

Simon Cottee

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With a recent spike in immigration to Europe from the Middle East (and further afield), there is an observed increase in public attention to and discussions on Muslims, who admittedly constitute the largest share of the arrivals to the Old Continent—their values, lifestyles and the like. Many of those discussions centre on the issue of integrationability¹ of Muslims into the European socio-cultural fabric, perceived to be first of all of secular, if not altogether post-religious, nature. Most of those who are negatively predisposed towards the prospect of successful integration of Muslim immigrants into European societies routinely point to the perceived fact that (all) Muslims in their daily lives are guided by the Islamic principles (however understood by them)—basically, that their habitual behavior is, if not strictly Islamic, then definitely culturally Muslim. And there is little, if at all, that might be regarded as secular, i.e. of non-religious nature. Furthermore, the pundits of the European cultural exceptionality (some would call them ‘cultural racists’) often insist that those perceived Islamic principles are incompatible with the liberal European values which are the basis of the contemporary European cultures. Consequently, Muslims cannot be integrated. End of story.

But maybe not? Maybe not all Muslim-born people apply Islamic principles (however understood by them) in their daily lives? Maybe there are those who are secular by choice? Or even agnostic? Or maybe even atheist? Surely, the fabric of Muslim societies and communities (and particularly in diaspora) is much more colourful when it comes to what people identified (and self-identifying) as Muslims believe in and how they relate to the transcendental than the self-appointed custodians of the European cultural purity allow themselves to admit.

The fact that there are many thoroughly secularised people of Muslim background, both in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world, becomes apparent when one looks into the social groups who were behind the initial protests against the crippling regimes in a number of Arab countries, which sparked the by now ill-fated ‘Arab Spring’—many of them were made of educated and liberal-minded Arab youth for whom religion was not the forming basis of their individual and social aspirations. Some among them might (if not must) have

1 I admit, this is a neologism but in my mind it best conveys the contents of the ongoing debates on the prospects of integration of immigrants and particularly those of Muslim background of the most recent wave.

been agnostic or even atheist. The subsequent discussions in the Egyptian and other Arab media, particularly social media, attest to that.

So, all in all, it turns out that there might be people of Muslim background who do not necessarily stick to this inheritance—indeed, some of them opt to ‘move out’, in other words, to apostasise. Simon Cottee’s study on several dozen (35, to be precise) ex-Muslims in the UK and Canada can meaningfully be viewed against the background of the current ‘Islam-as-the-obstacle-to-integration’ discussions in Europe, for, as he very pointedly shows in his book, though still little observed, there is an ever increasing share of people of Muslim background in Europe who do not identify with Islam any more. Consequently, they should not be identified with it by others and rather taken for what they are (or strive to be). And they are ex-Muslims.

Cottee approaches the topic of ‘moving out of Islam’ primarily from an anthropological vantage point, leaving aside the centuries-long discussions by Muslim jurists on apostasy. And he needs to be lauded for that, for rather than recycling the well-known truths of apostasy from Islam as a major crime warranting capital punishment, he sought (and succeeded) to look behind the façade of apostasy and into how ex-Muslims felt having abandoned their ancestral religion (and ultimately culture), how they made (or did not make) it public, what consequences they endured and how they coped with them. Or, in Cottee’s words, he focused on “the lived realities of apostates and how they subjectively make sense of their situation and the world in which they live” (p. 4). This makes the study not only relevant in the contemporary setting with the above-mentioned looming discussions but also very engaging and even entertaining.

The credibility of this qualitative study is enhanced by Cottee’s methodology, encompassing numerous interviews with the respondents which became possible only after meticulous preparatory work to win the trust of those people who, because of the sensitivity of the issue, often tend to be mistrustful of ‘outsiders’, i.e. basically all those who are not ex-Muslims, and particularly among the ‘closet’ apostates, who had not revealed their ‘moving out’ to their close ones. The ultimate result of the research is a well thought-over and structured account of apostasy as an ongoing process that apparently continues well beyond the moment of decisive admittance or ‘formal’ (public or not so) declaration of having ‘moved out’.

Among the intentions of the study was to argue “that ex-Muslims in the west must manage the moral stigma attached to apostasy within their own communities” (p. 5). This being true, one needs to add that the ex-Muslims in the west face stigmatisation from the non-Muslim majorities, ranging from non-recognition (‘you are still a Paki/Turk/Arab’, read ‘of Muslim cultural