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A STUDY OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM WITH REFERENCE TO

EGYPT AND IRAQ

A Survey of Western Sources

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ÖZET

İslamın ilk yayılış dönemlerinde başka dinlere mensup olan insanların bireysel ve toplumsal düzeyde İslam dinini kabul etmelerinin nedenleri ve sonuçları Batılı bilim adamlarını sürekli olarak meşgul edegelen bir konu olmuştur. Okuyacağınız inceleme Batılı araştırmacıların İslamın yayılış dönemlerinde meydana gelen ihtida (conversion) olaylarına ilişkin görüşlerini içermektedir. Araştırmamızın ilk bölümünde din değiştirme kavram ve sürecine ilişkin görüşlerini içermektedir. Araştırmamızın ilk bölümünde din değiştirme kavram ve sürecine ilişkin giriş niteliğinde bilgi verilmiştir.

Understanding Conversion

In contemporary social psychological works the concept of conversion appears to have had a comprehensive meaning. In the oft quoted words of Trayisano conversion refers to a radical reorganization of identity, meaning and life (Trayisano, 1970, p. 594 cited in Lofland and Skonovd) Heirich explains conversion in such phrases that "conversion is the process of changing, a sense of root reality" or "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding" (Heirich, 1977, p. 674) One can deduce from the above mentioned definitions that conversion is a very remarkable event which leads tantamount changes in the life of the one who experiences it. Thus, if one tries to undertake for an exploration of conversion experience many variables should be taken

into consideration to reach a sound conclusion. Of those the conversion motifs are of great importance.

Lofland and Skonovd suggest six fundamental motifs of a religious conversion, being identified as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive:

1- Intellectual motive: The intellectual mode of conversion commences with individual and private investigation of possible grounds of being alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment etc. Intellectual motifs do not push an individual into a social involvement to become acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life. Rather, in the course of such a process some individuals may convert themselves in isolation from any actual interaction with devotees of respective religion.

2- Mystical motive: Mystical motive of conversion, from a historical point of view, is the most common or the best known one. In the case of mystical conversion, the conversion experience can not be expressed in logical and coherent terms. It is noteworthy that who are considered the earliest scholars of conversion W. James, E.D.Starbuck, and E.T.Clark focused heavily on mystical conversion. During this type of conversion there is little or no social pressure, the convert is most likely alone at the time of actual event.

3- Experimental motive: Experimental motive refers to an active participation into a chosen group or life style and new religious orientation or belief which arises out of this participation. Intensive interaction seems to be a significant feature of many experimental conversion experience.

4- Affectional motive: Emotional factors are of great importance in some individual's life. Feelings can play an important role in our psychological life. In this type of conversion personal attachment or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process.

5- Revivalist motive: This motive implies the influence of preachers, organizations and groups which are of revivalist nature, on individuals' religious life. Within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd an individual might go into the process of ecstatic religious experience.

6- Coercive Motive: The final conversion motive refers to the use of some sort of power through brainwashing, programming, mind control, coercive persua-

sion and thought reform etc. The two key features of brainwashing or coercive persuasion are a- the compulsion of an individual, b- sincerely to confess the guilt or embrace an ideological system.

Whatever the conversion motifs may be, they differ significantly from one historical epoch to other, from one society to another. (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981, p. 377-83)

The State of Affairs in Egypt and in Iraq Before Islamic Conquest

Egypt

The ten years of Persian rule in Egypt had been followed by a strong Byzantine reaction after the victorious wars of Heraclius. Byzantine authorities hoped to terminate the long-lasting conflict between Monophysites and Dyophysites. But they failed to do so. At the same time the financial claims of the Empire on Egypt were very heavy and the administration of church and finance was controlled by the same body. In 631 Cyrus was sent to Egypt to persuade Coptic community to accept their proposal and to increase the revenues of the treasury. (Becker, E.I.Voll. 2, p.5) In Cambridge Medieval History (Voll.2.p.349) Becker also points out the fact that the Byzantine rulers forced the members of Coptic Church to convert to the Irenicon belief. The Coptic form of worship was forbidden and its priests and organizations were cruelly treated. The heavy burden of taxes fell upon the shoulders of Coptic community in order to assist in paying the debts of emperor.

Iraq

In Iraq, on the eve of Islamic conquest, the Sasanian state had fallen on hard times and its defence system considerably weakened. The majority of the population in Iraq were people of Aramaic origin. Preceding Islamic conquest its inhabitants were divided by barriers of language, religion, social class and way of life. With regard to religious diversity of Iraqi population, Zoroastrianism was the official faith of the Sasanian State, but it seems that Zoroastrianism was observed mainly by the Persian ruling elite in Iraq and therefore restricted mainly to the larger towns. The religious orientation of the majority of Iraq's rural inhabitants and of many town dwellers was shaped and moulded by the Church or the Synagogue.

Before Islamic conquest the Nestorian Church seems to have been the most

widely spread in Iraq. There were a number of Nestorian religious schools serving the needs of Nestorian community and stimulating a great following throughout the country. By comparison with the Nestorian, the Jacobite Church was weakly represented in Iraq.

The Jewish community was second in size after Nestorians and seems to have been well organized in Veh-Ardashir. The main Jewish community settled by the waters of Babylon in the area traversed by great canals which connected the Eupharates and the Tigris and along the Eupharates toward Syria. In these areas numerous rabbinical schools were located. (Donner, 1981, p.169)

Motivations of Islamic Conquests

Several factors can be taken into account with regard to motivations to embrace an expansionist policy: 1- There is a possibility that ideological message of Islam itself filled some or all of the ruling elite with the notion that they had an essentially religious duty to expand the political domain of the Islamic State. In other words the elite may have organized the Islamic conquest for they regarded it as their divine mission to do so. (Donner, 1891, p.270) 2- The desire to expand the political boundaries of the new state in order to secure trans-Arabian commerce route might have served as one of the causes of conquest movement. 3- The acquisition of properties in the conquered areas, taxes to be levied on conquered people, the booty in wealth and slaves might be considered some sort of financial advantages of expansionist attitude.

Conquest of Iraq

The conquest of Iraq began during the Caliphate of Omar. In 663 Khalid b. Walid appeared outside al-Hira making the opposition forces surrender without much resistance. After four years of this initial victory, the Muslim army put down the Sasanid forces. With this victory the door of Iraq was opened to muslim expansion development. (E.I.Voll.3) Generally speaking the conquest of Iraq by Muslims involved two separate arenas, one was in central Iraq and the other one was in the southern Iraq.

Conquest of Egypt

Islam was first introduced into Africa by the Muslim Arab army which invaded Egypt under the command of Amr b. As in 640 A.D. (Arnold, 1913, p. 102) Amr b. As set up his way to Egyptian lands from Syria and appeared unexpectedly on the

eastern frontier defeating Byzantines and capturing Babylon. From this strategically important place he extended the expansion of Muslim army up to the Nile valley and upper Egypt. During the Islamic conquest, Cyrus was sent to Egypt by Byzantine authorities to conclude a treaty. After having seen the unhelpful situation he concluded the final treaty of surrender with Amr by which the city was to be vacated. (E.I. Voll.2) As Arnold states, the withdrawal of Byzantine troops after three years left the Christians to Muslim administration. The welcoming attitude which was shown to Arabs by local Christian population played an important role in the rapid success of the Arabs. The Orthodox adherents and supporters of Byzantine rule oppressed the indigenous Egyptian churches, exiling their leaders and persecuting their members. It seems that to the suppressed Copts and Jacobites, the Islamic conquest brought a freedom of religious life that they had not enjoyed for a century. (Arnold, 1913, p. 102; Brett, 1973, p.2)

Highlighting The Conversion Into Islam

Judging from the survey of western sources it seems that there are a number of questions inherent in the study of conversion to Islam during the early period. The difficulties which one faces stem from the lacunae of sources in this area of Islamic history. It is virtually impossible to give accurate rate of converted population in a given time and space. Western scholars tried to explore and highlight the problem of this paper from different angles, emphasizing a number of diverse causes and effects. Western sources claim that the concept of Islamization and Arabization do not seem to have been clearly defined in related sources. Being confronted with foregoing difficulties, in what follows, I shall try to give an account of conversion process as conceived in western sources including its motifs and results without making sharp distinction between Egypt and Iraq.

It occurs to me that Dennet focuses on economic circumstances namely taxes which were levied on non-Muslim subjects in conquered lands. He gives an account of those who were liable to pay taxes and those who were exempted, the poor. The unemployed, the blind, the sick, the insane, the beggars and the monks of monasteries did not pay taxes. Women of all ages and children were also exempt. All the rest paid a poll-tax graded according to man's wealth and income. (Dennet, 1950, p.27) Dennet asserts that at the time of conquest many tribes akin to conqueror professed Islam at once and were from the outset exempt from all taxes except religious payment, zakat, but there is no evidence of conversion taking place among the peasantry dur-

ing this period of the conversion process. (Ibid, p. 32) He goes on pointing out the fact that there in only very few evidences of conversion throughout the Umayyad period in Egypt while poll-tax exemption constituted an economic motive for giving up old religion. He attributes this small amount of conversion to the fact that, from the beginning conversion had always freed a Copt of his poll-tax but not of his land tax. In addition to that, three other factors prevented conversion from becoming wide spread:

1- The solidarity of Coptic religious community. If Copt in a willage became a Muslim he was outcast in the eyes of his Christian brethern.

2- The attitude of Arab government itself which seems neither to have desired nor to have encouraged the step.

3- The Arab centralization of the taxation authority which made a closer control of the inhabitants possible. (Ibid, p. 87-89)

Lapidus gives an important emphasis on the gradual settlement of Arabs in the newly conquered lands. He claims that migration and settlement took place during the cours conquest. This process seems to be apart of an assimilation policy to reduce non-Arab and non-Islamic cultural and religious elements in the society. According to him Arab settlement promoted the social change and progressive, though partial, interaction of Arab and non-Arab polulation into new cosmopolitian communities. (Lapidus, 1988, p. 37) He appears to have accepted the idea of a slow process of conversion, claiming that a quick and massive conversion to Islam in the Middle East did not take place. The available evidence, in his mind, points rather a slow and uneven process of social and religious adjustment. (Ibid, p.51)

Becker draws our attention to the cultural expansion of Arabic thought through the adoption of Arabic language. (E.I.Voll.2) Language seems to be a very important factor to impose one's culture on one another. As a means of communication language carries all the elements of culture and thought. If one considers the relation between the language and the mind or system of thinking, the role of conversion, not specifically religius, can be easily discerned.

Brett claims that on the eve of Islamic conquest north African Christianity was demoralized and disunited. (Bertt, 1973, p.2) one might assume that in the case of an ecstastic convert, the old religion may have failed to meet sipiritual expectation of a

believer which seems to have greater promise of fulfillment in the religion. This situation may lead an individual to conversion and that person may find life in the new religion more attractive. (Bullict, 1979, p.35-36)

One can deduce from the foregoing discussion that Western sources suggest a number of causes and effects involved in the process of conversion to Islam in Egypt and Iraq. Our survey shows that Western scholars differ in their approaches to the problems of conversion to Islam in the formative period.

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