

Learning Christianity. How to 'Become' a Convert

Conversion can be seen in different ways: as a transformation of self, a crossing of community boundaries or a civilizing process. In all these instances, however, it is also a learning process.

In the context of the Netherlands, many converts to Christianity are refugees from the Middle East or East Africa. Some Dutch churches facilitate venues and teaching programs for such groups of converts. There are also transnational organizations like Youth with a Mission or Gospel and Muslims that develop courses for coaches working with Muslim background Christians. For my research, I interviewed both such coaches and converts, and I made a discourse analysis of their responses.

How are people 'trained' as Christians? What is the role played by the local and supra-local church community, and how does the convert appropriate the diverse frameworks of Christian living provided by his or her fellow Christians? Anthropologists of religion (Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Matthew Wood) have become more aware of the disciplines of power that form a specific religious habitus. In my research among converts from Islam to Christianity, I have observed that the teaching and learning relationship between converts and their host communities is directed not only towards the transmission of doctrinal content or spiritual awareness, but also that of a correct life-style.

In my presentation, I want to discuss some of the training programs, on offer in churches and Christian organizations, both in real life and on the internet, and the way learning objectives are formulated in them, and the way my respondents, trainers and recent and more mature converts, reflect on their learning process.

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