

Religious conversions in the Mediterranean world, edited by Nadia Marzouki and Oliver Roy. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 208 pp., £57.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-00488-8

This is an important book, part of the Palgrave Macmillan “Islam and Nationalism” series, addressing a much-neglected subject. Conversion to and from one faith to another is an extremely sensitive, emotive and contentious topic. Many societies have strictures or prejudices regarding apostasy, the perceived theological betrayal and the bifurcation of communal solidarity (not to mention identity). The modest title here belies the breadth, width and depth of this exciting achievement in academic literature, which makes for compelling reading, although one suspects the primary audience will be largely sociologists and anthropologists as the focus is squarely on the past two centuries. The roster of impressive young specialist contributors to this diverse and superbly written compendium testifies to the consummate skills of the editors. Drawing mostly on Francophone scholars, Marzouki and Roy demonstrate a striking control of terminological detail and subtle understatement, linking the book’s contributions into a coherent theoretical argument that contends, basically, that the phenomena and experience of conversion “reveals an ambivalent process that simultaneously aims at rejecting and finding religion” (8). In other words, this is a two-way street. Is it a question of qualitative theological principle or evolving personal faith? Is it an incremental shift in private beliefs and moral codes, or one of broad cultural practices, societal allegiances and intergenerational collective psychology? Is this process fundamentally one of acceptance or a form of repudiation?

The editors, Dr Nadia Marzouki and Professor Olivier Roy, have forged a useful textbook for scholars and students alike, which compares very favourably with other literature in the field, such as *Islamic Conversions: Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam* by García-Arenal (2001) or even the historic *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic* by Szpiech (2012).

Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World contains nine chapters by as many contributors. Marzouki provides an excellent Introduction to the book’s trajectory: “Based on a series of historical and ethnographical studies, this book shows how religious conversions to and from Islam, Christianity or Judaism in Mediterranean countries dramatically unsettle dominant understandings of nationalism, citizenship and secularism” (4). As a counterpoint, Roy provides the Conclusion, entitled “What Matters with Conversions?” He argues that deep social conventions and confessions, even rifts and schisms within traditional kinship and genealogical continuities, can all be acculturated or attenuated into shared identities, rituals, history and (importantly) destinies. The presence of converts, like religious books or buildings themselves, usually informs outside observers a great deal about the highly ambiguous complexities of cultural identity that anxious ideological or theological purists refute and downplay.

Elsewhere, an eclectic group address issues as diverse as competing taxonomies, endogamy and dormant folk group sentiments, black Africans converting to Judaism and Arab Muslims converting to Protestant Christianity, and the implications thereof. For instance the first chapter, “Evangelicals in the Arab World: The Example of Lebanon” by sociologist Fatiha Kaoues, briefly details the historic arrival and spread of Protestantism in the Middle East and particularly the Levant. She observes “an apostate calls into question the definition of the borders of social cohesion when it becomes apparent that common citizenship of a nation is insufficient to delimit its contours” (13). She reminds readers that conversion can be temporary, passive or partial – as much as aggressive, binary or garrulous. Most of the articles here also survey the legal and policy conundrums that such multi-directional and transnational conversions signify to the new social milieux and nation states in the post-colonial era,

where the foundational ethos, narratives and myths are dramatically emancipated and challenged. Nadia Marzouki herself writes a chapter entitled “Purifying the Soul and Healing the Nation: Conversions to Evangelical Protestantism in Algeria,” which examines the historical development and indigenization of Protestantism within an Arab society – with particular emphasis on the various competing legalistic, bureaucratic, humanitarian, ethnic and nationalist issues. Other equally vibrant contributions are undertaken by Julie Picard, anthropologist Don Seeman, Heather J. Sharkey of the University of Pennsylvania, Loïc Le Pape, Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot, Chrystal Vanel and Benoît Fliche.

Overall, my only criticism of this book is that, in view of the title, I would like to have seen a little more about the Balkans – a vast area of Jewish–Christian–Muslim conversion one way or another. For instance, in *Kosovo: A Short History*, the British writer Noel Malcolm observed directly that

Syncretism is an important part of the background to the whole issue of conversion. Syncretist folk religion supplies part of the answer; with so many practices either shared or replicated between the faiths, these people probably did not notice such a dramatic difference in kind between all forms of Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other. (Malcolm [1998](#), 131).

Wise words. Taken as a whole, this is a truly excellent book. Marzouki and Roy have taken a team of scholars to gaze steadily and persistently into the heart of a delicate (and for some, provocative) issue and emerged with excellent insights into transnationalism and territorialization. The place and role of converts to and from Judaism, Christianity and Islam within the Mediterranean has been hotly debated and remains contested in many respects. Conversion is both an immediate living reality and a palpable signal to future possibilities, as much as a spiritual quest for the transcendent. This deeply textured and philosophical analysis is a must for readers of both modern Western society and the Middle East alike.

References

- 1. García-Arenal, Mercedes. 2001. *Islamic Conversions: Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam*. Strasbourg: European Science Foundation.
- 2. Malcolm, Noel. 1998. *Kosovo: A Short History*. London: Macmillan.
- 3. Szpiech, Ryan. 2012. *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.