

# Gender and Conversion to Islam

## KARIN VAN NIEUWKERK

The workshop 'Gender and Conversion to Islam' was opened by Abdulkader Tayob (ISIM Chair at the University of Nijmegen) and Willy Jansen (director of the Centre for Women's Studies, University of Nijmegen). The convenor of the workshop, Karin van Nieuwkerk (ISIM) gave an introduction to the theme of the workshop. Yvonne Haddad (Georgetown University) was the first guest speaker. She gave a fascinating outline of the diverse groups active on the Internet and their specific discourses on Islam that are influencing the conversion narratives of female converts.

She also offered a historical background to the discourses behind *da'wa* activities and analysed the present constructions of gender that are produced in the conversion narratives.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons (University of Florida) used her own experiences to contextualize conversion to Islam in America amongst African Americans. She particularly focused on the Nation of Islam (NOI). She traced the attraction of the NOI to black-nationalist sensibilities on the part of the converts, which are a product of their exclusion from mainstream American life. She analysed the gender discourse in the NOI and the subordination of women in the organization. Whereas the traditional strength of black women has been overruled, the Scandinavian case, presented by Anne Sofie Roald (University of Malmö), showed the development of a transcultural Islam in which equal gender opportunity is included. She analysed the developments from the late 1990s onwards as the last stage in the development of a Scandinavian Islam and observed a growing acceptance of cultural diversity in the Muslim community on both a global and local scale. She analysed the creolization of practice and discourse. New converts first tend to defend traditional gender systems. However, as they go through various stages in the conversion process, there is a tendency to incorporate Scandinavian ideals of gender

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**There is a growing interest in the role of converts to Islam in Europe and the United States. However, whereas most converts to Islam appear to be women, this fact has been relatively neglected. The ISIM workshop on 'Gender and Conversion to Islam', held from 16 to 17 May 2003 in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, was aimed to readdress this imbalance by focusing on gender and conversion to Islam in the West. Nine scholars from various countries and different disciplines were invited to compare their research material.**

relations in the Islamic framework. These new Muslims nonetheless diverge from the majority society in embracing concepts of equity rather than equality.

The comparison of online and off-line conversion narratives presented by Karin van Nieuwkerk (ISIM) was aimed at understanding the different discourses that could help to understand why Islam can be attractive for women in the West. Besides the biographical narratives, the ethnic, religious, and gender discourses of new

Muslims were analysed. Not only the content but also the different contexts in which the narratives were produced – that is, fieldwork in the Netherlands versus self-written testimonies on the Internet – were compared. Margot Badran (Georgetown University and ISIM) continued with comparative life stories of a small number of female converts from the Netherlands, England, and South Africa. She particularly focused on the Islamic-feminist discourse produced by female converts. Islamic feminism is defined as feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm and is thus different from notions of gender equity. Islamic feminism derives its understanding from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice for both men and women. In Badran's research it became clear that converts are particularly important in articulating Islamic feminist discourses.

Haifaa Jawad (University of Birmingham) brought forward the Sufi paradigm. Sufism has been and continues to be an important agent for conversion to Islam. She outlined how the Sufis' emphasis on feminine values pertaining to the family and the feminine element in spiritual life has been crucial in attracting Western women to Islam. Stefano Allievi (University of Padua) discussed the shifting significance of the *haram/halal* frontier. He particularly focused on the *hijab*, an issue that is symbolically important both outside the community of converts and inside the associative milieus. He also suggested to de-Islamize the approach of conversion to Islam. The so-called 'Islamic' discourses pertaining to gender that are attractive to converts are very close to familiar European gender discourses of former generations.

Nicole Bourque (University of Glasgow) added an important dimension to the study of conversion by focusing on discourses and practices of Scottish female converts to Islam. Converting to Islam involves the recreation and renegotiation of religious, national, and gender identity. Yet, the creation of a new Muslim identity also entails the embodiment of this new identity and taking up new bodily practices. After discussing the creating and sustaining of a new identity, the last speaker, Marcia Hermansen (Loyola University, Chicago), addressed the transmission of female Muslim identity in the West. She focused on mothers who converted between 1967 and 1980 and analysed how they raised their daughters as Muslims.

Whereas the case studies revealed the differing patterns and discourses in various countries in Europe and the United States, the focus on gender also allowed for many connections to emerge.

## PAPERS PRESENTED

- **Yvonne Haddad:**  
'The Quest for Peace in Submission: White Women Converts' Journey to Islam'
- **Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons:**  
'African-American Islam as an Expression of Religious Faith and Black Nationalist Dreams and Hopes'
- **Anne Sofie Roald:**  
'Towards a Scandinavian Islam? A Study on Scandinavian Converts'
- **Karin van Nieuwkerk:**  
'Gender and Conversion to Islam: A Comparison of On-line and Off-line Conversion Narratives'
- **Margot Badran:**  
'Conversion and Feminism. Comparative Life Stories: South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands'
- **Haifaa Jawad:**  
'Female Conversion to Islam: the Sufi Paradigm'
- **Stefano Allievi:**  
'The Shifting Significance of the *Haram/Halal* Frontier: Narratives (on Hijab and Other Issues) of Male and Female Converts Compared'
- **Nicole Bourque:**  
'How Deborah became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity in Scotland'
- **Marcia Hermansen:**  
'Keeping the Faith: Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West'

The papers presented and discussed at the workshop will be prepared for publication.