Religion, the secular and the left

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How do different ideas about religion and the secular shape the building of solidarities and alliances?

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I n pretty much any part of the UK today you will find signs of a wide array of religious organisations and spiritual practices - food banks held in church halls, yoga sessions in community centres, mosques and small Pentecostal churches on industrial estates. For someone looking forward just a few decades ago, such signs of ongoing and visible religiosity might be surprising, as many assumed 'religion' would decline as society became more 'modern' and 'secular'.[1] Instead, religion is highly present within everyday life and public discourse, where it is characterised in vastly polarised ways - often as an inherently positive motivator for good people to do good things, but also as a profound threat to the social fabric. Such polarised judgements have been described as the good religion/bad religion paradigm.[2]

This piece is part of the Soundings Critical Terms series, which explores key concepts that are used on the left in varying ways, and which can lead to groups we might assume to be natural allies taking very different stances on political issues. This article focuses on 'religion' and 'the secular' and their relationship to left-wing organising and community building (which we broadly define as initiatives aiming to address social and economic inequalities). These often have quite different understandings of 'the secular', and this means that overt and explicit forms of religiosity are made manifest in varying ways. We focus on four common ways that we have seen religion and faith managed within left-wing organising.

Religion, the secular and the left

The first of these approaches sees 'religion' and 'faith' as a set of traditional practices that do not need to be engaged with as they will naturally disappear with modernity. On the left this approach has resulted in the tendency to treat religion with *indifference*. The second approach, most commonly associated on the left with secular Marxism, sees religion in relation to oppressive institutions which need to be excised from public life, with public expressions of religion being treated with *hostility*.

The third takes religion as a racial category, highlighting the relationship between Christian-Secular supremacy and colonial domination, while maintaining discomfort when it comes to engagement with religious content; we call this an approach of *limited welcome*. The fourth approach, which we call *incorporation*, emphasises the necessity of spiritual practices for sustaining collectives that can effectively challenge oppression. This seeks to engage with some spiritual practices and cosmologies outside of prescribed categories of 'religion' and 'nonreligion', as forms of knowledge that are crucial to challenging coloniality.

Having outlined these four approaches, and intentionally emphasised the ways in which religion can be aligned with progressive and liberatory aims[3], we then try to explore some of the complexities which can arise when these different interpretations are deployed in left-wing settings. These are discussed through two contrasting examples of leftist organising. The first is the work of Southall Black Sisters, a feminist organisation which is self-consciously secularist and which sits between 'limited welcome' and 'hostility'. The second is community organising in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire, particularly the monthly silent marches, which might be broadly understood as an example of 'incorporation'. We conclude by asserting the value of localised and contingent readings of 'religion' and 'the secular' over universalising ones.

Religion and the left

There is an enormous literature on the political idea of 'the secular', and how this could or should relate to 'religion' and 'belief'.[4] While a full account of these debates is beyond the scope of this article, a key aspect, and one which affects all of the approaches outlined below, is the relationship between religion and ideas of the public and private. Within a British context, much of the literature begins with the long history of Catholic/Protestant sectarian conflicts, as well as the political

shifts of the Enlightenment, which tended to construct religion as a 'private matter' and antithetical to notions of 'modernity'. Since left-wing organising spaces are by their nature concerned with public action, it is unsurprising that the extent to which religion and faith are made manifest within those spaces is often the subject of controversy.

Approach 1: Indifference - religion as dying tradition

The first approach sees religion as a kind of quaint tradition - as broadly harmless and 'unenlightened' but inevitably in decline, and therefore irrelevant to modern or progressive politics. The assumption that religion is gradually disappearing from public life has been deeply embedded in this perspective, which sees 'secularisation' as a trend or process occurring alongside other kinds of modernisation, such as industrialisation and the development of a bureaucratic state.

Early sociologists, like Weber for example, argued that the 'enchanted' world of the Middle Ages was displaced by developments in science and philosophy in the Enlightenment period, as people increasingly searched for rational rather than supernatural explanations for everyday experiences. For Durkheim, religious rituals created social cohesion in traditional societies where people's roles and life experiences were generally similar: they could not have the same kind of effectiveness in an industrial economy, where lives were much more differentiated.

In the decades following the Second World War, data from across Europe seemed to back up the idea that societies were steadily becoming less religious, with demonstrable declines in church attendance, church membership and belief in God - what is often referred to as the turn away from, and loss of trust in, religious institutions.[5] Explanations suggested for these changes included increased faith in the institutions of science and the welfare state, greater mobility, people's increased access to a plurality of world views, and gradual social liberalisation. Importantly, those proposing the secularisation thesis mostly saw it as a trend that would continue regardless of state decisions, the actions of civil society or the interventions of religious bodies such as churches themselves.

Critics have long argued that what is being referred to as 'religion' in this thesis is in fact quite a narrow category of activities, primarily modelled on how European populations have historically related to established Christian churches, and later-

established Jewish places of worship, within a Judaeo-Christian cultural context. Rather than seeing declines in the membership of these churches as an indication that religion per se was disappearing, such critics have highlighted the growth of non-established churches and less formalised spiritual practices. They have argued that society is not in fact becoming less religious, but rather that religion is transforming into less recognised forms of a more personalised and individualistic nature, which are more easily relegated to the private sphere.

Despite these longstanding critiques of sweeping ideas of 'secularisation', the idea that modernisation is intrinsically linked to the decline of 'religion' is pervasive in public discourse. Within left-wing spaces, such an approach is rarely made explicit but can been seen in a broad attitude of *indifference*.[6] This might become more evident at moments when it is made clear that the baseline assumption is that people in the room are not people of faith, or when long established left-wing groups do not have relationships with faith-based organisations, not out of any deliberate policy but simply because they have never considered them to be potential collaborators. The attitude of many unions, particularly those established in the post-war period, when secularisation seemed to be at its height, falls into this category.

More generally, an attitude of indifference might become more visible when its underlying assumptions are disrupted in some way, for example when somebody expresses surprise that second- or third-generation migrants (particularly from the global South) are 'still' religious, or perhaps even more practising than their parents, despite having been raised in the 'modern' context of the UK. The absence of any overt reference to religion, and/or the absence of any recognition when even the slightest reference to faith, God or theological concepts is made, could also be indicators of this approach.

Approach 2: Hostility - religion as institutional and oppressive

A second way of conceiving of the relationship between religion and left-wing politics is much more explicit, and sees religion as inherently opposed to liberation, and something that needs to be actively excluded from public space - including organising spaces - if progressive ends are to be achieved. This is generally rooted in an understanding of religion drawn from secular Marxism.

Soundings

In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously refers to religion as 'the opium of the people', envisaging religion as a set of institutions serving the social function of justifying inequalities and providing 'illusory happiness' for the proletariat. For Marx, criticising religion allows the working class to 'think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses'; he equates the process of coming to class consciousness with that of discarding religion.[7] Lenin followed this line of thinking in his claim that 'atheism is a natural and inseparable part of Marxism'.[8]

While not all forms of communism or socialism have been wedded to atheism, in a British context most socialist groups have been broadly secularist - assuming that a socialist state would be one with no formal role for religious institutions, and that under socialism religion would no longer be necessary. Many anti-colonial movements drew on Marxist ideas of secularism, as they battled against colonial regimes which were often staunchly supported by religious institutions. Fighting oppression, according to this approach, requires the construction of 'secular' organising spaces which are hostile to religion, faith and spirituality.

What is more explicit here than in the secularisation thesis is the claim that excluding religion from collective life is *desirable*, and a means of overthrowing oppressive institutions and achieving liberation. For many of those organising in the British feminist and lesbian and gay social movements of the 1970s, for example, especially those who had experienced damaging forms of patriarchy and homophobia in church contexts, the link between promoting progressive and socially liberal values and challenging the power of those kinds of formalised religious institutions seemed self-evident.

In the UK today, while there do exist queer and feminist groups which acknowledge that their members are people of faith, or seek to speak from a faith-based standpoint - Keshet UK or the Inclusive Mosque Project, for example - these remain marginal to mainstream debates. In other parts of the world, however, notions of religion and modernity are not framed as incompatible, and women's rights and queer activism, alongside other liberation projects, are often advanced with reference to theological arguments or language, and even from within places of worship. (For example, queer Christian activism in Kenya,[9] Catholic feminists organising for abortion and trans rights in Mexico,[10] or Islamic feminism.[11])

Those coming from a secular Marxist perspective may have differing views about

what should happen to religion within a future socialist society: some might imagine that religion will continue to exist in the form of private beliefs which will have no place in public life, and others might wish for religion to disappear altogether. What is important here is that secularisation is understood as an outcome of *struggles* between opposing forces, meaning that political engagement is necessary. Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism would be examples of this kind of secularist organising; and the kinds of issues they might mobilise around would include opposition to state-funded faith schools, on the assumption that they are inherently likely to create damaging patriarchal environments, or foster prejudiced views against other groups.

Approach 3: Limited welcome - religion as an expression of 'culture', 'ethnicity' or 'race'

A third way of conceiving of the relationship between left-wing political activity and religion - or 'the secular' - is to make space for certain kinds of religious expression and engagement within public organising spaces, but in limited or tempered forms. Theoretically, this is underpinned by an understanding that the denigration of their cultural and religious practices has been a key part of othering colonised people; thus, for example, the racist caricatures drawn by Enlightenment thinkers often referred to their belief systems in derogatory ways.[12] The creation of secular spaces that actively exclude anything seen as religious is recognised as a mode of contemporary racism; while permitting some forms of inclusion is seen as anti-racism. However, this welcome is limited to forms of religious expression taken as proxies for 'race', 'culture' or 'ethnicity', and avoids engaging with religious content such as beliefs, theologies or deities.

Anti-racist organising around Islamophobia is the most obvious example of this, with the recognition that hostility towards expressions of Muslimness - which often hinge on the apparent threat that Muslims pose to modern secular societies - furthers racism. It can also be observed in relation to other minority religions, including Judaism, where debates around antisemitism are framed as issues of 'culture' or 'ethnicity'. Another expression of limited welcome is when left organisations engage with faith groups such as black churches as a means of reaching ethnic minorities, with these institutions understood in functional terms as

providing valuable communal resources for surviving in a racist society.

While this approach has now become the dominant narrative in many leftist political organising spaces, it has been adopted as a result of the outcome of a series of struggles over recent decades. In relation to Islam specifically, the controversy following the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1989 split the left precisely on this question of how it related to contemporary understandings of racism. For some, the outpouring of contempt against Muslims triggered by the book's publication drew on longstanding Orientalist tropes of Muslims as violent, uncivilised and irrational; others took the opposite approach, seeing supporting Rushdie against death threats from the oppressive authoritarian regime in Iran as the anti-racist position. Still others saw the whole affair as irrelevant to anti-racism, with Paul Boateng, for example, stating that it had 'nothing to do with black discourse'.[13]

Mobilisations by Muslim civil society in the 1990s led to the term 'Islamophobia' being coined and popularised,[14] and to a series of demands being made of the New Labour government, many of which were conceded - including re-introducing a question on religion in the 2001 census, which allowed the structural disadvantage experienced by Muslims as a group to be evidenced the first time. (Prior to this, there had not even been an accurate figure of the number of Muslims in Britain.) Initially, groups such as the Muslim Council of Britain were perceived to be very much aligned with the establishment, but later they forged new relationships with left-wing organisations, through their joint opposition to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Puwar, for example, recounts large numbers of Muslims praying in Trafalgar Square during a 2001 anti-war demonstration, which had occurred during Ramadan.[15]

The War on Terror, introduction of Prevent and increasing preoccupation at a state level with the threat posed by Muslims led to a broad acceptance on the left that Islamophobia existed and constituted racism. Supporting forms of religious expression within public space, such as practising hijab or having access to prayer rooms, is thus framed as a means of countering hostility towards religious others, and recognising as part of normal everyday life practices that have been pathologised or seen as indications of radicalisation by a racist state.

This approach does afford a level of welcome to certain kinds of religious practice and expression. However, it is a *limited* welcome, which allows for its presence when it is compatible with sociological categorisations and forms of

knowledge that are rooted in an Enlightenment intellectual tradition in which the religion-secular distinction is deeply embedded.[16] For example, it is acceptable to discuss religion in the context of statistical evidence of group disadvantage. But there may be a difficulty in accommodating religious expression if it is associated with institutional forms that the secular left sees as more 'threatening' and loaded: Christianity is often not afforded the same kind of permission or respect, even if those practising it are 'black'.

In addition, the *content* of faith traditions - including theologies that might be mobilised to anti-oppressive ends - is generally bracketed out of discussions about faith-based racism. Namira Islam has coined the term 'soft Islamophobia' for situations in which Muslims feel they must minimise their religiosity in order to present themselves as non-threatening in anti-racist organising spaces. She gives as an example the time when she was the only person to quote the Qur'an or cite Islamic theology at a conference dedicated to discussing Islamophobia ('Islamophobia was the focus. Islam was an afterthought').[17] Much of the organising around Prevent would fall into this category of limited welcome, given that it primarily hinges on sociological arguments about Muslim disadvantage or disproportionate targeting, thus still treating the content of Islam itself as a private matter. Another example of this approach would be Hope not Hate, who often mobilise against the far right through ethnic minority faith communities without engaging with questions of God or theology.

Approach 4: incorporation - decolonised religion as a source of spiritual guidance

The fourth and final perspective sees faith, spiritual beliefs and theologies as normal, unremarkable elements of public life, and spiritual practices and beliefs as equally capable of motivating and sustaining collectives as they attempt to end oppression and achieve liberation. Those taking this approach do recognise that many institutions which have been labelled as 'religious' are implicated in perpetuating oppressive systems. However, they also emphasise the oppressiveness of the idea of the fully rational human being who can engage in a secular realm of public reason, which erases the tacit and embodied dimensions of knowledge that spiritual practices allow access to. Decolonial scholars such as Mignolo have spoken therefore

of the need to 'decolonise religion and liberate spirituality'[18] as forms of knowledge suppressed under coloniality.

This approach is probably the most unfamiliar and complex to describe, but can be seen as rooted in postcolonial perspectives which have shown how the concept of 'religion' was exported as a generic category with European colonial expansion. It was in the context of the colonial encounter that what we now understand as 'religion' (or 'culture') came to be understood as an entity that was distinct from other human phenomena and counterposed to 'the secular':

> the colonial aspect is crucial because the idea of a 'secular' realm of
> natural reason, scientific knowledge, civil society and the nation state
> is inseparable from the development of constitutions, world trade and
> capitalist markets. These in turn have a symbiotic relationship with
> the development of a generic concept of 'religion' and 'religions' based
> on Protestant Christian origins but projected universally.[19]

In the varied contexts of colonial capitalist expansion across the globe this religion/ secular divide took many forms, as different regimes sought to regulate what aspects of religion should be seen as a legitimate matter of public concern. For example, in India caste came to be understood as part of 'the Hindu religion' - and therefore a matter of private beliefs rather than political claims to equality - as a means of enlisting powerful groups to administer indirect rule.[20] In a North American context, one tool for denying the substantive claims of Native Americans for control of territory has been to label their land-based cosmologies as the spiritual beliefs of individuals, separated from public markets.[21] Colonial powers, of course, created these 'secular' state systems while also promoting Christian supremacy and seeking to convert subjugated populations. But many of their subjects then reappropriated Christian teachings to resist the dehumanisation of slavery and colonialism, or to continue to worship indigenous deities.

The contemporary context is thus highly complex: both oppressive and liberatory ways of being can be found across institutions and practices commonly labelled as 'religious' or 'secular'. Rather than starting from a fixed understanding of what 'religion' is, the approach that we are calling *incorporation* tries to reimagine the practices that can meet the spiritual needs of groups trying to challenge oppression

outside the religious-secular framework imposed by coloniality.

In some cases, this may involve overt engagements with theology, as in the Catholic liberation theology that is a continuing force in Latin America, or the black Christian thinkers in a range of denominations who argue that religious texts and scriptures can be enacted to liberatory ends, including anti-racism, queer activism, and anti-capitalist or other leftist political endeavours.[22] Similar arguments have been made in relation to other faith traditions, for example in claims that Islamic texts and practices contain important guidance on issues of exploitation and oppression[23], or the irreverent anticapitalist Judaism practised by a group like Jewdas.

Such explicit engagements with faith traditions or 'God' are more likely to appear in leftist spaces when dissociated from institutional religion, or made 'safe' by being couched in forms such as poetry or spoken word.[24] There is often more willingness to incorporate spiritual practices that are understood as 'non-Western' and 'pre-colonial', most obviously meditation and yoga as common forms of 'radical self-care', or the New Age or hippie spiritual practices promoting 'connection to nature' common among environmental groups. These may, however, be only questionably left-wing if they sidestep key questions of power.

Equally, practices related to 'indigenous' belief systems can be detached from political values, for example when the honouring of ancestors is regarded as simply a safe expression of 'culture' and indigeneity and lacks any connection to resisting colonial power. By contrast, within Pan-African and black community organising spaces indigenous African religions and Rastafari concepts might be drawn upon, alongside marginal black Christian theologies, to make substantive claims for reparations, or to formulate radical anti-capitalist stances against a state which is understood to be allied to whiteness and hard, exclusionary secularism.

The reason this is the most difficult of the four approaches to describe is both because it challenges embedded understandings of 'religion', and because it is intrinsically connected to non-verbal ways of knowing which are hard to incorporate into academic texts such as this one. It sits alongside the other three approaches to 'the secular' within leftist political organising as part of a typology which is not meant to be seen as exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but is offered here as a way of suggesting some of the ways various actors respond to 'religion', faith and spirituality in their activism.

Having described these different approaches, we now go on explore how they might work in practice in relation to two case studies, chosen because of their very different approach to religion. The first of these examples is Southall Black Sisters, a 'not-for-profit, secular and inclusive' feminist organisation that provides support and services to black and minority women; the second is the multi-stakeholder community organising that took place in the wake of the Grenfell emergency and commemorations, focusing particularly on the silent marches.

Secular black feminism: the case of Southall Black Sisters

Southall Black Sisters (SBS), founded in 1979, provides support for ethnic minority women experiencing gender-based violence. Its founders are explicit about their socialist feminist politics, and their anti-imperialism, seeing themselves within the tradition of anticolonial struggles in the global South. They often describe themselves as 'black feminists', with 'black' here (like the 'black' in their name) being understood as 'politically black', i.e. referring to all non-white people rather than just those of African heritage.

From the outset, the group has sought to challenge oppressive patriarchal norms within minority communities, which they often encountered as being justified in religious terms. In the context of domestic violence services, SBS have long raised concerns that when the work of providing services is framed in relation to religion, this can undermine the rights and safety of women. Writing in 1990, one of their members was highly critical of a Hackney refuge established solely for Muslim women, which imposed rules around wearing 'modest dress' and observing a curfew, and saw its role as providing a place for a 'cooling off' period before the women would return to their husbands.[25] The religious character of this service was seen as intrinsically linked to a policy of encouraging residents to reconcile with their families rather than supporting women to live independently, thus placing women at risk of further violence.

Presenting the work of SBS as 'secular' has been crucial to the way that the group has organised for the past forty years. They have developed strong relationships with institutions such as the National Secular Society, and Gita Saghal, who was an early member, went on to found the Centre for Secular Space. In the wake of the Rushdie affair, members of SBS formed Women Against Fundamentalism 'to challenge the

rise of fundamentalism in all religions',[26] and the two groups have maintained strong ties over the past twenty-five years.

What SBS mean by 'religion' in this context is made clear in a statement produced in 1989 expressing their solidarity with Salman Rushdie: 'we believe that religious worship is an individual matter and the state should not foster one religion above any other'.[27] Religion is thus constructed as a question of private beliefs, with the state and leftist organisations imagined as neutral in their endeavours to ensure freedom for all religions according to a secular, Western human rights framework. SBS have long been critical of the ongoing privileging of Christianity within the British state, and have argued that all faith schools, including church schools, should become non-religious community schools.

This construction of religion maintains that it cannot be part of a liberatory public space because it is intrinsically tied up with unequal power relations. In a speech to the National Secular Society, founder Pragna Patel asserts that religion 'cannot be allowed to define our roles and our values, because it is based on hierarchy and power and inequality in itself', and thus will always limit the freedom of 'women, sexual minorities and indeed other religions'.[28] Secularism therefore must insist on 'delinking [religion] from political power in the family, and in the community and in state institutions'[29] in order to give equal access to human rights.

The view that defining a group along religious lines will foster division and inhibit solidarities has arguably been borne out in a context such as Southall. Since the 1970s ethnic minority communities in Britain have in many ways themselves become more divided, with South Asian communities in particular fracturing along faith lines, partly as a result of growing sectarian conflicts on the Indian subcontinent. SBS have argued that even having specific terms for faith-based racisms can lead to divisions. When giving evidence to the recent Parliamentary inquiry into defining Islamophobia, they argued that using the term would impede collectivities: 'instead of solidarity and alliances being formed it leads to a hatred of the other'.[30]

In her National Secular Society Speech, Patel recognises that religion 'does play a positive role' in the lives of many of the women who come to SBS, and maintains that their understanding of secularism is not anti-religion. SBS may well see their own position as one of 'limited welcome', and there are undoubtedly women of faith who do greatly value the support the organisation has provided over many decades

of battling with religious conservatism. By our typology, however, we would describe their approach as one of significant hostility, in that it treats religion as a self-evident category that is inherently tied to oppressive institutions and practices that need to be removed from the public arena in order to achieve equality.

Commemorating Grenfell

Our second case study is very different, and looks at some of the responses to the Grenfell Tower fire. This is not intended as a comparison with Southall Black Sisters as a single organisation - this second example is very recent and involves multiple stakeholders, and there is no stated collective position on how they relate to 'religion' or 'the secular'. But it does help to illustrate what we mean by *incorporation*, when this is difficult to articulate through verbal and intellectualised means.

Almost immediately after the fire broke out in June 2017, a wide range of groups became involved in the emergency response, many of which were connected to faith institutions. It was Muslims, for example - who were awake for Ramadan prayers - who first raised the alarm; and by the following morning several churches, mosques and the local gurdwara were co-ordinating donations and volunteers as well as providing spaces of sanctuary for survivors.[31] These worked cooperatively with non-religious organisations such as the Rugby Portobello Trust and the Radical Housing Network. Over the past two years, a complex patchwork of different groups has emerged in response to the fire and its aftermath, including Grenfell United and Justice for Grenfell; this network includes groups offering spiritual and material support to survivors and those more focused on campaigning - though these activities overlap considerably.

The scale of the loss of human life and the community's intense suffering has meant that much of the organising has focused on creating collective spaces of mourning. Given that many of those who died were people of faith from a wide variety of backgrounds, these commemorations have drawn upon a multiplicity of faith traditions and practices. The official memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral was opened by a local Catholic priest and imam carrying a banner through the church, and the service included a Muslim girls choir singing a song called *Inshallah* and a young survivor of the fire reading a poem by Rumi. In June 2019, a multifaith vigil marking two years since the fire included prayers sung from the Qur'an, readings

from Sikh Scriptures and songs from a gospel choir.

These unambiguously 'religious' ways of commemorating those who died have been combined with other kinds of practices less explicitly linked to particular faith traditions, but maintaining the same tone and solemnity. The June 2019 multifaith vigil included a rendition of Coldplay's 'Fix You' and a poem from the rapper and local resident Lowkey with the refrain 'we will not betray the dead'. The Wall of Truth under the West Way has been a site where many people have lit candles, and the silent walks which began spontaneously two weeks after the fire took place have continued on the 14th of every month.

These silent walks have provided spaces for a very wide range of people to demonstrate solidarity - attendees are far more mixed in terms of age, background and race than most protests. They have also given opportunities to link the local and national dimensions of the issue.[32] At the end of one of the walks in 2018, a Labour councillor from Liverpool brought messages of support from Hillsborough campaigners and reflected:

> although we know pain, we don't know *your* pain, so it's been a very very moving experience for me to walk along with you tonight, and it will make me just even more committed to supporting you.[33]

The silent walks are not labelled as 'religious', 'spiritual' or 'faith-based' spaces. But we would argue that they constitute a form of collective embodied practice which invites those attending to 'know' the pain of those in mourning non-verbally and non-intellectually, in ways which challenge a hard division between secular public space and religious private space. It could be argued that Grenfell is such an extreme context that it is hard to draw wider conclusions from it. Certainly, the sense that it surpasses human understanding has pervaded responses such as Ben Okri's poem *Grenfell Tower*:

> When you saw it with your eyes it seemed what the eyes
> Saw did not make sense cannot make sense will not make sense.[34]

Comprehending the violent loss of so many lives is in itself difficult, and is compounded by the extreme complexity of the causes of the fire - which continues to afford protection to those responsible from facing justice. As Lowkey has noted,

it is only since the fire that those who survived have been able to come to some understanding of 'those invisible forces [which] can act in ways that can literally cause you to die'.[35] This sense of the unknowable is of course most starkly illustrated by the ongoing suspicions that the official death toll of 72 is inaccurate, and that additional people may have entirely disappeared.

We would argue that it is precisely this inability to grasp what happened through the intellect that makes embodied practices - in particular the shared walking in silence - crucial to the community's ability to maintain strength and experience solidarity in the face of incredible and ongoing injustice. By their nature, the silent marches allow a multiplicity of people to engage with them in different ways: while a practising Christian might see them as spiritual (incorporation), a non-religious left-wing activist might remain oblivious to the spiritual dimensions perceived by others (indifference), and another non-religious participant might understand that others see it in religious terms and feel respectful towards this while not being personally engaged (limited welcome).

In drawing attention to these elements we are not trying to argue that the presence of religious institutions and faith communities in the response to Grenfell has been an unequivocal 'good'. Undoubtedly there will have been disagreements and controversies around who holds power, in which patriarchy, class and racism have been at play across all the religious and non-religious institutions involved. What we hope to question here is the construction of the category of 'religion' as a static entity, and to call for more granular engagements with particular practices and their oppressive and/or liberatory effects. By focusing on the monthly silent marches - one such practice that has recently emerged - we also hope to challenge the idea that modern, 'secular' left-wing activists have no need of embodied collective practices when engaging in the hard work of forging alliances and being present with the suffering caused by capitalism and coloniality.

Conclusion: religion and secular beyond universalisms

As we have outlined, leftist groups have widely varying attitudes to the question of secularism and religion: they can be found on both sides of arguments around religious dress, faith schools, gender-segregated events in universities, or the value of a term such as Islamophobia. We have attempted to elucidate here some of the

theoretical underpinnings - often implicit - of the ways in which 'religion' and 'the secular' are being constructed by these different actors, in the hope that this might at least make the terms of the disagreements more comprehensible.

As we have already pointed out, and as we have tried to emphasise throughout this piece, our typology is not exhaustive and we do not see the categories as mutually exclusive. In practice, a single constituency Labour Party branch might provide 'limited welcome' when passing a motion against Prevent, be 'hostile' when defending LGBT education against protesters making arguments on religious grounds, and demonstrate aspects of 'incorporation' when attending a faith-led vigil following a terrorist attack. 'Indifference' might also underpin its day-to-day activities and modes of organising, for example if members who belong to faith communities have to constantly remind the rest of the group to consider engaging with them. However, it is arguable that 'indifference' is an increasingly difficult position to maintain in the current moment, given the growing prominence of racialised discourses on religion.

In the afterword for *After Grenfell*, Robbie Shilliam warns academics of the dangers of trying to create universal theories out of the fire and its aftermath, arguing that we should accept 'the salience of the knowledge traditions, intellectuals and activists of the Notting Dale locale'.[36] What we hope this analysis has highlighted is the need for contextual readings of 'religion' and 'the secular', as we try to understand how the left should go about building solidarities and alliances.

In the context of Southall, challenging patriarchy might mean challenging its expression in religious institutions, and defining women's spaces as 'secular' might be a necessary part of creating those collectives, given the sharpening divisions along faith lines in South Asian communities. Not far down the road in Notting Dale, however, different ways of relating to practices associated with faith traditions might be required, as locals and outsiders try to build solidarities by finding ways of 'knowing' each other's pain after profound trauma and loss.

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Soundings

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Notes

1. J. Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 14 Issue 1, 2006; L. Woodhead & R. Catto (eds), *Religion & Change in Modern Britain*, Routledge, London 2012.

2. P. Vardy, *Good and Bad Religion*, SCM Press, Stoddard & Martin 2017.

3. We acknowledge that this piece may be seen as over-emphasising the more positive potential for 'religion' and 'faith'; however this is an intentional attempt to disrupt the notion that anything placed within the category of religion is inherently 'bad' and incompatible with attempts to achieve social equality.

4. E.g. T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press 2003; E. Arweck, S. Bullivant & L. Lee, *Secularity and Non-Religion*, Routledge 2013; P.L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, Doubleday Garden City, New York 1979; T. Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, Routledge 2007; R. Catto & D. Martin, 'The Religious and the Secular', in Woodhead & Catto, *Religion and change in modern Britain*.

5. B. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, Oxford University Press 1966; Woodhead & Catto, *Religion & Change in Modern Britain*.

6. A current debate within religious studies is whether those who explicitly *claim* to be indifferent to religion are in fact indifferent - e.g. L. Lee, *Reimagining the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular*, Oxford University Press 2015. What we are referring to here is a more implicit kind of indifference which is unlikely to be professed.

7. K. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press 1972, p12.

8. V.I. Lenin, *Religion*, Read Books 2007, p5.

9. A. van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism and Arts of Resistance in Africa*, Penn State University Press 2019.

10. Marta Lamas, 'Cuerpo y política: la batalla por despenalizar el aborto', in Gisela Espinosa Damián and Ana Lau Jaiven (eds), *Un fantasma recorre el siglo: luchas feministas en México 1910-2010*, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico 2011; K. Bárcenas Barajas, 'Apropiaciones LGBT de la religiosidad popular', *Desacatos*, 61, 2019.

11. See, for example, the work of Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, Fatema Mernissi.

12. Hegel, for example, linked accounts of Africans worshipping 'natural forms' and not recognising God as 'a supreme being' to their supposed cannibalism and

acceptance of slavery (G.W.F. Hegel, 'Geographical Basis of World History', in E.C. Eze (ed), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Blackwell 1997.

13. Quoted in T. Modood, 'British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair', in J. Donald & A. Rattansi (eds), *'Race', Culture and Difference*, Sage 1992, p29.

14. E.g. Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*, Runnymede Trust 1997.

15. N. Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Berg 2004.

16. M. Horii, 'Critical Reflections on the Category of "Religion" in Contemporary Sociological Discourse', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol 28 Issue 1, 2015.

17. N. Islam, 'Soft Islamophobia', *Religions*, Vol 9. Issue 280, 2018, p1.

18. W. Mignolo, 'Neither Capitalism nor Communism, but Decolonization: Interview with Walter Mignolo (Part I), *Critical Legal Thinking*: http://criticallegalthinking. com/2012/03/21/neither-capitalism-nor-communism-but-decolonization-an-interview-with-walter-mignolo/.

19. T. Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, Routledge 2007, p9.

20. W. Sweetman, 'Colonialism all the way down? Religion and the secular in early modern writing on south India', in T. Fitzgerald (ed), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, Routledge 2007.

21. J. Cox, 'Secularizing the land: the impact of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act on indigenous understandings of land' in Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular*; A. Smith, 'Walking in Balance: The Spirituality-Liberation Praxis of Native Women', in Jace Weaver (ed), *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2002.

22. See, for example, R. Beckford, D*read and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain*, SPCK Publishing 2011; A. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique*, Routledge 2019; S. Stone, 'Consciousness, Hope and Power: The Nature of Pentecostal Political Engagement in Britain', PhD thesis 2020.

23. N. Islam, 'Soft Islamophobia'; Y. Birt, D. Hussain & A. Siddiqui, 'British Secularism and Religion: Islam, Society and the State', Kube Publishing 2011.

24. E.g. the Muslim rap duo Poetic Pilgrimage or Suhaiymah Manzoor Khan, who performs as The Brown Hijabi.

25. M. Inam, 'Opening Doors', in SBS Collective (eds), *Against the Grain: A celebration of survival and struggle*, Southall Black Sisters 1990, p27.

26. 'About WAF', WAF 2019: http://womenagainstfundamentalism.org/?page_id=4.

27. G. Saghal, 'Fundamentalism and the Multi-Culturalist Fallacy', in SBS Collective, *Against the Grain*, p24.

28. Pragna Patel on secularism and feminism, National Secular Society 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5mmeEARa9g.

29. Pragna Patel on secularism and feminism.

30. APPG on British Muslims, *Islamophobia Defined: The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia*, APPG on British Muslims 2019, p43.

31. A. Plender, 'After Grenfell: the Faith Groups' Response', Theos 2018: https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/Theos-After-Grenfell.pdf.

32. M. Charles, 'ComeUnity and Community in the Face of Impunity', in N.

El-Enany, D. Bulley and J. Edkins (eds), *After Grenfell: Violence Resistance and Response*, Pluto Press, London 2019.

33. D. Zyblersztajn, *Grenfell Tower Silent March*, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00qy_Hhg2GE.

34. B. Okri, Grenfell Tower, June 2017: a poem by Ben Okri, *Financial Times*: https://www.ft.com/content/39022f72-5742-11e7-80b6-9bfa4c1f83d2.

35. Quoted in Charles, 'ComeUnity and Community'.

36. R. Shilliam, 'Afterword: The Fire and the Academy' in El-Enany, Bulley & Edkins, *After Grenfell*, p196.