

Crisis and Conversion: Lessons from Conversion in the Middle East

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Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of conversion among Arab Muslims from Islam to Christianity. Utilizing Lewis Rambo's Model of Conversion as the theoretical lens, the study analyzes original qualitative research of conversion narratives. The article discusses: (1) the role of crisis in initiating conversion journeys; (2) the relationship between conversion barriers and crisis; (3) the nature of crisis and its relationship to converts' decisions to repent and commit to Christ; and (4) a comparison of this conversion trajectory with a stereotypical model. The article concludes with concrete suggestions for evangelistic ministry that can be applied in any context.

Keywords: evangelism, conversion, crisis, barriers, repentance

Introduction

Why do people convert? That is, why do people leave one religion and turn to another religion? More specifically, why do Muslims leave Islam and turn to faith in Christ? This is an interesting question to those working in the Muslim world. For many mission workers, the birth and growth of indigenous churches are not as fast as they would hope, hence they often wonder what they can do, if anything, to better reach the Muslims they are working with. While this article is focused on those living in the Arab Muslim world, many of the principles discussed will likely be applicable as well to those working among Hindu, Buddhist, and peoples of other religious traditions.

The focus of this article considers conversion to Christianity through a sociological lens, bound by theological propositions. The article discusses: (1) the role of crisis in initiating conversion journeys; (2) the relationship between conversion barriers and crisis; (3) the nature of crisis and its relationship to converts' decisions to repent and commit to Christ; and (4) a comparison of this conversion trajectory with a stereotypical model. The study concludes with concrete suggestions for evangelistic ministry that can be applied in any context. This article is not meant to be a comprehensive view of evangelistic ministry to Muslims but rather to help refine the work that mission workers are already doing.

The research project that informs this article was conducted in 2021, interviewing believers of a Muslim background with the purpose of understanding their conversion stories. As noted earlier, conversion is understood here as the process of leaving one worldview and adopting another worldview. In this case, we will consider people who have left Islam and followed Christ. The qualitative study conducted interviews with nine people over six months. Interviews were with both men and women, and ages ranged from 18 years old to 45 years old. There were Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, and there were two people who lived in a religiously mixed household, one with a Christian mother.

Conversion Through the Theological Lens and the Sociological Lens

Conversion can be examined through both a theological lens and a sociological lens. This article has four assumptions when viewed through a theological lens. First, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that causes someone to convert. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes,

and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Second, it is not possible for any Christian mission worker to fully see how the Lord is working in someone’s heart. The Mission worker may think the Lord is working in someone’s heart, and they are ready to come to faith, but then the person never does (Matt. 13:20-21). Other times, those who seem the least open are the ones who come to Christ. Third, there is a conversion paradox. While conversion happens through the work of the Holy Spirit, there also is a responsibility for people to respond to the gospel. People are not passive, and individuals bear responsibility to respond to the gospel through repentance (Acts 2:38). Lastly, people can only respond to the gospel call when they respond to a verbal call to believe in Christ (Romans 10:14). People do not come to saving faith in Jesus without having someone tell them, whether that is through a face-to-face conversation, reading Scripture or a book, or listening or watching programming online. God has ordained that he will bring people into his kingdom through the work of his saints.

Viewing conversion through a sociological lens seeks to understand how group interactions influence the individuals’ decisions to convert from one religion to another. Lewis Rambo’s “Understanding Religious Conversion” provides a key theoretical lens through which this article’s research project was structured. Rambo, in his book *Religious Conversion*, suggests that conversion begins when a person has a crisis (Rambo, 1993). To describe the process in a concrete manner here, a theoretical story of “Faisal” will be used. *Crisis* is the dissatisfaction Faisal has with his current belief system, which then leads him on a *quest* to resolve that dissatisfaction. When Faisal *encounters* a new religious system or worldview such as Christianity, he *interacts* with the new belief system—learning about the beliefs, the community, and what Christians are supposed to do. As he considers this new religion, he makes a *commitment* to the new worldview. This commitment leads to *consequences*—a new set of behaviors that align with the new religion Faisal has committed to. The process just described can be summarized as follows:

Crisis → Quest → Encounter → Interaction → Commitment → Consequences

While converting from one religion to another is one way for Faisal to resolve his crisis, that outcome is not inevitable. His crisis could result in other decisions. Faisal’s religious commitment could intensify, meaning he could become a more devout Muslim. He might also change the sect of Islam he associates with, such as going from being a nominal Sunni to a devout Wahabi.

Focusing on Faisal's crisis and religious commitment through a theological lens could lead to discounting Rambo's and others' sociological explanations--based simply on an assumption that theological and sociological explanations inherent contradict each other. However, viewing conversion through a theological and a sociological lens does not necessarily result in blurred vision due to those two lenses allegedly being opposed to each other. God's creation of the entire world, including all people in it, should lead to compatibility between biblically grounded theological and sound sociological observations of that world. If there are contradictions between biblical teaching and either theological or sociological conclusions, Scripture takes precedent. However, properly viewing conversion either theologically or sociologically should lead to compatible understandings and analyses. The Bible in fact gives examples of how the Holy Spirit uses a crisis in someone's life to push them toward the gospel. The woman at the well was an outcast in her own community and clearly looking for acceptance (John 4:1-26). The Philippian Jailer experienced an acute crisis of what he might consider a near death experience (Acts 16:25-40). In both of these cases, there seems to be a crisis that propels people to search, or be open to,

another worldview. The Bible confirms theological and sociological explanations of how a crisis can initiate people's conversion journeys.

The Role of Crisis in Initiating Conversion Journeys

Crisis is often the starting point of the path to conversion. This section will look more closely at crisis. Crisis that motivates an individual to consider an alternate belief system is precipitated by a catalyst. Rambo (1993) identifies multiple types of such catalysts:

- mystical experience that does not fit the previous worldview
- near-death experience
- illness or healing
- growing dissatisfaction with life (“Is this all there is?”)
- desire to experience God
- higher state of consciousness (produced by either drugs or religious experience)
- protean selfhood (the desire to find something new)
- pathology
- apostasy
- external factors

Every person interviewed for the research project had a crisis that propelled them out of Islam. The catalysts were varied—for one person it was sickness, for another person it was dissatisfaction with Islam and its theology. One person had a mystical experience in the form of dreams. Another person had strained relationships with their family. Another person lost a key scholarship, which crushed their ego. In each case, the dissatisfaction led the individual to ask, “What can I do about this? How can I find happiness and satisfaction?”

When Islam did not provide satisfactory answers to their questions, people were driven to look for answers outside of Islam. Often this decision was not an immediate rejection of Islamic theology or practice, but rather people took small steps to look outside of Islam and concurrently began a slow disconnection from Islamic rituals such as regular salat, or strict fasting. This external behavior was driven by and reinforced an internal identity shift. While they may not have left Islam explicitly, Islam played an increasingly smaller role in their lives. Functionally, every person disconnected from Islam.

This pattern was consistent. Every person interviewed left Islam before they decided to come to Christ. But leaving Islam did not coincide with coming to Christ: These were two separate processes. On average, there was a period of two years between leaving Islam and coming to Christ. When people did come to Christ, it was when they encountered a Christian who could walk with them in their journey. The Christian could show them how Christ and Scripture answered their questions. This discussion included the problem of sin, the need for repentance, and salvation through faith in Christ. A crisis seems to be an essential part of the conversion process.

Crisis and Barriers

One factor that influences the likelihood of a crisis leading to conversion consists of the barriers to conversion in the wider society. This section will further outline crisis and the relationship between crisis and barriers to conversion.

First, simply because someone experiences challenging life circumstances does not mean that the person will experience a crisis. For example, two Muslim women might both have a deeper desire to know or experience God. The first woman may continue to look for experiences in Islamic rituals such as prayer, folk Islamic practices, or going on Hajj and find those experiences satisfactory enough to remain Muslim. The second woman may start looking outside of Islam at other religions or religious communities. This search may lead her to finding information online about Christ. Or she may start to ask questions of the Christians she knows around her. In neither case did difficult circumstances lead to a crisis.

Second, crisis does not automatically lead to conversion. One factor influencing whether a person converts consists of the barriers to conversion in the wider society. Rambo (1993) identifies barriers to conversion that include both societal and individual factors, including:

- Stability of the society: the more stable the society, the less incentive there is to convert.
- The societal attitude towards conversion: the more negatively conversion is viewed, the lower the likelihood of conversion.
- Homogeneity of the society: the more uniform the broader society, the less exposure and acceptance the society has to people from other worldviews.
- Personal disadvantages of conversion: the higher the social cost to the individual, the less likely someone is to convert.
- How far away the new belief is from their old belief: someone considering a new religion will be less likely to convert, compared to someone switching sects.
- The totality of the world view: The more comprehensive the world view (such as Islam), the less likely the person will be to convert.

The presence of barriers can influence conversion in two ways. First, the greater the barriers, the greater the crisis needs to be to trigger a quest that leads a person out of Islam. Second, a crisis may need to be prolonged in order to result in a person making the choice to leave Islam, and then decide to follow Christ. To give an analysis of my context, we live in a city where the society and government are stable, the population has been homogenous until the last 15 years, there are no personal advantages to conversion, and conversion is viewed extremely negatively. Almost every local person is Muslim, and there are no local believers in Christ. The barriers to conversion are very high. Therefore, a crisis would need to be either incredibly immediate and acute or prolonged over a long period of time.

This relationship between barriers and crisis was consistent with the research. Most interviewees from the study came from situations where there were relatively lower barriers to conversion. In one case, the father of a convert already identified as an atheist. In another case, a convert had previously switched from one sect of Islam to another sect of Islam before converting to Christianity. In another case, a convert had a parent who was a Christian. These lower barriers meant that people were more likely to convert. Those who came from families where barriers to conversion were higher had more acute crises—dreams of Jesus, or problems with demonic activity.

It is possible for a Muslim to immediately decide follow Christ before deconverting from Islam. However, it seems that there are two situations where a conversion without leaving Islam is likely to be the case. Either the person lives in a society where the barriers to conversion are low, or the crisis is so acute that they need immediate answers to the crisis, and that answer is

immediately found in Christ. While instances of acute crisis occasionally occur, and we rejoice when it does, such situations seem to be the exception in places where barriers are high.

Crisis and Repentance

While the thesis of this article is that crisis leads to conversion, repentance must be included and accounted for. Repentance is not just a part of conversion: it is at the center of conversion. Mark tells us that "...Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe in the gospel,'" (emphasis mine). Repentance means turning (Strong's Greek: 3341 *μετάνοια*, n.d.). Scripture teaches that we are to turn from sinful behaviors and false doctrine. We turn to Christ, believing in his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 2:8-9), and committing to following the ethics of Christ (Col. 3:12-17). One cannot understand Christian conversion without repentance.

While some people's crisis might be that they feel guilty for their sin, and this drives them to seek better alternatives for their guilt, this is not the case for many people. In all the interviews conducted for this research, the individual experienced a crisis that acted as a catalyst that drove them to leave Islam. However, instead of a crisis of feeling guilty of their sin, their crisis was due to what Engel calls a felt need (Engel, 1990). The crisis of one woman, "Fatima," had to do with dissatisfaction with life: she was depressed, exams were stressing her out, and she wanted healing for her mom. None of the problems she expressed had to do with the concern that sin had separated her from God, and she did not know how to resolve that problem. Rather, she was drawn to the solutions that God had for her life overall. Faith in Jesus helped her to answer those questions.

Therefore, mission workers need to make the connection between the individual's felt need and the call to repentance. Using the example of "Fatima" above, one might help her make that connection as follows: "God offers peace amid stress. But to get that peace, God requires that we submit to him, and that the sin that separates us from God be removed. We cannot do that on our own, but Jesus takes the punishment of our sin in his death on the cross. If we only repent and believe in Jesus, we have access to God and the peace he offers." In this case, the role of the mission worker is to make the connection between resolving the crisis, God's work, and the need to resolve the relationship with God through Jesus's death on the cross through repentance.

Suggesting a Model of Conversion

One theme in the research was that the person who converted to Christianity had left Islam before they took any significant steps to explore Christianity. It was an average of two years between leaving Islam and coming to Christ. This process contrasts with what might be considered a typical trajectory of conversion:

- Step 1: Encounter a Christian
- Step 2: Hear the gospel/biblical ideas and observe Christian behavior
- Step 3: Study the Bible
- Step 4: Decide that Christianity is a better alternative than Islam
- Step 5: Decide to convert to Christianity

Considering the research and an understanding of conversion as discussed above, I would suggest a reordered process, particularly in places where barriers to conversion are high:

- Step 1: Crisis, and deconversion from Islam

Step 2: Encounter a Christian

Step 3: Hear the Gospel/biblical ideas and observe Christian behavior

Step 4: Study the Bible

Step 5: Decide to convert to Christianity

In this revised process, a crisis occurs first, accompanied by a deconversion from Islam. After that, meaningful encounters with Christians can occur where the individual can hear the gospel, wrestle with Christian ideas, and consider following Christ. Removed from the “typical” process is weighing Christian and Islamic religions, as the individual has already found Islam wanting.

Though it is after deconversion that a Christian might engage a former Muslim with the gospel, Christian friends and engagement before the crisis is essential. In the research, almost all the people who came to Christ had a Christian in their lives who sacrificially demonstrated Christ’s love to them, softening the convert’s heart to Christian ideas later when they encountered Christ. That Christian did not see the fruit of their labor, but they sowed seeds where others reaped (1 Cor 3:6).

The trajectory proposed above does not mean that people’s stories are “cookie cutter.” The stories of coming to Christ are varied. This study’s research showed people having had different crisis, at different ages, with different backgrounds, and on different timelines, and having explored different options before coming to Christ. Some went back and forth between different worldviews and returned to Islam for a period of time before coming to Christ.

Suggestions for Application

How does this study help us mission workers in Muslim contexts in our evangelistic ministry? Here are five suggestions for application. First, we should remember that we rely totally on the Holy Spirit. People are complex, and trying understand the inner workings of every person to formulate the right strategy and tactics is beyond our ability. The Holy Spirit and Scripture must be our guide as we share Christ and engage in spiritual discussions with our Muslim friends. Remembering that people’s catalyst to leave Islam is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit should also drive us to humility.

Second, there is no one methodological “silver bullet.” While there are methodologies and tools that can be used in ministry in Islamic contexts, we should not be too beholden to a particular ministry method. Rather, we should look to continue to learn and expand our repertoire and tool sets used to share the gospel with Muslims in love. Some Muslims need and want greater engagement with apologetic resources. Others are more interested in understanding what a new community might be. Others have mental health issues that they need help with. Whatever that person’s needs are, mission workers want to be equipped to engage people with the needs they have. No individual will have all the skill sets needed for the variety of people they will encounter. This is why mission workers should be on teams, and teams in the same city should seek to work together and leverage one another’s skill sets.

Third, those working among Muslims might find more fruit by looking for those who have already left Islam. Media ministry has been fruitful in finding those people. By shaping media messaging in line with typical crises that people have in the region where media is being used, the ministry might engage those who are looking for answers to their deepest questions. Additionally, we should be ready to go to the marketplace of ideas in our own contexts, like Paul going to Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). If there is no marketplace of ideas, we might create one—book

clubs and philosophy groups—where people can come and explore other ideas. The people who come to those groups are already looking outside their own worldview for different answers. Not everyone is in crisis, but there is a higher likelihood that someone who is searching for a new worldview will come to groups exploring new and challenging ideas.

Fourth, as much as the Holy Spirit guides us regarding where our Muslim friends are spiritually, mission workers can seek to engage someone according to that person's apparent phase in their spiritual journey. Below is a table (adapted from Rambo's conversion process) of phases in which our Muslim friends might be in their spiritual journey, and how mission workers might be able to engage them with the gospel. The mission workers' focus is always along side of sacrificial love and faithful presence.

Phase	Description	Mission Worker's Focus
Hostile	My friend is unwilling to talk seriously about faith. He or she may be agitated by spiritual conversation.	Build relational trust with my friend. Periodically test the waters for interest in spiritual conversation
Indifferent	My friend is unwilling to talk about spiritual issues for lack of interest.	Look for opportunities to apply Christ's teaching to relevant circumstances and topics.
Open	My friend is open to substantive conversations of faith. He is willing to listen to me and is willing to reason with me. But he is not interested in conversion.	Discuss Christian topics with the aim to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christian faith and following Jesus.
Crisis & Quest	My friend has a question that his world view does not answer, and he is looking elsewhere.	Ask lots of questions and seek to show how Scripture speaks to their crisis. Invite my friend to consider following Jesus.
Encounter & Interaction	My friend is looking at Jesus and wondering what it would look like to follow Jesus.	Help my friend understand sin and repentance, talk through the Christian community, ethics, theology, and practice.
Commitment	My friend is taking steps towards following Jesus, including steps such as confession, baptism, or joining a believing community.	Walk with my friend in their new faith in consistent discipleship.

Fifth, mission workers need to connect the individual's felt need to the message of the gospel. Catalysts are not always directly related to the problem of sin, but the death and resurrection of Jesus is the heart of the gospel message, and repentance from sin is the heart of the gospel response. We should carefully help our friends make this connection: "God offers peace amid stress or need. But to get that peace, God requires that we submit to him, and that the sin that separates us from God be removed. We cannot do that on our own, but Jesus takes the punishment of our sin in his death on the cross. If we only repent and believe in Jesus, we have access to God and the peace he offers." The role of the mission worker is to make the connection between resolving the crisis, God's work, and the need to resolve the relationship with God through Jesus's death on the cross.

Conclusion

Based on this study's research, conversion theory, and biblical precedent, it seems reasonable to conclude that those who convert from Islam to Christianity have had a crisis and will have deconverted from Islam before deciding to follow Christ. With this process in mind, mission workers can look for hints of crisis in people's lives, and seek to show both how the width, breadth, height, and depth of Christ's love speaks to the issues they are wrestling with and how repentance from sin brings them into the kingdom where they find their greatest joy and satisfaction with Christ.

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