

Muslims Questioning Islam

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My memory takes me back to the mid-1930s when I first heard about the famous Egyptian scholar, *Taha Hussein*. His name came in a conversation my father had with a friend, and it had to do with the troubles that Dr. Hussein encountered after the publication of his book, *al-Adab al-Jahili* (*Arab Literature in the Pre-Islamic Age*.) Somehow, the scholars at al-Azhar University in Cairo objected to the linguistic and stylistic similarities Taha Hussein posited between the Qur'an and the Arab literature of the "*Days of Ignorance*." It was not possible for a long time to obtain a copy of this book. I managed to get one while visiting a bookstore in downtown Amman, Jordan, in the mid-1990s. It had gone through fifteen printings since it was first published in Cairo, on May 11, 1927!

It was hearing about that event that me aware of the fact that it was very dangerous in the Arab and Muslim worlds to write anything that may be construed as diminishing the sacredness or uniqueness of the sacred text of Islam.

Forty years later, another book appeared that critiqued portions of the Qur'an, and generally all theistic faiths. The author, *Dr. Sadeq Jalal al-Adhm*, who at the time was teaching at the American University of Beirut, wrote "*A Critique of Religious Thought*." (*Naqd al-Fikr Al-Deeni*.) He got into trouble with the Lebanese authorities, was arrested, and spent one week in prison, from January 8 to 15, 1969. Eventually, he was exonerated from the charge of inciting divisions among the various religious communities of Lebanon. I must add that Dr. Al-Adhm comes from a famous Sunni family in Damascus.

Now, due to the rise of Islamic radicalism since the Iranian Revolution, hardly any published criticism of Islam or its sacred documents have appeared in the Arab world. However, there is one venue that allows Muslim dissidents to express themselves freely, i.e., the Internet. Most of us are aware of several English web sites that regularly deal with subjects that are critical of Islam. However, what surprised me greatly was the appearance of an Arabic article on a Kuwaiti web site known as Tanweer (Enlightenment,) with this provocative title:

"From Religion to No Religion" (*Min al-Deen ila al-Ladeen*): *The Confession of a Muslim who renounced Islam*. For those readers who are at home in Arabic, you may like to consult: <http://www.kwtanweer.com/articles/readarticle.php?articleID=408>

The author used a pseudonym that gives the impression that he is a Syrian from Damascus, who has gone through a difficult spiritual journey that ended with his leaving Islam.

I share the article with the readers of this web site to acquaint them with the spiritual and intellectual struggles that many Muslims are having when they seek to understand their faith in a globalized context. Now while I have sympathy with some of his problems that deal specifically with Islam, I certainly want to state that I disagree with him completely when his arguments veer in the direction of a wholesale rejection of all theistic faiths. As an Eastern Christian whose forefathers suffered from dhimmitude for thirteen centuries, I am thankful to be able to think and to write as a ***“liberated dhimmi.”*** My life experiences, far from making me doubt the veracity and vitality of my faith make me more attached to it and thankful to God for my ancestors’ stand in refusing to Islamize.

Here follows my translation of the text, having done my utmost to be faithful to the original Arabic, while at the same time striving to make it appear in as good English as possible. I must add, that the vast majority of the topics discussed on the ***Tanweer*** web site, are concerned about the **modernization, the renewal, and the reform of Islam**; they seldom touch on subjects that deal with an outright rejection of Islam. This is why, this contribution struck me as completely unusual, and extremely bold!

Will Durant said: *“Those who doubt religious faith the most are those experts in religion, since they have come to know religion as it truly is”*

What an accurate statement! I don’t doubt its truth. It summarizes my personal experience with religion. It may also cast light on the reasons that led me to take a decision to leave Islam. According to Islamic Law, I have committed the sin of ***radda***, i.e., apostasy.

Actually no one chooses his religion or his beliefs. Religion is similar to our names that are imposed upon us without our participation in the choice. I, like other Muslims, was born and grew up in a Muslim society, within a Muslim milieu, and family. I became a Muslim as a matter of tradition. Should I have been asked in the past: do you expect to become a person without any religious commitment; I would have stared at the person as his question was beyond consideration! During my days of commitment to Islam, I used to repeat the words of the late Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali: *“Unbelief is stupidity! All that is in the universe proclaims loudly the existence of God.”*

People who surrounded me kept sowing in my mind some very beautiful thoughts about Islam: ***Islam is the true and eternal religion; Islam performs miracles; Islam opens minds and hearts; etc.***

I grew up accompanied by Islamic illusions. Since I belonged to a religious family I became very religious, committed to Islamic teachings, and very faithful in performing all the duties of my faith. I was a very strong believer in Islam. I defended it emotionally, and with zeal. However, I had to contend with doubts and questions without finding answers to them.

All the religious authorities kept telling me: *everything in the Qur'an is true, and everything that did not agree with it was wrong and false. As for your doubts and suspicions, they proceed from Satan. If you keep on dealing with these doubts, don't forget to seek refuge in Allah and implore Him to defend you from the evils of the devils.*

I believed, and I grew up. The intensity of my clinging to Islam led me to read all I could find of the Islamic books, ancient and modern, ultra conservative as well as those open to new ideas. The more I read Islamic thought, the more my doubts increased. My mind became filled with questions that had no answers.

At this point in my life, I found one refuge, so I embarked on a spiritual quest for Allah. I convinced myself that all my doubts had originated with Satan. It was the duty of a believer, when assailed by doubts and questions, simply to implore Allah for forgiveness, and seek to forget them. In fact, I was attempting to force myself to ignore these questions as if they did not exist. After all, a man's mind is not capable to understand the secrets of religion!

And as a committed believer, I kept on forcing my mind to surrender to this line of reasoning, and to accept those simplistic answers that I read, or heard proceeding from the *'ulema*. However, this method did not work; I could not eradicate my doubts. In fact they remained embedded in some dark corners of my mind waiting for an appropriate moment to reappear with strength and to confront me anew. Here is an account of how these doubts returned in force.

One of my bad habits is my strong attachment to arguments. Once, while I was still a religious Muslim, a satanic idea came to me. I decided to assume the role of an atheist and confront a group of religious men with my arguments. Actually, my real aim was to strengthen my ability to engage in apologetics, and to discover areas of weakness in the position of the atheists through such encounter.

So, I went to the College where the Shari'ah is taught as it was close to the Law School where I was studying. I chose a bunch of bearded men and sat among them. I began to engage them in a religious discussion, setting forth my own arguments for unbelief. I allowed my tongue to wax eloquent with all kinds of proofs for my position. I was surprised to find them unable to deal with my arguments!

I kept on repeating this experiment several times with other people who were wiser than the first group, the result was the same.

Naturally, my old doubts increased. This led me to read more and my critique of religion increased. For the first time, I began to read Islam as a critic, and not as a believer in its sacredness. This led me to finally arrive at my position of no religion, and of forsaking Islam.

It was a long period in which I went through this painful experience of searching, reflecting, and continual studying. I experienced periods of pangs of conscience and bewilderment. I started to neglect my ritual prayers, while at the same time, I felt guilty. I decided haltingly to adopt the position of irreligion, but finally, I took my final decision: I left my religion [i.e. my Islam].

When a person begins to think and ask questions while not adhering to rigid structures of thought and presuppositions, and fails to arrive at convincing answers, it is at that point that one goes through a very serious intellectual struggle and faces one of two choices:

One choice would be to stop using one's mind and to accept the current religious thought. This is the simple and comfortable choice, both intellectually and socially.

The other choice would be to take a final and bold choice by forsaking what were previously considered unassailable positions. Here a person will have to pay dearly for his decision, both socially and intellectually.

It is very difficult for a person to be at the same time religious and rational. For the logic of faith forces one to accept teachings as absolute, that cannot be questioned. Thus you find yourself either forsaking your mind and denying it any function in life; and thus going on the path of religion. The other choice requires a person to follow the directives of his mind, thus leading him to forsake his religion.

Some may ask me, *“What were those doubts and questions that occasioned your intellectual crisis and forced you to forsake religion?”*

It is very difficult to summarize the multitude of my readings and reflections in a few lines. That would require several pages. Some samples of my critique of religion can be found in articles I write for a network of irreligious Arabs (www.ladeeni.net) Also, I contribute a monthly column dealing with *Religious Thought*, for the online magazine Al-Josor (www.josor.net) [Bridges]. Some day, I hope that I can publish a book on this subject.

I know that some of you would not be convinced by what I've already said. You will continue to regard the irreligious [atheist] as a human being with ulterior motives. I do understand this point of view which springs from an Arab milieu that is unaccustomed to accept or consider different points of view, and where there is a lack of freedom of expression. In fact in the Arab culture, every new thought is regarded with suspicion, and how much greater this attitude becomes when someone advocates a different religious view?

A critique of religious thought is forbidden in the Arab culture. It is often met with rejection; and [when published] the result is the confiscation of the book or magazine, and with putting the author on trial.

I believe that recognizing the right of the irreligious to exist and to express himself will eventually change this disfigured portrait of anyone who has renounced his religious faith. I have experienced through my dialog conducted on the Internet, that many of my religious colleagues approached me early in their discussions in an extremely hostile manner; the same thing could be said of some non-believers who entered the discussions with a similar attitude. However, my dialog [in a rather quiet manner] impacted the two sides, and especially the religious one. The person who began with a belligerent attitude toward the non-religious 'Other,' eventually was willing to accept co-existence with him. He became willing to accept him intellectually; or at least agree to consider that the non-religious person possesses a powerful thought that deserves to be heard and discussed, and not rejected, or despised.

It is rather too soon to talk about a critique of religious thought that gets published as it happens in the West. Personally, I wish I could succeed in publishing my thoughts in a book. What keeps this from happening is the entrenched system of Arab censorship that thrives on the principle that the door that brings you fresh air must remain closed. I have tried and tried to publish my thoughts in newspapers, in magazines, and periodicals. I have met with nothing but rejection. Everyone seems to be afraid of the consequences of publishing my work.

I am convinced that the Internet has a tremendous value as it serves anyone who has an idea to defend. It has opened for us a limitless space to openly and freely express our views. In fact, if it were not for the Internet, we would not have been aware of the existence of the irreligious or non-religious current within Arab and Islamic societies. Perhaps the day is coming when I would be able to speak openly and boldly using my real name, and say: **“Yes, I am an irreligious person, and these are my reasons.”**