



## Press release

Paris, Wednesday, 27 February 2019

### Paris conference 2019 Islam in the 21st Century

Following the conference, **Islam in the 21st Century**, held in UNESCO's grand auditorium on 26 and 27 February 2019, the association '**Islam in the 21st Century**' issued the following statement:

Islam is still facing the challenge of reform. After the discovery of modernity and the Age of Enlightenment, in the nineteenth century, Muslim voices were raised to call for openness and change. Reformists from religious institutions rebelled against those institutions to defend new theses and ideas. People will remember Tahtaoui translating the French Constitution into Arabic, Ali Abderazik upholding the principle of separation between the State and religion, Qâsim Amîn and Tahar Haddad denouncing the status of women under Islam, among many others. Discussions opened in some areas of the Muslim world and hot topics were raised without taboos, leading to a dynamic that could have gone far towards renewal.

This reformist momentum was hampered by a long list of successive impeding factors, including social and cultural conservatism, the colonial shock, mobilization of religion in the national liberation movements, the ideology of progress, national disenchantment, the cold war, the consequences of the oil boom, authoritarian governance, mass migration and failed integration policies, among others. Eluding this complex socio-historical context and reducing Muslim problems to a purely religious dimension distorts the debate and paralyzes efforts to change.

In addition to these factors, the emergence of radical, militant and violent Islam has made reform and modernization projects even more difficult.

Yet, the historicity of Islam could have led to other alternatives.





## L'Islam au XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle ❁ الإسلام في القرن 21 ❁ Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The battle is not lost, however, quite the contrary. It is still possible for Islam to adapt to new realities and historical changes. Thus, there is no reason to resign oneself to theses describing Islam as inherently “unreformable”.

Nevertheless, the refusal to stop Islam from changing should not lead to a denial of reality. Islam poses a problem, both in societies with a Muslim majority and in those with a Muslim minority. Without complacency, we must dare to point out the difficulties and denounce the obstructions.

**Regarding freedom of conscience**, Muslims are called upon to openly accept religious diversity and religious freedom, including in predominantly Muslim societies. They are also called upon to accept the fact that belonging or not belonging to a religion is an individual and free choice. Adopting, leaving or changing religion, or living without religion, is an inalienable right.

**Regarding violence**, Muslims are called upon to make clear and forthright their refusal to give religious legitimacy to any form of attack on the life, integrity, dignity and property of others. This concerns terrorist violence and the application of outdated punishments that are contrary to the principles of human rights and freedoms, such as the penalty for apostasy and punishments that cause physical harm.

**Regarding gender equality**, Muslims are called upon to go all the way to the imperative of secularization by accepting equality among all citizens, men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims.

**Regarding communication**, journalists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, are called upon to avoid the denial of realities; to avoid stereotyping, Manicheism and misrepresentation; to give a voice to modernist Muslims; to foster dialogue with those who are ready to create the conditions for a constructive debate.





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Re-spiritualize Islam? Deconstruct the fantasized history of Islam? This hope must not be borne solely by those of Muslim faith, but also those of Muslim culture and all humanists.

It is in the public interest that the fixation on Islam and suspicion towards more than one and a half billion Muslims should cease. Islam is a universal heritage that cannot be abandoned to radicals. The reform of Islam, currently led by an increasing number of enlightened women and men, is irreversible.

## Islam in the 21st Century

During these two days of discussions, attended by more than 500 people, thirty or so speakers endeavored to meet the Association's two objectives:

- ❁ To contribute towards a better appreciation and understanding of Islam.
- ❁ To provide a forum for modern Islam.

Now that these first steps have been taken, a second edition of this series of conferences on **Islam in the 21st Century** will be organized in a country that has yet to be chosen.

In the meantime, and in order to give greater reach to the association's work, producer Yamina Benguigui will publish a DVD containing about 60 minutes of highlights of this conference and interviews with the speakers.

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