Conversion and Gender, Two Contested Concepts

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This book is the outcome of a conference, Gender and Conversion to Islam, held at Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in May 2003. It tackles a topic that is highly relevant at the moment. The two main concepts, conversion and gender, are in themselves and in their combination highly contested.

The past decades have seen a shift toward an increased interest in religion. The processes of conversion toward Islam have apparently accelerated significantly after September 11, 2001, as has the expression of suspicion and hostility among the Western Christian or agnostic population toward such converts. These religious shifts are increasingly given political weight. Conversion, in particular conversion to Islam, has a political dimension, whether intended by the convert or not. Understanding the effects this brings about, both in the convert and in the surrounding society, is of crucial importance and the subject of several of the following studies.

A discussion of conversion is not only socially but also theoretically relevant. The concept of conversion has been found difficult to define. The common definition of conversion as an act of free will, as an authentic experience, or, in the Christian Pauline sense, as an inward transformation after a thorough search and/or divine inspiration, has been criticized before. Conversion takes on a wide variety of forms and meanings, which can only be understood in the specific contexts and specific power relations of the individuals and groups involved. The individual's free choice of religion is more an ideal, abstract notion than an observable fact. The level of freedom varies according to the rules set by the available religions or the accessibility of information, as well as to the historical context. The scholars in this volume have applied themselves to the task of uncovering the level of freedom within the context of restraints and opportunities, and indicated in which cases the concept of conversion is appropriate and what it exactly means. They have shown how personal conversion narratives form part of several wider discourses. Conversion is analyzed as a complex social phenomenon rather than only as an individual spiritual transition.

Conversion, beyond being a personal experience and an expression of personal religious preference, has a much wider impact and meaning. It nearly

always is a confrontation between two religions, the receiving and the deserted religion. All religions, including world religions like Christianity and Islam, have at certain points in their history tried to attract believers, whether by reason, by offering privileges, or through the sword. While the receiving religion attracts and respects new believers, and may openly target potential converts by missionary action or give rewards to newcomers in the community of believers, the deserted religion will reject and punish any apostates, and denounce the calls made by other religions. Punishments for apostasy may range from calling names—with negative connotations such as renegade, apostate, backslider, or turncoat—to ostracism, forfeiture of inheritance rights, loss of guardianship of children, loss of conjugal rights, or even death. Conversion therefore always has a double face, from the perspective of the receiving and of the departed religious group.

Religious boundaries are often vigilantly guarded, opened up for eligible newcomers, but quickly closed for people who want to leave. Religions differ over time and place in the level of control they are able or willing to exert over their boundaries. Conversion can therefore only be discussed in historical contexts and by taking the power relations between the particular religions into account.

The concept of gender is, like that of conversion, highly contested as well. Here it is most interesting in its combination with conversion. The two are connected on different levels. First, gender figures in the different participation levels of women and men in processes of conversion. When women convert more often to Islam, why would that be so? How is this connected to different positions of women and men or to notions about them? These are some of the questions answered in this volume.

Relevant in this context is the notion of the person who decides on an inward transformation. In many cultures, notions of the person are not applied in the same way for women as for men. Due to their social position, women often have less power of agency in many fields, including religion. For example, in my research I found that in Jordanian history, both the Christian minority and the Muslim population adhered to the rule that “a woman will follow the man,” indicating that upon marriage a woman was supposed to take on a man’s religious denomination (Jansen 2004). This custom implies that autonomy of the person in accepting religious beliefs is less recognized for women than for men. The level of sincerity or authenticity normally requested of converts is as a result less strictly imposed on women. More than men, women are seen as passive and obedient. Many life decisions are made for them by the family, including the choice of religion. This happens in spite

of general views that women and men are equally responsible for their own salvation and that conversion needs to be based on authenticity. There are cases in which women refuse to follow their husband's religious choices, but this often has severe consequences ranging from nonacceptance by their in-laws to loss of legal rights to their children, pension, and inheritance.

Gender also impinges on the protection of religious boundaries. The different Christian churches in Jordan had agreed in a covenant to solve the problem of mixed marriages by letting the wife follow the husband. Mixed marriage among the Christian denominations was quite common, and it was expected that the losses and gains in female church members would in the end be balanced. Crossings between Christianity and Islam were far more difficult. In Islam certain rules developed in order to avoid the effects of such submission of women to men and the resulting loss of female believers. A Christian woman was therefore allowed to marry a Muslim man, as it was thought that she would follow his religion and thus increase the community of believers, and even if she did not, the children would still be Muslim. The reverse, a Muslim woman marrying a Christian man, was not possible; it would mean the loss of a Muslim and was therefore forbidden. Such marriages can still not be legally contracted in Jordan. In such a context, not only are women given less voice and autonomy in deciding about their religion, but also the protection of religious boundaries takes on a specific gendered character.

The association of women's religious choices with their role in the family is repeated in theories that attribute the greater frequency of conversion of women to their family relations. The narratives in the following articles indeed show that quite a few women converted to Islam because they wanted to "follow their husband and his family" when they married a Muslim migrant. This social pattern does not necessarily exclude a "genuine inward transformation." Yet, the emic conviction of genuineness in the conversion narratives can well be combined with the etic positioning of the convert's actions and convictions in this wider context. The understanding of the larger impact of social ties for women's conversions, compared to men's, is seldom a sufficient explanation for the gender differences.

The articles in this volume repeatedly show a theoretical shift toward a focus on the agency of women. They uncover women's own views and actions toward conversion, their agency both in freely choosing a new path and in spreading the Call. New religions tend to target women and to be particularly attractive to women. The first Muslim convert was a woman, Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, who supported her husband morally and financially. The

first Christian, that is, the first person who was asked to believe in Jesus' resurrection, was also a woman, Mary Magdalene. Young religions or new offshoots of established religions (like Sufism in Islam and Protestantism in Christianity) tend to target women. Unfortunately, many do so only in the beginning. Once established and grown, many a religion has ousted women from religious leadership. This raises questions on women's activism in both expanding religions and in contributing to the development of their doctrines.

In the focus on women's agency, not only the reasons why women convert, but also their role in actively spreading the faith, will be discussed. Spiritual reasons are likely to take center stage, but social, material, or political aspects need to be taken into account as well. They do not necessarily exclude each other.

Second, gender not only intersects with the freedom and reasons to convert, but also with the effects of conversion. It affects the ways in which the person expresses and incorporates his or her new beliefs, and how others react to that. One example is the adoption of the symbols used to express the new faith. For instance, a beard or male circumcision evokes far less reaction than taking on the veil. Western society has made the *hijab* and the subordinated position of women into symbols of the "Otherness" of Islam, which raises the question of how female converts deal with this and give meaning to it. Another example of the gendered consequences is that female converts to Islam are confronted with a larger gap than men in the gender positions in the respective religious cultures. A Christian woman converting to Islam has to give up more freedoms (as defined by her culture of birth) than a man. Following Anne Sofie Roald's line of thought, it can moreover be expected that women need a longer period of time to accommodate and familiarize themselves with the new paradigm. The suggestion by Margot Badran and Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons to see whether this leads to feminist activity by converted women is therefore very exciting.

As this book will show, there are many points of connection between gender and conversion. It is a rich and fascinating field to explore.

Reference

- Jansen, W. 2004. "Conversion, Marriage and Gender: Jordanians and the Christian Mission." *SMT Swedish Missiological Themes/Svensk Missions Tidskrift* 92 (1): 99–122.

WOMEN EMBRACING ISLAM

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