An expert discussion on male and female experiences of conversion to Islam – socio-pedagogical implications in the European context

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Abstract:
This paper is a non-conventional academic paper based on a live discussion organized by the Polish expert on Saudi women’s issues, Professor Anna Odrowaz-Coates (2015, 2016), which took place in The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, in June 2018. Two participating experts are known for their conflicting points of view on issues of security and integration of Muslims in Europe. In this exchange of viewpoints, they focussed on the issue of conversion to Islam in Poland and the UK, drawing upon multiple field research experiences they encountered. The main points of reference deal with the conversion of British prisoners whilst in prison and that of Polish women of diverse backgrounds. The impact of new media on the formation of public opinion, dissemination of faith and radicalization is also considered. The expert debate makes a significant contribution towards the socio-cultural and political discussion on culture clash versus coherence, integration and stability in a European context. It also concerns the use of new communication technology for the preservation of peace, radicalization and the elevation of moral panic.

1. Introduction

Katarzyna Gorak-Sosnowska (K.G.-S.): Let us start by presenting what we’re doing now. I am using the scientific method in implementing a financial project funded by the OPUS grant (National Center of Science). The subject of my research is the social identity and functioning of Polish women who have converted to Islam. Many academic theses concern conversion to Islam because it’s a tempting subject within the study of women in Islam. Women often abandon their Catholic religion, do ‘something’ with their Polish identity, distorting it in some way and often, but not always, convert to Islam because of a man. I am interested in two basic aspects. First, religious socialization carried out “na sucho” (idiom – without immersion/exposure) i.e. how does one learn to be a practicing Muslim when there are no houses of prayer outside of Warsaw and meeting other Muslims is unlikely. Only 12% of Poles, according to a CBOS survey, have had direct contact with a Muslim.

The second aspect concerns how to function within the context of being the archetypal Polish mother, being Catholic and having a “platonic” dislike of Muslims. It is in these two contexts that we, together with the team, are looking at female Polish converts to Islam. The second project I’m working on is educational in character

1 www.sgh.waw.pl/zbwias
2 www.bartoszewicz.mg
3 Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, CBOS 37/2015, s. 2, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_037_15.PDF.
ref: EU | Muslim minorities and the refugee crisis in Europe (financed by Erasmus+ funds). It has a popularizing nature – opening out onto the world. In February, I met with 3000 middle school, high school, and even elementary school students. I told them about Muslims, Islam, women and Muslims in Europe. I have gathered some insights from this experience regarding the emotions connected with Islam and how Islam and the Muslims in Sucha Beskidzka, in Tuchów, in Wrocław or in Kraków are perceived.

Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz (M.G.B): I, on the other hand, have conducted research in Great Britain for my doctoral thesis on the potential terrorist threat of the European converts to Islam. My research interests in Islam began with converts, but went in a slightly different direction because, as a result of my field of expertise, i.e. international security and international terrorism, I became interested in what specifically makes converts an overrepresented group within terrorist organizations. A substantial percentage of the total number of converts within the Muslim community has resorted to violence. In my naive enthusiasm I thought that a doctoral thesis was a great excuse to answer the question ‘Why?’

I did not succeed, of course, but thanks to the fieldwork I had conducted in five countries I was able to see what the different trajectories of conversion and radicalization looked like (Bartoszewicz, 2013a). Starting with the first thoughts preceding conversion, to the acceptance of a different religion, and on to the moment when a person decides to reach for means that are beyond those acceptable in a liberal democracy. My research, i.e. conversations in prisons, mosques, sometimes in parks so that no one could overhear us, and in private homes in various countries, have allowed me to draw up a typology that can be helpful in assessing the risk that a given person will look towards radical solutions, such as resorting to violence, or whether they will ever be interested in violence, irrespective of conversion or religious involvement, because converts are after all an extremely diverse group. This was my starting point. However, research into this terrorist threat from the converts has pushed me towards something that in the West is called cultural security, what the daily media have coined as the clash of civilizations, and this is what I am mainly working on at the moment (Bartoszewicz, 2018).

2. Reasons for conversion

M.G.B: Thinking about the motivations of converting to Islam and simplifying the issue to a great degree, we can say that there are as many motivations and as many reasons or paths to a new religion as there are people since everyone has their own personal history. However, if we wanted to try to develop a model, we can actually attempt to specify several groups (Bartoszewicz, 2015a). The first one converts regardless of any religious values. These are pragmatic conversions and they often occur, for example, on the occasion of marriage. I have encountered such conversions at first hand. A person simply converts to Islam in a nominal way and there are no changes associated with it in their daily lives. The most interesting group of nominal converts that I met consisted of men who converted to Islam en masse in British prisons. They converted to Islam in order to get halal food which in the British prison system is of better quality, tastier and more varied. Usually, they started their conversations with me like this: “In the name of the Father and the Son, I am a Catholic like my forefathers, and my son will have his first communion in Ireland next year!” These sorts of conversions are not talked about, but they exist. The second type of conversions are conversions that are somewhat related to the changes in the religious life in Europe. Life in Europe has begun to commercialise so to speak. Conversions such as that of St. Paul, when a thunderbolt strikes from the sky and the person has no choice but to accept certain revealed truths, happen less and less often. On the contrary, the individual chooses the dogmatic system that suits him. Religions and belief systems compete with each other in a market that’s getting tighter and tighter, and a good number of converts that I’ve talked to were people who had entered the religious supermarket: “Well, three years ago, I was a Jehovah’s Witness, but now I’m a Muslim.” Very often, longitudinal research shows that these are short-term conversions, i.e. those people do not stay with Islam for long. The third type belongs to the group of true ‘Enlightenment’ conversions. A person finds themselves on the path of spiritual development and very slowly, usually independently, accepts certain laws that bring them towards

4 More on the project at http://refeu.eu.
Islam. These are often intellectual conversions, very particular, and, if examined from the sociological angle, usually concerning intellectual elites (e.g. artists, scientists). Finally, the last and the most distinct group is the group that comes to accept some of the axiological norms that Islam involves, the distinctions between good and evil and everything that this entails. However, these are not completely intellectual and private conversions. These are people for whom the resources of what we call organized religion are also very important. The entire Muslim community is an important factor and is active in the conversion process. During our conversations, such people said: “I wanted to have a family like these Muslims. They have such wonderful families!” or “I met a friend and her community helped me a lot.” It is a conversion that is not a completely isolated, but rooted rather in what is more associated with institutionalized religion.

Analyzing the stories of hundreds of conversions, I wondered what influenced the decision. It is indeed true that people who are in some way uprooted, deprived of resources, of family and of the support of friends, often look for a new place to put down roots. It is not without reason that the vast majority of conversions among Poles are of those who went abroad. If we go to London, Reading, Derby, we will see that there is a lot of searching in these places, where people are looking for a new place of their own where they can belong. However, my research has indicated that one’s mental approach to the conversion process is a far more important factor. The question is whether by accepting Islam, we accept something new, expand our lives, take on new values and open ourselves to a new way of looking at the world? Or is this a conversion that involves rejecting our old selves? For example, in prisons there were a lot of these rejection conversions, based on exclusion. There were people who said: “I killed and murdered, stole, took drugs and just wanted to stop it. I reject that old life, I close that chapter, and Islam gives me the opportunity to start from scratch, from a clean slate.” Such conversions do not necessarily only happen in prison, but there are a lot of them, and these are the pivotal ones. If I reject what was, I reject who I was and what I grew out of, all of the normative and axiological background, that is, the hierarchy of values that I was previously guided by. Very often such rejection is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I reject – in the language of the theory of the clash of civilizations – Western civilization and everything associated with it, and I am very negative towards it. This then translates into a certain way of looking at the reality that very often leads to violence (Cf. Huntington, 1993).

K.G. S: I have dealt with the phenomenon of the conversion of Polish women to Islam since January 2018. We are just starting to create a topic guide for in-depth interviews. However, Polish women I know who are converts to Islam and who wear the hijab, whether more from observation or from conversation, tell me that the fact that they speak Polish when approached on the street is a frequent cause of surprise. How is it that she speaks Polish? In turn, Muslim women who do not know Polish and answer in English are met with relief because of this, i.e. they are “imported” Muslim women and not Polish women who have abandoned their religion. I think there is a strictly socio-biological context to this, meaning that a Polish male with a Muslim woman is acceptable. However, the moment a woman gives herself to a Muslim man there is a much more negative reaction, in other words a woman is allowed less than a man. Of course, this applies only to those women who are visibly Muslim; many others who do not wear the hijab are not treated this way. One may wonder why some people treat women converting to Islam worse than men. It’s a matter of the gender and social roles that we have. If we have conflict and war, how can we humiliate the enemy? By harming their women. In this context, it seems better to be a man...

M.G.B.: This is a very interesting question, but I will contrarily turn it around a bit. I recall conversations with converts who very often complained that it was difficult for them to find a mosque where they felt at home. It is not always just about the language barrier. It is sometimes about situations where they themselves, white, converted, Western people, are not accepted as fully Muslim. We very often talk about the problems of acceptance from one side only, but there isn’t really a monopoly on it.

K.G.-S.: Mosques are largely multi-cultural – they are all-Muslim until there are so few Muslims that they can only afford one mosque or house of prayer. We know that in time these mosques become Moroccan or Shia-Iraqi, Ugandan, Indian or something else. Of course, there are differences on both sides when it comes to acceptance. On the other hand – we have converts that are more religious and converts that are more cultural, “light” Muslims, and here too there is a lack of understanding on both sides. Converts will say: “How is it that she was born under Islam yet goes around with a low neckline?!” Meanwhile, cultural Muslims will make comments concerning these converts: “Well, they dress up in Arabic costume.” Since he makes public
appearances, I suppose I can mention him: Professor Selim Chazbijewicz – a Tartar and a Muslim who accuses Polish Muslims of dressing up as Arabs. So here we have a Tartar view of Islam and of converts, a Pole here and a Pole there, and between them a sea of misunderstanding. In fact, there appear to be more barriers than foreseen community in the form of Ummah.

To pass the subject “Islam and Muslims in Europe” the students were asked to write in which European country there were the most Muslims, and Turkey was the European country indicated most often (SIC!). So the European border is problematic in itself as well as the problem of how to run statistics. On the one hand, we have the British version and the census, where we theoretically know everything including the followers of the Jedi religion and then we have France, where the number of Muslims is estimated based on the country of origin. The next question concerns who is a Muslim? If, say, I came from immigrant parents from Morocco, my name is Samira, I have a boyfriend with whom I live without marriage, who is an atheist, I do not wear a hijab, in principle I observe the holy days, because it’s expected. Am I a Muslim or not? The ID papers say yes, so nominally I am, but I have nothing to do with Islam, although I do not leave this community, because I can’t be bothered and someone has to bury me somewhere. When it comes to Muslim countries, we do not inquire – Saudi Arabia 99% of Muslims and that’s it, in Europe these questions are much more legitimate because of our cultural and religious landscape – believer, non-practicing, etc. but few people care to ask.

M.G.B.: The research hasn’t been done. In Great Britain, which is most advanced when it comes to systemic and state involvement in the field of integrating social reality with the reality of the machinery of state, there are huge problems. English converts most often said, “Well yes, there is the Church of England, great, but we could also do with a Mosque of England, because it would make things much easier.” It would facilitate, for example, formal and legal issues; there would be an official induction course which would end the problem of hate preachers because everything would, in the typical British way, be as systematized as their queuing system. There are many ‘invisible’ conversions that take place in secret, where the Shahada is said at home, and these do not show up on the record. If you look at this phenomenon from a security perspective it turns out to be quite dangerous. Very often such conversions are of the emotional type I mentioned earlier which reject the old order and which very often end in a very tragic way. I met one such convert in Great Britain, a Lithuanian, just before his departure to Iraq. I do not think that he would be coming back from there. On the other hand, from a sociological perspective, I reckon that until the institutional framework is sorted out, we will continue struggling in this way.

K.G.-S.: There are also two sides in the context of institutionalization. The Mosque of England would sound impressive, but not all Muslims are for formalizing or transforming the structures of Muslim organizations along the lines of Christian churches. After all, what would it entail? We have Muslims in Great Britain of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Moroccan, Sunni, Shia, etc. origin; and they are suddenly supposed to create one joint organization? Some European countries, for this reason, even demand from their Muslim communities: “get yourselves together and reach an understanding to make a sort of single conglomerate, and preferably add the Ahmadiyya, so that it all works together nicely.” Unfortunately, this is not entirely possible and this applies not only to Muslim communities in Western Europe, but also to indigenous Muslim communities – the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, such a common Muslim organization would be good, because, for example, there is the question of who establishes the core curriculum for teaching religion – Islam – in school. Such a joint organization would have a nice handbook and would probably have the mosques under its control, so a situation where we didn’t know what was being said in a mosque or a house of prayer wouldn’t exist. Given the multifaceted nature of Islam, is this type of solution even feasible? It may be worthwhile asking ourselves how we assess the role of the global network, the Internet, and global media in controlling and imposing a certain vision of Islam upon us, and in creating both a positive and a negative image. Does the global network have an effect on converts?

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3. The use of new media, the phenomenon of conversion and the threat of radicalization

M.G.B.: I will tell you about the darker aspects of the internet because they are being talked about most vociferously. The term “Lone wolf” is a term that has recently become very sexy. Usually, it refers to a person who has read something on various websites, become radicalized to the extreme, and later implemented the acquired ideas. Trying to control the global media output is, to paraphrase Bill Clinton, like attempting to “nail jelly to the wall.” It cannot be done. This is responsible for a vast plethora of phenomena: radicalization at home, young people leaving European countries for the Middle East; it is a tool of warfare. I did research in Kosovo on political and social radicalization. Kosovo has traditionally been secularized and Islam has often been a purely cultural phenomenon detached from rigorous religious practice. Suddenly radical websites have appeared, representing religious associations that seem to exist at least on paper and which have become vocal about the Islamisation of Kosovo. However, it turned out that one of the loudest and most problematic websites has been run by a Belgrade-based Russian. And the problem came up of how to interpret such situation. This does not mean, of course, that the radical message itself is harmless.

K.G.-S.: I would also mention another radicalization – this time, our youth’s attitude. While 12% have met and talked with a Muslim, others have not, but in Polish schools you can sometimes find a student who, for instance, can distinguish which verse from the Koran is the verse of the sword and which is not. He has heard about it, can pick it out from others, and sometimes also recite it and therein lies the danger. How is it that he knows precisely this verse? And if a student does know a verse – regardless of school he attends – why exactly is it the verse that calls for violence? At the time when young people quite readily accept some things and are very critical of others, when it comes to Muslims this is associated with a specific religious determinism. If I see a Muslim that means he is religious, and if he is religious, he knows the Koran, and if he knows the Koran, he knows the verse of the sword, and if he knows the verse of the sword he will surely kill me, because he has it written in his religion. The result of continuing with this shorthand form of cause and effect means that we are unable to reach the majority of Muslims, whether in Poland or in Europe, who do not want to have anything to do with extremism. I always say that we are practicing multiculturalism “na sucho” (idiom – without immersion/exposure) in Poland, and since it is without immersion/exposure we know that we are not going to be able to absorb certain things and I don’t know if we are capable of learning multiculturalism at all?

M.G.B.: On the other hand, I can probably tell you about what kind of emancipation is taking place within what we call Islamism, as a result of the increasing number of radicalized women. This often causes surprise and goes against the intuitive understanding of a woman as a peaceful element, which is often contrasted with the conflictual male element. The involvement of women in terrorist organizations is growing rapidly. The most vivid manifestation of these trends was ISIS, which during its peak attracted more women than men. However, it is not just the scale of engagement, although in fact this increase is huge, but also the ways in which women find their place in this radical stream of Islam (Bartoszewicz, 2015b). Where at first women were not present, with time they became a pliable instrument in a political struggle, only to gain their own independent voice, agency and power to act autonomously. The first female European convert who carried out a suicide terrorist attack was a Belgian national. Shortly after becoming Muslim, Muriel met Issam Goris, who was known as a radical Islamist. They got married in 2000 and moved to Morocco. Upon return to Belgium two years later the new religion became the axis of Muriel’s whole life. In 2004 she committed what is believed to be the first European woman convert suicide mission. What is important is that we know nothing about her. Muriel Degauque, was a deadly yet silent instrument of jihad. She did not leave any written or spoken testimony; we do not have at our disposal any manifesto or video where she would explain her motifs or ambitions. It seems that her life and deeds were insignificant, only her dying mattered as if Degauque was articulated anew in her death. Contemporary radical Muslims are much more outspoken and visible prior to committing acts of political violence. This is reflected in life as well as the personal writings of Samantha Lewthwaite, the White Widow, the person involved in the terrorist attack in a Nairobi shopping mall. Feminisation of radical Islam has led to a situation whereby women speak to other women as well as men on many different issues central to the ideology of political Islam: from hijab to jihad. This is a complete change, a new face of feminism.
4. Conclusions: Cultural cohesion or conflict?

K.G.-S.: I get the impression that we sometimes use the issues and rights of women in Islam when explaining our own reality, for example when discussing in vitro: 'What's the approach to IVF over there among the Muslims? Well, if it turns out that they allow it, this could be used as an argument by our side.' One might also wonder why people treat women converts to Islam worse than men. It appears to be the result of the gender and social roles that we have. In this context, if we were asked to answer the question as to whether there is cohesion or conflict between the cultures when we look at Islam and other religions in Europe, then I would go with option number three: plurality. Within this plurality there is conflict, cohesion and many other things. The sooner we get out of this binary order of things the sooner we can sort them out, but this is just my opinion, maybe a futuristic-utopian one.

M.G.B.: I would like to have plurality, but I think that we presently find ourselves in the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilizations and, unfortunately, this is becoming more and more apparent, and not just in Poland. As for conversion in prisons, setting aside those that are entirely pragmatic in nature, it should be remembered that prison is a specific microcosm. In this world, conversion can be a tool that allows an individual to move up in the hierarchy. Christianity has the reputation of being a "religion for losers" who only turn the other cheek. In contrast, Islam is perceived as a religion of tough guys and warriors, and this works great in prison. But there are also conversions that are purely spiritual. The desire, to break with a past which was sinful and evil. Quite often, the greater the offense, the greater the desire to start again (Bartoszewicz, 2013b).

Moreover, I think that one should talk about potentially problematic issues, and these should not be avoided, because by bypassing them we will never be able to build a common foundation. And from the perspective of someone who teaches every day, I sometimes think that we overestimate the possibility of fixing some things with a lecture. It is not always the case that problems resulting from two different ways of looking at the world can be fixed through dialogue. And you can sometimes get the impression that intercultural encounters are the answer to everything. From the perspective of a skeptic and an expert in security studies, I think this is a very naive way of thinking, bordering almost on utopian. This does not mean that an understanding is impossible. Of course it is; it's just that the huge number of matters, areas of life and problems that come with it cannot be solved within a year. I am always reminded of a certain somewhat arrogant Western or European view of promoting democracy. This is very similar. It seems to us that processes that have taken hundreds of years in Europe and which have been accompanied by rivers of blood, processes related to building stable states based on civil societies, can be tightened in time, condensed, while the unpleasant accompanying processes, such as wars, can be removed. It is exactly the same when it comes to the co-existence of different cultures. This does not mean that it can't be done, it can, but it truly requires great patience, time and the understanding that one must deal with the good and the bad things one by one.

References


