

Convenience Conversions In Prison

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Duke of Marlborough was recently interviewed on English television, where he declared that decades ago, when he served time in prison – yes, even dukes go to prison, something to do with a cocaine and heroin habit, and burglaries to pay for it – he became a Muslim in order to obtain more food. Apparently he regarded the halal option as providing more food than regular prison food, and the Duke decided it was worth converting for this ampler meal. He said nothing about its being “better,” but perhaps he also meant that.

And he's not alone. All over the Western world, there are prisoners who convert to Islam, sometimes out of belief, shallow or profound, and often, as with the decadent Duke, for what have been called "convenience conversions." The most important consideration for those behind bars is, of course, security, and conversion to Islam allows one to be a member of what is now – given the high rates of Muslim criminality and incarceration in the Western world – the biggest and baddest gang of them all. A community of bruisers and bruvvers who in prison likely threatened you as an Infidel, but now, once you've converted, will stick up for you as a Muslim.

And still others do so because Muslims apparently get to spend more time out of their cells; presumably this has to do with being allowed to gather in a group with other Muslims to say the five daily prayers. But more about that in a minute.

What shall we say about the Duke's public admission? First, we might ask the Duke if in the time since his incarceration, some decades ago, he has remained a Muslim. His story strongly suggests that he has not. And by announcing on national television that he had once converted to Islam, but that it was done only to improve his dining experience, this is a way of making light of the faith. It seems clear that he jettisoned Islam as soon as he left prison. As long as that remained unknown, he was safe. But now that he's just announced it in as public a fashion as possible, that raises a new problem. For there may be some Muslims in the U.K. who, furious with his attitude, his revelation of his temporary and insincere embrace of Islam, and the alacrity with which he apostatized once he was out of jail, may take it upon themselves to make an example of him, meting out the justice he deserves as an apostate – that is, death. And why not make an example of him, to make sure people know that once they have accepted Islam, no matter what they claim is the reason, they are Muslims for life, and no exceptions are to be made, not even for the Duke of Marlborough?

As it turns out, prisoners need not convert to Islam to be able to chose the halal option. The Duke, whose mind is clearly not of the best, apparently was unaware of this at the time. Or perhaps at that time, some decades ago, you did have to be a Muslim to receive halal meals. Or there is still another possibility: perhaps Jamie Spencer-Churchill (he was not then the Duke) had another reason for converting to Islam, that is, the physical security it provides prisoners, but was embarrassed to admit that, and instead decided he would attribute his conversion not to physical fear of being beaten up, but to the desire for more, or tastier, food. Of course, such concern for his safety would have been perfectly understandable. Imagine all the people who would like to settle their scores with the aristos and the toffs by making life exceedingly unpleasant for any of them who happened to end up behind bars. He would have been a natural target for violence.

And now the Duke faces the prospect of a new worry, that he brought upon himself by the casual revelation of his most temporary conversion, the worry that someone, somewhere, may be getting ready to punish him as an apostate. Such a killing would remind all those who made "convenience conversions" behind bars and simply assumed they could drop Islam once they got out, that it isn't possible.

Should we care about these conversions behind bars? Yes, I think we should. For even when people choose, out of concern for their physical safety, to become Muslims, they may then convince themselves that they really do believe in Islam, and that they converted because of that belief, not out of fear. Who wants to admit, even to himself, that he became a Muslim just because he was scared? You tell not just others, but yourself, that your conversion was prompted by honest belief.

And even just the desire for the halal food option, if accompanied by a public (though false) conversion, can become one more step on the road to real conversion. There's the

matter of pride: "I take my beliefs seriously "(the Duke being a devil-may-care exception to that rule). There's the matter of making sure your fellow Muslims believe you have sincerely converted, lest they decide you have not, and punish you for it. And then there is the matter of avoiding the charge of apostasy. If you convert in jail, whatever the reason or reasons, you may be stuck. Surely, you think, Muslims won't dare to start enforcing Sharia punishments in the West. But they already do. How many, originally "convenience converts," will, once they are out of prison, continue to practice Islam because they are now fearful of leaving the faith? In prison, they may have become Muslims out of concern for their safety; out of prison, they remain Muslims out of concern for their safety. And psychologically, it's easier for them, in or out of prison, if they convince themselves that they truly believe.

It would be far better if the prison authorities made sure that non-Muslim and Muslim prisoners received equal treatment. There's not much that they can do to deal with the violence inside prisons and the perception that Muslims provide better security for fellow Muslims, save to constantly increase the security for all prisoners, coming down hard at the least sign of violence. But for other "convenience conversions," something can be done. It should not be beyond the wit of the prison food services, recognizing that at present the halal food option is apparently deemed superior, to undo that advantage. I do not know if the halal option differs only in the meat that is offered, or if there are other differences in the two menus. But it should be easy to increase the portion size, or add spices to the non-halal meat, or in some other way make that non-halal meal as desirable as the halal option – perhaps provide beer with the non-halal dinners. How can Muslims object to this, when all you are doing is making the non-halal option as desirable as the halal option? And the proof that this policy is working will be the decline in the number of non-Muslims requesting the halal option.

We mentioned above that there is another problem, apparently, in the prisons, which is the perception, and I think the reality, that Muslims are allowed more time out of their cells than non-Muslims. I presume that is because Muslim prisoners are – according to an official document on the treatment of Muslim prisoners put out by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime – to be allowed, whenever possible, to participate in group prayer. For example, the U.N. document insists, “Each Friday, at noon prayer, Muslim prisoners should be allowed to listen to a Muslim religious preacher’s speech and have a group prayer.” The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime’s report on the proper treatment of Muslim prisoners goes further than just that Friday noon khutba-cum-prayer, declaring that “Wherever the facilities and security permit, group or congregational prayer should be facilitated.”

Furthermore, “because the original language of the Koran is Arabic, where educational material is available, Muslim inmates who desire should be permitted to learn Arabic using either, if necessary, volunteer instructors and/or self-study material. Muslim prisoners should also be allowed to meet with Islamic religious leaders to facilitate their study of the religion.” Presumably they would meet those instructors, and with those Islamic religious leaders, either as a group, or individually, in both cases not in prison cells but in the prison library, or perhaps a meeting room made available for the instruction in both Arabic and in Islam. How much extra time out of cells will all that add up to? It seems that the Muslim prisoners are indeed favored. This is in addition to the extra time they might have out of their cells if the group prayer is approved for more than once a week at Friday noon. If they are allowed group prayer for every one of the five daily prayers, it would be an extra 75 minutes every day, except Friday, when the total time might be as much as 90-110 minutes (given the Friday sermon). And I haven’t added the time they might be out of their cells for instruction in Arabic or in Islam. There’s a whole lot of Islam going on in

the prisons of the Western world. Certainly non-Muslim prisoners are right to think that Muslims are being allowed more time out of their cells.

Prison authorities can certainly grant an identical length of time out of their cells to non-Muslim prisoners. However much time the Muslim prisoners are granted out of their cells for group prayer and the Friday sermon, the same amount of time ought to be granted to non-Muslim prisoners. The non-Muslim prisoners could engage in playing cards or chess, or spending time on the library computers, or group Bible study (the reinforcement of Christian belief, as a counterweight to Da'wa, is surely to be encouraged. And Christian ministers ought to be as much in evidence as are the imams in our prisons), in the time allotted. Again, if Muslim prisoners complain about the "unfairness" of this, prison authorities can explain that there is nothing unfair about making sure that all the prisoners have available the same amount of time outside of their cells. This is just an attempt to remedy what has been an unequal situation.

This may seem like a trivial matter. But we all know that in the West many prisoners have been converting to Islam. Some do it out of conviction. Some do it out of fear. Some do it, as the deplorable Duke did years ago, to obtain more food, while still others may want as much time outside their cells as Muslim prisoners have been granted. Whatever the reasons, it's important to make sure that prison life is not perceived as better for Muslim than for non-Muslim prisoners. Nothing should be done to make Islam a more attractive option. Since we are prevented from tilting it in our favor, at least let's make sure to keep that playing field level. Right now, the Western world, in its inattention, is giving Islam an unfair advantage in its prisons. And not just in its prisons.

First published in