

Stories of Egyptian atheists in a hyper-religious society

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Although atheists are a tiny minority in Egypt, their convictions have provoked many debates, especially since the uprising of January-February 2011. Yet it is still very difficult for anyone to voice his/her rejection of religion in a society steeped in faith.



*Alber Saber at his trial for “insulting religion”, December 2012.
Via [centerforinquiry.net](#).*

N. is trying to tie her niqab to conceal her face. Her gestures are uncertain, the cloth falls over her eyes like a blindfold. She bursts out laughing. “I’ve forgotten how to do this! I haven’t worn one of these in eight years!.... I can’t breathe”, she adds. Ordinarily, N. wears nothing over her hair when she is here in her little holiday house by the sea. A few months ago, however, she started wearing a niqab borrowed from her daughter-in-law, along “with a long black dress and dark glasses, so I wouldn’t be recognized.” She covers herself now because she declared on TV that she doesn’t believe in the sacred character of the Koran. This kind of statement is blasphemous under Egyptian law and a punishable offense.

However, N. fears her family more than the police. Her sons, who are Salafists, refused to speak to her for a period of time. She notes that “the friends of my youngest son said to him ‘your mother, we’re going to wait for her outside her mother’s place and kill her!’ ” Her big hazel eyes clouded with tears, N. explains that, “I don’t want to end up like Faraj Foda.” She is referring to the Egyptian writer who was murdered in June 1992 by two members of Gamaa islamiya, an organization that had a hand in the assassination of Anouar Al-Sadate in 1981. Faraj Foda was a free spirit, advocating the emergence of a secular State in Egypt, divorced from the church. Several days before his death, the supreme Muslim institution in Egypt issued a fatwa against him. During his trial, Abu Ala El-Rabbu, one of the murders, admitted that he was illiterate. So having never read a line of Foda’s work, he was nevertheless convinced that the writer was a heathen, since he had been condemned by the religious authorities. El-Rabbu was set free in 2012 under President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government, and he justified his crime on the Saudi TV channel El Arabiya [\[1\]](#) by stating that “the punishment for apostasy is death, even if he repents.”

N. receives threats of this kind almost every day, particularly via the Internet. She is careful about what she publishes on social networks, and she conceals most of the information that might reveal her identity by leaking her address or those of her friends. Behind the embarrassed giggles that punctuate her words, behind the smile of this woman in her fifties, there is a catch in her voice

whenever something jars her memories. "After that show, everybody stopped speaking to me except my mother and father. My so-called liberal friends disappeared, I was alone." This is a solitude that still weighs heavily on her today.

"I THOUGHT I'D GONE CRAZY"

N. grew up in a conservative middle class family; she had a happy childhood buoyed by religion. "My mother says all the required prayers but also some extra prayers every single day." N. began wearing the veil at 14 and the niqab at 22. Having finished her medical studies, she married a very religious man and stopped working.

"My whole day was governed by religion, the prayers, the obligations... I had no control over my life," she remembers, sitting on her little sunbathed porch. "One day, my husband hit me. I went and complained to my father. He told me to forget about it, and that God gave my husband the right to hit his wife. I read the Koran every day but I'd never noticed that passage. I started reading it differently and I began to have doubts." The pious woman she had been lost her footing. "The Koran is full of mistakes, approximations, contradictions that go against scientific discoveries, logic, human rights."

At first she said nothing. "For a long time, I thought I'd gone crazy because I'd lost the faith." After nearly five years of doubts and questioning, she could no longer bear living a lie. She confided in her husband, hoping to make him believe, as she did, that the Koran was a human creation. He filed for divorce. She took off her veil. "It was very hard. I had to find a place to live, a way to earn my keep, to begin again from scratch."

Like many women in Egypt, N. had never lived alone. She'd gone from her parents' home to her husband's. Today, in order not to lose her sons she avoids arguments. When she sees them at her mother's house on Fridays "we never talk politics or religion!" Yet N. doesn't like to be called an atheist. "God just isn't my problem, I don't deny God's existence. But what I am sure about is that all the holy scriptures, like the Bible or the Koran, were written by men. We have to stop obeying them as if they revealed the Word of God," she insists. These are opinions that are unacceptable in contemporary Egyptian society.

A CAMPAIGN ORCHESTRATED BY THE GOVERNMENT

In 2009 the Gallup Institute polled the citizens of 114 countries on the importance of religion in their daily lives [2]. Egypt ranked near the top, on par with Afghanistan and higher than Saudi Arabia. Religion defines the social and legal status of every Egyptian. Religious affiliation is printed on an ID card, and citizens have very little choice: they are born Muslim (95% of the population), Christian, or Jewish, and can rarely change their faith. Despite this there are thought to be two million *Moulhids* (atheists) in Egypt. In 2014, Dar Al-Ifta, the government institution that issues religious edicts, put their number at exactly 866 – i.e. 0.001% of a population of 87 million souls!

Despite these numbers a campaign was launched against atheists. "They may be few in number, but they are a problem," says Ahmed Turki, who is in charge of this campaign for the Ministry of Religious Endowments. "Atheism is a factor of division in families and society," says Turki. The propagation of atheism among the young, according to him, is the fault of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were thrown out of power by the army in 2013. "They used religion for political purposes. And when young people saw that, they turned away from religion. Our goal is to limit this tide of rejection." The campaign was launched just after the coup, and many suspect the government of trying to redeem its religious image at little cost by drawing a veil over the army's authoritarian coup. When asked about the concrete actions carried out thus far, this government official remains

evasive: “We did a survey to find out what youngsters feel they need. The second phase will be launched this year, going into secondary schools and universities to explain what religion means. No politics, just preaching.” For this campaign the government called upon Al-Azhar and the Coptic church.

The 2011 revolution ousted Hosni Mubarak but not the Egyptian power structure, with its religious underpinnings. Thus, article 2 of the new Constitution stipulates: “the principle source of law is the sharia”—the very words first inscribed in the constitution by president Anwar Al-Sadat in 1980 [3]. However, the Arab spring and the aspirations that fueled it left a mark in Egypt. Debates about atheism have spread and discussion groups have formed on the social networks and in civil society. Secular advocates campaign for the official recognition of freedom of conscience, and for more options than just the three religions of the Book.

“A TATTOOED CROSS I CAN’T GET RID OF”

Yet according to Alber Saber, a militant atheist in his thirties exiled to Switzerland, there is more repression now than before. “Under Mubarak, I can only remember one instance, Kareem Amer,”—a 22-year old blogger sentenced to three years in prison for “insulting religion”—“but since marshal Sisi has taken power it’s getting worse and worse,” he sighs. And Alber counts fifteen instances of human rights violation against atheists in Egypt in 2014 alone. Alber was sentenced to 3 years in prison for blasphemy in December 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power. He had a blog in which he criticized religion. In September 2012, he posted a video, supposedly a trailer for an anti-Islam film called The Innocence of Muslims. The clip was leaked a few hours earlier and touched off violent protests in the Muslim world, causing the death of an American ambassador in Libya among other things. The American embassy in Cairo was also attacked. The next day an angry crowd gathered in front of Alber’s home [4]. He was taken into protective custody, but at the police station he was beaten and indicted for blasphemy. “They took my computer, my cell phone, they went through everything and found anti-religious articles I’d posted on the Internet,” Alber remembers. A few days before his appeal hearing he managed to flee to Switzerland where he is now a political refugee.

Alber comes from a Christian family and began thinking about the meaning of his religious affiliation during his first university class in philosophy. “I began reading newspapers, exposing myself to new ideas. I realized I was a Christian because my parents were Christians. But if my parents had been Muslims, I’d have been a Muslim. I was a Christian by default. So I decided I was going to choose what to believe all by myself,” he explains in his apartment in Neuchâtel. Alber began studying the sacred texts, the Koran, the Bible and the Torah. He was searching for a rational, scientific response to his growing doubts, but he found nothing of the sort. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing as atheism. But after four years, I realized that religion was just make-believe.” When Alber waves his hands to emphasize a point one can make out a cross tattooed on the inner face of one wrist, a sign worn by many Egyptian Copts. “I can’t get rid of it,” he says with a shrug. “It means nothing to me any more.”

In spite of the dangers some refuse to keep silent. TV hosts, increasingly fond of this kind of debate, regularly invite atheists to confront religious figures. The approach is often grotesque and imbalanced. Ahmed Harqan took part in several of those shows. He recently walked out of one while the woman who hosted the show screamed insults after him, such as “we don’t want any heretics here” [5].

He carries on the struggle with his own program on a web channel called FreemindTV [6]. “If our region is in so much trouble, it’s the fault of religion,” he explains. “Our channel’s goal is to bring a new viewpoint to the media scene in the Middle-East. The media always adapt their line to what the

majority think. There are channels that are simply mouthpieces for the power structure, they use religion to keep the people under control; the others are commercial, so they follow the opinions of the majority. We are trying to do something else.”

Ahmed is the son of a radical Islamist. “I used to be a Salafist too,” he admits, outlining an imaginary beard and knitting his eyebrows over two mischievous eyes. “It took a long time to change, even now I have the feeling I haven’t finished. Religion had such an influence on my life that I will never be able to get away from it completely,” he says. His wife, for her part, says she’s relieved. “I always had doubts, I was full of guilt. Now I feel I can say and do what I like, and not be afraid of being judged by some imaginary power watching me from above, not being afraid I’ll end up in Hell.” Her Muslim family won’t speak to her since she stopped wearing her veil, and because she doesn’t believe in God any more.

“THE POLICE ARE THE GUARANTORS OF MORAL PROSPERITY”

Both she and her husband have paid a heavy price for their commitment to atheism. In October 2014, Ahmed took part in a talk show on a private channel, Al-Quera wa elnas. The young man explained that in his eyes, ISIS is merely imitating what Mohammed and his companions were doing at the time of the conquest of Islam. A week after the show aired, Ahmed and his wife were beaten up on a street in Alexandria. They ran for protection to the nearest police station but they weren’t safe there either. The young woman refused to tell a policeman her religion and he started beating her. She was pregnant and lost the baby a few days later.

“That kind of thing enables the police to claim they’re acting in the interests of everyone. People condemn atheism, so when they see the police behaving severely with unbelievers they say, ‘Ah yes, the police are the guarantors of moral prosperity’,” Fatma Serrag observes bitterly. She is a lawyer who specializes in free speech cases. She has thirty activists in her association, which is still not enough to investigate all the instances of persecuted atheists. Often these victims have been informed on by their families or relatives. The heaviest sentence given to atheists is three years in prison, though article 98 of the Egyptian penal code authorizes up to five years for “insulting religion.” This “blasphemy law” is used not only against atheists, Fatma tells me, but also against Shiite or Baha’is Muslims, two religious minorities the Egyptian State does not recognize [7].

Sometimes the accusation of atheism is a pretext for personal vengeance, and at other times it is used for governmental repression of opponents to the military regime. Thus it was that in December 2014 the police raided and closed down a cafe in the center of Cairo. Presented as a “haunt of atheists,” the place was in fact patronized by members of the April 6 Youth Movement, which played an active role in the revolution of 2011, and was consequently viewed as a threat by the present government. If defendants are presented as atheists rather than political opponents public opinion is less likely to support them.

With a burst of laughter, N. dives into the water. “I used to be afraid of drowning with my niqab, it was hard to swim,” she exclaims. When asked whether she has any regrets about getting involved in such a violent struggle she shakes her head. “Living with two personalities was just too hard, you can’t be happy like that!” Yet how many are there who must hide their convictions because it would be dangerous to reveal them in this conservative Egyptian society?

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P.S.

* ORIENT XXI. 17 MARCH 2016:

<http://orientxxi.info/magazine/stories-of-egyptian-atheists-in-a-hyper-religious-society,1254>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1tBMQG-Ovs>

[2] <http://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>

[3] In 1971, Sadate's original formulation had been that the sharia was "one of the sources of Egyptian legislation" before he raised the ante with the constitutional reform of 1981.

[4] <http://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>

[5] Sabah el asima, November 2015.:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHUQf5FrwZo>

[6] <http://free-mind.tv/alais-kazalik.html>

[7] Hossam Bahgat, *Criminalizing Incitement to Religious Hatred Egypt Case Study*, OHCRH, S. D.