

The Perilous Path from Muslim to Christian

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“More Muslims have come to faith in Jesus Christ over the last thirty years—and specifically over the last seven to ten years—than at any other time in human history” wrote Joel Rosenberg in 2008, and the pace has intensified since then. Uwe Siemon-Netto confirmed in 2016 that “a global phenomenon is underway: Muslims are converting to various Christian denominations in droves in every part of the world.” Indeed, Christian missionaries have even coined a name and an abbreviation for them: Muslim-background believers, or MBBs.

Why is this trend taking place, what are the numbers involved, and what are the consequences?

Background

Historically, nearly all conversions involved Christians becoming Muslim, not the reverse. Islam has for 1,400 years been the “Hotel California” of religions (“You can check-out any time you like, But you can never leave”), as it prohibits adherents from either declaring themselves atheists or members of another faith, which from the Islamic point of view amount to the same thing. This attitude goes back to the religion’s origins (a Hadith quotes Muhammad, “Whoever changes his religion, kill him”) and the sense that leaving Islam is akin joining the enemy and, thus, equals betrayal. Additionally, to live as a proper Muslim has a powerful social aspect, participating in the maintenance of communal solidarity.

Accordingly, apostate Muslims everywhere face rejection by their families, social ostracism, and loss of employment; in Muslim-majority countries, additionally, their governments may well persecute, imprison, torture, and kill them. Skeptical Muslims historically have therefore overwhelmingly stayed within the Islam’s boundaries; even new religions deriving from Islam (the Druze, Nusayri/Alawi, Alevi, Babi, and Baha’i) initially do the same and long retain a murky relationship to it. The pattern still holds today, for example, with Interuniversal Mysticism (Erfan-e Halghe), a new-age version of Islam founded in Iran by Mohammad Ali Taheri.

As a result, historically only a trickle of Muslims became Christians. One accounting, by Church historian David Garrison, finds 5 movements of Muslims to Christianity prior to the twentieth century and 69 such movements in just the first 12 years of the twenty-first. At least some of the first 5 movements occurred under duress or to gain a specific benefit. Most prominent of the former were the Moriscos in sixteenth-century Spain, pressured to convert by their Catholic rulers. On rare occasions, whole communities have converted to gain advantages, as I have previously explained:

In seventeenth-century Russia, a regulation prohibiting non-Christians from owning serfs led to the conversion of rich Tatars, including the ancestors of such luminaries as the musician Sergei Rachmaninoff, the poet and historian Nicholas Karamzin, and the novelist Ivan Turgenev. Around 1700, some ruling families among the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon converted to Christianity to increase their political standing.

Egypt's rule over Syria in 1831-41 was a time of mass conscription when "every eligible Syrian Muslim was recruited to the Egyptian army." Yvette Talhamy explains:

This was not welcomed by the local population. ... While some Syrians chose to flee the country or maim themselves in order to avoid conscription, others turned to the missionaries and declared their willingness to profess Christianity, since Christians were exempt from conscription in exchange for paying an exemption tax. The American Protestant missionaries were flooded with requests to accept Druze and others into their church.

(Sadly for the converts, this ploy failed, for they were conscripted "regardless of whether their conversion was real or feigned.")

The same disinclination held until recently. Visiting Sudan in February 1972, I stayed with an American missionary who had lived in Khartoum for twenty years, teaching and discreetly holding Sunday services. But he won only five converts in all that time, or one every four years. Similarly, in a 1984 book, *Ten Muslims Meet Christ*, an American missionary tells the story of the meager results of missionizing in Iran.

Numbers of Converts

MBBs can be notoriously difficult to quantify because of their discretion and even dissimulation. Still, some startling estimates exist. Duane Alexander Miller and Patrick Johnstone estimate the total number of MBBs in 2010 at nearly 10 million, marking a 50-fold increase over the fewer than 200,000 converts of fifty years earlier. Reports of widespread conversions of Muslims to Christianity come from regions as disparate as

Algeria, Albania, Syria, and Kurdistan. Countries with the largest indigenous numbers include Algeria, 380,000; Ethiopia, 400,000; Iran, 500,000 (versus only 500 in 1979); Nigeria, 600,000; and Indonesia, an astounding 6,500,000 (due to unique circumstances). According to Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen, there are “even Christians in Medina and Mecca.”

In Egypt, a Coptic source informs me, “great numbers of Muslims converted to Christianity after the 2011 uprising and the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. The Coptic Church called Islamist President Mohamed Morsi the ‘great evangelist’ and stopped counting the converts. Go to any church and you’ll almost certainly find former Muslims, especially women, attending.”

Most dramatically, in a much-cited December 2000 interview on Al Jazeera television, the director of Libya’s Companions’ Lighthouse for the Science of Islamic Law (منارة الصحابة للعلوم الشرعية, Manarat as-Sahaba li’l-`Ulum ash-Shar`iya), Ahmad al-Qat`ani, stated without evidence that 6 million Muslims convert to Christianity each year. He reported that the Muslim population of Africa had gone from over half to just one third and raised the prospect of Islam disappearing from sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps he exaggerated for fundraising purposes, but his numbers have had wide circulation.

MBBs also live in the West, with the United States hosting by far the most (450,000) and Bulgaria the most in Europe (45,000). Since 2014, Liverpool Cathedral has hosted a weekly service in the Persian language (called “Sepas”) led by a deacon of Muslim origins; the Anglican bishop of Chelmsford, England, is an Iranian-born daughter of a convert. Muslim conversions increased the size of Berlin’s Evangelisch-Lutherischen Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde congregation from 150 to almost 700 in just two years. New institutions have been founded, such as the Pars Theological Centre in London, which since 2010 exists “to equip and mobilize the Iranian church by training a new generation of servant leaders to lead the church and transform the Persian-speaking world for the glory of God.”

Vague and divergent numbers suggest that while no one has a good idea of the number of Muslims converting to Christianity, the magnitude is large. Christians celebrate this phenomenon; Joel Rosenberg exalts that “the Church is being truly resurrected in the lands of its birth.”

Why Muslims Become Christians

Duane Miller notes that “Christ’s converts from Islam are often driven away from Islam as much as they are drawn to Christ or Christianity.” Focusing here only on the factors that propel Muslims specifically toward Christianity finds the list to be long.

Dreams and visions, especially of Jesus, probably draw about a quarter of MBBs. Mike Ansari, an Iranian convert, reports that many people “are actually having dreams and visions about a shining man dressed in white far before we are out there telling them about Jesus.” Dabrina Bet Tamraz notes that Iranian converts often ask each other, “Have you seen the white[-robed] man, have you seen Jesus?” The leader of a Presbyterian church in Pakistan found that Afghan imams were traveling hundreds of kilometers to study the Bible with him. When asked what prompted them to do so, the minister replied: “Dreams! Christ had appeared to them in their sleep and instructed them to come here to hear the truth.” And in Colorado, Pastor George Naeem who conducts classes in Arabic via the radio and the Internet reports that “Virtually all [his students] came following dreams.”

Michael Stollwerk tells of the time after a service at the cathedral of Wetzlar north of Frankfurt: “I stood at the exit, still vested, bidding the worshipers goodbye, when a veiled woman approached me. I fumbled through a slit in my robe for my wallet, thinking she was a beggar. ‘No, no,’ she said. ‘I only have a question: Are you the imam here?’ I answered: ‘Well, in a way I am – I am the pastor.’ She went on: ‘In that case you are the right man. God commanded me in a dream to go to the big church on the market square and ask the imam for the truth’.” She was baptized several months later. Siemon-Netto, who recounts these stories, goes on:

Next I heard of similar episodes from a Lutheran theologian whom imams visited through his back door in the middle of the night in Egypt for the same purposes; I heard it from a Catholic missionary who had worked in Algeria, from a Baptist whose surprise visitors told him that Christ had appeared to them in their tents in Saudi Arabia. An Anglican priest spoke of hundreds of Persian women attending secret Bible studies in Tehran following dreams. Pastor Gottfried Martens in Berlin estimated that at least two-thirds of his Persian and Afghan converts had followed the instructions of a “figure of light” identifying himself as the Jesus of the Christian Bible and not the “Isa” of the Koran.

Nabeel Qureshi a Pakistani MBB, explained this common pattern with reference to Islam: “Dreams are the only means by which the average Muslim expects to hear directly from God.”

Muslims open minded enough to read the Bible tend to be impressed by its contrast with the Koran, especially its emphasis on love. Wasef explains: “When they read the Bible, [it] changes them right away. It's better than any talk or any debates. When I sit down and talk with [Muslims], all that I say is from the Bible.”

There's a widespread sense among Muslims, supported even by Muslim-sponsored research studies, that Christians behave better than Muslims, that they behave, ironically, more Islamically. In a 2014 interview watched over 400,000 times on YouTube, a completely covered woman who gives her name as Shadya Sabir Hussein publicly declares on Egyptian television that she “hates Islam” and plans to become Christian because of all the killing that Muslims engage in. An Iraqi scholar noted that problems in Iraq have caused “many of our youths [to] convert to Christianity, after defaming Islam as a terrorist religion.” The Algerian crisis of the 1990s had a similar impact: all those deaths in the name of Islam led many to declare that “Christianity is life, Islam is death.”

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), by dint of its brutality, has enhanced this trend. Omar, a Protestant church administrator, testifies that “Most of the brothers here converted or come to church as a result of what ISIS did to them and to their families.” Jasim, a mechanic, was jailed by ISIS for six months in 2016 for not knowing the basics of Islam, during which time ISIS forced him to read the Quran and tortured him: “After I witnessed their brutality with my own eyes, I started to be skeptical about my belief.” He visited a church and “It didn't take me long to discover that Christianity was the religion I was searching for.”

Issues of peace and violence loom large in the conversion stories. Mark Durie informs me, “In my experience many Muslims from Muslim-majority countries are quite traumatized, and inner peace is a constant theme.” Iran's Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi confirmed this when quoting the motives of converts: “We are looking for a religion that could give us peace of mind.” Sadegh, now Johannes, started to doubt his faith while studying at the university in Iran: “I found that the history of Islam was completely different from what we were taught at school. Maybe, I thought, it was a religion that began with violence? A religion that began with violence cannot lead people to freedom and love. Jesus Christ said ‘those who use the sword will die by the sword.’ This really changed my mind.”

Personal contact with Christians who live righteously has a frequent role in conversion stories. Mohammad Eghtedarian stayed with a priest for six days, opening the opportunity for the priest to ask him the question that changed his life: “Do you have peace and freedom in Islam?”

Then there are the practical reasons for conversion. That Islam and Muslims are lagging behind the rest of the world prompts some Muslims to wish to get ahead by joining Christianity, sensing that doing so means joining the modern team.

Finally, conversion can be undertaken with the expectation of material gain. London's Daily Telegraph reports that some "Rice Christians" in Lebanon "say they converted to benefit from the generous aid distributed by Christian charities" and recounts the story of Ibrahim Ali, an impoverished Syrian whom the Anglican Church of God in a Beirut suburb offered "a bed, two hot meals a day and a small monthly stipend, on the condition he agreed to attend their weekly Bible study sessions." Ali explains that he converted for practical reasons, as did others.

Observations

Three thoughts on the process of conversion. First, although some Christian spokesmen (Zakariya Botros, Jay Smith & David Wood) criticize Islam, this has limited utility in attracting Muslims. Jill Nelson paraphrases Wasef: "Public debates between Muslims and Christians are not effective ministry tools, and Christian literature is usually ineffective as well. ... Statements such as those made by prominent evangelical leaders calling Islam 'wicked' and criticizing Muhammad also tend to drive Muslims away from Christianity." Victor Atallah of the Middle East Reformed Fellowship concurs: "We have to be careful not to condemn Muhammad but also not to condone him."

Second, traditional missionary efforts by Westerners, such as providing education and treating the ill, plays a surprisingly minor role in winning converts. Radio and television broadcasts, some founded and led by MBBs, have largely replaced them, including Radio Monte Carlo, SAT-7 International, METV, High Adventure Ministries, Voice of Christ Media, and Middle East Reformed Fellowship. An Algerian newspaper explained the role of these stations in Kabylie, the most intensely Berber (or Amazigh) region of Algeria:

The faithful whom we met have confirmed that information had, in their view, an important role in the legitimization of Christian doctrines. Like Saïd – who confessed that he listens a lot to Radio Monte Carlo and particularly its popular broadcasts in Amazigh. As for Slimane, he declares that "80 percent of the reasons which impelled me towards Christianity came from Radio Monte Carlo." There are also other radio stations such as "Miracle Channel" (SAT-7), and most of the faithful confirmed that they listen to these stations which broadcast the Christian message across the world.

Country-specific stations, such as Aghapy TV for Egypt or Elam Ministries, Iran Alive Ministries, Mohabat TV, and Nejat TV for Iran, also have a substantial impact. Ansari

explains about Mohabat TV: “It appears that roughly about 16 million Iranians within the last 12 months have viewed one or more of our programs on satellite TV and also on their mobile devices. That roughly translates to about 20 percent of Iran's population.”

Third, if foreign missionaries provided the initial spark, MBBs drive much of the current Evangelization of Muslims. Christianity has become dynamic again among believers in its home region.

Pious Frauds

Some Muslims convert tactically for practical reasons, especially to facilitate emigration to the West. A Church of God pastor, Said Deeb, quotes desperate Muslims telling him, “Just baptize me, I will believe in whoever just to leave here.” National Public Radio paraphrases Şebnem Köşer Akçapar of Koç University in Istanbul to the effect that “only some of the refugees are genuine converts. Others are using religious persecution as a way to get to the West.” Aiman Mazyek, head of the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland, reacts with acute skepticism about growing numbers of Muslim converts to Christianity.

Once in the West, conversion has two advantages. It can facilitate permission to remain, as governments (whatever their theoretical neutrality) sometimes favor Christian migrants; and it renders repatriation more difficult by putting the migrants in danger of persecution back home for abandoning Islam. As Volker Kauder, a leader of the Christian Democratic Union, points out: “Once someone has renounced Islam, regardless of whether or not he authentically converted to Christianity, he can be prosecuted for apostasy. When it comes to political persecution, those who persecute do not care about the authenticity of a conversion.”

Accordingly, more than a few converts have dubious spiritual credentials. Rick Robinson of the United Pentecostal Church in Turkey accepts that many of his congregants may not come to him as completely sincere believers: “There might even be some who start with the help just for the refugee status.” Gottfried Martens, the Persian-speaking pastor of the Evangelisch-Lutherischen Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde in Berlin, acknowledges not knowing which converts are genuine and which are tactical: “I know there are — again and again — people coming here because they have some kind of hope regarding their asylum.” Vesam Heydari, a member of that church confesses that “The majority of Iranians here are not converting out of belief. They only want to stay in Germany.” The congregation of Reverend Hugo Gevers in Leipzig is one-third former Iranian Muslim; he admits that “There were occasions where we were very deeply disappointed. We were

supporting them for years, they had the court case and a positive answer – and the same day they separated from us.” But he notes that entirely false conversions are low, especially since pastors have adopted protocols to identify fakers.

More broadly, one should not over-estimate the number of fraudsters. Berlin’s Martens observes that “there is really a kind of Christian awakening in Iran at the moment with pretty large dimensions. People who come to us have already had these contacts with house churches and have had to flee because of that.”

Muslim Accusations

Worried about “a Christian surge,” Joel Rosenberg observes, “Muslim leaders are becoming nervous and angry.” They focus on pious frauds and accuse all converts of switching religions for personal gain, such as funding, a job, or a visa. This has the convenient advantage of both discrediting MBBs while absolving themselves of responsibility. Such accusations are particularly common in locales like northern Iraq and Algeria, where conversions of Kurds and Berbers are unusually high.

Soon after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Muslim World League Secretary-General Abdullah al-Turki warned that “non-Muslim organizations” (meaning Christian missionaries) had entered Iraq “to start their activity under the cover of providing humanitarian aid” and warned of “the dangers this poses to Muslims.” Ahmed al-Shafie of the Association of Muslim Scholars in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, denounced a supposed secret influx of Christian missionaries: “We strongly condemn this disgraceful act against Islam and Muslims which demonstrates that there are hidden hands with foreign agendas [working] to destroy the society of this country.” Another Muslim figure in Sulaymaniyah repeated this accusation in 2007: “Missionaries are exploiting the harsh economic situation that these youths experience in these areas as they are unemployed and almost depressed. In some cases, the youths want to go abroad and [conversion to Christianity] is an easy way to achieve their dream as they can say that they are threatened and need a safe haven.”

In 2006, an official at Algeria’s Ministry of Religious Affairs, Mohamed Aissat, claimed that Christian missionaries entice local Muslims with such offers and “profit from the confusion of youths to convert them.” (He also noted that “Numerous youths have repented, returning to Islam.”) That same year, Algeria’s government passed a law prohibiting “anyone urging or forcing or tempting, to convert a Muslim to another religion” on pain of 2-to-5 years in prison and a fine of €5,000-€10,000. Two Muslim

converts to Christianity were sentenced to two years in prison and €5,000 fines under this law in 2008 for “proselytizing and the illegal practice of a non-Islamic religion.”

Living as a Christian

Winning MBBs is half the battle; getting them to stay Christian is the other half. A study of returnees to Islam in Indonesia by Julia Sianturi found several factors driving their actions:

Strong attachment to their family and deep Islamic roots seem to be the major leading causes to their decision to return to Islam. Discrimination from surrounding community and the divinity of Jesus might have some influence in their decision making. And their disappointment toward pastoral ethics raises a concern due to its effects on MBBs’ perception of the church and Christianity.

So great are these difficulties, Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen acknowledge that “at least half of all Muslim converts [to Christianity] return to Islam.” To address this issue, Duane Miller wrote a book with ideas on providing unprecedented numbers of MBBs with “a new and welcoming home.”

Converts who do remain Christian face various challenging alternatives:

1. Keep their conversion quiet by maintaining complete secrecy and continuing with the appearance and habits of a Muslim. Many, Nelson notes, still don “traditional Muslim dress to avoid the consequences of their conversions.” In some cases, they even maintain the myriad of Islamic customs and rituals. But this means suffering from deep solitude and moral failure. The pressure can become unbearable.

2. Announce the change of faith (or confiding in a close relative or friend who, outraged by the news, betrays the convert’s trust) leads to MBBs having their world turned upside-down. They face unremitting and sometime violent pressure from family, society, and government, a sense of isolation, and a loss of income. They cannot leave their Muslim identity. They may be forcibly treated for mental illness. When only one spouse converts, marriages can be broken up and contact with children lost. In Muslim-majority countries, authorities typically refuse to acknowledge conversions out of Islam, trapping MBBs legally as Muslims; female converts who may only marry fellow Muslims as their identity cards list them as Muslims, are limited to marrying male MBBs. Ironically, born-Christians avoid MBBs, and established churches reject them, leery of being accused of having been party to their conversions and punished accordingly. As one priest cruelly put it, converts “need to keep quiet about their belief in our Lord, or we all will suffer.”

3. Relocate to another city to make a fresh start as born-Christians means leaving family behind, starting new social relationships and earning a quiet living, while ever fearful of recognition or exposure.

4. Emigrate to non-Muslim-majority countries may seem like the perfect solution, but it is not. Beyond the strains of re-establishing one's life anew, usually with a new language, Islamic pressure can continue unrelentingly even there. Some MBBs remain scared of their home governments and so live in "an atmosphere laden with overwhelming suspicion." One convert observes that "Maybe someone inside the church is one of them." Accordingly, "refugees are careful to keep their distance from each other, never revealing information about their cases or details of their lives back home." Women face special problems. As the European Centre for Law and Justice notes about France, "a significant proportion of the converted women are threatened with being forcibly married, sent to their parents' country of origin or sequestered as long as they do not return to Islam. In infrequent [and] increasingly rare cases, converts are lynched or even killed by Islamists." Thus do the fear and loneliness continue.

Conclusion

Substantial voluntary conversions from Muslim to Christian amount to a historic novelty, one that alters a venerable imbalance, whereby Islam almost invariably poached believers at Christianity's expense. This turnaround has potentially great implications for how Muslims see themselves and their religion; the traditional confidence deriving from one-way conversions no longer holds; will something else replace it; or will this vulnerability undermine Muslim confidence? The implications run deep.

Conversions to Christianity, in turn, make up part of a larger move away from Islam, one that also includes conversion to other religions (especially Zoroastrianism among Kurds and Hinduism among Indians; Judaism and Buddhism also attract converts) as well as the adoption of deism and atheism. Together, these related trends pose a seldom-noticed but significant development that go far to negate the widely-noted Islamist surge of the past half-century. Indeed, they can potentially undo that surge.