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#FEMALEFORWARD

Nayla
Tabbara

—
*Professor and
Theologian*

The
**WOMEN of
WEBBAYN**

HOW?
WHY?
WHO?
WHAT?
WHEN?

WOMEN

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world are key for economies and communities to thrive. Therefore, the aim of our series "Women of Lebanon" is to give women from very different backgrounds in the country a voice, as we believe that it is important to portray strong women and use their impact to inspire future generations. Thus, this series will cover a whole range of different topics and sectors, from human rights, the arts to business and politics and all the women in the series have one thing in common: they are outstanding personalities who believe in change and the importance of individual responsibility to work for a better society. I am particularly grateful to Nicole Hamouche, the author of this series, who has identified and interviewed the ten women in our series and has worked so hard to make this project happen.

Enjoy reading and we hope that you will get inspired too!

Best regards,



Kristof Kleemann

*Project Director
FNF Lebanon and Syria*





Dr. Nayla Tabbara is the director of the Adyan Institute and the vice chair of Adyan Foundation and, previously served as director of its Cross-Cultural Studies Department.

She holds a doctorate in religious studies from the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne, Paris) and Saint Joseph University (Beirut, Lebanon) and is a university professor of comparative religions and Islamic studies. She has published in the fields of Islamic theology and other religions, education on interreligious and intercultural diversity and Qur'anic exegesis and Sufism.

In addition, she works on curricula development (formal and non-formal) for multifaith education and intercultural citizenship. Her publications include *Divine Hospitality: Christian and Muslim Theologies of the Other* (2011, co-author with Fadi Daou; in Arabic and French, 2012).

**Nayla
Tabbara**

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INTER CULTURAL STUDIES



NAYLA TABBARA

A pioneer and pillar of the inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Co-founder of Adyan, a foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity that is planting its seeds across the Middle East conflict zones.

by

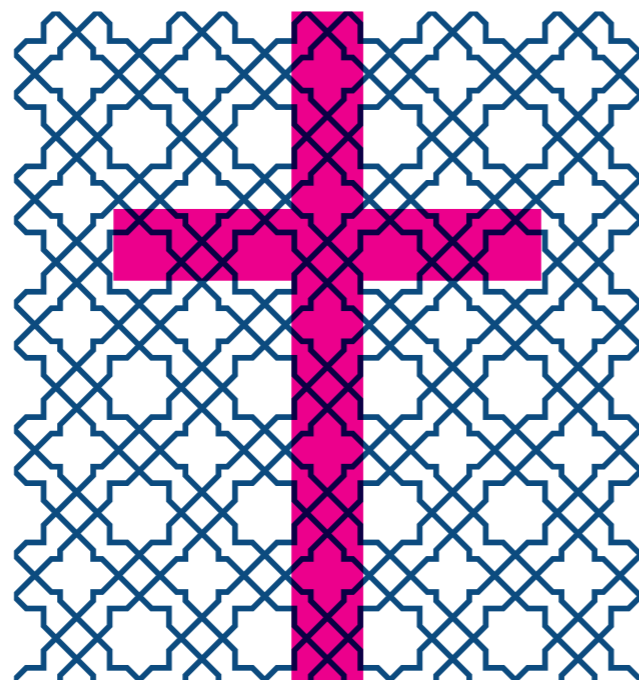
NICOLE HAMOUCHE

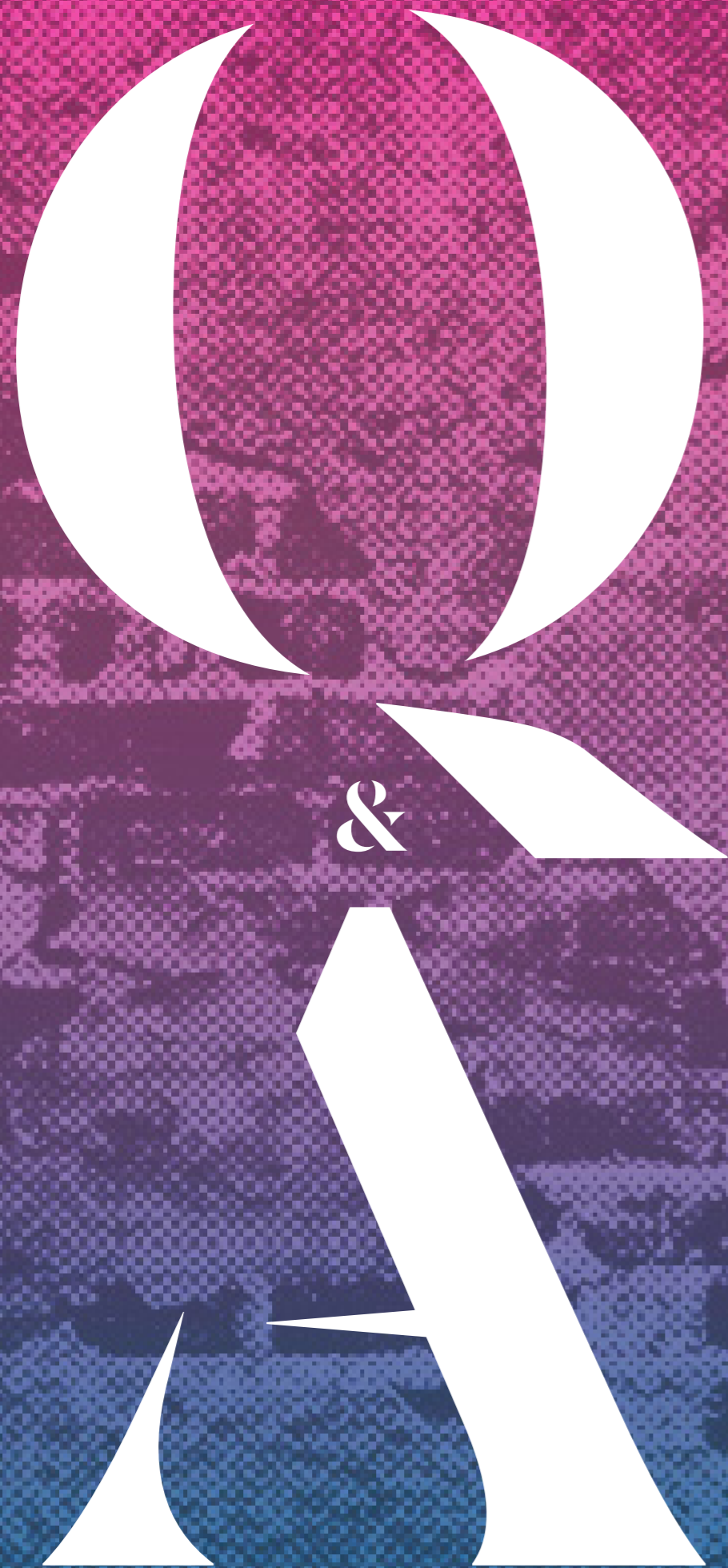
Nayla Tabbara is one of those who move the dialogue to new levels, in a soft clear fashion, she speaks about both Islam and Christianity and highlights what brings them together, rather than what separates them. Nayla Tabbara, co-founder of Adyan and former director of the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management within the foundation, is not afraid of tackling what is perhaps one of the most taboo questions in Lebanon and maybe in the world, the question of religion. "We need to bring religion in the public sphere, we need to talk about it, otherwise it will be a time bomb like what is happening in France currently. We need not run away from diversity, rather create a space where we can take it into account". The acclaimed religious sciences professor and theologian, who has earned many awards and distinctions, notably the Gold Medal of the *French Renaissance Award* and the *Special Jury Award of the Fr. Jacques Hamel Prize*, is more interested in translating theology into spiritual solidarity and communion than in mere theological debates.

Her books *Divine Hospitality, Christian and Muslim Theologies of the Other* co-written with priest Fadi Daou from Saint Joseph University and *L'Islam Pensé par une Femme*, shed a dispassionate new light on crucial questions of our times. The lady who holds a PHD in Science of Religions from the EPHE in Paris and Saint Joseph University in Beirut, did her dissertation on Sufism, as she was drawn to mysticism. She also spent six months in Rome, on scholarship, from the Pontifical Council for the Dialogue between Religions. Nayla Tabbara says her time in Rome was a turning point as she experienced there a deep spiritual communion with her Christian mates. Her study of the Quran's views of the other and essentially the Christian has brought her to the conclusion that diversity is willed by God and her

prolific publications attest to her deep interest in the Islamo-Christian encounter.

Nayla, a child of war, who grew up in a mixed environment and in a torn city, spares no effort to pave the way for peace building. She recalls her parents going to the demarcation lines when Beirut was divided East and West, to greet their Christian friends in an act of civil resistance and of refusal of separation. Thirty years after the end of the war, Adyan, the foundation she has co-founded with father Fadi Daou from Saint Joseph University, is committed to this refusal of separation and to multi-faith and inclusive citizenship education. Through Adyan, her teachings and her publications and interventions, Nayla Tabbara was able to demystify the religious matter and to spread the essence of its message, a message of conviviality, reconciliation and reunion. She is considered part of *Les Nouveaux Acteurs de l'Islam* ie. *The New Actors of Islam* as per the title of the book published at Bayard's prestigious publishing house.





Could you tell us about your journey on this spiritual path?



I was born in 1972 in a mixed surrounding, I studied at Carmel Saint Joseph a religious school. Sister Maryam Nour had left an impression on me, she used to drive a Vespa and they called them the red nuns at that time, as they were very liberal. Nobody wore the veil in the family, I have eight aunts, none of them wore the veil even if they fasted. I wanted to wear the veil when I was young, but my parents stopped me.

Since I was a kid I had existential questions. At five years old, I used to ask: does God exist? I attended sessions given by Shariyyat, a group of women who taught the Quran to children. When I was around twelve or thirteen, I started reading novels, spiritual,

stories of mystics, and actually, I relate my interest in Sufism to the reading I did in my youth: Regards from the Dead Princess by Kenize Mourad, a book examining the Hindu and Muslim spirituality.

For university, at first, I wanted to study Egyptology or compared religions. I ended up studying history at AUB and then medieval studies. I continued my studies in France and Germany. I felt the need to be anchored, like the people I was surrounded with. I found softness in religion when I was introduced to mysticism through Souad Al Hakim, an authority on Ibn Arabi and I did my PhD in Sufism.



And what made you opt in particular for the inter-religious dialogue and notably the Christian- Muslim one?

In the mid 90's, one of the fathers at the Institute for Islamic Christian Studies at USJ, invited me to take a course at the institute, I was also invited to take part in the youths' inter-religious meetings. At that time, I was not interested, I was more interested in concrete things. But then I felt I had a responsibility - as I understood I had a privilege having lived in a mixed environment - and started attending more of those encounters.

The turning point was in 2001 when I received a scholarship to study catholic theology at Il Pontificio Istituto Orientale in Rome. There, I made many friends, essentially priests. They welcomed me so warmly, so openly. When I wanted to go somewhere to pray, they would offer that I do so in their room or they would open the church for me. I also participated in mass with them and then realized, that in silence, we can pray together, that we can pray at the core of our differences, beyond our

differences. The time I spent there made me reflect on many questions: how to act with my Christian friends if I still wanted to act as a Muslim, what does Islam say about Christians, how to deal with the contradictions of some verses in the Quran that addressed Christians, and how to resolve them. I looked at the Quranic verses chronologically and contextually - there were many phases in the Quran - and found out that it's essence is not war and that the Quran promises salvation to "the people of the book".

The work I undertook, was very liberating for me and the actual communions I had with my Christian friends in Rome, the richness of my spiritual discussions with them, my faith was pushing me to work on fostering this Islamo-Christian encounter.



How was Adyan founded? And can you tell us more about its work?



I wondered at first, if I had the right to speak of theology and diversity as I was and am not veiled and have not studied Islam in the traditional milieu. Yet, I felt it was my responsibility having had the life that I had and having been fortunate to have studied at the Sorbonne and in Germany to share my insights and findings to bring us together.

When I came back from Italy, I first joined Darb Maryam, a women's NGO where Muslim and Christian women used to visit mosques and churches together to learn more about each other's religion. In those times, there were not many inter-religious initiatives: only Offre Joie and later LDS were active. Therefore, together with Father Fadi Daou from Saint Joseph University - where I was teaching - we decided to create Adyan. There was

a need to create something in the society that was secular and religious simultaneously. There was a need of bringing religion in the public sphere, of creating a space where we could take the Lebanese diversity into account, rather than run away from it, where people could accept and live it healthily both on an inter-personal and on a national level. This is how we created Adyan in 2006 with three other friends: a sociologist, a social worker and a psychologist.

The foundation focuses on policy making, research and training of trainers - who work for NGOs active in human rights, citizenship and dialogue. We have introduced a program on diversity and inclusive citizenship to the curriculum at school in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. We

have also launched a community service program and a junior Alwan program, which includes a religious initiation for youngsters. As for our research, it is focused on inclusive citizenship, spiritual solidarity and religious social responsibility with the focus of changing the discourse from sectarianism to working together towards the common good. In this sense, I have written with Father Fadi Daou, a book called *Divine Hospitality*, on Christian and Islamic theology of the other. The book was translated into four languages including German and the Faculty of Theology at Münster University has started a course about it.

Adyan has grown big: we have 25 to 30 projects per year, in Lebanon and elsewhere in conflict countries in the Middle East, where we provide

trainings and seminars. As a lead expert at the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management, I am now working on transforming our teachings into online material. We have also created an online media platform called *pluralism* on www.taadudiya.com, that reached 80 million people in Lebanon and the Arab world.

Can you share with us your take on women and Islam and on some current preoccupations such as the recent controversies and attacks, in France and elsewhere?

We need to make new interpretations to really understand God's message, to show that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. There is an Islamic feminism, we need to change the law, starting with equality. Islam has been hijacked by jurisprudence. We are equally responsible for each other, men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim. The fact that I am not veiled and that I am a woman opens the way to others and to the youth who can be inspired by me.

As for the controversies, what has happened in France is horrifying and Muslims' reaction was absurd on three levels:

1) Humanely, instead of condemning the horrendous crime, people were offended by the re-appearance of the caricatures.

2) Religiously, those reactions do not fit with the values of Islam and finally

3) The controversies are often all about political and economic interests rather than religious ones. Muslims are being manipulated.

How come they are not reacting to one million Uighurs Muslim who are persecuted in concentration camps in China?





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