

One woman's effort to tell of the fight against fundamentalism

By TienYi Long

Inspired by her father, an Algerian intellectual who faced death threats for being outspoken against fundamentalism, Professor Karima Bennoune set out to collect the stories of 300 people of Muslim heritage who had fought fundamentalism and coped with the attendant risk. The Professor of Law at the UC Davis School of Law subsequently compiled the stories into a compelling book named 'Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here'.

Professor Bennoune began by clarifying two common misconceptions about Muslim fundamentalists. The first is that fundamentalists target members of Western democracies. In fact, studies have shown that Muslims are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of fundamentalist violence: between 2004 and 2008, 85% of Al-Qaeda's victims were non-Westerners.

The second is the view that that people of Muslim heritage generally condone terrorism or fundamentalism. According to Professor Bennoune, fundamentalism should be understood primarily as a political project rather than a spiritual one. Fundamentalist movements are political movements of the extreme right which, in the context of globalization, manipulate religion to achieve their political aims. They are radical movements that aim to curtail the religious freedom of others, not to preserve the way that people have traditionally lived or behaved under Islam. As such, they should not be understood as representative of Islam or the Muslim community; indeed, it is offensive to assume that all Muslims are fundamentalists.

While supporters of human rights should also support an effective struggle against fundamentalism, there is no justification for discrimination against religious minorities. For Professor Bennoune, one of the most effective ways to challenge discrimination is to tell counter-stereotypical stories about people of Muslim heritage who have put themselves at risk in the struggle against fundamentalism. She then provided an overview of five stories in her book. The people she spoke about included:

- Faizan Peerzada, who staged performing arts festivals in Afghanistan despite repeated bomb attacks;
- Maria Bashir, the first and only female Chief Prosecutor in Afghanistan;
- Abdurizak Bihi, director of the Somali Education and Advocacy Centre and a community organizer against the radicalization of youth by fundamentalist groups;
- Ayesha Imam, who works to protect women's rights in Nigeria; and
- Amel Zenoune-Zouani, a 22-year-old law student who was publicly killed by the Armed Islamic Group for the simple crime of pursuing higher education as a woman.

Responding to questions by the audience, Bennoune noted that Muslim fundamentalism is only one of the many religious issues in the world. In the United States, Christian fundamentalists have prevented local secondary schools from teaching evolution in Science classes, and have advocated strongly against women's reproductive and sexual rights. However, the key thing to remember is that no one has the right to appoint themselves the spokesperson of God, according to Bennoune. We must never be afraid to ask questions, whether of other people's religions or of our own. Professor Bennoune also reaffirmed her faith in human rights as a universal language, one that affords protections to all persons regardless of the "categories" to which they belong. It was this belief in the universal struggle for humanity that motivated her father to speak out against fundamentalism. It continues to motivate her, and the people she has interviewed, in their respective struggles towards freedom.

Professor Bennoune concluded by calling upon the audience to stand up and make their voices heard against fundamentalism. While the journey ahead is challenging, Professor Bennoune believes that hope can be found in two places: in the strength of these individuals and their families, and in the men and women continue supporting the struggle against fundamentalism.



Karima signs copies of her book after the event