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# The Perils of Fundamentalism in France

## Interview with Caroline Fourest by Stephen Cowden

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**Caroline Fourest** is a French feminist writer, film director, journalist, radio presenter at *France Culture*, and co-founder and editor of the magazine *ProChoix*. She has been a columnist with *Charlie Hebdo* and *Le Monde* and has written several influential essays on the political and religious right in France and the US. She is the author of a biography of the far-right politician Marine Le Pen and of a number of books including *In Praise of Blasphemy: Why Charlie Hebdo is Not 'Islamophobic'*, *Brother Tariq: the Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* and most recently *The Offended Generation*.

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**Stephen Cowden (SC):** Caroline, you've had a distinguished career of acting as investigative journalist into questions of religious fundamentalism. Could you tell us how you first got interested in those questions?

**Caroline Fourest (CF):** Since the beginning, my interest about fundamentalism is connected to my interest in feminism and gender-based approaches. Because the first group I did work on was the Christian fundamentalist, and especially the anti-abortion movement, who were, at

that time, very active in France, helping the National Front who were my, also, first big work. So, I moved really slowly to the study of all fundamentalism. For years, I only specialised in Christian fundamentalism, especially Catholic ones.

**SC:** This was primarily Christian fundamentalism in France? Which you said is linked to the Front Nationale?

**CF:** Yes. Then I did enlarge to the study of the Christian fundamentalism in France to include the USA, also the pro-life movement behind the election of George Bush. But after 9/11, it became more and more difficult to not work on all kinds of fundamentalism, especially because, for years, many of my Algerian friends told me, "But you need to focus also, Caroline, on what is going on in Algeria, where the Islamists are just basically killing us, and you only speak about Christian fundamentalism."

**SC:** What years are we talking about here around the Algerian situation?

**CF:** It was the black years of the civil war between Islamists and democratic secularists (1991-2002), who were themselves in a very difficult situation because they had to accept the protection of the authoritarian regime, just to avoid being killed by the Islamists. So, it was basically the beginning of the inferno, and the nightmare, we are living since many years now, including in Europe. So, once 9/11 occurred, the only way to continue to be effective and useful on fundamentalism without fuelling the extreme right and the racist groups was to work on Islamism exactly the same way I did on Christian fundamentalism.

**SC:** And how did you start doing this work? What was your early focus when you started doing this work on Islamist fundamentalism?

**CF:** I wrote a book with Fiammetta Venner, who is a political scientist, named *Crossfire*<sup>1</sup> which concerned the way secularism was under fire from Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalism. We also compared them on the question of women's rights, approach to the culture, gay rights, also terrorism of course. This study led us to say it's not a question of religion, it's not a question of culture, it's rather a question of the political instrumentalisation of religion. This is the basic definition of fanaticism; what we call in France 'intégrisme', which is more precise.

**SC:** Could you just tell us a bit more about what that term might mean for people outside France?

**CF:** I know that in English the term used is basically 'fundamentalism', but this is only one sort of religious radicality. On the side of the practice, for example, you have orthodox Jews, you have Protestant fundamentalists, you have also Islamic fundamentalists. When we say 'intégriste' in France, that means it's not only that you are radical on the religious point of view, it's that you are radical on the political view in the name of your religion. And that's what I'm studying. I'm not interested in working on spiritualists, on some cults who want to retire from the world in a very dogmatic way. I'm interested in when the groups who sometimes can appear even less radical on the question of the practice of the faith, but, in fact, are more radical on the political impact, on the society.

For example, if you compare the different branches of the Salafism today; there is a Salafism that is very orthodox, very purist in its practice, which can definitely lead some to Jihad. But some of these communities are living far from the society and are not getting involved in politics. Other more reformist Salafists can be less fundamentalist, in the sense that they are trying to adapt their practice to society, so as to appear more modern.

It is the case of the Muslim Brothers, for example, which is from my point of view, after 20 years studying those groups, the most dangerous

politically. This is because they have a global strategy to destabilise many countries, many societies by many means, at the same time as being very smart and attractive in the media, using very soft, polite speech. They can be seductive, including for very smart students and people who are usually not attracted by radicality. And at the same time they are preparing groups of people to be ready to fight for their cause, which involves them being very aggressive and intimidating toward any secularist Muslims who are in front of them. My theory is that they are the most dangerous because they are the most active in fighting secular and peaceful Islam in Europe.

**SC:** Okay. Let me just take you back a bit to thinking about how we might define what we call fundamentalism. And I think you made a really interesting point there, that some of the most pernicious forms of religious fundamentalism that you're talking about within Islam are not necessarily strictly orthodox, they are not necessarily interested in the highly orthodox practice, but they are much more interested in politics? So if we're trying to characterise the relationship between what we might call religious fundamentalism and what we might call loosely 'mainstream religion', how might we think about that relationship?

**CF:** I think we have to go back also to a very simple test that a part of the left is forgetting when it is about religion these days. It is that in every culture, religion, political movements, there are progressive and there are reactionary elements. Fanatics, fundamentalists, integristes, whatever you want to call them - when their fundamental interest is in the political, they are more than reactionary. This is because they want to bring about a big backlash for all of the society where they are living. And their first victims, and first targets are definitely the secular Muslims. These are the Muslims who want to practice their faith, or sometimes who are just born in a Muslim culture without practicing the religion and want to live in a modern society like everyone, like every citizen, who suddenly find themselves at the centre of a campaign of intimidation, blamed for being

‘false Muslims’, the “wrong sort” of Muslims, “collaborating with modern society”, etc.

And this war really is a war because it is a battle over freedom of speech. In the name of being offended, the most reactionary representatives of a community can silence the most progressive, the one who is open minded and open especially to the critics of the religion. So, this is where the cultural battle for me is the most important, more than the fight against terrorism. Because terrorism will end one day, it will take time, because when ISIS is down, Al Qaeda will be back again and other groups will be back again. But as long as we don’t have this broader and more expansive view of how these forms of politics emerge within the cultural and intellectual background of this fanaticism, we won’t solve it.

**SC:** What you’ve said there might be thought by many people as a reversal of how these things are usually thought about, right across the political spectrum, from the left to the right. Most people and most government policy is focussed on the fight against terrorism. Are you saying that the ‘cultural battle’ is more important than the fight against terrorism?

**CF:** Of course I’m saying that both are necessary, and if we don’t stop terrorist attacks we will lose the cultural battle, alongside the way these events fuel racism, hate, anger. So it’s important that there is, at least, the minimum in democracy, a sort of national consensus in every country of modern society that wants to live in peace, about fighting terrorism. But politicians are really lazy, because they are stopping there, and especially in countries where the communitarian vote is so important to be elected. At the moment that politicians think they have to seduce communities to be elected instead of defending the national interest for all. They don’t address this, also because sometimes they don’t have level of understanding and insight that is needed to do so, because they themselves confused about ‘who are the Muslims’ and who are not. What

they are doing is speaking about the Muslims as though they are a whole united community - while there is an internal war, so brutal, between the fanatics and the progressives and open-minded ones that is going on all the time. And every time that a politician is doing that, they fail to be very clear about the fact that they are not supporting not only the terrorists, but also the fundamentalists. In this way politicians are helping the reactionary, the more brutal, the more violent, the more sexist, the most homophobic, the most unfair, to be dominant at the cost of all of the others.

**SC:** Yes, I think this is a really crucial point you make, which is firstly that there is something deeply patronising about the failure to recognise the range of political views amongst Muslims, but also that there are many Muslims who are directly being targeted by Islamists. It's common for politicians in Britain to talk about 'the Muslim community', implying that this community is all of one mind. So, in a sense that war that you're describing which is, as you say, a violent and brutal war, is something which is unrepresented, really, in the western media, and something which the vast majority of people don't know about.

**CF:** Honestly it is the case. In France we're speaking a lot about it, but while every time I'm crossing the borders and I'm speaking with, especially British colleagues, I'm really surprised the way this is not yet a debate. The simplification of this whole question, especially in English speaking countries, is terrifying. I've done lectures in the USA recently, and while there I spoke with students who are very progressive, very proud to be on the side of democracy, and very, of course, depressed by the victory of Donald Trump, without beginning to think about why it was that Donald Trump did win. Why was it so easy for him to win this cultural battle?

And when you are looking to the level of debate inside the American left, you have the answer. If, when there is a brutal, reactionary movement as

is the case of fanaticism today, which is destabilising, attacking everyone who is not like them, everywhere in the world, and the only leftist answer is to say, "Respect the culture, respect Islam." Every time you have this confusion between respecting the individuals in a very antiracist perspective that I share, of course, but then when it comes to Islamic reactionaries you suddenly stop being progressist and leftist? You are supposed to continue to be in solidarity with their victims which, again, are the open-minded Muslims.

I'll just give you one example about what is going on in Britain and one that I have been fascinated by. This is the campaign *One Law for All*, because for the first time, and especially most ex-Muslim feminists addressed this issue, these are women from Iran, from Bangladesh, from Pakistan. It's not a coincidence. It's because those feminists, coming from a Muslim background, are the first to know that every time they are confused with the fanatics in the name of respecting a community, they are losing their rights, and they are the victims of this patronising way to view the Muslim community.

And if you decide that 'the community itself should deal with those issues', then what does that mean? This can mean that when immigrants, who for example could be a girl coming from Pakistan or Iran to escape the fanatics, who then arrives as an immigrant in Britain, then who will defend her rights when she is in a situation of domestic violence or being under this domination of the male? This leaves her just alone in the face of that brutality, a brutality which comes to be tolerated as part of 'respecting culture'. That's anti-feminist.

**SC:** Absolutely. Now Caroline I want to move the discussion in a way that is talking about another aspect of your work which is very closely related to what you talked about with relation to the weakness of these arguments about 'respect the culture'. What you are saying is that when



people say they are respecting cultures they are essentially respecting a very patriarchal culture. That makes women's lives and struggles invisible. But in your own work, you have raised the question of how one should criticise religion in a more definite way, and I'm particularly thinking about your work around blasphemy. In a recent article which has been translated into English you talk about the 'sacred right to blaspheme'. Could you tell us something about why you think this whole question of blasphemy is so important?

**CF:** I used the word 'sacred' to balance, a bit, the situation where the religious people and the more intolerant religious people are always using the argument of their sacred right to be not offended, to silence everyone who is not thinking like them. So, at one point, I felt that the only way to say, "Okay, we are living both in the same society and expression is for all," was to say blasphemy is a right also. Because blasphemy is an opinion, you're not killing someone, you are not forbidding someone to think or to speak, you are just expressing your view on religion. And we know that every society who is not allowing free minds to criticise religion turns to authoritarian countries.

Every freedom in Europe has been won by first criticising the authoritarian regime and the authority in the name of a god used to silence the others. Especially with regard to France, when Charlie Hebdo was so passionate about defending the right to publish cartoons about Mohammed in a very specific context, I have to remind, maybe a thousand times on many TV programmes all over the world, that it was not a free provocation. It was a way to respond to a specific context where some Danish newspaper's journalist and cartoonist were under death threats. And where the only way to support this freedom of expression in the face of really serious death threats was to say, "Of course we are not following the rules of the fanatics".

There were a lot of people who helped the fanatics to think that the religious rules apply to everyone around who is not necessarily from that religion or is even religious. This is the beginning of domination which has no end. When you start to say that the taboo of one specific group, from their very restrictive view on religion, applies to everyone, then it's the beginning of the end of individual liberties. Nothing less.

So, this is why Charlie Hebdo and many newspapers, not only Charlie Hebdo, stand on the fact that it was important to continue to show the heart of polemic. First because this is the elementary job of a journalist, to inform and to let people think about the drawing themselves.

**SC:** Which Charlie Hebdo definitely did.

**CF:** I know that it was a very, very complex article about the context of the Danish cartoons. Whether they were good or not was not the point, we did not say it was fantastic.

**SC:** It was an argument fundamentally about freedom of expression.

**CF:** It's just a worldwide polemic that fanatics are threatening to kill cartoonists for those little drawings. And we think that our duty is at least to let you judge if this violence is justified, if there is not an unbalanced reaction there. Obviously, the aftermath of the story proved that the unbalanced reaction was predominant and clearly the beginning of something we should worry about. And after the 7<sup>th</sup> of January attack in 2015, it was, at least for a few days we thought, okay, now the world will understand the importance of standing for freedom of expression. But it only stayed for a few days, and the week after the same journalists who were so sorry about the loss of colleagues insulted me almost... not insulted, but were so brutal and violent about the cover of Charlie Hebdo saying everything is forgiven. And the way this material was censored on

British channels, on British newspapers - this was, for me, like killing them both a second time, refusing to do the journalist's job, refusing to inform, censoring... why? To please some fanatics? To please some people who are intolerant and incapable of looking at a drawing? This is the beginning of the Middle Ages coming back to Europe. You don't stop when you are on that path, because it's never enough to please those who are claiming to be offended because they are fanatics and intolerant, and so sensitive. They are happy only where you are following their rules. So, I'm not saying that every drawing is smart or is appropriate, I'm just saying that you cannot let think that the newspaper should act, the media should act as a religious fundamentalist court.

**SC:** These arguments you are putting forward might be those you would think that leftist progressives, feminists etc., would be absolutely rallying behind. Yet, what we see is massive confusion around these issues. Would you like to speculate on why you think that might be the case?

**CF:** Yes. And I wrote a book also, I think it's 15 years ago now, about trying to find an answer to that very troubling question.

**SC:** This book was called?

**CF:** 'The Obscure Temptation'.<sup>2</sup> It was about the temptation of the left to deny those issues, and more than that, to collaborate sometimes with extremely reactionary groups in the name of patronising the Muslim, in the name of being anti-imperialist, in the name of fearing racism which is, to my point of view, the best way to fuel it. I don't think that the extreme right in Europe is growing because of terrorist attacks directly than because of the blindness of the left about it. It's helping them so much to appear to be the only concerned people about what is going on.

**SC:** You're in the paradoxical situation where the only people who will name Islamist terror, Islamist violence, are the right.

**CF:** I don't think it's the case today anymore, at least in France. And honestly, I think that if we did escape from having the National Front in power – including after all the terrorist attacks we faced, almost one every week successful or not successful – it was partly because there is still, in France, a secular movement, right wing sometimes, leftist most of the times, who defend this middle approach of not denying Islamism, naming the problems, and at the same time confronting the extreme right and the racist movement who take advantage of it.

Of course, that is more difficult, that pushes you to be on both fronts every time. To lead two battles at the same time all the time, it's exhausting, but I find it quite healthy and balanced. The difference of the left who think that they will avoid racism by denying Islamism, it's not working because terrorism is there. It's just pushing people to be so angry that they are going to create more hate. Terrorist hate and racist attacks, fortunately we don't have it yet in France, and I hope it will never occur, but nobody can say that. But the denial is only helping hate to grow.

**SC:** But you do have faith in this kind of growing secular movement.? Tell me this: if we're thinking about the, sort of secular movement which is reacting against these kinds of forces, what kind of a political language is such a movement using?

**CF:** The secular movement, at least in France, succeeded in offering a cultural resistance to both the politics of hate and the politics of fundamentalism. But we have no political representation. It's a grassroots resistance, and this is the best situation. But the politicians are starting to be a bit like in Britain, starting to search for a 'cultural approach',

community votes, simplification about identities in a very capitalistic way, or post-intellectual way. Let's say, in a very pragmatic politician approach.

So, the danger is definitely there, even if we did avoid the National Front, we didn't have Brexit, we didn't Frexit, we didn't elect Donald Trump. Because for years, since especially the 7<sup>th</sup> of January (2015) terrorist attacks, I've heard from American and British journalists that France will be the country that will be the most Islamophobic and failing in extremism while it was proved that USA was so tolerant that it would never happen, and that Britain was not the target of the terrorists, and was safe because of the political tolerance. All of that has gone now, because now we know that terrorists don't choose. They don't preserve countries who preserve them.

Britain is in the middle of the Tornado with all of us, unfortunately. And the USA has elected Donald Trump, who is far more extremist than Marine Le Pen is. Of course we still have problems in France. The National Front is still on a high. We avoided them, but not by luck, but by grassroots work. And yes, I do think that this secular movement is for Europe's protection. It's the best way to both avoid people who want to destroy the capacity of people to live together, and people who want to use it as a way to let the fundamentalist groups have power in the name of multiculturalism.

**SC:** So, basically just to kind of think about all of that together, you really think there is a need to go back to those fundamental principles about the right to criticise religion, and the right to free speech and the right to blaspheme? These are fundamental principles, and really, in many respects, they go back to the French Revolution.

**CF:** Oh yes.

**SC:** Yet we're in this paradoxical situation where a lot of those values associated with the Enlightenment have become things which many academics and intellectuals don't defend, they are seen to be associated...

**CF:** They are even fighting it actually.

**SC:** The Enlightenment is presented as an oppressive extension of colonialism. How might we combat those kinds of arguments?

**CF:** First, we have just to notice the irony of that. You're right, many academics today in the name of postcolonial studies are creating that confusion between Enlightenment and cultural imperialism, forgetting that, for example, all the blasphemy laws, which are still sometimes used by fanatics against the progressives in Pakistan or in Bangladesh, are the fruits of the colonial empire of Britain and the monarchy.

So, this is a complete propaganda about confusing universalism with imperialism. Cultural imperialism would be to force people of the other country under economic domination to adopt cultural views, habits, and rights. We are speaking about citizens of their own country, with common law... If not this is actually working like during the colonial time inside your own territories, where there are the exotic, indigenous people who are the immigrants, who are not considered as citizens like the others, and the natives who are supposed to have rights, including to dignity of life. But this is not the same expectation for the others.

In my book *The Last Utopia*<sup>3</sup> I speak about the threats on universalism. Most of those attacks are coming from academics, and also authoritarian states helping them in the United Nations. They are creating that confusion between, again, universalism and imperialism, or tolerating fundamentalism in the name of multiculturalism. I'm believe in secular universalism, which is the most effective way to be equal, to respect

equality, to fight against domination. It can be cultural domination, it can be economic domination, it can be gender domination. And for all.

**SC:** Yes. Can I just ask you how you feel, as a feminist, if there is a specific way as a feminist you need to talk about universalism?

**CF:** Of course, there is a need today to refresh memories about the fact that feminism is a universalism and has always been a universalism. Feminism is the best way to say human gender, humankind, must respect equality for all. For centuries we had to fight against the official patriarchal defenders. It was already a very huge battle, and at the moment I think patriarchy is a very smart ideology, which always finds someone to defend it. At the moment, where feminism starts to win more and more battles, it's at this moment that we start to see people defending patriarchal attitudes in the name of feminism itself, using the word feminism to fight feminists.

**SC:** Could you give us an example of that?

**CF:** I'm thinking about all the academics and feminists who twisted the question of intersectionality, which was supposed to combine the antiracist movement and the feminist movement, to articulate it, to do the deconstructive work against dominations. It tends to be, today, a tool in the hand of some people who have never been part of the feminist movement before, not fighting for the right to abortion, not fighting for gay rights, not fighting for anything, who just appear to say that they are feminist in the name of fighting the other feminists, accusing them of being white, defending the veil and defending prostitution.

So, basically it says that antiracism is first. And as long as antiracism is first, we are not supposed to defend women's rights. Why? This is the cleverest way to break the feminist movement and the resistance to patriarchy in the name of tolerating culture and the name of not fuelling racism.

Unfortunately, that's really working on the young generation. I have students in Sciences Po, and I have met students in many countries around the world at conferences and lectures... I am really worried about the way they are confused about those issues, the way they are less and less political, less and less intellectual, and more and more attracted by this identity politics.

But actually, what happens here is that you reproduce segregation, you reproduce all the racist stereotypes because you think, for example, that a white feminist is not supposed to speak about black issues. So, that means that white people cannot support the antiracist cause. I have met students who are gay being accused by transgender students of being transphobic just because they wanted to debate about whether it is too soon for a 10-year-old to initiate gender transformation? And the transgender people on the campus were saying, "We feel offended, we want a safe room, we want to be separated from those gay, feminist, lesbian girls, because we don't want to hear about that." This is just segregation reproducing stereotypes and forbidding everyone to have a common debate.

When you cannot debate together, you don't live together. It's not a society, it's becoming a capitalistic parking lot where ideology is dead, but identity approach replaces it. But replaces it in the direction of what? Confrontation between minorities, while all this time Donald Trump is waiting, and the right wing is giving the impression of addressing the real issues. It's a nightmare for the left.

**SC:** You're absolutely right. This whole emergence of identity politics and the takeover of that paradigm has really had a detrimental effect, particularly on the younger generation of activists who are confused and who don't have the understanding. It's also related to what you talked earlier about the lack of a political language, about universality.



**CF:** It is related to the end of ideology. And don't get me wrong, I'm coming from a generation, 20 years ago when I started to be a gay activist and feminist activist, my nightmare was the exact opposite. I was inside the left, where they were so obsessed by social questions that they didn't want to hear about gender questions or homophobia. It was not an issue; it was supposed to be second in the list of the priorities. We were supposed to 'wait for the revolution'. In 20 years, we pass from one extreme to another. So, the point I try to make is not: forget about those questions at all. But keep it in a universalist way when you articulate the fight against domination, all kinds of domination. We are supposed to defend the right to progress and not back the backlash, not helping the reactionary, not helping the fundamentalist in the name of identity, respecting identity.

**SC:** So, in a sense, what we're really taking about is reconstructing universalism.

**CF:** Yes, or making it... Universalism is always a promise, it's never achieved. The universal declaration of rights is the most important document which brings together so many nations, so many cultures, so many people around a very simple text which is perfectly clear about the fact that there is no citizen above any other. And no one loves to be tortured, and no one loves to be killed or exorcised or having female mutilation. Nobody likes it. But it's a horizon, as we say in French, meaning it's a view you are watching from afar and you want to reach one day, it's a direction. It's a goal.

**SC:** A process?

**CF:** It's a process... But if you are sure you will never reach it, you are sure to quit. And this is what, actually, some of the political left is doing, quitting the quest of progress in the name of being elected by communities.

**SC:** I want to move the discussion away from those sorts of broader political questions and think about some of your specific areas of research. You've written books both on Tariq Ramadan and Marine Le Pen. I'm really interested in the way you've talked about your work evolving out of concerns with originally Christian fundamentalism, and then you went to look more at Islamist fundamentalism through Algerian colleagues who were telling you about what was going on there.

**CF:** First, yes, they are very similar in some way, Marine Le Pen and Tariq Ramadan, but they have a lot of differences too. The Muslim Brothers, the movement where Tariq Ramadan grew up, and this is the ideology he is promoting among the European young. Muslim Brothers are the National Front of Islam, they are not neo-Nazis, they are not Salafists, Jihadists, they are not stupid terrorists. They are just very, very reactionary people who think that the law is coming from the Qur'an, that the soldier of that law should align the law of their country more and more with Islam's approach. I'm quoting Tariq Ramadan in certain circles, of course he's never saying that on TV.

Marine Le Pen also tried to not say everything she has in mind when she wanted to be elected. Of course, she is never saying, "I'm racist, my main goal of my politics is to do a xenophobic politics." She is saying that she wants to defend secularism, the country, to be a patriot, but when you go behind you see that the National Front has not changed, that its only obsession is immigration and xenophobia as a solution that they have to offer us.

So, on those two figures my main work was to basically do what some journalists never do, that means realising that what Marine Le Pen or Tariq Ramadan are saying in the media and on TV is enough. To do an investigation, to confront those talks with what they really do on the ground, to show to the audience – who can be sometimes tempted into

believing them – who is around them, what is the background? What are the references that infuse that official speech? And it's a lot of work. And I understand why some journalists don't take the time to do it, because I did work on the National Front since 98, and on Marine Le Pen only... it took me, with Fiammetta Venner, months and months to establish exactly what was her ideology, and what could be the politics she would really do once she is elected, if she is elected.

Ramadan was worse. He is more than a politician. I have never seen a politician who can compete with him in terms of hiding his agenda. He has more than double speech, or a double personality. He has, really, a capacity to say whatever people want to hear, and at the same time is giving some glimpse of the fundamentalist agenda to his real audience. And it took me years to be able to confront that, to find proof of this double speech.

I did it in a book which was a nightmare for him in France, as the book about Marine Le Pen was... it really pissed her off a lot. Since then, honestly, my life became quite difficult because criticising Tariq Ramadan is far worse than fighting Jihadists, sometimes. This is because this involves years of harassment on the web, people who are accusing you of being Islamophobic, just because you criticise Tariq Ramadan and his double speech, and then you prove it, as you did with many fanatics before from the Christian world. And also, because he is always changing his sentences in a way to be not caught.

Finally, he is caught now. We really did see his double game, and the fact that he is serving a very, very fundamentalist agenda. There was one fact which at the time was not easy to prove and this involved his relationship with the Qatar Foundation of Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Tariq Ramadan always tries to look modern in his way as a way to promote fundamentalist Islam. But it comes to theology he is under the guidance of Yusuf al-Qaradawi,

who is the guide of the Muslim Brothers, who has written books which are very clear about the fact that, for example, we have to burn the homosexuals to clean the world from their impurity.

But now, today, Tariq Ramadan is officially employed by the Institute of Yusuf al-Qaradawi. He is his chief theological and business chief. So, there is no doubt about that at all now, except many people don't want to see that.

**SC:** You touched on the dangerous and violent nature of confronting Islamist fundamentalism. Would you like to say something about why you think it is so violent? And that there is this very direct danger of people who criticise it. And then how would you characterise Christian fundamentalism in relation to that?

**CF:** It is not that Christian fundamentalists are angels. I mean when you are working on the anti-abortion movement you receive death threats. My partner did receive a real heart of beef in blood by the post office, and there is some crazy Christian fanatics who can kill doctors, who can kill feminists for supporting abortion. Just the level of threats is absolutely not the same in terms of scale, because the number of crazy guys who can kill in the name of religion is far more, today, in the world, in the name of Islam.

When you have more countries less secularised and more Muslim countries are not well secularised because the nationalists, the Arab nationalism, used religion to control their opinion, for years. So, when Arab nationalism failed, and it was authoritarian, the only opposition that was organised was in the mosque, the only place where you can speak freely without fearing the police. And of course, it's the case in Egypt, it's the case in Algeria also. So, you have generations who have been pushed in this alternative of choosing Islamism instead of Arab nationalism.

**SC:** That's the historical context.

**CF:** Historical explanation for the scale of Islamism today. They win in authoritarian regimes because they are the opposition, and as adversity grows, they grow as a grassroots movement. And they win inside open societies where they use the open mindedness of their society to grow too. You join the two and you have the success of the Islamists internationally today, especially in a world where politics has forgotten the taste of being ideological, and what it means to believe in something.

So, this is why, today, when there are the young, and they have the same needs to believe in something, they need a goal. They need to feel alive, they need sense to their life. The Islamists give them that, because they give them a strong ideology to follow. They give the sense that if you go to Syria today to do the Jihad you will have sexual slaves, a colonial palace that you take from the indigenous Syrian people...

Universalism and secularism are the only ways to not fail into the trap of nationalism and racism. As long as you don't accept addressing another important ideology, Islamism will continue to recruit new young people.

**SC:** Thank you very much.

**CF:** Thank you, thanks to you.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Fourest, Caroline and Fiammetta Venner (2003). *Tirs croisés: la laïcité à l'épreuve des intégrismes juif, chrétien et musulman* [Crossfire: Jewish, Christian and Muslim fanaticism against secularism] (in French). Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- <sup>2</sup> Caroline (2009). *La tentation obscurantiste* [The Obscure Temptation] (in French). Paris: Grasset.
- <sup>3</sup> *La dernière utopie: Menaces sur l'universalisme* (2009) [The Last Utopia: The Threats Against Universalism] Paris, Grasset