

# *Ḥuṭṭ awlawīya lil-‘ilm!* Sherif Gaber’s *YouTube* Videos and His Views on Science and Religion

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## Abstract

This article examines the *YouTube* videos of Egyptian activist Sherif Gaber, an important voice among contemporary critics of religion who have a Muslim background. We scrutinize his ideas, with a focus on Gaber’s conceptualization of science, and advance a proposal on how to critically yet moderately engage with Gaber’s arguments.

## Introduction: Sherif Gaber and the Criticism of Islam over *YouTube*

The diffusion of vocal criticism of Islam on behalf of ex Muslims is an important phenomenon in the contemporary Muslim world. *YouTube* (launched in 2005) is a powerful tool and venue allowing ex Muslims to address a wide audience while bypassing antiquated and hostile media.<sup>1</sup> This paper contributes to analyzing this phenomenon and to engaging with it by focusing on the video production by the Egyptian activist Sherif Gaber Abdelazim Bakr (Šarīf Ġābir ‘Abd al-‘Aẓīm Bakr, b. 1992/1993), described as “the most successful creator of atheist content on the Arab internet in the late 2010s.”<sup>2</sup>

Currently, Gaber’s *YouTube* channel includes 28 videos in Egyptian Arabic (with English subtitles); it counts 403,000 subscribers, and the most popular video has 2.9 million views.<sup>3</sup> Such videos are mapped and discussed in the present article. *YouTube* is also

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. Elsässer, Sebastian. 2021. “Arab Non-believers and Freethinkers on YouTube: Re-Negotiating Intellectual and Social Boundaries,” *Religions* 12 (2), 106 (2021): <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/106> (see § 3). Gaber describes TV debates “in the Arab countries” as useless and full of animosity (“Q & A with Sherif Gaber,” 2017, discussed later. All links were accessed for a final check on September, 2 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Elsässer 2021, “Arab Non-Believers,” § 3.2.

<sup>3</sup> “Muslim Meets God,” 2017 (discussed later).

a crucial forum for the diffusion of ideas, apologetics, and debates at the intersection of Islam and science.<sup>4</sup> The second goal of this study is to scrutinize how Gaber uses science to criticize Islam.

Gaber created more videos than those currently posted on his channel. Multiple videos have been deleted from it but remain available elsewhere. He may have decided to only offer an “official” selection of his videos due to diverse (possibly overlapping) reasons, including second thoughts about their technical quality or the strength of their arguments,<sup>5</sup> or the desire to take distance from politically laden and sensitive topics. Gaber runs an official webpage,<sup>6</sup> and his Internet presence includes *Facebook* (where he defines himself as “film creator and artist”),<sup>7</sup> *Twitter*,<sup>8</sup> *Instagram*,<sup>9</sup> and *Patreon*.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, he elicits interest among viewers not only because of the topics he discusses but also due to his concrete trials and tribulations with Egyptian authorities. His self-description on *YouTube* reads: “Sentenced to 4 years in prison in 2 different cases for contempt of religion, criticizing the Islamic religion and supporting LGBT rights. Banned from leaving Egypt indefinitely. Trying to survive while working on a way out. Still going. Still believe it’s worth it.”<sup>11</sup> There exist journalistic accounts (including at least one interview with Gaber<sup>12</sup>) of such vicissitudes. A complete study of Gaber and his work should cover, and thoroughly analyze, all of his videos, Gaber’s web presence and persona (including the examination of his posts on different social media), and his actual biography. One may also want to examine the composition and reactions of his audience and the discussions of Gaber’s ideas offered by other YouTubers. Our scope is more modest: except for the video the titular quote comes from, we focus on the videos that Gaber decided to officially publish, assuming that they represent the perception he wants to convey of himself. Additionally, we scrutinize in depth *one* topic Gaber is particularly fond of: science. Ideally the present study will pave the way to more wide-ranging and in-depth ones. However, we also advance some suggestions on how to critically and constructively engage with Gaber’s arguments from a Muslim viewpoint.

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<sup>4</sup> See V. Gardner and S. Hameed. 2017. “Science and Islam Videos: Creating a Methodology to Find ‘All’ Unique Internet Videos” *CyberOrient* 11, (1), 54-85.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Gaber explains he took down a video about the “numerological” interpretation of the Qur’an after realizing he had used inaccurate sources (“Q & A with Sherif Gaber,” *cit.*).

<sup>6</sup> <https://sherifgaber.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/SherifGaber/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/SherifGaber>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/sherifgaber/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.patreon.com/SherifGaber/posts>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@SherifGaber/about>

<sup>12</sup> CairoScene. “On The Run: An Interview with Egyptian Atheist Sherif Gaber” September 18, 2015: <https://cairoscene.com/in-depth/on-the-run-an-interview-with-wanted-atheist-sherif-gaber>

## Sherif Gaber’s Videos: An Overview

In “Evolution and Religion are Incompatible”<sup>13</sup> (March 9, 2016;<sup>14</sup> henceforth ERI), Gaber contrasts human evolution with the story of Adam and Eve.<sup>15</sup> He points out that it is difficult to make sense of the idea that Adam and Eve were initially placed in heaven.<sup>16</sup> He states that “evolution is recognized by all the scientific organizations,”<sup>17</sup> and that it is supported by plenty of evidence. He compares believing in Adam and Eve with believing in *Spider-Man* or in *Harry Potter* just because there exist books about them, and he points out that it is scientifically impossible for humanity to come from one couple; also, he suggests that the primordial family, to populate earth, had incest as their only option. He emphasizes that looking for analogies or connections between evolution and the Qur’an relies on stretching the latter. He compares the *hadith* about Adam being 30 meters tall to the Japanese series *Attack on Titan* (2009-2021). He states that linking evolution with religion is worse than not believing in evolution; in this regard, he refers to (and shows a clip from) the scholar Adnan Ibrahim (b. 1966). Gaber concludes by pointing out the risk of taking religion as a source of information - this, he argues, will lead to discarding facts that contradict religion or to create implausible mixtures of science and religion.

“A Message to Every Arab Girl”<sup>18</sup> (March 21, 2016; henceforth MEAG) opens with the clip of a woman in a *niqab* stating “Thanks to Allah, I receive all my rights, I do not see any problems at all; I mean, let’s just obey what Allah told us, which is obeying men, or our husbands specifically.” Gaber (who mostly addresses his audience using the singular female pronoun) proceeds to criticize the *hijab*. Images are shown of young women - underwater, in a bikini, or performing physical exercises - creating a contrast with clips of women in traditional Islamic clothing as well as of preachers prescribing corporal punishment for women. Gaber states that “all the foreign [Western] countries are fighting day and night to make women and men equal” and suggests that women in the Muslim world are treated as servants even by closest male relatives, and that they are regarded as sex machines or as dependent on males. In the West, he states, harassment on behalf of men is legally prosecuted, while in the Muslim world women are blamed. “The Arab society you are living in,” states Gaber, “is a male society, a stupid one.” The video ends with the clip of a passionate speech by entertainer and activist Lady Gaga (b. 1986) encouraging her audience “to forget all of [their] insecurities.”

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILrF5Pk-bFs&t=3s>; The English titles are those displayed on *YouTube*.

<sup>14</sup> We discuss the videos in chronological order in reference to the dates indicated in the respective info boxes.

<sup>15</sup> Gaber oscillates between criticizing the narrative in a way that specifically applies to the Qur’an (for instance referring to the concept of *khalifa*) and to the other monotheistic religions.

<sup>16</sup> Here Gaber is not playing different characters (a technique he extensively uses later), but he uses direct questions that -he states- are posed by a third person, such as an atheist.

<sup>17</sup> Direct citations are from the subtitles (their match with Gaber’s words isn’t always perfect; they occasionally show minor grammatical or spelling mistakes, which we rectified).

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CsU3D59XC4&t=1s>

In “The School System is a Waste of Time”<sup>19</sup> (March 30, 2016; henceforth SSWT), Gaber argues that education is useless: it is based on memorization, and it inculcates an obsession with grades and competition that generates stress. He suggests that “one year of reading science articles or watching science documentary films... will be worth more than 20 years of memorizing schoolbooks.” He encourages his audience to read books about subjects they like. Gaber mentions statistics, such as only 27% of the people work in fields related to their degree; 80% hate their jobs; 32% of the richest people do not hold a college degree, including Steve Jobs (1955-2011) and Bill Gates (1955).

“How To Convert an Atheist to Islam?”<sup>20</sup> (April 9, 2016; henceforth HCAI) features Gaber as himself, as well as in the roles of a conservative Muslim and of an atheist young man whom the conservative tries to bring to Islam. The video illustrates five “steps” to convert atheists. One can try to lecture atheists about the “real” Islam, but it turns out that they are more knowledgeable than religious people, since it was the study of religion that alienated them from it. One may try to make them feel stupid, but atheists, explains Gaber, are scientifically demonstrated to be smarter, and will catch conservatives saying something silly. One can try to scare the atheists, but they do not believe in God and his punishments. One may try to convince them that life without Islam leads to depression, but atheists in fact never expressed unhappiness. Finally, one can resort to the Orwellian “big lie theory,” repeating falsehoods over and over again. Even then, however, the atheist remains unmoved and, paradoxically, he responds to Qur’anic citations with Qur’anic citations.

In “Debunking the Embryo Miracle”<sup>21</sup> (April 25, 2016; henceforth DEM), Gaber criticizes the belief that the Qur’an (23:13-14) is exceedingly precise in referencing human embryonic development, and that it was the first ancient text that described it. Gaber explains that Hippocrates (ca. 460-375 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Galen (129-216 CE) offered descriptions of embryonic development, suggesting that the Qur’an drew on (scientifically inaccurate) Galenian notions taught in Persia, where one of the Prophet’s companions studied. He also recalls how Muslim apologists fondly mention the work of Canadian embryologist Keith L. Moore (1925-2019), who expressed appreciation for the “embryological” verses;<sup>22</sup> Gaber points out, however, that even Moore noted the analogy between Qur’anic and Galenian notions.

In “Are Mountains Like Pegs?”<sup>23</sup> (May 2, 2016; henceforth AMLP), Gaber starts by encouraging the viewers to listen to scientists<sup>24</sup> instead of wasting time on social media.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJTt-eMGFB8>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6QfAikOTmI&t=9s>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQXjyuxpNdE&t=2s>

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Moore’s paper see M. Guénon, “Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī’s *i’jāz ‘ilmī* Approach: Embryonic Development in Q. 23:12–14 as a Scientific Miracle,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 21-3 (2019), 32-56.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IAPPvDs8qg>

<sup>24</sup> The term employed by Gaber is *‘ulamā’*, which he uses in reference to religious experts, too.

He shows clips of astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson (b. 1958) and physicist Michio Kaku (b. 1947), the latter talking about the stagnation of science in the Muslim world. Gaber sarcastically dismisses them, stating, in particular, that Kaku is an atheist and “his knowledge won’t be useful for him in Doomsday.” He then recommends listening to “Arab scientists” like Ali Mansour Al Kayali (b. 1952), Zakir Naik (b. 1965),<sup>25</sup> and Zaghoul El Naggar (b. 1933). Naik and El Naggar studied, respectively, medicine and geology; the former made a name for himself as a Muslim televangelist and El Naggar became famous for his TV programs and publications about the “scientific precision” of the Qur’an;<sup>26</sup> the lesser-known Al Kayali, according to one online source, has a Bachelor’s degree in Architectural Engineering.<sup>27</sup> Gaber shows a clip of El Naggar elaborating on the Qur’anic verse that likens mountains and pegs (Q 78:7) and claiming that studies show how mountains’ roots are ten to fifteen times bigger than what is seen on the surface. El Naggar uses Mount Everest as an example, claiming that it has a 100 km root. Gaber, however, shows how such a statement is inaccurate. He discusses types of mountains, explaining that none of them resemble pegs. He points out that, by running a *Google* search for images of mountains resembling pegs, only two pictures appear. One is solely found in Islamic websites and was created for a video illustrating the Qur’an. The second one comes from a scientific book, but it uses an exaggerated scale (as stated by its very author) and it was employed in a conference by El Naggar without proper context. Finally, Gaber mentions that mountains were likened to pegs also in the Bible, and by at least one pre-Islamic author.

In “Does God Exist?”<sup>28</sup> (July 1st, 2016; henceforth DGE), Gaber starts off by mentioning astronomic facts such as the size of stars and galaxies. Gaber poses an array of rhetorical questions, suggesting that the God who created the universe is unlikely to care about individual actions, also considering that different religions advance conflicting prescriptions while claiming to have the truth. God may well exist as a “first cause,” argues Gaber, and still not be the God that specific religions teach about. Gaber ends by stating that “the secret of the universe is way greater than we will ever imagine as insignificant humans within this universe.”

In “Criticizing Religion is a Human Right”<sup>29</sup> (August 13, 2016; henceforth CRHR), Gaber conjures up an Iranian who inherited Shī’ite beliefs. Upon maturing and getting educated, the person questions received ideas. Gaber suggests that neither this nor similar cases should be criminalized since the criticism of religious ideas falls under one’s freedom of expression and human rights. Gaber draws a parallel between the Dark Ages of Christianity, during which

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Zakir Naik (who is, in fact, Indian), see M. J. Kuiper, *Da’wa and Other Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 182-255.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of his views on Islam and science, see S. Bigliardi, *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science* (Istanbul: SRII, 2014), 103-132. El Naggar and Naik also feature in DEM.

<sup>27</sup> <http://elm-bayan.blogspot.com/2013/08/biographie-researcher-dr-ali-mansour.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej27cP7vx88>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9yoGGIF6lQ>

criticism of the Church was met with murder, and the present situation in Muslim countries, suggesting that the Dark Ages of Christianity are over, but those of Islam persist. Mocking an idea, he explains, is not mocking the practitioner's feelings; an idea does not feel insulted. He points out that without criticism, incorrect ideas persist for centuries. He also emphasizes the contrast between freedom of speech in the West (that can be used to preach Islam) and the lack of such freedom in the Muslim world. Muslims, he points out, may be outraged over a cartoon, but remain silent in the face of violence, terrorism, and violations of human rights committed in the name of Islam.

In "Is ISIS Islamic?"<sup>30</sup> (September 5, 2016; henceforth III), Gaber tackles the claim according to which ISIS does not represent Islam. He argues that violence historically committed to spread Islam exceeded what ISIS does. Additionally, he observes that terrorist leaders hold degrees in Islamic studies, countering the idea that they do not understand Islam. Finally, he suggests that a significant number of Muslims agree with ISIS's methods, and that only specific countries' laws prevent such people from applying them. These countries, adds Gaber, live in a paradox: they fight terrorist groups, but at the same time their schools teach doctrines such as "the right way of beheading." The problem, he concludes, is neither ISIS nor the people, but it's Islam itself.

"Secular or Islamic?"<sup>31</sup> (October 28, 2016; henceforth SOI) is a comedic and satirical dialogue. Gaber plays different characters being interviewed about the meaning of secularism: an Arab/Muslim ordinary young man, a Christian monk, a *sheikh*, an Asian man, and an Arab student (or intellectual).<sup>32</sup> All religious characters seem ignorant and wary of secularism. The *sheikh*, in particular, defines secularism as a Western Zionist American concept created to destroy Islam, but also the monk defines secularism as atheism or infidelity. The young man is not sure, but he supposes it to be *haram*. The Asian man explains that the government shouldn't interfere with anybody's religion because it is a personal matter, and the student defines secularism as the separation of religion from state: in a secular country anyone is free to believe in what they want. Once the characters are asked if they would like secularism in their own country (Egypt), the *sheikh* starts weeping. The young man realizes he has mistaken secularism for the ban of religion, but as long as it means freedom and equality between people then he would like his country to be secular. The monk stresses that as a Christian he wishes Christianity to rule the country, but as the representative of a minority he understands the need for secularism.

In "Muslim Meets God"<sup>33</sup> (January 28, 2017; henceforth MMG; currently Gaber's most popular video), a Muslim man who died while praying meets an angel at the gate of heaven. The angel asks him about his God, his religion and his prophet, and the man answers in excitement. To his disappointment, however, the angel denies him access, questioning the

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKYLS6XOxs0>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db56vgzAsc8&t=40s>

<sup>32</sup> This character isn't markedly gendered. Similarly to Gaber himself in his videos, they frequently use English words.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1AKpD49KmQ>

credibility of the Muslim tradition about judgment in the afterlife, and observing that all the man’s “good deeds,” including memorizing the Qur’an and killing someone who caricatured the Prophet, were pointless.

“The Myth of the Soul”<sup>34</sup> (June 2, 2017; henceforth MS) details a materialist criticism of the concept of soul. Gaber illustrates how the difference between living and non-living beings boils down to how atoms are arranged and interact. He cites the NASA Astrobiology Institute’s definition of life as “a self-sustaining chemical system capable of Darwinian evolution” adding that scientists led by biotechnologist Craig Venter (b. 1946) created a being that fulfills such criteria. Scientific explanations about atoms, cells and DNA are contrasted by Gaber with religious definitions of the soul as something that enters the body, makes it alive, and leaves it at death (including from places that some *‘ulamā’* indicate with precision; and he also mentions Jewish and Christian conceptions). Gaber denies that humans are unique and points out that it is impossible to define an exact moment in which they started having a soul. Sudden deaths are not explained in reference to an “escape” of the soul, Gaber illustrates, but to cardiac anomalies studied by medicine. He explains feelings, emotions, memories, and dreams in reference to neurons. Even animals dream, he points out, and since dreams can be physically explained, it is absurd to interpret them as signs of future events. The effect of drugs, alcohol and medicines also show that everything “spiritual” is in fact material. Gaber mentions the 2012 *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* according to which also non-human animals possess neurological elements that generate consciousness; he adds that even AI and robots can replicate it. He explains how experiments have demonstrated that self-awareness develops in stages. Gaber suggests that it is primitive to describe something as mysterious instead of trying to understand it scientifically: “Just because you don’t understand something...” he states, “that does not mean it has no explanation... Anything in [the body] you do not understand can be understood by science just like anything else in the universe.”

“The Lies of Al-Bukhary [sic] in Islam”<sup>35</sup> (September 12, 2017; henceforth LABI) opens with biographical facts about the famous *hadith* collector (810-870 CE). Gaber emphasizes that he was controversial in his lifetime. Regarding the claim that he memorized 70,000 *ahadith* as a child, Gaber states that it is impossible, unless one has some autism disorder. Gaber then discusses Al-Bukhārī’s research, casting doubt over the process of filtering out false *ahadith*: it would have taken him much longer than 16 years to investigate each narrative and be able to release his collection (all while working on other voluminous books). Moreover, he claimed to have memorized 300,000 *ahadith* as an adult (100,000 of which true), yet his book only contains 7,500. Gaber also points out the mismatch between Al-Bukhārī’s glorification of the Prophet as a miracle worker, and the Qur’anic verses indicating that the Prophet was a normal person. Islamic tradition, explains Gaber, is either unsupported by historical evidence or is inconsistent with it, and some *ahadith* even contradict each other. *Ahadith*, suggests

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FK-u7IvGMw&t=33s>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVCZ4FjYL0g&t=1345s>

Gaber, were used by Muslims who lived after the Prophet to glorify him, or to legitimize their own traditions and history.

In “Q&A with Sherif Gaber”<sup>36</sup> (October 9, 2017; henceforth Q&A), the YouTuber takes questions from his subscribers, including some about his life. Among other things, he states that he was raised in a strict Muslim environment, that he memorized the whole Qur’an, and that he abandoned Islam after learning more about it.

“Facts You Don’t Know About the Quran”<sup>37</sup> (January 30, 2018; henceforth FYDK) is structured in chapters focusing on specific topics. (i) The non-divinity of Christ is an idea as old as Christianity; it wasn’t introduced by the Qur’an. (ii) The Qur’an is derivative of Syriac Christian books. (iii) The Qur’an contains non-Arabic words; the confusion around its interpretation is caused by assuming that all of it is written in Arabic<sup>38</sup> or that no mistakes were committed while transcribing it. (iv) Multiple parts or terms of the Qur’an are unclear. (v) The Qur’an refers directly to Christ more than it does to the Prophet; this gives away its origin. (vi) Qur’anic stories come from the Bible or Rabbinic literature. (vii) The Qur’an’s literary quality is questionable. First, it resorts to enticement and intimidation, as opposed to logic. Secondly, it displays no organized order. Thirdly, multiple stories and sentences are incomplete. Fourthly, it contains redundancy (and Gaber suggests that eliminating verses such as those encouraging violence would be beneficial). In the fifth place, narratives are often repeated, and, in the sixth place, discussion of topics is repetitive, too. Finally, multiple parts of the Qur’an were removed or are missing according to the *hadith*. (viii) The traditional narrative about how the Qur’an was preserved, but also historical observations, raise doubts about its integrity. (ix) In particular, Gaber questions whether the Qur’an collected by Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (644/647-705 CE) is the same as the Qur’an as it is currently known, considering that the Şan‘ā Manuscripts (among the oldest Qur’anic manuscripts, dating back over 100 years after the Prophet’s death) contain verses not found in the Qur’an known nowadays.

“Sheikh Inviting Atheist to Worship the Only True God - Rinos!”<sup>39</sup> (February 19, 2018; henceforth SIA) is a conversation between two religious men and an atheist, all personated by Gaber. The former encourage the latter to worship the only true god, Rinos, who communicated with humans through Prophet Hamada. These are obviously allusions to Islam, and further ones follow (such as the prohibition of eating goose meat). The atheist can’t believe that Rinos exists, not having seen him. The religious men resort to apologetic arguments: one can reach truth by reason; since everything has a cause, there must be one supreme cause: Rinos; the holy book is full of scientific facts; one will get rewarded in the afterlife, etc. The atheist rejects all arguments by offering criticism based on logical, historical, and scientific reasoning.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThG4dzJyuT8>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvqgVS8KVJA&t=9s>

<sup>38</sup> In the following chapter Gaber observes that the very word “Qur’an” is Syriac, and it means “liturgical Christian book.”

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mG64EUUxOj4>

In “Miracle of Holy Fire – Debunked”<sup>40</sup> (August 19, 2018; henceforth MHF), Gaber questions, on the basis of historical, scientific, and logical observations, a traditional belief of (Coptic) Christianity, according to which the candles held by the patriarch miraculously light up after he enters the Holy Sepulcher on Holy Saturday (it is also claimed that the fire does not burn).

In “Help Me Escape Egypt”<sup>41</sup> (January 19, 2019; henceforth HMEE), Gaber elaborates on his struggle to find a safe place outside of Egypt. He talks about his plans to leave the country, obtaining a clean criminal record, and traveling to countries that do not require visas, referring to the obstacles he met in the past. He also asks for financial support from his viewers.

“Sherif Gaber Reappears After a Long Absence”<sup>42</sup> (May 8, 2020; henceforth SGR) is a conversation among a TV anchorman, a *sheikh* (based in Germany), a lawyer (based in Egypt), and Gaber himself (who plays the former three as well). The discussion revolves around his disappearance and the dangers he faced for his activism. He emphasizes his commitment to speaking up and fighting for freedom. The *sheikh* claims that Islam allows freedom of religion and does not have issues with criticism. However, he adds that only “positive” criticism is acceptable and rejects Gaber’s videos for conveying criticism that leads to doubt. The lawyer disapproves of the younger generation’s ideas, suggesting that they should not challenge inherited beliefs. He argues that thinking can become a curse. He thinks that controlling opinions is necessary to protect religion and maintain societal order. The video ends with personal attacks exchanged between the lawyer and Gaber, but also the lawyer and the *sheikh*.

In “The Heresy of Hijab in Islam”<sup>43</sup> (August 13, 2020), Gaber discusses the origin of the *hijab*, highlighting that the practice of wearing a headcover for women predates Islam and had different meanings such as a sign of marriage or aristocratic status. He points out that the term *hijab* in the Qur’an is not related to a headcover but means “obstacle,” “wall,” or “barrier.” He also questions the authenticity of the *hadith* related to the obligation of the *hijab*. Gaber argues that the original purpose of the *hijab* was to distinguish free women and slaves; a function that, today, has no more rationale. He highlights that, during the Islamic awakening in the early 20th century, the Muslim Brotherhood used the *hijab* as a symbol of *sharī‘a* and a way to gain political control (although prominent members would not enforce it on female relatives). Gaber criticizes arguments such as that the *hijab* increases ethics, protects women, or prevents temptation, arguing that they lack logic and evidence, but also pointing out the harm caused by the enforcement of the *hijab*. He illustrates how interpretations and practices changed over time and space, emphasizing that there is no agreement. In conclusion, he calls for critical thinking instead of blind adherence to tradition or authority, and for

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wJRKpuwXul&t=12s>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNXMBH5mIX0>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCtgzR5k6BQ>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=210jpT-NrIA&t=3s>

embracing change since life is too precious to be restricted by ephemeral beliefs and customs.

In “The Myth of Jinn and Possession”<sup>44</sup> (March 11, 2021; henceforth: MJP), Gaber introduces creatures from ancient mythologies and emphasizes their similarity with Islamic *jinn*. He points out that the belief in their presence in unclean places contradicts the idea that they are immaterial. This, he argues, reflects the simplicity of those who created the myths. He asks questions regarding beliefs in *jinn* summoning, pointing out their inconsistency. Additionally, he proposes medical explanations for the cases of possession.

“Modern Fanatics - Abdullah Rushdy”<sup>45</sup> (November 30, 2021; henceforth MF) focuses on the titular Egyptian preacher (b. 1984), whom Gaber criticizes for engaging in Orwellian “doublespeak” regarding topics including the definition of *kāfir* (infidel) and of rape. The only difference between Rushdy and ISIS terrorists, claims Gaber, is that the latter have an actual place and opportunity to apply their ideals. Rushdy, points out Gaber, focuses on inhumane and obsolete practices like stoning as a punishment for adultery “while the world is busy figuring out how to build cities on other planets or trying to spread peace and advocate for freedom and human rights and spend billions to create medicine and save poor countries.”

“Sherif Gaber is a Freemason Agent”<sup>46</sup> (January 21, 2022) humorously criticizes the aforementioned Rushdy, who stated that the quantity of Gaber’s videos is proof that he is being helped. Gaber plays different characters. The conspiracy leader (who speaks with a Russian accent) has summoned his subordinates including Gaber himself (or “Agent 037”). He is dismayed at Rushdy’s genius, who has uncovered the conspiracy, but still determined to carry on with Gaber’s mission to “spread freedom and corrupt morals.”

“Beg Him and He Might Help You”<sup>47</sup> (April 7, 2022; henceforth BH) is a skit involving a man concerned with the health of his comatose daughter and a man who serves as a public mediator between people and “Shiba the patron.” The official gives the man a piece of wood claiming that, through nanotechnology, it enables contact with Shiba who, however, does not talk or reply to anyone: he only hears. The official’s explanations are so convoluted<sup>48</sup> that the man ends up doubting Shiba’s existence and sets out to inform others about the fraud. The mediator calls the police on him.

In “Zakir Naik - The Wizard of Scientific Miracles”<sup>49</sup> (August 3, 2022; henceforth ZN), Gaber criticizes Naik’s discussion of “scientific miracles,” stating that he relies on wrong information (historical and scientific), stretched translations, mistranslations, or even lies, to

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fewib-ZrZY>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiDU6IOqTTY>

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIGw9\\_glW5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIGw9_glW5g)

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lszO5JhBfr4&t=10s>

<sup>48</sup> These are thinly disguised references to Islam and the Prophet, alluded to as “Saied Maazawi.”

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3ewI1YXc-c&t=12s>

have the Qur’an align with, or predict, scientifically accurate information. Additionally, Naik is labeled by Gaber as an extremist, for promoting violence, including the beating of wives, and the demolition of temples and churches in Islamic countries.

In “The Lie of Scientific Miracles”<sup>50</sup> (September 24, 2022; henceforth LSM), Gaber elaborates on *i’jāz ‘ilmī*. His arguments include the following: the Prophet could be familiar with scientific information; Muslims do use critical thinking to debunk miracles from other religions; a picture passing for evidence for the “splitting of the moon” in fact shows a natural crack on the lunar surface; there is no scholarly agreement over the interpretation of given verses as referring to physical phenomena; alleged scientific miracles are trivial facts; “numerical” miracles (e.g. the claim that the word “day” occurs 365 times in the Qur’an) are based on arbitrary word selection. Gaber criticizes the believers who are swayed by such “miracles,” that rarely influence anyone outside the religion. He highlights instances of manipulation, such as people converting to Islam due to financial incentives, and points out that such practices do not provide evidence for the validity of a religion. Gaber also scrutinizes the story of Moore, the embryologist, who is often cited as a convert; Gaber explains that Moore was working in Saudi Arabia and his appreciation for the Qur’an was prompted by financial reasons. Moore, points out Gaber, never claimed that the Qur’an was miraculous, nor did he convert to Islam. Gaber also discusses the conversion of mathematics professor Jeffrey Lang (b. 1954), arguing that it was driven by emotional reasons. Lastly, Gaber discusses whether the Prophet was illiterate, observing that there are conflicting theories, and that the Prophet could have gained information from educated individuals and travelers.

In “Interview with a Facebook Jihadi”<sup>51</sup> (January 31, 2023), Gaber plays the anchorman of the TV show “A Sample from our Community” and Muhammad, a first-year college student engaged in posting pro-Islam messages on the Internet after his attention was caught by a *sheikh*’s video. Over the interview, Muhammad (whose speech is rich in involuntary sexual allusions) ends up giving off the inconsistency, hypocrisy, and naivety of his positions. Pressed by the anchorman’s questions, he confesses that he is “a loser who wants to feel important” and ultimately “want[s] to appear smart to a girl [he has] on *Facebook*.”

In “Banned from Leaving – A Message from Sherif Gaber”<sup>52</sup> (March 19, 2023; henceforth BL), Gaber updates his viewers about his situation. He finds himself “between two hells”; in order to be allowed to leave Egypt he needs to serve four years in jail, although he may be imprisoned regardless. He doesn’t hide his sadness but emphasizes he will persist in his struggle.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YDSnXuwKSc&t=10s>

<sup>51</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcDNYgM5z\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcDNYgM5z_Q)

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tpmGWoVPxs&t=1s>

## Gaber's message, persona, and style

While he is often referred to as an atheist, a better-fitting description of Gaber is that of an ex-Muslim who criticizes Islam in its historical, scriptural, theological, ethical, social, and cultural aspects, while positively emphasizing the West, secularism, and freedom of speech. Gaber does so by engaging in “militant infotainment”: over twenty eight videos (for an approximate total duration of nine hours) Gaber offers to his viewers, in highly condensed, clear, and often humorous form, a veritable “tool box” of arguments to criticize religion in general and Islam in particular, that one would otherwise find scattered in multiple contemporary and historical texts of the “freethinking” tradition, both in the West and in the Muslim world. Additionally, Gaber’s videos include references to personal events<sup>53</sup> and appeals to his viewers to financially support his attempts to leave Egypt.

Gaber has constructed a special *YouTube* persona: he radiates self-confidence as well as cheerfulness (except when he is reporting on sad events, cf. BL), and he often uses self-deprecating humor (for instance regarding his own accent in English). Additionally, Gaber’s mention of his life in hiding and constantly on the move paint him as a brave person who is willing to risk his life to stand up for what he believes in.

Considering Gaber’s usage of memes, pop culture references (including recent films and series), and overall style (as well as evidence offered by the comments below his videos), his intended audience is most likely composed of Gen Z (teenagers and young adults as of 2023). His language and concepts are relatively easy to understand, making his content accessible, for instance, to teenagers with a middle- or high school background. He may be addressing viewers with backgrounds similar to his own, who already feel disconnected from, and want to oppose, religion, offering more intellectual depth and articulation to their position; he may also be trying to share his viewpoints with Muslims in the hope that they reconsider some of their beliefs. More occasionally, Gaber seems to be responding to his critics. Finally, producing videos may be a way for Gaber as a person to confront his own feeling of alienation from his immediate surroundings.

Gaber often provides information at a rapid pace, not leaving one enough time to think.<sup>54</sup> He plays with emotion as well; supporters may find themselves sympathetic and feel relief and enjoyment at the mockery of certain aspects of religion or of its representatives, including scholars and popular preachers. Adversaries may be carried away by an outraged response to Gaber’s videos. Interestingly, however, *direct* interaction on behalf of Gaber with his audience (supporters and opposers alike) in the form of responses (in writing or in his videos) seems to be very limited; this is somewhat surprising, also considering that the supporters

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<sup>53</sup> In addition to elaborating on his trials and tribulations, starting with an altercation with one of his university instructors (Q&A), Gaber gives bits and pieces of his biography that may shed light on additional reasons why he may have turned away from religion. In SSWT he alludes to having experienced abusive behavior at home as a child. In other words, Gaber may have grown disappointed in religion not only as a result of intellectual criticism but because of its association with an environment in which he felt highly uncomfortable.

<sup>54</sup> But of course, videos can be accessed multiple times and their content can be critically scrutinized or assessed in the light of additional information.

could be mobilized. So far, collaboration with other YouTubers is non-existent. All this may indicate that Gaber is too busy with the preparation and production of new videos, while living under difficult circumstances; there may, however, be alternative or additional explanations (for instance, in relation to Gaber’s personality).

Overall, Gaber’s videos can be described as informal, sarcastic, and occasionally abrasive. He uses amusing memes, clips, and skits to get his points across. Over time, the quality of Gaber’s videos has shown significant improvement in terms of production values but also of acting. One of Gaber’s favorite techniques is impersonating different characters; another one is using references to a fictional religion instead of Islam. While Gaber has toned down some of the most sensitive discussions (or even dropped some subjects entirely), the skits of his official videos sometimes depict Muslims (especially *sheikhs*) in a caricatural way as ignorant, uncompromising, loud, and giving them accents with negative stereotypical associations in his viewers’ perception (such as the Saudi one as perceived by Egyptians).

Gaber mostly focuses on Islam. Direct criticism of other religions is more occasional (and it mostly includes Coptic Christianity, the religion that, after Islam, is closest to Gaber). It is also true that Gaber’s criticism of core religious concepts including the very existence of God or of an immortal soul applies to all religions. This may be a result of the fact that Gaber often draws on the ideas of Western “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) and Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) whose contributions to the public discourse on atheism do not mainly focus on Islam.<sup>55</sup>

Gaber’s constant standard of comparison whenever he touches upon Islamic ethics and society is the West, which deems an ideal place that has reached the apex of science and freedom (cf. MEAG). Gaber suggests that rejecting religion is the inevitable result of thinking logically and consistently. Islam is represented as nonsensical, outdated, and harmful in the sense of both relying on, and inciting, ignorance and violence. Muslim men are generally depicted as simple-minded, oppressive, hypocritical, in denial (as well as in conflict among themselves). Muslim women are represented more occasionally but still as generally ignorant and oppressed.<sup>56</sup> Gaber also mocks traditional authorities’ overprotectiveness towards Islam, suggesting that it is ultimately infantilizing Muslims.

When thoroughly criticizing the sacred and foundational texts of Islam, Gaber may be directly inspired by texts and ideas elaborated in the West (for example, in FYDK he

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<sup>55</sup> Other times Gaber seems to be “repackaging” classical arguments of Western atheism; for instance, the analogy between God and the needle in the ocean in DGE recalls an argument famously advanced by Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) in reference to a teacup in space; all the arguments against the existence of the soul in MS are reminiscent of Epicurean ones (just reformulated in reference to 20th and 21st century science); Gaber resorts to arguments against supernatural miracles (cf. MHF and LSM) and theism (cf. HCAI, DGE, SIA) that one can find in David Hume (1711-1776); but then again, Western classical arguments may have predecessors in the Muslim world as well.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the only exception is the “intellectual” character in SOI; however, not only is such character androgynous, but it can be seen as ultimately aristocratic and detached from reality to the point of not really making, or constituting, a difference.

references the work of Theodor Nöldeke, Christoph Luxenberg, and Volker Popp<sup>57</sup>); however, he also catches up, *de facto*, with a centuries-long tradition of questioning scriptures, prophethood, and miracles in the Muslim world.<sup>58</sup> Gaber strongly questions, in particular, the accuracy of the transmission of the sacred texts, thus applying to Islamic texts a criticism that Muslims traditionally level at Jewish and Christian scriptures. Additionally, their phrasing and meaning are presented by Gaber as ambiguous and therefore as lending themselves to multiple interpretations. Finally, teachings that may not be perceived as ambiguous are still presented by Gaber as ethically questionable. Presented with such criticism, Muslims may opt for different counterarguments, that Gaber often alludes to. For instance, Muslims may insist on the ultimate credibility of the transmission of the texts; or argue for their clarity; or for the plausibility of some interpretations; or for the ethical character of the prescriptions that such interpretations yield. Gaber suggests, however, that each and every defense of this kind will ultimately resort to arguments that conflict with sound historical information, logic, and common sense (including intuitions about what is right and wrong). In other words, the arguments that Muslims resort to in order to defend Islam, according to Gaber, give away how Islam is constantly interpreted in different ways, each one of which, in addition to conflicting with other ones, seems to be embraced opportunistically and while overlooking the rules of sound reasoning.<sup>59</sup>

## Sherif Gaber's Conceptualization of Science

Scholar Sebastian Elsässer has examined the production of four YouTubers who qualify as Arab freethinkers/nonbelievers/atheists including Gaber. He points out they “delve into the four overlapping areas of critical thinking: natural science, textual criticism of the Holy Books, the history of religion, and philosophy (ethics and logic). The kind of mix depends mostly on the intellectual formation and preferences of the individual protagonists”; specifically, Elsässer identifies science as a main element of Gaber’s message, and one that marks his distinctions from other freethinkers/atheists active on *YouTube*. “Gaber,” he writes, “has the strongest focus on natural science... [and] he is the one closest to a

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<sup>57</sup> The first one was a German orientalist (1836-1930); the second one is the pseudonym of the author of the monograph *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (originally published in German in 2000).

<sup>58</sup> See I. Warraq, *Leaving the Allah Delusion Behind. Atheism and Freethought in Islam* (Berlin and Tübingen: Schiler & Mücke, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> One may think, at first, that Gaber’s discussion of *hadith* is contradictory; in fact, its tensions significantly exemplify the strategy we have just described in general. On the one hand, Gaber discredits such tradition, scientifically and historically. On the other hand, he refers to “embarrassing” episodes and teachings carried by that very tradition. If a Muslim responds positively to the scientific criticism, she or he may will end up downplaying the importance of the *hadith*; but this leaves her or him with the responsibility of deeply reconsidering all those religious teachings and practices that are justified in the light of the *hadith* itself (not to mention that similar criticism applies to the Qur’an and should be consistently embraced). If the Muslim decides to still embrace the *hadith*, she or he will look oblivious to logical, scientific and independent thinking, in addition to having to justify ethically unacceptable episodes and teachings.

‘materialist’ conception of atheism.” Additionally, Elsässer explains such YouTubers’ reaction to “scientific miracles” in reference to the fact that “literalist and fundamentalist interpretations [including those focused on “scientific miraculousness”] have come to dominate popular knowledge of Islam in Egypt and the Arab world in recent decades”; in fact, he adds, “this genre of religious reasoning... is a common apologetic device in contemporary Islam that is popular across different religious schools and trends... [and] it is often the first counterargument used by Muslim believers if others question the truth of the Qur’an.”<sup>60</sup>

References to “science” are ubiquitous in Gaber’s videos. Out of 28 videos, four advance extensive and detailed criticism of “scientific miracles” (DEM, AMLP, ZN, LSM); one is fully dedicated to discussing evolution and religion (ERI); four elaborate on science-based criticism of religious concepts and beliefs (DGE, MS, MHF, MJP). In addition to science-focused videos, most of the remaining ones are punctuated with allusions and references to science. One can replace ordinary education by watching science documentaries (SSWT). Muslims attempting to convert atheists have superficial, distorted knowledge of the theory of evolution (HCAI). Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) idea was great because people were allowed to criticize it, and it withstood the test of time (CRHR).<sup>61</sup> In two videos (CRHR, III) one of the meme-like pictures behind Gaber reads “Bro, do you even science?”; another one shows the caption SCIENCE, combined with one below it that reads HARAM and shows the titular protagonist of the 2012 movie *The Dictator* (2012). In MMG, when the Muslim man arrives at the gate of heaven, he states: “I was right and all the scientists [*ulamā*] were wrong!” Science shows that Al-Bukhārī cannot have researched and memorized all the *ahadith* he is believed to have collected (LABI). “Scientific miracles” are the last resort of religious people hard pressed to justify their religion but do not withstand scientific and logical scrutiny (and so doesn’t religion overall) (SIA). In HMEE, Gaber compares himself with Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). The anchorman of SGR defines Gaber as “a young man who wants to spread love and science” while the lawyer, Mr. Houssam makes a brief negative remark about “Christopher Dawkins [*sic*] ... that man who is into monkeys and stuff” (a reference to *Richard Dawkins*, conflated with Christopher *Hitchens*). Gaber suggests that science is ignored by fanatics (MF)<sup>62</sup> and that religious prescriptions are often cloaked in pseudoscientific

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<sup>60</sup> Elsässer 2021, “Arab Non-Believers,” § 4.

<sup>61</sup> A portrait of Darwin features in MS, and in Q&A Gaber talks with a Darwin puppet sitting next to him that reappears in SIA. In Q&A, he also mentions genetic human-chimpanzee similarity in relation to a question about ethics, and he recounts his confrontation with a university professor who criticized homosexuality while Gaber regarded it as a normal phenomenon, explainable through genetics.

<sup>62</sup> In this video, Gaber claims that Rushdy “doesn’t try to argue by using logic, science and evidence... No, he only keeps on repeating that it’s mentioned in Islam.”

arguments (BH). Perhaps, the video that is most laden with references to science is MS, including scientific documentary-like or science-related imagery, such as an animated representation of atoms, and plenty of clips of scientists like astronomer Carl Sagan (1934-1996) talking about molecules and about science and religion,<sup>63</sup> physicist Lawrence Krauss (b. 1954) discussing chemistry and biology, the aforementioned Kaku citing science fiction author Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), the aforementioned Dawkins explaining that the soul is a primitive concept, astrophysicist Sean Carroll (1966), molecular biologist Cynthia Kenyon (1954), computer scientists Ray Kurzweil (1948), and biologist David Sinclair (1969).

In summary, science is perceived and presented by Gaber as the epitome of, or the best expression of, logical, critical, and consistent thinking; additionally, he sees it as a vehicle of wellbeing, so that its practice, and the development of technology, are presented by him as the touchstone of ethical behavior. For example, in MMG the angel unfavorably compares the Muslim man's deeds with the achievements of scientists who benefited humanity. Overall, science plays a paramount symbolic and critical role in Gaber's video production. Such a role can be effectively described by citing a statement Gaber makes in one of the videos he has deleted from his *YouTube* channel: “*Ḥuṭṭ awlawīya lil-‘ilm!*” (حط أولوية للعلم), or “Make science a priority!”<sup>64</sup>

Considering that he is not a scientist and that he has no advanced scientific education, Gaber's emphasis on science may have been inspired by two distinct but intertwined factors. The first one is the emphasis on science-based criticism of religion that is conveyed by the aforementioned Western “new atheists” like Dawkins that Gaber is fond of referencing. And, as accurately described by Elsässer, the second factor prompting Gaber's interest in, and promotion of, science as a tool to scrutinize and ultimately dismiss religion, is the widespread popular discourse on the scientific compatibility, or even miraculousness, of the Qur'an.

That having been said, at least five limits can be identified in Gaber's conceptualization of science. To start with, he seems to mainly identify science with unassailable *facts*, glossing over the existence of scientific disputes, as well as of open or fluid areas of scientific investigation. Secondly, he doesn't elaborate in detail on how science may (or may not) possibly have bearings on ethical values. Thirdly, he doesn't seem to take into account that technology may well have destructive effects. Fourthly, he seems to idolize scientists thus ignoring their human limitations including the possibility of engaging in criminal behavior.<sup>65</sup> Finally, Gaber

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<sup>63</sup> Sagan is also mentioned in MMG: the angel mentions him with Richard Feynman (1918-1988), Darwin, and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) and states that he “adores” Sagan's “video” “The Pale Blue Dot” (Sagan in fact published a book with the title *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*).

<sup>64</sup> “How to Make Your Country Better,” March 15, 2016. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/sherifgabehowtomakeyourcountrybetter>

<sup>65</sup> Gaber or his supporters may well object that science still provides the best and most logical path to understanding the world, and that the scientific method can help one to get rid of misconceptions, harmful practices, and pseudo arguments including those used by (religious) authorities to buttress their own teachings.

does not seem to be aware that, currently, not all Muslim authors and thinkers (including genuine scientists) who advance models for the reconciliation of Islam and science do so in reference to *i’jāz ‘ilmī*; there exist Muslim critics of the “scientific miraculousness” of the Qur’an as well as different, if less popular, proposals to intellectually harmonize Islam and science including (human) evolution.<sup>66</sup>

## **Concluding Notes: How to Constructively Engage with Gaber’s Arguments**

Gaber seems to leave to his audience with a radical choice: either one is on the side of science and logic (and, ultimately, atheism) or on the side of religion. Acknowledgement, on his behalf, of moderate and compassionate Muslim positions is rather occasional (cf. Q&A). In fact, reality may display more flexibility, graduality, porosity, and nuance than Gaber’s videos suggest. Muslim viewers who can stand Gaber’s mockery and other biting aspects of his videos may find in such videos a challenge to their own knowledge and articulation of Islamic history, traditions, and beliefs, and may well engage with such challenge rationally, gingerly, and piecemeal. Some Muslim viewers may find themselves in agreement with Gaber’s criticism of “scientific miracles,” and many will reject Islamic terrorism, admitting that such positions and behaviors are part of contemporary Islam and a problem for Muslims, while at the same time rejecting the idea that they essentially, entirely, and exclusively represent Islam. Viewers may also develop doubts as to the authority represented and exerted by religious *‘ulamā’*. They may namely realize that such *‘ulamā’* often bring subjective and questionable opinions to the articulation of Islam, and that the very existence of conflict and contradiction among them does not speak well to the reliability of their leadership. Such a realization, however, should not necessarily entail giving up on faith. Additionally, viewers may be critical of some aspects of Gaber’s videos and arguments, for instance pointing out that his sources (as provided below his videos) aren’t always as accurate and complete as one may expect. And of course, Gaber’s very style including sarcasm and quick communication may be regarded as off-putting by viewers who do not object to discussing religion in principle, including with Gaber, but may still prefer a more balanced, pluralistic, and academic approach.

This analysis has been elaborated by several authors including a non-religious one. We think that a shared, constructive response to Gaber’s videos may be articulated along the following lines. Ultimately, all individuals, Muslim and non-Muslim alike (the latter including non-believers), rely on, and must navigate, irrational beliefs and received visions, and cannot revise or get rid of them instantly and wholesale. When interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims is inevitable, a nuanced, compassionate, and mutually respectful attitude is in place and, in fact, in everyone’s practical interest. In this vein, the whole *confrontation*

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<sup>66</sup> For an overview of the contemporary debate see N. Guessoum and S. Bigliardi, *Islam and Science: Past, Present, and Future Debates* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

“atheism vs. Islam/religion” suggested by videos the like of Gaber’s ones may be fruitfully reframed as a *conversation* aimed not at identifying a final “winner” and a “loser,” but rather at learning from, and about, each other, while engaging in self-reflection and, possibly, challenging one’s own beliefs, and one’s assumptions about other interlocutors.

#### **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.