

## Review of *Secular Muslim Feminism: An Alternative Voice in the War of Ideas* by Hind Elhinnawy (Bloomsbury, 2024)

Yasmin Rehman\*

\*Correspondence: [msyasmin.rehman@gmail.com](mailto:msyasmin.rehman@gmail.com)

I cannot express how excited I was when a friend sent me a link to this new publication. At last, a book about Muslim women ‘that challenges the oversimplified and monolithic portrayals of Muslim women’ as passive, subjugated victims of Islam that has dominated for far too long. Instead Elhinnawy presents us with the rich and long history of feminist activism in non-western and Muslim majority countries, of diverse struggles, contexts and ideologies as well as a glimpse of the immense potential for change that secular Muslim feminists can and are creating for themselves, their communities and the wider world. This book is a must read for anyone interested in gaining wider insight and knowledge of the struggles that face Muslim feminists in the West and in Muslim majority countries from religious fundamentalists and the Right.

Elhinnawy gives voice to and platforms secular Muslim feminists across the world, who have and are involved in challenging religious fundamentalisms, Sharia laws, the imposition of religious dress codes, gender inequalities, racism, colonialism and imperialism and much more. The book makes clear that advocating for women’s rights, challenging religious, cultural and traditional practices can and is being done without opposing religion but critically in prioritising the need for, and preservation of secular spaces in guaranteeing equal treatment for all, including minority communities.

Many of the women interviewed for this book have helped shape my own feminist activism and my identity as a secular Muslim feminist. Some are missing but many including Marieme Helie-Lucas and Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Zainah Anwar and Sisters in Islam, Nawal El Saadawi, Saba Mehmood, Musawah, Afiya Zia, Azar Nafisi, Shirin Ebadi, Leyla Qasim, Taslima Nasrin, Mona Eltahawy, Tehmina Kazi and Maryam Namazie are recognised and their activism recorded. I have also been introduced to the work of many Muslim feminists, I’m ashamed to admit I did not know – including Elhinnawy herself. More about this later.



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Elhinnawy analyses the narratives secular Muslim feminists draw on to articulate their political, ideological viewpoints. Further, she demonstrates how secular Muslim feminists and Muslim feminists working within a religious framing see the 'other' as 'monolithic and fixed, lacking in nuance, diversity and evolution' thus limiting opportunities to develop strategic alliances that would advance their shared struggles. However, whilst optimistic about the immense potential for positive change, she warns that secular Muslim feminists and feminism, not only runs the risk of, but are indeed often co-opted by the Right and thereby reinforce racist, anti-Muslim tropes and stereotypes often 'masquerading as concern for the subjugated Muslim woman'.

Elhinnawy presents the obstacles that secular Muslim feminists face including the discrediting and marginalisation of secular voices as pro-Western, racist, anti-Islam and inauthentic by Muslims and by many non-Muslims. She describes the hijacking of feminist language and discourse by the Islamic feminist movement, the imposition of a singular Muslim identity that denies an inclusive, diverse understanding of religious and cultural traditions and practices and the exclusion of secular women's voices by the Left. She also analyses and critiques the idea that the war on terror and ongoing conflicts in Muslim majority countries can liberate the West from the scourge of Muslim terrorism and simultaneously free Muslim women from oppressive and violent Muslim men.

Elhinnawy includes in her challenges and critiques the 'celebration of Muslim women's agency' often presented as an alternative to western secularism and values which, she states, results in an accommodation of patriarchal and conservative aims that does little to further women's rights or emancipation. As she says, 'While recognising the contributions of Muslim feminists and Islamic reformists to the advancement of feminist awareness and women's empowerment in Muslim contexts, there is scant evidence supporting the notion that Islamist politics have led to tangible improvements in the material and symbolic status of women in any Muslim setting.' As I read this, I could not help but think of the ways in which religious leadership has been elevated by Western governments as the authentic voice of 'the Muslim community' and a search for solutions that seems to be caught in religious scriptures and framing.

In closing, I cannot write about this book without saying something about the author, Hind Elhinnawy. Despite living and working in the same city for many years, it has only been through the publication of this book that we, two avowedly secular Muslim feminists, have connected. The more I have found out about her the more evident is her courage and

commitment to advocating for women's rights. A former costume designer and now women's rights advocate and academic, Elhinnawy has dedicated more than two decades to advocating for women's rights in the MENA region and beyond. She has contributed to significant law and policy reform in Egypt and not least by being the first woman to file and win a paternity case in the Egyptian courts defying religious and social norms. Having met Elhinnawy, I can see she is a tour de force. I am devouring her other writings and look forward to seeing, reading and discovering more of what she does in the future.

**Yasmin Rehman** is a secular feminist activist and former CEO of Juno Women's Aid in Nottinghamshire, UK. She is an editorial collective member of *Feminist Dissent*.

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