

Searching for Heaven in the Real World. A sociological discussion of conversion in the Arab World.

Kathryn Ann Kraft

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In 2009 I conducted interviews with Christian leaders in Syria and Jordan on the topic of family legislation in minority communities. In one of the churches, while waiting for admission to the head's office, I had a chat with the male secretary. His views on gender, particularly gender relations, were similar to that of Muslims in the two countries; in short: KKK (Kinder, Küche, 'Kirche') for women, and economic support of the family for men.

While reading Kathryn Ann Kraft's book on Arab Muslims converting to Christianity my experiences back in 2009 come to my mind. Kraft's description of Arab Muslims turning Christians resembles Westerner's (mostly with a Christian background) conversion process to Islam. The new faith community's alternate acceptance and non-acceptance of the new converts has similar traits in the two convert groups. The ambivalent attitude towards the converts from the community they are born into also has similarities. It is however important to be aware of that to leave Islam while living in a Muslim country has more serious implications for the individual than in western countries, where the individual might be outlawed by his or her family and society, but where violence due to conversion is nearly non-existent. Although Kraft explicitly states, that Muslims embracing Christianity, who in Muslim society are regarded as apostates, are rarely killed, they are nevertheless frequently threatened (p. 86). Moreover, it must be noted that the threats are not from the state, but from the families who feel their honor are at stake.

Kraft's study builds on an extensive fieldwork with participant observation, interviews, and on-line contact. She gives quite detailed methodological information with adequate reflections. One important point is that she masters the Arabic language. Her interviews were conducted in Egypt and Lebanon with Arab men and women from various

Arab countries who had converted from Islam to Christianity. She captures the conversion mystery of searching for the absolute fulfillment by discussing the various aspects in the conversion experience in terms of the converts' aspiring for the perfect 'unity', 'community', 'believer' and 'identity'. She also speaks of the converts' disappointment when their dream of the new religion does not fit the reality. However, she avoids dealing with the conversion process in stages in which disappointment plays a huge role.

In her discussion she tells of how Christian missionaries, particularly non-Arabs in the Arab world, tend to merge Biblical and Koranic narratives in their missionary activities. Thus, Jesus' Prophethood is, for instance, stressed, rather than his divine nature. It is also interesting to see how cultural sensitive the missionaries are as they encourage the out of Islam converts to Christianity not to take a tough break with their Muslim families, but to keep good relations with their kin.

Kraft looks into the new Christians' relation both to the community they are born into and to the Christian community they join after conversion. Similarly as in studies on converts to Islam in Western countries, the conversion tends to be rejoiced by the new community. Muslims in the West and Christians in the Arab world are minorities. Thus minority members will look at a person's conversion from majority society's religion into a religion of a minority community as a triumph and a confirmation of their 'truth' over the majority hegemonic 'truth'. This is particular true for Muslims in Western countries due to the stigmatization of Muslims, but also to a certain extent true for Christians in the Arab world, due to the political setting where religious affiliations plays an important part. At the same time, as Kraft has observed, converts to Christianity in the Middle East are often suspected of being spies, a conspiracy thinking which often exist in undemocratic societies. Whatever the case, converts experience themselves often to be figure heads, a show-off, with no real place in the new community. At the same time the link to the community they are born into

weakens and the converts therefore tend to end up in between two faith cultures. Kraft discusses these problems of community belonging and points at that at least one of her interviewee turned back to the Islamic faith.

There are however some aspects in Kraft's discussion which could have been developed further. I believe that it is in her discussion of intertextuality, which I have referred to above, that Kraft's impressive study has its main weakness. Kraft emphasizes the two Islamic concepts; 'tawhid' (unity; e.g the unity of God) and 'umma' (community), and sees them as crucial for how converts out of Islam adapt themselves to the new faith. It would be fruitful to know the converts' Islamic commitment before their conversion in order to be able to judge the validity of Kraft's discussion in this matter. Kraft's evidence of the link between the two concepts and the convert's new religiosity is that these have saturated the whole Arab-Muslim world. This might to a great extent be true, at least the last fifty years with the growth of Islamism in the Arab world, but if the persons have had no religious Islamic experiences it is doubtful how profound their involvement in 'tawhid' and 'umma' are. Moreover, the stress on the two theological concepts in the converts' new religious experience indicates a 'theologization' of Muslim experiences in general, e.g., that 'all' Muslims are religious instead of regarding the phenomenon as it is, a result of a collectivistic culture's search for legitimizing the belonging to a community.

Despite this concern, Kraft's study deserves to be read. Her study is thoroughly written and it is obvious that she has done a profound research on a unique material. A study of Muslims converting to Christianity in the Middle East is extremely sensitive, due to religious tensions, which, to a great extent, are due to that majority Muslim politics favor Muslim affiliation. This might be particular true for Lebanon where the political balance between the religious groups builds on the number of members within the groups (although the numbers are not known). Kraft's own devotion to Christianity gave her access to the field

and she has managed to balance her own devotion to the subject with academic considerations. Kraft's theoretical discussions are in addition well developed and advanced. The book adds to the academic field of conversion, despite that Kraft has not dwelled too much into earlier conversion research. The reason for this might be that she to a greater extent looks into the convert experience after conversion instead of looking mainly at 'why' Muslims convert to Christianity. Her study also contributes to social science studies of individual and collective identity building and theories on community relations.

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