

Egyptian Unbelievers' Beliefs

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LEAD-IN:

Atheists have been overlooked by the Egyptian society for a long time. However, following the January 25th revolution in Egypt, atheists in the country are speaking up and calling for their rights to be integrated in the society. In this documentary Luciana Antonious talks to Egyptian atheists who express their beliefs and the difficulties they face in a Muslim majority country.

NATSOUND: Egyptian street with sounds of traffic, church bells, and Mosque prays

MUSIC: Meditation by Sami Youssef (Fade in)

The trend of atheism has always been a taboo in the conservative society of Egypt. Egyptian atheists believe they are recently increasing in number. And, they are speaking up through blogs, social media, and Talk-shows.

Atheists have not been granted basic rights in the "Islamic" Middle East. Islam has always been an integral component of the Middle Eastern culture and history. Dr. Madiha El Safty, a Sociology Professor at the American University in Cairo, claims a belief system is what holds the Middle East together.

Dr. Madiha: "Religion is a major part of our culture. The components of culture include a belief system. Religion is part of our socialization system. All the Arab region shares that. This part of the world considers religion a basic part of socialization." (0:17)

In Islam and according to the Sharia law, ex-Muslim atheists are guilty of apostasy, a crime with a possible death penalty. Since Egypt is an Islamic country by its constitution, Islamic Sharia law is incorporated into the national law. This means that all Egyptians are subjected

to the Sharia Law, regardless of their religion. According to a Pew Research Center poll in 2013, 64% of Muslims in Egypt believe people who leave Islam should be killed. This is 20% lower than three years ago.

MUSIC: Meditation by Sami Youssef (Fade out)

MUSIC: A meeting by Omar Khairat (Fade in)

One of the main problems with atheism in Egypt is that people don't have enough knowledge about either the existence of a significant number of scientologists, agnostics, deists, and atheists in general, or the differences between their beliefs. Whenever atheists have to discuss their skepticism in religion, or the existence of god, they usually receive the same reply regardless of what they think: "If there is no God, who is the creator."

This can challenge either an atheist who doesn't believe in the existence of god and religion, or an agnostic who thinks it is impossible to know whether god really exists or not, but it would never confront a deist or a scientologist. The deists already believe in a God who created the universe and then renounced it while scientologists believe in science as the creator, not God.

Emad Adel, a 21-year old scientologist born for a Christian family, explains why he believes in science instead of God.

Emad: "Discovering theories and the scientific community findings make me leave my religion. Theories about the universe like cosmogony and evolution refuted the religious theories because faith is the opposite of knowledge. Because Faith doesn't require any evidence and if something you believe in had evidence, it will be knowledge not faith" (0:28)

Emad represents a huge number of the atheists in Egypt nowadays, who are mostly in their 20s.

MUSIC: A meeting by Omar Khairat (Fade out)

MUSIC: Instrumental Worship Music (Fade in)

Although Egypt Independent newspaper estimated the number of atheists to be more than three million now, there are no official statistics and research about atheism and its reasons in Egypt. This is why Ramez Habib, a student at the American University in Cairo conducted his own research to figure out the relation between science and atheism.

Ramez: "I reached out for about 80 people from 18 to 25 years old, with roughly equal number of Muslims, Christians and atheists. And I found out that 67% of the interviewed atheists think that scientific progress buries religion and that it is the main cause for their atheism." (0:19)

Although this number is based on a student's work, the reported results are very credible due to the relatively large and heterogeneous sample. It seems like as people find out more into science, religion then is rejected as an unqualified source of truth and correct knowledge.

The rise in atheism is believed by many people to be a by-product of the January 25th revolution.

NAT SOUND: Revolution

Madiha: "The revolution has its impact on Egyptians; for the first time, they can rebel, they can rise, they can express their ideas. People are no longer afraid in Egypt. They can express themselves freely."(0:15)

As the breaking down of the previous political system during the revolution seems also to break down the social and religious restrictions in the society.

MUSIC: Instrumental Worship Music (fade out)

MUSIC: Background Music by Relax Daily (Fade in)

Karim Nagib, a 21 year-old Engineering Student, joined the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square from its first day. Karim was a mainstream Protestant Christian who was involved deeply in the Church community.

Karim: "The revolution broke a lot of norms whether community norms, or norms in ones thinking. After the revolution, I found people who have goals bigger than them in the revolution, and this goal is very noble. Church always says that the noblest thing is to live your life for the glory of god. However, when I see it now, NO, there are a lot of things that are noble, and more noble than living for the glory of god."
(0:31)

During the previous two years, religious leaders participated in different political events. They expressed their political views, and some of them have even held political positions including Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi leaders. The actions and positions of these leaders might have windswept the faith of people who looked up for them as role-models.

Dr. Madiha: "We have two religious institutions. They have a role in explaining the religion and in affecting the individuals' lives of each religion. If there is atheism, it can be a rebellion against what Islam has been reflecting recently. Our Islam here in Egypt is the moderate Islam but these radical Islamists have interpreted their own Islam and distorted the Islam that we have grown up understanding." (0:36)

Religious institutions have played a role in destroying the religious bubble in the Egypt. Although this is not obvious in the case of Al-Azhar, the Christian church held very controversial positions in different occasions including their advocating for specific candidate during the presidential elections, their withdrawal from the constitution assembly, and their relation with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, known as SCAF, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Karim: "At the beginning, when I thought, I found myself comfortable in the church community; I used to pass the question. But after the revolution, I didn't have this fear of not belonging to a church. I had times when I refused what the church did concerning things with the revolution like for example having people from the SCAF

in the Christmas to greet the Christians while Christian people were killed by the military." (0:28)

What seems to be common among unbelievers is that they all tend to over-think. They criticize the essence of things that people take for granted. After they abandon their religion, the task is more difficult. At first, the holy texts and interpretations provided some ideas that can console them. As atheists, they have to explore the answers to everything. For example, they don't have the privilege of assuming that a bad incident is god's will, and a good thing is God's grace and blessings.

Emad: "Religions are all just people trying to justify their lack of knowledge and trying to find meaning in things that don't make sense, but I believe everything has an explanation." (0:15)

Karim: "Actually, it is easier to believe in a god than not believe in one." (0:05)

This is true. Unbelievers have a harder life than believers. They have to resolve their internal conflicts. Also, they have to face the external pressure that they are subjected to. According to the Global Religion Project by the Pew Research Center, unbelievers encounter two difficulties.

The first is governmental restrictions. In Egypt, the identity card should represent your religion. No one can state a belief other than the three Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These are the only three beliefs recognized by the Egyptian constitution. Although representatives of atheists demanded to be recognized in the 2012 constitution, this seems to be impossible. Unbelievers are subjected to Blasphemy laws, which prohibit the contempt of religions.

Karim: "People in Egypt especially, you are either a Christian or a Muslim, it is more like people don't get what you are speaking about. My name doesn't have any

significant of being a Christian or a Muslim, people always tries to know whether I'm Christian or a Muslim." (0:20)

Karim claims that the problem is cultural illiteracy. People don't understand atheism. They only think it offends their religion.

The other restriction is societal hostility. When an atheist guy appeared on El Mehwar, Egyptian TV Channel, and stated that his parents were getting along with his atheism, many people were surprised. This man, like Karim and Emad, believes he doesn't have a problem because his family and friends are accepting their atheism. However, this is not true. Karim always makes sure people in his university don't know that he is an atheist. He is the Student Union President in one of the largest universities in Cairo, and his beliefs can make him lose this position. Also, many atheists requested anonymity because they are afraid of losing financial support by their families, or being discriminated against in the society.

Although familial people may understand, the majority of the community would marginalize atheists.

MUSIC: Background Music by Relax Daily (Fade out)

MUSIC: Last Day by Mikka Mettinen (Fade in)

Dr. Madiha: "You are socialized into your religion from the earliest childhood. The idea of being an atheist is a social stigma and is totally unaccepted by the society. They are unaccepted socially, people do stigmatize them; they marginalize them, exclude them. Neighbors even may not be willing to include them in their lives."
(0:20)

Egypt is at a crossroad after the 2011 revolution that called for Freedom, and equality. If there is a serious rise in the number of atheists in Egypt, the question of whether to include or exclude unbelievers from the society needs to be answered urgently for the sake of the society.

MUSIC: Last Day by Mikka Mettinen (Fade out)

This documentary was produced and narrated by Luciana Antonious

Special thanks to Dr. Madiha El Safty, Karim Nagib, Emad Adel, and Ramez Habib.

NAT Sound and Music are extracted from YouTube

Music by:

Meditation by Sami Yusuf

A meeting by Omar Khairat

Background Music by Relax Daily

Last Day by Mikka Mettinen

Instrumental Worship Music

Thank you for listening to "Egyptian Unbelievers' Beliefs."