Conversions*

... in Egypt

By MONIKA LINDBEKK

On August 4, Muḥammad Ḥigāzī, an Egyptian in his early thirties, appears in a video uploaded to YouTube [[↗Social Media](#)] looking pale but composed. In a well-rehearsed statement, he publicly blesses the Prophet Muḥammad as “the foremost among God’s creation” and also spells out the *shahāda*, the Islamic proclamation of faith. With this, Ḥigāzī—until then Egypt’s ‘best-known convert *from* Islam’ who had become Christian and taken the name Bishōy—reverts *to* Islam. The video ends a nine-year-long, eventually unsuccessful struggle with courts and other authorities to be legally recognized as a Christian. (Back in 2007, he had filed a lawsuit to try to change his religious identity as shown on his ID card from “Muslim” to “Christian”). In the video, a resigned Ḥigāzī apologizes to his family and says he will never again speak to the media:

I want nothing from this video. I have no desires. I will not appear again in the media. I will not appear again in public. [...] I say this out of my complete free will. I am under no pressures from anyone. I am not being held by any agency, nor am I under any pressure of any kind. And that’s it. (*al-Ṣabāḥ*, April 12) [[↗Freedom vs. Constraint](#)]

Muḥammad Ḥigāzī’s story sheds light on how the Egyptian state inserts itself into religious life. It recognizes conversion *to* Islam, but not conversion *from* Islam to another religion. While Ḥigāzī’s public reversion to Islam in August is not covered extensively in Egyptian newspapers, echoes of the controversy sparked by his act of requesting legal recognition for conversion to Christianity continue to reverberate. In 2008, a court had ruled that Ḥigāzī, born a Muslim, could not have his conversion recognized because this would amount to “apostasy” (*irtidād*) and therefore contradict public order and morals. In a program aired during Ramadan, however, *shaykh al-Azhar* Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib elaborates that apostates should not be punished by death (*al-Buḥayrī*). Earlier this year, the head of al-Azhar’s Committee had declared that

God acknowledges the freedom of humans to choose a religion or belief without coercion (...). Apostasy (*ridda*), however, is a major sin (*min al-kabā’ir*) as it signals disbelief in God and his Holy Book. (*al-Ṣabāḥ*, April 12)

This definition of Islam has the effect of authorizing intervention in the domain of belief [[↗Freedom vs. Constraint](#) (Individual *vs.* Collective); [↗In Islam, ...](#)]. Individuals such as Muḥammad Ḥigāzī therefore live in fear for their lives. Any attempt to trick the system through forgery of ID documents exposes people to the risk of prosecution [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#), [↗Tricking the System / Tricked by the System](#)].

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But how to convert *to* Islam? In principle, it suffices to pronounce the *shahāda*. In practice, however, things are not so straightforward. An investigative article titled “Want to convert? Meet me later” offers an account of this process (*al-Ṣabāḥ*, April 12). The female journalist’s adventure into the labyrinth of Egyptian bureaucracy begins with her entering *Mashyakhat al-Azhar*, a bulky concrete building. On the ground floor, she reaches an office carrying the sign “Announcement of Islam for Egyptians” (*Izhār al-Islām lil-Miṣriyyīn*). There she encounters five employees, four men and one woman, all in their early twenties, with a mandate to ascertain whether potential converts indeed believe in God and his Prophet and freely consent to convert.

According to the young employees, the following documents are required in support of changing one’s religion: (1) certificate of approval granted by the Mufti of Egypt to ensure his acceptance of her entrance into Islam, that she is not underage, and the presence of two Muslim witnesses; (2) a written approval from the Ministry of Interior. When the author says that she has difficulties procuring the necessary documents (especially the validation from the Ministry of Interior), she is advised to pay a visit to al-Azhar’s Fatwa committee which is situated to the right of the entrance to Azhar mosque. On the wall is a sign saying that pronouncement of fatwas is not conditioned by payment of a fee. In a Kafkaesque twist, an employee at al-Azhar’s Fatwa Council gives her the address of a small mosque in the semi-rural area of Shubrā al-Khayma for the sake of speeding up conversion procedures. At the mosque she is welcomed by a husband and wife who volunteer to teach prospective converts about the rituals and obligations of Islam. The wife assures her that they receive no profit for doing this. The author of the article subsequently visits the couple at their home where she is initiated into the Islamic way of life, the characteristics of the Prophet and the angels, along with the ritual of prayer. The initiation ceremony takes place inside a small living room decorated with Qur’ānic verses and is accompanied by low Qur’ānic recitation playing on the radio.

Stories of conversion are also a recurring theme in popular culture. The stories highlight that converts are treated with ambivalence. On the one hand, they are viewed with distrust and suspicion: they are not only viewed as having turned their backs on a set of religious beliefs, but also their families and social conventions. On the other hand, they are viewed as brave pioneers. The former is evident in the Egyptian feature film *Mawlānā* (The Preacher) where an incident of conversion is used to critique the interplay between political power, religious establishment, mass media and Islamist extremism [↗[In Islam, ...](#), ↗[“The System” vs. “The People”](#)]. The protagonist, a highly popular TV preacher [↗[Celebrities](#)] known for his independent unconventional thinking, is approached by a couple from the highest echelons of society, close to the inner circle of the President. They ask the hero to “revert” their “spoiled” son who has become Christian and started to donate enormous sums of “their” money to the Coptic church. The ruling elites also fear angering the religious establishment upon whom they rely to keep society in check. In the end it turns out that his conversion has been mere camouflage: in reality, the convert is a terrorist. In the movie’s dramatic climax, the son detonates a bomb inside a church which kills many. Apart from exploring the origins and effects of tensions between Muslims and Christians, the film engages with tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Ultimately, the story is used to deliver a message about inter-religious tolerance and the importance of independent thinking.

Meanwhile, in the bestselling novel *Fī qalbī unthā 'ibriyya* (A Jewish girl in my heart) by the Tunisian author Khawla Ḥamdī, the conversion of Nadā, a Jewish girl, to Islam is used to make the reader experience the true spirit of Islam. Khawla Ḥamdī's book depicts different stages in the conversion process. These include opening oneself to new options; meeting a person who embodies the religious vision (freedom fighter and exemplary Muslim Aḥmad); finding a home (in Islam, depicted as a home for the homeless, likened to hot tea); and committing oneself to an Islamic way of life, embodied in Nadā's donning of the *hijab* [↗**In Islam, ...**]. The process is compelling and transformative, but hardly smooth and seamless. Nadā is expelled from home and disowned by her orthodox Jewish mother due to her wearing the headscarf. Suffering on account of her conversion to Islam, Nadā is portrayed as a “martyr of true belief”. While the novel on the surface seeks to advance a vision of religious tolerance, it is marked by power hierarchy. The novel is consistent in portraying Islam as superior compared to other religions, embodied in the adoption of Islamic identity and mode of dress by a young Jewish woman. For the majority of readers—Muslims, of course—such a portrayal of their own religion must have a reassuring effect [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**].

Khawla Ḥamdī's idealized portrayal of Islamic tolerance stands in contrast to the accounts of inter-religious conflict found both in newspapers and fictional representations [↗**Clash**]. The investigative journalist from *al-Ṣabāḥ* sheds further light on the dynamics of conversion when, on another day, she visits a Coptic church in Shubrā al-Khayma. She tells the security guard that she is a Muslim woman who wishes to change her religion to Christianity and is granted a meeting with the priest. Patiently, the latter tells her that

Only God cares what stirs in people's hearts. You do not have to be a Christian on paper to be one of us. Our church is open to you in case you wish to come here and worship. But I can't help you with more than that. [↗**Dual Identities / Masking**]

The investigative journalist also tries her luck with the head of the *Jewish* community. After broaching the subject of her prospective conversion from Islam to Judaism, the journalist's interlocutor on the phone tells her: “You are going to bring about a disaster on me (*inti ḥa-twaddīnī fī dāḥya*)!” whereupon the connection is broken. The brusque response has to be seen against the background of the precarious status of the Jewish community in Egypt. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many Egyptian Jews were expelled or compelled in other ways to leave the country. Once a thriving community, the Jews in Egypt have been reduced to six elderly women, reports *Egypt Independent* in July.

While, historically, conversions to Islam were welcomed, nowadays they seem to be deemed increasingly as a threat to national security as they tend to be associated with sectarian tension and conflict [↗**Security vs. Fear**]. On January 29, *Nujūm miṣriyya* reports that the Tura prison administration had to separate Muslim Brotherhood supporters after they forced three Christian prisoners to convert (*NMisr*). The stories that attract most media attention, however, revolve around *female* converts to Islam. On May 7, *Īlāf* (*Elaph*) newspaper uses the term “sectarian crisis” (*azma ṭā'ifiyya*) to describe a series of incidents in which Coptic girls in Upper Egypt have allegedly converted to Islam. In June, an eighteen-year-old Coptic girl disappears from a village in Upper Egypt after reportedly converting to Islam [↗**Disappearances**]. In another village a rumour spreads that a Christian woman has eloped with a young man named “Islam” (‘ABD AL-ḤAFĪZ). Demonstrations erupt outside the

local police station where male members of the local Coptic community demand that the girl be returned to her family. On the other side, the local Muslim population accuses the police of colluding with the Coptic Church to prevent such conversions. Subsequently some men are arrested while others are dispersed [[♣Prison](#)]. In response to these emotional demonstrations, the head of the local security directorate issues a statement that the woman in question is not held in police custody, but is on a train to Cairo to announce her conversion to Islam at al-Azhar. The eighteen-year-old girl appears in a video clip on YouTube (‘ABD AL-ḤAFĪZ) [[♣Social Media](#)]. The video shows her wearing a black hijab and giving a furtive smile while announcing her belief in Islam. Her declaration is less rehearsed than that of Muḥammad Higāzī; in the background, the voice of a man can be heard reciting the *shahāda*, which she repeats after him (YT, May 4). Shrouded in mystery, this episode, as others like it, gives ample room for speculation: did the woman in question convert willingly or was she in fact kidnapped and forced to adopt Islam? [[♣True vs. False](#), [♣True = False \(Life in Limbo\)](#)]. The fact that women’s conversion elicits such anxiety can probably be explained by common assumptions about women’s relations with men [[♣Male vs. Female](#)] who are neither their husbands nor belong to their families and religious communities, particularly in the governorates of Upper Egypt. Expressing fear and anxiety over this and other similar incidents, some Copts try to create an association aimed at handling what they view as the growing phenomenon of forced disappearances and kidnapping, but they fail to obtain the official permit required [[♣Disappearances](#)]. Returning to the article in *al-Ṣabāḥ*, an approval from the Ministry of Interior validating the conversion and change of name in an ID card is noteworthy among the documents required for conversion to Islam. This signals that a closer monitoring of the boundaries between religious identities has come to be viewed as necessary step to prevent further sectarian tension and agonism, as reflected in a statement by the head of al-Azhar’s Fatwa Committee:

According to God, the believer is free to believe and the disbeliever to disbelieve. However, in cases where conversion leads to *fitna* on account of social disapproval, the issue is referred to national security agencies and the judiciary for the sake of protecting the individual and nation (*al-Ṣabāḥ*, April 12).

Conversions may put society at risk of *fitna*, “trial, temptation, sedition, civil strife”—the word reminds of the big schism in early Islamic history that led to the Sunni-Shia split and has become almost synonymous with civil war ever since. In light of this and other barriers facing converts attempting to change religious membership religion in ID cards, the author of the article wonders whether the principle of freedom of religion that is found in the 2014 constitution is not just “ink on paper” (*hibr ‘alà waraq*), as the popular Egyptian proverb says.

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