Religious Transformation in the Middle East
Spirituality, Religious Doubt, and Non Religion

Edited by
Karin van Nieuwkerk
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About the Editor

Karin van Nieuwkerk is an anthropologist and professor of contemporary Islam in Europe and the Middle East at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies (Radboud University). Most of her work examines gender, cultural politics, performing arts, and religious transformation processes—moving in and out of religion—mainly pertaining to Islam in Europe and the Middle East. She is the author of A Trade like any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt (1995); Performing Piety, Singers and Actor in Egypt's Islamic Revival (2013) and Manhood is not Easy: Egyptian Masculinities through the Life of Sayyid Henkish (2019). She is also editor of Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West (2006); Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theatre: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World (2011) and of Moving in and out of Islam (2018).

Introduction: 'Religious Transformation in the Middle East: Spirituality, Religious Doubt, and Non-Religion in the Middle East'

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The political impact—or rather the lack thereof—following the revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East has been well documented. Yet less is known about the religious transformation that has since taken place, with most attention having been dedicated to radical Islam, political Islam, Salafism, jihad, and the methods adopted to combat these currents. The development of 'moderate Islam', constructed as an antidote to these movements, has also been examined and critically assessed for its politicized character and the uncontested appraisal it receives from the West (Mahmood 2009). A development that has received less attention is the way that contesting political authorities both during and after the Arab upsurges has also affected religious authorities due to the intertwinement of religion and politics in different countries in the Middle East.

Since the 1970s, the emergence of mosque movements and the ensuing vocal piety discourses in the Middle East have been intensively studied, (e.g., for Egypt see Hirschkind 2001, 2006; Mahmood 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Deeb 2006 for Hezbollah, Lebanon) and light has been shed on their conservative religious nature. These authors have shown how the piety movement has instilled conservative-religious values through lessons and sermons, mediated across various different media platforms. The emergence of lay preachers striving to sell their pious messages to young people, and the subsequent effects on the middle and higher-middle classes, have also been widely discussed (e.g., for Egypt see Bayat 2002, 2005, 2007; Haenni 2002, 2005; Van Nieuwkerk 2013). Piety has become visible across the religious landscape, through an increase in the number of mosques, veiling (*hijab* and *niqab*), the growing of beards, and the appearance of the '*zibib*', the dark spot on the forehead of Muslims which indicates the frequency of touching the prayer mat. This has illustrated the embodied nature of the region's omnipresent piety movement. Yet how have the recent upsurges in the Middle East affected the discourses surrounding both the conservative pious ones and the clearly politicized ones, such as Salafist movements and the Muslim Brotherhood?

This Special Issue draws attention to some of the many religious transformations currently emerging in the Middle East which diverge from the dominating rhetoric surrounding 'radicalization', 'political Islam', or the increase in religious fervor and piety among believers. Without denying that these tendencies are highly relevant and continue to play a crucial role in the region, we would like to point out other currents that seem to be coming more to the fore after the uprisings. The contemporary realities of religious ambivalence and 'imperfection' (Al-Ajarma, this issue), leaving the Muslim Brotherhood (Menshawy, this issue), religious doubts and critical thinking (Franke, this issue), looking for alternative forms of spirituality or individualized piety (Franke; Kütük-Kuriş; Van Nieuwkerk, this issue), de-veiling (Kütük-Kuriş; Van Nieuwkerk, this issue), and different forms of non-conformism, free-thinking, non-belief, and atheism (Franke; Richter; Elsässer, this issue) have all been considered.

The revolutionary uprisings appear to have affected religiosity in the Middle East in a myriad of ways. Firstly, there appears to be a transformation in the legitimacy of the

sources of religious inspiration. Lay preachers, such as the Egyptian 'Amr Khalid, have become less attractive to younger generations of the revolutions in their aftermath. The same holds true for authoritative institutions such as al-Azhar and the Coptic Church. They are deemed to have taken the 'wrong side' of the revolution and accordingly lost their credibility in the eyes of young revolutionaries. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its slogan 'Islam is the solution', has also proven to be ineffective, at least in the context of the one-year rule of President Morsi in Egypt. In combination with the outright repression of its members by the Egyptian state, many members have been disappointed by the Muslim Brotherhood's performance and numerous members, including those of high-ranking, have resigned (Menshawy, this issue). Moreover, atrocities committed in the name of Islam by Da'ish/ISIS have driven people away from religion or at least made them question what Islam really is (see also Elsässer, this issue). Authoritative institutions, such as al-Azhar, have mostly argued that 'this is not Islam', yet with these violent acts having been committed in the name of Islam, uncertainty has been raised about who decides what counts as Islamic. This has created aversion against certain interpretations of Islam and driven many people reflect on their own understanding of their religion. Young people have started to question religion in its hegemonic and political forms, looking for various alternatives, both inside and outside of religion.

Secondly, the sheer experience of being involved in the historic moments of the uprisings, as part of a collective body toppling powers that had been ruling for decades, has had an empowering effect on many protesters (see also Van Nieuwkerk 2021). The ex-Coptic activist Alber Saber, who participated in the Egyptian Kifaya movement before the revolution, asked: "Do you think someone who would take to the streets before the revolution and who chanted against Mubarak would be afraid to reveal their beliefs?"[1] One of my interlocutors explained how this feeling of empowerment during the revolution and the downfall of Mubarak spilled over into questioning religious authority:

"I started to see people actually changing after the revolution. (. . .) The idea of saying no! You said no to a superior power that we thought it would never fall. This is a part of the system that you have been growing into, is falling apart! So, there is another system, a fundamental one in Egypt, that is, the religion. So still you can say no!".[2]

This did not stop at questioning state and religious authorities but also reached the third pillar of authority in Egypt: parental authority or patriarchy, as several other interlocutors remarked:

"Actually, after the revolution, we start rethinking everything in our life, from politics, religion, what goes on your family, the relationship with your father to the ties with your friends. You start questioning everything".[3]

Accordingly, there appears to be a crisis in religious authority, not only because of its fragmentation but also as a result of the effect of contesting all kinds of authorities, particularly political, religious, and patriarchal.

Thirdly, the wide accessibility of social media as a source of information has enabled young people to actively question received ideas and search for information on alternative forms of religiosity and spirituality. Social media has been a helpful political tool for organizing the uprising itself, also proving valuable in contesting religious authorities. Exploring other religions, usually dismissed as 'unbelief', and finding many similarities between religious systems, has made young people aware of the relativity of religious claims to truth. In other words, if all religions seem to believe that they hold the absolute truth, how do I know my religion is the only right one? Thus, many questions are raised about the plausibility and undisputed status of the religion one was born in. What often manifests is a renewed commitment towards searching whether Islam or Christianity— depending on the religion in which one was raised—can truly possess the ultimate truth. It further encouraged reflection on one's own understanding of religion. While this reflective

process can strengthen and deepen religiosity, it can often lead to a more personalized version of piety.

Whilst Sufism appears to have become more attractive to young people, New Age spirituality and Buddhism can also stake claim to a rise in popularity. Rather than the available conservative piety discourse that stresses the significance of ritual, doctrine, outward conduct and religious commands, people search for personal forms of religiosity and piety. Whereas removing the *hijab* can be a sign of religious doubts and questioning, it can also represent a search for a more inward-oriented piety instead of the outward-oriented forms of the existing piety movements. As Kütük-Kuriş and Van Niewkerk (both this issue) unearth, this can manifest in young Muslim women taking off the veil whilst simultaneously feeling spiritually close to God than ever before.

The advent of widespread internet access has enabled young people to explore non-belief and atheism, fields that are strongly detested and feared within society. Yet, critical thinking about religion is nothing new to the region. Isma'il Adham was famed for writing an essay in 1937 in Arabic entitled "why I am an atheist." Yet, after the decline of leftist and communist ideas in the Middle East, as well as the rise of Islamic movements around the 1980s, atheism has become confined to small academic circles. Western New Atheism of the 21st century, however, has transformed the Arabic intellectual scene due to the circulation of translated video clips and lectures on the internet, as well as the translation of some major works such as Dawkins' (2006) The God Delusion.

Various forms of freethinking, nonbelief and (new) atheism have gradually become available online, promoted by an active youth blogging movement and YouTubers from the Arab Atheist Network. Young nonbelievers all over the Middle East realized they were not the only ones with religious doubts and founded an online community of like-minded people and activists (see also Richter, this issue). Before the uprisings, nonbelievers' media, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels had already existed but it was only after the revolutions that they really began to mushroom. Whilst numerous Atheist Facebook groups were in circulation by the late 2000s, the transition of some activists from the relatively closed and limited sphere of social media groups to YouTube has represented a new stage in this development (see Elsässer, this issue). Such a shift cannot be explained by social media dynamics alone but is also embedded in wider social and political developments, especially in Egypt, where many of the YouTube activists come from. Famous freethinkers and atheists such as Hamed Abdel-Samad, Sherif Gaber, Adam Elmasri and Kosay Betar have a large international audience (see Elsässer, this issue).

It is of course difficult to assess whether nonbelieving is a growing trend among young people in the Middle East. Due to the sensitivity and stigma surrounding the topic, as well as the harmful legal and societal consequences, many nonbelievers refrain from discussing their convictions (see also Richter, this issue). Yet since the uprisings and the spread of relatively safe and anonymous spaces on social media, many people have begun to speak out. Although it is not easy to measure whether there is a growing trend or that more people are simply daring to speak out, there are indications which suggest an increase in those self-identifying as non-religious. As the Arab Barometer (Figure 1) points out, the number of people in the Middle East identifying as "not religious" has risen from 8% in 2013 to 13% in 2018. Only Yemen saw a fall in this category. According to this source, this change has been most prominently experienced by those under 30, among whom 18% identify as 'not religious'.[4] Based on the research tools by the Arab Barometer, the table below shows an increase in self-identified nonbelievers or agnostics in several countries in the Middle East since 2011, the year of the uprisings.[5]
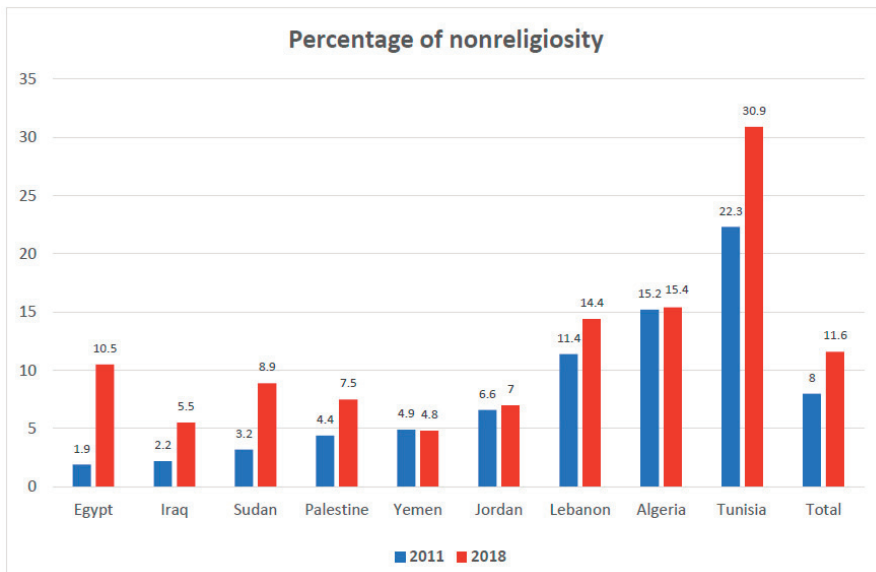
Figure 1. Non-religiosity (Source: Arab Barometer).

The upsurge in doubts and the questioning of beliefs has not gone unnoticed amongst religious authorities and state actors, provoking intense debates on how to counter this trend of non-religiosity and 'spiritual crises'.

This special issue consists of a cross section of current works in social science, religious studies, and related fields on Islam/religion and non-religion in the Middle East. The articles focus on spirituality, religious doubts and non-religion by presenting case studies from different countries in the Middle East, with examples from Turkey, Morocco, and Egypt. The article on freethinkers and nonbelievers on social media includes the reflections of participants from Syria and the diaspora. Despite the diversity of the case studies, there are striking similarities in the authors' observations on important social trends.

Firstly, as discussed above, several authors note the importance of social media as a relatively safe and anonymous space, suitable for exploring and expressing sensitive issues and non-conformist ideas, be it religious doubt, alternative forms of spirituality, agnosticism or nonbelief. The availability of smart phones and personal computers, where people can search for information on topics which they would not dare to investigate in an internet café or on a shared computer at home, also provides space to delve into sensitive topics. Yet in the current environment following the Arab uprisings, surveillance has not disappeared; rather it has become more advanced (Richter, this issue). Accordingly, even within these relatively safe online spaces people can be exposed and persecuted by state laws concerning, for instance, blasphemy. In many countries in the Middle East—even where there may be official freedom of religion—there is not always freedom of expressing critical views on religion, let alone nonreligious views. For instance, in Morocco, Article 220 of the Penal Code criminalizes "shaking the faith of a Muslim". Blasphemy, the disrespect of religious practices, and the violation of public morality and virtue are strictly forbidden as well (Richter this issue).

Nonbelievers, doubters, and freethinkers are then obliged to employ different tactics of hiding, only disclosing their doubts, critical views, or non-beliefs to like-minded friends. In other words, they live "secret lives" (Van Nieuwkerk 2018), or use various ways of "wrapping" their selves (Franke, this issue). Non-practicing Muslims or nonbelievers might wrap themselves in "Muslimness" in order to please others, or use wrapping techniques such as hiding, silence, and pretending to pray or fast. Another interesting tool, discussed

by Richter (this issue), is the use of humor in online forums, which can also be understood as a form of "wrapping" criticism. Non-religious humor can be seen as a way to covertly express dissent in a context in which religious authority is omnipresent and closely linked to political legitimacy (Richter, this issue).

Secondly, several articles in this special issue point to the development of individualized forms of religiosity. The process of individualization is an important force that contests social and religious pressure towards conformity. With regards to unveiling, Van Nieuwkerk (this issue) shows that both her religious and nonreligious interlocutors took off the *hijab* as a way of discovering their own personalities and desires. In doing so, they uncovered their own way of being (non) religious, discarding the hegemonic piety discourse which compels women to veil. Against societal and religious pressure, they explored their own sense of self and femininity. The same holds true for the Turkish case, as analyzed by Kütük-Kuriş (this issue), where de-veiling can be regarded as particularly remarkable considering it has taken place under almost two decades of rule by the Islam-friendly AKP. In the Turkish context, the headscarf is often perceived to signal political alliance with AKP, leading some women to de-veil, as they have grown tired of their appearance being associated with the ruling party. Accordingly, despite similarities in the experiences of women who take off the veil as an expression of desire to uncover their own selves, this process takes place in quite different socio-political contexts.

Franke (this issue) also shows that her interlocutors stressed their autonomous perspectives on religion. They reflect upon how to be religious or how not to be religious, how to believe or how not to believe, how to practice or how not to practice, what to wear or not to wear. In the case of disengagement from the Muslim Brotherhood, former members' sense of self, in particular how they use "their mind" and "independent reading" to mull over alternative ideas, has proven essential for the process of exiting from the collective body (Menshawy, this issue). Yet, as Al-Ajarma highlights (this issue), we should not underestimate the enduring force of family and society to make people conform to social expectations. Al-Ajarma studies Moroccan pilgrims' after-hajj experiences and the negotiations required to keep up with the social expectations that come with making the pilgrimage. She shows that pilgrims' good conduct is not merely a matter of private conduct but is displayed and assessed in the public arena. Therefore, pilgrims have to negotiate their new status within the mundane and complex reality of everyday life. Accordingly, there are many ambivalences and tensions which pilgrims have to deal with upon their return to Morocco.

This brings us to the third cross-cutting theme. Connected with the previous trend of individualization, several authors point to the presence of ambiguities in (non) religious trajectories. Inspired by the debate within the anthropology of Islam in terms of 'the everyday' (Schielke and Debevec 2012) and 'lived religion' (McGuire 2008), these authors examine the contradictions revealed in the lived experiences of their (non) religious interlocutors. Al-Ajarma, Franke, Kütük-Kuriş, and Van Nieuwkerk (this issue) all demonstrate that their interlocutors have diverse and often conflicting desires and ambitions, with regards to educational activities and successful professional lives, engaging in sports or leisure activities or experiencing love and gratifying relationships. Inspired by scholars like Schielke (2009), Deeb (2015), and Beekers and Kloos (2017), these authors show the ways in which Muslim subjects negotiate the norms of Islamic piety in order to achieve these numerous objectives in life. As a result, it is crucial to regard religious doubt as a highly complex process which does not relate well to fixed positions and binary categories.

Al-Ajarma (this issue), for instance, investigates the ways in which Muslim subjects live with moments of imperfection and ambivalence that are innate to human experience, by concentrating on moral flexibility in her interlocutors' discourses and practices. She argues that these moments of doubt and religious weakness can be 'productive'. Her research builds on the insights of Beekers and Kloos (2017) and De Koning (2017), who argue that a self-perceived sense of failure offers an important and productive entry point for the study of lived religion. The acknowledgement of moral failure can result in a constant effort of self-

fashioning. Taking these insights one step further, Al-Ajarma argues that acknowledging one's sense of failure can be a 'technique of the self' in which the sense of failure is rechanneled into a moment of learning which then fuels further pious self-cultivation. Yet, conversely, the very same process of ambivalence, and the experience of conflicting desires and ambitions, can also be a productive means of questioning and disengaging from pious discourses and expectations. Cases of unveiling in Turkey (Kütük-Kuriş, this issue) and Egypt (Van Nieuwkerk, this issue), as well as leaving the Muslim Brotherhood (Menshawy, this issue) have neatly illustrated how this can materialize. Despite their similarities, studying daily lived contradictions, ambivalences, and sense of failure underscores the importance of carefully contextualizing the socio-political circumstances within these different case studies.

Finally, several authors show that 'religion' and 'non-religion' are not opposing categories but can intersect in daily lived experiences. This observation is connected to the growing body of literature that attempts to deconstruct the religious-secular divide (see e.g., Asad 2003; Hirschkind 2010). In this regard, it is useful to examine the terminology for non-religion and atheism in the Arab context. Elsässer, (this issue) following Schielke (2013), points out that "atheism" might be a misnomer in the contemporary Arab world, as the common Arabic word used to refer to atheism, *ilhad*, does not necessarily imply an ontological stance on the existence or non-existence of God. Neither does the neologism *la-dini*, which simply negates belonging to a religion (*din*). This could mean that in the contemporary Arab context, "the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one's stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview" (Schielke 2013, p. 639).

The importance of breaking down the fixed boundaries between religion and non-religion is brought to life by Van Nieuwkerk's study on unveiling in Egypt (this issue). Unveiling appears to be a fundamentally religious issue and is certainly perceived as such by many (religious) observers in Egypt. Without denying the relationship of unveiling to (non)religion, Van Nieuwkerk demonstrates that the religious dimensions only scratch the surface of the profound issues underlying unveiling. The narratives of women—whether religious or nonreligious—who unveiled show that unveiling is part of a process of uncovering the self in its manifold aspects. By dismantling rigid dichotomies between the 'believers' to the 'non-believers', profound commonalities between them became clear. The motives behind unveiling are more about a battle over women's (rebellious) minds and bodies more generally, rather than their religiosity per se.

Accordingly, this special issue taps into important religious transformation processes presently emerging in the Middle East that have previously received less attention within scholarly literature. Processes such as individualized spirituality, forms of freethinking and non-conformism, as well as religious disengagement and disassociating from faith are all astutely brought into consideration. Moreover, the contributions also provide highly relevant insights for several contemporary debates that are crucial in the social sciences and religious studies. This includes processes of individualization; the study of everyday lived (non) religion; the anthropology of doubt, ambivalence and ambiguity; and last but not least, the deconstruction of the religious-secular divide, a divide that is seen as almost impenetrable according to many actors in the Middle East.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to the sensitivity of the topic and protection of the interlocutors.

Notes

1   http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/27/alber-saber-brotherhood-will-drive-the-people-to-secularism.html (accessed on 10 June 2015).
2   Interview with author 21st of January 2018.
3   Interview with author 13th of February 2015.
4   See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377 for a comparison of the 2013 and 2018 waves (accessed on 17 June 2019).
5   Data taken from the Arab Barometer, which provides tools for analysis of the dataset collected in five waves between 2008 and 2018. People were asked to identify as religious, somewhat religious, nonreligious, or 'don't know'. https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool/ (accessed on 7 October 2019). Libya, Kuwait and Morocco are included in the BBC analysis, which slightly increases the percentage of nonreligious people to 12.8%. Since these countries were not included in the second wave (2011), I have left them out.

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Article

Arab Non-believers and Freethinkers on YouTube: Re-Negotiating Intellectual and Social Boundaries

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Abstract: This article uses the increasing visibility of Arab non-believers in the virtual public sphere as an opportunity to re-examine the key issues and dividing lines between believers, sceptics, and non-believers in Arab societies. It analyzes the currently four most popular Arabic-language YouTube channels created by freethinkers, nonbelievers, and atheists and points out commonalities and differences in style, content, and message. The article argues that the sense of a lively and growing virtual community has raised the confidence of non-believers (*lā-dīnīyūn*) and atheists in the Arab world and made them more daring in their self-portrayal and in their demands on society. As the examples show, YouTube allows them to circumvent the hostility they face in society and in the mainstream media and to connect with an audience that numbers in the tens of thousands of people from all over the Arab world and the diaspora. The article argues that freethinking and non-belief imply an attempt to re-negotiate social and religious boundaries within Arab societies and could—in the long run—have an impact on legal and constitutional questions as well, such as family law and the prerogatives of religious authorities.

Keywords: nonbelievers; freethinkers; atheism; Egypt; Syria; Arab world; social media

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, atheism and agnosticism have become more visible in the Arab world, and a new socioreligious group of self-declared non-believers (*lā-dīnīyūn*) seems to be emerging (see the introduction to this special issue and several other contributions). While the phenomenon has been covered quite extensively in journalistic accounts, such as Brian Whitaker's Arabs Without God. Atheism and freedom of belief in the Middle East (Whitaker 2017) and Khaled Diab's Islam for the Politically Incorrect (Diab 2017), as well as in many articles in Arab-language blogs and newspapers, important analytical questions remain unanswered—for example, concerning the precise meaning and rhetorical function of the neologism *lā-dīnīya* and to what degree it can even be considered a clearly defined intellectual trend.

Writing in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Schielke 2013), anthropologist Samuli Schielke pointed out that "atheism", the most common umbrella term to denote non-believers in a Western context, might be a misnomer in the contemporary Arab world, as the common Arabic word used in the sense of atheism, *ilḥād*, does not necessarily imply an ontological stance on the existence or non-existence of God. Neither does the neologism *lā-dīnī*, which simply negates belonging to a religion (*dīn*). This could mean that in the contemporary Arab context, "the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one's stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview" (Schielke 2013, p. 639). Schielke suggests that, in order to reach contextually appropriate and precise definitions of the terms we are using, it is important to situate atheism and other shades of non-belief "within a wider landscape of moral-spiritual critique and dissent that is nearly as old as Islam" (Schielke 2013, p. 648).

This article uses the increasing visibility of Arab non-believers in the virtual public sphere as an opportunity to re-examine the key issues and dividing lines between

believers, sceptics, and non-believers. Its aim is to provide an updated mapping of the self-positioning of Arab non-believers and their relationship with the wider field of religion and religious critique. For this purpose, I have examined the content of four YouTube channels propagating radical criticism of religion between 2015 and 2020, which I have selected based on to their relative outreach and popularity at the current juncture.[1] While YouTube offers an infinite variety of content on almost any topic, the platform itself provides valuable quantitative data on the audience reaction to the published content, which makes it possible to identify the most popular and most widely known voices. To begin with, users can express their interest in a channel by "subscribing" to it, which means they will be notified about newly published videos. The individual videos of each channel can further be rated by the number of views and the number of likes and dislikes they receive. A large number of subscribers, a consistently high number of views for different videos, as well as high like-to-dislike ratios mean that a given YouTube creator has a dedicated and engaged audience. The four YouTube channels portrayed in this article (see Table 1) were among the leading Arabic-language channels according to these criteria in the past five years and, at the time of writing, have a core audience that numbers at least in the tens of thousands. Three of the four protagonists portrayed below are of Egyptian and one of Syrian origin, but that does not seem to limit their audience to people from the respective country. Additional user data, partly of a non-public nature and provided to me by one of the creators themselves, indicate that their channels are being watched all over the Arab world from the Maghreb to Egypt and the Arab East to the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia.[2] They also have a strong following in the Arab-speaking diaspora in Europe and North America, where three of them actually live. In this sense, they really are manifestations of a regional and global trend of Arab non-belief.

Table 1. Popular YouTube Channels by Arab non-believers and freethinkers, December 2020.

Name of Channel	Hamed.TV	Sherif Gaber	Adam Elmasri	Kosay Betar
Established in	May 2015	March 2016	October 2017	February 2018
No. of subscribers	160,000	299,000	66,000	78,000
Total no. of clips	272	22	97	69
No. of clips with over 100,000 views	123	22	22	24
Most views for a single clip	641,000	2,169,000	290,000	266,000

2. Freethinking and Atheism in Arab Muslim Thought

While atheism is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Arab world, radical religious criticism is not. A common term that has been used to describe the overlapping tendencies of unconventional religious inquiry, religious criticism, and skepticism in the Muslim world—past and present—is the term "freethinking" (Schielke 2013; Urvoy 1996; Coury 2018, p. 3; Stroumsa 1999). Freethinking means critical thinking about established religious dogmas and the total or partial rejection of established religious authorities. It does not necessarily imply either belief or non-belief in a given God or religion. Arab intellectual history before the modern era includes a number of radical minds who expressed far-ranging disapproval of all known religions of their time—Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism—and many more figures who took issue with some religious dogmas from a rationalist or skeptical point of view (Urvoy 1996; Stroumsa 1999; Crone 2016). Stroumsa (1999) notices the vague use of the term "freethinkers" and proposes to reserve it for those who rejected all religious traditions, like Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī and Ibn ar-Rāwandī, the two protagonists of her study "Freethinkers of Medieval Islam" (Stroumsa 1999). While it is intriguing to know that Arab *lā-dīnī*s—those who apparently

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[1] I have excluded some popular Moroccan channels from the survey because I do not understand Moroccan Arabic.

[2] Adam Elmasri, video-interview with the author, 16 August 2020. Abdel-Samad speaks about his viewer statistics in the following clip from October 2015:كلام جديد عن المخطوطات الاولى للقرآن :برنامج صندوق الإسلام ـ الحلقة الحادية والعشرون , . (Box of Islam Programme—21st episode: new talk about the first manuscripts of the Qur'an) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyOCQmE0WL0.

"are not of a religion"—existed long before the term was invented (probably around the turn of the 21st century?), there is no benefit in defining freethinking in such a narrow way. Hence, I shall opt for a broader concept of freethinking that encompasses both believers and (possible) non-believers, precisely because it captures the "ambiguity and fluidity" (Schielke 2013, p. 648) of religious criticism in the Arab world that defies the application of narrow concepts.

Even though atheist ideas started spreading rapidly from Europe to the Middle East in the late 19th century and some Arab non-believers have adopted the term *ilḥād* in the sense of "atheism" since the 1930s, self-declared non-belief remained a rare phenomenon in the Arab world throughout the 20th century. Nevertheless, the modern Arab world has a strong tradition of freethinking, which reached a first climax in the so-called "liberal age" between the 1920s and 1950s (Hourani 1962; Coury 2018). In this period, even some mainstream intellectuals, such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889–1973) and Naǧib Maḥfūẓ (1911–2006), penned books that were considered highly impious by religious conservatives but have continued to inspire later generations of freethinkers (Diab 2017, pp. 282–86; Ǧunaym 2017). When the intellectual climate became more restricted and more conservative with the rise of authoritarian nation-states and, since the 1970s, of religious revivalism, many freethinkers became more cautious about voicing their views in public. Some decided to fight back against the rising tide of both oppositional political Islam and the Islamic-conservative turn of the nationalist regimes by adopting a discourse of political secularism (ʿalmānīya) (Kinitz 2018). As a religious stance, secularism is a type of freethinking because it can be used to criticize dogmas and certain social and political effects of religion, but brackets the question of belief itself. On this background, the emergence of a broader trend of self-declared non-believers (*lā-dīnīyūn*) or atheists (*mulḥidūn*) in the 2010s represents an important rupture from the dominant pattern of the preceding decades. However, as this study is going to show, the emerging trends of non-belief overlap and intermingle with previous traditions of freethinking to a considerable extent.

Hence, for the sake of analytical precision, I will continue to use the term freethinking along with the terms non-belief and atheism. There is an overlap between freethinking and non-belief in the area where people profess that they "have lost their faith," "have left religion x," "do not believe that God communicated with any prophet," but do not explicitly declare themselves non-believers. The generic term for professed non-belief in the contemporary Arab world seems to be *lā-dīnīya*. As mentioned above, its literal meaning is not belonging to any religion and does not imply a specific philosophical stance concerning God. In modern-day usage, *ilḥād* is a sub-category of non-belief that corresponds to what English-language scholarship usually calls "positive atheism" (Bullivant 2013; Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013).[3] The new atheist writers of the English-speaking world, such as Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, are fairly well-known in the Arab world (Jackson 2018). However, many Arab non-believers prefer other terms to describe themselves, such as agnostic (*lā-adrī*), indifferent (*lā-ikritāṯī*), or deist (*rubūbī*). As the following analysis will show, these tendencies are significant in their own right.

3. Arab Non-Belief and Social Media

As Brian Whitaker, Khaled Diab, and other chroniclers of contemporary Arab non-belief have pointed out, freethinkers and other non-conformist groups in Arab societies were early adaptors of the internet and the social media (Whitaker 2017; Diab 2017). The rapid spread of smartphones and the social media app Facebook in the Arab world has enormously facilitated this development. By the late 2000s, Atheist Facebook groups started springing up by the dozens—this is when observers first noticed that non-belief could be a growing phenomenon in Arab societies. The transition of some activists from the relatively closed and limited sphere of blogs and social media groups to YouTube

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[3] According to this definition, a positive atheist is someone who holds a specific belief that there is no God or gods, while a negative atheist is someone who does not know or does not care whether a God exists.

represents a new stage in this development and a significant shift. Going out on a limb in this manner makes them more vulnerable but also tremendously increases their potential visibility and outreach. This shift cannot be explained by social media dynamics alone, but it is also embedded in wider social and political developments, especially in Egypt, where many of the YouTube activists come from.

After the Arab uprisings in 2011, mainstream media in the Arab world experienced a short-lived period of upheaval and experimentation (Abdullah 2014; Leihs 2015). In Egypt, television anchors in private satellite channels started addressing socially sensitive topics that had previously been considered out-of-bounds, including atheism.[4] The young and media-unexperienced atheists who appeared on television shows usually faced a considerable degree of incomprehension and hostility in the studio. For the sake of spectacle, producers paired them with Azhari shaykhs who would attempt to interrogate them about their personal background and mental well-being and force them to admit intellectual and doctrinal errors (Diab 2017, pp. 260–64). In this context, it is not surprising that some activists, encouraged by the growing public interest in hard-hitting criticism of religion but intimidated by the hostile reception on mainstream television, turned to alternative media outlets. The first YouTube channel that managed to reach the production quality of regular television was Hamed.TV (Hamed.TV n.d.), set up by German-Egyptian political scientist Hamed Abdel-Samad (Ḥāmid ʿAbd al-Ṣamad, b. 1972) in 2015, and a number of others followed in subsequent years.

3.1. Hamed Abdel-Samad and the Freethinking Tradition

In Germany, where Abdel-Samad has been living since 1995, he is a public intellectual known for his (self-)critical and often provocative engagement with Islam and his appearance in debates about the integration of Muslim migrants. It is little known there that he also runs one of the most successful Arabic-language YouTube channels covering freethinking and religious criticism.[5] The channel was set up in May 2015 and had 157,000 subscribers as of August 2020. On this channel, Abdel-Samad has published a series of videos, mostly lectures by himself, entitled *Ṣandūq al-Islām* ("Box of Islam"), dozens of which have reached over a hundred thousand views.

Abdel-Samad was born and raised in rural Lower Egypt as the son of a village imam. After studying English and French in Cairo, he migrated to Germany, where he acquired an M.A. degree in political science and pursued a career in academia. In 2009, he published an autobiography entitled *Mein Abschied vom Himmel* ("My departure from heaven"), in which he portrays himself as an intellectually gifted and academically successful, but emotionally and sexually deeply troubled person. One of the main themes of the book is the desperate struggle of the first-person narrator with religion and faith. He is unable to find peace and fulfilment in religion but also cannot stop searching and hoping. "God is not the solution to my loneliness. God is my loneliness", he states enigmatically, adding that he envies people who can just calmly state that they "don't believe in anything" (Abdel-Samad 2010, p. 286). In Germany, this book propelled him from a little-known academic into a public figure. He appeared on television as a sidekick to famous journalist Henryk Broder in the satirical documentary "Entweder Broder—Die Deutschland-Safari" (2010/2011) and was invited to represent German Muslims in the advisory body "Deutsche Islam-Konferenz" by the German interior ministry.

In parallel, Abdel-Samad also attempted to launch a public career in Egypt. An Arabic version of his autobiography appeared in 2008 under the slightly modified title *Wadāʿan ayyatuhā as-samaʾ: riwāya* ("Bye-bye, heaven—a novel"). Although he was well aware that the book was likely to cause furious reactions from religious conservatives and extremists

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4. During this period, Aḥmad Ḥarqān (b. 1982), a former Salafist from Alexandria, became a well-known face of atheism on Egyptian television— see for example his appearance on the show al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ, hosted by Īmān Abū Ṭālib on Dream TV in June 2014. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIVHoR_1C2g (accessed 4 February 2021).

5. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnTJcc901wCa5vZQQot8fCw/ (accessed 13 August 2020)

and might put his safety at risk, he opted against using a pseudonym and personally appeared on Egyptian television to present the book (Abdel-Samad 2010, p. 296). His unconditional will to break taboos and stir up discussions runs deeply through Abdel-Samad's intellectual and personal style. The documentary film *Art* War (2014) by Marco Wilms shows him in 2012—at the height of Islamist influence after the 2011 revolution—walking through the streets of Cairo. He wears a T-shirt that features an image of Satan and the words (in English): "God is busy. How can I help you?" As one might expect, he ends up surrounded by a crowd of agitated young men but makes a narrow escape. In the tumultuous years of the Egyptian revolution, the courage and recklessness encapsulated in this anecdote earned him a great deal of respect from likeminded people and consolidated his reputation as a freethinker and fearless opponent of political Islam in Egypt.[6] This partly explains the immediate success of his YouTube channel when it was set up in 2015.

The basic idea of "Box of Islam" is simple: Most of the clips, each between 22 and 30 minutes long, are plain lectures by Abdel-Samad on a given topic within the genre of historical criticism. Its gist is to treat sacred scriptures and sacred histories—like the Qur'an, the life of Muhammad and the early Muslim community—as simple human phenomena that can be analyzed with the same tools of historical investigation as any other event. Abdel-Samad's trademark approach is to draw on the scholarly discourses in which he is well-versed due to his religious formation in Egypt and years in German academia. He has a way of channeling high-brow academic debates into simple and provocative talking points. While his views about Islam and Muslims have often been criticized as one-sided and overly simplistic, he has always been able to justify them on the basis of commonly recognized textual readings and historical research.[7]

Some of the most important views that Abdel-Samad expresses in "Box of Islam" and in his books are the following: The Quran is not the word of God. "I do not believe that God ever talked to Muhammad or anyone else," Abdel-Samad states bluntly (Abdel-Samad 2015, p. 159). He argues that its content can only be salvaged from a modern scientific and ethical perspective if it is thoroughly demystified and humanized. The Qur'an should be read as a human document that reflects the circumstances of its time and the experiences of Muhammed and the early Muslim community (Abdel-Samad 2018, pp. 208–30). The spiritual and ethical message of the Quran remains a valuable source of inspiration for Muslim believers and can be appreciated by non-Muslims as well. The legislative part of the Quran contains rules that constituted creative and acceptable solutions to the practical challenges of the time but are no longer valid and certainly not applicable to modern multi-religious and democratic societies. This includes Quranic injunctions concerning war and peace, the treatment of non-Muslims, women, and sexuality. Quranic passages about heaven and hell are equally problematic and only acceptable if interpreted metaphorically in the way of the mystics.

According to Abdel-Samad, traditional and literal interpretations of the Quran lead more or less directly to what he labels "Islamic fascism" (*al-fāšīya al-islāmīya*). By Islamic fascism, Abdel-Samad means the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the Salafi movement. The choice of the term "fascism" shows Abdel-Samad's style of adding rhetorical flourish and acuity to common talking points, in this case criticism of political Islam. Rather than staying on conventional territory, Abdel-Samad ups the ante by claiming that "fascistic ideas" are already present in early Islam and in the Quran (Box of Islam #36–43): Islam terminated religious pluralism on the Arab peninsula, demands absolute obedience from its followers, does not tolerate differing views, and aspires to world supremacy. Both Islam and fascism are "political religions" with their respective prophets, absolute truths, and propensity toward violence

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[6]   Kacem El Ghazzali, "Kein Preis ist zu hoch für die Freiheit: Liberale Muslime kämpfen in ihren Ländern für sie, westliche Intellektuelle kapitulieren vor ihr", NZZ, 23 May 2019, https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/muslimische-welt-aktivisten-setzen-sich-fuer-die-freiheit-ein-ld.1483682. (El Ghazzali 2019).

[7]   For an academic criticism of Abdel-Samad's views see Mouhanad Khorchide's replies in the jointly published book *Islam der Islam noch zu retten?* (Abdel-Samad and Khorchide 2017).

and martyrdom (Box of Islam #36, 7:56). From the lens of cultural psychology, Abdel-Samad claims, it is obvious that Muslim societies share the same symptoms of collective psychological disorder that plagued European societies in the age of fascism: narcissism, coupled with an acute inferiority complex and paranoia (Box of Islam #36, 6:50). It is about time that Muslim societies acknowledge these problems and deal with them in a self-critical way.

It appears that this "psychological" approach is Abdel-Samad's favorite and most powerful tool of religious criticism. This becomes clear in his iconoclastic portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad, which is the subject of the first twenty episodes of *Box of Islam*, uploaded between June and October 2015. In the same year, Abdel-Samad published the book *Mohamed. Eine Abrechung* ("Settling the Score with Muhammad"), which covers the same material. In this book, Abdel-Samad initially shows an acute interest in revisionist tendencies in Western Islamic studies, which postulate that Islamic narratives about the Prophet and the early community cannot be corroborated scientifically and that early Islamic history may have to be retold in a totally different way.[8] However, in the end, he opts for a radically different approach, which consists in taking the Islamic sources at face value, but reading them against the grain. This sudden shift away from radical historical-critical skepticism is explained by Abdel-Samad's real aim, which is to draw a life-like "psychological portrait" of Muhammad that reflects his deeply personal disappointment in the Prophet.

Abdel-Samad's portrait goes as follows: Muhammad was a deeply ambiguous person who did a lot of good things but suffered from serious behavioral disorders and mental problems. The roots of Muhammad's torn personality lie in his difficult childhood. Orphaned at an early age and raised by strangers, he was an outsider in his own clan. Some even suspected that he was not a legitimate child. The deprivations of his early life, which only ended with his unconventional marriage to the wealthy widow Khadija, motivated his lifelong "addiction to power and recognition" (Abdel-Samad 2015, p. 16). His prophetical calling—after a relatively stable and happy period as Khadija's husband—was probably the result of a specific type of epilepsy. However, this was not his only illness: he was a narcissist, a control freak and a paranoiac. He compulsively married many women in his later life, but "he did not treat them like tyrant, but rather like a disturbed child that suffers from a fear of abandonment" (Abdel-Samad 2015, p. 16). Once he had tasted power as head of his community in Medina, his use of violence became unscrupulous and excessive even considering the standards of the time, as for example when he ordered the annihilation of a whole Jewish tribe, the Banū Qurayẓa (Abdel-Samad 2015, p. 192). Abdel-Samad further points out that according to the Islamic sources Muhammad condoned the killing of people who criticized him or made fun of him, for example the Jewish poet Kaʿb b. al-Ašraf.

As much as Abdel-Samad's theses about Muhammad and the Quran and Islamic religion in general aim at provoking and unsettling devout Muslims and forcing them to embark on a radical re-evaluation of their beliefs, it is possible that his core audience does not perceive him primarily as a non-believer or atheist. To start with, Abdel-Samad has prudently never put a label on his own religious status: Is he a doubting and struggling believer who is just "angry at God and the Prophet" but willing to reconcile? Is he a religious searcher, a spiritual person without religion or God, like some of his German acquaintances whom he describes favorably in his autobiography? (Abdel-Samad 2010, pp. 17–36, 230–33) Or has he become an agnostic or an atheist? He does not say. Probably, "freethinker" would be a fair description. This also makes sense because it is precisely the tradition of Arab freethinking that allows him to be at the center of debates with people from a variety of intellectual and religious trends, many of whom seem to appreciate him as a critical interlocutor.

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8   He rehearses the well-known works of Michael Cook and Patricia Crone on the subject, but seems more familiar with the writings of the "Saarbrücken school," a lesser-known group of German orientalists who share between them the hypothesis that the historical Muhammad probably did not exist and that Islam originated as a Arab-Christian sect in the Levant. In spite of devoting a great deal of attention to the revisionists, he ultimately dismisses their findings—which also have not been accepted widely in Western Islamic studies.

Looking at the "guest list" of Abdel-Samad's channel, there is the Egyptian Aḥmad Saˁd Zāyid, who appears in a series of episodes in 2019, is a university lecturer and fellow YouTuber who runs a popular channel on the "history of ideas" and calls himself a "humanist." In 2017, Abdel-Samad travelled around France and Morocco to meet a number of Maghrebian intellectuals and give them the opportunity to promote their published works. Among the people he interviewed are Muḥammad al-Musayyaḥ, a historian and researcher in pre-Islamic and early Islamic manuscripts,; secularist philosopher and Amazigh activist Muḥammad ˁAṣīd, Rašīd Aylāl, author of an iconoclastic book about al-Buˁārī and his Hadith collection[9]; and Saˁīd Nāšīd, whose books promote a rationalist style of Islamic faith.[10] Finally, there is Mouhanad Khorchide, professor of Islamic theology at the University of Münster (Germany), with whom Abdel-Samad has also held several public debates about "whether a reform of Islam is possible" and with whom he has published a common book on the same matter (Abdel-Samad and Khorchide 2017).

Significantly, none of these guests are professing non-believers and some, like Mouhanad Khorchide, Aḥmad Saˁd Zāyid, and Saˁīd Nāšīd, are even avowed Sunni Muslim believers. Rather than the promotion of atheism, the main aim of Abdel-Samad's channel seems to be the creation of a virtual "intellectual salon" for freethinkers from all over the Arab-speaking world, including the Western diaspora. The aim that Abdel-Samad shares with his guests and that motivates them to collaborate with him is to demolish religious dogma and replace certainty with doubt and open inquiry—freethinking in its traditional sense. Finding an alternative identity and philosophical answers to existential questions outside religion, on the contrary, do not appear as a central issue. Regarding the age of Abdel-Samad and his circle of guests—uniformly middle-aged and above, this might be a message that has a stronger appeal among the older generations in the Arab world. However, regarding the size of the audience, it must be considered an important current alongside the novel trends of non-belief. It is also transformative in the sense that Abdel-Samad—if one accepts him as a freethinker—has probably pushed the boundaries of Arab freethinking as far as very few people before him.[11]

In one of their debates, Mouhanad Khorchide asks Abdel-Samad, somewhat exasperatedly, "I really wonder how you want to reform Islam if you at the same time hold that it is not susceptible to reform. Which kind of offer are you trying to make to Muslims? Burying the prophet and abolishing the Quran is not reform." While Abdel-Samad ducks the question, an increasing number of Arab activists on the internet—especially of the younger generation—have been offering a straightforward answer: leave Islam and become a *lā-dīnī* (non-believer).

3.2. Sherif Gaber: Atheist and Comedian

According to his YouTube figures, the most successful creator of atheist content on the Arab internet in the late 2010s is Sherif Gaber (Šarīf Ǧābir), a young Egyptian in his twenties, who has 288,000 subscribers (as of August 2020) and whose most popular videos have reached between one and two million views. While Hamed Abdel-Samad successfully boasts his academic credentials and erudition in the field of humanities and social sciences, the rising star of Sherif Gaber is attributed to his ability to translate religious criticism into the "language of the young people" or the "language of the streets." Another part of Gaber's fame lies in his courage—although living in Egypt, he appears under his real name—and his well-publicized history of persecution at the hands of religious conservatives and the Egyptian state.[12] Even though his videos are exclusively in Egyptian Arabic, he has a circle of supporters from around the globe who provide his clips with

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[9] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḫārī. Nihāyat usṭūra* ("Sahih al-Bukhari—the end of a legend"), Rabat: Dār al-Waṭan, 2017.

[10] An expression borrowed from title of one of his books: *Dalīl at-tadayyun al-ˁāqil* ("A Guide to rational religiosity"), Cairo: Dār at-Tanwīr, 2017.

[11] For portraits of previous modern Arab freethinkers like Ameen Rihani, Ǧamīl Ṣidqī az-Zahāwī and Maˁrūf ar-Ruṣāfī see Coury 2018.

[12] Khaled Diab, "Egyptian atheists: Caught between Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde", 24 May 2018, http://chronikler.com/reflections/egyptian-atheists-sherif-gaber/. Sherif Gaber describes his own story in "Help Me Escape Egypt", 29 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNXMBH5mIX0.

subtitles in various foreign languages and have pledged a total of over USD 4000 monthly on the crowdfunding platform Patreon to support his effort.[13]

Remarkably, while most successful YouTubers tend to publish a new video every one to two weeks to keep the audience hooked, Gaber has only produced 22 videos since March 2016 (Sherif Gaber n.d.). What is it that makes him so interesting to his audience? Gaber's early videos follow the usual pattern of a YouTube lecture; with his informal style of talking and the heavy use of visual aids, cuts from documentary films, and memes, Gaber obviously appeals to a younger demographic of "digital natives" who expect a presentation to be entertaining.

While Gaber's talking points are similar to those of all non-believers (science, history, ethics, and logic), he somewhat stands out with a strong commitment to atheism (*ilḥād*) with a tendency toward scientism and materialism. In one clip, for example, he tackles the "superstition of the soul" and offers biological and chemical explanations to the phenomena of human feelings and consciousness. In a series of videos (March–July 2016), Gaber focuses on convincing the audience that it is not possible to reconcile a scientific world-view with Islam. In doing this he adopts a rhetoric of "shock" and "confrontation" (*uslūb aṣ-ṣadma*), by which he juxtaposes his own rational, scientific, and humanist point of view to the conservative Islam of the traditional religious scholars and the Salafi preachers who populate Arab television.[14] He especially attacks those who try to reconcile scientific discoveries with a conservative or scriptural reading of the Quran under the label of the "scientific miracle" (*al-iˑǧāz al-ˑilmī*), a widespread exegetical tendency in contemporary Islam (Dallal 2004; Riexinger 2011; Bigliardi 2017).[15] Like other non-believers on YouTube, Gaber is confident to be able to prove that the so-called "scientific exegesis" is in fact pseudo-scientific nonsense. A favorite topic of Gaber's in the field of ethics is the subordination of women and sexual self-determination; he defends gender equality and the rights of homosexuals. He also attempts to prove that violence in the name of religion is not a problem of marginal extremists but goes back to the core teachings of Islam and have shaped the history of Muslim societies. The deeds of the Salafi-Jihadist extremists of the so-called "Islamic State," who controlled parts of Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2017, are according to Gaber not an aberration from but a true reflection of Islamic law.[16]

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.[17] Another video called "A Muslim meets God on the Day of Judgement" (*Muslim yuqābil Allāh fī yawm al-Qiyāma*),[18] is Gaber's most popular production so far with over two million views. Gaber impersonates an average, decidedly dumb-witted Muslim, whose confidence is not impaired by his limited knowledge about his religion. He has just died unexpectedly and now arrives at the gates of heaven. There he meets a bossy guardian angel and runs into trouble because the Judgement turns out to be different than he expects. For example, the angel has apparently

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[13] See https://www.patreon.com/SherifGaber (accessed on 9 September 2020). Patreon is mostly used by artists and producers of creative internet content in order to invite donations and subscriptions by their audience. Although other YouTube activists of non-religion also use Patreon, Gaber so far seems the only one who earns a significant amount of money through it.

[14] Deutsche Welle Arabic, Shabab Talk, 14.06.2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLBwgBs6oZc, 28:22.

[15] خرافة إعجاز تكوين الجنين في القرآن(The fable of the miraculous scientific accuracy of the embryology of the Qur'an) 25 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQXjyuxpNdE ?هل أوتاد الجبال إعجاز علمي(Are the "pegs of the mountains" a scientific miracle?) 2 May 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IAPPvDs8qg.

[16] هل داعش تمثل الإسلام(Does ISIS represent Islam?), 5 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKYLS6XOxs0.

[17] علمانية ولا إسلامية؟(Secular or Islamic?), 28 October 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db56vgzAsc8.

[18] مسلم يقابل الله يوم القيامة(A Muslim meets God on Judgement Day) 28 January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1AKpD49KmQ.

never heard about the famous Hadith that whoever says "There is no God but God" will be allowed to enter paradise right away. Instead, he demands proof of good deeds.

A third video of the same type features two men trying to convince an atheist to join their monotheistic religion based on worship of the God "Renos" and his friend "Ḥamāda" (a common nickname for "Muḥammad").[19] The conversation passes through the expected points of discussion between devout Muslims and non-believers. The atheist refuses to believe in a God whom nobody has ever seen and who cannot be described in rational terms. He suspects that the Prophet Ḥamāda might have written the Book himself, considering that nobody was there when he first received it and that parts of it read like an expression of his whims and desires.[20] The believers then contend that the Book's beauty and wisdom proves its authenticity and has persuaded "400 Russians and 67 North Koreans" to join the Religion. However, the atheist remains unimpressed and points out that the Book contains plenty of illogical and unscientific sentences. Next, the believers contend that atheism is a materialistic worldview that does not recognize any moral rules, while the atheist retorts that reason provides a sufficient foundation for morality. Finally, the discussion reaches the issue of creation. The atheist contends that the existence of the world does not logically presuppose the existence of a God who created it, even less so of a God who "loves and hates" like human beings.

Sherif Gaber's plays are open to interpretations on different levels. As any type of comedy and satire, they work with the tools of exaggeration and innuendo and play with the repressed emotions and taboos of the audience.[21] The open blasphemy involved Gaber's portrayal of the Judgement Day and the "Renos and Ḥamāda" parody is a tool of provocation that has much in common with Abdel-Samad's irreverent portrayal of the Prophet, but the theatrical enactment gives it an additional edge. Gaber's believing critics—who are at least as numerous and vocal as his supporters—correctly point out that the religious types he impersonates and the things they say about religion are grotesque caricatures that do not represent a deeper understanding of Islam.[22] Indeed, one might question whether Gaber's stark juxtaposition of various figures representing his own atheistic point of view and a parade of devout morons and bigots can deliver an intellectually compelling criticism of Islam as such. Needless to say, the atheist always easily wins the argument.

On a different level, Gaber's satire can also be read as a biting commentary on socially existing religion, in which case it becomes hard to deny that his figures—however exaggerated—are taken from real life in Egypt and the Arab world. People like them can be witnessed in religious debates on television on a frequent basis, and they constitute a constant source of anxiety for Arab non-believers who are considering to "come out" about their non-belief.[23] On this background, they can easily relate to the scenes enacted by Gaber. For the non-believers who make up his large group of fans and admirers, Gaber's plays have a potential of catharsis and self-assurance: First, they allow them to have a good laugh about social situations that are filled with awkwardness and anxiety in their own imagination or experience. Second, they symbolically reverse the balance of power, which is heavily tilted in favor of the religious conservatives in real life (Jackson 2018; Diab 2017, pp. 244–93; Whitaker 2017; Schielke 2013, p. 647). In Sherif Gaber's parallel universe, the atheist confidently deflects the arguments and threats of the believers and proves his own

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19 شيخ يدعو ملحد إلى عبادة الإله. (A sheykh calls an atheist to the veneration of a deity) 19 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mG6 4EUUxOj4.

20 A somewhat distorted allusion to the story of Zaynab bint Ǧaḥš, which is frequently mentioned by Arab non-believers, cf. (Abdel-Samad 2015, pp. 127–32). According to the Quran (Q 33:37), God personally decreed Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab, thereby changing the rule that Muslims could not marry the former wives of their adopted sons.

21 For a more detailed analysis of the use of humour among Arab atheists, see the contribution of Lena Richter in this special issue.

22 For example, Aḥmad Buḥayrī. {إعرفوه بالعقل} (07) شيخ يدعو ملحد إلى عبادة الإله الواحد "Know it with your intellect" (7) A sheykh calls an atheist to the veneration of a deity). 24 March 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkIifQdSjKA.

23 According to numerous accounts collected by journalists, non-believers face hostile reactions from relatives, friends, and acquaintances on a daily basis, and many more have probably been choosing to keep their real convictions to themselves. See (Jackson 2018; Whitaker 2017, pp. 77–98; Diab 2017, pp. 244–93).

intellectual and moral superiority. Even Heaven is on the side of the non-believers: In the Judgement Day scenario, it turns out that God has just been watching a video of Carl Sagan, an American science popularizer with avowedly naturalist and agnostic convictions—and He enjoyed it greatly![24]

3.3. Adam Elmasri: A Deist Alternative to Atheism?

While the shock-and-confrontation style of Hamed Abdel-Samad and Sherif Gaber is probably one of the keys to their social media fame, there are other paths to success as well. On the basis of the well-known accounts of Arab Atheism, the Egyptian Adam Elmasri (a pseudonym), may appear as a rather untypical Arab non-believer. He was not born into Islam, but into Coptic Christianity, and he does not declare himself an atheist (*mulḥīd*), but describes his own beliefs as deist (*rubūbī*). Since the start of his YouTube channel in October 2017, he has been able to gather an audience of over 60,000 subscribers, and more than a dozen of his videos have crossed the threshold of 100,000 views. Thousands of favorable comments and questions under his videos also reveal that his message motivates a high degree of engagement among his audience.

From his videos, it is possible to put together a fairly detailed intellectual and religious biography of Adam Elmasri. Doubtless, Adam's ability to verbalize and explain the complex intellectual and emotional process of becoming an unbeliever is one of the strengths of the channel. Adam was born in the late 1970s in Cairo and grew up in Egypt as a Coptic Orthodox Christian.[25] He describes his former self as a committed believer who enjoyed mass and spiritual retreats at monasteries (a common practice among Coptic Orthodox believers) and lived his daily life "in the company of Jesus Christ." As an adolescent, he became engaged in religious dialogue and acquired a great deal of knowledge about Islam through reading and attending discussion groups with Muslims. He graduated from college in Egypt and worked for a while as a graphics designer. Adam's departure from Christianity only occurred after he migrated from Egypt to a Western country at the age of 27.[26] He had already reached his thirties when, after enrolling in a humanities-based BA program of Biblical Studies, he came to realize that "religions are just a human invention and that there is no such thing as revelation." Adam describes his departure from religion as intellectually liberating—stressing the enlightening effect of philosophical reasoning and scientific knowledge—but also as emotionally painful.

In several videos, Adam explains why rejecting religion has not turned him into an atheist *stricto sensu*. He describes himself as a *lā-dīnī*, someone who does not follow any religion, and a deist (*rubūbī*), a believer in some sort of "first mover" (*musabbib awwal*) or creating force (*quwa ḫaliqa*).[27] Some of his educational videos describe Adam's open-ended search for alternative philosophical ways of thinking about God.[28] A major reference seems to be the best-selling "Conversations with God" series by American author Neale Donald

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[24] مسلم يقابل الله يوم القيامة. (A Muslim meets God on Judgement Day) 28 January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1AKpD49KmQ, 13:40.

[25] ولماذا هذه القناة التي تهاجم الأديان؟ (المعروف بالباحث سابقاً)من هو ادم المصري   (Who is Adam el-Masry (formerly known as 'the Searcher') and why this channel that attacks the religions?)   8 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1WuH0 6qFhA; فيديو لابد من مشاهدته لكل مسيحي ترك الإيمان او يعرف شخصاً ترك المسيح.   (A must-watch video for every Christian who left belief or knowns anyone who left Christ), 20 September 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwHukFZbUEs في سبع سنين ـ تعليق علي رحلة بعض الملحدين ولماذا اتهوا إلي الإلحاد(In Seven Years—a comment on the journey of some atheists and why they ended up with atheism), 11 February 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MByY2ilG08.

[26] Adam Elmasri, video-interview with the author, 16 August 2020.

[27] كيف تعجز الحجة الأخلاقية عن إثبات وجود الله(How the moral argument for the existence of God falls short), 25 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWhj_m5-dnU.

[28] At the beginning of his YouTube career, he used the pseudonym *al-bāḥiṯ* ("searcher"), probably a deliberate double-entendre between the two meanings of the Arabic term *baḥṯ*: religious-spiritual search and scientific research.

Walsch, who is considered a representative of New Age or non-religious spirituality.[29] Quite different in style are a number of carefully produced "short films" that highlight the emotional, personal side of non-belief and the search for answers to existential questions.[30] Considering the effort that must have gone into them, they seem to be closest to Adam's heart and personal aspiration. However, regarding the number of views and comments, his audience clearly prefers Adam in his role as a hard-hitting, witty and academically informed critic of religious dogma.

Most of his videos, as well as his most popular ones fall into this category. Their general style is that of an educational lecture, but Adam Elmasri's eloquent rhetorical style and consistent use of colloquial Egyptian Arabic also inspire a degree of informality. Adam's videos are split between those attacking specific Christian and Islamic dogmas, such as the resurrection of Christ or the inimitability of the Quran, and those that criticize teachings that are in some way common to Islam and Christianity. Adam's treatment of Christianity is clearly focused on the Egyptian context and goes right to the core of the most commonly held religious beliefs and practices among Coptic Orthodox Christians (Voile 2004; Heo 2018). In one of the first videos of this kind, he challenges the claim of the Coptic Orthodox Church that it has preserved the authentic original doctrine of Christianity. He describes the large variety of Christian teachings from the very beginning and argues that, from a scientific point of view, there is no such thing as the original Christian doctrine.[31] Even the compilation of the Gospel, he argues, was subject to a great deal of historical accident. Subsequently, Adam Elmasri published a series of clips that challenge and debunk "Christian miracles": the widely celebrated Marian apparitions in Zaytūn (1968) and in other places across Egypt; the Holy Fire miracle experienced by Orthodox Christians every year at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; miracles of healing attributed to the Virgin Mary or famous Arab Christian saints.[32] In addition to this, Adam's channel also offers a series of more scholarly lectures on the history of Christianity.

While Adam originally started out with the aim of offering a rationalist and historical-critical commentary on Orthodox Christianity and an introduction to non-belief, he quickly got drawn into the already raging YouTube rivalry between propagandists of Islam, mostly of the Salafi tendency, and Arab non-believers. His commentary on Islam was triggered by audience reactions and debates, rather than by a pre-conceived agenda.[33] In his replies to viewers who welcome his radical criticism of Christianity and use it as an occasion to

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[29] وهم الانفصال ـ اكبر وهم في تاريخ البشرية ـ قد يغير حياتك. (The illusion of separation—the biggest illusion in the history of mankind—this might change your life) 18 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0da6P6sn4k; رحلة في عقل الإله ـ الحلقة الأولى ـ كيف يتواصل الإله وهل يكشف عن ذاته؟ (A journey within the mind of God—first episode—how does God communicate and how does he reveal himself?), 13 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1euaBn_VdHo.

[30] (The atheist believer—a short film about the right belief)المؤمن الملحد ـ فيلم قصير عن الإيمان الصحيح, 13 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZF7MdygR6g. سيرك الحياة ـ فيلم قصير ـ Circus of Life—Short film. 25 July 2019; تجربة جديدة ـ مناجاة ـ لكل من يعاني فى صراعه مع رحلة الشك للخروج من الأديان. (A new experience—rescue for everyone who struggles with their journey of doubt towards leaving religions), 16 September 2019; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeFs0qB5i38.

[31] المستقيم (الأرثوذكسي)اكبر وهم في تاريخ نشأة المسيحية والإيمان الرسولي(The greatest illusion in the history of early Christianity and the proprer apostolic/orthodox faith), 6 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0vTg8kodW0;

[32] كشف معجزات المسيحية ـ الحلقة الأولى ـ معجزة نقل جبل المقطم بين الواقع والخرافة(Unveiling the miracles of Christianity—first episode—the miracle of the displacement of the Muqattam hills between reality and fable), 27 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfU73PA5cIE. كشف معجزات المسيحية ـ الحلقة الثانية ـ ظهورات العذراء، معجزة أم خداع؟ (Unveiling the miracles of Christianity—second episode—are the apparitions of the Virgin Mary miracles or deceit?), 17 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEbKhAJsT60. كشف معجزات المسيحية ـ الحلقة الثالثة ـ وهم النور المقدس خرافة سبت النور(Unveiling the miracles of Christianity—third episode—the illusion of the holy light on the 'Saturday of Light') 18 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdFm8BhD29E. كشف معجزات المسيحية ـ الحلقة الرابعة ـ معجزات الشفاء(Unveiling the miracles of Christianity—fourth episode—miracles of healing), 4 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjZCEDk_F4w.

[33] Adam Elmasri, video-interview with the author, 16 August 2020.

"invite him to Islam," Adam goes much less into the details of everyday piety and mostly focuses on scientific mistakes and logical contradictions within the Quran.[34]

His favorite approach, however, consists in challenging shared dogmatic issues of the monotheistic religions, as well as social mores that are based on conservative interpretations of Islam and Christianity. This approach is especially significant, because it marks him out as a principled non-believer, whose message cannot easily be misconstrued as being just anti-Islam or anti-Christianity, a common misconception by social media users.[35] Among the shared dogmatic elements in the monotheistic religions that Adam subjects to a historical criticism are the Deluge and the figure of Satan.[36] As always, the message is they are in fact human inventions, "legends" (*asāṭīr*) and "illusions" (*awhām*) that can easily be demystified with the tools of natural science and by historical-critical inquiry into the religious traditions themselves. In a series of videos entitled *Rabbinā ʿayiz kiddah* ("God wills it"), Adam discusses religious commandments pertaining to social and personal life: marriage and divorce, gender relations, love and sex, and homosexuality. He states, "My problem is not with religion in itself, but with those who claim to know exactly what God wants and want to force everyone to live accordingly."[37] Based on a general philosophical reasoning, he calls for gender equality in marriage and divorce and the acceptance of homosexuality as a biologically given inclination, not a choice, and argues that pre-marital intercourse should not be considered as "adultery" (*zinā*). Following up on the argument that the rules of the Sharia and Christian canon law are man-made and not sanctioned by God, he invites his viewers to imagine a God who "does not want us" to follow these rules, but only requires us to "live together in human kindness."[38]

3.4. Kosay Betar: Agnosticism and the Question of Coexistence

A shared characteristic between Adam Elmasri (Adam Elmasri n.d.) and Kosay Betar (Quṣayy Bīṭār) (Kosay Betar n.d.), another emerging YouTube figure of the late 2010s, is the more nuanced approach towards belief and unbelief that does not construe them as polar opposites. Kosay is a Syrian in his twenties who lives in a Western country. He describes himself as a self-taught "agnostic" (*lā-adrī*) without any claim to philosophical or academic erudition. His videos consist in entertaining lectures and fictional conversations in colloquial Syrian Arabic. The self-description of his channel—as of August 2020—reads as follows: "Hello, I'm Quṣay Bīṭār from Damascus, Syria. [. . .] I love and respect all humanist (*insānī*) and moderate believers from any religion. The aim of my channel is to share my thoughts about religion, science and logic. It is an attempt to give the new generation a chance to see things from a different perspective, a chance that I did not have when I was young."[39]

Kosay started his YouTube channel in February 2018 and has published videos on an almost weekly base through 2019 and 2020. His audience has been increasing at a remarkable pace: Between February and August 2020, the number of subscribers to

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34 In a nutshell: لماذا لم أعتنق الإسلام ولم أعتبر بالقرآن؟ (Why I did not embrace Islam and consider the Qur'an), 19 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4NQQyI_VdY.

35 Adam Elmasri, video-interview with the author, 16 August 2020. In a study on controversies about Islam on YouTube, Ahmed Al-Rawi (2017) notes that—across political and language barriers—the YouTube audience is strongly polarized and divided into mutually antagonistic camps: Muslims vs. Western Islamophobes, Sunni vs. Shia Muslims, and Arab Muslims vs. Arab Christians. This explains why people would wrongly pigeonhole voices with a more nuanced or previously unknown message.

36 أسطورة الطوفان ـ إن كانت نظرية التطور خطأً فهل تصح الأديان والكتب السماوية؟ (The legend of the Deluge—in case the theory of evolution is a mistake, does that mean the religions and their Holy Books are right?), 2 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ug0-Pm-NZOE. الشيطان و أصله فى الديانات الإبراهيمية (إبليس)كيف تطور اختراع شخصية (How the invention of the person of Satan/the devil developed and on its origin in the Abrahamic religions), 7 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwZkjxGPN30.

37 ربنا عايز كدة ـ الحلقة الأولى ـ الزواج والطلاق (God does not want this—first episode—marriage and divorce), 25 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqMifRoYfQo.

38 ربنا عايز كدة ـ الحلقة الأولى ـ الزواج والطلاق (God does not want this—first episode—marriage and divorce) 25 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqMifRoYfQo.

39 https://www.youtube.com/c/KosayBetar/about (accessed 25 August 2020).

his channel rose from 30,000 to 60,000, and many of his recent videos have passed the threshold of 100,000 views; thousands of likes and mostly favorable comments show that a considerable part of the audience is actively engaging with the content.

According to his own account, Kosay experienced a gradual loss of faith as a young adolescent that was triggered less by external changes than by lingering questions and doubts.[40] Journalist Khaled Diab found a similar process in many of the non-believers he interviewed: "For a surprising number of atheists [. . .] their abandonment of faith was, paradoxically, actually the product of an attempt to deepen it, understand religion better or silence the doubts plaguing their consciences." (Diab 2017, p. 255). Kosay turned to reading the Quran, hoping to find answers: didn't people always say that it was written in clear, easily understandable Arabic? Instead, he stumbled on many verses that were hard to understand and explain, and a great many that clashed with his own sense of logic and morality. As he was losing his faith more and more, he experienced a phase of shock, anger, and disappointment vis-à-vis his parents and Muslim society at large: Why were they telling us all those illogical stories about God, Creation, and Revelation?[41] Why were they lying to us about the negative sides of the Prophet and the Quran?

As much as he stresses that he was not raised in an intolerant, bigoted religious atmosphere, Kosay expresses a strong intellectual disaffection with liberal and progressive interpretations of Islam.[42] He compares those who argue that the Quran does not promote violence and hatred with those who propagate the "scientific miracles" found in the Quran: both approaches rely on selective and entirely arbitrary interpretations that have no philological or historical basis. When it comes to the questions of violence towards non-believers and the subordination of women, Kosay seems convinced that the conservative and extremist shaykhs do have much of the textual evidence on their side. He frequently uses "citations" in the form of short video clips from television shaykhs—all the way from the conservative Egyptian preacher Mutawallī Šaʿrāwi (1911–1998) to the league of mostly Saudi-Arabian and Egyptian Salafi scholars who became famous through television during the 2000s. One of his favorite references is Waǧdī Ġunaym (Wagdi Ghoneim, b. 1951), a firebrand preacher affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who espoused Salafi-Jihadist views after the 2013 coup in Egypt. In the clips referenced by Kosay, he defends some of the most shocking practices re-introduced by the so-called "Islamic State" on the basis of traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), such as the enslavement of prisoners of war.[43] Even though Kosay does not deny that different, more moderate interpretations of Islam exist and have a broad following, he mistrusts the broad influence of the "bigoted" (*mutaʿaṣṣibūn*) shaykhs in Arab societies, especially over uneducated people. It's the moral outrage at the injustice of both the foundational religious texts—Quran and Hadith—and the conservative scholars and preachers who uphold them to this and try to force them on society, that fuels Kosay's drive to dismiss the religious tradition altogether.

Kosay's attacks on religious dogma follow his personal explorations along the main paths of non-belief described above: textual criticism, philosophical reasoning, and historical inquiry. What is unique about his channel is Kosay's thoughtful engagement with a question that is probably quite essential to those who have lost their faith: 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? How do I counter accusations

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40 الطريق إلى اللادينية - 7المغالطون الحلقة(The deceivers #7—the path towards non-belief), 8 August 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITOs5 XIEhZ0. فشل قصة الخلق - 1لماذا تركت الإسلام ـ الحلقة(Why I left Islam #1—the story of creation is a failure), 16 March 2020, https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=fZMFZvKPjX4.

41 فشل قصة الخلق - 1لماذا تركت الإسلام ـ الحلقة(Why I left Islam #1—the story of creation is a failure), 16 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=fZMFZvKPjX4.

42 أسباب إنتشار الإلحاد و التشكيك في المجتمع الإسلامي ـ مشاكل التفسير(The reasons for the spread of atheism and doubt in Islamic society—problems of exegesis), 5 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc9xxsT9U40.

43 صالح لكل زمان و مكان - 12لماذا تركت الإسلام ـ الحلقة(Why I left Islam #12—suitable for all times and places), 21 August 2020, https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=5fYrCxLumdI.

and prejudice? How do I sort out my relationship with believers, both intellectually and emotionally?

In one of his earliest videos, Kosay takes to task the arrogance and excessive in-group/out-group thinking of many non-believers, especially recent ones: "Atheism does not make you more intelligent or more educated!"[44] Some have left religion merely because of an emotional crisis or because it is "cool."[45] Many atheists, he warns, have experienced a sudden, superficial and ill-digested conversion, which then becomes a source of intolerance and bigotry. Here, Kosay echoes (self-)critical tones that are not uncommon among Egyptian non-believers, too (Schielke 2013, p. 646; Andeel 2015). Kosay insists that atheists should be the first to respect others and other opinions because the lack of intellectual freedom inside religion is exactly why they left it. He suggests that being a believer or not is not a matter of intelligence (*ḏakāʾ*) but of conviction (*iqtināʿ*), and people with different convictions can still respect and love each other. Still, unbelievers have something important to give because they contribute to the spread of science and logic in societies that have been intellectually stagnant for a long time.

On a related note, Kosay points out that people who have left religion are still in search of a worldview and an ethical orientation that they find rationally convincing and emotionally appealing.[46] The path toward settling on a new conviction can be long and arduous. For example, there is no teleological progression from religious belief to deism, then agnosticism, and finally positive atheism. Any of those stages is a valid intellectual stance in itself. Kosay stresses that is it important to explain these differences to religious believers as well, in order to counteract the problem that non-believers in Arab societies get lumped together indiscriminately under the label of atheism (*ilḥād*), which is fraught with negative connotations.[47] Kosay makes a lot of effort to confront the most common preconceptions and accusations faced by non-believers and to suggest effective counter-arguments.

For example, it is a common misconception (according to Kosay) that atheism and its emphasis on science leads to a materialist belief in the non-existence of God.[48] In contrast, he proposes that non-believers simply place knowledge above belief and hence refuse to believe in things or theories that they do not find intellectually convincing, a stance called agnosticism (*lā adrīya*). When Muslim believers portray disbelief as something eccentric or implausible, it should be pointed out that disbelief is in fact quite a common thing: Most believers only believe in one particular God and disbelieve in all the other Gods that other humans believe in. Another common prejudice is the one that equates atheism with (supposedly) anti-religious modern ideologies such as communism or National Socialism and the crimes committed in their name. Kosay concedes that (unlike Hitler) Stalin and Mao were indeed atheists. However, he argues that what united Stalin and Mao and motivated their brutal methods was their "belief in the absolute power of the state." Political authoritarianism of this kind can be accompanied with a desire to abolish religion, but it can also be combined with a drive to control religion and use it as a tool of dominance, which according to Kosay is the case with the regimes of the Arab world. The most important point, however, is that different from any given religion, atheism is not a single doctrine with a fixed set of books or references. There is no atheist Book that constitutes the basis of the variety of ideologies and world-views adopted by non-believers.

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[44] انجازات الملحدين العرب(The achievements of Arab atheists), 19 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYDIvv3Jgnw; Cf. the observation by Anthon Jackson: "Of course, there is plenty of in-group/out-group thinking on Egyptian atheist forums, including outright mockery of what many members see as pure religious lunacy." (Jackson 2018).

[45] الطريق إلى اللادينية - ٧المغالطون الحلقة(The deceivers #7—the path towards non-belief), 8 August 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITOs5XIEhZ0.

[46] Ibid.

[47] الإيمان و الإلحاد و إحتمالية وجود الله(Belief and unbelief and the probability of the existence of God), 5 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hpNTYZ20ig.

[48] Ibid.

A different but equally common accusation is that atheism is only a cover-up for the unbridled pursuit of carnal pleasure.[49] According to Kosay, conservative believers like to picture atheists as people who migrate to the West in order live a life full of parties, alcohol, and sex. Here, he argues that they completely misconstrue a lifestyle that is in principle open to religiously prohibited pleasures like alcohol or premarital relationships. Why do they only focus on the sexual aspects of relationships and fail to recognize that they are as much about love, mutual respect, and responsibility? As matter of fact, there are many Muslims in Arab countries who pursue a hedonistic lifestyle; the pursuit of pleasure has nothing really to do with the question of belief and unbelief. For a man whose only concern in life is to give free rein to his sexual drive, the most appealing choice should not be any Western state but the Islamic system propagated by Salafi Muslim and in which men will be allowed to sleep with an almost unlimited number of wives and female slaves.

In one of his clips, Kosay states the view that, while non-believers will always be in a zero-sum struggle with the "bigots" (*mutaꜥaibūn*)—among the learned authorities as well as among the common people—there is a chance that they can coexist and be on friendly terms with other Muslim believers.[50] There are those educated Muslim who try to interpret the Quran in a contemporary way, who believe in a tolerant and forgiving God, and who want to live in peace with people from other religions. However, there are also uneducated Muslims who live with a simple belief in a good God and a desire to lead an ethical life, and there is no reason to be in conflict with them either.

4. Discussion

All of the freethinkers and non-believers covered in this survey are firm in their rejection of the sanctity of religious beliefs and dogmas and in their insistence that everybody should have the right to criticize them and even make fun of them outright. In the Arab world, where there is a long tradition of expressing doubt about religious dogma in a nuanced, allusive or figurative way, and in small and often 'elitist' social circles, this is a significant innovation. The deeper socio-economic reasons of this phenomenon remain to be explored: migration and the globalization of education and media, individualism and consumerism, the demographic transition and weakening of traditional family and neighborhood structures. The fact that the phenomenon also includes members of religious minorities seems highly significant in this context, but remains to be explored more thoroughly. However, there is no doubt that the apparent spread of freethinking and non-belief at this particular point in history has been made possible to a large extent by advances in media technology. Only the rapid spread of social media in the Arab world and the increasing availability of low-budget broadcasting technology have enabled a new generation of Arab non-believers to move beyond the limits of book-reading intellectual circles and beyond the hostile environment of the mainstream media and begin to address—in some cases apparently with considerable success—a wider Arabic-speaking public.

Beyond the general agreement on unlimited free speech concerning religion, there are important differences in style and intellectual approach. First, there is the differentiation in the protagonists' self-description: On the one hand, there are the non-believers who see themselves as atheists (Sherif Gaber) or use the more generic term *lā-dīnī* plus an additional qualifier like agnostic (Kosay Betar) or theist (Adam Elmasri). On the other hand, there are those who continue to identify with the religion they were born into or refuse to declare their religious status and form whom I have suggested the term freethinkers. If people in this group use self-descriptions, these do not indicate whether they are believers or not but focus on other aspects of their intellectual stance, such as secularism (*ꜥalmānīya*), humanism (*insānīya*), and enlightenment (*tanwīr*). Considering the case of Hamed Abdel-Samad, it

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[49] الأسئلة الكلاسيكية 4 - ؟ ارتد عن الإسلام لإتباع شهواتك (Typical questions #4—do you apostatize to follow your desires?), 13 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2v1xnP_ren8.

[50] الأسئلة الكلاسيكية 8 - ؟ لماذا تنتقد الإسلام فقط (Typical questions #8—why do you only criticise Islam?), 17 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aC4usVOAIY.

seems likely that freethinkers find it easier to reach a degree of public acceptance and insert themselves into general debates, even if their criticism of religion is as radical as that of the non-believers. However, Abdel-Samad's apparent advantage over the other YouTubers in this area might as well boil down to his being older or being in possession of higher social capital as a successful academic and writer in a Western country. All things considered, it remains an open question if radical freethinking and atheism can benefit from their presence in the social media to become a more regular feature of public debates in the Arab world.

When it comes to the intellectual content and the type of arguments used, the distinction between freethinkers and non-believers is of less significance. All four channels delve into the four overlapping areas of critical thinking: natural science, textual criticism of the Holy Books, the history of religion, and philosophy (ethics and logic). The kind of mix depends mostly on the intellectual formation and preferences of the individual protagonists. Abdel-Samad relies mostly on his sphere of academic expertise, social sciences and history, plus textual criticism of the Quran and the Hadiths, while Sherif Gaber has the strongest focus on natural science—as mentioned he is the one closest to a 'materialist' conception of atheism. Adam Elmasri derives most of his input from historical and textual criticism, but has a much stronger philosophical side than the other channels.

There is also evidence of what Gavin Hyman has called the "reactivity" of atheist thought to the religious culture that it rejects (Hyman 2017, p. 29). The criticism brought forward against Islamic theology is focused very strongly on the scriptural meaning of the Quran and certain Hadiths and shows little interest in or in-depth knowledge of scholarly traditions. This is quite probably a reflection of the fact that literalist and fundamentalist interpretations have come to dominate popular knowledge of Islam in Egypt and the Arab world in recent decades (Schielke 2015, pp. 65–82). In addition, the most active opponents of the non-believers on YouTube are almost uniformly Salafi-styled activists who themselves contribute to directing the debate towards the exegesis of the foundational texts and excluding a large part of Islamic scholarly traditions.[51]

This circumstance explains why so many videos produced by non-believers deal with the hypothesis of the "scientific miracle(s)" (*al-iʿǧāz al-ʿilmī*) of the Quran. This genre of religious reasoning, which claims that the Quran—if interpreted in the proper way—has predicted many scientific discoveries, is a common apologetic device in contemporary Islam that is popular across different religious schools and trends. As Sherif Gaber's imaginary "Renos and Ḥamāda" dialogue shows, it is often the first counter-argument used by Muslim believers if others question the truth of the Quran.

Another topic that is amplified by current events in the Arab world, namely the spectacular rise of Salafi-Jihadism in Iraq, Syria and some other countries torn by instability and civil war in the years after the Arab Spring, is the issue of Islam and violence. The surveyed YouTube channels frequently refer to the views and actions of the so-called "Islamic State" and its supporters as particularly shocking examples of religiously motivated violence. They also claim, based on the same scriptural sources that the Jihadists themselves use to justify their deeds (verses from the Quran and stories about the Prophet and his followers) that this is what the "golden age" of early Islam really looked like. In this way, Jihadism serves as an ideal foil for non-believers to confirm their rejection of Islam on intuitive moral grounds, sometimes at the cost of avoiding any recognition of less extreme theological readings.

Non-believers on YouTube cover similar topics based on current interest, argumentative convenience, or because they are challenged to do so by their opponents and critics, but these do not necessarily define their positive views or core message. There is a difference between explaining why you do not believe in certain things and defining what kind of non-believer you want to be. While Abdel-Samad's approach is mostly focused "demol-

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[51] On the polarization of online debates about Islam and the disproportionate influence of the more radical and extreme voices in either camp see Al-Rawi 2017.

ishing" religion, the others also try to spell out a positive message of their own or even provide practical advice. The fact that they openly declare a divergent religious status that is far from self-explaining in the Arab world, already puts them under a certain pressure to spell out the intellectual and ethical consequences. While Sherif Gaber, Adam Elmasri, and Kosay Betar each offer a different world-view in place of Muslim and Christian theism, they remarkably converge on ethical and social questions. All of them strongly endorse gender equality and—a much more controversial issue in the Arab world—the acceptance of homosexuality. It seems that their non-belief comes as a package deal with "progressive" social views and offers the promise of an individualistic, cosmopolitan lifestyle.

An individualistic outlook also determines their views on how to deal with the vexing social and political situation in the Arab world, where freethinkers and non-believers still face widespread rejection and persecution (Whitaker 2017; Jackson 2018; Diab 2020). While the challenge of political Islam, both in its moderate and radical shapes, is too omnipresent to be ignored, Abdel-Samad is the only one who offers clearly articulated political views on current events in the Arab world. The other YouTubers portrayed here, on the contrary, avoid talking about politics almost completely. Their focus is, one might say, on strengthening their own intellectual community. They seem to believe that establishing a visible presence in the virtual public sphere is a step toward making non-belief an accepted part of the intellectual and social landscape in the Arab world. The sense of a lively and growing virtual community has certainly raised the confidence of non-believers and made them more daring in their self-portrayal and in their demands on society. In this sense, freethinking and non-belief imply an attempt to re-negotiate social and political boundaries within Arab societies at large. One crucial question for the period ahead is how religious authorities and institutions and common believers react to the challenge of non-belief and how believers and non-believers negotiate their relationship. However, recent studies about digital media in the Arab world caution us against over-estimating the potential of emerging digital communities when it comes to challenging and dislocating deeply entrenched social and political power structures (Richter et al. 2018, p. 4). It might be a long way before the voice of Arab non-believers will have an impact on legal and constitutional questions, such as family law and the prerogatives of religious authorities.

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Article

Laughing about Religious Authority—But Not Too Loud

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Abstract: In Facebook groups of young Moroccan non-believers, cartoons, memes, and jokes that mock religion are widely shared. By phrasing the messages in a humorous way, it is possible to express experiences and viewpoints that are more difficult to communicate in direct speech. Studying these forms of humor can reveal several themes, frames, and tropes that are important to many former Muslims, such as criticizing the legal restrictions of non-belief and countering stereotypes about non-believers. This leads to the following question: To what extent is humor being employed as an (online) tool for young Moroccan non-believers to challenge the religious status quo? To answer this question, the article analyzes numerous examples of religious-related humor during the COVID-19 pandemic and Ramadan. Hereby, it becomes clear that many jokes remain a limited and covert dissent strategy, as they are only shared among fellow non-believers. Yet, this article argues that jokes are an important method of differentiation, self-expression, and in-group identification that can build a fruitful ground for future activism.

Keywords: anthropology of non-religion; lived religion; online activism; humor; memes; Morocco

1. Introduction

People keep asking me, 'Is COVID-19 REALLY that serious'? Listen y'all, the casinos and churches are closed. When heaven and hell agree on the same thing, it's probably pretty serious. (Facebook post during the COVID-19 global pandemic 2020).

Looking at the numerous Facebook groups of young Moroccan non-believers, many aspects may catch one's attention: the sharing of personal stories, the quickly mobilized support if a group member gets in trouble, and the vivid discussions. Yet, one aspect, in particular, is difficult to overlook: the sheer amount of memes, cartoons, and jokes that flood the Facebook group wall. Humor, as the introductory quote illustrates, is one of the most popular ways of expressing experiences and thoughts among non-believers in different parts of the world. On the surface, Internet memes and other jokes might appear trivial. While they often appear to lack seriousness, they are an intrinsic part of today's digital culture (Milner 2012; Shifman 2013) and carry important social, emotional, cultural, and political messages (Miltner 2018; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Beyond that, memes can be an important part of lived (non)religion, as they are a common and participatory expression of meaning-making in everyday life (Aguilar et al. 2017).

Despite the long-established use of humor as a political tool (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014), the study of both online and offline activism has rather focused on serious and structural aspects, such as leadership styles, strategies, and mobilization (Hiller 1983). The lighter and creative sides of (online) activism, such as rap (Gruber 2018), art (Horváth and Bakó 2016), or humor (Hiller 1983), have been often neglected. By looking at the use of mockery among young Moroccan non-believers, this article aims to shift the focus to the humorous side of online activism. During numerous interviews, which I conducted between 2016 and 2020 about the experiences of being not religious, the role of humor was often mentioned. The gender-mixed interview group encompassed Moroccan non-

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believers[1] with a Sunni Muslim background, who were between 18 and 35 years old, mostly lived in Casablanca or Rabat, and belonged to the educated middle class.[2] Based on the recommendations of my interviewees, I selected four different Facebook groups[3] to explore the role of humor further:

1. Atheists in Morocco is a private hidden group with around 4000, mostly young, members from Morocco and the diaspora, that mainly interact in English. This group has been the main source of jokes for this analysis.

2. Marocains pour la Laïcité is a francophone, private, and visible group that includes 16500 members with different (non)religious viewpoints, who advocate for the separation of religion and politics in Morocco.

3. MALI ؟مالي is a private-visible group with 7000 members that belongs to the public page of MALI (Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles). Its activist content is shared in different languages, such as French, English, and Arabic.

4. Ramadan for everyone is a small, private, and hidden group that has been mainly active in 2018. It is meant for people who do not fast, such as non-believers, non-fasting Muslims, or Christian converts.

While these groups have different aims, such as exchanging ideas or organizing meet-ups, this article focuses on jokes as a potential tool for activism. In this context, activism can be defined as contesting hegemonic religious power structures. Recognizing that jokes might be shared with a non-activist purpose or that non-believers might prefer other forms of activism or not to engage in activism at all, this article narrows the focus on non-believers who see jokes as (part of their) activism. This article thus takes a look at a specific group of people (mainly young, urban, educated, and middle-class Moroccan non-believers) engaging in a concrete practice (sharing religious-related jokes online) for a particular purpose (challenging religious authority). Hereby, religious authority is understood by most interviewees as being an omnipresent structure that permeates the whole Moroccan society, rather than only being incorporated by individuals or religious scripts. Against this backdrop, the following question arises: To what extent is humor being employed as an (online) tool for young Moroccan non-believers to challenge the religious status quo?

To answer this question, the article starts by analyzing the legal and political space for Moroccan non-believers, especially for those who aspire to engage in (online) activism. Following the contextualization, I describe the forms, tropes, and dominant themes of humor, such as legal restrictions, mocking religion, and reflecting on society's views towards non-believers. First and foremost, I refer to religion-related jokes made during the COVID-19 pandemic, when activists relied even more on online activism, and during Ramadan, which can be seen as the high season of (humorous) activism. After this thematic analysis, I underpin these research insights with the theoretical functions and strategies of using humor as an activist tool. While the focus is put on how humor can (in)directly challenge religious authority, humor can also fulfill other purposes. It can contribute to bridging (non)religious disagreement, to create identification among non-believers, and to establish differentiation towards the religious majority. Finally, I discuss the limits of humor as an activist tool, such as its potential to create division and to remain a covert dissent strategy.

2. Spaces for (Online) Activism in Morocco

In Morocco, activism that openly advocates for freedom of conscience is rather restricted, as many activists fear the legal and social consequences. Suffering from stigmatization, activists reported cases of (verbal) violence by family members, investigations by

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[1] Acknowledging that the self-identifications of this group can reach from being atheist to agnostic to cultural Muslim, I opt for the broad term "non-believers" (*la dini*).

[2] Names of people are pseudonymized, unlike otherwise wished by the interviewees.

[3] Names of hidden groups are pseudonymized.

authorities, and obstacles in professional, educational, and private life. As a consequence, some prominent voices, such as Kacem El Ghazzali, had to flee the country.[4] The restrictive situation for non-believers becomes visible in the Freedom of Thought ranking (2019), where Morocco takes place as 182 out of 196.[5] While the Western frame of this ranking needs to be taken critically, it gives an indication as to why many non-believers prefer not to engage in activism or opt for more indirect forms of activism such as humor. Moreover, the room for humorous activism is influenced by the semi-authoritarian Moroccan context, which restricts some freedoms but offers others (Ottaway 2003). Both citizens and politicians can use humor, but political satire is especially seen as a weapon of the weak and those in opposition (Nilsen 1990).

The Moroccan government has often been applauded for taking a relatively liberal hands-off approach. Yet, in the current post-Arab uprisings environment, surveillance and censorship did not vanish, but only became more advanced (Iddins 2020). For instance, by combining new spyware with traditional ways of intimidation, such as phone tapping or spreading false rumors. At the same time, ways to circumvent restrictions developed (Shayan 2016). Humor tests the border of what is still tolerated to express. On the one hand, some jokes enjoy a free pass as they are "not meant seriously" and provide a space of liberty that allows people to vent frustrations (Davies 2007). On the other hand, some topics, that touch the troika of "allah, al-watan, al-malik"[6] (Kettioui 2020) cross that line and are labeled as blasphemous. The awareness that it is not possible to criticize or joke about certain topics leads to (self-)censorship (Rahman 2012) and a try-and-see ethos that tests the limits of freedom of speech (Iddins 2020).

The room for humor is also influenced by the religious or secular morality the state and society base their identity on. In the case of Morocco, morality is closely linked to Islamic values. This is mirrored in the preamble of the constitution which defines Morocco as a "sovereign Muslim State, attached to [. . .] its indivisible national identity. Its unity is forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamist, Berber [amazighe] and Saharan-Hassanic components." Islam and humor do not need to oppose each other. On the contrary, humor is an important part of Moroccan society. Yet, joking can undermine the Islamic authority which is often associated with discipline and modesty (Bayat 2007). Most importantly, Moroccan religious and political authority are closely tight, as the King is not only the political head but also the Commander of the Faithful.[7] This title gives him much symbolic importance and power, such as the legitimacy to preside over the High Council of the *Ulemas*[8], which is the only instance entitled to issue *fatwas*[9]. His position is backed by the constitution which specifies that it is not allowed to criticize Islam or the monarchy (§ 175). In this respect, questioning religion, with or without jokes, becomes a problem, because it indirectly undermines the authority of the King.

While the current King, Mohammed VI enjoys a liberal reputation and promotes religious coexistence, especially with Jewish co-citizens (Maghraoui 2009), he remains cautious not to weaken the monarchy's religious basis (Benchemsi 2015). Therefore, the King encourages a certain form of Islam that gives him control and limits other forms of religion that might question his power.[10] While many NGOs support the idea of individual freedoms, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, not many civil society players (can) work openly on the right not to believe. However, as part of the Arab uprisings, the February 20

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4   Interview Kacem El Ghazzali, 7 December 2016, Skype.

5   The Freedom of Thought Report is conducted by Humanist International and measures the following categories: (1) Constitution and Government, (2) Education and children's rights, (3) Society, Community, and Family, and (4) Freedom of expression, advocacy, and humanist values. Humanist International was founded in 1952 in Amsterdam and has its headquarter in London.

6   God, the country, and the King.

7   Amir al-Mu'minin.

8   Islamic scholars.

9   Religious consultations.

10   For instance, the movement Al Adl Wa Al Ihssane, which does not recognize the religious legitimacy of the King.

movement raised more attention on the topic (Thompson 2015). Without embracing a too utopian idea of technological determinism, the Internet became an open and connecting space for activists and critical journalists of whom a significant part identified as not religious (Iddins 2020). In this context and its aftermath, the new generation has shown a strong proclivity for political satire, cartoons, and mockery (Kettioui 2020; Harutyunyan 2012). For instance, in Facebook groups, such as "Mohammed VI, My Liberty is More Sacred Than You." With the visual rush, artistic critique and a call for more civil rights and freedom became visible on social media, television, and the streets (Khatib 2013; Baylocq and Granci 2012). To calm the mixed calls for democratization and secularization, the King proposed a reformed, albeit ambiguous, constitution in 2011, that name-checked the demands of Moroccan liberals and conservatives, as well as international institutions (Benchemsi 2012).

In general, this new constitution promotes both Islam (§ 1 and 3) and the freedom of belief (§ 3 and 25). At the same time, Morocco signed several UN treaties concerning freedom of religion, conscience, and thought, such as the Resolution on the Freedom of Religion or Belief (UN Human Rights Council 2013). The government only commits itself to these international conventions as long as it is compatible with the national identity based on Islam (preamble). Albeit important reforms, the family code *Moudawana* and the penal code still restrict religious liberties, including the right not to believe. Several Articles of the Penal Code prohibit anyone from affirming any views other than those of Islam (Benchemsi 2012). Among others, Article 220 of the Penal Code criminalizes "shaking the faith of a Muslim", which makes it difficult to utter bold jokes about religion. The disrespect of religious practices, blasphemy, and the violation of public morality and virtue are strictly forbidden (§ 483). For example, recently actor Rafik Boubker got accused of blasphemy when he praised the benefits of alcohol for connecting with God. He risked being sentenced to up to two years of imprisonment and a fine of up to EUR 20,000. Besides, conversion from Islam, missionary activities, and the distribution of non-Islamic religious material are criminalized (Benchemsi 2015). For this reason, Facebook administrators of groups such as "Atheists in Morocco", often do not let Muslims enter the group, to avoid being accused of dissuading Muslims from their beliefs.[11]

Despite the restricted room for humor, it is still one of the most popular forms of online activism among Moroccan non-believers. In general, 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 instead of institutional politics (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). Like other forms of online activism, the use of humor among young Moroccan non-believers has developed from the first activists who began with blogging, to switching to Facebook and other social networking sites. By now, many Moroccan "gen Y-ers" advocate for individual liberties online, even at the risk of offending or upsetting the religious status quo that underlines the political system (Rahman 2012). The Internet has especially given a counter-voice to non-believers and other minority groups that are often not fully represented (Mohammed 2019). Social media platforms provide a relatively safe space of resistance and consciousness-raising in comparison to more overt forms of activism. On the Internet, topics are being discussed in alternative ways to the ascribed social norms (Fileborn 2014). Thus, while Moroccan non-believers can exchange their jokes about religion on Facebook, they cannot do it in the same way outside of social media.

The degree to which Moroccan non-believers can and want to make jokes, both in public and online, also differs from person to person. While most of the active Facebook group members merely circulate, like, or comment on jokes, others also engage as pro-sumers (Ahluwalia and Miller 2014) by (re)making, (re)adapting, or (re)mixing memes (Shifman 2013). In particular, closeted non-believers might not want to make certain jokes in public, as that would indicate their not religious or even anti-religious viewpoints. Due

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[11] Interview with Facebook administrator "Atheism in Morocco", 24 December 2020, Facebook Messenger Call.

to the controversial nature and social taboo that non-believers face, joke-tellers might be afraid of the reactions of Muslim family members, friends, and colleagues. Hereby, one's position in terms of, for instance, gender, safety net, living abroad or in Morocco, and socio-economic situation influences the ability to tell a joke in public. This is added to the personal motivations not to openly tell jokes, for example, due to not wanting to offend religious co-citizens. Considering these different aspects, it is important to keep an intersectional perspective in mind: who can make what kind of jokes in which context and in front of which audience?

Essentially, the Moroccan context leaves not much space to openly mock religious authority, as it is closely linked to political power. Consequently, jokes are mainly made in the private hidden online sphere among like-minded non-believers or Muslims who share similar views, but are rarely shared in public. Exceptions are a few activist groups, such as the MALI movement, that does not only share, but also creates cartoons. The dissatisfaction with the legal situation in addition to societal taboos of being less or not religious also becomes the subject of jokes itself, which I turn to in the next section.

3. Joking about Religion: From Beers in Ramadan to Prayers against the Coronavirus

Humor that mocks religion as the foundation of political power can take different forms, such as puns, rhetoric questions, mockery, witticisms, anecdotes, caricatures, or satire (Schutz 1977). It can be a part of face-to-face communication but also mediated via newspapers, television, and social media (Driessen 2015). As bottom-up and low-key resources, memes are especially popular among non-believers (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Ironically, the term meme was first introduced by new atheism thinker, Dawkins (1976), in his biological research. Since then it came to be understood as a common tool of creative expression of today's digital culture (Aguilar et al. 2017).

Jokes enjoy longevity and transnationality, as they change forms according to the religious and national context while keeping the same core (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014). Although almost all Facebook group members grew up in a Muslim environment, they often take jokes from bigger atheist or agnostic pages which are frequently coined by a focus on Christianity. This became already clear with the introductory quote that referred to closed churches instead of mosques. Sometimes jokes are also adapted to the Islamic context by changing the name of the religious leader or prophet. For instance, one cartoon shows an empty list with the caption "A list of things that God has done during the pandemic". The same picture is shared and slightly adapted to "A list of things that Allah has done during the pandemic".

While some non-believers do forward the jokes to friends in- and outside Morocco or aim to openly address those in power, most non-believers tell their jokes only in private and/or hidden Facebook groups. Especially, bold jokes remain only internally communicated. Many non-believers share the view that, for now, it is still too much of a risk to share these jokes with a bigger audience. Even in private and hidden groups, some non-believers do not feel completely free to express their opinions, out of fear that screenshots of the group members and their conversations may be taken and exposed beyond the Facebook group. Others refrain from joking about religious authority, as they consider it irreverent or not funny. Despite that, jokes have the potential to travel very quickly, intended or not, beyond the initial network of circulation. Most of the jokes are told in colloquial English or French, but if the jokes are translated into Darija, which has become more popular since the February 20 movement, an even wider group is reached (Kettioui 2020). Moreover, the development of making jokes more visual and shorter, such as in the form of tweetable one-liners, has contributed to a possible widespread and quick outreach.

The form, language, and content of the jokes also depend on the Facebook group. In the hidden group Atheists in Morocco, memes are especially popular among the predominantly young and English-speaking members. Jokes cover a wide range of subjects, such as the existence of Allah or religious followers. The shared memes are often relatively bold and sometimes involve sexual innuendos. In the visible group Marocains pour la Laïcité, mainly

French cartoons that address subjects such as the headscarf debate and jihadism are posted. In the MALI group, many political cartoons are shared which, among others, focus on the legal situation of non-believers in Morocco. The political messages of the cartoons reach a large audience, as the jokes are not only translated into different languages, but also made both in public and in private. In the hidden group Ramadan for everyone, mainly jokes in Arabic related to fasting are posted.

As humor is a possibility to express experiences and opinions, jokes can give an indication of which topics are important to non-believers. Looking at the four Facebook groups, I identified recurring themes of humor which can be broadly divided into (1) criticizing the legal situation, (2) mocking religion, and (3) reflecting on society's views towards non-believers. Firstly, humor addressing the legal situation might be the most political category of the three, as it directly criticizes the restrictions related to freedom of conscience. Especially, laws, which have been partly drafted by French colonial administrators who stayed after independence, are in the spotlight (Zirari 2016). One of these laws is Article 222, which states that it is not possible to eat on the street during Ramadan. Based on this article, the police arrest or fine people each year who break the fast in public. As everyone had to stay (and eat) inside due to the pandemic, activists ironically celebrated 2020 as the first year with (almost) no arrests. For instance, Figure 1 shows a disenchanted police officer who is asking: "but boss with the lockdown what am I gonna do with Article 222?". A similar cartoon portrays a man calling the police asking, "My neighbor is drinking water in his living room, can I beat him up or are you gonna arrest him arbitrarily?". Most jokes are slightly exaggerated as the police usually do not apply the law very strictly, especially if someone would eat without causing attention. According to Soufiane, a young web designer, the hyperbole is used on purpose to show the disproportion of being arrested or having to pay a fine for a basic need, such as drinking water.[12] Jokes shared among non-believers do not only address their own restrictions, but also the legal struggles of perceived allies. For instance, the LGBTQ+ community, religious minorities, and feminist groups that also fight for more rights and liberties. In relation to that, some jokes criticize the considered religious basis of criminalizing, for instance, abortion (§ 453) or homosexuality (§ 489). In this context, joking statements such as "Allah is gay" or a *Kaaba*[13] in rainbow colors are common.

Figure 1. © MALI/Visant.

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[12] Interview Soufiane, 18 December 2016, Rabat.

[13] A sacred site in Islam that indicates the direction of prayer and is the destination of the pilgrimage *hajj.*

Secondly, jokes can target religion as a belief system, and mock its religious followers, leaders, and figures. In this regard, one of the running gags is to ironically apply religious terminology for mundane matters. For instance, by saying "Oh my God, I worship that" or "Thank God I'm an atheist". Not only religious language but also behavior is sometimes imitated. For instance, one time I was invited to join a group of activist non-believers for a drink. When the sound of the *adhan*[14] filled the air, one of the activists jumped up from her chair, loosely wrapped a scarf around her hair, and said jokingly "bye, bye I'm going to pray". Other jokes repetitively reproduce religious scenes, for instance between the prophet Muhammad and his first wife Khadija. Humor that directly addresses religion itself often mocks the lack of religious evidence and contrasts religion with science. In many jokes it is especially criticized that religion often gets the credit for scientific achievements. For example, when a doctor successfully finishes a surgery but the person only thanks God/Allah. Sometimes, this kind of humor can be quite dark, for instance, when a picture with a boy having cancer is titled "God works in mysterious ways". Other popular examples that aim to underline the perceived illogical character of religion (see Figure 2), are the biological impossibility of Noah's ark or the portrayal of Jesus as the only white man in the Middle East. Contrasting religion and science became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when religion was portrayed as helpless and science as a rational solution. In addition to that, many jokes make fun of the claim of each religion to be the only religion: "There are 5000 gods, but yours is the true one". Many cartoons also joke about "religious plagiarism". For instance, the "pupils" Islam, Christianity, and Judaism sit in a classroom and copy from each other. Another repetitive joke is to quote phrases from the Quran which the joke-teller perceives as illogical or violent. In this respect, non-believers often joke that they know the Islamic scripts better than believers do, or that what made them leave Islam was actually reading the Quran.

Figure 2. © unknown.

Furthermore, jokes that portray religion as misogynistic are common. Especially popular are cartoons of women wearing the burqa. In Figure 3, one woman is commenting on another woman who "dares" to show her ankles. Moreover, beauty contests where everyone looks the same, and bus seats or bin bags that are "accidentally" taken for women with burqas are frequently made jokes. This is often contrasted with men wearing fewer clothes: a woman, wearing a burqa, is sweating on the beach, while her husband next to her only wears swimming trunks. Another target are Muslim feminists, in jokes that portray feminism and Islam as incompatible. Besides that, in many memes, Islam and other

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[14] The Islamic call to prayer recited by a *muezzin.*

religions are often described as violent, which is contrasted with the self-display of being religions of peace. For example, aliens look down on the planet Earth and comment, "they are fighting over which religion is the most peaceful". This leads to a picture of religion in general and Islam in particular as being irrational, misogynist, and violent. Yet, these humorous presentations are not uncontested among non-believers.
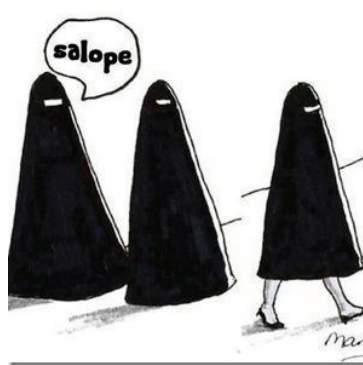

Figure 3. © man.

When jokes target religious communities, they are often depicted as blindly following their beliefs. This is, for instance, visualized by showing a scan of their head, which reveals emptiness instead of a brain. This also became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, in jokes such as "praying only helps if you add soap". Portraying religious followers as ignorant is also the aim of mocking the arguments of believers, for example, by sharing screenshots of discussions with believers about the existence of Allah. Religious people are sometimes also presented as insanely talking to an imaginary friend. In one cartoon of the American sitcom *The Simpsons*, Marge talks to her psychologist and says "Oh, I was just praying to God that you will find me sane" and he answers "I see. And this God is he in the room right now?" In a similar dialogue, someone is asking: "Do you have any cases of mental illness in your family" and the interlocutor replies, "I have an uncle who believes in God". When it comes to religious followers, especially fundamentalists, portrayed with long beards and weapons are targeted. Most non-believers are more hesitant to make fun of "ordinary" Muslims as they often have good relationships with their religious co-citizens.

Furthermore, religious leaders are frequently the focus of humor. For example, in the following joke: "A priest, a rabbi, and an imam walk into a bar. The bartender says: what is this? Some kind of a joke? Muslims don't drink alcohol". During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of jokes about religious leaders increased (see Figure 4). In many cartoons, they were begging scientists to quickly develop a vaccine to calm down their religious community. Moreover, rich sheiks or televangelists who ask for private jets are mocked. Religious leaders in higher positions, such as the pope, receive their share of mockery as well. In comparison to the numerous jokes of pedophile priests, imams get off quite well and are only scarcely addressed. This shows again that a lot of the content of the jokes is not created in Morocco, or other countries with a Muslim majority population, but is derived from Western sources.
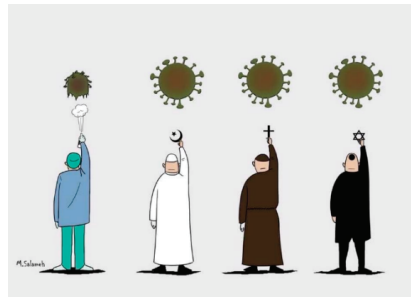
Figure 4. © Salameh.

Besides religious leaders, prophets are frequently portrayed tropes. While there are also many puns about prophet Muhammad, such as "atheism is a non-prophet organiza- tion", there are even more jokes about Jesus (Aguilar et al. 2017). Apart from the already mentioned relation to Western satire, this might be explained by the taboo concerning visualizations in Islam and the sacred character of the prophet Muhammad. The favorite protagonist of jokes seems to be God's or Allah's opponent: Satan. In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, one meme shows Satan making an astonishing face which is titled "Satan looking at God's plan for 2020". Another meme of Satan says that plagues, great floods, and pandemics are God's department and a list compares God and Satan, where God checks the following boxes: (1) committed genocides, (2) asked a man to kill his only child, (3) allowed slavery, (4) made women inferior to men, and (5) caused all the suffering in the world. In this light, the list of Satan seems small: (1) convinced two people to eat fruit. The roles become reversed as Satan becomes the "good guy", while God is portrayed as the bad one. References to Satan and hell are equally frequent in non-pandemic times. From time to time, a picture of Jesus looking around the corner is posted in the Facebook group Atheists in Morocco, saying: "I'm here to remind you that you will all go to hell" and statements that hell must be more fun are common.

Thirdly, jokes can reflect on the personal situations and everyday concerns of non- believers. Hereby, jokes often embrace self-satire, a form of visual critique which is flourish- ing. This form of humor is used especially during Ramadan, such as stating: "No offense but pretending to be fasting is actually harder than fasting". In other jokes, non-believers describe themselves as fighters who have to survive the "hunger games"[15] and desperately look forward to the end of Ramadan, which is, for instance, symbolized by a beer bottle next to the crescent (see Figure 5). Some self-mocking jokes respond to clichés of being immoral, such as "Yes, we eat babies for breakfast". Figure 6 shows how the perception of the same person can change when he is saying that he is not believing in God. From a "normal person", he is changing into a Satanist with long black hair praying to the Sigil of Baphomet.[16] These and other jokes very much relate to the experiences of non-believers. During an interview, Soufiane told me: "People at school talk about me. They say I worship the devil. I don't feel safe".[17] At the same time, the self-portrayal can also be very positive, as non-believers mostly come off quite well. For instance, there are even t-shirts with the slogan "Support intelligence- sleep with an atheist". This example also shows that many jokes can be quite sexual in nature, which touches on multiple taboos at the same time.

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[15]   Reference to the film and book series Hunger Games.

[16]   The pentagram of the Church of Satan.

[17]   Interview Soufiane, 18 December 2016, Rabat.

Figure 5. © unknown.
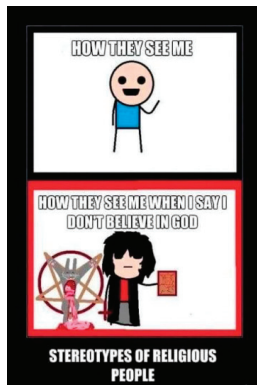
Figure 6. © unknown.

Other jokes focus on the personal restrictions that non-believers encounter. Figure 7 shows a mother holding the mouth of the "dog" (her child) to not say anything negative or critical about religion in the presence of the rest of the family. In this and other cartoons, social mechanisms such as *hchouma*, which can be roughly translated as "bringing shame" to oneself or the family, become evident. Furthermore, how to behave correctly during Ramadan has been a topic in jokes for a long time. This can be exemplified by comparing the following two cartoons (Figures 8 and 9), which have been published with around twenty years of discrepancy.[18] The first cartoon poses the question: "You eat during the middle of the day?", upon which the old man answers: "It's chewing gum". The second cartoon portrays two police officers who comment on a man walking down the street: "He's smiling during Ramadan- that's suspicious".

Figure 7. © unknown.

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18   Figure 8 was published in the daily newspaper L'Opinion, and has been illustrated in the dissertation "Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: an ethnographic study of the month of Ramadan" (Buitelaar 1991).

Figure 8. © L'Opinion.

Figure 9. © Dieu, journal Liberté Algérie.

Of course, many members of Facebook groups also make jokes that are not (directly) related to religion, such as memes about former US President Donald Trump. However, a specific kind of humor can be distinguished that criticizes laws based on religious norms, mocks religion, as well as its followers, leaders, and figures, and reflects on clichés and stereotypes about non-believers. This leads to the question: what is the purpose behind these different kinds of jokes? Can we see them as forms of activism or do they have a mere entertaining purpose?

4. Humor = An Activist Tool?

As Aguilar et al. (2017) have pointed out, religion-related joke-tellers can apply different frames. Memes about religion do not need to be critical or negative, but can also be positively employed by religious followers, for instance, when the promoting religion frame or the playful frame are used. Yet, in the examples discussed above, especially the questioning frame and the mocking religion frame are employed (ibid). The questioning frame explores common and often negative generalizations to raise objections or doubts toward perceived religious contradictions. This frame was visible in jokes about religion, including their textual basis, promoters, and followers. By doing so, this frame aims to encourage debates and exchange. The mocking religion frame goes a bit further in its critique of religion and aims to undermine beliefs. Applying these frames facilitates different purposes.

Returning to the main question of this article—humor can indeed have a subversive purpose that targets those in power, and therefore plays a key role in challenging the power equilibrium. How religion is presented in these counternarratives can challenge "traditional" forms of belief and undermines religious institutional structures (Aguilar et al. 2017; Kettioui 2020). According to the punch theory, traditional forms of satire in general and political satire in the Arab world, in particular, have been nearly always directed to punch upward, at figures of authority rather than downwards (Mulder 2018). Thus, usually, satire is a critique of the powerful made by the disempowered, which offers a

chance for dialogue (Gruber 2018). This is also the case of Moroccan non-believers who find themselves in a lower power position and criticize the hegemonic religious authority. Jokes can reverse the status of people by portraying inferiors as superiors and vice versa (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014). Yet, power constellations are more complex and go beyond being religious or not. Most non-believers also find themselves belonging to the educated middle- or even upper class. In this case, making jokes about religious people that play with stereotypes about the working class, such as ignorance or superstition, can be a form of punching downwards.

When it comes to humor as a tool to challenge the religious status quo, either the mere fact of joking or the content of the joke can be subversive. Often, jokes carry messages that directly criticize the legal or political situation for non-believers. Consequently, humor can aim for the enforcement of certain norms and rules in order to change a situation. It can also serve as a means of clarification to explain the communicator's viewpoint on religion (Meyer 2000). In this respect, humor can also point out the taboo (Kettioui 2020) around leaving Islam. Memes, and cartoons that aim at challenging the religious status quo, are designed to get attention, and in doing so, to provoke and shock (Mulder 2018). Challenging authority can also be indirect, by using self-satire. In a Muslim-majority context where agency for non-believers is rather limited), the purpose of ridiculing oneself is not to create victimhood but empowerment (Anderson 2013). By visualizing their struggles and restrictions, Moroccan non-believers create a subtle critique that underlines the perceived absurdity of the situation and goes beyond the direct mockery of religious authority (Mulder 2018).

The provoking nature of many jokes can also have the purpose of differentiating oneself from the religious majority. The differentiation became especially clear by looking at jokes made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many non-believers shared memes that mocked the behavior of religious followers and leaders to the pandemic and compared these reactions to the ones of scientists and doctors which were depicted as fact-based and rational. Praying was portrayed as irrational and ineffective and religious leaders were shown as being dependent on scientists. This led to the construction of an opposition between two groups that either opt for science or religion without leaving space for in-between positions. Furthermore, other dichotomous notions of modern vs. backward, violent vs. peaceful, and misogynic vs. feministic were being reinforced. When believers and non-believers are being contrasted, the differentiation might lead to a form of moral superiority by putting the freedom not to believe above religious views (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014).

While humor addressing Islam can be polarizing (Molokotos-Liederman 2019), jokes can also bring Moroccans with different ideas together and bridge incongruities. Self-mockery or an ironically used "*inshallah*" (or "*outshallah*") are common among both non-believers and Muslims.[19] For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people with different (non)religious ideas made fun of the government's promise—*inshallah*—of a short lockdown. Humor does not always need to be "laughing about somebody" but can also be a "laughing with". In addition to that, most jokes are less intended to upset fellow citizens, but instead aim to contest the hegemonic religious-political power that denies non-believers equal rights. As medicine student Anas says: "I also have a lot of friends who are not atheists. But they are very open. We make fun of each other!"[20] By doing so, laughing can help to diffuse tension, disagreement, and dissonance (Gruner 2017). To avoid conflict, it can also be a way to convey a message that cannot be said directly (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014). At the same time, humor about religion also brings together non-believers from different religious backgrounds. While some groups, such as "Atheists in Morocco"

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[19] While I speak here of two groups (non-believers and Muslims), I would like to stress that religious identifications are more complex and fluid and go beyond this binary division.

[20] Interview, Anas, 6 December 2016, Temara.

mainly include non-believers who grew up in a Muslim environment; other, international pages, such as Atheist Republic, attract people from all over the world.

Humor can also attempt to create identification, as it connects the joke-teller to the audience (Meyer 2000). By doing so, jokes help to identify common struggles, dilemmas, and shared values (Driessen 2015). This gives a human face to non-believers who deal with different stereotypes and prejudices, such as being perceived as immoral. Revealing one's personal situation, and therefore also one's restrictive environment, makes the audience a fellow witness, which aims at creating awareness, solidarity, and understanding (Mulder 2018). Thus, the personal component about being not accepted within society or one's family, provokes empathy with the joke-teller. This is especially the case during Ramadan, when many non-believers feel restricted to eat in public and, depending on their living situation, also in private. Jokes about the common experiences and struggles weld together non-fasters and create a group feeling that strengthens the emotional ties and norms. Being able to understand the cultural code behind memes and other jokes that mock religion and finding its content funny can symbolize belonging towards other non-believers (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Consequently, joking about a common target increases the internal group feeling, in-group trust, and cohesion (Gruber 2018). However, many nonbelievers also disagree with jokes that portray religion as unscientific, misogynistic, and violent. The different understandings of humor become clear in the vivid discussions in the comment section that follow the post of a controversial joke. In some cases, the disagreements of what is considered funny make group members leave the group.

In short, humor can perform and combine different purposes, such as challenging authority and bridging incongruities. It can also mark group boundaries, by creating a feeling of identification and belonging to (digital) communities. At the same time, this can lead to differentiation, as it can also be a tool to test and challenge social cohesion (Driessen 2015). While not every joke might directly challenge religious authority, most jokes contribute indirectly to questioning authority. Expressing agency, in-group identification, and outgroup-differentiation can be a fruitful ground for future activism. Finally, the purpose and intention of the jokes also depend on the group and the person that makes or shares the joke.

5. The Limits of Humor as an Activist Tool

As we have seen so far, humor can be a way for many activists to challenge religious authority but not every non-believer that shares jokes about religion has automatically an activist agenda. Many prefer not to engage in any kind of activism, for instance, because they focus on their private life or consider other topics more important. Others do engage in activism related to the rights of non-believers, but opt for other forms of activism, such as seeking dialogue, trying to change religious aspects of the school curriculum, or taking part in demonstrations. Moreover, those who see humor as an activist's tool recognize its limits. Most humorous messages only reach a small group. Among others, language skills which can range from English and French to Darija and Tamazight, depending on the group, are required. Remarkably, only a few jokes are made in Fusha—the official language of the political and religious elite (Kettioui 2020). Besides language skills, other necessary pre-conditions are (Internet) literacy and Facebook access. In Morocco, 60% of the population has access to the Internet and Facebook is one of the most frequently searched and visited sites, especially among young Moroccans between 18 and 35 (Rahman 2012). Mouhcine, a comedian and founder of the Facebook group "Ramadan for everyone" suggests that in order to sensitize more people for (non)religious minorities, it would be good to share funny videos also outside of social media. For him, also, non-digital alternatives, such as stand-up comedy might be a good option.[21]

While in theory, around 12 million Moroccan Facebook users do have access to Facebook groups, in practice, the interaction remains mainly restricted to non-believers and

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[21] Interview Mouhcine, 2 June 2019, Casablanca.

does not involve Moroccans with more religious viewpoints. The degree of intermingling also depends on the nature of the group. Some group guidelines explicitly state that Muslims are not allowed to enter, as the group is "intended to be a safe space for Moroccan non-believers." Such Facebook groups protect themselves by being not findable purely based on the group name. New members need to be invited and are first checked by the administrators if they do not pose any threat to the group. Additionally, entering these groups works like a self-filter: mainly those interested in the topic would know about these pages or would want to become members of the Facebook groups in question. As most members feel part of a trusted community of like-minded people, they communicate intimate opinions, thoughts, experiences, and jokes. Omar, an engineer whose parents are non-believers as well, describes the group as the following: "It's really enjoyable. It's good that there are no Muslims in it. In the group, I can make jokes about a lot of things."[22] Other groups that have a more secular character are open for Muslims as well, and groups such as "Ramadan for everyone" might also attract Moroccan Christians and other groups that do not fast.

On the bottom line, the jokes remain in the private or hidden sphere, out of sight from the views of relatives, curious neighbors, and colleagues. This kind of covert dissent (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014) is more frequent when there is acceptance of, or resignation to, the status quo. This might be the case for most Moroccan non-believers who are aware of the societal taboo around leaving Islam and might not see it feasible (or desirable) to change that from one day to the other. Exceptions are activist organizations such as the MALI movement or the international page Atheist Republic who do take the risk to tell jokes in public because they consider it necessary to break taboos and to speak up. In this respect, the more people tell a certain joke, the more it gets normalized, and the more the shared accountability is spread. Thus, it might become possible to make the same jokes in public, which are now merely told in private.

Due to the covert nature of making jokes about religion in the web 2.0 (O'reilly 2009), this kind of activism has been perceived as rather safe and passive. According to Hicham, a 21-year-old student, online activism alone is not sufficient: "We just hear their voices on social media and social media is not enough. People are afraid, that's why they don't go on the street. People are afraid of the reactions, are afraid to get beaten up, afraid of getting arrested. If all atheists would go on the street it would change a lot. People would know that we're a lot of people, that we're a mass. People just need to say: today we will do it. Today we will do the sitting but today I'm wondering too if I should go on the street."[23] Thus, taking part in street activism can have far-reaching consequences, such as losing one's job, putting oneself and family members at risk, and jeopardizing relationships. However, relying only on online activism also risks being derided as "slacktivism", as relatively little commitment is needed for posting or sharing some scattered jokes on Facebook (Shayan 2016).

While online activism might be a safer place for minority groups in comparison to street activism, perceiving Facebook as a private and shielded sphere can also become problematic. The Internet still bears several risks, such as online harassment, digital public shaming, trolling, and surveillance (Shayan 2016). Therefore, some non-believers prefer to use fake Facebook profiles or names. Although the Internet offers some anonymity, the peril remains of being arrested, identified, or intimidated both by insiders of the group and outsiders. This has been the case for Soufiane when he was 18 years old: "I posted stuff about Islam on Facebook because that's the only place I feel safe to share my thoughts, but I forgot about the fact that I have also Muslim family members and friends on Facebook. My aunt saw my posts and told my mother about it. This caused a lot of problems. We were fighting. My grandma left us- she moved out. My mum wanted to move out too. So I went to the mosque in order to calm them. The fighting became less. My dad still doesn't

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22   Interview Omar, 8 December 2016, Casablanca.

23   Interview Hicham, 15 December 2016, Rabat.

know that I'm an atheist. I don't want to cause any more problems. And I will keep it for myself until I'm financially independent".[24]

If the "success" of online activism is measured in the efficiency to mobilize widespread participation in a collective activity that receives public recognition and thus brings change (Shayan 2016), the online jokes of Moroccan non-believers might be considered unsuccessful. However, while sharing jokes in Facebook groups might not be enough, forms of online and offline activism can also nourish each other. For example, reading jokes about breaking the fast during Ramadan online, might encourage people to eat in public. This offline–online cycle can also go the other way around, as activism online does not take place in an isolated and neutral space, but is closely connected to the local, national, and international context. In particular, "reaction memes" respond to current news, events, or other happenings (Aguilar et al. 2017). For instance, as soon as someone gets arrested for eating in public, many posts fill the timelines. The added value of offline protest should not be underestimated. Face-to-face interactions of telling a joke are needed to move beyond virtual-only ties and to sustain change in the long term (Shayan 2016). In addition to that, it should not be forgotten that behind jokes on the Internet are real people that put physical, psychological, and emotional effort into online activism.

The few jokes that do reach the Muslim majority provoke mixed reactions. As we have seen based on the numerous examples, some jokes, in order to challenge religious authority and to receive attention, can be quite bold and sometimes also apply vulgar jargon. As jokes are often exaggerated to make them funnier, they often lack the nuance of a normal conversation. This can cause offense and polarization. Humor can thus hurt the subject of the joke or the group that feels addressed, especially when stereotypes about Muslims are reinforced. Thus, while non-believers face clichés themselves, they also engage in reproducing stereotypes, such as portraying believers as blindly following their beliefs. Hence, a mutual stereotyping takes place that rather increases differentiation than that it fosters understanding. Other jokes amplify oppositions, such as violence and peace or belief and science.

Within both the group of non-believers and the Muslim community, huge differences in what is considered "funny" exist. For example, many but not all Muslims might find it hurtful to see a cartoon about the prophet Muhammad. At the same time, many but not all non-believers claim their right to make jokes about religion. Thus, some activists consciously test the borders in their pursuit of freedom of expression and argue that blasphemy laws only work to the disadvantage of minorities, such as non-believers. For many, joking about religion is not necessarily blasphemy, but rather a creative and unrestrained critique. According to Salim, an active member of the civil society, "It does not matter if you agree with these (sometimes extreme) statements or not, it is about the right to say whatever you want."[25] Furthermore, Moroccan-born co-founder of the MALI movement Zineb El Rhazoui became a subject of this discussion, as she was a former journalist at Charlie Hebdo and often vehemently defended cartoons about Islam.

Others are more critical about the unlimited defense of blasphemous jokes and point at the overemphasis on Islam in jokes and biased understanding of putting freedom of speech higher than religious offense. They criticize the discourse, in which religious criticism is associated with freedom and rationality, whereas religious censure is often linked to intolerance, arbitrary, and coercion (Asad et al. 2013). As we deal with a Muslim majority context, it is important not to apply a Western-Christian lens on religious-related jokes. As many scholars have pointed out, Islam has a different relationship to blasphemy. According to Mahmood (in Asad et al. 2013), for many Muslims, the connection to the prophet can be very close and personal and signs can be real embodiments. Therefore, many Muslims might perceive the negative iconography in cartoons or jokes about the prophet as a direct assault and moral injury.

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[24]   Interview Soufiane, 18 December 2016, Rabat.

[25]   Interview Salim, 7 May 2019, Rabat.

In short, while for some, humor should be without limits, others insist on borders that must not disrespect other people's beliefs. Where we draw the line between artistic freedom, religious criticism, and blasphemy is conditioned by the personal and religious values of each person, as well as the context in which the joke is made. Taking both positions into account, it is useful to reflect once more on the punch theory. While in the French debate following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, it was mainly argued that satire is there to punch in all directions (up and down), in other contexts, satire is mainly used to punch up. Thus, usually, satire is a critique of the powerful made by the disempowered. Who is the one in power depends very much on the context and the specific positionality. While in Europe Muslims, are part of a discriminated minority, in Morocco, Islam is the religion of the majority and closely linked to power. Therefore, punching towards Islam has different meanings in both contexts. This proves again that humor is relative (Driessen 2015): in one context, a cartoon about religion can be a tool of expressing liberty, and in another, it can be a visualization of intolerance towards Islam or other religions. In other words, "one's sense of humor may be another's offense" (Molokotos-Liederman 2019).

6. Conclusions

Coming back to the initial question of to what extent humor is a tool for Moroccan non-believers to challenge the religious status quo, the following conclusions can be drawn: the numerous cartoons and memes shared in the four Facebook groups that are especially popular among young, urban Moroccan non-believers, shows that humor plays a crucial role. Jokes can give an indication about which topics are important to non-believers. These subjects include direct criticism about the legal restrictions of liberties for non-believers and perceived allies such as the LGBTQ+ community and feminist groups. Other jokes mock religion or reflect on society's views towards non-believers. Not every joke carries an activist message or is told with a political intention, yet, many jokes have the potential to convey controversial opinions that challenge religious expectations and questions of authority.

Humor can therefore be seen as a form of resistance. Jokes on the Internet offer a way to covertly express dissent in a country where religious authority is perceived as hegemonic and closely linked to political legitimacy. In this context, non-believers perceive the Internet as a relatively safe space, while being aware of perils, such as surveillance. Jokes can break the taboos about leaving and criticizing religion and make the unspeakable discussable. Hereby, most jokes do not target a single person that incorporates religious power, such as the King, but rather criticize religious authority as a structural component that permeates the whole society. Nevertheless, joking about religion and its messengers, as well as religious leaders and followers, can undermine the religious basis of the political system. In addition to that, self-satire indirectly questions the religious status quo by reflecting on the position and personal experiences of being not religious in a Muslim-majority society. While humor can be a powerful weapon of the weak, it can also cross the boundaries of the acceptable, as the line between religious criticism and blasphemy remains thin. Especially in a digitalized and globalized world, jokes can reach others within no time, who might disagree about the funniness of the message. Humor that criticizes religion does not only depend on the context, but also on the (power) position of the person who is telling the joke.

To conclude, challenging authority is one, but not the only purpose. Humor can also bridge incongruities when laughing together and it can lead to a feeling of identification. This becomes especially visible during Ramadan when the social pressure on practicing religion increases. In this period, jokes are a possibility to vent about shared struggles, such as having to pretend to fast. Lastly, humor can also function as differentiation, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the jokes contrasted the reactions of religious leaders with those of scientists and doctors. While self-expression, identification, and differentiation might not challenge religious authority directly, they might contribute to activism in the long run. Online communities, such as (closed) Facebook groups can

have different functions. They are not only places to laugh but also to exchange ideas, to mobilize, and to support each other. This is important, as activism does not start out of nowhere, but often begins with informal online debates about social and political issues. Facebook groups, such as "Atheists in Morocco", do not constitute a big movement so far, but mocking religion and humorously reflecting on the situation of non-believers can contribute to vivid discussions that might develop into louder activism in the future.

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'Uncovering the Self': Religious Doubts, Spirituality and Unveiling in Egypt

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, discourse on religious piety has taken many different forms, from mosque lessons by lay preachers—such as 'Amr Khalid—to religious TV programmes and leisure activities. Within this widespread religious culture and cultivation of forms of visible piety, wearing the veil became an almost uncontested norm for women. As Saba Mahmood demonstrated, the veil became a crucial way to express and cultivate a 'pious self'. Yet especially since the 2011 revolution and its aftermath, many young Egyptians started to question political, religious and patriarchal authorities. Amongst others, this took on open or hidden forms of non-believing, as well as a search for new forms of spirituality. Based on fieldwork and interviews, this contribution looks into the motives and experiences of women who decided to cast off the veil. In view of the hegemonic piety discourse, this is a huge issue, which is met by fierce reactions and accusations of immorality and non-belief. Whereas for some women this decision is an expression of religious doubt or a turn to a non-religious worldview, for others it is a way to contest the current piety discourse in a search for a more personal and spiritual connection with God. While the relationship with religion among my interlocutors might differ, they share a common attempt to uncover their 'authentic selves'. By unveiling, they express their wish to define their own space and ideas regarding religion, gender and their bodies.

Keywords: (un)veiling; gender; spirituality; piety; non-belief; the self; Islam; Egypt

1. Introduction

"'Amr Khalid ruined my childhood", Heba mentions several times during the interview I conducted with her in a smoky coffee shop in an upmarket neighbourhood in Cairo.[1] "Because wearing hijab at the age of twelve (…) entails many other things, such as, you are not allowed to play in the streets anymore; you're wearing hijab so you better not run (…) because your boobs would shake (…). Hijab is so un-feminist! (…) It is so discriminatory! (…) You become so judgmental (…) Hijab makes people view themselves as if they are morally better, even if they're not".

In front of me sat a passionate young woman of 24 with her attractive long curly hair loose, confidently talking about her current views on religion and gender, as well as the pain she endured during the process of removing the hijab. Although she "hates" 'Amr Khalid, the popular lay preacher who was highly influential in spreading the piety movement into the middle and upper-middle classes from the 1990s until the 2011 revolution, taking off the veil in no way signalled a decrease in devotion: "I can tell you wholeheartedly that when I removed this [hijab], I became so close to God!".

The hardship she endured was particularly related to the strong opposition of her relatives, especially the 'emotional blackmail' of her mother. By unveiling, doubt was raised regarding her morality and faith, whilst it also endangered her family's reputation due to the suspicion that they were not raising her as a properly marriageable girl.

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1   All names have been changed. Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

Women's bodies have often been the terrain over which social, religious and political views have been contested, enforced or reclaimed. Since the 1990s' 'Islamic Revival', the piety movement crafted 'pious and disciplined bodies'. The 2011 revolution, however, seems to have opened up space for 'liberated bodies'. The younger generation of the revolution not only questioned the political establishment, but also religious and patriarchal authorities. It unleashed a search for the younger generation's own voice and ways of life. Several women I interviewed in the course of my research on religious doubts and unveiling expressed that wearing hijab 'is not the natural me'.[2] Their experiences with and through the revolution bolstered their courage to reclaim their own bodies and minds. They wanted to "own" their bodies and minds. While the political revolution is felt to have 'failed', a 'silent revolution' appears to be ongoing.[3]

Yet, we should be careful not to replicate the oppositions that have harmed the field of anthropology of Islam for too long, in which Islam is equalled to cultivating docile bodies whereas developing non-religious sensibilities would entail agency and liberation. As Saba Mahmood articulated, agency is the historically and culturally specific modality of action to effect changes in the world and in oneself. What appears docile (or liberated) are forms of agency " . . . that can be understood only from within the discourses and structure of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (Mahmood 2005, p. 15). The revolution appears to have enabled new modalities of action and to have opened up space to question religious, political and patriarchal authorities (Van Nieuwkerk 2018b, 2021a). Although most of my interlocutors were pessimistic about the current possibilities to effect change 'in the world', they acknowledged the changes that have been stimulated within 'themselves'. It is thus important to contextualise (un)veiling as a form of agency in the changing political and religious landscape of Egypt.

This article will closely consider unveiling in present-day Egypt (see Kütük-Kuriş for a comparative case study on Turkey, this issue). Some of my interlocutors were non-religious and removing the veil was a way to embody and express their non-religious lifestyles. For others, taking off the hijab was part of their journey towards a more inward-focused or personal form of piety and spirituality. Studying the process of unveiling can thus twin the religious and non-religious motivations of women rather than opposing them. While the relationship with Islam among my interlocutors might differ, they share a common attempt to discover their own personalities and identities. By unveiling, they express their wish to define their own space and ideas regarding religion, gender relations, femininity and their bodies. Unveiling is not only about religion, but particularly about 'uncovering their selves'.

Based on fieldwork and interviews,[4] this article examines the motivations and experiences of women who decided to remove the veil. For the larger project on religious doubt and non-belief, I conducted several periods of fieldwork between 2013 and 2018. I interviewed 37 non-believers, ranging from agnostics to outspoken atheists, consisting of 22 males and 15 females of which 26 were former Muslims and 11 former Copts. I also investigated the state media on atheism and the social media generated by activist atheists. In that context I interviewed ten women who took off the veil. I also spoke with three women who unveiled but remained spiritual. This is why I conducted an additional seven

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in-depth interviews with women who remained within the faith but unveiled in January 2019. Accordingly I interviewed twenty women between 2015 and 2019, of whom 10 self-identified as non-religious and 10 as either spiritual or Muslim. During the research on religious doubt and non-believing, unveiling was only one of the many aspects that were significant in their trajectories and for this reason these interviews less richly document the process of unveiling itself. I mainly used a snowball technique to access women, since the topic, particularly doubt and non-religion, is very sensitive. Therefore, only trusted friends could introduce me to a next interlocutor. Most women I interviewed were between 25 and 35 and of middle or sometimes upper-middle class backgrounds. All were highly educated and worked in journalism, with NGOs, in teaching or translation work or international companies. They were young urban professionals. Accordingly my results are not representative for the experiences of women of other social classes in Egypt.

By analysing young urban professional women's experiences with unveiling in present-day Egypt, I hope to contribute ethnographically to an 'anthropology of Islam, doubt and (non) religion'. The first section will examine the anthropology of Islam, doubt and non-belief. The second section will analyse the historical developments regarding (un)veiling in Egypt and the theoretical lenses used to explain this phenomenon since the 1970s. Section three highlights the motivations of my interlocutors to veil and the following section, section four, why they choose to unveil. This article will particularly demonstrate the ways in which my interlocutors reclaim their minds, bodies and 'selves' by unveiling.

2. The Anthropology of Islam and Non-Belief

Saba Mahmood (2005), Charles Hirschkind (2006) and others—inspired by Talal Asad (2003)—centred their attention on the Islamic Revival in Egypt, followed by numerous studies working on Egypt or other parts of the Muslim world (e.g., Hafez 2003; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006). Their studies were ground breaking for several reasons. They took the religious motivations, desires and practices that became visible in Egypt since the 1980s seriously as a religious phenomenon in their own right. Rather than reducing it to a reaction to Westernisation or as political statements against secularising regimes and economic malaise, Islamic piety was studied for its own intrinsic motivating force.

Authors such as Mahmood and Hirschkind also demonstrated how people were cultivating a pious self by veiling, by listening to religious Qur'an recitations, by acquiring Islamic knowledge through courses and lectures, by praying and by various other religious practices characteristic of the piety movement. These religious activities were a means of training the religious sensibilities of the participants of the piety movement. Mahmood and Hirschkind turned the common notion that praying is an expression of devotion upside down and showed how praying and other religious acts helped to hone a pious constitution.

Moreover, particularly Mahmood (2001) also showed that cultivating a pious self is an active ethical process performed by devotees. Agency should not only be conceptualised as a form of resistance towards religion and normative structures. Conforming to and trying to adhere to religious norms also needs active training and struggle.

This brief summary only scratches the surface of the new paradigm that these authors have introduced into the anthropology of Islam. Yet several authors also criticised the 'pious turn' in anthropology, also known under the umbrella question "is there too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam" (Schielke 2010, p. 1).

First, several authors working on women's roles in the piety movements around the world criticised Mahmood's analysis of 'submission' or conformity to religious prescriptions as an active way to cultivate piety—albeit inspiring—as one sided, since it started to elide other forms of agency by pious women, such as resistance (Noor 2017).

Second, scholars draw attention to ambivalence, doubt and ambiguity in everyday life practices, including in religious practices. As Schielke argues, the studies on the piety movement tended to present an image which is "too coherent and idealised". Not only are the religiously-committed individuals easily taken as "paradigmatic representatives", scholars also tend to analyse attempts to realise a pious self, rather than the actual outcome

of the endeavours. Further, by taking exceptional, committed activists rather than the majority of people as the basis of analysis, these studies tend to reproduce the bias of the specific group under study (Schielke 2009, p. 537). Schielke and Debevec (2012, pp. 2–3) argue: " . . . for a view that takes (. . .) everyday practice (. . .) of religion as the starting point, looking at actual lived experiences and their existential significance for the people involved."

Third, the larger background to these lines of critique on the pious turn is shaped by the societal and academic discourse on Islam and Muslim societies. These tend to perceive 'Muslims' foremost as religious subjects as if they only devote themselves to religious activities. Inadvertently, the pious turn might produce an account of Islam that is very much in line with social and political discourses on Islam as a dominant feature and force that cannot be erased. As Schielke observed on the pious turn: "While this turn has provided direction for a number of innovative studies, it appears to stop short of some key questions regarding everyday religious and moral practice, notably the ambivalence, the inconsistencies and the openness of people's lives that never fit into the framework of a single tradition. In short, there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam (Schielke 2010, p. 1)."

Finally, Makdisi argues that the copious scholarship produced about Islam including the works by Asad and Mahmood leave out the abundant, obvious and meaningful discourses and practices of non-Muslim Arabs and secular Arabs: "I concur with Aziz al-Azmeh's criticism of the "over-Islamization of Islam." The fixation on the study of "Islam", "the Muslim", "the Muslim Women" and "Islamic piety" has ignored secular Arabs or those Muslim Arabs for whom piety does not signify something publicly political (Makdisi 2019, p. 16)."

Two promising lines of inquiry can be deduced from these critical observations: a focus on the study of everyday life and its ambivalence; and examining the secular and non-Muslim traditions in the 'Islamicate' world (Hodgson 1974).

The line of inquiry into the 'everyday life' and its ambiguities is important and promising. Yet, scholars need to be careful to avoid (re)creating a tension between the normative realm and the everyday life as Fadil and Fernando (2015) have observed. In their attempt to think through this new investment in the 'everyday', they observe that some proponents of the study of everyday life might inadvertently claim that religion belongs to the normative realm, whereas play or ambiguity in the practice of religion is part of the realm of everyday life. Daily life is then solely examined as the site where religion is resisted. Yet religious deliberations on norms and practices take place at both the level of normative traditions and in daily life. Indeed, as I will show, the process of (un)veiling includes deliberations in everyday life about religious normative discourse and practices as well as resistance, doubt and reconsideration of these norms and practices. 'Grand schemes'—in this case foremost the religious discourse promoted by the Egyptian piety movement—and 'the everyday' are not opposed, but integrated into daily life's deliberations and practices.

The second line of inquiry—studying the traditions of non-Muslim Arabs (Christians, Jews, etc.), secularism, secular sensibilities (Hirschkind 2010), religious doubt (Pelkmans 2013), non-religious people from diverse denominational backgrounds, etc.—is relevant in a historical sense as well as timely, as there appears to be a trend towards increased religious doubt and non-belief (Whitaker 2014, Arab Barometer).[5] However, this line of inquiry is not yet well developed. Due to the same bias to view Islam/religion as a dominant force, secularism and non-believing has received scant attention (Makdisi 2019; Van Nieuwkerk 2018c). Whereas religious discourses on apostasy and legal aspects have received attention (e.g., Adang et al. 2016; Olsson 2008; Larsson 2018), the number of studies on embodiment

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5   https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool/ (accessed on 7 October 2019). See also https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377.

and daily life experiences of non-believers are limited and have only recently started to emerge.[6]

In the study of non-belief and atheism in general (not necessarily related to Islam), the focus appears to be on leaving 'religion'.[7] That is, they mainly express a 'religio-centric' perspective (Streib 2014; Cragun and Hammer 2011; Lee 2015). In line with Schielke (2010), who argues that there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam, it could be argued that there is also too much emphasis on religion in the process of moving out of Islam. Of course we should study theological doubts and motivations, but the process of leaving a faith entails much more than the religious or doctrinal aspects. Moving out of Islam can be only a small part or specific stage in the enfolding life stories of people.

I concur with the argument that it is important to study the everyday life negotiations of normative traditions, whether religious or informed by other 'grand narratives' (e.g., secular-liberal ideologies), and how these discourses are appropriated, reproduced and transformed in people's lives. I also think we should not only study paradigmatic examples, whether in processes of religious intensification or in leaving religion. Just as cultivation of the pious self needs training and effort, the same holds for secular sensibilities. It is important to study the enactment of belief and non-belief in terms of embodiment, affect, dressing and changing daily life practices such as eating and feasting. Neither belief nor non-belief is a 'natural' or 'normal' disposition, but needs cultivation.

This article will investigate unveiling as a lens through which to apply this research approach. I consider unveiling is a suitable topic to do this, first because dress and comportment are significant aspects of daily life. Second, as is examined below, unveiling is part of the project of religious questioning and leaving faith, as well as searching for an inward-focused, individualised piety. Therefore, both belief and non-religiosity can be considered within the single study rather than setting these out as two separate fields. By not a priori opposing the 'believers' to the 'non-believers', I was able to closely examine the profound communalities in my interlocutors' journeys with (un)veiling. Third, unveiling discloses women's active engagement in uncovering and cultivating the self. Akin to cultivating a pious self by veiling, unveiling is for a large part about discovering the self in its multifaceted aspects. Finally, whether unveiling for spiritual or non-religious reasons, the motivations extend beyond a narrow focus on religion per se into the questioning of gender and subjectivity. Accordingly, the study of unveiling can critically question the salience of religion as a motivating factor and force in women's lives and aspirations.

The phenomenon of (un)veiling in Egypt and the different theoretical frames that have been used to study it within their historical and shifting contexts will be examined in the next section. All of these frames have been relevant for certain periods and pertain to specific groups of Egyptian women.

3. Understanding Veiling in Egypt since the 1970s

Veiling by women is and was the most notable aspect of the Islamic Revival since the 1970s. It is a rich topic that has been debated since the beginning of the last century when the first Egyptian women removed the face veil. Most scholars agree that the veil of the 1970s is not a re-appearance of the veil that elite women once wore up until the beginning of the 20th century. It is a new phenomenon with new meanings.

In 1983, I lived on campus at Cairo University for 10 months and had lengthy discussions with many students, half of whom had recently adopted the veil. Many unveiled students intended to veil at a later point in their lives. MacLeod mentioned a consistent growth of veiling among lower-middle-class working women from about one-third of her informants in 1983 to three-quarters in 1988 (MacLeod 1991, p. 105). Sherifa Zuhur's

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[6] See Schielke (2012, 2013) and Van Nieuwkerk (2018a, 2018b, 2021a, 2021b) for Egypt; Enstedt (2018) for Muslims in Sweden; Cottee (2015), for Muslim in the UK and Canada; Vliek (2020) for Muslims in the UK and the Netherlands.

[7] For the notion of becoming an 'ex', see Ebaugh (1988). On leaving Religion, see Handbook of Leaving Religion (Enstedt et al. 2020) (https://brill.com/view/title/33911).

research took place in 1988 and two-thirds of her informants were veiled, either with a hijab or niqab; the face veil (Zuhur 1992, p. 59). During my last research before the revolution, most people estimated that approximately 80 to 90 per cent of Muslim women in Cairo were veiled. Whereas this is not necessarily based on accurate statistics, it conveys the notion that an overwhelming majority of Muslim women were veiled. Non-veiled women were often assumed to be Copts.

In the 2010s, some analysts note a trend towards 'down-veiling', which "refers to a subtle and seemingly growing tendency among certain circles of urban Egyptian women toward less concealing and less conservative forms of Islamic dress" (Herrera 2001, p. 16). In addition, the development of fashionable styles of veiling started to become visible. Veiled artists and TV personalities played a prominent role in making veiling fashionable (Van Nieuwkerk 2013). As well as the trend towards down-veiling, there seemed to be a trend towards 'up-veiling' running in parallel. The niqab also attracted a growing number of adherents in the urban landscape. With most women wearing a more or less stylish form of veiling, the veil as such lost its clear message of piety and modesty. The veil had fallen victim to 'piety inflation', with some pious women trying to distinguish themselves by wearing the niqab (Van Nieuwkerk 2013).

Yet around the time of the revolution (2011), several women started to reflect on the veil and whether this was a conscious personal choice or merely one based on peer pressure. Again, no numbers or statistics are available, but especially the middle-class and well-educated women I talked to recently (2015–2019) mention many friends or friends of friends who either removed the veil or wanted to do so but were afraid of the potential repercussions. The story of unveiling was occasionally shared on Facebook and some stories were published (Eltahawi 2016). It is now more common to see unveiled women in upmarket neighbourhoods.

There are several theoretical frames for understanding veiling in Egypt, which have evolved over time. In the late 1970s, scholars focused mostly on socio-political aspects and conceptualised veiling as a form of protest or activism (El-Guindi 1981, 1983; Marsot 1984; Hoffman-Ladd 1987; MacLeod 1991). The first studies on veiling as activism mainly concentrated on female university campus students in the late 1970s. Veiling, perceived as the symbol of Islamic authenticity, was theorised as a form of protest whether against the secular regime or against cultural dominance by the West.

In the 1980s, several authors understood veiling as the symbol of tradition and submission. It was analysed as the public evidence that women had internalised and accepted control over their bodies and sexuality. An interesting analytical mixture of submission and protest was developed by MacLeod (1991). She conducted her research among lower-class working women. For these women the hijab was a form of symbolic action by which they expressed their feelings of conflict and confusion about combining work outside the home with marriage and motherhood (MacLeod 1991, p. 97). Although lower-class working women were out and about in public, according to MacLeod, they actually felt that their main place should be in the house. By veiling, they signalled to neighbours, colleagues and strangers in the street that their primary role was that of a "traditional wife and mother" (MacLeod 1991, p. 121).

From the late 1990s onwards, a focus on the religious meaning of the veil as a sign of piety surfaced as a main frame to understand veiling (Mahmood 2001, 2005; Deeb 2006). Researchers studying the veil in the late 1990s criticised previous studies for their lack of attention to the religious dimensions of veiling (Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2001, 2005). Mahmood (2001, 2005) in particular studied the role of veiling in creating a pious self. According to preachers of the piety movement, veiling should not be seen as a custom but as "a challenge that far exceeds the simple act of donning the veil" (Mahmood 2005, p. 51). Veiling is a critical marker of piety, as well as the "means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (Mahmood 2005, p. 158). The veiled body becomes the "necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed" (Mahmood 2005, p. 23). Veiling

can be compared to praying, reading Qur'an or engaging in charity. It is one of the means to construct a pious self which simultaneously expresses and harbours the feeling of piety.

Not only has the religious meaning and motivations of veiling spread more widely since the late 1990s, but the pious discourse on veiling has also become more elaborate and wide spread across various classes in Egypt. With the growth of the piety movement, many women took lessons in the mosque and familiarised themselves with the religious discourse of this movement. Lay preachers, such as 'Amr Khalid, with their clean-shaven faces, modern appearances and pleasant messages that piety and wealth could sit well together (Bayat 2002; Wise 2003), attracted young people and the well to do. Veiling was also an important topic among the female preachers who gave lectures in the many 'Islamic salons' at the homes of the upper-middle classes. The growing religiosity among the upper classes and 'lighter' religious discourse are among the factors that encouraged the development of veiling as a fashion item. Veiling, in whatever form, became the new normal among large segments of society (Van Nieuwkerk 2013).

The 2011 revolution was a watershed experience for many, especially the young. Many younger Egyptians started to question political, religious and patriarchal authorities, the three interconnected and seemingly unassailable powers that once one showed signs of crumbling, did not leave the other two untouched. The political regime, backed by religious authorities and some of the lay preachers (such as 'Amr Khalid), lost credibility. The politicisation of Islam and the ensuing power play during and after the revolution also contaminated religious discourses. This was compounded by the one-year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, which proved a conduit for doubts about the credibility of Islam as a political system. The Muslim Brotherhood's maxim 'Islam is the solution' fell totally flat with a section of the younger generation.

Loosing fear of the ruling power and its repressive apparatus was a significantly empowering experience. It also enabled the questioning of different kinds of authorities, as a young female non-believer who unveiled, Elham, explained to me:[8]

> Any person under 30 and anyone born up to until 1981—any Egyptian—came to consciousness knowing one thing: Hosni Mubarak is the president. He was a part of the hierarchy. 'Okay there's God, there's religion and there's also Hosni'. And we couldn't change him, *whatever* happened. Being able not only to say no, but to say no in these huge numbers and to actually throw him out of his position made people think... well, if he can go, then any authority can go! What about the authority of God?

Ibtisam similarly explained how this feeling of empowerment during the revolution and the downfall of Mubarak quickly boiled over into questioning religious authority:

> That's what I like about the revolution. It could be a collective experience and at the same time a very personal one. After the revolution I was still wearing the hijab. Then I started to question not just Islam, but the notion of God himself. I compared him to the president, to tyranny, God as tyrant. Somebody is in charge all the time; you're never free. Even if you think you're free. For me this was the starting point.[9]

As can be seen in greater detail in my interlocutors' narratives below, the revolution was a catalyst not only to question political, religious and parental authorities, but also to uncover and free 'the self' from these powerful authoritative discourses (see also Introduction, this issue). However, their motives to veil are examined first.

4. Motives to Veil and the Image of Non-Hijabis

I interviewed twenty women between 2015 and 2019, most within the framework of a larger project on trajectories of religious doubts and non-belief that also included male

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8   Interview with author on 29 October 2017.

9   Interview with author on 13 February 2015.

and Coptic interlocutors. Of the twenty interlocutors, two non-religious women had never worn the veil. Sahar used to veil only during the holy month of Ramadan and unveiled the remainder of the year, but later decided to remain unveiled for the whole year. Riham, who has religious doubts and a strong desire to unveil, remained veiled due to concerns about personal security. As a divorced mother she needed to protect her reputation as a respectable mother, in order not to endanger the custody of her daughter. Lina re-veiled due to pressure from her mother and although she was not convinced of veiling herself, she was happy to calm her mother.

Whereas ten identified as Muslim-spiritual believers, the other half were either agnostic, atheist or identified as both spiritual and as non-religious. They believe in 'God' or a 'force', but not necessarily in religion or in the Muslim conception of God as they had been taught. This indicates not only the complexities in the relationship between (un)veiling and religious identifications, it also reflects the difficulty in drawing firm lines between belief versus non-belief, as many of them remain spiritual whether within or beyond the self-defined boundaries of Islam.[10]

Most of my interlocutors did not characterise their upbringing as strict, but rather as conservative. Heba, with whom I started the introduction, explained what a conservative religious family entails:

As a child I was so religious. So devoted! I'm basically brought up in a semi, kind of, conservative family. Not extremist, but conservative: who like their girls modest; who like them not to have relationships with boys at school and stuff like that. To be modest in your clothes, in your talking...[11]

Karima was from a '*sharif*' family, that is, she is related to the lineage of Prophet Muhammad, but described her family as moderate. Three of them considered their families 'strict'. Zahra, who had never donned the veil, came from a communist family and had as a child been scared to death that her friends would discover that her parents were non-believers.

It was not uncommon for my interlocutors—whether from a religious, conservative or moderate family—to go through a period of religious intensification. Elham, who has now left Islam, explained:

My upbringing was really very religious. (. . .) Hijab is a nice thing for women. Prayers always are the way we connect to God and beware of everything you say and everything you do, because it may upset God. As a child I was very afraid of this thing that they called God that I don't know. I even imagined him as a very giant man, with a very long beard [laughs]. I know this is really childish, but this is how I imagined him. Very angry and ready to throw me in hell at any point—whatever I do he might anyway send me to hell. (. . .) But as a teenager, I don't know what happened, I became really very religious. I even prayed more often and I went to the mosque more often. I talked to people like I am a sheikh [laughs] or a *da'iyya* [preacher].[12]

Hayat also related that—against the wishes of her parents—she went through a period of religious intensification when she was 16:

I started with an upbringing in which there was not that much religion but more morals (*akhla'*). I am the one who went in the direction of religion. It was my personal decision. My parents did not agree. I decided to wear the veil. I was convinced that I had to wear the hijab because it was a religious duty (. . .). I wanted good credits (*sawab*). My parents refused the veil because I was still young. (. . .) I wore the veil because of my religiosity and extremism [*tadayun wa*

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10 I will focus on unveiling and for that reason cannot deal with the complete stories of leaving Islam of my non-religious interlocutors. See for more on non-belief Van Nieuwkerk (2018a, 2018b, 2021a, 2021b).

11 Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

12 Interview with author on 29 October 2017.

tazamud] (. . .) I was worshipping God, reading Qur'an and hadith and listened to sheikhs. I did not even greet a man. I wanted to wear the *niqab,* but my father objected completely to this.[13]

Even Zahra from the communist family 'tried religion':

I tried to fast for a couple of years, not out of being convinced but out of trying to fit in. To see what they see, to feel what they feel, to be like them. Maybe they have a point, maybe they see something that I don't see, maybe it is because of my upbringing that I don't see it. (. . .) But (. . .) it did not have any meaning for me [laughs].[14]

In the three previous quotes, my interlocutors refer to key aspects—or 'grand schemes' —of the religious revival in which they grew up: being afraid of hell and the afterlife, trying to earn religious credits for the hereafter (*sawab*) and foremost devotion through hijab and modesty for women. But when this discourse becomes the 'norm', 'fitting in' also becomes important.

Popular lay preachers, influential in the piety movement of the 1990s, emphasised the importance of being ready for the afterlife and for 'meeting your Creator' (Van Nieuwkerk 2013). Hijab was an imperative preparation for this, as Karima from the *sharif* lineage of the Prophet explained:

. . . we as young people back then, we were 15 and 14 and we were thinking of *il-akhra*, the afterlife. So that is why basically, most—if not all—the girls wore it [hijab] at that time: because they are afraid of the afterlife: (. . .) 'Let's hope and work for it and do whatever sacrifices for the afterlife'. (. . .) It was the fear of the afterlife, the fear of being punished, because of what you were wearing, you were doing, or you were not doing . . . [15]

Even if you did not personally listen to the preachers' tapes, the pious discourse on the afterlife and the importance of veiling would reach you via friends, Karima continues: "I did not personally listen to these very famous videos or cassettes (. . .) but my friends would tell (. . .) stories about how a bride on her wedding day was not wearing it and in full make up and suddenly a car hit her and 'Oh my God! You can die at any moment'."

Sahar, who used to veil only during Ramadan, was confronted with scary discourses on not wearing hijab while at high school:

(. . .) there was a teacher who spoke to us about heaven and hell and death and torture and that kind of stuff and I developed a very severe phobia of death from high school. Because I am not veiled, the male teachers would take it upon themselves to start preaching. One of them said something to me that I will never forget. 'You are walking on the rope now but fire is around you, hell is walking around you', because I was not veiled. It really scared me back then. Deep down I thought God is probably not that narrow minded, but at the same time it scared me because I thought it must be true.[16]

Being raised with the hijab discourse circulating within the piety movement, it was sometimes difficult to disentangle whether veiling was a personal choice or one also influenced by social, religious or peer pressure. For Arya, it felt like her own choice at the age of 15, yet she also acknowledges 'indirect pressure':

Yes, at the time it was my choice (. . .) Maybe pressured indirectly, because of the circles around you. Because most of the friends just put it on, so you need to be like them (. . .) But for me (. . .) it was completely my choice. I was really happy about it at the time. (. . .) Everything was right after Ramadan. So, you

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[13] Interview with author on 15 February 2015. It was conducted mostly in Arabic but we changed into English as soon as the waiter was near.

[14] Interview with author on 30 October 2017.

[15] Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

[16] Interview with author on 28 April 2018.

know, you just feel spiritually you are ready for this. And you are feeling 'ahh, it is time'.[17]

Yet, several of my interlocutors explained how although at the time it felt like a personal choice—and not an easy one at that—in hindsight they see that it was also informed by 'encouragement from the environment to veil' or to do with 'fitting in'. Heba, for instance, explains that she was a rebel by nature by veiling at a very young age of 12: "So I was like the one standing out. I am doing the adult thing, that was wearing hijab." She also reflects that it was neither choice nor force:

(. . .) No, it wasn't my choice. I wasn't forced to do this, but because of the environment I was in. It was so encouraging to do this. The notion of the more you cover up, the closer you are to God; a very specific notion. The way you dress speaks about your beliefs, your upbringing; that you actually come from a very good family.[18]

Ibtisam, who only donned the veil for two years, explained that she did not veil for intrinsic pious reasons but "because society was telling that in order to be closer to God you need to wear hijab. I was young and all my friends were wearing hijab. I went with the flow." Others also explained that they veiled because they were praised and loved for doing so and were told that "God loves the veiled girls". Riham, who wants to remove the veil but tries not to taint her image as a respectable mother after divorcing, explains:

I was not for it or against it. It was just something that everybody was doing. Especially after the 'Amr Khalid discourse on hijab, everyone was wearing it and I had to be part of the crowd. Everyone in my class at school was wearing it; they were taking pride and showing it off. And people congratulated the new hijabis. So I followed.[19]

Veiling was therefore inspired by the piety movement and done for pious motives; however, it had also become so much the norm that it became difficult to disentangle piety from peer pressure. Most of my interlocutors do not belong to the 'first generation' young-sters growing up during the piety movement, but are more akin to a 'second generation', as several of them remarked.

The veil became so normal that it started to lose some of its heavier religious symbolism, as Karima from the *sharif* background explained: "... as you have seen, people are wearing it differently. And we have even invented styles like the Spanish style. And the turban (. . .) Really cute. (. . .) And you can show your earrings and even your neck and everything." When I asked her whether veiling is still interpreted as a religious sign, she continued:

At the beginning it was, that is why we would take care of how we speak with other men, how we wear it. Because you are wearing hijab, you should be presentable or respectful. But now, it's an everyday thing. It's a natural thing; it's like wearing your shoes, it doesn't mean anything. And you will find girls with very tight skinny jeans and even ripped jeans and they are very stylish.[20]

Whereas veiling used to provide some protection against harassment in the street, in my interlocutors' experiences wearing the veil—or not—makes no difference anymore. Harassment made Heba question the hijab: "It happens every day—either verbally or physically. And also, I started to question: Why do I have to accept this despite being so modest? Despite being headscarved?"

Despite the fact that veiling had become the default and that different (fashionable) forms were developing, the religious and moral values attached to the veil in the eyes of

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17 Interview with author on 17 January 2019.

18 Interview with author on 11 February 2019.

19 Interview with author on 17 October 2017.

20 Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

society did not diminish. It signified not only piety or closeness to God, but also being raised in a good family, modesty, good morals and being marriageable. Unveiling was considered an extremely difficult and sensitive issue. Arya explains:

> The veil for many people (. . .) presents your morals. It presents religion; it presents . . . your levels of spirituality with God. Although they don't have the right to judge this part (. . .). But, [after unveiling] (. . .) they would feel that you have become less moral, less religious (. . .), less everything that comes to mind, *less*...[21]

The combined connotations of '*less religious*' and '*less moral*' were most frequently mentioned and very difficult to deal with for my interlocutors. Lina, who re-veiled, explained that unveiling is considered a huge sin: "It is the equivalent of converting to another religion. Not believing in God. Having sexual affairs. (. . .) So for them taking off the veil is a sin, a huge one."[22] Heba explained that after removing hijab some male friends approached her "physically": "you took it off so you are becoming more available to us."[23]

The gravity of unveiling becomes clear by the idea that you better not wear the veil at all rather than veiling and taking it off afterwards, as Karima explained: "This is like you are playing with God. You can't do that. You can't play with God. You have to be serious about it. Because you once wore it, you can't take it off."[24] Latifa is divorced and considers remarrying. Her future husband whom she described as very open-minded asked her to make up her mind whether to veil or unveil, before meeting his parents because "it would give the wrong impression" if Latifa were to remove it at a later date.[25]

Women who unveil are thus considered *less religious* and *less moral* and for that reason also *less marriageable*. Heba was told that her chances of marriage would be minimal as a non-hijabi and her parents want her to marry as soon as possible:

> They told me: 'men want a girl who will be the mother of his children and the one who is modest. So your chances of getting married are so minimal right now' (. . .). They view me as a less religious person now. So I'm a source of a threat. (. . .) Like they expect me to do anything right now, because you are not wearing hijab.[26]

My interlocutors were also often told that they would be *less beautiful* without a veil when discussing their wish to unveil with friends and relatives. The beauty of veiling is a well-known aspect of the pious discourse on veiling. The headscarf is sometimes likened to a frame which highlights the attractive features of the face, but it also indicates moral beauty (Van Nieuwkerk 2013).

The image of non-hijabis as less religious, less moral, less attractive and less marriageable is captured in the metaphor Heba heard from the religious institute of al-Azhar where she went to consult on her decision to unveil. The imam she met likened the unveiled lady to "uncovered meat hanging at the butchers full of flies, which you will not be able to eat." Heba was furious at this degrading image of women as butchered meat that cannot be 'consumed'.

Finally, non-hijabis are also perceived as *less obedient*. They stand out, deviate from society's norms and are perceived as rebellious. Karima explained that after unveiling: "suddenly you are being strange. 'Why are you thinking for yourself? You shouldn't! You should follow the main interpretation that everybody is following . . . ' So when you do it,

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[21] Interview with author on 17 February 2019.
[22] Interview with author on 12 January 2019.
[23] Interview with author on 11 January 2019.
[24] Interview with author on 12 January 2019.
[25] Interview with author on 13 January 2019.
[26] Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

it is also threatening to society. Because you are kind of rebelling against what has been established for a couple of decades now."[27]

It is against these negative images of non-hijabis that women make the decision to unveil. Unveiling is about going against the grain and an act of rebellion against social and religious discourses on veiling, morality and obedience within the family. They express a claim for more personal space and more air to breathe, as will become clear from my interlocutors' narratives in the next section.

5. Unveiling and Uncovering the Self

When I asked Heba whether she remembered the first day she stepped out without a veil she exclaimed: "OH MY GOD. I remember every detail about it." She was told by her parents to uncover only outside their neighbourhood. So Heba went out with a turban covering her hair and met up with a friend who removed it for Heba:

> Because she knew of the suffering and the pain I was in. We went to a coffee house (. . .) and took a lot of pictures, because it is my first day. So my Instagram was (. . .) filled with pictures of me. (. . .) I remember that (. . .) I was very joyful at the beginning of the day, 'I'm free'. I told her like, 'I can't believe I can feel the air in my hair. That is unbelievable; my hair is breathing right now'. (. . .) And in the middle of the day, I started to get more uncomfortable. I felt like I was rude. 'I need to bring this back. I need to have my scarf (. . .) No, I'm not feeling comfortable' (. . .). This is the kind of damage hijab does: when I removed it, I felt like I'm not covered at all. (. . .) But, it got better (. . .) After all I was very, very happy with *me*; with my choices.[28]

Like Heba, several other of my interlocutors told me about initially "feeling naked" without hijab, a very uncomfortable feeling, but also about "feeling the wind in your hair", a very liberating and enjoyable feeling. Most expressed similar feelings about becoming "me".

As mentioned above, my interlocutors' choices and narratives of unveiling should be situated within the context of the revolution and its aftermath. The revolution empowered people to question political, religious and patriarchal or familial authority structures. Social justice, (gender) equality and more space for alternative lifestyles and personal space outside the control of (parental) authorities and the watchful gaze of society were also core issues. The 'silent revolution'[29] that still continues in Egypt is predominantly connected to liberating 'the self' from 'society' and creating an 'authentic self', as my interlocutors' narratives below will further demonstrate.

Most of my interlocutors discuss their emotions just before unveiling in terms of feeling "choked", "I am acting" and "this is not me". Different variations of these expressions are a recurring theme in my interlocutors' stories. Such feelings are related to three interconnected fields: the social ("feeling suffocated"); the religious ("being hypocritical") and the personal ("being true to myself"). The personal dimension particularly includes feelings about femininity.

First, regarding society or community pressure, Arya, for example, described her feelings of being choked both emotionally and physically:

> I had this feeling of being choked. (. . .) It was a really difficult decision to take it off. (. . .) But now I am starting to . . . love more of myself. It is not about the people, it is not about *your* judgments. It is not about *your* way of thinking. It does not matter anymore to me. (. . .) They don't actually want to talk to you

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[27] Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

[28] Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

[29] http://www.eutopiamagazine.eu/en/ayman-abdelmeguid/columns/egypt\T1\textquoterights-silent-revolution.html (accessed on 10 June 2015). See also Van Nieuwkerk (2021a) and the Introduction to this special issue.

now because 'you are not one of us'. Okay, that is fine! (. . .) I think I am a stronger person now.[30]

Second, regarding the religious dimensions, Latifa expressed that wearing the veil gave her the "feeling of acting":

It was making me feel like I am acting. So I chose that I was religious, but deep down (. . .) I don't have all the faith. It was very complicated. (. . .) I need to explore myself. (. . .) I just feel like I am not being myself and He knows when I'm acting something that I'm not feeling. It is not right. So, I took it off. And I have never felt happier, freer (. . .). I just feel like I am more myself. I feel more religious than ever.[31]

Several of my interlocutors started to feel that in the meantime the hijab has become "just a piece of cloth" and that "hijab does not define a good Muslim". They also reflected on the notion that hijab seems to have become "a free pass": as long as you wear it, you are good in the eyes of society, no matter what your actual behaviour might amount to. Lina also applied this to herself. She was having sexual affairs with boys and having a bit of a "rough time":

So I took it off, because it was not reflecting who I am. It was simply not. And it shouldn't be a free pass. (. . .) I am very hypocritical if I pray to God because I am a sinner. I pray because I want to repent. Then I would do it again and have sex again. And then I repent again (. . .). In 2015, I took the vow that I am not having any affairs with any guy unless he is the right person. (. . .) And then I took the veil off. I felt that I treated the veil in my rough patch as a free pass.[32]

Lina felt comforted and accepted by God though, with or without a hijab. Other interlocutors also expressed the feeling that they wanted to be a good person "but not through hijab only".

Another motive to unveil connected to the religious field is that the hijab is felt to create moral distinctions or, as Heba expressed in the quote used to introduce this article, "It is so discriminatory!" Later in the interview I returned to the topic and she reflected:

It discriminates against people, between people. Because (. . .) it is something that defines you as a Muslim, defines you as something different than the other. Me, I'm the norm and the others are the exceptions. That kind of thing. I hated that in hijab actually, I just hated that. (. . .) I remember one day, I was going to work and I woke up, 'Oh my god! I'm doing this again. I'm going to wear this. I don't want to leave the house again with this kind of shape in me'. No, it is so damaging. (. . .) Hijab is (. . .) so damaging in (. . .) its core concept.[33]

Several of my interlocutors who not only unveiled but also left religion mentioned this aspect of creating moral distinctions as a core issue that made them question Islam generally. For them it was not only the distinction between the veiled and the unveiled woman but the larger issue of creating distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims and the claimed moral superiority by Muslims, as they perceive it. Heba reflects on her current stance: "Yeah definitely. I am a person who is less judgmental of people; who is more open to differences; more open to people who are different in terms of religion, in terms of . . . race. (. . .) I'm an advocate for equality between people."[34]

Third, my interlocutors particularly expressed the notion of finding 'themselves'. Several quotes above already revealed the fundamental connection between unveiling and selfhood: they found their own voice against societal judgement, peer pressure and

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[30]   Interview with author on 17 January 2019.
[31]   Interview with author on 13 January 2019.
[32]   Interview with author on 12 January 2019.
[33]   Interview with author on 11 January 2019.
[34]   Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

religious discourse of the piety movement. They developed an individual, personal notion of spirituality—whether within or beyond the religious boundaries of Islam. Some interlocutors mentioned that "hijab is the last thing you should do and not the first" and could imagine re-veiling if they felt that it represented "who they are". Yet they particularly expressed that being religious or spiritual is "between me and God". They sometimes even feel that "hijab creates a distance between me and God" as Heba expresses:

> I couldn't handle it. I remember I was praying, I was crying so hard, telling God: 'Please tell me what to do. If this thing is right, make me love it, make me accept it. (. . .) Because it is actually moving me away from you. (. . .) I stopped praying. (. . .) I stopped fasting at Ramadan. I was kind of angry at you. Why you are doing this to me? I'm not loving this'.[35]

For this reason, Heba became "so close to God" after removing hijab. Latifa also explained that after removing hijab: "I just feel like I am more myself. I feel more religious than ever (. . .). Because I feel so much better, not because I moved away from God, but because I got closer to Him".[36] For those who remained religious and identified as 'Muslim', the content of their religiosity and spirituality changed not only towards a more personalised form, for some it also changed their conception of God from a frightening force that punishes to a more kind and loving image. Some of them also unburdened themselves from the stress that was placed by the piety movement on death, hell and punishment. Mona, who works for an NGO and self-identifies as atheist, is happy to concentrate on "real pressing issues" such as social inequality rather than worrying about death:

> I am happy now when I look into the mirror. Before, I saw someone with a veil that is not me. Before I was sad and feeling guilty all the time. All the time my conscience told me I was sinful: 'He will punish me for a reason'. Now (. . .) I concentrate on things that I can change in society. And I enjoy my life more. Generally I have become a better person. I no longer think about death all the time. Death is a moment for us all, just a moment like any other. The difference is just that it is the last moment. I am not going to lose years of my life thinking about this moment.[37]

For the non-religious interlocutors the notion of becoming a better person was no longer connected to religion but could be related to different social activities and good conduct. For them, being a moral person had no connection with religion—or even conversely, they were now motivated to do good intrinsically and not out of fear for God.[38]

For all of them, critically using their "own mind" was significant. This could relate to religion but not necessarily so. They expressed that they were no longer "afraid to use their minds". They had no desire "to blindly follow religious authorities", if at all. For some this included questioning hijab as a religious obligation (*fard*), for others this was one of the many aspects they questioned about religion. Hayat, who self-identifies as agnostic, felt that "Hijab not only made me sit at home, but also cut off my brains from thinking. Even my thinking was of a specific kind; connected with God." Now she felt she created space to reflect on many important social and personal issues.[39] They generally felt "more open-minded", "less judgmental", and "more world-open".

Finally, for all my interlocutors, religious or non-religious, uncovering their 'selves' by unveiling was also critically related to gender, to their femininity and their bodies. Karima, who works as a university teacher, clearly articulated hijab as 'covering the self' by describing hijab as a "uniform" that erases woman's distinctive personalities:

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[35] Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

[36] Interview with author on 13 January 2019.

[37] Interview with author on 16 January 2018.

[38] As mentioned before, the relationship with God and Islam is rather different for my religious and non-religious interlocutors. Due to the focus on taking off hijab I cannot go into further detail on why they not only unveiled but also left Islam (See Van Nieuwkerk 2018b, 2021a, 2021b).

[39] Interview with author on 15 February 2015.

We were like unisex. We were neither men nor women. Because this is how the society urges us to be. We were unisex. I look at my students and they are all the same. Unfortunately! Although I know that they have different mentalities and personalities and everything. But eventually they will all wear the same and look the same to me. (. . .) It [unveiling] makes me aware of myself more; of my uniqueness. (. . .) It reveals our identities. So it makes me more aware of who I am.[40]

Latifa also reflected that hijabis all look "the same". Although there are different styles: "I just felt we are all the same; copies."[41]

For most interlocutors, this uniqueness was related to femininity and sometimes—but not necessarily—'beauty'. Heba asserted: "I looked far more beautiful when I wore hijab, because hijab frames your features, so you appear more beautiful to be honest. (. . .) I was fine either way."[42] As above, the notion of 'veiling as a beautifying frame' is part of the piety discourse as Lina also experienced when she re-veiled. Colleagues told her: "'You look much more loveable' (. . .). You are much more beautiful. Please don't take it off again'". Yet Lina felt that hijab made her look much older than she actually was. At the age of 18, she was usually thought to be around 25.[43] Once again it was particularly related to the feeling that "this is not me", as Latifa also expressed:

I got married really young, right after I graduated. I had my daughter right after I got married. So I started to feel I looked so old. This is when I started to feel (. . .) this is not really what I would want to feel like. (. . .) Step by step, I started to feel less feminine, less beautiful: (. . .) I don't feel old. (. . .) And then I went through a very difficult time in my marriage. And this was another reason I felt less feminine. And I felt I wanted to take it off. It was around 2010, maybe after the revolution. A lot of people were taking it off. And I started to feel that maybe I need to feel free. I need to feel that I am free.[44]

Latifa even postponed unveiling because she was afraid that people would interpret this as a way to be more attractive to a future husband, whereas for her it was related to feeling and looking like "who she really *is*". She *did* feel feminine and *did not* feel old and she wanted to be free to express these feelings. Sarah likewise did not recognise the image of herself when looking in the mirror when she was pregnant and going out with a hijab: "I looked like a ball with hands. (. . .) I did not want to go outside because I didn't want to look at myself in the mirror. It's not a woman, it's a thing!" Sarah tried to put on more make up but it did not work for her, whereas after taking off the veil she expressed: "I feel this is me, normal, pregnant. I feel peaceful".[45]

Karima likewise felt that "playing with her hair" increased her feelings of femininity. In the beginning, she did not know what to do with her hair:

So, I started to play with my hair; to feel more feminine, actually. (. . .) Yes, you should not show your femininity. Being feminine means speaking in a soft voice, . . . not being so apparent, or you should be very modest and people should hardly notice you. Okay, where is my femininity in that?! Where is the idea of being sexy, or being attractive or anything? All this was to be saved until you get married? (. . .) But (. . .) I missed being attractive. I want to be attractive, I want to feel, to put makeup on as I wish. To wear a dress in summer, because it's hot.[46]

40   Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

41   Interview with author on 13 January 2019.

42   Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

43   Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

44   Interview with author on 13 January 2019.

45   Interview with author on 2 July 2013.

46   Interview with author on 12 January 2019.

Karima clearly expresses her urge to break free from societal norms of femininity and to discover her own femininity. This feeling of desiring to express your uniqueness and femininity was shared by many interlocutors and was narrated as a deeply felt urge to uncover the (feminine) self against all societal and religious odds.

For some, this ownership of their own bodies included having sexual relationships as a "personal right". Agnostic Hayat related this after taking off hijab:

> I had the feeling that I returned to my own self (*nafsi*) once again. I found myself. I broadened my scope beyond religion and morality and thought about what do I want or not want; not what God wants me to do or not to do. (. . .) I did not have sex before I left Islam, because in religion it is forbidden. My thoughts now are: 'It's okay. It is my right'. If (. . .) I do nothing bad to others, it is your right to do it. Sex is a big problem, you need marriage and agreement of the family but in my present stage I see it as my personal right. It is not even the right of my partner, it's my own right. This is my present way of thinking: what belongs to me is my own right. My body is my own, my mind and my thoughts are my own. My dreams and ambitions in society are mine—especially if it does not damage anyone else.[47]

Although Hayat starts with the right to "own" her body, in the sense of her right to sexuality, it extends to the freedom to shape her own life, having her own thoughts, ambitions and dreams. Some of my interlocutors were able to actualise these dreams and ambitions against societal pressure by being financially independent, engaging in relationships of their own choosing and shaping their own lifestyles. Some unmarried women even managed to live alone or with a roommate, something quite rare in Egypt.

Most of my interlocutors were happy with the changes they had been able to realise for themselves by unveiling. They felt "stronger", "more confident", "more independent" and "courageous" after unveiling. Unveiling particularly involved and brought about a fundamental process of discovering and "finding themselves". In the process of "uncovering the self", they recognised more broadly their own desires and ambitions. Accordingly, unveiling is not only the expression and outcome of the process of uncovering the self, but also became the means by which they developed and fashioned their individual selves and lives.

Heba expressed her ambitions as follows: "I want to be true to myself. I want to be remembered (. . .) with this courage when I die: 'Heba was a very courageous person. Heba was true to herself. She was leading a different live, with her friends, her notions . . . '."[48] Unveiling is not only an articulation of their self-discovery but also motivates a larger process of exploring who they are and what they want.

6. Conclusions

By analysing unveiling in present-day Egypt, this article intends to contribute ethnographically to an 'anthropology of Islam, doubt and (non) religion'. The process of (un)veiling includes deliberations in everyday life about religious normative discourse and practices, as well as resistance and reconsideration of these norms and practices. 'Grand schemes'—in this case the religious discourse of the Egyptian piety movement—and 'the everyday' are not opposed, but integrated into my interlocutors' daily life reflections and choices. This contribution also intends to counterbalance the 'over-Islamisation' in anthropological studies by looking into religious doubt and non-belief, without a priori opposing non-belief to belief. My interlocutors' narratives indicated not only the complexities in the relationship between unveiling and religious identifications, they also showed that it is difficult to draw hard lines between belief and non-belief. Many of them remained spiritual, whether within or beyond the self-defined boundaries of Islam.

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47 Interview with author on 15 February 2015.

48 Interview with author on 11 January 2019.

Unveiling appears to be a fundamental *religious* issue and will certainly be perceived as such by many (religious) observers in Egypt. I do not want to deny that unveiling is related to (non)religion, at least during the process of my interlocutors' daily deliberations whether to unveil or not. As demonstrated, for some interlocutors unveiling was part of the process of finding a more spiritual and personal relationship with God, whereas for others it was a staging post in leaving religion altogether.

Yet the religious dimensions only scratch the surface of the profound issues underlying unveiling. My interlocutors' narratives show that unveiling is part of a process of uncovering the self in its manifold aspects. They discover and express their unique personalities, (non) religious identities and their femininity. They express their desire to take ownership of their selves, minds and bodies.

Within the context of social, religious and political pressures weighing on them, they are searching for their own subjectivity. Similar to Mahmood's analysis regarding veiling, we can see that by unveiling they not only express 'the self' but also craft their individuality. Unveiling expresses and brings about transformations in their subjectivities, desires and ambitions. Unveiling is an articulation of—and also sets in motion—a larger process of discovering who they are and what they want. In the process of unveiling, my interlocutors proactively cultivate selfhood. By actively deliberating on "who they are", they reflect on "themselves" and on "the world".

Both my religious and non-religious interlocutors were searching for authentic selfhood, albeit cloaked in different positions regarding Islam. Unveiling challenges normative religion, even if it is motivated by a search for a personalised spirituality. More importantly, my interlocutors share a fundamental motivation to "find themselves" and discover their femininity, their own desires, ambitions and way of living. In opposition to socio-political and religious discourses defining women's subjectivities and desires, they discover their own voice.

By not a priori taking religion as the starting point in the process of unveiling, it was possible to unearth a common fundamental dynamic at play. Crafting selfhood by women challenges the power of the three authoritative pillars in Egypt: religion, politics and the family. Contestation about unveiling is a battle over women's (rebellious) minds and bodies more generally, rather than their religiosity per se. Uncovering the self by unveiling is indeed part of an on-going 'silent revolution'.

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Article

Moral Ambivalence, Religious Doubt and Non-Belief among Ex-Hijabi Women in Turkey

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Abstract: This article investigates religious transformations in contemporary Turkey through the case of women's unveiling. Drawing on 10 in-depth interviews with university-educated urban women who have recently stopped wearing the veil, the article examines their experiences and their motivations for unveiling. It asks to what extent and in what ways Muslim women's decisions to unveil are a reaction against the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) shift towards electoral authoritarianism and Islamic conservatism. Some practicing Muslims, particularly youth, have withdrawn their support from the government because of its political authoritarianism and its abandonment of Islamic ideals relating to justice. Since the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the AKP has come under critical scrutiny, both economically (e.g., increasing youth unemployment rates, widening income inequality, the shrinking middle class, clientelism) and sociopolitically (e.g., gendered social welfare policies, pro-natalist campaigns, the discourse on creating a pious generation). However, although the current political atmosphere plays a significant role in women's unveiling, the article also discusses women's personal and theological motives. The article elaborates on how ex-hijabi women contest both Islamist politics and Islamic orthodoxy regarding female religiosity and how these women reinterpret dominant gender norms.

Keywords: (un)veiling; moral ambivalence; religious doubt; non-belief; Islam; Turkey

1. Introduction

In March 2018, İhsan Fazlıoğlu, a renowned professor of Islamic philosophy, made some statements about headscarf-wearing students who identified as deists or atheists but remained veiled due to familial and societal concerns. His statements sparked a public debate about whether Turkish youth—particularly those from devout Muslim families—were losing faith in Islam (Fazlıoğlu 2018). The debate was expanded by the results of a study on the religious convictions of Imam Hatip (religious vocational secondary schools) students, conducted in the religiously conservative city of Konya. The study confirmed that increasing numbers of young Muslims were leaving Islam (Milliyet 2018). However, the head of Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs, Turkey's highest religious authority), as well as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its partner, the Nationalist Action Party, denied that deism and atheism were on the rise among youth, and described the debate as a defamation campaign against the young (Bianet 2018b; Diyanet 2018; Yenişafak 2018). In subsequent months, numerous interviews with young people appeared online, testifying the religious transformation of Turkish youth. The interviewees offered diverse narratives: some described their personal journeys away from Islam (BBC 2018; Medyascope 2018); others explained how they used historicist, leftist and/or gender-egalitarian interpretations to made peace with Islam (Bianet 2018d). Some said that their strict religious upbringing had produced a personal backlash against Islam (Bianet 2018a), while others related their disenchantment with Islam—namely its widespread Sunni interpretation—to the political, economic and social injustices experienced under the Islam-friendly AKP (Bianet 2018c; EkmekveGül 2019; Medyascope 2020).

The debate underwent a new twist when ex-hijabi women began sharing their stories of "transition" from veiled to unveiled. First, the online platform *Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin*

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(You Will Not Walk Alone) published the anonymous stories of young women who had decided to unveil. The platform aimed to generate a sense of solidarity among women with similar experiences (Çatlak Zemin 2019). Media and public attention peaked when ex-hijabis used the social media trend of the "10-year challenge" to announce their decision to unveil, posting photographs of themselves from the time when they were veiled beside current photographs showing them unveiled (BBC 2019).[1] This time, public intellectuals with different ideological orientations entered the debate. The pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Şafak* presented conservative Muslim views. Several intellectuals stated in this newspaper that it was women's own decision to wear, not wear or remove the veil, and the public should respect those decisions. Yet, they also noted that international media outlets (such as BBC Turkish or Independent Turkish) treated unveiling stories as stories of liberation. In doing this, Muslim conservatives were issuing a warning, some even claiming that such stories were fabricated by "outside forces" (Albayrak 2019; Kaplan 2020; Kılıçarslan 2019). Ironically, secularist intellectuals in the pro-Republican People's Party newspaper *Cumhuriyet* agreed with the pro-AKP intellectuals' conspiracy theory that online reports about the removal of the veil were from unreliable sources (T24 2019).[2] At the opposite end of the spectrum, Muslim feminists and reformist Muslim scholars offered a more balanced view to argue that the young were dissatisfied with Turkey's religious pedagogy. They claimed that digital media gave young and educated Muslims easy access to alternative religious interpretations, which helped them to develop critical perspectives on classic Islamic texts and Muslim practitioners' religious discourses (Böhürler 2017; Öztürk 2019).[3] Muslim feminists particularly emphasized the AKP's neoliberal and Islamically conservative body politics, which, they contended, led young Muslim women to distance themselves from traditional interpretations of Islam (Sönmez 2019).

Public opinion surveys supported the religious transformation thesis. In the previous decade, the number of headscarf-wearing Muslim women had remained almost unchanged (52% in 2008, 53% in 2018). However, there was a slight increase in the number of non-hijabi women (34% in 2008, 37% in 2018) (Konda 2018). While cases of unveiling received great attention, it was not young people's appearance but rather their mindset that underwent a marked change. For example, the number of women who agreed with the statement "a married woman should get her husband's permission to work outside the home" dropped significantly (50% in 2008, 35% in 2018), and disapproval of cohabiting couples dramatically declined (42% in 2008, 33% in 2018) (Konda 2019). There was a slight rise in the number of people who describe themselves as deists or atheists, although non-believers still comprised a small and hidden group in Turkey (ibid.).

These changes might be regarded as perplexing because they occurred during the almost two decades of Islam-friendly AKP rule. Since its rise to power in 2002, the AKP's Islamically conservative social policies had been the subject of controversy. Notable examples included the gendered character of its social welfare policies (Buğra 2012), the "three children" campaign (Dedeoğlu 2012), the expansion of Diyanet's role in gender and family policies (Adak 2017), the discourse of creating a pious generation (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017), and the rise in the numbers of Imam Hatip schools and Islamic theology departments (Ozgur 2012). It is, therefore, significant to ask to what extent the AKP's efforts to promote Islamic ethics and values in public and private spheres affected the views and performances of Muslim youth. In particular, this article explores the extent to which the AKP's religiously motivated social policies influenced headscarf-wearing Muslim women who have recently stopped wearing the veil. The article examines not only their sociopolitical motives but also their personal and theological motives for unveiling.

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[1] In this popular trend, Facebook or Instagram users juxtapose two photographs of themselves taken 10 years apart. The trend began as a way to share how (and how much) the user's appearance has changed over time.

[2] See Van Nieuwkerk (2018b) for a similar conspiracy theory about unveiling in Egypt.

[3] See Bunt (2018) on how the Internet has changed Muslim practitioners' views of local Islamic authorities.

The article is based on 10 in-depth interviews conducted in 2020.[4] I conversed with ex-hijabi women about their families, upbringings, educational journeys, careers and marriages. To explore their motivations for removing the veil, I first asked them how and why they had embraced the veil in the first place. Then I asked them to outline the factors that had triggered their decision to unveil. Several newspaper interviews and blog entries are available about headscarf-wearing women who had recently decided to remove the veil; to expand on my interlocutors' accounts, I also draw on these secondary sources.

My data does not include narratives from ex-hijabis who live in the provinces or who have no tertiary education or career prospects. Thus, although my ex-hijabi interlocutors provided varied experiences of (un)veiling in relation to social class, religious and ideological upbringing, parents' education, and city of birth, this article does not claim to offer an exhaustive typology of (un)veiling in Turkey.

I start with a discussion of the headscarf controversy since the 1980s, with particular emphasis on the AKP era. Second, I introduce a theoretical framework derived from anthropologists of Islam, who began in the 2010s to conceptualize Muslim subject-formation processes, not in terms of coherency or consistency (Mahmood 2005; Fadil 2009; Van Nieuwkerk 2013), but in terms of flexible processes (Deeb and Harb 2013; Liberatore 2017), moral ambivalence (Schielke 2009a, 2009b, 2015), feelings of imperfection and moral failure (de Koning 2013; Jouili 2015; Kloos 2017), skepticism and doubt about religious truth claims (Pelkmans 2013), and moving into a phase of non-belief (Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018; Schielke 2012; Van Nieuwkerk 2018b). Then I briefly introduce my interlocutors, particularly their veiling stories. This helps me to evaluate their motivations for the unveiling. In the subsequent sections, I discuss my interlocutors' motivations for the unveiling: religious symbol fatigue, rejection of family pressure, refusal to see the veil as a prerequisite for female religiosity, and religious doubt and non-belief.

2. The Politics of (Un)veiling in Turkey

Veiling among urban Muslim women has been the subject of great controversy in Turkey since the rise of the Islamist movement in the 1980s. Although the practice never disappeared during the Republican period, and—unlike in Iran—Republican elites did not outlaw veiling, they employed pedagogic methods (e.g., balls, beauty pageants, magazine articles, radio broadcasts, anti-veiling campaigns) to promote a new national look for women (Adak 2014; Chehabi 2004; Çınar 2005). This new urban style was inspired by Western clothing habits, but it was not mere imitation. Instead, the ideal Turkish woman was portrayed as a "modern-yet-modest" (Najmabadi 1991), "veiling" her sexuality in the public sphere not by donning the veil, but "by deemphasizing femininity and projecting a "neuter" identity" (Kandiyoti 1997, p. 126). There was an absence of fashion for urban Muslim women who wanted to veil: head-covering remained largely non-urban, marking the wearer as provincial or rural.

As a result, women combining the veil with Western fashion were nowhere to be seen in the urban public spaces until the 1960s. The transition to multiparty politics and democracy in the aftermath of World War II, as well as the internal migration and urbanization accelerated in the 1960s, created a socio-political environment favorable to devout Muslims. In this period, though very few in numbers, young women with the distinctive urban Islamic look (i.e., a large square headscarf pinned under the chin which covers all the hair and the neck and is combined with a matching overcoat) began to enroll in universities. Due to the lack of specific regulations on the head covering, the headscarf-wearing students during the 1960s and 1970s did not have uniform experiences. While some pursued education with the veil, others were forced to unveil by university professors. Some transgressors were expelled from the college (Aksoy 2005).

Following the 1980 coup d'état, the National Security Council issued decrees outlawing the headscarf in universities and the public sector. The ban in the 1980s was in action on

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[4] Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, some interviews were conducted through videoconferencing.

and off due to the then-prime minister Turgut Özal and his center-right Motherland Party (ANAP)'s efforts. The attempts to lift the ban were futile, but ANAP negotiated to moderate the regulations (e.g., allowing students to wear a *turban* or authorizing universities to impose their own regulations) (Çınar 2005, pp. 78–83).[5]

In the 1980s, the rise of the Islamist movement was the main reason why the headscarf issue was always on the political agenda. The Islamist movement caused a dramatic change in some urban women's clothing, as increasing numbers began to wear headscarves. In parallel with the process of economic liberalization and the emergence of devout Muslim male entrepreneurs, a market for urban Islamic attire developed (Gökarıksel and Secor 2010; Sandıkçı and Ger 2002). Although not all urban female veiling practitioners supported Islamist politics, the Islamist Welfare Party's (RP) success in the 1994 local elections and RP's becoming a partner in a coalition government in 1996 came as a shock to secular sections of society (Çınar 2005).[6] Secular Turks' fear of an "Islamist takeover" primarily targeted headscarf-wearing women studying at universities or working as public servants. The soft coup of 28 February 1997 aimed to impede the popularity of the RP; thereafter, the ban on the headscarf in universities and the public sector was strictly implemented (Barras 2013), and an unofficial ban in the private sector became more widespread (Cindoğlu and Zencirci 2008). The ban was justified on the grounds that the veil violated equal rights and the freedom of others. Veiled students were also accused of extremist opposition to the secularist regime and aspirations to replace democracy with theocracy (Arat 2001).

The ban on the headscarf did not diminish but rather increased public appearances of veiled women. Along with the members of Islamist politics, veiled women organized public demonstrations against the ban (Özyürek 2006). Some chose women-led grassroots activism to campaign against the ban, arguing that it violated women's citizenship rights to religious freedom, education and work (Barras 2013; Çayır 2000). These activists highlighted the gendered nature of the ban and aimed to draw support from secular feminist NGOs. The headscarf ban as an issue of women's solidarity, however, was a highly contentious topic. Particularly Kemalist and socialist feminists perceived the veil as a symbol of women's oppression. Thus, collaborating with women who 'consent to their own oppression', they argued, was against the idea of women's solidarity (Marshall 2005). Still, some liberal feminist platforms and liberal intellectuals sided with Muslim women activists and defended women's right to wear the veil (Amargi 2011; Arat 2004).

Headscarf-wearing women coped with the ban in diverse ways. Some chose to unveil to remain in higher education or the job market. Some preferred to be part-time veil practitioners, removing it at the entrance to their school or workplace. Some quit their jobs or their education. The headscarf ban also led to a braindrain of veiled women, mainly to Europe and the USA.

It was in this context that the AKP achieved electoral victory in 2002. For pious sections of society, what brought the AKP to power was not just the financial crisis of 2000–1, but also the aftermath of 28 February. Women who had suffered from the headscarf ban hoped it would be ended by the newly founded, Islam-friendly AKP. However, it was

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[5] For the exact chronology of the ban, see: (Benli 2011).

[6] Drawing on Salwa Ismail (2006) and Cihan Tuğal (2009), I refer to Islamist politics, or political Islam, as a modern political project which not only aims to insert itself into political, but also the social and cultural spheres. Islamism generates a coherent Islamic narrative through appropriation of religious symbols, signs, and ideas from Islamic traditions. Even though Islamist politics is thought of as positioning itself against secularism, following Asad (2003), I read binary categories of "the secular" and "the religious" are modern discursive constructions to mediate and shape people's identities. Thus, both secularism and Islamism refer to dynamic, relational, and context specific political processes, their meanings are always constructed and constrained by power relations. It is not the Qur'an which determines Islamism, but rather the socio-political context which decides its contours. Therefore, Islamism has the ability not to oppose secularism, but instead to adapt to changing conditions through appropriation, negotiation, and absorption (Ismail 2006; Tuğal 2009). Hence, I do not analyze the rise of political Islam in Turkey in regard to the contention that Islamization aims at total change in the legal system in favor of Sharia law. Instead, for the Turkish experience, it would be more accurate, following Tuğal's argument, to emphasize the secular state's absorption of Islamism into neoliberal conservatism.

only after the AKP's third term in office that the ban was gradually lifted between 2010 and 2016.[7]

The lifting of the ban was a slow and tedious process. This was first because of the secularist backlash against the AKP's early attempts to abolish the ban. The 2007 election of President Abdullah Gül made his veiled wife Turkey's first headscarf-wearing first lady. This was followed in 2008 by efforts to lift the ban in higher education, resulting in a closure case against the AKP.[8] In 2010 the ban was abolished *de jure* for university students only. Although secularist attacks made the AKP reluctant to lift the ban in all sectors at once, the 2010 constitutional referendum made the AKP more immune to secularist challenges. Nevertheless, the AKP continued to use the headscarf ban as political leverage to maintain the support of its devout Muslim electorate.

The most telling event was Muslim women activists' "No Headscarf, No Vote" campaign during the 2011 general elections. These activists had long lobbied for the abolition of the ban. This time they asked the political parties to nominate headscarf-wearing election candidates. Although the AKP presented itself as the "patron" of headscarf-wearing women's rights, it did not support these campaigners and indeed dismissed them as "self-interested women", "seditionists" and "feminists" (Kütük-Kuriş 2016). In response to these accusations, some campaigners "confessed" that they had made a mistake; to deploy Jalal's (1991) useful notion, they chose the "convenience of subservience" to the AKP's male-governed party politics. These events exacerbated the binary opposition between "good" and "bad" Muslim women, providing the AKP with an effective discursive tool to create and regulate political friction within Muslim women's organizations. This discursive regime was especially beneficial in terms of the AKP's monopoly over women's civil society activism.

In its first two terms, the AKP collaborated with both secular and Muslim feminist activists to reframe the woman question according to the principle of gender equality (e.g., the 2001 and 2004 reforms to the Penal and Civil Code) (Ilkkaracan 2007). However, as the AKP moved away from the European Union accession process, the emphasis on gender equality was replaced by gender justice (or equity) (Kandiyoti 2019)—a notion based on the thesis of complementarity between women and men—thus bypassing women's demands for equality. The AKP accelerated the process in 2013 with the foundation of the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a government-supported non-governmental organization vice-chaired by President Erdoğan's daughter. Some Muslim women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took the same path and began acting as AKP-directed organizations, to use Molyneux's (1998) characterization. These developments led to the marginalization of not only secular women's NGOs but also Muslim feminist NGOs that critiqued the complementarity thesis from within Islam. Thus, since 2013, those aligned with the AKP's Islamically conservative gender policies have played an active role in women's issues from domestic violence to divorce, maintenance payments and empowerment.

Women's multiple trajectories of (un)veiling in Turkey need to be analyzed against this social and political backdrop.

3. Conceptualizing Muslim Women's Unveiling

Feminist scholarship on the Middle East has given central importance to the role of the veil in Muslim women's subject-formation processes. Some early studies depicted Muslim women as passive onlookers in masculine power regimes due to the veil (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1975; Moghissi 1999); others overemphasized the veil's subversive potential against secularist and colonial regimes and saw Muslim women as empowered subjects

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[7] First, the ban at universities was lifted *de jure* in 2010. In 2013, the ban on veiled lawyers and civil servants was abolished. Following the 2013 democratization package, four female AKP representatives entered parliament wearing the veil. The ban on veiled judges was abolished in 2015, and on police officers in 2016.

[8] The Constitutional Court rejected the attempted legal action.

(Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Göle 1996; Arat 2005). However, later sociological and political-economy approaches established that headscarf-wearing Muslim women are not a homogeneous group: there is great variety in their perceptions of Islam and the veil, depending on their differing affiliations (e.g., class, education, generation, occupation, geography, ideological alignment). The literature shows that not all veil practitioners sympathize with political Islam, and not all of them explain their motivation for wearing the veil on religious grounds (Zuhur 1992). Religious and cultural values often intertwine, and some women embrace the veil to maintain social respectability (Abu-Lughod 1986). Social class has received special attention since upper- and lower-class women have different motives for adopting the veil (e.g., social status, entry into the job market or educational institutions) (El-Kholy 2002; Macleod 1991; White 1994).

Although this wide body of work has shown that political affiliation, class belonging and cultural values are no less significant than religious factors in women's decisions to wear the veil, the turn to piety in the early 2000s reclaimed the relationship between religiosity and the veil. Mahmood (2005) famous work on female piety examined Muslim women's self-realization processes in terms of their obedience to external authority, i.e., God. In this context, the veil and other religiously driven performances (e.g., daily prayers) are disciplinary acts to cultivate "better" Muslim selves. In other words, for Mahmood, the veil as bodily performance constructs the "good" Muslim woman.

Mahmood's emphasis on piety and Islamic norms as strictly constitutive of Muslim female subjectivity has been severely criticized by a number of anthropologists of Islam (Bangstad 2011; Deeb and Harb 2013; Kloos 2017; Schielke 2009b). They contend—and I agree—that Muslim subjects have various and often conflicting aspirations, even if they try to live pious lives. These aspirations include being economically successful, pursuing educational activities, participating in sports, experiencing romantic love or enjoying leisure pursuits. These scholars have demonstrated the ways in which Muslim subjects (re)negotiate the norms of Islamic piety to achieve such objectives. Thus, instead of focusing on the cultivation of the "perfect" Muslim, these scholars investigate how Muslim subjects live with imperfection and ambivalence, which are innate to the human experience. The role of piety in Muslims' lives cannot be denied, but these scholars define piety "as a process [. . .] rather than a rigid process of climbing a ladder of faith" (Deeb and Harb 2013, p. 156). They focus not on pious perfection but on moral flexibility in Muslim subjects' discourses and practices.

Building on these recent anthropological engagements with moral flexibility and ambivalence, I argue that women's unveiling is not necessarily related to a decline in their religious convictions. Multiple factors inform Muslim women's decisions to unveil, just as they have myriad reasons for veiling in the first place. The adoption of the veil does not necessarily indicate the achievement of "perfect" piety; not all ex-hijabis turn away from piety. Here, I draw on Pelkmans's (2013) notion of religious doubt as an internal process of the mind, referring to individuals' questioning of religious truth claims and their search for alternative religious knowledge. For Pelkmans, religious doubt is not the opposite of religious belief; it is co-constitutive of belief. In the case of the unveiling, some women may begin to feel uncertain whether the veil is mandatory in Islam. Some may further doubt traditional interpretations of Islamic sources that put women in a subordinate position. Thus, in this article, unveiling refers to Muslim women's religious transformation—a dynamic, nonlinear, open-ended process.

Deeb and Harb's (2013) "alternative fatwas" and Liberatore's (2017) "mosque hopping" are illuminating here. These scholars suggest that Muslim women have the moral flexibility to choose among different Islamic interpretations instead of following one particular scholar. For veiled women who are considering unveiling, this flexibility is highly significant: before making their decision to unveil, most of my interlocutors had engaged with various Islamic sources on female piety. Of course, the search for new insights does not necessarily yield answers to one's questions (in my interlocutors' case, the question of the veil). Pelkmans (2013) regards religious doubt as an unsettling state of mind that

pushes individuals towards resolution and certainty. Nevertheless, some of my interlocutors were still unsure whether the veil was a religious requirement. Here I follow McBrien (2013, p. 254), who argues that "prolonged doubting pushes subjects towards resolution, which allows a return to non-reflection, to everydayness, a situation in which they feel at relative ease or peace in the world". I also draw on Schielke's (2009a, 2009b) use of moral ambivalence and imperfection to examine cases where Muslim subjects simply learn to live with ambiguity and complexity.

However, we should not rule out the role of self-perceived moral failure as a constitutive element in Muslim subjectivities (de Koning 2013; Jouili 2015; Kloos 2017). Kloos (2017, p. 2), for example, studies feelings of moral failure as an "ethically productive rather than devastating" experience and discusses the flexible and creative ways in which "Muslims deal, in thought and action, with the problem of sinning" (Kloos 2017, p. 24). This framework helps us to understand ex-hijabi women who continue to believe that the veil is mandatory but learn to live with their own religious lapse.

As noted above, removal of the veil does not necessarily entail the abandonment of Islam. However, some of my interlocutors engaged doubtfully with traditional as well as more egalitarian Islamic interpretations, moving into the process of becoming non-believers. Because religious transformation processes are open-ended journeys, the exit of some ex-hijabis from Islam should also be analyzed. Drawing on scholars who examine how cycles of religious doubt can bring loss of faith and how ex-Muslims manage their departure from Islam (e.g., Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018; Schielke 2012), this article also discusses some ex-hijabis' strategies for managing their newly acquired non-believing selves.

4. Ex-Hijabi Women: Not a Homogeneous Group

As stated above, there was intense media coverage on the case of women's unveiling. Moreover, I myself am a headscarf-wearing woman since my early teenage years, and I have recently heard various third-person stories of unveiling from friends and family. As a researcher, I also had interlocutors from the previous ethnographic study who decided to unveil. Thus, at the time, I decided to embark on this research, I was already aware that women from a different class, family and ideological backgrounds decided to unveil. I intended to show this variety in my research. Yet, I also knew that being a veiled researcher would have both its merits and limits. After all, ex-hijabi women were being judged by different groups. To them, speaking about their decision with a veiled woman would be an uncomfortable experience. There was also the possibility that they may feel that I would empathize with their hardship. Moreover, as a veiled woman, I had the contacts not easily available to a "secular" researcher. With the assistance of family members, friends, colleagues and interlocutors from my previous fieldwork, I began interviewing my interlocutors. Hence, it was thanks to the support given by this wide social network that my ex-hijabi informants had little in common except their decision to unveil. They displayed differences in social class, religious and ideological upbringing, parents' education, and city of birth.

Despite this diversity, my informants, who were aged between 23 and 41, all had undergraduate degrees. Some had also pursued Masters or doctoral degrees. Another similarity was that even though some had been raised in small Anatolian cities, all informants had received their tertiary education in metropolises (in Turkey or abroad). Upon graduation, all had decided to settle in metropolises to increase their employment opportunities. They were now white-collar employees with good career prospects in fields ranging from diplomacy to psychology, engineering, the arts, media and film. Despite their diverse social class positions and/or religious and ideological upbringings, they had developed urban and upwardly mobile lifestyles, arguably thanks to their educations. Their last commonality concerns their political affiliations. One interlocutor declared that she was pro-AKP. Another mentioned that her early support for the AKP had faded since the 2013 Gezi protests. Some also mentioned that they disapproved of the AKP's market-friendly approach because they felt that neoliberalism went against the Islamic ideal of justice.

Although most interlocutors felt the need to distance themselves from the AKP, they also stated that they did not support any of the opposition parties either, except one interlocutor who supported the People's Democratic Party.[9] When asked, they instead expressed their political views in terms of women's equal rights and individual freedoms.[10] This resonates with polls indicating that Turkish youth are undergoing a religious and political transformation (Konda 2019).

Nevertheless, their differences in class position and religious and ideological upbringing are major factors, making their experiences heterogeneous. Consider Irem (34, single), who was raised in Istanbul's shanty district of Ümraniye by lower-middle-class parents who adhered to traditional Islam:

> After primary school I began wearing the veil. This was what my family expected of me, and it was normal to me too. [. . .] Due to the headscarf ban, my parents wanted me to attend the Qur'anic course run by Diyanet instead of formal state education. A year later, however, my mother supported me to return to school, fearing that I would end up like her with no secondary school certificate. This was the only support I could get from my parents. [. . .] I continued formal education by taking the veil off at the school gate. Tiring days, it was hard making friends at school, as many students had prejudices about veiled women. [. . .] I didn't want to have a similar experience at university. [. . .] I liked studying abroad. But my parents couldn't back me financially. I worked in low-level jobs to meet my expenses abroad.

Irem now works in diplomacy for an international organization, a position she attained after years of hard work without parental support. Another interlocutor, Ece (32, married), was born into a bourgeois family and raised in Istanbul's affluent Erenköy neighborhood by university-educated parents who adhered to Sufi Islam. Although Ece had had negative experiences at work due to her veiling, neither her veiling narrative nor her relationship with her parents was similar to Irem's:

> My religious upbringing was based on ethics and morals not necessarily defined by Islam but by the importance of *şahsiyet* [character] and *mahremiyet* [privacy]. Head-covering was not my parents' top priority. Modest clothing was always advised, such as non-décolleté outfits. [. . .] My mother doesn't embrace the veil in its strict sense. She wears the veil loosely [revealing her hair] and wears trousers with short tunics. You couldn't tell that she was a hijabi. [. . .] My parents never encouraged me to veil. By contrast, they disapproved of my decision. I entered a phase of growing religiosity soon after I lost my granddad. This coincided with my university graduation. I sincerely wanted to wear the veil. My parents warned me that due to the negative stereotypes attached to the veil, my job prospects would be jeopardized. I did not listen to them.

Nur (41, married) stands at the other end of the class spectrum: her father worked in a factory, her mother was a housewife, and both adhered to traditional Islam. Nur was raised in the Aegean city of Manisa until her family's move to Izmir, Turkey's third most populous city, which is famous for its mostly secularist residents. Echoing Ece's narrative, Nur's parents did not wish her to adopt the veil. Yet unlike Ece's early socialization into Sufi Islam, Nur's Imam Hatip education introduced her to Islamism. Soon she took up the veil:

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[9] This left-wing party is mostly supported by secular Kurds in Turkey. Recently, secular intellectuals, leftists, devout Muslim democrats and members of other minority groups have also become members of parliament for this party.

[10] For example, there have recently been heated debates about the "Istanbul Convention", a Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Conservative NGOs, some Muslim intellectuals and the leaders of Islamic *tarikats* (orders) have lobbied against the convention, claiming that it will break up the family and promote LGBT rights. Not only secular and Islamic feminist NGOs, but also the pro-AKP KADEM has sided with the convention, arguing that it aims to protect women's rights. In the wake of these debates, many of my interlocutors preferred to express their political views in terms of their support for the convention. I observed a similar attitude to the 2013 Gezi protests: many interlocutors noted that they supported these protests.

I won the public boarding school exams, but my father didn't want me to stay away from home. While searching for a school, our next-door neighbour, a deputy head at an Imam Hatip school, suggested his school. I enrolled there and really liked the environment. There I encountered Milli Gençlik Vakfı [National Youth Foundation, the youth organization of the former Islamist Welfare Party]. [. . .] These were my radical years. I read all Sayyid Kutb's work. I willingly adopted the veil, wore a *pardesü* [long, loose overcoat]. My bodily attitudes changed. I abstained from shaking hands or hugging with male cousins. I quit listening to pop music. These were all sins [laughing loudly]. My change caused a furore among my relatives, if not my parents. They thought I was indoctrinated.

Nur continued her education at a theology faculty in the conservative city of Erzurum. However, the headscarf ban disrupted her graduation, and she had to return to Izmir. To earn a living, she worked in low-level jobs. She stated that some flexibility in her observance of the veil began during this period:

It was not practical to wear a *pardesü* while you work long hours at a factory. It was too hot. Mum told me that you work for *ekmek parası* [bread and butter]. Allah forgives. I then began wearing trousers with tunics.

Nur returned to university following the AKP's lifting of the headscarf ban.[11] She now works as a religious education teacher in a state school and lives a middle-class lifestyle with her son and husband, who works in academia.

As Irem's, Ece's and Nur's stories demonstrate, my interlocutors had diverse veiling experiences in relation to their class belongings and religious upbringings. Special attention must be paid to the role of ideological upbringing, specifically the ex-hijabis' relations with political Islam. In Nur's vignette, her enchantment with Islamist politics was very telling. Although half of my informants noted that either they or their families had once or still now supported political Islam, their approaches to that ideology were diverse. Compare Pınar's and Bilge's experiences. Computer programmer Pınar (28, single), the daughter of lower-middle-class parents that supported political Islam, had been born and raised in Kocaeli, a city known as "Istanbul's industrial extension". Arts correspondent Bilge (29, single), a daughter of middle-class, university-educated parents, had been raised in Istanbul's historic and religiously conservative neighborhood of Fatih. Pınar said:

My parents were political activists, supporting the Welfare Party. My social environment was all made up of people that believed in the *dawa* movement. [. . .] I attended Qur'anic summer schools run by Islamic orders as well as Islamist groups. I liked courses run by the latter, as their curriculum also involved sports activities and reading sessions. There I met many intellectual headscarf-wearing women. I was inspired by them, began reading salvation novels,[12] and decided to wear the veil at the age of eight. My mother, who wears a black chador, was not sure "whether I would bear the responsibility of wearing it at a young age". My father appreciated it.

Bilge's parents' approach to political Islam was different:

My parents are devout practicing Muslims. I wore the veil at the age of 13. [. . .] At the time, there was the craze for being an active Muslim. The Welfare Party era. I remember attending their demonstrations with my parents. Listening to *ezgis* [Islamically "proper" songs] at home. However, my parents couldn't fit in under the authority of a group. For them the 1990s Islamist trend was a passing

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[11] The AKP granted an amnesty to headscarf-wearing women who had quit university because of the ban. Many veiled women exercised this right.

[12] Islamic salvation novels (*hidayet romanları*) emerged as a genre in the 1980s. They are famous for their dichotomy between modern and Islamic ways of life, which is constructed through a secular character who has the material means to pursue a prosperous lifestyle, but fails to find real happiness and contentment. By contrast, the pious protagonist strictly follows Islamic values and ethics, and therefore is immune to discontent in the modern world. Salvation novels are so-called because they always have happy endings: a secular female character usually adopts an Islamic way of life—often symbolized by her donning the veil—and thanks to this transition, she finally finds the meaningful life she has sought (Çayır 2007).

thing. [. . .] I will also never be an exemplary hijabi. I never wear a *pardesü* or a long tunic. I wore a turban [revealing the neck]. [. . .] My parents did not criticize my style much. They were attracted to Sufism later. My father said "this is a journey, a road. Just take it".

Sema's (23, married) parents' view of Islamism differed from both Pınar's and Bilge's parents. A master's student in the arts, Sema was raised in a lower-middle-class household in the eastern Marmara city of Sakarya. Her Islamist parents questioned mainstream Sunni Islam and became politicized through the writings of revolutionary Shi'a figures such as Ali Shariati. Sema narrated her upbringing:

I was born to Islamist parents. My father has secularist parents, but he became attracted by Islamism to the extent that he changed his secular-sounding name for an Islamic one by a court ruling. But his Islamism is critical of Sunni Islam. He criticizes the neoliberalization of Islam, and therefore the AKP. So do I. Even so, I studied at an Imam Hatip school. These were lonely years, because my parents' view of Islam radically diverged from the official Islamic discourse at school. To show my school friends I was different, I would carry Shariati's books under my arm.

Pınar's, Bilge's, and Sema's experiences of political Islam show that even families who adhere to political Islam had a diverse and changing understanding of Islamist politics. Just as their parents had contending views of political Islam and gave various performances of religiosity, my informants had also acquired their own "unique" understandings of Islam and politics, which greatly differed from the way they had been brought up by their parents. As discussed below, some even decided to leave the faith altogether.

5. Motivations for Unveiling

5.1. Fatigue from Muslim and Secular Gazes

The most recurrent answer to my interview question about unveiling was, "I no longer want to represent Islam; I'd like to represent only myself". Since the veil is perceived as the symbolic marker of Muslim identity and marks the female body as that of a practicing Muslim, it automatically enlists women to act as "perfect" or "proper" Muslims. The definition of a "proper" Muslim woman comprises a combination of discursive and bodily acts, including modesty in speech, behavior and clothing. Although it exhibits wide variety in diverse Muslim spaces, laughing loudly, smoking cigarettes or shisha in public, dancing or singing in mixed environments, socializing in alcohol-serving venues, talking to members of the opposite sex in a seductive manner, wearing make-up, choosing ostentatious colors and styles of dress, or not completely covering the hair and neck are all regarded as "improper" bodily performances for veiled Muslim women (Deeb and Harb 2013; Kloos 2017; Kütük-Kuriş 2020; Liberatore 2017; Saktanber 2002; Van Nieuwkerk 2013). Those who transgress the rules of Islamic modesty often experience verbal or non-verbal expressions of public disapproval. They also receive advice on how to better cultivate themselves as hijabis.

These practices of admonition are based on the Qur'anic concept of *amr-bil ma'ruf* (commanding good or right and forbidding evil and wrong), which is defined as an individual duty for every virtuous Muslim (Cook 2010). To explain the impact of this notion on Muslims' lives, Khan (2012, p. 153) states that Muslims believe that there is a "little mulla in each of us". My interlocutors fiercely criticized this notion of the "inner mulla" who is responsible for "correcting" Muslim women's practices. Many stated that being continuously judged by others (strangers and acquaintances alike) for their behavior and appearance was an immensely frustrating experience. Irem, for example, stated that she had first considered unveiling during her undergraduate years abroad. Although she did not act on this at the time, her memories of how other Turkish Muslim students had judged her clothing and behavior were vivid:

I studied abroad due to the headscarf ban in universities. There were other Turkish students at my university, but I never got along with them. As they never approved of my veiling. Most were in *pardesüs*, their veils dropping over their shoulders. They talked behind my back, as I wore skinny clothes or make-up. [. . .] Some asked irritating questions such as whether my *wudu* [ablution] was acceptable when I had make-up on. Or I had male friends, and they were against the idea that men and women could be friends. On one hand, they gossiped about me. On the other, I saw that they did not pray regularly, so they did not truly live Islam either. Meanwhile, they employed the discourse of "Muslim sister". This seemed dishonest to me. I remember telling myself that I did not wish to be like them. Because I can't pray regularly either. I also can't stop thinking about whether I wear the veil properly.

Ece expressed her frustration:

I came to the point of thinking that my veil prevented me from being Ece. I did not come into this world as a woman who was only responsible for wearing the veil. I came into this world to be Ece. But I am reduced to being a veiled woman. No one has the right to take my right to be Ece away from me, just because I also happen to be a veiled woman.

Ece's statement reveals that for ex-hijabis, the veil became an obstacle to their individuality. For some, this negative experience stemmed from Muslim practitioners' attitudes toward Muslim women, but some interlocutors regarded devout Muslims and secularists as two sides of the same coin. Ece's narrative made an important criticism of devout Muslims:

Since I wore the veil soon after my graduation, I only sought a job in companies run by devout Muslims. At the time, secularists would not even consider my CV because I was veiled. But my headscarf was a problem in the companies of devout Muslims too. The way they treated you was "be thankful that we gave you a job" [i.e., because of hijabis' lack of job options]. [. . .] The worst experience was my last job. There were no rules in the institution. Meritocracy did not apply. What mattered was your network. Who you know, whose nephew or friend you are. I had no chance to improve myself. I always struggled to be a successful woman, and look at me, I achieved nothing [in a sad voice]. All those years, no promising career. [. . .] They expect you to be a "perfect" Muslim, a *dawa* woman. But they ignored injustices created at their own hands. The betrayal of *dawa* was theirs. Not my skinny trousers. Their "perfect" Muslim women discourse felt sickening. I decided not to be regarded as one of them.

Irem's and Ece's criticisms of devout Muslims, and the question of whether those who attacked their performances of piety were "perfect" Muslims themselves, are important: they reveal that Irem and Ece had individualistic approaches to Islam and piety. This is a way of being Muslim without adhering to *amr-bil ma'ruf*. Deeb's (2006) and Kloos's (2017) distinction between social and personal piety is helpful here. Social piety refers to religious practices and ideas that are not self-imposed but socially inculcated through *amr-bil ma'ruf*. Personal piety, on the other hand, refers to the formation of personalized agency, a process through which actors navigate their own assessments of religious beliefs and practices. This does not necessarily mean that actors resist all practices promoted through social piety: for example, Irem asked herself whether her veiling style was Islamically proper. However, what ex-hijabis had in common was that they defined piety on individualistic terms, rather than through external impositions.

Another crucial aspect of ex-hijabis' critique of devout Muslims who strictly followed *amr-bil ma'ruf* relates to the fact that social piety rules are imposed primarily on women. Ece's comparison of Muslim women's Islamically proper veiling with other Islamic values such as justice was very telling. For Ece, favoritism and nepotism deeply conflicted with Islamic values and ethics. Yet at her workplace—which was closely tied to the AKP government—there were no safeguards against favoritism; it just became the norm.

Ece, therefore, criticized devout Muslims' gendered application of Islamic ethics. Her account levels strong criticism at the discourse of the "good" Muslim, which specifically aims to regulate women's bodily performances while overlooking the "wrongdoings" of Muslim men.

My interlocutors' negative experiences in regard to the veil did not only relate to their encounters with devout Muslims. They also shared numerous stories about secularists. The kernel of their problematic encounters with secularists was that headscarf-wearing women are commonly considered *de facto* supporters of political Islam. Considering the AKP's journey from the political margins to the establishment, this assessment is often intertwined with the presupposition that headscarf-wearing Muslim women support the AKP. As discussed above, the lifting of the headscarf ban has been an important subject. Its significance does not only lie in headscarf-wearing women's memories of their experiences of the ban. The AKP has further benefited from the headscarf ban discourse to keep its devout Muslim electorate intact. However, in parallel with feminist scholarship on the Middle East, in Turkey, the veil cannot be understood simply in relation to its wearers' political views. Headscarf-wearing Muslim women have diverse political orientations with respect to social class, generation, education, etc. As mentioned, this heterogeneity of political views was clearly evident among my interlocutors. This was why, for my interlocutors, being treated as pro-AKP made the experience of donning the veil difficult. Irem's workplace experiences illustrate this:

> In my current job, I work with foreigners and secularist Turks. They have their prejudices about me. This is not very apparent, they are very polite. But I still feel it. I cannot build up business networks easily. To achieve this, I attended several work dinners. Some take place in alcohol-serving restaurants. So as not to attract attention, I changed my style. I wore a *turban* and put on earrings. Still, I felt uneasy. Everyone gazes at you, as if to say "what is she doing here?" Or if there is a debate about Islam, they come to me with questions. But I am not an imam to issue fatwas. This is silly. I felt as if I was carrying a flag. [. . .] Or in my previous job, a colleague said "I hope Tayyip Erdoğan dies". Or the boss's driver, every single day, he would open the newspaper when I was around, and cursed Erdoğan.

Irem was my only interlocutor who openly supported the AKP, but despite her pro-AKP position, she stated: "Having such polarized debates in the workplace is not something I prefer. I often did not comment on these occurrences. But it is really exhausting". Although my other interlocutors did not support the AKP, they shared similar disturbing experiences because they had been taken as de facto AKP supporters. Thus, the hypervisibility of the veil and its wearers' assumed alignment with the AKP were important factors in their decisions to unveil. Bilge summarized this:

> There is this formulaic perspective that if you are a headscarf-wearing woman then you are pro-AKP, and if you are an unveiled woman then you are from Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği [Atatürkist Thought Association, an ultra-laicist and ultra-nationalist NGO that vocally supported the headscarf ban]. This is a rigid view, unchangeable. I do not want to be likened to either of them. [. . .] Every time I met someone, I would first explain who I was not. I am done with this. By removing the veil, I chose to be neutral. When I am unveiled, you can't understand whether I support the AKP or whether I am an Atatürkist. Now you need to speak to me first to understand my views. This gave me some space. I desperately needed that zone of liberty.

Yeğenoğlu (1998) argues that the neat dichotomy between veiled and unveiled women is a discursive political construction. Bilge's statement is a good illustration of this discursive regime's distressing effects on headscarf-wearing women's everyday lives. This was why some of my informants had decided to unveil. In most cases, this decision was not about turning away from the Islamic faith. It was about abandoning its most visible symbol.

5.2. Parental Authority

Most interlocutors stated that they began to wear the veil soon after puberty. The adoption of the veil at a young age conforms with Islamic authorities' guidance for girls on when to commence the observance of religious duties (e.g., praying, fasting, veiling).[13] Nur had decided to wear the veil following her socialization into Islamic groups during her Imam Hatip years, and her close relatives had responded negatively to her veiling; Ece's parents had disapproved of her veiling. However, apart from these two, my interlocutors stated that wearing the veil from the age of puberty was commonly accepted in their family and social circles. Since veiling was the norm in their social environment, and the teaching of its importance as part of their religious upbringing, most told me that they had readily performed what their parents and family environment expected of them.

The cases of Filiz and Pınar, however, contradict the thesis of personal will in adopting the veil. They stated they had not liked wearing the veil but had been unable to reject their parents' authority. Their decisions to unveil referred to the abandonment of a practice they never had willingly embraced. They felt strong enough to make the decision only after they had made their own readings of Islam. This helped them to come to terms with their own negative feelings about the practice. They had both carried out their decision after attaining economic independence. Another commonality between Pınar and Filiz was their upbringing in small, Islamically conservative Anatolian cities where the image of the veil had religious as well as cultural connotations (e.g., honor, social reputation) (for a comparative case study on Egypt see van Nieuwkerk, this issue). In comparison with interlocutors who had grown up in metropolises or less conservative Aegean cities (such as Nur), Pınar and Filiz described their parents as having rigid definitions of modesty. These definitions had regulated their attire since early childhood. Filiz (28, divorced) had been raised in the historic province of Safranbolu in the Black Sea region by middle-class parents attached to traditional Islam. Her narrative about her parents was informative:

> My father is an imam. He is a respected person whom people ask for fatwas. He always wanted me to properly represent his religious authority. My parents both reminded me that I was going to wear the veil when the time came [menarche]. [. . .] My clothing had always been an issue. For example, as a small girl, I always wore boys' clothes such as trousers and a blue shirt. My city wasn't rich in textiles. But for sure, the shops had both girls' and boys' departments, and my mother always picked my clothes from the boys'. She had an issue about girls wearing skirts. I remember wearing trousers, not tights, under my school uniform. [. . .] Then my periods began, earlier than I expected. To me this was bad luck, because I did not want to wear the veil. When I began wearing it, I could not make my parents happy, though. My father always commented like "why don't I wear longer tunics" or "why do I prefer skinny trousers" etc. For that reason I did not join my parents' excursions for a year, to avoid any disputes about my clothing [. . .] I was very determined to pursue my university education in Istanbul, to have a more independent life. It wasn't like a plan that I would move to Istanbul and then remove my veil. I was just certain that I would not spend my entire life in a small city right beside my parents.

Filiz did indeed pursue her tertiary education in Istanbul. She currently studies for her Ph.D in psychology. Her experience with her father, who assigned her the role of pious perfection, in Mahmood (2005) sense, and with her mother, who forbade her to wear clothes associated with a female identity, illustrates the adverse consequences that can arise from parents' authority over children's religious upbringing. Pınar also said that her

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13 Muslim legal scholars do not commonly agree on the exact age of maturity. Girls are accepted as sexually and psychologically mature from the onset of puberty, and the performance of religious duties must then begin. However, the distinction between minors and adults in classic texts has become complex following the modernization process, especially since international organizations such as the United Nations introduced the new category of adolescence. An adolescent is regarded as having a sexually mature body, but as not having yet attained "the age of reason". Due to its secular foundations, the Turkish legal system reflects this tripartite categorization (Fernea 2006).

strict upbringing had aroused enormous anger against her parents as well as religion itself. As mentioned above, although Pınar had chosen to wear the veil under the influence of Qur'anic summer schools, she soon regretted her decision:

> I was not happy, as my parents became overly controlling. My father would check my clothes before I went out. [...] There were specific rules for me, never applied to my brothers. I was not allowed to go out at night, or shop alone. My parents' strict approach became unbearable. [...] They never asked what my wishes were, they just concentrated on what they expected from me. [...] I felt that this system did not work for my benefit. It caused anger in me. [...] I was just around 14, and my first questioning of women's status in Islam began. I questioned the verses in the Qur'an and the Sunnah concerning women. [...] I then realized that my parents had the wrong understanding of Islam. But what is the right way? [...] You see, unveiling is only a detail in my story. My problem with my parents' authority turned into a problem with Islam, male authority in Islam.

Parents' rights over their children's religious upbringing is a highly contested issue beyond the scope of this article. However, I wish to highlight that Filiz and Pınar carefully regulated the social and political implications of their narratives of strict parenting and religious upbringing. Their stories have considerable potential to reproduce the neo-Orientalist discourse that portrays Muslim women as oppressed by their religion and views the veil as the symbol of their subjugation. Filiz and Pınar were aware that their stories might be taken as stories of "liberation" versus "oppression". They both expressed discomfort that their experiences might contribute to neo-Orientalism or Islamophobia. Consider Filiz's statement:

> My story is in fact a story of liberation. But I know very well that my experiences are not representative of all headscarf-wearing women. [...] This is why I explained to no one what had motivated my decision.

Although both Filiz's and Pınar's religious upbringings had triggered a process of religious doubt, only Pınar left the Islamic faith, as I will discuss in detail below. Despite her negative views of Islam, Pınar took extra care in her expression of those views, as she did not want to be taken for an Islamophobe:

> I feel real anger towards what I experienced during my childhood. My anger is very explicit in my discourse about Islam. But I do not like to be regarded as an Islamophobe. [...] I openly share my views only with my headscarf-wearing Muslim feminist friends. At first, I even avoided voicing my thoughts to them. But they understood where my anger comes from. In fact, it was these Muslim feminist friends who encouraged me to take off the veil. They told me, "if you do not believe in Islam, then you should be honest with yourself. You shouldn't continue to perform a practice that you do not believe in".

With regard to Filiz's and Pınar's accounts of religious upbringing as their main motivation for the unveiling, I must also emphasize the strong relationship between urbanization and religious education in the family. Irem and Hilal also mentioned that their clothing had been strictly regulated by their parents. Furthermore, Hilal (25, single), who had been raised by university-educated middle-class parents, stated that she had postponed her decision to unveil because she had not yet convinced her aging parents and did not want to upset them. At the time of the interview, after a year of postponement, she was finally about to carry out her decision: thanks to her new job in a film production company, she had saved enough money to move into a flat with a friend:

> My going out without the veil would sadden my mother. The transition process would also be hard for me, so I can't bear her reactions while I continue to live with them. I recently agreed with a friend to become flatmates. Once I move out, I will stop wearing the veil.

Hilal tellingly emphasized the importance of economic independence as an antidote to parental pressure. Economic independence was also evident in Filiz's and Pınar's cases. Nevertheless, I perceive Filiz and Pınar as very different from Hilal. First, the problem of parental authority was center stage in their unveiling stories. Second, both Filiz and Pınar had been brought up in small, conservative Anatolian cities. The experience of urbanization is an important factor for ex-hijabis because urban life offers alternatives that may help them to develop better mechanisms to cope with parental authority.

5.3. Religious Doubt

The hardships my interlocutors faced in their everyday lives due to the veil propelled some to make further readings of Islamic sources about women's veiling. They often sought out various interpretations of the Qur'an to establish whether the veil was religiously mandatory. For some, this inquiry was the key to their decision to unveil. Once they had found alternative interpretations, they could set themselves "free" from religious guilt in Kloos's (2017) sense. Ece's changing views on the veil were important:

> I began questioning whether the veil is *ibadat* [worship]. I am still not sure. [. . .] I already pray five times a day. To me this is more important. Because *ibadat*, when it is done with love, must give you comfort and benefit. The harm that being veiled has done to me, however, exceeded its benefits [referring to her negative experiences in the workplace]. Because of these so-called devout Muslims in the workplace, I was on the brink of losing my faith. I did not let this happen, so I gave up any extra merit that wearing the veil would have brought me. I preferred my faith to my veil. I now see things very differently.

Hilal too stated that she was unsure whether the veil was a requirement in Islam:

> I am a devout Muslim, but I am confused whether veiling is *fard* [a binding religious duty]. Because the Qur'an says cover your bosom. It seemed to me that the verse does not apply specifically to the hair. I searched about this online, hoping to find respected scholars approving this view. My parents, for example, like the views of Şaban Ali Düzgün [a reformist Islamic theologian]. I came across one of his TV appearances with Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal [a Muslim feminist hadith scholar]. Although she herself is a veiled woman, Tuksal argues that the veil is a cultural practice. I sent a link to this TV program to our family WhatsApp group. My parents chose to ignore my unveiling decision. I want them to know that I am certain about my decision.

Hilal's case demonstrates that not all ex-hijabis turn away from Islam itself. Yet, like Hilal, most question Islamic truth claims. Hilal's unhappiness with the veil pushed her into intense uncertainty about it. Her engagement with various Islamic scholars resonates with Liberatore's (2017) informants' "mosque hopping", or Deeb and Harb's (2013) informants, who picked and mixed "alternative fatwas" rather than following one particular jurisprudent. In Hilal's case, her alternative fatwa referred to doubts about the common Islamic interpretation of female veiling. Here I refer to Pelkmans's (2013) definition of religious doubt as having a "push" effect on the doubter. In Pelkmans's view, Muslims in relationships of doubt with traditional Islamic sources push themselves to find a resolution. Although Hilal was still uncertain, her case illustrates how religious doubt facilitates the quest for alternative knowledge.

On the other hand, some interlocutors' religious doubts did not begin with questioning the veil. Their general unease about classic Islamic sources on women and other taboo topics such as drinking alcohol led them to seek different interpretations. They then encountered historicist readings of the Qur'an, and a radical transformation began in their beliefs and understandings about Islam. Thus, there was variety in their experiences of religious doubt: some interlocutors' uncertainty went beyond the veil. Nur's account was telling:

I first encountered historicist approaches to the Qur'an and hadith collections during my graduate studies in theology. I never heard of Fazlur Rahman [a modernist Muslim scholar] in my undergraduate years. Professors at my undergraduate university were really conservative, they presented such views as nonsense. However, my postgraduate supervisor belonged to a school of historicism. This opened a whole new world to me. I was baffled by the idea of interpreting the Qur'an differently. I began thinking about the overall objective of the Qur'an and hadiths. I assessed normative truth claims defended by Islamic jurists against what are seen to be the real intentions of Allah's revelation. My change, therefore, is an intellectual one. The way I see Islam has changed. I do not see *ibadats* hierarchically. Prayers, fasting, you name it. I believe that Allah issued religious dictums for general ethics. Not for single *ibadats*. At the time of the Prophet, the veil as a form might have been necessary. But for me, this form does not apply to our contemporary lives. What applies are the general objectives of the Qur'an.

Nur's story of religious transformation is important, given that she teaches religion and ethics in a state primary school. In light of her controversial views, I asked how she had managed the process of unveiling and how she conducted her classes:

I first told my husband about my decision. It was ok with him, but he told me "wait until we move to Istanbul". At the time, we were about to move from Izmir to Istanbul. I found his idea reasonable, because this idea of a religious education teacher removing her veil might create a furore among the parents. But in Istanbul, it would be a fresh start. Students would see me as an unveiled teacher, not knowing about my change. [. . .] Besides, in my classes I teach students the common Sunni interpretation of Islam. I do not share my own views. [. . .] At home, I try to be an example to my boy. I sometimes pray, putting the veil on loosely. It is important for him to see the prayer mat or *tasbih* [prayer beads]. I attach great importance to *zikr* [acts for the remembrance of Allah]. Before going to sleep, we express our gratitude to Allah. When my son asked me about religion, I gave him answers in accordance with Sunni Islam. Not because I believe that he needs to do all the *ibadats*. But he needs to know them so as not to feel socially isolated.

Nur's unveiling story and her relationship with her son demonstrate the importance of having a strategy before putting one's decision to unveil into action. Although Nur was not a non-believer, she knew very well that her views might be taken as "improper" in a predominantly Sunni Muslim society. She, therefore, benefited from strategies adopted by other ex-Muslims (e.g., Cottee 2015). For example, she postponed her decision in order to alleviate the psychological complications that might arise from comments by her students' parents about her unveiling; at school, she passed as a Sunni Muslim, despite her controversial views on classic Islamic sources. She also took special care of her boy's upbringing. Nur wanted her son not to feel alienated, and she tried to build his belonging to the larger Muslim community.

Filiz's intellectual journey has similarities with Nur's religious transformation. The similarity, however, does not extend to the final moment of unveiling, which for Filiz was unique in its speed, even though her intellectual quest had been a long and dynamic process:

As my father is an imam, we had a big library with Islamic books. I read them all [. . .]. But since my childhood what these books taught never seemed right to me. [. . .] My readings continued in later years. I came to the conclusion that yes, there is a Creator, there is Allah. *Ibadats* do good to one's soul. But I believe there are various ways of doing *ibadats*. [. . .] When it comes to the veil, I believe that the fatwas of the seventh century reflect the society of their time, and these fatwas can't apply today. [. . .] All these thoughts made me certain that I do not accept Islam as a package. I mean that there is a template dictating

that you cannot drink alcohol, extramarital sex is forbidden. Or women must veil, and they must behave in this or that way. You are supposed to abide by it. I never bought this package. [. . .] One night, contemplating these thoughts, I told myself: "Filiz, you deny this package. You drink alcohol, thinking that if you do not lose your social and cognitive functions, then it is ok. You believe that if your action does not harm anyone, then it is ok. Then why do you never think outside the box about the veil?" It was the very first time I wondered whether I should unveil. My heartbeat quickened. [. . .] I decided to try going unveiled for a week, to make my informed decision. The following day it took me hours to step outside. Yet I went outside wearing a minidress. Since then, I have been unveiled.

Filiz's account of her unveiling and religious transformation is important in many respects. First, her views on alcohol and dancing in mixed environments show that she defines piety in individualistic terms. This is also a criticism of social piety, which requires Muslims to act modestly for the public good. For Filiz, individual choices come before social responsibilities to present oneself as a "perfect" Muslim. Indeed, she denies the association of specific manners and behaviors with Muslim perfection. Second, her quick decision-making process illustrates Pelkmans's (2013) notion of religious doubt as unsettling the individual and triggering a resolution. Filiz has already reached a resolution in her inner world; her unveiling decision completes her attainment of certainty.

5.4. Exiting Islam

Many interlocutors said they had experienced a period of religious doubt before making the decision to unveil. This is often related to classic Islamic interpretations of the veil as a religious imperative whose abandonment may trigger a sense of moral failure or sin. Irem and Bilge, who had not embarked on any quest for alternative Islamic interpretations, explained how they had come to terms with their own religious negligence (Kloos 2017) or learned to live with ambivalence (Schielke 2015). Nevertheless, most interlocutors mentioned that the process of religious doubt had introduced them to gender-inclusive interpretations of Islam. These alternative readings helped them to cope with their negative experiences concerning the veil without experiencing feelings of religious negligence. However, Pınar's and Sema's search for alternative Islamic interpretations led them further—into a process of religious disaffiliation. Pınar explained how she exited Islam:

My childhood memories never stopped haunting me. I had anger towards Islam, thinking that Islam promotes men's interests. [. . .] At university, I met Muslim intellectuals who denied the Sunnah and relied only on the Qur'an. This gave me relief for some time. But my peace with this new interpretation soon faded. This new correct reading seemed not very correct. For instance, marital rape is a big issue for me, and this new perspective was still weak on this subject. [. . .] I began thinking that I had made an enormous effort to understand the correct form of Islam. But most women couldn't dedicate the same time and energy. Think about women working 12 hours a day in a factory. How do such women find the correct reading? [. . .] I therefore couldn't hold onto this new and moderate version of Islam.

As discussed above, Pınar shared her views with her headscarf-wearing Muslim feminist friends. Sema had a slightly different story:

I liken parental bonding styles to my relationship with God. I have divorced parents, and this affected me during my teenage years. I particularly had problems with my mother. We never had a secure attachment style. The same way I denied my mothers' authority, I denied God's authority. [. . .] I have always believed that I did not choose Islam, it was assigned to me by my parents. I have always thought that submission to God does not suit my nature. This is why I always

paid attention to faith, not Islamic law or specific *ibadats*. [. . .] Although I was veiled, I had issues with alcohol, I tried drugs. I lived with my boyfriend before we got married. [. . .] I never searched for the true Islam. For a time, I was in close contact with Muslim feminists. At the time, I had already begun wearing the veil loosely [revealing the hair]. Then my readings brought me to deism, and I quickly stopped wearing the veil. In the last couple of years, I began defining myself as an atheist. This was like a watershed, once you deny God there is no turning back.

Pınar's and Sema's stories share commonalities in their move into a phase of non-belief. However, their stories have many differences too. In Pınar's religious transformation story, a quest for "true" Islam plays a cardinal role. As explored in previous sections, as a teenager, Pınar had believed in the romanticized Islam presented in salvation novels. She only used alcohol or dated after she had become a non-believer. By contrast, Sema had been indifferent from several Islamic observances and dispositions (e.g., praying, abstaining from alcohol, showing modesty in relation to the opposite sex), even though she had adopted the veil. However, unlike in parental authority stories, Sema had not perceived the veil as an externally imposed practice. As her views of Islam gradually changed, her approach to the veil was also transformed (first a loose hijab, then unveiling).

Another important dimension in Pınar's and Sema's religious transformation processes is that their transition from religious doubt to non-belief did not bring them resolution in Pelkmans's (2013) sense. Pınar, for example, told me that she did not want to define herself as an atheist or deist. She wanted "some time off"—or to follow McBrien's (2013) take on religious doubt, a phase of non-reflection:

To be honest, I do not ponder whether I am an atheist or a deist. I just moved out of Islam, and Islam had imposed on me a very intense identity. After leaving such a strong identity formation, finding another identity would mean constraining my freedom. I simply do not care whether God exists or not.

Pınar's statement of fatigue constitutes a non-reflection upon her newly acquired self. In Sema's case, social motives to conceal her exit from the faith were apparent. Sema also emphasized that her religious transformation was a dynamic process:

Two or three years ago, I was a deist. Now, I am an atheist. But I don't publicly declare this. I only share it with close friends. I have suffered enough from stigma. It was because of the social stigma attached to the veil that I first said goodbye to my veil. I don't want a new stigma [of being an atheist]. [. . .] Secondly, I don't like to declare myself an atheist, because once you accept it, people behave as if your Muslim past never existed. I do not like this. [. . .] When you say "I am a Muslim", people expect you to act like Mohammad's lawyer. Likewise, when you say I am an atheist, people expect you to claim that Mohammad was a paedophile [referring to his marriage with Aisha]. I don't want to be in this frustrating game.

Sema's statement is significant in three respects. First, she was aware that being a non-believer carried a moral stigma, and thus passing as a Muslim was an important strategy. As Cottee (2015), Enstedt (2018), Schielke (2012) and Van Nieuwkerk (2018a) demonstrate, being an ex-Muslim and sharing this only with trusted friends is a common strategy in both Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority contexts. This is because, as Schielke (2012, p. 309) argues for the Egyptian case, "morality is identified with religiosity to the extent that "having no religion" means to lack any moral sense". Thus, Sema's reluctance to declare her atheism was a strategy to avoid being accused of immorality or targeted as an apostate. Second, Sema criticized the neo-Orientalist discourse about Islam, and her concealment strategy prevented her from being taken for an Islamophobe. Last, Sema valued her Muslim past. The significance she attributed to that past slightly differed from the way the literature discusses ex-Muslims who—especially in the early stages of their transition—have difficulty giving up some religious observances (e.g., drinking alcohol,

having extramarital sex, eating pork) (Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018). As elaborated above, Sema said that she had occasionally broken rules of propriety concerning female piety during the time she had identified as a Muslim. Thus, for Sema, respecting her Muslim past was about reconciliation with her memories and experiences of Islam.

Pınar's move into the phase of non-belief had other complex dynamics. She displayed some similarities with the ex-Muslims described by Cottee (2015) and Enstedt (2018). For example, Cottee (2015) notes that leaving Islam requires one to both learn and unlearn habits, tastes or clothing practices. Contrary to both Cottee and Enstedt, Pınar did not describe drinking alcohol or dating as stressful experiences: "At the beginning, I lost control. I got drunk. [. . .] I still drink when I see secular friends. But I decided not to spend so much money on this. I've come to realize that drinking alcohol is not a big deal". However, a perhaps unexpected occurrence, which also paralleled the literature on ex-Muslims, was that Pınar sometimes missed the veil:

> Some days I miss wearing the veil. Because unveiling didn't dramatically change my life. It is my faith that has changed. Missing the veil isn't about religiosity. I performed this practice for years. Why should I suddenly abandon it? But I can't do part-time veiling either. Thoughts about "what would people say" hold me back. If I lived abroad, I would definitely try part-time veiling.

For both Pınar and Sema, unveiling was related to their religious disaffiliation process. However, leaving one's faith is a nonlinear and fluid process, and ex-Muslims may maintain some of their "old" practices and beliefs. Although veiling is often perceived as religiously driven, and some of my interlocutors gave it up at the risk of "sinning" (Irem, Bilge) or after seeking alternative Islamic interpretations (Nur, Filiz, Hilal), for others, it had simply been a habitual practice, and its abandonment might cause feelings of longing for an "old" habit, without religious connotations (Pınar).

6. Conclusions

This article has investigated the reasons why some hijabi Muslim women have recently decided to stop wearing the veil. This phenomenon has occurred under the Islamically inclined AKP, and the article has examined the extent to which women's motivations for unveiling relate to Turkey's current sociopolitical atmosphere. Although many of my ex-hijabi interlocutors declared that they did not like to be perceived as pro-AKP, I have outlined other sociological reasons as well as familial and theological motivations behind their decisions to unveil.

This article has discussed Muslim women's decisions to unveil in terms of their construction of a new perspective on politics and political authority. Their criticisms do not only target devout Muslims who demand Muslim perfection; ex-hijabi women also criticize the secularist gaze. A crucial point here is that despite the normalization of the headscarf under AKP rule, my interlocutors still refer to feelings of fatigue with the secularist gaze. Certainly, their fatigue is not unconnected to the increasingly polarized climate fostered by the AKP since the Gezi protests. Polarization and anti-AKP sentiments thus emerge as important reasons why many of my interlocutors have stopped wearing the veil. Most of my participants define their political alignment, not in terms of political party affiliations, but with regard to basic liberal and/or human rights conceptions (e.g., justice, women's equality, meritocracy, freedom of expression). Thus, although removing the veil may mean non-alignment with the AKP, it does not indicate adherence to any opposition parties.

Moreover, the article has argued that unveiling is closely related to Muslim women's religious transformation—a dynamic and nonlinear process. Contrary to popular media debates or Islamic and political discourses on the subject, unveiling is not necessarily about abandoning the Islamic faith. Most interlocutors' changing engagements with mainstream Islamic ideas, discourses, and symbols suggest that ex-hijabi women develop a new perspective on female piety. It is central to most interlocutors' experience of unveiling that they began by questioning the achievement of perfect piety—which necessitates the carefully regulated and socially policed implementation of behaviors, dispositions and acts

that are particularly imposed on women. Often critical of this gendered imposition of social piety, many ex-hijabi accounts demonstrate a growing dissonance with taken-for-granted Islamic discourses. Importantly, my interlocutors' religious doubts are diverse, ranging from questioning the veil as a religious dictum to challenging traditional interpretations of Islam or leaving the faith altogether. One surprising finding is that ex-hijabis sometimes miss the practice of veiling. Such longings for the veil, especially by ex-Muslims, subvert the veil's usual significance in the construction of the "perfect" Muslim. Moreover, ex-hijabi women's narratives of unveiling—particularly expressions of doubt about the veil as a religious dictum and the general defense of alternative readings of Islam—result in the reconfiguration of religious authorities (e.g., Diyanet, Islamic scholars, Islamic orders).

Overall, despite differences in their upbringing, class and political affiliations, educated urban Muslim women's decisions to unveil in Turkey refer to a quest for individualism: they define piety in individualistic terms, counter parental pressure to make decisions about their own lives, or perceive politics through the lens of individualism and women's rights.

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religions

Article

After Hajj: Muslim Pilgrims Refashioning Themselves

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Abstract: The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is one of the five pillars of Islam and a duty which Muslims must perform—once in a lifetime—if they are physically and financially able to do so. In Morocco, from where thousands of pilgrims travel to Mecca every year, the Hajj often represents the culmination of years of preparation and planning, both spiritual and logistical. Pilgrims often describe their journey to Mecca as a transformative experience. Upon successfully completing the pilgrimage and returning home, pilgrims must negotiate their new status—and the expectations that come with it—within the mundane and complex reality of everyday life. There are many ambivalences and tensions to be dealt with, including managing the community expectations of piety and moral behavior. On a personal level, pilgrims struggle between staying on the right path, faithful to their pilgrimage experience, and straying from that path as a result of human imperfection and the inability to sustain the ideals inspired by pilgrimage. By ethnographically studying the everyday lives of Moroccans after their return from Mecca, this article seeks to answer the questions: how do pilgrims encounter a variety of competing expectations and demands following their pilgrimage and how are their efforts received by members of their community? How do they shape their social and religious behavior as returned pilgrims? How do they deal with the tensions between the ideals of Hajj and the realities of daily life? In short, this article scrutinizes the religious, social and personal ramifications for pilgrims after the completion of Hajj and return to their community. My research illustrates that pilgrimage contributes to a process of self-formation among pilgrims, with religious and non-religious dimensions, which continues long after Hajj is over and which operates within, and interacts with, specific social contexts.

Keywords: Hajj; Islam; Morocco; everyday life; self-formation

It was narrated that the prophet Muhammad said: "An ʿumra is an expiation for the sins committed between it and the next, and Hajj which is accepted will receive no other reward than Paradise." (hadith)[1]

1. Introduction

One day before leaving Mecca in October 2015, Abu Bakr, a Moroccan teacher in his early sixties, prayed: "O God, I pay You farewell with my tongue, but not with my heart." He then left Mecca to return to Morocco, having completed the rites of the Hajj. At the airport in Casablanca, his family waited in anticipation of his safe return. At home, food was prepared for a banquet for family and friends. The living room was cleaned and scented, and plates of sweets were placed on a centrally positioned, large, round table. The preparations at home seemed akin to a purification ritual, making ready the house to welcome the returning pilgrim and the many visitors who would come to congratulate him on his safe return.

In a later conversation with Abu Bakr, he used a telling image to describe the condition of those who perform a pilgrimage, saying: "[Pilgrims] now are like newborn babies: cleansed from sins and full of goodness." He estimated that Hajj precipitates a

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1 *Hajj al-Mabrūr* refers to an accepted pilgrimage (cf. Muslim, book 15, hadith 493).

major transformation in selfhood and a change on spiritual and moral levels. However, according to Abu Bakr's wife, once pilgrims return home, the real test begins: "would they transform so fully and live up to the morals developed during Hajj and how would they live upon return?"

The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is one of the five pillars of Islam and a duty which adult Muslims must perform—once in a lifetime—if they are physically and financially able to do so (Aziz 2001; Bianchi 2004; Peters 1994). During the days of Hajj, pilgrims perform a series of religious and symbolic rites, following the footsteps of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad (cf. Wolfe 1997; Peters 1994; Mawdudi 1982). The Hajj is not only an individual religious undertaking of devotion for Muslims but is also a global annual event that embraces political, social, economic, and intellectual aspects (Ryad 2017). For Muslims, the Hajj often represents the culmination of years of preparation and planning, both spiritual and logistical (cf. Gatrad and Sheikh 2005, p. 133). During Hajj, the behavior of pilgrims should be dominated by piety and morality, by abstention from all temptations, by tolerance when dealing with others and by the avoidance of disputes (Bianchi 2004). The significance of the Hajj and the impact of its rites assume great importance throughout the lives of pilgrims, which can be seen in numerous studies about the Hajj (cf. Bianchi 2004; Wolfe 1997; Peters 1994; Scupin 1982).

As if to mark its personal and social significance, once they have completed the Hajj, pilgrims are given the honorific title al-ḥājj, for males, or al-ḥājja, for females and the legacy of Hajj manifests itself in their everyday lives. In Morocco, from where thousands of pilgrims travel to Mecca every year, and where I conducted research for eighteen months among Moroccan pilgrims, many of my interlocutors described the Hajj as a transformative experience on both personal and social levels. When they returned from Mecca, my interlocutors spoke about their aspirations to transform and live up to their new status at home. Nonetheless, this desired transformation is not automatically acquired simply by virtue of having completed the pilgrimage. To maximize spiritual benefit, pilgrims must strive to lead pious lives amidst the ambivalences, contradictions and inconsistencies of their everyday lives (cf. Al-Ajarma 2020).

On the worldly level, there are benefits associated with pilgrimage such as good reputation that might impact a pilgrim's social interactions or commercial activities. For example, a businessman who has been to Hajj is expected by community members to be trustworthy and truthful which positively impacts his business (example provided by Abu Bakr, fieldnotes). Pilgrims are often invited as witnesses to marriages and to act as judges in cases of dispute as their opinions and ideas are highly respected in the community (Al-Ajarma 2020). Returning pilgrims, share the community expectations of morally elevated comportment in their daily lives after their return, while, at the same time, admitting a realistic sense of human imperfection. Thus, the question that is often expressed by pilgrims and non-pilgrims alike about the transformative qualities of Hajj remains: what happens on return to the mundane rhythms of the daily life of pilgrims?

In this article, I explore the putative spiritual and social benefits for pilgrims upon their return from the Hajj and particularly address some of the more complex ambiguities they encounter. I do this by making close reference to the testimonies of Moroccans whom I interviewed during long-term fieldwork conducted between the summer of 2015 and the winter of 2017. I argue that the daily lives of those who have performed the Hajj involve an array of practices to which pilgrims are expected to be dedicated. The very fact that people who have performed the Hajj are addressed with the honorific title al-ḥājj/al-ḥājja points to expectations of how the experience must, by inference, have changed them. The enactment of what is deemed to be a correct performance of religious duties involves specific ideals or normative expectations, which are dictated by a religious authority or, alternatively, by a faith community's understanding of Islamic tradition. I argue that pilgrims strive to become pious, virtuous, or 'correct' Muslims, as they understand that term, in a process which ultimately becomes the continuous crafting of a religious self. However, this process of crafting a religious self takes place within a context where a pilgrim's morality is

both displayed and assessed in the public sphere and is not merely a matter of religious observance and private conduct. Pilgrims have to negotiate their new status—and the expectations that come with being a ḥājj/ḥājja—within the mundane and complex reality of everyday life. Therefore, there are many ambivalences and tensions that pilgrims have to deal with upon their return to Morocco. By focusing on the lives of pilgrims after the pilgrimage is completed, this article aims to contribute to the anthropological study of pilgrimage as part of Muslims' everyday life (cf. Schielke 2010). In this research, everyday life is explored through participant observation, by following a group of Moroccan pilgrims mainly through the public and private domains which make up their everyday realms of existence. This study scrutinizes the religious, social, and personal ramifications for pilgrims after the completion of Hajj and how they engage in processes of continuous self-formation that sometimes include moments of success and at other times experiences of doubt brought by the ambiguities, contradictions, ambivalences of everyday life.

2. The Impact of the Pilgrimage on the 'Everyday Life' of Muslims

There is a range of academic studies that look at Muslim pilgrimage through various lenses, for instance in relation to tourism (Jamal et al. 2018; Timothy and Olsen 2006), historical encounters (Ryad 2017; Peters 1994, 2017), and globalization (Hyndman-Rizk 2012; Bianchi 2004).[2] Considerably less work, however, has been performed on the socio-cultural dimensions of the Hajj in the lives of Muslims (cf. Clingingsmith et al. 2009; Donnan 1995; Haq and Jackson 2009; McLoughlin 2009). In a study carried out by David Clingingsmith, Asim Khawaja, and Michael Kremer (Clingingsmith et al. 2009) to estimate the impact of performing the Hajj on pilgrims, the authors focus on how performing the Hajj affected religious beliefs and social attitudes of Muslims including feelings of unity with fellow Muslims, increased observance of Islamic practices, such as prayer and fasting, and increased belief in equality and harmony among ethnic groups, in addition to favorable attitudes toward women. In *Mass Religious Ritual and Intergroup Tolerance: The Muslim Pilgrims' Paradox*, Alexseev and Zhemukhov (2017) explore how the pilgrimage experience can translate into social tolerance toward out groups. Through studying the experiences of Muslims in the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, the authors argue that pilgrims were more tolerant toward outgroups and open to diverse interpretations of Islam than were similar non-pilgrims. Alexseev and Zhemukhov further discuss the pilgrims' struggles with whether or not their Hajj was accepted by God, leading them to analyze their actions during the pilgrimage. In personal accounts of the Meccan pilgrimage, Moroccans—with whom my study was conducted—speak about how they see themselves as Muslims, individuals who seek spiritual quest and members of a Muslim community following their pilgrimage (cf. Cooper 1999; Donnan 1995). The Hajj is significant in shaping individual moral conduct and bestowing an aura of religious merit on those who successfully completed it (cf. Joll 2011). Christopher M. Joll, in his study of Muslim merit making in Thailand, refers to the Hajj as the biggest merit-making event of a lifetime (Joll 2011, pp. 171–80). Even the title al-ḥājj or al-ḥājja is highly significant on both personal and social levels as form of social, religious and moral capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986; Cooper 1999, p. 93). However, to study how pilgrims bring their understanding of the pilgrimage to reframing the ways in which they engage with religious, social, and cultural practices *after* the Hajj, in my view, one should examine pilgrims' everyday lives including their behavior, interactions, and other discourses—both personal and social.

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[2] Other studies have examined the pilgrimage of Muslims in the West, especially in relation to diaspora communities. Some examples include the work of Seán McLoughlin (2009, 2010, 2013) on the pilgrimage of Pakistani Muslims in Great Britain, the research of Farooq Haq and John Jackson on the Hajj experiences of Pakistani and Pakistani-Australians pilgrims (Haq and Jackson 2009), as well as Carol Delaney's study on the pilgrimage of Turkish migrants in Germany (Delaney 1990). There is also several edited volumes on the Hajj including *Hajj: Global Interactions through Pilgrimage* edited by Luitgard Mols and Marjo Buitelaar (Mols and Buitelaar 2015) which includes several case studies on the Hajj, the more recent volume *Muslim Pilgrimage in the Modern World* edited by Babak Rahimi and Peyman Eshaghi (Rahimi and Eshaghi 2019), and most recently, *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond: Reconfiguring Gender, Religion and Mobility* edited by Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Viola Thimm (Buitelaar et al. 2020). Personal accounts on Hajj (from Morocco) include Abdlellah Hammoudi's *A Season in Mecca* (Hammoudi 2006) and Hassan Aourid's *Riwāʾu Makka* [The Waves of Mecca] (Aourid 2019).

A point of departure for the study of everyday life—in general—might be Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (De Certeau 1988), which examines life as it is lived and daily exchanges as a rich source of meaning for scholarly analysis. De Certeau turns focuses on what he sees as the creative poetics of the 'common man' in his patterns of interactions, offering a microanalysis of the daily enactments and renegotiations which people undertake. The study of everyday life focuses on what people do and say in a specific context and how they experience, express, and shape their 'lived religion' (McGuire 2008, p. 12; cf. Schielke and Debevec 2012; Dessing et al. 2013; Ammerman 2007). Understanding religion, Nancy Ammerman argues, requires attention to both the 'micro' practices of everyday interaction, and the 'macro' social structures among which one lives (Ammerman 2007, p. 234). Meredith McGuire follows a similar argument in her work where she focuses on religion as it is practiced, experienced, and expressed by 'ordinary people' (McGuire 2008, p. 12). People's actual everyday experiences, she argues, reflect their personal understanding and daily negotiation of their religion (McGuire 2008). Assuming that individuals continuously engage in making and remaking religion by undertaking religious activities, the religious lives of people are co-constituted by various, sometimes competing, priorities and experiences involving all dimensions of life (cf. Ammerman 2007). This makes everyday life a key tool in the study of religion (Toguslu 2015).

For Muslims, Mecca is the most sacred city on earth, and it has a powerful presence in their everyday life. Many Muslims consider the pilgrimage to Mecca to be the ultimate realization of one's religious development and a way of achieving moral fulfilment or becoming a good, or better, Muslim. Being and becoming a good pilgrim for many people includes the perfection of virtuous behavior, morality, and demonstration of piety (cf. Mahmood 2005). In general, pilgrimage in the everyday life of Moroccans epitomizes the meaning of Islam as "a grand scheme" (cf. Schielke 2010, p. 14). This means that the pilgrimage to Mecca becomes a guideline for life, a spiritual 'watch' and 'compass', providing meaning and direction to everyday concerns and experiences (cf. Tweed 2006). Taking into consideration the complexities in people's everyday lives and their motivations, experiences, practices, and uncertainties in dealing with such complexities, the study of everyday aspects of religion as lived by ordinary people can reveal the "plural, complex, and essentially unsystematic nature of religion" (Schielke and Debevec 2012, p. 3). Since the religious lives of most Muslims are not necessarily governed by an internally coherent set of ethics or by a certainty about the place of religion in both public and private spheres, anthropologists working on Muslim societies have highlighted the prevalence of moral ambivalence, the ways in which individuals deal with conflicting "moral registers" (Schielke 2015, p. 53ff), or "multidimensional" selves (Simon 2014). Thus, struggle, ambivalence, incoherence and failure must receive attention in the study of everyday religiosity (cf. Schielke 2010; Deeb 2015).

In the introduction to the edited volume *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion*, David Kloos and Daan Beekers argue that the struggles inherent in everyday life can, in fact, contribute to productive avenues in the processes of ethical formation rather than be seen as setbacks or obstacles to it, given the appropriate, constructive reading of, and learning from, the perceived 'failure'. Therefore, as Kloos and Beekers argue, a comprehensive approach towards the religious subject should include both questions about religious commitment, success, social mobility and progress as well as questions about drawbacks, doubt, and sinfulness. What I find in the narratives of my interlocutors in Morocco is that, although they are sometimes uncertain, doubtful, or—indeed—their daily lives show ambivalence, they nonetheless frame their religious lives in terms of an effort to be 'good Muslims' as individuals and members of larger Muslim community. The self-image of a pilgrim is constructed within his or her socio-cultural community, where particular religiously defined ideals of the pilgrimage to Mecca—and of those who perform it—are presented and taught (cf. Sadiqi 2018). A pilgrim is often seen by the community as a person who should apply the highest ideals possible in order to achieve the ideal religious selfhood within the context of their everyday life

(Al-Ajarma 2020). Nonetheless, a pilgrim is also an individual who has to deal with the ambivalence of everyday life including one's path to piety, drawbacks, doubt, and struggles of 'staying on the right path' or straying from it, as I argue in this article (cf. Beekers and Kloos 2017).

3. Methods

The findings presented in this article are based on an ethnographic study that investigates the socio-cultural embeddedness of Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in contemporary Morocco (Al-Ajarma 2020). The data were collected through extensive multi-site fieldwork that took place between July 2015 and January 2017. Participant observation was conducted to research the presence of Hajj in everyday social relations and micro-practices before the journey and after their return home. In addition to participant observation, in-depth interviews were held with people who have been on Hajj. The stories produced in interviews were used to analyze pilgrims' use of different discourses in narrations on the meaning of Hajj, while participant observation allowed the study of how concrete acts and unsolicited references to Hajj point to shifts in pilgrims everyday lives. I examine how pilgrims reflect on the aftermath of their pilgrimage by looking at how a pilgrim is expected to behave and how pilgrims reflect on their daily struggles and deal with them. For the purpose of this article, I use testimonies from ten pilgrims who reflect on their post-Hajj experiences and four non-pilgrims who reflect on their experiences with pilgrims.[3]

4. The Return of Pilgrims and Expectations of and from Them

During my fieldwork in Morocco, my interlocutors often describe their journey to Mecca as a religious and spiritual experience so great that it was sometimes "beyond comprehension" (Amina, pilgrim from Fes). In their narratives, many pilgrims echoed the words of Rashid, a pilgrim from Mohammedia, who told me:

Pilgrimage is a great experience; it is an *opportunity* to cleanse oneself from sins . . . When one returns home, he is like a new born baby; one purified from sins . . . It is an opportunity for a new start and a renewed fait . . .

In this sense, the Hajj is a rite of passage that marks transition to a new life cleansed from sins, a life that starts upon return from the pilgrimage (cf. Donnan 1995). In conversations with Moroccans, many people spoke to me about their expectations that those who have been to Mecca come back spiritually rejuvenated, displaying a new enthusiasm for a religious life upon return home. In the words of Zahra, a fifty-three-old woman from Fes: "When pilgrims return from Hajj, they come back similar to a blank sheet of paper . . . They should be careful what to write on that sheet . . . " The image of the pilgrim as a *tabula rasa* suggests that all past misdeeds are obliterated, purged and forgiven, so that the returned pilgrims begin their spiritual journey again, with no sins weighing them down. The ideas of rebirth and purification are central to the spiritual transformation which the returning pilgrim hopes to undergo and their social prestige and legitimacy that comes with it (cf. Eickelman and Piscatori 1990).

According to Zakariya, a tailor from Fes, when pilgrims return home, they focus on having the 'correct' character traits deemed by tradition to be associated with a good pilgrimage, a topic that recurred frequently in discussions of pilgrimage with Moroccans. In conversations related to the Hajj, my interlocutors often focused on describing what is expected of a pilgrim, both in terms of external behavior and expressions of piety. Interior piety is largely linked to the idea of cultivating, and having cultivated, the sense of a close relationship with God, a feeling highly prized by pilgrims. Upon return from Hajj, many

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[3] The eleven Moroccan pilgrims whose narratives are used in this article (in the order they are presented): Abu Bakr (61, teacher from Mohammedia), Amina (57, teacher from Fes), Rashid (64, businessman from Mohammedia), Zakariya (56, tailor from Fes), Samiya (62, homemaker from Fes), Osama (68, former government employee from Fes), Yasir (fabric shop owner, from Fes), Ali, (39, engineer from Casablanca), Lubna (37, former factor worker, from Mohammedia), and Hisham (67, former teacher from Safi). The three non-pilgrims: Sarah (45, shop owner, from Ouezzane), Hassan (23, student, from Safi), Nisrin (29, job unknown from Casablanca), Najla (59, teacher from Mohammedia).

pilgrims manifested a desire to achieve closer proximity to God, an inner state achievable through the devout performance of religious duties. This was illustrated in my interactions with pilgrims in Morocco, when I asked what, if anything, had changed in their lives since returning from Hajj. First, those returning to Morocco after performing the Hajj told me that the pilgrimage resulted in transformations that were manifested in behavior related to religious rituals, most notably in the realm of prayer and other kinds of religious activity. According to Samiya, a pilgrim in her sixties from Fes:

> Before going on Hajj, I used to pay less attention to my religious duties . . . I could not wake up for *fajr* prayers [at dawn], for example, and rarely fasted outside of the month of Ramadan . . . Now, I make sure to pray on time, wake up for *fajr* prayers, fast regularly and help others . . . A pilgrim should never lie, should not cheat, and should be a good neighbor . . . [A pilgrim] should stay on the right path [*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*] . . .

My interlocutors often spoke about striving towards what they considered to be a pattern of Islamic perfection. Although they may oscillate between this ideal and the realities of daily life (cf. Beekers and Kloos 2017), observable evidence suggests that they tried to be faithful to their pilgrimage, and "stay on *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* [the straight path]," to quote the words of Samiya.[4] For example, as asserted by Samiya, prayers are an important part of a pilgrim's daily routine; the morning prayer is a central focus in the schedule of waking and preparing for work. Pilgrims take on additional daily prayers and religious obligations, including voluntary fasting and reciting the Qurʾan. In general, pilgrims assert a conscious belief that they have become more mindful of religion in their daily life.

For my interlocutors, becoming a pilgrim was largely concerned with the development of a new moral self, one that differentiates more closely than before between what is good and bad, right and wrong, sacred and profane. This new zeal can be heard in daily speech, with pilgrims intensifying their use of religious interjections, such as *in-shāʾ-Allāh* (God willing) and *mā-shāʾ-Allāh* (God has willed it), which they widely use in their daily conversations (cf. Migdadi et al. 2010).[5] Such interjections serve to indicate a prevailing disposition to think, speak and act within a religious framework. Pilgrims also exhibit a determination to perform other acts, including extending hospitality and giving alms to the poor. Other aspects of external behavior, operating on a lower level, but nonetheless having significance for pilgrims, include smiling, being kind to others, solving disputes, and adopting a positive demeanor in public. Such conduct is not exclusively the province of the devout, but pilgrims seemed to see it as a daily manifestation of spiritual grace acquired, or intensified, during Hajj.

Pilgrims try to protect and preserve their new spiritual state of purity while, at the same time, navigating their daily lives and interactions with others. Society may expect to perceive the outward signs of inward change. However, the ideal of 'staying on the straight path', nonetheless, is met with various challenges and realities of everyday life that require decision making: "should one take advantage of the new status and ask others to address him or her with the honorific title of *al-ḥājj or al-ḥajj?*" (Samiya); "Should a pilgrim conduct business which might entail religious compromise, such as the inability to perform prayers on time?" (Abu Bakr); and "Should a pilgrim lie, pretend, or cheat to benefit his business?" (Rashid). Pilgrims voiced these challenges and others as part of their everyday experiences after Hajj. In my conversations with the three pilgrims—and other Moroccans—I tried to unpack how they dealt with these challenges.

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4   *Al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* or the straight path is mentioned in the opening chapter of the Qurʾan in the form of a supplication prayer from humans to God: "Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray" (Qurʾan 1, 6–7). Historian Michael Cook notes that *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic is only ever used in a religious context. Also it has no plural form, indicating that there can be only one *ṣirāṭ* which is living through the way to God (Cook 2000, p. 25).

5   Both *in-shāʾ-Allāh* and mā-*shāʾ-Allāh* refer to that what God wishes can come true (Migdadi et al. 2010).

The answer for the first of the three questions—that of honorifics—is somewhat debatable among my interlocutors. While some of my interlocutors considered it "normal" to use the title of *al-ḥājj* or *al-ḥājja* as a sign of respect and honor when addressing a person performed Hajj, other people questioned the "normality" of such naming. Nisrin, a young Moroccan woman from Casablanca, for example, told me that respect and honor should be given to a person for their moral behavior and good deeds regardless of their having performed the Hajj. She told me the story of a friend of her mother, who upon returning from Hajj, demanded to be called *al-ḥājja*. Nisrin previously addressed the women as *khāltī*, a term that means maternal aunt and is applied—as a mark of respect—to older women. Nisrin questioned the demand of the older woman and insisted that she was being respectful when referring to the woman as *khāltī*. According to Nisrin, the woman wanted deferential recognition for her status and was seeking social recognition for religious merit, pursuing prestige rather than spiritual recognition. More than once, Nisrin said, the woman called attention to her pilgrimage, by bringing the topic up when she visited relatives; for example, when she made reference to the cold weather, she insisted on comparing it with the dry heat of Mecca during her pilgrimage. When I asked Nisrin if she called the woman by the title *al-ḥājja*, she answered: "*Allāh yismaḥli* [May God forgive me], but when I see her, I call her *khāltī* on purpose . . . I can see it on her face that she does not like it!" The fact that Nisrin began her answer with *Allāh yismaḥli*, however, was an indication that she believed her behavior towards her mother's friend might not be appropriate, considering the latter's age and social status as a female pilgrim. To some extent, being recognized as a pilgrim still carries high social significance among Moroccans, although the greater frequency of completion of the Hajj has introduced a modern ambivalence to the title, albeit a relatively muted one.

When Moroccans discuss the issue of ascribing high status to pilgrims, many people draw a clear distinction between religion, culture and tradition. Abu Bakr, for example, questioned the established practice of automatically giving titles to pilgrims in Morocco. For him, the practice of naming is more of a cultural than religious practice. When asked about the title *al-ḥājj* by which he is known, he commented:

> When the Prophet performed *the* Hajj in Mecca, no one called him *al-ḥājj* Muhammad. His companions also performed the Hajj. But no one says *al-ḥājj* Ali, *al-ḥājj* Umar or *al-ḥājj* Uthman . . . Those were the leaders of the Muslim community; yet none of them was called *al-ḥājj*.

The reason a person should perform pilgrimage, according to Abu Bakr, is simply that God commands pilgrimage, and, therefore, it is not obligatory to be given the title *al-ḥājj* upon their return from Mecca. Zakariya expressed a similar view:

> When someone prays, he performs an obligation. Yet, he would not be called *al-muṣallī* [the one who prays]. When he fasts, he performs an obligation, yet he would not be given the title of *al-ṣāʾim* [the one who fasts]. Pilgrimage is the same; it is an *obligation* and those who perform it are lucky and hopefully God accepts their pilgrimage; but there is no need for them to be called *al-ḥājj* . . . I did not ask people to call me *al-ḥājj*. However, everyone started calling me *al-ḥājj* upon return from Mecca . . . Now, my work colleagues, my family members, my cousins, and neighbors all call me *al-ḥājj*.

Both Abu Bakr and Zakariya believed that it was a decision made by the community to confer upon them the honorific title of one who has completed the Hajj and it was not something the pilgrims themselves should ask for (cf. Buitelaar 2018). Nonetheless, both men are known in their community as *al-ḥājj*. During my fieldwork, I met with the two men numerous times on different occasions, always hearing their relatives, family members, and others calling them *al-ḥājj*. Sometimes the real name of a person even overlapped under the title *al-ḥājj*, such as *al-ḥājj* Osama, a former government employee from Mohammedia who was always addressed with the title *al-ḥājj* among his collogues followed by his family name.

The respect and honor showed towards pilgrims comes with expectations of piety and respectful behavior with others as to justify the honor which others should show them. However, the honorific title rings hollow when the transformation expected seems unfulfilled and members of the community are reluctant to ascribe the title to flawed individuals. One way my interlocutors reflected on the difference between expectations and reality was shown in humorous accounts of pilgrims returning from Hajj. For example, Sarah, a woman from Ouezzane, told me this joke while talking about returning pilgrims:

> There was a Moroccan man who returned from Hajj. He went to a nearby shop in his neighborhood where he was a regular customer. He asked the *owner* to show him the record of his debt in the shopkeeper's loan notebook. The man was excited thinking that al-ḥājj was about to pay the debt. He opened the notebook and pointed to one page. The pilgrim said: "Where is my name?" The shop owner answered: "Here it is, al-ḥājj!." The pilgrim nodded his head and said: "Well, now you can write 'al-ḥājj' in front of my name!"

This humorous account illustrates the expectation of the shop owner of a returning pilgrim paying his debt and then being met with the irony that the pilgrim was only concerned about the title. The joke hints at the challenge of change following a pilgrimage and the possibility of there being unchangeable characteristics. Hassan, a young man from Safi, told me another humorous account of a similar nature:

> There was an old lady who told a lot of lies. Her children said: "Let's send her to Hajj so that she will be decent and stop lying." So she went to Hajj and *returned*. Her children waited for her at the airport and upon welcoming her back they asked her: "Al-ḥājja, how was your travel?" She said: "Oh, what can I say? The airplane broke down and was stationed in the middle of the sky; we had to get out and push it to move!"

The use of humor in both accounts can be interpreted as a means of challenging the boundaries of social expectations (cf. Tamer 2009). The jokes indicate how pilgrims were looked upon or treated upon return. This technique interrogates the 'perfect' image some people attribute to pilgrims. Although people might have religious, social and personal expectations from pilgrims and effectively demanding higher standards of a pilgrim than of others, pilgrims are first and foremost humans who might or might not change following their pilgrimage experience. Pilgrims might aspire to stay on the right path, yet they have to negotiate their journey—on that path—through the ambivalence of their everyday life.

5. Ambivalences of Everyday Life, Staying on the Right Path and Straying from It

When I asked my interlocutors about the changes they witnessed in their actions after they returned from Mecca, they sometimes struggled to scrutinize their own behavior. Those around pilgrims, however, including family members and friends, in my experience, were more vocal in actively assessing the behaviors and religious conduct of the returned pilgrim. For example, Najla, the wife of Abu Bakr, clearly remembered her husband's post-hajj behavior:

> Before al-ḥājj left for Mecca, at the airport, he cried and asked for forgiveness for every moment of anger and every unjust action during our life together . . . I felt like he was paying the last farewell . . . We all cried and to myself I thought that he would return as *al-ḥājj*, a truly transformed person! . . . I wondered: 'can he live a life without sins? . . . Will he live up to his new *title*, al-ḥājj?'

Remembering the return of her husband to Morocco, especially the first few weeks, Najla described him as the kindest she had ever known him. "How long do you think that lasted?" Najla asked me. She then answered her own question: "Three months!" Najla recalled the words of her husband upon his return from Mecca:

> He told me that being on Hajj reminded him of the Prophet, especially of the deeds of the Prophet who was a gentle man, a kind and a loving husband, *and* a good father and neighbor . . . [My husband] wanted to be a loving husband

just like the Prophet . . . And he was! He was the perfect husband; never angry, always smiling and speaking nicely and gently . . . For three months! After three months, he returned to his old self . . . He is not a bad person, but he easily gets angry, screams, and gets irritated often . . . I have to say, though, those three months [immediately following his return] were the best months of our twenty-five years of marriage . . .

In the three months that followed her husband's return from Mecca, Najla recognized Abu Bakr as "truly *al-ḥājj*;" a pilgrim who was spiritually transformed. The husband worked to demonstrate piety and reverence and by evincing qualities such as open-mindedness and readiness to be a good husband. This change is a state largely brought about through the pilgrim's own efforts. However, the transformation, in this case, was not held to be permanent, revealing that the experience of pilgrimage alone is often considered insufficient, of itself, to bring about a total and lasting change. For Najla, some pilgrims appear not to have internalized the moral status of pilgrimage deeply enough, with the result that they find it difficult to sustain their desired transformation following their return to their daily lives after the pilgrimage (cf. Spiro 1997, p. 3). Therefore, the new moral status, acquired after pilgrimage, becomes a site of struggle for the returning pilgrim, a fact observed within the family, and evaluated by those closest to the pilgrim. Rashid, the pilgrim from Mohammedia, expressed this dilemma clearly when he told me:

When people go on Hajj and return, their behavior might change between themselves and God with more prayer, fasting and almsgiving. However, what is between themselves and people might not change a lot . . . Pilgrims are just humans; they might return to treat people badly, cheat, or gossip . . . [That's part of] a human's daily life!

Reflecting on the daily struggles pilgrims face, my interlocutors often compared the daily life in Morocco with the pilgrimage experience itself. Abu Bakr, for example, reflected on his experience by saying:

Over there [in Mecca] you're occupied with worship and with very little distraction you would think that you would lead a pious life once you return home . . . And then you come here where you have to go to work again, deal with people on a daily basis, *sometimes* you have no time . . . At first when you come back you are still in that [pious] mood; but with daily busy life, you return to the routine . . .

What Abu Bakr described was coherent with his wife's observation of the change in his character following his pilgrimage. His return to the rhythms of everyday life was shaped less by the effects (or absence of them) of a spiritual transformation brought about by the pilgrimage than by the routines of work, family, and social life. Abu Bakr's experience was somewhat similar to that of Rashid who told me:

In Mecca I felt so peaceful; I was only occupied with worship from morning to night; I would pray, read Qur'an, visit religious sites . . . Then when I came back, I wanted to stay on the straight path . . . I had to go to work again, to deal with people at work, the day is busy between work, family, and other responsibility. In Mecca, I didn't have any responsibility as such apart from worship . . . At first, I was more committed; still connected with my Hajj experience . . . But being back in real life is difficult . . .

For Abu Bakr and Rashid, committing to the morals they aspired to achieve when they were in Mecca including honesty, trust, and 'staying on the right path' was difficult given the "realities of everyday life, struggles, and having to deal with people at home and at work" (Rashid). What the two men described was the taxing transition from the intense experience in Mecca, dominated exclusively by religious pursuits, to the return home, to the multi-dimensional demands and rhythms of everyday life, such as work, family life, and social responsibilities. Rashid compared the difficulty of staying on the right path, with 'the trust' that what is mentioned in the Qur'anic verse " . . . We did offer the trust [of

reason and volition] to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it—they have always been inept and foolish" (Qurʾan 33: 72). He believed that the ideals a pilgrim aspires to reach are similar to the 'trust 'mentioned in the verse: so heavy and unattainable that even heavens and earth refused to carry that trust and also, in a vein similar to the verse, he believed that being foolish and straying from the right path is part of "man's nature."

Although Rashid believed that it is almost impossible to stay on the right path, he believed that there are ways to be a good pilgrim including fully applying the teaching of the Qurʾan and the Prophet's instruction for moral action (cf. Schielke 2009). He told me that he aspired to do good deeds, fast more, and be a good husband as examples of being a good Muslim in general and a good pilgrim in particular. He, however, admitted that it is hard for everyone to live up to the standards of being a good pilgrim, and therein lie the ambiguous consequences of pursuing the ideals of religious expectations. As Najla put it: "At the end of the day, a pilgrim is only human; humans do the right and the wrong. They might try not to, but it is difficult." Thus, the benefits of pilgrimage in terms of its legacy are held to be equivocal. Therefore, some pilgrims—and people around them—recognize that to fail and err is human and thus they moderate their expectations of pilgrims.

It is, of course, pilgrims themselves who must deal with their own sense of failure. They may provide different explanations for the change, or lack of change, in themselves after Hajj. Osama, a pilgrim from Fes, for example, told me that he believed that one's character does not significantly change after Hajj but that the outcome of Hajj depends on one's upbringing, *tarbiya*. What Hajj adds, according to Osama, is a reminder of moral behavior that people sometimes overlook though the distractions of everyday life. He, nonetheless, insisted that, although a pilgrim might return to his old habits, the change in his or her heart would remain consistent after Hajj. In his words: "after Hajj, a pilgrim's heart is filled with faith [*yiʿmar bil-īmān*]." To overcome the sense of failure, Osama visits Mecca regularly to perform the minor pilgrimage, *ʿumra*. He told me that he has been to Mecca at least twenty times since he performed the Hajj. For Osama, and several others of my interlocutors who can afford the expenses of *ʿumra*, the minor pilgrimage seemed to be a way to deal with their sense of failure by visiting Mecca and "renewing their faith" (Osama).

I noticed during my fieldwork that the difficulties or tensions that emerge when pilgrims try to live up to the religious ideals can be age specific. Many older pilgrims had fewer daily responsibilities and thus could assign more time to religious activities such as fasting and diligent prayers. Ali, for example, told me that his father, who was retired, had more time during the day to dedicate to religious duties such as prayers and voluntary fasting. He, however, as a younger man, had more distractions within the structures of his daily life. He, nonetheless, argued, that within his community, people tend to be more lenient in judging the behavior of younger people than that of older ones whom they expect to show pious behavior.

Many of interlocutors acknowledged that it was their struggle to lead pious lives after the Hajj that led them to realize that impossibility of always remaining on the right path. Yasir, a fabric shop owner from Fes, emphasized the fact that "it would be impossible for any Muslim—including pilgrims—not to commit sins; only God is Perfect." Here's how Ali, an engineer from Casablanca, put it:

> People have diverse opinions when it comes to what is right and what is wrong . . . I know I make mistakes . . . I really try not to; but at the end of the day we are not angels . . . We all make mistakes . . . I think it was Imam Shafi'i who said, 'I believe my *opinion* is right with the possibility that it is wrong and I believe the opinion of those who disagree with me is wrong with the possibility that it is right . . . '

Expressions such as "Only God is Perfect and "We are not angels" were used by Yasir and Ali to demonstrate the continuous struggle and tension between complying with religious obligations and wanting to engage in mundane activities. The acknowledgement

of failure, in my view, was part of the two men's 'self-fashioning' as pious Muslims (cf. De Koning 2017, p. 48). Also in the same volume, Thijl Sunier asserts that *failure* and *virtue* are ambiguous, semantic categories subject to debate and contestation (Sunier 2017, p. 113). It could be argued that explicitly acknowledging their sense of failure can be a 'technique of the self' through which pilgrims formulate and rechannel that sense of failure as a learning moment (cf. Beekers and Kloos 2017; Sunier 2017).

When my interlocutors acknowledged their failure in the process of ethical formation due to the ambiguities of their everyday lives, they spoke of the different ways they cope with this sense of failure by finding consolation in religious or social activities. Some pilgrims, for example, told me that they managed to find spiritual encouragement by engaging in activities that were performed within their social networks which were established during the pilgrimage itself. According to Lubna, a young woman from Mohammedia:

> During the pilgrimage, I became friends with some Moroccan women I met in Mecca. When we returned, I stayed connected with a few of them . . . Sometimes we visit each other and often we exchange messages via WhatsApp . . . We remind each other of the *time* we spent in Mecca and support each other if needed . . .

Hisham, an older man from Safi, shared similar accounts to that of Lubna, stating that he also was able to establish networks of friends—during Hajj—beyond his old social networks with whom he regularly connect. Other pilgrims find support in social activities such as gatherings of family and friends. Ali, for example, is a member of a group that plays music and sings religious-themed songs at events and gatherings such as weddings or other celebrations. He told me that the activities of the band and practice meetings positively influenced his life. He also told me about a friend who acted similarly by producing artworks including drawings and paintings which he then shared with friends or exhibited in halls where people could see them. These activities, Ali argued, "could strengthen one's incentives to perform religiously motivated acts in the midst of the struggles of life."

Reflecting upon his experience and 'testifying' about moments of struggle—and sometimes failure—contributed to his understanding of his self-development and maybe, as he reflected it, enhanced the presentation of his religious self (cf. Buitelaar 2018).[6] In other words, recognizing and responding to one's lack of capacity to realize certain ideals becomes a mode of self-cultivation.

To sum up, failing to live up to ideals and to perform all one's religious obligations can be partly excused, or at least counterbalanced, by referring to one's laudable intentions and motivations, suggesting that failure itself is not due to carelessness or a lack of faith, but some flaw inherent in the human condition. I suspect that many pilgrims felt the need to emphasize in this verbal way their heartfelt commitment in order to present themselves as legitimate religious adherents who take their religious obligations seriously, even if their performance falls short of what was desired.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed how pilgrims, who have fulfilled the fifth pillar of their faith, relate to a particular religious ethos that they are expected to embrace, negotiate, and practice within the social spaces they inhabit. On the basis of my observations and conversations with Moroccans, both pilgrims and their family members, friends and other non-pilgrims, I have argued that, just like everybody else, the everyday lives of pilgrims are laden with ambiguities and contradictions. There are several contradictions between, on the one hand, how a pilgrim is expected to behave in a religious moral register and, on the other, the reality of his or her actual behavior and daily interactions with others. Furthermore, as a major event in the lives of Muslims, the Hajj does not only affect the millions of pilgrims who actually make the journey, but also their friends and relatives who vicariously experience the occasion through them. Therefore, the relationships between

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[6] Buitelaar, personal communication (15 October 2019).

pilgrims and their social networks after the Hajj are likely to change, in complex and varied ways, based on their new religious and social status.

While my Moroccan interlocutors recognized that pilgrimage to Mecca can have certain transformative properties on moral and ethical self-formation of returning pilgrims, they do not always consider the outcome to be perfect or lasting. Thus, my research reveals that the construction of a virtuous self and piety is far from straightforward in the everyday lives of pilgrims. Despite the aspirations and manifestly sincere efforts made by returned pilgrims, there is a general realization—among my interlocutors—that the performance of the Hajj is no guarantee, per se, of a life transformation and an elevation to a higher religious standard. It seems, from the research, that the lived experiences of pilgrims are rather marked with complexities and ambivalences—all of which are rooted in human imperfection and conditioned by the social context in which pilgrims live.

The narratives of pilgrims indicate this complexity in their struggle to remain on the right path of piety and straying from that path. The complexity can also be seen in the responses of family members and friends to the newly elevated pilgrim which reveal some social responses when expectations placed on pilgrims are not fulfilled. The humorous anecdotes targeting the pilgrim who remains unreformed operates with wit and mild satire to indicate a community acceptance, and maybe gentle mockery of, the failure to live up to the expectation of total moral transformation. Similarly, the denial of the deferential title of ḥājj or ḥājja to those whose conduct disappoints can act as a corrective, a puncturing of hubris of those who prize their title above their religious virtue; such acts also subtly assert the importance of the proper comportment of the ḥājj or ḥājja by withholding the title from those who seem not to merit the honor.

To sum up, if piety, religious self-fashioning and conviction constitute one aspect of what pilgrims strive to achieve, post-Hajj, imperfection, uncertainty, and ambivalence are undeniably competing elements of the everyday lives they live. Self-perceived failure is, in many cases, part and parcel of religious practice and experience. To navigate, or negotiate the complexities of life as it is lived, while still maintaining a sense of striving for spiritual improvement, is a laudable religious pathway according to many pilgrims. However, it is also the case that to accept human frailty and yet sustain a religious endeavor, even if not perfectly realized, could provoke a sense of failure, which might, in turn, militate against that sustained religious practice. A possible reconciliation of these conflicting positions seems to be a recognition that spiritual improvement is the target, rather than perfection, and this allows pilgrims to navigate the ambiguities of daily life as they find them.

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Article
Muslimness on Demand: Critical Voices of Islam in Egypt

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Abstract: Academic research on Islam in Egypt often focuses on the entanglement of religion and politics, mostly analysed with regard to public spaces. This article seeks to nuance the focus on pious activism and the idea that Islam is dominating everyday life in Egypt by taking individuals' intimate non-religious perspectives into consideration. This research on individual pieties, on being religious and *doing* being religious, especially opened up the worlds of individuals who are different. Drawing on fieldwork with young Alexandrians this article considers the subtle voices that are currently becoming increasingly louder, which hint at tendencies away from mainstream Islam and express alternative options and different versions of belief. These silent, and often silenced, voices are heard only under exceptional circumstances, because they often coincide with criticism of present social and political conditions. Criticism that mixes religious, social, and political content is almost impossible to express publicly in Egypt. By focusing on these narratives, this article tries to understand the relationship between criticism of Islam and processes of individualization. In addition, it seeks to analyse these narratives in order to explore the dynamic character of the self in the realm of religiosities and non-religiosities.

Keywords: atheism; Egypt; criticism of Islam; religiosities; non-belief; non-religiosities; youth; Alexandria; processes of individualisation

1. Introduction

> "I don't pray.
> I don't believe.
> I am an atheist" (interview with author, February 2018).

Since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, understandings of Islam have undergone efficacious changes. The ousting of President Hosni Mubarak was followed by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohammed Morsi, whose presidency has greatly affected the way Islam is perceived. Restrictions during Morsi's rule—restrictions imposed in the name of religion—resulted in disappointment in the "Islamization project" of the regime (Haenni 2016; El Esrawi 2019). In the direct aftermath of the revolution, public debates over religiosity ensued and an unprecedented momentum of political and religious plurality translated in a wide array of movements and political fractions in the public sphere (Haenni 2016). This in turn was reflected in a momentum of re-positioning and questioning of political and religious authorities. For many individuals this also included reconsidering their (non-)religious identities. As Khaled Fahmy states in his reflection on the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013: "Egyptian society finds itself, confronting and raising [. . .] very, very deep questions [. . .]. [W]hat to do with Islam? What is the proper position of [. . .] Islam [. . .]" (Fahmy 2013)? While this holds true for larger political debate, in this article, I particularly examine how these questions have impacted the intimate experiences of young individuals. In addition, how did the momentum for change effectively set in motion a process of individualization, of which many Egyptians were in need, to form an opinion and a position? The revolution was perceived as a great

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failure, in the sense of a collective momentum of delusion (Abaza 2020). What emotional mechanisms and strategies do youths employ to deal with these disappointments?

The change in power from Mohammed Morsi to President Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi is characterised by restrictions in an attempt to limit the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, public religious spaces such as mosques were regulated (Bano and Benadi 2018). Based on that, my initial, heuristic, question, was: Why do some Egyptians stop going to the mosque, and what does this apparent disenchantment with public religion symbolise? This question led to others: How does the daily life of those who do not follow mainstream Islam look? Moreover, what happens to their "selves" and how do they negotiate living in a Muslim majority society?

The turmoil of the revolution and its aftermath have been meticulously described and analysed by various scholars such as Saad (2012), Fahmy et al. (2019), Schielke (2015), Abaza (2012, 2014). Mona Abaza (2020) in particular highlighted how young individuals searching for identities are torn between agency and passivity since the revolution. She identifies insecurities, generational differences, and misunderstandings in terms of values and appreciation amid dystopian environments. This article relates to the existing scholarship and deals with searches for identity among young Egyptians but goes a step further by adding the dimension of individualisation and (non)religiosities to the analysis.

This research on individual pieties, being religious and *doing* being religious, not only provided me with insights into the worlds of individual believers, but especially opened up the worlds of individuals who are different. During the years 2016–2019, I lived in Alexandria to carry out ethnographic research within the larger ERC Project "Private Pieties. Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics", University of Göttingen. The following analysis and findings are based on the interviews I conducted as part of this ERC-Project. I examined the subtle voices that are currently becoming louder, which hint at tendencies away from mainstream Islam and express alternative options and different versions of belief. These silent, and often silenced, voices are only heard under exceptional circumstances, because they often coincide with the criticism of present social and political conditions. Criticism that mixes religious, social and political content is almost impossible to express publicly in Egypt (Schielke 2012). While "Muslimness" in all its facets and intensities is possible and accepted, "non-Muslimness" (including atheism and non-belief) exists, but cannot be articulated—certainly not in public and hardly in private. This often leads to "Muslimness on demand", that is, my interlocutors would wrap themselves in Muslimness and act as Muslim in front of their families, colleagues or strangers. My interview partner, Saif, and I created the expression "Muslimness on demand" during one of our many discussions (10.12.2017). Saif describes himself to be a "homosexual atheist", who needs to make use of the "Muslim" register in various situations, such as in front of his family, colleagues, neighbours and strangers. He is afraid of their opinion and that they would stigmatize him as "unworthy" and "shameful" if they knew he is not straight and not even a believing Muslim. Only close friends know his real identity (Franke 2020b). Although there is no visible public scene of atheists in Alexandria, the location of my research, those who do not believe in Islam do gather in private and in public, but without being recognizable as atheists. Like elsewhere, they also connect through other common interests, like age, favourite club, sexual orientation, interest in body modifications, or "doing drugs". This has methodological relevance for my research, because I was able to get to know atheists through other acquaintances who do not consider themselves to be atheists (but Muslim, Agnostic, Baha'i).

This study also focuses on the relationship between processes of individualisation and criticism of Islam, exploring why some of my interview partners label themselves as non-believers, and what impact these different non-religious identities have on their selves. In my analyses, I demonstrate the processual and fluid character of (non-) religiosities. I thus aim to examine different interpretations and lifestyles of individuals who claim to no longer adhere to the perceived "Islamic mainstream norms". These individuals

would be identified and identify themselves as Muslim and can range from simply *being* Muslim (passive believers) to *doing* being Muslim (active believers, as well as non-believers pretending to be Muslim). My focus group—those who label themselves as critical of Islam—ranges from those being silently critical but still believing, to those deliberately being different as active non-believers. The processes of individualisation that accompany the varying degrees of criticism are crucial in this respect. I will therefore first deal with the notion of criticism. Subsequently, I will take the reader into the field of my research to highlight some of the positions that I encountered. These positions will be analysed by means of theoretical concepts, such as mechanisms, camouflage, emotions, and trust, to explore the dynamic character of processes of individualisation in the realm of religiosities and non-religiosities. My main aim is to show the entanglement of (non-)religiosities and processes of individualisation. I will thus explore different processes of individualisation that demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the self.

My primary sources consist of qualitative individual interviews and group discussions, participative observation, and written sources in Arabic (Qur'an and Hadith, leaflets, "grey literature", and social media (for a detailed discussion of the role of the internet and social media in the context of religious transformations, see the contribution by Sebastian Elsässer in this Special Issue). I conducted 27 interviews with young Egyptians who consider themselves to be "different" in terms of religiosity and social expectations (for a quantitative analysis of the religio-scapes in Egypt, see the introduction by Karin van Nieuwkerk in this Special Issue. See also the opinion surveys from World Values Survey or Arab Barometer to specify dynamics among the larger Egyptian society: http://www. worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp (accessed on 15 January 2021) as well as https://www.arabbarometer.org/countries/egypt/ (accessed on 15 January 2021). All of my interlocutors have been informed and gave their consent prior to the interviews about my academic intention, that I will use the interviews as sources for my work. All the names have been anonymised and personal details have been changed.

I spoke with both men and women aged between 18 and 35, some of whom participated in the 25 January revolution (Mehrez 2012). All are Alexandrians from middle class milieus with high school or university degrees. Fifteen are employed, with jobs ranging from personal trainer in a gym to a judge in the high court. Five are studying at Alexandria University, and seven are unemployed. I will draw in particular on the interviews (written) conversations, and participant observations with those who consider themselves to be "different" in order to emphasize the flexibility and processual character of (non-)religiosities. This can include religiosity, non-religiosity and re-religiosity. By re-religiosity I mean the process of becoming religious (again), if someone has been less religious and did not pray for a while or even some years and then decides to resume praying for example. I chose interviews as a research method, despite being aware of the limitations and difficulties of interviews and language when researching sensitive subjects, because I was particularly interested in the emic expressions of my interlocutors. My interlocutors were open to interviews in specific places, such as my house, cafés with large open spaces to avoid proximity to potential bystanders/listeners. It would have been impossible for me to meet them in their private homes and "observe" anything deviant from Islam, since they usually hide their non-Muslimness in front of their families. Alexandria formed the centre for my research; having myself grown up in Alexandria, I was reliant upon, and grateful for, my social network there, especially since I took my three small children with me. In addition, Alexandria is an interesting city with diverse and heterogeneous (non-) religious milieus, such as Sunni, Coptic, Sufi, and Salafi communities.

Analysing religiosities and non-religiosities is a complex endeavour because it requires accounting for processes of transformation. I therefore analyse (non-) religiosities as fluid and multi-layered (non-) religio-scapes, in the sense of Arjun Appadurai's notion of social imaginaries (Appadurai 1996, p. 33). (Non-) religio-scapes are analysed as processes of religious belief or non-belief, which need to be looked at from varying perspectives. Different approaches from anthropology and Islamic studies, including gender, identity,

as well as emotions, are merged to acknowledge the complexity of studying (non) religio-scapes.

2. Critical Approaches to Islam

Over the past years, academic research has increasingly dealt with topics such as religiosities and pieties. The study by Saba Mahmood (2005) on public piety of Muslim women in Cairo is a prominent example in this regard. Lara Deeb has similarly studied piety in public spaces in Beirut (Deeb 2006). This focus on public piety has been questioned by other scholars who highlight social groups and individual positions away from the public space. These studies deal with voices that challenge established norms and concepts in the realm of religion, religiosity and piety. The studies by Göle (2000), Haenni and Holtrop (2002), Soares (2005), Schielke (2006, 2009a), Debevec (2012) as well as Bayat (2013), Menoret (2014) and Kreil (2016) are ground-breaking examples. My own research continues this line of thought by looking at non-religiosities and non-pieties in Alexandria and thus listening to those voices who contest the established religious norms informed by the state or Islamist movements. These contesting voices do not want the public sphere to interfere in their intimate beliefs, or rather non-beliefs, and practices. Accordingly, this study adds to the existing literature and the ongoing debate regarding the subject of "anthropology of Islam" by taking into consideration Schielke's criticism that "there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam" (Schielke 2010, p. 1). Although I mostly agree with Schielke's analysis, my findings and my interlocutors demonstrate that Islam in general continues to be important to the younger generations. However, I try to nuance the debate by reflecting on those individuals who position themselves and their life worlds in relation to Islam, i.e., within or outside Islam, and the difficulties that emerge from this position. Islam can therefore not be ignored as an analytical category, but at the same time, we need to be aware that other aspects of everyday life are also important for the youths, such as prospects for the future, philosophy, family dynamics, and leisure activities. My study looks at the spectrum of Muslimness: not only the heterogeneity of the types of being Muslim (religious, pious etc.), but in particular of not being Muslim and being (actively) non-Muslim. This perspective acknowledges atheists as well as a wide range of passive and active non-religious individuals who try to negotiate and re-negotiate their selves in a society where Islam is not just a religion but framing life worlds through culture and tradition (Asad 2015).

I was often told during the many conversations I had in Alexandria, that "the" Islam does not exist but that "the" Islam has been polyphonic since its beginnings (Bauer 2011; al-ʿAẓm 1970, p. 87 and pp. 12–13). Criticism of Islam was part of its founding period during the time of the prophet Muhammad and has been debated throughout history with more or less intensity (ʿAlāl 2018; Arkoun 2002; Al-Azmeh 1996; Said 2002, pp: 69–74; Arkoun 1994). Categories within these debates can vary from indifference (towards God, Islam, religious practices of the community), ignorance (of God), and scepticism or doubts (e.g., in the efficacy of prayer or hijab). However, such positions are usually excluded from the label "criticism of Islam" and are rejected as illegitimate by mainstream scholars. Moreover, most of my believing Muslim interview partners prefer to only subsume Muslim belief variations under the notions of "criticism of Islam" and not atheism or agnosticism (Al-Rawandī 2020). The fact that voicing criticism publicly or even in small private circles is difficult is also related to the fact that there really is hardly any publicly available contemporary criticism. However, in some cases in both my interviews and the debate, these variations are included and form a vital part of Islamic philosophy (al-ʿAẓm 1970; Asad 2009, pp. 20–63; Hanafi 1997, pp. 1025–42). Despite the fact that non-belief is part of Islam's historical legacy, my interview partners felt that their deviant and different perspectives are something new. This timely aspect of "newness" in relation to one's belief status is related to the developments that have been fostered by the 25 January 2011 revolution.

While the majority of the voices I collected are more or less in congruence with mainstream Islam, many of my interlocutors were critical of how "the" Islam is being interpreted and lived by others. Often, the criticism encompasses both the religion (Islam as *dīn*) and the lived religion (religiosity). Some of them would still consider themselves Muslim, while others would label themselves agnostics or atheists or refuse to label themselves. Atheism is not a new phenomenon in Muslim majority societies, however the spread of, and access to, the internet gives it more visibility and non-believers the possibility to research and connect with other like-minded persons worldwide. This might create the impression that atheism is on the rise, but it remains to be awaited if this is permanent or a temporary trend (besides the fact that a certain number of non-believers always exists in societies). The youths often do not want to be labelled or label themselves as anything. They prefer to leave the "identity-card" blank in order to have all options still available, and to switch between identities more easily without needing to explain who and what they are. I understand criticism here in its original sense as "differentiation" and not necessarily as opposition: differentiation between various forms of how to be a ("good") Muslim and differentiation between Islam and other forms of belief or non-belief (von Bormann and Tonelli 1976, pp. 1249–67). "Scepticism" would also be applicable here, however, I prefer the term "differentiation" to highlight its unbiased meaning. Among my interlocutors, there is a wide variety of positions from occasional doubt to convinced atheism (Janson 2016). Non-belief is just one of the many ways to positioning oneself.

The term that I encountered most frequently in Alexandria when talking about religiosities was *īmān*, and its corresponding *muʾmin*, which are generally translated as "belief" and "believing" (McGuire 2008; Asad (2011) refers in footnote 20 also to chapter 6 of Smith (1998) for an etymological account of the terms). Other recurrent terms that emerged in the interviews on non-religiosities include "atheist", agnostics, apostates, and the notion of the non-religious. "Atheists"—*mulaḥad, mulḥid, ilḥād,* categorise themselves as not believing in God. "Agnostics"—*lā-ʾadrīyūn,* "not knowing", or consider it impossible for humans to know whether God exists or not. "Apostates"—*murtadd, ridda* (Wehr 2003, p. 387), renounce a belief, while the notion of the "non-religious" *lā-mutadayyin* refers to those who believe but do not practice, sometimes also labelled as "indifferent" or "ignorant", whereas, *lā-dīnī, ghair-muʾmin, ghair-dīnī*—"without religion" or "non-believer"—are summarising terms that can encompass atheists, agnostics and apostates (Wehr 2003, p. 999). I also use the notion non-conformists, which encompasses those who consider themselves to be religiously deviant or different (belief and non-belief variations) (Kleine 2015, pp. 3–34).

3. From the Field: Intimate Perspectives

I encountered various forms of non-religiosities in Alexandria, and would like to introduce two individuals and their critical perspectives to Islam. During an interview with Khaled in February 2018, he asked me if I was interested in atheists—a topic that I did not bring up myself, since the Egyptian state outlaws atheism, which makes talking about the subject both in public and in private a dangerous endeavour (HRW—Human Rights Watch 2015). I answered a bit hesitantly: "Sure, why not—do you know any?" Khaled affirmed saying "You have to meet Mo'men, he is an atheist, he doesn't believe in Islam, but his name is very Muslim—funny, *ṣaḥ*?" and organised a meeting with him. My hesitancy stemmed from the fact that studying religiosities was risky enough and although my pre-formulated questions—prior to the field trip—included non-religiosities, I did not expect to be able to meet unashamedly self-defined atheists. For me, the aspect of non-religiosities was more about being a non-practicing Muslim and not necessarily about rejecting religion altogether.

Khaled himself is a 34-year-old Egyptian from Alexandria, trained in politics and economics. He lives from one day to another on a considerable inheritance from his deceased parents. Unmarried without children, he shares a flat with his older brother whom Khaled describes as "quite religious and not approving of my lifestyle". Khaled's lifestyle is characterised by voluntary joblessness, sleeping in, and spending nights out

in Alexandria's bars, hanging out with friends and drinking alcohol and taking various kinds of drugs. His uncle is a well-known Sheikh in Alexandria, the reason behind the initial suggestion for an introduction to Khaled. I usually met Khaled in public cafés in downtown Alexandria, and since he was flexible regarding time, we most often met during the day. The hours we spent together were not only interesting in terms of his position towards Islam, but also because of his understandings of Egyptian economics, politics, culture and society, all of which "go into the aspect of religion. Here in Egypt nothing can be separated from Islam and everything is incorporated in Islam. So, if you want to know anything about the people and religion, you need to know this [entanglement]." Khaled's perception of religion and "who he is" is crucial. "Who one is" was a recurrent theme during many of my interviews. It is about one's identity, which is also defined within the realm of Islam, and my interviewees mostly considered being Muslim to be a part or the part of one's identity. This also applies in one way or another to those who no longer consider themselves to be Muslim. Khaled says of himself that he is very critical about Islam and labels himself "Muslim in a way, also agnostic; yes I am a Muslim agnostic". For him, on a practical level in everyday life, this means that he does not pray, that he is not sure about his belief, and that he doubts it. However, during Ramadan he fasts—but on his own terms which can mean that he fasts consecutively for a few days, that he fasts only during the week and not on weekends, that he stops smoking during the day and drinks (alcohol) only on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. His broad and personalised interpretation of the requirements and necessities of Islam is rather flexible, which he adjusts to his mood and schedule.

This flexibility that Khaled expressed to be his "religious lifestyle" is rather different to Mo'men's perception. Mo'men, an Alexandrian in his early 20s, is very strict when it comes to the subject of religion: "I don't pray. I don't believe. I am an atheist"(interview with author, February 2018). He started reading philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kant when he was still a teenager. Both prompted him to think about his own religion:

> "But I was still doing religious things like praying and fasting with my family. It is not easy to be different when everyone around you expects you to be like them without doubting or questioning what and why you are doing what you are doing. Then I had to join the military. This was a disaster. Because of the military itself and because of religion. I was stationed in the Red Sea area where they have gold mines. All the other soldiers and officers are praying and fasting and stuff. I usually went smoking cigarettes when they prayed. But one day the officer asked me why I don't pray with them—so I decided to pray with them, because I didn't want any questions. After a while I stopped praying again and nobody asked any more questions. I hated these prayer times. I also hate the military."

Mo'men's ability to camouflage his intimate position and to act as a praying Muslim alongside his comrades is indicative of the process of social wrapping in the sense of "Muslimness on demand". This has nothing to do with a light version of Islam, with choosing what fits for one's own benefit from the religious register that one's religion offers—it is about the ability to adapt to what one perceives as socially expected behaviour, to avoid conflict, to camouflage one's inner self. Mo'men underwent a metamorphosis of his religious identity, from Muslim to Atheist. This metamorphosis is not a streamlined process, but a curvy one, with detours and twists and turns (Alhourani 2008, pp. 185–203; Hendry 1993).

Mo'men is now working as an engineer for a construction company. The things he witnesses from so called "pious people" (*mu'minūn*), for example theft of work material, is proof for him that they are all just "pretenders" (*mutaẓāhirūn*). He no longer wants to be part of this "superficial game". For him, the revolution of 2011 changed a lot:

> "Not only that people were finally talking about anything really, but also that we teenagers started using the internet frequently. This made it easy for me to search

for information on anything really. I did not read Nietzsche in a book, I read him on the internet and what I found was exactly what I was feeling. First, there was the doubt that things around me, things like Islam, are not true. That we are just marionettes to some God, some leader. But this is not enough for me. I started thinking and reading more and I found that there is lots of material on atheism. And that this is me. I am an atheist [*anā mulḥid*]."

Intrigued by his strong position, I asked him about his perception of the afterlife, since this is a dominant theme in the everyday life of most Muslims. He told me that he does not believe in an afterlife and that he also does not believe in paradise: "We have this world to live in and to do our best to get along with each other but that's about it. When we die, we die. There will not be anything called paradise or re-birth. This is what I *think*, since I am a non-believer I do not *believe* in things, I can only think or assume." For Mo'men, his realisation of no longer being a Muslim caused a metamorphosis in the sense that he rejects anything to do with Islam and that he re-defined himself as atheist (King 1996, pp. 343–51). He even stopped saying common phrases like *ʾin šāʾa-llāh*, *al-ḥamdu-lillāh*, *as-salāmu ʿalaykum*—religiously connoted sayings, which are part of the everyday language of most Egyptians. Even those who do not believe or doubt their belief would still say them out of habit or intentionally, so that they do not reveal their otherness, their difference, their non-belief (intentional boundary). Not so for Mo'men. For him, it is a sign of weakness or laziness if someone still uses these sayings, even though they no longer believe in God. While Mo'men said that he would not tell anyone he is an atheist, he was walking on a dangerous path by not using religious phrases in social situations requiring them, such as when facing sickness or death, or as an answer to a religious phrase, such as *as-salāmu ʿalaykum*: *wa ʿalaykum as-salām* or *mabrūk: allāh yubārek fīk/ī*. Saying *ahlan wa sahlan* to the former or replying *shukran* to the latter is not the expected answer for the counterpart. This can not only be perceived as rude and unfriendly but can also signify non-religious behaviour that creates doubt about one's Muslimness in the mind of the others (Singh 2012).

4. Turning Points: Processes of Individualisation and Interpretations of the Intimate Self

The examples of Khaled and Mo'men are indicative of the struggles for religious and social freedom and the corresponding processes of individualisation in contemporary Egypt (Franke 2020a; Hall 1990). While the revolution has its share of triggering and empowering these processes, initial dynamics of individualisation happened prior to the uprising in various areas, such as marriage, higher education or dress codes. Khaled and Mo'men take these processes to another level by positioning themselves in opposition to mainstream Islam in different ways.

Khaled, on the one hand, is still embedded in Muslim thinking and Islamic norms. He reinterprets existing religious knowledge for his own benefit to serve his needs in everyday life. His position is not so clear and not necessarily in opposition to Islam per se but in opposition to how Islam is being lived around him. Accordingly, his criticism of Islam is a criticism of the way Islam is interpreted and practiced in society (McGuire 2008). On the other hand, there is Mo'men, an unapologetic atheist. He is very determined in his rejection of Islam and anything related to it. His criticism spans Islam as *dīn* and overall society, most of the members of which he considers to be "hypocrites", *munāfiqūn* (Schielke 2012). Being aware of his endangered position, he tries not to stand out in public, while at the same time, no longer pretending to be Muslim (HRW—Human Rights Watch 2015). His experiences during military service were a lesson not to go against his own conviction just to please others. Mo'men is now very self-confident about his atheism and does not hide it, yet he also does not rub it in the faces of others, and usually wraps himself in silence.

Both Khaled and Mo'men decided at some point in their lives to be different (Alhourani 2008). This decision took time to develop—in the case of Mo'men, it took five years of contemplation and another three years to be sure of his choice and to

live an atheism-conforming life. His surroundings were not very conducive for this metamorphosis, coming as he did from a lower middle-class milieu of a "traditional family that is very religious". The "new" Mo'men needed to move out of his family house and find a flat. Given his low salary, this meant that he had to rent a room in a shared flat—something that was not very common in Alexandria prior to the revolution. It is now more common, at least among the younger generations, although it is still not considered "normal". For Khaled, things look differently. His parents passed away when he was at university, and although he lives with his religious brother, he says he is freer to do as he wants than others whose parents are still alive. In his everyday life, nobody controls or questions him. His brother does not ask any questions and this freedom allows Khaled to sleep in, party, and fast or not.

At some point in their lives, both Khaled and Mo'men began to critically think about the religion they were born into. This turning point is individual. Throughout my research among young Alexandrians who consider themselves to be different or non-believers, most reported that this turning point came during their teenage years, around the years of the 2011 revolution (Roudi-Fahimi et al. 2011). The turning point has often been triggered by curiosity for other religions or philosophical thinking, out of anger at the perceived religious hypocrisy of families and friends, or out of boredom. This resulted in surfing the internet out of curiosity, or out of necessity—especially in the case of my homosexual interlocutors. The reasons are diverse and not always explicitly connected to a specific event or incident. However, it can be said that the interlocutors' distance from Islam mostly occurred at the conscious level in combination with various emotions.

Most initially appear to have had a feeling of being uncomfortable in their religious practices and around those who consider themselves religious. The feeling of doubt and uncertainty opened the space of wanting to know more—beyond the already known. With the newly acquired knowledge came feelings of disenchantment towards Islam and subsequently feelings of detachment of their "home religion" (Benjamin 2014). The notion of disenchantment is important here in the sense of emotional distancing. This distancing occurs in the realm of intimacy and the intimate self. Regarding the notion of intimacy, I would like to emphasize, that while many scholars understand and define intimacy as something related to desires, sometimes correlated with physical relationships, I understand intimacy to first be related to the self, second to space and third to other people, (Hammad 2016; Kreil 2016, pp. 166–80; Jyrkiäinen 2019).It paved the way to consciously think and act according to, what they perceive to be, the expected norms of atheism, agnosticism and all the variations therein (Harvey 2016). By norms I mean, what my interview partners perceived and explained to be the habitus of being an atheist or agnostic, such as stating "I don't believe, thus I am an atheist, therefore I do not pray and I do not say religious sayings". While some of my interview partners would feel comfortable in their new status of non-believer, others would try several options, even other religions (such as Baha'i or Buddhism), just to return to Islam in a new or different manner, or to come to the conclusion that agnosticism best describes their state of contemplation. This shows that the shifting religio-scapes and non-religio-scapes in Alexandria are not static, but in flux. It is a constant process of thinking and re-thinking, navigating, negotiating and re-negotiating one's position towards and within Islam.

This struggle for one's (non) religious positioning and identity is consequently also a struggle for individualisation (Fuchs and Rüpke 2015, pp. 323–29; Fuchs 2015; Alhourani 2008, pp. 185–203; Hall 1990, pp. 222–37).The processes of individualisation that are currently occurring in Egyptian society are one of the major findings of my field study (Franke 2020a; 2020b, pp. 22–29; 2021). Most of my interlocutors stressed their "very own" perspective on religion: on how to be religious or not to be religious, how to believe or to not believe, how to practice or not to practice, what to wear or what not to wear. They particularly reflect on the crucial question of the "why"—which shall be confined to the intimate space of the self (Foucault 1988). I follow Martin Fuchs in that my "approach [. . .] implies that one has to be open to the inclusion of additional, partially different experiences

and narratives of individualisation [. . .], it means focusing, above all, on the *experiences*, *doings* and *perspectives* of [individuals] [. . .]" (Fuchs 2015, p. 333; emphases are mine). According to Fuchs, the lens to research religious developments should be the concept of individualisation, that is, how religion is "lived, articulated and re-instituted [. . .] [this includes how] actors see themselves and their practices"(Fuchs 2015, p. 333). Fuchs focuses in his analysis on relationships of the individual with others, which are interactive and constitutive of social imagination. While I agree with his observation that notions of the self should be centre stage in analysing processes of individual religiosities, I differ from his position that considers religious individualisation as opposed to processes of individualism (Fuchs 2015). The example of Mo'men shows that (non-)religious individualisation can also be entangled with processes of individualism. In my study, I observed a number of ways and styles of people expressing their individualisation. In the examples of Khaled and Mo'men, the mechanisms and strategies encompassing these processes of individualisation take place in terms of self-determination and in the sense of setting and defining one's physical and emotional boundaries. The case of Khaled shows that these mechanisms and strategies can be embedded within Islamic social norms and structures, namely, to be in-between Islam. This means that my interview partners attempt to remain part of mainstream Muslim society, to adjust their perspective to the perceived norms, to hide, remain silent or camouflage their true self and not to openly challenge religious and social boundaries.

In other cases, such as in the example of Mo'men, it is about moving beyond Islam. Beyond Islam here signifies the aim of my research participants to experiment and live with what is possible outside Islamic norms and societal expectations (this is in contradiction to the arguments and findings of Binzel and Carvalho (2017, p. 2573) who state that "a (one-time) decline in social mobility can cause a widespread and long-lasting religious revival led by the educated middle class"). They try to live their intimate selves, by disregarding, opposing or contesting the expectations of family and friends. For these persons, the struggle to be seen as independent individuals is quite challenging. They consistently stated that a lot of energy was required to confront their loved ones with opinions and convictions that differ completely from the principles they were raised with and lived with until the moment of change. This educational biography applies to both parties, that is, my non-conformist interlocutors and their "loved ones". In many cases, my interviewees and their families share the same—or a similar—upbringing with comparable norms and ideals. Thus, there is a common ground of knowledge regarding Islamic principles and how Islam should be practiced in everyday life.

However, my non-conformist interlocutors deliberately took a different path. This change requires demarcations, and every person I spoke with had, and continues to have to define for themselves what these boundaries are, how they protect them and how they circumvent others' boundaries. Those who adhere to mainstream Islam also have boundaries of what is and what is not acceptable for them. While most interview partners, both believers and non-believers, stated that they are open and do not judge anyone because in Islam, this is up to God or because they want to give the freedom they ask for themselves to others (in the cases of non-believers), reality can look differently. For example, some of the believers with whom I spoke said that they are relaxed regarding prayer and veiling for their children. Yet, when I spoke with these children, they mentioned that their parents are not as relaxed as they claimed and in fact forced the children to pray or to veil.

5. Processual Dynamics: Anger as Transformative Power

These different realities and corresponding generational discrepancies triggered changes that my interlocutors said occurred at the same tumultuous time as the revolution. Both eased the way for changes in thinking (Sowers and Toensing 2012). These reflections included contemplation about oneself, about God and religion, about one's

family and friends, society, health, work and politics (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94). Mo'men concurred with Khaled's perspective:

> "With the revolution we could finally start thinking freely about the failures around us and in ourselves. First in terms of politics. We saw Mubarak fall—Mubarak the great leader of Egypt, basically our society's father. Second in terms of family dynamics. This enabled us to see our real fathers fall—we demonstrated and gathered against their wish. And finally, with regard to religion. We started doubting God and we saw God falling and failing. He couldn't protect us anymore. So who is he then? Not powerful enough? Maybe he doesn't exist. These thoughts set the balls rolling" (interview with author, February 2018).

This perspective was reinforced by the psychologists with whom I also met several times (Franke 2020a). They too, maintained that patriarchal structures within Egyptian families are no longer strong and are shaky. Children are challenging these structures by no longer blindly obeying their parents. The parents cannot resort to God's anger as a last resort of failed educational sanctions if the children do not believe in God and God's power any longer. Questioning God's power in line with questioning the power of one's father (parents) and the power of the political leader—from a psychological perspective, all three are considered to be the major pillars of Egyptian society—meant that power is shifting in society (El-Sharnouby 2017, pp. 84–95; Yordanova 2017, pp. 492–98). The nuclear and extended family can be understood as resembling the larger Egyptian society, as the psychologist Dr. Shadi put it (interview with author, June 2018). The youth is questioning "old" power relations and demanding "new" dynamics in which their voices, their visions, their perspectives are respected, heard and ideally established. Dr. Shadi views the anger that the youth is projecting at these three pillars as vital in the coming years. He already sees transformations happening in these areas: "The anger that the youth feel, and which I can see in my sessions, is an underrated emotion that often has negative connotations. Anger is a very powerful emotion and anger can bring about something new; it is a creative emotion and should not necessarily be repressed" (Tavris 1989; Baruch et al. 2008; Nisar and Rashid 2016, pp. 1–16).

During my research stays in Alexandria, I could see that the anger of the youth is entangled with disappointment and expectation, frustration and hope (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94; Schielke 2009a, pp. 158–85; Misztal 2016, pp. 100–19). These emotions are felt not only towards the political leader, family structures and God, but were accompanied by the feeling of powerlessness regarding the impossibility of creating one's own future. This was particularly salient in terms of job prospects and accessing an apartment. In Egypt, this correlates with starting one's own family, as a regular income is needed to buy or rent an apartment which is the basis for engagement, marriage, and procreating. The absence of these results in frustration in young men and women at the economic situation in Egypt and political mismanagement (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94; Schielke 2009a, pp. 158–85). If the way of life and the lack of choice depends on aspects that are difficult or impossible to change for the majority of the youth, then the level of frustration leads to anger and ultimately to "emotional blunting" (Berenbaum et al. 1987, pp. 57–67; Tasman and Mohr 2011). According to another of my interviewees Asmaa, the deteriorating post-revolution situation meant for her that the voices of the youth are not being heard:

> "We were demonstrating every day, we had hopes and expectations. We were happy, euphoric and optimistic. We knew, now, now change is possible. Egypt will flourish. Our future will be glorious. This was what we felt. Everything was possible. Everything that is good will finally come to us. And then? Now? Nothing. Nothing of all that. We are stuck. Life sucks more than before the revolution. We cannot do anything. We are imprisoned. Yes, a few things changed. Many of us live in shared apartments now and not with their parents anymore. We have changing relationships and sexual contact. Many of us do not want to get married or have children. We do not believe in God or Islam any

longer. It is a version of freedom. But in the end, what is this freedom useful for? Nothing! Our situation is actually worse: we are not in the old structures of tradition and culture anymore, we want to be modern and open minded, but our chances are limited, actually zero. We see and access the world through social media and we still cannot be part of it. So, we create our own world, spaces of refuge. We experiment in our leisure time with non-religion. And with drugs, music and sex, with fashion and tattoos. What we want is another revolution. A revolution that has an outcome. Maybe even a change of society that is not conservative anymore. We want to breathe within our society. Now, it is all suffocating, our family, politics, society, work. Even traffic. It's all too much. There is no space. No space for action or interaction and no space to move. Not even to think. And this is dangerous. I see this and I tell you this. But my friends—they drown everything in alcohol, in drugs. They close their eyes. I also want to close my eyes, but I am a girl, maybe it's different for me. I still feel responsible. The others don't feel this. We go out every day after work, we gather at someone's place or we go to the bars. We try not to be alone to always have friends around us. Sometimes we discuss things. Many times, we just sit, talk bullshit, drink, smoke, listen to music, dance. Sometimes we cook together. It's dangerous for us, because neighbours or the *bawwāb* can call the police and this would get us into trouble. But we usually pay him or give him a beer. In Ramadan it is even more dangerous. But we still do it. I think we don't have anything to lose" (interview with author, March 2018).

According to Asmaa, the account of her perception of life is representative of her friends' situations. She uses the pronoun "we" while she talks about her life to strengthen her position and to make her account less personal. Asmaa is 29 years old. She comes from a middle-class milieu family with "strict, conservative parents, who have enough money to pay for a good education". Her father, working as an engineer, "forced" her to put on the veil at the age of 15. Her mother works part-time in a bank and is also veiled. During university and the heyday of the revolution, she decided to set new boundaries, move out of her parents' house—against their wishes—and take off the veil—also against their wishes. This was at the age of 20. The breakup with her parents was necessary in her eyes because they excessively limited her sense of freedom and because she could no longer take the constant fighting between her parents and between her parents and her siblings. Moreover, the biggest problem for Asmaa was the impossibility to speak about herself with her family. Neither her parents nor her siblings seemed to be interested in her thoughts and feelings. There was no space in her home to speak about her intimate self with them. Her inability to discuss with her parents her wish to take off the veil, or to move out, or to discuss her frustrations or her friends bothered her very much. She felt as if she was a different person in her family—wrapped in invisibility and silence.

This dual life is something I came across often during my research in Alexandria. Almost everyone I met who considers themselves to be different in one way or another, is trying to cover up and hide this otherness in order to pretend to be "normal", "like everyone else", or "as expected by society". These "standards" that are set by society and perceived to be guidelines for everyone are by no means written norms. They are negotiated rules enforced by parents and grandparents on the younger generations. The expectation is that they will be obeyed and any misbehaviour will be ultimately punished by God, who is the last resort or employed as last resort (El Feki 2014; El Feki et al. 2017). Most of my interview partners said that it is difficult and complicated for them to act in opposition to these perceived norms: not to pray and not to obey or believe in God, not to have sexual relations before marriage, not to be straight, not to live alone, and not to wear the hijab for women (if required by the family or spouse).

The emotional state of my interlocutors who consider the revolution to be a turning point in their lives was striking. Not only because the majority of these young people highlighted the emotions, but also because the revolution triggered and empowered them

to actively change something in their lives that made them unhappy—be it moving out of the family home, taking off the veil, to stop *doing* being religious and to stop being religious, or by dating, drinking alcohol, getting a tattoo, or changing career. The turning point also meant a shift in power structures (Galán 2012, pp. 17–30). They made use of their agency to change things and to act in non-conformity to established norms that apply to their family members or to the larger society. As Susana Galán puts it: "The 2011 Egyptian revolution can be explained in many different ways, but even the most systematic account of events will fail to convey the emotional intensities of that time and its affective impact on its participants: the dreams and aspirations, the hope, the pain, the confusion and the disappointment" (Galán 2012, p. 17).

These processual dynamics which encompass the religious and the non-religious are focussing on patriarchal structures that are now being questioned and contested. The father-figure of the political leader, the family father, and ultimately God as universal father of the *umma,* are not accepted or taken for granted any longer (Yordanova 2017, pp. 492–98). Their position and power over the individual is subject to individual interpretation and criticism, even rejection. The fact that the social environment by which the non-believer is surrounded is perceived to be inflexible when it comes to the needs of the non-believer, demonstrates that strategies have to be acquired by each individual in order to remain part of the social community without having to fear exclusion (Schneiders 2010, p. 13). These strategies can, for example, be camouflage, disguise, and pretence. They can span the realms of discourse, embodiment and practice (Emerson and Holquist 1986, pp. 121–22; Anderson 2006; Eliade 1959). Although it is not the ideal form of living, they still consider these strategies to be necessary for them "to live in peace" with others and not to be bothered. They hide their intimate selves and only reveal them to an explicitly chosen audience.

6. Mechanisms of Metamorphosis: Camouflage and Emotions

Criticism of Islam alongside atheism and agnosticism is highly sensitive in Egypt, which constitutes a difficult surrounding for anything deviant from mainstream Islam. My protagonists apply several techniques in the realm of strategic hiding mechanisms. These techniques are necessary to protect oneself from social and political punishment, and to avoid "otherness". At the same time, these mechanisms also need to be flexible enough for individuals to maintain their integrity (Alhourani 2008). Strategic mechanisms in general are meant here in the sense of techniques of the self, to camouflage their real identities, while at the same time not losing their intimate positions (Foucault 1988).

In line with Jeannette Marie Mageo, I argue that hiding and camouflaging oneself is a great deal about controlling, hiding and camouflaging one's emotions and beliefs (Mageo 1998, p. 91). For my non-conformist interlocutors, it is important to separate their own ideological perspectives from their emotional selves. Camouflaging their emotions and feigning different opinions should not affect their emotions. The fact that they are non-conformist in terms of their non-religiosity does not mean that they have to act in a visible, non-conformist manner. Particularly in Alexandria's public spaces, it is important to practice religious conformism and to reproduce dominant social practices. This is in line with Pierre Bourdieu's habitus approach on power relations and social structures that are being reproduced (Bourdieu 1977). Or, as Richard Jenkins puts it: "Structures produce the habitus, which generates **practice**, which **reproduces** the structures [. . .] [emphases are mine]" (Jenkins 1982, p. 273).

In addition, Joy Hendry offers an interesting approach to the subject of presentation, namely the culture of wrapping. This includes the material culture of wrapping presents, language as wrapping, the wrapping of the body and space, as well as social wrapping—in the sense of people wrapping people (Hendry 1993). I find her approach useful, since my interview partners who re-defined themselves as no longer Muslims wrap themselves in Muslimness in order to please others, which is indicative of Hendry's social wrapping. Moreover, for my interlocutors, social wrapping means using wrapping techniques such

as hiding, silence and camouflage to wrap their belief status. This includes wrapping themselves as Muslim in front of a certain audience—those who would not accept or rather those who are perceived as not accepting one's new belief status—not talking about religion and one's own convictions at all and finding excuses for not praying collectively at home or at a mosque. In the latter case, one pretends to have already prayed or will pray later or claims to have a business meeting at prayer times (Alhourani 2008). The same is true for fasting in Ramadan, by eating and drinking without others as witness.

The social wrapping is strategically employed for several reasons. Some of my interview partners stated that they do not want to lie to their loved ones, because they think that this is morally wrong. Others would say that they do not want to involve anyone in their intimate affairs of religious conviction because they are shy and do not want to share personal topics with anyone. Others mentioned that they fear public intervention if they inform people about this delicate topic of non-belief and atheism. So, for their own protection and also to protect others from becoming involved in a potential legal case, they keep this information to themselves and wrap themselves in silence. Some are afraid of the reaction of their peers, such as being rejected, or they do not want to be forced to debate religion and may even be forced to change their perspective.

By means of social wrapping, doubt should not surface, since it is not only an emotion among the critics of Islam, but also an emotion among counterparts that can threaten the lives and safety of the non-conformists. Thus, the internal doubt of the individual should not spread to others—others should feel confident in the individual's Muslim belief status. I emphasize this, because it is of utmost importance to my protagonists that their ambiguity when it comes to the subject of criticism of Islam remains within their intimate selves. I use the term ambiguity here in reference to Thomas Bauer, who highlights the presence of ambiguity among pre-modern Muslim societies (Bauer 2011). He analyses the "Ambiguitätstoleranz" of Islam from the 9th to the 16th centuries (Bauer 2011, pp. 13–14). Bauer says that these centuries were known for their tolerance regarding ambiguity within Islam. Referring to his analysis, and also taking into account Karin van Nieuwkerk's approach to conversion and deconversion of Islam, which similarly mentions ambiguity and doubt in this respect, I use the term ambiguity with a different connotation, namely in the sense of not being sure of how to be oneself among mainstream society and also of how to position oneself in-between or beyond mainstream Islam (van Nieuwkerk 2018). Moreover, my focus is not on historical processes, but on the intimate level of the self. By no means should this ambiguity be passed on to someone else, neither as confirmed information nor as assumed fact in order to prevent rumours from spreading among the community. The same is true in those cases where ambiguity is absent from the beginning or has been transformed into certainty during the process of changing one's belief status.

Ambiguity as well as certainty in non-conformism need to be protected and shielded from curious enquiries, views or investigations (Kleine 2015, pp. 3–34). Both should be treated and kept secret. As is the nature of secrets, they need to be kept unique and unshared, otherwise they lose their status of exclusivity and can pose trouble or danger for both the confessor and the listener. By treating one's intimate non-religiosity as an exclusive secret, the belief status becomes a valuable mind-set that some of my interview partners even considered to be a treasure. Thus, it was possible for them to separate it from their own body, practice and public figure, and self-representation. This treasure, the secret, was detached from their identity in such cases where they considered it necessary to hide their non-religiosity. Communal prayer, fasting, repeating religious phrases, wearing the hijab—these can be measurements to camouflage their belief status in front of others, both in the private and in the public spaces. During my time in the field, I have not met anyone who informed their entire family of their non-belief. Some might have shared their secret with siblings, but rarely. None have spoken with their parents about their non-believer status, and their extended families also remain unaware.

Since the social environment of the person who maintains a non-conformist perspective regarding religion is not receptive and welcoming of deviant viewpoints, the position

of the non-believer is rather fragile. Power might be exerted on them by peers or state measures. Thus, many non-believers apply social wrapping and the technique of wrapping themselves in silence in order to continue to be part of the social setting in which they are embedded.

7. The Entanglement of (Non-)Belief and Trust

Trust was often mentioned simultaneously with the idea of "secret" by my interview partners, and so researching non-conformism in the emotional context of doubt and ambiguities also meant looking at trust as a concept (Weber 1988, pp. 471–72). Trust is a complex interpretive concept with multidimensional facets (Luhmann 1989, pp. 1, 7–8, 16 and 23. In the discipline of philosophy, there is a long ongoing debate on the notion of trust with various scholars discussing this complex concept. Among them are Simmel, Jencks, Luhmann, Giddens, Durkheim, Parsens, Elias, and others. All of these scholars focus on different aspects of the concept, with partly varying, even disagreeing stances. Simmel 1978, p. 179; Jencks 1979, p. 63; Luhmann 1979, pp. 26, 66–69; Parsons 1970; Elias 2000, p. 482; Giddens 1990, pp. 99, 121; Jalava 2003, p. 175).

Accordingly, I will focus on the entanglement of belief and trust, since this is at the core of my interlocutors' positions. Blending belief and trust means that others expect the individual to act according to their interpretation of Islamic norms. The concept of trust has many facets, the first being trust in me as an international researcher. The second usually was trust in oneself, as in being true to the self, as well as being authentic in thought, deed and word. A third aspect is trust that one's new and different belief is the truth. Finally, my interlocutors claimed that trust in others played a major role in the sense that they could only open up to others if they felt assured to trust their integrity.

For my interlocutors, social life in the sense of everyday life in combination with religiosity—or non-religiosity—is an arena of struggle. This struggle can be internal as well as external, with the latter characterised mostly by power struggles. As Jencks argues: "One of the classic puzzles—perhaps *the* classic puzzle—of social theory is how society induces us to behave in ways that serve not our own interests, but the common interest of society" (Jencks 1979, p. 63) [emphasis is mine]. In this sense, knowledge transaction, as in information transaction, would fail without trust. According to Giddens, the self must be a reflective one, since modernity has influenced and led to alterations regarding the intimacy of social relationships. Interpersonal relations are not self-evident, but rather mutual social projects that require "work", and the trust between the individuals needs to be won (Giddens 1990, p. 121). Contrary to Giddens, I argue in the case of my study that trust in individuals, in each other, and in their Muslimness does not need to be won in Alexandrian society. They acquire general trust by society, since born Muslims are trusted to stay Muslims throughout their lives. The important aspect is that trust needs to be kept and not lost. I relate here to Simmel who talks about the belief in someone: "[w]ithout the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate, for very few relationships are based entirely upon what is known with certainty about another person, and very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as or stronger than rational proof or personal observation" (Simmel 1978, p. 179).

Most of my interview partners who consider themselves as "other", or as different to the perceived mainstream of Muslimness around them, would therefore seek another space—a trusted space—that is neither the private space of the family, nor the public space of larger society and politics, nor the digital space of social media. Instead, they look for a trusted space that mixes private with intimate interests. This consists of close friends, who either share the same (non-)religious conviction or who have other factors in common, such as making music, taking drugs, talking about, or rather joking about politics. Here, they could open up and act according to their own intimate positions or just be present without saying or doing anything that would reveal them as non-conformist, but without feeling uncomfortable in the environment (Rawlins [1992] 2017; Spencer and Ray 2006). They seek a peaceful environment that does not threaten their integrity and in which they

need not apply wrapping techniques on their selves. It is a bubble, a safe space, where not being Muslim is possible. No questions, no punishment, no rejections are to be expected in this bubble, and thus feelings of fear are not being evoked. All my interlocutors were relaxed and at ease in a chosen environment, whereas they stated that other environments, especially their family realms, are not as receptive of them in terms of their intimate selves. Accordingly, this feeling of doubt—being unable to be *doing* being Muslim—is not an emotion that they experience in the safe space. In other spaces, this feeling of doubt and failure is dominant and can lead to seclusion (Haddad 1997, pp. 3–29).

This seclusion is not only an intimate one in the sense of secluding one's emotions from others, but can also be a physical one in terms of not searching for the company of those who are perceived to be not understanding of the "new" belief status. While this active behaviour to determine the boundaries of one's spaces is described by almost all of my young interlocutors, they also describe their perspectives to be in opposition to mainstream perspectives on Islam and on being Muslim and on *doing* being Muslim. On the one hand, I understand this opposition as demarcation and segregation, especially in spatial terms. On the other hand, I also interpret it as resistance, in the sense of opposing how and what Islam should be for a larger public (Elyachar 2014, pp. 452–71; Abu-Lughod 1990, pp. 41–55; Scott 2008; Tohamy 2016; Daly 2010, pp. 59–85; Tadros 2016; Baizhi 2011, pp. 119–27. This resistance also opposes and criticises the social norms and expectations that accompany religious dominance (Baizhi 2011). In some cases, they might be willing to discuss these positions with their family and friends in order to justify themselves or to discuss boundaries of what could be possible and what is impossible, such as taking off the veil (see van Nieuwkerk and Kütük-Kuriş, this Special Issue).

However, in most cases, such debates are not taking place, especially not within the family, and only rarely with friends. It is much more common among my interlocutors to negotiate and re-negotiate their own belief with themselves. Interview partners who consider themselves Muslim may consult a sheikh, written sources or negotiate their relationship with God by themselves.

My interview partners who make their choices without the consultation of God cannot reassure themselves. So, sometimes they do things that they do not feel comfortable with, because society is not open for their ambivalent positions. They also consult their emotions and refer back to feeling "good" about their actions or decisions. It is important for them that despite someone no longer believing in God or Islam, it does not mean that they lack a moral conscience. Wes Morriston calls these non-believers, "reasonable non-believers" (Morriston 2009, pp. 1–10). My non-believing interlocutors consider themselves to be responsible human beings. This claim is important to them, because they grew up being told that non-Muslim societies are irresponsible, for example, regarding pre-marriage relationships or people's treatment of their elderly parents and perceived abandonment of them. They were usually introduced to God in their childhood as the guardian of morals, adequate behaviour, piety and as the one who declares what is good and bad.

Thus, without God, moral behaviour cannot endure. This criticism of non-belief is something many of my interviewees fear being confronted with, which is one of the reasons why they would never dare to discuss their non-belief openly with their families and friends. The doubt, ambiguity, "I don't know", "I am not sure" and indifference, underlie continuous changes that are not obvious to me as a researcher. Many of my non-believing interview partners oscillate, go through periods of non-belief—belief—non-belief and not being sure of what to believe, or how. It is a processual dynamic that depends on age, marital status or parenthood. I do not include gender here, because gender is not necessarily a factor that influences one's belief status, since women were equally among my research partners—however, for women, the situation changes more often in cases of marriage and motherhood.

8. Ambiguities and the God–Disciple Relationship: Feeling Alone

The above-mentioned processual dynamics do not happen without significant individual developments in terms of emotions and personality, especially in the realm of religiosity and non-religiosity. In my analysis of Qur'ān courses, I found that for those taking the course, the divine relationship in Islam is basically "between me and God". This resembles an organic Islam freed from negative influence in order to become better Muslim by themselves, with others not being involved in this relationship (Franke 2020a). The same is true for the non-relation or un-relation if someone decides to be outside of the relationship with God. This too should just be between themselves and God or themselves and a deity or between themselves and nothing—depending on the respective viewpoint. In the context of deviant opinions, this exclusive relationship becomes even more relevant, because in most cases, it is impossible, due to state regulation and social stigma, for the non-believer to express their position openly. This feeling of being alone among family and friends, that is, not being able to express one's doubts, alongside the feeling of being alone within Islam, is rather problematic and can lead to various corresponding behaviour. Dr. Shadi comments that psychological withdrawal, depression, violence, and abuse develop in relation to the feeling of being alone. Many of my interlocutors describe this feeling as abandonment, especially in the relationship with God. They literally feel abandoned by God, because they do not obey him. The feeling of "God hates me", as stated by Saif, a young homosexual, is based on his opinion that his prayers are not divinely accepted, since homosexuality is forbidden in Islam (Long 2004, pp. 129–43; Tolino 2016, pp. 49–63). In the following account, his insecure position with regard to religion becomes apparent. He explicitly expresses his doubts and his worries:

> "How come he loves me, if I am impossible for him? How would he listen to me, if I am not supposed to exist? If my entire being is wrong? This is so full of hypocrisy. I am all alone. I cannot talk to my family. I cannot talk to my friends. I cannot even talk to strangers [because they might reveal his identity to the police]. But I am here and I know so many gay people in Alexandria and still we do not exist. I want to leave this country. I want to be who I am in the streets and at home. I stopped praying because I can't take this anymore. I also don't fast. It's useless. But at the same time, I do not have enough money to buy food outside. So during Ramadan, I eat stuff from the fridge that my mum cannot count, so she won't notice. I am so embarrassed to have to do this. But my parents would never accept me the way I am. I doubt God. Why did he create me in the first place? In Egypt people think you can heal homosexuality, that it is something I chose. But it is not. Ever since I can remember I am like this. Not psychotherapy, no medication, nothing would change that. Yes, of course I can pretend to be straight. But I could not get married and have kids for example. Many here in Egypt do that as a cover up. But they are unhappy. I don't want to end up like this. I want to go to Europe and be who I am. I don't believe in Islam anymore. I feel alone and I cannot trust anyone"(interview with author, December 2017).

Saif's self-perspective is mixed with ambivalent emotions towards his family, overall society and God. He feels that he has to neglect his intimate self and wrap himself in invisibility—not only in the private, supposedly safe space of the family, but even in the intimate space and relationship to God, and in the public space of Alexandria. For Saif, it feels as if he has to live in the shadows. Although he tries to adapt to society, it is basically impossible for him to be a fully accepted part of it. Despite his claims of not being religious, he has to abide by the oppressive structural norms that religion imposes on its followers, such as sexual limitations, living in one's parents' house, adhering to prayer and fasting. His outlook on the future looks rather grim, being raised in a family from a lower middle-class milieu. He is searching for alternative spaces and ideas, for a different lifestyle. What he finds instead is misogyny and homophobia mixed with racism and classism in the atmosphere of a military dictatorship in a city that is plastered with utopian ways of living and the offers of expensive real estate that portray a Western lifestyle to be the one

to which everyone aspires (Abaza 2020). Although he does not want to escape from this life and his home country, he does not see any other option beyond the traditional one of getting married, having children and having a job that will take up most of his time.

This frustration that Saif felt and expressed is something that many of my interview partners shared. He wishes for other options, but he fears that it is impossible in Egyptian society. Thus, he changes the little things that he can in his life—such as being the one who determines his (un-)relationship with God. The exclusive relationship that the believer shares with God in their intimate dialogues and prayers is something that many of my interlocutors stressed, in the sense of intimacy between oneself and God (Franke 2020a).

In general, when it comes to criticism of Islam in the personal realm and the relationship with God, my interview partners often said, that they "are . . . and not . . . ". They usually positioned themselves as opposed to something or someone else, or that something or someone else was opposed to them. Such as not practicing Islam "enough", in the sense of not praying often enough would mean that they see themselves as being "far from God" which is opposed to being "close to God". Others then, who pray more and more regularly, would be labelled from the outside as being "close to God". In the accounts of my interview partners, dichotomies were dominantly expressed, that is, they regularly articulated opposites and judgements (perceived or expressed). Their language and oral expression contain a considerable number of juxtapositions and boundaries, which are inscribed with meaning. My non-believing interlocutors felt that anything described by others as pro-Islam and in favour of God to be something positive, valuable and good, whereas they experienced anything deciphered by others as contra-Islam and against God to be something negative, not valuable and bad. The interviews with non-conformists were often marked by defensive behaviour and expressions that would support or justify their deviant positions. It was striking that one is either "with God" or "not with God". "With God" then is really anything that can still be labelled "Muslim" as opposed to those who claim to be atheists or agnostics or "non-Muslim" (anymore). The "in-between" is not necessarily accounted for: it can range from "Muslim, but not praying" to "Muslim, but drinking" to "Muslim and praying regularly". It is as if there are only two options possible in Alexandria's social discourse: Muslim and non-Muslim, although the latter is only accepted by those who belong to this very option, otherwise they are muted and mute themselves from their peers.

Silent, nuanced utterances are present, yet I found that they are mostly lost in the noise of the "Muslim" and "non-Muslim" debate. Defence and accusation, judgements and assessments are dominating the conversations I observed. It is striking that while biased behaviour and expressions are prohibited according to Islamic norms, they are still part of the discourse. Even in such cases where my interview partner stated that some people act or say things that are not in line with Islam, they would tend to have a dismissive tone: "this is what others do out there in the street "but this is not Islam" [*bas hūwa dah mish al-Islām*] (interview with author, November 2016). As Mo'men stated, for many of them, it is difficult to remain neutral and to embrace all the human mind-sets and options that are present in society. Another aspect flows into the debates of criticism of Islam that I listened to, namely that criticism can trigger self-reflection or actually should trigger self-reflection, something that is avoided by those who reject anything "other" to Islam.

9. Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that the individual is at centre stage in my analysis, I observe a major development currently taking place in Egyptian society at large. First, many young Egyptians are experimenting not only with faith and religiosity, but also with testing social boundaries that are perceived to be applicable to every Muslim, such as not getting married, while at the same time having (a) relationship(s), not living in one's parents' house, undertaking body modifications, playing with fashion, and indulging and experimenting with sexuality. Second, those who are not testing these boundaries are experimenting with Islam and being religious on a different level—a level that is perceived to be a higher one

than the "normal" *doing* being religious. These people are striving for a better version of Islam (Franke 2020a). To sum up, those who still believe in God believe that they live in a society of double standards where "being committed and fearing God" does not exist anymore. This is why they consider themselves to be the "guardians" of Islam, the only ones left to protect and live their faith.

In this article, I have shown that my interlocutors do not necessarily understand criticism of Islam to equate to secularism or even apostasy. Rather, the notion of criticism of Islam contains many perspectives, among them also deviant perspectives. Most importantly, criticism here does not essentially refer to heresy and irreligion.

They experienced the revolution of 2011 and they are among those who are deliberately taking the path of individualisation. Their emotional spectrum is broad and diversely ranging from anger, failure, frustration and hopelessness. By means of the practice of everyday life, they contest mainstream Islam as lived by most Egyptians. They employ processes of individualisation to challenge the masses, and through emotions, change can also be evoked (Ajala 2018, pp. 57–71; El-Sharnouby 2017, pp. 84–95; Schielke 2009b, pp. 158–85; Deeb and Harb 2013, pp. 1–22). My interview partners might expect that the above-stated "negative" emotions that they felt leads to feelings of incapacitation (El Shakry 2017; Whitehead and Whitehead 2010).

However, my findings show that the opposite is the case. Hopefulness emerges, since something new can be created from the emotion of anger and from turning one's back on Islam and thereby becoming open to other and different religious options (Whitehead and Whitehead 2010). Passivity is thus not the outcome, rather my interview partners are proactively meandering through the possibilities to act that remain or open up for them. Despite frustration, unemployment and a grim outlook for the future, they still want to change things and are motivated to act within the limitations they are surrounded by. Their love for Egypt in terms of its society is a strongly expressed sentiment. Within the larger social setting, they search for an environment in which they can live and meet their individual needs. Regardless of their opposing perspectives, they still want to be in line with, and in harmony with, the majority, especially with their family. Most of my interlocutors said that they wished for their parents and siblings to be open for their "new, different, other" selves and deviant perspectives on Islam, or at least to be open for a debate and ultimately for "letting be". They demand an attitude of "live and let live", something they grant everyone else, and they are now claiming for themselves.

Such an approach would allow the youth to experiment with trial and error and be an acknowledgement that change is asking for flexibility without pre-judgment. In addition, it would also discharge the elders and opponents from their responsibility given the "new" non-conformist convictions of the youth. According to my findings, the development of individual non-religiosities is something new in the recent history of Egyptian society. It is not only new, but contains a great deal of potential and energy that can culminate in changes that affect the larger society. Since I observe these changes to be processual and interlinked with individual dynamics, an outcome is unpredictable. However, the changes do not remain on the surface, but enter deeper structures in society, which is why I anticipate the youth's energy to be pervasive.

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Article

The Ideology Factor and Individual Disengagements from the Muslim Brotherhood

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Abstract: Since 2011, there has been a growing wave of individuals leaving Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and many of them have opted for documented publicity by writing autobiographies narrating their whole journey. This article explores the ideological components of the disengagement process on the basis of a frame analysis of these writings. It seeks to understand how individuals acted against some of the meanings central to the Brotherhood's ideological character and influence. They construct sets of meanings negating or renegotiating those long fixated, sanctified and ineluctable parts of the group's ideology. The process of meaning making is situated within the Arab Spring where the Brotherhood's dominant ideology also suffered from ruptures, incongruence or dissonance. For example, many exiters realized that the group's ideology is not 'evolutionary' enough to align with a 'revolutionary' moment in Egypt's history, and it thus failed to provide them with a sense of meaning regarding the dramatically changing world around them. The disillusionment goes beyond a battle of textually-situated meanings between the Brotherhood and its disgruntled members during the process of their departure from it. It appertains to a context of new resources and opportunities made available to exiters to resist, challenge, and even falsify the dominant ideology without incurring heavy losses or harsh penalties often meted out by the group against its 'dissidents'. The agency of exiters, i.e., their capacity to act against the group's ideology or manifest their rebellion against its elements, is also enabled by the state's relative tolerance towards the exiters, a degree of social assimilation inside Egypt, internal ideological and organizational divisions inside the Brotherhood and geographical re-spatialization.

Keywords: Egypt; Islamism; Muslim Brotherhood; disengagement; the Arab Spring; social movements

1. Introduction

On January 2011, Egypt witnessed a massive uprising producing changes for the state and for the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's main opposition force. The head of the state, Hosni Mubarak, had to resign on February 11 of the same year against waves of public protests spreading across the country. The historic moment brought opportunities for the Brotherhood which has long suffered from the regime's brutality for decades[1]. Emerging as the country's most powerful civilian actor, the Brotherhood made it to the top echelons of the state with the election of its commander Mohamed Morsi as president on 30 June 2012. The group also secured a majority at Parliament, a reality unthinkable in the pre-2011 era. Nevertheless, the group's political gains were short lived. On 3 July 2013, the military suspended the constitution, removing Morsi from the presidency and putting him under arrest, on the heels of massive popular protests against Morsi calling for early presidential elections. In the following months, the security forces violently suppressed demonstrations against Morsi's removal. Many of the group's members were killed, injured, detained or forced into exile under the crackdown of the regime. Abdel-Fatah El-Sisi, the Minister

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[1] For a historical trajectory of the relationship between the state and the Brotherhood, see Ardovini (2016). The politicization of sectarianism in Egypt: 'creating an enemy' the state vs. the Ikhwan. *Global Discourse* 6: 579–600.

of Defense and who led the ouster of Morsi, left the military to run for president and was elected in 2014. As El-Sisi consolidated his grip on power, his regime escalated its repression, leaving the Brotherhood at the receiving end of 'one of the 'harshest crackdowns in its history[2]'.

Within these dramatic events under which the Brotherhood gained and then lost power within less than two years, the group has witnessed its own trajectories of change. Many individuals announced their departure from the Brotherhood, citing different reasons such as their disillusionment with its 'evolutionary' ideology failing to respond to the 'revolutionary' moment of the Arab Spring or even failing to give them a sense of meaning on what is happening around them. This article thus focuses on understanding the phenomenon of individuals who disengaged from the Brotherhood from 2011 to 2020 and how far ideology played a part in such a disassociation, thus aligning with a limited emerging literature analyzing the Brotherhood from an individual rather than organizational perspective[3]. The phenomenon is situated within broader socio-political changes providing resources for opportunities pushing an individual towards the departure. Ideological disengagement is also an identity-making process in which individuals have been seeking to construct their own personal identities through negotiating their relationship with the group's dominant identity and its ideological underpinnings. This article adopts a post-structuralist framework, where personal identity is not a unique, isolated or compartmentalized being but a relational entity evolving within different layers of interactions within and outside of the Brotherhood[4]. Still, this article does not have a pre-existing theory shaping the research in an explicit way. I found any theoretical framing as my concern is exploring the meaning making of exiters as far as possible on their own terms, in what is closer to an interpretive phenomenological analysis[5]. Nevertheless, I use the 'Identity Process Theory' (IPT) to 'inform' rather than 'drive' my research in order to maintain flexibility in tracing the exiters' meaning making[6]. Concerned with the 'holistic analysis of the total identity of the person[7]', the IPT encompasses elements related to the everyday experiences of individuals inside the group as well her or his social or political activities outside of it. It highlights the context not as a mere background but a constituent of the phenomenon being researched[8]. Equally significant in the IPT, itself an approach benefitting from synthesizing different theories such as symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis, is that the dynamic process of interaction also includes interpretation. In other words, each individual explains her or his experiences as a member of the Brotherhood as well as an ex-member. The analysis shows how individuals evaluate their experiences once they were part of the movement and how they use these evaluations to empower their disassociation from it through steps such as assimilating into different networks of interactions and interpretations.

Within this understanding, i.e., disengagement as a process, and discourse, this article can re-conceptualize disengagement not as a matter of linear 'stages' premised on well-

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[2] Biagini (2017, p. 35). The Egyptian Muslim sisterhood between violence, activism and leadership. *Mediterranean Politics* 22: 35–53.

[3] See Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation: tracking the Muslim Brotherhood's trajectories after the 2013 coup. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1–17; Menshawy (2020). *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood: Self, Society and the State*. Cham: Palgrave.

[4] For a post-structuralist conceptualization of identity and relationality, see Joseph (1993). Gender and relationality among Arab families in Lebanon. *Feminist Studies* 19: 465–86. The idea of relationality can also be premised on the Foucauldian understanding that the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she or he becomes a 'self-conscious agent'. Therefore, the complex relations of power inside the movement and its dominant ideology or identity offer with them an array of 'resistance points' under which individuals can take up new identities or negotiate the ones assigned to them by the group; see Foucault (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books. For similar arguments, i.e., empowerment via subordination in Islamism, see Mahmood (2011). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Hafez (2003). *The Terms of Empowerment: Islamic Women Activists in Egypt*. Cairo: American University in Cairo.

[5] See Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000). Migration and threat to identity. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 10: 355–72.

[6] Coyle and Murtagh (2014, p. 46). Qualitative approaches to research using Identity Process Theory. In *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change*. Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis Marie Breakwell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 41–64.

[7] Jaspal and Breakwell (2014). *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 250.

[8] Coyle and Murtagh (2014). Qualitative approaches to research, p. 42.

defined 'turning points', as the predominant view within the social movement literature,[9] but as a matter of multi-layered interpretations and interactions between individuals, groups and even states, between different identities, and between times. The present time stands as a *moment of emergence* when individuals announce their departure from the group, but the past interacts with presentism by indicating *moments of evolution* when those individuals were attempting to negotiate and renegotiate their ties with the group and its ideology and when disengagement was a 'potentiality' rather than an actuality' in Giorgio Agamben's words[10]. Disengagement is also a matter of context, providing the resources upon which individuals construct and establish their meanings and related identity-making components based on evaluation and assimilation.

Disengagement from the Brotherhood, founded in 1928, for ideological reasons is not new[11]. There were incidents such as the prominent struggle of power and ideology between the group's founder Hassan El-Banna and his deputy, Ahmed El-Sukkary, leading to the latter's exit in 1947[12]. However, the recent wave is different in volume and level. Since 2011, several members have come out to announce their disassociation from the group, which is different from the far-and-few cases of the past 80 years of the group's history. The list of exiters also cut across the different levels of membership including those of high-profile caliber such as Kamal El-Helbawy and 'Abdel-Mon'im Aboul-Futouh, senior leaders of the Brotherhood[13]. The list also goes beyond generational lines, the dominant fault line shaping the scholarship on disagreements and interactions inside the Brotherhood[14]. In the post-2011 wave, exiters include older members as well as members of the younger generation (e.g., the list prominently includes El-Helbawy, 80 years old, Aboul-Futouh, 70 years old, and Huzaifa Hamza, 28 years old). Furthermore, the disengagement takes a more publicized form as many of them narrated their experiences in dozens of autobiographies, hundreds of media interviews and many more posts on social media. This article thus seeks to unearth this unique 'spectacle of disclosure' that can even us better understand the Brotherhood's dominant ideology itself, especially as many ex-members reveal various secrets publicly on this underground movement.

The next section elucidates the sampling and methodology based on analysis of auto-biographies and interviews. The section that follows focuses on parts of the Brotherhood's dominant ideology before following them by how individuals negotiate and renegotiate their meanings as part of their journey outside of the movement. The frames identified in the texts of exiters are situated within the surrounding environment as part of the contextu-alized understanding of disengagement as well as part of investigating the conditions and resources which have facilitated or hindered disengagement. The environment includes shifts in state behavior, changes within the Brotherhood and geographic re-spatialization

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9   Ebaugh (1988). Becoming an ex: The process of role exit. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Books; Fillieule (2015). Disengagement from radical organizations: A process and multilevel model of analysis. In *Movements in Times of Democratic Transition*. Edited by P. G. Klandermans and C. van Stralen. Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.

10   Despite this brief mention, Agamben's approach on concepts and their instrumentality align withs my argument in this article. He situated concepts such as disengagement as a continuous process, beginning with desires or a possibility of objection or disgruntlement over the group's ideology; Agamben (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Translated by D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 46.

11   For details on previous shapes and forms of dissent and disassociation, see Zollner (2009). *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and Ideology*. New York: Routledge; Wickham (2004). The path to moderation: Strategy and learning in the formation of Egypt's wasat party. *Comparative Politics* 36: 205–28. doi:10.2307/4150143.

12   Lia (2006). *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928–1942*. Reading: Ithaca Press. Also see El-Baquri (1988). *Baqayya Zekrayat (Residues of Memories)*. Cairo: Al-Ahram Centre for Translation and Publishing.

13   See Aboul-Futouh (2010). 'Abdel-Mon'im Aboul-Futouh: Shahid 'ala al-Haraka al-Islamiyya. ('Abdel-Mon'im Aboul-Futouh: A Witness to the Islamist Movement). Cairo: Alshorouk.

14   See Al-Anani (2009). The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path. Hudson Institute. Available online: https://www.hudson.org/research/9900 -the-young-brotherhood-in-search-of-a-new-path (accessed on 2 February 2020); Lynch (2007). Young brothers in cyberspace. *Middle East Report* 37; Brown and Dunne (2015). Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June. Available online: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP248-EgyptMB_BrownDunne_final.pdf (accessed on 10 February 2021). Since 2011, there has been a growing tendency in literature to focus on cross-generational shifts inside the Brotherhood, albeit with maintaining different binaries of delineation such as male/female activism; see Biagini (2020). Islamist women's feminist subjectivities in (r)evolution: the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22: 382–402.

especially after the 2013 coup where many members of the group fled to different countries, prominently including Turkey.

2. Sampling and Methodology

This article analyses 11 autobiographies which exiting members either wrote or published in 2011 and afterwards. The criteria for including those written works is their availability in hard-copy or online formats. I triangulate my sources of data with 33 semi-structured deep interviews with other exiters who also left the movement within the same timeframe (2011–2020). The interviews were mostly conducted in two countries (15 in Egypt and 14 in Turkey against 3 in the UK and 1 in Qatar). The imbalance is justified as Egypt is the foundational basis of the Brotherhood and where most of its members live while Turkey reportedly hosts many members of the group (a Turkish opposition figure put the unverified number at 20,000.[15]). The sampling is based on snowballing, especially as many interviewees are difficult to reach given their preference for a quiet disassociation from the movement. Still, the interviews were important in order to fill in gaps or complement the autobiographies. The list includes a female interviewee for her testimony to counterbalance and perhaps corroborate that of the single female ex-member among autobiography authors. The representation of exiting members interviewed during this project somehow correlates with the representation of existing members or the original population makeup on which more data are already available [16]. For example, members of the Brotherhood dominantly belong to the 'middle class', and it thus 'prevails in the educated circles' and takes 'university students' as an important category in its recruitment[17]. Approximately 40 percent of the interviewees are writers or journalists and 16 percent are students. As the Brotherhood's recruitment also 'targets children' especially 'kids of its members,' the sampling also reflects this policy. Fifteen people of the 33 interviewees joined the Brotherhood when they were less than 16 years old, and 17 others when they were between 17 and 24 years old. As the Brotherhood is a hierarchical movement, where promotion is partly related to duration of stay in the Brotherhood, this article adopts a more equitable distribution. Nine interviewees stayed in the group up to 10 years, 10 of them up to 20 years and 11 others up to 30 years. The age groups are also fairly distributed (3 interviewees are in their 50s or above, 2 are in their 40s, 4 in their 30s and 3 in their 20s).

Exiters publishing their autobiographies could belong to the 'apostate' category, that is, those individuals who could have voices 'loud' enough to narrate their experiences and to challenge the group's ideology publicly[18]. The interviewees are mostly of the 'ordinary leavers' who drifted away quietly from the movement without speaking to the media or announcing their disassociation with fanfare similar to those of the 'apostate' category. The combination thus adds to the methodological rigidity as frames identified in texts and autobiographies are corroborated against each other (or perhaps can cancel each other out as part of the framing process drawn on what is common in their narratives). This can also add truthfulness to the findings by cancelling each other out. Having said that, the research admittedly depends on biased subjective individual accounts that could include stronger sentiments and revengeful desires among the exiters. Given the current situation in Egypt, including the regime's crackdown on Islamists, I withheld the full names of some interviewees given the current changing circumstances or because of their original desire to keep a low profile (even if they gave me the consent to publish their names). The names of the autobiography writers are mentioned in full as many of them take their very act of

[15] Abdel-Hamid (2019). Mustashar Erdogan li-Ikhwan Masr: Antum laguun lada al-hezb al-hakem (Erdogan's Advisor to Egypt's Brotherhood: You Are Refugees of the ruling party). *Al-Arabiya*, February 22. Available online: https://bit.ly/3b95l2s (accessed on 2 January 2021).

[16] On the Brotherhood's official website, it explains its structure as follows: 'The MB group does exist in all the classes, from the upper one to the lower, but it's mostly dominant in the middle one, which is the main source for recruitment,' No author. Muslim Brotherhood: Structure & Spread (2007). Available online: http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=817 (accessed on 7 February 2021).

[17] No author. Muslim Brotherhood: Structure & Spread (2007). Available online: http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=817 (accessed on 7 February 2021).

[18] Introvigne (1999). Defectors, ordinary leave-takers, and apostates: A quantitative study of former members of New Acropolis in France. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3: 83–99.

such an exposure and high visibility as part of their 'purposive self-presentation[19]' framing their experience as ex-members in a specific way for particular ends (e.g., they repeatedly appear on TV or actively narrate their experiences on social media).

I identify ideological disengagement in frames. Each frame contains specific thematic meanings manifesting in keywords, phrases or sentences. Depending on the conceptualization of Robert Entman, a pioneer in the theorization and application of the frame analysis, the framing process includes how these linguistic formulations are 'organized' to convey a specific meaning/s in a 'salient' or 'selective' way in order to focus on a specific 'aspect of the perceived reality'[20]. Salience and selectiveness are based on features such as repetition and frequency of some of their meanings or their association with specific familiar meanings related to the movement's dominant ideology. With the possibility of several related frames, I collect them under broader categories named in this article as 'master frame[21], which is also procedural step to organize the meaning making within the texts of exiters in a qualitative manner. For example, the 'battle for mind' master frame is based on the selective repetition of words such as 'mind', phrases such as 'the Brotherhood has no mind' or sentences 'the Brotherhood is a body without mind' in the texts of exiters. The selective formulations gain salience as they are highlighted into headlines or sub-headlines, as they are prioritized to be part of the titles of the books as well as first in answers of interviewees when I ask them questions such as 'what are the most important element leading you out of the Brotherhood?'. As adopted in other projects on the Middle East[22], part of the framing is contextual as it relates to the 'background understandings of the way things are[23]' or have been under the movement. In other words, individuals construct their meanings against the 'field of meanings' embedded within the Brotherhood's dominant ideology and all related 'cognitive strategies' of interpretation processes[24]. In other words, individuals not only create their own new frames but they also resist or challenge the existing frames long fixated and imposed by the Brotherhood. On the basis of several readings of these texts of autobiographies and interview transcripts, I predefine the two master frames, 'the battle for God' and the 'battle for mind'. The master frames are broad in order to include many experiences and events into the 'ideological' disengagement. Still, the analysis does not preclude the existence of other master frames, and thus I cannot claim any universality or generalizability on the causes of disengagement from the Brotherhood or any other movement. This article modestly searches for patterns of meanings in the texts and for contextualized understanding where the Arab Spring or events before it could have provided resources, opportunities for articulating or operationalizing disengagement.

Within this framing process, ideology is understood as sets of 'thematized meanings[25]' describing and explaining disengagement of individuals in their own words. Still, the thematization brings 'ideology' to its classical definitions based on associations with power relations. The 'distortion' in the way members understand the social world and their role in it is partly the result of the Brotherhood's dominant position and ideas which keep them from developing a true or adequate understanding of themselves or the surrounding circumstances.[26] Some exiters therefore describe their departure as an ideological 'emancipation' out of these 'distorted' meanings and 'dominant' relationships. In this vein, the very act of meaning making is part of an ideology of resistance where individuals are emboldened to convey their meanings after they have long been hidden, downsized or suppressed by the leaders of the movement. Exiters, now managers of their own meanings,

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19   Coyle and Murtagh (2014). Qualitative approaches to research, p. 48.
20   Entman (1993). Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43: 51–58.
21   See Benford and Snow (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–39.
22   (Menshawy 2017). Menshawy, Mustafa. 2017. *State, Memory and Egypt's 1973 War: Ruling by Discourse*. Cham: Palgrave.
23   Woodly (2015, p. 97). *The Politics of Common Sense: How Social Movements Use Public Discourse to Change Politics and win Acceptance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
24   Van Dijk (1988, p. 171). Semantics of a Press Panic: The Tamil "Invasion". *European Journal of Communication* 3: 167–87.
25   Van Dijk (1998). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage.
26   Menshawy (2020). *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood*, p. 79.

thus always refer to details and elements of the dominant ideology as to 'think about' the group's dominant meanings in the engagement process as well as to 'think from' as they construct their own meanings by resisting, negotiating or even falsifying this dominance.[27] Again, this reaffirms the relationality in the identity-making process since each individual is 'living in a world of others' words' and the limits of the self are crafted by the individual in 'interdependent, communicative relationship with others'[28]. Disengagement is a process that begin in the minds of exiting individuals and is a product of their own thinking (or was experienced as such). But the process is still based on meanings outside their minds including those of the movement and its ideology as well as the surrounding macro social or political considerations including the Arab Spring. The framing is thus both individual and social, exactly as identity making is. Identity is located not just within 'individual pysches' but is negotiated, accorded or taken up within social relationships and joint meaning-making processes.[29]

3. The Battle for God: The *Rabaniyya* Master Frame

One can easily identify a key thematic construction in the writings and interviews with exiters: their battle to re-arrange their relationships with God, which I can refer to as *Rabaniyya*. However, this section begins with how the Brotherhood consolidate the commitment of members through the concept before moving onto show how those members reconstruct its meanings on the journey out of the group.

Literally, *Rabaniyya* is a word deriving from *Rab* (God) and it thus relates to how to obtain the satisfaction of God and an 'acquaintance' with Him[30]. The Brotherhood's dominant ideology set *Rabbaniya* as its own master frame. In the words of a leading figure in the Brotherhood, Youssef El-Qaradawy, 'the goal and the way of man in life as well as his final end of his hopes is realizing this 'satisfaction of God''[31]. The group's leaders have linked the concept itself with the goals of the Brotherhood as if they are one and the same. In other words, satisfying God equates to satisfying the movement. As the group's founder, Hassan El-Banna, aptly phrased the group's often-repeated slogan: 'God is our goal.'[32] The Brotherhood also endows itself with the mission solely; it presents itself as the 'the only Islamic movement he should join' as it is the one which 'follows the path of the prophet Muhammad and seeks to establish the Islamic state.'[33] The Brotherhood used the concept to guarantee a sense of collectivization. The shared goal of satisfying God requires 'stripping the self . . . of its whims.[34]' The concept of *Rabaniyya* is central to the identity-making process imposed by the Brotherhood to prioritize the we-ness against weakening the I-ness of individuals. The concept underpins the two principles of the Brotherhood's socialization doctrine: communion and renunciation[35]. The latter dictates that the member withdraws from all of her or his social ties outside the group and the former pushes the member into the 'we' based on unanimity and exclusivity as a group of 'true' Muslims[36]. Those individuals are further de-subjectified as their roles include a share of this collectivized mission such as recruiting new members as part of 'Da'wa towards

27 Ricoeur (1981). Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation. Edited and Translated by J. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 227; Porter (2006). *Ideology: Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 6.

28 Coyle and Murtagh (2014). Qualitative approaches to research, p. 44.

29 Coyle and Murtagh (2014). Qualitative approaches to research, p. 45

30 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't Rasael al-imam al-shahid Hassan El-Banna (A Collection of Epistles of the Martyr Imam Hassan El-Banna)*. Alexandria: Da'wa, p. 125.

31 For more, see El-Qaradawy (2016). Al-Rabaniyya: Ola khasa'es al-Islam (Rabaniyya: The first trait of Islam). Available online: https://www.al-qaradawi.net/node/2243 (accessed on 10 December 2020).

32 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't rasayyel al-imam*, p. 125.

33 Al-Anani (2016). *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood*, p. 77.

34 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't rasayyel al-imam*, p. 61.

35 See Menshawy (2020). *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood*. p. 46.

36 Bittner (1963). Radicalism and the organization of radical movements. *American Sociological Review* 28: 928–40; Coser (1974). *Greedy institutions: Patterns of undivided commitment*. New York: Free Press; Filliele, *Disengagement from Radical Organizations*, p. 47.

Rabaniyya' [Emphasis added].[37] All these meanings were always given full salience by repetition and frequency in their statements and speeches. El-Banna always mentioned that it is the 'pure Jihad for the sake of God' that requires 'stripping the self', 'suppressing the self's own feelings and its whims' and 'forgetting the self[38].

The idea of *Rabaniyya* enhances engagement and also acts as a bulwark against disengagement both socially and ideologically. Leaving the movement means 'leaving God', which it claims itself the sole representative of. 'The slogan of the Brotherhood, 'Islam is the solution' makes the others believe that 'Islam *beta'na* (ours),' according to Osama Dorra who exited the movement in 2011 after more than 10 years of membership[39]. The conflation means that disengaging from the Brotherhood connotes a disengagement from Islam itself. Indeed, one common feature of the Brotherhood's reaction to disengagement attempts is accusations of 'apostasy' or replacing 'God' with the 'Satan'. The evocation of the 'Satan' is significant accusation facing the potential or current exiters. It set the organizational boundaries between the *inside* and *outside* of the Brotherhood along religious boundaries of being or outside of Islam itself. Under this new level of conflating meanings, engagement thus means 'satisfying God' and disengagement means 'satisfying the Satan'. Members who left the group concurrently narrated several incidents in which the leaders of the Brotherhood referred to 'Abdel-Mon'im Aboul-Futouh, a senior leader in the group until 2011, as 'the Satan' after he exited the group[40].

Organizationally, the Satan-related comparison can also help guarantee the sense of the leaders' 'religious supremacy[41]' and related powers of imposing full obedience among the leaders. The Satan is perceived in the Islamic scriptures including Quraan as the figure who opposed the order of God to prostrate in front of Prophet Adam.[42] As the temptation by the Satan is a very 'effective' tool of punishment[43], many disgruntled members had been unable to leave the Brotherhood as they cannot 'afford provoking God's wrath'[44]. The ready-made accusation has its own emotional and social consequences. Tarek Aboul-Sa'd (joined in 1985 and left in 2011) said the 'most painful moment' of his experience is the confrontation with his wife 'accusing me that I became less of a Muslim.'[45] Others referred to similar 'psychological and social pressures', especially as the group also launches a 'smear campaign' accusing the members of related 'Satanic actions such as abandoning Islamic duties such as prayers, involvement in activities of moral decadence such as womanizing [having temporary sexual relationships with women].'[46] In full realization of its effectiveness, the leaders have long centralized the demonization as a key tool of discipline and punishment.[47]

Exiting members countered these conflated meanings between the group on one hand and God or Islam on the others in a number of ways. First, they reconstruct the meanings of *Rabaniyya* itself beyond the idealistic or utopian ones of the Brotherhood's dominant narrative. It is re-described as an instrumentally adopted tactic to guarantee a full blind obedience of the 'earthly' orders of the movement's leaders. Islam Lutfy (who departed the group in 2011 after a 27 year membership) evoked one specific occasion under which he had challenged the ideas of his Brotherhood leader on the injustices of the US-led invasion of Iraq. 'I told him that the US invasion for getting hold of the spoils of Iraq including its oil is a normative geo-political action adopted by Caliph Omar when he

37 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't rasayyel al-imam*, p. 125.
38 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't rasayyel al-imam*, p. 61.
39 Dorra (2014). *Min Dakhil al-Ikhwan Atakalam (From Inside the Brotherhood I Speak)*, 2nd ed. Cairo: Dar al-Masry.
40 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
41 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
42 Ali and Leaman (2007). *Islam: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.
43 Lasswell (1938). *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. New York: Peter Smith, p. 77.
44 El-Qassas (2017). Phone Interview.
45 Aboul-Sa'd (2017). In-Person Interview. Cairo.
46 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview; Nazily (2017). In-Person Interview. Doha; Personal Interview; (Lutfy 2017) London.
47 Yakan (2005). *Al-Mutasaqitoun Min al-da'wa: Kaifa . . . wa Lemaza (The Dropouts from the Daawa: How and Why?')*. Beirut: Al-Rasala leil Teba' wal Nashr, p. 82; Kandil (2015). *Inside the Brotherhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

decided the conquest of Egypt,' said the 40-year-old lawyer[48]. The leader effectuated the first purpose of *Rabaniyya*[49], warning Lutfy that he was on the verge of "apostasy" and that he should read more Quraan and perform further pray to God in order to dismiss "Satanic ideas in your mind".[50] The concept of *Rabaniyya* thus helps the group block debate via a form of 'unreflective instrumentalism,' that where beliefs and behavior emphasize that knowledge is worthless unless it immediately and directly leads to gains such as consolidating cohesion inside the group or becoming closer to God[51].

Exiters challenge the concept of *Rabaniyya* by de-coupling Islam from Islamism in order to prove that disengagement is not an act of deviance towards the Satan or moving away from God's satisfaction. Many pages in the autobiographies were dedicated in what seems as a battle to re-interpret the concept of *Rabaniyya*, thus benefiting from the 'expansiveness of Islam in terms of the textual and rhetorical canon' which Islamist movements have long instrumentalized in order to select their own meanings[52]. They found at their disposal 'a rich heritage with historical depth that can be drawn on various junctures with different contexts[53].' Exiters now have the capacity to re-interpret Islam and Quraan from the same reservoir from which the Muslim Brotherhood selected its own hegemonic ideas acting as if part of *Rabaniyya*. For example, the first page of Ahmed El-'Agouz's book, *The state of Murshid . . . Manufacturing The Muslim Brotherhood Mind*, began with this Quraanic verse that states:

He is the One who has revealed to you the Book (the Quraan). Out of it there are verses that are Muhkamat (of established meaning), which are the principal verses of the Book, and some others are Mutashabihat (whose definite meanings are unknown)'. Now those who have perversity in their hearts go after such part of it as is mutashabih, seeking (to create) discord, and searching for its interpretation (that meets their desires), while no one knows its interpretation except Allah[54].

El-Agouz reinterpreted the text to prove that the Brotherhood leaders are those who belong to the second category in the verse, i.e., 'searching for its interpretation (that meets their desires)'. He cited the leaders' contradictory decisions to take part in or boycott elections under Mubarak on the basis of their manipulation of other Quraanic verses of the 'Mutashabihat', especially when they cite different Quraanic verses for different occasions.[55] Within this actuality of re-interpretation, El-Agouz made 20 citations from the Quraan in the first chapter only and the four chapters adopted the same practice. 'Eid in his aptly titled book, *Atheists in Paradise*, made citations of eight Quraanic verses in the first 9-page chapter to convince readers that the Brotherhood distorted Islam as the latter 'endows tolerance and respects freedom of expression and freedom of thinking'.[56] If the movement imposed 'one Islam', exiters sought to present 'multiple *Islams* under which they can accommodate meanings favorable to their act of disengagement.[57] They also found the mission of re-interpretation necessary to challenge all of the Brotherhood's claims that 'they represent all the Muslims and their ideas are *the* Islam[58]' [emphasis added]. Therefore,

48 Lutfy (2017). In-Person Interview. London.

49 The leaders have extensive powers especially on means of 'punishments' as the rules of the Brotherhood does not 'specify' them; Landau-Tasseron (2010). Leadership and Allegiance in the Society of the Muslim Brothers. *Hudson Institute*. Series 2, paper 5, p. 4.

50 Lutfy (2017). In-Person Interview. London.

51 Claussen (2004). *Anti-intellectualism in American media*. New York: Peter Lang; Peters (2019) Anti-intellectualism is a virus. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 51: 357–63.

52 Elshaer (2013, p. 116). Islam In the Narrative of Fatah and Hamas. In *Narrating Conflict in The Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*. Edited by D. Matar and Z. Harb. pp. 111–32.

53 Elshaer (2013, p. 116). Islam In the Narrative of Fatah and Hamas. In *Narrating Conflict in The Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*. Edited by D. Matar and Z. Harb. pp. 111–32.

54 Ramzy (2013). *Dawlat al-Murshid*, p. 11. The verse is translated via this website Quran.com. Available online: https://quran.com/3/7?translations= 27,18,17,95,101,84,21,22,85,20,19 (accessed on 2 February 2021).

55 Ramzy (2013). *Dawlat al-Murshid*, p. 19.

56 'Eid (2015). *Mulhedoun fil Gana (Atheists in Paradise)*. Cairo: Mahrousa. pp. 15–20.

57 Sayyid (2003). *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*. London: Zed Books Ltd, p. viii.

58 El-Shafei' (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt.

the exiters emphasized the need to open interpretation of Quraan to people without any 'custodianship' or 'exploitation' by Islamist movements.[59]

Some exiters went far in de-coupling of Islam and Islamism by turning the Brotherhood's same equation in the opposite direction; the Muslim Brotherhood is not part of Islam as it does not adopt its 'true' tenets. Individuals found the group's ideology closer to that of 'communist Marxism'[60] or 'fascism.'[61] For others, it is more like the Freemasons because of their isolationist attitude, 'which is anti-Islamic since our religion calls for full inclusiveness of everyone without considering her or his race, colour or the way she or he is dressed.'[62] The frames are reconstructions of older frames evoked by opponents of the Brotherhood who accuse it of belonging to the mentioned ideologies.[63]

4. The Battle for 'Mind': The Anti-Intellectualism Frame

Ex-members place an emphasis in their narrative on disillusionment with 'cognitive' aspects of the Brotherhood's ideology; that is how some of the ideas promoted by the movement do not make sense in their minds. The features of this criticism can be grouped and pooled as the master frame of 'anti-intellectualism'. The term can have different meanings including those related to a complex continuum of traits[64] associated with obtaining 'knowledge' *intuitionally*, through instincts, character, moral sensibilities and emotions against obtaining it *rationally* through 'intellectual pursuits.'[65] Other scholars define anti-intellectualism by judging it on the basis of activities that can 'close' the mind[66] such as those that block 'reasoned discussions', interactive exchange of views or mere 'conversations.'[67] It is within this understanding that anti-intellectualism is pejoratively associated with 'religious fundamentalism'.[68] In this vein, the Brotherhood is an 'anti-intellectual' movement' as it adopts 'cognitive inflexibility', 'authoritarianism' and 'dogmatism'.[69] These features all evolve on attempts to block or limit the activities of the 'mind', a word repeatedly and frequently mentioned in the texts of exiting members. As adopted in the previous master frame, I will begin with demonstrating how the Brotherhood's dominant ideology deals with the 'mind' before moving onto how exiting members counter or negotiate meanings related to it.

The Brotherhood always proclaimed itself as a 'group with a mind'[70]. For example, it made 'comprehension' as the first of so-called *Arakan al-Bay'a* (Pillars of the Oath of Allegiance) which members have to commit to before they are being admitted as full members. The rhetoric of El-Banna highlights the group as 'liberating the mind'.[71] However, he always conditioned this liberation on the other pillar of the oath and which calls for full and blind obedience to the Brotherhood leaders and which is widely referred to as the *Al-Sam' wal T'a* (hearing and obedience). For example, the group has always warned its

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[59]   'Eid (2015). *Mulhedoun fil Gana*, pp. 15–23.

[60]   'Abdel-Mon'im (2011). *Hekayatii ma' Al-Ikhwan (My Story with the Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, p. 209.

[61]   'Abdel-Mon'im (2011). *Hekayatii ma' Al-Ikhwan (My Story with the Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, p. 15.

[62]   'Abdel-Mon'im (2011). *Hekayatii ma' Al-Ikhwan (My Story with the Muslim Brotherhood)*, pp. 37–38. Other exiters repeated the same accusations; El-Khirbawy (2012). *Ser al-m'abad: Al-asrar al-Khafiya li gama't al-ikhwan al-muslemeen (The Temple's Secret: The Hidden Secrets of the Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: Nahdet Masr. Of course, these associations—Lenin, Machiavelli, Freemasons—are wild and do not evince a sharp intellect but ready-to-hand prejudices and clichés. In any case, the language of exiting members in this context is wild, free, and not well founded, certainly in a precise sense.

[63]   This is a repletion of the discourse of critics and opponents who have along associated the Brotherhood with fascism, Nazism and Communism; see Kamal (1989). *Al-nuqat Faqqa al-Hurouf: al-Ikhwan al-Muslimon wa al-Nizam al-khas (Dots on Letters: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Special Apparatus)*. Cairo: Al-zahraa Leil I'lam al-'Arabi, p. 93; Sadat (2015). *Qissat al-Thawra kamlea (the Whole Story of the Revolution)*. Cairo: Dar al-Hilal.

[64]   Hofstadter (1962). *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. London: Jonathan Cape, p. 7.

[65]   Shogan (2007). Anti-intellectualism in the modern presidency: A republican populism. *Perspectives on Politics* 3: 817–31.

[66]   Bloom (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[67]   See Elder (2015). Is Anti-Intellectualism Killing the National Conversation? The Age. Available online: https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/is-antiintellectualism-killing-the-national-conversation-20150801-gipidj.html (accessed on 2 February 2021).

[68]   Kakutani (2008). Why Knowledge and Logic Are Political Dirty Words. New York Times. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/11/books/11kaku.html (accessed on 2 February 2021).

[69]   Shogan (2007). Anti-intellectualism in the modern presidency: A republican populism. *Perspectives on Politics* 3: 817–31.

[70]   In one of his writings, El-Banna repeatedly highlighted that 'Islam liberates mind', El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't Rasayyel al-Imam*, pp. 393, 416.

[71]   El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't Rasayyel al-Imam*, p. 391.

members against 'debating' meanings of the Quraan or discussing controversial topics such as the discord between the caliphs who succeeded Prophet Muhammad.[72] The warning coheres with the first master frame of *Rabaniyya*. Muslims need to 'act in solidarity', 'come together around one single interpretation of Islam' and 'avoid arguments' as part of the journey towards obtaining God's satisfaction.[73] The mind use or its manifestations of comprehension are also qualified by the group's other pillar of the oath is 'trust'. Under the pillar, each member has to take the orders of her or his leaders as 'absolute' without a chance of 'criticizing or modifying or showing hesitance towards them'[74].

The exiting members reacted to this qualified and instrumental use of the mind within the Brotherhood's ideology by directly and literally calling it a 'group with no mind'. 'It fosters a herd mentality and makes its members obey orders without thinking of them as if they have no minds,' said Ahmed Ramzy in his memoirs.[75] Ahmed El-'Agouz's book is full of references to how the leaders 'always paralyzed our minds'.[76] Sameh 'Eid amplified the same meaning by lamenting how the group failed to 'encourage debates or open our minds'[77] The element is prioritized as one of the most salient reasons cited for writing down the experience of their disengagement as 'an attempt to challenge 'attempts to freeze my mind'[78], 'a search for my critical mind'[79], and an attempt to 'save half of my mind as the other half is already destroyed during my membership at the movement.'[80] In interviews, the same meanings were reiterated as separate exiters attributed their way out to such elements as 'an effort to restore my mind'[81], 'throw out all dogma implanted into my mind'[82], 'stop the Brotherhood from blocking my mind'[83], a 'show of respect to my mind'[84] and 'a rebellion against those who have long turned off my mind.'[85]

Almost all exiters cited stops including events and experiences of challenging or seeking to challenge *Al-Sam' wal T'a*, the principle under which the Brotherhood has qualified the use or respect of the mind-drawn activities, simply including internal discussions. The 42-year-old Ahmed Nazily (who exited the movement in 2011 after almost 40 years of membership) remembers his disillusionment with the repeated expression of 'asking my prefect (official) in the Brotherhood to understand the order he gave me before I would execute it'[86]. 'They even freeze your mind from taking simple decisions. For example, the direct leader of my Brotherhood group [the *usra* or 'family' as the smallest organizational unit of membership inside the Brotherhood] was absent on one meeting. We waited and waited before I suggested that one of us would deputize him for the meeting to proceed'. The suggestion opened fire gates as Nazily was reprimanded and penalized.[87] Others narrated similar incidents, demonstrating how the group was less flexible when it comes to considering options. 'I felt like an automaton. The group wanted me to act like a machine, accepting every order without thinking or even feeling about them[88],' said 'Alaa El-Shafei,

72 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't Rasayyel al-Imam*, p. 391.
73 Cited by Kandil (2015). *Inside the Brotherhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 30.
74 El-Banna (1990). *Majmu't Rasayyel al-Imam el-Shahid*, p. 400.
75 Ramzy (2013). *Dawlat al-Murshid wa Sanam Al-Ikhwan (The state of the guide and the statue of Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: Rodiy, p. 42.
76 El-'Agouz (2012). *Ikhwani out of the Box (A Muslim Brother out of the Box)*. Cairo: Dawen Publishers, pp. 21, 24.
77 'Eid (2014). *Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimoon: Al-Hader wal Mustaqbal, Awraq fil Naqd Al-Zati (The Muslim Brotherhood: the Present and the Future: Papers from Self-Criticism)*. Cairo: Al-Mahroussa, p. 27.
78 El-'Agouz (2012). *Ikhwani out of the Box*, p. 8.
79 'Abdel-Mon'im (2011). *Hekayatii ma' Al-Ikhwan*, p. 210.
80 Ban (2013). *Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimoon wa Mehnat al-Watan wal Deen (The Muslim Brotherhood and the Predicament of Nation and Religion)*. Cairo: Al-Neel Centre for Strategic Studies, p. 7.
81 M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
82 M.S.M. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
83 Nazily (2017). In-Person Interview. Doha.
84 S.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt. Please note that the place of some interviews is delberatly referred to as 'Egypt' to add another level of anonymity.
85 S.M. (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt.
86 Nazily (2017). In-Person Interview. Doha.
87 Nazily (2017). In-Person Interview. Doha.
88 El-Shafei' (2017). In-Person Interview. Cairo.

55 years old, who exited the movement in 2011 after 38 years of membership. All these stories build its ideology as anti-intellectualistic in the sense of being haunted by 'cognitive inflexbility', defined as the lack of 'awareness of options and alternatives in a situation, or the willingness and adaptability to be flexible.'[89] The examples show anti-intellectualism as the group adopts 'religious antirationalism', where emotions such as those based on the sense of belonging or the we-ness of group solidarity are 'warm' and 'good', while reason or mind based on debate is 'cold' and 'bad'[90], an outlook often complemented by the absolute systems of belief drawn on *Rabaniyya* and its references to *Quraan*.

One way of challenging the Brotherhood's anti-intellectualism is engagement in intellectualizing acts which show use and respect of the mind such as reading. Almost all exiters mentioned it as one stage of the process of their disassociation. They challenged the Brotherhood's control and censorship of what they read or even the practice of reading collectively in supervised weekly meeting. Mohamed Aboul-Gheit, who exited the group in 2011, said he secretly began reading out of the curriculum including the works of other Islamist leaders banned from the movement's literature such as Mohamed El-Ghazaly. 'I found those thinkers open-minded, and began asking myself: How my leaders do not allow them'.[91] The list expanded to include other banned works such as those of Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, and 'again I felt disillusioned since the man did not appear to me as anti-Islam as my leaders used to tell us.'[92] The intellectual journey gained a social aspect that challenged the dichotomies driven by the first master frame dividing people as those who are inside the Brotherhood and Islam it represents and those who are outside them. It is a diffusion of the inside/outside boundaries strictly set by the Brotherhood's policies of 'communion and 'renunciation (Menshawy 2020). Therefore, Aboul-Gheit was introduced to a different 'multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them, and to act accordingly.'[93] Aboul-Gheit joined virtual forums, further becoming disillusioned with other aspects of the Brotherhood's anti-intellectualism tending to adopt dividing the world into more 'simplified' and 'manageable' forms.[94] He remembered that he was shocked to 'discover that there is an *other* which I can deal with and trust other than the Brotherhood's members and leaders'. Aboul-Gheit, who studied medicine, moving onto journalism after his disassociation, described his journey as an 'mind-opening practice'.[95] The activities of Aboul-Gheit challenges the anti-intellectualism of the Brotherhood and its 'unreflective instrumentalism'. Under the latter feature, knowledge via independent or individualized reading is not worthy as it does not lead to pragmatic benefits such as increasing the group's cohesion or solidarity as well as to direct use values such as bringing individuals closer to God's satisfaction. Therefore, one typical reaction of the Brotherhood's leaders to such rebellious acts of intellectualization is the often-repeated request for members to 'read more Quraan' or 'perform more prayers'.[96]

The 28-year-old Huzaifa Hamza, who exited the movement in 2014, said his journey outside the group began at the library where 'I was reading Noam Chomsky, Thomas Friedman, Henry Kissinger and even more simply the *Newsweek*.' While these writings 'opened the world to me, they also increased my tension with the Brotherhood's ideology out of realisation how exclusionary and backwarded it sounded to me,'[97] he said, attributing his membership to birth as his parents are both Brotherhood members. The practice also included re-reading the literature of the Brotherhood in the works of the founder El-Banna.

[89] Martin and Rubin (1995). A new measure of cognitive flexibility. *Psychological Reports* 76: 623–26.
[90] Claussen (2004). *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media*. New York: Peter Lang; Peters (2019). Anti-Intellectualism Is a Virus. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 51: 357–63.
[91] Aboul-Gheit (2017). In-Person Interview. London.
[92] Aboul-Gheit (2017). In-Person Interview. London.
[93] Van Dijk (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage, p. 8.
[94] Neuberg and Newsom (1993, p. 113). Personal need for structure: Individual differences in the desire for simpler structure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65: 113–31.
[95] Aboul-Gheit (2017). In-Person Interview. London.
[96] Hamza (2021). Phone Interview; Aboul-Sa'd (2017). In-Person Interview. Cairo.
[97] Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.

'I realized that our leaders have been teaching us mere dogma through their imposed rigid interpretations of Islam.[98]' Again, these references build on the 'anti-intellectualism master frame since dogma can be defined as the tendency to promote a 'relatively unchangeable, unjustified certainty.'[99]

5. Social-Political Context

The two master frames appear consistent and coherent as identified above; exiters repeat almost the same descriptions and their testimonies full of experiences and events hold together to form a reasonable whole. However, such a framing process is driven not only by similarity of unity of meanings in verbal or written texts under analysis, it also needs resonance; that is how these frames align with the external world, shaping or being shaped by them. Meaning is not only drawn from salience or selectiveness only by those directly writing the texts or taking part in the interviews, there are other agents helping in the production and dissemination of these meanings to 'influence people's political understandings and social imaginations more forcefully than other kinds of information and evidence[100]'. Those agents also allow the master frames to 'inhabit a special discursive space', thus achieving 'harmony' through alignment with 'background notions, common logics, and new ideas.'[101] In this section, I posit the two master frames within the opportunities and resources made available by other agents and circumstances which contextualize them in harmony as an indicator of 'resonance'. These opportunities or resources are *structural*, i.e., related to changes regarding the movement or the state[102]; *temporal*, related to the timing of processing or announcing the disengagement during or after 2011; or *spatial,* related to the whereabouts of the developments internally (e.g., the Tahrir Square) or externally in terms of the exiters themselves including the relocation of some of them to other countries, prominently including Turkey.

Temporally, the disillusionment with the Brotherhood's ideology gained its key moment of resonance in the protests which erupted on 25 January 2011. Many of exiters narrated how they had been dismayed over the activities of the group at the time. They perceived these activities as more oriented towards serving the self-interests, political ambitions or 'authoritarian' desires for control and domination among the group's leaders rather than serving concepts such as *Rabaniyya.* 'The group's leaders wanted to replace the regime of Mubarak rather than topple it down to create our imagined utopia which had always told us about.[103]' This was similarly repeated in and across the texts of other exiters. 'The leaders were seeking to achieve their own personal interests not the interests of Islam or the Muslim community they claim representation of,' said A.S.R.[104] Exiters found more specific events to validate their claims such as secret talks between some of the group's leaders and Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's vice president and the head of the General Intelligence Directorate in the early days of the protests[105]. As the news spread about what happened during the talks, i.e., the Brotherhood offering their support for ending the wave of protests in return for a 'larger share of the political pie'[106], many members announced

98   Ban (2017). *Ikhwan wa Salafiyyon wa Dawa'ish (Brothers, Salafists and ISIS Loyalists)*. Cairo: Al-Mahrousa, p. 330.
99   Altemeyer (2002). Dogmatic behavior among students: Testing a new measure of dogmatism. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 142: 713–21. doi:10.1080/00224540209603931.
100 Woodly (2015). *The Politics of Common Sense*, p. 97.
101 Woodly (2015). *The Politics of Common Sense*, p. 98.
102 Erika Biagini concluded that the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood following the 2013 coup 'favored the emergence of women's leadership, firstly within women-only movements and subsequently, as the very survival of the Brotherhood became increasingly compromised, in the movement as a whole', Biagini (2020). Islamist women's feminist subjectivities in (r)evolution: the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22: 382–402.
103 Nazily (2017). In-Person Interview. Doha.
104 A.S.R (2017). In-Person Interview. Cairo.
105 Weakileaks (2013). Re: Intelligence guidance foredit. Available via The Global. Intelligence Files. Available online: https://wikileaks.org/gifles/docs/12/1263665_re-intelligence-guidance-foredit-html (accessed on 5 December 2020).
106 Kandil (2015). *Inside the Brotherhood*, p. 137.

their departure from the movement in protest[107]. They called it as 'an act of treason[108]', and others called it 'counter-revolutionary'.[109] Ahmed Ban, the 50-year-old writer, ended his 20 year membership in a resignation letter that read: 'Shame on the movement which meets Suleiman in a unilateral action while claiming it also vociferously and wholeheartedly support the protesters.'[110]

This is a moment of misalignment of frames. As mentioned above, the leaders have long constructed themselves as 'holy' individuals, a subject position drawn on their sponsorship and application of the *Rabbaniya* mission. 'They has always inculcated in us values of honesty, honor and self-respect for the sake of realizing the Utopian dream or project of an Islamic state or society,' said Huzaifa Hamza[111]. Himself the son of a leading figure inside the Brotherhood, Hamza added 'how can I reconcile the dream with the horrible behavior of our leaders.[112]' The activities of the leaders also resonate with the master frame 'anti-intellectualism' as the leaders of the group did not 'open discussion' or reveal the details of the meeting with Suleiman even to the members of its *Shura Council* [literally means consultation], acting as the Brotherhood's legislative body[113].

The angry sentiments inside the Brotherhood found more ground after Mubarak resigned on February 2011. Exiters cited events under which the Brotherhood further sacrificed key components of its ideology for the sake of what they identified as part of the post-Mubarak political spoils. For example, they referred to different occasions when the group 'colluded with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in using brutal force' against protestors.[114] As the Brotherhood became closer to the SCAF, they distanced themselves from revolutionary or secular forces who organized and led the protests, again consolidating accusations of 'departure from national demands and committing more acts of treason for the sake of narrow interests or short-term political gains'[115].

The group took power as Mohamed Morsi, then a leader in the group's Guidance Bureau, won presidential elections in May 2012. This inflamed further disillusionment as 'Morsi sounded less as an Islamist leader than a copy of Mubarak himself[116].' Indeed, 'Morsi and Mubarak are the same' sounds like a frame on its own given its repetition and frequency in the texts of exiters citing 'authoritarian desires to grip on power', 'excluding the opposition', 'not embracing pluralism', and 'corruption.'[117] It was also a moment of incongruence in framing as the Brotherhood has long framed itself to its members as 'the ideal Islamic organization, pure of the filth that infected the rest of society.[118]' The angry reactions of exiters resonated with the mood outside the movement. The general feeling among Egyptians at the time is that neither the president nor the group moved towards the 'triumph of ideology' and that their control of power was 'a product of normal and calculable power politics, including coalition building, political maneuvering, and placating different interests and power centers within society[119].' Sayyed Milad, a 33-year-old shop trader, left the movement in 2014 after 9 years of membership said: 'I was not satisfied at the time because the Brotherhood allowed its power politics to trump its own

107 Abou-Khalil (2017). Phone Interview.
108 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
109 The descripted in repeated in interviews with Lutfy (2017), Nazily (2017), Abdel-Gawad among others.
110 Ban (2017). *Ikhwan wa salafyyon wa dawaish (Brothers, Salafists and Members of ISIS)*. Cairo: Al-Mahrousa, p. 256.
111 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
112 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
113 Beshara (2016). *Thawret Masr: Men jumhuryet yulyu ella thawret yanayir*, p. 505.
114 See Wikileaks (2011). H: Intel. Secret offer to El. baradei/Muslim Brotherhood-army alliance. Hillary Clinton email archive. Available online: https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/12845 (accessed on 30 October 2018).
115 El-Qassas (2017). Phone Interview.
116 Aboul-Sa'd (2017). In-Person Interview. Cairo.
117 Ramzy (2013). *Dawlat al-Murshid wa Sanam Al-Ikhwan (The State of the Guide and the Statue of Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: Rodiy, p. 134.
118 El-Sherif (2014). *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
119 El-Sherif (2014) *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

ideology. I joined the movement for the *Da'awa* in the first place.[120]' Others felt that the group's political ambitions led it to comprise on its ideological base including the mostly touted project of founding an Islamic state or society.[121] More exiters felt vindicated. This view of Aboul-Sa'd, who exited the movement in 2011, made him feel self-empowered as well as proved him right in front of his wife who had accused him of 'being less of a Muslim' upon his departure a few months ahead of Morsi's presidency. 'She felt I was right. She realized that disengaged from a self-interested group, not from Islam. Thanks to Morsi, she can see such evidence loud and clear.'[122]

Spatially, the revolution allowed members of the Brotherhood resources and opportunities for ideological enrichment and fertilization. For example, during the protests at the Tahrir Square, protestors agreed not to raise any identity markers of political or social groupings for the sake of highlighting the consensual demand of the resignation of Mubarak. Members of the Brotherhood joined forces with members of secular forces, chanting slogans such as 'Muslims and Christians are all for Egypt' or 'long live the crescent and the cross'. These slogans were always 'avoided' or even 'abhorred' by the Brotherhood, always giving priority to slogans such as 'Islam is the solution.'[123] The square thus provided the space for exposure to such linguistic deviance and a unique repertoire of performances away from the control of the Brotherhood's leaders usually entitled to approve or disapprove the group's own slogans on similar occasions. A heterogeneous 'spatio-political fabric'[124], the Tahrir Square replaced the traditional *spaces* of the Brotherhood usually marked with exclusivity and in-group similarity such as the mosque. Huzaifa Hamza, a member for 20 years, even attributed his disengagement to these 'discussions with members of other forces at the cafes around the Tahrir Square[125]'. These new circles of debate and socialization were eye-opener for Hamza and other members who found in them a chance of free riding leading to their disengagement from the movement. In 2014, he wrote an article for a news website asking the Brotherhood's leaders to 'dissolve the movement', and the article consequently led to his own dismissal from the movement. He attributed the idea of the article to his chats at the Tahrir-overlooking cafes, a hub of gatherings of mostly secular forces. Within these places, the Brotherhood lost its ability to impose 'unanimity' and spatial exclusion as one key step towards consolidating its control of members via the abovementioned policies of communion and denunciation.[126] The Tahrir Square also obfuscated the boundaries between the inside and outside once enforced by the Brotherhood as part of its *Rabaniyya*-related beliefs.[127]

As Morsi lost power in the June 2013 coup and members of the Brotherhood began a sit in in *Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya* Square, the frames of the exiters found another level of resonance. The resonance was more of a dissonance of the Brotherhood's dominant ideology. For example, the leaders instrumentally adopted the concept of *Rabaniyya* at full volume and speed during the *Rabi'a* sit in to keep the protestors united and mobilized. Their speeches were full references of Quraanic stories that the Brotherhood would win and Morsi would be back to power. They depended on prophecies and expected miracles, and the rhetoric was evidenced by further claims that 'Prophet Mohammed is with us now'[128]

[120] M.S. (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt.

[121] A.Z. (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt.

[122] A.Z. (2017). In-Person Interview. Egypt.

[123] Tammam (2011). *Al-Islamiyoon wal Thawra al-Misriyya: Hidoor wa Taradod wa Musharakah* (Islamists and the Egyptian revolution: Absence, hesitation and participation). Available online: https://bit.ly/2Pw2ILn (accessed on 23 October 2018).

[124] Bayat (2017). *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, p. 540.

[125] Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.

[126] Bittner (1963). Radicalism and the organization of radical movements. *American Sociological Review* 28: 928–40; Coser (1974). *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment*. New York: Free Press.

[127] Menshawy, *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood*, p. 46.

[128] YouTube (2013a). Ezhak ma al-rua'a al-elaheyah fi Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (Laugh with God-inspired dreams in Rabi'a al-'adweya) Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NAyi00COSQ (accessed on 4 November 2018).

or that Archangel Gabriel leads the members in their prayers during the sit in.[129] As they represent 'true Muslims', God will support the protestors with miracles similar to those of Moses when he faced down the Pharaoh, or so run claims made during the sit in.[130] In other words, the leaders went back to instrumentalize the monopoly on the 'satisfaction with God' and all associated utopian ideas building the 'imaginary' at the core of the group's Islamism.[131] Nevertheless, the group's ideology failed to serve purposes as the security forces stormed into the sit in, killing hundreds including women and children[132]. Many members attributed their disengagement to this failure of the group's *Rabaniyya* master frame to move from *irrealis*, what is imagined, to the *realis*, what is happening on the ground. 'The main problem of the Brotherhood's leaders became very clear to me: Their ideological line and their practical line are in disconnect or dis-alignment,' said the 36-year-old Emad Ali who exited in 2017 after 15 years of membership. Some ex-members even told me that the disconnection was so strong that they abandoned Islam completely given their disillusionment with the whole idea of the 'divine' claimed by the Brotherhood's leaders and enmeshed into their ideological principle drawn on *Rabaniyya*.[133]

All these levels of disillusionment with the Brotherhood's performance during the Arab Spring emboldened members in their ideological battle against the Brotherhood's leaders. For example, they rejected the usual equation based on employing the frames of 'victimization' by the leaders after events such as *Rabi'a.* As many leaders and members were imprisoned by the regime of El-Sisi, the Brotherhood sought to gain further legitimacy and consolidate mobilization against the regime's oppressive practices. It is the same equation of the past under which the Brotherhood gained popularity and flourished by weathering the regime's bans and jailing for most of its existence. 'I perceived this victimization as an act of opportunism, weakness, cowardice or even incompetence,' said Hamza. He and others took the victimization frame as an excuse by leaders to 'deny that they were defeated by re-constructing others such as the oppressive state as a lightning rod for all the Brotherhood's problems or its failures.[134]' Many exiters insisted that the leaders of the Brotherhood, including those in prison, 'be held accountable,'[135] as they have 'blood on their hands' by not protecting the lives of protestors at *Rabi'a.*'[136]

Furthermore, exiters engaged in a battle of framing to rename those killed in Rabi'a not as 'martyrs' (the preferred description of the Brotherhood and its leaders) but as 'casualties'. It was more of a 'passive martyrdom,[137]' thus allowing the exiters to victimize those who were killed rather than take them as subjects or agents of the killing as 'acts of resistance'. This shift in meaning makes the leaders as well as the regime stand as perpetrators. 'I will never forget or forgive those leaders as ignorant as full of themselves during the Rabi'a sit in," said A.Y., 33 years old and who left the group after 12 years of membership. He elaborated: 'Those leaders assured us at the sit in that security forces cannot dare storming of the camp. They claimed that they know more than we do. These were all misinformation and lies.'[138]

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[129] YouTube (2013b). Manasat Rabea'a: Gabriel (alayhe alsalam) dahar fi masjed Rabea'a (Rabea'a stage: Gabriel) (peace be upon him) appeared in Rabea'a mosque). Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oOaAbsqVcg (accessed on 4 November 2018).

[130] Kandil (2015). *Inside the Brotherhood*, p. 2.

[131] The evocation of these tales in the Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya sit-in can be taken as part of a general understanding inside the Brotherhood that Quraan, from which some of these tales are drawn, can provide solutions concerning this crisis and 'every aspect of daily life'; see Al-Hudaybi (1878), *Dusturuna* (Our Constitution), Cairo: Dar al-Ansar, pp. 9–10.

[132] Human Rights Watch (2014). According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt. Human Rights Watch. 12 August 2014. Available online: https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt (accessed on 10 January 2021).

[133] See Youtube (2019). No Author. Aljazeera's Fi Sab' Sinein (In Seven Years). 2019. Documentary. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tTdlSzIANo (accessed on 20 December 2020). At least two of the 33 interviewees told me that they are no longer believe to Islam.

[134] Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.

[135] K.F. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.

[136] G.'A. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.

[137] See Matar and Harb (2013). (Eds.) *Narrating Conflict*.

[138] Y.A. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.

The acts of the Egyptian regime after the removal of Morsi have provided opportunities and resources at different levels. For example, unlike Mubarak's regime, El-Sisi's regime does not limit its crackdown and detention campaigns to the leaders. Many rank-and-file members share the burden of the repressive measures. They thus felt that they deserve having a say in what is happening inside the Brotherhood. It sounds like a new 'social contract', where members who pay the same price as their leaders deserve equal 'privileges' including redistribution and more sharing of power. The prison also came with an opportunity for members to mingle with their leaders, once described and distanced as 'those who are above' as part of their aura of sanctity[139]. This interaction left many members doubting the effectiveness of the hierarchical structures over which the organization is based. 'Those leaders whom we always obeyed their orders blindly were exposed to me as ideologically hollow, unsophisticated, backward, mind-deficient and ignorant'[140], said the 23-year-old M.E. after a six-month imprisonment in 2015.[141] He cited examples of their 'shallowness' such as 'they do not read newspapers or got preoccupied with interpreting his dreams.'[142] M.E. also showed no empathy for those leaders who were in prison as 'whole idea of facing down the regime via imprisonment sounds really silly and stupid.[143]' Again, these new meanings and accusations of ideological hollowness or opportunism support the countering of the *Rabaniyya* master frame as leaders simply appear more as humans with no aura of sanctification that long immunized them from criticism or made their orders unquestioned. Exiters have the capacity to resist and criticize the ideas and characters of those leaders without fearing ready-made accusations of apostasy or choosing Satan.

The state has added grist to the mill, providing more material resources for disengagement. It supported the production and dissemination of ideas and meanings constructed by the exiters. The state's printing houses took over the publication of some autobiographies and allowed others to be published by other printing houses amidst the highly censored atmosphere under El-Sisi. The state media outlets opened space for exiters to narrate their journey or comment on the actions of the Brotherhood in general. In a radical change of seats, the exiters are thus endowed with the 'power of expert'[144] controlling the general public's access of information and interpretations on the meanings of their experiences as well as the meanings of the Brotherhood's ideology especially as existing Brotherhood members are not allowed the same opportunity or resources. Many of the exiters also benefited from further state opportunities such as jobs, business trips to Europe or assimilation into alternative ideological circles such as membership into cultural institutions. The state's clampdown on members of the Brotherhood, including banning the whole movement from operating and ordering its assets seized as one Egyptian court ruled in September 2013, was counterbalanced by a lenient position towards Exiters. Within this state support, the two master frames gained further consolidation by amplification and elaboration. For example, 'Eid narrated his experiences in two autobiographies and also gave his views on the ideology of the Brotherhood in three more printed books[145]. He is a regular host in TV channels and writers for newspapers, news websites. It is difficult to disconnect this popularity with the support of the state which mostly owns or censors media outlets and uses them in its propagandistic campaign against the Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the state's rewards came at the price of limited access to politics. El-Qasass, a deputy leader of the *Misr Al-Qawiyya* (Strong Egypt) Party and whom I interviewed in 2016, was arrested two years later, in February 2018. Despite his vociferous attack on the Brotherhood, he was

139   See Chapter 5 of Menshawy (2020). *Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood*.
140   M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
141   M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
142   M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
143   M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
144   Lippmann (1997). *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, p. 384.
145   'Eid (2013). *Tajribati fi saradeeb al-ikhwan (My Experience in the basements of Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: Jazeerat al-Ward; 'Eid (2014). *Qissati ma' al-ikhwan (My story with the Muslim Brotherhood)*. Cairo: Mahrousa; 'Eid (2014). *Al-ikhwan al-muslimoon al-hader wal mustaqbal: Awraq fil naqd al-zati (The Muslim Brotherhood: The Present and the Future: Papers from Self-Criticism)*. Cairo: Al-Mahroussa.

accused of 'belonging to a banned movement'[146]. Aboul-Futouh, who founded the party and magnetically attracted many exiting members of the Brotherhood, was also arrested at the same time after publicly criticizing El-Sisi in a TV interview. The opportunity which the party offered to exiters, especially given its inclusion of reference to Islam in its platform that made it a more convincing alternative for Brotherhood members not seeking a full 'discursive rupture' with their past, was lost. Furthermore, the state's coupling of members and ex-members in its campaign against the Brotherhood could sound like throwing the baby out with the bath water. Many of exiters narrated how the disengagement of Aboul-Futouh (still in prison at the time of writing this article), a 'charismatic influential character taken as a mentor' especially among young Islamists, was a key factor facilitating their own disassociation[147]. Even more, many exiters took part in his presidential campaign in 2012 in which he ran against the Brotherhood's candidate, Morsi, and also joined his party, *Misr Al-Qawiyya* (Strong Egypt), whose platform calls for 'respect for individuals freedoms', 'the right of self-expression' and 'participatory democracy'.[148] His detention therefore sends mixed messages affecting the pace of disengagement from the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood attempted to win over many exiting members by bringing them to the movement through steps such as adaptation and promising 'internal discussions on what went wrong', 'diversifying' the group's skillset to treat its lack of political expertise, and adopting more 'revolutionary' strategies for resisting El-Sisi's regime[149]. Nevertheless, these steps of adaptation mostly remain 'lip service' given the continued control of the traditional 'historical leadership'[150]. Representing the 'stagnation camp', the 'historical leadership' are in charge, controlling the Brotherhood's financial resources (and thus discursive resources bolstering loyalty to thee frames of dominant ideology) and are still internationally recognized[151]. The organization as a whole 'remains largely immobile[152]' and many of the reasons that pushed exiters to leave still exist. This is the case as the Brotherhood were ideologically divided after the 2013 coup. Leaders were involved in disputes and public disagreements on issues, throwing accusations of corruption and embezzlement[153]. This disagreement thus offered an opportunity for members to vindicate their frames, countering the Brotherhood's ideological basis of *Rabaniyya*. The divisions also undermined the need for unity and much-needed consensus among Muslims for the sake of realizing the joint mission of 'satisfying God'. Paradoxically, the divisions opened windows for ideological emancipation based on an unprecedented individualization. Many rank-and-file members now enjoy an 'unprecedented amount of independence from the organization's hierarchy' enough that they have begun to pursue 'individual strategies to reform the movement' in response to the failures of the 2013[154]. As these strategies are hampered by the Brotherhood's tilt towards 'stagnation' and its leadership towards 'dormancy[155]', many individuals were encouraged to express and effectuate dissidence, previously suppressed and undermined in the name of organizational unity. In other

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146 No author, Tajdid habs al-Qassas naeb hezb 'Misr al-Qawiyya (Renewing the Arrest of El-Qassas, the Deputy Leader of the Strong Egypt Party), *Aljazeera*, 22 January 2020. Available online: shorturl.at/ktTV6 (accessed 2 January 2020).

147 Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.

148 See the party's facebook page. Available online: https://www.facebook.com/MisrAlQawia (accessed on 12 December 2020).

149 Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation, p. 15.

150 I am grateful to Mahmoud Sha'ban, an Istanbul-based journalist and researcher on the Muslim Brotherhood, for the insight. Sha'ban's argument is that the 'historical leadership' returned the group to 'organizational rigidity and ideological strictness to the pre-2011 levels 'given the expansive economic and media projects in which many members of the group are now employed.' This economic prowess, partly gained through alliance with the Turkish government, 'bought off loyalty and muffled dissent inside the movement especially given the difficult job market and limited options available to potentially exiting members if they think of building their own career independent of the group after their disassociation,' said Sha'ban. Interview. Sha'ban (2021). On phone. 20 January.

151 Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation, p. 4.

152 Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation, p. 4.

153 Aziz (2017). Divisions Widen between Muslim Brotherhood Factions after Policy Reassessment Initiative. Available online: https://bit.ly/2Uo27PI (accessed on 19 September 2019).

154 Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation, p. 2.

155 Ardovini (2020). Stagnation Vs adaptation, p. 2.

words, individualism, long abhorred and derided inside the Brotherhood as I detailed above, is now part of the reality of the dynamics inside the Brotherhood.

One final resource for ideological disengagement is the broader geographic re-spatialization to new territories such as Turkey. Since thousands of the Brotherhood's members escaped to avoid El-Sisi's wrath, some members felt that the re-spatialization allowed them to announce their disengagement. Hamza said:

At university, I study Marx; at work I meet as a journalist more pragmatic and flexible Islamists such as members of the ruling Justice and Development Party which stood out from the Brotherhood because; and you see a complex life full of ideological colours beyond the Brotherhood's white/black classification.[156]

Some members left the movement's lack of sophistication as 'I realized the rhetoric of my traditional leaders inside the Brotherhood really does not fit a socially liberal and open society as the Turkish one[157]'. M.E. said living in Istanbul allowed him to live in more 'secular' areas of the city and away from the 'Muslim Brotherhood arenas where most members and leaders live.[158] This geographic distancing is not available to many exiters in Egypt, with many of them suffering from smear campaigns practiced by existing members or leaders.[159] They also feel pressure of social isolation especially as part of the Brotherhood's recruitment tactics depend on spatial proximity, where many members end up working or living within the same space.[160] Furthermore, the state of El-Sisi is also changing tactics, raising fears that exiters could also be part of the widespread clampdowns that left tens of thousands in prison. The regime's move is so far not sweeping, targeting Islamists who are involved in politics or challenging its durability. Nevertheless, judging by the desire for ideological freedom of association and for more intellectualism which exiters mentioned as part of their reasons for disengagement, the picture looks bleak. The anti-Brotherhood regime and its ideology appear as exclusivist and restrictive as the Brotherhood was. The state rhetoric on the need to 'eradicate' the Brotherhood's ideology leaves members with no space to stop and think of alternatives away from the dichotomous binaries of the past (e.g., Muslim/non-Muslim, God/Satan, inside/outside). This perhaps explains the slowdown in the wave of exiters in recent years (if we judge by public announcements of departure).

6. Conclusions

The Muslim Brotherhood has long posited itself as the sole representative of Islam and its membership as the path towards obtaining God's satisfaction. The conception of 'the Muslim Brotherhood is Islam' has significant consequences including limited freedom of speech and difficulty when trying to leave the movement. Members were asked to blindly 'hear and obey' the orders of their leaders, gaining sanctification out of this 'contract' of leading the way towards God. A disgruntled member faces 'godly' disciplinary actions and leader's accusations of 'apostasy' and Satanic dispositions. A member seeking to 'stop and think' about the ideas of the movement has also to think of broader punitive measures related to their social relations and severance of relations when belonging to the 'society of Muslims'—a punishment which is costly, especially given the group's dynamics of recruitment and mobilization, which means members of the same real kinship family, i.e., brothers and sisters, and husbands and wives, and imagined kinship family, i.e., friends, are all connected by their membership in the group. In other words, losing the membership of the Brotherhood means losing these valuable social ties. This article therefore presents disengagement not only as discourse discerned via the frames of exiters in their texts but also a process of negotiating these social or ideological interactions. This made it necessary for exiters to engage in re-interpreting the tenets of Islam and verses of Quraan which the

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[156] Hamza (2021). Phone Interview.
[157] M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
[158] M.E. (2017). In-Person Interview. Istanbul.
[159] See Chapter 2 of Menshawy (2020) Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood
[160] Fayez (2011). *Janat Al-Ikhwan*, p. 15.

Brotherhood took as its core values and the system of belief in order to prove the that they can be Muslims not Islamists. They also negotiated dominant meanings long stabilized inside the Brotherhood's ideology.

The discursive layered disengagement is contextualized. The Arab Spring provided opportunity to evidence and validate such de-coupling and also sped up disengagement as well. The Brotherhood's leaders in power were found to be mere political agents seeking to take over the existing political order rather than Islamist leaders moving towards replacing it with their envisaged 'Islamic state' or 'Islamic society'. Exiters felt disillusioned that the imagined 'Islamic project', long cultivated into their minds as an unrealized dream, gave way to pure power politics when Morsi came to power. Leaders were perceived as power-hungry brokers searching for political gains out of compromises with the older regime. More significantly, many members felt that the leaders are 'humans' who err and commit mistakes. Losing the aura of 'sanctification' _ or the 'those who are above' as they are best known inside the movement led to demands for those leaders to 'be held accountable,' a revolutionary shift of thinking in a hierarchically shaped group that always asks members to obey leaders the same way 'a dead body poses in front of the one washing it after death'.

This article demonstrates that disengagement is a complex process, which makes the mission of understanding disengagement based on more layers of interaction including that between the past and present. Announcing that a member is out of the movement is just a *point of emergence* as the decision or steps leading towards it are all acts of the past, full of *points of evolution*. This makes sense as the process of ideological disengagement is partly cognitive. It began in the minds of exiters years or perhaps decades before it was articulated in texts announcing the disassociation. Many exiters cited earlier activities such as independent or even solitary reading practices as part of the journey of freeing themselves of the movement's highly censored curricula and collectivized cultural cultivation. Disengagement is an act of cumulation rather than an act of specific 'turning points' or 'stages' that some literature pay attention to. Additionally, language cannot be ignored as it not only describes or represents events of experiences of disengagement, but also creates them as the texts of exiters are full of patterns of actions to construct and reconstruct meanings which I aggregated and organized as frames and master frames. The process has a social or political side along with the cognitive side. All the frames operate within the changes after 2011, the year marking the beginning of the unprecedented exit wave. Take the Tahrir Square as epitomizing the kind of radical new society which members of the Brotherhood have long envisaged under the name of 'the Islamic project'. The square offered a more presentist and prefigured foundation for a different future. For many Brotherhood members, the utopian world is realized not imagined. As far as disengagement is concerned, this environment provided opportunities and alternatives including new ideological relations of belonging and a space shared with members of secular forces which organized and led the protests in the Square and even with other exiting members whom the Brotherhood always sought to isolate, demonize or even deny their presence. Exiters felt agency at the group's level as well, emboldened to question its unquestioned ideology due to actions of the Brotherhood itself including organizational division, the fragmentation of its identities and ideological bases. As this fragmentation continues, the Brotherhood's relationship with Islam and religion in general changes. It can no longer proclaim itself as the sole representation of Islam simply for two main considerations. The Brotherhood is no longer a single monolithic or united group to make such a claim. Secondly, there is no one single dominant version or interpretation of Islam which every member of the group has to abide under claims of unanimity or solidarity by consensus. There are many different interpretations of Islam (including those of the exiters as well as those of different factions seeking to justify their positions). Furthermore, a part of the change is the shift in accessibility. The Brotherhood can no longer disseminate its dominant ideology across the ranks of what is meant to be a well-organized hierarchically-shaped movement. Almost 50 percent of its members are 'inactive', according to some estimates

inside the movement, according to which many 'dormant' members stopped engaging in its activities as they feel 'alienated or traumatized'[161]. This could mean that the research on the Brotherhood has to give away its old assumptions of monolothism. Scholars can no longer deal with a single movement, a single ideology or a single identity.

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