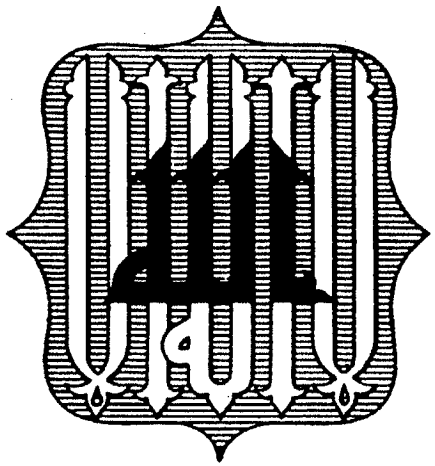
THE ISLAMIC QUARTERLY

A Review of Islamic Culture



There is no god but Allah

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The Editor wishes to emphasize that views expressed in this journal are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Editor

A STUDY OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM WITH REFERENCE TO EGYPT AND IRAQ

A Survey of Western Sources

Talip Küçükcan *

Understanding Conversion

In contemporary social psychological works the concept of conversion appears to have had a comprehensive meaning. In the oft quoted words of Trayisano, conversion refers to a radical reorganization of identity, meaning and life (Trayisano.1970, p.594 cited in Lofland and Skonovd), Heirich explains conversion in such phrases as "conversion is the process of changing, a sense of root reality" or "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding" (Heirich, 1977, p.674) One can deduce from the above mentioned definitions that conversion is a very remarkable event, tantamount to changes in the life of the one who experiences it. Thus, if one tries to undertake an exploration of conversion experience, many variables should be taken into consideration to reach a sound conclusion. Of those the conversion motives are of great importance.

Lofland and Skonovd suggest six fundamental motives to religious conversion, being identified as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive:

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1- Intellectual motive:
The intellectual mode of conversion commences with individual and private investigation of possible grounds for alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment etc. Intellectual motives do not push an individual into a social involvement or to become acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life. Rather, in the course of such a process, some individuals may convert themselves in isolation from any actual interaction with devotees of the respective religion.

2- Mystical motive:
The mystical motive for conversion, from a historical point of view, is the most common or the best known one. In the case of mystical conversion, the conversion experience cannot be expressed in logical and coherent terms. It is noteworthy that those who are considered the earliest scholars of conversion W. James, E.D. Starbuck, and E.T .Clark focused heavily on mystical conversion. During this type of conversion there is little or no social pressure; the convert is most likely alone at the time of actual event.

3- Experimental motive:
The experimental motive refers to an active participation in a chosen group or life style, and a new religious orientation or belief which arises out of this participation. Intensive interaction seems to be a significant feature of many experimental conversion experiences.

4- Affectional motive:
Emotional factors are of great importance in some individual's lives. Feelings can play an important role in our psychological life. In this type of conversion, personal attachment or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process.

5- Revivalist motive:
This motive implies the influence of preachers, organizations and groups, which are of a revivalist nature, on an individual's religious life. Within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd, an individual may enter the process of ecstatic religious experience.

6- Coercive Motive:
The final conversion motive refers to the use of some sort of power through brainwashing, programming, mind control, coercive persuasion and thought reform etc. The two key features of brainwashing or coercive persuasion are:

a- the compulsion of an individual,

b- sincerely to confess guilt or embrace an ideological system.

Whatever the conversion motives may be, they differ significantly from one historical epoch to other, from one society to another (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981, p.377-83).

The State of Affairs in Egypt and in Iraq Before the Islamic Conquest:

Egypt:
The ten years of Persian rule in Egypt had been followed by a strong Byzantine reaction after the victorious wars of Heraclius. Byzantine authorities hoped to terminate the long-lasting conflict between Monophysites and Dyophysites. But they failed to do so. At the same time the financial claims of the Empire on Egypt were very heavy and the administration of Church and finance was controlled by the same body. In 631 Cyrus was sent to Egypt to persuade the Coptic community to accept their proposal and to increase the revenues of the treasury. (Becker, E. I. Vol. 2, p.5) In the Cambridge Medieval History (Vol. 2. p.349) Becker also points out the fact that the Byzantine rulers forced the members of Coptic Church to convert to the Irenicon belief. The Coptic form of worship was forbidden and its priests and organizations were cruelly treated. The heavy burden of taxes fell upon the shoulders of the Coptic community in order to assist in paying the depts of emperor.

Iraq:
In Iraq, on the eve of Islamic conquest, the Sasanian state had fallen on hard times and its defence system was considerably weakened. The majority of the population in Iraq were people of Aramaic origin. Preceding the Islamic conquest, its inhabitants were divided by barriers of language, religion, social class and way of life. With regard to the religious diversity of the Iraqi population, Zoroastrianism was the official faith of the Sasanian State, but it seems that Zoroastrianism was observed mainly by the Persian ruling elite in Iraq and therefore restricted mainly to the larger towns. The religious orientation of the majority of Iraq's rural inhabitants and of many town dwellers was shaped and moulded by the Church or the Synagogue.

Before the Islamic conquest the Nestorian Church seems to have been the most widely spread in Iraq. There were a number of Nestorian religious schools serving the needs of the Nestorian community and stimulating a great following throughout the country. By comparison with the Nestorian, the Jacobite Church was weakly represented in Iraq.

The Jewish community was second in size after the Nestorians and seems to

have been well organized in Veh-Ardashir. The main Jewish community settled by the waters of Babylon in the area traversed by great canals which connected the Eupharates and the Tigris and along the Eupharates toward Syria. In these areas numerous rabbinical schools were located . (Donner, 1981, p. 167-69)

Among the other religious communities that existed in Iraq were the Manichaeans and Mazdakites, driven underground by the Sasanian persecution during the fifth and the sixth centuries and there were also Mandeans, a gnostic baptismal sect living mainly in Maysan in the south of Iraq. (Donner, 1981, p.169).

Motivations of the Islamic Conquests

Several factors can be taken into account with regard to the motivation to embrace an expansionist policy:

1- There is a possibility that the ideological message of Islam itself filled some or all of the ruling elite with the notion that they had an essentially religious duty to expand the political domain of the Islamic State. In other words, the elite may have organized the Islamic conquest because they regarded it as their divine mission to do so. (Donner, 1891, p.270).

2-The desire to expand the political boundaries of the new state in order to secure a trans-Arabian commerce route might have served as one of the causes of conquest movement.

3- The acquisition of properties in the conquered areas, taxes to be levied on conquered people, and booty in wealth and slaves might be considered some sort of financial advantages of expansionist attitude.

Conquest of Iraq

The conquest of Iraq began during the Caliphate of Omar. In 636 Khalid b. Walid appeared outside al-Hira making the opposition forces surrender without much resistance. After four years of this initial victory, the Muslim army put down the Sasanid forces. With this victory, the door of Iraq was opened to Muslim expansion which gradually covered the whole area in the course of its historical development.(E.I.Vol.3) Generally speaking, the conquest of Iraq by Muslims involved two separate arenas; one was in central Iraq and the other in the southern Iraq.

Conquest of Egypt

Islam was first introduced into Africa by the Muslim Arab army which invaded Egypt under the command of Amr b. Aas in 640 A.D.

(Arnold,1913,p.102). Amr b. Aas set out for the Egyptian lands from Syria and appeared unexpectedly on the eastern frontier, defeating the Byzantines and capturing Babylon. From this strategically important place he extended the expansion of the Muslim army up to the Nile valley and Upper Egypt. During the Islamic conquest, Cyrus was sent to Egypt by the Byzantine authorities to conclude a treaty. After having seen the unhopeful situation, he concluded the final treaty of surrender with Amr by which the city was to be vacated.(E.I. Vol.2). As Arnold states, the withdrawal of Byzantine troops after three years left the Christians to the Muslim administration. The welcoming attitude which was shown to Arabs by the local Christian population played an important role in the rapid success of the Arabs. The Orthodox adherents and supporters of Byzantine rule had oppressed the indigenous Egyptian churches, exiling their leaders and persecuting their members. It seems that, to the suppressed Copts and Jacobites, the Islamic conquest brought a freedom of religious life that they had not enjoyed for a century. (Arnold, 1913, p.102; Brett, 1973, p.2).

Highlighting The Conversion to Islam

Judging from the survey of western sources it seems that there are a number of questions inherent in the study of conversion to Islam during the early period. The difficulties which one faces stem from the lacunae of sources in this area of Islamic history. It is virtually impossible to give an accurate rate of converted population in a given time and space. Western scholars tried to explore and highlight the problem from different angles, emphasizing a number of diverse causes and effects. Western sources claim that the concept of Islamization and Arabization do not seem to have been clearly defined in related sources. Being confronted with the foregoing difficulties, in what follows I shall try to give an account of the conversion process as conceived in western sources including its motives and results, without making a sharp distinction between Egypt and Iraq.

It occurs to me that Dennet focuses on economic circumstances ~ namely taxes, which were levied on non-Muslim subjects in conquered lands. He gives an account of those who were liable to pay taxes and those who were exempted: the poor, the unemployed, the blind, the sick, the insane, the beggars and the monks of monasteries did not pay taxes. Women of all ages and children were also exempt. All the rest paid a poll-tax graded according to man's wealth and income (Dennet, 1950, p.27). Dennet asserts that at the time of conquest many tribes akin to the conquerors professed Islam at once and were, from the outset, exempt from all taxes except the religious payment, zakat, but there is no evidence of conversion taking place among the peasantry during this period of the conversion process. (Ibid, p.32). He goes on to point out the fact that there is very little evidence of conversion throughout the Umayyad period in Egypt, while poll-tax exemption constituted an economic motive for giving up the old religion. He attributes this small amount of conversion to the fact that, from the beginning,

conversion had always freed a Copt of his poll-tax but not of his land tax. In addition to that, three other factors prevented conversion from becoming wide- spread:

1- The solidarity of the Coptic religious community. If a Copt in a village became a Muslim, he was an outcast in the eyes of his Christian brethren.

2- The attitude of the Arab government itself which seems neither to have desired nor to have encouraged the step.

3- The Arab centralization of the taxation authority which made a closer control of the inhabitants possible. (Ibid, p. 87-89).

Lapidus places an important emphasis on the gradual settlement of Arabs in the newly conquered lands. He claims that migration and settlement took place during the course of conquest. This process seems to be part of an assimilation policy to reduce non-Arab and non-Islamic cultural and religious elements in the society. According to him, Arab settlement promoted social change and progressive, though partial, interaction of Arab and non-Arab populations into new cosmopolitian communities (Lapidus, 1988, p.37). He appears to have accepted the idea of a slow process of conversion, claiming that a quick and massive conversion to Islam in the Middle East did not take place. The available evidence, in his mind, points rather to a slow and uneven process of social and religious adjustment. (Ibid, p.5 1)

Becker draws our attention to the cultural expansion of Arabic thought through the adoptation of the Arabic language (E.I.Vol.2). Language seems to be a very important factor in imposing one culture on another. As a means of communication, language carries all the elements of culture and thought. If one considers the relation between the language and the system of thinking, the role of conversion, not specifically religious,can be easily discerned.

Brett claims that on the eve of the Islamic conquest, North African Christianity was demoralized and disunited (Brett, 1973, p.2) . One might assume that, in the case of an ecstatic convert, the old religion may have failed to meet the spiritual expectations of a believer, which seem to have greater promise of fulfillment in the new one. This situation may lead an individual to conversion, and that person may find life in the new religion more attractive. (Bulliet, 1979, p.35-36)

One can deduce from the foregoing discussion that Western sources suggest a number of causes and effects involved in the process of conversion to Islam in Egypt and Iraq. Our survey shows that Western scholars differ in their approaches to the problems of conversion to Islam in the formative period.

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