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Conversions unveiled; Appeal of Islam to women explored

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In the 1990s, when she first set out to interview women about their conversions to Islam, Anna Mansson McGinty expected to meet the wives of devout Muslims, women whose religion had come from their husbands.

But a more complex picture emerged as McGinty, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, began delving into the women's stories for her 2006 book, "Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam."

McGinty, 35, interviewed women in her native Sweden and in the United States, and found no typical Muslim convert. Nor did she find conversions that could be reduced to a single act.

"The book's main aim," she said, "is to show that conversion is not, as many scholars have described it, a one-time event. It's a constant process. It's never-ending."

Among the nine women profiled in the book was Mariam, an American-born graduate student in anthropology who went to do field work in an oasis in northern Africa, and while in the field converted to Islam at age 25. Years later, she married a man who also was a Muslim convert.

There was Fatimah, a former Catholic who had abandoned religion in college, then, as a married mother of two, watched a documentary on nuclear holocaust that led her to embark on a spiritual quest. In the course of this quest, she would divorce her husband, convert to Islam and later marry a Muslim man.

"Becoming Muslim" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, \$65) sheds light on how women in Islam are perceived, an issue that reflects the rift between the Muslim world and the West.

Yvonne Haddad, a professor who teaches the history of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at Georgetown University, said a fundamental misconception about Islamic women stems from an old colonialist notion.

"There is a whole history of European colonialism," she said, "that justified the occupation of Muslim lands by saying, 'We have to save Muslim women.'"

Early Crusaders saw Muslim women in their veils and imagined they were abused by their men, hidden under cover, Haddad said.

Today the idea persists, though it is balanced by a view from the opposite side of the cultural divide.

"Muslims look at Western women as being abused by their husbands because they allow strange men to talk and flirt with the women," Haddad explained.

Negative ideas about the treatment of Islamic women, however, are not without some grains of truth.

There have been forced marriages and "honor killings" of women in certain Muslim cultures, said Marcia Hermansen, director of the Islamic World Studies program at Loyola University of Chicago, but such practices are not part of most Muslims' "everyday reality. It's not sanctioned by the religion."

"Under the Taliban, certainly women were hideously oppressed," said Leila Ahmed, a professor at Harvard Divinity School.

At the same time, Ahmed said, "nobody has ever asked me to explain why there have been women heads of state in Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. How many European and American women heads of state have there been?"

"The extraordinary achievements and freedoms of Muslim women are simply invisible."

Hermansen pointed out that some of these heads of state were the wives or daughters of leaders, evidence in her view that "family identity trumps gender distinctions for the most part."

Although Islam is often labeled one of the fastest-growing major religions in the U.S., the numbers are in dispute.

Ali Khan, national director of the American Muslim Council, said America's Muslim population has grown from 6 million to about 10 million in the last decade.

Growing up in Sweden

Hermansen said the 10 million figure "is probably high" but added, "there is a correct perception that the number of Muslims is growing, and most of that is through immigration, some is through conversions and some is from births (to Muslim families)."

Given the current climate of misconception and debate, Ahmed said the decision by women to convert to Islam "is a very important subject which is just now beginning to be studied."

McGinty came to the subject after growing up in southern Sweden in a largely secular home.

Despite the limited role religion played in her own life, McGinty became fascinated by the role it played in the lives of others.

The interest emerged in 1985 when her family went to live for a year in Iraq where her father was working as a doctor.

Her friendship with two teenagers from very different Muslim families left a lasting impression.

One was Pakistani, from a traditional, conservative Muslim family; the other was Turkish, from a non-practicing Muslim family.

She noticed how their lives differed from her own, for example the stricter parental control the Pakistani friend experienced, "her very strong belief and the strength that it gave her."

At Lund University in Sweden, McGinty took courses in religious studies, sociology and European ethnology.

She wrote her student thesis on converts to Islam, a topic she would further develop for her doctorate and her book.

In 1996, she came to the U.S. for graduate studies at the University of California-Santa Cruz and, while there, met her husband.

She returned to Sweden, where she received her doctorate in 2002.

The following year, she joined the department of geography and women's studies at UW-Milwaukee.

Detailing the journey

McGinty's interviews with the nine women were never intended to be a scientific survey. Instead, they offer a window into the journey toward conversion and the consequences of that decision.

One of the Swedish women told McGinty that the decision to wear the veil changed the way fellow Swedes viewed her. The woman said that strangers assumed she was an immigrant and would speak slowly, asking, "Do . . . you . . . speak . . . Swedish?"

The veil has become a powerful symbol of the complexity of Islamic conversion.

McGinty found that converts were eager to wear the veil to identify themselves as Muslim, yet also saw it as something "intimately linked to the stereotypes of Muslim women."

Some women, McGinty said, remove the veil before entering their workplaces.

Women also told McGinty that, since their conversions, people seemed to view them as boring or serious, almost discounting the possibility that they might have a sense of humor.

New kind of femininity

All of the women, McGinty said, found something in Islam that aligned to a core part of their personality.

Some found that zakat, or alms giving to the poor, which is one of the five pillars of Islam, fit a belief in social justice.

Others found in Islam a faith that spoke to their sense of religious yearning or spiritual quest.

Some of the women, she said, found that Islam allowed them to try out a new kind of femininity, one that emphasized modesty and placed value on who a woman is rather than what she looks like.

"Conversion triggers profound questions to the self," McGinty wrote in her book. "It heightens the awareness and prompts reflections of who one is, who one was, and where one is heading."

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