

**Reversion:  
Why do ‘Christian Converts’ from Islam Return to their Old Religion?  
What Can Be Done to Prevent It?**

John Span

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**Abstract**

There is much to celebrate worldwide in terms of unprecedented numbers of Muslims coming to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior. The global church has the welcome challenge of discipling these new worshippers of the biblical Jesus and to integrate them into the life of the church. These are wonderful challenges to face.

At the same time, just as there are encouraging statistics of growing numbers of ex-Muslims now in Christ (xMnCs), there is a statistic that few missionaries want to talk about. It is the worrisome number of so-called converts who return to Islam. Patrick Johnstone’s engaging question below sets the tone for this study, which establishes the need for this research, briefly examines biblical and Qur’anic terms for apostasy, considers a number of historical examples, identifies common themes, and then proposes some antidotes. Concerning those who fall away, Johnstone (2008:12) asks: “How many of those who find the pressures too hard, the Christians around them too unwelcoming, or the replacement for the close-knit societal and family network such large hurdles that they leave their new faith in Christ and return to Islam?”

**Key Words:** antidotes, apostasy, Parable of the Sower, reversion

**Introduction**

In 1991, a veteran missionary, Ken Wycherley, who had planted churches in several Muslim-majority cities, reported that between 80 to 90% of the so-called converts from Islam returned to Islam in a short time. His observation was that the cause of this phenomenon was “incomplete conversion” and what he called “premature births” (Wycherley as cited by Greenlee 1996:26). Erich Bridges reported a similar statistic in a 1997 article, in which he interviewed a long-term missionary with the Southern Baptist Convention, working in the Middle East. This person reported that frequently these converts are alone and “don’t have fellowship with other believers. Most of them revert to Islam after a short time. Some say 90 percent of the Muslim converts in the Middle East have reverted to Islam—if not to agnosticism—within the first year after they decide to follow Christ” (Bridges 1997:1).

In 2004, Nik Ripken reported on a global study on the persecution of Christians. He noted an alarming number of Christian women who had come out of Islam returning to their former religion when their husbands died or were martyred (Ripken 2004). Further details are below.

In 2005, Thomas Walsh conducted a study of British ex-Muslims and their integration into the church. He interviewed people from varied backgrounds, including ‘Paul’ of Punjabi background and ‘Deborah’ of Iranian background (Walsh 2005:48). Both had been Christians for over 20 years, and they suggested that reversion to Islam often occurs when the church does not address “the totality of life” among ex-Muslim converts. Paul cited a statistic of 70 to 90% who return to Islam when the “social, cultural, political and also spiritual *raison d’être*” of Islam are not addressed by the church.

Two different doctoral dissertations by Craig Dunning and Kathryn Kraft, both of which document conversions by Muslims to Christianity, acknowledge the need for further study on the phenomenon of reversions (Dunning 2014:291; Kraft 2007:214).

These studies, albeit with somewhat limited data, suggest that reversions are occurring, and perhaps at a much higher rate than has been admitted by the Christian mission enterprise before.

### **Apostasy and “Double Apostasy”**

A study of both the Bible and the Qur’an shows that they are aware of the possibility of adherents of a religion to depart from it. Both of these texts describe this process as apostasy. The Old Testament uses Hebrew terms derived from the root *sh-b* or “to turn/return,” also translated as “backsliding” [Heb. *m<sup>e</sup>šûbâ*] (Jer 2:19; 3:6, 8, 11, 12, 22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hos 14:5). In the New Testament, two main words are used to describe the phenomenon of “falling away”: *aphístēmi* is used in Jesus’ parable of the Sower describing the seed that had no root (also I Tim 4:1), and *parapíptōto* describes those who had tasted “the heavenly gift” and then had “fallen away” (Heb 6:4–6). Elsewhere, apostasy could apply to the action of one who puts his “hand to the plow and looks back” (Lk 9:62), to Demas (2 Tim 4:10) whom the apostle Paul described as a deserter who “loved the world,” and to descriptions of false teachers who were once part of a local body of believers (Acts 20:29).

The Qur’an uses the *r-d-d* word stem which contains the idea of turning back/returning/denial/refusal (Q.2:217; 5:54; 47:25). The terms *radd* (apostasy) or *murtadd* (apostate/renegade/turncoat) are derived from that r-d-d stem.

In this study, we will focus strictly on reversions back to Islam [Muslim→Christian→Muslim]. We will see that the first part of the progression, (M→C), as well as the response of Islam to this stage, have a large influence on the second part (C→M).

Prior to proceeding further with this investigation, we must define a few terms. We are using the term “reversions” to mean a return back to a former state; in this case, it is used to describe the action of Muslims who claimed a Christian profession and then returned to Islam. Others have called these “reconversions,” “deconversions,” “relapses,” or “attrition.” At times, Muslims have stated that their movement away from a religion to Islam is not a conversion, but a reversion, because they suggest that Islam is the original primordial religion, and thus they say that a person is simply returning to its source. When we speak of conversion, we use it to describe M→C as the process whereby a person consciously becomes an informed worshipper of the biblical Jesus, via true repentance and faith, and has a conscious identity of being a new creation in Christ and a part of his body of worldwide believers.

If we combine Islamic and Christian points of view, these persons could be said to be “double apostates” as they have apostatized both in the eyes of Islam and Christianity. It is outside of the scope of this paper to delineate the schools of thought in Islam on the punishment for apostasy, but suffice it to say that an Islamic attitude is always that the apostate is a polluting element in the Muslim community and must be persuaded to return to the *ummah* in this life, also with the threat of eternal punishment in the next life. These dynamics appear in some of the anecdotes below.

### **Pressures to Return to Islam**

The following accounts are of men and women who left Islam to follow Christ and who encountered various pressures to return to Islam. These accounts are from India, Indonesia, Canada, Bangladesh, North Africa, Egypt, South Africa, and the Middle East.

### **The Story of Former Muslim Women**

In her study of conversion experiences in Israel/Palestine, Kathryn Kraft observed the pressures to revert back to Islam, and one case of actual reversion among the women she interviewed. In the first case, a woman became a Christian a few months after her husband and her family used various inducements to facilitate her return to Islam. Fortunately, she rejected them. Kraft's first-hand report reads, "My brother called my family [in our home country] and told them. They started talking to and about me. They would send gifts, nice gifts (sweets, flowers...) with Quranic verses slipped in them, to try to call me back to Islam. ...To this day, they think my faith is really [my husband's] fault and they don't even really blame me in some ways" (Kraft 2007:140).

Kraft also reported that, after assembling all of the data of her interviews, she learned that one of the interviewees had returned to Islam, even though she presented herself as a bona fide Christian during the interview process. Kraft learned from some of her Christian friends that this person may have been pretending to be a Christian (Kraft 2007:84-85).

Nik Ripken, who worked for many years in the Horn of Africa, collaborated with a number of researchers to conduct worldwide interviews of Christians enduring persecution (Ripken 2004). Data from 48 countries, involving 450 interviews, was collated and the results published. The study found that eight out of ten or 80% of xMnCs were male and 20% were female. Frequently these men had a three-to-five-year journey to Christian faith. They led their wives to the same faith, but over the course of only three-to-six months. The study also showed that "most" of these women "cannot describe a Christ-centered faith experience apart from her husband's" nor "articulate how to share her Christian faith with another woman." The section concludes with the sobering words, "many women reported to be MBBs [Muslim background believers] returned to Islam immediately following the death or martyrdom of their husbands" (Ripken, 2004:20).

Ripken's data raises questions about the quality of discipleship of these women, how much of an Islamic ethos is still in their homes, and how the local body of Christ engages these women. Similarly, Kraft's data shows the pressures on women to revert to Islam and the way that Islamic society ascribes a linkage of a woman's faith to that of her husband.

### **The Story of Nathaniel Sabat**

Henry Martyn, famed missionary to India, had a translation helper with the Christian name Nathaniel Sabat. Sabat, whose given name was Jabal, arrived in India with a profession of faith due to witnessing the martyrdom of one of his friends and to reading the Bible. Local missionaries quickly baptized him. They sent him with a salary to Martyn, and in 1807 he began to help translating portions of the Bible into Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. In 1814, Sabat formally renounced Christianity and wrote a defense of Islam with the title, *The Sabatian Proofs which support the pillars of Muhammadan religion, and subvert the columns of the abrogated Christian faith* (Wali 1925). He printed 600 copies at his own expense and distributed them widely. Sabat stated that he had become a so-called Christian "only to comprehend and expose the doctrines of

Christianity.” Later it was suggested that he had turned back to Christianity, but Islamic accounts of his life call that into question.

### **The Story of a ‘Batak’: A Man from Sumatra**

In his account of 11 years of working among the Batak people of Sumatra, Gottfried Simon relates the challenges of the new life for converts out of Islam. He relates a letter that he had received from a fellow missionary detailing a Batak’s own admission of a dual-life.

The sorrow God has sent upon me is too great, and the temptation too severe. I cannot endure. I have become a Mohammedan that I may again have a wife. I have received my portion from God, like the Prodigal Son. I will consume it with riotous living. The good seed has fallen with me among thorns and been choked by them. I am now a lost sheep, which is lost in the wilderness. May other Christians not imitate my conduct. I have not become a Mohammedan because I really consider the religion of the Mohammedan a good one. I know that the Lord Jesus is alive and sitting at the right hand of God in heaven. Five of my people have already died as Christians. My purpose used to be never to be parted from them. My prayer now is that master (the missionary) and his wife would help me to lead my wife over to Christianity, so that I, like the Prodigal, may return from the far country to God our Father (Simon 1912:323-324).

### **Two Students**

In his documentation of the process of conversions to Islam and to Christianity in South Africa, Andreas Maurer acknowledged the phenomenon of reversions back to Islam (Maurer 1999:161). Maurer’s analysis shows that material inducements can be the cause of so-called conversions and that when they are removed, the person reverts. He relates the story of ‘C2’s’ friend who came to South Africa to “find a better life,” a job, and was attracted by the love of Christians and their witness. He attended Bible college for three months (just long enough to obtain a residency visa), was baptized, and made all the motions of “accepting” Christ prior to his return to Islam. Maurer observes that he simply used Christians for material advantage but doubts that he was a true convert at all.

A student of West African Muslim descent came to a Canadian Bible college (Eyewitness 2019). He came as a Christian and enrolled in the Bachelor’s program. According to a fellow student, his story as the son of a village chief, his ethnic background, and his sports ability accorded him a “rock-star” status. At the Bible college, there were two groups of students: those who were serious about discipleship, and those who took alcohol consumption, bar hopping, and dancing as something to be flirted with. Diallo associated with the latter group during his stay. As much as Diallo showed healthy signs of respect for the book of the Bible and strongly objected to its use as a doorstop, worldly attractions and ties to his former identity as a Muslim of nobility exerted strong pulls on his life. Eventually, he left the Bible college and returned to Islam.

### **A Southeast Asian**

Peter Kwang-Hee Yun relates a poignant story in his comprehensive study of converts to Christianity in Bangladesh. This narrative (with the pseudonym ‘YO4’) details responses to persecution by a former Muslim who became a Christian, the advice of the person who introduced this man to Christ, and the convert’s self-preservation technique.

My friends were calling me a *guru* [leader or teacher]. But, after several days of the news being spread of my family's religious change, our village religious leaders called a social judgment meeting. They asked my family, "Did you become Christians?" I replied honestly "Yes." After listening to my answer, they decided to make us *ek ghore* [family which is banned]. They forbade us to get water for drinking and washing, communication with other neighbors, shopping at the local markets for foods.... After that, during the nights, they threw stones to my house and sometimes put excrement in my house. The son of a religious leader spit on my body. After suffering for one month, my father had had brain stroke. And, my body became very skinny. People said that Allah gave his punishment to the betrayer, meaning me. I called my gospel introducer, a pastor of my *Jama'at*. He said to me, "You have to endure these kinds of persecutions." With help of one Hindu family, we could survive for one year.

Next year, our village religious leaders called for another bigger meeting where they forced my family members to come back to Islam. They warned us, "Leave this village tonight if you want to keep Christians. Or you can *touba* [repent] your false and go back to being a Muslim." I thought that we don't have any land out of this house. We can't live outside of this place. That time, I called my pastor and he advised me to maintain Islam outside, but continue to have fellowship with our *Jama'at* and keep faith as followers of 'Isa. They brought me to a field at night without my family and beat me. By persuasion of my father, we came back to Muslim family publicly. But, I do not attend any Muslim religious meetings. They had another idea to keep me a Muslim by marrying a Muslim woman. Being forced by community pressure, I married a Muslim woman without willing agreement of my parents and me. But, I still continued to present at my *Jama'at* from time to time without informing my family members and kept my faith in 'Isa (Kwang-Hee Yun 2015:132).

## Two Men from North Africa

Known as the first Egyptian convert to ask for an official change of religious status from Muslim to Christian, Mohammed Hegazy (b. 1982) converted in 1996 (Winer 2010:96). His conversion and his request to the authorities in 2007 invoked the wrath of his family, who eventually reported him to the authorities as an apostate. In 2008 his father openly stated, "I am going to try to talk to my son and convince him to return to Islam. If he refuses, I am going to kill him with my own hands." At that time Hegazy responded,

I would like to send a message to my dad. I saw what you said in the newspapers. You say you want to kill me; to shed my blood in public. But I love you so much because you are my dad and because Jesus taught me to love. I accepted Jesus Christ willingly and nobody forced me. I forgive you. No matter what decision you make. No matter what you do. To my dad and mom, I say Jesus Christ died to save me.

On July 30, 2016, however, Hegazy made a YouTube video in which he said the Islamic confession of faith, the shahadah, and announced that he left Christianity and returned to Islam. What are some of the factors that led to this reversion?

After his conversion, due to threats from family members, Hegazy and his family had to go into hiding. At this time he also documented abuses that Egyptian Christians were suffering and appeared on a US television channel, al-Hayat. Eventually, his wife and daughter fled to

Germany where they received asylum status. In 2009, a group of Islamists called for the charge of blasphemy against him, as they alleged that his departure from Islam cast it into a bad light.

In June 2014 he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for his filming—without official authorization—the suffering of Christians in the Minya area, at the hands of local Muslims. Hegazy’s lawyer, Kharam Ghobrial, states that during his imprisonment the authorities did everything possible to break his spirit, including physical and psychological abuse with Hegazy eventually becoming suicidal. His lawyer is convinced that Hegazy’s YouTube video was scripted, done under pressure, and a self-survival tactic on his part. After his prompt release, Hegazy stated, “...But praise be to God who strengthens me in Islam. I am not coming today to talk about specific things, because it was a personal thing between a person and God. But I am coming today because I hurt a lot of people in my family and my friends and caused them a lot of problems” (Morning Star News 2016).

In his account of life and ministry in North Africa, Don Little relates the story of ‘Mostafa,’ a 23-year-old who had become a Christian and was discipled by his colleagues. Little observed that this young man was highly enthusiastic and was entrusted with a cell group of four new believers which he had helped to start. After a two-year absence, Little returned to find Mostafa struggling with his faith due to a “number of bad experiences with expatriate workers and fellow believers” (Little 2009:1). Mostafa’s struggles persisted for three years, after which time he left the area, found a good job, married a Muslim wife, returned to Islam, and cut off all ties with his former house church. Little observed that seven years after a “brief stint” as a Christian believer Mostafa had completely returned to Islam.

### **Observations about These Stories**

These stories show that there is an interplay between responses to persecution, to the motives of the convert, to the examples of surrounding Christians [whether nominal or committed], to missionaries, to the presentation of the gospel, and to subsequent discipleship. Several stories illustrate what Roland Miller described as the Islamic community’s response to someone’s apostasy:

The essence of the blasphemous act [of conversion to Christianity] is the rupture of the fabric of the sacred community that God has chosen and graced. So serious is the sin considered to be that traditional Islam has even pre-empted the eschatological judgment of God by turning it into a case for immediate communal action against the erring person, ranging from social ostracism to death (Miller 2002:229).

Here are some more particular observations:

1. In the case of Christian women of a Muslim background, the study by Ripken would indicate that much training needs to be done for their Christian husbands and their churches to insist that they are deeply trained in the ways of the Lord. It appears that the Islamic idea that a woman is saved by her allegiance to her husband might still play a role in the fact that she might not have known her own identity in Christ.
2. Conversion to Christianity is very difficult and involves significant persecution from surrounding Muslims at the social, physical, economic and spiritual levels. One could say that the conversions of ‘YO4’ and Hegazy caused what could be described as a virulent autoimmune rejection reaction by local Muslims. Some writers have compared this reaction to transplant

rejection. It appears that Batak and Mostafa encountered much less overt persecution, but the temptation to compromise came through other avenues.

3. The first advice of the pastor of the worship gathering (*Jama'at*) to 'YO4' was to endure persecution even in the face of being called a "betrayers" and of having invoked the wrath of Allah. The second piece of advice (assuming it was the same pastor) as a response to increased persecution was to become a hybrid or chameleon Muslim-Christian.

4. The threats of the larger Islamic community of expulsion from his land were enough to cause 'YO4' to make concessions to their demands, including marrying a Muslim woman—something that Mostafa might have done willingly. In Batak's case, it was his desire to marry that caused him to present himself as a Muslim. 'YO4's' yielding to his father's urging also caused him to make concessions, going as far as to declare publicly his allegiance to his Muslim family. Hegazy also succumbed to family pressure and eventually moved in with his parents after his public declaration that he had left Christianity.

5. In the case of Diallo, the lures of earthly accolades and pleasures were very strong. Diallo thus maintained a "rock-star" status. For Hegazy, it is possible that the publicity and appearances on television caused him to have incurred the wrath of the authorities, and it is an open question as to whether this was wise in his local context. It is possible that the economic rewards of Mostafa's new job contributed to his departure from Christianity.

6. All interviewees gave appearances of having converted to Christianity. Some seemed genuine, and others spurious. Some were rushed into baptism (e.g. Sabat, women interviewees in Ripken's study) or received material benefits (e.g., Sabat, C2's friend).

7. 'YO4' was encouraged to maintain two identities, namely that of a Muslim and that of a follower of Jesus. It is possible that Sabat maintained a dual identity as a type of espionage, while Batak appears to be more of a crypto-Christian, and it is possible that Hegazy is the same.

8. It is unknown if 'YO4' had children, but we know that Hegazy has a daughter. A critical research need is to examine the second and third generation of xMnCs to see if they are still walking in the Christian faith.

9. Conflict with both expatriate and local believers played a role in the decline of Mostafa's Christian fervor.

### **Categories Influencing Reversions**

An analysis of these stories suggests that six major areas of influence on reversions are possible. These areas do not operate independently but more as facets of a unified whole.

The first are what we will call "missionary induced" reversions. In these stories, one can see the effects of expatriates promising and delivering jobs, visas, and money, as well as putting some of these new converts on a pedestal. Part of the back-story, as Wycherley and others have observed, are the effects of preaching a shallow gospel and shallow sense of sin, allowing spurious repentance/conversions, and of a failure to outline the cost of discipleship. Conflict between missionaries and nationals also came into play.

A second area includes the motivations of converts [or so-called converts]. As much as the heart-motivation of a person is hard to know, it would appear that a few cases exhibited mixed

motives, as some sought to use Christians' kindness and largesse for their own personal gain. At times, the hidden goal was to gain better status via employment or acceptance into Bible schools. Sabat's own words would indicate that he was a type of "double-agent," pretending to learn about Christianity but using this knowledge to subvert Christianity.

Thirdly, persecution dynamics came into play. Some appeared to have had some preparation for the eventuality of suffering, but others seemed poorly prepared. Ripken observes that the degree to which missionaries have a solid biblical theology of suffering plays a vital role in their understudies. The degree to which a person was enfolded and upheld by a group of local Christians also played a role.

Theological dynamics that come into play include preaching and teaching on regeneration, repentance, conversion, the substance of the gospel, the sinfulness of sin, the cost of discipleship, and suffering.

Mission agency and sending church factors also seem to come into play. For example, if a mission agency acquiesces to the demands for success stories from sending churches, likely it will develop ways and means to return with a message such as "baptisms are booming." Also, these institutions have an eschatology of hastening the coming of Jesus and will likely develop outreach methods with a focus on "need for speed" and seek out methodologies that promise rapid multiplication (Wu 2014).

Finally, we consider church dynamics. The story from Ripken shows a need for discipleship programs that contain a healthy critique of local cultures and their influence. In this case, it appears that women and their husbands maintained a rather Islamic view of marriage, with women seen as less than valuable and, likely, the women maintaining a less than healthy dependence on their husbands for their salvation. In the case of Diallo, a factor that came into play was the quality of disciples who surrounded him. As much as Mostafa had other believers around him, his conflicts with them and other pressures caused him to drift. There have also been frequent reports of national established churches refusing to enfold new converts from Islam, and some ex-Muslims report that they are lonely and cut off both from their former Islamic social networks and now from Christian fellowship.

### **Ten Antidotes to Reversion**

There is a growing body of literature that stresses the need for deep and healthy discipleship in converts from Islam. Most of these authors are painfully aware of the reality of reversion. Don Little and Nik Ripken have gone on to publish texts on suffering and discipleship (Little 2015; Ripken 2008). Others, such as Johnny Elbitar in his dissertation, "From Conversion to Assimilation: Developing a Missional Ecclesiology to Retain Converted Muslims to Christ in North America," see the need to accentuate retention strategies rather than increasing rates of conversion (Elbitar 2017). Sarah Yoon stresses the need for better discipleship methods among women (Yoon 2015).

What follows are highlights, rather than extensive treatments, of ten areas that could be implemented to prevent reversions.

a. Follow Wycherley's advice that acts of "costly discipleship" are important. Insist on a clear presentation of the cost of discipleship to seekers, along with highlighting stories of those who resisted the pressure to return to Islam (such as Kraft's interviewee).



- b. Follow Wycherley and Ripken’s advice that long rather than short, and deep rather than shallow, discipleship prior to baptism is critical.
- c. Follow the advice of Thomas Walsh’s interviewees that the enfolding of new believers out of Islam is critical, and have this enfolding address the “totality” of the old Islamic worldview as Ripken noted. The former Muslim Nur Armagan, echoed elsewhere, suggests that most reversions happen within two years of conversion, while rarely after five years (Armagan 2010; Meral 2006). He suggests three “safety nets” which can prevent reversions: relevant theology, the conscious integration of new believers into a Christian community, and a holistic discipleship strategy. This is very much a church-based approach. Similarly, James Pursley stresses that barriers to discipleship for those who have left Islam include theology, biblical narratives, spiritual disciplines, church attendance/discipline, finances, ethics, relationships, family, marriage, childrearing, and folk practices, as well as “residual influences of their former Muslim worldview and primary sources (Qur’an, *Hadith*, *Sirat*)”. He recommends, “Muslim primary sources and worldviews must be intentionally deconstructed and reconstructed upon the Bible and the Christian worldview for the BMB to grow spiritually” (Pursley 2019:iv).
- d. Examine the missionaries’ motivations and whether the idol of success drives their efforts. Do the same for mission agencies and ask hard questions whether their lionizing of new converts from Islam has hindered more than helped.
- e. Depend on local believers, as Ripken and others have observed, to look for telltale signs of spurious conversions, as well as to entrust discipleship to mature local believers.
- f. Utilize methods of gospel presentation that preach the whole counsel of God, along with the need for conviction of sin, genuine repentance, and genuine conversion. Consider the material by Will Metzger in his *Tell the Truth* (2012) which compares and contrasts the approaches and results of human vs. God-centered evangelism.
- g. Take into account that Islam engenders spiritual bondages that new converts will need to reckon with. Mark Durie’s work *Liberty to the Captives* (2013) addresses this dynamic.
- h. Refuse to adopt insider movement paradigms which engender the phenomenon of chameleon or dual-identity “Christians” who ultimately, as one former Muslim privately observed, “are neither good for Christianity nor good for Islam.”
- i. Pray for crypto-Christians who live a conflicted life, such as is possible with Hegazy, and definitely the case for Batak, the man from Sumatra.
- j. Stress that adoption of a theology of suffering is not an option for missionaries, mission agencies, churches, and new converts. It is part of discipleship.

## Conclusion

The stark reality of reversions back to Islam calls for much more honesty on the part of Christians to recognize their existence. There is also a critical need for a rigorous theological analysis of the motivations and methods of missionaries, mission agencies, and churches, along with much greater dependence on the wisdom of national believers, especially mature ones, who have come out of Islam. The weak or non-existent ecclesiology of some missionary methods must come under scrutiny, and viable alternatives must be proposed.

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