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AN INTEGRATED MOSQUE FOR A SPIRITUAL AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of a spiritual and progressive Islam, promoted by the authors of this text, is desired by many French Muslims. They demand innovation and freedom in their faith, paving the way for a spiritual journey informed by modernity. This vision exists as part of a project creating a place of worship, the Simorgh mosque, which would endorse certain founding principles. At this mosque, women are imams and lead all services, including those for men. The ritual prayer is not segregated. Any Muslim, male or female, may lead the prayer if he or she so desires. As such, there is no lead imam. Each woman, including the imam, may choose whether or not to wear a veil. All the sermons are in French, encouraging true ownership of Islam by French Muslims, allowing them a deep understanding of the discourse and giving them the opportunity to engage critically with the religious messages. Furthermore, Muslims of all denominations are welcome. This project is led by the Voice of Enlightened Islam (V.I.E.) movement, founded in September 2018 by the two authors of this memo and supporting the idea of an Islam which bridges the gap between loyalty to its legacies and openness to the future.

Eva Janadin and Anne-Sophie Monsinay are the cofounders of Voices of Enlightened Islam (V.I.E.) and leaders of the Simorgh Mosque project. In 2017, Eva Janadin cofounded the Association for the Rebirth of Mutazilite Islam (ARIM), which aims to re-discover this rationalist theological movement. Anne-Sophie Monsinay, who follows a teacher from a non-dualistic mystic tradition (proclaiming no separation between God and human beings), speaks at conferences on these topics. Both are administrators of the Facebook group “Progressive Sufism,” which aims to engage Islam with the present and provide spaces of open dialogue for Muslims who may need them, away from any community or family pressure.

The English Quran translations used herein are those of:
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem *The Qur'an: A New Translation*
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
The authors, however, have modified some passages.

This text was written in French by Eva Janadin and Anne-Sophie
Monsinay for the Foundation for Political Innovation. The original version
is available on our website. This version is a translation by Ubiquis.

AN INTEGRATED MOSQUE FOR A SPIRITUAL AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION

Faced with the conservative, sometimes fundamentalist, even obscurantist excesses of certain interpretations of Islam, many Muslims from diverse backgrounds have for years been engaging in a broad collective reflection to support the emergence of a progressive vision of Islam. These voices seek to participate in the construction of a French society that can withstand all forces of fragmentation and division.

In September 2018, the movement for spiritual and progressive Islam "Voices of Enlightened Islam" (V.I.E.) was born. This initiative was motivated, among other things, by several years of group discussion on social media, and by the awareness of a reality on the ground that we can no longer neglect in today's Islam: the demand from many Muslims for innovation and freedom. We thus wish to offer them a roadmap for a spiritual journey rooted in modernity. The movement aims to build a network of collaboration between individual and institutional actors who embody this "other Islam" so that they can come together and help reveal new theological and spiritual options.

Today we have a spiritual and civic responsibility to no longer allow extremists and conservatives of all stripes to hold a monopoly on interpreting the Quran and the prophetic tradition. It is up to us, Muslim men and women, to take the initiative: no one else. Many of us are now coming together around shared principles, organising ourselves in order to build a genuine collective force, to stop hiding our prayers in the shadow of intimate confessions, to stop acting alone.

Our approach is based on several objectives:

- Identifying, explaining, producing and disseminating as many existing theological options as possible which align with our vision of Islam and our founding principles;
- Intervening in French media and public debate to clarify the principles, objectives and theological positions of the movement, as a voice of French Islamic discourse;
- Facilitating spaces for open dialogue through social media and by organising public events and debates;
- Supporting the creation of spiritual and progressive places of worship and training their imams.

I. WHAT IS AN ENLIGHTENED, SPIRITUAL AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM?

Contrary to common belief, we do not believe that it is possible to translate the word “Islam” as “submission” (*soumission*), a term which in French has negative connotations. In Arabic, “submission” translates as *kbudû‘* and not “Islam”. There is no single French word which translates “islam,” instead this requires a paraphrase which includes the notions of “peace” and “voluntary or conscious abandonment.” The term “Islam”, whose root *slm* refers to peace (*salâm*), can be translated as follows: "entering peace"¹. Islam is thus not slavish submission to God. On the contrary, in its etymological sense, this word refers to abandoning oneself to Him freely, peacefully and spontaneously to enact and radiate this peace around oneself. It has nothing to do with “submission”, which contradicts freedom and completely erases the idea of peace.

This religion consists of choosing the symbol of divine oneness (*al-tawhîd*) as a fundamental element in one’s own quest for meaning and in following Quranic Revelation as a guide which offers spiritual teachings and a set of practices. Ultimately, it is to recognise Muhammad as a Prophet and Envoy

1. See “Person of the Month: Dr Ghaleb Bencheikh”, interview with Ghaleb Bencheikh, sospelerin.over-blog.com, October 1st 2012 [www.sospelerin.over-blog.com/article-personnalite-du-mois-dr-ghaleb-bencheikh-110769716.html].

of God, but also as a model, as he was able to create his own daily spiritual life by looking for answers deep within himself. The constant memory of this profession of faith connects all Muslims and allows for the renewal of the alliance with God through ethical actions, ritual practices and moral attitudes such as gratitude and wisdom. Although Islam distinguishes itself through its form and practices, we recognise the transcendent unity of the basic teachings of all other spiritual traditions.

1. Living an enlightened Islam

The symbol of divine Light is a model that releases within us a source of knowledge and judgement capable of eliminating all forms of obscurantism. From this perspective, a Muslim must reject any interpretation of Islam that runs counter to the dissemination of modern science, wisdom and knowledge. The same applies to any understanding of Islam which discredits the intelligence of the heart and human reason in favour of blind imitation of traditions (*taqlîd*).

Reason (*'aql*), whether logical or intuitive, analytical or synthetic, is a sign of wisdom. *Naql*, that is to say the following of received wisdom, is, in our opinion, the scourge of current Islam. If Muslims continue to encourage the idolatry of their predecessors, conservatism and its children Islamism and terrorism will continue to attack human dignity. Indian Sufi philosopher Mohammed Iqbal (1877-1938) was one of the opponents of this blind imitation of traditions: "Don't devalue your personality through imitation, / Protect it, for it is a priceless jewel. / Oh, how good it would be for man to be free / To go forward, free from the chains of the past! If the imitation was a good thing, / The prophet would have followed, too / The path of his ancestors². Prophet Muhammad was revolutionary in the sense that he brought innovations to his own society. He should be imitated for this capacity to free himself from ancestral subjugation, in order to shift the lines and break with habits become mechanical and alienating.

Embodying an enlightened Islam involves bringing reason to the majority again so it can think for itself and constantly making use of critical reflection. According to Iranian thinker Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammed's position as the Seal of the Prophets (*khatm al-nubuwwa*), which brought an end to the Abrahamic revelations, does not mean the end of interpretation, but instead launched an era of ongoing and renewed interpretation³ of which none of the religious denominations can claim to have exhausted the possibilities.

2. Quoted in Luce-Claude Maître, *Introduction à la pensée d'Iqbal*, Pierre Seghers, 1964, p. 63. Also see Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Islam et société ouverte. La fidélité et le mouvement dans la pensée de Muhammad Iqbal*, Maisonneuve and Larose, 2001, p. 97.

3. Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience. Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Brill, 2009, p. 33-34.

When God made Adam his successor and heir (*al-khalisfa*)⁴, He offered a human being the ability to take over from a Quran which has today fallen silent and must be made to speak through asking relevant questions. Not content with leaving and falling silent, God made sure to begin an era “when the word of God becomes that of man.”⁵, judging the latter to be mature and grown enough to wisely use his new power, conscience and freedom, i.e. to take on this heritage responsibly: “From this point of view, the closure of revelation would in fact be an expression of a sacrifice by God, a complete self-sacrifice through the offering of all His power. His gesture of withdrawal from the world would thus be the highest gesture of love, in which one gives everything to another. This closure would not be an abandonment, but a gift.”⁶

2. Living a spiritual Islam

Rethinking Islam while avoiding its spiritual dimension and the question of faith is to deny its original meaning, its original *raison d'être*. This religion is, above all, a personal and intimate path intended to connect us to God, to self, to others and to nature. It is about rising to transform ourselves internally, in order to better invest in the world. It is a way of conducting a search for meaning which aims for a culture of interiority. Islam is a spirituality and not a tool for influencing politics or structuring social ties. Secularization and the separation of church and state in France offer freedom of thought and the possibility of a regular and intense spiritual and religious life. Our practices are therefore neither ideological signposts intending to totally describe and confine the lives of the faithful by and within Islam, nor distinctive signs of the crystallisation of an identity or community pride, nor a distrust of coexistence, the West, and modernity.

In France, since the 1905 law on the separation of church and state, social and legal standards stem from positive law and no longer from divine law. So what remains of religion in a secular country? Everything that comes from beliefs, inner faith and religious practice, in other words the spiritual. Embodying a spiritual Islam consists in moving from a static religion to a dynamic religion as described by the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941)⁷. The function of static religion is social conservation, the creation of homogeneous collective discipline which does not concern itself with individual spiritual needs. In contrast, a dynamic religion is one governed by what Bergson calls the “vital impetus” of creating a personal connection with The Absolute and pulling away from one’s group to go beyond its limits, and our own. Thus, religion lived as a spirituality is no longer a “social fact”, i.e. a set of rules and duties

4. Quran 2: 30-33.

5. Abdennour Bidar, *L'Islam sans soumission. Pour un existentialisme musulman*, Albin Michel, 2012, p. 134.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Henri Bergson, *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*, PUF, 1959, p. 1150.

"defined, separately from me and my actions, in law and morals", and whose "public conscience" ensures its respect, repressing "any act that offends through the surveillance it exercises over the behaviour of the citizens"⁸. In contrast, the separation of church and state and secularization have enabled religion to become an intimate spiritual fact and an existential aspiration. This does not mean limiting faith and its actions to an invisible sphere. Everyone is free to demonstrate their faith or not within the limits of law, public order and fundamental freedoms. This new way of living spirituality requires opening up time for internalization and the personal ownership of religious norms.

A spiritual, mystic, and initiatory approach to the Quran presupposes a relationship with God and the Quranic text that is completely different from the classical approach. According to this approach, God is not a Transcendent Being who should be feared and who we must obey, to avoid burning in the flames of Hell. A mystic does not practice because God demands it, or to please Him— God is self-sufficient and does not need our acts of worship to exist. To contemplate the face of God, carefully enacting the form of rites to the letter is not enough. A mystic will undergo an internal transformation through different earthly techniques and attitudes in order to achieve a true internal contemplation of the face of God. A mystic practices religion for its own sake, to evolve, to journey toward to His or Her Creator and to resemble Him. He or She is driven by the love of God as a supreme force and motivation, rather than by fear. Many people have alluded to this unconditional love between a human being and his or her creator. Râbi'a l-'Adawiyya, a mystic woman from the eighth century, expresses it eloquently: "My God, if I love you for fear of Your Hell, burn me in its flames, and if I love you in search of Your Paradise, deprive me of it. I only love you, Lord, for You. Because You deserve adoration. So do not deny me the majestic contemplation of Your face"⁹.

What makes mystics unique is that they have tasted this love, present in the Quran through the names "the Loving One" (*al-Wadûd*) and "most Gracious, most Compassionate" (*al-Rahmale al-Rahîm*) attributed to God. This is not merely the theoretical love they would have discovered by analysing the Quran intellectually. They have had a spiritual experience which allows them to feel that love. This feeling has different elements: it is first a physical sensation that passes through the body, then an emotional sensation that affects the psyche or the soul (*nafs*) and finally a spiritual feeling, of plunging into a particular state of conscience that is often described as a state of peace, a state of being and an awareness of divine oneness (*al-tawhîd*), that is to say the experience of the disappearance of duality, of the separation between the interior and the outside, between self and God.

8. Emile Durkheim, cited in Abdenour Bidar, *Quelles valeurs partager et transmettre aujourd'hui ?*, Albin Michel, 2016, p. 198.

9. Cited in Jamal-Eddine Benghal, *La vie de Râbi'a al-'Adawiyya. Une sainte musulmane du VIII^e siècle*, Iqra, 2010, p. 88.

This proximity to God relies on immanence. In Islamic tradition, it is common to talk about divine transcendence, that is to say, the conception of God as outside us, but very little about His immanence. Mystics focus on immanence because it alone justifies and explains the meaning of the spiritual journey. This notion appears in many places in the Quran. It is first indicated in this verse: “We created man—We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein¹⁰”, which indicates to us a strong physical proximity between God and human beings. If God is closer to us than to the veins in our necks, it is legitimate to imagine His presence within us. This idea is expressed more explicitly in the following verses: “Your Lord said to the angels, ‘I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him.’¹¹” or even in these: “when your Lord told the angels, ‘I am putting a successor [*khalīfa*] on earth,’ they said, ‘How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?’ But He said, ‘I know things you do not.’¹²”

God says that he has instilled his Spirit (*rūh*) in Adam, referring here to the archetype of humanity. Mystics consider the Spirit of God (*rūh Allāh*) as an emanation of God that is fully God but not all of God, because He cannot be limited to a body. In other words, God cannot place himself entirely in the human being, because we would then lose any notion of transcendence, but he can put into a human a part of Him that is both part and all – God being indivisible. This divine character is later confirmed in the verse in which he asks the Angels to prostrate themselves before a human being. To the extent that an angel would never prostrate himself before any being but God, if he bows down in the face of a human, that can only signify the divine quality of that creature.

In Surah 2, verse 30, the human being becomes the “caliph” (*khalīfa*) of God, i.e. His heir, his successor¹³. All these verses are in keeping with the Bible, which mentions that human beings were created in the image of God¹⁴. This means that we have abilities similar to those of God which include asserting our creative power to continue His work by constantly recreating the world. As Mohammed Iqbal put it, “God made the world, man made it even more beautiful.¹⁵”. This also means that all the divine qualities represented by the various attributes of God are powerful within us and are only waiting to be developed. The goal of Muslim mystics is to bring these divine qualities to the forefront in order to truly be in the image of God.

10. Quran 50: 16.

11. Quran 38: 71-72.

12. Quran 2: 30.

13. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 7.

14. Genesis, I, 27.

15. Mohammed Iqbal, cited in Luce-Claude Maître, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

A final term that is used very frequently recalls the idea of divine immanence. This is the word *amâna* which M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translates as "the Trust"¹⁶: "We offered the Trust [*amâna*] to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it— they have always been inept and foolish."¹⁷ "God has therefore entrusted us with a "Trust" which the rest of His creation refused and human beings are thus obliged to "do righteous deeds"¹⁸. This is also a great responsibility, a set of qualities to enact to prolong His creation and transform ourselves from within in order to act better in the world.

3. Living a progressive Islam

Pushing back against conservatism and stasis, Tunisian scholar of Islam Mohamed Talbi reveals his approach to the Quran "which must be constantly contextualised and updated, taking into account the "*maqâsid*", the goals of the text". He considers the sacred text to be "a directional arrow", that is to say a guide (*hudan*): "We follow the arrow he shows us, and we walk, not looking behind us towards the Ancients (*Salaf*), but to the future, that of our grandchildren"¹⁹.

The Quran is the starting point for a future direction which must always aim for more progress and more freedom. Our entire effort is focused on regaining the Quranic spirit and its guiding principles. Thus the sacred text is not the end point, and the first generations of Muslims are no better than those of our century. The time separating us from the original version of Islam is a blessing and not a curse. One *hadîth*²⁰ rightly says: "Do not curse time, because God is time." Time, with its constant progress, is seen as a symbol of God constantly recreating life. Likewise, the faithful are called to perpetual movement and to escape the entrenched tradition of their ancestors and interpretations stuck in the past²¹. Mohammed Iqbal warns against being trapped in worship of the past: "You, bewitched by Yesterday and Tomorrow, / Contemplate another world in your own heart! / You sowed the seed of shadows in the earth, / You imagined Time as a line / [...] / Ignorant of Time, / You are ignorant of eternal life. / How long will you be a slave to night and day? [...] Knowing its roots gives the living a new life: / Its being is more splendid than the dawn. / Life participates in Time and Time participates in Life: "Do not curse Time": / that was the order of the Prophet"²².

16. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an...*, op. cit., p. 271

17. Quran 33: 72.

18. Quran 19: 96.

19. Quoted by Harzoune Mustapha, in a review of Mohamed Talbi's book, *Universalité du Coran* (Actes Sud, 2002), *Hommes & Migrations*, n°. 1238, July-August 2002, p. 142 (www.persee.fr/doc/AsPDF/homig_1142-852x_2002_num_1238_1_5092_t1_0142_0000_2.pdf).

20. Statements or deeds attributed to the Prophet.

21. See Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Comment philosophe en islam ?*, Philippe Rey, 2008.

22. Mohammed Iqbal, cited in Luce-Claude Maître, op. cit., p. 87-88.

To embrace a progressive Islam is not to regard the Quran as a closed text or a fixed legal code, but as a guide and a light which shows and suggests for us a direction to take in order to chart our own course. It also involves accepting that movement structures life and that the world, like knowledge, is perpetually changing, as it ceases to idealize the early centuries of Islam. “This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance [*hudan*] for those who are mindful of God²³.” By describing the Quran as “guidance”, God encourages man to revive it through new readings, looking for the spirit and hidden meaning of the verses.

This progressivism refers to the idea of a process of social progress begun at the time of the Quranic Revelation, which we must continue today, in the light of the current context. The Quran was a revolutionary text for its time. It encouraged the liberation of slaves, gave women the right to inheritance at a time when they had no such right, and limited polygamy by establishing implicit monogamy. These measures may seem trivial, even backwards, in the eyes of modern readers, since they are only minor limitations or small advances, but they offered freedoms which were culturally acceptable to the people receiving them, while taking care not to upset the socioeconomic norms of the time so that the spiritual message could be received and accepted. We can see this as true divine pedagogy at work, which shows us the direction to be followed for future readers of the message of the Revelation. The role of new generations of Muslims is to continue this progress beyond the letter by being, as the Quran was, true to its spirit, always ahead of their time. Today, the place of women in most Muslim communities, as well as individual freedoms, are declining when compared to the cultural norms of our society, and even to those of the Prophet's era. However, Muslims should be the forerunners of social reforms that promote greater equality, fairness, and justice between individuals.

This progressive approach requires a rigorous method for interpreting the Quran. It is about reading the text while keeping the essence and spirit of its message rather than its letter. To grasp this spirit, it is appropriate to question the meaning, context and reason for the Revelation of each of the prescriptive verses. Why does God ask for this? In what context did he say this? What was the social situation prior to the revelation of this verse? Was it regressive or progressive for the time? In the latter case, does applying the verse literally today also make us progressive? If, on the contrary, it is regressive when compared to our society, may we not consider that we have sacrificed the spirit of this verse in simply keeping to the letter? To go against its spirit is to oppose the true divine prescription. Thus, for each social theme addressed in the Quran, it is appropriate to search for guiding principles set out in other verses that do not address a particular context and that will guide interpretation.

23. Quran 2: 2.

The case of slaves

Slavery was not abolished by the Quran or by the Bible, as it was an integral part of the socioeconomic functioning of the Arab tribes of the 12th century. It was not possible to abolish it without proposing an alternative model that would have taken some time to implement. Furthermore, the primary purpose of a Revelation is not to bring about social progress but to deliver a spiritual message to enable individuals to achieve spiritual wholeness. Of course, this can only be done with a minimum of justice and fairness between individuals. The Quran, through its social laws, educates, bringing in deep and subtle reforms to show posterity how to advance these standards. Slavery is not abolished, but the text continually encourages slaves to be freed under religious pretexts. For example, anyone who has broken an oath must free a slave as a consequence²⁴.

By making the emancipation of slaves a good thing, God indicates that he is in favour of the abolition of slavery without shocking the people of the time. As far as slavery is concerned, all but the most purist of Muslims have been able to demonstrate a certain progressivism by abolishing it completely and condemning it. It is time for this understanding of the spirit of the text to be extended to other social prescriptions.

The status of women

The Quran gave women rights at a time when their status was extremely precarious, with most of them not being allowed to work and being subordinate to their father or husband. The Revelation allowed them to inherit, limited polygamy by establishing implicit monogamy and offered them many legal and financial protections.

Indeed, a verse gives women the right to inheritance²⁵, by giving them half the share a man would receive. It is the inequality between brothers and sisters that appears to be the most problematic. This is currently being discussed in some Muslim countries (Morocco, Tunisia, etc.)²⁶. It is important to remember that this verse revolutionised the rights of women of the 12th century since it gave them for the first time, in Arabia, the right to inheritance, although this remained half that of a man. This inequality was in line with the standards of the time: the majority of women were unable to work and it was the husband's responsibility to take care of his entire family financially. It therefore seemed logical that men should receive a larger share of the legacy.

24. Quran 5: 89.

25. Quran 4: 11.

26. See Asma Lamrabet's work on inheritance in this regard, in particular *Les Femmes et l'islam : une vision réformatrice*, Political Innovation Foundation, "Values of Islam" series, n°. 8, March 2015, p. 28-29 [www.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/074-SERIE-ISLAM-A.Lamrabet-2015-03-02-web.pdf], and Salah Eddine Soltane's study in *Mirāth al-mar'a wa qadiat al-musāwat*, Ennehada (Egypt), 1999.

Today, most women work and naturally support the needs of their families alongside their partners, and it would be extremely unfair to maintain such an unequal distribution among the children – boys and girls – of a deceased parent. This law is therefore obsolete and should longer be applied. Continuing to apply it in a different context goes against the spirit of the Quran.

The verse that best illustrates the subtlety of Quranic pedagogy is that which limits polygamy: “...you may marry whichever women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias.²⁷” The verse starts by limiting polygamy to a maximum of four wives before specifying that it is actually more appropriate to marry only one to be “equitable” and “avoid bias”. The Quran appeals here to the piety of the believer who seeks to rise spiritually and sees it as more worthy to have only one wife. Gradually, and by allowing the people of the era the time needed to embrace this idea, he was paving the way for a monogamy in which we see an invitation to more equality. Here, the Quran shows the direction to be followed so that, once the Revelation is complete, the message has been broadcast and the centuries have passed, we can continue the divine will initially established and thus continue to interpret the Quran today.

II. THE PRINCIPLES OF VOICES OF ENLIGHTENED ISLAM (V.I.E.)

To live an enlightened, spiritual, and progressive Islam is to respect a set of principles and criteria that will enable us to select or, on the contrary, to disregard an interpretation of Islam and the Quran. The principles we have chosen have the distinction of being common to both modern-day values and the Quranic spirit. Thus, any interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah must respect seven purposes: freedom, critical thinking, openness, pluralism, humanism, universalism and acting together. On the occasion of the launch of the Voices of Enlightened Islam movement, we have written a founding manifesto which we seek to explain below.

27. Quran 4: 3.

1. Freedom and critical thinking

“Today, we create the V.I.E., Voices of Enlightened Islam. A movement for a spiritual and progressive Islam, balanced between loyalty to its legacies and its drive towards the future, which raises up the voices of a Muslim culture [...]: Which has freed itself from religious dogmatism, where every conscience has the right to choose the means of his or her spiritual life – no compulsion in religion!; Which offers the possibility of a spiritual life based on a quest for personal meaning, free and non-compulsory practices, to enable each individual to develop independence – in which scholars’ expertise on religion is only advice; Which educates its children about freedom of conscience and critical thinking, about rejecting prejudice to ascertain the truth, about respect for all differences, solidarity, softness, compassion, love and peace towards all living things; Which then encourages, throughout life, each and every person to build the self-confidence necessary to find his or her individuality, deepest aspirations and personal spiritual needs; Which dares freely criticise its own founding texts and traditions to update their interpretation from the perspective of reason, love and the principle of non-violence – and which demands that each imam be the bearer of these values and preach peace²⁸. ”

In this first part of the founding manifesto of our Voices of Enlightened Islam movement, we insist on two principles: freedom and critical thinking. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1905 French law on the separation of church and State guarantee freedom of conscience. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought and religion, which means that everyone is free to change religion or have no religion, and to practice and to demonstrate their religion or lack thereof as they wish, while respecting the freedoms of others and public order. Nobody should therefore be worried due to his religious beliefs, that is, be subject to compulsion or punishment, whether symbolic or real, and whether by the agents of public authority or by any religious authority. Any judgement of excommunication, from any side, goes against freedom of conscience.

Conscience is a guide that allows a person to forge their convictions, an internal voice that makes it possible to engage in dialogue with one another in which no one can interfere. It is the most intimate part of a human being, that which guarantees its integrity and unity. Freedom of conscience is this ability

28. Voices of Enlightened Islam. Movement for a spiritual and progressive Islam, "Founding Manifesto", www.voices-islam-eclair.fr/Manifesto-founder/.

to make the decision to do what is right and good, to think for oneself and lead one's life in a way which matches one's deep aspirations.

“There is no compulsion in religion²⁹” This is one of the Quran's guiding principles, meaning that no one should physically, morally or legally force an individual to have (or not to have) religion or to follow (or not follow) religious practices. However, what happens when a faithful Muslim is under community or family pressure to enact the rites of Islam? Isn't this another form of force, where you try to force the individual through moral pressure to submit to God's orders? This pressure only leads to great guilt among the faithful who ultimately pray or fast only out of obligation and not because they have a sincere intention (*niyya*) or because they feel an inner need. It is therefore time to put an end to this regime of perpetual guilt, but to do so it is necessary to question the legal notion of obligation (*fard*).

Moral obligations are those of an individual conscience, the execution of which cannot be compelled or enforced. An individual may be compelled not to kill because of obstacles that make this action impossible, but he or she may find himself or herself obliged not to kill when he or she realises, in the course of exercising his or her responsibility, that it is morally unjust to kill. Therefore, he or she freely agrees to the rule not to kill. If this person still decides to kill, he or she will be punished by this law.

In Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and divine law (*shari'a*), the notion of obligation (*fard*) concerns not only moral duties (not killing, not stealing, etc.) but also religious duties whose accomplishment will be rewarded and negligence punished either by God on the day of last Judgement or by men through positive law informed by Islamic law. This leads to a total confusion of value systems: cultural rules that are supposed to be individual and social rules designed to structure common life are made equivalent. It is fine to have shared obligations and prohibitions in order build a society, and therefore entirely legitimate to punish an individual who has infringed these rules, provided that they are defined by a democratic and secular state, particularly in the French context. No one can imagine a society without any laws, where everyone lived according to their own desires.

However, religious ritual practices are by no means rules of the same nature as social standards, which is not taken into account at all in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). While the rules for society connect many individuals and aim to prevent infringement on the dignity of others, religious rules only concern individuals, separately. These standards are personal and private, which is totally incompatible with the establishment of uniform and shared rules and with the very notion of religious obligation. Rituals are the ultimate matter of

29. Quran 2: 256.

conscience. Who today can claim to interfere in this internal dialogue between God and the faithful other than the individual concerned by the faith? It has therefore become a matter of urgency to free up religious practices from Islamic jurisprudence in order to focus solely on their spiritual and mystic sense and not on their prescriptive and normative aspects.

The notion of religious obligation can threaten or even oppose freedom of conscience: not only does it imply that individual reason has no right to take control of intimate and intimate spiritual life, but it also divides Muslims between those who practise according to the official rules agreed by orthodoxy and orthopraxis, i.e. those who would be within divine law and those who make choices among the practices offered by Islam. The latter are therefore considered as “outside-Divine-Law” and may be punished, whether in symbolic or concrete ways. Thus, due to the limitation of ritual practices (*‘ibâdât*) to within the concept of *shari‘a* (divine law), religious rites have never been conceived of in Islam outside the legal and normative field. And this is exactly where the problem lies.

There are two types of obligations in Islam: individual duty (*fardu ‘ayn*), including fasting, prayer, charity and pilgrimage, and collective duty (*fardu kifâya*), whose accomplishment by a sufficient number of people in the community exempts others from executing it (prayers for funerals, etc.). Some may say that the idea of individual duty may be the beginning of a certain independence, because it is a question of agreeing to a religious rule handed down. However, autonomy is more than just consent to a rule. It is determining the rules oneself. Who, in Islam, has always had a monopoly on setting standards if not a caste of jurists and theologians? The ordinary faithful Muslim does not have the right to choose his own religious rules, he just has a duty to agree to them internally so that sincerity is achieved. Yet, when a heteronomy, that is, an external system such as a religious law, determines religious norms and the lines not to be crossed, it is impossible to imagine genuine spiritual autonomy and thus genuine freedom of conscience and religion. Hasn't it been said that Islam has no clergy? In theory yes, but in practice no. So it's time for every Muslim man and woman to take up this personal reason so that the normative domain ceases to be the monopoly of the clerics³⁰ and every faithful person reclaims his or her spiritual life in a clear and conscientious manner, provided that an education worthy of the name accompanies this emancipation.

30. See Abdennour Bidar, “Quels usages de la raison pour la connaissance et la conduite spirituelles ?” in *La civilisation arabo-musulmane au miroir de l'universel : perspectives philosophiques*, Unesco, 2010, p. 221-228 (<http://mutazilisme.fr/abdenour-bidar/>).

No external system and no third party can force a person to follow a single way of embodying their own religion. Another person can enlighten and assist with decision-making, but only the conscience can decide to trace its own spiritual path as it sees fit, regardless of external pressure. As a result, the ritual practices prescribed by the Quran cease to be obligations, they become spiritual suggestions which we can contextualise, adapt to a new context, retain, abandon, develop, redevelop, etc....And where everyone is free to choose what constitutes the rules and standards of their spiritual life. This also means that rethinking one's practices and spiritual life can only be done on an individual basis, looking at what seems to be the most relevant, fair and effective for one's own spiritual journey.

2. Openness and pluralism

“Today, we create the V.I.E., Voices of Enlightened Islam. A movement for a spiritual and progressive Islam, balanced between loyalty to its legacies and its drive towards the future, which raises up the voices of a Muslim culture [...]: Which encourages pluralism in interpretations of texts, and denounces the violence of those who wish to impose a single reading;
Which is rethinking its places of worship to allow gender integration during prayer, and women to pray with or without veils, to become imams and to lead any service, including those for men;
Which is also rethinking these spaces so that they become places of open dialogue, with libraries open to all literatures;
Which sees collective spiritual life as a companionship whose members help each other to chart their own path, without any moralising judgement and community pressure – unique but not alone, let us be free together!
Which makes it possible to invent a new spiritual sociability, where Muslims are not bogged down in a uniform and inward-looking community (Ummah) – our Ummah is humanity!³¹”

In this second part of the manifesto, we insist that Islam is intrinsically plural, even if this plurality is not clearly recognised and valued. Acceptance of the other lies at the heart of Voices of Enlightened Islam, which encourages acceptance not only of people from different Islamic denominations, whether Shia, Sunni, Mutazilite, Sufi, or Ibadi, but also of individuals who dare to have their own interpretations and choose their own practices within Islam. A free and benevolent dialogue between Muslims must therefore be re-established, as collective spiritual life must be opened up to the pluralism of spiritual beliefs within the framework of a free group. Thus, no Muslim man or woman can

31. Voices of enlightened Islam, “Founding Manifesto,” art. cit.

have a monopoly on interpretation or judge others' spiritual approach.

Finally, it is necessary for Muslims to open up to the world. Communitarian confinement goes against both the project of Republican brotherhood and the brotherly spirit of the Quran. It only encourages fear of influences outside Islam. In contrast, the Quran invites different peoples to know each other and not to become entrenched in identity-based individualistic logic³².

3. Humanism and universalism

“Today, we create the V.I.E., Voices of Enlightened Islam. A movement for a spiritual and progressive Islam, balanced between loyalty to its legacies and its drive towards the future, which raises up the voices of a Muslim culture [...]: Which unreservedly recognises the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and which proclaims freedom, equality and brotherhood, values common to all civilisations; Which advocates and practises justice and peace, while rejecting all violence, hatred, revenge, injustice, and all kinds of racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – and by forging bonds of universal sisterhood and brotherhood; Which fully recognises the equality of dignity and rights between women and men, which considers the emancipation of women a major struggle and fights uncompromisingly against patriarchal domination³³. ”

In this third part of the manifesto, our positions are clear: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be respected unconditionally, as these are the values of our time. All human beings are unique and have the same “innate nature” (*fitra*). To us, freedom, equality and brotherhood are not values on which France has a monopoly, rather they belong to the whole of humanity, and no Muslim should be accused of treason when he proclaims adherence to these principles as they structure the Quranic text. Better still, the French slogan is an opportunity to definitively reconcile Islam and the Republic: “The more faithful she is to her motto “Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood”, the more France will offer Islam the means to live here in the essence of their shared spirit. [...] Islam and France share the same fundamental and founding values, and the same radical crisis of these common values. So, now and urgently, Islam and France share a responsibility: reinvigorating this shared oath³⁴. ”

32. Quran 49: 13.

33. Voices of Enlightened Islam, “Founding Manifesto,” art. cit.

34. See Abdenour Bidar, “Le génie de l’Islam et le génie de la France convergent au cœur”, *Le Monde des religions*, n°. 93, January-February 2019, p. 54-56.

Thus, any interpretation of the Quranic verses that goes against these principles must be definitively ruled out (practices of mutilation or stoning, for example). The Quranic text is regularly condemned for its violent verses, repeated and highlighted by terrorist groups in particular, which would make this text a source of danger or at least discredit its spiritual content. This widely-held idea makes no sense given the circumstances in which these verses were revealed and the political situation at the time. Most of the holy texts were revealed at times when conflicts between tribes were frequent and they were always adapted to the situations being experienced by the recipients of the Revelation. The Bible has at least as many conflicted and violent verses as the Quran. But what to do today with the most violent passages in the Quran? Let's take the following example: "Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits. / Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. This is what such disbelievers deserve—That is the reward for the deniers. / but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful. / Fight them until there is no more persecution, and worship is devoted to God. If they cease hostilities, there can be no [further] hostility, except towards aggressors.³⁵" The intention-first reading of the Quran believes that it has a historical dimension which is now obsolete. The wars led by the Prophet were defensive. The Quran was revealed over a long period of twenty-three years, during which Muhammad attracted many enemies due to the rise of Islam and the political, economic and social threat that the Prophet posed to the Quraysh tribe. In light of the hostilities suffered by Muslims (looting of their homes in Mecca, torture, etc.), God allowed them to defend themselves after the Hijra, in Medina, because there were no alternatives.

Critics of Islam and Islamist terrorists often tend to isolate Verse 191 of Surah 2 ("Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out") out of intellectual dishonesty or fanaticism, without considering the verses that precede and follow it and which give the historical context and all the behaviour to be adopted in war by Muslims of the era. This Quranic passage clearly states that the conflicts were been aimed at recovering what was stolen from Muslims and urged to them stop any attack if the opponent relents and turns back. The aim was both to recover the homes of people of Mecca and to be able to exercise their religion freely.

35. Quran 2: 190-193.

4. Acting together in service of humanity's progress

“Today, we create the V.I.E., Voices of Enlightened Islam. A movement for a spiritual and progressive Islam, balanced between loyalty to its legacies and its drive towards the future, which raises up the voices of a Muslim culture [...]:

Which believes that in the texts of Islam there are precious resources which engage this heritage with the present time, and which contribute to continuously leading mankind towards spiritual, political and social progress; which participates in all the major vital struggles of our time: the fight against poverty, human exploitation, inequalities, discrimination linked to nationality, religion and sexual orientation; and the fight for access for all to education and culture, for social justice, the creation of ecosystems of brotherhood, and an ecology which teaches us to care for the planet.

Which helps all the consciences and societies of our time to escape materialism and money-as-king;

Which plays a full part in all major spiritual, philosophical, political, scientific and bioethical debates by contributing the best of its thinking and wisdom;

Which participates in bringing together all men and women of good will on the planet, atheists, agnostics and believers, to build a world of justice and peace together;

Which joins all its forces to the great project of global civilization: giving every human being the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential, for the benefit of all and of life³⁶. ”

In this fourth and final part of the manifesto, we insist that the development of spiritual and independent Islam does not at all imply an individualistic quest cut off from the world and others. On the contrary, following the logic of personalism developed by French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950), an individual who is not capable of forging links with others and with his environment can only fall back on himself, succumbing to the notion of a separation between “them” and “us” or “me”. The logic of communitarian isolation is similar to that of individualism, because it is imagined in both cases that human relations are always governed by competition, hierarchy and the protection of a besieged identity. To emerge from this way of conceiving otherness allows us to develop common action, that is to be able to engage in the world in the service of the common good and the general interest, and not in the service of a community, clan or a personal interest.

36. Voices of Enlightened Islam, “Founding Manifesto,” art. cit.

Islam is thus not limited to drawing on tools which only guarantee its own spiritual development. Its heritage can also contribute to the spiritual, political and social progress of humanity in many fields such as ecology and protecting the animal kingdom, science, bioethics and the development of political systems that guarantee social justice. On the other hand, we do not want this progress to be solely economic, materialistic and individualistic and to lead to an increase in social inequalities and injustices.

III. A SPIRITUAL AND PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM WORSHIP

A spiritual and progressive worship embodies the principles of the V.I.E. movement in the collective organisation of the practice of Islam. Spiritual practices are important in our lives, but we lack places that truly embody our vision of Islam. Progressive Muslim men and women have often given up on mosques, taking refuge in solitary practice or in circles of intellectuals and academics who only have a deconstructivist, neutral and scientific perspective on Islam. This approach is more than necessary, but today it is insufficient to allow us to rebuild another way of conducting spiritual life in a daily, communal manner.

This abandonment of places of worship has created a vacuum. The network of French mosques is now dominated by a religious conservatism which allows itself to be poisoned by power struggles between different factions of foreign national interests, disproportionate financial interests, conflicts of interest, and the influence of Islamism and religious fundamentalism. New places of worship must emerge to meet the needs of “mosque orphans”, Muslim men and women who feel very lonely in their practice of Islam and no longer see themselves in the majority perspective on Muslim worship.

The aim is not, under any circumstances, to impose these principles and this view of religion on all French mosques, but to allow those who are prepared to adhere to them and to embody them to be able to do so freely, without having to be subjected to judgements, threats or sanctions by their religious communities. Our aim is therefore simply to offer an alternative form of worship and to be seen on an equal footing with all other branches of Islam. Under the freedom of conscience and religion that secularism guarantees, everyone must have the right and the opportunity to find a place of worship in which they can practise their religion according to their heart and beliefs, where they feel comfortable.

1. The rituals, an unconsidered element of Islam.

Rethinking and restoring meaning to spiritual practices

Much work has been done by Islam's reformers since 19th century, but only in certain areas. On the dogma side, the tools of theological discourse (*kalâm*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) have allowed new Islamic thinkers to undertake considerable, innovative projects. In this way, new readings of the Quran have been proposed in the light of the human and social sciences as well as the linguistic sciences. Other ways of conceiving of Heaven, Hell, the final Judgement and the Prophets have been discussed, just as the free will of human beings has been emphasized over predestination. While it is still difficult to gain official recognition of the human and historical elements of understanding the Quran and the *Sunnah*, this discussion is now possible at least on social media and in some countries³⁷. We also note the emergence and dissemination of theological counter-discourse to confront archaic and obscurantist interpretations of *shari'a* (recognition of gender equality, fight for human rights, etc.). However, in practice, these struggles are unfortunately far from being won in Muslim countries and still need to be undertaken with increased support, strength and courage.

These attempts at reform mainly affect the socio-political issues related to Islam, and touch very little on its spiritual aspects. Historical-critical analysis highlights human intervention in the Quranic Revelation which implies a contextualisation and relativisation of part of its content. This work is essential in order to move away from simplistic beliefs, to clearly separate the sphere of faith from that of historical knowledge, and to deconstruct unfounded dogmas and reason through the text. But if we remain at this stage of deconstruction without proposing a new method and a different degree of reading, Muslims will have only two options for want of a third way: to abandon Islam (which everyone is free to do) or to cling to rituals and dogmas unsuited to our times.

The failure to rethink spiritual life in Islam leads to two dead ends. On the one hand, since politics is separate from religion in France, socio-political debates about Islam no longer concern French Muslims, unlike in Muslim countries where these standards still have practical impact. On the other hand, to consider reforming Islam only in its socio-political aspects without touching on the spiritual suggests that Islam is more political than spiritual.

Thinkers are often very cautious on questions of faith, and even more so on those questions relating to Islamic practices and their adaptation to our times. This is not surprising since these areas are intimate and cannot be subjected to abstract and intellectual analysis. When it comes to worship rituals, we are not working in the same world as when we seek out historical veracity.

37. All these reformers were been well studied by Rachid Benzine in *Les Nouveaux Penseurs de l'Islam*, Albin Michel, 2004.

Reflecting on the meaning and evolution of religious practices requires truly considering Islam as a spirituality and having experienced its practices. These considerations are based above all on lived reality and not on a purely intellectual approach.

Thus, some new Islamic thinkers remain reluctant to reform the field of worship (*'ibâdât*) which has as of yet not been (re)thought, even though it forms the heart of spiritual life. Adapting its practices to spatial, temporal and individual circumstances is frowned upon and often rejected as punishable innovation (*bid'a*). This is because the religious rites have become the “symbolic capital” (Pierre Bourdieu) of Islam, the untouchable core and line in the sand, in other words, an exceptional area where reason and critical thinking should not apply. However, some adjustments to worship are allowed (adaptation of fasting duration in the case of long daytime periods, grouping of prayers, exemptions in the case of illness, travel, etc.), but they are still strongly frowned upon. This is especially apparent when we consider the fact that breaking the fast is still criminalized by the laws of some Muslim countries.

In addition, it has become very difficult to rethink worship practices, because there are many social and cultural standards that clash with and contradict with these rites, such as maintaining conservative views on gender relations and the notion of modesty. These norms, which are deeply rooted in the collective unconscious, have no spiritual and religious foundation, because they have no particular influence on the cultivation of the bond between God and the faithful. They nevertheless are a significant part of the ways in which worship, especially group worship, is envisioned in Islam.

There is a great paradox to be solved: the Arab term *fiqh* designating Islamic jurisprudence means “deep understanding,” whereas worship practices are generally only understood in their formal and superficial aspects, and are not subject to in-depth reflection. We thus allow ourselves major innovations when revisiting certain social rules enacted by the Quran, but we are often unable to envisage the same flexibility in adapting religious rules.

For example, it is common to hear in Islam, even among those who call themselves reformists and progressives, that the “horizontal” social standards dictated by the Quran must be subject to reasoned thought, but that “vertical” religious practices may be exempt. Since these acts are symbolic, they would not be intelligible, that is to say understandable, by the human mind: “It is the horizontal domain of Muslim practices that are intelligible (*ma'qûlât*), unlike its rites, which are on the order of the rationally unintelligible, whereas one does not question the ‘why’ of ritual practices (*'ibâdât*)³⁸. However, just

38. Tareq Oubrou, *Coran, clés de lecture*, Foundation for Political Innovation, “Values of Islam” series, n° 2, January 2015, p. 19 [www.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/068-SERIE-ISLAM-T.Oubrou-2015-01-19-web.pdf].

because a rite has a symbolic function does not mean that it is absurd and should be exempt from human reflection. On the contrary, the question of “why” is fundamental, and it is paradoxical to accept, on the one hand, the use of personal judgement (*ray*) to interpret the Quran’s social standards while refusing to do so for its rites of worship. Refusing to question the meaning of religious rites is tantamount to falling back into the trap of blind following (*taqlid, naql*), denounced above.

Some will chastise us for taking the easy way out and adapting a rite simply to make it less “restrictive.” That is not the case, and such reasoning would not make much sense: rites are, in any case, non-obligatory, if any given part of worship is not appropriate for a person, he or she is free to abandon it. Considering the meaning and rationale of a rite also leads to a review, in light of the Quran, of the meaning given to certain ritual bans that have no Quranic basis: the obligation to pray in Arabic or the ban on women fasting or praying during their periods. The Quran advises against sexual intercourse during a woman’s period considering it to be a painful condition³⁹ and Muslim jurists have over-interpreted this verse in stating that this painful condition would lead, beyond sex, to a state of impurity that would prevent them from fasting and praying during their periods. However this is nowhere in the text: “They ask you about menstruation Say, ‘Menstruation is a painful condition, [*adhâ*] so keep away from women during it. Do not approach them until they are cleansed; [*yathurna*] when they are cleansed [*tatahharna*], you may approach them as God has ordained.” God loves those who turn to Him, and He loves those who keep themselves clean. [*al-mutahirîn*]⁴⁰.” Thus, a woman who chooses to pray or fast during menstruation adapts her religious practices, but ultimately practices more than traditional Sunni Muslims because she does not interrupt her fast during the month of Ramadan and prays every day. We will come back to the language of prayer at the end of this work.

On the other hand, we need to understand the meaning of the question of why we practice this or that religious ritual. It involves considering both the causes and the reason that justify a ritual rule and the purposes of the rite. Unlike the Quran’s social norms, the *raison d’être* of a rite (*illa*) is not necessarily to be found in the circumstances of the Revelation (*asbâb al-nuzûl*) and historical causes. Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941) states that religious rites are irrational because their historical cause has disappeared. In truth, from the historian’s point of view, it is completely pointless to think that we can find the historical origin of the emergence of a rite. Thus, according to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), the cause of a religious rite is not to be found in history or prehistory, but in the discovery of a

39. Quran 2: 222

40. Quran 2: 222. See Dr Al-Ajami, “L’impureté, et l’impureté des femmes, selon le Coran et en Islam ; S6.V45, S5.V6, S4.V43, S2.V222”, www.alajami.fr (www.alajami.fr/index.php/2018/06/01/s2-v222/).

raison d'être which we can accept as correct intuitively because we experience it in performing the rite. Here we thus enter more into an intuitive conception of reason, rather than discursive or analytic, even if, in Islam, reason (*'aql*) has always been conceived of as intellect encompassing both synthetic intuition and analytical reasoning. Religious practices are above all non-historical instinctive anthropological acts: "Prayer was, originally, instinctive. [...] Prayer, as a means of spiritual illumination, is a normal vital act through which the little island of our personality suddenly discovers that exists within the larger whole of all life"⁴¹. As soon as a rite is linked to an internal instinct, precisely this in and of itself constitutes its justification. The cause of a rite is therefore to be found in the subjective and intimate experience that takes place during the contemplation of the ritual. Any spiritual practice is entirely justified if it is motivated by a profound and transcendent need, that is to say an internal and personal reason. Conversely, if this latter is not present in the intention of the faithful, then the rite can be legitimately set aside without the individual having to suffer any particular consequences.

Another fundamental question: what is the purpose of a religious rite? According to Wittgenstein, a human being executes a religious ritual primarily to express deep anthropological realities through symbolic gestures. He still opposes Frazer who, in 1890, in *The Golden Bough* ("*Le Rameau d'or*") asked why people undertake religious and magical rituals that have no effect⁴². Wittgenstein refuses to address the need to perform a rite as if it had to have a material effect on the life of the believer. For him, the very fact of practising a rite provides satisfaction and gives rise to a deep feeling sufficient to justify its purpose. The rite is self-sufficient and finds its purpose at the very moment of practice, in the present instant. A result is therefore not to be expected in the future (salvation, obtaining material goods here on earth, etc.). To pray to God is to be able to imbue an instant with an eternity. By making a moment sacred through gestures and words, we become completely present: the process becomes the goal and we no longer expect our prayer to come true in the future. In its completion, it is answered. It is no longer a request for divine intervention because it is itself a connection with God.

The purpose of a rite must therefore be spiritual: it must be aimed at an internal, initiative and mystic transformation, a connection between the Self and the presence of God. In other words, it aims to progress our being and awareness. A rite should not be aimed at achieving external, superstitious and magical intervention. It provides an internal energy to boost the vitality spirit of the believer. It is thus not a medicinal prescription able to cure the evils of the believer without any personal effort being made.

41. Mohammed Iqbal, *Reconstruire la pensée religieuse de l'islam*, Éditions du Rocher, 1996, p. 90.

42. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough", in *Philosophica III*, TER, 2001, p. 28-37.

The question of “why” should therefore be posed systematically, because it raises questions about the meaning of Islamic rites of worship. Due to the dismissal of the “why,” Islam’s Ulemas and jurists have focused on the form its rites should take. The hidden meaning of ritual gestures is often reserved only for Sufi initiates or great mystics. One of the causes of this issue may be that religious practices in Islam have been governed primarily by jurisprudence (fiqh), more than by mysticism. In most cases, we thus encounter books on ritual practices where the authors focus on how to do them and say nothing about their meaning. However, it is not just a question of having memorised the formal shell of rituals, but also of asking a fundamental question: what is this rite expressing and saying about human nature? It is the question of substance above form which will give meaning to the rite, and this quest for meaning must be at the heart of any spiritual education. The faithful should not simply act without understanding. The rite explains it self, meaning that we must make an effort to state clearly and precisely what is implicit in it. It is a language of gestures, a symbol in actions, it is about translating these into words and deciphering them, as a set of signs that come to express in a very reduced and allusive form a set of thoughts so great that the gesture can only hint at them.

The practices are tools thus that God offers in His revelations which lead towards Him, opportunities to move closer to Him and resemble Him. In other words, we are not practising for God, but for us. There is therefore no consequence for missing a prayer, praying differently, not fasting or adapting our fast. The Quran offers tools, so that we may find out if they are effective for our spiritual journey today. The answer will differ depending on the individual and the spiritual personality of each person. Intention and presence are the key.

Rethinking one's Islamic practices presupposes as a pre-requisite moving away from the traditional idea of a practice as compulsory in order to obtain salvation or carried out under the threat of divine punishment. Otherwise, whenever a person wishes to adapt a practice, he or she will be filled with a counter-productive sense of guilt. It is a question of ceasing to see religious practices as an end in and of themselves and no longer considering them through a logic of accountancy but rather as tools for achieving a spiritual goal. This new way of looking at ones relationship with God radically changes the perception of spiritual and religious life.

2. The Simorgh Mosque Project

The Simorgh mosque project is led by Eva Janadin and Anne-Sophie Monsinay. It is not affiliated with any particular denomination of Islam, but draws on the teachings of Sufi mysticism as part of a progressive and non-traditionalist approach. This spiritual and progressive worship is seen as a

search for meaning and exploration of its deepest significance rather than as an orthopraxis. The function of such a mosque is to organize group ritual prayers, led by a volunteer, devotional *dhikr* sessions (repetition of the names of God), Sufi chants, studies of the Quran and the prophetic tradition, as well as education about Islam in all its dimensions (mystical, historical, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, etc.).

The principles of a spiritual and progressive worship

Equality of individuals

- The imamate of Women

At the Simorgh mosque, women are imams and lead all services, including those for men. There are already female imams in the world, the United States, Denmark and even Germany, presiding over mixed congregations (Amina Wadud, Ani Zonneveld, Sherin Khankan, Seyran Ateş, etc.). We can also note the female imams of China, who only lead women's prayers, and the existence of Mourchidates in Morocco, who take on certain spiritual support roles but cannot perform all the roles available to male imams. Despite this, women are fully engaged in Muslim cultural associations but are excluded from leading worship.

Muslim women have a right to a full and free collective spiritual life. Currently, they are constantly forced to live out their relationship with God alone or only around other women since they often do not have the right to become an imam, nor to choose not to wear the veil, nor to pray beside men. It is time to deconstruct centuries of patriarchal readings of the Quran and the *Sunnah*, and to stop using religion to justify and sanctify social, cultural and anthropological norms around gender relations.

What does the Quran say about the imamat? The answer is relatively simple: absolutely nothing. No verse prohibits a woman from being an imam. There is no mention of any directive concerning the gender of the person who leads a prayer or gives the sermon (*khutba*). Only the *Sunnah* refer to it and a tradition handed down by Abu Dawud (817-889) in particular is controversial, which tells the story of Umm Waraqa, a female *hâfizha*⁴³ who participated in the dissemination of the Quran at the beginning of Islam. It was reported that the Prophet visited her and ordered her to lead the prayer for the members of her household (*abla dâriha*), while granting her a muezzin⁴⁴. This *hadîth* clearly allows the imamate of women. The only question is whether or not it is allowed before a mixed-gender congregation.

43. A person who can recite the Quran from memory.

44. On this subject, see "Imâma de la femme", doctrine-malikite.fr, 27 January 2018 (www.doctrine-malikite.fr/forum/imama-de-la-femme_m44296.html).

A second variation of this tradition exists which states that Umm Waraqa only requested permission to run the women's prayer, which was granted to her. But what about the first version of this prophetic word? According to progressives, since the Prophet did not prohibit Umm Waraqa from leading prayer before a mixed-gender congregation, she was logically allowed to do so. The mere fact that the Prophet asked her and not a man from the household is enough to validate the imamate of women before a mixed-gender congregation. In the 13th century, the *shaykh* Sufi Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) had already allowed women to be imams before a mixed congregation, as he believed that the perfection of the human soul is accessible to both sexes⁴⁵. On the other hand, for those opposed to the imamate of women before a mixed assembly, the fact that it is not explicitly stated that Umm Waraqa was leading men implies a ban. They also feel that the term "household" refers only to Umm Waraqa's family, the "home," which they believed did not include any men. Yet the texts attest that she had men at her side: a muezzin and a slave. It is difficult to imagine that these two individuals did not pray behind her, because it is precisely the imam's muezzin and slave who would have had to stand in front of the assembly. The patriarchal interpretation, therefore, assumes that she only led the women of her home, and that the muezzin simply called them to prayer and then went to the mosque and prayed with the slave.

Apart from these rather confusing interpretations, a question regarding the term used to mean "household" can also be posed: the Arabic word *dâr* has multiple meanings and refers to at once a house and a territory, an area or even a neighbourhood. What prevents us from thinking that Umm Waraqa was mandated to lead the prayer of her entire neighbourhood and thus that of the men? The mere fact that the Prophet has made a muezzin available to her indicates that the gathering was sufficiently large and certainly mixed to make presence of the latter necessary. A prayer in a strictly intimate and family setting does not justify the presence of a muezzin specifically assigned to this position. It is therefore enough to interpret this tradition in a spirit of social progress to justify the legitimacy of the imamate of women while extending it to any type of congregation.

Of course, it is entirely appropriate to question the authenticity of this tradition. There is no way we can assert the truth of the matter, but this does not matter. As in other religions, controversies about the authenticity of narratives, doctrines, and interpretations are not uncommon. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the significance, here resolutely feminist, of the statements of Muslims of the era, living in a patriarchal society where women's rights had only regressed since the Prophet's death.

45. Ibn 'Arabi, "Wasl bi-imâmat al-mar'ah", in *Al-futûhât al-makkiyya fî mârîfat al-asrâr al-mâlîkiyya wa l-mulkiyya*, Beyrouth, Dâr Sâdir, 2003, chap. 69, vol. II, p. 83-84. Furthermore, Asma Lamrabet highlights a recent study which reports "the presence of more than 8,000 women including scholars, exegetes, traditionists, and muftis who have taught many Muslim scholars, including the founders of legal schools, from the 12th century onwards." (Asma Lamrabet, op. cit., p. 15, note 9).

In any case, the legalisation of women's imamate cannot be based solely on this prophetic aphorism. Not only can opinions against female imamate not be based on the Quran, but they call on the interpretations of certain Sunni jurists who decided on this issue in a consensus (*ijmâ'*) now centuries old, which in no way reflects the values of a modern society. We can thus read in all Sunni judicial traditions that, for a man, praying behind a woman would render his prayer invalid.

This rejection of the imamate of women comes from a habit of wanting to increase the number of religious bans on the basis of a precautionary principle. When the Quran does not specify any specific rules to follow in a particular case, it has become common in traditional Islam to ban rather than permit. On the one hand, this amounts to taking the Quran for what it is not, that is a legal code, and on the other hand, God has already warned humans against this slippery slope: "Do not say falsely, 'This is lawful and that is forbidden,' inventing a lie about God: those who invent lies about God will not prosper."⁴⁶ What does this verse say? It encourages us, first of all, to follow a well-known legal principle: anything not prohibited is allowed. Article 5 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man states: "Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be forced to do anything not provided for by law. If God has not explicitly banned the imamate of women, it makes sense to consider that this is allowed. We cannot therefore decide to create bans where none exist. This verse also urges us not to speak for God in order to justify theological positions and to exploit the sacred. If the Quran is silent on certain subjects, this means that human beings can find their own answers to questions without always having to refer to the sacred text.

Since the Quran says nothing about this imamate issue, and the *Sunnah* is not explicit either, and judicial opinions are now out of date, could we not use our personal reasoning and conscience to allow women the imamate through a logic based on the common good, justice and fairness towards women? In reality, the obstacle to the imamate of women is neither religious nor theological but cultural and psychological. It is about seeing a woman lead men by standing in front of them in a position of authority, and seeing a woman's body in front of a man, which is a problem for some. Once again, human dignity is under attack, since this implies that man is a beast incapable of repressing his sexual desires and that the body of women is nothing more than a commodity to be consumed or hidden. But saying that this is not a religious issue must not prompt us to refuse to begin to settle the question from a theological point of view, because the advocates of such a misogynistic and archaic reading continually attempt to justify their position on religious grounds. This confusion prevents constructive solutions being reached.

46. Quran 16: 116.

- **Integrated prayer**

At the Simorgh mosque, the creation of which is the project we are proposing today, the prayer ritual is integrated. There is no hierarchy between men and women, who pray together in the same room. The times of prayer are therefore fully inclusive and there is no physical separation between genders. From the moment a female imam is accepted in front of an assembly to lead the prayer, men must necessarily be behind her. If the latter agree to be behind one woman, they are likely to agree to be behind or next to other women as well. The imamat of women is, in fact, an argument for the integration of men and women's prayers.

In the days of the Prophet Muhammad, women were never excluded from worship and prayer. They were placed behind the men, without any physical separation. This provision establishes a hierarchy which is to the women's detriment, but it is again necessary to put this into context: the society of the time was probably not ready to establish real spatial equality between the sexes because, according to the attitudes of the time, women still held an inferior status. The most alarming thing is that not only has the way in which gender is organised in spaces of collective worship remained the same as it was the days of the Prophet, but it has often even regressed. Today, in most French mosques, women are separated from men by a curtain, or even a wall, when they are not simply relegated to the basement or to an adjacent room, as the sad example of the Paris Mosque demonstrates. The fact is clear: the place of women in our mosques takes them back to the status they had before the Quranic Revelation, that is to say side-lined and excluded from collective religious practices.

What does the Quran tell us about gender equality? There are general guiding principles in this area that show us the direction to be followed for the post-Revelation generations. The Quran insists on the complementarity of the couple⁴⁷, on equality in religious practices⁴⁸ and on the ontological equality of the sexes⁴⁹. The fact that there is no indication of a hierarchy of gender in verses that do not refer to a particular social context should be enough to make it clear that there should be no gender hierarchy in current Muslim communities.

Following a progressive logic, moving towards more equality between men and women would require prayers to be completely integrated. In many countries, societies have evolved and women have finally gained legal equality with men, although of course this can still be improved upon. In France, gender integration is the rule in all public places (schools, swimming pools, gyms, etc.), with the exception of those where one undresses such as changing rooms or

47. Quran 2: 187.

48. Quran 33: 35.

49. Quran 4: 1; 49: 13.

toilets. Since the mosque is not a place where one undresses – on the contrary – there is no reason why it should be exempt from this integration. It should also be pointed out that gender equality is part of the Republican values, the French Constitution and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and that the construction of an Islam of France should therefore not be exempt from this accepted rule.

Western society is ready for full integration of its places of worship. The majority of Christian churches abide by this rule – although Catholics also have issues regarding women's right to preach.

However, the question is whether Muslims are ready for gender integration in ritual prayers and the imamate of women. The vast majority of them are not. This is not surprising, given that the current standard, which is considered untouchable, is to completely separate the two sexes.

The problem is that we can no longer afford to wait. First, because of the discrepancy with the West's cultural and social norms, which creates a huge gap between everyday gender integration and the religious space, but also because many Muslim men and women are ready for this integration and no longer tolerate women being treated as inferior beings, judged only on their sexual attributes. The mosque is not the place for such worldly considerations. In the eyes of God, we are not men or women, but rather spiritual beings, divine beings, carrying within us the Trust. Collective prayer at the mosque aims to connect us with God and to allow us to experience the spiritual energy of a group through shared practice. The question of gender and of carnal pleasures is completely inappropriate there.

Every Muslim man and woman should question what drives him or her to go to the mosque and not accept the presence of the opposite sex in the same prayer room, in front of or alongside him or her. Those who do not consider themselves capable of resisting the temptation of women can simply lower their eyes, put themselves in the first row, go to a non-integrated mosque, or even abstain and pray at home. The same opportunities exist for those who feel embarrassed to prostrate themselves in front of a man, they may pray in the back row or go to a non-integrated mosque. Everyone is free to choose a place of worship that suits them. As for men's well-known obligation to pray at the mosque on Friday – when women would be exempt – obviously this tradition can only be upheld if the intention of the prayer is pure and sincere.

- **Rethink the status of imams**

At the Simorgh Mosque, any Muslim, male or female, may lead the prayer if he or she so desires (*khams imâm*). As such, there is no lead imam. As for the imam who takes responsibility for the sermons (*al-khutba mum*), he or she must always present his or her point of view as a particular illumination,

advice, an interpretation, not as an absolute truth, obligation or prohibition. Participants are therefore frequently invited to engage in debates following the imam's speeches.

It should be remembered that Islam is characterized by the absence of a formal and hierarchical clergy, i.e., that the imam is not sacredly ordained. This can also be described as a "universal priesthood," where every believer, rather than clerks belonging to a particular caste, has the power to minister. The imam, according to its Arabic etymology, is simply the person who leads the community in prayer, he or she is like a conductor and his or her role is to serve to the community.

An imam can thus only be self-proclaimed, that is, no higher authority can give him or her that role. It is the community which chooses its own imam: as soon as the adherents of a mosque do not reject him or her and are willing to accept the interpretations presented, he or she is legitimately an imam without having first to obtain any permission from a higher authority or his or her peers. This, of course, poses serious problems when it comes to fundamentalist imams preaching violence and a disruptive discourse, hence the importance of establishing an education for imams which will enable us to teach theological alternatives suited to the French and European context in order to counter such disruptive discourse.

Individual freedoms

In the Simorgh mosque, any woman, including the imam, is free to choose whether or not to wear a veil. In addition, no external pressure or judgement is permitted regarding the clothing of any person. This is about respecting individual freedoms and the intimate link between the faithful and God. In the Quran, at the time of the Prophet, the veil was only a mark of social distinction to distinguish religious women from others, not a tool to deepen their connection to God: "Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful⁵⁰."

For this first reason, it seems inconsistent to force women to veil themselves during prayers, while accepting (for some) that they may not do so outside the mosque. Let us carefully read the key verse regarding the veil: "Tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. / And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves [*khumur*] fall to cover their necklines [*juyûb*]. and not reveal their charms [*zîna*] except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands'

50. Quran 33: 59.

fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper." ⁵¹. At no point in the Quran is it ordered that women should cover their hair, let alone their faces. They are simply asked to cover their necklines with a cloth or any other clothing.

Only the *Sunnah* refers to a veil which covers the hair and thus added an obligation that was not explicitly present in the Quran. As the *Sunnah* is not equivalent to the Quran, it cannot contradict it or add new standards, new obligations, or other prohibitions.

The Quranic text only encourages a certain modesty in relations between men and women, and this modesty applies to both men and women. Both men and women are asked to be chaste, which does not mean restraining and refusing their desires, but rather acting in restraint, moderation and mutual respect. Nothing tells us to avoid the opposite sex at all costs. This is completely at odds with the current thinking that sexual temptation can only come from the side of women, that her body naturally attracts men's eyes, and that she could not look sexually at a man or that a man's body could not arouse desire. Thus, the argument against the imamat of women linked to the fact that they should avoid men's gazes crumbles since, in the end, we would have to follow the same logic and prohibit any man from preaching to women. In any case, first of all, the aim of the believer who comes to the mosque is not to seduce his or her fellow worshippers, but to devote him or herself to God. Since the mosque is not a dating agency, everyone must learn to take responsibility for themselves. The quality of a prayer, the sacred nature of a place and moment depend on the quality of presence and the internal contemplation of each person and not the percentage of skin covered by the worshippers, which the Quran also reminds us of: "Children of Adam, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness and as adornment for you; the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments—[*al-taqwā*] this is one of God's signs, so that people may take heed ⁵²." Thus modesty does not depend only on clothes, it is also, and above all, an attitude and behaviour which requires restraint, reserve and discretion in both words and gestures.

As for the phrase "not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal", it is no more than a pleonastic turn of phrase which does not deserve so much exegetical dithering and one-upmanship aimed at fully covering women. It should be understood as not exaggerating ones beauty, without

51. Quran 24: 30-31.

52. Quran 7: 26

provocation or exhibition. Furthermore, the standards of modesty vary over time and across societies, and are not the same in France as in North Africa, for example. The aim is not to judge who is wrong or who is right, but to accept different styles of dress from different to cultures. Today, in France, a woman's hair is not culturally considered an intimate part that should be hidden in public.

If the Quran does not force women to wear the veil, we must also specify that nothing prohibits it. It is a free choice as long as the person wearing it does not seek to impose it on others by making it a religious obligation. In the name of freedom of conscience, banning or obliging the wearing of the veil is a breach of individual freedoms.

Inclusiveness

Muslims of all denominations are welcome at the Simorgh mosque, without discrimination or distinction of origin, gender or sexual orientation, based on our principles of openness, pluralism, humanism and universalism. Non-Muslims may also attend or participate in the activities of the mosque. The condition of this inclusivity is that attendees must respect the principles of spiritual and progressive worship, and not use these personal identities to make demands which go beyond the scope of worship within this mosque.

Speaking French

Islam has always been assimilated into the cultures and customs within which it has existed. Thus, Indonesian Islam is not the same as Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Turkish, African, Balkan or European Islam. Until now, a French Islam has not emerged, as the latter is essentially a North African Islam that has been imported, with its original language. This was initially justified due to the fact that the first generations of Muslims were not yet predominantly French-speaking. However, today most French Muslims are in fact French-speakers, and we must adapt to this reality.

This is why, at the Simorgh mosque, all the sermons (*khutba*) are in French. Every Arabic term and every verse of the Quran are systematically translated to ensure that everyone understands the sermon. Moreover, depending on the imam leading the prayer, the latter is conducted sometimes in French and sometimes in Arabic, allowing Islam to truly adapt to French culture. The aim is to encourage a true ownership of Islam by French Muslims by allowing them a deep understanding of the discourse and giving them the opportunity to engage critically with its religious messages.

Today, many French Muslims do not speak Arabic, but most of them still pray in Arabic, sometimes without understanding the meaning of their words. Because prayer is a practice that offers an opportunity to connect with God intimately, it therefore seems incongruous not to grasp the meaning of the

speech we are addressing to Him. The argument frequently invoked against the use of French is that translating the Quran amounts to interpreting and thus altering its original meaning, as well as losing the poetic beauty of the Arabic language of Revelation. Interpretation is a hollow debate, as an Arabic-speaking Muslim in fact ascribes meaning to Arabic terms and interprets the verses internally in reciting a prayer.

With regard to the poetic beauty of the Arabic text, we can only acknowledge it and leave each individual the freedom to continue to pray in Arabic. But if this preservation of the beauty of the text is to the detriment of understanding, it becomes urgent and relevant to question the priority given to prayer: what spiritual fruit do we gain from a prayer whose words are not understood? Especially as, once again, the obligatory nature of conducting ritual prayer in Arabic is not theologically justified. Nothing in the Quran mandates prayer in Arabic. On the contrary, the text justifies the choice of this language simply because the people receiving the text understood it. Thus, the Prophet and the first Muslims prayed in their mother tongue. Another element which should definitely convince us that the divine directives are more inclined towards prayer in vernacular languages: all the prophets prayed in their mother tongues, Hebrew for Moses and Aramaic for Jesus.

Banning a Muslim from undertaking his or her ritual prayer in a language other than Arabic once again means prioritizing form over substance, understanding, and purity of intent. Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) expresses this idea in the *Mathnawi* through a tale chastising Bilal, the first muezzin of Islam, for mispronouncing Arabic: “The honest Bilal, in making the call to prayer, had the habit, because of his strong feelings, of pronouncing *hayya* as *hyya*⁵³/ So the people say: ‘O Messenger of God, this mistake is not permitted, now that we are at the beginning of the establishment of Islam. / O Prophet and Messenger of the Creator, choose a muezzin who speaks better. / At the beginning of religion and piety, it is a disgrace to mispronounce *hayy la l-falah*.’ / The anger of the Prophet boils and he gives one or two indications of the hidden devotion granted to Bilal, / Saying: “O vile men, in the eyes of God, Bilal’s hayy is better than a hundred ha and kha and words and phrases. / Don’t make me angry, for fear that I will disclose your secret – at once your end and your beginning.” / If you don’t have a gentle breath in your prayer, go seek a prayer from those with pure hearts⁵⁴. ”

53. These are two different "H"s in the Persian and Arabic languages, with different pronunciations.

54. Rûmî, *Mathnawî, La Quête de l'absolu*, Éditions du Rocher, 2014, vol. III, p. 540-541.

3. Why Simorgh?

The Simorgh is a bird from Persian mythology found in the writings of authors such as Sohrawardi (m. 1191)⁵⁵ and Farid-ud-Din 'Attar (m. 1221)⁵⁶, and in the writings of other thinkers such as Avicenna. It is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the Angel of humanity or even of Conscience. In the Shi'ite Ismaili Gnosis, the Simorgh and its place of residence, the Tûbâ tree, are the symbol of the personal imam, the inner guide of every believer who reveals his deep ego, which helps him find his own way and the unique bond that binds him to the Divine in order to achieve his celestial ascension, the personal *Mi'râj*. Like the Phoenix, when the Simorgh dies in flames, it means the death of the inferior and earthly ego followed by a spiritual re-birth, or the illumination of the soul by the Eastern light of highest spiritual knowledge.

It is in the *Mantiq al-Tayr (The Conference of Birds)* that Farid-ud-Din 'Attâr best develops this figure. The latter is a mystical epic which describe the quest of birds led by a hoopoe who go in search of their king, the Simorgh. In the end, only thirty birds complete their quest to contemplate the sublime bird. But what do they find? Is it an external being distinct from themselves? No, they end up finding themselves and the deepest secret of their being. In fact, in Persian *si-morgh* means "thirty birds" and the French philosopher Henry Corbin translates this in a brilliant way: "When they look at Simorgh, it is in fact "Simorgh" that they see. When they contemplate themselves, it is still Si-morgh, thirty birds that they contemplate. And when they look at both sides simultaneously, Simorgh and Si-morgh are one and the same reality. There are two Simorghs, yet Simorgh is unique. Identity in difference, difference in identity⁵⁷. The spiritual quest makes it possible to find and meet oneself. This is the ultimate goal of the journey: both to realise that we are what we are and that we are different from what we are. Knowing the Simorgh (in other words God) allows you to discover your spiritual ego and to know yourself: when you realise what you are, you realise that you are part of the eternal Simorgh. Therefore, the quest for transcendence inherently leads to knowledge of the self and the Ego. The believer is a mirror which allows us to look at the Face of God and see in our soul the reflection of The Absolute. So close and so far, the Simorgh is a symbol of divine mystery, both transcendent and inherent, absent and present⁵⁸.

It is this move towards freedom of conscience that we want to suggest and offer to Muslims who come to pray in this mosque. We want to offer Islam's spiritual resources as a medium so that each and every one of us can discover our own

55. See Sohrawardi, *L'Archange empourpré*, Fayard, 1976.

56. See Farid-ud-Din 'Attâr, *La Conférence des oiseaux*, adapted by Henri Gougaud, Seuil, 2002.

57. Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien*, Gallimard, 1991, vol. I.

58. See Amélie Neuve-Église, "Simorgh : de l'oiseau légendaire du Shâhnâmeh au guide intérieur de la mystique persane", *La Revue de Téhéran*, n°. 19, June 2007 [www.teheran.ir/spip.php?article242 - gsc.tab=0].

Inner Being and chart our own path to God. Such is the purpose of the Islamic Sufi methodology, which aims to enact this prophetic adage: “He who knows himself knows his Lord,” the equivalent of the Delphic *Gnothi seauton*⁵⁹. This approach is aimed at spiritual autonomy, meaning seeking answers within oneself and not in systems of external laws that must necessarily be the same for everyone and cannot adapt to the spiritual needs of each person. It is about learning to listen to this interior master, one’s conscience, in order to create one’s Adamic being through a truly gnostic approach to self-knowledge. Such is the order God gave Adam: “In God’s eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, Said to him, ‘Be’, and he was. [*kun fayakun*]⁶⁰”

On the other hand, since it is not possible to achieve this goal alone, this mosque allows for a collective mutual assistance in this search for meaning in order to invent a new spiritual sociability in Islam that exists outside of any judgement and community or family pressure, and where mutual questioning and the teaching of a real Islamic spiritual culture are priorities. This brotherhood and sisterhood allows everyone to advance along their paths in the same way as the birds helped each other to discover the Simorgh. It was their cohesion and collective spirit that led them to their goal: “Look at the divine seekers arrived at His Court. They helped each other, taught each other. There are as many paths to the glorious Friend as there are living atoms⁶¹. This is the teaching of the *al-‘Asr Surrah*: “By the declining day / man is [deep] in loss, / except for those who believe, do good deeds, urge one another to the truth, and urge one another to steadfastness.”⁶²”

CONCLUSION

We hope that this project will enable the Muslim men and women who need it to no longer feel alone and to find, in this vision and this future place of worship, a refuge and a new opportunity to live their spiritual life with Islam, in freedom and conscience. Today, this mosque already partially exists through the personal practices of those leading the project, but it does not yet physically exist, simply due to a lack of space and financial resources. We wish and hope to remedy this as soon as possible in order to provide such a space for all those who wish to live and share their spirituality in a brotherly and sisterly manner within the framework of this enlightened, spiritual and progressive Islam.

59. “Know thyself.”

60. Quran 3: 59

61. Farid-ud-Din ‘Attâr, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

62. Quran 103: 1-3.

GLOSSARY

‘aql: Reason, intellect

‘ibâdât: The legal rules that deal with the field of worship

Al-khalîfa: A successor, an heir

Al-tawhîd: A symbol of divine oneness, a central principle of Islam

Amâna: A term designating a Trust given to a third party, here what God entrusts to Man

Bid‘a: An innovation that did not exist in the Prophet’s time. It is often considered prohibited and therefore punishable according to orthodoxy. However there are innovations that are considered beneficial.

Dhikr: Recalling the names of God, remembering, reminding

Fardu ‘ayn: Individual duty

Fard: The legal concept of obligation

Fardu kifâya: Collective duty

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Fitra: The original and profound nature of man as created by God in Adam. A state of harmony between man, creation and God.

Hadith: Writing, speech, or actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad

Hâfîzha: A person capable of reciting the Quran by heart

Khatm al-nubuwwa: Seal of the Prophets

Khutba: A sermon

Kalâm: A theological discipline that encourages rational discussion, speculation and argument

Maqâsid: Literally "the purposes", in the sense of "goals" or "objectives"

Muezzin: Designates the person responsible for the call to prayer

Nafs: The soul or ego

Naql, taqlîd: The following and imitation of the ancients

Niyya: The correct intention which determines the sincerity of any act in the life of a Muslim. This is an absolute condition for the admissibility of a prayer and is explicitly stated before beginning.

Oulémas: Literally “those who know”, refers to all specialists in religious topics of Islam

Oumma: The Muslim community as a whole

Ray’: Opinion, personal judgement

Rûh: Spirit, breath

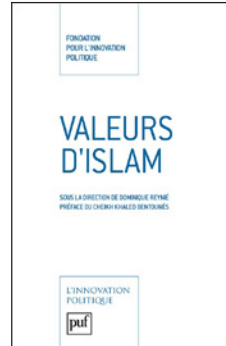
Sharī’a: Literally “the path to source,” designating by extension all Islamic teachings. In the Western press, Shari'a is almost systematically translated as "Islamic law" or "Quranic law", ignoring the spiritual aspects of shari'a.

Shaykh: A person recognised for his or her wisdom and/or holiness or knowledge of the Quran and the Sunnah.

Sourate: Chapter of the Quran

Sunna: This term refers to Islamic traditions based on the actions and words of the Prophet Muhammad. The Hadiths are part of the Sunnah.

SERIES: VALUES OF ISLAM



1 قيم الإسلام

التعددية الدينية
في الإسلام،
أو الوعي بالغيرية

إيريك جوفروا
جانفي 2015

2 قيم الإسلام

القرآن،
مفاتيح للقراءة

طارق أوبرو
أفريل 2015

3 قيم الإسلام

الإنسانية والإنسية
في الإسلام

أحمد بويردان
أفريل 2015

4 قيم الإسلام

التصوف:
روحانية ومواطنة

باريزا الخياري
جوان 2015

5 قيم الإسلام

الإسلام
والميثاق الاجتماعي

فيليب موليني
أوت 2015

6 قيم الإسلام

الإسلام
وقيم الجمهورية

سعد الخياري
جوان 2015

7 قيم الإسلام

التربية في الإسلام

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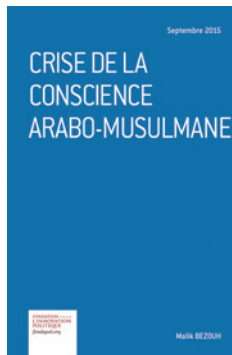
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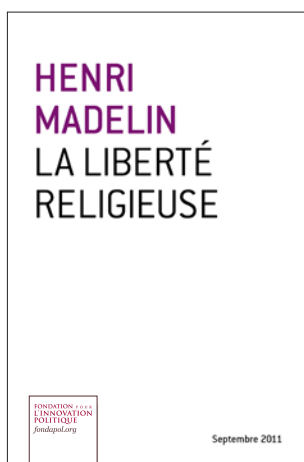
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AN INTEGRATED MOSQUE FOR A SPIRITUAL AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

By *Eva JANADIN and Anne-Sophie MONSINAY*

The emergence of a spiritual and progressive Islam, promoted by the authors of this text, is desired by many French Muslims. They demand innovation and freedom in their faith, paving the way for a spiritual journey informed by modernity. This vision exists as part of a project creating a place of worship, the Simorgh mosque, which would endorse certain founding principles. At this mosque, women are imams and lead all services, including those for men. The ritual prayer is not segregated. Any Muslim, male or female, may lead the prayer if he or she so desires. As such, there is no lead imam. Each woman, including the imam, may choose whether or not to wear a veil. All the sermons are in French, encouraging true ownership of Islam by French Muslims, allowing them a deep understanding of the discourse and giving them the opportunity to engage critically with the religious messages. Furthermore, Muslims of all denominations are welcome. This project is led by the Voice of Enlightened Islam (V.I.E.) movement, founded in September 2018 by the two authors of this memo and supporting the idea of an Islam which bridges the gap between loyalty to its legacies and openness to the future.

Eva Janadin and Anne-Sophie Monsinay are the cofounders of Voices of Enlightened Islam (V.I.E.) and leaders of the Simorgh Mosque project. In 2017, Eva Janadin cofounded the Association for the Rebirth of Mutazilite Islam (ARIM), which aims to re-discover this rationalist theological movement. Anne-Sophie Monsinay, who follows a teacher from a non-dualistic mystic tradition (proclaiming no separation between God and human beings), speaks at conferences on these topics. Both are administrators of the Facebook group “Progressive Sufism,” which aims to engage Islam with the present and provide spaces of open dialogue for Muslims who may need them, away from any community or family pressure.

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