

## Faith, Feminism and Fundamentalisms: *Theo Sowa* in plenary discussion with *Everjoice Win*, *Fatou Sow* and *Musimbi Kanyoro*

This discussion of the nexus of religion, fundamentalisms and feminism on the continent took place at the 4th African Feminist Forum in Harare in April 2016.

**Theo Sowa:** These topics [the intersections of faith, feminism and fundamentalisms] have really dogged our movement in many ways. We live on a continent where religious fundamentalisms as well as other types of fundamentalism (political, economic, social and cultural) have continued to undermine the achievement of our rights. Yet we have a movement where many women are religious and many are secular. We've even lost feminists on the basis of our inability to discuss and sort out these issues. As Hope Chigudu says in one of her books, today "we're going to discuss the undiscussable". EJ, why is it important to talk about faith and fundamentalisms now?

**Everjoice Win:** Spiritualism is very important for many of us. Faith is important for many of us. Many of us participate in organised religion. These processes... play different roles in terms of our spiritual and emotional wellbeing. They provide a social support system. I'll share an anecdote from my mother. She says these are the two reasons she goes to church: "One, to simply be reminded to be a good person and two, so that on the day that I die, my family won't have to do a lot of work. One of these women from my church can do it... they will be there for me".

Christianity is the religion I was raised in and the one I know. Increasingly on our continent, more and more churches are playing an economic role with the social safety nets some of us used to have and no longer have because our states are failing us. The church becomes the place you go to fill that gap. For some of us, it's an informed choice – something you were raised in. I don't completely subscribe to Karl Marx's assertion that "religion is the opium of the people". For some people, it serves that purpose (an equivalent to smoking your spliff). For others, it's a matter of spirituality and belief in a greater being. For me, it's a personal choice – a conscious choice I've made as a feminist and as a woman.

However, presently I have found some challenges with organised Christianity, in particular, on our continent. We are seeing a rise in very conservative Christianity – a type we haven't seen for a very long time. Very conservative in so far as going back to some of our old traditional value systems that tell women certain messages about how we should behave, what our place in society is, and these are battles that we thought we had [already] fought. Some of you will remember the Churches' Decade for Solidarity with Women after the Nairobi Conference. So many of us had worked with churches to try and advance women's rights. Now we are seeing this rise of a very conservative brand of Christianity with very negative messages for women.

We are also seeing quite a strong connection between church and state. Increasingly, religious Christian institutions are having an impact on laws, policies, policymakers, behaviours and attitudes. In Zimbabwe, during the constitution-making process, there was an attempt to put in the Constitution a phrase that says "Zimbabwe is a Christian country". What does that mean? It's more than a matter of a phrase. What does that mean in terms of human rights, in terms of who gets included in that phrase, bearing in mind the diversity we have? It would have had quite serious implications for human rights for women and various citizens in the way the state would have implemented that Constitution. Increasingly, around elections, we see how governments use religion as reasons to persecute and prosecute groups of people that they don't like – sex workers, LGBTI persons, single women, single mothers like me. This is how it happens and Christianity gets mobilised, particularly around elections, as a way to identify political parties who have fallen out of favour.

The other thing for me is around prosperity gospel – but prosperity for whom? The message that comes out of this gospel is that, if you are not prospering, it means you are not praying hard enough. What does that mean to a poor woman who is trying her damn hardest to fight against the structural causes of that poverty? We're taking women, in particular, and poor peoples' minds away from the fight they need to fight – to challenge these oppressive systems – by telling them that it is their fault. What happened to the liberation theology of the 1990s that taught us that we can actually use religion as a tool for empowerment? That is one of the key things. The other thing around prosperity gospel is that it is very individualistic and not about the collective good. It's about you as an individual and your household

who shall prosper – to hell with everybody else. This links with the neoliberal capitalist model that says, “You will do it and you will be okay as long as you work hard as an individual. If you don’t, that’s your problem”. That nexus between religion, the economic model and system is concerning, because it is not a tool for liberating people and people’s minds.

**TS:** Musimbi, I’ve heard you speak before about how Africa is “notoriously” spiritual. How do we as feminists work within – and deal with – religious structures that we know have been discriminatory and oppressive? Over the past few years, religious structures have been behind most of the conservatism on our continent, pushing legislation that we have been fighting against for a long time. How do we navigate that?

**Musimbi Kanyoro:** I’m very comfortable as a woman of faith in the sense that I believe there is something to religion. I can shape it to make it respond to what I believe in. That’s very important for me. I was born in a Quaker family and Quakers don’t preach to people. So, I didn’t really know what it meant to have people preaching to you until I was in high school and university. That’s when I learned the kind of religions we are talking about – those organised around telling people how to behave. Our continent is extremely religious. I have not been to any place where I’ve found people in masses saying that they didn’t believe in something. That brought me to a reality of saying, if I have to deal with liberation, social issues and justice, I will have to find a way to make religion part of it. Religion does not just come from somewhere heavenly but it has everything to do with economics, politics, social fractures and neighbourliness. Religions have not *become* conservative, religions have always been conservative and very little has changed. But every time one experiences that particular religion in a particular way, you discover your own way of defining conservatism. Religious stories frame their messages in terms of making what sounds conservative to one person a value of most importance to another person. For example, the current conservatism will do something – and it’s been there for a long time – about defining family. In our societies, families are a very important thing. When religions are organising and defining family, people get attracted to how they’re defining that family.

Religions tend to define what they see as morality. As long as people of that generation or locality believe that that’s how morality should be defined, they are comfortable with it. But count one or two who actually question that, then you start to see what fundamentalism or conservatism

is. Religions that are fundamentalist believe they are giving the fundamental truth. They define truth based on how they see truth at that particular time for themselves. That's very dangerous, because this means that religions are double-edged swords. I, personally, became a feminist by finding things that I was brought up to believe in as completely unhelpful to my work on justice and feminism. Some things I found helpful were the possibilities of supporting those in struggle. Religions do it really well.

I also found that the very scriptures that people believe in do not bring much dignity to women. Many unnamed women are in the scriptures of the Bible – just like in our society today. We do things, they are not heard. I can raise that and say that the traditions we believe in do exactly the same, modeling what has happened. There is so much violence – rape and incest. There are certain passages in the Bible, things that were not explained to us when we were reading the scriptures. I read these and became more aware of the extreme injustices toward feminist theologians.

Any scripture records the history of a people at a particular time. They can take it as a model or a message being passed down at a particular time. I have to be able to analyse and choose what is important for me and my generation. It is important for feminists not to shun religion and run away from it, because it's going to stay forever. But let's define mechanisms and tools to analyse religions and the holy scripts we receive. That is what governs a majority of the communities because they are told that "your scriptures read this way". The leaders act like military [heads of] state, they say, wholesale, "this is what you have to march and go on". I'm very much in favour of those feminists who subscribe to feminism by using the tools that they made and *not* the master's tools.

**TS:** Fatou, you've spoken before about the extent to which analysis of religion tends to strengthen women's knowledge of religious texts. Does it fail or succeed? What is your experience?

**Fatou Sow:** I would like to tell you what my stance is on religion, as the other panelists did. They strongly defined their identities, and stated that they were Christian women and believers and practicing. I am Peul (Fulani), but culturally Wolof, the major ethnic group in Senegal. I am Senegalese. I was born and raised in a Muslim family. I was taught to recite the Qur'an during my childhood. My parents made me take Arabic as a foreign language in high school. They thought reading and speaking the language would help

me to know my religion better. I can say that I am culturally Muslim. I am a feminist sociologist and retired from academia after a four-decade career. I am a wife, I am a mother, whose status and roles are impacted by religious norms said to be “derived” from Islam. All these features strongly make up my identities. So, religion is also a part of my core identity. I use one layer of my identity or the other, depending on the situation I find myself in, when I have to define who I am, and have to think or to act.

If someone were to ask me if I believe in God, I would say that’s none of their concern. It’s my own business. I make this comment because there is a growing tendency today to be questioned, as a Muslim, about one’s personal religious practices, such as the observance of daily prayers, Ramadan, or to manifest openly one’s faith, even religious zeal. In Europe also nowadays, because I am Muslim, I am often questioned about the veil, the radicalisation of Muslim groups, about Islam’s compatibility with modernity, and so on.

So, for me, faced with organised religion and its discourses, which become more and more widespread in public spaces, I don’t begin by playing the role of a Muslim woman. I know that thinking about God might help to create a comfort zone for many peoples, for instance in cases of moral panic, distress or sickness. Being Muslim, without metaphysical anxiety or exaltation, is a comfortable position. “Insha Allah!”, we are used to saying.

Now, what about reinterpretation of Islam? This is an extremely important issue. Knowledge about the religious texts helps sustain one’s faith. In a country like Senegal, as well as in many societies in Muslim contexts, women are mostly taught basic verses and prayers in Arabic, a language not very many devout Muslims speak and understand. That’s all the knowledge they have and use in their beliefs and daily practices. They seem to be quite comfortable with it, until that knowledge starts to be manipulated over time, by various Muslim leaders and groups. Muslim discourses over the past four decades have become more and more conservative and coercive on women’s position and rights within society. Muslim women cannot protect themselves against this conservatism or radicalism if they don’t know about the religious texts, and cannot detect their mis/interpretation by groups who claim to be knowledgeable. Sometimes, men are more knowledgeable, or women think they are, because leading the prayers is their duty. This gives men the authority to interpret the rules and norms.

This question of interpreting Qur'anic discourses has been a longtime debate within the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). I'm a member, and the current director. If our members are predominantly Muslim, it is because we live predominantly in Muslim contexts or in societies with large Muslim groups. We have members of different faiths, and some who don't claim a faith. The networkers don't need to be of Muslim faith or practicing believers in any faith, because WLUML is not a faith organisation. We came together around the issue of religion and decisions made for women in the name of religion. Those decisions are political within the society, and with state and non-state actors. WLUML started its initiative during the early eighties, with the rise of what has been called "political Islam". As stated in its preamble, WLUML "provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam".<sup>1</sup> I trust that believers, whatever their faith, should have the capacity to know about the religious texts, and understand them in order not to follow religion blindly. For African societies where Islam is the predominant religion, those texts are in Arabic. Their translation and interpretation in local languages are generally done by men, and are often problematic.

When I speak about Islam, I refer mainly to Muslim cultures, not one culture, but the various cultures in which Islam is embedded, and which shape Muslim identities. Our experience of WLUML as a global network within the Muslim world shows that, even if we share the same religion and its grounding principles, we have so many different experiences, behaviours, practices that the concept of Ummah seems more of a dream of a unifying world than a reality. This is a challenge to the construction of a "Muslim woman", which has become an integral part of the construction of "Muslimness" in general. I do not claim to be an exegete of the Qur'an and the hadiths, but I surely can think about the fate of women in the name of Islam. I can also relate to the ways in which various cultures customise religion: this is the background of all our debates.

Religion for me is intimate and personal. It is true that I live in a country where spirituality and religion are present. I agree that there aren't many places in the world where spirituality and religion, although different, don't have some space. Religion should also remain in people's personal space, but when it is factored into politics and affairs of the state, then problems occur. We wonder, in whose interests does organised religion work?

In order to know about my citizen's rights, and exert them, I don't need to refer to any religious book, but to the Constitution and other "secular" sets of laws elaborated, and adopted in parliament, after debates with people. In order to be a good Muslim, I need to know about the Qur'an, its principles, and rituals. I don't need religion to be a committed citizen. It is a big issue to have religion becoming political and using radicalisation to control its followers and seizing (always political) power. What should be taken into consideration isn't so much religion, but the abuses by people who claim to be of the religion and who impose their patronage over individuals and communities. Sometimes, religious leaders control faith to the extent that religion seems to no longer exist, because it has been manipulated, changed, transformed, in order to seize power.

TS: All three of you, in some ways, are talking about religion and people's individual lives but also the danger at the intersections of religion and the state. One of the things we've seen on the continent over the past few years has been the role of religious funding of particular social and political activities. In Ghana, we had a Christian minister who was one of the president's closest advisors. In Uganda, some have been able to trace funding and influence around the promotion of the anti-homosexuality bill directly to conservative churches in the United States. How do we navigate that? How can we say, on the one hand, this is personal, but on the other hand, we're seeing increasingly the power of religion to attempt to change our constitutions and legislation into discriminatory policies?

EW: I agree with Musimbi: most of the organised religions we have on the continent have always been conservative. Let's not forget that Christianity, in particular, came out of the colonial project. It was used to justify colonialism and slavery. That still continues. That's why we are interrogating this as feminists in this current, historical moment to say: What is the place that religion is taking and how is it mobilised in ways that are not empowering, in ways that are taking up space, in ways that are mobilising resources and people to oppress groups?

Many of us have read the work of Jessica Horn in documenting the impact of the US Bible belt on PEPFAR (the US President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief) – the funding for HIV/AIDS in Africa – and we have seen and are living the effects of that today. Those are some of the things we are saying as feminists, that we need to have a conversation and challenge this. It is beyond

just saying, “It is my personal choice”. To the extent that the personal choice begins to impinge on the collective rights of others, the justice system, the constitutions – for me this is where the issues are. This is how someone put it the other day: Christianity came with the colonial project, but at certain times, it was Christianity that stepped in to provide for the welfare of black African people. Whether it was schools or hospitals – many of us are products of Catholic and Anglican schools. There are hospitals that a lot of those missionaries set up in our countries. But what we have seen, increasingly, is that some of us grew up with the church taking care of people. Now we have people taking care of the church.

How do you justify a pastor driving five Mercedes? One human being leading a congregation of 200,000 people? In a country with the levels of poverty like Nigeria, how do you justify an individual owning a private jet? Yes, it is a personal choice – we can’t deny that – but more and more research is showing that actually these churches are attracting poor people who are then using all of their resources to fund individuals.

**MK:** The religions haven’t changed. The players have changed. They are using exactly the same tools of development, schools and health services to bring to our communities that are impoverished. Especially today, we notice more, because there is more disruption and lack of peace. There are a lot of other things that are happening, but the religions themselves haven’t changed. They are using the exact same tools.

**TS:** Fatou, that notion that religion hasn’t changed and is using the same tools, we know about that intersection between race, religion, money and imperialism. How do you feel that those intersections are playing out even now?

**FS:** I would like, first, to respond to some remarks just made, to say that we expect religious missions/associations to be charitable, be they local or international. The church and the mosque have cared for, sustained and taken charge of people. It is part of their moral and religious obligations. Christian missionaries have worked a lot in Muslim contexts in health, education, although in some cases, in the past, it was part of evangelisation, as well as part of the process of colonisation. Many “Muslim” states (where Islam is the religion of the state), for instance Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran or Turkey, have funded the construction of mosques, Muslim schools, health facilities, as well as their missionary activities. It was about the “Islamisation” of African



societies. We also must remember that many faith-based organisations receive a huge amount of money from governments, religious institutions, private sectors or private donors to carry out their work.

However, I must also say that, in a country like Senegal with a large Muslim population, solidarity is, firstly, family-based. It's in one's family that one finds loyalty. This is crucial. We have various forms and sources of solidarities: village-based solidarity, ethnic-based solidarity and religion-based solidarity. The solid base is a foundation of the family, spiritual, and social – not necessarily religious – solidarity. It's not in the mosques that people will particularly find this support.

Often impoverished families don't have the means to take on their responsibilities towards their children, so they send them to a marabout to provide for their education. They also take the decision because they are attached to their customary and religious cultures. The young *taalibe* are children who attend the Qur'anic school. In the past, they would attend Qur'anic schools after, or during, which they would learn rural, agricultural or artisanal skills or even fishing. Today in capital cities, there is no more training towards any skill. These kids are mostly seen at traffic lights begging for money to bring back to their marabout or feed themselves.

Now, your question about the ways in which the intersection between race, religion, money and imperialism plays out is very complex. Religion, culture and politics are intertwined in their various actions. Their intricacy in values and norms, resulting in laws, has a strong impact on women's bodies, women's health, and civil rights. In countries like Senegal and elsewhere in the region, we have intersections between the marketisation of religion and faith, as well as over-capitalisation, from various sources. This globalised capitalism puts pressure on masses of peoples around the globe.

Feminists have discussed the trends after the fall of the Berlin Wall. That was a milestone in the process of democratisation in various parts of the world, including Africa: restructuring of the world political arena, growth of neoliberal economies as a result of the privatisation of the material and financial resources of the "poorest" countries while (African) states were eroded as managers of their economies, the rise of various forms of fundamentalism and conservative cultural and religious patriarchies, the escalation of "identity" policies... All those features had a strong impact on women. We unfortunately can discuss only a few points.

Religious revival leading to various forms and levels of fundamentalism is widespread in many societies and systems of beliefs. Former US President George W. Bush withdrew financial support to states or international organisations, such as the United Nations Fund for Population [Activities] (UNFPA), because of his neo-conservative religious beliefs. Within the European Union, some member states are still demanding that Christianity should be inscribed as a constitutive dimension of European identity. But we also have the Middle East, which is Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait – and even Turkey, which was supposed to be a model civil state and was recognised and accepted widely as such. Today, the government in Turkey is less and less a civil state and is more and more religious and uses religion as a tool. Some Muslim states in Northern Nigeria used religion as a political tool, beginning in 2000, when they extended Sharia to include criminal law in Sharia courts. Although such law was said to apply only to Muslims in principle, in practice, it applied to everyone, whatever the faith that the plaintiff professed. These few examples show that religion has never been absent from the political arena, even when it is supposed to be confined to the private sphere. Furthermore, they show the new profile of relationships between religion and politics with the rising radicalisation within religious groups. Those groups are thoroughly imbued with a “mission” to lead society and to transform social contracts, which is based on a very peculiar view of the sacred.

The veil is an issue that requires to be discussed. Senegal isn't a Muslim country, because a land does not have a religion. It is stone and water, but the individuals who live there may have a religion or an ideology that is based on a book. As Muslims, we have the Qur'an, while other faiths have the Bible or the Torah. Some other peoples don't. This is complex and should be seen as such. Senegalese women either wear a scarf or don't. But the so-called Islamic veil, which is a veil that is coming from the Middle East and Asia, is a veil derived from a “cultural” fashion. That is, one dresses according to regional customs and people have Islamised the clothing. We see this in the Islamisation of cultures and culturing of Islam. The culturing of Islam in West Africa and in Senegal has been a centuries-long process. What Muslims are facing in very recent years is an Arabisation of Islam. Young Muslim women didn't cover their hair, even though married women could wear a scarf (*musoor*) on their head, but it was never a veil that covered the neck, the whole body down to the feet, the arms.

As I have said – and I’ll have to be a little vulgar here – the veil is supposed to hide long hair, but the kinky hair of black women doesn’t always arouse. There are other ways. In Senegal today, groups of young men who studied in the Middle East and returned home, because of their foreign training, they didn’t fit in, either in government structures or in the Brotherhood version of Islam that is so particular to Senegal. They thought of reforming local Islamic practices: besides changing rituals, they requested women to cover up. The first people to cover up in Senegal were young girls, especially university students, because it is in the universities that it all began. So Saudi Arabia, with the spread of its Salafist movements, which never asked women to cover up in Senegal before, suddenly made them cover up, even going so far as to make them start wearing the burqa. This represents money and capitalism on the part of Saudi Arabia – it is building wells and spending money on the country in exchange for Islamisation. The greater the number of men or women Islamised, the more money local Muslim organisations could get. So, this combination explains a great many challenges we are facing today. Religious radicalisation comes from all this.

**MK:** What I seem to be noticing with the funding aspect now is a conversion where the extremists are connected with the security of countries. They are defining international funding. Right now, people are focusing a lot more on terrorism. People begin to define any terrorist activity that happens with Islam. We have to continue with the women’s movement to ensure that this doesn’t happen. In many places, the most affected people are Muslims. It’s not the religion that defines terrorism.

The other extreme religious people – whether they’re coming from Christian, Jewish, Muslim faith or another – usually fund services. When they fund services, they become very dear to the people in the areas they work. They get a lot of mass following. We should look at those aspects. This can also include funding agencies that have religion as a base.

What I see in the women’s movement is looking to women who are organising to better frame the ways of fundamentalism. Especially those fundamentalisms that attack women. There’s no place where religions agree like they do on the question of women. They disagree on everything and then it comes to women’s reproductive health and they all agree, and the religious leaders come together. That’s what joins us as women of the world. To actually find these unifying things for ourselves and make it our power

for the message, for content and for funding. The connection between the agenda for women and other injustices that are happening in the areas of sexuality – LGBTQI, abortion, choice, deciding not to have a child, dealing with childlessness – it touches the integrity of our bodies. Religions like to define women’s bodies because they like to think that they know a lot more about how to define women’s sexuality. The religious extremists use media and new technologies really well.

This is an area in the feminist movement where we have to be assertive and responsive to providing solutions which also use tools that will make us form solidarity. If a woman is being attacked by a religious group because of anything – whatsoever that thing is – we have to be able to communicate that message widely so that we can stand in solidarity. What’s happening in Egypt today with the closing of space for activists, women around the world are standing in solidarity. We have to use that as a way of finding solutions. We have to research and use proper media to communicate solidarity.

EW: Spirituality and religion are a personal choice. Religion has no space and no place in national legislation or policy. The state should be kept free of all of that. We must fight to protect and preserve secular states. Our movements are getting demoralised by Christian fundamentalism. We have to fight, protect and save our spaces even within the women’s movement. I’ll tell you my mother’s words again, “You don’t need religion. Just be a good person”.

FS: I think it is very important, of course. Feminists shouldn’t be involved in the management of religion. They should leave religion in its terrain (church, mosque and other religious institutions and spaces), but they should help to understand the place religion holds in society, especially in women’s lives, and fight against the rise of fundamentalisms. Their goals should be the struggle against discrimination in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, language and faith, and the promotion of secularism (secularisation of the state, and of global politics, secularisation of laws).

The place of religion is in one’s heart and personal code of conduct. But where political decisions are taken, where laws are made, where the collective management of the community is done, there is no place for religion. Religious leaders obviously are citizens; they have to respond to the law like any citizen, instead of trying to decide on the laws that govern the country and its institutions. This was stated by the current Senegalese president, Macky Sall, between the two rounds of the 2012 presidential elections. I think

it is important to maintain the separation between religious institutions and the state. We are lucky in our countries to have governments that do not recognise a state religion.

I agree with Ayesha Imam, who put this simply: “Allow people who want to express their spirituality to do so”. It doesn’t mean that because we assign spirituality to the mosque or the church that we don’t have our own spirituality. Spirituality takes on many forms – religious, intellectual and these all go together – but we must create a lay space where everyone has a place.

## Endnote

1 See “About WLUML” at [www.wluml.org/node/5408](http://www.wluml.org/node/5408).