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Abstract:

This paper deals with the specific situation of refugees from predominantly Muslim countries who were brought up Muslim but profess to be atheists at the time of the research. Little research has been done on this topic so far. While there is some research available on the motives for disavowing Islam and the potential consequences in some different countries, there is barely anything on the specific situation of so called Ex-Muslim refugees in Austria. Therefore this paper after giving insights into the general situation of Ex-Muslims, aims to show the specific problems of refugees based mostly on semi structured interviews, with both refugees and activists.

Stereotypes surrounding both Islam and Muslims, as well as atheism affect the way they are seen and treated. However the biggest issue is a lack of awareness of the potential consequences of leaving the Islamic faith in the general public and among judges.

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der besonderen Situation von Flüchtlingen aus überwiegend muslimischen Ländern, die muslimisch erzogen wurden, sich aber zum Zeitpunkt der Untersuchung als Atheisten bekennen. Zu diesem Thema gibt es bisher nur wenige Untersuchungen. Während es einige zu den Motiven für die Abkehr vom Islam und den möglichen Konsequenzen in verschiedenen Ländern gibt, ist kaum etwas über die spezifische Situation von so genannten ex-muslimischen Flüchtlingen in Österreich verfügbar. Daher zielt diese Arbeit darauf ab, nach einem Einblick in die allgemeine Situation von Ex-Muslimen, die spezifischen Probleme von Flüchtlingen aufzuzeigen, basierend auf semi-strukturierten Interviews mit Flüchtlingen und Aktivisten.

Stereotype, die sowohl den Islam und Muslime als auch den Atheismus umgeben, beeinflussen die Art und Weise, wie sie gesehen und behandelt werden. Das größte Problem ist jedoch das mangelnde Bewusstsein für die möglichen Folgen des Austritts aus dem islamischen Glauben in der allgemeinen Öffentlichkeit und bei Richtern.

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Introduction:

You barely hear from them in the mainstream media and public discourse yet they are becoming more and more common, at least that's what recent developments suggest. People who disavow Islam to become atheists, also known as Ex-Muslims, don't get much notification from the general public but they are becoming more vocal about their beliefs, their experience and their journey out of Islam. It is also suggested that their number is increasing. However there is little data available to verify this.

Not just in public discourse, but also in scientific research, apostasy in Islam is a marginal topic. It is only recently that there is any attention paid to it at all. The sociologist, Simon Cottee describes it like that: "Islamic apostates or Ex-Muslims are not merely marginal in sociology; they are non-existent. Indeed, there is not a single sociological study, in either article or book form, on the issue of apostasy from Islam."(Cottee 2015, 1).

This was the situation in 2015 and there has since been some more research done. However it is still rather limited, as Karin van Nieuwkerk states in 2018 people converting to Islam has received far more attention than people abandoning it. There has been very little research done on the rise of atheism and atheist movements, like for example the New Atheists in the West. However, similar movements in the Middle-East have gotten even less scholarly attention. Furthermore, the research on this topic mostly concerns the social and legal consequences of leaving Islam, rather than the motives and the process itself. This is despite the number of atheists both in the West and the Middle East who are open about their belief, is growing. Van Nieuwkerk explains it like this: "This inattentiveness can be related not only to the general lack of notice to the study of atheism and nonbelieving but also to perceptions of Islam as a solid, inerasable personal and political force. The study of Muslim societies suffers from an overemphasis of religion as the most important factor in the lives of Muslims."(van Nieuwkerk 2018, 3).

I first became aware of the issue of apostasy in Islam when I came across a post on Twitter by an Ex-Muslim - a person who was raised Muslim but has turned away from the faith. The woman talked about how she is often denounced as a traitor by devout Muslims, while non-Muslims often still see her as a Muslim. She also spoke about how quickly one is put in the right-wing corner for making statements critical of Islam. This was back in 2017. I have since come across a lot of similar statements when doing active research both online and in the field. I have talked to several Ex-Muslims as well as activists who support their cause. In 2018 I wrote my bachelor theses about the situation of Ex-Muslims in Western countries. This

paper is partly built on the research I did back then but also combined with new more specific research conducted for it as well as literature that wasn't out back then. Rather than just discussing the general situation of Ex-Muslims in the West, I will now focus more on the specific situation of Ex-Muslim refugees in Austria. I have therefore talked to Ex-Muslim refugees as well as worked with organizations that support them, like the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe Österreich and the Atheistische Religionsgemeinschaft(ARG) which I will talk about more specifically later. The situation of Ex-Muslim refugees is particularly difficult because in addition to the above mentioned problems, they also deal with uncertainty about their future, and the fact that there is very little awareness about the potential consequences of apostasy from Islam- like in many countries it's still a punishable offense- and therefore often judges dismiss them. I will therefore follow the question of how perceptions and ideas of Ex-Muslims affect the way they are treated in society and how this might impact their asylum procedures. I shall thereby first look at the general problems Ex-Muslims face from the Muslim community as well as their internal struggles. Then I shall look at how stereotypes on Islam and apostasy affect the way they are perceived by the majority population and how these perceptions might affect their asylum procedures. Concerning asylum procedures, I shall look specifically at narratives about Islam, narratives about atheism and at the general lack of awareness about the situation of Ex-Muslims. Because all of them influence the way judges might deal with them.

The aim of this paper is to give some insights into the struggles that come with leaving Islam(not all people deal with these struggles equally, as it depends on their backgrounds and how important their religion has been previously to them and their environment). I will elaborate on it later in detail but for many Muslims it is not easy to just accept another person leaving Islam, since on the one hand Islam is so central to their identity that somebody abandoning it is seen as an attack against who they are rather than just something they believe in and on the other hand, because apostasy is seen to be threatening the unity of Muslims. This is why a lot of Ex-Muslims face harsh judgments, abandonment and even threats or violence when coming out as atheists. However since Islam is very central to a lot of Muslims, abandoning it also comes with a lot of internal struggles, as one has to question everything one believed in as well as one's identity.

However not just dealing with pious Muslims can be hard, but also the relation to the majority population in Western countries is not easy. Often Ex-Muslims face the same hostility and discrimination as Muslims, just for having darker skin and a Muslim name. Unfortunately people who come from Muslims-majority countries or look like they might, are often

automatically assumed to be Muslims. On the other hand, criticizing Islam or talking about negative experiences with Muslims can quickly land them the accusation of Islamophobia. Furthermore there are also some reservations towards atheists, as they are widely believed to be less moral or less trustworthy than religious people, despite studies have suggested the opposite, which I shall elaborate on later. However when it comes to asylum procedures, the biggest problem is a general lack of awareness about the problems and potential dangers that come with disavowing Islam. It was a recurring theme in interviews both with Ex-Muslim refugees as well as with activists supporting them, that many judges don't know about the situation in a lot of Muslim-majority countries. But even if they are aware of the dangers that apostates face, many Ex-Muslims are not believed, because they don't fit the stereotype of atheists being confrontational and aggressively ranting against religion. So this paper aims to shed some light on all these issues that Ex-Muslims in general and Ex-Muslim refugees in particular have to deal with.

Methodology and reflection

Apart from literature on the issue of apostasy in Islam, this paper is to a big part built on semi-structured interviews with Ex-Muslims as well as activists who support their cause. The interviews I did specifically for this paper were conducted between autumn 2021 and spring 2022. However I will also use some material that I collected for my bachelor theses back in 2018. The interviews were mostly organized through contacts with activist groups. Most of the research I did for this paper happened during lockdowns due to the Corona pandemic. Therefore it was not possible for me to visit many public events that have to do with the topic, as they could not take place or at least were under restrictions and not many people would come. Also in spring, when the Corona-restrictions were lifted, I started to work at the weekends when most public events take place. However when communities and activist-groups dealing with that issue emerged shortly after I finished my bachelor theses, I would regularly attend their events and so got in contact with the community that was forming in Austria. So while I have been to many public events dealing with this topic and related issues, for the most part I have been there as a private person and supporter rather than a researcher. It is generally not easy to work on a topic like that of apostasy in Islam. Not just for the above mentioned scarcity of literature on the issue but for several difficulties that might arise in the research process. When I started working on the issue back in early 2018, there were no official communities in Austria and I therefore had to travel to Germany for most of the early

interviews I did. This has since changed and for my master theses I have worked with Austrian organizations. Despite this it is difficult to find interview partners even with good contacts in the community. Contrary to the stereotypes surrounding atheists in general and Ex-Muslims in particular being loud-mouthed and confrontational, which I will elaborate on later, many Ex-Muslims are rather shy when it comes to talking about their experience and beliefs. A lot of them have been subjected to or threatened with violence. This often makes it hard to build trust and a lot of mental health issues may come with it (I had Ex-Muslims tell me how good they find that I write a paper about this but say that they couldn't be part of it due to their mental health). Also talking about such experiences often can be difficult. One person that I have interviewed, later confessed to me that she did not tell me her whole story as it would have been too painful for her to talk about it. Being confronted with all of this and having to reflect on it can also affect you mentally as a researcher and I have to admit that when I first started working on the topic I was not fully prepared.

Furthermore communication itself was rather difficult as many of the people I worked with speak neither German nor English fluently and in one case there even was an interpreter needed. This also makes it harder for them to communicate their exact point and some information might have gotten lost. Despite some of the interviews were in German, I will quote them in English, as the paper is also written in English. Also the fact that many of my interlocutors had strong accents made it harder to later understand and transcribe the interviews. There have even been some passages that I cannot use as it was not possible for me to figure out exactly what was being said.

Since I got a relatively limited number of interviews, the approach of this paper will be rather qualitative. This is not because I consider the quantitative to be less important, but because it simply does not make sense or is not possible to give exact figures and statistics. That's why I can't give any information on whether, for example, more women or more men turn away from Islam, or at what age people are most likely to disavow it. Nor will I specify on how many Ex-Muslim refugees there are in Austria or what country they most likely come from. This is an approach largely shared by scholar's previously researching the topic. As for example Maria Vliek explains "This project includes both men and women. It does not discriminate based on ethnicity. Partially, this is because I did not have the luxury to turn down anyone who was willing to be interviewed. More importantly, it was because research into people moving out of Islam is relatively 'young'. Therefore, it makes sense to first approach the subject broadly before refining the questions further. It seemed premature, for example, to assume that issues surrounding moving out of Islam are gendered and therefore

select only men or only women to participate. The same argument goes for ethnicity.”(Vliek 2021, 9).

This paper is supposed to give insight into the situation of Ex-Muslim refugees in Austria with specific focus on how stereotypes affecting them might influence the way they are treated in asylum procedures. I will therefore first discuss apostasy in Islam more generally, focusing on both why people leave Islam and how this affects their lives both legally and socially. Then I will discuss the stereotypes that surround both Islam, atheism and Ex-Muslims and finally how they affect asylum procedures. For this I will mainly refer to the interviews that I conducted with both Ex-Muslim refugees and activists who support them as well as informal conversations. Because while there is little literature on the process or the consequences of leaving Islam, there is barely anything about the situation of Ex-Muslim refugees.

It should also be said, that since a lot of the paper is based on interviews with Ex-Muslims, when it comes to how they are treated, there always is a subjective element to it and it is not always possible to say for sure, how much of it is due to people’s own interpretation. So experiences might be exaggerated or downplayed in some cases. Also when I quote social media posts made by Ex-Muslims, there is always a small chance, that some stories might be fabricated. However I use them as examples to illustrate common patterns of what Ex-Muslims experience.

Since Islam is a topic that many people have very strong opinions and feelings about and debates around it are frequently very polarized, I think it worthy to clarify that the aim of this paper is neither to defend nor criticize Islam. I also don’t intend to judge whether or not Islamic teachings are to blame for the violence that apostates from or critics of Islam experience or if it is just misinterpreted by some radicals. This too is not because I think of this question as unimportant but rather because it would go beyond the scope of this paper which is specifically about the situation and experience of Ex-Muslims. The perspective of Ex-Muslims is central for my paper but not the accuracy of all ideas.

Finally I should also talk about my own background and position, as how interlocutors see you and what assumptions they have about you might influence, what they tell you or how they portray certain aspects of their story. I entered the field as a white, Austrian, middle-class woman in her mid-twenties, while most of my interlocutors were men with Middle-Eastern background in their twenties to forties. As Maria Vliek writes “Besides the need to establish a level of rapport, certain power dynamics and preconceived ideas of who one is as a person as well as one’s position as a researcher are always brought to the table. This is important to realize, since it considerably impacts what is said and what is left unsaid. For example, being

white, a woman, and an ‘outside’ has perhaps allowed many of my interlocutors to tell their stories freely. Under the cover of anonymity, some told me that they felt they could share more on this particular subject than they had done previously.”(Vliek 2021, 17). So what my interlocutors told me might have been different from what they would have told for example somebody who is themselves from Middle-Eastern background.

Furthermore most of them have been raised very religiously and abandoning their religion was a big deal and got them in danger. Some have even experienced violence or have at least been threatened with violence. Where else I have been told about God and Jesus as a child but for the most part nobody really cared if I believed it or not. So for me religion has never been a central part of my life, and while I don’t believe in anything religious, I for the most part don’t have strong feelings about it. This is in stark contrast to some of my interlocutors, who are active critics of Islam and religion in general.

Literature review

The issue of people leaving Islam is relatively marginal in the social sciences. As Cottee described, when he started his research for his study that was published in 2015, there was basically nothing on this topic. Other researchers who have later written on this topic like Karin Van Nieuwkerk have noticed similar. Generally speaking, people converting to Islam have gotten far more recognition both in scientific literature and in the general public. Vliek notices “Furthermore, historically conversion has been a popular topic in the study of religion. In recent years, there has been a particular interest in conversion to Islam in Western contexts.”(Vliek 2021, 124).

However as Cottee notes, this specifically applied to the issue of leaving Islam, as the act of leaving one’s religion in general-also known as apostasy- has been widely studied for a long time. Leaving religion has also long been neglected, as according to Cottee, in 1969, Armand L. Mauss noticed that the sociological literature on religion contained hardly more than “an occasional oblique mention of religious defection”. In 1987, Stuart A. Wright noticed similar, namely that there is relatively little systematic investigation in deconversion or disaffiliation of one’s religion. However this changed starting with David G. Bromley’s “The Politics of Religious Apostasy”. There have since been a number of publication on religious exiting. However these have mostly left out apostasy in Islam(Cottee 2015, 1).

One can only make assumptions about the reasons for the lack of attention for apostasy in Islam in academia. It might be because, as will be elaborated on later, you are quick to be

labeled Islamophobic when discussing people's negative experiences with Islam or the negative impact it might have on some people's lives or out of fear of being instrumentalized by far right people who aim to spread anti-Muslim sentiments. However it might also be simply because it's generally not an issue you often hear about and therefore not on many people's minds.

However, there have been some studies on that topic in recent years, one of the most notable that of Simon Cottee which the first section of this paper is largely based on. However these first major studies on this issue have been criticized in more recent literature on the topic. As Vliek writes "The study of so called 'ex-Muslims', however, may place too much emphasis on agency in subjectivity, such as, for example, narrowed rational choice accounts of agency that argue that the search for (non-)religiosity is like a marketplace in which the individual chooses the most beneficial existing belief system available(...). This approach to the self as being a purely agentic subject capable of choosing without constraints ignores the situatedness of the individual within complex discourses." As she empathizes both the existing power structures and context as well as the individual agency have to be taken into account.(Vliek 2021, 104).

She also criticizes Cottee and his study specifically. First he found all his interlocutors through the online CEMB forum. She states this as the reason why most of the narratives in his research resemble social break-away and religious break themes. This according to her has two reasons as people who search support online will be more likely to have experienced religious breaks or social break-away themes. The second reason is that narrative standardisation might occur.(Vliek 2021, 141). The point here is that as she found in her own studies carried out in Britain and the Netherlands, abandoning their religion is not necessarily traumatic or life changing. However the reason I use Cottee's studies a lot as a basis is that despite this valid criticism, for my interlocutors it certainly was, since my studies focus on people who face potential danger over not believing and a majority of the people I talked to haven't just stopped believing but actively reject Islam(something that as Vliek also points out, not all Ex-Muslims do).

Vliek also criticized that most previous studies on leaving faith tend to focus on the negative, losing aspects and religious faith sides of changing belief. She claims that a lot of what has previously been written does not resonate with a lot of her interlocutors narratives or self-definition. She also criticizes that a lot of what has been done in that field pays too little attention to people's lives outside of religion. She also refers to Samuli Schielke, who wondered if "the importance of 'Islam' and 'religiosity' had been overemphasised in the study

of the anthropology of Islam, and whether questions of ambivalence had been neglected.”

Similarly she points out that “the study of what constitutes ‘being secular’ on the individual level primarily focuses on what one is in relation to religion”. (Vliek 2021, 123).

This is just to point out some critique of the way, apostasy in Islam and related topics have been dealt with. However, as mentioned before, I explicitly focus on the group of Ex-Muslims, to whom their relation to religion is central, as it keeps affecting their lives. The term Ex-Mulism itself has been criticized by Vliek, as it focuses on what someone is not anymore and because of some political stances associated with it and not all of her interlocutors wanted to identify with this term. However I have decided to still use it as it is the most widely used term both in academic literature and in public debate and has long been used in campaigns started by members of that group and furthermore because the majority of my interlocutors have used this term to refer to themselves.

There was another challenge as this was supposed to be an anthropological paper, yet the vast majority of the actually very scarce literature to the topic was written by sociologists, which made it harder to bring in an anthropological focus as there seems to have been little interest in apostasy from Islam in anthropology so far. Actually Islam as such has been neglected for a long time and so were Muslim societies, as historically anthropology used to deal with small scale, “primitive” societies. Very early on, anthropologists would study religion in small, non-industrial societies in order to find the simplest form of religion due to a belief in a unilinear evolution of society with religion going through the three stages of animism, polytheism and monotheism, with monotheism being relatively absent from the study of early anthropologists(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 140/141).

According to Al-Qurtuby, Evans-Pritchard was perhaps the first anthropologist, who studied Islam and Muslim societies as such, in his research on how the Sufi order was built along trans-Saharan trade routes and was used as a mobilisation of tribal groups against the Italian occupation in Libya. However, Al-Qurtuby also notes that the anthropological research that followed, dealt mostly with tribal societies, especially in the Middle East, focusing on social structure and kinship studies.

He also claims that until the late 1960s or early 1970s, research on Islam or Muslim societies was rather rare in anthropology. The anthropological study of Muslim societies started in the 1950s, when among the earliest anthropologists in that field were Fredrik Barth, Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, among others, with Geertz being often named as the most influential(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 140/141). Especially his “Observing Islam”, where he compared Islam in Morocco and in Indonesia, finding that while in Morocco, the Islamic concept of life

meant activism, moralism and individuality, the same concept meant aestheticism, inwardness and a radical dissolution of personality in Indonesia, served as an intellectual basis for future anthropologists.

However, Al-Qurtuby also criticizes the lack of real Muslim voices in Geertz's work and claims that despite him showing how Islam can be lived fundamentally differently, he still ended up essentializing it, as while he has taken into account the specific cultural, historical and social conditions of Morocco and Indonesia, he has argued that all are expressions of Islam(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 142).

Also Varisco has criticized Geertz's text for his ethnographic thinness and claims that the writings of classical anthropologists like Geertz and Gellner are by far overrated in anthropology. He also scrutinizes Gellner for his disregard of Muslim's self representation and his orientalist representation of Islam as mirror image of Western Europe(Houston 2009, 201).

Al-Qurtuby also criticizes Gellner for his ethnocentrism and his monolithic approach of Islam as a fixed entity that exists independent of the will of men and serves as a blue print of social order. According to Al-Qurtuby, Gellner has not contributed to "what anthropology of Islam might be, or ever, what it means to study Islam"(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 144).

Al-Qurtuby names Gilsenan's "Recognizing Islam" as another work identified with the anthropology of Islam, that unlike the previously mentioned succeeded in avoiding essentialism when it comes to Islam. Gilsenan examined the practices and lives of the people defining themselves as Muslims discussed Islam as "a word that identifies various relations of practices, representations, symbol, concept and worldviews within the same society and between different societies."(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 145).

There also developed a general debate about the concept of anthropology of Islam. However it only attracted a relatively small number of anthropologists. According to Al-Qurtuby, the idea of an anthropology of Islam was initiated in 1977 by Abdul, Hamid el-Zein in his article "Beyond Ideology and Theology: the Search for the Anthropology of Islam". Some years later, in 1986, Talal Asad wrote an article called "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" and also in the same year, Akbar Ahmed wrote a book entitled "Towards Islamic Anthropology". However for the most part, anthropologists dealing with Islam or Muslim societies have not managed to reach a wide audience outside their own discipline and have less influence compared with for example political scientists. This is most probably because stakeholders, government officials or political leaders tend to find quantitative research more understandable and convincing than ethnographic fieldwork(Al-Qurtuby 2021, 145/146).

One central question in the debate around anthropology of Islam is that of whether there is one “true” Islam or if there are many “Islams”, emphasizing the plurality and complexity of Muslim societies and Islamic practices. El-Zein claims that anthropologists need to fully reject the dichotomy of “true Islam” versus “false Islam”. To the contrary, Talal Asad states that “if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition [Islam] that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, costumes, and morals. It is a *tradition*”.

Al-Qurtuby criticizes Asad’s position, emphasizing that not all Muslims possess a deep knowledge of the Quran or the Hadith. In fact a lot of them don’t even understand Arabic, the language in which the Quran is written. Furthermore a lot of Muslims do not actively practice their religion. He asks, if according to Asad’s definition of an anthropology of Islam, they should be seen as “bad” or “untrue” Muslims. To him, as one of the main aspects of anthropology is the avoidance of bias, we should not necessarily start from where Muslims start (Al-Qurtuby 2021, 146-149).

He also criticizes another supporter of the notion that there is only one Islam, Akbar Ahmed. Ahmed suggests the concept of an Islamic anthropology, that unlike anthropology of Islam has a clear paradigm and blueprint, namely Islam. So Islamic anthropology according to Ahmed is “the study of Muslim groups by scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam-humanity, knowledge, tolerance-relating micro village tribal studies in particular to the larger historical and ideological frames of Islam.” The concept of Islamic Anthropology is highly critical of (Western) anthropology as it attracted missionaries and colonial administrators. Therefore Western anthropology had to purify itself from “the subversive material, methods, and terminology of the missionaries and colonial administrators.” However Al-Qurtuby claims that Ahmed’s concept of Islamic anthropology is guilty of the same failings, it accuses Western anthropology of, since there are theological assumptions behind it. The idea, so Al-Qurtuby, that there is only one Islam or an ideal type of Islam is empirically unrealistic, as there are multiple variations of Islamic practices and cultures. While you can largely say that Muslims agree on the Quran as a central text, they differ greatly in their interpretation of it. Ahmed’s approach, so Al-Qurtuby fails to acknowledge the fact of cultural diversity. While Al-Qurtuby to some extent agrees with Ahmed’s critique of Western anthropology’s ethnocentrism, he sees his approach as the reverse side of the same coin. The assumption that Islam cannot be studied and understood by non-Muslim anthropologists, sees Western anthropologists as a monolithic group and ignores both changing trends in the field

and individual variation. So while some Muslim anthropologists like Ahmed fight Western ethnocentrism, they seem to be fine with their own Eastern ethnocentrism. Al-Qurtuby stresses that the quality of the research does not depend on the religious or ethnic background of the researcher(Al-Qurtoby 2021, 49-51).

1. Apostasy: Definitions and Approaches

The term apostasy derives from the Greek term *apostasia* and generally refers to the abandonment of a religion or sometimes any belief system. While for a long time the issue of apostasy has been relatively neglected in the social sciences, there have been several attempts to define it. Depending on the definition one uses, not every exit of a religious group would count as apostasy, as it has often been defined as a conscious, often confrontational act of disavowal. The apostate leaves a group that was previously a source of belonging or identity and now sees themselves as an ex- or former member of that group. It is not always necessary for the apostate to disclose their apostasy to others, depending on the definition used (Cottee 2015, 14/15).

As mentioned above, there are multiple definitions of apostasy. For example C. Kirk Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof defined an apostate as somebody who „held a religious identity at one time“ but now doesn't identify with any religious group. So according to this definition, one has to abandon religion altogether and not just leave one religion for another. According to David G. Bromley, an apostate has to not just abandon, but actually oppose their former religion. Stuart A. Wright similarly defines the apostate as “a defector who is aligned with an oppositional coalition in an effort to broaden a dispute, and embraces a posture of confrontation through public claims making activities”. Anson Shupe also describes the apostate as “an outspoken visible critic” of the group they left. So according to this definition, not every religious dropout is an apostate. Simon Cottee, while agreeing that an apostate is somebody who rejects their former faith, is critical toward the idea that they have to be a visible critic of it, as there are many people who silently reject the religion they grew up with, and never disclose to anybody. So instead of distinguishing between apostates and just “leafertakers”, as Bromley does, he suggest to differ between public and private apostasy. So rather than focusing on somebody's motivation and destination, Cottee suggests to ask whether somebody rejects the faith into which they were born or converted into so that they “no longer subscribe to it's core beliefs nor personally identify with it” in order to decide whether somebody qualifies as an apostate (Cotte 2015, 16/17).

Now one has to differentiate apostasy from other, partially related concepts, like for example that of conversion, since apostasy focuses on somebody leaving their old faith, while conversion is defined by the adoption of a new one. So while they might overlap, since one can leave one faith for another, they are two essentially different things. Therefore apostasy is also not the same as defection which is defined as leaving one faith to join another. Another

concept one has to distinguish apostasy from is that of heresy. While the apostate leaves a group, the heretic criticizes it from within. Often the heretic might even believe to be the one who holds the true values of that group. Since the heretic remains part of the group while being in conflict with it, they often cause more confusion than an apostate who rejects the group's values altogether. Here the core difference is in self perception, since the apostate no longer sees themselves as part of a group, while the heretic sees themselves as the defender of its true values(Cotte 2015, 17/18).

However the definition of apostasy is not just contested in social science but also within the groups themselves, as often violation of rules or deviant behavior is framed as apostasy even if that person still fully sees themselves as a member of that group. According to Howard S. Becker, deviance is not inherent to a person's action but rather created in society as he says: *"Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an `offender`. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label."* Not every violation of a rule is considered to be deviant. This depends on the interpretation of the group. Cotte argues that the same can be applied to apostasy. As he explains: *"social groups define the range of acts which can be included under the rubric `apostasy`"*(Cotte 2015, 21). For example in Islam, withdrawal from the two declarations of faith or one of them is widely agreed to count as apostasy. However some Islamic scholars have a much longer list of what constitutes apostasy. For example the Hanbali scholar Ibn Qudama counts almost any violation of the rules as apostasy. Not just the rejection of so called agreed upon commandments like the five pillars of Islam or denying parts of the Qur'an, but also drinking wine or eating pork. However he states that it does not count as apostasy, if these acts stem from a person's ignorance or insanity. Only when the person persists, they become an apostate(Cotte 2015, 22). So according to this pretty much any violation of Islamic rules counts as apostasy, which means, that a large proportion of people who identify as Muslims would be considered apostates in this scholar's view, since, as Ali A. Rizvi writes(in North America) there are more Muslims who drink alcohol, dance, spend the night at their partner's place or eat haram food, than there are who actually pray five times a day.(Rizvi 2016, 86/87). So one can easily be seen as apostate by parts of a faith community, without actually disavowing the faith or its central values. There are several examples of this. For instance the Saudi Arabian blogger, Raif Badawi was accused of apostasy in a fatwa by the cleric

Abdurrahman al-Barrak, despite he never publicly called himself an atheist or the like(Haidar 2015, 131-135). In fact he often used Islamic scripture as a basis for his arguments(Badawi 2015, 42/43). Despite in this particular case the court judgment was later changed to “insulting Islam”, it still suggests that apostasy is a label often put on people that does not have to align with that person’s self perception. This is not just true for individuals who might disagree with some religious authority but also for other faith groups within the religion of Islam. For example some radical Sunni Muslims would see Shias as apostates as they rejected the successorship of the first caliph(Rizvi 2016, 33).

So while among Muslims there is a lot of disagreement about what constitutes apostasy, you can generally say that the more radical a scholar, the longer his list of acts that count as apostasy will be. Patrick Sookhdeo states that through the rise of Islamists in recent years, the definition of an apostate has been widened so that any disagreement with what is considered orthodox Islam is now seen as apostasy(Cottee 2015, 22).

So there is not one official definition of apostasy but in fact there are many that contradict each other and not all of them require a person to actually disavow their faith, although in social science this is largely the core criterium. However there are a lot of different approaches toward apostasy in both scientific literature as well as the groups in question. With all that in mind, I shall now clarify my own approach to apostasy that I will use throughout the paper. Now I think that there is validity to several different definitions and I don’t want to give a general judgment on which one is the right one, as it depends a lot on the context. However in this paper I will refer to people who left Islam to become atheists. They have to disclose their atheism to at least some people as this is a condition for naming it as a reason for asylum. But while many of the people I talked to in the Ex-Muslim community criticize Islam at least on social media, being an open critic of Islam is not a requirement to count as apostate.

However one also has to clarify the definition of an atheist, as Karin Van Nieuwkerk states “Who counts as an atheist, as a skeptic, or as an agnostic? This question is particularly pertinent in a climate in which nonbelieving is highly politicized, and a secularist can sometimes be labeled an atheist because both positions are perceived as despicable.”(Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 310). The boundaries between an agnostic and an atheist might indeed be blurred as generally speaking even the most vocal atheists will admit that they can’t know for sure that there is no God, just as many religious people will admit to not actually knowing about the existence of God. I will not dive into any debates on who is or is not an atheist or how certain one has to be about their position to count as an atheist but rather just make it

depend on which label a person identifies with the most. Van Nieuwkerk also warns from treating atheism as a final and fixed stage since many people go through a phase of anger against God but rather than leaving Islam find to a different, often more spiritual interpretation of it (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 311). However in my paper I will focus on where a person is at in the moment. So while it is possible (although in my opinion unlikely) that some of my interlocutors might return to Islam or find to another religion at some point of their lives the core criterium to qualify for my research project is that they have left Islam and identify as atheist at the time of the research.

2. Reasons for apostasy in Islam

There are multiple reasons why people leave Islam and they are very individual as is the apostate's experience. But generally you can say that from the first doubt to the actual disavowal of Islam is usually a process of months if not years. When it comes to the kind of doubts that people experience, Cottee differentiates broadly between three categories: Epistemological doubt which focuses on whether the claims that Islam makes about the world, like the existence of God are true, moral doubt, which centers around ethical issues like the concept of predestination, the punishment for unbelief or the role of women and finally instrumental doubt where the person questions the rationality or utility of Islamic commands, like the prohibition of drawing certain motives (Cottee 2015, 33-35).

However Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Mucahit Bilici distinguish largely two categories of reasons why people leave Islam, namely intellectual motivations, which refer to theoretical or ideological concerns and experiential/social motivations which refers to personal experiences and social behavior. Of course the line is not always exactly clear as a belief system causes social behavior. These categories however are further divided into sub-categories like the status of women, the contradiction of Shari'a and human rights, Islam as illogical and unscientific, etc. in the case of intellectual motivations and encounters with bad, cruel Muslims, Muslim ill-treatment of women or non-Muslims in the case of social/experiential motivations (Khalil/Bilici 2007, 118/119).

There are usually triggers that start the doubt. This can be either personal experiences or political events but also discoveries about Islamic scripture or history that the person was not previously aware of or exposure to other belief systems (Cottee 2015, 33-35).

When it comes to personal experiences many Ex-Muslims refer to the death of a beloved person. Cottee quotes one of his interlocutors: "He was just such a good person and he was so young, and I thought: how can God do this? I really wanted to believe in God. I really did. But then it was like, 'Fuck God, I can't be bothered. You can't exist, and even if you did, I don't want to believe in you.'" (Cottee 2015, 36).

Ali A. Rizvi also tells the story of the death of his younger cousin, Sana, when he was a child. Not quite understanding what was going on back then he asked his relatives what was happening to her and they responded things like "She is returning to God" or "God is taking her back", portraying it as something good but at the same time they were praying for God to let her stay or to stop her pain. But Rizvi recalls that "God doesn't do either of those things that day. Her pain gets worse. She struggles harder and harder to breathe, her gasping

becomes more and more pronounced. And then, finally, it stops. My three year old cousin, Sana, is dead.”. He further recalls how his “five year old mind is seeing this as a gruesome game of tug-of-war between God and the rest of us.” and describes his thoughts about God like this: “This unseen being who my parents have told me is all-powerful and can do anything he wants is on one end of the rope and barely even has to try.(....) He lets us keep tugging for a while, stretching out the agony over time, gradually amping up our struggle like a trained torturer.(....) It’s cruel, sadistic and obscene. Yet they are praying to him, begging him to save Sana, but from whom? Himself?” He also did not understand why “almost every ritual in the immediate days after Sana’s death- from the funeral prayers to the burial ceremony- seems to involve God as a positive character, despite what he did to her.”(Rizvi 2016, 59/60).

The death of a loved one was also cited as a cause for doubt by one of my interlocutors, whose mother died in childbirth when he was just nine. He told me how everybody said to him that she would surely go to paradise as she died during Ramadan and she was fasting. However he later came to believe that she died actually because she was fasting while pregnant.

However there are other events in the life of a person that might lead to the development of doubts, like falling in love with a person one is not supposed to be romantically or sexually involved with according to the faith, like a non-Muslim or a same-sex person(Cottee 2015, 36).

Other reasons that often trigger doubts in then still believing Muslims are political events like 9/11. On September 11th 2001, the prominent Ex-Muslim, Yasmine Mohammed wrote in a Twitter thread: „17 years ago, I dropped off my daughter at daycare and was on my way to class at university. On the radio they were talking about a tower burning in NY, it was all so surreal. Then right before I parked the car, they said there was another plane. I listened to audio of people /1 screaming and I knew exactly what had happened. When that second plane hit, I immediately knew who was responsible. If the father of my child had not already been in prison for his links to AlQaeda, I would have sworn that he was involved. I wanted to rip the hijab off my head /2 I didn’t want to be associated w those murderers. When ppl looked at me, I knew all they’d see was the cloth on my head that screamed IM ONE OF THEM! But I wasn’t. But I was. But I didn’t want to be anymore. All of our lives were changed that day. We all went through personal /3journeys instigated by the terrorists that day. My journey began when the Dean of my Dept called me into his office to ask if I was ok. My ppl had just murdered his ppl in cold blood and he was asking if anyone made me feel uncomfortable. He

wanted to make sure I wasn't dealing w any backlash. The shock I was already feeling was now multiplied. 'No, no one is making me uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable because people have been murdered. I'm uncomfortable because the murderers are Muslim like me. THAT makes me uncomfortable.' /5 I marveled at how stupidly kind he was and at how shrewdly evil his enemy was. I felt sick as it dawned on me that they were no match for each other. It also dawned on me that I didn't want to be Muslim anymore. /6 I wanted to get as far away from Islam as I could. How could I continue to be associated w a religion that I knew was ruthlessly determined to spread more blood? I wanted out. I wanted to be reborn, like a phoenix, out of the ashes around ground zero. 7 [#NeverForget](#)"

However as Cottee writes, what actually started the doubting process was not always the attack of 9/11 itself but rather the reactions of some pious Muslims to it, as many would defend the attack, which many moderate Muslims would find not only immoral, but also un-Islamic. Here Cottee refers to one of his interlocutors: "I couldn't understand how such a devout and pious Muslim, who carried out every religious duty to a fault, could be so confident in beliefs that were so obviously immoral, so obviously wrong. This led me to an even more troubling thought: was I like him? Not in the sense of trying to justify killing innocent people- but what if I was also confident in beliefs that were wrong? What if the Quran is not the word of God? What if Muhammed is not the Prophet of God? And what if Islam is not true?"(Cottee 2015, 41/42).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali also recalls how the reactions of some Muslims to the 9/11 attack made her seriously reflect on her faith. Shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center, a camera team filmed the cheering of some Muslim teenagers in the Netherlands, where she lived. She states that while all of the Netherlands was shocked, her fear was much deeper, as she knew that what was filmed was no individual case.(Hirsi Ali 2006, 376). This forced her to make a decision on where she really stood in this whole political and religious debate that followed 9/11; where she stood when it came to Islam. Fully aware that it was not just this small group of fanatics who held this attitude towards America and the West, but rather a lot of Muslims saw it as justified, she found that she had to make a decision. She also had to figure out if this was the real Islam.(Hirsi Ali 2006, 377).

She describes her active confrontation with these questions "Nicht Bin Laden, sondern der Prophet Mohammed war die moralische Führungsgestalt, daher sollte man sich mit ihm auseinandersetzen. Aber was, wenn mir das Ergebnis dieser Analyse nicht gefiel?(...) Wenn man in einem hübschen Haus im Bilderbuchstädtchen Leiden saß, klang das sehr weit hergeholt, wie die Fantasien eines Wahnsinnigen, doch Bin Ladens Zitate aus dem Koran

gingen mir nicht mehr aus dem Kopf. “Und wenn ihr die Ungläubigen trifft, dann herunter mit dem Haupt.” “...tötet die Heiden wo immer ihr sie findet, greift sie, umzingelt sie und lauert ihnen überall auf!” “Nehmt euch nicht die Juden und Christen zu Freunden. Sie sind untereinander Freunde [ergänze sinngemäß: aber nicht eure]. Wenn einer sich ihnen anschließt, gehört er zu ihnen [ergänze: und nicht mehr zur Gemeinschaft der Gläubigen].”(....) Ich konnte nicht anders: Ich nahm den Koran und den Hadith und schlug die Zitate nach, nur um ganz sicher zu sein. Ich wollte eigentlich nicht, weil ich wusste, daß ich dort Bin Ladens Zitate finden würde, und ich war noch nicht bereit, Gottes Wort in Frage zu stellen. Aber ich musste es wissen: Basierten die Anschläge vom 11. September auf dem reinen Glauben an den wahren Islam? Und wenn ja, wie dachte *ich* über den Islam?”(Hirsi Ali 2006, 380/381).

This confrontation gradually changed her relationship to Islamic scripture as she found herself thinking for the first time that the Quran was not holy but rather written by humans.

She also refers to the influence of the culture at the time of its writing as it is strongly influenced by the Arab tribal culture at that time. Finally she claims that the Quran spreads a violent and bigoted culture that oppresses women. Hirsi Ali, despite acknowledging that the Quran teaches a lot of good things too, like being benevolent, she could no longer look past all the violence and bigotry.(Hirsi Ali 2006, 381/381). Questioning the divinity of the Quran for Hirsi Ali eventually led to her questioning the existence of God himself “Damit ich diese Überlegungen anstellen konnte, mußte ich erst einmal glauben, daß der Koran relativ ist. Er ist nicht absolut, er bringt nicht die wörtlichen Äußerungen Gottes, sondern er ist nur ein Buch. Ich mußte mich auch vom Glauben an die Hölle lösen, denn bisher war ich deswegen stets vor einer Kritik am Islam zurückgeschreckt. Eines nachts dachte ich plötzlich: “Aber wenn das so ist, was glaube ich dann über Gott?””(Hirsi Ali 2006, 383).

For Ali A. Rizvi, 9/11 was also a factor in his path to apostasy. He too would come across a lot of people who supported the attack. As many would tell him how America deserved it. Many people according to Rizvi would see it as “a justifiable relation to America’s anti-Muslim foreign policy, but it also isn’t Muslims who did it. It’s either the Jews or the U.S. government.”(Rizvi 2016, 14).

Many also start questioning their faith because they first read the Quran- which they are told is the true and authentic word of God- in a language that they understand. As Ali A. Rizvi explains: “In most Muslim households, the Quran sits at the highest place possible.(....) It cannot be recited or physically touched unless an act of ablution and purification called *wudhu* is performed. It cannot be recited or touched by menstruating women. It is read in its

entirety during the Sunni *taraweeh* prayers in the holy month of Ramadan, and in many Muslim communities, it is held over the heads of grooms and brides as a blessing when they get married. A child completing her first reading of the Quran is a monomentous occasion- parties are thrown, gifts are given.(....) but the majority of Muslims in the world cannot understand any of it.”(Rizvi 2016, 30). Many conservative Muslims actually consider it as sacrilege to translate the Quoran, as Rizvi continues. However with the rise of the internet, it became much easier to find multiple translations and to compare them with each other. One could also easily find videos where Islamists would reference the Quran while committing acts of violence.

Rizvi who grew up in a Shia-family and spent a lot of his youth in Saudi Arabia, where Sunni Islam is the state religion, was always told that the culture around him, where minorities and women are denied the most basic rights, had nothing to do with true Islam.(Rizvi 2016, 30). However he recalls that when he first read the Quran in a language that he understood, he “found endorsement for almost all the Saudi’s actions in the Quran.”. When he talked to his parents about these verses they seemed themselves surprised about their content and came to the conclusion that he must be mistaken. As he learned, many liberal Muslims who did not speak Arabic were suspicious with the accuracy of the translations or the trustworthiness of the translators(Rizvi 2016, 35).

Rizvi also claims that if the translation was not called incorrect, it was said to be “misinterpreted” but an explanation of what the correct interpretation was, usually didn’t follow. Also Quranic verses, if not misinterpreted they were said to be “specific to that time” or “out of context”. However there was no explanations given of what the correct context was. Or it was said to be a metaphor that was not supposed to be taken literally. However Rizvi claims that the more questions he asked “the more “metaphoric” the Quran got.” and that “anything in the text that had been proven false over the centuries was deemed a “metaphor””. And if he brought up that many Arabic speaking nations like Saudi Arabia or Egypt also followed this interpretation of the book, he was told that “the Saudis had been bought by America and Israel a long time ago, and remember, those Egyptians even had a treaty with the Jews.”

All these excuses would in Rizvi’s eyes render the Quran’s words meaningless. He also came to the conclusion that his family, who he describes as “truly decent human beings”, did not get their morality from the Quran but rather interpret the Quran in a way that was compatible with their morals. “As much as their denialism could be frustrating in an argument, their flat-out refusal to accept that their religion prescribed bad things meant, to me anyway, that they were

good people. And they weren't good people because of their holy book; they were good people *in spite* of it." With all that in mind Rizvi concludes that "they didn't get their morality from the Quran; they used their *already-present* morality to *interpret* it- or at least interpret what they thought was in it." (Rizvi 2016, 36/37).

Cottee reports that many apostates decided to read the Quran in a language that they understand and study Islamic history in an attempt to become better Muslims. "For many respondents, Islam was a crucial part of their lives growing up. It shaped what they did and how they saw themselves. Moreover, it profoundly shaped how they felt about themselves. (...) They felt Muslim." Many of his respondents as Cottee describes, have learned to recite the Quran, but not to understand it. Often moving to a new country, where they first had close contact to non-Muslims was central to their desire to learn more about Islam. For many people this desire also came from increasing pressure through their parents. However when they read a translation of the Quran, they were shocked at its content. For some respondents, as Cottee describes, the aim was not to discover Islam in order to become better Muslims, but rather to defend Islam against its critics (Cottee 2015, 38-41).

For many Ex-Muslims being exposed to alternative ways of thinking was what first planted the seed of doubt. As with the scriptural discoveries, the internet plays a big role here, as it gives people access to all different kinds of ideas and theories about the world. Rana Ahmad recalls the first time she stumbled across the word "atheist" on the internet. She further looked for information online, as at that point she did not know what an atheist was. She describes her thoughts about this discovery like that "Diese Worte sind so ungeheuerlich, dass mein Herz beginnt, wie wild zu schlagen. Nicht zu glauben ist die größte Sünde in dem Land, in dem ich lebe. Das ist ungeheuerlich, dass ich zuerst gar nicht verstehe, was diese Worte mir sagen sollen." She further describes her confusion "Auf die Abkehr vom Islam steht in Saudi-Arabien die Todesstrafe. Ich kenne andere Religionen, Christen, Juden, Buddhisten. Aber dass es Menschen geben soll, die gar nicht glauben, kann ich nicht begreifen." (Ahmad 2017, 139-148).

Also finding out that a person they like is an atheist might cause someone to reflect on their worldview including their relationship to their religion. Ayaan Hirsi Ali recalls her first encounter with an atheist "Dann sagte er mir, er sei Atheist-er glaube nicht an Gott. Ich war entsetzt. Ich konnte mir nicht vorstellen, dass so etwas Böses möglich war, vor allem bei jemandem, der so nett war und so gut aussah." (Hirsi Ali 2006, 141).

But also discussing ideas online might make people reflect on what they previously took for granted. Many have only had contact to other Muslims for most of their lives and took Islam

as belief system for granted. As long as they did not come across other beliefs they didn't analyze their own. Some found themselves in the position that they had to defend what they took for granted for the first time.

But not only actual discussions about faith can make people examine their own beliefs more closely but also the mere contact with people from different backgrounds and with different ideas. As one of Cottee's interview partners put it "Because most of the people I knew were non-Muslims. So they'd always ask me questions and I had no answers at the time or I'd make up something and then go home and check that it was right. I wanted to be ready when people asked me and to convince myself as well, because a lot of it didn't make sense to me."(Cottee 2015, 37/38).

Generally being surrounded with people from other background might lead to a more critical view of the culture one grew up with, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali recalls "So machten etwa Marcos Freund Giovanni und dessen Freundin Mirjam miteinander Schluss, nachdem Giovanni zu einem dreimonatigen Forschungsaufenthalt nach Israel aufgebrochen war. Während seiner Abwesenheit verliebte sich Mirjam in Oliver, einen Freund von Giovanni. Als Giovanni zurückkehrte, war er wütend(die beiden waren jahrelang zusammen gewesen), aber es kam nicht zu einem Ehrenmord, ja, es gab nichtmal die Andeutung von Gewalt. Mirjam hatte das uneingeschränkte Recht, sich in einen anderen Mann zu verlieben- selbst ihre Mutter war dieser Ansicht, obwohl sie Giovanni vergöttert hatte. Ich war fasziniert; diese Haltung und die dahinterstehende Moral waren mir völlig fremd."(Hirsi Ali 2006, 366).

For some Ex-Muslims however there was no specific event or change in their life that started the doubting process. They just no longer felt the connection to their faith and to God. They might have felt like they were abandoned by God or they just didn't feel his presence anymore. This is what Cottee refers to as "spiritual alienation". It can be a cause as well as a product of first doubts(Cottee 2015, 41).

One of my interlocutors also reported that he never really was religious although he grew up in a Muslim family "Yeah, I called myself Ex-Muslim since I was seventeen years old... I never considered myself as a Muslim before then. Yeah I am from Muslim family. But it was like identity more than belief. And also I don't have so restrictive family, for them to be non-Muslim is something horrible but it's not to push us to pray or fast at Ramadan or things like that. So when I moved to Palestine and start to think about it.... Some questions came and I saw some people are non-religious and supporting the communist party it was there so... I consider myself Ex-Muslim since I was seventeen years old. When I became an atheist maybe at five, six, seven years, because before that I didn't care about what the difference and I

didn't know the difference between to believe and not to believe." Again you can see that while he never really believed, it was a change in environment and confrontation with other ideas that made him consciously reflect on the ideas he grew up with.

Also being subjected to very strict rules and feeling the frustration of the religion defining much of their life can make people question their faith as another of my interlocutors explains "When I was a child, I fled to Iran with my mother and that's when it started that this compulsion in Islam was very annoying for me and I was really only in favour of Islam.

Because everyone forced me to pray and fast all the time. And at the time I wondered whether that was true, whether it was all really right or not. And it was really very stressful for me.

And after I came to Austria and somehow found this opportunity not to pray and not to have to pray and not to have to fast and nobody forced me and this freedom. That's what made me get away from all that stuff."

But the reason people leave Islam go beyond personal experiences or discoveries but rather are a social phenomenon. While unlike what some media suggests apostasy from Islam is not a new phenomenon, it is likely to be growing. Since in many Islamic countries it is not easy and in fact very dangerous to come out as a non-believer, it is hard to know the actual number of people who leave Islam. However it is discussed much more in recent years, as Van Nieuwkerk explains "Although we simply do not know the number of nonbelievers and skeptics, in its different shades and moments there is a shared feeling that, even though we cannot know whether the trend is growing it is at least becoming more visible and audible."(Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 312).

There also is a movement among atheists to speak about their atheism more openly, which leads to the issue being talked about more. In the discourse around atheism and apostasy, there are several explanations given for the growth or growing visibility of apostasy in Islam. One is that apostasy is a direct reaction to religious extremism such as the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or generally acts of violence done in the name of Islam. For example the New York Times reporter Thomas Friedman sees a clear connection here "The Islamic State has visibly attracted young Muslims from all over the world to its violent movement to build a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. But here's what's less visible-the online backlash against the Islamic State... by young Muslims declaring their opposition to rule by Islamic law, or Shariah, and even proudly avowing their atheism." However as Van Nieuwkerk states, this explanation is limited as the countermovement against violence committed in the name of religion does not necessarily lead to atheism or a complete abandonment of Islam. In fact it can also be used to explain the rise of people searching for a more spiritual version of Islam,

such as Sufism. So while religious extremism leads to more conscious reflection among religious people it can also lead to different interpretations of the religion and not necessarily to its abandonment (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 312/313).

The perceived rise of apostasy from Islam is also often linked to the Arab Spring. Van Nieuwkerk describes the situation in Egypt, where the revolution is often linked directly or indirectly to people exiting Islam often by young people who participated in it themselves. As Van Nieuwkerk states “For many activist youths, freedom from religion is a direct result of their fight for freedom of expression, democracy, and a secular state irrespective of personal believe.” So while the revolution “is often seen as a political failure, for many it meant a seminal moment because they took hold of their own thoughts, actions, believes, and lives.” So it led them to question deeply rooted believes and traditions stop blindly following religious norms but above all to question all kind of authority be it religious or secular. However Van Nieuwkerk again states that this does not have to lead to a disavowal of religion. Rather this skepticism is part of a general resentment toward authorities. Many people reflect more on their believe as well as their choices like whether or not to wear the hijab and whether their decision to wear it in the first place was actually theirs. However here also many go through a phase of doubt and anger with God but eventually find peace in the idea of a loving more spiritual God (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 313/314).

Another reason often stated for the growth of atheism is access to social media. This is especially important in an environment where deviant views cannot easily be expressed, as it gives people access to alternative viewpoints. Through social media people can see opinions that they don’t normally get confronted with in their everyday life. For many atheists and skeptics reading about Darwin or the New Atheist movement or Richard Dawkins was central to the development of their views. It was important for them to find out that they were not alone with their doubts but rather they were shared by many others. However not just atheism or skepticism flourishes through social media but generally more marginalized and otherwise repressed ideas including religious extremism (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 314).

2.1. Content of doubts

As mentioned above, the doubts people have in the process of leaving Islam can center around intellectual or moral questions or in some cases the utility of Islamic prescriptions. These are of course not mutually exclusive and one individual might have unanswered questions on all these levels. One frequent source of doubt is the existence of God, because many find it

contradictory that there is so much suffering in the world, when there is an all powerful and loving God. Another variation of that doubt is directed at the divinity of the Quran as “many of Prophet Muhammad’s revelations were conveniently revealed when he wanted something.”(Cottee 2015, 33). But also coming across other religions can make people question the Quran’s claim for exclusive epistemological authority. Being exposed to science can be a catalyst for questioning Islamic claims like the creation story too(Cottee 2015, 33). Ali A. Rizvi gives a detailed account on how he gradually came to the conclusion that the claims of Islam did not make sense to him. One of the things that he struggled to understand very early were the supposed actions of God, as he recalls: “Back in the summer of 1988, I was in Pakistan with my family when the president, Zia Ul-Haq, was killed in a plain crash. One of the more popular stories that got out was about his personal Quran, which survived the crash with minimal charring, apparently just enough for it to qualify as a miracle. The way people ranted about it was bizarre to my eight-grade mind. “Did you see? Not a word damaged in his Quran! *Masha`allah!* Praise God!” *What’s so impressive about a god that allows thirty two people to perish in the sky, instead choosing to protect a book?* I thought. And a book with billions of copies in print around the world, at that. But there were grown, educated adults around me going on and on about it. There was probably something I missed. Maybe I’d understand it when I got older.”(Rizvi 2016, 11).

But also the arbitrariness of who God supposedly helps and who he forsakes fueled his skepticism, as he tells: “I would see tearful survivors of plain crashed on television, profusely grateful to God for saving them, and immediately wonder what the dozens of other passengers who had perished had done wrong to not deserve this honor. I would see post-soccer-game interviews with the winning team captain claiming God’s blessing made them victorious, and wonder what the other team could possibly have done to make themselves unworthy of this divine endorsement. In simple, everyday rituals, like listening to my elders thanking God before dinner, I would wonder if a more honest prayer would be something like, “Thank you, Lord, for providing us with lots of extra, sure-to-be-wasted food tonight, instead of giving it to those kids in Ethiopia who are starving to death.”(...) I would feel strange asking God for things. I was part of a relatively well-off family, with well educated parents sending me to a good school.(...) Whenever I asked for a school exam to go well(...)I would secretly imagine God replying, “Yes, Ali, I will help you get an A on that chemistry test tomorrow as soon as I’m done setting off this Ebola epidemic in Africa. Then I’m all yours.”” Another event that triggers his doubts was watching Rebecca Vitsmun speak to Wolf Blitzer after a tornado. After she survived she said no to the question if she was thankful to God, simply because she

did not believe in his existence. So one can wonder, why God chose to save an atheists who openly denies his existence rather than the dozens of people who were likely believing Christians. He also notes, that some illnesses that would mean almost certain death only decades ago were now treatable and have a high survival rate. “But unlike today’s pediatric oncologists, God was supposedly always there, for millenia upon millenia, before 1980. For children who had the disease before that, like Sana, these “miracles” were few and far between.”(Rizvi 2016, 61-63).

However the final straw for his apostasy was the discovery of science. Finding how small and actually insignificant the Earth was and later when reading the Quran in English, comparing it to science, that makes claims founded by evidence and welcomes people to question and falsify it rather than threatening them when doing so made it eventually impossible to believe in Islam anymore.(Rizvi 2016, 105/106).

Still letting go of Islam and God completely was a long process, as like many apostates he initially tried to reconcile his doubts with his faith. As there always was the question of the last “how” that remained unanswered, he would just fill this void with God, without further asking, who created him. The argument that when the universe needs a creator, than so does that creator, and when God does not need a creator then why should the universe, was avoided by the adoption of a somewhat pantheistic view of God, where he was the universe. He did so as at that time he was still eager to hold on to God in a way that seemed intellectually honest to him. So every mayor scientific theory, like that of the Big Bang or evolution was welcomed but he decided that God had to start it. All this made it also easier to make sense of why pain and suffering exist.(Rizvi 2016, 107/108).

However he describes how his “intellectual honesty eventually caught up to the denialism, and the search for truth overrode the desire to sanitize a scripture I was too afraid to let go.”(Rizvi 2016, 115). So he finally gave up on the belief in God completely. “I was gradually beginning to see now that God was just a lazy answer to some very good questions- the “god of the gaps.” For any scientific question that didn’t yet have an answer, people chose to say, “God did it,” instead of “I don’t know.””(Rizvi 2016, 118).

So his previous excuses did no longer hold up. “On evolution, I could no longer share Francis Collins’s comfort in reconciling faith with scientific reality as I once did. The idea that an everloving, merciful god would use a violent and unjust process like natural selection to create all life on Earth was beginning to look like a stretch.”(Rizvi 2016, 119).

He also points out that the notion that while science answers the “how” questions, religion would answer the “why” questions was not correct as in fact religion does make plenty of

“how” claims, like how the Earth and humans emerged. So does science answer a lot of the “why” questions.(Rizvi 2016, 125).

Anyhow for him it was the question of the Big Bang that finally made the question of God obsolete. Because when the Big Bang was the beginning not just of the universe but of time itself, there was no before the Big Bang and therefore no creator. Rizvi refers to some physicists, who claim that “asking, “What happened before the Big Bang?” is like asking someone standing right at the North Pole to walk north.”(Rizvi 2016, 127).

And as is a recurrent theme among Ex-Muslims, the question of why such a powerful creator would care if people worship him. “These ideas made the holy books I’d read growing up seem small, narrow, and so... *human*. Why was the supposed creator of this unfathomable universe advising us on how much our daughters should inherit compared to our sons? Why was he so concerned about punishing those who oppose his authority? What a creator of nebulae, time-distorting black holes, and hundreds of billions of stars and galaxies would be so insecure to consider it an absolute requirement that the inhabitants of this infinitesimally tiny speck of a planet regularly kiss his ass in gratitude for the infinitesimally tiny fragment of time they are here, or suffer an eternity of fire and torture? What creator of the inanimate double helix DNA molecule that codes for a single cell zygote to multiply and differentiate into a mind-boggingly complex human being within forty weeks would fill up his handful of books to humanity with imbecilic fables about men living in the bellies of fish(verses 37:139-144) or men delivering two hundred foreskins to a king in order to marry his daughter(1 Samuel 18:27)?”(Rizvi 2016, 128/129).

However, often the doubts are not of epistemological but of moral nature. In many cases what drives people away from Islam are not intellectual arguments, but ethical issues. Such issues might be the arbitrariness of predestination, where being born a Muslim would bring you to heaven. To many it makes no sense that something one did not choose, a mere accident of birth would decide a person’s fate.

But also the punishment for unbelief as it is prescribed in the Quran makes many people question the morality of their faith as it seems highly questionable that a God who does not provide any physical prove for his existence would punish you for eternity for doubting him. This to many does not line up with the idea of a morally good, loving and benevolent God. So for many the problem with their faith was, that God seemed to care more about what you believe in than what kind of person you are.

But also the position of women in Islam can be a starting point for the doubting process. Like one person said “These are some of the questions I was asking. Why do women have to cover

up and not men? It's not fair. I also remember being very disturbed by this whole four wives thing. I wasn't necessarily disturbed that there was an allowance of four wives. I was disturbed that there was no allowance of four husbands."

Other moral doubts may center around specific Islamic commands like the prohibition of having a sexual relationship with a non-Muslim(Cottee 2015, 34).

But also the simple question of why there is so much suffering in the world, when there is a supposedly loving and all-powerful God is a question that often arises. Here one of my interlocutors explained "So for me the first time, I said, many, many interest, interesting, because so I had for example, so I know a mullah in Iran. So every time, I asked why many people in Iran have no food or have no housing, because Iran is a good, a beautiful country, we have enough money. But why don't people get anything. The mullah, yes, he said because your God want you to stay like this, because I asked why. He said, because God wants this life(...) for example stay and next life If you died, then the next land you got everything. And I saw, for example, this mullah has good cars, good housing and marries a young woman. So my question, I asked, if I for me, get another life, but for you, why get now. Yes. That's very, very funny too. (....)And I searched many, many information and I thought everything is business, religion is a bad, smart decision in the world, faith." This is generally a recurrent theme among atheists and sceptics, the question of how an all-mighty and morally just God would allow for all the injustice in the world to happen since, given him being all-powerful, he could easily change it.

3. The consequence of apostasy in Islam

Leaving Islam is not an easy task for many apostates and even less so is coming out as an Ex-Muslim. In some instances this can actually be dangerous even deadly for the apostate, as several Muslim-majority countries apply the death penalty for leaving the faith. This of course is not the case everywhere. However, even if there are no legal consequences, it can still cause tensions within the social environment and even disownment or threats of violence from the family. But also internal conflicts might cause Ex-Muslims trouble, like anger over the time they wasted trying to be “good Muslims” or guilt because they feel like they have disappointed family members.

In the following I shall discuss the consequences that leaving Islam might have on a legal, social as well as emotional level. But first I want to look at why apostasy is such a big issue for many pious Muslims in the first place. Why can't they just let people walk away from their faith and “agree to disagree” with their Ex-Muslim family members? One might assume that if you are secure in your faith and firmly believe in the truth of it, you should not feel threatened by somebody thinking differently of it. However, it is not that simple.

As Cottee explains for many Muslims Islam is so central to their identity that one leaving the faith might be seen as a personal attack rather than just a disagreement with their worldview. For some Islamic jurists, apostasy is at least as horrible as murder, as it threatens the Muslim community from within since according to Yusuf Al-Qaradawi speaking against Allah or his prophet is “more dangerous to Islam than physically attacking its followers...moral mischief in the land is more hazardous than physical mischief.” The classical Muslim jurist al-Samara'i claims that the apostate “causes others to imagine that Islam is lacking in goodness and thus prevents them from accepting it.” Basically apostasy is perceived as a threat to the faith because as Cottee puts it “if one person can be persuaded to leave Islam, then why not all?”(Cottee 2015, 12).

However, this is by no means specific to Islam. In fact you find that same hostility toward apostates in Christianity too, as for example in the fifth century, the Theodosian Code said that “it is graver than death and crueller than massacre when someone adjoins the Christian faith and becomes polluted with the Jewish incredulity.” It is also not specific to religion as people who disavow secular groups are often met with equal condemnation. According to Georg Simmel, in-group conflicts are often more intense than out-group conflicts. This particularly applies to the renegade as “The recall of earlier agreement has such a strong effect that the new contrast is infinitely sharper and bitterer than if no relation at all had existed in

the past... And where enough similarities continue to make confusions and blurred borderlines possible, points of difference need an emphasis not justified by the issue but only by that danger of confusion.” So apostates are generally perceived as a threat against the unity of the group. Lewis A. Cosar claims that if a group experiences an outside threat it may be forced to get closer together. “Here we note that a similar reaction occurs in the defense of the close group against a danger from within. Indeed... the reaction may be stronger under these conditions because the ‘enemy’ from within, the renegade or heretic, not only puts into question the values and interests of the group, but also threatens its very unity. Renegadism signals and symbolizes a desertion of those standards of the group considered vital to its well-being, if not to its actual existence.” So the renegade or apostate is perceived as a threat to the boundaries of established groups(Cottee 2015, 12/13).

The renegade according to Cosar will likely join a new group, often a rival out-group. The fact that they cannot return to their former group might increase their loyalty to their new group and therefore strengthen the out-group. Therefore the renegade is more dangerous to their former group than somebody who has always belonged to the out-group. The renegade according to Cosar causes even more fear and condemnation in groups that are themselves struggling for acceptance. So the reactions to the inner enemy depend on the conflict with the outer enemy. Because “Once a group is well established and its continued existence is no longer in question, it can afford to take a milder view of renegadism.”

Neil Vidmar says about the perceived threat of in-group deviance “Social harm to the community is far worse when the deviant acts are committed by those who are in-group members than when they are committed by outsiders. The acts are not only viewed as a violation of rules, but an explicit rejection of the norms and values by one who is required by group membership to adhere to them. Thus, the acts are far more threatening to the members of the community who subscribe to the values. The reaction is further exacerbated when the acts come to the attention of outsider groups that are viewed as competing with the in-group, because the deviance lowers the in-group values relative to those of the out-group.”

According to Cottee, this causes the members of the group to reflect on their own loyalty to that group. What Durkheim says about crime, can also be said about apostasy; it brings the remaining group members closer together(Cottee 2015, 13/14).

3.1. Legal consequences

Apostasy from Islam is punishable by death in 13 countries, among them Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia. According to Rob Heaton, there are a total of 19 countries that criminalize apostasy from Islam(Heaton 2016, 3). However, it is debated, whether or not the Quran itself can be seen as a basis for this law, since while there are verses condemning apostasy and calling for punishment, it also famously says that “there is no compulsion in religion”. It is not the aim of this paper to discuss whether the death penalty for apostasy is rooted in the Quran itself or not. However it is a fact that some countries that penalize apostasy use the Quran- or their interpretation of it- as a basis for their legal system. One of these countries is Saudi Arabia which is famous for both its cruel punishments and intolerance towards other opinions and worldviews. Saudi Arabia does not have a written constitution but rather the Quran and Sunna serve as basis for legal framework. Individuals don’t officially have rights but rather they are ascribed to God, the state and those in power. The Basic Law of Governance also requires that children are taught to obey God, His Messenger and those in authority and cherish national unity. So the state is in power to “prevent whatever leads to disunity, sedition and division.” This can be used to persecute and punish everybody who calls for change or questions the status quo.

There are several cases of people having been punished for expressing views that were critical of the religious establishment. The probably most famous example of this is the case of Raif Badawi, who was publicly flogged for expressing secular views. As previously mentioned, he was accused of apostasy- despite never publicly disavowing Islam- which would have likely meant a death sentence. However, while the most famous, this is by far not the only case of Saudi Arabia forcefully oppressing ideas that they deem threatening for the religious establishment. Another case is that of Hazma Kashgari, who at Mohammed’s birthday wrote on Twitter “On your birthday, I will say that I have loved the rebel in you, that you’ve always been a source of inspiration to me, and that I do not like the halos of divinity around you. On your birthday, I shall not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, no more.” While Kashgari had shared ideas like this before, the timing of these tweets caught the Saudi public’s and government’s attention. He therefore had to flee and seeked asylum in New Zealand but was apprehended in Malaysia and sent back to Saudi Arabia. Many wanted him to be sent to death, among them Sheikh Nasser Al Omar, who called for the death penalty as a

“security measure” so that the kingdom would not be destroyed by Allah. However he was eventually sent to prison for almost two years for the “crimes” of apostasy and blasphemy. In 2014 Saudi Arabia passed a new law that linked expressions of atheism and apostasy to terrorism, thereby expanding its power to punish them. The official definition of terrorism now included “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.” This law aimed at the silencing of the growing atheist and skeptic population. The Saudi Ambassador to the US, Abdallah al-Mouallimi defended the law, claiming that Saudi Arabia was “homogeneous in accepting Islam by the entire population”. He also claimed when referring to the first person who was sentenced under this law, that he could have kept his opinion to himself in order to escape the punishment. The expression of atheism is further framed as a danger by the Saudi government, as it is thought of as threatening the social order and unity of the country(Heaton 2016, 3/4).

However even in countries where apostasy is not explicitly forbidden, like Egypt, atheists can face legal consequences for their worldview. In Egypt, freedom of religion goes as far as to acknowledge all three Abrahamic religions although the vast majority of the population are Muslims. The number of atheists is assumed to be growing although this is not confirmed by official statistical evaluation as most atheists are likely to be in the closet. However there is increasing concern about atheism among religious leaders that goes so far as for a nationwide campaign against atheism that is said to be part of a so called effort to curb extremism, which has been announced on national television. I will later elaborate more on the fear that atheism causes among many religious leaders as well as ordinary people in Egypt.

So while in Egypt being an atheist is not illegal, outspoken atheists can still easily land in prison, as blasphemy against Islam is a criminal offense which carries up to five years in prison. One example of this would be that of Karim Ashraf Mohamed al-Banna who was arrested in 2014 while dining in a so called “atheist café”. Previously to that his name appeared in a “list of known atheists”, published by a local newspaper. He was sent to three years in prison and abandoned by his father who accused him of embracing “extremist ideas” against Islam.

However the situation in Egypt is complex as there are cases of atheists landing in prison for their ideas while others appear on national TV and often have their own big social media platforms to talk about atheism. And while they are attacked or belittled and frequently interrupted on TV, they still keep being able to discuss their ideas in public(Heaton 2016, 5-8).

3.2. Social consequences

Not every Ex-Muslim has to fear any legal prosecution or sanction from the state, as in many countries both in the West and the Middle East, there are no laws concerning leaving one's faith. However that does not mean that leaving Islam and disclosing one's apostasy to other people does not have severe consequences. As Ali A. Rizvi describes the situation of many Ex-Muslims: "Many are disowned by their parents and lose their families. Their friends refuse to associate with them. Their communities ostracize them." (Rizvi 2016, 67). According to a study conducted by EXMNA (Ex-Muslims of North America), 67% of the respondents experiences emotional manipulation after leaving Islam, 62% reported the loss of friends, 61% stated, they were verbally abused 45% experienced the loss of their family, 34% received threats of violence and still 13% were physically abused. While the sample of this study was not randomly chosen but rather the respondents were members of the EXMNA community (and it can be assumed that people whose apostasy affected their life are more likely to join an official community that aims to provide a safe space for Ex-Muslims), it still indicates, that leaving Islam comes with a lot of potential negative consequences.

Therefore as Cottee describes the decision of whether or not to come out as apostate is often a very difficult one. That's why for many it is a choice between two competing evils. Cottee describes this dilemma as follows "If they disclose their apostasy to loved ones, they risk hurting them and incurring their rejection. Yet if they conceal it from them, they must endure the psychological misery of living a lie." (Cottee 2015, 80/81).

However in this section I will focus on those who have disclosed to at least some people within the Muslim community. Usually, Ex-Muslims are selective about who they disclose to and mostly tell friends and siblings rather than parents and if they do eventually tell their parents, they often tell one parent before the other. The level of religiosity of a person, alongside the personal relationship with them is often a deciding factor in whether to tell them or not (Cottee 2015, 81/82).

The negative reactions of some Muslim friends or family members might lead to general distrust against Muslims as Cottee describes the situation of one of his interlocutors who "having learned the hard way from bruising experience with his own family: he won't disclose to Muslims tout court. Commenting on the issue of disclosure in an Ex-Muslim online forum discussion, he writes: 'I don't trust Muslims at all... Once the information leaks out, there's no telling where it will go. I do whatever I can to avoid getting into conversation with Muslims I know.'" (Cottee 2015, 83).

Often when Ex-Muslims disclose their apostasy, their intentions get misunderstood or questioned or it is treated like something they have to justify themselves for. So there is a lot of pressure as to how to explain themselves. They might even carefully think through and memorize all their arguments before disclosure. As Cottee describes, a big concern might be to make clear that they are abandoning Islam, not their family and that they are not simply doing it for a “freer lifestyle”.(Cottee 2015, 92/93).

Coming out as an apostate does not always have to be an active or deliberate choice. It might be the case that something they did has raised suspicion, which eventually led to them admitting to their apostasy. However, some Ex-Muslims consciously do something to raise such suspicion. One possibility is to criticize passages of the Quran or certain hadiths or linking terrorism to Islam. Another possibility to raise suspicion is to not follow religious obligations like fasting in Ramadan. But also the increased pressure to engage in religious activities might be a reason to come out during Ramadan.(Cottee 2015, 95-98).

The level of difficulty of disclosing depends very much on the recipient, as do the potential consequences. While opening up to non-Muslims is generally described as relatively easy and just mildly frustrating because most of them don’t fully understand the meaning of their apostasy nor do they care, disclosing to Muslims can have severe consequences for the apostate’s life. According to Cottee many parents and siblings react with shock “as though a terrible catastrophe had befallen the family.”(Cottee 2015, 99). However often family members react outright angry and condemn the apostate “She attacked my character, she attacked my personality and she attacked my living habits.” The condemnation might go as far as to accusing the apostate of trying to ruin the family or even being “as bad as a pedophile”.(Cottee 2015, 101/102). In some cases admitting to one’s apostasy even means losing family members as this quote exemplifies “She said at some point, ‘Well, you can leave the religion, but it would mean losing us’. And she said we’d only do family duties toward you(because in Islam the parent has to look after the children until they are independent). So she’s like, I will only do that because Islam says so. I don’t want anything to do with you, you’re not my daughter.” This can even go as far as allowing violence against the apostate, as one of Cottee’s interlocutors describes the situation. “If you decide to come out and tell everyone about it then I had better face the consequences, because the ruling on apostasy in shariah is death. If anyone decided to carry that out I won’t stop them.” But also actual violence and humiliation through family members is often the case as Cottee quotes another interview partner “Later that night when he came back from the mosque he called us all downstairs. Then he made me tell mum. He told me to say to her I’m a kafir. ‘Say you’re a

kafir.' So, I went to my mum, 'I'm a kafir'. And she burst out crying and went ballistic and then tried to beat me, and my dad stopped her. My sisters just set there, crying their eyes out. And my dad was crying and very angry. Then he sent us up to bed."(Cottee 2015, 102).

However, often family members blame themselves rather than the apostate as they feel like they failed in raising a good Muslim, they let their child too much freedom, where not strict enough or that they just did not prevent it from happening, did not talk to the apostate about their doubts etc. Often this applies not only to parents, but to siblings as well.

Frequently the apostasy of a family member causes shame and fear and some Muslims might fear that if it went public, it would ruin the family's reputation in the local Muslim community. This fear is often not unfounded. There are reports from Ex-Muslims about the extended family shaming their parents, accusing them of being bad parents and even refusing to socialize with them. The issue here is that they see it as the parent's failing rather than the apostate's own choice. Sometimes apostasy is treated like an contagious disease that might infect other family members. So the apostate is kept from other family members like somebody's children so they don't turn them into atheists. Some apostates are even put on the same level as pedophiles as the pedophile is "not only morally depraved, but also the moral and mortal enemy of children: a corrupter of innocence and purity."(Cottee 2015, 103/104). Other times the possibility of somebody in their right mind leaving Islam is simply denied. Very common tactics are to discredit the apostate and accuse them of ignorance, claim that they don't actually understand Islam, they are not intellectually capable of understanding it etc. Commonly the apostasy is not acknowledged as a choice but rather as a mental illness or due to demonic possession. So the apostasy is pathologized or framed as irrational or not the apostate's own choice. And even if the apostasy is seen as a choice, it is often attributed to "bad" reasons, like the apostate just wanting to sleep around or drink alcohol. Often family members will try to shame the apostate into returning to Islam which sometimes leads to them pretending to believe again at least for some time(Cottee 2015, 105-108).

However sometimes family members also are genuinely worried about the apostate's safety and wellbeing and therefore urge them not to tell any other members of the family or the Muslim community. Another concern of family members telling Ex-Muslims to not tell other people is that they might see the apostate as a bad person or think that they are leaving Islam, just so they can sleep around.

Of course there are also cases where the apostasy is simply accepted by a person's family. Some Ex-Muslims report that coming out as atheists has changed nothing between them and their family members. But many times not the whole family reacts the same way. Cottee

refers to one of his interlocutors who had to leave her home because of her parent's anger over her apostasy but shortly after got a message from her siblings saying "It's okay, you're still our big sister and we understand and we still love you." (Cottee 2015, 110).

Maria Vliek also quotes an interlocutor whose decision to no longer participate in Ramadan was completely accepted "So my mother[']s reaction was very striking. At the beginning of the Ramadan, the first one I didn't participate[...] I was home in the evening[...] So I said to my mother: 'I have decided, I won't fast'. Then she said: 'Yeah, It's your life, I completely understand'. The next day she was in the kitchen, and she was making breakfast for me!" (Vliek 2021, 137).

Disclosing to Muslim friends is generally experienced as easier than telling family members because while being painful, losing a friend is not the same as losing a family member. While friends usually react calmer than family members on hearing the news, they are not more supportive and often come up with the same accusations.

However having one's friends vilify or deny one's apostasy is not the only painful reaction, because sometimes alongside the anger friends will pity the apostate, saying that they will pray for them. While expecting the anger and rejection, the apostate might not be ready to be pitied.

However often apostates made the experience that their friends thought that they would return to Islam that their apostasy was just a phase and that they still believed deep down. But when they realize that this was not going to happen, they often abandon their apostate friends. At the beginning, friends might still be able to talk them out of their unbelief and that it is just a weird phase. However as they realize, that they can't talk the apostate out of it, they become aggressive and sometimes even threaten them. Despite some friends respond positively to hearing about their apostasy, generally speaking coming out as apostate weakened if not destroyed most of their friendships with Muslims (Cottee 2015, 111-113).

Many apostates end up trying to take back their disclosure and pretend they had returned to Islam. This can be due to external pressure but also because they feel guilty because they had hurt their family and wanted to undo the pain they caused.

This can cause purely emotional harm, but there can also be other consequences like parents being extra careful to not let the apostate's siblings take the same path. So the Ex-Muslim might feel guilty about sabotaging their siblings and limiting their opportunities. This can be a motivation to pretend that they returned to their faith, making their parents believe that they just did not know enough about Islam (Cottee 2015, 113-115).

So while many Ex-Muslims felt like they had to come out and experienced it as relief, they may still end up regretting it both for their own sake and for that of their loved ones.

That's why many apostates choose to hide their apostasy out of fear of rejection, disownment or hurting their family. Not wanting to hurt their loved ones is a big motive in if and how to disclose. But there also is a lot of pressure coming from the Muslim community to be religious and to hide it if you are not, as an openly atheist person would be considered shameful. So protecting your family from shame is also a reason for some to not come out. However apostates who come from a liberal family often don't disclose as it is simply not deemed necessary, since they can still live their lives the way they want and are not restricted through their religion. Some might still disclose but because they want to and not because of any necessity. Also in cases where somebody lives far away from their family, they might not feel the need to tell them, as it doesn't affect them (Cottee 2015, 120-126).

However, if Ex-Muslims hide their apostasy out of a necessity, they often adopt a public persona like the "lazy Muslim", the "liberal Muslim" or the "confused Muslim" in order to pretend that they still believe in Islam despite maybe not following all Islamic duties like praying or fasting, or wearing Western clothes and leading a Western lifestyle. Pretending to just be too lazy to carry out all the religious duties can be a save way to not be bothered too much by the religion without being open about one's atheism, as being a bad Muslim is generally tolerated more than being an unbeliever. So one way to avoid coming out as an atheist is to just act like you are a non-practicing Muslims. So while parents might still be dissatisfied about it, they will tolerate it, while they couldn't handle their child being not a Muslim anymore.

Another strategy would be to present oneself as a liberal Muslim and openly expressing liberal views and even questioning some elements of Islam, live a liberal lifestyle while at the same time not denouncing Islam itself. However this strategy is slightly more risky and might eventually come out, as people may become suspicious. It is also possible to take back the disclosure by claiming that one had just been confused about it. However in some cases it is necessary to actually pretend to be a pious Muslim and follow all the religious duties in order to be accepted by one's social circle "I think by then my mum kind of believed that I'd completely gone back to being a Muslim. And I was really playing the part now. Whenever something would come up I'd always defend Islam. (...) And I make sure that every time I go to see my cousins here I have the hijab on, everything. My university ID card has a photo of me with my hijab on and my Oyster card, too-in case my mum checks. I just make sure that there are no holes in my story."

There are other strategies of course too, like disguising one's criticism of Islam as "jokes" and thereby using humor to hide what one really feels (Cotte 2015, 129/130). However staying in the closet often means living a lie and pretending to be somebody you are not.

Since coming out as apostate might have severe consequences, Ex-Muslims who decide to stay in the closet (at least for a while or to some people) develop strategies to hide their unbelief and explain suspicious behavior. The lack of interest in Islamic practices might be explained through various excuses. For example illnesses like diabetes can be used as an excuse for not fasting during Ramadan. Women might also claim to be on their period. Also breaking Islamic rules like eating haram food might be explained away "I think I blagged it, luckily. I said that I had heard so much about this place and I really wanted to try it and I gave in. Then I went on to say that everyone sins. I told him that not eating haram and not drinking are not the only 2 points of being a Muslim and there are much worse sins.

So, somehow, I managed to give him an Islamic lecture while eating a haram lamb and rosemary pie!" The strategy is to let people think instead of you being not a Muslim, that you are just prone to weakness like everybody else (Cotte 2015, 131/132).

Of course there are different degrees to which one might use this strategy. If you live far from home it is possible to simply lie about your whole lifestyle rather than just make excuses for some small "failures". However another way to avoid being exposed as an apostate is to retreat from one's social circle. By keeping relationships distant and withdrawing from existing relationships, one can protect the secret. However this does not always have to be a deliberate choice, as not identifying as Muslim anymore can alienate one from Muslim friends if the friendship had been primarily based on a shared Muslim identity. However by avoiding close contact to Muslim family members and friends, one doesn't have to constantly lie to them or risk their condemnation. But also making new friends within the Muslim community can be difficult. (Cotte 2015, 134/135).

Also talking about one's experience as Ex-Muslim in general can be hard, for the above mentioned reasons but also out of fear of being called Islamophobic or accused of bigotry, as the Twitter- user maddycore(zakra's wifuu) wrote "brother/sister in islam you need to understand that an ex muslim sharing their incident online or trauma dumping online isn't islamophobia, all we do is tell our side of the story to people so that people can know abt how we were treated. how does that make anyone islamophobic??" Also the user CEOmeeting shared a meme saying "If Muslims would actually listen to the religious trauma of "ex-Muslims" instead of immediately writing them off as islamophobic, than maybe the Ummah wouldn't be so insufferable".

While in the study that Cottee conducted, non of the mostly Canadian and English Ex-Muslims had to fear actual physical harm, many apostates who come from Muslim majority countries do. In interviews as well as informal conversations, several of my interlocutors have mentioned avoiding close contact to Muslims often for safety-concerns. One particularly said that his father in law threatened him after finding out about his atheism, which led to him leaving his country. He also said that he still got messages by family members and to the question of what kind of messages they send him, he stated “Yeah something like ‘are you stupid’ and ‘I’ll make you dead’”. Another interviewee also spoke about receiving threats from pious Muslims “Yes, I’m afraid so far, sure, sure Austria I’m a bit afraid. Because I have seen many Muslim people here or these people always believe differently. Because in my home country, I’ve seen for example(...) I know an Afghan I believe. These people told me for example, yes, he know for example I am atheist. He told me, if you are, you come to Afghanistan or other country, I will make you dead. Yes. And I was really scared.” Also as another interlocutor told me, leaving behind one’s family at home does not always mean they are safe from them “From my point of view, it’s really difficult for the atheists, like the ex-Muslims, because they have relatives and family somewhere in Muslim countries. And most of those who know this, these Afghans and foreign people, are very well connected. And it can happen that someone tells someone and then the families of these people know. And then that person will get into trouble. And for many it’s very difficult to show and say this in public.”

So being seen as an apostate can not only lead to one being rejected or condemned by friends and family members but also lead to actual safety concerns as many Ex-Muslims especially those who are of public interest receive violent threats on a regular basis. Ayaan Hirsi Ali describes the situation after criticizing Islam on television and in the Media(despite at that time not having explicitly disavowed it) “Mein Vater erzählte Karin, dass er immer wieder Morddrohungen gegen mich erhalte. Somalis riefen aus Italien, Skandinavien und Holland bei ihm an und warnten ihn: “Hirsi, wenn du deine Tochter nicht in den Griff bekommst, wird sie umgebracht.”

Karin erzählte mir zunächst nichts von diesem Gespräch. Als sie es mir dann doch sagte, nahm ich es nicht ernst. Wer würde sich schon die Mühe machen, mich umzubringen? (...)Nach meiner Meinung gefragt, erklärte ich, der Islam sei wie ein geistiger Käfig. Wenn man die Tür eines Vogelkäfigs öffnet, bleibt der Vögel zunächst darin sitzen, weil er sich fürchtet und seine Gefangenschaft verinnerlicht hat. Auch bei geöffneter Käfigtür braucht der Vogel daher eine Weile, bis er wegfliegt.

Eine Woche nach Ausstrahlung der Sendung klingelte bei mir das Telefon. Es war mein Vater. "Was um Himmels Willen ist los?", fragte er mich. "Bei mir läuft das Telefon heiß. Innerhalb einer Woche haben mich zwanzig Leute angerufen. Was höre ich da über dich? Was hast du über den Islam gesagt?" (Hirsi Ali 2006, 401/402). Despite Ayaan Hirsi Ali was a vocal critic of Islam and receiving death threats for it, she did not feel ready to come out as an unbeliever. As she said at that time she did not feel ready to come out as an apostate, because for many Muslims, there is nothing worse than that. They even believe that apostates deserve death. This is seen as even worse when a woman does it, as than it comes from the lowest and least pore part of society. (Hirsi Ali 2006, 405). Despite she had not herself confessed to being an apostate at that time, it was obvious to some Muslims. She describes how during a Talkshow, several men would shout at her and calling her a liar, claiming, that she is not a Muslim. After said Talkshow she was told to not leave alone, as it was not save. (Hirsi Ali 2006, 405/406). In this case it weren't all just empty threats as Ayaan describes one incident that was likely an attempted attack against her "Wir hatten gerade mit der Vorspeise begonnen, als plötzlich die beiden Bodyguards auftauchten, mich zwischen sich nahmen und wegführten. "Wir gehen", sagten sie. Ich hatte kaum Zeit, meine Gabel hinzulegen. Sie brachten mich durch den Hinterausgang nach draußen. Ich konnte nichts Bedrohliches entdecken. Doch als wir im Auto davonrasten, erzählten mir die beiden, daß nach und nach mehrere mit nordafrikanisch aussehenden Männern besetzten Autos vorbeigefahren seien. Auf dem Parkplatz stiegen die Mitfahrer jeweils aus, und die Fahrer holten weitere nach. Einer hatte mich vermutlich in das Hotel gehen sehen und seine Freunde über Handy verständigt. Die Leibwächter sagten, sie seien nicht darauf eingerichtet, es mit so vielen Leuten aufzunehmen. Mir war nichts aufgefallen, doch nun hatte ich Angst." (Hirsi Ali 2006, 411). Ayaan Hirsi Ali is not the only Ex-Muslim who receives violent threats and is in constant danger. The German Ex-Muslim Ali Utlu has also reported being threatened with violence. In a 2017 interview with heise online, he tells about his experience "Ich bekomme in der Woche Dutzende Morddrohungen, viele davon sind so konkret, dass sie direkt an den Staatsschutz gehen. Zum Teil kommen die Drohungen mit Klarnamen. Manchmal stellte sich heraus, dass dies junge Deutschtürken waren, die dachten, das wäre ein Spaß. Viele andere kommen aber von rechtsradikalen Grauen Wölfen (türkische "Nazis") und Islamisten - und da wird es sehr ernst.(...) In meinem Briefkasten fanden sich schon ein abgetrenntes Schweineohr - mit der Nachricht, ich würde der Nächste sein, und ein Salafistenkoran mit konkreten Mordaufruf gegen mich als Ex-Muslim und homosexueller Islamkritiker.

So zeigte man, dass man weiß, wo ich wohne. Dadurch hatte ich monatelang Angst, meine Wohnung ohne Begleitung zu verlassen. Ich mied die Kölner Innenstadt, weil ich Angst hatte, man könnte mich erkennen. Dadurch war ich in ständiger Panik. Das schlug sich auch auf meiner Psyche nieder, so sehr, dass ich nicht mehr arbeiten konnte. Das ging so weit, dass mich mein Arzt als arbeitsunfähig einstuft und ich heute "Rentner" bin. Aber ich werde mich nicht mundtot machen lassen - auch wenn ich jetzt schon einen hohen Preis dafür zahle." (Mühlbauer 2017) So being an apostate from Islam can leave you in constant danger especially but not only if you are publicly visible. Online activists too who are not publicly known sometimes fear for their safety because of it and take measurements to protect themselves as one of my interlocutors explained "...now I have YouTube channel and so on. People already know a lot about me, although I've blocked a lot of them, I try to stay safe, you know(...). But that's never, never 100 per cent sure if, no matter where you are, yeah."

One of my interlocutors has actually reported having been physically attacked by radical Muslims "And they attacked me. Two of them they beat me. But not... not in hard way but they pushed me to the wall or something like that, very aggressive way, you are not a human or it's become..., they do not like you, they are not comfortable with you. So anything happens, small things, for example if you are working in a place and I don't know if I put my glass here in your place it will not be nicely to ask me, it will be something aggressive. There is a big part they perceive us as non-human. I'm lucky that I'm in shelter, asylum seeker which they are... have fear, that they don't want to do something that will affect their case. So they have fear. But if I was with a group, they don't have this fear, they will do more than that."

There are also attempts to vilify Ex-Muslims, as the Twitter- user Antitheist, Esq tells "Last night I was in a Muslim space titled "The Ex Muslim Agenda". I listened as British Muslims went off about how ex Muslims are kuffar & should be killed & not tolerated. I requested to speak & asked if we could progress towards amicable dialogue. They kicked me out." It is generally a frequent allegation on social media that Ex-Muslims have an agenda or are an organized group to destroy Islam, as another Twitter- user named Burhan S claims "Did you notice how there are twitter accounts like these atheists and ex Muslim ones specifically spewing hate against Islam but you won't find such accounts which are against other religions. I'm just trying to point out facts that these people have An agenda to bring Islam down".

The risk is generally bigger, when you are in a majority-Muslim country regardless of whether or not being atheist is seen as a crime in said country, as there are also individuals

that see it as their religious duty to fight apostasy. One interlocutor explains the situation in Bangladesh where there have been several violent attacks against atheist bloggers “But it's not a risk in Bangladesh if someone says they don't believe, that's not a problem. Problem is when someone speaks directly and says about religion, you know. You don't believe anything, whatever, you don't believe anything, whatever. But if you don't believe and then talk about it, say prepared or write, then you have more risk than someone, but it knows it, people are worse. Risk is, there is from, there is (...) law and also there is someone who read or heard such hadith and this talk says that if someone does something like that, writes something like that about prophet or religion, then if you killed them then you go straight to paradise. And there are such stupid people too, many too. And you can't guess who they were or who or where it can happen. You don't need al-Qaeda or anything like that to do something like that.” But also in Islamic countries apostasy is often systematically fought not just through legal restrictions. In Egypt for example atheism is framed as a threat by the official media. The atheist position is thereby often deliberately misrepresented, atheist guests are interrupted and often prevented from actually participating in the discussion. It is believed that atheism is a danger to society. A campaign that Al-Azhar started together with the Ministry of Youth seeks to combat atheism but at the same time aims to get in dialogue with atheists to give them a chance to come back to Islam. The need for this campaign is explained through the fear that atheism will “spread like an epidemic”(Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 307-309).

It is controversial however whether you should give atheists any platform at all. The Mewher channel for example got a comment from a viewer saying “Let's not grant very precious time on air to certain groups to broadcast deformed ideas that eventually deform an entire generation.” According to Van Nieuwkerk most Egyptian broadcasters are ambivalent on how to deal with this issue. An example that illustrates this is that of Sheikh Salim who was with an atheist in a TV program, where he called him “brother” and “friend”. However later he apologized for even being there with him “because my presence with him gave him value he does not deserve.” So if Egyptian channels do broadcast atheists they are very concerned about the “danger” they might unleash. So they try to create a certain image about atheists(Nieuwkerk 2018, 315).

First, they are framed as deviant and abnormal. They sometimes try to explain the atheist's “deviance” through their family background. There even is a case, where the mother of an atheist was called during the program, in order to express her distress over her son's disbelief. Atheists are also portrayed as marginalized and deprived youth, rather than a group that is present among all classes. So the media tries to “contain this “danger” by showing that

atheists are exceptional, deviant, abnormal, and belong to a marginal group in society. In fact, many atheists, after being exposed as such, are ostracized and become outcasts.”.

Another strategy is to present atheists as a secret society that has imported their ideas from the outside and is probably even paid from “outside”. For example, Sheikh Salim who wanted to bring atheist Ahmad Harqan back to Islam and “restore his sanity” but after failing noted that “Rather he wanted to propagate an idea that is imposed on him. He is paid to propagate such an idea.” There are also links drawn to communism to show the foreign and dangerous nature of that idea. Despite many atheist try to stand up against the defamation, many who become publicly known as atheist leave abroad (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 315/316).

Atheism is also heavily pathologized and portrayed as a mental illness or disease. Often psychologists and psychiatrist are invited on TV programs to comment on atheism. Atheists are accused of having obsessive compulsive disorder or being mentally unstable and therefore adopt defective ideas. They are also said to have an identity crises or personality problem. According to a “specialist in the psychology of atheists” who “The Mistr 25” invited, this leads to atheism because “Then, this atheist does not discuss an idea, but discusses his existence.... So, instead of fixing it from the inside, they try to fix it by adopting other ideas to achieve such peace of mind.” However atheists are not just framed as unstable but also accused of attention seeking. Often they are sent to either a psychiatrist or a sheikh (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 316).

Apostates are also portrayed as illguided and “exposed to the wrong ideas about Islam”. So they need to be provided with the correct ideas about Islam to bring them back to the right path. However, generally atheism is met with repression, denial and silencing. Since “God knows best” you should not doubt or question him, as doubts come from the devil.

On TV shows, religious scholars, religious authorities, and parents warn against not dealing properly with doubts. While some preachers find that there must be a place for questions, it usually does not go very far as at least some questions come from the devil.

Atheism is also portrayed as illogical. The idea behind it is that human beings are born with the innate disposition to submit to God and that God’s existence is the logic that is accepted for all times in all societies. There is the idea of a natural state of religiosity and that God created both religion and science so they cannot contradict each other. Atheists are therefore accused of not having scientific evidence (Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 316/317).

And finally atheists are portrayed as immoral. So on TV they are frequently questioned about their moral ideas and actions. For example when the atheist who’s mother was invited to talk about the distress her son’s nonbelieve caused her, expressed concerns about her, he was

asked why he did that because “Taking care of your parents is something religion calls for.” Other times atheists are asked, if they now sleep with their mothers and sisters, as atheists are seen as being driven by lust, which according to this narrative is the reason they rejected religion. A common idea is that there are no morals outside of religion so atheists must be immoral. Dr. Bakr Zaki Awad puts it like this “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. They don’t watch what they do or say, whether in public or private. His God becomes his mind. 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 interests whatever way possible.”(Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 318).

There is a very specific case for Ex-Muslims in Palestine as one of my interlocutors explains, that when you leave Islam, you are said to be siding with Israel, which takes the accusation of being a “traitor” to another level “Somehow to be Ex-Muslim and also something it is different in Palestine from other countries. To be an atheist or to be an Ex-Muslim... To be Muslim or non-Muslim is also about the conflict in Middle East the conflict in Israel and Palestine. So for them it’s conflict between Jewish and Muslim and to be non-Muslim is something... you are on the other side. You go to the other side. So for them they cannot understand to be atheist that means you are depositing them both the Muslim and the Jewish. But for them no, you go out from our side and you become to other side. So it’s so dangerous to clear your believes. And that’s what makes it more complicated. Especially when they are talking about the Palestinian according to Islam opened this land how they like to say it before 1400 years they came so it’s our land according to Islamic, religious rights. So when you are non-Muslim that means you are throwing your rights to this land. Also you became a soldier for your enemies. And that was, the normal people on the street, my uncles, the people they cannot understand... they will treat you as a traitor. it’s to be a traitor.”

3.3. Emotional consequences

As mentioned before, apostasy does not happen over night but rather is the outcome of a long process of intense reflection of oneself and the world. After all it is not easy to let go of something that has been a central element of your life ever since and that you found meaning

in. Ali A. Rizvi describes how despite having intense doubts, he did not feel ready to leave Islam for a long time “Despite all this, I still wanted to try and give religion another chance. I was reluctant to completely let go of my personal God, and at this point, didn’t feel the need to. Part of it was fear, but more than that, I simply couldn’t wrap my head around the idea that billions of people around the world-including my parents, teachers, and even esteemed scientists like Newton-could be wrong.”(Rizvi 2016, 107).

However, to many Ex-Muslims the doubting process is very painful. Often the doubts would hound them, intrusively come up and not let go of them, as Cottee states the apostate-to-be might try to fight these doubts, thinking it was the devil whispering in their ear. So many apostates used to suppress their doubts when they came up. A failure to do so is frequently followed by guilt, because a “good Muslim” doesn’t doubt(Cottee 2015, 42).

But also the fear of going to hell is often constantly present during the doubting phase. Cottee explains that for many of his respondents, the idea of paradise was too abstract to really imagine it, were else the idea of hell was rather concrete and vivid. This he attributes partly to the fact that in the Quran the description of hell was much more plastic and detailed than that of heaven. So hell even before one starts actively doubting might evoke fear since the Quran is very explicit about it “We shall send those who reject Our revelations to the Fire. When their skins have been burned away, We shall replace them with new ones so that they may continue to feel the pain: God is mighty and wise.” In another quote it says “Garments of fire will be tailored for those who disbelieve; scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins; there will be iron crooks to restrain them; whenever, in their anguish, they try to escape, they will be pushed back and told, ‘Taste the suffering of the Fire.’”

But not only is the doubting process accompanied by the fear of eternal torture, but also negative experiences in the here and now might be seen as a punishment for one’s doubt as Cottee quotes one of his interlocutors “I spent a lot of my teenage years unhappy because of the way things were at school. I didn’t understand why I was being bullied. I hadn’t done anything wrong. I wasn’t a horrible person. And then I actually remember, I think I was about fourteen or fifteen, I got quite scared and thought that God was punishing me because I was questioning the religion.”(Cottee 2015, 43).

Another source of anxiety for many apostates-to-be is the fear of social ridicule or censure. This is especially present when one witnesses other people experiencing this for having doubts. But ridicule and nasty comments behind one’s back are not the worst things that some apostates-to-be would fear when discussing their doubts. Also the possibility of people

thinking of them as “possessed” might cause fear especially when they have heard of violence against those who are thought of as possessed, like the practice of “beating the ghost out of them”. So many times when experiencing doubts they can’t talk about it, as doubting God is often demonized. Often people are taught not to question. So when they experience doubts, they cannot share them with anyone, as they fear people’s reaction. This is particularly the case when they have already heard people close to them make negative comments about non-believers or even condone violence against them.(Cottee 2015, 44).

According to Cottee, in his study there was only one respondent who contradicted this picture “I can’t remember anyone telling me not to ask questions or that something was true ‘just because’. This includes my parents who were pretty open-minded and discussed things with me in a mature way.” However this respondent kept his doubts a secret from his extended family and when he disclosed to his uncle who he had previously admired for his liberal mindset, he was the one who took it the worst.(Cottee 2015, 45).

But of course there are also apostates whose family was accepting and tolerated or even encouraged them to question things. Ali A. Rizvi who grew up in a very liberal family writes “My parents, both professors educated in the United States and Canada, always encouraged my siblings and me to engage in critical thinking.(...) While they were believers themselves, my parents were much more open to our questions doubting elements of the faith they were raising us with. Around the dinner table, we bounced ideas around and debated them, with all of us getting a chance to chime in, regardless of age. My parents didn’t agree with us on everything, and at times even disagreed angrily-but we knew this would never translate to violence, disownment, or abandonment.”(Rizvi 2016, 104/105).

However for many Ex-Muslims this is not the case. A lot of them experienced the doubting process as very distressing not just because it meant questioning their entire worldview but also because of external repressions they had to fear.

Because the doubts were so stressful, some sought clarity in online discussion fora, where they could be more open while using the anonymity of the internet. But even here, they often tried to avoid condemnation or being seen as a bad Muslim or even an atheist. One strategy is to express one’s doubts in the form of questions and be very careful in how to express these questions “I wouldn’t say, ‘Why did God say that?’ Because this is blasphemy. You can’t question God. So instead, I’d say, ‘What is the wisdom?’ That’s the way you’re supposed to phrase it.(...) You have to pretend that you want to know what God meant by this, because God knows all.” Another way to avoid suspicion is to express one’s doubts through the voice of others like saying “my uncle said...” or the like(Cottee 2015, 46).

So doubting is often a very hard and stressful process especially because in many cases one has to go through it alone. If they seek answers, this would often not make their doubts go away but rather intensify them. Many times the apostates did not get satisfying answers but rather were met with condemnation or just silence. But often they were also told to “stop questioning” and “just trust in Allah”. This happens in online discussions as well as when talking to family members or friends. Often the apostates experienced little to no support and understanding during their doubting phase and as Cottee says “Even the closest and most trusted people can respond to doubts in the coldest and most dismissive way.”(Cottee 2015, 47/48).

But many of his respondents have also reported dissatisfaction over the “evasive”, “weak” or even “nonsensical” answers. They “either danced around the question or just said “Allah knows best” or “God works in mysterious ways.”” Sometimes they would also just say that you were not supposed to question God. This often happened at a time when the now Ex-Muslims still wanted to believe in God and be good Muslims “When I started doubting it properly I never in a million years thought I was going to leave Islam. I thought I was going to have all my questions answered and be proven wrong. Yes, I thought it was going to strengthen my faith actually, but it completely went the other way.”(Cottee 2015, 49/50).

However during the doubting process, the primary conflict is with oneself; between two sides of oneself which Cottee refers to as the haram and the halal voice. Here the haram voice is “the voice of doubt, whereas the *halal* voice is the voice of Islamic rectitude.” Over time the haram voice usually gets louder and more intrusive, as Cottee describes “In the initial stages of the doubting process, the haram voice resembles a kind of murmur: faint, but loud enough to merit examination. Later on, after probing exacerbates existing doubts or reveals new ones, the haram voice is emboldened and becomes more insistent and unruly: it is now radicalized.” So this phase is characterized by a lot of internal conflict as “The louder the haram voice, the more punitive and threatening the halal voice becomes, vigilantly warning against the shame and danger of disbelief. The confusion for the would-be-apostate lies in not knowing which voice to listen to and to credit.

Because of this fundamental uncertainty, the would-be-apostate goes schizoid: skeptic the one minute, believer the next. Thus begins a torturous and self-perpetuating cycle of doubt and believe.”(Cottee 2015, 52).

The doubts in their belief often leads to doubt in themselves too, as they often come to think that there is something wrong with them because at that time many still want to believe in God. Often they really wanted to be good Muslims even long into the doubting process.

Sometimes the mind is already seriously questioning the religion but on an emotional level they are still deeply connected to their Muslim identity. However, the intensity and duration of the doubting phase varies. But generally it is experienced as more difficult, the more pious one has previously been, since for those who have always been moderate believers, the psychological investment in Islam was smaller. For some the doubts would almost consume their whole thinking(Cottee 2015, 53/54).

There comes a point however where the apostate-to-be comes to the conclusion that their current state is untenable and that they have to make a decision. This decision concerns both their belief and their identity. At this stage of the doubting process, the doubts are now openly confronted. This phase that Cottee refers to as deliberation phase can be divided into what he calls macro deliberation, which addresses the question of whether Islam is true, focusing on the outside world and the micro deliberation, which is directed inwards and is concerned with whether Islam is true for oneself. This decision to resolve the internal conflict once and for all is often caused by an event that makes the would-be-apostate see the magnitude of their doubts. As Cottee writes, for one of his interlocutors it was the experience of being given the opportunity to go to Mekka, but when there realizing that she didn't really feel anything about it, while everybody around her was crying or in deep prayer, she was just thinking of all the freedoms other people had. But also other important events like the prospect of an arranged marriage may be the catalyst for the deliberation, since being married to a pious Muslim would make it harder to leave Islam and possibly force one to live in the closet. But also a relationship or the prospect of such with a non-Muslim can intensify doubts and force the apostate-to-be to openly confront them (Cottee 2015, 55-57).

In the deliberation phase the would-be-apostate now looks at Islam more critically and specifically studies sources that are not pro-Islam that they would previously have avoided or dismissed. They also start reading the Quran more critically and deliberately seek out both sides of the argument. Often they still want to believe but also have clarity. But generally at that time they still fear leaving Islam. It is also important to have given Islam a real chance before finally leaving it. So when they looked at the arguments on both sides, they found that those supporting Islam were weak(Cottee 2015, 57/58).

But many times when they looked into themselves they also found that they did not really identify with Islam anymore. It may not be in line with their personal morals or they may feel uncomfortable following its rules. So leaving Islam may be seen as a necessary step to being true to oneself(Cottee 2015, 62).

But when, usually after a long doubting process they conclude that Islam is neither true to the world nor to their sense of self, it often is a very defining moment that they remember in much details. It may happen after thinking about it for the whole day or when they realized that they no longer felt guilty for doing things that were considered sins. Directly after leaving Islam they often feel a lot of conflicting emotions. Immediately after disavowing Islam, a lot of apostates felt strong relief. The war with themselves that they had for months if not years is now finally over. They were no longer stuck in between. They often still did not know what exactly they were or what they believed in, but they knew what they were not and what they did not believe in; they were not Muslims and they did not believe in Islam. They now no longer had to feel guilty about not following religious rules but also they no longer had to constantly question themselves(Cottee 2015, 66). Ayaan Hirsi Ali says about the moment after her final decision “Und ich fühlte mich erleichtert.

Es war ein gutes Gefühl. Ich quälte mich nicht mehr, spürte nur eindeutige Klarheit. Der lange Prozess, bei dem ich die Fehler in meinem Glaubenssystem erkannt und vorsichtig um die ausgefransten Stellen herumgeschlichen war, an denen ich schon Teile herausgerissen hatte, immer wieder ein Stück; das alles war vorbei. Die Engel, die auf meiner Schulter saßen und mich beobachteten, die Anspannung, daß ich Sex hatte, ohne verheiratet zu sein, Alkohol trank und meinen religiösen Pflichten nicht nachkam-das alles war weg. Die allgegenwärtige Aussicht, später in die Hölle zu kommen, war verschwunden, und plötzlich wirkte mein Horizont viel weiter(Hirsi Ali 2006, 395).

It is also common to feel very excited shortly after the apostasy, because now they can do all the things that were previously forbidden to them and reinvent themselves. This applies to both small every day activities as well as major life choices. This can already be caused by simply knowing that one could do all the things that one could never do before, without actually doing them. But the excitement can also result from new ways of thinking. Because when you are raised religiously things tend to be certain. So abandoning the religion might be exciting as there are suddenly things to discover and make up your own mind about.(Cottee 2015, 67).

However, there are also a lot of negative emotions that follow the apostasy. One of these feelings is guilt, as Cottee explains “Some respondents reported feeling guilty about renouncing Islam: not because they thought they had done anything wrong, but because they felt that they had violated their family’s wishes.” There is also a lot of shame even if they are convinced that they did the right thing. Having disappointed family members can cause great guilt even if one doesn’t think that one has actually done something wrong.(Cottee 2015, 68).

Also many apostates felt angry after they left Islam. That anger was not only directed at Islam but often also at oneself. The source of this anger is the awareness of the lost time and that they didn't disavow sooner. Realizing how much time one has spent trying to be a good Muslim can be a source of great anger at oneself. While some just expressed general regrets about the time they had lost, others were very specific about what opportunities they did not take like rejecting potential partners who they were not supposed to be with according to their religion.

However, sometimes the anger is directed directly towards Islam, so much that the apostate may feel the need to publicly denounce it on the internet, speaking out about all the negative experiences they had with it, or just generally bashing Islam like one comment on the FFI website "Ali Sina is right, there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim, only an ignorant Muslim and a terrorist one". But also family members might be subjected to that anger as they were the ones who raised them with Islamic belief. This can go as far as calling them in the middle of the night, angrily confronting them with every negative aspect of Islam or bad deed of Mohammed. Also not understanding how others can still follow Islam in spite of all of this might further fuel that anger. So after leaving Islam there often is a lot of anger directed at Islam as well as Muslims, as one of Cottees interlocutors said. "I was self hating, I was resentful, I was angry, I hated Muslims."

Anyhow, after a while that anger begins to fade away and frequently people are eventually ashamed of their tone and distance themselves. The shame about their tone might also be due to the fact that they still feel connected to their Muslim family members. However the anger can also be expressed in a more nuanced way (Cottee 2015, 68-70).

Another emotion that comes up after leaving the faith is that of residual anxiety. Sometimes the "halal voice" comes back telling the apostate things along the line of "what if you are actually wrong", even though they did not believe it on an intellectual level anymore. Here a possible reaction is to give God an ultimatum "I thought, okay, I'm going to give God a week to convince me that he exists. I knew deep down that nothing was going to happen but I still gave him an ultimatum." This can also include disrespecting God to test what happens. However, when nothing happens, the apostate eventually feels better. This disrespecting God to see what happens can include doing things that would themselves be seen as highly offensive acts by many Muslims, like destroying the Quran.

However what stays with a lot of apostates is the anxiety of what if they were actually wrong in the end, what if the devil had just misled them and they will eventually end up in hell. Although they don't believe it on a rational level, a latent feeling of anxiety might still be

there way after leaving the faith. This fear can continue even years after leaving Islam. (Cottee 2015, 70/71).

And finally a lot of apostates go through a phase of confusion and feeling lost, as leaving Islam has left a void that they don't know what to fill with. Because while they are now certain about what they don't believe in (Islam) and what they are not (Muslims) they often don't immediately know what they do believe in and what they are and what to build their new identity on. Also not having a purpose anymore can cause great emotional stress. This loss of purpose and identity might even lead to depression as everything eventually feels pointless.

Apostasy can also be followed by uncertainty as the apostate previously had a script that told them how to live their life and what to strive for and this is now gone. Also the realization of death as final can be hard to deal with. This can be especially bad combined with the realization of how much time they have already wasted. (Cottee 2015, 71-73).

But not just the apostasy and having to rebuild one's entire worldview can be emotionally damaging to Ex-Muslims but also the (potential) reactions of their surrounding. Many therefore choose not to disclose their apostasy. However this basically means living a lie and sometimes building one's entire life on something one no longer believes in. This can lead to loneliness and frustration. This is especially the case when the people around the apostate are predominantly Muslims and very pious. The apostate might feel "suffocated" or "oppressed" by the expectation of piety, especially as they can never openly express their emotions and thoughts. The source of frustration may be the constant need to pretend to be something one is not, like following Islamic rituals even if one does not believe. For example having to pray or fast in Ramadan or recite the Quran can be very hard.

But also to have to hide the breaking of Islamic rules like drinking alcohol or eating non-halal food and constantly having to worry when doing haram things or not being able to do them at all and being forced to simply accept this fact, can be very frustrating. So while after leaving the faith many felt regret over the lost time, the lost opportunities, ect. when concealing their apostasy this regret is mostly concerning the future; the time that they will lose, that they are forced to renounce joys and opportunities and possibly the feeling of wasting the best years of their lives. This is generally even worse for women as they have even less freedoms and possibilities to engage in un-Islamic behavior. They might be constantly watched over and controlled by their parents and family members. It can also be hard, as people both within and outside the Muslim community tend to assume that you are Muslim, especially when you wear Islamic clothes such as the hijab. This can go as far as people assuming that one is in

favor of Islamic theocracies like Iran. This constantly hiding an essential part of oneself and having to pretend to be something one is not can lead Ex-Muslims to move away from their family to have more freedom. Living in the closet also comes with constant anxiety that somebody might find out, somebody might see them doing things that they are not allowed to. Another emotion that is frequent in closeted apostates is shame; shame because hiding their true thoughts and feelings makes them feel weak and cowardly. Pretending to pray can also feel ridiculous to them. Having to do things that one actually rejects like wearing the hijab can also feel humiliating. Also still promoting the religion that one rejects and wearing the scarf despite completely disagreeing with what it stands for can be damaging mentally. But also constantly lying to your loved ones can cause feelings of shame even if you do it to avoid hurting them (Cottee 2015, 147-149).

But above all, being a closeted apostate means dealing with a lot of loneliness. Even if they are around their loved ones they often feel estranged and emotionally alienated. They find it hard to relate to Muslims as they no longer identify as such and have been through things that those who have not renounced their faith could not understand. They might also find that they don't have a lot to talk about with their Muslim friends anymore as the one thing they have in common, their Islamic belief is not there anymore.

Often they also perceive it as though Muslims cannot relate to them anymore and that they would condemn or reject them if they found out their apostasy. Therefore contact with Muslims is often avoided. In conversations with Muslims they might be very careful with what they say. There always is a central part of themselves that they cannot express. Being forced to constantly hide who you really are can be very damaging to many apostates and eventually lead to self-isolation.

The pressure to keep one's apostasy hidden can be even stronger, when one has already experienced rejection for it before. Avoiding contact with loved ones is a way to not have to openly lie to them which can also be hard and damaging. But both lying to and distancing oneself from family and friends can damage the relationship in a long run.

Many closeted Ex-Muslims also fear close and meaningful relationships with non-Muslims, as they might make their family members suspicious. So they deliberately avoid getting too close to non-Muslims. So in romantic relationships with non-Muslims they might be reluctant to taking the next step like moving in with that person because that would mean coming out to their parents (Cottee 2015, 149-152).

So being a closeted Ex-Muslim like living in the closet in general causes deep psychological damage because they constantly have to lie to others including those they are the closest with

and pretend to be something they are not. Therefore they have to watch what they say and do around others all the time and live with the constant risk of being exposed. That's why they need to constantly betray both the trust of their family members and themselves. It is hardly possible to move on in their lives or develop meaningful relationships as long as they remain in the closet. But also the existing relationships get damaged from it. As staying in the closet makes it necessary to both lie and keep distance from others, it created both distrust and and resentment(Cottee 2015, 152/153).

But however painful staying in the closet is, coming out of it to many Ex-Muslims is a hard decision that in its consequences can be equally painful. Cottee quotes some of his interlocutors saying "There is no compulsion in religion. Tell that to my parents." or "If you're going to come out to others, do not be under any illusion:it won't be easy. People can be assholes." Many also compare coming out as apostate to telling your parents that you are gay. So the decision to come out is a very sensitive one that needs a lot of consideration. As mentioned above the choice to come out or not to come out is often experienced as a choice between two competing evils; to either keep living a lie or to disappoint and potentially loose one's family. As Michael Ignatieff states "We are doomed to choose and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. The world we encounter in ordinary experience is one on which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate and claims equally absolute, the realization of some which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others..." For Ex-Muslims often either way they choose comes with emotional pain. Cottee claims that all of his respondents struggled or are struggling with this dilemma. Cottee states that all his respondents felt the desire to disclose their apostasy "They all felt it, this urge, but most didn't act on it, not straight away and almost always not fully, exercising caution on the matter of whom to trust with their decision."(Cottee 2015, 80/81).

However, Cottee also emphasises that for many of his respondents, the disclosure didn't actually feel like a choice. Not being honest simply felt impossible to them. Not telling it to anyone would make them loose their minds(Cottee 2015, 83). However the desire to come out does not always have to do with their personal life but can also be meant to support other Ex-Muslims; to show them that leaving Islam is possible and that they are not alone(Cottee 2015, 84/85).

Disclosing one's apostasy is always accompanied with the anxiety of how family members and friends would react. However if Ex-Muslims eventually make the choice to disclose to their loved ones, they often end up regretting it, sometimes so much that they try to take it back and pretend to believe again. This does not always have to be for pragmatic reasons but

rather for emotional ones, as they see the hurt and distress in their family members. This makes them want to undo the pain they have caused. However some also state to being emotionally blackmailed into taking back what they said about Islam and their apostasy(Cottee 2015, 114).

So at first coming out as an apostate feels liberating even if it went bad because they have been struggling with this decision for months if not years and finally have clarity. They don't have to live a lie any longer. However this is often followed by regret and sorrow over the pain they've caused their families(Cottee 2015, 115/116).

4. Narratives around Ex-Muslims and their effects

While in the previous section I elaborated on the experience of Ex-Muslims themselves, I shall now focus on the way they are perceived by society and how this may affect the way they are treated especially in the asylum procedure. There is little literature on the experience of apostates from Islam or why they leave and how this impacts their lives. However there is even less about their relationship to the majority population and how they are seen by them. My approach will be partly based on literature and partly on conversations with Ex-Muslims and activists as well as online research. Here I shall focus on the one hand on how narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims affect the perception of Ex-Muslims and also on how ideas and prejudices surrounding atheists and non-belief impact the way they are seen. Furthermore I shall elaborate on the lack of public awareness when it comes to the existence and struggles of Ex-Muslims.

4.1. Ex-Muslims and narratives about Islam and Muslims

Generally speaking, hateful attitudes towards Islam and Muslims affect people from Muslim majority countries regardless of whether they are themselves Muslims. For example as Michal Buchowski states, in early 2017 there have been several attacks against kebab shops, motivated by a hate against Muslims. In one case the vandals even spray painted “Fuck ISIS, Fuck Islam” on the facade. It is most likely that the perpetrators did not know or even consider if the shop owner was actually a pious Muslim. Buchowski also states that while his research refers mainly to Poland, rising xenophobia is a problem in all of Europe. It is also not expressed only by ordinary people but also state leaders, presidential candidates, journalists and academics. As he claims, it is enough to have darker skin to be linked with Muslims, which can lead to verbal or physical attacks. According to him, the number of legal investigations of racially or ethnically motivated violence in Poland has doubled between 2013 and 2015. However this is just the tip of the iceberg since, as he states the vast majority of cases go unreported or are dismissed by prosecutors or judges. It is also often claimed that the right for freedom of speech protects the expression of prejudices and antipathy. The hate against people from majority Muslim countries has risen since what is called the “refugee crises” in 2015. This is particularly remarkable in a country like Poland where the Muslim population make up less than one percent and therefore pose no credible threat to the Polish economy, culture or safety. This is a phenomenon often referred to as “phantom-

Islamophobia”, meaning that the hate or fear towards Islam or Muslims does not come from real encounters that people have with Muslims.

However while the amount of hateful attitudes towards Islam, Muslims or foreigners has increased since 2015, it is not entirely new. At least since 9/11, Islam has been associated with terrorism, violence, fundamentalism etc. Anyhow, the anti-Islamism also represented in the media is based on an orientalist image of “a barbarous, anti-Christian enemy of Western civilization(....) The Muslim Other has once again become an iconic symbol of cultural fears concomitant with neoliberalism and its globalization from above, income inequality, and social injustice, as they are perceived by a systematically decaying middle class and even more impoverished poor. Terrorist attacks and refugees have been mentally glued together in popular attempts to explain everyday hardships, disintegrated social cohesion, and eroding collective identities.”

This hate towards Muslim immigrant is actively fed by propaganda, as pictures of war victims, wandering from the South of Europe up north are shown alongside news of terrorist attack. Thereby people are actively frightened by the picture of Muslim hordes who bring with them terrorism, rape women or impose sharia laws. Thereby Buchowski speaks of a “postfact” paradigm insofar as potential threats are freely invented. For example in 2015, shortly before the election, the Law and Justice chief of Poland made up stories about fifty-four “sharia zones” in Sweden, where allegedly the state has lost control and people were afraid to hang the Swedish flag or women were afraid to wear short skirts. He also told about churches being used as toilets in Italy(Buchowski 2017, 519-521).

While Buchowski refers primarily to Poland, the basic patterns can be found in other European countries too. According to Andre Gingrich, Germany’s domestic secret service named Islamist extremism as the single most dangerous challenge to security in Germany in its annual report of 2004. At the same time right wing extremism has also grown and there has been a rise of ten percent in hate crimes motivated by right wing ideologies. So while both ideologies are potentially dangerous, as they can motivate people to violence, according to Gingrich, it was only one percent of the Muslim population that supports Islamist extremist and less than three percent of the German population that supports right wing extremism(Gingrich 2005, 513/514). Obviously the statistics are from 2004 and therefore do not represent the current numbers it still shows the pattern of over exaggerating the danger posed by radical Islamic ideologies.

In Poland however the hate against Muslims and immigrants has gotten so extreme, that Buchowski stated that researching the structural reasons is no longer enough for anthropology

as a discipline but rather it is its moral duty to react. This is especially because he identifies descriptions of Muslims that “deprive them of human features” and claims that in this respect “Islamophobia is indeed reminiscent of anti-Semitism in interwar Germany”. This again is not a problem of Poland in particular. There have been initiatives by Polish anthropologists such as the Polish Ethnological Society issued a statement condemning the hostility against immigrants and Muslims in particular and linked it to the birth of fascism and the processes that led to genocide and ethnic cleansing(Buchowski 2016, 62-64).

However, there are also more specific narratives about people who have left Islam. As with most things related to Islam, many people have strong feelings about the existence and visibility of Ex-Muslims, so narratives go from them being seen as brave heroes who courageously stand up to an oppressive culture/religion up to them being accused of being part of an Islamophobic movement and collaborating with Western imperialists. I want to make clear at this point that I don’t(necessarily) see them as either. Rather to me and in the approach I take, they are mostly normal people who grew up in a belief system that in many cases was very dominant in their lives and that they no longer want to be part of. As with most demographics you will find views and ideas from all over the political spectrum among Ex-Muslims.

That said, when it comes to public representation, a few prominent Ex-Muslims dominate the field, as Van Nieuwkerk states “...some particular vocal Ex-Muslims in the West have determined the representation of Muslim skeptics and atheists. Ex-Muslims, particularly those residing in the West, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali(2007;2015), Ehsan Jami(2007), Wafa Sultan(2009), and Ibn Warraq(2003) have fostered an anti-Islamic discourse. Their plea for the urgency of a Muslim reformation was embraced by Western liberals and conservatives(Mahmood 2009).”(Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 308). So while these prominent figures do not represent or speak for all Ex-Muslims, they are the ones who have the most impact on the public image of Ex-Muslims.

Daniel Enstedt and Göran Larsson point out how apostasy narratives are frequently used for contemporary polemic attacks against Islam and Muslims. In a study about the representation of Islam and Muslims on the internet platform WikiIslam, they analyze common narratives around apostasy from Islam. The website publishes articles critical of Islam to tell, what it represents, as the truth about Islam, which would not be published on mainstream platforms like Wikipedia. However the site does not aim to deliver neutral information as Enstedt and Larsson point out “It is important to stress that “truth” is only associated with negative and critical stances against Muslims. Quotes are taken from Islamic sources and sayings from

Muslim spokespersons and therefore presented as authentic, but selection and presentation of the material remains very one-dimensional, and alternative interpretations are seldom represented. For highlighting negative and biased perceptions about Islam and Muslims, the site is often perceived as being anti-Muslim, if not Islamophobic.” It also aims to build a defense position against Islam and Muslims as a global threat(Enstedt Larsson 2013, 64/65). In doing so, the narratives of Ex-Muslims are central for this site and the legitimization of its views. Most of the articles on WikiIslam have been published elsewhere first. However the central aim of this site is to “show that Islam is wrong and nonsensical, and that Muslims should be taken seriously because they pose a dangerous threat to the open society.”(Enstedt Larsson 2013, 66). According to Enstedt and Larsson the narrative about Islam, especially conversion into Islam represented on this site resembles similarities with the narrative about cults, where the member is a victim, brainwashed and manipulated into joining the group. So Islam is depicted through stereotypes about cults. It is shown as oppressive and illogical and leaving it is presented as an “act of freedom” or “awakening”. Here parallels can also be drawn to conversion narratives, where the convert feels lost and after calling for help finds their place “in an enlightened community of like believers”.(Enstedt Larsson 2013, 72-74). Generally in popular apostasy narratives, Islam is often framed as “autonomous entity different from other religions”. The time as a Muslim is characterized through oppression, deprivation and marginalization and the act of leaving is given a triumphant character, where they left the oppressive situation. The person’s past as a Muslim and former insidership gives the narrative authority, as it is perceived as more authentic. This applies both in narratives that focus on personal experiences about oppression and in such that focus on the irrationality of Islam as opposed to reason and science, which is common among outspoken atheists like the New Atheist Movement. Here atheism is also framed as “natural”, since all people are born without a religion, so the religious belief is imposed on the child who is indoctrinated(Enstedt Larsson 2013, 82).

This argument, I must say, is of course critique-worthy since, while it is true that all people are born as non-believers, religious beliefs have emerged in the vast majority of cultures and societies, so it is probably not so “unnatural” for humans to develop them in one form or another. People are also born without speaking a language, yet nobody would claim that it is “unnatural” for them to learn one.

Anyhow, the process of leaving Islam is often framed as a critical and unbiased inquiry. The apostasy is associated with words such as “rationality” “logic” “truth”, “freedom”, “equality” and the like all of them set in opposition to Islam that is presented as the exact opposite.

Through the apostate's past as a Muslim, the narrative is more reliable when revealing a perceived truth about the "real" Islam.

As Enstedt and Larsson state, "public speech about Islam and increased anti-Muslim- and Islamophobic- rhetoric in society has important implications for the debate about people who leave Islam." They also claim that "These apostasy testimonies can also be used by individuals who wish to question Islam and Muslims. From this point of view these stories can easily be turned into an important weapon in the hands of those who want to express anti-Muslim feelings and so constitute an important element in an Islamophobic world view that presents Islam and Muslims as diametrically opposed to all other worldviews." (Enstedt Larsson 2013, 88).

The role outspoken Ex-Muslims play in these narratives can best be illustrated by the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She is a Somali refugee who has long resided in the Netherlands. She openly criticized not just Islam but also migration policies and the treatment of women in Muslim societies. This led to her receiving death threats on a regular basis. However she became very influential in the Dutch politics and debates. At that time free speech was first framed as diametrically opposed to Islam which Hirsi Ali mobilized through drawing from her own experience and insider knowledge. According to Mineke Bosch, both Hirsi Ali's orientalist approach and the fact that both her autobiography and the way she told her story were designed to address a predominantly Western, liberal male audience contributed to her success. On the one hand her depiction of Muslim women as abused, oppressed and helpless was in line with orientalist images dominant in western culture. On the other hand it reinforced the idea of western superiority and the backward Muslim other. She takes both, the position of the insider and victim and that was framed as the female, exotic other, as the media highly exoticized and aestheticizes her with photographs and references to her beauty. She was framed simultaneously as pure and innocent and as an expert with insider knowledge. At the same time she was framed as "one of us" as she embraced Western values and therefore became liberated (Vliek 2021, 37/38). A large part of Hirsi Ali's success is that she is framed simultaneously as "one of us" and as "other". She also presents a linear narrative of becoming. As Vliek says "Through victimhood and intimate knowledge of the terrors of Islam, she had chosen to be liberated and part of the enlightened West and could thereby claim authority." (Vliek 2021, 92).

So the perception of Ex-Muslims is heavily tied to narratives around Islam. And Islam is debated very controversially, as some deny any connection between Islamic teaching and terrorist or violent acts committed in the name of Islam, while others see it as the single cause

for violence in Muslim majority countries or Muslim communities or simply violent acts done by people who happen to be Muslims. There is also a lot of controversy, when it comes to how society should deal with Islam and Muslims. Some people are against any critique against or ridicule of Islam, because it might offend Muslims or it might even be discriminatory against them. For example after the terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo, some people while not condoning the attack, claimed that the magazine had actually crossed a line with it's Mohammed-cartoons(Pleßnigg 2018, 70). Even way before that when Salman Rushdie got a death fatwa for writing "The Satanic Verses", some of the media claimed that his writing was offensive and provoked the reaction against him. Jimmy Carter called Rushdie's book an insult in the New York Times(Rizvi 2016, 139). Even after Rushdie was attacked with a knife in 2022, there were voices on social media who blamed the attack at least partly on him.

However, others like the authors Heiko Heinisch and Nina Scholz see these very acts of criticizing/ridiculing Islam as necessary to maintain a democratic and open society, as is the central topic of their book "Charlie versus Mohammed-Plädoyer für die Meinungsfreiheit". Heinisch further says in an interview with "Kurier": "Muslime müssen wie alle anderen lernen, dass ihre Religion nicht für alle anderen sakrosankt ist. Im Schlusswort unseres Buches „Charlie versus Mohammed. Plädoyer für die Meinungsfreiheit“ haben Nina Scholz und ich geschrieben: „Der Islam gehört zu Europa, wenn Witze über ihn und Kritik an ihm genauso selbstverständlich sind wie bei anderen Religionen und Weltanschauungen auch.“"(Widler 2017).

The theme of free speech is generally very central in this debate. Attacks against the freedom to criticize or ridicule Islam are often used to argue that Islam is incompatible with modern and Western values as Vliek states(Vliek 2021, 16). Vliek also quotes the former editor of the BBC's Today program, Rob Liddle "Islam is masochistic, homophobic, and a totalitarian regime. It is a fascistic, bigoted, and medieval religion. I have plenty of friends who are Muslims, and I know other Muslims I don't get along with. I may be Islamophobic, but I am not against the religion. As long as we're able to say what we think about Islam and Muslims without fear of censorship, being accused of racism, or having our heads cut off, then we're heading in the right direction." Vliek analyses this statement the following "Liddle starts by characterizing Islam in opposition to his beliefs, describing it negatively, and conflating it into a monolithic ideology and regime. He denies being racist or generalizing people negatively by claiming that he knows Muslims, both people that he gets along with and people that he does not. He characterizes the issue as 'nothing personal' and something that 'he simply believes'.

In summation, he claims that he should be allowed to uncritically utter such statements because of the right to freedom of speech: 'we' British(white) critics should be able to say whatever we want about them(Muslims)."(Vliek 2021, 34). This argument is also based on an approach to free speech as a one-way street, as he claims the right to say whatever he wants about Islam and Muslims, without being accused of racism. So he sees it as his right to say whatever he wants about others but at the same time denies other people's right to criticize him or his beliefs. So he doesn't quite advocate for free speech as a universal value since while it is true that freedom of speech gives you the right to say whatever you want about Islam and Muslims, it also gives others the right to call you out on it and call your ideas racist. Anyhow, the accusation of Islamophobia is often described as a big obstacle for free speech. Vliek here refers to an incident of Richard Dawkins being deplatformed for his perceived offensive statements "Richard Dawkins, one of the panelists, problematised his experience of being denied the opportunity to speak at the University of California, Berkeley, in June 2017, because some of his comments on Islam had 'hurt and offended' many Muslims. KPFA, the local community-supported radio station that hosted the event, claimed that while it supported free speech, it did not support hurtful speech. According to Dawkins, by commenting on Islam, and more specifically Islamism, he did not utter 'hurtful speech': 'I have always been critical of Christianity, but I have never been de-platformed for that'." This is often referred to as "racism of lowered expectations" by critics of political correctness, meaning that people who are otherwise feminist, pro LGBT etc. will tolerate it when someone from Muslim background is misogynistic or homophobic. Benjamin David goes as far as calling the accusation of Islamophobia as the "greatest limiter of free speech" referring to the term as "a word, created by fascists and used by cowards, to manipulate morons". According to Vliek, Dawkins also accuses the liberal community of valuing "the avoidance of potential conflict (clashes over Islamic and secular sensibilities) above the individual's perceived right to speak and critique." According to him, the liberal institutions also curb critique through "charges" of Islamophobia. The term is also criticized for implying irrationality. Dawkins also states that it is racist and condescending to assume that one group needs 'special protection'. Sarah Haider, a prominent Ex-Muslim also claims that individual freedoms are curbed by concerns about religious sensibilities and calls for the fight for more liberties and values of Enlightenment, modernity and progress.(Vliek 2021, 95/96).

Maryam Namazie the speaker of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain criticized left wing parties and public figures for siding with islamists and claimed that the "regressive left's" accusations of Islamophobia would impose de facto blasphemy laws. Just like Hirsi Ali, she

also is in a position to claim authority as a voice from within, somebody who has been inside Islam and can now speak out against it(Vliek 2021, 79/80).

These are just a few examples to illustrate the positions on both sides. This discourse and the emotionality of some of the people who engage in it often leads to Ex-Muslims being glorified on one and demonized on the other side.

However, it is also important to mention the position of Ex-Muslims who unlike people like Hirsi Ali or Namazie are not publicly heard, like Vliek does. She refers to one of her interlocutors who said about Ex-Muslim activists “I doubt whether that would have the right effect. Because you become harder and harder, and you will not change each other’s opinion [...] I disagree with extremism, also in unbelief.” Another of her interlocutors said referring to Hirsi Ali “To have your politics be solely driven by your own experience, it can be a motivation, but it shouldn’t be your entire political agenda.” She generally says that many of her interlocutors in the Netherlands view that celebration of blasphemy and apostasy as more harmful than helpful for those who want to move out of Islam. They also are worried that the narratives of people like Hirsi Ali could be used by people who aim to exclude Muslims(Vliek 2021, 80).

When I did my research most of the people in the Ex-Muslim community would largely take the position of the publicly visible Ex-Muslims such as Hirsi Ali or Namazie. However I got most of my contacts over secular organizations and groups, some of them openly critical of religion. Also people who have made negative experience with their former religion, and face potential danger because of it, will probably be more likely to actively reject that religion rather than just not believe in it anymore. The aim here is not to judge which side is right or wrong but rather to acknowledge that both positions exist and that the Ex-Muslims that you are most likely to hear about do not represent everybody who has abandoned Islam.

4.1.1. Instrumentalization through right wing ideologues

This leads to Ex-Muslims often being instrumentalized for right-wing propaganda, even if many of them regularly distance themselves from it. So when they criticize Islam or speak about negative experiences with Muslims, this is often used by right-wingers and anti-Muslim bigots to foster their narratives. Here a common problem is that it is primarily right-wingers who will listen to Ex-Muslims.

However, they do this not out of a genuine concern or sympathy for victims of Islamist violence or with the intention to help oppressed people but rather to confirm their narratives. One Ex-Muslim I talked to put it like this “Right wing they took us as a valid card with a short term. Most Ex-Muslims they are hand in hand with the right wings like sadly we just have to deal with them sometimes. They are the only one they can hear us. So the Ex-Muslims that they don’t know, right wing they are using us as card with a short term. When we are finished when they just reached their goals, changed the policy of the country you know against immigration, asylum seekers, they won’t be treating us better than those they are fighting against. So we will be on the same side as these unwanted people. So really very risky, very. Because you see them they are not in love with us, but they just use us as a valid card and when it’s just done we will be invalid card and then we will be a trash.”

Also Rana Ahmad had to experience how fast criticism of Islam can be used for right wing propaganda as she writes in her autobiography “Wenig später halte ich einen Vortrag auf einer vom Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime organisierten Veranstaltung, zu der vierzig, vielleicht fünfzig Menschen kommen. Leider ist darunter auch ein Mann, der einer rechtspopulistischen Partei nahesteht. Er lädt das Video auf YouTube hoch und versucht damit, rechte Propaganda zu machen. Ich kenne Deutschland zu dieser Zeit noch nicht gut genug, um zu begreifen, wie leicht Islamkritik von ausländerfeindlichen Populisten für deren Agenda missbraucht wird.”

Many outspoken Ex-Muslims on the internet regularly distance themselves from these people, like for example the user Zara Kay wrote on Twitter “Yes I’m an ExMuslim anti-theist, yes I don’t agree with Islam on a lot. And no I won’t be used for your far right agenda. I will not help you build a narrative to hate all Muslims. I will challenge bad ideas no matter what ideology or religion they come from.” Also the fact that their trauma connected to the religion are instrumentalized is often addressed, like in a Tweet by putri “i really wish there was a safe space for ex muslims to talk about their traumatic experience with the religion where our words wouldnt be taken out of context and where our words wouldnt be cherry picked by bible thumping christians to be used for their own agenda”

4.1.2 Accusations of Islamophobia

On the other side outspoken Ex-Muslims are frequently accused of fueling an Islamophobic narrative and collaborating with the right. When talking to Ex-Muslims or people who support them as well as on internet platforms, I would frequently come across the problem that Ex-Muslims find it hard to talk about problems connected to Islam without being attacked. Very

often they get accused of being Islamophobic or right wing. This accusation usually comes from liberals or left wingers.

That, according to Ali A. Rizvi stems from the mostly genuine intention to protect Muslims from discrimination. However, so Rizvi, this noble goal is often pursued completely the wrong way. For Rizvi this is due to the discrepancy of the role of Islam in countries where Muslims are a minority and such where they are the majority of people. Where Muslims are a minority, Islam is the belief and the identity of a group that is often discriminated against and that therefore needs to be protected. However where Muslims are the majority, often Islam is used as a tool by the government to justify oppression.

This dichotomy influences liberals both in the West and in Muslim majority countries. Many things that have been said by liberals in Muslim-majority countries would have been labeled Islamophobic if said in Western countries. Faisal Saeed Al-Mutar states: „Many(Western Liberals) have betrayed us liberals in the Middle East and other Muslim countries, and sided with the Islamists against us.“, a feeling shared by many liberals in the Middle East.

So often it is not as easy for Ex-Muslims to speak about their former religion because of the accusations that come with it as Rizvi states “I grew up in countries where simply speaking your mind could get you sent to prison, flogged, or even executed. Early on, I promised myself that when I got to a place where I had the freedom to speak, I would. And I wouldn’t take my freedom of speech for granted, not even for a day. But when I finally arrived in North America, I saw that things weren’t that simple.”

In Rizvi’s view many Western liberals confuse the defense of Muslim’s right to believe what they want with the defense of that belief itself. For him the critique against Islamic doctrines and the defense of Muslim's rights must go hand in hand, as the majority of victims of Islamist violence are themselves Muslims. “Doing the first without the second would be grossly unfair to millions of good Muslim people who are not only the most frequent victims of Islamic terrorism, but also maligned due to the actions of violent jihadists who actually take their faith and holy book seriously. And doing the second without the first would be grossly unfair to the innumerable victims of “Allahu Akbar”-yelling militants who chop off heads, take sex slaves, and accurately quote Quranic verses supporting their actions.” So, as Rizvi emphasizes, it ultimately needs both the right to criticize ideas and the right to believe in that same ideas. (Rizvi 2016, 133-135).

One of my interlocutors also pointed out the difference between respecting a person’s right to believe whatever they want and respecting the belief itself “First of all I don’t have any problem with anybody, he can believe what he want. I can accept somebody who believe that

this car created all the universe and this car forbid him to eat banana on Wednesday. Okay, he can believe what he want. But I don't need to respect his belief. First of all I respect his right to believe but not his belief."

Rizvi sees a connection to the reactions to 9/11, when Islam and Muslims suddenly were at the center of political debate. This debate was dominated by largely two narratives.

One was built on hate and hostility towards Muslims. According to this narrative, all Muslims would secretly support terrorists and moderate Muslims were just extremists in disguise.

Stricter immigration laws were demanded and people with darker skin were put under general suspicion and told to go back to where they came from. The number of violent attacks against women with headscarf increased. The people behind this narrative according to Rizvi were mostly far right, religious Christians or Jews.

The second narrative would equate any criticism of Islam with hate against Muslims. So anybody who criticized Islam or passages from the Quran would be called Islamophobic or racist. "Criticizing Islamic beliefs or the content of the Quran would promptly earn one the label of "racist," "Islamophobe," or in my case, "sellout" or "Uncle tom."". Even when Bush started the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, he insisted, that it was not a war against Islam. For Rizvi the central problem is, that neither of these narratives is able to distinguish between an ideology and the people who subscribe to said ideology.

This can be particularly difficult for Ex-Muslims who are critical toward Islam but are also close to Muslims, as Rizvi explains both narratives fail to make the distinction between ideas and people. This made it difficult for him since while he wanted to criticize Islam, he did not want to be seen as hating an entire group of people especially since the people he grew up with were Muslims. And for Rizvi this distinction is the most crucial because "...human beings have rights and are entitled to respect. Ideas, beliefs and books don't and aren't. The right to believe what one wants to believe is sacred. The beliefs themselves aren't.

Challenging ideas moves society forward. Demonizing people rips society apart. If anything, it's precisely because of how I'd seen ordinary Muslims suffer under theocratic policies and Sharia law that I wanted to start a dialogue to help shatter the taboo of criticizing religion. Luckily I wasn't alone."(Rizvi 2016, 135-137).

In the aftermath of 9/11 a new movement formed, that became very central to Ex-Muslims. This movement became known as the New Atheists with leading figures such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens or Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Several books came out criticizing religion and highlighting the negative effects it has on society. Most of the authors that were central for the movement named 9/11 as a catalyst "that drove them to attack and

expose religion as a destructive force that must be countered.” They did not attack Islam specifically, but didn’t spare it either. This according to Rizvi was something that at that time no one was used to, especially not Muslims. It was the common notion that Islam was a religion of peace and that it were people distorting it to justify evil. But the new atheists saw it the other way round; most Muslims were moderate but the Quran wasn’t.

However for Ex-Muslims it is maybe most important that atheists were encouraged to come out and openly speak about their disbelief. It also was an encouragement to see religion being attacked and not treated as something worthy of respect, as Rizvi states, the “aggressive approach of new atheist writers seems to resonate much better with nonbelievers living in the Muslim world. They are censored, persecuted, and angry. They find the polite, tiptoe-around-taboos approach to criticize religion in the West frustrating, a privilege of open societies where the right to free speech is taken for granted.”(Rizvi 2016, 137-139).

Now there has been a lot of criticism of the new atheist movement, saying that it is militant, racist, Islamophobic, etc. It is also accused of having a misogyny problem(Reestorff 2018, 211). However the aim of this paper is not to judge whether or not these criticism is justified. The point is rather that, while this movement like any movement might not be perfect or even close to, it is a strong encouragement and source of a feeling of community and belonging for many Ex-Muslims, due to its unapologetic criticism of religion which also includes Islam and due to it openly seeing unbelief as a virtue rather than a vice.

Although more people see things more nuanced and take on a position in between these extremes, the basic narratives persist. On both sides there is a lack of differentiation between an ideology and a group of people which leads to criticism of Islam being conflated with hate against Muslims. There also is the argument that Islam itself is not bad but rather the problem are people who misuse it for bad things. This is an idea many Ex-Muslims disagree with as they find a lot of bad things in the Quran and Hadith and often have even left Islam because of the violence propagated in the Holy Book. One of my interlocutors puts it like this “So I faced these kind of things when I talk about how Islam itself is bad, they teach me how Islam itself is not bad, the people who interpret Islam in a harmful way, they are the bad persons, but the religion is not bad. But I know we have things in the Islam in the Quran, in the Hadiths, they say something bad.” Another interview partner told this story “One time we were in course that was, when it was terrorist attack in France, it was in 2018, in November, December 2018. It was attack there, terrorist attack. And the teacher, she start her day to say ... she stopped like that and she said “We are sorry for what happened yesterday in France, but I’m sure it is not representing Islam.” She was from Hungary, she’s Christian from Hungary. And for me it

was, I looked at her like that (...) and all the class, most of them were Muslims, 90% were Muslims. And they don't care about she is talking about. For her, ok, somebody killed there, so what the shit it's ok for us. And I looked at her again. "can I ask you a question?", I asked her and she said yes "Did you read Quran?" She say no "did you know anything about Islam, did you understand Islam" and she say no "How you decide it's not represent Islam?" When you say it's not representing Islam, I felt that you are... you studies Islam for four years or you read the Quran... but you're talking about.... That is Islam. What happened is Islam."

Ex-Muslims on the internet too frequently criticize the fact that to call out violent elements of Islamic scripture or talk about violence done in the name of Islam will quickly have you accused of being right wing. As Yasmine Mohammad writes on Twitter "I'm not offended when ppl say I'm conservative or right-wing because it's not an insult; it's just incorrect. I'm pro-choice, pro-universal healthcare, pro-free education, pro-environment and pro all enlightenment values. I'm also anti-religion. All religions. Especially Islam."

Another complaint often expressed by Ex-Muslims is that there is generally too much consideration as to not hurt anybody's religious feelings compared to those that are harmed by religious practices. One interlocutor put it like this "No you have to be more you know don't say these words because it's very offensive. It's like my people they are dying there just what here it's offensive for them that's really ridiculous, because in my country women they die in honor killing, it's part of Islam. We get this apostasy they die, when you just say I don't believe in Islam anymore they kill you we have... you know these things are very serious, because it's a person's life. Are we more concerned about not offending them? Give me a break!" Another interviewpartner highlighted the difference between attacking an idea and attacking a person "So that with Muslims because I'm not..., because sometimes they think we can't talk against Islam, yeah I can talk against Islam I can talk against Mohammed, I can talk against your beliefs. It's my right you can talk against my belief. But that doesn't mean I'm insulting you, why you and your beliefs the same person, you are not the same person. Beliefs can be changed in any moment, so we are not the same person. So that's what I'm trying to talk, through workshops, talking, daily talking, to give them... because when I saw, the Austrians they do nothing about that. For them integration is "Lern Deutsch"."

So Ex-Muslims who are outspoken about their apostasy get a lot of attacks and accusations of being anti-Muslim or right wing.

4.1.3. Lack of public awareness

However for the most part Ex-Muslims are hardly recognized in mainstream media and by the public. As several of my interlocutors have stated, there is barely any public awareness about apostasy in Islam. Here I want to quickly refer to my own experience while conducting my research. When I told people that I was doing research on the situation of people who come from Muslim families but are atheists themselves, the reactions were often like “What this exists?”. This might seem strange, because there are so many people who abandon Christianity, that probably everybody will have heard about them. According to Statista, 72 055 Austrian people have left the Christian church in 2021 and the issue is widely talked about. So it would be logical to assume that people leave Islam too. However it is a topic that, while being discussed on some internet platforms and in certain organizations, is hardly present at all in public discourse. For the most part, the existence of apostates in Islam is not denied, the topic just barely, if at all, exists in the mainstream media and debate.

This leads to a general lack of awareness not just about the specific struggles of Ex-Muslims but also about their mere existence. So when people are confronted with a person with a Muslim name being an atheist, they might not immediately know how to deal with it, as one of my interlocutors pointed out “...and also with some... not some, most of the people here, they know that I’m atheist, Ex-Muslim or sometimes non-Muslim with the Islamic name. And for them they need like two, three days to understand how to deal with me. It’s like two, three days, they(...) and to ask, what about him. So to be atheist from Middle East, in Europe is the most catastrophic thing that you can be because you are not part from the people here, you are not part from the people you came from. It’s like women also they came from Middle East, between her people, they can understand that Austrian women can have their free life but they cannot accept Syrian women or Arabic women she will have her free life. But what happens with atheist is more, more complicated.”.

Another thing that a lot of Ex-Muslims have to deal with is that they are constantly assumed to be Muslims. This can come with seemingly harmless things like people assuming, that they don’t eat pork, as one interlocutor explained “So to go to any place and to... for example I want to drink something or to eat something and I order something and suddenly they say, it’s contain pork.” Another interlocutor describes a similar situation “And his sister brought food, and she said, Ali(name changed) I’m sorry, I thought I brought pork, steak pork, I think. Or no, schnitzel, yes. She brought schnitzel. And she said, I’m sorry, I have to bring you

something else. I said, no, why. She said, you're a Muslim. I said, no. I said, no, I'm not Muslim. I eat everything, I don't care. What Austrians or European people eat, I eat too."

However this assumption comes from both anti-Muslim bigots and people who support Islam and can result in more negative experiences as one of my interlocutors pointed out "It's both sides sometimes. Sometimes they treat me as a Muslim, people they don't like Muslims. So they treat me as a Muslim. And for me it's discrimination. So I don't say no, I'm not Muslims, I'm not from this bullshit, because I would be like them. It would be like yeah, let's discriminate others. No, I will not like that... from them. So when they discriminate me because I am Muslim, it's bad and if they will love me because I am Muslim, also it's bad, because I am not Muslim, I am an atheist." So it can be a very difficult task to deal with anti-Muslim bigots as an Ex-Muslim if you don't want to appear as supporting them.

However, while all of my interlocutors have addressed the issue of being initially thought of as Muslims, the extend to which it seems to affect their personal life varies greatly. So while some report being heavily discriminated against, others claim there being no effects that go beyond people assuming them not eating pig or drinking alcohol. One interlocutor also pointed out that even if people initially see him as a Muslim, they quickly change their mind when talking to him "But I have seen many Austrians always believe you are Muslim. Yes, that's different. And if I say, for example, atheist maybe immediately they do not believe. Yes, because I come from a Muslim country. But I talk for two or three minutes, for example, and then say, yes, so ok atheist." So the amount of negative experience tied to this circumstance might depend strongly on the kind of people one typically interacts with. Also the individual's subjective interpretation of an event or another person's actions or intention might have an impact on how they experience it.

There are also voices among Ex-Muslims that show some understanding towards people's general reservation toward immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, as one of my interlocutors explains "Normally, many Austrians are afraid of foreigners because they think they are Muslim. Because Muslim people, it's not my fault, but really, it's dangerous. Because I have seen many (...) for example I was, for example Burgenland, I live in a homeland. For example, I was with, I think 70 foreigners. These 70 foreigners, I think for two months or three months in Burgenland, made many, many problem. I saw with my eye. (...) these ladies beaten. Ah, many, many. Or the, many, many drank alcohol and then beat them up again. And the police come every week, every week, or. For example in Vienna too, 22nd district, I've seen lots and lots of foreigners, lots of problems. That's normal, I've seen for example, because I've been working for the municipality for three years. I had a lot of Austrians, these

people know me, they are very, very nice. They know me. If an Austrian knows me, with me is very, very nice. But normally many Austrians don't know foreigners. Or other countries. They are very scared. That's quite normal, yes.”

However the reactions and perceived ignorance of people who are pro-Muslim or pro-Islam can be just as damaging for Ex-Muslims, as my interlocutor continues “One of my friends, it was on facebook. I met him, yeah I like blablabla and he say I like Islam. But I told him I’m not Muslim and he say, “what?” Why you are not Muslim. And he’s Austrian. And he start to ask me why I am not Muslim and he disconnect the relation. Because most of the people they like refugees, they supporting refugees, they supporting their belief, they like their custom, their religion, their hijab, their... I don’t know, they like it. So when they discover somebody is atheist for example, against hijab, they will not understand that.

So there is an organization here in Mattersburg(place changed to protect the interlocutor’s anonymity), I am part of it. And we discussed one time about hijab. And for them, they didn’t accept at all, Austrian and foreigner, they didn’t accept at all what it mean to be... you are not supporting hijab or you are not accepting hijab. (...) so it took for me one hour to discuss what the meaning of hijab is in Islam. What it means is not what they say. So it’s from both sides and both sides it hurts.”

So they often experience both sides of the above mentioned narratives. They will frequently be met with the same suspicion, reservation and outright hostility as actual Muslims, as Ali A. Rizvi points out “Most ex-Muslims have Muslim-sounding names and have lived in and come from the same places as their Muslim counterparts. Consequently, they are just as likely as other Muslims to be on the receiving end of anti-Muslim sentiment and/or harassment”(Rizvi 2016, 71). This can go as far as for some people to deny the mere possibility of a person leaving Islam. As for example in 2017 the Twitter-user “Hijab Strangler” responded to an outspoken Ex-Muslim online: “Fuck off. Once a Muslim, always a Muslim. It’s the same with pedophiles. Death is the only cure.” So long story short, leaving Islam does not prevent one from experiencing anti-Muslim bigotry.

At the same time other people will portray Islam in a more positive light around them, even if they reject this attitude. One of my interlocutors tells about this experience “So Austrian sometimes to show you, he is so nice to you, he will start to be nice to Islam. So my original name is different, my original name is totally Islamic. So say for example if I’m in course or meeting somebody new in Austria and he shake hands and say you know, Islam is great, I read the Quran, it’s so great and for me it was what the fuck, what the shit, why are you doing that, no, it’s not.”

4.2. Ex-Muslims and narratives about atheism

I have already elaborated on how in Egypt atheists are framed as abnormal, accused of being part of a “secret society” and paid by the “outside”, portrayed as mentally ill, unreasonable and above all immoral. Now the idea of atheists or non-believers lacking moral principles is by far not limited to Egypt or the Islamic World. Studies suggest that many people in the Western world still think of atheists as less moral than believers. A 2011 Study in the “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology” even suggests that atheists are distrusted as much as rapists (Geggel 2021). In the study conducted by the University of British Columbia, participants were provided with a hypothetical scenario of a man who hits a parking car and flees without leaving insurance information and later that same man steals money from a wallet he found. Then they were asked, if that man was most likely to be a Christian, a Muslim, a rapist or an Atheist. Most people chose either atheist or rapist, in approximately equal numbers. This study aimed to look at how atheism was perceived in the general public. However surprisingly not only the religious participants chose predominantly the atheist or the rapist but also those religiously unaffiliated. (Rizvi 2016, 143). The study suggests, that people generally assume that you act more moral when you believe that there is a God watching you.

There are other studies that indicate that atheists are generally widely distrusted. According to a cross-cultural study published in “nature”, atheism is widely associated with immoral behavior and violence, even among atheists.

However, when you look at people’s actual behavior you find that there is no positive correlation between religiosity and morality and some studies even suggest that there may be a negative correlation. For example The Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation asked 1686 Americans about what in their opinion was to blame for a person being poor. The study found that Christians, especially white evangelicals were much more likely to blame a person’s lack of effort or individual failings for their poverty. As Albert Mohler says “There’s a strong Christian impulse to understand poverty as deeply rooted in morality - often, as the Bible makes clear, in unwillingness to work, in bad financial decisions or in broken family structures. The Christian world view is saying that all poverty is due to sin, though that doesn’t necessarily mean the sin of the person in poverty. In the Garden of Eden, there would have been no poverty. In a fallen world, there is poverty.” However, here the divide was not just between Christians and non-Christians but also between Democrats and Republicans with Republicans being significantly more likely to blame poverty on the persons themselves

rather than external circumstances. So other factors definitely have to be taken into account too.

However, another study conducted by Jean Decety from the University of Chicago, done on more than 1000 children from different national and religious backgrounds found, that children with a religious upbringing are less willing to share with others and support harder punishments for other people's wrong behavior. For the study the children could decide for themselves how many stickers they wanted to share with other children from the same ethnic and religious background. Then they were shown a short film where an actor hit another actor and where asked, if the behavior was wrong and how the person in the film should be punished. The result was that kids who were not raised religiously were generally more willing to share than those who were, with children from Christian and Muslim backgrounds being the least willing to share, compared to those from other religions like Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism. Furthermore the more religiously a kid was raised the more stingy they tended to be. The researchers also state that since the children they had to share with belonged to the same ethnic and religious group, it could not be explained simply through prejudices against people from different backgrounds. The study also shows that religious children called for much harder punishments for the person in the film they were shown. Decety concludes that "Frühere Studien haben schon gezeigt, dass religiöse Menschen keineswegs per se besser sind als ihre nichtreligiösen Gegenparts. Wir gehen nun darüber hinaus und belegen, dass religiöse Menschen – und auch ihre Kinder – sogar weniger altruistisch sind." (Lenz, 2016)

As Psychology Today points out, secular states with a low level of religiosity in the general population often have lower crime rates than those where the average person is more religious "First off, many highly secular societies in the world today with the lowest rates of belief in God—such as Sweden, Japan, and the Netherlands—are among the safest, most well-functioning, and most humane societies on earth, with the lowest murder rates, violent crime rates, infant mortality rates, child abuse fatality rates, incarceration rates, etc. Conversely, those nations with the highest rates of corruption, murder, inequality, political repression, and violence—such as Colombia, El Salvador, and Jamaica—are among the most religious. Granted, this is merely a correlation, but it is a powerful correlation that may knock out the knees of the claim that "only God" can provide morals and values for civilization." Also in the USA those states with the highest level of religiosity have the highest rate of violent crimes and those states with the lowest level of religiosity have the lowest rates of violence. So while this is only a correlation and no causality is proven, it at the very least

shows that the belief in God does not inherently define morality. As Psychology Today points out, if religion would lead to more moral behavior than we would see the opposite correlation. However, it can be observed that a drop in religiosity in a society does not lead to an increase in violence. Actually history suggests quite the opposite. As examples, Psychology Today names the Netherlands, where the homicide rate in the capital city, Amsterdam was at 47 per 100,000 inhabitants back in the mid-15th century, where religion was strong and has since dropped to 2 per 100,000 inhabitants today when religion is weak. A similar development can be seen in England, where in medieval times, where society was deeply religious, the homicide rate was about ten times higher than in the 20th century where the level of religiosity has decreased drastically. Today England is about 95 percent less violent than it was in the Middle Ages. But to see this, one does not have to compare medieval societies with modern ones which one might argue is rather far fetched. But also recent history suggests that decreasing religiosity does not lead to increasing violence, as in recent decades religion has weakened in the United States while crime rates have gone down.

But on an individual level too, studies have shown that secular people are less likely to commit violent crimes and atheists are under-represented in prison. Also atheists and agnostics have been shown to exhibit lower levels of racism, nationalism, militarism and general bigotry. They also show more honesty and tolerance for people they disagree with and are more likely to support helping refugees and non-traditional couples to have or adopt children (Psychology Today 2020). So it is clear that the belief in God does not constitute morality.

However, Rizvi also points out that many apostates leave their religion because its values and practices go against their morals “The reality is, for most Ex-Muslims who were raised in Islam, leaving religion is a moral choice, as became readily apparent in the #ExMuslimBecause social media campaign described in chapter 3. This isn’t unique to Islam. Atheists from all kinds of backgrounds frequently say they broke from their religious upbringing because they found these religious “values” to be unacceptable. They consider the secondary status of women, the often-violent discrimination against gays, and the tribalistic exclusion and “othering” of those deemed “infidels” and “kuffar”-or those who weren’t “chosen” or “saved”-to be divisive and morally abhorrent.” (Rizvi 2016, 144).

However the negative image of atheists is not limited to the assumption of them being immoral but they are also often described as arrogant, aggressive “know-it-alls” who want to push their views on others. Rizvi elaborates on why he didn’t identify as atheist for a long time “For the longest time, I didn’t like the word atheist precisely for the same reason that I

was one: I was deeply uncomfortable with any kind of absolute certainty in the absence of evidence. So I identified as an agnostic. My answer to whether or not I believe in God was always, “I don’t know.””(Rizvi 2016, 99). Many non-believers, even prominent people like Einstein were and are reluctant to label themselves as atheists. This can for once be because they want to embrace humility or because they don’t want to be seen as arrogant or generally be associated with any negative stereotype about atheists. Rizvi further points out that his hesitation to identify with the word atheist was due to the stereotype of atheists being aggressive and arrogant and want to tell everybody what to think and what to do. That was until he realized that to him theists were in fact the ones who claimed to know the absolute truth, while atheism was a position of humility.(Rizvi 2016, 103).

You also find a lot of the notion of atheist being arrogant, aggressive and even hateful on social media. Prominent atheist dictators like Stalin are also often referred to by people who believe in negative stereotypes about atheists, such as in a meme posted by the Twitter-user Escaping atheism. Another meme posted by the same account which at the time I’m writing this has 2421 followers, says “Atheists don’t hate fairies leprechauns or unicorns because they don’t exist. It is impossible to hate something that doesn’t exist. Atheists hate God because he does exist”. Which also falls in the stereotype of atheists being hateful, as they are accused of “hating” God rather than just not believing in his existence. Another example of this assumption is a statement by the Twitter user “Mark”, saying: “No. Why would anyone HATE a book/religion? Hatred is irrational. Atheists are the biggest fascists. Atheists try to SHUT DOWN speech they don’t like.”, again assuming that atheists generally feel hate against the religion they don’t consider to be true and furthermore accusing them of wanting to shut down other opinions. These are just a few examples of online attacks against atheists that build on the stereotype of them being hateful and intolerant of other opinions.

So atheists are still confronted with a lot of negative stereotypes that have no foundation in reality. However, they may also experience not just subtle stereotyping but open discrimination and hostility, as one of my interlocutors reports “Also from... I told you from authorities... for them... so many people here in authority, they are catholic. And for catholic, to be a Muslim is better than to be an atheist. So sometimes they are not happy to meet an atheist. So you show them that you are atheist. One time I was in a church and it was on... Christmas 2018. and I was with friends, they were from Egypt, they were Christian, orthodox. And we heard that there is an event in church before the midnight prayers and they don’t know how to go there, so I took them to church. And the religious people, group there, they know that I’m atheist and for them... they invited also Muslims(...) they invited also three,

four Muslims. For them they were... treat me like trash. It's like, "you cannot come. There is no place for you." I don't want to come, I just show the people where, I will not... are you crazy? You think I want to come inside. I didn't start that but after like ten minutes are they talking, not directly but how their reaction, their behavior.... And they welcomed the Muslims, welcomed the orthodox, can't imagine catholic welcomed orthodox and welcomed Muslims, for them it's ok. But to be an... just to be an atheist for them is something... you are nothing. That's came from catholic." However, sometimes even when religious people are not openly hostile toward atheists, they might show some reservation "one time I visit the Freikirche... evangelical church, one friend he say "...come, they will talk today about Israel" so I went with him and you know, they coming to welcoming me and I say, ok, hallo, but I'm not Christian, I'm atheist and suddenly it's for her like two seconds and she's say "You're welcome". But it was not... it took like two seconds, three... two seconds to say that. I think that the only time that somebody welcoming or accepting that... that you're atheist."

5. These narratives in asylum procedures

So Ex-Muslims are caught between various narratives that negatively affect the way they are perceived and understood by the mainstream society. But what does that mean for atheist refugees who seek asylum because their apostasy would be a danger to their lives or their freedom in their homeland? In the following section I will analyze the way stereotypes affect atheist refugees and their treatment across the lines or narratives about Islam and Muslims, narratives about atheism and general lack of awareness about apostasy in Islam and the situation of Ex-Muslims.

In this section, unlike the previous where I talked about the situation and perception of Ex-Muslims in general, I will focus on the Austrian context when discussing asylum procedures. So despite there being international laws and guidelines, every country's situation is unique and what I am saying now only applies to Austria.

By international law, people who are persecuted for their worldview in their homeland are entitled to asylum. Austria has subscribed to these standards (Peryl Neugschwendter Schmaus 2018, 233/234). However, this does not mean that these standards are applied in practice. There is hardly any literature on the situation of Ex-Muslim refugees and their experiences around asylum procedure, so this section will largely be based on the experience of Ex-Muslim refugees themselves as well as activists who support them. So the statements are from their point of view and their subjective interpretation may play into the way they describe their experience.

5.1. Narratives of Islam and Muslims in the context of asylum procedures

I shall now follow the question of how stereotypes about Islam and Muslims may influence asylum procedures. As discussed earlier, there is the question of conflating Islam-an ideology- with Muslims-a group of people. Ali A. Rizvi has written about how we must differentiate between them. While I agree that it is important to distinguish an idea- like a religion- from the people who subscribe to this idea, I think that since, as discussed previously, many people fail to make this distinction, you need to discuss them together in the context of stereotyping and prejudice.

Prejudices against Muslims that often stem from ideas about Islam have led to general skepticism towards refugees from Muslim-majority countries in large parts of the population. As mentioned before Islam is widely framed as a violent and dangerous religion, associated

with terrorism, oppression of women and general violence, which leads to Muslims being perceived as potential threat by a lot of people. Since people who come from Muslim-majority countries are frequently automatically categorized as Muslims, this affects Ex-Muslim refugees too.

However, the reservation toward Islam and Muslims can also lead to more support for Ex-Muslims, as they are the ones who chose to leave Islam. Wilfried Abfalter, the head of the ARG and supporter of Ex-Muslim refugees explained this in an interview “So in the conversations we had on Mariahilfer-Straße, that is, where I was involved in the dialogue. And I can only remember that I always encountered a fundamental understanding. Yes, there are these problems in these countries and it's a perfectly understandable reason for seeking asylum if you don't want to submit to this religious regime, which is of course also politically strongly characterised. That you want to get out of this country and live somewhere else. So, many people understand that. It's often related to the fact that Islamic cultures don't have a particularly positive image in Austria at the moment, at least not among the average population. So there is definitely this scepticism towards Islam and active resistance to, or concern about, the prevalence of Islamic influences in our society. Yes, that's an issue in that respect and it's also a partial explanation as to why it can be understood so generally, I think.” It is generally not uncommon that people who meet (Muslim)refugees with suspicion are very supportive of Ex-Muslims in general. This is something that can also be found a lot among activists on social media.

5.2. Narratives of atheism in the context of asylum procedures

Atheists too have a very negative image among large parts of the population and several of my interlocutors have reported being met with prejudices and suspicion due to them not believing in God. Martin Welsz, one of the activists I spoke to also says that he often advises people to not call themselves atheists, because of the stereotypes surrounding atheism “I tell everyone that's the first thing. And I don't know if they just listen and do that. I say, don't say you're atheists, because atheist isn't that great in Austria. It's not forbidden, but it's not great now. There are also stories where this has been confirmed, where they have said such things. Good. I always say ex-Muslims. Ex-Muslim. Because Muslims are unpopular.”

Widely held stereotypes about what atheists are like also affect asylum procedures and whether or not someone is believed to be an atheist. Some people still have a very specific idea of what kind of person an atheist is, as there is that image of them being extremely loud

and provocative, and aggressive towards religious ideas and always feel the need to openly denounce religion. While you will find these atheists a lot on social media, in real life most atheists don't act this way, as Wilfried Abfalter explains "These two sides must always be explored, so to speak, by the authorities and the court. And the further this is done and to what extent and with what interest, unfortunately there are sometimes or unfortunately there are sometimes quite a lot of prejudices about how an atheist behaves. So many people have the image that they are very extroverted people who are very aggressive and out for conflict. Confrontational. And proactively rail against religions, so to speak. Not everyone is like that, yes. And especially in this language situation, that those who flee here don't necessarily have the best knowledge of German at the court hearing, many are.... And it's an authority and a state body. Many are often reticent, and that's a problem when a judge or a civil servant has different expectations. Because this is then perceived as something where someone is obviously not particularly involved and not personally affected."

He also explained that especially at the beginning of his activities in the field he often had the experience of judges finding the idea of atheism "strange", as he explained "And there were obviously judges in particular who were quite alien to this kind of world view or religious conviction. That was clearly not their world. And then it was often about a supposed contradiction about the ARG and less about the person and the proceedings."

So when it comes to asylum procedures, stereotypes and expectations about atheism still play into the way Ex-Muslim refugees are treated. They are expected to act a certain way in order to be believed that they are atheists and atheism is still met with general suspicion.

5.3. Lack of awareness about the situation of Ex-Muslims in the context of asylum procedures

So while both prejudices against Islam and Muslims as well as prejudices against atheism still affect the way Ex-Muslim refugees are treated, not just by the wider public, but also in court, the problem, that has by far been addressed the most in my interviews is a lack of awareness about the situation of Ex-Muslim refugees and the dangers of apostasy in many countries.

It already starts with the issue of people from Muslim-majority countries are often automatically assumed to be Muslims in the general population, as Martin Welsz stated in an interview "You don't really believe them, I don't think. If his name is Achmed or many are called Mohammed. If his name is Mohammed, he's Mohammedan. That's logical. You only have to think a little. He has no chance of being perceived differently. I mean, they make an effort, but then they're also in the middle of nowhere, as they say in English.(....)And how do

you make anyone understand that if he looks like this, like Jesus Christ probably looked from the Middle East. That he is not necessarily a Muslim. Yes. I don't have a solution. And that he's not a lesser man either, and I don't know, I don't know. That's what makes me a bit sad.” As mentioned before, during my research process, when I was talking to people about my work and saying that I was writing about people who are from Muslim background but are atheists themselves, the reaction was often like “what this exists” or “I never knew that there were people leaving Islam”. Wilfried Abfalter said, that he did not make this same experience in the interview, however he admitted to living in an “atheist bubble” “I myself live in an atheist bubble, I must confess quite frankly. So for me, of course, that's nothing surprising. And many of the people I'm in contact with are like that, they think like me. I hadn't realized that.... And that's Mariahilfer-Straße, which is also a relatively cosmopolitan part of Vienna. Where many tourists and people from places other than Vienna are here. There are certainly areas in Vienna where an information stand like this would be more likely to provoke conflict when people pass by.”

However, the problem is not just people being unaware of the existence of Ex-Muslims but also a lot of them not realizing, that apostasy is actually dangerous, as Martin Welsz further continues “Well, it starts with the fact that they don't even realize that it's a problem that in these countries you can't choose whether you go to the mosque every Friday or not. Yes. We don't know anything about that. And how dangerous it is to question this belief.” So a lot of people are not conscious of the potential consequences of apostasy from Islam. There also is the idea that if you just don't talk about your atheism there is no problem or that it is easy to hide it from your environment, as one refugee stated “And authority for them, atheist is not a problem. So I get my negative from BFA and one of the reason “ok, you are atheist, so you don't need, you don't have some prayers, special prayers, special things to do and you cannot do in Palestine. So you can be atheist in Palestine”. It was most silly sentence I hear in my life. It was like, you can be Ex-Muslim in Palestine, you can be atheist in Palestine, how you decide that. So the authority also, in Europe general they cannot understand.”

As being atheist is often not recognized as a potential source of danger, asylum seekers are often dismissed or not taken serious, even if they can prove their apostasy, as he further explained in the interview “OK, for me, when I came to Austria here, I came with YouTube channel that I can prove it. With the head of organization more than ten years about human rights which I can prove it. Because my organization it was part from mediteranian network and I learned that on Erasmus, my organization and there is a certificate and so many evidence that I am the head of that organization supporting human rights. And I proved they

took my office from the media. It's article from the media that it happened in this day blablabla.... And YouTube channel and this I bring this paper from here and also Zentrale Ex-Muslime in Deutschland.”

However, as he also explained, being a convert to Christianity would have brought him better chances, as this is acknowledged to be a source of danger “And for him... and I tell my story, I told my story and suddenly for him its asylum here its chance.... Your chance could be better.... He became like... listen, he didn't ask anything about atheist... he didn't(...)If you say you are Christian, you was Muslim and became Christian, they will send you to a place to be sure you are not lying. Here in Austria that exist so here is different. He just set with you and ask you anything he came to his mind. Sometimes he don't care about what you say. So he didn't ask me from any question if I am atheist or what that mean about atheist or what the atheist life in Palestine. He didn't ask me anything.”

Also he claims that in his asylum procedure his atheism was not addressed as it is simply not seen as relevant since most European people imagine leaving Islam to be like leaving Christianity would be in most European contexts “ Because he didn't ask me about atheist. For him to be atheist that mean nothing. It mean nothing for asylum case. So for that he didn't ask anything about atheist about Ex-Muslim, about that... and that give me the feeling that they are not understanding at all. Here in Europe they don't understand the meaning of being Ex-Muslim in Islamic country. Not just in Islamic country... to be Ex-Muslim in Islamic community also in Europe. To be Ex-Muslim between Muslims. In Europe or in Islamic country, what this mean... European they don't have any idea about that. They thinking it's like to be Christian and to be Ex-Christian or you stop your belief. In Europe it's ok. Nobody will ask you about what you believe, nobody will stop you on the street and ask you about it. And you can say what you want. But in our land, no, in our community, no.(...) they don't give a shit about, they don't care anything.”

Throughout that whole interview there was an ongoing theme of not just atheism being dismissed as a problem but also of continuously not being listened to and having clear experiences denied “All his question was about: you are from Palestine you escaped to Israel. And I show him my Palestinian passport, my Palestinian identity card. And we have also a card it came from Israelian army. Because when we need a permission to enter Israel, this is... this card came from Israelian army to people living in Westbank. So when he give me negative he say you are Israelian. You are Israelian and you can go back to Israel and for me it's... and Israel is a safe country. And for me it was are you stupid? I show my Palestinian passport, Palestinian identity and that card was from Israelian army that I was from

Palestinian territory and how... how you decide that I am Israeli. And I went to him again and I tell him ok, I'm Israeli, I want to go back to Israel, please go and bring for me Israeli passport. If you bring for me Israeli passport, I will go. Now but he say you are not Israeli, not he... I don't know, organization working with him and he say, but you are not Israeli, so what... why you give me negative? You wrote one of the reasons that I'm Israeli. And he wrote also that atheist... to be atheist there... it's where there... there it could be Palestine it could be Israel... to be atheist there, it's no problem, you can live.... So for me... for him I have no case."

Also the idea that they should just flee into their neighboring country has been addressed in interviews "You can't say across the board, yes, if he comes from Afghanistan, he has no right to fly there. (...). Why isn't it the smartest thing to go to a neighbouring country? Firstly, there are already 3 million refugees in Iran anyway, and even more in Turkey. And the next thing is the EU. And of course they can now say, of course, according to Dublin it all belongs to the Bulgarians and the Greeks and it's none of our business. We are a landlocked country, please. And you can ask how Bulgaria and Greece will cope with this for the EU with 200 million people in the richer-than-average countries. Because you can't say to a pushback, well, he comes from Afghanistan and has no right to be here. What about a homosexual? People have simply never thought about that. Because they're always left out in the cold and have no arguments anyway.

But there is also no politician who says and explains it like that. And that's what I would have wished for from Mr Kurz as State Secretary for Integration. That would have been the right thing to do." While in the interview it was not explicitly discussed, if this is also an issue at court, it definitely is in the general population.

Furthermore there is little awareness of the fear that some Ex-Muslims may feel, when openly discussing their ideas as a result of having to conceal them for a very long time, as Martin Welsz further explains "And someone who is a nurse and an introverted person, but at least just as valuable, yes, but he always gave the impression that if he had something to hide and he told me that, I said, talk for your life at the trial, he said, his whole life he has learned not to open his cardboard and hide the fact that he is not a Muslim. And that maybe it's his guilty conscience that's gnawing at him too, or that he has his strange behavior. And yes, he didn't get asylum, what am I supposed to do? And he didn't dare to apply for asylum a second time or anything like that." It is generally often addressed by people who work with refugees, that there is a general lack of awareness of trauma responses in court situations.

Since as discussed before some people have an idea about atheism that does not always line up with reality they will often ask questions that are not useful in finding out whether or not somebody really is an atheist. Therefore the ARG works with a professor of religious science in order to formulate an expert opinion, as Martin Welsz explains “As I said, the expert opinion from the professor helps a lot and I think it's a fundamentally different situation, that and these refugee proceedings. If you have a dispute between two parties and you have to settle it, more or less, it's actually the daily job of these administrative judges. We each fib a little bit that he meant me super and how super right his arguments are.

And in the end, they may both be fibbing, yes. And that's the daily grind. And that then, it can happen that some refugees also say nonsense, but I also asked a refugee in Germany whether a Muslim would drink beer, for example, in order to get asylum. He said, of course, yes. So an atheist refugee, yes, of course. Well, you can't just say it like that, it's just, how should I put it, that it's not believed. It's easier if the professor has already confirmed it, because otherwise questions like, what are Nietzsche's main works?(....) Or a question, I'm lucky, because now I know the answer, but at first, in a court case like this, I would probably have been at a loss as to what to say. What is happiness for you? Oida, what does that have to do with atheism, yes?”

Another problem that frustrates many refugees is just how long the asylum procedure takes sometimes despite good evidence, as one interlocutor tells “It's like they... for example, my lawyer now according to my case.... I am... I will tell you something now also it's not about(...) my court... before three years exactly 27. March 2019 I start my appeal, my complaint. And waiting three years, my judge... my judge, three years I don't hear from him anything. And also I send him from six organization, atheist organization or Ex-Muslim organization from all the world, United States, England, France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria in my name, it's in my appeal and all of them they say this man he was... his life is under threat there. And it's not Ex-Muslim Council in France, Ex-Muslim in England and Germany and this organization in the United States here in Austria and from Switzerland and professor in law he wrote a text about in Palestinian law what's mean to be atheist or to talk something bad about Islam you will be jailed ten years. And we translated to German and he wrote it according to the parts in our law in Palestine and he sent it to the court, ok. And after that I bring to my... my court so many confirmations. My language level, my workings, volunteering. I wrote, three... four text during last year.(....) Since I came to Austria I just wake up every morning to search for new confirmations. confirmation for which is helping people confirmation for learning confirmation for blablabla confirmation confirmation

confirmation.” While such procedures often take long, he also emphasized how other refugees who were not Ex-Muslims would get asylum way faster “So tell now my court with all these papers with this all confirmations with all of this they let me wait for three years. And I saw Muslims they came just two, three months. They took their asylum and they are Muslim. There are so many of them and I’m sure they were with ISIS. I’m sure, I’m not doubt. And they took it after three four months. And the person he’s really skeptic from his... and he lose his life his family, everything. And he from first moment he start to work and helping. This I win this prize that next month I will get the prize from the president. And right, my court and my case it’s nothing. So that’s the situation for atheist here in Austria. To be an atheist you are not exist. It’s not a problem for them. That’s all about what it is, ok, you can be atheist. Ok, I know I can be atheist but I cannot be atheist there. I can not... so I don’t know how we can change their minds in this, I don’t know.”

The lack of awareness about the specific problems of Ex-Muslims does not just present at court, but generally in most of the population, as he also explains “Till now when I meet people and I’m talking about that sometimes, why... why what is the reason you are came here and you’re talking about Ex-Muslim and for them it’s something silly really... you came for.... It’s not like here, it’s not like to be Ex-Christian, I don’t know.”

So there is a lot of unawareness among judges when it comes to the struggles of Ex-Muslim refugees, to the potential dangers they face but also there are some misconceptions about what atheists are like which might lead to people not being believed. However there is also some progress when it comes to the perception of Ex-Muslims and apostasy in Islam.

6. Increasing awareness of apostasy in Islam and social movements

The general public is still largely unaware of the situation or even the existence of Ex-Muslims, however, there have been some movements to increase their visibility in recent years. As mentioned before, it is not clear, if the number of apostates actually goes up, but they are definitely discussed more often and more and more people are openly coming out as Ex-Muslims. Of course this is made way easier due to Social Media, where people can openly express their opinion often anonymously. So there have been several social movements like for example the #ExMuslimBecause campaign, where Ex-Muslims were invited to share their reasons for leaving Islam on Twitter. The campaign quickly trended on Twitter. There still is a strong online community of Ex-Muslims with various platforms. But not just online, Ex-Muslims organize in real life, like in foundations such as “Ex-Muslims of North America” or the German “Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime”. These groups and associations aim to both give Ex-Muslims a community and to spread public awareness in the general public.

But Ex-Muslims also find company and support in other atheist and secular movements and groups such as the New Atheists, who unapologetically criticize religion and see it as a huge source of violence, oppression and conflict, a sentiment that a lot of Ex-Muslims share. There are also multiple atheist groups and communities, that support and work with Ex-Muslims like the Atheist Republic, an online community with a local group in Vienna, that used to hold monthly meetings.

This group is closely connected to the Atheistische Religionsgemeinschaft(ARG), that advocates for more acceptance for atheism and against discrimination and the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe Österreich, that aims to support refugees who face danger in their homeland for leaving their religion. The ARG is run by Wilfried Abfalter who I have interviewed and worked with previously. They aim for equal treatment between religious and atheist groups, through being legally accepted as a religious association. On their homepage they explain it like this: “Wer Gleichberechtigung sucht, wird sie nur unter jeweils ganz konkreten Bedingungen finden. In Österreich werden die Rechte und Pflichten von Religionsgemeinschaften ganz wesentlich vom Religionsrecht mitbestimmt; die Frage, was eine Religion ist und sein kann, bildet dabei einen zentralen Knotenpunkt, von dem vieles abhängt. Da wir uns als Atheistische Religionsgesellschaft mit religiösen Fragen beschäftigen und uns auch selber als religiöse Bekenntnisgemeinschaft verstehen, liegt es für uns nahe, uns auch rechtlich als Religionsgemeinschaft zu organisieren und eine volle Gleichberechtigung und Anerkennung als Religionsgesellschaft in Österreich anzustreben.”. While their official

main goal is for atheism to be equally accepted as other worldviews, they also advise and support Ex-Muslim refugees during asylum procedures, in close collaboration with the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe.

However, in Austria groups and associations that deal with apostasy in Islam are relatively small, few in number and a central organization is largely absent. Where else in Germany there are way bigger organizations like the “Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime” that get international recognition. They are there for Ex-Muslims as well as people who are simply believed to be Muslims because of them being from a Muslim-majority country, as they state on their homepage “Dem Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime gehören Menschen an, die entweder den muslimischen Glauben aufgegeben haben oder die niemals Muslime waren, wenngleich sie aufgrund ihrer Herkunft aus einem sog. „muslimischen Land“ gemeinhin der „Gruppe der Muslime“ zugerechnet werden.”

The “Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe” has existed in Germany much longer than it has in Austria and it is also a much bigger association. Its founding is closely linked to Rana Ahmad, an Ex-Muslim refugee going public with her story of persecution, and getting a lot of public recognition within Germany. Her book “Frauen dürfen hier nicht träumen”, in which she tells her story of fleeing Saudi Arabia actually became a bestseller in Germany.

One of my interlocutors describes the discrepancy between Ex-Muslim organization in Austria and Germany “When I was in Israel I had a contact between me and the Ex-Muslim Zentrale in Germany. More than two years so they knew me. We are, we were like talking two, three times weekly. I was... the situation in Germany it was for me so clear what happened there, Islamic organization, Ex-Muslim organization.... When I came to Austria, because I didn’t know where I will be, I don’t know... but it happened that I came to Austria. So when I came to Austria I start to ask about any contact between any atheist organization or Ex-Muslim organization. I found there is no Ex-Muslim organization. So the organization in Germany, they start the connection. It came from also the Atheist Refugee, Rana Ahmad... in Germany, which also we have contact. So they build the contact with the organization here. I... the first meeting was with Wilfried about... I think Atheist Religion...” While since then the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe Österreich, has been founded, it is still a very small organization compared to Germany.

Another problem is that the little support there is for Ex-Muslims in Austria might not always be easily accessible as it is very much concentrated in Vienna “Because I’m living in Eisenstadt.... I was in situations not like today, it was worse, last time because I didn’t have money to go to Vienna and come back and it was hard to save a lot of money to go.... So the

contact it was tiny... it was not big. And after that was COVID19 catastrophe. And that for more than two and a half year, we don't have any contact. But I'm happy, now I'm start to read there is monthly meeting again. There is something that make me... and now I can travel to Vienna when I want.... So at least it will start again." While the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe sometimes pays a refugee's travel, the resources are limited, as the whole organization consists only of a few members and the donations that it receives are not high.

So while apostasy in Islam is still largely ignored by mainstream society and in most of the media, there are more and more groups and associations who address the issue. In Austria specifically there is very little there yet, but it has increased in the last years and there are ambitions also among Ex-Muslims themselves to establish more "One of my beliefs, of my dreams and I talked to Mina Ahadi when she visited Vienna I sat with her and we talked about establish an Ex-Muslim organization here again in Austria or any other organization to be more with Ex-Muslim or people from not-Austria, from outside. Because we can understand each other, we can understand our problems. And that's one of my dreams after I get my positive... or my residence here in Austria and I start my life... and start to establish this kind of organization.... It must be because we don't have it. I believe there is so many atheists between the Syrian they came here. I would say, we have like 40 000 who came to Austria last year I believe there is at least one hundred, one hundred is not few people. It's lot of people. They need somebody to take care about them. And each of them they feel himself that he is alone. Nobody understand there is... there is people like him. So we need this kind of organization to support each other and that's my goal."Also more Ex-Muslims speak out about their struggles and more people listen to them. There are a few Ex-Muslims like the aforementioned Rana Ahmad, who get recognition beyond the secular movement. So the public visibility of Ex-Muslims is growing while still rather limited.

However, the little support there is makes a big difference for Ex-Muslim refugees as at least on an emotional level they are less alone, as one of my interlocutors explains referring to the, by the time I'm writing this, unsuccessful help from the ARG and the Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe "Yeah, they wrote a great letter to approve that I am atheist, that I am Ex-Muslim, I'm not Muslim anymore. And that's what surprised me... the problem is it came from the authority here.... When they don't care about that, for them it's not a problem to be an atheist it's not. Not the organization here they support... I didn't ask something and they then do it. What I asked, they helped me... how much they can do. So nothing, I never called them and they didn't respond or I sent E-Mail or message. So I believe it's never happened. When I sent any message or E-Mail or something to ask or clear something or I have a

question, immediately, according to their time they responded. So that's make me feel... also when there is no communication... but I feel somehow some safety. There is people... there is people in other side from that."

Conclusion

Apostasy in Islam is a very complex and little studied issue. So are the reasons and the consequences of apostasy and the position of the apostate both in their former community and the wider society.

The motives for people to leave the Islamic faith can be both political and personal and related to both social events and personal experience. Often life-changing events, both positive and negative trigger the doubting process.

But also the content of doubts can be various, ranging from scientific to moral and philosophical questions. Also perceived contradictions between traits ascribed to God and his actions, like God being portrayed as loving and kind, yet not doing anything against the immense suffering and injustice in the world can be central in the doubting process. The question of why an allpowerful being would care about such mundane things like if you pray, fast, have sex, etc. frequently comes up.

For many Ex-Muslims, leaving Islam comes with a lot of hardships, sometimes even physical threats. This is due to the importance Islam has for many Muslims. As it is central to their identity, somebody disagreeing with it is perceived as an attack against who they are as persons, not just something they believe to be true. Furthermore somebody leaving Islam is seen as a threat to the unity of the Muslim community.

This results not just in laws and often harsh punishments against apostasy but also in social ostracism and even the loss of family members and friends. Many Ex-Muslims experience loved ones cutting ties with them as a result of them coming out as atheists. Some Ex-Muslims even experience threats of violence from pious Muslims. This affects mostly those who are publicly visible and outspoken critics against Islam, like in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali who up until this day relies on police protection. But also other, internationally less well known Ex-Muslims, like the German internet-activist Ali Utlu get threats on a regular basis. But even if one does not experience such severe consequences for their apostasy, leaving Islam is not easy for many. The doubting process itself is often hard, as they have to question everything they held to be true. It is also tied to a lot of guilt as they were taught that a good Muslim doesn't doubt their faith. This guilt often stays long after them finally disavowing Islam because it is so deeply ingrained into their conscience but also because they feel like they've let down or even betrayed family members. But also the fear of hell that follows the doubting process often stays with them even long after they stopped believing in heaven or hell. Often they also moan the lost time when they spent their lives trying to be what they

thought was a good Muslim. This lost time can be the time they feel like they wasted in the past but also the future that they lose due to trying to not let anybody know their apostasy. It can also be hard to do things that they reject or don't identify with like wearing the hijab to please their family and not raise suspicion.

But not only the relationship to the Muslim community is often difficult but also to the general population. The mere existence of Ex-Muslims is politicized by many and debates about them are very polarized. While the one thing that all Ex-Muslims share is that they left Islam, they are often collectively attributed certain traits. This is in parts due to a few very vocal and publicly visible Ex-Muslims who push certain ideas. But narratives of apostasy are also actively used by ideologues to foster anti-Islam or anti-Muslim narratives that often seek to frame Islam as fundamentally different from all other world views. The former Muslims are often framed as brave heroes who left an oppressive environment and this act of leaving is portrayed as breaking free from an oppressive cult-like entity. While it is true, that most Ex-Muslims (at least those who speak about their apostasy) have experienced Islam as oppressive, the reality is still more complex than these narratives.

Despite many Ex-Muslims often distancing themselves from the right-wingers who use them, they will still be instrumentalized for their propaganda. Many times it is primarily right-wingers who are willing to listen to Ex-Muslims. However they do this not because they care about people who may suffer oppression or violence in the name of Islam but rather just because it fits their narrative.

On the other side, when speaking about problems connected to Islam, Ex-Muslims often see themselves confronted with the accusation of Islamophobia or general bigotry against Muslims. This is often made out of a concern for Muslims who are often discriminated against. However it is argued that just like people who collectively blame Muslims for Islamist violence, the people who make these accusations fail to distinguish between an ideology and a group of people. This also makes it harder for some Ex-Muslims to speak their minds, as they don't want to be associated with anti-Muslim bigots.

However maybe the biggest issue is that most people are not aware of the existence of Ex-Muslims as apostasy from Islam is barely discussed in mainstream discourse and media. They are therefore often assumed to be Muslims just for having a Muslim name. This happens from both sides, those who reject Muslims and therefore are hostile towards them as well as those who support Islam and will assume that one does so too. So they are hardly ever understood and often feel like they don't really belong anywhere, neither to the people they came from nor to the majority society.

Furthermore even today in the Western world, atheists are still met with prejudices and reservation if not open hostility. It is often assumed that they are less moral than religious people although studies have shown that there is no positive correlation between morality and religiosity. To the contrary it has been shown, that non-religious people act more moral and generous and that they generally show more compassion for less fortunate and marginalized people.

Other prejudices that atheists are often confronted with are that of them being arrogant, think that they are better than others or that they want to impose their views on others. These ideas often lead to people being distanced towards atheists or even meeting them with open hostility, which is particularly the case with religious groups.

All these ideas play into the way Ex-Muslim refugees are dealt with in asylum procedures. Ex-Muslims are caught between a variety of narratives which play into asylum procedures too. Although negative ideas about Islam affect Ex-Muslims too, since people who come from a Muslim-majority country are frequently just classified as Muslims, it does not have just negative consequences for Ex-Muslims and Ex-Muslim refugees. To the contrary, many people show more understanding for Ex-Muslims precisely because of their reservation towards Islam and Muslims. Even if people are skeptical towards refugees in general, they may make exceptions for (outspoken) Ex-Muslims.

Stereotypes about atheists also affect the way Ex-Muslims are treated in asylum procedures. Often judges expect a certain behavior from them, as there is the idea that atheists are aggressive people who actively seek conflicts and feel the constant need to denounce religious ideas. However, this is not always the case and as I have been told by activists, many Ex-Muslim refugees are pretty much the opposite of this stereotype.

However the problem that has been addressed the most in interviews is a general unawareness of the situation of Ex-Muslims and apostasy in Islam. Since people from Muslim-majority countries who look like the stereotypical person from the Middle East or even have a Muslim name, are classified as Muslims, people from these countries who claim to be atheists are frequently not believed. For some people the idea of somebody leaving Islam itself is a foreign concept. But even if Ex-Muslims are believed, there often is a lack of awareness about the potential consequences that apostasy can have in some countries. Also some assume that there is no problem, as long as one doesn't openly talk about it.

So while the lack of awareness about the issue of apostasy in Islam is still a central problem this is slowly changing as there is some progress. Ex-Muslims themselves organize as well as other people who are aware of their problems try to change the situation.

But also in science, while the issue has been almost completely ignored for a very long time, there have been a few studies on apostasy in Islam in recent years. However it still is a very marginal topic in the social sciences and not on every aspect of the issue is literature to be found. While there is some literature on the reasons for people to leave Islam and also the way their apostasy affects their relationship to the Muslim community, there is hardly anything about the way, Western mainstream societies respond to them.

So it is a topic where definitely more research needs to be done as there are many questions that have not been systematically explored. However for Ex-Muslims to actually benefit from that research, it is necessary to not just stay an academia but be communicated to the public.

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