

NONBELIEVERS, APOSTATES, AND ATHEISTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Chapter 9

Shoe-Ing the Atheist: Gendered Emotional Responses toward Nonreligion in Egypt

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9

SHOE-ING THE ATHEIST

Gendered Emotional Responses toward Nonreligion in Egypt

Karin van Nieuwkerk

Introduction

An episode of the Egyptian TV program “Red Line” set the stage for a contentious debate involving an Al-Azhar scholar, a lawyer, and two atheists—Sherif from a Muslim background and Abanub from a Christian background (Khad Ahmar 2016). The anchor initiated the conversation by asserting that atheism was foreign to the Arab world and Egypt, a land synonymous with the esteemed Azhar institution. Sherif was given a limited time to articulate his skepticism before Sheikh Sayed Zayed assumed the role of correcting Sherif’s views.

When the lawyer, Mr. Nabih Al-Wahsh, steps in, the tone soon changes into threats: “atheism isn’t a mere phenomenon that affects individuals or groups, but a national security threat. Let me emphasize this: it’s a national security threat!” Suddenly, the topic is shifted to religion as a source of morals and values, which those “deprived of the blessing of faith” obviously do not uphold, like protecting “your honor” and “your women.” The lawyer holds: “An atheist can get into any kind of relationship he wants and legitimizes all kinds of vices.” Sheikh Sayyid adds: “But that’s why they are rejecting religion. They’re rejecting religion to drink alcohol, fornicate and to be immoral!”

The topic turns back to the constitutional rights and freedom of expression of one’s opinion, which, according to the lawyer, does not hold for atheists. The lawyer yells to make clear that atheists have the right to be atheists, but they cannot “promote” atheism: “in your home and among your family, feel free to be an atheist, but to promote atheism, this is clear-cut ‘*kufr*’ (infidelity).” The lawyer is getting visibly agitated and loudly shouts, “it was

wrong to even host them. Infidels! They're infidels!" "We should shoe these people! Shoes! Get out. Get out. No, no, these people shouldn't sit down with us." He actually takes off one of his shoes and threatens to throw it at the atheist guests, yelling, "The shoes of the managing director of this channel have a higher standing than you do!"¹ Shoeing is an ultimate and iconic gesture of contempt and insult in the Middle East (Asser 2008; Duke 2013; Henley 2011; Ibrahim 2009: 219).

Similar strong emotions are echoed among my interlocutors' significant others—notably parents and relatives—upon learning of their nonreligious stance. Parents express a mix of sadness, moral indignation, and shame, particularly when it comes to nonreligious women, who are often viewed as a source of disgrace for their families. Some women are even labeled as mentally ill. Consequently, nonreligious women often face severe consequences, ranging from discipline to ostracism and harassment.

In light of these pervasive emotional reactions to atheism and nonreligion in Egypt, this chapter aims to dissect the reasons behind this fear, anger, and disdain. Why are atheist and nonreligious men and women in Egypt feared and despised? Why are they considered a national security threat? And why is the reaction towards women even more severe? A practice theory of emotion can shed some light on these emotional responses.

This chapter draws upon interviews conducted with young nonreligious Egyptians from both Muslim and Coptic backgrounds.² It also involves the analysis of various atheist channels, including Black Ducks, Masri Mulhid, George Paul, Alber Saber, and Ahmed Harqan.³ Furthermore, the research material includes state TV and religious media coverage surrounding atheism.⁴ Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that most nonreligious people remain "in the closet," direct conversations with significant others of the interlocutors were impossible. This chapter accordingly provides, in addition to their legal position, an indirect perspective: my interlocutors' experiences with the emotional responses of parents, relatives, friends, and colleagues.

The study of nonreligion is an emergent field (see, among others, Bullivant and Ruse 2021; Cottee 2015; Copeman and Schulz 2022; Lee 2015; Vlieg 2021), but the context of the Middle East has not yet been extensively explored (with notable exceptions such as Richter 2021; Schielke 2012, 2013; van Nieuwkerk 2018; Whitaker 2014). Especially, the gendered aspects as well as the emotional trajectories of leaving religion are underexamined. This chapter contributes to the understanding of the emotional and gendered aspects of the trajectories of moving out of religion. It will do so by examining the emotional responses towards young Egyptian men and women who leave Islam and Orthodox Christianity.

This chapter aims, first, to elucidate the legal status of atheists and the nonreligious, secondly, to delve into the depiction of atheism in state media,

and finally, to understand the reactions of parents and relatives. Throughout this analysis, a particular focus will be placed on the emotional and gendered responses toward nonreligion, encompassing anger, disgust, moral indignation, and shame.

Practice theory of emotions

Anthropology and the broader realm of social sciences have experienced a significant shift toward the exploration of emotions and affect (Skoggard and Waterston 2015). While the study of emotions and their universality has long captured anthropologists' attention (Beatty 2014), recent focus has centered on dissecting the notions of emotions, feelings, and affect. This shift aims to transcend the mind-body dualism that has often framed these discussions. To comprehend the lawyer's act of throwing his shoe as the ultimate symbol of contempt, the essence lies not so much in defining anger or contempt but rather in understanding what motivates these emotions and their impact on individuals. For this purpose, a practice theory of emotion, examining the role emotions play for and between individuals, proves more pertinent. Approaches suggesting that individuals don't simply have emotions but actively do emotions offer fruitful insights (Scheer 2012; Scheer, Schepelern Johansen, and Fadil 2019). Although I have specifically delved into the affective trajectories of my nonreligious interlocutors (van Nieuwkerk forthcoming), understanding the emotional responses of significant others and society at large is crucial for my interlocutors' well-being.⁵

Emotions have long been connected with the interiority of individuals and were for that reason considered hard to examine. Emotions also have a long gendered history of being connected with femininity and the private sphere (Scott 2009, 2018). Recently, several scholars, however, started to approach emotions no longer as private feelings or belonging to the "inner realm" of persons but rather as engagements with the world. Scholars who share the core idea that emotions are engagements with the world are philosopher Robert Solomon (2011) and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004).

Ahmed's conceptualization positions emotions as a stance toward the world or as a form of "worldmaking" (Ahmed 2004: 7–8, 12). It is important to study what moves and motivates people. Ahmed underscores that the term "emotion" originates from the Latin *emovere*, meaning "to move, to move out" (Ahmed 2004: 11). Thus, her central inquiry is: "What do emotions do?"

Solomon argues that emotions are not self-enclosed feelings but are *about* something. We get angry at someone or at something. "It is a way of interacting with another person ... and a way of situating oneself in the world" (Solomon 2011: 19). It is thus important to study the "aboutness" of emotions. Emotions are also strongly interpersonal. Most of our emotions arise

with and in reaction to other people. According to Solomon, emotions are evaluations or “judgments” about the world, the self, and others. Emotions are structured by ways of perceiving, judging, and evaluating the world. Anger arises when one feels wronged or offended, and the other is put on trial. Moreover, emotions are also dynamic and have a history. It is a process over time and has to do with the history of the situation.

Given their engagement with the world, emotions inherently possess a political aspect. While Solomon briefly acknowledges this aspect, he does not fully explore it (Solomon 2011: 158). I contend that comprehending the historical and contextual facets of emotions necessitates acknowledging their political dimension, which significantly shapes my interlocutors’ emotional experiences and the reactions they face. Other scholars, such as Abu-Lughod (1987) in her work on the “politics of sentiment” and Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) on the “politics of emotions,” illuminate the entwinement of emotions with political context. Ahmed also extensively delves into the “Cultural Politics of Emotions” (Ahmed 2004). In this chapter, I examine the relational, social, and political dimensions of emotional responses toward nonreligion.

Legal position of atheism and nonreligion⁶

The new Egyptian constitution, ratified in early 2014, lays down the foundation for absolute religious freedom in Article 64, while Article 65 safeguards freedom of thought, expression, and opinion. However, the penal code’s articles pertaining to “ridiculing the heavenly Abrahamic faiths,” “desecrating religious symbols,” and “mocking a religion or religious rite in public” continue to be employed to silence expressions of nonbelief or “blasphemy” (Mada Masr 2014a). These articles are utilized to target outspoken atheists on social media platforms and report them to security forces (Ezzat 2018). Moreover, Christian citizens also find themselves ensnared by the same legal provisions (Saber 2014). Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), noted in a 2021 report that two official government discourses have been evident since the reign of el-Sisi (Ibrahim 2021).

On the one hand, el-Sisi has repeatedly emphasized respect for freedom of religion and the freedom to abstain from belief. In his New Year’s address in 2015, explicitly addressing the Azhar, he urged for a transformation of religion. He acknowledged that numerous young individuals turned to atheism due to their inability to reconcile the injustice, violence, and devastation perpetrated in the name of God (Nader 2022). He reiterated the importance of reforming Islam on multiple occasions (Al-Ahram 2017).

On the other hand, official institutions have been actively combating atheism in alignment with the government’s “fight against atheism” initiative (Ibrahim 2021). In 2014, the Egyptian Council of Churches

announced the establishment of interfaith committees of mosques and Islamic clerics, with the objective of controlling and confronting atheism among members of both faiths (Mada Masr 2014b). Al-Azhar also started a campaign together with the Ministry of Youth to combat atheism. The campaign's goals were spreading awareness of the danger of atheism to society and launching a dialogue with atheists to give them a chance to come back to religion (Fouad 2014).⁷ Also, prison sentences were recently handed down to several atheists such as Sherif Gaber, who had his own YouTube channel in 2019, and Anas Hassan, activist, blogger and moderator of the Egyptian Atheist Facebook page, in 2020 (EIPR 2020; Ibrahim 2021).

This dual discourse seemingly converges in the endeavor to combat “all forms of extremism,” serving as part of a state initiative to endorse moderate and non-political expressions of religious practice. The proposed “Islamic reform campaign” appears mainly to consist of promoting a quietist non-political form of Islam in schools and society (Heller 2015), a policy that was also current under his predecessor. Accordingly, the religious institutions do not only address nonreligion but equally combat religious “extremism.” Religious “extremism” is considered as threatening as atheism. The two are considered two sides of the same coin, as the Minister of Religious Endowments, Mukhtar Goma’ stated in 2018, mentioning that his ministry was taking steps on all fronts to make Egypt immune to “atheist, heretical and extremist ideas and to contain the spread of atheism in Egypt” (El-Din 2018). In his view, public order should be informed by a conservative-moderate form of religion and all forms of extremism—both religious and nonreligious—should be annihilated.

In December 2017, a new law was proposed that directly criminalizes atheism. The draft-law proposal was put forward by a Member of Parliament and has, at the time of writing, not yet been submitted. The drive behind this proposal provides clear insights into the fear of atheism as an issue for the political order. We have seen how the blasphemy laws provide ample opportunity to prosecute nonbelievers, so why is this new law directly criminalizing atheism needed? `Umar Hamrush, secretary general of the Religious Affairs Committee (2015–2020), during a debate on the draft ban on atheism, seconded the idea of Goma’ that atheism “is just as dangerous as the phenomenon of ... radicalism, and we should do our best to fight both” (El-Din 2018).⁸ The influential editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Egypt Today*, Khaled Salah (2018), wrote in an opinion piece: “The dangers of terrorism are known, but not many know that atheism and terror are equally destructive. Atheism also weakens one’s identity and calls into question established beliefs in history, canons, religious symbols, the Prophet’s companions and followers, and ultimately leads to the collapse of the foundations of entire nations and of their sacred beliefs.” Hamrush’s draft bill of “Atheism

Criminalization” was supported by the Azhar but lacked support in the parliament and received public criticism (Ibrahim 2021).

Egypt is not alone in equating atheism with terrorism; Saudi Arabia similarly demonstrates this association (Whitaker 2015). The political discourse within Egypt, bolstered by religious authorities and substantial sections of society, views atheists as a menace comparable to terrorists. Atheism is perceived as a force capable of eroding both public and political orders. In the words of Turki, the head of the Endowment Ministry’s mosque management unit, “If [atheists] rebel against religion, they will rebel against everything” (Darwish 2015).

Fear stands as the prevailing emotion steering the state’s response to atheism and nonreligion. In the framework of practice theory, fear revolves around perceiving and sensing something as dangerous (Solomon 2011). The object of fear is unequivocally stated: rebellion. Atheists and nonreligious people who speak out are feared for their rebellion against the religious, political, and moral order. “Fear might be concerned with the preservation not simply of ‘me,’ but also ‘us,’ or ‘what is,’ or ‘life as we know it,’ or even ‘life itself’” (Ahmed 2004: 64). In our example, the atheist other is constructed as endangering the state’s very existence. Fear motivates actions to conserve power. This justifies forms of violence and translates into repression of the public expressions of atheism.

Media representations of atheists

The most common representation of atheists, particularly in the media, is that they are “deviants,” in line with the literal meaning of *ilhad*. Representations of deviance have different social, moral, psychological and political realms. Accordingly, the representations translate into various images of otherness: “abnormality,” “immorality,” “corruption,” “deformity,” and “foreignness.”

The trope of abnormality is, for instance, expressed in a talk show on the Egyptian TV channel Mehwar. The moderator told the founder of Black Ducks (*Batt al-Iswid*), Isma`il Muhammad: “You are the abnormal one. You are the one who deviated from society’s norms.” Deviance from society and everything society stands for, its norms, its structure, and its commonly held ideas and practices is the core of the representation of nonreligious people.

The trope of atheist deviance is particularly related to morality. Accordingly, a common representation of nonreligious people is that they want to be freed from the “shackles of religion” (Mehwar channel 2013). They are often questioned about their moral ideas and actions. Questions such as, “Would you accept if I propagate prostitution?” or “Are you now sleeping with your mother and sister?” are often directed at atheists (Mehwar channel 2013). Atheists are perceived to be driven by lust to reject religion, because it

limits their desires (Black Ducks episode 63). This representation conveys the idea that there is no moral framework outside the religious scope, defining nonreligious people automatically as immoral. Dr. Bakr Zaki Awad, Dean of the Faculty of Theology of al-Azhar University, was allowed to conclude the show—in which Isma`il Muhammad featured but finally left the studio because he was not allowed to express himself—by saying:

...without religion, there is no right or wrong. Atheists do not believe in the wrong at all. Therefore, it's okay for an atheist to marry his sister or his daughter or his mother. For them this is allowed, because they don't believe anything is forbidden. When they deny the existence of God, they deny the existence of what is forbidden. ... In their faith, they don't believe in hell or heaven. There is death and it ends there. So, they are entitled to enjoy life as much as they want in their lifetime. There is no payback or punishment. They allow themselves to satisfy their needs and their interest in whatever way possible.

(Mehwar channel 2013)

Leaving religion is represented as a license for unbridled indulgences of one's passion and desires.

Nonreligious people are represented as ill-guided and illogical. If atheists would have the right knowledge, they would become believers because atheism is perceived as an illogical position. Much effort and time are spent on showing how atheists deny the “logic” accepted by all times and all human societies, that is, the existence of God. Not only the fact that religion is said to have existed at all times and in all places confirms the idea of the natural state of religiosity, but also the idea that God created both religion and science shows that they cannot be contradictory, sheikh Salim argued (Al-Bab al-Maftuh 2014). Generally, it is aimed to show that the existence of God is not merely a “theological” stance but particularly a “logical” position (Misr 25 TV 2013, part One). Atheists are accused of lacking scientific evidence for the denial of God's existence. In addition, the discourse about the scientific character of the Qur'an, also called *Bucailleism*,⁹ is used to convey the importance of science and logic as natural partners in faith.

Most representations of nonreligion, like deviance, immorality, and ignorance, are linked to a lack of proper upbringing and family instability. The media accordingly delve into the “deviants” family background and private lives to see whether some crisis—financial, social, or moral— can explain their deviance. This idea of dysfunctional and unstable family life feeds into another powerful image of atheists, as mentally ill. Several young people experiencing doubts or a “religious crisis” have been sent to a psychiatrist.¹⁰ It is also not uncommon to invite a psychiatrist or psychologist to the show to reflect on atheism. The TV channel Misr 25 invited a Saudi “specialist in

the psychology of atheists” to reflect on the possible “obsessive compulsive disorder” of atheists. The specialist did not diagnose them as such but rather as “psychologically unstable persons who have adopted a defective way of thinking” (Misr 25 TV 2013, part Three).¹¹ Atheists are often represented as deformed personalities. In addition to being unstable and feeble-minded, they are also represented as “attention seeking,” looking for “personal gain,” and “conceited.”

Finally, a last common trope of the nonreligious other is foreignness. Atheists are presented as belonging to a “secret society” with “imported ideas,” or being “brainwashed” and possibly paid from “outside” (Mehwar channel 2013). The titles of some of the programs such as “The Secret World of Atheism” point at this representation. Questions during TV interviews like, “who leads you today in Egypt?”; “where did you get your ideas from?”; “who pays you?” or remarks like “certain cells are being imported from abroad to propagate certain ideas” (Mehwar channel 2013) expose traces of the generally widespread conspiracy theories in Egypt. Nonreligious people are placed outside the socio-political order of the Egyptian nation.

The dominant representation of atheism in the analyzed media consists of a strong rejection of atheists as individuals who not only fall outside the religious order but are also social misfits and deformed personalities. They do not embody what it means to be a good Egyptian citizen. The overriding emotions are fear but also anger, moral indignation, contempt and disgust for that which is “not us.” There is a strong fear of contagion to other young people who might become infected with atheists’ “corrupted” ideas.

Anger involves a judgment that one has been offended or harmed by someone or something. Solomon points at the strategic function of anger in that it puts the offended persons in an elevated position, enabling them to look down at the offender:

in anger, the other is put on trial. Even more powerful, and more judgmental still, is moral indignation, an emotion in which one accuses the other not just on one’s own behalf but on the behalf of some moral principle The strategic advantage of this set-up should be obvious. Emerging from a situation in which one has been hurt, offended, or humiliated, one repositions oneself as superior, even as righteous

(Solomon 2011: 24)

The societal judgment and moral indignation are clearly expressed in the social media I analyzed and also experienced by my nonreligious interlocutors.

Nonreligious people are perceived as not belonging to the Egyptian nation. In the introduction we have seen the act of shoe-ing the atheist as an ultimate gesture of contempt. Shoes symbolize dirt and are left at the door of the house. They do not belong in the polite space. We also dominate

what is under our feet. It is thus a sign of ostracization and degradation. The lawyer mentioned in the vignette in the introduction also added that atheists are “*banzin wisikh*,”¹² the lowest kind of dirty oil. He yelled: “These people should be gathered in Tahrir Square¹³ and burned alive with dirty oil!”

One of my female interlocutors encountered another form of contempt when she went to the religious institution of the Azhar for a consultation with a sheikh on unveiling. The imam she met likened the unveiled lady to “uncovered meat hanging at the butchery full of flies, which you will not be able to eat.” Consuming meat is a—perhaps not very subtle—metaphor for the consummation of marriage or sexual intercourse. This degrading image of women as butchered meat which cannot be “consumed” shows a strong sense of aversion and disgust.

As Solomon (2011: 212) argues, contempt and disgust “are emotions that keep their distance. And in fact we distance ourselves from that which disgusts us.” Contempt implies looking down at someone and involves a judgment of superiority. Emotions generally contain evaluative judgments. While judgments of responsibility are primarily in anger, shame, or embarrassment, in contempt and disgust, judgments of relative status are played out. Contempt and disgust indicate looking down from a position of superiority.

In her chapter on disgust (2004: 82–100), Ahmed, like Solomon, reflects on the dimensions of distance and unequal power relations that are involved in disgust. Yet, in her analysis, emotions are primarily analyzed as movement between bodies and objects (Ahmed 2004: 10–11). Ahmed reflects on how disgust pulls away bodies from the object of repulsion. Like the sheikh’s meat metaphor, Ahmed works with the example of food, which can provoke feelings of disgust and repulsion. That which disgusts us is seen as dirt that is contaminated and contaminates. Like flies contaminate the meat, unveiling taints the female body. It repels, forcing one to move away from it, while simultaneously exhibiting a desire for the object (in this case the meat—or women’s bodies). It is not that the meat is inherently disgusting; rather, it becomes repulsive through its contact with the flies. In addition, it is the proximity of the “polluted meat” that could become part of us by consuming it, which is felt to be threatening and offensive (Ahmed 2004: 85). It needs to be avoided, ostracized or erased due to its corrupting nature.

Reactions of disgust are also about objects—flies, uncovered meat, uncovered women—that seem “lower” than the subject, which in this case is represented by the sheikh who uses the metaphor but whose opinion is recognized by society at large. Disgust of “‘that which is below’ functions to maintain the power relations between what is above and what is below, through which ‘aboveness’ and ‘belowness’ become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces” (Ahmed 2004: 89). Disgust thus reproduces power relations and keeps objects and subjects in their place. To be the object of disgust

fixates on the inferior position of those likened to uncovered meat with flies or dirty oil.

Yet there is a gendered dimension to the focus on female bodies that become filthy and on dirt under the shoes or dirty oil. This metaphor of meat with flies illustrates contempt and foremost disgust of unveiled women's bodies. The idea of consummation points at ownership of female bodies. The potential "consumeability" of female bodies is at stake. I will come back to the gendered dimensions in the final section below.

Emotional response by significant others

Whereas some activist atheists, particularly social media activists, openly revealed their nonreligious viewpoints, most of my interlocutors were careful to whom they disclosed. Yet, even while hiding their nonreligious views, their lack of religious commitment—not praying and fasting or taking off the veil—draws attention to a perceptible change in religious practice, often provoking reactions from parents and relatives.

Different forms of fear, anger, and social expulsion are exhibited by parents, friends, and strangers. Several of my interlocutors experience a strong sense of ostracization, even to the extent of being declared socially and religiously "dead." This takes several forms. Mushir, a male former Coptic interlocutor, explained that for his parents he was already "dead" at the moment he expressed his religious doubt to them, despite doing this in the cautious form of "what if." He vividly remembers their response:

...because it felt like they heard about my death. Truly! This is how they would respond if someone had told them that I had died. And it made sense. Actually, it made sense back then, that they would respond this way. This is such a huge thing for them. ... I am going to hell and if I am going to hell I can be in hell now for as far as they are concerned. Then I am already dead. And they care about that of course. They care probably about where I am going in the afterlife more than what I do in this life now.

(interview January 15, 2018)

For his religious parents the realization that he would go to hell for being an unbeliever, taking away the promise of eternal life, meant an almost instant death. A former female Coptic interlocutor was disinherited when her nonreligion became known. To her, this felt like being declared "dead" since she was no longer considered a rightful heir of the family (interview May 6, 2018).

Although perhaps the examples of being proclaimed socially dead are rare, other forms of hostility and social erasure are not uncommon, whether

receiving death threats or being kicked out of the house. Former Muslim Ahmed Saber is cautious, explaining that he appears anonymously on Black Ducks out of fear for his relatives' rage:

I can't show my face in the video today because I'm worried I can protect and defend my life very well, whether in a discussion or in a fight, against any religion, especially Islam. At home, the moment they realized I have different ideas from that of the rest of the herd, and that I think differently, my mother threatened to hire someone to kill me. I asked her whether a man, who died 1400 year ago, can be more valuable to her than her son. The answer is yes!

(Black Ducks episode 66)

Former Muslim Masri Pharaon, who was only briefly active on social media and now lives in France, was kicked out of the house and threatened by relatives: "They kicked me out of their homes in order to force me to go back to Islam. Can you imagine your family kicking you out of their homes? Can you imagine being thrown into the streets?" (Masri Pharaon channel).

Other forms of social erasure included being fired or breaking off contact, or silence. One of my male former Muslim interlocutors, who came out as a deist on media and now lives abroad, mentions that his parents no longer contact him:

My parents are old and I don't want to upset them. But I discovered after I came here, that they knew. Someone saw my Facebook and went to them to tell them. They broke all contact with me. For four years, there is no contact. ... They see it as a crime that needs to be punished, as since I am not over there the punishment is that they do not contact me anymore.

(April 6, 2018)

Another form of disconnection is a refusal to eat together, indicating a form of cutting ties within communal social life. This happened initially to one of my male interlocutors when it became clear that he stopped praying, but eventually, he found a way to live together with his parents: "There is something in religion: My mother told me if you do not pray you will not eat with me. ... My mother was particularly afraid of the people when they would know" (interview October 26, 2017). In this case we see again that parents particularly feel ashamed. They strongly fear public opinion, which will hold them accountable for their children's perceived "misdemeanor."

My interlocutors also understand their significant others' sometimes harsh responses. They are aware of the social pressure put on parents and want to spare them this discomfort by remaining "in the closet" (Cottee 2018). My interlocutors are familiar with the general negative attitude towards

“deviant” people. Parents are responsible for raising their children in accordance with the hegemonic social, religious, and moral frameworks. Therefore, my interlocutors understand why significant others respond with fear, shame, sadness or anger. One of my female interlocutors from a Muslim background explained: “[T]here is a kind of responsibility as well. If my child loses faith, God is going to punish them and the child. ... So, there is fear” (interview April 28, 2018).

Former Muslim Mariam tells on *Black Ducks* that her parents were also afraid that she had become a “Satanist,” when she tried to discuss her agnostic views. Her parents’ response shows both their love and care as well as fear about Mariam as well as their own afterlife. In their view they will be held accountable to God:

They are Wahhabi Salafists. We’re both at the end of the spectrum; totally the opposite. So, I can’t even discuss agnosticism with them. ... They attacked me for being a Satanist, telling me how my heart has been filled with blackness For them, I belong to the lowest level in hell because I memorized the Qur’an then turned agnostic. I tried to explain to them how this has nothing to do with them, because God will punish me on my own. ... Their response ... is “we’re all responsible for our parish.” As a result, they believe they’re going to hell because of me. ... But let’s not say it’s their complete view of the situation, because they actually love me and care for me. It’s unjust to say otherwise.

(Black Ducks episode 51)

We can thus observe that intimate relations between parents and my non-religious interlocutors are harmed whether out of parental love, fear of being held accountable in the eyes of society, or fear of hell for themselves and the allegedly doomed child.

Parents thus show fear (of society and the afterlife) but also anger as well as love and care. Yet they particularly feel shame, or more precisely shame before others (Ahmed 2004: 101). Shame, guilt, and embarrassment are foremost emotions of self-blame and responsibility, including moral responsibility (Solomon 2011: 100). While embarrassment is based on the judgment that one is in an awkward situation but not at fault, shame signifies that one is to blame. It means acknowledging that one is to blame and responsible for wrongdoing (Solomon 2011:210). It is about “taking (or not taking) responsibility”: “One takes responsibility for doing something wrong, for letting down one’s community, for violating public mores It also suggests that these emotions are deeply dependent on cultural as well as ethical presumptions” (Solomon 2011: 210).

Ahmed adds another important element to the analysis of shame. One may be ashamed of someone, but this also indicates that shame concerns

somebody “I am interested in, somebody whose view ‘matters’ to me. As a result, shame is not a purely negative relation to another: shame is ambivalent” (Ahmed 2004: 105). Shame also entails love and care. “If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love.* What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love” (Ahmed 2004: 106, emphasis in the original).

Shame thus also includes care, concern, and love because the sons and daughters matter to the parents, relatives, and friends. Parents try to raise their kids according to the social and religious ideals of their community out of love. Their love has “failed” to produce the ideal of conforming children. Parents are feeling responsible for their children’s behavior but are also interpellated to take up their responsibility as moral guides. They are made ashamed of themselves by “failing” in this task according to their moral communities. They can be encouraged to punish those under their responsibility. They feel responsible for and are held accountable for their children’s breaking of rules and violating authority.

Although both sons and daughters can receive reactions of hostility, shame, and fear, the pressure to conform and behave obediently seems to be directed more fiercely at daughters. Shame is particularly a feeling expressed about women’s transgression.

Emotional responses toward disobedient daughters

We have seen above how parents feel and are held accountable for bringing up their sons and daughters as good moral citizens. Failure to do so makes them feel ashamed in the eyes of society and fearful of God. It is particularly deviance from societal norms and expectations that frightens parents. These norms and expectations are gendered. Although punishment and hostility are faced by both sons and daughters, women often face more disciplinary actions in attempts to control them. Almost all my interlocutors—male and female, from a Muslim and Coptic background—thought that becoming nonreligious was more difficult for women.

The harshness in the attempt to keep or get women back into the fold is related to several factors. First, in the case of my Muslim interlocutors, religiosity is more visible in women, as the example of veiling indicates. It is inscribed onto their bodies. While men can grow beards or wear certain clothes to indicate their Salafist or Wahhabi leaning, taking this off is interpreted as going back to “normal,” “moderate” religion in accordance with the state-defined understanding of religion. This is often met with relief rather than punishment, except by Salafi circles. Taking off the veil is interpreted as the road towards heresy. One of my male interlocutors, for instance, observed: “the social stigma about how they [women] have to behave, wearing the

hijab... if she decides she does not want to be in Islam it is not as easy as for me. I just stop praying but for her there are changes that relate to her appearance” (interview January 23, 2022).

Unveiling was considered an extremely difficult and sensitive issue. Arya, who unveiled, explained:

The veil for many people ... presents your morals. It presents religion; it presents ... your levels of spirituality with God. ... But, [after unveiling] ... they would feel that you have become less moral, less religious..., less everything that comes to your mind, *less*...

(interview February 17, 2019)

Women who unveil commit a visible act of transgression, disobedience, and rebellion, which evokes feelings of contempt, fear, and disgust in an attempt to keep women in place. It is also about controlling women’s bodies. This partly explains the strong reactions against women who unveil, let alone those who leave the faith. Yet there are other factors linked to the female body that play a role as well.

A second reason for the harsh responses toward disobedient daughters is related to the association of nonreligion with immorality. Morality and immorality are strongly linked to the female body. The social construction of gender and gendered differences regarding morality make female nonreligion a more difficult issue to cope with for parents and society at large. This results in stricter surveillance and discipline. Society’s view on immoral women has severe consequences for women but also for their parents and families. One of my female interlocutors, for instance, mentioned that, “The idea is that the girl represents the honor of the family (*sharaf*). But if she appears deviant, not only in the sense of God... you know what I mean... that reflects on her family” (interview January 16, 2018). She refers to perceived moral deviance, like having boyfriends and sexual relationships outside marriage. One of my male interlocutors also held that although for both genders it is very difficult to leave religion, for women it is more difficult due to “the honor of women and this kind of ideas” (interview January 17, 2022). The protection of women’s morality and by that the honor of the family is important in many Egyptian families, both Muslim and Christian. The representation of nonreligion as immoral is thus a sensitive issue, particularly for women, and can have more severe repercussions for them. Men generally have “more space to fool around” as a male interlocutor from a Christian background explained: “Everything for women is harder... in a religious society the males get much more space to make mistakes, to experiment and to fool around. ... The females are looked at as a package of disgrace, an easy way to get dishonored” (interview January 6, 2018).

Control of the female body is crucial for the respectability of families and their members. As the angry lawyer also made clear in the vignette, atheists are supposedly not respectably upholding the societal values of protecting “honor” and “women.” Accordingly, the social construction of gender and morality makes women responsible for preserving their honor and that of their families. For that reason, they are granted less room for deviance, whether religiously, socially, or sexually.

Third, parental control is often more strongly exercised on women due to patriarchal living arrangements. They usually live in their parents’ home until they marry, and the surveillance of daughters’ movements is often strict. Although some of my interlocutors, male and female, managed to rent an apartment for themselves or with roommates, this was uncommon, particularly for women. One of my male interlocutors observed that control of women was strong whether from the father, the husband, or the sheikh, particularly in Muslim families:

The Islamic faith really puts a burden on women to have certain qualities, to do certain actions. ... Either the father is controlling his daughter, until she is going to get married and then her husband is going to control her. And if not, then the sheikh is going to control her. So yeah I would say a woman in this context would be seen in a more negative light than a man would be seen if she comes out as a nonbeliever.

(interview January 15, 2018)

Yet the control of daughters can also be strict among Christian families. A former Christian interlocutor experienced patriarchal control from her father’s side when she was still living in Egypt and now witnesses it with her sister:

Even when I was 27, my father could tell me “go inside your room,” or he could hit me when I did not go to church; in my face, on my body. My father thought that when you have not been to church for a month, the devil will get inside you. ... For women it is much more difficult to leave religion. All eyes are cast on her: where is she going, to whom is she talking. My sister will be 31 this year and my father still controls her.

(interview May 6, 2018)

We thus see my female interlocutors experience strong control over their bodies. Women are supposed to be under the guardianship of men and not to “own” their own bodies.

Women’s assigned responsibility to keep the honor of the family by obedience as well as the responsibility parents feel to discipline daughters can lead to harsh measures against female deviance. Reem’s story, which she shares

on *Black Ducks*, illustrates how her parents first tried to “discipline” her through beating, but when that was to no avail they concluded that she was either possessed by an atheist demon or mentally ill.

My family... when I first told them, reached two propositions: either I was haunted or I went crazy. ... My father visited a sheikh who claimed to speak with demons and stuff. My father told the sheikh that an atheist demon was inside me, and that I wasn't the one talking to them but the demon. My father wanted to send me to this man to exorcise the demon. I called many people in my family, members of the family who understand the situation, and asked them to put an end to this. They called my father and forbid him from sending me to this man. At that point, my father started beating me. They used to tie me up and beat me with a broomstick. My mother always said it was a bad behavior and that I had to be disciplined. I wouldn't have said what I said if I was disciplined. This was the initial reaction. Then, they realized no matter how much they beat me, I'd still hold on to my ideas.

Reem was eventually forced into a mental hospital:

My father is a doctor and has many friends working in hospitals. ... He then suddenly asked me to go out with him for a walk. I agreed. Suddenly, three big men seized me and pushed me into the hospital. My father told me he wouldn't let me out of this place before I believe. I stayed there. My mom didn't know. I found myself in a mental hospital with people screaming all day and night. My disease was not believing in God. ... I was in the hospital, because they see atheism as a mental disease. They couldn't bear to understand I have a different opinion than theirs, to the extent that they sought any means possible to forbid me. They took my laptop and everything in the hospital. I couldn't write anything or post anything online. It was an attempt to eradicate the voice.

(Black Ducks episode 45)

Reem's story shows the extent of parental control and the fear for female deviance. Her parents tried to wipe out any form of independent reasoning and expression that differed from parental and societal understanding. The general fear of stepping out of the herd and becoming an independent person with one's own way of thinking and acting is even more condemned when it concerns women.

In the trajectory of leaving religion, all kinds of assumed deviant acts intersect: immoral behavior, independent thinking, and voicing alternative understandings. As one of my male interlocutors mentioned: “Of course it is more difficult for women. In Egypt they cannot even go out, really. They cannot

share their thoughts, they cannot express themselves” (interview January 15, 2018). A female interlocutor who unveiled explained that:

[S]uddenly you are being strange. “Why are you thinking on your own? You shouldn’t! You should follow the main interpretation that everybody is following....” So, when you do it, it is also threatening the society. Because you are kind of rebelling against what has been established for a couple of decades now.

(interview January 12, 2019)¹⁴

Leaving religious practices—let alone leaving religion—is perceived by parents and society at large as a dangerous form of rebellion that shakes the social and religious fabric of society.

Stepping outside the established normative framework for women also means that my female interlocutors risk losing protection. Rebelling against religious, social, and gender norms can lead to harassment, particularly sexual harassment. Again, it is the female body that is punished. Accordingly, disciplining female rebels is not only more strict and violent due to the reasons mentioned above; they are also treated as “free game” that can be assaulted. A male interlocutor observed that women can be “approached by men” when women leave “the social contract”:

Of course, it is way harder for women. They are not only leaving religion but leaving a social contract.... It depends on the social sector she is in but definitely the family is not going to be okay; even the neighbors are not going to be okay with it. My sister has someone working with her in the firm and she was wearing *hijab* and decided she took it off. She never said that she was turning atheist or something but the perception of men who are working there is very negative. They start to assume—because she has taken off the *hijab*—that she is completely fine with their approaches, even when she is married.... It is free game! So, it is very difficult, especially if they are living with the family.

(interview January 23, 2022)

One of my female interlocutors, who did not leave religion but unveiled, equally experienced that after removing her *hijab* some male friends approached her “physically”: “you took it off so you are becoming more available to us” (interview January 11, 2019). Zahra, another female interlocutor who is nonreligious, also shared her experiences of harassment:

A woman who takes off *higab*—not coming out as an atheist—she is doomed. If she says she is an atheist that will be like a disaster. She will get harassed. ... [W]hen a woman is not religious or a little bit liberated,

then they say it is okay to do so and so and to harass her because she is a whore. Some people know I drink, and they think it is okay to call me in the middle of the night and say inappropriate things because I drink! So, if I say I am an atheist, that is another level, that is totally another level. I cannot afford it, I know I cannot afford it.... I am not a moral being, it is okay to do to me so and so because I deserve it. They might even think I want it. I am worthless, what morals do I have? What standards do I have? You know? You drink! You should be okay with me calling you and say whatever. You are not religious, so why you won't you want to sleep with me?

(interview October 30, 2017)

Women who are considered “less religious” are perceived as “less moral” and thus as loose and lax regarding sexuality. Women’s bodies and sexuality are a prime focus of societal and religious concerns about morality. This makes nonreligion among women a highly sensitive issue for parents, society, the state, and religious authorities. This also explains the strong disciplinary actions nonreligious women encounter. It also sheds light on why control and punishment are directed more frequently at female bodies and sexuality.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the emotional responses toward nonreligious men and women by the state, society, and significant others, particularly parents who are held accountable for raising their children as good moral citizens. Using the lens of a practice theory of emotions, it examined the relational, social, and political dimensions of emotional responses towards nonreligion.

Atheists are perceived as endangering the public order and by that the state’s existence, justifying forms of violence against atheists and repression of the public expression of atheism. Significant others and society at large regard nonreligious men and women as deviating from societal and moral frameworks. They have become more individualized, independent, and critical, which is considered a dangerous form of rebellion against the social fabric and its normative frames. This is accordingly met with responses of fear, anger, moral condemnation, contempt and shame but also with continuing care, love and efforts to win them back.

The chapter has also demonstrated that the perceived offense of being non-religious is felt even more strongly when it concerns women. Leaving religion is perceived as leaving morality. Morality is a highly gendered concept. Efforts are directed at controlling women’s minds and bodies. Women who claim ownership of their own minds and bodies are strongly condemned and punished. They are perceived as dirty flies, which should be crushed under society’s shoes.

Notes

- 1 He uses the expression “*andaf minnak*,” which literally means “cleaner than you.”
- 2 I interviewed more than fifty people: 12 Coptic sceptics and nonbelievers (7 males and 5 females); 28 from a Muslim background (18 males and 10 females). I also spoke with journalists, activists, and religious people about the phenomenon of atheism. In addition, I interviewed 10 women who took off the veil but identified as religious (See Van Nieuwkerk 2021b).
- 3 I analyzed, among others, 35 episodes from the productive Black Ducks founded by Isma`il Mohamed <https://www.youtube.com/@IsmailMohamedTV/videos>; 22 episodes of Masri Mulhid Archive 104 - YouTube; 21 episodes of Sherif Gaber <https://www.youtube.com/c/SherifGaber>; and 7 of Ahmed Harqan (أحمد | AHMED HARKAN lunstoppable - YouTube). From a Christian background I analysed 16 episodes of George Paul’s on “Science and Faith available at channel the Other. <https://www.youtube.com/@TheOther/featured>) and 14 of Alber Saber Alber Saber - YouTube. I have downloaded all the videos and transcribed them with the help of assistants. YouTube is a volatile world and many videos are no longer available.
- 4 For instance, `Amr Khalid’s’ four episodes on atheism *Radd `ala al-ilhad* / Response to Atheism https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23Z__Wv6qTw; Sheik Habib `Ali al-Jifri 29 episodes Lahzit Sukun / Moments of Tranquillity <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HjWyHewevk>; Coptic Priest Abu Dawud Lami`a 34 episodes “A question puzzling me” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7x1kKyhnjI>. Accessed June 13, 2023.
- 5 I particularly use the notion of “emotional experience” of Solomon to understand the different affective stages my interlocutors experience in their trajectory of leaving religion. Here the emotional responses of others are central which makes Ahmed work in which she examines what emotions do to other bodies and between bodies highly relevant.
- 6 My interlocutors have various self-identifications. Some identify as atheist, other as agnostic, or spiritual but not religious. Most feel comfortable with the broader label of *la dini*, literally nonreligious.
- 7 For further information see also IHEU freedom of thought report also available online at: <http://www.freethoughtreport.com/>, accessed July 13, 2015.
- 8 See also <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/330727/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-MPs-back-ALAzhars-new-initiative-to-fight-sp.aspx>, accessed November 2, 2021.
- 9 The term “Bucailleism” is derived from Maurice Bucaille, who published the book *The Bible, The Qur’an and Science in 1976*. In this book he argued that the Qur’an contains no statements contradicting established scientific facts.
- 10 See, for instance, Reem’s story on the atheist channel Black Ducks, episode 45, that I will discuss in the final part.
- 11 Dr. Tarek Al-Habib, a psychiatric attending at the University of King Saud, is specialized in the “psychology of atheists.”
- 12 The expression “*banzin wisikh*” is a derogatory insult leveled at people one strongly despises. Atheists are loathed to the degree that one wishes they would be burned using the worst and lowest kind of oil.
- 13 Tahrir Square is the famous place where most of the massive demonstrations during the Revolution of 2011 took place. It is not clear whether the lawyer intentionally makes a connection between the Revolution and the spread of atheism (see Van Nieuwkerk 2021a).
- 14 She is particularly referring to the religious revival in Egypt since the late 1970s.

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