



**Why We Left Religion:**  
*testimonies by ex-believers*

*edited by Mubarak Bala,  
Carly Stathopolous,  
Hank Pellissier & Hafsa Guled*

*Brighter Brains  
Institute*

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**Dedicated to**

**Hauwa Liman & Saifura Khorsa**

**International Red Cross aid workers**

**killed by Boko Haram, 2018**

**“One must state it plainly.  
Religion comes from  
the period of  
human pre-history, where  
nobody had the  
smallest idea what was going  
on”**

**- Christopher Hitchens**

# Introduction

Faith? No more...?

Religious belief is plummeting around the world, especially in developed nations with excellent education systems. In Europe, non-believers will soon be the largest demographic, and in the USA, 31% of college students have no religious affiliation.

Developing nations are also rising up against the tyranny of irrational superstitions.

In Nigeria – where Pentecostal preachers plague the south and Islamic extremists rampage the north – there are nine pro-secular organizations.

In the Philippines - a Catholic stronghold where divorce, abortion, and birth control are illegal - rebellion against the Vatican extends from the President to activist freethinkers.

Why are people abandoning religion? This collection of testimonies by ex-believers reveals multiple reasons:

- Disillusionment with the cruelty and hypocrisy of religious leaders and their congregations
- Access to skepticism, critical thinking, and atheist argument for disbelief on the internet
- Rebellion against religious atrocities such as pedophilia, and the dehumanizing of women, homosexuals, and Hindu castes
- 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific evidence that exposes “truths” in the Bible and Quran as only ludicrous myths
- Historical and literary analysis of sacred texts, revealing them to be contradictory and self-serving, with authoritarian agendas.

This collection owes a deep debt of gratitude to every individual and organization who helped accumulate the contents: David Fitzgerald, Yasmine

Mohammed, Phil Zuckerman, Brighter Brains Institute, Mubarak Bala, Harris Sultan of Ex Muslim Atheist (Facebook), The Friendly Atheist, Barry Duke of The Freethinker, Hafsa Guled, Military Atheists and Secular Humanists (MASH), and, most importantly, the subreddits dedicated to apostate communities: exjew, exhindu, exmuslim, exchristian.

Our apologies to everyone we forgot to thank!

Many contributions to this book had to use pseudonyms or call themselves "Anonymous" to protect themselves from harm. In thirteen nations, apostasy and blasphemy can be punished with a death sentence!

We hope for a very near future where all non-believers are respected and safe.

Our ambition for this collection is that it can provide support, motivation, inspiration and assistance to all the "doubters" in the world who are presently contemplating their own exit from religious belief.

We hope you find strength and community in these pages.

(The Editors)

Mubarak Bala

Carly Stathopolous

Hank Pellissier

Hafsa Guled

# Ex-Orthodox Jews

## Yair

I grew up knowing that Judaism was true. It was never a question: I sensed that my parents believed in it completely, and as a bright, sensitive, intellectual boy I simply never doubted that they were right.

My parents had grown up in traditionally Jewish homes, with a nominal but proud maintenance of some basic Jewish customs such as a family Passover *seder*. In their teens they had each become more observant, and by the time they met they had become practicing Orthodox Jews. This was the outlook I was raised in, and the basic theology was expressed with such conviction that I never even thought to question it.

I adopted the Jewish concepts and outlooks as absolute truth. I took them very seriously - encouraged by the example of my parents, by the sermons of the community rabbis, by the books I read, and by the cultural norms which reinforced this outlook so unambiguously.

I was inspired by the idea of becoming a great rabbi, which was the only aspiration I can remember my father ever having of me. "A rosh yeshiva," he would say in proud fantasy. I read books about the 'great rabbis' of past generations, stories of their apparent superhuman feats of morality and humility. I was determined to be like them.

But I struggled. I was severely emotionally abused by bullies for two years within two of the ultra-Orthodox communities in the city which my family had joined. The damage this did to me was profound, and while extensive therapy has been a great help, I am still dealing with the issues it's left me. At about fourteen I experienced a mental crisis caused by the stress, anxiety, and abuse that I had suffered.

As I gradually overcame these emotional issues, greatly helped by a good psychotherapist, I experienced a strong conflict between taking the religion



as seriously as it demanded and allowing myself some breathing room or even a little lightness in my daily life. I struggled with this for years, feeling guilty when I saw that I was not living up to the standards so unambiguously detailed in the books of Talmud and Jewish day-to-day law that were such a central and revered part of our lives.

The most difficult Jewish practice for me was praying. I longed to feel emotional and spiritual connection, especially in my suffering and my loneliness. But I didn't get much out of it. I invested great energies into prayer, but it mostly left me exhausted and disappointed.

Over the years that followed, I had many alternating periods of feeling connected to the ritual practice and feeling burdened by it. I felt sure that the problem was in me and didn't even entertain the notion that there might be an issue with the religion itself.

Years later, after moving to Israel, graduating from college, and working for a few years in high-tech, I experienced a mental burn-out, a fairly common phenomenon in the industry. I decided to try some more therapy. Many issues came up as I tried to get back in touch with myself, and one of the main ones was a simple fact: I had had enough of living a Jewish life. Not knowing where it would take me, I decided to be loyal to myself and to take gradual but concrete steps away from my religious lifestyle.

The struggle towards genuineness and self-honesty was deeply meaningful, but also incredibly painful. I took it step by step, as so much of the persona that I had held onto so tightly for years turned out to be built on wishful thinking, childhood fantasies, and a profound dissonance between desire and reality. I paid a therapist dearly to experience these insights, and it was well worth it.

I was living in Jerusalem. Taking off my kippah, walking out on a Friday night with a musical instrument, or eating non-kosher food - confronting the fear I had of 'what will they think?' - was very difficult, but also deeply fulfilling.

But even after living my life for a year or so with less and less Jewish character, I still felt something in me holding on to Judaism. I examined it in



therapy and in my own introspection, and it seemed to be a hesitation to abandon a structure and system which I had known my whole life; something which still had the appeal of making me feel comforted and accepted as 'one of us'.

As Passover approached, I became apprehensive about visiting my deeply religious parents for the family *seder*. My movement away from religion was not a secret, but it was never really acknowledged by my family. My parents asked me less and less about my life, and I felt that I had less and less to share with them, knowing how offended they would get to hear me talking about new parts of my life which were so exciting to me and yet so disturbing to them, such as bars I'd been to, mixed dance classes, rooftop parties and solo backpacking in Germany.

I came across a down-to-earth lecture by an expert historian \* who clearly showed that there is no archeological or historical evidence that the Biblical exodus ever happened. This struck a powerful blow at the foundation of my rational faith in Jewish belief, which had still been lingering against my will. I also came across a wonderful site \*\* of arguments and reason against Jewish apologetics, where I began reading a detailed, well-researched list of fundamental flaws in the Jewish Bible. These errors were so obvious, but as a religious Jew I had unquestioningly accepted the rabbinic apologetics and 'contextualizations' of so many of these issues and had never really stopped to think for myself.

It finally hit me. Despite my irreligiousness and my desire to be rid of any kind of connection to Judaism, the shock at suddenly seeing the simple falsehood of my most basic beliefs from the youngest age was overwhelming; even traumatic.

It took time to adjust to a world without a divine 'big brother', one where there are no safety nets, no opportunities to 'come back and try again' in another life, and no objective morality as defined by a deity and his 'flawless' book of laws and stories. It's still not completely normalized for me; I'm sure it will take more time to get there. But the sense of freedom, of independence, of being the master of my own destiny and the only listener to my thoughts, is marvelous.

I'm freer than I've ever been. I never dreamt it would be this challenging to follow my own path, or that it would lead me out of everything I've ever thought of as true and real - but it's something that has become so precious to me for its difficulty and for its results and gains. I feel that I'm more well-adjusted than I've been for most of my life, and while I have issues which I'm working through and difficulties that I'm struggling with in various aspects of my life, I'm deeply proud and satisfied with having gone through this process.

\* The lecture on the Exodus was given by Professor William Propp at UCSD - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6TsppQ5UNY>

\*\* The website that refutes Jewish apologetics is <http://www.talkreason.org/>

## Naomi Itzhak

My mother was raised in Orthodox Judaism and she raised us with an ethnic Jewish identity. When I was 26, I married a nice Israeli man of conservative/ reform observance. He showed me how ignorant I was of my heritage. We were only married a year, but after we divorced, I started studying with a modern Orthodox organization in Los Angeles. I took Hebrew and observance classes and I was welcomed to the community like a prodigal daughter.

After a year, I was offered a trip to Israel, to learn and sightsee. I went for 2 weeks. I made friends and decided to return immediately. I enrolled in seminary in Jerusalem, to learn full time everything a Jewish Orthodox woman should know. Cooking, history, Hebrew and Torah study. I was looking for an internal resonance, a feeling of doing the right thing.

After a flood of information and an incredible community connection, I still wasn't feeling anything. My soul was floating without aim. I wanted desperately to find a note that resonated in my being. I could spend my life wrestling with theological issues if I felt I was at least on the right path.

I struggled, but I felt doubt. I prayed and worked hard; everyone else believed, what was wrong with me? Then, on Yom Kippur, hot, thirsty and hungry, praying at the western wall, I had a realization. I felt nothing because there was nothing to feel. There was nothing wrong with me. I turned and walked away.

It took me a few months to figure out how to get home. It took me another few months to actually leave the community I had been surrounded with for a few years.

Just before my 31st birthday, I embraced my atheism. I've lived happily ever since. I haven't regretted my learning, travel or searching. It has left me feeling complete. I asked all of the questions I had, and I am responsible for the truth of my life.

I'm thankful that I am no longer trying to fill an imaginary void.

## Josh Mandell

I was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I went to services weekly and Hebrew school twice a week. I went to a Jewish summer camp and got a Bar Mitzvah.

In my first year of high school we moved to a new city and joined a very right-wing Orthodox congregation. I went to the local public school, but it wasn't the best fit for me for many reasons. That summer I went to an NCSY (Orthodox) summer camp in Baltimore. They were made aware that I was deciding between going back to public school or attending an Orthodox Jewish Yeshiva. I was yelled at and beaten down mentally until I "decided" that I should go to yeshiva.

I spent 3 years in a right-wing Orthodox Yeshiva in Chicago. It wasn't fun. I was years behind the other students. I turned in my first Talmud test blank, not because I didn't know the answers but because I couldn't read the questions. It was also very socially isolating since I didn't have the same background as the other students who had been in religious schools their entire life.

After 3 years in Yeshiva in Chicago I went off to Yeshiva in Jerusalem for a year like everyone else in my graduating class. Israel was life-changing for me, I met a broad spectrum of religious and non-religious Jews. I met the top minds of the generation. I also saw how my fellow Jews treated each other; it was awful to see the baseless hatred certain sects of Jews had for anyone who wasn't a member of their tribe.

After I got back from Israel and went to college I started to slowly fade out from organized Judaism. I'd seen everything the religion had to offer, which were some amazing things, but in the end living in the metal box orthodox Judaism puts you into wasn't worth it for me.

# Ex-Hindus

## Avi

I was a pious, god loving boy. In second grade, I was outraged when an astronomy book suggested the Sun will "go out" like a candle in a few million years. How could the Sun god go out?!

I was like that till I was 15 years old. I didn't ask the gods for much, just a battery-powered kids' bike. I started asking for it when I was around 10 but I never got it. I started thinking about the fact that half a decade's worth of worship didn't get me such a small favor.

Then, I started thinking about the times that the gods did help me. I couldn't find a single instance. I thought about how my ethical and religious mother has never lived a comfortable life. But big-time criminals who also believe in the same gods somehow lead really comfortable lives.

That's when I stopped believing that there was any such thing as god. The concept of god became too absurd for me to ever believe in.

I won't lie, some days, I feel an emptiness inside me, and sometimes I feel like I am missing out on the comfort felt by religious people. But the concept is just too absurd for me to ever believe in. I tried once, but I just couldn't make myself believe something that ridiculous. So, to fulfill my need for something bigger than myself and awe inspiring, I've turned to the cosmos. Reading about and seeing pictures of great cosmic bodies like the pillars of creations more than makes up for the hole.

## Ram

In 2016, I was 12 years old and extremely depressed, I felt so sad, people around me always said the gods would save me from my problems, I just needed to keep my faith in Hinduism and believe the gods exist and inevitably I would be cured. My grandmother contacted a pundit for advice on how I could recover, he said the same thing as everyone else.

(I tried to commit suicide multiple times, but I failed because I didn't stab myself deep enough. The closest I ever got was making a hole in my shirt, when my mom asked about this I lied about the cause)

My 12-year-old self decided to research atheism, by watching atheist youtubers like Logicked. I thought maybe Hinduism was all false, maybe I would never be cured by the gods magically. I decided to abandon Hinduism and become an atheist, it felt liberating.

The next day I thought "did I really make the correct decision?" I started to research Hinduism; I learned of the creation myth and I learned how Hinduism leans from being a little bit misogynistic to being full on misogynistic.

When I came out as an atheist many people repeated the same bullshit, they always said "believe in the gods, they'll heal you". Everybody around me hated atheists, my mom threatened to kick me out of the house, she didn't because "she loves me" (yeah right).

After I became an atheist, I felt like I needed to improve myself and actually make an effort to make my life better. I had a "wake up" call, I also became happier, this is why I'm still alive today.

## **Mamta Patel**

One reason I left Hinduism is because my view on praying is that it has zero outcome. I didn't like spending all that time in the temple praying for nothing.

I hate asking a nonexistent being "God, please make my mother normal" because she has a mental illness that she's been fighting with for 10 years now.

I made the right decision to get her the help she needed. All those years God wasn't anywhere.

I will never go back to Hinduism.

## **Peachy**

I can't believe in God(s), I can't wrap my head around it. Hinduism is very interesting, but I just don't believe in it. I just drifted away.

I quite like some of the morals presented in it, but I hate the caste system. I also do not like Karma because its purpose is dumb to me. I believe people should refrain from doing bad things because they're BAD things, not because they're being scared into not doing it. Karma does not always work. There are multiple serial killers who were never caught. MLK was killed, despite his accomplishments, is that karma?

I left Hinduism, but I don't hate it. I just don't like being restrained by it and I would rather define my own morals.



## **Curryspace**

I left Hinduism after I started watching videos of Hitchens, Dawkins and Sam Harris. I also took religious studies and philosophy courses. I realized no one actually understands anything in their religion and most of it doesn't make sense.

## **Keksup**

I like beef and I don't really care about the silly "we have to consider all life everywhere as sacred" narrative that persists in every strain of Hinduism. I think it's very silly and naive.

# Ex-Buddhists

## Tim K

I became interested in Buddhism at the age of 18. I started reading more and more about it until I eventually joined a local Tibetan meditation group at the age of 21. After wrestling with serious doubts about it for 10+ years, I finally severed my ties at the age of 37. Why did I leave?

Buddhism has a theory of causality that relies on reincarnation. I've often heard that one doesn't need to believe in reincarnation to be a Buddhist but the trouble with it is that your teachers believe in it. Or at least mine did. Also, the concept of *Tathagatagarbha* (Buddha-nature) - the idea that we and all animals are perfectly omniscient enlightened minds. This is unfalsifiable in the extreme.

Buddhism was an early attempt at a theory of everything, but it hasn't delivered on its claims, like the claim that Buddhism explains the nature of mind. That requires enormous, clear and unambiguous evidence. Where is it? Meditation with all the traditional claims around what it can do for the practitioner now ends up with a handful of studies that indicate that it may help people be "nicer" and "more relaxed" - this is ridiculous. Buddhism claims meditation will make you clairvoyant, not relaxed. Where are the studies to show that it does what it is traditionally claimed to do?

Buddhism's claims about how the world works and how the mind works are wrong and outdated. Science has kicked its butt when it comes to that. Also, I resist the assumption that formal meditation is good for you. Guided meditation has been shown to increase suggestibility and I'd have to say that I saw this in action. A lot.

Buddha made enormous claims about the "the way things are". He essentially gave a theory of everything. A huge set of claims with flimsy evidence, by today's standards. So, following Hume's advice, I threw it to the flames.

Buddha claimed to have come to a state of "enlightenment" which is sometimes described as a state of perfect omniscience. He then proceeded to teach for 40 years on the nature of reality, including the nature of mind. If anyone claimed to have complete insight into the nature of reality and of the mind, we might reasonably expect an amount and quality of evidence proportional to the claim. I don't feel this evidence exists. The general claims about how the world is are found mostly in the *Abhidhama*, a collection of teachings on the subject. It contains descriptions of a flat earth with an enormous mountain in the middle at the top of which the Hindu God Brahma lives. I could go on. The descriptions of the nature of mind are found throughout the Sutras, Prajnaparamita and a variety of different Tantras. Suffice to say that I feel modern cognitive sciences have uncovered more in the last 100 years about how the mind actually works than all teachings on this subject found in all Buddhist texts in the last 2500 years. Also, reincarnation? I mean, come on.

Buddhism's weird backwards stuff doesn't get taught in the west. But try being gay in Tibet or Nepal. Over there, Buddhism is the social equivalent of the Catholic Church.

Buddhism is mostly harmless in the west, it's also mostly woo. Buddhism is FULL of backwards irrationality. For every seemingly level-headed idea that Buddhism produces, it produces 10 bullshit ideas. Most Buddhist organizations fall under the heading "Harmless but Woo-y", thus I recommend not bothering with them.

It is true that the Buddha isn't seen as a god, but every school believes in the existence of gods, they just don't worship them. My teachers, and other teachers from other lineages and schools, often spoke of gods, local spirits, demons etc. The Buddha was apparently approached by Hindu gods after his enlightenment who requested that he teach. The original texts... clearly talk about gods, god realms, demi-gods, demons, hell etc...

The behavior of my teacher bothered me at first, later on I figured that the problem had more to do with the power structure above him that enabled his behavior. I can assure you that, although I didn't like my teacher's behavior, he was endorsed by the leaders of the lineage from the before the time I joined right up until today. Later I started to think that it was more

the overall ideology that enabled the power structure. In the end it was that. You can read up on a variety of scandals in the Buddhist communities, including accounts of gross sexual abuse, financial fraud, murder and all the other good stuff that accompany the practice of any religion and its institutions. Monastic retreats are rife with poor behavior. Scandals abound in the Tibetan monasteries in the west. And those are the just ones that are subject to at least some degree of freedom of expression and openness. Imagine what's going on in monasteries in the East! Sexual abuse by clergy. We've seen how rampant it is in Catholicism. How prevalent do you think it is in Buddhist monasteries? I think power and celibacy are a horrible combination. I've heard lots about the numerous sex scandals in Tibetan Buddhism but don't imagine that weird stuff isn't going on in monasteries and temples of all traditions in Thailand, Burma, Japan, the UK.

Regarding pilgrims, it's a sad thing there aren't any Tibetan versions of James Randi around to debunk and disempower the clerical class in that part of the world. In time there will be, I'm sure. A friend of mine who recently traveled through there put it rather succinctly: "I always thought religion was bullshit but when I saw dirt-poor people in Nepal giving away their hard-earned money so that stupas could be painted with gold, I *knew* it was bullshit". So much for "helping all beings". The accounts of what life was like for the average Tibetan under the Lamas are horrifying. The PRC isn't much better, but holy shit did the Lamas ever treat the people poorly.

Christopher Hitchens' oft-repeated line "those who offer you false comfort are false friends" has stuck in my head since I first read "God is not great". That book had a huge impact on me and was one of the many nails in the coffin of my Buddhist involvement.

## John Horgan

In 1999 I decided I needed a spiritual practice, so I started attending meditation sessions in the basement of my town's library. I learned more about Buddhism by reading books and articles, attending lectures and conferences and, most of all, talking to lots of Buddhists, some famous, even infamous.

Eventually, I stopped attending my Zen sessions.

One problem was that meditation never really tamed my monkey mind. During my last class, I fixated on a classmate who kept craning his neck and grunting and asking our teacher unbearably pretentious questions. I loathed him and loathed myself for loathing him, and finally I thought: What am I doing here? By that time, I also had serious intellectual qualms about Buddhism.

I concluded that Buddhism is not much more rational than Catholicism, my childhood faith.

One of Buddhism's biggest selling points for lapsed Catholics like me is that it supposedly dispenses with God and other supernatural claptrap. This claim is disingenuous. Buddhism, at least in its traditional forms, is functionally theistic, even if it doesn't invoke a supreme deity. The doctrines of karma and reincarnation imply the existence of some sort of cosmic moral judge who, like Santa Claus, tallies up our naughtiness and niceness before rewarding us with nirvana or rebirth as a cockroach.

Those who emphasize Buddhism's compatibility with science usually downplay or disavow its supernatural elements. The mystical philosopher Ken Wilber, when I interviewed him, compared meditation to a scientific instrument such as a microscope or telescope, through which you can glimpse spiritual truth. This analogy is bogus. Anyone can peer through a telescope and see the moons of Jupiter, or squint through a microscope and see cells divide. But ask 10 meditators what they see, feel or learn and you will get 10 different answers.

Research on meditation... suggests how variable its effects can be. Meditation reportedly reduces stress, anxiety and depression, but it has been linked to increased negative emotions, too. Some studies indicate that meditation makes you hyper-sensitive to external stimuli; others reveal the opposite effect. Brain scans do not yield consistent results, either. For every report of heightened neural activity in the frontal cortex and decreased activity in the left parietal lobe, there exists a contrary result.

There is also the claim that contemplative practice will make us gentler, humbler, and compassionate. In *Zen and the Brain* (MIT Press, 1998), the neurologist and Buddhist James Austin proposes that meditation and mindfulness erode neural regions underpinning our innate self-centeredness. But given the repulsive behavior over the past few decades of so many gurus—including Chogyam Trungpa - who was an alcoholic womanizer and bully—you could conclude that mystical knowledge leads to pathological narcissism rather than selflessness. Instead of shrinking to a point and vanishing, the mystic's ego may expand to infinity.

Did Buddhism deflate the ego of Steve Job?

I've had a few experiences that could be called mystical. I have felt a jaw-dropping astonishment at the improbability of existence, and an overwhelming sense of life's preciousness. However, others may have very different reactions. Like an astronaut gazing at the earth through the window of his spacecraft, the mystic sees our existence against the backdrop of infinity and eternity. This perspective may not translate into compassion and empathy for others. Far from it. Human suffering and death may appear laughably trivial. Instead of becoming a saint-like Bodhisattva, brimming with love for all things, the mystic may become a sociopathic nihilist.

I suspect some bad gurus have fallen prey to mystical nihilism.

They may also have been corrupted by that most insidious of all Buddhist propositions, the myth of total enlightenment. This is the notion that some rare souls achieve mystical self-transcendence so complete that they become morally infallible—like the Pope! Belief in this myth can turn spiritual teachers into tyrants and their students into mindless slaves, who excuse even their teachers' most abusive behavior as "crazy wisdom."

I have one final misgiving about Buddhism—or rather, about Buddha himself. His path to enlightenment began with his abandonment of his wife and child. Even today, Tibetan Buddhism—again, like Catholicism—upholds male monasticism as the epitome of spirituality. To me, "spiritual" means life-embracing, and so a path that turns away from aspects of life as essential as sexual love and parenthood is not spiritual but anti-spiritual.

Buddhists often respond to my carping by saying, "You didn't give Buddhism enough time! If you truly understood it, you wouldn't say such stupid things!" And so on.

String theorists and Freudian psychoanalysts employ this same tactic against their critics, saying we can't fault their supposed solutions to existence until we have devoted as much time to them as true believers.

Sorry, life's too short.



## Vernon Ortiz

I think Buddhism ultimately ruined my life.

For the longest time, I studied and followed precepts of Buddhism, the goal: reduce or eliminate suffering. I studied it on my own and put what I was learning into practice. Over a long period of time, I gradually began to let go. Things didn't bother me, I wanted less and less, and life was easy. I was content. Good or bad things didn't happen in my life - just... things. I would accept them, and move on, secure in the knowledge that it is what it is.

15 years later, I have no passion. No peaks or valleys. I'm just coasting with no real ups or downs. I have no goals or ambitions, although I'm very successful in what I've chosen to do with my life. I'm kind of upset about that. For the longest time, I thought that decreasing desire would decrease my suffering, and it definitely did, and for that, I am thankful - but at the same time, I think it also robbed me of happiness.

Is this feeling I'm having a side effect of Buddhism? Is it the goal? Did I miss something?

# Ex-Muslims

## Anas (Pakistan)

I am a gay teenager living in Pakistan

My pain started making me question Islam. Pakistan's ideology is based on Islam and Islam isn't good to homosexuals. I have anxiety, I can't talk to employees, they think of me as a weirdo, refer to me as a girl because my voice is "girly" not manly. I wish I was normal, so I wouldn't have gotten into this mess. But I can't change so I have no choice but to deal with it. It's literally ordered in the fucking Quran to execute Homosexuals. Open the Quran and read it. Do you also know a gay couple that live in the Middle East? Neither do I.

I was interested in boys since I was 13, I was never interested in a girl sexually.

Constant abuse from my parents and culture made me question the validity of the religion. I went online, I searched and researched and slowly I lost my faith. I came to the conclusion Islam is false. This didn't happen over the course of a day it took me months.

My whole life I was taught a lie.

Yesterday I got beat up by my dad; he scratched me on my forehead and lower lip. A few moments after the beating he told me to massage him and told me how he was beating me to teach me a lesson, and said Allah likes this and that and he loves me and other crap.

In Pakistan it's a norm beating the shit out of your kids and no one bats an eye but in a western country a parent can suffer for beating its child. Multiple human rights violations in Pakistan but who fucking cares. I can't stop fetishizing the west because where I live, I can't be accepted but in the west you can because there exists a thing called 'rights.'

I suffer abuse from my parents both mentally and physically. I thought I could turn to Allah whenever I was having a bad day. I used to cry and curse Allah and blame him when my parents would hit me. It has been going for years until I realized what if no one is listening to my cries? I explored Islam and finally left.

Barbaric shariah laws - the great prophet cut off a guy's hand just for stealing a piece of cloth, a trivial thing, thieves are no angels I know that but cutting someone's hand is too much, don't you think?

Muslims talk about morality, yet they support the guy who cut off HANDS of another guy just for stealing a piece of cloth. You permanently disable a human being for one mistake.

I cringe and weep for humanity every day. Life's harsh.

Whoever says Islam is the most feminist religion is delusional. Even the blood money is worth half if the victim is a girl. Morality of Islam is disgusting in my view.

Quran is considered a timeless book for whole humanity at every age but a whole surah is dedicated to:

- 1) examine the women who were migrating to Medina from Mecca at that time
  - 2) to tell Mohammed which women he can marry and which relative's wives he can marry
  - 3) to tell the believers of that time how to visit Mohammed's house and what to do after eating the meal
  - 4) how to talk to his wives
  - 5) to not marry his wives after his death
- And a bunch more.

Islam controls everything in a Muslim's life, people can't think critically or even properly it's like logic just skips their minds. If you even go against Islam people will go batshit, for example look up blasphemy laws in Pakistan; even if the state does not punish you the mob will lynch you.

The penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment, 5:33

I need to keep my mouth shut, I was thinking about telling my Muslim parents about coming out. Holy hell I live in the ME. Being a ex Muslim is more than enough and to be a homosexual is just worse.

I can't tell people around me how I feel. I have great friends but say anything against the religion and its chaos. They are great friends and support me in every way except religious.

Why do you reddit/muslims think we leave Islam just to eat pork and drink wine? I wouldn't care one bit about pork and wine, there are many more reasons why we left Islam. Contradictions, hypocrisy, lies, illogical claims etc.

Calling me a snowflake, cute, do you know if I tell the people around me or the authorities got to know that I'm an ex-muslim I'll be the one punished to death? Ask yourself who's the real snowflake here me or the people who'll try to get me just because I left their religion, there's a reason why Ex Muslim want to move western countries and it's called freedom. Aren't you the guys who are licking the shoes of Prophet Mo?

We didn't leave Islam because we didn't understand but because it strips people of their rights (women) killings of Homosexual and it's false scientific claims etc.

It's hard for Muslims to accept that someone left their not-so-perfect religion. You expect us to tolerate Islam but you can't tolerate people leaving Islam. Hey if Islam was little bit loose on apostasy, I don't think the hate would be much

Pedophilla is embedded in the people of Pakistan for example the western part of Pakistan the kpk area is filled with pedophiles, and they mostly have

sex with younger boys aged between 9-12 year-olds from poor backgrounds, because they are helpless, homeless and runaways.

(<https://youtu.be/NMp2wm0VMUs>)

Why people do this? Is because they are sexually repressed, like why people rape other inmates in prison. The situation is similar.

*Eid ul adha* is a shitshow, animals getting slaughtered in the streets, cows, sheep and camels. There are intestines with green stuff. For a few weeks before the festival the animals are force fed. It sucks.

## Obaid

I was very inquisitive growing up. I questioned everything. At 11, when I learned the sun was going to go to nova and destroy the Earth in 5 billion years I came home and asked my parents why “this doesn’t jive with the Day of Judgement.” They tried to tell me, “no no no, it’s the same thing; the Day of Judgement and the sun going nova are the same thing,” but I just couldn’t buy that.

The more I learned about basic high school science, and evolution, and chemistry... that all made sense to me, and religion didn’t.

I worked in Afghanistan for 7 years and I saw some gruesome stuff, but the saddest thing I saw were the thousand year old statues of Buddha that were blown up because they were an affront to Islam. All because they want to protect their god and their religion. In my mind, I think it’s like, ‘how weak is your god? How weak is your faith? That any kind of dissent might veer someone away.

If Islam is your belief, if you think it is true, why not let people question it? Free speech is the only thing I’m a fundamentalist about. It’s the bedrock on which all other liberties are built. If you don’t have free speech you’re not going to get any other liberties.

In Islam... you have none. You can’t speak out, you can’t question.

## Amara

I'm a physicist who wants to spend her life doing awesome research, knowing everything there is to know and taking part in education and science communication.

I left Islam because I concluded that all organized religion is detrimental to human progress and that either a being who fits my definition of god doesn't exist or is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

When I was still Muslim, I used Islam as a source of personal spirituality and reflection. I still went by my own moral code and focused on my own ideals: namely living life helping people solve personal and social problems, striving towards world peace, education, making people excited about awesome science and figuring out and knowing everything there is to know, beautiful art and wanting to experience and explore the whole universe.

As the years passed, the more I learned about science, history and anthropology, and the more I thought about how to achieve a near perfect egalitarian world where everyone can be as personally, socially, economically secure, free and happy as possible, it became obvious that all organized religions are detrimental to the human progress in all forms.

Blind belief and superstition have no place in the endeavors I described. We must make rationality, critical thinking, and appreciation for facts and the scientific method and logic our ideals. We must all love, accept, include and help one another.

Blind belief in disproved nonsense or never been proven supernatural events and belief in one's 'moral' and intellectual superiority based on belief in and adherence to ancient religions and ideologies is holding humanity back from both scientific and social progress. We can't solve problems if ignore facts regarding both the existence of problems and the facts of nature. All ideologies that demand blind belief (including Islam) ask you to ignore reality, and facts and the provable, and agree to ideas, the happening of events and prescribed 'morality' on blind faith. Because god said this happened, or said this idea is good for progress, or this thing is moral or immoral, it must be true! Even in the face of contradicting evidence.

All gods in all religions extinct and present are immoral, malevolent and self-absorbed to various degrees and don't fit my ideas for a potential god-like entity. Either one who is indeed omnipotent, omniscience and omnibenevolent, or some entity to started up our universe and has since left, and let it develop on its own devices. The first kind obviously doesn't exist while the second kind is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

It doesn't matter who or what if anything created the universe. If it fits my definition of a potential god, would be happy with people's efforts towards gaining knowledge, creating beautiful art, experiencing the universe, helping and loving one another and solving problems.

That is all I would want from my creation, if I were a godlike being. Nothing more. I don't need them to worship me. If my creation were to stumble across me and my role in creating them, through their search for knowledge, yay! They get a cookie. But I don't care, as long as they're smart, creative and kind.

If a god as described in the world religions exists, it is incompetent, malevolent, self-obsessed being must deal with me on 'judgement day'! I'll fight it for toying with and trying to hurt good kind smart awesome humans.

That was a quite a rant! I apologize. I'm sick of Muslims assuming that we all left ONLY and MAINLY because we hate the oppressive and violent actions of individual Muslims (at large or in our families and communities) or we wanted to be free to indulge in solely superficial mindless pleasures.

I was sheltered from the actions of horrible Muslims at large as well as the horrible things in Islamic ideology as a child, grew up surrounded my loving tolerant family and friends, and was free to do almost everything. I still left for several well thought out reasons.



## Mubarak Bala (Nigeria)

I questioned religion all my life, but did I get the right answers? No. I was never satisfied with all the murderous hateful literature. I was seven when I consistently asked my father about the imaginary Allah, when and how he made himself, and other 'crazy' questions. He answered me as best he could, to keep me in line.

Free thought is not encouraged about god... The science I understood gave me answers that were pretty satisfactory. The world was much more amazing than what they say it is. By the time I was an adult, I was already liberal, then secular. By university I was already agnostic and humanist. By 2009, I was more vocal, and an activist, for *Almajiri* freedom.

From 2012, my criticism turned towards Boko Haram and Islam. The naked violence confirmed me an atheist, knowing this is how Islam was in the first century. Many Chiboks were sacked by Muhammad and his followers in Arabia. Many girls and women were taken as booty and raped by those Muslims we name our children after. I just would not belong to such barbaric religion.

As you may know, the Islamic sharia demands that apostates be murdered, but the procedure before that is to lock up the offender for three days and plead with them to recant their stand/statement. If they don't, then a medical exam is next, where it's determined whether or not the individual is crazy to deny the lovely religion of peace. If they're certified sane, beheading follows, if mentally ill, compulsory medication is necessary.

They can't imagine a world where someone would just leave. That's what happened to me. Well, almost. In the end, the doctor that said I was insane was removed, having said I needed a god, and that even in Japan, they had gods, that atheism is a mental disease, and denying the Adam and Eve 'history' as delusion. The new doctors, plus the earlier ones that long ago said I was sane, and what I needed was some sermon or prayer, certified me sane, in the presence of the DSS (the domestic intelligence service in Nigeria) officers assigned to protect me from my dad and uncles. I forgave them and withdrew my legal litigation, on terms they have not yet met fully.

## Yasmine Mohammed

I was born into a marriage that was on its last legs. My parents moved from California to Vancouver, Canada to raise their children in a quiet environment far away from the free love culture of 1960s San Francisco. They were actually separated when my mom discovered she was pregnant with me. She hoped that this news would cause my father to reconsider, but he still left her. He left her with three children in a city she was unfamiliar with, in a country she was uncomfortable in.

My mother, who was born and raised in Egypt, went looking for support and community, and unfortunately this quest caused her to gravitate towards the local mosque. In that mosque, she met a man who was already married, and already had three children, but who offered to take her on as his second (concurrent) wife. In Islam, a man can have up to four wives. His French-Canadian convert wife accepted this arrangement.

I was around five or six years old when this man entered our lives. I had no idea why my mom was accepting of all his brutality. He demanded that she wear a scarf on her hair, which was very strange to us, and it made me angry that he was changing my mother. Soon after, he sat us down and broke all of our records in front of us. I sat there helplessly as he snapped Kenny Rogers, Hank Williams, and Dolly Parton into pieces. My mother just stood there with her hands clasped, looking at the carpet, avoiding our eyes and ignoring our questions.

“Music is haram!” he bellowed.

I had never heard that word before, yet I heard little else but that since that day. Haram means forbidden. From that moment on practically everything was forbidden – I could no longer have birthdays, ride my bike, go swimming, join in hot dog day at school, or play with my friends down the hall of our apartment building – as they were non-Muslims. Befriending non-Muslims was also haram.

All of these things that were taken away were replaced with five daily prayers and memorization of the Quran. Every morning we were woken up to pray fajr, the prayer that must be performed before sunrise, and then in

the hours as we waited for school, we had to sit and rock back and forth as we memorized foreign sounds from an ancient text. We had no idea what we were saying. But that fact was irrelevant. The objective was not to learn or understand; the objective was to regurgitate.

Eventually, at the age of nine, I was strapped into a hijab as I was sent to our local Islamic school. The following years were a constant tug-of-war and turmoil as I consistently fought against this sick invasion of my life – but was simultaneously mind-numbingly terrified of resisting. Not only were the promises of torture in the grave, the Day of Judgment, and of Hell excruciatingly detailed, but the earthly punishments that I endured daily were threats that were consistently followed up on.

At the age of thirteen, I managed to involve social services and begged to be taken out of that home. I told them, and the police, and the judge of how we were severely beaten. I told them of how I was hung up upside down in our garage and how the bottoms of my feet were whipped.

They all knew.

Yet, after months of deliberating, the judge ruled that different cultures are free to discipline their children in different ways.

Because of their cultural norms, my family was excused from torturing me. I understood then that had I been a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl, my country would have protected me. But I was born into the wrong family. My skin was not the right color, and therefore I was not worth protecting.

I stopped fighting after that. I learned that what Allah wanted would transpire. Allah would make sure that I didn't escape. And Allah would make sure that I be punished for trying. I went to infidels – the enemy – for help. There was never any excuse for that.

Years of depression and continued trauma later, I was forced into a marriage with a man that I barely knew. I was nineteen when my mother sat me down and told me that she was sick and tired of me and that she no longer wanted to deal with me. I was sick and tired of her too. After years of fighting, I thought maybe if I just listen to her, maybe she'll actually like me... possibly love me as she loved my sister, who never stepped out of line.

And perhaps he will be a decent man. I was so tired of fighting, and so out of options, that I gave in. I didn't approve of the marriage, per se, but in Islam a woman's silence is consent.

I sat there stoically with tears streaming down my face as the katb kitab, Islamic marriage, was performed.

After we were legally married, and I moved into his apartment, the beatings and the rapes began almost immediately. I would try to elicit my mother's help, but she would only remind me of the verses in the Quran that clearly gave him permission to beat and rape me. Who was I to defy Allah's commands? I withdrew inside myself under a black niqab that covered every bit of me, even my eyes. I also wore black opaque socks and black gloves delivered from Saudi Arabia.

I accepted my fate because I saw no other option.

My only reprieve was to imagine that this monster might give me a little girl. That would be the silver lining to this life of Hell. I would have a little girl to love and to love me and she will be my best friend.

Soon, I was pregnant, and shortly after my 22nd birthday, I was holding my very own little miracle. I loved her with more love than I ever knew was possible. She was everything to me. As I kissed her little fingers that were wrapped tightly around my finger, he leaned in and asked:

"Is she cleaned?"

"Yes, I just gave her a bath." I responded.

"No, I mean, is she fixed?"

"I don't understand what you mean..."

"No, no," my mother interjected "We do that later. When she's older."

Then I understood. He was talking about female genital mutilation (FGM). He wanted to mutilate my little miracle. I responded with a defensive anger I

didn't know I still had in me. I would have jumped out the window with my baby to get her away from him. But my mother's response was buying me some time.

"Ok. Well. We better do it right away. I will not have my daughter be unclean."

"Yes, yes," responded my mother, "we'll take her to Egypt and have it done as soon as we can."

That's the moment I decided that I would get my daughter out before they had the chance.

With only a high school education and no support from anyone outside of my family, the Islamic community, I had no idea how I would get out, but I knew I needed to. I needed a plan.

When my daughter was about a year old, my mother began to bleed profusely from her nose and mouth simultaneously. I called 911 in hysterics. I thought she was going to die. When the ambulance arrived to take her away, I hesitated – I had never left the house without him. I knew he would be furious. But surely this was an extenuating circumstance? I grabbed my little girl and we rode in the ambulance with my mom.

When we arrived at the hospital, as I sat in the waiting room, I was approached by a man and a woman. They explained that they were from CSIS- essentially, the Canadian CIA. I didn't even know we had an Intelligence Agency.

They told me that the man I married, Essam Hafez Marzouk, was an Al Qaeda operative who worked closely with Osama bin Laden.

In a pre-9/11 world, those words didn't mean much to me. I knew he had been in Afghanistan before he came to Canada, so I suspected he had some ties to jihadis. Why else would an Egyptian teenager go to Afghanistan? But I had no idea of the extent of his involvement.

Through a series of convoluted events (that I will explain in detail in my upcoming book, *From Al Qaeda to Atheism*), I was finally able to escape from him and my family, with my daughter, and begin to study at university. At university, I took a History of Religions course that changed the trajectory of my life. That's when I discovered that this book, which I believed to be the verbatim word of God, was simply a book of plagiarized stories. Without all the divinity attached to it, I was free to denounce that book and eventually the purported author as well.

Now, as a free woman, my advice to any girls under threat of being forced into a marriage is: don't give up. In my day there was no social media. There was no one to reach out to. Today, you are privileged to have a network as vast as the planet itself.

Reach out for support and you will find it.

(If you are facing honor violence, FGM, forced marriage or other forms of violence, please reach out to the AHA Foundation. If you are an ex-Muslim in North America, you can contact EXMNA. If you are a Muslim, you can contact the group Muslimish in the US or Faith to Faithless in the UK.

## **Harris Sultan**

After I discovered that morality in Islam was immoral, that science in Islam was flawed, and - to top it off - that there was no evidence for the existence of God... it became impossible for me to stay a Muslim.

## Hassan Radwan

I was born in 1959, 5th child in a family of 8. My father, Aziz Radwan, was from Egypt. He brought us up as Muslims but wasn't very strict. He used to say ~Religion is about how you treat people." He paid a Tunisian Sheikh to teach us Quran & Arabic at home. My mother, Mary Magson, was from a Christian family but converted to Islam largely to please my father. She used to say, "It's all the same God."

I wasn't religious growing up and sometimes resented the fact I'd been given a funny name and exotic religion in a country where few shared them at the time. But as I reached my late teens, confusion about my identity & a series of events caused me to re-think my views about Islam.

The first was the Islamic revolution in Iran. I found TV images inspiring: defiant civilians rising up against a brutal tyrant. I was also aware the role religion was playing - my religion, Islam.

I was confronted with another example of the power of religion when my close friend returned from a camping trip to announce he was now a born-again Christian. He became irritatingly exultant about his faith and constantly attempted to convert me. But the more he explained things such as the Trinity, Original Sin, and Atonement, the more I knew these were concepts I could never believe in.

A few months later I saw Cat Stevens on television, giving a farewell concert. He had become a Muslim, changed his name to Yusuf Islam & resigned from the music business. I felt that if such a creative person like Cat Stevens saw something worthwhile in Islam, perhaps I, as someone born with an Islamic heritage, should take it more seriously.

The final episode was when my father invited me to go to Egypt with him for a holiday. I was now 19 years of age and at a crossroads in my life. Unsure of my identity and where I was going. We stayed at my uncle Fouad's house in Cairo. He was very religious & we soon got into discussions about religion & he gave me a copy of the Quran to read. As a child I had read and learnt a



few Surahs but this was the first time I read it right through & to my surprise I found I couldn't put it down.

The Quran is not like any ordinary book. It doesn't follow any of the conventions of standard prose. It has no definite beginning nor end. There is no plot to follow and no neat resolution. It jumps abruptly from one account to another. Even its style changes with little warning, from a steady narrative to fast paced rhyming prose. Yet I found it strangely irresistible. It seemed to speak to me on a deep level and I found it comforting.

God is light upon light. Closer than your jugular vein, ready to answer the one who calls upon him. Wherever you turn there is the face of God. Be humble & avoid arrogance. Forgive and control your anger. Treat family, orphans & those in need with kindness. Stand up for justice & keep your trust. No one shall carry the burden of another and no one shall be wronged in the slightest. God sees and appreciates all you do. Not a leaf falls from a tree but God is aware of it.

I felt inspired & the words moved me to tears. I was certain it was the gentle and loving presence of God speaking to me. I spent most of the holiday reading Quran & meeting members of my extended family where conversations invariably turned to religion. I returned to England full of zeal & determination to immerse myself in Islam.

I immediately enrolled for a BA in Arabic & Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) taking Tafseer & Pre-Islamic Poetry as my specialist subjects. I was fortunate to have three wonderful & charismatic Arabic scholars at SOAS at the time who in successive years each became my personal tutor during my 5 years there. Dr. David Cowan, the convert & author of *Modern Literary Arabic*, Dr. Wansbrough the author of *Quranic Studies* and Dr. Abdel Haleem the author of the popular translation of the Quran.

As a young Muslim keen to soak up everything I could about Islam, I found the atmosphere at SOAS invigorating. I attended every extra-curricular lecture and debate. I devoured anything and everything that had Islam as its subject matter and the SOAS Library became my home, with its shelves

packed full of rare manuscripts. I stayed late into the night and regularly had to be asked to leave by staff locking up.

In between my efforts to learn more about Islam, I was also busy spreading the word to others. I was motivated by an ardent desire to share what I had discovered & to save them from Hell.

A friend invited me to join him on a Tablighi Jamaat - a movement aimed at bringing Muslims back to the path of pure Islam. I found myself on a long road trip heading to the Dewsbury Mosque nestled in the Yorkshire moors. There we listened to talks and invited locals to attend prayers & lectures.

The experience of being isolated in the mosque - cut off from the world - had a profound effect on me. By the time I returned home I found my priorities had shifted. I was less concerned about this life and far more focused on the next life. I let my beard grow longer, I wore a Jilbab and cap. I not only prayed all the compulsory prayers, but I prayed all the extra prayers, too. I did my best to follow each and every Sunnah I could. I fasted every Monday & Thursday, I sipped water in three breath pauses, entered a door with my right foot, slept on my right side, used a Miswak daily and so on. I was determined to keep in my mind that heightened state Taqwa that I had felt at the Dewsbury mosque.

I became president of the SOAS Students Union Islamic Society from 1981 until 1984. During my presidency I set up an Islamic book stall, organized talks, debates, films, a prayer room and permission to use one of the lecture rooms for Friday Prayers.

We shared the responsibility of giving the Khutbah amongst ourselves as well as inviting speakers from outside such as Adil Salahi the translator of Sayyid Qutbs tafseer In the Shade of the Qur'an & Dr Kalim Siddiqui, the Director of The Muslim Institute in Endsleigh Street & his understudy, Dr Ghayasuddin.

It had been my spiritual search for meaning & identity that had brought me to Islam. But it was soon taken for granted that I would support the political stance of other Muslims on issues such as Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan and later on Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq.

Traditional views of Islam see no division between politics and religion. There is no Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and unto God the things that are Gods. Prophet Muhammad was a military leader as well as a spiritual leader and applied Islam to every part of life, both public and private.

Muslims were to be regarded as one body; If one part of the body feels pain, then the whole body suffers. Therefore, I felt my commitment to Islam meant a commitment to my Muslim brothers and sisters around the world. I began to take a keen interest in global politics. The major issues at the time were the Iranian Islamic revolution, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the ongoing issue of the Palestinians.

The plight of the Palestinians was highlighted in 1982 when unarmed Palestinian men, women and children were massacred in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, by Christian militia while the camps were surrounded by the Israeli military.

I remember seeing pictures of whole families lying dead in the narrow streets, their bodies bloated by the hot sun, hands still clutching the ID papers they had been desperately showing. The images created enormous anger within me.

The Russian invasion of Afghanistan triggered different emotions. The struggle of the Mujahideen against the might of a superpower was inspiring and it seemed to confirm the oft-repeated claim that only by returning to 'pure Islam' could Muslims ever put right injustices we had suffered. My brother and I led an Islamic Circle at the 'The East Finchley Dawa Society.' It was for young Muslims learning more about their faith. The meetings were mixed and informal. We invited speakers such as Sheikh Darsh from Regent's Park Mosque, a delegation from The Federation of Student Islamic Societies, the modernist Dr. Essawi, and brother Yusuf Islam. The Dawa society produced its own magazine called "The Clarion" which I edited and included articles about Islam and topical issues. We also organized sports activities & camping trips.

It was noticeable that by the mid 1980s some hardline and narrow-minded political Islamic groups began monopolizing such meetings. The most

prominent of these were the Salafis who espoused a very literalist form of Islam that sought to cleanse the religion of what they regard as innovations, superstitions and heresies. Throughout the 80s, Saudi Arabia financed the spread of Salafi doctrine through mosques & bookshops up and down the country. It's no exaggeration to say they changed the face of Islam in the UK & indeed the world.

The Salafis were not the only group gaining ground at the time. Hizbu-Tahrir - a group aimed at creating an Islamic State in Muslim countries - were their main competitor. One of their prominent members at the time, Farid Kasim, became a regular visitor to our Dawa Society. His one overriding obsession was the Islamic State & often hijacked discussions to propagating his views. Farid and his mentor Omar Bakri were too radical even for Hizbu-Tahrir and they left to form an even more militant group called Al-Muhajiroun.

Islam places great emphasis on marriage and as a young single Muslim I was soon being encouraged to get married to complete my Deen. In 1983 I was introduced to a devout Muslimah and we married a short while later. Marriage has the effect of cementing your beliefs and lifestyle as they are now shared with your partner & children and your investment in it becomes set in stone.

I had 5 children in total across two marriages, though my baby daughter Huda was premature and died in hospital a week after she was born. I remember staying up every night praying and making Dua to God to save her. When she died, I consoled myself that - God knows best, it was a test & she was in a better place. I also blamed myself. I must have failed somewhere at being a good Muslim. I tried even harder to be a better Muslim.

After graduating I began my Phd into the Tafseer of al-Zamakhshari. I had translated a third of the tafseer and written two full folders of commentary when the need to earn money for my family meant that I shelved my studies to complete my Postgraduate Certificate of Education so I could begin my 30 years as a school teacher - 15 of which I spent as a senior teacher at Islamia School - the one founded by Yusuf Islam. Islamia School was both a mad and a wonderful place. The sincerity, commitment and genuine warmth of the individuals involved made me feel part of a huge family. The pupils I taught over the years will always remain in my heart and were as dear to

me as my own children. Throughout my years there it was always much more than a job.

I was of course faced with incidents & awkward issues that I put in a box labelled 'God will explain later'. But I was so sure Islam was true that if there was anything that didn't make sense, I would put it down to my own limitations. It's very difficult to doubt & question things you've taken for granted since childhood & become emotionally attached to, particularly when they form the basis of your whole identity. We only tend to question things when we look at them from a fresh perspective. But in order to get that we need to be shaken out of our comfort zone. A series of events in my life gradually began to do just that and forced me to look at things from a different angle. The first major one was 911.

I was teaching at Islamia School on September the 11th as the news of the WTC attacks began filtering through. The school closed early due to death threats made to the school. I remember there was an eerie silence as I drove home. I asked myself how anyone could do such a thing in the name of God and my religion. How could they get Islam so totally wrong?

My instinct was of course to distance Islam from their actions. These people were motivated by a twisted sense of grievance be it political, social or psychological and were just using Islam.

However, some of the ridiculous conspiracy theories that suddenly emerged from the lips of otherwise intelligent people, shocked me. Worse still were a minority who actually tried to defend the attacks, arguing that they were not innocent because they had voted for the Kufr system that was bombing Muslims.

A close friend of mine had become a hardline Salafi and had begun following a Sheikh who was telling his followers to emigrate to Afghanistan to fight the Kuffar. He read me a Bayan from his Imam that was full of quotes from Quran & hadith used to justify the most abhorrent ideology.

Here in front of me was a perfectly sane and intelligent individual who was completely certain he was right in defending the indefensible. Of course, I dismissed his views as a twisted perversion of Islam, yet I couldn't help

feeling shocked at how he could believe these things with such utter conviction. It left me wondering if I too was certain of things and yet could be completely wrong. There were also events in my personal life that shook me out of my comfort zone, including the breakdown of my second marriage. But the greatest blow was the illness of my eldest son. He had fallen in with a group of friends who were smoking. Ironically, they were from Islamia School, the very place I had sent him to be safe and secure. Unfortunately, cannabis triggered schizophrenia in him. Something that he has now suffered from for the past 13 years, requiring regular medication & constant support.

Again, many prayers were offered and in particular Tawassul - begging God - because God loves those who beg him. I thought back to the nights I had begged God to save my daughter Huda. I had believed with all my heart the words of the Quran that said: 'Call upon Me, I will answer you" (40:60) and "(He it is) who answers the distressed one when he calls upon Him and removes the evil." (27:62). Now here I was again begging God not to take my son - the light of my eyes - away from me, but as always, the heavens stared back with silent indifference.

Like most Muslims - I made a thousand and one excuses for God's apparent lack of response. It was a test & God will reward you for your Sabr. God has a greater wisdom. It was for the best. It was my fault - I must have done something wrong or my intentions were wrong. And then of course there was the old: God responds to what we need, not what we want. Clearly, I needed my heart broken.

The Quran mocks the pagans & challenges them with a very simple concrete test to prove their idols are false. "Call on those whom you assert besides Him, they have neither the power to remove your troubles from you nor to change them." (17:56) they will not answer" (46:5) But does God answer prayers? Couldn't the excuses I gave God be applied to the pagan idols?

The Quran asks:

*"Who is more astray than he who calls on other than God Allah, who will not respond to him."*

But why shouldn't this same logic be applied to Allah? Why is it foolish to believe in idols that don't answer, yet not foolish to believe in a God that doesn't answer?

I was still teaching at Islamia School when the 7/7 London attacks took place and again, I was confronted with embarrassingly absurd conspiracy theories as well as shocking attempts at justification. Discussions in the staff room in better times had generally been about trivial matters such as what things break wudu & are food additives from insects, haram? But now I started asking how could Muslims use Qur'an & hadith to justify acts of terrorism? Why would God never forgive Shirk? Isn't Hell an excessive punishment? Of course, the answers came in the form of verses, hadith and sayings of scholars. In the past I would have just said, Mashallah & nodded in pious agreement but now I couldn't help questioning the logic of these texts.

I started looking at the Quran in a much more critical way - something we Muslims never truly do. Our starting point is that it is the perfect word of God and reading it is an act of devotion not critical assessment. Any problems that are highlighted are due to our flawed and limited understanding. Any energy spent dwelling on them is only directed at absolving the Quran rather than entertaining the slightest possibility it could be wrong.

However, I was determined to be brutally honest with myself. Amongst the verses that troubled me, the following stood out, as it was difficult to dismiss using the usual 'context' argument. "As for those women from whom you fear rebellion (first) admonish them (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) hit them." (4:34)

I tried many times to explain it in a way that made sense, but it gnawed at my conscience. I re-visited the arguments I had heard many times that the conditions and restrictions which the Quran placed upon wife beating amounted to a virtual ban, particularly since Muslims are obligated to follow the Prophet's example and he never laid a finger on his wives, saying "The best of you is the best to his wife." - And he said; such hitting must be "not severe" (ghayr mubarrih) and so the scholars say it must be "light" and was just a symbolic show of displeasure to be administered using a tooth stick.

But these arguments no longer convinced me. If it was true that these restrictions amount to a ban, then why not just ban it? The Quran had no problem banning polytheism which was far more entrenched religiously and financially & didn't hurt anyone. I came across interpretations that claimed the words "hit them" actually mean "leave them alone" but this explanation not only revealed complete ignorance of Arabic it highlighted that I wasn't the only Muslim who couldn't believe God would allow a man to hit his wife. But instead of questioning the Quran they resorted to absurd apologetics. Seeing how desperate they were to protect their faith against all reason only served to weaken mine.

Once I doubted one verse, I soon found myself doubting others, particularly those about Hell.

No other holy book describes the tortures of Hell in such graphic detail as the Quran. Unbelievers are to be kept alive, so they can have their skin repeatedly roasted or peeled off by hooked rods of iron. Molten brass poured into their mouths and over their heads so that their faces melt. There will be no respite, no let up, just constant torture for eternity. Each time they die they will be brought back again so that they keep screaming in utter agony.

I remember one Khutbah where the Sheikh pointed out the scientific miracle in the verse that says their skins will be replaced. "Science has only recently discovered that pain receptors are in the skin." he said beaming triumphantly, "Yet here is Allah telling us 1400 years ago that the unbelievers will have their pain receptors replaced so that the pain will never stop."

How can it make any sense for God to torture his flawed & limited creation without end? What purpose does it serve?

I remembered reading about a cruel Central Asian dictator who had Muslim rebels executed by boiling them alive in vats of scorching oil. I thought what kind of insane monster would do that? Yet the Quran says God will not only do that - but will do it forever, preventing these wretched souls from dying so they endure this unimaginable agony forever. It contradicts all reason &



justice & makes a mockery of the Quran's claim in typically hyperbolic style that God is: "The Most Merciful of those who show Mercy!"

Like many Muslims I used to respond to questions about Hell by saying: "Oh it's just metaphorical." But I had to admit that this didn't make sense either. Metaphors don't change the meaning of something horrible into something nice. If the Qur'an uses such graphic torture as a metaphor, then it means some sort of unimaginable suffering. It cannot mean something benign.

So, whether unbelievers are to be literally burnt forever or it's a metaphor for some other inconceivable torment - the result is exactly the same: A punishment that will cause unimaginable suffering & the most extreme pain possible whether it be physical, mental or spiritual.

There now seemed no end of verses that I could no longer ignore. Verses that allowed slavery or punishments such as flogging and amputating hands. Nonsensical stories of Solomon and his army jinn and talking birds, Yunus swallowed by a whale, squadrons of stone-throwing birds that obliterate armies and the savage tribes of Gog & Magog imprisoned behind an iron wall.

The creation of Adam & Eve which is clearly at odds with the evidence that modern humans are a result of a long cumulative process of evolution. Or the mighty Kingdom of Solomon the like of which will never be seen again. Yet despite an abundance of historical & archeological evidence for other empires at the time there is not one scrap of evidence that Solomon even existed let alone had a mighty kingdom. Or the adventures of Thul-Qarnayn that sound suspiciously like the well-known fictional legends of Alexander the Great.

The Quran was simply unravelling before my very eyes. It was as though I had been under a magic spell and suddenly, I had woken up. I asked myself what was it that is so miraculous about the Quran?

The traditional claim is that the Qur'an is inimitable and of such linguistic excellence no human could produce.

Firstly, being inimitable doesn't mean it's from God. Most authors & artists leave their fingerprint on their work making it impossible to imitated exactly. It doesn't mean it's from God.

Secondly, linguistic excellence is subjective. I've read several books by Arabic scholars detailing the amazing style, rhetoric, linguistic techniques etc., but the very process of deciding what to highlight & what criteria to use is inevitably subjective. Is repetition always a good thing? Is ambiguity a sign of divine eloquence? Are verses, the meanings of which Muslims have argued over for 1400 years, proof of superhuman clarity?

If I cannot see this miracle after 50 years of studying the Quran & classical Arabic, how can most Muslims - never mind non-Muslims? Less than 5% of the human race speaks Arabic and only a small percentage of Arabic speakers know classical Arabic in any depth. A miracle that most humans can't verify for themselves is a poor miracle indeed. Was that really the best an all-Wise God could do?

A more modern defense of the Quran's divine nature is that it contains scientific miracles. But when I looked into each one it was obvious it was utter nonsense.

I'd kept my doubts and views to myself apart from some discussions with my two brothers. Then out of the blue I received a text from my eldest sister. It read:

*"How u doing? I heard startlingly that u r becoming an apostate! Maybe u should try 2 get hold of american writer jeffry lang's 'help i'm losing my religion' love".*

Seeing the word apostate made my heart skip a beat. I put the phone quickly back in my pocket. I told myself that I shouldn't reply as sharing my thoughts would only upset my sister. But the truth was I still couldn't admit to myself that I was an Apostate.

My dwindling faith did however make it impossible to carry on at Islamia School and I resigned in 2006. I got a job as an online teaching mentor. This gave me the flexibility to take care of my four children and my mother who

was now suffering from Alzheimers. My two ex-wives were happy for the children to stay full time with me - they knew I was a good father and had always been the sort of person people could rely on. I was good at sorting things. Fixing things. Taking care of things. But unknown to them I was gradually slipping into a deep depression.

There were several factors. I was juggling so many things, trying to stay in control. A single working father, taking care of my children, the eldest of whom was now living in supported accommodation for those suffering mental health issues. On top of that caring for my mother with Alzheimer's.

My day would be getting up early to wash and dress my mother and make her breakfast & give her medication. Get my two younger ones up, make breakfast & pack their lunches. Take them to school. Visit my eldest son. Clean his room and cook him food. Come home and cook for my mum. Spend some time online checking and sending work to my students. Pick up my children from school. Cook dinner. Deal with my mother's mood changes which often meant the children had to be ushered away to their bedrooms. Help with homework. Get mother changed & put to bed. Then get up several times throughout the night to my mother calling me. Her Alzheimer's affected her sleep pattern and all sense of time.

On top of this I had lost my faith and had slipped into a nihilistic existential crisis where I could see no meaning nor joy in life. I felt powerless & the situation seemed hopeless.

After 3 years of this routine - day in day out - I went to the doctor for advice. She prescribed antidepressants. But that had the immediate effect of making me feel suicidal and a few weeks later I attempted suicide. It was the lowest point in my life. But strangely it lifted a weight from me. My sister stepped in to care for my mother & my two ex-wives realized the stress I had been under and also stepped up to take some of the burdens I'd been carrying. My brother insisted I stay with him for a while on his farm in Oxfordshire.

Getting away from all the stress and spending time out in the countryside was amazingly therapeutic. I immersed myself in work on the farm doing deliveries, helping with lambing, doing the BBQ on Open Days, collecting

eggs, making wooden benches and just about every other odd job. I was able to get my perspective back.

I can't say I have solved my existential crisis, but it no longer seems to matter as much. As far as Islam is concerned - I know I don't believe in it anymore. It doesn't mean I have fundamentally changed. I'm the same person I've always been. But one cannot simply \*choose\* to believe or disbelieve. I simply no-longer believed the Quran was the word of God. I wasn't evil, arrogant, bad or willfully turning away. I had struggled with it long and hard. I had attempted over many years to make sense of problematic passages, but I had to admit in all honesty the answers I found didn't satisfy me intellectually, spiritually or morally. If there is a God, he would surely want me to use the heart and mind he gave me, despite its limitations. He would surely appreciate my honesty & sincerity in calling it as I see it.

I don't hate Islam. I know Islam, like other religions, brings a great deal of good and comfort to many people's lives & I know of course that Muslims are good decent loving people. And whether I like it or not Islam remains very much part of my life because of Muslim family and friends and of course because it has been the major influence in my life for almost 60 years. Many of its good teachings are still ingrained in my character. But I simply don't believe it is from God. I believe all religions are man-made. As for God - I'm Agnostic - I just don't know if there is some sort of God or not. I don't think anyone really does, if they're really honest with themselves.

## yus456

My family doesn't know I am gay and that I don't believe in Islam. I live in Australia - beats living in Pakistan! I lived in Pakistan for some years; Pakistan is an absolute nightmare. They have blasphemy laws and they monitor people online. I am trying to avoid going to Pakistan lest I am sentenced to death for blasphemy because I am a Pakistani citizen, or my parents force me into a *rishta* - arranged marriage. You can imagine how dreadful the question of marriage is for me.

I hate how I cannot be myself and think freely without fear of repercussion from Muslim community and worst of all I am gay. Being gay makes it so much more difficult. Back as far as I can remember I was attracted to boys and I still am. I will not dare tell my parents that I am not convinced of Islam and that I happen to be homosexual.

Why did I live Islam? The homophobia, the sexism, the violent punishments, the Islamic perspective on non-Muslims, the Sahabas were ruthless assholes, the hadiths can be downright vile, and many other things. I could go on forever. In Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Muslim majority countries - families kill their homosexual members. Hadith says kill the sodomites and the story of Lot in the Qur'an is clearly about annihilating homosexuals. Mufti Menk said homosexuals are worse than animals. Muslim scholars say the same de-humanizing bullshit. There are 21 Muslim majority countries where the death penalty can be potentially enforced for homosexuality activities. Muslims are ironically cold and lack empathy - the discrimination Muslims face does not give them empathy for other people who are persecuted such as homosexuals or free thinkers.

I found Muhammed's story to be really boring and he wasn't as nice as Muslims made him out to be. So much rubbish propaganda about his character. His character is not really special. I don't find the Quran special either. Definitely not from God and not objectively perfect lol! The scientific miracles are just based on cognitive bias, mental gymnastics and all sorts of fallacies. I have a serious disdain for this religion. I always hated the recitations especially the ones on TV. They sound terrible and don't get me started on the indoctrinated, narrow minded of some Muslims - like holy shit!

I hate having to pray to a god I am not convinced exists. I am forced to pray, I have to eat halal food, Ramadan sucks because I am very skinny and makes me lose too much weight on top plus it turns out Islamic fasting is not that good for you,

I hate the intense hypocrisy of Muslims when it comes to human rights (they cry Islamaphobia in the West but meanwhile they have terrible human rights themselves). The religion traps you whether you believe in it or not. I only tried to force myself to believe in Islam because I feared hell so much.

Science is not perfect, but it is the best thing we got which ACTUALLY WORKS! You can observe not just with the eyes but also through math and the scientific method. I was once obsessed with the scientific 'miracles in the Quran.' Then I decided to look at them objectively and it was an apologetics game at the end of the day. The scientific miracles are bull crap and Muhammed was not perfect, at all. I left Islam because the scientific miracles turned out to be false. This combined with views of women in Islam, homophobia, eternal hell, Muhammed's behavior, the idea of Allah being all merciful and eternal contradiction, the dehumanization of the kafir, the not-so-perfectly-written book etc. gradually made me lose faith.

Allah doesn't exist. However, if he did exist why would he torture human beings forever for being ungrateful? What does that serve to do? Why not finally reveal himself and teach us the right way? Doesn't make any sense. So, Allah punishes me for being ungrateful for my existence by torturing my existence for eternity?  
Allah obviously gets upset if we don't worship him. Shouldn't a God be above that. He creates humans that are fallible then complains about how people don't find his religion convincing?

I dislike many Muslims. Muslims have no problem being assholes and self-righteous. Their beliefs are based on asshole morality, like if you disbelieve in Allah you are the worst of all creatures and will burn in hell forever. Their medieval faith is Nazi like, advocating for people to be put to death, arrogant, and very dogmatic. I do like many Muslims though, such as my family, cousins and friends.

The best part of leaving Islam is that you are not dumb, deaf and blind like sheep anymore. You have freedom of conscience and realize religion is about brainwashing and being tribal.

There is no evidence that the universe came out of nothing. The reason why you would say 'God did it' is because you are too lazy to just say 'I don't know what happened and nobody else knows so far and that's ok'. Insecurity is high in Muslim societies. You have to believe in magic to believe in a religion that says you have to believe in the existence of Jinns and Angels. Belief in black magic is part of Islam. Islam is filled with superstition.

I stayed with Islam for much longer due to fear of eternal burning and skinning and boiling and whatever vile torture Allah would supposedly do. Islam is a fear-based faith where the slave has to accept the tyranny of a sadistic, psychopathic, jealous, scared, bitchy, petty Allah.

Leaving Islam didn't feel like it destroyed my identity, it actually strengthened my other side that I kept suppressed and hidden because of Islam.

Muhammed was a man of his time. His time sucked bad. Unfortunately, his Islam survived all these years and we have to deal with 7th-century backwardness.

I am too scared to tell my parents/family. My mother believes that insulting the prophet should be punished with the death penalty. They would definitely be angry if I leave Islam. I am not sure if I will get disowned or not. My siblings wouldn't care too much but my parents will certainly not have it. Just glad I don't live in a Muslim country.

## Mohamed Salih Aldsogi (Sudan)

I am Sudanese, 24 years old, I was born and raised a Muslim Sunni, in an Islamic country - Sudan, a very highly religious society.

In 2011, I found my way to rethink my religion via social media. I joined Atheism groups on Facebook to defend Islam but after many and different debates with nonreligious members I started to change my mind. I began read more about Islam and Qur'an. I began read about philosophy and science. Leaving my religion was not like I woke up and decided that I'm not Muslim today! It was a long process of thought.

I am a person who believes in freedom and equality and peace between all humans. In contrast, religions have not achieved equality and peace among people. I was taught to love and respect Mohammed the prophet more than anybody and anything in the world more than my Mother or Father even myself! It was hard to believe that I lived my whole life in a big lie.

I am the first Sudanese citizen who publicly challenged the apostasy article by declaring that I renounced Islam not in favor of another religion but to be a person of "no religion." I wanted to be recognized as such. I chose a different and highly significant means - to challenge what the regime thought no Sudanese citizen (in their right mind) would dare challenge: Islam. What I did was not just completely unexpected but a major blow against the Islamist regime, Islam the regime's *raison d'être* and its most effective weapon in the arsenal of its oppression.

In May 2017, I submitted a petition to a court of law in the city of Omdurman asking for a change in my National Record of my religious status from "Muslim" to "Nonreligious". The next day, I was arrested and charged with the criminal offense of apostasy in accordance with article 126 of the 1991 Penal Code. Article 126 criminalizes the act of abandoning or renouncing Islam on the part of any Sudanese citizen who grew up as Muslim. According to Article 126, apostasy is a crime punishable by death --- once an apostate is convicted, his or her sentence can only be overturned if he or she disowns his or her apostasy and re-embraces Islam.



My case, which was unprecedented, received widespread attention in Sudanese (and non-Sudanese) social media networks and electronic newspapers. The authorities found themselves in an embarrassing and delicate situation and their response was a most sinister move. While under arrest, they sent me to a psychiatrist who conducted a routine interview at the end of which he gave me the impression of being understanding and sympathetic and cryptically told me, "I'll help you to get out of this mess!" Soon afterwards, I was told that I was free to go. It was only after my release that I learnt that the psychiatrist submitted a report in which he claimed that I was mentally unbalanced. This report became the basis of the government's active media tarnishing of my image.

The authorities adamantly refused to hand a copy of the psychiatrist's report to my defense lawyers. Following my release, the situation became critical by the day and was increasingly tense and fraught with danger. The Islamist regime could move any day to take its revenge and make an example of me by placing me in a mental institution or, equally likely, one of the many terrorist organizations in the country could take the law into its hands and carry out a "meritorious" act of jihad against me, since "apostates" have no right to life in the eyes of such organizations.

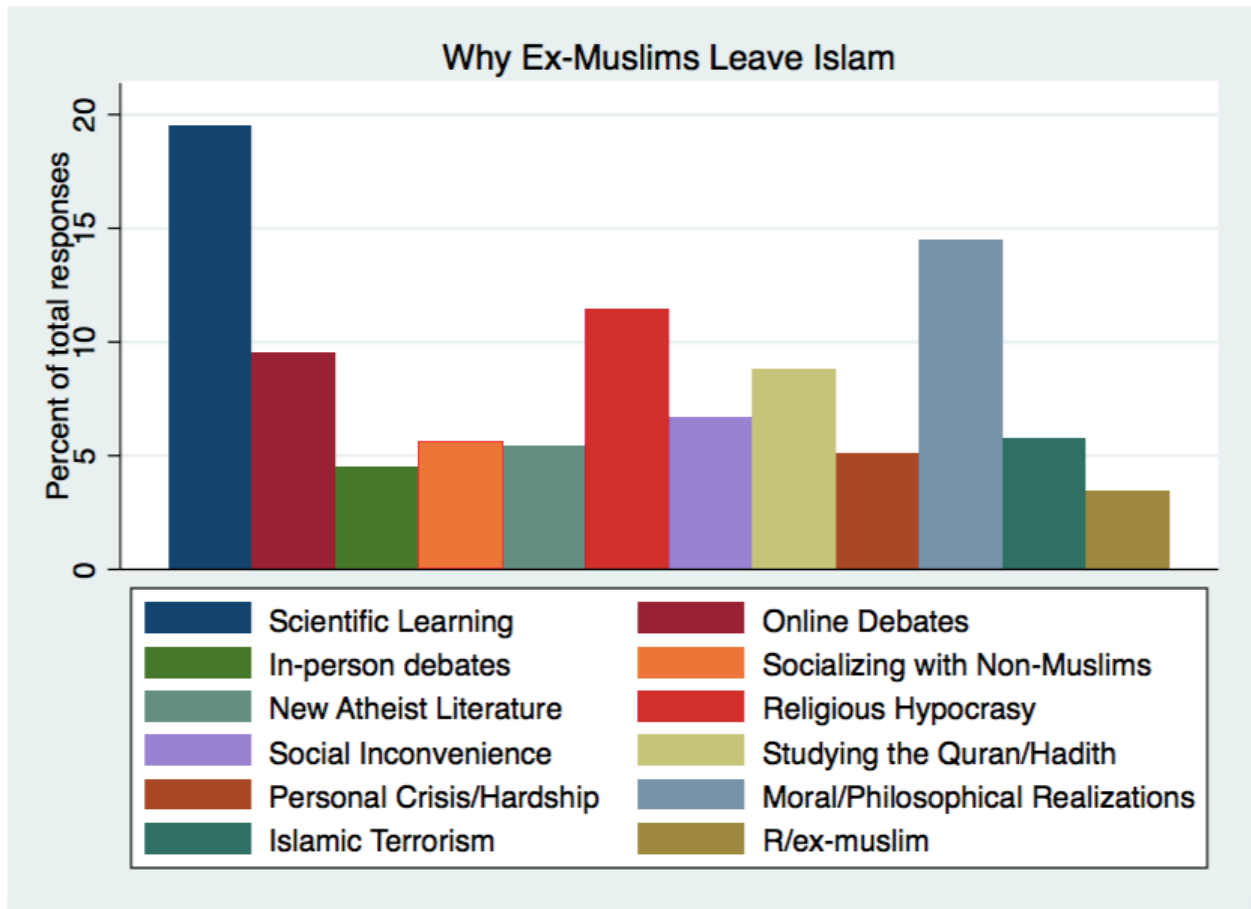
It was clear that my unprecedented act had earned me the unique status of a publicly confirmed, "scarlet letter" bearing "apostate" whose sanity or life could be snuffed out any moment with impunity. Fearing for my life, I had to leave my country with immense grief and sadness.

Finding myself in Kampala, Uganda, does not put an end to my fear. I, as someone who has publicly renounced Islam and whose face has been splashed all over mass media networks, still live in the shadow of the Islamic threat. News from Sudan as far as I am concerned is not good either. In February 2018 the Sudanese Constitutional Court dismissed my constitutional challenge against Article 126 of the 1991 Penal Code (the apostasy article) which I had initiated before I had to leave my country, and which was followed up by a team of human rights lawyers.

My constitutional challenge of Article 126 was the first of its kind and the Constitutional Court's decision came as no surprise to me or to the human rights community. It is unlikely that Article 126 will be repealed

under the current regime as it is the very article that proclaims and asserts its Islamic nature.

Being forced to leave my country and finding myself unable to go back under the current Islamist regime, meant not only the loss of my freedom but also the interruption of my education through which I wanted to give back to my society. What I am seeking now is a chance to rebuild my life and be an active contributor.



**Graph by Zach Goldberg**

## exdutchmoose

It has been 3 weeks since finally admitting to myself that I don't believe in it anymore and that the Islam I grew up with is way different than the real Islam in the books. For years I was driving myself crazy with different interpretations and metaphors for stuff I was not able to explain. Countless hours of watching Islamic scholars trying to find answers, every scholar leaving me with a feeling of dissatisfaction.

I tried telling myself that I believe, but deep down inside I knew it didn't make sense. Deep down inside I knew Islam was just a way of controlling people. I thought maybe these feelings were just djinns or whispers from the devil, so I started also listening to Quran recitation, like you supposedly should do when you start having these doubts.

The recitations were beautiful, but the doubts didn't go away.

I started looking a bit more into hadiths and the life of Muhammed, of course leaving me with even more questions I was not able to find the answers to. I also started finding disgusting stuff in these hadiths and became kinda anti-hadiths. I had not yet really looked into the Quran with a translation I understand, so I bought one. I expected the Quran to give me the wisdom and answers I needed and perhaps go on in life as a Muslim that mostly uses the Quran and is critical of most hadiths.

I truly wanted to believe. From the time I was 14 till 19 I have had some mental issues, lost most of my friends and isolated myself, basically wasting some of the most precious years of my youth. I was finally getting out of this and becoming a mentally and socially stronger person, about to start a new chapter in my life. All I wanted now was to just not be the black sheep anymore and really believe in my religion again.

I begged Allah to give me answers and started reading the Quran. I didn't find a lot of wisdom though, it was mostly how great Allah and his messenger is, how beautiful his creation is, a lot of stuff that gave me even more questions and how all disbelievers were going to burn in hell. My head was now about to explode as this was totally confirming the feeling I had

deep down inside. I stopped reading and threw it on top of my closet so i couldn't reach it, saying to myself to just stop researching and believe in it.

1 month goes by and it's now 1 week before college starts again. I could not suppress the urge to research anymore and started again. This time looking at the stuff that really kept me somewhat a believer: "the scientific miracles of Islam". Now I told myself to just research these miracles one by one. If I could not find strong arguments against these miracles, that would be enough for me to believe in Islam the rest of my life. Lo and behold every one of these 'scientific miracles' could totally be debunked, some of them already known by the Greeks for hundreds of years.

From then on it went really fast to the exit. I started to be more and more objective and saw how Islam is full of illogical stuff, contradictions, scientific mistakes, mistakes about other religions (the wrong description of the Christian trinity for example), verses in the Quran that are clearly only in the interest of Muhammed himself and of course all the things that basically go against human rights etc. The night before my second year of college i stumbled upon the ex-Muslim subreddit, which gave me the last push of courage to finally admit to myself that i don't believe in Islam.

It feels great to have found the truth for myself, but at the same time it feels awful to not be honest with the people around me. I am obsessed with being ex-Muslim and can't focus on anything else than this. Obsessed with thinking of the best way to be myself in the future. I am also constantly being reminded of this because of the friends and family I have who are Muslim. Knowing you just have to say one sentence: "I don't believe in Islam" and they will turn against you is the most depressing thought i have ever had.

I now know why even the most critical Muslims don't dare to leave this religion. This has to be one of the most mentally tough things you can go through as a human. I know I will be fine eventually, living in the Netherlands I should be fine, although the phenomenon ex-Muslims here is something that is almost unheard off.

## **Anonymous**

I was born to a Muslim family consisting of 22 children, my father was totally against western education, it was after his death that I was able to attend western school and I was the first to do that after numerous struggles with my whole family.

Even as a kid I asked questions and challenged some claims of religion, like 'where does Allah live?' 'Does Allah have brothers, sisters and friends?'

My mother, a devoted Muslim, always smiled and said 'Allah does not have all the people you ask about - he lives in the sky and you will understand when you grow up'. Fortunately for me while growing up I have been curious on unreasonable claims.

Unfortunately, my atheism is concealed because of my personal safety in the location I find myself. In Nigeria religion is rhythm of life. Living in a Muslim society like ours one cannot frankly live an atheistic life. Therefore, whenever I am among Muslims and time for prayer, I sometimes join them and when I am all alone, I enjoy my freedom from religion.

I need anonymity in this testimony, for security purposes. It has to be undercover.

## **Sarah Elgindy**

My three siblings and I were raised as Sunni Muslims. My immigrant Egyptian father was my mother's first and only love. She was from a small rural town in Minnesota. When she decided to convert to Islam, her immediate family cut her off completely which was easy to do since she had moved to NY to be with my father.

Empathy and kindness were missing in my family. Some of my oldest memories are of my father beating my mother and verbally abusing her for small insignificant matters like spaghetti not cooked to his liking. The concept of being kind and tolerant to others was not taught. As time went on, my father used religion as justification for his actions - he had the foolish notion that he was some sort of religious revolutionary due to his heightening Islamic views.

I started to question my religion. The tipping point for me were the lies that could not hide behind the ever-convenient word, "culture." All were about the suppression of women:

My uncle wanted to have me circumcised as a newborn - he did it to my female cousin when she was thirteen because she flirted with a bunch of boys one day. But, when criticized, they called it a cultural issue, not a religious one.

My father said to my mother that when a woman denies a man sex, an angel curses her in heaven. But that's a cultural issue, not a religious one.

He would tell us that women are not supposed to raise her voice or laugh noticeably in the presence of men. But that's a cultural issue, not a religious one.

My father tried to get rid of me three times by arranged marriages that I was either pressured into or did not give consent to. But that's a cultural issue, not a religious one.

A woman has three houses: her father's, her husband's, and her son's. But that's a cultural issue, not a religious one.

When girls discovered their own sexuality, they learned the hard way that their modesty was to be kept because it was a reflection of EVERY one of their male family member's honor. But, honor and reputation, that's a cultural issue, not a religious one.

When the concept of god finally left me, there was no community to catch me until I stumbled on the Council of Ex-Muslims forum.

## **Irumba Juma Siriwago (Uganda)**

I am from a Moslem background but most projects through the mosque where I used to pray only helped people who were not needy - ignoring the needy ones.

My mother was a widow looking after 8 children, but the mosque never helped her because of high discrimination. All her life she struggled working in people's gardens to meet the basic needs of her children: food, medical care, school fees.

It is from this background that I chose to become a humanist.

## **Warsan Guled (Somalia)**

Me leaving Islam was not an easy or overnight decision. It was a long and gradual journey. It started with my views, feelings and ideas changing.

I grew up in a Muslim country (Somalia) and knew nothing outside of Islam. My whole life and everything revolved around Islam. I was brought up by my very religious (Salafi) aunt and uncle. I was made to wear the hijab at the age of 3 the same time I started going to madrasa. I finished the Quran at the age of 10.

After that I became a "mentor" in the madrasa and helped my teacher with the students. I was never sent to school as it was considered baseless and khurafat of my family. But my elder brother went to a 1 hour private school. And I learned reading and writing in Somali (I could read and write only in Arabic) by looking at my brother doing his homework at home.

When wars and conflict worsened in my country we moved to Kenya at the age of 13. There I first saw "infidels." People with beliefs other than mine. Most of them were very nice, honest, and hard-working people. The opposite of what I was told infidels would be. But still, I held prejudices and hate against them, solely for their beliefs. I thought they were inherently evil, dirty, and actively rebelling against Allah and were all going to burn in hell for it, and that I should never get close to them or feel empathy for them.

But as a person, I was changing, because before coming to Kenya I was very pious, lecturing all the time and being a Quran teacher. But in Kenya, I started watching movies and sometimes even listening to music, which I used to beat my Quran students for doing!

Fast forward to my life at 16 years old. We moved to Sweden. When I first came here I was still a very much practicing Muslim, praying five times a day, fasting, reading the Quran, wearing long hijabs, etc. However, here in Sweden, I had no chance to avoid the infidels. They were everywhere with me. Gradually I started becoming friends with non-Muslims and that minimized my hate and prejudices.



I started being in awe of this country, it's peace, it's justice and fairness to everyone, it's nonjudgmental, nice, understanding and educated people. I started opposing the misogynistic comments and views (which are so very common in Muslim communities, and which I never had a problem with before). I started realizing that being a woman is *not* a birth-defect and doesn't make one a third-class citizen. I started embracing my rights as a human.

Gradually, I became a less judgmental "everyone for their choice as long as they don't hurt others, who am I to judge" type of person. I started accepting girls who didn't want to wear hijab, accepting "the whores" accepting gays as people with feelings and rights, Shias as fellow Muslims etc. All this time I was also being introduced to the world of knowledge, education and science. I learned and learned and had mind-boggling moments of discoveries.

Existence and earthly phenomena were no longer mysterious, miraculous, only god's knowledge, allahu a'alam; instead, things were explainable, we could try understanding everything and we should. Rain was not mysterious, neither was the volcano, or the seasons, or the reason why the sky is blue. Earth was no longer flat and stationary, and the center of the universe - instead, it was a tiny rock floating in vast space. Sky was not a physical thing that Allah held with his majestic powers from crashing down upon us, which turned blue and black by his will.

I searched for more and more knowledge and then I stumbled upon evolution. Next I learned about great people like Galileo, Socrates and Darwin, and the struggles they went through with the ultra-religious, ignorant, insecure societies they lived in. I learned many of them were finally executed by their societies, for their differing views that contradicted the words of the lords of the universe. I saw how similar those people (societies) were to Muslims.

And then, I stumbled upon Neil deGrasse Tyson; I watched his series (*Cosmos: a Spacetime Odyssey*) and his videos. It made me think, and that is when I started doubting and questioning Islam. After that, I discovered the work of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. I read about other

faiths and how the religious stories were copied and pasted with twists from ancient beliefs, folktales and heroes.

Then, it all felt apart. Religion was no longer miraculous; it was more like fables and a cult. Finally, I told myself that I was no longer part of this religion. I was only a human and nothing more, no label should restrict my love for everyone, for science and for knowledge.

I still live with my family and dress just as I did as a Muslim and wish to gain freedom in the near future.

Dear readers, I want you to know that just because a person (like me) is dressed like a follower of a conservative religion, it doesn't mean they believe in that religion. Not every hijab and abaya clad woman is a Muslim.

## **Sphinx (Egypt)**

I came out as an ex-Muslim to both my parents and got acceptance from my mother only. I got a strong rejection from my father. I might never recover the relationship I had with him and I accept that.

I want to be myself in front of my family. I want to express my opinions and my concerns freely. I want to marry whoever I want and invite my family to the wedding without faking a Muslim wedding. I want to raise my future kids without teaching them to lie to their grandparents. I want to be true to myself and true to others. I want the people I know - family or not - to be accepting and loving. If you reject difference just because you are narrow-minded then I just don't want to know you.

Coming out as an ex-Muslim is the toughest thing to do; it takes courage and preparation. If I had to do it again, I would.

## Abdulrahman Aliyu (Nigeria)

It's been a very rough journey for me, cause leaving Islam isn't a picnic, especially in a Muslim dominated society like northern Nigeria. One has to fight every teaching received from one's parent, society and culture.

Emotional and psychological trauma is how I spent two years of my teenage life. Sometimes I wondered if it was Allah testing or taunting me for a crime I committed unknowingly. Other times I imagined there might be a God, it just couldn't be this sadistic, cruel, bloodthirsty God, like the Allah of Islam.

I left Islam when I was just 19. I started inching towards Christianity, but I never really subscribed to it because I came across what I call my "enlighten point" - a book written by Professor Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

I can sum the factors that led to my atheism as follows;

1. Having brought up in Islamic cleric's home, I was opportune to understand Islam; It is all about dominating the world, with its rigid laws, barbarism, and infringement of human's right activities.
2. Having enrolled in western school, I became literate, and very addicted to books. I read a lot, because by nature I am a very curious person; this led me to be a free-thinking man.
3. And lastly some degree of intelligence that I obviously possess. I don't think someone with less than average intelligence can summon the courage to denounce a given religion by his or her parent.

Those three points transformed my line of reasoning from an ancient, barbaric, and dogmatic thinking view to a freer, scientific and a logical one. However, dumping Islam is very dangerous in a society like northern Nigeria, thus I am still an undercover atheist, for the fear of my life.

## Makahlj7

What is the morality of a Muslim? To consummate the marriage to a child, because their prophet did so? Also note that this disgusting act is sunnah and recommended in Islam, for Mo did that.

Monotheistic religions had their good uses in the past, IMHO. Now they're just outdated and harmful to varying degrees.

In my opinion, few people leave Islam just for "1-2 verses". Once the Quran is stripped of even 1-2 measly verses, it loses its magical perfection and immutability, and a chain reaction of further criticism and verse removal soon follows.

Islam is scary. To be honest, although I don't really believe in hell, I feel annoyed and angry when someone thinks or, worse, tells me that I'm destined for hell. I usually get a strong impulse to punch that someone in the face.

I have both Asperger's and OCD, but it seems I'm lucky that I realized early that Islam is bullshit and hell as it described in Islam simply cannot exist, so I'm not afraid of it.

## Sathern9

My parents are from Afghanistan. I was born in the US and I live in Virginia.

My belief in Islam never felt genuine at all. It felt like people competing to be the most pious.

For starters, the Quran is shit... I didn't like the content of the Quran. It never caught my interest. The Quran has verses directed for violence and the popular narrative of Islamic history was violent.

In Islam, non-Muslims are condemned to Hellfire. This is emphasized multiple times in the Qur'an. This is not something where you can pull out the "context" card, nor is this the "literalist" position. This is the position the Qur'an has stated over and over.

What I find in the Qur'an are ramblings of a preacher using old stories to confirm his religion and unnecessary violence and insults toward non-believers. Why would a god purposely lead his own creations to disbelieve?

Muhammed's true motives were spiritual, and he wanted to reform his culture. He needed military power to overrule the Quraysh. His plan was to unite Arabia. Abu Bakr's and Omar's plans were to expand after the vacuum of the Persian Roman war. I'm sure the Quran we have today have more of Omar's Word than Muhammad's.

The words of the Qur'an come from Muhammad and his episodes of his seizures. Allah wants worship. Basically, Allah was Muhammad's ego.

# ChocolateThunder

I left Islam once I realized god only exists inside our heads. There is no evidence of god.

If god is so great, why would he let billions suffer while allowing the corrupt to live luxuriously and continue destroying the disenfranchised/minorities? (Example: Rohingya, Iraq, Libya etc...).

Also, the idea of predestination doesn't make sense. If god knows I'm going to hell, then why make me suffer by living (fucking sadist).

Women in this religion are very restricted in pursuing what they want. Example: I have a friend who had to stop pursuing athletics after puberty kicked in because it's haram, she was told that hell awaits, she'll ruin her families honor etc...

I once asked a sheik if it was haram for a 90yr old dude to marry a 13yr girl. The answer was "the prophet married a 9yr old so it's halal" That was the final straw. Fuck any religion that condones pedophiles.

Hypocrisy was another major factor in me leaving Islam. When you ask critical questions, you're threatened with hellfire or your faith is called into question. Fuck that BS.

Living free broadens your perspective and actually makes you question your values, instead of scorning and convincing yourself the other person is going to hell. Through broadening my perspective I've learned to throw away values that don't stand valid when questioned.

## Zak H

There are many, many reasons why I left Islam, but in my mind the biggest realization I had (which took me about 2 years to figure out) was that I only believed in Islam because that was what I had been taught. Here's a litmus test to give yourself for anybody who's on the fence.

Imagine a world where everything your life remained the same except for one thing. You've never heard of Islam. You were still born, raised by your parents, went to school, got a job, got married, had kids and basically lived life but the only difference is you and everybody you know have never heard of Islam and have no idea what it is. This shouldn't be too hard to imagine as right now there are hundreds of different versions of other religions out there, past and present alike. Chances are there's more than a couple you've never even heard of.

Now imagine in this alternate world one day you meet a Muslim. And he begins to tell you about the religion. Like one of those street preachers that you can find in pretty much any major city anywhere in the world. In my experience most people tend to avoid the street converter, regardless of the religion just because most people don't want to deal with it. But let's say it's not just any Muslim, the person you run into is Muhammad himself. And he begins spouting off all of his stories and warnings of end times. Would you still believe in Islam if it was presented to you that way?

If you're the kind of person that would walk away from a conversation like that, thinking wow that dude is crazy, you're not a Muslim. You've just been doing what was taught to you for many years. Think about it. Who in their right mind would believe a guy who says he talks to angels and god, he says he rode a flying horse all over the universe and has visited the different levels of heaven and hell, and met people from the past or any of the other extraordinary claims that Islam makes?

You know what we do with people like that nowadays? We put them in mental hospitals. Seriously, go visit a mental hospital, you'll find plenty of people who can talk to god and tell you exactly what he wants you to do. Prison too is another place that's sadly full of not mentally stable people with

a larger portion of people than normal who can talk to god, ghosts, demons, Satan, angels etc.

The reason you wouldn't believe Muhammad's stories today is because we know better. The world in general is more educated at large than we were 1400 years ago, so the stories are unbelievable. Same reason you don't give any credit to that Christian / catholic / Jewish / Mormon / Hindu / Sikh / Buddhist / scientology or any other random religion that you've never heard of and really don't even care about street preacher.

I was a faithful Muslim for many years and I truly did believe in Allah, the last prophet and judgement day. But it was only because I learned about this stuff from a young age and it stuck with me throughout adulthood. It was only when I re-examined Islam through the lens of myself as an adult that I realized wait a second, this is all bullshit and I wouldn't have believed in any of it if it was presented to me today.

Do you really believe in Islam? Or do you only believe because that's what you were taught? Chances are it's the latter, once you look at Islam with a critical eye it all kind of falls apart.



## Mr. Bang

I am Bangla, born and raised in London. I started attending the Mosque at 6 as my mother took me there every weekday from 5pm to 7pm. I started reading the Quran at 8 and left the mosque at 11. I'm 19 now so how did I leave Islam?

My mother was a Bengali immigrant and my father is a worthless degenerate. My mother valued education and she taught me the importance of an education. I first loved math then physics. I attended secondary school at 12 and at this point I held the belief that it was possible to believe in both science and Islam.

I met my first friend at that school, he was an atheist who believed solely in science. Of course, we would discuss religion and philosophy, it was inevitable. He was reasonable and polite. At first, I would argue that the Abrahamic religions make up most of the world's population so most of the world couldn't be wrong; Allah created the Big Bang, Allah agrees with science, however if science and Islam disagree, I would side with Islam.

I was just a Muslim kid trying to make sense of the world through math, science and the Quran. Of course, one of these things is not like the others.

Speaking to this new friend brought up the question what is the truth? There are contradictions within the Quran but what sealed my disbelief was the story of Dhul Qurnain traveling to 'both ends' of the Earth and seeing the sun set in a muddy spring.

The Quran is contradictory with science, history and itself. If the Quran is the word of Allah, then Allah must abide by 2 laws:

1. He cannot contradict himself. (Which he does)
2. He cannot contradict reality. (If he does then he better leave some evidence. 950-year-old Noah?)

The Quran could have written one thing to make me a believer.  $E=mc^2$  or  $F=ma$ .

Why don't Muslims ever admit that they believe Islam because studying math and science is too hard? Instead they believe in a 1400-year-old book.

Before I was born, Allah knew whether or not I was going to hell? It would be better if he didn't create me at all if I was going to hell. You can't win both sides of predestination/ free will.

Allah made the hell fire. Then he realized he didn't want to waste an empty creation, so he made sure most of the world are destined for it.

"Islam is the most logical religion I've come across" - The competition is not very good. Being the most polished piece of shit doesn't make the Quran any less of a piece of shit. The Quran contradicts itself and reality. Islam is not the religion of logic. What it is, is The Religion of 7th Century desert dwellers.

Mohammad lusted after a 6-year-old girl (like a disgusting degenerate). Pedophilia is a psychiatric disorder in which an adult, or older adolescent experiences a primary or exclusive sexual attraction to prepubescent children. If a man today said he was told to marry a 6-year-old because Allah told him through a dream, he would be closely monitored by the police. Maybe forced to get some psychiatric help.

Islam treats women as 2nd class citizens. Pre-marriage a woman is her hymen. Post marriage a woman is her uterus (as well as a washing machine and private chef). Welcome to Islam.

In a professional setting in a Western environment, if you told your colleagues that you literally believe in the Bible they would laugh. I think Islam will reach this level of irrelevancy in 50 years in the middle east and 100 years in third world countries.

The internet is where religion comes to Die. Give it time.

## **Sazzadul Hoque Rakib (Bangladesh)**

I was born and brought up in a very conservative religious observant family. The seed of blind faith was seeded at a very early age. I breathed the holy Quran day in and out. I took its message as the literal revelation of god as do majority of the Muslims. Indoctrination so intense it acts like a horizon from which nothing returns. All my life I felt special pride of being born as a Muslim. The Quran was taught to us systemically at an early age, the Hujur (religious teacher) used to come give us Quranic lesson when I was 6 or 7 years old - the lesson scheduled every day at 4:00 pm except Friday. Islam deprived me of my childhood; Islam robbed me of my innocence. I wasn't allowed to play except Friday thus I used to patiently wait for that Friday for my little freedom.

As a child I used to ask my mother to tell me religious stories concerning Islam. Every day all I thought was how to become a good Muslim through rigorous ritualistic practice. For example: How to pray? How and what to eat? How to wash your self before prayer? Which foot to step first when entering the toilet/restroom? How to clean one's anus and cockpit after defecation or urination? How to hate others who are not Muslims?

This continued for many years. My childhood was robbed. Until the bubble busted, when I was in 8th grade, there was this new teacher. Young, smart and somehow, I became very good friends with him, he was the only one from whom I was able quench my thirst for knowledge. Growing up I had millions of questions, but I hardly found any answer from any one, especially rational answers, thus I had to answer my own.

As stated earlier I was a devout observant Muslim and the teacher was an atheist. At times I couldn't accept the fact he was an atheist, I could not phantom that an atheist existed, let alone hanging me around with one, but I did. He was the only teacher who could satisfy my inquisitive mind. He was the only one with whom I could exchange ideas freely about theology without fearing retribution.

I had millions of questions which no one could answer, including religious scholars and preachers. Majority of the time I was asked to follow and asked not to question religious authority. I was told, if I do question, then I would

never go to heaven, like a Kafir (non-believer). Majority of the time I used to ask my atheist teacher about his faith and at times I tried to convince him to revert back to Islam. That didn't go well. Instead he would provoke more contradiction about theology and the existence of Allah.

For example, what is destiny? if Allah wrote the entire destiny? Simple but very effective question which I could not answer. Majority of the time I was unable to answer his question but later I would seek answers to those question in religious texts. Many nights and days I studied but every time, I came to a dead end. The more I read the more questions I had, for example: if Mohammad said to seek knowledge travel to the farthest land on Earth (China) but in reality, I couldn't even travel a foot out of my room or my mind. Every single time I ended up in a dead end or a circle. The gravity of Islam is so strong I was just orbiting around it like satellite.

My association with my teacher provoked my mind to see things differently. My lens of knowledge change from black and white, to color, slowly. The more I asked the more I answered about the nature of religion and Allah.

A major question was: "where did we come from?" What does Islam have to say about our origin and what does science say about our origin? Slowly I began to realize that I no longer could keep faith in Islam thus I began to drift away from it toward humanism. It wasn't easy but when I did it, it felt like taking a fresh breath out of the water. Out of nowhere asking question became compulsion, I could not stop.

I began to question people around me about religion, initially my family then my friends and then everyone else in the city found out about my views of Islam. Eventually the news reached to different imams of the city, some even consulted with my mother and other family members to shut me up. Instead of concealing I began to write on Facebook about bigotry taking place around me. When I saw atrocities taking place against minorities in Bangladesh I began to write more, I just couldn't keep my mouth shut. At that point I began to attract more attention from religious leaders. Then one fine day I realized that my closest friends are now my enemies both in Dhaka and Chittagong. I am no longer one of them but an outsider.

On May 25, 2017, I posted an article on Facebook where I wrote, "I wish to live like a human but not as a Muslim. Things I was taught and made to believe are wrong."

The post went viral. My Facebook ID was suspended; things progressed so fast I couldn't believe it. A barrage of phone calls came, and over a hundred people from my village came to meet my maternal uncle and my mother. The rain of threats began and continued. Some of my fundamentalist teachers at my university in Dhaka tried to get me arrested, realizing I left Dhaka for my village. Once in the village I couldn't stay there either. Once the locals knew I was there I started getting phone calls and verbal threats to kill me wherever they find me.

From my village home I went to my maternal aunt's home, I stayed only for few days. When they found my whereabouts, I got thousands of phone calls and threats to burn my auntie's home if I was sheltered there, so I left.

Now I am a fugitive, hopping from one shelter to another. While on the run from one safe house to another I was told that imams at different mosques were talking about me after every Ajan (Islamic prayer call). The subject: "I became a nastic and kafir thus I am subjected to death" according to Islamic law. The news of kafir and nastic went viral in the surrounding area of my village. My maternal uncle with whom I was the closest, informed me they (the mullahs) were on the lookout to kill me.

Realizing I could no longer stay in Bangladesh safely or I would be slaughtered like a cattle, I fled the country and took shelter in India on May 30th 2017.

## Zaynab Abdullah

Where is the proof that the Quran is true? There is nothing into the Quran that suggests it is true, or that I should believe it is true. How can Allah justify punishing me if he expects me to believe in Islam based on blind faith?

I started wearing the headscarf around 10 years old, not because I wanted to, but I respected my father and knew it would make him happy. I learned how to read but not understand the Quran and pray five times a day. I did not like to do anything religious even when I thought I had some sort of "bond" with God.

It was my formerly Muslim mother who helped me realize Islam was false. When I was 13 years old, my mother began questioning the truth of Islam. Being a brainwashed kid, I wondered why she would question what I thought was "the perfect religion." My mother kept bringing up questions and I kept trying to think of answers that didn't make me think "come on! Is this the best I can do?"

Islam is against women, some examples are:

- A woman may not pray while on her period because she is "impure"
- a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man
- women will be the majority of the inhabitants of hell because they're unintelligent and deficit in religion
- prepubescent girls are fine to have sex with
- a man has the right to beat his wife if she displeases him
- women only get half the inheritance their brothers are given.

My father said he would divorce my mother if she left the religion. She has 4 other kids besides me, she doesn't want a divorce because she's afraid he'll get joint custody and try to take all the children back to Saudi Arabia.

I am now a closeted atheist, but I drop hints to my younger brothers, so they can decide their own path.

## Hurr Ali Naqvi (Pakistan)

Hurr Ali Naqvi is my pseudonym. I'm from Lahore, Pakistan. I was born in 1990 into a conservative Muslim family. I had memorized a couple of Koranic verses before I learned to read and started "offering" *Salah/Namaz* (Islamic prayer) right after I began to walk. We have both, Shi'a/Shiite and Barelvi Muslims in our family but I was more inclined to Shi'a Islam during early childhood years.

### **The Islamists brainwashed an innocent child**

I made a drastic change in my religious sect after meeting a group of Islamist young boys at school as I turned 10. They used to preach me about Wahhabism. One of the boys also invited me to visit a '**Madrassa**' (Islamic religious school) where his uncle used to teach Koran and preach Wahhabi version of Islam. They gave me 'free' books and religious literature to read and I soon became a hardline Wahhabi Muslim because I was convinced that it's the only true sect of Islam which leads to '*Jannah*' (the imaginary Arabic heaven). Those predators succeeded to brainwash me with radical Islam; I stopped listening to music, watching movies, TV dramas and even quit playing video games. I 'celebrated' the 9/11 attacks happened in 2001 because they told me that it's 'Jihad', a very important part of Islam. I was just 11 and notorious terrorist Osama Bin Laden had become my 'role model'.

After passing out from middle school, I asked my parents to let me join a Madrassa as I wanted to become a Wahhabi cleric. My mother resisted, she refused apparently because Shia'as hate Wahhabis who declare them non-Muslim 'infidels'. After tense negotiations, she conditionally allowed me to study at Madrassa of my choice only if I attend high school to pass Secondary School Certificate exam (O Level equivalent in Pakistan). I started studying at a new high school. I was being closely monitored by my family who wanted to convert me back to 'normal Islam'. As the time for 9<sup>th</sup> grade exams drew closer, I began to study hard leaving very little time for religious activism. I was planning to reunite with my old Islamist friends after finishing the exams. However, moving into a new rental house ruined my plans. I had to spend long summer holidays in a new town without old

friends. Every Friday, I used to ride a bicycle to a Wahhabi mosque for “Jumma” (weekly prayer) which was far away from our home.

### **Taking the First Step to Change**

One Friday afternoon, I got heatstroke after I returned from the mosque in blazing heat. I was given IV fluids at hospital and the doctor advised me to take rest for a week. We didn't have internet connection and a computer or a smartphone at home back in 2005. I was getting bored, so I couldn't resist watching TV. A docudrama series '**Nat Geo Investigates**' on National Geographic Channel sparked my curiosity. Luckily, the series comprising *Air Crash Investigation*, *Seconds from Disaster* and *Interpol Investigates* episodes used to be aired with Hindi audio feed which is very similar to Urdu we speak in Pakistan. It not only helped me in learning a lot of new things but one of the episodes also saved me from becoming a hardline Islamist.

It was an ***Interpol Investigates***' episode ***Terror in the Skies***; the story of **EgyptAir Flight 648 hijacking** by Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) happened on Nov 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1985. I was shocked to learn that how a terrorist Omar Razaq brutally shot two female passengers from Israel. It was very disturbing to watch that part of the docudrama where Rezaq killed Nitzan Mendelson. When her name was called, Mendelson could barely walk and collapsed but she was dragged up to the door by her hair where Rezaq shot her to death. I watched it at the time when I used to hate Jews (and Israel) the most. Nonetheless, that woman was innocent, and she was killed only for being an Israeli citizen. That act of brutality was enough to shatter the 'peaceful image' of radical Islam. Before I watched it happening, I was told that Jihad is only justified when you're under attack and killing women, children and peaceful civilians is not allowed in Islamic Jihad.

I watched more informative shows on Discovery, National Geographic and The History Channel which opened my mind to a world I'd never known before. After summer holidays, I had become a different person, better call a 'secular Muslim'. I passed Secondary School Certificate exam with average grades and went to the college instead of Wahhabi Madrassa. I began to skip daily prayers and fasting in Ramadan also became less habitual. However, I still had a very nice image of Prophet Muhammad in my mind. I used to think that it was a group of bad Muslims, not the Prophet of Islam, who is



responsible for terrorism. In 2006, I also participated in a protest held against *Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy* chanting 'Death for Blasphemers'.

### **The problem is Islam, not just the Muslims**

After passing Higher Secondary School Certificate (similar to A Level) exam, I decided to go for higher studies in spring 2009. I was enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Science program at a private University with secular study environment. 2008 – 2011 was one of the darkest periods of history when a series of terrorist attacks killed thousands of Pakistani citizens. Radical Islamist groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda proudly accepted the responsibility for most of the terrorist attacks targeting government agencies and civilians. I myself, narrowly escaped a suicide bomb blast as I'd left that area behind a few minutes earlier. I was really upset and started researching Islam once again because I wanted to know the truth. I went to the campus library where I read Hadith, translation of Koran and other books written by top Islamists of all times. I had already read some of those books but this time I wasn't an ignorant teenager who'd believe everything because it's been mentioned in a 'holy book'.

Whatever I read in Islamic books, I began to question why such foolish and illogical things were written; why music is forbidden, why women cannot step out of their homes without male guardian and why nonbelievers can't be friends with Muslims? Fortunately, we also had internet facility at the campus. As I tried to find the answers to these burning questions using online resources, I came across a number of shocking discoveries. It was revealed that Islam is in fact the problem and it's not the Muslims who're doing heinous crimes against humanity.

### **When Criticism Becomes Blasphemy**

Meanwhile in Pakistan, then governor Punjab Salman Taseer was assassinated by an armed policeman on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard supposed to protect him had been motivated by a Barelvi Islamist to kill the governor because he'd committed 'blasphemy' by calling the controversial 295C a 'black law'. This made the governor an apostate, liable to death sentence! The way a majority of Pakistani Muslims, even

those from educated and 'secular' backgrounds, openly supported Mumtaz Qadri made me feel frustrated. I was on the verge of leaving Islam but still worried about what could happen to me after death. The fear of *Jahannam* (the imaginary Arabic hell) was preventing me to take a big decision because I was still uncertain about the possibility of 'life after death'.

### **My Last Prayer at Mosque**

However, when I compared theory of evolution with theory of creation by Allah and Koranic verses with scientific facts, I got a clear picture of how they use religion(s) for personal gain. I had known the fact that all religions are based on fear and Islam is no exception. As a matter of fact, Islam is the most violent, intolerant and the inanest religion of today's world. I am not sure, maybe it was the last week of November 2012 when I offered my last Friday prayer at a local mosque. I had become an atheist (NOT an agnostic) few days following my last ever *Salah* (prayer). There's no need to worship or feel guilty for skipping prayers anymore. I was satisfied but this was just the beginning of a new and different life. Renouncing your religion in mid-20s is hard and it becomes even harder when you happen to live in an Islamic state surrounded by hardline Muslims.

### **Coming out of Closet**

I remained silent for 4 long years, didn't say or write any word against Islam. In 2016, I decided to speak out against Islamic terrorism and discriminatory treatment of minorities in Pakistan and other Islamic countries. I created an anonymous Facebook alias account and also started a blog at Medium. It came as no surprise to me when I started receiving death threats and offensive messages from Muslims soon after I went online. Anyone who dares to criticize this 'religion of peace' gets death threats from Islamists. Although I never shared any 'blasphemous' content, my first alias account was suspended 16 months later as a result of Muslim's mass reporting. I ain't quitting but I will keep exposing Islam in cyberspace.

Nobody knows that I'm an ex-Muslim atheist in my real life. I don't meet atheist people or have video-chat with anyone I meet in this world. Sometimes I have to pretend to be a good Muslim, so I can blend in with

hostile Muslim society. In fact, camouflage is nature's sneakiest trick to survive in a harsh environment.

Unlike theists, I don't believe that atheism can make you a morally sound person. An atheist can still be a bad person. I'm a humanist atheist who always prefers humanity over anything else. I don't hate Muslims, but my war is against Islam. I believe that better education, awareness and right to free speech can make this world a better place to live.

You can follow my blog posts at <https://medium.com/@hurr.ali>

## MoMi

I'm Gay. Islam's view on homosexuality was one of the main reasons I gave up on Islam. Even at the young age as 13, I couldn't take the cognitive dissonance of watching Merciful Servant videos feeling all good about myself and praying salah and reading Quran all day long, and then going to bed at night to masturbate to beefy hairy grandpas fuck each other lol.

I couldn't do it, so I gave up on Islam. Not the only reason I finally left, but a major one.

I always thought what I was doing was sinful and tried to look at girls instead, but it didn't work and ultimately made me feel bad. The worst part was this was all self-inflicted because I don't really have the type of family where I can just talk to about my issues whenever I feel like it.... I think it still affects the way I see myself as being gay.

While I've stopped "trying to not masturbate" and stuff, I kinda still have the idea that it's "sinful" in my mind. But that might just be my guilty conscience of being in the closet and basically deceiving people. So, there's that.

My dad on the phone earlier... He really thought I was gonna fast for Ramadan on Wednesday. I don't like this, I don't like lying, I feel like I die on the inside a bit every time I lie, and I think this where most of my guilt from being atheist comes from....

Muhammad's life. You can't read that stuff and honestly come back and tell me you think this guy's a real prophet.

When I hear Muhammad described as a guru, it makes me cringe so hard. Even Cardi B is more deserving of that name than him. Examining Muhammad's childhood, it's pretty clear this guy was messed up from the start. Look at how he treated his opposition, like this old female chief who had her legs split apart or something of the sort, or the 12-year-old girl who was killed for making songs insulting Muhammad ....

# Ex-Christians

## Leisha Sayers

My deconstruction began two years ago, the 16th of October, when I lost my 21-year-old daughter in a tragic UTV accident in which she was a passenger. She was home for the weekend from her Air Force duty station in SC. I lost a husband at 24 and that was very difficult as well, but losing my daughter destroyed all that I knew.

I was a lifelong believer. Was all in. I had grown up "knowing" there was a god and I was supposed to "get right" with him...

But where was he, the night I lost Morgan? My faith began to collapse. Where was god when I prayed for my child to survive? Where was he when I was lying on the floor day in and day out in agony wishing for my breath to escape my body and never return? Where was he when everyone abandoned me and my family? Where was he in all of my questions and pleadings? Nowhere, I learned.

I learned the night of the accident that prayer doesn't work. It's nothing but words to a sky.

Within weeks, the pastor informed me "I needed to be at church, so people could love on me." I guess meeting me in my brokenness at my home was too much. I needed to be in their comfort zone. I couldn't comply. I couldn't grieve according to their narrative. The church and all the people were soon gone...before the casseroles could get cold.

It was then that I learned that the Holy Spirit was a lie. People aren't changed by it or anything else. That was step two in my deconstruction.

Step three was realizing when I stopped brainwashing myself with the singing, bible reading, teaching, and Sunday services... god was gone. I never felt him after the night I lost my child. Not one time in my pleading,

begging, and praying for any kind of help or a sign did I get a reassurance that my child was in Heaven, that God didn't do this, that he was good... any of the stuff I needed.

He was never there. There is no God to answer me. It was all in my head the whole time.

Step four was when I enrolled at university to pursue the undergraduate degree my daughter was in the process of getting. I had my children young, so I put off getting my degree to raise them and work. I wanted to do this to honor her.

As I began taking classes, at a Christian university of all places, I began to learn about the early church and its beginnings in a western civilization class... this added to my newly formed belief that the church and religion were nothing more than man-created social constructs to handle the existential issues of life.

That and a way to rob men of their money and time. I also began exploring on the internet and in books all the questions I had closed my mind to when I was a believer. Books, articles, websites, etc., that were filled with rational information helped me see that what I was learning and feeling was legitimate.

I soon left the Christian university and transferred to the university my daughter attended before joining the air force. I'm in my sophomore year now.

I describe myself as a total atheist at this point.

## Kimberly Morrison

I tried very hard to believe when I was a child. I just wanted to belong and be like everyone else. The church cured me of that quickly.

Twelve years old was a vulnerable age for me. I joined a teen group at the church. Not only did I feel accepted, but I found friends there that would not have given me the time of day outside of the group. My mother didn't go to the church, but she supported me and even helped me with understanding the Bible. Even though I had doubts about the presence of a higher power, I felt like everything was going my way, so I stayed. I went camping at a Christian camp, I competed in a competition at the church based on talent and the Bible, which I won, and I began to participate in more church activities.

This changed drastically after a year, when the church offered a field trip to all the teens members of the church. We were all transported in a bus to a church that was a larger building that would fit all of us, to see a movie. At first the movie seemed ok; it was about Christian children living happily with their parents - I remember the girl in the movie was carrying a red balloon, holding her father's hand. The movie seemed innocent and I sat back in my chair relaxing until the tone of the movie changed drastically. As the girl walked calmly with her father, there were people all around chaotically panicking. I realized that the movie was reenacting the end of days, Revelations.

The little girl finally stopped walking and stood at the end of a line of people who were ignoring the chaos around them. The father was reassuring his daughter that everything would be alright, and there was the sound of something in the background making a loud, short chopping noise. When the little girl and her father got to the beginning of the line, it became evident that the noise was... a guillotine. The father calmly told his daughter that they were going to see Jesus and led her up to the guillotine. At first, the girl hesitated, then she did what her father directed, which was to put her head into the guillotine that would end her life. The camera quickly focused on just the balloon, then the noise came. The balloon floated up to the sky and the movie ended.

The kid behind me threw up on the floor because he was so upset. Parents who attended the movie helped him out of the room and cleaned up as the preacher asked the audience of teens what they thought the movie represented. Many teens voiced their opinions. I sat frozen in my chair, shocked by the horror we had been subjected to. After the brief Q & A session, the preacher told us Revelations predicted there would be hell on earth for all non-believers. He thought this would convince the teens that Christianity was the only way. I then realized that I couldn't stay. The movie was disgusting, brutal, an abomination. We shouldn't have been subjected to that.

As an adult I now realize that many religions use fear to motivate their parishioners; fear of the unknown, fear of being ostracized, fear of not going to heaven. I wonder what would have happened to me had I not seen that movie. Would I have become a true believer? Would I still go to that church?

I am happy with my choice to leave and hope others will find the strength to do the same.



## **Krista Tappin (ex-Jehovah's Witness)**

My parents met at a JW convention in Los Angeles. First marriage for my father and 2nd for my mother, who already had 2 boys.

I was the oldest of the 2nd set of kids. My 1/2 brothers 7 and 10 years older than me. My little brother came 3 years later, little sister, 3 more years later.

Our family moved to Washington state when I was 2. We vacillated between lower middle class and abject poverty, depending on my father's employment and how many kids were at home.

One of my first memories is of being terrified of god, much the same way as I feared the boogey man. I didn't believe he existed, but I had an irrational fear of being judged and dying. Every single negative news story, natural disaster and personal suffering was a sign of the nearing end of the world to my mother. It was relentless. A daily dose of anxiety.

I was afraid that my doubts would be my downfall. I thought there was something wrong with me since everyone else believed. I just had to try harder to overcome my sinful thoughts. I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I would be the cause of their stumbling block, an obstacle to their faith. I was a sinner, evil and undeserving of salvation. I was 7.

I remember my mother showing me a check that she was depositing into the donation box. It was the balance in the checking account. She said that god would provide for us. I remember being hungry, often. I remember my mother lying and cheating the 'system' in order to keep us fed and clothed. I remember resenting the church, hypocrisy and the obviously rotten ideology I was forced to live with.

I kept my doubts hidden and worked hard to be an example. I studied, was obedient and shunned the outside world. I spent summers and weekends knocking on doors and preaching. My shyness was overcome by zeal. Every knock was terrifying, but I kept at it. If I stopped, they would find out how awful I was and shun me.

I lived a secret double life in my late teens. Spending 40 or more hours a week 'in service' preaching while spending secret hours with other kids, pushing against our boundaries and breaking rule after rule. By the time I was 18, I found that most of my friends must not have really believed, they broke all of the rules. So, it wasn't just me. I left, quietly. I just stopped going.

I moved in with a friend. I had zero life skills, no money, a GED and was clueless about basic social interactions. I had lived in a bubble. Even my rebellious friends were miles from what I saw in the 'normal' world.

I started having sex. After being raised with abstinence only attitudes, I didn't practice regular birth control, depending solely on condoms. One broke. I was pregnant and had been raised with stories of women who had abortions being haunted their whole lives with the sound of screaming dead babies. At the same time, my 'concerned' friend was pregnant as well. She took it upon herself to call my family and 'save' me.

I lost my job after too many sick mornings. I moved back home and was confronted immediately. I agreed to talk to the elders about my situation. My father came with me. I sat in front of 3 men who were like uncles to me and told them about my sex life, drinking and drug use. They cried. They prayed over me. Then they disfellowshipped me. My parents and siblings I lived with stopped talking to me. All of my childhood friends abandoned me on the exact same day. After another failed attempt at trying to work while sick, my parents kicked me out.

I stayed with my boyfriend for a few days. He didn't want to support me and was angry that I didn't have an abortion. He wasn't a JW and didn't understand any of my upbringing. I was homeless. I then found a home for unwed mothers. It was depressing. After 3 months, a former work friend offered me a job managing an apartment complex. I was 18, 6 months pregnant and had no clue what I was doing. But I finally had my own place and a decent boss.

My boyfriend and I decided on adoption and started interviewing people. My mother was furious and tried to legally intervene. Telling me that they'd

support me and my baby or demanding that I give them my child. After telling me a few months earlier to 'go live on the street and learn some lessons.'

I delivered the day after Christmas.

I don't think I've ever recovered from being abandoned by everyone close to me, literally hundreds of friends and acquaintances, all on the same day. Trust isn't something that comes back once it's been broken by everyone at once. I lived through that time, astonishingly. I was forever damaged by the actions of everyone I knew.

Now, 26 years later, I think about it, talk to my therapist and try to recover, still. I also wonder how it's possible for so many people to be so cruel, so blind and so incredibly sad. I pity everyone who ever dealt with that culture. I am amazed at the strength of people who have left. I am astounded that society allows such monstrous teachings to continue or even flourish.

## **Carly Stathopoulos (ex-Jehovah's Witness)**

I was born into the Jehovah's Witness organization, also known as JW.org, or, as us ex JW call it, the Borg.

Twice I've left the Jehovah's Witnesses. First was when I was 18 after being disfellowshipped for having sex with my very first boyfriend. The elders used me as an example to the other young ones in the congregation to not commit fornication. I got re-instated, but that so-called 'brotherly love' they taught me my whole life was not there. I was the black sheep of the family. I got kicked out of home. I was shunned by everyone.

Eventually I got a 'worldly' (non JW) boyfriend. We were forced to marry in 3 months because he was a non-believer, if I didn't marry, I would have been disfellowshipped again. He was made to study the 'TRUTH' as they call it. However, he never converted, and he walked out on me and my daughter when she was 8 months old.

I was still heavily indoctrinated with JW doctrine and this is how I was always easily manipulated to come back. They would use my daughter as emotional leverage saying things like: 'you don't want her to die in Armageddon, do you?' or 'you do want her to live forever don't you?' or even fear tactics like 'Armageddon is just around the corner.'

This was the scariest thing that was brainwashed into us as children. The fear of not surviving Armageddon is tangible. Only baptized JW would survive this day of 'Jehovah's anger' and it was your golden ticket to live forever in paradise on earth, be perfect, never grow old and watch our dead loved ones be resurrected.

September 11, 2001 happened 3 months after my daughter was born, and that brainwashed fear came pouring in. I thought 'this is it!' I was so scared that my daughter and I would die. I spent every day at my parent's house for two weeks waiting for Armageddon to happen. The cult still had me trapped!

I went back to the JW but I couldn't follow the strict rules. I found people so fake with fake lives. I hated going witnessing, I thought it was so rude to sell people a cult using fear and scaring them into believing. But eventually, I got remarried to a believer named Luke who tried very hard to get me back

to 'Jehovah'. I began studying with a sister and everyone thought this is it she's back!

One day at an assembly, which is a large a 2-day event, I realized something. I had two small babies, and no one had helped me. Where was this brotherly love I was brought up believing?

But the big shock was a doctrine change, the 'New light.' I remember thinking how could it be truth if it's being changed? I was furious!! I felt lied to!!

I started researching on-line about people who had left the JW. Apostates! A filthy word in JW world. They let people know the truth about The Truth. I discovered so much information! I made my husband watch videos with me and it was in those moments that we both woke up! For 2 years straight, every day we researched. We connected with Lloyd Evans and Mike and Kim - JW activists helping people wake up from the cult's indoctrination. We found a whole community of ex JW trying to wake others up. This helped unravel our brainwashing.

We love that children are not being bought up believing God will send fireballs down to destroy the world and kill everyone. They can think for themselves and not be controlled or brainwashed; they can look for truth, not be a follower or a blind believer.

Luke and I are now back at school. He is studying Psychology and I'm doing counseling and life coaching. This way we can help others that leave the JW cult with life advice, how to find their future and discover who they truly are.

## **Ron Williamson (ex-Jehovah's Witness)**

I went to "Kingdom Hall" when I was a child - two nights a week and again on Sunday. I went to Yankee Stadium in 1963 for the Jehovah's Witness convention.

My mom got disfellowshipped when she split from my dad, she had to sit in the back of the church with a head covering and was not allowed to speak to anyone, including me and my sister - we had to ignore our own mother! I thought that was cruel and I couldn't understand how these people she had been previously been close friends with were now ignoring her. She quit the church not long after that, but our dad kept taking us on Sundays and had a neighbor (who was an elder in the church) come over every Monday night for Bible study.

I asked a lot of questions because some of the stuff we were being told didn't add up. One question I asked the elder was, "if god knows everything and knows what's going to happen in the future, why didn't he know that Adam and Eve were going to eat that apple?" He said he'd have to get back to me on that, but he never did.

The worst was going out on Saturdays for "service", where you go door to door with the Awake and Watchtower magazines. Going to a town or two away from us was bad enough, but going to houses locally where I might see kids I went to school with was horrifying! I was so embarrassed.

Another thing that REALLY messed with my head was being told Armageddon was approaching and the world was going to end in 1975. You can imagine what goes through a 10-year-old's mind (in 1965) thinking the world was going to end soon. It affected my schoolwork thinking "what's the point?"

As I got older (13), and more independent I spent less time with my dad and stopped going to church altogether. I started saying I was agnostic in my 20's and I finally admitted to myself and others that I'm a full-blown atheist.

Unfortunately, my younger sister stayed in the church and she thinks I'm the devil and we haven't talked to one another in over 30 years.

## **Melanie Lindholm (ex-Mormon)**

I grew up in Utah during the '70's and 80's in a very devout Mormon family. Everyone around me was Mormon and there was no internet, so how was I going to learn anything different? Although I had secret doubts, they were difficult to articulate into words because I didn't have the vocabulary to do so as a child, and I'd been taught that doubts are flaws indicating lack of faith. The church demanded perfection and faithfulness. My parents demanded obedience and honor to our pioneer ancestors. A lot was expected of me as the first-born child, but more importantly, I was descended from Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Having family lineage to the prophets was almost like being royalty.

For 32 years, I lived the perfect Mormon life. I attended all church meetings, always held multiple callings, completed saving ordinances (baptism, endowment, temple marriage) for myself and the dead, raised my children in the church, attended seminary and institute, believed everything I was taught, read scriptures, prayed, and did everything that was asked of me by church leadership. In short, I did everything "right." Doing what's right is supposed to lead to happiness, and I had certainly done everything right, so why was I unhappy? I'd been told there wasn't anything wrong with the church, so if I was unhappy, the problem must be with me. Maybe I didn't have enough faith, pray enough, or do enough "good works." So, I continually pushed myself to DO more and BE more, to prove that I was good enough, that I was worthy of happiness. (I later discovered this is a trap that most religions use to keep people on a perpetual treadmill. You're never good enough. No matter what. That's why you need what the church is selling: A Savior. This Savior loves you unconditionally, but there are conditions. Lots of conditions.)

A series of events, some involving sexual abuse, caused me to question people in the church and question doctrine taught by the church. Throughout my life, all my unanswered questions and doubts had been set upon a shelf in my mind. One day the shelf came tumbling down because it couldn't hold any more. I had to admit to myself that I couldn't honestly look my child in the eyes and tell him that I knew the church was true, that it was everything it claimed to be, that it was worth giving your life for. I started allowing myself to question and to search for answers. I believed that if the church

was true, then surely there would be evidence to support its claims and doctrine, if only I looked hard enough.

I desperately wanted to increase my faith, so I purchased a book from the church bookstore entitled "4 Zinas" about my pioneer ancestors and church beginnings (one of the women named Zina was the wife of both early prophets, the lineage through which I was born). Much to my horror, this book caused an even greater faith crisis. I learned that both my family history and church history were not what I'd been told – especially disturbing was the fact that Joseph Smith secretly married other men's wives.

I'd been in the church my whole life and I was unaware of early pioneer women who never knew whether their child was their husband's or the prophet's. What else didn't I know? That question led to hundreds more. I became insatiable; I couldn't get my hands on enough books. I wanted to know everything, from every perspective. I went on a research binge for almost 2 years reading everything from religion, philosophy, science, to history. One by one, things I'd been taught as unchanging doctrine, turned out to be bullshit. I cannot overstate how traumatic and devastating it was to discover that everything I'd been taught was a fraud, to realize I'd given my whole life to a sham.

To process this crisis and to document what I'd learned while researching, I wrote a book entitled "Why I Left" detailing specific Mormon doctrines with the evidence for and against each. It is strictly fact-based and does not include my personal experience. In part, I discuss how there is no archeological evidence to support the Book of Mormon, how DNA evidence proves Native Americans cannot be descended from Jews, and how the order of creation described in the Book of Abraham is scientifically impossible.

Now armed with knowledge, I had confidence to formally leave the church. I was only afraid of the social consequences of that decision. I knew I'd risk losing relationships with friends, family, and neighbors. Although my husband and I left together, we knew there was a chance our marriage wouldn't survive such upheaval. It's rare for couples to leave together, but even more rare that their marriage endures once the foundation of the church is removed. I understand why people don't leave their religions – because the social and familial consequences are often more than they're



willing to risk, even if they know the doctrine is bullshit. For me, it was all the way in or all the way out. There was no middle.

In the US, citizens have the right to leave or join a religion whenever they chose. I found a form letter on MormonNoMore.com specifically worded for resigning Mormons that legally obligates church headquarters to remove their names from membership records. I filled in the letter with my name and birthdate and mailed it directly to Salt Lake City.

The fallout was expected. I was now considered "an apostate." Family and friends wouldn't speak to me because I was a threat to their spiritual welfare. Seven years later I was divorced. I had literally become a different person – a woman with a mind of her own, who voiced opinions and questions, who didn't accept the status quo – quite opposite of the person he married.

Although the road out of Mormonism was incredibly painful, it was liberating in ways I cannot adequately describe. I now enjoy freedom of thought and freedom of choice. I'm free from the guilt and fear imposed by religion. If I had known what was waiting for me "on the outside," I would have left sooner!

## David Kyle Johnson Ph.D. (ex-Nazarene)

I grew up in the panhandle of Oklahoma, a part of the state that is so isolated, so rural, and so religiously conservative that we used to talk about “the liberals in Oklahoma City” like Rush Limbaugh talks about “the liberals in New York City.” Indeed, I know how Rush talks about the liberals in New York City because, as a teenager driving a tractor on a farm during the summers, I used to listen to Rush Limbaugh five hours a day (even though his show was only 3 hours long). Everyone I knew who farmed listened to him too.

I was born into a little-known evangelical denomination called “The Nazarene Church,” an offshoot of Methodism and the holiness movement. Nazarenes believe in what they call a “second work of grace.” As you probably know, when you “say the sinner’s prayer” and “accept Jesus into your heart,” you are “saved.” Your sins are forgiven. This is standard evangelical fare. But Nazarenes believe that you can also be “sanctified”—you can reach a perfect state of “holiness” such that you never sin again. I have been told many times that, in the good ‘ol days, Nazarene preachers would pridefully declare things like: “I haven’t sinned since 1952.” (As far as I know, no one pointed out to them that pride was a sin.)

When I was a young child, my upbringing had so terrified me of going to hell that I asked God for forgiveness of my sins at least 20 times a day. I still have the prayer memorized and can “spread it” (say it fast) like a high school debater trying to squeeze in one last argument before time is up.

“Dear Jesus, I confess my sins, and ask you to forgive me of all my sins and cleanse me of all unrighteousness.”

And I would say it for the most mundane things. True story: I once reached for a note on the piano with my middle finger, only to notice that in doing so I also made the “flipping off” gesture. Was this a sin? “I’m not sure,” I said to myself. “But I do know that if I think it isn’t and I’m wrong, I could burn in hell forever. I better play it safe. Dear Jesus, I confess...”

As a teenager I did the normal things a nerd does. I was in band and speech and debate. I loved *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. I even rebelled a bit by watching *The Simpsons*. (Yes, that really was seen as rebellion. Once, in Sunday School, when Homer was mentioned derogatorily in a lesson, all of my

“classmates” looked at me accusingly...as if whatever objectionable thing he had said were my own words.) But I was also a Bible quizzier. What’s Bible quizzing you ask? It’s like High School “quiz bowl,” except all the questions are about the Bible, and competition is between teams from churches. Oh, and instead of pressing buzzers, you jump off seats.

So, between the years of 1990 to 1995, at least once a month during the school year, you could find me with my team, at some Nazarene church in Northwest Oklahoma, sitting up against a wall and jumping up and answering questions about Acts, or Romans, or Mathew...or whatever book was the selected “portion” for us to study that year. By my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, I got to where I could read a chapter of scripture (about 25 verses), over and over for about a half an hour, and then repeat it back to you from memory nearly word for word. I’m not exaggerating; I really could. And I wasn’t even close to the skill level of those that dominated these competitions at the regional and national level. Some could not only quote any passage to you by simply giving them the chapter and verse number; they could ask you every question possible from that verse, and give you every answer, in under 30 seconds. (This is what you had to do sometimes if you “jumped” before a question was finished.)

I actually credit the intellectual exercise that Bible quizzing forced me to do for a large portion of my academic success; High School was a breeze compared to memorizing the entire book of Mathew, although Speech and Debate was a huge influence as well. But for my journey away from the moral and intellectual oppression of my church upbringing I credit two things: Star Trek and philosophy.

The specific element of *Star Trek* that changed me was Mr. Spock. I still remember where I was when I saw my first episode—“Specter of a Gun” – and watched Mr. Spock use logic to accept that the town of Tombstone they were seeing was an illusion and thus nothing in it could hurt him. I was fascinated (to borrow a term) by his ability to use logic to figure out the way the world actually is (despite the way it appears). From then on, I endeavored to be reasonable, logical, and seek the truth like Spock.

But I didn’t really get the skills to do so until I studied philosophy. Interestingly, I actually walked out of my first philosophy class as a freshman...but only because I was in the wrong room; I was supposed to be in the biblical literature class next door. I was training to be a pastor at the

time. But when (in my sophomore year, when I actually took philosophy for the first time) my philosophy professor walked in on the second or third day and said "Today, we are going to study logic" and put up Spock's "Vulcan salute," I was riveted. The questions we went on to consider, the topics we studied, the arguments... "This is what I was meant to do with my life," I said to myself. "Teach philosophy." I changed my major before the semester was up, and reveled in studying philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, and showed a particular acuity for formal logic proofs.

As I examined my religious beliefs with the newfound clarity and precision philosophy provided, I quickly came to realize that almost everything I had been taught as a child was wrong—ridiculous even. Non-sensical. The Trinity. The soul. The Holy Spirit. And since, inspired by Spock, I was concerned with logic and truth, like the good philosopher I aimed to be, when I realized that I was wrong about something, I changed my mind.

The grandest realization came in the spring of 1999, when I took both philosophy of religion and New Testament theology. The standard understanding of the purpose of Jesus' death is as an atonement for sins: God demands a sacrifice (he demands suffering) in order to forgive sins, and Jesus serves as that sacrifice (he suffered) so we don't have to. "But if God is all loving," I asked myself, "why does he demand suffering before he will forgive? I mean, I can forgive someone without having to stomp on their foot first. Why can't God? He's all powerful, right?"

Some of my classmates suggested that he must demand suffering in order for justice to be served. But punishing one person for the crimes of another, by definition, does not accomplish justice...even if you punish yourself. The central doctrine of Christianity is thus logically incoherent...or, at best, logically incompatible with its notion of God as an all loving being. Logically, God cannot be both merciful and just...and only a vindictive cruel God would demand a sacrifice before he forgave sins.

I ended up writing a paper on this for my New Testament theology course for which I proudly received a perfect score from one of the department's hardest professors. Indeed, he encouraged me to try to publish it. After I showed no interest (something I still regret) he wrote his own paper on the topic (in 2000 entitled "The Death of Jesus: Historically Contingent or Divinely Inspired") in which he concluded: "The satisfaction theories of the atonement are inadequate to express the richness of divine love that suffers

because they arise out of the faulty assumption that God's primary attribute is justice and that God must vindicate himself and his moral government and demand payment for a moral debt." Amen, brother. Amen.

But by the time I graduated I still wasn't an atheist. I went to grad school (in philosophy) still believing that God existed, that God was love, and that Jesus was his messiah...although, admittedly, I had a very "liberal" definition of what "messiah" meant: "God's moral example." And by the time I was done with grad school, the latter belief had faded.

But I didn't become an atheist until after I got my first philosophy teaching job and taught an independent study on atheism. As a result, I became familiar with atheist philosophers and atheist arguments to which I had never been exposed while studying under Christian philosophers, and I slowly began to realize that the atheist's arguments were better. The arguments for God failed, the problem of evil really was convincing (especially the argument from natural evil, which took on a new light to me after the Indian Ocean tsunami), and the burden of proof was on their side. Because, again like Spock, I valued logic and truth above all else, I slowly began to realize that I no longer believed.

But I didn't actually admit it to myself until one day when I was reading the book *God: A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and William Lane Craig. Given that Craig is likely the most renowned Christian apologist, I went in hoping for a fruitful exchange. Craig's arguments were so clumsy, however, and riddled with fallacies and misunderstandings (while Armstrong's were so careful, clear and persuasive) that I literally said to myself, out loud, "I can't let anyone even think I'm a theist anymore. I can't be associated with arguments like Craig's anymore. It's embarrassing." (The part that literally made me throw my book across the room in disgust was Craig's response to Armstrong's "argument from ignorance." See pp. 101-110 & 129-134.) An intellectual weight was lifted.

But I still couldn't bring myself to openly admit my atheism publicly and even continued to go to church. I had been running some minor food service programs and thought I could still do some good (although participation in these programs from the congregation was quite sparse). But then I started to notice the bile that was coming out of the preacher's mouth in a way I never had before:

-The misogyny (“Girls, don’t be surprised by what men do when you dress that way.”)

- The scientific ignorance (“Global warming is a hoax; only God can affect the weather”),

- The casual racism (“You know, the other day I saw some....”)

I realized that, as a PhD’d philosopher, by simply being there I was adding legitimacy to this church. Indeed, even if I didn’t have a degree...my presence at this church every Sunday helped it continue to exist, which meant it helped to spread that message. I soon left, openly admitted my atheism, and then later wrote a paper on the very concept that motivated my exit: guilt by association. (The paper is called “Moral Culpability and Choosing to Believe in God” and you can easily find it online.)

I still have many Christian friends, some of which are ministers (who studied along with me as an undergrad)—and I respect them. Many have some of the same problems I do with the Church and its teachings. But when I can, I ask them: At what point do you continue to try to fix a broken institution from the inside...and at what point do you realize that it is beyond repair? At what point does your participation in and thus your promotion of the institution simply make you guilty by association of the moral crimes it commits? At what point are you doing more harm than good? And at what point do you just cut your losses and leave? For me, it was a long time ago.

## **Nathan Princewill (Nigeria)**

Hi God, let me introduce myself because clearly you don't know me, or you do but simply chose to ignore me.

I was born into a Christian family

I was raised to believe in thy trinity

As a boy, my sisters Jane & Josephine did their part to teach me about your ultimate sacrifice, your awesomeness and why you're the Almighty.

But as a man, you gave me reasons to nurture and feed my curiosity.

I want to know why the good perish like an obedient sheep waiting to be slaughtered

I guess their crime was they were too good to be true

I want to know why you took the most innocent kid in my childhood

I guess his crime was he just couldn't be rude

I want to know why that pregnant woman was hit with a stray bullet in my neighborhood

I guess even her unborn baby was drowning in sin even without taking his first breath of oxygen,

I just wanna know why.

I want to know why Jane left this unkind and unsympathetic world in a hurry,

She left just 10 months after her husband danced to the solemn jazz of death,

She left in her sleep,

She left behind 3 orphans,

She left with a heart pricked with thorns,

She left her good life for an afterlife,

And she certainly left me.

I guess her crime was being the kindness the world needed,

She just left,

I just wanna know why.

I want to know why you took Josephine only 4 months after Jane

She was young, charming and loved by all

I raised my hands to the heavens in tears & prayed

Just as Jesus did with Lazarus

I had faith as I spoke life into her lifeless body  
All I needed was a similar miracle  
But unlike your son [Jesus] that was answered  
You preferred serving me doubts in buffets about your existence,  
I guess if I was your son, you'd take that call.  
They both loved & praised you truly,  
You may doubt it but I swear it's true.

Dear God, I leave you this voicemail with the fact that you never take my calls,  
You were probably on vacation or maybe this is just another adventurous game to you where you kill off the good and innocent characters because they're the villains in your pathetic video game.  
Perhaps the later,  
My guesses are just as good as your work ethics because even the old scorned cemetery wept at the loss of my sisters within four months.

You are the father that was never here whenever i needed him,  
Hence I leave you this profound truth  
I've deleted your number.



## **Robert Magara (Uganda)**

I was raised in a poor family. My parents were both from strong, active Christian traditions in which they believed wholeheartedly.

The first crack in my religious shell occurred in my early teens when I began to notice that neither prayers nor anyone else seemed to reach any higher being or get any real results.

I began to think that anyone who believed in prayer was either fooling themselves or trying to impress others.

It got me to the point where I just couldn't take it anymore and stopped going to church altogether. I was 28 years old.

## **Masereka Sebastian (Uganda)**

People who are poor are praying nights and days in search for money and they are not getting any. This is wasting time and energy.

In the church people are told to mind less about earthly materials but again the church leaders will demand materials, money etc for their own benefit leaving the so-called Christians of that church very poor and helpless.

Thirdly, whenever a person falls sick the church leaders will say the sick person sinned and that is why people become sick. To try to nurse this person they demand money in order to pray for him/her. What is this?

## Zachiam Bayei (Nigeria)

I was born 39 years ago in Kaduna State, Nigeria. I never chose where I would be born or raised, the society I grew up from gave me these identities. My mother is deeply religious, but my father was not; he is handicapped by illiteracy, while my mother is literate.

My mother set religious rules in the house while I was growing: no chores are done on Sundays, every morning and evening prayers are mandatory in the house. Failure to honor such rituals with 'reasonable' excuse often create ire from her.

I began to doubt religious teachings whenever I tried to marry what god's representatives say and what was happening in my society. An example is my Mom, when she is back home from church she is always cursing with the slightest provocation. I found it difficult to understand why someone who just asked for God's forgiveness is the same person who is now cursing. This is common among religious folks around me. They are filled with contradictions.

I long was a skeptic of the teachings of the Bible and it's God before becoming an avow Atheist. I grew up a society where internet access was limited. So, having access to information via internet was expensive and reserved for the rich and educated. I was limited due to my poverty at that time.

I accidentally consolidated my disbelief in God and religion when I first met Karl Marx ideas on "State and Religion" in a sociology text at a friend's house. I read its content voraciously like a child starving seeing food after a long time. Having access to secular books in my society was rare.

Next, I discovered I was not alone in doubting religious teachings and their gods. Knowing there are thinkers around the world who share similar disbelief in religion and their gods was a great relief for me while growing up.

I finally parted away with religion and its god when I was 19 years on earth. I stopped going to church and I threw away the Bible my Mom gave to me.

## Laura Wright

I was raised in a Christian home. I accepted Jesus as my savior when I was 5 because I was terrified of hell. I was baptized four years later of my own volition and excelled in our church's children's programs. It all seemed so perfect.

Only it wasn't.

For years we had the Bible shoved down our throats, every night we would read the Bible and pray together. Fortunately for my parents, we were taught the Law before we were old enough to ask questions about marrying rapists, legal slavery, and other things. And because we were homeschooled, we were never exposed to evolution or anything that would contradict what they believed. We were also forced to learn everything from a Biblical perspective and were encouraged to question nothing, but the liberal narrative. On top of it all, my parents were psychologically abusing my sisters and me.

The first of my spiritual dysphoria started in my early 20s. I had fallen in love with a leader in my church. By this time, I had moved away from the conservative teachings of the baptist church I was raised in and moved on to a nondenominational church. Months into the on/off relationship with this man I realized that something was familiar but very wrong and suddenly it clicked that this was the same abuse I had suffered with my parents. But my trusted adoptive moms at church just told me to forgive him and my parents. Sure, what I'd experienced wasn't great, but God had forgiven them, so I should too.

A year after I broke up with my ex, I decided to run away to Houston. But Texas was no relief. Being in a new city struggling financially and socially, I started to get very depressed. I tried going to counseling at my church, but I was told that all my depression was the result of not forgiving my parents. Jobless and depressed? Forgive them. I finally left counseling feeling misunderstood, discouraged, and alone.

I decided to go to the local bible college. Soon, I had more questions than answers. How do we know the Bible is the inherent word of god? Who chose

the cannon and how do we know it's the holy text? Why does it matter is predestination is real or not? My professors never answered those questions and I soon began to doubt the validity of scripture.

The real kicker happened nearly two years ago. I was traveling in London over the Christmas holidays when I hooked up with a guy in my hostel. I had always followed strict abstinence before marriage, so it was a complete shock to me. I was racked with guilt afterwards, but that experience made me think. I wasn't that kind of girl, so why would I do that without hesitation? I started to really examine my head for the first time in ages. I knew that somehow it was connected to the abuse. All those verses about how God will never leave me popped into my head. I was comforted until the fatal thought crossed my mind:

If God was there for me, why didn't he stop the abuse?

And that was the end for me. Nothing made sense, and everything made sense all at the same time. It wasn't enough to have a warm fuzzy feeling inside of me that God was in my heart and healing my pain. Where was he when I was being told I wasn't going to be good enough to please God? Where was he when I was so alone and dead inside that all I wanted to do was end it all? Sitting up in heaven and letting it happen. That's not a god worthy of worship. That is a sick, twisted, super being who can't even bother to use his powers for good. It was then and there that I decided that if god was real, he could come find me.

I have been lucky enough to know genuinely good people since leaving the church. One is my boyfriend whose extensive knowledge of natural history has opened my eyes to how blinded I was by religion. He had been amazing in supporting me through it all. We met only a few months after I had left, and he has seen the majority of the fallout that has happened as a result. But unlike God, he has been there loving me and helping me stand up for myself.

They always say your life will fall apart if you stop following God. Well my life was in shambles already. I think it's gotten more put together since I've left. And even if it won't change that much, at least I know the truth and can live in the true reality of the way things are.

## Joel Pearson

My name is Joel Pearson. I was raised as a missionary kid, leaving my own country when I was 3 and only returning for 1 year in every 4 during my childhood. That meant I was raised almost exclusively in the company of Christians who were such strong believers that they travelled to Chad (Africa) to spread their religion. I didn't know any better because I'd never experienced anything else. I was even taught young earth creationism and climate change denial in a Christian international American school in Cameroon.

When I moved back to England at age 16, I gradually softened up to secular people, as my country was then transitioning into its current position as majority non-religious. Comedians mocked religion and everyone I trusted seemed to be OK with it, and when I got a job as an engineer there were no other Christians, so I grew accustomed to the idea of blasphemy being permissible; a huge change from my childhood aversion to even thinking anything bad about Christianity.

I encountered many minor things across the next decade or so that started to shift my perspective. Friends from work who I respected but had opposing beliefs: A pagan boss whose arguments I couldn't refute, a Buddhist co-worker who was a better person than me despite being "godless", a gentle atheist who had long philosophical discussions with me, a wonderful gay man who made me re-evaluate god's opinion about homosexuality.

A pivotal point happened was when I was 31. A co-worker curiously asked me a question: "Other than the people, what do you get out of the church?"

That stuck in my mind for months. I couldn't answer it.

Things really changed a couple of months after that. I realized that I didn't like being ignorant about evolution because everyone else seemed to know more about it and my Christian education had almost completely excluded it. I resolved to know more and picked up the most famous book I could find on evolution: *The Selfish Gene*. It was stunningly well written, and every fact I checked turned out to be true. I realized that my teachers had lied to me. That made me wonder what else they had lied to me about, and since this

author Richard Dawkins had such clarity in his prose, I looked for more of his books. I discovered "The God Delusion".

This was a tough choice. I was a firm believer in Jesus, and part of the worship team in church, even leading worship sometimes. If I'd been asked how certain I was that Christianity was true, I would still have said "100%".

Having been shaken by my discovery that I'd been lied to about other things, I decided that I would treat this book with total honesty. If God was real, I had nothing to fear and the book would only strengthen my faith. If I discovered a different truth, I would be stronger for it.

I finished the book over the course of two weeks. Everything in it made sense. It was like peeling away layers of misconceptions from my mind and discovering reality piece by piece. Every fact I checked stood up. I had never been taught logic before.

It was strange attending church after the first week of reading the book. Seeing the emotional manipulation, the fallacious reasoning, and the ignorance of Christian history and of how the real world worked.

When I finished the book, I immediately sent my resignation from the worship team, picked up all my equipment from the church, stopped attending all religious meetings, and embarked on a long journey of discovery: Reading books on atheism, philosophy, ethics, religious history, cosmology, cosmogony, psychology, quantum physics, evolutionary biology, science fiction both dystopian and utopian, and much more.

I had to rebuild my world and my place in it: reconstructing my narrative to fit myself into a new story that was closer to reality than the previous one. I took a course on metaphysical naturalism with Dr. Richard Carrier, which was very helpful in exploring the big questions with someone who had given it a lot of thought.

I discovered that Jesus probably never existed at all, very different from the line that the church had fed me. I learned that 3/4 of the books in the New Testament are anonymous, forged, or traditionally misattributed. I also learned that trained pastors \*knew\* this, but lied about it to their sheep.

I went through a phase of anger at those who had misled me and wasted half of my life giving my time and money to a scam, but I now see them as victims of the same mimetic virus that I'd been infected with.

When I was still a Christian, I was led to believe that life as an atheist was immoral, purposeless, depressing, terrifying, and vulnerable to predation by supernatural malevolences.

Now I know that atheism is just removing the blindfold and contains no worldview of its own. Instead, you can choose your own positions on everything rather than being dominated by religious leaders.

Morality was never from religion. Purpose is unique to each person, not handed down from on high. Why be depressed when the universe contains more wonders than you could discover in a million lifetimes? What's so terrifying about freedom? Demons are inventions to keep you trapped in fear. Once you escape from superstition, you need fear them no more.

In short, I left behind ignorance and apathy. I discovered that with no gods ruling over me, I had a whole new world to explore and had a purpose in helping humanity thrive. I had a purpose far better than that of being a meat puppet in a predestined course ordained by a celestial despot. I was finally free to be myself. In many ways, my life started at age 31.

## Gary (United Kingdom)

I underwent adult baptism at my local Anglican Church because I was not sure my mother had me baptized as a baby. I became an active communicant. I was elected to sit on the Parish Church Council, I officiated at the Eucharist, took my turn to lead the intercessions and the Sunday School for children. One day, the curate asked if I had ever considered qualifying for the non-stipendiary ministry. The long process of putting myself forward for selection and training was initiated after having been recommended to the Diocese.

I began to study Christianity in earnest. I enrolled on a Diploma course in Christian studies with a prestigious Anglican evangelical college and read widely, but my studies led to the end of my Christian faith.

After reading John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* I realized I could not with any integrity convey to another person a convincing explanation of the Atonement—least of all to myself. I discovered John Spong, Richard Holloway, David Strauss, Uta Ranke-Heinemann and Karlheinz Deschner— theologians who were anathema to the church. Their books brought into the light what was already lurking in the recesses of my mind.

Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens provided the *coup de gras* to my lingering Christian faith.

I now regard myself as an atheist, but also as a “cultural Christian”— I love choral Evensong and I marvel at our historic churches and cathedrals.

People are free to believe what they choose but were they to impose those beliefs on me then I will become one of their most implacable enemies.



## Luca (ex-Unification Church)

My story begins when I was in my 20s. I was a student at a university in a small European nation, but I was also “looking for God.” I prayed, meditated, and went from one church to another, because I wanted to do something great and good for God, but I didn’t know what. Eventually I was invited by people I met on the street to a 1-day seminar on The Divine Principle of the Unification Church. Following that I went to a 7-day seminar, then a 21-day seminar. I joined after that; I became a member of the Unification Church for over 10 years. I was a pastor and church leader in my country.

I found the Unification Church to be very logical and systematic. Their main point was that Jesus was not supposed to die on the cross; he was supposed to build the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth, and we were supposed to help him. That is what I tried to accomplish during those years: I was building the Kingdom.

Why did I leave? My doubt started when I saw the television show *Cosmos*, narrated by Neil De Grasse Tyson. Watching it, I realized the universe was billions of years old, with the evolution of the human species requiring two million years. It didn’t make sense to me that God would waste all that time, just waiting for humans to evolve. Why didn’t he just create humans and then save us? And what was God’s plan with *Homo Habilis*, *Australopithecine*, and other pre-human species?

To scientifically understand the evolution of the human species, I started studying anthropology and paleontology. I also read Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* and critical scholarship on the New Testament by Bart Ehrman. I realized the Bible stories of Noah, Abraham and Moses were unhistorical, just myths. The premise of the Divine Principle of the Unification Church - which is based on the historical reality of those Biblical events - lost all meaning and sense. I read books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, that enabled me turn to science for deep existential answers. The end result was I completely rejected the notion of any supernatural existence. I also joined The Clergy

Project, an organization of former religious leaders, co-founded by Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, and others.

I left the Unification Church at this time.

Do I resent my 10 years with the Unification Church? No, not at all. I have no negative feelings about my time spent with the church. I met many nice people, that I loved. I believe I was deluded by the Church's beliefs, similarly to Reverent Moon himself and all his followers, but I have no negative feelings about this.

The important thing now is that even after losing my faith, I continue to have deep existential experiences that I previously thought were due to God's presence or his answers to my prayers. People like Carl Sagan have helped me to be in love with my life and the universe and to enjoy my existence, even more significantly, without any belief in supernatural reality or deities. My life is so precious now. I value every moment spent with my family and friends here in this beautiful immense Universe.

## **Rodney Saenz (ex-Seventh Day Adventist)**

The Seventh-Day Adventist faith enshrouded me from many things, a trait I once saw as holy and protective, especially from the “Adversary” and the satanic demons and disciples who fell under his manipulation. As a “child of God,” the church challenged me to close my mind off from any unseemly influences, which ultimately rendered me ignorant to the truth I saw around me on a daily basis. In my mind, those who suffered simply reaped what they’d sown, or harvested the sins of their predecessors: those who never sought out or even refused the protection of their lord and savior.

On September 11, 2001 I witnessed the wicked results of a faith taken to its extreme as the Twin Towers fell, injuring or killing thousands in their wake. My mind was quickly ablaze with justifications and prayers, seeking resolution to the unholy use of god’s name as the justification for mass murder. This ultimately led me down a torturous path of tragic, historic parallels and an investigation into how this could be allowed by an omnibenevolent creator.

Ultimately, it dawned on me that the presence of a single atom of evil in this purportedly ‘perfect’ being was all the proof needed to engender doubts about that fiction. Finally, I began to understand why Christians are commanded to close off from the influence of the world, under threat of damnation. Before long, I’d exposed myself to Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and the other “Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Initially, and through gritted teeth, I braved myself for the inevitable ‘reward’ for my sin of apostasy; when that never arrived, I quickly saw my loss of faith replaced by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, of science, history and the best in humanity. This unwavering search for information, which had once been sorely limited to the words of the “faithful,” quickly became a tidal wave, under which my wavering faith stood no chance of survival.

Today, my faith has realigned to the best of reality, and my ethics are now based in the firm soil of humanity, warts and all, as opposed to the childhood fantasies to which most of the world still clings, like abandoned fledglings still hoping for the return of their parent. The scales of blind faith no longer obstruct my view of the world, and today my life is more full and greater than ever before.

## Char (ex-Mennonite)

I was raised Mennonite. The church was our life--every day. There was worship committee, song leading, choirs, teaching Sunday School, Youth Group, Bible Quizzing, grace at meals and long walks that involved deeply personal conversations with God. I "accepted Jesus into my heart" no less than three times during my childhood and youth.

There were facets of that life that were undeniably stifling. I grew up praying for forgiveness if I so much as thought the phrase, "Oh my god." I believed that sex before was a sin, so despite dating my now-husband for more than four years, I remained a virgin on my wedding night.

I eventually came to ask questions about how was it that we decided that fornication was a sin, but chose to ignore the biblical condemnation of working on a Sunday or mixing fibers in clothes? I found it interesting how doctrine changed with the times. Some sins became more pronounced and others less egregious. Who was making these decisions? It didn't make sense! As did so many other things in the Bible. I gradually came to examine those doubts more closely.

When I had my own children, the questions became more pronounced. The nonsensical nature of scripture. The contradictions and rationalizations.

I realized I didn't feel comfortable or welcomed in church. I never really had, and I stopped forcing myself to go.

I might have stayed "faithful" if I'd had a core group of friends in our church, but neither my husband nor I ever felt accepted. We felt colossally let down by our church family in many ways.

There was a critical moment, an epiphany that finally allowed me to admit to myself that I just didn't buy the whole concept of a fantasy friend in the sky who was watching out for us.

Our children were small, three of them under age 6, and I always had them say a prayer before bed. There was a story on the news of a kidnaping and murder of a young girl... I remember looking at my children... Thinking, about this young girl and the prayers she and her parents had likely said.

I thought back to the disappearance of Lesley Mahaffey and Kristen French - two beautiful young girls from our region who were brutally tortured, murdered and dismembered at the hands of Paul Bernardo, and of all the prayers they and their families must have made. I looked down at my children and thought how ridiculous it was to ask some imaginary friend to look after them. If there was a god, surely, he would have protected Lesley and Kristen! The idea of someone watching over us was ludicrous! I was enraged by the deception and realized if anybody was going to care of my children it would have to be me.... fuck god!

That reasoning gave me the resolve to finally accept that it was all bullshit and let it all go.

It wasn't immediate, though. It took me a number of years to be able to identify myself as atheist, and to this day my mother doesn't know--but only because she's never quite asked the question. She's in her 90's and I'd rather not put her through that. I look at her and I'm sad. Ever since I was a small child, I've listened to her talk about her hopes for heaven. She's read all the books by those who've been "to the other side" and returned. She's spent her whole life waiting to die, and I'm sad because I wonder what adventures she passed by because she was so convinced her reward would come in the next life.

I, on the other hand, am freed of the fetters of "morality" and the notion of sin! After I let go of God, I wrote erotic romance novels, dabbled alongside my husband in the world of swinging and bisexuality, and have been extremely forthright, outspoken and open with my own kids about sex, among other things. I've been rewarded with a wonderful relationship with my now-adult children. I can't tell you how freeing it was the first time I allowed myself to say "Fuck!" or, even better, "Jesus fucking Christ!" and to this day I get an unholy satisfaction from saying that phrase out loud and knowing that there is nobody "up there" listening who gives a fuck about my vocabulary.

## **Marissa Torres Langseth (The Philippines)**

The Philippines is known for its lovely islands and lovely people. A smile everywhere, but beneath those smiles are real life stories of pain, suffering and torture and fear of the unknown.

The Philippines is also known for its poverty, prostitutes, and children for sale, despite the fact that it is 80% Roman Catholic and 97% religious. A shame, indeed, people are still living in the dark ages, delusion of grandeur, a natural phenomenon for the very poor.

I was in elementary school in grade five, when I discovered science, when I became a skeptic. I could not accept my mother's explanation that I came from a bamboo split opened by a lightning. I thought, it did not make sense at all. I have questions galore that nobody could answer. I just let it go, but, at the back of my mind, my questions lingered. I went with the flow, joined a choir at our nearby church.

The military church was always jam packed with people taking communions, but these are the same people who love to gossip and back stab our neighbors. Funny, but those who are going to church are the most abnormal in my eyes. They are good only with their own flock and those outside their circle were treated like garbage. They treated me like garbage. Another confusion and cob web in my mind. Why did a god allow this? I let it go, who am I to question their behavior. Who am I to question a god? I am only a small fish.

I was forced to go to church by my mother, who thinks everything came from a god. My mother would kick me and pull my hair just to wake me up to go to church on Sundays. In college, a military chaplain (priest) was always showing me his erection even inside the church. I was as naive as a newly bloomed flower and could not understand what was that all about, until one night, at a party, he tried to get me drunk and brought me to a secluded place. I realized something was wrong with that scenario and I ran away, never to go back to that church again, however, I did not report the incident to anybody. Who am I? People will just wag their tongues and brand me as a girl of "ill repute". Besides, who will believe in a poor girl like me? The priest can never do such a thing.

At an early age, I was able to crack the mystery that there was no Santa Claus. Only the parents played Santa, but since, we were poor, we did not get any gifts from our parents. There was no Santa, he never appeared to me nor I have seen a trace of him. There was no Santa Claus.

I was still on a searching mode, when I finished college. I graduated at the top of my class, Cum Laude at a famous university in Cebu province. I went to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to the need to secure some funds to be utilized to go to the USA. While in the KSA, I almost became a Muslim. I thought it was necessary at that time. I almost memorized the whole "salah". Things happened for a reason, at least that was what I believe in before, I had a very tragic experience in the KSA. Long story short, a Filipino man persuaded me to believe that he was the right man for me and we ended up marrying and produced one child. He ran away without any reason never to be found again.

What did I do wrong? Where did I go wrong? I accepted that it was just a test of my existence. Still, there were cobwebs in my mind, why bad things happen to good people? If there were a god, should he, at least, intervene? or stop these misfortunes in my life?

My skepticism was once again rekindled. I went to the USA and discovered that I am really free to practice any religion. Still I went a searching, I joined a born again / Christian group who think that they are all saved. I thought I was also saved, until one time; the pastor wanted ten thousand-dollar donation from me. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Why should I donate that much? I have no money!

I did not go back to that church, because I felt like they were ripping me off. Aren't we supposed to give what we can afford, not forced to share 10% of our income. I could not understand the logic behind it.

Another query about the importance of religion and god. I witnessed 911, a true tragedy, bigger than life. Why would a loving god allow this to happen? There were good and bad people in those twin towers. Why? Again, and again, the good are being victimized. Is there a god? Where is he? Is he worthy of my praise? I guess not, so I came out as a humanist.

Humanism is still a struggle in the Philippines. It connotes Satanism, evil, demon, or what have you, a truly negative connotation. Who cares? I converted all my sisters into humanists without much ado. They saw my struggles, they saw my success, better still, I became the Santa Claus in our household.

I am encouraging Filipinos to believe in themselves, put their best foot forward, to be kind and good without god and stop the delusion that a god is watching over us. ([www.hapihumanist.org](http://www.hapihumanist.org))

There is no outside intelligence. There are no gods, nor demons. There are no fairies nor angels. There is no superman, nor batman, nor Spiderman. Being an atheist gave me more awe and wonder because, I saw the world through prisms of reality. No outside intelligence necessary”

## **Olayiwola Zikrulah (Nigeria)**

My parents practiced Christianity, Islam and Traditional African religion altogether so while growing up, I was making comparison among them all and I could see that they have many things in common, one is they all want MONEY irrespective of the kind of sweet talk they say to you in order to attract you to their folds.

As I grew up, I began to see the human made-up nature of them all cause they were no different from political parties having factions.

They all claimed the origin of the universe was inspired by an alleged creator. But why would a single creator tell different things to different people such that it causes discrimination and bloodshed? If rival football fans can exchange blows and rival religious groups can do the same, it is laughable for anyone to claim divine creation for their religion but claim that football was man-made.



## Sarah

I was indoctrinated at the age of 12 and baptized in the Holy Spirit at 13.

My whole life was spent either with 'God' or running from God with the internal belief that nothing in my life would be right again until my life was with God again. LOL.

It is so disempowering.

I did so much reading about religion but instead of it enhancing my belief in God, it destroyed it.

Do people even realize how contradictory Christianity is? There are many different denominations in Christianity - what 'Christianity' will you follow? How do you know for absolute certain, that what you are being taught is the truth?

The more I learnt about the different beliefs, the contradictory 'rules', the more questions I had.

Reading up about the 7th Day Adventists. The Mormons. Researching the whole damn Pentecostal movement. I looked up everything and spent hours, days, nights just absorbing facts, myths and controversy all on just Christianity alone.

And I came up with one conclusion and one conclusion only. That after a lifelong, deep down, core and fundamental belief in God I now no longer believed in him at all.

I sat there in the darkness and watched as the internal walls made of solid brick and mortar, shattered and crumbled to the ground in disbelief. Walls that guarded my entire life came crumbling down and covered me in decades of dust. Confusion and doubt crept in for the first time and its destruction was total.

But once the dust cleared? Once I started looking around at everything those walls had once blocked? I tasted freedom for the very first time. The

liberation that comes when you no longer have your internal thoughts governed by glimpses of Heaven and flashes of Hell. The battle between good and evil, God and the world, was torn away. The heavy chains that ruled my life were broken and like a prisoner kicked out into the light after spending decades chained inside a dark room, I felt relief but confusion. I no longer knew what to do or what to think.

But the more I read, the freer I became. Like walking down a dark corridor and glimpsing the light that shined brighter with every step until I was standing outside in the fresh air with the sunlight beaming on my face.

Did I once believe in God, Jesus, heaven and hell? Damn straight I did. Thoughts of dying brought on visions of hellfire and gnashing teeth. Thoughts of heaven brought on visions of going to church every Sunday, always trying to live up to impossible standards while losing empathy for those who believed differently.

My thoughts now are completely free of those beliefs.

What I do believe is... the more you learn, the more you know... and the more you realize how much you DON'T know.

## **Draco (ex-Catholic)**

I was raised in a strict Catholic family. I look back on my life now and remember the crazy stuff my family went through and I really can't believe it.

In 1972 my father had a massive heart attack and died. I was 6. My younger sister was 2, my older sisters were 8, 12, 14 and 17. So my mother is alone raising 5 children with only her income as a waitress. At the funeral our priest reminded my mother of her duty to the church and to make sure she kept donating on Sunday. She was also expected to make sure each of us continued to go to Catechism Class, which cost money as well.

At about 10 I was asked to leave Catechism Class because I asked too many questions. Three Nuns came to my house and yelled at my mother about my constant questioning of their lessons. I was not allowed to talk at all in class. I was given a red card to hold up if I needed to use the bathroom, but one Nun told me not to use it because the answer in her class was always going to be "No."

In the coming weeks I spoke twice and both times I was slapped across the face. I told my mother and she said I was never going back. The Nuns and the Priest came over again and convinced my mother that because I wasn't going to Catechism Class I had to work for the Church. At 10 years old I was the church janitor emptying trashcans, cleaning bathrooms and setting up and taking down chairs for Bingo past 10pm.

I was still a firm believer even at 16. I was questioning, but still firm in my belief.

At 18 I joined the Navy. While Stationed at NSA Oceana in Virginia Beach I found a local church organization was giving lessons on base. The classes counted toward a degree in Divinity and my mother wanted me to take them. She told me God would keep me safe if I went.

It was in these classes that I learned how fake the church was. They answered all the questions I had as a child and it was crystal clear it was all made up foolishness. The answers didn't make any sense.

The final straw was an answer I was seeking since age 10. Why does a criminal have freedom of choice, but the victim doesn't? The answer I was given at 10 was, "shut up, don't question God's plan!" The answer I was given as an adult in a College classroom... "Victims go to heaven so it doesn't matter. The criminal is the one who matters because that is who God wants to choose the right path in life."

I never finished the courses. I told my mother I finished. Even after everything the church put her through, she was not going to like what I thought. I just kept it all to myself.

Most of my sisters are still firm believers. Only one has fully broken out, mainly because of how poorly they treated my mother. The other 4 vary in belief.

## **Carol Loomis (ex-Catholic)**

In 2009, I began to read Christopher Hitchens work. Then I read *The God Delusion* and several other Richard Dawkins books. That was all I needed to confirm the doubts I'd been having about my lifelong Catholic religion that had thoroughly brainwashed me.

Finally, at age 60 or so, I saw the truth. I'm now a happy atheist.

## Milos Baraz (ex-Catholic, Slovakia)

From my early childhood, I used to listen to the same words: *If you commit a sin, you will go to hell*. My grandma was the biggest expert. She was a very good person, but completely manipulated by Catholic Church. She used to tell me: "You will have to suffer in burning fire until Jesus will forgive you all your sins and only then you will go to heaven."

I was not very excited when my parents signed me up to the Catholic school. I wanted to stay in the previous one, normal state school, but I had no choice. I was born in Catholic family, so I had to attend Catholic school. We used to listen permanently about us going to hell if we do something wrong and also that the hell has no end, it will last forever.

When I was 11, I started to doubt the religion. I started to doubt that the Almighty and All-Good God can allow such evil happening permanently around us. I didn't understand how he would not punish people for such horrific deeds whilst punishing us for eating meat on Friday. I also heard many times that I must not judge God because God can decide whom he will give his grace and whom not.

I started to lose myself in all that jumble: If God is so good, why does he allow so many terrible things? How can he reward bad people and punish good ones? Why is it written in exactly opposite way in Catechism? Why cannot I say anything against him or I will be punished even more severely for blasphemy and unheard temerity to judge God's decisions?

I didn't understand. I knew there was no justice in the world and I was told God could unreasonably give bad things to good people and good things to bad people and I was supposed to shut up or I would be even more severely punished. Because I was supposed to be too stupid to understand God's decisions. This simply didn't make sense to me.

I stopped believing when I was 15, but in fact I had serious doubts two years earlier. But I was still full of fear of hell and punishment, so I could not stop believing. Since 15, I left Catholic faith, but for some time I still believed in God. It was not so simple, just stop believing in anything. I also could not stop visiting church out of respect to my parents.

Since 18, I became atheist and never went to church again. Now I felt I was free. I had enough time to verify my conviction, if I was not mistaken after all, and I wasn't. From that time, it always irritates me, and I feel very sorry for people that believe in an Almighty and All-Good God who is capable of tolerating all the evil and doesn't move a finger against it.

My mind always stops with wondering how someone can believe such nonsense their whole life. Of course, the people are affected by environment and surroundings. They cannot simply say they don't believe and that it is the fact there is no God. Even if they did, they would always run into prejudice and aggression, being blamed as "intolerant."

Our society is very seriously manipulated and even those who know the truth, cannot say it publicly because the powerful individuals don't like the truth. And almost everybody chooses to serve them, usually for extremely low reward. I am saying: No, there is no god. But nobody listens because the truth is far less important than the profit...

## **Bob Pellissier (ex-Catholic)**

I grew up going to a Catholic grammar school and I had to go to church every Sunday and sometimes during the week. If we got to school early, we had to go sit in on the Mass that was underway. All the kids did their best to ditch going to church. So, even in the beginning, it was something we tried to avoid rather than believed in and wanted to attend.

Later on, in Junior High and High school, one night a week I had to go to catechism class. There, I spent many classes arguing with the teacher about evolution - how does the church explain that, considering we were supposed to believe the earth was made in 7 days? I could never get any answer that made sense, other than I needed to "have faith".

I felt like... if this aspect of the Bible doesn't make sense, then what other parts also are bogus? I stopped believing in it, and as soon as I went off to college I stopped going to church.

Also, I spent 1.5 years traveling through third world countries in the next few years, (Africa, South America), I went to many remote areas where people had never been exposed to a major religion. These people were happy and were trying to lead good lives. I felt that if there was a god, why would he send all these people to hell just because they never were taught Catholicism and had no reason to believe in him? Or, if they did have other religion, Catholicism would still send them to hell. That wouldn't be fair.

I felt that if there was a god - he wouldn't put up rules like that. So, there must not be a god.

Look at all the money spent, and lives lost in the name of religion for thousands of years, and still continuing. The world would be a better place if there was no such thing as religion.

## Joe - ex-Catholic

I was raised in a very traditional nuclear family in Madera, California. My parents were Catholic immigrants from Mexico and candles of the "Virgin de Guadalupe" were commonplace in our home. My parents worked six days a week and went to Church on Sundays. I was the 4th of 5 children and all my siblings ahead of me attended catechism and completed their 1st communion. When it was my turn, I made excuse after excuse, faked injury, faked illnesses and ditched class. As time went on, my parents stopped trying to force me. So, what made me come to the realization God was an illusion at such a young age? What made me rebel and be the odd ball kid in a deep-rooted Catholic farm working community in Central California?

There are many factors:

One of my first memories is my grandmother died at age 49 of cancer when my mother was just 20 years old and I wasn't born yet. I asked why God didn't save her, because my mother prayed for her to live? Also, two of my Dad's brothers were murdered - why didn't God save them? No one ever had a good answer to this question and at some point in the 5th or 6th grade I just thought - "This is all bullshit" It is just tall tales like the Greek myths or Cinderella.

When I was very young I saw my Sunday school teachers (men in their 20's) smoking marijuana in the park (this was of course illegal at the time and very evil to me) and there was a pastor in our projects and I'd hear stories about his mistresses — I was confused by it all - the lives that they were leading - why did we follow their word?

Hell was scary as a kid - I wanted to go to Heaven where there was cookies and ice cream forever. But I didn't understand how someone could be bad all their life, and then repent at the end and go to heaven, while someone else who was good all their life but just didn't believe in Catholicism, would go to hell. I asked that question in catechism class and they didn't have an answer. That did not make sense to me. I believed a righteous god would judge you on your actions, not on your beliefs.



Early on I developed an affinity for the sciences; In school I started doing projects on the universe and I wondered, "God created all the stars and we're just on a planet attached to one of them?"

Those are some of the reasons I am not a Catholic.

## **Louise Marie Claire Bordeleau (ex-Catholic)**

What did me in with Catholicism was the guilt they posed upon me. How dare they push religion on me before I learned anything else such as Math, French, History or life itself? How dare they take over me for the first 14 years of my life?

I was put in a Catholic reform school run by just nuns when I was 14 years old. That's when the puking started for me to the point that when church time arrived every day I'd act up so they would lock me up in the closet. That was better than listening to shit anymore, I loved the closet, my escape.

How about a church that doesn't demand your money and make you feel bad for not putting anything in the basket in front of all your community? Are they shaming you? You bet your sweet ass they are,

Science is your friend. Seek it.

## **Alan (ex-Catholic)**

I was brought up a Roman Catholic but, I began to question the beliefs and teachings at the age of 26. While working as a junior doctor in a psychiatric hospital, I had an "epiphany" while out for a walk in the country. Within a period of less than an hour I came to a confident conclusion that I could not accept the Christian definition of God or that human beings had an immortal soul.

Firstly, I rejected the idea that an all-knowing, all powerful and all loving creature would only forgive us our sins as the result of the sacrifice and death of a unique man who was, in some way, part of himself.

Secondly, from my clinical experience, I rejected the concept of the immortal soul. The Catholic catechism defines the soul as having three properties: memory, understanding and free will. I had seen patients who had none of these. Did that mean they had no soul, or had lost it through no fault of their own? In addition, I could not conceive of a human being having any sort of awareness without a functioning brain.

The immediate reaction was one of immense relief. I was no longer crushed by a series of nonsensical myths; I could stand up straight as a human being. From then I have never looked back at my Catholic days with anything other than a sense of regret. I am convinced that I would have had a better life and been a better person without this experience.

Even now it has some effect in that my Catholic upbringing has made me a more militant atheist. Catholicism sees everything in clear divisions of black and white, good and bad. Not for me the comfortable, compromising, shades of grey attitude of the Church of England. There is no atheist like an ex-Catholic.

## John Lisbeth

I smelled a rat at an early age.

My father was raised Catholic and my mom was Methodist. They took me to church on Sunday (not every Sunday) and I paid as much attention as a little kid usually does in church.

When I was 8 (1954) they put me in Sunday School.

My Sunday School teachers urged us kids to read the Bible, so I started with Genesis. I had questions and the next Sunday I asked them.

Were the stars made at the same time as the Earth – Genesis 1:1 – or on the fourth day – Genesis 1:16-19?

Were plants created on the third day, before humans – Genesis 1:11-13 – or were they created after humans – Genesis 2:4-7?

I was informed that my questions were inappropriate. When I persisted, my parents were told that I was “being disruptive” and wasn’t welcome any more.

I was shocked. In school, if I had questions, my teachers always knew the answers. It was like a law of nature. I realized that, if my Sunday School teachers couldn’t answer questions posed by a 2nd grader in their supposed area of expertise, there was something seriously wrong.

It all went downhill from there. I kept reading the Bible and kept finding obvious nonsense.

It took a few years to shed my early conditioning, but I really didn’t have any other viable choice.

By Jr. High, I was a stone Atheist

## **Bong Faner (ex-Catholic, The Philippines)**

I was an 'above average' Catholic. I went to church, observed traditions, I was a member of the 'Legion of Mary,' a Catholic group that meets every Sunday, and I played guitar for a church choir for four years. I was sincere in my beliefs.

In the late 70s and early 80s, Protestant sects or 'born agains' were starting to gain foothold in the Philippines and were converting Catholics into these groups. I had cousins who were converted. I started to get curious on why and how these groups were successful in converting people. I found out that their points of contention are that a lot of Catholic doctrines, like the extreme adoration of the Virgin Mary, as well as the saints, are not Bible-based and were just inventions by Popes and the Catholic hierarchy. In my own research, they were right.

But I decided to take it one step further, I wanted to know if there really is any evidence about god? I always assumed that there was a historical Jesus and that events of his life were well-documented. I found out that there is really no evidence that can be verified by scientific means, and it all comes back to faith - believing in the absence of evidence.

I didn't become atheist immediately. It was a slow process, I resisted the urge to disbelieve. After approximately three years, I moved from an unquestioning believer to a full-blown atheist. It's very liberating and I haven't looked back ever since. I appreciate life even more!

## **Penny Laframboise (ex-Catholic)**

My mother-in-law was a true Catholic. She believed in prayer and penance. She not only believed but lived her belief. She prayed to her god often, never for herself, but for others who were struggling with life's challenges. She was always the first person there to help any way she could.

In 2007 Ida was diagnosed with a Glioblastoma, a brain tumor. The surgeon who operated did all he could, but the prognosis was devastating. Eight to twelve months was all we would have with this wonderful lady. During her time remaining she fought so hard to remain a vibrant part of her family and community.

Coming close to the end I would spend time holding her hand trying desperately to comfort her. But comfort was never to come. Instead she would spend this time agonizing on how her suffering was proof that she hadn't done enough in the service of god. She hadn't prayed enough, given enough money or time to her church. I tried reassuring her that I had never met anyone as devoted as she was. She sadly shook her head and with tears in her eyes said it wasn't enough.

Ida passed away and I know her last thoughts were not of her family that she raised to be shining examples of herself. She wasn't thinking of all the family gatherings she would miss or the hole she was leaving in the hearts of those who loved her. She died believing her god was punishing her for her misdeeds and anguished that somehow, she could have done more.

In my opinion this is the worst harm that religion can bring to the average believer sitting in the pew on Sunday.

## Steuart Campbell

As a young adult, I was involved in the Berean Forward Movement, whose members believe in 'Dispensational Truth', and the idea that salvation will be restricted to a certain group of believers.

Bereans emphasize examination of the Bible to see if what we are told is true and to discover secrets hidden from others. In effect Bereanism is a gnostic belief. Its secrets will guarantee salvation to the Bereans while being denied to everyone else.

I started to study the history of the Jews. I hadn't gone very far with this before I realized they were just a group of desert tribes who had no greater insight into the universe than anyone else. The Old Testament was merely a record of their myths.

After that I tried to reconcile Xianity with reality. Eventually I was down to only one superstition--the Resurrection.

I decided that it was nonsense to believe that someone could come back from the dead and that Jesus must have died like everyone else. It was a curious feeling. Relief and fear at the same time. I was no longer a Xian.

This was in 1970 and I was 33, the same age as Jesus when he died. I had wasted years as a Xian and was starting on a new atheistic life. My wife claimed to see it coming. We removed our children from the Sunday School, much to the disappointment of the teacher there, who claimed that my son seemed to enjoy it. I think I had an argument with her.

## David Fitzgerald (ex-Baptist)

I can pinpoint the exact millisecond I went from firm Southern Baptist believer to former Christian. Losing my faith was a lot like losing my virginity – not so much a change of belief, but moving from one state to another, a rite of passage with no chance of going back to the way things were before.

I first met Wendy in our local community college, a super-cute little brunette with long hair, a button nose and mischievous eyes. Wendy was nothing like the Christian girls I knew. She was into all kinds of decidedly unBaptist-y things like tarot cards, scary movies and Joan Baez. She smoked. And she and I would flirt through theological arguments.

So, one day as we're engaged in flirtatious and furious debate, Wendy cocks her head at me and says, "Well Dave, you *know* the Hindu religion is like, 3000 years older than Christianity!" Bristling, I was all set to fire off a scathing retort ("Oh, no it isn't!") –but the strangest thing happened.

I suddenly realized... I was about to say something *that I didn't know was true or not*.

And *that* realization hit me like a bolt from the blue, leaving me literally dumbstruck. All I could think was: *I'm just like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses – I'm just parroting what I've been taught*. I felt like a tiny David Byrne was on my shoulder, singing the words from that Talking Heads song:

*And you may ask yourself, "Am I right, or am I wrong?"  
And you may tell yourself, "My God! What have I done?"*

Afterwards, I walked around in a daze. It had never once occurred to me to ask one simple question: is what I believe so passionately and unshakably even *true*? Christianity had lost all its legitimacy. From then on, it didn't just feel fake; it felt *obviously, pathetically fake*. I had been raised on lies my whole life – and I had believed them.

In hindsight, losing my actual virginity, even as a committed Christian, was no big deal (but that's a whole other story). But losing my religion? *That*

threw me for a loop. Finding my faith wanting and letting it go left me feeling very vulnerable and wobbly for the better part of a year or more.

I remember thinking things like: "*Who's keeping me safe now?*" "*What about the special plan God had for my life?*" It felt as though I was in an airplane, and the bomb-bay doors had opened up underneath my feet... and yet somehow, I was still flying along just fine.

The miracle was, as time went on, my new life became progressively easier. The more I embraced being an atheist, the more relaxed I became. I was still a skeptic, but now I didn't have to inspect new information first to make sure it didn't conflict with official dogma.

Now I wasn't just a temporary sojourner through a sinful world waiting for death or the Rapture to go to Heaven. For the first time, I really felt connected to the wide open awe-inspiring universe. I was already home.

I also felt so much more connected to everyone around me, regardless of what they believed, how they looked, or where they were from. Ironically enough, my compassion for my fellow human beings became so much more "Christ-like" after I gave up Christianity.

Most surprising of all, suddenly Evolution made a LOT more sense – all the arguments I had parroted with such zeal instantly popped like hollow apocryphal preacher stories. *Of course*, Evolution was true. I can't tell you how wonderful it felt to jettison the weight of all that denial. The pressure of resisting obvious scientific truths for years had been exhausting – and the sheer joy of embracing the magnificence of evolution was exhilarating.

My newfound atheism sparked a love affair with science and the truth that has enriched my life ever since. It led to me co-creating *Evolutionpalooza!*, San Francisco's oldest Darwin Day celebration, as well as the world's first Atheist Film Festival. Today I give talks on college campuses and at secular events around the country.

My atheism also led to an unexpected new career as a writer. I became curious about Jesus: what he really said and did, and how much of his gospel stories were just legendary accretion. Soon, I was completely



shocked—first by how skimpy, and secondly, how dodgy, our evidence for his life was. Long story short, I would up writing *Nailed: Ten Christian Myths that Show Jesus Never existed at All*, and later, *Jesus: Mything in Action*, books that argue that Jesus was a completely spiritual figure of the earliest Christians.

These days, death doesn't scare me half as much as not living while I'm alive... As the ancient philosopher Epicurus said: "Why should I fear death? If I am, then death is not. If Death is, then I am not." Mark Twain quipped that he had been dead for billions of years before he was alive, and it hadn't bothered him at all. That's how I look at it, too: When we die, we're merely going back to where we came from.

## **Macsen John Rex**

I tried Sunday school, because of the possibility of winning candies, but found it stunning that any adult could actually believe the Bible stories.

After reading the whole Bible, several times, I became truly atheist.

## **Maria Leta Bezdecheck**

I was indoctrinated in my teens by a much older sister and her charismatic husband. I lived with them during high school and attended Jesus People Church twice a week at the least. We were in it deeply.

When I was older, I began debating atheists on YouTube...and losing. I admired their arguments and suspected I was batting for the wrong team. It was definitely on the internet where I became aware that I was an atheist. The realization made me happy.

## **Anonymous (ex-Baptist)**

I didn't want to be a martyr. Or did I?

I read the account of Jim Elliot and his death at the hands of the Auca people of Ecuador. He and his missionary friends landed their plane, knowing the legendary hostility of these "Indians," all in the noble name of sharing with them the gospel of Jesus Christ. This would become the inspiration for everything I wanted to do.

It was implanted in me in my fundamentalist evangelical Baptist upbringing that nothing... nothing was more important than winning souls to Christ, convincing them that Jesus was the only way to heaven. I was so devoted to my faith, that I abstained from Halloween, never drank, never cursed, and shunned sex until I was married. I grew up thinking everyone at my public school was bound for Hell and that I must try to intervene. My one vice was masturbation. Every time my adolescent hormones tricked me into committing this sin, I would self-flagellate by slamming my head into the floor in punishment. I prostrated myself before God and begged for forgiveness. My relationship with Christ was so important to me, and I hated myself for my weakness.

So, at the of barely 20, I married my girlfriend with every intention of going to New Tribes Bible Institute and leaving for Papua New Guinea as missionaries. I had already served the church in Russia, Brazil, and also in Niger, West Africa. We wanted this to be our life.

Unfortunately, our attempts to get into this school and fly to New Guinea were met with problems. It turned out that, as conservative as my upbringing was, I was considered too liberal for this school. I no longer considered alcohol to be an outright sin at the first drop, plus I felt now that cursing was acceptable if there was no one around who was offended by it. These admissions on my part were enough to exclude me from candidacy.

My wife convinced me to take up study at a community college and delve into anthropology, my chief secular interest. I went with every intention of learning everything I could about this discipline and "take anthropology back for Christ." I would find all the evidence that so-called scientists ignored for

their liberal agenda. After classes in sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy, I began to see a bigger picture that bordered on disproving my previous paradigm.

I prayed. I prayed so hard to keep my faith. Two years of these classes passed while I begged God to erase my doubt and give me full confidence in him. After all, if a Christian was to get anything they prayed for, it would surely be for more faith. But one day, I sat in bed and realized, I was praying to something I no longer believed in. I no longer believed. How would I tell my wife?

"I'm not a Christian anymore. And I don't think I care."

My wife broke down and ordered me never to tell anyone. Two months went by with my promising to keep silent. However, living the lie was too much. One day, while my wife was out, I posted the truth on Facebook. When she came home, she was infuriated that I had broken my promise. She threw things at me, cursed and stormed out of the house. She returned an hour later and attempted to apologize, but without my even saying a word back to her, she became so worked up that she ended her apology with a yelled, "I hate you!" and she stormed out of the house again.

Divorce seemed probable, but we had just recently agreed to move to China for a year and teach English, not as missionaries, but just as teachers. Neither of us wanted to give up this opportunity so off we went. A year of living amongst completely different people and having to rely on each other in a town where no one spoke English renewed our friendship and introduced questions into my wife's heart.

Upon returning from China, we decided to stay together and within a few years, my wife had become an atheist too.

## Nick Allison

I was religious at one point in my life and even briefly flirted with the idea of attending seminary school. Thankfully my parents – who attended a Methodist church for a while when I was young but were never particularly devout – instilled in me the ability to think critically, and as I grew up, reason slowly began to overtake faith.

The last vestiges of a personal protector god were stripped away when I was 21-years-old, sitting at Fort Benning, GA, a future Infantryman waiting to begin basic training. My religion crumbled along with the Twin Towers that morning – and with the subsequent wars we fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. I could no longer keep up the facade of faith in the face of so much senseless death and destruction.

Perhaps there is some sort of intelligent force that created the universe. But, for me, it's a monumental stretch to say that It takes a personal interest in our well-being.

Saying "God bless America" and "pray for the victims" is nice and all – and I suppose it can make a certain type of person feel all warm and fuzzy inside – but one has to wonder how it is that an omnipotent being can't control jetliners... or why an omni-benevolent one would choose not to.

I don't 'pray' for a better future, but I hope some day the human race will learn to settle our petty differences with conversation, reasoning, and understanding rather than bombs, bullets and, suicide attacks.

## Reginald Bien-Aime

I lost my faith in God and accepted the fact that I was an atheist in August of 2009. This was the end of a long journey that started with the events of September 11th, 2001.

I was in a study lab at Miami-Dade College when I got a call from a friend who asked me:

“Oh my God, Reggie! Are they going to call you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh my God, go watch the television!!!”

I went into an office just in time to watch the second plane hit the second tower. I watched in disbelief as the building crumbled down. Eventually I went downstairs and started making my way home. I remember the eerie silence of the main building as all the students started to hear the news.

I was a 20-year-old college student who joined the Florida Army National Guard to pay for my college tuition. I fully expected to get a call from the staff of Charlie Company 1st of the 124th Infantry to get my stuff and be on standby. That did not happen.

At Saint Thomas University I met a young man who was either from India or Bangladesh. He was Muslim, and he calmly told me what Jihad was. I was working as a security guard at the school and watched endless loops of the tragedy of 9/11 on various TV sets. The news suspected Osama bin Laden as the one who orchestrated the attacks as part of a ‘Jihad’ against the United States. But according to the young man, Jihad was simply a struggle that can take many forms. I remember how calm he was as his religion was being linked to the terror attacks. That left an impression on me.

Rumors swirled about the possibilities of deployment. My aunt wanted to send me to Haiti to escape having to deploy. Since we didn’t hear anything about deploying, I begin to feel confident that everything would be OK. I believed my recruiter when he essentially told me that the National Guard never get deployed to major events such as a full war. At worst I thought I would head to New York City and help out with efforts there.

December's drill was very relaxed. We were in our PTs doing our annual medical review. It had been 3 months since 9/11 and Charlie Company got no Warning Orders. I was in line to get my last signatures to check out when a phone call came: We were activated and only had 7 days to ship out!

After months of training in Fort Stewart, Georgia, we took a long flight to our first of several missions. Eventually we landed in Jordan. We were in a strange land among strange people. In Jordan the Sun looked different. It looks like a different planet. Their toilets were holes in the ground and the Muslims were pious. A veritable army of men worked around the clock building up the small outpost we were staying in. I remember going to the chow tent and seeing bacon being offered. In Islamic countries this was a NO GO; but there it was. There wasn't supposed to be any magazines with sexy women on it either.

Hammers banged incessantly all day and all night. All of the sudden, a strange sound burst out of thin air and a cease fire to the hammering commenced. The Islamic call to prayer was obeyed by all the workers. Everyone submitted in a beautiful display of unity that I've never forgotten. Hundreds of men had their butts in the air and foreheads to the ground. In America religion was a recreation. In Jordan religion was life 24 hours a day. I admired that; then the war on the ears resumed.

Months later, I was in Ar-Ramadi, Iraq in the heart of the Sunni Triangle. I was sure I was going to die at war. Since I was a Christian, I assumed I was going to Heaven. However, I didn't know what the afterlife was going to be like. I carried a New International Version Bible in my assault pack for good luck. It occurred to me that I had the time and opportunity to read the Bible to find the answers to my questions. This is when I made a life changing decision: I was going to format my brain to erase all the information I was told about the Bible and reinstall the program fresh from the beginning. I started in Genesis chapter 1 with a notebook determined to entertain any and all questions I had and to write down whatever answers I find.

By chapter 3 of Genesis it became annoying that text inspired 4 questions for every 1 answer. I decided to read on without going through the text with a fine-tooth comb because it would take forever to get answers. I thought

the Bible was like a regular book that gave answers in the end, so I hurried through the book between missions.

By February 2004 I was back in the States. I asked to speak to my pastor to discuss the troubling things that I learned from the Bible. I was surprised of how little he knew about the atrocities of the Old Testament. It was then that I discovered that just because a person is a pastor, it does not necessarily mean they are familiar with religion or the Bible. I decided to continue to educate myself because if 9/11 was caused by religion then I wanted to do all that I can to prevent further destruction. It was in that spirit of inquiry that I started my journey to eventually become an atheist.

I went on to complete reading my Bible. I read other books on the subject. I stumbled upon websites which bolstered my knowledge from various perspectives. I discovered that my church members were not interested in what I learned and its ramifications. I began to talk to people from various denominations and other religions. I eventually stumbled upon a book called 'The Bible Handbook' by Foote and Ball. That book catalogued contradictions, atrocities, and mistakes in the Bible. That book showed me that people knew for a long time that the Bible was flawed and was not the 'Word of God' as it was thought to us Christians.

I was challenged to read the Quran by a friend who left Christianity and became Muslim. I finished a Yusuf Ali version about a year later. By the time I read the Quran I had learned too much to be impressed by Muslim claims. Eventually I discovered podcasts on atheism and was blown away by how much atheists knew about what I learned. Of all the people I spoke to they were the most knowledgeable on the subject, yet they didn't believe in God. I went to a meetup with a local group in North Miami Beach at a Starbucks. I was nervous to associate myself with those people but by the end of that evening I posted on Facebook that I attended this meeting knowing full well this could cause controversy.

I returned home with a new understanding of that atheism was. Atheists were not bad people. The atheists I met were normal people with a sense of wonder for the world. If anything, they were nerds. I was a nerd. I felt like those were my people. So, I came to terms with the fact that I left my religion and became an atheist.

## Ben Kikugawa

My older brother says I had a conversation with my father on the drive back home from Sunday worship when I was four years old.

Me: Dad, can God do anything?

Dad: Yes. Yes, God can do anything.

Me: Then can he make a rock so big that he can't pick it up?

Dad: Well God can do anything so, yes.

Me: Then he can't do anything because he wouldn't be able to pick up the rock!

My brother says all my intelligence for the rest of my life went into that one question.

Fast forward to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I stole a cigarette from my mom's boyfriend and went to enjoy it on my favorite rock overlooking the central valley. I frequented this place to ponder life, coming up with my own answers that made sense to me. It was there I concluded there was no afterlife; that life after death has long been accepted by mankind out of fear of non-existence.

That boyfriend of my mother was abusive, and I frequently ran away.; this led to run-ins with law enforcement. Eventually I would find myself in the courthouse praying to a deity for mercy. As any nonbeliever would anticipate my prayers went unanswered and I went to state prison for five years for selling pot. My mother, a daughter of a Presbyterian minister, tried to console me by saying all of Jesus's disciples were imprisoned at one point or on another in the bible. Thanks mom.

Prison is boring. Morgan freeman said it best in *Shawshank Redemption*, "...a man will do anything to keep his mind occupied." I attempted to read the Bible from cover to cover and made it as far as Leviticus. I can't say if I stopped because it was utterly ridiculous or if I found more enjoyment recounting the bricks in my cell. Fortunately for me the prison offered college courses that I quickly enrolled in and found more agreeable reading material.



I took philosophy and biology and I really enjoyed both classes. Having the chance to overlook all the different world religions it seemed to make sense that they were all manmade.

Can god see into the future? If so, wouldn't he already know who makes it into his kingdom and who does not? Why not just bypass all the freewill and skip to the eternal salvation/damnation? Perhaps because god is not omnibenevolent? For me, a more acceptable answer is that god just simply doesn't exist.

I was 29 years old in a prison fire camp when I became full blow atheist. I would later accept a theory purposed by Jeremy England who proposes life is a law of physics in his essay titled *Statistical Physics of Self Replication* to support the origins of life on our planet.

In short, it was education along with innate common sense that lead me to atheism.

Now when I hear religion extremists speak, I can't help but feel pity for them and their immunity to reason.

## **DN Wright**

After being brainwashed my whole life, "losing my religion" came to me after reading "The Age of Reason" by Thomas Paine - one of the few founding father' that did not own slaves.

"The Age of Reason" changed the beliefs about religion and god that I'd held my entire life. Better late than never.

## **Mac Hoban**

I didn't lose my Christian faith; it was pried out of my desperately grasping fingers.

After getting my dream job with the church, setting up a statewide relationship counseling agency, I was all set to live out my life as a minor church leader and general doer of good. I was shocked by the contradiction between church talk and church walk, appalled by the casual daily cruelties of church life, unable to find a mentor who could help me. I tried to talk to clergy friends, but they squirmed most uncomfortably when asked to discuss their faith in a personal way. Clichés and slogans were all I got.

I wrestled with the theology issues and as I came closer to the inevitable (atheist) conclusion I tried every way I could to wiggle off the hook. My life was busy and chaotic with two jobs and six kids, it was hard to get time to think.

Then one day I needed to ride 600 miles on my motorbike to get to a conference, so I decided that would be my thinking day. On a bike there's no one to talk to, no radio, no distraction or interruption. You fill the tank, ride till it's empty, fill and ride, fill and ride.

I was a Christian when I got on the bike after breakfast, an atheist when I got off it at dinner time. It's inevitable. However much I'd like to believe all that rubbish, it just doesn't hold water. Christianity just does not stand up to close scrutiny.

## **Gwenn (African-American)**

I lost my religion after reading my Bible when I was 11 or 12...after reading through all the mythologies in my local library--Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Norse etc. -- because I loved them. Of course, reading the Bible, I quickly realized it was the same genre and that was the end of my belief.

## Rebeka

The Kentucky area I live in is a Bible-thumping, praying before football, pray before you eat at a restaurant, god bless your little heart kind of place. I was begged to come to a missionary Baptist church by a friend, and, being a stay-at-home mom with a limited circle of adults to talk to, I finally caved.

I'd never heard of being "saved." Some call this "accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior" but missionary Baptists reinforce the idea with a "knocking on your heart" feeling.

I first on an Easter Sunday and the place was packed. I got sucked in! There was singing songs, crying on the altar, all "done in the spirit" meaning that god himself had sent it down and talked to your heart. I was "saved" at 31 years old and baptized in a river. I stayed for 12 years.

Why did I leave? I grew disillusioned with the community. I have nothing against homeschooling, but all the pastor's children were years behind the public schoolchildren. Also, the pastor would call people out during the sermon - that pissed me off; because god is supposed to be about love, right? The pastor claimed god gave him every word, but I know he was just a hateful liar with his own agenda.

In May 2016, the pastor poked fun at my job. I drive a group of special needs individuals to a workshop. The pastor asked if I was still driving the "tard bus." I was caught off guard. God was supposed to make us all, how could the pastor make fun of another human this way? I had long questioned the theory missionary Baptists had that children are born with special needs due to the sins as the human race, because God "doesn't make mistakes."

I went home and wrote my resignation as a church member and I've never gone back.

Now begins my new chapter, my new belief system. I'm 46 and far from done educating myself. I want to be a better person every day because we are all on this big blue ball for such a brief time, we all deserve to be treated well.

# Editor Bios

## Mubarak Bala

I'm a chemical engineer, born in Kano State, northern Nigeria. I attended the Saudi funded Islamic Foundation Aliyu Bin Abi Talib primary school where I was trained in Wahhabi Islamic thought, with a jihad ideology. I later attended Hassan I. Gwarzo, in Kano State, where Islamic (Qur'anic) study is given a high priority. I was very good in science & Arabic/Islamic courses; I compared both and picked the truest, discarding the mythical. By 2009, I was an activist, for Almajiri freedom. By 2012, the naked violence of Boko Haram confirmed me as an atheist, knowing this is how Islam was in the first century. In 2014, I was beaten up by family members for my apostasy and sent to an insane asylum; I was released through the aid of international humanists. Today I'm an advocate for social justice, a thinker, writer, and an activist trustee in many Nigerian atheist/humanist groups. I agitate to bring Enlightenment to Nigeria, on Facebook, with humor...

## Hafsa Guled

I am a 22-year-old Somali-Swedish woman. I was born in Somalia and spent the most part of my life there. I am fluent in Somali, English, Swahili and Swedish, and I read, write, and speak some Arabic. I was brought up by my very religious family members and the first 15 years of my life were spent exclusively in religious studies such as Quran memorization/ teaching and no other normal studies. I was very religious growing up but left the religion 1.5 years ago and became atheist due to many reasons. I am one of the hundreds of thousands of ex-Muslims leaving the religion and living under the radar. I am not out about my beliefs because I still live with my family who live in a predominantly Muslim area. Coming out will put my life in danger and sever my relationship with my family, which I am not ready for at the moment as I am studying and not financially stable. "Hafsa Guled" is my pseudonym.

## **Carly Stathopoulos**

I was born and raised in a Jehovah's witness family in Australia. I finally left this "cult" for good with my husband Luke Stathopoulos 6 years ago. I have 3 children aged 17, 8 and 6. We teach our kids to be skeptical critical thinkers, we let them experience what we didn't get to in our childhood like Christmas, birthdays and other holidays and social activities. We encourage them to be themselves so that they can grow up to create happy and successful lives for themselves. Our 8-year-old son was diagnosed with Nephrotic Syndrome at age 3 and needed an Albumin blood transfusion to live. Blood transfusions are forbidden as a Jehovah's Witness, thankfully we both had recently left JW and we could give him with the blood transfusion.

Growing up in that cult caused me to experience huge trauma, confusion, isolation and abandonment issues. I was forced into marriage, disfellowshipped, suicidal, living in fear, brainwashed into believing lies. Love is conditional and your whole life is controlled by the organization. After years of finding myself again, overcoming the fear and brainwashing, relearning who I was and finding my place in the world, I am now studying to be a life coach. My husband and I want to become counselors to help others that have left cults or are seeking to escape.

## **Hank Pellissier**

I was raised Catholic, but abandoned this when I went to college, so I could sexually `sin` without fear or guilt. I co-produced the world's first atheist film festival in 2009 (in San Francisco), and co-produced an Atheist 2010 calendar. In 2013 I started the Brighter Brains Institute, a nonprofit that has built four humanist schools and two humanist orphanages, in Uganda. Additionally, it has provided over 40 Critical Thinking workshops in Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and The Philippines. As a journalist, I've written columns for *NYTimes.com*, *Salon.com*, *SFGate.com*, and I've published several e-books, primarily on brain development.

# Brighter Brains Institute

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We promote secular humanist education around the world, especially in SubSahara Africa. We've built two humanist primary schools, two humanist secondary schools, and two humanist orphanages – all in Uganda.

We've also provided over 40 Critical Thinking workshops in Uganda, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and The Philippines.