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CHRISTIAN CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Clint Hackenburg

The complexities of conversion

Determining when, where and why Christian populations converted to Islam and how diverse they were, particularly during the medieval period, is extremely complex and often contested. Conversion to Islam involved a complex and dynamic relationship between Islamisation, Arabisation, immigration and emigration, intermarriage, birth rates, conquest and reconquest, enslavement, coercion, taxation, depopulation and repopulation, as well as missionary activity. It is equally important to recognise that conversion was not only multicausal but ‘temporally and geographically sensitive as well’ (Mikhail 2014: 80). Moreover, the conversion process to Islam demonstrated minimal uniformity regardless of the languages, cultures, races and ethnicities of the converted populations.

Even the word ‘conversion’ requires explanation. Simply put, Christians and Muslims approach conversion differently. On the one hand, the Pauline paradigm of conversion typically involves both an epiphanic experience and personal transformation prior to becoming a Christian. On the other hand, conversion to Islam often involved the reverse; therefore, the personal and religious metamorphosis commonly occurred after conversion (Calasso 2001: 33, 44). Moreover, in Islam – unlike Christianity – religious identity is intimately connected to both personal choice and legal classification (Zorgati 2012: 70–4). Consequently, in order to avoid confusion, I have defined conversion as the process by which a particular society and its people came to be politically, culturally, institutionally and spiritually defined by Islam.

The early Islamic conquests: taxation and transformation

With the exception of tribal inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, the approximate century between the death of Muhammad (632) and the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate (750) saw very little conversion to Islam. During this time, the economic apparatus of the burgeoning Islamic state was reliant upon the taxes exacted from the non-Muslim population, of which the Christians were the most sizeable. Therefore, actively encouraging or coercing conversion to Islam, and thereby – at least theoretically – relieving a convert from paying the jizya (poll tax), could threaten the fiscal viability of the state. However, in reality, conversion to Islam seldom relieved Christians of their financial obligations, at least prior to the reign of ʿUmar II (r. 717–20) (Penn
Christian conversion to Islam

2015: 34). As Umayyad officials continued to impose the *jizya* on converts, they were met with increasing hostility and resentment. During the first century of Islam, the economic policies of the Umayyads are considered one of the primary factors limiting Christian conversion to Islam (Dennett 1973: 87–8). It was only after the tax reforms of ʿUmar II that Christian conversion to Islam slowly began to gain momentum. Despite that, with respect to conversion, it was the substantial and sustained reforms under ʿAbbasid rule, in which the client system was undone and converts were permanently dismissed from paying the *jizya*, that precipitated a rapid rate of conversion amongst the Christian population.

For this reason among many others, the role of the *jizya* is critical to any discussion of conversion to Islam. In addition to its application and collection, which relied upon a ‘loose network of intermediaries and imperial agents’ that was prone to embezzlement, the impact of the *jizya* upon conversion varied depending on time, location and demographics (Robinson 2000: 82–3). Ishoʿyahb III (d. 659) confirms that Christians were paying the *jizya*, a tax described in Q 9:29, as early as the 630s. Although early Islamic taxes appear to have been inconsistently administered, they were nevertheless cumbersome for certain sectors of the non-Muslim population. Consequently, Christians – at times – converted solely to avoid taxation. For instance, the authors of the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* (c. 775) and *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* claim that payment of the *jizya* triggered significant Christian conversion to Islam in northern Mesopotamia and Egypt respectively. In fact, many of the Christian accounts of the seventh and eighth century describe the imposition of Islamic taxes as an unmistakable form of fiscal and religious oppression. Lena Salaymeh contends that payment of the *jizya* signified a partial membership in the Muslim community, whereas payment of the *ṣadaqa* or *zakāt* (charity or alms tax) demonstrated full membership (Salaymeh 2016: 181–99). Conversely, some Christians considered the *jizya* more or less a conventional economic inconvenience (Palmer et al. 1993).

Historically, in order to adapt to the ever-changing social and political conditions of the pre-Islamic Near East, Arabs had embraced a fluid sense of identity (MacDonald 2009: 22). During the Islamic period, this flexibility continued, and as a result Arabs were able to absorb non-Arab populations. As Wasserstein states, ‘Islamisation was intimately tied up with two other processes, linguistic and ethnic acculturation to the Arab rulers, without, however, being coterminous with them’ (Wasserstein 2010: 185). In this regard, conversion to Islam entailed much more than uttering the *shahāda*. During the majority of the Umayyad period, converts first had to become a client (*mawālī*) of an Arab tribe (Crone 1980: 76–7). Therefore, prior to the reforms of ʿUmar II, conversion to Islam often required a religious, social and, for non-Arab converts, an ethnic reconfiguration (Reinink 2006: 129). This process primarily attracted the lower strata of society, primarily captives and slaves. Regardless of their humble origins, many *mawālī* went on to occupy important positions in the administration of the caliphate.

Unlike many of the other early Islamised lands, Persia did not experience any extensive linguistic or ethnic transformation. Moreover, prior to the ʿAbbasid period, a relatively limited number of Persians, many of whom were Christian, had converted to Islam. However, between the ninth and eleventh centuries, various local dynasties oversaw the conversion of the majority of the indigenous Persian population (Bulliet 1979: 16–32, 43–63). During this time, Persians redefined what it meant to be Persian, and, in doing so, Persian identity and historical memory were ‘woven into the dominant narratives of the history of Islam’ (Savant 2013: 32, 136). Therefore, conversion to Islam could, at least in the Persian context, involve far-reaching historiographical modifications as well. Nevertheless, outside Persia, the systematic Arabisation (the adoption of Arabic as a language) of Muslim-controlled lands was crucial to the inevitable Arabisation (the adoption of Arab culture), Islamisation and eventual conversion of significant numbers of the non-Muslim populations (Mikhail 2014: 170).
Quantifying conversion

Determining the pace at which the Christian populations of the caliphate converted to Islam is contentious. In 1979, Richard Bulliet produced the first quantitative research concerning this process. Relying on biographical dictionaries, he created statistical curves that enabled him to estimate the rate of conversion in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Spain. By pinpointing the transition from non-Islamic to Islamic names, he maintained that he could isolate the generation which converted to Islam, thus allowing him to calculate the speed with which certain populations converted. Bulliet’s results are succinct, tidy and enticing; however, they are not without shortcomings that have attracted criticism. Most entries in the biographical dictionaries concern male urban elites, leading Ann Christys (speaking of al-Andalus) to advise that Bulliet’s conclusions ‘should not be applied to the population as a whole’ (Christys 2002: 3). Additionally, Mikel Epalza argues that the adoption of an Arabic name did not necessitate conversion to Islam, nor did a Latin name confirm an individual’s Christian identity. Likewise, Coptic, Syriac and Persian names did not confirm an individual’s religious identity. In addition to overlooking the significant numbers of conversions that resulted from the conquests, Bulliet’s analysis also neglected ‘the enslavement of prisoners of war and their subsequent manumission and Islamisation; and second, the flight of the peasants to evade taxation’ (Wasserstein 2010: 191). Finally, Bulliet’s conclusions are based upon the assumption that the information in the biographical dictionaries is genuine and accurate. With this in mind, Bulliet’s conclusions become even more tentative given the extensive documentation of falsified genealogies produced in the medieval Muslim world (Savant and de Felipe 2014). Scrutiny and limitations aside, however, scholars have generally accepted Bulliet’s conclusions that conversion took place over several centuries (Safran 2013: 107–9; Tieszen 2013: 24–6).

Islamisation

The early Islamic conquests had completely replaced Byzantine and Sassanian political and administrative rule in the Middle East. Therefore, the indigenous non-Muslim populations, who had relied heavily upon Byzantine and Sassanian legal codes, now became increasingly dependent on Muslim courts (Penn 2015: 148–9). Naturally, as Islamic institutions expanded, Christian institutions dwindled, and the more reliant non-Muslims became upon Islamic institutions, the more likely conversion would occur. Robert Hoyland states, ‘Probably more significant in the long run for conversion was the erosion of the prestige and influence of the leaders and institutions of the non-Muslim communities’ (Hoyland 1997: 341). This erosion included the regular transfer of both land and wealth into Muslim hands as well as the appropriation of funds for various Islamic institutions, primarily through the *waqf* (religious or charitable endowments) which funded mosques, madrasas, hospitals and clinics, graveyards, bridges and roads, orphanages and public fountains. What is more, with institutionalised patronage at both the local and imperial level, ‘Islamising’ institutions continued to grow rapidly. This expansion created ‘a total disruption of social connections, family habits, tastes in fine arts, architecture, and music, in diets, land use, spatial distribution of power, languages, daily routines and more’ (Ellenblum 2014: 62). As formerly Christian lands were being rapidly transformed, the anonymous author of the late seventh-century *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* voiced a pronounced fear of an impending mass Christian conversion to Islam. To a certain extent, the fears and anxieties of late seventh-century Christians were justifiable. The first strident examples of Islamisation came under the rule of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) in the form of the Dome of the Rock, a monument to the power and continuity of Islamic rule. Moreover, during his reign, Islamic coinage also
Christian conversion to Islam

became centrally organised and managed, thereby replacing Byzantine currency (Robinson 2000: 52, 167). Within the course of a century or two, Christians would have witnessed Islam subvert Christianity as the defining characteristic of the public sphere. In this regard, conversion to Islam represented an avenue toward unmitigated social, economic and cultural participation in a now Islamic society (Coope 1995: 50, 59).

The far-reaching Islamic conquests established Muslim-minority rule and incorporated enormous swathes of diverse lands into the burgeoning caliphate. This expansion resulted in immigration, emigration and widespread internal displacement extensively across Mesopotamia, the Levant, North Africa and Spain, though only sporadically across the Iranian plateau. Mass migration often came in the form of vast movements of nomadic Arabs throughout the caliphate. However, with the slow decline of the ʿAbbasid state beginning in the late ninth century, waves of Turkic immigrants poured into the central Islamic lands and, beginning in the eleventh century, pushed deep into Anatolia (Peacock et al. 2015). Throughout the medieval period, extensive Muslim migration, both Arab and Turkic, was often followed by the conversion of significant amounts of the indigenous population. This process occurred at varying rates, eventually resulting in partial to near-complete Islamisation of the region. Still, neither immigration nor emigration were prerequisites for partial or pervasive Islamisation. Much of western Africa and south-east Asia were thoroughly Islamised by merchants and Sufi missionaries without a significant foreign Muslim presence.

A watershed century

The eleventh century inaugurated a period when conversion between Christianity and Islam became a multidirectional phenomenon. Within a span of 50 years, Christians had established Norman rule in Sicily (1061–91), reconquered Toledo (1085) in Spain, and – under the banner of crusade – occupied significant portions of the Levant (1099). However, this eleventh-century Christian resurgence across the Mediterranean coincided with the appearance in North Africa of a powerful and often anti-Christian Berber dynasty, the Almoravids (al-Murābiṭūn, c. 1062–1147). Subsequently, in the following century, an even harsher Berber dynasty, the Almohads (al-Muwaḥḥidūn, c. 1147–1248) emerged and replaced the Almoravids. In Spain, the Christian recapture of Toledo sparked not only the immigration of Andalusī and North African Christians to the northern Spanish city and its surrounding environs but also the conversion of significant portions of the city’s Muslim population to Christianity. Additionally, in response to the oppressive rule of the Almoravids and Almohads, North African Christians fled to Norman Sicily as well as parts of southern Italy (Metcalfe 2009: 175). Another factor accelerating the Islamisation of North Africa was the institutionalisation of Sufism across the region, which significantly contributed to the conversion of the North African countryside (Brett 1973: 6–10). Although the eleventh century marked a period of duress and steep decline for North African Christianity, isolated pockets of Christians still survived the medieval period. The Andalusī historian al-Bakrī (d. 1094) mentioned Christians in Tlemcen, and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) alludes to the many Ifranj (Franks) living in Tunisia (Hitchcock 2008: xv).

The decline and eventual near disappearance of Christianity from North Africa mirrored in many ways the experience of Islam in Sicily, where Islamic rule was permanently abolished and its Muslim population absorbed or removed. Moreover, the Norman conquest of Sicily paralleled the early Islamic conquests: the Normans had neither a coherent conversion policy nor were they interested in forcibly converting the Muslim population (Metcalfe 2009: 101). In fact, under Count Roger I (r. 1085–1101) conversion to Christianity was often discouraged and even prevented. Although conversion may not have been actively encouraged, after their rule

179
was firmly established, the Normans began to target Muslim elites for conversion. With this policy, the Normans hoped to destroy Muslim leadership across the island (Metcalfe 2003: 50–4). In addition to the inexorable conversion of the Muslim population, the Normans welcomed a variety of Christian immigrants from Europe, Arab and Andalusī Christians from North Africa and Spain, and even Christians from the collapsing Crusader states. Over the course of the next few centuries, Norman-Christian rule completely transformed the demographic composition of the island.

Few formerly and predominantly Christian regions were as thoroughly transformed as Anatolia, the landscape and population of which underwent a near-complete Islamisation in approximately four centuries. Unlike the conversion of Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, North Africa and Spain, where significant portions of the indigenous populations converted to Islam, Anatolia was primarily Islamised through immigration. Although the number of Turkic immigrants to Anatolia between the years 1050–1500 is impossible to pinpoint, Osman Turan has suggested that 70 per cent of the Anatolian population are descendants of Turkic immigrants. In the eleventh century, Anatolia was home to an overwhelmingly Christian population with approximately 400 bishops and 35 metropolitans. However, after the decisive defeat of the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071 and the ensuing civil war, both of which crippled the Byzantines, Seljuk Turks seized a significant portion of Anatolia. Subsequently, the region was inundated with waves of Turkic peoples. Moreover, in 1261 the Byzantines withdrew their forces from the peninsula and by 1500, Anatolia – a region once regarded as the heartland of Christianity – now required a meagre three bishops and 17 metropolitans to oversee its Christian population (Vryonis 1990: 197). At this point, 90 per cent of the population were Turkish-speaking Muslims and, according to Ottoman records, less than 8 per cent of the Anatolian population registered as Christian (Minkov 2004: 19).

Navigating life as a dhimmī

Already by the end of the seventh century, many Christians of the caliphate had accustomed themselves to living under a seemingly irreversible Islamic rule, which throughout the medieval period was accompanied by habitual, albeit tolerable, persecution. Living as ḍhimmīs, Christians ‘negotiated the ambiguities of living under Islam’ (Penn 2015: 143). During the medieval period, Christians experienced periodic bouts of heightened violence and persecution. At times, the unpredictable vicissitudes of Christian life under Islamic rule were exacerbated by a strict set of rules and regulations known as the Pact of ʿUmar (Shurūṭ ʿUmar), whose implementation ranged from innocuous to draconian depending on a variety of external circumstances (Levy-Rubin 2011: 85–7). It defined the legal status of non-Muslims living under Islamic rule and, when enforced, limited the social mobility of non-Muslims (Emon 2012: 72; Levy-Rubin 2011). Although the Pact of ʿUmar is often associated with Ḥārūt ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–44) or Ṭūl b. Abī Ṭālib (r. 634–44), the stipulations – at least as we know them today – probably did not coalesce into a well-defined set of provisions until the ninth century (Fattal 1958: 68–9; Cohen 1994: 55–7; Levy-Rubin 2011: 61–2, 68). Scholars disagree regarding the purpose of the Pact of ʿUmar along with the jīzāya, its most consistent requirement. On the one hand, Albrecht Noth maintained that apparently discriminatory stipulations were not intended to degrade or humiliate the ḍhimmī population; rather, they were intended to distinguish Muslim from non-Muslim (Noth 1987: 290–315). Claude Cahen, on the other hand, states that the fuqahāʾ (jurists) and qadāʿ (judges) interpreted ḍhimmī regulations in a restrictive and repressive way with the intent of persecution. Maribel Fierro contends that ‘the process by which Muslims had become a majority seems to have gone hand in hand with a hardening of the “ḍhimmī” situation’.
Christian conversion to Islam

(Safran 2013: 165). And even further yet, others suggest that conversion to Islam was an inevitability for most non-Muslims living under *sha'īʿa* law and that non-Muslims did not perceive themselves as legitimate members of the Islamic state (Mikhail 2014: 107).

As a result of capricious *dhimmī* policies coupled with a perceived fickle allegiance to Islamic rule, Christians were particularly vulnerable during political, economic and military crises. Christians, however, were perhaps most susceptible to hostility during the advances and successes of Christian forces against Muslims, notably the Byzantine reconquests of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the *Reconquista*, and the Crusades. Still, forced conversion to Islam was rare, possibly due to a precedent established during the formative years of Islam. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), as well as both Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767) and al-Shāfīʿī (d. 820), the eponymous founders of the Ḥanafī and Shāfīʿī schools of Islamic jurisprudence, argued that forced conversion to Islam was illegitimate. This position, however, was not universally accepted by Muslim jurists, given that the *Kūfan* jurist al-Shaybānī (d. 805) maintained that a forcibly converted individual was bound to Islam and that a death sentence was justifiable for his or her apostasy (Friedmann 2003: 104). This disagreement was certainly less nuanced with respect to polytheists, who were routinely offered the path of conversion or death.

**An irreversible decline: the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries**

Throughout the medieval period, Christians often experienced episodic and fleeting campaigns of oppression, such as those launched by the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) and the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Ḥakim (r. 996–1021). However, Christians also endured more menacing and protracted periods of discrimination as well, like the decades of suffering under the Almohads and Maṃlūks. Although it was during the eleventh century that North African Christianity began to decline rapidly and collapse, it was a century of Almohad rule (1147–1248) that administered the *coup de grâce* to Christians living west of Tripoli. In Egypt, the Baḥrī Maṃlūks enacted a severe implementation of the Pact of ‘Umar between the years 1293–1354 in order to drastically reduce Coptic involvement in the Maṃlūk bureaucracy (Little 1976: 552–69). The Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) reports that persecutions and assaults were launched against the Copts in 1259, 1264, 1279, 1283, 1293, 1301, 1321 and 1354 (O’Sullivan 2006: 66). This mistreatment included harassment and violence, the confiscation and expropriation of Coptic land and assets, and, in extreme cases, forced conversion, mob violence and death. Whether brief or prolonged, maltreatment of Christians – with respect to geography and time – resulted in phases of accelerated conversion to Islam. However, after an extended period of Almohad and Maṃlūk persecution across North Africa, Egypt and the Levant, Christians were not granted a reprieve.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Christians witnessed the collapse of the final remnants of the Crusader states, far-reaching and permanent Turkic penetration into Persia and Anatolia, the near-complete elimination of North African Christianity under the Almohads, the conversion of the Mongols to Islam, severe persecution under the Maṃlūks, the Black Death in the 1340s and the crushing oppression of Tamerlane. Needless to say, during these two centuries, Christianity experienced a ‘steep decline’ from Persia to the Pillars of Hercules (Noble and Treiger 2014: 32).

**The role of women**

Through conversion to Islam, men enjoyed a wider array of social benefits than women and increased social mobility (Zorgati 2012: 67). Moreover, ‘Women were not competing for success in the public arena and therefore did not have the same incentives as men to conform to the
religion of the rulers’ (Coope 1993: 60). Nevertheless, conversion to Islam – apart from a spiritual experience – presented Christian women with select social advantages. Upon converting to Islam, a Christian woman could hastily dissolve an undesired marriage with her Christian husband, gain custody of her children, and inherit family wealth and assets.

Mixed marriages and concubinary relations between Muslim men and Christian women offered negligible social and economic advantages to the female party. During the early Islamic period, mixed marriages between Muslim men and Christian women complicated matters with regard to such issues as legal status, inheritance and apostasy (Simonsohn 2013: 197–215). Writing in the early eighth century, the West Syrian bishop Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) deliberated on and ultimately permitted Christian women who had married Muslim men to take communion (Hoyland 1997: 604). However, by the end of the eighth century, mixed marriages – in the eyes of certain church leaders – posed a significant threat to the Christian community. This led the West Syrian patriarch Giwargi I (d. 790) not only to prohibit these Christian women from taking communion but, along with the parents who permitted such a union to take place, to ban them from entering the church (Simonsohn 2013: 201). Still, as mixed marriages continued at varying rates across the caliphate they yielded steady and unrelenting demographic changes. Islamic marriage policies (derived from Q 5:5), which permit Muslim men to wed kitābī (Christian and Jewish) women but prohibit marriage between Muslim women and kitābī men, ultimately worked to diminish the dhimmī populations. Furthermore, children of mixed marriages were legally considered Muslims (Tieszen 2013: 33). Additionally, Muslim men, unlike their Christian counterparts, practised polygyny, allowing them to take up to four wives (Q 4:3). With a greater religiously sanctioned accessibility to marriage, concubinage and sexual relations, Muslim men produced more children than their non-Muslim counterparts.

Conclusion

Both Islamisation and Christianisation remain incredibly difficult processes to assess, and even more difficult to quantify. Ronnie Ellenblum encapsulates this difficulty, stating:

The terms Christianisation and Islamisation are thus often used to describe the processes by which an entire ethnic group is gradually transformed, but not necessarily the outcome of the process or the exact moment when the process terminates. Processes of change are often diachronic and open-ended. They usually last over several generations. These transformations evolve as economics and culture are being altered. They can be halted temporarily, reversed, perpetuated, or intensified, and the exact point at which such a process terminates is often debated.

(Ellenblum 2014: 64)

Although scholars often ascribe political, economic, and/or social incentives to conversion, still, the spiritual dimension should not be disregarded. The nexus between a convert’s motives and the nature of his or her new identity would not have been static. More likely, conversion, whether to Islam or Christianity, would have been a dynamic journey involving the interplay of both the spiritual and the secular. Therefore, what may have started as a politically, economically and/or socially motivated conversion may have blossomed into a genuine spiritual metamorphosis. Personal conversions, like various other aspects of Islamisation and Christianisation, slowly and steadily contributed to the overall religious transformation of numerous regions and their populations. However, they were not pivotal in the overall demographic reorientation of the Islamic world or the re-Christianisation of Spain and Sicily. Ultimately, by the beginning of the sixteenth century,
the percentages of Christians and Muslims across the Mediterranean, the Levant, Mesopotamia and Persia had more or less stabilised.

References

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**Further reading**


