

Secular Rescue: The Underground Railroad for Atheists

Monday 29 January 2018, by [BRAYTON Ed](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2018).

The Atlantic has a powerful story about Lubna Yaseen [1], an Iraqi woman who faced death threats for expressing her atheist beliefs in her native Iraq (she was literally threatened by Al Qaeda militants for not wearing a hijab). But Secular Rescue [2], a project of the Center for Inquiry, got her out of Iraq to safety.

Growing up in Hillah, a city in central Iraq, Lubna Yaseen developed an independent mind at a young age. “My mother is an atheist intellectual person, and she brought up me and my siblings to think for ourselves and to be open to anything,” she told me. Yaseen was particularly concerned about her teachers’ attitudes toward women. “I always asked why girls should wear a hijab and boys are not obligated to do so,” she said. Why would “God” treat the two sexes differently? She quickly learned the dangers of expressing these views: Her teachers often threw her out of their classes, and sometimes beat her.

In 2006, when Yaseen and her mother were driving home one day, al-Qaeda militants pulled them over and threatened to kill them for not wearing the hijab. Still, Yaseen’s desire to explore secular thinking grew at university. “I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. Whenever there was a conversation, I talked.” She started handing out leaflets on Mutanabbi Street, the heart of Baghdad’s intellectual life, and wrote about her atheist beliefs on Facebook. Her activism attracted further threats from fellow students and local Islamist militia groups, but she was determined to continue. “I believed in my rights to be who I am,” she said...



Yaseen would still be at risk if it weren’t for the actions of Secular Rescue, which helped her escape to California, where she is waiting for her asylum claim to be approved. The initiative, launched in 2016, is run by the Center For Inquiry, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that aims to promote secular values, such as scientific rationality and freedom of speech, with the support of Richard Dawkins and other prominent atheists.

“It’s really an underground railroad of sorts for non-believers in countries where simply expressing doubt about religious belief is a criminal offense or where it may lead to grave physical harm,” Robyn Blumner, the president and CEO of the CFI, told me.

The origins of Secular Rescue actually go back before 2016. It really began in May, 2015, when I was running a lobby day for CFI-Michigan at the state capitol. The night before I got an email from Taslima Nasrin, who was then living in India, saying that the same militants who had killed many atheists in Bangladesh were now threatening her life and asking for help getting her out of that

country to somewhere safe. Michael De Dora, at the time the head of CFI's Office of Public Policy, was there with me and we spent the next day making phone calls in between taking meetings with legislators, trying to find a way to get her to a safe place.

We managed to succeed in getting her to America, but we knew that there were many more people in similar danger all over the world. Michael then went to work at CFI to put together what was first called the Freethought Emergency Fund and later became Secular Rescue, and everyone at the main office in Amherst worked hard to make it a reality. Now we're seeing the results of that work. But it takes money to be effective, so I urge you to donate to the project if you can. [3].

ED BRAYTON

P.S.

* PATHEOS. JANUARY 25, 2018:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/dispatches/2018/01/25/secular-rescue-underground-railroad-atheists/#S1eXOfGA2dJMZPjl.99>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/the-underground-railroad-to-save-atheists/550229/>

[2] <https://secure.centerforinquiry.net/secular-rescue>

[3] You can do that here: <https://secure.centerforinquiry.net/secular-rescue>