

Abdullah Al-Qassemi: The Arab Embodiment of Western Thought

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Abstract

Of all the branches that witness a hiatus of scholarly writing in the Arab world, a typical story of apostasy in general, and from Islam to another faith in particular, remains a prime example. The following paper is an attempt that endeavors to comment on, and intervene in, the turbulent and momentous life of Abdullah-Al-Qassemi. It locates Al-Qassemi's intellectual and spiritual development from Wahhabism to radical atheism in his foray to historical opprobrium of the Quran and expulsion from Egyptian academic culture. This is the first study devoted exclusively to Al-Qassemi's conversion in the English language. It underscores his experience of atheism and faith, and offers, among other things, new insights into the peculiar social processes behind his apostasy. In a tremendous amount of scholarly writing, he succeeds to seamlessly give birth to some of the most controversial ideologies that the Arab world has never seen before.

Keywords: Religion, Atheism, Apostasy, Arab world, Islam

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Introduction

The profundity and breadth of Al-Qassemi's polemic are too erudite and significant to be neglected, or, even more disappointingly, unheard of. It is sometimes heralded that the reason why there are so few interpretations about his atheism is that the books are so multifarious that no one has found a consistent way of approaching them. For most of human history, religion has, in successful measures, played a crucial role in shaping one's ideologies and convictions. However, philosophers and theologians had, across all centuries, and beyond all expectations, impugned the quiddity of religion and its role in a rapidly advancing globe. They ascertained that the fundamental role of religion is to fulfil the powerless and defenseless mankind with emotional satisfaction. That is to say, metaphysics. Among these erudite philosophers was Abdullah al-Qassemi. His influence on several issues such as religion and atheism has been correspondingly remarkable, and he was constantly regarded, by very few minorities, typically Arab intellectuals, as one of the great thinkers of his lifetime. Abdullah is undoubtedly the most influential Arab figure in the intellectual history of the Middle East. His notoriety has, to the astonishment of both his admirers and critics, risen dramatically following the unthinkable upheaval he triggered among Arab scholars. His works are recondite and sometimes ironic which makes reading them an arduous task. Modernist scholars take his epigrams, quotes, and aphorisms ad nauseam to shed light on his views about ethics, religion, life, death, morality, and above all, atheism. Intellectually, this is a catastrophe, because it obscures the fact that he was a system builder whose philosophy could only be absorbed in its entirety.

Western thought, led and broadened by such luminaries as Descartes, Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche, has never failed to artistically portray some of mankind's finest and horrid ideologies. These ideas and convictions paved the way, as perhaps never before, to reach unprecedented heights deemed completely impossible in ancient times. The emergence of Abrahamic religions in the Middle-East, and with them Monotheism, the belief that there is only a single deity, has marked a major turning point in the history of Homo Sapiens. The incipient scientific methods of the early 17th century with *Galileo* have been seen as a groundbreaking advancement, yet, they recurrently faced bitter criticism from the Roman catholic church due to their explicit discourse against the foundations of Christianity, one of history's greatest faiths. Of wide-ranging scope was Christianity's permeation in the Western world. It witnessed, among other things, wars, revolutions, and drove humanity to another major Abrahamic religion, Islam. Religious diversity coincided with Islam's birth back in the seventh century CE, when Judeo-Christian communities and Pagans were prevalent throughout Mecca. The literature surrounding

Islam as a major faith, one would argue, is immensely rich, and similar to myriad systems of beliefs, it has sparked innumerable controversies. Abdullah Al-Qassemi, one of Islam's most vitriolic critics, has dedicated his life to both the glorification of, and attack on, Islam's foundations, rendering him a figure of much-needed study and research.

The Man

Abdullah's birthdate was never registered or known. Estimations differ but the most widely held date is 1907. He himself was doubtful about that issue. Al-Qassemi was born in Khab-Elhaloua (Saudi- Arabia) to a financially destitute family in which grinding poverty was the dominant aspect of life. His parents parted ways when he was only 4, and the young kid was forced to live with his grandfather. His mother had, unaware of the pernicious repercussions the young boy might encounter, and having to look for financial security elsewhere, remarried. Whilst his father, stunned with dismal poverty and the social primitiveness of his town, and seeking to prosper in trade, embarked on an experience selling pearls in Oman. The early divorce of his parents was to have dreadful and lasting consequences on the psychology of the young man. "All I can remember from my childhood is that I lived with my grandfather whose life and status were no different to mine when it comes to grief and horridness. Our lives were replete with agony, despair and bleak emptiness". He wrote. These events, among many others, typically those of famine and the harsh treatment he was subject to at an early age, were solid marks in the inner self of the kid, and were to inaugurate, in a prodigious literary output, an Arab pen of no equal caliber. Abdullah remained with his grandfather, but soon came to realize that he represented a burden to the latter. He, to his great astonishment, found himself trapped and guilty in an existence he was later to question and criticize with a violent yet honest pen. Aged 7, and with no prospects of a formal education, he started working in agriculture, where his work was to harvest plants unsalaried. He artistically described those days as: "horrid" "miserable" "bleak" "inhumane" and questions, in touching and emotional lines, the kernel of the very word "humanity". His face-to-face contact with grief and deprivation significantly shaped his psyche, and endlessly colored the books he was to write.

Al-Qassemi's social status, throughout his early years, has not changed. But the idea of leaving behind what he described as "inhumane conditions" started to loom on the young man's mind. He believed that however belated change would come, and, eventually, it gradually came. Around 1917, when the first world war was ravaging different parts of the globe, both economically and socially, he commenced a long and exhausting journey through which he was to cement several viewpoints that were to last for his entire lifetime. Mentally devastated by his dismal situation, he commenced to think of moving away from his homeland. Several attempts had followed but all ended in miserable failure. His long and arduous journey across the Arabian Peninsula had unexpectedly and regrettably led him to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia's capital), where bleak images of famine and drought were apparently remarkable. Soon, he would realize that there were others who shared the same fate, and that life, with all its intricacies and turns, handed them equal treatment as he was given and shown.

After numerous unsuccessful attempts to meet his father, luck has eventually handed the young man that long-awaited opportunity. Expecting images of affection, intimacy, love, and sympathy from his father were innocent aspirations ultimately and unfortunately dashed by his father's cruel, heartless, and strict religious background. "I arrived at where my father was residing, and for the very first time I experienced fatherhood. It was an intense shock that ran beyond any scope of my expectations. Religion has turned my father to a tyrant, to an autocrat, to an empty soul." He grimly and poignantly wrote. "He saw his strict behavior towards me as a glorification and championing of his ideals and primitive beliefs". He adds. His father's deep neglect of the relationship was a toxic force which resulted in the alienation of the young boy's psyche. Young Abdullah set out to hold his father responsible for the imbuing of emotional abuse, and constant disapprobation that branded his childhood a measured yet fierce outburst of sorrow and failure years in the making. These were perhaps the most traumatic experiences of his life.

When he arrived at Sharjah (UAE), he had not yet received a formal education, but few glimpses of what he had been informally taught in previous years, typically the basics of the Arabic language, along with brief exordiums

where the Quran is explicated and demystified, stood embedded in his mind. Between 1900-1920, the United Arab of Emirates had known profound developments in the social and economic spectrums. Abdullah benefited greatly from these significant changes, and read voraciously to cover and compensate the void left in his soul from his earlier years. Luckily, graduate students from local universities were handed, though not all of them, teaching positions in nearby institutions, where Abdullah was to form rudimentary viewpoints on various subjects. In contrast to what he had ever witnessed, Al-Qassemi was fascinated and amazed by the benign and humane treatment he had been receiving throughout his tenure as a student. By the end of the 1920s, his father's health started to deteriorate significantly, and, in 1922, death, whom he regarded as a necessary and normal act in the Islamic faith, came to claim him. Abdullah's first foray into theology and/or religious studies, was propelled by a close friend called Ibn Rashid. They had spent several months together before they left Iraq to India for, so to speak, commerce. Due to their financial insecurities, they lacked the means necessary to maintain a prosperous business, consequently, they decided to join an Islamic school in New Delhi (*AL MADRASSA RAHMANIA*), where they were tutored and given courses by specialists on Quran, Hadith, the fundamentals of *Shari'a (Islamic law)*, among other subjects.

Abdullah, later in his life, described the school as intellectually-inferior. When asked about how he managed to communicate with Indians, since he mastered no more than a single language (Arabic), he retorted the fact that he made no acquaintances with them whatsoever, and instead, spent all his time acquiring knowledge. After two momentous and lively years in India, they decided to change their destination. They had arrived at Iraq where they attempted to join another school (*ALKADIMIA*).

Financial obstacles, perhaps not even regarded at the beginning, hindered their ambition of joining the school, and precipitated the idea of moving on. Aged 19, Abdullah travelled with his friend Ibn Rashid, through Damascus, to Cairo, a city that Abdullah would admire and despise for varied reasons.

The Man's Works and Thought

Around 1928, Al-Qassemi and his friend had successfully managed to join the most prestigious university in the Arab world (*Al-Azhar*). It was and still remains an institution with high proportions, one in which radicalism, in some domains, was prevalent. To his amazement, he did not believe that he would be accepted, consequently, he read every book he could lay his hands upon and established, unlike most of his fellow students, a firm grasp of the fundamentals of what he would later champion (Wahhabism). Whilst Al-Qassemi's stay in Egypt seemed to be proceeding smoothly, the political conflicts that took place in Egypt around the 1920s played a pivotal role in directing the man's writings. These political conflicts, coupled with profound engagement in socio-political realities, and an insightful resonance from the man himself, paved the way to make his pen a prolific one.

In the first part of his life, Abdullah wrote extensively on Salafism, a movement, he believed, to be the emancipation of all human conflicts in the world. Abdullah's great affinity towards reading would lead him to come face-to-face with one of the most influential tomes in the history of the Islamic world (*Foundations of Faith*) written by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab. Al-Qassemi was an avid reader, and it is remarkable how the premises of such thinkers would eventually find way to his writings. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab was, to a great extent, a radical thinker whose main ideas were established to pinpoint the vicissitudes of Islam, and how to further entrench a more sacred, original and triumphant faith in the Arab world. The dominance of Europe, on probably the most spheres of life, propelled Abdullah to interrogate the foundations of the Islamic faith. To his bewilderment, he did not perceive how the Europeans (unbelievers) managed to thrive in all aspects of life, whilst Arabs were economically and socially underdeveloped. Between 1935-1940, Abdullah's fame started to soar rapidly in Egypt, even more remarkably, on the so-called Arab world.

He believed that the rules of society were developed to keep the powerless, enfeeble and weak people down and to maintain the status quo. He rigorously opined that religion represents a cosmic burden without which humanity might well have been far better off. He was the first Arab philosopher to draw parallels between the Islamic tradition and Eastern faiths, and how they conspicuously differ. Abdullah's exegesis of multiple foreign

texts, one would argue, had been one of enormous and extensive scrutiny, and to a large extent, one that equally marked the history of religious criticism. Western philosophy, some assert, is a sequence of ups and downs, and with each leap, whether onward or backward, a giant mind comes to the scene. In 20th century Saudi-Arabia, Abdullah, with limited means or none at all, successfully managed to take Arabian thought to previously unexpected heights. Embedded within the vast polemic he penned, is a wide array of unmatched erudition. Moreover, an artistic and splendid use of figurative language to portray widely sacred entities as no more than mere, plain objects was prevalent throughout his later works. It is worth noting that it would be quite bizarre to attempt to conceive Al-Qassemi's corpus without having a full grasp of what it meant to be an Arabian in the twentieth century. Revolutions were striking on an unprecedented scale, and a new spectrum towards new, monumental transitions in every-day life was forcibly established. Religious dogma, scholars with different backgrounds maintain, was no exception and, it, too, was subject to influences. All these factors had contributed to shaping the man and his thought, and, perhaps unexpectedly, caused him to further propagate his ideas.

Within the labyrinthine tapestry of his works, intricate maneuvers and language tricks were developed and kept to maintain a somewhat appeal and gravitation towards his words. Grandiloquent throughout his books, the reader becomes fascinated by the erudition of the man. His meticulous dissection of the Islamic tradition had, to an astonishing extent, allowed him to form powerful and reasonable assertions about the veracity of Islam. He had a strong aversion to Quran, and argued that its verses are but primitive projections of human attributes. His thoughts dovetailed nicely with those of most 19th century German thinkers. He eloquently substantiated the amount to which the masses are fooled by religion, and how it impeded their development and prevalence. Along with a cohort of Arab intellectuals, he convincingly demonstrated how Arab nations put themselves in chains by giving religion and state more power, while neglecting and underestimating the role of reason. Abdullah eschewed the traditional norms and revolutionize against them, and embraced a more secular world. One can only wonder how the history of theology in the Arab world would have been differently viewed had he succeeded in achieving a more expanded fame in western lands. As for the time being, there is literally no translation for any of his works in the English language.

The influence of western figures on his convictions and thoughts was clearly conspicuous. Al-Qassemi had exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century Arab thought, and continues to be a significant inspiration for the posterity of all Arab nations. He was first and foremost a Salafist who championed its roots and virtues. He was convinced of the primacy of religious doctrines and robustly opined that human emancipation is bound to following its example. His upbringing, which was dismal and bleak, has significantly contributed to this way of thinking. Al-Qassemi expatiates on the topic of morals to an astonishing extent. Several twentieth century events would drastically change how the man observes and perceives certain ideologies. The horridness of war along with its drabness, agony, and anguish that were pervasive and ubiquitous all over the world was to influence his inner self in the most remarkable ways. Compassion for human emancipation, coupled with a strong will to overthrow the bonds and constraints of religious mythology was a driving force that proved enduringly feasible in Al-Qassemi's long lasting intellectual legacy. The advent of the second world war is closely followed by the publication of his book *These are chains*.

In it, he proclaimed that certain religious doctrines hinder our moral credentials to think independently and solely from the bonds and shackles that religion implies. He argued that, at the core of our human essence, there lies a hidden affinity towards metaphysics, and that man, this complicated creature as he so frequently puts it, will forever be in bonds lest we overthrow them. He asseverated that religious doctrines signify how man is bound to external forces no matter how grand, powerful, sophisticated, and artistic his aspirations are. Consequently, he was accused of blasphemy and repeatedly assaulted by the authorities. He regarded the ancient Islamic massacres as pure evil and maintained that war is a doleful plight for the human development and prevalence. He abhorred and subverted the indoctrination of young children to the religion of their parents: "All societies give birth to new generations, only us give it to our parents and grandparents". He grimly asserted. That said, he demystifies the abstruse, rather gruesome nature of the doctrines which deny us from artistic hopes and dreams, as well as new ideologies and percepts.

Following the exuberant controversy of his book *These are chains*, is a book collection of belligerent attack on Eastern thought and the idiosyncrasies of its people. His last three major books have undoubtedly the most revealing and intense humiliation towards the Islamic tradition. In 1977, he published his magnum opus *Arabs, a Vocal Phenomenon*. In it, he brilliantly showcased the dark and bleak nature of Arab thought. The tome conspicuously portrayed Abdullah's vehement invective on the sacred Islamic tenets. Unlike any other insightful book, it is abundantly replete with aphoristic claims that denounced the way Arab people regard the Islamic doctrines of the day. It is the religious bonds, Abdullah maintains, that fetter us from prevailing and reaching our full humane potential. The influence of the great German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach was heavily marked in that particular work. To liberate oneself from the fetters of religious myths was a long and exhausting objective in the far-reaching perspective of Abdullah for every single indoctrinated Muslim.

There are numerous sides in his Academic and literary life that can be regarded as convoluted. He vehemently loathed the act of having children "A woman's belly is the most dangerous factory in the universe" he claimed. His bleak philosophy in this regard is close to the premises and ideologies of Emile Cioran. Both thinkers deem the human existence as a burden and an obstacle to a divine and cosmic freedom, and it's no surprise that Abdullah would have loved Cioran's book *The Trouble with being Born*. The use of figurative language gave his works a literary appeal and broadened the ways in which he interpreted Islamic tradition, the recurrent use of figurative language whenever mentioning words like "god" "religion" "existence" allowed him to be classified as a major twentieth century thinker and philosopher.

Nineteenth century German thought, perhaps with its vast Hegelian and Marxist jargons, does represent one of the finest examples of intellectual primacy. It dealt, perhaps more than what any eighteenth century scholar would have envisaged, with almost the entirety of former held beliefs. It examined religion, society, family structure, alienation, work, economy, revolution, metaphysics, among other concepts. Abdullah had reached the zenith of his career when he created an intellectual amalgamation between German thought and his own, paving the way for modern scholars to scrutinize the deep yet obscure events of his life.

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