

FEMINISM AND FAITH
An Interview with Alison Scott-Baumann
by Henrieta Șerban

Henrieta Șerban: Feminism and faith, faith in feminism... I would like to start our conversation with the topic of equality feminism seen in connection with the theme of feminism and faith, both because we have to start somewhere and because it is interesting. Exasperated by silence (here, a euphemism for "inequality") many women might agree with Clara Fraser (Revolution, She Wrote, 1998) who said that "The logic of feminism is to expand into generalized radicalism." Which sort of womanhood is central for the portrait of Alison Scott-Baumann?

Alison Scott-Baumann: First of all I would like to thank you warmly, Scientific Researcher II PhD Henrieta Șerban, for inviting me to respond to these questions and I hope that our disagreements – which are inevitable – will not interfere with our ability to communicate. The ground-breaking LUMINA conference in May 2015 was the place where we met, and I am very grateful to Bianca Berna for her invitation to such an inspiring conference.

I am a university Professor of Society and Belief at London University in the School of Oriental and African Studies. Social justice issues have led me to work with Muslim groups in Britain, India, Africa and Pakistan for twenty years and I am a philosopher with a great affection for the work of Paul Ricoeur. This is because the 'Muslim' has been identified by British (and many European) citizens as the 'alien other', and I believe this is detrimental to all concerned. I speak good French and German and see myself as a European, yet for the purposes of this interview I will often use examples from British life because that is where I am based. Henrieta, I would be delighted to discuss further with you the possible synergies between Romania and Britain.

I have recently been awarded a major 3 year research grant of one million euros to look at *Re/presenting Islam on campus*, with special focus upon gender, interreligious relations and radicalisation. <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/359DFD05-5543-4A69-8A6E-F7857B16EE14>. My team and I will seek to bear witness to good practice and develop positive conversations about Islam in the modern world. Due to recent government legislation that aims to stamp out terrorist activities, there is a complicated situation on all university campuses, where staff and students now all have to be monitored in case they are showing signs of being radicalized. This seems to me to be a counterproductive approach. I do not deny that there are difficulties yet we must also support good role models. My research over 20 years shows that there are numerous competing narratives about the nature of Islam on campus. We have lived through a decade of increasing pressure

and during that time there has been no balanced, consistent or cross-sector analysis of the expression of Islam on campus. In our project we will redress this imbalance by promoting ‘co-production’; enabling participants to be co-producers of meaning alongside project researchers. Triangulation of different data sources and data types will ensure a balanced picture and complement emerging impressions. By working closely with students and staff at a representative sample of British universities and two Muslim HE institutions, we will provide accurate measures of the *status quo* and formulate positive strategies for addressing Islam on campus in so far as it affects broader discussions around ‘radicalisation,’ gender and interreligious relations.

I have a good track record of original research and I hope that this sort of work shows that a woman can be a great professor – there are not many of us in Britain and there must be more in future! I can demonstrate as a role model that this is possible and I can also support women who seek to develop their careers, and this is part of my portrait of womanhood.

In order to explain my portrait of womanhood further, I must tell you a little about my triple inspirations: they are my mother, my daughter and many modern men. My mother was born in 1910 and decided to break taboo by training to work as a teacher and also insisting upon marriage (before the second world war a woman chose one or the other pathway, never both).

My daughter is a fulltime academic, wife and mother and I have to watch her juggling these responsibilities in a world that has not yet proved itself particularly supportive of women who wish to realise their full potential.

The ‘many modern men’ I speak of are those husbands, sons and fathers who realise that they want to support women to develop and that all will thereby be enriched – emotionally and spiritually as well as economically. Here I include my own son, my father and my husband.

This is a heteronormative model that I sketch out, and I am the mother of two children and grandmother, so I have fitted myself into this model, not least because I love children and enjoy my husband’s company. And yet I am also very concerned about the pressure that heteronormativity exerts upon us all. I believe that we are all pressured into behaving heterosexually in order to keep the human race alive; but this will happen anyway. We will not die out. Consider the populations of China and India. However, being forced to be heterosexual usually privileges a phallocentric approach to bodies, an approach which in turn endorses existing patriarchy. What about the clitoris? What about non-reproductive forms of mutual pleasure?

H. Ş: These aspects are extremely relevant within the Romanian context which, in my view, starts to support gender diversity and feminism more. But let us select a few feminist keywords and directions: romantic, socialist, reformist, radical. What is your definition of feminism?

A. S.-B.: My definition of feminism is as follows:

- Gender equality for the benefit of all.
- Critique of androcentrism: i.e. putting males at the centre of the world view

- Challenge to capitalism as a male dominated phenomenon
- Using gender to analyse democracy and justice

In philosophy and in everyday life there are two particular forms of thought that women need to understand and withstand if they are to be feminists. These two are implicit bias and stereotype threat. Implicit bias is the undeclared privileging of one group over another and to stereotype threat is the perception of characteristics that must be retained in order to retain membership of one's group. They are two discreet yet often interlinked forms of thought that contribute to woman's underrepresentation in philosophy and in everyday life, both as subject and object (Saul, 2013). This reflects a strange habit on the part of both men and women to differentiate thought processes on the bodily evidence of genitalia rather than intellect, dating back to Aristotle (and before) : he used principles based on his observations of the natural world and formalised this binary into a logic, which presented male as positive and female as negative. This binary logic perpetuates one of the most significant manifestations of binary thought in western culture, that between male and female (Haslanger, 2008). Yet Western metaphysical philosophy generally ignores the body, so this powerful binary is central to Western philosophy and yet cannot be discussed within the usual parameters of Western thought.

We can see the gravity of this situation if we look at women on British university campuses: Phipps and Young, in 2012, were commissioned by the National Union of Students to research the experiences of women students on campus, because of concern about male predatory behaviour, commonly called 'lad culture.' Women students who were interviewed believed that 'Lad culture' (young men behaving badly towards young women) was particularly influential in the social side of university life. They identified extracurricular activities and sports as key places for sexist misogynist behaviour, and they reported that sexism in these environments could spill over into sexual harassment and humiliation. Many female students saw 'lad culture' as significant in their personal life. They felt uncomfortable about misogynist jokes used in their friendship groups, and they felt under pressure to engage in multiple sexual relationships which were not conducive to establishing and maintaining long term commitments. They described frequent sexual harassment and molestation, and gave some accounts of sexual violence.

They believed university education to be 'gendered' and they cited issues such as the descriptions and status of particular subjects, such as engineering and science and classroom interactions in which the men dominated. They also identified negative attitudes towards feminism and gender-related topics in the university curriculum. I believe that this research suggests the lack of feminist thinking: if women are equal, why do they see themselves as sexual objects before seeing themselves as humans? Really important issues are not being understood, not being dealt with in university life and not being taught or discussed within the curriculum: how can we help young women to behave independently on campus, how can they learn to deal with what Le Doeuff calls gendered knowledge (the 'sex of knowing'), how can they identify and challenge implicit bias, how can they recognise stereotype threat and how can they manage their body and

their desires (LeDoeuff, 2003)? They need to be made aware of implicit bias and stereotype threat, and this should be done in Women's Studies or Gender Studies but such classes are closed and need to be restarted. It is entirely possible to have opinions and still be feminine.

H. S.: In other words, realistically, to talk about women being equal to men is still pretty radical in itself. In this respect, here is a tricky position related to "implementing" equality feminism: Why should we continue to talk about feminism, or equality feminism, when Western women are no longer the Victorian powerless creatures in need of men's protection and guidance?

A. S.-B.: I have just seen the new film 'Suffragette' directed by Sarah Gavron; set at the start of the twentieth century, around the time of my mother's birth. It is a good account of pre-feminist struggles, struggles for the vote and for autonomy in law and over their own reproductive potential. Yet it is also sad to know that many young women in Britain today do not value the vote. If we do not work hard to keep our democratic rights they will atrophy or be eroded. Our female comedian and social commentator Sandi Toksvig has just given up chairing a very successful current affairs radio programme to help found the Women's Equality Party, dedicated to gender equality for the benefit of all. I think I will join her party!

A women's party can work with men to attempt the following debates: Can we expand the political agenda beyond current ideas of democracy?; Can we redraw boundaries between the political, the economic and the domestic?; Who is in charge of how we think?

Neoliberalism is a term often used in these discussions and it is a major influence on young women because this is a form of capitalism in which I believe that women are again being seen as consumable objects: Neoliberalism is different from state-organised capitalism; Can free-market society undermine identity and the shared understandings that bind us socially?; Karl Polanyi described 'fictitious commodification' in 1944, *The Great Transformation*, and we see this in Britain with the privatisation by stealth of education and health.

Nancy Fraser describes this as 'Free-market fundamentalism' in her excellent 2013 book *Fortunes of Feminism*. In this volume, Nancy Fraser considers that something went wrong in the 1980s. She believes that the politics of recognition tried to 'recognise difference' between men and women, gay and straight...this meant transforming culture and was an excellent attempt. However, she describes how this attempt collided with rising neoliberalism that sought to suppress ideas about social egalitarianism and, instead, promoted free market approaches that can be and often are mistaken for freedom of choice, when in fact they represent the hegemony of multinational corporations manipulating our buying preferences: Baudrillard pleaded in vain: don't join the objects' but we often see recognition of difference through consumerist eyes, instead of being a human dilemma about difference and similarities across genders and identities.

H. S.: Judith Butler, discussing a real-life rape case, reproduces the misogynist question of the judge: "If you have a man at home, what are you doing running

around getting raped?” Rape remains a delicate subject for both religion and feminism. Let’s not forget: there are countries where the woman is compelled to marry her rapist.

A. S.-B.: In Britain, despite apparent liberal attitudes, few rape cases ever reach court, there is still the feeling that ‘she got what she deserved’ and professional groups such as doctors and social workers often warn victims that they will not be believed, despite physical evidence. This is a terrible situation and can scar a woman for life, emotionally as well as physically. It can also damage the life of her aggressor. School education must be one answer to this problem that should no longer be with us.

Another answer refers directly, Henrieta, to your judge’s quote: “If you have a man at home, what were you doing running around getting raped?” Let me return to Nancy Fraser to argue that the woman’s desperate need to move about reasonably freely and not be frightened for her safety is a crucially important issue. If we transform our thinking, we can protect women better. Fraser presents two models of running a family and then proposes a third (yes, again I am using a heteronormative model but it can be applied to all women who need to work and run a home – in other words all women!) The first model she shows us is that of:

Universal breadwinner:

- Liked by liberals and equality feminists this model guarantees social security mainly by reforming labour markets and providing day care, care for elderly , in order to guarantee social security
- Fraser believes that this could make it seem that women’s lives should be led as if they were like men
- Thus women could be penalised for not being more like men

The second model she offers is that of

Caregiver parity:

- Conservatives and difference feminists propose that:
 - Instead of family wages, we would have informal carework in families
 - Funded by caregiver allowances
 - Fraser challenges this model because caregiving thereby becomes equal to breadwinning, to ‘make difference costless’ (Fraser) – but does it?
 - This risks relegating women to home based carers
- Nancy Fraser proposes a third model of family life, which she recommends:

Universal caregiver:

- This facilitates men becoming more like women i.e.
- People who combine breadwinning with responsibilities for primary caregiving
- If we treat women’s current life patterns as the norm, not that of men, breadwinning and carework are seen as equal and related.

This is an economic, domestic and social approach to men and women’s lives and presupposes that women must move around in society in order to work, care and earn. Therefore indirectly Fraser’s model challenges the deep rooted and primitive belief that women are asking to be assaulted or raped if they are out and about: they must remain confined indoors if they are to be real women.

H. Ş.: Yes, the “normalisation” of a family life that treasures carework as much as breadwinning seems to me crucial for the future of any advanced society, not only that of feminism. Carole Pateman addresses this point interestingly, too. To put it briefly she proposes an income for women as caregivers. Which so advanced that is largely left commented. But another apple of discord is abortion.

A. S.-B.: I believe it is a woman’s right to have access to abortion – and clearly I very much hope she does not have to make use of that facility. In mainland Britain it is possible. In 2013 in the Republic of Ireland, the Roman Catholic part of Ireland, it was agreed to allow abortion if the mother’s life is at risk, including from suicide. This is an insistence upon the right of the child to life, which is of course absolutely right, and yet there are many cases of rape or coercion and it remains necessary for the majority of women who seek abortion in the Republic of Ireland to travel abroad for the procedure.

H. Ş.: Gloria Steinem identified as feminist anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men. Is feminism reforming politics? How should we understand equality?

A. S.-B.: The new Women’s Equality Party (WE) in Britain is very new and it is not possible to judge what success they will have. I hope they will be able to influence the debate. We should understand equality therefore also as giving women confidence to develop their potential: there are relatively very few women professors in academia in Britain. In my professorial role I can influence others, support women and advise them academically. However, none of this is easy and is the result of a long struggle that will never end. Success depends upon sisterhood, and the belief that such struggles also benefit boys, sons and men, husbands and brothers.

H. Ş.: Feminism is renewed faith in oneself. Could searching/interest for men's approval be somehow interpreted still as feminism?

S.-B.: There are fundamental biological and socio-cultural matters that affect the relationship between men and women, and however hard one tries, we have huge social pressures upon us to be attractive, to attract a heterosexual mate and also to be attractive to our own sex to show that we are fashionable and that we are making an effort to be part of a group! We have to teach the young to be aware of these pressures and to see that their personality is more important than their frock! Boys and young men often feel the same way.

It may be true that gay feminists are the most free to express themselves because they do not seek men’s approval. I have noticed that female comedians are often gay, and they feel comfortable with men without seeing the need to be approved of by men. Consequently men usually find them delightful companions and enjoy their humour. Sandi Toksvig is a good example of this. If, therefore, a woman can see herself as a human being and not as a sexual object, she can develop a real personality. As discussed earlier, the stereotype bias that means a woman must be subservient, compliant and a good sport who does what men want, is detrimental to women and yet still very powerful.

H. Ş.: Does religious faith and faith in a better future overlap? What is the future of feminism?

A. S.-B.: Feminism is often viewed as a dirty word, one that is frequently disowned by women of all faith and backgrounds. Such an act of disowning demonstrates that many women do not wish to accept that they are equal yet different to men; rather they wish to accept that they are inferior and different. This belief does a great disservice to men as well as to women, as men cannot rule the world properly without women's input and indeed the world would probably be a better place with the woman's viewpoint. By allowing women to play an active role within faith structures such as the church, there is the possibility of feminising the patriarchal establishments that tacitly allow paedophilia and predatory behaviours enacted by adult males upon young males and females. So I do not see feminism as dirty, but I see its absence as filthy, worse than dirty.

H. Ş.: The religious texts and dogmas assign for woman the role of helper, depriving the person of certain dimensions of humanity (i.e. creativity, aspiration, independence). I read about Marie Shear saying "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." How can a woman of faith be a feminist? How can a feminist be a woman of faith?

A. S.-B.: In Britain, the Church of England has finally, after many difficulties, appointed several women bishops, and my local bishop, Rachel Treweek of Gloucester Diocese, has recently called for God to be un-gendered. Instead of calling God He, she asks that we always call God simply God, with no gender attached. Whether she succeeds or not, in a church body that is still fundamentally patriarchal, she is showing the way for women of faith to ask that women must be treated as equal to men in the eyes of God. Indeed in the Bible God is usually not gendered, although most translations down the ages have made God male, of course. My Muslim women friends and colleagues will argue that the Qur'an is a feminist document and does not privilege the man over the woman. However they see certain Hadith (the interpretations of the Qur'an) as often setting out clear limits to the woman's rights and privileges.

H. Ş.: In everyday life equality often takes shape between average men and clearly above average women. Do you see exceptionalism as still the current route to gender equality?

A. S.-B.: It is indeed true that women have to be more competent than men in order to succeed – and even when they are more competent, they are often penalised for being 'too well qualified'! All Western societies need to take a good long hard look at themselves, because each of these men had a mother – a mother has the power to educate her sons into being feminists.

We can look at a different form of exceptionalism, the way in which modern society tends to see Islam as the exception that makes it irrelevant for solving societal problems. My friend and colleague Dr Georgina Jardim, a South African Christian, has researched an overlooked aspect of movements against Apartheid

in South Africa and found that Muslims, and in particular, Muslim women, played an important role. She saw how Muslim women were founders or participants in different forms of resistance (trade unionist movements, protest actions, charitable activities that crossed racial divides). They adopted the cause of social equality even when that threatened their own safety, both from the Apartheid regime and often from within their own resistance movements or familial communities. She believes this shows how women have to battle with masculinist narratives of nationhood and community in order to fight for justice for society as a whole. Their struggle shows how social behaviour and political action come to be gendered in ways that demonstrate both implicit bias and stereotype threat: repressive behaviour and codes are often assumed by women and men who are determined to protect their privileges and power. Jardim concludes that Muslim women's activism in the anti-Apartheid context show that power is gendered. Therefore the responsibility for gender activism cannot be left to the state, but is the obligation of civil society – women and men.

H. Ş.: Which is the way that religious faith opens to equality?

A. S.-B.: I will give an example from my work on university campus relations between the sexes, discussed above. In Britain, spiritual needs may be expressed more clearly in Muslim communities than among the general non-religious population, and this can raise issues for those who may seek some sort of spiritual nourishment from their university. Yet Muslim concerns about the secular campus are dismissed as puritanical and even bordering on an attack on western values. Muslim women who wear headscarves are seen as out of step with modern society and with so-called fundamental British values and will be accused of 'non-violent extremism', a term recently invented by the British government. They may be thought to be harbouring terrorist sympathies: in any event they would not be believed to be capable of contributing to the debate I am developing about women on campus. Alison Phipps shows two ways in which this can work: first the neoconservative view presents the Muslim woman as a victim of patriarchy, oppressed and cowed, and secondly the neoliberal politics of recognition has a homogenising effect so that Muslim women are perceived as fundamentally different from most students on campus. Therefore their views are seen as irrelevant to other students on campus (Phipps 2014). By this means we are excluding from the conversation a faith based group that could be as valuable as any other faith group in considering the woman's position on campus and her need for dignity, equality and fair treatment. I have written about this in a book chapter: "Speak to Silence and Identify Absence on Campus: Sister Prudence and Paul Ricoeur on the Negated Woman Question" in Eds. F. Henriques and A. Halsema, *Feminist Explorations of Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy*. Lexington/Rowman & Littlefield, which will be published in 2016.

H. Ş.: Thank you for this interview. Let's hope that it may be the beginning of a beautiful project.

A. S.-B.: Thank you for the interview and let's keep in touch.