RECLAIMING, NARRATING, AND REINTERPRETING ASPECTS OF RELIGION IN TAOS AMROUCHE, HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, AND ASSIA DJEBAR

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the ways in which three francophone Algerian women authors, Taos Amrouche, Hélène Cixous, and Assia Djebar, approach their respective religions and portray them in their works. Through textual evidence from their fictional works, I show how the problematic of religion in Algeria – where the three Abrahamic religions have been in tension at different times in recent history – has underpinned these authors’ sense of self and being in the world. I examine how they all redefine religion out of a feeling of exclusion and traumatization and add female and woman-centered voices to a larger conversation on the nature of religiosity.

All three of these authors are feminists, yet they embrace religion, all the while defining their own understanding of it. In order to do this, they reread the original texts of their religions, as well as the cultural texts surrounding them. Taos Amrouche, caught between the European culture to which she is drawn because of her family’s Catholicism, and the Muslim-Berber culture of her ancestors, expresses a constant feeling of alienation, and portrays a trauma that she attempts to heal through the use of autobiographical writing. Competing cultural influences and hurtful encounters with a racist French Catholicism lead her to elaborate an alternate concept of Christianity. She recreates herself as the alternative messianic figure of a mystical, sensual, and inclusive religion. Hélène Cixous suffers from a similar situation of exclusion, although she is a member of a religious group that situates her in the colonial crossfire, between Muslims and Europeans. She engages in a process of dismantling and reconstructing religion in a style that is characteristically subversive and highly challenging. With the aid of a language that, according to her, has divine qualities, she mocks established religion, highlights the human, bi-gendered qualities of God, and calls for a religion of love and inclusion. Assia Djebar insists on placing
her rereading of religion in its historical context, one that has made religion a wounding experience for her, but that also provides examples of strong Muslim women engaging in exegesis. Emphasizing her use of the original scriptural sources, she breaks down androcentric interpretations of religion and condemns fundamentalist violence, and reinterprets Islam with an emphasis on female corporality, women’s solidarity, dialogue, and inter-religious tolerance.

Although these authors employ different strategies to proffer a new understanding of their respective religion, all three agree that a religion welcoming to women should be genuinely dialogic, inclusive, and conducive to personal, mystical, and/or sensual experiences. Having been placed at the cultural crossroads of Algeria by history, they all show an awareness of the necessity to creatively unite disparate elements, textual and cultural, in order to construct a conception of religion that is not only acceptable, but also enriching for them as women.
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Introduction

“Le XXIe siècle sera religieux ou ne sera pas”, is a statement frequently attributed to André Malraux, the French writer and politician. Malraux, in fact, did not formulate this idea in such a terse manner, but rather claimed that during the twenty-first century, humanity would have to face the daunting task of reintegrating “its gods” into its existence (“L'homme et le fantôme”). Indeed, whether we speak about gods in particular or about religiosity in general, the presence of religion in public discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century is becoming ever more visible. Considering the nominally religiously motivated terrorist attacks on several continents in the early years of this century and the military conflicts in which the United States is engaging in various countries, supposedly in reaction to such terrorist activity, public discussion on religion is relevant and justified in its scope. The failure of systems such as Communism and a general upheaval caused by globalization have caused insecurities, to which some have reacted by retreating into more traditional values, all of which necessitate a re-evaluation of religious principles and the place that religion should hold in present-day societies.

The foundations for the present discourse were laid in the twentieth century, with growing movements of religious revival in Muslim-majority countries, religion-centered civil wars on the African, European, and Asian continents, the founding of nation-states based on religious principles, and an increased use of mass media for the purposes of spreading thought on religion. Many, such as Nader A. Hashemi, have argued that rapid modernization in Muslim-majority countries has led to a trauma that has impelled many to return to traditional religious values (160).
This dissertation proposes to analyze some of the literature that was born from this period of religious revival, and asks how women authors relate to the tensions resulting from it. It will focus on the works of the Algerian authors Taos Amrouche, Hélène Cixous, and Assia Djebar. For these women, has modernization, as Hashemi would suggest, really been the trauma that has had to be healed through a return to religiosity, or is it rather that for women, unlike for men, religion has been the trauma that has had to be healed through an “application” of “modernity”? This “modernity” might come in the shape of secularism, a turning away from traditional ways of living religion, or a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional religious texts. I argue here that rather than turning away from religion and towards a completely a-religious frame of thought, Amrouche, Cixous, and Djebar re-evaluate and re-read their respective religions in order to arrive at a result with which they can identify as feminists. This stands in contrast to the rejection of religion as a whole, opposed as a foundation for patriarchal discourse by the majority of mainstream Western feminist discourse.

I. Problem Outline and Historical Background

When analyzing literature with a view to religion, investigating the writings of women authors is in some respects self-evident. All of the Abrahamic religions set women apart in their rulings on human behavior (even if some religious scholars stress that their religion strives for equality between all human beings, including women). The basic texts of these three religions are primarily directed towards a male reader, and in many cases include special provisions for the behavior and treatment of women. Later interpretations of those texts have been undertaken
by scholars who were overwhelmingly male, and thus show an andronormative bias, viewing the male as the default and the norm, and creating separate rulings for women.

This project aims to invert the gaze that is cast upon women by religious authorities purporting to represent religion, and to investigate what kind of gaze is cast upon the religions themselves by women who consider themselves members of those religions. There is much research on how religious authorities view women and their place within the founding texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet, little has been done on how women writers have dealt with these issues in their own literary texts.

While restricting itself to a specific country, this project aims to compare the writings of authors from different religions, in order to investigate whether any parallels appear between writers who each deal with one of the three Abrahamic religions. Moreover, an analysis of three different religions yields more interesting results in the Algerian context due to historical circumstances. This is why, out of the francophone nations of the world, Algeria was chosen, because it has a history of great cultural diversity. Algeria is positioned at the crossroads of several different cultures - African, European, and Middle Eastern. Correspondingly, it has also traditionally been home to a number of different religions - a situation that is simultaneously the source of great cultural richness and a source of conflict. The events in Algeria’s history have also impacted the religious life within its borders in many interesting ways - from its colonial history to its liberation to the conflicts between the government, the citizenry at large, and Islamist extremists.

Benjamin Stora, in Les Trois Exils: Juifs d’Algérie, very aptly calls colonial Algeria a “communauté plurireligieuse” (180), although this diversity often did not lead to an accepting
awareness of the richness of this heritage. Stora outlines the lives of the members of the indigenous Jewish community in Algeria, most of whom were very religious and lived rather modest lives, but were often the victims of attacks, benefiting from little protection from the colonial authorities. Despite the existence of many historical cultural affinities between the Jewish and Muslim communities, the larger part of the members of the former oriented themselves towards France, most importantly because of the Décret Crémieux of 1879, which made all Jewish citizens of colonial Algeria French. However, Stora also insists that the Decree led to what he calls the first of “three exiles”, because it alienated the Jewish population from Muslim Algerians. The second of these exiles was the Vichy regime in Algeria with its anti-Semitic policies, which abrogated the Crémieux Decree, a moment that Stora describes as a “terrible surprise, une imprévisible catastrophe” (75), during which a generalized atmosphere of anti-Semitism reigned. In this “exil ‘intérieur’” (87), Jews were progressively excluded from almost all professions, as was the father of Hélène Cixous, who was a doctor.

The third exile, according to Stora, occurred when Algeria became independent. At this moment, as Albert Camus has also portrayed it, the Jewish Algerian population found itself caught between two fronts. Because of the attacks against its members during the fight for independence and the call for an independent “Muslim” Algeria, the Jewish community in the end sided with the French camp, which led to their eventual exile to France. Here, however, conditions of life for the new arrivals were extremely difficult both economically and culturally, because they felt excluded due to cultural and religious differences. Despite the fact, then, that Hélène Cixous’ family was much less religious than most of the Jewish community in Algeria, her experience of Algerian anti-Semitism, exile to France and feeling of disorientation there are
by no means unusual, and exile will be one of the major themes that will emerge in the ways in which she relates to religion.

In some ways, however, Jewish inhabitants of Algeria were in a similar situation as Catholics at independence – many Catholics had to leave the country as it became independent, or chose to do so because of an increasingly hostile climate. The conquest by the French in the nineteenth century was seen by many French Catholics as the “reconquest” of a land that had historical ties to the Roman Catholic Church (Curtis 262). Although direct conversion of Algerian Muslims was banned by the French government, the activity of religious orders was considerable in Algeria, which led many, especially in Kabylia, to convert – as did, for example, the parents of Taos Amrouche. Nonetheless, religion was largely racialized, and despite promises of non-interference in religious matters at conquest, the French colonial authorities nevertheless used religion to undermine Arab and Berber cultural identity in order to more easily dominate it. As a result, religion became an important and sensitive issue in multi-cultural and multi-religious colonial Algeria.

The more recent history of Islam in Algeria will be outlined in further detail in the chapter on Assia Djebar as it pertains to her works. However, it should be pointed out here that, unlike Jews and Christians, Muslim Algerians, who were subsumed under the expressions “Français musulmans” in colonial Algeria, did not have access to full citizenship rights. Their lives under colonialism, exposed to numerous pressures aiming at the undermining of an independent cultural identity, can be compared to a “tremblement de terre perpétuel”, as Joseph Jurt has phrased it (14). Their legal status as Muslims was different from that of Jews under the colonial regime. The “respect” for the conquered people’s religions promised by the French to
the Dey of Algiers in 1830 went much further than the French understanding of secularism would habitually imply, due to the fact that neither Muslim nor Jewish Algerians practiced the separation of worldly and spiritual matters the way that the French did. Thus, *shariʿa* courts still governed much of Muslim Algerians’ lives. Nevertheless, Muslims were also subject to continually discriminatory treatment on the part of the French, as legitimized by French law (Hunger 40-41).

During the liberation struggle, as mentioned above, Islam played an important role as a unifying factor, which from then on made an “Arabo-Islamic discourse” central to any legitimization of power in Algeria (Mengedoht 80). The Arabization politics in newly independent Algeria had a strongly religious bent, and movements calling for a political Islam gained much momentum as the decades after liberation went on. These movements appeared to be the only possible alternative to the ruling FLN for an increasingly disenchanted Algerian public (78), a power that the FLN realized, catering more and more to a religiously conservative constituency to rival Islamist forces. By instituting the 1984 Family Code and designating Islam as one of the defining pillars of the Algerian Republic in its 1989 Constitution, the FLN government demonstrated the extent to which religion and politics were already intertwined in the country. As a result of the construction of an all-important, unitary official Islam, the chances for political pluralism have been minimized, and alternate thought on religion is struck with ostracism and considered highly suspect (Harbi 174). Therefore, it must be seen as particularly significant if an Algerian writer, and even more importantly, a high-profile woman writer such as Djebar, proposes an alternate system of thought regarding religion.
Unlike in Algeria, the separation between religion and the state has a long and well-known history in France, a separation whose strongest roots date back to the French Revolution. The temporal power of the Church was curbed during this time by the confiscation of Church possessions and the limitation of the Church’s power to keep registries of personal status; priests were forced to swear an allegiance to the new cult instituted by the revolutionaries or face severe violence. Republican values held that the government should be elected by the people, rather than hold spiritual legitimization, and that freedom of belief was one of the rights of the citizen. Republicanism also led to the creation of secular schools, which, over the course of the nineteenth century, broke the clergy’s control of schooling in France. Free, “laïc”, and mandatory education was provided by law thanks to the Jules Ferry Laws of 1881 and 1882.

Anticlericalism, which had been a strong trend throughout the nineteenth century, especially due to the clergy’s support for anti-republican regimes (Gibson), continued into the twentieth century. The Dreyfus affair, which reached its fever pitch towards the turn of the (twentieth) century, pitted Catholics (and anti-Semites) and anticlericals against each other, and tensions between the two once again ran high. The worldly power of the Church eventually experienced another setback in 1905, when the Catholic Church was officially separated from the French state by law.

In the later part of the twentieth century, religion and its relationship to the French state had to be renegotiated due to the fact that the religious makeup of the country had been changing. Laïcité, which in its most basic meaning signifies the separation of religious affairs and the affairs of government, is usually understood to mean that religion pertains to the private realm. It is in this context that the display of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools was forbidden by law in 2004 and that the covering of the face was made illegal in public in
2011. These laws that mostly affect Muslim women wearing the hijab and the niqab or the burqa led to much debate and to renewed tensions between the French government and religious groups within the population.

What will be most important in this dissertation is the extent to which this French secularism extended its reach to the Algerian colonies, and in how far women such as Amrouche, Cixous, and Djebar were influenced by it. Cixous and Djebar both attended secular public schools, which opened up their lives to intellectual pursuits, broadened their horizons, and finally led to their international careers. However, religion also had an influence on their young lives, in Djebar’s case in the sense that she also attended Qur’anic school, and in Cixous’ case because the Vichy government temporarily deprived her of the right to go to school as a Jew. The interplay of these events with the authors’ lives will be explored in their respective chapters.

In France, voices affiliated with women’s movements were in support of the above-mentioned bans on head veiling/covering, arguing that this is a custom that limits women’s liberties, and thus welcoming any opposition to it. The major French women’s movement, or MLF, which has a long and illustrious history, was also strongly inspired by the French Revolution (although demands for greater rights for women predate the Revolution). Hopes for increased women’s rights, based on the Revolutionary discourse on equality, found their expression particularly in Olympe de Gouges’ 1791 “Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne”, modeled on the 1789 “Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen”. However, despite women’s participation in both the revolutions of 1789 and of 1848, their hopes for full citizenship rights were dashed in the aftermaths of those revolutions. Girls’ education, however, improved, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century.
With the support of women’s organizations, many of which had already been founded in the nineteenth century, rights such as financial independence and the right to work improved for women at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the first and second world wars, women and their organizations rallied once again behind their national causes, but they also lobbied for women’s right to vote in the interwar period. Republican universalism furnished many of their arguments. After a much more conservative period under the Vichy regime, women eventually achieved the right to vote in 1944.

After May 1968, the debate on women’s rights turned towards issues such as contraception, abortion, divorce, and violence against women. The “Mouvement de libération des femmes” was born with the deposition, in 1970, of a wreath to the “wife of the unknown soldier” on the Champs-Elysées. This movement was inspired by the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, who had already published her Deuxième Sexe in 1949. The MLF consisted of many different groupings, including revolutionary leftist factions, and groups like “Psychanalyse et politique”, in which Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva at one point participated (Moi, Thought 4). It is important that many members of this movement thought of their activity and mission as completely subverting male “civilization” and categories of thinking (Tristan 66). It is in this context that Hélène Cixous’ call for a new, subversive feminine way of writing (discussed in more detail in the chapter dedicated to her) must be understood.

Due to the intellectual connections between France and the Maghreb, much of this thought and material also made its way to Algeria. Especially well-read women such as the authors under discussion here would be aware of the developments in French feminism, and reflected on their meaning for local conditions. I will discuss how these women authors, as
Algerians, fit into feminist discourse, and whether, and if so, how, they alter it to be more appropriate to their own local/cultural contexts.

Let us now turn toward the definition of some key terms for the purpose of this study. First and foremost, what is meant by religion and religiosity in this dissertation should be clarified. The meaning with which the word religion will be used here is close to its dictionary definition, which, in the Merriam Webster dictionary, stresses the supernatural as well as the systematic nature of religious beliefs (two aspects that will provide two important parameters of analysis for this dissertation). It is thus “the service and worship of God or the supernatural” as established by “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices”. It is noteworthy here that, as long as these “attitudes, beliefs, and practices” are systematic, they can be “personal” or “institutionalized”. The Oxford English Dictionary goes into more detail by defining religion as the “[b]elief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods)”, and “such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement”. The ways in which such a system of belief may lead especially women to “spiritual or material improvement” will provide one of the focal points for the present analysis.

Significantly, the Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender, besides stressing the supernatural characteristics of religious beliefs, also emphasizes the relational aspects of religion. Under the entry “Religion, Religiosity, and Gender”, this encyclopedia states that “[r]eligion as an ideology involves the individual in a unique commitment and a unique network of relationships, real and imagined. The irreducible belief core common to all religions contains the belief in spirit entities inhabiting an invisible world, and our relationship with them” (Beit-Hallahmi, my emphasis).
This is important because the relational aspect of religions, be they the individuals’ relationships to other believers, to non-believers, to representatives of a religion, or to supernatural entities, will play a central role in this dissertation.

The belief systems of religion lead the individual believer to religiosity, explains the Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: “While religion is an institution and a belief system, what we measure in the behavior of individuals is religiosity, which is the adherence to a particular belief system”. I will thus here use the term religiosity to designate a person’s way of living religion, whereas the term religion will describe the system of beliefs itself.

It is remarkable that authors such as Cixous, Amrouche, and Djebar, who are by many considered to write from a feminist point of view, do not reject religion but rather identify with their respective religions, since for the mainstream of Western feminist thought, religion is a thorny issue, if not to be rejected outright. The question then arises to what extent and in what ways Djebar, Cixous and Amrouche can indeed be considered feminists.

Let us therefore first examine basic definitions of feminism. Moving from the more general to the more specific, The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines feminism as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes”, as well as the “organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests”, a definition that will be helpful here as the understanding of feminism used in this dissertation is relatively broad. To consider the term in a more literary context, the purpose of feminism has been defined as seeking “to expose […] patriarchal practices” (Moi, Politics xiv). In her work on feminism in Muslim-majority countries, Azza Karam defines feminism as “an individual or collective awareness that women have been and continue to be oppressed in diverse ways and for diverse reasons, and attempts towards liberation
from this oppression involving a more equitable society with improved relations between women and men” (Women 5). Finally, Margot Badran, in Feminism Beyond East and West, provides a definition that is helpful both in its historical scope and in its insistence that feminism is not limited to the geographic location that gave rise to it:

The term feminism was coined in France in the late 1880s by Hubertine Auclert, who introduced it in her journal, La Citoyenne, to criticize male predominance (and domination) and make claims for women’s rights and emancipation promised by the French revolution. Historian of feminisms Karen Offen has demonstrated that since its initial appearance the term has been given many meanings and definitions; it has been put to diverse uses and inspired many movements.

By the first decade of the 20th century the term had made its appearance in English, first in Britain and then in the 1910s in the United States. By the early 1920s it was in use in Egypt where it circulated both in French and in Arabic as nisa’iyya. Yes, the term originated in the West, specifically France. No, feminism is not Western […] Feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms. (24)

The term “feminism” will thus be used here in this very basic sense. “Feminist” will be used to qualify a literature that speaks out in favor of the equality of the sexes and that aims to “expose […] patriarchal practices” (Moi, Politics xiv). Literature will be considered “feminist” if it demonstrates an awareness of women’s oppression in the interest of overcoming this oppression, and attention will be given to the ways in which these efforts are “articulated in local terms” (Badran 24).
II. Justification of the Corpus

The next section will explain the reasons for which each individual author was chosen for this dissertation. Firstly, each author’s place in the canon of French-language Algerian literature will be discussed briefly; secondly, reasons will be given why she will be considered an “Algerian” author; and lastly, it will be explained in what ways she will be considered to be Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, as the case may be.

As French-speaking authors from Algeria, Amrouche, Djebar, and Cixous all have their own independent claims to fame. Amrouche, for instance, distinguishes herself as “la première femme issue de milieu arabo-berbère à écrire en français” (Malti 5), and also as “le premier auteur arabo-berbère à dire ‘je’” (11). Among authors from her region of the world, her writing thus constitutes a type of revolution, both because she uses the French language as a woman and as a Berber, and because her writing is autobiographical. Moreover, due to her unconventional upbringing – which probably played an important part in her taking up the pen to say “‘je’” – religion plays a considerable role in her oeuvre. Religion is frequently referenced, analyzed, or brought into context with various parts of her life story, which is another factor that makes her a fitting choice for this dissertation.

Concerning the question of whether she can be considered an Algerian author, Amrouche has been said (and has said herself) to be “in exile” everywhere on earth, expressing feelings of cultural estrangement in most of her autobiographical work. Therefore, it might be claimed that she does not “belong” to any one place, including Algeria. However, I will argue that if her origins can be tied to one location, it is the Kabyle Berber country of Algeria for a number of reasons.
Firstly, for many, Amrouche as an artist is today mainly remembered as a singer of traditional Berber songs from Kabylia (Brahimi 5), the homeland of her parents that she visited on several occasions, describing them in vivid detail. Amrouche was one of the first who brought this kind of heritage to a global stage, was well-versed in it, and published records of it in her name, and is thus closely associated with it. One of Amrouche’s autobiographical personae, Aména in L’Amant imaginaire, is reminded by her husband of “ces chants de ta race auxquels tu as donné ton âme” (cited in Brahimi 68, my emphasis), which alludes to the quasi-religious meaning of these songs for the protagonist. There is thus a strong and very personal link between Amrouche and the culture of Algerian Kabylia, a culture that she represented to the outside world through her musical activity.

Furthermore, if Amrouche and her autobiographical personae can be difficult to tie to one specific region to which they would belong, it is apparent that any place other than Kabylia feels much more foreign to her. Being unwelcome at a French pension because of cultural differences is the main subject of Jacinthe noire. Similarly, in Rue des tambourins, the family’s dwelling place in Tunis is consistently depicted as “exile” (Brahimi 30): Amrouche has “Never truly arrived in Tunis”, because there she is an outsider – she is of Kabyle origin, but professes to Catholicism (Santos 327).

Finally, as many readers have noted, when Amrouche’s country of origin is evoked, this usually takes place in the context of references to the idea of an “Eden” or “Paradise” (Adam 57). According to José Santos, Berber country, for Amrouche, is “une version laïque et ‘tangible’ du paradis perdu” (326). Especially in L’Amant imaginaire, notes Denise Brahimi, “La Tunisie […] est en train de sortir définitivement de sa vie, tandis que la Kabylie y entre sur le mode de la réconciliation” (66). The land that Amrouche habitually calls “nos montagnes” thus becomes the
one that she identifies most closely with; she even longs for it as much as other Christians might long for the lost Garden of Eden.¹

This kind of belonging may be imaginary, because the Eden Amrouche describes is not attainable for her anymore: despite having a clear location, it only exists in her imagination the way that it used to be. “Sur ces racines,” writes Santos, speaking of the protagonist’s kabyle childhood in Rue des tambourins, “l’héroïne d'Amrouche a greffé un mythe entretenu par sa famille, celui d'un lieu idéal, utopique, sorte d'Eden d'où le groupe a été irrémédiablement chassé.” (337). No matter how imaginary this kabyle paradise many be, however, the author is firmly rooted in it. This makes her an Algerian author whose imagination draws its inspiration from the culture and influence of a specific Algerian region.

Taos Amrouche’s Christianity is emphasized in most of her literary works, which are considered to be largely autobiographical (Brahimi 7, Malti 11, Adam 57, Santos 328). In Rue des tambourins, it is the Christianity of the main character’s family that defines them as societal outcasts, and in Jacinthe noire, the main character confesses to a different kind of Christianity than her peers, but nonetheless speaks of her Christian upbringing (176) and her Christian love (229). Solitude ma mère, finally, casts the main character in a family that has brought her up a Christian. Thus, if we agree with Brahimi, Malti, Adam, and Santos that Amrouche’s works are autobiographical, and if the main character’s Christianity consistently plays such a central role in determining her destiny, we can assume that Amrouche considers herself to be a Christian as well. This assumption is substantiated by Amrouche’s biographers, who describe her “appartenance” as “chrétienne”, as do Brahimi (86) and Santos (326).

¹ Amrouche’s perception, in this way, is in keeping with the views of the many Kabyles that have had to exile themselves from the region, either to France or to Algiers, making Kabylia almost a synonym for a “lost paradise”. One might even say, then, that her exile is double – geographic and religious.
Assia Djebar’s claim to fame hardly needs to be established any more. The quality of her oeuvre and her place within French-language literature has been widely recognized - not least in her election to the Académie Française. Besides the fact that she is one of the most, if not the most well-known woman author in the francophone North African corpus, her works were chosen for this dissertation because they comment in a number of different ways on religion and religiosity, the way it is lived, the way it is institutionalized, and the way it is brought into contact with politics. Her courageous speaking out on these matters has been a central factor in her recognition on the international literary scene.

Calling Assia Djebar an “Algerian” writer is, arguably, the least debatable compared to the other writers chosen for this dissertation. Djebar’s involvement in Algerian history and sociology is indicated even by the titles of her works, such as Le Blanc de l’Algérie or Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement. These books take a critical stance towards aspects of Algerian society and towards the Algerian government; however, Djebar’s involvement with Algerian politics and statements on it go back as far as the early years of the Algerian nation. During this period, she wrote her Poèmes pour l’Algérie heureuse, a “sign of official favor” (Ringrose, Dialogue 10). This supportive stance changed considerably over the years, as Djebar denounced the “radical nationalism” in her home country (O’Riley 11), and its government’s “relentless policy of Arabization” (Zimra, “Medina” 18), but all of it shows clearly her direct involvement in the affairs of her country.

These works, thus, make strong statements about events in the history of the country. Le Blanc de l’Algérie, for example, as Clarisse Zimra claims, “has taken a courageous public stand against the ongoing butchery perpetrated in her native land in the name of Islam” (Zimra, “Medina”), as the book was written “in the aftermath of the Algerian riots of 1988” (Ringrose,
Dialogue 228). Reaching further back, Djebar’s work since 1997 explores “colonial history as it relates to contemporary conditions in Algeria” (O’Riley 10). Even when the title of a book refers to an entirely different locality and the plot is set on a different continent, the implications for Djebar’s native land are clear and present. *Loin de Médine* was an *œuvre de circonstance*, which, although it is set on the Arabian peninsula during the time of Prophet Muhammad, asks the question in its introduction, “how far from Medina is Algeria today?” (Zimra, “Medina”). By “presenting her novel as the legitimate heir of Islamic modernism, Djebar contests the assimilation of that movement to culturally conservative Algerian political discourse”, explains Donald R. Wehrs (858). The detour to a different time and place thus enables Djebar to make a more legitimate point with regard to religion in her home country.

Beyond politics and religion, Djebar is concerned with the Algerian “national identity” as a whole, which, according to Priscilla Ringrose, she would prefer to be “‘more genuine’” (23). Going into more detail, Clarisse Zimra explains that Djebar would like to salvage “Algeria’s denied or silenced multicultural, multiethnic, multiglossic past”, in order to enable the formation of a “plural, multiple ‘Algérianité’ of the inner self” (Zimra, “Medina”).

Moreover, in her films, her musical and cultural references, as well as her physical movement, Djebar shows a deep association with Algerian culture. For example, she has still been visiting Algeria regularly after moving to Paris (*World Literature Today* 800). This association is particularly strong regarding the feminine culture, literature, and music of Algeria, as Zimra points out. Among other aspects, Djebar has created films about the Algerian people on Algerian soil, and frequently references the rich musical culture of Algerian women in her written work. Djebar’s close cultural affiliation with Algeria is also shown in the way in which she solves the problem of writing in French, since some might see her writing in this language as
a betrayal of her Arabic roots. Djebar “arabizes” her French (Ringrose, Dialogue 24) by including some Arabic expressions and structures in her French-language writing. Due to her political statements as well as through cultural and linguistic association, then, Djebar can clearly be said to be an Algerian author.

Djebar’s conflicted but strong association with her native country becomes clearest in her own words, in her essay “The Eyes of Language” (reprinted in a special issue of World Literature Today): "You always negotiate with your country, but you do it badly. You want to leave it, and yet you do not want to leave it; you want to forget it and not forget it, to curse it and to sing its praises.... [...] suddenly you feel, growing on your own back, new eyes [...] these eyes are there to look once again at this country” (785). Algeria is thus a country that Djebar explicitly considers hers.

The critics of Djebar’s oeuvre, as well as her biographers, are also mostly in agreement about the author’s being a Muslim. Evelyne Accad, for example, points to Djebar’s upbringing when she calls her “a writer of middle-class Muslim and Algerian origins” (“Assia Djebar” 802). Zimra, more directly, cites Djebar’s self-identification when she claims that Djebar calls herself “simultaneously a French writer and a Muslim believer” (22). Finally, Meryem Ouedghiri refers to Djebar’s technique of reinterpreting history in order to prove specific points: For Djebar, “the turn to Islamic history” is “a must for all Arab-Muslim women” such as herself (60). It is thus safe to assume that Djebar can be considered and considers herself a Muslim.

Hélène Cixous’ status within the canon of French-language literature is similarly well-established. Although, as Alison Rice has documented, Cixous herself prefers not to be labeled as “francophone” because of the political implications of the word that connote “a certain
university culture” (20), Cixous can lay claim to her Algerianness in her own right, as will be shown, and she will therefore be considered here as one of the most widely read authors hailing from Algeria. Moreover, like Amrouche, Cixous’ personal history is very marked by religion and religiosity, having led to a very particular status for her in Algerian literary history. The centrality of Cixous to the corpus of Algerian literature in French and the importance of religion and religiosity in her oeuvre thus make her a vital component to the present analysis.

In Hélène Cixous’ works, her national, cultural and religious identity is subject to a constant process of triangulation. This is due in large part to Algeria’s history, in which identities, especially in the twentieth century, had to be continually negotiated. In *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*, Cixous describes her personal identity as “espagnole dite française allemande dite française juive dite française catholique dite française” (cited in Yee 197). At the same time, although Algerian society seems to constantly refer her back to a supposed French identity, in *Vivre l’Orange* Cixous responds with incomprehension, claiming that in spite of this reference she did not know France, nor did she know anyone there (167-68, cited in Penrod 141). Clearly, this France that was supposed to be hers is not: upon arrival in France in 1955, she has “an absolute feeling of exclusion, of interdiction, of deportation” (*Rootprints* 203-04; cited in Penrod 142-3). Due to the colonial situation, then, there is a sense that the character representing Cixous in her autobiographical novels is “without a national identity” (Penrod 136), least of all French.

As to her relationship to Algeria, the place of her residence for much of her early life, one of her main points in *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* is that she paradoxically dreamed of one day “arriving” in Algeria although she was already living there. This longing for somewhere to belong and be accepted has been described as “a tale of unrequited love” (Yee 190). The
manifestations of this unrequited love can be seen in many instances in her autobiographical work, such as *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*. Although the political and sociological realities in Algeria make it impossible for Cixous to be accepted as an “Algerian” (a designation which, according to Cixous herself, was hardly used for any one during her time of residence there), her Algerianness is one of longing and of identification.

This voluntary identification with Algeria also appears in Cixous’ essay *Mon Algériance*, in which she depicts her support for the Algerian independence struggle with the exclamation, “Que l’Algérie vienne au monde” (74). This expression is important because it is used in the explicit context of giving birth, Cixous’ mother being a midwife who had helped hundreds of Algerian babies come into the world. The close identification between the Cixous family and Algeria is also echoed in Cixous’ later autobiographical writing, as for example on the first few pages of *Si Près*, where Cixous shocks her mother with the announcement that “j’irais peut-être à Alger” (5, 16, italics in original). This thought and declaration entail a long reflection on longing and impossibility, involving both Cixous and her mother, and demonstrate to what extent Algeria, despite or even because of the suffering it inflicted on both, has left its mark on them, connecting the two of them closely with it. The reason Cixous gives for wanting to visit Algeria is her wish to see her father’s grave – Algeria is thus quite explicitly her father-land, as in *patria*, a home. Others have claimed that Cixous’ identification with Algeria takes the shape of a lasting desire, a constant presence in her oeuvre: “Algeria is both everywhere and nowhere in Cixous's writing”, as Lynn Penrod states (136).

This longing does not exist without a necessary pain – in fact, Cixous describes her association with Algeria in terms of physical injuries or “stigmata”. About her friendship with Jacques Derrida, also a Jew of Algerian origin, she writes, “Si nous n’avons pas en commun la
circoncision […] nous avons en miroir un nombre de stigmates précis et datés Alger 1867 [sic], 1870, Oran 1940, Alger 1940, 1942, 1954, 1956, toutes ces dates de pâques, passations, expulsions, naturalisations, découtoyennisations, exinclusions, assimilation, assimulation, indigè/ne/stion qui constituent l’archive de ce qu’il appelle ‘ma nostalgie’ et que j’appelle mon ‘algeriance’” (quoted in Stevens 82). Algeria is thus present enough for Cixous to leave injuries that are as painful as real wounds.

Therefore, I will here consider Cixous to be an Algerian author, not least due to the diversity of her origins and cultural background, a diversity that was, for a long time, one of the hallmarks of Algerian society. Winifred Woodhull, in Transfigurations of the Maghreb, claims that Cixous “writes of the non-place she occupies”; but this non-place is, precisely, Algerian, because the country was turned into a non-place for many of its residents by its own history and politics. If history has attempted to deprive Cixous of a national association, this is particularly characteristic of her life in Algeria; and her personal association, as expressed in her works, has outlasted all of these “exclusions” and “denaturalizations”.

The question to what extent Hélène Cixous can be said to be Jewish is somewhat complex and has been discussed at considerable length, both by herself and in secondary literature - the latter most notably by Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller in her article “Hélène Cixous: A Sojourn without Place”. In a somewhat contradictory move, Debrauwere-Miller on the one hand claims that Cixous “is not disposed to claim a Jewish identity and maintains that only the notion of womanhood has meaning” to her (255), because claiming such a Jewish identity would limit the multiplicity of identities for which Cixous strives. On the other hand, Debrauwere-

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2 Additionally, the name “Cixous”, according to Mon Algérian, is a Berber name; be it the name of a Berber tribe (as claimed by Cixous herself), or a pronunciation of the word “couscous[ou]” closer to the original Berber word.
Miller also declares that “Cixous claims her Jewish identity” (257) and that “Cixous’ Judaism is subverted and takes on a new dimension” (258). In conclusion, we can say that Cixous does not refuse her Jewish identity, but is careful to always frame it as only one identity of many, and one that should not be considered primary.

In fact, Cixous’ own writings show very clearly that she does not reject Judaism and a Jewish identity. In Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif, she explains how beginning at three years of age, she had “signé un pacte avec le J entre toutes les lettres de la langue française, le J dit ji gît j’y,” in reaction to her mother’s obscurantist statements about Jews (11). This points toward a clear association with a Jewish identity. Judaism, in Cixous’ writing, is located in the same focal point as being a woman: “Tu es, toi aussi, juifemme, menue diminutive, souris parmi le peuple des souris, assignée à la crainte du grand méchant chat”, she writes in Venue à l’écriture (15). The neologism juifemme combines in a single portmanteau the nouns for “Jew” and “woman”, but also, by phonological association, alludes to the oral contraction of the French for “I am” (sometimes spelled “chuis”). This would make juifemme translate to “I am woman”, at the same time as it makes the same word mean both “I am” and “Jew”. By using this type of word play, Cixous thus asserts her Jewish identity (the meanings of “existence” and “Judaism” both combined in the same word), and simultaneously extends this Jewish identity to all women, in the sense that they are by their very nature excluded from “culture”: “‘Admire-moi. Je suis le génie du christianisme. […] Dehors, petite juive. Vite’” (Venue 19). As a woman and as a Jew, then, she is ostracized, colonized: “Je suis du parti des offensés, des colonisés. […] Je suis juive.” (née 130). What is most important here is that she insists that this Jewish identity kindles a feeling of solidarity with other colonized, othered people(s). This solidarity, along with Jewish history, provides her with inspiration and a driving force for her work: “l’Histoire m’en avait
nourrie j’ai eu la ‘chance’ de faire mes premiers pas en plein brasier entre deux holocaustes” (Venue 24, my italics). Solidarity will remain an important concept as we examine how women authors who are also religious can be feminist.

As we have seen, these authors do not reject their respective religions but rather identify with them in various ways. This is significant because in much feminist thought, religion and the apparatus of tradition, custom, and philosophy that depends on it have usually been rejected as part of the foundation upon which the patriarchal system is built. “[R]eligious discourse”, summarizes Deborah F. Sawyer, “was largely a bête noir [sic] for second-wave feminism, understood to represent patriarchy in the starkest terms” (312). Luce Irigaray, for example, rejects conventional religion because it does not provide woman with an image according to which she might “establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own” (43), and reminds her readers of how woman herself is branded as “diabolical” in the Judeo-Christian tradition (44). She, as well as Cixous, stresses the masculine nature of the traditional God, who is “potent, phallic and male” (Moi, Politics 8). Toril Moi also reminds us of Virginia Woolf’s criticism of patriarchy’s “metaphysical essentialism”, “which hails God, the father and the phallus as its transcendental signified”.

More closely referring to the area of investigation of this dissertation, the feminist Evelyne Accad proposes a criticism of religion in the Maghreb and the Mashreq through her review of French-language literature from those regions. Her analysis in Veil of Shame blames the Abrahamic religions for the prevalent view of women as unclean (27), for encouraging the view of women as mere producers of offspring (ibid.), and for the cloistering of women (40).
In what sense, then, can the works of Amrouche, Djebar, and Cixous be considered to be feminist? Taos Amrouche, for one, has been said not only to be the first Berber autobiographer (as pointed out above, Malti 11), but also to reject the silence that masculine discourse has been imposing on women until that moment (4). This taking up of the act of speaking is then a “revendication d'émancipation des structures patriarcales qui les maintiennent [les femmes] en état d'infériorité et de soumission par rapport à l'homme” (9). Jeanne Adam provides a more detailed analysis by showing how Amrouche’s novels challenge the “puritan austerity” of the culture from which she hails, and criticizes the norms of a society in which males are always given preferential treatment (58). In L’Amant imaginaire, for example, the narrator (an alter ego of Amrouche heself) expresses her opposition to the inegalitarian practices of this patriarchal culture. Strong women characters predominate: in Rue des tambourins, Amrouche portrays how the mother is never afraid to assertively stand up for her rights and opinions in the face of her husband’s opposition (58).

Nevertheless, Merolla and Adam also qualify the extent to which one can speak of “feminist” novels in Amrouche’s case. “[O]n ne saurait parler de romans féministes au sens polémique du terme”, says Adam, cautioning that Amrouche does not subscribe to a feminism in the Western, i.e. European or American, sense (59). Merolla similarly claims that concerning community and women’s equality, critical remarks can occasionally be found in Amrouche’s oeuvre, but in general, “il y a une sobriété relative de la critique” (124).

However, if we analyze Amrouche’s oeuvre according to the criteria of feminism outlined above, we do find that the most basic qualifications apply. Whatever Amrouche’s general stance towards her native culture, she does expose women’s suffering, abuses of women’s dignity, and inequalities between men and women, particularly in Rue des tambourins
and *Solitude ma mère*. Her main characters, with whom she appears to identify, express opposition to those customs of inequality in the interest of a “liberation from this oppression” (Karam, *Women* 5). One of the most striking moments in Amrouche’s oeuvre is that of the maternal grandmother in *Tambourins*, who, having fallen victim to ostracism from Kabyle society after an unwanted pregnancy, suffers both from mistreatment on the part of her community and from pressures to remarry, but defending herself, she maintains that her chin tattoo (commonly worn by Berber women) is worth as much as a man’s beard (89-90), thus putting herself onto an equal footing with men. Together with Aménas’s rebellion against the discriminatory rules that her parents attempt to impose upon her in *Solitude ma mère*, and the strong mother and grandmother characters of *Tambourins*, the predominant message of her books is quite clear. This is in agreement with the definition given for feminism here, even if it sometimes does not take the shape of the Western feminism that the majority of readers might be most familiar with. As Badran would put it (24), it is a different kind of feminism, born from a different kind of context, but a feminism nonetheless.

If we now turn to the literature of Assia Djebar, the question of whether or not she can be considered a feminist has been discussed at length, and certain critics have indicated reservations concerning her feminism, or at least its “revolutionary” nature. Evelyne Accad, for example, claims that although Djebar’s early novels might give us the impression that Djebar’s thought on “women’s role and their liberation” might be revolutionary, her introduction to a book of photographs (*Femmes d’Islam*) shows her ideas on gender in a different light and proves her to be “at most a moderate” (*Veil* 47). Winifred Woodhull’s position on this subject is such that she registers Djebar’s “pessimism about feminism’s power to change social relations in contemporary Algeria” (79), but she claims that Djebar strives for a “construction of
international networks in which feminism’s relation to other progressive struggles can be defined within specific historical, geopolitical, and cultural contexts” (86-87).

This concentration on the particular context of women’s situations is also visible in Accad’s analysis: she remarks that according to Djebar, women are not inferior to men in Islam, but rather complementary (“Assia Djebar” 808). Due to their history and cultural experiences, according to Djebar, imposing immediate and complete liberation on Algerian women might not be in their particular interest (Veil 48). In these assessments of Assia Djebar’s oeuvre by her critics, one notices a certain unease with a stance that is perceived as not quite as radical or enthusiastic as might be desired and that is mitigated to some extent by considering local conditions.

However, Djebar’s vision of women from within their own cultural contexts has caused other critics to applaud her for taking a feminist stance from within the framework of Islam – for instance by pointing towards what Djebar has termed “Islam’s ‘insupportable feminist revolution’” (Zimra, Wehrs 841). In Loin de Médine, as these critics claim, Djebar uses the same techniques as religious extremists in order to cement her feminist position. She reinterprets the foundational texts of Islam, and in this way, “claims for her feminist discourse a specific, orthodox theological lineage” (Wehrs 858). Meryem Ouedghiri similarly points out how in Médine, Djebar uses Islamic sources to support her demands for women’s rights (60-1), her technique being that of a “feminist reading” of Qur’anic verses (54).

To return to our original definition of feminism, then, Margot Badran’s description applies, which purports that “[f]eminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms” (24). Other scholars agree that the criteria for feminism apply fully in her case: Fatima Zohra Lalaoui, for instance, calls Djebar’s perspective in Médine “résolument féministe”,...
While Donald R. Wehrs is even more specific by calling it “an Islamic feminism” (866).

Furthermore, speaking in more general terms, Priscilla Ringrose calls Djebar “a pioneering Arab ‘feminist’ novelist” (Dialogue 18), who has been marked out as a “writer of feminist credentials” ever since her collection Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement (21). Therefore, even if Djebar’s position might not be comparable with the type of feminism proposed by radical European feminists, she has her own way of exposing patriarchal practices (Moi, Politics xiv), while speaking out in favor of overcoming them.

If we now consider the works of Hélène Cixous, most of the critics writing on her oeuvre would probably agree that she can be classified as one of the foremost French feminists (she is usually grouped among French feminists, although she will here be considered Algerian for the reasons mentioned above). However, Cixous herself would probably be the first to deny that she is a feminist at all (Moi, Politics 103). If Cixous refuses feminism as a theory, it is because she equates it with a turn “away from the present” and towards the past, and sees it as a “bourgeois, egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system” (ibid). This system, according to Cixous, should instead be subverted entirely. In terms of writing, this has led her to call for the creation of what has seemed to some as a “textual jungle”, a type of text that resists any theoretical interpretation, including feminist (102; more on this type of writing will be said in the chapter of this dissertation devoted to Cixous).

This kind of thinking, however, also provides one of the reasons why she can nonetheless be considered a feminist: the type of writing that Cixous advocates is meant to subvert patriarchal or “phallogocentric” norms (105). Jennifer Yee maintains that it is “[p]art of Cixous’ feminist project” to deconstruct the “frozen, clichéd image of women inherited from millennia of masculine representation” (199), and this is also true of Cixous’ treatment of the images of
women handed down by religious authorities and traditions. In this way, her writing exposes patriarchal practices in view of overcoming women’s oppression. In addition to this, Cixous also strongly supports the feminist movement (as opposed to her stance regarding feminist analytical discourses outlined above) and is in favor of women’s liberation (Moi, Politics 103-4; also pointed out by herself, for example, in Makward 33). This is in conformity with the criteria for feminism set at the beginning of this section.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, there has been much valuable research done on all three of these authors, and this will provide an important foundation to my own observations. However, none of the works presented above has so far analyzed religion in the oeuvres of my main authors with the overarching attention to religion that will be given to it here. Moreover, the approach that will be used here will be different. Besides using a historical perspective on the works selected, as many of the above authors have done, the works will undergo a closer reading that focuses on a number of narratological elements, such as perspective, voice, narrative distance, character, and chronology. These observations will provide valuable clues when put into the context of religion and religiosity.

Furthermore, this research will be informed by a number of different perspectives, as will be further elaborated below. Theoretical perspectives will include some concepts from postcolonial theory, and feminist perspectives that will inform my readings will include, of course, Hélène Cixous’ own theories on women’s writing, especially the coming of women to writing and the ways in which this experience is reminiscent of ecstatic states, and Luce
Irigaray’s postulates on the necessity for women to create a divinity in their own image, such that they may attain their goals to the extent that men are able to. Finally, reformist perspectives from religious studies will furnish analytical tools. The thinkers Abdullahi An-Na’im and Khaled Abou El Fadl will provide ideas on the reinterpretation of religious sources and on how religious discourse may be altered to allow for more equal rights between women and men.

The first chapter will focus on works by Taos Amrouche, analyzing how, in her development of an approach to religion, she portrays a multifaceted exclusion, but also attempts to heal through the use of autobiography. In the chapter that follows, devoted to Hélène Cixous, I will investigate the ways in which the author, who has been placed by history in a position of exile, playfully subverts much of religious discourse in order to construct a creative, human-focused and language-oriented approach to religion. Finally, the following chapter will focus on Assia Djebar, who uses historical and religious sources in order to reinvent an approach to religion that is focused on dialogue and on solidarity between women. The conclusion will draw together observations on all three authors and provide a final comparison of their approaches.
This chapter asks in what ways the novels *Jacinthe noire, Rue des tambourins, Solitude ma mère*, and *L’Amant imaginaire* by Taos Amrouche elaborate and narrate the protagonists’ relationship(s) to religion and religiosity, and if or how they create a new system of religious belief and practice that is specific to the protagonists themselves. It explores some of the influences on which the author draws to elaborate this relationship, the ways in which the relationship is constructed, and the implications that this has in the larger framework of North African and metropolitan French society.

I argue that across the four books, despite the fact that an appreciation for amalgams and hybrid forms of culture, heritage and religion is expressed, an exclusion from the main religious and cultural systems is conceptualized. This exclusion of the novels’ protagonists is due, however, not only to an exclusion of the protagonists by the community, but also to a self-imposed exclusion. It is therefore important to investigate in what ways the narrator portrays the religious traditions that influence her life, how she relates to established structures and pre-conceived notions, and from what point of view this takes place. The investigation considers how and why an exclusion and self-exclusion take place, and as a result, how a new conception of religion and religiosity is created.
In this chapter, I argue that because of these reciprocal exclusions, religion has been a cause of trauma for Amrouche. I use trauma in both a metaphorical and etymological sense: religion has been as injuring to Amrouche as the Greek origin of the word, meaning “wound”, suggests, and I will start from the definition that Laplanche and Pontalis supply in summarizing Sigmund Freud’s theories on the subject: Trauma is “An event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization” (465). In ways that I detail in this chapter, due to religious reasons, the Amrouches’ difference from their surroundings, caused by her parents’ conversion to Christianity, was perceived as extremely intense and painful by Taos, and it overwhelmed any possibilities she might have had to deal with it (for example, community support or psychological tools). Only later in life did she undergo psychoanalysis, and until then, her writings fulfilled a therapeutic function. Her writings, which by critical consensus are considered to be autobiographical (Brahimi 137, Santos 328, Adam 57), thus take on the function of what Suzette A. Henke has termed “scriptotherapy”, “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii). In a process whose value has also been recognized by researchers in psychology (e.g. Crossley 541), writers, according to Henke, find a “therapeutic alternative” in “life-writing” and thus heal the psychological wounds inflicted by traumatic experiences (xii). In spite of the oft-claimed impossibility for the trauma patient to speak about the traumatizing event (e.g. Gilmore 6), Amrouche speaks out about the injuries she has sustained and attains a way of healing herself by elaborating her own approach to religion and religiosity.

This Amrouchean project bears several unorthodox, rebellious traits. Firstly, Amrouche takes no heed of the notion that trauma is supposedly “unrepresentable”, but clearly depicts in
her works the root of her trauma that is the conversion of her parents to Christianity and their subsequent societal exclusions. Secondly, she, as an Algerian author, uses a narrative form that is, in the minds of her readers, associated with a Western bourgeois genre of nineteenth-century European tradition (an association explicitly expressed most prominently by Georges Gusdorf, and hotly contested by a number of other scholars). Even if Amrouche, as a historical person, is rejected by the “West”, she will still use a literary means claimed for itself by Western literary tradition in order to overcome this trauma. Finally, Amrouche takes a subversive stance by portraying her own vision of religion, not only speaking as a woman in a context in which women are traditionally denied a voice, but marking a clear difference from more conservative, established voices. In this way, she uses literature in an innovative manner that claims religion as hers and alters it for her own purposes.

It should be stressed here that in this chapter, I argue that Amrouche follows her own version of Christianity rather than Catholicism. I associate the former with what Amrouche herself has termed “suivre le Christ” (*Solitude* 69), and consider it to be more inclusive of different branches of belief; this is the concept to which Amrouche adheres and of which she constructs her own version. Catholicism, rather, with its clergy, dogma, and Church Fathers, is a concept of which Amrouche is much more critical.

Taos Amrouche has, to this date, not been given much attention in literary scholarship; however, a number of researchers do shed light on aspects of her life and work that will provide an important basis for my own analyses. Thus, much of the existing scholarship on Amrouche, such as Ribstein’s “En marge d’un genre”, Malti’s “Voix, Mémoire et écriture”, and Brahimi’s *Taos Amrouche, romancière* takes a genre-centered approach analyzing Amrouche’s use of
autobiography. Ribstein, for example, explains how Amrouche, although of Catholic confession, can be said to impinge upon Muslim rules of “bienséance” by writing autobiographically (41). According to Malti, however, these rules have recently been infringed more and more: women writers of North Africa have turned increasingly towards autobiography in order to “se ré-approprier et [...] ré-écrire un passé que le colonialisme d’une part, puis leur propre société d’autre part, leur ont nié pendant trop longtemps” (4). This study will therefore also ask whether the authors under investigation blame mainly colonialism or male and / or religiously justified silencing of women for the necessity of their re-appropriating this past, or whether their works indict both of these factors to varying degrees. However, despite Malti’s casting of Amrouche as the first Berber autobiographer, she fails to explain the fact that in one of Amrouche’s four autobiographical novels, *Jacinthe noire*, Amrouche in fact does not say ”je”, telling the story of her alter ego in the third person singular, from the point of view of an outsider. Strategies such as this will help me elucidate the author’s cultural and narrative positions, which will add to the larger picture of how she places herself into a religious context.

Another aspect of Amrouche’s works that is well established in studies such as Malti’s and in Brahim’s *Taos Amrouche, romancière* is the fact of Amrouche’s being “torn” (“tiraillée”) between cultures. The alienated status of Amrouche’s characters, combined with the appearance of quasi-religious vocabulary referring to Kabylia in her work leads, for example, José Santos to claim that this region represents a lost Paradise for Amrouche (326). As he correctly claims, this loss can be qualified in terms of trauma (329); but whether it can be called a “version laïque du paradis perdu” (326, my italics) is a question that will need to be further investigated. In a similar way, Jeanne Adam, in “A la rencontre de Taos Amrouche”, also focuses on the ways in which Amrouche is an outsider, but additionally, she uses a feminist approach to explain how male and
female concepts in Amrouche’s work relate to each other. However, she hardly relates these observations to religion at all. While alienation and a state of being torn are indeed a central fact of all of Amrouche’s works, most critics do not analyze in much depth the fact that the exclusion from which Amrouche and her protagonists suffer is at root caused by a religious issue, and that her attitudes towards religion should thus be given more attention. As I will show, this “tiraillement” to which Amrouche is subject in the colonial situation is the result of multiple factors, all of which put her into a complex relationship with religion.

In *Taos Amrouche, romancière*, Denise Brahimi points out that in *Jacinthe noire*, a spirituality is elaborated that is particular to the main character Reine (“[elle] lui est propre”, 86). I agree with this, but Brahimi overemphasizes the idea that this is a *pagan* spirituality - thus practically excommunicating the character. This is too harsh a judgment, since in fact Reine never turns away from Christianity, as I argue in this dissertation. Brahimi characterizes Amrouche’s portrayal of spirituality as born from the ancestral past of her Kabyle home (e.g. 55, 74); I, however, will show its innovative aspects, many of which are due to Amrouche’s hybrid nature. Further aspects on which I will build in this dissertation are Brahimi’s excellent analysis of how the shift of point of view functions in *Jacinthe noire*, and connected to this, of Amrouche’s relationship to Western culture. Although this is set up quite well in Brahimi’s book, the connection to religion is somewhat lacking, and so I will draw from these arguments in explaining the ways in which Amrouche develops her thoughts on religion. Finally, and importantly for me, Brahimi briefly mentions in a few instances the connection that Amrouche draws between erotic love and spirituality (89, 131). This association will have to be analyzed in more detail, and connections will be drawn with the works of the other primary authors of this dissertation.
The books that are under investigation here are *Jacinthe noire, Rue des tambourins, Solitude ma mère*, and *L’Amant imaginaire*. *Jacinthe noire* was Amrouche’s first novel, published in 1947. It depicts the arrival and stay in a Parisian pension of a young woman from Tunisia, who can be assumed to represent Amrouche herself, who stayed at such a pension in 1934 (Ribstein 6). The book is, however, designated as a “Roman”, and is told entirely from the perspective of a French friend of the protagonist Reine, who was strongly influenced by the Tunisian visitor in her views on life, morality, and religion. The novel thus, besides descriptions of the day-to-day life in the pension, consists of many conversations between the two friends, as well as letters and monologues by Reine to depict her Tunisian home and her ensuing views. This is rendered more lively by the developing conflict between Reine and a number of the other girls living at the pension, most of whom refuse to accept Reine, due both to their racism and to their differing views on morality and religion.

The 1996 edition by Joëlle Losfeld, which I will be using, prefaces the book with a letter by André Gide, an author highly admired both by Amrouche and by her character Reine, and who expresses great praise for the book.

*Rue des tambourins*, which was published in 1960, delves further into Amrouche’s past; this novel chronicles the childhood and youth of the protagonist Marie-Corail or “Kouka”. Her family members and their influence on her are particularly present here; thus, two of the four chapters are named after her mother and grandmother, respectively. It also devotes considerable attention to Kouka’s interaction with her ancestors’ Kabyle homeland and with her family’s moral code. The book ends on the conclusion that the protagonist is too culturally unique to ever be able to attain happiness, as others are incapable of relating to her unusual personality.
The latter part of *Tambourins* begins to portray the protagonist’s relationships with men; this will be the main topic of *Solitude ma mère* and of *L’Amant imaginaire*, published in 1975. This latter was published in the shape of a diary, depicting in particular the relationships of its author/narrator Aména with her husband and lovers. These are determined by “l’origine kabyle” and “l’éducation chrétienne qu’on jugea bon de [lui] donner” (29). The main focus is on art and on Aména’s relationship with the man whom she would like to be her lover, Marcel Arrens, who has been thought to represent André Gide. However, it is also a meditation on the way to consolidate Eastern and Western influences and cultures in her personal and artistic life.

*Solitude ma mère*, finally, was published in 1995, although it was written during the 1950s and 1960s. It is in some respects a continuation of *Rue des tambourins*, as it chronicles the relationships of its protagonist Aména with the men in her life, who provide the chapter titles. Aména travels through North Africa and then Europe, looking for fulfillment and understanding, which is denied to her due to her cultural exceptionalness as well as to the sexual frigidity imposed upon her through cultural taboos in the course of her upbringing. Different inter-ethnic as well as inter-cultural conflicts are explored, among them the trauma brought on by one of Aména’s first lovers’ marrying a Frenchwoman rather than her; and these factors combine to lead the narrator-protagonist to a profound resignation to her tragic fate of solitude.

I. *The Amrouches: Christian Berbers in Colonial Algeria*

Taos Amrouche was born on March 4, 1913 into an Algerian family in Tunisia. Her parents, Fadhma (Caroline) Aïth Mansour and Belgacem–Augustin Amrouche, had been raised by Catholic priests and nuns in Kabylia, and had converted from Islam to Christianity.
Amrouche’s mother Fadhma was an illegitimate child, which had led to her social exclusion from Kabyle society, being physically abused by her peers and kept apart from the public life of her village (*Histoire* 26-27). This caused her to connect illegitimate birth with social exclusion, and in order to preserve her daughter from the same fate, she passed on very strict rules of sexual morality to her, as appears throughout Amrouche’s oeuvre. However, Fadhma also saw it fit to provide her daughter with a solid education in Christian schools (Allaoua 32).

Another important person in Taos’ family was her brother Jean, seven years older than her, who was the first to achieve fame on the French literary scene. He was also the one who later helped her publish her works (Allaoua 15). As Jean Déjeux has pointed out, Jean appears under the guises of several of the characters in Amrouche’s oeuvre, such as Laurent “Le Prestigieux” in *Tambourins*, or as the brother Alexandre in *Amant* – characters that reflect the changing nature of the relationship between Taos and Jean. The quality of Jean’s poetry is strongly influenced by mysticism, and for him served as a means of bridging the gap between cultures, as Beida Chikhi has demonstrated. In this way, his conception of art and poetry certainly influenced Taos’ use of literature and autobiographical writing as healing the wounds caused by her own cultural hybridity (in turn caused by conversion to Christianity) – and quite possibly taught her ways in which religious resonances could be woven into her narrative.

Taos was raised in Tunis, where she received an education entirely in French. She spent a considerable amount of time in Kabylia with her family on several occasions during her childhood, which left a strong impression on her (Adam 57). However, she also received a great deal of exposure to the other pole influencing her identity: In 1934, when Taos was 21 years old, she was sent to Paris by her parents, where she was meant to continue her studies (Her mother Fadhma also notes this in her *Histoire de ma vie*). This was the event that gave rise to Taos’ first
novel, *Jacinthe noire*, which she began writing in 1935 and finished in 1939 (although it was not published until 1947).

Also in 1939, Taos intensified her activities as a performer of traditional Berber songs. She participated in a singer’s convention in Fès, during which she won a scholarship to the Casa Velasquez in Madrid. Here, she met her future husband André Bourdil, with whom she was to have a daughter. Moving to France for good in 1945 and working for the French radio, she performed in many more recitals of traditional Berber music. Despite initial problems finding a publisher for her books, she also continued her activities as a writer, publishing her second novel, *Rue des tambourins*, in 1960. In 1966, she then published a collection of Berber stories, poems, and proverbs entitled *Le Grain magique*, and in 1975, *L’Amant imaginaire*, her third novel, this time in the form of a diary. Amrouche’s fourth novel, *Solitude ma mère*, was written starting in 1955 and probably continued until the 1960s, but published only much later by her editor, Joëlle Losfeld, in 1995. This was well after Amrouche’s death, in Paris, on April 2, 1976.

During the last ten years of her life, her singing career had become ever more important to her, indicating perhaps a reconciliation with her Kabyle heritage in the midst of her life in France (Santos 338). She had also become much more active on behalf of the Berber population of Algeria since the late 1950s, speaking and writing in favor of the preservation of the Berber language and heritage.

Amrouche’s Berber identity is of particular importance in the context of her Christian religion due to historical circumstances. Numerous scholars have pointed out the considerable extent of the Christianization of Kabylia during the first centuries CE (Serralda, Servier). This former Christian identity of Kabylia, subsequently transformed into an Islamic one by the Arab conquest, may also be at the root of the “Kabyle Myth” supported by the French colonial powers:
The French perception of Kabyles as “only superficially Muslim” (Goodman 9) was probably due to the geographic nature of the region, notoriously difficult to conquer for both the French and the Muslim Arab armies (Mehenni 83). It was assumed that there had been remnants of Christianity even after the Muslim conquest, and that therefore Islamization was not as profound in Kabylia as in other regions. However, statistically, Christianity was not extremely widespread in Kabylia (Mehenni 38); thus, the “less Islamic” nature of the Kabyles was more perception than fact. At the same time, this status as a still relatively small minority rendered the position of its members all the more vulnerable and put its members even more on the defensive, as we will see in the case of the Amrouches.

What this means for the Amrouche family’s history is that, being of an ethnicity whose allegiance to Islam was doubted in the first place, the stigma of having indeed rejected Islam must have been particularly stinging. A community that is sensitized about its religious allegiance (being forced to justify and affirm it in the face of criticism) will be particularly unforgiving towards members who do defect from this religion; and indeed, Jean Morizot points out that there was a particularly strong ostracism leveled against Berbers who had converted to Christianity. Converts were treated as “renégats” (147), and this is also an expression that we find in several instances in Amrouche, designating the way her family was viewed by Kabyle society (Tambourins 37, Solitude 195). Her mother Fadhma uses the same expression in her autobiography: “Pour les Kabyles, nous étions des Roumis, des renégats” (203). Therefore, due to the fact that Berber converts were especially stigmatized and the fact that in Islam, religious defection carries a strong stigma to begin with, the fact of Taos Amrouche’s own Christianity must have been very wounding for her. She felt the exclusion from her community of origin in a particularly stinging way, the reasons for which are rarely explicitly analyzed in her works, but
nevertheless perceptible in the suffering that she expresses at her exclusion from Muslim Kabyle society. This is part of the traumatizing, wounding nature that religion takes on in Amrouche’s life and oeuvre for which I argue in this chapter.

II. A Subtly Subversive Autobiographical Style

By using autobiographical writing, as has been pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, Amrouche comes to what Suzette A. Henke calls “scriptotherapy”, “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii). As will be explained here, Amrouche makes this genre her own, ostensibly following simple narrative norms, but effectively coming to terms with her own traumatic experiences through the adaptation of the genre and the depiction of the experiences of her characters.

At first reading, Amrouche’s writing appears remarkably simple: Its autobiographical nature has been fairly well established. Although there is no explicit autobiographical pact within her works, and although all of the books under consideration here bear the notice “roman”, they can be considered autobiographical novels due to the parallels that they show with Amrouche’s own life. However, Ada Ribstein has pointed out that Amrouche uses a somewhat nonconformist construction of autobiography in the third person in *Jacinthe noire*, and that she thus constructs a bridge between “Orient and Occident”: Amrouche uses the form of an autobiography in which she makes the narrator the “other” (94). By using this technique, she combines the very occidental genres of the bourgeois novel and of autobiography with the oral tradition, which

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3 According to Philippe Lejeune’s *Le Pacte autobiographique*, the author of an autobiographical work enters a contract with his or her reader according to which the author will write on his or her own life, striving for honesty and truthfulness in his or her portrayal of him- or herself.
Ribstein associates with Berber tradition: by separating narrator from protagonist and letting the former tell the story of the latter, Amrouche opens the door to prolonged oral exchanges between the two. Thus, the real story of Reine is related in oral tales, reminiscent of traditional Berber storytelling (8). Others also point towards the European, Christian origins of the autobiographical genre, such as Kherib Allaoua in *L’ambivalence culturelle dans le roman Rue des tambourins de Taos Amrouche*, and establish quite convincingly the autobiographical nature of Amrouche’s oeuvre. This autobiographical nature, although embraced, is thus, like Amrouche’s religiosity, not simply accepted without modifications, but adapted to her own needs.

The storytelling in Amrouche’s oeuvre is, for the most part, astonishingly linear, as has also been pointed out by Denise Brahimi (45). This can be read as a statement that the author is familiar with the norms of Western novel-writing. However, compared to the considerable challenges to narrative norms taking place on the European literary scene during the time of Amrouche’s writing (from the 1930s to the 1960s), her narrative techniques prove to be particularly conservative. This can be interpreted as a willingness to hold on to more conservative norms, as she also holds on to Christianity, although we will see that she also challenges those writing norms in very specific ways, just as she challenges certain norms of religion. One may also see an eschatological aspect in Amrouche’s linear storytelling, especially considering her concern with destiny and inevitability throughout her oeuvre. This is expressed most strikingly in her friend Noël’s “decree” in *Tambourins*: “*Vous ne serez jamais heureuse*” (italics in original, 335). It appears that in her mind, certain events *must* happen as if by divine decree, and sometimes they must even happen in a particular order, such as the steps of Reine’s martyrdom in the Paris pension. This is akin to Christian eschatological thought on the progress towards “last things”, the end of the world, the Second Coming of Christ etc. By thus focusing
on concepts strongly influenced by Christianity, Amrouche’s writing style speaks to an attachment to the basic concepts of the religion, although she criticizes many of its applications and of its appliers in other contexts.

When it comes to the focalization of the characters in Amrouche, one notices that it is intensely internal, at least in the case of the protagonist-narrator. According to Gérard Genette, the only way to fully realize internal focalization is interior monologue (193), and in many ways, Rue des tambourins, Solitude ma mère, and L’Amant imaginaire consist mostly of a monologue-like internal meditation by the autobiographical narrator, whereas this kind of internal focalization is split between two characters in Jacinthe. In each case, the narrator (and in the case of Jacinthe, also the non-narrator character Reine) lets us in on her most intimate secrets, and the writing process appears like a therapy, a working-through of a traumatic event.

What is more, there are also other religious resonances in Amrouche’s use of autobiography: As Paul Jay points out in Being in the Text, autobiography originally served authors to free themselves from the “religious or communal ends” imposed by other forms of literature (41). In this way, autobiography enabled them to transcend themselves “without any divine ‘Helper’” (id.). By writing on religious themes in the autobiographical mode, then, Amrouche gains the ability to free herself from religiously imposed norms, and is thus capable of determining those norms for herself. She is freer to decide whether to be religious at all, and if she does choose to be so, as I argue that she does, she is able to establish parameters for this religiosity herself thanks to her increased independence. At the same time, if other writers use autobiography to free themselves from religion, Amrouche turns this procedure around by using it to speak about religion – which she embraces by redefining it, as will be analyzed in detail in the chapter dedicated to her.
Despite these autobiographical characteristics, as has been alluded to before, *Jacinthe noire* uses a very peculiar technique. The character that has been identified with Amrouche, Reine, is not the narrator; rather, she is being observed by another character who tells the story in the first person. This character, Marie-Thérèse or Maité, looks upon Reine in a highly sympathetic and even admiring way, and gains access to Reine’s inner life through Reine’s very personal and detailed stories. This can lead us to a number of conclusions: Firstly, we can conclude that Amrouche, who throughout her autobiographical oeuvre stresses the fact that she is misunderstood, needs to tell herself in full detail and be understood by others to the degree that Reine is understood by Marie-Thérèse. Secondly, like the orientalizing, alienating elements in much of Amrouche’s oeuvre (to be analyzed later in this chapter), this displacement of the narrating instance also indicates an acute audience awareness on the part of the author. She is so concerned with the reactions of a Western audience (to her person, her writing, or her music) that she goes through the effort of displacing her own perspective into that of a Western woman in order to (literarily) gauge what that woman’s reactions to her would be. We can thus assume with Denise Brahimi that this technique is being used in the interest of showing how much Reine is “étrangère à elle-même” (14), alienated from herself. Displacing the narrating situation is equivalent to saying that due to her cultural hybridity, she cannot even speak of herself by herself, but that a Western point of view (that of Marie-Thérèse) is imposed upon her.

Finally, Ada Ribstein interprets this displacing move as signifying a subversion of Western narrative expectations. Much more on the subversion of narrative norms will be said in the chapter on Cixous; but even Amrouche, with her seemingly so straight and conservative storytelling and her apparent acceptance of the genre of autobiography engages in a certain degree of subtle, but wide-ranging subversiveness in her storytelling. Thus, besides proving
herself capable of following the norms of Western storytelling, she establishes her independence from them and her ability and willingness to recast them. This shows a considerable degree of liberty and creativity with established rules, which also carries over into the realm of the religious.

Compared to these kinds of protagonists, most other characters in Amrouche’s oeuvre are rather flat, characterized only by a few visual features or traits of character. Thus, the characters of *Jacinthe*, for example, are described only by one or a very few epithets: “Marie-Josèphe, l’effacée”; “Paula, aux yeux enfantins, et Jeannette, aux yeux vifs, au teint olivâtre, espagnole de sang” (19), etc.⁴ Throughout the novel, characters are reduced to a few primary traits, with little or no development - with the exception of the protagonist. Even the first-person narrator Marie-Thérèse is reduced to a pale and nondescript figure, whose lack of interesting traits is stressed explicitly to point out the protagonist Reine’s unusual, almost larger-than-life character. The secondary characters are mere types, reminiscent of fables. It can be assumed that these secondary characters exist primarily for the effect that they have on the protagonist, in order for her to reflect herself in them. The limited nature of their characterization stresses the vivid and multi-faceted nature of the protagonist’s psychological inner life, which is the novel’s main focus. By using such a contrasting *repoussoir* technique, Amrouche is able to focus on and work through her main character’s inner conflicts, and in so doing, her own.

⁴ A similar phenomenon to that of demoting secondary characters to put the female main character into light can be observed in *Solitude*. The protagonist’s family members are reduced to one or a few traits of character, such as the strong Yemma or the intransigent Gida. Often, this trait is even part of their designation: The sons in the family are often named “Charles le Prodigue”, “Laurent le Prestigieux”, “Georges le Rieur” etc. All of this simplicity is mirrored in the narrator-protagonist’s mind, who exposes her inner life in great detail and in all its contradictions.
Reine, then, is portrayed as extremely colorful and exciting (“un corsage de laine feu”, 14, “de teinte violente”, 15, etc.), especially in comparison with the drab pension girls.

Interestingly, Reine’s autobiographical double, Taos, also contains keys to Reine’s personality: “Taos” is the Arabic word for peacock, and in a fashion similar to that of the peacock, Reine displays her adornments and surrounds herself with unusual beauty. More than that, Reine also surrounds herself with a following of her own - as Jacinthe continues, there begin to be two camps in the pension, those on Reine’s side, and those who are against her. In parallel, Reine recreates for Marie-Thérèse the “brilliant cortège” (284) that used to be hers in Tunisia; she thus truly becomes a kind of “queen” surrounded by her court. More than that, she almost transforms herself into the goddess of her own religion: She creates a kind of sanctum for herself in her room, which appears like a golden, sacred refuge filled with reliquaries to Marie-Thérèse; and she invents a liturgy of sorts, consisting of songs and poetry. In this way, Reine is not only regal, but surrounds herself with an air of divinity.

For the purposes of the narrator Marie-Thérèse, then, who is completely under Reine’s spell, Reine’s function is akin to Luce Irigaray’s postulate of women creating a god of their own in order to determine what goals and ideals to attain. Reine is revered by her following, and in fact, her being first martyred by her enemies in the pension and eventually chased from it is reminiscent of a passion play, a symbolic crucifixion. Reine symbolically dies for having brought her “gospel” to the world of ungrateful Parisian pension inmates, and although they torture and eventually brutally chase her from their world, her “apostles”, the narrator Marie-Thérèse and some of her friends, have well heard her message. In fact, in the best tradition of Christian apostles and of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, Marie-Thérèse writes
Reine’s gospel with *Jacinthe noire*. In this way, Reine propagates her message of a religion of love, sensuality, and of praising God through His creation.

By thus creating a fabulously colorful, messianic double of herself in her autobiographical writing, Amrouche is able to focus on the character’s internal life, and thus uses the genre’s therapeutic functions in order to work through the trauma that religion has inflicted upon her. Rather than only following established literary traditions, she makes them her own and adapts them to her own purposes; and in addition, epitome of subversion, she creates a character who has her own aspects of divinity and thus challenges established notions of the nature of God.

**III. Four-way-streets: Amrouche caught between Muslim and Christian Cultures**

Despite these high-flying ambitions, it also becomes clear that Amrouche’s position at the crossroads of East and West is a highly difficult one because it implies exclusions from all sides. Throughout Amrouche’s novels, it can be seen that the main characters experience alienation from both the Berber and the European cultural circles, and that it is in both cases bidirectional (the characters are both experiencing and exerting rejection) and ambivalent (involving attraction and repulsion at the same time). Kherib Alliaoua has explored in depth the cultural ambivalence present in Amrouche’s *Rue des tambourins*, which leads the protagonist simultaneously to attempt to embrace and to reject the two cultures to which she is exposed (108). He concludes that, although this is a highly destructive process in Amrouche’s case, it leads to the creation of a completely new, hybrid identity that learns to speak the language of the other. I would like to show here how these two cultures, Berber/Muslim and European/Christian, are rejected by her, but also reject her themselves.
A. No Longer One of Us: Cultural Rejection from Berber Country

The difficulty of Amrouche’s relationship with her parents’ homeland becomes most obvious on p. 124 of Rue des tambourins, where, in the context of the family leaving the Kabyle mountains, the words “déchirement”, “déchirerait” and “déchirures” all appear on the same page. Returning to the “pays” is tempting – for example, when Tambourins’ protagonist is called on by Berber women who want to find a husband for her, and who thus attempt to attract her with all kinds of compliments (99); or when Berber dancers lure her into their circle with their tantalizing rhythms (104-105). However, the protagonist also regularly experiences rejection on the part of just this country and its culture. For example, when she is shown the Muslim cemetery in which she will never rest, she feels that her family members are being forever “chassés de notre propre pays”, because she is told that she will spend eternity far from her Muslim ancestors and in the wrong resting place (76). On another occasion, when she attends a wedding in her village in Kabylia, she does not fit in, although she is dressed up and made-up à la mode du pays (104). It is clear that this is the case because of her westernized city upbringing (in turn due to her family’s Christianization), which does not allow her to adopt the Berber village customs as her own. Thus, her homeland rejects her and her family: “Ce pays ancestral où chacun se permettait de nous juger, nous repoussait” (Tambourins 172).

Another way in which the schism between the narrator and her family’s culture of origin is imposed upon her is through the rules that she is expected to follow while she is living with her parents. Her education in a Christian environment and her contact with Christian girls has caused her to acquire different norms than those of her parents’ culture of origin (be it about dress length, Tambourins 40, or about going out with boys, 181; more on this will be said in the
section on moral codes and gender norms). Especially the sexual taboos of the latter clash with her chosen culture – for example, the shame of having given herself to her fiancé and having to hide this from her parents tears her apart (Solitude 71-72). Therefore, she experiences her parents’ more conservative norms as a rejection of her chosen way of living on the part of Kabyle culture, and feels more alienated from that culture than ever. What is more, as a child, Amrouche is being “cruelly” separated by her parents from her Muslim peers (Tambourins 105-106) - which leads her to go so far as to say that she has had “no childhood” (300). In all of these ways, then, the narrator’s education has led her to feel that her family’s culture of origin is rejecting her – she has no way of associating with Arab or Berber children, and her parents critique her for her chosen lifestyle on the grounds of their ancestral culture. It must appear to Amrouche’s protagonists, then, that, due to their upbringing, their ancestors’ culture has no place for them. They are placed in a double bind – forbidden, on the one hand, from frequenting Arab and Muslim children, and on the other hand, criticized by their parents for their newly acquired culture (which they have only acquired due to the parents’ own doing, the parents’ conversion). This double bind is what makes Amrouche’s alter egos inadmissible to the company they seek – they are rejected not due to any conscious decision, but due to an intuitive reaction (almost akin to a body rejecting a foreign substance), and this is what makes for her wounding loneliness.

Finally, the entire family is stigmatized in the eyes of their original community due to the fact that they are converts to Christianity. The ostracism leveled against converts to Christianity by Kabyle society has already been pointed out in section I. This conversion (kufr, also meaning “disbelief”) carries a particularly strong stigma in Islam, and the fact that the narrator’s family is alienated from much of its surrounding population because of it is mentioned in a number of instances (Solitude 195, Tambourins 37). Thus, Amrouche’s narrators, doubles of Amrouche
herself, depict an alienation from Berber culture that is expressed in their experiences in Kabylia, in the effects of their upbringing, and in their perception of the stigma of *kufur*.

**B. No Longer One of You: Othering Her Ancestral Culture**

The rejection experienced by Amrouche and her family is not exerted in only one direction. It appears on many occasions, for example, that Amrouche’s protagonists have internalized European prejudices against the North African population. In some cases, this only expresses itself in simple stereotyping: The narrator of *Solitude, ma mère* expects that Africans should have “feu”, “saveur”, and “esprit” (199), qualities that, albeit being mostly positive, are stereotypes nonetheless. Another instance of stereotyping of Kabyle Berbers can be found in *Rue des tambourins*:

> Il manquait à Emeraude le costume ancestral et les ornements barbares qui eussent accusé la noblesse de ses traits, et toutes les senteurs qui eussent gardé son mystère: l’ambre et le musc, le safran, le henné, le jasmin et la rose. En un mot, il lui manquait *la magie de l’orient*. (*Tambourins* 51, my italics)

In this instance, Amrouche clearly chooses one of her two identities, the Europeanized one, and takes its point of view. In order to cater to a European audience, she simplifies Berber identity to attributes recognizable by that audience – smells, costume, and jewelry. Then, she simplifies the whole to a stereotype that seems to be directly taken from a 19th-century tourist guidebook, “la magie de l’orient”, when what she calls “magie” should be more than sufficiently familiar and far less than magical to her; but this is the expression with which her intended European audience will have the strongest associations.
Similarly, the narrator exoticizes Arab North African culture by describing its festivities as “des divertissements féeriques” (Tambourins 106), conjuring up the “mystère des noces orientales, célébrées dans le secret des patios, parmi les chants et les danses voluptueuses” (64, my italics). The stereotype continues with a description of the sensual revelries in a “mystérieuse salle” (65); however, this mysterious hall is the narrator’s own neighbors’ patio, and should therefore be familiar rather than mysterious to her. She still renders it exotic and mystifying in her description, using well-known commonplaces attached to Arab culture, such as the sensuous dances danced and sugary dishes served at this celebration. In this way, she is quite clearly taking on an Orientalist point of view that casts Berber and Arab cultures as Other, mystifying and astonishing, a point of view that defines those cultures and belittles their intricacies by simplifying them into stereotypes. It is telling that the culture described in such an Orientalist way is in fact part of Amrouche’s own heritage. Amrouche clearly chooses one side of her identity, the Europeanized one, over the other, North African Berber one, while distancing herself as far as possible from the latter by taking on an exceedingly European perspective and casting Arab and Berber cultures in an exotic light. This demonstrates how much she has internalized Orientalist clichés and to what extent she has become alienated from this segment of her heritage.

Whereas these stereotypes are often relatively neutral and even on occasion positive (a symptom of the simultaneous attraction and repulsion mentioned above), Amrouche’s narrators often also speak about North Africans of non-European descent in a clearly derogatory way. In Tambourins, the narrator’s own relatives are described as smelling bad, as having “de longues barbes incultes” and “[d]es yeux de bête à demi sauvage” (42). The house of the Amrouche family’s Berber gardener – one of the few outside of her Europeanized milieu that she visits – is
immediately associated with dirt and pests (149); and she harshly chastises the Muslim husband of her family’s Sicilian maid for imposing his will on her (Tambourins 152, 162). When Amrouche depicts non-pied-noir North Africans, then, she jumps to the conclusion that they are less clean, depicts behavior that conforms to negative stereotypes, and uses imagery that stresses the fact that she perceives them as uncivilized.

However, depictions of the family’s interactions with Muslim North Africans are fairly rare, and when they do appear, the stereotypical character of the facts described is all the more striking. Amrouche’s narrator herself explains this by mentioning that her family deliberately isolated itself from the Muslim populations of its hometown for fear of being punished as renegades. However, interactions with Muslims must have occurred much more often than their presence in the novels suggests. Moreover, the family’s and the narrator’s relationships with the Muslim community in the abstract sense is hardly ever reflected upon. This suggests a wound of sorts, a pained relationship that the author is attempting to avoid. Even when a trauma is being worked through (such as in scriptotherapy), direct contact with the original wound, which would here be interactions with Muslim North Africans, is often avoided. Thus, even though Amrouche is using autobiographical writing to come to terms with the wounding inflicted upon her by religion, she is still doing so by avoiding one of the most painful aspects of her family’s history – that of contact with the Muslim population.

Finally, when Amrouche’s narrator’s relationship to her own roots is investigated, it is striking how negative her evaluation of those roots turns out. She speaks about the “atavisme” that causes her to be oversensitive to the smell of alcohol (Solitude 110), an oversensitivity that stems from the negative view of alcohol in the Muslim culture of her ancestors. Furthermore, she bitterly accuses the origins that make it impossible for her to be carefree in love: “J’incriminais
mon origine et la façon dont mes parents m’avaient élevée” (i.e., according to Kabyle mores, 119). Anything, then, that shows up the influence that her ancestral culture has had on her is viewed negatively and given the worst epithets.

Through all of these observations, a picture of Amrouche emerges that, firstly, attempts to evacuate any association with Muslims and Islam from her creative world, and, secondly, attempts to completely take on the point of view of the pied-noir society in which she lives, even to the point of debasing her own origins and family. In attempting to become part of one group, Amrouche tries to “other” the part of her hybrid self that is her desired community’s Other. That this struggle, despite its sacrifices, is not successful will be shown in the next section.

C. Not Yet One of You: The Inability to Integrate to European Culture

One of the first impressions by which the reader is struck throughout Amrouche’s novels is to what extent her protagonists try to adapt to the culture of European-Christian origin in North Africa, and also that in Europe when the novel takes place there. One remarks that the protagonists show a clear predilection for European lovers, and do not even seem to consider the possibility of taking lovers of North African origin (with one exception in Solitude). What they call their “efforts pour essayer d’être semblable aux autres” (Solitude 114) are in reality efforts to adapt to Christian European culture exclusively: The narrator-protagonists’ cultural references are, when they are chosen rather than subconscious, European (see esp. Tambourins 21, 335; also pointed out in Brahimi 73). Amrouche writes in a genre that has traditionally been linked to European culture (although it has been used in many other cultural contexts as well more recently); and even in the imagery she uses to express the most profound desires of her
protagonists, the Europeanized nature of her framework of thought shines through: When consumed by the “fire” of her own contradictions, the narrator of *Amant* yearns for the soothing view of “green hills” (322).

However, despite this apparent longing to integrate into this Christian European culture to which, due to her parents’ conversion, she seems to have no alternative, there are also numerous passages in which it becomes clear that on a deeper level, the protagonist cannot accept this culture as her own and must therefore reject it. “M’intégrer à lui?”, asks Kouka of *Tambourins* on the subject of one of her pied-noir lovers (whose culture, if not European per se, is determined by European points of reference). “Mais ne serait-ce pas perdre mon passé, ma race, et jusqu’à mon existence propre?” (279). In this case, then, Kouka would reject European culture rather than giving up her Kabyle bearings for a man. It is particularly in situations of crisis that these moments of rejection of her European education occur. For example, when her pied-noir fiancé rejects her for a European woman, the protagonist of *Solitude* is outraged by the ease with which her entourage accepts this dishonorable behavior. “Où donc est votre sens de l’honneur, à vous, Européens ? Tu ne vois pas qu’il y a d’ignoble dans cet abus de confiance?”, she asks of her best friend, a pied-noir woman (80). It is during these emotionally intense moments that the protagonists decide that European culture is not for them and that, as it is, it must be rejected.

Another of these emotionally intense moments is the main subject of *Jacinthe noire*, in which the protagonist for the first time experiences Catholic European culture up close, i.e. in her own living quarters. When she finds out to what extent this culture is contrary to her own belief system, she openly shows her rejection of it - by storming out of the room at a moment of communal joy (176), openly declaring her intention to leave the pension (229, 236), and finally,
expressing the summary of her reproaches to a leader of the community in a letter (252-56). As will be detailed later, this is because the culture she is experiencing clashes violently with her own religious and ethical values – which, in turn, are determined by openness, joy of life, and sensuality. Whatever the case may be, this situation makes it impossible for the protagonist to coexist with this kind of Catholic European culture.

Indeed, in keeping with her reservations about established Catholic dogma, Amrouche’s works show a decided distrust towards the representatives of the Church and of its established structures (perhaps also influenced by the anticlerical strain in early 20th century French literature, Swift). Especially in *Jacinthe noire*, this is visible: The one thing in which the protagonist had put her hopes had been Father Julien, and even he betrays her at the end of the novel (204) by telling her secrets to her enemies. Just like the holier-than-thou pension girls (“Trompeuses comme l’innocence de Paula”, 246), he is “[u]n traître qui livre ceux qui viennent à lui sans défense, lui qui m’était apparu comme un saint” (246). At the pinnacle of hypocrisy and perfidiousness, the leaders of this Catholic pension thus use the attributes of holiness and (Catholic) respectability in order to ensnare those who are different and to lead them to their downfall and humiliation: “Trompeuses alors, la lumière de ses yeux et de ses mains, la sainteté que reflétait son visage émacié? […] Je me sentais mourir de honte et de douleur” (246). The lying and hypocritical nature of these characters is evoked many times (“Ecouter aux portes, épier, jeter un coup d’oeil sur les letters qui ne vous appartiennent pas”, 180), but is most strikingly summarized in the sentence describing the feelings the pension director harbors toward the protagonist: “‘Elle vous aime dans le ciel, ce qui lui permet de vous détester sur terre!’” (269)

Indeed, the atmosphere in the pension is unhealthily tense. For example, there are never any sensual amusements, such as music or dancing, according to the unwritten house rules (25).
The director, Mlle Anatole, keeps a close watch over the pension (in)mates when she “[vient] faire sa ronde” (27), but the girls themselves also create an atmosphere of distrust because they speak behind each other’s backs (43) and manipulate each other (44). The characters whose consciousness the reader is allowed to enter, Reine’s and Marie-Thérèse’s, reveal to what extent those characters have the impression that they must be constantly on their guard and concerned with what is being said about them: “On commente tous mes faits et gestes” (96), Reine observes during an escapade, and in her farewell letter, she determines that “il y a une inquisition dans la pension. Car Mlle Anatole saurait-elle que je suis ‘un danger’ pour mes camarades si elle ne les avait sondées, une à une, de sa voix mielleuse?” (256). There is thus a constant control of everyone’s thoughts and feelings, and none of the pension girls are able to express themselves freely without having to be concerned about the consequences. Most disturbingly, the control is disquietingly vague: Reine and Marie-Thérèse realize that “on se soucie de notre amitié à la pension” (96), but the possible punishments are unknown. This makes the hovering menace all the more oppressive.

Beyond being conniving, lying backstabbers, the pension girls representing the Catholic Church in *Jacinthe noire* are also generally fear-inducing (inspiring a “peur” that inflates such as to become “angoisse”, 211), and for good reasons: Their conspiratorial, scheming nature is proven, resulting in Reine likening them to Molière’s Tartuffe in several instances (250, 260). More specifically, however, the pension is likened to a cult with its own, independent leadership and undoubting members who have their own customs, their unwritten rules, and even their own language (46). As alluded to above, Reine goes so far as to compare the pension members to one of the most shameful institutions in Church history - that of the Inquisition (256). Faced with this kind of a negative impression of French Catholicism, it is obvious that a new conceptualization
of religion and religiosity needed to be elaborated by this author who was unwilling to part with Christianity altogether.

Finally, Amrouche charges French Catholicism with two crimes that must weigh particularly heavily for an author who has grown up with the influence of Islam: Idolatry (the pension girls adore their leaders like idols, and one of them is actually described by the narrator as “la grande idole”; 197); and encouraging monasticism and exaggerated forms of chastity, and even pushing those towards it who do not feel a natural penchant for it (Jacinthe 86; Solitude 140). We will see in the final section what she proposes as an alternative.

A special case of representing the Church, missionarianism in Amrouche is treated in a somewhat ambivalent way. In many instances, especially in Tambourins, admiration is expressed for the good deeds of the Soeurs Blanches, who were the original cause of Amrouche’s mother’s conversion to Christianity (and thus of Amrouche’s own being raised Christian). They help the sick (66, 87), raise orphans (69), and direct crafts centers (Jacinthe 200). More than that – beyond doing good deeds, the missionaries are seen by the narrator’s family as practically superhuman: “[L]es prêtres n’étaient pas des hommes à nos yeux, mais des représentants de Dieu sur terre. Au-dessus des mortels, à l’abri de leurs belles draperies de neige, ils étaient sacrés” (Tambourins 93). In Jacinthe noire as well, the protagonist praises beyond mere admiration the missionary who has helped her come to Paris to study: “Thala est un Africain converti. Il fait du prosélytisme. Mais c’est chez lui une vocation et non une attitude. […] Les enfants et les bêtes vont à lui […] son sourire vous ressuscite” (115). Through these allusions to Jesus Christ, Amrouche also transforms the missionaries who inspire her into something more than mere men and women, by virtue of their self-sacrifice.
The difference between true and false missionaries (those who are missionaries out of self-sacrifice, and those who do it for their own personal sake), however, becomes clear when Reine, the protagonist of *Jacinthe noire*, compares the North African missionaries to the girls in the Parisian pension, who like to cast themselves as junior missionaries – and who are probably inspired by the early twentieth-century Catholic revival in France and by the conversions of authors they read, such as Huysmans or Péguy (44). "Mais on leur répète qu’il faut sauver les âmes!", exclaims Reine, and then draws a clear distinction between two types of missionaries: "Les âmes ! Mais on les sauve avec son sang, avec sa vie!" (121). Missionary efforts are false and contemptible when they are being covered up by hypocrisy and disingenuousness (118-19) or when they only serve the missionary’s self-aggrandizement or some other ulterior purpose (115). Similarly, conversion attempts are reprehensible when they aim to convert someone against his or her own will, such as the narrator’s grandmother in *Tambourins* (72). Thus, for Amrouche, there is an admirable and an unacceptable way of pursuing missionary activities.

In fact, even the North African missionaries, whose activities are praised so highly in some instances, are not always depicted in the most flattering way. “[I]l croit nous comprendre,” criticizes the narrator’s mother in *Tambourins* one of the more gullible missionaries, “et il se met le doigt dans l’oeil” (85). Much worse is the behavior of one missionary who “aimait d’un peu trop près les petits garçons” and molested them in the sacristy (87). The Sisters also sometimes show reprehensible behavior: the narrator’s mother, who was living with the Soeurs Blanches, was accused of a crime she didn’t commit, and was rudely punished and humiliated by the Sisters (88). Then, adding insult to injury, they reminded her of the incident years later in the form of a joke (89) – an incident that proved to have a formative role in shaping the narrator’s attitudes to Church representatives. Thus, the narrator feels quite ambivalently about these
missionaries, who on the one hand dedicated their lives to Kabylia, but on the other hand also misunderstood and mistreated its people all too often.

Ultimately, trying to adapt to European culture and to accept its norms, to think in its frameworks, has been a lifelong struggle for Amrouche’s protagonists, but eventually, it ends in rejection and an inability to accept embracing it. The reason for this, a rejection of her own person that she experiences on the part of European culture, will be explained in the next section.

D. Not Yet One of Us: Othering, Misunderstanding, and Racism

"Je ne saurai jamais, me disais-je, manger comme tout le monde, travailler, dormir, profiter de la vie, et même souffrir comme tout le monde !", exclaims the narrator of Solitude faced with Parisian ways of living (133); and by “tout le monde”, she, significantly, means Christian European society. Even earlier in this book, she has proclaimed that “ce bond par-dessus les siècles, je n’en étais pas capable » (100), referring to the same attempt at adaptation to European culture.

Of course, she has good reasons to assume that this adaptation is not possible for her because she has been given numerous signs of rejection from Europeans or those who presume to represent European culture. Firstly, one of the major dramas of Solitude is the rejection of its main character by her pied-noir fiancé in favor of a young Frenchwoman. Not only are the lovers and love interests of Amrouche’s protagonists incapable of and unwilling to understand the young woman’s cultural particularities (Tambourins 202, Solitude 100), but their qualms about entering into a relationship with her are also directly ascribed to the fact that she is an “indigène” of Berber origin (Tambourins 255). This expression is repeated several times and in more than
one book (see Solitude 26, 69, 83, and 92), and always in the context of the protagonist not being considered quite as worthy as others due to the fact that she is labeled as an “indigène”.

To this rejection in the romantic sphere is added a rejection in the realm of the social: As Jacqueline Arnaud has pointed out, the solitude of Amrouche’s main characters is due to their perceived “différence raciale” (I), which is portrayed most trenchantly in Jacinthe noire. Here, this “racial” difference is evoked multiple times as a reason for the main character Reine’s ostracism. “Une seule d’entre nous me déroute”, says her pension mate Paula, who calls her “cette Reine de race mystérieuse, de sang africain” (44). The apposition between these two phrases implies a causation: because Reine is of a different origin, she is incomprehensible, and therefore disturbs Paula. On occasion, this “racial” difference is even used as an excuse for demonizing Reine: For example, Reine reflects the other girls’ opinions of her and Marie-Thérèse by summarizing, “Maintenant, le diablotin fraternise avec le diable” (115). Furthermore, when Reine reflects on the pension girls’ accusations that she has a corrupting influence, she cries, “On m’a investi de ce pouvoir diabolique, moi, Marie-Thérèse!” (247). Thus, Amrouche’s doubles have no chance of being accepted into European culture, being accused of the worst characteristics and being subject to the worst racism. Due to this, both in her romantic life and in her interactions with her female peers, Amrouche’s main characters are rejected from European culture.

Clearly, then, Reine is more than simply an outcast for the pension girls: besides being likened to the devil, she is considered heretical because she leaves the fold of conservative Catholicism to construct an alternate approach to religion. When she is expelled from the pension, she is sacrificed as if she were a heretic burned at the stake. Moreover, her activities have a further dimension: In addition to her fantastical nature, analyzed above, her activities at
the pension – i.e., first gathering a following and then being sacrificed – gain an air of martyrdom or even of a Messianic Passion. Amrouche’s depiction of Reine’s presence and history at the pension, including her expulsion from it, liken her to Jesus Christ, the Messiah of her own religion.

For the pension girls, Reine is thus made to be the Other necessary for them to define themselves in a positive light. “Je suis le sujet que l’on étudie, elles sont légion à m’épier et à me juger”, she confesses, almost a statement foreshadowing theories on Orientalism. She is described as a “curiosité” (113), “un oiseau des îles” (247), and, simply to mark her difference, is said to swear “comme une négresse au milieu de femmes blanches” (although throughout the book she never uses a single swearword, 248), clear instances of exoticization. No matter her real origins, she is used to mark and define difference, and thus in turn reminds the pension girls of “une Espagnole”, “une Russe” or “une Syrienne” (111). She thus becomes the radical Other for her peers of European origin, who refuse to make any effort to understand the intricacies of her actual nature, her history, or her goals.

It is remarkable that the protagonist explicitly points out that all of this occurs in spite of her Christian religion. “A quoi bon avoir […], tant bien que mal, suivi le Christ ?”, she asks. “Je serais toujours une étrangère, une indigène” (Solitude 69, italics in original). This statement makes it clear that, because of her Berber origins, it does not matter to the outside world how well she follows traditional Christian dogma. Race, in this case, trumps religion (somewhat against the spirit of the original Church Fathers, as Saint Augustine, for example, was himself a Berber). At the same time, however, and somewhat surprisingly, it demonstrates that Amrouche never renounces her Christian identity; it is as much a part of her as her haunting Berber heritage. Therefore, it is a necessity for her to create a version of Christianity that is her own and that she
can nonetheless believe in, although she has experienced such hurtful rejection from those who claim to represent established Christian dogma.

Christianity has been hurtful to Amrouche’s autobiographical protagonists in alienating them from their community of origin, and thus inflicted a trauma or wound upon them. Colonialism permitted missionary efforts and the conversion of the Amrouche family, while giving rise to hopes of integration into pied-noir society; at the same time, however, it did not do away with the racism that prevented this integration, while the Amrouches were being rejected by those living on their ancestral lands and the ancestral way because of their conversion.

On the other hand, however, Christianity is also a refuge of sorts: when the narrator is being rejected both by the Christian-European society to which she seeks to assimilate and by the Berber society of her origins, only the Christianity that links her to both remains between the two. This “safe haven” of religion must therefore be made into as welcoming a place as possible, by adjusting it to her needs. I will define the resulting parameters of this adjusted Christianity in the final section of this chapter.

IV. Bilateral Rejection as the Mother of Creativity: The Amrouchean Synthesis

A. Cultural Crossings: A Necessary Hybridity

Initially, it should be remarked that in the world of Amrouche’s novels, mixtures, blends, and amalgams in general hold a place that is given a positive value. "[I]l est un peu vain", Denise Brahimi points out, "de vouloir distinguer les deux cultures de Taos, puisque toute son histoire est justement de les mêler intimement pour en faire sa propre substance" (78). Generally
speaking, then, cultural blends are valued, especially in the case of Amrouche’s own personality, since she herself aims to blend them. Within the family, the necessary mixes of old Berber traditions and French fashions are accepted, and particular appreciation is given to the mixing of cultures in cosmopolitan Algerian society.

There are a few exceptions, however, for example in situations in which a character is portrayed as giving up his or her own essential identity (such as the Sicilian Alba, whose submission to her “Arab” husband the narrator turns into derision, *Tambourins* 151). There are also situations in which the amalgam succeeds only partially, due to the character’s core identity: This is, for example, the case in the aforementioned scene in which the main character of *Rue des tambourins* is dressed up as a Berber girl for her cousin’s wedding. For a moment, this gives her the illusion of having the best of both the urban, Christian and the rural, Muslim worlds. Eventually, however, she realizes that she “ne cadrai[t] avec rien”, that she is and remains an outsider, and that her dress is only a superficial pretense (104). This is an instance of both cultural impersonation and ambiguity: Although Marie-Corail tries her best to impersonate a young Berber girl, and ambiguously, momentarily feels accepted in the circle of her Berber relatives, it is an illusion, and Marie-Corail cannot cheat herself into forgetting the Christian, European part of her identity.

A similarly ambivalent attitude transpires in Amrouche’s description of the Iakouren family at the beginning of *Tambourins*: Certainly, they form an unusual group, and they attract much attention in their “exile” home of Tenzis. “[N]ous détonnions,” the narrator summarizes (29). However, this unusualness is also intriguing (“intriguait”, 29), and the verbs and adverbs with which the family’s elders are described reveal a certain pride and insistence on their difference: “Le père, malgré sa chéchia, se rendait à la messe, tandis que Yemma s’obstinait à ne
jamais l’accompagner, mais l’aïeule portait *ostensiblement* des offrandes aux marabouts” (29, my italics). This mixture of attitudes and behaviors on the part of the family therefore attracts attention, but it is also a source of pride for the family, as the “obstinate” and ostentatious, and thus, confident, nature of their customs indicates.

It is just this pride in the family’s idiosyncrasies that transpires when the narrator of *Rue des tambourins*, in a very strong statement, defends her grandmother’s Muslim practices against a nun’s insistence that the narrator convert her grandmother. “Je ne veux pas qu’on touche à ma grand-mère!”, she shouts, expressing a strong belief in the rightfulness of religious mixing at the heart of her family (72). Another family member who blends different cultural influences in all innocence is the little brother Marcel, from whose mouth “s’envolaient, pêle-mêle, des bouts de cantiques, des berceuses ou des rengaines” (38), and the mother Yemma, who, desperate to save her children from illness, calls not only upon the medical help of the local nuns, but also upon the magical practices of a family member (108). Thus, when the mix of cultures is a frank and authentic act or born from necessity, it is valued positively: Yemma and Gida the grandmother respond to a genuine need to be sustained by the spiritual traditions of their upbringing, and the mixing of different types of music on the part of Marcel represents an innocent child’s recasting of whatever pleases him. The narrator of *Tambourins* expresses great understanding and appreciation for these instances of cultural blending.

This is also the case in a larger societal context. Few scenes are described with as much appreciation for their harmony as that taking place on the beach at Asfar, where "Arabes, Juifs, Maltais, Siciliens et Français sillonnaient en tous sens cette langue de sable heureuse [...e]t toutes ces races qui voisinaient sans heurt vous communiquaient un sentiment d’euphorie et de sécurité” (145-6). These different « races » are of course also representative of different religions...
coexisting harmoniously – Arabs (Muslims), Jews, and French (Catholics) coexisting peacefully evoke Amrouche’s enthusiastic approval. A parallel impression of intercultural harmony is echoed in an intertextual reference in *Jacinthe noire*: Here, André, one of the novel’s most admired pied-noir characters, has written a story called “*Qui de nous est la belle, ô lune! la Princesse solitaire*” (126). This title takes up the words of a North African fairy tale. The amalgam of North African legend and French language and literary culture thus helps one of the most innocent and admirable characters of *Jacinthe noire* make a living. This means that such an amalgam is highly valued, constituting a new kind of art and beautifully blending aspects of North African and French cultures.

When cultures are hybridized in an innocent and non-artificial way – i.e., when they occur as a result of a natural inclination and not as the result of a character contorting him- or herself - then that hybridity constitutes a positive value. It should also be pointed out that whether valued positively or negatively, when they occur, expressions of hybridity always occur by necessity in Amrouche. Amrouche thus presents us with a world in which the mixing of cultures is inevitable, a matter of fate and the result of a constellation of circumstances – as is to be expected at a historical juncture such as that of early 20th-century Tunisia. As described by Amrouche in the beach scene at Asfar (*Tambourins* 145), many different cultures coexist around each other in that place and time, such that interactions, cultural blendings and hybrids are unavoidable. The only thing that can be influenced is whether it is lived honestly and constructively, or whether coercion or dishonesty takes place. Thus, what matters for Amrouche is the lived praxis of hybridity, just as Françoise Lionnet defines *métissage* as a praxis rather than a theory (8). The merchants at the Asfar beach must negotiate their cultural differences on the

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5 doubly intertextual, as it is also later taken up in a scene in *Solitude ma mère* in which the protagonist incarnates the princess calling out to the moon, 167
spot rather than resorting to theoretical considerations, and the mother Yemma in *Tambourins* must resort to whatever praxis will keep her children alive, be it the nuns’ medical knowledge or ancestral magic. As suggested by Lionnet, this praxis of hybridity has a liberating power that can be used to explode the rigidity of preexisting frameworks – as it does when Reine of *Jacinthe noire* enters the Paris pension house and explodes the preconceived notions of its inhabitants. Thus, it can be used to provide the fresh air and the new kind of thinking that characters like Amrouche’s protagonists need so desperately in order to re-frame the way in which they approach religiosity.

**B. Moral Code and Gender Roles**

Between the personal, interior world of the narrator(s) explored in section III and the world at large lies the realm of the family and the narrator’s relationship to her immediate community. The most important observation to be made in the context of religion and the family / community is that contrary to what the reader might expect, Amrouche does not portray Islam as characteristically limiting to women, nor does she portray Christianity as particularly liberating to them. When she depicts the strict education that she is given as a girl by her family, it becomes clear that this strictness is a function of culture rather than of religion: The parents will not allow her to go out even with female friends (*Tambourins* 227), and consider her “comme une enfant” that has to be watched over, “malgré mon diplôme” (262). They do this because of the strict cultural norms according to which they were socialized in Kabylia, and their conversion to Christianity has not changed much about this socialization. Christianity, moreover, is not necessarily a factor that opens up a larger world to young women: Speaking of the girls
from the Christian village in Kabylia, Amrouche says, “Il m’était alors possible de les retrouver, mais pour les entendre m’entretenir de leurs bijoux et de leur trousseau, car elles n’imagineaient rien au-delà des montagnes qui fermaient leur horizon” (*Tambourins* 173). Religion in itself thus does nothing about opening horizons for these girls; their lives and attitudes are still determined by the culture in which they grew up, which determines their daily activities (“la cour à balayer, le couscous à rouler”, 172) as well as their hopes and dreams.

In a different context and on a different continent, Christianity is no more helpful in letting young women choose their destiny: “‘Ma soeur?...,’” recounts the French narrator of *Jacinthe*, who is from a Catholic family. “‘Il y a dans l’air un mariage pour elle. Le prétendant est à Paris, je suis chargée par ma famille de l’examiner, de le scruter...’”. North African Reine replies, astonished, “‘Et Marie-Hélène a cette docilité? Si le fiancé hypothétique vous plait, il plaira du même coup à votre soeur? Admirable!’” (120). Both speakers here are Christian; the difference in their reactions to an arranged marriage thus stems not from their religion, but rather from the differences in their temperament. According to Amrouche, then, arranged marriages and limited prospects for women are thus not uncommon for Christian women, and Christianity does not play a particularly liberating role in their lives.

Moreover, freedom of movement for women is not greater for Christian than for Muslim women in Amrouche. In fact, in the Kabyle village, Christian women are less free to move about than Muslim women are (*Tambourins* 62). Conversely, the narrator’s Christian mother, who lives as a “recluse” in the Christian-dominated city, discovers a new freedom of movement in the Berber village (82-3). The Muslim world, then, is not depicted as any more oppressive to women than the Christian world in Amrouche’s oeuvre in terms of its moral and gender rules.
On the other hand, in some instances, Amrouche caters to the Orientalist conception that many Europeans at the time of her writing had of Muslim North African culture. This also plays into the context of gender norms. Beyond rendering this culture “mysterious” and othering it, as has been pointed out above, Muslim culture is also often characterized by its sensuality by Amrouche, part of which consists in the jewelry of the Muslim girls from the Kabyle village:

[S]urtout ce que j’enviais, c’étaient les vêtements et bijoux dont se paraient nos parentes du haut village [musulman]: ces fibules, ces anneaux d’argent qui tintaient clair, ces colliers d’ambre noir ou de corail, et ces foulards dont les franges retombaient comme de chatoyantes crinières. *(Tambourins 45)*

According to the narrator, typical Berber women are adorned by beautiful headscarves, wear creole earrings and ankle bracelets (70), and exude perfumes of “l’ambre et le musc, le safran, le henné, le jasmin et la rose” (51). Indeed, the headscarf is seen as a tool of beautification (70, 123). On holidays, even the youngest girls in the Kabyle village wear remarkable amounts of make-up (103) and dance the “intoxicating” dance of the *Danseuse Inconnue* (105). None of these are attributes permitted to young Marie-Corail, whereas Christian life is characterized by great austerity.

In the city, as well, the narrator describes Muslim festivities full of envy for their sensuality:

Où était la gaîte qui soufflait sur les mariages des quartiers populeux de Tenzis, et les fleurs, les calèches pimpantes, les grelots, les cocardes et les floquets qui donnaient un air de fête aux chevaux ? Je regrettais, malgré moi, le mystère des noces orientales, célébrées dans le secret des patios, parmi les chants et les danses voluptueuses. (64)
The “Oriental”, i.e. Muslim, lifestyle, is thus characterized by an abundance of sensuality by Amrouche; she expresses envy and regret at Muslim women’s rights to beautify themselves and live among the pleasures of working-class festivities. Occasionally, the severity of Muslim Kabyle traditions is also pointed out – for example in the fact that the possibility of men and women meeting in public is severely limited (78, 81). These depictions, however, are much rarer. The reader has the impression that Amrouche prefers to stress the sensual, beautiful aspects of Muslim Kabyle culture in an attempt to other it in an orientalizing gesture, in order both to set herself apart from it and make it appear more interesting for her European audience.

Once again, however, Amrouche inserts a subtle twist into her writing, here into a seemingly conventional serving of Orientalist clichés. She communicates the impression that, although life in the Kabyle mountains and the local moral norms are harsh, it is not religion that oppresses women, and that life for women in Muslim communities is often more pleasurable than that of Christian women. At the same time, Christianity as a religion does not per se provide liberation for women in Amrouche, although some of her European audience might assume that it would. All the while and despite using some Orientalist lieux communs, Amrouche thus provides a more differentiated perspective on religion in the life of a young North African woman. This is necessary because, caught between two cultures as she is, she must seek her own approach to both and elaborate her own vision of religion and religiosity.
It should be repeated here that Amrouche and her protagonists at no time reject Christianity in itself. As has been analyzed in the Introduction, Amrouche does consider herself Christian, and so do her protagonists. However, despite the fact that they still embrace Christianity, it has also been established in this chapter that the protagonists both experience a certain degree of rejection from pied-noir and French Catholics, and that they also reject them and their religious culture in many instances. Thus, it is a very personal, individualistic approach to Christianity that is being constructed in these works, which is what I am going to show in this section.

Indeed, the self-determined and self-guided nature of Amrouche’s approach to religion is made explicit in a number of instances, especially in *Jacinthe noire*. In their search for a religious position, her narrators strike out on their own and choose for themselves the Christian tenets they will follow. “Elle dit […] qu’elle n’a besoin des lumières d’un prêtre que lorsqu’un de ses actes peut être préjudiciable à autrui”, says one of Reine’s pension mates about her (46), and, “[e]lle se vante d’y atteindre [à Dieu] par la souffrance et toujours seule avec l’aide de Dieu” (47). Reine thus explicitly sets herself apart from the group around the pension director, who all aspire to the same religious path. She expounds this in an exclamation addressed to her helpmate Marie-Thérèse: “Adhérer à un groupe! La chose la plus aisée et la plus reposante pour une Paula, mais pour nous! […] Nous sommes des exilés, Marie-Thérèse, des solitaires” (117). Exclusion is thus unavoidable; but she also explicitly embraces it. The events in *Jacinthe* confirm her in this attitude, since even priests betray those who confide in them, such as Father
Julien (260). Rejecting and being rejected from conventional religion, the protagonist of *Jacinthe* has no other option but to search for her own path.

This type of search for one’s own relationship with God and for a personal definition of that path is, of course, most characteristic of mystical approaches to religion\(^6\). Both the protagonists of *Tambourins* and of *Jacinthe* have undergone mystical phases, and there are references to ecstatic states in religious contexts in *Solitude* (167) and in *Jacinthe*: “[D]ans une église, et surtout dans une chapelle, je n’étais plus moi-même. L’encens et les chants suaves me transportent”, explains the narrator (93). Not being oneself, i.e. “standing outside oneself” (*ex-stare*, the Latin verbal root of the English noun “ecstasy”), and being carried away (“me transportent”) are common events in mystical experiences of God, and attempts at mystical experiences have historically often been means to achieve a new and independent understanding of divinity. This path, rather than following written dogma or Church leaders, is clearly given the preference here.

The mystic search for approaching God through personal experiences such as ecstasy is often related to music in Amrouche. The pension girls’ chants are one of the few things that Reine appreciates about them in *Jacinthe* (91), and she shares her own “cantiques” with them in the hopes of building a connection (16, 145). She confesses that “Le chant grégorien est mon élément. Je m’épanouis dans un contentement sans limite” (*Amant* 115). Thus, music is what transports the different protagonists, incarnations of Amrouche, onto a different place; and it puts them into a state in which they can draw closer to God.

\(^6\) According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “‘mysticism’ generally refers to claims of immediate knowledge of Ultimate Reality (whether or not this is called ‘God’) by direct personal experience”, and “Paranormal phenomena, such as trances, visions and locutions, are often regarded as ‘mystical’”. In the Christian context, since the Middle Ages, it has been thought to mean an “experiential knowledge of God” leading to a “loving union” with Him.
In addition to this, for Amrouche, religious music is what connects the different religions of Europe and the Maghreb: while it is what truly touches her in Catholicism, it also deeply moves her when she encounters it in other cultures, and she feels a spiritual connection through it. In Kabylia, for example, a funeral chant “m’a bouleversée” with its “cadences magiques” (Tambourins 112), and the “douloureuse offrande” of a chleuh singer of sacred hymns is what inspires her to become a singer herself (Solitude 214). In this way, music has a double function: it is the saving grace of Catholicism for Amrouche, who has undergone such wounding through this religion, and it also has the power to connect different religions that have so often been in conflict during the time of her writing. In way that is reminiscent of Rousseau’s expression, then, the wounding agent contains its own remedy: “Le remède est dans le mal”.

It should be stressed, however, that although Amrouche’s protagonists search for an individual religious path, this search is never exclusionary. Amrouche’s protagonists’ concept of religion is often characterized as “intuitive” (Jacinthe 168), thus relying on their own resources; but this emphasis on the individual person does not mean that they close themselves off from others. Rather, they accuse practices that exclude, such as those of the pension girls in Jacinthe; and they emphasize the importance of good deeds towards others: “[e]lle parle si bien de charité!”, exclaims one of the pension girls describing Reine (46). The concept of religion that is elaborated here thus focuses on the individual conscience, but does not exclude or show disrespect to others.

Beyond being anti-exclusionary, Amrouche’s concept of religion is often connected to love – be it that a character converts to another religion out of affection for her husband (Tambourins 152), that a young person’s love is poured into prayer (“dépensant dans mes adorations au pied des autels des trésors d’amour”, 191), or that love for God shines on the faces
of nuns (Amant 119). Romantic love, as so often in mystical literature, is often likened to mystic ecstasy: “Lorsque je parle de lui, je m’exalte, il est là,” Reine describes her feelings for her fiancé in Tunisia (Jacinthe 124). This connection between interpersonal love and religion is not surprising if one takes the view of José Santos in “Mythe des origines et nostalgie chez Taos Amrouche”: According to him, Amrouche’s protagonists suffer from a fundamental split in their personalities that is due to their families’ conversion, and that they are trying to heal through amorous relationships: “Pour tenter de remédier à cette situation, les héroïnes tenteront, en vain, de trouver dans leurs relations avec les hommes un échappatoire à leur malaise” (331). These attempts take on a much deeper sense if one understands to what extent religious feeling in Amrouche’s world is connected to love.

The concept of religion that Amrouche elaborates is thus clearly this-worldly rather than otherworldly. Indeed, it is often stressed that what is important in the sacred lies in its worldly aspects: “elle mourait faute d’entendre glorifier Dieu et le monde”, is the sentence that most succinctly summarizes the central dilemma of the protagonist Reine in Jacinthe (223). Unlike the other pension girls, she sees no conflict between loving a man and loving God:

[J]e leur disais: 'Comme l’on demande à Dieu le pain de chaque jour, dans mes prières, je lui demandais de me donner ce droit [sic] mon cœur avait besoin : l’amour d’un homme […] elles ont cru entendre le démon parler par ma bouche. En vain essayais-je d’ajouter : ‘àu-delà de Jacques je vois Dieu. Jacques n’est pas un obstacle, il n’est pas une joie qui me vienne de lui sans que j’en rende grâces à Dieu.’ Elles m’ont assurée que, si je persistais dans cette voie, je tomberais dans l’hérésie. Car, au lieu d’aimer les êtres en Dieu, c’est Dieu – imaginez-vous – que j’essaie d’adorer dans les êtres, ces êtres que j’ai l’illusion d’aimer chrétiennement, mais qu’en réalité j’aime d’un amour violent,
As usual, Reine here does not hesitate to expound her views to her pension mates, insisting that through her fiancé, she adores God, and even implying that she directly communicated with God, asking him for a man to love. The other girls, who, in their austere views of the world, consider all sensual love a sin, claim that she is on the path to perdition and (once again) demonize her for publicizing such views. After this assault, however, Amrouche makes sure to clarify that Reine never changed her mind about her position: “Je n’ai jamais douté de moi” (217). She thus maintained her position of loving God through His Creation – unlike the pension girls, who saw Creation as a distraction from their otherworldly concerns.

In some instances, this love goes even further, and Amrouche’s idea of the sacred is linked with erotic love. As we have mentioned before, religious topics are often linked with the realm of the sensual, not only in the context of music. In the very beginning of the novel, Reine reads a poem by her brother, “Une prière”, which is accused of being “bien sensuelle” by the pension girls (26). Then, she reads the “Cantique du printemps” by Milosz (which she later confuses with the biblical Song of Songs, 211), with particular emphasis on the line “Que le monde est beau Bien-Aimée, que le monde est beau!” (26). Prayers and religious music are thus closely associated with the erotic: this becomes clear in the briefest form in the scene from *L’Amant imaginaire* in which the narrator describes a mass as “rite syrien primitif et sensuel, orgie d’encens, chants viscéraux » (176). What pleases her most about the way Christian mass is celebrated, then, is when it is taken back to a simple, originary form (“primitif”), and indulges in all the sensuality of the olfactory and auditory means at its disposal. These can go so far as to
reach the level of the erotic (“orgie”) – ideally, for Amrouche, the stimulation provided by a religious service should be such that it is comparable to that of the sexual.

Music is thus the element that most immediately connects love and religion. Besides this being true in the Christian context, it also holds in other cultural settings. For example, it is also the purpose of the Berber chants to which the protagonist of Amant has given her “soul”.

“Etrange mariage mystique ! », exclaims her husband (cited in Brahimi 68, my italics), unusually perceptive here of his wife’s capacity to attain higher things, including love, through her art. This combination of music and mysticism is particularly reminiscent of Sufi ways; more on the intersections between Amrouche’s religiosity and Islam will be developed later in this section.

It should also be pointed out here that the style of Amrouche’s writing is characterized by a great sensuality and a passionate, almost melodramatic tone. Denise Brahimi points this out, adding, "Sans doute faut-il s’habituer, pour entrer dans la lecture de Taos, à ce type de langage imagé et vibrant. Refuser le pathos, c’est fuir devant la douleur, tricher avec l’émotion" (9). Throughout the oeuvre, the greatest emphasis is put on sensual perceptions as well as on psychological observations (as is to be expected in therapeutic writing), and strong feelings, exclamations and questions abound. This both points towards the narrators’ situation as dramatically different and apart from others, but also puts into practice an attitude towards life and spirituality that focuses on the senses.

Finally, Amrouche makes it clear several times in L’Amant imaginaire that a human marriage based only on spiritual criteria and without sensuality is a nonsensical idea (174). Conversely, she links physical love to divinity when she exclaims, “ô mon amant, tu embrasses comme un dieu!” (431), and when she calls the phallus “ce petit dieu tyrannique et indépendant –
avec ses colères sacrées» (342). Thus, while refusing a sterile, puritanical conception of religion, and refusing also monasticism after having seriously considered it (Jacinthe 89, Solitude 140), religion in Amrouche is oriented towards the worldly, interpersonal love, and towards the body.

In this context, it is also highly significant that the pension in *Jacinthe noire* is called “La pension des Filles de Jephté” (45). In the Book of Judges, Jephtah’s daughter is sacrificed to atone for Israel’s sins, after spending two months mourning the fact that she will die a virgin (Judges 10:6-12:6). Linking the girls inhabiting the pension to sacrifice, mourning, and an ignorance of carnal life creates a very telling contrast with the sensual, erotic, joyful and inclusive idea of religion that Amrouche creates for herself. As if they were trying to emulate Jephta’s daughter, the pension girls seem to be in a constant state of atonement, being ostentatiously contrite (“C’était à qui s’effacerait avec le plus d’ostentation”, Jacinthe 102). Reine, as soon as she arrives, explodes this hypocritically virginal lifestyle by unabashedly enjoying colors, the seasons, fruits, flowers, and human beauty. This parallel with Jephta’s daughter thus illustrates one aspect of the European Catholic way of life that Amrouche definitely rejects, and demonstrates by opposition what alternatives her own “gospel” suggests.

This sensual conception of life, spilling over into that of religion, is of course inspired by André Gide, who provides one of the central intertexts of Amrouche’s oeuvre. Reine, in *Jacinthe*, openly confesses to reading Gide – a fact that is shocking to her pension mates due to Gide’s open celebration of sensuality and challenges to bourgeois morality. Moreover, Gide provided the preface to *Jacinthe noire*, and in *L’Amant imaginaire*, he is represented in the character of Marcel Arrens. What links Amrouche and Gide is an original wound inflicted by a religion lived in too restricted, too puritan a manner, and a liberation from this through the creation of an autobiographical oeuvre that elaborates an alternate system of thought.
Besides these concepts, which can still be contained within the context of Christianity, there are also aspects to Amrouche’s elaboration of religion that are brought to it from outside of a Christian frame of reference - most notably, elements of pantheism or even paganism, magical elements, and Islamic influences. In several instances, Amrouche describes natural phenomena in such a way that it makes it clear that there are supernatural elements involved; this is especially the case in *Jacinthe noire*, in which the changing seasons are described with such an intensity that they imply the presence of mystical forces. Moreover, magical elements enter the daily life of the family in *Tambourins*. For instance, a fever is caused by the evil eye (the narrator speaks as though she gives complete credence to these beliefs): An aunt has to be called upon, who cures it using a magical remedy involving a chicken slaughtered and prepared “suivant certains rites” (108). Conversely, Kabyle magic can also turn itself against the Amrouche family: When the narrator of *Tambourins* feels rejected by her ancestral home, she ascribes this to the “genies tutélaires” who inhabit the Kabyle mountains, whom she herself used to salute “soir et matin” (172). Amrouche’s world is thus inhabited by spirits and mysterious forces that have nothing to do with established religions such as Christianity or Islam, and her everyday life is influenced by rituals that are just as independent of them. The natural way in which they enter her narrative proves that they are a force to be reckoned with, and that she accepts them as part of her concept of spirituality.

Interestingly, these magical aspects imported from Kabylia even enter France with Reine’s arrival. The pension in *Jacinthe* is described by Reine as being “haunted” (“habitée”), turning the presence of inimical tensions in the house into spirits (*Jacinthe* 112). Moreover, even representatives of the Church, such as Father Julien, are ascribed “magical” qualities when they are in full command of their powers: “sa voix magique s’élève, s’amplifia au maximum”, he is
described when he moves Reine to a quasi-ecstatic state with his declamations from the Bible (211, my italics). If taken together with the magical aspects of North African spiritual life, then, we see that Amrouche’s concept of religion, in its inclusive way, by no means rules out elements taken from other belief systems, such as spirits and magic.

Denise Brahimi, in *Taos Amrouche, romancière*, points out very pertinently to what degree Amrouche’s concept of religiosity expressed in *Jacinthe* is influenced by Rousseau, an intertext that is also mentioned explicitly in the book itself. “Comme Rousseau,” explains Brahimi, Amrouche “réussit ce paradoxe de prôner un retour à l’origine et de se situer pour cela dans une avant-garde. Le rôle que joue pour elle la culture berbère est du même ordre que celui du mythe primitif (qu’on appellera celui du ‘bon sauvage’) dans le rousseauisme” (74). This return to the origins, mixed with the personal approach to God expounded by Rousseau in *Emile, ou de l’éducation*, does link Amrouche and Rousseau. However, there are many additional elements to Amrouche’s idea of Christianity that make her approach entirely her own.

For example, in a very few, but telling instances, we can also see how much influence Islam has had on Amrouche’s protagonists’ conception of Christianity. To a pension mate who tells her about Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, *Jacinthe*’s Reine replies that “nous n’habitons pas le même monde et, qu’en dépit d’une éducation chrétienne, je ne différerais guère de ma vieille grand-mère, restée musulmane. Je lui ai avoué que j’assistais à la messe avec ferveur, mais comme à un mystère incompréhensible” (168). Thus, while still calling herself a Christian, Reine insists that her understanding of this religion is different from that of her pension mates because of an Islamic influence.

Similarly, the narrator’s grandmother in *Tambourins*, is defended by likening her faith to Christianity. As the nuns want to force the narrator to make her grandmother convert (an instance
already mentioned above), the narrator claims in her defense that her grandmother “fait ses ablutions et ses prières plusieurs fois par jour. Elle s’efforce vers le bien. Elle jeûne, en plus du carême, pour que lui soient remis les péchés dont elle ne se souviendrait pas » (72). By explaining this in terms that Christianity and Islam share, the narrator points out the parallels between the two religions and draws them closer together. For her, it matters little whether another person calls herself Muslim or Christian if she attempts to do good for her soul and for others. Whether religion is lived well or not is a matter between a person and his or her God. These instances are further proof of the hybrid inclusiveness of Amrouche’s conception of religion.

It has been pointed out (especially by Allaoua and Brahimi) that Amrouche’s concept of Christianity approaches paganism. Allaoua proposes the most convincing argument for this assertion, citing Amrouche’s daughter as saying that her mother followed the “culte des vierges noires” (104). I have two reasons for diverging from this interpretation: Firstly, if Amrouche did follow this “culte”, one can also define it as a branch of Christianity, and simply another interpretation of it. Secondly, I am more concerned with the portrayal of religion that appears in the literary text of Amrouche, rather than in the biographical aspects of her life. The literary text itself brims with Christian references. Amrouche’s incarnations in those texts claim that “le péché, à mes yeux, le plus impardonnable était de désespérer du Seigneur » (Jacinthe 272) and that they have « tant bien que mal, suivi le Christ » (Solitude 69). These and other citations above show clearly that Amrouche’s protagonists do consider themselves as remaining within the scope

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7 “Vierges noires” or black Madonnas are depictions of the Virgin Mary who have a dark complexion, due either to the intentions of the artist, to the material used, or to changes in color over time. Black Madonnas exist on several continents, including the Americas, Africa, and Europe. They are often linked to beliefs in female deities pre-dating Christianity (Barham 328).
of Christianity, that they do believe in and at least attempt to “follow Christ” – although they refuse certain other people’s approach to Christianity and seek their own path.

Denise Brahimi claims that Amrouche has no intention of subverting religion (89), but I argue that her writing does have subversive aspects, although they are rather subtle. Firstly, it subverts a conventional approach to Christianity because Amrouche develops an approach that is at odds with the aspects of Christian dogma that have been discussed above. Clearly, her ideas have been considered dangerous by those holding more conservative religious views (A pension mate, when discussing Reine’s approach to religion in Jacinthe, warns that “Je la trouve dangereuse”, 45) – thus, her influence has been feared as being too revolutionary. Amrouche as an author publishes these views and, if her books are truly autobiographical, she has not hidden them from any of her peers in her interactions with them. This is an “undercutting” and an “overturning” of dogma, the original meaning of the Latin sub[under]-vertere[turn]. Secondly, Amrouche also subverts Muslim religious tradition, both by writing as a woman (Malti) and by braving the taboo on writing about sexuality (Allaoua 93). As a woman writer of Muslim cultural background and Christian confession, Amrouche is thus religiously subversive in more ways than one.

V. Conclusion

Out from an uncomfortable colonial situation of being caught between two cultures, rejected by both, Amrouche thus creates a new synthesis of religious views: she chooses aspects of each culture that agree with her hybrid nature, and she violently rejects those that do not. This is a necessary process, required in order to achieve the autobiographical therapy that she needs.
At the same time, however, it is a highly risky process because it involves subversive practices, both in the form used and in the topics addressed (the opposition she encounters can be seen most clearly in her character Reine). Whether scriptotherapy was psychologically successful for the historical person Amrouche can, of course, not be assessed here. However, what results from her writing process is a highly striking hybrid of non-exclusive beliefs that, despite the feminist orientation of the author, does not reject Christianity per se, but rather creates a new view of divinity and its own interpretation of the gospel, as it is for example incarnated in the character Reine. Amrouche thus claims religion for herself, in order to embrace an altered version of it that celebrates Creation and the senses, involves music and mystical states, relies on independent reasoning, and welcomes different influences. In this way, religion not only provides the initial trauma that has necessitated this process of de- and reconstruction, but also, through this very process, results in a new concept that provides a refuge for the author who experienced exclusion from so many quarters.

If we consider Amrouche’s writings in the light of Gayatri Spivak’s theories about (self-) representation, we realize that Amrouche is forced into a position of having to represent herself. One of Spivak’s central questions in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is whether the subaltern can ever take on a subject position and speak for herself, rather than being represented (i.e, spoken for). In Amrouche’s case, we must realize after reading her works that, although she falls into several of Spivak’s categories of subalterns (being a woman of Berber descent), there is not even the possibility of another instance representing, managing, or producing her: much to Amrouche’s own dismay, her composite being makes her too unique to be subsumed into a collectivity or to be represented. This forces her to conceptualize an approach of her own to life,
culture, and religiosity. Amrouche is not represented by anyone, nor does she represent anyone else. Denise Brahimi, in this context, refers to Amrouche’s “double projet”, that of “comprendre et se faire comprendre” (6): By exploring herself and making herself known, Amrouche completes the work necessary for achievement of selfhood by the Other, to use Spivak’s terms: She is the former Other of her European interlocutors, but through her work of (religious and other) introspection, she achieves her own voice, defines her own path, and in that way attains selfhood.

In this way, and despite her rejection of certain aspects of European culture, Amrouche becomes one of the persons constructing spiritual bridges between Europe and Arab-Berber North Africa, in a way similar to her constructing bridges through her performances of Berber songs. Often misunderstood, as has been shown here, her approach to religion unites influences from North and South of the Mediterranean, and her inclusive attitude reaches out to audiences from different horizons. Despite her oft-mentioned loneliness and apparent self-aggrandizement, she uses the tool of autobiography in order to make a voice heard that accuses racism and exclusiveness and celebrates a spirituality of inclusiveness, dialogue, and appreciation for this world.
Writing, religion, and feminism have very particular and particularly potent interactions in Cixous’ oeuvre. All of writing is imbued with the power of divinity in Cixous’ world – the word, i.e., writing, is “God”, as she states in La Venue à l’écriture: “L’Écriture est Dieu. Mais ce n’est pas le tien” (19; the narrator is here addressed both as a woman and as a Jew). It is through writing that human beings are linked to divinity; indeed, as I will show in this chapter, humans may even usurp a piece of divine power, according to Cixous. How, then, can they attain this godliness? Cixous links the power of writing – and especially of re-writing - to that of religion, and uses this power of writing as a tool in the interest of feminism. The result is a feminist exegesis, writerly in the Barthesian sense. The reader of a religious intertext - in this case, Cixous herself - is no longer a passive consumer, but creates while reading it. In this way, Cixous not only re-creates God for women, as Luce Irigaray would demand, but provides a new vision of religion for the needs of women.

The key ingredient that enables this feminist exegetical process to function is paradoxically a considerable degree of irreverence, which expresses itself in a playful subversiveness in Cixous’ works. This is the famous playfulness to which Jacques Derrida refers in the citation above from H. C. Pour la vie, c’est à dire..., when he observes that Cixous “mocks everything, even the death of God”. The reference is significant because rather than accepting in the Nietzschean sense that God no longer has any significance in our lives, Cixous
uses her irreverent style both to revive God, and to mock him – in the sense that she critically inspects Him and the traditions humans have attached to Him, and then, playfully, irreverently, constructs an alternate concept. In this way, the stylistic subversiveness characteristic of Cixous’ writing, and her attitude towards religion are directly related and akin to each other – one informs and sustains the other. The creativeness with regard to writing that Cixous so militantly demands in “Le Rire de la méduse” is thus directly applied in both the form and the thematic content of her work.

Much scholarship has, of course, been dedicated to Cixous’ work, also including a number of contributions on the ways in which religion and religiosity are portrayed in her work. Unlike the existing research, the focus of my analysis will be on the interactions between Cixous’ writing style and religious themes in her work, and on the implications that these observations have for her revised concept of religion as a whole. I will, however, take precious clues from the works of scholars preceding me on the issue of religion in Cixous’ works.

In this context, the biographical approach is particularly popular among critics, and a great number of them stress Cixous’ position as a permanent outsider (according to her own portrayal of herself). Christa Stevens, for example, in “Judéités, à lire dans l’oeuvre d’Hélène Cixous,” concentrates on Rêveries de la femme sauvage and Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif, as well as La Venue à l’écriture. She focuses on the ways in which Cixous was stigmatized due to her Jewish identity, despite which she continues to define herself as a Jew, if only out of an “obligation de fidélité” (82). This idea of an “obligation” will be of particular importance to this research, as I ask to what extent the three authors, rather than rejecting religion, elaborate new approaches to it. Stevens also points to the historical context in which
Cixous grew up, which led to the “stigmates” she shares with Jacques Derrida (82). This provides a helpful background for my work, on which I will elaborate by reading Cixous’ works with closer attention to the narrative strategies she employs.

Lynn Penrod also places her biographical approach to Cixous’ Jewish identity under the sign of exile, but also points to the quasi-mystical ecstasies the French language afforded Cixous (as portrayed in *Stigmata*, 168). This paradoxical relationship to “the language of this France that repudiated us” will need to be further explored, as Penrod implies that Cixous’ linguistic ambitions are tied to a trauma that is inflicted by Jewish religious history in Algeria. The combination of writing and mysticism mentioned by Penrod is also picked up by Alicia Ostriker, who claims that Cixous writes in a style of “fearless ecstasy that fuses sexuality, politics, and mysticism” (196). Moreover, Ostriker also refers to the notion of the mother as a goddess (ibid) – an idea that will provide a valuable tool for my analysis.

Unlike Ostriker, Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller focuses on the way that the place of the father and his loss figure into Cixous’ writing. This father is both Jewish and considered an autochthon by the French, leading to a double exclusion for him and his family on the part of both the French colonial authorities and the local Muslim Arabs (861-2). For Cixous, according to Debrauwere-Miller, this has created an eternally unfulfilled desire to finally arrive and feel at home somewhere, which, paradoxically, has also given her the privilege of never really “breaking with” (“rompre avec”) Algeria (867). Darker aspects are emphasized by Jeannelle Laillou Savona and Jennifer Yee: in “Retour aux sources”, Savona uses a similar approach to Stevens’ and Penrod’s, but she stresses the effacement of or embarrassment about Jewishness by Cixous’ family in *Osnabrück, Réveries*, and *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*. Savona also chronicles Cixous’ exclusion from Muslim Algerian society, and refers to how Cixous' oeuvre resonates
with a Talmudic tradition that encourages critical commentary (103), a subject that will be particularly important in this dissertation. Exclusion from Muslim society is also explored in depth in Jennifer Yee’s “Colonial Outsider”, where Yee describes how the “darkness” of Cixous’ position (a position of innocence, according to Yee, although Cixous is condemned for supposedly being complicit with the colonial system) is offset by playful language. In this dissertation, the biographical and historical information provided in this article will only be used as a canvas for a closer, more narratologically and form-oriented reading. The “subversion of French classical syntax” (195) that Cixous achieves and that Yee frames into the context of the colonial situation will be further analyzed and put into relation with her construction of religiosity.

The condition of being an outsider is also one of the main themes in Carola Hilfrich’s article “Hélène Cixous”, although Hilfrich focuses on the ways in which this was turned into a strength by Cixous. She also defines very well the relationship between Cixous and Derrida, another Jewish-Franco-Algerian, the exchange with whom enriched both of their conceptual worlds. Indeed, the author who can probably provide the deepest insight into Cixous’ personal trajectory as well as into her relationship to Judaism must be Jacques Derrida, who has variously written on his friend Cixous’ oeuvre. In H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire..., he mentions the ways in which she “se moque de tout, en particulier de la mort de Dieu” (13), an observation that will be helpful for the analysis I will carry out. At the same time, however, Derrida comments on how, despite mocking the fact of God’s death, Cixous also “proves” the existence of God (134). By referring to Cixous’ coining and use of the word “rêvexister” (in Le Prénom de Dieu), Derrida extrapolates that fantasy and dream, to Cixous, are the only way to prove God’s existence because the fact that everyone “dreams God” is the only reason he exists (134-5; the creation of
God by humans is thus a way of demonstrating the fact that he exists). Finally, there is, in *H. C. pour la vie*, a kind of literary conversation between Cixous and Derrida on the tallit: Derrida remarks that girls and women in Judaism do not wear it; but Cixous, in the short story *La Baleine de Jonas* from *Le Prénom de Dieu*, appropriates the tallit for herself. “Elle le prend”, in Derrida’s words, “Le droit, elle le prend et le surprend, et le comprend – et le change” (133). This assertion of new rights to herself as a woman, especially with regard to the symbols of Judaism, will be an important theme in the analyses that will be carried out in this dissertation.

In order to allow for a textual analysis of sufficient depth, the primary corpus for this research had to be limited from among the considerable number of works that Cixous has published to date. I selected the following four – *Le Prénom de Dieu*, *La Fiancée Juive*, “Mon Algériance”, and *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* - because they include both works whose narrative thread adheres more closely to the author's own biography, and others considered to be more fictional (the distinction between the two often remains intentionally blurry in Cixous’ oeuvre). I considered it important to choose both works that include direct reflections by Cixous on her biography and on historical events in her life, and fictional works in which her relationship with religion is elaborated in a more metaphorical way. Furthermore, I chose the works for the analysis in this chapter because they include both works from Cixous’ earlier career and more recent publications, thus providing a more comprehensive and evolving picture of Cixous’ approach to religion throughout her writing career. In some cases, such as in that of *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage*, the fact that the book is a seminal work within Cixous’ oeuvre that has received much attention from critics also provided a selection criterion – *Les rêveries*

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8 The tallit (also spelled “thaleth” by Cixous) or prayer shawl is a religious garment worn for prayer only by Jewish men.
was one of the first moments in Cixous’ career in which she spoke so openly about Algeria and her past there. Finally, many of the aspects of religion and religiosity analyzed here are also present elsewhere in Cixous' oeuvre, but they appear in the works chosen here with the greatest clarity, intensity, or are formulated in most narratively striking manner. In this way, they permit the reader to arrive at a coherent idea of how religion and religiosity are represented in Cixous’ oeuvre overall.

*Le Prénom de Dieu*, dating from 1967, was the first book that Hélène Cixous published. It is a collection of short stories of differing lengths, whose style is highly metaphysical, metaphorical and often allegorical. The content is relatively abstract (Cixous often simply mentions “the city”, “my mother”, “the master”, etc, without further explanations), the time and place unspecified, and the narrative outline vague and often flat without any visible progression of the overall situation. The stories are linked by an impression of almost biblical universality, by an anguish caused by nagging metaphysical questions, and by constant references to biblical texts. The stories that make up this collection of short stories are entitled “L’outre vide”, “La marche”, “Le successeur”, “La lyre”, “Le Sphinx”, “La ville”, “Le veau de plâtre”, “Le lac”, “La baleine de Jonas”, and “Anagramme”.

*La Fiancée juive*, published in 1995, tells, in no particular chronological order, the story of two (male and female) lovers, who, as the title hints, never get married but live a passionate relationship with supernatural overtones. The title, however, only indirectly refers to the narrator, the female lover, as it is principally a reference to the painting “The Jewish Bride” by Rembrandt. The second title of the book, *De la tentation*, may refer to the temporary state of the relationship, but also constitutes a play on words, as the lovers live their relationship as if nomadic, in a “tente” (130). Besides the two lovers, there are a number of secondary characters,
one of which is the cat Thea, who accompanies the lovers, and God, who appears with different traits of character depending on the situation. Mostly, however, the book depicts in highly metaphorical language the interactions between the lovers, the narrator’s interior monologue, and the way the couple deal with the outside world. It is written in a style reminiscent of surrealist écriture automatique, bringing to the fore subconscious associations, sound- and wordplay (a constant feature of Cixous’ style), and expressing a great freedom from most rules of narrative.

“Mon Algériance” is an article that was first published in the magazine Les Inrockuptibles of August-September 1997. The title is most likely an allusion to Jacques Derrida’s “différance”, which suggests never quite arriving at meaning, in the same way that Cixous claims that she never quite arrives either in Algeria or in France. In the article, Hélène Cixous clarifies a number of questions about events in her life and how they affected her personality and views. In particular, the questions of exile and belonging are addressed, along with that of nationality, family history, her own family name, the colonial sociology of pre-independence Algeria and the place of Judaism in it, Franco-German-Algerian relations in particular under the Vichy regime, the place of language and languages in all of this, and finally her rediscovery of Algeria in France through Algerian women whose human rights were under threat. The article consists of short sections concerning these topics, which are elaborated on in a language rich in examples, images, wordplay, clipped sentences, exclamations, and direct speech. In many ways, it jumps from one topic to another as much as Fiancé does, but the thematic coherence throughout the article is quite visible. The tone is highly personal.

Finally, Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage dates from 2000 and depicts the narrator’s childhood and youth in colonial Algeria. Its style is not as documentary-like as that of “Mon Algériance”, involving more wordplay, sound association, and more imaginative scenes. The
framing device consists of the narrator conjuring up her childhood in Algeria in scenes that suddenly descend upon her, and the book then provides the explanation to her statement that for the entire time she was living in Algeria, she was dreaming of one day arriving in Algeria (pp. 9 and 168). It depicts in great personal detail the violence that characterized relationships between the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities in colonial Algeria, a violence whose impact is both softened and exacerbated by Cixous’ use of humor, metaphors, associations, and the filtering through her own sensual impressions.

The aspects of religion and religiosity that appear in these four works are many and varied. Among the most prominent ones, I have selected the traits that form the most coherent pattern, such that a comparison with other authors’ works will be possible. However, this subject is sufficiently rich and vast in Cixous’ oeuvre as to deserve to be treated at book-length by itself, and further research will have to be undertaken in the future in order to do it justice.

*I. Growing up Between “Holocausts” and the Feminist Project*

Hélène Cixous’ biography, beginning, in her own words, “en plein brasier entre deux holocaustes” (*Venue* 24), makes it understandable that religion plays such a major role in her life that it has to be dealt with and worked through in her literary works. She was born on June 5, 1937 in Oran. Her father was a Sephardic Jew of Spanish origin and her mother an Ashkenazi Jew who had fled Germany after Hitler had come to power. Hélène grew up first in Oran, and later in Algiers, after her family's move to the capital. Her upbringing was not particularly religious; there was hardly any influence of the Talmudic tradition in her home, and holidays for her were empty of religious content (Debrauwere-Miller, “Sojourn” 254). Rather, her childhood
was influenced by Jewish superstitions and myths, and the family tended to identify with the German-Jewish community around them (rather than with the Algerian-Jewish community).

Among the political events that influenced Cixous’ childhood and youth were the Second World War and the Algerian struggle for independence, in which the Arab condition was particularly troubling to the young Cixous (Debrauwere-Miller, “Sojourn” 254). The two discriminations on the part of the French colonial system against the Jewish population and against budding Algerian nationalism are brought together literally by Cixous in the description of her lycée experience: The “Plan d’anéantissment de l’être algérien” and the “effacement de l’être juif” went hand in hand (Rêveries 144 and 126, resp.). However, the relationship between Cixous and her Muslim Algerian surroundings in no way reflected these commonalities; rather, this relationship is a “tale of unrequited love” (Yee 190) in which Cixous longed to be close to Muslim Algerian children, but never succeeded. This reflects the colonial Algerian situation, in which there was little solidarity between Jews and Muslims, although they both suffered to varying degrees. At the same time, Cixous’ family was not accepted into the Jewish community either, because to this community, the Cixous family’s members were not sufficiently religious, leading to isolation on all sides.

Algeria under the Vichy regime brought several traumatic events into Cixous’ early life, as Jewish individuals in Algeria were deprived of their French citizenship. In addition, Jewish children were also excluded from French schools. At this point, critics have pointed out, Cixous formed a connection between Jewishness and the French language: In school, she realized that she could protect herself against Vichy’s exclusiveness if she had “the language and its subterranean passages” (Penrod 139). French thus became a means of resistance, and also a
bounty wrested from Vichy France: “[J]’ai appris à parler français dans un jardin d’où j’étais sur le point d’être expulsée parce que juive” (Venue 20).

Moreover, under the Vichy regime, Cixous’ father was denied the right to work – later on, Cixous drew a connection between this interdiction and the tuberculosis that killed him at a young age (Debrauwere-Miller, “Malgérien” 854), an event that was especially traumatic for the young girl. The rise of Nazism in Europe also brought trauma to Cixous’ life in another way, as her extended family lost several members in concentration camps. The ways in which events such as these have had resonances in Cixous’ writing will be investigated in this chapter.

The death of Cixous’ father led to her mother having to provide for the family herself, which she did without remarrying, and this in turn was only accepted with difficulty by Algiers society. Due to the unpleasantness of life in the Clos-Salembier neighborhood, which she describes in Les rêveries de la femme sauvage, Cixous left for France in 1955; here, however, she felt more excluded than ever (Penrod 142). Her encounter with male misogyny in France led to her engagement in the feminist struggle, as mentioned in the introductory chapter.

These views on feminism should be briefly examined here, as well as Cixous’ thought on writing and tradition in general, given that they play an important role in the elaboration of her approach to religion. Cixous is probably best known for creating the notion of écriture féminine, an idea and practice that, according to her, is difficult, if not impossible, to define. However, it can be said generally that écriture féminine, in Cixous’ thought, emphasizes the free, poetic, and fictional elements of writing and the rethinking of categories that have traditionally been repressed (such as woman and the body), in order to question existing power structures. As an alternative, Cixous advocates an “economy of the gift”, based on receiving and giving, and especially focused on the mother-child relationship. The mother, for Cixous, is always the source
of things to be given, women are always close to “the mother” (*Rire* 44), and in order for women to come to writing, they must first “give everything” in order to gain their liberty (*Venue* 46). This new state of affairs will, according to Cixous, be brought about and supported by linguistic changes that will allow women to finally “write themselves” (*Bloodsworth-Lugo* 263): women must invent an entirely new language that delves into the riches of their unconscious, that lets go of the inhibitions imposed by phallocentric society, and that espouses the *jouissance* provided by the experience of letting oneself be penetrated by one’s experiences. In this way, women may approach divine states, embody love, and finally experience themselves (*Venue*).

In this sense, and considering this call for linguistic changes, it is understandable that writing is in itself of a revolutionary nature for Cixous. Verena Andermatt Conley sums up Cixous’ central question regarding writing thus: “Writing has always been done in the name of the father, and the question must be asked, how do women write?” (292). This has important repercussions for Cixous’ understanding of religion, as religious leaders have often cast themselves in a paternalistic light, and God has been envisioned as “the Father”. It is important then that for Cixous, “There are no absolute, immutable values beyond words or the grammar and syntax that order them” (290). From this questioning of tradition and of the conventional use of language derives Cixous’ concept of reading and writing. This concept is strongly influenced by Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism, which emphasizes the fact that the meaning of a text is always deferred. Therefore, the writerly aspect of reading is emphasized in Cixous’ conception of the text; reading a text, for her, is always rereading and, in some sense, rewriting it (293). This will become of central importance in the discussion of Cixous’ relationship to religious texts and religious traditions. For Cixous, there is never only one meaning to a text, and
texts as well as received ideas must be deconstructed in the interest of allowing the reader, and especially the female reader, to actively construct her own ideas.

Language, for Cixous, is thus of a subversive nature, and involves subversive practices. These occur “on a material level (phonemes and graphemes), on a conceptual level (questioning of the concept), and in an ongoing reflection on writing” (Conley 293). This chapter will explore the ways in which these material and conceptual subversions play out in the context of religion.

Another way in which Cixous uses subversion lies in the role of sexuality in her writing: She often plays with genders quite liberally, jumping from “masculine” to “feminine” frequently, mocking the two concepts, or mixing them up (pointed out by Sellers, xxviii). She thus takes the slippage or “différance” of meaning in language a step further and applies it also to sexual differences. In Cixous’ struggle to redefine religion for women, this kind of play holds a central role, and the way in which this takes place will be shown in this chapter.

II. Torn in Triangulation: The Need for Reevaluation

If Taos Amrouche’s protagonists are torn between and experience attraction and repulsion from two sides – that of Christian North Africans of European origin, and that of the indigenous Algerian population – the same can also be said of Hélène Cixous’ autobiographical characters. However, the situation is even more complex in Cixous’ case, as she must triangulate between three cultures: Muslim Algeria, Catholic pied-noir society, and the Jewish minority in Algeria. As Jeannelle L. Savona has pointed out, Cixous’ rapports to the different constituent factors of her identity – French, Jewish and Algerian – are highly ambiguous (97); this is the
result of competing attracting and rejecting factors that are present in all three of her relationships to the different population groups in colonial Algeria.

A. A Lack of Arrival: Rejection by Muslim Algerian Society

The rapport of simultaneous attraction and rejection is particularly present in Cixous’ narrator-protagonists’ relationships with Muslim Algerians. This is embodied especially strikingly by two “characters”: by the Cixous family’s nanny Aïcha, and by the “mauresque” doll that the narrator “burns ambiguously to be or to possess” (Yee 135). Aïcha the nanny is the only part of Algeria to which the narrator or Rêveries has access, and the narrator takes advantage of this opportunity as much as possible: “[J]e me nichais contre Aïcha […] je me serrais contre le corps d’Aïcha” (Rêveries 14). Aïcha permits this, but it also becomes clear that this small concession does not allow the narrator any way of truly knowing or even adapting to Muslim Algeria: “[E]lle me laissait en riant serrer son pays pendant un mince instant sans suite autre que les centaines de portes du Clos-Salembier par-delà le grillage du jardin tournaient vers nous leurs paupières baissées” (Rêveries 14). This lowering of eyes on the part of surrounding Algeria recalls a Qur’anic injunction of modesty (24:30). It signifies the refusal on the part of Algeria at large to enter into contact with the narrator; despite this short and treasured instant of contact with Aïcha, an employee of the house, the narrator remains an outsider because she does not follow the expected religious norms.⁹

⁹ The names given to both of these figures in themselves embody Hélène’s and the Cixous family’s estrangement from Muslim society. The term “mauresque” is heavily loaded in the colonial context and bears connotations of stereotypical representations of Algerian women in painting, photography, stories etc., taking on a derogatory connotation in some contexts. As to Aïcha, the family eventually finds out in Rêveries that her real name is Messaouda, and that they
This rejection takes on a much more violent shape in a different scene of Réveries, in which the relationship between the narrator and her brother with Muslim Algerians is described as an actual “war”: “[N]ous étions assaillis au Clos-Salembier par les êtres mêmes que nous voulions aimer, dont nous étions lamentablement amoureux” (44). The sentiment of vulnerability and affection on the part of the Cixous children is answered with its opposite – physical assault, the epitome of rejection, a situation that leaves the Cixous children helplessly ostracized. A similar, though less physically violent behavior is described on the part of the Muslim classmates who appear in the narrator’s classroom at one point: They answer the narrator’s offer of camaraderie and affection by grouping her with their enemies. “Je leur tendais la main, je voulais faire alliance avec elles contre les Françaises,” describes Cixous in “Mon Algériance”, but “[e]n vain. Pour elles j’étais la France” (74). Once again, for religious reasons – the Cixous’ Jewishness – the narrator is considered to be on the side of the French, the Muslim girls’ enemies; therefore, she is ostracized, a painful, wounding memory.

Cixous is thus unable to be accepted by the Algeria that she so yearns to be part of – to which she is even irrevocably connected because of her father’s having been buried there. “J’y ai laissé mon père mêler sa poussière à cette poussière, tribut rendu à une terre d'emprunt […] A cause du fantôme de mon père je ne peux m'apatrier nulle part” (“Algériance” 71). No matter how closely she feels connected with the country in which she lives, and no matter how much her father’s haunting presence reminds her of her link to this country, the young Cixous is incapable of being accepted by its inhabitants, who see her as belonging to their enemies. This rejection for religious reasons is a further trauma, and forces the writer to seek alternatives and healing through writing – a process of reevaluating as well as of creation, in which old religious had imposed the name Aïcha on her. By using these names and evoking these incidents, then, Cixous shows the chasm that existed between her family and Muslim Algerians.
norms are challenged and old texts are reread from a writerly point of view, in order to come to a new understanding of religion.

B. “[C]ette France qui nous répudiait”: Rejection by Pied-Noir Society

The “French” with whom Muslim Algerians group Cixous, unfortunately, are just as unwilling to give her a place in their midst – and this is also due to her religion. France, as Cixous tells it in “Mon Algériance”, “nous jetait en 1940 hors de la citoyenneté française et nous privait de tous les droits civils, à commencer pour moi par celui d'aller à l'école” (72). During the Vichy period, Jews in Algeria were “exclus […] de la citoyenneté française, de l'éducation, de la profession, de tout” (73); her father, for example, was prohibited from practicing as a doctor (Rêveries 62). Beyond these legal deprivations, in themselves already harsh enough, there was also a great deal of social exclusion directed against Jews from Christian pied-noir society: The narrator’s lycée is “bien traditionnel classique ordinairement antisémite” (122), a characterization that emphasizes how established these prejudices were in Algerian society. Being determined by this “tradition”, the friendship between the narrator and the French girl Françoise (a name as French as is possible) is also damaged by anti-Semitism. This is particularly painful for the young narrator, because she loves her friend deeply (117); but it is impossible for the two to have a normal, mutually accepting kind of friendship. It is not even possible for the narrator to visit Françoise, all because of “cette bizarre coupure radicale entre nos maisons […] l’antisémitisme” (122). Thus, the exclusion leveled by French society against Jews in Algeria is all-encompassing – it concerns all social, professional, educational and civil rights. The narrator’s brother, similarly, is affected in the most brutal way by the ambient anti-Semitism in Algeria: When he
gets up onto his family’s house’s roof and is seen by the priest of a nearby church and the boys in
his care, “[l]es Français hurlèrent ‘Sale juif!’ en voyant mon frère sur son propre toit, me dit mon
frère. Le petit curé riait” (“Algériance” 72). Religion is here closely linked to social exclusion. If
the Cixous family, then, has no way of gaining access to the Muslim society of Algeria, its
Christian society rejects her just as painfully.

As can be seen from the example of the Catholic priest, what is most shocking about the
rejection of Cixous as Jewish is how accepted this rejection is in society – an acceptance that,
eerily, is even adopted by Cixous’ family itself to some extent. On the one hand, Cixous
becomes hyper-sensitized to racist and anti-Semitic structures around her: “Cette ‘santé’ du corps
social, je l’éprouvais comme maladie, toutes ces défenses, ces rejets, ces portes j’en faisais mes
maladies personnelles”, she tells concerning the lycée in which the absences of Muslim or Jewish
girls “béaient”, like “[de] grands trous […] ces énormes accrocs dans la robe” (Rêveries 123).
She thus reacts to the social injustices of the Algerian colonial system as if it constituted an
illness entering her body, and to which her physical being must form a reaction of absolute
rejection, as though to save her life. On the other hand, she also realizes that she is expected to
overlook these absences like everyone else does; however, “je ne pouvais évidemment pas ne pas
voir ce qu’il y avait à voir” (123). Even her own mother and grandmother have ended up getting
used to a persistent and unceasing anti-Semitism, which they call “gesunder Antisemitismus”
(“healthy anti-Semitism”, 106), an expression that is apparently deprived in their mouths of all
the irony it carries when used by Cixous. Everyone in the Cixous family is expected to see anti-
Semitism as just as commonplace and acceptable as the rest of Algerian society does; but it is
just this commonplace nature that repulses Cixous.
Religion and religious identity have thus been a source of great suffering for Cixous due to the historical circumstances in which she has lived. This wounding nature of religion is also reflected in her use of metaphor – and it is most astounding that in some circumstances, she portrays a suffering due to religion, or to faith, as a pain that seems to be borne willingly. “C’est parce que nous sommes sur la foi. Sur le gril. C’est parce que nous vivons la chance de sa lance”, she writes in *La Fiancée juive* (174, my italics). She continues, “[m]oi aussi je m’achète des couronnes d’épines et je me remue les rêves dans les plaies” (175), another way of describing willing suffering for the sake of faith. It is important that this “faith” is here portrayed as akin to the faith that two lovers have in each other; and in typically inclusive Cixousian fashion, the suffering imposed by faith is likened to the Passion of Christ (“couronnes d’épines”). Cixous thus explicitly recognizes that faith is often the source of much suffering (akin to that of Christ on the path to the cross); but if it is a self-determined, love-oriented, inclusive faith, it is embraced.

Her way of dealing with this trauma brought on by religion lies, of course, in language and the text. Using the tool of language and that of textual interpretation, Cixous can construct her own understanding of what religion should be and work through the traumatic experiences of childhood. The saving value of language is already brought up in “Mon Algériance” when Cixous describes the situation in the makeshift school organized by the Jewish community of Oran under the Vichy regime. Significantly, this conquest of language as a weapon is already put into religious terms here: “Ah *mon Dieu* c’est donc cela que tu *m’annonçais*? Un jour j’aurai les clés d’adjectif qualificatif!” (73, my italics). Her own acquaintance with language is thus cast in mystical tones – she dialogues with God, receiving language as though she were Mary at the moment of Annunciation. As we can see from this, Cixous thus does not turn away from the idea
of a gift-giving God; but, as we will see in more detail later, she will also use His gift to deal with the aspects of religious tradition (in the etymological sense of *trader*; something handed down through the centuries) that are hurtful to her.

What is important here is that the subversive aspects of language, this gift from God, are already made clear in the same scene from the Jewish school:

Je frémissais sur ma chaise et pendant ce temps le Qualife Haroun Al Rachid faisait sa tournée au premier rang de la salle à manger, dans les rues d’Oran. Ainsi dans la langue de cette France qui nous répudiait se glissaient des califes? C’était le comble de la Féerie subversive. Rue d’Arzew les jeunesses pétainistes défilaient en vain. J’avais la langue et ses souterrains. (73)

After having experienced the mystical properties of language, Cixous thus understands that language can also be used as a tool for political ends, that a specific language does not necessarily have to be used to support the ideologies of the culture that brought it into being (in this case “cette France qui nous répudiait”). It is used in this class room to discuss the “Qualife Haroun Al Rachid”, which to the young Cixous means that it can be used to inform listeners and readers about topics that might be suppressed by the leading ideology promoting that language (and that is, of course, what she will do later on in *La Venue à l’écriture* and “Le Rire de la Méduse”, for example). In this way, Cixous practically invites her readers to read her works with a view to the ways in which she uses language subversively. Language has supernatural (“féerie”) aspects, given how powerful they are, and these aspects – besides connecting Cixous with divinity, as in the passage above – also provide her with the tools to dismantle existing power structures. That is true in the context of established religious frameworks as much as in the context of patriarchy, as we will see next.
III. Toying with Language, Toying with God: The Cixousian Subversion

As pointed out above, Cixous learned early on how to appreciate the French language and the possibilities for play that its intricacies provide. This is of particular importance given to what extent language – especially in a religious context – is a tool for feminist insurgence. Cixous’ writing style is characteristically iconoclastic – a subversion that can be put into parallel with her challenges to religious dogma. She challenges androcentrically biased norms on several levels: Not only is she one of the foremost feminists literature in French has to offer, but she also challenges religious dogma in many different ways, as will be shown in this chapter. Finally, she also engages in a third subversion, that of narrative norms and of grammatical and language norms. In this way, she proves that none of the norms established by societies - be they norms of grammar and narrative, or those established by the patriarchs of Christianity or Judaism - need to be followed. By showing that the subversion of the former can lead to the creation of beautiful works of literature and to the rejuvenation of a writing style, she opens up her readers’ minds to the possibility of the subversion of the latter – especially when toying with the rules of language occurs in the context of religious themes.

Indeed, this iconoclastic writing style can be found also and in particular in the religious realm. In order to engage in the mixings and crossings that will be analyzed further on, for example, Cixous – very appropriately - uses portmanteau words, blending two or more words together. This is especially the case when Cixous invents new concepts of divinity, like mixing the concept of God with that of a telephone (which in this instance incorporates the thought of the quasi-divine lover, see below). Here, the thought of the telephone and the divine lover
combined become the expression “Dieulephone” (*Fiancée* 16), implying that the narrator is helplessly at the mercy of the phone call, which takes on omnipotent dimensions. On another occasion, when the telephone becomes a “faux téléphone” representing a mischievous demon, it becomes a “téléfaune” (39). In this manner, by telescoping words, Cixous creates new ideas about the shapes that divine things may take. Her creativity in blending words mirrors the way in which she combines the aspects that form her reconstruction of religion.

This use of creative language formation is closely related to Cixous’ use of sound association. The link she constructs between spirituality and physical love, for example, is alluded to in a supposed lapsus: When speaking of her and her lover’s bedroom, whose door is covered in “blessings” (italics in the original), the narrator of *Fiancée* says that “[r]ien n’est simple, je m’égare, c’est ce qui arrive dès que je m’enfonce dans le sein secret de la chambre, je devrais dire entre les seins. Je devrais dire chez les saints” (77). By playing with the connotations of the words “sein”, “seins” and “saints”, as well as with their similar phonology, Cixous shows up subconscious links between the thematic realms of sexuality and religion. A similar procedure is used when Cixous associates the words “hôtel”, a place for a romantic rendez-vous, and “autel” (78), a place where marriages are celebrated, but also a place of worship. By thus making the phonetic link between these two homophones ([ɔtɛl]) explicit, Cixous demonstrates a preexisting association between the two concepts, and by so doing connects them even more closely in the mind of the reader – in this case, connecting physical love and religion. She simultaneously plays with the subconscious of her reader, using for her feminist purposes all the strategies at the disposal of a writer.

The play with associations, however, does not remain on the phonological level, but also enters the realm of grammar and syntax. For instance, on more than one occasion Cixous plays
with syntax and punctuation: Speaking of an utterance of the lover in Fiancée, for example, she calls it “cette chose, qui ne disant dit qui disant ne dit” (sic, 56), meaning that the utterance is meaningful through what it does not say, while its literal meaning is quite limited in its signification. The syntax and punctuation of this sentence are contorted and unusual; however, we understand its meaning. Moreover, the sentence can almost be said to be more expressive due to its grammatical strangeness: it underlines the revolutionary nature of the utterance it describes, the uncommon nature of its meaning.

The play with grammar is especially prominent when it comes to the gender of nouns, and this is particularly true in the context of divinity. The cat, who, as we will see, is a representative of divine nature, is given the attributes of both sexes in the charming neologism “ce chatte”, because it represents both sexes (135). However, the fact that God’s sex is indeterminate is also made explicit elsewhere: “Celui ou celle qui commence”, says Cixous, referring to an unspecified deity, and then, she proceeds to join the two pronouns to create a neologism that expresses the two-gendered nature of God: “elleouil”. “[E]lleouil”, or “ilouelle”, “boite la nuit sur les pentes de ses montagnes” (79). This bisexual expression, “elleouil”, is also clearly linked to divinity in its linguistic Hebrew associations: “el”, and also “il”, thus both of the two phonetic realizations associated with gender in French, are both variants of the “oldest Semitic term for God” (Hartman). Thus, Cixous’ typical play with grammar and language creates an expression for God that not only combines two sexes, but also clearly refers to divinity in another (Hebrew). When Cixous does not directly create, as Irigaray would demand, a new God in the image of woman, she creates the language that would make this creation of God in the image of woman possible, by finding new expressions for God that involve woman’s image. For she clearly insists that when speaking of God, one must give equal consideration to the
possibilities of God being male or female, and this bisexuality must be reflected in the grammar of the language the writer uses.

The bisexual nature of God is similarly reflected in the two lovers, who represent divinity as well (see the final section of this chapter). Not only do the two of them unite to create divinity; they are also – grammatically – portrayed in a way that gives each of them the attributes of both sexes, in Cixous’ characteristically subversive way: “que tu es belle mon bien-aimé que tu es beau ma bien-aimée” (sic), Cixous writes in a scene in which the two lovers compliment each other (51). By turning the rules of French grammar around (the original meaning of the second part of the Latin sub-vertere, “to turn”), Cixous succeeds in creating exceptional circumstances. Her message, however, is immediately comprehensible if the reader is willing to accept the new rules of Cixous’ grammatical game. In this manner, Cixous forces the reader to consider the possibility of new rules being valid, she fosters doubt in existing systems, and she encourages the creative de- and re-construction of those systems. Her playful relationship to the text reaches its full power when she employs it in the service of her revisionist feminist project regarding religion.

On other occasions, Cixous refrains from using any grammar at all - in fact, she employs no words at all, but still utilizes the ensuing silences to express herself. This shows her disrespectful play with language at its most subversive - because the most basic expectation that a reader brings to a book is that it be filled with words. Cixous, however, challenges even this expectation, and includes sections of text that are quite simply blank. The book La Fiancée juive, for example, bears this title because the couple that is formed by its main characters is engaged by way of a “promesse si délicate qu’elle n’avait jamais été prononcée” (20). Because this is an unpronounced promise, it must not be written in the book, either - and Cixous renders this
unpronounced nature typographically as follows: “depuis des années ils ne s’étaient pas dit: «
» «
» sinon avec les ailes des yeux et les dents nues »
(21). The same unspoken promise is referred to again later on in the book, when the couple talk about Rembrandt’s painting *The Jewish Bride*: “Et à la question « l’aura-t-il jamais épousée, le pauvre? », la réponse dorénavant serait : « oui, jamais ». Alors il dit : . Alors elle dit : . Tant mieux” (157). It is, of course, left up to the individual reader to invent what the two lovers did (not) say to each other; but the reader will remember the previous mention of the silence regarding an engagement, and fill in the blanks accordingly in his or her mind. By not simply mentioning, but rather including silences in her work, Cixous not only bypasses conventional narrative rules (and in the process, subverts them); she also encourages textual interpretation on the part of her readers. She thus essentially forces the reader to engage in the same kind of process in which she engages when she reinterprets religious texts. In this way, she involves the reader in her re-interpretive process; and this can only make the process more acceptable in the eyes of her readers.

In fact, the subversive play with narrative rules is also sometimes addressed explicitly in Cixous. The main character of *Fiancée*, while pondering her life and the nature of love, tells that she has once seen a very old woman who had attained the point of “ne plus s’interdire aucun des paradoxes de l’amour” (137) and thus was no longer going to “se priver des joies de ce monde sous prétexte que nous sommes soumis aux lois totalement stupides et arbitraires de la Chronologie” (138). By capitalizing “Chronologie”, Cixous calls to mind the way in which she occasionally assigns capitals to specific terms in order to connect them with divinity (as will be further discussed below). At the same time, she ridicules it by calling it “stupid” and “arbitrary”, which is one of her playful jabs at authority. Chronology, then, is on the side of the religious and
literary establishment (which presumes to establish its dominance by assigning capital letters, as she implies by her use of the capital C); and as we can see, Cixous sees no good reason to follow the “stupid” rules of chronology. Once again, she assumes a position of playful disrespect to the norms and subverts them. Cixous’ narrative mode, as Charlotte Berkowitz describes it, is “subversively near to dream” and to the unconscious (177); thus, Cixous is obviously going to break these arbitrary (and thus created, most probably by men) rules, such as those of chronology, most notably in the fact that works like Fiancée are completely achronic and make a mockery of any “logical” sequence of events.

Cixous addresses this lack of chronology directly herself in Fiancée: “J’aime les figures de construction du temps par révolution: inversion transgression, passage au-delà, transport d’une année à une autre” (106, my italics). She thus confesses to preferring a non-linear conception of time – one that flies in the face of the traditional “Chronologie” that is likened to the traditional God and His establishment through a capital letter. In this manner, she is rebelling against an eschatological frame of thought, a Messianic notion of time marching forward towards last things, and indulging in her own counter-conception of time. Cixous directly recognizes the link between this conception and subversion – called “transgression” by her above. She in this way inscribes herself both into a traditional notion of “female” time, which is considered to be cyclical in opposition to male, linear time (Kristeva 16), and into the conception of time that much second-wave feminism proposed as perceived by women (17). Interestingly, Julia Kristeva points out that this notion of cyclical time is linked not only to mystical civilizations (more on mystical tendencies in Cixous will be said shortly), but also to states of jouissance (whose erotic dimensions will also be discussed further on in this chapter). Cixous’ ideas on time and
chronology thus fit squarely into the subversive currents of her time, that of a feminism attempting to undermine masculine views and concepts.

Beyond chronology, another set of narrative rules that is played with subversively is that of point of view. The point of view often shifts in Cixous’ oeuvre, and in many instances, little or no explicit indication is given as to whose point of view is currently prevailing. This keeps the reader constantly alert and active in the process of interpretation of the text. For example, in the story of the Kabyle woman who visits the narrator’s mother in her clinic to get a false birth certificate, Cixous first calls this – without quotation marks in the original text – “encore une histoire invraisemblable” (Rêveries 110). She implies by what comes before that this is the mother’s opinion, but also taken over by the narrator (her daughter), due to the absence of quotation marks. Next, and again without quotation marks, the narrator’s own thoughts as in opposition to her mother’s are reflected: “ma mère est folle” (110). Finally, within the same paragraph and once again without the slightest quotation mark, the opinion of the surrounding society regarding the mother’s refusal to provide the false document is indicated: “elle est une fausse porte” (110), indicating that the mother was wrong in her refusal. Thus, the narrator shifts her point of view from one individual or group to another and from one contradicting opinion to another, without much typographical or other explicit indication of whose opinion the reader is witnessing. The reader’s constant activity in interpreting the text is therefore required. This is in parallel to Cixous’ own interpretations of religious and other texts, and she seems to indicate to the reader that this is a natural process in which every reader should take part.

The doubt that Cixous preserves when it comes to point of view in her works is not the only one that she cultivates. Doubt is of particular importance in a religious context, since it is the key factor that can put faith into jeopardy. Cixous, in her effort to keep the reader involved in
the reading process, cultivates doubt also in the sense that often, her meaning is intentionally (and famously) unclear. In a religious context, this is the case for example in the story “La Lyre” of Prénom, in which the narrator claims to have replaced his heart with a lyre – however, it is completely unclear what this instrument represents in the story: whether it represents faith, the capacity to evoke faith, the instrument of Orpheus in Greek mythology, God’s presence, the fact that God has stolen the narrator’s heart, or something entirely different. The reader him- or herself must choose between these options and keep in mind that there may be many possibilities. In this way, Cixous undermines the idea of a single authority or a single interpretation, and keeps awake in the reader’s mind the readiness to accept alternate solutions. By constantly keeping awake the reader’s awareness, Cixous indicates that textual interpretation is crucial and that reading is an active, writerly act; and her playful, subversive writing style encourages the reader to treat religious references in as irreverent and creative a way as she treats her intertexts.

In a similar way, Cixous plays with biblical references when she concludes the story of “La Lyre” with a parable (75-76). However, as if she were referring to, or even mocking the often-vague meanings of biblical parables, the message of her parable is utterly unclear. What is more, it has no positive effect on the listener of the parable in the story, who seems to have understood it no more than we readers have (77-78). This is another way of indirectly mocking biblical references and putting their power into question. Cixous thus sows doubt in the minds of her readers concerning parables, by constructing a parable of her own that demonstrates how unreliable parables often are, and this once again shows that many interpretations are often possible. This emphasis on doubt and uncertainty calls to mind other unclear texts in need of interpretation, such as the founding texts of the Abrahamic religions, and encourages doubt
regarding the (mostly androcentric) interpretations that have been made of them throughout the histories of their interpretations.

Another way in which Cixous sows doubt is by using intentionally contradictory language. Not only does she often use language that is unclear or ambiguous in its meaning; in some cases, two things that she writes in sequence directly contradict each other. This is for example the case in one of her descriptions of God, who “s’enorgueillit sans s’enorgueillir” (Fiancée 51). The reader can speculate about the meaning of this contradictory statement – for example, that God appears to be proud but really, cannot be said to be so because He is infallible; however, nothing in the text allows the reader to be quite certain of whether his or her interpretation is correct. In a similar way, the narrator of Fiancée speaks of a “Livre” that was “tellement fort qu’il était une pierre” (74). Saying that the narrator had read that “Book”, however, “n’est ni faux ni vrai” (74). By thus making contradictory statements follow each other, Cixous is making a mockery of any attempts to read a clear and unambiguous meaning into her text. She appears to be telling the reader that the only thing that he or she can be certain of is the uncertainty of his or her interpretation. What is more, a reader of an Abrahamic faith will be immediately familiar with these kinds of contradictions and reminded of their presence in scripture; this allusion on Cixous’ part will make it all the more clear to him or her how contradictory scripture can be and to what extent exegesis is often a relatively arbitrary choice between one interpretation and another. In this manner, Cixous is doing in a literary way what other scholars are attempting to do with holy scripture – i.e., demystifying it, historicizing it, and reopening it to what Assia Djebar would call “ijtihad”, an intellectual striving for an understanding of the original sacred text.
The concept of textual interpretation is indeed quite important in Cixous’ work, and this is especially the case in the religious context. Intertextuality is a central fact in all of her writings, as allusions or direct references to other works are a constant presence in her text. This even goes so far as to construct links between Cixous’ own books – the story “Le Sphinx” from Prénom, for example, reappears again several decades later in Fiancée (75). This strong presence of intertextuality, coupled with the importance of religious themes, constantly calls to mind the idea of exegesis, the interpretation of scripture. Exegesis, of course, was the basis of male power in many societies dominated by religion over the centuries, because male exegetes reserved this privilege for themselves. Cixous seems to call the (female) reader not only to write, as she does in “Le Rire de la méduse”, but also to call her to read in a writerly way, to reread and thus rewrite scripture, such that that right can no longer be usurped by the androcentric establishment. The treatment of religion in Cixous’ oeuvre, through its irreverence and its intertextuality, is thus a call to engage in a feminist exegesis, one that should be carried out in a writerly, creative way.

Cixous herself frequently cites from or alludes to the Bible and other religious texts. This may happen in an overt and explicit form, such as in the scene in which the two lovers approach a paradisiacal state and the narrator describes, « il est penché sur moi le fiancé-biblique » (Fiancée 144), or in the situation in which a dream that the male lover has creates itself, « comme il arrive si souvent – dans la Bible » (152). It happens much more frequently, however, that Cixous uses biblical phrases and inserts them into her own sentences, such that the biblical content is only part of a larger idea. Thereby, she lends her own sentences more gravity. However, it can also be said to have the reverse effect of rendering the biblical citation more mundane and less transcendent or exalted. When Cixous writes, for example, in “Anagramme”, a story from Prénom, that “[c]e que nous avions appelé le dernier serait le premier” (198, the
narrator in this scene is reflecting on his succession), this recalls Matthew 19:30: “Plusieurs des premiers seront les derniers, et plusieurs des derniers seront les premiers”. This has a somewhat ambiguous effect: On the one hand, the reader feels that the every-day situation in the text into which this quasi-citation is inserted is elevated in dignity; however, at the same time, the fact that Cixous handles the Bible as she would any other text and changes it around the way she pleases produces the impression that she handles the biblical text somewhat willfully and without much respect. Indeed, Cixous is toying with scripture; and in this way, she teaches the reader that it is acceptable, even recommendable to approach these texts in a familiar way, to interpret and deconstruct them and come to one’s own understanding as to their meanings.

A similar effect is achieved when the narrator of Fiancée speaks (one can only assume) about the lovers’ relationship being akin to “Admirer Dieu à la sueur de l’âme” (123). Here, Cixous’ words produce a curious switch: a citation from the Bible that describes a relatively mundane situation, "Gagner son pain à la sueur de son front" (Gen. 3:19), gains a more elevated, spiritual meaning when Cixous changes “Gagner son pain” into “Admirer Dieu” and “son front” into “l’âme”. Cixous thus in a way “spiritualizes” the Bible itself, almost as if she were trying to make it even more conducive to evoking faith. At the same time, one cannot help noticing that she is taking considerable liberties with the sacred text, which can be interpreted as a lack of respect. This effect is therefore highly ambivalent; but what does become clear is that while seizing spirituality and religious texts for herself, the leading idea behind Cixous’ manipulations is creativity and utter liberty with the text.

One masterful incidence of religious intertextuality occurs in Fiancée, in which the female narrator speaks of all the men of the earth, none of whom is like her lover: “Tous étaient inconnus, chacun n’était pas toi et chacun m’a rappelé à quel point mon ami et lui seul est pareil.
au faon des biches sur les montagnes déchiquetées. Mais plus exactement il est le pommier qui donne à manger le bien avec le mal” (102). This recalls, in an almost funny way due to its imitative nature, the biblical Song of Songs:


Once again, Cixous engages the Bible, but she changes it around according to her own taste. Specifically, in an inversion that can be considered subversive, the sexes are once more changed, and not the female lover is akin to an apple tree, but the male lover is. Cixous thus produces a kind of pastiche of the Song of Songs – and by so doing, she uses the Bible passages for her own purposes. She does not subvert the intention of the Song of Songs of singing the praises of a lover, but adapts it to her own needs: that of taking liberties with the Biblical text, using it as a tool and adapting it; and the most subversive aspect of this procedure is, of course, that she is a woman doing it from her own perspective and for her own purposes.

In fact, the mixing of the religious and the mundane that is present in this pastiche takes the idea of subversive exegesis even further. When she makes general statements about the nature of life, Cixous puts God, saints, literary figures and human beings without further distinction on the same level. « Prenez Augustin, prenez le petit François, prenez Job, prenez Dieu : des combats, des coups bas du premier jour jusqu’au dernier, une vie de fous », she describes in *La Fiancée juive* (36). According to Cixous, then, all of these levels of existence are worth the same: struggles have to be mastered by all, no matter how close to divinity. This, of course, flies in the face of any conception of an omnipotent God who does not have to deal with
the same amount of problems as lowly humans do; thus, it constitutes another facet to Cixous’ project of challenging religious dogma. Moreover, this leveling effect is also in accordance with Cixous’ insistence on the human value of divinity, a topic that I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

A similar effect to that of this juxtaposition of characters is achieved through Cixous’ use of capital letters, a topic already alluded to above. Cixous employs capitalization quite generously, and sometimes, it is used for words that quite clearly refer to characters or objects that imply divinity. Jennifer Yee points out that the capitalized “Velo” in Réveries is made akin to the Messiah not only by virtue of the fact that the narrator and her brother wait for it for a long time, but that it is also given a divine aura through this capitalization (191). In other cases, words representing God are capitalized to make it clear that it is He to whom Cixous is referring: This is the case with “le Grand” in Fiancée (35). In other instances, however, concepts are capitalized that are alternatives to an Abrahamic God: this is for example the case for “Dieu ou l’Accident” (123), or “l’esprit mauvais appelé Abandon” (80). Moreover, in other cases, Cixous uses capitalization in order to confer divinity to an instance that might not otherwise be clearly recognized to contain such divinity: This is for example the case when the two lovers in Fiancée are sleeping, and the narrator calls them “Leur Deux étant quelque chose de compliqué que Dieu s’est dit” (120). Throughout all of these examples, two things become clear: Firstly, that Cixous is still tied to the old system of capitalizing words associated with divinity; but that, secondly, she works from within this system in order to relativize the concept of the divine, to alter it by reinterpreting it. Not only the Abrahamic God has a right to this kind of capitalization, but alternative concepts of divinity do as well, according to Cixous, and in particular those she proposes in her own works. Capitalization, in this way, is yet another of the master’s tools that
Cixous employs to undermine the master’s house – the house of the androcentric socio-religious establishment.

The technique of mixings involving religious elements, however, goes much further. For instance, Cixous often refers to Christian beliefs, using New Testament stories to support her own points while confessing to Judaism and coming from a Muslim country. She illustrates, for example, the power of love by illustrating it with the miracles performed by Jesus Christ: “Le secret du miracle est que par amour le paralytique s’est levé lui-même. […] Lève-toi mon amour et jouis” (123). Not only does Cixous here link religion and love; she also decides to speak for Jesus Christ. In order to make her point understood, then, she never shies away from using elements from other religions.

Cixous also creates new expressions that combine elements from different religions: For example, she calls the poor man living under the stairs in her house in Algiers, Mohamed, “le Juif errant musulman” (Rêveries 139). While expressing a considerable degree of compassion (not the least because she links the man to her own religion), this also implies that concepts from one religion may be useful for another religion, as well – and thus shows up the parallels between the two. Cixous may even be implying that the differences between religions are completely unimportant when compared to the primacy of human values such as love – this is shown, for example, in the suffering and confusion that is caused by seeing one’s lover get married: “Mais comment, tu vas aller là-bas, dans cette espèce d’église, ou de cathédrale, ou de synagogue ou de lieu de culte…” (Fiancée 154, my italics). Here, differences between religions cease to be important when compared with the simple fact that the narrator’s heart is being broken. In these two examples, then, that of Mohamed and of the lover’s marriage, the
differences between religions are abolished in the name of human compassion and of love between human beings.

The source of this confessional tolerance, and even mixing, may be seen in Cixous’ education. “Quand j’eus 10 ans,” writes Cixous in “Mon Algériance”, “mon père me donna en même temps un maître d’arabe et un maître d’hébreu” (73), using this as an example of the tolerance and diversity within the Cixous family. This inclusiveness of both of the languages of Judaism and Islam is also symptomatic of Cixous’ understanding for the “Other” in French Algeria: She and her brother are embarrassed by the stereotyping leveled against Muslim Algerians, even when this stereotyping originates from their own parents (Rêveries 93). They also have a great deal of understanding for the Algerian independence struggle, Cixous expressing contempt for the French obscurantist policy that ignores the existence of an Algeria separate from the French presence (150, 155). Conversely, the pied-noir girls in her class, who ignore the presence of Muslim Algeria, are called both “excised” and “exorcised” (124) – a telling use of vocabulary because it calls to mind some of the most violent crimes against women perpetrated in Muslim and Christian societies, respectively, genital mutilation and witch-hunts. The removal of the presence of Muslim Algeria in the French lycée in Algiers is thus compared to both the removal of the capacity for sexual pleasure and to the expulsion of a demon. In either case, it is a violent procedure that strikes the narrator of Rêveries through its “énormité”, its “absence énorme” (124), and it demonstrates to her the necessity for inclusiveness, toleration, and the consideration of elements observed in other religions.

On the contrary, Cixous’ desire to know and be with Muslim Algerians is expressed in her wanting to possess the “mauresque” doll that her father refuses to buy for her (134-5), implying the hope on the part of the young Cixous that this object (which, after all, has no will of
its own), will allow her to experience “Algeria” more closely. It is also expressed in her understanding of and appreciation for the Muslim girls who one day appear in her class. “Je sus immédiatement qu'elles étaient l'Algérie qui se préparait,” she explains in Algériance (74). Thus, despite hailing from a Jewish family and being grouped with Christian pied-noir girls, Cixous expresses great appreciation and empathy for the Muslim society surrounding her.

The mixing of these different cultures surrounding her is, of course, also expressed in a linguistic way. In Mon Algériance, Cixous portrays the “sport linguistique et amoureux” that took place in her family (73): “on jouait aux langues chez nous, mes parents passant avec plaisir et adresse d’une langue à l’autre tous les deux, l’un depuis le français l’autre depuis l’allemand, en sautant par l’espagnol et l’anglais, l’un avec un peu d’arabe et l’autre avec un peu d’hébreu” (73). If cultural acceptance functions by way of language, it was practiced to an extreme in the Cixous household; and what is most important, two languages directly associated with religions, Arabic and Hebrew, are included on equal terms in this “loving” sport of language. Cixous engages in her typical mixing-up of elements and irreverent breaking up of boundaries, but in so doing, she creates a new amalgam that unites disparate elements, encourages diversity, and decrees religions to coexist affectionately.

This love for combining languages also transpires in the code-switching in which Cixous herself engages in her works. She switches from one language into another without any kind of marking other than the change in language itself, and often without a clearly visible reason. This occurs for example when the female lover in Prénom discovers that she is pregnant: She describes the situation as “instantanément tout à fait at home” (119). Cixous gives the reader no indication of why she suddenly chose to use English, and thus he or she may presume that it seemed spontaneously more appropriate to the author. At other times, it becomes clearer that the
language used implies that Cixous sought to represent the language in which an expression was first heard, or to reflect an association that is only attached to the expression in a specific language. Such can be assumed when Cixous follows up “le chêne” with “die Eiche” in Rêveries in order to reflect the connection of the tree with Germanness (33). She also uses the expression “gesunder Antisemitismus” two times in the original German (43 and 106), an expression that sounds especially uncannily callous in this language because it echoes the Nazi era. In other cases, it is the conquering Roman association attached to “delenda est” when Cixous speaks of Algiers as a city under siege (75). In any case, whether the reasons for the choice of language are clear or not, the effect is often the same: While once again requiring her reader to use all of his or her intellectual resources in order to keep up the interpretive effort of his or her reading, Cixous also makes a statement of tolerance and inclusion by using all of these languages on equal terms.

In this way, Cixous engages in a playful subversion on many levels, employing an astonishing variety of techniques. By using grammatical and gender play, portmanteau words, sound associations, by toying with chronology and with blanks in her writing and using a shifting point of view, Cixous habituates her reader to a style in which he or she must read with constant attention and mental activity. He or she must be prepared for Cixous to use aspects of her writing to play with and subvert the reader’s expectations in any way possible – especially in the realm of the religious. This is supported by a general tendency to sow doubt in the reader’s mind and to mix elements of different confessions and languages, as well as to jump back and forth between the religious and the mundane. The use of all of these techniques sets the stage for a generally revised concept of religion and religiosity, and for points of criticism such as that of institutionalized religion, which will be discussed next.
IV. Religion as an Institution: Mocking Divinity

First and foremost, it must be stated that the concept of religion in Cixous’s works is in general completely divorced from any dogmatically established context. The requirement for absolute truths that must be believed in appears to have been abolished; there is no one firm, absolute set of beliefs in Cixous. One example is, once again, that of the “messianic” bicycle. Not only are a variety of words capitalized by Cixous to endow them with a God-like aura; but when Cixous capitalizes the bicycle the narrator and her brother receive from her mother in *Rêveries*, she also makes it explicit that this “Vélo” indeed represents a kind of religion to which narrator and brother subscribe. “Du besoin fou du Vélo”, as she writes, “naissait la nécessité des rites d’une religion à laquelle autrement, en dehors du Vélo, nous n’étions ni formés ni attachés, mais l’urgence nous faisait joindre les mains et courber la tête” (28-29, my italics). Besides the fact that religion is here portrayed as an oppressive force that weighs on its believers so much that they “bow their heads” in submission, this citation also indicates that religion can be born from any urgent need. This invites the reader to conclude that for Cixous, even well-established religions are merely constructions that were based on an urgent need that at one point seemed to warrant the establishment of a system of faith. Religions are thus not supernaturally God-given, but simply created by humans in need of a system of belief.

This idea is also reflected in *Le Prénom de Dieu*, in which Cixous invents the character of “La Tête”, who, in a somewhat ridiculous fashion, attempts to make the narrator believe in its own divinity. “Ici est mon temple”, claims La Tête: “Adore-moi. Baisse la tête. Dis: la. Dis: un. Ne dis pas: deux. Il n’y a que Moi. Dis: Je te crois.” (16) Once again, the representative of an arbitrary religion makes the narrator bow his head in submission and demands unconditional
belief. Through this ridiculous representative of religion, and the intertextual analogy to the Old Testament’s “jealous” God who wants to be the only one, Cixous creates a parody of monotheism: It is only by force of coercion and simplistic repetition that monotheistic religions can maintain their influence and their followers.

La Tête, here, is portrayed as a random character who simply assumes its divinity. In a similar way, Cixous assigns divinity to several characters by likening them to the Messiah: the family’s dog in Reveries, for example, becomes “le Chien d’Annonciation”, “qui autrefois fut le Roi et fils de Dieu” (51). Similarly, the character Mohamed in Reveries, who lives under the stairs of the narrator’s house, becomes “l’envoyé” (139) and “Prophète pur de dieu et de personne” (140, the lowercase d in “dieu” signifying that divinity can be taken away as easily as it is assigned). In this way, Cixous bestows a religious signification to various characters of her own choosing; she manipulates divinity at her whim in order to characterize personalities in her books. Thus, she removes religion from an untouchable, immutable, unapproachable position to one that allows it to be manipulated and used as a tool for her own ends.

When speaking of the idea of waiting for the Messiah, Cixous already challenged this tradition in Prénom. Rather than the people of Israel awaiting the Messiah, in Cixous’ work it is a being from a different religious tradition altogether, a sphinx, that is placed in the desert in order to wait for “celui qui, à la fin, viendrait” (81)\textsuperscript{10}. In this way, the idea of waiting for the Messiah is subverted and recreated in a completely different form, and thus, religious dogma traditionally seen as immutable is challenged. But also in Fiancée, a people wait for a Messiah

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\textsuperscript{10} The Sphinx, who is the title character of a short story in Prénom, exists only for the sake of increasing God’s control: “Dieu créa le Sphinx pour que le désert fît partie de sa Création” (81). Its only purpose is to await him who, according to God, will arrive one day, a function that the Sphinx fulfills somewhat unwillingly (81-2) and mutinously (86), and that provides most of the plot of the short story.
who does not come, crying “‘Yarrive! Yarrive!’”. The one who finally does come is “Un qui s’est faufilé, ni vu ni connu, un de ces rats toujours prêts à prendre le pouvoir pendant les époques où les rationnés à mort font les frais de l’espoir” (42). Once again, Cixous ridicules opportunists who use religion in order to take advantage of the less fortunate and suppress those weaker than them; more than that, she accuses those opportunists of their religiously justified misdeeds. Cixous thus encourages her readers to view religion critically; indeed, she encourages readers to reread and analyze religious traditions and texts in order to discover which tenets are acceptable to them and which ones should be rejected.

It is not only the concept of waiting for the Messiah that is challenged in Cixous’ works, but also other sacred traditions. Confession, for example, is described as “l’horreur de la confession” in La Fiancée juive. It is highly significant here that this expression is mentioned only as an aside, in the tone of a fact that everyone knows, but that does not have to be directly addressed: “‘Peur’, c’est lui, ce mot que l’on aime à chuchoter dans l’horreur de la confession, jamais il n’y eut mot plus confiant […]” (73, my italics). The mention of the expression “l’horreur de la confession”, while the main attention of the sentence is on the word “Peur”, implies the assumption on the part of the narrator that any reader would agree that confession is a “horror”, although it is one of the sacraments of the Catholic Church. This is a very indirect way of subverting religious dogma, by simply inserting criticism in a by-the-way manner, because it discourages dissent from her reader, making a critical reading of her message on the part of the reader less likely.

Doubt and criticism of established dogma continues in the story “La Baleine de Jonas” in Prénom, which features an unnamed religion and a protagonist who starts to doubt its veracity. When this protagonist decides to read the central book of his religion, he realizes that “il était
écrit des mensonges” (164). Although Cixous does not name this religion directly, she, by making a book so central in it, metaphorically criticizes the Abrahamic religions. At the same time, she also encourages those who believe in one of those religions of the book to turn to their “book” themselves, to engage in their own kind of exegesis in order to determine on their own which tenets to believe in and which ones to reject. Taken together, these challenges to the “book” and to sacred traditions such as the wait for the Messiah and Confession indicate to what extent Cixous defies established dogma.

After these challenges, the idea of criticizing and toying with God Himself is not far off. The expectation that Cixous is going to do this has been present since the title page of the book *Le Prénom de Dieu*, almost like a warning: Someone who uses a person’s first name is on familiar terms with him or her, and may permit him- or herself some occasional mockery of the other person thanks to that familiarity. Cixous seems to imply with this title that since no one else knows God’s first name, it may be one of His mysteries; but by indicating that it will be one of the subjects of her book, she is familiar with it. Using this technique, she approaches almost scandalously closely to God, which is part of her way of mocking Him, relativizing Him and making Him more familiar.

Another form of this critical toying with God is, for example, the judgment passed on the actions of God, who puts a sphinx into a desert without the sphinx knowing or understanding anything about God’s intentions (“Peut-être aussi Dieu avait-il des projets de développement pour quelque temps futur. Cela, le Sphinx ne le saurait point”; *Prénom* 81). There are, however, also much more direct forms of criticism of characters meant to represent God. One instance of this is the critique by the narrator of the character “La Tête”, which presumes to be God, in “L’outre vide”. Rather than accepting its claims to divinity, the narrator resists it: “Tais-toi.
Inutile, je suis déjà là,” claims the narrator. “Avant toi! Avant toi! […] Non, je dis non, je veux que tu te taises, je dis deux et trois […] Tu mens” (Prénom 16-17). Finally, the narrator engages in a violent, nightmarish fight with this God-like character who simply assumes its divinity: the result is that “derrière le plâtre écrasé il n’y a pas de visage, elle m’a menti, et je l’ai crue” (19).

“La Tête”, then, is a metaphor for false divINITIES and their dangerous powers: Even if one knows their assertions to be false, they often manage to convince us, and thus win followers. What is more, by depicting a narrator who resists and even fights this God-like instance, Cixous encourages her readers to critically evaluate what is being presented as divinity to them. This is part of her disrespectful, subversive project that rereads religion, necessitated by the fact that traditional dogma is unacceptable to her feminist sensibilities.

The narrator is not alone in criticizing God; others in His creation do, as well. The Sphinx, for example, decides that “Si Dieu n’existait plus je serais Dieu. Car que fait Dieu, désormais, sinon attendre?” (86). God’s creation, the Sphinx, thus starts rebelling against him, and considers the idea of taking His place. A similar thought occurs in La Fiancée juive: “la peuplade qui erre sur les talons de Dieu” starts murmuring about the injustices and random events in His creation. “C’est injuste ruminent-ils” (34). Thus, the narrator and the rest of Creation begin having doubts about God and his power, and start to challenge it – an attitude that Cixous depicts as completely understandable, as if she were encouraging her readers to engage in this kind of disrespectful behavior as well.

The reasons for this also become clear - God is cruel, and often arbitrarily so. This is apparently necessary because cruelty and arbitrariness are the only means by which He can assert His power: “Dieu voyait bien qu’il ne pouvait se prouver qu’en torturant les obstinés”, it is claimed in Prénom (83). We are thus quite far removed from the idea of an omnipotent, a just
God; in order to be recognized as God, yes, even to exist, He depends on humans, and He must inflict pain on them with all the sadism implied in the verb “torturer”. Even more clearly, God is qualified as “le noueur, l’étrangleur […], celui qui aboie et mord à l’envers, et à l’endroit qui fait ramper” (178). Implied in these verbs are connotations of blind rage, even indicating the powerlessness of barking and biting dogs; God is thus an arbitrarily aggressive being who, despite the fact that He sometimes succeeds in making humans crawl, is reduced by Cixous to the level of a dog.

Interestingly, the narrator’s conclusion to these descriptions in Prénom is, “pourquoi ne serais-je pas comme celui-là?” (178). It is easy to imitate God, according to this narrator: “il suffisait d’abolir le scrupule” (177). Thus, God may be immoral; but that makes Him all the easier to imitate in order to take his place. This makes Cixous’ statements at this point doubly provocative and doubly subversive. The unscrupulous, torturing nature of God is also present in Fiancée, which speaks of “les malheureux ennemis que le caprice de Dieu torture” (35). God is thus merciless, brutal, and sadistic, simply because this is the only way in which He can stay in power faced with His Creation. This way of rereading religious history and scripture makes it all the more clear why a reevaluation of our concept of God is necessary, and why an alternate concept should be constructed.

Even God’s angels can be full of cruelty, according to Cixous. This is particularly the case in La Fiancée juive: “Une épée charnelle s’allume dans mon aorte et l’ange la plonge jusqu’à la garde”, is how she describes romantic desire (44, my italics). Angels, although they are usually only present symbolically, are threatening: They are “armés jusqu’aux dents” (89). Even more menacingly, “les anges bossus sont sur ta piste et ils auront ta peau trop lisse”, even when one feels safe in the midst of amorous bliss (63). This reminds her readers of the
threatening way in which religion is all too often presented to believers, and the nightmarish impression with which these citations leave the reader show that this is an unacceptable state of affairs which necessitates a rereading of religion according to new parameters.

Situations and characters linked to established religion generally have a threatening and arbitrary character for Cixous; and this is linked to the androcentric nature of such religious systems. The religion of the imaginary society in Prénom shows this in metaphorical fashion: In it, “les femmes ne savaient pas lire et le maître [the religious leader] dédaignait de leur enseigner le livre”. This is because the master of this religion “disait que les femmes grignotent le monde du regard” (159). This constitutes a clear reference to the Abrahamic religions in which women are not allowed to be clerics, that is, to preach the Word; they supposedly lack the necessary intellectual capacities and are limited to physical acts (here, looking and eating). Men, on the other hand, “lisent [le monde], le polissent, le caressent, le pénètrent, le fécondent et l’honorent”, according to this master (159). The master thus inscribes himself in phallocentric tradition, because it is through male sexual, phallic power that men have exclusive access to religious authority and exegesis. Of course, by using such exaggerated and overly symbolic language, Cixous is also creating a parody of male prejudices, and especially of prejudices propagated by religious leaders, against women and their supposed inability to engage in exegesis. This adds to the playfully subversive project in which she encourages critical reading and a feminist approach to the claims of religious authorities.

Indeed, in this same instance Cixous also openly criticizes these attitudes. Women, in this society, are the only ones to have kept the inquisitive spirit so dear to her: “Il n’y avait que les femmes et les enfants qui fussent encore capables de curiosité” (158), she states, and the women foment all kinds of rebellious ideas about the master - that he might not actually exist, be a
woman etc. (160). Beyond attaching a positive value to this rebellious spirit, and reflecting male prejudice against women, moreover, Cixous establishes a critique of religion by having the master construct “une galerie suspendue et grillagée” for the women in their devotional space (159, my italics). This alludes not only to the separation of men and women in synagogues and mosques, but also to the seclusion and confinement of women according to some religious norms. The master’s religion thus takes on clearly oppressive traits.

This phallocentric, oppressive nature clearly does not remain without protest from the characters in the books. “[L]es piétés”, used as a noun without further qualification, are equated in the story “Le Lac” in Prénom with “toutes les hontes dont sa mère avait emmuré son esprit”, ”son” referring to a protagonist called “la fille” (150). In order to fight these “hontes”, these “verbes transmis”, the protagonist must “tout briser, abattre, s’arracher aux desseins de la race” (150, my italics) – thus, she must resist the traditions passed on in society through androcentric writing. And indeed, the protagonist fights back: She “avait cogné toute la nuit, fendu les interdits, éventré les piétés, parfois taillé dans le vif de sa propre chair là où la vie d’en-haut s’était insinuée jusqu’à ses veines” (150, my italics). Thus, traditional (“transmis”) religious dogma is linked to the chastising of women and to their imprisonment (“emmuré”) in restrictive modes of thought. At the same time, the message is also that it is not impossible to resist the impact of this dogma on one’s own self – although this resistance sometimes occurs at the price of inflicting damage on oneself (“taillé dans le vif de sa propre chair”) if it has already left too deep a mark. 

In a more concrete manner, Cixous also accuses the religious establishment on several occasions through a critique of the character of the rabbi or religious leader. One representative

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11 This moment also reminds the reader that it is women who almost physically embody religion, as it is also them who pass it down to the next generation in Judaism.
of this class of religious “masters” is the character of the “maître” in “La Baleine de Jonas” (Prénom). Through this exemplarily threatening character, Cixous rewrites the biblical story of Jonah and the whale: In her version, Jonah is not ingested by a whale, but swallowed up by the master of his religion (167) – suggesting that this master considers himself to be doing God’s bidding, as the whale is in the biblical story. However, in Cixous, rather than the whale spitting out Jonah at God’s command, Jonah takes it upon himself to cause his freeing: “j’entamai ma remontée marine” (178, italics in original). By rewriting this Old Testament story, then, Cixous both challenges the establishment of religious leaders, and puts the actions and decisions of God into human hands.

The critique of religious leaders is continued in the portrayal of a number of rabbis. For example, the rabbi of Osnabrück in Rêveries is described as “malheureusement pas sympathique”: “c’était un orgueilleux et un cochon le Dr Krakauer il nous a plutôt rebutées [de la religion] les femmes l’envoyaient promener en plus il y avait des préservatifs par terre dans la cour de la Synagogue” (100-101). Another rabbi receives an even more scathing judgment for his immoral advances towards the narrator’s grandmother (Osnabrück 138). Religious authorities, then, can be either abstract “maîtres” as in Prénom, where they tyrannize their followers, or actually existing rabbis, as in Rêveries and Osnabrück; in either case, however, they are portrayed as repulsive, sexually immoral, ruthlessly power-hungry, and discriminatory against women. These kinds of characters and limiting, imprisoning dogma all combine to make established religion unacceptably androcentric and misogynistic for women – thus necessitating an overturning and a feminist rereading of religion on their part.

God himself, to add the capstone to her critique, is portrayed by Cixous as fallible and as no better than mere humans. He is ridiculed most efficiently by the sentences “C’est un Dieu qui
ne sait pas tout. Encore en pyjama” (*Fiancée* 50), and by the reply “j’étais encore couché, là-haut” when He is called on (ibid.). This is thus a God who must respond when called upon, and who can be ascribed all the characteristics that humans possess. It is a God who is “jealous”, as the Old Testament God is, but who nonetheless is not the only one, who has never been “seul pour maître” (79). His power is thus relativized: For example, he cannot control the devil (164-65). In a subversive, disrespectful move, then, Cixous turns the one, exclusive, omnipotent God of the Old Testament into a fallible, human-like character who is powerless to exclude any competitors.

When Cixous makes God Himself appear as a physical character, she ridicules Him quite apparently, which becomes clearest in the short story “Le Sphinx”. Firstly, He is “forgotten” by humanity (*Prénom* 85); and in what follows, His making night follow day is characterized as “étrangement puéril” (86). Finally, in the scene in which He descends to the waiting Sphinx, He appears “infiniment petit, grain de sable blanc”, and must light a tiny lamp in order to pacify this creature of His (“en signe de paix”, 90). When God is directly referred to, He is called “le vieillard” or “le vieux”, and His physical aspects are emphasized: “le vieillard s’assit et laissa le repos monter dans ses membres comme la sève dans un vieux tronc” (90). He thus has a body like humans, a body that ages and that is liable to fail Him at the most important moments. This ridiculing characterization of God by Cixous flies in the face of the traditional fearful respect He is usually given by believers; it overwhelms all biblical notions of omnipotence, uniqueness, omnipresence, and infallibility. Far from refraining from questioning the ways of the Lord, Cixous equates Him with a human being, makes Him accountable to others, and portrays him as fallible.
If God is fallible, this is shown most clearly when His dependence on human beings is depicted. He is “forced” to use certain methods in order to give rise to human faith – for example, due to human demands, God must use “une formule mathématique aussi compliquée que celle que Dieu avait employée pour que la lumière fût” (Prénom 84). God is embarrassed and humiliated by this state of affairs, in particular because some humans go so far as to present Him with their faith as a present (84). Because of this, God hates “les langues des hommes qui sans cesse le provoquent à se prouver”, because they “peuvent d’un seul mot le nommer, d’un silence le tuer” (182). God is thus dependent on humans, their language, and their choice to believe in Him or not; if humans do not speak of Him, they do not create Him with their words. His feats are portrayed as a necessary, but often insufficient precondition for human faith.

This dependence on humans, even for His own existence, is summarized most strikingly in the sentence, “tous rêvent pour que Dieu révexiste” (183): God is Himself only created in the dreams of His “Creation”, of human beings. In this way, Cixous turns the concept of divine omnipotence on its head when she asserts that humans have power over God, rather than only God having power over human beings. This recalls the fact that for her, words, writing, and creativity are more potent even than God Himself - and that women must seize these tools in order to end their own oppression. If God is fallible and created, women must seize this opportunity to rewrite religion for their own purposes.

Finally, the most humiliating blow is dealt to God when Cixous portrays human beings – and even others, like the Sphinx in Prénom - who assert their own godliness. One example is that of the character Jonas, who, after deciding that the “maître” of his religion is no better than him, decides that he (Jonas) might as well be God himself: “Et si j’avais toujours été Dieu ? et si Dieu était mon vrai nom et si Dieu était l’ombre de mon absence […] ? Je le rêve, il me tue, je le
chasse, il me poursuit, je suis Dieu, il est Jonas” (181, my italics). After having created God through his dream, as stated above (recalling the sentence, “tous rêvent pour que Dieu rêvexiste”, 183), the character usurps the power of making God turn into him, and himself turning into God. This invites the idea that the God of the Abrahamic faiths had, at one point, been as fallible as we are; and that the question of who becomes God, as well, is arbitrary. God is, then, no longer eternal and all-powerful for Cixous, but created and fallible; and he or she who takes this power may even have the power of determining the shape and nature of God.

The Sphinx, too, after having long remained faithful to God, starts believing that it would be God itself if God did not exist (86). Following this, “le Sphinx croyait sentir la divinité bouger en lui” (id.), and finally, when God descends to it and asks if it had been waiting for Him, it replies, “Je m’attendais” (90, my italics), an answer whose gravity is made explicit by stating that it “s’abattit comme un bloc aux pieds du vieux” (id.). The Sphinx thus completely disappointed its maker by deciding that it could usurp divinity itself. God, moreover, is entirely dependent on His followers, and their attempts to usurp His position have been many. Not only is this a far cry from the traditional concept of the Abrahamic religions, which demand unquestioning respect of God the father; it also encourages the reader to imagine him- and especially herself as in the shape of God, and God in his or her shape.

V. God as Writing, God with Human Traits: Reading A Bisexual Deity of Love

Beyond simply ridiculing established religion and demonstrating its androcentric, arbitrary nature, Cixous also proposes a different conception of religion that is detectable throughout her oeuvre. Given that humans usurp divine power, it is only appropriate that the
concept of divinity that she recommends should involve the divine nature of humans. “Dieu est Imagination”, states Cixous (Fiancée 79, recalling the idea that humans dream God into being (183). The act of imagining, then, is “le premier degré de l’échelle où nous conduisent les anges aux yeux insinuants” (Fiancée 79), the first step on the ladder that leads towards divinity – a ladder that we are meant to ascend, as the inviting angels seem to imply. It is through imagining, then, that humans are able to approach divine things.

The importance of imagining and of writing is so great for Cixous because according to her seminal works on women and writing, La Venue à l’écriture and “Le Rire de la Méduse”, writing itself is divine. She says so quite explicitly by stating that “L’Écriture est Dieu” (Venue 19), and makes these two elements appear as signifying the same in her playful appositions, “L’écriture ou dieu. Dieu l’écriture. L’écriture de dieu” (30). Interestingly, here, writing, and therefore divinity, is already coupled with sexuality: When the narrator of Venue asks herself (or an imaginary interlocutor) about the possibility of writing herself, writing is equated with sexual pleasure. To write means to “Jouir comme jouissent et font jouir sans fin les dieux qui ont crée les livres” (20), and because this is such a sexual, intimate act, it should, according to her imagination, take place in a hidden location: “Ecrire […] devait se passer […] Dans l’intimité d’un sacré” (21). Thus, writing is an erotic act, the sacred nature of which links it to divinity. Sacredness, and in particular the religions “of the book”, are thus linked very directly not only to exegesis, the act of reading and of interpreting a text, but also to the creative act of bringing a text into being oneself. In this way, Cixous once again flies in the face of theologians who maintain that believers should only follow the interpretations of established authorities. Cixous’ approach to religion is one that keeps the text alive and that works creatively with words.
However, directly after her statement that “Writing is God” comes the warning that some have been excluded from this writing: “L’Écriture est Dieu,” the narrator is told, “[m]ais ce n’est pas le tien” (19). What follows implies that writing – and its traditions – are assimilated to Christianity: “Admire-moi. Je suis le génie du christianisme”. Those, however, who do not belong to this religion, must back off and renounce writing: “A genoux rejeton de la mauvaise race” (19). The “authority” speaking in the name of Christian “culture”, here, presumes to speak in this way to this narrator because the narrator is Jewish: “Dehors, petite juive” (19). Cixous thus mockingly represents the way in which she is kept away from writing due to her religion. This, however, is not the only reason for which she is being discriminated against: Directly coupled to her Judaism is her quality as a woman, who is being kept “outside” of writing for that reason as well. The fact that these two discriminations are linked is shown in the neologism “juifemme”, which summarizes the full impact that being female and Jewish simultaneously implies (19). The fact that writing is forbidden to women in particular becomes even clearer in “Le Rire de la Méduse”: Speaking of the necessity and of the difficulty for woman to “write herself”, Cixous states that “rien ne nous oblige à […] renflouer sans cesse la religion du père” (47, my italics), meaning that in the past, women have been made to feel obligated to do this. The history of writing and the history of religion have both been determined by the androcentric bias of this “religion du père”; and the male-determined idea of divinity, in turn, claims that “une femme bien réglée, normale, est d’un calme… divin” (40), accepting the fate chosen for her. However, this limiting, passive definition imposed on women is exactly why Cixous demands that women should write - and in an astonishing move, she links challenges to the phallocentric religious establishment and the combination of writing and sexuality: “Qu’ils tremblent, les
prêtres, on va leur *montrer* nos sextes!\(^{12}\) (47, italics in original). The androcentric religious-literary establishment has thus erected ideals both of womanhood and of religion that are far too limiting and discriminatory towards women; and this is why those ideals must be rewritten from women’s perspectives. Writing, in particular when it is linked to sexuality, is the weapon of choice against this androcentric establishment.

Significantly, for women, the problem with writing lies in the fact that according to the phallocentric cultural-religious authorities cited in *Venue*, one must “write from God’s perspective”. This God is the God critiqued by Cixous in the ways mentioned above: He is the limiting, male, androcentric God created by a male religious establishment. “*[N]e faut-il pas écrire du point de vue de Dieu ?*”, the narrator of *Venue*, interested in writing, asks timidly. The authoritarian cultural instance with which she is speaking gives her the crushing reply, “Hélas!”, and the conclusion can only be, “Alors renonces-y!” (36). However, in her typically subversive way, Cixous seems to invite her reader to doubt these answers. If the reply “Hélas!” is a lie, the reader is invited to speculate on what might happen if one were not obligated to write “from God’s perspective”. Moreover, what would happen if one were obligated to write from God’s perspective, but not from the perspective of this God - what would happen if the concept of God were changed? Woman is excluded from writing because one must supposedly write from the perspective of a male and – one can assume – androcentric God; but what if women (such as Cixous) changed the concept of who God is entirely? Then women, with a God in their own

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\(^{12}\) The fact that “*montrer*” is in italics here has interesting implications both for religion and for femininity. The reader may assume that “*montrer*” is meant to evoke the shared root with “*monstre*”, a deformed being to be shown, as if women were somehow physically deformed (a possible allusion to Freud); but it also calls to mind the “*monstrance*” that holds the Eucharist in Catholic liturgy. Considering Cixous’s well-known tendency to play with sounds and associations, one can here see a linking of a supposedly deformed femininity and its actual nature, which is closer to sacredness.
image, or created according to their own ideas, might not be forced to renounce writing. This is why, in the context of “Coming to writing”, a renewed concept of religion and of God is crucial for Cixous’ thought.

How, then, should the concept of God be changed, according to Cixous? As has been suggested above, there is a human aspect to God, a godly aspect to humans. In particular, there is quite clearly a parental aspect to the humanized concept of divinity: In fact, both her father and her mother are sometimes likened to deities. All of Cixous’ writing, as Jacques Derrida explains, is “tout occupée de génération, et de filiation”. His meaning becomes clearer as he continues by speaking of the “filiation” of Cixous’ oeuvre itself, the “lignée de l’écriture”, or her “œuvre comme lignée” (22). Besides taking, as Derrida does, “descent” or “la lignée” in the metaphorical sense of the pedigree and intertextual links of her works, one can also see aspects of the filiation motif in Cixous’ concept of religion: Thus, it is not surprising that the young Hélène, who lost her father at an early age, imagines God in a filial way. “Lorsque j’avais trois ans,” recounts the narrator of Venue, “Dieu était un jeune homme élégant et maternel, dont la tête peut-être coiffée d’un chapeau de cérémonie s’élançait dans les nuages” (24). Thus, God may be the father, but if so, He is a “maternal” father who protects and takes care of the narrator.

Charlotte Berkowitz, in “Paradise Reconsidered – Hélène Cixous and the Bible’s Other Voice”, points out that although the sacred is embodied by God in Cixous’ lexicon, God is not necessarily the father: rather, Cixous “finds holiness” in “interconnection with the mother and, through her, with all life” (176). There are many motherly God-figures in Cixous’ oeuvre: In “L’Outre vide”, part of Prénom, for example, the narrator states that “ma mère exigéait que je fusse son adorateur” (22). This is not surprising, because “La Tête”, which usurps the position of God in this story, is simultaneously equated with the narrator’s mother: (“tu as la tête de ma mère
et si tu ressembles à ma mère, c’est parce qu’elle est la première”, 17). This narrator sometimes has moments of “dévotion mystique à ma mère”, in which he sacrifices for her even the air that he breathes (25). Similarly, the mother and grandmother of the narrator in Réveries are sometimes likened to goddesses: They are “les deux petites silhouettes des déesses distraites aux yeux hagards” (32). The diminutive nature that Cixous occasionally ascribes to divinity is only implied here; but further on, the criticism and ridiculing of it is made once again explicit, as the two mother-goddesses become “maman-et-Omi les deux petites déesses dépassées” (33). The revised, humanized concept of God that Cixous proposes thus tends much more towards the feminine than to the masculine, and bears distinctly maternal traits. Cixous challenges the masculine, transcendent, infallible image of God by making familiar humans into God figures, and turning the traditional forbidding male figure of God into an approachable female one that can be playfully manipulated.

Indeed, Cixous even here does not shy away from challenging this maternal concept of God, and she does so by exposing it to the concept of matricide. In Réveries, for example, she insinuates that her brother might have killed their mother had he not been able to kill a rat instead: “Aussitôt je suis traversée par l’horrible idée qu’il eût peut-être mieux valu que le rat mourût pour nous. Cela eût peut-être évité un égorgement de mère” (33). Here, this murder of the mother is only a possibility; but in Prénom, she goes so far as to portray the murder of her mother itself, perpetrated out of despair at the mother not being able to accept the narrator’s love:

13 Significantly, Cixous here uses terms of ritual sacrifice: The rat dies “for us”, as if it were a degraded version of Christ, another demystifying stab at divine concepts. The mother, conversely, is almost “égorgée”, calling to mind the slitting of the throat of an animal in order to render its meat kosher or halal. Cixous thus never ceases to play with concepts related to religious rules – be they related to Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, even if the play may be considered somewhat distasteful, such as in the case of a matricide or of likening a rat to the Messiah.
“Je tue ma mère. C’est plus facile qu’on ne croit” (32). No matter how divine mothers are, then, this does not keep Cixous from relativizing even this concept of divinity by exposing the representative of divinity to murder. Humans are the creators of God, dreaming God into being; and therefore, they can also once again remove Him or Her from existence.

The other way in which divinity is human in Cixous is through the concept of love. Lovers are portrayed as having access to the divine in many instances. Firstly, love is a remedy against the devil and against existential terrors: “Mais que peut la terreur,” asks Cixous in *Fiancée*, “contre l’oiseau à deux âmes l’une mâle l’autre femelle qui tire une vie de chaque mort ?” (*Fiancée* 81). The answer is, nothing, because “la santé des amants rend le diable malade obligatoirement” (33). Simply by being together and through their love, lovers thus fight the devil, unite their souls, and constitute a life force. Throughout *La Fiancée juive*, the two lovers are portrayed as if they were two angels fighting evil, beginning with the phrase “ange sur ange” when the couple make love (23) and culminating in the sentence “il ne dépendait que de moi de refuser au mal sa victoire” (202) at the end of the book. Lovers, even when they are not directly depicted as divine, are metaphysically on the side that opposes evil and the works of the devil. They thus constitute an alternate entity to God.

When they are not depicted as angels, they are often described as akin to biblical personages. For instance, when they meet again after a separation, the male lover is called “le fiancé-biblique” (144). In another instance, when walking with her lover, the narrator of *Fiancée* asks him: “si, par hasard, ceci était un message? Prends ton bâton. Frappe le rocher et une oie jaillira” (11, italics in original), and further on: “frappez sur le rocher et entrez” (12). By creating an intertextual link to the book of Exodus and likening her lovers to the people of Israel and Moses in the desert, Cixous gives them a larger-than-life, supernatural quality, which can only be
ascribed to the fact that they are lovers (as that is the only thing that we know about them at this point). At the same time, however, the effect is double: Cixous combines humor with the biblical parallel, adding wordplay (…“et entrez”). Thus, she never strays from her irreverent point of view and reminds the reader that within her playful world, all kinds of creations are possible.

Furthermore, when the lovers make love, this also takes on a quasi-religious dimension: It is called “communiant de près” (12), as if each other’s company were the only company needed for communion to take place. This scene lends a devotional aspect to lovemaking – as if it were a way of connecting with God. Cixous implies that the only thing that is needed for a connection between God and human beings is the intimacy within a couple. No longer is dogma or a clergy required; individual humans create their own kind of religiousness.

In fact, the lovers are explicitly linked to divinity in a number of instances: For example, when they take a shower together, they are said to be taking “une douche ensemble comme deux dieux” (Fiancée 120). Moreover, on many occasions, the female narrator speaks of her lover as “Seigneur” (85, 86, 87, 93), sometimes “seigneur, bien-aimé” (8), alluding to the fact that she adores him like a god (notwithstanding, however, the fact that she is capable of attaining divinity as well through love). Once more, God is thus given a human form. This becomes even more explicit when the narrator says of her lover that “sans cesse tu avances vers moi entouré de colonnes de feu et de nuées de puissances insaisissables” (89), evoking the way in which God appeared to the people of Israel in the desert. Love is therefore an important component of what confers divinity to human beings in Cixous’ world.

This is only natural, claims Cixous, because according to her, “[o]ù il y a passion le surnaturel est ce qu’il y a de plus naturel” (Fiancée 152). This supernatural nature is, firstly, present in the concept of lovers being “elected” to be lovers by divine ordinance: “Dieu vous
tombe dessus avec délicatesse” when He decides that the lovers are “élus pour l’amance” (34). Love itself is linked to God’s existence when the lovers are described as “Ils pensaient (s’aimer) (l’amour) comme Dieu respire : sans un souffle. Au maximum” (21). Love, then, is quite literally a paradisiacal state: “Dormir lourdement” in a “chambre d’amour” “est le paradis trouvé” (36). Paradise and God himself are therefore concepts that only attain their full, most positive, and most desirable meaning in the context of a relationship between two lovers. Moreover, God is directly involved in their state of being lovers; thus, love contributes to the personal connection between humans and God.

The connection between love and religion also appears in more oblique references. For example, Cixous alludes to the Song of Songs when she calls the female lover in the couple of which she writes “la bien-aimée de Jérusalem” (101). By virtue of being lovers, then, two people attain biblical qualities. The realm of the religious is also linked to lovers when Cixous discusses the painting “La Fiancée juive” by Rembrandt: “le geste religieux”, she supposes, “avec lequel l’homme étend sa main sur le sein de la femme nous [fait] penser que ce tableau est aussi un miroir” (145, my italics). The two lovers of her book thus recognize themselves in the painting; but what is more, they recognize that a gesture of love and desire has a spiritual dimension. The fact that both of the couples are experiencing this connection between desire and the religious connects the couple of Cixous’ book with the couple in Rembrandt’s painting. The two couples, across the more than 400 years that separate them, thus both appear to be part of a greater whole, of a divine purpose.

This is in keeping with what Amy Hollywood points out in “Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Works of Hélène Cixous and Cathérine Clément”: in Cixous, “dominant social structures”, such as those of the religious establishment, are seen as “repressive and oppressive”. However,
“desire”, such as that of the couple of *Fiancée* and that of Rembrandt’s painting, is “the site, for Cixous, of a disrupting and liberatory mystical excess” (147). This, for Cixous, is the case for couples throughout the centuries – they discover a connection with God and divinity within their desire for each other. Desire is part of Cixous’ subversive and playful project of rewriting, as she includes scenes from the Bible and art history in her intertextual, intercultural rereading of the links between religion and love.

Remarkably, however, this religious nature of love and desire is not always portrayed in an agreeable way – in fact, it is sometimes likened to a crusade, or even to a crucifixion. “[C]’est tous les jours départ de croisade” claims Cixous, just after she describes how her lover “m’a été donné pour que je me déchire en joies” (70). Love, then, is a dangerous struggle, although it is a struggle in the name of a higher concept, as the Crusades claimed to be. In this context, the two lovers are also described as “moi l’une branche de la croix toi l’autre branche” (70), and in a further reference to the Passion, Cixous claims that “Ce n’est pas une c’est six lances qui me percent sous le sein, tout ce transpercement c’est par toi qu’il me vient” (70). By comparing herself to Jesus Christ, the narrator thus makes it clear that love is a sacrifice that is entered into willingly, but that entails as much pain and suffering as a crucifixion.

At the same time, despite the suffering, faith must be lived joyfully according to Cixous, and the passage in which this becomes most explicit also references Jesus Christ. Describing the lovers’ togetherness, Cixous claims that “[A]dmirer Dieu” is a “joie rigoureuse”, thus combining the concepts of obligation and of enjoyment. In what follows, she moreover claims that Jesus’ miracles were only due to love: “par amour le paralytique s’est levé lui-même. […] Lève-toi mon amour et jouis” (123, my italics). Love, then, is the only reasonable explanation or foundation for religion in Cixous, the only way in which the concept of religiosity can be made understandable.
The fact that this involves a reference to Christianity can be understood to illustrate Cixous’ understanding of religion in general, broadening her scope beyond Judaism. In any case, however, love is the only precondition on which an understandable, livable religion can be founded, and in order to be acceptable, it must be lived joyfully.

Beyond referring to other religions such as Christianity, Cixous also alludes to belief systems like animism or what almost appears like spiritism. However, these allusions are linked very elegantly back to Judaism and more established religions: Of the cat Thea, for example, who accompanies the couple in Fiancée (and whose name, to begin with, is the Greek word for “goddess”), Cixous says that “[s]i la tora ne vous a pas été donnée comme guide, vous pouvez apprendre du chat la modestie, de la chatte l’assentiment à ce qui vient. Amen.” (110) The cat is therefore presented as incorporating everything that is important in the central ethical and legal guide of Judaism; but beyond that, she is also – in particular through her name - presented as a kind of animal divinity.

This becomes even more explicit in the phrase, “D’ailleurs c’est le dieu petit, muet, à l’un et l’autre sexe […] ce chatte” (135). In this subversive grammatical move, Cixous cleverly combines grammatical attributes that simultaneously ascribe male and female properties to the cat, and reminds the reader of the “oiseau à deux âmes l’une mâle l’autre femelle” (81), the bisexual animal that already connected the two lovers to divinity. The two sexes of the cat make her a representation of the (male and female) lovers, who themselves are connected to divinity, as explained above.

When God is present in this shape, (s)he deserves submission, according to Cixous: “Je suis ta souris, chat divin”, she states, and “quand le dieu bondira-t-il sur moi? […] Je suis sans pouvoir, lui peut me sonner” (15-16). The reasons why submission to this kind of divinity is
acceptable are made clear: “ce chatte, je ne peux pas ne pas l’aimer. La Shekina est » (135). This other name for the cat Thea, Shekina, which is usually defined as the presence of God in Judaism (Unterman 440), has also been ascribed specifically feminine attributes and called “the feminine Divine Presence” (Gottlieb 20). This cat-goddess, the Presence of God, is simultaneously equated with love in Cixous: “Comme l’amour, l’animal, est arrivé inespéré […] Je ne peux pas ne pas obéir à l’ordre muet: Aime-moi” (135). Since the cat-goddess represents the aspect of religion that is love, this is the interpretation of religion to which the narrator of Fiancée subscribes and submits – the orders of this divinity are willingly obeyed.

If, then, these animistic traits are acceptable for Cixous’ conception of religion, it is because they encourage a more personal relationship to God. Indeed, this relationship is very direct, even when the narrator is not challenging God. The narrator of ‘La Lyre” in Prénom, for example, attempts to give himself up completely to God, and as a result, “[u]n seul souffle passait de Tes lèvres [addressing God] en mes veines ouvertes pour s’exhaler chaud encore de toi par mes lèvres vers les autres” (69). As a result, the narrator is able to speak to God directly – it appears as if the entire story is addressed to Him. What is important here is that this personal, mystical relationship with God is a relationship that bypasses any mediator. This is expressed even more strongly in “La Baleine de Jonas” (also part of Prénom), a story that opposes its narrator to the “maître” of his religion. Instinctively, the narrator knows that he does not need this intermediary, and that he has access to God himself: “Je savais que le nom [the narrator’s own true name] était dans les noeuds de soie du thaleth” (the prayer shawl that the narrator has inherited from his father), and that “il eût suffi que je m’en saisisse pour que Dieu me tissât et que tout silence fût voix” (177). The path towards being able to seize religion, then, lies in the
ability to construct a strong relationship, which allows one to come to a personal relationship with God – and this is independent of the community and of other teachers of religion.

It should be remembered here that despite all of the criticism we have seen above, despite her irreverence and challenges to dogma, Cixous is still quite attached to Judaism, culturally and affectively (see also the Introduction). Beyond her criticism of her mother’s embarrassment about Judaism (Rêveries 101), she mocks her mother’s avoidance of even mentioning the religion: “Naïve, elle disait c'est un J. Exorcisme. Tabou. J'ai bien connu les subtils poissons de l'interdit : les interdits s'interdisent eux-mêmes. Ils s'automutilent. Il ne restait plus de nous que la lettre J. J devint ma première lettre préférée : je disais je avec énergie.” (Algériance 72). She thus opposes a considerable amount of energy to the mother’s distancing herself from the religion. Furthermore, a reader familiar with Cixousian wordplay will also notice the association between the pronunciation of the letter “J” and the pronoun “je” – thus, the letter that represents Judaism in her autobiographical tale is the same that is associated phonetically to Cixous’ very own identity.

What is more, Cixous’ lasting attachment to Judaism – despite her family’s general distancing itself from the Jewish community – shines through in instances such as her calling the Jewish cemetery “le vrai cimetière, le juif” (71). In this way, her movement is doubly rebellious: she rebels both against her mother’s distancing herself from the Jewish community, but at the same time also against the established institutions of Judaism (such as the rabbi) and its misogynist tradition.

It is also significant that the concept that the relationship with God should be a personal one, as described above, is a trait that is particularly present in Judaism (Abrahams 457). This fact, combined with Cixous’ explicit defense of Judaism against its “exorcism” in Mon
Algériance (72), shows that Cixous does not reject Judaism per se; what she does reject consists in its fossilized traditions and its self-centered representatives. The view of religion that is presented in her works, despite its ostensible disrespect, returns to the personal relationship with God traditionally found in Judaism; it places love back at the center of the religious experience and recognizes divine aspects in human beings. What is to be criticized and rejected consists in the dogmatic view of religion that does not recognize that at one point, religions were born from relatively arbitrary rules and that the concept of God itself depends on support from human beings. The phallocentric tendencies that have crept into established religion are to be rejected, and the possibility of a female God should become more central and recognized.

Cixous’ perception of religion, as we have seen, is strongly marked by the need for interpretation in all contexts. This, also, is a tradition that has a considerable presence in Jewish religious history (Elon); however, interpretation has usually taken place among men within Jewish communities (Berkowitz 179). In order to place religion into the hands of women, then, Cixous recognizes the need to place this valuable tool, that of textual interpretation and exegesis, into women’s hands.

VI. Conclusion

Cixous, while not rejecting religion in a new, revised form, thus uses it as a tool in order to attain her own goals. She knows that faith is a powerful weapon: “Même minuscule comme un grain de séné la foi peut faire sauter les montagnes” (Fiancée 39), and if religious dogma stands in the way of her feminist project, this dogma must be revised in order to give women access to religious experience. Throughout Cixous’ writing, we discover a kind of religiosity that, if lived
correctly (according to her), provides the believer with joy and places love at the center of human existence; and for this reason, women must be given access to religiosity. This is in keeping with Irigaray’s theories, which hold that having a God of their own will be a powerful and motivating factor for women to attain their own goals. Cixous and Irigaray, then, far from despising religion per se as inimical to women, demand a revision of religious tradition in the service of women.

The tool of this revision, as we have seen, is a feminist exegesis: Cixous rereads religions and the traditions upon which they rely in a feminist way; and thus, a writerly type of reading becomes the religious tool par excellence for her and for women. In a playful, subversive way, Cixous irreverently deconstructs the edifices of dogma, liturgy, and the established concept of God Himself. In her playful quest of subversion, she uses narrative innovations to make writing a revolutionary tool in the hands of women, to create an idea of God and of religion that will be more respectful of them. Her call for a feminist reappropriation of language, as in La Venue à l’écriture and in “Le Rire de la Méduse” thus turns into a call for a feminist reappropriation of religion by means of textual interpretation.

Similarly to Taos Amrouche, Hélène Cixous has been placed at a historical juncture at which acceptance into religious communities has been denied to her – a painful and wounding experience. This makes her feminist quest to rediscover a rootedness in religion so important: Women like her, having to find a voice to represent themselves, assert the right to a religion after their own needs, which they construct using the tools of (re)writing and the skills of playful subversion.
Assia Djebar: A Muslim Feminist Engaging in *Ijtihad*

As Muslims, we can no longer afford to refuse to critically engage our tradition. We have reached a critical stage in the history of our faith and we must have the will-power and courage to reclaim and reestablish Islam as a humanistic moral force in the world today. (Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 4)

As with Amrouche and Cixous, religion and its interpretations have been an indirect cause of hardship for women characters in the works of Assia Djebar, a hardship she depicts in moving detail. From the time following the Algerian War of Independence, during which promises to women were broken on religious grounds, to cloistering, domestic abuse, and the fundamentalist violence of the 1990s, Djebar depicts throughout her oeuvre how religion has been used to create situations that cause disadvantages for women. Much of this – and Djebar, as a historian, is acutely aware of it - has been the result of the interplay of religion with historical circumstances, and above all, of the influence of colonialism, which pitted the French colonizers against the Arab and Berber population of Algeria. Frantz Fanon, for example, points out in *L’An V de la revolution algérienne* the aggressive unveiling of Muslim Algerian women by French colonial powers, which led to resistance by Muslim Algerian men. The attempt by the French colonizers to destabilize the Muslim population by undermining Islam thus led to a conservative backlash in which religion became one of the few cultural ramparts left to the colonized, and in which the attachment to conservative Muslim norms grew more and more intense. This historical background explains the situation of Islam in Algeria, one that has prompted Djebar to call for a revised approach to religion that takes into account Algeria’s diverse heritage, the original message of the Prophet Muhammad, and contemporary dialogue on women’s rights.
Most importantly, as I will show in this chapter, the difficult situation for women in Muslim Algeria does not lead Djebar to reject Islam per se; rather, she depicts a peaceful, popular Islam that is lived especially intensely in women’s solidarity. In order to arrive at this vision, Djebar goes back to the time of the Prophet to salvage an Islam that she can espouse as a feminist. As has been analyzed in the introductory chapter, Djebar, although she comes from a background of secularism, does consider herself a Muslim. Once again, despite her support for a secular state, she is still attached to the Islamic religion. In order, however, to reconcile her feminist and secularist orientation and a Muslim belief, she distances herself from many contemporary beliefs and practices, and finds a different approach to religion that is her own. In this, she undertakes a highly intertextual work of reinterpretation that she has herself called “ma volonté d’ijtihad”, a term she understands to mean an “effort intellectuel pour la recherche de la vérité” (Médine 6).

The definition of the term *ijtihad*, particularly with regard to the areas of law to which it can be applied and to the question of who may engage in it, has been the subject of much debate over the centuries. However, there is agreement on its basic, literal meaning, which is that of “exerting oneself”, in the sense of exerting individual reasoning regarding religious rules. In its more restricted meaning, it refers to a scholar of Islamic law giving an opinion based on the Qur’an and / or Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, according to more conservative understandings, only the opinions of scholars of early Islam, up until the tenth century, ought to be followed and no further interpretations should be undertaken. This point in time is referred to as the “closing of the gates of *ijtihad*” (Schacht); however, opinions are divided on whether this

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14 Although Djebar does not overtly apply the label “feminist” to herself, she is considered to be a feminist author by critical consensus. Moreover, as mentioned before, Djebar’s positions agree with the criteria for “feminism” outlined in the Introduction in that she speaks out in favor of the equality of the sexes and aims to “expose [...] patriarchal practices” (Moi xiv).
supposed closing indeed took place. It is also important that a number of Orientalists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wrote of the “closing of the gates of ijtihad”, itself not an established fact, that it led to the petrification of Islamic law in more recent centuries, thus using it as a way to disparage legal and religious scholarship in Muslim countries (Ali-Karamali 244).

If the “closing of the gates of ijtihad” is accepted as a necessary fact by some, many reformist Muslim legal scholars (such as, for example, Abdullahi An-Na’im and Khaled Abou El Fadl) demand that the “gates of ijtihad” be reopened and new interpretations allowed. Moreover, according to Abou El Fadl, every mujtahid (person engaging in ijtihad) may be correct “regardless of race, class, or gender” (9). There is, however, great disagreement about just this: May only highly erudite scholar clerics interpret the sacred texts, or is it, as others contend, the duty of every believer to do so (Ahmadi 43)? Ijtihad is thus a highly controversial concept of textual interpretation of religious texts, raising questions about authority and legitimacy - who is allowed to speak in the name of religion and decide what Islam “says” on specific topics? Here, I will use the term in a metaphorical sense, but also employ it to investigate who is seen to have the right to speak out saying what a specific religion means to him or her, using his or her own reading and interpretations.

Interestingly, for Assia Djebar, the term takes on a much more personal meaning, almost in the way of introspection, discovering the ways in which a sacred texts resonates within her: “J’écris par passion d’’ijtihad’,” she explains in her reception speech to the Académie Française, “c’est-à-dire de recherche tendue vers quoi, vers soi d’abord” (3). However, her use is closer to the original meaning of the term in Loin de Médine, in which she calls ijtihad an “effort intellectuel pour la recherche de la vérité” (6), with religious texts as her foundation. I will myself use the
term in a metaphorical, but also more restricted sense of a writer consulting religious texts in order to come to his or her own conclusions regarding what is religiously valid.

By proceeding in this way, Djebar does not simply challenge “the legitimacy of fundamentalism on its own terms,” as Donald R. Wehrs put it, by insisting that this Islamic tradition of *ijtihad* “issues in feminist fiction” (859). As I will show here, Djebar, in her *ijtihad* effort, roots her procedure in Islamic tradition, but by so doing, she arrives at a renewed, feminist definition of Islam that thrives on dialogue and exchange, that is inclusive and tolerant of other believers, that has sensual undertones, and that centers on women’s solidarity. In this way, she is able to consolidate her secularist orientation in political matters (for example, when it comes to Algerian legislative issues or to the implementation of government policies) and a simultaneous attachment to Islam in the personal sphere, making her at once a feminist and a believer.

We know that a number of authors have approached similar themes to those analyzed in this dissertation. None, however, include works from throughout Djebar’s oeuvre in their considerations, and most do not use an approach that is as narratologically oriented and that remains as close to the text as the approach I will use here does. Clarisse Zimra, for example, in “Not So Far from Medina: Assia Djebar Charts Islam’s ‘Insupportable Feminist Revolution,’” does excellent work braiding together Djebar’s personal history as a Muslim of secular upbringing, especially given that many of Zimra’s arguments are supported by interviews with Djebar herself, and her own reading of Djebar’s works. Zimra’s emphasis on the fact that Djebar uses the concept of *ijtihad* to reappropriate religion for women while staying within an Islamic framework is an important element on which I will also build my argument in this chapter. However, I will concentrate on Djebar’s literary work, rather on her own words about her
oeuvre, much more and more closely than Zimra does; and unlike the latter, I will also define what kinds of religious alternatives Djebbar points out.

Among those who stress predominantly the sociological aspects of religion, such as veiling or seclusion, is Evelyne Accad, for example. In “Assia Djebbar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature”, she begins by enumerating the burdens put upon women in North Africa and the Middle East by religiously determined customs, and then compliments Assia Djebbar for her ability to “synthesize her traditional Muslim background and her European education” (802). Accad goes on to give an overview of the way Djebbar’s works relate to the Muslim-dominated society of Algeria. While I appreciate the comprehensiveness of this picture, I do not share the exasperation of Accad’s critique, borne out in her final question, which sounds like a conclusion: “Is there no middle way between glorification and reinterpretation of tradition to show how today's Islam has been twisted or radically transformed?” (810-811). The ways in which this transformation and this twisting have taken place will, however, be explored in this dissertation, as will the question as to whether there is such a middle way. Veiling is also a predominant issue in Rita Faulkner’s “Assia Djebbar, Frantz Fanon, Women, Veils, and Land”. Using Women of Algiers, Faulkner critiques Fanon’s essay on the veil with regard to women’s participation in the war of liberation, and the question of veiling themselves voluntarily or not. Her argument is that in Femmes d’Alger, Djebbar answers Fanon’s reading of women’s unveiling on the part of the colonizer and his claims of women gaining independence during the revolutionary struggle in his L’An V de la révolution algérienne by liberating women’s bodies, which are reclaimed by her women characters. While not focusing on religion, this article will provide important background information for my own reading.
Jeanne-Marie Clerc, in *Assia Djebar: Écrire, Transgresser, Résister*, sheds a similarly postcolonial light on Djebar’s works. While she reviews a number of different works by the author and comments on several religious themes, these are almost always limited to the issues of veiling and seclusion, as well as the elaboration of a female subject position to transgress the limits imposed by Muslim patriarchy. In this way, Clerc remains much closer to a sociological-historical analysis of Djebar in the Algerian context, whereas my own method of reading will stay closer to the text, its narrative techniques, and its intertextual strategies. In that way, I will arrive at a more comprehensive picture of Djebar’s approach to religion and of the aspects that she considers as desirable in it.

Donald R. Wehrs’ also very good “The ‘Sensible,’ the Maternal, and the Ethical Beginnings of Feminist Islamic Discourse in Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Loin de Médine*” similarly puts Djebar’s discourse in *Médine* into relation with the discourse of Islamic fundamentalists, clearly establishing the fact that Djebar’s is a discourse that is simultaneously Muslim and feminist. Very pertinently, he points to the importance of Muhammad as a (particularly human) character, to the regulation of women’s speech that Djebar aims to break, and to the connection between the body and transcendence in *Médine*. However, there is not much connection with Djebar’s oeuvre at large or with other aspects of religion that are also prominent in *Médine*; this more contextualized and comparative work is what will interest me more in the present study.

Elizabeth Morgan’s “Veiled Truth: Reading Assia Djebar from the Outside” similarly focuses on a few specific aspects of Djebar’s approach to religion – in this case, especially the issue of veiling, and that of women speaking out in their own interests. Unlike in the case of Wehrs and Zimra, the result is that the image given of Djebar’s perception of religion is
predominantly critical. In this dissertation, I will highlight and analyze both the positive and negative aspects present in Djebar’s approach to religion. The way in which Morgan puts Djebarian discourse into the context of secularism and colonial domination is exemplary; however, despite encouraging men and women to engage in “conversation” with scripture, Morgan herself engages in very little conversation with the relevant Qur’anic passages concerning veiling, even less in Djebar’s own exegeses of those passages. Djebar’s engagement with scripture will be an important element in the present analysis.

Conversely, Priscilla Ringrose’s *Assia Djebar in Dialogue with Feminisms* provides a remarkable cross-reading of Djebar’s works and those of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed. Very appropriately, Ringrose does not focus on whether or how Djebar has been influenced by these thinkers, but rather puts the latter’s works in dialogue with the former’s. In religious matters, her center of attention is largely on *Loin de Médine*, in which she points out Djebar’s concentration on the figure of the Prophet, on the spiritual message of Islam, and the prominence of women authorities. However, Ringrose emphasizes the sociological much more than I will here (I will focus more on a closer reading of the text), and does not analyze much of Djebar’s other works with regard to religion. Moreover, whereas Ringrose claims that Djebar’s portrayal of women’s relations to each other is on the whole negative and that solidarity is an “impossible dream”, I will argue that women’s solidarity is a major factor in Djebar’s project of creating a new, dialogue-focused approach to religion.

Ringrose, however, also provides a helpful analysis in her article “Voices of Early Islam – Islamic Vision or Feminist Revision?”. Here, she critiques the fact that Djebar eludes important aspects of early Islam’s history that should have been on the agenda of a feminist thinker. In the interest of presenting women that take their destinies into their own hands and at the same time
“speak out loud and clear in the name of religion” (89), Djebar “glosses over” areas in which women’s autonomy is limited by early Islamic society (92). By focusing on the spiritual aspects of Mohamed as a leader and of early Muslim women as his followers, she also eschews the unjust applications of the new religion’s rules. However, it appears to me that firstly, it is fully Djebar’s intention to focus on the spiritual dimension of early Islam in the interest of her feminist interpretation, and that, secondly, she does also provide examples of its unjust applications - most prominently in the case of Fatima. Moreover, I find it somewhat problematic to suppose that Djebar attempts to create a “‘politically correct’” religion because that concept is not defined in Ringrose’s article, nor does Ringrose explain why Djebar would be interested creating such a religion.

In this chapter, then, I will demonstrate first the ways in which Djebar accuses what she portrays as poorly understood religion, beginning with the unkept promises to women that were made during the Algerian war of independence. Starting at that moment, Djebar outlines how women were refused the same rights as men, and subjected to cloistering and discriminatory polygamy laws as well as pressured to veil. I will continue by analyzing how Islamist violence is portrayed in Djebar, another example of religion misinterpreted. In the ensuing section, I will show the evidence for a continuing attachment to Islam on the part of Djebar, and outline her portrayal of women as Islamic exegetes. Finally, I will analyze Djebar’s own approach to Islam, which focuses on inclusiveness, dialogue, solidarity, and human values such as love.
I. Assia Djebar: The Oeuvre of a Muslim Feminist

This “Muslim feminist”, as Azza Karam would call her, does not engage in the kind of work that Luce Irigaray would call creating a God in woman’s own image (43). However, Djebar’s work is certainly re-creative, as she reconstructs not a divinity in itself, but the approach that believers should take to it. In this chapter, I chronicle how Djebar moves from accusations against an Islam that has been disfigured by patriarchal rule, to a de-facto attachment to Islam in its original message, and finally, I trace the parameters of her re-reading of the religion. My concern here will not be, as for Priscilla Ringrose, whether Djebar can “invent a ‘politically correct’ Islam, palatable to both East and West” (217). Her process is not one of invention, both because her technique of ijtihad has been used for centuries, also by women (see below), and because she builds upon already existing structures. Moreover, I will not be concerned with whether the result is appropriate for the “West”, but rather with the question of whether it is depicted as appropriate for the women with whom Djebar seeks to engage in dialogue – many of whom, like herself, confess to Islam.

In this way, Djebar becomes part of a long and prestigious chain of Muslim feminists. In this context, I will use the term “feminist”, regardless of whether or not an individual considers her- or himself such, defining a feminist as someone who is aware “that women have been and continue to be oppressed in diverse ways and for diverse reasons because of their gender”, and who also engages in “attempts to eliminate this oppression and to evolve a more equitable society with improved relations between women and men” (Karam 18-19). Muslim feminists in

15 “Muslim feminists” are called “Islamic feminists” by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, with the equivalent definition that Islamic feminism is “grounded in religious texts, most importantly
particular, according to Azza Karam’s article “Women, Islamisms, and the State”, “use Islamic
texts” in order to “show that the discourse of total equality between men and women is
Islamically valid”. If a feminist discourse does not justify itself within an Islamic framework,
according to Karam, this is self-defeating, because such a course of action is “bound to be
rejected by the rest of society” (22). This is why Muslim feminists tend to argue for a
reinterpretation of *sharia*-based laws, and for *ijtihad* (23).

This is historically important because arguments derived from Western feminism have a
problematic history in Muslim-majority countries. Often, they were used by colonial powers to
disparage Muslim cultures and divide their populations. Moreover, women from Muslim cultures
who used arguments of Western feminism were often depicted as traitors to their cultures of
origin by more conservative forces. A feminism based on Islamic tenets circumvents these
problems by making feminism more difficult to attack and easier to accept for more religious
individuals, while (ideally) beating fundamentalist forces at their own game of employing Islam
for their purposes.

According to Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, Muslim feminists began to be active in
the latter half of the nineteenth century with publications in women’s journals, but also in papers
of wider circulation such as Egypt’s *al-Jarida* (xxix). Besides these kinds of articles, poetry,
novels, and short stories were the preferred genres of feminist writers, including Aisha al-
Taimuriya and Zaynab Fawwaz, who wrote in the late nineteenth century (xli). Particular critical
attention was garnered by Qasim Amin’s 1899 book *Tahrir Al-Mar’a (The Liberation of the
Woman)*, and in 1909, Malak Hifni Nasif, under the pen name of Bahithat al-Badiya, published a

the Quran”, and “calls for gender equality and social justice” (xviii). The expression “Muslim
feminist” was preferred here for the purpose of easier distinction from “Islamist feminists”.
collection of speeches and articles in her book *Al-Nisaiyat* (Feminist Pieces or Women’s Pieces; xxv).

This early Muslim feminism was continued in the twentieth century with the more organized activities of feminist movements – many of which came into being in the period between 1920 and 1960. The centers of these activities were in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The development of some of these associations in Egypt (such as the Society for the Advancement of Women, the Egyptian Feminist Union, or the Intellectual Association of Egyptian women) and the stories of their leaders, like Huda Sha’rawi, Nabawiya Musa, or Zainab al-Ghazali, are depicted by Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many of these organizations were beginning to be co-opted by state governments for their own purposes (xxix) – the co-optation of women’s activism for liberation purposes is depicted particularly astutely by Assia Djebar herself. A third wave – which for some countries constituted a first wave of feminism – began in the 1970s and 1980s, with the activities of Nawal al-Saadawi and the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, and the outspoken activism of figures such as Amina Said or Fatima Mernissi (xxxvi). Throughout these decades, what unites these strong currents of activism is a more or less elaborated viewpoint that Islam in itself is not inimical to women, but that the interpretations that men have made of it through the ages indeed are, and that consequently the original sources must be reinterpreted in light of changes in society in order to account for the needs and rights of women.

Assia Djebar prefers to give few interviews, which is why only more basic facts of her biography are widely known. She was born Fatima-Zohra Imalhayene in 1936. Her middle-class parents, especially her father who was a teacher in a French colonial school, decided that despite
the fact that she was a girl, she should not wear the veil, and that she should receive an education. Thus, while Arabic was the language spoken in her home, she received an education at a boarding school in which French was spoken. She went on to study history, and began publishing fiction and nonfiction at a very young age, choosing a pen name at the publication of her first novel.

Djebbar’s early works, such as *La Soif* (1957) and *Les Impatients* (1958), have been dismissed by some as “self-indulgent bourgeois stories” (Ringrose 10), whereas the following two works, *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962) and *Les Alouettes Naïves* (1967) were given the scarcely more positive label of “ideologically correct” (10). This is hardly surprising, however, since Djebbar had worked for an FLN newspaper in Tunis from 1958 to 1962 and published a collection of *Poèmes pour une Algérie heureuse* in 1962. This was a sign that the authorities were in support of her (10), just as Djebbar herself was active in the struggle for Algeria’s independence (Morgan).

From 1969 to 1979, Djebbar did not publish. She then broke her silence with the film *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*, and published her book of short stories *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). In the meantime, she had settled in Paris, but still regularly visited Algeria.

Her prolific writing ever since has often reacted to events in her homeland. *Loin de Médine*, for example, published in 1991, was written in reaction to the rise of fundamentalism in her home country, and in particular to the riots of 1989. Then, in 1996, she published *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*, in reaction to the events of the Algerian civil war. *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* is also a homage to the lives and works of intellectuals and writers who fell victim to fundamentalist violence, one of whom, Abdelkader Alloula, was her brother-in-law and a childhood friend
(Ringrose 11). Since 1997, then, her work has focused on the colonial history of Algeria and the way it relates to current conditions of life.

In 2005, Assia Djebar was elected member of the Académie Française, a public recognition of her important place in French-language literature and of the degree to which she has enriched this literature.

This chapter will concentrate on three of Djebar’s major works, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, the work that first brought Djebar international recognition, *Loin de Médine*, Djebar’s treatment of the beginnings of Islamic history, and *Oran, langue morte*, with its focus on the Algerian civil war. Whereas *Médine* is certainly an “incontournable”, an unavoidable work from Djebar’s oeuvre when dealing with religion, due to its historical treatment of the time of the Prophet, the choice of *Femmes d’Alger* and *Oran, langue morte* deserves more justification. Although important elements of the ways in which Djebar portrays religion, such as cloistering, Islamist violence, or the need for solidarity, also appear in other works, these aspects are depicted in the most striking and artistically creative way in these three books. Moreover, in these works, these elements are being combined in ways that permit the most interesting conclusions regarding Djebar’s overall approach, and regarding women and religion in Algeria in general.

*Femmes d’Alger*, published in 1980, is a collection of short stories written during the two previous decades. This is the book with which Djebar broke her silence of the years from 1969 to 1979. An “Ouverture” and a “Postludé” frame the short stories thematically and historically, and clarify the author’s speaking position. Subdivided into stories of “Aujourd’hui” (both from 1978)
and “Hier” (from 1959, “1970 et 1978”, 1966, and 1965), the stories address the social situations of women of Algiers with regard to men and to their rights in an “independent” Algerian society.

*Loin de Médine* was published in 1991 and has been called an “œuvre de circonstance” by Djebar herself. This is because it was written in reaction to what Djebar perceived as the annexation of the Islamic religion by Algerian “‘intégristes’”, and in order to ask “how far from Medina” civil strife-shaken Algeria was at the time of Médine’s writing (Zimra 825). It is a detailed historical, though also fictionalized, account of the early years of Islam, centering on the years just before and shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad, and it focuses on the role of the women in and surrounding the early Muslim community. The accent is here put on the strength and importance of these women, as well as on the original personal message of Muhammad and on its significance for the place of women in society. Djebar uses original historical sources and especially the accounts of early Islamic historians such as Ibn Hicham, Ibn Saad, and Tabari (*Médine* 5). She interweaves such historical accounts with the imagined stories of women from within and around the early Muslim community, in order to outline her own understanding of the Prophet’s message and of how it was received and altered.

*Oran, langue morte*, published in 1997, is a collection of short stories, most of them (five out of seven) labeled “nouvelle”, with one story called “conte” (“La femme en morceaux”) and one “récit” (Annie et Fatima). The stories are separated into two sections, “Algérie, entre désir et mort”, and “Entre France et Algérie”, and given a thematic clarification in the Postface, “‘Le sang ne sèche pas dans la langue’”. The emphasis in the first part is put on life in Algeria under the threat of Islamist violence, with very vivid evocations of everyday fear for one’s life, the need for freedom of movement and a life as normal as possible, and human interactions in the
face of violence. The second part concentrates on family ties between France and Algeria, and on how rapports between their respective cultures can be lived in the most peaceful way possible.

II. Religiously Justified Submission

The subjugation of women for religious reasons is portrayed in a particularly cutting way in Djebar because she also depicts the ways in which women participated (and some would even say, were used, *Femmes 54*) in the Algerian war of independence. Although there is not complete consensus among historians concerning this, most observers agree that the participation of women in the independence struggle, supposedly on equal terms and described so enthusiastically by Frantz Fanon (41), did not actually lead to an equal status for women in the ensuing society. Mustafa Al-Ahnaf claims that despite the fact that women participated in the armed struggle at the risk of losing their lives, “derrière cette participation, il n’y avait aucun projet d’émancipation. Subalternes étaient les femmes dans la vie sociale, subalternes elles sont restées dans le mouvement de libération” (240). Karima Bennoune, in her article “Between Betrayal and Betrayal”, explains that in the post-war society, there was a real powerlessness of women, that their (already low) numbers in parliament decreased, and that the ruling party’s discourse soon demanded a return to more “traditions”, especially in the form of personal status law. This backlash was made nowhere as obvious as in the *sharia*-based Algerian Family Code that was promulgated in 1984. Although male-female equality had in theory been inscribed into the Algerian constitution, the Family Code effectively turned women into legal minors who were defined “only in so far as they are daughters, mothers, or wives” (Salhi 27). It also legalized male polygamy, required women to be represented by a matrimonial guardian, and makes obtaining a
divorce extremely difficult for women, while automatically assigning the family home to the ex-
husband in the case of a divorce (30). The Family Code, reportedly, was an attempt at placating
Islamist tendencies in the Algerian population, and as such pitted against each other Islamists
and feminists, who reacted against the Code with public demonstrations (29). Reforms were
passed in 2005, which improved women’s situations among others in the realms of the
matrimonial guardian (who is no longer able to contract a marriage by himself), parental testing,
and limits to polygamy. However, in some cases, men and women are still not equal before the
law, and in this way, although some of the devaluing treatment of women that Djebar describes
is based on customary cultural practices, men in Algeria do have a legal basis for not allotting
women as many rights as they themselves have before the law.

The above-mentioned hypocrisy between real-life danger for women during the war of
independence and their subsequent betrayal by the society for which they fought is strikingly
depicted in Femmes d’Alger. Djebar praises the “porteuses de feu” (54) and evokes their
suffering in many instances. The scenes of torture are especially arresting, such as the one that
opens the initial short story, in which a husband dreams about his wife being tortured in a
French-Algerian prison (11). The sacrifices of female freedom fighters are thus quite present in
Djebar. However, what she accuses is the fact that although they have freed the country, women
have not attained freedom for themselves. Djebar’s freedom fighters quickly transform into
locked-up women, and Djebar conveys this very explicitly through the use of the symbol of
barbed wire: “Où êtes-vous, les porteuses de feu, vous mes soeurs qui aurez dû libérer la ville…
Les fils barbelés ne barrent plus les ruelles, mais ils ornent les fenêtres les balcons [sic], toutes
les issues vers l’espace…” (54) The men who were the comrades, the “brothers” of the female
freedom fighters during the war of liberation, have in turn become women’s jailers, such that two
former women freedom fighters now ask each other: “Y a-t-il jamais eu des frères […]?” (55). The liberation war thus failed to effect a true liberation because “nous nous sommes précipités sur la libération d’abord, nous n’avons eu que la guerre après!” (59). There cannot be, according to Djebar, any real freeing of the country as long as women are not free.

At the same time, however, it must also be mentioned – and Djebar is more than aware of this, as Rita Faulkner has pointed out in “Assia Djebar, Frantz Fanon, Women, Veils, and Land,” – that conservative religious mores were not the only cause for the increasing cloistering of women (848). The prison-like circumstances evoked especially in Femmes are also a result of moving away from traditional housing that was more adapted to Algerian customs. The move towards living in apartments rather than in houses with courtyards, vestibules, and open rooftops resulted from gradual migration to the cities, as well as from the fact that at independence, pieds-noirs had left behind apartment buildings rather than traditional housing. Djebar herself is aware of these social factors and ascribes some of the malaise that women feel with their living situations to them. For example, the assembly of women in one of her hammam scenes describes how in a village, rural women have broken the faucets in their homes because those faucets deprived them of the custom of going to the communal fountain. What one of the speakers interprets as ignorance, another sees as “La liberté !”, because it is an act of protest against the new style of constructing houses. “Comment leur a-t-on construit les nouvelles maisons? Fermée, chacune, sur elle-même…”, interprets another woman who has heard the story (Femmes 41). The new houses impede communication between women and destroy the communitarian fiber that used to exist. These circumstances, alluded to throughout Femmes, combine with conservative attitudes toward religion to make women feel the restricting, confining nature of their living quarters.
Inspired by the episode of the war of independence, Djebar on several occasions draws parallels between actual prisons as governmental institutions, such as the French prisons in which the female freedom fighters were locked up, and homes as prisons: in “Jour de Ramadhan”, part of Femmes d’Alger, one of the women in the fasting family states that if her sister has “connu la prison, moi je l’ai connue aussi, mais ici même, dans cette maison que tu trouves merveilleuse” (133). In a different historical context, that of the Delacroix painting Women of Algiers, Djebar draws the parallel between a prison and the harem, whose inhabitants she calls “[p]risonnières résignées” and “Moins sultanes soudain que prisonnières” (148). In an oppressive analogy, then, the reader – even if he or she has absolutely no personal experience of cloistering – understands how the prison as a means of repression can enter the most intimate space of a person: the home.

As mentioned above, religion was certainly not the only factor in the increased cloistering of women, and Djebar is also aware of this. The novel Vaste est la prison, for example, can be read as indicating that the narrator is perceiving all of Algeria as a huge prison, and that religion is not the only factor producing this impression. At the same time, however, in Femmes d’Alger, Djebar is clearly accusing the betrayal of women’s hopes for liberation, betrayed by leaders who returned to more conservative mores and who, as time went on, passed more and more conservative laws, culminating in the sharia-inspired Family Code of 1984 that made concessions to the Islamists. These laws, based on an androcentric interpretation of Islam, make it possible in the first place for women to be treated with inequity.

The harem women in the Delacroix painting, according to Djebar, are “absentes à elles-mêmes, à leur corps, à leur sensualité, à leur bonheur” (148) – by the fact that they are imprisoned, their identity is thus practically erased, as they do not have access to their own
selves, absent to themselves. Cloistered women are often evoked in especially moving terms in *Femmes d’Alger*: Djebbar begins with the musical tradition of the “‘chants de l’escarpolette,’” songs sung on their terraces by locked-up women, which she calls “chemin de tristesse” and in which only the hope for a miracle remains (23). The most touching scene of cloistered women occurs in a *hammam*, in which, once again, women sing to let out their grievances: “Elle se console plutôt!,” says the character Baya when asked by a French friend about the lamento of a woman in the bathhouse. “Nombre de femmes,” she explains, “ne peuvent sortir que pour le bain” (38). Thus, the Western reader, along with the French visitor, learns about the extent to which the seclusion of many women in Algiers is restrictive – they are the ones who “se dévisagent à travers les vapeurs: ce sont celles qu’on enferme des mois ou des années, sauf pour le bain” (40).

Part of the force of these scenes comes from the fact that the narrator refrains from imposing a judgment or expressing any emotion at their evocation. She mentions the mere facts, and the observable effects that they have. Despite sometimes seeming somewhat cold in her style, Djebbar thus avoids any accusations of melodrama, simply allowing the reader to form his or her own reactions. She is, once again, not speaking for or in representation of anyone, not imposing any conclusions on her readers, but letting the women and their actions speak for themselves in their own powerful way.

Cloistering is an especially central issue in Djebbar because of the importance of the free movement of bodies in her works. Women throughout her oeuvre have an irresistible need to roam about and walk on the street. For example, when meeting a marriage candidate and being asked what she does, Sarah, the protagonist, answers, “Je marche toute la journée […]. Je ne me lasse pas de marcher dehors” (35). Another short story character, this time in “La Femme qui
pleure”, has been abused in the home, and as a form of therapy, “dans les rues d’Alger, je marchais, je marchais, comme si ma face tombait dans mes mains […] des rues en demi-équilibre et complices quand vous saisis le désir de vous précipiter… L’azur partout” (63-4, my italics). This thought of being surrounded by the blue of the sky is taken up again in Oran, langue morte: “moi qui renversais la tête pour me repaître du bleu du ciel, pour ne pas me lasser de laisser la lumière m’envelopper, moi qui planais, qui nageais dans l’azur” (73, my italics).

Walking, then, is like flying for the women of Femmes and Oran: “je transporte mon corps, je le glisse, le pousse imperceptiblement, il s’enverrait, il décollerait presque. Je flotte au-dehors, ivresse pure, car toujours dehors” (Oran 54). Women are able to obtain almost superhuman powers by this freedom of conquering space, of using their bodies to move forward. This essential and invigorating freedom is rendered even more precious because it constitutes a challenge to the murderers who are ready to kill women during the Algerian civil war, while using Islam as an excuse for their crimes. Djebar’s protagonists are aware of this danger: “J’avance, je suis vivante, ma joie muselée en dedans de moi et tranquille, je défie qui au-dehors, quel meurtrier?” (73). This challenge to those murderers, however, is necessary – not only to deprive them of their power, but also for women to heal the wounds of their sufferings.

According to Djebar, if women have been forbidden from speaking and from moving about freely outside the home, the way to free them effectively, to heal the trauma that a poorly interpreted religion has imposed upon them, they must not only speak, speak as much as possible (as will be discussed later), but also move about as much as possible. The way to attain liberation is to exercise it, to move in spite of the interdiction to move, even in the face of danger.

A theme that is connected to that of the freedom to move about outside the home is that of veiling. Djebar’s stance on this issue at first reading seems somewhat ambivalent. On the one
hand, veiling “protects” women and enables them to leave the house and be the subject of looking themselves, rather than being the object being looked at (*Femmes* 152). One could, thus, perceive the “oeil libéré,” the eye that moves freely because it is protected by the veil, as signifying the conquest of public space. However, Djebar states clearly that this is to no avail, as a “vicious circle” closes on the women whose eye is thus permitted to wander, because its gaze is in turn perceived as a “menace” (151) by the men who rule public space. Djebar thus also devalues what the reader might otherwise perceive as a potential asset for women’s achieving more liberty.

This apparent ambivalence on the part of Djebar mirrors the ambivalent attitudes regarding the veil prevalent in contemporary debates, in which even feminists propose both arguments supporting and opposing its wearing. The splits and contradictions that the question of the veil has caused, for example, in France, upsetting even conventional oppositions between right and left, has been chronicled by Bronwyn Winter in “Secularism aboard the Titanic.” Interestingly, in this French debate, many feminists find themselves supporting a law (the 2004 law banning the wearing of religious insignia in French schools) against headscarves that was designed by a conservative, right-wing government, nominally in support of a secularist tradition - while other feminists support the right of women to wear headscarves, and thus seem to ally with conservative Muslims or even Islamists, who also support this wearing.

Although Djebar is usually rather quiet in the media regarding such issues as the debate on the veil, especially compared to other high-profile French intellectuals, the portrayal of veiling in her works is on the whole negative when surveyed across her oeuvre. In one instance, for example, Djebar links veiling to the loss of a sense, and in this way, calls to mind the fact that it is physically limiting to women. In a very subtle and indirect way, she constructs a parallel
between the act of veiling and the idea of rendering women deaf as a rite of passage. One could imagine, dreams Sarah, the protagonist of “Femmes”, a society in which women would receive on their ears, at puberty, large “barrières” that would make it impossible for them to hear anything. “[C]e serait un crime d’honneur au cas où un mâle […] tenterait de se faire entendre d’elles” (26), implying that this is similar to the way in which it could be construed as a crime of honor if a male attempted to remove the veil of a woman who is not his wife. This scene is rendered particularly intense due to the fact that the speaker is in precisely this situation – wearing headphones and thus limiting her senses – when this thought occurs to her. Women’s veiling, Djebar indicates here, is thus almost like depriving them of the sense of hearing. In a way that indicates even more invasiveness, Djebar likens veiling to mutilation, at least in the cases in which women veil in such a way that only one eye is visible and can see the outside. This, she calls “éborgnée” (151) – the women’s senses are not only limited, but this limitation is like a physical wound – bringing us back to the idea that religion can be traumatizing in the way that a physical injury is.

Rather than portraying wearing the veil as freeing because it allows women to leave the house, Djebar links it to imprisonment, and interestingly, also to the silencing of the voice. The symbol-laden short story “La femme qui pleure” in Femmes, which includes descriptions of almost the full range of stages of dress and undress, ends in the passage:  

“La Femme qui pleure” tells the story of a (nameless) woman confiding in a (nameless) man regarding her unhappy marriage to an Algerian man and her life with his family. The man she is addressing has escaped from prison, and does not speak at all. They meet on three consecutive days on a beach, where she wears a bikini, but envelops herself in a haïk and face veil when she leaves. They begin to caress each other, but further intimacy is interrupted by the arrival of policemen. The woman’s veil takes on a central role, being absent in the scenes of intimacy, but being “convulsively crumpled” in the crying woman’s hands after the man leaves (68). When she intends to dress in it, it makes her bow down (64); wearing it, she first becomes a “parallélépipède” and then an “étrange parachute” (64). In any case, the veil estranges the
L’homme se leva, se tourna vers la femme. Il avança les deux mains ensemble, comme du temps où ses poignets étaient enchaînés. Ses doigts soulevèrent le voile blanc à terre, puis le lâchèrent… Il alla pour dire quelque chose: sur le voile, sur la femme qui attendait.

Il rejoint la bête [...]. (68)

In the end, the man says nothing, and lets himself be taken back to prison by the soldiers with the dog (“la bête”). The scene seems to tell the reader that the imprisoning of individuals, like this man, is akin to the wearing of the veil; and that the existence of both types of imprisonment, state prison and veiling, impedes speech and communication between the sexes. The man recognizes the link between his own imprisonment and the woman’s veiling, implied by his gesture and his intention to say something; but because he must leave and return to prison, he stays silent, and his attempt at communicating with the woman is foiled. Thus, a triangle is constructed between veiling, silencing, and imprisonment. Speaking out and expressing oneself, however, are extremely important in Djebar’s oeuvre, particularly in the context of women’s issues and religion, as we will see in the final section of this chapter; and veiling, as we have seen here, can be said to impede this type of communication.

Finally, Djebar of course also returns to the years of early Islam in order to depict how veiling was experienced at that time. In parallel with her central thesis of a general decline of the situation of women and a distancing from the original message of Islam, one of her characters observes that “les épouses du Prophète, semblait-il, sortaient moins librement qu’auparavant […] elles se dissimulaient tout entières dans leurs voiles” (Médine 140). This is in opposition to the woman from herself, making her no longer look like herself, although it represents an idea of purity women are supposed to “run after” just as the woman would run after her “tissu immaculé” (64) if the wind on the beach were to blow it away.
very early years of Islam, in which the women of Muhammad’s community went so far as to fight alongside men in the Muslim armies (“Elles combattirent en personne”, 152). Veiling, however, is given a bad reputation also in this context of the early Muslim community: A woman who is made to veil in front of an assembly of men becomes “aveugle, quasiment fantôme aux longs voiles noircis” (204), simply a “forme noire” (205). The veiled woman is thus deprived of any humanity, of any personality; all this veiled woman is able to do is wait (“j’attendais”, 205) for her fate to be decided on. Her veiling is thus linked to the loss of any agency whatsoever.

In fact, however, Djebar here also presents a theologically legitimate opposition to the tradition of veiling in Islam per se: the veiled woman in the scene just mentioned recalls the “versets du voilement”, which, according to her, a witness of the times, concern only “les mères des Croyants [i.e., Muhammad’s wives], non les femmes ordinaires comme moi!” (204). However, in order to keep the community happy, she agrees to bow to the pressure to veil. This way, Djebar at the same time depicts the dehumanizing and depersonalizing effects of veiling, explains why many women veil nonetheless, and puts forth an Islamically valid opposition to the tradition of veiling at all.

Interestingly, there is a recurrent scene throughout Djebar’s oeuvre in which she constructs a counter-space to that of the veiled woman, alone under her coverings. This space is that of the hammam, space par excellence for women converging, conversing – and of course, shedding all of their clothes. Rather than losing themselves as they do when veiled, women here reconstruct a close and harmonious connection with their bodies. Furthermore, hammam scenes in Djebar are always encouraging of confidences between women, thus increasing their solidarity amongst themselves; and encouraging the exchanges of words, which provide healing, as we will see in the final section of this chapter.
This space of the completely unveiled woman is also that of Picasso’s counter-*Femmes d’Alger*. In this painting, inspired by Delacroix’s, the women are no longer imprisoned, and are completely naked. “Comme s’il faisait aussi de cette dénudation non pas seulement le signe d’une émancipation, mais plutôt celui d’une renaissance de ces femmes à leur corps” (163). If veiling, according to Djebar’s character from *Médine*, is not necessarily mandated by Islam, another space that is, in fact, part of the Islamic tradition, the hammam, liberates women. This space brings them community and solidarity and allows them to have a close and healthy relationship with their bodies.

By making the hammam such a central setting in her works, Djebar interestingly inscribes herself into a tradition that had previously been dominated by orientalist representations – and by retracing the genealogies of paintings such as that of Picasso and of Delacroix, she engages them critically, positioning herself clearly regarding this artistic history. Hammams had also provided the inspiration for much-discussed scenes in the work of writers such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose writing, in turn, inspired Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Le Bain turc*. By reappropriating this tradition that formerly granted Western artists the means to define what they perceived as the “Orient”, and by using her particular technique of giving women a voice (“parler près de, et si possible tout contre”, *Femmes* 8), also and especially in the hammam, Djebar reclaims and redefines this space. It is still, as it was for example for Montagu, a space for the West to encounter the East; but it takes place on the North African women’s own terms, including, comforting each other and even a Western woman (37), but without the romanticizing veneer of longing for alterity perceptible in orientalist painting and in Montagu’s writing.

If the “belles du harem” need to be liberated by Picasso, as Djebar indicates in her Postface, she herself also makes rather strong statements against the Islamic possibility for men
to have several wives. While taking on the voice of one of the sons of “Félicie” in one of the short stories of *Oran, langue morte*, she calls this possibility “l’ostentation et le cynisme de la bigamie impudente (‘Dans un esprit contraire à l’Islam’ avait commenté Père)” (264). The fact that it is indeed Djebar supporting this opinion becomes clear when one considers her portrayals of the early Muslim community in *Médine*. Aïcha, for example, is usually called the “favorite” wife of the Prophet (193), but seeing him marry several other women is described as wounding to her (“La jalousie mord,” “la polygamie de Mohammed, subie ainsi de plein fouet,” “la blessure la plus vive,” 275). The fact that Djebar herself sees polygamy as contrary to the spirit of Islam is implied in her very detailed depiction of Muhammad’s defending of his daughter Fatima’s interests when her husband wants to take another wife: She quotes Muhammad as claiming that “[c]e qui lui fait mal [à Fatima] me fait mal!” (74). Implied in this statement is the awareness that polygamy indeed hurts women, and that it is thus condemnable at least in certain cases. Even in the Prophet’s own family, there are many jealousies among his wives - a fact that was well-documented by the chroniclers of the time (54). Finally, Djebar goes so far as to blame polygamy for the civil strife between different Muslim groups: When Muhammad is about to die, he asks the wives present at his deathbed to bring him a scribe; the result is that they bring him the male that each is closest to, resulting in the eventual presence of Abou Bekr, Omar, and Ali. Faced with this multiplicity, Muhammad does not choose a successor, “[c]omme si le corps de l’Islam devait se diviser, enfanter par lui-même luttes civiles et querelles, tout cela en tribut payé à la polygamie du Fondateur” (59).

Polygamy in Djebar is, then, by necessity divisive; it brings up one wife against her “co-wife” and is to blame for the entire division of the body of Muslims into Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims. Since even the Prophet himself, model of men, was incapable of being equitable
between his wives, it is impossible not to fall into the category described by the hadith that Djebar cites: “Mais si vous craignez de n’être pas équitables, prenez une seule femme!” (73, referring to verse 4:3 of the Qur’an). Historically and theologically, then, as well as from a psychological standpoint, polygamy is untenable for Muslims, according to Djebar.

There are, of course, other abuses of women’s rights denounced in Djebar for which Islam is used as a justification. This goes from an obsession with virginity, forced marriages, and domestic abuse to marital rape and repudiation. A particularly central objection is that of taking girls out of school – this, once again, proves particularly divisive, as it threatens to break a family apart in one story of Femmes d’Alger (133). Interestingly, however, when this topic comes up in Oran, langue morte, God himself is on the side of women. A young emigrant girl in “La fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant”, curiously staring at the writing on a boat, prays ardently, “Un jour, ô Dieu, faites que je sache déchiffrer ces dessins!” God hears her prayer and fulfills her wish: “Elle lira.” (56). It is, thus, not Islam per se or the Islamic God (in whom Djebar believes, as explained in the Introduction) that is blamed for these terrible injustices, but the interpretations that androcentric societies have made of it. When the abuses of women’s rights are denounced, it is the misogyny of society that is accused; but women, as we will see below, have their own Islam to which they are attached, and for Djebar it is not the religion itself that is the cause of these troubling abuses.

It is, indeed, the submission to men that is the root of the “psychological problems” in Algerian society, according to Djebar. “La haine,” exclaims one clear-sighted male character in “Femmes d’Alger,” “[n]ous la suçons avec le lait de nos mères exploitées! […]C]e n’est pas seulement le colonialisme l’origine de nos problèmes psychologiques, mais le ventre de nos femmes frustrées!” (28). If women are used and abused, Djebar states here through the mouth of
a character that is presented as one of the most shrewd observers in “Femmes,” they can only give birth to a society that is unhealthy and suffers from internal divisions and enmities, because they pass on their frustrations at being oppressed to their children.

Submission, according to Djebar, is part of Muslim life - but only submission to God. A woman in Médine, for example, who has just gained her freedom from her former husband through Prophetic intercession swears to herself, “Ne plus s’agenouiller, sauf pour la prière, pour mille prières à Dieu!” (253). Djebar generalizes this attitude to the women of early Islam: “Des Musulmanes de la plus rare espèce: soumises à Dieu et farouchement rebelles au pouvoir, à tout pouvoir” (299-300). Thus, Djebar provides a clear interpretation on what Islam should mean to women, and divorces the original message of its Prophet from later, androcentric interpretations.

III. Islamist Violence

A particularly nefarious way in which women were subjected to bad treatment in the name of religion was in the context of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, in which Islamist fundamentalists turned violently against certain sections of the Algerian population, especially women. In this section, I will focus mainly on the narrative techniques that Djebar uses in order to provoke her readers’ empathy when she depicts scenes of Islamist violence. By manipulating narrative point of view, making use of the ways in which characters are introduced, playing with the instances of narrator and narratee, and manipulating chronology and narration speed in an almost filmic manner, Djebar promotes the reader’s impression of knowing the victims personally and of feeling him- or herself the fear that is being created by armed Islamists.
Djebar’s narrative methods thus directly translate the horror of the Algerian civil war onto her readers’ sensibilities.

To provide a very general historical background to the violent decade of the 1990s, although the term “civil war” is contested, many historians of the decade are in agreement that the extent of the violence constituted an actual war within the country (e.g. Bennoune, Jurt 7, Stora 112, Bozzo 220). Many factors are cited as root causes for these events, the oldest probably being the alienation caused by French colonization and by the “francisation” of the original population of Algeria (Jurt 13). Another is likely present in the “fascination” with armed battle present among Algerian youth since the days of the independence struggle in the 1950s and 1960s (Al-Ahnaf 29), which, according to some observers, has produced a “culture de guerre” within Algerian society (Jurt 13). However, the most important cause probably consists in the negative economic development during the 1970s and 1980s in Algeria, which led to crises in education (207), housing, and employment (Bennoune), all of which were coupled with considerable population growth and traumatizing social changes over a brief time span (Al-Ahnaf 241). This troubling state of affairs, especially among the predominantly young population, led to riots in 1988, spreading from Algiers throughout the country. These riots were struck down by the army, resulting in hundreds of dead (Bennoune). However, as a result of the riots, opposition parties were finally permitted by the government, and in the 1990 and 1991 elections, the fundamentalist FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) was hugely successful against the ruling FLN party (Ruf 226). This, in turn, led to a putsch by the Algerian army, and to a hugely violent clash between Islamist factions and the Algerian government with its military, to which many civilians fell victim (Jurt 7).
The Islamist movement, which to many unemployed and underprivileged youth appeared as the only alternative to a political establishment in which they did not believe (Al-Ahnaf 27), was already present in anti-colonial opposition against the French, and gained additional credibility through the Iranian revolution in 1979 (26). Since the 1970s, Islamists used scare tactics against members of the Algerian population that did not conform to their conception of Islam (Bennoune), and violence increased exponentially after the 1991 elections. Women were especially targeted by Islamist threats and physical attacks, and so were “[n]oted intellectuals, including psychiatrists, journalists, sociologists, doctors and professors,” many of whom were killed or received death threats because their ideas or life style did not conform to the narrow ideals of the armed Islamists (Bennoune).

The tens of thousands of lives lost, supposedly in the name of religion, are only one side of this drama. The climate of fear and intimidation among the threatened groups, determining an entire life style, is another aspect of it, and the portrayal of this aspect is a skill at which Assia Djebar excels. She herself has received death threats from Islamist groups (Skalli 49), and the paranoia that this fear can cause is almost tangible in her works. This is especially the case in Oran, langue morte. The narrator of “La fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant” is worried by every bearded passer-by and constantly on her guard, because she imagines that “un jour, ils me reconnaîtront, au square ou dans un supermarché, ils m’abattront le lendemain, devant le hall de l’immeuble, quand je sortirai” (77). This creates an impression of inevitability, an ever-looming threat that weighs on the protagonists all through their daily lives.

This threat is made even more tangible for the reader when Djebar puts him or her into the position of someone losing a friend. While following the life of the French teacher Atyka in
“La Femme en morceaux,” the reader slowly gains the impression of knowing her personally, and when she is murdered, this makes a deeper impression on him or her (210).

A similar device is used in “La fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant,” but here, its impact is even more direct: It is the narrating instance that disappears because the narrator Isma (Arabic for “name,” as if she were only there to fulfill the function of narrating instance) is killed (131). This comes as a shock to the reader, who, over the preceding sixty pages, has grown accustomed to listening to her voice, and thus feels this loss even more personally. A sophisticated play with narrator and narratee is also present in another instance where Djebar portrays losing a friend to terrorist violence. Most of “La Fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant” is addressed to a disappeared friend of the narrator, Nawal, of whose death, however, no one is certain. Thus, the reader is reminded of the pain of death and uncertainty every time that the narrator addresses this narratee.

At the same time, by putting a potentially deceased person in the place of the narratee, who is usually the reader him- or herself (a position he or she is used to holding), Djebar associates the reader with a victim of Islamist violence. She thus forces the reader to imagine him- or herself as having been murdered by Islamists, and thus showing that this can indeed happen to anyone.

A similar effect is attained by Djebar’s manipulation of chronology. “L’Attentat,” also part of Oran, langue morte, begins with the mention that a specific character has died – most of the remainder of the story consists of a kind of flashback. This allows the narrator’s compassion at the death of the character to build, as he is presented. Moreover, it also once again creates an effect of the inescapability of finally being killed by Islamist murderers – a feeling that was an everyday reality for many Algerians during the time of the civil war.

Another way of bringing the atrocity of Islamist murders closer to the reader’s sensibility lies in the way the murders themselves are depicted. After the reader has made close
acquaintance with the future victims, the way they are killed is described in merciless detail. This is all the more striking as the reader is more familiar with the general reserve in Djebar’s judgments. Most often, she permits the reader to come to his or her own conclusions, and does not impose a judgment using her narrator’s voice. This allows the reader to hear more clearly the voices of the participants in the events themselves, and the conclusions to which he or she comes him- or herself take on much more force. However, the details of the murders are sometimes almost mercilessly gory:

Le fou, qui brandissait son poignard, s’est avancé vers elle [Atyka]. Oui, Omar, du coin le plus reculé de la classe, le seul à rester assis, a vu. Il voit et il a vu le bossu s’approcher du corps basculé d’Atyka, d’une main lui relever la tête en la soulevant par ses longs cheveux – ses longs cheveux roux, flamboyants, vivants. Son autre main, d’un geste long et sûr, dans un même mouvement, tranche le cou d’Atyka. Sa tête est brandie une seconde. Il la pose droite, sur le bureau. (211)

This detailed precision is unsentimental, almost surgical, such that the reader can produce his or her own judgment. However, it also attains two other goals: the gory nature of the details serves to bring the events closer to the reader, and communicates the unimaginable brutality of events. At the same time, the accuracy and detail makes the scene appear as if the author had experienced it herself; it is an effect of realism that makes the unbelievable believable through the power of its detailed narration.

Moreover, in the depiction of these scenes of brutality and to bring them closer to her readers, Djebar also manipulates the speed of her narrative quite considerably when she tells about these murders. One almost has the impression of watching a movie in slow motion (which
is of course appropriate if one considers that Djebar is also a filmmaker\(^{17}\). This is especially the case in her depiction of the teacher Atyka:

Atyka reçoit debout une balle au coeur. Elle se trouvait dressée derrière son bureau. Sa voix plane, protestation vibrant encore malgré la première salve, celle qui a fait courber les élèves et juste avant le coup qui a visé le coeur d’Atyka: ‘En armes, et vous entrez dans ma classe!’

La seule phrase qu’entend encore Omar, le dernier des élèves, le plus jeune, le plus frêle. A la dernière rafale, il s’est relevé. Obsinément, il s’est dit: ‘Je ne resterai pas couché!’ Il entend encore la voix ferme d’Atyka qu’il aime et qu’il admire. (210)

The quasi-filminic slowing-down of the pace of narration serves, once more, to expose the reader to the full impact of the atrocity committed. It seeks to attain the impression that the reader had been present with the characters and felt the full onslaught of the trauma. The reality of these unimaginable events is reinforced by the speed of narration, which accounts for the time the mind needs to be able to register that what the eye sees is indeed happening. This effect is made even stronger by the fact that the same scene is told consecutively from two different points of view: the reader enters the scene from the point of view of Atyka, whose thought processes he or she is accustomed to following; however, at the moment of her death, the point of view shifts to that of her student Omar, and the scene is retold from his perspective. This serves to draw out the scene even more, to drive home the reality of its unimaginable brutality. It also serves to enlarge the circle of those struck by the suffering caused by Islamist violence: We enter the minds of those suffering from it, and experience the pain of more than one victim. Finally, the intensity of the scene is also reminiscent of martyrdom depictions, as present in Western cultures, but also in

\(^{17}\) Djebar published her film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* in 1978 and *La Zerda ou les chants de l’oubli* in 1982.
the martyrdom legends born from the Algerian liberation struggle. If Djebar, then, is reconstructing her own approach to religion, the martyrs for this new, tolerant, dialogue-focused approach already exist, as depicted by her here. They stand in opposition to what Djebar depicts as a false understanding of Islam, in which the religion is abused for the personal aggrandizement of some and the subjugation of others, in which a minority with brutal tactics and a loud voice negates the liberties of the whole of society.

IV. A Continuing Attachment to Religion

Despite all of the criticism that Djebar levels against the interpretations that some have made of Islam, an attachment to this religion still shines through in her works. Rather than Djebar rejecting Islam, the religion per se, as opposed to the interpretations that have been made of it, is portrayed in a positive light through Djebar’s characters and discursive techniques. If Islam is “le contraire de la contrainte” (according to Médine’s character Oum Keltoum, 172) and thus a matter of free choice, a clear choice in favor of this religion is made on the part both of the narrators of Djebar’s works and of her characters – and, according to Djebar herself, she writes “close to” these women (Femmes 8). At the same time, this religion has to be reinterpreted, and the ways in which this takes place will be explained in the final section of this chapter. First, however, we will explore in what ways an attachment to Islam is present in Djebar’s works, how this “taking root” (enracinement) in religion, as she describes her own effort (Zimra 827), is expressed in her texts.

One of the features of Djebar’s works, which are, after all, written by a defender of secularism, is the presence of religious formulas used by their female characters. Djebar goes so
far as to include a reference to a religious maxim in the title of one of the short stories of *Femmes d’Alger*, “Il n’y a pas d’exil:” On the last page of the short story, it is explained that “Il n’y a pas d’exil pour tout homme aimé de Dieu. Il n’y a pas d’exil pour qui est dans la voie de Dieu” (84). The speaker is Hafça, a member of a highly religious family who have emigrated to France, and who, in a circle composed of women, often discusses matters of religion. The fact that this religious maxim is taken up again in the title of the short story implies that the author agrees with it. The author thus sides with these women, for whom she feels solidarity (especially because they, like her, are exiles), and with whose popular, every-day religion she sympathizes.

In fact, commitment to Islam is often expressed by Djebar’s main characters, and this, interestingly, often occurs in the context of Ramadan and fasting. Djebar spins an almost romantic vocabulary around the fasting of this month, as lived by women: “les maisons deviennent profondes, l’ombre translucide et le corps s’alanguit,” she describes the Ramadan experience of a number of women in a family, and a winter Ramadan is described in enthusiastic tones by one of these women: “Vous verrez quand il viendra en hiver! Doux et tendre comme de la laine, le Ramadhan d’hiver” (131). These women, then, enter the fasting with “une allégresse d’ascète,” and the little girls in the family, seeing this, cannot wait to be allowed to participate in this religious duty: “[elles] s’impatientaient de jeûner (quand auraient-elles enfin la permission? […]” (131-2). The women sincerely enjoy this experience and its deprivations, speaking to a clear commitment to the religion, or at the very least to the cultural ritual it implies.

What is more, Ramadan fasting, in Djebar, has a triple power: That of freeing one from imprisonment (a highly significant power in Djebar, as imprisonment and freedom of movement play such a central role in her writing); that of resisting an oppressor, such as the colonial power;
and that of fastening the ties of female solidarity across cultural and national divides. In *Femmes d’Alger*, Djebar writes of a group of rebels in a colonial French prison in Algeria:

> L’exil et les chaînes devenaient immatériels, une délivrance du corps qui tourne dans la cellule mais ne se cogne soudain plus aux murs ; deux Françaises arrêtées dans le même réseau s’étaient jointes à l’observance islamique et, malgré la fadeur de la soupe au crépuscule, comme le repos se creusait au-delà des heures grises comme le chant des veillées, malgré la garde, semblait franchir la mer, rejoindre les montagnes du pays !

(132)

Ramadan fasting, then, frees the spirit from earthly constraints to such an extent that it can even pass through prison walls; and this, in turn, enables the freedom fighters of this story to resist their French enemies. But what is more is that the act of fasting brings Algerian women closer to those who might otherwise side with their enemies: French women. This religious observance in fact strengthens female solidarity rather than separating “believer” from “nonbeliever”.

Of course, in her characteristically historiographic manner, Djebar also uses historical retrospective in order to stress the extent to which many Muslim women are faithfully attached to their religion – and nowhere does she do this more strikingly than in *Loin de Médine*. She gives examples of women who followed the Prophet despite the resistance of their families – such as Oum Salama, who had to overcome considerable obstacles to be able to follow Muhammad to Medina. Finally, within the Muslim community, Oum Salama was able to enjoy a “vie musulmane sans contraintes” (53) – an extremely potent phrase that expresses to what extent the women of early Islam only longed to be able to freely express their religiosity. Djebar thus stresses the commitment of these early Muslim women to their religion, who even overcome the resistance of their families out of love for Muhammad’s message.
This commitment is also depicted in a particularly striking way when Djebar evokes the life of Oum Keltoum, to whom an entire chapter (“La fugueuse d’hier”) is devoted. Having been converted to Islam by a former slave (158), Oum Keltoum fled her family to join Muhammad in Medina. There, she had to be protected by the Muslim community against her brother’s threats (163-166). This episode is particularly important because in its context, Muhammad received a revelation, which allowed Oum Keltoum to remain with the Muslim community despite earlier agreements that runaways should be returned to their original community (163-5). Djebar thus sheds a special light on the commitment to Islam of early Muslim women, a commitment that was recognized by the Prophet, and that even occasioned Qur’anic revelation.

Conversely, as Priscilla Ringrose points out, Djebar, in her desire to portray an Islam that is palatable to women, obscures aspects of the early Muslim community that would render the religion less acceptable to feminist sensibilities. This is for example the case in the context of polygamous unions and divorce rules, whose injustice (allowing men, but not women, access to multiple spouses and to divorce at will) is often obscured in Médine (237). For Djebar, it is the original spiritual message of Islam that must be stressed, and if an androcentric bias has entered the young Muslim community, the Islamic God and the Messenger himself are on the side of women.

Indeed, Djebar’s attachment to Islam becomes visible especially in her portrayal of the Prophet. He is depicted as particularly fatherly and generous, in addition to also having especially humane characteristics such as compassion, understanding, and gentleness. Of special importance for the purposes of this study are the traits that regard Muhammad’s treatment of women. Once again, the story of Oum Keltoum (158-169) is particularly telling, as she flees her family to join the early Muslim community, and is protected by the Prophet’s intervention that
even involves divine revelation (165). Another example is that of Habiba, who comes to join the community out of love for “God and his Messenger,” and is welcomed by a Prophet full of “gentleness” (93). In shedding light on these instances, not only does Djebar show women’s love for and commitment to Islam, but also to what extent this was appreciated by the Messenger himself. By thus taking up the historical record and reinterpreting the original texts of her religion, Djebar points out how supportive and protective of women the Prophet was.

A number of other instances mentioned in *Loin de Médine* link the Prophet to contemporary and historic discussions about “Islamic” rulings on certain issues. There is, for example, considerable debate in Muslim countries on whether or not music is permissible in Islam (al Faruqi). Djebar states a clear opinion on the subject when she depicts a scene in which the Prophet encouraged the inclusion of music in a wedding (125). According to her, “Djaber ibn Abdallah, l’un de nos traditionnistes les plus réputés” (124), interpreted this scene as follows: “Eh bien, c’est le Prophète lui-même qui, non seulement songeait à la réjouissance des autres, quand il les aimait et les savait croyants fidèles, mais l’encourageait” (125). Thus, as a historian, literary writer and *mujtahid*, Djebar uses the traditional text in order to exercise her own judgment and construct her own interpretation.

Muhammad, then, does not only encourage music and amusement, but also has a sense of humor: The women who hastily cover their faces when the Companion Omar is announced cause him to laugh heartily (249). Also in other ways, the Prophet is depicted as a highly human character, and Djebar also stresses his agreeable appearance: he is “‘celui tout en blanc’, à la voix si douce, à la barbe parfumée, aux cheveux bouclés sur le cou” (166). As a Muslim believer, then, Djebar also affirms her belief by expressing her admiration for the Prophet Muhammad and depicting him in a highly positive light, especially when women’s concerns are at issue. This
strengthens her project of demonstrating that the original message of Islam was not one that was inimical to women, but rather one that can be seen in a feminist light.

On the more negative side, the problematic nature of religion plays out in its most destructive way in Djebar when it is removed from the “lumière originelle” of Muhammad’s message and interpreted according to an androcentric agenda. This is especially the case when religion mixes with politics. Not only does religion become destructive, as we have seen above, when it is used as an excuse for fundamentalist violence, but it can also lead to complications in other, more civil ways. For example, the mother Félicie of “Le corps de Félicie” in Oran, Langue morte, would be denied her last wish of being laid to rest next to her husband according to the logic of Algerian administrators, because she is not a Muslima. It is only the love and ruse of her Muslim and non-Muslim children - human factors - that enable this all-important burial to take place according to the wishes of the mother. Human values, such as love and intelligence, are thus opposed to the explosive mixture of religion and politics in Djebar’s œuvre. Religion by itself, however, may be a positive force, which can even work for the betterment of humans when it increases their compassion – one of the foremost traits of the Prophet, according to Djebar.

V. Continuing a Tradition of Female Reinterpretation

If, according to Djebar, Islam cannot be accepted as it is imposed by those with the loudest voices in her society, but must be subjected to personal reinterpretation and revision, on what grounds is she able to put this into practice? Djebar calls her own effort of reinterpretation, as we saw, “ma volonté d’ijtihad,” footnoted by herself as “effort intellectuel pour la recherche
de la vérité” (Médine 6). Her effort is justified by her citing of an all-important *hadith*: “Allez chercher le savoir même en Chine!” (Oran 368). This *hadith* is cited here in the context of opposing it to the un-Islamic insanity of Islamist killers (a teacher who receives death threats and will soon be assassinated remembers this well-known *hadith*), and it sets the tone for Djebar’s own effort of reinterpretation: by citing it, Djebar states that she sees her own effort as placing itself *within* the framework of Islam itself, not opposing it. When expressing herself on matters of belief, such as Islamist activities or exegesis, Djebar thus takes care to frame her own thought within the mention of Islamic traditions, such as that of the concept of *ijtihad* or of *hadith* literature.\(^\text{18}\) Djebar places herself within a long and prestigious tradition of interpretation by pursuing a feminist agenda with arguments gleaned from within the religion and its traditions themselves. If looking for knowledge is a duty imposed by Islam itself, Djebar’s own effort to gain more knowledge about the religion, to search for her own religious truth within Islam’s primary sources, cannot be opposing this religion, but rather continuing its tradition along the lines of its original message.

For it is Islam’s original message that Djebar is interested in. As has been shown in the preceding section, Djebar harbors great respect for the figure of the Prophet and for his original message. What is more, she believes that after the initial “light” that Islam provided, Islam moved away from it due to androcentric interpretations: Medina, all too soon after having been the locus of the initial revelation, has become a “lieu de pouvoir temporel” which “s’écarte irréversiblement de sa lumière originelle” (Médine 5). Throughout *Loin de Médine*, Djebar deplores the degree to which men’s interpretations have corrupted the original egalitarian message of the Prophet, and have come to interpretations that have been to the disadvantage of

\(^\text{18}\) Patricia Geesey also points out this favoring of “continuity with the past” in Djebar, and cites her use of *hadith* evidence (43).
women in particular. This is all the more deplorable for Djebar as the original message of Islam was, in her own words, a “feminist” one (79). It involved the right of women to inherit from their fathers, “pour la première fois dans l’histoire des Arabes”, and “par l’intermédiaire de Mohammed!”. The men of early Islam, however, cannot bear this “insupportable révolution féministe de l’Islam.” They limit the influence of this revolution, first and foremost by refusing Fatima’s right to inherit from her father (79). The true spirit of Islam, as becomes clear from Djebar’s structuring of the dialogue, is that it first staked out women’s rights in a rather revolutionary move, and that the Muslim community was therefore meant to continue moving in such a direction. In a paragraph brimming with exclamation marks, Djebar attributes to Fatima the (unexpressed) opinion, “la révolution de l’Islam, pour les filles, pour les femmes, a été d’abord de les faire hériter, de leur donner la part qui leur revient de leur père!” (79).

Muhammad’s original intention, for Djebar, was thus to improve women’s position in his society, and any androcentric interpretation is therefore an aberration from his spirit. By accusing, as she does in her text, those who deprived Fatima of her heritage as soon as Muhammad was dead, Djebar explicitly shows her position that Fatima was treated unjustly and that Muhammad would have protected his daughter’s right to inherit.

Interestingly, the case of Fatima’s inheritance in Loin de Médine is an early instance of men and women citing religious tenets from the same source in order to oppose each other: Fatima citing the rules regarding women’s right to inherit, and casting this as representing Islam’s true spirit; her male opponents citing a Prophetic hadith claiming that “Nous, les prophètes, […] on n’hérite pas de nous!” (79). Djebar’s representation of one of the most
respected women of Islam as engaging in hadith battles with the companions\(^1\) legitimizes this kind of strategy for women. If they engaged in the same kind of process, mining scripture for arguments in favor of their own goals, they would only be emulating the Prophet’s beloved daughter, which makes the process Islamically valid. (The same technique is used by the Muslim feminists presented in the introductory section, and by the women exegetes mentioned further on in this section.)

The other lesson of Fatima’s battle for her inheritance is that Prophetic hadiths, and indeed the Qur’an itself, should, according to Djebar, not be interpreted literally (as also pointed out by Wehrs, 862), but always in consideration of their historical context. “On lui refuse sa part d’héritage,” complains Djebar, “au nom d’une interprétation littérale d’un propos de Mohammed” (79, my italics). This literal interpretation is much less valid than that of Fatima, because hers is congruent with the spirit of Islam. Djebar’s argument that it is the spirit of Islam – its original impetus called “feminist” by her (79) - that must live on and be continued, not the literal applications of the words of its scripture, is present throughout Loin de Médine. Ever since the Prologue, she repeats the fact that “Il [Muhammad] est mort. Il n’est pas mort” (11), indicating that although Islam’s Messenger passed away, his message will outlast him. Djebar’s emphasis is thus on the spiritual heritage of the Messenger – rather than on his person, or on his literal words.

This stress on the message rather than on the literal interpretation is all the more significant as Djebar tells the reader that the historical context is extremely important when one wants to come to a conclusion regarding what is Islamically valid and what is not. Because the

\(^1\) The expression “companions of the Prophet” (as-Sahāba) comprises the companions, disciples, family, and scribes of Prophet Muhammad. As a group, they are highly respected in Islam because they provided information on the Prophet’s traditions, the source of later shari’a rulings.
words on the page themselves are less important than the spirit in which they were written, the historical conditions of their writing are extremely central. This is, of course, appropriate, as Djebar’s training is as an historian, which becomes evident throughout her oeuvre. Not only does all of Médine demonstrates how capably Djebar juggles historical evidence and her own interpretation; she also skillfully interweaves tales from the past and the present. This is for example the case when she criticizes the way in which Algerian Islamists of the 1990s misinterpret the history of Islam. “Chaque leader intégriste s’appelle ‘cheikh’ chez nous, en ces temps présents! Il se veut ainsi, par ce vocable (que les véritables maîtres autrefois n’osaient se donner), le père des jeunes chefs de bande” (143). By stressing how the differences in interpretation of historical facts affect the realities of the murderous present-day struggles, Djebar draws attention to their importance. This importance is also central to her own interpretation of the Islamic past, and in her use of *ijtihad*.

Djebar also explicitly refers to the need of religious views being adapted to the times. For example, an injured woman in *Femmes d’Alger* who must be operated is reminded roughly that she will not be able to work anymore if she does not accept the anesthesia that she claims to be against her “beliefs” (45). Djebar thus stresses that if believers focus on the aforementioned spiritual message of Islam, they do not need to be limited to a literal interpretation of scripture, since such an interpretation may no longer be applicable to the times. This stress on the historical context and on adaptation of the religion’s message is a central part of Djebar’s project of reinterpretation and renovation of the religion.

One of the specific strengths of Djebar’s historical approach is the fact that she brings into her works many strong women who were also of importance in their communities, women who “have considerable status and power,” as Priscilla Ringrose puts it (228). This is particularly
the case in *Médine*, which features a large number of women who held important places in their communities or accomplished feats noteworthy for the courage or strength of character it took to carry them out. The most well-known of them are of course Fatima and Aïcha; but Djebbar also casts light on Fatima’s daughters Oum Keltoum and Zeineb (299). Most remarkably, Djebbar portrays the women of early Islam who fought within the Muslim armies, as Oum Hakim did, for example. For her, participating in combat on behalf of these armies represented a form of prayer (151). Thus, these early Muslim women were not only noteworthy for their unusual strength, they also used their unusual strength in the service of their religion. In this way, they constructed their own approach to spirituality and to living their Islamic faith.

More directly, however, Djebbar presents the reader of *Médine* with women who, in this first community of Islam, already interpreted religious texts on their own. Atyka, for example, knows the Qur’anic text well and is therefore ready to present the women who want her to veil her face with an argument that is also today often mentioned to oppose veiling for women (204). She both knows the history of the revelation, and is ready to interpret it on her own account. Eventually, she does not insist on her own interpretation of the Qur’anic text in order to keep the women around her happy. However, Djebbar’s insistence that Atyka will later on further develop and apply her own reasoning indicates that she encourages women to return to the Qur’anic text themselves and come to their own conclusion: “… Je saurai bien,” thinks Atyka, “les jours suivants, ne m’occuper que de ma propre conscience de Croyante, devant Dieu et devant son Messager, eux seuls!” (204) In this almost mystical-sounding sentence, Djebbar thus seems to encourage women to seek guidance regarding religious duties within themselves and within their own rapport with God. In this scene, she clearly separates the will of the community from the
individual’s own believer’s conscience, which, she insists here, must be a person’s ultimate guide.

Another example of a woman from Qur’anic times who was educated in scripture and knew how to apply it is that of Safya (‘qui sera plus tard la première grande juriste,” 54). However, the presence of women learned in Qur’anic matters is not only remarkable in *Loin de Médine*, but also in other works: in *Femmes d’Alger*, for example, the reader encounters the venerable old “Yemma” in the short story “Les morts parlent”. This motherly figure is highly respected in her community because of her “savoir des choses religieuses” (112-113), and is consulted in grave matters such as the decision to take a second wife. In such a case, she recalls the Qur’anic rule and advises the questioner according to her interpretation of it (116). In fact, she even acts as a reformer of religious mores: When she returns to her village after an absence, “La foi elle-même, telle qu’on la pratiquait dorénavant, subissait l’influence de [Yemma] Hadda” (119). She thus reforms the entire way that religion is lived in her community, thanks to her religious learning and her skill in interpreting religious texts. Djebar shows, then, that at all times in Muslim societies, women have interpreted scripture, and that they have been highly respected for it. The fact that they have done so has not only been accepted, but also been a great source of prestige for women. It is thus only recommendable for women to gather knowledge about their religion and to come to their own conclusions regarding what lessons to draw from its tenets.

Finally, Djebar also cites women who are religious authorities in contemporary societies, such as the “prêtresses” of the Mzab region of Algeria. “[E]lles savent toutes le Coran” (92-93), claims Djebar in *Oran, langue morte*; and these women are well-versed in Qur’anic exegesis (“savante […] en exégèse coranique”, 93). Whether women are “laveuses de morts” (93), give advice in religious matters, or are the chroniclers of a family’s history, their religious authority
can be considerable: “Nostalgie de la horde,” part of Femmes d’Alger, for example, shows such a family in which the women are the bearers of this latter responsibility - they preserve the family’s memory of the religious habits and experiences of individual members (140). Therefore, the women are responsible for the way in which these family members, especially men, are viewed in religious terms. The women are themselves able to judge whether or not the behavior of an individual member appeared to them to be congruent with the tenets of Islam as they see them, and their voice is given credence.

All of this evidence from Djebar proves that women have held religious authority and religious learning for a long time in Muslim societies, and that they have always been able to interpret scripture by themselves and come to their own conclusions. This is, in fact, recommendable in the framework of Djebar’s larger project of “parler, parler sans cesse” in order to “tout débloquer” (Femmes 60), her larger project of dialogue. Women must also talk about religion and its texts, must engage with those texts and construct their own interpretations. This is in keeping with what other scholars have more recently stressed about the history of Islam – i.e. that there have been, at many different times, important and respected women who also engaged in exegesis, expressed themselves on religious matters, and were respected and listened to by their communities. The extent to which this is true in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries has already been pointed out above in the section on Muslim feminists. However, as Leila Ahmed chronicles, Muslim women have often held important positions in Muslim societies, beginning with Muhammad’s wives who were the principal sources on the Prophet’s sunna, his customs and sayings (‘Aisha even briefly assuming political leadership, 43). Ahmed points to Muslim women being active on the battlefield, such as Hind bint ‘Utbah (57), Umm Hakim, or Azdah bint al-Harith (70), and to seventh- and eighth-century women who were
known for their literary abilities, such as ‘Atika bint Zaid (76) or ‘Aisha bint Talha (77). More importantly, however, she points out that over the centuries, women tended to mostly have room to develop their spiritual and intellectual gifts in the context of Sufism, as was the case of the eminent Sufi saint Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya (96). Other female Sufi masters are described by the twelfth-century Sufi scholar Ibn al-Arabi, who studied under “Shams, Mother of the Poor,” and Nunah Fatima bint al-Muthanna (99).

In later centuries, prominent Muslim women were also known for their charitable works, such as Zeinab bint Abu’l-Barakat (thirteenth century) or Umm Zeinab Fatima bint al-‘Abbas (fourteenth century), who were prominent because of their considerable religious learning as well (110), or the fifteenth-century Qur’anic scholar Khadija bint ‘Ali (114). Throughout this account, it becomes clear that some women have traditionally held important places within Muslim societies, and that their learning, also on religious matters, is not an unusual phenomenon. An approach to Islamic history, then, that ignores or denies these women’s place is inaccurate and short-sighted, and sometimes a sign of bad faith on the part of individuals attempting to turn around religious history in the favor of conservative men. Djebar’s work, on the other hand, is in agreement with the accounts of eminent scholars such as the eleventh-century theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who provided an account of “eminent religious women” (67), and Ibn al-‘Arabi, who greatly praised his female teachers (99). The tradition of female religious interpretation is well-established, as these accounts show20, and Djebar, although her work is literary, inscribes herself in a prestigious tradition.

20 This is also established in further current scholarship, such as, for example by Saba Mahmood in Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke in Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing, and by Mahnaz Afkhami in Faith & Freedom: Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World.
Let us now consider the conclusions to which Djebat herself comes in her own re-reading of her religion.

VI. Working Towards Inclusiveness and Dialogue

Reinterpretation of religious texts is thus a central theme throughout Djebar’s oeuvre – in fact, this is true of reinterpretation in general, and for men as well as for women. This points to a central facet of Djebar’s conception of religiosity: that of inclusiveness. In this last section, I will analyze the aspects that make up Djebar’s revised vision of religion. I will focus on the ways in which the factors of love and solidarity between women appear as central facets, on what role that dialogue and the power of the voice play, and on the ways sensuality and the body are being brought into play.

A. Solidarity for an Inclusive Religion of Love

First and foremost, Djebar points the reader towards a concept of religion in which inclusiveness plays a central role – and this is true on more than one level. This inclusiveness – which is also present in Djebar’s other works, where women of many backgrounds and of differing religions are being given voice - is important because it sets Djebar apart markedly from the religious interpretations of Muslim extremists, whose monolithic interpretations of scripture only allow a very narrow conception of religious truth, and to whom any influences from outside of their own cultural circle are anathema. Along with Djebar’s focus on women’s solidarity, inclusiveness also inscribes her in a discourse of international, intercultural feminism,
in which networking between women of different national and cultural backgrounds becomes central and provides a vital resource for activists (see for example Farida Shaheed’s “Networking for Change: The Role of Women’s Groups in Initiating Dialogue on Women’s Issues”).

In Djebar, inclusiveness expresses itself in several different ways. Feminist reinterpretations, for example, are applied not only to the Qur’an and hadith, but also to literary texts such as the 1001 Nights (“La Femme en Morceaux” in Oran, langue morte). Moreover, feminist readings can be applied by men as well as by women – this is for example the case of the husband of “Le Corps de Félicie” in Oran, langue morte, who claims that polygamy is “dans un esprit contraire à l’Islam” (264). This emphasis on inclusiveness when it comes to religious matters is in strong opposition to more fundamentalist interpretations: Hafid Gafaiti, in “The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebar's Unveiling of Women and History,” points out very pertinently the parallels between the “obsession with unity” common to Islamism and “authoritarian socialism” such as that of the Algerian government. It is thus significant that Djebar’s interpretation of Islam refuses such a focus on unity and stresses multiplicity and acceptance of equality within diversity. For example, the basic male-female equality that the Qur’an can be said to support is stressed by Djebar in several instances. When an Algerian woman is threatened by Islamists, she cites the hadith concerning the search for knowledge “all the way to China”: “Cela concerne naturellement Croyants et Croyantes” (368). Djebar’s reading of the Muslim religion therefore logically stresses comprehensive, egalitarian aspects. Men and women, in her view of Islam, have the same rights, and therefore, they must be given the same consideration in her elaboration of her approach to religion.

Moreover, her very exploration of the past of Islam, that of its earliest years in Médine, is not an exclusive depiction of Muslims. Although the majority of the main characters in the book
are Muslim women, a considerable number of non-Muslim women are also included, to
demonstrate the illustrious nature and place of many women of differing origins in the seventh
century. Djebbar makes this explicit at the very beginning of Médine, by referencing the
“Musulmanes ou non musulmanes” whose appearance her book will illustrate (5). The very work
that most directly focuses on Djebbar’s own interpretation of what Islam means for her thus
prominently features non-Muslim women alongside their Muslim counterparts, another sign of
Djebbar’s inclusive feminist approach to religion.

Another impressive example of Muslim-non-Muslim tolerance and harmony can be
found in “Le Corps de Félicie” in Oran, langue morte, in which Djebbar presents a family that
includes Muslims, Catholics and atheists, all of whom get along eventually – although often not
without friction. Each of the Franco-Algerian couple’s children has two names, one
Arabic/Muslim and one French/Catholic, and is given the freedom to make his or her own choice
of religion (or to refuse religion altogether). This family, in the strength of its cohesion, is
eventually stronger even than the Algerian state, as the children manage to have their mother
buried next to her husband in Algeria, although she was a Christian during her lifetime. Human
values such as solidarity and familial love are thus stronger than the divisive interpretations of
religion that have too often been promoted, for example by the Algerian state, as Djebbar shows.

Love, Djebbar demonstrates, is a force that protects against the murderous effects that an
exaggerated attachment to wrongly interpreted religion can have. When Félicie, the family’s
Catholic mother, is about to be executed by a fanatic at the moment of Algeria’s independence,
she wears a necklace bearing a miniature Qur’an, which saves her at the last minute (347). She
wears the necklace out of love for her husband, Djebbar stresses – therefore, it is interreligious
love that saves a woman in extremis. Being inclusive about religion can thus save lives in cases such as this.

This inclusive acceptance is returned to Félicie by the Muslim women with whom she lives in Algeria. For her generosity in material matters and help in communicating with the authorities, she is awarded the “specifically Muslim” quality of “nya, quelque chose comme la bonne foi,” or “innocence” (255). For a Catholic woman who never thought of changing her religion to be given this strongly religious epithet by a venerable old Muslim lady, Félicie’s efforts at integrating her own life and that of the Muslims around her must have been considerable. She is fully accepted, beyond all possible religious divisions, for her human values, her compassion and generosity.

Egalitarian acceptance across religious boundaries is also included in many of the circles of friends that Djebar depicts. In “Oran, langue morte,” the closest friend of the narrator’s Muslim mother is “Madame Darmon,” a Christian woman (42). Similarly, the third page of the short story “Femmes d’Alger” introduces the character of Anne, a Frenchwoman whom one can assume not to be a Muslim, and who is taken care of by her Muslim women friends after an attempted suicide (13-14). These kinds of friendships are described in the warmest tones, and the non-Muslim women are integrated into the society of the Muslim women without any differences being made – this is especially the case in the space of the hammam (37-44), where a warm, physical atmosphere of solidarity is created between the Muslim and non-Muslim women, worries are aired, and support is shared. This counter-space to that of the isolated veiled woman is the opposite to that of solitude; and this space par excellence of women’s togetherness is explicitly portrayed as being religiously inclusive.
Besides the above-mentioned indicators, one may also consider Djebar’s narrative style indicative of egalitarian acceptance. For example, throughout her oeuvre, narrators and points of view shift frequently, and they can be those of males or females. In addition, the narrators are very rarely differentiated from each other by specific traits or ways of expressing themselves. Everyone seems to have the same right to his or her voice, to being heard; and one narrator or point of view is not preferred over another due to any particular traits. The use of narrators as well as points of view is thus highly egalitarian in Djebar.

This way of allowing different women to speak is also and especially present in *L’Amour, la fantasia*, in which Djebar gives other women a voice almost in the way that a sociologist might. This way of Djebar’s characters figuratively sharing the sociologist’s microphone is somewhat less present in *Ombre sultane*. Here, an “évoluée” narrator addresses a cloistered, less educated woman who has married the man the narrator has divorced, and uses the second person for this throughout the novel. According to some critics, such as Anjali Prabhu, this does constitute a distancing between the women, and it speaks at or for the other woman. However, most critics agree that the two main characters’ identities are eventually sufficiently blurred as to allow a reading that emphasizes women’s collectivity. In any case, in most of Djebar’s oeuvre, inclusiveness and solidarity are emphasized by means of a leveling effect of egalitarian points of view, among other techniques.

In the context of Djebar’s works, Naomi Nkealah points out that “the notion of ‘third world’ women and the politics of feminism brings together an ‘imagined community’ of women, ‘imagined’ not because it is not ‘real’ but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries”. This expression of the “‘imagined community’”
applies directly to the diverse groups of women presented here: feminism, in the sense of a concern with women’s sufferings – especially when discussed in open dialogue - creates a community of solidarity between diverse groups of women. This is especially important in a religious context, because women such as Djebbar refuse to relinquish Islam as a whole, but in order both to arrive at their own definition of Islam and to resist oppressive definitions, they are in need of this kind of “imagined community” and of the intellectual exchange it provides.

It is also in the context of fundamentalist violence that female solidarity provides women with the support they need to face this threat. After the husband of the narrator of “L’Attentat” in *Oran, langue morte* is assassinated, there is a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and support on the part of female colleagues and friends: “Un jour […], elles sont venues: […] une quinzaine de femmes de tous âges […] elles entrèrent chez moi, calmes, souriantes, certaines mélancoliques. Quelques-unes à m’embrasser, à m’entourer. […] Une vraie réunion de famille” (154). These women know that they can only face the danger posed by religious fanatics if they support each other. Their solidarity is warm, diverse and accepting, and they provide just what the victim needs in terms of emotional support, thus making the incredible suffering of the Algerian civil war bearable.

In some of these scenes, then, Djebbar can be said to undo the orientalizing gesture – a simplifying definition of the “Orient” promoted by Western males in order to dominate this “Orient” - in a double movement. No longer is it white men defining the Orient in order to set themselves apart from it and assign a higher value to themselves. Rather, here, it is women from the region formerly called the Orient welcoming European women and engaging in a process of simultaneous and reciprocal healing with them. Djebbar implies that it can only be by including other points of view, other *voices*, that a viable approach to religion can be constructed, because
this solidarity becomes most important in contexts that have to do with religion. This occurs, for example, when the Muslim-non-Muslim assembly including the Frenchwoman Anne uses humor to mock domestic abuse and polygamy (Femmes 31). In this way, through shared laughs and togetherness, women heal their religious anguish through the strength that is provided by their solidarity. In a similar, but opposite constellation, religious mores can also destroy female solidarity, for example that between mother and daughter. An obsession with the daughters’ purity can lead mothers to lock them up, rather than support their freedom of movement or decision-making (30). If religion is to be lived in a way that will be conducive to granting women more rights, according to Djebar, there must be solidarity and dialogue; otherwise, women will be the tools of their own oppression.

B. A Means to an End: The Power of Dialogue and of the Voice

Dialogue and the power of the voice, then, play a central part in how Djebar imagines a renewed vision of Islam. After opening her collection of short stories, Femmes d’Alger, with the caution that she intends not to “parler pour” Algerian women, but rather “à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre” (8), she closes the speaking “with” Algerian women that her book undertakes with the conclusion that the dialogue must be continued in the future. In typical Djebarian fashion, this should take place by going back to the past: “Je ne vois que dans les bribes de murmures anciens comment chercher à restituer la conversation entre femmes” (164). This is the same conclusion to which her characters come: “Je ne vois pour les femmes arabes qu’un seul moyen de tout débloquer: parler, parler sans cesse d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, parler dans tous les gynécées, les traditionnels et ceux des H.L.M.” (60). If women want to extricate
themselves from the problems that an unjustly interpreted religion has imposed upon them, and that Djebar points out, they will have to dialogue, to interrogate the past. They will need to return to the history of Islam, to popular traditions, to the original texts of religion, and negotiate with themselves (ijtihad) and with each other. In this way, they are in competition with Islamists, whose intention it also is to return to the “fundamentals” of Islam, but who mine the texts for their own advantage. The result is quite literally a battle of textual interpretation, in which the stakes are high, as they regard actual human lives.

By not speaking “for” but rather speaking “close to” other women, Djebar avoids the very gesture that, according to Gayatri Spivak, is being imposed on the subaltern – that of speaking for or claiming to represent the subaltern. In this way, Djebar manages not to belittle Algerian women: she gives them the right to speak for themselves, refusing to speak in their stead. By giving them a “voice” – which, in both Arabic and French, also means “vote” – Djebar gives them a power that is akin to the political power that is attached to it.

This becomes central in many instances in Djebar’s works. For example, she uses the term “Voix” as a heading for several of her chapters in Médine, to give, literally, a “voice” to the women of early Islam that are beginning to be forgotten. The “verbe,” the word or the act of speaking is not only “la plus précieuse des armes” “chez les Arabes” (Médine 44); it is a precious weapon especially in the context of religion. Not only is everything “Verbe d’abord; si le Verbe défaille, le sang coule” (101), but the “word,” capitalized here to indicate already its connection with divinity, provides legitimacy both to the Prophet Muhammad and to the transmitters of his story (among them the “rawiyates,” female transmitters of prophetic traditions, that play such a central role in Médine). The “word” has a divine aspect. The fact that she has recognized this makes the satirist poet of Médine, who opposes herself to Muhammad, so dangerous that she
must be silenced in the most gruesome of ways ("N’avait-elle pas en elle une étincelle divine? Dieu ne lui parlait-il pas à sa manière [...]?", 119). Through words, then, the speaker, male or female, attains power; more than that, he or she conquers a way of constructing a relationship with God.

It is indeed a kind of conquering in which women must engage when they want to attain control of this most precious of weapons, especially in a religious context - because in “Arab societies,” as Djebar claims, they have been kept away from it at all costs. There is a “‘cult of silence’” that is taught to young girls since their youngest age, and that is being perceived like a “seconde mutilation” by Algerian women (Femmes 158). One of its nefarious results is an “incommunicabilité quasi totale des sexes” (160). The only solution is for women to speak for themselves, but this speaking - especially about their own concerns and rights - becomes all too often a “transgression” (8). However, these multiple silencings – represented so aptly in Djebar’s analysis of Delacroix’ painting Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement (158) – must be transgressed. Otherwise, women risk being treated as “things”, because they, as well, will become part of “‘le monde muet’” and thus be “traitées en choses” (Oran 377).

The way that this “transgression” of speech can be achieved is depicted in a highly impressive way in the context of teaching - at university and in school. The matter of language use (French or Arabic) in the classroom, for example — an all-important question considering Islamist violence against French teachers — is debated hotly in a classroom in “L’Attentat” (Oran 159), and the teacher, after some initial altercations, eventually manages to create an open, inclusive discussion on the role of education. The classroom even provides a space for respectful discussion on the interpretation of religion, for example on the question of whether Islam grants men and women equal rights (198). Finally, the power of the voice is presented with its ultimate
strength when the teacher Atyka continues to speak in front of her class even after her head is cut off by her Islamist killers (211). This stark transgression of the laws of physical reality, very rare in Djebar, gives the voice of a teacher, especially one beloved and listened to by her students as Atyka was, a supernatural quality. All of this proves that the classroom is a central space in Djebar’s project of encouraging dialogue—especially when it is dialogue about the role of religion or dialogue in the face of religiously justified oppression. In the voice of the teacher, the already great power of the voice is multiplied, and it is therefore an invaluable tool in the project of rereading, reinterpreting, and exchanging opinions in an egalitarian dialogue.

The power of the word, finally, is expressed most impressively in Djebar’s own style. It is almost amusing that a description of Djebar’s writing style can be found in her works themselves. Firstly, not only is this style highly poetic, but actual pages of poetry are included in her collections of short stories (such as in “Le Rire de l’ensevelie” in *Oran* or the final pages of *Loin de Médine*). Djebar describes admiringly this kind of writing style when she depicts Aïcha evoking her own past and that of the early Muslim community: “Les phrases qui ne se durcissent pas en formules; qui restent poésie” (*Médine* 300). It is just this poetry, Djebar implies, that is at the root of Aïcha’s power, and that makes her influential as a keeper of memory. Another description of the style admired by Djebar can be found in the way of speaking of the seductive black slave from “La femme en morceaux” (*Oran*): “avec des mines, et une recherche précieuse de l’expression, des formules sophistiquées, des parenthèses en lianes…” (187). Like everything else about this slave, his way of speaking is extremely attractive, and the reader can assume that Djebar herself finds this style of language desirable. Her own, indeed, shows the same “recherché,” the same sophisticated formulas and parentheses and the statement about the slave
serves to point this out. Djebar in this way draws attention to the important place that the power of the word holds in her writing by appreciating its allure in someone else’s speech.

On a larger scale, the reader is also made to appreciate the sophistication of Djebar’s style when she plays with mises en abyme, which reach a particularly impressive level in “La Femme en morceaux” (*Oran*). The narration in “cercles concentriques” in this story, as Djebar herself calls it (201), has Atyka in 1990s Algeria teach the story of Sheherazade, who tells the story of Haroun el Rachid and the “Woman Cut Into Pieces” in Baghdad (a tale that actually opens the short story), and in this story, Djaffar the Vizier tells the tale of the two sons of the Vizier of Cairo. The skill of Djebar, beyond simply encasing story in story, lies in transgressing the boundaries between the different levels of narration – one story bleeds into and provides lessons for another. Moreover, on nearly every level of storytelling, a woman is victimized, except for the “deepest” level, Djaffar’s story – and it is in the middle of this deepest story level, while the reader and the triple audience of all the different story levels are waiting for their respective stories to continue, that the brutal interruption of the murder of Atyka intervenes (207). It makes this “cutting” of both the woman’s body and of her voice, as well as of all the story threads, all the more dramatic. But it also makes the quasi-supernatural continuation of the voice of Atyka (whose name in Arabic means “ancient”, as if to allude to the depth of time transgressed by this story) all the more striking. The voice cannot be stopped, no matter how brutally one attempts to do so. Just like Sheherazade and Djaffar in their respective stories have to tell tales to save their lives, one must speak to survive in civil-war Algeria – even in the face of, and beyond, death. Of course, the (very literarily sophisticated and intertextual) irony in Djebar’s story is that Sheherazade, on the one hand, survived by telling her stories; Atyka, on the other hand, is
executed for telling a tale from the 1001 Nights (banned by Islamists as pornographic). Although Atyka’s voice carries on, like that of a mutilated Sheherazade, the person Atyka herself is killed.

However, beyond this gruesome parallel, Djebar’s play with point of view in this short story also provides another lesson on the power of the voice, dialogue and teaching: by finally letting Atyka’s student take over the predominant point of view, Djebar shows that thanks to the teachers’ example, teaching, and the strength of their voice, students will eventually carry on the teachers’ messages. In this way, the voice and its message goes on, despite Islamists’ atrocities. There is an interesting parallel between this transmission of the voice and that of the *asnād* chain of Islamic authority. It is through an unbroken chain of transmitters that *hadith* are passed on, and this is an important source of Islamic thought and jurisprudence. Djebar, in her reformative way, creates a new chain of transmitters, in which common individuals can take part, not only religious authorities. This is an important part of her reformative, egalitarian project of portraying religion.

In the context of the power of speaking, it is also important to insist on the oral quality of many of these works. The importance of oral language is stressed by Djebar in *Femmes d’Alger*:

> “J’aurais pu écouter ces voix dans n’importe quelle langue non écrite, non enregistrée, transmise seulement par chaînes d’échos et de soupirs” (7, my italics).

It is true that besides the important presence of direct speech in Djebar’s works, the narrators’ own words also have a distinctly oral quality. Often, they create the impression of being the transcription of words addressed orally to another person – the short story “Oran, langue morte,” for example, is addressed directly to a friend of the narrator, as if the narrator were speaking to her directly. The subversive quality that oral literature can have has been pointed out, for example, by Fatema Mernissi in the first chapter of *Scheherazade Goes West* (5): oral literature has been used especially by women (who were
often illiterate) to transmit their own versions of stories, and the oral medium allowed them to introduce subversive “distortions” into their discourse that, thanks to the fleeting nature of the medium, circumvented censorship. In this way and using this tool, says Mernissi, many despots have been disempowered “[t]hroughout Muslim history” (5). By giving an oral quality to much of her oeuvre, then, Djebar inscribes her own writing in the tradition of the subversive, revolutionary nature of this oral literature that is so specific to women. It uses the word, and especially its oral powers, to reclaim religion for women.

Assia Djebar does not go as far as Hélène Cixous does when she claims the divinity of writing in *La Venue à l’écriture*. However, the impression of a quasi-divine power of writing that is present in *Venue* also echoes through Djebar’s oeuvre. In Djebar, women must claim the power of the word, be it in writing or in oral dialogue; they must do so in order to arrive at the sacred, and from there to construct their own concept and practice of religion. If Cixous asks, “‘Je suis’… : qui oserait parler comme dieu ?” (24), Djebar would probably not agree that by speaking, one moves oneself closer to God; but the commonality between Djebar’s thought and that of Cixous resides in the fact that those who speak often claim a god-like authority, and that women must not let themselves be subsumed and represented by this authority. Instead, they must speak for themselves, saying “je” for their own selves, in order to voice opinions, take responsibility for their own lives, and dialogue with other women. They thus remain on the level of the human themselves, and language becomes but a tool to control the this-worldly interpretations of religion.
C. Sensuality and the Body

In a further comparison with the works of Cixous and Amrouche, there are relatively few sensual or erotic aspects that are directly and explicitly connected with religion in Djebar. However, there are a number of them that are linked to the themes outlined above, such as female solidarity and the power of the word. For one thing, religiosity and the body are already implicitly connected in the scenes discussed above in which Djebar presents issues such as freedom of movement vs. Islamist repression, the wearing or shedding of the veil, and in hammam scenes. The ways in which women live their bodily lives are, in her books, very frequently and unavoidably connected to religious rules, which one may or may not accept.

Moreover, the body is also explicitly linked to religion in a few scenes. For example, in a short story from *Oran, langue morte* that bears the same title as the book, the narrator remembers how, when she was a young child in 1962 Oran, her parents had both been killed by the French forces. Having refused to go to their funeral, she was comforted by her aunt upon the return of the latter, while the aunt was murmuring religious phrases and invoking the name of God: “[E]lle m’a caressée longuement tout le corps; elle m’a comme pétrie: des épaules en passant par les hanches et jusqu’aux genoux. ‘Au nom de Dieu! répétait-elle, puis, Dieu le généreux! Dieu le miséricordieux!’” (17). In this (literally) touching scene, women in a moment of despair find comfort in religion - but also in physical contact. The rapport with God, then, when combined with the need to comfort another woman, can take on a bodily, sensual aspect; a physical exchange takes on a spiritual dimension.

Words in Arabic occasionally take on an erotic dimension, which is especially significant because the Arabic language, in which the Qur’an is written, is considered to contain sacred
qualities itself (as Djebar insists herself in “The Eyes of Language”). For example, Isma (“name” in Arabic, as if to draw attention to what follows), who has been killed, signs her last letter in Arabic script, and her husband, after reading it, caresses the signature as he would her body: “Les doigts d’Ali touchèrent plusieurs fois la signature d’Isma écrite en lettres arabes, puis abandonnèrent la frêle arabesque” (Oran 130). It is as if Isma’s body had turned entirely into this name written in Arabic letters, to be caressed and eventually abandoned, as her dead body in the cemetery. In another instance, it is spoken Arabic that takes on distinctly erotic characteristics. The narrator of “La Fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant” in Oran, langue morte is falling in love with a man because of the way he speaks her native Arabic. “Sa langue c’était la mienne, mais lovée, murmureée, comme se pouvant prêter à des effusions, peut-être des gaillardises, et à des caresses de mots (qui feraient languir des autres), à des effleurements d’échos, à des promesses d’aveux…” (83). In an almost Barthesian manner, words here become caresses, language becomes bodily movement and physical touch. However, unlike for Barthes, here, in a somewhat daring move, it is the Arabic language with its connections to Islam that is given these erotic properties.

There is, therefore, an indirect connection between religion and eroticism; and in a striking parallel to what we have discovered about Cixous’ works, the same man from “La Fièvre” is given the epithet of “O mon Seigneur”, as lovers or husbands are addressed in traditional songs from the Mzab region of Algeria (90). This parallel between the way that God is addressed and the way a partner is addressed finds an echo in the “conversion” (at the hands of

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21 This is particularly noteworthy as more austere schools of Islam, such as Wahhabism, oppose aesthetic appreciation of Arabic script, for example in calligraphy.

22 I am referring to Barthes’ idea from Fragments d’un discours amoureux: “[l]e langage est une peau : je frotte mon langage contre l’autre. C’est comme si j’avais des mots en guise de doigts, ou des doigts au bout de mes mots” (87).
her children) of the mother Félicie in “Le Corps de Félicie”, who is declared a Muslim by her children because they know that during her lifetime, she would have done so herself out of love for her husband if she had known that this was the only way to be buried next to him (Oran 307). Religion, in Djebar, is therefore linked not only to solidarity, and its stronger version, love, between women, but also to the sensual aspects of erotic love between men and women.

This is certainly not borne out as strongly as in Cixous, in which the connections between scripture and the love life of the couple in Fiancée is made explicit. Despite the still quite daring way of connecting Arabic to sexuality and sexuality to religion, Djebar’s techniques are much more subtle, almost as if she were writing in a constant awareness of the hypersensitized context of writing on Islam. Her writing still has a comparatively very modest character, which almost makes mentions of sexuality stand out more.

VII. Conclusion

In many ways, then, parallels can be drawn between Djebar’s works and those of Cixous and Amrouche. For all three of them, sexuality, sensuality, and the body in general are brought into connection with religious experiences and opinions. Like Cixous and Amrouche, Djebar bears a number of grievances against the interpretations of religion proposed by those representing mainstream or established religion, because they have presented religion in the shape of a set of rules that limit women’s rights and freedoms. However, of the three, Djebar, with Loin de Médine, is the author who most overtly approaches the foundational texts of her religion and presents an alternate interpretation – an interpretation that she herself terms ijtihad and thus inscribes within the learned tradition of exegesis in her religion. Moving ever farther
away from home – from the women of Algiers to Oran, and then even farther to the Arabian peninsula of Medina – her aim seems to be to follow the prophetic hadith that recommends the search for knowledge “all the way to China.” In this way, she glorifies knowledge, learning, and consequently, speaking out on one’s learning, also and especially on the part of women, and also and especially on the subject of religion.

Furthermore, if Cixous presents her readers with scattered references to historical events concerning Judaism – such as the Vichy regime in Algeria, or the Holocaust – historical events are even more primarily present in Djebar’s works, and are directly addressed, for example the decade of the 1990s or the freedom fighter’s histories. Finally, Djebar and Cixous are in agreement over the power of the voices of women in the religious arena: whereas Cixous turns this message into theory, as in “Le Rire de la Méduse” and in La Venue à l’écriture, the call to conversation as well as shining depictions of the power of the word are woven through Djebar’s oeuvre. If Djebar insists on inclusiveness as a guarantor of feminine solidarity and dialogue, inclusiveness is also a central factor in Cixous’ religious concept. These parallels and divergences will be discussed in final detail in the Conclusion chapter.

It must be borne in mind that despite all of her reinterpretation, religion for Djebar also still bears distinctly wounding traits for women. This is put into quite direct terms, for example in the aforementioned epithet “éborgnée” applied to a veiled woman (Femmes 151), or the violently gory vocabulary used to depict the beheading of the French teacher Atyka (Oran 210-213). Religion thus literally cuts “into pieces,” just as the title of the short story “La femme en morceaux” indicates (163). The previously mentioned “trauma” is thus clearly present, both in the literal meaning of wounding, and in the psychological sense: the betrayal after the Algerian War of Independence (Femmes), the paranoia inflicted by Islamists during the civil war of the
1990s (*Oran*), and the effects of androcentrically interpreted religious texts all have a traumatizing effect that needs to be worked through, as we have seen above, by way of dialogue and an effort at *ijtiḥad*. The ways in which comparisons can be made between the three authors regarding the traumatic nature of religion, overcome through writing, will be further explored in the Conclusion.
Conclusion

Women must start assuming the right to define for themselves the parameters of their own identity and stop accepting unconditionally and without question what is presented to them as the ‘correct’ religion, the ‘correct’ culture, or the ‘correct’ national identity.

(Farida Shaheed: “Networking for Change: The Role of Women’s Groups in Initiating Dialogue on Women’s Issues”)

We have thus far learned that Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar, and Taos Amrouche deal with religion in ways that are all very specific to each of them, and that, rather than rejecting it, they redefine it in ways that show similar tendencies in some ways, but differ markedly in others. How do they, then, compare in the broader lines of their portrayals of religion, and what conclusions can be drawn from these similarities and differences? What are the repercussions for the larger social and historical context? Have these women, as I asked initially, been able to imagine, through the act of writing itself, an alternative to institutional religion, one that could only be devised by means of fiction?

I. Comparison and Synthesis

If we compare the concepts of religion and religiosities that the three authors present, the first factor that becomes apparent is that among the features of this new construction, the concepts of inclusiveness and love are quite present in Cixous, Djebar, and Amrouche, although this plays out most clearly in the context of solidarity in Djebar and in Amrouche. The concept of solidarity through religiosities is barely present in Cixous, although the reader gains the impression that implicitly, this is what the author would aspire to if it were possible to attain, given her references to religious communities. Djebar, conversely, quite clearly proclaims the
need for women’s solidarity in the face of oppression; and the yearning for solidarity, especially with coreligionists, is also quite tangible in Amrouche. This expresses itself in her protagonists’ being portrayed as outsiders, and in the forming of different factions in *Jacinthe noire*.

One feature that all three authors have in common, however, is that religion is closely associated with love. This is true in the idea of loving God through His creation or even through a romantic partner, as in Amrouche, and in Cixous’ association of lovers with angels and her portraying of a love relationship as divine. Interestingly, although religiosity is also related to love in Djebar, this love is of a different nature: it mostly concerns women’s affection for each other, and the fervor that women bring to Islam, especially during the early years of the religion’s existence. It is thus not surprising that erotic elements play less of a role in her religious concept than in those of the other authors, although these elements are also present. However, they are much more visible in Cixous’ texts, in which sexual acts are infused with a sense of the divine. In Amrouche, it is sensuality rather than sexuality that is a determining factor of religiosity, but this sensuality is ever-present and an indispensable feature of this author’s approach to Christianity.

Related to the experiences of the senses there is also in these three authors clear support of a personal approach to religion. This subjective approach often takes on mystical tones, as in Amrouche, where protagonists are capable of attaining mystical states during Mass; and here, as well, a personal, self-guided understanding of religion is present in protagonists who do not require any formal, institutional help to become closer to their notion of God. This self-guidance is also a central factor in Djebar’s elaboration of her concept of *ijtihad*; and in Cixous’ case, the individual reading and interpreting of scripture seem to be self-evident. A self-guided, individual religiosity is thus a feature of the concepts of religion elaborated by all three writers.
Importantly, the connection between reading/writing and quasi-religious ecstasy found in Cixous is particularly central to her thoughts on literature and writing – this is borne out most clearly by her term “extases franco-linguistiques” in “Mon Algériance” (73). Language is causally linked to ecstasy, and God, for her, is writing (“L’Écriture est Dieu”, *Venue* 19); and by using this tool of writing, one, and a woman in particular, has the opportunity to draw nearer to divinity. In Djebar, it is not writing so much as speaking, but just as much the power of the word, that will bring women (metaphorical) salvation: she exhorts women to speak ceaselessly in front of each other, also and especially about religion, and only in this manner is it possible for them to attain liberation (especially from religiously justified oppressions). In Amrouche, writing has a slightly different function, but nonetheless one of liberation. By using forms of autobiographical writing, Amrouche is able to work through the trauma that religion, in the form of the conversion of her family, has imposed upon her. Speaking out about herself and her own relationship to religion thus also has a very powerful function; in this case, one of therapy. In this way, writing and speaking play a therapeutic, cathartic and ultimately creative role for all three authors in the context of religion.

Interestingly, these conceptions of religion show aspects of what Roland Barthes calls the writerly, the “scriptible”. In more or less explicit ways, as has been pointed out above, Amrouche, Djebar and Cixous all approach texts regarding religion with a “writerly” eye – assuming that other texts have numerous meanings, influences and connotations, and that it is the reader’s task to “write” his or her own interpretation into this never-ending play of the text. Each of the three thus becomes “non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte” (*S/Z* 10). This is of particular importance in the context of scripture with its many meanings and contradictions, and in a context where some religious groups claim to have found the one
meaning to end all meanings to the sacred text. It could indeed be argued that there are important parallels between the concept of the writerly and that of *ijtihad* – most strikingly that of exerting oneself in order to come to one’s own judgment concerning the meaning of a text. Thus, whether these authors, Djebar, Cixous, and Amrouche, describe themselves as engaging in a type of *ijtihad* (as Djebar does), or whether their approach to working with texts resembles that defined as “writerly” by Barthes, the manner in which they work with texts is an active one that inscribes their personal interpretations into texts that they know to be fluid in their meanings, and susceptible to evoking many different opinions. Naturally, when drawing this parallel, the question must be asked whether in a religious text there can be an ultimate “*signifié*” that would end the infinite play of meanings, a possibility that Barthes denies absolutely. The answer to this question would vary from one believer to another – there are, of course, those who take the text at its most literal, most limited meaning, for whom there is almost no play within the *signifié*. For readers looking for an alternate interpretation of a religious text, however, it is up to them how far they wish to allow their faith (which these three authors undoubtedly have, as we have seen) to limit the extent of play in meaning that they see in the text. The importance here lies in their recognition of the richness of possible meanings. In other words, the choice of arresting the play of the *signifiant* at a certain point is theirs.

Related to the question of how much “play” an individual reader allows in interpreting the meaning of the text is the role that imagination plays in her concept of religion and religiosity. Interestingly, despite this importance of speaking out and of the power of the word, only one of these authors makes it explicitly clear what an important role imagination plays in her works. This is the case of Hélène Cixous, who gives imagination a primordial place even when it comes to the existence of God. Conversely, this is not at all the case in Djebar, who,
Despite being highly creative in her use of language, makes sure to situate her re-writing of her religious approach within the Muslim tradition of *ijtihad*. This may well be due to the fact that the threat of hard-line fundamentalism has had a considerable influence on her life, so that her willingness to take too many liberties with her interpretation might be affected. As in Djebar, inventiveness does not play a major role in Amrouche with regard to religion; she works from within an established framework, although she rebels and protests against some of its rules. We can therefore state that Cixous is the only one of the three authors who engages in explicitly subversive work and undertakes a literary deconstruction of religious frames of thought. Similarly to the main character of her short story “Le Lac” in *Le Prénom de Dieu*, she has “éventré les piétés” and engaged in a thoroughly disrespectful dismantling of religious frameworks. However, all of this is part of her playful, subversive writing style that challenges all norms and consciously disregards any established set of rules. Cixous is thus the only one of the three who consciously engages in transgression in a religious context. One may assume that the reasons for this can be found in her upbringing, which, among the three authors, was the most secular. The influence of radical gender politics has also certainly played a role in her willingness to take religious subversiveness much further than either Djebar or Amrouche have.

The exact ways in which this radical feminism and her views on religion have interacted, however, should be further researched in the future.

Despite the fact that Amrouche and Djebar write in a way that is much more respectful of religious frames of reference, they, too, by virtue of their challenge to religious norms, engage in subtle forms of transgression. They may not do so as consciously as Cixous does, and not address their transgressive work as directly as she does. But Djebar, for example, by the mere fact that she engages in what she calls “*ijtihad*”, engages in a transgression in the eyes of more
conservative Muslims, who maintain that this activity must only be carried out by certain persons who fulfill specific rules of religiosity and learning. The fact that this is considered a transgression is illustrated by the violent reactions on the part of some to Djebar’s writings on Islam in *Loin de Médine*, as Clarisse Zimra points out. Amrouche, in *Jacinthe noire*, portrays a character that is an alter ego of herself, whose views on religion are seen as subversive, if not close to heretical. In the eyes of many, then, the ways all three of these authors have written on religion can be viewed as transgressive, depending on what their own interpretation of religion is.

It is important to note here that Djebar’s writing in her cultural context takes on an additional renegade quality due to the fact that according to more conservative interpretations of Islam, the very act of creativity is proscribed, making Djebar’s writing *per se* a “sinful” act. This makes Djebar’s writing especially subversive in itself, without needing to put any additional emphasis on imagination or creation, as Cixous does. For that matter, if one agrees with Hélène Cixous, the mere fact of women writing at all is a kind of transgression. As she claims in *La Venue à l’écriture* and especially in “Le Rire de la Méduse”, women have been kept away from writing for much of human history, and writing as a woman is thus an inherently transgressive act. This is all the more the case for women who write on religious topics. According to conservative interpretations of all of the Abrahamic religions, there is no place for women to express themselves and be heard on religious matters. Thus, the simple fact that Cixous, Djebar and Amrouche are speaking out on these subjects as women is a transgression in itself.

Finally, and despite the fact that innovation and transgression play such an important role for the works of these three authors, it also becomes clear that intertextuality has much significance for all three of them. However, intertextuality is used differently between the three
authors. Whereas Assia Djebar performs intertextual work on a particularly explicit level, inserting citations with clear source indications, and even discussing her use of these citations in her work, this intertextuality, while being at least as present, works quite differently in Hélène Cixous. Intertextual references, in her work, flow through her text and through each other; they are abundantly present, but often only in allusive form, calling to mind an association that occurred to the author and providing a playful twist on what she is saying. In sum, all of these small asides, jokes, and supposedly insignificant kinds of wordplay create an impression of an elsewhere, which provides an entirely novel experience for a reader of Cixous’ world of words. The reader must be constantly aware and work actively with her text in order to understand these references and keep up with Cixous’ train of thought. In Amrouche, in turn, intertextuality is mainly used to construct the narrator-protagonist’s personality, to explain Amrouche’s literary and cultural references, and thus to construct her person in the reader’s mind. Intertextuality thus has a much more personal, autobiographical function here. In all of these contexts, however, intertextuality is at the authors’ service to construct her approach to religion. While it is used historiographically and pedagogically by Djebar, Cixous uses intertextuality to play with concepts of religion and divinity, constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing different configurations. In Amrouche, it serves to expose the inner conflicts of her main characters, who, through their behavior and professed attitudes, bear out the author’s idea of religiosity quite clearly. These intertextual constructions, then, also have aspects of bricolage, in the sense of a seemingly random cobbling together of an alternative religiosity in the service of women’s values. For lack of an already existing system of religiosity for women, these authors use the textual materials at their disposal to assemble a new construction of how religion could function in a more equitable way.
Implied in the concept of intertextuality is the role of dialogue; as each author’s texts dialogue with other sources, and as each author engages in her interpretive work, it is also another dialogue that is encouraged: an interpersonal dialogue, a dialogue between faiths, and a dialogue between individuals who hold different opinions about the same religion. Amrouche, Cixous, and Djebar, thus focus firmly on the idea that expression and speech are of vital importance in the context of a feminist reflection on religion and religiosity, and their approaches are all marked by a particular openness and readiness for exchange. This is an important prerequisite for the above-mentioned solidarity between women and across cultures.

It is certainly true that colonialism and its aftermath have created a set of historical circumstances that made it more likely for a situation like that of the three authors in this dissertation to occur. The encounter of European and North African cultures – sometimes violent, sometimes fruitful – has made it possible for these religious combinations to come into existence, and these encounters and clashes have created situations in which religion has been lived by these three authors as an experience that was somewhat wounding and in many ways traumatic. The attraction to and simultaneous repulsion by European culture created in Amrouche’s life, the shock of Vichy France and the anti-Semitic and anti-French tensions present in Cixous, as well as the oppressions and fundamentalist violence in Djebar’s oeuvre have all made religion a factor that has been wounding, in the sense of a painful trauma, in these authors’ lives. At the same time, the influences of various feminisms – be they the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, Muslim feminism, or the influence of a strong and unyielding mother and grandmother (as in Amrouche’s case), the interactions of different political and societal ideas and actors at this specific historical juncture have also made it possible for, and even encouraged, women to think about religion themselves, on their own terms.
It is remarkable that these feminist authors chose not to reject religion, or at least chose a lived religiosity of their own. Many of their references are still clearly religious, just as they speak about themselves as Muslim, Jewish, and Christian, respectively; but they have very specific ideas about how they wish to live this religiosity, and about how they view these religions. It appears, then, that these authors, as feminists, see religiosity as a right among others to which women are entitled; and as educated, feminist women, they make it clear what aspects of the traditional, male-dominated religion are not acceptable to them. Firstly, for them, women have a moral right to religion, in the sense that systems of thought, such as feminisms, should not deprive them of a right to believe. Furthermore, the right to religious freedom anchored in many constitutions should also be understood to mean not only the right to refuse religion, but also to embrace the religion of one’s choice without constraint. This can constitute a way of expressing one’s feminism, as religion can be employed as a force for social change.

We may not take Irigaray on her word that women must have a God in their own image, then, but rather, we should use her ideas metaphorically if we conclude that these authors claim a right to religiosity for women. Rather than creating a divinity in their own image (which, it must be granted, Cixous sometimes playfully does), they all create an approach to religion, and certainly a religiosity, that is their own, in which they can believe, and most importantly, that furthers their goals, as Irigaray would demand. It is thus not simply the divinity that is changed, but the belief system for which it stands. By so doing, these authors harness the enormous forces of faith, in order to overcome their own traumas and to attain their own goals – among which, the achievement of equal rights for women and for men. Given that faith is so powerful, these feminists claim for women the right to channel it, define it, and use it just as men do.
Interestingly, by so doing, and as has been seen especially in the chapter on Djebbar, women in this way have the possibility of robbing misogynist conservatives of their argumentative ammunition. By reclaiming religion and making it their own, by self-identifying as Muslim, Jew, or Christian, these women give conservatives a much smaller chance of using religion as a weapon and of threatening women with exclusion from religious groups. Because they are claiming a religious identity, but at the same time refusing certain behavioral norms that they see as misguided interpretations, religious arguments have a limited usefulness to control their behaviors and restrain their freedom of action. The personal and the societal can in this case interact: When each individual believer is able to elaborate him- or herself the way in which he or she wishes to approach religion, he or she is only then able to influence public opinion without being pushed in directions that he or she might otherwise not accept. The personal search for an individual interpretation is thus an important precondition to engaging in a (no less necessary) larger dialogue on faith and belief in society at large.

Feminist discourse, in societies such as that of Algeria, where religious affiliation has always played an important role, stands to profit greatly from the resources of (reinterpreted) faith in order to be taken seriously by both Algerian men and women. For Islam, Abdullahi An-Na’im has explained that “[i]f the advocates of the human rights of women fail to take religious discourse seriously, their opponents will mobilize it in Islamic communities, thereby denying them the vital political and practical support of those communities” (“Dichotomy” 54). Djebbar, Cixous, and Amrouche show a certain awareness of the need to take religious discourse seriously, and of the fact that not doing so can pose a serious impediment to the furthering of women’s rights. They thus use a religious framework in order to challenge and change conditions, such that women, and feminist women, do not have to choose between women’s
rights and religion, and that they can no longer be attacked on the grounds of supposedly being subservient to a Western-dominated, anti- or non-religious feminism.

At the same time, simply because their feminism does not take the shape familiar to Westerners, this does not mean that they are any less “feminist” than, for example, a French MLF militant. Their feminism quite plainly uses different arguments, ones that, in the socio-cultural context of their origins, may well be much more effective. According to our initial definition, feminists expose patriarchal practices and encourage and work towards “a more equitable society” providing greater equality between the sexes (Karam, Women 5). As we have seen it in this study, this is the case of Cixous, Djebar, and Amrouche.

Of course, in light of the history of feminism, it may be asked why Cixous, Djebar, and Amrouche have chosen to remain relatively close to religion, at least in the altered form in which they see it, rather than choosing to reject religion and religiosity outright, as many others have. Most notably, in the French and francophone context, Simone de Beauvoir is a prominent example of a feminist who chose a path apart from religion. The answer most probably lies in the historical circumstances of Algeria, which made all three of these authors outsiders to a certain degree. In Cixous’ case, this is the result of her growing up with a highly diverse ancestry and in a time and place where she was discriminated against as a Jew. Her diverse background forced – or, she might say, enabled – her to never feel a true sense of belonging in any place, to feel herself to be constantly “en arrivance”. Even though she grew up in a family in which religion played a very small role, Judaism is one of the few cultural refuges that remain for her, which is why she does not abandon the religion, but rather recasts it in a way that is palatable for her as a feminist. She can use Judaism as an identifier (one of many, as she insists) precisely because it permits her to associate with the “offensés” and the “colonisés”, as she explains in La Jeune Née.
This Judaism therefore finally provides her with a sense of belonging and solidarity with a
variety of socially and politically subaltern groups.

Amrouche’s case is similar, though not quite the same - in her case, it is her Christian
upbringing and culture that make it impossible for her to find her place among those she
intuitively feels to be “her” people (the innumerable “nos” used in connection to Berber country
and Berber customs indicate this intuition). At the same time, her efforts to assimilate into
European or pied-noir culture are only marginally successful, which forces her to have recourse
to art – the songs of Kayblia – and to what she personally appreciates about Christianity and
Catholicism, such as its visual arts, music, poetry, sensual aspects, and a sense of community.
Assia Djebar, in turn, despite her international fame, can be seen as somewhat of a “turncoat
among her own people”, as Elizabeth Morgan put it (608), having gone to secular French school
and become a highly educated woman, having acquired Western concepts of thought and
eventually moved to France and to the United States, she has, seemingly, put much distance
between herself and popular Algerian culture. For this reason, she may have felt the need to re-
explore at least one aspect of this culture, the one that is the most polemical in present-day
discourse, and to re-associate with, at least, a certain kind of religiosity, and a certain kind of
community, all the while claiming religiosity for herself and asserting the right to define the way
in which she lives and understands religion herself.

In many ways, then, this kind of work can be read as an undoing of the othering that is
present in practices of Orientalism. Firstly, by inscribing themselves into feminist discourse,
while at the same time providing their own points of view and arguments separate from those of
mainstream Western feminisms, these authors add their forces to a movement. This is
particularly important given the prominence of women’s solidarity, in Djebar in particular, but
also in Amrouche. Thus, these authors are not the Others of the West, and not the Others of its feminist movements any more. At the same time, however, they do not let themselves be represented by a European feminist movement, because they add their very own particular type of feminism, which is the type that will function most effectively in the socio-cultural context from which they hail. They claim the right to speak for themselves, all the while inscribing themselves as an independent part of a movement of women who call for the entirety of their rights - including that to religiosity.

What is more, however, these approaches to religion also make it impossible to subsume these women into representation by religious leaders or by a male religious establishment. These authors’ speaking out on religious matters makes it impossible for others to speak for them, least of all the religious “authorities” whose views and power they reject. By so doing, they leave a marginalized, subaltern speaking position and shed light on themselves. In this way, they are no longer the “dark continent” that, in Cixous’s words, the male establishment has cast them as, implying that women’s inner lives are dark and incomprehensible. By illuminating even the darkest, i.e. the most private aspects of themselves – that of religion, and, as we have seen, often also the related realm of sexuality –, they achieve agency, an agency that allows them to define by themselves the rules according to which they choose to live, also and especially in the sphere of religiosity.

In many ways, then, reading the works of Djebar, Cixous, and Amrouche in this fashion is very much a matter of perspective – a matter of the possibility of including other points of view in our established categories, of shifting our point of view to accommodate and include

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23 Using an expression first applied to women by Freud, Cixous addresses herself to women in “Le Rire de la méduse”, saying that “parce que tu es Afrique, tu es noire. Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux” (41).
narratives from cultural contexts to which we are less accustomed. To return to the words of Gérard Genette, perspective involves the question of how restricted – or not – the point of view in a narrative is. If we understand this definition metaphorically and apply it to our reading, Djebar, Cixous, and Amrouche encourage us to widen our perspective both on what religion is, and on what constitutes feminism. Just as Djebar, for example, insists on the centrality of perspective when she stresses the importance of (historical) context in the interpretation of religious text, we must also read the texts of Djebar, Cixous, and Amrouche with a view to socio-cultural context in the case of feminism. “No, feminism is not Western”, states Margot Badran, “Feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms” (24). It is this particular context that should encourage us to widen our perspectives on different types of feminism, as they appear in Djebar, Cixous, and Amrouche’s approaches to religion.

The question might rightfully be asked, of course, whether a religiosity that stands in opposition to many of the established rules of religious tradition can still be called Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. Unfortunately, and given the immense diversity of the present-day spectrum of religious currents, it is impossible to determine with the tools of literary analysis whether Cixous’, Djebar’s, and Amrouche’s approaches sufficiently conform to established dogma to be still considered part of Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, respectively. What has been important for this dissertation is the perspective of the authors themselves: do they see themselves as speaking from within a certain Judaism, Islam, or Christianity? To what extent are their frames of reference constructed out of elements of these specific religions, and to what extent do they speak of themselves as Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, respectively? Over the centuries, all of these religions have undergone momentous changes, resulting from the interpretations of religious texts on the part of their followers, and disagreements, often violent,
have always existed. In this spirit, the interpretations of these three women authors can be seen as simply another set of more or less divergent interpretations, and the fact that they are female should not serve as a criterion to exclude them from this debate.

In a sense, then, these three authors are breaking down the time/space continuum, because at earlier points in time in the histories of Christianity and Islam, these religions were much less hardened into established systems. In some manner, then, the authors are traveling back in time in order to reclaim voices that were denied them by the males in power at those moments when religions were still being formed. The reason why these women have only been able to make their voices heard more recently is related to the fact that only now, they do not (usually) have to fear for their lives for speaking their minds (although this is only true in a relative sense, as we see from the cases of many reformist thinkers on religion whose lives are in danger).

At the same time, however, it should also be pointed out that the way these authors write about religion is in most cases quite discreet. They do not seek to proselytize with their ideas, and therefore, their style of writing on religion is never moralizing or dogmatic. This may well be due to the influence of French secularism (which affected even Taos Amrouche, as she attempted to adhere to the values of French culture), which encourages individuals to keep religion in the private rather than in the public realm. It is also significant that these three authors use fiction rather than more argumentative, expository genres. The novel and short stories are less conspicuous vehicles for values and ideas that are considered by some to be revolutionary, and thus pass relatively more easily under the radars of those whose opinions on religion are more rigid, thus limiting the potential for violent reactions.
II. Possible Future Avenues of Research

Certainly, in this dissertation I have only been able to analyze very briefly the ways religion is present in the works of Cixous, Djebbar, and Amrouche – a brevity explained by the necessity for comparison, as outlined in the introduction. However, the oeuvre of each of these authors deserves to be examined with regard to religion in much more depth than has been possible here. There is much more material that could be explored in further depth, some of which is as rich as that cited here. At the same time, the space is not sufficient here to include all of this material in the present analysis, and it will therefore have to be included in future research.

Moreover, it would also be interesting to analyze the reception of some of these works, especially, if this is possible, on the parts of groups of varying degrees of religiosity, and to study the reactions of these groups to the religious elements present in the books. The study of reception, although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, would shed a very revealing light on the present findings. In the future, it should be investigated how these ideas on religion have been received by the (in most cases, relatively elite in the majority) readers of Amrouche, Cixous, and Djebbar. Moreover, it would be informative to investigate how different genres that have been excluded here for the sake of comparison – such as theater, or movies, in the cases of Cixous and Djebbar – attain different audiences, and what kinds of echoes they evoke.

The focus of this research has been on the works of feminists who are also women. However, it might be worthwhile to extend this type of research to include male feminists, and engage in a comparative study of their views on religion and gender as present in literary texts.
Comparisons might be drawn between religion in female and male feminists’ literature from a specific region, such as Algeria or the Maghreb. Finally, the present dissertation is concerned with religion in the works of feminist authors from North Africa. It would be highly productive to study the same topic comparatively in the works of female and/or feminist authors from other francophone regions, such as, for example, the Levant or sub-Saharan Africa, and/or to regard the interplay of gender and religion across different confessions in those regions. Are there commonalities between different French-speaking regions, and how has the influence of French universalist principles of secularism played out in different cultural contexts? In other regions, how do religion and gender relate to each other in literature, and can any possible differences be imputed to different ways of viewing religion and its interactions (or lack thereof) with politics?

**III. Conclusion**

The conceptions of religion and religiosity in these works, then, go beyond a reclaiming of religiosity for women – although this is certainly an important motivator for a feminist to concern her- or himself with religion. Religiosity, according to these authors, should be one of the rights to which women should be entitled, whether they choose to take advantage of it or not. By learning about religion, by working with it in her literature and elaborating her own understanding of it, an author educates herself in a discourse that is taken very seriously by a great number of people in the present-day world, East and West; and by thus educating herself, she learns what are considered her rights under a certain discourse, and how this discourse could be influenced from a feminist angle.
In this way, and by returning to the original (re)sources of their respective religions, women can elude the accusations of betrayal that are so often leveled against feminists as subservient to Western feminist discourse, when religion is used as a marker of cultural authenticity. By defining themselves as both feminist and religious, women may counter fundamentalist and religiously conservative discourses on those discourses’ own terrain, with a knowledge of their arguments and a strength drawn from the same sources. If religious extremists usurp the right to speak in the name of religion, i.e. if they presume the right to represent it, as writers such as Khaled Abou El Fadl have shown they often do, women stand to gain the most by reclaiming a part of that right and by speaking out in their own interest on their own views on religion and religiosity.

Finally, by working with religion in their oeuvres and reflecting on basic texts and lived religiosity, these authors also work through traumas, by facing them and engaging in scriptotherapy. On both the personal and the societal level, then, women, and in particular feminists, stand to gain greatly from engaging with religion. Whether or not this squares with a Western-centric concept of feminism, it provides a tool whose utility and relevance cannot be denied.
Bibliography


