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Swimming against the Current A comparative perspective on leaving Islam in Morocco and the Moroccan diaspora in Belgium

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**SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT
A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON LEAVING ISLAMIN MOROCCO AND THE MOROCCAN
DIASPORA IN BELGIUM**

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Lena Richter

ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of non-believers in a Muslim-majority country and a Muslim-minority country by providing a long-term ethnographic account of the non-religious trajectories of Moroccans in the homeland and the diaspora in Belgium. In the two countries, contrasting political, religious, cultural and legal contexts and discourses lead to different experiences of leaving Islam. The article zooms in on the individual paths of becoming non-religious by looking at the following phases: 1) religious upbringing, 2) developing doubts, 3) performing non-religion, 4) coming out, 5) forming a new identity, and 6) shifting belonging and solidarity. Hereby, intersectional aspects, such as gender and socioeconomic position, are taken into account. Based on these research insights, this paper formulates recommendations for policymakers, NGOs and researchers.

KEYWORDS

non-religion, non-religious trajectory, Morocco, Moroccan diaspora

Introduction

According to the large-scale study Arab Barometer (2019), non-religion¹ is rising in the whole Arab world. This is also the case for Morocco, where 13% of the population identifies as non-religious. This percentage is even higher among the urban and educated youth. Also in the Moroccan diaspora, religious practice is declining among the new generation. However, the number of Moroccan-Belgian non-believers is rather small. In 2009, only 0.2% of the respondents of a study conducted by the INED stated they were non-religious (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal, 2009). Looking at the experiences behind these statistics, the question emerges: What are the narratives of young Moroccans that grow up in an environment where Islam is either omnipresent or a big part of their diasporic identity? To answer this question, I begin with a brief contextualization of Morocco and the diaspora setting in Belgium. Next, I introduce the non-religious trajectory approach which divides the experiences of becoming non-religious into six overlapping phases. After that, I present my main research findings that are based on 30 life-stories of young, urban and educated Moroccan non-believers that I encountered between 2016 and 2019.² Next, I zoom in on the different phases of the non-religious trajectory that depend on the surroundings, personal characteristics and intersectional aspects (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Reflecting on these insights, I formulate recommendations for policymakers, civil society actors and researchers who are working on the topic of non-religion and Islam. Finally, I draw some conclusions, summarizing both the research findings and the policy recommendations.

Contexts

While non-believers, both in a home country or diaspora context, all “swim against the current” by deciding to leave Islam, the implications differ. In Morocco, the semi-secular 20th February movement led to a new constitution that embraced the idea of freedom of belief (e.g. §3 and §25 of the constitution). Moreover, the rise of social media has opened up new spaces for (anonymous) expression, exchange and support among non-believers (Pulcini, 2017; Desrues, 2013). Nevertheless, non-believers are often portrayed as political troublemakers and morally misguided. Therefore, leaving Islam remains a taboo. In addition, non-believers are required to marry, divorce and inherit according to Muslim family law (Moudawana). Besides, some laws directly restrict the freedom of conscience (Benchemsi, 2012; 2015). For instance, a (considered) Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man (Moudawana, §39), only Muslims can adopt children (Moudawana, §149), it is not possible to eat in public during Ramadan (Penal code, §222) and it is prohibited to “shake the faith of a Muslim” (Penal code, §220).

In Belgium, the situation is almost reversed. The country ranks first in providing freedom of thought with respect to governmental affairs, education, society and expression (Humanist International, 2019). Belief mainly remains in the private sphere (Fadil, 2011) and secular norms

¹ This paper gives preference to the broad term non-religion instead of the negatively coined term atheism.

² This article is based on my master’s thesis, which mainly refers to interviews conducted in Morocco and Belgium in 2019. In some cases, I also draw on a previous data collection from 2016, which I did together with Tessa Ubels in Rabat and Casablanca.

are, except for some Catholic influences, dominant. In Belgium, Islam developed from a religion of guest workers to the second biggest religion of the country (Sägesser, 2018). Especially after 9/11, Islam has often been associated with terrorism, misogyny, and radicalization (Saeed, 2007; Swyngedouw, 1992). In this climate, the line between leaving Islam and feeding negative images is thin: in the “best case” it means being praised for being part of the modern secular and an example of integration. In the worst case, one might be accused of, intended or not, nurturing right-wing assumptions about Islam, as former Muslims are seen as “living proof” of anti-Islam claims. While a few non-believers incorporate this rhetoric, the majority shows solidarity with the Moroccan community (Enstedt, 2018).

Research Findings

Within the two contexts, personal choices and intersectional aspects, such as gender, further shape the experiences of being non-religious. This becomes clear by looking at the multiple narratives of young non-believers. Based on recurrent themes during in-depth interviews, I extracted six fluid phases of the non-religious trajectory: 1) religious upbringing, 2) developing doubts, 3) performing non-religion, 4) coming out, 5) forming a new identity, and 6) shifting belonging and solidarity. These phases should not be seen as strictly chronological but can overlap and change in order. While non-religious trajectories can take very different directions, the visualization of the non-religious trajectories in Morocco and Belgium show certain patterns (see illustrations 1 and 2). In Morocco, the non-religious trajectories seem to be more abrupt and deviant than the trajectories in the diaspora.

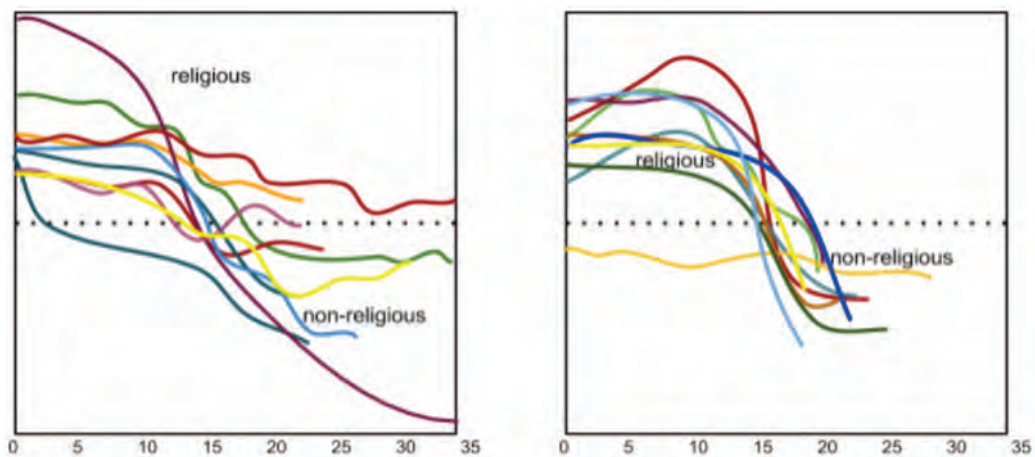


Illustration 1. Non-religious trajectories in the Moroccan diaspora according to age

Illustration 2. Non-religious trajectories in Morocco according to age

The differences and similarities in becoming non-religious between the two contexts will be elaborated on phase by phase in the following paragraphs.

1) Religious upbringing

Religious upbringing often has a strong intergenerational component (Fadil, 2017). In Morocco, most parents provide their children with a religious “starter package”, which begins at birth with

whispering the Adhan³ into the baby's ear. Religious education is also present in different parts of society: from the school curriculum to children's books and television channels,⁴ which leads to an early knowledge about Islam. The religious upbringing also depends on social characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity. However, children actively negotiate the ascribed religion provided by their parents, and the sometimes opposing religious views among siblings show that the upbringing is not all-determining. For example, children might apply a more cultural or more selective interpretation of Islam and, in some cases, they might question religion as a whole.

In the Belgian post-migration context, the parents' form of belief is often seen as moderate and cultural. Hussein⁵ (interview 28.03.2019) describes the generation gap as follows: "For them, it is obvious to be Muslim, they never grew up, like me, in an environment with people who were not religious." Many characterized Islam as a "total package" that "not only determines your faith but what's allowed and not allowed, how you interact with people, what you eat, when you pray" (interview Ilyas, 12.03.2019). The upbringing also depended on the number of family members, the neighborhood, and the school. The majority also went to Quran schools but due to limited Arabic skills, for many, it felt like learning something by heart without understanding the meaning. All in all, most interviewees had a quite balanced view on their religious socialization. They remembered positive sides of their Muslim upbringing, such as learning respect and other values, and negative sides, such as scary good-night stories about jinns⁶ or strict teachers in the Quran schools.

2) Developing doubts

In the Moroccan context, being young means being part of the Arab Spring and social media generation. On the Internet, they were confronted with non-mainstream ideas (Van Nieuwkerk, 2018): "I studied a lot about Islam; mostly online. Without the Internet, I would be a Muslim" (Kamal, interview 07.12.2016). Traveling abroad or going to a new university or a private school also often triggered doubts about their belief that was previously taken for granted. This made them dig deeper into the Quran where they often stumbled on contradictory or controversial Surahs.⁷ While developing doubts, many also looked into other religions. Hereby, Buddhism often came off best but other Abrahamic religions were seen as the same as Islam. Besides theological questions, nearly all interviewees stressed the importance of civil rights in their choice to leave religion. Rachid (interview 16.12.2016) added that where you are born basically decides what you should believe and therefore asked himself: "how could all of these religions be right at the same time?" In general, the phase of developing doubts takes time and energy, as everything they believed in starts to lose its validity.

In the diaspora context, from a very young age, the interviewees asked themselves questions about multiple cultural and religious identities. The religious upbringing of the parents was

³ The *Adhan* includes the *Takbir* (Allah is great), and the *Shahada* (the Muslim creed).

⁴ Moroccan television channels must dedicate 5% of their airtime to Islamic content.

⁵ To protect the identity of the interviewees, names are replaced by pseudonyms.

⁶ *Jinns* are "spirits" in the Islamic mythology and theology.

⁷ The Quran consists of 114 Surahs ("chapters").

contested by being constantly confronted with other ideas, for example from non-religious friends or the Catholic school. The interviewees compared themselves and what they were allowed to do with children of Belgian origin. They also had to continuously answer questions such as “why don’t you eat pork?” and (at a later age) “why don’t you drink alcohol?” Leaving religion was not always related to deep questions about the existence of God and not everyone delved into (Islamic) theology. In the diaspora, for the majority, it was more about the socio-religious impositions and limitations. Female interviewees particularly stressed the many rules as adolescents, such as not being allowed to wear a bracelet, to shave, to have a dog, to play cards, to have a boyfriend or to go out. Sanaa (interview 12.03.2019) also criticized this: “When I got a rule it always came from the Quran.” Being non-religious does not need to be the final terminus. Many said that they are “still searching” or felt again closer to God in difficult times. Others stated that doubting Islam felt like a free fall but, once these thoughts are there, they are irreversible.

3) Performing non-religion

There is no step-by-step script on how to behave as a non-believer but often the group pursued a “liberal” lifestyle, before and after coming out as non-religious. Leaving religion means the learning of new habits and the unlearning of old rules. For instance, some people tested their new borders by drinking alcohol. At the same time, conforming behavior also took place, such as celebrating Aid-al-fitr at the end of Ramadan, not eating pork, and using religious terms, such as *hamdullah*. Others changed their behavior according to the context. For instance, Yasmine (interview 09.12.2016) shared: “I do have to wear a headscarf because my parents tell me to do so but when I’m outside of my hometown I take it off.” In Morocco, due to legal and social restrictions, many led a “double life” or kept a low profile but sometimes this “deviant” behavior became political.

In Belgium, many did not follow religious practices and rules. For instance, they did not pray or fast. The absence of practicing Islam can be a form of subaltern behavior, which is to a certain extent tolerated (Rachik et al., 2007). The interviewees also often did not meet the expectations of the Moroccan community by having a non-Moroccan partner, living alone, or drinking alcohol. This behavior was sometimes embodied by having tattoos, piercings, or removing the hijab. Those who visibly changed their behaviors were more exposed to reactions from their surroundings. Also in Belgium, many were hiding their wine bottles and closed the curtains during Ramadan, so that a passer-by could not see them eating. Ilyas’ wife Sofie even “converted” to Islam for the sake of his parents, although they are both non-religious. Performing “non-religious” behavior can also be a way to gradually prepare the family for one’s change of belief.

4) Coming out

While society might turn a blind eye to non-religious behavior, openly declaring that one is non-religious is another step. In Morocco, the choice to come out depends on many factors, such as fear of losing your job, endangering family bonds, being stigmatized, or getting in trouble with the law. Women are especially confronted with bringing *shuma* (shame) on themselves and their families. Therefore, it often seems like an unspoken law not to talk explicitly about it:

“My mom knows. I know that she knows, but I pretend that I don't know that she knows” (Youssef, interview 29.11.2016). While some interviewees received support or discovered that other people in their surroundings were also non-believers, others were asked to rethink their decision, had to leave the house, and experienced (verbal) violence. Omar's girlfriend, for instance, reacted as follows: “On my birthday my girlfriend gave me the three holy books. She said: “You are free to choose, but you have to believe in something!” (interview 08.12.2016). Only on Facebook, many non-believers can be more open.

In the diaspora, people were foremost afraid to hurt or disappoint their families. They neither wanted to (completely) turn their back on their Islamic upbringing and values, nor to feed the anti-Islam discourses. Therefore, many disclosed their non-belief or phrased it as “not practicing”. The reasons for staying in the closet (maintaining the domestic bliss, remaining part of the community, etc.) seemed to outweigh the reasons for coming out (e.g. “being oneself”). While hiding might lead to less conflict, it can also become mentally taxing. Hussein (interview 28.03.2019) is one of the few outspoken non-believers: “I'm just 26 and Muslims have been here for two, three generations, maybe even four. And it's a bit strange that in all this time I'm the first to actually make that public.” While there is no formal ritual for becoming non-religious, some marked their coming out with something they considered before as *haram*. For Hussein, this was a big step: “It sounds so cliché with the alcohol, but if you drink, then you actually know clearly okay I'm not a Muslim.”

5) Forming a new identity⁸

Not only friends and family members had to get used to the change in belief but also the person itself had to come to terms with the fact of no longer being a Muslim. While many things learned during childhood were no longer valid, Islam often remained a cultural reference point. In addition, being non-religious is not only the absence of or deviance towards the “standard identity” Islam (Matza & Blomberg, 2017) but is replaced by new ideas and practices. In Saïd's words, that is why you should not call someone an atheist because “you don't call someone who doesn't play football an *afootballer*” (interview 12.12.2016). Belgian non-believers navigate between the Moroccan-Islamic identity of the parents and the community and the diverse non-religious self-identifications. For example, Fatima (interview 16.12.2016) stressed: “I used to be a ‘hijabi-girl’ and now I'm not really an atheist, not 100%. I don't want to label myself as anti-religious. I see myself without a label.” This shows being a non-believer does not need to be an exclusive and all-encompassing identity (Sen, 2016).

In the Belgian context, through the salient experiences of ethnic discrimination, the question of being not religious seemed to play a subordinate role. Still, through the continuous double life combined with losing an important part of the previous self, some people experienced an identity crisis. Being non-religious also meant believing in oneself instead of trusting in the help of God, which can be empowering and unsettling at the same time. While they no longer identify themselves as Muslims, they are still seen as Muslim by both the Belgian society and the Moroccan community.

⁸ For the sake of simplicity, I use the terms identity, belonging and solidarity in their singular form. It would be more correct to speak of identities, belongings and solidarities.

6) Shifting belonging and solidarity

In the Moroccan context, nation-making is closely tied to religion, which often led to a feeling of non-belonging and aspirations to move abroad. Based on the common feeling of exclusion, they felt very close to other non-believers in Morocco and abroad who find themselves in a similar situation. Rachid states: “The sense of having a community of atheists is helping a lot. And the community is growing because of the Internet culture” (interview 16.12.2016). In addition, they also became allies with other religious minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, and feminist groups that shared similar struggles and also fought for more liberties. While most minority statuses, such as being a member of an ethnic group, are given, leaving the religious group is an active choice to be part of a minority.

In the diaspora, many stressed the cultural belonging towards the Moroccan community and the solidarity *within* the Belgian-Moroccan community remained strong. Most non-believers did not blindly follow the secular discourse but remained critical. Sanaa (interview 12.03.2019) stated: “I certainly feel connected to the Moroccan community, not because we have the same values but mainly because we share the same problems.” She adds: “That’s why we have to stick together, we have to make each other strong, but sometimes I feel that we are making each other weak, that we judge each other for not being religious enough” Hussein (interview 28.03.2019), however, said he had lost his place in the community by making his non-belief public. As most interviewees did not know any other non-believers of Moroccan origin, a group feeling was absent, albeit many expressed the wish to encounter other non-religious people. As many felt that they do not fit anywhere, they built their “own house” with other people who also found themselves in an in-between position, for instance, based on their sexual orientation or ethnic background.

In short, it makes a huge difference to be a non-religious minority within a Muslim majority or to be a non-religious minority as part of a Muslim minority in a non-religious-Catholic environment (see illustration 3). In particular, groups that might disagree on a lower level (non-religious convictions) are reunited on a higher level (national identification).

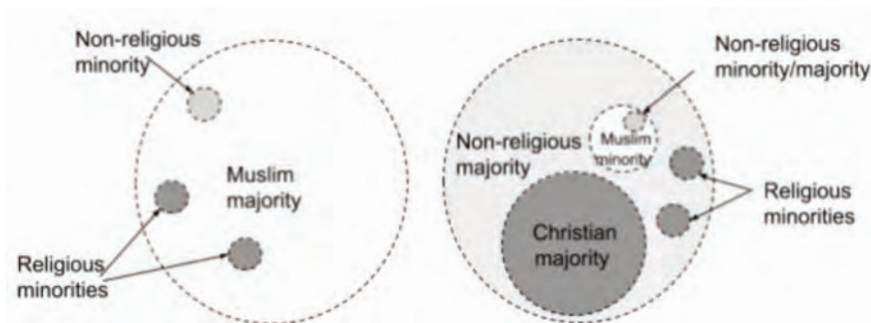


Illustration 3. Comparison of a Muslim-majority and a Muslim-minority context

Policy and Research Recommendations

All in all, the different trajectories illustrate that leaving Islam is, in both contexts, not always an easy step, especially when it evokes feelings of incomprehension and non-belonging.

Consequently, many non-believers prefer to lead a double life, which can create a psychological burden. The trajectories also show the impact of personal and contextual circumstances, such as discourses and laws. So how can these qualitative insights be useful for policymakers, think tanks and NGOs in Europe and Morocco to support the non-religious minority?

Language matters

Despite the growing visibility of non-religious views online, “being Arab” is often equated with “being Muslim”. This reduces religion to one’s ethnic background instead of seeing it as a personal choice that can also change in the course of one’s life. Another linguistic confusion concerns the misunderstanding that non-believers are always secular and Muslims are not. While being secular concerns a preference for a political order, being non-religious concerns one’s personal view on religion. In addition, terms such as atheist or ex-Muslim carry anti-religious notions and assume a clear rupture with the religious past (Vliek, 2018). An even more negative connotation can be found regarding the term infidel (*kafir*), which is often linked to blasphemy, heresy and betraying one’s religious community (Griffel, 2016). A counterexample to these negative terms is “freethinker”, which gives the impression that only non-believers can think without constraints, while religious people blindly follow their belief. In sum, these terms do not always grasp the reality of how people would identify themselves (Cragun, 2011). The terms non-believer or non-religious (la *dini*) can best cover the wide variety of identifications and are in line with the general hesitance to use outspoken labels. Yet, it is even better to follow the emic and diverse self-identifications, which reach from agnostic to humanist and sometimes include hybrid identifications such as “Muslim atheist”, “cultural Muslim” or “spiritual atheist”, which proves again that the topic is not that black and white.

Showing awareness

Both in Europe and Morocco, there is not enough awareness of the group of non-believers with a Muslim background. Non-religion is a hard to measure and almost invisible phenomenon, as the majority of non-believers “stays in the closet” (Sidlo, 2016). Besides, in order to create more mutual understanding and to deconstruct stereotypes both about Muslims and non-believers, more dialogue is needed. This can also help to move away from a dichotomous divide between Muslims and non-Muslims (Fadil, 2015) towards a contextual, gradual, and intersectional approach that gives space for the continuum of religiosity (Randeree, 2016). It is also necessary to create awareness about the legal situation around freedom of conscience. In the European context, creating awareness should not be seen as an either-or question: it is necessary to shed light on the structural discrimination of Muslims and to pay more attention to non-believers. Moreover, research can help to make the group of non-believers with a Muslim or other religious background more visible. So far, especially less outspoken non-believers have received little scholarly attention (Van Nieuwkerk, 2018). And quantitative research can provide useful statistics on non-religion inside and outside Morocco in relation to aspects such as gender, urban-rural differences and ethnicity.

Creating representation

Showing awareness is also strongly linked to creating representation. While awareness targets the whole society, representation focuses on the group itself. During the interviews both in

Morocco and the diaspora, I often encountered non-believers who thought they are alone and an exception. As it is still a taboo to talk about the topic they often kept their non-belief for themselves. In their circles of friends, in school books and public functions, they could not find (many) Moroccan non-believers. The few outspoken Moroccan non-believers that appeared in the media were often presented in a bad light or considered as “too extreme”. Moreover, the “Four Horsemen of New Atheism”⁹ being white, middle-aged men do not offer much room for identification. Therefore, it is crucial to give a platform to more nuanced views that also counter the right-wing narrative. At the same time, no one should be pushed to speak out on the topic. For instance, collective “atheist coming out days” expose people to risks by encouraging them to make their non-religion public. That said, the safety of disclosed non-believers should come first. For example, by talking more about the topic than the group itself, or by using anonymous formats and platforms, such as podcasts and pseudonymized narratives.

Providing space and support

Keeping the pattern of the non-religious trajectories in mind, different kinds of support are needed in each phase and situation. Becoming non-religious can be a very lonely journey. In some cases, non-believers even go through depressions or have suicidal thoughts. Here psychological help is needed. In all phases, it would be valuable to have contact persons, such as former Muslims, who went through similar experiences. Online and offline meetup groups can also help to exchange ideas and common struggles. Sometimes non-believers are confronted with having to leave the parents' house, or encounter violence and death threats. Therefore, it is important to have safe spaces in the country and abroad, where non-believers can go, in case they need or want to leave their surroundings. Moreover, being endangered due to non-religious views should be recognized as a legitimate request for asylum. And during Ramadan it would be important to have spaces where people feel safe eating. In general, it is important to keep in mind an intersectional approach: not everyone has the same safety net and is able to go abroad if necessary.

Reflection on the Eurocentric view and colonial heritage

Based on Eurocentric biases, many researchers and policymakers tend to focus on “othering” aspects that create the exotic, Muslim other (Anthony, 2015), which contrasts with the European secular “us”. Instead, it is important to include topics in the academic canon that challenge these dichotomous constructions, such as non-religion. It is also crucial to become aware of Europe's role and colonial heritage. For instance, several restrictive laws in Morocco, such as Article 222, date back to colonial rulers (Zirari, 2016). Moreover, claiming that Muslim-majority countries are just 20 years behind Europe but will sooner or later follow the path from religion to secularization is problematic. On the one hand, this implies a false superiority and, on the other, non-religion and secularism are not European inventions. Poets and writers, such as Al-Ma'arri, who lived during the Abbasid period (750-1258), already criticized the religious system within a flourishing philosophical debate many centuries ago (Young et al., 2006). During the interviews, it became clear that most non-believers did not want a copy-pasted French *laïcité* and rather referred to Moroccans own secular Amazigh history (Heath, 2015). This requires a

⁹ Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett are often described as the Four Horsemen of New Atheism.

contextual awareness that being critical about Islam in a Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority context carries very different meanings.

Conclusions

This research has shown that non-religious trajectories cannot be examined without taking the cultural, historical and social contexts into account. As has been set out, the discourses in Morocco and Belgium are almost reversed.¹⁰ While in Morocco, non-religious liberties are restricted, in Belgium the secular discourse is prioritized and governs Islam in the private sphere. In both contexts, Islam also has a salient intergenerational dimension, being something that is transferred and modified from generation to generation. As Islam is either at the core of the national belonging or the diasporic identity, leaving Islam is more than a purely ontological question. This becomes clear by looking at the self-reflective ponderings of the interviewees, the decision to come out, and the forming of new identities and belongings, often embodied in clothes and lifestyle. Hereby, the experiences of being non-religious also depend on personal and intersectional aspects, such as gender. All in all, the experiences of non-believers in Morocco and the diaspora can be first of all characterized by their diversity.

These insights also have implications on how different actors can engage with the topic. A starting point is to embrace the diversity of non-religious views by avoiding generalizing, Eurocentric and loaded terms. Instead, more neutral terms, such as “non-religious” or the ones that follow the emic self-identifications, can create more linguistic visibility. The lack of representation of less outspoken former Muslims has far-reaching consequences, such as that “being non-religious” is usually not included in the law or as legitimate asylum requests. It also leads to the absence of safe spaces. To change this, contact points that provide (mental) support and meeting groups are essential. While often more outspoken and sometimes right-wing voices get heard, it is necessary to give a safe platform to more nuanced views. Furthermore, to confront mutual stereotypes and to deconstruct binary notions of religiosity, dialogues between different religious and non-religious groups should be stimulated. That said, NGOs, scholars and policymakers can play a crucial role in creating more visibility and understanding for non-believers with a Muslim background.

¹⁰ This division rather describes the general discourses and does not grasp the complexity of the sub-discourses negotiated between different generations and actors.

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