

Dossier

Religious literacy for media people as a key factor to learn how to deal with religion as part of culture

An interview with Nayla TABBARA¹

Q1: Throughout the history of humanity, patriarchal ideology and values prevailed as a social system, giving men primary power and leadership. Social institutions like education, religion, media and law supported and reproduced patriarchy. When it comes to Islam, there is a historical and contemporary perception that based on the Qur'an and Hadith, women do not have the same legal status and rights as men. In your recent book "Islam in a woman's perspective",² you state that it is more the patriarchal interpretation and implementation of the Qur'an than the text itself that have kept women oppressed. How do you explain that?

A: When we look at the gender issue in Islam today, we see that women suffer from unequal rights and that men practically monopolize the Islamic religious discourse and the public sphere. For some people this means that Islam itself is a biased religion. However, since the 1980s, there have been women and some men working on the scriptures of Islam: *Hadith* and *Qur'an* to provide new interpretations. Those scholars work within the context of Islamic feminism. Their writings show that it is in fact the interpretation of the text, rather than the text itself, that is patriarchal. Taking the Qur'anic text in its context allows us to see that it was in fact a

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² Published in French under the title "L'Islam pensé par une femme", Bayard Editions, 2018. The book received the special jury award of the Jacques Hamel prize (February 2019) and the Ecritures et Spiritualites award (May 2019).

revolutionary text in seventh-century Arabia. For example, according to Islam, girls are allowed to receive half the inheritance that their brothers receive. This was at a time when girls did not inherit anything at all. Hence, the *Qur'anic* text came as a breakthrough in its context. The problem, according to Islamic feminists, is stopping there and not going on to continue this breakthrough in subsequent contexts. In this framework, for Muslim feminists and men who are working for a reform in Islamic thought and practice, since the aim of *Qur'an* was to give women their rights, this should not stop us from giving equal inheritance for boys and girls today. Even if the text said half, it said half because it wanted to give women a right, and half the inheritance was something unheard of at the time. This is what is allowing Muslim thinkers and activists in Tunisia today to work for gender equality in inheritance. The reform was approved by the government in December 2018 and the law is pending parliamentary discussion and approval before being passed.

Another example about interpretation is the story of Creation in the *Qur'an*. It shows that women and men are ontologically equal. The verse that speaks about the creation of human kind says that women and men were created out of a single soul and from this soul its spouse came out. Actually, the word soul in Arabic is feminine (see Surah An Nisa' 4:1). Grammatically, the verse puts the feminine before the masculine in the history of creation. Yet most importantly, both are equal coming from one soul. Then the *Qur'an* tells the story of Adam and Eve, but does not put the blame of the fall on Eve. There are verses that put the blame on both of them and others that blame Adam alone. Yet, interpreters of the *Qur'an* were men from the middle ages. They reverted to the Jewish interpretation of the story of creation of Adam and Eve, which puts the blame on Eve, and included it in the interpretation of the text, even though the *Qur'anic* text doesn't put any blame on. This highlights the crucial role of interpretation in transforming the meaning of the text.

The same can be said for polygamy. The verse on polygamy³ starts off with the condition of taking care of orphans, i.e. that a man taking care of orphans and wanting to be fair to them can marry their mother. The verse comes in a context of war when men were taking care of orphans of their friends and relatives who had died on the battlefield. It says, "And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan-girls, then marry (other) women of your choice, two or three, or four but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one." Yet later in the same Surah (Qur'anic chapter) the *Qur'an* says, "And you will never be able to be equal between wives [...]"⁴ Thus, the second condition is

³ "And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan-girls, then marry (other) women of your choice, two or three, or four but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one or (the captives and the slaves) that your right hands possess. That is nearer to prevent you from doing injustice." (Qur'an : An-Nisa' 4:3)

⁴ "And you will never be able to be equal between wives, even if you should strive [to do so]. So do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging. And if you amend [your affairs] and fear Allah - then indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful." (Qur'an: An-Nisa' 4:129)

equity. Feminists today read this verse in context as a *Qur'anic* pedagogical way to tell men that they would not be able to be just and that God's will is monogamy and not polygamy. At that time, men – especially those with money- were used to having as many wives as they wanted. The *Qur'anic* text comes to gradually limit that practice. However, since this concept was also interpreted only by men in the Middle Ages, they just focused on the “up to four”, seeing it as a license and not a limitation.

Q2: Traditional media played an important role in shaping women's perception, widening the gender gap and reinforcing gender stereotypes. However, the media can play a major role in spreading messages of emancipation and equality. Activists and feminist movements claim that women are underrepresented in media and struggle for gender representation. Are secular and religious media giving activists more visibility and are spokesmen and spokeswomen equally represented in debates?

A: I have a problem with the question itself because I don't think that it is the traditional media or media in general that played this role. The media just portray reality and the reality was that those who spoke about religion were mainly men. Furthermore, the gender gap in media representation of religion is relevant for all religions and not limited to Islam, and it represents social mentalities. For instance, in our Middle Eastern context, women are hardly accepted as religious leaders, whether in Islam, or Christianity. I know women today in Lebanon who have been ordained pastors in the evangelical church and who are rejected or at least not well accepted yet because of the traditional male role for religious leaders. When thinking about religious leaders in our society, people directly think of a male. Even the term used in Arabic for religious leader is *Rajol Din*, meaning “man of religion”. Part of our work in *Adyan*⁵ is to promote the expression “men and women of religion”. We coined this expression and I am happy to say today that many of the male religious leaders working with *Adyan* are starting to use it. We've been working also with people in religious media on how to cover these issues and getting them used to use the expression. We are also trying to promote the idea of having women speaking about religion on traditional and social media. Therefore, I don't think that it is the fault of the media. It is, however, the role of the media to try and search for women and promote their example and voice. For instance, in March, I was invited by the French France 2 TV Channel to be a part of their guest panel on their religious Sunday morning program where they interview guests from different religions. For the special occasion of International Women's Day, they hosted only female leaders to speak about Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Christianity. But this initiative of inviting women was limited to that day and was not something they do on a regular basis. Hence, the tradition that the media have of inviting mainly men to

⁵ *Adyan*, Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity, is a Lebanese NGO that promotes cultural and religious diversity along with coexistence and diversity management among individuals and collectivities on the social, political, spiritual and educational levels.

talk about religion is not only limited to our Middle Eastern countries, but is also widespread in parts Europe and the Western world. The whole world should work more on portraying and promoting women -religious leaders, theologians, religious educators...- speaking about religions in mainstream media, whether they are religious or secular media.

For things are changing and we are getting more and more female religious leaders, and female religious influencers speaking about religions. The United Nations agencies are also working on promoting this topic. This is quite interesting, because ten years ago we couldn't talk about religion in the context of the UN. Today, they talk more about religions and promote women as religious leaders and influencers. Another example is the Egyptian *Al Ghad* TV which hosts a show on modern Muslim thinkers. They are showcasing both men and women theologians and religious influencers from Arab countries and in the Arab context. This is an excellent step to promote gender-equal representation in media in this part of the world. At *Adyan*, we just had a seminar with Islamic scholars and theologians to work together on citizenship and coexistence in Islamic higher education. We were eighteen people and seven out of those eighteen were women. This makes me glad because, a few years ago, on many instances I would find myself the only woman in the room, as many other women in the field in their own contexts. To sum up, more and more women are being hosted to speak about religions in conferences and scholarly debates, as well as in the media. However, this needs to be intensified, and spread to other contexts.

Q3: Are there any media debates on women and religion, especially in the Islamic context? And what do they show?

A: A very interesting program was a TV and online show on Deutsch Welle, hosted by Jaafar Abdul Karim in Arabic, where he invited two women, along with a third guest, an Islamic male religious leader from Egypt. One of the female guests was Sherin Khankan, Denmark's first female imam who founded the first female-led mosque in Copenhagen, called Mariam Mosque. It is to note that women leading prayer is accepted in Islamic traditions, but only for women and not for a mixed congregation of men and women. Sherin Khankan is also mandated by the Danish government to conduct Islamic marriages, which is also accepted by Islamic tradition and is also applicable in some countries like Jordan or Egypt, for conducting a marriage is not restricted to religious leaders in Islam as it is more a contract between two persons. The second female guest Afra' Jalabi, a Syrian-Canadian journalist, researcher and peace advocate, had previously chocked the media as she used the expression "In the name of God, the most merciful and compassionate" in a feminine designation of God in Arabic. This show showed the tension in Islamic society between modern thinkers and traditional scholars; the religious leader rejected completely these two women; the first because she was not veiled and the second because of her female designation of God. He tried to explain his position by going back to the roots of Islamic sciences with expressions that only those who study in higher Islamic religious institutions understand. On the other

hand, the women guests were speaking in simple language accessible to all, yet lacking the classical idioms. One could see that what was at stake was not only a tension between the patriarchal and the non-patriarchal but between a modern way of thinking and a classical, i.e. pre-modern, way of thinking. This divide actually exists today within the Muslim society at large.

Among the Muslim youth, some are looking for more liberal ways of thinking while others stick to the traditional patriarchal interpretation. They are afraid that this liberal interpretation will lead to the end of Islam, because they are afraid that the end of patriarchal authority would lead to chaos. Personally, I consider this tension as something creative. Its roots are of course to be traced back to modern education and the emancipation and critical thinking it instills.

It is a world phenomenon that extremist movements try to counter. For instance, Boko Haram means “education is *Haram*”, i.e. western education is illegal and will lead to sin. Because education allows people to think by and for themselves and gives them the ability to have their own interpretation, a lot of Muslims are questioning traditional interpretations. Therefore, they need to see both men and women more and more on the media scene reconsidering religious interpretation and re-explaining it according to today’s context and according to the values and principles we all agree on today, such as human rights and equal human dignity for all.

Q4: More and more Muslim activists are contesting unequal treatments women have experienced historically and continue to experience in Muslim communities. They are calling and striving for gender reform in Islam. Could you give us an overview of these movements?

A: Today, we have more and more activists, but also thinkers who are working on reforms, especially those related to unequal treatments and rights. The very interesting thing about Islamic feminists is that they are diverse themselves. By diverse I mean some of them are liberal and others traditional; some of them wear the veil and others don’t. They also come from different denominations in Islam: Sunni, Twelver Shii, Ismaili... They are also diverse in their focus: some work on the interpretation of the Qur’anic text itself, like *Amina Wadud*, *Asma Barlas*, *Riffat Hassan*, *Asma Lamrabet*. Others like *Fatima Mernissi* worked on the *Hadith* text. There are also women working for women’s place in public religious sphere, i.e. as religious authorities leading prayers, teaching religion, promulgating *fatwas*. Some of them are also part of the traditional Islamic authorities and some of them are more liberal, promoting themselves as alternative Islamic figures. A third group is that of women (and sometimes men) working to change personal status laws, like *Sisters in Islam* in Malaysia or *Musawah*, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. Among these laws are the decision concerning marriage, i.e. the tradition that gave the father the right to decide whom his daughter is going to marry or at what early age she marries, justified by the example of Aisha, the young wife

of the prophet.⁶ This tradition has been legally changed in Morocco, where the *Mudawana*, the personal status law, was amended. This reform was requested by the King and ratified by the parliament, by request of human rights activists, thinkers and civil society organizations. The king formed a commission of men and women from different fields. It included religious people, activists and civil society organizations, but also doctors, sociologists and researchers.

Likewise, in Tunisia, the Individual Freedoms and Equality Commission includes women and men thinkers and activists trying to change laws. They proposed for example that there is no text in the *Qur'an* that prohibits muslim women from marrying men from the religions *of the Book*.⁷ Until now, Islamic law allows men to marry women from the *people of the Book*, but not vice-versa. Tunisia revoked the law and now Tunisian women can marry men from the *people of the Book*.

Social media can be used in this framework to create cross-border networks. *Musawah* organization is working on just that. Although they are based in Kuala Lumpur, they have international presence and they try to link Muslim women activists and feminists from around the world and promote awareness and new interpretations. An initiative like this one should be more covered and promoted on both traditional and social media.

Q5: Were these actions promoted in the media? In fact, how secular and religious Media are responding to this call for reexamination and reinterpretation of religious texts in Islam in general?

A: Unfortunately, all these reforms and improvements are not covered well by the media. We don't have enough programs promoting them. For Tunisia, the media covered how some religious authorities answered and mainly fought back against the Tunisian initiative and reforms. We always see limited media coverage for the entire process and reforms, whether it is for Tunisia, Morocco or even in Lebanon. Indeed, a few years ago, the age of guardianship of children following a divorce or death of the husband for Sunnis was raised from seven years for boys and nine for girls to the age of twelve in Lebanon. However, this wasn't covered by the media. Nowadays, there are activists working to promote these issues especially on social

⁶ However, this is controversial because, first of all, we are not sure how old Aisha was when she got married. According to the *Hadith*,⁶ some say that she got married at the age of nine. Others say at the age of fourteen. Some texts even say that she was eighteen. She was very young considering the age difference between her and the Prophet, but most probably she was not nine. Second, if we consider the first wife of the prophet, Khadija, she was twenty five year older than him. In very traditional contexts, people say, "Let's perform sunna, i.e., let's go do like the prophet did and have our little girl marry an older man," but nobody said, "Let's perform sunna and follow the example of the prophet and marry a woman who is twenty five years older." This is also related to the patriarchal interpretation and are not stated in the *Qur'an*.

⁷ Islamic term which refer to Abrahamic religions: Jews, Christians, and Sabians.

media so that women would understand their rights. We definitely need to cover these changes better and learn the methodology and texts that helped to introduce these modifications in other countries. We need to learn from the best practices so that other countries don't start from scratch.

From my perspective, the media are not providing enough coverage mainly because people in mainstream media and in politics are afraid when it comes to religion. They don't know how to deal with religious issues, and sometimes they think that religious leaders are sacred. They prefer to stay away from problematic religious issues. At *Adyan*, we give courses on religious literacy for people working in media. We consider the religious landscape as part of our society and culture. Religious leaders and influencers are also part of this culture and are main stakeholders in our society. Therefore, they need to be also challenged positively to reflect together for the benefit of the society. They shouldn't be idolized and what they say should not be considered as part of revelation. They are men and interpret religion according to their own context and history. Thus we need to open a constructive dialogue with them and among them. Another point is that the media don't portray enough interfaith or interreligious encounters; they consider them boring and folkloric. Yet interreligious encounters sometimes bring important new positions of religions to social and political issues. Furthermore, there are a lot of interesting changes happening inside religions that are worth being showcased. That's why we need religious literacy for media people to know how to deal with religion as part of culture.

Q6: Thanks to increased use of electronic devices and access to social media, new media allow to spread messages easier than traditional media. What is the perception of religious authorities regarding the use of social media? Are they responding back through the same channels? And are religious social media covering gender issues and activist calls for gender equality and women's rights?

A: Religious authorities have understood the importance of social media today and are using it. *Al Azhar*, the leading Sunni authority based in Egypt, for example, has a very strong presence on social media to promote its positions concerning values, citizenship, other religions and even the role of women as religious teachers or working in *Fiqh*. Until now, however, it promotes more positions regarding values, diversity and citizenship, but has not promoted positions for women's rights except in rare cases against gender based violence for instance. Thus, we are still awaiting to have a position from *Al Azhar* for women's right and the place of women in Muslim society. Recently, in a document co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of *Al Azhar*, we find one small paragraph about women's rights. It is a good start, but we need more, a lot more, in view of all these problematic interpretations of texts and unjust practices on the ground.

From my experience with Religious authority and media, I was honored to be invited by *Al Azhar's* big conference in 2017 about freedom, citizenship, equality and inclusion. It was a very important conference that was attended by eminent

religious leaders and political leaders from different Arab countries and different religions. I was the only Muslim woman spokeswoman talking on the platform without wearing a veil. *Al Azhar's* website and related media promoted the content of my discourse. However, they didn't show my picture. I think this is due to the fact that I am not veiled. This for me is nonetheless a good sign, as it shows that *Al Azhar* accepts and promotes women teaching and explaining religion and working on interfaith issues.

Q7: How secular and religious media have reacted to your call for a holistic and interpretative reading of the Quran from a woman's perspective? Could you share with us your own experience with the media since the publication of your book?

A: As the book is in French, readers are already used to this modern way of thinking. Therefore, I didn't have any negative reaction. On the contrary, I had positive feedbacks. But I am sure that once translated into Arabic, the book will be controversial.

But I have an experience concerning the reception of my reflection on social media through the *Adyan* platform called "Taadudiya" meaning pluralism. We showcase in it short films promoting youth as role models, to encourage activism and interreligious solidarity. We have another series called "We can talk about religions". While the youth series presenting young men and young women is well accepted and has positive reviews, the films about religions have high rating but are sometimes viewed as controversial. Sometimes the controversy is from the topic or from the interfaith or intrafaith rapprochement that they showcase, and sometimes it is due to the fact that the speakers are not male religious leaders or nuns but female scholars of religion or female pastors. I appeared in one episode with a protestant woman preacher, to speak about patriarchal interpretation of religion. It was one of the most controversial episodes in the series with some comments like: "Who are you to speak about religions?" or "Women should stay in the kitchen"... In another episode I spoke about Islam and other religions, alongside my colleague Fr. Fadi Daou, with whom I co-wrote a book entitled *Divine Hospitality* that presents side by side Islamic and Christian theologies of other religions. The aim of the episode was to give an idea of the book's content, and I received a lot of negative comments because of : 1- the pluralist position that I was advancing, 2- the fact that I am a woman speaking of religion- 3- the fact that I am not veiled. The reactions of course were not all negative as there were a lot of positive ones. Yet I also look at the negative reactions positively, because it shows that people are engaging in these shows, and not brushing them off as pure heresy, that they are challenging them in a way. I think these shows and others are getting people bit by bit used to women in general and secular women in particular speaking about religious issues.

Q8: In the introduction of your book, you revealed that you agreed to write the book provided that it is not restricted to gender issues and women's right in Islam. According to you, there is a mindset to limit the contribution of women in Islam to the gender sphere, thus maintaining and supporting discrimination between men

and women. You present yourself as a Muslim woman theologian and you stress on the role of female Muslim theologians beyond gender questions. How do you see the place and role of Muslim women theologians?

A: This book wasn't actually my decision; it was a request made by Bayard Publishing House. A year earlier, a French journalist had written a book called "The new actors of Islam", which included a chapter about my work and engagement. Bayard liked my profile and asked me to write something about Islam and women. I agreed on the condition that the book would not be limited to questions related to women or to Islamic feminism. As much as Islamic feminism is important to me (there is a chapter in my book about it), there is a problem today because whenever we want a woman to speak about religion, we want her to speak about women's role and women's position in religion. However, as women, we are also theologians. I am personally a theologian of diversity. This is what I wanted to showcase in this book. I wanted to write about the theology of diversity, the theology of fragility, the perception of God and what inspires Muslims. I also wanted to write about political and social theology, violence in Islam, and issues related to Islam and State, which are very important to be tackled in our modern pluralistic societies.

Q9: So you wanted to widen the reflection of women on Islam, having a holistic approach of reinterpreting Islam?

A: Yes, definitely. But I wanted also to remind the public, whether it was the media, readers, activists or intellectuals, that whenever you are in front of a woman engaged in religious thoughts, that doesn't necessarily mean that she is engaged only in issues related to women. Women as much as men can interpret anything in religion. In fact, in the introduction of the book, I said that nobody has a full interpretation of a religion because each of us speak and interpret it from their own context. As a Lebanese woman, my interpretation is affected by my context and history and by my gender. Likewise, a man is affected by being a man, by his nationality and by his history. That's why we say that we need to reinterpret what was interpreted by men in the Middle Ages because we live in a different context than the Middle Ages.

Q10: Religious knowledge and studies suffer also from gender gap. In your book, you say that women in Islam have to regain their place in the religious sphere and Islamic studies. Why is it regaining and not gaining and how the Islamic world in general and the media in particular are responding to it?

A: At the time of Prophet Muhammad, he was trying to empower and push women to take part of the public sphere. For example, the first martyr in Islam was a woman. We had women who went alone for the *Hegira*, following the migration of the prophet and his followers from *Mekka* to *Medina*. This was really unsafe at that period. These women decided to become Muslims and left their husbands, families and homes and followed a new religion. One of these women is mentioned in the *Qur'an* and has a Sura (Qur'anic chapter) whose title is inspired by her story (Al Mumtahana). The prophet gave full access of the Mosque to women the whole time and not only during the time of prayer. They were there for all the teachings and

there were also a specific day per week for the women and their questions. Hence they had double the time compared to men. The Prophet also encouraged *Um Waraqa* to lead the prayer for members of her household. According to feminists, members were both women and men, while the traditional version says that they were women with boys that hadn't reached the age of puberty. We know that the Prophet encouraged his wives *Aicha* and *Umm Salama* to lead the prayer for women in their houses. He was encouraging this public role of women. Women also played a role on the first battlefields. After the death of the Prophet, *Aicha* and *Umm Salama* in particular were also transmitting religious knowledge. People and even the caliphs would come to them to receive answers to issues; *Fatima*, his daughter, also interpreted texts from the *Qur'an*, especially those related to her own inheritance from her father. Thus, women had a major role in the religious sphere during the first period of Islam. However, after that generation, we see that women were confined to the transmission of religious knowledge instead of production of knowledge, and to inner spaces and not public spaces. During the first few centuries of Islam, we had women who used to give public sermons. Some of them gave sermons for both women and men. Bit by bit, this habit got reduced. After the 13th century, the *Madrassa*, the institute of religious learning, appeared and became exclusive for males. Before that period, learning and transmission of religious knowledge used to happen in homes, libraries or even hospitals, and without any institution. Once learning was institutionalized, it became exclusive for males and knowledge transmission in private and spaces gradually lost its importance. Women also went less and less to mosques because the patriarchal interpretation said that women do not have to go to the Friday prayer. In some countries they were not even allowed to go to mosques. At the beginning of Islam, however, both women and men attended the Friday prayer and all prayers.

The 20th century saw the return of Muslim women to the public sphere because they got access to education. They thus became able to take part in the debate and defend their positions. Feminist movements arose everywhere, from Asia and the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent, calling for their rights and requesting their presence in the public sphere. Some struggled hard to gain their rights again. For instance, *Chamima El Sheikh*, in South Africa, went on strikes next to mosques demanding that women be accepted to pray in the mosque. Along with a group of women activists, she entered by force and was kicked out. They started praying on the streets, under the rain. Bit by bit, they gained the right to enter mosques. In other countries, women were not prohibited, but it was just not part of the habits and culture. Since the eighties, women came back gradually to mosques, especially during Ramadan period. Yet their place is either at the back of the mosque or on a different floor, or in a side room.

In the 21st century, women demanded to be in the central space of the mosque but also started wanting to lead the prayer for both women and men. Traditionally, women were allowed to lead prayers for women, but not to men. They also wanted

to perform the *Azan*,⁸ the call to prayer, for until now a women's voice in Islamic traditional circles is considered in of itself seductive, and thus not fit for the call to prayer. The first one to lead a mixed-gender prayer was *Amina Wadud* in 2005, along with another woman who did the call for prayer, in New York. It was highly covered by the media at that time and quite controversial. We started having more and more women calling and leading mixed-gender prayers, mainly in the United States and Canada. Nowadays, this is starting to become more common in Europe. Another aspect is the sermon, *Khutbah*.⁹ I personally consider the *Khutbah* more important than leading the prayer, which is repeating structured words. In the sermon, you can add new ideas and text interpretations and share your message.

In the Islamic *Al-Noor* Organization in Canada, the sermon is delivered one week by a man and the next week by a woman. Recently in Europe, new mosques have emerged where women and men lead the prayer together and some accept women praying without wearing a veil. It is important to notice that wearing the veil in the mosque is not mentioned in the *Qur'an*; it is in the *Fiqh*, the jurisprudence. In France, *Kahina Bahloul* is promoting the Fatima Mosque, a new mosque where the prayer is led simultaneously by a man and a woman and where the congregation is divided, women on the right and men on the left. The mosque didn't open yet, but the project was launched online and in traditional media. On Arab media and social media, *Kahina Bahloul* is receiving both negative and positive reviews. The negative ones even attempt to her honor. The positive ones underline the importance of having a mosque that resembles people with human rights values and speaks their own modern language. It is interesting to point out that whenever a woman says a controversial content, negative feedbacks turn immediately to her honor, yet when a man promotes controversial ideas, he is labeled according to his belief and ideas, not his honor, and is thus called an atheist or an apostate.

Q11: In your book, you state that, traditionally in Islam, God is beyond gender, yet a patriarchal image of God has strengthened patriarchal dominance. Why a beyond-gender perception of God is so important for gender equality?

A: In my book I wanted to point out our perception of God, how we humans have created a male perception of God and how this perception has affected the religion. Grammar affects the way we perceive things. When we talk about God as a "He", whether it is in Islam, Christianity or Judaism, this affects our image of God, making it patriarchal. Thus, we should be aware that, without even noticing it, when we call God "He", we tend to give God or the divine a patriarchal attitude.

I wanted to remind in my book that in Islam, God has names of Mercy and names of Majesty. The second ones are fatherly attributes, but the first ones are motherly attributes. The most important attribute of God in Islam is "Al Rahman", an attribute that is repeated all the time in our religion, and it is among the motherly

⁸ Muslim call for prayer made from the minaret of the mosque

⁹ The sermon delivered at the mosque during Friday's prayer.

attributes, the names of Beauty. “Al Rahman” means the merciful, a word that comes from the root *Al-Rahem*, meaning the womb in Arabic, which is a very motherly attribute. But even though it is the most important attribute, we tend to bypass it and perceive God as the powerful, the judge, i.e. through the more masculine attributes. Therefore, I want to highlight that God has both attributes and is beyond gender. Moreover, in the Islamic tradition, the Sufis, i.e. the mystics, wrote poetry calling God with feminine names as a way to highlight the beauty of God. Sufis, so as not to always be confined to using “He”, also tended to refer to the Divine Essence, “She”.

We need to think about the two aspects of God, the feminine and the masculine, the Beauty and the Majesty, the maternal and the paternal; otherwise, we tend to legitimize patriarchal interpretation of religion as we convey a strictly masculine image of God.

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