

NEW ISLAM IN POLAND – POLISH CONVERTS

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New Islam In Poland – Polish Converts (Abstract)

The article attempts at presenting and assessing various conversion motifs among Polish converts to Islam. Conversion itself constitutes a fascinating subject attracting sociologists, anthropologists and other academics specializing in social sciences. Conversion to Islam observable in the recent years in Poland seems to be not only a result of a temporary fashion among Polish hip-hop artists, but prevalingly, a long-lasting process of getting disappointed with the Catholic Church activity (however not its teachings) and new-born “religious market” which was impossible before the collapse of the Iron Curtain (except for Buddhism). The paper identifies the main reasons of the conversion to Islam based on selected sociological theories confronted with the informants’ insight.

Key words: religious conversion, Poland, Islam, hip-hop culture, Catholic Church

In the aftermath of the prevented terrorist attacks on the planes destining to USA and the findings that all the arrested men were of Muslim religion, including at least one convert, Polish converts to Islam yet again have started to feel insecure and anxious – as they have been already closely watched by special services and now they will be watched even closer, for the atmosphere surrounding Islam has grown really tense. Who are they? What are the reasons that they have decided to abandon one religious order widespread in Poland (Catholicism) in favor for a system that seems to be culturally alien?¹ Do they subscribe to some particular sets of views that can be considered anti-modernistic or, on the contrary, they are sufi, i.e. mystics? Furthermore, since the conversions to Islam have been swiftly increasing after September 11th events, one should pose a question why such an atrocity had a substantial and measurable impact on one’s religiousness, esp. in the light of the fact that not the victims of the attacks but the perpetrators were Muslims and claimed the religious legitimization for their performance.

Conversion itself constitutes a fascinating subject attracting sociologists, anthropologists and other academics specializing in social sciences. As such, it has been deeply explored and well-described. Conversion to Islam in Poland has been recognized mainly by mass media, but not scholarly so far, for the research undertaken within the frames of RESET Program aimed at identifying the reasons for this religion change and was conducted between the years 2004-2006. Conversion motifs were reviewed and analyzed and the paper aims to present the outcomes of the study.

Islam, in the eyes of Polish ordinary citizen, is a difficult and demanding religion. The scope of duties and responsibilities resulting from being a part of *umma* is considered

¹ It only seems to be alien, as there has been considerable Tatar minority in Poland for last 6 hundred years leaving in the territory adjacent to Polish-Lithuanian border, who profess Islam (Parzymies, 2005)

here to be enormous and overwhelming. Additionally, most of the heinous terrorist acts committed at the end of 20 and at the beginning of 21 century were performed in the name of Islam – the criminals used Islam to attain their political goals. Public awareness absorbed their argumentation without any criticism and doubts, what, in turn, perfectly matched the terrorists.

Mass media which, of necessity, simplify the reality to make their headlines or to fill the columns, this time trivialized Islam to that extent that it is associated now chiefly with women maltreatment, suicides in the name of God, Usama ibn Laden, his illegal fatwa ruling jihad against “crusaders”², etc.

Converts, the people who willfully changed their religion to become Muslims, are thus seen as the followers of an odd system which leads to violence and aggression against the modern world and Christian tradition. As many of them are women, it is worth inquiring why they converted to a religion that has an image of promoting inequity between sexes.

The study of the relevant sociological theories allowed for the tentative assumption that a change in a religion is a result of:

- 1) Disappointment with the previous life, including the religious system;
- 2) Anxiety and loneliness, loosened family ties;
- 3) Active religious search, already existing religious need;
- 4) Contacts with the representatives of the other religion;
- 5) Spiritual enlightenment.

It has been stated that the conversion is a rather long lasting process, which concerns a change of identity, being manifested through so called conversion indicators, i.e. membership status (rites de passages), membership demonstration (a person excludes herself/himself from the previous group and leaves behind the old identity), rhetorical indicators, i.e. biography reconstructions (a convert reconstructs it in two ways: he evaluates the past in a different manner and alters his existence to adjust it to the demands of the new religion), new attribution methods (a convert attributes all his previous thoughts, feeling and more important events to a fact that he was destined to become a Muslim and consequently all led to this) and suspension of the logical reasoning (a convert does not say how, he says, what). (Snow, Machalek, 1984:173-176)

As it has been mentioned above, the researchers have been interested not only in confirming or falsifying the sociological theory, but mainly to get information why Islam was the religion of choice and what kind of Islam has been chosen. First assumptions that the main reasons for the conversions (expected to be the most frequently referred to in the interviews under a disguise, naturally) included anti-Semitism expressed as a solidarity with a Palestinian case (failed, however the interlocutors supported Palestine, but they denied being anti-Semites), hip-hop influence from the USA (partly confirmed through press monitoring as Polish hip-hop celebrities were reluctant to be interviewed by the researchers due to the fact that they had had dealing with dishonest journalists who had tried to impersonate academics in order to get more “trustworthy”, as they thought, data) and disintegration in the converts’ social context (partly supported) were elaborated, however the findings showed that the reality was much more complex.

² Usama ibn Laden is a business administration graduate and waged a war against Americans, Israelis and collaborating with them Muslims, not having any legal authority to do so. A war can be only declared by Last Imam (Shi’) or caliph (Sunni). Ibn Laden considers himself a Sunni follower. Caliphate ceased to be in 1924. Moreover, Usama ibn Laden issued a fatwa, i.e. legal statement, that can be issued only by a mufti, an Islamic scholar, law and religious studies graduate (possessing a university degree and with completed ifta’ studies).

As far as the methodology is concerned, the in-depth interviews were employed.

The interviewed were those who considered themselves as Muslims, no matter how they could be perceived by genuine Muslims, as “it is impossible to weight in quantitative terms what percentage of non-Islamic elements he [a convert] carries with him”(Levitziou, 1979:26).

Therefore the researchers did not evaluate the converts' Islam in term of specifying from the perspective of Islamic law if they meet all the requirements of being “true Muslims”. The Muslim, for the sake of the study, is a person that identifies himself as such.

The respondents that have eventually agreed to share with the researchers their life stories were all educated (either university students or academics, PhD holders) and most of them (12 out of 16) were females.

Reasons for conversion

Disillusionment concerning the institution of the Catholic Church, Christianity *en bloc* and inconsistency of the Church's teachings were the most frequent motifs formulated by the respondents. One of them said: “*I felt pinched by its [the Church's] vanity, hypocrisy, hierarchy...inability to solve problems in a simply way*”... Nearly all complained about doctrinal mysteriousness : “*In Christianity everything is a mystery and an ordinary man knows nothing about it and he had better not know anything. The existence of (...) some secrets in Vatican (...) has been defined as simply incomprehensible.*”

The interlocutors repetitively held that Christianity ambiguously specified what was good and what was evil, when Islam was thought to assign most of the behaviors to a category (of permitted, prohibited, demanded, recommended or condemned deeds, etc) (See.: Ruthven 1998:102).

One of the interlocutors put it this way: “*(...) Islam clearly says what is evil*” (...) The example of the alcohol drinking has been continually employed. One of the respondents said that he drank (although Islam prohibits drinking alcohol)³ but at the same time he admitted: “*I know that I commit a sin*” and this awareness *refrains* him from drinking and becomes his *internal guard*. Also, he added, that “*(...) no sermons from pulpit will create such a culture of sobriety that exists in the Muslim countries, as here [in the Catholic countries] there is no clarity.*”(...) The other respondent (a man, who has been seriously interested in the Bible and in the Papal history), said: “*(...) There is an opinion popular with many Catholics that there is a part reserved only for the religion and a part which is not reserved for a religion. There are some aspects of life which are excluded from a religion (...) and for example politics has nothing to do with morality. In Islam things look different. Simply you must be guided by the religion. (...)*”

Nevertheless, a statement appeared that Christianity could be a great introduction to Islam, as a Muslim spiritual leader said in a conversation with one of the interviewed (what confirmed legitimacy of his decision concerning the conversion): “*(...) without Christianity Islamic mysticism cannot be comprehended at all.*(..)”

Another frequently given reason was loneliness, often not verbalized straightforwardly – it was not a physical abandonment, but rather a perceived difficulty with establishing closer contacts with the loved ones due to unresolved conflicts, feeling of emotional separation or lack of understanding.

³ Quran forbids drinking wine only but per analogiam (qiyas) the prohibition is extended on all the kinds of alcohol. The analogy (qiyas) is one of the main sources of the Islamic law.

“(...) *I do not get along with my father (...)*”, “(...) *My parents mainly sit in front of the TV set (...)*”, (...) *I do not talk to my father too often actually (...)*. This motif appears in the most of the interviews and particularly concerns women and their quite cold relations with the fathers with simultaneous very vaguely defined relations with mothers clearly subjugated by *the pater familias*. The families seem not to meet emotional and spiritual needs of the female respondents, although they cannot be called pathological, rather distant with weakened bonds, dysfunctional in a certain way.

As far as men are concerned, their contacts with parents are either correct (even warm) or they did not constitute a clear impetus for searching closeness, they were not a source of need for compensation for the emotional coldness at home. Strangely enough, one of the responders admitted that the fact that he came from the atheistic family made him more religiously open (however it should have been the other way around, taking into consideration a socialization process).

Willingness and readiness to start looking for a religion appeared long time ago – our respondents read a lot on various religions, esp. on Hinduism and Buddhism: “(...) *I was interested in various religions...[I treated them] as a kind of intellectual entertainment(...)*”, “(...) *I read the Bible and some prayer books(...)*”, “(...) *I had some idea about Buddhism and Hare Krishna (...)*”. Thus one may say that there preexisted a certain readiness to change a system.

Women who decided to become Muslims have revealed that Islam gave them feeling of being a real woman (as they put it) :“(...)” *I have started to feel more womanly, that has never happened to me before. Now I can dress nicely, I must take care of many details, like adjusting my scarf to the gloves and other parts of my clothes (...)*” “(...) *Men stopped picking me up and making strange noises when I am passing y, I feel much more respected , however not always accepted’(...)*” Asked about the fact that men can easily divorce them in Islam and take another wife, they objected vehemently : “(...) *They would never take another wife without my approval, as Islamic law clearly regulates that(...)*”. A girl that has been married for many years to a Muslim (but converted to Islam before meeting him) claimed: “(...) *If he stopped supporting the family for a certain period of time, then I can divorce him on the grounds of financial negligence. Also, I do not have to pay any bills, if I do not want to, whereas my husband must care for everything(...)*” The female converts repeatedly assured that conversion and subsequent marriage to a Muslim, secured them financially and clarified the social role they are to play.

After making decision about conversion, the converts had to undergo a ritual of shahada⁴, which introduces a person into the spiritual world of Islam (which cannot be abandoned according to the Islamic law)⁵, excludes him irreversibly from the world of the infidels, meeting all the outward hallmarks of the identity change. Do the converts manifest

⁴ i.e. a formula “There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger”, which is a verbal confirmation of a monotheistic principle.

⁵ A person that abandons Islam becomes an apostate, what can result in various ways. Quran does not prescribe any earthly punishment for leaving Islam, but ahadith, i.e. words and sayings believed to be ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad there are some suggestions how to punish an apostate. As, according to the believers, he rejected Truth consciously. In the historical times Islamic law prescribed death penalty for apostasy (Christianity and Judaism alike) and to this day there are debates in the world of Islam if an apostate should be punished and how. Radicals call for a death penalty, the moderates refer to Quran and the fact that Quran delegates the punishment to God himself upon the Judgment Day. It is worth noting that the most known apostate, according to some, is Salman Rushdie, the author of Satanic Verses or Tariq Ramadan, a well-known reformist, Oxford University professor with Swiss passport, who calls for reforms In Islam (Saeed, 2003:44).

their new identity? It appears that not necessarily due to the fact that their compatriots associate Islam predominantly with terrorism or, at best, with fundamentalism, what has been clearly pointed out by one of the respondents: “(...) *one of the reasons why I could not find a job was that I am a Muslim. More, that I must be a terrorist... (...) you are Muslim, so you are no good, you are on the other side (...)*”. He felt that, as he converted into Islam, he became “(...) *a traitor, a cheater, nobody should trust me ... (...)*”. Hence, he stopped talking about his religion⁶. A female convert, student, confided that she had been dubbed as “Bin Laden” on a street, two other admitted that they had had to stop wearing head scarf to work, because of their bosses protest, who considered such a cover as extravagancy or explicated that the company was an nonreligious one.

Biography reconstruction

All the female respondents had one thing in common- they frequently underscored that their conversion into Islam and the dress code intrinsically linked with the decision did not constitute any violence against their freedom.⁷ “(...) *This was never like that that I used to wear short skirts and naked belly (...)*”, *I always liked trousers under some kind of a tunic as a top(...)*”, another respondent, asked about sport clothes, answered: “(...) *Before embracing Islam I never wore any extravagant clothes (...), that was the way I was brought up by my parents (...)*”, adding that once during her stay in England she was taken aback by a sight of a girl wearing “(...) *knickers and posh boots (...)*”. Some Muslims threw away the statues or figural pictures in pursue to observe iconoclastic prohibitions⁸, but they did not resign from photos. Also, a question of possessing a dog came up, as a dog’s saliva is perceived in Islam as being impure (however Quran does not mention it). One of the female respondents has a dog and for a while she was thinking of giving him away, but then she concluded that “(.) *this dog is traumatized, so I cannot give him just to anybody... He suffers from some neurosis, he has these thrills, poor doggy... (...)*”, but “(...) *nobody wants to visit me anymore not to get spat by the dog (...)*” Women converts try to select their hairdressers carefully (females, too), however they are not so strict as to it, and in emergency cases they visit male hairstylists. Muslims have not given up their bank accounts⁹, being aware at the same time that they disobey one of the basic Islamic prescription (as majority of world Muslim does): “(...) *They*

⁶ Shi’e Islam allows to conceal someone’s religious identity, if its revealing would impose a risk for a believer (taqiyya). But every Muslim should be a living shahid, i.e. through his life and deeds show the beauty of his faith to encourage others to convert to Islam – in Sunni Islam complete resignation of manifestation of somebody’s religious affiliation may be seen as hypocrisy which is perceived by the radicals as apostasy.

⁷ It is worth remembering that Quran does not command women to cover their faces or hair, it recommends concealing only “ornaments”. It is linked with a term “awra” which is differently interpreted by Islamic schools of law. Thus, one can meet women dressed in an “European” style and also very carefully covered in different Islamic countries (Jansen ,1997).

⁸ Contrary to a common relief, iconoclasm is not very strictly obeyed, however Islamic clergy do insist on not hanging pictures of humans and animals at home (also pictures of Muhammad’s grave, etc). However, first visit in any Islamic country shows that the prohibition does not work: in Lebanon one can see billboards with soldiers who died in the fight (shuhada), in Iran one can come across pictures of Khomeini and Husayn, etc. Shi’e art is filled with symbolic animals, such as peacock or lion.

⁹ In Islam here is a prohibition of interest rates. Banks live on the interests, i.e. they earn money out of time that cannot constitute a source of income according to the Muslims. To address the problem, so called Islamic banking was elaborated; a person that pays his/her money in the bank participates in the bank’s profits and losses. (Kamiński, 2003:141–156).

force you to keep a bank account at work as they pay the salary in on a monthly basis(...), (... my bank account is a vista, annually it has something about half percent less than the inflation rate (...). I do not live out of the interests, actually lose keeping the money on my bank account (...). All converts observe the times of the prayer¹⁰, but they attempt to be sensible and practical, as it has been described by the interlocutor fascinated with Islamic mysticism: “(...) At some point I felt that this rhythm [of the prayers] made me neurotic,(...)” let alone that it irritated his mother, an elderly woman, who claimed that he prayed as if he was eighty years old. Since then he started “(...) being less strict as far as the prayer is concerned (...)”, which, to him, constitutes “(...) an extremely crucial conversation with God”. However, his zealot attitude surprised even Muslim hardliners from one of the country where he spent a year on a scholarship. One night after return from a trip, he took out his prayer rug and commenced a prayer. His roommate, a devoted Muslim, was taken aback and inquired him about the reason. The respondent replied that as they had both missed one ritual prayer during the day, he had to make up for it. That, in turn, made his roommate laugh.

Polish New Muslims receive their conversion as a very positive event. The time prior to the conversion they see as empty or even ghastly: (...)“*I was really a bad person before*”(…). Also, they perceive themselves before the change as lost, messy. Some suggested that analyzing the past they had noticed some clear (as they see it now) signals and symptoms inevitably leading to Islam (but they fail to specify what signs exactly).

When the question of WTC appeared during the interviews, the respondents never seemed surprised and they started to complain on mass media and their overall tendency to take statements, and particularly Quranic verses, out of the context, not knowing the historical background of the Revelation.¹¹ They unambiguously define themselves as the enemies of any kind of fanatics. A girl that converted to Islam after the tragedy of WTC said: “(.) *I differentiate terrorism from Islam.(...)*” For one 11th September became a pretext to pray (as he neglected praying for some time), having understood that “(...) *that will be now an image of Islam (...)*This is politics, that is a great harm, this is untrue and great injustice that this will build the relations with Islam and I wanted to convince myself that this is not what it seems to be (...)”.

The respondents try to avoid being identified with some current in Islam, although between the lines it is not hard to recognize it. Their Islam is moderate and intellectual, seeming not being committed to any ideology. One respondent expressed his view that “(...) *everybody is a Muslim. (...), but (...) I did not know it before, because I belonged to the church which pinched me(...)* and (...) *Islam allowed me to read Christianity (...)*”.

They do not, however, break with some forms of previous traditions linked with Christianity, justifying that fact with reluctance to hurt the feeling of their parent or grandparents (and those of them who did not inform the closed ones about the conversion, actually lead a double life). Thus, they do celebrate Christmas and Eastern, knowing that for wahhabi sect (its influence can be seen in Poland) participation in such events equals with apostasy, so they can be called “adhesionists”, being still somehow connected with the

¹⁰ The prayer can be postponed, if there were no conditions for observing it in due time.

¹¹ The investigation of so called circumstances of the revelations (asbab-al-nuzul) in Islam constitutes a field that for centuries has been very important for both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The Muslims (however not fundamentalists) refer to the derogation theory that says that later revealed verses derogate the earlier ones (what resembles Roman paremia “lex posteriori derogat legi priori”), but it is very difficult to establish which verses were the previous ones. Up till today the issues spur heated debates in the Islamic and non-Islamic world. Quran as it is now is more or less symbolically compiled (Firestone , 1997)

previous order, even though they do not ascribe to it an spiritual dimension.

Conclusion

Polish converts to Islam very often referred to “shallow spirituality” of Poles and clearly their conversion constitute a protest against rapid secularization. Their Islamization is a rebel against laicization and /or Catholic Church teachings, defined as being illogical and incomprehensible at times. Interestingly enough, majority of the converts asked for some explanations on some aspects of their religion, demonstrated considerable lack of knowledge (however the claimed they were well-read in the Islamic theology). One may conclude that they know about Islam comparably the same as they know about Catholicism, but their emotional approach to Islam is much deeper and the emotional profits they get from being in *umma* are much greater than they got from being involved in Catholic community.

Also, the interviewed displayed some characteristic features of people who tend to rebel and their revolt and consequent conversion to Islam has been facilitated by the fact that Islam found its way in Poland thanks to the release of the Iron Curtain. The religious space became opened for many religious movements, which previously were considered exotic or unacceptable. A newly emerged religious supermarket caters for all tastes. As post-socialist mentality still exists (that can be observed in growing sentiments among the elderly people who pass them to the younger generation) and, what is more, Islam has strong socialist base in terms of social care and control, the converts may interpret their changing in the religion as something that happened very naturally. Having faced capitalism, they feel uncomfortable under new circumstances, torn between the past and the present that they contest. Perhaps, if the communism had not collapsed they would have had changed their religious affiliation to Buddhism which was very popular during state-socialism period in Poland or would have engaged in the other religious movement available (since all of them emphasized the preexisting readiness to look for some entirely new spiritually).

Small research sample has not allowed to draw more conclusions as to the potential of the converts' possible radicalization. They rather avoid the topic or stress their commitment to democratic values and loyalty to Poland (however, criticize Polish presence in Iraq). Interestingly enough, in the Internet fora the discussants appear to be much more explicit as far as their religious engagement is concerned. What one can observe is that the virtual interlocutors are definitely extreme in every aspect of their religiousness to a great extent, but then a question arises if they are so since they believe to be anonymous and nameless or they just wish for engaging Internet surfers into a debate.

The number of the converts is still growing, so very soon new up-to-dated data will be required in order to evaluate the tendency and its possible impact on Polish society.

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