

# CONVERSION TO ISLAM

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## I. Introduction

Religious conversion has two important connotations, viz., theological and social. Theologically, it is an act of contrition asking forgiveness from God for the wrongs committed by the individual and community and the second signifies the change of one's affiliation or membership from one religion to another. Islam, being a religio-political community, gives importance to both these aspects. Repentance or compunction of heart is considered something affecting one's personal relationship with God while the conversion to Islam has a lot of social consequences. Every Muslim is keenly interested in spreading his faith. The early history of Islam shows that political leaders through their conquests have paved the way for the expansion of their religion. A lot of research has been carried out, and it continues even today, on the phenomenal growth of the Muslim community in the world and their results are not always in agreement with one another. Moreover, since the socio-religio-political situation differed from country to country we cannot postulate a uniform pattern or theory for the propagation of Islam. However, an attempt is made in this short paper to explore the Quranic concept of conversion and also to have a quick glance how Islam spread in a few countries. I shall, then, point out some factors that were responsible for the rapid expansion of Islam throughout the world.

## II. The Uniqueness of Islam

The theological foundation for the missionary spirit among the Muslims to convert others to their religion lies in their understanding of Islam as the only true religion perfected and blessed by God. "This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favour unto you, and have chosen for you as a religion AL-ISLAM" (5:3). The Quran speaks of itself as the best guidance for mankind (10:199) and Muslims as the best community of the world (3:110). In the light of these and other similar verses of the Quran some of the Muslim scholars argue that mankind is left with no choice but to accept Islam as a religion. "and who

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so seeketh as religion other than the 'Surrender' (to Allah) (al-Islam) it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter" (3:85).

### III. The Uniqueness of Prophet Muhammad and the Holy Quran

The Islamic creed demands that the Muslims should believe in all the prophets of the world and also in all the revealed scriptures.

Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and unto him we have surrendered (10:136).

But this universality of prophets becomes restricted when it is said that the prophethood from Adam culminated in Muhammad and so is the final and the seal of prophets.

O Prophet! Lo! We have sent thee as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner. And as a summoner unto Allah by His permission, and as a lamp that giveth light. And announce unto the believers the good tidings that they will have great bounty from Allah (33:45-47).

Muhammad is a messenger of Allah and the seal of the prophets and Allah is aware of all things (33:40).

Similarly, though the Muslims have to believe in all the revealed scriptures, in reality the Quran is the only book that contains the fullness of revelation in its original form not contaminated by the touch of the human hands. According to Islamic understanding, all the previous scriptures have been abrogated, cancelled or even corrupted by their followers. So the Quran is the only clear revelation (5:16) and the clear guidance (11:185). Those who disbelieve in the Reminder when it comes unto them (are guilty), for Lo! It is an unassailable scripture (41:40). Those who distort our regulations will be hurled into the (hell) fire (41:40). Though the mankind and *Jinn* should join together to produce the like of this Quran they will not succeed in it (18:88). This is the glorious Quran (51:1), mercy and healing (71:82), good tidings (17:9). Muhammad has been commanded by God to proclaim the sacred teachings of the Holy

Quran to the humanity (15:94). Finally, the Quran has corrected and confirmed all the previous regulations: "O ye unto whom the scripture hath been given! Believe in what we have revealed confirming that which ye possess" (4:47).

#### IV. Foundations for Conversion to Islam

The Holy Quran very emphatically teaches that "There is no compulsion to religion" (2:56). But those who do not believe the Islamic concept of God (Allah), the prophethood of Muhammad, and also the Holy Quran, are listed among the 'infidels' of different categories who are the rightful owners of hell fire. The People of Scriptures (*Ahl al kitab*) have a special place in the Islamic concept of salvation.

Lo! Those who believe (in that which is revealed unto thee, Muhammad) and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans – whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right – surely the reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve (2:52, 5:69).

Those who come closest to the Islamic faith are the Christians.

Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those believe (to be) the Jews and idolaters. And though wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe to be those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks and because they are not proud (5:82).

But even the Christians and Jews are counted among the losers in the sight of God as they disbelieve the prophetic mission of Muhammad and the scripture given to him. The Christians are specially accused for believing in the divinity and the redemptive mission of Jesus and also for corrupting their holy scripture - The Bible.

And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: the Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah Himself fighteth against them. How perverse are they!

They have taken as Lords beside Allah their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were bidden to worship only One God. There is no God save him. Be he glorified from all what they ascribe as partner unto him. He it is who hath sent his

messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religion, however much the idolaters maybe averse (9:30, 31, 33).

The names of other religions are not mentioned in the Quran. But they all maybe grouped in the large category of idolaters since they do not accept Islam and its way of life. They follow their own religious traditions, which in the eyes of Muslims are very often idolatrous practices. Idolatry is the greatest sin a human being can commit and it will not be forgiven by God.

Lo! Allah forgiveth not that a partner should be ascribed unto Him. He forgiveth (all) save that to whom He will. Whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, He hath indeed invented a tremendous sin (4:48).

Those are the whom Allah hath cursed, and he whom Allah hath cursed, thou (O Muhammad) will find for him no helper (4:52).

The Muslims are exhorted not to take Jews and Christians even as their friends. "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk" (5:51). Thus, it is with an exclusive theology that denies salvation to the people of all other faiths that Islam started off its missionary enterprises.

## V. Conquest and Conversion

The power crazy political rulers and religious leaders made good use of the belligerent character of the Arabian tribes to conquer the neighbouring countries and convert its inhabitants to Islam. As in many other matters Muhammad set the example of a good missionary. Within three years of his ministry he could gather a good number of followers around him. Since they experienced opposition in Arabia some of them migrated to Abyssinia and Muhammad with some of his friends fled to Medina where he reorganized the warring tribes of Arabia into a closely-knit religio-political community with Islam as its moving spirit. Thus, they became one of the most powerful religio-political forces of the world. He invited the people of Arabia and other neighbouring countries to join him, though formal conversion to Islam was not always demanded. Soon after the death of Muhammad in 632, the Muslim army conquered and subdued Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and Persia. They became the masters

of an empire, which extended westward to Spain and eastward beyond the Indus. The Muslim warriors established their religion wherever they went. Even when political and financial support from the rulers declined Muslim missionaries carried their faith into Central Africa, China, and East Indian Islands. The most powerful factor at work in the stupendous success of the Muslim missionary enterprises has been the arduous hard work of the Muslim missionaries.<sup>1</sup>

## VI. Conversion to Islam in India

The Indian peninsula has the highest number of Muslims in the world and so it is very important to study how so many were converted to Islam.<sup>2</sup> It was customary to attribute the reason for this spread of Islam to the military invasions. Serious historians like Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, however, point out some other sociological factors for this rapid expansion. "The growth of Muslim society in India took place through four processes, conquest, conversion, colonization, and migration."<sup>3</sup>

Military conquests were conducted by rulers like Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030), Muhammad bin Tughluk (1325-51), Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan (1757-1792). But these cannot account for the phenomenal growth of Muslims in India. Nizami explains this reality as follows:

Muslim society grew in India through conversions, which took place voluntarily at tribal levels, and often through peaceful persuasion of Muslim mystics. The social setup of India in the 11th and 12th centuries was based on the principle of caste, as the idea of physical pollution was one of the basic principles of the Hindu social system. When the Muslims conquered these caste cities they threw open their gates to everybody with the result that the egalitarian principles of Islam attracted large number of non-caste Hindus and professional

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<sup>1</sup>T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, London: Constable and Company Ltd., 2nd ed., 1974, 3.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed study of the spread of Islam in India, refer George Koovackal, "Missionary Expansion of Islam in India," *Journal of Dharma*, VI, 2 (April-June 1981), 197-214.

<sup>3</sup>K. A. Nizami, "Islam in Hind," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis et al., Vol. III Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2nd ed., 1954, 4-8.

groups to the fold of Islam. It was this conversion of the lower caste population to Islam, which swelled Muslim society in the country.<sup>4</sup>

The Sufi mystics, not the political rulers, were the main agents of conversion to Islam in India. Through their presence, words, inspiring life, examples, and mystical power they could attract large number of people to Islam especially at the village and tribal areas. They handled the problem of conversion with great sympathy, understanding and love. The Cishti saints, for example, attracted the Hindus to the Muslim way of life, without demanding formal conversion or initiation into the mystic way of life. Their sympathetic and comprehending attitude enhanced the effect of their persuasion and so they could convert numerous tribes to Islam.<sup>5</sup>

### VII. Conversions in Kerala

"Islam in India in all probability began in Kerala and the '*Mappilas*' (the Muslims of Kerala) are the descendants of the first Indian Muslims."<sup>6</sup> This view of Miller is supported by other scholars as well since there existed trade relationship between Kerala and Arabia.<sup>7</sup> The Arab traders soon after they became Muslims brought their new faith also to Kerala where they were warmly welcomed by the rulers and the people. There existed a cordial relationship between the people and the Muslims who were called '*Mappilas*', which meant "great child" or "a bridegroom."<sup>8</sup>

Islam began to flourish in the west coast peacefully and steadily and it was crowned by the conversion of the last Cheraman Perumal, the king of Kodungalloor. Immigration, inter-marriage, support of the political rulers, especially that of the Zamorians of Calicut, personal benefits received on becoming a Muslim, etc. were factors for the growth of Muslim community in Kerala. The Mappila Muslims propagated their faith in an informal and unstructured way. A large number of low caste people embraced Islam in order to improve their social status and economic well-being. But now it has decreased due to the sociological changes in Kerala.

<sup>4</sup>K. A. Nizami, "Islam in Hind," 429.

<sup>5</sup>K. A. Nizami, "Islam in Hind," 450.

<sup>6</sup>Rolant E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976, 39.

<sup>7</sup>S. S. Nadvi, "The Muslim Colonies in India Before the Muslim Conquest," *Islamic Culture*, VIII (1934), 4.

<sup>8</sup>Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 30.

Formal conversion activity has been carried out in Kerala by the Maunath-ul-Islam Sabha at Ponnani and Tarbiyat-ul-Islam Sabha in Calicut. Special facilities have been provided for the 'catechumens' such as the welcome, circumcision and instruction of the new converts who are given religious training during which they are provided with free food, lodging, and clothing. It is estimated that 300 to 1000 converts are being received at Ponnani annually.<sup>9</sup>

### **VIII. Factors Related to Conversion**

No single factor can be pointed out as the main cause of the rapid growth of Muslim community throughout the world. The religious, social, and political situations in each country were unique and specific and so one has to be very careful with regard to generalization. However, some factors could be seen at work in the whole process of conversion to Islam.

#### **1. Military Invasion and Coercion**

As a religio-political community Islam did not have a uniform pattern or policy for its propagation though it is very strong in its missionary character and expression. There is no ordained priesthood in Islam though the religious teachers and leaders have great influence on the believers. Though a visible head of the Islamic community called Caliph functioned till 1924, it was only a nominal title without much influence or control over the happenings in the Muslim world. The political leaders wielded the real power in the Islamic society and so they controlled even its religious affairs. Hence, it is but natural that they made use of Islam to achieve their political gains.

The critics of Islam have exaggerated the role played by the political rulers and military conquests in securing conversion to Islam. No historian will deny the fact that, especially in the early centuries, the Arabian warriors paved the way for Islamization of the Middle East and the neighbouring countries. Some of the Muslim historians may remark that those were only military conquests. But the outcome was that the conquered people were forced to accept Islam as their religion and Arabian culture as their way of life. The popular image of a Muslim warrior is that he holds a sword in the right hand and the Quran in the other. Though this is a bit exaggerated version of the story we have to accept that the earliest

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<sup>9</sup>Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 241.

conquests in Islamic history were carried out for political purposes. But, as a consequence, most of the people of the conquered countries were directly or indirectly converted to Islam. Dennett puts this fact in the following words: "At the time of the Arab (Muslim) conquests the conquered people had three options: to face death professing their own faith, or to live in the land after paying a heavy tax called *jizya* (protection tax) or to be converted to Islam."<sup>10</sup>

Speros Vryonis explains the experience of Christians of Asia Minor as follows: The conquests of Asia Minor were in operation over a period of four centuries. The Christian societies in those countries were submitted to extensive warfare, incursions and destructions, which undermined the existence of Christians. In the 1st century Turkish conquests and invasions, about 63 towns and villages were destroyed. The inhabitants of other towns and villages were enslaved and taken off to the Muslim slave markets. It was not until the Ottoman pacification and the reunification of Anatolia that normal conditions were restored to the few remaining Christian communities.<sup>11</sup>

In general, the Muslim rulers and the religious-minded officials have followed the covenant (*dhimmah*) between Muslims and the people of the Book, established by Prophet Muhammad and continued and practised by the Caliphs after him. They were guaranteed security of life, property, churches, and freedom of worship in return for the payment of *jizya* tax. But there were also many exceptions to this practice when certain over-zealous Caliphs and provincial governors forced conversions through various means.<sup>12</sup>

Honesty to any sacred text demands that its individual verses should not be treated in isolation as proof texts to argue out a point convincingly. Thus a careful examination of the Quran in its letter and spirit reveals the apparent contradiction concerning the use of force, human or divine, to

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<sup>10</sup>Daniel C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, Delhi: Idrah-I Adabyati, 2000, 3.

<sup>11</sup>Speros Vryonis Jr. "The Experience of Christians Under Seljuk and Ottoman Domination," *Eleventh to Sixteenth Century*, cited in Michael Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990, 201.

<sup>12</sup>Wadi Z. Haddad "Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence Ninth Century Baghdad," cited in Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity*, 33.



compel the people to accept Islam as a religion.<sup>13</sup> For example, we read: "O prophet struggle against the unbelievers (*kufar*) and the hypocrites (*munafiqun*)" (29:73). "When the sacred months have passed kill the idolaters (*mushrikun*) where you find them and take them and besiege them and prepare every ambush for them. But if they repent and establish the prayer (*salat*), and pay the 'zakat' then make free their way" (9:5).

A word may be added about *jihad*, translated as "holy war." The critics of Islam propagate that *jihad* is a duty on all Muslims in order to propagate their religion. In fact, the Holy Quran praises those who die while fighting for God. This does not mean that they are fighting against the infidels so that they could impose their religion on them. The real meaning of *jihad* is "to struggle against." This would mean to wage a war against the evil tendencies inherent in every man or woman and also to fight against a visible enemy who unjustly attacks you. When a Muslim country is unjustly attacked by a non-Muslim enemy the ruler of the Muslim country can request other Muslim countries for their help in their war against their enemy. But there are certain conditions to be fulfilled and only then it becomes a valid reason for *jihad*. Some of the Muslim rulers have made use of *jihad* in the past for their selfish interests declaring that they are fighting for Islam. Whatever reasons the corrupt leaders may put forward, the Quran does not sanction any war to increase the number of Muslim community in the world.

Finally, it may be added that the *mutazilites* (rational thinkers of Islam) are of the opinion that *iman* (faith) does not develop from coercion and constraint but is to be built upon deep personal appropriation and individual choice.<sup>14</sup> It must, however, be admitted that many Muslim conquerors with their fanatic zeal to propagate Islam have not paid sufficient attention to the noble teachings of the Quran that promotes peace and religious harmony in the world.

## 2. Economic Factors

In the conquered lands, the ownership of land, economic resources, and manpower passed gradually to Muslim hands. Even the tax system

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<sup>13</sup>Haddad "Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence Ninth Century Baghdad," 111.

<sup>14</sup>Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," cited in Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity*, 123.

was discriminatory. Anavati describes, for example, the situation in Egypt as follows:

Conversion to Islam had many material and social advantages. To declare oneself a Muslim meant, at least in the beginning, to be exempted from the payment of taxes. Every male Copt (except monks) was subject to five taxes among which were the *jizya* (protection tax) and *kharaj* (land tax).<sup>15</sup>

It may be noted here that many people living in the countries conquered by Muslim warriors became Muslims mainly to avoid the payment of these discriminatory taxes, which were at times very heavy. Since collection of these taxes was the main sources of income for the government, many Muslim rulers had, in fact, discouraged conversions to Islam.

### 3. Religious Factors

"*Cuius regio eius religio*" (whose reign his religion) was a potent factor for conversions to Islam. As the religion of the rulers Islam enjoyed social and political prestige and patronage. The Islamic institutions flourished because of their formal affiliation with the rulers. The financial support from the government helped the Muslim institutions to function well. The rise of Sufi Orders added a very powerful missionary impetus to the already flourishing Muslim institutions.

### 4. Social Factors

Though Islam preaches and practices equality of all human beings, the status of Jews and Christians as a protected group called *dhimmis* had a lot to do for conversions to Islam, especially in its early history. This was the legal basis for their survival in Muslim countries. According to Speros, with the collapse or weakening of the centralized Muslim states, the legal status and protection of the *dhimmis* also lapsed in some form or other. Thus there were many incidents of forced conversions of all the *dhimmis*.<sup>16</sup>

The various types of discriminations, which the non-Muslims had to undergo, were also important factors of conversion to Islam. For example,

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<sup>15</sup>Georges C. Anavati, "The Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages," cited in Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity*, 239.

<sup>16</sup>Vryonis "The Experience of Christians Under Seljuk and Ottoman Domination," 202.

the testimony of a *dhimmi* was not valid in the Muslim *shariah* courts. But the testimony of a Muslim, even if it was far from the truth, was accepted as valid. The situation of Christians in Pakistan, even today, is a clear example of the 'second-rate' citizenship of the *dhimmis* in a Muslim country. Blasphemy or any derogative word about Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, if supported by two Muslim witnesses, is enough for a falsely accused Christian to be stoned to death.

### 5. Marriage Customs

Institutions of marriage and concubinage also contributed to the conversion of many Christians to Islam. At the time of marriage Christian brides had to bring dowry whereas Muslim grooms often paid or promised to pay "bride price" for their wives. Besides, in Christian societies both the boy and the girl should be baptized Christians. But in Islamic society, a Muslim man can have a Christian or a Jewish wife who could retain her original faith. The children born of these mixed marriages, however, became automatically Muslims. In many cases, the Christian wives of Muslims also became Muslim for the smooth living in the families, especially for the welfare of the children. In Kerala, for example, as Miller points out, many among the Christians, who were converted to Islam, the largest numbers were Catholics or Syrian Christians who were denied divorce in Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Speros describes concubinage also as an important factor for conversion to Islam:

Among the Turkish Muslims, institutions of concubinage known as *kepin* was a contractual arrangement for a fixed period and for which the male paid a cash sum to the father of the woman. In this relationship, the ensuing offspring usually (especially in case of male children) stayed with the father whereas the woman returned to her father after expiration of the contracted period. Such were the inroads, which it (Islam) had made in the Christian society for its growth.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 240.

<sup>18</sup>Vryonis "The Experience of Christians Under Seljuk and Ottoman Domination," 204.

## 6. Problems within the Local Communities

Conversion from one religion to another takes place when the people are not satisfied with their own religion. This is evident in the case of conversions to Islam from Zoroastrianism and Christianity. As Hitti points out, the bulk of the population had no attachment to the national Zoroastrian creed, because the Zoroastrian clergy constituted a distinct caste having no close contact with the people. Most of the members of the clergy were corrupt and so were hated by the people. Furthermore, there was a significant layer of artisans and craftsmen who had been considered low caste by the Zoroastrian clergy. They enthusiastically welcomed the new religion of Islam as it made no social distinction and held them equal with the Persian middle class.<sup>19</sup>

Many Christians living in the countries conquered by the Muslims found themselves divided by sectarian and schismatic groups and so were less enthusiastic in religious matters. They also felt that Christianity was not at all dynamic and so did not adequately respond to their spiritual and mundane needs. In this situation Islam showed great flexibility and dynamism in accommodating Christians of various sects. After all, Muslims and Christians were the members of the same society for centuries, sharing certain traditions and common life style.<sup>20</sup>

The failure of Christians to live up to their faith, especially by those who are expected to set good example such as the clergy or patriarchs, is also pointed out as one of the several factors that led many Christians to the fold of Islam. Sulayman, for example, "blames the conversion of Christians on the laxity of people in their religion and the repugnant behaviour of the clergy at the altar in the churches and holy sanctuaries."<sup>21</sup>

The lack of knowledge of the Christian doctrines and the simplicity of Islamic doctrines had popular appeal to the people. This has also attracted many Christians to Islam. This was especially true in the rural areas where the followers of different religions could not distinguish the Islamic doctrines due to the similarity of their own basic tenets. This

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<sup>19</sup>Philip K. Hitti, *The History of Arabs*, New York, 1977, 145.

<sup>20</sup>Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity*, 7.

<sup>21</sup>Mari B. Sulayman, *Akhbar Fatarikat Kursial-Mashriq*, ed. Henricus Gismondi, Rome 1899, 115.

makes the transition from Christianity to Islam easy and untraumatic, especially in the presence of incentives.<sup>22</sup>

Thus several types of conditions have been offered as favourable factors for conversion to Islam. The most important was the internal weakness with non-Muslim communities due to corruption, inequality, and sectarian conflict among their members, very often enhanced by the religious leaders. Other factors include the similarity of some doctrines and practices, cultural assimilation, the adoption of Arabic speech, and the attractiveness of Islamic military success, rationalism, simplicity, and hope.<sup>23</sup> Lapidus summarized the conditions that reduced the resistance of non-Muslims to conversion to Islam as "social restrictions, legal inferiority, Muslim hostility, excessive taxation, and physical insecurity."<sup>24</sup> Of course, social advantages and financial prospects were more potent factors than theological and spiritual elements in securing large number of conversions to Islam, especially in the early period of Islamic history.

#### IX. Characteristics of Conversion

The characteristics of conversion to Islam are visible more at the social level than at the spiritual level. The most indicative changes would be in ritual matters like congregational prayers, attendance at other religious functions, observance of the fasting in the month of Ramzan, etc. The ruling element in the early Caliphate was Arab as well as Muslim. The distinction between being a Muslim and being an Arab was probably not entirely clear in the minds of the neophytes. Consequently, the social traits indicating 'Arabness' were necessary to show one's conversion to Islam. Religious conversion would mean symbolically to die in one community and to be reborn in another. But there is no sacramental performance in Islam equivalent to Christian baptism. There seems to have been no registration or documentary proof of change of religion and anybody could be a witness of conversion. In most cases there seems to have been neither catechetical preparation for conversion nor a thorough understanding of

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<sup>22</sup>V. L. Menage, "The Islamization of Anatolia," *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion, New York, 1979, 53.

<sup>23</sup>Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 74.

<sup>24</sup>I. Lapidus, "Conversion of Egypt to Islam," *Israel Oriental Studies*, II (1972), 260 cited in Gervers, *Conversion and Continuity*, 139.

the Quran and the basic tenets of Islam. The use of Arabic as the language of Muslims was also a real problem for the new converts.<sup>25</sup>

### X. Benefits of Conversion

The converts to Islam soon realize that they are fortunate to belong to Islam, the best religion in the world that was chosen and perfected by God Himself. They adore the only true God Allah without any image or idol. All the believers are united into one sacred community (*umma*), in which equality and brotherhood reign supreme. The holy Quran, the impeccable word of God that contains the substance of all the previous revelations in its purest form, provide them with a divinely ordered code of conduct for personal and public life. They enjoy a religio-political setup where the poor and the weak are specially taken care of. It also guarantees conditions, which ensure prosperity for all. Indeed, they also appreciate the simple and meaningful prayers without any pompous or impious rituals and complicated ceremonies.<sup>26</sup>

### XI. Conclusion

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and it claims to have more than 1 billion followers. Conversion to Islam, as pointed out above, is a very complex phenomenon. No single factor can be pointed out as its main cause. Islam as we see it today originated as a religio-political movement to work for the total liberation of the Arabs. With the help of the remarkable success of the early military conquests, Islam was established in Arabia and the neighbouring countries. One cannot deny that force was used directly or indirectly to secure converts to Islam. It became a real threat to the existing religions of various countries except, perhaps, China and India. This created fear, hatred, and animosity in the hearts of others against Muslims. Though the Muslim scholars are trying to disprove that the religion of Islam is a religion of the sword, the bad reputation it has inherited from its very inception still exists very strongly in the minds of others.

The process of a peaceful penetration of Islam among the poor, low caste, and the rural population, and the voluntary conversion of millions of people of all walks of life throughout the world have not been sufficiently

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<sup>25</sup>Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," 129.

<sup>26</sup>Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal, *The Mission of Islam*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1977, 30.

understood and appreciated by others. The dictatorial rule in most of the Muslim countries, the unpleasant experience of the people of other faiths in certain Islamic nations, the terrorist activities rightly or wrongly attributed to some Muslim groups and organizations even today continue to perpetuate the old image that Islam still believes in and practises forced conversions. As long as Islamic religion and politics are aligned together, this image would continue to remain, at least, among the followers of other faiths.

The most important thing, perhaps, to be noted in the issue of conversion is the enthusiasm of the whole Muslim community to share their faith with other people. They sincerely believe that their religion is superior to all other religions of the world. The Muslims have respect for the faith of others but some of the latter's religious observances are not appreciated or approved by the former since they smack of polytheism and idolatry. They wish to remove idolatry, materialism, and discrimination in the name of caste, colour, and country from the world, and, then, to establish the worship of the one true God. This will promote equality, justice, peace, prosperity, and brotherhood in the world. In other words, they work for the reign of God on earth. Millions of people all over the world are attracted to these total liberative forces and the noble teachings of Islam and so embrace it with joy, freedom, and conviction.