

Kiwis on the straight path: Muslim conversion in NZ

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Muslims are everywhere these days, at least that's the impression you might get from media reports which regularly seem to focus on the latest scandal, perceived injustice or apparently unreasonable demands of Muslim migrants, sparking calls from 'mainstream' Kiwi's to 'fit in, or go back home'. The stereotypical image of Muslims portrayed in these articles reflects a common perception that the majority hail from rigidly segregated, paternalistic, Middle Eastern countries whose burqa-clad women are treated as second class citizens. Add to this the ongoing rhetoric of the war against terror where, at least in the eyes of the general public, terrorists (read Muslim) are depicted as 'hating those who love freedom' and who are hell bent on imposing their own norms and behaviours onto others. Of course there may be some truth in this perception, but the vast majority of Muslims here are content to just get on with their lives and maintain cordial relations with their fellow New Zealanders.

Kiwis in general are tolerant, embracing cultural, religious and ethnic diversity; but there will always be a small minority that enjoy harassing those who stand out or look different. I'm sure most Muslim women wearing hijab will have experienced minor forms of abuse; it's even happened to me and my family near a mosque, when a car full of rowdy hooligans shouted obscenities and told us to "go back where you came from", except in rather more colourful language! The only problem is that this is where we come from. Some of us are fifth or sixth generation New Zealanders, of white European or Maori descent. Yes, we may be perceived as a bit of an oddity but we are not alone, as Islam is currently acknowledged as the fastest growing religion in the world. This was already the case before the September 11 attacks and statistics suggest that interest in Islam has grown considerably since that time.

So what is the appeal in Islam? Why do some Pakeha and Maori apparently reject those 'typical Kiwi values' in favour of this seemingly militant, misogynistic and intolerant religion? Christmas hams, award winning NZ wines, a day out at the races, beer with your mates after the rugby and don't forget lotto on Saturday night. Isn't that what being a good kiwi is all about? Why would anyone willingly choose to restrict their eating options, fast for a whole month every year, adhere to a different dress code, suffer possible rejection from friends and family and enjoy spending time in contemplation and prayer? Well the fact is that this is a reality for a growing number of Muslim converts in this country. Some are overtly Muslim while others prefer to keep their beliefs more private, even in some cases from friends and family. In this article I want to briefly consider the phenomenon of religious conversion and then share some of the results of a study undertaken prior to the

terrorist attacks in 2001 with a group of thirty one Kiwi Muslim converts.

A significant body of literature exists, detailing sociological, psychological and theological influences on conversion, the majority embedded within a Christian framework although many of the underlying principles can be equally applied to non-Christian conversion. Various paradigms have been proposed which consider it as rapidation of growth, unification of the divided self, as a change of direction, an act of surrender or programmed conversions in the context of revivalist meetings¹. The entire conversion process is complex and multifactorial with various characteristics assuming relevance for different individuals. Three types of conversion can be identified². At one end of the scale is an increasing religious awareness from a position of disbelief or uncertainty to one of religious devotion. There may also be enhanced devotion within one religious tradition (intra-faith) or a complete change from one religion to another (inter-faith). A general trend towards enhanced spirituality and renewal of religious commitment around the world can be seen within many traditions. Many writers have attempted to define the phenomenon as either a gradual or sudden process during which a divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy self, becomes unified, consciously right, superior and happy³. The term conversion is frequently used to refer to "an abrupt change toward an enthusiastic religious attitude, with ... highly emotional features being conspicuously evident"⁴. Thouless describes intellectual, moral and social

1 (Oates, 1978) Conversion as rapidation of growth is based on Starbuck's view that conversion hastens normal development during adolescence (p.153-4), unification of a divided self (p.153-4), change of direction (p.158), act of surrender (p.160) and programmed conversion (p.163).

2 (Kose, 1996a)

3 (James, 1978)

4 (Oates, 1978)

conversions⁵ and this definition probably fits best into an Islamic framework. From the findings of this study conversion to Islam is neither abrupt nor highly emotional; on the contrary it is usually the result of a gradual change in beliefs and attitudes, often over several years. The highly emotional features sometimes associated with Christian revivalist meetings are conspicuously absent. Most converts comment that there was a gradual shift in attitudes with many believing they were already Muslim in their souls and there is often a deep sense of returning to Islam associated with feelings of inner peace. From an Islamic perspective the term reversion is preferred, based on the concept of fitrah, which considers the innate nature of all beings to be Muslim, in the purest definition of the term. Those who submit to the will of God, find peace. Within a secular framework this could be equated with conforming to the laws of nature. Haeri explains that:

All human beings in fact are born in submission to natural reality and therefore in Islam. It is the society and the parents who often corrupt that innate Islamic state. There are people all over the world who discover Islam in themselves during some period of their lives, and not as a result of having come across the conventional religion of Islam. Rather it is an echo of something far deeper and precreational, which is centred in the hearts of all human beings.⁶

It is the pacification of the soul, the nafs al-mutma'inna mentioned in the Qur'an (89:27-30) which becomes the means to salvation⁷. This concept corresponds with the experiences of many converts, particularly the feeling of always being

Muslim at heart and the strong sense of returning to a previous state of inner peace and feeling 'at home' once they accepted Islam.

There are numerous religious and spiritualist movements, so the question of 'why select Islam?' remains. New Zealand is small and geographically isolated and although we are enthusiastic travellers, few Kiwis have had little direct knowledge or experience of Islam. Some of the motivational factors that prompted these people to convert, how they first developed an interest in Islam and some of their experiences since becoming Muslim were examined as part of the study. Thirty one participants, twenty males and eleven females were surveyed, with the time since conversion ranging from less than one year to fifty years. The average age at conversion was thirty two, with females tending to be younger than males. These findings have been supported by similar studies overseas⁸ and provide a point of contrast with Christianity. Starbuck in his classic and frequently cited book considered "conversion to be a distinctively adolescent phenomenon, belonging almost exclusively to the years between 10 and 25".⁹ He suggested that if it had not occurred before the age of twenty the chances were small that it would ever be experienced. Adolescence is often considered the most susceptible time for Christian conversion as the psychological and social traumas experienced by young people of this age prompts them to question and explore their own worldview and belief systems. These variables seem to be less important in an Islamic context, which is often the end point of a long, gradual and carefully reasoned process.

⁵ (Thouless, 1978)

⁶ (Haeri, 1997)

⁷ (Ernst, 1997)

⁸(Khan, 1978);(Kose, 1996b);(Poston, 1991)

⁹ (Starbuck, 1908)

Throughout this article I have inevitably drawn comparisons between Islam and Christianity, mainly because the majority of Muslim converts (70% in this study) had either been practicing Christians or had significant exposure to this tradition. The remainder had no specified religion or described themselves as “free thinkers”. Only twelve people described their previous religious experience as exclusively Christian, the rest had obviously been searching for other spiritual meaning in their lives with several people ‘sampling’ a range of alternative religions. The non-Christian religion most commonly explored was Buddhism, followed by various Hindu inspired philosophies including the Hare Krishna movement.

Popular perceptions of Islam as a patriarchal religion are often reinforced by media images. Poston who conducted a similar study in the United States suggests “the stereotypical image of the Muslim male emphasises his virility and masculinity, and this may well be a source of appeal to Western men”.¹⁰ He discusses issues of veiling and seclusion of women, their exclusion from official positions of leadership and the fact that their attendance is not required at mosque functions, to justify his claim. Certainly research conducted amongst Muslim converts confirms men are attracted to Islam¹¹, which has often been contrasted with the appeal of Christianity to women. While some of these factors may help explain the attraction for men, it is inappropriate to confuse cultural practices with misunderstood religious expectations. Women’s rights and issues of equality were important considerations for most New Zealand women converts and several made a point of emphasising the difference between the practices of some Muslims and

Islam, the religion. One young female convert observed that the image of a Muslim woman embodies the essence of femininity and maternal ideals that are often perceived as lacking in Western female role models. While females may appear submissive to outsiders, this would certainly not fit their own perception as confident, articulate, independent women who frequently occupy positions of authority within the community. Although sixty-four percent of the NZ sample group was male, the majority of recent conversions have been women. A similar trend has been reported in both the US and Britain, where women converts are purported to significantly outnumber men.¹² In general however, Islam appears to have a universal appeal regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Marriage is frequently cited as a motivational factor and it is a commonly held assumption that most men only convert in order to marry a Muslim woman. While this is certainly true for some individuals, among the study group only thirty percent were introduced to Islam through contact with a potential spouse and for many of these people the eventual decision to become Muslim was motivated more by theological than legal concerns. The single most important factor which stimulated an interest in the religion was meeting Muslims, often neighbours, fellow students, a future partner or through travel. Reading or study was also influential but often this was also sparked by personal contacts.

An open question was used to discover what particular aspects of Islam had the most appeal, resulting in over seventy responses. These were broadly arranged into four distinct categories: practical aspects/guidance for life, theological,

¹⁰ (Poston, 1991)

¹¹ (Kose, 1996a);(Poston, 1991);(Khan, 1978)

¹² (Koya, 2000)

sociological and moral/ethical considerations. The number in each group was totalled and calculated to give percentage significance for the category. Thirty-five percent reflected practical issues and guidance, including simplicity and common sense, obligations and discipline such as adherence to the fundamental pillars of Islam i.e. prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and charity. Sociological aspects, including fellowship, women's rights, the importance of family values, abhorrence of chemical addictions, intoxicants, gambling and other social considerations were influential in twenty-five percent of responses, with theological arguments viewing Islamic teachings as an answer to their questions being equally important. Many of these can be seen as a counterpoint to Christian teachings, particularly the emphasis on strict monotheism and non-acceptance of the Trinity, rejection of the concept of original sin and acknowledgement that the Prophet Muhammad was only a man. Many liked the idea of Jesus as a Muslim prophet as this helped to link their earlier Christian beliefs with Islam and allowed them to retain many of the elements of Christianity that they were happy with. Several people felt Islam actually reinforced their original devotion to the core fundamentals of Christianity which they believed had been eroded over the centuries. Moral and ethical factors, including respect, justice, fairness, strength, truth, morals and responsibility were also influential.

As a logical extension to the previous question, participants were asked to list their main reasons for finally deciding to embrace Islam. Theological reasons were cited by over seventy percent of respondents. These included the emphasis on strict monotheism, submission to a creator, guidance found in the Qur'an and Sunnah and some elements of predestination. Several people indicated

that there was no choice because they were already Muslim in their souls. Sociological motives mentioned by the remaining thirty percent included marriage requirements, providing a solution to life crises and societal problems, social values and a sense of community. All answers related to the individual's perception and none reflected external or politically inspired motives.

On a personal basis the impact of conversion can be mixed as relationships with friends and family are frequently placed under strain. Interfamilial tensions, particularly if family members are themselves religious, can encompass feelings of betrayal through rejection of long-held beliefs. Although females were more likely to receive encouragement and support in their decision than males, one recurring theme mentioned by young female converts highlights the concerns parents may have about their daughters marrying Muslim immigrants. Popular movies and books fuel fears that impressionable young wives will be 'forced' to wear Islamic clothing or move overseas to live in a 'repressive' Muslim society, however sensationalising these issues can add to the difficulties new Muslims face. Islamic norms of behaviour are also often in direct conflict with Kiwi culture effectively alienating converts from their previous social contacts. There is a tendency to socially ostracise those who choose not to drink, but most people anticipated this and felt the 'sacrifice' was worth it. On a positive note it is encouraging to learn that the majority of people did not report any issues of discrimination although half the group experienced some intolerance at times, particularly women wearing scarves. The general impression was that this was directed at Muslims in general rather than converts in particular. Some women felt wearing hijab can act as a barrier which stops people interacting with them and the consensus opinion was that most

prejudice came from other women. It is certainly evident from even a brief review of media interviews that issues of veiling and headscarves dominate any discussion with or about Muslim women.

I have briefly described some of the most common challenges facing converts in their relationships with fellow New Zealanders, but what about their relationship with other Muslims, the majority of whom are migrants? Most participants in the study love the cultural diversity and feel welcomed, however a small number have difficulty integrating and can feel isolated, mainly because of language barriers and confusion between cultural practices and religious requirements. Overall the response to the question of whether they had ever had any regrets since becoming Muslim was a resounding, No! Four people did express some reservations relating to social difficulties, the attitudes of some Muslims and the image of Islam in the West, but none to Islam itself.

As we have seen the appeal of Islam as a universal faith is gradually taking root in New Zealand as the steady stream of kiwi conversions indicates. Typically converts are around the age of thirty and tend to be better educated than the general population. They usually have a Christian background but have often studied other religions, sometimes at university. The decision to convert takes time; it is well considered and usually extensively researched. Islam has a strong intellectual appeal that fits well into a Judeo-Christian framework. The strong monotheism is important for many people who may be uncomfortable with Christian concepts of the Trinity and divinity of Jesus. The idea that Muhammad, the Messenger of God was a human, like earlier prophets and messengers, is appealing to many. Similarly, simplicity of belief and practice, with no

intermediary between the worshipper and God is often emphasised. For some people social guidance is central, the importance of family values, women's rights, egalitarian fellowship and rejection of all forms of intoxicants and gambling provide a well-structured and clearly defined pattern for life. An increasing number of New Zealanders are discovering that Islam provides a spiritually fulfilling and socially satisfying option. With converts found in all areas of society it may now be time to acknowledge that conventional Muslim stereotypes no longer apply.

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