

A Quiet Tsunami

Nonreligion and Atheism in the Muslim World

Jack David Eller | ORCID: 0000-0002-5347-2955
Global Center for Religion Research, Denver, CO, USA
david.eller.anthropology@gmail.com

Abstract

Both scholars and the general public have tended to assume that Islam is immune to modernization and secularization and that Muslims are all fanatical religionists. However, the growing and increasingly active number of nonbelievers in Muslim-majority countries has been called a tsunami by religious authorities. This article surveys the current research on nonreligion and atheism in Islam-dominated countries, with special attention to Egypt. After examining the statistical information on nonbelief, including in unlikely places such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, the article considers the terminology of nonbelief in Arabic, which is not equivalent to English terminology and illustrates the local nature of nonreligion, constructed in relation to local concepts of religion. The article then discusses the social and legal perils of nonbelievers in societies still committed to religious belief and finally investigates the lives and activities of nonbelievers and atheists, individually, in groups, and online. The article concludes with some reflections on modernization and secularization, noting the forces that have made nonbelief more possible and prevalent in Muslim-majority contexts but also led to multiple specific secularities and atheisms.

Keywords

atheism – ilhad – Islam – nonbelief – secularization

1 Introduction

On the streets of Seyyun in Yemen, a young man crossed the path of two young *sharifs* or descendants of Muhammad, recognizable by their honorific garb and

their proper beards. The man bowed to kiss the hands of the heirs of the venerable prophetic line; however, later he confided that, “We kiss their hands now, but just wait till tomorrow,” divulging his Nasserist, anti-conservative, and anti-religious leanings. As for the *sharifs*, once they were in private they tossed off their turbans, turned on recordings of Western popular music, quaffed whiskey, and complained of their country’s “stifling boredom, the ignorance of local people, the cost of alcohol, and how wonderful life had been” outside Yemen (Gilsenen 1982, 10).

This scene was described four decades ago, relating an event from two decades prior. Yet the passing of sixty years has not made it any likelier for Westerners to imagine citizens of Muslim-majority countries as other than atavistic religious fanatics and terrorists. We might expect no better from partisans and politicians, but informed scholars are not as easily forgiven, like Ernest Gellner who wrote several years after Gilsenen’s account that “no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam” and that indeed “Islam is secularization-resistant” (Gellner 1991, 2). Yet, apparently unbeknownst to the public and scholars alike, Islam has a long history of questioning religious beliefs, forming secular and socialist (although perhaps not liberal-democratic) governments, and producing agnostics and atheists who shed religion completely. The last statement will astound many Western observers, who according to Ahmed Benchemsi are “culpable” for their “inability to even conceive of an Arab atheist” (Benchemsi 2015).

Admittedly there are many obstacles to conceiving and perceiving Arab and other (ex-)Muslim atheists. Not the least is language: most of the activity of nonreligious former Muslims occurs in Arabic, which few Westerners can read. Much of it also occurs under the radar, in closed groups and secluded internet sites, due to the stigma and literal criminalization of disbelief under many Muslim regimes. And of course it is drowned out by high-profile Islamists like al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and more. Finally, it is worth noting that atheists and secular activists are not particularly accepted or understood even in liberal Western societies.

Nevertheless, according to Khaled Diab of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, there is a virtual “tsunami of atheism” in the Muslim world and has been for quite some time, accelerated by the events of the 2010 “Arab spring” but already underway well before. Diab reports that there is “a vibrant atheistic underground” in the most unlikely site of the Wahhabi kingdom of Saudi Arabia, quoting one denizen of the hidden atheist community as saying, “We non-believers have meetings and groups in a lot of Saudi cities. If you go into them, then you will be shocked by the numbers and elements of society represented” (Diab 2020, 18).

This essay is a study of the presence and challenges of nonbelief in Muslim-dominated societies. It cannot hope, in a small space, to exhaust the subject or cover every corner of the Muslim world, focusing instead on Arab countries and predominantly on Egypt. There are several other things that the essay will not attempt to do. It will not discuss the centuries of philosophical and scientific disputation on the existence of the Muslim god or the divinity of the Qur'an; there is an abundant literature on that topic. It will also not examine the wider matter of secularism and liberalism, either the empirical fact of secular/socialist regimes like Nasser's Egypt or Hussein's Iraq or the deeper question of the compatibility of Islam with liberalism and democracy. On the latter, there is a robust, although again comparatively low-profile, debate within Islam. And it will certainly not argue for or against the existence of the Muslim (or any other) god; it is not a *defense* of Muslim atheism.

What the essay will achieve is, first, a survey of the available statistical information on nonbelief in Muslim and Arab countries (remembering, naturally, that not all Muslims are Arabs nor are all Arabs Muslims). It will also ponder the complex Arabic terminology of nonbelief, which is not identical to the Anglophone discourse of atheism but is every bit as complicated and varied. Finally, it will investigate the presence and activities of nonbelievers in their Muslim-majority contexts, including the reasons for their rejection of and departure from the religion and the social and legal opposition they face. Before proceeding, we acknowledge that the phrase "Muslim atheist" may seem awkward if not oxymoronic; however, it is meaningful in two senses. First, it serves as shorthand for "an atheist who has forsaken the Muslim god and religion." Second, it emphasizes that atheism or irreligion is always and necessarily shaped by the god and religion against which it is arguing and from which it is escaping. The experiences, issues, and concepts of "Muslim atheists" are not entirely the same as those of "Christian atheists" (as valid a term as the former), "Hindu atheists," and so forth. Shoaib Ahmed Malik, for instance, insists that atheists who aim to overthrow Islam must engage with the Arabic language and with the alleged "miraculousness" of the Qur'an—specifically, "prove that the Qur'an is not a literary miracle" (Malik 2018, 36).

2 Atheism in Islam by Number and Name

Precisely how common is nonbelief among the Muslim population? Such facts are always difficult to discern, including in the United States and the West but more so given the scorn poured on nonbelievers in Muslim culture. Additionally, there is interest on both sides in exaggerating the numbers, up by pro-

atheism partisans and down by their enemies. For example, the pro-Islamic and anti-atheist institution known as Dar Al Ifta recently published the improbable claim that exactly 866 atheists inhabited Egypt, with another 325 in Morocco, 242 in Iraq, and no more than 34 and 32 in Libya and Yemen, respectively, for a grand total of 2,293 in the entire Middle East and North Africa (Benchemsi 2015).

The World Values Survey cited by Samuli Schielke suggested that nonreligiosity was considerably more common (Turkey 16.9 percent, Indonesia 15.2 percent, Iran 16.2 percent, Morocco 8.2 percent, Egypt 7.5 percent), although atheism was still diminishingly uncommon (0.5 percent, 0.3 percent, 0.1 percent, and “nil,” respectively) (Schielke 2013, 647). These extremely low figures are contradicted, however—especially the zero atheists in Egypt—by the testimony of an Egyptian atheist and quoted by Benchemsi (2015): “My guess is, every Egyptian family contains an atheist, or at least someone with critical ideas about Islam.” Again, the 2012 Gallup poll calculated that, in the very heartland of Islam, Saudi Arabia, up to one-fifth were not religious and five percent were “convinced atheists” (Diab 2021). Meanwhile, the German news agency Deutsche Welle posits, based on multiple surveys, that “almost half the population is loosening their ties to Islam”: for instance, in Lebanon, “Personal piety has declined some 43 percent over the past decade, indicating less than a quarter of the population now define themselves as religious” (Holleis 2021)—despite the fact that every Lebanese citizen is officially registered in one of eighteen religious categories, of which “nonreligious” is not an option.

For these reasons, a more sensible and reliable source is the Arab Barometer (www.arabbarometer.org) which conducts annual polling in eleven Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries. In 2019 the survey found that respondents who identified as “not religious” equaled thirteen percent, up from eight percent the year before. Predictably, such irreligion was more common among young people: fully eighteen percent of people under the age of thirty called themselves nonreligious. The percentage of nonreligious youths ranged widely by country, from nearly half in Tunisia to a quarter in Algeria (González 2020). (Consequently, the survey also discovered dwindling support for Islamist parties—as low as twenty percent—and for religious leaders, demonstrating that Muslims are *not* all fanatics and terrorists.)

Looking at specific countries, the 2019 Arab Barometer survey indicated that Tunisia, typically the most secular of MENA states, accommodated the largest proportion of nonreligious, roughly one-third. More than twenty-five percent of Libyans and approximately fifteen percent of Algerians and Lebanese were nonreligious, as well as about ten percent of Egyptians and Sudanese. Yemenis were the only nationality with fewer nonreligious in 2019 (five percent) than

in 2013 (twelve percent). Saudi Arabia was not included in the poll (BBC News 2019). The survey also documented sharp declines in mosque attendance, with drops by twenty percentage points, plus or minus, in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia (in the last case, to a mere thirty percent).

Other studies confirm these results. A 2012 WIN/Gallup International survey concluded that nineteen percent of Saudis regarded themselves as nonreligious—with a full five percent avowing atheism, compared to the twenty-three percent of religiously unaffiliated and three percent of avowed atheists in the United States, according to the 2020 PRRI Census of American Religion. Especially fascinating is the situation in Iran, that bastion of Islamic revolutionary extremism. A 2020 survey by The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) came to the following conclusions:

- “Approximately half of the population reported losing their religion.”
- More than twenty-two percent expressed their religious affiliation as “none,” while 5.8 percent were agnostic, 2.7 percent humanist, and an impressive 8.8 percent atheist.
- Even among the devout, credulity in specific religious dogmas is in retreat: only thirty-seven percent asserted belief in an afterlife, thirty percent in heaven, and twenty-six percent in the future coming of a savior.
- More than two-thirds (sixty-eight percent) preferred to keep religion out of state legislation, more than half (fifty-six percent) did not want religious education in schools, and nearly three-quarters (seventy-two percent) opposed the compulsory hijab for women (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020, 1–4).

Reflecting on all these data from around the region, Benchemsi (2015) offered this synopsis:

Considering the extent to which the Arab social and political environment impedes the expression of non-belief, the numbers of doubters and atheists would likely be significantly higher if people felt freer to speak their minds. In January, Egyptian atheist activist Ahmed Harqan told *Ahram Online*, “If the state preserved and protected the rights of minorities, the numbers of those who reveal they’re atheists would increase tenfold.”

One explanation for the discrepancy between statistics and the sensed presence of nonbelievers and atheists in MENA is certainly the hesitation of such individuals to stand up and be counted; another is the motivated reasoning and (under)counting of nonbelievers in an intensely anti-atheist milieu—both of which are also true in many Western nations. A third, though, is the

inconsistency of terms and categories between Christianity-dominated and Islam-dominated societies; we cannot unproblematically assume that the same words and concepts apply in both settings. Wilfred Cantwell Smith made this point in 1979 in his renowned book *Faith and Belief*. Put bluntly, traditional Islam and the Qur'an have "no word for 'belief' in the modern sense" (Smith 1979, 34), so the idea of "nonbelief" does not quite make sense in the Muslim context. Accordingly, Smith contended that it never crossed Muhammad's mind that someone would not "believe" the revelation on which his new *din* or religion was based.

The key to the difference between Christian and Muslim notions of religion relates to this word *din*, which is not quite equivalent to the English word "religion." The Arabic word conveys several distinct but intersecting meanings. Abul A'la Al-Mawdudi (2022) saw these meanings as sovereignty/power/rulership, submission/obedience/service, and judgment/accountability, all amounting to "that way of life in which we recognize Allah alone as the possessor of all power and majesty and surrender ourselves to Him." A Western source, reading the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* or traditions, extracts four meanings—"mutual obligation, submission or acknowledgement, judicial authority, and natural inclination or tendency" (Encyclopedia.com). Derived from the same Arabic root are *dana*, to be indebted, and *dain*, to be obliged to follow laws, customs, and ordinances of debt.

Hence, Islam as a *din* is not so much a proposition that you "believe" as an obligation that you accept. Refusal to accept Islam is *kufir*, and one who refuses is a *kafir*, usually translated as "infidel" but more accurately meaning "spurner" or "rejecter"; again, classical Islam could not conceive that anyone would find the message *untrue* but rather they might snub the obligation out of stubbornness, selfishness, arrogance, or confusion. Smith likened the *kafir* to "the cantankerous ingrate who rejects" authority and duty and goes against natural human inclinations (Smith 1979, 42). The other classical form of nonbelief was and is *shirk*, usually translated as "idolatry" but again better understood as "association" or false equivalence: the *mushrik* or "idolator" is usually a polytheist who erroneously equates some other being(s) to the one true god, Allah. Finally, Smith argued that the Qur'anic term commonly translated as "believe" in the modern Western sense is *zanna*, which signifies not merely holding an opinion or endorsing a proposition but more specifically "having an opinion about God and His doings ... that is woefully and manifestly awry" (45). That is, *zanna* is not just "belief" but fanciful, false, and perverse belief.

In this discursive regime, Western-style nonbelief is an exoteric concept, and atheism is almost incomprehensible. Let us then consider the available contemporary Arabic terms in the realm of secularism and nonbelief. "Secularism"

is rendered in Arabic as *‘ilmanīyah* (from the word *‘ilm* for knowledge) or as *‘alamaniyah* (from *‘alam* for world), the former implying less “secular” than “scientific” and the latter perhaps closer to the English “worldly” but arguably without the political connotations; further, both of these terms are as polysemous and contentious as their English alternatives (Hurd 2003). Whether in Arabic or English, secularism does not automatically entail non-religion or anti-religion, which is still understood in Arabic primarily in terms of *kufṛ* or “the personal denial or rejection of any of the six fundamental beliefs—that is, belief in God and His oneness, in God’s angels, in the divine revelations, in God’s prophets, in the Day of Judgement, and in preordainment” (Malik 2018, 7). Related to *kufṛ* is the term *takfir* or denunciation of someone as a nonbeliever (sometimes interpreted as “excommunication,” a far too Catholic concept).

For those who simply want to extricate themselves from religion, without necessarily declaring its falsity, a popular neologism is *la dini* or *la deeni* (*la* is Arabic for “no”), literally “no religion,” but Mina Nader warns us—just as surely for the English words “non-religious,” “unaffiliated,” or “none”—this is not a synonym for atheism. Instead, as one organizer of a La Deeni event in Egypt described, “La Deeni is a term that unites many who do not believe in any [organized] religion, for example, the atheist, the agnostic, and the deist, who believes that there is a first cause for this universe without believing in any religion, in addition to other categories” (Nader 2022). By one estimate there are four million *la dini* in Egypt alone today.

Speaking of the agnostic, Sebastian Elsässer (2021, 3) mentions other names that ex-Muslims use to refer to themselves, such as *la-adri* for “agnostic” (literally “I don’t know” in Arabic), *la-ikritātī* for “indifferent,” and *rubūbī* for “deist.” At the extreme, at last, is “atheism,” to which, according to Kenan Sevinç, Thomas Coleman, and Ralph Hood (2018), no indigenous Arabic word corresponds. Unfortunately, the Arabic word *ilhād* is used for atheism by both atheists and theists (*mulhid* for atheist)—unfortunate because of its decidedly pejorative ring, deriving from the root for deviation, rejection, and rebellion. Schielke notes that atheists have appropriated the term, which interestingly does not contain any direct reference to god(s) unlike English “atheism” (no-god-belief); still, in contrast to other Arabic terms, it “is primarily a theological and moral position,” and “while it is today usually used by Arabic speakers in the sense of atheism, it can go along with a variety of ontologies: atheist, agnostic, deist, dualist, or pantheist” (Schielke 2013, 638). In some other languages, “atheism” has been adopted as a loan word, as in Turkish (*ateizm*) and Bahasa Indonesia (*ateisme*). Another relevant term is *riddah*, commonly translated as apostasy (both denoting defection or turning away); it covers not only atheism but blasphemy or heresy and conversion to another religion and so

is not synonymous with atheism. All of this thinking transpires in the framework that belief in—or better yet, recognition of—Allah is natural and innate; as Ikram Hawramami (2019) expresses it, “Humans start out as theists then the knowledge is embedded within their souls while being absent from their brain’s memory,” making atheism (or affiliation with any other religion) not just wrong but unnatural.

The upshot of this analysis is two-fold. First, we cannot assume that English or Western concepts like atheism, non-religion, or nonbelief have the same meaning in an Arabic context. Second, we must be cautious about interpreting statistical data on atheism, non-religion, and nonbelief in an Arabic context, since we do not always know which particular terms were featured in a survey.

3 The Burden on Nonbelief in MENA

Earlier we quoted Egyptian atheist Ahmed Harqan who opined that only the lack of state protections—or worse, the fact of state persecution—prevents the ranks of Arab atheists from revealing their true numbers. This naturally raises the question of what pressures and penalties nonbelievers and the non-religious face in Islam-dominated countries. Schielke is frank that, “In most Muslim-majority societies, today, atheism and nonreligion are strongly scandalized, and often also criminalized” (2013, 647). In several places, including Lebanon and Egypt, every individual is officially assigned to a religion; Khaled Diab (2021) relates that his Egyptian birth certificate identifies him as a Muslim, as if Muslim identity is established at birth (which, honestly, in Islamic thinking it often is). In another essay (Diab 2020, 18), he adds that despite the fact that Egypt’s Constitution (Article 64) insists that “freedom of belief in absolute,”

Egypt also sees itself as a pious country of devout believers where perceived insults to the faith cause public outrage. What this means is that although Egypt does not outlaw atheism, its penal code does effectively make blasphemy a punishable offence. For example, Article 98(f), which was originally passed in 1981 to protect religious minorities, has in recent years been weaponized by Islamists and the state to target Christians, secular critics and atheists.

Article 98 (Article of Blasphemy) of the Egyptian Penal Code prescribes prison sentences of up to five years for disrespect to religion and has been deployed against known atheists (Ibrahim 2021), and indeed Karim Al Banna, an Egyptian student who dared to identify as an atheist on Facebook, was sentenced

to three years in jail for “insulting Islam” (Benchemsi 2015). Not satisfied with these tools to combat nonbelief, a Bill of Atheism Criminalization was proposed in the Egyptian Parliament but thankfully never enacted. In justifying the proposal, Amr Hamroush, Secretary of the Commission of Religious Affairs in the Egyptian Parliament, denounced atheism as “contempt for religion” and atheists as people with “no doctrine [who] try to insult the Abrahamic religions” (Diab 2020, 18).

Elsewhere, things are no better or considerably worse. Brian Whitaker (2015) informs us that six Arab states—Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait (the last of which the United States fought a war to liberate)—punish non-religion or apostasy with death, although no executions have been carried out recently. Even so, Saudi Arabia deems atheism as terrorism and castigates it strongly: Raif Badawi, who founded the blog Free Saudi Liberals, received a prison term of ten years, along with one thousand lashes (Benchemsi 2015). At the western end of North Africa, Morocco’s Constitution ambiguously enshrines both Islam and freedom of belief, while the criminal code outlaws profession of any religion other than Islam. Most troublingly, Article 220 of the Penal Code sets fines and prison terms for both compelling and preventing religious worship as well as for attempting “to destabilize a Muslim’s belief or convert him to another religion,” thus making it illegal to criticize, joke about, or argue against Islam so as not to “shake the faith” of a believer (El Kaidi 2020).

But laws and threats of prison are only part of the campaign against apostasy and unbelief. Schielke (2013, 647) stresses that

non-believers and atheists have to fear social rejection more than state persecution. In Egypt, being openly not religious at all, or even worse not believing in God, can lead to loss of job, divorce or impossibility to marry, exclusion from the family, and in at least one case it has led to assassination [as happened to well-known activist and author Farag Foda or Faraj Fouda in 1992].

Nonbelievers are regularly attacked verbally (as they are in Christian and other theistic milieux) as immoral, deviant, and mentally ill if not actually satanic. One Saudi journalist pronounced that a Muslim atheist “is usually a parasite” who “will probably eventually commit suicide An Arab atheist is usually a drunk, certainly a degenerate and has definitely nothing to offer” (Diab 2020, 20). Nonbelievers and atheists are often invited onto television and internet talk shows, where they are derided, like Mohamed Nofal, who was subjected to “a long insulting lecture” by the host “before kicking him out of the studio and

advising him to go straight to a psychiatric hospital” (Diab 2020, 20). In Egypt, university students who espouse nonbelief have actually been committed to psychotherapy (Ibrahim 2021).

So dire is the threat from the alleged 886 Egyptian atheists that the government and both Islamic and Christian authorities have joined forces in a literal campaign “to fight atheism.” The prestigious Egyptian university known as Al-Azhar contributed to the effort by forming the Bayan Unit “to confront atheists, conducting face-to-face interventions to convince them of the ‘moderation of Islam’” (Nader 2022), on the false premise that good Muslims only turn against their religion because of the impression that Islam is an immoderate and violent faith.

4 Living *La Dini* and *Ilhād* in MENA and Beyond

Given the extraordinary social and legal burdens on the nonreligious and godless in Muslim-dominated societies, it is a wonder that there is as much *la dini* and *ilhād* as there is. What is the path of disengagement, disaffiliation, and ultimately disbelief in a Muslim context? In one of the few sociological studies of “leaving Islam” or the “renunciation of a group’s foundational beliefs and values” (Cottee 2015, 14), Simon Cottee characterizes it as “a cumulative process which occurs over a period of many months or even years and involves certain common biographical experiences”:

Preeminently, it is a situation of moral jeopardy, where the integrity of the self is put into question and the most fundamental questions to do with human existence are confronted and addressed: “what do I believe in?”, “what is my purpose?”, “how should I live my life?”, “whom can I trust?”, “with what or whom should I identify?”, “what should I most value?”, “who am I?”

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This view is consistent with the bulk of literature on the deconversion process—and frankly, with the conversion process—which is generally discovered to be gradual, tentative, often partial, and frequently reversible. Cottee proposes a three-stage course from belief to nonbelief, beginning with “pre-apostasy” and followed by “apostasy” and “post-apostasy” or what he dubs the *ex-Muslim jihad* or efforts to construct a new life, new meaning and new relationships without religion—which may include active anti-religion and proselytizing apostasy to others.

As in most if not all cases of religious departure, Cottee suggests that the process starts with doubt provoked by personal experiences or traumas, awareness of alternatives, struggles with scripture, a sense of alienation from or abandonment by their god, and major political events (35). All of his interviewees explored their doubts and found the Islamic responses to their explorations unsatisfying: sometimes the answers they received from scripture, authorities, or other believers were evasive, weak, or meaningless, and sometimes they were simply discouraged from asking questions altogether. Confusion, uncertainty, and internal discord led to self-criticism and eventually to “deliberation” or the serious decision to settle the dilemma once and for all. The apostasy stage commenced with the future disbeliever disavowing religion privately; this choice was often accompanied by mixed emotions of relief, excitement, guilt, anger (over the time and opportunities lost in religion), anxiety, and ongoing confusion. “Disavowal rituals” performing and announcing the exit from religion included disclosure of one’s new position and identity to friends and family, “pigging out” (i.e., intentionally breaking taboos by drinking alcohol, eating pork, engaging in illicit sex, or, for women, doffing the hijab), and “disinvolvement” or distancing oneself from the congregation and maybe the community.

Digging deeper into the process, Benchemsi like many others, in Islamic, Christian, and various settings, emphasizes the role of doubt, which is already a break from the taken-for-granted truth of *din*. The individual may “start to question the illogicalities found in the holy texts” (Benchemsi 2015). Ironically but not uniquely to Islam, the gradual loss of faith is often “actually the product of an attempt to deepen it and to understand religion better” (Diab 2020, 17), which is not always motivated by a desire to disprove religion but quite the opposite. For instance, one Egyptian atheist testified that he began to explore religion more intensely in college due to his acknowledged ignorance of the subject: “So I decided that I was going to delve deep into it and be as expert as possible,” but what he learned “gave me the shock of my life” (17). Likewise, Islam Ibrahim was inspired by religious curiosity to study the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad, but he “found a lot of contradictory and bloody things and fantasies in it Anyone who uses his brain five minutes in a neutral way will end up with the same conclusion” (Benchemsi 2015).

The role of alternatives to standard, and especially to extremist, Islam is also significant, and these alternatives can emanate from outside or inside Islam. Reading secular sources, particularly but not exclusively Western ones, is a key factor; those who come to criticize and reject Islam are characteristically enthusiastic readers, and their diet consists of such fare as “medieval Arab philosophers, Islamic mysticism, European philosophy and social theory (notably, Nietzsche and Marx), the works of contemporary Arab secularist

intellectuals, Arabic literature of the 1950s and 1960s, and translated world literature,” both fiction and non-fiction on subjects like feminism and human rights (Schielke 2012, 305). The availability of these materials is crucially related to social-structural changes in opportunities including Western education, urbanization, and of course mass media like television and the Internet, to which we will return shortly. Modern media have also exposed formerly unknown alternatives *within* Islam. Muslim countries, again not uniquely, often broadcast religious television and radio programs to promote piety, like Geo Television in Pakistan. One popular show on the network, *‘Alim* (scholar or one with knowledge), invites religious experts from diverse schools of thought and jurisprudence to discuss religion, but the effect is often quite the opposite of what is intended: viewers, commonly women, who may have previously assumed that Islam speaks with a single voice on religious matters instead hear incommensurable differences of opinion. Audiences are consequentially and unavoidably thrown onto their own judgment as to which authorities to heed and what constitutes religious authority in the first place. The experience creates awareness of differences inside Islam and unintentionally encourages “selective piety” and doctrinal divisions in society (Kazi 2018).

Despite the attention so far to doctrine and belief—which is also a trait if not obsession of Western nonbelief and atheism—Schielke cautions us that the driver of religious disaffection is often not “epistemic” at all but precisely “affective,” at its foundation “an intimate moral discontent with a prevailing sense of religion” (Schielke 2012, 302). Like “misotheists” (Schweizer 2011) who develop antipathy or hatred for their god (without necessarily ceasing to believe in him/her/it) resulting from the moral failings of the deity and his/her/its devotees, many thoughtful Muslims are disturbed less by the *truth* of religion than by the *morality* of religion and religionists. Summarizing four personal accounts of Muslims whose belief was undermined by their moral sensibilities, Schielke writes:

In the first account, the world is full of injustice, and while God is just He does not solve it but lets people wait even though ... “delay of justice is injustice.” In the second account, divine justice itself appears as unjust: if God could make all people believers, why does He make some people infidels and then condemn them to eternal damnation? In the third account, the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, who should be the exemplary Muslim characters, display unnecessary and unjustified cruelty. In the fourth account, religion appears as a completely inadequate and chaotic way to establish any real moral order in a society urgently in need of it.

What this demonstrates is hardly the immoral nature of nonbelievers—a common and unfounded accusation—but exactly the opposite, their profound sense of and demand for justice, fairness, and tolerance, which are in palpably short supply in their society and its religion. As Harris Sultan put it most forcefully in his confession of apostasy, *The Curse of God: Why I Left Islam*, “I am not anti-religion; I am anti-misogyny, anti-slavery, anti-sexism, antiviolence, anti-ignorance, anti-child abuse, anti-oppression, and anti-war. Religion is anti-me” (Sultan 2018, 11). (Dangerously, Sultan surrenders Islam to radical Islamists like ISIS and the Taliban, rendering Islam an irredeemably extremist and violent system.)

Finally, who are the people who turn their backs on Islam, and what are the social and cultural experiences that have led to their demographic increase? Given everything that we have seen so far, it is not surprising that, with exceptions of course, “non-believers are part of the young and social-media generation that has moved their activism to the Internet as they mostly favor personalized and issue-specific cyber-activism” (Richter 2021, 76). Yet, while the Internet is an indisputably momentous force (see below), the citizens of today’s *la dini* and *ilhād* have been prepared by an array of factors, including and exacerbated by the shockwaves of the Arab spring.

Two crucial factors are education and popular culture, which often go together. Indeed, Wael Al Soukkary gleaned that all of the Egyptian atheists he interviewed were bilingual in Arabic and English, many having attended Western-style schools, and all “were also allowed almost without any qualms to consume Western cultural products such as music, movies, video games, and literature” (Al Soukkary 2015, 50). Throughout the Muslim world, including in the revolutionary Islamic republic of Iran, according to Pooyan Tamimi Arab who co-authored the aforementioned GAMAAN survey, “the literacy rate has gone up spectacularly,” giving locals unprecedented access to information (Holleis 2021). Literacy and education more generally play an especially prominent role for women, who have been denied this opportunity previously. The very fact that they are able to attend school is supplemented with the friendships they make and the lessons they learn; for young Muslim women, “coming into contact with feminism or other ideas about male-female relationships, particularly at college, started their search of religious gender constructs” and alerted them to “issues of injustice and discrimination not only of women but also of other marginalized groups such as the LGTB community” (van Nieuwkerk 2019, 26).

Education and literacy are only the most formal aspects of what Al Soukkary stresses as *cultural hybridity*. In fact, Al Soukkary (2015, 50) relates that middle- and upper-class Egyptian families typically evince “high exposure and con-

sumption of foreign cultural products such as movies, music, TV and video games,” and many future atheists are fans of these genres. One young woman who became disillusioned with religion because it failed to offer her “peace of mind” ended up joining a rock band and performing on stage.

Overall, Schielke maintains that “most nonbelievers appear as unconventional and individualistic characters with unconventional and individualistic motivations and trajectories” (2012, 305), perhaps overdetermined to lead non-mainstream lives. These personal proclivities, combined with what Al Soukkary calls “loose religious socialization” in many contemporary Muslim families (that is, not imposing and demanding close observance of religious practices and norms), “predisposes individuals to apostasy by two means. Firstly, by allowing the possibility of adopting alternative lifestyles that doesn’t comply with religion. Secondly, by allowing a space for individuals to develop ideas and world-views that are independent from mainstream religious discourses” (Al Soukkary 2015, 28).

Individual personalities and family structures are not sufficient to account for the growth of nonbelief, though, and Al Soukkary rightly pushes us to contemplate variables beyond the household, including and especially what he calls “the impious city.” In a word, freethinkers need space to think, and the modern Muslim city provides such space. Most dramatically, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb describe the “leisurely Islam” of downtown Beirut, Lebanon, where the genders can mix at coffee shops (including Starbucks), people can stroll through the Beirut Mall and enjoy alcohol and pork (albeit in “a separate glass-enclosed room with a separate cash register” to keep the *haram* products and their proceeds apart from the *halal*), and visitors can take in other “cultural and entertainment activities” not only permitted but promoted by Hizbullah (Deeb and Harb 2013, 67–71).

But one does not have to travel to Beirut to experience a cosmopolitan environment with space for nonbelief. Egyptians can move to and within “social milieus where nonreligious or not yet very religious ways and visions of life are more commonplace. The most important such milieu is the intellectual artistic scene of downtown Cairo” (Schielke 2012, 306). In the city—Beirut, Cairo, or any other—residents, particularly the young, can live far from their village kin and share apartments with others of their kind; they may even socialize and date outside the faith. Indeed, Schielke finds it noteworthy “that many of the men have or have had relationships with Western women and that many of both sexes have lived with someone without being married” (2012, 305). In these and many ways, the impious city—or rather, the city that houses the pious, the less-than-pious, and the self-consciously and aggressively impious—is able “to accommodate emotions, desires and lifestyles that don’t comply with

expectations of ‘proper’ behavior expected from ‘good citizens’ and ‘good Muslims’” (Al Soukary 2015, 76).

This takes us at last to how people perform and practice *la dini* and *ilhād* in a Muslim-dominated social setting. The simplest answer is, in largely the same manner as apostates from any religion. Nonbelief and atheism are not a lot more popular in the United States, Russia, or India than in Egypt or Saudi Arabia (if, admittedly, the penalties are somewhat less severe). Predictably, much of (ex-)Muslim nonbelief dwells online, on Facebook, Twitter, and other private websites, chat rooms, and social media. Brian Whitaker’s acclaimed sociological study, *Arabs without God*, dedicates a chapter to the “Godless on the Internet,” since, as he quotes Helmi Noman, “The Arab atheist community is largely an online phenomenon, with limited visibility offline and with virtually no umbrella groups” (Whitaker 2017). Among the numerous online groups and communities documented in his book are:

- Paltalk, before the rise of Twitter and Facebook
- Black Ducks (an Arabic equivalent of “black sheep” or misfit in English), a YouTube talk show presented and directed by atheist Ismail Mohamed
- Arab Non-Religious Network
- The Arab Atheists Library, a Facebook page for downloading free secularist books
- Arab Atheist Broadcasting, a YouTube channel with a viewership of up to four thousand
- a Jordanian atheist Facebook group
- Arab Atheists Syndicate
- Humanitarian Non-Religious
- Arab Atheists Forum and Network.

This list is far from exhaustive, and new groups form regularly. Both van Nieuwkerk (2019) and Benchemsi (2015) mention Black Ducks, with the latter counting 140 episodes of the show at the time of his writing; he conveys that its objectives are to achieve “a secular society in the Middle East and North Africa” and to offer “solace and courage to those who are atheists in secret so they may know they are not alone in the world.” To be sure, mainstream Muslims as well as extremist and terrorist groups also have a presence online, and virtual and anonymous gatherings are not totally immune to surveillance and persecution.

Sebastian Elsässer compares four different and not-already discussed YouTube ventures, each displaying different qualities. The oldest, Hamed.tv with 160,000 subscribers, is the brainchild of Hamed Abdel-Samad, a German-Egyptian political scientist renowned for his criticism of “Islamic fascism.” His “Box of Islam” segments consist of lectures lasting twenty to thirty minutes which generally “treat sacred scriptures and sacred histories ... as simple

human phenomena that can be analyzed with the same tools of historical investigation as any other event” (2021, 5). Much less didactic, and more explicitly atheistic, is Sherif Gaber’s channel, whose style of youthful humorous non-belief has attracted almost 300,000 subscribers.

What is unique about Sherif Gaber is the use of comedy and satire as a means of transporting the message of non-belief. In several short plays, Gaber stages fictitious conversations about religion in which he impersonates all characters. One video of this kind, “Secular or Islamic [state]?” features a bearded and turbaned Salafist, an average uneducated lower-class Muslim, a bigoted Coptic Christian, and a sophisticated upper-class intellectual discussing the notion of secularism.

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Sadly, Gaber was arrested in the mid-2010s; when he was released on bail in 2015 he disappeared to produce his underground YouTube show but was re-arrested in 2018 trying to escape from Egypt, where he continues to hide (Diab 2021). Third, Adam Elmarsī, who dubs himself a *rubūbī* (deist) and not an atheist, speaks from a Coptic Christian rather than a Muslim perspective. His preferred approach is to challenge dogmatic and conservative monotheism, such as beliefs about Satan or Noah’s flood; in these and other lectures, “the message is [that] they are in fact human inventions, ‘legends’ (*asatur*) and ‘illusions’ (*awham*) that can easily be demystified with the tools of natural science and by historical-critical inquiry into the religious traditions themselves” (Elsässer 2021, 12). Fourth, Kosay Betar (or Qusayy Bitar) represents the *la adri* (agnostic) position. A Syrian living in the West, he does not aspire to banish religion but to elevate knowledge over belief and to answer the question, “What now? After deciding to leave Islam, where do I go? What does atheism even mean and what can non-believers contribute to society that believers can’t?” (13).

In Morocco, Free Arabs is an online project of Ahmed Benchemsi, whom we have quoted previously. Nabil Echchaibi (2013) characterizes it as an initiative “to amplify the voices of a new generation of Arab thinkers, activists, journalists, and artists who dare, against all odds, to flaunt their dissent.” The slogan of the site is “Democracy, Secularism, Fun,” which it combines in satirical video series like “The Horrific Four” (with four fictional players—an imam who has lost his faith, a modern career woman, a gay Arab, and an Israeli Jew), “The Fatwa Show” (in which a witless imam and his student parody fatwas [legal decisions on silly subjects like contact lenses and carrots]), and “*Al Bernameg*” (The Show, a version of Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show”). As these productions illustrate—and as has been observed around the world among

nonbelievers—comedy is a prime tool. Lena Richter also looks at Moroccan Facebook groups (Atheists in Morocco, *Marocains pour la Laïcité*, MALI (*Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles*), and Ramadan For Everyone) that express their disdain for religion through “cartoons, memes, and jokes” (Richter 2021, 1), specifically poking fun at religious diversity and how religions plagiarize each other, religious misogyny, the stupidity of religious devotees, and the foolishness and foibles of religious leaders and prophets. Likewise, Abdelrahman Fakida (2019) samples the funny and insulting tweets of what he calls Egypt’s “Twitterati,” which skewer the Qur’an, Islamic scholars, and the Prophet himself, as well as Ramadan, the hijab, Islamic law, and Arab/Muslim masculinity.

As noted, much of this activity takes place in private online spaces, sometimes anonymously and ideally under the radar of religious and political authorities. Other individuals and organizations are much more public, sometimes achieving celebrity status although often operating from the relative safety of the West. Two of the best known are Ibn Warraq, founder of the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society and author of the popular *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (1995), and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali woman who emigrated to the Netherlands in 1992, was elected to the Dutch Parliament in 2003 after announcing her atheism in 2002, and whose two most famous books are *Infidel: An Autobiography* (2007) and *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015). Others who have taken a public stand against Islam or religion itself are Armin Navabi, author of *Why There is No God: Simple Responses to 20 Common Arguments for the Existence of God* and founder of the organization Atheist Republic (www.atheistrepublic.com); Ali Rizvi, author of *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey From Religion to Reason*; Sudanese author Amir Ahmad Nasr of *My Isl@m: How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind—and Doubt Freed My Soul*; and Harris Sultan, whose *The Curse of God: Why I Left Islam* was cited above.

For average (ex-)Muslims who identify with *la dini*, there are groups and networks outside MENA like Ex-Muslims of North America and chapters in Canada, Europe, and New Zealand. Most *mulhid* (masculine) and *mulhida* (feminine) in Muslim-dominated societies do not have such luxuries. Al Soukkary explains that while some nonbelievers “come out” and publicly affirm their apostasy, others—probably the majority—adopt strategies of “passing” or “pretending.” Both tactics involve a certain amount of deception; consequently, “nonbelievers often live fragmented lives with a high degree of duplicity” (Schielke 2012, 306), which is doubtless true of apostates everywhere. Pretending is obviously a more active guise, in which non-religious individuals “temporarily adopt a Muslim identity,” while passing, as the name suggests, is more passive, simply going along and not drawing attention to one’s disbelief.

Interestingly, Islam allocates a space for such behavior, which nonbelievers can exploit. Known as *menafad* (negligence, never-minding), it refers to “the act of ignoring a task, a commitment, a request or a social situation where a particular action or behavior is expected but not performed” (Al Soukkary 2015, 72) without explicit refusal or rejection. Fieldworkers have commented that “good Muslims” often neglect or postpone religious observance (e.g. attending the mosque or performing daily prayers) because, for instance, they simply do not have time right now; they do not forsake their Muslim faith and promise that they will be “better Muslims” in the future. Remarkably, many people in the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan know that they are lax Muslims; they approach their faith with a sense of irony and embarrassment, admitting with a nervous laugh that “if a *real* Muslim observed us, he/she would not think we were Muslims” (Louw 2012, 156).

5 Conclusion: Islam and Secularization Theory Revisited

Our brief tour of Islam, *la dini*, and *ilhād* has proven categorically that Islam is not inherently secularization-resistant. Not even considering efforts to reconcile Islam with science or to forge a liberal and democratic Islam, the evidence shows that the religion can generate, and the society can accommodate, the non-religious, the agnostic, and indeed the atheist. Further, in many ways the experience of the *la adri* and the *mulhid(a)* has much in common with that of nonbelievers and others bearing stigmatized identities around the world. At the same time, there is much that is different, not least the severe and potentially fatal ramifications of nonbelief and *riddah* in the Muslim world.

That the conditions that spawn *riddah*, *la dini*, and *ilhād* are consonant with those that feed doubt, disaffiliation, and defection cross-culturally encourages us to revisit secularization theory once more. By this we do not mean to revive the unilinear model of secularization attributed to Weber and Marx among others; modernization is not a one-way street from religion to non-religion. All the same, the factors that Weber highlighted (urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, rationalization) and others that he could not imagine (mass media and the Internet) are precisely the ones that open the door to “disenchantment”—again, not always utter disbelief but very often disenchantment in the more ordinary sense, as disappointment with religious authorities and disillusionment with texts, doctrines, and rituals. Contemporary cultural and social experience does not, to paraphrase the old pesticide commercial, “kill gods dead,” but it does shatter certainties and expose alternatives to replace those shattered givens.

In conclusion, therefore, we can draw some lessons and recommend some directions from our knowledge of Muslim nonbelief.

1. Modernization is a powerful solvent for religion and a fertile soil for non-religion and atheism, but modernization does not equal Westernization. For many years we have recognized *multiple modernities*, including specifically in the area of Christianity and Islam (Hefner 1998); there are some common factors of modernization, as well as circulating paths of modern thought and practice, but different civilizations, countries, and communities absorb, process, and respond to this content in their own ways. Similarly and more immediately germane, scholars have noticed *multiple secularities* and *multiple atheisms*. A decade ago Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt insisted that we take seriously the notion of multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell 2015), and we have always known that “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization” had multiple meanings, from privatization to marginalization to elimination of religion. This is truer still in another language like Arabic with its own lexicon and discourse of belief and disbelief (if “belief” and “disbelief” are appropriate categories at all). Finally, “atheism,” which might seem like a self-evident concept, has proven to be anything but; as studies of atheism in locations such as Turkey, Japan, and India (see e.g. Quack 2012a and 2012b on India) illustrate, the ideas, agendas, and institutions can vary greatly.
2. Secularization is one possible effect of modernization but never the only possible effect. What modern society facilitates (if not demands) is *choice*, and religious faith remains a viable option, much to the consternation of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and such adamant secularization theorists. Schielke put it clearly in his study of nonbelief in Islam: in addition to outright rejection of religion in the light of contemporary social experience and the blatant contradictions between religious teachings, scientific knowledge, and moral imperfections, “There are at least three other (and probably more) likely ways to deal with such serious conflicts: first, the turn to intense religiosity as a way to overcome doubt; second, the turn to a critical belief as an attempt to articulate a different basis of religious belief; and third, a form of moral reasoning that bypasses conventional doctrinal reasoning without trying to critically rearticulate it” (2012, 312). Indeed, many observers have commented that religious fundamentalism (Islamic or otherwise) is a child of modernity.
3. The enduring value of secularization theory is not, obviously, the prediction that religion will and must wither away, which has been decisively refuted. Rather, the point is that (post-)modern culture introduces

two primary conditions that contribute to the distancing from religion—diversity and instability. Ultimately, these conditions are two sides of the same coin, almost two ways of saying the same thing. Because citizens of the (post-)modern world are aware of diversity, that is, of other possibilities of thought, action, valuation, and organization, and cannot then be unaware of them, all concepts, identities, institutions, and “truths” become unstable. People realize, if only viscerally and not cognitively, that things could be, have been, and will be other, which is a particularly toxic realization for religions that stake a claim to certainty, absoluteness, and stability.

4. Finally, these and similar studies suggest that there is more to know about atheists, agnostics, secularists, and other “nones” than we have previously appreciated. Commonly, we assume that non-religious people are just like religious people, only with the religion removed. However, the various surveys and ethnographies cited in this essay suggest that the lived experiences of nonbelievers are a valid and essential subject of research themselves. In keeping with the embodiment turn in social sciences, over a decade ago Charles Hirschkind (2011) pondered whether there is a distinct “secular body” that calls for attention. This question has not been answered; it has barely been raised. But everything we have presented here powerfully indicates the value of acknowledging that nonbelief and atheism are more than intellectual positions on the god-question but are lived and embodied sensibilities and thus of bringing to light the felt qualities of godlessness, from the fear of punishment to the comfort of the company of other apostates to the intensely moral nature of the “trust in the capacity of human moral judgment” (Schielke 2012, 311).

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