

# The Conversion and Baptism of Iranians: Simultaneously Saving the Honor of Converts to all Religions

A Commentary by Thomas Schirmmacher

## 1. Why of all Things do Muslims become Christians? A Word regarding the Baptisms of Iranians, Afghans, and Others

At present, many Muslims who have come to Germany from other countries are being baptized. The interest in Christianity in these countries is unusually large, such as in Afghanistan, or in Iran above all, where there have been many conversions. In Iran, there have been at least 500,000 conversions from Islam to Christianity over the last 10 years.

The fact that these conversions currently taking place here in Germany are predominantly not the result of intensive missionary work (also not by the Evangelical camp) is shown by the fact that most of those willing to be baptized contact the publicly visible Catholic and Protestant churches and do so often with rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine. These baptisms are partly hushed up by the churches, be it because they appear to be disconcerting – the church in the Rhineland, for instance, published a paper against mission efforts among Muslims and at the same time is performing baptisms nationwide – or because they are hushing this up to protect the baptized.



In any case, I believe that the mainline churches are currently baptizing more ex-Muslims than all evangelical groups and free churches put together. In Austria this is even more so the case.

If this wave of baptisms were purely a result of missionary work in Germany, the 'success' would have to extend to all home countries of the refugees. But in reality, conversions are mainly connected to these countries, where there is an awakening going on in the country. This explains the concentration of baptisms of Iranians and in addition on a lower scale from Afghanistan. Syrians are also being baptized from time to time. However, in view of the large number of refugees from Syria, this is a very small proportion.

But why do Muslims leave Islam at all and then almost always turn to Christianity?

*For Muslims who are toying with the idea of leaving Islam, for example because they have grown weary of violence in the name of Islam or are looking for a more liberal faith, Christianity is usually the alternative. Why?*

Muslim thought is so monotheistic that very few consider either becoming affiliated with an atheistic worldview or turning to a non-monotheistic religion such as Hinduism. A Muslim then has three alternatives if he wants to stay with monotheism:

1. **Movements within Islam** with new prophets after Muhammad, like the Ahmadi emanating from Pakistan, or new religions emanating from Islam, like the Bahai – they are all growing worldwide but are massively harassed and persecuted in Islamic countries;
2. **Judaism:** Conversion to Judaism remains the exception, not only because Jews are the object of rejection and they or Israel are the political enemy par excellence but also because Judaism is a very small religion (see below);
3. **Christianity:** From a Muslim point of view, Christianity is, on the one hand, supported by the fact that according to the Koran, Christians believe in the same God. Additionally, and in contrast to the Jews, Christians are portrayed positively in the majority of the cases in the Koran. On the other hand, it speaks for Christianity that there are more Christians than Muslims. This circumstance occupies Muslims around the world because the truth is viewed to actually always be the winner. Islam should thus be the biggest world religion. This question has been relevant since the beginning of colonial times and still is today. At that time it was primarily a question of why Christianity was more successful and much larger in numbers than Islam. While Christianity has always had a place for a suffering Christianity as a minority, in Islam the prophet is always successful and truth is always connected to greatness and success. In the end, the message of love, forgiveness, and mercy must also be mentioned in addition to the greatness and ‘success’ of Christianity when a Muslim plays with the idea of turning away from Islam.

What most accounts for Muslims wanting to leave Islam? To put it bluntly, the main reason is that more and more Muslims all over the world are fed up with the violence committed in the name of their religion, be it by terrorists or by oppression in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. By far the majority of those interested in conversion assume – rightly or wrongly – that the tendency to violence can be traced back to the history and teachings of Islam itself and that in Islam there is no such thing as the example and commandment of Jesus to love one’s neighbor, even to love one’s enemies.

Most people are familiar with the discussion that Islamism that is prepared to use violence or violent Islamism is not classical Islam. However, they either don’t share the classical view that Islam and Islamism are to be differentiated, or they see Iran or Egypt and Saudi Arabia as official speakers of Shiite or Sunni Islam, or they simply see the consequences worldwide and don’t want to be associated with it anymore – rightly or wrongly.

In other words, whether one sees this neutrally, combats it, criticizes it, or cheers for it: *For Muslims who are playing with the idea of leaving Islam, Christianity is, so to speak, the natural alternative, even and especially when they have not come into contact with some form of Christian mission.*

## Incidental Remarks

Considerations in this treatment are primarily of a religio-sociological and psychological points of view nature, addressing more what the outsider can see and say and what statistically results from viewing the entire situation. Justifying a theological evaluation of conversion is questioned just as little as the individual personal view of the convert. Moreover, the impression should not be given that all developments in the field of religion can be explained. Why in certain Islamic countries like Indonesia or Iran were there and/or are there mass conversions to Christianity, while in other countries, which are just as free or oppressive, this is not the case? Why has the Czech Republic become even more secular

since 1989, while Hungary is experiencing an enormous religious awakening? The religious development of the entirety of the former 'East Bloc' contains more surprises than explainable developments.

Christian theology speaks of revival, for example, when a large number of people simultaneously become Christians or where people who only went by the designation of Christianity by name suddenly begin to take their faith seriously in everyday life and practice. Why this is suddenly the case in one country and among one people and not in others has not yet been clarified by intensive research into church history. Moreover, Christian theology argues that a conversion is an event between God and man in which God himself is the actual initiator.

## 2. Against a general Denigration of Converts

The dpa (Deutsche Presse Agentur, or German Press Agency) journalist Daniel Naupold has placed all Muslims who become Christians under general suspicion that they are only doing this, or at least also because they expect to have a greater chance of success in the asylum process (I have used [the version in Focus](#)).

Naupold writes:

“Three-month crash courses are meant to enable Muslims in (sic!, correct: from) Iran and Afghanistan to enter into Christianity. Hundreds are baptized afterwards. Due to the fact that as Christians they would be threatened by religious persecution in their homeland, the chance of receiving asylum in Germany increases.” “Many of them declare that genuine faith has led them to make this decision. After all, a change of denomination additionally increases their chances of being allowed to stay in Germany.”

It is first of all a wrong step to act as if a change of religion religion is automatically useful in the asylum process. At first glance, this may seem to be the case to the outsider. At second glance and for the expert, however, the situation has a different appearance. For there are enough examples where this has not been the case in the eyes of decision-makers or courts and where it is much easier if there are other reasons having to do with danger and persecution! Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not always recognized as a reason for asylum, be it because conversion is doubted or be it because it is not doubted but is not classified as life-threatening in the individual's home country.

Does Napold not know anything about church asylum which is often intended to protect converts who are to be deported despite conversion? Does Napold not know anything about the fact that often the decision-makers and the courts decide that one can live well as a Christian in Iran and that one can keep one's Christianity to oneself? After all, Naupold only cites Iranian converts in Berlin as examples (comp. our book: Friedemann Burkhardt, Thomas Schirmmacher. *Faith only in One's private Chamber? On the Protection of Religious Freedoms of converted Asylum Seekers (Glaube nur im Kämmerlein? Zum Schutz religiöser Freiheitsrechte konvertierter Asylbewerber)*. VKW: Bonn, 2009).

Does he not know that, in addition, courts usually have very high expectations of a conversion. A baptism alone seldom suffices since active church affiliation must be added, together with character witnesses who can offer confirmation. Does Naupold not know that both the Protestant Church in

Germany and the German Bishops' Conference have submitted clear petitions that the courts make demands on a conversion that go far beyond what the churches expect from the convert? And doesn't Naupold know that there are asylum seekers who pretend to convert without ever having seen a church from the inside but that this seldom applies to those who go to the trouble of taking the three-month courses on foundations of the faith which he describes?

If Naupold knows nothing about all this, then why does he speak at all about the subject before he has questioned experts and researched numerous cases?

The journalist has the privilege of being able to write and publish something like this quickly and easily. Besides: Since when does writing in a differentiated manner create circulation? And after all, dpa articles must be short and crisp, not differentiated and long!

As an academic, I would have to substantiate something like this with figures and studies which at the present time do not exist. What we do have, however, is concrete experience in dealing with asylum seekers and converts. Naupold, however, does not seem to have spoken to anyone who does.

Let us, however, take a look at the entire, differentiated range of those whom Naupold is treating as one, whereby I simply follow practical experience without being able to guarantee completeness or provide percentages – in any case, these are not individual cases or exceptions. We will stay with the case for Iranian Muslims who want to become Christians in Germany.

- Indeed, there are cheaters. However, they rarely have an interest in investing too much time and energy. And since for Muslims the hurdle to a complete turning away from Islam is very high, and since they are then also quickly discriminated against by their relatives, the price of baptism is usually too high for them.
- There are those who became Christians in Iran and were baptized and therefore had to flee but cannot necessarily prove all this here and therefore attend courses about faith, etc. in Germany.
- There are those who already secretly became Christians in Iran but have not told anyone about it out of fear for their lives in Iran. Therefore, they only convert to Christianity (formally) in Germany where it is safe.
- There are those who were already curious about Christianity while in Iran but did not have the freedom to get to know about Christianity without encountering danger. This is due to the fact that in Iran one cannot 'just' take a church course or attend Christian services for a while out of curiosity. Their curiosity cannot be stilled until they are in Germany, regardless of whether this in the end leads to conversion or not.
- There are those who really only appear to show an interest in Christianity. Without having planned for it to be the case, they are then actually "caught up by the fascination" of the Christian message when dealing with Christianity or attending church or taking church courses.
- There are those who, for the sake of their extended family, have refrained from pursuing the idea of a conversion but are now liberated from this compulsion once in Germany.
- There are those who become Christians, but who do not bring this up in the asylum procedure, either because they do not want to, or because they do not come across the idea, or because their lawyer advises them not to because judges do not at all like asylum grounds that have been added after the fact. Additionally, there are other reasons for asylum that are less difficult to prove than conversion.
- There are those who actually think that it is useful to be a Christian in Germany since they think that Germany is Christian in the same sense that Iran is Islamic. This is the idea that one can only really

participate in societal life if a Christian. If they then realize that this is not the case and freedom of religion here means that religious affiliation, for example, does not count as a factor in a job (and, for instance, is not even recorded by the state!), they lose their interest in Christianity.

It is to be added that Naupold gives the wrong impression that a change of religion must be an unambiguous, tidy issue. In reality, converts often live – at least for a while – in two worlds. The sociology of religion has long since documented that, firstly, conversions are not the only way of religious change. Rather, there is also a gradual, creeping change of religion. Secondly, most conversions do not take place in a black and white manner. Rather, the old religion still lives on for a long time in partial fashion under the cover of the new one.

Why should this be forbidden for Iranians? Is there a hitherto unknown passage within the right to conversion showing precisely how religious change has to proceed? Does not one have the right to change one's religion as one wants and can do so as a part of freedom of religion? At any rate, in Germany one can change one's religion loudly, quickly and clearly but also quietly, very slowly, and in a manner hardly noticeable to others.

Millions of Germans are Christians without knowing exactly why. Why should migrants of all people be only exclusively active, convicted, and religiously educated exemplary Christians? And would we as free citizens want to see a prescription as to exactly how we have to change our religion or worldview if we want to change it?

### 3. On saving the Honor of Converts!

#### 3.1 Emotional Error No. 1: “As is often the case with Converts . . .”?

The terrorism expert Holger Schmidt, who is associated with the German broadcaster ARD, has not only denigrated converts to Islam on the program SWRaktuell. He has done the same with converts from one religion or worldview to another by generally disparaging them as radicals. “These are the ones who go in 150 per cent,” he is quoted as saying, because they “often” become more radical than the followers of a religion who were born into that religion. Thus, he serves a widespread general suspicion which, however, cannot be statistically corroborated.

At any rate, the SWR has reported as follows ([Biggi Hoffmann: “Those are the ones who go in 150 percent.” SWR-online, May 27, 2015](#)):

“Converts often act in an extreme manner: to consciously decide for a religion plays a big role, Schmidt states. They deal with it in a completely different manner compared to someone who grows up with a religion: ‘One decides much more reflectively and if one gets to know a very radical form of a religion, as is the case with Islamism, then there is a danger that one goes in with 150 percent.’ According to this expert, many of the resolute Islamist fighters are converts ‘who are extreme with a kind of overreaction, I would almost say fixation on what they learn as a radical religion.’ This effect is particularly dangerous. Almost derogatory or astonishing remarks about converts even come from the Islamist terrorist scene, along the lines of the motto: ‘Those are the ones who go in 150 per cent.’”

Converts should not be generally condemned. Yes, people who act in extreme fashion are sometimes converts. But the reverse is not confirmed by any research, first of all that converted extremists outdo other extremists – there are really too many counter-examples in ISIS for this assertion. And secondly, it is not confirmed by research that converts automatically become extreme or are above average in how often they become extreme. Can one really denigrate hundreds of thousands of converts worldwide every year because a few of them become terrorists?

As a general rule, we only know extremists who have converted because they appear in public, or in the media, or even in everyday life. However, we generally do not know the peaceful and ‘normal’ converts because they are not the subject of the media. They hardly appear in public, and even if we meet them in everyday life, they do not strike us as converts.

There have been and still are some Catholics who have become Protestants and vice versa, and who very aggressively represented and currently very aggressively represent their new denomination. But every year we have more than ten thousand crossovers between the Catholic and the Protestant churches. This occurs without those concerned being noticed in any way, not even those who take the step out of deep conviction.

Not every German who becomes a Muslim becomes an Islamist! Not every atheist who becomes a Christian becomes an extremist. Not everyone who leaves the church and changes from the Christian faith to a non-religious worldview becomes an extremist.

Not every Jew who becomes an atheist becomes a Marx. Not everyone who turns away from monastic training becomes a Stalin.

There are millions of converts that do not become extremists. Extremist converts comprise a small minority of converts from Western countries!

By the way: Schmidt thinks that certain other ISIS terrorists think that converts are the ones who go in with 150 percent. So murderers are able to tell us whether others are still more murderous? Is it possible to significantly outdo the terrorism of ISIS? And more often than not, there is also the reverse reality. ISIS terrorists do not like the fact that converted Western combatants suddenly have scruples when they have to kill uninvolved women and children! Here one finds that those born into the religion are often more uninhibited than converts.

### **3.2 Emotional Error No. 2: “Just like in a Sect . . .”?**

This terrorism expert, who is paid by fees collected from all Germans, plays with emotions that his viewers like and share rather than explaining differentiated interrelations. According to Deutsche Welle, Schmidt says that these converts are “like a cult.”

“Schmidt reports that there are always cases in which young people run away and make their way to Islamist combatants. ... If someone behaves radically, the question arises whether one can still persuade the person to turn back. Basically it’s like a sect,’ Schmidt says.”

What is it that can be said so sweepingly about a “sect”? Let us leave the fact aside that ‘sect’ is actually a sociological term for all smaller splits from big religions and worldviews. In any case, we have hundreds of thousands of members of “sects” who have never attracted attention by leaving home to wage war elsewhere. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, can be accused of much, but not of being warmongers and of producing soldiers. Instead, they are imprisoned in many countries around the world on account of their total conscientious objection.

Aren’t these just emotional moves made against small groups instead of demonstrations of serious and verifiable patterns?

Thanks to globalization, the number of individuals around the world changing religions will continue to grow strongly in coming years. On the one hand, young people – no longer just Western youth – are claiming to choose their own religion, like they do their music style, fashions, or profession. On the other hand, thanks can be given to travel opportunities and the Internet, whereby people get to know other religions to an extent never seen before. Over the long run, this cannot be prevented, except through violence and enormous social pressure.

It is therefore important that this process, which is also part of a society that is democratic and receptive to new ideas, is not draped with emotional fragments just because a few of the converts become terrorists.