

NONBELIEVERS, APOSTATES, AND ATHEISTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Chapter 3

Once a Muslim, Always a Muslim?

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ONCE A MUSLIM, ALWAYS A MUSLIM?

Lena Richter

Introduction

I'm like them, we grew up in this environment. I cannot escape or rupture it. Most importantly, I don't even want to. Not because I feel close to it but because it's a way of understanding and positioning myself in a more sympathetic position in order to have a conversation.... But my current re-appreciation of the role of religion should not be mistaken for the fact that I'm firmly a nonbeliever. In practice, I couldn't be further from being a good Muslim. It's a contradiction that I live.

(Soumaya,¹ Rabat 2022)

During our interview, Soumaya, a university teacher in her early thirties, explained how she went through different phases of being nonreligious. First, there was the “anger phase”: opposing and questioning everything related to Islam. Now, a few years later, she shifted her position and finds herself in a phase of reconciliation with her Muslim background and environment. She no longer wants to fit perfectly into the category of atheist but rather acknowledges and embraces the fact that she is living a contradiction: being an atheist and a cultural Muslim. While openly identifying as an atheist would mute conversations, framing herself as a cultural Muslim allows space for dialogue.

Shifting from Morocco to the diaspora context, Marouane,² a former imam and *hajj* travel companion, from Flanders, has a similar take as Soumaya:

What I try to convey to the ex-Muslims in my network is: You should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. You are not Muslim anymore, you have seen that religion is a human-made illusion, fine, but there are

so many positive aspects of religion that you can still pass on to yourself and to your children.

He adds: “There are many things that I still do, not for Islam, but simply because it is better for my quality of life, for society, and for nature. And these are things that I got to know through religion.” Among others, Marouane refrains from eating pork and drinking alcohol for health reasons and enjoys intermittent fasting. Moreover, he kept the value of spending his time productively, something he sees originating from religious discipline: “For more than a decennium I have set my alarm for the morning prayer to be at the mosque as early as 4 o’clock.” While Marouane is critical of certain aspects, he did not develop an “aversion” against Islam. Instead of regretting his religious past, he is thankful for what Islam has taught him and for the encounters he had with Muslims.

The ambivalent positions of Soumaya and Marouane resonate with other interviewees from my research on nonreligion in Morocco and the Moroccan diaspora. They, too, try to make sense of their nonreligious identity while navigating a religious environment. The link they keep with Islam differs in strength and can range from (almost) nonexistent to very present. The position that someone embraces is influenced by previous experiences with Islam. More negative experiences while growing up seem to lead to more oppositional views. For instance, one interviewee who grew up in Brussels had a strict, at times even violent, religious upbringing. She opted for clear labels to underline the break with her religious past and cut off contact with her family. Her perception of Islam became very negative, whereas others who had experienced Islam as a choice rather than a forced path tended to retain a more positive image of Islam. They stood, like Soumaya and Marouane, firmly behind their nonreligious views but also stressed their Muslim background. This chapter is thus based on the observation that while atheists and agnostics might criticize parts of Islam, they often continue to engage in certain Islamic aspects, out of habit or necessity, but also out of choice.

Concretely, this chapter draws on the narratives of around 50 life-story interviews which I conducted between 2019 and 2023. My research group consisted of young people (aged 18–35) living in urban Morocco and the Moroccan diaspora in Europe who went to university and have a middle- or upper-class background.³ As their specific self-identifications differ, this chapter opts to use the broad terms nonbeliever and nonreligion (*la dini*). These examples from Morocco and the diaspora will show similarities and differences of being a former Muslim in a Muslim-majority and a Muslim-minority context. While every former Muslim keeps to some extent a relationship with Islam and fellow Muslims, this chapter pays specific attention to those who explicitly stress this bond.

While elsewhere my research has focused on the everyday activism of young Moroccan nonbelievers and the ways they disengage from Islam (Richter 2021, 2022, 2023), this chapter aims to shed light on how they also continue to engage with Islam. As an academic translation of having a “Muslim heritage,” being “Muslim by birth” or having a “Muslim background” and “frame of reference,” I would like to introduce the term “post-Muslim.” The key purpose of this chapter is not to provide a clear definition of this term but rather to use it as a working term that can open up new discussions on (post-) Muslimness. It allows us to shift the focus to transformation and continuity rather than opposition. This implies that post-Muslim, similar to nonreligion, is a container term which aims to include different emic identifications, such as cultural Muslim. Needless to say, sub-categories like “cultural Muslim” have nuanced and personalized meanings. Categorical inflation is difficult to avoid as it is part of the complex ambiguity of describing nonreligious identifications.

Moving away from Islam?

Both in societal debates in Muslim-majority countries and right-wing discourses in Muslim-minority countries the picture of so-called Ex-Muslims who speak publicly is rather one-sided (Nixon 2019; Smith 2014). From television debates to YouTube channels, former Muslims have become a prominent voice in the discourse around Islam (Elsässer 2021; Khazaal et al. 2023). The nonreligious messengers are often very critical of Islam (Saeed 2007). While, in the diaspora, it is usually not newsworthy if someone leaves Christianity, biographies of former Muslims breaking with Islam are being published regularly. For instance, in the Netherlands, auto-biographies by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2007) and Lale Gül (2021) have become bestsellers. Yet, more subtle positions and experiences are often missing from the discussion (Vliek 2020). Including these voices does not only lead to a more nuanced framing of Muslims but also of former Muslims by moving away from the image of the “angry Ex-Muslim.”

In Europe, the discrepancy in framing defectors from Islam and Christianity also becomes visible in language. Instead of talking about “Ex-Christians,” many people rather stress that they are “Christian on paper” or have a “Christian background.” These “fuzzy” identifications also resonate with the statistics that approximately half of Europe’s citizens are neither regularly practicing a religion nor strictly identifying as nonreligious (Voas 2009). The most common form of Christianity is to embrace a nominal or in-between position, yet it remains the least studied (Ammerman 2013). This chapter argues that the same religious continuum applies to many former Muslims (Randeree 2016). Mouad and Sara,⁴ a young nonreligious couple living close to Rabat, make the same comparison:

“There are also some Muslims by culture, like Christians who only celebrate Christmas.” Keeping cultural aspects of religion can thus be observed among nonbelievers from different religious backgrounds (Spoliar & Martínez-Ariño 2023).

As every self-identification, the term “cultural Muslim” assumes different meanings for each individual. Particularly in the diaspora, opting for this term can express a feeling of solidarity with Muslims as a marginalized and discriminated group. In general, former Muslims need more words to describe the complexity and ambiguity they feel in relation to Islam and the Muslim community. As a consequence, labels such as “Ex-Muslim” often fall short, as the binary between “what one was” and “what one is” does not align with their experiences (Vliek 2020). Instead, former Muslims might self-identify in various terms, including seemingly “oxymoronic” labels such as “Muslim atheist” (Eller 2022; Froese 2005).

Also in studies about losing religion in general and leaving Islam in particular, the theoretical emphasis is often put on how people disaffiliate from religion (e.g., Cottee 2015; Streib et al. 2009). The study of nonreligion is described as what people “reject, question, caricature, and avoid” (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2017: 8). This is reinforced by oppositional terms such as “atheism” or “nonreligion.” While various scholars define nonreligion as a relational concept (Lee 2015; Quack 2014), the semantic structure of the term remains antagonistic rather than continuous. This typically leads to questions about motives to leave Islam and the struggles to distance oneself from one’s religious environment. Instead of asking *why* people leave Islam, it is more interesting *how* they do so (Vliek 2023). In this respect, most research focuses on people who clearly identify as atheists, and less emphasis is put on the in-between positions (Cottee 2015). Hence, speaking about “leaving Islam” is not always accurate, as many do not leave Islam as a whole but only certain aspects of it.

This chapter aims to be complementary to the research mentioned above: exploring how former Muslims still keep a connection with Islam and their Muslim environment. Embracing anti-religious views often applies, if at all, only to a particular phase and to some aspects of Islam. Looking at lived forms of (non)religion shows that nonbelievers do have extensive religious knowledge and continue to participate in some Islamic practices and celebrations. As a consequence, the perspective on lived (non)religion diminishes differences and binaries (Richter 2023; Salonen 2018). This observation can be seen as the counterpart of Schielke’s (2009) well-known statement that Muslims are not always pious. Similarly, many former Muslims only object to some religious ideas and practices, instead of opposing all forms of religion *per se* (Mumford 2015). On the premise that Muslims are not always devout, and nonbelievers are not always anti-religious, religiosity becomes something fluid, versatile, and complex (Schielke 2009).

As in Schielke's research, my interviewees explain this contradiction by framing "Islam as a culture to which they belong even when they don't believe in it as a religion" (Schielke 2012: 307). The term post-Muslim further builds upon the work of Vlieg (2019) and others who have shown that being nonreligious is an active negotiation between one's former religious self and one's rather new, nonreligious self, as well as the relation to significant others. This leads to positions of being "neither in nor out" of the Muslim in-group (Vlieg 2020). The chapter further ties in with defining the relation between religion and culture, which is related to questions of "belonging without believing" and adaptation strategies to religious environments (Woltschleger and Beach 2013). Moreover, it touches upon questions of resistance and agency in reclaiming religious norms (Mahmood 2006).

Post-Muslim—an imperfect category

Before expanding on the idea of post-Muslim further, it is necessary to distinguish it from other terms. The concept of post-Muslim is not to be confused with the term post-Islamism, which refers to a turning away from political Islamism among the Muslim youth toward more personalized forms of belief (Bayat 1996, 2005, 2007). It is also not the equivalent of post-Christianity, the tendency that Christianity loses its role as a dominant religion but is still hidden in values, worldviews, and practices that are no longer seen as necessarily Christian (Bullock 2018). In this respect, post-Christian societies are societies where so many individuals have dissented from Christianity that Christians have or will become a minority.

While these terms mainly address changes on the societal level, the term post-Muslim focuses on the individual. Certainly, this does not mean that there is no interaction between the two levels. Prioritizing the individual also reveals insights into societal processes and vice versa. For instance, as with post-Christianity, former Muslims are often unaware of how Islam still manifests itself in their daily routines. Sometimes interviewees claimed that Islam did not play any role in their lives anymore while later adjusting this statement, giving examples of how it actually did. While related terms such as post-Christians or post-Jews are not much used in the societal and academic discourse, it might be interesting to explore if the term also works for other religious traditions.

The concept of post-Muslim embraces the idea that someone's values, thoughts, and behaviors are to some extent still marked by Islam. As the relation someone keeps with Islam is versatile and can take different degrees, it is very difficult to clearly define what counts as post-Muslimness. The following questions arise: Where to draw the line between a post-Muslim, a non-Muslim, and a Muslim? Is every former Muslim a post-Muslim? And if not, what makes a post-Muslim a post-Muslim? For instance, if someone

keeps up a religious façade in order to avoid problems is this a form of post-Muslimness or is it rather an imposed Muslimness due to external circumstances? Is performing the role as post-Muslim another form of hiding from religious expectations and leading a double life? The trickiness lies in the fact that it is often difficult to distinguish between an imposed and an actively chosen role: someone might engage in religious traditions for multiple reasons, such as keeping up good relations with one's surroundings *and* enjoying the cultural aspects of it.

Post-Muslims might therefore be best defined by what they are not. They are neither convinced and dedicated Muslims nor strict Ex-Muslims who completely turn their backs away from Islam. This chapter opts for a broad definition of the term post-Muslim, including both unconscious and conscious forms of post-Muslimness as well as chosen and less voluntary aspects. Yet, as a gradual term, the term applies to some former Muslims more than to others. In this sense, those who keep a stronger connection to Islam and the Muslim environment can be seen as “more” post-Muslim. These critical notes on terminology left aside, we cannot do without categorizations. To fill the concept with meaning, let me provide examples of what post-Muslimness can look like.

Having a Muslim background means agreeing with some values and practices while disagreeing with others. This implies a selection process of which rituals, ideas, and practices to keep and which to dispose of (Hagström and Copeman 2023). This is not always an easy process, as Rachid, an Amazigh activist from Casablanca, said in this regard: “In the beginning, I didn’t know how to manifest my religiosity after I decided to leave it.” While some religious practices, values, and relations are dropped and new nonreligious practices are picked up (Richter 2023), this chapter focuses on which Islamic practices, values, and relations are being kept. Looking at the experiences of Moroccan nonbelievers, it becomes clear that some aspects of Islam remain more popular than others. Religious practices are often redefined in a multitude of ways depending on emotional, relational, and inspirational values. While some practices are kept consciously and out of conviction, others are experienced more as inescapable. It is, therefore, necessary to unravel these two poles further by differentiating between chosen and imposed forms of post-Muslimness.

Post-Muslimness as a choice

Even for those to whom religion only plays a minor role, in a rather uncommitted way religion might be present at life events and celebrations. Without necessarily having a religious value to them, participation in religious holidays can remain a meaningful experience, centering around tradition, spirituality, and community. In particular, *Eid sghir*,⁵ which marks the end of

Ramadan, is popular among nonbelievers. As Oussama,⁶ who lives between Belgium and Morocco, states: “I still really like the *Eid sgbir*: it’s about seeing your family and eating food—who doesn’t like that?” Instead of religious reasons, it is mainly celebrated for cultural motives, as both in Morocco and in the diaspora *Eid* is also part of the cultural identity. Another strong motivation is to accommodate family members. Soufiane⁷ (2020) from Rabat does not celebrate religious holidays when he is by himself, but out of kindness, he does it for his mother. He sends her messages and sometimes goes to his family’s place to celebrate with them. When Soufiane visits his mother during Ramadan she sometimes teases him and asks jokingly: “Have you even fasted a day? You’re not fasting—aren’t you?” Her teasing also reveals that she suspects that Soufiane is not fully participating in Ramadan.

While some religious traditions enjoy consensus, the popularity of others is disputed. Ramadan is such an ambiguous case. Among some nonbelievers, the month of fasting is highly detested, as it either means being obliged to fast or to hide eating, drinking, and smoking. Others enjoy the special atmosphere of the month, including short working days, long Ramadan nights, and the feeling of community. For them, the meaning of Ramadan is secularized, as they participate not for religious reasons but for health benefits, to challenge themselves, or to lose weight. Many also find their own adaptation to Ramadan, such as drinking water or engaging in intermittent fasting. While fasting without religious intention can be very exhausting, re-adapting the meaning of Ramadan is a way to cope with the situation. A similar case is *Eid kbir*,⁸ the feast of sacrifice. While some view the slaughtering of the animals as cruel and overly expensive, others see it, like other religious holidays, as an occasion to spend time with family members.

While one might assume that the majority of nonbelievers drop prayers, exceptions are made when it comes to special occasions, such as funerals, praying with others, or more spiritual adaptations, such as meditation. During a 2022 interview in Tangier, 29-year-old Namira told me how she likes to pick aspects from different spiritual traditions:

I can take some good things from Sufism, I can take some good things from Buddhism, and I can take some good things from atheism. I like meditation and I might even pray in a Muslim way just to see if I feel a kind of spiritual connection with the universe. I can get inspired by many things.

Jamal⁹ who grew up in the Netherlands also prays occasionally as a form of mindfulness: “It’s funny, when my parents told me to pray I always refused, but now that I’m so busy, praying can be a nice distraction and it gives me a break.” He adds: “My friends don’t understand that I’m thinking so differently and so critically but that I do pray.” Expectations of what it means to be nonreligious do not only come from Muslim friends and family members

but can also be internalized, as the best friend of one of my interviewees who continued praying told him: “Dude, what the hell am I doing, I don’t even believe in God!”

The Islamic pillars, *zakat* or the paying of alms and *hajj* or the pilgrimage to Mecca, are equally disputed. Some criticize the idea of helping others to increase their chances of going to paradise. Others describe *zakat* as a beautiful gesture. Asking Soumaya what motivates her to still engage in practices such as paying the *zakat*, a small part of her salary during *Eid*, she said she sees it as a generational continuation: “My mum did it, my grandmother did it, so I also do it.” Yet, she also adapts this process: instead of giving the *zakat* to a religious institution, she gives it directly to people on the street. While going on *hajj* is out of the question for most nonbelievers, a few would still be curious to experience it from a tourist perspective. Others are willing to pay for the *hajj* of their parents. Despite being critical of Saudi Arabia and its profit-making of the *hajj*, they do want to fulfill their parents’ wish, because they know it is important to them.

Opinions also differ when it comes to Islamic music, architecture, calligraphy, and fashion. Focusing on the cultural aspects of Islam is a way to keep a connection with Islam without compromising one’s nonreligious views. In the line of Islam as a culture many express appreciation for these more cultural aspects. At the same time, some see these aspects not as Islamic but rather as Moroccan or Amazigh. When it comes to clothing, a few nonbelievers opt for “modest fashion” or keep wearing Islamic symbols as a sign of cultural identification, such as wearing earrings or necklaces with the hand of Fatima or the evil eye. Some might even have tattoos inspired by Islamic motives, proving again how two seemingly contradicting aspects can be combined. These embodied aspects of belonging are observable in both, the Muslim-majority and the Muslim-minority context, but slightly more in the diaspora, which might be related to questions of identity.

While being critical of some values, many, like Marouane, also underlined the positive values of Islam, such as altruism or the feeling of community. According to some interviewees in Morocco, Islamic values were even necessary to keep stability and moral guidance in Morocco, which comes very close to the King’s discourse on Islam (El Haitami 2012). When I asked how they would hypothetically raise their children, most would teach their children about different worldviews and religions and encourage them to make their own choices. Yet, some indicated that it would be handy to use Islamic values, celebrations, and stories. Ilyas,¹⁰ who lives with his family in Antwerp, reflected on this:

I was raised in a religious system myself and I sometimes miss this with raising my children. Of course, we try to educate them well to become good and polite, but I wonder is this enough for children? Norms and

values are easy to convey, but it is more about how the human being is positioned in the world and the stories about nature. Religion is also a very big piece of identity, the feeling of warmth and tradition. My children already have a difficult situation with a Flemish mother and a Moroccan father.

Ilyas regrets that he does not know more about the Amazigh culture and stories, as this would be something he would like to pass on. The latter aspect is also related to knowledge. While Marouane, as a former imam, is particularly knowledgeable about Islam, he is not an exception. As religious education is obligatory, Moroccan nonbelievers often know a lot about Islam (Boyle and Boukamhi 2018). Their knowledge is often deepened when they start to develop doubts which motivate them to “do their own research” about Islam. Some of my interviewees even claim that they “knew the Qur’an better than Muslims do,” as they extensively read Islamic texts, including the “inconsistent and controversial parts.” Consequently, texts such as the Qur’an and the *hadiths* remain reference points when mentioning parts of Islam they agree or disagree with.

In both contexts, Islam is deeply linked to relations. Often the most important people, friends, siblings, and parents, are Muslims. This also influences the feeling of belonging that is, in Morocco and in the Moroccan diaspora, strongly connected to religion (Bullock 2018). This feeds into questions of belonging without believing and shows the different dimensions of religiosity: whereas belief might fall short, and practice might only be there in an uncommitted way, affiliation might remain. This is also recognized by Jamal.¹¹ While he likes to identify himself outside the box, he acknowledges that religion also has the power to connect people: “You can say that all those boxes are wrong, but you also want to belong to something.” Some of my interviewees brought their best friend to the interview, who is a Muslim, or told me how they confided their doubts first to their mother, a religious scholar. Others would point at Muslim idols, such as the Muslim feminist icon Fatima Mernissi. While relationships are not totally disruptive they are nevertheless selective. For instance, many are only friends with Muslims whom my interviewees would describe as “liberal, open-minded, or secular.” Some express understanding of the religiosity of their parent’s generation but have less comprehension when it comes to their Muslim peers.

At the same time, several interviewees described with a touch of nostalgia or even envy how Islam provides a source of comfort to their Muslim friends and family members. While religion no longer carries meaning to Soumaya, she admires and acknowledges how Islam plays a role for others. For her female family members, Islam can be a source of resilience that helps them deal with everyday struggles. While she envies the spiritual capacity of her family members, reciting the Qur’an also makes

her feel peaceful when she faces panic attacks or difficulties. Listening to Qur'anic recitation is something she would not have done during her "anger phase" but only went back to more recently. She adds: "I only pick what matters to me. There's some religious music that I absolutely love on an aesthetic and poetic level." While Marouane, too, became more critical of some passages of the Qur'an, he knows the Qur'an by heart and still finds beauty in it.

Soumaya's closeness to Islam is not directly related to religion but more about connecting to people who matter to her. She describes this very clearly herself: "It's foremost an identification with my family and less with religion." When she lets someone recite the Qur'an when visiting her grandparents' graves, she does not do it primarily for herself but because she knows this would have been meaningful for her grandparents. She also sometimes listens to the *adhan*, the call for prayer, as a way of nostalgia and being closer to her family. Soumaya's relation to Islam is thus mainly about creating more meaningful relationships with fellow Muslims. While she does not believe anymore, she still wants to belong (Wollschleger and Beach 2013). To still be part of her environment, a reframing is necessary that requires a process of de-religionization and culturalization of Islam. The convergence toward Islam is not one-sided. While Soumaya is open to religious concessions, her mother too shifted her language. When she realized that religious arguments did not work to keep Soumaya from smoking, she opted for more mundane arguments, such as that smoking would be bad for her health.

In sum, when it comes to Islamic traditions, practices, and values, there is some room for compromise and continuity. In a selective way, former Muslims chose to keep engaging in certain aspects of Islam. Yet, they do not simply take over Islamic ideas but rather find their own adaptations of keeping up traditions and norms in a way that makes sense to them. For instance, Soumaya's friend Sadiya,¹² who lives in Rabat, summarizes it as follows:

Maybe there are some aspects of Islam that I'm okay with as a cultural thing, not as a religion. *Eid* is also part of Morocco's cultural identity. Also using words with God in them, like *inshallah*. I couldn't find words that can replace the same meaning. I grew up with these words. Why should I go through the trouble of finding other words? Using them, doesn't mean that I believe in them. It has only a cultural connotation for me.

Making use of religious terminology also creates a bond with one's Muslim surroundings: "It makes you feel like you belong to the same universe." Thus by engaging in certain practices, many former Muslims keep to a certain extent a bond with their Muslim surrounding. While the examples mentioned so far are illustrative of an active selection, some post-Muslim aspects are not always perceived as voluntary choices.

Post-Muslimness as an unescapable reality

To return to the question raised in the title, to a certain extent it is difficult to escape the categorization of being a Muslim. Once a Muslim, you might continue to be considered one. This feeling is increased as it is nearly impossible to remove either Moroccan citizenship or official religious affiliation. As religion is transferred via the father, almost every Moroccan is automatically considered Muslim. This unescapable identity is related to an unescapable environment. Moroccan nonbelievers both in Morocco and the diaspora do not live in a vacuum: they grew up in a Muslim context. Depending on their parents, the neighborhood, and their school, they have been exposed to Islam in one way or another (El Ayadi et al. 2007; Skandrani et al. 2012). Especially for young nonbelievers, their often religious childhood and youth make up a significant part of their lives. Most of them became nonreligious around the age of 18: interviewing them, in their twenties and early thirties, meant that for more than two-thirds of their lives, they had been religious.

Not only in the past but also in the present Islam remains omnipresent (El Ayadi et al. 2007). My interviewees in Morocco described Islam as the water you swim in or the air you breathe. From hearing the call for prayer to seeing religious symbols and being exposed to religious terminology—it is difficult to escape the presence of Islam. This is also the case for contextual restrictions and expectations, such as religious laws and norms (Benchemsi 2015). While Islam might be less omnipresent in the diaspora, the immediate surroundings of my interviewees were often Muslim. They too went to Qur'an schools and mosques, took part in religious celebrations, and followed religious eating rules.

Soumaya's self-identification as a cultural Muslim comes not only from observing her inner reflexes and behavior but is also triggered by how others perceive her. In particular, during the seven years that she spent in Europe no matter what she did or what she said, being Moroccan meant she was automatically interpellated as Muslim. While Soumaya stressed that her self-identification should not be reduced to being a product of her time in Europe, her diaspora experiences gave her some distance to look at Morocco and Islam from a different perspective. By positioning herself as a cultural Muslim, she expresses solidarity with fellow Muslims who experience discrimination. Combining her views as an atheist with a cultural appreciation of Islam, she anticipates the feeling of being boxed by others and positions herself outside the box. Also, Marouane described the strong discrepancy between how others see him and how he identifies himself. When someone googles him old pictures and videos of him as an imam emerge. While he did not come out as nonreligious, people did notice that he reduced his mosque involvement to a minimum, namely the attendance of funerals, marriages, and other important life rituals.

Being very reflective about her relation to Islam, Soumaya acknowledges how some aspects are consciously chosen while others happen out of habit. For instance, she automatically draws on religious expressions in situations where she needs comfort:

I have some Muslim reflexes. When I'm worried I would refer to something related to religion. Or when I'm sick I would repeat verses or a pattern of voices, so your nerves are getting soothed and distracted. The only recitation I know comes from Islam, so why not engage in that? The kind of language I use is not something I can or want to escape. But I'm also conscious of it. It's like if I hit my hand I would automatically say ouch and I'm aware that it's the same with religion....

Here, an ambivalent picture emerges: while some aspects of Islam are chosen, others feel more imposed, like rules imprinted on her memory. Among others, Soumaya shared how she feels paranoid about throwing away bottles of wine in her immediate neighborhood in her Northern hometown. Instead, she walks to a different part of the city where no one can track back that the bottles belong to her. This feeling is also recognized by Marouane, who describes it as conditioning. As mentioned earlier, he still feels the need to always be productive, which he calls a basic principle of religion: "Like the prophet Muhammad, you should use your time wisely because life (on earth) is short."

Thus, even for nonbelievers, feelings of religious guilt and *hschouma*¹³ persist, as internalized norms are sometimes difficult to discard. Some of my interviewees told me they did not feel comfortable displaying affection on the street such as holding hands or giving a hug. They also felt bad for having sexual relationships or drinking alcohol. Moreover, they would adapt their clothing or hide their tattoos. This is also the case for Marouane:

There are certain things that I do out of automatism or habit. For instance, I don't feel the need to have tattoos. If I would not have been religious, I would maybe have a different stance on that. So I'm wondering, is it because of my background that I'm thinking like that?

Also, Mouad describes the impact of how he was raised: "The only thing I do is to say *hamdullah* after eating. It's conditioned, my dad's secretary used to give me cookies every time I said *hamdullah*. It was like a competition with my brother, who said it the most." For Mouad, it is not only about habits but also about thoughts such as homophobia and sexism which he links to religion. According to him, a lot of people have a hard time detaching themselves from that.

Likewise, food customs can persist even after people disaffiliate themselves from their religious upbringing. Most of my interviewees said that they would not eat pork because they did not like the taste or do not eat meat in general. It is as if their bodies had developed a resistance to certain food habits (Vliek 2020). Some of my interviewees acknowledged that it is difficult to start eating pork when they were brought up hearing that pork is *haram*. Even though Charif,¹⁴ a young Moroccan from Rabat, identified as “100% nonreligious” he admitted that:

There are some things that you don't feel like doing and you're not aware that this related to religion. You grew up feeling disgusted by pork and at some point, you catch yourself still being disgusted by it and you ask yourself why.

One of my interviewees shared a joke to illustrate how important the rule not to eat pork was: “One day a guy in a bar was so tipsy that he was really craving pork and asked to order some. ‘Impossible,’ said the bartender, ‘we’re Muslims!’” While no one was blinking an eye about drinking alcohol, consuming pork was a different story. In Morocco, pork was for many also just never an option due to the lack of access, as it is only sold in a few places. This is different in the diaspora, where pork is available. However, not eating pork was one of the first rules my interviewees in the diaspora would learn as children. The same arguments are valid for the consumption of *halal* meat. According to some of my interviewees, *halal* meat just tastes better, while others pointed out the higher availability of *halal* meat in Morocco. Anas,¹⁵ who moved from Morocco to Germany stated: “Not to be disrespectful but the food in Germany, and especially the red meat is not that good. So even here, I still buy *halal* meat, it tastes much better.”

Post-Muslim aspects might not always be done out of conviction but might also be pursued strategically. As explained by the chameleon effect, individuals adapt to their social context in order to facilitate social interaction and signal group membership (Wollschleger and Beach 2013). In other words, they put aside their own convictions in order to gain access to the group. This means that they pretend to hold the same views as the hegemonic preference although, in reality, they have different ideas (Wollschleger and Beach 2013). Some of my interviewees listened to Qur'anic recitations, participated in Islamic holidays, and used religious expressions to keep up a religious façade. Others went to the mosque to calm down a family conflict and used religious arguments to get a point across.

This also depends on the Muslim-majority or minority context. Islam can be an important part of the national and diasporic identity. In Muslim-majority contexts, former Muslims, reinforced by gender and class expectations, are still impacted by the predominance of Islam (Bayat 2007). In the diaspora,

this has very practical consequences, such as that Muslim organizations have become a nexus of social networking, job placement, and community resources (Beek and Fleischmann 2020). This may have resulted in people viewing nonreligious views and behaviors as illegitimate, further reinforcing the necessity of membership in the religious group. Due to social sanctioning and less access, individuals might choose the benefits of religious participation despite their different ideas (Wollschleger and Beach 2013).

The complexity of being a post-Muslim

As we have seen so far, and as visualized in Figure 3.1, it is necessary to differentiate different forms of post-Muslimness such as (un)conscious and (un)intended forms of keeping up religious practices, as well as doing it out of conviction or for others. The latter can also be described in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Accordingly, there are parts of being post-Muslim that are influenced by the perceptions and expectations of others, as well as contextual restrictions. This leads to a complex tension between what is perceived as an active choice and what is rather viewed as a result of one's surroundings and upbringing. This differentiation is not always easy, as it is often also a mixture of motives. Actively choosing something and framing it in a positive light can also be a coping mechanism. If it is unavoidable to take part in *Eid*, the situation itself cannot be easily changed. Yet, it is possible to adjust one's attitude and to try to look at it from a more positive perspective, which can be seen as an act of agency in the limited space available.

Another example to illustrate that a clear distinction between intended and unintended forms of post-Muslimness cannot be made is language. Almost always, Moroccan nonbelievers keep using religiously connotated language. While some do this consciously, for others it is more related to semantic satiation: using religious language has become so natural that one no longer thinks about the original religious meaning of words, such as *bismillah* or *inshallah*. For this reason, using religious expressions is usually

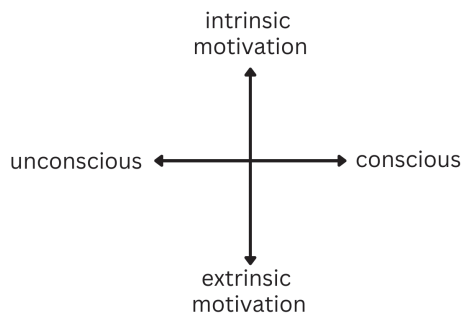


FIGURE 3.1 The spectrum of post-Muslimness.

no longer perceived as something religious. At the same time, language can also be a way to show respect and create connections with fellow Moroccans in Morocco and in the diaspora. Ayoub,¹⁶ an atheist from Rabat, first dropped religious phrases but then picked them up again: “There was a moment in my life when I did not use these sentences anymore. But they create social cohesion; people gonna trust you, they just gonna think that you’re one on them, that you’re part of the society.” In the diaspora, some Arabic expressions, including those whose meanings have religious roots, have even become part of the youth language (Schoonen and Appel 2005). As with many practices, when it comes to religious phrases, the feelings can be best described as mixed. Hind,¹⁷ who identifies as agnostic and lives in Rabat, shared how her views shifted:

One and a half years ago my best friend died, and people told me religious blessings. I know that my friend was not religious but it’s so obvious in the heads of people that every Moroccan must be Muslim, that they don’t think that this could be different. These are moments of paradox when you say ‘Yes, yes, *hamdullah*,’ even if you don’t believe in God. But now I see these things more as social codes, it’s part of the culture.

Individuals may vary over time in how they see their own religious identity. The closeness to Islam can differ depending on different phases. The feeling of post-Muslimness is especially visible in the narratives of those who have been nonreligious for a while. Interviewing the same people after a couple of years,¹⁸ most interviewees remained within the nonreligious spectrum while they became a bit more lenient toward Islam. When I interviewed Soufiane again after a couple of years he told me:

How I see religious people has changed a bit. First, I tried to limit my circle of friends based on their mindset and what they believe in. This was in my early stage of being irreligious. Recently, in 2019, it kind of changed because I had a lot of positive interactions with Muslims and *hijabi* friends. So now I try not to judge people based on their religion.

Paradoxically, Islam often played a more significant role in the phase where people were firmly nonreligious and opposed religion. The re-appreciation of Islam becomes possible exactly because its significance declines. Having gained some emotional distance from it and having processed the process of becoming nonreligious allows the space to re-evaluate one’s relation with Islam.

The level of engagement with one’s Muslim environment can also vary according to different moments of the year, such as Ramadan, and can even

change on a daily basis. This is not always a rational process but is also linked to emotions. Ali,¹⁹ an Arabic teacher from Rabat, describes this as follows:

Some days I like to consider myself as someone with a Muslim frame of reference in terms of thinking, some other days it doesn't make sense to me. So it's not stable, it's changing. But I would always consider myself as someone with a religious basis. Honestly, I often think it's too much trouble to think about it, so I leave it to the way I feel about it.

Post-Muslim activism: agency, resistance, and negotiation

Whereas many nonbelievers possess more radical positions and views on a private level, they seem to downplay and selectively choose which views to share on a societal level. Depending on the situation and the interlocutor, they adopt a reconciling approach. Therefore, at first sight, embracing a more post-Muslim position might seem like the opposite of an activist position. However, while post-Muslims might be less bold in their resistance, non-compliance does not always need to be “actively” expressed but can also take different forms (Wollschleger and Beach 2013). Resistance can be more silent, for instance, when participating in religious rituals without religious intention.

The question of navigating one's nonreligious position in a dominantly religious environment is closely tied to questions of agency. Following Mahmood, it is necessary to uncouple the notion of agency from that of resistance. For her, “the capacity for agency is entailed not only in acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways one inhabits norms” (Mahmood 2006: 12; see also Therrien 2022; Vliek 2020). Consequently, agency should not be understood as equivalent to resistance but as a capacity for action (Mahmood 2006: 33). Mahmood argues that we need to define agency outside the binary construction of doing and undoing norms and instead analyze how norms are “lived and inhabited” (Mahmood 2006: 48). This being said, it is not only vocal nonbelievers who possess agency and the capability of resistance. Those who embrace in-between categories also resist expectations, namely to be 100 percent atheist or 100 percent Muslim. In this respect, agency should not be reduced to those who seek debates but also to those who strive for coexistence and who still engage in practices.

While one might assume that fellow Muslims would welcome those who still engage in Islam, it is a position that needs to be actively claimed and negotiated. Both religious and secular environments sometimes react with confusion as many post-Muslims do not fit into the general image of a non-religious person. For instance, Soumaya's Muslim friends tease her when she shuts down the music during the *adhan*. They also question Soumaya's use of religious terminology, something she refrained from at the beginning

of her nonreligious trajectory. She no longer feels the need to revise her language and sees religious language as part of her linguistic repertoire: “When I use religious expressions, my friends ask, ‘Why do you say this, you’re not even religious?’. But this is the language that I have, you cannot confiscate that from me. I’m the same as you, just without belief.” Also, Marouane’s friends are often confused as to why he still abstains from alcohol, although he identifies as nonreligious. Some even expressed suspicion that he follows a two-pronged approach, questioning the truthfulness of his nonreligious views.

Similar to Soumaya’s and Marouane’s case, Ali’s self-perception differs from how others would describe him:

People have a certain way of seeing me as a nonreligious person, and that I think that religion is bad. But that’s not how I see myself. People refer to what they know: Muslims pray and they do Ramadan and even while I don’t do these things I could still consider myself Muslim. How people see me depends on how much I open up to them. If people see me being myself, they definitely assume I’m nonreligious. Can I be both? Religious and nonreligious at the same time?

The latter quote illustrates how Ali is talking back to a certain narrative about nonreligious Moroccans (Richter 2022). Similarly, Jamal is also often confronted with various expectations about his identity: “People think that if you’re liberal you despise everything and you leave everything behind. I just wanna be progressive *and* embrace my love for Sufism.”

The normalization of being nonreligious is thus not exclusively reserved for strict nonreligious positions. On the contrary, normalizing nonreligion means normalizing the many different identifications within the spectrum of nonreligion. It means normalizing the position somebody feels comfortable with, instead of fulfilling certain expectations of what nonreligion and the post-Islam script ought to be (Cottee 2015). This also implies a flexible understanding of who counts to the Muslim in-group and who does not, which goes beyond theological criteria (Quack and Schulz 2023; Saba 2011). Many actively claim their space as post-Muslims, such as Hind: “One time in Ramadan, someone didn’t say ‘*Ramadan karim*’ back because I don’t believe. But Ramadan remains a special month for me, I think I have the right to be wished a ‘*Ramadan karim*’ as well.”

This kind of negotiation is based on proximity. Several interviewees criticized that activists often stay in their bubbles and that convictions and lived realities are too far away from each other to have a proper conversation. While activists might talk back to the negative discourse about atheists, they are not always listened to (Richter 2022). Those who position themselves as “post-Muslims”²⁰ rather than as strict Ex-Muslims can capitalize on their

in-between positions and mediate between different groups. Possessing an understanding of both religious and nonreligious views helps to bridge discrepancies and to facilitate dialogue. In the end, former Muslims can often empathize with religious viewpoints, as they have been religious themselves. Speaking the same, or at least a similar, language helps to foster a dialogue. In this respect, many employ religious arguments to get a point across. By not claiming a position outside but at the border or even within the Muslim community, they are able to reach audiences that most activists cannot reach.

Appreciating certain aspects of Islam does not exclude taking a critical stance. On the contrary, turning one's back on Islam might also imply the feeling of not having the right to say something anymore, whereas remaining close to Islam opens more space for critique. Focusing on commonalities might also make it easier to accept small differences as part of diversity within the Moroccan society and diaspora. Young Moroccans can seek connection with their Muslim surroundings *and* simultaneously claim their rights as nonbelievers. Their statements of appreciation are often followed by a "but," which shows that they negotiate their Muslim background in relation to their nonreligious self. By seeing Islam as a heritage, rather than a religion, it loses its sanctity which allows more space for critique.

Claiming a post-Muslim position does not only challenge the expectations of fellow Muslims but can also be a response to discourses that take place on a societal level. In the diaspora in Europe, positioning yourself as a post-Muslim can be an expression of solidarity with Muslims. Solidarity is reinforced as the discrimination based on perceived country of origin, which is often equated with Islam, weighs heavier than differences in religious views. In Morocco, post-Muslims respond to and challenge negative perceptions of nonbelievers as being anti-religious, Westernized, or ignorant (Benyachou 2023). Positioning themselves as part of the in-group also allows alliances with fellow Muslims in and outside Morocco. While Zaina²¹ from Brussels does not wear the veil herself and even has some critical remarks about it, she also stands in solidarity with those who want to wear it and is very engaged in the campaign "Hijabis fight back." In Morocco, post-Muslims might join forces with fellow Muslims who would equally like to reform established forms of religion.

Hearing more subtle voices contributes to a more accurate idea of how nonreligion takes shape in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts. Marouane sees this position as one that needs to be more at the forefront:

The problem is that if you are young and need advice then you can either go to a very religious imam or to a radical Ex-Muslim, but for someone who just wants to have an open and neutral conversation about this, that option does not exist. And if people like me always stay in the background and don't take responsibility, that's not fair to the community and to vulnerable young people.

Concluding remarks

Being a post-Muslim can take different forms. For some, it is a conscious choice to keep engaging in certain practices and to nourish a connection with their religious environment. Yet, even those who frame it as a choice pose questions to what extent it is really a choice, acknowledging that their decisions are also influenced by how they grew up and how they are still surrounded by Islam. Another distinction can be made between being a post-Muslim out of conviction and being a post-Muslim for others, for instance, to please family members or to express solidarity with fellow Muslims. Both distinctions are difficult to make, as it is often a combination of intended and unintended acts which are motivated by internal and external factors.

While the precise composition of being post-Muslim differs per person and context, it is remarkable that selection patterns are visible: some practices remain more popular than others. What they have in common is the fact that they are not done out of religious motives but rather for cultural or relational reasons. This shows that not every act that seems to be religious needs to be religiously meaningful. Someone might read the Qur'an out of curiosity or to admire its poetry, fast as a dieting practice, refrain from alcohol for health reasons, or appreciate the beauty of religious calligraphy and poetry. This selection and adaptation process might be frowned upon as religious cherry-picking but might be similar to Muslims who equally prioritize certain practices over others.

This cultural reframing can also be seen as a compromise toward and convergence between oneself and one's surroundings. Without wanting to romanticize coexistence or discrediting other forms of activism, it is important to include these post-Muslim positions in the debate around nonreligion. Focusing on commonalities, using a similar linguistic repertoire, and positioning oneself as part of or close to the in-group can foster dialogue and create, according to my interviewees, new allyships. Moreover, embracing a post-Muslim position might help to normalize different viewpoints and challenge common categorizations and stereotypes.

The term post-Muslim is helpful in analyzing continuities and commonalities in the (non)religious trajectories, but it also has some limitations. First of all, it is meant to be an analytical category rather than an emic self-identification. The term post-Muslim might not work for everyone at every moment. People might go through phases where they feel a more opposing or a more continuous relationship toward their Muslim background. Hence, it is meant to describe the field of tension of those who in one way or another keep a relationship with the Muslim in-group.

Another critical remark can be made by looking at the semantic construction of the term. In the age of "post-everything" (Kirk 2006) many trends

are labeled as “post.” The category aims to go beyond oppositional notions of nonreligion, non-Islam, and Ex-Muslim and strives to focus on continuity rather than disruption. Yet, the prefix “post-” might suggest a hierarchy of development as it implicitly implies a linear process from pre to post.²² Besides the fact that this is semantically incorrect, as we do not use the term pre-Muslims, it is also important to stress that trajectories can take multiple directions. People can move in and out of religion (van Nieuwkerk 2018) and do not always shift ideas from being Muslim to post-Muslim. For instance, one might also grow up with Islam playing a secondary role and later opt for a more active way of being Muslim.

At the same time, both in Morocco and the diaspora, some practices that are often framed as nonreligious can also be seen as continuity. Looking at the experiences from a post-Muslim angle might shed a different light on certain aspects. While having relationships, drinking beer, walking a dog, or smoking is often portrayed as a disruption with Islam, they can also form a continuity. For instance, many of my interviewees drank beer even when they still identified as Muslims. The difference might rather lie in the perception of these practices as the level of guilt might have been higher while being religious.

Besides its pitfalls, the term is useful to bring attention to how former Muslims keep up a relationship with their Muslim surrounding. In particular, it is relevant to grasp the experiences of those who maintain a relatively close connection to Islam. It makes clear that whereas Islam does not necessarily carry religious meaning for them any longer, it can still matter in terms of values, relations, and practices. This is especially valid in the narratives of those who have been nonreligious for a while. Instead of categorically breaking with Islam, former Muslims show flexibility in selecting and reframing former religious practices in cultural terms. The post-Muslim angle makes clear that the relationship with Islam for many former Muslims is neither always absent nor foremost negative, but can also be positive. Albeit, most of the time the relationship can be best described as ambiguous.

Notes

- 1 All names are pseudonymized.
- 2 Interview August 8, 2022, Gent.
- 3 The choice for this specific research group is based on the fact that nonreligious views are particularly popular among this group.
- 4 Interview April 24, 2022, Temara.
- 5 Also known as Eid Al Fitr.
- 6 Interview May 18, 2022, Kenitra.
- 7 Interview July 2, 2020, Rabat.
- 8 Also known under the name Eid al-Adha.
- 9 Interview May 23, 2021, online.
- 10 Interview March 12, 2019 and January 13, 2022, Antwerp.

- 11 Interview May 23, 2021, online.
- 12 Interview May 12, 2022, Rabat.
- 13 *Hchouma* can be translated as “shame.”
- 14 Interview October 16, 2021, Rabat.
- 15 Interview March 3, 2022, online.
- 16 Interview March 12, 2020, Rabat.
- 17 Interview May 20, 2022, Rabat.
- 18 Previous to this research project (2019–2023), I already conducted around 50 interviews with former Muslims between 2016 and 2019. I re-contacted some of my old interviewees to do follow-up interviews.
- 19 Interview May 13, 2022, Rabat.
- 20 Here, post-Muslim refers to those who keep a stronger connection with Islam and their Muslim surrounding.
- 21 Interview July 8, 2021, online.
- 22 This insight is also credited to a conversation with Joud Al Korani.

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