

## Losing their religion

# The number of ex-Muslims in America is rising

*Yet even in the land of the free, apostasy isn't easy*



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AS SOON as he stepped off the plane on a family holiday to Kenya, Mahad Olad knew something was wrong. His mother, a “very devout, very conservative, very Wahhabi” woman, was acting strangely—furtively taking phone calls when she thought he was out of earshot. His suspicions would soon be proved correct. Mr Olad’s family, Somali immigrants to America and devout Muslims, had discovered that he had not only renounced Islam but was also gay. The holiday was a ruse, an intervention to save his soul.

Mr Olad was told he would leave college and be turned over the next day to the care of Muslim clerics who would restore his faith. “I was aware of the horrors of these camps,” Mr Olad says. “They operate them in the middle of nowhere, where you cannot escape. They subject you to beatings, starvation and trampling.” He tried to contact the American embassy, but it could not send help because of recent

terrorist attacks nearby. Luckily, he also managed to reach a Kenyan atheist group. In the dead of night he sneaked into his mother's room, stole his passport and was whisked away by taxi to the embassy, which eventually returned him safely to America. He has not spoken to his family since.

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Though few have such harrowing stories, hundreds of thousands of American Muslims might recognise something like their own experience in Mr Olad's tale. As the number of American Muslims has increased by almost 50% in the past decade, so too has the number of ex-Muslims. According to the Pew Research Centre, 23% of Americans raised as Muslims no longer identify with the faith.

Most of them are young second-generation immigrants who have come to reject the religion of their parents. Some, however, are older when their crisis of faith arrives, already married to devout Muslim spouses and driving children to the mosque to study the Koran at weekends.

The vast majority, whether young or old, are silent about their faithlessness. One Muslim college student, who came home drunk one evening, was confronted by his father. Not thinking clearly, the son confessed to his father that he was an atheist, whereupon the father revealed that he too had lost his faith many years ago. Yet he still admonished his son for not hiding his secret well enough.

Publicly leaving Islam is difficult because many Muslims live in tight-knit communities. Many apostates are left closeted, afraid to put at risk their relationships with their parents, on whom they may still depend, or with their siblings and their friends. Non-believing Mormons, Hasidic Jews and evangelical Christians find themselves in a similar predicament. Within Somali enclaves in

Minneapolis and Pakistani ones in Dallas, renunciation of Islam is tantamount to renunciation of an entire social circle. “The most frustrating part is living knowing that my life has to be guided by the rules I don’t agree with,” says one still deep in the closet.

Apostasy is different from apathy, but that is also growing among Muslims. Among believers aged 55 or older, 53% say they perform all five of the mandatory daily prayers—no easy feat, considering that the first must be done before dawn. Among Muslim millennials, that proportion falls to 33%. Few would be ostracised for missing a prayer, or not fasting during the month of Ramadan—so long as those misdeeds were not made public.

In broad terms, there are two types of ex-Muslims. Those who are from less religious families simply drift away and face fewer repercussions. “It was a progression,” says one such ex-Muslim, who stopped praying at the age of eight after noticing that nothing cataclysmic happened when she missed a prayer one day. Then she starting sneaking meals during Ramadan, before moving on to alcohol and premarital sex. At 18, she was an atheist.

Then there are those in more religious households. They tend to have cleaner breaks, sudden realisations while studying the Koran or the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Often the verses that trigger this are controversial ones about slavery or gender that family members and imams cannot explain satisfactorily. Coming across the writings of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens sometimes has the same effect. Some chafe at sexism or homophobia. “I remember one Halloween, I wasn’t allowed to go trick-or-treating because I had to clean up after dinner, but all my male cousins and brothers got to go,” says one female ex-Muslim who is not out to her family (nor will ever be, she fears).

To cope, some look online, seeking solace in anonymous forums. One, hosted on Reddit, has nearly 30,000 followers. Here ex-Muslims trade stories of families kicking their children out after they confess their disbelief. But they also traffic in lighter-hearted fare, like taking pictures of booze-and-pork meals during Ramadan—enjoyed in the daylight, of course.

### **Out and proud**

Despite all the pressure of family and community, more ex-Muslims seem to be going public. Ex-Muslims of North America (EXMNA), an advocacy organisation,

has pushed for those who safely can to publicly declare their renunciations. “The goal is to change things enough so that we no longer need to exist,” says Sarah Haider, EXMNA’s director. The group launched a university tour, entitled “Normalising Dissent”, which has attracted angry critics and required extensive security preparations. Though she must contend with death threats, and has to be quite vigilant about infiltrators to her organisation, Ms Haider persists. “Condemnation is still acknowledgment,” she notes.

While the penalties for apostasy can be high in the West, they are much more severe in the Muslim world. In Pakistan, blasphemy carries a death sentence. In Bangladesh, atheist writers have been hacked to death by machete-wielding vigilantes. An atheist who recently appeared on Egyptian television to debate a former deputy sheikh from Al-Azhar University was dismissed by the host and told that he needed to see a psychiatrist. Mr Olad, who was born in a refugee camp in Kenya, has seen both worlds—he knows ex-Muslims in Kenya and Somalia who were severely beaten when their secrets were discovered. “I feel very grateful to live in a country where I have at least some level of protection,” he says.

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