

**Seyran Ateş: *Selam, Frau Imamin. Wie ich in Berlin eine liberale
Moschee gründete*, Ullstein 2017.**

By Anja Wieden, Oakland University, USA

“Wo sind die Feministinnen? Warum gehen sie nicht auf die Straße?” (“Where are the feminists? Why don’t they take to the streets?”, my translation)

1 By asking these questions, Seyran Ateş publicly expressed her disappointment with the German Left in the popular Austrian political TV talk-show *Talk im Hangar 7*, titled *Ist der Islam noch zu retten?* (*Is it possible to save Islam?*, my translation) that aired in 2017. Ateş, a well-known human rights lawyer and female Imam, had recently founded the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque in Berlin, which is the only self-described ‘liberal’ mosque in Germany. It is important to add here that the adjective ‘liberal’ in reference to Islamic places of worship or Islamic movements is a rather vague description, given the fact that many Muslims claim this attribute for their specific religious orientation. Ateş’s definition of ‘liberal’ implies – based on her claims made in *Selam, Frau Imamin. Wie ich in Berlin eine liberale Moschee gründete* (2017) (*Selam, Mrs. Imam. How I Founded a Liberal Mosque in Berlin*, my translation) – that the Ibn-Rushd-Goethe mosque serves as a counter-model to a place of worship where women and man are strictly separated. Moreover, women are encouraged to lead prayers and head coverings are not mandatory. In the spirit of building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures, Ateş explains that the mosque is purposely named after medieval Andalusian-Arabic polymath Ibn Rushd and German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Both are representatives of, in many ways, avant-garde thinking in different times and cultures. People of all genders, sexual orientations and religious denominations are welcome to visit the mosque and partake in the ceremonies.

2 According to the *Spiegel*, immediately after its opening, various Muslim voices in opposition to the project ridiculed and even boycotted the place of worship due to the fact that women pray alongside of men (“Türkische Medien hetzen,” Popp and Reimann) (“Turkish media outlets stir up hate”, my translation). On account of Ateş’ promotion of an inclusive Islam, *Zeit Online* reported that she received bomb and death threats, leading

to permanent police protection of her person (“Polizeischutz für Gründerin der liberalen Moschee verstärkt”) (“Police Protection for the Founder of Liberal Mosque”).

Surprisingly, feminists did not – and still do not – stand up for Ateş in defense of her liberal project. Why this hesitation? Is Ateş’s enterprise to reform Islam too touchy of a subject, even for Leftist voices? While Ateş does not directly answer this question in her work, she gives enough food for thought as to why her reformist enterprise might rub many people the wrong way. As she explains in the opening chapters, the mosque is specifically committed to promote the message of Islam as an inherently peaceful religion while openly addressing uncomfortable and critical topics, such as Islamist terror groups who abuse Islam to further their thirst for political and social power. According to Ateş, the silent majority of Muslims do not identify with these powerful and politically active groups, who claim to speak for the entire Islamic community. It is her goal to mobilize Muslims to publicly distance themselves from political Islamic opportunists, whose violent actions have strategically spurred prejudices and Islamophobic sentiments against Muslims worldwide. This might be the reason why her seven-chapter book reads more like a call to political action than a mere description of her project. Although Ateş does not claim in her work that her ‘liberal’ understanding of Islam should be the status quo for modern-day Muslims, her positions on the necessity of re-interpreting Quranic passages through a contemporary/Western lens dominate the narrative. Hence, her work falls into a line of criticism like for instance Bassam Tibi’s vision of a Euro-Islam that favors a Kantian engagement with the religion.

3 While the book begins with the founding history of the mosque and ends with its opening, her overall work is interspersed with personal anecdotes, chapters on her religious beliefs, her assessment of Turkey’s authoritarian regime, and the author’s general views on rightwing and leftwing politics. This narrative style prominently features in chapter three, “One God,” for instance. Here, she gives the reader insight into her childhood and early adulthood. She states that her Muslim upbringing has never stood in opposition to the Christian religion Ateş experienced around her as a young girl. Ateş carefully carves out the divisive as well as unifying factors in both religions. Similarly to her previously published works, like *The Multicultural Mistake* (2007) and *Islam is in Need of a Sexual Revolution* (2009), Ateş personable narrative style enables the reader to identify her

weaknesses and strengths in analyzing political, historical and religious statements, which diversifies her overall account. She openly tells the reader who she is: a feminist, a former squatter, a leftist, and a critic of radicalised Islam. One of the most spiritual passages in the text is the description of her near-death experience. In 1984, the female Imam was shot by a Turkish radical in a counseling center for Muslim women. Surviving this attack not only bolstered the author in her faith, but also made her aware of the destructive forces that result from radicalism and that it was high time to shun, expose and bring these violent – and therefore un-Islamic – individuals to justice. In that sense, her mosque serves the purpose to educate both non-Muslims and Muslims on the rich history of an enlightened Islam; a vista of or on Islam that has been largely silenced in Western mainstream media in the twenty-first century.

5 In order to demonstrate how difficult her position is as an advocate of a ‘liberal’ Islam, Ateş also compellingly details her assessment of the yearly Islam Conference, first initiated by Germany’s Federal Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, in 2006. As an outspoken critic of mosque associations who enforce the headscarf for girls and promote gender apartheid, Ateş was a thorn in the eye for many Muslim representatives. Already in 2007, representatives like herself and Necla Kelec were excluded from the conference. The author calls this move to oust liberal Muslim voices – with the blessing of German politicians – a “death sentence” (48) for the Islam Conference¹, as any actions taken or proclamations issued therein would exclude a large portion of valid albeit alternative voices. Her standpoints are reflected in contemporary political discourses. Both the author Güner Balci and the journalist Samuel Schirmbeck, for instance, see potential dangers in liberals’ misguided tolerance towards unconstitutional behavior of religious minorities within German borders.

6 Following the stream of liberal Quranic teachings and interpretations that Ateş favors in her work, in chapter 4, “Turkey and Germany – my two homelands”, she outlines the special role of Turkey with its omnipresent traces of state-enforced secularism and its recent transition to a form of government which re-introduces its version of Islamic values

¹ In 2018, Ateş was invited again. It was the most heated Islam Conference to date, as conservative and liberal Muslims engaged in fierce altercations. See *Zeit Online*, Nov 29, 2018 <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2018-11/deutsche-islam-konferenz-islamverbaende-dtip-zentralrat-muslime>.

against the grain of long years of republican secularism. Ateş highlights how Erdoğan in his popular rhetoric against assimilation² discourages Turkish-Germans from assimilating into German society based upon their supposed religious superiority. When the Turkish government caught wind of Ateş's project to open a liberal mosque in Berlin, they targeted her with a well-planned smear campaign. Rumors were spread that the Ibn-Rushd-Goethe mosque was funded by the Gülen-movement. Ever since the summer of 2016, when Erdoğan's former ally, Fethullah Gülen, supposedly planned a coup against the leading government, any association with Gülen poses an immediate threat to an individual. Ateş distances herself from these unwarranted accusations that have put an end to her frequent travels to Turkey for the time being. Despite her critique of both Erdoğan and Gülen, who succeeded in destroying the secular Turkey that Ateş remembers, she acknowledges the dangers of laicism being enforced overnight. It should be added here that the author, a self-identifying devout Muslim, favors a secular government since it guarantees the religious freedom of everyone, including apostates and atheists.

7 Ateş's prose is straight-forward and therefore recommendable to a wide and diverse audience. For readers who are not familiar with the works of liberal Muslim advocates in Germany, I would suggest consulting the works, amongst others, of Mouhanad Khorchide and Bassam Tibi. Since *Selam, Mrs. Imam* particularly criticizes and distances itself from conservative mosque associations sponsored by DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) in Germany and Austria, it would be helpful to learn about their roles and founding history in Europe. Readers should always keep in mind that Ateş engages with Islam from a strictly feminist perspective. Her interpretations of Surahs are developed through a gendered lens with which other Islamic scholars might not agree, as the foregrounding of female figures might question cultural (not necessarily Islamic religious) traditions. For academic engagements with the text, it would be a revealing enterprise to consult the works of the anthropologist Esra Özyürek who is quite critical of the establishment of an enlightened Islam. In her 2015 work *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, she analyzes reformist voices that come out of the European/Kantian tradition as exclusive

² See Erdoğan's multiple state visits to Germany, in which he demanded from Turkish migrants to not assimilate into German culture, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/erdogan-urges-turks-not-to-assimilate-you-are-part-of-germany-but-also-part-of-our-great-turkey-a-748070.html>.

forces that promote prejudices against cultural and immigrant Muslims. By comparing these opposite viewpoints, scholars of Islam will be able to experience a more diversified picture of the plurality of the Islamic religion that is practiced in Germany, and how Berlin's liberal mosque might be able to advance or inflame religious discourses.