

Conversion and Fundamentalism: A Challenge to Islam and the Liberal Order

Written by Esther

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Liberal democracy and Islam are two ideologies, each with a set of values. There are Muslims and Westerners who see the meeting between the two as a clash, and there are those who think the two sets can be merged together and coexist. It is therefore interesting to examine those Westerners who grew up with liberal values, and chose Islam as their religion.

There are many reasons people choose to convert. Some do so for love and marriage, others because they are looking for spiritual meaning. However, there are also those who convert to Islam as an alternative to the current liberal ideology. Especially after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, converts tend to lean more towards political choices rather than spiritualism and personal choice.

According to Prof. Stefano Allievi, Islam offers a "spiritualization of politics, the idea of a sacred order" There are converts who choose Islam not for its religious qualifications, but in order to make a political statement, choosing an alternative set of values over those of the liberal West. Converting to Islam can be seen as a rebellion against the excesses of the West, such as public sexuality, or to the West's foreign policy, but it can also be seen as a rebellion against its basic liberal values.

Islam offers converts a new set of social laws, offering set boundaries for what is right and wrong, rules that can be followed, and which aren't provided by liberalism.

In its most basic sense, converting to Islam has been used as a protest. In two recent cases conversion to Islam was used as a form of protest against rules with which the convert did not agree. In one case a Dutch furniture salesman converted so he could open his shop on Sundays. In another, a group of Norwegian prisoners converted to protest the lack of halal food in the prison.

The idea of rebellion can go much deeper. A recent study in Denmark conducted by Kate Østergaard and Tina Gudrun Jensen sheds light on a usually overlooked aspect of conversion. According to the study 'Nye Muslimer i Danmark' (New Muslims in Denmark), a sixth of converts in Denmark don't think Islam can be combined with democracy. However, about half saw democracy as an Islamic principle. Islam will rule society, but such a society will be based on democratic values.

Most converts in Denmark have a progressive ideology and are generally critical of the modern capitalist and materialistic society, the same attitude that characterized left-wing groups of the 60's and 70's. A similar trend can be found in Spain. The first converts to Islam in the post-Franco era were radicals who saw Islam as an alternative to the exhausted West and to corrupt capitalism.

In his book "Al Qaeda in Europe", Lorenzo Vidino expresses a similar viewpoint. Converts reach radical Islam through disillusionment with Western and European society. Especially with Islam, people convert as a form of social protest, with Islam serving as an alternative to neo-Nazi or anarchist groups.

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Myfanwy Franks, a researcher who has studied converts to Islam and is the author of "Women and Revivalism in the West: Choosing Fundamentalism in a Liberal Democracy," said that "being troubled does not necessarily lead people to conversion – people who aren't troubled convert – but it could lead to extreme radicalization."

This radicalization is not theoretical. Converts make up at the most 1-2% of the Muslim populations of different countries in Europe, but according to a recent study, they make up 5-6% of terrorists. According to Edwin Bakker, head of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, converts tend to radicalism because they try to be as true to their religion as possible. In other words, for those converts, Islam is seen as a non-democratic movement, set on destroying liberalism.

Islam attracts and converts many types of people: those who see democracy as a Muslim ideal and those who choose Islam as an alternative to the liberal democratic order. The latter group is dangerous, both to Islam and to liberal democracies. They are dangerous to Islam since they are strengthening the more violent aspects of the religion and bringing in their own radical elements. They are a danger to the West since liberal democracies have a much harder time dealing with fundamentalism when it is clothed in Islamic theology, than they do dealing with neo-Nazi or anarchist groups.

Esther is an independent researcher of Islam in Europe who has followed news on the Muslim community for the past two years. She runs the blog Islam in Europe.