

Atheism and Islam: A Conversation with a Moroccan writer, blogger, and activist

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The following interview was conducted by Stefano Bigliardi for the Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics in Italy. It was first published in Italian.

Kacem El Ghazzali (b. 1990) is a Moroccan writer, blogger, and activist currently living in Zurich. He obtained political asylum in Switzerland in 2011. He was forced to flee from his country after his schoolmates discovered he kept a blog about atheism in which he openly declared himself to be a nonbeliever, and started harassing him verbally as well as physically. School authorities not only failed to intervene but also blamed him for his ideas and for having made them public. Kacem has told his story in the novel "Flight 8J540 Casablanca-Geneva." I reached Kacem via Skype on October 24, 2016 for a chat about atheism and Islam.

Stefano Bigliardi: The story of how and why you left Morocco is well known, and I will briefly reconstruct your background as an activist in the introduction to our conversation. But I would like to discuss your activism from an even more personal perspective. How was "your" atheism born? Was it spontaneous, a tendency not to believe, or was it inspired by certain readings – and if so, which ones?

Kacem El Ghazzali: I would say both. As a child, between the age of seven and ten, I used to ask questions. Like any child. Including questions about God: who is he? Where is he? The very fact that I received no answer, or rather, that I felt I was asking forbidden questions, and that my interlocutors were both scared of answering and of those very questions, well, all this made me realize at an early age that religion could not be defended in a logical fashion. In fact, back then I did not consider myself as an atheist but as a Muslim. Culturally Muslim, of course, since I did not believe in Allah but I was at least following religious practices, although maybe not always in a disciplined manner.

For instance, I was pretending to pray, and I was doing it without the ritual of ablutions – which is essential. Or I was pretending to fast during the month of Ramadan, and actually I was eating in secret. Later on, at about the age of sixteen or seventeen, I started feeling the urge to analyze and read a lot. Philosophy greatly helped me, perhaps even more than science, although the theory of evolution was an important ingredient. I do not want to speak in a religious fashion, of course, and say that philosophy provided me with "salvation" analogously to religion for religious people, but for sure I found logical and convincing answers in it. My atheism was built on this. There was an "instinct" on the one hand, and there was, on the other hand, the urge to give myself an articulate answer as to the reasons for my own atheism, the same kind of answer I was demanding from religious people without actually obtaining it.

Bigliardi: How is it to be an atheist in the Muslim world? Can you explain whether there are any differences across countries? Is there a spectrum of possible situations?

El Ghazzali: There are differences, to be sure. But one ends up comparing evil with evil, or evil with worse! For instance Morocco is considered as one of the most liberal Arabic and Islamic countries. Moroccan atheists, but also Lebanese ones, enjoy some liberties if compared for instance with Saudi or Iraqi ones. We have also witnessed changes over time. For instance the situation in Syria was better before the Arab Spring. The country, to be sure, was ruled by a dictator, dissidents were jailed and tortured, but still, there was room for some discussion of religion, and books were published in Aleppo that were forbidden in Cairo or Riyadh. Then again – being an atheist in Morocco is like walking around a Hamas campus while waving an Israeli flag. It is not something one can be proud of, or that one can declare serenely. On the contrary, it can bring about many troubles.

In some countries, like Morocco, one can be an atheist given that one does not make it public. If you state it privately it can happen that you lose part of your friends or that your family violently opposes you, or even kicks you out. In Saudi Arabia it is not just society – you can be legally persecuted as a terrorist. And in Morocco activism, political action, are anyways forbidden. If one tries to bring atheism into the public sphere, to create a debate in order for atheism to be taken into account as far as laws and regulations are concerned, so that Moroccan atheists can enjoy some kind of protection analogously to Jews who are protected by the constitution, one can be prosecuted as a person who is “waging war unto Islam”. And Islam is “defended” not only through words and articles, but also by way of legal action or by using physical violence...

Bigliardi: But in order to get a general idea of what contemporary Islam is we should also take into account all those attempts at reforming Islam from within, shouldn't we? I mean, there are numerous theories, developed by Muslim intellectuals, theories dear to European liberal intellectuals, which harmonize for instance Islam and feminism, Islam and contemporary science, Islam and democracy, even Islam and homosexuality... Such attempts are perhaps highly intellectual and definitely not mainstream, but they do exist. What do you think?

El Ghazzali: Up to a certain extent I do uphold these attempts, but I also criticize them. It is all about taking the Koran as a reference and this creates a problem. Once you open the door to those who want to use the Koran in a certain way, you open the door to all those who likewise want to use it but find other concepts in it. The very term “interpretation” is in fact misleading because there are Koranic verses one can refer to that convey a very immediate meaning: verses that legitimate violence, hate, death to the apostates. I do not wish to wipe out religion, of course. But it should be confined to the private sphere. You want to be a Muslim? No problem! But at the same time you must also accept logic and reason, and focus on what human beings really have in common, which isn't the Koran but the very fact that they all are human beings inhabiting the same planet and sharing the same universal rights. All the attempts at defending this or that concept or principle “in Koranic fashion” just brings about theological disputes among Muslims in which liberal ideas end up having a big disadvantage. Furthermore, one thing is to find inspiration in the ideas of some great Muslim thinker of the past, another thing is to strive to find contemporary ideas in what the Prophet said or did fourteen hundred years ago, which, in my opinion, deprives any discussion of all seriousness.

Bigliardi: Now that you have been living in Europe for some years I guess you are rather familiar with the “inclusive discourse” promoted by left-wing parties (I am well aware, of course, that we are using a highly imperfect term here). Sometimes one gets the impression that the old Marxian adage that religion is the opiate of the masses is not fashionable anymore. What one rather hears is an invitation to openness towards religions and perhaps with special consideration for Islam. Is that the case?

El Ghazzali: Yes. This is something that makes me very sad and bothers me a lot, as much as I am

bothered by the way right-wing parties deal with Islam and migration from Muslim countries. But I still blame left-wing parties! The reason is that, instead of coping with problems in a rational fashion, differentiating between criticism and anti-Islamic animosity, they have been avoiding those very problems or passing over them in silence. This allowed populists and demagogues to get hold of the debate while presenting themselves as the heroes of freedom, the only ones who hold dear the destiny of Europe and the West. We can see this also now in the American elections with Trump and Clinton. I am forced to recognize –and it is the cause of great sorrow to me— that I agree with a rightwing politician when he states that there is something like an “Islamist threat”. Why do we have to hear certain things from Donald Trump and not from Hillary Clinton? She would be receiving praise for that; I would be her first supporter! The same thing happens here in Europe, where I am blamed by certain leftist circles for being an “Islamophobe” (although they fail to explain why someone who criticized the Pope is not blamed for being a “Christianophobe”). And mind you – I am very careful in stating the limits and the aim of my criticism and the fact that I do come myself from a Muslim country and I have a Muslim family!

I am the last one who would be against liberty and civil rights or against Muslims as individuals. In Europe the situation is very complex, and the left has apparently lost its political compass. Minorities’ rights must be defended but being a minority does not entail possessing the truth and being above criticism. One of the consequences is damaging not only the atheists in the Muslim world, but also the liberal Muslims I was mentioning earlier, or even those who just want to critically deal with the Koran, placing it in a certain social setting or analyzing it with the tools of history and linguistics. Those who take such a standpoint should be welcomed like heroes by the West and by the left, the same way in which the dissidents from the Soviet Union should have been welcomed as people who needed visibility and support.

Bigliardi: So aren’t you afraid that your criticism of Islam brings grist to the mill of right-wing Islamophobia? What if one day you wake up and find out that you are being quoted by some racist leader, some extremist who fans the flames of intolerance?

El Ghazzali: Once again: I am not responsible for that. Leftist parties are the ones to blame. The people feel that the political left does not listen to their logical fears – we are talking here about reasonably argued ones, not about phobias. Fears inspired by facts and statistics, for instance those concerning demographic shifts. One should avoid denying those fears or labeling them as paranoid. When it is time to vote, if there aren’t multiple options, a person who is scared, precisely because they are scared, will vote for the parties who voice those very fears although they are right-wing ones that historically have nothing to do with the struggle for civil rights or for humanist values, but rather with the values of the church! I am of course referring to the Catholic right, not to the right meant as economic liberalism. There are parties inspired by religion who are able to present themselves as the voice of reason: this bothers me a great deal!

Bigliardi: Fair enough. So let’s close the circle and discuss activism again. What needs to be done? Which actions can be promoted in your country? And in Europe? What do you think you will do?

El Ghazzali: This is a good question, and a difficult one at the same time. In fact what I do is not activism. It is self-defence. I belong to a minority under attack, devoid of any support and protection. Under these circumstances it is difficult to promote, for instance a reform, which is something that is usually expected from people like me. However, I must admit that, if we focus on the changes in the Muslim world rather than on what I have accomplished or I can accomplish myself, we can notice that there are encouraging phenomena underway. I’ve been in Europe since 2011. I left Morocco when I was twenty. I was a student in high school. I see now that one can declare themselves an atheist on Facebook, but also a Christian or a homosexual. Thousands of users do that regularly. Atheism is discussed on Arabic TV. I hear about atheists meeting in bars. This is

happening in Morocco but also in Tunisia and Egypt. And even in Saudi Arabia! They use nicknames, but there are Saudi atheists, for instance on Twitter! Actually some surveys show a remarkable presence of atheists in Saudi Arabia, superior to other Muslim countries.

I am not entailing, of course, that each and every person who turns their back to religion automatically is a decent human being. An atheist is not necessarily a noble and ethical person. Atheism is a specific stance concerning existence, its origin, its end. An atheist, as to their behavior, can well be a pedophile or a terrorist! However, before the advent of the Internet, the atheists were invisible in the Muslim world. We remember President Ahmadinejad's statement that there are no homosexuals in Iran...

Obviously, whenever there is a declaration of atheism on the Internet there is also plenty of hate, atheists are depicted as Satan, and so on... But communication is still a form of contact and society will slowly get used to the topic. Once a habit is created, there can be a courageous politician who can bring atheism up in the public sphere.

However, the things in my home country may even be more complex because one has to take into account, besides the social setting, the fact that the King there is both the Head of State and Commander of the Faithful so that any changes in matters of religious freedom are very difficult to promote even if he were to take action in person.

P.S.

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<https://www.kacemelghazzali.com/single-post/2017/02/05/Atheism-and-Islam-A-Conversation-with-Kacem-El-Ghazzali>

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