İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi, Sayı 1, 1997, 65-89

# The Assessment of Various Factors in the Spread of Islam During the Medieval Period

Ali Köse*

This study attempts to consider conversion to Islam during the medieval period in a comprehensive way. One aspect of the paper is to evaluate several theories explaining conversions, especially those by Western secular social scientists. The earliest theory, which has since been replaced, considers force as the cause of conversions. The newer theories mainly focus on the influence of social and economic factors such as avoiding the *jizyah*, a poll tax. However, it is pointed out that these theories are not comprehensive enough since historical events or the circumstances of particular times or localities were also involved or were the main factors. The theories of the Western social scientists also overlook religious, spiritual, and moral factors. For example, today, through a number of writings, it is known that a theological encounter between Christians and Muslims began by the eighth century and that doctrinal matters such as the nature of Jesus were being discussed, were of concern to people at that time, and were involved in conversions. Thus, this paper concludes that credit should also be given to the attractiveness of Islamic beliefs and practices and to the missionary work carried out by Muslims, mainly Sūfīs, when explaining the expansion of Islam in its early years.

The first and the oldest explanation of the spread of Islam, widely called the "sword theory", is a simplistic notion that Islam was spread by the sword. This explanation continued up until the end of the nineteenth century. Then, at the turn of the century beginning with Arnold's *The Preaching of Islam* (1913) this view began to change. Since that time to re-explain the spread of Islam, mainly Western scholars came up with new theories about conversion to Islam in the medieval period. They suggested that factors such as convenience; improved social, economic or professional status; relief from the *jizyah*, a poll-tax; and the

* Ali Köse, Ph.D., is a research fellow at the Centre for Islamic Studies (TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi), İstanbul. The author would like to thank Karen M. Wolfe for helping with the English.

enjoyment of greater mobility in trade were the incentives for conversions. Thus, conversion was reduced to a social phenomenon. In fact, many overlooked such factors as the failure of Christians themselves to live up to their faith, the failures of the clergy and the patriarchs of the church, and the harsh conditions under which the people of Byzantium lived. It is the aim of this paper to explore a greater number of factors and to propose a more comprehensive hypothesis that emphasizes religious, spiritual, and moral factors along with the social and economic factors in order to explain the conversions to Islam in the medieval period.

In fact, conversion to Islam is not a topic that has been explored very much. Muslim literature is singularly poor in records of conversions especially in its early years. In addition, the historians of Islam have not emphasized the topic, probably considering the experience of conversion to be unnecessary to report. Also, recorded conversion stories do not include the original religion of converts because the prior religion of the convert is not important in Islam.[1] In the Ottoman city of Bursa, for example, we find no records in the official archives of conversions until the middle of the fifteenth century except for some special cases related to obtaining official papers for the pilgrimage to Mecca. In 1632 there is one recorded conversion. While official records show that there were only 20 conversions between 1550 and 1599, unofficial records of private foundations illustrate that only in 1573 around 50 people converted to Islam.[2]

Despite the lack of data, various theories, as mentioned above, explaining the spread of Islam have been put forward. The first, the sword theory, suggests that non-Muslims changed their religion simply because they were forced to when conquered. This theory dates from the time of the Crusades, but it reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. A second theory emphasizes the interaction of immigrant Muslims with the native peoples. A third one is the so-called patronage theory which asserts that people converted to Islam in order to receive particular favors from the ruling class such as relief from taxes or promotion in the bureaucracy. A fourth theory sees Islam as a socially liberating force. It emphasizes that Islam liberated the lower classes of society. This theory is especially accepted as an explanation for the conversions in India given its Hindu caste system, and, to a lesser extent, it is accepted in order to explain conversions in the former Byzantine and Sassanid lands. According to this theory, after receiving Islam's message of social equality preached especially by Sūfī shaykhs, the oppressed castes (or classes) converted *en masse*.[3]

---

1 R. W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1990, 123, pp. 123-133.

2 O. Çetin, *Sicillere Göre Bursa'da İhtida Hareketleri ve Sosyal Sonuçları (1472-1909)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1994, 33.

3 For a wider treatment of the theories cited see R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1706*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, 113-7.

In fact, these theories do not present a comprehensive understanding of conversion, and they can be refuted given the facts of geography. The taking up Islam by peoples of different cultures and ethnicity in various lands indicates that Islam is rich enough to offer different people different things. Thus, various factors leading to the expansion of Islam based on the times, localities, and historical circumstances are likely. For example, social conditions may have played a major role in the conversions of many Andulusians in the ninth century. However, the people of Anatolia in the thirteenth century seem to have been mainly attracted due to Sūfism. This is a reminder that it is also important to include religious and spiritual reasons as a part of the search for any major patterns in the spread of Islam.

Also, when considering individual people, it is clear that when they encounter a new idea, philosophy, religion, or even a new technology, they do not suddenly decide to discard what they already have and replace it with what is new. If they feel sympathy towards the new alternative, they include it to their stock of knowledge. Then, over time they come to identify the old with the new. If their interest persists, and if they feel content with the new alternative, they may, still later, replace the old with the new. Recent studies on conversion have revealed that individuals' stocks of knowledge or their cognitive styles are also important in their accepting and validating new propositions.[4] Moreover, in the process of converting, people generally have a mixture of reasons, both mundane and spiritual, that concern them. They must also believe that they will not lose too much by converting. We witness such conversions today as in the accounts of contemporary native British converts to Islam who, before deciding to convert, thought about the place of Jesus and other prophets in Islam and concluded that they would not be losing much by accepting Islam.[5]

In the rest of this paper I will be considering and evaluating the variety of factors that seem involved in the spread of the Islamic state and in the increasing numbers of non-Muslims converting to Islam.

### The Rapid Spread of the Islamic State and the Waning of the Older Powers in the Area

It is clear that Islam includes the idea of a mission[6] to spread itself while binding its adherents to exercise tolerance towards those who are not yet Muslims as they desire and work for their conversion. One of the earliest verses commands the Prophet to "Arise and Warn" (74:1). Before receiving this command, the

4 A. L. Greil, "Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements", *Sociological Analysis*, 2, (1977), 120, pp. 115-125.

5 A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, Kegan Paul, London 1996, 56.

6 Max Müller, in a lecture delivered in December 1873, divided the six major religions of the world into "missionary" and "non-missionary." According to his classification Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam fall under the head of missionary while Judaism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism are considered non-missionary. This paradigm has been a literary commonplace since then (cited by T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, Constable, London 1913, 1).

Prophet was only preaching in private among his family and intimate friends. Another revelation ordered the Prophet to "invite to the way of God with wisdom and beautiful preaching" (16:125). However, it was not until the conversion of ʿUmar[7] that the message of Islam was made public. Then, when the idol-worshippers of Mecca continued to reject the new message, the Prophet decided, in 622, to migrate to Madina with a small community of his followers. Once there the number of Muslims multiplied rapidly. Then, in 630 at the head of an army of 10,000 the Prophet, both as a commander and a messenger like the prophet Moses, captured Mecca meeting almost no resistance, and the Meccans accepted Islam.

After the death of the Prophet, in the seventh and eighth centuries, the early caliphs extended the Islamic state to include all of the Arabian peninsula. They also expanded into the Christian world when they conquered provinces of the Byzantine Empire in Syria, the Holy Land, and Egypt. Then the Umayyad caliphs (661-750) pushed the boundaries of the Islamic world beyond the Indus River in the East, and they brought the Maghrib and most of Iberia under Muslim control in the West. This swift expansion was attributed to force by some historians, but Arnold[8] observes that the missionary side of Islam should not be overlooked: "The sword came to be looked upon by Christian historians as the instrument of Muslim propaganda, and in the light of the success attributed to it the evidences of the genuine missionary activity of Islam were obscured."

Other historians have explained the rapid spread of Islam in its early years as being due to the fact that the Byzantine and Sassanid empires had both decayed and collapsed long before the Arab warriors reached the lands (the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, Iran, and North Africa) they now controlled. In Iran, the people were tired of the warfare (604-628) between the Byzantine and Sassanid emperors prior to the Arab conquest. In Egypt, the Byzantine government was making heavy financial demands in order to support its shrinking treasury. Also, in Anatolia the processes that led to the weakening of Christianity in the areas where Islam initially spread were taking place.[9]

During the wars between the imperial armies and Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa the local populations remained mostly passive and were left undisturbed. Thus, for the locals it was only a matter of changing loyalty from one power to another. They often saw Muslims as political liberators[10] and did not feel they were losing their independence. In fact, between the indigenous

7 ʿUmar, who was to become the second caliph after the Prophet, was the fortieth convert to Islam. His conversion presents an example of a complete and sudden religious experience and is similar to that of St. Paul's.

8 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 46.

9 S. Vryonis, "Religious Change and Continuity in the Balkans and Anatolia from the Fourteenth through the Sixteenth Century", in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, (ed) S. Vryonis, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1975, 133, pp. 127-140.

10 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 54-5.

people and Byzantium conflict over religion had arisen. The question raised by Anawati[11] after describing the situation in Syria helps us understand the conflict: "The Nestorians, condemned at Ephesus in 431, had gone underground or taken refuge in Persia. The Monophysites, condemned at Chalcedon in 451, viewed Constantinople and the Greeks who sided with her as enemies of their faith... Why should they not welcome as ally an invader of their own race who appeared to promise them their religious freedom?" The Copts in Egypt were also in a theological dispute with Byzantium. The Coptic Church had claimed to represent the truth and considered other churches heretical. Therefore, the Copts were subjected to pressure to accept the Chalcedonian faith of Byzantium while some of their churches were taken away from them.[12] Anawati also presents an account by Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) complaining of the cruelty of the Romans prior to the Muslim conquests which again demonstrates why people would have welcomed the conquerors as liberators: "The God of vengeance, seeing the wickedness of the Romans who, wherever they ruled, cruelly plundered our churches and monasteries and condemned us without mercy, brought from the south the Sons of Ishmael to deliver us from them... It was no mean gain for us to be delivered of the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, violence, and jealousy, and to find ourselves at peace."[13] A letter by a Nestorian bishop, addressed to a friend of his, again testifies to the welcome given to the Muslims by the conquered peoples: "These Tayites (i.e. Arabs), to whom God has accorded domination in our days, have also become our masters; yet they do protect our faith, respect our priests and our saints, and make donations to our churches and our convents."[14] While describing the violent internal disorder in Byzantine Asia Minor on the eve of the Turkish conquest Vryonis writes: "The state and church continually subjected Christian heretics to pressure... There were systematic attempts to enforce Chalcedonian Christianity on the various non-conformists of Anatolia, attempts that the government backed with persecution. Such measures were applied at various times to Jews, Montanists, Paulicians, and Monophysites."[15]

Arnold[16] points out that the Eastern Church at the time was in a degraded moral and spiritual condition while Trimingham[17] suggests, regarding the Islamization of the Berbers in North Africa, that "the North African Church died rather than was eliminated by Islam since it had never rooted itself in the life of the

---

11 G. C. Anawati, "Factors and Effects of Arabization and Islamization in Medieval Egypt and Syria", in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, (ed) S. Vryonis, 20, pp. 17-41.

12 G. C. Anawati, "The Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 238, pp. 237-251.

13 G. C. Anawati, "Factors and Effects of Arabization", 25.

14 Assemani, Bibl. Orient, III, 2, p. XCVI; cited by M. Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam*, MWH London Publishers, London 1979, 175.

15 S. Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1971, 67.

16 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 70.

17 J. S. Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa*, Oxford University Press, London 1962, 17.

country." Brett[18] shares the same view: "On the eve of Islamic conquest North African Christianity was demoralized and disunited."

As for Spain and India, in Spain the Muslim conquerors were regarded as the liberators of the people from the much-despised Visigothic regime while in India after the eleventh century circumstances were not very different from those in the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. Indian cultural traditions regarding both Hinduism and Buddhism had begun to decline. Although the spread of Islam between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries put political and cultural pressure on Indians, Islam was left on its own as a missionary religion since Indian missionaries had ceased spreading the Buddhist message in foreign lands, and Hindus had never been eager to convert people.[19]

Islam, no doubt, also did offer people liberation in terms of social equality, but this fact should not overshadow the main fact that it offered people a theology, that is, Islamic monotheism as opposed to Hindu polytheism. Although Islam did spread in India where the caste system existed, it also spread in other lands where there was no caste system, or in lands that offered more social equality than India. Eaton[20] rightly questions the theory of social liberation in the case of India and explains that if the theory were valid, the conversions would logically have mostly come about in areas where the Brahmanic social order was most deeply entrenched such as in the Aryavarta region, but what happened was quite the reverse.

In the Mediterranean area from the sixteenth century on a great number of Greek Orthodox followers living in the Ionian and Aegean islands under Venetian control converted to Islam since they were at odds with the Venetian administrators and ready to welcome the Turkish conquerors and their religion. The taxes and polls imposed by the Venetians were so heavy that many Dalmatians migrated to the Ottoman territories. In fact, it was mostly the women who wanted to escape and settle down in the Ottoman territories.[21] Thus, as the Islamic state expanded, a variety of circumstances existed that would have led individuals to convert to Islam and find a life in Islam more attractive.

### The Migration of Muslim Populations to the New Lands and the Establishment of an Islamic Ambience

Levtzion[22] attracts our attention to the important role played by nomads whether Arabs, Berbers, or Somalis in spreading Islam. Because they were not just warriors but were also migrants and settlers in the new Islamic lands, they

18 M. Brett, "The Spread of Islam in Egypt and North Africa", in *Islam and Modernisation*, (ed) M. Brett, Frank Cass, London 1973, 1-2, pp. 1-12.

19 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, 90, 98, 132.

20 R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 119.

21 A. Vanzan, "In Search of Another Identity: Female Muslim-Christian Conversions in the Mediterranean World", *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 3 (1996), 327, pp. 327-333.

22 N. Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 291-2, pp. 289-311.

helped bring about the Islamization of the locals due to their social and cultural contact with them. Similarly, a recent study[23] that examines the official records in the province of the old Ottoman capital Bursa has revealed that when Bursa was conquered, a huge population of Turks, with some Iranians among them, moved to city. So the city soon became a city where people of various races and religions lived together with the Turks or Muslims who, no doubt, were in a superior position. Ibn Bibi gives an account of how the Anatolian city of Sinop was Islamized after being conquered by the Saljuq Sultan Izzaddin Kaykavus I. Initially, *qāḍis* (Muslim judges) and *imāms* (the prayer leaders) were sent while soldiers were accommodated in castles. In fact, the officials came and lived there with their families. As for the local population, those who opposed the Turks and those who were willing to leave the city were sent to the nearby city of Samsun. Then, new settlers from other Anatolian cities were encouraged to migrate there. Upon seeing that all of these measures still did not achieve the desired results, the Sultan saw that it was necessary to gain economic power. Therefore, he issued a writ ordering the well-off merchants from the neighboring cities to be sent to Sinop. Finally, within a few years the city turned into a Turkish or Muslim city.[24]

In the newly conquered areas, Muslims first established administrative, religious, and economic institutions. With the spread of mosques, *madrasahs* (traditional schools of higher learning), *zāwiyahs* (places of religious retreat), and *caravanserais* (inns), the new Muslim lands gained Islamic patterns of life. Muslim traders would also arrive and practice their Islamic faith. As small Muslim communities formed, the *qāḍis* arrived to settle disputes among those in the community while to meet the intellectual needs of the community theologians were brought in. Then, the arrival of Sūfis would lead to the penetration of Islam into the existing culture.[25] The Christians in the conquered lands viewed the Muslims as a social community they should cooperate with. Thus, Muslims and Christians participated in each other's holidays and in visitations to shrines according to local customs. Even today one can find the shrines of Christian saints being visited by local Muslims in Anatolia just as Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī's (d. 1273) shrine is visited by many non-Muslims. It can be assumed, though, that where the conquerors had extensive contact with the indigenous populations, as in Kūfa and Basra, conversions occurred in greater numbers.

Another example of the transformation process in newly conquered lands much like the Sinop example and the general pattern mentioned above is what happened in Anatolia. There the process occurred in three stages. First, Turkish officials moved to the newly conquered lands with their families to exercise authority, and Muslim populations from neighboring lands were encouraged to migrate there.

23 O. Çetin, *Sicillere Göre Bursa'da İhtida Hareketleri ve Sosyal Sonuçları (1472-1909)*, 22-3.

24 el-Hüseyin Ibn Bibi, *el-Evāmiru'l Alāiyye fi'l-Umūri'l-Alāiyye*, published by N. Lugan and A. S. Erzi, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1957, 216-7; O. Çetin, *Selçuklu Müesseseleri ve Anadolu'da İslamiyet'in Yayılışı*, Marifet, İstanbul 1981, 101.

25 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 125.

Second, to accelerate the process of Islamization new institutions such as mosques, *madrasah*s, Turkish baths, pious foundations or *waqf*s and charity organizations, as well as health centers were established. Third, merchants were encouraged to migrate there.[26] The institutions such as the pious foundations established by the Muslims absorbed the crippled and disoriented Christians and Islamized them. In addition, the missionary outlook of the dervish orders that located there aided the work of the Muslim institutions.[27] By the late thirteenth century, the majority of the once Christian population in Anatolia had become integrated into Muslim society. This was inevitable as, in Bentley's words, "the Christian clergy had lost its confidence and much of its discipline, and the ecclesiastical structure of Anatolia had fallen into ruin."[28]

A slight variation of this pattern occurred in some of the other new lands. Sometimes the conquerors first settled in garrison towns probably intending to remain physically segregated from the subject people, but over time they began to see themselves as settlers and through such means as intermarriage began interacting. Then, a gradual process of acculturation would begin.[29] This sort of contact must have come about in the Fustat province of Egypt during the governorship of ʿAbd al-ʿAziz b. Marwān (685-7) since the number of Arab forces dispersed in the area was nearly 40,000. Another place in Egypt in which conversions took root was Alexandria (the center of naval operations) where there was close cooperation between the Arabs and Egyptians.[30] Finally, it is clear that in some of the new lands acculturation was extensive. For instance, when Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī died (1273) a great number of non-Muslims as well as Muslims attended his funeral.

In brief, Muslims entered communities at the highest levels and extended their influence downwards to the masses. To put it in Christian terms, they carried out a "high church" strategy which targets legislative, judicial, economic, and other bureaucratic structures, as against a "low church" approach which targets the lower level of the subjects, i.e. the masses.[31] This meant that an Islamic atmosphere was created through which Islam could gradually penetrate.[32] This afforded the agents of *daʿwāh* (mission) an enormous advantage. The Islamized institutions helped to create both the desired ambience, as Levtzion calls it, and they protected those persons who worked to enhance it. This ambience gave Muslims a psychological advantage which allowed them to speak from a position of power.

26 O. Çetin, *Selçuklu Müesseseleri ve Anadolu'da İslamiyet'in Yayılışı*, 102.

27 S. Vryonis, "The Experience of Christians under Seljuk and Ottoman Domination, Eleventh to Sixteenth Century", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 202, pp. 185-216.

28 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 123.

29 M. I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, 37-45.

30 M. Shaban, "Conversion to Early Islam", in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed) N. Levtzion, Holmes and Meier, London 1979, 29, pp. 24-29.

31 For the high church/low church distinction see J. H. Kane, *A Global View of Christian Missions*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1971.

32 G. E. Von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: A History 600-1258*, trans. K. Watson, Allen and Unwin, London 1970, 53.

Also, Muslims due, for example, to their literacy and wealth were considered to be superior. Thus, conversion to the religion of the Muslims became culturally positive. Also, since the policy-making institutions within the culture had been Islamized, acceptance of Islam came to represent not a deviation from but rather conformity to societal norms. In other words, the reconstruction of institutions in previously non-Muslim lands gave way to social change which precipitated conversion to Islam, or in the terminology Levtzion uses, an Islamic ambience, created by a combination of the newly established Islamic institutions and the immigrating Muslim populations, gave rise to conversions.[33] One other example, which Eaton[34] discusses, is that of the *qāḍis* located in the new lands. They not only settled cases among Muslims but also handled cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, non-Muslims were drawn into the legal and social orbit of Islam.

However, it often took a long time for the establishment of an Islamic ambience to take effect. The transformation of large societies often took several centuries. It has been estimated that only around 18 percent of Iraq was Muslim in 800 while in 882 the number of Muslims was around 50 percent. Bulliet[35] assumed that between 791 and 888 up to 34 percent of the population of Iraq, Syria, and even Egypt became Muslim, and he called this period the "bandwagon process" period. The culture of Islam that was once alien to the local populations came to seem quite natural to them as new generations were educated according to Islamic traditions.[36] In fact, an Islamic world can only be said to have emerged by the third and fourth Islamic centuries (ninth and tenth centuries) in the Near East and the Maghrib.

At the individual level, also, conversion is not an "all or nothing" process. It is rather an evolving process. Perhaps initially one's acceptance of the new religion involves large gaps in what is known about the religion. Filling in these gaps only occurs over time. This is even valid today related to conversion to Islam or other religions. Cox studying Eastern religious movements in America, wrote: "People who claimed to be immersed in Hindu practices often seemed amazingly unfamiliar with the Hindu scriptures. Enthusiastic Zen disciples sometimes seemed to know very little about Buddhist philosophy."[37] There seem to be stages in the conversion process. A ninth century Christian *kalām* or theology book (Summa Theologiae) in Palestine states that many Arabophone Christians accepted the first part of the *shahādah* (declaration of faith: "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God"), but at the same time they did not clearly embrace the

33 N. Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamisation", in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed) N. Levtzion, 9ff, pp. 1-23.

34 R. M. Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India", in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, (ed) R. C. Martin, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1985, 116, pp. 106-123,

35 R. W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1979, 80-91.

36 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 13.

37 H. Cox, *Turning East*, Allen Lane, London 1979, 17.

Prophet Muhammad. Also, although they saw Jesus as only a messenger, they were still called waverers *(mudhabdhabin)*, or unitarians.[38] Their particular way of viewing things suggests that they had reached a "way station" on the road to complete conversion to Islam. Thus, it can be assumed that in the first centuries changes, except in institutions, were limited or not substantial while only later did Islam begin to gain momentum and conversions multiply.

**Social and Personal Motives Leading to Conversion**

In this view of conversion religion is treated as a social reality rather than as a religious or universal reality. Proponents of this view are, therefore, mainly Western-trained secular social scientists treating religion as a reflection of the social order. For them conversion is reduced to a social behavior which ignores any religious considerations. Thus, conversions to Islam in the early centuries of the Islamic state are viewed as matters of social behavior since accepting Islam involved a social distinction rather than religious belief, especially when people were not fully aware of what they were taking up. For proponents of this view, Bulliet,[39] for example, it was by around the fourth Islamic century that converting to Islam gradually became a matter of knowledge and belief while in the earlier period economic and social motives dominated.

According to this view, the conquered peoples, who witnessed the defeat of Byzantium and the Sassanids and became the subjects of conquerors of another faith, faced the fact that their own religions were the religions of the defeated while the religion of their conquerors had undeniable prestige and advantage. It is assumed that in this situation the conquerors gained a sense of superiority while the new subjects faced defeat and subjugation which would have debilitated their self-confidence.[40] Five ways in which Islam held a socially superior position are suggested: (1) Islam became the religion of the state meaning it would be supported and favored in every way; (2) Muslim military forces were victorious giving Islam superiority; (3) Islam was now the religion of first class citizens while other religions, although tolerated, were the religions of second class citizens; (4) Muslims could freely build religious institutions such as mosques and *madrasahs;* and (5) economic institutions like *waqf*s that also had spiritual functions could be established.

Thus, in order to enter the favored religious group and gain certain advantages converting to Islam was necessary. An example is provided by Anawati[41] who outlines the case of a non-Muslim living in Egypt (in the Middle Ages) who by converting could gain full integration into Muslim society and the advantages of belonging to the ruling, majority group. These included shedding the restrictions

38 S. H. Griffith, "The First Christian Summa Theologiae in Arabic: Christian Kalam in Ninth-Century Palestine", in *Conversion and Continuity,* (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 22, pp. 15-31,

39 R. W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period,* 41.

40 N. Levtzion, "Conversion Under Muslim Domination: A Comparative Study", in *Religious Change and Cultural Domination,* (ed) D. L. Lorenzen, El Colegio De Mexico, Mexico 1981, 34, pp. 19-38

41 G. C. Anawati, "The Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages", 239.

concerning the *dhimmis* (protected people), the ability to gain high social standing and even the opportunity to obtain the highest office of the state, and gaining access to a life outside of the neighborhoods in which the *dhimmis* lived, and marriage to a Muslim woman.

Clearly being *dhimmi* and having to pay the jizyah meant having a separate and clearly subordinate social status which in turn could create a feeling of inferiority in non-Muslims, and the policy of the state involved setting up the *dhimmi* social group more or less in all of the conquered lands. Coope gives an example of this social arrangement from ninth century Umayyad Cordoba: "If a Muslim and a *dhimmi* meet in a narrow street, the *dhimmi* must step aside and make room for the Muslim."[42] Thus, in this view, non-Muslims would have considered converting so as to enjoy full social and legal status.

There were also cases in which some non-Muslims verbally converted to Islam in order to gain access to high positions. The story of Ibn Antonian of Cordoba, who was still a Christian when he joined government service, provides a vivid example. When Ibn Antonian was later offered the office of chief administrator, he had no choice but to convert since the Sultan, Muhammad I, was unwilling to appoint a *dhimmi* to such a high position. His conversion was widely discussed. Some believed that he was Muslim, but some did not and assumed that he died professing Christianity.[43] On the other hand, some institutions did offer good opportunities to non-Muslims. One worth noting is the Ottoman institution of *devshirme* in which Christian children, while still adhering to their own religion, were educated and socialized as Muslims in order to rise high in the Turkish military service.[44] In the early years of this institution, families were unwilling to lose their children, but once the opportunities made available were understood, families voluntarily handed their children over to the *devshirme* system.

Another incentive for converting that might also be considered a form of social behavior is that of converting due to racial or ethnic similarity. In the conquered lands there were many non-Muslim Arab settlers. For the Arabs it may have been easier to associate with fellow conquerors and accept their religion since they were closer to the Muslim conquerors than they were to the Latin Christians. Ethnic, racial, or even geographical factors, then, might have provided an impetus for Christians in conquered lands to unite with fellow Arabs as they still do today. For example, today we see that black people sometimes unite under a racial banner with Muslims or certain Christians, or we see Middle Eastern Muslims who feel more at ease with Nigerian Christians than with European Christians. Beyond that as Levtzion[45] rightly emphasizes, Eastern Christians were not

42 J. A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Cordoba", *Journal of World History*, 1, (1993), 51.

43 J. A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion...", 64-5.

44 H. Inalcik, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", *Studia Islamica*, 2 (1954), 112, pp. 103-129.

45 N. Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities", 299.

respected by their Latin co-religionists during the medieval period. Greek Orthodoxy was seen as causing a schism necessary to end and the monophysite creed as total heresy. One may wonder, though, just how much of an explanation racial and ethnic similarities provide since religious conflicts among particular racial and ethnic groups can also be witnessed.

Another social behavior that can be examined, which may have provided a pattern of conversion, is that of intermarriage, mainly between Muslim men and *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the book or those the Qur'ān cites as having received revealed scriptures) women. Arnold (p. 181) reports that in the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century "it had become very common for Christian parents to give their daughters to Muhammadans, and for Christian women to make no objection to such unions." Also, many verbal conversions might have taken place for the sake of marriage as we witness today.[46] No doubt, some of these verbal or half-hearted conversions at the time of marriage later turn into heartfelt conversions.

Another social incentive leading to conversion might have been the need or desire by some non-Muslims to conform to certain Muslim practices. Coope[47] brings a source from tenth century Umayyad Spain to our attention. She reports that Muslim workers at the palace refused to work with uncircumcised men (who refused circumcision due to their cultural loyalty) or to work with those who did not respect Muslim food restrictions. However, these same workers were less upset by non-Muslims' consumption of alcohol at the palace. This indicates not only that Muslims were less interested in a person's religion than in observing their Islamic practices, but also that non-Muslims might have faced certain pressures related to participating in some Islamic observances.

Although social and personal incentives, no doubt, led some people to convert, there must have been many people who converted to Islam out of conviction and heartfelt belief given Islam's remarkable respect for Christianity and the tolerant treatment of Christians by the caliphs.[48] In addition, social factors are often described in extremely general terms making them rather questionable. As for converting in order to maintain one's status or wealth, many modern studies of conversion to new religious movements in the West suggest that neither are of great concern. For instance, Lofland and Stark's[49] study of conversion revealed that converts often seek to escape their upper or middle-class values and actually welcome a lower living standard and a different social status. Finally, the social incentives theory may also illustrate that non-Muslims at the time were not strongly committed to their previous faiths.

---

46 A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, 114-9.

47 J. A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion...", 56.

48 A. Kreutz, "Indigenous Christian Communities in Medieval Islamic Lands: A Report", *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8 (1987), 29, pp. 28-30.

49 J. Lofland and R. Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Behaviour", *American Sociological Review*, 30 (1965), 862, pp. 862-874.

**Economic Incentives and Avoiding the Jizyah** (Poll-tax)

Some historians focus on economic incentives, along with social motivations, especially the desire to escape the jizyah levied on non-Muslims and the desire to gain certain trade advantages in order to explain conversion to Islam. Some studies have observed that the earliest converts were largely from the upper class or from the most marginal among the lower class, i.e. the oppressed groups. They point out that members of the upper class sought to maintain or improve their status and wealth under the new circumstances while the members of the lower class hoped to gain new opportunities.[50] Levtzion[51] also accepts the idea that "among the lower classes people might have converted to Islam in order to evade the jizyah" but doubts the significance of such conversions in the over-all process of Islamization. Bentley,[52] in the case of Egypt, seems to be convinced that the Umayyads' differential rates of taxation favoring Muslims eroded the status of the Christian elites, socially and economically, and the Coptic church encouraging conversions.

Focussing on economic circumstances, namely taxes levied on non-Muslim subjects in the conquered lands, Dennett[53] maintains that at the time of the first conquests many tribes akin to the conquerors professed Islam at once and were from the outset exempt from the jizyah. He also points out that there is very little evidence of conversion during the Umayyad period in Egypt at the time that exemption from the jizyah constituted an economic motive for giving up one's religion. An important point to be taken into account when dealing with the jizyah issue, as Arnold (p. 59) spells out, is that "this jizyah was too moderate to constitute a burden... it released them [non-Muslims] from the compulsory military service that was incumbent on their Muslim fellow-subjects." Also, women, children, and the poor were exempt. Finally, the amount involved was not that great. The annual amount of the jizyah in the time of the Prophet was equal to the expenses of an average family for ten days.[54] As for the wealthy converts, they would have had to pay *zakāt* (legal alms) at the minimum rate of 2.5% of their total wealth levied annually instead of the jizyah just like every other Muslim subject.

Another point is that in the eighth century the Umayyad government was not actively encouraging conversion because with the rise in the numbers of those claiming exemption from the jizyah the treasury suffered. Thus, by the end of the Umayyad Age in 750, the majority of the population of Syria, Egypt, and Iraq

50 R. W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam", 131; V. L. Menage, "The Islamisation of Anatolia", in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed) N. Levtzion, pp. 52-67; P. Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature", in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed) N. Levtzion, pp. 68-99.

51 N. Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities", 298.

52 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 93.

53 C. D. Dennett, *Conversion and Poll-tax in Early Islam*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1950, 32.

54 M. Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam*, 149.

were still Christian.[55] These facts do seem to invalidate the jizyah theory of conversion. If it had been that important, a preponderance of people would have converted within a century of the conquests. By the second half of the twentieth century, then, the view that people in the conquered lands converted in order to escape the jizyah began to change. Dennett,[56] for example, maintained that mass conversions cannot be explained by the desire to escape the jizyah. Lapidus' work[57] suggested that Egyptian Copts converted en masse in the late ninth century, 300 years after Egypt was conquered. Likewise, Brett[58] presented the idea that mass conversions in Egypt and North Africa came about in the ninth century. Bulliet[59] treated conversions in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq up to the eleventh century as due to social factors. Levtzion[60] held to the view that conversions did not necessarily occur en masse which indicates that they had nothing to do with the jizyah.

Although the jizyah theory of conversions can be questioned, there are cases where other economic incentives may be involved in some conversions. Following the conquest of Egypt, the Umayyad government employed the Coptic Church and Coptic notables in collecting the agricultural tax revenues. However, in later years when the Umayyad government was more fully in control of the administration of Egypt (and also of the Iraqi Sawād), it wanted to benefit from the wealth of Egypt by changing the status of the Egyptian land from treaty (*sulhan*) land, as it was in the period from 715 to 740, to non-treaty (*'anwatan*) land, which would make Egypt *kharāj* (a tax on property owned by non-Muslims) land instead of *'ushr* (a tithe on property owned by Muslims) land. In this way, the rate of taxation would double.[61] In fact, the government did decide to redesignate the land and assess farmers themselves, which also involved replacing the Copt personnel with Muslims. Thus, unlike the situation in the earlier period, where a native Egyptian, often from the church, set the district's rate of assessment and collected the taxes from the local population in order to remit them to the Umayyad government, now farmers became tenants on state land, and they were directly liable to the central Umayyad government. As for the affect on the Coptic church and on the local elites, they lost their economic position and their influence over the peasant population. In his analysis of this situation, Frantz-Murphy[62] concludes that "the attack, if you will, on the Coptic church was economic, not religious or cultural." It does seem likely that circumstances like these would have paved the way for new conversions.

55 J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam*, Routledge and K. Paul, London 1985/1965, 81.
56 C. D. Dennett, *Conversion and Poll-tax in Early Islam*, 1950.
57 M. I. Lapidus, "The Conversion of Egypt to Islam", *Israel Oriental Studies*, Vol. II (1972), pp. 248-262.
58 M. Brett, "The Spread of Islam in Egypt and North Africa", 1973.
59 R. W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 1979.
60 N. Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization", 1979.
61 A. Noth, "Some Remarks on the 'Nationalization' of Conquered Lands at the Time of the Umayyads", in *Land and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, (ed) T. Khalidi, American University of Beirut, Beirut 1984, 223-4, pp. 223-228.
62 G. Frantz-Murphy, "Conversion in Early Islamic Egypt: The Economic Factor", in *Documents de l'Islam Medieval: Nouvelles Perspectives de Recherche*, (ed) Y. Ragib, Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale, Cairo 1991, 17.

Another case in which economic incentives enter in is related to the trade guilds or the *Āhilik* associations. Up to the sixteenth century, they had a strong base in Anatolia. According to their traditions, only Muslims were accepted as members. Given their importance in society, non-Muslims wishing to enhance their business prospects may have wanted to convert to Islam in order to join these associations. Although there are not many records that illustrate this type of conversion, one can, with some reservation, guess that this economic situation led to conversions.[63]

One might wonder about whether conversion for economic or other social reasons might be considered unacceptable in Islam. In fact, they were seen as acceptable. The Prophet himself practiced *muallafa-i ḳulūb* (giving zakåt or alms to those whose hearts have recently been reconciled to Islam) and a passage from the Qur'ān (9:60) advises it. For example, the Prophet gave Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb, Safwān b. Umayya, Suhayl b. Amr and many others a hundred camels to win their hearts to Islam.[64] Converts were even paid cash by Arab commanders.[65] However, this is not to say that there were no conversions besides those purely out of economic concerns. Several examples, though, where economic concerns seem primary include one reported by Abu'l-Farac. A wealthy Armenian, Philartos, at the time of Sultan Malik Shah (1072-1092), converted in the presence of the Sultan and was circumcised in 1086 so as not to lose his lands, castles, and prestige. Then, it was said that he died professing Christianity.[66] Hardy[67] reports that two censuses in the nineteenth century in the northwestern provinces of India recorded that many landholding families declared their acceptance of Islam in order to escape imprisonment for non-payment of revenue to Delhi or to save their land in the villages. However, we have to consider their numbers in the population to that of the masses. In fact, mass conversions of peasants did occur such as those among peasants on the periphery of Muslim power, and this type of explanation of conversion does not seem to help us understand them.

We must also consider those who refused to change their allegiance despite advantageous opportunities, incentives, or psychological pressure. Imagine a Christian living in Egypt at the time of the Caliph ʿUmar II (717-720) when he declared all converts to be exempt from jizyah as long as they continued to pay the land tax. A committed Christian would not have been tempted by this decree. However, a shaky or lapsed Christian might have. It seems likely that Christians who were strongly attached to their religion or who did not think that Islam would suit them for one reason or another would remain loyal to their faith no matter what economic or social incentives there were. In fact, the existence of Christian

63 Çetin's (1994, p. 64) study revealed that there were converts from 30 different job groups in the city of Bursa during the 15th and 16th century, and concluded that these figures may provide clues about economic incentives.

64 Ibn Hisham, *al-Sīratu'n-Nabawiyyah*, ed. M. Saqqâ, et al, Second edition, Cairo 1955, II, 492-3)

65 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 95.

66 G. Abu'l-Farac, *Abûl Farac Tarihi*, trans. Ö. R. Doğrul, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1945, I, 329-333.

67 P. Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia", 80-1.

and Zoroastrian communities in Muslim lands to this day illustrate that those who were committed continued in their religion. In short, the jizyah as well as other economic disadvantages were not heavy enough to ruin non-Muslims. Thus, the prospect of avoiding particular economic difficulties may have appealed mainly to those who were not firmly committed to their previous beliefs or to those who were at odds with existing institutions such as the church.

**Merchants and Commercial Networks**

One of the vehicles for the propagation of Islam in pre-modern times that did not depend on military expansion was based on the contacts made by merchants engaging in long distance trade who introduced their faith to others and aided a process of voluntary conversion in east and west Africa, India, and south-east Asia. Ahmad, in his study of conversion to Islam in twelfth century India comments that: "Islam was brought every year from abroad by merchants who arrived late in the spring and returned before winter to their cities like Kashgar and Yargand."[68] Rizvi,[69] in the case of India again, describes how Arab merchants settled in the prosperous state of Gujarât and converted their local Hindu servants to Islam. In these circumstances, it was not the Muslim traders' theological convictions which won converts but rather their conformity to a particular Islamic life-style. Watt[70] points out that the sincerity of Muslim businessmen impressed the non-Muslims with whom they had business relations. Muslim merchants also had extensive dealings with local rulers who, in return for their conversion, obtained such benefits as entering into the political and commercial life of the larger world and recognition from the Islamic state. During the time of the Umayyad caliphs, there was trade with the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East while during the ʿAbbâsid dynasty commercial relationships were extended to the Baltic Sea in the north, to the Indian Ocean in the south, and to the South China Sea in the east.[71]

It is understandable that through voluntary association with Muslim merchants, native people, especially ruling elites, would gain political and economic benefits, but what the merchants presented to them in terms of religious beliefs and moral principles also had to make sense to them. Some scholars emphasize the fact that the elites in Africa did not fully abandon their inherited tradition which indicates that their acceptance of Islam did not involve a real transformation. However, this fact does not prove that their conversion was not real. Islam does not force people to entirely give up their old traditions. Doing so is only needed when any of them conflict with basic beliefs and principles.

---

68 A. Ahmad, "Conversion to Islam in the Valley of Kashmir", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 23, (1979), 8, pp. 3-18.

69 S. A. Rizvi, "Islamization in the Indian Subcontinent", in *Religious Change and Cultural Domination*, (ed) D. N. Lorenzen, 40, 58 pp. 39-60.

70 W. M. Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1972, 16.

71 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 90.

### Sūfī Activities

By the end of the tenth century, Sūfism had become a distinct way of religious life and thought, and it spread throughout the Islamic lands in the eleventh century. Its centers were Baghdad, Khurasan, and Anatolia. It took various forms either standing fairly closely to Sunni Islam or taking on more extreme forms. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a number of important Sūfī orders were founded in Asia, Egypt, and North Africa. Among them the Qādiriyyah, Yasawiyyah, and Qalandariyyah Sūfis can be cited. One widely held opinion is that it was the Sūfis who most reached out to the masses and provided the links such as between Hindus and Muslims in medieval India.[72] From Mawlānā (d. 1273) in Anatolia to Jalāl al-Din Tabrizī (d. 1244-5) and Shah Jalāl Mujarrad (d. 1346) in Bengal, Sūfī saints attracted the masses due to their humanity and reputation for having spiritual power.

Sūfis also carried the main burden of spreading Islam outside the Muslim world into northern and eastern Africa, India, and Indonesia. They also played an important role in promoting conversions to Islam in the lands under Muslim rule, especially to those conquered after the tenth century such as Anatolia, India, and the Sudan.[73] They established contacts with non-Muslims by emphasizing common religious experiences such as the belief in healing, visiting shrines, and seeking the help of saints. They also encouraged rural and tribal people to embrace Islam by adapting moral and religious instruction already existing in a locality to Islamic purposes. Sūfis with their mysticism and doctrinal flexibility played a prominent role in attracting communities to Islam by giving Islam an emotional and spiritual tradition. In India, for instance, the Sūfis helped to increase social interaction between Muslims and Hindus. They also furnished Islam's philosophical point of contact with Hinduism. Through such contacts and the simplicity and broad humanism of Sūfis Islam won converts.[74] Sūfism also has many parallels to Christian pietism which emphasizes the internal dimension of existence while largely ignoring the external conditions of life on earth. In addition, Sūfis concentrated on individuals and were able to spread Islam while not always protected by the Muslim political and judicial system or the Islamic ambience. One widely discussed matter is the abandonment of Islam by the Berber nomads in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries before they finally accepted Islam. One interpretation of their final acceptance is that Sūfis complemented the conversions of earlier centuries brought about by military conquests.[75] Elsewhere, as in Indonesia, although Islam appealed to the Javanese ruling elites from the thirteenth century

72 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 270ff; A. Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964, 83ff; R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1978, 155.

73 N. Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamisation", 17.

74 P. Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of...", 88-9.

75 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 94.

onwards due to contact with the Muslim Gujarāti merchants, it only became popular among the Javanese people after the fifteenth century due to Sūfism.[76]

The contribution that Sūfism made to the spread of Islam can best be exemplified by the case of Anatolia. From the thirteenth century through the fifteenth century there was an influx into Anatolia of holy men fleeing from the Mongol invasion in central Asia and seeking refuge under the protection of the Saljuq sultanate. They founded dervish brotherhoods.[77] Köprülü[78] clearly describes how Sūfism started in the thirteenth century in Anatolia and spread into all of the great cities, and how it has lasted over the ages. Among the famous Sūfī personalities in Anatolia was Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī[79] whose *Mawlawī* movement began in the large cities of Anatolia in the thirteenth century and spread in every direction from Egypt to Azarbaijan. The Saljuq rulers of Anatolia also had great respect and affection for the Sūfī shaykhs, and in the lands they conquered, they constructed a great many *tekkes* (lodges) for them and provided them with rich endowments. Vryonis[80] writes that the dervish orders' tolerant, modest, and syncretic preaching brought about the affiliation of Christians to Islam in Anatolia.

The *Manāķıbnāmahs* (books of hagiographical literature which include biographies and anecdotes of the saints and the pious) from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries include stories about the relationships of the shaykhs and dervishes with non-Muslims, although a recent study[81] has revealed that it was the heterodox Islamic Sūfī groups or *ṭarīqahs* such as the *Qalandariyyah* and *Bektāshiyyah* that were most eager to deal with non-Muslims while the orthodox groups such as the *Khalwatiyyah* and *Naqshbandiyyah* dealt with Muslims. The same study also indicates that these heterodox *ṭarīqahs* were likely to attract Christians not from Orthodox Christian churches but from the oppressed heterodox Christian sects. Here, we have support for the theory that Islam attracted the oppressed masses in conquered lands. As far as the Islamization of Anatolia during the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, there are two Sūfī groups worth mentioning, the *Alp Erens* and the *Āhīs*. Barkan,[82] states that it was these *dervishes* in Anatolia (and in the Balkans) who cultivated the deserted lands, formed

76 M. C. Ricklefs, "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java", in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed) N. Levtzion, 1979, 107, pp. 100-128.

77 Especially Türkmen dervishes from central Asia, belonging to the *Yasawiyyah* and *Malāmatiyyah* ṭarīqahs (known as the Sūfis of Khurasan), and dervishes from Bukhara, Turkistan, Iran, and Iraq during and after the Mongol invasion migrated to Anatolia.

78 M. F. Köprülü, *Islam in Anatolia after the Turkish Invasion*, trans. G. Leiser, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 1993, 9-11, 17.

79 al-Rūmī (d. 1273) and the religious brotherhoods he inspired exercised a great influence upon the religious and cultural history of Anatolian society from his base, Konya. Mawlānā is said to have converted 18,000 people during his lifetime (S. Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, 386).

80 S. Vryonis, "Religious Change and Continuity in the Balkans and Anatolia from the Fourteenth through the Sixteenth Century", 136.

81 A. Y. Ocak, "Bazı Menâkıbnâmelere Göre XIII-XV. Yüzyıllardaki İhtidâlarda Heterodoks Şeyh ve Dervişlerin Rolü", *Osmanlı Araştırmaları (The Journal of Ottoman Studies)*, Vol. II (1981), 35, pp. 31-42.

82 Ö. L. Barkan, "Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri", *Vakıflar Dergisi*, 2 (1942), 282-5, pp. 279-304.

new settlements, encouraged the spread of Islam, and helped the Saljuqs and the Ottomans push westward.

One might wonder just how the Sūfīs established their relationships with the non-Muslims around them. Did they all, such as those in India, concern themselves with making converts? In fact, it wasn't the case that all Sūfīs were obsessed with converting others to Islam. It was something that happened naturally. The Sūfīs' philosophy enabled them to adopt more receptive attitudes towards non-Muslims than Orthodox Islam did. This also seems true in our times.[83] Of course, Sūfīs were not all the same. As Eaton[84] in his study of Sūfīs in the Indian city-state of Bijapur (1300-1700) illustrates, there were Sūfīs of different types throughout Islamic history. Some were landed elites, some were other-worldly to the point of reclusive withdrawal, some preached Islam among non-Muslims, and some were not of the peaceful sort but were militant and participated in wars. Eaton describes, for example, Pīr Ma'bari Khandayāt in Deccan as a militant Sūfī. We see this "militant" type not only in India, but also in northwestern Iran and in Spain, where they participated in frontier warfare. Sometimes militancy was resorted to since martyrdom, when necessary, is also sacred to Sūfīs. Thus, in one way or another Sūfism acted as an agent in the spread of Islam, but the form it took varied according to the differing circumstances in the different localities. Eaton also discussed Sūfīs elsewhere, in the Birbhum District of Bengal, who were not holy warriors but pious mystics. He mentions an inscription dated 1221, just seventeen years after the district was conquered, associated with the first Sūfī immigrants in Bengal. This inscription, which records the construction of a Sūfī lodge, reads: "[The Sūfīs] who all the while abide in the presence of the Exalted Allah and occupy themselves in the remembrance of the Exalted Allah."[85] Finally, Eaton[86] suggests that it was the Sūfī initiation ceremonies, the tombs of their saints, and their folk literature that enabled them to establish their relationships with non-Muslims.

No doubt, the work of the Sūfīs also tended to mitigate the harshness of the military conquest while other features of Sūfism that are emotionally appealing such as the use of dance and music (*dhikr*) as well as their folk literature attracted non-Muslims. The Sūfīs in India, as Eaton[87] points out, adapted the simplest elements of Sūfī doctrine to the already existing local folk poetry and the resulting poems were sung even by village women as they did their household chores. Bentley[88] lends support to Eaton's findings by attributing conversions of Indians in large numbers to the Sūfīs ability to popularize and combine Islam with the native cultural traditions.

---

83 A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, 142ff.
84 R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 30-4.
85 R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 71-2.
86 R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 165.
87 R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 157-8.
88 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 117.

It also seems likely that the explanation for why Islam did not take root in such places as Sicily and Crete and even Spain, even though these were areas where Islam prevailed politically and militarily is that Sūfism was not able to play its part in these areas. In the medieval period Islam encountered Christianity in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily, Crete, and Spain. Although these areas were conquered, in Sicily, Crete, and Spain Islam was later lost and replaced by Christianity.[89] It could be that Islam was not able to penetrate deeply into Latin Christianity or that without Sūfism to assist its spread it was bound not to remain for good. In the case of Spain, Coope[90] explains that Christians were not aware that there could be a more inner and private side of Muslim piety, i.e. Sūfism. Although there were Sūfis in Spain, they remained apart from the common people located in *ribāṭs* or forts on the frontier of the Islamic state.[91]

**Religious and Spiritual Reasons for Converting to Islam**

The most undervalued explanations for conversions as the Islamic state and Islam spread are the religious and spiritual ones. It is clear that it would be impossible for individuals to change their religion for opportunistic reasons and then later raise their children in a spirit of piety. In fact, Islam would not be the religion it is today of great masses of people if converts to Islam had not developed positive spiritual attitudes toward Islam at some point. Perhaps some people initially converted for opportunistic reasons, but then changed their attitudes gradually over time. Is it not possible that these people found the truths and doctrines expressed by Islam persuasive?

The fact that social and economic incentives played a role in conversions does not mean that Islam did not appeal to people as a religious system. People do have both mundane and spiritual needs. To say that people converted only for mundane reasons would mean denying that people have spiritual needs. People will not forget their intellect and soul forever even if they have chosen their religion, or even a philosophy or political party, for certain mundane reasons. As for the Christians in the Middle East, since they were mostly settled and educated people with a strong urban orientation,[92] it seems more likely that their conversions were not motivated just by social and/or economic incentives.

The emphasis that Western secular social scientists, especially, put on such incentives may lead us to the conclusion that conversions never involved the transformation of the inner self brought about by emotional and religious needs. The early stages of conversion may involve the inner person less, though, because it does take time and experience to discover what the new religion offers.

89 S. Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, 351.

90 J. A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Cordoba", 59.

91 A. Thomson, *Blood on the Cross: Islam in Spain*, Ta Ha Publishers, London 1989.

92 R. W. Bulliet, "Process and Status in Conversion and Continuity", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 6, pp. 1-12.

Moreover, no matter what degree of inner change has accompanied a conversion, greater religious commitment may still come about. Assuming that spiritual and emotional needs played no role in conversions during the medieval period or later would be incorrect.

Bulliet,[93] in fact, cites several conversion stories from *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, a famous work by Baladhūrī (d. 892-3) devoted to Islamic conquests, and from other early books. Among them is the story of a convert whose father was a Christian and mother a Jew who embraced Islam after the Prophet appeared in a dream saying, "Don't be deluded any longer by the faiths of your parents; follow my religion!" The conversion of Anselmo Turmeda (a Franciscan from Mallorca) in the fourteenth century occurred after he was convinced that the New Testament predicted the rise of the Prophet Muhammad after Jesus.[94] Both of these examples illustrate that theological reasons for conversions were also involved. Turmeda even gave his reasons for his acceptance of Islam in an autobiography. However, most commentators thought that he had had political reasons for converting.[95] There were also conversions that occurred due to religious experiences. Arnold writes about Said b. Ḥasan, an Alexandrian Jew, who embraced Islam in the year 1298 and who speaks of the sight of Friday prayer at a mosque as a determining factor in his own conversion:

> And when I entered the mosque and saw the Muslims..., I heard a voice speaking within me, "This is the community whose coming was announced by the prophets", and when the preacher came forth clad in his black robe, a deep feeling of awe fell upon me... and when he closed his sermon with the words, "Verily God enjoineth justice and kindness and the giving of gifts to kinsfolk, and He forbiddeth wickedness and wrong and oppression. He warned you; haply you will be mindful" (The Qur'ān 16:90). And when the prayer began, I was mightily uplifted, for the rows of the Muslims appeared to me like rows of angels, to whose prostrations and genuflections God Almighty was revealing Himself, and I heard a voice within me saying, "If God spake twice unto the people of Israel throughout the ages, verily He speaketh unto this community in every time of prayer," and I was convinced in my mind that I had been created to be a Muslim.[96]

Also, people of the time did not ignore religious issues. A number of writings such as St. John of Damascus' (679-749?) catechism in the first half of the eighth century to teach Christians how to respond to questions addressed to them by Muslims.[97] The Bishop of Haran, Theodore Abū Qurrāh's (750-825?), writings on

---

93 R. W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam", 132.

94 The part of the New Testament he focussed on (John 14:16-7, 14:26, 15:26; 16:7-14) speaks of the paraclete (comforter or counsellor) which Christians identified as the Holy Spirit. Muslims, on the other hand, read this part as a prediction of the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad.

95 For a discussion of this issue, J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 7, 172.

96 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 417-8.

97 D. J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1972, 132-159; W. Z. Haddad "Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth-Century Baghdad", in *Conversion and Continuity*, (ed) M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, 34, pp. 33-53.

the foundation of Christian theological thinking in relation to other religions including Islam, and ʿĪsā b. Sābiḥ al-Murdār's (d. 840-1) refutation of the Bishop's work[98] illustrate that a theological encounter between Christians and Muslims had begun in the very early days. In addition, a Christian kalām book (Summa Theologiae)[99] written in Palestine in the ninth century expresses the idea that the Islamic message of "There is no God but Allah" was simple and not as complicated to Christians as the earlier messages of their other opponents, the materialists (*al-dahriyyah*) and atheists (*al-zandaqah*). The clarity of the language about God in Arabic as well presented a formidable challenge to Christians. It was also seen that the first phrase of the *shahādah* meant a God other than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[100] The inclusion of these points in a Christian *kalām* book may indicate that doctrinal matters, primarily the nature of Jesus, were being discussed and were of concern to people at that time. The author of the book warns Christians that they should be firm regarding the nature of Jesus as explained by the church since giving way on it would result in losing the distinctiveness of their faith.

Religious issues also entered into conversions given Muslims' sense of a mission and the way they undertook this task. Their understanding of mission (*daʿwāh*) meant associating themselves with the Prophet and showing compassion, gentleness, and good manners to both Muslims and non-Muslims in order to prove the superiority, simplicity, and rationality of the basic Islamic theological doctrines and moral principles. Muslims, when they encountered different cultures, pointed out to the peoples of the other religions that Islam was an inclusive religion and that Islam's purpose was to continue and purify Judeo-Christian revelation. Muslims also accepted all prophets, be they Jesus or Moses, and showed how prophethood fit with pure monotheism. Today the approach and teachings are the same. Lord Headley (d. 1932), an English convert to Islam, on his acceptance of Islam in 1913 considered himself a far better Christian than he had been before.[101]

Moreover, Muslims could point out to Christians that Islam is a religion with no mysteries or theological and philosophical burdens to deal with since it has no Trinity, no Incarnation, and no Redemption. The initial demands on the new Muslim were also not great. Islamic practice is easy. It does not involve any harsh measures or sacramental performances like baptism to prove one's change of religion.

98 S. Rissanen, *Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam during Early ʿAbbāsid Rule*, Abo Akademi University Press, Abo 1993, 21.

99 S. H. Griffith ("The First Christian Summa Theologiae in Arabic", 17) calls this manuscript *Summa Theologiae Arabica* and reports that "it was copied, or perhaps compiled, by Stephen of al-Ramlah at the monastery of Mar Chariton in Palestine in the year 877 A.D." Griffith also reports that "this manuscript also contains another original composition in Arabic by a Christian author, namely Theodore Abū Qurrāh's apologetic tract on the Christian practice of venerating images of Christ and the saints." See also S. H. Griffith, "Islam and the Summa Theologiae Arabica; RABI' I, 264 A. H.", in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 1990, 229, pp. 225-264.

100 S. H. Griffith, "The First Christian Summa Theologiae in Arabic: Christian Kalam in Ninth-Century Palestine", 20, 23.

101 Cited by A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A study of Native British Converts*, 18.

There is no priesthood nor a hierarchy of clergy. More than anything else, it promises rewards awaiting the believers.

In the case of Jews, the theological motivation was also remarkable since Islam shares a great deal with Judaism, much as Christianity and Islam share some beliefs. Conrad's study[102] of conversion to Islam in nineteenth century Ottoman Jerusalem found some theological reasons for Jews' conversions along with social incentives. Conrad offers the account of a Jewish convert to Islam who cites several points of agreement between Judaism and Islam that encouraged him to convert. They included both being monotheistic, both including circumcision, both dealing with women at certain times of the month similarly, both recognizing Moses, Noah, Abraham, and other prophets, both observing many of the same juridical rules, and both sharing some criminal laws.

In some of the conquered lands, there were also other faiths with beliefs that were not very alien to the doctrines of Islam and with followers whose world views and orientation to life were similar to those of Muslims. Many Zoroastrians, for example, were familiar with Islamic doctrines such as the day of judgement, heaven, and hell; and therefore, accepting Islam was not very difficult for them.[103] In eighth century Persia, the nominally Christian *Shahrighān* or landed class believed that Jesus was one of the Prophets and an ordinary man much as Muslims did.[104] Muslims also subdued areas having a Hellenistic history and culture. In the cities and the coasts of Palestine and Egypt the populations had been under Greek domination for over nine hundred years before being conquered by the Romans. In fact, the Roman conquest was not able to change the Greek or Hellenistic character of the Near East.[105] Therefore, in those areas Christianity had not had much of a chance to penetrate into the social and cultural fabric leaving these people with a shaky sense of religious identity. Thus, for them Islam may have offered a religion less difficult to grasp.

**Conclusion**

In analyzing conversion to Islam in India, Hardy[106] states that those who have argued for the use of force to explain conversions have not in general defined what they mean by force. Eaton,[107] again in the case of India, also raises the question of force bringing about conversion and concludes that it is just too simplistic to claim that Islam was a religion of the sword. He continues: "A glance at the geographical distribution of Muslims in the subcontinent reveals an inverse relationship between the degree of Muslim political penetration and the degree of

102 L. I. Conrad, "Reflections by a Nineteenth-Century Convert to Islam on Judaism and Christianity in Ottoman Jerusalem", *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 1 (1996), 67, pp. 63-73.
103 J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 95.
104 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 69-70.
105 D. J. Constantelos, "The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh and the Eight Centuries", *Byzantion*, Vol. XLII (1972), 326, pp. 325-357.
106 P. Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of...", 78.
107 R. M. Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India", 107.

conversion to Islam. If conversion to Islam had ever been a function of military or political force, one would expect that those areas of heaviest conversion would correspond to those areas of South Asia exposed most intensely and over the longest period to rule by Muslim dynasties. Yet the opposite is the case."

Although Western-oriented scholars today seem to have abandoned the theory of force[108] in order to explain the spread of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula, they have come up with theories emphasizing that social, political, or economic incentives have influenced the conquered peoples. They seem to give no credit to the attractiveness of Islamic beliefs and practices nor to the missionary work carried out by Muslims. Social, political, or economic incentives alone, however, do not fully explain the success of Islam. Surely, such conversions also had to depend on the decisions of the individuals involved, for conversion is about the conscious adoption of a new set of beliefs and principles that reshape one's life. Since adults are often reluctant to change, the mere presence of social influences is not enough to explain conversions. The convert is not a passive recipient. Among all of the social, political, or economic factors mentioned in this paper, none can be singled out to explain all of the conversions that have occurred. All together they may explain many conversions, although for some persons or groups particular factors may have played a major role. In fact, it is also necessary to consider the psychology of the people conquered and their dislike of the previous administration or of the religious conflicts they may have been involved in, the waning power of the earlier empires, and in many cases, the beliefs and behavior of the Muslims these people encountered such as the Sūfīs who invited the potential converts to their religion so that they could share it in the future. Today studies of conversion illustrate that it is a complicated matter and that for each individual there could be more than one motive involved.[109] It would be imprudent to confine the spread of Islam to a single cause that explains all times and regions. Islam itself is multifaceted, and different facets of it might have appealed to different people of different backgrounds at different times. Its simplicity, spiritual features, and moral principles that organize individuals' daily lives should also not be discounted.

In addition, the way Islam dealt with earlier religions may help explain its spread. Islam did not claim to be a new religion set apart from the Abrahamic religions. It claimed to be revising the older religions. It also asserted that the prophets of all religions proclaimed the same message as the Prophet Muhammed. Thus, its Holy Book, the Qur'ân, is full of references to the prophets sent to the

108 In some cases there were executions, but these were not the result of rejecting Islam, but resulted from some individuals' making degrading comments repeatedly in public about Islam. For example, executions of around 50 Christians were carried out in Cordoba between 850 and 859 when they publicly insulted the Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic faith. They deliberately invited execution by walking into the *Qādī*'s court (J. A. Coope, "Religious and Cultural Conversion...", 54; J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, 18).

109 For a wider discussion see J. Lofland and N. Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 4 (1981), pp. 373-385.

Jews and Christians. It has shown great flexibility and dynamism in accommodating converts from many backgrounds such as Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. It lets people keep their traditions, but never gave way to those that oppose it. Thus, it has been interpreted in various lands and periods differently. It has also adapted to the lands and the culture of its followers while transforming both. It, therefore, flourishes today in areas as diverse as Morocco and Indonesia.

## ÖZET

### İslâm'ın Yayılışına Dair Teorilerin Değerlendirilmesi

İslâm'ın yayılışı hakkında özellikle Batılı tarihçiler ve sosyal bilimciler tarafından çeşitli teoriler ortaya konmuştur. Daha çok tarihçilerin üstlendiği ve eskimiş olarak telâkki edilen kılıç teorisi, artık yerini sosyal ve ekonomik bakış açılarını yansıtan teorilere bırakmıştır. Sosyal teoriyi savunanlar, fethedilen topraklarda devlet dini haline gelen İslâm'ın her bakımdan desteklenmesi sonucu, yenilgi psikolojisi içerisindeki gayri müslimlerce üstün insanların dini olarak algılandığını ve onların kendilerine sosyal özgürlük sağlamak için müslüman olduklarını ileri sürerler. Ekonomik teori ise, bazı ticarî avantajlar ve benzeri sebeplerin yanında insanların cizyeden kurtulmak için müslüman olduklarını savunur. Oysa, meselâ Hz. Muhammed zamanında bir kişiye düşen yıllık cizye miktarı ortalama bir ailenin on günlük harcamasına denk olduğu halde, müslüman bir kişi hem zekât mükellefiydi hem de gereğinde askerlik görevini yerine getirmekle yükümlüydü.

Bütün bu görüşler, dinî ya da mânevî sebepleri gölgede bırakacak şekilde ortaya konmuş ve ihtidaları tüm yönleriyle izah eden kapsamlı bir teorinin ortaya çıkmasını engellemiştir. İslâm'ın yayılışı değişik zaman, mahal, kültür ve şartlara göre farklılıklar arz edebilir. Meselâ IX. asır Kurtuba'sında ihtidalarda sosyal şartlar rol oynarken, XI. asırdan itibaren Anadolu insanı tasavvuf kanalıyla İslâm'a girmiş olabilir.

İslâm'ın daha ilk yıllarında Hıristiyanlarla müslümanlar arasında teolojik anlamda münazaralar olmuş ve İslâm'ın mesajı, özellikle Hz. İsa'nın tabiatı (Tanrı'nın oğlu olup olmaması gibi) üzerine öğretisi ön plâna çıkmıştı. Dolayısıyla, İslâm'a giren kimselerin İslâm'ın dinî öğretilerini gözardı ederek bu yönde adım atmaları genelde söz konusu değildi. Suriyeli Aziz John'un (679-749?) Hıristiyanların çeşitli konularda müslümanlara nasıl cevap vermeleri gerektiğini öğreten bir ilmihal kitabı yazması, Harran Piskoposu Ebû Kurrâ'nın (750-825?) İslâm'ı da içerecek şekilde Hıristiyanlığın diğer dinler karşısındaki pozisyonunu ortaya koyan eserler kaleme alması, teolojik anlamda bir karşılaşmanın daha o tarihlerde başladığını göstermektedir.

Din değiştirme, normalde şuurlu bir kabullenmedir. Kişi, hayatını şekillendirmek üzere belirli inanç ve prensipleri benimser. Din değiştiren kişi, pasif bir alıcı olarak görülmemelidir; çünkü insan karakteri genelde değişime kapalıdır. Bundan dolayı da ihtidalar yalnızca sosyal ve ekonomik sebeplere dayandırılamazlar.