

Anthropologist's research sheds light on the growing population of non-religious Moroccans

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Credit: Nicolas Postiglioni from Pexels

A growing group of Moroccans is non-religious. The research of anthropologist Lena Richter sheds light on how young, urban atheists in

Morocco and Europe use subtle forms of activism to normalize their non-religious identity. Richter will be defending her Ph.D. thesis on this topic at Radboud University on 8 May.

Religion plays a central role in Moroccan society. The vast majority of Moroccans (officially around 99%) are Muslim. The Moroccan government monitors religious affairs, and although freedom of religion is a [constitutional right](#), individuals who distance themselves from Islam may experience [social pressure](#) or even discrimination.

"In Morocco, three topics are taboo: God, the king, and the Sahara. Consequently, most young Moroccans do not openly proclaim their atheism or agnosticism. Doing so has too many social consequences," says anthropologist Lena Richter.

As part of her research, she interviewed 50 young (aged 18 to 35) educated atheists and agnostics from the urban middle class in Morocco and Europe.

Everyday activism

The interviews revealed that non-religious views are mainly expressed indirectly in subtle actions that do not conform to the ideal image of the good Muslim, and therefore go against the norm. "A person might for example get a tattoo, drink a glass of wine or go to a bar once in a while, eat during Ramadan, or joke about Islam on [social media](#)," says Richter. "Or people might stop doing things, like praying or going to the mosque."

These minor rule violations are tolerated in Morocco by the government, religious institutions, and within the family. "Non-religious views are not appreciated, but as long as the person doesn't make a big thing out of it, people in their network won't either," says Richter.

In fact, to some extent, it can be easier to be a non-believer in Morocco than in Europe, according to the researcher. A non-believer in Morocco operates from a minority position. But in Europe—where Moroccans are already a minority, and where Muslims are discriminated against—it is more likely to be seen as a stab in the back of the community.

"Moreover, in Europe, there is a risk that the narratives of non-religious Moroccans are manipulated by right-wing groups," says Richter. "Non-religious individuals are used as examples against Islam because they left it, when that was not their reason for doing so at all. As a result, most people in this group avoid public debates."

Social media

Atheism within Islam is not new. As early as the ninth century, there were poets and philosophers who were critical of religion. But social media has made the phenomenon much more visible. Whereas [traditional media](#) promote a national view of Islam, social media provide a platform for other views and, more importantly, discussions. "On social media, you see discussions emerging among young Moroccans about faith," Richter says.

Richter hopes her research will create a more nuanced view of religion among Moroccans. "Moroccans are often seen as a homogeneous group—every Moroccan is a Muslim—and that, of course, is not true.

"There are also many differences within the group of non-religious Moroccans. It matters a lot whether you have parents who are themselves less strictly religious or whether you come from a more conservative family.

"There are atheists who have strong views on religion, but also many people who still feel a connection with Islam and enjoy celebrating

Ramadan with their family, for example. Belonging and solidarity also play a role in this."

Provided by Radboud University

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