CHAPTER 4

Conversion of European Intellectuals to Islam: The Case of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje alias ‘Abd al-Ghaffār

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In reflecting on the role learned European converts to Islam may play in intercultural communication and Islamic scholarship, it seems useful to distinguish between three main types of conversion. First, there is the permanent conversion, in which the convert acts out of free will and personal conviction and believes that he has converted for the rest of his life. In their new status, these intellectuals also may acquire completely new audiences and with them new chances for a successful intellectual career, especially if they use their talents in the service of combatting their old faith. In fact, numerous polemical and apologetic writings flew from the pens of these erudite converts who attacked their old faith or philosophy of life and defended their choice of Islam. A famous case is Fray (“Brother”) Anselm of Turmeda (‘Abdallāh al-Tarjumān al-Mayurqī), who authored his famous anti-Christian pamphlet *Gift for the Intelligent to Confute the People of the Cross* in Tunis, after his conversion to Islam in the latter half of the fourteenth century.1 In fact, this phenomenon of learned European converts producing polemical and apologetic writings continues to the present day, as is amply illustrated by the study of Salah Abdel Razaq on neo-Muslim intellectuals in the West; he writes long chapters on their contributions to Islamic polemical, anti-Western, and anti-Christian literature.2 Some of the works of these converted polemicists even enjoy distribution on a worldwide scale, in translations into the major languages of the Muslim world. There are, however, some rare exceptions to the majority of these polemical erudites. An example is Leopold Weiss, of Austrian Jewish extraction, who converted to Islam and adopted the name Muhammad Asad, then delved deeply into Arabic and Islamic sources, and ultimately developed

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2 Salah Abdel Razaq, *Neo-Muslim Intellectuals in the West and Their Contributions to Islamic Thought and the Formation of Western Islam* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), Ch. 5, 229–262, and Ch. 6, 263–212.
into an Islamic scholar with a wide recognition, and even translated and commented upon the Qurʾān.\(^3\)

A second type of conversion frequently observed is forced conversion. Here, the intention of the “convert” usually is to return in due time to his/her original faith or conviction or even to continue his/her original faith or conviction without any interruption but in secret. This results in the phenomenon of a simulated or fraudulent conversion. During the period of slavery, for instance, many enslaved European Christians outwardly converted to Islam under duress. Those who were fortunate enough to escape or be ransomed usually reverted to their original faith immediately upon returning to their home countries.\(^4\)

A third type of conversion to be distinguished is the conversion of convenience. This is an insincere form of conversion performed only to obtain certain interests, like a marriage, access for one’s children to a confessional school, access to a certain club or place open to adherents of a particular religion. The fraudulent convert who converts out of convenience may have in mind activities such as espionage, research in the field, love relations, etc. The history of European “conversions of convenience” to Islam is promising and deserves a profound historical study. The earliest example known to the present author dates back to the year 1162, when, according to Arabic sources, two Andalusian Christians (probably Arabic speaking “Mozarabs” from Christian Spain), disguised as Muslims, attempted to dig an underground tunnel in Medina, in order to steal the bones of the Prophet Muhammad and bring these with them back to Spain. They were unmasked and executed.\(^5\) Another early example is the early sixteenth-century Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema who as a “temporary convert” was able to provide an eyewitness report of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina with historical explanations in a language that his readers could understand; he described, for instance, Abū Bakr, Muhammad’s successor buried next to him, as a “cardinal, who had the ambition to become pope.”\(^6\)

Each of us can think of some famous examples of a more recent time, like Edward William Lane (1801–1876), who undertook research in the first half of

\(^3\) Martin Kramer, “The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss),” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 225–247.

