

Digital Dissent

Decoding the Critical Discourse of Ex-Muslims about Islam(isms) on X

ECREA Doctoral Summer School 2024

Key words: Critical Discourse, Islam, Ex-Muslims, Apostate, X

Throughout history and since the infancy of Islam, apostasy, blasphemy and the critique of Islam have been viewed as heretical, perilous, and, in some countries, punishable by imprisonment or death. Consequently, individuals renouncing their Islamic faith have often been silenced and compelled into clandestinity. Blasphemy and apostasy punishments do not only occur in Muslim-majority countries, but also extend beyond borders in the West and internationally. In the Muslim world, apostates, religious minorities, and Muslim reformers are generally persecuted by the state and subjected to societal violence aimed at silencing any dissent against the dominant ideology. In the West, those accused of insulting Islam can also be subjected to threats, violence, or executions (Marshall & Shea, 2011).

Here are a few examples for illustration of the phenomenon happening in Western Europe: The decapitation of French teacher Samuel Paty in 2020, the Charlie Hebdo shootings in 2015, The Dutch “Fitna” movie controversy and fatwas, The Lars Vilks Muhammad Swedish drawings

controversy and condemnations in 2007, The Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Danish cartoons worldwide controversy in 2005 and the 2004 Dutch film “Submission” written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and produced and directed by Theo van Gogh who was later assassinated by an islamist.

A key date that stirred things up and sparked discussions among apostates is the thunderous fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989 by Iran's late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring that every Muslim worldwide had a duty to kill Rushdie due to his novel “The Satanic Verses”. He lived a clandestine life until he was stabbed in 2022, resulting in the loss of an eye. Additionally, the novel's Japanese translator was assassinated, the Italian translator was stabbed, the Norwegian publisher was shot, and 35 guests at the Turkish hotel hosting his Turkish publisher were burned to death. (Marshall & Shea, 2011).

A plethora of Ex-Muslims have shed light on this silencing and on the living conditions of apostates while criticising Islam. There are former Muslims who have pursued careers as researchers, writers, journalists, speakers, or artists and who operate openly, and there are those of Muslim origin who express criticisms of Islam and Islamisms while leaving their religious status ambiguous. These individuals have diverse backgrounds and opinions, but what unites them is their Muslim heritage and their commitment to questioning, at varying levels of critique, certain aspects of Islam, particularly extremist or conservative interpretations, the treatment of women and homosexuals, the place of minorities, and restrictions on freedom of thought and expression.

To name a few of these preeminent figures we cite Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Hissa Hilal, Kamel Daoud, Boualem Sansal, Zineb El Rhazoui, Waleed al-Husseini, Chahdortt Djavann Ali Amjad Rizvi as well as Ibn Warraq, Brother Rachid, Wafa Sultan, Hamed Abdel-Samad, Amine Elbahi and Hela Ouardi.

It should be noted that all these individuals with distinctly different profiles – men, women, converts to Islam and imams, former extremists, converts to Christianity or atheists – have either received death threats, had a close relative killed or had a fatwa issued against them due to their questioning of paradigms related to this religion.

On another level, and analogous to the Islamic organizations such as the Muslim World League, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), the Organization of Muslim Scholars, the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Islamic World Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISESCO), and the Strategy of Cultural Islamic Action outside the Islamic World, there are organizations dedicated to Ex-Muslims worldwide that are relatively recent in historical terms.

These organizations, both on the ground and online, are often created with the aim of uniting these individuals and providing them with a supportive community and advocacy, as well as raising awareness globally about the issues they face. The safe space provided allows sharing experiences, discussing concerns, and finding mutual support. Meetings, discussions and events are organized to enable Ex-Muslims to connect and freely express their views on the anachronisms and other problematic questions within Islam.

The Central Council of Ex-Muslims, originally initiated by Mina Ahadi was created in Germany in 2007 intending to mirror the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, which was founded in 1994. Although Ahadi and other apostates initially expressed a preference for the term "atheists" and "humanists" rather than "Ex-Muslims", they eventually adopted this designation and began preparing for the formation of the council. After the formation of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, the term "Ex-Muslim" quickly gained popularity in the media and the success of the Central Council directly inspired the creation of similar structures in other countries such as the United Kingdom, North America, France, Morocco, Singapore, Jordan and Sri-Lanka. Other organisations for Ex-Muslims worldwide also emerged¹ such as in Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Scotland, Norway, Italy, India, Pakistan and the MENA region....

In parallel, and thanks to the Internet, Muslims are opening up to the world more than ever before. They seek translations, explanations, and interpretations that either encourage or not critical reflection on their religion. They engage in discussions on forums, online chat rooms, and social networks, and watch various types of videos. We learn by Ali A. Rizvi that Ex-Muslim activist Maryam Namazie compares the impact of the Internet on Islam to that of the

¹ List of Ex-Muslim organisations. (2024, February 24). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved June 23, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ex-Muslim_organisations

printing press on Christianity, stating: “*The Internet is doing to Islam what the printing press did to Christianity.*”²”

Consequently, just as social media platforms have been used to help spread Islam, Islamisms as well as terrorist propaganda and attract new supporters to extreme ideologies, including that of the Islamic State, Ex-Muslims also use these platforms to gather and mobilize their efforts in a kind of “digital counter-propaganda”. These are activist initiatives within communities such as those mentioned earlier, or private initiatives. In recent years, particularly in the context of numerous terrorist attacks, there has been a notable shift in the discourse of apostates. Unlike before, an increasing number of Ex-Muslims openly declare their apostasy and criticize Islam(isms) on social networks.

Thus, this research addresses the gap that exists in the literature, regarding the online engagement of Ex-Muslims, a new living lab community.

Until recently, studies on apostates have primarily focused on the reasons for their apostasy, their life trajectories, how they navigate their apostasy within Muslim societies, the social and legal repercussions on their lives, as well as the process of conversion and deconversion (Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Schirmacher, 2009; Streib et al., 2009; Gooren, 2010; Cottee, 2015; Schirmacher, 2016; Mohamad et al., 2017; van Nieuwkerk, 2018; Vliek, 2019, 2021).

However, no research seems to have examined the critical discourse of Ex-Muslims regarding their initial religion on social media platforms. Therefore, this particular research delves into the critical discourse of francophone Ex-Muslims about Islam(isms) on X (formerly Twitter).

The objective behind using the term “Islam(isms)” is to highlight the complexity of this religion and the multiple perceptions that stem from it. There are multiple Islams and multiple Islamisms, with porous boundaries between them. Islam and Islamism looks like 'conceptual' nebulas of indomitable variabilities. There is not one Islam, but many Islams, and not one Islamism, but many Islamisms. Thanks to the numerous branches and currents - mainly Sunni and Shia but also Ibadi, Sufism, Ahmadiyya, Alawites, Druze and Kharijite as well as Salafism,

² Visscher, M. (2018, March 9). Kritiek op de islam zal de wereld vrijer maken. *de Volkskrant*. Retrieved June 23, 2024, from <https://myprivacy.dpgmedia.nl/consent?siteKey=PUBX2BuuZfEPJ6vF&callbackUrl=https%3a%2f%2fwww.volkskrant.nl%2fprivacy-wall%2faccept%3fredirectUri%3d%252fbuitenland%252fkritiek-op-de-islam-zal-de-wereld-vrijer-maken%257ea4579845%252f>

Wahhabism or Jihadism - and interpretations claimed by Muslims around the world, as some voices assert, there could be as many possible Islams as there are Muslims.

The polysemy of the word "Islam" rhetorically generates a multitude of adjectives. We hear about fundamentalist Islam, strict Islam, radical Islam, fascist Islam, violent Islam, extremist Islam, the "true Islam," authentic Islam, Islamo-leftism, political Islam, the "Islam of my grandmother," folkloric Islam, moderate Islam, tamed Islam, Islam of France, Islam of Belgium, reformed Islam, liberal Islam, peaceful Islam, or tolerant Islam... This very need to attach an adjective to the word that represents one of the three major monotheistic religions reflects and proves that this concept is not unique and is not understood in the same way by everyone. The communicating subject feels compelled to add an adjective to maximise the chances of understanding by the interpreting subject.

However, for a category of people including Ex-Muslims, it seems that there is only one "true" Islam, the one from the books. This hypothesis will need to be confirmed or refuted through our discourse analyses.

In this study, we observe a phenomenon that was not visible a decade ago and seems to be expanding. To this end, we adopt a qualitative empirico-inductive approach by combining Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) framework inspired by N. Fairclough, Kress and Van Leeuwen and enunciative pragmatics and enunciative polyphony of discourse, aligning with Patrick Charaudeau's works. This methodological fusion enables a thorough examination of the intricate layers within the discourse. With the following research questions, we would like to (1) understand how do the Ex-Muslims multimodally represent Islam(isms) and how they multimodally represent apostasy and the apostates, (2) expose the arguments that go against Islam(isms) and the ones that are in favour of apostasy and last but not least (3) extract the underlying ideologies behind their discourse.

While Fairclough's analytical approach (1989) theorises that language is a "power tool" because it facilitates change and can influence behaviour, a key aspect of enunciative pragmatics is the notion of the enunciative point of view. It posits that each utterance is produced from a specific point of view, in our case, that of the Ex-Muslim, and that this point

of view influences how the message is received and interpreted. Charaudeau (1983, 2019) focuses on the study of “speech act”, that is the actions that speakers perform when expressing themselves in the specific context of enunciation. It examines the role of the enunciator in the production of discourse and how this act of enunciation influences the meaning and interpretation of linguistic statements. CDA and enunciative pragmatics also addresses the notion of context in the interpretation of language. It acknowledges that the meaning of an utterance largely depends on the context in which it is produced. Ultimately, we intend to reveal how action and power intertwine in the critical discourse of Ex-Muslims.

The notion of critique becomes then as understood by Zienkowski (2017), a power tool for social, cultural, and political change, as it can help highlight injustices, inequalities and provide a foundation for the activism and action of outspoken apostates. In the particular case of Ex-Muslim critical discourse, criticism is also perceived as a way to vent and express one's distress and sometimes detestation as in many cases, these apostates endure violence; they are intimidated, verbally attacked and forced to live in a state of hyper-vigilance for the rest of their lives. This sometimes increases their sense of revolt, which ultimately manifests in hateful, cynical, or condescending messages. We do believe that this criticism should not be interpreted simplistically or maliciously, but rather viewed as a potential catalyst for reforms and modernisation within “21st-century Islam”.

Let's get down to the practical side of the analysis process.

Our investigation is characterised by a non-intrusive, non-participatory approach, avoiding direct interaction with the X profiles studied. The content we have selected is freely accessible since the observed spaces are not restricted and do not require a prior friend request. Therefore, we adopt the status of observer with our personal X account, foregoing our anonymity. However, we chose to follow the analysed profiles, and most of them followed us back, meaning they became aware of our online presence and the topics that interest us. The primary language is French, however, polyphony in discourse drive us to consider Arabic and English when necessary.

To examine the rhetoric constructed on X, we are using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Since the advent of Elon Musk, it is impossible to download tweets directly into the

software, thus, we are following these steps: (1) Data collection, which involves taking screenshots, renaming the actual tweets, and then classifying them into cases based on the names of the X profiles. (2) Entering the screenshots into NVivo and copy/pasting the text of the tweet into the created file. (3) Categorising tweets as either tweets or retweets (4) Coding to answer the research question. The coding categories are the following: ‘Multimodal representations of Islam(isms)’, ‘Multimodal representations of Apostasy and Apostates’, ‘Arguments against Islam(isms)’, ‘Arguments for Apostasy and Apostates’, ‘Hashtags’ and ‘Not related’. When there are potentially ideology-related indicators, we note them in a memo.

We then use an analysis grid inspired by the approaches of Fairclough, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001, 2020) and Charaudeau to analyse the tweets. This involves examining multimodal textual practices, discursive practices, and social practices as well as the performativity of the different discourses. This will lead us to (5) the identification of underlying political, religious, cultural and other ideologies by distinguishing the values, beliefs and norms conveyed. (6) Synthesise the results by identifying the trends, dominant discourses, and main ideologies present in the tweets and then proceed to (7) interpreting the results considering our research questions and confirming or refuting the hypothesis saying that there is one “true Islam” in the eyes of Ex-Muslims.

Based on N. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (1989, 1992, 2005) and inspired by the multimodality insights of Kress & Van Leeuwen, our analysis grid encompasses three levels: (1) Micro: Analysis of multimodal texts. The objects of analysis are tweets with various semiotic modes; textual metafunction, and visual grammar. (2) Meso: Analysis of discursive practices, including intertextuality, speech acts, means of production, processes of production, dissemination, and discursive assimilation, social semiotics, and interpersonal metafunction. (3) Macro: Analysis of social practices, examining the broader social context, conditions of discursive productions, ideational metafunction and ideological effects. The analysis process involves three steps: description, interpretation, and explanation. In some cases, depending on the construction of the tweet, it will be analysed using Charaudeau's “actantial model”.

This research presents certain limitations that are essential to acknowledge. Firstly, it focuses on French-speaking discourses, although the phenomenon of Ex-Muslims is global, affecting various languages such as English, Arabic, Pakistani, Farsi, and Hindi. This language limitation may restrict the scope of the study's conclusions. Additionally, the absence of a quantitative approach may limit our understanding of general trends related to the discourses of Ex-Muslims on X.

Another point to note is the lack of consideration for the impact of these discourses on the public. Understanding how these discourses influence individuals' perceptions and attitudes would be essential for a comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, the study does not address the analysis of the connections created between Ex-Muslims on and off the X platform. This social dimension could provide valuable insights into how these discourses interact with social dynamics.

Repeated account deletions on X also pose a challenge, as they result in the loss of trace of certain accounts that are reopened multiple times and, in some cases, disappear forever. This instability in data collection can affect the consistency of the analysis. Finally, the anonymisation of some profiles constitutes another obstacle, making it difficult to understand the individuals behind these accounts and truly contextualise their discourse. We also consider the possibility, albeit slim, that some profiles may be "bots".

Our method has some limitations that we acknowledge and consider in our approach. Firstly, we chose a critical multimodal discourse analysis perspective to examine the discourses of Ex-Muslims on X. An alternative approach, such as a historical, social or psychological analysis for example, could have provided different insights. Furthermore, our qualitative methodology faces several challenges. The complexity of discursive layers, the psychology of the actors, their unknown personal life journeys, as well as the analysis of messages within the context of X's specific rules, make interpretation challenging.

Multimodal analysis is inherently complex due to the diversity of communication modes involved, which requires a significant investment in time and resources. This is particularly true since Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, which has impacted our methods of data collection and processing. Additionally, qualitative analysis is subject to a certain degree of

subjectivity, as it largely depends on the researcher's perspective. Consequently, different researchers might reach different interpretations of the same data.

However, we are fully aware of these limitations and strive to analyse the data we have collected with the utmost precision. Our approach is modest, recognising that the complexity of our subject requires a nuanced analysis despite these challenges.

We just started the process of NVivo coding however, the empirical study of the data has led us to some observations. Through the prism of Zienkowski's insights into the metapolitical dimension of discourses, the social practices of the Ex-Muslims' critical discourse on X could reveal an attempt to interact with the broader political and social context. This is facilitated by the digital space, which besides its polemic situation, is functioning, for them, as a sort of 'democratic' platform that upholds free speech in some cases thanks to anonymity. Not only does it give a voice to a previously silent community, but it also empowers them in their international social engagement. As this niche of individuals navigates the digital space, their discourse, backed with the on-the-ground efforts, appears as an emerging 'wanna-be' political force, attempting to challenge established paradigms and power structures. Thus, in addition to helping them gather and connect beyond borders, X becomes a platform for critically examining and questioning the foundations of Islam and its culture, contesting dominant paradigms and ideologies related to this religion, pushing boundaries, fostering discussions and contributing to strengthening the Ex-Muslim culture.

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Questions:

1. Apostasy as an Ideology:

By choosing to conduct critical discourse analysis (à la Fairclough), one cannot escape the notion of ideology. That being said, at this stage of my research, political, religious, economic, or social ideologies remain broad and complex currents, which do not allow me to clearly identify any one of these currents in the discourse of Ex-Muslims. Certainly, there are elements of liberalism, feminism, nationalism... but it is not easy to categorise these discourses.

I would tend to approach apostasy from Islam as an ideology by itself constructed from these major currents and linked to each individual's experience.

Can 'apostasy in Islam' be considered a social ideology on its own?

2. Metareligion

In the context of Ex-Muslims, I see Activism as a form of inverted proselytism (Activism -> inverted proselytism -> Politics -> Metapolitics -> Metareligion)....

Relying on Zienkowski's (2019: 137), Metapolitics involves the clash of "conflicting modes and models of politics" and the "reshaping of the structure of the public realm as well as the entities, borders and processes that constitute it".

In the frame of my research, I would tend to address of metareligion... Metareligion would refer to discourses and movements that seek to influence religion, religious discourse, and the relationship to religion, and to influence 'confessional' society by modifying the philosophical, cultural, and ideological foundations on which religious decisions rest.

Does this seem coherent to you?

3. Methodology

Is the methodology presented logically constructed to address the research questions?

4. NVivo

Is the working method on NVivo software optimal?

5. Unrelated Tweets

For unrelated tweets, do I need to go through the entire process if they do not address the research questions?