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# The Islam of Converts

*by Juliette Galonnier*

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**The religious convert is a figure of fear and fascination today. Looking beyond clichés, Juliette Galonnier’s investigation in France and the United States shows the daily struggles facing converts who, in the absence of established social frameworks, often experience their religion in great solitude – while at the same time trying to reinvent it.**

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## **Fear of converts**

Over the last two decades, the troubling and suspicious figure of the ‘convert to Islam’ has seen a spectacular rise. It made its appearance on our screens and bedside tables against a backdrop of terrorist threats and has become a key feature of contemporary popular culture, as all aficionados of television series can confirm. From *Sleeper Cell* (2005) to *Homeland* (2011) or the fourth season of *House of Cards* (2016), several convert characters – ‘radicalised’ and capable of the most heinous crimes in the name of their new religion – spice up storylines with betrayal, concealment, and manipulation. The same can be seen in the music industry, as evidenced by American folk singer Steve Earle’s track ‘John Walker Blues’ (2002), devoted to John Walker Lindh, a Muslim convert and fighter in Afghanistan, tracing the tragic and poetic life of the man known as the ‘American Taliban’. The literary scene has also drawn on the dramatic potential of converts’ lives. Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015) tells the tale of a disillusioned academic, a passive onlooker to the progressive islamisation of French institutions, who converts out of spite and for lack of a better option. Sebastian Rotella’s *Le chant du converti* (2012) is more abrupt and presents a Muslim gangster named Raymond, newly converted and planning terrorist attacks. Finally, in *Fatigue du sens* (2011, p. 115) Richard Millet describes a young female convert seen in the underground in the following terms: ‘Her pale face rigidly wrapped in a white *hijab*, her hands slender, her eyes full of the suppressed fury characteristic of European women converted to Islam, as well as the sweetly

smiling resignation of a martyr in the making' (quoted in Liogier, 2012, p. 110). The caricature of the convert, preferably pale with blue eyes for optimum effect, combines several moral fears of our time: terrorism, religious extremism, indoctrination, and the 'great replacement'.

Of course, this obsession with converts is not new. Other eras had their own versions of it. To give just one example, huge collective emotion swept across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when hundreds of thousands of Europeans converted to Islam in Morocco and the Ottoman regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli in the context of piracy and maritime wars in the Mediterranean (Bennassar & Bennassar, 1989). The European pirates and sailors who became Muslims on the North African coasts sometimes did so under duress – to escape the slavery to which they were reduced after capture – and sometimes freely, to marry, enjoy the possibilities of social mobility afforded by southern Mediterranean societies at the time, or to satisfy a new desire for spirituality. Over the waters, the Inquisition stepped up its efforts to track down these apostates accused of having 'donned the turban', 'turned Turk', or 'become Moors'. The troubling figure of the 'renegade' emerged on the cultural scene. It was taken up by the theatre, in particular, appearing in several plays such as Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1623) or Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* (1612) telling the tale of English pirate Jack Ward, who later became Yusuf Rais (1553-1622) and whose many exactions scandalised and thrilled European audiences in equal part.

In contemporary society, the intertwining of converts with collective fears reflect their increasing involvement in violent transnational movements claiming to represent a radical interpretation of Islam, such as Al-Qaeda from the 1990s onwards and Daesh from the 2010s onwards. Daesh's spokesmen have become masters in the art of Hollywood film production and have contributed to producing the stereotypical image of the 'convert'. The turban-wearing sea-faring adventurers of yesteryear have been replaced by blue-eyed men in balaclavas brandishing Kalashnikovs and determined women hidden behind dark *niqabs* that also bring out their blue eyes. Beyond the question of media strategies, the fraction of converts in these organisations is, indeed, disproportionately higher than the percentage of converts in the Muslim population as a whole. This disparity can be explained by the transreligious appeal of the radical ideology offered by these movements, capable of mobilising individuals from a relatively broad range of backgrounds, including non-Muslim, and by the greater vulnerability of certain converts to this kind of discourse, particularly when driven by the zeal of the novice while at the same time being isolated and poorly integrated in conventional Muslim networks.

Nevertheless, it is important to underscore that this is a minor phenomenon: the total number of converts in France is believed to be around 100 000 (700 000 in the United States) and only a few hundred are involved in violent activism, amounting to under 1%. The violent path trodden by an active minority of converts must therefore not overshadow the more banal and everyday experiences of the silent majority who will be the focus of this essay. Far from any media frenzy, although it often affects them, men and women choose to embrace Islam,

giving it a range of meanings and practising it in a variety of ways. On a daily basis, these new Muslims have to deal with incorporating new beliefs and practices, frequent incomprehension from friends and family, being viewed with hostility, and entering a new community of believers with its own divides. I have already discussed elsewhere<sup>1</sup> the discrimination converts face when they display visible signs of religious affiliation to Islam; here I will focus on their influence on contemporary redefinitions of Islam. The increasing influx of converts in the Muslim population (according to the French Central Bureau of Cults, there are 4 000 conversions to Islam per year<sup>2</sup>) reconfigures the relationship to religion in ways that, while not as spectacular as dominant representations would sometimes have it, are nevertheless profound and significant. This article is based on 82 biographical interviews conducted with male and female converts to Islam in France and the United States, as well as on ethnographic observations carried out in converts' associations in both countries. In order to preserve anonymity, all names have been changed.

## **Converts' associations**

A wide range of motives and events can trigger conversion: a spiritual quest, a mystical revelation, political reflection, travel to a Muslim country, networks of friends, marriage, etc. However, converts often share similar difficulties afterwards, with isolation one of the main problems. The in-between position created by any change of status, religion, or identity can cause difficulties and discomfort. Converts are often confronted with incomprehension, or even indignation, from friends and family. The enthusiasm they express for their new religion stands in stark contrast with their loved ones' representations of it, leading to conversations of the deaf: they are often accused of having terrorist leanings, being brainwashed, being prudish, being misogynist, or betraying their nation, and can be mocked and stigmatised. When they aren't outright rejected, they are, at the very least, often forced to practise their religion alone. They pray in isolation, sometimes even in hiding to avoid conflict. Meals, at the heart of family life, become a source of tension as shared food decreases. The people close to them suddenly become very distant (Puzenat, 2015, p. 145). In parallel, converts also struggle to become integrated in the Muslim community: as novices, it is hard to join pre-existing family or friendship groups. Some feel they are judged for practising their religion imperfectly. Visits to the mosque can be a failure: the new converts are often shy, awkward, and unaware of dress codes or etiquette. This therefore leads to more or less embarrassing blunders, which are pointed out to them more or less tactfully and exacerbate the feeling that they are out of place. Increasingly out of kilter with their family environment, but not yet

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<sup>1</sup> Juliette Galonnier, 'The racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some insights from white converts to Islam', *Social Compass*, vol. 62, n° 4 (2015): 570-583.

<sup>2</sup> This figure should, however, be treated with caution insofar as a) mosques do not systematically record conversions, some of which occur independently, and b) many people join Islam and then leave again – religious change is part of complicated diachronic processes for which precise figures are difficult to produce.

properly integrated in the Muslim community, these converts find themselves in an uncomfortable in-between position. This double marginalisation poses a threat to their religious affirmation and, sometimes, leads them to practise their religion in rigid and ostentatious ways as if to confirm their religious change once and for all – a stance that has ironically been labelled ‘convertitis’ or the illness of the convert and that can lead to self-dramatization.

The response to this situation has come from organisations. In France and the United States, many mosques and Islamic centres offer courses for beginners aimed at providing converts with initial religious training. In parallel, converts’ associations, which are independent from traditional Muslim bodies, have also emerged over the past decade. Created by long-standing converts and particularly present in the Anglo-American world, they go by names like ‘New Muslims Association’, ‘Revert Muslims Association’, or ‘Muslim Converts Association’ and specialise in what they call ‘convert care’. These sorts of associations also exist in France, although they are fewer in number. They provide support to recent converts through talks, mosque visits, individual or group tutorial sessions (how to announce conversion to one’s family, how to find one’s place in the community, etc.), and organise meetings and mediation with loved ones, etc. For these associations, converts are specific Muslims with specific problems and their experiences are not the same as those of Muslims born and socialised in traditionally Muslim families. They require individualised ‘tailor-made’ support to take in hand their religious practice and overcome their isolation.

Converts find themselves particularly alone during the month of Ramadan, devoted, among other things, to sharing and to strengthening community ties. Converts are often alone when it comes to preparing and eating their *subhoor* (the meal eaten at dawn before the day of fasting) and *iftar* (the meal breaking the fast in the evening). Mary, a 30-year-old project manager from Saint-Louis, explained jokingly that she often broke the fast in her flat with ‘chocolate cake, while playing with [her] cat or watching Seinfeld’. This rather touching isolation, whereas Ramadan meals are usually celebrated festively in Muslim families, can be a real source of despair. Aware of the problem, converts associations have set up a range of activities to create bonds during Ramadan. In France, converts can sign up online to find companions with whom to break the fast and attend the *taraweeh* night prayers at the mosque. In the United States, the association I observed put in place a system of ‘*iftar* ambassadors’ through which families welcomed converts in their homes to break the fast. It also set up a programme of ‘*subhoor* buddies’ who phone one another before sunrise to mutually encourage each other to get up, as well as a ‘*subhoor* chat’ on Facebook, where converts, from as early as 3.30am, share their recipes online and post photos of the balanced meals that will get them through their long day of fasting.

These associations also take on a role of religious supervision, ensuring that the new converts, in their desire to learn, do not fall prey to ‘convertitis’ and do not subscribe to marginal or radical interpretations of Islam. The associations strongly discourage using ‘Sheikh Google’, i.e. learning about religion online by surfing on more or less reliable

websites. Instead, they give out precise reading lists promoting an Islam of the ‘middle ground’ from which converts should not stray.

The converts who turn to these associations are those who have not managed to find their place within the Muslim community. When asked about any difficulties she may have had after converting, Jenna, a 35-year-old lawyer from Chicago, explained: ‘not really belonging anywhere. You don’t belong to Christians anymore. And the born Muslims aren’t really inclusive of the rest of us. That’s why I got happily involved in a convert group because we are all on the same board’. Similarly, Cynthia, 30, who often attends the activities run by a converts’ association in France explains: ‘I feel very alone. That’s why I come here, I need to stock up, to recharge my batteries, otherwise I can’t do it, I get disheartened.’ The idea that converts share specific problems – which Muslims ‘by heritage’ cannot understand – is at the heart of the mission taken on by converts’ associations, which have progressively established their legitimacy within the broader landscape of Muslim associations.

## **The Islam of converts in all its diversity**

Despite their varied origins, social backgrounds, and ways of practising Islam, converts tend to share the same conclusion: ‘Muslims aren’t Islam’. At the French converts’ association, members can endlessly be heard repeating ‘live your Islam without Muslims’; ‘I chose Islam, not Muslims’ states another young female convert; and British singer Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam has regularly declared ‘Thank God I learned about Islam before I knew Muslims’. Present in almost every single interview I conducted, this statement shows that converts draw a clear boundary between Islam as a perfect and eternal belief and Muslims as necessarily fallible and imperfect. Implicitly, this distinction overlaps with another that converts make between the *religion* of Islam and the *culture* of most Muslims, whether North African, Middle Eastern, or South Asian (to just cite the main origins of Muslims living in France and the United States). This ‘culture’ is presented as something that weighs on the ‘religion’ itself, distorting and corrupting it. In response, converts make it their duty to reform their religion and free it from the cultural influences they deem harmful: they present themselves as responsible for redefining and reviving Islam. Chloé, a 21-year-old student from the Lille region, who has been a convert for a few years now, affirmed: ‘there’s hope brought by the new Muslims, because we arrive with the advantage of not having the weight of tradition that certain North-African families have, who mix culture and religion... So we arrive with a new perspective and with the advantage of a certain virginity’. As for Pablo, a 22-year-old student from Chicago, he believed that ‘the converts in America are going to save Islam’.

Obviously, converts are not in any way a homogeneous group and this statement in itself covers a wide range of conceptions and interpretations. In both France and the United States, three broad lines of criticism of culture can be observed among converts,

corresponding to different paths of reform. The first group believes that culture *contaminates* Islam and promotes a *de-cultured* Islam, purified of any outside influence and refocused on its scriptural foundations; the second group considers that the culture of immigrant Muslims (North African, Middle Eastern, South Asian) is unduly *dominant* in Islam and strives, instead, to *acculturate* Islam to French or American culture; finally, the third group believes that the cultural traditions inherited from Muslims' countries of origin *hinder* Islam's message of social progress and engages in *reinterpreting* the texts.

These three critiques of culture (as contaminating, hegemonic, or regressive) and the three paths of reform to which they give rise (de-culturation, acculturation, reinterpretation) offer a general overview of the different ways converts engage with their religion. Let us now turn to each of these in detail.

## **Searching for a pure form of Islam**

Converts engaged in the path of de-culturation often judge quite harshly those they refer to as 'cultural', 'practically practising', or 'Ramadan' Muslims, in other words those born into families of Muslim tradition but who do not practise Islam assiduously. They accuse them of contaminating Islam with superstition, folklore, and traditions inherited from their country of origin, which they describe as innovations (*bid'a*). They advocate a return to a pure and fundamental Islam, as practised by the Prophet and his Companions in the early days of Islam, a mythical golden age which they believe they can revive by following religious texts to the letter. This kind of literal interpretation can be found in several branches of Islam, but has been popularised by Salafi movements in particular. Although this is not systematically the case, Salafism tends to mainly attract individuals characterised by social exclusion and family anomie as well as converts dissatisfied with their in-between position and who have often broken away from their original backgrounds. In the United States, most Salafis are African Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds, as the movement has become established as a source of respectability, discipline, and rectitude in poor neighbourhoods (Jackson, 2005, p. 46).

The simple and rational nature of the textual approach advocated by Salafism, combined with a puritanical and 'intransigent' (Adraoui, 2013) ethics, are particularly attractive to new converts in search of a clear and univocal interpretive framework. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) expressed this clearly through a comparison between Salafism and the Protestant Reformation: 'Luther, at one point, said "listen, what you're telling us, we don't believe it anymore, give me a Bible, I'll read it and I'll see what's really written in there". And well, here it's the same thing actually. I mean they've gone back to the sources, they've stripped them of everything that's about tradition, culture, superstition, etc.'. The meritocratic and democratic nature of access to religious texts as encouraged by Salafism also resonates

with some converts' quest for religious legitimacy: within Salafism, religious capital is a function of knowledge and the practical application of texts rather than of Muslim cultural heritage. Quite the contrary, 'culture' – whether Western, North African, South Asian, or Middle Eastern – is conceived as corrupting true religion. As Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) explains: 'when you're in Salafi Islam, you're taught that, in a way, everything that's cultural isn't good'. More than any other branch of Islam, Salafism offers a prime place to converts who are perceived as more able to divest themselves of the weight of cultural influences.

## **Acculturation**

Running counter to this interpretation, other converts consider culture as something that enriches and fuels religious practice. However, they refuse to embrace the cultures usually associated with Islam (Arab, South Asian) and prefer to remain faithful to their 'own cultural baggage'. These converts vilify what they refer to as 'couscous Islam', a condescending term aimed at contesting Arab cultural hegemony. This is how Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) for example described the Sufi gatherings she stopped attending: 'There were lots of things that bothered me. First, I thought that, culturally, it was far too North African. Well... they were all wearing djellabas, including the European converts. And then, well, the cliché you know: at the end, we ate couscous sitting on the floor! That's just...!!! I have nothing against it, you know, but it's just... why is Islam's image always associated with that?' These converts are also critical of their fellow converts who fall into the 'cultural trap' and 'Arabise themselves' the more they enter Islam.

In response, they propose maintaining their cultural identity by combining it with Islamic precepts. It is therefore no longer a question of purifying Islam but rather of adapting it. This was the central aim of the programmatic text 'Islam and the Cultural Imperative', written by American convert Dr Umar Faruq-Abdallah (2004), according to whom Islam was conceived as able to espouse the contours of the cultures that embraced it, sublimating them without completely altering them: 'Islam has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no colour of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow.' There are frequent calls to invent an 'authentically French' or 'American' Islam, in which converts without any 'Muslim cultural baggage' could be 'culturally at ease'. The converts' associations I encountered were particularly committed to this endeavour. However, defining what an 'authentically French' or 'American Islam' might look like is a seemingly impossible task. The converts engaged in this undertaking invent new modes of cultural expression that are compatible with Islam on a daily basis, while remaining 'faithful to who they are'. They experiment in a broad range of areas, including language, clothing, food, and art.

Language use, for example, is the topic of serious conflict. The American converts' association has established a strict rule that all Islamic terms in Arabic (*duniya*, *iman*, *hijab*, *fiqr*, etc.) must systematically be translated into English during lectures or group discussions. Adopting an Islamic name following conversion is also a controversial practice: it used to be very common, but has become less systematic as converts increasingly refuse to give up their birth names for Arab names arguing that, given the universal nature of Islam, no name is more Islamic than another. These considerations also intervene in liturgical practices: several of the converts I encountered recited the five ritual prayers in the language they were closest to (English, French, Polish) rather than the Arabic advocated by Muslim orthodoxy. Food is also a key locus for hybrid practices: as Méliissa (27, association manager, Paris) summarises, being Muslim 'doesn't stop me from eating cheese, loving Beef Bourguignon, and being attached to French cinema'. Converts also draw on history to show that Islam is an integral part of the cultural foundations of their country and cannot be perceived as foreign. These are just a few examples among hundreds of others. Overall, the path of acculturation is generally promoted by converts who are well-integrated in society, who feel at ease in their in-between position, and are proud of their position as cultural intermediaries.

Acculturation is, however, more or less facilitated by national contexts and seems particularly well developed in the United States. There are several reasons for this. First, religion is a key feature of civil life in the United States and one of the main ways in which immigrants become part of the American mainstream. Conversely, religion is not a factor in affiliation to the French nation; instead, religious sentiment is considered incongruous and unintelligible. Furthermore, the French state frequently interferes with attempts at acculturation through its top-down approach to creating a French Islam with which many Muslims do not identify and which they see as ordering assimilation. Moreover, this top-down imposition fails to recognise the processes of acculturation that, in fact, already exist in daily life. Additionally, in the United States, Muslims are the most ethnically diverse religious group. According to a study on American mosques, 33% of the congregation are of South Asian origin, 27% of Arab origin, and 24% are African-American (Bagby, 2012, p. 13), which encourages multiple expressions of Islam. This multiplicity is necessarily much less prevalent in the French context for purely demographic reasons – more than 70% of French Muslims are of North African descent (Laurence and Vaïsse, 2007, p. 39).

Furthermore, Islam is much more a religion of conversion in the United States than in France. Only 1 to 3% of the 4.7 million French Muslims are reportedly converts, whereas the latter make up 21% of the 3.45 million American Muslims which translates to approximately 700 000 people (Pew Research Center, 2017). Among these converts, 64% are African American, 22% are white, and 12% are Hispanic (Bagby, *ibid.*). African Americans, who have taken up Islam in various movements (Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, Ahmadiyya) since the 1910s, have been pioneers in acculturation, making Islam into a driving force in the fight against racism and contributing to its indigenisation through various forms of art (jazz, hip-hop), clothing, and cooking (for example, the Nation of Islam's trademark

bean pie). Converts of Hispanic origin have recently taken up the torch, creating associations such as the Latin American Da'wah Organization which is run by convert Juan Galvan and whose slogan '¡ Puro Latino! ¡ Puro Islam!' summarises its aim. In January 2016, the first entirely Spanish-language mosque opened its doors in Houston, Texas. The Spanish language and Latin American cuisine (in its halal versions) are at the fore, testifying to the lively cultural reinvention of Islam on the American continent, which is as yet unparalleled in France.

## **Reinterpreting Islam**

The final path of reform consists in striving to reinterpret Islam's scriptural sources with a view to social progress. The aim, in particular, is to rid Islam of any erroneous interpretations resulting from the social position of its main scholars within often unequal and patriarchal cultures. From this perspective, most of the evils with which Islam is taxed (misogyny, homophobia, polygamy, racism, etc.) are ascribed to the harmful influence of the cultural contexts in which the texts have been interpreted. The aim is therefore to return to the spirit rather than the letter of the Islamic message, freed from the weight of traditions deemed reactionary. As a result, the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy are radically reconfigured.

This aim of historicizing, revisiting, and reinterpreting the Qur'anic canon can also be seen, for example, in the Islamic feminist movement or in Islamic LGBTQ movements, to which several converts belong. This is the case, for example, of African-American convert Amina Wadud, who led one of the first mixed prayers in New York in 2005, whereas current Muslim orthodoxy precludes women from holding that role. Converts Daayiee Abdullah, Pamela Taylor, and Kelly Wentworth are also active members of the association Muslims for Progressive Values that promotes gender equality and LGBTQ inclusion. In France, the association Muslim Homosexuals of France, founded by Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, also draws many converts including several of my respondents. For partisans of reinterpretation, who tend to be highly educated and strongly politicised, it is not just a question of adapting Islam to the surrounding culture but also of using the subversive potential present in the spirit of Islamic texts to profoundly change dominant culture with a view to greater equality and justice.

## **What's a convert?**

In the shadows of the spectacular and violent trajectories of a small minority, ordinary converts reinvent the practice of Islam in the day-to-day, according to different orientations.

Affirming the universal nature of Islam, their attempts at reform go hand-in-hand with distrust of, sometimes even contempt for, the traditions of Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, or the Indian subcontinent, which they view as misguided, folkloric, or obscurantist. For converts, constructing their own Islam therefore sometimes entails reifying the practices and beliefs of immigrant Muslims.

Converts are not alone in their attempts to revitalise Islam, however. Second or even third generation immigrant Muslims, born in France or the United States to Muslim parents or grandparents but who practise a very different form of Islam, face family conflicts that are sometimes as violent as those experienced by converts. These Muslims, who could be described as ‘born again’, make the same cultural critiques as converts and contribute to the same movements of reform. Some even interpret their heightened religious practice as a form of conversion, thereby stretching the definition of ‘convert’ beyond its usual meaning.

### Further Reading

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