

Final Report

Understanding Unbelief in Egypt

Report on preliminary findings

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Preface

This report is the result of a pilot study conducted in 2013, and the result of the study conducted under the 'Understanding Unbelief programme' entitled 'Understanding Unbelief in Egypt' (January 2018- July 2019). This report is a preliminary description of the huge amount of material I collected, rather than a full analysis. Based on the material of the pilot a book chapter has been written (Van Nieuwkerk 2018b). Two articles will be published (Van Nieuwkerk forthcoming 2020/2021). Eventually a monograph is envisaged in which all the material will be used to provide an in-depth account of nonbelieving in present-day Egypt. The goals for this report are thus rather modest and descriptive.

I would like to thank many people for helping me in this research. Most of them will have to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I could imagine that it would have been better for the people who I will introduce in this study not to have allowed me an interview. Speaking out about religious doubts, agnosticism, nonbelief or atheism is not an easy thing. It can have serious repercussion if it gets known to relatives, employers, or state security. Therefore I am very grateful to those who spoke out, but of course I will protect their identities, use pseudonyms or change details of their stories that might reveal their identities.

I would also like to thank the Egyptian students who helped me in translating the large amount of material on social media on nonbelieving, whether from the religious media, the state media, or the nonbelievers' own media - particularly the many You tube channels dealing with this issue. We decided that even for them it would be better that their names are not linked to a project on nonbelieving. Of course the people featuring in the video channels who are not hiding their identities will be presented as such in this report. I will thus follow the strategic choices people themselves make with regard to hiding or coming out for skepticism or nonbelief.

Finally I would like to thank the Understanding Unbelief programme of the University of Kent for making this research possible.¹

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Introduction

Whereas the rapid rise of ‘nones’ in the West and movements like ‘New Atheism’ have received insufficient scholarly attention, this holds even more for similar developments in the Middle East. While atheism, unbelief, agnosticism and related terminology suffer from negative connotations (Zuckerman 2009), even in the field of sociology of religion (Cragun and Hammer 2011), the Arabic equivalence, such as *kufr* (unbelief), *ilhad* (atheism), *ridah /irtidad* (apostasy), *la idriyya* (agnosticism) not only evoke strong condemnation but can have severe social and legal consequences and even be punishable by death (Peters and De Vries 1976-1977; Berger 2003; O'Sullivan 2003; Olsson 2008; Adang, Ansari, Fierro and Schmidtke 2016).

Processes of secularization also gained an important, albeit severely contested, foothold in the Middle East. However, especially since the Islamic Revival of the 1970s, the public sphere has largely become ruled by religious-moral norms. Nonbelievers are perceived as a threat to public moral order. For that reason unbelief appears to be a matter of state security.

This religious-political context affects the nature of unbelief in the Middle East. It is not only difficult to ‘come out of the closet,’ it also produces different connections between believing and belonging. Many nonbelievers will still try to ‘pass’ as Muslim and to belong to the religious moral communities of which they are part (Cottee 2015, 2018; Enstedt 2018). They try to belong without believing.

Yet against all odds, a growing number of nonbelievers do speak out. Nonbelieving even appears to be a growing trend and certainly is a cause of great concern for political and religious leaders in the Middle East. This growing visibility and/or audibility of nonbelievers’ voices in the public realm are a striking development.

This relatively new development in the Middle East, however, has hardly received scholarly attention (exceptions are Schielke 2012, 2013; Whitaker 2015; Sidlo 2016; Pauha & Aghaee 2018). This lack of attention can not only be related to the general lack of attention for the study of nonbelief and atheism, but also to perceptions on Islam as a solid, inerasable personal and political force. The study of Muslim societies suffers from an overemphasis on religion as the most important factor in the lives of Muslims (Bowen 2012). The study on nonbelief can redress this over-determined view. Studying nonbelief will greatly nuance our understanding of the force and influence of religion in the Middle East.

This research focuses on Egypt because nonbelieving is at the moment a very sensitive issue and widely discussed in the media. Since the 2011-revolution and particularly after the ousting of President Morsi in 2013, the media has claimed there is a tremendous increase in the amount of nonbelievers and atheists. This ‘problem’ is purportedly caused by a rigid understanding of religion as has been enforced by the Muslim Brothers. This would have caused young people to despise religion and set them off on a journey towards doubt and disbelief. Whereas we have to be cautious to uncritically reproduce this media frame, it is a highly interesting contestation that enables us to examine the importance and nature of unbelief.

The powerful intertwining of religion, politics and morality makes nonbelieving an extremely sensitive issue in Egypt. Statistics are therefore difficult to get or to assess for their reliability. Several outspoken atheists were persecuted and fled the country. Others who stayed in Egypt are regularly harassed, particularly if they go public. Being nonpracticing or even a private nonbeliever is not necessarily a (security) problem, but coming out as such in public is highly controversial. For that reason the available estimations are part of on-going political contestations (Van Nieuwkerk 2018b). However, a recent survey - on many different topics - from Arab Barometer, published by the BBC, indicates that since 2013, the number of Egyptians, particularly under age 30, identifying as "not religious" has risen from approximately 3% to 11%.¹

Yet, despite the lack of clarity with regard to absolute numbers, there is a noticeably increase in young Egyptians coming out for nonbelieving and publicly testifying they have left the faith. Recently there have emerged several You Tube channels run by Egyptian atheists (e.g. Black Ducks, and Free Mind), and Facebook pages on nonbelieving, agnosticism and atheism (e.g. Egyptians without religion, and Agnostics in Egypt). In addition there is a campaign 'say it out loud' encouraging people to come 'out of the closet.' This new trend is visible among Muslims as well as Coptic Christians and involves men as well as women. Some of them testify anonymously on social media, others do so openly. Some identify as activist atheists, others as agnostics. Some go through a phase of religious doubts, others are religiously indifferent. It is important to analyse these various forms and expressions of nonbelief.

Particularly for women, moving out of Islam is a contentious issue and systematically related to moral laxity. All nonbelievers are accused of immorality, however, the burden of this accusation weighs more heavily on women. Whereas for all nonbelievers leaving the community of faith is a painful experience, due to the minority status and involvement of the Coptic Church in everyday life activities of their followers, the impact on ex-Copts can be particularly acute. Accordingly, the different impact and hold of belief systems and institutions on people vary according to gender and religious or ethnic identity. These variations and the interconnection of previous religious experiences and the nature of current unbelief is a central focus of this project.

These experiences inform not only the nature and expression of nonbelief but also the subsequent development of alternative outlooks on life and related sensibilities. Leaving Islam is not only a cognitive process but also involves bodily acts, such as removing the veil, ceasing to fast, or changing dietary habits, although several nonbelievers continue to embody parts of religion in order to 'pass' as a Muslim. The developments of alternative outlooks and its ambiguous embodiment will be another focus of this project.

In order to study the nature and variety of unbelief in Egypt, it is important to examine the highly politicized media framing in both state and religious media. This will influence the self-definitions of nonbelievers, atheists, and agnostics. Particularly the framing on immorality is strong and many nonbelievers mention that the moment they exposed themselves they were confronted with the question "do you now sleep with your mother and your sister?" The study analyses the media frames and particularly focuses on nonbelievers' own understandings of unbelief and the ensuing understanding of morality.

Research questions, methodology, and sources

This study therefore examines the following questions:

- How is unbelief perceived, defined, and debated in Egypt by diverse political and religious actors? Which terms are used to label different forms of unbelief?
- How do male and female ex-Copts and ex-Muslims define and experience religious doubt and unbelief?
- In how far do they reveal or conceal their nonbelieving and doubts and how does this affect their feelings of belonging?
- What are the characteristics of different forms of unbelief? What is the content of their arguments? What kind of God/religion do they leave behind?
- In how far do they develop alternative understandings of belief and a new outlook on life and morality? How do they embody these new convictions and ensuing sensibilities?

The theoretical approach of this study is informed by the anthropology of religion, the secular, and religious doubts (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2009; Hirschkind 2010; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Pelkmans 2013) and the on-going character of religious transformation processes. This is captured in the notion of ‘moving,’ in this case moving out of Islam and Christianity in Egypt. Moving out of religion is a dynamic but also ambiguous process that has no specific ending. The concept of moving emphasises the dynamism and potentially never ending character of transformation processes regarding belief, worldview and in that sense also of unbelief. It also opens up space to reverse the attention from religion as a system defining people’s behaviour to the idea that it is people who make sense of and move from, to, between and out of religious positions and worldviews. This process takes place at the level of ideas but also, and particularly, at the level of everyday practices in which ideas, morality, and sensibilities are embodied and acted out (Van Nieuwkerk 2018a). Instead of, or next to, ‘the grand schemes,’ (Schielke and Debevec 2012) it is particularly in everyday life that complex, ambiguous, and contradictory attitudes towards (lack of) faith are experienced and lived (McGuire 2008). The study thus aims to develop an approach of ‘lived nonbelief’ (see also Lee 2015). Schielke and Debevec (2012) have criticized the anthropology of Islam for putting too much emphasis on Islam. Yet, not only belief but also nonbelief can differ in its degree of salience in people’s lives. Approaches to nonbelief should neither consider this necessarily as a stable destination nor treat it as the most salient aspect of nonbelievers’ identities. It is particularly the various forms and varieties of experiences that we need to grasp.

For that reason, in terms of research methods, this study uses a comparative, intersectional approach and studies men and women as well as Muslims and Copts in Egypt. It combines fieldwork and face-to-face interviews and a study of the agnostics’ and nonbelievers’ social media, particularly You Tube channels and online testimonials, as well as the way nonbelievers are represented in state and religious media.

I already started fieldwork in Egypt in 2013, and in addition to studying some of the state and religious media sources, I interviewed 12 agnostics or nonbelievers (men (9), women (3), Muslims (9) and Copts (3)) in addition to some interviews with general observers (see van Nieuwkerk 2018b). In 2017-2018, I conducted an additional amount of 35 interviews both

with nonbelievers as well as people who could shed light on the social issue of nonbelief from their professional background (journalists, psychiatrist, religious scholars etc.). Also some informal talks have taken place at the meetings of the Secularist Society in Cairo. This research report is accordingly based on a total of 11 interviews with Coptic sceptics and nonbelievers (6 male and 5 female); 26 from a Muslim background (16 male and 10 female); and 13 interviews with various people: activist (1); Sufi inspired youth (3); general observers (6); Azhar scholars (2) and a Coptic priest (1).

As is to be expected with such a sensitive topic, coming in touch and being granted an interview with nonbelievers was not easy. My first contact was made by posting on a Facebook group of Egyptian agnostics. The moderator responded and we made an appointment in the lobby of a Western hotel. Through acquaintances I met some young Coptic sceptics and nonbelievers who brought me into contact with other individuals. I basically used the snowball technique to broaden my network. Meeting people through friends of friends of friend was essential to have the trust of people to meet me. Usually I met in an open public space like western style coffee shops or gardens, sometimes in the privacy of their homes, and one interview even took place in the safety of a long car drive. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, a minority in Arabic or switching languages e.g. when the waiters came with the order. Coming into contact with women willing to share their story was even more difficult but I was lucky to being introduced to a group of female friends who dared to speak out. Although I am happy with the number of people I have been able to talk to, I obviously cannot claim they are a representative sample. Claiming such a thing with a group whose number and profile is unknown, would be impossible.

My interlocutors were all informed about my research project, institutional affiliation, and my intention to publish about the topic. They gave their consent to use their information and life stories, but of course in a completely anonymised way. Accordingly, several details are changed to guarantee their anonymity. One person asked me later on not to use his story as he was afraid that his identity might be revealed due to the fact that he had also published about (part of) his trajectory using his own name. This request will of course be honoured and his trajectory will only figure in a very general way. Yet it again points to the sensitive nature of this topic and possible dangers involved in case they are exposed.

In addition to fieldwork, I tapped into the rich online materials available. The online nonbelievers more often - but not always - reveal their identity and I will follow their method of hiding or revealing. I made an inventory of the available You Tube channels (such as the Black Ducks, Arab Broadcasting, Free Mind), individual channels of Egyptian atheists (e.g. Isma`il Muhammad, Ahmed Harqan, Masri Mulhid, Sherif Gaber), some of whom have left the country and work from the diaspora (e.g. Alber Saber, Masri Mulhid, `Ali `Ali, George Paul, Hamed `Abdel Samad). I also examined the state and religious media (e.g. `Amr Khalid, Habib `Ali al-Jifri, Mo`ezz Mas`ud and Father Dawud) dealing with unbelief, including talk shows featuring prominent activist atheists in dialogue with Coptic priests and Muslim sheiks.

Transcribing and translating this highly relevant and rich material is very time consuming. I made a selection of the most relevant sources and worked with a team of local research assistants to translate these sources into English. Some of them were able to use subtitle programs, others translated it in a word file. Some of them did not make a literal translation

but rather summarized the main points from a discussion. So the level of detail of the translation might differ. We did not manage to translate all the material I initially selected. So I also worked on some programmes myself without making a full translation due to lack of time. I also included some English subtitled You Tube channels from nonbelievers of an Egyptian background (Sherif Gaber, `Ali `Ali, and Hamid `Abdel Samad). Below I will describe the most important sources.

From the state media I selected some 'scholarly' debates about Islam and atheism (5 episodes). They mainly go about the existence of God, the evolution theory, Big Bang, creative design, and other explanations about the origin of the universe disproving the non-existence of God. In addition, I selected a few more 'sensational' talk shows featuring nonbelievers, sometimes with guests refuting their ideas (8 programmes). These talk shows quite often end in shouting and the guest beings ordered to leave the studio. Although the anchor invites them because they are atheists and because it is a hot topic, the hosts do not want to provide nonbelievers with a platform for spreading their views. Quite often an official from a religious centre of learning – like al-Azhar or the Coptic Church - or a psychiatrist is invited to explain the 'wrong' and 'unbalanced' ideas of 'these misguided youngsters.'

With regard to religious sources, I analysed the Ramadan series Lahzit Sukun / Moment of Tranquillity (30 episodes) of Habib `Ali al-Jifri, a Yemeni preacher and scholar who is highly popular.² The series is located in a studio setting where the host interviews Habib `Ali based on reports in which atheists express their views and questions. There is no direct interaction between nonbelievers and the preacher. They feature in compilations and reports while the host reiterates their main points and invites the preacher to address them. He does so in a quiet and friendly way. This forms a huge contrast with the media shows ending in anger and shouting. Famous lay preacher `Amr Khalid also made a Ramadan series in 2015 dedicating 4 episodes to the topic of atheism.³ He particularly addresses young people and their parents concerning questions about the existence of God and the 'wrong' information by atheists expressed on social media. His aim is to make the youth resilient against this atheist rationale and to support parents in properly dealing with religious doubts of their children. It is an emotional pious appeal rather than dealing with atheism in a logical and rational debate style. I also looked at popular lay preacher Mo`ez Mas`ud (a lengthy TV interview and a few episodes of 'Steps of Satan') in which a more artistic approach is used. Particularly the song 'Ya Rehla' is interesting for advocating the quest for knowledge and doubts as an important aspect of the journey towards truth instead of a danger to faith. Finally, I examined 34 episodes of the well-liked and respected Coptic priest Father Dawud Lama`i, who made a programme 'A question puzzling me' on questions around atheism and God's existence in 2013 and 2014.⁴ This is a more classical, religious setting with the priest sitting behind his desk, with religious symbolism and more a one directional way of giving explanation about religious themes like why evil or violence exists.

There are a lot of social media sources from nonbelievers, many more than I have studied. I could not include all sources on unbelief since it had become in the meanwhile a very extensive source. I limited myself to channels moderated by Egyptians, both from a Coptic and Muslims background and not from other Arab countries who also occasionally host Egyptian nonbelievers, like the Arab Atheist Broadcast. I also chose those who mainly cater to an Egyptian or Arab audience by producing their videos mainly in Arabic and are less

targeting Western audiences. Sometimes they are taken offline due to complaints and later on started again as happened several times to the channel of Masri Mulhid. This occasionally meant the loss of episodes and sometimes they called upon their followers to upload them again if they have saved them on their computers. So it is a volatile online world. Some like, Masri Pharaon, only made a few episodes and then stopped (I analysed 6 episodes), others are very productive and continued for a long time like Black Ducks /*al-Batt al-Iswid*. From some of the sources I only selected a few episodes dealing with Egyptian nonbelievers (Free Mind (3 episodes) and *al-Gahr bi-Ilhad* / Declaring atheist (2 episodes)

My main source is The Black Ducks, which has a similar meaning to black sheep in English.⁵ It is moderated by Isma`il Muhammad. Isma`il Muhammad was influenced by one of the first cases of arresting young people for nonbelieving, the case of former Coptic Alber Saber. This made him reflect on and study about Islam and human rights, leading him eventually to leave religion and to become an activist for free speech. The main aim of the Black Ducks is to provide a platform for expressing opinions of nonbelievers, freethinkers, atheist, agnostics, or holding a different worldview that is not accepted by main stream media. In addition they want to show that their voices are not marginal, on the contrary, they are many. Black Ducks' host Isma`il Muhammad started in August 2013 and uploaded 312 at the time of writing (March 2019).

Isma`il Muhammad interviews his guests, mainly nonbelievers and secularists from all over the Arab world from both a Christian and Muslim background, about their reasons for nonbelieving, freedom of speech, human rights issues, position of women, science, evolution, logic, religious myth and superstition, as well as gender, sexuality, homosexuality and civil marriage. The topics also deal with current political events related to religion, ISIS, Charley Hebdo, the burning of the Jordanian pilot, or comments on Egyptian media dealing with atheism. But mostly he interviews nonbelievers and freethinkers on their views and journeys in which several of the above themes are intertwined.

I analysed 60 episodes, sometimes hosting the same guest. I chose the episodes with Egyptian nonbelievers, male (41) and female (19) from a Coptic (15) and a Muslim (45) background. Some of them are now living abroad. Several are visible, mainly those living in the West, other are wearing a mask, or are only audible but not visible. The variety of voices expressed in the various episodes of the Black Ducks is my main source of information for the atheist media. Isma`il Muhammad usually started with questions about the motives, reason and trajectories of the nonbelievers, thus providing rich material for this study.

Like Isma`il, Ahmad Harqan works from Egypt. They made several episodes together but Ahmad Harqan also opened his own channel.⁶ Ahmad Harqan is a former Salafi who was destined to become a preacher. He studied in Saudi Arabia and is well versed in Qur'an and hadith. When confronted with 'inconsistencies' in his study of the sources, he finally decided the Qur'an cannot be divine. He finally lost faith and became outspoken against religion. He made some episodes explaining religious views on topics like the 'Story of God' and 'Religion and Morality'. Later he started *Hiwar Maftuh*/ Open talk. This takes the form of a lengthy discussion group in which several guests from Egypt and elsewhere participate on a topic of mutual concern like: the label "Extremist Atheist", "Thinking about Returning" and "Islamophobia" (I selected 5 episodes). In his episodes his religious/Salafi background and knowledge of Qur'an and Hadith is clearly recognizable. His style is less focussed on personal stories but particularly aiming at refutation of religion based on religious sources.

In addition, I also analysed several episodes (27 in total) from the channel run by Masri Mulhid / The Egyptian Atheist, one of the first channels to open shortly after the revolution.⁷ After he shared videos of himself declaring that he does not believe in God, he started receiving harsh criticism. The situation escalated when he filmed himself tearing apart the Qur'an. Egyptian Islamic Satellite Channel ElHafez showed the video on air and the result was that the sheikhs in the studio declared it religiously correct to kill him. He is working from the States and uses a confrontational style. He was also invited as a guest in the Black Ducks show several times. From his own channel I particularly choose the series '*Limadha ana mulhid*' / Why I am an atheist (21 episodes). He identifies as anti-religion and tries to combat the 'destructive' effects of religion on society. He is disliked by many for his aggressive tone but he legitimizes his approach by saying that his cursing and sarcasm is a weapon needed to enlighten society: "It might be in a rough manner but I believe that to wake up someone in a coma, a punch to the face will be more effective than a gentle tap." He is a medical doctor and works from the USA.

Sherif Gaber has a totally different approach.⁸ He uses humour to make young people reflect on religious aspects he considers 'myths': particularly the 'scientific miracles' in the Qur'an such as the embryo 'myth'. Most of his episodes are subtitled in English (I analysed 21 episodes). He often makes sketches playing different characters himself, poking seemingly innocent questions at a 'mainstream' believer who tries to answer Sherif's questions in a recognizable but funny way. Sherif Gaber was expelled from university when he questioned his professor's information about homosexuality. He was accused of atheism, imprisoned and later set on bail. He went underground for several years while producing high quality video's but was recently charged again for blasphemy and arrested.

Hamid `Abdel Samad's series 'Box of Islam' also has English subtitles.⁹ He takes a more historical scholarly approach concerning the time and life of the Prophet and the development of the prophetic tradition. I watched several episodes but did not include them extensively because they have a specific more historical textual approach and do not deal with current political issues or debates.

From a Coptic background I chose Alber Saber and George Paul. Alber Saber was jailed and sought asylum in Switzerland. He produced videos from Switzerland and engaged in debates with believers (I analysed 12 episodes).¹⁰ George Paul is a medical doctor working in the USA. He is a frequent guest on other channels, such as the Black Ducks, and is active on Qanat al-Akhir / The Other Channel.¹¹ I choose 17 episodes, particularly those dealing with a response to religious preachers' programs such as `Amr Khalid and Father Dawud Lama`i, refuting their representation and explanations of atheism.

I have collected a large amount of documents and sources dealing with various aspects of atheism and unbelief in present-day Egypt. I have used atlas-ti to systematically code all the documents. In this report I will only deal with the key issues of the Understanding Unbelief project, that is, the nature and variety of unbelief and how this is embodied and lived by male and female nonbelievers of a Muslim and Coptic background. Since these issues are closely intertwined with the political situation, I will provide an overview of the political context in order to make the recent discussions about nonbelieving in Egypt comprehensible.

Chapter 1 'The atheist Spring'?¹²

Atheism or scepticism - or accusations thereof - is not a recent phenomenon in the Muslim world. In his book 'Religious Freedom' (2005), al-Khatib provides a brief historical overview of prominent cases in the modern Middle East in which the freedom to change or leave religion was hotly debated. Starting with As`ad Shidyaaq (1798-1830) a Levantian Catholic Maronite who converted to Protestantism and was killed during his confinement, the discussion on freedom of conscience was fanned. In the late 19th century, scholars – like the Egyptian professor Shibli Shumayyil - supporting the new theory of evolution also sparked accusations of heresy and atheism. The modernist renewal movement of, amongst others, Taha Hussein and Muhammad Hussein Heikal, was a prominent case of accusations of apostasy by these enlightenment writers as well. Isma`il Mazhar, founder of al-Usur magazine in 1927, openly posed the issue of atheism for the first time in the Arab world (al-Khatib 2005: 17).

In 1930, Isma`il Adham wrote a famous essay with the title "Why I am an atheist." After reading Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species' he became a 'believer in evolution, science and logic' (2005: 267-268). Whereas Darwinism and natural science played a central role in Arabic debates in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the 'scientific atheism' of Marxism and communism was much more influential in its second half (Schielke 2012: 312). However, communists and socialists in most Muslim countries rarely promoted atheism in public. They usually argued that Islam, when properly implemented, is perfectly in accordance with socialism (Schielke 2013: 644). Many intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s had a secular attitude and open or hidden stances of nonbelieving (Whitaker 2015).

Since the late 1970s, the Islamic Revival became a noticeable phenomenon in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world. During this period the number of blasphemy cases increased, initiated both by conservative Islamists within the religious establishment and non-state actors, such as journalists, independent religious figures, academics, and members of parliament, who tried to attack secular intellectuals and artists. Farag Fuda, a secular intellectual, was murdered in 1992 after the Egyptian religious authorities decided that "everything he does is against Islam" (Mostyn 2002: 148). In 1994, the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed by two militant Islamists. In 1993, the famous scholar Nasr Abu Zayd was declared "heretic" and was forced into exile in 1996 because of the accusations of apostasy.

Whereas previously the media did not pay much attention to apostasy and nonbelieving because it appeared to concern incidental intellectuals or artists, since 2005 it became a large concern for society. Young people were increasingly engaged in debates on belief, secularism, and atheism, using blogs, discussion forum, and Paltalk.

Karim `Amer was the first blogger to be arrested in Egypt in 2005. He wrote a highly critical blog about Islam, particularly about the riots and attacks on Copts in the name of religion, for which he was arrested and jailed for 4 years in 2006. Alber Saber was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment in 2012. On 26 January 2013, he was released for an appeal session and left Egypt. These cases inspired other young atheists to open You Tube channels to inform the public about nonbelieving and secularism.

Obviously internet provided many different ideas, among which those of vocal new atheists like Dawkins. Particularly his book “The God Delusion” but also videos by new atheists, translated into Arabic, were a source of information and inspiration about atheism. The emergent Arab and Egyptian nonbelievers’ social media became increasingly important for young nonbelievers, not only as a source of information but also as an eye-opening experience that there were ‘others out there’ sharing one’s doubts about God and religion.

Around the period of the revolution many You Tube channels, and Facebook pages opened and magazines were published discussing nonbelieving and atheism, such as the ‘Arab Atheist Magazine’, ‘Arab Atheist Broadcasting’, the ‘Declare your Atheism Facebook page’ and channels by individual nonbelievers, such as ‘The Egyptian Atheist’ and the ‘Black Duck show’.

This proliferation of social media on nonbelieving resulted in a high-pitched debate within state media and among religious officials about this alarming and threatening phenomenon. Speculations about the number of atheists abounded. Religious sources such as the main authority of Islam, the Azhar, reported that Egypt counted exactly 866 atheists out of a population of 87 million. However, former Grand Mufti, ‘Ali Goma’, said that a study was conducted by the Azhar among 6000 youth and 12.5% of them turned out to be atheists. He managed to have 10% of them revert back to Islam. Sheikh Turki, responsible for the Azhar campaign to fight atheism, estimated them at a few thousands, yet he feared nonbelief would spread like an epidemic thus explaining the need for a campaign. However, another sheikh in a media programme estimated atheism at 3.700.000, particularly due to people’s anger at the Muslim Brotherhood rule.

It is difficult to estimate the number of nonbelievers because it is too dangerous for most to ‘come out of the closet’. As George, a young nonbeliever from a Coptic background, expressed: “Most Egyptians lead secret lives – whether sexually or religiously. I have no doubt that there are far more atheists than would be publicly counted. And those very atheists would express adamant religious belief in public even though they might be secretly atheists. This is not an environment that would allow expression in any way” (Interview 8th of February 2015). So, who are these outspoken or hidden atheists? Why do they leave Islam and why do some choose to speak out despite the danger involved?

The revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the ‘Atheist Spring’ in Egypt

For the young people involved in the revolution, political values such as freedom of expression, democracy, freedom of thought and conscience, equality, and secularism were high on the agenda. They did not actively ask for the freedom of (no) religion but demanded the separation of state and religion and freedom of expression. Accordingly, for many activists, the freedom of (no) religion was part and parcel of their fight for the freedom of expression, democracy, and a secular state, irrespective of their personal beliefs. Adham, a young atheist from a Muslim background, told me about the importance of the concept of freedom for his experience of the revolution: “I started realizing that I am not the only one, there are other people like me. There are other people who believe in the same way I believe. They believe in freedom as a concept not in freedom as a religious concept. They believe in equality. They can disagree with you but still defend you” (Interview 25th of

October 2017). In addition, some of the most profiled revolutionaries were actually nonbelievers, although it was mostly after the revolution that people became aware of this. The fact that several of the revolutionary heroes were nonbelievers encouraged others to come out for their nonbelief.

For most of these young activists, whether believers or nonbelievers, religious authorities had lost their appeal because 'they had chosen the wrong side of the revolution' by supporting the regime. The failure of religious authorities, both the Islamic Azhar and the Coptic Church, to connect with the revolutionary forces in the initial stage of the revolution angered many young people and drove them away from religious institutions. Also popular preacher `Amr Khalid, who urged young people assembled on Tahrir square to return home, lost many of his young fans. In addition the political use of Islam and the ensuing power play during and after the revolution contaminated religious discourses and consequently alienated several young people from religion. The one-year rule by the Muslim Brotherhood also led to doubts about the credibility of Islam as a political system. The slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood "Islam is the solution" totally lost appeal for young revolutionaries. One of the atheists I met, told me:

"If you are advocating all the time 'Islam is the solution' and then you have the chance and you did not deliver anything. You actually were a disaster. So Islam is not the solution? ... They tried to cover it up: this is not Islam blah blah blah. So what the fuck is Islam?! If Islam is not the Muslim Brotherhood, not the Salafis so who or what is Islam? The Azhar? It is infected with Muslim Brothers and Salafis as well! Is it Da`ish [IS]? Some people chose for this and went there. And some found out 'yeah better to have no religion actually'. I choose to be an atheist" (Interview 14th of February 2015).

The revolution not only encouraged liberation by its political goals of, amongst others, freedom of speech and conscious but also by the sheer experience of being part of the historic moment of overthrowing the ruling power. It was felt as a huge empowering event and capacity that was not contained to the political sphere but transformed into a feeling of personal empowerment. Most of the young atheists I met were actively involved either directly on Tahrir square or following the revolutionary moments from a distance on social media. Not all women were allowed to participate and some were still young at the time, but all of them felt personally engaged. As Alber Saber, an activist atheist from a Christian background expressed: "Do you think someone who would take to the streets before the revolution and who chanted against Mubarak would be afraid to reveal his beliefs?"¹³

Loosing fear for the ruling power and its repressive apparatus was an important empowering experience. It also enabled questioning different kind of authorities, as a young female atheist explained to me. Elham was not allowed to participate directly in the revolution by her parents for fear of being killed or raped, but she nevertheless experienced the huge empowering effect of overthrowing Hosni Mubarak:

"Any person under 30 and person born up to until 1981, any Egyptian, came to consciousness knowing that Hosni Mubarak is the president. He was a part of the hierarchy. 'Okay there is God, there is religion and there is Hosni.' And we could not 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 that

..well.. if he can go, so any authority can go! What about the authority of God?"(Interview 29th of October 2017).

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

"That is what I like about the revolution. It could be a collective experience and at the same time it is very personal. After the revolution I was still wearing the *hijab*. Then I started to question not just Islam, but the idea of God himself. I compared him to the president, to tyranny, God as tyrant himself. So somebody is in charge all the time; you are not free. Even if you think you are free. For me it started with this point" (Interview 13th of February 2015).

Yet it did not stop by questioning state and religious authorities but reached the third pillar of authority in Egypt: parental authority or patriarchy. Ibtisam continued by saying: "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."

Also Zahra, a female atheist, observed:

"The revolution made the people want to be free and I think religion makes you not free. Outside reading and stuff, people reject religion and God because they want to be free. I reject religion. We owe the revolution many things: There is a sexual revolution as well, not just the religion thing" (Interview 30th of October 2017).

We can thus observe a clear relationship between the revolution and questioning authority. Conscious reflections on inherited practices and refusing to blindly follow authorities are part of the process unleashed by the revolution in Egypt. This impacted the three pillars of authority in Egypt: the state, religion and patriarchy (Van Nieuwkerk 2018b). Below we will unpack the contestations from the side of the authorities and the nonbelievers in the field of politics, religion and the family.

Contesting political and religious authorities

Atheists entered the political field. They were active during the revolution as well as during the ousting of president Morsi. They also met with the committee of fifty, who wrote the new Egyptian constitution in 2014, asking for a complete "secularization of the state".¹⁴ They campaigned for the removal of the prescribed category of religion from the ID card and also for a civil law instead of the religious family laws. They also certainly contest religious authorities and the idea of God. They perceive contradictions in the Qur'an, entertain doubts about the exemplary character of the prophet Muhammad, and point at scientific theories that totally contradict religious explanations. They criticize perceived injustice with regard to women, minorities, and nonbelievers within religion. Yet the way the Egyptian state - backed by religious authorities – combat atheism cannot totally be explained by these political

divergences and contestations. Atheism appears to shake the very foundation of the Egyptian state.

Especially since the Islamic Revival of the 1970s, processes of secularization as analysed in the West, in which religion is relegated to the private sphere and secular principles inform the public realm, have almost been inversed in the Egyptian context (Krämer 2013). The public sphere is largely ruled by religious-moral norms, while 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom from religion' can only be practiced in the private sphere. For that reasons atheism is not only a religious problem, addressed by religious authorities through campaigns and guidance of the youth, but also a political threat that has to be dealt with by the state.

According to the penal code, there are three articles that can be used: Article 98 of the penal code stipulates that 'the contempt of heavenly religions' through written, oral or any other means that could lead to sectarianism is punishable by six months to five years in prison, and/or fines of LE500 to LE1000. According to Article 160, the desecration of religious symbols is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years, and/or fines of LE100 to LE500. Article 161 stipulates that mocking a religion or religious rite in public is a crime carrying the same penalties as Article 160. This law is not only used against nonbelievers but also against Christians and Shi'a believers who can be accused of blasphemy or defamation of Islam.

In December 2017, a new law was proposed that directly criminalizes atheism. The draft-law proposal came from a Member of Parliament. This draft-law has, until the time of writing, not been implemented. The motivation behind this proposal provides insight into the fear for atheism as an issue of the political order. Although the new constitution, ratified in early 2014, guarantees absolute religious freedom and freedom of thought, expression and opinion, we have seen how the blasphemy laws provide ample opportunity to prosecute nonbelievers. Why is there a need for a new law directly criminalizing atheism? In order to understand the rationale for the proposed outlawing of atheism it is important to briefly investigate the entanglement of religion and politics within the Egyptian state.

Ex-president Morsi was asked during the Egyptian presidential elections campaign, aired on Al-Nahar TV in 2012, what his position was on religious conversion and freedom of worship. He answered:

"With regard to the first question, about religious conversion, the well-founded principle in Islamic law is that there is no coercion in religion. This means that one must not be forced to believe in a particular religion. It is between me and my Lord. It is between the Egyptian citizen and his Lord. If he wants to change his belief, he is completely free to do so. There is a common misconception with regard to apostates and their punishment by death. This needs to be clarified. As long as the apostate keeps it to himself, rather than proclaiming it in public, thus becoming a danger to society, he should not be punished in accordance with the Islamic punishment for apostasy. However, someone who proclaims his apostasy in public, and calls for others to follow suit, is a danger to society, according to its norms, beliefs, laws, and constitution. If somebody acts in a corrupt and erroneous way in his own home, nobody has the religious or legal right to knock on his door, and ask what he is doing. But once his home turns into a den of iniquity, which threatens society, the law and the *shari'a* [Islamic law] intervene".¹⁵

The public sphere is thus ruled by Islamic law, yet religious extremism is just as threatening as nonbelieving. The public order should be informed by a conservative-moderate form of religion, as become clear from the following excerpt from the Minister of Religious Endowments, Mukhtar Goma`. He stated on the 16th of January 2018, that his ministry is taking steps on all fronts to make Egypt immune to “atheist, heretical and extremist ideas and to contain the spread of atheism in Egypt”. He continued:

“All efforts should be mobilized to fight irresponsibility and deviation in our society, because these are the ones which lead to the spread of atheism. Irresponsibility begets atheism, and we should fight both, because they are two faces of the same coin.”¹⁶

`Umar Hamrush, secretary general of the Religious Affairs Committee, during a debate on the draft proposal, seconded Goma`’s idea that atheism “is just as dangerous as the phenomenon of ... radicalism, and we should do our best to fight both.”¹⁷ Influential editor-in-chief Khaled Salah wrote in an opinion piece in newspaper ‘Egypt Today’:

“The dangers of terrorism are known, but not many know that atheism and terror are equally destructive. Atheism, also, weakens one's identity and calls into questions established beliefs in history, canons, religious symbols, the Prophet's companions and followers, and ultimately leads to the collapse of the foundations of entire nations and of their sacred beliefs.”¹⁸

We thus see in the political discourse of the Egyptian state, backed by religious authorities, that atheists are seen as deviant, destructive, unnatural, and a threat to the public order. Atheism is not only perceived to destroy the public or political order but also the moral order. The most common accusation against nonbelievers is that they are immoral. They are accused of becoming atheists in order to free themselves from religious restrictions regarding sexuality and to indulge in ‘sinful’ and ‘lustful’ practices. This brings us to contestations around gender and sexuality.

Contesting patriarchal authorities

Gender issues play a vital role in the motivation for both men and women to entertain religious doubts. Islam - but also Christianity - is perceived to enforce unequal relationships between men and women and to suppress sexuality. Many male and female nonbelievers were engaged with issues of injustice and discrimination not only of women but also of other marginalized groups such as the LGTB community. After being introduced to feminist ideas about male-female relationships, particularly at college, several female nonbelievers initiated a critical enquiry into religious gender constructs.

Sarah explained in the Black Ducks show (episode 81) how during her years at college, she developed an interest in human rights and women’s rights and studied the human rights’ charter:

“I noticed how everything conflicted with religion. The clear obvious image suddenly appeared to me, after years of not seeing it. I was shocked. I started to hear the Qur’anic verses depicting scenes of violence and assault, and verses about women. I was horrified. I was shocked. I started to realize that this is wrong. I passed through different phases of disbelief. I would follow the Qur’an but not the *hadith*, because it’s erroneous. ... I reached an agnostic stage, believing there is a higher power, not a god in the sense of the word or as depicted in these religions, but energy of the universe, a god inside us, but not known. I concluded with a stage renouncing all illogical unscientific occults and spiritual god. The final stage was atheism, because God doesn’t exist. The most important reason for me was humanity and justice”.

Hypatia, the nickname of a female nonbeliever who wears a mask to reveal her identity in another show of Black Duck (episode 60), expresses her feminist-atheist vision for the future as follows:

“I would demand freedom to wear whatever I want without harassment or persecution. Nobody should talk to me about my clothes. Second, I want to inherit the same amount as my brother, not half. I want to go to court and testify as my brother. I’m not half woman to bring another woman along to be complete. I’m not half anything. I’m not a remainder of something. I’m a human being on my own. I don’t need anyone to tell me to do anything. Third, I want this authority to be removed. We need to lift the guardianship off all women in Egypt”.

Female but also male nonbelievers I spoke with questioned discriminatory stances towards women within religion, critiqued fraternal and parental control, or demanded the freedom to remove the headscarf. Most of them eventually did remove the *hijab* but a few who tried to hide their doubts or atheism kept on wearing this iconic symbol of Islam. They insisted on more freedom to go outside and meet with friends, to choose their own spouses, and to live a more independent life. The nonbelievers’ claims and contestations thus go beyond liberation from religious restrictions by demanding political freedom and free choice in personal matters.

Here we can see the depth of the issues at stake not only for the religious and patriarchal order but also the political and public order. This provides insight into the backlash on atheism and the political use of apostasy as a way to punish those who break away from established norms and values. It is not the actual change of religion that constitutes the main problem, but rather the act of rebellion it implies (Larsson 2018: 209).

Chapter 2 Debating the Nature of Unbelief in Egypt¹⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, the analysis is based on current debates about, from, and among atheists and believers and not that much on religious or philosophical debates about the nature of unbelief. Within the present highly politicized context and emerging from the need felt by state and religious media to battle young people who leave the faith, it is clear that there is less need for a sophisticated analysis of the nature of the phenomenon but rather to combat it with all possible means. The media thus particularly explains the 'wrong' assumptions and understanding of religion, or the 'corrupted' motives of young people to deny religious truth rather than what unbelief is or how to define it. Implicitly, though, there are some central assumptions that inform these debates.

Most importantly is the common idea that 'all people are born "Muslim"', that is, in a state of submission to God, which is the literal meaning of "Islam". All people, regardless of religious convictions are by nature religious beings. To be religious is perceived as *fitra*, the natural disposition of human beings. Non-believing is not only against God's order but also against the natural order - as ordained by God. Because nature is God's creation, God's system is what is "natural". Rejection of God is accordingly "unnatural" and against the nature of human beings. The meaning of atheism in Arabic, *ilhad*, literally means deviation. It is not merely a deviation from "the right path" but also from the natural order and the innate essence of being human. A proof of the human condition as submitted to God is found in the argument that no civilizations has ever existed without deities.²⁰

The idea that religiosity is the natural state is so pervasive that people have difficulty even grasping the notion of unbelief, as several nonbelievers attested in the interviews. `Imad explained that for his Muslim relatives, nonbelief is non-existent and invisible. They simply do not recognize it even if it is in front of their eyes. They simply cannot imagine and phantom what it is: "if you don't know it, you don't see it. If you don't know it can exist.. so I think most of the people around me can't imagine. God is so real! That they cannot imagine anyone doubting" (Interview 9th of June 2017). Also former Coptic Christa explained her mother's difficulty grasping the notion of not believing. Changing from one religion to another was perhaps bad but imaginable, changing to 'nothing' was inconceivable:

"My mom, she does not grasp what it is (...). She knows I have so many friends who left Islam. They are not Muslim anymore. 'So what are they now?' They are nothing. She was like: 'how come, are they going to convert to Christianity?' No they don't believe in the idea of religion anymore. 'I don't get how you can be not something.' So many people around the world are not something (...). But it is a very absurd idea for her" (Interview 5th of January 2018).

You have to believe in something, if it is not in Islam, it must be something else.

This fundamental idea that it is human's natural disposition to believe in 'something' colours the understanding of unbelief in different ways. First, in many discussions about atheism from a religious perspective unbelief is perceived as 'something': whether a belief, a sect, an organization, with its own ideology, mission, forerunners, books, and prophets. God must be replaced by 'something' else: be it science, Darwin, evolution, the mind, or nature. It is a

common thought that nonbelieving humans need new sets of beliefs whether in materialism, Marxism or nihilism. So many debates centre around what atheists “believe in”. Haitham Tala`at, who often engages in debates with nonbelievers, clearly expresses this idea of ‘atheism as sect’ by telling the former Coptic Alber Saber:

“Look at atheism; it has hundreds of sects ... There is, for example, passive atheism, and positive atheism, there is a non-religious sect; a deist one, there is a non-religious non-theist sect, there is a temporary agnostic sect and there is a permanent agnostic sect, "weak atheism and strong atheism" [he said it in English]. There are tens of atheistic sects and each one of them says they have the absolute truth and any other sect is wrong”.²¹

Haitham Tala`at concludes that his opponent, Alber Saber, who denies being part of one of these sects and not a firm believer in materialism either, that Alber is not “a real atheist”.²²

Second, unbelief is perceived as an unnatural disposition and as abnormality. A frequent thought is that people become atheists in order to ‘sin’, to indulge in ‘bodily perversions’ or to have ‘unnatural attractions’.²³ This understanding of unbelief is closely related to the presumed motivations for nonbelieving, that is to be freed from the burden and restrictions of religion: Quoting ‘the materialists’ as saying "we die and live, and nothing destroys us except time" nonbelievers’ main motives are perceived to be able to live their lives without worrying about heaven, hell or judgement.²⁴ “Atheism is a world devoid of good and evil; of holiness and impurities; this world is abstract and neutral to both good and evil. That is atheism”.²⁵ Nonbelieving is thus understood as abnormality, corruption, and deviance. Most negative representations of unbelief derive from this notion of deviance and lack of morality (see van Nieuwkerk 2018b): “Atheism is not a solution. It is the failure of providing any solution. It allows you to do anything you want without good or evil. So, atheists are devils. Atheism is the religion of the devil. I admit that some atheists support morality but there is no moral atheism”.²⁶

Third, in most debates between believers and nonbelievers, believers perceive the nonbelievers’ main question to be whether God exists (or not). So endless debates go on whether there is proof of God’s existence or not, or whether evolution theory or Big Bang disproves the existence of God. If nonbelievers cannot proof God’s non-existence or provide the final cause for the beginning of universe (other than God because what or who caused the Big Bang?), than the idea of God is not falsified. So from the religious side of the debates unbelief is the rejection of the existence of God.

For most nonbelievers, however, the main issue is not whether God exists but the question is whether they believe that God exists or not. As former Muslim Aly Aly, now residing in the USA, tries to explain:

“Atheism is an answer to a definite question, and it is one question only: ‘Do you believe in the existence of God?’ Not ‘Does God exists’. No! The question is “Do you believe, believe - 50 stripes underlining this word - in God’s existence. Atheism does not say anything about the existence or non-existence of God, it only discusses the belief (*iman*) of a specific person in God’s existence, or the lack of his belief in the existence of God... There is a strong difference here (...) whether I am talking about my belief in something or about the existence of something”.²⁷

So whereas for believers in these debates it is the ‘something’ in which you believe that is crucial because the ‘believing’ aspect is rather self-evident, for nonbelievers it is the ‘believing’ part that is central. Only if it is logical and as long as it makes sense to them they can believe in ‘something’.

Obviously nonbelievers have a different understanding of the nature of unbelief. Yet they formulate and defend their ideas in response to the religious framing of unbelief. They accordingly reverse several of the above-mentioned assumptions and representations.

First, some nonbelievers turn the saying that ‘all people are born Muslim,’ upside down by claiming that ‘all people are born atheists’: Former Salafi Ahmed Harqan, for instance, starts his ‘Open Talk’ show ‘Why are you an Atheist’ by explaining

“For me, we are all born atheist, or non-believers. Then, we learn a certain faith or religion, as children, without being consented or asked. We are raised according to our parents’ religion, in order to become believers. Therefore, to ask why someone believes makes more sense to me”.²⁸

Another nonbeliever claimed:

“Before there is Allah there was atheism as atheism is the natural thing that you are born with. It is the human nature. The print or even the stamp [of religion] this is what is weird and needs explanation. If you are a Muslim or a Christian this is the weird thing as the only truth would be doubt, which is the most natural and normal thing ever created”.²⁹

Accordingly, to most nonbelievers to be an atheist should be the normal condition.

Second, several nonbelievers express the thought that in a way Muslims and Copts – or believers of other religions - are also atheists because they reject the Gods of other religions. The nonbelievers just go one step further on the road and reject all Gods. Black Ducks’ guest Ahmed Saber said:

“The problem is that Muslims don’t see they are themselves atheists. They don’t believe in any other God but the one they believe in is the true God. As I’ve told you, they were born into it, by chance. Chance offered him the true God, religion and sect. They are atheists to all other Gods on the surface of this planet, whereas I’m an atheist to all gods adding to that the Muslim’s. I didn’t find a God worthy of being worshipped” (episode 66).

Third, nonbelievers insistently refute the idea of atheism as a religion or a sect, replacing God with a new subject they supposedly believe in. For them unbelief has no specific ‘reference’ such as Sherif explains in a heated TV debate: “There’s no such thing we believe in as ‘The Book of Atheism’³⁰ or as another young atheist says: “I refuse to depend on the words of anybody. I would read for myself instead. I have my mind and the ability to gain knowledge and that is exactly what I would depend on. This is my reference”.³¹ In an interview `Amru explained: “I feel there is a misconception among religious people. People want to put you in a box: Muslim box, Buddhist box, atheist box. I understand the view but I don’t think I have the set of rules to abide to with my fellow atheist or organization or something” (Interview 21th of November 2017).

Former Salafist Ahmed Harqan considers atheism a specific position:

“Atheists simply don’t find the idea of God convincing. That is all. It doesn’t require anything further to become an atheist. Religious people called this position atheism. We didn’t call ourselves atheists, or anything, in fact. This is what they called us. We’re ordinary people who rejected the idea of religion, since there were no evidences behind it. We were not convinced. There is no anti-supporters league. There is no league for those who don’t like Coca Cola”.³²

Until now we have seen what unbelief is not for nonbelievers: not a religion or sect. So what is it according to them? It is hard to get a clear grip on it because as Reem explains: “Atheism doesn’t impose anything on you, which is the best thing about it” (Black Ducks, episode 256). Student of philosophy, Hassan Kamal, identifies as belonging to the school of Mourad Wahba, a professor of philosophy at `Ain Shams University in Cairo: “... we believe that everything is relative and everything changes and evolves, so we are against a set of absolute beliefs. We are all about ‘thinking.’ Being an atheist is not about an idea but it is a thinking manner. An atheist takes the logical way of thinking” (Black Ducks, episode 193). Ex-Coptic Christa, told me:

“Maybe not on a wide scale but I come from a certain circle in Cairo where there are so many agnostic people. Especially, you know, the artists, the musicians, those who study political science or literature and philosophy. I might be wrong but people who are into art or academics don’t feel that they have to stand somewhere; that they have to be on completely solid ground. It comes with a belief that certainty and that I have to belief firmly in something ... but as I go on, I read and discover new things. I change every single day” (Interview 5th of January 2018).

Accordingly, although atheism is often represented as a dogmatic conviction or a solid position to many nonbelievers atheism is the ‘not-solid’ ground (Black Ducks, episode 42).³³ Unbelief or atheism is an attitude of not looking for solid convictions and particularly an intellectual stance. George Paul said:

“I don't like calling it an ‘atheism phenomenon’ but an ‘intellectual or open-mindedness’ phenomenon, that is taking place due to the prevalence of social media networks and internet, and the ease of getting to know ‘truths’ and do research, unlike the past, when it used to be difficult for you to get to grips with what's happening. ... This development of social media networks and the internet made research very easy and made many people who used to do nothing but listen to clergymen's nonsense ... find other means to get information and get to know different people and ideas. This movement, which I do not like to call an ‘atheism movement’, but an ‘enlightenment intellectual movement’ began to spread in societies, all societies”.³⁴

Also for Hassan Kamal being an atheist is not about an idea or conviction but it is “a thinking manner” (Black Ducks, episode 193).

For most nonbelievers, unbelief is something quite contrary to how they have come to perceive a religious position: that is the guardian of an absolute truth. Former Coptic Christa also expressed:

“I believe in nonbelieving [laughs] ... I think it is humanistic, like nothing is certain. And there is a proof every day that nothing is certain. The very idea of having a very firm belief and these many absolutes contradicts with the state of the universe, the world and humans in general... Things change overnight and this has happened to me in my personal life. It is not in my favour if I believe in absolutes. If I believe in absolutes I will be shaken every single day; because things are not certain like that. I feel that it keeps me have an open mind. It keeps my mind open enough to consider so many things ... And this was something I struggled with when I believed. I always felt that I need to be in a position where I condemn someone else to make sure that I am right. The very idea that I am completely right means that I believe that somebody else is completely wrong [laughs]” (Interview 5th of January 2018).

Nonbelievers say they rather embrace the relativity of truth and the importance of doubts and questioning. Although most nonbelievers hold science in high esteem, it is the kind of science that raises questions, as former Muslim Mustafa expresses: “I would describe my position as someone who believes in the inherent capacities of science that criticizes itself. To acknowledge two things that religion lacks: a) it is not wrong to say that I don’t know; b) It is not wrong to say that I was mistaken” (Interview 25th of October 2017).

So for many nonbelievers atheism is about having an open mind, not following dogmas, rules, or leaders. This means nonbelieving is an open ended trajectory.

To wrap up this chapter on the nature of unbelief we can contrast the religious views, in which unbelief is turned into a form of belief, to the nonbelievers’ preference for open-ended, non-solid, flexible and indefinite ways of thinking. This does not mean that they cannot have very firm opinions, for instance, against their former religion or do not become adherents of certain new ideas and convictions, but it is not part of unbelief to be anti-belief or to have e.g. left wing political views. Especially with regard to the current political tensions in Egypt it was interesting to note the different views on the military, the rule of president al-Sissi, and how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood among non-believers. Accordingly with regard to intellectual or political views there is a wide range of thoughts among them, underlining again that they do not move from one position into another but to manifold positions and views. Even with regard to what ties them together – their previous belief system -different attitudes can be discerned. This brings us to the varieties of unbelief.

Chapter 3 Varieties of nonbelieving

Discussing the nonbelievers' self-identifications was interesting for deepening the understanding of the meaning of unbelief in its different shades. The analysis particularly underlines the indeterminateness and ambiguities of their identifications. In addition it highlights the sensitivity of being labelled as nonbeliever, particularly in its most outspoken form.

There was a difference between the social media material I used and the interviews. First, the social media included more outspoken and activist atheists whereas the interviews included a variety of ways in which they position and identify themselves with the concept of unbelief. In the social media material, the nonbelievers more often came out for nonbelief, whereas most of my interlocutors remained in the closet except for close friends. Although several nonbelievers in social media, e.g. in the Black Ducks, were hiding their faces - particularly women working from Egypt - most - especially those (now) working outside Egypt - were coming out for their identity as a nonbeliever. Second, in their activism on social media being clearly labelled or labelling themselves was sometimes seen as an asset - instead of a burden. Reem, currently living in the USA, expresses in Black Ducks (episode 256) that she found it useful to adopt the title of atheism in order to be taken seriously and not being perceived as 'just going through a stage that will pass'. In contrast, several of my interlocutors refused being labelled and kept open the possibility of shifting identifications.

Third, none of my interlocutors identify as anti-religion like Masri Mulhid and some other vocal activist atheists do on social media:

"I, honestly, I don't like to label myself with the word "atheist". Although I am, I deny the existence of this invisible being they call "Allah," "Jesus," or whatever name they choose. I deny these myths. This matter doesn't concern me at all. The idea of the existence of a god and all that nonsense doesn't concern me. What mainly occupies me is the destructive effect of religion on society. I don't identify as an atheist but an anti-religion. I like to identify as an anti-religion not an atheist, though I am an atheist, but the basis is the animosity towards religion".³⁵

I intentionally did not limit myself in my fieldwork to self-declared atheists since I wanted to get a better understanding of the various forms of doubt and nonbelieving. I will now examine the different and ambivalent positioning of my interlocutors, starting with the reluctance to being labelled at all, whether due to the harsh connotations in Arabic, their unwillingness to use a sticky label or the stickiness of fear for 'really being a nonbeliever' due to their religious upbringing.

Obviously it can be dangerous to come out for nonbelieving, so it makes sense not to come out as such. Yet also being raised with negative stereotypes about atheism and nonbelieving makes the realization that one has become a nonbeliever oneself very difficult and stressful. Former Muslim Lila, who explored Christianity for a while, now identifies as "borderline atheist". She explains: "Generally speaking I was very religious and then I went out, I got into Christianity for a while and then I became agnostic and now I am a borderline atheist. It is

not easy for me to say that I am an atheist but to be honest, I just am ...” (Interview 21th of January 2018).

When I asked my interlocutors explicitly how they identify, most interlocutors did eventually come up with a label or a position, something between the regular labels, or plural positioning: agnostic (4), nonreligious but keeping open the possibility for spiritual powers in various manifestations (6), deist (1), agnostic – atheist (6), atheist (9) ‘heritage Muslim’ (2) secular Muslim (1), humanist (1). Most felt comfortable with the broader term of *la dini*, non-religious because it could include the various types of nonbelief and keep open the possibility of doubt or spirituality.

My first interview in 2013 was a focus groups discussion with four friends, two identifying as atheists and two as agnostics. Momi started a Facebook page on agnosticism because this was a position that was relatively unknown in the Egyptian context. He explained the difference between his position and his friends: “I am not sure whether God exists or not. But the atheist people don’t believe in any religion or in God. About us, the agnostic people, we are not sure whether God exists or not. But it is close to each other” (Interview 2nd of July 2013).

Most of my interlocutors prefer the indeterminateness of the label *la dini*. The space it creates and the fact that it is socially a more convenient stance are among the reasons why several of my interlocutors position themselves as either *la dini* or in between agnosticism and atheism.

Consistent with their idea of nonbelief is a non-firm position, even most of those who identify as atheists keep open other possibilities. Even Milan, who calls himself a bit ‘extreme’ and closely identifies with atheism, does not call himself a ‘full atheist’:

Maybe it is because my understanding is not complete about atheism; my understanding of agnosticism is not complete. That is why I will not characterize myself as a full atheist. What would be a full atheist? A person who thinks that he could not ever be proven wrong, or could be proven that religion is some form of translation or understanding of something greater than people don’t understand. This is like: ‘no, I am right!’ It is the opposite of the religious person but in a more logical way, [but also] a bit closed-minded (Interview 6th of January 2018).

As we have seen most of my interlocutors prefer an open position, even the most closest to atheism keep open the possibility of doubts and change. For that reason several of my interviewees identify as *la dini*. Being non-religious also keeps open the option of a spiritual connection, which several of my interlocutors expressed. Sometimes this refers to a religious or a Godlike connection, but it could take another form as well, like nature, energy or beauty.

Former Muslim Elham, who after an active journey among religious positions - from very religious, to *qur’aniyya*, that is only relying on the Qur’an and not on the prophetic tradition, to deist, to briefly venturing into Christianity, during the interview identified as ‘nonreligious spiritual’:

“So again I backed off from Christianity too and began the circle of doubting religion. I had and still have a feeling that there is a power, some power in the universe that is

connecting all of us, with nature and each other. And this power or spirit might be God or might be nature or might be a nameless genderless entity but ..yeah I guess this has been going on for 3 or 4 years now. That state of .. well I don't have a label and I don't feel like wanting to having one. I am a nonreligious spiritual person" (Interview 29th of October 2017).

Taking up the open nonreligious (*la dini*) position was common because of the space it provides for different identifications while still retaining the possibility of spirituality, whether expressed in a religious or non-religious frame. We saw already the 'non-firm' preference of many of my interlocutors regardless of the label they identified with - if any, so it is no wonder that it can also result in shifting positions over time. We have seen several instances in the above examples and interview excerpts: from doubtful, sceptical, to more nonreligious forms or 'bordering atheism', but also the other way around as the last two examples exemplify: from 'close to atheism' towards more agnostic stances.³⁶

Salience of non-religion and other identifications

Some of my interlocutors explain in the interviews that being a nonbeliever of whatever sort is only part of their identity and for some not an important one anymore. They 'could not care less' than how to position themselves towards religion. Within the context of Egypt where religion is part of the political order and atheism is a sensitive issue it is understandable that nonbelieving is a 'thick' identity. Yet for several of my interlocutors the issue of unbelief in due time lost its importance. So depending on how long ago they left the faith it was a crucial issue or had lost its salience.

For former Coptic Milan his unbelief was very important: "It is critical to my identity. Because for a long time you fell you have been lied to or cheated or something" (Interview 6th of January 2018). Yet for others, years have passed and they moved on, giving their irreligious identity a less important place. The more spiritually inclined have their periods of searching and coming back to core questions interspersed with periods of indifference, like Christine expressed: "I am not very persistent. I leave it aside and come back, but I always come back to it" (Interview 21st of January 2018). For former Coptic Mushir, unbelief has also become less important: "[W]henever someone talks about what they believe in, God, or that they don't believe in God, I just listen to them, without any.. harshness. Because it really does not matter to me. It is unimportant" (Interview 15th of January 2018).

Whereas for some it becomes a matter of 'life goes on' other interlocutors find different priorities that catch their attention. Of the young agnostics and atheists I met during my first group interview in 2013 I met two of them two years later. In the meantime they were less invested with the issue. The agnostic page was no longer a top priority and the atheist friend was trying to finance his marriage.

In order to examine the varieties of unbelief, I have also used an intersectional approach and examined both male and female nonbelievers as well as those of a Muslim and a Christian background. In the next two sections I will deal the differences of becoming a nonbeliever, first according to religious background and next according to gender.

Differences among nonbelievers from a Muslim and Coptic background

Many of my interlocutors told about the way they were raised to see other religions as 'wrong'. Both Christians – and the denominations within the Coptic Church such as Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic or Evangelical - and Muslims and the currents within Sunni Islam - such as different Salafi or reformist trends - raised their kids to see themselves as being on the right track whereas all others are wrong. This discriminatory stance towards other religions or denominations sparked questions and doubts, such as reflection on 'how do I know I am the only one on the right path whereas all the others claim to be the one and only true religion as well'?

Most interlocutors, both from a Muslim and a Christian background, explained that they were not used to befriend each other. Muslim and Christians kept to themselves. However, now, after becoming nonbeliever and being indifferent towards these religious difference, many former Christians intermingle with likeminded (former) Muslims. Some former Muslims tried Christianity before leaving religion altogether. One of my former Coptic interlocutors became Muslim but only to be able to get a divorce from her husband, not because of religious motives. She eventually married a nonbelieving man with a Muslim background. The religious divide they were raised with became insignificant, opening up other bonds of friendship based on common ways of thinking and living. A few of my interlocutors were or had been in an 'interreligious' relationship, which is unacceptable for their respective religious families.

The isolation of Copts and the fact that they are a minority could make leaving the religious community more difficult. Therefore I asked my interlocutors the question whether they thought it was more difficult for people with a Christian background to become a nonbeliever than for Muslims, or not, and why.

Most of my interlocutors agreed that *socially* it was hard for Copts to leave the community. Former Muslim `Imad reflected on how the Coptic community is a survival strategy in the face of discrimination:

“...it is a survival strategy, for Copts.. ...Being an Egyptian citizen is enough to feel unsafe but being an Egyptian Copt gives even more stress to life. I can imagine it is harder for them. I don't know a lot but from my experience I can imagine it is harder. If you are a doctor you will be discriminated against to find a good job, so you need to ask the Church... it is survival tool, your network. ... If you are ostracized, that is a very hard punishment” (Interview 9th of June 2017).

Others agree that perhaps socially it might be more difficult for Christians to leave the community but *legally* and with regard to *safety* it is more difficult for Muslims. Milan balances the weight of being a social outcast versus safety as the prize to pay on becoming a nonbeliever:

“I see it as a matter of priorities and a price to pay. The price to pay for a Christian is to become a social outcast. But the price the Muslim has to pay for leaving his religion is his safety because he is no longer safe! There are certain groups who track down people and follow them, the extreme way of Islamist; the punishment for apostasy being death so

they make their life hell and send them death threats. Maybe they do nothing but it is riskier for Muslims to do so than for Christians. They can even be welcomed by Muslims and be asked 'okay so what about Islam?' They have this subtle way of inviting you... They try to invite you over and win you over. ... So I think a Christian can get away with it more easily" (Interview 6th of January 2018).

So in general we could say that leaving religion is perceived by most of my interlocutors as more difficult for Christians regarding the social aspects but in the end more difficult for Muslims with regard to the legal aspects.

Nonbelieving and gender

Gender issues play a vital role in the motivation for both men and women to entertain religious doubts. This mainly deals with the way Islam but also Christianity is perceived to enforce unequal relationships between men and women. Gender issues also play an important role in my interlocutors' experiences, trajectories towards becoming nonbelievers, and the reaction they receive from relatives, friends and society at large when their doubts become noticeable. Gender is a central theme but here I will only deal with those issues that have a direct bearing on the topic of the nature and variety of unbelief and whether male and female nonbelievers are differently perceived and treated.

For several women coming into contact with feminism or other ideas about male-female relationships, particularly at college, started their search of religious gender constructs. Many male and female nonbelievers were engaged with issues of injustice and discrimination not only of women but also of other marginalized groups such as the LGTB community. At the moment of my research the issue of homosexuality was much debated due to the police raid on people during the concert of pop group Lelit Masru` whose leader is gay.

In many cases these doubts and questions with regard to unequal gender treatment had to do with personal experiences. I cannot deal with all the specific cases, and will do so elsewhere, but Christa neatly sums up - not her personal - but her female friends experiences:

"I am not sure because I was not exposed to it personally. I think at least for my friends, the catalyst for this change of thought they went through was the kind of oppression they faced at home. The curfew and dictating how they dress, dictating how they look, what they can do and what they can't do. I have many friends, for instance, who took off the veil but when they are at home, they put it on because they cannot tell their parents that they took it off. They would be beaten up ... maybe they would not allow them to go to work. It is sad, but is one of the reasons why they start to hate what religion represents for them. They either oppress you in a way, you have to come home by this time, or you can't go to work or we won't give you money or they view you completely as an insane person. I remember, she is not really a friend, but a friend of a friend and

when she took off the veil, her parents were shocked and she convinced them that she is crazy. She used to have a depression and she was seeing a psychiatrist so they already thought she was crazy and when this happened they contributed this to madness: ‘She is mad so this is why she does this’” (Interview 5th of January 2018).

I was interested to know whether nonbelievers themselves think that becoming or being a nonbeliever is more difficult for women than for men. Most interlocutors thought it was much more difficult for women. Basically this was related to the perception of unbelief as deviance and lack of morality, highly gendered concepts. Although for all nonbelievers being deviant and immoral is bad, it is worse for women in several respects as we will hear from a number of my interlocutors. Lila responded to my question whether it is more difficult to be a nonbeliever for women than for men:

“Absolutely! [laughs] absolutely! Islam gives a lot of liberties for men, there are still structures, there are still rules and everything, but there are a lot more liberties for men in Islam. I think we passed some of the strictness of Islam, with women going to work, getting out of the house, but still in my own family there are women who cover their faces, and stay at home. My father remarried and his wife is not working. He tried to make my mother not work. My uncle’s wife wears the *niqab* and she is not working, she does not say ‘hi’ to men and she does not see men... of course it is harder for women in Islam (Interview 21st of January 2018).

Dunya agrees with Lila and adds that Islam is much more visible on women than on men so removing this visible aspect is much harder for women:

“It is definitely more difficult for women. Particularly from the social aspect, because it has to show very much on a woman the difference between how a religious and a nonreligious woman looks is far greater than a religious man and a nonreligious man. And a woman gets attacked for what she is wearing, how she speaks, if she smokes, for instance, all of these little things are okay for men to do but not okay for women. It always puts them in a difficult position: ‘I am doing this, but I am not...’. It is a lot harsher for women. Maybe I am biased, but I know it was very difficult for me” (Interview 17th of January 2018).

Mara reflects on the gendered nature of ‘being deviant’ and the importance to keep up appearances for the family as a unit by its women ‘looking’ religious rather than ‘being’ religious:

“In our society it is not important whether a girl is praying or fasting, the important thing is that she wears *higab*. So that her image and that of her family shows they are a respectable family. The idea is that the girl represents the honour of the family. But if she appears deviant, not only in the sense of God, you know what I mean.. that reflects on her family. ... We are a conservative society. So it is not appropriate that you are a girl and you have freedom to move about relaxed on your own or sleep outside your parents’ home, dress what you like; it is conservative! You represent your family. The boy, if he makes a mistake, it is his, but for a girl it ruins the whole family. And religion governs morality so if she has no religion, she has no morality.³⁷ That is ... the way they think” (Interview 16th of January 2018).

So the image of a respectable, religiously conservative family is primarily upheld by the conduct of women, which makes acts against religion by women very sensitive. This also explains the sometimes violent and extreme measures against 'deviant women'. Several cases of severe maltreatment by relatives, whether in the form of physical abuse, psychological torture, or hospitalizing daughters, are mentioned in the Black Ducks show. Of course these are extreme examples - and most nonbelievers stay in the closet to avoid problems with relatives, friends and society at large, yet these examples provide insight into the gendered nature of unbelief.

As we have seen in chapter 1, atheism is generally feared because of the rebellion against the religious order, the socio-political order and the patriarchal order. We have seen already some reasons why nonbelief is perceived as more dangerous and threatening when it is performed and disclosed by women. Firstly, as we have seen above, it has to do with the equation of morality with religion and the fact that the family's reputation is invested in the female body.

Secondly, this heavy investment in female bodies invokes a fear for the free choice by women. As Reem explains: "the free will of a woman scares the man" (Black Ducks, episode 256). In religious perspectives on women's free choices, the first fear to come to mind is committing immoral acts.

Combatting patriarchal society is a huge task, needing a revolution as Maryam mentions in her 'message to all Egyptian girls':

"I'd like them to know that we live in a patriarchal society. We're controlled by patriarchal authority in everything. It is impossible how insulting it is to be someone's responsibility, was it your father or husband. It is insulting to be with someone who covers your expenses. Where is 'you'? Why does he have to pay for your expenses? Create your own identity and your own self. Be independent. Choose whom you want to live with, and be a partner. All girls should think beyond parents and their authority. Every person should think of a solution. ... [Parents] believe that it's only their daughter or son who thinks this way. They may accept the existence, gradually or through a revolution. The problem lies in some girls and the way they enslave themselves and feel happy about it. They feel the pleasure and delight in being a slave. I don't really understand why they do this" (Black Ducks, episode 51).

It was interesting to see that quite a few of the young nonbelievers I spoke with left the parental home and shared an apartment with other young people. The social custom is to stay at with the family until marriage. Yet due to the high age of marriage for men, as a result of the high cost of marriage, several men with a good job rent an apartment with other male roommates until they are able to marry. Most of my interlocutors in their late-twenties to early-thirties left the parental home. Also several of my female interlocutors did so, which is quite rare. The privacy that came along with living without social control provided them space to develop their own thoughts on religion and morality. Instead of constantly being watched and questioned about their whereabouts they could create their own way of thinking and living.

In this section we have examined nonbelief and gender and seen that nonbelieving by women is perceived as a great danger, not only to the religious order, but particularly to the

moral and patriarchal order on which the family but also the political system is based. Religion and morality is seen by most as identical, so leaving religion is leaving morality. Nonbelieving women are accordingly perceived as immoral and undermining the sexual-moral order and thus threatening the moral unity of the family. Nonbelievers, male and female - but women to a larger extent – have to combat the patriarchal structure and control of the family and particularly fathers, brothers, and husbands.

Conclusion

Nonbelieving or leaving faith goes beyond the religious dimensions. It questions the chain of authority from the political and religious onto patriarchal authority. It means liberation from traditions, from religious moral prescripts, from parental control. It entails self-liberation, building an independent life, claiming privacy and the right to live your own life according to your own chosen standards. Both the religious and the patriarchal order heavily rely on the control of women's bodies. Women taking back control of their lives, their thinking, and their bodies thus fundamentally threatens the foundations of the socio-religious and political order.

This means that not everything about nonbelieving is strictly about religion/unbelief. It is tied to many more aspects of life. This goes two ways: on the one hand, since religion is tied to the socio-political order nonbelieving has wider implication than the religious field. On the other hand, nonbelieving can be instigated by other issues than strictly related to religion e.g. gender inequality and patriarchal control.

As we have seen, nonbelievers actually do contest the three taboo zones in the Middle East - politics, religion and sexuality. They rebel against political, religious and patriarchal authorities, making nonbelief such a sensitive and fundamental issue.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377> (Accessed 26th of June 2019). The underlying data set is not yet available so the precise numbers are not yet known but are deducted from the graphics of this report.
- ² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQqIZ1-p5L4&t=5s> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23Z_Wv6qTw&list=PLhbs8A5De9zRH3A1NjP9u6lwjvMQdcluz&index=13 (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eQxZsnjXm8&t=114s> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQuI0UMM0WaUXnlyEuo-6Ng/videos> (Accessed 26th of June 2019). In the report, I will mention the episodes that I will quote.
- ⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0w-Uxr3htcnmUK3nWTyN9w/videos> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ⁷ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxI5a6mdHUylqTHPVZ_UAzg/videos (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ⁸ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_CKL5F9i7e9sPnZcxXP3HQ/videos (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ⁹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOYN5F3PPrf3NiCI_JaaktA/videos (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/AlberEgypte1/videos> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpKa8yzpqN5ZcEwcjZz92Cw/videos> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ¹² This chapter is a draft version of the forthcoming article for The Cambridge History of Atheism (eds. Bullivant, St & M. Ruse) entitled 'The Atheist Spring? Emerging Nonbelief in the Middle East'.
- ¹³ <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/27/alber-saber-brotherhood-will-drive-the-people-to-secularism/> Accessed 26th of June 2019.
- ¹⁴ <http://chronikler.com/middle-east/egypt/atheists-out-closet/>. (Accessed 10th of June 2015); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfPEXqiXfMg>. (Accessed 10th of June 2015).
- ¹⁵ <https://www.memri.org/tv/mohamed-morsi-during-egyptian-presidential-elections-campaign-conversion-religion-allowed-if-not/transcript> (Accessed 8th of January 2019).
- ¹⁶ <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/288240/Egypt/Endowments-ministry-taking-steps-to-protect-Egypt-.aspx> (Accessed 8th of January 2019).
- ¹⁷ <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/288240/Egypt/Endowments-ministry-taking-steps-to-protect-Egypt-.aspx> (Accessed 8th of January 2019).
- ¹⁸ <http://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/40633/OPINION-The-atheists-are-coming> (Accessed 8th of January 2019).
- ¹⁹ This chapter - and parts of next chapter - are a draft version of the forthcoming article for "Cultures of Unbelief (eds.) Lee, L., Bullivant, S., Farias, M., and Lanman, J. entitled 'Cultures and politics of nonbelieving in Egypt (Oxford University Press).
- ²⁰ See e.g. dr. `Amr Sherif at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozn9q3TTcbe> (Accessed 11th of July 2015); and sheikh Salim at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvgm1wv5pDs> (Accessed 14th of July 2015).
- ²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1EkEnfHLWU&t=9s> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFQyF1Gu18M> (Accessed 26th of June 2019).
- ²³ See e.g. Father Dawud Lama`i episode 13 and George Paul's refutation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwT_KPBDTZE&t=119s (Accessed 27th of June 2019).
- ²⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_ItQ_0sq3g (Accessed 27th of June 2019).
- ²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jWeh7hkEdY> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).
- ²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jWeh7hkEdY> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NAybCnZz8U&t=1s> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBJNHKTJJWc&t=67s> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

²⁹ Reports from nonbelievers in Habib `Ali's series 'Moments of Tranquillity' episode 5.

³⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_ItQ_0sq3g (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

³¹ Reports from nonbelievers in Habib `Ali's series 'Moments of Tranquillity' episode 5.

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzCKw7P0WmE&t=79s> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

³³ In this report I mainly concentrate on the nature and variety of unbelief and for that reason I cannot deal with the difficult trajectories and hardship to arrive at this position. Period of agonizing doubts and depression were common among many former believers.

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chtofQTATrk&t=721s> (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

³⁵ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxI5a6mdHUylqTHPVZ_UAzg/videos (Accessed 27th of June 2019).

³⁶ In this report I limit myself to the nature and variety of unbelief. In the forthcoming monograph I will look more closely at the motives for losing faith and the trajectories of nonbelievers, dealing in more detail with the on-going journeys.

³⁷ Morality is the crucial issue and how morality is inseparably linked to religious frameworks. I discussed the issue of morality and religion and nonbelievers' own views on morality at length with my interlocutors but cannot deal with it here.