Telling the Truth about Islam? Apostasy Narratives and Representations of Islam on WikiIslam.net

Daniel Enstedt and Göran Larsson

This article analyses six apostasy narratives published on WikiIslam.net and examines how Islam is represented and understood in them. The narratives contain self-referential and autobiographical components, and the truth-claims made in them are often based on the narrator's own experiences as a former Muslim. From the six testimonies it is clear that Islam is presented in a negative and biased way, as summed up in the following three points: (1) Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought; the beliefs that Islam holds to be true are false; (2) Islam is not about peace, high standards and God; Islam is an evil, self-centered and morally corrupt religion, and Muslims are hypocrites; (3) Islam is an oppressive, misogynist and violent religion, and is negative for its followers, especially women. These views on Islam, expressed in the apostasy narratives, articulate several themes found in islamophobic discourses and the so called New Atheist movement.

Apostasy narratives play an important function in contemporary polemical attacks on Islam and Muslims. In the article six narratives from the WikiIslam portal are analyzed that can serve as illustrations of anti-Islamic polemics by means of 'personal' testimony.

WikiIslam: a brief outline

WikiIslam was created to become the one-stop source of information critical of Islam and because it was impossible to publish what it represents as the truth about Islam on, for example, the Wikipedia online community-edited encyclopaedia. It is important to stress that "truth" is only associated with negative and critical stances against Muslims. Quotes are taken from Islamic sources and sayings from Muslim spokespersons and there-

fore presented as authentic, but selection and presentation of the material remains very one-dimensional, and alternative interpretations are seldom represented. For highlighting negative and biased perceptions about Islam and Muslims, the site is often perceived as being anti-Muslim, if not Islamophobic (Larsson 2007).

Besides providing critical information about Islam and Muslims, the aim of the site is also to build online [a] defensive position against Islam and Muslims as a global threat. Under the heading the Internet Toolbox for Islam-Critics, we read:

> Islam is a global challenge. It should be met with a global response. The best instrument for doing this is the Internet, the most international medium of all. As many news outlets may still be reluctant to openly criticize Islam, the Internet opens the possibility of a freer discourse on such subjects than more traditional media do. The intention behind this Toolbox is to encourage more people to use the Internet as a way of getting critical discussion of Islamic issues out to the general public. Any person who wants to is very welcome to copy this list or any parts of it that they may find interesting to their own websites. The Toolbox is a work in progress, and everybody is encouraged to add more "tools" of their own. (Quotation taken from Larsson 2007:58).

WikiIslam provides Internet users with new ways of combating and criticising Islam and Muslims in both cyberspace and offline, by circulating critical information about Islam and Muslims. In order to get the message out to a larger audience, the information on WikiIslam must also be translated into as many languages as possible: today the site therefore offers translations into a large number of Western and non-Western languages. Those who support the aims of WikiIslam are therefore encouraged to send in new materials, thus contributing to the content of the portal and developing an online defensive position against Islam and Muslims. As we will see in the next section of our article, the narratives of ex-Muslims (here called apo-

stasy narratives) are of great importance for WikiIslam and its adherents. These stories are testimonies that illustrate, support and legitimize the critiques of Islam and Muslims posted on the portal.

Most of the apostasy narratives found on the WikiIslam portal are published elsewhere and are reproduced on WikiIslam with the permission of the original sites. For example, one of the most frequently quoted sites is faithfreedom.org (see Faithfreedom.org 2001), where Ali Sina is one of the contributors, a topic that we will return to in the final analysis. It is clear that WikiIslam is attempting to show that Islam is wrong and nonsensical, and that Muslims should be taken seriously because they pose a dangerous threat to the open society. With these aspects in mind, the questions posed in this article are about the use of apostasy testimonies on WikiIslam. What is the role and function of the apostasy narratives posted on WikiIslam when it comes to the sites ambition to "tell the truth" about Islam? How are the "personal" experiences put to use when narrating about Islam and the process of leaving Islam?

Apostasy and Islam

The prohibition against apostasy, or abandoning one's religion, is nothing new in Islam, and it is not only interpretations of Islam that expresses a negative stance on apostasy. However, it is Islam that is usually portrayed as the most extreme religion when it comes to defections. In Islam, apostasy (irtidād) has frequently been linked to other negatively charged terms, for example, unbelief (kufr), blasphemy (sabb al-rasul), heresy (zandaqa) and hypocrisy (nifaq). Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed's Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam (2003) is one of few studies of apostasy and Islam. The authors examine the contradiction between freedom of religion and interpretations of Islam that imply that apostasy should be punished with death. They point out that this decree is contrary to other fundamental texts and beliefs in Islam and emphasize the often contradictory statements about apostasy that have been made throughout history. Saeed and Saeed mainly examine apostasy in Malaysia and the problems that have arisen there. Paul Marshall and Nina Shea's Silenced: How Apostasy and

Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide (2011) should also be mentioned in this context. Marshall and Shea survey how restrictions on apostasy and blasphemy are applied in Muslim-majority countries, as well as the contemporary debates on apostasy and blasphemy in non-Muslim-majority countries. Even if Marshall and Shea's main focus in on freedom of religion, international law and politics – not on apostasy – they, at least indirectly, demonstrate how the process of leaving Islam and legal responses to apostasy differs between Muslim-majority countries and non-Muslim-majority countries.

Most studies of apostasy have been conducted in a Christian context or in relation to new religious movements. We cannot mention all of these studies here, but will just point out two positions in previous research that are related to our analysis. In the anthology The Politics of Religious Apostasy (1998), edited by David G. Bromley, apostates are defined as religious people who leave their religious groups under the specific circumstances of conflict and instead become part of the resistance against the religion of the left. This definition separates apostates from other types of defectors from religion. It is also this type of apostate who gives voice to apostasy in Ibn Warraq's pamphlet Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out (2003). The autobiographical testimonies presented in Warraq's anthology articulate severe critique against Islam and the apostasy narratives on WikiIslam both replicates and refers to these testimonies, as the following analysis will show. Sociologist Phil Zuckerman's study of apostasy in Faith no More (2011) supports a somewhat wider definition of apostasy. Zuckerman examines the reasons why people abandon their religion through a series of interviews with actual apostates. Apostasy is, according to Zuckerman, often a lengthy, diverse and individual process, rather than the conflict-charged event that Bromley and Warraq assume it to be.

An even more nuanced and elaborated model of the apostasy process is found in Heinz Streib's (et al.) Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America (2009). As the title illustrates, the authors prefer the term

deconversion instead of apostasy even if the latter is more frequent used in research. They single out five characteristics when defining deconversion: "(1) Loss of specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; (5) disaffiliation from the community." (Streib et al. 2009:22). Besides these aspects they also lists a range of possible "deconversion avenues," or possible outcome of the deconversion process, for example leaving religion, finding a new religion or leaving the religious group while keeping some aspects of the religious faith (Streib et al. 2009:26–8). "Deconversion," Streib writes, "is biographical change" (2009:23). We can therefore talk about apostasy in terms of religious change, similar to Lewis Rambo's description of the conversion process (Rambo 1993:1, 17). In their Amazing Conversions, Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger describe de-conversion as a gradual religious change (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997:232). However, the apostasy stories analyzed below are mainly of the first kind, where a clear break occurs after a cataclysmic conflict.

Current Worldview

Testimonies from former Muslims

On the March 1, 2013 there were 303 apostasy testimonies on WikiIslam. net, 212 formulated by men and 91 by women. 248 apostates had been born into Islam, and 55 were converts. *(See Table 1)*

Current Worldview	Percentage
Christianity	12% (n=37)
Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism	5% (n=8+6+1)
Theism, Deism, Pantheism, Spirituality	6% (n=19)
Atheism	28% (n=86)
Agnosticism	12% (n=37)

Humanism	9% (n=26)
Other–unknown	28% (n=84)

Tab. 1. (Source: People Who Left Islam 2012)

After reading all of these testimonial narratives, several themes and narrative figures seems to recur. We examine some of these narratives in detail here. As far as possible we have chosen narratives from different positions: male-female, born into Islam-converts, different current world views, and different country of origin and residence. The age variable was more difficult to calculate since most apostates were in their twenties or early thirties. Several studies suggest that apostasy more frequently occurs when people are in their late teens or early twenties. These findings do not depend on any specific religious tradition. Apart from these 303 testimonies, there were also a large number of "comments from former Muslims" linked from the web page, which, the web page makes clear, were "primarily taken from testimonies which were too short for their own page." Of the total of 177 comments, 133 were formulated by men and 44 by women. Since these comments often only rearticulate what the apostasy narratives elaborate in greater detail, we will not deal with these comments further here.

After going through these narratives, we have chosen to analyze six testimonies that represent different positions and experiences. The chosen narratives will illustrate that apostates can give different reasons for leaving Islam and that they use different arguments when explaining their new position on Islam and Muslims. In analyzing these narratives, we use some of the methods provided by discourse analysis – "Islam" is, form such perspective, seen as an unstable and even "empty" concept interpellated or inscribed with meaning by the apostates – and rhetorical analysis, using the classical Aristotelian concepts logos, pathos, and ethos. We are here interested in both the position-specific narratives and experiences, and the group's shared narrative, that is the group-specific narrative, these being the criteria for choosing the six different apostasy narratives. Our point is that

these narratives about being an ex-Muslim "gather people around them," to quote sociologist Ken Plummer (1995:174). To be a member of the virtual apostasy community the apostates have to use the contemporary hegemonic narratives when expressing their experiences as former Muslims. Focus is therefore on how hegemonic narratives are at work in the formation of personal apostasy narratives and, at the same time, excludes non-hegemonic narratives. However, before scrutinizing these testimonies in detail, we will quote the so-called "Testimony Disclaimer" posted on WikiIslam:

> Testimonies of leaving Islam are candid, honest submissions by former Muslims who have varying experiences and beliefs. After leaving Islam they may turn to agnosticism, atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, [theism] and so on.

> [...]

> Because these submissions are personal experiences and thoughts, they may not necessarily comply with our guidelines which apply to most of the other content on the site.

> The validity and accuracy of the views contained have not been verified and do not have any connection with the rest of the content on the site. (WikiIslam: Testiomony Disclaimer 2013).

In the following analysis, it is important to stress that we are not trying to determine whether the testimonies are true or not. It is only the text and the internal textual rationale (i.e. the argumentation and rhetoric used and the examples employed to demonstrate the apostates' case) that are of interest to us. The testimonies contain language that is very critical of Islam and Muslims, and it is obvious that many believing Muslims will have problems with how their religion is being presented. However, from an academic point of view the testimonies can be seen as vital parts in the ongoing struggle over how to define a specific religion, and they illustrate clearly the power struggle that is going on over how to define Islam and Muslims.

Apostasy narratives

Fool I Was

The alias Fool I Was is presented as a Swedish woman with a Christian background who converted to Islam. After being a Muslim for nine years, she left Islam for Christianity. Her interest in Islam was first raised when she met a man, an "Arab with hazel eyes and a big heart, or so I thought..." To gain his mother's acceptance she started to study Islam, the Quran and hadiths. Love and marriage are not unusual reasons for converting to Islam in contemporary Sweden (Sultán Sjöqvist 2006; Roald 2004; Månsson 2002), even though the conversion process is usually seen as resulting from a crisis (See Rambo 1993:44–55). Her mother-in-law, who, according to the narrator, first saw her as "the 'Swedish whore who took her little boy,'" changed her mind after she had converted to Islam. While her own family was upset by her conversation, her husband's family was pleased. The conversion also satisfied her desire for a sense of belonging. "When you first fall in love with the religion, everything is wonderful."

Besides her own reading of the Quran and the hadiths, she took lessons from a local imam. She became, as she puts it, "the perfect Muslim..." The "Arab Muslims" she met during her time as a Muslim she describes as basically ignorant about religion: "[m]any converts know much more about Islam than born Muslims." During the years as a Muslim, she "helped many girls convert to Islam," girls who were going to marry Muslim men. She summarizes her experience of women converts to Islam in a sentence: "Love is what gets women into to Islam; their brains are what get them out."

It is important to note that this narrative is told from the apostate's perspective. The narrating "I" is converting to Islam while marrying a Muslim man, and leaving Islam after divorcing the same man. Her love for the Muslim man and conversion to Islam coincide, as do the dissolutions of her marriage and of her Muslim faith. In a book that has now become a classic, Becoming an ex (1988), sociologist Helen Ebaugh points out the gradual shift between different positions, roles and identities as significant

for modern societies where changes of partners, work, sex, residence and religion are increasingly frequent. And it is from the position of the "ex," in two ways, that the story is articulated.

The conversion part of the story of Fool I Was does not follow the usual pattern of conversion narratives. In Reading Autobiography (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the conversion narrative as follows: "The typical pattern involves a fall into a troubled and sensorily confused 'dark night of the soul,' followed by a 'call for help,' a process of transformation, and a journey to a 'new Jerusalem' or place of membership in an enlightened community of like believers." (Smith and Watson 2010:266). Interestingly, this "dark night of the soul," a reference to the title of the poem written by the 16th century Spanish poet San Juan de la Cruz, occurs when Fool I Was converts to Islam, not before. In other words, the apostasy narrative follows a similar pattern but changes the place of religion that the narrator has left. But leaving religion does not necessarily mean losing religion. A change of religion can also imply yet another conversion; another religion is found and replaces the former one. This is also pointed out by Smith and Watson in referring to Malcolm X's Autobiography: "Conversion may be neither definitive nor final, as suggested in Malcolm X's chronicling of his multiple conversions." (Smith and Watson 2010:266).

How, then, does the woman Fool I Was depict Islam in her apostasy narrative? Her first contact with Islam is described as a period of love and fascination for the religion's clear answers to a variety of difficult issues in life. But already from the beginning there was also a sense of alienation, since the religion in general and the Quran in particular did not grab hold of her: "I got the Koran and read it. I had read about converts who got enlightened and started crying while reading it. I didn't feel it; I was more confused." The feeling of confusion grows even stronger over the years. On the one hand she is performing the role of a convert, even helping other women to convert, while on the other hand, behind the image of the "perfect Muslim" that she is performing, there were also feelings of unease, dissatisfaction and estrangement. The Quran, according to her understanding, "consisted

of rules of what to do and what not to do, different judgments for this and that. It's just a lot of hate and punishment." Still, she converted to Islam, or was "brainwashed," as she phrases it. By using the word "brainwashed," she is associating her conversion to Islam with the process in which people join so-called "cults."

The discourse about "cults" and their strategies of recruiting potential members is usually stereotypical and prejudicial and is frequently reproduced in popular media and media. In this discourse the "member" is described as a victim, kidnapped or in some way manipulated to join the group – terms like "mind control" and "brainwashed" are frequently used in this discourse – while the leader of the religious group is depicted as a pathological individual whose motifs are money, glory or sex (Wessinger 2000:6). Such ways of understanding sect or cult members as victims have met with massive criticism, not least from scientific perspectives (Richardson and Introvigne 2001:163). Even though there is no manipulating sect leader in her story, the narrator Fool I Was is using this theme in describing her time as a Muslim. Islam is therefore depicted using familiar stereotypes about "cults."

The time as a "perfect" Quran-studying Muslim was also a time of hypocrisy, double standards, and confusion. Islam is depicted as an oppressive, anti-intellectual and un-logical religion: "Islam is all about not using your own mind, thoughts or desires." Leaving Islam, conversely, is narrated as an act for freedom – "I'm free!" – and an awakening from "the dark night of the soul..." "I woke up," she writes, not when converting to Islam but when leaving it. This quote gives one example of how Fool I Was struggled with Islam during her time as a Muslim:

> I tried to believe. I really did. I cried many times for not "getting it." I did not feel at one with Allah while praying. I was irritated when Ramadan came, rather than being happy. I hated the Hijab and the double standard in Islam. I also felt like an outsider. Mostly I feel sick for defending Islam. I was brainwashed and repeated phrases like: "The Hijab protects women." "Having many wives was not obli-

gatory; it was to help the widows in the time of the prophet." "Islam is peace." "When we fast we cleanse our bodies and minds." I was confused. (Fool I Was [Former Muslim] 2013).

This way of describing Islam has been frequent in Western culture. Islam is described as a more or less fundamentalist religion, far from the peace-loving, democratic and multifaceted image of Muslim advocates such as Tariq Ramadan (2007) and John Esposito (2011). In studies about Islamophobia in the West, the shift from 19th century Islam as mystical, exotic and even erotic religion – in stark contrast to contemporary Christianity – to the post-revolutionary religion, with its connotations of military action, guerrilla wars and manhood, is a common theme (see Said 1981). This suggests that the rhetoric of the present-day apostasy narratives would be hard to find in, for example, 19th century Europe. It is clear that public speech about Islam and increased anti-Muslim – and Islamophobic – rhetoric in society has important implications for the debate about people who leave Islam. Fool I Was' autobiographical narrative confirms these later, contemporary prejudices about Islam by referring to her own experiences as a Muslim, thus giving her image of Islam an air of authenticity.

Tatsuhiro

In contrast to Fool I Was, Malayan Tatsuhiro was born into Islam, but left it for Buddhism. In contrast to predominantly Christian Sweden, the majority of Malaysia's population practices Islam (61.3 percent), even though a significant minority are Buddhists (19.8 percent). But even though Tatsuhiro's situation differs from that of Fool I Was in Sweden, there are some common figures of thought that seem to transcend the personal aspects as well as the culturally specific ones. These themes are connected to the way the two apostates understand and describe Islam. But let us first scrutinize Tatsuhiro's narrative.

Tatsuhiro first discusses how Islam has come to influence Malaysian law in negative ways, especially at the present day. Islamic law limits freedom of religion, he writes, and he describes Islam as a foreign element in Malaysian

culture, since "pre-Islam ethnic Malays were adherents of Hindu or Buddhist faiths…" The Buddhist Tatsuhiro argues that, "to force an ex-Muslim [like himself] to keep his faith unto Islam and to discriminate [against] apostates is verily against humanity's freedom of religion…" This discourse, in which Islam is an oppressive force in society, is due to the religion's place in Malaysia, which differs from the Swedish discourse on Islam we have already dealt with. The obvious connection, however, is that in both cases Islam plays a negative role in society and in people's lives. When we consider the motives for Tatsuhiro leaving Islam, we find that the Swedish and Malaysian discourses coincide here too:

> I left Islam due to the fact that the Quran contradicts humanity and science itself, plus historical accounts of Islam conquests on other nations were horrible, and the historical accounts according to the Al-Hadith are terrifying towards women.

In this quote, Islam is once again given agency, as if the religion is monolithically acting on its own. The rationality argument is also mentioned when discussing the Quran, which is represented as irrational in relation to science, which here symbolizes rationality and "fact" in opposition to fiction and myths. But Islam is not just understood as an irrational delusion: its conquests are cited as an example of the religion's brutal and inhuman history. That is fact, not fiction.

Although Tatsuhiro gives these reasons for leaving Islam, atheism does not seem to be an option for him. Instead, after considering Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, he chooses to become a Buddhist. To Tatsuhiro Buddhism is a "'free form' religion" and "the most 'neutral' religion in terms of interfaith dialogues." Hence, he compares and contrasts Islam and Buddhism with each other. While Islam is portrayed as irrational, oppressive and inhumane, Buddhism is simply seen as its opposite.

Tatsuhiro keeps his Buddhist meditations a secret from his father and other Malaysian Muslims. Living in Malaysia as a former Muslim and now as a Buddhist, he is surrounded with several problems that have to do with how

"the Malaysian government imposes Islamic Sharia law" on him. But even though he frames Islam in a basically negative light, Tatsuhiro points out that "Modern Islam has its good side," using the analogy of how theories can be revised within science. A modern version of Islam can therefore be a positive expression of the religion. But it is clear, according to Tatsuhiro, that there is no such modern version of Islam in Malaysia.

Paz

The story of the American woman called Paz was first published at Apo-statesofislam.com and, like most such stories, has been republished on WikiIslam. Paz was a convert to Islam, and her narrative starts with the conversion process and ends with the de-conversion or apostasy narrative. The narrative thus uses the well-established form and metaphor of Western literature, that of a journey (Bernhardsson 2010:33). In Paz's case, the journey into Islam coincides with her marrying a Muslim man. But unlike the narrative of Fool I Was, Paz's journey starts before meeting the man, a fascination that developed after encountering a woman who had converted to Islam: "I was captivated by Islam; it was so mysterious and new to me." After reading about Islam on the Internet and studying the Quran at home, she came to the conclusion that Islam was the religion for her: "I wanted a change in my life and this was it."

She met her future husband, Khalid, on a chat room on the Internet. After two months of correspondence they met at her home in New Mexico and got married in a local mosque. But things didn't turn out as expected. Khalid "was revealing himself to be more and be stricter and stricter..." While she stayed at home all day, he controlled her from work and when at home questioned her about her activities, especially religious ones. She should, according to Khalid, live her life according to Sunnah, though the same rules did not seem to apply to him. Paz continues:

> I was required to sit down and drink my glass of water in two or three gulps exactly, according to Sunnah. He was trying to make me become right-handed and stop using eating utensils also according

to Sunnah. [...]. He was on my back about my every move while he was clean-shaven, used mouthwash that contained alcohol (while at the same time insisting that I not use vanilla extract in any cooking because of the alcohol it contained), smoked, and did whatever he pleased. (Paz [Former Muslim] 2013).

The ideal image of the Muslim man she had married fell apart piece by piece up to the point when she could not take it anymore. She describes this period as "oppressive and suffocating" and as "the most exhausting, draining period" of her life. Thus far in Paz's narrative, the representation of Islam has changed from being fascinating, mysterious and the ideal way of life to being more and more aligned with her husband's views, which marginalized and oppressed Paz. Thus, Islam became at the same time more "masculine" in character, the "feminine" aspects being left aside (See, for example, Hoff-mann 2012). The masculine image of Islam, in the narrative represented by Khalid, was also a religion full of hypocrisy, as the quote above makes clear. When Paz decides to leave Khalid, it is not only he she is leaving but also Islam. The image of Khalid and the image of Islam had become merged together for her. Paz also mentions a number of "key beliefs [...] that were contradictory to Islam," among them equality between men and women, free agency, joy, love, compassion, fellowship and kindness, to mention but a few. These "traits [were] lacking in Islam," and she could therefore no longer be a Muslim.

After escaping from Khalid during the daytime while he was working, she returned to her mother in New Mexico, to "sweet freedom and relief..." Though she did not de-convert immediately, she describes her new-found freedom as follows: "I could eat in a restaurant again! I could watch TV, go to the store, eat with a fork, I was free!" After Paz had left Khalid, she disco-vered she was pregnant and became afraid to tell him because she thought that he would take the baby and raise it according to Islam. Her apprehen-sion was confirmed as Khalid, finding out she was pregnant, told her that he had "been advised by a cleric to take our child to Saudi Arabia, away from me..." But that never happened because Paz had a miscarriage.

Paz's narrative is presented chronologically; she is looking back at a period of her life, and it is from her present position that she is examining what happened. The last part of her story sums up her view of Islam. She seemed at first to be able to separate her marriage from Islam and considered Islam a "religion of peace..." She even describes herself as a "non-Muslim apologist for Islam:"

> I blamed my failed marriage on my husband's abuse, not realizing that his abuse was acceptable in Islam. Though Islam was not true, I thought Muhammad might have been inspired with some truth to give to his followers. I even thought he might have been a prophet, but not the best or the last. I assumed the religion had been corrupted and changed to what it is now. I even knew about the horrors of the Taliban of Afghanistan, and thought they were severely misguided. (Paz [Former Muslim] 2013).

Her position as an apologist eventually changed. When September 11 happened she questioned her previous understanding of Islam, after "reading more about the terrorists, the Taliban, and Islam, [...] starting to change my mind, starting to think Islam is evil..." Paz's narrative ends, not about her own experience or situation, but with a conclusion about Islam: "The truth was undeniable. Islam is not and never was a religion of peace." This is Paz's conclusion, one she draws from have been a Muslim for a long time. This way of integrating personal experience with opinions and harsh statements about Islam, as if Islam were an autonomous entity different from other religions that had several different interpretations and expressions, serves to make the narrative reliable and authentic. This way of using the "personal" when narrating about Islam the religion is rhetorically effective. These personal narratives all have significant elements of pathos that aim to affect the reader's emotions and create sympathy for the narrator. Once that has been achieved, the reader might also be convinced about the narrators' perspective on Islam. If the rhetoric succeeds, the reader gains the same insights about the true nature of Islam that the narrating "I" has acquired, namely

Daniel Enstedt and Göran Larsson

that "Islam is evil," not a religion of peace. This way of criticizing Islam differs from other types of critique that predominantly use logos.

The self-referring and self-experienced narrative is similar to what John Beverley defines as testimonio:

> A testimonio is a novel or a novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator, who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts (Beverley 2003:320).

Even though there may be some parallels between the life-story and the testimonio, the latter is distinguished by its aim of making a new audience aware of the situation he or she has experienced or is experiencing at the present moment. The position that the testimonio narrative expresses is intertwined with the narrator's own identity, and the act of testimonio consists of oppression, suffering and marginalization "that is implicated in the act of narration itself" (Beverley 2003:320). Although the apostasy narratives testify to oppression, deprivation and marginalization, they usually have a triumphal character and have usually left the oppressive situation they are talking about. But, just like the testimonio narrative, the apostasy narratives give the reader access to a perspective and an experience that would not be available otherwise. And the narrative's truth is deeply dependent on authenticity. Beverley again:

> This presence of the voice, which the reader is meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power and privilege from the position of the excluded, the marginal, the subaltern (Beverley 2003:321).

Another mark that signifies a testimonio is the erasure of the author's function and textual presence. The narrator has written down his or her narrative in the first person. It is the narrator's own experience, thoughts and emotions that the reader can partake of. This is how the apostasy narratives become authentic, real and "true..."

The Apostate

A very different story is formulated by the Apostate, a 24-years-old woman who was raised as a Muslim in Saudi Arabia, but is now living in America. Significantly, the Apostate's statement ends with the conclusion that she cannot believe in "a religion that is as nonsensical and ludicrous as Islam plainly is." While her narrative is given authority by her Muslim background, she uses logos arguments throughout. When she read a short book about the history of the world's religions, she "had an epiphany about Islam: it was crystal to me that it was just another man-made religion, destined to take its place with other religions that had come and gone, whose gods had been worshiped for centuries and then been abandoned into obscurity." Islam was no longer "God's truth" as she had been raised to believe.

The Apostate left Islam because of the religion's irrationality, history of violence and inequality, and she uses several arguments well-known from the New Atheist movement, in which Richard Dawkins is one of the most prominent figures. One example is when she is talking about the "modern Muslim" who is "reinterpreting scripture in the light of our modern values..." The question that arises is "why not just adopt the modern values and drop the unnecessary muddling factor of revelation?" What is notable is how she is rhetorically creating different positions. In contrast to other Muslims, the "modern Muslim" tries to reshape Islam into some relation with what she calls "our modern values." But in so doing the "modern Muslim" might just as well drop the religion altogether and hence become just "modern" (in her sense). The main reason is that "modern" and "Muslim" are incompatible and not able to combine. "Muslim" is per se anti-modern, and "modern" is anti-Muslim. This way of arguing about religion can also be found in Richard Dawkins' writings (Dawkins 2006:307-308). We give a few more examples of this way of arguing:

> I see Islamic history as a sort of joy-ride of imperialism, oppression and a chronicle of misery with "Bad Idea" written all over it. But my main beef with Islam, the main reason I don't believe any divine

being revealed the Koran or appointed flawed Muhammad as the final prophet, is the utter ludicrousness of the idea of Revelation. […]. The purpose of this whole revelation business was to provide mankind with guidance […]. [w]e can't really take any of the "guidance" at face value because then we'd be slaying kafirs, taking slaves and oppressing women at every turn. […]. The Koran and the Hadith are also very flawed as sources of law, or even as guidance, for the simplest human society, much less our complex modern societal structures. They fall apart with the least scrutiny – the edifice is built on ignorance, superstition, bad history and worse science. (The Apostate [Former Muslim] 2013).

The Apostate came to these conclusions by using her own mind, and states that she did not "set out to stop believing." Seeing Islam in this new light made it impossible for her to remain a Muslim. The Apostate's apostasy narrative is thus pursued through rational arguments, not emotions or relational aspects, as in some of the other narratives.

Freethinker

Freethinker also had a Muslim upbringing, like the Apostate, and also criticizes Islam for being irrational. Freethinker mentions the new atheists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris as influences, and for the most part his narrative is about "telling the truth" about Islam through Quranic exegesis. The starting point for this truth-seeking, however, as Freethinker himself puts it, was due to an embarrassment that occurred when as a Muslim he could not answer questions about Islam because he lacked a proper knowledge of it. Such lack of knowledge is common among Muslims, Freethinker points out, and he describes his own quest for truth in the following way:

Seeking the truth is not about consolation, comfort, confirmation of a prior conception. Truth means "facing and accepting" the reality, that can be harsh, cruel, bitter but the false notions are released. The best thing was that I was not afraid about unbiased inquiry following

factual information with awareness; I persuaded facts that led me to truth. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

The remaining part of his story is dedicated to presenting "facts" about Islam that lead him to the "truth." The facts usually consist of quotes from the Quran. Another important statement has to do with atheism in relation to religion: "you are born without beliefs. The mind of a child is hijacked by their guardians as it was not preinstalled with beliefs by any god." While man is a born atheist, religion is imposed upon the child, who is indoctrinated. Another way of putting the logic of Freethinker is to say that atheism is natural and religion is its opposite, that is, not natural, or in a milder form; and, more in line with the Apostate above, religion is said to be cultural, man-made. This line of argument is well-known in atheist circles. At the same time, scholars argue that religion is "natural" (see, for instance, Boyer 2003, McCauley 2011 and Sloan Wilson 2002). Freethinker's scrutiny of Islam leads him to the following concluding remarks:

> Religion breeds group-ism, incites hatred, discriminates people and is an irrational fanaticism. Superstition is the seed of religious rituals. Traditional and cultural ideologies limit individual to pre-structured thoughts in every sphere. [...]. Selective religious ideology may turn one into mother Teresa, but an absolutist (word by word) follower of religion is bound to sow seeds of hatred and discrimination. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

This statement is about religion, not Islam, even though the rest of the text is about Islam. Freethinker also distinguishes between religion and spirituality, although only implicitly when discussing his admiration of the Buddha's teaching, while rejecting Buddhism as a corrupted version and "contradictory to original teaching of Buddha..." This does not mean that Freethinker is a Buddhist. The distinction between the teaching of the Buddha and the religion of Buddhism relies on a common public understanding of religion as something aligned with institutions, power and men, while spirituality is religion's opposite (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:12–32; Lynch

2012:4–5). This type of argument could be applied to Islam as well, but Freethinker prefers to discuss Islam as a prototypical religion, separate from spirituality.

Naeema

Former Muslim Naeema is a 20-years-old woman who was born into Islam but has converted to Christianity. Her mother converted to Islam from Christianity when she married Naeema's father. Naeema describes her father as "extremely religious," even though he was an "open-minded man." Her upbringing was religious, and as a child she had a positive view of Islam. But as she got older Islam became a hindrance; she couldn't dress the way her friends did, and because she was afraid of Allah's punishment she did not develop her drawing skills. As she puts it, she "missed a lot of fun," but even worse she "feared the fire of hell" and did everything to please Muhammad and Allah. This period, when she was socially isolated, she describes as a period of phobic fear of Allah and Muhammad.

After studying Islamic views on women, she understood Islam as "every bit like apartheid in South Africa..." She mentions misogynic hadiths "about the household of Prophet Muhammad, about his wives, about his battle. Hadiths about rape and female war captives..." This version of Islam clearly differed from the Islam she grew up with. And her negative understanding of Islam only increased: "I looked at Islam's rule of polygamy for men, yet women are not given any alternative. I saw nothing but injustice." After reading the Quran and the hadiths, she dismisses Muhammad as a "man of 54 sleeping with a nine-year-old child" and as a "mentally and emotionally abusive husband..." And Islam is just as bad as Muhammad: "Islam turned women's bodies into sex factories for men..." And when she examined Islamic history, she "saw no love, no peace, no kindness, no humanity, but only a river of blood and anarchy flowing with the lives of so many innocent [The original is partly written with capital letters.]..." All these findings led Naeema to leave Islam: "I denounced the Islamic Prophet. He was a false prophet! [...] I'd rather spend eternity in hell with victims of war, than with warmongers and rapists in Allah's paradise."

But leaving Islam did not make her want to leave religion altogether: "I was longing, sorry thirsting for a God to praise..." And the interest in Jesus and Christianity arose together with this longing for God. She started to read the Bible and began comparing Jesus with Muhammad, the Christian God with Allah. Jesus

was way too pure and wise to be human. Especially in comparison to the Islamic Prophet's 7 century, illogical and superstitious mentality. Jesus Christ was born 600 years before him, but seems to speak with eloquence, intelligence, authority and righteousness. [...] Why does he speak of a commandment of "Loving the Father with all your heart"? I never Loved Allah. I always feared him. He never gave me a chance to love him. By now I was in tears! All the frustration, the loss and the failures of all the years came gushing out. Suddenly the G-d of the Gospels and the G-d of the Quran split. One seemed like a G-d of Fire and War and the other a G-d of Love and Mercy. The one was promising hell fire, while the other was promising salvation. [...] I denounce Allah, Muhammad's imaginary god. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

Just as Freethinker contrasts Buddhism and Islam, Naeema makes a similar comparison between Christianity and Islam. In the quote it is clear that Islam is understood as a false and oppressive religion, its Prophet as superstitious and illogical. Allah is not God, but "only" Muhammad's "imaginary God." Islam, she writes, consists of "unjust, mentally exhausting, superstitious, oppressive, disruptive, intellectually stifling, hypocritical doctrine and chains." It is Naeema's background and experience as a Muslim that makes her anti-Muslim rhetoric seem reliable. She is a former insider who has turned outsider. Her story's autobiographical character produces a "truth" about the "real" Islam. At the same time, her self-referring narrative is a story about stages of development in which Naeema's life-crises make her change position on the question of Islam. And since Naeema left Islam, and even though she had a religious upbringing, she is what Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger describe as an "amazing apostate" in their Amazing Conversions (1997).

Conclusions

The apostasy narratives published on WikiIslam differ in context, contents and character, but follow similar patterns when it comes to genre, rhetoric and representing Islam.

Genre

A central aspect of the apostasy narrative's type of text and its relation to truth-telling about Islam is the rhetoric aspects of genre or what genre does, rather than is. The apostasy narratives put several different genres to use, but we will limit our discussion to the genre of autobiography. As autobiography the apostasy narratives can be associated with non-fiction, documentaries and representations of the reflexiv truth of a person's life. The narrative contract between the narrator and the reader implies that the narrator represents the position he or she is talking from. There is a correspondence between the narrative's "I," its protagonist, and the narrative's author. If the reader did not believe in this connection, the narrative's authenticity, its truth claims, would fail. This self-referring text is aligned with the referentiality of literature as well as its realism.

The autobiographical pact, associated with French theorist Philippe Lejeune appears when the reader identifies the narrative's author with its protagonist. The autobiographical text supposes, Lejeune writes, "that there is identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about." (Lejeune 1989:12, as quoted in Smith and Watson 2010:207). Through the autobiographical pact, fiction is suspended from the story, and the text is represented to be true. In this way, the autobiographical pact denotes a kind of truth claim – it is fact, not fiction. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, it is when the text's narrator and the protagonist coincide that the text's veracity becomes difficult to determine, since then it cannot be categorized as either fact or fiction (Smith and Watson 2010:15–16).

The key aspect of the autobiography's truth claims is that they are based on the narrator's own experience. In the above narratives, this type of self-

referring is most explicit in the testimonios of Fool I Was, Paz and Naeema, which claim to portray a specific, self-perceived experience. But this does not mean that the narrative is personal in the sense of being private; rather, it uses and reproduces a conventional narrative about what it means to leave Islam as a personal experience.

Rhetoric

Looking at the logos, pathos and ethos arguments – well-known rhetorical ways of persuading the reader-listener – it is clear all three aspects are used at different lengths in the narratives, often with one aspect to the fore (See, for instance, Foss 2009:26–27). The typical logos argument states that Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought: it is simply not reasonable to be a Muslim (for example, the narratives of Tatsuhiro, The Apostate and Free-thinker above). The logos argument points out details in the Quran and established Islamic beliefs, and comes to the conclusion that they are not God-given and true, but false, man-made and nonsensical. The narrator often comes to this "insight" after a period of serious study of Islam and Islamic thought, and at times the result of the generally isolated study was not planned from the outset. The "insight" therefore also surprises the narrators themselves. Aligned with this argument is also the view, expressed by the Apostate, that "religions comes and goes…" Emphasizing the temporality of a religion also relativizes it, representing "truth" in Islam as just one of many "truths" that will eventually disappear. The only truth that will survive is based on rational and logical arguments.

The ethos argument is about convincing the listener or reader that the narrative is reliable and true, which is generally achieved by gaining the audience's trust. In the apostasy narrative, this is done by the self-referring narrator telling us about his or her own experience as a former Muslim. In the conversion narrative, there are several examples of how ethos is used. The motives for converting to Islam are "pure" and signify a high moral standard. This has to do with manners, restrictions on sexuality, alcohol and more. When the narrator, like Fool I Was or Paz, has been a Muslim for a

while, she or he sees the religion for what it really is: hypocrisy. And when Islam fails to live up to the high moral standards of the narrator, the latter has to leave it.

The pathos argument, finally, rests on the narrator's own experience of being a Muslim. By using biographical materials, the narrator is able to express and create feelings about the subject matter, Islam. If the reader is a Muslim, the pathos argument can also be about showing possibilities in the future. The "I" in the apostasy narrative can thus work as a textual node of identification.

Islam representations

The apostasy narratives that contain self-referential and autobiographical components make the truth-claims based on the narrator's own experiences as a former Muslim. They make these in different ways that amount to different claims. Logos: (1) Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought and the beliefs that Islam holds to be true are actually false. Ethos: (2) Islam is not about peace, high standards and God; Islam is an evil, self-centered and morally corrupt religion, and Muslims are hypocrites. Pathos: (3) Islam is an oppressive, misogynist and violent religion, and it is negative for its followers, especially women, even if they don't know it themselves. The descriptions of the effects of apostasy mirror [descriptively] the negative image of Islam. The recurring words characterizing apostasy are rationality, logic and truth; peaceful, happiness and permission; freedom, equality and autonomy. In the apostasy narratives and the narrators' testimonios, these adjectives are incapable of combining with the word "Islam."

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Both apologists and polemical writers who want to tell the truth about Islam and Muslims are using the Internet and other social media. How the truth is being construed is not just a matter of context and the aims of the writers but also technical and rhetorical aspects. As scholars of religion, it is our job to analyze how different opinions and voices are striving to gain the upper hand in creating simulacra of discussion, and from this point of view the opinions posted on the WikiIslam.net portal provide interesting empirical material. Several academic studies have demonstrated how the Internet has become the new platform for anti-Muslim opinions, racism and Islamophobia (See, for example, Larsson 2007). In this forum, we have analyzed how apostasy testimonies can be used as truth claims to demonstrate that Islam is a dangerous, irrational and anti-modern religion, but the narratives analyzed should not be seen as a sample to determine how Muslims discuss and argue the question of apostasy and we also need to know if apostasy testimonies (like the ones we have discussed in this article) are being read and whether they are having an impact on decisions to leave Islam or not. These apostasy testimonies can also be used by individuals who wish to question Islam and Muslims. From this point of view these stories can easily be turned into an important weapon in the hands of those who want to express anti-Muslim feelings and so constitute an important element in an Islamophobic world view that presents Islam and Muslims as diametrically opposite to all other world views.

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