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Being a Non-Believer in the Time of an Islamic Revival: Trajectories of Doubt and Certainty in Contemporary Egypt

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Abstract

Looking at the trajectories of people of Muslim origin in Egypt who express religious doubts, I argue in this article that doubt and non-religiosity are not necessarily a child of a Christian genealogy of the secular, and definitely not alien to Muslims. Instead, we have to understand them as an intimate moral discontent with the contemporary age of Islamic revival, even if their shape and some of their positive claims are borrowed from notions of Western origin and global currency—most notably, human rights and feminism. There are reasons and ways to become a non-believer in a society profoundly affected by a religious revival, and these reasons and ways can be telling about the nature of doubt and certainty in general. They also offer a perspective on the problematic of secularism that focuses on issues of belief and existential trust rather than governmentality and discursive power.

The best thing about religion is that it produces heretics.

Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*

INTRODUCTION

After a century and a half of what looks in retrospect like an era of triumphant non-religion, we now live in a time of a religious revival. Around the world, religious

movements are at the forefront, religious identities serve as effective bases for political mobilization, and secularism has come under attack from various sides. It almost seems as if the scientific certainty and futuristic hope once associated with the project of modernity are now being projected onto projects of religious revival that promise clarity, certainty, justice, and hope to whoever is committed to following that path .

The triumphant tone of secularism and atheism in the past century now appears exaggerated if not mistaken. Religions were there all the time, alive and kicking, just often not seen by social scientists and other intellectuals who put their faith elsewhere.¹ Thus, Peter Berger has argued that rather than trying to explain the seeming anomaly that so many people are very religious in a modern world, what should raise our curiosity are the few people who are not.² To put it in more abstract terms, the secular requires as much explanation as the religious does.³

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Muslims in particular have been made to represent the contradictions surrounding the apparent failure of the "secularization thesis." New atheists are taking issue with Islam in very radical and sweeping ways, declaring Muslims to be essentially incapable of rational reflection and moral action.⁴ In a more sympathetic vein, Muslims' moral and legal traditions have become the key focus of an emerging critical anthropology of secularism.⁵ Although mutually antagonistic, these two (mainly Western) approaches to Islam and secularism share a wider political and intellectual sensibility that is a striking reminder of Orientalism's construction of the East as the foundational Other of the identity of the West,⁶ be it as a vilified object of hate or as the starting point of a sophisticated academic critique of liberalism. This focus on a difference between Islam on the one hand and secularism and non-religion on the other can easily make us overlook the fact that non-religion and atheism have long had supporters among Muslim peoples, too.⁷ And while some of them have joined the ranks of the radical atheist revival,⁸ claiming that the only solution is a radical break with the past, the reality of religious doubt and non-belief in a Muslim-majority country like Egypt offers a much more complicated picture.

In Egypt, people who do not adhere to any religion usually describe themselves as either *muḥīd/a* (non-believer, atheist) or *lā-dīnī/yya* (non-religious). To be a *muḥīd/a* or a *lā-dīnī/yya* is a theological rather than a metaphysical position, and it can entail atheism (decided non-belief in God), agnosticism (suspension of judgment about the existence of God), as well as deism (belief in God without belief in a religion). *Iḥād* (unbelief, non-belief, atheism) and *lā-dīniyya* (non-religiosity) are thus not necessarily the same thing as atheism, which is why, I prefer to translate them with “non-belief” in this paper, and only use “atheism” to refer specifically to the belief that there is no god.

In this article I argue that contemporary Egyptian non-belief in Islam takes seriously the claim of Islamic religious discourses, especially the latter’s modern revivalist and Islamist variants, to provide an all-encompassing formula for justice and good life. Non-believers measure that claim by the consistency of the commandments and moral practices that are conventionally identified with Islam and by the moral integrity of key religious figures, especially the Prophet Muḥammad, and arrives at the conclusion that these fail to deliver what they promise not because of the contingency of historical practice but because they are inherently in error.

Yet although some atheist critics of religion may claim otherwise, there are many possible paths other than either adhering to or overthrowing conservative religious standards. There are many more people who are religious but in unconventional or critical ways than there are non-believers, and even more who hold to conventional religious views but live impious lives. In Egypt, non-religion is an unlikely way to think and feel about life and the world, and precisely because it is unlikely, it is important to understand why anybody would pursue such a path. The key question that I pursue in this article is therefore: What is the positive ground on which a non-religious life can be built in a social world that is saturated by religion?

Looking at the trajectories of people of Muslim origin in Egypt who express religious doubts, I argue in this article that non-religiosity is not necessarily a child of a Christian genealogy of the secular, and definitely not alien to Muslims. Instead, we have to understand it as an intimate moral discontent with a prevailing sense of religion, even

if its shape and some of its positive claims are borrowed from notions of Western origin

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and global currency (most notably, human rights and feminism). There are reasons and ways to become a non-believer in a society profoundly affected by a religious revival, and these can be telling about doubt and certainty in general.

In contrast to an emerging critical anthropology of secularism⁹ that has focused on the formation of the secular state and its citizen-subjects, I argue in this article that we must also look at some of the more immediate, existential moments of a secular way of being in the world. The case of doubt and non-belief offers a perspective in which the secular is less about governance and more about conviction, less about subjectivation and more about a subjective search for a sound moral base for life.

So far we know very little about the everyday experience of non-religion in the contemporary age of religious revivalist movements. Most of the serious empirical research on the grounds and shapes of non-belief has been done in the fields of sociology and of intellectual and social history, especially in regard to the intellectual origins of atheism and the process of secularization in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁰ In the field of anthropology, to which I hope to contribute with this article, very little research has been done on doubt, non-belief, and non-practice.¹¹ A significant exception was a panel organized by Soumhya Venkatesan and Lee Wilson at the biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2008, titled "For a skeptical anthropology?," which raised the question of how to account for moments of uncertainty and skepticism that can at times be hidden behind a performance of certainty. A convincing appearance of certainty might be the precarious outcome of a hard labor of convincing oneself, while the real foundations that do provide trust and certainty lie somewhere else.

This article is based on many informal discussions and periods of participatory observation conducted between 2004 and 2011, as well as on seven in-depth biographical interviews conducted in the spring of 2008. The interviews were with Sayyid¹², a school teacher; Shādiya, a Sudanese NGO activist who moved to Egypt some

years ago; ‘Abd al-ḥalīm, who worked for a state-owned television channel; Makkāwi, who after years of living from working-class jobs had recently managed to make a living from theater and NGO work; Salāh, a lawyer working for a small local company in an industrial town; Layla, a lawyer working for an international law firm in Cairo; and Fayrūz, an NGO activist and student of economics at a provincial university. Of them, Fayrūz sees herself as a Muslim and Layla and ‘Abd al-ḥalīm as agnostics, while the others describe themselves explicitly as atheists. The article also features three persons with whom I have had many conversations but no biographic interviews and who all see themselves as believing Muslims, albeit in unconventional ways: Maṣri, a technician at a telecommunications company and son of a pious Sufi family; his uncle ‘Arabi; and Ismā‘īl, a shopkeeper and teacher in a village in northern Egypt.

WHO IS A NON-BELIEVER?

Egypt is a profoundly religious country inhabited by a majority of Muslims (approximately 90% or more) and a minority of Christians, most of whom have embraced, respectively, Islamic or Christian movements of religious revival since the 1970's, after a period of secularization that began earlier in the 20th century. Usually this does not mean that people would become become pious activists, but rather that they support revivalist ideals of ritual, morality, and justice while putting those ideas only inconsistently into practice.¹³

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Some—very few—Egyptians do not hold to any religion. It is impossible to determine their exact number, since a confessionalist common sense (backed by personal status law) asserts that every Egyptian must be either Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.¹⁴ In any case they are a small minority.

The significance of non-believers does not lie in their numbers, however. While too dispersed, idiosyncratic, and unorganized to be called a movement, they do hold to similar ideas, develop their ideas for similar reasons, often read the same books, and address a similar sense of trouble with the shape of the social world. Thus, they can best be understood as representing what Raymond Williams has described as “structures of

feeling,”¹⁵ forms of affective social experience in formation that cannot be reduced to the fixity of ideologies or worldviews. They are part of wider social developments, and despite their small number they tell of some underlying conflicts and tensions over the ways Egyptians experience their lives and the powers to which they are subjected.

But who can be considered a non-believer? What kind of doubt counts as serious religious doubt? The accusation of unbelief is much more common than unbelief itself and has a long history, beginning with the Qurʾān, where the polemic against the infidels (*kuffār*, sg. *kāfir* – a concept that implies not so much epistemic rejection as affective ungratefulness) is instrumental to the call to Islam.¹⁶ In the present time, many people, especially but not only those who are actively pious, often make maximalist claims about what makes a person religious (and which they themselves often do not fulfill). People who do not pray or fast, women who do not wear a headscarf, and those who live a lifestyle otherwise deemed impious, are sometimes pejoratively labeled atheists (*mulhīd/a*). But only a very small minority of radical Islamists go so far as to claim that such people have factually left the common ground of Islam and become apostates.¹⁷ In everyday usage, the accusation of unbelief is a way to define the boundaries of ideal religiosity and does not entail the claim that someone really has stopped being a Muslim. Instead, it should be understood as a critique and an admonition. As such, it is ever-present in religious discourse, while real unbelief is largely hidden and much less common than the accusations. What, then, constitutes “real” non-belief? When is one merely impious (‘*āḏī*), and when is one no longer a Muslim? Ismāʿīl, who describes himself as a believing albeit impious Muslim, offers a useful common-sense definition that distinguishes between a maximalist and a minimalist understanding of belief and non-belief:

Samuli: “What’s the criterion that makes one religious and what makes one an atheist/non-believer [*mulhīd*] in the eyes of the people here?”

Ismāʿīl: “The first criterion for being religious is prayer. The other is the use of beautiful religious phrases. The third is adhering to Islamic law, such as not

collecting interest [*riba*]. But breaking any of these doesn't make you a *mulhid*. Many people don't pray. My father has never missed a *rak'a* [sequence of prayer] in his life. I don't pray, but he doesn't slaughter me, he doesn't refuse to eat with me, although in Islam giving up prayer is a serious thing, punished by death. Also adhering to Islamic law is not the criterion. There are three shops owned by leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood....They all collect interest—and not 20 to 40 percent per year like other shops, but ten percent per month. So that doesn't make you a *mulhid* either. As for religious phrases, the kids in the street *bi-sibbu al-din* [curse, literally 'insult religion']; at the table at lunch with his father, a boy may say, 'this to your religion, that to your religion.'¹⁸ It's normal. The only thing that makes you a *mulhid* is when you doubt or insult the Prophet and our Lord. Everything else is

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subject to debate and difference, but if you say that the Prophet is a son of a whatever, you cross the line. The Prophet and our Lord are the only thing people agree on definitely and don't accept any doubt in. That's the only certain, fixed thing. Otherwise people live in so many different states, in the morning there is a state, in the evening there is a different state. And the people are like animals bound on a rope, forced to make a living. And everyone who makes a reasonable living does it either on the basis of theft or bribes."

Following this common-sense definition outlined by Ismā'īl, actual non-belief in contemporary Egypt involves questioning the minimal foundations of Muslim creed: God and the Prophet Muḥammad. It is an affective rather than an epistemic matter. And it is different from being impious or having unconventional religious views. Many people live in ways that run counter to pious ideals and practice ambivalent minimal piety that comes close to religious indifference. But they generally do not articulate views critical of religious notions and norms; on the contrary, an impious way of life and minimal religiosity can go perfectly well with very strict religious ideals. A smaller but

intellectually more influential group of people argue that religion is being misrepresented and misunderstood as a rigid fundamentalist set of prohibitions, and that Islam correctly understood is a more open-ended source of spiritual and ethical practice. Toward the end of this article I return to that point of view, which can help us understand the different consequences doubt can have.

THE PRACTICE OF NON-BELIEF

In a society where religion is a pervasive idiom of metaphysics, politics, morality, and subjectivity, being not religious at all is an unlikely choice that offers little satisfaction in social terms.¹⁹ It therefore does not surprise that most non-believers appear as unconventional and individualistic characters with unconventional and individualistic motivations and trajectories. Those I know have different lifestyles, political views, and family backgrounds, and their critique of religious beliefs and discourse can take different shapes and directions. What they share is a social experience of high education; intellectual, white-collar, or artistic professions; and an intensive engagement with literature, arts, philosophy, and religious traditions. It is striking that many of the men have or have had relationships with Western women and that many of both sexes have lived with someone without being married, which is generally considered completely out of bounds in Egypt. But there are others who live very conventional lives that in no way reveal that they hold to religious views differing significantly from those of their family and neighbours.

Almost all of the non-believers I interviewed highlighted the importance of reading in the formation of their ideas. The readings they mentioned to me included Mediaeval Arab philosophers, Islamic mysticism, European philosophy and social theory (notably Nietzsche and Marx), the works of contemporary Arab secularist intellectuals, Arabic literature of the 1950s and 1960s, and translated world literature. The Qurʾān, canonical ḥadīth collections, and early Muslim historiographies also play a central role in their intellectual profile. Much as the emergence of atheism and liberal theology in 18th- and 19th-century Europe went hand in hand with a critique of the Bible, a critique of the

Qurʾān and the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad is central in Egypt to both non-belief²⁰ and attempts to find new bases for a positive belief in Islam.²¹

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My interlocutors all strongly valorized the pursuit of knowledge and the willingness to open debate. Situations in which such open debate is possible are very few, however, and the people I interviewed all expressed their distress with the way they felt compelled to conceal some or all of their real beliefs, and with the degree of isolation and insincerity that results from that concealment. Shādiya told me:

We are thinking about how to put [our son] in a school where there is no religious education. But we won't be able to, because that's only possible at the international schools. We would need lots of money—and that's also a form of discrimination. So I don't know what we can do. I imagine that he will come home from school with many questions, like "Mama why don't you cover your hair?", or "Mama why don't you pray? Mama why don't you fast?" As long as he is a small child I cannot say to him it's because I don't believe in God, because he will certainly go and tell his friends, and we will get into trouble. I don't know.

Non-belief is a serious taboo in Egypt. Publicly criticizing core religious beliefs will certainly provoke disapproval and misunderstanding; it may lead to divorce and loss of employment; and it can result in imprisonment and assassination.²² Under these conditions, non-believers often live fragmented lives with a high degree of duplicity. Salāḥ, who works as a lawyer in a small company in one of Cairo's industrial satellite cities and lives in a village in the Nile Delta, describes his life as one of troubling deception, all the more troubling since his turn to atheism was grounded in a desire for frankness and honesty (a key issue for contemporary non-belief to which I return further below). A few like-minded friends, books, and the internet provide the contexts where he can develop his ideas freely. His wife does not know that he is an atheist. His boss fired him after he refused to identify himself as either a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew, and he

only got his job back after feigning repentance.

This sense of trouble is less urgent among people who move in social milieus where non-religious or not very religious ways and visions of life are more commonplace. The most important such milieu is the intellectual and artistic scene of downtown Cairo, where most people are in some way religious but there is enough space for non-believers to encounter and exchange ideas. For Makkāwi, a self-taught theater actor without higher formal education, contact with the various circles of people that intersect in this scene provided the key momentum that made him move from religiosity to non-belief. Importantly, Makkāwi is the only one among my non-believing interviewees who did not express a sense of isolation. He has successfully created a circle of more or less like-minded friends around himself. He works in the cultural scene, his wife is European, and his best friends are artists and left-wing political activists who consider religion to be a very private matter. This does not mean that Makkāwi does not practice a degree of duplicity, too. He comes from a very religious family of southern Egyptian migrants to Cairo, and in the social world of his family he considers it to be a matter of practical wisdom and of respect toward his parents not to say everything he thinks.

The difference between Salāḥ's and Makkāwi's experiences, then, is not one of duplicity versus frankness, but one of relative isolation versus connectedness. Duplicity is common to everyday life as people navigate ways of social and intimate being that are irreconcilable in theory but parallel in practice.²³ It becomes more troubling under conditions of isolation, while it can be more fulfilling when embedded in respective social milieus. The price of such connectedness, however, is a degree of social closure.

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Living alternative and unconventional lives is easiest within a position in the class and urban geography that has a degree of closure from the more conservative and pious standards of the wider society.

The problem of isolation has been changed to some extent by the increasing connectedness of Egyptians to the internet. There exists a whole cyberscape of secularist, freethinking, and non-religious blogs, internet sites, forums, and social

network groups in Arabic. Some of them are clearly personal projects of individuals,²⁴ while others have a large number of contributors from different Arab countries.²⁵ The emergence of this cyberscape has opened paths of connectivity and exchange for people who do not have access to the very narrow social circles where non-religious ways and visions of life have some currency. At the same time, it has also resulted in a very sharp tone of discussion, especially when committed Islamists and radical non-believers meet in the virtual space of social networks, mutually criticizing, attacking and hacking each others' sites.

The provocative, at times even intentionally offensive, approach of some atheist and freethinking internet activists²⁶ bears a certain resemblance to some formerly Muslim atheists in Europe who demand that Muslims make a clear and complete break with their religion and fully embrace Western values.²⁷ But the non-believers I spoke with generally do not see the need for such a break. Instead, they are trying to find ways to remain grounded in their society despite their disagreement with some of its values.²⁸ Even when they have come to define themselves clearly as non-religious or even atheist, religion has not disappeared from their lives. Salāḥ and Shādiya describe this continuing presence of religion as a troubling ambivalence; they both point out how they continue to use religious phrases in their language and how their entire education and culture are saturated by Islam. Their solution is to view Islam as a culture to which they belong even when they don't believe in it as a religion. Shādiya maintains that such cultural Islam, as it could be called in analogy to German *Kulturkatholizismus*, does contain many things with which she agrees:

We are now drinking tea in my neighbor's office. This is a form of the generosity of Muslims, and I make use of it as a culture. We talk in a place that belongs to someone else. It's a form of Islamic cultural generosity: He allows me sometimes to use his office for my work. That's what I mean by "culture."

Sayyid exhibits the most striking coexistence of religion and non-belief. Raised in a

religious family influenced by Sufi spirituality, and having been very religious until his student years when he slowly began to move toward non-belief, Sayyid is a great admirer and connoisseur of Qur'ānic recitation and Sufi music although he disagrees with their message. But more than just aesthetic appreciation seems to be at stake. For Sayyid, the spiritual dimension of religion continues to have some validity even when he believes that it is a human invention, which is why his wife described him to me as a "Sufi atheist."

THE TRUST ON WHICH DOUBT DEPENDS

This leads us to the core question of this article: What are non-belief and religious doubt about in a religious society like Egypt? On what grounds do some people take this path?

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Becoming a non-believer should not be confused with loss of faith. The first is a process of acquiring and developing new beliefs and practices that in different degrees replace previously held religious ones, a process that is akin to religious conversion. Loss of faith, in contrast, can be a much more negative experience of losing trust without being able to find anything else to hold onto. The few people who told me about such experiences related the fear of losing faith to a general fear of losing one's hold on life and to suicidal thoughts.²⁹ The non-believers whom I interviewed, however, did not describe the development of their views as a loss. While they often did describe their experiences as painful and difficult, their stories all conveyed a sense of trust, a feeling that there certainly is something to hold onto.

Sayyid is a former teacher, now an employee in a publishing house, with a vast command of Arabic literature, philosophy, and religious debates. He was very religious until his student years but his religious belief began to crumble when he felt that key questions regarding the justice and mercy of God remained unanswered. While he continues to have an inclination toward spirituality, he is an atheist and sees religions as man-made limits to the possibilities of human spirit.

Shādiya is a very outspoken atheist and sees atheism as freedom from fear and

intolerance. Due to her experience of the Sudanese civil war and her work as an NGO activist, she highlights especially the issue of war and peace (ascribing to religions a constant propensity to war) and the rights of marginalized people.

‘Abd al-ḥalīm’s main concerns are with social progress, science, and rationality. In terms of cosmology, he presents himself as an agnostic who is not concerned at all about the question of the existence of a god: “I don’t know and I don’t want to know.” Instead, he is concerned about what he sees as an overwhelming chaos ruling his society due to the influence of a contradictory and irrational religious ideology.

Salāḥ is perhaps the most philosophical of my interlocutors. The question of life after death—especially heaven and hell—formed the initial moment of his doubt, which in the course of his friendship with Sayyid eventually led to atheism, although he continues to express a metaphysical uncertainty about creation vs. evolution. He highlights the values of frankness and justice and expresses distress about his inability to live out these key values due to social pressure.

Makkāwi was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his adolescence but left the movement because he felt that he was manipulated by it and because of his love for art, which was considered *ḥarām* (forbidden) by his fellow Islamists. He highlights the values of freedom, independent choice, and self-realization, and argues for his atheism on the ground of the contradictory nature of religious doctrines and the contradictory behavior of religious people.

Layla is daughter of an atheist father and a Jewish mother and has never been religious. Because her Egyptian ID card identifies her as a Muslim she participated in Islamic religious education at school. Troubled by her difference from others, she tried to be religious but did not find it satisfactory. While she describes herself as an agnostic, she also expresses a distinct idea of what real religiosity should be about: a spiritual sense of closeness to God, decidedly in contrast to the public pious pressure she was shocked to encounter in Egypt after having lived in Europe for five years.

With all their differences, two shared issues emerge among the interviewees. First is a general annoyance about hypocrisy, contradictions, and the unwillingness of

people to have a "serious" discussion about religion. Second, justice and injustice play key role in all of these accounts, be it in the form of gender equality, war and peace, social justice, the injustice of hell, or the inconsistent and contradictory behavior of religious people.

My critical thinking about the existence and nonexistence of a god [*ilāh*]³⁰ began when I was nine years old, before I had any political or economic ideas: Why didn't he stop the pain of others? Why do people die? Why is there suffering? If the whole world is based on suffering, and he is wise and just as they say, why doesn't he do anything? I remember that my father had a problem with my mother at home, a family problem. He decided to leave our home. Why didn't god solve the problems of a child? Why did he remain a spectator of things that hurt me? (Shādiya)

At that time, questions emerged to which I got no answers. The Qur'ān says that God [*Allāh*] could have made all people believers if He wanted. But He didn't. Why didn't He? Why does He send some people to hell and others to paradise? Does God reward good Jews and Christians? The answer was that He rewards them for their good deeds in this world but punishes them in the afterworld. But what about a good, righteous Jew who lives in poverty all his life? There was no answer to that. (Sayyid)

When I read the biography of the prophet Muḥammad by Ibn Hisham, I found... things that cannot be justified. They saved none of the [Jewish tribe of] Bani Qurayza although they surrendered without a fight. They said: We will give up our possessions and go. The prophet Muḥammad said: I will let one of you judge over you. He chose Sa'd ibn Mu'adh. Sa'd ibn Mu'adh said: Kill them. He took them and killed them one by one. They had said: We will leave Medina. Why kill

them? I don't find a justification. (Salāḥ)

The government employs religion to calm down the people. The Islamist groups employ religion to agitate the people. And you go out in the morning, pray your obligatory prayer to open the day, and the first thing you do after that is take bribes at your work. Today in Egypt nothing runs without bribes. You pray and take bribes. ('Abd al-Ḥalīm)

Each in its way, these accounts are exemplary of the centrality of morality and justice. In the first account, the world is full of injustice, and although God is just He does not solve it but lets people wait while, as Salāḥ argues, "delay of justice is injustice." In the second account, divine justice itself appears as unjust: if God could make all people believers, why does He make some people infidels and then condemn them to eternal damnation? In the third account, the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions, who should be the exemplary Muslim characters, display unnecessary and unjustified cruelty. In the fourth account, religion appears as a completely inadequate and chaotic way to establish any real moral order in a society urgently in need of it. Many more accounts could be reproduced at length, all with different variations of the argument that while religion promises justice and morality, it does not hold to that promise.³¹

More striking than the explicit emphasis on consistency, justice, and morality is what is left unsaid in these accounts. In all my interviews, I was eager to enquire how my interlocutors would articulate their moral views in the face of the fact that in Egypt morality is identified with religiosity to the extent that "having no religion" means to lack any moral sense. Somewhat to my surprise, most of them did not express a need to reformulate or redefine moral values. The definitions they gave were rather general

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and quite conventional, highlighting virtues such as honesty, faithfulness, mercy, and tolerance, all values that have general currency in Egypt and can be argued for on religious grounds. Human rights and gender equality were usually quite central to their

views, but not to the exclusion of other conventional moral discourses. Instead of trying to formulate an alternative, non-religious morality, they in different ways told how they had come to find the dominant religious discourse, or religion and God as whole, to be opposed to the moral values that they had assumed to be based on religion and guaranteed by God.

This begs the question of what exactly stands in doubt and on what grounds. Clearly these accounts do not tell of a general doubt or uncertainty. On the contrary, they all express a very strong sense of certainty and trust about what is right and what is wrong. To understand this relation of trust and doubt, it may be helpful to think with Ludwig Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*,³² where he pursues the question of knowledge and certainty and the conditions that certainty and doubt must fill to be meaningful. Wittgenstein points out that it is not possible to meaningfully doubt everything: I cannot, for example, meaningfully doubt my knowledge of my own name or my ability to understand the language I speak. Such doubts would put an end to any reasoning or discussion. Meaningful doubt, Wittgenstein argues, requires grounds—not just in the sense of a motivation but also in the sense of the trust in something else that is not in doubt: "That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn."³³ This metaphor of hinges of certainty that are needed to open a door of doubt is helpful for understanding the conditions under which a religion can become a subject of essential doubt in a social world where that religion is a main source of certainty, hope, and morality.

Blaming the Prophet and his companions for falling short of their own ideals in a religious tradition where they stand as the paradigmatic representatives of ideal character and conduct, and blaming God for injustice in a metaphysical imagination where an all-mighty God has made everything according to a wise plan, requires a strong albeit seldom articulated trust in one's own capacity of independent moral judgment. This is the key ground, the "hinge of certainty," for religious doubt in contemporary Egypt. The conclusions emerging from such doubt can vary greatly (a

point to which I return below) but this key moment of trust is its ground.

It is important that we distinguish between motivations for doubt and the grounds of certainty that make doubt possible. If an egalitarian notion of justice clearly has been both a motivation *and* a ground of certainty for religious doubt in all accounts I have recorded, the same has not been the case with scientific claims to truth. While my interlocutors emphasized that reading was very important for them, they also recalled that doubt and questions had preceded reading. Rather than raising questions, they said, reading had provided them with possible ways to answer them. It is at this step that discourses such as human rights, feminism, early Arabic poetry, Marxism, liberalism, *mu'tazili* theology, natural science, Hellenistic and Arab philosophy, other religious traditions, etc. become relevant. They do not necessarily motivate doubt or non-belief. Instead, they offer a ground from which it is possible to imagine a religious life and worldview that is different from the conventional image of piety, a good life entirely without religion and prophets, and a possibly also a world without a god.

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Yet just as a declaration of faith does not exclude doubts, neither does a declaration of unbelief. Convinced about the invalidity of religion and the impossibility of a just, good god, Salāḥ also told me in 2008 that he finds evolution theory hard to believe. While God the lawmaker was positively dead for him, he remained haunted by God the creator: "The feeling of injustice made the idea of a god decline in my mind bit by bit. But the problem of existence, how the universe began—that has brought the issue of god back." As I met Salāḥ again in 2011, this metaphysical doubt (and its underlying certainty of a meaningful universe) had compelled him to give up the - for him - lonely trajectory of atheism. While he still holds to largely the same moral views, he has found more existential comfort in a more spiritual vision of life, and he has begun praying again. Hinges of certainty do not make everything clear—all they do is offer a fixed point from which to set other things into motion. They do not fix the direction of that motion.

RELIGION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The ground of certainty that underlies contemporary Egyptian non-believers' turn against religion is a trust in the capacity of human moral judgment. Such moral character has always been key to non-belief, and it can be argued that long before the emergence of modern atheism there have been expressions of a moral rebellion against the inconsistent promises of religions.³⁴ In her study on English freethinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Susan Budd argues that rather than intellectual reasons, what was crucial for the freethinkers "was the realization that the Bible, minister etc. was *wrong*--i.e. morally wrong."³⁵ This point of view is strikingly similar to the accounts of contemporary non-believers in Egypt. There is also some similarity between my interlocutors' views and the moral discontent of some north American college students from Christian milieus who are struggling with what can be described as a revivalist Christianity in parts of the U.S.³⁶

It is likely that some of this similarity is genealogical and can be attributed to the secular projects of nationalist modernity; the political heritage of liberalism, socialism, and communism; the spiritual paths of reformist Judaism, Protestantism, counter-Reformation Catholicism, and occultism.³⁷ But the impact of European ideas alone does not explain the shared moral focus of Arab non-believers in the 21st century, their American contemporaries, and English freethinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries.

For one thing, moral non-belief is not a European invention. The "atheist" (actually deist) Arab poets and philosophers of the 3rd hijri century who are the topic of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī's seminal work on atheism in the history of Islam,³⁸ expressed a similar conviction that human reason is sufficiently capable to differentiate between right and wrong and that there is no need for prophets and religions, which in the end only cause confusion and war.

Furthermore, non-belief does not always take the shape of moral protest.³⁹ For Layla, who is not a convert into non-belief but grew up without a religious faith, moral protest is not a key issue. She expresses a very different form of non-belief, an open-ended agnosticism for which religion is an exotic outsider rather than an intimate

opponent. Her vision bears some similarity to the kind of non-religiosity that is common in northern and eastern Europe, its relation with religious lifeworlds characterized by established distance rather than by struggle.

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The history of non-belief in the Arab world shows significant shifts of emphasis. Although non-belief appears to have always had a moral dimension, Darwinism and natural science played a much more central role in Arabic debates in the first half of the 20th century,⁴⁰ and the declaredly scientific atheism of Marxism and communism was much more influential in its second half.⁴¹ In contrast, although most of the people I spoke with emphasized the importance of objective, scientific knowledge and lamented the lack of it in their society, they never described scientific knowledge as a key to the development of their views.

The relative marginality of scientific knowledge and the emphasis on justice, independent judgment, and free debate among Egyptian non-believers today reflects the centrality of Islam as an idiom of morality and subjectivity in their lives. Counter-revivalist doubt and non-belief are born out of an unease with and a protest against the way revivalist religion promises coherence, justice, and happiness, but in practice brings about ambivalence, oppression, and suffering. While non-believers deny the capability of revivalist religion to provide real solutions, they do take its promises very seriously.

THINGS TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Non-belief is not the only, and certainly not the most likely, conclusion that is drawn from the experience of a contradiction between religious promises and moral considerations. There are at least three other (and probably more) likely ways to deal with such serious conflicts: first, the turn to intense religiosity as a way to overcome doubt; second, the turn to a critical belief as an attempt to articulate a different basis of religious belief; and third, a form of moral reasoning that bypasses conventional doctrinal reasoning without trying to critically rearticulate it. .

In related research project among people who for some part of their lives have

been very religious,⁴² I regularly encountered an urge to find clarity and trust, a strong desire for a clear framework of action or a simple principle that allows one to easily differentiate between right and wrong. In these accounts people tried to overcome an existential uncertainty by pursuing a project of clarity and purity. The non-believers, in contrast, while often expressing a similar discomfort with the confusion and ambiguity of everyday practice, do not express a desire for a firm moral hold. They express a strong trust—expressed precisely in the way they seldom see any need to argue for it or to emphasize it—that there is universal human justice and that they and everybody else have the capacity of judgment to recognize it.⁴³ Because they feel certain about this firm hold, they want to do away with frameworks of action which they deem inconsistent, unnecessary, and unjust.

But this sense of a firm moral hold is not necessarily bound with non-belief. It is also shared by many people who take it as the starting point of a search for a new articulation of their religious beliefs. They share with non-believers the primacy of justice but arrive at a different solution, declaring that some religious beliefs may be irrelevant or misinterpreted but that there is a sound core to religion. This allows them to hold to a religious identity and faith—even if often a shaky one—while distancing themselves from what they see as wrong elements.

This is the course taken by Fayrūz, whose religious views are unsettled through the contradiction she perceives between Islam as a social practice and her feminist notions of gender justice. Her religious beliefs shift between fundamental doubt, even about the nature of revelation and the existence of

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a world beyond this one, and a critical belief in Islam with the exception of passages she feels to be incompatible with her understanding of gender justice and equality. In this regard, she is—albeit with some ambiguity—ready to bring into question even very central aspects of Islamic belief, including parts of the Qur’ān, while maintaining an affective attachment to Muḥammad’s message. There are two key differences between her views and personal trajectory and those of the non-believers. First, the affective

dimension of a relationship to God and a higher level of meaning and experience is something that is very important to her even in the face of serious doubt. Second, she sees the religion of Islam as something that can be rearticulated and remade in a better, morally sound shape, in contrast to the non-believers who tend to deem not only Islam but religions in general as essentially misguided.

Finally, the sense of moral trust in spite of troubling religious tenets is often shared by people who are quite religious and have never expressed any doubts about their religious beliefs. This is the case with Maṣri and his uncle 'Arabi, two men active in the Sufi milieu in the Nile Delta. Maṣri is very interested in mystical poetry but not very observant when it comes to ritual practice. 'Arabi is a pious man by conventional standards who carefully observes his daily prayers but profoundly dislikes what he finds a superficial fake religiosity that has swept Egypt lately. At one occasion as I met the two at Maṣri's home, the talk somehow moved to Christians, and Maṣri told an anecdote:

"A Christian in Ṭanṭa was taking his son to a hospital but he died on the way. While he was seeking help, a Muslim driver stayed with the child, and when he returned and found the boy dead the Muslim told him: "Don't worry, I made him recite the *shahadatayn* [the Muslim creed—Muslims believe that reciting it before death will guarantee passage into paradise]." The Christian: "You son of a bitch! We are Christians!" (Laughs.)

'Arabi: "And the Christians were upset because they thought that the boy will go to hell along with all the Muslims."

Maṣri: "But everybody goes to paradise."

'Arabi: "Yes, everybody goes to paradise. How many Muslims are there? One and a half billion. Is our Lord going to send the rest of his creatures to hell? They will go to paradise on the basis of their deeds."

Maṣri: "Only people with really bad, criminal deeds go to hell."

If there is one thing that really is explicit in the Qur'ān (and, as the anecdote reminds, in the Bible), it is that believers go to paradise and others go to hell. It would be difficult to

challenge this message in the framework of theological discourse. But Maṣri and 'Arabi are not concerned with theological discourse. For them, the solution to this particular form of theodicy is very simple: God is just, and it would be unjust that good people go to hell just because they are not Muslims. So they don't, unless they really deserve to. In this reasoning, justice simply overrides theological considerations. There is no need to formulate it into a coherent doctrine because God's justice already provides the necessary coherence and trust.

The trust in one's own capacity of moral judgment and the sense of contradiction in religious norms do not automatically lead to substantial religious doubt. Neither Maṣri nor 'Arabi ever made any reference to such doubt. Substantial doubt requires more than

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a trust in human moral judgment. It requires the desire to make sense of the whole thing, an urge to make things fit, a discomfort with gaps, ambiguities, and silences. From there, it can lead to non-belief of various kinds, but it is more likely to lead to attempts to regain faith, or to attempts at alternative hermeneutics that make things fit.

To develop doubt and non-belief in our present time of religious revival, one needs to have trust in justice and human reason, a desire for clarity and a discomfort with ambiguity, a tendency to see the fault in the whole of religion rather than in its parts, and access to intellectual debates and social circles that allow one to formulate these sentiments as a positive belief. Non-belief is thus not merely a matter of temperament, but also of social position. While none of my interlocutors belongs to the rich and powerful of Egypt (although Layla does come from Egypt's Francophone high bourgeoisie), their lives are also not characterized by a sense of powerlessness and unpredictable contingency. They are highly educated (or self-taught), pursue middle-class careers they are usually good at, and possess material and/or educational means that allow them to feel in control of their lives.

Such sense of control, or a lack thereof, appears to have a strong relation to the degree to which people attribute their predicament to invisible actors and powers.⁴⁴ Of course, having existential power over one's life does not yet make one an unbeliever,

but it does seem to be very difficult to develop enough trust in one's moral judgment and intellectual capacity to understand the world in a non-religious way if one does not command a sense of power and control over one's life.

Although conversion into non-belief involves an unusually high desire for clarity and an unusually strong trust in one's own moral judgment, this does not mean that the beliefs that non-believers express will be consistent and free of contradictions. On the contrary, even in the context of arranged interviews where people are already concerned with producing a coherent narrative, the accounts of the non-believers appear as jerry-built bricolages of life experience, personal temperament, different texts and readings, and everyday successes and frustrations. This does not mean that their views lack certainty: on the contrary. However, the underlying certainty of moral reasoning can be quite different from the cultivated appearance of certainty and absoluteness with which people express shaky and shifting moral ideals and standards. A convincing performance of certainty allows for and depends on silences, ellipses, contradictions, and ambiguity. Where the real, unquestioned foundations of people's lifeworlds and worldviews lie is a different question. Very few people ever seriously try to make perfect sense of their beliefs, moral ideals, and worldviews, and this also goes for non-believers. Some things are simply taken for granted, and it is there that we should search for the really significant moments of certainty without which serious doubt is never possible.

CONCLUSION: NON-BELIEF, SECULARISM, AND LIFEWORLD

While the non-believers propose a very particular and radical solution to moral discontent in a time of revivalist religion, they are also part of a wider sociopolitical current that is commonly described as secularism. This seems obvious at first sight. The non-believers I have encountered without exception identify themselves as secularists. But what exactly is secular about their lives and views? This is by no means clear, given the slippery and ambiguous nature of the notion of secularism, an essentially contested concept.⁴⁵ For the sake of a conclusion, I try to explicate what the non-believers' trajectories can add to

an understanding of secularism in a world where the secularization thesis has turned out to be false.

Strangely, the currently most productive theory of secularism in contemporary anthropology does not account for the existence of non-believers. This theory, which has been developed by a circle of scholars taking their inspiration from the work of Talal Asad,⁴⁶ states that secularism does not mean that people are less religious, but that under the conditions of secular state power religious practice and beliefs are expected to take a specific form. Scholars working with this approach focus on the attempts of national states and political and intellectual elites to impose secularism as a hegemonic discipline over citizens that assigns religion a specific place and shape in a governmental architecture of power.

In his thought-provoking short essay "Is there a secular body?" Charles Hirschkind critically develops this line of thought and points out that even in some of the most advanced analysis to date, the sensory and embodied dimensions of the secular have remained much less clear than the politics of secularism.⁴⁷ Hirschkind argues that this is partly due to the way the secular is always defined through its other, religion, so that what it means to live a secular life can seldom be phrased in anything other than negations. Trying to pinpoint a "secular bodily ethics"⁴⁸ can be difficult, even impossible, because there are so many different senses of ethical cultivation that can be called secular—Hirschkind names, for example, university education, the psychoanalyst's couch, and the training seminar of business executives.⁴⁹

Hirschkind's tentative conclusion is that the question about the secular body is premature because we still lack a proper understanding of the "social ontology of the secular." I share Hirschkind's concern with the embodied, experiential aspect of being secular. But I propose a somewhat different tack. From the basis of the accounts of Egyptian non-believers, I want to suggest that the secular becomes less mystified and elusive when we look at the underlying certainties of a non-religious sense of being in the world.⁵⁰

While Asad, Hirschkind, and others present a critical theory of the secular in which being religious and being secular are interdependent parts of one and the same civic discipline, some Egyptian political critics of secularism see it very differently. The notion of secularism (*‘almānīya*) has come under heavy attack from Islamists who argue that “separating religion from politics is the shortest path to unbelief.”⁵¹ The Islamists, thus, seem to have a different theory of the secular; and although it is a rather blunt theory, it is worth taking seriously.

During the spring and summer that followed the 25 January revolution in 2011, liberal and leftist supporters of a “civil” (that is, neither theocratic nor military)⁵² state increasingly faced the accusation of being “heretics” (*zanadiqa*) or “infidels and atheists” (*kafara wa-muḥidūn*) from their Islamist competitors. On 29 July 2011, when various Islamist groups organized a show of strength in Taḥrīr Square, two leftist or liberal demonstrators were seen holding signs stating “I’m a Muslim” and “Me, too” to counter the equation of their political visions with unbelief.

Although grossly unfair toward the vast majority of self-declared secularists in Egypt who are believers, the Islamists’ polemical equation of secularism with atheism is not entirely misplaced. This, I argue, is because being secular is never only a form of civic discipline but also a subjective way of being in the world that contains the possibility of non-belief. Islamists’ rejection of the secular is thus not so much directed at the

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power structures of the nation-state—they are very much part of it, and in 2011, the various Islamist movements of Egypt all expressed their allegiance to the new military government that would well qualify as secular in Asad’s terms—as at the possibility of a subjective lifeworld that is not dependent on the certainty of following God’s commandments, a certainty whose cultivation in a changing and uncertain world is one of the most compelling aspects of Islamist and revivalist piety movements.

When non-believers describe themselves as secularists, they are deeply involved in the ambiguity of secularism as a strategy of argumentation, a political project, and a

subjective disposition. As a strategy of argumentation secularism falls within the category of duplicity insofar as most non-believers prefer to downplay their non-belief in public and frame their views in the idiom of secularism in order to tackle issues they find important—such as gender equality or freedom of religion—without taking up sensitive topics that would put an end to any discussion. In this sense, secularism is a way to evade otherwise irresolvable conflicts. And yet the non-believers' commitment to secularism is also a genuine one, grounded in a general vision of human existence and politics. The non-believers I know in Egypt neither expect nor wish that non-religion could replace religion for good. Instead, they want belief, both religious and non-religious, to be a private matter of personal choice protected by a religiously neutral state—but in order to be such a private matter, belief has to be joined with a relativist recognition of other beliefs, which can never be taken as a given. In this respect, their secularism seems to be not too far from Asad's depiction of the secular as a civic discipline. But at the same time, they also describe themselves as secularists in the sense of not being religious. In this sense, secularism is a primarily personal, moral, and theological disposition.

I therefore suggest that the theory of secularism as civic power needs to be complemented with an understanding of the secular as a positive quality of belief and lived experience, and the underlying certainties in which they are grounded. In this regard, I would like to reverse Talal Asad's idea that the secular is not the opposite of the religious but rather a way to give religion a specific place in society. I suggest that when looked at from the point of view of belief, doubt, and certainty, the secular actually has a lot to do with people being less religious, although this side of the story is sometimes consciously downplayed by secularists themselves.

Secularism in this sense is grounded in the historical emergence of the very possibility of there being such a thing as an opposite of religion, a condition without divine presence. This is a point made by the annalist historian Lucien Febvre, who took up the question of whether the renaissance author Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) was an atheist as some authors in the early 20th century had argued.⁵³ Febvre argues that in

renaissance Europe, life in all its facets, including intellectual life, was so thoroughly saturated by Christianity that there simply was no space outside it, no reasonable option of taking a position outside religion—an option which, according to Febvre, took at least another century to emerge.

In the early Islamic Middle East, unlike in renaissance Europe, such a position outside religion appears to have been very much possible, if only for the relatively short period of a century or two. This was a period that witnessed the emergence of wildly impious poetry, rationalist philosophy, dramatic doctrinal schisms, and Sunni scholarly orthodoxy alike. It was a period when there appears to have been both the space and the need for ways to think beyond the paths outlined by prophets. However, as ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawi

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points out, this was a space outside the prophetic, but not outside the divine.⁵⁴ There could be doubt about religion, but not about the lifeworldly certainty of an intentional universe.

Thinking further along the lines marked by Febvre and Badawi, being secular has to do with the loss of the self-evident trust in prophets’ and God’s (or gods’) presence and power in everyday life, and the emergence of possible trajectories of life and visions of the world that rely on a different kind of trust. Being secular, in this sense, has to do with the unsettling of a particular kind of certainty, one that has to do with the intentionality of the universe and the everyday presence of the transcendent, and the enforcement of a different kind of certainty, one that has to do with the power (and hence responsibility) of humans to shape the world they live in. While atheism may be its most radical articulation, this shift does not generally imply a turn away from a religious belief; on the contrary, revivalist religious movements worldwide are part of this shift. Centering religious texts and individual moral agency, and decentering established institutions, traditions and forms of collective spirituality, they offer one of the most powerful and compelling ways to deal with the loss of the lifeworldly certainty that once marked the relationship of the human with the visible and invisible world.⁵⁵ Non-belief

and religious revival thus share an existential ground of experience, but they present dramatically divergent ways to come to terms with it. Revivalist religiosity is about regaining that lifeworldly certainty by renewing divine presence through the means of textual knowledge and ethical discipline, while non-belief is about developing a lifeworldly certainty that turns the loss of divine presence into an accomplishment with the help of a trust in human agency and judgment.

NOTES

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¹ But see Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs* (Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp, 1985 [1968]).

² Peter Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," in *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, ed. John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamimi (New York: New York University Press, 2000 [1996]), 38.

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Gregory Starrett, "The Varieties of Secular Experience," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (forthcoming).

⁴ For new atheism, see, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); For new atheism taking issue with Islam, see Michel Onfray, *Traité d'athéologie* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2005); Ibn Warraq, *Why I am not a Muslim* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995); idem, ed., *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

⁵ Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18 (2006): 323-47; idem, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Townsend Papers in Humanities*, no. 2 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/84q9c6ft>, 64-100.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁷ See Abd al-Raḥmān Badawi, *Dirāsāt Islāmīya min Tārīkh al-Ilhād fi al-Islām* (Cairo: n.p., 1945); Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dīni* (Beirut: Dār al-Talī‘a, 1969); Jürgen Wasella, *Vom Fundamentalisten zum Atheisten: Die Dissidentenkarriere des ‘Abdallah al-Qasimi* (Gotha: Perthes, 1997); and Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb, ed., *Ḥurrīyat al-I‘tiqād al-Dini: Musājalat al-Īmān wa-l-Ilhād mundh ‘Asr al-Nahḍa ila al-Yawm* (Damascus: Dar Petra, 2005).

⁸ For example, Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam*; and Ayan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel: My Life* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

⁹ See, for example, Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire”; idem, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect”; John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Nadia Fadil, “Managing Affects and Sensibilities: The Case of Not-handshaking and Not-fasting,” *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2009): 439-54; Irfan Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?*; and Sindre Bangstad, *Sekularismens Ansikter* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2009).

¹⁰ See, for example, Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1942); Badawi, *Dirāsāt*; Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977); Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1987); Michael Hunter and David Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Richard H. Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt, *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Germany: Fromman-Holzboog, 1998); Christel Gärtner, Detlef Pollack and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, eds., *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2003); al-Khaṭīb, *Ḥurrīyat al-ʿitiqād al-Dini*; and Wasella, *Vom Fundamentalisten zum Atheisten*

¹¹ But see Les Beldo, “Atheism and Orthodoxy: An Analysis of Moral Reasoning in the American Culture Wars” (master’s thesis, University of Chicago, 2008); Gregory Simon, *Maintaining Islamic Certainty in Minangkabau, Indonesia* (manuscript); and Fadil, “Managing Affects and Sensibilities.”

¹² The people quoted in this article do not appear with their own names.

¹³ While actual activists in Islamist or piety movements are relatively few, their vision of a religious life has become commonplace in Egypt. The increasing practice of regular prayer, especially among men, the very wide-scale shift in women's dress toward a covering style deemed Islamic, and the shift in ritual practice from Islamic mysticism and saint veneration towards an emphasis on textually correct ritual with the aim of moral perfection, are some of the everyday expressions of the societal extent of the Islamic revival. A 2011 poll of Egyptians' views of the relationship between religion and politics gives some quantitative indication: While 71 percent of the respondents supported democracy, a vast majority agreed that Egypt's laws should either be based on the Qur'an or be in accordance with Islamic values and principles, and 95 percent of the respondents said that Islam should play an important role in politics. For figures and interpretation, see Yasmin Moll, "Special Report: What the Pew Poll on Egypt Really Means," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 17 May 2011, online document: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/CairoReview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=57> (accessed 8 September 2011).

¹⁴ Due to a hegemonic Muslim understanding that only the three oldest Abrahamic religions, or "heavenly religions" in Islamic parlance, count as "real" religions, other religious traditions are not formally recognized in Egypt. This has practical consequences, especially for members of Egypt's small but established Baha'i community, who are denied ID cards and with it citizenship rights unless they consent to be registered as either Muslims or Christians. See Daniele Cantini, "Being Baha'i in Contemporary Egypt: An Ethnographic Analysis of Everyday Challenges," *Anthropology in the Middle East* 4 (2009): 34-51.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-35.

¹⁶ Mustansir Mir, "Polytheism and atheism," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2006): 158-62; Susanne Olsson, "Apostasy in Egypt: Contemporary Cases of Hisbah," *The Muslim World* 98 (2008): 95-115; Jörn Thielmann, "La jurisprudence égyptienne sur la requête en hisba," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 34 (1998): 81-98. There is a difference between *kufir* (unbelief) and *ilhād*

(non-belief, atheism), the first being such a dramatic accusation that most Muslims would be very hesitant to ever seriously make it of a fellow Muslim, while the latter is somewhat more ambiguous and less dramatic as an accusation.

¹⁷ For the Muslim legal problematic of apostasy in the contemporary practice of law, see Olsson, “Apostasy in Egypt”; and Thielmann, “La jurisprudence égyptienne.”

¹⁸ To avoid using what is considered to be foul language, Ismā‘īl does not fully pronounce the expressions *yikhrīb dinak* (may your religion be destroyed) and *din ummak* ([may] your mother’s religion [be destroyed]).

¹⁹ See also Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*.

²⁰ See, for example, Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam*; al-‘Azm, *Naqd al-fikr al-dīni*; ‘Abbās ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr, *Miḥnati ma‘a al-Qur‘ān wa-llāh fi al-Qur‘ān* (Damanhūr, 2004); and Khalīl ‘Abd al-Karīm, *al-Juzūr al-tārīkhīya li-l-sharī‘a al-islāmīya* (Cairo: Dar Sina li-l-Nashr and Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Intishār al-‘Arabi, 1997).

²¹ See, for example, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsa fi ‘ulūm al-Qur‘ān* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Organization, 1993); Asma Barlas, *‘Believing women’ in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur‘an* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 2002); and idem, *Re-Understanding Islam: A Double Critique* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam and Assen: Van Gorcum, 2008).

²² See, for example, the court case against Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd, whose marriage was declared void in 1995 on the grounds of his alleged apostasy, an accusation which he rejected (“Jurisprudence Abū Zayd,” trans. Baudouin Dupret and M.S. Berger, *Égypte/Monde arabe* 34 [1998]: 169-201); the story recounted by Salah in this article about his temporary loss of job; the imprisonment of the blogger Karīm ‘Āmir from 2007 to 2010 on the grounds of his writings about al-Azhar and confessional clashes (<http://www.freekareem.org/> [accessed 8 September 2011]); and the assassination of Farag Foda, a leading secularist intellectual, in 1992 (Ana Belén Soage, “Faraj Fawda, or the Cost of Freedom of Expression,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11

[2007], <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a3.html> [accessed 8 September 2011]).

²³ Catherine Ewing, “The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency,” *Ethos* 18 (1990): 251–78; Samuli Schielke, “Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39, no. 2 (2009): 158-85; Simon, *Maintaining Islamic Certainty*.

²⁴ See, for example, <http://nakneef.blogspot.com>.

²⁵ See, for example, <http://www.ssraw.org>; <http://www.ladeenyon.net>.

²⁶ See, for example, the online action of ‘Aliyā’ al-Mahdi, a feminist activist and professed non-believer who in November 2011 published nude images of herself on her blog as a provocation against the covering of women which is seen both by al-Mahdi and by the majority of Egyptians as sanctioned by Islam. <http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/2011/10/nude-art.html>

²⁷ Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*.

²⁸ See, for example, Magdi ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *al-Mūt fi al-gharb* (Cairo: Āfāq, 2009); see also Fadil, “Managing Affects and Sensibilities.”

²⁹ This relation between suicide and the collapse of religious faith is very clear in the interviews by Nadia Taysir Dabbagh among Palestinian men who had attempted suicide. Nadia Taysir Dabbagh, *Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair* (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2005), 223-29. See also Stefania Pandolfo, “‘The burning’: Finitude and the Politico-theological Imagination of Illegal Migration,” *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 3 (2007): 329-63.

³⁰ My use of capital/lowercase g in god/God in translated interviews reflects the difference in Arabic between *ilah* (a god) and *Allah* (God).

³¹ See Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam*.

³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

³³ *Ibid.*, sentence 341, emphases in original.

³⁴ See Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance*; Badawi, *Dirāsāt*.

³⁵ Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 107.

³⁶ I am indebted to one of the *IJMES* anonymous reviewers for this point, about which little or no research has yet been conducted, to my knowledge. It is congruent, however, with Budd's observation that English freethinkers' organizations in the 19th and 20th centuries were typically dominated by first-generation freethinkers hailing from socially mobile but religiously conservative backgrounds – Anglican in the 19th century, but Catholic in the 20th century, after the increasing secularization of Anglican Christians made struggling with religion a less urgent issue in that milieu.

³⁷ Notably, Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian* (see al-Khaṭīb, *Ḥurrīyat al-I'tiqād al-Dīni*, 101), and the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and French existentialists.

³⁸ Badawi, *Dirāsāt*.

³⁹ See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York and London: Columbia University Press), 14-15; and Karl Löwith, *Wissen, Glaube, Skepsis: Zur Kritik von Religion und Theologie*, *Sämtliche Schriften*; 3 (Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler Löwith, 1985), 335.

⁴⁰ al-Khaṭīb, *Ḥurrīyat al-I'tiqād al-Dīni*, 10-1.

⁴¹ Of course, Marxism and Darwinism do not necessarily conflict with a Muslim faith, just as human rights and egalitarian justice do not. Rather, Marxism and Darwinism provided a ground from which to possibly think about a non-intentional world, and this different ground of doubt also provided positive non-belief with a different thrust—one of the consequences being that while an earlier generation of Marxist atheists could afford a condescending view of religion as something that would slowly give way to the light of science, contemporary non-believers usually take religion much more seriously as a powerful and lasting fact of human existence.

⁴² Schielke, "Ambivalent Commitments." The group of people about whom that article tells does not overlap with my interlocutors in the present article. There are, however, many cases of people whose biographies include both periods of activist religiosity as well as periods of non-religiosity

and atheism in different combinations. Makkawi's trajectory from the Muslim Brotherhood to socialist cultural circles is one example.

⁴³ In practice, universal justice is a very elusive, historically and culturally specific matter. However, I am not concerned here with the truth or falsehood of the belief in universal justice, but rather with what kind of life experience it relies on and what it accomplishes.

⁴⁴ Michael Jackson, *Life Within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ Starrett, "The Varieties of Secular Experience"; Bangstad, *Sekularismens Ansikter*.

⁴⁶ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; idem et al., *Is Critique Secular?*; Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire"; idem, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect"; Fadil, "Managing Affects and Sensibilities"; Hussein Ali Agrama, "Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or Religious State?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010): 495-523.

⁴⁷ Charles Hirschkind, "Is there a secular body", post on *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/11/15/secular-body/> (accessed 10 January 2011).

⁴⁸ Hirschkind, "Is there a secular body?"

⁴⁹ Evidently, the same would apply with trying to find a common chord between such "religious" sites of ethical cultivation as ancestor worship, inquisition, spirit possession, textual scholarship, and blessing the food.

⁵⁰ On the notions of lifeworld and being in the world, see Michael Jackson, ed., *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 4th ed. (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1975), 229-50; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Galimard, 1945), 493-94.

⁵¹ So stated on a sticker distributed in Alexandria in March 2011.

⁵² Because of the bad reputation the word “secularism” has gained, supporters of a secular form of government have in recent years replaced “secular” with “civil” (*madani*), implying a distinction from theocracy and military rule but not from religiosity.

⁵³ Febvre, *Le probleme de l'incroyance*.

⁵⁴ Badawi, *Dirāsāt*, xii-xiii. Badawi argues that Arab non-belief (*ilhad*) in the age of early Islam was directed against prophecy because of its absolute centrality for humans’ connection with God in Arab culture, and that after the rejection of prophecy no relationship between the human and divine remained, so that the issue of God’s existence did not arise. Given the engagement of Hellenistic-Arabic philosophy with divinity separately from prophecy, however, it seems that the two issues were distinct to some degree, and that the theological rejection of prophets remained embedded in a metaphysical affirmation of an intentional universe. See Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-Falasifa = The Incoherence of the Philosophers: Parallel English-Arabic Text*, Trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah : Brigham Young University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28 (1994): 64-130.