Conversion to Islam

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2. Conversion to Early Islam

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In Mecca, before Islam, religion encompassed much more than simply the question of faith alone. The sacred place, the sacred months and the pilgrimage were as important to the religious system as they were to Meccan trade. Quraysh and its close trade allies were called the *ḥums*, a word which denotes ideas of courage, strictness in religion and dedication to a sanctuary.[1] In short, trade and religion were inseparable, and no one could reject the one and expect to participate in the other. Thus conversion at the time of Muḥammad meant not only changing one's faith but also cutting oneself off from the other activities of the community. Quraysh described such action as *ṣaba'*, to change from one religion to another, implying that such a person had set himself up as an enemy of his own people, *ṣaba'a 'an dīn qawmihi*.[2]

Of course the new converts would not use such a term to describe their action. The most comprehensive term used by Muḥammad and the Qur'ān is *dakhala fī dīn raḥmat Allah*, as is very clear in sūra cx: "and you saw people entering Allah's religion in throngs." As for *āmana and aslama*, there is no doubt that *āmana* was used to indicate its simple meaning, to believe. On the other hand *aslama* was used to introduce a new concept in place of the original notions of, "to abandon something, to give something up, to let something loose entirely, to leave or desert someone, to abstain from aiding someone and throw him into destruction, to leave someone in the power of another who desired to kill or wound him, to become resigned

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1. M. J. Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* (1965), pp. 132–139.

2. Ibu Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, s. v. *sba'*.

or submissive."[3] To many of the Arabs of that time these notions were exactly the opposite of what they considered to be good moral conduct. However, it is typical of Muḥammad to use a commonly accepted term but in a new light, giving it a new conception to fit his vision. But in this case he came close to underestimating the reaction of the highly individualistic Arabs who thought that they were being asked to accept treachery and submissiveness as their way of life. He probably realized that, but as always he persevered, using *aslama* and its derivatives as little as possible while qualifying them more and more.

The question of *mu'minūn* and *muslimūn* was still a sensitive issue at the time of 'Umar when he was given the title of *amīr al-mu'minīn*. This was soon after the rebels of the apostasy wars had been brought back into the fold. To call them *muslimūn* would have been repugnant to their pride while *mu'minūm* was a more tactful and politic word which conveniently covered all members of the community.

H. A. R. Gibb argued that "in Muhammad's own lifetime, it [Islam] was received at three different levels. The *first* was at *the level of total conversion*, producing religious personalities whose activities and decisions were motivated by a complete inward acceptance of its spirit and principle. This group, the nucleus of the future religious institution, was in the nature of the case relatively small to begin with but steadily increased with the expansion of the community. The *second* was that of *formal adhesion*, of willing acceptance of the outward prescriptions and duties, without assimilation of their spirit, but because of the advantages to be gained by incorporation in the new community. Its leading representatives were the later Meccan adherents, to whose mercantile temper the external demands of Islam were eminently suited, requiring only the dedication to religious duties of a proportion of time and wealth, while leaving the rest free for personal activities and interest. A further commendation of Islam in Meccan eyes was the firm control which it established over the Bedouins, whose acceptance was on the *third* level, that of *enforced adherence* maintained by threat (and after Muḥammad's death by the application) of military sanctions."[4]

There is nothing inherently novel about Gibb's classification but it is too neat to correspond to historical facts. The so-called religious institution is more a feature of Ottoman history than of early Islamic times, and one can hardly speak of a nucleus of such an institution before the 'Abbāsid era. As for the second level of conversion, Quraysh was not the only group that saw the advantages of conversion; there were others who sent delegations to negotiate their formal adherence. Indeed Quraysh's formal conversion was brought about by the use of a certain measure of force. The shrewdness of

3. Ibid., s.v. *slm*.

4. H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. S. J. Shaw and W. R. Polk, London (1962), p. 5.

the Qurayshites persuaded them to face the facts and realize their defeat. But once they were converted, their support of Muḥammad against their former allies, and their support of Abū Bakr in the apostasy wars proclaimed their total conversion in no uncertain terms.

The formal adherence of many Arab groups had to be an enforced adherence after the death of Muḥammad, and it is a mistake to consider them all nomads, since they included many agriculturists of Yaman and Ḥaḍramaut like al-Ash'ath b. Qays and his followers of Kinda, or, for that matter, the *ahl al-qurā* of Ḥanīfa. Finally, to see these third-level converts as the later Khawārij, who were first in alliance with a religious party of the first-level conversion and then at variance with it, is a generalization which is not borne out by the sources.[5]

To understand the significance of conversion one must ask what it meant in all its aspects to the would-be converts. There is no doubt that the outward demands of conversion to Islam were easy. Meccans were called to worship Allah, whom they had worshipped before Islam. And it would not have been that difficult for them to renounce one deity or the other, especially when they were used to changing their allegiance between Allāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzā among many other deities. Demands on their time for prayers were no more than a few minutes a day, and they were accustomed to going out in the mountains for religious meditation for weeks at a time. Their sacred shrine was held in the highest respect, and the pilgrimage was adopted into Islam. Claims on their wealth were minimal, and in any case it was made very clear to them that these would be held for the benefit of the whole community.

It is evident that there was something more in Islam to which they so strenuously objected. This could only have been Muḥammad's proposals to reform the Meccan trade system that were implicit in his religious teachings. His failure to convince the Meccans with his point of view eventually led to the establishment of the Madīnan Commonwealth, better known as the *umma*. Conversion was not a condition for membership of this new community at that stage, and the Jews of Madīna had the same rights and obligations as all other members. However Muḥammad soon realized that their inclusion in the *umma* was incompatible with its basic interests, and they had to be eliminated from Madīna altogether.[6] On the other hand, the Christians and Jews of Najrān, feeling the pressure of Madīna, were willing to negotiate. Significantly the famous verses in the Qur'ān about the *jizya* were revealed in relation to these negotiations. But still more significant, their *jizya* was to be a collective contribution to the Madīnan commonwealth of 2,000 suits a year, each suit worth 40 dirhams.[7] As it does not

5. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* . . ., ed. by M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879–1901), vol. 1, pp. 1946–1947.

6. M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A.D. 600–750 (A. H. 132): A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 12–13.

7. Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. by M. J. de Boeje (Leiden, 1970), pp. 64–66.

seem that Muḥammad was particularly fashion-conscious or was planning to drape all his followers in Madīna in expensive Najrānī suits, it is more likely that these suits were intended eventually for other markets.

After the surrender of Mecca, delegations poured into Madīna from most parts of Arabia to declare their acceptance of the Islam and to negotiate the necessary terms. The principle was established that every convert had to pay *zakāt/ṣadaqa*, and the few who preferred not to accept the new religion but wanted to join the *umma*, had to pay *jizya* on an individual basis. The problem was that many of those who were paying *zakāt* expected quick returns on their contributions. When these payments did not bring any dividends and Muḥammad died without achieving his ultimate success of restoring the trade flow, these Arabs, convinced of the failure of the Madīnan enterprise, stopped paying their contributions. The Madīnans, strongly supported by the Meccans, saw the matter differently, and the latter especially were now desperate for the success of the project on which all their fortunes depended. The apostasy wars resulted in a victory that forced the reconversion of the vanquished, but they were not treated, at least for the time being, in the same way as those who had remained faithful. During Abū Bakr's time, the former were deprived of taking part in the raids in Iraq and Palestine.[8]

During the raids in Iraq, Khālid exacted sums of money from certain localities and no questions of conversion were raised. Indeed, at that time, the idea of converting such people did not and could not have occurred to the Arabs. Abū Bakr was still faithfully trying to carry out Muḥammad's trade plans and had no plans for expansion, otherwise he would not have held back the *ridda* Arabs. As far as Abū Bakr was concerned, Khālid and his men were taking part in the age-old tradition of raids into Sāsānian territory, and if it helped to relieve the economic pressures by extending these raids into Palestine, so much the better.

The unexpected Arab victory against the Byzantines in Palestine was the first test of 'Umar's statesmanship. He did not hesitate. A change of direction took place; instead of a limited Arab, Madīnan based commonwealth striving to recapture the rich international trade of the time, a new pan-Arab expansionist regime was born. Although Islam continued to have the highest respect for trade, there were now far more important things with which it would concern itself. The principles that were conceived to guide a trade enterprise had now to be adapted to govern an empire, and this was not an easy task. Trial and error sometimes compounded the errors, but there was a general rule that was widely applied: effect the least possible change in the conquered territories. Perhaps the most important factor in this situation was that the Arabs were very quick to understand that in order to realize the maximum benefit from their conquests, it was of vital importance to maintain the existing tax structures in these territories.

8. Shaban, *Islamic History*, pp. 23–27.

Therefore they had no option but to leave the administration of these territories in the hands of former officials; the *dihqāns* in Iraq, the Byzantine administration in Syria, and the Church hierarchy in Egypt. Needless to say, under the circumstances conversion was not an issue; it was neither encouraged nor discouraged. The important thing was that every subject had to continue to pay his taxes, whether it was a land tax or a craftsman's tax, with very minor modifications. The terms used to describe these taxes, *jizya* and *kharāj* were interchangeable, but the fact remains that the simple principle of *jizya*, first applied in Najrān, was stretched to cover a completely different situation. Egypt remained solidly Coptic. Even those Egyptians who manned the Arab navy were not converted and were paid wages for their services. In Iraq, there was a striking example of conversion when about one thousand horsemen from the remnants of the Sāsānian army decided to join the Arab forces and accept Islam. Accordingly they were given the highest stipend and were used in subduing the difficult province of Fārs.[9] However, the rest of the population was not affected, and this included the clans of Taghlib living in Mesopotamia who preferred to remain Christian. In Syria, the situation was quite different, as there were many Arabs living in Syria under Byzantine rule and others living on the fringes of the Syrian desert. Some of the Arabs of Syria withdrew with the Byzantine forces, while the rest remained behind accepting Arab rule with very little sign of conversion amongst them. The Arabs who were living outside Byzantine rule were very quick to side with their fellow Arabs, especially after the first successes, and indeed took part in the conquest of the rest of Syria. These Arabs from the clans of Quḍā'a, mainly Kalb, were converted, and according to the plan of the Arab settlement of Syria, they were given lands especially along the fertile coast where they were also given the responsibility of defending it against Byzantine sea attacks. They were satisfied with this arrangement which similarly applied to the original conquerors of Syria and Jazīra. All these Muslims duly paid the *'ushūr*, tithes, on the land they held. The non-Muslims continued to pay their taxes according to the Byzantine system.[10]

While the Arabs in Syria were allowed to spread all over the province, those in Iraq were segregated in the garrison settlements of Kūfa and Baṣra. In Egypt they were confined to Fusṭāṭ with rotational garrison duty in Alexandria. Eventually the Arab conquerors of North Africa were also confined to Qayrawān. Such a situation where contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims were very limited, would neither invite nor encourage conversion. The peaceful cooperation of the Egyptians and the continued unruliness of the Berbers would explain the total absence of conversion at this early stage in Egypt and North Africa. But in Iraq the very rapid expansion of Kūfa and Baṣra soon changed the character of these two

9. *Futūḥ*, pp. 373–374.

10. For details, see Shaban, *Islamic History*, pp. 42–43.

garrison towns. By the beginning of the Umayyad period these two urban centers offered good opportunities in their expanding trade and required the services of many craftsmen. The indigenous population took advantage of this situation and began to move in, but at the same time as their contacts with the Muslims increased, there were more and more instances of conversion amongst them. Nevertheless this was a slow process, and the vast majority of the rural population remained unconverted.

In Egypt during the governorship of 'Abd al-Azīz b. Marwān (685–7), Fusṭāṭ was disbanded and the Arab force of between 30,000 and 40,000 men was dispersed around various parts of the province, thus forming a proper army of occupation in closer touch with the population of the countryside.[11] However, this did not seem to have produced any significant number of converts. Perhaps it was in Alexandria, the center of naval operations, where there was close cooperation between the Arabs and the Egyptians, that conversion was beginning to take root.

The most spectacular movements towards conversion occurred in North Africa about that time. Although the Berbers tried to take advantage of the second civil war to get rid of Arab rule, in 694 Syrian troops poured into North Africa and soon put an end to their revolt. Many Berbers were converted, and 12,000 of them were recruited into the Arab army, given stipends and treated in exactly the same way as the Arab Muslims.[12] Indeed, Berbers formed the great majority of the Arab army that crossed into Spain in 711 and destroyed the main forces of the Visigoths. Eventually, and until 739, Berbers were allowed to cross from Tangiers into Spain to settle there. Of course these later settlers were also converts, but we have no means of assessing their numbers.[13]

For the rest of the Umayyad era, the question of conversion was part of the much wider issue of assimilation.

11. Ibid. pp. 112–113.

12. Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar* (Cairo, A. H. 1284), vol. 6, p. 109; Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. by V. V. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), p. 204; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil* . . ., ed. by C. J. Tonberg (Leiden, 1866–1871), vol. 4, p. 302.

13. Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, vol. 5, pp. 373–374; *Futūḥ Miṣr*, pp. 217–218.