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IDENTITY CHANGES ON THE RELIGION AXIS

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Din Ekseninde Kimlik Deęiřimi

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“Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbours them with difficult choices.”

Amin Maalouf

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ABSTRACT

Religious identity change is discussed in the literature mainly regarding religious conversion; however, the estimated increase in the atheist and deist identities in recent years also finds an echo within the academic literature. Disaffiliation from the religion that the family ascribed often comes with significant social and emotional challenges. Especially, claiming an atheist identity after disaffiliation increases the likelihood of facing discrimination and prejudice.

The present study aims to understand the experiences of people who became atheists after leaving Islam and their identity reconstruction process. This study is conducted through in-depth interviews made with 10 participants. The interviews were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA 2020. The thematic analysis of the data revealed four main themes that explain the identity change process: being Muslim, experiencing a conflict between Islam and self, becoming one's own person, and living with a new identity. At the core of this identity change, the participants interviewed experienced an internal conflict between their internal experiences, needs, and desires and the requirements of the Muslim identity. This conflict led them towards self-knowing, by which they started to understand their internal experiences and make contact with their disconnected feelings and urges. As a result of this process, they started to construct a new identity based on their own choices and agency. The study results contribute to the literature regarding enlightening the processes that trigger an identity change as well as the construction of a new identity, in addition to understanding the often stigmatized and concealed atheist identity and the challenges that atheist individuals deal with.

Keywords: Atheist Identity, Identity Construction, Qualitative Study, Religious Disaffiliation, Religious Identity Change

ÖZET

Dini kimlikte deęişim literatürde genellikle bir dinden başka bir dine geçmek olarak tartışılrsa da son yıllarda ateist ve deist kimliklerdeki artış akademik çalışmalara da yansımaktadır. Bireylerin aileden gelen dini kimliklerini bırakmaları genellikle büyük sosyal ve manevi kayıplar, gibi zorlukları beraberinde getirmektedir. Özellikle ateist kimliğe geçişlerin ayrımcılık ve önyargılarla karşılaşma olasılığını artırdığı görülmüştür.

Bu çalışmada Müslümanlıktan ateizme geçen kişilerin bu süreci nasıl deneyimledikleri ve yeni bir kimliği nasıl inşa ettikleri anlaşılmaya çalışılmıştır. Araştırma, 10 gönüllü katılımcıyla yapılan derinlemesine görüşmelerle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmeler deşifre edilip MAXQDA 2020 yazılımı kullanılarak kodlanmış ve yapılan tematik analiz sonucunda bu kimlik deęişimi sürecini açıklayan dört temel tema belirlenmiştir: Müslüman olmak, İslam ve kendilik arasında çatışma yaşamak, kendini tanımak ve yeni kimlikle yaşamak. Görüşme yapılan katılımcıların bu deęişimin temelinde kendi içsel deneyimleri, ihtiyaçları ve arzuları ile Müslüman kimliklerinin gerektirdikleri arasında bir çatışma yaşadıkları belirlenmiştir. Bu çatışmanın onları kendi içsel deneyimlerini daha fazla anlamaya, temas etmedikleri duygu ve dürtüleriyle temas etmeye başladıkları bir kendini tanıma sürecine yönlendirdiği görülmüştür. Bunun sonucunda da kendi seçtikleri ve temellerini belirledikleri sahiplenilmiş bir yeni kimlik inşa süreci görülmüştür. Çalışmanın sonuçları, bir kimlik deęişimini tetikleyen ve yeni bir kimlik inşasını ortaya çıkaran deneyimlere ışık tutmak, bunun yanı sıra Türkiye’de damgalanan ve gizlenen bir kimlik olan ateist kimliği ve bu kimliğe sahip bireylerin karşılaştıkları zorlukları anlamak adına literatüre katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ateist Kimlik, Dinden Ayrılma, Dini Kimlik Deęişimi, Kimlik İnşası, Nitel Araştırma

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The possible increase of disaffiliation from Islam has been a significant discussion within the mainstream and nonmainstream media in Turkey (Aktan, 2019; Girit, 2018; Öztürk, 2017). A nationwide survey revealed that atheist and deist identities have become more common than last decade (KONDA, 2019). According to this survey, the percentage of atheists in Turkey increased by 2% from 2008 to 2019. The same survey revealed that 90% of people who reported to be not affiliated were under 35. Also, according to the same report, the number of people who reported to be religious decreased by 4%. On the other hand, older research that compares results from 1999 and 2006 revealed that within those years, the number of people who identified primarily as Muslim increased by 9%, and the number of people who identified as “very religious” increased by 7% (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006). Nevertheless, most of the public opinion polls continue to indicate that a great majority of people in Turkey identified as having faith in God, as religious, and as Muslim (KONDA, 2019; Kulat, 2017; PEW, 2019).

In addition to this recent inclination, Turkey, in fact has been the subject of an increasing political Islamist agenda for the last 50 years beginning with 1970’s. This increase in the radical Islamist views affected many aspects of religions as well as certain religious symbols such as the headscarf. The radical Islamic rise transformed the headscarf from a traditional item to an Islamic symbol (Kaya, 2019). With the strengthening of radical Islamist congregations and cults, the secular army of the time attempted an almost coup in February 28th, 1997 resulting in the increasing polarisation between the secular and religious parties within Turkey. The coup not only affected radical Islamist but also all Muslims especially by emphasizing the radical Islamist symbolisation of turban. This resulted in many Muslim and non-Muslim women to rise against the prohibition of headscarf in public institutions (Kaya, 2019). The AKP rule beginning in 2002 and onwards, promised to the religious and conservative section of Turkey, who felt oppressed

and robbed of their rights until then, a more democratic and equal Turkey (Çınar, 2006). However, the AKP rule, helping the strengthening of congregations and cults that aim to replace Turkish constitution with Islamic law (shariah) contributed to the construction of an increasingly less democratic, more Islamic and therefore a more oppressive and autocratic rule (Bölükbaşı, 2012; Kaya, 2019).

Over the recent years, the topic of disaffiliation became also more prominent in academic studies in Turkey (Arslan, 2016; Aydın, 1995; Gülfil, 2018; Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019; Menküç, 2019; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). However, the literature on disaffiliation focused chiefly on the reasons of religious disaffiliation (Arslan, 2016; Aydın, 1995; Gülfil, 2018; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018) or aimed to provide suggestions regarding the prevention of disaffiliation and the reinforcement of religiosity (Aydın, 1995; Gülfil, 2018; Menküç, 2019; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). Despite the increasing number of studies that address non-religious identities, the number and the scope of the existing research remains inadequate to understand the topic comprehensively. This study aims to bring attention to the identity changes that became more widespread in recent years, focusing on the identity change experienced by the individuals who are disaffiliated from Islam.

This chapter summarizes the literature on identity and ego identity status, with a more elaborated literature review on religious identity change and atheist identity.

1.1. IDENTITY

Identity as a concept utilized within different disciplines from psychology to sociology to history, has many different definitions varying from a collection of categories that define a person's roles within a society (Stryker & Burke, 2000) to a general category that refers to the person's belonging to a certain collective group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Identity can be grouped into two main categories: a personal identity by which an individual defines oneself in terms of their individual idiosyncratic characteristics and roles; and a social identity or a collective identity

by which the individual identifies as part of a larger group (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). The individual or the personal identity can consist of social roles (such as being a husband, being a teacher, or being a citizen) (McCall & Simmons, 1978, as cited in, Thoits & Virshup, 1997), and demographic (such as age, race, or gender) and personal characteristics of an individual (such as being a brunette person or an assertive person) (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

According to Stryker and Burke (2000), social identity has the function of including an individual in a certain group while at the same time distinguishing the same individual, as a member of that particular social group, from other social groups. They suggested that each person pursues ways by which they can derive heightened self-esteem out of their social identity; therefore, each person constantly compares their own group to other groups. According to their theorization, if an individual starts to become dissatisfied by their in-group, in other words, when the group starts to fail to increase an individual's self-esteem, they would either leave the group in search of a new identity or remain in the group but strive to change the group from within (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

The term "identity commitment" related to the scope of this study was first coined by Stryker (1982). The term refers to the extent that an individual invests in a particular identity. People who are high on identity commitment spend a significant amount of their time cultivating their role in and engagement with that particular identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

The concepts of "concealable stigmatized identity" (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011) and "identity salience" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982) are also crucial with regards to the frame of the present study. Identity salience refers to the importance of a particular identity for a person. According to the conceptualization of identity salience, the self is organized around different identities, which are arranged according to their ranking of importance. The identity that an individual primarily identifies is on top of the ranking, in other words, it is the most salient identity for that individual (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). The term concealable identity refers to identity that is both marginal and not visible by other parties unless it is declared (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). Abbott and Mollen (2018) consider atheism as a

concealable identity since it is not discernible for others, and it is considered marginal. According to Quinn and Earnshaw (2011), a concealable stigmatized identity has two axes: valanced content and identity magnitude. The latter is very similar to identity salience and refers to the hierarchical importance of a particular identity within an individual's self-definition. Valanced content is related to the experiences (both positive and negative) regarding the concealable stigmatized identity. It contains exposed, internalized, and expected stigma, the reactions of others to the disclosure of identity, and the learned positive information for self-defence against stigma (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

1.1.1. Ego-Identity Status

Different from the social identity theories and definitions, Erik Erikson (1968) developed the concept of "ego identity" and incorporated the notion of identity within a psychodynamic frame. He defined identity as a sense that the person stays the same when shifting from different social contexts and relationships. Identity, according to Erikson (1968), organizes a person's different experiences, values, principles, and relationships under its roof and provides a sense of coherence. It is also conceptualized by him as being open to development throughout an individual's lifespan. He proposed eight stages for ego development and every stage of the process corresponding to a specific age range. Each stage included a typical developmental objective and the counter position of that objective. The ego identity development coincided with adolescence and contained the opposing poles of identity and identity diffusion (Erikson, 1968).

According to Erikson (1968), religion is one of the earliest influences in one's ego development. He suggested that as an institution, religion organizes the moral principles as well as the daily rituals of individuals and cultivates the seeds of basic trust in one's safety in the face of absolute evil through protection by an all-powerful being. He considered religiosity as an essential component for the development of a healthy concept of trust. By this theorization, Erikson did not suggest religion as the sole promoter of trust during ego development but instead

as representing organized rules and structures that reassure one's security. In the absence of religion, another system can serve to maintain the development of a feeling of trust (Erikson, 1968).

Marcia et al. (1993), building upon Erikson's theory, proposed their identity status theory which contained four different positions or statuses. Their research began in 1964 with 20 male university students and has included thousands of individuals since then (Marcia et al., 1993). They grouped their participants in terms of their identity commitments. They found that there were two groups who were committed but differed in terms of their commitment styles and two groups who were not committed but also differed in terms of their styles. One of the committed groups experienced what can be termed as an "identity crisis," an exploratory process by which they questioned their previous identities and were highly involved in constructing a more idiosyncratic identity for themselves. On the other hand, the second type of committed group did not experience such an exploration period but invested in their designated identities without questioning. They also found that these two groups differed in terms of their reasoning styles in that the former was found to be more flexible than the latter. The not-committed groups also differed in terms of whether their processes included an identity crisis or not. The not-committed group who experienced an identity crisis was worried about their lack of investment in a particular identity and was interested in pursuing a consistent and meaningful identity. The last group was either indifferent and apathetic regarding identities or proactively rejected defining themselves by identity categories (Marcia et al., 1993).

The four identity statuses identified as a result of the research mentioned above by Marcia et al. (1993) were Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement. Identity Achievement and Foreclosure Identity Status corresponded to the dichotomy of Identity and Identity Diffusion in Erikson's theory of ego development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). The two statuses in which commitment was observed were Foreclosure and Identity Achievement (Marcia et al., 1993). Foreclosure referred to an identity status in which the person is unquestioningly committed to the identities that their families determined.

Identity Achievement is a status that refers to an identity which the individual constructed as a result of an intense period of questioning and search. The identity of a person who can be categorized under this status becomes a distinct and idiosyncratic identity. The other two statuses in which commitment was either not present or only obscurely present were Moratorium and Identity Diffusion. In the Identity Diffusion status, no commitment was observed, and the person at this status has no concern or preference regarding their identities, remaining indifferent to what it meant and required. Finally, at the Moratorium status, the person, although they had no current commitment to a particular identity, strived to commit to a coherent identity (Marcia, 1966). It is important to note that the individuals who fit perfectly into one of the four status categories were infrequent, and only a few exhibited a total commitment or (lack of commitment Marcia et al., 1993).

1.1.2. Atheist Identity

The Oxford dictionary defines atheism as the “belief that there is no God” (Oxford, 1993). While some authors’ definitions of atheism are compatible with that of the English dictionary (Baggini, 2003), there is an ongoing philosophical debate over the meaning of atheism (Bullivant, 2013; Cliteur, 2009; Eller, 2010; Le Poidevin, 2004; Martin, 2007; McGrath, 2004). Although the Cambridge Dictionary and Baggini suggested a “belief” in their definition, Eller (2010) argued that atheism is not a belief but a theological position that does not claim a creator or creators. Similarly, Martin (2007) also objected to the definition that atheists believe that God does not exist and argued that an atheist is a person who claims no belief with regards to any god. McGrath (2013) argued that atheism is not only the disbelief in any god but, in fact, a declared position, a deliberate rejection to believe in any god. Le Poidevin (2004) defined atheism as the rejection of theism and described theism as the belief in an omnipotent and supernatural creator. Cliteur (2009) focused on the semantic analysis of the word, which contains the alpha privative “a-” that provides the meaning of “the absence of theism.” The word “theism” etymologically comes from the Greek word “theos,” which means God

(Bullivant, 2013; Oxford, 1982). However, Cliteur (2009) did not define atheism as simply a disbelief in God but as the rejection of believing in a theistic God. A theistic God is specified with certain characteristics such as being omnipotent, primordial, and everlasting. A theistic God is also idealized to be absolutely good and supreme. Therefore, atheism is not only disbelief in religions but rather a rejection of the theistic values and principles as well as a theistic God (Cliteur, 2009). Martin (2007) made a distinction between disbelief in a theistic God and disbelief in any god or any divine, spiritual being by defining the former as “atheism in the narrow sense” and the latter as “atheism in the broad sense.” In the scope of this paper, the word atheism will be used in its narrower sense since the participants defined themselves as atheists, although some of them retained belief in certain spiritual explanations regarding the operations of the universe (Martin, 2007).

One study attempted to develop a model that explains the stages involved in the formation of an atheist identity. Siner (2012) suggested a model in order to understand the development of atheist identity in college students. They based their proposal on a combination of Jenny L. Small’s Doctoral Dissertation on the development of religious identity in college students (Small, 2008) and Fassinger’s theory developed to explain the identity development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (Fassinger, 1998, as cited in, Siner, 2012). In their paper, Siner (2012) compared atheist identity to LGBTI+ identities and addressed certain similarities between them, particularly in terms of how they are both stigmatized, minority identities. Many studies defined atheist identity as a stigmatized identity and explored the ways atheist individuals were stigmatized or discriminated (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Cloud, 2017; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Scheitle et al., 2019). The fact that atheism is also different than most LGBTI+ identities in terms of its’ concealability (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) increases the chances that it remains hidden; however, the discourse on atheism adopted the vocabulary including “coming-out” and “being in the closet” that originally belonged to the LGBTI+ discourse (Alidoosti, 2009; Anspach et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2015) indicating the relevance of the dilemma of whether to conceal or disclose one’s identity. The reasons for, the possible consequences and influences of, and the

strategies for disclosing one's disbelief are among the most commonly studied topics within the literature on atheist identity (Brewster et al., 2014). The stigma around the label makes it hard for individuals to disclose their identities, especially to their families, particularly if they were raised with a particular religious affiliation (Zimmerman et al., 2015). The psychological and, at times, physical hazards of developing an atheist identity can also be detrimental (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2014).

The particular LGB identity development theory Siner (2012) referred to as a base for their atheist identity formation theory suggested an identity development scheme within two different contexts: individual and social (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger, 1998, as cited in, Siner, 2012). For both contexts, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed an identity development that unfolded along four stages. The first stage, named awareness, suggested a self-recognition phase of identity development. The second stage was exploration. At this stage, the student started to discover their sexuality either through experimentation or by observation. The third stage of development, deepening/commitment, was when the student started to claim their LGB identity and socialize with their community. The final stage was named internalization/synthesis, suggesting that in this phase, the student integrated their LGB identity into the whole of their identities and felt confident in carrying the label (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Siner (2012) also referred to Small's (2008) religious identity development theory in college students in order to combine it with McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model. Small's model suggested six stages of religious identity development in college students. Along with different models specified for different monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), Small also attempted to apply their own model to illustrate the development of an atheist identity. According to their model, the first stage of atheist identity formation described an initial state where no agency upon the identity was claimed. The second stage was a period where one started to pick up on the information in their environment regarding religion and faith and started to be aware of their religious identity. In the third stage of atheist identity development, one started to have questions, doubts, or displeasure regarding

religion and God. A stage of transitioning, namely stage 3.5, was theorized as an intermediate phase in which one left former religious beliefs and constructed a new identity. In the fourth stage, the individual owned their identity. This phase included an increasing capacity to investigate and question as well as possible participation in a rational or intellectual community. Stage five was described as a period with increased connection to other individuals and increased humility. The sixth stage, not so different from the fifth, was also described as a period of life where the participants became increasingly humanitarian and were in harmony with all people (Small, 2008).

Figure 1.1. Small's Faith Development Trajectory Model for Atheists

Stage 1		Truths received from parents; non-reflective, fantastical faith
	Stage 2	Potential focus on the religious community of membership
<i>Partnership with Humanity</i>	Stage 3	Tacit, egotistical
	Disappointment with God	
	Stage 3.5 (Transition)	Abandonment of former beliefs
	Stage 4	Doubting, rational, non-communal
<i>Self and Humanity</i>	Stage 5	Paradoxical, relative, developing lack of self-centeredness
	Stage 6	Decentralization of the self to: Humanity Acting on Behalf of society

Source: (Small, 2008)

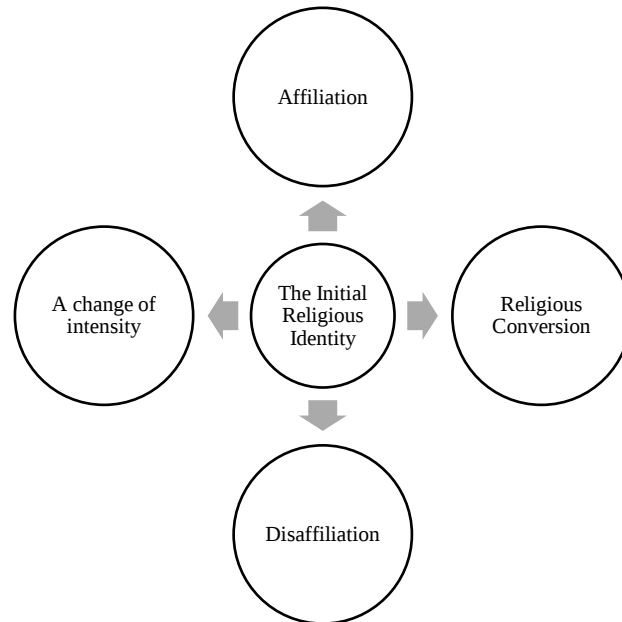
Based on Small's (2008) religious identity development theory for college students and McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model for LGB students, Siner (2012) proposed their own atheist identity development model ASID. This model consisted of four stages taken from McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model, and the six stages

of Small's (2008) model were incorporated under these four topics. Siner (2012) also, following McCarn and Fassinger (1996), applied their model to two different contexts: individual and social. The first stage, Awareness, describes a stage where the person recognized their own doubts and questions regarding religion (the individual context) and became aware of others with atheist identities (the social context). The second stage, Exploration, was a stage in which the individual acknowledged their disbelief and discovered the meaning of atheism (the individual context). In the social context of the second stage, the person also explored the community, in other words, other people who were atheists, and started to form opinions about this community. The third stage, Deepening/Commitment, was a more autonomous phase in which the individual knew more about their identity as well as themselves and was becoming more proactive in terms of their self-expression (individual context) as well as participation in atheist organizations (social context). At this stage, they also become more aware of their own position and status within the society as an atheist (social context). The last and fourth stage, Internalization/Synthesis, regarded the integration of atheist identity into their global individual identity and social identity (Siner, 2012).

1.2. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CHANGE

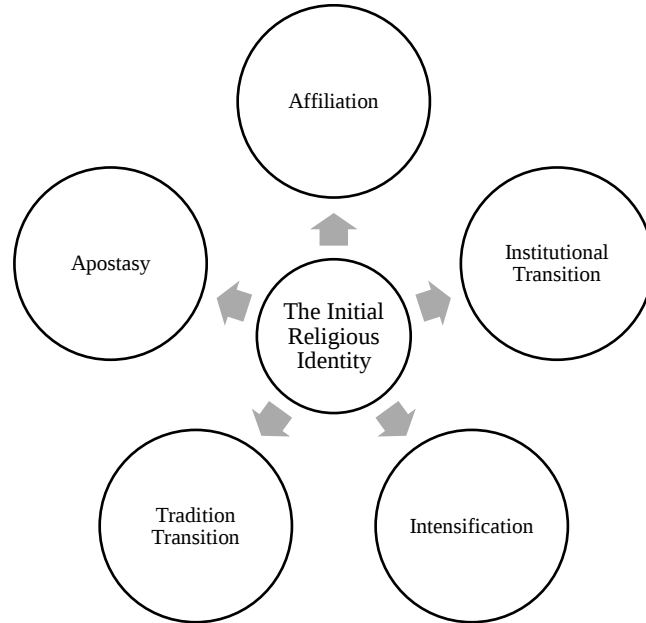
A change in religious identity is commonly referred to as religious conversion within the literature (Arslan, 2016; James, 2002; Kayıklık, 2005; Rambo, 1993). A study from Turkey aimed to identify the diversity within religious conversion experiences and classified disaffiliation from religion under the fourth directional category of religious conversion (Kayıklık, 2005). Other directional categories were a change of intensity within the affiliated religion, conversion from one religion to another, and changing from disbelief to affiliation.

Figure 1.2. Kayıklık's (2005) Categories for Religious Conversion



A similar categorization with regards to the direction of the conversion was made by Rambo (1993). They identified five conversion categories: apostasy, intensification, affiliation, institutional transition, and tradition transition. The first one, namely apostasy, involved disaffiliation from one's former religion. The second category, intensification, described the experience of increased religious ideation and attachment. The third, affiliation, was the experience of starting to follow a religion while previously being non-religious. The fourth, tradition transition, described transitioning from one denomination to another, such as changing cults or congregations. The last one occurred when massive social and cultural changes were experienced, such as being colonialized (Rambo, 1993).

Figure 1.3. Rambo's (1993) Categories for Religious Conversion



Kayıklık (2005) classified conversion also under three categories in terms of duration, including a sudden change, a gradual change, and religious socialization. The sudden change was also referred to as “crisis conversion” and “self-surrender conversion.” (Kayıklık, 2005). Meadow and Kahoe (1984) conceptualized this type of conversion to occur in three stages: In the first stage, the person experienced conflict, distress, and confusion. In the second stage, the person experienced a radical change with a feeling of revelation and insight. In the third stage, the person experienced a feeling of harmony, unity, serenity, and inner peace (Meadow & Kahoe, 1984, as cited in Kayıklık, 2005). Besides the temporal differences, gradual conversion was also classified as a more conscious, agent, and cognitive process than the sudden conversion, an affect-driven and experiential process (James, 2002; Kayıklık, 2005). The last type, religious socialization, referred to the acquisition of religious (or non-religious) identity in a developmental process by picking up the environmental and social cues and internalizing them in time (Paloutzian, 1996, as cited in Kayıklık, 2005).

Another conceptualization of religious conversion processes was developed by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). They named their model “Conversion Motifs” and identified six different motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Their first motive, intellectual conversion, involved a process where an intensive intellectual effort was at work and the person proactively pursued and researched the options. The mystical motif suggested a dramatic change that involved an intense spiritual experience. The experimental conversion included an experience in which the person voluntarily adopted a prospective religion’s lifestyle in order to experiment with it first hand and see if it fit them or not. The fourth motif, affectional conversion, described a social conversion process that occurred as a result of the person developing an attachment to certain followers of the religion. It is important to note that the attachment to the social group was primary in this case, compared to the attachment to the religion, which came secondarily. In the fifth motif, namely the revivalist, an intensity change was more likely to occur rather than a radical religious conversion. In this type of motif, the person’s dormant religious feelings were awakened or “revived,” in a sense, by another individual. The final motif was coercive conversion which, as the name implies, defined an enforced religious conversion. It was a coercive conversion if the person was frightened, tortured, or threatened into conversion, was “brain-washed,” or other social, psychological, or physical forces were at stake (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981).

1.2.1. Religious Disaffiliation

A particular direction of religious identity change includes leaving religion and becoming non-religious, which was referred to as apostasy (Cook, 2006; Deringil, 2000; Pulcini, 2017), or religious disaffiliation within the literature (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Nica, 2020; Rainwater, 2019). Literature on religious disaffiliation encapsulates mostly research on disaffiliation from monotheistic religions to atheism, deism, and agnosticism, and the research has been mostly conducted in a Western context (Berger, 2015; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Khalil

& Bilici, 2007; Nica, 2020; Pulcini, 2017; Smith, 2011) Among those studies some focused on particularly disaffiliation from Islam (Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Pulcini, 2017) and one investigated the process of becoming an atheist for 40 Americans who came from mostly Protestant and Catholic Christianity backgrounds (Smith, 2011). Others focused on the formation and the nature of atheist identity (Brewster et al., 2014; Cimino & Smith, 2011; Nash, 2003; Siner, 2012).

In Turkey, the literature on disaffiliation has focused on experiences of Muslims who later became deists, atheists or agnostics (Aydın, 1995; Çayır, 2014; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalı & Şahin, 2018). In addition to a more general inquiry regarding religious disaffiliation, some studies focused on the process of becoming an atheist (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2018). Other empirical studies aimed to understand atheism and deism in itself rather than focusing on a disaffiliation process (Gülfil, 2019a, 2019b; Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019; Menküç, 2019).

In the following section, studies from Turkey, as well as the international literature regarding disaffiliation and the process of becoming an atheist, will be explored in detail.

1.2.1.1. International Literature on Religious Disaffiliation

Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) conducted a study comparing recently disaffiliated people's psychological health and well-being and those who were always affiliated or disaffiliated. Their findings suggested that disaffiliated people experienced inferior psychological health compared to both groups mentioned. The authors found out that the mediator of the difference was church attendance which points to the role that social connections play on the psychological well-being of people who are disaffiliated from their former religion and the related community (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016).

Another study by Nica (2020) focused on participants' psychological well-being and the identity reformation process. In this qualitative study, people who left fundamentalist Christian religious groups were interviewed in an attempt to understand the ways through which they reconstructed their identities as well as

how this identity reconstruction affected their psychological well-being. Their study revealed that people who left fundamentalist groups experienced difficulties regarding the loss of their formal roles within their religious community (such as being a clergyman or having responsibility within the church) and the loss of status that came with it. Participants experienced this loss of status as a factor that negatively influenced their self-construct and, therefore, their well-being. During the transition process, participants continued to experience certain stressors, some of which were also linked to their roles within the frame of their new identity. However, during this process, some of the participants' well-being increased primarily due to a gained autonomy, the decrease of guilt, shame, and fear that was related to the religion, and also their new roles within their new identities (such as being a volunteer) (Nica, 2020).

Berger (2015) also conducted a study with ex-fundamentalists who had left an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and examined the difficulties they encountered as well as how they dealt with them. The difficulties they encountered included adapting to a new social environment and new intellectual challenges, as well as financial and procedural difficulties. The strategies they used in order to overcome those difficulties included conformity, making compromises in favor of others, moving into a new location that non-Jewish people mostly inhabited, pretending to fit in, becoming "thick-skinned and innovative as well as trying to keep up with others (Berger, 2015)

Among the studies regarding disaffiliation, a few focused on disaffiliating from Islam, the one by Khalil and Bilici (2007) being one of them. This study examined people who were disaffiliated to deism, atheism, agnosticism, and people who converted from Islam to Christianity. The researchers relied on different resources, including published and online narratives of former Muslims, as well as their own interviews with people who left Islam. Their research focused on the reasons for leaving Islam as well as the direction of the apostasy. Their findings revealed that ex-Muslims left Islam for reasons that can be mainly categorized under two topics: "Intellectual/Ideological Motives" and "Social/Experiential Motives". The former of the categories included the criticisms that were directed at

Islam and Islamic law regarding subjects such as problems concerning human and women's rights, lack of scientific thinking, rigidity and harshness of Islamic rules, issues with regards to the character of the prophet Muhammad and the geography-specificity of the Qur'an. The second category mainly included negative experiences with Muslims (Khalil & Bilici, 2007).

Another study focused on the formation of an atheist identity (Smith, 2011). The study suggested four stages of atheist identity formation: 1) a starting point where a theist identity was claimed, 2) a questioning phase, 3) rejection of religion and God, and 4) coming out as an atheist (Smith, 2011). Smith's (2011) research was one of several studies in the literature that adapted the terms of "coming-out" and "being in the closet" that had been initially claimed by the LGBTI+ discourse to the discourse of atheist identity. (Alidoosti, 2009; Cloud, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2015).

Zimmerman et al. (2015) examined the impact of disclosing one's identity as an atheist on family relationships. The reactions of the family members were coded under the categories of a) supportive and b) not supportive. Both categories were further examined along three axes: 1) cohesion vs. lack of cohesion, 2) adaptability vs. rigidity, and 3) healthy communication vs. poor communication (Zimmerman et al., 2015).

In their master's thesis, Alidoosti (2009) attempted to understand the coming-out processes of atheists. The study showed that the experience of coming out as an atheist unfolded in three phases, including atheists' explanation of their identity formation, the way they disclosed their identity and the reactions they received, and finally, the impacts of their coming out as atheists (Alidoosti, 2009).

Cloud (2017) discussed 50 different narratives of atheists, which were extracted from the Coming Out Godless Project website. The website of the project that in 2017, reportedly used to contain the testimonies of people who disclosed their atheist identities, today seems to consist of content that invites visitors to different religions by introducing characteristics of each religion's culture (<https://comingoutgodless.com>). In their study, Cloud (2017) found that the coming out discourse that atheists utilized and also criticized by the LGBTI+ community

for appropriating it (Anspach et al., 2007) was used by atheists to assert both high and low levels of agency over their identities. The author also compared and discussed different levels of agency and how they relate to the characteristics of atheist identity assertion (Cloud, 2017).

1.2.1.2. Literature from Turkey

The studies from Turkey will be presented under two topics: The studies that focus on atheism and deism and the studies that focus on disaffiliated individuals.

1.2.1.2.1. Atheism and Deism in Literature from Turkey

The oldest study known regarding deist and atheist identities was conducted by Aydın (1995) from On Dokuz Mayıs University's Department of Philosophy and Science of Religion. At this point, it is important to note that the majority of the studies in Turkey regarding religious disaffiliation or non-religious identities have been conducted by scholars from the departments of theology, the science of religion, or the Islamic studies (Aydın, 1995; Çayır, 2014; Gülfil, 2018, 2019b, 2019a; Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019; Şimşek, 2018). Some of the studies were conducted within small samples that represented a local population (Çayır, 2014; Gülfil, 2018, 2019b, 2019a; Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019; Menküç, 2019). As a method, an important part of the studies used a descriptive research design and as collected data through surveys (Aydın, 1995; Çayır, 2014; Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019) while the others offered a review of the literature (Şimşek, 2018) or used qualitative methods (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2018, 2019b, 2019a; Zavalı & Şahin, 2018). All the studies mentioned above focused on the reasons for disaffiliation.

Aydın (1995) conducted a study with 152 people from Samsun, Ankara, and İstanbul who expressed a lack of belief in religion. In order to measure participants' attitudes towards religion, Aydın used an inventory developed reportedly based on the literature. However, within the study, no references were presented from the

literature for the resources used to develop the inventory. Another critical problem regarding the study was the presumptions and biases that were revealed by the language used. A few representative quotes from the study are presented below in order to demonstrate the biased language:

“Religion was attacked by various comments which were presumed to be rational.” (Aydın, 1995)

“The existence of God or any divine authority was questioned many times, and the reality behind the religious experience was clearly denied.” (Aydın, 1995)

The author also revealed that they considered doubt regarding religion or the existence of God as an undesirable situation. An example is presented below:

“The goal of the present study is to contribute to understand the psycho-social reasons of the behavior of denying religion which greatly influences one’s psychic life, and to gain a conscious approach towards this behavior that is an important problem.” (Aydın, 1995)

The results of Aydın’s study (1995) could be examined better in light of the limitations and the biases it carries, as in the case of all research within the literature. The study revealed that the restrictive aspect of religion, the status of women in Islam, restrictions regarding sexuality, the obligation to wear headscarf and cover body parts, the excessive punishments within Islamic law such as amputation and the death penalty accounted for 53% of the participants’ attitudes towards religion. 44.74% of the participants reported that they were influenced by Muslims’ actions, such as the Madımak massacre in 1993, the murder of Uğur Mumcu, or verbal assaults on secular people, as well as the pressure from the teachers, and the compulsory religious education in schools. 81,58% of the participants reported that they were affected by the Islamic exercises worldwide and the exploitation of religion. 48% of the participants reported praying despite their attitudes towards religion. 90,74% of the participants reported the influence of books on their attitudes towards religion. 94,74% of the participants reported as being highly influenced by intellectual improvement (Aydın, 1995).

One study was conducted with 1150 freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior high school students among ten schools in Adıyaman in order to understand

the prevalence of deism among high-school students (Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019). In their study revealed that 50,4% reported that they had faith and that they found rational and logical evidence regarding the existence of God; 27,2% reported doubts and problems regarding the existence of God; 1,4% reported disbelief, and 1% reported indifference towards the issue. They found that within Anatolian high schools, the ratio of doubt was higher among students compared to other types of high schools. The main aim of the study was to understand the prevalence of deist ideation among students, and the results revealed that over 20% of the students reported having no faith in “God’s intervention into the universe,” which has been determined as an important criterion for deist ideation by the researchers (Gündoğar & Yürgüç, 2019).

Another study regarding religious attitudes of students was a descriptive study conducted by Çayır (2014) from Dicle University’s Faculty of Theology. Çayır’s (2014) study attempted to understand the influences on adolescents’ doubts about and criticisms against religion. The study’s population consisted of 200 freshmen high school students (including one “*imam hatip*” high school) within the Çınar district of Diyarbakır. The study used a survey titled the “Survey of Religious Doubt, Faith, and Attitude” in order to measure students’ outlook for Islam; however, neither the source of the survey nor a reference regarding the measure was clarified within the study. Their results revealed that students differed in their religious attitudes as a function of their socio-economic status, gender, age, and the level of education of their families. Older students and students with lower socio-economic status scored higher on religious doubt. Female students scored higher on religious practices and praying compared to boys. Also, students whose parents had higher education levels perceived religion as a restrictive phenomenon. The study also demonstrated that religious doubt was mostly about the afterlife, divine providence, and the evil and the injustice of the world (Çayır, 2014).

Finally, Şimşek (2018) conducted a review of the studies conducted within Turkey and abroad regarding the deist and atheist inclinations among high school students and adolescents to better understand the reasons. They concluded that the process of going through adolescence was the main reason for religious doubts and

disaffiliation (Şimşek, 2018). The study also aimed to provide suggestions regarding the prevention of disaffiliation and the increase of atheist and deist identities among students. Similar to Aydın's study (1995), this research also contains a bias in favour of religious identities and against non-religious identities (Aydın, 1995; Şimşek, 2018).

1.2.1.2.2. Studies on Religious Disaffiliation in Literature from Turkey

In the literature, a few studies focused on disaffiliation from Islam to atheist and deist identities, all of which used qualitative methods (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2018, 2019b, 2019a; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). More relevant to the subject of the present study, Gülfil (2018, 2019a, 2019b) and Arslan (2016), both thesis studies, directly focused on the transition from Islam to atheism (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2018).

Zavalısz (2016) interviewed 25 university students (15 atheists and 10 deists) regarding their family relationships, the level of religious education they received from the families, their relationship to society in general, and the intensity of their prior religious practices. The participants were also asked about their doubts regarding religion, the reasons behind their disaffiliation, and whether they experienced a traumatic event that might have affected their decision to become atheists or deists. 76% of their participants reported either no attachment or a very weak attachment to Islam during the period in which they identified as Muslims. 32% of the participants reported that they had never engaged in Islamic practices, while only 1% of the participants performed religious practices on a regular basis. None of the participants were former members of Islamic congregations or cults. (Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). As in Aydın's study (1995), participants reported the influence of religious exploitation of religion on their disaffiliation (Aydın, 1995; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). In addition, participants also reported that they had difficulty in making sense of the narratives of miracles and that they were disappointed because of not receiving a response to their prayers. 64% of the participants reported that they have disaffiliated as a result of questioning the

Qur'an, Muslims, or creation. As a response to the researchers' question of whether they experienced a traumatic event related to their disaffiliation, 32% of the participants reported a traumatic event (such as the death of a loved one as a result of an accident, intense conflicts within the family, divorce of the parents, being separated from the mother). 44% of the participants reported that other atheist or deist acquaintances influenced them; 56% of the participants reported that they influenced others in the same way; and 36% reported that they might claim a religious identity again, someday (Zavalsız & Şahin, 2018).

Gülfil (2019a, 2019b) studied a sample consisting of 18 people who were members of the Atheists Association in Istanbul. The nature of the sample implied the representation of certain characteristics of the participants. The study mentioned these characteristics by referencing the main goals of the association, which were (1) to allow collaboration among atheists and non-religious people, (2) to introduce and popularize atheist arguments, (3) to support people and institutions which work for similar goals, (4) to fight against the use of religion and ideologies against atheists and non-religious people; and finally, (5) to advocate atheists' right of free speech. Gülfil's study had a similar bias as Aydın's, in favour of theism and the presumption of God's existence which was again implied by the use of language. An example of biased language, which was quoted from the literature review section in which she discussed the influence of modernism on disaffiliation, is presented below:

"Therefore, these types (of people), deny the creator with their grandiosity and their admiration of themselves by almost seeing themselves as God." (Gülfil, 2018)

Gülfil's research revealed that the reasons for participants' disaffiliation included their desire for liberty and independence, the adoption and prioritization of scientific, rational, and logical thinking, modernism and secularism, as well as issues regarding Islam, such as participants' perception of God, and the ubiquity of evil in the world (which was referred to as "the problem of evil" within the discourse of philosophy of ethics (Le Poidevin, 2004)). According to the results of the analysis, the participants of the study perceived God as a "punishing," "scary,"

“pain-inflicting,” and a “cruel” being. (Gülfil, 2018). Based on the results and the data of the subject study, Gülfil (2019a) attempted to understand the reasons for the participants’ perception of God as a negative figure using descriptive and content analysis methods. Their analyses revealed that negative and traumatic experiences, as well as emotional factors related to financial difficulties and the problem of evil, contributed to the development of a negative God perception in participants (Gülfil, 2019a). Gülfil (2019b) interpreted the results with regards to the influence of secularism on becoming an atheist. Participants perceived secularism as being “modern,” “contemporary,” “progressive,” as well as relating to the adoption of a rational, scientific perspective and universal principles. They found that secularism, although not directly leading to atheist ideas, contributed to the formation of a world view and a perspective that shape their perception of religion (Gülfil, 2019b).

Lastly, Arslan’s study (2016) attempted to understand the reasons for the transition from Islam to atheism. In their study, Arslan considered the process of becoming an atheist as a conversion process (based on the literature on religious conversion) and referred to studies in Turkey that discussed disaffiliation within the frame of religious conversion (Arslan, 2016; Hökelekli & Çayır, 2006; Kayıklık, 2005). As part of their research, Arslan interviewed 30 people who had disaffiliated and became atheists. They found that being raised by a more secular family, having more leftist political values, being Alevi, male, and having a higher education degree were factors that made participants’ transition processes relatively easier to go through compared to participants with other backgrounds (Arslan, 2016). Although specifically focused on a transition from Islam to atheism, Arslan’s study (2016) investigated the period solely before the identity change. The present study offers a holistic approach by attempting to understand the before and aftermath of the change, including the transition process, with particular attention to the identity aspect of the issue.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS

Individuals who met all three criteria below were eligible to participate in this study:

- a) Individuals who used to identify as Muslims later disaffiliated and became atheists,
- b) Individuals who currently define themselves as atheists; although their definition of atheism differed,
- c) Individuals older than 18 years old were eligible to participate in this study.

Participants were mainly contacted through convenience sampling using personal contacts, clinical psychology e-mail groups, and the social media platforms and Whatsapp groups of certain universities.

Twelve people who met the criteria above volunteered to join the study. Two of the participants' interviews had to be excluded from the study due to technical failures regarding audio recording. Among the remaining ten participants (five identified as female, four as male, and one as non-binary), all were raised in Turkey. Although all participants had Muslim religious background, their identities differed with regards to certain affiliations. While some participants were relatively secular Muslims, half of the participants came from traditionally Muslim families, which means they identified as Muslim but were secular and not particularly religious, or religious but not deeply informed regarding the religious teachings. Three participants had families that had connections with cults and political Islamist congregations and identified as religious Mus. Participants' ages differed from 21 to 34. Eight of the participants were living in the metropolises, one was living in a smaller city in Anatolia, and one was living in a foreign country. All participants had a high level of education; one had a master's degree, two were enrolled in

masters' programs, three had a graduate degree, and two were graduate students. The SES levels of participants differed from low SES to middle SES.

Table 2.1. Demographics of Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Education	City
Amber	F	24	MA Student	Europe
Bronze	M	21	BA Student	Metropole
Emerald	M	31	BA Graduate	Metropole
Indigo	M	34	MA Graduate	Metropole
Magenta	F	30	MA Student	Metropole
Mustard	M	32	BA Graduate	Metropole
Olive	N-B	24	BA Student	Metropole
Ruby	F	28	MA Student	Metropole
Silver	F	21	BA Student	Metropole
Violet	M	25	BA Graduate	Small city

2.2. PROCEDURE

After the approval of Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Board, the prepared announcement of the study (APPENDIX A), which contained brief information about the purpose of the study, the researcher and the consultant, the estimated amount of time to complete the interviews, the participation criteria, and contact information was shared with the platforms mentioned above as well as the researcher's personal contacts. Those who volunteered to participate reached the

researcher via the contact information provided in the announcement. Afterward, the detailed information regarding the interview process and the informed consent form (see APPENDIX B) was sent to all participants via e-mail, and participants were asked to declare their consents by replaying the e-mail sent. Interviews were conducted online via the digital meeting software Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Upon the approval of the informed consent form, a time and date for the interviews were decided together with the participants, and the researcher sent the Zoom link for the interview to the participants.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (see APPENDIX C for interview questions) were used for the data collection process. The interviews lasted between 75 to 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded using two different digital record devices (one as backup) placed near the computer speakers. After the completion of each interview, the audio records were transcribed by the researcher.

In order to ensure participants' confidentiality, interviews were conducted in a place where the researcher can remain alone and uninterrupted. Participants were asked to ensure the same conditions within their chosen interview place. The researcher took some notes with the permission of the interviewees with the intention of keeping a record of the participants' nonverbal cues and keeping track of the interview. The records were transcribed while the wi-fi connection was turned off, and all the documents, including the transcriptions, audio records, and the MAXQDA folder, were secured with passwords and restored in a separate memory device. All the identifying information of participants was concealed considering confidentiality issues.

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to evaluate participants' experience of religious identity change, Thematic Analysis Method was used to analyse the data. This method was first developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for this study because it is a valuable method of analysis to describe and systematize a complex data set comprehensively by identifying patterns that reappear within data. The

thematic analysis also suggested providing the advantage of fitting into various theoretical frames (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher took notes both during the interviews and after in order to reflect on the participants and the theme of the project. MAXQDA, a software developed for qualitative data analysis, was used for coding the interviews and generating themes. Before starting the coding process, audio transcriptions were read two times in order to gain familiarity and a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. After a detailed coding of the data, the patterns that emerge across the codes were identified. The emerging themes and subthemes were discussed by the researcher and the advisor and rearranged in its final organization. For member-checking, all participants were sent an e-mail containing the identified themes and subthemes and a brief summary of the study results (see APPENDIX D). Participants were asked via e-mail if the themes and subthemes represent their experiences and were requested to share any comments or objections. The final organization of the themes and the results were made based on participants' feedback.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

This section will present the themes and subordinate themes derived from the interviews conducted with 10 participants. The analyses will be supported by the translated quotes from the participants' narratives. As a result of the data analysis, four main themes were identified, which are: Being Muslim, Experiencing a Conflict Between Islam and Self, Becoming One's Own Person, and Living with a New Identity.

The titles and the content of the themes were reconsidered according to the feedback received from the participants during the member-checking process. Most of the participants agreed that the themes and sub-themes reflect their experiences. One of the participants, Magenta, wanted to emphasize the importance of experiencing an internal conflict in her story, stating that it was the main issue she wanted to communicate when she volunteered for the study. Another participant, Olive, expressed their concerns regarding the term "leaving the fishbowl," which may sound Islamophobic and offensive to some readers and participants. The reasons that this phrase was used will be explained in more detail under the sub-theme. However, the feedback is essential in that it invites the researcher and the reader to be careful against biased interpretations. Olive also reported their wish to emphasize that the reasons for becoming an atheist was not solely related to positive or negative experiences with Islam but rather was the result of a process that was influenced by many other reasons, such as having other identities that have conflictual aspects with Islam, or other negative or positive experience that are irrelevant of religion, such as career choices or experiencing traumatic experiences. Therefore, it is also critical to indicate that understanding the reasons that directly influence the change process is beyond the scope of this study, and the experiences of participants, indeed, reflect many factors that interact with each other play a role in this process. The data results can inform us regarding the contributing factors;

however, to reach conclusions regarding the cause-and-effect relationships, further studies with qualitative methods are required.

It is also important to note that despite the fact that all participants transitioned from Islam to atheism, their identity change trajectories differed reflecting each participants' unique experiences and conditions. In the next page is a simplified summary of the different identity change processes of all participants. All the processes that participants went through individually is more complex and detailed however the summary is included for brevity reasons:

Table 3.1. Participants' Identity Change Trajectories

Participant	Religious Background
Amber	Secular > becomes religious > discovers Sufism > becomes pantheist > becomes atheist
Bronze	Former political Islamist > involves in a congregation > leaves congregation > becomes atheist
Emerald	Secular family > becomes atheist
Indigo	Former political Islamist > family is a member of a cult > transfers from cult to a congregation > leaves congregation > becomes atheist
Magenta	Traditionally Muslim family > becomes atheist
Mustard	
Olive	Traditionally Muslim family > converts to Christianity > becomes atheist
Ruby	Traditionally Muslim family > becomes atheist
Silver	Traditionally Muslim family > becomes atheist
Violet	Former political Islamist > family is a member of a cult > becomes atheist

3.1. BEING A MUSLIM

Although all participants formerly identified as Muslims, they all had different backgrounds regarding their religious identity. Some of the participants came from families who were in close connection with a certain Islamic cult (*tariqat*) or a political Islamist congregation (*cemaat*), some of them came from relatively religious families who were independent in their practice, while some others were raised in relatively secular Muslim families (the last two will be mentioned from time to time as “traditionally Muslim families”). In addition to these differences, their experiences with Islam and interactions with their immediate circle also varied. These differences were discussed in more detail under the subthemes of Positive Experiences with Islam and Negative Experiences with Islam.

3.1.1. Positive Experiences with Islam

This sub-theme encapsulates participants’ experiences that they found helpful and beneficial when they identified as Muslim. One of the main aspects of these experiences was to attribute positive qualities to God and their relationship with God. These included seeing God as a protective, forgiving, and compassionate being that looks out for people’s wellbeing.

Ruby, who was raised in a relatively secular family, described her perception of God when she was a Muslim as follows:

“There’s someone who protects you from all kinds of things or that there is a being that sees what a good person you are and who can see the challenges you face is an unbelievably comfortable thing.”

The positive attributions to God were also accompanied by the perceived sense of love, in other words, love of God and being loved by God. Bronze, who was coming from a more religious family that had loose connections with an Islamic congregation, explains how he understood religion as a child:

“...my connection to religion, like I said, emm... used to associate with a cozy environment, I mean being a part of an institution, with friends... and doing things for God’s will, and that God loves us and that we love each other, it meant mostly these sorts of things when I was a child.”

Positive experiences with Islam also included finding answers within Islam to the difficult questions of existence, such as the purpose of life, finding meaning, and a sense of direction, all of which helped to deal with the fear of death. Sometimes, however, the fear stems from Islamic teachings themselves. For example, Magenta, a woman raised in a small, conservative city and learned Islam via her aunt, who became radically religious when Magenta was a toddler, shared her memory of a religious gathering in which an older adult told stories regarding the afterlife and hell. She reported her reasoning at that age which helped her to deal with the fear that resulted from what she overheard:

“This (prayer) was my escape, I thought; if I can make God happy, emm... I am not going to experience that fear, that fear of death, that void, that darkness...”

Similar to dealing with difficult questions and mortality, participants also stated that they experienced a sense of peace and relief from troubles when they used to pray. Olive, a non-binary who experienced a lot of difficulty in Islam due to their sexual expression and orientation, expressed their feelings of peace during prayers:

“Sometimes I really used to feel very serene like a feeling of vanishing. There used to be a feeling as if you leave everything behind and just relax there...”

Lastly, participants also reported the positive experience of a sense of belongingness, warmth, and togetherness, which they felt as Muslims. As an all-knowing being, God was also perceived to know right from wrong. Participants expressed feelings of being on the right track when they focused on their faith and religious practices. They saw God as a guide for them to “become a good person.” Indigo, a formerly religious man raised in a family connected with an Islamic cult, later in high school transferred to a religious congregation and left his family’s cult. He described this sense of belongingness as follows:

“Belonging to this community, therefore, provided a feeling of belonging to an elite, zealous minority. You were like one of the chosen absolute good ones; I, mean the sorts of good people which you can see in the Lord of the Rings, etc.”

He also explained how he used to feel that he was a part of a community that deserves to triumph:

“I, as a community, at that period, saw myself as the member of a community which was victimized in its righteous fight and which one day will declare shariah.”

Here, being victimized can also be listed among the negative experiences in relation to Islam. However, the negative quality of this concept is relatively ambivalent since participants also described that they derive a feeling of self-esteem and privilege out of this victimization. Other positive and negative experiences can also have ambivalent quality, and none is mutually exclusive. Although some participants had predominantly positive experiences while others mainly had negative experiences, almost all participants reported experiences that involved both positive and negative aspects.

3.1.2. Negative Experiences with Islam

Like its counterpart, participants’ negative experiences with Islam included the description of a bad God, which bore characteristics such as being vindictive, punishing, unattainable, judgmental, angry, and scary. Olive, quoted above depicting the peace they felt when praying, talked about their conversion from Islam to Christianity before becoming an atheist. Below, they describe how afraid they were of Islam’s God and how they used to imagine God:

“What I remember about religion from childhood is all fear, like I used to imagine God as like, emm like a white thing, sorry ... like a white silhouette and something scary that has round things in their eyes and their mouth, something that does not have a particular shape, (...), so I imagined something like that, and I was very scared as a child.”

Fear, the most frequent code from the data, was an essential ingredient of most participants’ negative experiences with Islam. Fear of God was one aspect of

this experience, while other aspects included fear of demons, fear of hell, fear of angels, and fear of the family. Silver, who was forced to wear a headscarf by her family, and sometimes punished by physical violence due to her sexual curiosity, expressed that she was afraid of her family with regards to their religious expectations as below:

“...Religion is a little bit, for me, if I have to associate it, it is really associated with fear of family. Being afraid of the family, being afraid of enforcements that may come from the family....”

Below, Silver also described her parents’ expectation to conceal her body and repress her sexuality due to their religious beliefs. She continued by adding the inhibitory, restrictive qualities that were associated with the religious culture she was raised in:

“...I was always exposed to these things and feeling bad; for example, if I wear skinny jeans, I mean I must not wear it... or I had to wear my elder sisters’ old clothes, so it was always associated with a bitter feeling, always a prohibition.”

Another participant Mustard, raised by a traditionally Muslim family, explained the influence of his grandmother, who was known in their village as a “saintly” person who was highly respected. Mustard described the fear he used to feel when he thought about the angels believed to fly on people’s shoulders and write down their sins and good deeds. The experience of being monitored was reportedly a negative experience regarding Islam for other participants as well. Mustard’s expression also implies the expectation of receiving punishment from God, especially with regards to sexual activities:

“... you are always being monitored, and someone writes down everything you do. I remember I found it really scary. Emm, yes, I used to think that all the time, I used to find myself thinking about it. After I die, they will take out the notebooks and speak everything I did and made. I needed to be careful then; for example, it also affected me when I was a teenager. You are masturbating; you need to do the whole-body ablution (a ritual that needs to be performed after sexual activity according to Islam), and I never masturbated if I could not do the ablution. I was thinking I need to do it right now, I got very dirty now, I feel very dirty now, it used to end up

there, and then you cannot help but start to think about everything related to heaven and hell.”

In sum, the most comprehensive aspect of the negative experiences with Islam was identified to be fear. The experience of fear was mostly related to subjects of sins, fear of punishment, going to hell, and most commonly, sexuality and body.

3.2. EXPERIENCING A CONFLICT BETWEEN ISLAM AND SELF

The transformation from Islam to atheism, at its core, harbours a conflict between Islam’s values and participants’ own values. This conflict was triggered when they left their usual social environment and met people with different identities or met different ideas. Although varying in their nature, these new encounters marked the beginning of an inquiry and a process of exploration. While some of the participants dived right in this discovery, some struggled to maintain their Muslim identity before they felt sure and secure to move forward.

3.2.1. Leaving the Fishbowl

This sub-theme describes the new encounters that participants experienced and encouraged them to question their faith, leading them to obtain a new perspective. The title was an in vivo code named after some of the participants’ expressions to depict their early environment. One of the participants, Olive, during the member-check process, reported their concerns regarding the term, stating that it might sound Islamophobic. Therefore, it is important to note that the term “fishbowl” does not depict Islam or the Muslim identity but rather the encounters and the stimuli from the participants’ early environment. For example, Bronze, who had a relatively moderately religious family, described his childhood environment as a “fishbowl,” a Turkish idiom that suggests an isolated environment with limited variety and stimulation:

“By the way, I, almost until I finished high school, you know the phrase ‘living in a fishbowl’ it was just like that for me, I didn’t know other lives very much. Emm... I also didn’t know other people very much either.”

If not with the exact phrase, many of the participants described, as termed by another participant Indigo, “a fishbowl effect,” where they were exposed to little diversity in their environment, especially in terms of identities and opinions. The content of the encounter that triggered their process differed for each participant, as mentioned above. For some, the breaking point involved encounters with new people who had identities or ideas that were new to them, such as someone with a different religious or socio-economic background, an atheist, someone with an opposing political opinion, or new experiences, such as falling in love. For others, it was the first time they indulged in an activity prohibited by Islam, such as consuming alcohol, enjoying a sexually intimate experience, or skipping prayers. For most participants, separating from the family residence was a key component of leaving the influence of the initial environment behind.

One of the participants, Violet, who grew up in a small neighbourhood in which almost all residents were members of a regional cult, and as a former member of the cult who used to spend his time mostly doing religious practices, talked about his feelings when he finally found himself in a different social environment after high school:

“Because now, people around me study incredibly, etc., and they have a little bit of fun, so, you think, I mean, there is a world out there, flowing, and it is convenient. So, you cannot try to abstain from your urges (nefsini köreltmek). You just realize that it is a vain effort. So, your practices start to change. I don’t know... if you are going to pray, or whatever it is that you’re going to do, instead you hang out with friends (...) later, although minorly, your world starts to change, and when my discomfort decreased in time, I mean it decreases in time, it happens through time.”

Violet here described a new environment whereby he started to distance himself from his religious practices and religious community; in other words, the outside of the fishbowl gradually led him to his new identity. However, the direction of the transformation from Islam to atheism was not linear for all participants. This

leads us to our second subordinate theme, which is about how participants discovered different identities and how their relationship to each changed along the process.

3.2.2. Trying to Discover New Possibilities

Participants Amber and Bronze talked about a period in which their religiosity increased and transformed. Bronze explained that the high school he attended had a more religious identity which he later adapted himself to. On the other hand, for Amber, the breaking point that strengthened her religious identity was reaching puberty. She shared the details of her experiences as follows:

“There was hearsay information, like for women, your sins begin to be counted; for example emm, and for example, I remember that when I had my first period, there was, I found an ilmihal (a guidebook for teaching Islamic values and practices), and I remember reading it, to learn what I need to do now emm... and, actually, for example, ilmihal can be the beginning of my religious readings, after that, I started to read religious stuff more, that day might be it.”

She described her religious identity at the time as a relatively rigid and intolerant identity by which she judged other people, and especially her mother, for not carrying out religious practices. Later, she came across another breaking point when she met Sufism. This new approach, in her own words, “softened” her rigid religious identity, leading her to become a pantheist before deciding that she was an atheist.

The nonlinear change that Amber and Bronze went through followed a different direction for Indigo, who was at first a member of a cult and then transferred to a religious congregation which her father disapproved of. He described this transformation as a much more radical change for his life compared to becoming an atheist because he thought that the change from a Sufi cult (which required surrender through abandoning rational thinking) to a congregation that based their teachings solely on reasoning and logic, facilitated the rational inquiries that would eventually lead him to become an atheist.

Olive, another participant who discovered different identities along the process, explored Christianity after they disaffiliated from Islam. For them, the change did not only involve discovering different identities but also the process of accepting their sexual identity and sexual orientation, two important topics that caused significant internal conflict for many participants.

While for some, discovering sexuality could only start after their disaffiliation process, for others, it started much earlier and sparked the process of change. Silver disclosed that she discovered sexual activities at an early age by secretly enjoying sexual pleasure or “revolting behind the curtains.” She explained that her sexual curiosity had always put a distance between her and Islam. After separating from her family home for college, she started to experiment with sex. This period of discovery prompted her transition while also causing a lot of guilt and fear:

“So, I’m scared of something, something is happening, I’m changing, I’m feeling something, I really want that part, I want to be with someone, to be someone’s girlfriend but I also want to experience different things; and on the other hand, this inhibitory part, scary part, the part that I still have to hide things from, scared me so much. For example, I remember constantly crying when I return from my boyfriend’s house; I used to cry a lot because I had sex that day, because I was scared.”

Discovering new possibilities was experienced as an academic and intellectual curiosity for most participants. For example, Mustard talked about how he challenged himself to find satisfying answers for his philosophical queries and found it necessary to move forward:

“I was thinking that if I was going to crash it at some point, depart from it completely... then I have to force myself into it; I need to earn that departure, I guess.”

3.2.3. Managing Internal Conflict

Leaving the fishbowl and the new discoveries it brought about generated a lot of confusion, guilt, shame, desperation, and fear for some participants. Participants reported varying strategies or mechanisms in order to deal with all this internal conflict. One of them was the spontaneous or deliberate reaction to take religion as a reference when they found themselves in a conflict, while another was to avoid thinking about the conflictual issues altogether. One other strategy, especially at the beginning of the process, was trying to find ways to conserve their religious identity and faith.

Emerald started getting curious, questioning the existence of God and religion after his roommates started to talk about atheism. He elaborated on the conflict he experienced between the part of himself that wanted to maintain the faith and another part that had doubts and questions:

“Because at the same time, that also means a lot of battles of thoughts in your brain; because at the beginning, a part of you still wants to have faith. But the things you read make a lot of sense, I mean. So, how to say, whether what you want, whether what you wish prevails or your logic- there is really a battle there, I mean you battle against your brain, I think.”

The conflict between their inner experience (such as doubts, desires, and curiosity) and their religious identity could be challenging. Violet described how hard he found it to accept the change he was going through as follows:

“Religion is something that can pervade all your world; so, when you are fighting it, you are fighting all your friends, etc., really fighting your whole world. I mean, this- it is very difficult for one to step outside and look from a distance.”

Similarly, another participant, Mustard, described how strong the influence of religion was on him and how difficult it was for him to move away:

“I was feeling that I shifted towards there (atheism) a little more, but that (religion) was so powerful. I mean, now that I look back, it was the recent past, I mean that background, that upbringing, those rituals were so powerful, I couldn't let them go somehow because it felt like a comfortable and peaceful space.”

Like Violet and Mustard, who shared their experience regarding the strong pull of their former identities, Silver explained that, even after she strayed from her religious practices and discovered new activities that are forbidden in Islam, such as having sex or drinking, she found it very difficult to make a statement about her newly forming identity:

“There was such a great fear because of that perception of God. Because still somewhere there was a fear that prevents me from saying that I am not a Muslim; I mean, I had such an attitude that I thought: ‘I just cannot do my practices somehow, but I can still say that I am Muslim, whatever.’ Even to myself, I was saying: ‘Why wouldn’t I say that I am a Muslim, I am afraid of God, I pray when I am afraid.’”

Silver’s statement also involves an avoidant reaction by which she tries to evade from thinking about questions regarding her identity. Magenta, another female participant, gradually moved away from religious practices starting from high school and met with feminist ideas in college, which confused her about her religious identity. Similar to Silver, Magenta also talked about her avoidant reaction as below:

“So, I realized that I don’t want to pray, I don’t want to fast. One part of me says: “You don’t want it because you know it’s nonsense,” but another part of me says: “okay, we don’t talk about these, okay, now you are just being lazy, God will forgive you, and you will do these when you have time, you live in a dorm,” etc., was what I told to myself.”

The internal conflict that participants experienced and their avoidance response to it also involved a counterpart where the participants felt they were being hypocritical because they still kept their practices even though they knew, deep down, that they were not entirely convinced. Silver, who struggled to avoid confronting her identity change, had talked earlier to her father about wanting to take out her headscarf because she felt hypocritical wearing it while she did not fully believe that she should:

“I remember telling my father: “I don’t want to wear the headscarf anymore, I don’t feel like it; I feel insincere because I don’t do it believingly, I feel hypocritical, I am not going to keep doing it.”

Magenta also shared that she felt hypocritical about the process when she avoided confronting her transformation. She expressed her pride in managing to take that step:

“It is very hypocritical; I mean to postpone these, to make excuses about these. I am proud of myself now that I clarified it instead of doing it half-heartedly. I feel honest and brave; I had that confrontation even though it was difficult.”

In addition to evading the issue, another common mechanism that participants remembered using, in retrospect, was to actively urge themselves to keep their faith. Mustard described how he found himself turning to religion when he felt his inner experience conflicted with Islam or when he felt confused about the new ideas and questions in his mind:

“I used to think that homosexuality wasn’t natural (...) again, similarly when some things didn’t match up, I feel that I used to turn towards that side. (...) if something didn’t match up in my head, I used to validate it through religion. I used to validate whether this is right or wrong through faith; this is the way it was when I went through that process.”

Silver remembered putting in a more conscious effort in order to convince herself into believing, but at the same time, having an internal conflict between the desire (partly due to feeling obliged) to believe and an unwillingness regarding the practices:

“I was trying to believe, as I mentioned; I was trying to understand the rationale. I really was trying to understand the underlying logic; I was curious and wanting to ask (...) then, one part of me wanted to believe because of the obligation, but another part of me wanted to stay away, for example, from the obligation to pray.”

The internal conflict that resulted from leaving their metaphorical fishbowl gave birth to an emerging identity in participants, certain parts of which competed with their faith and religious identities. Accompanying this battle, participants reportedly went through a process of self-acceptance by which they became

acquainted with formerly repressed, concealed, or ignored parts of themselves. According to participants' narratives, this process helped them develop a new, claimed identity that was expressed as more unique and authentic.

3.3. BECOMING ONE'S OWN PERSON

The rules and obligations of Islam inflicted guilt and shame regarding certain aspects of their experiences, such as sexual desire or general curiosity about life and existence. Apart from the negative feelings it caused, Islam's teachings also gave them a readymade direction and purpose in life. The process of questioning their faith and moving away from Islam was accompanied by a sense of loss and a new search for meaning.

Participant Bronze communicated that when he was a Muslim, he was used to the fact that religion determined everything in his life and expressed the comfort he felt around this convenience. He described the difficulty he experienced during his disaffiliation process due to not being able to rely on religion as a reference point:

"This time, I had realized that for some things I needed to decide for myself, that was the hardest part, directing my life by myself from then on. I couldn't adapt to that for a long time."

After leaving Islam, participants reported being alone in their quest for purpose, and they expressed the difficulty they had dealt with while trying to build their own values to pursue. This led to both the difficulty in terms of having more responsibility for their decisions and the benefit of having more agency in their lives.

The process of building a new identity seemed to consist of three stages which may co-exist and are not linear: Surviving the difficulties the process of identity change caused, resisting to assert and maintain an emerging identity as well as struggling with both psychological and social challenges, and growing by way of meaning-making and finding a purpose.

3.3.1. Surviving

Along the process of change, participants reported facing many challenges. The most common challenge was reported to be a sense of loss. In addition to describing the disaffiliation process as a loss in itself, such as losing God, losing faith, losing the advantages Muslim identity provided, participants also mentioned losing the support of their social environment, losing the love of their family, as well losing the sense of meaning and purpose in their life.

Olive, a non-binary gay, encountered a lot of social and psychological difficulties along the process. They reported that when they were Muslim, they used to be discriminated against and bullied because of their sexual expression. Due to the same reason, they were also oppressed by their family in many ways, including being forced to go to conversion therapy. Dealing with doubts and questions regarding religion, Olive was also, at the same time, struggling to handle the trauma of conversion therapy, having difficulty in meeting their academic responsibilities, and dealing with the injury and hurt caused by the family. They described this overwhelming period of their life:

"...at that point, I was like, "I have lost God; the God didn't exist either," so I already emm ended up somewhere like "I don't belong in this world." Since I was born, I was born as a male, but since I was born, they have (also) been telling me I am not a man, emm... I try to be a man emm... and they still keep ridiculing me; my family doesn't love me, there is no God. I have also messed up academically, and in this process, I was also consumed psychologically, emm I had lost all sexual desire and romantic desire, and the therapist at that time, the guy who gave the so-called conversion therapy, repair therapy emm said, "you are on a neutral stage now, from homosexuality, you are moving towards heterosexuality, look, you made it halfway." In fact, I was dying, and at the time, I was already undone academically; my family was not by my side; also, there was no God, so I collapsed psychologically."

Similar to Olive, who had to deal with profound loneliness, many participants experienced different types of loneliness in this process. Emerald wryly

shared an anecdote with his mother, who refused to cook for him during Ramadan because he was not fasting. He communicated that he felt lonely and discriminated by his mother, which made him think about the loneliness his new identity brought about within society in general:

“That type of thing hurts one because you feel lonely. In school, we are a total of two or three people who can talk about these things; maybe these kinds of things make you feel lonely, maybe it is also related to the social structure. For example, if I were in England or Germany or Holland or Norway, these kinds of places, it wouldn’t be a problem... but if you are doing this (being an atheist) in a country such as Turkey, this is a problem because you are in a place where big masses oppose and the psychic difficulty, I mean was not to the extent that would drive me to depression or despair due to my decision, but these sorts of little moments in which I felt lonely, I got very angry, and I felt people tried to devalue me.”

Violet also described the feeling of loneliness and alienation he felt when he no longer believed in Islam. The phrases he used hints that he was convinced that somehow, he or his decision to stop believing was responsible for the losses he experienced:

“Emm suddenly, including your family, you wipe out all your support because they are to you, and you are to them, an enemy. When you express an opinion or something, they don’t want to stand by you anymore.”

Indigo described the loneliness that came with losing the sense of belonging he used to feel when he was with his friends from the Islamic congregation that he was a member of. In addition, he also faced a lot of difficulty in terms of his relationships with the family:

“That belongingness to a group caused a lot of work later because it is not something that you can replace easily. With profound loneliness... that was not just because of the lack of belongingness to a group, but because all my family relationships suffered from deep wounds which needed to be repaired, primarily my nuclear family. I left the medical school simultaneously, so it was a double-edged thing, emm that process was challenging for me, and I still, to some degree, have to deal with them.”

Later, Indigo commented that he felt he did not belong anywhere and how this caused a great sense of emptiness in his life. He described how he tried to refill the emptiness caused by the lack of belongingness, but he realized later that it was an emptiness that was to remain unfilled. This sense of emptiness was another common experience among participants, complementing the feeling of loss. Olive detailed the anxiety that was caused by this sense of emptiness as follows:

“... what if I die and God stands across me and says ‘who is your God?’ what am I going to say? (...) That’s why, from that moment on, everything became very meaningless to me, emm just reading religious books, thinking about Allah, thinking about God, and finding a creator. That was my greatest purpose, and not being able to find it created an enormous burden upon me, and I remember that it was such a great burden that I was crying in every corner I found.”

The search for something to replace the former religious faith and identity was also experienced by Bronze, who described how he tried to replace his Muslim identity with a new leftist identity and how he got attached to this new ideology the same way he used to be attached to Islam. Above, he had described how, as a Muslim, he had erased anything related to his own self and agency and completely dedicated his will to the service of God and Islam. He explained that, as a leftist atheist, he also dedicated himself entirely to transforming society. However, the same dynamic repeated itself here, leaving him with a sense of meaninglessness:

“In our minds, there was doing things for ourselves, for the people, doing things for the world, and I believed it almost as I believed in something divine. I was able to motivate myself thinking it is not going to happen now, maybe it will happen in the far future, but I was going to work for it. But this started to seem meaningless; I mean, I started to see what I did was ineffective; but also, mostly, I started to think if the things I want to do or the world I want to live in is going to happen hundred years later or never, why do I care?”

Magenta explained the difficulty generated by the lack of meaning religion readily provided and added the humility that resulted from this:

“...that existence doesn’t have a divine value makes it hard to endure sometimes; it makes it hard to make meaning out of life, make meaning out of your existence, and also maybe it makes it hard to boost my ego.”

Another difficulty participants faced pertained to family relationships. All participants came from Muslim families, some from highly religious ones who organized their lives mostly around religious teachings and sometimes that of a particular cult or congregation. Most participants expressed that they found it very difficult to disclose to their families their atheist identity. Some chose never to do so, while others tried to get their family accustomed to their secular lifestyle, if not their atheist identity. Raised by a family whose members were in relation with an Islamic cult, Indigo was one of those who struggle to maintain a relatively good relationship with his family members but just like others, he experienced a lot of conflict and challenge regarding maintaining that relationship:

“This was the beginning of a very upsetting process for my family, of course, because until that day, (...) I was on a path that promises bliss in both this world and the other world in which they believed, and that would make them proud as members of the society, but suddenly I left both.”

Although she came out to her mother, Ruby still found it difficult to express her atheist identity in other social contexts due to the stigma this identity carries in society:

“If every atheist declared their identities, then probably a war would break out in the country.”

The stigma the participants reported feeling extends to many identities they carry. Muslim identity is not exempt from stigma itself in specific social contexts. Along with that, those who have identities that conflict with mainstream Islam, such as being a vegetarian, being LGBTI+ or being a feminist, face a lot of challenges as Muslims. In addition to being Muslim and being an atheist, being an atheist who used to be a Muslim also brings its own concerns regarding social stigma, as described below by Violet:

“You realize the hypocrisy and the nonsense of the people in the world, their political errors emm, etc., and when you say something, they judge you by your

earlier period, saying things like “you were already a Muslim, you are a Muslim” things like that.”

Violet was raised in a small place where the people in his village, including his family, were mostly members of a particular cult. He found it very difficult to come out as an atheist and explained the challenges of living with a stigmatized identity:

“A lot of people – I didn’t either mention it to my family, lots of people don’t mention it, don’t mention it to their friends, or their old friends, etc. I am not seeing my old friends at all. Because it had to be this way, I mean they were always going to judge you anyway.”

Silver was also raised in an oppressive family that forced her to wear the headscarf and practice religion. She explained having a conflictual relationship with religion even when she was little and always tried to find a way to be away from her family and be free from oppression. She explained she became more and more independent after years of effort, but that still felt as if she was living a double life. In the passage below, she explained how, in order to feel safe, she felt obliged to conform to her family and conceal her true identity when she was with them:

“Still, there is a lot, emm at least when I am with them, there are a lot of codes I still need to follow. Dress codes, for example, emm I cannot wear a mini skirt when I am with them, they never knew that I wear them, for example. Or, for example, when they call me, ending the call saying “blessed be your evening,” etc., the fact that all these codes still remain.”

Despite all the difficulty they had to survive, participants also found a lot of ways to struggle and fight against the challenges they faced in the process.

3.3.2. Resisting

The mechanisms and strategies participants used to deal with the problems they faced during the process varied for each participant. Sometimes participants tried more direct ways like confrontation, political idealism, or revolting, while other times, they resorted to less direct or less proactive ways to protect themselves

from suffering more harm through discrimination, isolation, or exclusion. The above quote from the interview with Silver is also an example of struggling to maintain the family relationship by conforming to their values while she was with them and living her life the way she wanted when she was away. The passive resistance she had followed was also accompanied by an active resistance through which she established certain boundaries for herself. She described the ways of fighting against her family, the ambivalence she experienced towards the idea of coming out, maintain her inner struggle, and the double life she somehow managed to live throughout the process:

“... there is still a Silver in me who feels captivated, who is scared and still, when I go there this increases a lot; but when I come to ((the city)), I see a woman who tries to build her own life, who tries to support herself, who tries to finish her school and invests in knowing herself <her voice trembles>. I see a person who put a lot of effort into constructing this identity. Sometimes, that scary part of me still tries to grab my feet and pull me down, there is still this part of me who is really scared <tears come down>, but I am still at a point where I am still learning, questioning emm but to be clear, I want not to fear God anymore. This is my general attitude now. I don't want to believe in anything irrational; I don't want to be scared like my family did to me; I don't want to be scared by supernatural things. I want to arrive at a point where I can be free of these fears, and I am still struggling to do that, but there is this part that I hide and pretend, unfortunately.”

Coming from a strictly religious family which claimed a lot of authority in her life, Silver strived to find a balance between asserting herself and maintaining her family relationships.

Similarly, Indigo, who came from a strictly religious family and used to be a religious radical himself, struggled to find a balance between asserting his identity and trying to remain non-threatening for his family:

“The responsibility to be the repairing party emm became my responsibility because, at the beginning of the process in their eyes, I was a young man who was corrupted and will burn in hell forever, and now I go to theirs as a middle-aged man who does not live up to their standards, they love me very much, and I love

them very much. With small steps, I moved forward in a way that would extend my realm of freedom emm I didn't sever my ties with them."

Violet, who came from a similar background to Indigo, described the difficulty of leaving religion behind and how much courage it took:

"Most people have no financial support, no emotional support. No friends...emm when you look at the situation from this perspective, these are very sad things. I mean, it is as if you are someone who must always be excluded; I am sure those people who went through this are really good people; I haven't met anyone bad yet because emm I mean because these things take a lot of nerve. I mean I- thinking different from that world and go in and out, it takes a lot of nerve emm it takes holding your head up high."

The struggle was less prominent for other participants who came from relatively more secular families, and the resolution came more naturally. For example, having lost his father when he was in high school and going through the identity change after the incident, Emerald had to deal with conflict with his mother. He explained that at the beginning, when he was newly an atheist, he used to be very aggressive in asserting his identity, for example, by rejecting celebrating religious holidays. In the passage below, he tried to explain how his attitude towards his Muslim family changed as he aged:

"Well, later, when I got older, I understood that... Well, what is the point? What's the point of tension, I mean? Well, they are the people that I love, their belief, I mean they believe in it, they like it. Okay then. I can celebrate religious holidays. I still do, for example. I go visit my relatives during the holidays. I don't care about it that much. I mean, I don't think about atheism anymore, like that."

The struggle participants reported fighting, most involved their families or other close relationships. They strived to either conceal their identity in order to protect their relationships or tried to defend their identity as much as possible and maintain a balance between the two. For most of the participants, this was a significant issue. The way they dealt with this issue varied for each person, mostly depending on their relationship with their family and their relationship to their Muslim identity.

Silver, who had a loose connection with her Muslim identity since childhood, stated that she always had a problem with religious rules and either struggled to live up to them or revolted against them in secret:

“It was something that was always spinning around in my head, always scaring me, but despite all that, the rules I broke, the rules that were broken secretly, behind closed doors; (...) there was always that fear, that oppression, but within that, there was always breaking, secretly, breaking the rules; for example talking to boys was forbidden or doing anything that includes touching but I used to experience it on the virtual platforms when I first had a telephone....”

As seen from Silver’s example, the time of the struggle also changed. Sometimes the participants fought while maintaining connections to their Muslim identity; other times, they needed to fight against other challenges when they tried to live with their new atheist identities, with the struggle continuing anywhere in between. Olive described that when they became an atheist, they still needed to express their anger towards God or anything that God represented in their life even though they did not believe in it anymore:

“I remember buying gin and putting on horrible songs emm pulling my pants down to my knees. I mean, God, according to what I was taught, said: ‘cover from your knee up to your belly button.’ Emm, so I was covering anywhere God allowed and revealing anywhere God ordered to cover, and I was dancing and shouting and spitting anger when I was alone in the house; and I was doing it against God, like when I did that, I used to feel as if God was resenting me.”

Olive later found another way to redirect their anger by utilizing it in favor of political activism:

“Currently, I am running activism against this fear that was infused in children, emm this- ‘don’t do this, be like that,’ against this kind of normative perception, and in essence, the essence of this activism is completely based on this. I mean my anger towards what was done to me, that pressure that was put on me.”

Participants shared that, along the process of change, they met many challenges and discovered different ways to face, avoid or overcome these

challenges. That continuous striving led them to find ways also to thrive, grow, and self-actualize.

3.3.3. Growing

All participants described a process of self-knowing both as a result of and as contributing to their identity change. It started around latency or puberty and proceeded until now. For example, Indigo identified his romantic feelings for a woman as the leading factor for his departure from the religious congregation.

“I started to talk with the girl to whom I was attached with a strict platonic love for nearly three years... She’s in the next room right now; we are married; emm and that was for me emm required a vital change because, in the congregation, such a thing was unacceptable. I resisted it so much, but finally, emm somehow I couldn’t resist that feeling.”

The feelings of love that were awakened inside Indigo made it hard for him to stay in a congregation where it was forbidden to make any kind of contact with women. His feelings made it necessary for him to make certain changes in his life, which resulted in him gradually leading a more secular life and, in the end, becoming an atheist.

For all participants, a conflict was experienced between their own feelings, needs, desires, urges, and the requirements, teachings, and values of Islam. The participants then followed their inner callings, which led them to a stage where they felt the need to accept their desires, true identities and became curious about who they were. What ensued was a sense of knowing themselves, exercising more agency in life, and taking responsibility for building their own values by referencing, this time, their own inner realities instead of religion.

Bronze described the course of knowing himself as follows:

“I have realized that I do actually also have desires, feelings, things I want. I have never listened to them until now, and I never worked for them, but now I cannot reject them; otherwise, I mean, I won’t be able to live in this life; then, I even thought about committing suicide for a while, but emm I still had hope, too, I was

able to see an outlet. I was saying, 'If I try to obtain the things I wish, things I desire, maybe it will work out' Even though I found them very difficult and I wanted to work for them a little, it was very hard, but I managed to do them. Last year I started therapy."

Similar to Bronze, Silver also benefited from psychotherapy in the pursuit of knowing herself. For Silver, self-knowledge was also associated with knowing her sexual identity, understanding, and exploring the meaning of being a woman, as well as living up to her own idea of femininity:

"As I realized my femininity, I mean as I realized that I am a woman, I have my desires, I have an existence. Because the two went hand in hand; what the religion imposed and the concealment of my womanhood went hand in hand, and I couldn't realize it, I couldn't notice it for years."

Participants identified being honest to themselves to be an important aspect of getting to know themselves. In a humorous tone, Magenta compared her disaffiliation with ending a relationship and described her choice to confront her lack of belief as "a proper break-up" instead of "friend-zoning or ghosting God," which she considered being hypocrisy. She talked about the role of honesty in her case as below:

"The things I believe to be right and the things that soothe my consciousness, even though they are for my benefit or not, even though they are hard, I prefer to do them and be at peace with myself. Emm, hypocritically, because this is a very insincere thing for me if I plead God while I doubt God's existence, this is a very hypocritical thing: postponing these, making excuses about these. I am proud that I made it clear instead of doing it half-heartedly. Therefore, I feel honest and brave; I had the confrontation even though it was hard."

Participants connected their self-knowledge and self-candor to their learned capacity for questioning and critical thinking. They emphasized the importance of the methods and the procedures one resorts to in order to obtain knowledge. Having given up a specific narrative once, this time, they felt the need to be more careful and rigorous in terms of pursuing the truth. Silver described her own approach:

“I need to have a filter rather than the truth. Now, analytically this place (points to her head) needs to be working a lot, emm atheism is associated with a working brain, emm not a still paused mind that stopped questioning, as in my family. Because that one has paused, they turned off a lot of things years ago, but now, when I compare them to myself, emm I try to challenge those, I try to learn from those, I try to ask what I wonder about .”

Bronze also described his attitude towards obtaining information:

“We need to be very careful about how we obtain and how we produce information, and we need to think about it a lot; this is my perspective. And I emm instead of ready-made narratives, emm or information that comes from the easy way, the quick way, I think that the information needs to be produced through researching and researching how the researching is done, analyzing the methods, the theories; that life needs to be built upon this.”

The critical thinking skills that the participants reported as having acquired along this process of identity change seemed to have become their alternative ways to construct the values and moral codes that would guide their lives. They talked about this process both as liberation and as a burden due to the sense of responsibility it brought about.

“I mean, I want to build a world-view in my head, and I want to move forward by building it upon a sturdy ground. I mean I want to- I want it to be authentic, emm to be sincere.” (Amber)

Ruby talked about her opinions about having to build one’s own value system:

“You form your own ethics; I mean without being a part of something with people around you. I think this is a very important thing, emm because, I think doing something that contradicts your own ethical rules is less likely compared to not doing it due to fear of God.”

All the factors mentioned above ultimately carried participants to reach a stage when they felt more autonomy and agency in their lives. With this autonomy came a sense of responsibility along with a sense of freedom. Some participants articulated a feeling of the liberation of their minds, which they described as a relief

and activation of certain capacities of the mind that remained idle until that time. For example, Violet stated that his curiosity became manifest after his disaffiliation and talked about this experience as a capacity “set free.” His interpretation was that his religion was oppressing his ability to be curious because his mind was mostly occupied with prayers he missed and other religious practices. He is also one of the participants who experienced this change as a liberation among other things:

“Psychologically, I was unbelievably relieved. I mean, I don’t know, getting free from all these obsessions... I mean, I felt terrible, a lot of trauma and trauma, but when I lived through those, I was always under their influence I mean for a long time... for two years, or so I feel at ease; as I said, I had been under their influence for a long time. Despite that I lived through them, I lived through their traumas, being free from it, I mean, feels so good to me.”

Mustard talked about a similar liberation and relief he felt around issues regarding his transformation process:

“I describe it, to be honest, you know that rockets which go to space discharge their load and elevate; this is how I feel the taboos in my life. Even though my paternal family is Kurdish, emm I was raised with a strict Kemalist ideal, ideology, and I was educated so. There was also the homophobia that came with the religion; later- there was the religiosity also, and I discharged them one by one in my life through my education and my travels, gradually discharged them, first got rid of Kemalism to be honest, because it was very deified for me.”

Amber spoke about the sense of freedom she felt on the day she called “my first day without God.” She reported remembering a particular night at which she went to bed with the representation of God in her mind, and she woke up in the middle of the night to find that “God was gone.” Her narrative also describes the feeling of autonomy and control she felt in her life:

“That day, I remember walking the same road I always used to walk, but this time with no God. And, I mean, I always go to school, this is an effortless action, but that day I went there without a God. For example, this was a very, very different feeling; it was so liberating, unbelievably liberating because now you can think with your mind whatever the way you wish. Now your mind is only under your control.”

In getting to know themselves, participants also had the challenging opportunity to confront their more troubling attitudes; besides the initial and more natural process of identity change, they also pushed themselves to change in other, more self-improving ways. Indigo detailed the changes he underwent throughout this period:

“At first, I was a person who imposed upon her (his wife) certain clothes and certain behavior patterns; now it changes. Also, socially, I used to be very self-conscious about my roles in many relationships and have tried to change them.”

He continues as follows:

“My relationship with women became more liberal during university mostly. I also opened up a little bit in the university preparation course and also in the medical school a little bit, but it reached the most civilized level at the university. Besides, in my social relationships- the brotherhood mood that comes from the brother position I used to have- it again caused distance between me and some of my close friends with whom I had long-term friendships; because I used to feel responsible for other people’s actions. I used to feel an impulse to correct them. It was something exactly based on religion, I mean not readily being able to set the limits of your knowledge and your authority and intervene in others’ lives sometimes as manifest judgment and sometimes behaviourally.”

3.4. CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH IDENTITIES

This subtheme pertains to participants’ changing relationship to their atheist identity and other people’s identities. The change and variety participants experienced within the frame of their Muslim identity was discussed above (see. 3.1). Similarly, participants also experienced a change within their atheist identities, and diversity was observed in their relationship to their atheist identities. Similarly, their attitudes towards and relationship with other Muslims and other atheists also showed variation.

Regarding their relationship with other Muslims, there were two central attitudes: having an Islamophobic period and experiencing difficulty understanding

other Muslims who lived more secular lives but did not make the choice they had. Some participants, for example, reported that they had an Islamophobic period after their first shift to atheism. Olive described their shift from that Islamophobic period:

“When I was the president of the atheism collective, I was a very Islamophobic person, too. Later, when I started to study ((social sciences)) and as I noticed that Islamophobia is actually a fiction and that atheism is a similar discourse, thinking that these are all discourse and all is a fiction that belongs to today, for me these all lost their meanings.”

The second main attitude participants reported to experience is directed towards Muslims who live more secular lives or who are religious but adopt a more alternative Muslim identity, such as feminist Muslims. Some participants reported that although they respect those people’s choices, they found it hard to make sense of their identities. Ruby described her feelings towards a friend of hers who was a feminist Muslim:

“I trust her common sense a lot, etc., but her husband can wear a short-sleeved T-shirt on the beach, but she has to wear the headscarf. I mean, I was like, “How can you accept this?” Of course, I never said this to her face <laughing> I used to talk about it with the friends. How can a person accept something like this because it doesn’t make sense? If she were an unquestioning ignorant person, it would be easy, but how can people who have the capacity to question accept this? I used to feel very confused about these things.”

Another participant, Magenta, explained her thoughts about Muslims who does live up to Islam’s standards although they define themselves as Muslims:

“Many of my friends still don’t tell that - this is such a convenience- they don’t readily tell that they are not Muslims, that they do not believe, but they don’t have a single practice regarding Islam. They are only as Muslim as I am, only saying ‘Inshallah, mashallah’ (...) why did I leave it instead of indulging in the luxury as they did? That’s my stupidity, I guess.”

Regarding their relationship to atheist identity, experiences also varied. It is important to note that not all participants preferred to label themselves as atheists.

Their view of atheism also differed. For example, Magenta and Olive stated that they did not believe in any divinity but also thought that science was inadequate to explain all the experiences in the universe; therefore, they explained they have sympathy towards certain spiritual explanations or practices.

Another different experience regarding atheist identity was that of Violet's. He had the experience of not being appropriately understood, especially by people who did not have a religious background. He also shared that he found atheism very aggressive, especially towards religious people, and that, therefore, he preferred to call himself a "non-believer" instead of an atheist. He made an argument about the difference between faith and religion:

"By the way, I don't define myself as an atheist; I define myself as a "non-believer." I know that this is called an atheist, okay, no problem, emm I just don't like it because, as we talked about earlier, I don't like the hostility, I mean the hostile attitude towards those who believe; it is based on my earlier experiences as I said. Of course, I am an atheist; in fact, I am an enemy of religion, if you ask me <laughs>, but I mean, nobody defends their religion to you, they defend their faith, yet religion is a different institution."

Some other participants also pointed out that although they defined themselves as atheists or did not see a particular problem regarding the term "atheism," they also did not prefer or claim atheism, particularly as part of their identity. They had mentioned that their atheist identity became salient mostly when they were with religious people. One participant, Amber, explained this by saying that she "has closed that page." For some participants, this was a part of their life that they put behind and did not think about anymore. When asked, they said that they preferred to define themselves with their other identities, such as their sexual identity, occupation, etc. Besides, participants also mentioned that, except for the Islamophobic period of those who reported experiencing such a period, they perceived religious identity as a very personal experience and emphasized the need for respect for people's freedom of thought and faith.

Participants' perspectives on identities in general also varied. For example, for Ruby, identity meant a social unity that required collective action. On the other

hand, Bronze, for example, thought that identity categories were entirely meaningless and restrictive in terms of understanding human experience:

“Now, there is no identity that I claimed for a while, actually. I mean because now, I don’t care that much about identities, to be honest. I kind of passed that phase; identities are tools for us to learn some things, to form ideas about them; this is how I think mostly. Of course, many people claim certain identities, or they are assigned certain identities, but the thing we call identity, emm the more universal it is, the hollower it becomes in a way. I feel close to certain identities or close to what certain identities mean sometimes, but there is nothing I directly claim.”

Thinking in retrospect, none of the participants shared any major regrets regarding their choices. However, for some of the participants, one common regret pertains to a sense that this change is too belated, a feeling that this change could have occurred much earlier. For some of those participants, having a religious identity was experienced, again retrospectively, as a waste of time and energy. However, most participants also shared gratitude about their background because of all the experience and knowledge it provided them with.

An experience that was common in all participants was that they considered themselves as people who have seen both sides. Because they knew the experience of being a Muslim and being an atheist, they interpreted that this process of change provided them with an enhanced capacity for empathy. What is also common is that they all described this advantage as a benefit of this identity transformation process: *“Once I was a Kemalist, and once I was a Sunni, I had faith; I used to go to the mosque. emm later I don’t know, I found myself going to LGBTI+ parties, a totally different environment; emm I did the military service, emm a completely different environment there, too and all these, returned me as an acquisition, and when I need someone, when I say when I need someone I mean when I need to talk, for work or something different, I felt that I could easily find common ground.”* (Mustard)

However, for some participants knowing both sides resulted in the sense of not belonging anywhere. They felt different from Muslims who did not go through the process of questioning and confrontation they went through and the atheists who

did not have to go through a similar process. This caused them to end up in a place where they still felt lonely and isolated:

“This is also a situation which puts me in difficulty with regards to finding my identity. I mean, I cannot be in the same position with anybody; emm I struggled for a while feeling the absence of it, but later, I thought that being alone emm is a position that can be very precious, that the emptiness that I try to fill is an emptiness that was caused, in the first place, in relation to my attitude towards religion.”
(Indigo)

Regarding the adoption of their new identity, one comment was by Magenta, who was concerned about questions relating to child-raising. Thinking about having her own children, she had to face the question of how to raise her children in terms of religious identity:

“What kind of a school will my child go to? They will go to school, there will be a course for religious education there, and the child will say, “Oh, I don’t have faith.” If they take it after me, then they will probably say anything anywhere and then will be excluded, will not be loved; maybe parents will tell their children not to speak with my child. The direction that Turkey is following is also obvious. When I think about all these, I have that identity crisis yes because emm I, for example, don’t want my child to be raised as a Muslim. When I listened to those lies as a child and now that I am convinced that they were lies, I cannot tell them to my child, but on the other hand, there is such a society...”

Regarding the future of their identities, some participants saw their identity as fully formed and did not expect it to change much from now on. On the other hand, some others, while also feeling more agency and control regarding their identities and having a much more defined sense of who they were, considered identity formation a process as an ongoing one and expect that the future may bring about many changes.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand the experiences of people who shifted from Islam to atheism. The development of their Muslim identities, the transformation process, and the difficulties it brought about, as well as the issues around their current identities, were explored through semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten participants. Based on the results of these interviews, four main themes, with one to three sub-themes, were identified.

The first theme, “Being Muslim,” included participants’ relationships with their Muslim identities and was comprised of two sub-themes: “Positive Experiences with Islam” and “Negative Experiences with Islam.” The second theme, “Experiencing a Conflict Between Islam and Self,” was specified to contain participants’ experiences regarding their transformation period, which was discussed as a transition phase from Islam to atheism. The theme revealed three main themes: “Leaving the Fishbowl,” which describes participants’ exposure to a new social and physical context, “Trying to Discover New Possibilities,” which contains participants’ experiences around the exploration of new identities, and “Managing Internal Conflict” which includes the strategies participants’ used to resolve the conflict they felt between their internal experiences and the values and rules of Islam. The third theme was “Becoming One’s Own Person” and consisted of three sub-themes: “Surviving,” “Resisting,” and “Growing.” The first one included the challenges of the process, while the second sub-theme covered the ways through which participants fought against the challenges they faced. The third sub-theme was characterized by the insight and self-knowledge participants gained out of this process of change. The final theme, “Changing Relationship with Identities,” was related to participants’ current views of Muslim and atheist identities, as well as their current identity definitions and perspectives.

This chapter will interpret the results of this study. In addition to the limitations and the strengths of the current study, possible clinical implications and

suggestions for future studies will be discussed, considering the present study and the findings of other studies in the literature.

4.1. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first theme that was identified through a detailed examination of the data was Being a Muslim. This theme encapsulated participants' relationships and experiences regarding Islam. The theme revealed that all participants have different religious backgrounds and all participants' experiences were unique compared to each other but also compared to their immediate environment. Research from the literature also supports this result. One study investigated the religious beliefs of emerging adults with different theological positions and beliefs, including Protestant Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and atheism. The results of their study indicated that each participant formed their own unique belief system based on their original position and their individual experiences (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Participants of the current study varied in terms of the intensity of their religiosity. A study from Turkey also revealed that participants who changed from Islam to atheism or deism reported having varying degrees of attachment to Islam when they were Muslims (Zavalsız & Şahin, 2018). Some of the participants came from relatively more secular families, while some others came from families who are members of Political Islamist cults and congregations. The current study participants' former Muslim identities did not only change due to their family's religious background, but they also varied in terms of their own personal attachment to religion, other identities that were also salient such as ethnic identity, political identity, or the participants' sexual identity or orientation. Participants also reported experimenting within their religious practices, such as praying with different outfits or praying in Turkish instead of Arabic to find the best version that will make more sense to them. All these factors combined formed a unique and individualized religious identity for each participant, resulting in a unique change process.

Based on Marcia's Identity Status theory (1993), the participants of the study shifts from the Foreclosure identity status, which describes an identity that

was accepted without question, to Moratorium identity, which describes a search for identity, and finally to an Achieved identity status which describes an identity that is reached after a careful questioning and search (Marcia et al., 1993). The shift is not linear for all participants. Also, some of the participants, for example, Amber, who was raised in a relatively secular family and discovered the details of Islam by herself after puberty, experienced a subtle shift from foreclosure to moratorium status. In addition, for some participants, the intensity and the duration of each identity status differ. For example, Indigo, who left his family's Islamic cult to enter an Islamic congregation, can be said to experience a rather long moratorium status by which he was in a state of ongoing questioning and search.

In addition to Marcia's ego-identity formation theory, certain studies are developed to explain atheist identity development particularly (Siner, 2012; Small, 2008). Among the studies that develop an atheist identity formation theory, Small's (2008) study is the one that was empirically supported; therefore, within the scope of this chapter, that study will be discussed.

Small's (2008) atheist identity development suggests six stages. Their first stage corresponds to Marcia's foreclosure identity (Marcia et al., 1993). The first stage status suggests an initial state where no agency upon the identity was claimed (Small, 2008). For the present study, this stage corresponds to the initial Muslim identities of the participants. This is the stage before they become aware of their Muslim identity and reflect upon it. The second stage is when one starts to focus on the information regarding the religious environment. In other words, this is a period where one starts to be aware of their religious identity. In terms of the present study, this can be conceptualized as when participants start to learn and be included in religious teachings and practices. This is also the stage where their relationship towards Islam - for example, the resistance or the eagerness they feel towards religious practices - starts to develop. In the third stage of atheist identity development, one starts to have questions, doubts, or displeasure regarding religion and God. Combined with Small's (2008) stage 3.5, which was theorized as a transition process in which one leaves former religious beliefs and constructs a new identity, these two stages can be compared to Marcia's (1993) Moratorium status.

In the present study, these stages may include the sub-themes of “Leaving the Fishbowl,” “Trying to Discover New Possibilities,” and “Managing Internal Conflict.” According to Small (2008), the fourth stage is the stage that one owns one’s identity, and it includes an increasing capacity to investigate and question as well as possible participation in a rational or intellectual community. The participants of the present study also reported an increased doubt, as well as critical and scientific thinking and a more rational search for truth. They describe Stage five as a period with increased connection to other individuals and increased humility. They also describe the sixth stage, not so different from the fifth, as a period of life where the participants became increasingly humanitarian and are in harmony with all people (Small, 2008). The stages from four to six can be compared to Marcia’s Achieved Identity Status (Marcia et al., 1993). Stages five and six also can be compared to participants’ experiences of having seen both sides and the resulting increased capacity for empathy towards all identities.

Small’s (2008) theorization of atheist identity development seems to be in line with the present study’s findings. However, specific points of the atheist identity formation theory need further discussion. First of all, Small (2008) develops their theory based on religious identity formation theories. However, atheism is considered a non-theological position (Cliteur, 2009); therefore, adopting a theory that explains the development of religious identity is inevitably insufficient to understand the identity development of atheists. The second issue about the study is that Small (2008) developed their stages in parallel with the developmental periods of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In other words, they position the first and second stages within the years of childhood, while they expect the third and fourth stages to unfold during adolescence years (Small, 2008). However, it is possible for a person to start questioning their religious beliefs in the late years of adulthood (Berger, 2015; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Nica, 2020). Although Small’s (2008) study is critical since it is one of a few studies that aim to develop a theory of atheist identity formation, its downsides and shortcomings indicate the need for further studies that will support Small’s (2008) efforts and build upon it.

Another issue that echoes in the literature regards the concealment of participants' identities. Arslan's study (2016) shows similar results in terms of identity disclosure. According to their study, parents who were seculars or non-believers tried not to disclose their identities. Also, participants of that study commonly preferred not to claim atheism as an identity due to stigma (Arslan, 2016). Although not all participants in the present study attributed the reason not to call themselves atheists to stigma, the literature can help enlighten this common phenomenon. Many studies in the foreign literature investigate and discuss the relationship between identity concealment and the stigma that is woven around atheism (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Alidoosti, 2009; Cimino & Smith, 2011; Cloud, 2017; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Scheitle et al., 2019; Siner, 2012; Smith, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2015). Literature in Turkey is minimal, and only two studies address the issues around atheist identity disclosure (Arslan, 2016; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018).

In Zavalısz and Şahin's study (2018), 22 out of 25 atheist and deist participants reported they prefer to conceal their identities. According to their study, participants tended to adjust their behaviors regarding concealment according to people's attitudes in the context. Those participants also reported that they were tried to be convinced into religion when they disclose their identities to Muslims. In the present study, four out of ten participants reported they disclosed their identities to their families and their friends. Two of the participants reported that they shared their identity with some members of their families. One of the participants shared his experience partially, meaning that he only shared certain aspects but did not discuss his faith. The remaining three participants, similar to Zavalısz and Şahin's findings (2018), disclosed their identities to their friends who would be accepting towards their identities but not to their families because they were concerned about the reactions they might receive. Two of these three reported paying attention to their clothes or the words they use when they are with the family members.

The difficulty of the identity disclosure resulted in some atheists and some scholars comparing atheist identity to LGBTI+ identities, especially with respect to

being stigmatized (Cloud, 2017; Siner, 2012) and adopting queer discourse for identity disclosure and concealment, namely: coming out and being in the closet (Cimino & Smith, 2011; Cloud, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2015). However, there is a discussion within the literature about the consequences of the appropriation of this discourse that was claimed by another minority group (Anspach et al., 2007). Although this debate is beyond the scope of this study, the fact that many scholars needed to adapt notions regarding identity disclosure and concealment supports Abbott's (2018) theorization to consider atheism a "concealable and stigmatized identity."

The literature from Turkey primarily focused on the factors that influence people to change from Islam to atheism or deism (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2018; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). Also, some of the studies that are conducted in Turkey reveal the author's bias through the vocabulary used, such as preferring the term: "denying God" or "denying God's existence," which indicates the researcher's bias towards pre-accepting the existence of God (Gülfil, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). Due to the limited number of studies conducted in Turkey and the appreciation that all studies can reveal important information, the findings of these studies also will be included and discussed within the scope of this chapter. The reasons for becoming atheists and deists were listed as being leftist, being from the Alevi sect of Islam, having a secular family, receiving higher education, being male (Arslan, 2016); the pursuit of liberty and independence, negative attributions to God, the problem of evil, the pursuit of meaning, rationalism, liberalism, science, technological advances, modernity (Gülfil, 2018), puberty and coming of age (Şimşek, 2018), not receiving a response from God, not being able to make sense of the supernatural narratives, and spiritual opportunism (Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018).

The present study participants also report some of the factors suggested by other studies to have an essential part in the transition process from Islam to atheism. However, their narratives did not point to a direct causal link between these factors and their transition. In Arslan's (2016) study, the factors that contributed to making the transition process easier were presented as causal factors. The present study also demonstrates that people from more radically religious backgrounds find

it comparably harder to detach from their former environment as well as their former identities. Although their families' levels of secularity have an important role in how they experience this process, it is not clear whether it is a direct contributor to their disaffiliation since other factors such as their relationship with the family members, the marital status of the parents, and also participants' and their parents' attachment styles are among important family-related factors to consider. Also, in the current study, participants who at a certain period of their process became more religious compared to their family despite their family's secularity. Of course, it is important to note that participants who come from political Islamist families or religious families compared to secular ones are higher on the continuum of foreclosure identity status, which may also make it harder for the change process for them (Marcia et al., 1993).

The present study revealed that the transition process participants went through is an overall change that comprehends many aspects of their identities, experiences, and personalities. Participants did not only change their theological positions, but they went through a discovery process through which they obtained a deeper understanding of themselves. Along this process, other aspects of their identities (such as their political identities or their relationship to their sexual identities) and their personalities (such as their relationship to their bodies and sexuality, their understanding of the world and the people around them, or even their career options) also changed significantly. All these factors interact with and influence each other resulting in more questions and the requirement for more research regarding the topic.

4.2. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

A significant amount of the research on atheism in the foreign literature is focused on the stigma and the discrimination that atheist people face (Brewster et al., 2014). One of the characteristics of atheist identity is that it is a concealable identity. In other words, it is not discernible to other people compared to most other identities, such as race (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Smith, 2011). Atheism is also

mentioned in the literature as an identity that was stigmatized (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Alidoosti, 2009; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Nash, 2003; Siner, 2012). Nash (2003) reported that atheist students were stigmatized by other students using derogatory words, some of which are “Satanic,” “immoral,” “mean-spirited,” or “empty.” Other studies revealed that the psychological well-being of atheists is under the negative influence of discrimination and the expectation of stigma (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2014). Other research showed that the psychological and physical health of participants who went through a disaffiliation process tends to become more vulnerable compared to those who did not experience such a process, whether they are believers or non-believers (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). A study that conducted interviews with people who try to leave their ultra-orthodox Jewish community in New York found that the most common psychological challenges of the process were experiencing difficulty in retaining familial bonds, loss of social support, and difficulty in adapting to a secular world in which they need to take their own responsibility. The findings of the current study are also consistent with the literature. The participants reported feelings of being discriminated against and isolated, as well as experiencing loss of former friendships, an injured relationship with the family, and a difficulty that was resulted from losing the sense of direction, meaning, and purpose that believing in Islam provided them. On the other hand, participants also derived a sense of liberation, especially from the latter of the challenges due to the fact that it gave them a greater sense of agency, autonomy, and freedom (Nica, 2020). This finding is also consistent with another study which found that the psychological well-being of people is negatively affected when they go through a disaffiliation process; however, the study also showed that their well-being increased after they started to claim and identify with their new identities (Nica, 2020).

Despite the resilience, insightfulness, and adaptive capacity of the people who come out from this process growing (Nica, 2020), it is also evident that leaving one’s religious belief brings about many challenges that need to be considered within the clinical room.

4.3. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Over the recent years, there have been increasing attention on the topics of disaffiliation and non-believers in literature from Turkey (Arslan, 2016; Deringil, 2000; Gülfil, 2018; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). Most of the empiric research focuses on the pre-disaffiliation period and investigates the reasons behind the religious change (Arslan, 2016; Gülfil, 2019a; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). Some of the research from the literature also reportedly aims to provide suggestions to prevent such change (Gülfil, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). The nature of this topic is intricately intertwined with political ideologies and therefore calls for a lot of controversies (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006). Therefore, the research around disaffiliation remains to be far from being objective and impartial.

The present study aims to contribute the literature about religious disaffiliation greatly. Among the studies mentioned above, Arslan's study (2016) is the only one to directly focus on the transition from Islam to atheism. Other studies either tackle conversions out of Islam to either other religions or to different theological positions that include agnosticism and deism, in addition to atheism (Gülfil, 2018; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Şimşek, 2018; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). This study differs from Arslan's (2016) study in the sense that it investigates not only the pre-transition period but also attempts to understand the experience of identity change in a more comprehensive sense, examining the participants' relation to all different identities they claimed along the process. Another contribution that the present study offers to the literature is its endeavor to understand religious disaffiliation from the theoretical perspective of identity change and identity formation (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Ahmed, 2019; Marcia et al., 1993; Nica, 2020; Small, 2008). The present study also attempted to discuss the stigma and the challenges that disaffiliated atheist faced along the process, which is an aspect of the issue that was intensely investigated in the foreign literature (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Cloud, 2017; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Scheitle et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2015) but not in literature from Turkey.

The present study has certain limitations, too. First of all, the qualitative method of the study helps to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences at the cost of generalizability. Perhaps, a study with more participants who went through a disaffiliation process may contribute to the generalizability of the results. Secondly, due to the magnitude of the data, all details of the participants' experiences could not be covered within the limits of the report. In order to compensate for that, the utmost efforts were made in order to identify the themes that represent the participants' experiences in the best possible way.

The third limitation of the study pertains to the restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews of the study were made using an online meeting platform, therefore the participants were met behind the screen. It is possible that a virtual interview resulted in some losses compared to a face-to-face interview. For example, during the interviews due to the problems in the internet connection, there were times when either party had difficulties in hearing each other. Sometimes the need to reconnect was required which may have resulted in the participants forgetting what they were going to say or change their decision to give certain information. If the interviews could have been conducted in a face-to-face manner, it is possible that the data could be a little different.

Another limitation regards the participants' diversity. Although they differed in terms of socio-economic and the details of their religious background, all of the participants of the study were either university students or university graduates and they were all millennials whose ages ranged between 21 and 33. Some of the participants also had graduate and doctoral degrees. The limited diversity regarding the education levels and the ages of the participants may cause a certain bias in the data.

The last limitation of the study pertains to the researchers' subjectivity. Qualitative research methods do not exclude the perspective of the researcher; therefore, different researchers may have identified different themes from the same data. This study aimed a certain level of impartiality and objectivity, to be able to reach this goal it is important to consider the perspective and the background of the researcher which may affect the results of the study. This thesis was mostly

interpreted based on a sociopsychological perspective. Therefore, other possible interpretations from other perspectives such as developmental, psychodynamic, psychoanalytic, or educational psychology were not included within the scope of this study. It is also worth noting that the researcher adopts a more secular and liberal worldview which may also affected the perception of the research data.

4.4. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Religious identity is a concept that is intimately related to other aspects of society such as geography, culture, and nationality. Therefore, although the international literature helps to understand specific universal issues around atheist identity, it comes short of enlightening the culture-bound aspects of the subject. A study from America found that atheists come last in the list of people who can be trusted. What is more interesting is that Muslims are right above the atheists (Edgell et al., 2006). While in America, being an atheist and being Muslim are both minority identities, in Turkey, Muslims are considered a majority identity while atheist identity remains stigmatized and marginalized (KONDA, 2019; Kulat, 2017; PEW, 2019). This asymmetry in Turkey created a disadvantage for participants who left Islam and became atheists. Therefore, understanding the transition from Islam to atheism is a very culture-dependent issue that needs further understanding in Turkey.

In addition, the clinical implications, in other words, the challenges that Muslims, atheists, or questioning people faced because of their identities, need further studies in the context of Turkey. The result of the study revealed that all participants reported experiencing many challenges during different periods of their identity change process: such as feeling discriminated, being bullied, dealing with intense fear, isolation, and loneliness; the sense of emptiness and loss of meaning, and even the ideation of or plans for suicide.

The issue of identity change is important in terms of social identity and social stigma but also important to understand the dynamics of change and transformation. Participants who went through this process reported a

comprehensive change in many aspects of their identities, attitudes, and opinions. Acquiring more understanding with respect to the mechanisms of change participants went through, may help understanding the dynamics of change within other contexts, such as change in the therapy room.

It is worth considering the possibility that the participants of the current study may have character traits that render them inclined to be more open to change and new ideas. Therefore, a new study which examines the relationship between certain character traits and identity change would be helpful to understand the contributing factors.

In addition, a psychoanalytical understanding of participants' religious ideation can also immensely contribute to the psychoanalytic literature and clinical practice. One of the participants Amber reported an experience which she described as having God in her mind one night and waking up in a Godless mind the other day. Understanding the representation of God and divinity in terms of object representations may help to develop a different perspective in order to understand this experience in a deeper way.

The research on the topic of disaffiliation from Turkey mostly focused on the reasons for the change (Arslan, 2016; Zavalısz & Şahin, 2018). However, all these studies are qualitative studies that cannot reveal a causal relationship. Therefore, other empirical results in order to understand the causality of such a change may be conducted with a greater number of individuals. In addition, a study with a more diverse population can be important to understand the variety of the experiences and may contribute to the generalizability.

The present study focused on religious disaffiliation and the change from Islam to atheism; however, investigating this change from the other direction may help better understand the dynamics of change and may lead to understanding the issues around religious identity and identity change from a more objective perspective. Also, a comparison between atheists who were disaffiliated between atheists who were always atheists and did not experience such a change process may help to understand the differences and commonalities between those different identity formation processes.

Lastly, the participants of this study mainly reported experiencing an internal conflict between their values and the values of Islam. The conflict led them to leave religion and construct a new identity. It would be interesting to interview people who went through such a process but remained Muslims in order to understand the dynamics of internal conflict resolution and may provide a different perspective on identity formation.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to understand the experiences of individuals who are disaffiliated from Islam and identify as atheists. The study aimed to understand the process of identity change and identity reconstruction. The study results revealed that at the core of this process of change was a conflict experienced between one's needs, desires, urges, and the requirements of religion. The individuals used different strategies to cope with this conflict which eventually led them to construct a new identity. This new identity was based on participants' own autonomy and differed from their previous identities in terms of the level of the agency involved in the identity construction process. The current study is one of the first among studies from Turkey to explain the experience of religious disaffiliation. Also, the difficulties and challenges experienced by the atheist individuals revealed as a result of the study need further research. This study also focused its attention on identity, which is a flexible, agentic, and complex construct that can change, transform and interact through time

"...It is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free."

Amin Maalouf

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Announcement of the Study

Dini Kimlik Deęiřimi: Müslümanlıktan
Ateizme Geçiř Deneyimlerini Anlamak için Nitel Bir Çalışma

Katılımcıların dini kimlik deęiřiminde yaşadıkları deneyimleri anlamak amacıyla yürütölen arařtırmamıza katkıda bulunmak ister misiniz?

Bu arařtırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik
Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öęrencisi Esma Eda Tölek tarafından
Hale Bolak Boratav danışmanlığında yürütölmektedir. Arařtırma kapsamında,
Müslümanlıktan ateizme geçmiř olan ve deneyimlerini paylaşmak isteyen
katılımcılarla yaklaşık 60-90 dakika sürmesi beklenen çevrimiçi görüşmeler
gerçekleřtireceęiz.

APPENDIX B – Informed Consent Form

Bilgilendirilmiş Onam Formu

Araştırmayı Destekleyen Kurum:	İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi
Araştırmanın Adı:	Dini Kimlik Değişimi: Müslümanlıktan Ateizme Geçiş Deneyimlerini Anlamak için Nitel Bir Çalışma
Araştırmacının Adı:	Esmâ Eda Tülek
Araştırmacının E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:	
Araştırmanın Danışmanı:	Hale Bolak Boratav
Danışmanın E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:	

Bu araştırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Esmâ Eda Tülek tarafından Hale Bolak Boratav danışmanlığında yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, katılımcıların dini kimlik değişiminde yaşadıkları deneyimleri anlamaktır. Araştırmanın dini kimlikte yaşanan değişimlerle ilgili çalışmalara katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Bu araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde, yaklaşık 60 ila 90 dakika sürecek çevrimiçi bir görüşmeye katılmanız beklenecektir. Bu görüşmede, Müslümanlıktan ateizme geçiş konusundaki düşüncelerinizi ve gözlemlerinizi öğrenmek için sizden bazı sorulara yanıt vermeniz istenecektir. Yapacağımız görüşmede verdiğiniz yanıtlar, sonraki analizlerde kullanılmak üzere, görüşme sırasında bilgisayar hoparlörlerinin yakınına yerleştirilecek ses kayıt cihazlarıyla kayıt altına alınacaktır. Görüşme sırasında görüntü kaydı alınmayacaktır.

Bu araştırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcı bilgilerinin gizliliği esas alınmaktadır. Verdiğiniz tüm bilgiler gizli tutulacaktır. Ses kayıtları araştırma süresince yalnızca araştırmacının ve danışmanının erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, araştırma sona erdiğinde silinecektir. Alınan demografik bilgiler, görüşme sırasında alınan yanıtlardan ayrı olarak saklanacak ve eşleştirilmeyecektir. Araştırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri kullanılmayacak, elde edilen bilgiler toplu olarak değerlendirilecek ve bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır.

Bu araştırmaya katılmak tamamen isteğe bağlıdır. Görüşmeye katılmanın üzerinizde herhangi bir olumsuz etki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüşme sırasında yanıt vermek istemediğiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüşme sırasında dilediğiniz zaman kaydı durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüşme başlamadan önce, görüşme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediğiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde çalışmanın herhangi bir aşamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden araştırmadan çekilme hakkına sahipsiniz. Araştırmadan çekildiğiniz durumda verdiğiniz bilgiler değerlendirmeye alınmayacaktır.

Görüşmenizin sonuçları, araştırma sonlandırılmadan önce gözden geçirmeniz için sizinle e-posta yoluyla paylaşılacak ve geri bildiriminiz doğrultusunda gerekli değişiklikler yapılacaktır. Burada amaç, sizin görüşlerinizin ve deneyimlerinizin en doğru şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamaktır.

Bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum. Bana anlatılanları ve yukarıdaki açıklamaları anladım. Çalışmaya katılmayı, görüşmenin ses kaydına alınmasını ve verdiğim bilgilerin bilimsel amaçlı yayınlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum.

Katılımcı Adı-Soyadı:	
Tarih:	

APPENDIX C – The Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- Bana biraz kendinizden bahseder misiniz?

Geçmiş: Aile, Çocukluk ve Ergenlik

- (Dini) kimliğinizde yaşadığınız değişimi/dönüşümü daha iyi anlamak istiyorum. Bu süreci en iyi şekilde kavrayabilmek için de dinle ilk ilişki kurmaya başladığınız zamanları anlamak istiyorum. Çocuklukta ve ergenlikte dinle ilişkiniz nasıldı?

- a. Dinle ilgili ilk anılarınız neler?
- b. Tanrıyı/Allahı nasıl anlıyordunuz?
- c. Tanrıyı/Allahı nasıl hayal ediyordunuz?
- d. Dini nasıl anlıyordunuz
- e. Aile içinde nasıl dini pratikler vardı?
- f. Bu pratikler size nasıl geliyordu?
- g. Din eğitimi nasıl veriliyordu aile içinde?
- h. Bu öğrendiklerinizi nasıl anlıyor, nasıl anlamlandırıyordunuz?

- Bir Müslüman olmak sizin için ne anlama geliyordu?

1. Sizin o dönemdeki dini pratikleriniz nasıldı?
2. Müslüman olmak kimliğinizde, kendinizi tanımlama biçiminizde nasıl bir yere sahipti?
3. Din hayatınızda ne kadar yer kaplıyordu?
4. Hayatı ve kendinizi anlamanızda nasıl bir etkisi vardı?

- Bir ateist olmak o dönemde ne anlama geliyordu?

Değişim Süreci

- Sizce çocukluktan yetişkinliğe dinle olan ilişkiniz nasıl değişti?

1. Bu değişim nasıl başladı?
2. Bu başlangıcı neler tetikledi, neler etkili oldu?
3. Değişim süreci nasıl ilerledi, bugün olduğunuz noktaya nasıl geldi?
4. Bu değişim davranışlarınızı ve günlük hayatınızı pratikte nasıl etkiledi? Bu etki ne zaman başladı? (ibadetleri bırakma ya da dinin yasakladıklarını yapmaya başlama)

- **Bu deęişim süreci sizi nasıl etkiliyordu?**

Bugün

- **Biraz da bugün olduęunuz konumdan ve bugünkü kimlięinizden söz edelim. Geçmişten bugüne tüm bu süreci düşününce bu yaşadığınız deęişimi ve vardığınız noktayı nasıl anlamlandırıyorsunuz?**
 1. Bu deęişim sizi nasıl etkiledi?
 2. Hayatı, dünyayı, varoluşu anlamlandırma biçiminizi nasıl etkiledi?
 3. Bu deęişim kendinize bakışınızı nasıl etkiledi?
 4. Kimlięinizin başka yönlerini, farklı kimliklerinizi nasıl etkiledi?
- **Ateist olmak bugün sizin için ne anlama geliyor?**
 1. Ateist olmak şu anda kişilięinizde, kendinizi tanımlama biçiminizde nasıl bir yere sahip? Hayatınızda ne kadar yer kaplıyor?
 2. Bugünden baktığınız noktada Müslümanlıęı ve ateistlięi nasıl görüyorsunuz?
 3. Bu deęişimin olumlu gördüğünüz yanları neler?
 4. Bu deęişimin olumsuz gördüğünüz yanları neler?
 5. Müslüman kimlięinizden, inancınızdan bugüne getirdiğiniz/taşıdığınız bir şeyler var mı? Neler var?
- **Geçmişe yönelik düşündüğünüzde farklı olmasını istediğiniz şeyler var mı?**
- **Geçmişe dair düşündüğünüzde iyi ki böyle olmuş dediğiniz şeyler var mı?**
- **Bugünden baktığınızda geleceęi nasıl görüyorsunuz?**
- **Benim sormadığım ama sizin eklemek istedięi bir şey, yaşadığınız deneyimi daha iyi anlamam için “şundan da bahsetseydim iyi olurdu” dediğiniz bir şey var mı?**

APPENDIX D – Member-check E-mail

Merhaba ...,

Umarım iyisinizdir. Size, Müslümanlıktan ateizme geçen kişilerle gerçekleştirdiğim görüşmelerin sonunda ulaştığım sonuçların kısa bir özetini paylaşmak ve ortaya çıkan bilgilerin sizin deneyimlerinizi yansıtır yansıtmadığına dair sizden geri bildirim almak adına yazıyorum.

Araştırma kapsamında sizin de dahil olduğunuz 10 farklı katılımcıyla derinlemesine görüşmeler yaptım. Bu görüşmelerin ışığında, daha önce kendisini Müslüman bir kimlikte tanımlarken bir değişim sürecinin sonunda bu kimlikten ayrılmış ve kendini ateist ya da inanmayan biri olarak tanımlamaya başlamış katılımcıların yaşadıkları deneyimi, bu dönüşümü nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını, geçmiş kimliklerine ve bugünkü kimliklerine nasıl baktıklarını anlamaya çalıştım.

Görüşmeler sonucunda özellikle öne çıkan, yaşanan dönüşümün bütünlüklü ve anlamlı bir anlatısını kurabilmeyi mümkün kılan noktaları belirli temalar altında toplayarak sizin de yaşadığınız bu süreci mümkün olduğunca özetlemeye çalıştım. Ancak araştırma kapsamının ve raporlama sürecinin doğası gereği taşıdığı sınırlılıklar nedeniyle ulaştığım sonuçların tüm katılımcıların deneyimini bütünüyle kapsayabilmek noktasında eksiklikler taşıdığını belirtmem gerek. Görüşmelerimiz sonucunda deneyimlerinizi iki veya üç alt başlıktan oluşan dört ana tema altında şu şekilde topladım:

1. Müslüman olmak
 - 1.1. İslam’a yönelik olumlu deneyimler
 - 1.2. İslam’a yönelik olumsuz deneyimler
2. İslam ve Kendilik Arasında Bir Çatışma Yaşamak
 1. Fanustan Çıkmak
 2. Yeni Olasılıkları Keşfetmeye Çalışmak
 3. İçsel Çatışmayla Başa Çıkmak
3. Kendini Tanımak
 - 3.1. Hayatta Kalmak
 - 3.2. Mücadele Etmek
 - 3.3. Büyümek
4. Kimliklerle İlişkinin Değişmesi

Yaşanan değişimi anlamak için sürecin başına, *Müslüman kimliğin* gelişimine ve dönüşümüne bakmak gerekiyor. Katılımcıların Müslüman kimlikleri hem bu kimliklerin dışavurumları hem de anlamlandırılma biçimleri bakımından çeşitlilik gösteriyordu. Kimi

katılımcılar için dine dair daha olumlu atıflar, kimileri içinse daha olumsuz atıflar baskın olsa da pek çok katılımcı İslam'a dair hem olumlu hem de olumsuz deneyimlere sahipti.

Bu değişim sürecinin en temelinde pek çok kişi için temel bir nokta İslam'ın değerleri ile kendi iç değerleri arasında yaşadıkları bir çatışma olmuş gibi görünüyor. Bu çatışmanın temeli pek çok kişi için alışık oldukları, kimileri için "*fanus etkisi*" yaratan bir sosyal çevreden uzaklaşmak, yeni insanlarla veya yeni fikirlerle karşılaşmak ve bunların etkileri ile yüzleşmek oluyor. Bu etkinin tetiklediği *içsel çatışma* ile bir dönüşüm süreci başlıyor. Her katılımcının bu içsel çatışma ile *başta çıkma* biçimi farklı oluyor. Kimileri daha hızlı bir değişim sürecine adım atarken kimileri öncelikle eski kimliklerini korumanın yollarını araştırıyor.

Bu içsel çatışma, kişilerin *kendilerini tanımaya* başlamaları, iç dünyalarında daha önce dini kimlikleri nedeniyle suçluluk, utanç gibi duygular yaratan hislere, duyumlara ve deneyimlere bakabilmeye, bunları benliklerinin bir parçası olarak kabul edebilmeye başladıkları bir sürece eviriliyor. Bu süreçte hem kendi iç dünyalarındaki içselleştirilmiş baskılar, hem de dışarıdaki dünyada karşılaştıkları kimi önyargılar, ayrımcılıklar ve bazı kayıplar karşısında *hayatta kalmaya* çalışırken bir yandan da kimi zaman kimliklerini ortaya koyarak, kimi zamansa daha dolaylı yollarla kişisel sınırlarını belirlemeye çalışarak kendilerini var etmek adına bir *mücadele* ortaya koyuyorlar. Bu mücadele zaman zaman kendisini toplumsal düzeyde bir idealizm ve aktivizmle de gösterebiliyor. Tüm bu süreçte ortak olansa katılımcıların ifade ettiklerine göre kendilerine karşı daha dürüst oldukları, belirli bir otonomi kazandıkları ve kendi hayatlarının sorumluluğunu üstlendikleri bir *büyüme* süreci oluyor.

Son olarak kendilerine çizdikleri bu yeni kimlikle yaşamının onlara sunduğu yeni bakış açıları var. Bu değişim, elbette, *başka kimliklere nasıl baktıklarını, ateist kimlikle olan ilişkilerini etkiliyor* ve bu kimlik de kendi içinde bazı değişimlerden geçiyor ve farklılaşmaya, şekillenmeye, keşfedilmeye devam ediyor.

Tüm bu süreci anlamama ve üzerine düşünmeme fırsat verdiğiniz, değerli hikayenizi büyük bir açıklıkla ve cömertlikle paylaştığınız için çok teşekkür ederim. Deneyimleriniz kimliklerin akışkanlığını, değişkenliğini anlayabilmek, farklı kimlik gruplarının toplum içinde yaşadıkları zorluklara ışık tutabilmek açısından çok değerli. Yukarıda sunduğum açıklamalara, temalara ve alt temalara dair sorularınız, yorumlarınız, eksik kaldığını, hatalı ya da yanıltıcı olabileceğini düşündüğünüz noktalar varsa benimle paylaşmanızdan memnuniyet duyarım.

Bu süreçteki tüm katkılarınız için bir kez daha teşekkür ederim.

Sevgiler,

Eda Tülek

Ethics Board Approval

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.