

of wanting to enjoy every moment of warmth and comfort. In the morning, most people confirm my suspicion. They didn't sleep and couldn't care less. The sensation of being nurtured, after feeling so deprived, is gigantic, overwhelming. In less than twenty-four hours, our mood has changed from grim acceptance to celebration and optimism. I have nothing sardonic to say about it.

For breakfast, it's oatmeal and boiled eggs and dried fish. Then the Vittrekwas load us up with coffee and more than enough supplies to keep us fed until the end of the trip. We take our time packing and cleaning the shack, savouring every moment inside. Calder does an interview with Ernest, Alice, and Margaret. Callan takes some photos. One of the scientists sharpens Ernest's axes, then chops and stacks wood for an hour. Nobody wants to leave. When we finally do, we're happy, full, and—though nobody mentions it—foolishly guilty of continuing in the tradition of unprepared white explorers in the North.

Last night, Ernest told us that when a successful moose hunt comes home to Fort McPherson, it's radioed in and any surplus is shared. That's how community works. That's how northern river culture works. And it makes room for outsiders—even stupid, well-intentioned tourists, self-anointed protectors of the Peel, become beneficiaries of this kindness.

"Just make sure you tell people about the Peel," Alice says in my ear when I hug her goodbye.

Back on the mighty, muddy Peel, the cold continues, the rain continues. Now, instead of talking about what we're going to eat when we get off the river for good, we talk about Ernest and Alice. When we reach the Lost Patrol memorial, a weathered wood pyramid with a plaque on it, the Vittrekwas pass us in their boat, headed home for the season. We wave. Three days away, in Fort McPherson, they'll welcome us again.

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### *The Unbelievers*

Graeme Bayliss

KIRAN OPAL SAT in a quiet corner of the house, holding a slice of pizza and waiting to explode. A few minutes earlier, the thirteen-year-old had gone from hanging out with friends at a birthday party to making the most important decision of her life: cheese or pepperoni?

She knew which was the right choice. She knew that God was watching. But the smell was overpowering. She reached for the tantalizing mass of meat and cheese and took a bite. Then she skulked away, ashamed and afraid of what might happen next. Pork was *haram*—forbidden—but Opal had eaten it anyway. And worse still, she had liked it. She knew the grisly punishments that God visited upon sinners: the melting skin, the lightning bolts, the garments of fire. She did not want her friends to witness the divine repercussions that she would now surely face.

So she sat and awaited God's wrath. But God's wrath never came: not after she rejoined her friends a few minutes later, nor in the days and weeks that followed. "I remember the fear," says Opal, now thirty-seven and living in Toronto's west end. "I'm so far away from it, but I still remember that gut fear."

Six years after that first act of defiance, Opal left Islam for good. She had spent her teenage years trying to appease her parents by

playing the role of the devout Muslim, but she could not keep up the act. “I always had to do more and more to prove myself to them,” she says. “And I felt worse and worse.” She began to shirk her religious duties, praying less often and making up excuses not to go to mosque. Even when she stopped practising her religion altogether, the terror she had felt at the birthday party remained. It took about seven more years before she got over her vestigial fear of hell.

The decision to leave Islam is a serious one, usually made after protracted struggles with doubt, shame and fear. Apostasy is considered the greatest sin a Muslim can commit. According to the Library of Congress, it is a prosecutable offence in twenty-three countries—in nine it can be punishable by death. But apostasy is difficult not only for Muslims living in countries where religion is law. Even in Canada, the freedom to disbelieve can be circumscribed by menacing social pressures. Apostates, known as *murtads* or *kafirs* in Islam, are often ostracized by their communities and disowned by their families, causing emotional and financial distress.

But in recent years, some apostates have discovered that they do not have to face their isolation alone. In 2013, Opal co-founded Ex-Muslims of North America, or EXMNA, a non-profit that offers safe spaces for former believers to meet and share their experiences through monthly meetings and robust online support. In three years, the organization has spread to eighteen North American cities, boasting hundreds of members—the majority of whom have not “come out” as non-believers to their friends or family. For these people, EXMNA is the only support they have.

As a teenager, Sadaf Ali never considered leaving Islam. The concept simply did not occur to her. “Something my mother used to tell me growing up was that you can’t *not* be a Muslim,” she says. “Your father is Muslim, your grandfather is Muslim and his father before that. It’s just something you can’t leave.”

In fact, Ali could not do much of anything without ostensibly Koran-backed interference from her parents. They forced her to work at their restaurant for less than minimum wage. They controlled her hours, leaving her no free time on weekends and crippling her social life. She felt alone. Her parents did not support her desire to go to university, and although they eventually relented, they made sure she stayed near home and under close watch; while attending the University of Toronto, she was forced to live in nearby Mississauga with her uncle and grandmother. Through everything, her parents cited Islam as justification.

At eighteen, just a few months into her first year of university, Ali was struggling with depression and anxiety, conditions exacerbated by years of family conflict. She fantasized about dropping out of school and volunteering in Tunisia, of learning to speak French and disappearing into a world thousands of kilometres from home. She had few people to speak with, but one cousin offered some advice: take your fears and your anxieties, write them down on a piece of paper and put them in the ground. Coming home late from school one night, Ali waited for her bus driver to pull away from her apartment building; then she dropped to her knees and began to dig at the wintry earth with her bare hands. In the shallow hole, Ali placed a slip of paper admitting that she was not sure whether she believed in God anymore—something she had never been able to say aloud. Later, in her bedroom, she faced Mecca and asked why she had been made to feel so alone. What had she done to deserve her broken childhood? “And that’s when I realized I was talking to myself,” Ali recalls. “No one is listening to me. No one gives a shit about me. There isn’t some man in the sky who has this fate for me.”

It took Ali three years to come out as an atheist to her parents. They took it badly, devastated by the thought that their daughter might face an eternity in hell. And although Ali avoided going

home in the aftermath, she could not escape her family. Her parents phoned constantly. Her brother called too, angry that Ali had renounced her faith and left their mother in tears. “He told me to keep my opinions and my beliefs to myself,” Ali says. Her father once sent her a Shia book, along with a handwritten note imploring her to pray for salvation. In the immediate aftermath, some members of her extended family refused to speak with her, including cousins with whom she was close. “They think that because I’ve left religion and don’t agree with their cultural practices that I’m suddenly a bad person,” she says. “They don’t think that I have any morals.”

One day in 2011, while browsing Reddit, Ali came across the community “ExMuslim,” which today has about ten thousand subscribers. Suddenly there was a name for her—an identity she had always been denied. She began to chat with some of the other members, adopting their peculiar argot—“ex-Moose” for ex-Muslim; “Big Mo” for Muhammad; and “in the closet” and “coming out,” appropriated from the vernacular of the LGBTQ movement. Through this forum, Ali spoke with two other apostates from Toronto, Opal and then twenty-five-year-old Nas Ishmael, about leaving Islam and the isolation she felt. They decided to meet up in person.

Just six people attended that awkward session in March 2012, at an oyster bar in Toronto’s Koreatown. “We were all just sitting around like, ‘So, here we are,’” says Ishmael, who today is the media-relations director of EXMNA. Then someone told a blasphemous joke (“We make a lot of jokes about bacon,” Ishmael explains), and another passed around an old student ID card revealing the Spanish moss of a beard that once hung from his chin. The ice was broken. The meeting was nothing revolutionary, but it was liberating for everyone to be able to speak openly about their apostasy.

The group began to hold monthly sessions, which steadily grew

over the next year and a half (today it is not uncommon for thirty or more members to attend a meeting). Through the ex-Muslim forum, Ali and Ishmael discovered that a number of apostates were holding similar events in Washington, DC. Americans Muhammad Syed and Sarah Haider reached out to the Toronto group to discuss forming a larger umbrella organization for ex-Muslim support. “It seemed like there was a real need for it,” Syed recalls. With a formal structure, the group could lend legitimacy to the notion that there is such a thing as life—and community—without Islam. EXMNA was formed.

Since the organization was established in September 2013, it has expanded rapidly, with groups in Houston, Philadelphia, Vancouver and Winnipeg, among others. In September 2015, the organization’s eighteenth branch sprouted in Columbus, Ohio. There are now about five hundred members across North America, with more than one hundred in the Toronto chapter alone. The group even offers online meet-ups so that ex-Muslims in more remote settings can still be a part of the community.

Today, organizing events remains EXMNA’s core function, although it also publishes an online magazine called the Ex-Muslim and is hoping to launch a podcast that would give closeted apostates the chance to tell their personal stories anonymously. Board members are volunteers, and although EXMNA is a charitable non-profit in the United States, donations can be hard to come by; members attending atheist and freethinking conferences often pay travel expenses out of pocket. The organization has recently involved itself in more international work, offering advice to apostates abroad and even connecting them with EXMNA members in their home countries (often international students who joined while studying in Canada or the US). For now, though, the group is primarily focused on creating communities at home. “We barely have the capacity to do what we’re doing in North America,” Syed

says. "So we do what we can, when we can."

"You do not deserve to be on Allah's earth." Sarah Haider looked at the anonymous message; it was her first death threat. "Tell me where you are and I will burn you and every other *kafir* for going against the will of Allah and spreading lies. It must be done. Watch your back."

Security has been a concern for EXMNA since its inception. This letter—the first of many the organization has since received—went on to say that ex-Muslims deserved to have acid thrown at their mothers' faces for having raised children like them. While Haider says that few of the threats that members receive are credible, it can be difficult to distinguish garden-variety internet vitriol from genuine danger.

And it is not only anonymous online commenters who leave members worried. In the summer of 2014, Haider was preparing to deliver a speech on Islam and women's rights at the Pennsylvania State Atheist/Humanist Conference. She and Syed recall receiving an email from a Muslim scholar who wanted to debate Haider on her understanding of the religion (in his view, of course, her understanding was all wrong). The man never actually addressed Haider in his email; instead he requested to debate her through Syed, as if he were seeking a parent's permission to speak with a child. That the man would not condescend to address a woman smacked of fundamentalism to both recipients and made them wary. Haider politely declined—but the man bought a ticket and showed up anyway. "Nothing about that is particularly scary on its own," Haider says. "It's only in the ex-Muslim context that it becomes a scary thing to do." She says that religious fervour can turn into violence. "It's hard to know," Haider continues, "if the person is unhinged and feels it's their religious duty to take you down. It's not unprecedented for that kind of thing to happen."

At the conference, the man aggressively harangued his unwilling adversary, rejecting the notion that the abuse of women's rights was directly tied to religion in Muslim-majority countries. He did not threaten anyone, but Haider recalls that he became increasingly hostile as he held the floor. Afterwards, a handful of audience members offered to escort Haider to her hotel room and anywhere else she might need to go, which she accepted. "Everyone just had this panicked look on their face," she says, "because they were all thinking the same thing."

Events like these are why the Toronto and Washington ex-Muslim groups independently devised security procedures to screen potential members, which were later refined when EXMNA formed. The founders will not disclose exactly what these procedures entail, only that they involve a volunteer, often using a fake name, getting to know a prospective member over Skype and attempting to determine whether the prospect is, in fact, an ex-Muslim. Once the group is satisfied that its criteria have been met—which can sometimes take several interviews and a background check—they will provide the prospect with the time and location of their local chapter's next meeting.

There have been close calls in the past. Syed says that one Muslim man tried to cause trouble with the then-nascent Washington chapter in 2012. The prospect managed to get his screener's real name and phone number, which he then posted to social media, describing the activities of the ex-Muslim group to a number of Islamist organizations and vaguely but ominously insisting that something needed to be done about them. "That experience really shook us," Syed says, adding that as EXMNA grows, it will need to be even more vigilant. (It will also need to be more efficient: the waiting list to join is dozens of names long, a backlog that tends to worsen during holidays such as Ramadan, when closeted ex-Muslim screeners are surrounded by practising family and friends.)

The screening process is, of course, about ensuring the safety of EXMNA's members, although not only from the threat of violence. A meet-up is meant to be a safe space in the more abstract sense, too: a place where apostates can discuss their issues without feeling judged or unduly exposed. For that reason, Ishmael says, the group does not allow ex-Muslims who have left Islam for another faith to attend meetings. "When you leave Islam for another religion, you have the support system of that religion," he explains. "When you leave Islam for no other religion, where do you go? That's the space we offer."

The organization also prohibits practising Muslims who are questioning their faith. This, too, is for the purpose of maintaining a safe space. But some critics argue the policy results in little more than preaching to the choir. Sheima Benembarek\* is a self-described moderate Muslim from Morocco who works as an editor for the United Church Observer. She says that banning questioning Muslims from meet-ups creates a kind of echo chamber, a space where everybody agrees with everybody else, fostering the notion that their position is the only correct one—a lot like the mosques they decry. "Anybody that's genuinely interested in opening their parameters and bettering themselves as a person isn't going to be that closed off," she says.

Still, for nearly all members, absolute discretion is a prerequisite to participation in meetings. Some have not revealed their apostasy to their families; others have concerns for their personal security. Irsa Khan† is a member of EXMNA's Toronto chapter. She has not come out as a non-believer to her parents. Born in Pakistan and raised in the US, Khan experienced constant domestic violence growing up. "My mom has a lot of dental issues because of the number of times her teeth have been knocked out," she says. At five, Khan borrowed a boy's bike; for the transgression, her father picked her up and shook her until she passed out. She hopes that she

will never have to tell her parents about her apostasy. Meanwhile, a Somali member, who asked not to be identified because he comes from a small fundamentalist community in Ontario, notes that since he has family in Yemen, Somalia and Kenya, his apostasy could result in trouble abroad. "If I go to any of those countries," he says, "I could be killed."

EXMNAS founders have been disheartened by the perception, both of conservative Muslims and of secular liberals, that their group is anti-Muslim. Benembarek is among those who hold that view. "I don't buy that they're these reasonable, rational intellectuals who don't actually have any anger toward anybody." Benembarek adds that their "juvenile" vernacular—those words that helped Sadaf Ali connect to others like her online—betrays their Islamophobia. Organizations like EXMNA have also faced criticism from prominent academics, including Deepa Kumar, a professor of media studies at Rutgers University and the author of the 2012 book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*. At a public lecture this June on Islamophobia, Kumar referred to ex-Muslims as "native informants"—comparing adults determining their own beliefs to quislings collaborating with their colonial oppressors.

Yet EXMNA's organizers insist they harbour no ill feelings toward Muslims who practise their faith within the confines of Western values such as equality and universal rights; it is only Muslims who transgress those values in the name of religion that they oppose. EXMNA members also say that calling their organization Islamophobic is particularly vexing: not only does it muzzle critics of the religion with implications of racism, but for ex-Muslims, it does not even make sense. "Islamophobia means an irrational fear of Islam, right?" Ishmael says. "As apostates, we have a very rational fear."

Ishmael acknowledges that anti-Muslim bigotry exists and

that it should be combated, but he says that to use the term Islamophobia to encompass that bigotry, as well as to shield the religion from criticism, is unfair to every Muslim who has ever been discriminated against, including just about every member of the ex-Muslim community. “I’ve been told to go back to my country,” says Ali, who left EXMNA in early 2015 when her involvement began to take up more time than she could afford. “I know what it’s like to experience racism. But a lot of people don’t understand that. We’re not turning against anyone, we’re not turning against our people...”\*

Ishmael interjects: “All we want is just to exist.”

Bilal Azad<sup>†</sup> remembers the day he told the Toronto EXMNA chapter that he had come out to his family. “I felt like a superhero,” he says. Azad explains that he originally planned to tell his mother and father about his apostasy after he turned twenty-five. Instead, his experience with EXMNA encouraged him to do so just four months after he attended his first meeting, when he was twenty. “My biggest fear was that if I came out to my family, I wouldn’t have anyone,” he says. He quips that while he now gets disowned every weekend by his mercurial parents, thanks to EXMNA, he is never without family. Still, there are parts of Islam that Azad misses.

The ritualistic elements of religion are part of what makes believers feel connected to something bigger than themselves. And, imposed or not, the sense of community and identity that Islam engenders through those rituals can be difficult for ex-Muslims to give up.

Many women, such as Khan, continue to wear their hijabs (“I still feel naked without it,” she explains). Some ex-Muslims still enter the bathroom leading with their left foot, as scripture dictates. Others have trouble giving up prayer. Azad continued to pray for years after leaving Islam, during a period in which he identified as

a deist. “I truly believed that prayer was a form of meditation,” he says. “Regardless of whether there’s a God or not, the concept of prayer and the action of praying were still beneficial to me.”

But rituals, traditions and the communities that form around them can exist in secular life, too, and EXMNA is working to create them. Members who come out to their relatives often find that they miss the familial conviviality of events such as Eid, the feast that marks the end of Ramadan. But the group has that covered; in 2014, it organized Haramadan (playing on the Arabic for “forbidden”), giving apostates who have become distant from their families the chance to celebrate with friends instead. It includes a new tradition called Secret *Shaitan*—that is, Secret Satan—in which members exchange gifts based on a given theme. It may not entirely account for lost family time, but it is something.

Other former Muslims create rituals for themselves. Irqa Khan gave up on Islam during Ramadan, as she was fasting for forgiveness and fighting back hunger pangs. One day, she noticed that a co-worker had abandoned a carton of French fries on his office table. In that moment, Khan knew that she was done with her religion. “I looked up, and I’m like, *You know what, screw this bullshit.* And I ate all his fries.” Today, the dish holds a particular significance for her: whenever EXMNA meets at a bar, she orders fries—and none of the other members know why. “Those have become the love of my life,” she says, laughing, “because they were there for me.”

Trade-offs are a big part of ex-Muslim life: family for new friends; Eid for Haramadan; faith for French fries. But for EXMNA members, at least, the benefits outweigh the costs. “I have freedom of thought, and that’s been worth more than anything,” Khan says. “Not to be afraid of the things I think anymore.”

\*Benembarek is a former colleague of the author.

<sup>†</sup>Name has been changed to protect privacy.