FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE: MAY MUSLIMS BECOME CHRISTIANS, AND DO CHRISTIANS HAVE THE FREEDOM TO WELCOME SUCH CONVERTS?

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This research represents a continuation and elaboration on Miller's research for the Christianity and Freedom project, presented in Rome in December of 2013. This article seeks to understand the challenges and context of Christians who are also ex-Muslims in the Holy Land. Attention is paid to the difference between the contexts in the West Bank and Israel, and how the established Christian Churches sometimes safeguard their own precarious sense of security by turning away Muslims who seek to know more about the Christian faith and converts from Islam[2].

1 The Status of the Apostate in the West Bank and Israel

Many of the Christians we spoke with during our fieldwork[3] described their various contributions to society, and how they were motivated by their Christian ethos, and how they had Muslim students as well as Christian ones. This confluence of aspects of Christian presence in the West Bank, along with the centrality of the freedom of religion in relation to the area of the Middle East, led to the question, *Given that you include Muslims in your activities, and that you are a Christian community, what do you do if a Muslim says, I have read your book and I have believed in Jesus and what he taught, and now I would like to become a Christian?*

This question surfaced naturally within the contours of our interviews. At this point, then, I wish to shift our focus from the question of agency/non-agency for Catholic and Orthodox Christians in the West Bank, the topic of our main article, to the issue of religious freedom in Israel and the West Bank (incorporating insights and observations from the larger Arab world, which are indeed relevant).[4] This exploration of religious freedom focuses specifically on the sensitive but important question of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity: freedom for the Christian community to present their message to Muslims and, if that message is embraced, accept that new member into their community; and freedom of the Muslim-background individual to engage in religious conversion, which is to say turning from Islam (or aspects of Islam) and turning to Jesus and his religion, which is, in our context, understood to be Christianity, and his followers, which here means, in some sense of the word, the Church.[5]

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[2] This essay is included as an addendum to Miller and Sumpter, 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Indigenous Christianity in Modern Israel-Palestine with an Emphasis on the West Bank' (Christianity and Freedom Project, 2013). Readers should refer to that article for details regarding background and context. The author felt that it was not possible to abbreviate this material quickly enough to be included for distribution at the Rome conference in December as part of that article. Nor did he feel that it was ideal to simply leave out the material as it touches on some central questions of the freedom of religion of Christians and Muslims in both the West Bank and Israel.

[3] Two weeks in Jerusalem and the West Bank, in the summer of 2013.

[4] The situation of converts from Islam is extremely sensitive. Many of them decline to even identify the country/region they live in identified. Because of this, I am permitted to say that some of the sources used in this section are in Israel-Palestine, but not all of them. The insights of converts from other lands though may be used because the problems that converts in the Arab world face are often very similar, whether they are from Morocco or Iraq, Syria or Yemen.

[5] The nuance is needed because there exist allegations (but to date, no falsifiable evidence) of communities that have turned to the message of Jesus enunciated in the Bible without having left the Islamic society and culture. These alleged movements are called 'insider movements'.

In general these Muslim-background believers are seeking conversion and initiation, but have not been baptized and do not belong to a local gathering of Christians. They do have the interior conviction and experience of having turned away from the old of Islam and to the new of Jesus and the faith he and his followers taught, though. It is perhaps most accurate to consider such individuals (and they are often isolated and alone) as marginal believers. Their theology tends to be evangelical or charismatic, for those are the communities that are most engaged in presenting the Christian message to Muslims, but they do not often belong to the local evangelical congregation, be it Baptist, Assemblies of God, Brethren or something else. In relation to this research, then, these CMB's (Christians from a Muslim background) will not be classified as evangelical Christians, but as their own, marginal and often disconnected group of believers.

In order to better understand the difficulties faced by CMB's we must examine their context in greater detail. In relation to the established churches, their presence is either hidden or (more often) not acknowledged at all. In Israel Muslims have the freedom of religion and conscience to leave Islam for another religion or no religion at all. In the West Bank this is disputed. In Hamas-controlled Gaza this would likely lead to execution, which according to Al Bukhari *jihad*, 149, is the explicit punishment levied by the Prophet for people who leave Islam. There exists unanimity among the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence regarding the matter dating back to the first century AH (Griffel 2008), though there is disagreement regarding the fate of the female woman apostate– some preferring imprisonment until return to Islam over execution– and the question of whether the apostate should be offered a chance to recant or not (An-Na'im 1986). The words of the Prophet on the matter appear unequivocally clear: *man baddala diinahu fa'aqtaluuhu*– who so changes his religion, slay him.[6]

There were differing opinions among the Christians we interviewed in Jerusalem and the West Bank on the matter. I therefore visited a (Muslim) lawyer in Bethlehem who kindly answered my questions (free of charge) about religious conversion: "Can people change religions here? I mean, from Christian to Muslim, or Muslim to Christian?" I asked, trying to make the question non-threatening. His answer, in impeccable classical Arabic which could only be mustered by a jurist or poet was, "Your answer comes in two lines: the Christian may become a Muslim, but the Muslim may not become a Christian." When asked why, he explained that the Palestinian Constitution specified shari'a as a source of law, and this was the opinion of the shari'a on the matter. He specified that the legal bases for this were found in the hadiths of the Prophet. Many of the Christians we interviewed, and ex-Muslim Christians as well, were clearly aware of this. In Palestine this sentence might well be carried out (though not by the PA), as it was in the case of Ahmad al Achwal, though only after he was allegedly tortured in the prisons of the PA,[7] or they might be expelled from their homeland because of their Christian faith. Such individuals are relatively powerless and can therefore make few demands for justice, whereas traditional, orthodox Islamic justice specifies execution for them. Even if the state turns a blind eye to their apostasy, their family may well take matters into their own hands.

2 How Churches and society interact with converts from Islam

2.1 In the West Bank

Returning to that original question– what would the Catholics or Orthodox do if approached by a person who wanted to convert– we received various answers. One was that conversion could indeed take place if done quietly and away from the public eye (though this does not mean the government will legally recognize the validity of said conversion). Other respondents felt that this would sow sectarian discord, endangering the discourse of the one Palestinian people wherein religion is secondary to nationalism. In other words, the presence of the convert implies something that can be found in Christianity but that cannot be found in Islam. This could hurt the feelings of some Muslims and lead to discord. Thus the freedom of the Muslim to leave Islam, and the freedom of the Church to welcome the convert were seen as less valuable than that of sustaining of an image of united Palestinian-ness. In the West Bank, this was the response we most often heard: that the

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[6] Some Islamic scholars, like Ahmed Subhy Mansour, have called into question the validity of the hadith (1998, 2006). For this he was labeled a *kaafir* and was forced to flee from Egypt to the USA.

[7] As related in Weiner 2005: iv, 27-31. In fact, the book was dedicated to him.

potential convert should be turned away (or sent to some other church) because welcoming in converts is too dangerous or risky.

Another response involved welcoming the convert from Islam in secret, so as to prevent sectarian divides and potential violence. While not completely surrendering the freedoms involved this approach represents concealment of those freedoms for the sake of maintaining civil order and security. One Palestinian convert[8] I met told me of her search for a church that would accept her. She had read some Christian material and had become convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. One local priest allowed her to attend church but would not baptize her and eventually tired of her insistence for baptism. Another priest (from a different church) gave her a key for the church building so she could come and pray on her own, but said that he could not baptize her. An old monk I met in Jerusalem (neither Catholic nor Greek Orthodox) told me he could help her. I asked, would you baptize her? He said no, he couldn't. And I asked if his bishop would.[9] He said, no, that his bishop would never do that. But, he said, he knew an old, retired priest who would do it, though the baptism would take place in a bathtub, with me as sponsor, and in secret. (This course of events did not come to pass, though she was eventually baptized.)

With few exceptions the churches in the West Bank do not appear to feel their right to welcome converts from Islam is an important one. Or, if it is important, it is not worth the repercussions that will come along with it. Converts are few and far between, and publically welcoming a single convert could, they seem to think, lead to violence or punishment. Moreover, as some said explicitly, converts from Islam will be killed. Thus one person in the West Bank said, 'We have freedom of religion here, but not like in the West, where a person can change their religion.' Another Christian (not ex-Muslim) in Bethlehem explained that while her (Protestant) organization was devoted to liberation and freedom, they would not accept a person who wanted to convert to Christianity from Islam. Ironically, some representatives of the traditional Churches, who by and large expressed a derogatory view of evangelicals, who are not recognized by the PA or the State of Israel, said that when they get a Muslim asking about Christianity they send them to the evangelicals, who are, it appears, the community that might at least answer a Muslim's questions.

2.2 In Israel

In Israel, the situation is different. Muslims in Israel have the freedom to convert, and Christians in Israel have the freedom to openly incorporate Muslim converts into their churches. I estimate that there are about 300 or so CMB's in Israel, and perhaps a few hundred more in the West Bank. Nonetheless, this rarely happens. In Israel, persecution will not originate from the state, but according to a Catholic priest in Jerusalem (where, independent of Occupation, citizens are under Israeli law) they can welcome Muslim converts, but they will often be persecuted and even killed by their families.

3 The challenges and interests of the Christian convert from Islam

3.1 Belonging and Community

Freedom as a concept is closely tied to interests, for the free person is able to pursue their interests. And so turning to the interests of the CMB's themselves, they are various. One of the key challenges they face is the local church, as intimated above. Because of this, some CMB's do not attend Arab churches, but prefer to attend Hebrew-speaking home congregations made of mostly of Messianic Jews. Messianic Jews, who believe that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed God's messiah, are not generally accepted by the larger Jewish population as genuine Jews. As such, they are liminal or marginal figures. CMB's are too– the Muslim community does not accept them because of their apostasy, the Arab Christians do not accept them because of suspicion, a (perceived) long history of abuse at the hands of Muslims (though this is only spoken of in private), their precarious situation as a tiny minority, and their desire to not harm the 'one people' discourse. One congregation in Israel that I visited was both Arabophone and also openly welcomed CMB's and Muslim enquirers, but this is the exception. The converts who attend a Messianic home church demonstrated creative agency

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[8] Here and throughout some minor details have been changed regarding the converts in order to ensure their security.

[9] Many churches only allow bishops to baptize adult converts.

in relation to belonging and assembly. In relation to freedom, we are speaking of freedom to belong to a community larger than one's self, after one has been expelled from their original family and community. Agency was exercised here on various levels to preserve freedom of assembly, or more precisely, freedom of community or even freedom to belong.

During an interview with a Protestant cleric in Israel, he related how he had baptized a couple of Muslims (and Jews) over the years. After thorough catechesis and making sure they understood what they were doing, and that their motives were sincere, he would baptize them, submit the documents to the State of Israel for change of religion, and then register them not with the local Arab congregation, but an international (and thus largely expat) one in a large city. These people could avoid the rejection of Arab Christians while also legally belonging to a recognized church, and as such they had the legal rights of belonging to that established Church in Israel, which meant that issues related to inheritance and burial and marriage would be handled by Christians, not Muslims. (This option would presumably not exist in the West Bank.) The CMB's who attended an informal home church of mostly Messianic Jews did not have these rights, as their congregation is not recognized by the state, but they did at least have the possibility to belong to a community of people like them– liminal, rejected figures.

The difficulties related to community and belonging may lead one to pose a further question: why do these liminal CMB's not simply form their own churches? The answer is that, in the larger framework of the Arabophone world, they have done just that. Almost all of the Christians in Algeria belong to such communities. Also, a case study exists of how one such group came into being, rather accidentally, though the specific location cannot be disclosed.[10] In most places, though, they do not exist in sufficient numbers to form such churches, and also, one claim of the Christian faith is that it 'breaks down the wall of hostility' (Eph 2:14) between different communities, and so CMB's (many of whom have read the Bible quite rigorously) are justified in seeking to be incorporated into a heterogeneous and variegated community.

3.2 The challenge of employment

If employed by a Muslim then the apostate will likely lose their job, and if their landlord is Muslim, they will likely lose their place of residence. These things are especially true in the West Bank where there is little legal recourse for the apostate. I knew one young man, a convert in the West Bank, who moved to a new city and started to work for a Christian man at his store. When the storeowner learned that he was a convert, he fired him. If he had been born into a Christian family there would have been no problem, but it was simply too dangerous for him to have a convert working for him.

In Israel proper, there is less likelihood that one will be fired for converting. If someone works for a family-owned business it could happen. But if one works for the government or a larger company, then as long as a person continues to do his or her work in a manner that is not disruptive, they should be able to continue with their work.

The reality of discrimination in relation to the freedom to work has made churches in other parts of the Arab world focus on offering training and job skills so that the convert will be able to have start own businesses, though I am not aware of any such initiatives in Israel-Palestine. From the point of view of the few Christians who will relate to converts from Islam, there is a desire to avoid the creation of dependency by giving the convert money or long-term employment. The concern here is two-fold. First, that doing this insincere converts may be attracted, thinking that conversion means employment; and second, that these ministries or missionaries often have very limited funds and simply cannot afford to do this.

3.3 Having the status of polluting individuals

Apostates from Islam have crossed a boundary that, it is thought, endangers the safety and cohesion of the entire community. As such, they are treated as a polluting presence that must be contained, eliminated or purged.[11]

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[10] Chapter 4 of my *Living Among the Breakage*.

[11] The concept of pollution used here is largely influenced by Douglas 1966.

Therefore, a key difficulty faced by ex-Muslims is related to family dynamics. As a Lutheran in Bethlehem explained to me, the question of religion is wrapped up in family identity. There exists the conviction that leaving Islam necessarily means betraying one's family, and alienation from family is widespread among CMB's. Even if Muslim family-members want to continue to relate to a convert, there is often overwhelming social pressure to force/entice the convert to 'return to Islam', or to rid the region of the polluting presence of the apostate. There are various strategies for achieving that, including keeping the convert confined, killing the convert (which is rare, but does happen), forcing the convert to emigrate (more common), or forcing the convert to quietism (also common).

All of these strategies for containing or eliminating the polluting presence of the ex-Muslim involve circumscribing their freedoms, though this is much more pronounced in the West Bank than in Israel. The first strategy involves removing their freedoms of movement and assembly by more or less imprisoning them in their family's home. The second involves the loss of all freedoms. The third, exile, involves robbing someone of the freedom to live in his or her homeland. Ironically, Palestinians often speak of being forced out of their homes as a great injustice, while in fact this is a regular way among Palestinian Muslims of dealing with Christians who converted from Islam. The final form of dealing with pollution is to allow for the person to remain but make sure that their polluting message does not spread. This represents an agreement not to speak about Jesus or the Christian message, and probably an agreement not to attend a local Christian congregation.

The ex-Muslim Christian community in Israel-Palestine only numbers in the hundreds, though it has grown substantially in the last two decades. How are these Christians working to promote their own freedom? The community in Israel-Palestine in itself is so small and young that it is hard to say with any precision how agency is being exercised on more than an individual scale. On a larger scale, when we examine the writings (mostly autobiographies focusing on their religious conversion) of ex-Muslim Christians, including those from countries like Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, it is possible to identify some clear instances of agency in relation to freedom in particular.

4 Agency

In spite of these difficulties, CMB's do appear to be working toward a number of goals, one of which is the subversion of unjust social structures.[12] The unjust structure which is targeted as being inhumane and unjust is nothing other than the Islamic shari'a itself, for it is the shari'a that prohibits them from enjoying their freedom to live in their home, to work where they like, to have their religious conversion acknowledged by the state (as in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, though not in Israel, Turkey or Pakistan), to assemble with fellow Christians in safety, to share their views on religious matters in safety, and so on. One response to all of this is to explain that the shari'a is in fact very diverse and dynamic and there are theories of it that allow for religious conversion and tolerance. Such an objection is pointless though, because that is not their lived experience of shari'a. The shari'a they know is the one lived out in their societies, not the contemporary, more liberal forms found at American and British universities. CMB's in their writings advocate for freedom of religion, including the freedom to leave Islam for another religion or no religion at all, and that such a decision should be acknowledged officially by the state where the state keeps track of such things; freedom of speech, including speech that is critical of Muhammad and the Qur'an and what are often perceived as misogynistic Islamic customs; freedom of assembly, in relation to being able to meet and worship with fellow Christians in safety; freedom in relation to family law, in that converts should be free to raise their children in a Christian household, and that marriage and burial should be handled according to Christian guidelines for the convert and not according to the shari'a.

Returning specifically to Israel-Palestine, though, we do not find a community that has either the will or the security to engage in such practices. In Palestine they experience persecution on multiple levels, and the state has no interest in providing security for them, and may well have an interest in facilitating those who wish to delimit their polluting presence. Many of the Christians in the West Bank are keenly aware that apostates are to be killed, and told us that in no uncertain terms.

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[12] Which, as I argued in my doctoral thesis (Chapter 5), means that we can speak of this as a form of liberation theology. This, however, should not to be confused with the 'Palestinian Liberation theology' of Naim Ateek, who does not endorse the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, as he told me in an interview.

Churches stand little to gain in terms of welcoming in converts from Islam, and have much to lose. Thus, converts or seekers are either turned away, received in secret but without initiation (baptism) and visible incorporation in the Christian community, or referred to the few (mostly evangelical) churches that might interact with them.

In Israel, churches are not endangered to the same extent by welcoming in CMB's. Much depends on who controls the police force in a given region or city though. If the local police force is Arab, then it is almost certainly Muslim (as is the case in Nazareth), and it is unlikely that vandalism of churches will be punished. If the police force is Jewish, I don't know. Also relevant is the visibility of the violence. Mere vandalism will probably not be punished, but burning a church or killing a convert– that violence reaches a level of visibility that might shame the police forces into securing some level of justice for the Christian.

In general, though, demanding justice and safety for CMB's is not considered to be in anyone's interest. And so, of all Christian populations in Israel-Palestine, this is the most powerless and abject one. Their experience reports that Islam is unjust and oppressive, an opinion that would make many people uncomfortable. Their mere existence seems to imply that Islam, properly understood and practiced, is neither peaceful nor tolerant. But exercising their freedom of conscience, if nothing else, they have left Islam for Christianity.

5 Motives for Conversion

In relation to the two-level discourse of certain Christians in the West Bank and Christian education as well, one possible interpretation saw these as ways to ensure a secular if largely Muslim-led society that formed identity largely around nationalism– whether in terms of Palestinianness or Arabness (both words being used often), rather than having two separate communities (one Christian, one Muslim) that center their identities around religion, though they happen to speak the same language and have limited common customs. Conversion from Islam to Christianity, and openly inviting Muslims to consider the real option of conversion, likewise can be interpreted as political strategies, though these activities (conversion and evangelism) should never be simply reduced to political or social motives. People who engage in conversion and evangelism tend to envision Islam in its orthodox and traditional forms, as mentioned above, as irredeemable and ultimately incapable of producing a just society.

In the context of Israel-Palestine, 'authentic Islam' is supposedly constructed on the pattern of life of the Prophet, who was, in the view of most ex-Muslims, a violent, misogynistic, insecure and intolerant individual. Any attempt to construct a just social order upon a religion-politic that understands such an individual to be 'the ideal man' or '*al insaan al kaamil*' is destined *ab initio* to fail. The solution is obvious then: change people's minds, and help people who have changed their minds. This is an identifiable arena in which agency is exercised in Israel-Palestine by limited numbers of Christians. Even the simple act of praying for Muslims to become Christians is an act of agency, at least from the point of view of the Christian who believes that prayer can really affect the world today. In spite of this, praying for the salvation of Muslims is exceedingly rare, including among evangelicals, though there are exceptions (Miller 2010).

While there are studies relating to the question of why Muslims convert to Christianity (Woodberry, Shubin & Marks 2007; Gaudeul 1999), of particular interest here is a study done by South African missiologist Anthony Greenham titled 'A Study of Palestinian Muslim Conversions to Christ.'[13] Greenham interviewed some 22 people in Israel-Palestine, divided evenly between men and women, and found that the 'core conversion factors' were: 1. The person of Jesus Christ (22/22); 2. God's miraculous involvement in their life (16/22); 3. The truth of Jesus' message (16/22) ; 4. The role of other Christian believers (13/22) (172). Political instability and rejection of Islam were each only mentioned by three persons. This means that, at least among Greenham's converts, conversion was primarily driven by turning to Jesus and his message and only secondarily by turning away from Islam, its Prophet and its politic. The ultimate selling point of the Christian faith appears to be, quite definitely, the person of Jesus Christ. This finding coincides with conversations and interviews I have had with CMB's both form Israel-Palestine and elsewhere. The centrality of the personality

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[13] Greenham *St Francis Magazine* 6 no 1 (February 2010) p.116-175.
http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/pdf/2010/116-175SFMFEB2010.pdf

and teaching of Jesus does not, however, make this a solitary and private journey, as is seen in the fact that 'the role of other believers' was mentioned by over half of Greenham's converts. Converts I know had similar experiences. The young lady from the Galilee who had an outgoing and virtuous Christian co-worker who answered her questions, the European missionary who provided a Bible in Arabic to the young seeker from the West Bank, the Arab guesthouse operator who continually prayed for and with the young student in Haifa, these are other examples.

Greenham's findings imply that we should not see conversion from Islam to Christianity as primarily a political discourse of criticism directed at Islam, but rather as a claim to have found something new, hope-giving, nourishing and peaceful in Jesus Christ that was not available in Islam. That the shari'a will not allow for this turning from the old to the new to take place in a peaceful and secure manner only later elicits efforts to undermine the shari'a as detailed in §4.

6 Conclusion

In sum, in relation to the freedom of CMB's, the structures of the shari'a and Islamic intolerance are the main limiting factors. Another one, and one that Christians are in a better position to actually address, though, is the fact that churches often reject the seeker or the convert. One believer from the West Bank related how a priest had threatened to call the police on him if he kept on coming to his church. The sense of anomie that Kraft (2013) found in her study of Egyptian and Lebanese converts likewise applies to converts in Israel-Palestine. The activity of converting compromises the relationships that previously existed, and so new relationships need to be formed to replace those and to provide a medium wherein socialization and identity-formation (as a Christian) can take place. Converts often *feel* a great sense of internal emotional and spiritual liberation/freedom in discarding Islam for Christ. The challenge to the churches in Israel-Palestine is to be a home where that new identity can flourish, and where, if possible, other challenges facing the convert, from physical danger to the loss of a job, can be addressed as well. To date, most churches, including evangelical ones, have not been up to this dangerous task.

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