



MY ISLAM

**How Fundamentalism
Stole My Mind—
and Doubt Freed
My Soul**

AMIR AHMAD NASR

"Amir is one of the most exciting and dynamic Muslim voices to come on the stage in years. Read this funny and enlightening book and find out why."

—Reza Aslan, international bestselling author of *No god but God*

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*In memory of
all the digital activists
and
freedom fighters
of the Arab Uprisings
who died for liberty.*

This is Not Just a Book About Religion

This is a book about breaking free from ancient and modern prisons. Prisons in the forms of limiting beliefs, media censorship, restrained identities, and the often soul-sucking 9-5 jobs that stand between us and the passion-driven, meaningful work we were each born to do.

It is a book about young, rebellious Muslims with something explosive in their hands: a computer connected to the Internet, and its power to help ignite an uprising and help assert the values of a new more inquisitive and outspoken generation that is absolutely, irreverently, and irrevocably fed up of the status quo.

Part coming-of-age memoir, part passionate call for reason and liberty, *My Isl@m* is an inspirational and searing story about finding your voice, daring to revolt, and doing work that matters.

It sweeps readers from war-torn Sudan to oil-rich Qatar, from Turkey and Lebanon to the United States and to the frontlines of the Digital Revolution. Through its pages, Khartoum-born author Amir Ahmad Nasr tells the overarching tale of how the internet opened his eyes and heart to a world beyond the religious dogmatism and conspiracy theories of his upbringing, and recounts his transformation into a defiant digital activist and aspiring change-maker. He unveils the untold personal stories behind some of today's major news headlines, and delivers them with moving and surprising candor.

These stories about the individuals who inspired his profound spiritual transformation could just as powerfully inspire you in yours.

My Isl@m delves into some of the key internal battles raging within Islam and explores ways forward for a new generation of Muslims. Nasr shares little-known behind-the-scenes stories of the 5-year youth-led digital prelude to the Arab Spring, and explains why the war for liberty is far from over.

Through the lens of Nasr's personal life, readers will also appreciate the positive aspects of the New Age and New Atheist movements—from the writings of Eckhart Tolle and Sam Harris to Christopher Hitchens' polemics—and will learn about the perils of multicultural identity in an increasingly globalized world.

This is a courageous, thoughtful, and sometimes controversial book that will speak to readers of all religious and spiritual persuasions, and anyone curious about where Islam might be headed in the next decades.

Advance Praise & Reception

“As a former Christian fundamentalist, I deeply resonate with Amir’s faith journey. Regardless of your religious background, if you’re struggling with belief or if you’re curious about how the digital revolution is impacting religious thought and empowering a new generation of young activists, this book is a must!” – **Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God for Evolution*, endorsed by 6 Nobel Laureate scientists**

“*My Isl@m* is a love letter to freedom of speech. As Nasr wrestles with oppression, mental and physical, personal and political, his story consistently turns on his ability to find new information, often from surprising sources, and eventually from his own ability to speak as well as listen.” – **Clay Shirky, best-selling author of *Cognitive Surplus***

“Amir is one of the most exciting and dynamic Muslim voices to come on the stage in years. Read this funny and enlightening book and find out why.” – **Reza Aslan, international best-selling author of *No god but God* and *How to Win a Cosmic War***

“This is the passionate, skeptical, tech-savvy voice of a new age of Islam. Through the lens of his own life, Nasr sheds light on a generation of revolutionary life-hackers poised to change the global conversation about religion and politics.” – **G. Willow Wilson, author of *The Butterfly Mosque* and *Alif the Unseen***

“*My Isl@m* is an important and significant book, especially at this time in our history. Amir shows both the downside and, as important, the beautiful upside of Islam as a religion, particularly when it is viewed through an Integral lens, which is how religion in general will need to be viewed if it is to survive into the future as a positive force. This is the right message, at the right time, from the right person.” – **Ken Wilber, author of *A Brief History of Everything* and *Eye to Eye***

“*My Isl@m* is a beautiful story about love, heartbreak, and redemption. Read it, and be inspired.” – **Salman Ahmad, lead singer of Junoon, author of *Rock & Roll Jihad***

“The post 9/11 world has seen an outpouring of vitriol against the Muslim faith. This book provides an antidote to such thinking, from a man who grew up immersed in an environment too few of us understand. This is a brave and moving work that touches on Palestine, terrorism, web activism, love and life in a way that shows the nuances within Islam. I salute the desire to reject fundamentalism. It makes us question what the ‘war on terror’ has done to us all.” – **Antony Loewenstein, best-selling author of *My Israel Question* and *The Blogging Revolution***

“Like every age, ours is one of political and religious unrest, of fanaticism, persecution and rebellion. But today, people have the technological tools to be heard – despite the powers that be. The Internet is not only a force for quick communication, but for unheard-of access to education. And Amir Ahmad Nasr shows in his powerful, timely and provocative work how he was able to move beyond a narrow worldview into one that embraces liberty, freedom, brotherhood and even belief. *My Isl@m* is an essential book for these dangerous, exciting times.” — **Michael R. Drew, co-author of *Pendulum: How Past Generations Shape Our Present and Predict Our Future***

About the Author



Described by *The Economist* as “puckish” and by WIRED as a “formidable speaker,” AMIR AHMAD NASR is a storyteller and cultural commentator who regularly sheds light on how the Internet-driven Millennial revolution is impacting society, culture, and politics. He is the formerly anonymous cheeky voice behind the acclaimed sociopolitical blog *The Sudanese Thinker* until the revelation of his identity five years later during the Arab uprisings of 2011. He’s shared the stage with Nobel Peace Laureates, former presidents, and fellow social entrepreneurs, and has been featured by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New Yorker*, BBC, and Al Jazeera, amongst many others. He writes at www.AmirAhmadNasr.com/blog.

Prologue

HE SMACKED HER ACROSS THE FACE—a violent thundering slap. The television seemed to reverberate with the impact. It was the climax of the show, and I had entered the living room uninvited.

“Why did he hit her?” I asked my mom. “Shush, not now,” she replied, her eyes still fixed on the screen.

I hated being ignored. “What happened? What did she do?” I continued, insisting that I get an answer. “I said, not now!” Mama snapped back, now obviously annoyed.

The woman collapsed on the floor and broke down in tears. The man who had hit her, clearly still enraged, stood tall above her, and then shouted in her face, “You’re divorced. Divorced. Divorced!”

The words marched out of his mouth, decisively and with absolute vengeance. I didn’t want to risk getting a similar response from my mom, but I couldn’t resist.

“Why did he say that three times? What happened, Mama?” “How many times do I have to tell you, not now,” Mama shot back, still not fully acknowledging my presence. “Will you tell me later then?” I asked, desperate to know if I would ever get to find out what the mystery was all about. “*Khalas*, fine, yes,” she assured me.

My mom was busy watching an Egyptian series, and I was bored out of my six-year-old mind. I did my best to amuse myself, but neither my brother’s Michael Jackson tape, nor my Ninja Turtle action figures, nor my well-worn superhero fantasies did the trick. After what seemed like forever, I sensed movement outside my room. My mom was done with her television show, so I rushed out to demand my answer. “Will you tell me what happened now, Mama? Why did he hit her? And what was that thing he said three times?” “He got angry at his wife and divorced her,” she responded at last.

Still, I wasn’t satisfied. “Why did he get angry? What did she do?” I continued. “Later, Amir, later,” Mama replied.

Later—many years later—I’d finally come to better understand part of what happened in that memorable scene.

Generally speaking, in the Islamic tradition, a man can divorce his wife up to three times, after which it becomes extremely difficult—even virtually impossible—to remarry her. If a marriage is in trouble, but there is a chance of reconciliation, a husband will make the divorce proclamation, “You’re divorced,” just once to his wife. This leaves the door open for a change of heart. Even if, enraged or disillusioned, he makes the proclamation twice, hope is not lost.

Only deeply troubled, irreconcilable marriages end in a “three-proclamations divorce” and a mushroom cloud of heartbreak and anger like the one portrayed in that Egyptian television series.

Over the years, I often found myself recalling that scene, and wondering about the remaining questions. What did the wife ever do to deserve getting divorced with three fierce proclamations? Did her husband love her, and if he did, what changed? And why the hell did he have to hit her?

One day, however, I partly understood. I experienced that kind of rage, the agonizing pain of feeling betrayed by one that I had loved unconditionally. I, too, longed to end it with that fierce finality. But my love was not a woman. It was my faith.

Growing up, I loved my sci-fi cartoons. I loved my toys. I loved my LEGOs. I loved what I loved especially when it lit up my creative imagination freely and in all its magical glory. But above all, I loved Islam.

Therein lay all the heartbreak.

For a while, there was a beautiful, spiritually liberating, mystical Islam that I loved as a child; later, entwined with it, came another Islam, that dictated that I should hold on to certain beliefs or risk burning in hell for all eternity. It erected tall suffocating barriers between me and the magical curiosity and imaginative free thought I loved as a child.

I didn't like that Islam. It was mean. It made me uneasy, but it was so thoroughly fused to the other one I revered and loved that I could no longer tell the difference.

And so I believed without questioning. Like a young man wedded to a stranger in a forced arranged marriage that he accepted for fear of betraying his family, I devoted myself to my faith. I practiced, worshipped, and swept doubt under the rug whenever it surfaced.

I memorized long passages of the Qur'an, joined national recitation competitions, won, and got featured in the newspaper. I listened to my bearded teachers, trusted them, and followed their instructions. I became wary of non-Muslims. I hated Jews, hated secularism, and doubted democracy. I had a love-hate relationship with the West and its leader, the "Big Satan," the United States of America.

Finally, at the height of my deeply held jihadist euphoria, I wished I could die and martyr myself for Islam and occupied Palestine.

I was eleven years old.

What followed will not only surprise you, but it is my hope that it will inspire you to see various forms of religion in a fresh and more nuanced light. It includes tales about haunting melodic calls to prayer, a French girl named Doubt, anti-Muslim bigots, five pillars and a teddy bear, a sexy bellybutton ring, a soulful three-eyed beauty nicknamed Trinity, American bombs raining on a pharmaceuticals factory, and an accidental blog that turned my life upside down.

This book is my story. Part memoir, part manifesto for liberty, it's about my relationship with Islam and its guardians. It's about my journey from arranged marriage to infidelity to the brink of irreconcilability . . . and back.

It's a meditation on blogging and the Internet, and how they've forever altered yesterday's dictatorial politics of ignorance and ushered in a new politics of knowledge that helped trigger and facilitate the so-called Arab Spring. It's about courageously following your heart's cause, finding your tribe, and doing what you can to help change the world. It's about the search for identity, meaning and, ultimately, Truth.

If you're someone who's had a difficult relationship with religion, or you have a deep interest in it; someone who's got a burning desire to help advance freedom, human dignity, and justice on our increasingly shrinking planet; someone who's passionate about personal and cultural transformation and self-empowerment, what I write is for you.

If having your beliefs challenged boils your blood, this book is probably not for you.

Lastly, if you value evidence, and if you passionately believe that God (or "God" if you wish) shouldn't be reduced to ink on paper, but should instead be experienced, expressed, and honored freely in love and ecstasy, and without coercion, then this book is certainly for you.

Order your copy today on Amazon or other vendors via the official [My Isl@m](#) book website. To learn more about the author and receive irregular and irreverent updates, visit the the author's blog at www.AmirAhmadNasr.com/blog.