Social functioning of female reverts[1] to Islam in Poland

Monika Ben Mrad

UNIWERSYTET JAGIELLOŃSKI
E-MAIL: MONIKA.BENMRAD@GMAIL.COM
ORCID: 0000-0002-0359-3468

Abstract

This article, based on two field research carried out between 2018 and 2021, draws upon qualitative and quantitative data and aims to depict the current state of female reverts to Islam in Poland. The growing number of reverts in Europe has fueled discussions about the concept of European Islam and the role of reverts in society. Thus, even if they are identified as a small part of the population, they can become social agents in interfaith linking. Reverts deal with prejudices and balance their identity between a sense of religious and national belonging. There is a common assumption in public opinion that religiosity as such excludes the identification and integration of minorities with major cultures and groups, so in this article the author wanted to look at how Polish women reverting to Islam negotiate their religious identity, beliefs and practices while living primarily in a Catholic environment.

Key words: Islam, Muslims, converts, reverts, acculturation, religious identity, intercultural relations
JEL Classification:

Introduction

Religious acculturation to mainstream culture (in the context of a Christian or increasingly secular majority) is becoming more and more an area of regard, especially if it concerns Muslim minorities due to an increased public control over this group. Within this topic, conversion to Islam has attracted more and more interest, mainly in research on radicalization that is believed to be connected with conversion. Research on the psychological processes related to religious continuity and changes in connection with migrations has increased in intensity, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Debates on multiculturalism, which on the one hand focus on the adaptation and integration of Muslim minorities and on the other hand on the emergence of fundamentalist religious groups that attract many converts, raise compelling questions for psychologists: What are the social and cultural influences on personal religiosity? How do faith changers negotiate their new religious identity with other culturally relevant identities, such as ethnicity and nationality?

In order to answer these questions I followed the paths of Polish women embracing Islam, looking at how they combine being a Muslim and a Pole simultaneously and how they cope with the circulating stereotypes. I wanted to see whether belonging to the Muslim community is more vital than to the Polish nation? How do Polish converts balance their patriotism and the accusations of public opinion of treason? Do they feel that Polish values are contrary to Islam?

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[1] Author uses the word 'reverts' and not 'converts' because Islam teaches that every human being is a Muslim by birth and that parents or society can make us stray from the straight path. When one accepts Islam, it is considered to be returning to that source of faith. Since the noun revert suits the interested persons themselves, I will use this term for them even if it does not yet appear in the above sense in dictionaries (both English and Polish, the mother tongue of the respondents).

There are two main theoretical approaches to psychological research of minority religiosity and religious conversion:

(1) the development of a religious identity that is based on the concepts of ethnic/cultural identity and their socialization

(2) religious acculturation, which is a psychological adaptation to cultural diversity

The starting point for further analysis of the topic will be religious conversion according to social identity and psychological acculturation theories. I will also present conversion types and problematic issues concerning this research area. In the next section of the article, I will introduce the context for my study, including selected quantitative indicators and an overview of Islam and Muslims' media image. In the last, main part of the text, I will look at who the Polish female converts to Islam are: how they motivate their decisions to convert, how they relate to the world's umma[2] and Polish society, and how they define their own identity.

The article analyses secondary sources and materials collected during field research. The latter mainly consisted of partially structured interviews with Polish women who had converted to Islam. Each interview was conducted using a previously prepared script and lasted for about two hours. The field research was conducted from August 2018 to February 2021 within two research projects headed by Górak-Sosnowska (when referring to this research, I will use the abbreviation R1) and Ben Mrad (R2)[3].

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. The respondents remained anonymous. Both studies were also supplemented with a quantitative tool - a survey covering respondents living in Poland and abroad. It was possible to compare the similarities and differences of Polish women living in their homeland, in Western Europe and Muslim-majority countries. A total of 236 Polish female converts to Islam participated in those surveys.

Conversion

Religious identity

"Religion is what humans do about what they consider as (an external) transcendence, and religiosity is the corresponding individual differences construct, with people differing concerning the presence and intensity of such a tendency" (Saroglou 2011, 1321). Through its meaning-giving and community-building functions, religion can be viewed as a form of culture that often overlaps with other cultural traditions and values. It means that different religious groups from the same country of origin may have different practices, norms and values. Therefore, members of a particular religious group may be more like their fellow believers in another country than their fellow citizen of another religion (Güngör 2020).

However, upbringing in a specific religious context provides us with a religious point of view and reference as well as membership in the group. This means that even if we are not a believer, we judge what is morally right and ultimately good based on codes belonging to a specific religion (Ysseldyk Matheson & Anisman 2010, 67). Thus, an atheist from a Catholic country will use Christian codes, and an atheist from a Muslim country, Islamic ones. This may mean that people changing religion at the expense of new rituals do not entirely abandon inculturated schemas and values in the conversion context.

Religious identity includes emotional, social, and collective aspects shared with other community members. By changing religion, the continuity of this experience is cut off. People who converted to Islam while living in a country where the majority religion is a different one move from a majority status to minority, which may have consequences for one's identity. Religiousness in this new context takes on a different meaning: instead of the majority's approval and participation, the reference group narrows.

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[2] An Arabic word meaning a nation, and in the religious sense the entire Islamic community.

[3] "Managing spoiled identity – the case of Polish female converts to Islam" (NCN, 2018–2021) headed by Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska [I was a research assistant in this project] and my own research project carried out for my PhD "Changes in the religious identity of Polish women in mixed Catholic-Muslim relationships" (UJ, 2018-2021).

Religiousness is a multidimensional phenomenon involving identification, faith and practice. Religious identity corresponds to religiosity's socio-emotional aspect and emphasizes religion's subjective importance and belonging to religious groups. Religious beliefs (e.g. Orthodoxy) denote beliefs about the right way of life and morals. Religious practices include private and public manifestations of religiosity following the recommendations of the religion's sacred rites and rules (Saroglou, 2011). This multidimensionality creates individual and contextual differences in religiosity. Hence, as religious practice declines in society, one may exhibit an increased need for religious identification.

Religious acculturation

Those contextual differences are different religious groups that may influence our religiosity. When a different cultural context influences us, our identity begins to change, adapting to the new situation. We call it acculturation. Acculturation, thus, refers to adaptive psychological processes in the face of intercultural contacts (Graves 1967).

Religious acculturation refers to how individuals negotiate their religiosity when engaging in ongoing contact with other religious or secular individuals or groups. Religious acculturation involves both change and continuity in personal dimensions of religiosity over time in response to the quality of intercultural relations and the religious group's vitality. Psychological research on religious acculturation focuses on personal religiosity at an individual level.

Studies from the two-dimensional perspective of acculturation (Berry 2005) and correlation studies suggest that religiosity does not stand in the way of integration into mainstream culture (Sirin et al, 2008). For example, more religious Muslims are acculturating faster than their less religious peers. Moreover, they support collectivist values more strongly and value modern individualistic values such as self-guidance (Güngör et al. 2012). Consequently, people belonging to Muslim minorities are reportedly choosing the best of their religion and mainstream culture and engage in aspects of their hybrid lifestyle and values as they move from one cultural context to another. The process has to be more vital for converts, who are fluent in majority scripts and adopt Muslim ones, not through passive inculturation but an intentional and volitional study of the subject.

Types of conversion

There are two types of conversion: relational and rational (Allievi 1998). The first type results from social ties that force conversion. This happens as part of re-Islamization (Kepel 1991) or through marriage (Allievi 2000)[4]. Rational conversion is an individual decision that results from a detailed search for a system of meanings and has an intellectual background. In this case, people most often concluded after reading the Koran that Islam responds to their desire for spirituality.

Many research projects show that rational conversion began to prevail in Europe over the years – such conclusions were drawn from a study in Great Britain, published in 2013 by the University of Cambridge (Suleiman 2013). Similarly, Abdennour Bidar (2016), a French philosopher and education ministry specialist, believes the conversions are also fueled by official French secularism, which he says breeds a spiritual void. However, French experts point out more nuances in this topic, according to which conversion to marry has been quite common in France for a long time, but more and more young people are now perceived as converts to better integrate socially in neighbourhoods where Islam dominates. According to Gilles Kepel, an expert on Islam and the French suburbs, conversion has turned into reverse integration (Kepel 1991).

According to Samir Amghar (2006), a sociologist and expert on Islamic radicalism in Europe, in some areas where Muslims dominate, even non-Muslims celebrate Ramadan[5] because they like "a group effect, its festive atmosphere". The question remains, is partial adoption of customs and engaging in religious rituals related to conscious conversion? According to the definition of religious acculturation and what the respondents declare, the change of faith is a process, not a specific moment in time.

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[4] In most interpretations of the Quran, a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim, and a Muslim man can only marry a Muslim, Christian or Jewish woman.
[5] This Muslim holy month requires fasting during the day.

Problematic issues

Terminology

In common Polish language - not very strictly - the word "nawrócenie" is the process of making a conscious decision to break with sin and turn to God and entrust His love, mainly in the context of Christianity. In the conversion to other faiths, the verb 'transition to' (pol. "przejście na") is used instead. Also, in English, as Ipgrave (2006) notes, discrimination against converts takes place already at the language level, as the word "conversion" was for many years reserved for Christians, and the public often treats non-Christian conversion as a hobby. Many of the respondents in mentioned projects reported that their families did not take their conversion seriously and thought "they would get over it".

There are also problems with the word "neophyte", which is understood in too many different ways. Following the Cambridge dictionary, the neophyte has recently become involved in an activity and is still learning about it. It is a newbie's synonym. In colloquial language, however, the word is used as a synonym of rookie (a person who knows nothing about a given issue) or a person involved in something excessively because he still has the enthusiasm of a freshman. This word has no neutral meaning.

Therefore many new Muslims do not call themselves "converts" or "neophytes" but "reverts", even in Polish. This is because Islam teaches that every human being is a Muslim by birth, and it is parents or society that can make us deviate from the straight path. When someone adopts Islam, they are considered to return to that faith source. As it corresponds to the person concerned, the verb 'revert' would be the most appropriate word to describe the people who turned to Islam, even if it does not yet appear in the above meaning as a noun in dictionaries (both English and Polish).

Statistics

Statistical data is another issue that is problematic in the topic of conversion. We do not need numbers to study individual religiosity, but if we want to examine whether a given group of reverts identifies, interacts and shares standard features and patterns, we must have an idea of its size. Alas, most countries do not keep official statistics on religion. Questions about faith are not asked during censuses, and even if they are, without specifying whether the current belief is the original one. In recent decades, only a few surveys have begun to measure individual changes in religious identity, but the most comprehensive covers only 40 countries (Barro et al. 2010).

Studies on converts come mostly from individual country studies, therefore it is difficult to develop general data for the continent. As an example, the French Ministry of the Interior estimated that in 2013 there were around 100,000 converts, while in the same year, Djelloul Seddiki, director of the El Ghazali Theological Institute at the Grand Mosque in Paris, estimated their number at one million (Meziti 2013, 351). France, which describes itself as secular, does not keep any official statistics on race, ethnicity or religion, so those estimates are more guesswork. Similarly, a 2010 study by an interfaith team of experts, Faith Matters, suggests that the number of converts in the UK could be as high as 100,000, with 5,000 new conversions occurring every year nationwide (Brice 2010).

According to a publication of the Central Statistical Office in Poland (GUS)[6], due to the Polish society's religious specificity, the surveys cannot provide reliable data enabling the reconstruction or even approximation of the entire religious structure of the Polish population. Thus, the GUS research on the Muslim population is based on religious organizations' data, estimating it to be about 50 thousand, but Nalborczyk and Pędziwiatr (2018) claim that this community might be up to seven times larger.

There are no statistics on Polish converts, though. Imams do not keep a register of converts (people who recited shahada, the Muslim confession of faith, as part of an official ceremony in a mosque). Conversion does not require an official ceremony. There is no verse in the Qur'an or in the hadith that requires a witness or any other form of evidence related to the testimony of faith. Keeping track of converts can be difficult because:
- most of the converts did not officially leave the Catholic Church (the act of apostasy),
- many Poles converted to Islam during their stay abroad,

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[6] "Religious denominations in Poland 2015-2018" by Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2019.

- they live in places where there is no mosque or any organized Muslim community, so they do not have contact with their fellow believers,
- some of them even did not confess changing their faith to their families.

However, since it is estimated that in Europe converts account for 2% of the Muslim population, then based on the data from the Office for Foreigners, according to which in 2019 there were 23,425 people from countries with a Muslim majority legally staying in Poland and about 10 000 immigrants from Russia (assuming that most of them come from the Caucasian republics, whose inhabitants are Muslims), we can expect about 700 converts. It is impossible, though, to verify whether all these foreigners are Muslim. If we use the declared number of Muslim organizations in Poland – 50,000 (Dudzińska Kotnarowski, 2019), we will calculate the number of converts to be around 1000. However, as the analyzed research shows, many Muslim converts do not join any associations.

Facebook groups such as "Polish Muslimah", etc., gathering the Polish Muslim women's community show way more significant numbers. We cannot verify what percentage of converts is active in social media. We also do not know what percentage of group members live in Poland and whether they are converts or Muslims by birth (from mixed or Tatar families). The groups may also include people interested in Islam and not necessarily converted to it.

Conventional and social media picture

Muslims in Europe are often the subject of intense discussions and political controversy sparked by terrorist attacks and campaigns by right-wing populist parties that see Muslims as a threat to the European culture. It is also sparking a growing debate about Islamophobia, attitudes towards Muslims and the populist right.

The Faith Matters report examined the media coverage in UK and found that while 32% of articles on Islam published since 2001 were related to terrorism or extremism, the figure rise to 62% for converts (Brice 2010). There are no similar studies in Poland, and there has been no terrorist attack in this country since the Second World War. Nevertheless, religiously motivated terrorism comes up very frequently in the headlines.

The negative image of Muslims in media (Bertram et al. 2017) is built especially on radio and television supported by the ruling party (Piela 2017) and serves specific goals of the government (Bobako 2016). Right-wing supporters in Poland believe that accepting Muslims would be culturally harmful. There are fears that significant cultural differences may make it difficult for Muslims to assimilate into Catholic Poland. Muslims constitute less than a percentage of Polish society, but interestingly, in the research conducted by the IPSOS institute in 2018, Poles significantly overestimated their statistical presence, giving a number as much as fifty times greater[7]. Since there are so few Muslim refugees in the country, discussions about them in the Polish public debate apply to refugees in countries other than Poland. Just as we have anti-Semitism without Jews, the same can be said about Islamophobia without Muslims.

Facing prejudice

In 2016, the PEW Research Center researched 10 European countries' attitudes towards Muslims. A positive attitude towards Islam's followers was expressed by the inhabitants of countries with a high percentage of the Muslim community: in Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. The negative image of Muslims, on the other hand, was maintained in countries with little Muslim social participation: Hungary and Poland[8].

Analyses of the Center for Research on Prejudice show that Poles are characterized by a high level of Islamophobia (Skrodzka Stefaniak 2017; Winiewski et al. 2017). Poles' negative attitude to Islam and Muslims is confirmed by all research conducted on this subject – from the research carried out by prof. Ewa Nowicka (1990)[9], to polls by OBOP (Public Opinion Research Center)[10]. Even at the level of a cursory analy-

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[7] „Perils of conception 2018" IPSOS Pobrane 20.02.2021 https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/perils-perception-2018
[8] Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey. Q36. PEW Research Center

sis, it draws attention to the fact that the respondents mainly use pejorative terms when describing Muslims. Therefore, the same stereotypes are repeated about Islam's followers, perceived as primitive people, inclined to violence and fanatically attached to religion.

As the CBOS research on the perception of other nations by Poles shows, since the "Arabs" category was included in the question panel in 2002, the group in question had some of the highest rates of dislike and the lowest rates of sympathy – in the last edition of this survey from 2018 62% and 10%, respectively (CBOS 2018)[11]. Of course, Polish converts are not Arabs, but an essential trait of Polish Islamophobia, i.e. generalized negative attitudes or feelings towards Islam or its faithful (Bleich 2011), is transferring them to Arabs in the first place. This is because Islam - even though only one in five of its followers is Arab - is perceived by Poles as primarily an Arab religion. Meanwhile, As both R1 and R2 show, as many as one-third of Polish converts have never been to a Muslim country, neither before nor after conversion and the Arab culture is foreign to them. There has been an increase in Islamophobic attitudes and narratives in many social life dimensions (Pędziwiatr 2016).

There is also a stigmatization of a Muslim woman, viewing her as subordinate. Concerning Muslim women, stereotypes are repeated about high fertility, low education, inactivity, and conservative views on social issues. However, it is forgotten that in many Muslim countries, the inconveniences of women's lives are due to the general social situation, and they are not caused by religion. Data on literacy and fertility rates per country from The World Bank shows that those factors are mainly related to the wealth of the country, not its dominant religion, and thus are comparable to European in wealthy countries such as the Emirates, Saudi Arabia or Tunisia, and much higher in developing countries such as Somalia or Afghanistan[12].

The one-sided media image does not allow to see Islam in its full diversity, and stereotypes also have to be contested by Polish Muslim women, who reported in interviews that they are regularly accused of converting to Islam because their partner has manipulated them. The converts have been branded by the media and associated with extremist ideologies and discriminatory cultural practices.

There is also the view that conversion is the result of pressure from other people, and since most converts are women, this completes the patriarchal vision that women are less intelligent. Judging by what the media writes about Islam, one would expect liberal and intellectually committed women to avoid it widely. The paradox is that they are the ones who decide to choose Islam because they have more open minds and a better chance of encountering representatives of other cultures.

Facing reality

In response to the described stereotypes, the studies R2 (108 respondents) show that most of the Polish female converts living in Poland have higher education and are professionally active (67%). From the R1 (128 respondents), we will find out that only 41% of converts are married, and as many as 35% of them were Muslim before they met their partner. This means that only 14% of converts converted to Islam after meeting a Muslim husband.

The results of R1 and R2 are consistent with those of Rogowska (2017), which shows that 12% of Polish reverts are in a relationship with another converted Pole, and as many as 73% have no Muslims by birth among their friends. This means that less than a third of Polish female reverts are in a mixed relationship. As the results of R2 also show, being in a mixed relationship with a Muslim does not mean a change of faith. Only 16% of Polish women in mixed relationships with a Muslim converted to Islam after meeting their

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[9] "Respondents describe Arabs as lazy and dirty, aggressive and disrespectful to women. They are also credited with such negative qualities as: inability to get along with others, bad upbringing, quarrelsome, brutality and cruelty, as well as falsehood, dishonesty and self-interest, as well as religious fanaticism."

[10] Z czym kojarzy się Polakom słowo „Islam", TNS OBOP 2001[There were many more negative categories of perception of Islam than neutral or positive ones; "I associate Islam with terror and terrorism" - 18%, "with war" - 11%, "with Osama bin Laden" - 6%, "with fundamentalism and fanaticism" - 4%, "with aggression and violence" - 2% , "With poverty and backwardness" – 3%, "with the Taliban" – 1%.]

[11] CBOS. 2018. Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów, Warszawa: Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej.

[12] The World Bank. Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate) https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS

husband, and 78% remained with their faith. This indicates that for most women in the study, the motive for choosing Islam was not dictated by a romantic relationship.

Motivations to become a revert

Reverts most often motivate their choice of a new faith with the logic of its truths, the clarity of the rules and the lack of intermediaries in a relationship with God:

> "*I never believed that Jesus was the son of God. After all, he prayed to him himself. I thought Catholics said 'Son of God' in the sense that we are all children of God. Jesus has always been the incarnation of God's word for me, that is, the communicator of this word. Later, not all other Catholics understood it the same way. When in college, we learned about councils and what was added and subtracted from this religion. For me, it was just adding oil to the fire. Establishment of the Holy Trinity, change of the ten commandments, confession, celibacy, saints…. It was absurd to me. It turned out that I was always a Muslim, but just I didn't know Islam yet (laughs).*" [A female respondent living in Poland]

Another recurring conversion theme is that Islam provides more structure and discipline than other religions. It is a way to return to society with greater family values. According to the neophytes, Islam is the only answer to the world's needs, hope for its spiritual renewal, an escape from a sense of moral ambivalence:

> "*That's how I started to get involved ... I already felt so disgusted with my life, and I knew that here I have these prohibitions that will free me from my way of life. I will not be able to drink, I will not be able to have sex without getting married, I will not be able to dress too frivolously, and it will be good for me. And that convinced me. I will have some fetters from such a superficial point of view, but that they will free me because my weaknesses will simply have a chain, and my more positive personality will be released.*" [A female respondent living in Poland]

Religious identity can be a protective factor against harmful environmental influences and risky choices. The religious community promotes collective values such as solidarity and loyalty in the group in a trusting, relational context and creates a cohesive social climate conducive to resilience. Suarez-Orozco (et al. 2011) examined the role of public religious practice on social relations and welfare in a racially and religiously diverse sample. Those who were more likely to engage in private and public religious practices (such as Prayers and Church services) had a more extensive network of pro-social friends and social support. Bonds with like-minded people were associated with a stronger religious identity, a sense of purpose in life, and a low level of risky behaviour involvement. These findings underscore the role of religious commitment as the source of moral virtues and are consistent with Erikson's (1968) claim that religiosity provides the ideological and social basis for positive identity development.

According to the respondents in both studies, Islam has a "peaceful influence" on them and "the world looks brighter" after converting. Reverts are attracted to egalitarianism and equality regardless of gender, race, or background. As the Prophet Muhammad said, "*O people! Your God is one, and your forefather (Adam) is one. An Arab is no better than a non-Arab, and a non-Arab is no better than an Arab, and a redskin is no better than a black, and a black is no better than a redskin except in piety* "(Ahmad 1992). They are also attracted by the attitude towards women, their rights and equality. Women, along with Islam, received "*rights for which European women could end up at the stake in the Middle Ages*."[13]

The Quran, in contrast to the Old and New Testaments, addresses men and women directly: " *Surely ˹for˺ Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who remember Allah often – for ˹all of˺ them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.*" (Al-Ahzab 33). Moreover, in the era of the rise of Islamic feminism, whose precursors are primarily reverts, many scholars look back to the original text of the Koran and hadith, re-examining the accepted classical interpretations of women.

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[13] Emina Ragipovic, za: Dudek A. (2016). „Poddaję się. Życie muzułmanek w Polsce". Warszawa: PWN

Although many local cultures in some Muslim countries reduced women to the roles of a wife or a mother, in the early days of Islam the Prophet Mohammed was accompanied by women who fulfilled themselves in other functions. The first Muslim was a woman, which is symbolic. The Prophet's first wife, Khadijah, believed in his mission and was also a successful businesswoman; Khawla, a warrior in Mohamed's army, saved his life on the battlefield; the Prophet's wives were specialised in medicine, law, and education. Most of them weren't mothers at all. These are just some of the examples given by the subjects.

Undoubtedly, one of the less frequent conversion motives is the influence of third parties, friends, partner or some authority:

> "*Students from a foreign scholarship joined us in our studies. It was the communist era. We didn't know anything about the outside world, so as soon as foreigners showed up, we spent a lot of time with them. Besides, they were learning Polish, so we helped them in many everyday matters. I was impressed with how mature they are compared to our guys, how composed, confident, calm, consistent. Before I started dating my husband, already as part of this group of friends, we prayed together and fasted. I never thought of myself as a Muslim, and I recited shahadah to my father-in-law for the first time when we would pick up the kids from school. It was like 20 years later.*" [A female respondent living in Poland]

Attitude towards umma

Muslim teachings emphasize all Muslims' existence as one supranational family – the umma. In his considerations on the psychology of conversion, Coe described it as one of the stages of creating a social group in which its members will self-realize. He considered the position of converts in society in terms of the new socialization implied by the new faith (Coe 1899).

Most religions have strict moral codes and boundaries, value self-control, and praise self-sacrifice for the long-term good. In particular, social relations with co-religious persons serve as an ethical guideline. In his research, Kingand Furrow (2004) stated that compared with less- and non-religious people, religiously committed people built more supportive relationships. These social relationships, in turn, increased an altruistic and empathetic concern for others. Importantly, these patterns of association between religiosity and moral outcomes through increased social capital showed slight variation by ethnicity or gender, suggesting that religiosity acts as a social glue and moral compass for both the minority and the majority.

The respondents repeatedly admitted that a warm welcome in the Muslim community, e.g. in a local mosque, contributed to the final decision of conversion. Most of the respondents have also declared that at some point they participated in initiatives organized by the local umma, e.g. in meetings for women or events for the general public to spread reliable knowledge about Islam and become more involved in civil society activities.

There were also voices that the support for a new member of the community weakened with time, which may be particularly acute for people whose decision to convert was related to ostracism from family and friends:

> "*At first, there is a great rush to get you [to accept Islam], and then they drop you off like a hot potato.*" [A female respondent living in Poland]

Society, patriotism and sense of identity

Perceived discrimination by the majority may lead to an emphasis on religiosity. Likewise, the ban on headscarves in some Western European societies can complicate the identification of Muslim women with the nation they live in (Güngör 2020). The social status and acculturation level of minority groups shape how they experience religiosity concerning mainstream culture. In an intercultural study involving a stigmatized (Muslim) minority in Belgium, Friedman and Saroglou (2010) found that more religious people were less attached to mainstream culture because they saw a more significant gap between it and their origin. More religious Muslims had lower self-esteem and experienced more depressed moods because they perceived less mainstream tolerance for their religious beliefs. However, among the Muslims, an increased religious identification is associated with higher self-esteem, meaning that religious identity receives support

from the co-religious community and serves as a buffer against discrimination by most society (Bender Yeresyan 2014; Dimitrova Aydinli-Karakulak 2016).

The cited studies, however, did not concern reverts. Although they also struggle with discrimination and declare that strong faith helps them maintain a positive self-image, they rarely admit to a sense of detachment from the Polish culture. On the contrary, many say their patriotism has increased since the conversion. They motivate this, on the one hand, by the desire to prove to others that a change of religion has nothing to do with national belonging and that Muslim values do not conflict with Polish ones, and on the other hand, with the requirement of Islam, which imposes compliance with the laws and customs in the country of residence.

Reverts declare that they are often accused of treason or race. However, most of them say that changing religion didn't change their attachment to Poland:

> "*I love Poland. This is my country. I have been a girl scout for eight years. I converted to Islam many years ago, and I still wear my uniform, organize events, travel with scouts on trips, once I even had to go to the mass on 11 November. I had to stand in the church with the banner. I treated it as a service to the scouting movement and Poland, not to the Church. This is my country. I was born here. This is my homeland, and religion has nothing to do with it. The worst thing is that people think that I have renounced my nationality. I wear a scout uniform and a hijab. They just told me to buy a beret-coloured scarf.*" [a female respondent living in Poland]

The results of the surveys indicated at the beginning showed that in terms of worldview, Polish reverts do not differ significantly from the national average (in comparison with the most recent CEBOS results on the same issues). In both studies, the question about the moral acceptability of different behaviours was asked. Reverts were more liberal than the national average about contraception, IVF and LGBTQ marriage, while they were less consenting to the death penalty and cohabitation. Only in the case of the latter indicator, the difference was significant: only 45% of reverts considered cohabitation as morally acceptable, compared to 65% of the general public.

As Maciej Kochanowicz (2015), Polish revert and journalist, stated: "*they are no longer just Arabs living in France or Pakistanis living in England, as most immigrants were perceived a few decades ago, but French Muslims or British Muslims (and - also! - Polish Muslims). They are also not socially marginal (in the sense of positioning on social status) as before.* We have to get rid of the imaginary Islamic culture because the concept is only a stereotype. Culture can be national or ethnic, and religion is not part of it. There is no contradiction or difficulty in being Polish and Muslim, or French and Muslim because these two identities coexist."

New Muslims' identity was not built on the path of thoughtlessly and uncritically accepted socialisation but through their own choices, thoughts, and learning. Thus, they did not take over the customs features of individual regions of the Muslim world that would affect their understanding of religion (Badron, 2006). This is confirmed by research on Muslim identity construction in European countries where German, French, Swedish and British Islam is spoken.

German Muslims, for example, believe that Islam, once purged of cultural raids, fits well with German values and lifestyle. Some even argue that being a German Muslim is entirely in line with the German Enlightenment's older values (Özyürek 2015). Some, however, believe that reverts do not necessarily bring Islam closer to European culture. For instance, Didier Leschi, currently Director-General of the French Office for Immigration and Integration and President of the European Institute for Religious Studies, thinks that reverts often have to exaggerate their religiosity to be accepted as Muslims and therefore tend to be extremist more often than others[14].

Polish reverts living in Western Europe generally do not differ from those living in Poland. The only apparent difference between the two groups emerging from the research R1 and R2 is wearing the hijab, which is chosen by 68% in the West and only 14% of reverts in Poland.

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[14] Statement following the arrests of a terrorist network in France in October 2012, quoted by the New York Times (2013) de la Baume (2013). More in France Are Turning to Islam, Challenging a Nation's Idea of Itself. New York Times. 03.02.2013.

Conclusions

Despite the great diversity of Muslims and regardless of their religious identification, Muslim identity is treated as a single category in the public's eyes. From the perspective of mainstream society, Islam is an obstacle to integrating Muslim minorities in Europe (Foner Alba 2008).

In reply to that, religious acculturation studies draw attention to both socio-cultural influences and the continuity and change in religious identification, beliefs and behaviours of religious minorities, and the conditions in which religious identity is compatible with or collides with national identities. Developmental, intercultural, and acculturation studies on religious minorities suggest that religious acculturation is primarily part of collective cultural continuity, and as such, religiosity does not necessarily exclude the integration of religious minorities into society. Indeed, an unfavourable social climate towards religious minorities, as well as perceived discrimination, may impair their ability or willingness to engage with mainstream society.

Research on individuals who decided to join the minority religious group through conversion can shed additional light on the general trajectories of spiritual development and the contextual differences in forms, meanings and functions of religiosity among acculturating groups. Such research can contribute to public discourse from a minority perspective and influence policies geared towards positive intergroup relations and social cohesion in increasingly culturally diverse societies and may show integration and inclusion.

While French public services have for years warned that reverts are a critical element of the terrorist threat in Europe because they hold Western passports and "do not stand out in the crowd," researchers who have long dealt with integration issues (e.g. Özyürek 2015, Sealy 2020 2021) see a very different social role for Muslim reverts.

The small percentage of reverts compared to the overall Muslim community does not mean that they are of negligible importance. The role of reverts is vital in shaping European Islam in several ways. On the one hand, they are the primary social intermediaries as they create the European Islamic culture. On the other hand, reverts change their social environment position and express their act in terms of choice (Allievi 2000). In Europe, this group is both Europeans and Muslims, which sets the tone for the Muslim community. According to Karin van Nieuwkrek (2007), converts to Islam living in the West play at least three critical mediatory roles:

- reverts, especially intellectuals, offer Islam some legitimacy in the eyes of society
- the existence of converts to Islam gives Muslim immigrants a confirmation of the truthfulness of their religion and a guarantee of the legality of their rights in Western society
- the third role is played by converted women who often break the terrible image of a Muslim, forcing them to develop a new discourse on Islam and gender.

They show the critical role of converts who are mediators between two worlds and, as it were, put Islam into the European framework.

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