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Algeria and Tunisia

Katia Boissevain¹

Christianity has a long presence in this part of the Mediterranean, dating back to the Roman Empire. Its activities were later reenacted during the French colonial period with the arrival of men and women of French, Spanish, Italian or Maltese origin. In the late nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church embarked on a vast mission of church building, to help and assist the colonial endeavour. This took effect in different ways, according to the political arrangement that France imposed on the country: colony for Algeria (1830–1962) and protectorate for Tunisia (1881–1956). Alongside the establishment of Catholic churches, the Reformed Protestants also ensured that places of worship were available. During this particular period of the French conquest, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, hoped and aimed to convert Muslim subjects.

Nowadays, aside from minor Christian groups (Europeans who stayed on after independence, American or African expatriates working there), small communities of local converts are emerging in Algeria and Tunisia. Over the last twenty years, conversion to Christianity has been developing, mainly in Algeria and to a lesser extent in Tunisia, in the form of Evangelical Protestantism or neo-Evangelical churches. More recently, since 2003, Sub-Saharan African workers or students have also contributed to the revitalisation of the Church, both Catholic and Protestant.

States and “New” Religious Minorities

In Algeria, a discreet conversion movement has been at work since the early 1990s but received significant press coverage for the first time in 2004. The press campaign (by national media) highlighted the effectiveness of proselytism in Kabylia, the Berber region in the north of Algeria. The numbers were intentionally inflated (30% of the population in the region of Tizi-Ouzou) in order to inflame public concern and thus force the State to take measures. The main step was the passing of the law concerning ‘non-Muslim religions’ (2006), which forbids religious celebrations outside defined religious buildings (and only with an administrative authorisation) and proselytism. With no official numbers, conversions are difficult to estimate, but the Eglise Protestante d’Algérie (EPA, founded in 1972) is a federation of around 25 churches, comprising Reformed, Methodists, Lutherans and Evangelicals. The Anglicans and Adventist converts are outside this federation. It is thought that the members within the federation number between 10,000 and 15,000, and those outside around the same numbers. Despite the legal framework (since 2011, the EPA has been officially recognised by the State), regular attacks on Christian places of worship are reported and Christians are frequently taken to court on charges of proselytism.

In Tunisia, the numbers seem to be fewer still. Here again, official numbers are unavailable and the number of local Christian converts is estimated to be between 2,000 and

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10,000. In contrast to Algeria, they are mainly to be found in urban settings, where they openly congregate in churches. Administrative intimidation also occurs and a subtle balance is at work between ‘freedom of conscience, of belief and free expression of religion’ (Article 6 of the 2014 Constitution) and the prohibition of proselytism. The Catholics, on the other hand, all of whom are foreigners, number around 20,000.

Leaving Islam and Becoming Christian

In both countries, when conversion to Christianity is discussed with Muslims, the question raised is that of apostasy (the negative side of the process), which is considered an act of religious treason. Indeed, it is common knowledge that were Sharia law followed, religious conversion would be punished by death. The fact that this sanction is a subject of debate and that no consensus emerges among Muslim scholars does not nuance opinion at the popular level. It is considered that the apostate (*murtad*) has turned his or her back on Islam, and thus on the *Umma* (Muslim religious community) as a whole. The accusations of religious treason are debated in the press, both in Algeria and Tunisia, through vast campaigns that portray the converts as a menace to the stability of the country. How do the men and women who have chosen to change religion counter the accusations of treason on the political and social levels?

Since independence both Algeria and Tunisia have based their national construction on the idea of the strict equation between one country, one language and one religion, putting aside any social reality that contradicted this ideology, such as the Berber linguistic specificity. In Algeria, this ideology of unity has been shaken by the Berberist movement, but in Tunisia, nothing apart from the acknowledgment of its small Jewish community has come to contradict the equation ‘Tunisian = Muslim’. Today, Protestantism, especially in its Evangelical form, is perceived as a religion imported from the USA. As such, it is not welcomed, since the United States is perceived to be a friend and supporter of Israel. This perception and ‘Israel’s’ centrality in Evangelical theology are no doubt the main reasons for the strong reactions Protestantism provokes.

Apostates/converts (depending on the point of view) are most often considered traitors: in an evolutionary understanding of religion, Islam is the last and most complete of the three revelations (Judaism and Christianity being the previous two). Converting to Christianity is therefore perceived as a pointless regression. When a conversion is announced, or discovered, families feel they have been cheated upon and abandoned and are often stunned by a secretly matured decision. Becoming Christian is interpreted by the others as a choice formulated against everything for which they have been raised. If it is a mistake to think that most Algerians or Tunisians conscientiously practise their ritual obligations, still it remains the case that a Muslim rhythm marks the day, the yearly calendar and the life rituals. Stepping aside and choosing the Christian religion is not only a break with the social body, it also breaks with the social rhythm. When families interpret this change as an allegiance to the ‘God of the French’ or, worse still, the USA, new converts often find themselves excluded, sometimes willingly, from family gatherings with religious connotations, such as circumcision ceremonies, weddings, birth or death rituals, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and Moulded (birth of the Prophet Muhammed).

The other reproach formulated against converts is that they maintain an ambiguous relation with ‘abroad’ and are not loyal to their homeland. Critics might allege that many converts secretly hope that conversion will help them acquire a visa or a marriage with a foreigner (preferably a Westerner). As a result of these accusations, Algerian and Tunisian converts are constantly reaffirming their love for their nation and for their culture – which they dissociate from their religion. Whether on the ‘Christians in Tunisia’ website, where it is stated that we ‘are Tunisian, we were born in Tunisia and we live in Tunisia’ or in interviews collected by Karima Dirèche in Algeria, where Kabyle converts assure that they could never leave the beauty of their land, the important issue is to demonstrate that one’s religious identity was chosen spontaneously and not because of transnational Evangelical networks which are, in any case, most of the time unknown to the converts themselves.

Intertwined Histories of Christianity

Contemporary Evangelical movements in Algeria and Tunisia reactivate discourses and representations of the ancient Christianity of North Africa as a mean of legitimisation. In the fourth and fifth centuries, this form of Christianity was linked to Rome and allowed for the development of the Church of Africa, directed by the Bishop of Carthage. Today, during their worship, pastors often make reference to the ancient Christian martyrs in a compression of historical time, thus bridging the gap between the tortures endured by the first Christians and the vexations faced by converts. The figures of Cyprian, Tertullian and Saint Augustine are regularly called upon, and the theme of persecution and courage becomes a powerful ferment for converts’ identity.

Much later, the Church of Algeria was founded by the creation of the Bishopric of Algiers in 1838. It was then mainly a Catholic Christianity linked to the Algerian colonial project, which it was hoped would expand throughout the country. The Berber regions attracted the greatest attention as they were considered to be less fully Islamised. This idea guided the action of the Archbishop of Algiers, Cardinal Charles de Lavignerie, who in 1868 founded the Missionaries of Africa, commonly known as the White Fathers and Sisters, devoted to the conversion of the Arabs and the peoples of Central Africa. As early as 1840, a Reformed mission followed, to serve soldiers and farmers who were settling.

Today, the Catholic churches in Algeria and Tunisia are not much solicited for religious conversions. Muslims turn more willingly toward the Evangelicals. There can be several reasons for this. In 1957, the year of Tunisian independence, the Catholic Church still possessed around one hundred church buildings and a lot of land. In 1964, the Vatican and the new Bourguiba government signed an agreement called the *Modus Vivendi*, in which the Tunisian government allowed the Catholic Church to remain in the country in exchange for much of the land and religious buildings in its possession. Seven churches were left open for worship. Additionally, the Church was required to officially renounce proselytism and solely direct its religious activities toward the existing Catholic community. The Church was also allowed to maintain educational and health-oriented activities (hospitals) aimed at serving the Tunisian population.

Contrasting with this is the situation of the Protestant churches. Even though the Reformed Church was present in the region from the late nineteenth century (the first Protestant military chaplain, Georges Durmeyer, founded the Reformed Church of Tunis in 1882), no such agreement was passed, maybe for lack of a single interlocutor. As a consequence, the Protestants did not find themselves tied to this formal prohibition. In the 1990s when Evangelical missionary networks came into play alongside the mainstream Protestants, they did not feel constrained in their desire to spread the Christian message, as their theology requires of them.

In both Algeria and Tunisia, the Catholics are identified with the colonial period, whereas Evangelicals are perceived to be participating in a modern call to Jesus, both worldwide and local: worldwide because rhetoric insists on its supposed 'tidal wave' effect (in Latin America, Africa or Asia), and local because it taps into the ancient history of North Africa, particularly the pre-Arab, pre-Muslim, 'original' Berber identity. This Berber discourse is particularly effective in Algeria.

Furthermore, it has to be stressed that aside from the pastors and the formal religious hierarchy, local converts rarely make an issue of their denominational identity. Whether they are Methodists, Pentecostals or some other denomination, most of them just define themselves as 'Christians', at best 'Evangelicals', embraced by the love of Jesus. They build their new religious identity in opposition to Islam and generally remain aloof from the theological differences between Christian denominations.

In Algiers, Monsignor Henri Teissier was the Catholic Archbishop until 2008, when he was succeeded by Ghaleb Bader. The leader of the Eglise Protestante d'Algérie was the American Hugh Johnson from 1972 to 2008; he was succeeded by Mustapha Krireche, who served until 2016, when he in turn was succeeded by Noureddine Benzid. In the Catholic Church in Tunisia, Illarion Antoniazzi succeeded the Palestinian Maroun Lahham, who had been Bishop of Tunis from 2005 and then Archbishop from 2010 to 2012. The main Protestant churches in Tunis are the Reformed Church (led by 8 pastors) and St George's Anglican Church. Their main mission is to provide for Western or African believers. Alongside this worship, during separate services, Tunisian pastors offer worship in the Tunisian dialect for the local converts. In order to be able to remain in the country without trouble, the foreign pastors must not undertake any proselytism toward the Tunisian community and are best advised to have very little contact.

Who are the Christians?

Converts come from diverse sociological categories: young or old; men or women; highly educated, middle-class or socially fragile. People in their late teens or early twenties in Tunisia turn to Christianity with deep mystical passion and find in their new-found love of Jesus a way to affirm their own choices and differences with the social environment. In Algeria and more specifically in Kabylia, Karima Dirèche has shown how the religious choice is also a political one, set in the debate about Berber specificity, distinct from the Arab

identity and therefore from the Muslim one. Their claim to a specific Algerian identity is consequently strengthened.

Moreover, the arrival of Christian Sub-Saharan African migrants, be they students, workers or refugees, has had a great effect on the make-up of Christianity in the region. Having been quiet churches up to the 1990s, today they are loud and joyous places with singing and passionate praising. Churches have had to adapt and call upon African priests and pastors to help lead this movement. Alongside these changes there has been an increase in intentional evangelistic outreach. As a consequence, African Pentecostal pastors (mainly from Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire) convinced some locals to join their churches of different denominations.

Conclusion

Converts usually claim to have been attracted to Christianity either 'spontaneously', through a discussion with a friend, or thanks to radio, TV or the Internet. The myth of endogenous calling is very strong and is deployed with the aim of counteracting accusations of being the toy of outside interests. For example, a Korean missionary is identified as an Arabic language student, a touching Christian song on the radio is heard as a personal call from God, and the mobile recording studio used for encouraging local Christian artists to write Christian songs is interpreted as 'really nice people here to help'. Local discourse makes every effort to minimise the implication that transnational Christian organisations (such as MENA – Ministère Évangélique parmi les Nations Arabophones) are behind the conversion of local people, who have supposedly been caught unawares. However, Christian media are broadcast in the region and are listened to on the radio, watched on TV and followed on the Internet. The existence of small communities of local converts to Christianity, despite their relatively small numbers, has a clear impact on public debates concerning freedom of thought or the way to deal legally with religious diversity.

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