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### Citation

Allievi, S. (2002). *Isim Newsletter*, 11(1), 1-26. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16817>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
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The visibility of converts to Islam in the media has recently undergone an exponential increase – mainly in the United States. There was the case of Jonny Walker, labelled 'Jonny the Taliban', born into the wasp upper class, who was apprehended as *mujahid* in Afghanistan. Then there was Jos Padilla, the would-be terrorist who was seized in an airport loaded with explosives. Finally, John Allen Williams came on the scene. Of Jamaican ancestry, born in Louisiana, this former American soldier in the Gulf War became the serial killer that terrorized Washington in October 2002 by killing 13 people in cold blood. These three tales have nothing in common, apart from the fact that all three protagonists are converts to Islam.

# Converts and the Making of European Islam

STEFANO ALLIEVI



PHOTO: STR. © REUTERS 2000

Former British  
pop star Cat  
Stevens, now  
Yusuf Islam.

These three tales of converts to Islam also have in common that they all deeply affected the American imagery and brought about a reawakening, or even the discovery of an interest in the Islam of converts, which until recently – with few exceptions – was mainly considered to be a phenomenon limited to the black Muslims movement of Elijah Muhammad and nowadays of Louis Farrakhan (of whom John Allen had been a follower), and consequently almost thought of as an 'ethnic' oddity.

In Europe, attention paid to conversion to Islam has begun to gather momentum in the last years and has opened up to research into the role of some Sufi groups, trajectories of the feminine conversions, and the role of converts in Muslim associations. Nev-

ertheless, literature on the matter remains rather scarce, especially when compared to that of the so-called 'new religious movements', some of which have a smaller membership compared to converts to Islam.

The highest number of conversions to Islam is brought about by a cause that has little to do with the search for spirituality, namely marriage (following the Islamic rules, a non-Muslim male cannot marry a Muslim woman without converting). Such a reason for conversion may contradict the principle of freedom of religion and of conscience as it developed in the West, but is normally lived without special problems by people who, often, are hardly religious, and are consequently little disturbed by this choice. These conversions have generally no great impact on the lives of the individuals and of the couples, and often not even on that of their offspring. As a matter of fact, conversion under these circumstances is a means to reach another aim (marriage), not an end in itself.

However, other trajectories to conversion, which, like the previous ones, can be called 'relational', even if far less numerous, are the ones that have the greatest impact: on the lives of the individuals, but also on that of the Islamic communities in Europe. In the list can be included the 'discovery' of Islam through meeting Muslim believers, while as a tourist or on a business trip to Muslim countries, or through meeting an immigrant in Europe and eventually falling in love with him or her (it is the case of several mixed couples, even when the conversion is not compulsory, as in the case of a non-Muslim woman marrying a Muslim man).

A different model of conversion is that of the 'rational' conversions. Here we can refer to the intellectual conversions, 'cold' so to speak, which are due to the reading, even by chance, of the Qur'an, for all sorts of reasons and in the most diverse situations: either received as a gift, as happened to one of the most well-known European converts, former pop singer Cat Stevens, who became Yusuf Islam, or because it was found in the prison library. Others became acquainted with Islam through books of Islamic mysticism, notably Sufism, which have attracted a wide Western readership. Other books that

have influenced certain conversions are those of traditionalist authors such as René Guénon, Fritjof Schuon, and Titus Burckhardt, all of whom became Muslims.

Sufism is, however, a specific way to enter Islam, or rather a special facet of it, and leads to embracing Islam through the role of the *turuq*, not often connected to the 'Islam of the mosques'.

For many converts the background of conversion is political, both (even extreme) right and left: Islam, the religion of praxis that does not distinguish by principle between the 'city of men' and the 'city of God' but rather willingly superimposes them, seems to constitute an ideal way to 'spiritualize' a militant commitment that previously was only social or political. It is not merely by chance that we find these converts in the leadership and in the intermediate centres of the Islamic associations in Europe, in the mosques, and in promoting political initiatives such as requests to be recognized by the state. In short, they are closely in touch with the Islam of the immigrants.

## Functions

A distinction can be made between the actual and potential functions of converts – with the aim of trying to understand the dynamic and evolutionary aspect of the process. One can speak of a function of cultural mediation, of linguistic translation, and of interpretation, in a broad cognitive sense. In practice, the following acquire great importance: the contribution in terms of social know-how; the pooling of a network of relationships (including the political, institutional, and religious ones), which already exist and which can be developed further; the peculiar intellectual function that is shown through the capacity to mediate and to produce culture both within the community (books and reviews, but also testimonies and sermons) and, chiefly, outside of it through the contribution made to the formation of the image of Islam (conferences, public relations, and on a larger scale the simple explanation of personal behaviours like wearing the *hijab*: as one of our interviewees stated, 'I am a walking symbol').

In a more general sense, the converts constitute (and are perceived as) a crucial ele-

ment in at least three fields. They offer *legitimation* in the eyes of society: a function fulfilled especially by the intellectuals who have converted. They are present also in the academic milieu, for instance among the orientalist, and they contribute to producing the image of Islam and its contents. The converts also provide *confirmation* to the benefit of the migrant community, especially those with a weaker sense of identity: their *shahada*, when enunciated in an Islamic centre, or in publications, are a 'proof' of the superiority of Islam and a confirmation of the rightness of their faith for those immigrants who are often less integrated and less well-educated. Finally, they comprise an element of *guarantee*: a convert is a citizen – and a militant or an Islamic leader as a citizen can not be expelled, or surrendered, to this or that native Islamic country.

If that is the present situation in several European countries, in spite of significant variations of weight and importance between the one and the other (which ought to be analysed individually), the potential situation, the possible evolution of the function of the converts, is not the same. Indeed, some of the present functions served by the converts are transitory: for instance, they fill a gap in terms of leadership and cultural elaboration because of the lack of immigrants capable of doing so. However, they could be substituted by a new leadership, which may come from abroad but will more likely be produced within the second and third generations of immigrants, something that is currently happening in several European countries.

Nevertheless, the lasting importance of the converts must be emphasized, mainly in the institutional interface and in the 'power games', which are linked to the national or regional representation of Islam, particularly with respect to the host society and its institutions: a role that the passage of generation among the Muslim communities will not be able to cancel in the short term, even though one might hypothesize that the overestimation of their role in cultural and organizational leadership that is now attributed to the converts – very visible in some countries, namely those where immigration

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by Stefano Allievi

is a most recent phenomenon – might be proportionally devalorized in the future.

However, starting from the second generation, we witness a sort of 'normalization' of the relationships and of the social separation of functions between converts and immigrants. It is not without reason that second-generation intellectuals compete with converts, but it is especially noteworthy that they also cooperate and mutually support each other in the battles over cultural hegemony fought against the first-generation leaders, or those coming from the Muslim countries.

The converts, in their 'dual position', appear to be able not only to serve a function in the relationship between Islam and the public space, but also in the transition between the Islam of the fathers and that of the sons, in unison with the second generation. In a way, the converts foreshadow a tendency of the second-generation Muslims towards an Islam that is no longer an inherited tradition, brought from the native country, but a conscious choice.

To sum up, the converts are in the ideal position to perform a function in the passage from Islam *in* Europe to Islam *of* Europe, and then in the creation of a *European* Islam. They are, after all, nothing more than Europeans of Islamic adherence, who cannot be qualified as immigrants or as bearers of a foreign culture. Consequently, they are also producers of an Islamic culture with a European inclination. They are in fact at the same time the product and the mediators of the meeting between Islam and Europe. A Europe that is also, without knowing it, the European part of the Islamic *umma*. To conclude, they globally perform a function that promises to have important consequences for the very self-definition of the European Islam, and perhaps also of the Islam 'of origin'.

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