



THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAM: A CONVERSATION WITH HELA OUARDI

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We are pleased to present this interview with Hela Ouardi who has recently published the third volume of the series, Les califes maudits (The Cursed Caliphs), [Meurtre à la mosquée](#), Murder in the Mosque). She has previously published [Les Derniers Jours de Muhammad](#) (The Last Days of Muhammad). In these works she seeks to demythologize and thereby humanize the founder of Islam. Professor Ouardi teaches French literature and civilization at the University of Tunis.

Here, she is interviewed by Annie Laurent, for [La Nef](#), through whose kind courtesy we are bringing you this translation.

Annie Laurent (AL): Your work challenges the history of early Islam as it is generally transmitted, You teach French literature at the University of Tunis. How did you decide to dive into this work of a historian and is both iconoclastic and titanic?

Hela Ouardi (HO): There are two important points in your question. The first one concerns "questioning." I think I am doing exactly the opposite insofar as I am trying to restore the true history of the beginnings of Islam and to highlight the mythical and mystifying character of the version "generally transmitted" as you say. At the beginning of my investigation, I asked myself this double question: where is this authentic version? Who is in charge of transmitting it? The answer to both questions is: nowhere and nobody. All that the Muslim knows about the genesis of his religion are bits of legendary and incoherent stories. So, I believe that my investigation is based on two major tasks that have nothing to do with any subversive attitude: to bring order to this history and to make it intelligible. The narrative approach in my books allows me to achieve this double objective.



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As for the relationship with my academic specialty, that speaks for itself. My literary training, far from making me a stranger to the work of historical investigation on the Muslim Tradition, has prepared me very well for it. The corpus of this tradition is a literary corpus par excellence (and we have only this to inform us about the beginnings of Islam—there is no archaeological trace dating from the period of the Prophet and even of his first successors). The historian of Islam is thus condemned to analyze a literary tradition. And here I must admit that I am a bit "like a fish in water" because my great familiarity with the analysis of texts puts me in a very good predisposition in this regard. The only notable change in relation to my previous research (French literature and civilization) is that of the language. However, as I am bilingual, the study of texts in Arabic and their rendition in French do not pose any particular problems for me.

AL: Your investigations refer to a multitude of Islamic sources, both Sunni and Shiite. How were you able to access them when many of them seem to be untransmitted, as if one wanted to make them suspect, so as not to interfere with the hagiographic approach to history?

HO: As I told you, there is no "official version" of Islamic history. On the other hand, I do not entirely agree with the idea of suspicion that you evoke: Muslims venerate the sources of Tradition without reading them and without knowing them; and all my work consists in revealing the contents of these books, to make them accessible by breaking a little the glass cage in which they have been imprisoned

over the centuries.

AL: You point out that no text written by Muhammad or dictated by him to his secretaries has been preserved, even though, contrary to legend, he was not illiterate. Can you enlighten us on this point?

HO: Muhammad's alleged illiteracy is a theological ruse to support the dogma of the Qur'anic miracle. In order to show that the Qur'an is a divine work and not a human work, the idea was conveyed that an illiterate man was not capable of producing such a scholarly and well-written book. In my books, I provide irrefutable evidence from the Muslim tradition that destroys the legend of the illiteracy of the Prophet of Islam. This legend has moreover imposed itself thanks to the semantic vagueness that surrounds the Arabic adjective "*ummi*" with which Muhammad is often tagged. This word designates at the same time the illiterate, the follower of a religion without a Book (at the beginning, Mohammed's detractors refused to recognize his prophecy because he did not bring a sacred book). Finally, the word "*ummi*" can also designate a man from Mecca who was nicknamed "*Umm al-qurâ*" (this nickname appears in the Koran). So, you see, the vagueness surrounding Muhammad's illiteracy is the pure product of lexical polysemy!

AL: The "Rightly Guided Caliphs." This is the name reserved for the first successors of Mohammed, who are presented as models to be imitated even though they were particularly violent. Do you think you can convince your Muslim readers of the validity of the label "cursed Caliphs" that you attribute to them?

HO: I don't want to convince anyone. I make Montaigne's famous phrase my own: "I do not teach, I report." So, I report facts that are not at all of my own invention or even the fruit of my interpretation. Thus, the label "cursed caliphs" does not reflect a personal position on these historical figures. It emphasizes a very specific event (on which Sunnis and Shiites are curiously agreed): the first two caliphs were cursed by Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, because they disinherited her; abused her so much that she died of grief (or of something else less natural!) only a few weeks after her father. This is a fact reported in great detail in all the sources, and I defy anyone to contradict me on this point.

AL: Your [series](#) stops at Omar, the second Caliph (634-644). Will you continue your research on the following ones?

HO: That is planned, of course; but the next two (Uthman and Ali) will not be included in the cycle of the "Cursed Caliphs;" they will be the subject of separate monographs.

AL: Don't you fear being accused of disbelief or suspected of discrediting Islam as a religion at a time when it is presenting itself under worrying aspects from which Muslims also suffer?

HO: And you, when you get on the road, don't you fear to have an accident? I don't think about virtual threats because if I did, I wouldn't do anything. Besides, whoever accuses me of being a disbeliever and of undermining Islam is in fact only accusing the "venerable" authors of the Muslim tradition, because I am only reporting what they say.

AL: In recent years, a growing number of Muslim intellectuals have called for a reform of Islamic thought. Do some of them join you in your enterprise of historical deconstruction? In other words, can Islam reconcile itself with history without risking annihilation?

HO: I prefer to speak of "historical reconstruction" because the mythification and the ideological instrumentation of the past have literally annihilated the history of Islam and have made of this religion a mummy, a timeless and anachronistic object. I regard my work as a restoration-reconstruction. I want to give life to this fossilized memory, by giving back to the founding characters of Islam their human dimension which would show them closer to us. So, Islam, by reconciling itself with history, does not risk annihilation; on the contrary: it will revive.

AL: Many emphasize the need to put an end to the dogma of the "uncreated" Koran, which blocks the contextualization of the most inappropriate passages for today's world (the status of women, the legitimization of violence, etc.), while others stress the absence of a recognized authority that could assume such a responsibility. In what form do you see this resurrection?

HO: The resurrection will not take place at all on a dogmatic level, but by working on representations, such as, for example, humanizing the character of the Prophet and his Companions in films, serials, and documentaries that portray them so that they cease to be disembodied ghosts. And there, I think that the aesthetic appropriation of the history of Islam by artists, creators, playwrights, etc., could cause a lasting influence on the minds. The Renaissance in Europe was accompanied by atrocious religious conflicts. However, this period continues to shine on universal history, precisely because it was the

bearer of a decisive aesthetic project. Islam awaits the aesthetic revolution that will revive it from within.

Featured image: The Angel of Bounty and the Arrival at the Second Heaven by Muhammad. Timurid Herat, ca. 1465.

