



## Feminism, Muslim Theology and Religious Pluralism

*Interview with Nayla Tabbara and Jerusha Lamptey*

*Renaud Fabbri: Since at least the Islamic Revolution in Iran and other more recent political developments in the Sunni world, the question of the status of women has become a central and increasingly polarizing topic*

*in world affairs in general and in the relation between Islam and the Western world in particular. Rightly or wrongly, there is also a growing perception that the situation of women has worsened rather than improved*

---

Jerusha T. Lamptey is Assistant Professor of Islam and Ministry and Advisor for the Islam, Social Justice and Interreligious Engagement Program at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Nayla Tabbara is Vice Chairperson of Adyan Foundation, a Lebanese foundation for Interreligious Studies and Spiritual Solidarity ([www.adyanvillage.net](http://www.adyanvillage.net)) and Director of the Adyan Institute.

*in the Muslim world over the last decades, at least in some countries. Would you agree with this assessment and if so, why has it been so and why has the status of women become such a contentious issue?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* To begin, I would say that the question of the status of women extends back much further than the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Speaking only of Islamic contexts and traditions, we see questions about women, their status and roles discussed in the *Qur'an* and *ahadith*. In relation to the “Western” world, there is also a longer history that is evident in multiple discourses, especially in the genre of writing known as traveler’s accounts and in artistic representations of Muslims, Muslim settings, and Muslim women. Mohja Kahf has written a book that traces some of these various and long-standing representations. In relation to the last few decades, the rise and spread of rigid and conservative ideologies and Islamic interpretations is certainly a concern in relation to women. This does not mean that the situation of every individual Muslim woman has worsened, but it does mean that in many contexts women do not have the same legal status and rights as men. This impacts the physical, economic, marital, educational and even spiritual opportunities of women. In terms of it being a contentious issue, it is also true that the topic of women has been utilized by various “Western” contingents AND

by various Islamic groups in order to highlight perceived fundamental distinctions between “Islam and the West”. I would argue that in both situations women have been used as propaganda, and that concern for women is not always the primary concern. Finally, I would say that if women are suffering, if women do not have equal rights, and if women need support, then it is a real issue. The fact that certain “Western” and certain Muslim groups exploit the topic of women for their purposes does not negate the fact that there are real issues and lives at stake.

*Nayla Tabbara:* It is true that since the 1980s there are two movements on the Islamic scene: one movement “on women”, and one movement “from women”.

By movements “on women” I mean the emergence and proliferation of Islamist extremist movements, of Islamist rule (whether of *Sunni* or *Shi'i*) and Islamist legifiration that is against the other, the other without being the person from a different religion or sect, and the other within, mainly women.

Yet in parallel, since the 1980s Islamic feminism has been expanding, and this is what I call the movement “from women”. Women have not only been demanding rights and changing rules and laws and participating more in public life, which they have been doing in Muslim majority countries since the beginning of the 20th century, but they have

achieved since the 1980s big steps in (re)gaining their place in the religious sphere. Women have fought their back into the mosque to pray, as they had been over history moved away from it and in some cases prohibited access to the mosque. They have changed religious laws in many countries regarding personal status, and have in some cases breached the taboo of women being at the pulpit as an imam giving a Friday or *Eid* sermon. Finally they have regained their place in Islamic studies, not only in transmitting traditional studies but in producing new Islamic thought, new theories in the study of *Qur'an*, and new theologies.

### **Feminism(s) and Muslima Theology**

*Renaud Fabbri: Could you give us an overview of the emergence and evolution of the Feminist discourse in the Middle- East and the Muslim World?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* There are many good books written on the topic by specialists in these areas, including those written by Margot Badran, Leila Ahmed, and Lila Abu-Lughod. I would direct you to these and other sources, which provide detailed analyses of particular contexts. One comment I will add is that feminist discourse is not a single entity; there are many formulations of feminism. Therefore, in looking at this history you see multiple strands of discourse stemming from different sources

at different junctures. These range from a general concern for women's well being to particular colonial formulations of universal feminism to third world feminisms.

*Nayla Tabbara:* In a nutshell, the feminist discourse in the Middle East was not Islamic nor Christian nor Jew nor other, it was a feminist movement that started at the beginning of the 20th century and responded to the needs of women from the different religious backgrounds to break the limitations that were by law imposed on them and demand their rights in participation in political life.

Religious feminism came at a later stage. Some argue that the feminist movement worldwide was becoming too a-religious, if not anti-religious, and some believing women wanted to combine their feminist positions with their religious beliefs. This led to the development of Christian feminism, and Muslim feminism as of the 1980s. This faith-based feminism stems from within the religion to effect change in it regarding women. One important note is that the feminist movement in the Middle East and the faith-based feminist movements have also had men that championed them since the beginning of the 20th century, including Muslim religious leaders.

*Renaud Fabbri: For most Western secular feminists, religion is the root-cause of the historical alienation of*

*women and the origin of patriarchal values. Why and how do you see the role of Islam as potentially more positive in terms of women's identity and women's lives?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Religion certainly has been a cause of historical and contemporary alienation for women and a zone of patriarchal values. This is true. What is not true is that this is all religion has been, has to be, or can be. Religions all have the potential to be egalitarian and the potential to be patriarchal. Islam is no different. There are aspects of the tradition, for example *tafsir* and law, that are dominated by patriarchal and androcentric assumptions. Can this be different? Of course, but it will take a lot of challenging self-reflection on behalf of the worldwide Muslim community. And there are aspects of Islamic sources and tradition that are phenomenology egalitarian and just. These will need to be prioritized. While I find great beauty in Islamic traditions, I do not believe that they are necessarily or inherently more positive than other traditions—including other secular worldviews—when it comes to women's identity and women's lives.

*Nayla Tabbara:* Religion is what we

make of it. Our culture influences our interpretation of religious texts and we either rigidify interpretation and sanctify it so that no one dares to change it, or we allow interpretation to evolve according to the



Photo courtesy of Patrick Ringgenberg

core values of both our faith and our time. One of the root causes of patriarchalism and of extremism is thus, according to me, the rigidifying of medieval interpretations. Therefore, to promote human rights, women's rights, religious freedom, and other of our most important causes today,





I believe that we need to go back to the text and “un-read patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur’an*”, using an expression from Asma Barlas, providing new interpretations to verses that led to unjust rules and negative perception of women. But all this should be done based on a theological foundation, that of God’s love for all humankind equally and of God’s justice, with a holistic reading of the *Qur’an*, i.e. taking the whole of the *Qur’an*, not a selection of verses, and a contextual approach, i.e. reading verses about relations between men and women in the context of 7th century Arabia and taking from them the moral of the story, in this case the impressive advancement in regards to women’s rights at that time, instead of sticking to the letter of the verse. If we follow this meth-

odology, and if we base ourselves on the end note of the verses concerning women in terms of advancement at the time of the beginning of Islam, then we can see this as an opening for us to go towards more opening in explaining some verses that are still interpreted in a problematic and apologetic way.

*Renaud Fabbri: How do you see the role of Muslim-Woman theologians in promoting gender equality and social fairness toward women and fighting the various forms of violence against women in the Muslim World and elsewhere?*

*Jerusha T. Lamprey: Muslima theologians and other Muslim women who critically yet committedly engage the tradition play an invaluable role*

in terms of promoting equality and fighting against structural and physical violence against Muslim women. They have knowledge of the tradition, its sources, and the diversity of interpretations that have been offered throughout the centuries. They are able to chart the manner in which authority has been constructed throughout the tradition and the manner in which diverse contexts shaped ideas of authority. They are capable of challenging patriarchal and androcentric interpretations that are frequently presented as the word of God, and thus as indisputable. This is why some other Muslims seek to delegitimize the work of *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars. It is provocative because it is rooted in the tradition, knowledgeable of the tradition, critical of aspects of the tradition, and relentless in its pursuit of justice for all people.

*Nayla Tabbara:* The role of Muslim-Woman theologians is not only to promote gender equality and work for the rights of women, this being the role of Muslim feminists and activists for women's rights. The role of Muslim women theologians is like the role of Muslim men theologians, to promote new interpretations, new reflections, explanations on religious issues, concerning dogma and concerning the role of the believers and their relations to the world, i.e. to creation, to each other, to politics, to society...etc. Women's

causes come within this framework, and women theologians can assist Muslim feminists and activists by providing them with the theological foundations for what they do, and vice versa, activists and feminists can help theologians by giving them information from the ground that allows them to test their reflections.

Thinking that women theologians only deal with issues concerning women is like saying women doctors are not only gynecologists. We need to get out of this mentality and see that women theologians deal with all matters of faith, otherwise, we would have feminine theologies for women and masculine theologies for men!

*Renaud Fabbri:* Prof. Tabbara, you present yourself as a Muslim-Woman theologian and Prof. Lamptey as a *Muslima* theologian. None of you claim to be Feminist Theologians. How would you position yourself vis-à-vis Western Secular Feminists? Do you see overlaps between their concerns and yours?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* My usage of the label "*Muslima* Theologian" is designed to be particular yet not dismissive of feminism. In other words, I consider myself a feminist, yet I am a particular sort of feminist. In line with other forms of feminism, such as womanist theology, *mujerista* theology, *Latina* theology, African women's theology, and Asian women's theology, I started using this termi-

nology in order to critique assumptions of universal female experience and assumptions of parity across religious and secular worldviews. In addition, I use this label to capture aspects of my personal, experiential and theoretical positionality. It indicates that my approach arises out of my identification as a believing and practicing Muslim. More importantly, it indicates that my work is rooted in the Islamic tradition, while simultaneously probing and testing the bounds of that tradition. The term *Muslima* also indicates an interconnection with my positioning as a woman. Part of this relates to my individual experiences as a woman. However, another aspect of it arises from a deliberate choice to align myself with—and draw pointed insights from—scholarly reflections on women’s experience, including those drawn from other feminisms and feminist theologies. In reference to “Western secular feminists,” I would respond by asking, who do you actually mean? What individuals? What groups? Rather than reify the myth of an inherent clash between Islam and “Western secular feminism”, we need to be specific and informed. There is indeed overlap in my work and the work of some feminists who are not religious, and in other cases I have concerns. In general, I would say that my concerns arise when feminism (of any kind) is used to override the agency and voice of people or to holistically demonize all religion. However, this

is not the position of all secular feminisms.

*Nayla Tabbara:* I present myself as a Muslim Woman theologian and not as a feminist theologian because I do not work on women or gender issues. My focus in theology is “Theology of the other” i.e. Islamic perception of diversity and other religions. Thus my work only overlaps with the work for western secular feminists around the fundamental values such as human dignity, equality, respect of individuality, respect of diversity...etc.

My work overlaps more with Muslim feminist exegetes (interpreters) in methodology, the holistic and contextual approach to the Qur’an and the unreading of patriarchal or exclusivist interpretations, i.e. interpretations that consider that other than Muslims do not achieve salvation.

*Renaud Fabbri:* *In your opinion, why is it that the concept of “feminism” has come to be considered by many women scholars of the Muslim world as intrinsically problematic?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I don’t agree that it is always considered in this fashion. Yes, there is an ambivalent relationship with certain modern formulations of feminism, particularly those formulated and enacted as part of missionary, colonial and modern imperialism. These particular formulations have been used as

political capital and have promoted the notion that there is only one way for women to be free, equal and empowered. Underlying this has been the assumption—not based on fact or research—that women’s experience is universal and homogeneous. This is of course not true. But, these are not the only forms of feminism that exist. In fact, there exist a multitude of “second-wave” and “third-wave” feminisms that arose precisely to critique these notions of universal women’s experience that were largely based on the experience of white, Western and middle class women. Among these critiques is post-colonial feminism that seeks to expose the manner in which power, race, religion and sexuality converge in colonial and post-colonial contexts. There are those female voices that unequivocally reject feminism as “foreign” or “un-Islamic.” They are more than entitled to this opinion. In my view, however, this stance is connected to two important realities. First, it mimics the rhetoric of authoritarian (usually patriarchal) Islamic ideologies, as well as the rhetoric of colonial and imperialistic ideologies. Both of these try to emphasize an inherent disconnect between Islam and feminism. Second, I believe this opinion reveals a lack of knowledge of contemporary feminism, and especially feminist theologies, the diverse feminist approaches of women of faith in other traditions. Contemporary feminist theologians grapple with patriarchy

in their traditions, with secular and universalized feminisms, and with legacies of colonialism and imperialism. I believe deep knowledge of these diverse voices would make the unequivocal rejection of all feminism more difficult.

*Nayla Tabbara:* As mentioned above, Muslim women theologians deal with all issues related to Islam and Muslims, not only “women issues”. Feminism was and still is very important in the journey of de-patriarchalizing our traditions and regaining women’s voice and role, yet the role of women theologians and women religious scholars should not stop at issues of women, but should cover all issues in religion, otherwise feminism becomes a trap.

### **Religious knowledge and Qur’anic Hermeneutics**

*Renaud Fabbri:* *Islam grants a very important place to women such as Maryam, Aisha or Fatimah. Can these women still represent a realistic model for women? Or do you think on the contrary that the emphasis on these ideal, paradigmatic figures tends to obscure more concrete contemporary challenges for women?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Exemplary women are by nature exemplary, meaning they have a particular and rare experience. In the case of Mary, for example, not many women can relate to the notion of being impregnated by



God's will through the angel Gabriel. This is not their experience. However, there are other aspects of Mary, such as her persistent trust in God, which can be emulated and valuable. However, one issue is that accounts of these women have been largely recorded and interpreted by men. This means that idealized figures can be used to enshrine patriarchal and androcentric conceptions of the ideal woman and to obscure contemporary challenges. I

would like to see two things in this area. First, women must re-interpret these examples in ways that actually relate to their contemporary experience. What can Mary teach us about our struggles, about being alone, about being slandered, about being in positive relation with God even when family or community rejects us? Second, why must women only look to women as exemplars? Women need to engage male examples and read them through their particular female experiences.



Photo courtesy of Shuang Wen

*Nayla Tabbara: Sayyida Maryam in the Qur'an is a model not only for women: she is a model for believers, men and women, as is Asia, in the verses 11-12 from Surat al Tahrīm (Sura 66): "And God has cited for the believers the example of the wife of Fir'aun (Pharaoh), when she said, "My Lord, build for me, near You, a house in the Paradise, and deliver me from Fir'aun and his deeds, and deliver me from the unjust people. And (God has also cited the example*

of) Maryam, daughter of ‘Imrān who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her Our spirit, and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and His books, and she was one of the devout.” Likewise, I believe that Aisha and Fatima as well as Khadija and Zaynab are also models for both men and women.

In the case of Aisha, Umm Salama and Fatima, we could highlight their role in the transmission and production of religious knowledge, as a model for women: Aisha alone is reported to have transmitted 1200 *hadith*, and Umm Salama and Fatima have a role in jurisprudence as Umm Salama spoke on the question of *Shura*, and Fatima provided analysis on the question of inheritance of prophets.

Yet models for men and women in general and for women in specific should not stop at the beginning of Islam. Islamic history and culture has shown us many models that we need to invest in highlighting, men or women who have spent their life defending, based on their Islamic deep rooted faith, the rights of the excluded and the marginalized, in peaceful ways and without expecting anything in return, on the lines of the prophets.

*Renaud Fabbri: Historically men have tended to monopolize religious knowledge. What was the role of women in the transmission of religious knowledge in early Islam and how has it evolved? In what fields of knowledge,*

*whether juridical, theological or spiritual, were they the most active?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Once again, this is a huge topic that has been chronicled in many books. I will make two summary points. First, there is a tendency to glorify the early role of women in the transmission/recording of religious knowledge while overlooking the fact that they were later excluded. So Aisha did recount the bulk of *Sunni ahadith*, but *usul al-hadith* would come to be dominated by men. Women were there and this is notable, but they did not stay in the center of the structure of religious authority. Second, women did not dominate in any of these fields. There are notable and important women figures in all fields, but they did not dominate or have equal representation in any. The absence of women and lack of equal representation means in the worst-case scenario patriarchal and androcentric laws, practices and customs were enshrined. In the best case scenario, it means that the valuable perspectives and concerns of women were not heard first hand or considered in the formulation of what would become tradition.

*Nayla Tabbara:* An overview of the history of women in the transmission and production of religious knowledge during history may astonish us. It actually shows that women have been taking part in the religious studies scene from the be-

ginning. After the women companions that transmitted *hadith*, the following centuries show women learning *hadith* by heart and teaching it, and women engaging in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) at least in learning and teaching it, women learning *hadith* books and Qur'anic recitation as well as women sermonners (*wa'izat*), renowned sufi women and at a later stage women as *shaykhat ribat*. Many women gained notoriety in their knowledge and were sought out teachers. In the first 6 centuries of Islam, there were no Islamic studies institutes (*madrasa*). Religious knowledge was given in public and private locations and each student would pride him/herself on the teacher they had learned with, receiving from them a certificate (*ijaza*) and adding it to their CV (called *mashyakha*). It is very interesting to note that most of the classes were mixed for men and women, and the women were teachers as well as students. Ibn Hajar al Askalani for instance studied with 53 women. Al Khatib al Baghdadi, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Hanbal, all had women teachers. Likewise, women had female and male teachers. With the beginning of the institutionalization of religious knowledge through the *madrasa* that was a purely male environment, the non-formal religious education began slowly to be reduced and thus the number of women in the transmission of religious knowledge slowly degrades after the 7th century H/ 13th century, to regain a new

position in the 20th century. It is to be noted that women were mostly present in *hadith* sciences. They had a limited role in *fiqh*, for becoming a *faqih* *muftiya* gave authority that was considered as men's prerogative.

*Renaud Fabbri: A very significant development in contemporary Islamic theology has been the development of a feminist exegesis. Do you think there is a properly feminist perspective on the Qur'an and the ahadith, and what have been its main contributions?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I am not sure what is meant by "properly" in this question. There are exegetical projects carried out from women's perspectives. Some of these scholars adopt the label "feminist" and others do not. I think that some of this work has been revolutionary and highly valuable, including the work of Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and Asma Barlas in English scholarship. This work has made many contributions. Some of the most significant are its challenge to the hegemony of all male and typically androcentric exegesis; its emphasis on the fact that all interpreters are human and thus all interpretations of the *Qur'an* are human—not divine—products; and its centering of egalitarian aspects of the *Qur'an* as the primary ethical norms of the text. Also, this work has made it clear that women can and should interpret, that this is a valid and valuable enterprise. The

*Qur'an* has been the primary focus of exegetical work. This is understandable in light of its authority and position in Islamic thought. There has not been as rigorous engagement with ahadith. Some new work is now being produced that seeks to interpret and assess *ahadith* without holistically embracing or holistically rejecting the content.

*Nayla Tabbara:* There are many lines of interpretation of the *Qur'an*, the traditional exegesis, the analytical exegesis, the theological one and what the *batini tafsir* that means interpretation of symbols (*shia, ismaili...*), the legal one, the mystical one... then there are the modern *tafsirs* with the liberal and the feminist *tafsirs* as well as ideological ones. Yet the *tafsirs* that are the most widespread are the *tafsirs* of the traditional line, done not only by men but by men who represented power. Yet the *Qur'an* cannot be understood from one side of the social stratum. It has to be understood through the eyes of the poor and the powerless to complete the picture because Islam is not the religion of the rich and the powerful. Feminist exegesis is one exegesis that fills such a gap in *Qur'anic* interpretation.

## Religious Pluralism

*Renaud Fabbri:* Some religious traditions worship the Divine under both Masculine and Female aspects. Neopagan feminists such as Marija Gimbu-

*tas* or Carol Christ have even argued that it is impossible to improve the status of women without acknowledging the feminine dimension of God. By comparison with Indic religions or modern neo-paganism, Islam seems to conceive God as beyond gender in terms of metaphysical incomparability or masculine (Huwa) as based on scripture. What is your theological position on these issues, and how do you see their contemporary relevance?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I would agree that there is a theological and metaphysical difference in the Islamic traditions in relation to the incomparability of God and the notion that God is beyond gender. Thus, in many cases, the question of what sort of human language (masculine, feminine, or neutral) should be used to denote God is not as central. It is however somewhat different when Arabic texts are translated into other languages, such as English, that are not grammatically gendered. In most English *Qur'ans*, God is "He." This has an impact on the reader and the theological understanding inculcated in the reader. While one could respond that this is the reason the *Qur'an* should be read in Arabic, it is not realistic that all Muslims will ever do this. Additionally, even though there is a theological distinction with regard to language, in the Islamic tradition we need to consider whether people see God as a male even if language and theological concepts are



Photo courtesy of Marco Guinter Alberton

beyond gender. More precisely, is God depicted as being on the “side” of or favoring males? Does God appear to address only males, or males primarily? What are the perhaps inadvertent theological implications of this? The point is that there may be a theological claim (with which I would agree) made about God being incomparable and beyond gender; but this claim may not filter into interpretation or practice. This is an important area of consideration in contemporary discourse. How do we make the connections between egalitarian theological claims and sometimes non-egalitarian realities on the ground?

*Nayla Tabbara:* I agree that a patriarchal image of God strengthens patriarchal mentalities and that a

“beyond gender” perception of God strengthens equality, just as the perception of the other as an infidel in the eyes of God promotes discrimination and double standards whereas the perception of the other as a “believer in a different path” promotes respect of the other and equality. The “beyond gender” perception of God is also important for the believer in his/her own personal relation to God. God’s most beautiful names are in effect divided into the names of Majesty and the names of Beauty. The former refer to the masculine side of God, dealing with solidity, strength, power etc, and the latter to the feminine side of God, dealing with mercy, nurturing, loving, forgiving etc. If someone were to focus on just one of these sets of names, one’s relation to God would



be lacking.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Lamptey, I believe you are working on the connection between sexual and religious differences. Could you tell us more about the specific insights that Muslima Theology can provide on the question of religious pluralism?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* In my work on reinterpreting the Qur'anic discourse on religious others and religious diversity, I draw resources for rethinking the meaning and value of religious difference from Muslim women's interpretation of the *Qur'an*—primarily the hermeneutical and theoretical approaches of Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, and Asma Barlas—and feminist theology. While neither field is primarily concerned with religious difference, both fields offer pointed critiques of dominant paradigms of human difference (specifically, sexual difference). In doing so, they provide insights into and conceptual fodder for the articulation of alternative models of human difference. For example, Asma Barlas draws a distinction between difference that differentiates “laterally” and difference that differentiates “hierarchically”. Her main contention is that sexual difference (that is, biological difference) is one form of “lateral” human difference. It is divinely-intended and purposeful. It should be acknowledged. But it should never be used as the basis of assessment. She distin-

guishes this from “hierarchical” human difference, which is associated with *taqwā* (God consciousness, or piety) and is the basis of evaluation and judgment. Without going into too much detail, I seek to apply this distinction between lateral, divinely intended forms of human difference and *taqwā*-related, evaluated forms of human difference to the Qur'anic discourse on religious diversity. I argue that the *Qur'an* actually speaks of two genres of religious difference, and only one form is evaluated. I also argue that the recognition of two genres of religious difference in the *Qur'an* helps to explain the presence within the text of verses that appear contradictory and which have been the source of much exegetical debate throughout Islamic history.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Tabbara, your own work is focusing on the Qur'anic approach to religious diversity. Could you explain to us what you see as the scriptural foundation in the Qur'an for dialogue with Christians and Jews? What are the main challenges in the content of the Qur'an itself and in the way it has been interpreted traditionally to interfaith engagement?*

*Nayla Tabbara:* In the book entitled “Divine Hospitality: the other in the dialogue of Islamic and Christian theologies” that I co-wrote with Fr. Fadi Daou (in French, Lit Verlag, Munster, 2014, in Arabic, Saint Paul Editions, Beirut, 2011), I went over all the Qur'anic verses that deal with

the other, especially the People of the Book and tried to resolve some apparent contradictions on the theological level.

For, on the one hand, we have verses showing diversity as a divine will, such as: *Al Baqara* 2:148 "To each is a direction towards which to turn; therefore compete in good deeds and towards the good. God will bring you all back to Him. For God hath power over all things", and *Hud* 11:118: "Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community." Added to that we have verses that promise salvation to the People of the book: *Al Baqara* 2:62 "Those who believe, and those who follow Judaism, and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." And *Al Ma'ida* 5:69: "Those who believe, those who follow Judaism, the Sabians and the Christians,- any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness,- on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."

Yet on the other we have verses such as *Al Imran* 3: 19: "Religion before God is Islam" and *Al Imran* 3:85: "Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers."

The narrow understanding was to see in these verses an exclusivist stance, meaning that the only accepted religion is Islam in the nar-

row sense and that all other religions are not accepted, meaning that the followers of other religions will not receive salvation in the hereafter. Yet this contradicts the verses mentioned above and the following verses in *An-Nisa'* 4:123-124: "Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book (can prevail): whoever works evil, will be requited accordingly. Nor will he find, besides God, any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness,- be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them."

These two verses from *Surat an-Nisa'* stress on the fact that salvation is not a question of religious identity but a question of faith and good deeds. They are followed by a verse that allows to give a wider understanding of islam, i.e. islam in the wide sense: *An-Nisa'* 125: "The best religion is to submit to God (aslama) while doing the good, following Abraham's community, and God took Abraham for a well beloved". It is thus the faith of all those who believe in God, abandon themselves to Him in confidence and follow the steps of Abraham.

It is in this wide sense that the word Islam is to be understood in verse 3:85 (Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him ) especially since this verse is preceded by the verse 3:84 that says: "Say, 'We believe in God, and that which has been revealed to us, and that which has been revealed to Abraham and Ish-



Photo courtesy of Patrick Ringgenberg

mael, and Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes; and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord; we make no division between any of them; and to Him we submit.”

As for verse 3:19 “Religion before God is Islam” it can be understood in this manner but can also be understood as such: according to Islam in the narrow sense, the best religion is Islam (in the narrow sense) yet this does not contradict that other religions (Islam in the large sense) have truth and guidance and that followers of those religions receive salvation too, especially that they believe in the same God: “And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner – unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing -and

say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves.” (*Al Ankabut* 29: 46)

It is important to note that the Qur’anic theological positions towards the other are the same throughout the entire *Qur’an*, i.e. throughout the 23 years of revelation. What affected the understanding of these verses and led to an exclusivist standpoint is interpretation and legal positions related to historical, political and economic reasons. Resolving these issues in the manner I just summarized above is not meant for the other, to improve dialogue with the other or our image in front of the other, it is first and fore-

most meant to improve our understanding as Muslims as to how God want us to perceive others and how to act with them.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Tabbara, in your work, you also stress the importance of contextualizing verses, to understand the attitude of the Qur'an toward other faiths. Could you elaborate more on this topic?*

*Nayla Tabbara:* In the previous question I mentioned the verses that deal with theology and dogma. Another challenge is the verses that have an incidence on Muslims' behavior towards the People of the Book, for there are some verses that speak highly of the People of the Book and others that enjoin not to trust them or take them as allies, and others that talk about wars with the People of the Book.

What allowed me to get a clearer picture of this question was the rearrangement of these verses chronologically. This led me to realize that the verses talking negatively of the people of the book and that mention violence with them belong to the warring period between Muslims and Jews during the Medinan phase, but that the final phase of revelation enjoins fraternal relations with the people of the book. In fact 3 phases are to be seen: a first phase (Mecca) where the talk about the people of the book is always positive, a second phase (Medina) where slowly we move from good relations to war-

ring relations with Jewish tribes in Medina, and finally an opening phase starting with the return to Mecca with verses enjoining opening up to all peoples and verses calling for conviviality with the people of the book such as: "O mankind! We have indeed created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. Truly the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing among you. Truly God is Knower, Aware." (*Al Hujurat* 49:13) and: "Today the good things are permitted to you, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is permitted to you, and permitted to them is your food. Likewise, the believing married women, and the married women of those who were given the Scripture before you, if you give them their wages in wedlock, and not illicitly, or taking them as lovers. (*Al Ma'ida* 5:5) and "To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one community, but that He may try you in what He has given to you. So vie with one another in good works; to God you shall all return, and He will then inform you of that in which you differed." (*Al Ma'ida* 5:48). The final call of the Qur'anic text is thus to open up to others, to go to them and get acquainted with cultural and religious others, to build fraternal and even familial relations with the people of the book and, instead of fighting on dogmatic differences or



prospect is new knowledge, and that is always a benefit. Knowledge does not mean direct cooptation of other beliefs, views or strategies but it means opportunities to think about what we are doing and what we could be doing differently. In terms of a role to play in dialogue, I believe the presence of *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars is vital because it reveals some of the internal diversity of the Islamic tradition.

letting those build walls between us, work together for the common good.

*Renaud Fabbri: To conclude, as the Muslim world is going through a period of intense political and sectarian turmoil, what do you see as the concrete prospects and potential outcomes of interfaith dialogue for the Muslim community? Do you see Muslim-Woman theologians and Muslim women in general as having a specific role to play in this endeavor at a theological and a more grass-root level?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey: One concrete*

Also, women are not typically seen as the primary religious authority or Imam, and thus their concerns and voices have been excluded in certain forms of dialogue. Inclusion therefore promises to change the nature of dialogue itself. One way it can do so is that *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars are working against their own marginalization and thus may be sensitive to other forms of marginalization as well, including marginalization or negative characterizations of other religious traditions. They may also help to create



a space in dialogue where theoretical ideals and on the ground realities are discussed in tandem, rather than in isolation from one another. Finally, women in dialogue can be supporters and helpers of other women from other traditions. They can recognize some common struggles, embrace real differences, and channel the strength of their diversity into a pursuit of equality and justice.

*Nayla Tabbara:* I believe that the need today is to go beyond dialogue and work together in the framework of citizenship that is inclusive of religious and cultural diversity in our different countries and I work on actualizing this through Adyan foundation ([www.adyanvillage.net](http://www.adyanvillage.net)) and the Adyan Institute that I direct. This inclusive citizenship can assure that all religious and cultural groups, and that men and women, participate

equally in the public sphere. Based on the acceptance of diversity, it is a buffer against extremism that by definition refuses diversity within and without. In this inclusive citizenship and this call for participation of all in the public sphere as social change agents, all responsible individuals, be they male or female, be they Muslim or Christian or other, be they Arab or non-Arab, have a role to play. It is time to move from our clustered religious identities and fixed gender roles to work for the common good for all. Among our fundamental values at Adyan foundation, the first one is the acceptance of diversity as a value and the second is seeing individual itineraries as a richness: Each person, male or female, has something to add to society, to religion and to the human heritage.