

Islam: Fastest Shrinking Religion in the World (Part 2)

PART TWO CONTINUED: CONVERSIONS TO CHRISTIANITY.

MOROCCO

In Morocco, there is also a certain amount of evidence of Muslims converting to Christianity. While the majority of Christians are foreigners, the organisation known as the Voice of the Martyrs, founded to help persecuted Christians round the world, claims that there are at least 45,000 native Moroccans who have converted to Christianity, particularly in rural areas, often baptized in secret in various Moroccan churches. However, the International Religious Freedom Report published by the United States Department of State gives a much smaller figure, citing the estimates given by Moroccan Christian leaders, of 8000 Moroccan Christians out of a population of 34.8 million. [1]

An article published in 2006, on the Moroccan website, Ya-biladi, gives the reason for this modest but nonetheless remarkable movement towards Christianity: "The Arab press has been quick to accuse the US evangelists for the massive conversion numbers, therefore playing into the hands of the Islamists who advocate an end to the semi-freedom of religion in Morocco. But this assumption is wrong because as many observers emphasized, some Muslims are disillusioned by the crimes committed in the name of Islam, especially in Algeria by the Islamists and al-Qaida's terrorist acts and are looking for something else." [2]

DAVID GARRISON'S RESEARCH

Perhaps the first truly in depth study of conversions to

Christianity in recent years comes from David Garrison and his colleagues, the results of which he recounts in his book, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, published in 2014. [3] He conducted two studies. The first took six years. The second, in greater depth, he conducted over a period of two and a half years, between 2011 and 2014. He writes, "With the assistance of numerous on-site collaborators, interviews have been collected from 45 movements in 33 Muslim people groups in 14 countries". He defines a "movement" as "a movement of Muslims to Christ to be at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period". Garrison's conclusion is that "Today, in more than 70 separate locations in 29 nations, new movements of Muslim-background followers has crossed the threshold of at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptized believers, all of whom have come to Christ over the past two decades. In some countries the numbers within these new movements have grown to tens of thousands. Though the total number of new Christ followers, between two and seven million, maybe a statistically small drop in the vast sea of Islam, they are not insignificant". [4]

The interviews were conducted in the languages of the converts and then translated with the help of bilingual assistants. Garrison and his co-workers isolated nine distinct geo-cultural clusters or complexes of Muslim people groups.

Defined initially by geography, these clusters have been further shaped by shared history, languages, trade, conflict and thus, destiny. Following Arab Muslims' description of their world as "The House of Islam", we called these nine geo-cultural clusters "Rooms", Rooms within the House of Islam: (1) West Africa, (2) North Africa, (3) East Africa, (4) The Arab World, (5) The Persian World, (6) Turkestan, (7) Western South Asia, (8) Eastern South Asia, and (9) Indo-Malaysia. [5]

Garrison is careful not to sound triumphalist; on the

contrary, as he points out with due modesty, the figure of two to seven million converts to Christianity comes to “less than one-half of one percent of the Muslim world’s population, hardly a cause to gloat”. [6] A little further on, he admits, “As an evangelical Christian, I come to this study with biases, I submit my own faith and practice to the authority of the Bible and the unique and exclusive salvation claims of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. But as a phenomenologist, I have attempted to hold my personal convictions at bay until I accurately described the phenomenon in question.” He finds much to admire in Islam and Islamic civilization; he has studied Arabic, and lived among Muslims in India, Egypt and Tunisia. His Muslim friends are described by him as “the most hospitable, generous and gracious people” he has ever known. [7]

IRAN

Iran is one of the most interesting of all the “rooms” that Garrison studied.

He observes that, “Of Iran’s population 64 percent were born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and have little affection for it. While Christianity is growing rapidly in the country, so too are many other worldviews as Muslim Iranians seek a respite from the state religion. It is common to find Iranian young adults walking away from Islam and turning to atheism, secularism, hedonism, drugs, and even ancient pathways such as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.” [8]

I shall be discussing Iranian atheists in a later section, but I can personally vouch for Garrison’s latter conclusion. Over the last twenty years, I have given talks to Iranian groups in Paris, Stockholm, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and New York; they have all been anti-Khomeini, and most have been atheists, and certainly secularists – thus, evidently, their flight from Iran. Garrison also points out, quoting journalist Scott Peterson, “‘hidden behind the mullah’s mask is the most

unashamedly pro-American population in the Middle East'. The sentiment was expressed spontaneously after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America, when 60,000 Iranians gathered on Tehran's football stadium dressed in black to hold a candlelight vigil." [9]

House churches are the most common place for Muslim converts to Christianity to worship. The House Church movement may have, as a conservative estimate, 100,000 followers, but "data from interviews with Iranian Christian refugees, and the number of correspondents to satellite Christian television programs give reason to believe that figure could be as high as a few million". [10]

Garrison refers to Mark Bradley [11], who wrote, "If the figures from the survey carried out by Mohabbat TV were translated nationally, it would mean that 8 million people are interested in Christianity and nearly 3 million would actually want to become Christian". The German online journal, Deutsche Welle [DW], cites other figures: "It is said that between 250,000 and 500,000 Iranians have converted, though the actual number is impossible to know." [12]

DW then explains the reasons for conversions: "They are turning away from Islam primarily because they are disappointed in their government, which has tied politics and religion together so as to make them inseparable, and has curtailed many civil rights in the name of Islam." [13]

Persecution of Iranian Muslim converts to Christianity has led many to flee to the West. The U.K. daily newspaper, *The Guardian* [14], describes the journey of these asylum seekers in Germany: mainly Iranian, and occasionally Afghan, émigrés who have given a new lease of life to the religious life of Germany. Many have paid as much as to \$30,000 to be smuggled into the country with fake passports. Once in Germany they have usually adopted western names, and have added greatly to congregation numbers in several independent Lutheran,

Evangelical and Presbyterian churches. They are now waiting for their baptism ceremonies as they rebuild their lives.

The last time Germany saw so many Iranians seeking entry was just after the 1979 revolution. The number of Iranian refugees has doubled every year for the last five years, from less than 1,000 in 2008 to 4,348 in 2012. Official figures from the federal office for migration and refugees confirm this trend. Over 3,500 Iranians were granted asylum last year, and Iran was one of the countries from which Germany saw a steep rise in asylum applications.

The Guardian gives the reasons for this exodus: "Spread across multiple churches and asylum camps, Muslim-to-Christian converts from Iran make up a noticeable population of asylum seekers who say a growing crackdown on Muslim-born Christian converts back home, and disillusion from decades of living under Islamic law, have led them to Germany. Though Iranian converts can be found in The Netherlands, Sweden and Austria, Germany's economic stability and reputation as a major refugee hosting country has made the European country the most desirable destination."

In the past, most of Iran's Christians were ethnic Armenians and Assyrians who are allowed to practice their religion freely as long as they did not proselytize. Thanks to Christian satellite television broadcasts, in the last five to ten years, Iranian Diasporan Christian pastors have had an enormous influence over their fellow Iranians back home. Even ethnic Armenians and Assyrians have taken to spreading the gospel to their Muslim neighbours. The combined result is that the religion is taking hold throughout Iran. The Guardian tries to give estimates of the numbers involved, but notes: "The underground nature of the Christian conversion movement has made numbers impossible to determine accurately. Estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000 by various sources. Though these statistics cannot be independently verified, converts and pastors both in and out of Iran say the movement is strong and

widely spread. Some converts have also been reported to travel to neighboring Armenia to become baptized.”

STATISTICS

Perhaps one of the most astonishing statistics thrown out comes from a Muslim cleric, Sheikh Ahmad al-Katani, in an interview conducted by Al-Jazeera television [15] in 2000. Al-Jazeera quickly deleted the interview, but intrepid Christian evangelicals have managed to retrieve it [16], and even have the link to the original Arabic transcript [17]. Sheikh Ahmad Al Katani, the president of The Companions Lighthouse for the Science of Islamic Law in Libya, claimed that in Africa (by which he means essentially Black Africa), “On the other hand, the number of Christians has increased from one million in 1902 to 329,882,000. Let us round off that number to 330 million in the year 2000 [18]. ...In every hour, 667 Muslims convert to Christianity. Every day, 16,000 Muslims convert to Christianity. Every year, 6 million Muslims convert to Christianity. These are huge numbers...” [19]

Al Katani does not tell us how he arrived at those extraordinary numbers.

Pew Research Center’s figures tell us that, “the number of Muslims living between the Sahara Desert and the Cape of Good Hope has increased more than 20-fold, rising from an estimated 11 million in 1900 to approximately 234 million in 2010. The number of Christians has grown even faster, soaring almost 70-fold from about 7 million to 470 million [emphasis added] Sub-Saharan Africa now is home to about one-in-five of all the Christians in the world (21%) and more than one-in-seven of the world’s Muslims (15%).” [20] And yet the following Pew conclusions contradict the Sheikh’s contention that Muslims in Black Africa are converting to Christianity at, to him, an alarming rate: “Neither Christianity nor Islam is growing significantly in sub-Saharan Africa at the expense of the other; there is virtually no net change in either direction

through religious switching.” [21] Who is right?