



Muslim feminist plans to open liberal mosque in Britain

Seyran Ateş, a Turkish-born lawyer and human rights campaigner, is visiting London to investigate potential sites for new venture

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A Muslim feminist who founded a liberal mosque in Berlin, triggering death threats and fatwas, is planning to open an inclusive place of worship in the UK, saying a revolution in Islam is under way.

Seyran Ateş, a Turkish-born lawyer and human rights campaigner, visited London this week to investigate potential sites for a liberal mosque open to men, women and LGBT Muslims on an equal basis, and people from all strands of Islam.

She hopes to establish such a mosque within a year, and says her aim is to create similar places of worship in every European capital.

“I’m not alone with this idea. It is a movement, it’s a revolution,” she told the Guardian. “I may be the face of the liberal mosque, but I alone am not the mosque. We have millions of supporters all over the world.”

However, the opening of the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque, in a space rented from a Lutheran

church in Berlin last month prompted a hostile reaction from conservative Muslims in Europe, Egypt and Turkey.

Ateş received death threats via social media and was told “you will die” during a street confrontation. Egypt’s Dar al-Ifta al-Masriyyah, a state-run Islamic body, declared the mosque’s principles incompatible with Islam. The legal department of Cairo’s al-Azhar University issued a fatwa against liberal mosques.

Turkey’s main Muslim authority, Diyanet, said the mosque was an experiment “aimed at nothing more than depraving and ruining religion”.

Ateş, 54, who has had police protection since 2006, was forced to step up her personal security. The itinerary of her two-day trip to London was unpublicised, and she was accompanied by close-protection officers. Asked if she feared for her life, she said: “Yes, a little bit. I could be in danger. People recognise me.”

Although the Berlin mosque was crowded on its opening day, numbers dwindled following the death threats. “It made people afraid to come,” said Ateş. But, she added, 95% of emails she had received since the opening of the Berlin mosque were supportive.

“There are more and more people wanting to break the chains. In many countries you can find people who are practising what we’re doing, but they are doing it under cover, privately,” she said.

“Liberal and secular Muslims are squeezed out by radical Islam, so they decide to be silent. It’s not so easy for liberal Muslims to be ‘out’. It’s like being homosexual. They are tarnished as the ‘enemy of Islam’.”

The Berlin mosque took eight years to establish, “but I think now things will go faster,” said Ateş. She is planning to open a second liberal mosque in Freiburg by the end of the year, and is working closely with other progressive Muslims, including Ani Zonneveld, a female imam based in Los Angeles, Shirin Khankan, a Danish woman and imam who opened a female-led mosque in Copenhagen last year, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, an Algerian-born gay imam based in Marseille, and Elham Manea, an expert in sharia law based in Zurich.

Ateş said in the UK there was a particular need for liberal Islam because sharia courts were permitted to operate. “Sharia is a war against women’s rights, nothing else,” she said. “The UK has helped Islamists to bring women under Islamic sharia law and its patriarchal structures.”

Ateş also takes a tough line on headscarves. When she opened the Berlin mosque, she said women wearing burqas or niqabs would not be admitted. She has since compromised: women must show their faces to her or other female leaders at the mosque but then will be given the option of replacing their head coverings. However, no woman wearing a niqab or burqa has as yet come to the mosque.

“There is no Islamic requirement [to cover one’s head]. There is no theological argument even in the most conservative interpretation of the Qur’an,” she said.

The hijab, niqab and burqa represented the sexualisation and subjugation of women, she added. “It’s men saying, ‘I cover her because she is my property.’”

“In Germany more and more women are veiled. You see children of four or five wearing headscarves. Women in north Africa are fighting not to wear the hijab while western women are fighting to wear it. I’m on the side of women worldwide who don’t want to be veiled.”

The Berlin, Freiburg, London and other liberal mosques will be open to Muslims from all sections of Islam, such as Sunni, Shia, Alawi and Sufi.

Ateş is also gathering support for a European citizens’ initiative on extremism, including Islamophobia and antisemitism. She needs a million signatures from at least seven EU member states to oblige the European commission to consider a request for legislation “to prevent the adverse consequences of extremism”.

“We’re confident of getting the signatures; it’s a snowball,” she said. The proposal was liberal, aimed at protecting all religions, and was pro-women’s rights, she added.

She is hoping to gather 100,000 signatures from the UK. “You are still part of Europe, you still have responsibility. Even when you have your Brexit, you will still be part of Europe.”

Ateş is supported in her efforts to found an inclusive mosque in the UK by several members of the House of Lords. David Pannick, a human rights lawyer and crossbench peer, said: “Seyran Ateş should have the support of all who believe in freedom of religion. It is sad that those who take advantage of freedom of religion for themselves are so reluctant to grant it to others.”

The Labour peer Kamlesh Patel said he also supported Ateş’s “push for inclusivity and the freedom of choice in worship”.

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