

IN SEARCH OF A NEW LIFE: CONVERSION MOTIVES OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

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- 1. Introduction** (background information about the history and development of Christian Muslim relations in South Africa with special attention to conversion in both direction)
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- 6. Analysis of the Conversion Narratives from Christianity to Islam** (analysis of 10 narratives of people who converted from Christianity to Islam)
- 7. Analysis of the Conversion Motives** (combined analysis of chapters 5 and 6, among other things the research shows that in each conversion case between 2-4 motives are active during the conversion process).

The following five motives have been identified:

- 1) Religious (Intellectual)
- 2) Mystical
- 3) Affectional
- 4) Socio-political
- 5) Material

- 8. Implications for Missiology** (conversion should be seen in a more holistic way: two ways and with a variety of motives).

At the end the following has been added:

- ◆ Complete Bibliography
- ◆ Appendices containing: Abbreviations, Glossary of Islamic Terms, whole Transcripts of Conversion Narratives as told by the 20 converts.

2. Summary

The Muslim population in South Africa has its origins in the 17th Century when they were initially brought in as slaves or political exiles by the Dutch colonisers. Christian-Muslim relations have not always been good and especially the topic of 'conversion' has often caused conflict between the members of the two faiths. Additional problems such as the apartheid era has caused many Christians, especially Africans, to question their faith and turn their back on Christianity by converting to Islam. There are other areas which have caused conflict in the relations such as mistrust, misinformation and discrimination. In South Africa's religiously pluralistic society people convert from Christianity to Islam, and vice versa, from a variety of motives.

This study first discusses various Christian missiological debates on understandings of conversion and then surveys psychological approaches to the motivational structures of 'decision-making'. The heart of the study is the presentation and analysis of the conversion narratives of 20 converts (10 from Islam to Christianity and 10 from Christianity to Islam). These narratives are analysed in terms of five key conversion motives, as a result of which various patterns of conversion motives emerge.

In church practice and missiology, conversion is often understood only in one direction (towards Christianity) and with only one valid motive, namely a strictly religious one. This study reveals, however, that such a view is inadequate. Conversion should rather be understood as a two-way movement and based on combinations of various motives. This study concludes with the presentation of a holistic missiological understanding of conversion which applies more adequately to the South African context. This new understanding of conversion may help to promote better understanding and respect between faith communities.

KEY TERMS

Conversion; Christian-Muslim relations; Missiological understanding of conversion; Conversion narratives; Motivational theories; Conversion motives; South Africa.

3. Analysis of the conversion motives

In my research I interviewed 20 converts, ten who converted from Christianity to Islam and ten from Islam to Christianity. The narratives reveal that between two and four of the motives I have identified played a role in each conversion process.

From the interviews it appeared that, when more than one motive was operative, the conversion process usually started with one motive but then moved on to the others, sometimes leaving the initial motive behind, especially when the material motive initiated the process. In other cases the original motive persisted as a key factor throughout the process. Various other combinations or constellations of conversion motives were found.¹

Some comments on each conversion motive:

1) Religious: My research findings reveal that 18 out of 20 respondents experienced this motive as a vital factor in their conversion process. The converts acquired knowledge of the new faith and compared the new with the old (Okorochoa 1987:262). If the new faith appeared to them superior then that became one of the motivations towards accepting it. The main issue mentioned by converts to Christianity was the love displayed in the Bible through Jesus and also the warmth in the church among Christians. The converts also found “hope and assurance” which they hadn’t experienced before. In these cases, Islam was perceived as a religion with meaningless ritualistic practices and utterances in Arabic which most people in South Africa did not understand. By contrast, converts expressed their joy at having a “living relationship” with Jesus and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, a number of converts accepted Islam because they said Christianity was not practical and was against common human reason. They experienced it as replete with irrational doctrines such as trinity and incarnation. In contrast, they found Islam to be accommodating to the findings of modern science, which therefore appeared as the only viable option for an enlightened man or woman (cf. Poston 1991:164, Naudé 1978:8).

2) Mystical: It is significant that six out of ten converts to Christianity said that a supernatural experience contributed greatly to their decision to convert, whereas none of the ten converts to Islam mentioned this motive. All six converts emphasised that this supernatural encounter happened towards the end of their conversion process and that it was the “final straw” which convinced them to make a commitment to Christianity. The converts appeared to be convinced that God had spoken to them in a direct way.

3) Affectional: 18 out of 20 converts mentioned this motive as a motivational factor in their conversion process. It can be assumed that the reason why people convert (in both directions) is often not that they are intellectually convinced about the new religion but because a “friend has shown them the way” (cf. Poston 1991:163). Frequently marriage is the reason why a spouse accepts the other partner’s religion. In the Muslim community the non-Muslim spouse is usually expected to convert to Islam.

¹ I discuss these combinations in chapters 5 and 6 of my thesis, where I analyse the 20 conversion narratives with the help of my analytical grid (Maurer 1999:157-203).

4) Socio-Political: Five out of ten converts from Christianity to Islam indicated that the socio-political situation in South Africa was a reason for them to convert to Islam.² This fact confirms Rambo's (1993:41) hypotheses: "Indigenous cultures that are in crisis will have more potential converts than stable societies." Conversion thus becomes an act of revolt against the religion and society in which the converts were born and brought up. It is a break with their past with all its painful memories.

5) Material: This motive appears in five of the conversion narratives. If people see that their basic needs are fulfilled they are often prepared to change their religion. People with serious physiological needs often display a high "availability" for conversion. People who are likely to fall in this category are the unemployed, young people who would like to study but have no money; refugees, and recent immigrants. Many poor people in South Africa have recently become Muslims in order to get food or a job.

Other emerging aspects:

- Converts often have a strong desire to witness to their newly found faith.
- Many converts have to endure opposition and persecution. It is significant that five Muslim converts to Christianity faced persecution compared to only one Christian convert to Islam.³
- The ritual of commitment is seen as a final break with the past and as a public confession of embracing the new faith.⁴

4. Conclusion

My empirical findings suggest that the conversion process is usually driven by a variety of motives. I contend that a human being should be viewed in a holistic way, as a person with different needs, all of which play a role in the movement to conversion. It is therefore questionable to distinguish between "pure" and "impure" conversion motives. According to my understanding, a sound theological anthropology views a human being not only in spiritual terms but as a whole human being, who is situated in a specific economic, cultural, religious and political context. One cannot expect a decision as fundamental as conversion to a new religious community to be made solely on the basis of the truth claims of the new religion.

The conversion door swings both ways:⁵

It is my conviction that the Bible supports a view of conversion that includes a two-way movement. There is no problem to declare a person a "convert" in Christian terminology if this person turns towards Christianity. But can a person also be declared a "convert" if she/he turns away from Christianity? It appears that the Bible uses the term "apostates" (cf. Douglas et al 1962:48, 250-252) in such cases. I propose that it would be to the benefit of missiology to adopt a more holistic view of conversion and include both ways of conversion in its definition.

Apostasy in the Old Testament is described in terms of "turning away" or disobedience to God in a particular situation (e.g. Ex 32:8). The Bible teaches that it began with the transgression of Adam in paradise. God dealt with this sin of apostasy in a radical way (see for instance Gen 3, Ex 21:17, Ex 32:10, 35).

In the New Testament apostasy appears to be a continual danger to the church and there are repeated warnings against it (cf. 1Tim 4:1-3, 2Thes 2:3, 2Pet 3:17). What was the attitude of Jesus towards apostates? He seems to have taken a different attitude, since he did not support the use of the death penalty, as was often the case in the Old Testament. One such account is recorded in John 6:60-71, where many disciples deserted Jesus, since they could not understand his teaching. In terms of the categories used above, one could describe this as a "religious" conversion motive, dominated by a

² The apartheid system in South Africa, which caused widespread suffering in black communities, was justified by means of Christian theology. This caused many black Christians to become disillusioned with Christianity, and some converted to Islam as a result of this.

³ One of the reasons for this is that there is a "law of apostasy" in Islamic shari'ah which rules that Muslims who turn their back on Islam should be executed (*Hadith Muwatta Imam Malik*, page 317, quoted in Gilchrist 1986:340). Where Muslims are a minority community this law is not legally in operation, but Muslims nevertheless practise the spirit of this law by putting intense pressure on an 'apostate' (*murtadd*) to reconsider his/her actions.

⁴ With Muslims it is the recitation of the Islamic creed (*shahadah*) and with Christians it is baptism.

⁵ This title is adapted from a quote by Conn (1986:7).

negative or “push” factor. The reaction of Jesus was that he was not afraid of losing disciples (cf. Buttrick et al 1952:574f). He gave them the space to make up their minds, so they were in fact free to leave. The same attitude was revealed by Jesus when he met the “rich young man” (Mk 10:17-22), where it is emphasised that Jesus loved him. As Christians we are challenged to emulate this attitude of Jesus: To show genuine love to those who are in the process of turning from the faith we belong to; not wanting them to leave, but refraining from all coercion to make them stay.⁶ Our understanding of conversion *to* our religious community – and consequently the nature of our self-understanding as Christians – is directly related to our understanding of conversion *away* from it.

5. Implications for contextual church praxis

The theology of conversion proposed in this paper emphasises two dimensions that have often been neglected: the wholeness of the human person and the two-way direction of conversion. This has two consequences: all the conversion motives discussed above need to be accepted as playing a valid part in any specific conversion process; and missiology should give as much attention to those who leave as to those who join.

This understanding of conversion has a number of practical implications. First, it encourages a faith community to take adequate measures to care for new converts who join the community, acknowledging that there is a whole variety of motives “pushing” or “pulling” the person to make such a move. Secondly, a faith community should take special care of people who wish to convert to another faith.

In order to guide converts more meaningfully a few practical steps are recommended to a Christian faith community (cf. Barclay 1963:82-103, Rahner 1978:206-211, Kasdorf 1980:60, Ismail 1983:391, Wells 1989:44-47, Heidemann 1996:12):

- Within each faith community there should be a small specialised group⁷ consisting of members trained to welcome new converts from another faith.
- This group should show genuine interest and care for converts and leads them into a deep study of their new faith and its religious practices.
- In due course, the convert should be introduced through this small group to the larger faith community.
- If the convert is a single person, he/she should be “adopted” into a family of the new faith community.⁸
- By applying these guidelines the faith community will take care in an organic way of the spiritual and social needs of new converts in their group.
- In addition, this small group should also be trained to counsel and care for people who are contemplating converting away from Christianity to another religion, such as Islam, in the same loving attitude. First, this would mean trying to encourage them to review their Christian faith before converting. Should a person still want to convert to another faith, the group should be sensitive to that desire and even assist him/her in investigating it thoroughly.⁹ Finally, when the person converts to another faith, the church should let him or her go in peace and Christian love.

⁶This does not imply a lame or weak stance. It should include preventive actions like those proposed by Poston (1990). He mentions five reasons why Western converts to Islam prefer it to Christianity: simplicity, rationality, practicality, equality and anticlericalism. Poston gives guidelines on how churches can better address people’s needs by changing their attitudes to these five issues, thus also employing a holistic view of conversion (cf. also Nissiotis 1967).

⁷This small group should function in the context of a holistic understanding of conversion, i.e. by taking seriously all the needs and motivations that move people to change their religious allegiance, and by providing care for converts who move towards and away from Christianity.

⁸This applies especially to converts to Christianity from a Muslim background. They are often ostracised by their own relatives and therefore need a ‘new family.’

⁹Many Christians would say that this is going too far, namely to assist people who want to leave the faith community. I disagree with this argument. By assisting a person I mean that I would provide that person with literature about that other religion, I would accompany them to visit people of the other faith and allow them to get information before making a decision, etc. In actual fact I would say that through this process both parties benefit. In my experience, by displaying a caring and loving attitude, certain people reconsidered the situation and did not convert to the other faith. This might also have been the case in the life of convert “C7” (see Maurer 1991:174-175), had a Christian person helped her to make a thorough investigation of both faiths before taking a decision towards Islam.