

The Academic Biography of Myriam Francois

Early Life and Acting Career

Myriam Francois was born Emilie Siobhan Geoghegan François in December 1982, in Camden, London, to an Irish mother and a French father ¹. Raised bilingual in English and French and educated at a French school in London, she entered the public eye early as a child actress. At age 12 she won critical acclaim for her portrayal of Margaret Dashwood in the Oscar-winning film *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) ². Francois went on to appear in the Australian family comedy *Paws* (1997) and the drama *New Year's Day* (2001) ². These youthful forays into film gave her a taste of public life, but her path was soon to diverge from acting toward academia and intellectual exploration.

Academic Journey and the Path to Islam

After her early brush with stardom, Francois pursued higher education with vigor. She enrolled at the University of Cambridge, where she read Social and Political Sciences, earning her B.A. in 2003 ³. It was during her time at Cambridge – a period of questioning and discovery – that she began a profound personal journey toward faith. Raised in a Christian environment (she describes herself in youth as a “skeptical Catholic – a believer in God but with a mistrust of organized religion” ⁴), Francois found her assumptions challenged by new ideas and friends at university. Intellectual curiosity led her to investigate Islam not just casually but with academic rigor. “*I embraced Islam after graduating from Cambridge,*” she later reflected. “*Prior to that I was a skeptical Catholic — a believer in God but with a mistrust of organized religion*” ⁴. What began as an effort to intellectually spar with a Muslim friend over theology turned into an earnest study of the Qur’an ⁵.

Francois approached the Qur’an first “*in anger, as part of an attempt to prove my Muslim friend wrong,*” but soon found herself reading it “*with a more open mind*” ⁵. This scholarly and spiritual inquiry proved transformative. She recalls how the very opening chapter, Al-Fatiha, “*with its address to the whole of mankind, psychologically stopped me in my tracks*”, speaking to her in a voice that transcended her previous religious doubts ⁶. The Qur’anic text engaged her on a deep intellectual level – “*As someone who’d always had a keen interest in philosophy, the Qur’an felt like the culmination of all of this philosophical cogitation. It combined Kant, Hume, Sartre and Aristotle... and answer[ed] the deep philosophical questions... ‘why are we here?’*” she explains ⁷. This was more than a theological revelation; it was an intellectual emancipation that provided “*objective moral truths*” in a relativistic world and a newfound sense of personal responsibility for her actions ⁶. The convergence of her philosophical pursuits with spiritual fulfillment marked the **intellectual** and **emotional** crux of her conversion.

By the time she completed her Cambridge degree at age 21, Myriam Francois decided to embrace Islam (adopting the first name *Myriam* as a reflection of her new Muslim identity) ¹. She formally converted in 2003 after what she describes as “*extensive research*” and soul-searching ⁸. Close friends initially assumed this was a passing phase, but she knew it was, in her words, “*much more profound*” ⁹. Importantly, Francois emphasizes that her acceptance of Islam was not a break with her Western cultural roots but an extension of her lifelong values. “*I have never seen my conversion as a ‘reaction’ against, or an opposition to my*

culture,” she notes. *“In contrast, it was a validation of what I’ve always thought was praiseworthy, while being a guidance for areas in need of improvement.”* ¹⁰ In this way, the **spiritual** dimension of her journey was intertwined with an ethical affirmation of her existing principles.

Embracing Islam: Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual Dimensions

Francois’s conversion story is often recounted in her own reflective voice, revealing the blend of intellectual rigor, emotional honesty, and spiritual yearning that defined it. The Qur’an, for her, was not just a holy scripture but *“pivotal”* in answering philosophical questions that had lingered from her studies ⁷. Discovering Islam involved deconstructing misconceptions – she “picked apart” Orientalist depictions of the Prophet Muhammad to understand his true historical persona – and finding continuity with earlier prophets she knew from Christian tradition ¹¹. Emotionally, the decision to become Muslim meant navigating relationships and identity: friends had to adjust to a “new” Myriam, and she had to find her place in a community she was not born into. She admits that at first she *“did not immediately identify with the Muslim community”*, encountering cultural practices in mosques that felt *“confusing and stressful”* to a newcomer ¹². The **emotional** challenge of reconciling her British identity with her adopted faith led her to contemplate what a balanced Muslim identity should look like in a modern Western context.

Over time, Francois became a vocal proponent of an Islam at home in Britain – one that prizes core religious values without erasing personal or cultural identity. *“There is a need for a confident, articulate British Muslim identity which can contribute to the discussions of our time,”* she argues ¹³. *“Islam is not meant to be an alien religion, we shouldn’t feel like we’ve lost all trace of ourselves. Islam is a validation of the good in us and a means to rectify the bad.”* ¹³ This conviction underscores the **spiritual balance** she strives for: a faith that elevates and enriches one’s character and society rather than isolating one from them. Indeed, Francois’s understanding of Islam emphasizes ethical living and social justice – values that would soon shape her academic and journalistic endeavors.

Notably, Myriam Francois is cautious about labels. She even rejects the words “convert” or “revert” to describe herself, calling such terms *“exclusionary”*; in her view, she is *“just Muslim”* ¹⁴. This perspective reflects her desire to normalize her faith as simply another facet of her identity, rather than a category apart. It also aligns with her later academic interest in how identities are constructed and perceived. In the late 2010s, Francois made a personal decision to stop wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf), a choice that she found yielded its own insights. Suddenly, without a visible marker of her religion, she experienced far less of the bias many Muslim women face. As a self-identified white woman, she became acutely aware of how the absence of hijab allowed her to *“pass”* in society and avoid Islamophobic scrutiny – an experience that left her feeling *“enmeshed in white privilege”* ¹⁵. This realization further deepened her understanding of the interplay between faith, appearance, and societal prejudice, reinforcing her commitment to addressing **Islamophobia** and advocating for those Muslims whose visibility makes them targets.

Scholarly Pursuits in Politics and Islamic Thought

Myriam Francois’s journey to Islam did not halt her academic ambitions; on the contrary, it infused them with purpose. Following her conversion, she extended her studies internationally. She moved to Washington D.C. to pursue a Master’s degree in Middle East Politics at Georgetown University, which she earned with distinction ³. This period of formal training in Middle Eastern studies gave her a deeper grasp of the geopolitical and cultural contexts of the Muslim world, complementing her spiritual knowledge

with scholarly analysis. Eager to engage with Islamic thought at the highest level, Francois then undertook doctoral studies. She completed her Ph.D. (D.Phil.) at the University of Oxford in 2017, focusing her research on contemporary Islamic movements in Morocco ¹⁶. This doctoral work delved into the political expressions of Islam, blending fieldwork and theory – a natural extension of her interest in how faith guides social and political behavior. By examining Moroccan Islamic movements, Francois situated herself at the nexus of **Islamic thought** and practical politics, investigating how religious ideas translate into real-world action and governance.

Her scholarly accomplishments also include time as a Research Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies (SOAS, University of London), where she engaged with academic discourse on Islam and society ¹⁷. Through these roles, Dr. Francois has contributed to academia with the same passion she brings to her media work. In essence, her academic training in politics, Middle Eastern studies, and Islamic thought provided an analytical foundation for her public commentary. It equipped her to address complex issues – from Moroccan political reforms to debates on secularism – with both intellectual rigor and personal insight. Indeed, Francois's academic background is evident whenever she speaks or writes: whether she is discussing Quranic interpretation or European policy, her arguments are often buttressed by historical context and scholarly nuance.

Journalism and Public Commentary

Parallel to her scholarly career, Myriam Francois emerged as a prominent journalist and public commentator, renowned for articulating Muslim perspectives in Western media. Soon after completing her studies, she gained experience in community media as an assistant editor and writer at *Emel* magazine (a British Muslim lifestyle publication) in 2008–2009 ¹⁸. She also worked at the Islam Channel in London, honing her skills in broadcasting and engaging with issues relevant to British Muslims ¹⁸. These early roles signaled Francois's commitment to being a **“scholarly voice”** on Islam and social issues in the public sphere, bridging the gap between academia and everyday concerns ¹⁹.

Francois's transition to mainstream media was swift. By the late 2000s, she became a familiar presence on British television debates about religion and society. From 2008 to 2011, she was a regular panelist on the BBC's Sunday morning ethics debate show *The Big Questions*, invited as a young Muslim voice alongside veteran journalists and clergy ⁸. Her articulate contributions – on topics ranging from faith in public life to moral philosophy – marked her as a thoughtful advocate for understanding Islam in pluralistic Britain. She also appeared on programs like BBC *Newsnight*, Channel 4's *4thought.tv*, and BBC *News* broadcasts, often addressing misconceptions about Islam or analyzing current events involving the Muslim world ²⁰ ²¹. In 2011, she featured in the BBC documentary *The Life of Muhammad* (presented by Rageh Omaar) as a commentator, reflecting her growing stature as an academic who could explain Islamic history and theology to broad audiences ²².

As a journalist, Francois has been both a reporter and an opinion writer. In 2014–2015 she served as a correspondent for the *Huffington Post*, breaking stories such as an exclusive on a 36-page manifesto by alleged Al-Qaeda figure Khalid Sheikh Mohammed ²¹. She also became a columnist for the *New Statesman*, one of the UK's leading current affairs magazines ²³. Her columns and op-eds have appeared widely – in *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *TIME*, *Foreign Policy*, *CNN*, *Middle East Eye*, and more – often examining the intersection of politics, religion, and rights ²³. With her combined academic and personal background, Francois carved out a role as a nuanced explainer of Muslim issues to the general public. She is frequently called upon to discuss topics like radicalization, integration, and religious freedom, where she leverages

both data and personal experience. Francois's ability to engage multiple viewpoints – to speak as a Muslim, a Westerner, and a scholar – gives her commentary a rare balance. This has made her a sought-after voice in an era when conversations around Islam in Europe can be polarized.

Documentary Filmmaking and Media Projects

Beyond print and punditry, Myriam Francois expanded into documentary filmmaking to further narrate stories that matter to her. She joined the BBC as a presenter-producer, making her documentary debut on *BBC One* with **"A Deadly Warning: Srebrenica Revisited"** (2015), which reflected on the Srebrenica genocide's legacy. That film was nominated for a Sandford St. Martin award for excellence in religious programming ²⁴, signaling Francois's strength in handling sensitive historical subjects. In 2016, she fronted **"The Muslim Pound"** on BBC, a documentary exploring the burgeoning Muslim consumer market in Britain ²⁵. This project shed light on the economic and social presence of British Muslims, countering monolithic portrayals by highlighting an emerging middle-class subculture.

In 2017, Francois presented **"The Truth About Muslim Marriage"** on Channel 4, an investigative documentary that examined the legal and personal challenges faced by Muslim women in the UK who marry in unregistered religious ceremonies. The film's candid look at relationships and women's rights within the Muslim community earned it a nomination for Best Investigative Documentary at the Asian Media Awards ²⁶. Around the same time, Francois took on a role as Europe correspondent for *TRT World* (the international Turkish news network), covering breaking news across Europe (from French elections to the refugee crisis) and producing a monthly arts and culture series called **"Compass"** (2017–2018) ²⁷. This series saw her exploring diverse stories – from post-Brexit British identity to global art – again demonstrating her range beyond religious topics alone.

After 2018, Francois continued to create documentaries with a global and justice-oriented focus. She presented a BBC World Service radio documentary on the #MeToo movement in the Muslim world (2018), tackling the sensitive issue of sexual abuse and patriarchy in religious communities ²⁸. In 2019, she produced **"City of Refuge"**, a radio documentary on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and a BBC piece examining changing attitudes in a pro-Brexit town in Wales ²⁸. More recently, in 2022, she investigated women's rights in Senegal for the BBC with **"When Rape Becomes a Crime"**, an audio documentary scrutinizing the legal system and rape legislation in that country ²⁹. All these works highlight Francois's documentarian ethos: to tell under-reported stories with empathy and depth, often focusing on marginalized voices or misunderstood communities.

A pinnacle of her filmmaking career came in 2023 with her directorial debut **"Finding Alaa"**. Released via the BBC and Canada's CBC, this short documentary (produced by her own company, MPWR Productions) follows the story of an individual named Alaa, and it struck a chord on the film festival circuit. *Finding Alaa* garnered a "Special Mention" at Doc Fest 2023 and won "Best Short" at the Independent Shorts Festival in California, even making the BAFTA long-list for Best Short Film ³⁰. In recognition of her work, Myriam Francois was named one of 14 "filmmakers to watch" by One World Media in 2021 ³¹. As the founder and CEO of MPWR Productions, she has explicitly set out to center minority voices in her projects ³², aligning her production philosophy with her broader commitment to representation and social justice.

Aside from film, Francois engages audiences through digital media. In 2019, she launched a podcast called **"We Need to Talk About Whiteness"**, which facilitates frank conversations about race, privilege, and structural racism in society ³³. This initiative, which was shortlisted by BBC Audio Labs, underscores her

willingness to tackle not just issues internal to the Muslim community but also wider societal power dynamics – in this case, interrogating how **whiteness** operates as an often-unspoken norm. Through the podcast, as through her other media projects, Francois uses storytelling and dialogue as tools for education and bridge-building, consistent with her academic tone and desire for informed discourse.

Advocacy on Identity, Islamophobia, and Feminism

Across her roles as academic, journalist, and filmmaker, Myriam Francois has maintained a clear activist thread: she strives to combat misconceptions and prejudices surrounding Muslims, and to amplify voices (especially women's voices) that are frequently drowned out. A significant portion of her commentary deals with **Islamophobia** – the prejudice and hostility faced by Muslims in Western societies. Francois has critiqued media and political narratives that contribute to this hostility. In the wake of incidents like the 2017 Finsbury Park mosque attack in London, she wrote about how *"the media has cultivated a culture of hostility"* toward Muslims and how government inaction enables such prejudice ³⁴. In a 2015 column, she sharply observed that *"state-sanctioned prejudice is at the heart of David Cameron's approach to countering extremism"* ³⁵, accusing the then-Prime Minister of conflating pious Muslims with potential radicals. By calling out **"state-sanctioned prejudice"**, Francois pinpointed how official policies can stigmatize an entire community ³⁵. Her analysis, rooted in both her political studies and personal insight, often warns that treating Muslims as a suspect population not only violates rights but also undermines social cohesion.

Identity and representation are also central to Francois's activism. As a high-profile **Muslim woman** who is also Western and white, she occupies a unique intersection of identities. She often speaks about the importance of Muslims defining their own narrative rather than letting others define them. Early on, she took part in the *"Inspired by Muhammad"* media campaign in Britain, which highlighted how Muslims in modern life draw inspiration from the Prophet's teachings ³⁶. Through such efforts, she has tried to humanize the image of British Muslims and dispel stereotypes by showing their positive contributions to society. Her own story – a former Catholic and child star who chose Islam through intellect and heart – serves as a powerful narrative challenging the simplistic notion that Western and Islamic identities are incompatible.

Francois is equally passionate about **women's rights and feminism**, particularly in an Islamic context. She is part of a generation of Muslim feminist thinkers who assert that one can be both fully feminist and authentically Muslim. To this end, she translated into English the book *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading* by Moroccan scholar Asma Lamrabet ¹⁸. This work, which won an English Pen Award, explores Qur'anic verses from a women-centered perspective and aligns with Francois's vision of an Islam that uplifts women. In her own writings, Francois has often argued against both Islamic misogyny and Western feminist imperialism. For example, she has publicly contended that mainstream feminism needs to self-critique its racial and class biases: *"This House believes that feminism has been hijacked by white middle class women,"* she famously motioned in an Oxford Union debate, advocating for more inclusive feminist narratives ³⁷. The irony that Francois herself is a white, middle-class woman was not lost on her – she uses her platform to urge empathy across racial and cultural lines, insisting that women of all backgrounds should be heard in gender debates ³⁸.

One of Francois's notable interventions in feminist discourse is her defense of a woman's right to choose *if and how* she expresses her faith through dress. In response to polemics against the Muslim veil, she wrote *"The Feminist Case for the Veil"* (published in the *New Statesman* in 2014) – a critique of author Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's call to *"refuse"* the veil ³⁹. Francois argued that condemning the hijab or niqab as inherently

oppressive strips agency from the very women feminism purports to defend. While acknowledging genuine issues of patriarchal coercion, she pointed out that a blanket ban or shaming of veiled women only “*provides the ultimate insider’s reassurance*” to Islamophobes that their biases are justified ⁴⁰. In making a feminist case for the veil, Francois highlighted that true feminism must respect choices made by women – including the choice to practice modesty as a form of empowerment or spiritual conviction. Such stances have positioned her as a nuanced voice in the polarizing European debates over secularism, *laïcité* in France, and Muslim women’s dress. Rather than taking a simplistic “pro-veil” or “anti-veil” stance, Francois consistently centers the discussion on **women’s autonomy, dignity, and context**.

Published Works and Thought Leadership

Myriam Francois’s influence extends to her published works and thought leadership, which blend academic insight with accessibility. In addition to translating feminist Islamic theology, she has authored numerous essays and chapters on contemporary Islam and society. While she has not yet released a single-author monograph, her body of work – from policy reports to magazine features – constitutes a rich, multifaceted commentary. As a Senior Fellow with the New Lines Institute (a foreign policy think tank), she even produced an in-depth policy report on the **repatriation of children of ISIS fighters**, shining light on the humanitarian and ethical challenges faced by European children stranded in Syrian camps ⁴¹ ⁴². This illustrates how Francois applies her expertise on Muslim-world issues to pressing global problems, always with an eye on justice and human rights.

Across her writings, Francois often draws on her personal journey to inform her analysis. She has penned reflective pieces about her conversion and what it means to be a Western Muslim. In one such essay, she described how the Qur’an “*spoke of previous scriptures in a way which I recognized*” yet clarified her doubts, and how embracing Islam “*made me an adult*” by impressing upon her a sense of moral responsibility ⁴³. These personal reflections serve a larger purpose: by sharing how Islam enriched her life intellectually and ethically, Francois challenges prevailing narratives that cast Islam as antithetical to modern values. Her story becomes a counter-narrative to both anti-Muslim prejudice and extremist interpretations of religion.

Furthermore, Francois’s leadership is evident in the initiatives she supports. She frequently lectures at universities and public forums, from Oxford and McGill to literary festivals and grassroots community events ⁴⁴. At these venues, she addresses topics like Muslim identity in Europe, countering extremist ideologies with knowledge, and the legacy of colonialism in shaping today’s attitudes – all delivered with the academic tone of someone bridging scholarly research and lived experience. In 2021, she was honored with a “Woman in Media” award at the Muslim Women Awards ⁴⁵, recognizing her contributions to representation and discourse. She was also named among the European “40 Under 40” young leaders in 2017 ⁴⁶, underscoring her role as an emerging thought leader shaping conversations on integration, faith, and feminism.

A Narrative of Identity and Faith

Myriam Francois’s life trajectory – from child actress to Cambridge student, from convert to Islam to Oxford Ph.D., from media commentator to documentary filmmaker – reads as a rich narrative of continual growth and redefinition. Throughout this journey, her **intellectual curiosity, spiritual depth, and commitment to justice** have remained constant guiding forces. It is an academic’s biography lived in the public square: each chapter of her life builds on the last in a logical yet story-like progression. The decision to embrace

Islam in her early twenties, for instance, was not an isolated event but a turning point that gave new impetus to her academic and professional choices. It led her to specialize in Islamic thought and Middle Eastern politics, so she could better understand the civilization she had joined. It also propelled her into public advocacy – she became, almost organically, a spokesperson for her new faith at a time of great misunderstanding.

In narrating her own story, Francois often emphasizes bridges rather than ruptures. She speaks of Islam as “a validation of the good” she already knew, coupled with guidance to improve ¹⁰. This outlook enabled her to navigate multiple identities – Irish-French and British, Muslim and European, scholar and media personality – without feeling that they were in conflict. Indeed, her biography exemplifies a **hybrid identity** that defies the clash-of-civilizations trope. Francois stands at a crossroads of cultures and uses that vantage to foster dialogue. Whether she is parsing political rhetoric for evidence of Islamophobia or interviewing Syrian refugees in a camp, she brings a humane, informed perspective that has its roots in both personal experience and scholarly training.

Maintaining an academic tone in her public engagements, Myriam Francois invites audiences to see the world with complexity. She deploys narrative storytelling – sharing anecdotes of her own transformation or of the people she’s met – to humanize abstract issues. For example, by recounting how wearing or not wearing a hijab altered her daily interactions, she illustrates larger points about racial privilege and religious bias in society ¹⁵. By describing how a verse of the Qur’an “stopped [her] in [her] tracks” during her student days ⁶, she conveys the profound impact of scripture beyond the clichés often found in media. These personal narratives are interwoven with analysis, producing a style that is both engaging and enlightening.

In sum, Dr. Myriam Francois’s biography is one of a scholar-activist who has continually sought knowledge and truth, and applied them in public life. Her **journey to Islam** – intellectually searching, emotionally courageous, and spiritually affirming – lies at the heart of her story, informing her academic research on Islamic movements, her journalism on Muslim-West relations, and her activism against prejudice. It is a journey she often reflects on, not only to recount how she found faith, but to illuminate what that faith means for society at large. As she once wrote, “Islam’s beauty really comes into its own when it becomes manifest... a tool for the betterment of society, humankind and the world” ⁴⁷. In many ways, Myriam Francois’s life work – through teaching, writing, and filmmaking – has been an attempt to make those words a reality.

Sources: The information in this biography is drawn from a range of sources, including Francois’s own writings and interviews, academic and media profiles, and her published works. Key references include her personal reflections on converting to Islam ⁴⁸ ⁷ ¹⁰ ¹³, biographical details from *New Lines Institute* and Wikipedia profiles ³ ¹⁴ ², and examples of her commentary and scholarship in outlets like the *New Statesman* and academic publications ³⁵ ¹⁸. These sources collectively paint a comprehensive picture of an individual who has become an influential voice on Islam, identity, and justice in the 21st century.

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