

The influence of Polish converts to Islam on local groups in Poland

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Religion is one of the factors which defines the way one sees the world, himself and other people. When we come to the world in a family with defined faith, we get to know religious rules as an element of our socialization. Those religious instructions are supposed to help us in connecting with the sacrum, getting salvation, but at the same time it defines our duties towards other people. Parents raise their children to prepare them for independent functioning in society, and the part of this process is religion, which tell us what kind of social role we should play, how our marriage and family should look like, even the way we earn money or spend our free time. In societies where we have only one dominant religion, faith has strong influence on collective identity and culture. In such case it plays a solidarizing and integrating role. What happens when in strongly homogeneous society we find people who decide to change their religion and openly deny what their parents and society teach them? What happens when they choose a religion which is weakly connected with the history of their region? What if the religion they choose is seen as politically entangled, arousing fear and controversy?

The main topic of this desideration is the influence of polish converts to Islam on social and political situation in Poland. The history of mankind has been showing us that conversion can lead not only to individual changes but also social, political and economical in the macro sense. This is why I propose to look at conversion phenomenon from the perspective of a society or even a nation.

In the chapter one I describe the character of religion transformation of the west world in the context of globalization. The intensive process of penetration of different cultures, realignment of social pluralism, postulated secularism, individualization of lifestyle and religion freedom – all that creates a rich, free market of religions. We are able to mix and match from any religion system those elements which make us happy and practice them all together – for example believing in the divinity of Jesus and reincarnation in the same time. The conversion to the faith other than typical for our motherland started to be another common issue nowadays.

Most of research projects about converts to Islam has been conducted in the western countries which appear to be very different then post-communist states like Poland. This is why I decided to describe religious transformation of polish people in a separate subsection. In the case of Poland I have to consider important factors such as religious homogeneity, connection between Catholic church and national identity and finally the post-communist phenomenon named by James Richardson “the movements of gods” – the sudden influx of information about different religions and cultures after long time of isolation.

In the next subsection I describe how conversion of one group to religion other than the typical for the region can influence stability of social system and dynamic of social structure. Globalization, intensified flow of information, tendencies to individualize religion make it difficult to predict what people in fact believe in. This lack of clearness reminds us about Ulrich Beck and his theory of “the Risk Society”. In this subchapter I also describe mechanisms of emergence new believers presented by conversion theorist and those who have conducted empirical researches.

In the next subchapter I summarize the academic debate about conversion to Islam and stability of social system. The main part is dedicated to polish society, culture, tradition, legislation and position of minority in our democratic system. In polish case national culture is strongly dependent on homogenous culture of the majority. It reminds us about the theory of “the nation state” where central axis is homogeneous majority which aims to organize the social life of all society by reproducing and supporting national culture and identity on many levels. Using researches from other countries I consider position and possibility of making a social change by converts in Poland. What is more I analyze attitude of Polish people towards Muslims and describe possible consequences of appearing polish converts in society.

The western researches show that converts are likely to play important role of mediator between Muslim immigrants and the Christian majority. They try to be ambassadors of Islamic

religion for the rest of society and the native culture for Muslim immigrants. Almost all in countries where researches were conducted we observe that some converts are hyperactive in their voluntary work for local Muslims or other not necessary Muslim communities. Because they represent a different cultural background than people who come from Muslim countries they try to negotiate Islam with them. In Scandinavia converts call their spiritual projects "Norwegian Islam" or "Scandinavian Islam", and German converts claim there is no such a thing as "islamization of Germany" but "germanization of Islam". Converts have bigger and bigger influence on educational tools which are used by local mosques or even policy of Islamic organizations. Researchers claim that converts have started playing important role in shaping western Islam by adding European characters.

In chapter two I present eight thematic areas in which I conducted my own empirical researches in Poland. To answer the question if polish converts to Islam are a group which has abilities to induce the social change I use theory of "duality of structure" by Anthony Giddens. I consider what is the best way to analyze their external and internal interactions, level of participation in civil society and how responsible they feel about their local groups and the whole nation. I plan a method and justify its use for verification their attitude to patriotism, native tradition and culture, including elements of the Catholic religion. Converting to Islam can be understood as a rebellion against the history of the nation. In the case of Poland culture and statehood have been strongly tied with Christianity. My focus was on how polish Muslims are still carriers of polish and Christian culture. I conduct the study on people who has changed their religion but decided to stay in the country which is strongly connected with Catholicism. They keep intensive relations with Catholics, at least because of their families. It is possible that they create very specific form of identity, such as "dual religiosity" or "dual affinities". According to a polish Tatar scholar, professor Salim Chazbijewicz, polish converts do not adopt the real Islam. Instead they are just fascinated by "exotic culture". What is more western

researches show that many converts claim to have "a second motherland". Most of the time this is a country of their wife or husband or just one of the Muslim countries. Chazbijewicz's opinion was met with very negative reactions from Polish converts. I decided to verify his theory by asking converts about their daily habits and not religious elements of their life style which are connected with not Polish culture.

My next goal was to check the converts' opinion about Poland as a place to live, what makes them decide to stay here and what kind of changes in the country they want to see. This part of my consideration was inspired by results of foreign researches and Polish case of Natalia Polańska Eid, Polish convert who accused her employer for discrimination. The woman used to work as a high ranked clerk in the public sector. She claimed to be discriminated against because she was wearing hijab. The Polish court system has never faced a case of discrimination against Muslims before. Polish converts better than Muslims immigrants know Polish law, social rules and cultural codes. This is why they can have bigger potential to make a change in their workplaces and even Polish labor law. To measure that potential I also need to examine the structure of employment and education of converts.

The next issue is the attitude of converts to their own image of Poles. The way they describe Polish nation can be the reflection of their relation with the rest of society. This information appears to be very useful to describe their perception of Poles on the axis of homeliness and otherness.

Another key factor to understand the role of converts in society is to consider if they have any influence on public security. Islam is seen by many as religion politically entangled. Unconventional interpretations of Islam have been used by dangerous terrorist organizations which members are also people of the western world including converts. What is more Islam is not a centralized religion of the same interpretation in every country or spiritual movement. In combination with intensive and uncontrolled flow of information about religions and

cultures, which is a feature of our time, converts can be the real illustration of Ulrich Beck's conceptions of "the Risk Society". An infinitely large pool of worldviews, freely constructed from a limitless stream of information can be the reason of lack of transparency, certainty, or even possibility of forecasting and predicting what people can believe. This is why converts can be seen as a security risk. On the other hand converts stay in relations with various communities of immigrants and Muslims. Sometimes they even occupy important positions in local groups or even formal Islamic organizations at the national level. It is possible that some of them may come into possession of information which play important role for the security. I decided to verify their attitudes towards such situations, willingness and sense of duty to cooperate with specific services, and the level of responsibility for the security of their homeland.

The last topic is political behavior and attitude. Referring to the selected elements of various theories of democracy I describe what kind of possibilities for making a change in society, democratic system gives to converts. What is more I try to explain the possible paradoxes and diversity in their political choices and also take up the subject of the level of interest in their own country. It is possible that with the conversion to Islam, interest in the political situation of Poland has been replaced by interest in Muslim regions of the world.

The third chapter describes in details all the stages of conducting my empirical research. The project was divided on two main parts. In the first one the eight issues which I present in chapter two become topics for discussions during nine focused group interviews. Secondly the results of this qualitative research were verified by quantitative research in internet and paper questionnaire. Respondents of both parts of the research are Polish adults who presently live in Poland and converted to Islam and have at least one year of experience of being a Muslim.

The next chapter analyzes collected empirical material and include an attempt to draw conclusions. It evaluates the reliability and quality of the obtained results and also present some suggestions for further researches.

The summary of the dissertation explains several disputable issues and paradoxes that appeared at the design stage of the research concept and the analysis of the empirical material. In synthetic way I compare the image of Polish converts to Islam emerging from the results of my research, their impact on local communities and Polish society with the role and strategies adopted by converts in other countries of the Western world. Finally, I try to create a forecast for the future about the behavior, role and abilities of the converts to make an important social change in Poland. On the end I formulate recommendations for researchers who would like to look closer at this phenomenon as well as for police and internal security agency and creators of integration policy in Poland.