

Religious Conversion and Conversion to Islam

What is Religious Conversion?

- Conversion to any religion involves changes in personal attitudes and beliefs, and accepting a new set of values that impact multiple areas of a convert's life.

What is Islamic conversion?

- The Qur'an most commonly uses the word *aslama* (submission) to denote becoming Muslim. However, 'submission' doesn't adequately define or express the processes or experience of people converting to Islam, and no single definition of conversion can be found either in the Qur'an or within wider Islamic scholarship.
- The formal mechanism involved in becoming a Muslim is the same around the world regardless of to which sect a person converts (Sunni/Shia). To convert, the believer must pledge a single verbal declaration of the *kalima shahada*; preferably in the company of other Muslims. This ritual symbolizes a convert's submission, surrender, and acceptance of the oneness of *Allah* (God), known in Arabic as *tawhid*, and the divine laws established in the Qur'an.
- Converts reciting *shahada* declare the following statement: *Ashadu al la ilaha illa llah, wa ashadu anna muhammadar rasulu ilah* (I witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger and servant).
- From a social science perspective, conversion is observable at two levels; what people say and what they do. The first is based on a declaration and usually the institutional or communal recognition of that declaration. Declaring *shahada* fulfills this role. The second, and more credible indicator, is the practical application of Islamic religious principles to the convert's daily life.
- The practical duties of every Muslim are referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam. All converts technically should practice *shahada* (ongoing belief in one God), *salat* (ritual prayer five times a day), *zakat* (compulsory alms giving), *sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).
- This emphasis on practice comes from the Islamic principle of *Ihsan*, (perfection or excellence) which means in order to attain salvation a Muslim must combine faith and action, belief and practice, to show one's *imaan* (inner faith) in both deed and action.

Convert or Revert?

- The terms ‘reversion’ and ‘revert’ used to describe becoming Muslim are not uncommon. They relate to the Islamic concept of *fitra*; a core philosophical reference to the ‘innate’ or ‘primordial’ nature of all human beings. In Islam, doctrinally and philosophically, all children are born Muslim. Muslims believe that Allah creates all people as inherently good, believing in one God and endowed with the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. In other words, *Allah* creates all children according to *fitra*, and it is misguided parents who teach their children incorrect beliefs and raise them as polytheists, atheists, Jews or Christians. Therefore, individuals who “convert” to Islam could be said to “revert” to an original, pure or “true” religion.
- The majority of Western converts generally describe themselves as converts rather than reverts. Most converts do not appear to have strong views on whether one term or the other is used to describe them.
- A small minority of more doctrinally rigid Muslim converts in Australia, Britain, Western Europe and America believe that by ‘embracing Islam’ they are reverting or returning to their old or the original form of religion rather than converting to a new religion.
- Research suggests the reversion narrative that some converts construct only becomes part of a convert’s biographical reconstruction after their encounter and interaction with advocates of Islam. For example, a Muslim proselyte will tell a potential convert about the doctrine of *fitra* as a technique that provides meaning and influences the convert to accept the new religion. Then reversion becomes part of the convert’s narrative.

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