

Kathryn Kraft, *Searching for Heaven in the Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2012)

The research question at the heart of this book is: can Muslims in the Arab world leave Islam? And if they can, is leaving the Arab world the only viable way of leaving Islam? The answer provided is, yes, it is possible for Muslims to leave Islam and stay in the Arab world, but it is extremely difficult.

The major difficulty, even if not presented explicitly as such, seems to be that, with the exception of Lebanon, apostasy is illegal in the Arab world. So one cannot legally abandon Islam to convert to another religion. A formal conversion may mean a death sentence. Yet a few do convert. They convert because they reject Islam and because of an intellectual and emotional pull to Christianity.

The question I was left with after reading the book, though, is: is it worth it? The troubles converts go through seem so large that that “pull” becomes unclear; at least it was so in my mind. The problems converts encounter seem to be both internal and external.

Kraft explains that “Islam is a religion defined by unity. Unity in the oneness, or *tawhid*, of God” (p. 36). It is this *tawhid* that generates a strong sense of Muslim identity, which many are unwilling or unable to shed when they adopt a different faith. The oneness of God is demonstrated by rituals associated with everyday life activities, such as, say, housecleaning or bathing. “Even Muslims who are largely secular in their beliefs and lifestyle may have a relatively high level of participation in Muslim rituals, both because of the strongly ingrained nature of Muslim values in their upbringing (e.g. not eating pork), and for the sake of family cohesiveness and communal continuity (e.g. fasting during Ramadan as a family event)” (p. 40). The ritualization of daily activities is what converts seem to miss the most and seem unable to give up. They look to their new religion for the same level of rituals present in Islam, and cannot find it. They are therefore at a loss and disoriented. In addition, daily activities are so strongly characterized by their previous identity that it makes it hard for them to separate the activities from their previous faith.

So, we are told, people adopt a different faith, without abandoning their Muslim identity. Somehow, one can convert without actually converting. Legally adopting a different religion is not the same as abandoning Islam and adopting a Christian faith, or better, believing in Christ. So rather than converts, the converts prefer being called Muslim-background believers, or followers of Christ, or something similar (while Kraft has no problem in referring to them as converts). Officially they are not converts, but in practice they feel they are. Kraft argues that for some, Muslimism, just like Christianity, in the Arab world, becomes an ethnicity separable from a religion: “among Arabs of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian faith, I argue that Islam becomes their ethnicity, while Christianity becomes their religion” (p.101).

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Some converts continue with their Muslim lifestyle, in part also to maintain peace at home and the respect of their *umma*, their community. *Umma*, Kraft tells us, requires that the community takes priority over the individual, which is to say that one individual should sacrifice his/her individuality to the wellbeing and preservation of the community. Social cohesion is essential and unity is preserved by setting limits on individual expression. Apostasy can be interpreted in this context of *umma* to promote unity and to suppress dissent, even with death. Kraft draws parallels with the "do not ask, do not tell" attitude. If the conversion is not out in the open, it is as if it was not there. Shame is avoided and honor preserved. Avoiding explicit mention of conversion, it is claimed, is a demonstration of love toward the deviant member of the family and of the deviant member of the family toward his/her family.

After converting, having not found *tawhid*, Muslims are looking for *umma* in their new community, but find mistrust instead. The mutual suspicion between believers of Muslim background and born Christians extends into the Arab churches: "Arab Christians suspect people of a Muslim background of having political or material motivations for converting, or worse, of infiltrating their churches as spies." (p. 57).

Christian missionaries tend to be funded by Western money. So there is a strong association between Christianity, the West, and wealth. Kraft claims that the West, its freedom and its wealth, are not among the motivations for conversion, but often form part of the outcome and are often expected. Furthermore, religious deviants, we are told, must be careful about whom they associate with because they can cause serious problems for themselves and others. In addition, Christians are associated with Westerners and with the brutal violence of the Crusades and of the last two centuries of European colonialism. "The emotional distance that Christian born church members maintain from the Muslim-born co-religionists may never be completely surpassed, even by those converts who continue to actively interact with Christians." (p. 84).

Loneliness becomes a major problem. They are alienated by their Muslim family (or prefer to be such); it is dangerous to associate with foreigners, and Arab Christians are reciprocally suspicious. "They have lost the sense of moral integration which Islam and *tawhid* had provided them, and by which they had lived, or been expected to live, before converting. They also lost the structure and routine that members in the *umma* provided. They have a sense of being stuck between two worlds, wanting the best of both but finding themselves with best of neither" (P. 76). So the solution to the very high level of stress generated by these tensions may become two: returning to Islam or migrating to the West. This is especially the case when accompanied by the inner torture on how to raise their children.

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The account that Kraft offers us opens the door to several questions that I hope will be answered in future research. All the interviews in the book, and therefore the story she tells, come from converts and their perspective. Would the narrative have been different if the interviews included friends and family members, who saw their loved ones abandon what they think is the true religion and live a life they think is a sin? How unique are these stories? How do they differ, if at all, from attempts to convert out of Orthodox Judaism? Or out of some very conservative Christian communities? How do Muslim converts in the non-Arab world compare to the ones in the Arab world? And how do they compare to converts *into* Islam both in the Arab world and in the non-Arab world?

A book that raises more questions than the ones it set out to answer is, in my opinion, a good book and is worth reading. This book may not be the best introduction to Islam in the Arab world, or to the tensions present in it, as it takes that context for granted. Yet the experiences that it describes raise interesting questions about religion and society in the Arab world and beyond.

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