

# Rebels Without A God

Something remarkable has been taking place in Egypt. Atheism, a taboo subject that has always lurked on the fringes of Egyptian society, has become the focus of a heated debate

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Sometimes a film can change your life. This is exactly what happened to Alber Saber, but not in the way people usually mean. Little did the young activist suspect that the fevered imaginings and rantings of a religious bigot on the other side of the world would spark furious chaos right outside his front door. The film – or, more accurately, trailer – in question was *Innocence of Muslims*, the low-budget YouTube sensation that caused global controversy in 2012 for its crass and offensive depiction of Muhammad.

On 12 September 2012, a mob of angry neighbors gathered outside the apartment building where Saber lived with his family, angered by rumors that the boy next door had posted the controversial video on his Facebook page.

In fact, Saber had not posted the video. So why did the angry mob target him? Perhaps because Saber comes from a Coptic family – like the maker of *Innocence of Muslims* – and, unlike him, is an atheist.

Distressed and concerned, Saber's mother phoned the police, expecting them to turn up and protect her son and the rest of the family. Instead, the police returned the next day to arrest the outspoken blogger and activist who was actively expressing his atheistic convictions on social media. Saber was insulted during his interrogation



and a junior officer incited fellow prisoners against him, provoking one of them to cut him with a razor on his throat.

In December 2012, Saber was sentenced to three years for “insulting” and “disdaining” religion by “creating webpages, including *Crazy Dictator* and *Egyptian Atheists*”. “This made me feel that anyone who thinks differently to the religion or ideology of the state is a criminal,” he asserts. “But I will not give up my right to think.”

During his appeal, the young activist fled the country. “I really miss my life in Egypt because I am now living in Switzerland far away from my family, friends and country,” he told me from his exile, “even if my country does not respect my rights and has caused me a lot of trouble.”

Saber admits that despite the dangers he faced in Egypt, he did not want to flee. “If it were up to me I would stay and defend myself even if I were to be executed,” he said in an interview at the time.

The sensationalist corners of the media had a field day during Saber’s ordeal, depicting him as the atheistic equivalent of the Islamophobic, Quran-burning American pastor, Terry Jones. “A segment of the media inserted untruths about my case. They alleged that I burnt or tore up the Quran,” he recounts. “Many people still believe this, even though my case revolved around the articles and videos I made about my personal beliefs.”

And it is not just Saber. Ever since the revolution took off in 2001, Egyptian non-believers have felt emboldened and empowered, emerging from the shadows to carve out a space for themselves on social media.

This has had a ripple effect on the mainstream media.

For example, the widely watched *90 Minute* talk show recently hosted a young atheist and social media activist, Ismail Mohamed, in an episode titled “Penetrating the secret world of atheists in Egypt.” While the program brought the subject of atheism to a public platform, it was a missed opportunity to promote a mature public debate on non-belief. Despite the presenter’s assertions that she wished to give Mohamed a podium to express his views, she displayed blatant hostility towards the subject. Her guests included a psychiatrist who suggested that atheism was caused – as is similarly suggested about homosexuality in the Arab world – by psychological, financial and family problems and thus atheists deserved patience and pity.

The inconvenient truth is that atheism is not a psychological disorder. “I did not become an atheist,” counters Milad Suleiman, a young atheist blogger from Imbaba, a poor Cairo suburb that was gripped by an Islamist insurgency in the nineties. “Atheism is a state of thought. It has no specific starting point.”



#### The Atheist Spring?

Tunisia, the unexpected epicenter of the revolutionary wave that broke across the Arab world starting in late 2010, is once again setting an example to the rest of the region on the real value of freedom. The only difference this time around is that instead of being first to rise up against a despotic regime, Tunisians were first to pass a new constitution. This document, despite being drafted in compromise with the moderate Islamist an-Nahda party, guarantees “freedom of belief and conscience” and, perhaps most significantly, contains no references to Sharia. Yet calling the constitution “secular” would be going a step too far. Islam is still defined as the religion of the state and it is clearly stipulated that the president must be a Muslim. Also potentially problematic is the state’s dual duty to “protect the sacred” and to “prohibit charges of apostasy”. Could this one day be used to curb the freedom of

belief, a right that includes that of questioning the sacred and being an “apostate”?

It is, in fact, no coincidence that although Tunisia is more tolerant towards “non-believers” than most other places in the Arab world, atheism remains largely taboo. This is especially noticeable in the media, which perpetuate misconceptions about atheists. In an interview with *Tunisia Live* a male student, who is identified only as “OM”, complained about a journalist who interviewed him on his beliefs and afterwards wrote “...atheists worship stones and the sun, and ... drink urine and blood.”

Until recently most Tunisian atheists have kept their convictions behind closed doors, but since the post-revolutionary rise of Islamist parties, more and more have become vocal. At the same time, there seem to be some signs of a growing acceptance of atheist beliefs.

Paradoxically, many atheists arrive at their convictions as the product of an attempt to deepen their faith, understand their religion better or silence doubts plaguing their consciences. “When I started university in the eighties, I realized that I was very knowledgeable about lots of things, except my own religion. So I decided that I was going to delve deep into it and be as expert as possible,” Ayman Abdel-Fattah, a socially minded businessman and affably outspoken atheist in his late forties, told me in a noisy watering hole in the upscale Cairo neighborhood Zamalek. But instead of reaffirming his faith, this exercise, Abdel-Fattah admits, “gave me the shock of my life” because he found that the founding fathers and mothers of Islam were very human, for the most part cynically political, motivated by self-interest and riven by infighting, jealousy and overriding ambition.

Others begin their journey as deeply conservative believers. “I was a very religious person when I was a teenager. I used to teach kids in church and remote villages about Christianity and Jesus,” recalls Mena Bassily, a young Egyptian computer scientist now living in New Zealand. Unsatisfied with the clergy’s textbook responses to his growing doubts, Bassily embarked on a journey of spiritual self-discovery that eventually led him to jettison his faith.

Before the revolution, Abdel-Fattah says, Egyptians preferred to adopt a deathly silence on the subject. “There was not a single attempt for any serious academic study or genuine analysis of the social repercussions of the trend, despite the fact that it was easily observable through the blogosphere and social media at large,” he points out.

So what prompted the media to wake up to this phenomenon? “[Everything] changed after it became apparent [that] the Islamists were going to take over,” Abdel-Fattah explains. “[The media] concluded there was one, and only one, reason for this ‘atheism tsunami.’ It was the Islamists’ rule.”

The expression “atheism tsunami,” evoking images of a Biblical god flooding the world with atheists rather than the more conventional water, fire or brimstone, was memorably used by Amr Adeeb, the loud-mouthed host of the popular talk show *al-Qahira al-Youm* (Cairo Today). The ‘experts’ on Adeeb’s show concluded that young people were turning to atheism as a reaction to the reactionary brand of Islam that had taken hold in Egypt.

“Following the coup, a lot of people reacted against religion as a rejection of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood,” observes Amira Mohsen, a British-Egyptian journalist and media analyst. In addition, the military regime has manipulated the widespread fear that Egypt could become the next Saudi Arabia to demonize the Muslim Brotherhood and justify its persecution of the movement.

Blaming radical Islamists appeals both to atheists and religious moderates. For atheists, it supports the hope that



#### Unholy in the Holy Land

The Dome of the Rock. The Holy Sepulchre. The Western Wall. As the cradle of the Abrahamic faiths, the Holy Land is better known for belief than non-belief, yet atheists do walk among the faithful. However, when it comes to Palestinian non-believers, life can be lonely and finding like-minded people difficult. “I don’t know many non-believers,” admits George, a Palestinian atheist from Jerusalem. Whether this is a sign that the numbers are low or Palestinian atheists keep a low profile is unclear, he admits. “The Palestinian media doesn’t deal with the issue,” he says. It wasn’t always this way. Not so long ago, communists played a prominent role in the Palestinian struggle and the loss of Palestine seems to have triggered doubts about religion. For instance, the writings of both Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani deal with shaken faith. “God does not come to the poor,” Darwish declares in one of his poems, while a character in one of Kanafani’s stories declaims: “May the curse of the God who does not exist anywhere pour down on you.”



#### Non-belief: the Saudi situation

As a strict Wahhabi theocracy, Saudi Arabia does not tolerate the presence of other religions or other branches of Islam in the public sphere. Conversion and atheism are both considered “apostasy” and, according to the Kingdom’s laws, are punishable by death.

Unsurprisingly, citizens and foreigners living in Saudi are very careful when expressing views about religion. But there are a growing number of exceptions who are challenging these restrictions. One example is Saudi poet Hamza Kashgari who, in early 2012, posted three tweets on an imaginary encounter with Muhammad during the festival of the prophet’s birthday (*Mawlid*) in which he declared: “I shall not bow to you,” and “I have loved aspects of you, hated others.” After more than a year and a half in prison for his “blasphemous” outburst, Kashgari was finally released in October 2013. This is part of a broader backlash against Saudi’s Wahhabi establishment which has included a civil disobedience campaign by

women who want the right to drive. Even the fearsome *Mutaween*, the once untouchable religious police, is coming in for increasingly harsh criticism and opposition, including lawsuits and protest actions, especially after agents drove two young brothers playing music off a bridge to their deaths in a high-speed car chase. Despite the risks involved, a secretive atheist underground movement has emerged in Saudi. In order to discuss and share ideas, the group of dissidents mostly gather in online forums, but on rare occasions they also manage to meet face to face. “We non-believers have meetings and groups in a lot of Saudi cities,” one atheist told *Your Middle East* in 2013. “If you go into them, you will be shocked by the numbers and elements of society represented.”

society will, one day, throw off the shackles of conservative religion and choose secularism instead .

For religious moderates, placing blame elsewhere sustains their belief that it is not religion which is the problem but the way it is abused by extremists.

But while disgust at the surge of Islamic extremism may have prompted a number of Egyptians to abandon their faith, far greater influences appear to be intellectual conviction, more openness sparked by the 2011 revolution, and a gradual discarding of old, tired philosophies that tried to create homogeneity by ignoring the country’s diversity.

“Egyptian society has always been diverse and varied in terms of beliefs, opinions and cultures,” notes Alber Saber, the exiled blogger. “This has made many tolerant of those with differing outlooks.”

Beyond Egypt’s mainstream media, a profound public debate on belief has begun. This can be observed particularly in social media, which has seen a profusion of blogs, citizen journalism and films tackling this complex topic.

In the progressive ranks of the Egyptian media, there have also been efforts to portray atheists sympathetically. For instance, the online *al-Badil* (Alternative), which describes itself as “the voice of the weak”, produced a video documentary in which a number of atheists were given the space and freedom to elaborate on their beliefs, lives, concerns and worries.

Atheists hope that the revolution of consciousness which has overtaken Egyptian society will expand to include them. “I don’t think I will witness any earthshattering changes for atheists’ rights or recognition in my lifetime,” concludes Ayman Abdel-Fattah, “but I’m also certain that the momentum has reached an irreversible point.”