



GREASE
Religion, Diversity
and Radicalisation

Research paper:

How Does Secularism Impact Muslims in the UK?

Ross Goodman-Brown, August 2022

This working paper investigates the ways in which Muslims in the UK are affected by ideas of secularism and analyses what this means for religious diversity governance. Building on research and concepts that have already been established in GREASE, this paper takes an alternative approach to Muslim integration through the lens of secularism.

The aim of this report is to further the understanding of the ideological workings of secularism in the UK. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper interrogates presentations of ‘universal secularism’ in order to illustrate the potential harms and impacts.

The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

For further information about the GREASE project please contact: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

<http://grease.eui.eu/>

GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives.

Contents

Part One:

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
 - 2.1 What is Discourse?
 - 2.2 Contextualising Sources
3. Conceptualisations of Secularism
 - 3.1 Universal Secularism
 - 3.2 Multiple Secularisms
4. Religious Diversity Governance
5. Islam in the UK

Part Two:

6. Discursive Themes
7. Extreme Secularism
8. Progressive Secularism
9. Inclusive Secularism
10. Concluding Remarks

Part One:

1. Introduction

Islam in Britain has been presented as a national issue since at least the infamous Rushdie Affair of 1989. The protests that followed the publication of the *Satanic Verses* embodied a claim to basic liberal equality, amongst other things, that promises at least a toleration and respect for difference. However, this toleration in liberal democracies is often confined to the private sphere and experienced unevenly depending on the religion. At the time of the Rushdie Affair, there was no legal protection against religious discrimination, only laws that banned blasphemous language about Christianity. Islam, it could be said, was privately acceptable but publicly derisible. Legally, this changed in 2003 when religious discrimination in the workplace was outlawed.¹ Nevertheless, this negotiation points to a broader tension which cannot be easily assuaged through legal mechanisms; Islamic practices fundamentally challenge the ideals of secular modernity (Sabet 2008). In France, this tension is hyper-visible and profuse as Muslims are governed by laws and norms that overtly restrict religious practices (see Fernando 2014). In the UK, and other Northern European nations, the governing of religious minorities (overwhelmingly Muslims) plays out differently and irregularly but, as will show, always in relation to secular discourses.

In a dialogical book in which Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz discuss '*Islam and the Future of Tolerance*', Harris states that 'secularism is simply a commitment to keeping religion out of politics and public policy. Your religion is your business, and my religion, or lack of one, is mine. A willingness to build a wall of separation between church and state is what defines secularism' (2015: 34). This strict separation is evident and practiced in the formation of secularism in France (laïcité), but in the UK (and other Western European nations) secularism functions differently. Tariq Modood has described this institutional arrangement as 'Moderate Secularism', outlining how the British state and the Church have mutual autonomy but still collaborate in order to utilise religion as a 'public good' (Modood 2019).² For instance, 26 Anglican bishops sit in the House of Lords and a diverse array of faith schools are publicly funded. This arrangement, however, is not always consistent with the discourse that is produced in relation to religion's role within society. Therefore, what I am investigating is the way in which this inconsistent understanding of secularism affects the governance of religion and, more specifically, Muslims.

¹ Extended beyond the workplace in the 2010 Equality Act.

² For a more detailed explanation see Modood and Sealy's GREASE concept paper "Secularism and the Governance of Religious Diversity".

In their GREASE concept paper titled *Secularism and the Governance of Religious Diversity*, Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy explain that there are three analytically distinct levels of the secular: the metaphysical, the sociological and the political (2019). Their concern is largely the last of these which is defined as:

'The core idea of political secularism is the idea of political autonomy, namely that politics or the state has a raison d'être of its own and should not be subordinated to religious authority, religious purposes or religious reasons' (Modood, 2017: 354).

On the other hand, the sociological level 'relates to ways of living, social organisation, personal and family activities and religious practices' (Modood and Sealy 2019: 6). What this paper attempts to do, however, is to offer an alternative and complimentary theorisation of secularism. One that transcends the analytically distinct levels of secularism to investigate the way secularism is imagined and constructed into a discourse. Like all discourses, then, secularism forms a narrative that establishes a 'particular vision of the world', an accepted reality rather than an accurate history (Scott 2018: 9). This is not to suggest that this paper intends to build an argument against secularism, but it does hope to create space for a secularism that is more inclusive and can more effectively govern religious diversity. This is one of the key tasks of our time, as Charles Taylor states, 'religious groups must be seen as much as interlocutors and as little as menace as possible' (2009: xiii). In the UK, menace so often dominates religious discourse, especially in regard to Muslims.

In a post-9/11 landscape of overdetermined terror and extremism, Islam has become synonymous with danger and is heralded as a threat to Western/European/British values. A number of things are missing or masked by this discourse, most notably: the colonial roots of Euro/Christian-Muslim conflicts, misunderstandings of Islam and the often-unchallenged notion of secularism. Although inherently interconnected, in this project I will focus on the idea/conceptualisation of secularism. This is absolutely crucial because, as several scholars have shown (see Asad 2003, Scott and Hirschkind 2006), secularism is not a neutral mode of governance but values certain kinds of knowledge over others (rational/scientific over religious/traditional) whilst often claiming neutrality. This is to say that Islamic (but also religious/traditional) knowledge and practice is rendered secondary at best or dangerous and subversive at worst. As I will show, this is exemplified by the 'Trojan Horse Affair' in which Islam and Muslims are punished for enacting their secular rights. In other words, the idea of what a secular Britain should look like was in contention with the material realities of 'Moderate Secularism'.

In section 5, I will attempt to trace the conditions that have established the 'Muslim' as a political identity and almost simultaneously a discursive 'folk-devil', as Stuart Hall might say. But first, I want

to emphasize the centrality of what Levey terms the ‘Muslim presence and perceived challenge of Islam’ to any worthwhile analysis of secularism in the UK (2009: 15). As Sayyid explains, at this juncture ‘secularism becomes a means of dealing with the articulation of Muslim identity’ (2009: 199). At the same time, this is not to suggest that this is the only function of secularism or to fall into the ‘clash of civilisations’ trap, but that in this current context Islam and secularism are ‘inextricably bound together’ (Casanova 2006: 21). Importantly, in making this statement, I am conscious of reaffirming several reductive assumptions. For instance, throughout this paper I aim to challenge the binary opposition between religion and secularism that is so often propagated. As Joan Scott makes clear, it is through the presentation of this opposition that certain societal inequalities and pervasive discriminations are concealed (2013). Secondly, Islam is not approached as a monolithic, fixed entity, but a cultural system that varies across time and space. Therefore, when I speak about Islam, it is always with this in mind and overwhelmingly in the British context. Thirdly, I want to be clear that this report does not claim to speak for Muslims or to contain the ‘answer’ but offers an alternative framing for considerations of religious diversity governance that centres discourse.

2. Methodology

This report is based on extensive desk-based research, discursively analysing a set of sources that present certain ideas about the role of religion in the UK. Before outlining the sources that I have identified for analysis, I will explain what I mean by discourse and how I will analyse the chosen sources.

2.1 What is discourse?

In *Sex and Secularism* (2018), Joan Scott discusses how ‘the discourse of secularism’ is formed through a binary opposition to Islam, which leads to, and is reinforced by ideas of Western exceptionalism (freedom, rationality, tolerance) and claims of gender equality. Crucially, the use of discourse, Scott explains, signifies that secularism is not treated as a fixed category but a ‘discursive operation of power’ which must be historically and contextually situated (2018: 4). This is not to dismiss the material realities of secularism but to ensure that the various meanings and implementations of secularism can be tracked over time and space. As Stuart Hall tells us, discourse is ‘that which gives human practice and institutions meaning’, always transgressing the distinction ‘between these two levels of ‘pure ideas’ and ‘brute practice’’ (2017: 31-46). Discourse, as I understand it, is a ‘set of practices and statements constructed through a variety of sites’ (Sayyid 2009: 186). Tying this together, in the discursive analysis that I will undertake in part 2, I attempt to trace how language is used to construct an image of secularism that fixes the meaning of religion and

hierarchises knowledge and values. These constructions are not necessarily consistent or coherent, but these contradictions form part of secularisms power (Fernando 2014).

In order to effectively achieve this, I turn to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and, more specifically, a Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). CDS is primarily focused on the expression, constitution and legitimisation of discourse that creates or maintains inequality and discrimination (Catalano and Waugh 2020). Integral to this analysis, CDS seeks ‘change through critical understanding’ and therefore goes beyond explicit acts of exclusion to interrogate the way narratives of inclusion and progress can exacerbate difference (van Dijk 1993: 252). As well as seeing historical embedding and contextualisation of discourse as a paramount to analysis, DHA recognises three interconnecting levels of analysis: thematic content, macro strategies, micro techniques. The overall objective is to draw out themes through the identification and consideration of the strategies and techniques (Amer 2012). In this report, I focus on strategies of construction and perpetuation which build and then consolidate identifications that are based on the binary oppositions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Wodak and van Leeuwen 1999). These strategies are supported and produced by specific micro techniques that realize and legitimise Manichean divisions. In section 8, I outline three discursive themes that together inform a broad narrative of ‘universal secularism’.

2.2 Contextualising Sources

The sources I have selected are authored and produced by actors from across the political spectrum, demonstrating the proliferation of secular ideals in popular discourse. This point is crucial. One of the reasons that this report is necessary is that it attempts to trace narratives of exclusion that transcend traditional political boundaries and beliefs. I have chosen these particular sources because they each, in connected and specific ways, discuss the way in which religion is, or should be, governed and experienced. In other words, through the discourse contained within these pieces, secularism is imagined, produced and enacted. The first two sources (described below) are produced by seemingly marginal, overtly secular organisations that demonstrate the discourse of secularism most explicitly and extremely. The Secular Conference, for instance, is a marginal event that attracts minor public attention but is, however, supported by a diverse, international set of actors who collectively contribute to and inform public discourses. Similarly, the National Secular Society does not appear to command a large public profile, but this does not mean their influence is insignificant.³ The relationship between marginality and power is inconsistent and complex.

³ For example, the Trojan Horse Affair demonstrated that the British Humanists, although small, enjoyed direct communication with areas of the government.

These sources are accompanied by a New York Times podcast that explores the events of the ‘Trojan Horse Affair’, a scandal that erupted in 2014 amidst claims of an ‘Islamist’ plot to take over a number of schools in Birmingham. This event demonstrates the potential conflict between ideas of secularism, institutional arrangements and conceptions of Islam, capturing the way public spaces are shielded from certain types of knowledge and cultural influences. The podcast, I argue, illustrates the potential harms and dangers of the performance of some of the ideas that are contained within the documents produced by The Secular Conference and NSS. To demonstrate this, I have selected 17 quotes or segments from the chosen sources and analysed them dialogically, thinking through the similar and distinct ways they support ‘universal secularism’. Below I describe and contextualise the chosen sources in further detail.

The Secular Conference- Manifesto(s) for Secularism

The Secular Conference is associated with a series of events that started in 2014 which focus on the promotion of secularism, freedom and dissent/apostasy. The events, which are generally held on an annual basis, are supported (either through sponsorship or participation) by several prominent organisations that advocate for strict (or extreme) forms of secularism, such as: One Law for All, British Muslims for a Secular Democracy, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and Southall Black Sisters. These organisations, as I will explain further in the discourse analysis, rely on and reproduce the idea that secularism is key to societal ‘progression’ and the freedom of non-religious subjects. This is overwhelmingly substantiated through narratives that claim religion oppresses women and LGBTQI+ populations, who have supposedly gained (or been granted) their equality through the ‘long march of progress’ which is inherent to secularism (Asad 2003). As these conferences make clear, it is Islam that poses the biggest threat to secular progress. For instance, both the 2015 and 2018 conferences reference Sharia Law and secularism in their titles and indicate in their agendas the incompatibility of these governing concepts.⁴ Whilst this is widely accepted, when the two concepts are placed in opposition so explicitly, could it be that Sharia Law stands in for Islam and religion, creating an ideological displacement that constructs religion as a homogenous extremity?

The 2014 conference, titled Religious-Right, Secularism and Civil Rights, was accompanied by a manifesto that asserted the need to re-establish ‘universalism, secularism and citizenship’ in reaction to the growing dangers of the religious far-right. The manifesto called for an international front to stand for secularism and included demands for a strict and absolute separation of religion.⁵ This manifesto collected 42 initial signatures from women’s rights activists, academics, human rights

⁴ This idea is generally described as Sharia creep.

⁵ Quoted in full, manifesto available here: <https://www.secularconference.com/manifesto-for-secularism/>

lawyers and others. A transnational, influential and diverse set of actors who share the opinion that secularism is key to universal emancipation. Four years later, for the 2018 Sharia, Segregation and Secularism conference, an updated manifesto was constructed that embodied a shift in language and more detailed/additional demands. These demands include a ‘prohibition of gender segregation’, the countering of ‘racist and fundamentalist discourses’ and the ‘promotion of a universal human rights-based approach’.⁶ On the surface, these demands seem to promote equality but, as I will describe in part 2, the demands are overwhelmingly based on the notion that liberation can only be achieved outside of religious practice. This has two effects: firstly, it essentialises religion by offering certain examples of religious practice (often Islamic) and uses them as indicators of a much broader confinement and, secondly, this narrative exaggerates ‘progress’ in secular spaces. I will expand and contextualise both of these points throughout the report.

National Secular Society Report- Rethinking Religion and Belief in Public Life: A Manifesto for Change

The National Secular Society (NSS) was formed in 1866 and claims that over its 150+ year history, it has ‘always played a prominent role’ in the struggles to bring about laws based on equality and human rights. According to chairman Terry Sanderson, the focus of the organisation today is ‘to build a more equal, inclusive and just society based on secularism and on the application of universal human rights’.⁷ The NSS hopes to achieve this through a range of activities that are based on its Secular Charter:

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular state, where:

- There is no established state religion.
- Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or nonbelief.
- The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.
- The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.

⁶ Again, quoted in full and available at the same address.

⁷ Quoted in a 2016 report that celebrates the 150th anniversary of the NSS (available here- [https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/the-national-secular-society-the-first-150-years-\(1866-2016\).pdf](https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/the-national-secular-society-the-first-150-years-(1866-2016).pdf)).

- The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
- Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
- Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.⁸

These demands aim for many of the same things as the ‘Manifesto for Secularism’, especially the 2014 iteration, but the language that is used is slightly altered and the focus is centred on neutrality rather than liberation. This is a crucial difference that offers an illustration of how secular ideals are employed in pursuit of manifold, distinct political aims.

‘The Trojan Horse Affair’ New York Times Podcast (Episode 5)

The Trojan Horse Affair is the popular title of a scandal that centres around a letter which was received by Birmingham City Council that outlined a plot to ‘Islamise’ a number of local schools. After being picked up by the press, the scandal snowballed, becoming national news that would go on to influence government policy. Several year later, the New York Times launched a podcast that would redirect attention towards a story that is replete with contradictions and misinformation. In the podcast, two journalists (Brian and Hamza) follow a tumultuous information trail in order to discover who may have written this letter, why it caused such a storm and what the effects were on a local and national scale. In episode 5 of the series, Brian and Hamza interview two teachers (Sue and Steve Packer) that had worked at one of the schools in question (Park View) at the time of the scandal. Sue and Steve had testified at a hearing against their colleagues that ‘grew out of the Trojan Horse Affair investigations’ but had never been thoroughly interviewed or had the opportunity to relay their version of events since. In this opportunity, the Packers offer an account in which they act as both heroes and victims, always with the best interests of the children at heart. However, as I will argue in part 2, their actions are steeped in an idea of secularism that privileges certain forms of knowledge and dismisses agency of religious subjects.⁹

3. Conceptualisations of Secularism

Secularism has historically been primarily concerned with the governance of religion. What this means is that, as a system of governance, it must go beyond just the reductive idea of church-state

⁸ Quoted in full, available here- <https://www.secularism.org.uk/the-secular-charter.html>

⁹ Full transcript available here- <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/podcasts/trojan-horse-affair.html>

separation. Secularism is an evolving, dynamic concept that, as Modood and Sealy clearly explain, has developed from an opposition to religion into a set of ideas and practices that continually redefines religion (2019). Since its ‘encounter’ with secularism, Asad argues, religion has been reduced to a belief system that is abstracted from its much broader, complex societal position (2003). Religion and secularism, in this sense, is bound up with liberal and emancipatory projects as well as modernity, which includes colonialism, and secularism offers a lens into the working of this relationship.¹⁰ It is only once we think about secularism in this broader sense, or as I argue, discursively, that the various and extensive functions of secularism become apparent, including its uses in European colonial domination and its historic antagonism with Muslim societies (B. Robinson 2019).

3.1 Universal Secularism

Universal secularism is the term I am using to critically describe a broad discourse that encapsulates a set of ideas and practices which construct, govern and inform what it means to be religious. Universal, here, is employed provocatively to draw attention to the problematic nature of anything that is defined as universal, in that through its connection with modernity and colonialism, secularism has impacted vast swathes of the globe but not necessarily in the way it is claimed.¹¹ Universal secularism describes a process that includes the abstraction of religious expression from cultural context and the reduction of religion to a set of beliefs and it is formed through a number of binary oppositions, such as: the political and the religious, the public and the private and the modern and the traditional (Scott 2013). In a seemingly paradoxical process, secularism simultaneously claims opposition to religion and transcends this opposition through stipulations and disseminations of what constitutes religion ‘proper’ (Agrama 2010). At the same time, these processes are supported by a taken-for-granted assertion of neutrality (Mahmood 2013). As scholars such as Modood have shown, not only is state neutrality towards religion challenged empirically, but it is also practically impossible and disciplines religions that desire state cooperation (2019). One of the main aims of this report is to consider how these contradictions play out in the sources I will analyse and the possible impacts they produce.

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad demonstrates how the recognition of religion, that is contingent on a ‘specific Christian history’, abstracts and universalizes religion through the prescription of generic features and symbolic meanings which are embroiled in relations of power and knowledge (1993: 42-43). Extending this argument, Mahmood suggests that these processes of recognition are part of a

¹⁰ ‘A lens is good metaphor since in its literal sense changing it changes the way its viewer sees the world. And the metaphorical lens we choose are crucial, having the power to magnify, create better focus and correct our vision’ (Carruthers 2018: 8).

¹¹ See Hirschkind and Scott (2006) for more on this point.

broader project of the individualisation and privatisation of religion that attempts to make it more amenable to the rationality of liberal political rule (2013). This process differs according to context and, in the UK in particular, is connected to the neoliberalisation of society. Crucially, as Scott and Mahmood explain, in the case of religion, privatization offers an ostensible religious freedom that says you are free to practice religion privately, as long as these practices are commensurate with the dominant understanding of that particular religion and other societal norms (2013, 2012).¹² This is not necessarily consistent but is illustrated by debates on the veil and forced marriage. The key point that is made by Asad and many of his interlocutors is that the dominant, secularised conception of religion- a privatised and individualised set of beliefs- has a Protestant genealogy that acts to make other religions comparable, measurable and decipherable (Mahmood 2013). Whilst this is not necessarily a problem in and of itself, it must be viewed in relation to the historical and contemporary forms of Western domination. If we take this seriously, then it is important to ask how conceptions of religion disciplines and impact religious minorities.

Furthermore, universal secularism claims the ‘moral narrative of modernity’ to monopolise meanings and experiences of freedom, progress and equality (Keane 2012). One of the ways this monopolisation is most commonly brought into being is through constructions of gender and sexuality that claim an inherent desire for equality and tolerance. As Mahmood explains, images of ‘subjugated’, racialised women are employed to narrate a story of the progress of the West and the backwardness of the ‘other’ who is overwhelmingly depicted as Muslim (2013). This has a number of effects. Firstly, it essentialises religion and homogenises the experiences of religious subjects, often employing extreme representations of religion. Secondly, it collapses the differing ideas of progress and freedom into Western notions of choice and agency. Thirdly, it exaggerates and naturalises these depictions, concealing the fact that vast inequalities pervade secular societies and diminishing the struggles that have ensued for the freedoms and choices that have been won. Each of these are dependent on a linear conception of time. This does not mean that secularism has not played a role in societal improvements, but to say it enables these improvements is ahistorical and obfuscates a ‘gender inequality that is uniquely modern in history’ (Mahmood 2013: 49). Therefore, it is important to interrogate the implications of the naturalised association of secularism and progress and to ask at who’s expense this conflation comes.

The characteristics I have described are not exclusive to universal secularism, often contained within discourses of liberalism and democracy, but what makes them secular is their combined employment and relation to the constitution of religion (Connolly 2006). Furthermore, the description of these

¹² Both authors outline the similarity between the governance of religious norms and the governance of gender norms, in which both offer an ostensible privacy.

characteristics aims to demonstrate the broader ideological functioning of secularism, ‘a concept that has brought together sensibilities, knowledges, and behaviours in new and distinct ways’ (Hirschkind and Scott 2006: 10). Therefore, universal, here, does not depict a consistent and all-encompassing phenomenon, understanding that context specific forms of secular governance inform the material iterations of secularism. But it does attempt to draw attention to the connections between certain secular ideas and the continued epistemic violence of the imperial world. In other words, universal secularism is an invitation to think through the implications of secular ideas and how these ideas may impact religious minorities. Contrary to criticisms of this approach, it does not aim to essentialise or reduce the heterogeneity of secularism, but to broaden the questions we ask and interrogate the ways that religion is presented and constructed.

3.2 Multiple Secularisms

Secularism takes different forms in different contexts. The governance of religion in France (Laicite) differs from the governance of religion in the UK (‘moderate secularism’). These different contexts of religious governance are generally understood to fall under the broad umbrella of political secularism and are dependent on particular national histories. It follows then, that there are multiple secularisms. Multiple forms of the particular, context specific state governance of religion. But, also, multiple ways that these particular forms interact with the universal ideas of secularism that not only demand state autonomy but subjugate religious knowledge. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini explain, it is useful and necessary to identify and investigate the particular ways secularism functions in specific national contexts, but they must always be viewed in relation to the broader universal idea (2013). Therefore, universal secularism and multiple secularisms are not competing theorisations of secularism, they are in fact corollaries that describe both the socio-political formation of context specific secularisms and a broad discourse that travels across space and fixes time.

4. Religious Diversity Governance

This paper, in keeping with the wider GREASE project, recognises the necessity of normative concepts and places effective religious diversity governance as its core aim. This means that although this report is predominantly critical, it is also intent on imagining and exploring what a secularism based on genuine equality might look like. In other words, I contend that in order to effectively and equitably govern religious diversity, there must further develop an understanding as to how discourses of universal secularism impact religious minorities.

5. Islam and the UK

There is often a discourse of newness that surrounds the interaction between the West and Islam, but they share a long-intertwined history (Saeed 2009). Cedric Robinson makes this clear in *Black Marxism* when pointing to the centrality of this interaction in the formation of the Western conception of the superior self (1983). What is relatively new, however, is the number of Muslims living in Western nation states. In the context of the UK, and other European nations, Muslim immigration stems from protracted colonial dispossession, extraction and intervention, captured by Sivanandan in his seminal statement: ‘We’re here because you were there’. Any history or discussion of British Muslims must start with this fact. To not do so, is to further engage in a systemic project of cultural erasure that simultaneously misremembers and forgets colonial horrors and, crucially, fails to appreciate the coloniality that still permeates British life (Stoler 2011). Furthermore, it is not only forms of oppression that are masked but forms and acts of resistance, acts that are fundamental to a shared, more accurate British history. It is from this starting point that narratives of Muslim invasion can be most carefully understood; anti-Muslim racism is a distinct continuation of imperial discrimination that sits at the ‘nexus of religion, race and colonization’ (Walia 2021: 187).

Thinking with this does not diminish the specificity of the current moment but instead acts to anchor this analysis historically. As Modood states, ‘there is an anti-Muslim wind blowing across the European continent’ (2009: 164). Rather than new, this feeling can be described as specific, more virulent and more visible. In the UK, it can be traced to the events of the Rushdie Affair which Rogers Brubaker argues formed the Muslim as a political category/identity (2013). Prior to this, the Muslim signifier was often subsumed by broad ethnic identities (Asian/South Asian) and included in the category of political blackness. There was a shift in the problematisation of Muslims from an inability to integrate to, accelerated by 9/11, to an embodiment of danger (Fekete 2008). As has been well documented, the Muslim and the terrorist were conflated, Islam was reduced to its most fundamental, abrasive form and attached to the racialised body as a pathogenic contagion (Mayblin and Turner 2021). The results were tragic. Muslim experiences of hate crime expanded rapidly, and Islamophobia pushed many ‘ordinary’ Muslims into ‘radical’ practices (Jones et al 2017). More recently, the Muslim-terrorist nexus has expanded to incorporate the criminalised migrant and concretised its position as the expression of otherness.

This is not to suggest that Muslims are solely the victims of the construction and misrepresentation of Islam. Muslims claim and shape their identity through everyday acts and acts of resistance, as the Rushdie Affair demonstrated (Sayyid 2009). Tariq Modood argues that ‘Muslim assertiveness’ is ‘primarily asserted’ through ideas that are generally claimed to be Western, such as equality and

multiculturalism, rather than Islam (2009: 173). This represents somewhat of a paradox; Muslims are derided for a lack of equality ‘over there’ and accused of expecting too much equality ‘over here’. Furthermore, as Saeed explains, it is often because of, rather than despite, their religion that Muslims have adapted to British society (2009). What this suggests is that ideas of Muslim incompatibility are not only exaggerated but essentially egregious, and yet they still pervade public consciousness (Levey 2009). Discussions on and investigations into why this is the case often centre on Islamophobia. Whilst this is important, it is less often considered that Islamophobia is built on, or at least fundamentally related to, certain formations of secularism. And, crucially, as I aim to demonstrate, unchallenged ideas of universal secularism can also constitute the basis of critiques of Islamophobia.

In the UK, the Runnymede Trust’s 1997 report launched Islamophobia into public discourse. As Modood explains, however, the report only described Islamophobia as a form of prejudice, rather than a form of racism (2019). One of the differences, Sivanandan explains, is that prejudice describes people’s attitudes, whereas racism is about the institutionalisation of discrimination into the power structures of society (1990). In a delayed process, more recent reports by the Runnymede Trust and the All Party Group on British Muslims have come to accept that Islamophobia is a form of racism (Modood 2019). However, the delay to this realisation, and the legacies it has left, has led some to argue that Islamophobia is no longer an adequate descriptive concept. For instance, Junaid Rana and Sohail Daulatzai contend that Islamophobia has a tendency to individualise discrimination and therefore, to accurately describe the structural formation of racism against Muslims, Rana and Daulatzai suggest that anti-Muslim racism is a more effective description (2018). The efficacy of Islamophobia as a descriptive term is beyond this paper but the important point is that discrimination against Muslims is widespread and structural in the UK.

For example, in 2016 Muslims ‘suffered’ unemployment at twice the national average and were ‘far-less likely’ to make it through to the interview stage of an application process.¹³ Even though Muslims only make up around 5% of the general population, they make up 15% of the prison population and incarceration rates continue to grow.¹⁴ In fact, this growth of disparity just reflects the growing discrimination that is experienced by Muslims, experiences that are intensely sensitive to national and global events (Sealy and Modood 2020). On the other hand, it is important to state that there are a number of factors and arguments that are put forward to qualify the links between disparity and discrimination, such as language, culture and economic circumstances. Aside from these narratives often being racist in and of themselves, the idea of a feeling of cultural separation or exclusion,

¹³ A study found that applications with an English sounding name were more likely to be called for interview (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-38751307>)

¹⁴ Figures taken from the Nejma Collective Project (see <https://nejmacollective.wordpress.com>).

whether perceived or real, is not supported by Muslims who overwhelmingly feel a strong sense of belonging to Britain (Ipsos Mori 2018). However, the majority of both Muslims and non-Muslims believe that Islamophobia is a problem within the United Kingdom.

Islamophobia, like racism, is not a static concept, 'it changes shape, size, contours, purpose, function- with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system', but what I want to consider is how universal secularism acts to enable its continued production (Sivanandan 1990: 64). For instance, Joan Scott and Christine Delphy argue that secularism discursively constitutes the Muslim as the primary outsider or 'other' (2013, 2004). This takes place through the interconnected realms of gender and race, where the body becomes the space of contention and shifts between hypervisibility and invisibility. The female Muslim body is simultaneously constructed as confined to the private sphere and placed into the centre of public debates on autonomy and freedom, often through the politics of the veil or forced marriage, just as the Muslim man is imagined as her source of confinement. Scott argues that it is through these expedient and contradictory notions of space that the Muslim is primarily othered (2018). I will attempt to demonstrate how this works in practice in section 10, but what I am trying to do here is explain why there is a need to think about Islamophobia and secularism relationally.

Part Two:

6. Discursive Themes

In order to demonstrate the different ways that universal secularism is utilised and reproduced discursively, I have pinpointed three discursive themes that are constructed throughout the various sources I will analyse. These are not mutually exclusive and the lines between these themes are often incredibly blurry, but I suggest that there are distinct presentations which function in specific ways. I have labelled these themes extreme secularism, progressive secularism and inclusive secularism; together they contribute to a master narrative of universal secularism. To be clear, I am making these distinctions in order to show how universal secularism is presented through specific and interconnected techniques.

Extreme Secularism- Popularised by figures such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, extreme secularism argues that religion, which is often presented in fundamentalist forms (see Medovoi 2021), should be strictly confined to the private sphere and any transgression negatively impacts society. There is an assumed fixity in the separation of the public and private sphere which, although applied unevenly, considers religion to be a private affair.

Progressive Secularism- Assumes a relationship between secularism and progress, understood in terms of individual freedom, equality and democracy, exaggerates how much progress has taken place and places it in opposition to religion, often through reference to a modernity/tradition binary.

Inclusive Secularism- In more subtle ways, inclusive secularism reproduces reductive and generalised ideas of religion through ostensibly inclusive statements that seek liberation but always further exclude certain groups.

7. Extreme Secularism

Both the Manifesto(s) for Secularism and Secular Charter demand policies that adhere to an extreme idea of secularism. For instance, each call for the prohibition of religious influence in state-funded educational institutions:

‘Separation of religion from public policy, including the educational system, health care and scientific research.’

Quote 1 (Manifesto for Secularism 2014)

‘Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.’

Quote 2 (Secular Charter)

Quote 1 is broad a demand that calls for the separation of religion from all public policy but specifically education, ‘health care and scientific research’. This implies that the authors believe that these three areas are either the most important in a ‘modern’ society or the most vulnerable to religious influence. As Sayyid explains, there are a ‘set of epistemological arguments’ that centre on the idea that scientific research is contingent on the application of secularism (Sayyid 2009: 188). These arguments are based on constructions of neutrality and objectivity that hierarchise the production of knowledge, devaluing that which is considered irrational. With this logic, it makes sense that the secularisation of education is seen as a priority. However, the strict nature of the demands reproduce the glorification of neutral spaces of knowledge production, conceal the positive influences of religious practices and firmly associate any negative outcomes with religion. This process is exemplified by the events of the Trojan Horse Affair. For instance, in the initial stages of the episode in question, Sue and Steve’s son (Tom Packer), recommended the British Humanists as a

vehicle to express the concerns that the Packer family had about the environment at Parkview. He explains that they wanted to use a third party because of the risk that the right-wing press might weaponise their concerns and conveys that the Humanists are a responsible, secular organisation without prejudice. Immediately after, Hamza elaborates on this:

'He thought of the British Humanists as proponents of tolerance, equality, science, and human rights.'

One of the group's long-standing missions is to eradicate religious practices from British state schools, the regulations that require a daily act of collective worship in all state schools, the reason Park View School held Islamic assemblies.'

Quote 3

Tom constructs secularism as neutral, linking it to 'tolerance, equality, science and human rights'. This, I suggest, is one of the primary contradictions of universal secularism, which simultaneously claims neutrality and a set of universal values. Again, in order for these values to be taught effectively in schools, there must be an eradication of religious influence. Secularism, it is implied, is the sole proprietor of these 'universally' esteemed values. In fact, prior to this segment, Tom explains that what he found 'most upsetting' about the classroom incident was that it took place during a science lesson. In other words, the neutrality and objectivity of science must be protected from religious unreason. Reinforcing this point, Hamza's brother (Usama), upon visiting the location that Brian and Hamza had designated as their headquarters, noticed the British Humanists on the 'murder wall' and claimed he had heard 'very bad things'.¹⁵ Following this broad claim, Hamza offers a short prelude to Usama's elucidation:

Hamza Syed

Usama knew about the British Humanists from his university days.

They're a group that supports secularism in the UK.

They sound innocuous.

Their website talks about promoting reason and evidence and the scientific method.

Usama

I just know that within London and within the university Islamic society community, these guys were known.

It's just an organization non grata.

¹⁵ The 'murder wall' is the name given to the visual representation of actors, produced by the Brian and Hamza, that were in some way involved in the Trojan Horse Affair.

And everyone knows that they're peddling just rhetoric of Islamophobia and doing it in this kind of intellectualized way so that it's not the kind of Islamophobia that you associate with bigoted people. But they do it through studies that they've done to show how backwards the community is and things like that.

So it's the most pervasive type.

Quote 4

Firstly, there is again an association between secularism and scientific reason that hierarchises rational knowledge. According to Usama, the British Humanists are able to use this claim to scientific method, which implies neutrality, to legitimise knowledge that reproduces prejudice. Or more accurately, 'intellectualized Islamophobia'. Interestingly, this accusation is somewhat consistent with a number of the findings from a study that was undertaken by Stephen Jones and Amy Unsworth on 'Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain'. The authors conclude that 'systematic miseducation on Islam' is more likely to be expressed by people from 'higher social grades' who are more highly educated. Differentiating between anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments, the authors extrapolate that anti-Islamic beliefs are commonly held and legitimised amongst middle class populations.¹⁶ Agreeing with Usama's depiction of an 'intellectualized Islamophobia', Jones and Unsworth indicate that this demonstrates a particular kind of prejudice that is distinct from the kind associated with conservative thought, or so-called 'bigoted people' (2022). What this demonstrates is that when certain forms of knowledge are attached to scientific reason and given precedence, it becomes possible for this knowledge to slip into a legitimised form of prejudice. As the Trojan Horse Affair illustrates, this can lead to dangerous assumptions that discipline forms of knowledge that do not conform to reason, objectivity and neutrality.

To further illustrate the danger that can ensue from legitimised prejudice, Brian and Hamza explain the influence that Sue's communication with the British Humanists may have had on the events of the Trojan Horse Affair:

Hamza Syed

Michael Gove and his aides showed up that day with another letter they wanted to talk about, a quote, "letter received by the British Humanist Society relating to Park View Academy."

Unlike the Trojan Horse letter, this letter wasn't murky or fake-looking.

It's from identifiable people who'd worked at Park View and who were vouched for by the British Humanists, who said there really was a nefarious Islamization going on at the schools.

¹⁶ The authors draw on statements made by the sociologist Robert Belleh about religious prejudice being the 'only acceptable prejudice among the cultural elite' ("Reading and Misreading Habits of the Heart," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 190).

The Humanists moved quickly.

They had connections at the Department for Education, so they assembled Sue and Tom's allegations and sent them along.

Within days, Sue was finally on the phone with the Department for Education official, the deputy head of its Counter Extremism Division.

Sue Packer

I think they were just sort of clarifying because, obviously, there was the sort of anti-terrorism stuff, wasn't there, really?

And I sort of I made it clear, it's nothing to do with that.

This is just about human rights, girls being stopped doing things.

But obviously, I think my concern was when children are marginalized, and they're not feeling part of a community, I know that that can lead into other roads, can't it?

And I think that's what they were looking at, really.

Quote 5

Sue's concerns become part of a broader conspiracy about a 'nefarious Islamization' of certain schools in Birmingham which quickly shifts into a national security issue. As I explained earlier, there is a Muslim-terrorist nexus that enables any supposed transgression of public space by Islam to be identified as extreme and dangerous. Sue states that she does not see the relevance of counter-terrorism involvement because this is just an issue about human rights and freedom, but she quickly reverses course and implies that Islamic teachings can lead to radicalisation. In accordance with the idea of an 'intellectualized Islamophobia', Sue draws this connection through a discourse of legitimate concern that is based on understanding, and not prejudice:

Sue Packer

It was really hard because we're not prejudiced at all.

I mean, my closest friend is a female Muslim girl.

And I've got lots of friends.

We both have.

You're just afraid that you'll be made out that you're a racist, that you don't understand the cultures.

And I feel that we do understand the cultures.

But I mean, it was just about this group of men forcing one sort of form of Islam on a whole community.

Quote 6

In a well-worn defence against accusations of racism, Sue claims that she does not harbour prejudice because she has Muslim friends. But, as I have demonstrated and will explain further below, Sue's actions suggest that her views on Islam are misinformed, reductive and potentially harmful. In this section, I have attempted to show that these views are based on an extreme idea of secularism that constructs a strict separation between the public and the private, the state and religion, and does so in the name of neutrality. In doing so, an 'intellectualized Islamophobia' is performed. This legitimised prejudice hierarchises secular knowledge production and confines irrational forms of knowledge to the private sphere, marking transgressions as potentially dangerous. I understand that this argument is extrapolated from conjectural discourse and therefore difficult to prove, this is a limitation I take seriously but I contend that there is value in the illumination of the process and hope to work towards further meaningful evidence in the remainder of the report. In the next section, then, I will build on the arguments outlined above by demonstrating how these constructions are reproduced in alternative and interconnected ways, through the conception that secularism is fundamental to progress.

8. Progressive Secularism

In the 2018 Manifesto for Secularism, the first demand calls for:

'The promotion of a universal human rights-based approach for all, especially women and minorities, including the right to access changeable civil and secular laws voted on by the people rather than unchangeable 'divine' laws.'

Quote 7

According to the authors, a key part of 'a universal human rights-based approach' is access to democratic, secular laws, which should replace 'unchangeable 'divine laws''. Democracy is constructed as contingent on secularism and religion is associated purely with authoritarian governance. In a consistent discursive move, the progress and fairness of the imagined secular state are exaggerated and placed in opposition to a static, traditional religion. In her ethnographic account of the Women's Mosque Movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood challenges this distinction by tracing the formation of 'family law' to the colonial period, outlining that the formalisation of religious practices were forged in reaction to Western domination (2011). This is to say that rather than being 'unchangeable', this example of 'divine' law in Egypt can be traced to the disruption of Western forces and is therefore modern in its very nature (Badran 2013). As I discussed earlier, this points to a key contradiction of the 'moral narrative of modernity' which imposes backwardness on other spaces and races but conceals the historical context of these formations. When presented in this way, it becomes part of what Ann Laura Stoler calls 'colonial aphesia', where not only is colonial violence

confined to the past but alternative narratives are constructed to erase that harm (2011). The point is that binary oppositions between modernity and tradition are often more complex than their presentation suggests, and this simplicity masks the histories and formations of institutional arrangements. For example, the 2014 manifesto is initiated by a complex statement that claims:

‘Our era is marked by the rise of the religious-Right – not because of a “religious revival” but rather due to the rise of far-Right political movements and states using religion for political supremacy. This rise is a direct consequence of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism and the social policies of communalism and cultural relativism. Universalism, secularism and citizenship rights have been abandoned and segregation of societies and “communities” based on ethnicity, religion and culture have become the norm.’

Quote 8

In this case, the authors offer a relatively nuanced explanation of what they call ‘the rise of the religious right’, claiming that states are using religion for political supremacy amidst the failures of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Societal segregation, it is claimed, has been established based on constructed ideas of ‘ethnicity, religion and culture’. On the one hand, this seems consistent with the turn to identity politics that I outlined in section 5, but there are several issues that I suggest arise within this statement. For example, the authors present ‘universalism, secularism and citizenship rights’ as the antidote to ‘communalism and cultural relativism’, simultaneously depicting a timeline of progress that established these ideals and has now seen them threatened and fractured. Progress, here, is linear, contingent on secularism and juxtaposed to religio-cultural movements. As I have explained, when this happens the complexity and contradictions of modernity are concealed, and the harm enacted by secular states is diminished. The majority of harm is produced by the religious-right and the majority of good is claimed by the secular West, this exceptionalises good and bad and spares the intellectual labour of the interrogation of all that exists in between.¹⁷ The ‘abnormality and extremism’ of religious fundamentalism is placed in stark contrast to the ‘moderation and reasonableness’ of the West (Said 1978). As Sayyid makes clear, this discursive construction is experienced most frequently by Muslims because ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is the example that is overwhelmingly cited (1997).

¹⁷ Kelly Hayes quoted in: Winston, Jen. *Greedy: Notes from a Bisexual Who Wants Too Much*. Atria Books, 2021.

This is not to say that secularism cannot function to counter forms of communalism, at its best it encourages arrangements that utilise both non-religious and religious practices. But, when secularism is tied to a reductive idea of progress and universalised, it encourages essentialised views of religion (Singh 2021). A further narrative that exemplifies this point is that of gender equality. For instance, in the Trojan Horse Affair podcast, Sue and Steve are explaining that there had been an increase in ‘religiously motivated’ changes and religious influence more generally at Parkview school. To prove this point, Sue highlights the treatment of girls:

Sue Packer

‘There was a lot of unfairness going on.

Equality had gone out the door.

Everything was very strict, sort of thing.

Girls couldn't have their hair highlighted.

They were encouraged to wear their scarves.

Girls were being brought back from any sort of events where there was a male present.’

~

Sue Packer

‘Women weren't being treated properly.

Girls were not being given choices.

Girls were being dictated to.

There was a blanket rule that girls were not allowed to do things.’

Quote 9

It is clear, throughout the podcast episode, that Sue believes she is standing up for what is right or just and that she had a duty to speak out. In many senses, this is a desirable practice for an employee at a school, but it can so easily shift into ideological combat and misinformed assumptions. Shortly after claiming the loss of gender equality, Brian and Hamza question Sue on an assumption that she makes:

Brian Reed

According to Islam.

Is that what you mean?

Sue Packer

Well, that particular strain of Islam.

Hamza Syed

What strain of Islam does Tahir practice?

Sue Packer

Well, it's certainly the one that says that girls can't take part in activities when there's a man present.

Quote 10

Sue clearly states that there is a 'strain' of Islam which necessitates gender segregation. Whether this is accurate is beyond the scope of this report, but what I want to draw attention to is that together these statements reproduce a binary opposition between Islam and secularism through gender equality. Just as unfairness, inequality and dictation are tied to Islam, secularism becomes the terrain on which respect, equality and choice are made possible. As Sue indicates in quote 9, these oppositions are epitomised by debates and discussions on the appropriateness of the veil, which, often presented as an imposition and an inhibitor of agency, has been at the centre of debates across Europe that counterpose religion and secularism. It is when this happens, Scott explains, that discriminations based on gender, race and religion, are obscured rather than illuminated. In fact, 'when there has been testimony from women in headscarves, there has been an emphasis on choice, on their religiously inspired individual agency' (2013: 35). As Saba Mahmood shows, the combination of religious practice and individual agency fundamentally challenges the opposition between religion and choice (2012). For instance, later in the podcast Brian and Hamza introduce a female Muslim teacher from Parkview, who tells the journalists:

Saddiqa

I was just finding that I was so comfortable in this school, and I always wanted to embark on wearing the hijab.

And I just thought to myself, do you know what?

I mean, such a work environment that it just made me feel like I was welcome to be who I want to be. So to be in a place where it was OK to not have to quietly hide, I was like, I'm just trying to have my own journey, my own little bubble, and my own little place.

And you're telling me, I was forced.

If anything, I was feeling nervous about putting the scarf on because of those opinions, because of the likes of Sue.

Quote 11

Saddiqa explains here that not only is it egregious to suggest that the veil acts as a sign of oppression, at least in this context, but it represents a signifier of comfortability that allows her to explore her identity. This is exactly what multiculturalism should aspire to: a respect for difference and an equal sense of belonging (Modood 2019). Going further, Saddiqa states that it is in fact the misinformed opinions and discourse on the veil that creates apprehension about wearing it, flipping the script of oppression entirely. This is not to homogenise the experience of Muslim women and claim that this is

always the case, but to illustrate the harm that can be experienced when religious practices are reduced to Western, secular ideas of choice and autonomy. As Mahmood makes clear, when gender equality and progress are attached to secularism, new and distinct form of oppression can take root (2013). In the case of the veil, Muslim women are stripped of their agency as Muslim men are constructed as patriarchal figures that are unable to progress into modernity (El-Tayeb 2018).¹⁸

In this section I have attempted to illustrate how narratives of universal secularism fix religion to a previous temporality that endangers the progress (imagined or real) of modernity. One of the issues with this binary opposition is that complex systems of inequality become reduced to religious beliefs. As I have outlined, not only does this have the potential to homogenise and misunderstand religion, but it deflects attention away from other productions of harm and impacts the effectiveness of strategies that tackle discrimination. In the final section of this discourse analysis, I draw attention to the discursive construction of an ostensible inclusion which further draws on binary oppositions and promises of a specific freedom.

9. Inclusive Secularism

As well as claiming to stand against the ‘religious-right’, the *Manifesto for Secularism* (2014) calls for an ‘international front’ to stand together for secularism:

‘For many decades now, people in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the Diaspora have been the first victims but also on the frontlines of resistance against the religious-Right (whether religious states, organisations and movements) and in defence of secularism and universal rights, often at great risk to their lives.’

Quote 12

On the one hand, the authors are right to draw attention to the struggles of communities who are ‘on the frontlines of resistance’ and standing against forms of state and non-state oppression. Too often struggles that are based on transnational histories and geopolitical arrangements are reduced to national contexts, a trend that the broader GREASE project is attempting to challenge. However, this does not mean that claims for international solidarity are without problems. For instance, in this case, the authors of the manifesto have reduced a set of complex and context specific struggles to a battle between extreme forms of (bad) religion and a universal (good) secularism. Firstly, this obfuscates the fact that in each of the regions specified there are a number of interconnecting and competing reasons

¹⁸ This is a complex topic that has been covered extensively elsewhere but, as Mahmood elegantly outlines (2012), it is the very desire to ascribe a limited set of meanings which enables violent impositions.

for oppression and resistance (socio-economic inequality, imperialism, corruption etc) that are related to religion but cannot be reduced to it. Secondly, it is implied that secularism is the antidote to these conflicts which simultaneously masks the continued inequalities experienced in secular nations and reproduces the idea that unfreedom is confined to the global south. In essence, this narrative attempts to include advocates of secularism whilst reinforcing reductive notions of an homogenous 'religious-right'. As Zakia Salime shows in her work on Moroccan women's movements, when binary oppositions between the West/secularism and Islam/religion are constructed, there is a tendency for the drive for social change to be diminished, with groups becoming trapped in divisive battles that distract them from their original goals (2011).¹⁹

In the NSS's Secular Charter, there are alternative examples of inclusive secularism. For instance, one of the points states that in a secular state there is:

'Freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion'

The 2014 Manifesto for Secularism makes a strikingly similar demand:

'Freedom of religion and atheism and freedom to criticise religions.'

Quote 13

These statements appear to desire parity between religious and non-religious individuals, claiming equality between belief and non-belief. However, there are several assumptions contained within these demands. Firstly, religion is framed as an individual choice and centred on belief, effectively abstracted from wider cultural and collective contexts. As Asad argues, this recognition of religion is contingent on a liberal, Western understanding of religion that misunderstands or erases a diverse and complex array of cultural dynamics (1993). Second, this freedom is tied to and contingent upon the acceptance that religion can be changed, renounced and criticised. As I outlined in section 3, this demonstrates the contradictory nature of the privatization of religion which can only be considered a private affair if it is commensurate with societal norms. In other words, the religious subject is able to choose how they practice their religion, as long as these practices are in line with the dominant understanding of that religion. Mahmood argues that this understanding is discursively constructed by the state and a wide range of 'social, cultural and civic actors whose activities promote and engender secular dispositions with an emphasis on a post-protestant hermeneutical stance toward scripture and religious rituals, the retraining of moral and ethical sensibilities, as well as a linear conception of time and history' (Mahmood 2013: 48). Furthermore, as Mahmood suggests, the desire to change and

¹⁹ This is a simplified argument of a detailed book with a variety of arguments and findings.

criticise religion implies that it is static, homogenous and fixed to scripture, imagined only through the most extreme iterations. This amounts to an ostensible inclusion that enforces a process of recognition that potentially inhibits equality.²⁰

This does not mean that religion should be beyond criticism or that certain religious institutions have not been resistant to change in certain contexts, but that particular attempts to include can engender more harm than good. For instance, Modood explains that top-down attempts at inclusion may require a unified Muslim voice and enforce a hierarchised structure. This is particularly problematic in the UK because it is inconsistent with the practices of south Asian Sunni Muslims who make up the majority of the UK's Muslim population (2009). Rather than a corporatist inclusion, there needs to be space for a variety of Muslim voices and the eradication of impositions and assumptions.²¹ As I explained above, when inclusion is suffused with assumptions that homogenise and essentialise Islam, agency can be violently stripped from Muslims, and it becomes necessary for them to be liberated from their confines. For example, in the middle of the *Trojan Horse Affair* episode, after Sue and Steve Packer had outlined their version of the events that unfolded at Park View School, Hamza explains why Sue decided to speak out against the conditions that were being implemented, or the 'creeping Islamisation':

'The Packers wanted us to know that what they had done in the Trojan Horse affair, this years-long effort they'd embarked upon, was largely to protect this group of people they believed were suffering -

-

Muslim girls and women.

In the disciplinary hearing transcript, Sue testifies forcefully on their behalf.

To hear Sue tell it, she sacrificed her career defending a Muslim woman.'

Quote 14

Certainly, as I noted above, it is desirable for members of a society to fight for each other and for fairness. However, there is also a danger that unequal power dynamics are reproduced when you speak for someone, and this can act to further diminish their voice. In this case, Sue has made decisions for the 'Muslim girls and women' without taking their views into consideration. This is not to attribute individual blame but to demonstrate the way that secularism can be performed, and the universal discourse brought into being. Sue enacts a victim-perpetrator reversal in which she becomes the one who has suffered, 'sacrificing' her career for the freedom of 'Muslim girls and women' and

²⁰ Mayanthi Fernando explains how processes of recognition can act to discipline the religious subject if undertaken without addressing unequal power relations. (See also Glen Coulthard *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014)).

²¹ In the UK, this has been attempted.

admonishing herself of blame. Furthermore, within this apparent act of inclusion, Sue excludes Muslim men who are depicted as the arbiters of female Muslim unfreedom. Subsequently, Sue explains why it was necessary for her to speak out, even though no Muslim women themselves had come forward with accusations of discrimination:

Sue Packer

I think it's just because the women aren't very good at speaking out.

I shouldn't say the women, sorry.

A lot of women perhaps aren't confident to speak out in that community, especially female Muslims.

I think there's just sort of fear about speaking out.

Quote 15

It is apparent, then, that female Muslims are not able to confront discrimination because of an inherent fear, the implication being that this fear is intrinsic to Islamic communities and imposed by men. As I have already described, gender difference is constructed to be intensified within Muslim communities which is counterposed to the liberal West who have or are moving past this traditional difference. Again, what is obfuscated here is the complex workings of patriarchy which takes different forms in different contexts and has been historically central to Western imperialism (Federici 2004). Additionally, the image of the dangerous Muslim man, which can so easily shift into the terrorist, is discursively reproduced. As Brian reports below, there were certainly legitimate criticisms of events at Parkview, but Sue and Steve overwhelmingly reduced or connected issues to Islam:

Brian Reed

They agreed these were things that should have been addressed, but nearly all the women we talked to, staff and students, were uncomfortable with Sue being their emissary.

As one student put it, after we read her some of Sue's letters and writings about the school, that's a white person's view of Islam.

And they told us they were offended by the suggestion that they couldn't speak for themselves.

Quote 16

This statement exemplifies the functioning of inclusive secularism, Sue is clearly attempting to act as an advocate or 'emissary', but in doing so she reproduces a 'white person's view of Islam'. Secularism slips into Islamophobia and one's ability to stand up against discrimination is presented as dependent on race. It is beyond the parameters of the this report, but it interesting here to think about the connections between productions of universal secularism and structures of whiteness that function through domination. As Jin Haritaworn contends, Muslim bodies and populations can become associated with forms of discrimination (sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism) in order to absolve

white people from responsibility for historic and contemporary violence (2015). This is antithetical to the values of multicultural secularism that must necessarily take into account experiences of harm.

Returning to the *Manifesto for Secularism* (2018) to conclude this section and analysis, the authors demand the:

‘Countering (of) both racist and fundamentalist discourses whether they appeal to Sharia, fascism, anti-Semitism, casteism or any ideology which denies the universal dignity of every human being.’

Quote 17

Quite uncontroversially, discourses that deny the ‘dignity of every human being’ should be countered. But, as I have repeatedly shown, Islam is placed in opposition to liberatory politics and becomes the primary representative of fundamentalism. In this example, Sharia Law is offered as a system of harm that is comparable to fascism. To be clear, this is not to deny that harm is/has been experienced where strict adherences to Sharia are implemented, but that it must be contextualised in order to prevent it becoming a synonym of Islam. If, as the authors claim, we want to work towards liberation and universal dignity, it must be achieved without broad, reductive statements that simplify complex problems. If inclusion comes at the expense of certain populations then inequalities of knowledge, opportunity and safety are perpetuated.

10. Concluding Remarks

In this short report I have attempted to interrogate the way universal secularism is discursively constructed in three different sources. What I have found is that there are three interconnected themes or presentations of secularism which can function to reduce and essentialise religion, impacting how and where religious practice can be expressed. These presentations are often formed without the considerations of religious subjects and uncritically tied to Western values (freedom, democracy, equality) that do not always accommodate different cultural needs or contexts. The authors of the 2018 *Manifesto for Secularism* offer a provocative response to this claim:

‘Those who see human rights and secular values as ‘western’ simply negate the history of local African, Middle Eastern and Asian struggles for secularism and do not recall that secular values were clearly understood to be the only framework which could build multi-ethnic, multi-religious, plural societies based on the emancipation of women and minorities.’

This is a critique that I take seriously, and I want to be clear that it is not my intention to negate the various histories of struggles for secularism, or to suggest that secularism cannot lead to the emancipation of women and minorities. But I do think it is worth considering whether some ideas that are linked to secularism have the capacity to produce rather than reduce harm. Furthermore, as the Trojan Horse Affair demonstrates in the UK, discourses of universal secularism can inhibit religiously associated projects that improve community conditions and punish religious minorities for claiming their rights. Therefore, it is my contention that we must ask more of secularism if it is going to effectively govern religious diversity governance. Modood and Sealy, in their project concept paper, put forward the concept ‘multiculturalising moderate secularism’ as a way to do just this. To multiculturalise moderate secularism is to seek genuine equality through the recognition and accommodation of difference, to share public space that is free from domination, to actively subvert structures of domination and to engender an equal, and yet different, sense of belonging (2019). A multicultural secularism aims to be both inclusive and progressive but in a way that does not elevate or romanticise Western knowledge productions. Fundamentally, it seeks epistemic justice, valuing different forms of knowledge equally. To make this possible, I suggest, there needs to be an increased understanding of the ways in which universal ideas of secularism are constructed and experienced, a task I hope to have contributed to in this paper.

References

- Amer, M. Mosheer. "The Discourse of Homeland: The Construction of Palestinian National Identity in Palestinian Secularist and Islamist Discourses." *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 117–131.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Badran, Margot. "Gendering the Secular and the Religious in Modern Egypt: Woman, Family and Nation" in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Linell Cady, and Tracy Fessenden, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 103-120.
- Brubaker, Rogers. "Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, no.1, 2013, pp. 1–8.
- Carruthers, Charlene. A. *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*. Beacon Press, Boston, 2018.
- Catalano, Theresa, and Linda R Waugh. *Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Studies and Beyond*. Springer, 2020.
- Connolly, William. E. "Europe a Minor Tradition" in Scott, David, and Charles Hirschkind. *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 75-92.
- Delphy, Christine. *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism After the War on Terror*. London, Verso Books, 2015.
- El-Tayeb, Fatima. "Oppressed Majority. Violence and Muslim Communities in Multicultural Europe," in: Sohail Daulatzai/Junaid Rana (eds), *With Stones in Our Hands. Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 83-100.

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2004.

Fekete, Liz. *A Suitable Enemy*. London, Pluto Press, 2009.

Fernando, Mayanthi L. *The Republic Unsettled : Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2014.

Hall, Stuart. *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*. Edited by Kobena Mercer, Harvard University Press, 2017.

Haritaworn, Jin. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*. London, Pluto Press, 2015.

Jakobsen, and Pellegrini. "Bodies-Politics: Christian Secularism and the Gendering of US Policy" In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Linell Cady, and Tracy Fessenden, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 139-174.

Jones, Hannah (et al). *Go Home?: The Politics of Immigration Controversies*. Manchester University Press, 2017.

Keane, Webb. "What is Religious Freedom Supposed to Free?", *The Immanent Frame*, April 3rd 2012, available at- <https://tif.ssrc.org/2012/04/03/what-is-religious-freedom-supposed-to-free/>

Levey, Geoffrey Brahm. "Secularism and Religion in a Multicultural Age" in (eds) Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 1-24.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Mahmood, Saba. "Secularism and Sexuality" in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York, US, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 43-56.

Mayblin, Lucy and Joe Turner. *Migration Studies and Colonialism*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2021.

Medovoi, Leerom. "Keyword: Fundamentalism" in *Religion, Secularism and Political Belonging*, edited by Medovoi, Leerom and Elizabeth Bentley, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021.

Modood, Tariq. "Muslims, Religious Equality and Secularism" in (eds) Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 164-185.

Modood, Tariq. "Multiculturalism and Moderate Secularism". San Domenico: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2015, pp. 1-13.

Modood, Tariq. "Multiculturalizing secularism". In Phil Zuckerman & John R Shook (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 354-368.

Modood, Tariq. *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism*, ECPR Press, London, 2019.

Modood, Tariq and Thomas Sealy. "Secularism and the Governance of Religious Diversity". *Grease: Religion, Diversity and Radicalisation*, 2019, pp. 1-34.

Robinson, Benjamin G. "Racialization and Modern Religion: Sylvia Wynter, Black Feminist Theory, and Critical Genealogies of Religion." *Critical Research on Religion*, 2019, pp. 257-74.

Sabet, Amr. G. E. *Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance and International Relations*. Pluto Press, London, 2008.

Saeed, Abdullah. "Muslims in the West and Their Attitudes to Full Participation in Western Societies: Some Reflections" in (eds) Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 200-215.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.

Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1981.

Salime, Zakia. *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Sayyid, S. *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*. Zed Books, London, 1997.

Sayyid, S. “Contemporary Politics of Secularism” in (eds) Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 186-199.

Scott, David, and Charles Hirschkind. *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford University Press, 2006.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Scott, Joan W. “Secularism and Gender Equality” in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York, US, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 25-43.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

Sivanandan, Ambali. *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*. Pluto Press, 1983.

Ambali, Sivanandan. *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism*. London, Verso Books, 1990.

Stoler, Anne Laura. “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France”. *Public Culture*, 23 (1), 2011, pp.121–156.

Taylor, Charles. “Foreword. What is Secularism?” in (eds) Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. xi- xxii.

Van Dijk, Teun. “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis”, *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 4, 2, 1993, pp. 249-283.

Van Leeuwen, Theo, And Ruth Wodak. “Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis.” *Discourse Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999, Pp. 83–118.

Walia, Harsha. *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*. Haymarket Books, 2021.

