FAITH IS LIVED OUT IN COMMUNITY: QUESTIONS OF NEW COMMUNITY FOR ARAB MUSLIMS WHO HAVE EMBRACED A CHRISTIAN FAITH

By Kathryn Kraft[1]

1 Introduction

An increasing number of Muslims in the Arab world are being exposed to new ideas and are questioning the beliefs of the community into which they were born. Several of these individuals are choosing to embrace a Christian faith, a decision which can affect every aspect of their lives. Religious conversion usually entails a rejection of one's past (Iannaccone 1995:291), and conversion out of Islam into a Christian faith can be construed by fellow Muslims as a betrayal not only of their religion, but also of family and of community. This article investigates the social considerations faced by converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith, in the light of the strong social forces opposed to that decision and their own strong desire to live in community.

Following a faith decision, converts often work hard and face deep levels of frustration as they seek to develop new communities and redefine their existing communities. This

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includes their search for, and relation to, a church or other Christian community, as well as the dangers that they face as they seek to live their new lives. An essential element of this process is the choice of a life partner, especially since many converts are single when they make their decision and their marriage choice is inevitably affected by their faith choice.

These questions were investigated as a part of my doctoral research in Sociology during 2004-2008, including in-depth interviews with Arabs of a Muslim background who have converted to a Christian faith in the Middle East, mostly but not uniquely Lebanon and Egypt, and participant observation in their circles of friends and places of worship. The definition of convert that I use in this paper is broad and refers to a self-defined community of people born into a Muslim family who now profess a faith that is both different from what they were taught at home and somehow tied to Christian beliefs, regardless of how they reached the decision of professing a new faith.[2]

[2] Conversion in sociological writings refers to any turning, changing or redirecting of faith or of thinking. One of the more stringent definitions I have referenced is "a definite break with one's former identity such that the past and the present are antithetical in some important respects" (Barker and Currie 1985:305; see also Travisano 1970). Other theorists emphasise that it is difficult to define an individual as a convert, as anyone who has undergone any change may be defined as such (Snow and Machalek 1984, Staples and Mauss 1987, Carrothers 2004:104). Based on this understanding, while I am aware of the sensitivities of the term in many circles, I use it throughout this paper, in recognition of its academic meaning, to refer to people who have broken with, or weakened, their loyalty to former beliefs and developed an allegiance to Christ.

2 Pursuit of Unity

Considering both the diversity of Christian groups and ideological inclinations, as well as the diversity among Muslim-background followers of Christianity themselves, converts often expect to find complete unity and cohesiveness among Christians and are soon disappointed. The diversity among converts[3] means that they themselves often do not understand each other very well. Fenggang Yang reported in his presentation of different types of identity integration among Chinese converts to Christianity in the United States that it was hard for people to work out their identities, and that people found it especially difficult to interact with people of a similar background who experienced Christianity in a different way from themselves (Yang 1999:186).

Nonetheless, the members of the Chinese church he studied, where most people were converts, found unity in prioritizing their chosen identity as Christians over their ascribed identity as Chinese (Yang 1999:173). Similarly, many MBB's[4] interviewed in this study expressed that it was very important to them to be united as believers in the community of converts. One couple told of how they were among the first converts known in their region and so they worked with missi-

[3] This is an issue investigated in depth in my thesis, and in other academic works on conversion in the Muslim world. For more detail, see: Kraft, K. 2008. "Community and Identity Among Arabs of Muslim Background who Choose to Follow a Christian Faith" in *Department of Sociology*, Bristol: University of Bristol)

[4] MBB stands for Muslim Background Believer, and is a common term used to refer to people born into a Muslim background who have embraced some form of Christian faith or believe in Jesus. Various other terms are also suggested among practitioners in the Arab world (Believer of a Muslim Background (BMB), Followers of 'Isa (Jesus), etc.); in this paper I use MBB because it is a widespread term which, though controversial, seems less controversial than other identifications that have been recommended.

onaries to start their own church. The husband explains how any hint of division has been problematic for him:

> The Bible I have not really had trouble with, have always felt that it was pretty much good, but also I've felt that the church is hard to adjust to. It's hard to accept what the church is, what it does. There's so much denominationalism.

His wife continued, explaining how division is why they want to avoid affiliating with any one denomination:

> For example, the pentecostals come in and want to do their thing, but we don't want there to be separate pentecostals in the church. We are very determined as the [national] church to avoid denominationalism, and so we do this by fighting against any missionaries that try to instil this. Also, for example, we have had people in our groups speaking in tongues without translation, and we feel that this just brings division, because the Bible is very clear that tongues should only be accompanied by translation, so we don't allow it. So far, there are not divided groups of believers in our country.

As this couple increases its exposure to more diverse groups of Christians, meets more missionaries, and meets Christians from other Arab countries who have different ways of defining their own faith and adhere to different missiological theories, they become more and more determined to avoid such division in their new church. While other people who have spent time with their church have reported that there are divisions developing, the couple continues to express a strong desire to preserve unity if at all possible.

In the same way that this woman is opposed to pentecostalism, which she sees bringing division, others spoke harshly against the Catholic churches, and yet others against people who choose not to attend a mainstream or established church, and so on and so forth. Those who expressed both that they value unity and that they are supportive of all types of Christi-

ans often did not actually have any regular contact with different Christians, so were speaking from a theoretical perspective, not from experience. So while unity among Christians and among converts was expressed as an important value to converts, it proved an elusive goal for most.

3 Gathering MBBs together

As people join Christian groups, they find their new identities reinforced in community. People who have close regular contact with other converts find this to be especially true, and they work hard to reinforce their identity by seeking opportunities to be with people who share both their background and their faith. As Howard Becker argued, deviance[5] is reinforced by companionship with others of the same mindset: "From a sense of common fate, from having to face the same problems, grows a deviant subculture: a set of perspectives and understandings of what the world is like and how to deal with it, and a set of routine activities based on these perspective identities. Membership in such a group solidifies a deviant identity" (Becker 1991:38).

Group membership, especially membership in a minority group, has often been found to reinforce self-esteem and provide a stronger sense of identity (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:517). Therefore it is a strong desire among members of disadvantaged groups to be a part of a group, but a group that distinguishes itself from others. "People feel better about themselves if they believe their group is different from

[5] Deviance is a sociological concept of diversion from social norms; religious conversion is often referred to as religious deviance (see, for example, Stark and Finke 2000), a term especially suited when considering the strong pressures against leaving Islam.

other groups in ways that demonstrate their group is the best" (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:519).

Based on this argument, we might expect those converts who have regular contact with other converts to be more sure of themselves and stronger in developing their convert identities. This may be true, but my research sample was too small to confirm or disprove this hypothesis. Most fellowship groups I met had both convert and born-Christian members. Those groups that were comprised primarily of converts were new groups; few of their members had been converted for more than a year or two.

Sociological research indicates that is not unusual for deviants to actually not have very close contact with their fellow deviants (Downes and Rock 2003:26), and this seems to be true among many new Christian believers. Many participants reported struggling frequently with loneliness, as they found it was hard to find co-religionists with whom to spend time, and when they did, they often did not feel the intimacy they hoped for.

Several participants also reported practical obstacles to developing a community with other converts. For example, one woman lives on the ground floor of her building and so her door is open to the neighbourhood, which makes her feel uncomfortable hosting Christians or Christian meetings in her home. While she would like to take the initiative in building a community, she feels dependent on others' interest and availability. Another couple told me that in their group of converts, for a few years they always met in the home of missionaries, because all the converts were single and living with their families. Since their families were not interested in Christianity, it was not practicable to hold Bible studies or Christian meetings in their homes. However, as groups grow and converts marry, these obstacles tend to become less significant.

As the number of converts in a region grows and the group also grows, a different set of challenges presents itself, and enthusiasm and commitment can decrease as people become more anonymous. There is often a subsequent loss of cohesiveness (Pitchford, Bader and Stark 2001:385-386). One man, who is one of the most experienced known converts in the city where he lives, has seen the number of converts grow from almost none to a group that is too large to keep together. He sees that there is good in having different groups for different types of people, but also misses the cohesiveness that he felt when there were few converts:

> About five years ago, we were all together, but back then there were more or less no families, we were all single, although we came from different socio-economic backgrounds. But we all knew each other, and when we were all seeing each other regularly, we were sharing our lives with each other, sharing things. Not anymore, now there are lots of different groups and each group has its own ideas about things. I know this is because there are more of us now, and it is safer to be in smaller groups, but it's also because we have divided into groups where we feel more comfortable. It's very very important for us to meet and spend time together.

Even when groups become differentiated and diffuse, there are still benefits reported in regular contact with other converts. Susan Rothbaum discussed the importance for leavers of New Religious Movements (NRM)[6] to spend time with other leavers talking through their experiences. It is helpful

[6] NRM is a term used in sociology of religion to refer to religious movements that appear, often sprouting out of existing religious institutions, and attract a large number of followers in a relatively short period of time. The term can refer to any religious group that fits that description, but most NRMs are also characterised by requiring a high degree of unquestioning loyalty from its members.

for them to share a sense of what they left behind and the frustrations that they felt with their former identity (Rothbaum 1988:217).

Such groups help people as they take the time they need to place distance between themselves and their pasts, to evaluate their change and begin to adjust. Rothbaum also found, though, that support groups of leavers sometimes also fostered bitterness. Similarly, although communities of converts often helped each other a great deal in processing their pasts and their change, they also occasionally became a setting in which anger and fierce attitudes against Islam and unappreciative Christian groups could grow.

Anne Sofie Roald, in her study of Scandinavian women converts to Islam, found that having contact with other converts was important, and helped people as they learned to distinguish between what they eventually discovered was "cultural" Islam and "true" Islam. Many converts do not see a distinction at first, but they eventually reach a point of working to reshape Islamic ideas to their own context (Roald 2006:50).

Some participants in this study went through a similar process, eventually discovering that they had more choices in shaping Christianity to their situation than they had originally realised. Having experienced converts around who can share about their experiences and give advice to newer converts is helpful to this process. 'The "new" converts jump directly into the "old" converts' cultural sphere and internalize convert reconceptualizations directly, without having to go through the culturalization process into the Muslim immigrant community' (Roald 2006:52). When such a community and older converts are around to help work through contextualization of their new faith, they find they are able to start living it without expending as much effort on working out for themselves how to adhere their identities.

In particular, they are able to avoid imprudent adaptations to Arab Christian culture that they later on decide are not necessary to their faith, such as eating pork or praying certain ritual prayers. In addition, relationships with other converts help them to think through their stories, or how they develop their discourses of change. They also help young converts learn how to defend their new faith; they find that that too can be a shared experience with others like them (Bourque 2006:242-244).

There is an assumed hierarchy of respect among the members of the community of Muslim-background Christians. This hierarchy reflects the social hierarchy of many Arab communities which is usually according to gender and age. For example, women are often expected to follow the lead of men in their lives, and a convert who is older by age generally assumes the respect of a younger convert, often regardless of who has been a Christian believer for longer.

One woman who had been a convert for about ten years and was in her mid-forties at the time of our interview told me about a young convert girl she had recently met at a Christian church conference. The girl was from her hometown and was only 20 years old, but had believed in a Christian faith for five years. The older woman told me that as soon as she met her, she sat down with the younger woman and told her that she should not confront her family, that that would only make problems in the house and was not necessary. She told her not to do anything which would entail her leaving her home, as she is too young and should not do anything rash. Instead, she should be patient and not tell anyone, "I became a Christian."

As the older woman told me this, she indicated that as soon as she met the younger woman she saw her as someone who needed her mentoring and so, regardless of what the younger woman's needs might be, she took it upon herself to give advi-

ce. From younger converts who have been mentored and advised by older converts, I never heard a complaint about such treatment; indeed, some wished they had been more cared for by older believers, converts or not.

There is a problematic element in this, too, which is a resulting in-group bias. While belonging to a group of similar people helps build self-esteem and a stronger sense of belonging, it can also lead to members of the group failing to acknowledge criticism, principally to seeing one's group as superior to other groups, especially those groups that may be perceived as dominant (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:520-521). Some participants, particularly those who were at the forefront of efforts to gather converts together, demonstrated such a tendency towards defensiveness which created the space for them to describe themselves, the community of converts, as superior to other Christian groups.

4 Relating to Christians

Most people from a Muslim background who choose to embrace a Christian faith desire a connection with the historical religion of Christianity. Those who have no previous contact with other people who share their faith look first to Christian churches to find a community. Others come to belief through the influence of a Christian, whether Arab or foreign, and therefore connect their faith with Christianity. While it is true that some Arab and foreign Christians, especially missionaries, encourage converts to stay away from Christian churches because of cultural polarization, many others bring them to church. The few MBBs who do not automatically consider attending church are usually those who make a decision influenced by a fellow convert who avoids introducing the new believer to church. As the number of converts is gradually incre-

asing, we can see the number of people converting due to the influence of a convert increasing, too, so perhaps fewer converts will choose to associate with Christian churches.

However, among the participants in this study, most sought out a relationship with a church, though many expressed deep frustration with their chosen congregations. Gaudeul documented similar frustrations among the MBBs in his research. He found that many of them were not welcomed into churches and that many churches deliberately delayed granting baptism to converts from Islam. He suggests that this is largely due to church members' fear of repercussions, the sense of historical antipathy between Christians and Muslims, and mistrust of Muslims (Gaudeul 1999:268-270). However, he found that a Christian community was essential in helping a convert through the process of changing, in understanding his/her conversion and developing a theology by which to live (Gaudeul 1999:245).

In the literature about conversion to Islam, we read of similar dynamics about the relationship between born Muslims and converts. For example, Nicole Bourque writes that many of the women converts to Islam she studied felt that the born Muslims they met imposed much of their culture on the converts. She suggests that the born Muslims assumed that they could teach the converts to be just like them because they were the more authentic Muslims (Bourque 2006:244).

Many participants in this study had a similar experience. One woman told me that, after she had made her decision, which for her was connected to the sense of freedom that she sensed in Christian doctrine, she told some Christian coworkers about her change. This was their response:

> Some of them gave me a written prayer to Mary and said I should read it before I went to sleep at night. It had some things that I really couldn't say, and still couldn't to this day, such as "Ya Um-

> Allah" (oh, mother of God). So I wondered, what's the difference, Christianity and Islam are the same: all these traditions/rituals that I have to do!

This led her to question her new faith, but after she met with another Christian friend who explained that those rituals were not necessary, and that she could live her new faith according to her own conscience and sense of what God wanted, she was reaffirmed in her decision.

Meanwhile, in other instances, converts may be welcomed and honoured in churches because of their choice. Yvonne Haddad writes that woman converts to Islam in the United States are often empowered and respected, becoming leaders in Muslim circles. This is partially because they become well-versed in Islamic teachings, but also because their conversion contributes to the credibility of the religion (Haddad 2006:38-39). Many Christian converts out of Islam who leave their Arab homes and move to the West experience this, becoming pastors, public speakers, or even missionaries sent by Western churches back to the Middle East.

Converts who remain in the Middle East tell a very different story, though. They feel they are not respected by born Christians, especially not within the Christian churches that they begin to attend. One man explained that he would very much like to help with the church ministries, to study and learn and become a leader, but he has never felt as if the Christians want to listen to him:

> That's the big issue with us: it is that the church does not care for us like it should. They would never think of having us serve in the church, but they really do love us and we feel very loved by church people who come over and visit and look after us. But they don't ever really involve us, and they try to keep their distance.

He emphasised that he had felt very welcomed by the church, and very loved by members of the church, but that that has not translated to trust; he does not feel that they trust him or could respect him.

Another woman told a story of an experience that she had which taught her not to expect to have any real intimate relationship with a born Christian. She realised that they wanted to help her but were not willing to accept her help in return. She became friends with a Christian woman who is her age, and whose daughter was the same age as her own. The Christian woman helped her new friend quite a bit, often having her and her daughter stay over when her husband was travelling, and calling up frequently to see how they were doing. One day the Christian woman told her convert friend a personal secret in confidence, but then phoned her a day or two later to say that the information had been wrong. When the convert woman learned later that the secret had been true, she felt betrayed because she understood from this that the Christian woman did not trust her; she wanted to be the convert's confidant but did not want to depend on her in return. Many people spoke of their relationship to born Christians as being one-way, and expressed concern that true friendship was not possible.

Outsiders in a group often try very hard to do what they need to do to be accepted (Barker and Currie 1985:312). As people seek to play a role well and are confirmed in their performance by members of the in-group, there is increased trust and commitment to the relationship, and a sense of belonging in the group (Burke and Stets 1999:352). The converse is seen in situations where people do not feel trusted by the members of the in-group. For example, the young man who was disappointed by Christians, because no Christian family would consent to allowing him to marry their daughters, feels like an outsider among born Christians. Instead of establishing trust,

interactions like these reinforce mutual suspicion between born Christians and Muslim-background converts, so the young man now prefers not to spend time with Arab Christians at all.

On the other hand, other participants who reported a lack of trust in Christian churches when they first converted, enjoyed improved relations as they proved their loyalty. A number of participants told of visiting different churches, sometimes literally knocking on doors and at other times by the recommendation of friends, looking for someone who would be willing to baptise them. They usually quickly learned that only a few churches were willing to baptise Muslims, because of suspicion and the fear of government reprisal, but those churches also wanted assurances that the person was sincere about his/her conversion.

One participant recounted that when he first converted, he and a friend went to a church to ask the pastor to mentor them and oversee them as they evangelized other Muslims:

> He saw that we were young but very motivated. But he also saw that we were only 18-19 years old, and there were lots of 18-19 year olds that he worked with, so he saw us as among the teenagers. He didn't think we could handle the responsibility of such a ministry, nor the pressure: we might turn back, change our minds about it. So we left, but one year after I believed – we were living in a village far from the city then – there were 10 believers! We had gone from 2 to 10 in a year!... Then we went back to the church and the pastor welcomed us in, and now he was ready to work with us. We were baptised in the church, discipled by him, and he and the church introduced us to other converts that we hadn't known before.

Although this participant has maintained good relations with the church for years since the pastor finally baptised him, and he still helps in the ministry of the church, he too expres-

sed a sense that he is not trusted by Christians, and that they seem to keep their distance from him and his MBB group:

> People in church don't see any of this (our economic and legal struggles), there is NOTHING there. They give us nothing. We are treated like beggars, distanced. When we need something or want to communicate something, we are told to go through a friend of ours who is a Christian-born Arab, not to talk to them directly. They don't like having us around. Finally they gave us our own floor in the church to meet. That was good, but it also was a way of staying separate from them.

Therefore, the emotional distance that Christian-born church members maintain from their Muslim-born co-religionists may never be completely eradicated, even by those converts who continue to actively interact with Christians.

This is related to a lack of confidence in the validity of people's faith decision: some participants told me that not even they have the confidence that other converts will not return to Islam, so it is not surprising that some people who were born Christian would share that suspicion. It is also reflective of the history of polarity between Christians and Muslims; it is not easy for many Christians who have lived for centuries as a minority in a Muslim-majority region, to accept into their circle someone from an ethnic group that has long been seen as dominant and antagonistic. After all, in both Lebanon and Egypt, where I conducted the majority of my interviews, there has been a great deal of violent tension between Christians and Muslims, including in the participants' own lifetimes.

Roald found that in the community of Muslims she studied in the West, Muslim-born people were segregated from Christian-born. At first this segregation was largely because of suspicion on the part of the larger community of those born Muslim. However, as converts grew in their numbers and their understanding of Islam, the born-Muslims became more wil-

ling to welcome them in. By then the converts had developed their own sense of superiority; they saw themselves as following a less culturally-tainted Islam, and they had already formed their own groups. Therefore, the segregation continued (Roald 2006:53).

This seems to be happening among many MBBs. One convert said that a group of born Christians was hesitant to collaborate on a project with his group of converts, apparently because of a lack of trust. So, he said, he and his MBB friends would just go off and do their own ministry, which would be more effective since they understood Muslim culture better.

A common term to describe the community of Muslim-background Christian believers is a "minority within a minority." This refers to the fact that they are a small group of Christians who are neglected for being a minority within the Christian community, which is a minority in Arab countries. Different participants saw this dynamic in different ways. One participant told me that his goal is to develop a new collective identity, with their own heritage and traditions. He is attending a Christian music school so that he can start building a unique heritage for people from a Muslim background:

> I want to develop worship for my background. We are growing, raising in our numbers, but we are still a small community in a small community. It's good for us to make something for ourselves, and for the new generations.

Another participant took a slightly different view of the place of the community of converts within the larger Christian community in their country. He believes that they are presently a small, weak group within Christianity, but that they should seek to be something bigger. Instead of developing a distinct minority identity among Christians, he wants to see MBBs play a role alongside the Christian church. His argument is that as long as they are seen as a community within the

Christian community, they will never be independent of the expectations, prejudice and culture of the larger Christian minority in his country.

This is why many participants have avoided affiliating with a Christian church. Besides the cold welcome many felt when they first visited, they believe that apostatizing from their born religion was an act of freedom and that is a freedom they can only continue to exert if they do not ascribe to any label or institution. While they consider that they share the same beliefs with most practising Christians in their country, they see themselves as privileged that they do not have to fit into the label of the ethnic Christian minority. One woman explained:

> Recently I was spending some time with an injili (evangelical) family and the child asked me if I am evangelical. I said no, and this led to a further discussion. I said "I am free, and more comfortable with who I am than you, because I am nothing." Of all Christians, I can identify with evangelicals, because they focus only on the Injil (Gospel), but if an evangelical church institutes rules I don't want to be limited by that, and I am free to not follow their structures. Someone who identifies him/herself as a Christian is restricted to Christian existence and structures. I am free from those limitations.

Such people do seem to sacrifice community for freedom, though, as they have a hard time developing the community attachments that help them as they grow into a convert identity, and feel the lack of close personal attachments. This can be especially hard when they have a sense of having left the comfort of the *umma*.

5 Marriage: Choosing a Life Partner

Most of the participants I met converted before marrying, and several were still single when I met them. Finding an approp-

riate marriage partner was of paramount concern for them. Several of the young men said that not marrying was not an option for them, although some single women told me they would prefer to remain single if they could find a way to do that in their communities.

One's choice of marriage partner is an important element in a person's formation of a new community, because finding a partner who is sympathetic to one's own beliefs or, even better, shares them, makes it possible to continue with the same religious lifestyle.

In defending his theorization of religions according to the rules of economics, Laurence Iannaccone cites that empirical studies have consistently shown that when marriage partners share the same religion, their church attendance figures are higher (Iannaccone 1990:303). While there are many aspects of religious economics that are not very relevant to religious deviance, this principle holds true. Iannaccone's argument is that it is easier to be religious when both marriage partners share the same religious values, and so they are more likely to be religious.

I heard many stories of people who felt fulfilled in their new religious identity after marrying a fellow convert; in some ways it was similar to being converted a second time, especially for women, who found themselves with the freedom to participate in more Christian religious activities and welcome Christians into their homes. On the other hand, participants who married people who did not believe in Christianity often found it difficult to continue being as committed to practising their faith as they had previously, at least for a time. Marriage often seems to stabilize identity (Myers 1996:859-860), so what happens in a convert's life after marriage can have a significant effect on how s/he will live the rest of his/her life. Again the effect of this decision was often felt much more acu-

tely by women who were expected to submit to their Muslim husbands, than by men who were often able to convince their Muslim wives to follow their lead.

Hammond suggests that the stronger someone's chosen identity, the more likely s/he is to marry someone similar (Hammond 1988:4). This study was not able to fully test that assumption, especially since it is difficult to assess how dear someone's chosen identity is to him/her. However, some stories from my research indicate that this may not be true in an Arab Muslim context where, in the light of societal pressures, most marriage choices are potentially complicated and may prove problematic.

Men have more choice in marriage, as according to both local and Islamic law, they can marry a Muslim, a Christian, or even a Jew, though a non-Muslim choice of wife is frowned upon in many communities. They also generally take a leadership role in their homes, and so if they marry someone who does not share their faith, they have the freedom to continue with their Christian involvement and often lead their wives to convert as well. A few single men said that they would ideally marry a woman convert and, if not, a Christian woman, but if all else failed, they would marry a Muslim woman.

Muslim women, on the other hand, can only legally marry Muslims, so if they want to marry a Christian believer, they must marry a fellow convert. This dynamic makes adjusting to a convert identity much more difficult for women than for men. Some women get married in the West, and a few find ways to manoeuvre around the law to marry a Christian, but many look desperately for an MBB husband or concede to marry a Muslim man and almost inevitably distance themselves from Christian associations.

Most convert men told me that they find, or found, choosing a life partner extremely challenging, and that they are usually looking in the midst of strong family pressure. Many of them reported several refused proposals, and a sense of desperation that they might not find someone suitable and so be convinced to marry a cousin that their mothers have picked out. However, most stories of MBB men who married Muslim women who did not share their Christian faith have ended in relatively happy family lives and in the convert continuing to freely follow his new faith. I met a few women who converted through their convert husbands, and one man told me that after three years of marriage, his wife is very interested in his faith and is reading the Bible regularly. Even without her believing, though, she accepted that his faith was different before they were wed, and so he is still actively involved at church, and she has allowed him to make the decisions about their son's religious education. Therefore, it may be that some of the stress and pressure that single convert men feel is somewhat unfounded, as marriage to a Muslim woman may not necessarily be a threat to their faith as they worry it might be.

On the other hand, one missionary told me that the most significant difference he sees between the Muslims he knows and the converts he knows is their attitude toward marriage. There is a doctrinal tradition in Islam that marriage completes a person and building a good family is a religious obligation, essential to becoming a good Muslim. Therefore, many Muslims see marriage more as a religious rite than an act of love. However, when Muslim men in his country embrace a Christian faith, they often become more interested in developing a friendship with a woman and marrying for love. Convert men, therefore, are often looking for a woman who can both complete them religiously and with whom they are in love.

Those who marry someone who does not fulfil all of that may feel like they are settling for less, but many such marriages seem to result in a happy family life nonetheless. Because of the traditional Muslim emphasis on marriage, it may also solidify a man's position in his family, and help ease the tension that ensued from his conversion. One man also reported that, even though his family was not happy with his choice of a Christian wife, his relationship with his parents improved significantly after he was married and had children.

Women find themselves in a different situation. A number of women find themselves without an option other than to marry a Muslim man. Even if she has changed her faith in a way that has preserved her family's honour, if she marries a Christian man she may be seen as an apostate. One woman finally married a Muslim man after years of hoping to meet an MBB. Since her marriage, even though her husband had known about her faith from the beginning, she has had to start wearing the *hijab*[7] again, and has had little opportunity to be with Christians. After hearing stories like this, many women are eager not to marry a Muslim, do not see how they can marry a Christian, and so look for an MBB as long as they can withhold family pressure to marry at an appropriately young age.

Largely because of convert men's large dreams about finding an ideal life partner, so far it has been very difficult for convert women to meet MBB men whom they could marry. However, as we have said, marriage to a man who shares her faith is a ticket to freedom, so many women are eager to meet MBB men. This in some ways complicates their hopes, though. Many male participants reported that the convert wo-

[7] In her Middle Eastern country this is the typical Muslim woman's headcovering

men they have met have been so eager to get married and escape the restrictions of their home that they seemed little interested in building a relationship or marrying for love. In spite of this, I have encountered very few stories in which two converts marry and then later regret their decision. As religious deviants in a strongly cohesive society, a shared culture and shared faith often dim many of the potential strains on their marriage which are frequently experienced by people who marry born Christians or Muslims.

One strong motivation to marry someone who shares one's faith and culture is that people hope that their children will then face much less identity confusion, which is often even greater than the frustrations faced by first-generation converts. Those converts who have married and had children report appreciating a shared vision of how to raise their children, and unmarried participants expressed a desire for the same possibilities. While their children, who will always be considered in a Middle Eastern country – both legally and socially – as inheriting the religious identity of their faithers, will face conflicting pressures from their grandparents, schools and churches, at home they will be unified. On the other hand, a few participants do not trust the depth of the faith of their fellow converts, and so prefer to marry a Christian over a convert because they believe they can trust a Christian to be committed to raise their children with Christian values.

6 Relationship to Society

As communities of converts grow and become more visible, they often find that they face strong societal pressure and legal harassment. Those who are most visibly deviant, or seen to be the most different, are the most likely to be held back and stigmatized by the larger community (Shoham 1976:73-74).

Similarly, it seemed that people who converted in secret, or who did not draw attention to their change, rarely faced any threat by their community. One participant, for example, said that he had been following Christianity for more than ten years, but it was only recently, when he was leading groups of converts and becoming rather visible among Christians, that he faced his first government harassment. Another convert still lived as a Muslim in his community, so told me he felt no fear of his government because he had broken no laws, but he did worry that he could come under threat eventually.

One issue involved in facing threats seems to be the relationship between society's expectations as laid out by the law, and how those affect people's relationship with their families. One woman has faced official pressure for much of her Christian life, blacklisted from travel and occasionally harassed in her neighbourhood. Her father has accompanied her throughout these experiences. He himself is not interested in Christianity and, she suspects, has renewed his commitment to Islam as he has seen the changes in her life. However, the police often called on him to restrain her, or to force her to go to the mosque for lessons. When she wanted to travel or get married, it was her father who had to go through increased legal complications in order to for her to go through with her plans. At times he restricted her, beating her or keeping her imprisoned at home, but at other times, he has shown great compassion as he has witnessed the abuse she suffered at the hands of the police.

In a communal culture, where an individual's honour is his/her family's honour, it is not uncommon for families to face legal pressure on behalf of their relatives. Some families therefore pressure the apostate in order to try to avoid legal problems, while others try to defend and help him/her, and some attempt a bit of both strategies. Often, it seems, people's

families are more strict with their deviant family members not because their decision is religiously deviant, but because it is legally deviant. A few participants who at the time of the interview had no contact at all with their families told me that they think their families would accept their decision and even welcome them back into their homes if conversion were not considered illegal in their country.

Many people have had their employment affected by their decision. One participant converted before he had any professional qualifications, and told me that the only way he could make a livelihood was if he owned his own business. No one would hire him, not simply because he had no qualifications but because, in the past, new employers received a visit or phone call from the police warning them that they are employing an apostate. Others who are otherwise generally open about their faith are careful not to let their neighbours know about their conversion, because their lease is written to a Muslim, so they do not want their homes to be viewed with suspicion. Regardless of how people present their identities, many converts live with these daily pressures. While there are converts who gain from their decision to embrace Christianity, the religion of the West, many more become outcasts in their own society, often poverty-stricken and with broken relationships.

In most Muslim countries religion is an assigned collective identity. This stands in constant tension with the human rights values espoused in international law, which enshrine and defend individual choices. When religion is designated in official documentation, as it is in most Arab Muslim countries, it does help to protect minority groups, but it also makes it extremely difficult for individuals to choose their groups (Asad 2003:139).

Almost all apostates from Islam see legal religious identification as a serious deterrent to living their new lives. They report that they would prefer that religion become privatized, removed from identity cards and government regulation. Many Christian-born people are proud of the Christian identification, but would prefer for it to be changeable in both directions, not just to Islam. Converts out of Islam, on the other hand, mostly believe that they will be more able to grow into their new identities if they can approach their new lives purely on a socio-religious level, without any concern for legal designation at all.

These issues are faced in community. Being an active part of an MBB community may increase someone's visibility, and thus risk of legal pressure. However, there are important benefits in having strong ties to fellow deviants and co-religionists, as a source of emotional support and as people who can help a person to live a more cohesive life as a convert and make well-founded choices.

7 Conclusion

Issues of new community are significant to new believers in any faith context, and conversion stories all across the world inevitably include a social element. Most Arab Muslims who choose to follow a Christian faith come from a religo-social context where communal commitment is expected and collective identity is an important part of their self-identification (Mol 1978, Hammond 1988), as they endeavour to identify both with Muslims and with Christians. Therefore, social relationships play an essential role in helping them as they develop their new lives as people who have changed their faith.

Because of all these factors, it is vitally important to religious converts in the Middle East that they find a new com-

munity to which they relate. Many report difficulties in learning how to relate to other converts and to born Christians, and adjustments affect their personal relationships, such as in their search for a marriage partner, and their relationship to the larger society, as seen in the challenges they report in gaining official recognition of their conversion. However, these struggles are essential to building their identity within their new belief system, and most converts are committed to resolve these issues, needing only the encouragement and freedom to define their communities according to their conscience in their new faith.

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