



The good, meaningful life without God and religion: Malaysian atheists speak out

At the extreme end of the religiosity scale and obstinate against the rising tide of religiosity in the country are a small number of Malaysians—no more than 1% of the country's population—who are atheists. Freethinkers, agnostics, and nontheists, as they are sometimes known, are merely different shades of the same meaning: an unbelief in any God and religion, or at least, a conviction that God and religion are unimportant, if not irrelevant, in their lives.

Some think it unnatural and disconcerting, perhaps even suicidal, for anyone to willfully forsake all religions. How can anyone, without religion, decide what is wrong and right, for instance? How can anyone be good or have a meaningful life without divine help?

Who are they, these unbelievers?

Atheism is no longer fringe but growing. Thirteen percent of the world's population in 2012 are atheists, an increase by 4% since 2005, and, within the same period, world religiosity has declined by 9%. But whether religiosity rises or falls depends on where you are. Vietnam, Ireland, Switzerland, France, South Africa, Iceland, Ecuador, the US, and Canada are among the countries that have witnessed the largest decline in religiosity by between 10 to 20%.

But Malaysia has instead witnessed a rise in the number of religious people from 77 to 81% of the country's population and a fall in the number of atheists by 4% between 2005 and 2012. Whereas people's religiosities tend to decline with their

age, Malaysians' religiosity remains unwaveringly sky high across all age groups, from 15 to 54 years. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of religious Malaysians are fundamentalist—those adamant that their religion is the one true religion and the only truth.

If forsaking religion is bad, there should be some evidence that secular societies tend to fail or be worse off than religious societies. Yet, scientific studies consistently show the opposite: that people in secular countries, compared to those in religious ones, are more involved in charity work; are more trusting of strangers; have higher IQ scores; have lower levels of prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism, and homophobia; show greater support for women's equality; are more appreciative of science; and have higher rates of subject well-being. Secular countries also show higher economic growth, higher democratic stability, and better governance than religious countries.

Such trends persist even in Malaysia. [World Values Survey Wave 6 \(2010-14\)](#) showed that, among Malaysians, religious people were more intolerant of other races and religions than the atheists were. For instance, a third of religious Malaysians indicated they would not want neighbors of a different race or religion, compared with only 9% of Malaysian atheists. Furthermore, the atheists were between 10 to 30% more supportive of women's equality in marriage, education, job, and politics, and by as much as 38% more appreciative of science, compared to the religious.

Science in the religious Arab world has regressed since the 13th century. No major invention or discovery has emerged from the Muslim world for the past eight centuries. It is frightening to learn that people in the UAE countries read only an average of one book per decade, and that Spain has translated more English books into Spanish in one year than the whole Arab world into Arabic in the last 1000 years. Whereas the world spends an average of 2.2% of a country's GDP on science in 2010, the Arab countries only 0.1 to 1.0%. The Arab world contributes only 1.4% of the world's scientific papers and 0.1% of international patents. Furthermore, the [entire Arab region can only boast of two Nobel laureates in the sciences, compared to more than 120 Jewish scientists](#). OIC countries have only 8.5 scientists, engineers, and technicians per 1000 population compared to the world's average of 40.7 and OECD countries of 139.3.



Arab astronomers. Since its glory days, there has no significant Muslim invention or discovery for the past eight centuries (image from utopiaordystopia.com)

Correlation is not causation, of course. But societies appear to thrive, not collapse as they should, when religion is absent or exert little influence.

But, for some, being an atheist in Malaysia is difficult, if not dangerous. For ex-Muslims, coming out of the closet as an atheist is always an unsafe option, for severe discrimination and prosecution await them. Malaysia is among the most religious countries in the world and the least tolerant of unbelievers, as revealed by a [2012 report by the International Humanist and Ethical Union](#). Even our Prime Minister called humanism, secularism, and liberalism “deviant” and a “threat to Islam and the state”.

Amir (*not his real name*), who is 24 and a recent university graduate, is also both a Malay and an atheist. Having studied in many countries (both secular and Islamic) for nearly all his life, Amir has been exposed to a much greater diversity of cultures and outlook than most Malaysians have.

Amir described to me one of his early struggles with his faith: “[*Imagine*] you are in an international school and you are the only Muslim in the class. You look at everybody, and you think how could all of them be going to hell just because they don’t believe in the same things that I might have believed in. They are all going to hell even if they are not bad people ... That was one of the first times I thought about atheism.

“When you realize that there are a lot of different ways of living, you find that maybe [*what*] you have been taught isn’t necessarily the right one.”

Amir's mindset is just too different from the other Malays, so it is not surprising to learn that he has no Malay friends. Even the few he once had in the past eventually distance themselves from Amir.

"When I did tell them that I was an atheist—that sort of screwed things up," Amir quipped. "It's like there's something wrong with [me]. [*This happens*] even with someone I thought I was getting along with previously. Some unspoken barrier comes up.

"I find even the religious moderates in this country, by my standards, to be quite religious."

Each atheist has a different story to tell. Not all are like Amir, of course, who understandably has to keep his atheism a secret from his religious parents and from the society. Apart from Amir, none of the other atheists I met experienced any appreciable prejudice or discrimination because of their atheism.

Two other atheists I met were Willie, age 34 and a local university lecturer, and Kok Sen Wai, age 29 and a medical officer. Both are open atheists and outspoken about their atheism. Willie, in particular, has given many talks about rational thinking and humanism issues within and outside the country.



Willie, age 34 and a lecturer at a local university.

Both Willie and Sen Wai share a similar past. Both were once pious: Willie as a Christian and Sen Wai a Buddhist, and both begun their slide toward atheism by

asking too many questions: first, of their own religion, then of other religions.

“I started by comparing the different sects of Christianity: Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and so on,” Willie recalled. “When I was going through all of them, I realized that there are lots of different interpretations of the holy texts. Then I started checking out other religions as well. I actually read a translation of the Quran, and I looked up Buddhism and Hinduism. After a while, I figured out that there doesn’t seem to be a correct way, like the perfect way, of interpreting all of them.

“There is no proof. When you are faced with a question of whether something exists or not, you would actually require proof of it before you start believing in it.

“In the beginning, I considered myself an agnostic ... but, really, I discovered I was basically an atheist by definition.”

Sen Wai’s story is similar: “I guess this was the point in my life [*after examining the different religions*] when I realized that acquisition of [*further*] knowledge is fruitless if I am unable to tell if what I have learned is true or false. Though I did not know it at that time, I had inadvertently become a skeptic.

“The more you learn about religions, the more you realize that they are all alike in some way or another. They all demand faith that exceeds reason. Some of them even teach objectionable lessons that offend my conscience... I had stopped searching. I had come to accept that the well of religion is dry. I had become godless.”

While religious issues frequently occupy Willie’s and Sen Wai’s thoughts and concerns, Joey, who is 21 and a local university student, is rather indifferent. He has never been religious, so sliding into atheism for him was rather effortless, perhaps even inevitable.

“My family and I were Christian-*ish*, but who do not go to church, do not pray, do not say grace before we eat, and do not do anything that is Christian,” Joey explained. “I used to think that although I do not worship [*God*]*—*but if I am a good guy*—*maybe I will go to heaven.

“I was a freethinker for a while after that. But when I entered university, I hung out with some other atheists in my campus...and began to call myself an atheist. I

wasn't strong in my faith anyway, so it was easy for me [*to be an atheist*]."

But for many people, their conviction on atheism are often realized when they fail to find satisfying answers from religions such as the case for Willie and Sen Wai, or when they find religions offensive such as the case for Geetha, age 27 and a physiotherapist. That Geetha is also a feminist is important.

"All religions are essentially the same. They degrade women," Geetha complained. "Women are seen as lower class and expected to conform to men's expectations. The Indian culture and Hinduism are closely related to each other. I was in a culture and religion that disrespected women, that controlled women on how they should look and behave, for example. There's no equality: women are a discriminated lot and expected to be submissive."



Geetha, age 27 and a physiotherapist.

Atheists are sometimes regarded by others as rude, arrogant, and who are just as guilty as the religious fundamentalists in imposing their opinions onto others. The truth is the atheist community is diverse in many ways, one of which is by how atheists feel and react towards religion. Amir, Willie, Sen Wai, Joey, and Geetha exemplify such as a community.

While Joey is rather indifferent to religious people and religious issues, Willie is more diplomatic and wishes more for a rational but calm engagement with religious people.

"I chose to intentionally label myself as an atheist," Willie revealed. "Part of the reason is to foster the conversation, to force people to ask the question on 'What is this atheism?' and the topics around it."

Sen Wai and Geetha, in contrast, are less diplomatic.

“Religions are somehow considered sacred,” Geetha griped. “Nothing you can say about religion can be seen as constructive. Our arguments are always perceived as hostile by the religious.”

“If atheists are arrogant and disrespectful for calling Christians stupid,” Sen Wai added, “then one has to consider the Bible to be worse because [Psalms 14:1](#) describes nonbelievers as stupid, evil, and incapable of doing good. Islamic preachers claim that my wife and I, being *Kufrul-Inkaar*, deserve to be tortured in hell. What can atheists say that are more arrogant and disrespectful than what religious people are saying about atheists? I am sure that rude, boorish atheists do exist (as they do in any group of people), but given how atheists in general are constantly being insulted and threatened by religious adherents, I am inclined to excuse them.”

But what about morality? Could atheists be both godless and moral?

“Morality is ingrained within us,” was Geetha’s response. “Morality follows a simple, basic rule: don’t hurt others. Yes, religions have good moral values, but they do have some very bad ones too.”

For Sen Wai: “My morality comes from my innate primate sense of empathy and altruism: my conscience. So far, it has served me well. For example, while most world religions denounce homosexuality, I see no wrong in the love of two persons of the same sex so long as it is consensual and harms no one. Also, I can empathize with gay lovers. I ask myself, ‘What if I love someone but I am forbidden to do so?’ That would be tragic and unfair. I would further assert that the absence of religion would actually make it easier for us to do right by our fellow men in this case.”

“Even in the absence of moral authority [*from religion*], you can actually figure out what is right or wrong based on how it affects people” Willie added. “Evolution has helped to select people who do learn to live cooperatively, so basically, surviving together is always better than surviving individually. And the laws or values that actually help the society should be the [*morality*] that move us forward.”

Willie’s answers are reminiscence of utilitarianism: that we should do whatever

that will produce the best overall consequences for all concerned, and of the Golden Rule: “that which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor”. In other words, morality is decided on the basis that we do whatever it is the best, without bias, for everyone, and that we treat everyone as we like ourselves to be treated.

“*[Morality]* is actually quite an easy and straightforward issue to deal with,” Willie further explained. “It is just that people have the background that they must somehow be told what is right and wrong. At the end of the day, somebody who actually figures out and decides to do things because he knows it is right is a more moral person than somebody who does something because he is told it is right. So, if you believe and you do it, you are actually an agent of good, but if you are told to do it because it is good, then you are nothing, you are a robot, just following instructions. That’s just dumb, not moral.”

Like many Malaysians today, the five atheists I met each expressed concern over the rise of religious fundamentalism in the country.

“I am frightened at the rate by which we are losing our country to religious fundamentalism,” Sen Wai agonized. “Issues like Muslims touching dogs and gymnasts wearing leotards, which did not seem to matter in the past, are now headlining news. I am no political analyst, and I do not pretend to know the solution, but a government which continuously exploits racial and religious schisms cannot be healthy for a nation’s sense of unity.”

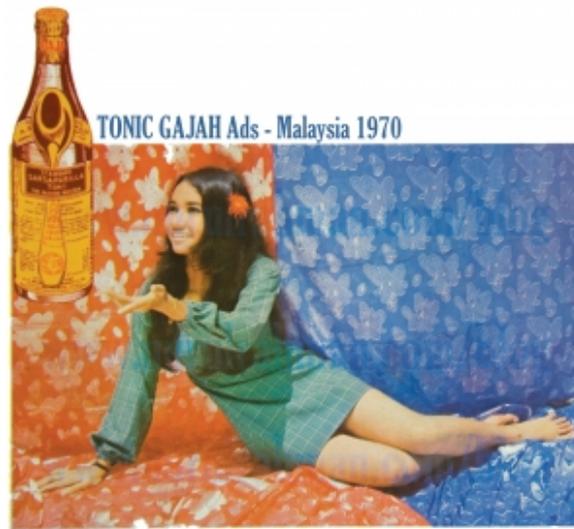


Yes, dogs are nice to see and even nicer to touch, but if you are a Muslim, dogs are *haram*, and you have to curb your innate urge to touch them (image from financetwitter.com).

“Malaysians weren’t like this before this,” Willie exclaimed. “In the past, you even have an advertisement of Guinness that said, ‘Guinness: [*baik untok kita*]’, and you had Malays in that ad. The fundamentalism wasn’t there in the early days of the country. So, how did we even get to this? There are a lot of scholars who went to these Arab countries, and they brought back a lot of the values that they actually saw from those countries which wasn’t actually here in the early days. The whole idea that there is only one way to be a Muslim or one way to be a Muslim country is ridiculous...I think a lot of people [*from a lack of reference*] have lost sight of Malaysia’s own past.



A Guinness advertisement in 1968, picturing two Malays (presumably Muslims too) in an ad for an alcoholic drink (image from hareshdeol.blogspot.com).



Your aurat is showing, miss. An early ad from the 1970. Good, old days, or sinful, old days? You have to wonder how people in the past managed to get to heaven (image from nurulrahman.com).

“The opposite voice is not being heard. People don’t dare to speak out, especially from the politicians ... You [*also*] have politicians who are saying secularism is bad for the country. This is a very sad state of affairs.

“We are living in a world that is enormously globalized, and it is very seldom where you can go to a country without actually seeing many Christians and Muslims living side by side regardless of which majority is in power. So, if you impose one set of fundamentalist values based on religion then you will run in contrary with others. So, in today’s world—especially in today’s world—you can no longer run this one-kind mind where only this set of values is the right one. The only way to apply all sets of values fairly to everybody is actually the secular kind of system.”

For Geetha, she fears the rise of religion fundamentalism will create a society that is increasingly irrational and less open. But it is women’s rights, she fears the most, that will be the hardest hit from increased religious fundamentalism.

When I asked her what the country should do, she simply said, “Keep religion out of politics.”

You might think the atheists, having forsaken their religions, would be happy to

see the back of religion or glee at its destruction. Remarkably, none of those whom I interviewed desired to destroy religion even if given a hypothetical chance.

“I would rather promote science than to destroy religion,” Geetha revealed, “because science encourages critical thinking. Destroying religion is pointless. I have many friends who are religious, but they are also liberal in their thinking.”

“I think religion is natural, like the most natural human thing.” Amir opined. “Religion becomes people’s identity, especially during times of trouble and persecution. Strip a person of everything, and a person’s religion is only that is left.”

“If I destroy religion, will I also destroy its culture?” Joey asked. “I don’t like religion when it affects people’s decision-making. But I like the culture that comes from religion[*such as its festivals and celebrations*].”

Destroying religion means denying people their religion. And that would exacerbate, not resolve, human conflicts because for many people, their identity, self-worth, and culture are derived, sometimes in large parts, from their religion. All human civilizations, past and present, have been influenced with varying degrees by religion, giving rise to amazing creations of religion-influenced art and architecture. Destroy religion and the world could be poorer for it. I can appreciate why Amir and Joey are reluctant to see an end to religion.

For Willie and Sen Wai: freedom of choice means freedom to believe even in religion.

“Fundamentally, we must give human beings choice,” Willie explained. “That means, even making sure the false choices are still available. You cannot tell somebody that ‘You must reach a [*certain*] conclusion’. You can hope they reach the correct conclusion. The whole idea of promoting science or scientific literacy is that humanity will become an intelligent species who will work based on evidence. Even within science, the principle is always to question yourself. At the end of the day, you must make sure everyone has the freedom to [*even*] make their own mistakes and to figure out their paths.”

“I think it is neither possible to be rid of religion entirely nor do I want to,” Sen Wai answered. “I believe in secularism. I believe that people should have the

freedom to believe in whatever they want to believe, so long as they do not harm anyone by it or try to force others to comply with their beliefs.”

I came away from my research enlightened that far from being deluded, immoral, or aimless, atheists can be very clear and articulate on their principles, stance, and concerns. Without religion, the atheists have found freedom, not to inexorably fall into a life of aimlessness, depravity, and despair, but freedom to discover that having a moral and meaningful life is not only desirable and possible, but also a better outcome than that prescribed by religion. Unlike the religious who are fixated on the afterlife, these atheists are instead much more focused on the here and now, on whether they are making full use of their single finite life, for the afterlife, to these atheists, is a simply a lie.

[Ricky Gervais](#), the English actor and comedian, said it best about living his atheist life: “[*When I die,*] it’s the end of something glorious, so I have to pack it all in. But, you know, I’m not depressed about it. I don’t want to die any more than anyone else. And I think there’s this strange myth that atheists have nothing to live for. It’s the opposite. We have nothing to die for. We have everything to live for.”

I like to thank Amir, Willie, Sen Wai, Joey, and Geetha for their time and frankness to be interviewed for this article. They are members of [MAFA \(Malaysian Atheists, Freethinkers, Agnostics and Their Friends\)](#), a social and discussion group on Facebook.

References

1. Charities Aid Foundation. 2014. [World Giving Index 2014](#). Charities Aid Foundation, Kent, UK.
2. Hoodbhoy, P.A. 2007. [Science and the Islamic world - The quest for rapprochement](#). Physics Today, August 2007. pp. 49-55.
3. WIN-Gallup International. 2012. [Global index of religion and atheism](#). Press Release. Zurich, Switzerland.
4. Zuckerman, P. 2009. [Atheism, secularity, and well-being: How the findings of social science counter negative stereotypes and assumptions](#). Sociology Compass, 3: 949-971.