

Ex-Muslims vs. Islam

Daniel Pipes

In the West, conversions involving Islam appear to be a one-way street in its favor. Famed new believers include Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Keith Ellison, and Sinéad O'Connor, as well as flamboyant flirts like [Prince Charles](#), [Michael Jackson](#) and [Lindsay Lohan](#). Also, there are about 700,000 African-American converts and their descendants.

But, in fact, it's a two-way street. Indeed, born Muslims who leave Islam have a far greater impact than do converts to Islam.

To begin with, some numbers: In France, around 15,000 Muslims convert annually to Christianity, according to a [2007 estimate](#). About 100,000 American Muslims abandon Islam each year, reports a 2017 [Pew Research Center](#) survey. This amounts to 24 percent of all Muslims in the United States, with Iranians disproportionately represented. These numbers roughly counterbalance those of non-Muslims converting to Islam.

Reasons for leaving Islam vary: Pew finds 25 percent of American ex-Muslims have general issues with religion, 19 percent with Islam in particular, 16 percent prefer another religion, and 14 percent cite reasons of personal growth. Slightly more than half of those leaving (55

percent) abandon religion entirely and slightly less than a quarter (22 percent) convert to Christianity.

Apostates challenge Islam in three main ways: publicly leaving Islam, organizing with other ex-Muslims, and rejecting the Islamic message.

First, overtly apostatizing is a radical act that can lead to execution in a Muslim-majority country like [Iran](#). Even in the West, it meets with rejection by families, social ostracism, humiliation, curses, [threats](#), reprisals, and [violent attacks](#). Accordingly, conversions out of Islam tend to be cautious or hidden, as in the cases of British author [Salman Rushdie](#) and pop star [Zayn Malik](#). [Carlos Menem](#) of Argentina minimized his apostacy; [Barack Obama](#) elaborately denied his.

Nonetheless, some converts make a point of leaving publicly, encouraging others by their example. [Ibn Warraq](#) wrote *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. [Nonie Darwish](#) and [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#) wrote books about becoming “infidels.” The journalist [Magdi Allam](#) converted at the hands of Pope Benedict in a widely televised ceremony.

Second, ex-Muslims living in the West do something inconceivable in Muslim-majority countries: starting with Germany’s Central Council of Ex-Muslims (*Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime*) in 2007, they have organized dozens of public [ex-Muslim organizations](#) to provide mutual support, polish arguments, raise troublesome issues (such as [female genital mutilation](#)), and [fight Islamism](#).

Third, Western-based ex-Muslims have developed an impressive reach into traditional Muslim communities with their books, radio, television,

e-mail blasts, websites, and social media. With near impunity, they spread savvy messages in Arabic and other major languages. Some (like [Wafa Sultan](#), [Zineb El-Rhazoui](#), and [Hamed Abdel-Samad](#)) focus on denouncing Islam, others help atheists [flee to the West](#). Converts to Christianity (such as [Brother Rachid](#)) often engage in religious disputation or (like [Sohrab Ahmari](#)) explain their spiritual voyages.

Converting, organizing, proselytizing: thus do vocal ex-Muslims in the West send shock waves to their countries of origin especially, where Islam is historically protected by custom and law from any [criticism](#) or even [irony](#), where repression and punishment render anti-Islamic views illegal. Anxious authorities [ban](#) Christian proselytizing and [censor](#) ex-Muslim voices. They even connect this movement to a “[Zionist conspiracy](#),” though such efforts tend to be as ineffective as they are platitudinous.

A poignant [anonymous letter](#) from Karachi, Pakistan, to the *Observer* during the peak of the *Satanic Verses* controversy in 1989 shows the inspiration of one ex-Muslim’s message. The letter writer replied to Ayatollah Khomeini’s call to murder Salman Rushdie because the novelist wrote disrespectfully about Muhammad:

mine is a voice that has not yet found expression in newspaper columns. It is the voice of those who are born Muslims but wish to recant in adulthood, yet are not permitted to on pain of death. Someone who does not live in an Islamic society cannot imagine the sanctions, both self-imposed and external, that militate against expressing religious disbelief. ... Then, along comes Rushdie and speaks for us. Tells the world

that we exist—that we are not simply a mere fabrication of some Jewish conspiracy. He ends our isolation.

With passion and a unique authority, ex-Muslims push believers to think critically about their faith. Their efforts have substantially contributed to a general [decline in religiosity](#) now conspicuously underway among Muslims, especially among [the youth](#). As the *Economist* summarizes a recent [Arab Barometer](#) survey, “Many [Arabic-speaking Muslims] appear to be giving up on Islam.”

Thus do boisterously opinionated ex-Muslims challenge their birth religion, helping both to modernize it and reduce its grip. Their role has only just begun.

Mr. Pipes ([DanielPipes.org](#), [@DanielPipes](#)) is president of the Middle East Forum. © 2021 by Daniel Pipes. All rights reserved.