NOTHING SACRED

WOMEN RESPOND TO RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND TERROR

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"A Disease Masquerading as a Cure": Women and Fundamentalism in Algeria

Karima Bennoune

An interview with Mahfoud Bennoune

My father, Mahfoud Bennoune, was raised in a devoutly religious Sunni Muslim peasant family in the mountains of northeastern Algeria. Serving in the Algerian resistance to French colonial rule, he spent over four years as a prisoner of war during the war of independence that raged from 1954–1962. In his most recent book, *Les Algériennes: Victimes d'Une Société Néopatriarcale,* he writes of how deprivation of freedom in French prison reminded him of the condition of many Algerian women and deepened his concern with women's issues.[1] After independence he went abroad to study, obtaining a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Michigan. He retired from the University of Algiers in 1994 but has continued to fight fundamentalism, armed only with his pen and his voice.

The lack of attention paid to Algeria in the United States is demoralizing for secular intellectuals like my father. Muslim fundamentalist crimes against Westerners are of interest, but not those much more numerous offenses against their own people. At least one hundred Algerians were killed in June 2002 alone and as many as one thousand since the beginning of the year. A June 28 attack by fundamentalists on a bus in a suburb of the capital, Algiers, killing thirteen, generated virtually no comment in the U.S. media. While little space is devoted to recounting these events, less still is given to attempts at making any sense of them. This excerpt from a much longer interview is a small effort to rectify this situation by recording the views of one academic who, like many in the Muslim world, has risked his life to offer a humanist perspective.

I. Algeria

Karima: What does the term "fundamentalism" mean to you? There are other terms that are used sometimes like "Islamism" or "religious extremism." What terminology is used in Algeria to refer to these phenomena?

Mahfoud: In Algeria the term in Arabic used most often is either *"Al Islamiyoun"* which is "the Islamists," or *"Al Usuliyoun"* which is "the fundamentalists." Some nonfundamentalist Muslims object to the term "Islamism" because they see it as derogatory of Islam. Prior to the emergence of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), they called them "the brothers," which actually is derived from the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. What is really meant by "fundamentalism" in this context is the use of Islam to promote a political project that is highly retrograde and extremely conservative. It is anti-woman, anti-rationalism, anti-science. In Algeria, the fundamentalists think the only period of Muslim history that is truly Islamic is that during the time of Muhammad and the rule of the first four caliphs. Then Muslims became un-Islamic.

K: The specific organizational roots of the contemporary Algerian fundamentalist movements really date to the 1970s. Why?

M: The early fundamentalists in Algeria came from middle-class backgrounds. Their movement took the form of reaction to land reform and the radicalization of the socialist workers management in industry. Specifically, the state decided to promote land reform, limiting the Algerian landlords' property to twenty hectares. The rest would be bought by the state and distributed to peasants who were organized in cooperatives. The leader of the fundamentalists at the time, Soltani, issued a *fatwah* declaring land reform un-Islamic. According to him, prayer performed on nationalized land would not be accepted by God. They joined an alliance with petty intellectuals and landlords who financed them.

Internationally, at the end of the seventies you had the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the emergence of the New Right in the West, the advent of post-modernism and the rejection of the Enlightenment, and especially the collapse of socialism as an alternative. Within this framework, after the death of Boumedienne,[2] the fundamentalists thrived and widened their base.

K: As we watch the crystallization of fundamentalist movements from the seventies to the nineties, what's happening in Algerian society in terms of the struggle over the status of women?

M: The question after independence was how to put an end to polygamy and how to resolve the problem of inheritance within the framework of the new Algerian state, whose constitution guaranteed women equality with men. Under colonial rule, marriage, divorce, and inheritance were regulated by the shariah and decided by special religious courts. The judges of these courts were trained by the French within the Islamic tradition and appointed by the French state. So we did not enjoy the separation of church and state because the French secular state did not apply the same rules to the Jews, the Protestants, and the Catholics as to the Muslims. After independence, the clerics and religious conservatives decided they would not agree to resolve these issues until the political tide turned against women. Legal reform in the political climate of the sixties and early seventies would have been favorable to women. But the clerics blocked reform until 1984. Meanwhile, women who had participated in the independence movement were pushed back home and their representation in politics fell. In 1962, the first Algerian constituent assembly had 10 women deputies out of 196 deputies, which gave it one of the highest proportions of women in a national assembly in the world, higher than in France or Sweden at the time. But this shrank to 2 deputies in the second national assembly, then to none between 1965 and 1982.

K: What happened in Algeria in the 1980s that made the fundamentalists' offer of an "Islamic solution" seem attractive to a broader sector of the population?

M: One factor is the authoritarianism of the Boumedienne era, and the corruption that existed under Boumedienne, though not to the degree as under Chadli's regime.[3] Then in the eighties, Chadli annulled the progressive reforms that were carried out during the sixties and seventies. The private sector was promoted and the public sector was dismantled completely. The regime even split the sixty-six public corporations, which carried out the development of the country in the sixties and seventies, into 472 minicorporations. This came during the period when, around the world, big mergers were taking place giving rise to huge multinational companies. The atomization of these public corporations, coupled with the cancellation of progressive social programs, led to disenchantment with socialism, but also to disenchantment with capitalism. And, therefore, it sort of became inevitable that the only way out seemed to be what they call "the Islamic solution."

K: What was happening to Algerian women while this "reform" was occurring in the 1980s?

M: 1984 saw the adoption by the national assembly of the family code. This code implemented *shariah* law in its most reactionary form concerning the marital status of women, putting women at the mercy of their husbands. It was pushed by the government, in alliance with the religious right and the fundamentalists. From a social and political point of view, government corruption and increasing political despotism pushed many young people toward the fundamentalists. They were suggesting that the only way out is to go back to our values and to the greatness of a past which is mythical, an illusion. They started attracting some middle-class, blocked youth, but especially those young people who had no educational or vocational training prospects, no job prospects and no housing prospects. Those are the ones that furnished the future shock troops of the fundamentalists. However, the leadership was provided by middle classes who professionally were blocked too. They were financed by the landlords and some conservative merchants.

K: October 1988 seems to have been a significant turning point.

M: On October 5, 1988, young people from popular quarters began demonstrating and attacking luxurious shops, and, especially the Riyad al Feth shopping mall, which was seen as representing consumerism within the context of an underdeveloped country. It became a demonstration against the symbols of the state and lasted for five days.

K: How did the state react and how did the fundamentalists step in and capitalize on that response?

M: Hundreds of Algerians were rounded up by the military and police, and they were atrociously tortured. The president declared a state of siege and ordered the army to shoot at random at young people demonstrating. The estimates of the number killed varied from five hundred to seven hundred. The fundamentalists at that point had been on the decline because the Bouali terrorist movement, which started attacking the state and the gendarmerie back in the eighties, was completely decapitated, and its leaders were put in jail. So the fundamentalists at that time were quite discouraged. But in the wake of the unrest, Chadli brought them into the picture. What we have to stress here is that the slogans the young people used in October '88 were asking primarily for good education and jobs. What they obtained afterwards was fundamentalism and the IMF-sponsored reduction of social spending and the loss of various jobs, which is a paradox.

K: In the climate of despair that followed, fundamentalism absolutely mushroomed within the country. How do we then get from the October uprising to the late eighties period and ultimately the triumph in the 1990 municipal elections of the Islamic Salvation Front?

M: By October 10, 1988, before the end of rioting, Chadli called in the leaders of the Islamists, and he struck a deal with them. Within the FLN itself various groups sympathized with the fundamentalists. But also Chadli and the ruling group in the military knew that the only way they could cope with the Islamists was by out-Islamizing them, co-opting their slogans and their program and implementing it themselves. When you try to out-Islamize the Islamists, you open the door for them. This led to legalization of the fundamentalists, especially the FIS, in violation of Algeria's constitution which prohibited parties based on religion. (The promotion of political pluralism in Algeria included support of the parties with state funds.) The fundamentalists were also helped by the unpopularity of the Chadli government, due in particular to his wild liberalization, and the FLN.[4] People thought then that the only way out was the Islamists. Therefore their numbers inflated very rapidly. Instead of the democratic forces demanding that Chadli, who was responsible for the bankruptcy of the state, resign, they accepted him as the father of Algerian pluralism and democracy. The fundamentalists, knowing his unpopularity, established their political party. But they never stopped denouncing democracy as blasphemy and insisting that there is no pluralism in Islam.

K: That reminds me of the Algerian joke that fundamentalist democracy means one man, one vote, one time. But, seriously, I remember visiting Algeria in this period and for the first time seeing a woman in a *chador*. What happened to women in the late eighties and early nineties as fundamentalism gained in strength?

M: Women were subjected to intimidation and verbal aggression, and sometimes actual violence, to pressure them to stay where they "belong," at home, and to veil. Publications, books, articles, newspapers, radio programs, and sermons in mosques were all attacking the emancipation of women. The fundamentalists wanted to kill the whole idea, rejecting its proponents as "the daughters of colonialism" or "the daughters of General Massu," a French general responsible for much brutality during the war. They wanted to discredit the women's movement completely.

K: One of the stories I remember from this period, when the FIS was

legally allowed to operate, was about fundamentalist teachers asking children in their classes to report whether or not their mothers and sisters veil or wear bathing suits to the beach.

M: There were many fundamentalist teachers. They often tried to pressure children to denounce their parents—whether they drink alcohol, whether their mothers go out without the veil, whether they listen to Western music. The school system played a major role because of its control by the religious right. The official mosques also played a tremendous role in the promotion of this Islamic agenda and the attack on women's rights.

K: What did FIS governance in the municipalities look like between 1990 and 1992?

M: The first thing the FIS did was to change the names of the city halls to Islamic municipalities. They imposed gender segregation; women had to enter from one side and men from the other. They banned concerts and mixed swimming on beaches. They used the city halls and provincial councils as an infrastructure to promote their own agenda.

K: There is a contradiction here, it seems to me. The fundamentalists are an essentially anti-modernist movement in substantive ideology. On the other hand, they engaged in many projects that may be described as modernist—organizing a political party, participating in elections and governing municipalities. How ought we to understand this contradiction?

M: It is very simple. They accept technology but reject science because science is premised on doubts. For them, technology is a means to an end and does not raise philosophical questions regarding the origin and evolution of the world. Biology and anthropology were denounced to me by Abassi Medani[5] himself, as alien, as a catastrophe for Muslims. They went as far as rejecting psychoanalysis as a Jewish plot by Freud, socialism also because Marx was Jewish and sociology because its founder Durkheim was a Jew. At the university where I used to teach, the fundamentalists wrote on the wall that these three figures were Jews, and that psychoanalysis, socialism, and sociology have to be banned as such because they are a plot against Islam. The fundamentalists are organized in the modern fashion with parties but their central committee is called *majlis al shura*, which is a religious council. In Islam there is a notion of *alem* or theologian, which is a status acquired through learning and work in the community. The fundamentalists said we do not need these theologians. Any Muslim who can read the Qur'an in Arabic can understand it by himself. This allowed them to

interpret the Qur'an as they wished. They said there are four loyalties they would have to break: loyalty of the Algerian to the past, because this past is un-Islamic; loyalty to the nation-state for the same reason; and loyalty to the family since the family did not teach Islamic fundamental values to the child. And you have to break with all your friends who are not Islamic enough. Even though confession is not an Islamic practice, a militant must also confess to an emir, a political leader within his cell, who would help him resolve his own inner contradictions. This operated as a sort of brainwashing, which has nothing to do with Islam, and created what I call a *homo Islamicus fundamentalis* or extremist militant. You are dealing with a sect that deemed all the rulers apostates. They denounced all forms of the nation-state, its secular laws, and its rulers which they call *pharaohs,* who rule without God's law. For them, the modern state and democracy is equated with blasphemy and secularism, and leads to the denunciation of Islam.

K: The Western media always implies the fundamentalists took up arms only after the interruption of the electoral process by the military in January 1992 [when the Islamists were poised to win]. Could you talk about the phenomenon of fundamentalist violence prior to the cancellation of the second round of legislative assembly elections?

M: For the fundamentalists it was very clear that the Algerian state became un-Islamic and had to be Islamized, that Algerians became almost impious and have to be reconverted to Islam. There are two ways they could be reconverted, either by persuasion, if possible, if not through *jihad,* by force. This goes back even to Sayyid Qutb[6] who declared that *jihad* is allowed against the nation-state to establish an Islamic state. In order to prepare Mujahideen, throughout the eighties when they were underground, the Algerian fundamentalists organized sports and cultural associations and summer camps. They were actually training Algerians in guerrilla warfare. Therefore, they were already psychologically and militarily prepared to carry out their struggle against the state. And by the early eighties, the various fundamentalist movements in Algeria were recruiting Algerians, and sending them to Afghanistan to fight on the side of the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union. They were recruited by the fundamentalist parties and associations which were underground at the time, financed by Saudi Arabia and helped by France and the United States. That is where the terrorists of the early nineties came from. Between six hundred to nine hundred Algerians who had some combat experience in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet Union

came back to Algeria after the withdrawal of the Soviet Army. They provided the nucleuses of the future terrorist groups of the FIS in the countryside after the cancellation of the elections.

K: Are there specific incidences of violence by the fundamentalists, prior to the cancellation of the elections, which you can mention?

M: There were women who were killed and some students.[7] There was also the attack by a group of fundamentalists in El Oued on November 25, 1991, one month before the legislative elections, that ended with the massacre of eleven soldiers. This was carried out by Tayyeb al Afghani, an Algerian who had been in Afghanistan. He was actually the head of the city council of El Oued as an elected FIS official. But what is criminal is that Chadli's government did not reveal the El Oued attack to the population before the elections.

K: It seems to me that the real tragedy of Algeria in the last few decades is the lack of good alternatives. What people essentially had before them in the elections was a choice between Scylla and Charybdis, between two monsters. What choice did Algerians really have?

M: The regime of Chadli was pro-West, antisocialist, profundamentalist. It used religion and the fundamentalists to undermine the left. Chadli also created a state which was completely paralyzed by corruption, corruption which was denounced by the fundamentalists. Therefore these corrupt rulers of the state on the one hand and the fundamentalists on the other took Algerian society and squeezed it between them and to this day, this is the Algerian tragedy. As an old woman said, between the thieves, that is the corrupt state officials and the army officers, on the one hand, and the killers, that is the fundamentalists, on the other, if I have to choose between them, I would rather coexist with the thieves. At least they will not kill me, and they will not tell me how to dress, what to do and what not to do. It is not a good choice to have to make.

The state originally promoted gender mixing in schools, and its policy was based on the idea that through the education of women, their status would improve. But, at the same time, within that state there were social forces that worked to prevent the kind of secular, rationalist education that would free Algerians from religious prejudices. So, there are some tremendous contradictions. But, for the fundamentalists, the question of women is very simple. They attributed all the evils of Algerian society to the debauchery of women whom they saw as the prostitutes of the modern postcolonial situation.

K: With hindsight, how do you view the cancellation of the second round of national assembly elections in January 1992?

M: Most of the associations, the foundations and some of the non-Islamic parties agreed that elections had to be cancelled, because otherwise the dictatorship of the FIS would be much worse than that of the mullahs of Iran. During the campaign, during the elections, the fundamentalists used a slogan: "'No charter, no constitution,' said God, said the Prophet." The day after the first round of elections a FIS representative said Algerians have to get ready to wear different clothes and change their lifestyles. In addition, there was evidence the fundamentalists tampered with the elections in the city halls they controlled. One million voters never received their voting cards and therefore could not vote. They knew that certain categories of society would not vote for them and therefore did not send those cards from the city halls. Taking all this into consideration, it seemed obvious that the elections had to be cancelled. Everybody believed, at least among politicized women and men, and in the trade unions, that they had to stop them or otherwise we would have a civil war.

K: Even understanding the nature of the fundamentalist movements in Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front in particular, as an international lawyer I remain uncomfortable with the idea that a military can put an end to an electoral process. As you yourself said, one of the reasons not to go to the second round of elections was to avoid a civil war. But since 1992 widespread violence between the armed fundamentalist groups and the forces of the state has claimed the lives of an unknown number of Algerians—perhaps between fifty and one-hundred thousand.

M: Actually the cancellation of elections helped the FIS a great deal to influence international public opinion. But you have to put the cancellation in context, which is never done. The trade unions, some of the women's groups, some of the NGOs were calling for it. Muhammad Boudiaf, who founded the FLN back in 1954 and was in exile in Morocco, was brought in as provisional head of state. He was given the authority to prevent civil war and to identify and implement a policy to resolve the crisis. He called upon the FIS, the FLN, and other parties to join him in this. Boudiaf realized that without addressing the causes that generated this crisis there was no way out. So he decided to: 1) cleanse the state of corruption, 2) put the military out of politics and 3) organize elections within a pluralist framework. With his dynamism and integrity, he became so popular, especially

among women, youth, and even with some former fundamentalist supporters, that he was assassinated in June 1992. He was shot on live television by one of his guards, an army officer of the secret service. After his assassination, his policies were abandoned by the generals, and the present crisis of terrorism and counterterrorism escalated. If we do not address the causes underlying the crisis we cannot get out of the crisis, but since we did not, we are stuck. This is the rub.

K: Can you talk a bit about what has happened, particularly to women, in the decade of despair in Algeria: 1992 to 2002?

M: There were many hideous crimes committed against women, justified by fundamentalist ideology. For example, the fundamentalist armed groups went back to an old Qur'anic verse which allowed Muslims to have what they call *zaouj al muta* or temporary marriage. So, with this justification, many hundreds of women were taken hostage by the fundamentalist armed groups, especially in the countryside, and subjected to a kind of slavery. They had to cook and wash and were sexually abused. After they are impregnated, they are often killed in an atrocious way. Other women who defied the fundamentalists were also killed. In one instance a high school student who was abducted in Boufarik in 1994 was used as a terrible example to try to stop students from going to schools. The fundamentalists wanted to impose a general strike against schools. They cut her throat and hanged her in a tree in front of the high school of Boufarik. There are lists of hundreds of women who were murdered. Within my own family, I had a cousin who was killed, shot many times, in front of his wife and eight children. His youngest daughter, five years old, became mentally ill because she was covered with his blood.

K: Why do you think there has been this doubt in the international community at times about whom is doing the killing in Algeria, when within the country there seems to be much more clarity?

M: There are multiple factors, including the clumsy and ignorant way, grotesque way, the Algerian government dealt with international public opinion, such as the barring of foreign journalists from coming into the country. But more than that the government did not present and implement a strategy capable of redressing the economic and social issues, eliminating corruption and defeating the fundamentalists in an efficient, legal, transparent way. This led to suspicion of the military and the Algerian generals. There *were* gross violations of human rights by the state, without any doubt.

But not on the same level as the killings, the assassinations, rapes, burnings, the suffering that was inflicted by the fundamentalists, all in total contradiction with the laws of war in Islam.[8] How could somebody come to you and declare a group of people, Muslims, as un-Islamic and go as far as justifying the killing of children, old people, the putting of bombs in airports and streets?

II. Algeria and Beyond

K: Algeria's terrible decade coincided with the heyday of globalization. What is your view of globalization's relationship to fundamentalism?

M: Fundamentalism is a by-product of globalism and the spread of capitalism and exclusion, because these trends create despair, and despair pushes people to become victims of groups who sell them some crazy ideas as solutions. "Islamic solution" is nonsensical, as is the global market fundamentalist solution, which is impoverishing and excluding people. And the latter actually creates the conditions for the growth of more fundamentalism of a political nature. On the one hand, you have the global markets, on the other hand, fundamentalism, conservatism, or fascism. Just like in Algeria, democracy then is caught in the middle of these forces.

K: In light of all this, where do we start to look for solutions? How can the situation of women in Algeria today be improved facing these forces of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and market fundamentalism on the other?

M: I am very hopeful as far as this is concerned. In Algeria, women have resisted fundamentalism despite torture, killing, intimidation. They never gave up trying to work, study, and go out, and they succeeded. Today they are the majority of our students. Over fifty percent of students in the universities are women, which is remarkable. Sixty percent of the successful baccalaureate candidates are women. In the high school population, women represent fifty-six to sixty percent. In the labor force, there are more and more women. But these successes are thwarted by the fact that Algeria today has the highest rate of unemployment in the world. Just over forty-five percent of its labor force is unemployed and the proportion of the unemployed among women is seventy-six percent. Therefore, women are faced with a situation where wages have declined, jobs do not exist, and when they are employed by the private sector, they are exploited and discriminated against. This is the future struggle. I just learned that they have created a new ministry

of women's affairs in Algeria. There are also four women in the new cabinet, named in June. But I do not expect anything from the current government, which is backed by the military, because they have so far avoided addressing the causes underlying the Algerian impasse. Therefore, the struggle goes on, more suffering will go on, but the women of Algeria today are determined to keep on struggling to improve their conditions.

K: How did Algerians react to the atrocities of September 11?

M: Well, Algerians knew more than anybody else, except the Afghans, about the hideous crimes of fundamentalist terrorism. They thought that while Algerians were victims of this form of terrorism, the Western powers, including the United States, were working with these fundamentalists and accepting their representatives in their own capitals, including Washington. In Algeria, every year since 1993, we had the equivalent of the victims of September 11 in the country, that is, victims of the fundamentalists. So, the Algerians deplore deeply what happened in the World Trade Center and the indiscriminate and hideous nature of that crime. At the same time, some add a comment, saying that maybe this will teach the U.S. officials a lesson that they should not play with a snake. It may turn around and bite you. There is also another lesson they want the U.S. officials to take into account. You cannot indiscriminately use force and bomb anywhere else in the world. You actually obtain the same results as terrorism, but from a plane high up where you do not see the impact. The Western powers want to believe that terrorism has no causes, but is like evil come from the devil. It has no historical roots, and therefore you have to isolate it and kill it, like you kill the devil. Terrorism, whether al Qaida, or bin Laden or the GIA[9] in Algeria has historical roots, has causes.

K: There are some who might try to co-opt your criticism of Muslim fundamentalists as a justification for their own negative views of Islam as a whole, their Islamophobia.

M: This thesis is based on ignorance. To reduce the Muslim religion which produced fantastic spiritual traditions, poetry, Sufism, and mystical philosophy and has a plural nature—there are all sorts of Islams—and to confuse it with fundamentalism, is a huge mistake. No one can condone Islamophobia. Fundamentalism is a universal phenomenon. It is not only the Muslims who have fundamentalism, but also the Christians, Jews, Hindus. All these fundamentalisms and all of this fanaticism have to be opposed. To confuse Christianity with Christian fundamentalists, Judaism

with Zionists or the Jewish fundamentalists, or Hinduism with the Hindu fundamentalists or Islam or Islams with fundamentalism is ridiculous. Any religion in the world, especially the major religions of the world, can be used to promote the liberation of human beings, freeing them from alienation and oppression. But at the same time every religious tradition can be used to foster and promote highly alienating, oppressive policies.

K: What do you have to say to those progressives in the West who do not want to criticize the Muslim fundamentalists because of this Islamophobia, or who simply do not understand what a threat these forces pose to their own societies but instead read them as representatives of the downtrodden?

M: It is true that fundamentalism is a by-product of globalization. It is an attempted cure. It is considered by the fundamentalists as a cure, but it is a disease masquerading as a cure. A disease cannot be used to cure societies. Fundamentalism cannot promote internationalism, brotherhood, toleration, understanding, or cooperation between peoples and cultures. Fundamentalism promotes narrow-mindedness, narrow identities, exclusions, frustrations, and hate. Its essence is based on the premise that some people are more religious than others, are superior to others and that you have to kill other people because of their beliefs. You cannot really think that people responsible for this kind of behavior can defend the oppressed and promote human freedom. They cannot. What we must understand is that religions have to be respected. But these religions have to tolerate and coexist with other people who have other beliefs and other values. The fundamentalists do not. Human rights, women's rights, freedom, equality, justice, all those things are very universal. No value whatsoever is relative and can be an excuse for discriminating or committing injustice.

K: Could you talk about the ways in which religious fundamentalism in the West impacts Muslim fundamentalism? President Bush recently said, in response to the Pledge of Allegiance controversy, that "this [the U.S.] is a nation that values its relationship with the Almighty." How does this kind of discourse interact with fundamentalism in the Muslim world?

M: A French philosopher, Régis Debray, called it recently "the return of God." Everybody is speaking about God and this God is almighty, and he knows everything and justifies everything. What is happening is very dangerous. Because of my own experience with the fundamentalists I believe the separation of the church and state represents major progress in human history. What would have happened if the United States Constitution did not

guarantee freedom of religion to all the sects and remove religion from the running of the state? If they allowed a major religion or sect to interfere with the running of the state, they would have ended up by provoking permanent civil war. The separation of church and state is the only way you can promote tolerance, coexistence and democracy within a state. I am more convinced than ever now that secularism is the only way out.

K: Recently there has been a lot of organizing among Muslim conservatives and Christian conservatives to block a progressive human rights agenda in international conferences. How do you understand the relationships between the Muslim fundamentalists and Christian fundamentalists?

M: There is actually a dialectical relation between the various religious fundamentalisms around the world. You take the Muslim fundamentalism, and Jewish fundamentalism which is expressed in the form of Zionism. They actually feed each other with hatred. You take Hindu fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism in the subcontinent of India and exactly the same thing is happening there. You take the reaction of the Christian right in the United States and their denigration of Islam. So, within this framework then the denunciation of each other's beliefs fosters hate and more fundamentalism. Also, the fundamentalists do share a lot of values, including prejudice against science. Once I had a problem with my fundamentalist students in Algiers who did not want me to teach evolution. I tried to work out a solution with them, pointing out ways the Christians and Jews came to terms with evolution. They told me they do not want to read the literature of the infidels. The next day they brought me the literature of the Christian right in America supporting a ban on the teaching of evolution or to put creationism on the same footing. They gave it to me in Algiers, translated into Arabic, and wanted to convince me that biology and evolution are wrong because this is what even the Americans say. This fortified the Algerian Muslim fundamentalist belief in the denunciation of science.

K: How popular are your secular humanist views in Algeria and in the Muslim world?

M: Secularists existed within the nationalist movements of the past and they exist today. After the fundamentalist banning of science and reason in the middle ages, critical thinking was frowned on. But the free thinkers have been trying very hard, and there are a lot of writings, a lot of discussion

within the Arab world. To understand, you have to look at what has been said and done inside the Muslim world. But who gives a damn about what the Arab Muslim press says, about what Arab intellectuals say?

K: Can you talk a bit about what difficulties and dangers you have faced personally for speaking out against fundamentalism and fundamentalist oppression of women?

M: I have difficulties talking about myself in a struggle which actually claimed the lives of thousands of people, in which many intellectuals and colleagues were murdered, even had their throats cut in front of their children. But all I can tell you is that I decided to oppose the fundamentalists because I think they are the most dangerous force within Muslim societies. I have been denounced publicly, I have been condemned to death publicly, and they openly tried to "execute" me. Between 1993 and 1997 I did not know when I went out in the morning whether I would come back alive. But I was lucky. A week before they were to kill me, I went into hiding. They found their way to my apartment and left me a message inside: "Consider yourself dead."

III. Conclusions

K: As Tolstoy asked, "What then must we do?"

M: Well, it's a very difficult question actually. You cannot give recipes for what can be done. We have to keep trying to promote hope and provide analysis of the causes of all this and the relationships between these various factors and variables, internal and external. This helps the framing of a perspective that would allow people to act in hope and figure out how to struggle for a better future.

K: The Egyptian singer Mohammed Muneer in the lyrics of a song from Youssef Chahine's "Al Maseer," the greatest antifundamentalist musical of all time, attests that "Singing is still possible." It is a song of hope in the face of extremism. After all you have lived through, both in the war of independence and in the last decade, are you still hopeful?

M: I am very hopeful and my hope is vindicated by the fact that in Algeria they killed women to try to force them to veil, but women opposed them and the majority of women and girls in Algeria today are unveiled, and they are defiant as ever to the fundamentalists. The fundamentalists are condemned to disappear because they oppose not only hope but also love.

Notes

1 Mahfoud Bennoune, *Les Algériennes: Victimes d'Une Société Néopatriarcale* (Editions Marinoor, Algeria: 1999) 10.

2 Houari Boumedienne, independent Algeria's second president, was in office from 1965 to 1979.

3 Chadli Benjedid was President of Algeria from 1979-1992.

4 FLN stands for *Front de Libération National*, Algeria's independence movement, which became the single ruling party after 1962.

5 Abassi Medani was head of the Islamic Salvation Front.

6 A leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, executed by Nasser in 1966.

7 For an account of fundamentalist violence against women prior to 1992, see Karima Bennoune, "S.O.S. Algeria: Women's Human Rights Under Siege" in Afkhami (ed.) *Faith and Freedom in the Muslim World* (1995) 193-7.

8 For information on these laws, see Karima Bennoune, "As-Salmu 'Alaykum?: Humanitarian Law in Islamic Jurisprudence," 15 *Michigan Journal of International Law* 605 (Winter 1994).

9 *Groupe Islamique Armé* or Armed Islamic Group, one of the fundamentalist armed entities reportedly responsible for many of Algeria's atrocities in the last decade. It was formed by Algerians returned from Afghanistan.