

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONVERT?

A few days before I write a terrorist attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, has left dozens dead. Responsibility has been claimed by a radical Islamic Group. On the actual day I write, an Interpol alert has been issued for a white British woman who converted to Islam in her teens and is now suspected of involvement, if not in this attack, in others of a similar nature. Even if this particular woman had nothing to do with this attack, or the others she is accused of, it is likely that converts to Islam will be involved in this action, as they have been in many other recent terrorist acts. Why? What makes converts do such atrocious things? Perhaps we need to look at what it means to be a convert to learn how they tick. Maybe then we will see that converts to Islam are no different to converts to Christianity, or Buddhism, or communism, or environmentalism or atheism. All converts are the same under the skin.

### What is a convert?

First, then, we need to define what a convert is. The word "convert" comes from a Latin word meaning "to turn round". In Biblical terms, both the Greek and Hebrew words rendered "convert" in English Bibles also mean "to turn round". In modern English usage the word means something more like "transform" or "change", as in converting degrees Fahrenheit into Celsius or pounds sterling into dollars. In each case a radical change is involved. Either you stop going one way and start going the other, or you are completely transformed. So when relatives of Islamic converts who have committed terrorist acts say "The person that I knew would never have done that", they speak the truth. But that person is no longer the person they knew. That is what being a convert is all about. And as I indicated above, this is not purely a religious phenomenon. People from affluent conservative backgrounds who become communists, and people from religious backgrounds who become atheists, show precisely the same characteristics as religious converts. The only difference is what they have been converted to. Because in every case the person concerned has embarked on a marked change of direction, has become another person, and has begun to live their life by an entirely different set of principles. And that leads them to exhibit a number of traits which make them very difficult for everyone to live with - the group they have chosen to join as well as those in their former world!

### Absolute Commitment

You do not ditch the habits and principles of a lifetime and risk losing all your friends unless you are absolutely committed to your new cause. The convert can be ready to sacrifice money, friends, status, employment, housing, even family for the cause. Not all converts give up all those things, of course, but many will actually make one or some of these sacrifices, and will testify to being ready to make the others "if necessary". If the new cause is a mainstream religion or ideology, it will be made clear to them that most of these sacrifices are not necessary, but if the religion, or ideology, or cult is more radical, it may require the new convert to make all these sacrifices, and others. The less one has to begin with, of course, the easier it is to make the sacrifices. So the most radical creeds tend to attract those who are poor and desperate, or those who have made a shipwreck of their lives on drink, drugs, or crime, and who now wish to make a new start. They reason that they have nothing to lose. This means the convert is far more likely to take extreme action. They are full of the commitment that comes from a new enthusiasm and consider their boats already to have been burned, so there is nothing to stop them.

### Disorientation

It is not surprising that people who embark on a new journey to somewhere they have never been don't really have much of a clue where they are going. This means they look quickly for guides to show them the way. There are two problems here, Firstly, they are easy prey for teachers and leaders who are looking for gullible followers. People who have grown up in whatever tradition these people have joined have had time to consider what their fellow religionists or those who share

their ideology have to say, and are able to sift out the gold from the dross and they know whom to take with a pinch of salt. The new convert does not have this experience and has a tendency to believe whatever they are told - and some of it is inevitably rubbish. Secondly, the convert is in no mood to accept half-measures. One is unlikely to reject one's former tradition, principles, and world view, and cope with the disruption that comes in the wake of such a decision in order to accept a faith or an ideology which is very like the one you have rejected. If one is going to convert, one has to have a clear picture of the faith, ideology, or worldview that one is converting to. This means that converts tend to be seeking a clear and unambiguous message to believe, which means that they tend to adopt extreme positions in the tradition they enter. Lifelong Muslims, Christians, communists, or whatever, may find some aspects of their faith or ideology difficult to understand or even to accept, and may find some way of re-interpreting those difficult elements. The convert, on the other hand would be most unlikely to show interest in a moderate form of belief. They will tend to see things much more in terms of black and white. Having readily embraced this new faith, they will defend it to the death. They can be very extreme. And pronouncements by moderate clerics/teachers/ideologues that these beliefs are incorrect will do no good, because these people will be denounced as heretics or sell-outs. The convert will seek teachers who will give the kind of clear and firm teaching they are looking for.

One may wonder, then, why there are so many moderate believers about, if all converts are extremists. The truth is that being a convert is very much like being in love. In its early stages love is very intense, but later it grows and deepens, but the intensity usually fades. It has to: most of us cannot live our lives at that intensity for ever. So the new believer believes everything intensely, but most grow and deepen with the years, and many of the originally firm and extreme positions are moderated. But just as some people have a need to seek over and over again the intense love of youth - even when they are married with a family and far too old for all that, so some believers refuse to grow beyond the convert stage and remain just as intense and extreme as ever

### **Exclusiveness**

The other tendency of converts is radical exclusiveness. Lifelong Muslims, Christians, communists, or whatever may well wish to show that they are decent, peace-loving people who want to get on with their neighbours. They would like you to show an interest in their beliefs, but would wish to show that these beliefs are life-enhancing rather than threatening. The convert, however, has just been through a life-changing experience and believes it must be just as much good news for others as it was for him/her. Thus they may well believe that their neighbours' world-view needs challenging right this moment, because they are missing out on the wonderful good news that has just turned the convert's life upside-down. It would never occur to the convert that some people would rather their life was *not* turned upside down because they preferred it right way up. And even if that thought did occur to them, they might well reason that the neighbour needed to be shocked out of their state of denial. This makes converts very difficult for their new friends, as well as for their neighbours to live with. The religion or group has invested a lot of time in seeking to build up a friendly relationship with their community, and here comes this convert like a bull in a china shop liable to upset all we've been trying to do! The neighbours may well be incensed, but are equally likely to see the convert more as a nuisance than as a threat. If the convert is attached to a mainstream faith or ideology, they will soon be instructed in the need for tact and diplomacy. But if they have joined a radical group this exclusiveness may lead them to become more and more dissociated from the society around. They may withdraw physically (as did the group at Waco), they may become paranoid about what the government or the world is going to do to them (Waco again, but also radical Islam), and they may lose all sense of bonding with anyone but the members of their own group. This would free them from all restraint when it comes to killing, wounding, or committing all kinds of atrocities against all those not considered members of the group. This freedom from restraint may also extend to acts committed against persons who might be considered co-believers, but whose belief or commitment was not considered radical enough. Hence some

jihadi fighters have no compunction in killing Muslims who they consider to have "sold out" to the West? America? whatever. In the converts view these people are not "true Muslims".

### **Fervent Proselytising**

The word "proselyte" comes from a Greek word the Jews used to describe someone who came to the Jewish faith. The Greek word means "one who comes toward". It was taken up by the early church in a similar sense. To "proselytise" means to seek proselytes or new recruits. The word has a negative sense today and few modern faiths or other groups use it. The church speaks of "mission" (from the Latin verb "to send") or "evangelism" (from a Greek word meaning "to tell good news"). Islam uses Arabic words with a similar meaning. Non-faith groups will talk about "recruiting" - a term which originally referred to finding people to join the army. Whatever one calls it, new recruits do it very fervently - and often quite successfully. Whether one is talking about faith groups or communist groups in the early twentieth century, it would appear that once one convert had been made, one could expect others to emerge from the friendship group of the first convert - especially if the first convert was the natural leader of that group. But sometimes they can go over the top, and they can be over-zealous. A careful leader will watch over the new convert and seek to curb their excesses. But if the convert attracted to a radical group or sect, the converts natural zeal may be exacerbated and even harnessed. Given that some groups believe in conversion at the point of a gun (not just radical Islam. Mao Tse Tung also had something to say about truth coming from the barrel of a gun), this could lead the convert into violence, believing that it was to gain victory for the cause

### **What does it mean to be a convert?**

We are back to the question with which we began. Being a convert means absolute commitment, disorientation which demands clear and unambiguous guidance, being exclusive and keeping a distance from surrounding society, and fervent proselytising. Some converts will be more extreme than others, of course. In some cases this will be down to their personality: in others it will be due to the nature of the group they join. But we have to be careful not to make hasty judgements about the faiths or groups these converts join. Not all Muslims are fanatical terrorists. Most are peaceable, law-abiding members of society. Not even all converts to Islam are jihadist, only a minority. Not all Christians are religious nutcases. Most are peaceable law-abiding members of society. But the Westboro Baptist Church in the USA demonstrate at Army funerals because they object to the presence of gays in the military and some fanatical Christians in America have committed acts of terrorism and murder at abortion clinics. We need to distinguish between moderate and fanatical groups within all religions and ideologies. The way one distinguishes between a moderate and a fanatic is by asking the question "is this person open to being persuaded by reason?" They may not actually be persuaded of the case one is seeking to make at a particular time, but provided they are in principle open to being persuaded by what they see as a reasonable case, they are moderate. The fanatic will never be persuaded whatever case you advance, because their mind is already made up. You cannot reason with a person like that. All you can do is try and restrain them, and to try to ensure that the supply of persons who are so desperate they feel they have nothing to lose dries up as quickly as possible.