

Suhraiya Jivraj (SJ) We're still very much bound by this idea of civilising our populations to be "secular moderns", that's what it was, you know, from the Crusades to gather the holy lands back from these marauding racialised hordes, to today. And we see that, you know, in terms of kind of protection of churches and protection of public space -

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (SMK) In this episode, I spoke to Dr. Suhraiya Jivraj and we had a really exciting conversation, I think primarily because her background is so wide in terms of the interest that she has. She doesn't come specifically or primarily from an academic background. She has experience working for international NGOs through to grassroots organisations and in the field of law. But she is also an academic. And the book that is worth mentioning for this particular episode is what she wrote on the *The Religion of Law: Race, Citizenship and Children's Belonging*, and what she's really interested in is essentially this binary itself, secularism and religion, and how those two terms are used to regulate people through government, law and policy.

She's also interested in decolonising work. I met her through a collaboration that she did with her students at the University of Kent to create a manifesto for decolonising. She was formerly the co-director of the Centre for Sexuality, Race and Gender Justice. She's also co-coordinator and principal investigator of the AHRC Decolonising Sexualities Network. She's a Reader in law and social justice and a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy. There's so much more that we can say about her, and her current work is primarily focussed on collaborating with Muslim women led initiatives on gender and race and religion inequalities from a decolonial approach.

I hope you enjoy this episode as much as I did. I'm really thrilled that we got to break down this binary as I think it's one that has too big of an impact on our lives. Let me know how you find it!

Today, I'm joined by Suhraiya Jivraj, I'm so happy to finally have you here. Thank you so much for making the time. How are you doing today?

SJ It is my pleasure to be with you, as always. Suhaiymah you know, I'm a big- I'm a big fan and I'm doing well. Thank you. In such tough times, I'm feeling actually really grateful for, you know, the safety that I have. So. Yes, thank you.

SMK That's really good to hear. Yeah. So we've been meaning to talk about this particular binary actually for a long, long time, maybe over a year. And I'm actually really excited and I kind of feel like this this particular episode could be really meaningful for a lot of people.

The binary we're going to look at today is secularism and religion. And I kind of feel that even lots of listeners who may have sort of agreed with the binaries that we've been able to follow- the binaries that we've broken down previously. You know, even this season we've had free speech and censorship, fascism/liberalism, we've had in the past innocence and guilt, all these kinds of themes. But I kind of feel that secularism and religion is one thing that isn't often broken down, even by people who think quite critically about those other sort of binaries that are built within the colonial world that we live in.

This is also a binary that underpinned the first time that we met properly, formally. And what I mean by that is that we were invited to have a conversation around secularism. And I wondered if you wanted to talk about that event a bit because you were a co-organiser and perhaps it sets the scene as well about how you are approaching this and coming to this topic.

SJ Sure, yes. So we met at an event that I was organising with the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in December 2018. And that event, as you know, was called 'Beyond the promise of secularism'. And it was really a way of bringing together work and activism by women, Muslim women predominantly, who'd been doing amazing work breaking down this binary, because, as you say, you know, it's one that even critical thinkers and activists just don't get into. And there's reasons for that. But, yeah, I think we felt that it was really a time to start getting into it and provide a safe space, I think primarily for people who felt caught in that binary.

So, you know, if you especially if you're experiencing things like Islamophobia and, you know, intersecting with anti-Black racism as a Muslim woman, you know, all of those things, we really wanted to provide a safe space for people to explore those issues without really being attacked.

This other event that was happening called 'Sharia Segregation and Secularism' held by a coalition of quite established, well-known feminists coming together, especially to emphasise when it was under the banner of this organisation called 'One Law for All'. And so what they're essentially calling for is, you know, "secular law" as opposed to "divine law". That's what they called for in this manifesto they created. And that's actually in their manifesto claiming the primary argument that secularism is important as a minimum precondition for equality. So equality, women's rights, et cetera, are all predicated on this notion of secularism. And for me, that's you know, that's hugely problematic. It just hides a whole host of other evils that doesn't really allow us to get to the heart of the matter of dealing with the actual issues that they want to deal with.

SMK Yeah, yeah. Even that title right? like Sharia, Segregation and Secularism, I think it ties together the way that perhaps secularism is framed to us. And I think, you know, I often begin these episodes with thinking about how these concepts, first of all, are presented on their own terms to us and just thinking about, you know, growing up and being at school, there was definitely a notion that, like secularism is straightforwardly a really good thing. And as you say, it's kind of presented as a precondition for those other good things like equality and freedom and, you know, yeah, women's rights, the rights of marginalised people in general. And I think that even for me, from a very young age, that was sort of confusing because there was also this notion that secularism is about separation of church and state. And yet at the school that I was going to, a state school, you know, we sang hymns every morning. We went to church on trips to the church every Christmas like it was a very- it was a *Christian* secularism.

It was a kind of confusing notion of what it was. And so I just think it's interesting that in that title, it's also pitted very clearly against Islam and Muslims and Sharia law specifically. That's just a reflection I have, and I wonder if that was also an impetus for setting up the event that you set up in that instance?

SJ Absolutely. Because, you know, the lived realities of all women who come from or who have faith in their backgrounds and their families, their own personal faith and belief systems, cultural backgrounds from communities of colour, the lived experience is much more nuanced and complex than what is caught by these terms, religion and secularism. So that the sufferings that, you know, women in particular, but also queer and trans people will be experiencing in our communities cannot be straightforwardly solved by this notion.

And I'll just read it to you, if I may. Number 10 in their manifesto, the "One Law for All" manifesto, that "*the recognition that secularism is a basic human right and a minimum precondition for women's and minority rights.*" And I want to say – as you say - that totally feeds into even at a school level, primary school level. I mean, I've got a child in primary school level they're told British values are universal. And that's where all this power comes in. And you talked about kind of Christian secularity an, yeah, exactly. That's what I refer to in my work as the "post-secular", where it's not really secular at all, because there's nothing free of Christianity. It's in all our kind of universalist thinking around human rights, etc.. So where they talk about "unchangeable divine laws" in the first of their points, in their manifesto, I mean, that's just it's it's inaccurate.

SMK Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I think, you know, they're very easy examples we can point to today. You know, recent news. There's been the sort of reaction, I guess, of the French government to Muslims within France. And this is all within the framework of "Muslims just pose a problem to secularis"m. And that really what that means is that they pose a problem to freedom. They can't coexist with, as you say, women's rights with rights of queer people, with people having, I suppose, what's then made out to be something that's inherent to France, to the West, which is freedom and rights of these people that we know at the same time, like women and queer people are killed, deported, you know, violated, exploited in the West. So I think that's a helpful beginning point, because you've given us a lot of space there to see that there's lots of cracks and fissures.

So I wonder if I can ask you more directly, you know, what perhaps is one of the, or the, central underpinning assumption that can help us to pick apart, I guess, this notion that secular or secularism and religion are opposites? Because I think that's something that's really at play here. On the one hand, we have secularism that's great and brilliant, and we have religion, which is, you know, even I remember growing up, people would always say - and I kind of felt like I had to concede- that religion at the end of the day is just the source of all violence. And you can't. And it kind of felt like this really debilitating failure of religion. Right? As opposed to this really fresh and kind of peaceful secularism. So anyway, I'm sure we'll talk about that bit later as well. But, yeah, what for you is the central assumption all the way in to begin unpicking this?

SJ Yeah. So, you know, I'm really privileged to sort of have a place within the academy, Universities where I have space to think about these things. I mean, I haven't always been an academic. I was a practitioner, lawyer and I worked on the Equality Act and bringing this idea that you could bring the different strands of equality together, because, as you know, we have kind of known protected characteristics. Now, at the time, it was kind of race, gender, disability and religion wasn't on the radar at all. So this was a new ground of anti-discrimination that was being brought through EU law at the time. And so that gave rise to the Equality Act. And that really got me into thinking about religion, because in practitioner circles, no one everyone just thought they assumed to know what it was. You know, the British state making new legislation, including an anti-discrimination of religion on the basis that they knew what this term was. I mean, it's actually pretty scary.

And that kind of gave me a real kind of ethical crisis, which is how I actually ended up in in academia to really think about this. And so I put a lot of time and thought into researching just the term religion, you know. That's how I kind of came to be a religion geek and I came across the fantastic work of people like Talal Asad, who's written books on the genealogy of the terms religion and secularism. And he makes a really, I mean, his work is very textured, but he makes actually a really very simple argument, and that is that we understand these terms as if they are trans-historical. That's the term he uses, meaning that they are used as if they don't actually come out of a particular historic period.

SMK So they've just been around for all time. Forever.

SJ Exactly. So we need to actually pay attention to how this word emerged when it emerged, how it developed. And when we do that, we realise that actually it's got a very specific history within Europe and the European Academy. And the same with secularity. So the Postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, he says that the trouble with concepts like secularism is that we think we understand them too well. We may define them in different ways, assume different political moral positions in relation to them. But the bottom line is that they seem natural to us as if they are instinctive, you know, they are truth in and of themselves, but that's just not accurate. Again, I come back to this idea of accuracy is just not accurate. Right.

SMK That's really interesting because I don't think people would- I don't think people would have seen that. The way that this binary is false is almost just because it's inaccurate. Right. Like, I you kind of assume there's going to be an ideological thrust here. But I think what you're saying is really interesting, that if we simply look at history and we kind of look at the emergence of these terms, there's a lot we can learn that- can you give us a bit of an insight into the emergence of religion and secularism actually, and I guess, connected with it, did they come about in a similar period or are these completely separate ideas?

SJ Yeah, sure. Well, you know, in these times, it would be kind of “decolonising” religion you could say, because we're decolonising everything, which is a good thing as long as we're doing it, you know, thoroughly and ethically. So, you know, if we start with the secularism thesis, as it's kind of known, this idea of separation of religious institutions, namely the church from state institutions - namely parliament and courts, and the kind of post enlightenment theorists would refer to this as the establishment, i.e. that we don't have an established church anymore. Of course, that's not the case in Britain, in the UK, because we do have a state church. But that's that's a different that's another story!

That's already a kind of an inherent contradiction as we have so many in this country, but at the same time or flowing from that, is this idea that the public sphere is free of religion. Right. And religion is then designated or delegated to the private sphere, the home that's kind of where we celebrate religious festivals. Apart from Christmas, of course, it comes back to your hymns and stuff at school and this is important. Why? Because it offers protection for both believers and non-believers through this idea of religious freedom. You know, and this this is really the kind of fundamental premise that's put forward by organisations like the National Secular Society. And it comes back to where we started our conversation, which is kind of addresses concerns around the control and power of religious authorities over, for example, women's bodies, family education, sexuality, freedom of speech, et cetera.

But, of course, you know, straightaway we kind of hit upon problems and that then goes back to what Asad talks about in terms of understanding where this term comes from. And it comes, of course, from Enlightenment Europe, where, you know, there was a backlash or a movement against the kind of despotic powers of the Catholic Church and, you know, a break away from Catholicism by kind of northern European Protestantism. But then later on, of course, you get a break away from that. And so you get this idea that secularism is based on knowledge of nature, whereas religions are based on faith in, quote unquote, supernatural entities.

SMK So there's also like a value judgement here that begins to develop.

SJ Exactly. And, you know, you can kind of see, to be fair, you can see how it emerges from this kind of very despotic, dogmatic ideology that was, you know, the papal church at the time. Right. So you can see how these ideas are kind of still in there. But the fact that, you know, we're talking about the 1700s and we're now in 2020 and we're still arguing for "one law for all" that is based on secular and civil law rather than unchangeable Divine law is just, you know, we have to really move on from that.

SMK Yeah, it sounds reductive on both sides in that sense and therefore very harmful.

SJ But we'll come on to that later, I think. And so just, you know, there's this ideological polarisation either or "religion or secularism", you know, for me exists at the level of dogmatic ideas as critical religion scholars have kind of highlighted. Just lastly, to say that, you know, the key thing that's emerged from that which comes back to where we started is that religion then becomes relegated to the backward, irrational past so that history is important because it's its religion is always stuck in this past, whereas the secular is modern is not

SMK Yeah. I think as somebody who is visibly religious as well, in the sense of, you know, wearing hijab, I think that's always something that's very apparent to me, is that really the only way I can remove myself of my backwardness or prove myself to be modern is to actually forgo religion like you can't be both. And I think, you know, I work with kids a lot and like kind of the beginning of high school age and something that comes up when you talk about the stereotypes that they might face being Muslim children in particular. Lots of children recognise that because of the fact they are Muslim, they are seen to kind of need to prove that they can fit the norms of the society they are in or that they, in fact, know they're seen as unintelligent. I think that's bound up with modernity as well. This idea that if you if you're religious, how can you be clever? Because you believe in all this, as you said earlier, like "supernatural" stuff you know? you're kind of just believing in things without logic, without rationality, without reason. And, you know, just I think it's always interesting to me that kids pick up on that even at that age. And how insidious, I suppose that is. It's not just like a political doctrine that's really theoretical. It seeps into the really embodied knowledge of children.

And I think what you've said that also resonates in something else for me, is that, you know, this is a really specific history that you're telling. This is like very, very localised to Europe and to really a certain set of events, I assume, like certain political leanings as well. You know, we want freedom from the church and the papacy. We want to be able to have our own sovereignty. And I think that's it's fascinating to think about today where secularism is seen to be a universal good. And any anywhere you go in the world, there should be this same set of kind of social organising. Otherwise, people are doing things not only wrong, but badly and probably in a way that also deserves Western intervention. Right? Like this becomes a grounds upon which to kind of make or justify imperialist ventures and these kinds of things.

So I guess something that I always try to think about with these episodes is, you know, whose terms are these? And I think you've answered that when clearly these are not everybody's terms, they're very specific terms. And something that in your book, *The Religion of Law*, you say it's that "religion is a modern term from within Orientalists scholarship during the 19th century, and the 20th century". And you say the study of world religion as a kind of category was "set out to document the lives of non Christians and non European peoples". And so I just wondered if I could ask you a little bit as well about this. This is talking about Orientalism and kind of Europe and non Europeans here, just in terms of whether this is also quite a racialised category and how it maybe is tangled up with colonialism in that sense.

SJ Yeah. I mean, just to kind of clarify the term Orientalism, which, of course, many people will be familiar with, but in my work, I'm specifically drawing on the work of the late Edward Said. And, you know, at that time, there is no "religion". It's just race. It's just what is not white European and therefore non Christian. Right. So it's in the encounter of Europe's Others through travel, trade, and then later on colonialism and empire. That, of course, the colonial administrators and academics. So knowledge producers, teachers, scholars need to understand what it is they are encountering. Who are these people? Are they indeed people at all? You know, if we're going to start right at the bottom, how can we understand how they're behaving? They look like they're worshipping, but is it the same as Christian worship or are they doing something else?

And actually, what was what was one of the most fascinating things that I discovered was within academia, the first kind of set of categorisations was happening around language. So how can we categorise the languages that people are speaking in the different areas of the world? And it was from there that then you get kind of the study of, you know, the belief systems, the practises and so on and so forth. But what is common to all of this study that was kind of early anthropology and early language studies because we didn't have all the different disciplines that we do. Now that you find in universities now, it was much more kind of streamlined. So you'd get kind of religion and language in the same area, in the same departments theology. And what was common to it all is this idea of the need to categorise how to categorise these people.

And of course, when you start categorising, you already have a premise from which you are wanting to categorise. And the premise was Christian whiteness. So what is Christianity? that's the first question we have to understand, and Christianity in theological terms is understood as or was understood at that time as a belief system coupled with ritual practises in order to kind of deepen that belief system. Right. So going to church, reading the Bible, singing hymns, so on and so forth. And so that's the view from which everything else is being understood. And that's why, you know, you get this kind of theological framing of everything else from the theistic faiths to, you know, the practises in what are now I can't remember the exact number, but maybe fifty six countries in Africa and all the different, you know, languages and practises there as well as elsewhere in the world. I mean, it's actually quite it's quite an undertaking. I have to say the fact it was done is quite mind boggling. But of course it's happening over, you know, three, three or more centuries. But it also kind of smacks of a bit of hubris as well. And therefore, you know, it's like the Orientalist idea is that, you know, the Christian West is the apex of civilisation and everything else is kind of then categorised and judged. I mean, that's the other the kind of corollary of categorises that it's then judged against that standard, that benchmark.

SMK That's also helpful because I think actually I'm just going to say what you're saying but there's also a certain arrogance to that undertaking, like this assumption that you can, in fact, make meaning out of or understand these things. And so just to clarify what you're saying, I take it, is that, you know, these scholars, these researchers, whatever, these anthropologists were essentially projecting onto every type of behaviour and practise that they saw, other people around the world to a specific framework. And I'm assuming this is where we get the notion that when you read text from seventeen, eighteen-hundreds talking about Muslim countries, for example, they call them like "Mohammaden countries". Right. Taking the notion of like Christ in Christendom and then using that with Muhammad ﷺ and then the idea of like "Muslim priests" and "Muslim churches". And I think I've sort of always wondered, I used to wonder like what on earth is that? Why were they using this bizarre language? But this makes sense. Now, you're sort of saying there's a projection and a confinement of to understand what these people are doing, but not on their own terms. Like, it

doesn't sound almost like anyone's really going to any efforts to ask, what is it you're doing? What's going on here? Is this the same?

And I think many people's contestation would be that Islam can't be really fitted into the same ways because it's such a different- or because Islam is such a kind of holistic religion. And even then, there's people, I'm sure, who are Christian, who would feel that Christianity also shouldn't be confined to the way that it was - another classic example is Hinduism right. Like this notion that Hinduism is just one monolithic religion when actually, you know, I take it that what's now called Hinduism is a set of like hundreds of different practises and kind of localised behaviours and religious practises. And so that kind of makes me feel that "religion" is also very unhelpful term. Like it just sounds to kind of reduce everything to this one Eurocentric notion of what counts as religion doesn't-

Then I also wonder if this is linked, and perhaps you can help us here, to the notion of like, you know, you have the Abrahamic religions, which I suppose of all religious practises are most "legitimate". But then also you have kind of, you know, superstition. And I think about the way that often, like, quote unquote, "African religions" are categorised as sort of "that's just something completely you know, it's not even within the realms of legitimate religion. It's just some weird practises, you know, witchcraft and sort of barbarism". And I think I see even there that categorisation in that hierarchy that you're talking about in the judging. So am I understanding what I'm saying here?

SJ Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, that whole period of history does itself a disservice, right? Because you can't even categorise Christianity and the diversity within Christianity into this kind of one word. I mean, there's a beautiful quote in a book that I read by someone who had the phrase and he and I quote it in my own work and he says, you know, religion is like a cinematic still that kind of captures that one can only capture that one moment and then before it then moves on to the next and then it's something different again.

SMK That's really interesting. Yeah.

SJ And so that's why you're totally right. It is an unhelpful word. And actually it's not just unhelpful, it's actually dangerous. One example that immediately comes to my mind right now is when I teach my students about the Haitian revolution and we look at the kind of impact of independence for Haiti from France at the time whereby France levied this debt because they thought that because Haiti and Haitians had gained independence and taken their colony away from them, they actually had to pay for this property. Yeah, it's mind boggling. And so in 2010, when they suffered this horrific earthquake and calls were made to kind of write off the debt and in fact, help and send aid to Haiti, this this whole kind of debate resurfaced. And we look at some of the media coverage. And one of the things that comes up is like, "oh, look at these Haitians. You know, they're their voodoo worshippers, superstitious." It's almost like, you know, that the earthquake - they brought it on themselves and they sort of - You know, it's really, really horrific. And that is racialisation of religion. That's how I refer to it, seeing it as something that is backward and inhuman, not human.

SMK It reminds me of something I read recently, and it was, I think, Lord Cromer who was like this big coloniser, I guess in the late eighteen hundreds. I think it was him that he'd written something about how Christians that you found in the Middle East, were Christians who had been tainted by the fact that they were of "that race" or surrounded by that race that was up there. And I think that for me is another example where it's like, hang on, there's two things going on here. You're trying to, you know, defend the Christianity is still pure and superior. But what you're seeing there is a race to

Christianity. And therefore, that's why it's regardless of the religion, because of the race of that religion. And I think that's yeah, I just I thought I also see that in a parallel that even if I wonder, even if Haitians were to be Christian or were to be other than I think that racialisation would still be that they would be doing it in a corrupt way.

SJ Totally. And this is it right. I mean, I just have to tell you a little anecdote of something I read because it's mind boggling and totally on that point. And that is that. So I think it's Miles and Brown have written about this in their book and it is a beautiful, historic overview, and it goes right as far back as the Mediaeval period. So we often kind of think about, you know, the Enlightenment period, 17th, 18th century colonialism, but actually right back to the Crusades, where crusaders going from Europe to the holy lands are not able to distinguish between Christians, Jews and Muslims and murdering them all because they're all racialised as the Other!

SMK Yeah, I mean, it's just that and actually, just in parallel, that reminds me of a lecture that I attended where the scholar was also kind of outlining how, you know, at what point Jews in the Middle East were kind of differentiated and how they became co-opted into this narrative of being somehow linked to your Europeaness rather than Muslims. And he was kind of pointing out that this notion that, like when we say "Muslims are the new Jews", it makes no sense because actually Muslims and Jews, "Muslims are the old Jews, the old Jews were Muslim" kind of thing. And that whole co-option was about racialising Jews. And even you see in the paintings he was showing us, you know, the whitening of Jews and Jewish women in the Middle East and kind of how, both Muslim and Jewish women, would be represented in the same way as kind of just like veiled figures and there was now this changing of dress where Jewish women appear to be more European. And I think that yeah, again, it's I guess just another reflection of what you're talking about.

SJ Absolutely. And if people are interested in that, the work of someone called Gil Anidjar, and he's written a book, a fantastic book called *Semites* where he totally breaks that binary down. So, yeah, for sure. And that's very important in these days. Right, where racialisation of religion is just it knows no bounds. And we have to we have to really pay attention to that so that we can mobilise against that.

SMK Can I also take this to perhaps the internalisation of this idea, too? Because something that I have experienced and I think others experience is that when you were growing up and you're unable to necessarily pick apart what's being told to you, I think as people who, you know, just simply believed there's a God - believe you are a created being, I think you also internalise this notion of what religion is and what it means and what it means to be religious, and so for me, I kind of now see that as I "secularised" my religion. Right. So I kind of had this notion of separation of space even so I think for me, a really big moment was when I began to wear a headscarf to school and everyone was kind of like, OK, what's going on here? I think there's so many other connotations and reasons around that, though obviously really gendered. But also I think just around like, "OK, like we thought you were really clever girl at school. We thought you were really smart. Like now you're kind of showing and symbolising your attachment to this really backwards thing".

And I wonder if, you know the way that the hijab and niqab, I guess across Europe, there are all these bans. There were all these, you know, narratives about how really this this symbol, more than anything else, perhaps reflects a real threat to secularism and to the values of the West. And I think about, you know, in France, the ban, that means that, you know, if you're a teacher or you work public education, you're not allowed to, quote unquote, have any religious symbols. And so the argument is this all this works equally for people who want to wear a cross. But how we know that there is a real specific targeting of Muslims within that.

And so I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how secularism and religion, this binary is also somehow weaponised in quite a specific way against Muslims. And I find that kind of difficult to articulate sometimes. But it's like I think, you know, I'm just seeing you nod as well. We know this to be true. We can see in the impact of sort of legislation that but what's going on there? And there are also a history to that.

SJ Yeah, well, I think it emerges from this kind of what I feel has become a kind of embedded impulse to civilise. Right. It's I mean, we can't underplay that because, you know, the level of missionarism across the world is I mean, before we get attacked for it, it's not obviously only specific to Christianity, but when in this particular period and if we're talking about it in terms of levels of power or dominance and ideology, then that's that's what we're talking about. We're still very much bound by this idea of "civilising our populations to be secular moderns". That's what it was, you know, from the Crusades to gather the holy lands back from these marauding racialised hordes to today. And we see that in terms of kind of protection of churches and protection of public space.

And those public spaces include schools. And so you mentioned, you know, the symbols and there's. A recent case that went all the way up to the European Court of Human Rights, it's actually an Italian case. We often talk about France and we don't talk about Italy. And it's and I find it really interesting because in that case, the judges decided that. So it was brought by a mum who complained about there being this crucifix in the kind of central hallway of the school at the front. And so the discussion was about the symbol and kind of what work is this symbol doing in a secular school environment. And the judgement was, well, this is pretty much a passive symbol, right?

SMK Wow!

SJ So you have the passive crucifix, but the active hijab and the work that the hijab can do is, as we know from the context of France, we don't have to kind of repeat that, is extremism writ large and and all the other things that they're attributing to it, in particular the most recent beheading of the teacher in France.

So it is weaponised and it does come from that particular civilising mission, and alongside it is this is this kind of, yeah, legislative policy trend or agenda, I should say, to create what has been termed the good Muslim, the progressive Muslim versus the extremist or bad Muslim, you know, the creation of this other binary within the kind of modern 21st century context. You know, those wearing hijabs can kind of overcome the backwardness that sticks to their hijab by displaying other factors, you know, so maybe what University you went to, what job you have or other kind of external things, markers, signifiers of your modernity so that you can kind of separate yourself from your backwardness, that your religious identity.

And, you know, it's not clear. So I don't want to make kind of grand statements about, you know, one set of agendas, because there's a real kind of - and I talk about this in my work, there's a real kind of anxiety because the project of civilising the racialised is never really complete, that always this anxiety comes out in judgements. It comes out in, you know, the discourse in the narratives of government ministers, including ministers of colour. Right. And so it's never a complete project. And so you will get this kind of desire for what I call "racial upliftment" including within schools with British values and all that goes with that and universities as well now, with the kind of, you know, trying to tackle attainment gaps to get over this kind of cultural deficit that people of colour are deemed to have but is never really complete. And that's why you get these extra retrogressive moves, whether that be in court decisions, policy even today with the deportation of yet another Jamaica 50. I mean, it's just it's grim.

SMK It is. And I think what you've just said there is a really important point, because I think one of the big impetus for me behind kind of breaking a lot of these binaries down is that when we do, I think we also see the perhaps the futility of trying to fit the right side. Right? And what you just said about good and bad Muslim, but also with assimilation being kind of offered as this project, if you fulfil it, you know, provisionally, you will be accepted. You'll be you know, "you're all in we're here for you".

And yet at the same time, as you say. It's never really made clear at what stage you will fulfil it and how far you have to go to do it. And I think that, you know, I remember even reading the Louise Casey report into social integration, quote unquote, in I think came out in like 2016/17. And in that there was this line that really stuck out to me where she said, going back to what you're talking about with British values being taught in schools, she said that in areas where there are higher concentrations of ethnic minorities, British values were less likely to be known. There would need to be taught as compared with areas where there were, you know, white people basically.

And what I found interesting, though, was that she didn't say where there's high concentrations of white people they would also need to be taught. Because what that said to me was that there's an idea that it's inherent if you're white, British values are kind of you kind of born with them, then you kind of, you know, part and parcel of who you are. And if you're the minority, they need to be taught. But then the question becomes, I guess, at what point can you be trusted to know that? When is it that you actually we can leave you alone, stop surveilling and checking that you have them within you and you just become that full, quote unquote, assimilated citizen.

And so I think that I just wanted to emphasise that point that you said, because I think for me, the project then becomes, well, hey, we can kind of wash our hands of this, you know, this burden to prove that we fall on the correct side of any of these binaries. Because the more interesting question I find is to ask what the function of that project even is and who it serves.

And so saying that I want to bring us into that final part of this podcast where, you know, you've already given us, like so many examples of how and what is served by this binary. But I suppose, you know, I recently was reading some of Saba Mahmood's work and one of the arguments she made was that religious liberty and tolerance, even kind of up until the 1948 Universal Human Rights Declaration, where religious liberty is defined. It's comes about as a result of the lobbying of Christian missionaries who kind of want to be able to have that clause in there because they're thinking about religious liberty as a reason to justify missionary intervention. That would kind of be on the basis that, you know, "actually everybody is allowed their liberty". But this is actually at the time, she says, if I recall correctly, where it was done to kind of attack on particularly like former Ottoman Empire, but also the kind of larger Muslim world or non-Christian world where it seemed to be a justification for making interventions there. And so, I mean, you've given us other examples as well. But I guess this bias or this function of secularism, religious liberty, tolerance, it seems to be in the past very clearly to do with kind of imperialism and civilising missions and kind of justifying those.

But I wanted to ask maybe what that binary continues to do, what might help us to understand why we cling so tightly to this binary? And I guess I'm just thinking about those listeners who for whom this is maybe a shocking revelation. The question, I suppose they might be left with in some way is why does it seem to hold so much weight? You know, why is it that we associate tolerance with secularism and not with religion, for example?

SJ In one word, capitalism. People please read Cedric Robinson's *Racial Capitalism*, or any work on racial capitalism. You know, we only have to go back to Weber, who wrote The Protestant Work Ethic. And actually, I've been thinking, I want to go back to some of that work because it's really fascinating how at this period in the 17th century, with the division between Christianity, between Catholicism and Protestantism, there's this idea of labour as a kind of Christian Protestant practise. So there's all this whole body of work that I'm yet to explore around how that becomes kind of almost imbibed, embodied into, you know, what Labour calls the Protestant work ethic, which creates modern capitalism.

And we only have to think about your favourite brands. Who has Cadbury's chocolate? Who has Quaker Oats. Yeah. And when I talk about the kind of racial upliftment of children into good citizens through this kind of notion of British values, which are just so ridiculous, I mean that there is full performance. Right. We have to perform them so that we can pass, or as the people these days call it, code switching, you know, and that is also part of performing being a model citizen so that we can fit within the capitalist framework that is the modern liberal or neo liberal state. Yeah, so that's a bit of somewhat of a wacky response to your question.

SMK But I think it's a really important response because I do I think there's a way in which secularism and religion are presented as a supposed non-political, as if they're not linked to these maybe systemic political factors in the world because these are grand terms like these are about the neutrality of our lives. And I think, you know, there's always this notion that secularism is the home toleration and religion is not. Thinking about what we're talking about today it's clear secularism is full of intolerance. You know, sort of the premise of it is to be deeply intolerant. But I think this link to capitalism actually brings out a really important point, which is that perhaps when we talk within that binary or religion is the source of all violence, there's a really big oversight, I think, of the role of capitalism in causing violence and in fact, being rooted in violence. And so perhaps also this binary keeps us from bringing our gaze to what you just brought it to. You know, I don't think capitalism is ever centered in that way in this conversation. And it's never seen as a perpetrator of the kind of harms of the modern world that we live in.

SJ Absolutely. No, I agree. And, you know, if we want to pay more attention to it, we can just see what Trump's religion in order to make us more kind of palatable, so, you know, you talked about the hijab. I'm just thinking about, you know, being queer and I can't be queer and Muslim. Well, I am actually, you know, but often my queerness trumps my Muslim identity due to capitalism. And because I'm not wearing a hijab anymore. And even with queer, it's like LGBT is now the thing that is kind of trumping or in fact erasing queer because lesbian/gay is kind of associated with the capitalist pink pound, for those that have demanded and gained equality. But same sex marriage doesn't bring class and other social relations that marginalisation or, you know, poverty and et cetera cause, into it. And so, again, it just always counts and its so clever, capitalism is like a chameleon that is able to kind of camouflage and hide itself is very much at the heart of religion and particularly in this country as well.

SMK Yeah, I think even if you think about globally, I guess thinking about the ways that capitalism often become and I think that's actually really valid to say, is often kind of seen as a god over God in that sense, that we have Muslim states and governments, so-called, who are happy to comply with really violent kind of global policies or US foreign policy or kind of buying or trading arms or other kinds of really nefarious deals in the name of capitalism directly would contradict, you know, if you were to really think about what it means to be in such a submission to Allah.

SMK And so that, I think, is another example of how, yeah, capitalism, I feel has also managed to reproduce for us religion as well. And kind of even, you know, thinking about really recent news story about Muslim Pro - this app that loads of Muslims had to keep track of prayer times and the fact that the data was being sold to military intelligence. I mean, you then see there's this like whole network and kind of global system within which actually religion itself, I think, is deliberately repackaged to us and even just thinking about, you know, Muslim influencers. Right. Like what it means to be a Muslim suddenly becomes very bound up also conveniently with kind of branding yourself becoming, you know, a marketing tool. And I think within all of that, always in the, you know, kind of reflecting what you're saying, where the state and capitalism kind of co-opts like which queer people or which women they want to kind of suggest are the ones deserving of life.

I think in the same way you see that with, you know, these kind of influencers and these kinds of Muslim states that are the "correct ones" that are appropriate and fitting. And we can live with them like in that picture of Donald Trump with the those Muslim leaders around him with that really like spooky looking crystal ball. And I yeah, I just think there's a real way in which capitalism also from a Divine epistemology has become one of the idols of our times, has become one of these false gods that we kind of worship, I suppose, instead of a worship that I understand to be one that leads us to bettering the lives of one another, being these social creatures who kind of put one another's humanity above capital accumulation, basically.

SJ And, you know, gosh, I mean, I know this example is bandied around a lot, but the fact that we supply arms to Saudi Arabia, who then, you know, bombs people in Yemen, it could never really get over that. I mean, it's just even painful to think about.

SMK Yeah. Yeah. And then also, I guess, how we all become complicit in all of these systems as people who, you know, how can we extract ourselves from that? I think yeah. I think that's a really helpful way of thinking about this as well. Or I guess just a note to bring us to a conclusion. I wanted to ask maybe a question that I think people listening or people going about their daily lives maybe feel forced into thinking about which is, you know, OK, yeah, you're a religious person. Fine. But, you know, are you pro or are you against secularism? I think this kind of becomes a question that you're asked to kind of prove, as you've said, like whether you were an acceptable citizen.

And I just wondered, you know, or perhaps this does make the concluding question, about a way that we can go about thinking about our world beyond whether we are pro or against secularism. Yeah. What would you suggest?

SJ Maybe it's the teacher, maybe. I always kind of tend to answer that sort of question with another question, which is, what do you mean by secularism? What do you mean by religion? And then get them to unpack themselves, because if they are talking about disestablishment or the separation of church and state or if they are talking about law that is not coming from a religious body. So, OK, we don't we no longer have ecclesiastical law, but there's many studies out there, including my own work that looks at judgements, you know, and I've written a piece which is entitled after a quote from a judge who quite openly in his judgement said, "As a white judge, I do not understand". So these things are not certain. We kind of try to think of them - I totally get the kind of impulse and the desire for certainty. But I don't know, maybe if you do feel fortunate enough to grow up with faith you kind of get trained, because I do see it as a kind of training in a different way of thinking, then you can cope with uncertainty more, and especially when uncertainty is often kept within the domain of the atheists or the agnostics. But actually, such uncertainty is a huge act of faith. For me anyway, and I think it's kind of in embracing that and really interrogating ourselves about on what these terms actually mean, that we can then engage in other, you know, other ways of thinking,

other ways of imagining other forms of activism. And this is not utopian what I'm talking about, because there are so many brilliant things happening out there that are not, you know, espousing the terms secular or religion, they're being much more accurate about what they mean.

SMK Yeah, that's a really beautiful kind of reflection, actually. And I think basically what you're saying about it being perhaps like a prompt or a jump point for us to be building the kinds of worlds or societies we want to live in. And one reflection I just wanted to share with listeners as well was about the way that, you know, oftentimes something I've noticed is a lot of conversations and actually yours probably being the exception, the conferences where you've been the organiser, but I have felt very differently about a lot of the kind of spaces that I've been in where people are purportedly talking about decolonising knowledge or decolonising institutions.

I feel like secularism is the one bastion of colonialism that they don't want to or haven't really thought to decolonise. And I feel that in those spaces, as a visibly Muslim woman, you become really sought after as a racialised identity. But nobody wants to talk about the fact that you believe in this epistemology of knowledge that is sourced from Allah that comes from, you know, that's still seen to be a bit embarrassing. That's a little bit of your kind of quote unquote, uncivilised baggage that you're carrying with you. And I think that really needs to be a conversation here as well. If we're talking about building an alternative world, if we're talking about, you know, abolition of the structures that we know cause harm and violence, I think we need to have a really serious conversation about the attachment to secularism and how that attachment means we're never really going to be letting go of the impact and the kind of harm of colonialism and colonial modernity on not only the world, but also on who we can be to our fullest extent, within our own psyches, within our own kind of emotional and physical bodies.

And that's just a reflection that I feel, you know, I don't know what that next conversation is, but it's a conversation I feel needs to be had taken really seriously. And that's why I was very excited also by excited about the prospect of talking to you about this, because I know that you're kind of able to have both those conversations in a much more nuanced way. And it's why I think I feel it's safe to have this conversation. And I think, you know, yeah, I just think when we're thinking about building those different worlds we want and dismantling those structures of violence, we have to kind of think about all the things we might be overlooking.

SJ Absolutely. And I totally agree with you. So I think that is so important to acknowledge that it's not easy. It's difficult. And I think that's something that, you know, secularism and even kind of the way people use the term religion as if it's a truth in and of itself, natural, instinctive, that's too big to revisit it's certainty and its truth to them is is dangerous for them because it could be unravelling. It all seems to unravel not just the knowledge systems, but themselves. And actually, it reminds me of, you know, that I've been academically part of a decolonising the curriculum movement with my students at my university. And it reminds me of the kind of workshops and trainings we've done with staff and others. And actually we created a set of principles. And, you know, number one was to kind of check our own privileges and where we're at and then to kind of listen and read and, you know, before kind of reacting to be reflective and just to see people engage with that and how they struggle with it rather than immediately kind of think, oh, yeah, you've given me an off the shelf and so I can now run with that where we're constantly in a rush. Right. And we don't want to refute.

That's just not the way we've been educated in this country. We are so sure that there are solutions to everything. There are ways to know and act and that there's an outcome and the outcome is productivity. And so this is a real challenge to the very core of ourselves as a society, humanity and

what it means to be human. And I think, you know, with covid is the perfect time to kind of engage in that further reflection, because it's just, you know-

SMK definitely and that's that's such a beautiful note to end on. I think that actually we can embrace the uncertainty that we recognise. It is a difficult journey. And in fact, if anything, that's where I place this podcast – we're in those uncertainties and trying to find where we might find ourselves after breaking down these different binaries.

I just want to say thank you so much. This has actually been a really expansive and wonderful conversation, and I'm just really honoured that you shared this time with me.

SJ Thank you. Suhaiymah, as always, happy to talk about religion and secularism any time.

SMK Thank you for listening to this episode of Breaking Binaries. I hope you, like me, can take something from our guest this week. Look out for episodes fortnightly and if you enjoy, please share. The music you've been hearing is made by an old high school friend, that came through, so shoutout to Violence Jack at @getviolencejack online. Thanks to all my guests for chatting to me every week and helping us to think a little more critically, and I hope, humbly, about our world.

I do believe that part of the way we transform the world is by transforming the ways we think about it. Thank you for listening. I've been your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, bye!