01-11-2018

Between universalism and narrow culturalism: An interview with Tunisian historian Sophie Bessis

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Islamic feminism, Tunisian LGBT rights, African-Arab relations, and the troubled history of North African Jewry are just some of the ground covered in this interview with Tunisian-French historian and feminist author Sophie Bessis.

[Editor's note: This article is part of Al-Jumhuriya's new "Gender, Sexuality, and Power" series. It was originally published in Arabic on 8 November, 2018]

Sophie Bessis is a historian who also represents a current of universalist feminists, one which may be seen as antiquated next to a modern feminist wave that exalts and celebrates the culturalist. Have we asked enough questions about the position and effect of these two currents? We met Bessis in her Paris apartment in the winter of 2017 to speak to her about the various strains of Islamic feminism, and her stance on classical universalist feminism. The conversation led us to wider discussions of universalism and culturalism in politics and history, and of the state of the Islamic Arab world in general.

Al-Jumhuriya: The impetus behind this meeting was what you've mentioned on several occasions about the new directions in feminism and Islamic feminism, which tend toward the elimination of universalist feminism in the name of the cultural and the local. We wanted therefore to discuss this with you.

Sophie Bessis: As I see it, the universal is besieged between the hegemony of the commodity and that of the religious. Two faces of globalization that has nothing to do with the universal, that is anti-universal, which is a thesis I worked on in my book La Double Impasse, in which there are extensive sections on the culturalist and the essentialist.

Al-Jumhuriya: We'll come back to everything you mentioned, but first we'd like you to introduce yourself, for it seems to us that Arabic-speaking readers, at least those in the Levant, may not be sufficiently familiar with you.

Bessis: I don’t think they know me, as only one of my books has been translated into Arabic, which was al-Gharb wal-Akharun: Tarikh Tafawwuq (“The West and the Others: A History of Supremacy”), released in 2000 and translated acceptably by an Egyptian publisher, Dar al-Alam al-Thalith. How do I introduce myself? Every work, academic or research-based, rests one way or another on a personal makeup. If I wasn’t who I am, or I didn’t receive the makeup that I did, perhaps I wouldn’t have written what I wrote.

I was born in Tunisia. I’m a Tunisian from the Jewish minority, though I was raised and brought up in a very secular family environment, in the broad sense of secularism. In terms of my parents, I grew up in a communist milieu; my mother and father were communist activists. This part of my makeup and upbringing was very important, with regards to what I later became, because I believe that in Tunisia, and perhaps in all the Arab countries, the communist parties—for all their many mistakes and shortcomings—were the only place in which ethno-religious affiliations were overcome, which is an element that can’t be overlooked in my personal makeup. My childhood was not at all marked by that kind of segregation; on the one hand because of my secular and irreligious surroundings, and on the other because my house was a meeting place for people of all kinds. There was no difference between the Arabs and the French leftists and anyone else. This had a large impact on my personal life.

Then history went its course, and the lives and fates of individuals were tied to the collective history, as is always the case in our countries, and the Jewish minority left the country, for numerous reasons. Yet I left Tunisia without

truly leaving it. At the start of the 1960s, in 1962 specifically, my father faced several problems. At that time the Tunisian Republic was trying to get rid of its senior Jewish staff. We departed the country leaving a house behind us. I was not severed from Tunisia for one day; today when I go there, I go to my house. I never once abandoned my Tunisian nationality—I am to this day a dual French-Tunisian national. I only became French at the age of 30. I completed my classical studies in Paris, and obtained a degree with distinction in history in 1972.

When I finished studying, I wanted to return to Tunisia. This was something self-evident to me, but less so to Tunisia. I had no desire to stay in France; as far as I was concerned, France was a foreign country. Even today I feel French in language and culture, but not in terms of a link with the place. It's fortunate that my culture is broader than France, and so I decided to go to sub-Saharan Africa. When we left Tunisia in 1962, my father entered the international staff corps, and we lived in Cameroon and Ethiopia. For me, Africa was a kind of great revelation. I went to teach in Cameroon, where I stayed for several years, and began the first part of my professional life, by which I mean I left history for a few years and worked on the issue of development, and north-south relations from an economic perspective. I became an economist, in a sense, and also a journalist. I taught in Cameroon and then became a journalist at the Jeune Afrique magazine, staying for a number of years. We could call that period the African years. That continent taught me a lot. It's a continent the Arab world doesn't know, or doesn't want to know, for in the Arab world there is a constant fear of reviewing history. Like every other people, we have dark chapters and brighter ones in our history. The Arab world doesn't want to

know it, and this comes out clearly today, when we see what's happening in Libya, with the return to the slave trade. This is the dark part of Arab history. Africans know it and remember it perfectly well.

And so I worked a lot on Africa, and my first books were about it. I covered all of west Africa, and for twenty-five years I roamed all around sub-Saharan Africa, and all my books centered on the political economy of what was then called "the Third World," and north-south relations; the core focus of my writing was without doubt north-south relations.

Al-Jumhuriya: Did you ever work on, or write, anything in partnership with Samir Amin, who worked a lot on this question?

Bessis: Never. I know him, and I know his work, but we have a lot of points of disagreement. He was with Andre Gunder Frank, theorizing unequal exchanges between north and south, but for a long time in his work he disregarded unequal exchanges within the same societies, and the class differences inside the countries of the south. I think this is a big shortcoming in his work.

Moreover, Samir Amin had an antiquated Marxist side that I do not. And he neglected the question of the peasantry, which is one I worked on a lot. The Marxists focused a great deal on the working class, but neglected the peasantry.

I was telling you, then, I worked a lot on questions of north and south. My first book, which was called L'Arme alimentaire ("The Food Weapon"), addressed this subject, discussing food-related and agricultural current affairs in north-south relations. In parallel, during the course of this, and because I was constantly encountering women during

my work, I became interested in them. I was always a feminist, but not until then at the professional and research levels. Thus the second track of my work became women, in the Maghreb and in sub-Saharan Africa. I was a freelance researcher without any academic or university affiliation. Even though I taught in numerous circumstances and places, I wrote my books outside the university frameworks, and thus—as may happen to everyone who works outside of academia—I expanded my field of vision, and began to write more general books, though always about north-south relations. Earlier I told you about the book The West and the Others, which is a highly general extended essay about the foundations of Western hegemony and supremacy. Naturally, there's an economic aspect, but it's also a book of general history. I returned, one way or another, to history, because history is essential to understanding all phenomena, including those we live through in the present.

And I should add something important about this progression, which is that I kept up my work about Tunisia and with Tunisia. When I was a journalist with Jeune Afrique, I used to cover Tunisia too. Later on, I became an independent journalist, writing for several newspapers and periodicals, such as Le Monde diplomatique. My relationship with Tunisia remained strong; in practice I never left it in my work and my continuous visits to it. In my youth I was active within Tunisia's leftist movements, first in the communist party, and then I was close to some on the far left, and I had many friends in that milieu. In 1986, I and a Tunisian friend, Souhayr Belhassen, who also worked at Jeune Afrique, began working on writing a biography of Habib Bourguiba, and it met with much success. At that time, Bourguiba was still alive and in power. Ours was the only independent biography of him, and it was re-printed

quickly. I hope there will be other biographies written about Bourguiba, for his personality deserves it, but so far ours remains the only independent one.

And with Souhayr Belhassen I wrote another book, Femmes du Maghreb (“Women of the Maghreb”), in which we spoke about the return of the religious factor to the forefront. Later, just a few years ago, I left journalism and returned to my position as an academic and researcher, writing several books, including La Double Impasse, and a small one last year that took me a long time to write, called Les Valeureuses (“The Valorous”), which recounts the history of five Tunisian women who left a mark on Tunisian history.

Al-Jumhuriya: I want to return to a point you mentioned when speaking about your personal makeup, and particularly your relationship with the Tunisian communist party. You said that these political structures overcame ethno-religious affiliations. In our countries, in the Levant at least, a large proportion of the members of these parties were from minority backgrounds. Was 1962 not a disappointment for you in this sense? For you to be forced to leave Tunisia after all that struggle, your parents’ struggle, in those political movements.

Bessis: Of course. By the way, how I wish a history of the communist parties in the Arab world would see the light of day. There is research and work done on it here and there, but there’s no comprehensive work on the history of all the parties. It’s a work that deserves to be produced. I tend toward the explanation that the pillars of the communist parties in the Arab world rested on minorities in the following manner: when one belongs to a religious minority, such as the Jewish one, which has a complicated historical

relationship with the majority—of course, I'm against both the melancholic narrative about a relationship of terror and atrocities and the utopian one about constant love and tolerance and harmony; more important are the grey areas in the history. I was saying that, when a person is Jewish, from a persecuted minority, and here I speak at the collective level, rather than the personal, there are two solutions. We find them even in the history of European Jewry; in Central Europe, and Poland, and Russia, and all the countries where the Jewish presence was demographically significant before Hitler's extermination: either to withdraw into the group, or to become cosmopolitan. In the Arab world, it was hard for such a person to become a nationalist, for Arab nationalism continued to retain that Arab/Muslim sense, despite attempts to impose secularism. Thus, those minorities had no options except for the group, or non-nationalist cosmopolitanism. This is how I read the division amongst the Jewish peoples. On the one hand, the choice of the group, which led in a certain way to a form of Zionism, for Jewish groupism in the Arab world prepared the ground for a kind of Zionism, and this was the culture of particularity. On the other hand, a battle in which we all fight for universal liberation for the sake of universal values, which by its nature will be free of groupist isolationism. This, in my opinion, is what explains Jewish affiliation to communist parties throughout the world, and not just in the Arab world. And it's not surprising that far-right discourse has always held that communism is a Jewish invention, a Satanic one, not just the product of Bolsheviks but of Jewish Bolsheviks in particular.

In 1962, I was fifteen years old. I was an adolescent, and I gauged the gravity of what was happening when we

departed by the despair of my parents, before whom everything they believed in—that is, a diverse Tunisia in which all Tunisians were equal—fell apart. They had fought with their comrades for the sake of independence, and for that reason the great disappointment, the embodiment for me of the concept of injustice, lay in my parents and those close to them who were forced to leave one by one. The question I ask myself is, could it have been avoided? It's a question that deserves to be asked. Let's take the Maghreb, which is the area I know best in the Arab world; I've studied the other states, but I know them less intimately. Independence in the Maghreb led to a kind of ethno-religious cleansing. I weigh my words here because I know they're harsh. It took ten years after independence for these states to become almost mono-religious, which is something that had never happened before in all their history. Algeria is a special case in this context, for it was colonized, it was three départements (administrative territories) of France. Tunisia and Morocco were French protectorates, and so the judiciary and legal systems were entirely different. The latter two remained nation-states, ruled by the king in Morocco and the bey of the Husainid dynasty in Tunisia. Algeria was colonized by the most radical form of occupation. With the issuance of the Crémieux Decree in Algeria in 1870, Jews were naturalized as French citizens, with the exception of the Jews of the Sahara, though that's another story we won't get into now. When independence came, the Jews left with the French, since they were themselves French citizens. Of course, here we can pose another question: why was the Algerian situation not like that of South Africa? Apartheid was a horrendous form of occupation, but the whites stayed in South Africa afterwards. I don't claim to have answers to these questions, but we have to ask them. Was it the

religious factor that was missing in South Africa?

I return to Morocco and Tunisia, where the matter was different. The Jewish groups here took longer to depart, and they did so for other reasons, but in the end, at the end of history as they say, at the moment of independence the number of Jews in Morocco was 350,000. They were the most numerically significant Jewish community in the Arab world, and were historically a very old one. They were Berber tribes who converted to Judaism. Today their number is between 4,000 and 5,000. In Tunisia there were, at a minimum, 200,000 Jews at the time of independence, whereas today they number around 1,000. This is why I say it's a highly complex history, which has only been partially written. The pairing of nationalism with religion was terrifying. Nationalism differs from patriotism, which reminds me of a famous saying by Romain Gary that I like a lot: "Patriotism is the love of country, nationalism is the hatred of others." It may be reductive, but it contains some truth. Nationalists are exclusionary.

What can you do, if you're from one of the minorities in Tunisia, and the constitution of the country after independence in 1959 stipulates in its first Article that, "Tunisia is a free, independent, and sovereign state, with Islam as its religion, Arabic as its language, and the Republic as its governing system"? It may be that this Article was unavoidable, because the bulk of the people in Tunisia are Muslim, and Islam is deeply embedded in the consciousness. I don't know. But no non-Muslim individual—say a Buddhist—will feel themselves truly Tunisian with this form of constitution. At best, this Article will create second-class citizens. There is a predicament in this Islamic dimension of national affiliation. It doesn't seem

to me that the situation is the same in the Levant. The big difference between the Maghreb and the Levant is that the former was only partially Arabized, but it was fully Islamized (with the exceptions of the minorities who stayed until the 1970s), while the latter was fully Arabized but only partially Islamized. In Algeria, a quarter of the people speak Amazigh, and in Morocco as many as 70% do, so the governments were forced to recognize this language. They were forty years late, but they recognized it in the end. However, in the Maghreb, Islam is not questioned at all. Amazighs are deeply Muslim. If we take the tribes of Algeria as an example, their affiliation with Islam runs extremely deep. It's the affiliation with Arabism that's subject to discussion in the Maghreb.

Al-Jumhuriya: Returning to the subject of ethno-religious cleansing after independence, do you not think it is a human demarcation? In the sense that in every period in which a state or nation is founded, there occur forms of cleansing that can reach the point of massacres, as was the case with Turkey and the Armenians.

Bessis: This is an extremely important question. If we take the example of Turkey, empires have always been varied in their nationalities and states, and this was of course the case with the Ottoman Empire. This doesn't mean there weren't higher subjects and lower ones, but it's in the nature of empire to be heterogeneous, as was also the case with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It suffices that the emperor is obeyed for life to continue. Minorities are persecuted from time to time, and this is part of history. When problems emerge, we look for scapegoats, who may be Armenians, or the Druze in Lebanon, et cetera. The Armenian Genocide was the product of the Young Turks

who were preparing for Kemalism. Prior to that, Armenians were still persecuted, but it never reached the point of extermination until shortly before Kemalism. Later on, history preserved the positive aspects of Kemalism, in terms of modernization, secularism, and women's freedoms. But Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] conducted cleansing against the Greeks too. Asia Minor had been Greek for 3,000 years, but he expelled them from the region, and torched the diverse city of Smyrna/İzmir, and of course Turkey became a secular, Sunni Muslim republic.

Returning to your question about whether the departure of minorities is closely tied to the emergence of nation-states, it's truly a good question. I don't know just one answer to it. If we go back to the European nation-states, there are two ideological paradigms for their inception. If we look at the paradigm of the French Revolution, the French person is anyone who wishes to be French, and shares the same values as their fellow citizens. As for the German paradigm, per [Johann Gottlieb] Fichte, what produces the nation is language and culture, and everything related at the time to German Romanticism, and so on. These, therefore, are two opposing concepts of the nation; one in the political sense and the other in the organic one. The political, or British, nation was able to avoid the exclusion of minorities, and so if the nation is founded on political affiliation, it is able to avoid exclusion, but if it's built on an organic basis, such as shared language and culture, etc., then exclusion is inevitable.

And it seems that contemporary states were built on an organic foundation. Take Zionism: aside from some leftist margins at the start of the twentieth century, which quickly disappeared, it was built in an entirely and classically

organic fashion, in the nineteenth-century style. It is the nation for the Jewish people. At its core, Zionist nationalism resembles the Arab nationalisms, for each of them excludes "the Other." The founding of the state of Israel did not improve the situation of the Jewish minority in the Arab world in any case. Only relatively few Jews emigrated to Palestine following the Balfour Declaration; perhaps a few tens of thousands, I don't know the number precisely. Then came Hitler's genocide, which in my opinion was the principal factor in the establishment of Israel; more than the Balfour Declaration; for the sense of guilt among Europeans was immense, prompting them to permit such an establishment. Yet states are built at the hands of middle, working, and professional classes, which didn't number many among the newly-immigrated Jews, for most of them were killed in the Nazi concentration camps. Where might these classes of Jews be found? In the Arab world. Thus Zionism came to woo those Jews in our countries; it's always forgotten that the Zionist movement was very active among Arab Jews. This was the first emigration, in the early 1950s, which was not due to direct Jewish nationalism. Then the state of Israel established itself as a brutal colonizing state, with the outcomes known to us all. This, naturally, didn't help the rest of the Jews in the Arab world, and conflicts were created between the nationalist regimes and the Jewish minorities, and we know the rest. The Arabness of those Jews was denied in Israel. We mustn't forget that Zionism, this form of nationalism, emerged in Europe in the early nineteenth century, bearing the same European cultural matrix. Truly, history is a game of Lego; you can't study one part of it without the others. Zionism emerged within the context of imperial expansion, within a cultural "habitus" marked by total European supremacy and hegemony over the rest of the world. European Jews, then,

felt themselves Jewish, but also European above all else. Theodor Herzl was, at the end of the day, a Viennese intellectual. As far as they were concerned, Arab Jews and Arabs in general were in the same category of primitiveness. They were people to be civilized, since Europeans alone had civilization. Thus there was discrimination between European Jews and Arab Jewish workers, as is currently the case with the Falash Mura. Therefore, I believe that one of the most important cornerstones in Israel today is the state of war and perpetual conflict. It's the rock that brings the nation together within this ideology, for the recurring discourse within successive governments and authorities in Israel is the following, and nothing else: "We are in danger." When we closely examine Israeli discourse, we find it's one aimed at eliminating the cultural differences between what I call the Jewish worlds. Can a Jewish woman such as myself feel closer to a Polish Jewish woman than to a Tunisian Muslim woman? Culturally, I'm certainly closer to the Maghrebi than the Russian or Polish, etc. Israel tried to create a nationalist Jewish identity that has never existed before. Within this project, perpetual war is the magic means of creating this identity. Zionism is further evidence of the extremely negative aspect of nationalist thought. Therefore I have always been at odds with nationalisms, cosmopolitan or universal.

Al-Jumhuriya: The starting point of our conversation was feminism; feminism between culturalism and universalism. I'd like to return to this point. You've mentioned on several occasions how universalist feminism is being combated in the name of more local culturalist feminism. How entire semesters in Western universities are devoted to discussion of the hijab, how the lecture halls and podiums fill up for

this kind of feminism, while the audience for universalist feminism is almost non-existent.

Bessis: It’s complicated. But I’ll try to summarize it. I will try not to speak in generalizations about culturalism and to answer the question. What is the universal? It is principles shared by humankind, pertaining to humanity as a whole. It happened, for historical reasons we can’t get into here, that the modern political formation of these principles occurred in Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. They are principles that say the human being is free, and that his or her freedom cannot be separated from their humanity.

At the same time that the universal was formed, a portion of humans were excluded from it, namely slaves, women, and colonized peoples. And here was the paradox. There is a feminism that says the universal became the monopoly of the white man. White males alone are universalist entities. This right doesn’t extend to women, slaves, and the colonized. The American Declaration of Independence is a wonderful text, but George Washington himself was a major slave-owner. This was how the West proceeded: we form the universal, and then we close it off. Bit by bit, individuals, and intellectuals, and the entire world came to possess this universalism. And, by the way, a portion of the anti-colonial struggles were conducted in the name of universalism, per the simple logic: if universalism exists, then we have the right to it, and the right to not be colonized. Then came the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and so on.

Thus Westerners found themselves stripped of their monopoly on universalism, which some Indian historians

call the “de-Westernization of universalism.” Here is the whole paradox, for all the discourse that shaped the history of Westerners vis-à-vis non-Western Others rested on two contradictory pillars: advocating identification and imitation (“if you want to be universalist and human, you have to be like me”) while at the same time establishing identitarianism (“whatever you do, you’ll remain Other; obscure, inferior, reduced to Otherness”). Westerners, irrespective of Islam and Muslims, need to remain the only producers of truth. The fluctuation between the two positions, and their loss of the monopoly on universalism, while they’re also in the process of losing their central position globally, makes veiled women a treasure for them. Women who remove their hijab resemble them too much, are not authentically “Other” enough. I speak about this in my book La Double Impasse. For about the last twenty-five years, with the emergence of essentialism, an important part of the Western left has defended political Islam, and criticized, with unprecedented ferocity and belligerence, secularists and laics in the Muslim world. They don’t want to deal with people who resemble them too much. People, that is, who oppose their monopoly on universalism and universalist values. All of my debates with the Western left in recent years have revolved around the fact they still confine the people of the south within identitarian denotations, which I can summarize as follows with regards to Muslims: you are Muslims, so political Islam is self-evidently your natural fate, why do you oppose it? This is a part of your culture. For this reason I believe that universalist secular intellectuals in the Islamic Arab world are hugely isolated, for they are a minority in their societies, and their allies are few at the international level. This manifested itself in the Syrian catastrophe, for the dictator naturally had his allies, and the Islamists had

theirs. The ones who were on their own were the democratic, universalist, and non-Islamist segment of the opposition. Thus is the culturalism of large parts of the Western intelligentsia a means of upholding the monopoly on universalist values and returning the Others to their presumed affiliations.

Another factor comes overlapping with all of that, which is that for about thirty years we've witnessed the reduction of culture to religion. When we say culture, it means religion. This is a surprising inversion of the order we learned in universities previously, which was that culture produces religions. Now we hold that it's religions that produce cultures. With this, the culture of a country or region is totally denied its diversity and complexity, and it gets reduced not only to the predominant religion but the most conservative form of this religion to boot; the form that is the one furthest from universalism.

Al-Jumhuriya: Is it not possible that behind the stance of these Western intellectuals is something that goes beyond the desire to monopolize the universal; is it not possible that there's a certain latent consciousness that one must start from the culture of the masses in order to build new universalist values? You know, and have written about this in your work on Tunisian history, that there is a huge gap between the culture of the general population and that of the elites.

Bessis: True. This is an element I hadn't taken into account in my previous response. Currently I'm working on a history of Tunisia, and this gap exists. When we take the history of the renaissance and reformation in the Arab world, in Tunisia and Egypt since 1830, this movement didn't touch

anyone besides the elite. In fact, the general population revolted at times against the ideas of the renaissance. And the whole issue today is how can a new universalist movement emerge without being prisoner to the principle of imitation and identification with the European universalist movement.

But there's a part of our contemporary history that doesn't support this argument that the masses are not accepting of openness to modernity and universalism. In Tunisia's contemporary history, a period occurred after independence, which I won't say was laïque, for post-independence Tunisia was never fully laïque, but it was truly a phase of secularization. I was a child, but I can remember perfectly how women began taking off their head covers, and did so with joy. I'm trying now to understand why. They were taking off the safsari, which is the traditional white head cover in Tunisia. Why? Because the hijab was not truly a religious obligation; it was a tradition, and when women wanted to become contemporary, they would take it off.

The Islamists' most powerful skill, in my opinion, was transferring the head cover from the domain of tradition to that of religious obligation; in other words, inventing a modern head cover, which is the hijab that we know today. This hijab is not the traditional head cover familiar to us. I've interviewed many young hijab-wearing Tunisian women, and there's no way they would accept to wear the safsari as their grandmothers did. That, to them, is something antiquated. This is a victory for the Islamists. The head cover was a tradition, then it became a religious duty.

Going back to this short period after independence, I remember Tunis University well in the 1960s. I completed my studies in Paris, but I had a lot of friends at Tunis University. The university cafeteria would be open during the month of Ramadan and serve beer; it never occurred to anyone to close the cafeteria. At that time the Tunisians in the university were from all parts of the country, it wasn't confined to the elites. And all the students would frequent those cafes, not just the elites. This period of secularization wasn't limited to the elites, and this will always be a puzzle to me. My mother used to teach at the Sadiki College in Tunis; a large and important high school in the capital. She was a teacher in the annex of the school devoted to males coming from other governorates far from the capital. These schoolchildren weren't the Tunis bourgeoisie. In Ramadan, there would be no more than three people fasting, and my mother would defend them against persecution by the non-fasting ones. Today, it's the opposite. What happened, exactly? We know that the general populace is deeply Muslim, and we know there is a historical gap between the elites and the masses, but this period I'm talking about touched everyone; everyone was turning towards modernity. Of course, there are many explanatory factors; geostrategic factors; the rise of political Islam; the power of money; and the end of the great secular ideologies, which were replaced by religious ideologies. But these do not suffice to explain it fully.

Now, is it imperative to build universal values drawing from the internal local references of our peoples? I think it's necessary to appropriate the global inheritance as a whole, taking something from all references, to build new values.

Al-Jumhuriya: I'd like to know more about your opinion of

the Islamic feminist movements, and of the women working in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), exegesis (tafseer), and theological reasoning (ijtihad).

Bessis: It’s complicated. There are two types of intellectuals. The first, in which feminists are also represented, say that religion and its affairs must be overcome; that we must think outside the boundaries of religion, because in all cases it leads us to dead-ends. The second says the only solution for deliverance is re-reading the religious texts and corpuses, and working on theological reasoning (ijtihad). And there is a current of ijtihad-advocates who do excellent work, by the way. Let us take Tunisia today, where the most important works of ijtihad are done, undertaken by women such as Neila Sellini and Amal Karami and many others, who question the patriarchal and misogynistic readings of the Qur’an, and carry out feminist, gender-neutral readings of the Qur’an. Among them I know many who realize that with any monotheistic religion, we’ll never reach absolute equality within the religious text, but we’ll make progress on some fronts nonetheless. There may be much common ground between these ijtihad feminists and secularists, where they are able to work together, but at the end of the day there comes an impasse: religions are not for gender equality. I recently spoke at length with the Islamic scholar Youssef Seddik about the famous Qur’an verse 4:34 (often known as the nushooz, or marital “recalcitrance,” verse). We can place things in their context, and we can do ijtihad, and find gentler readings, but at the end of the day the verse says “beat [your wives],” and, more importantly, it is addressed to men. Let’s suppose there were a verse saying “respect [your wives];” it would still be addressed to men. The text is not addressed to humankind in general, to both genders

equally, except in the part that is purely religious, in the spiritual sense. In the Torah, and the Gospels, we find the same inequality. This inequality is foundational to monotheistic religions, because they are based on legitimizing a system; a patriarchal system, to be specific. Even if we depart from the monotheisms, religions in general legitimize a patriarchal system. Of course, some religions do this more than others. If we get into a straight comparison between the texts, we find that the Gospels—apart from Paul's anti-women letters—are the least misogynistic texts. Naturally, later there came the theoreticians, and the clergy, and the ecclesiastical laws, all of which strengthened the patriarchal system. But the text per se is less misogynistic than the others. Moreover, the personality of the Magdalene is interesting within this biblical text. But in the end the prevailing image of the woman is that of the mother.

Al-Jumhuriya: Yet the act, in itself, of interpretation and exegesis and itjihad, is an important social performative act; it goes beyond the male-dominant role in ijtihad.

Bessis: Without any doubt. That it's women doing it is an element of utmost importance, which is what I said previously; re-opening the door of ijtihad is very important, and for women to be the ones taking the initiative is very important.

But I want to bring back what we discussed about the elite and the masses, to link it to the issue of ijtihad and the interpretation of scripture. If we address the European history of the Catholic Church—never mind Protestantism—reform was tied to the development of societies, in the sense that it was European society that

pushed the Church to evolve, and compelled it to accept things and make concessions, because the Church understood that it could either yield, or watch its churches empty of their flocks, who were moving away from them as many tenets and teachings were no longer in keeping with their lifestyles and thoughts. This is why the Church abandoned the issue of contraception, and discusses homosexuality, despite the great difficulties. In Arab Muslim society, this project of ijtihad and interpretation does not coincide with a social demand, and this is a big difference. What will be the effect of this itjihad if it doesn't arise based on a social demand? This is an important question, and this means that we're always within an elite scope of work; the bulk of society doesn't push for or demand ijtihadi readings. Instead, there are still those who listen to the most surreal and reactionary preachers, and that is when it's incumbent on the youth to find spaces to escape from the severity. Religion has lost its spiritual dimension, and Islam has been reduced to "one may" and "one may not." This closure within the textualist and literalist, for more than thirty years now, has stripped Islam of its spiritual dimension, which is an essential dimension in every religion.

Al-Jumhuriya: Do you think the clinging to Islam is also a response to a kind of "narcissistic injury"?

Bessis: There's certainly something of that. Perhaps one must go back to [Maxime] Rodinson in this context, and his book, Marxism and the Muslim World. Until the twelfth century, the Arabs were, according to Rodinson, a great force in the Mediterranean Basin, and the tragedy of the Arabs is this unfulfilled desire to regain that force; this longing for control and power. And if we read this at the political level, we find surreal results, such as when

[Osama] Bin Laden once said that “one of our priorities is the re-conquest of Andalusia.” This is a denial of history. There’s a Tunisian researcher, Ali Mezghani, who says that Arab Muslims live in the past, but not in history. This is true.

Al-Jumhuriya: Why? What is particular about the Arabs? Is it the past greatness in and of itself that causes this denial of history? Or religion?

Bessis: I don’t know, but Africans, for example, sub-Saharan Africans, were never a great global force outside their continent. They never once played a role at the geostrategic level. It may be this that explains their lack of nostalgia for a lost glory. Their approach to and understanding of the world is free from this imperial past. If we look at African theoretical currents—the “Negritude” theories of [Léopold Sédar] Senghor and their counterparts in the Antilles Islands, i.e. [Aimé] Césaire’s theory about Negritude—these are universalist currents. What’s the core of the discourse of these Negritude currents? It’s the following: “We’ve been excluded from the universal, we’ve been considered inferior creatures, the White Man was in dialogue with himself the whole time. So be it. Let’s accept ourselves as we are. As Negros.” They were not afraid to say they were Negros. To reclaim the shame and turn it into a source of pride is to return to the universal once again. The ideological trajectories taken in the Arab and sub-Saharan African worlds are very different, and I think the issue of longing for a glorious past is a central one in the history of the Arab world and in the Arabs’ cultural habitus.

And the big question of why the Arabs declined is one nobody’s able to answer in full. [Fernand] Braudel, in one of his works, says that this is one of the conundrums of

history. When the Arabs left Andalusia, at the end of the fifteenth century, they and the Christian world were on the same technical and cultural level. Three hundred years later, there was a centuries-wide gap between them. How did this happen? The question is complicated, and there are many conflicting explanations, including the one that says the move away from the essence of Islam made the Arab world incapable of letting in other foundations, and then modernity. Is it possible for us to leave this question aside and turn to something else free of longing?

Al-Jumhuriya: And yet, is it not a paradox that the new forms of Islam reflect a desire for a certain universalism? Is this not what's reflected in the term ummah [worldwide community of Muslims] used by the Islamists? This is not localism, but rather a desire for something covering the entire planet, as though in a kind of universalism?

Bessis: In the monotheistic religions, we have two with universalist aspirations and pretensions. Judaism laid some of the foundations of universalist principles in terms of the ethical and religious code; the Ten Commandments and so on. But it remains a local religion to some extent. Christianity and Islam had universalist aspirations, which is why they're in constant competition throughout history.

This wasn't the case with other, non-monotheistic religions. Let's take Hinduism, which is a large faith, with [over one billion] adherents, yet it doesn't have such aspirations, despite the fact it could have. Contrary to Christianity and Islam, which have been in mutual conflict and competition throughout history. Today, we find anew the manifestation of this ambition in political Islam, but through what? Through dusting off the "Domain of War" (Dar al-Harb) and

jihad. When I talk to young people from the Maghreb, I'm astonished by their unshakeable conviction that the whole world will become Muslim one day. I'll tell you about an extraordinary incident that happened three or four years ago. There was a Tunisian school twinned with a French school, and part of the twinning program involved trips to the two countries; the Tunisian children would go to France, and vice versa. After the end of the program, on the form for evaluating the experience, the children were very happy with the experience, except that the French children all mentioned their surprise at the persistence with which the Tunisians tried to steer them towards Islam. Christianity's familiar with these mechanisms, but Christianity has been globalized throughout history. It's still present among Evangelicals, but Christianity in general has been sufficiently globalized. Of course, dictatorial regimes have a big role in leaving space for Islamists, on condition that the latter leave them to rule. And the great Western powers left those dictatorial regimes alone, repeating the line that "they're not democratic regimes, but they're secular." The deceitful dictators used the forces of political Islam for their interests and in their own way, and the current generations are now living with the result.

Despite that, I still hold on to optimism of the will. If we take the moment of the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution, which was a moment of great elation and enthusiasm, this moment wasn't religious in nature. Religion wasn't present, nor was there anything against religion. It was truly non-religious. Young people chanting "Freedom, justice, national dignity;" what's religious about that? The underlying aspiration was not a religious one. Later on, religion came in through the window as a result of the forces that we all know. The space in those first moments was a universalist

space.

I still remember February 2011, one month after the outbreak of the revolution, there was a movement called “Kasbah 1” in Tunis, referring to the gathering and demonstration in Kasbah Square, where all the governmental symbols are. It was to call for the departure of the government that had been formed after the revolution. Demonstrators came from all over the country and occupied the square for over two weeks, and everyone was bringing food and covers for the young demonstrators, and the square was filled with graffiti in all languages and with slogans from all the world’s revolutionary references, from the 1968 revolution, from everything that touched their revolutionary sensibility at that moment. It was wonderful. And when they were dispersed, they cleaned the square. These civil gestures no longer exist in Tunis today. But this is why I say to myself that the seed is there, it just needs the right circumstance to come out. Perhaps by way of some achievement or attainment that sweeps away the successive frustrations and built-up anger. These dictatorships supported by the West, supported because they wouldn’t survive if they weren’t, and the Israeli question, which was a source of great frustration and anger, piled on top of other historical disappointments; all these factors laid the foundations of despair. It’s saddening that we see that two-thirds of the youth in the Arab Maghreb want to leave their countries. This is the frustration and failure after independence, which didn’t fulfill its promise.

In the time of Bourguiba—who was a dictator; today there is a kind of canonization of him, because after him we witnessed a vulgar police dictatorship—in Bourguiba’s time, there was a form of social advance, and of true republic

meritocracy. There were schools spread all over the Tunisian countryside to educate girls and boys. However, at the start of the 1980s, the economic situation began to decline severely. The linking of local history with global history, this globalization established inequality at the international level, in a manner reminiscent of the nineteenth century, at the time of Dickens and Zola. We started hearing of enormous wealth in extremely poor countries. It's not enough, then, for us to speak about gaps between the elites and the masses; we also have to talk about class differences. How can a sixteen-year-old boy see a rich neighborhood in his city and not want to break everything? When he's unable to break everything, he goes on jihad. Jihad, and Salafist-jihadist propaganda, provide an ideology to meet a demand; we can explain it using the vocabulary of the market. And there is, naturally, a supply of a particular utopianism at times. It's a supply to meet the demand from the youth to whom we haven't provided any suitable reading of the world, a supply offering them a reading in a language they know, which is the language of religion.

Al-Jumhuriya: Now a question related to the priority of the struggles in our countries, to the linking of queer and gender struggles with other political and social ones. Do you believe there are priorities, or should we, on the contrary, open up all the files at once?

Bessis: I'll give you a real-life example from Tunisia. Tunisia, after the revolution, is still in danger, in my opinion, but we won an important cause in this revolution, which is freedom of expression. In the gender and queer domains, homosexuality in Tunisia is punishable by one to three years in jail, but today we are in the process of discussing a

law to decriminalize it. The LGBTQ community is oppressed in Tunisia, just like ethnic and religious minorities, except that an “opening/outing” occurred, which is something very necessary to study. Before, minorities were not seen in the public realm, whereas today we have two Amazigh associations. There are human rights organizations that object every time a right is violated or an anti-Semitic act is perpetrated. There are LGBT associations, such as Shams [“Sun”] and Shouf [“Look”]. The question of gender minorities has entered the public debate. Of course, they’re still persecuted, not only by the state but by society, yet there has been noticeable progress. Recently, Tunisia was criticized by the UN Human Rights Council over the use of anal examinations on gay men, given that such examinations are considered a form of torture. After that, the Tunisian government issued a decision forbidding the examinations from being carried out.

Today, there is movement on human rights with regard to gender minorities which is very important in my opinion, which is why the “now or later?” question must not be posed. This is what was said to women every time: after the revolution, after independence, after socialism. The right moment will never arrive. The time is always right to talk about discrimination and persecution. Of course it will shock the people; you’re defending gay people at this point in time? Today all the human rights associations in Tunisia have put the LGBT question on their agendas: the Human Rights League and the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women. And on the annual day for opposing violence against sexual minorities, there are programs and lectures and so on. The important thing is we’ve started speaking about all of that. In this context, it’s important to chronicle the history of homosexuality in the Arab world; no one can

say it’s something that doesn’t exist in our societies. In the two Ottoman dynasties, the Muradid and the Husainid, all the beys had their catamites. They had their harems and women, but also their catamites, for whom they would declare their love openly. And of course there is the practice of compensatory homosexuality in the absence of women.

Al-Jumhuriya: What do you think of the view that says, I believe [Pierre] Bourdieu said this once, that homosexuality may lessen male chauvinism and the severity of patriarchy; that the appearance of homosexuality in the public sphere might lighten the burden of misogyny for women?

Bessis: Perhaps. I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it. Could the effacement of sexual boundaries lighten the burden of patriarchy? I don’t want to answer without thinking about it, but we shouldn’t forget that traditional male homosexuality of the Ancient Greek kind used to affirm male supremacy. Women were for the continuation of the species; true love was given only to men, to a peer, and this homosexual love was of a higher rank than ordinary straight love.

But what’s interesting in all of this is lesbianism, which is not taken seriously as a form of sexuality in our societies. It’s a kind of emotional game. Were lesbianism to be recognized, would it change anything? I don’t know.