## Taking the road to success

## A question of cultivation

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ملخص

يشير هذا المقال موضوع معتنقي الإسلام الجدد، لاسيما الجوانب المتعلقة بتنشئة هؤلاء، وذلك من خلال التركيز على دور اللغة في عملية التنشئة هذه. ويقدم هذا المقال لمحة تاريخية عن عملية إدماج معتنقي الإسلام الجدد وطرق تنشئتهم حسب تعاليم الإسلام. وفي جانب آخر يركز هذا المقال على آفاق وكذلك المحاذير التي تكشف عملية التنشئة الإسلامية لهؤلاء المعتنقين الجدد في السياق العالمي المعاصر.

## Abstract

This article deals with reverts to Islam and various aspects related to their cultivation, highlighting the role of language in the Islamic cultivation process. It offers a historical glimpse on the cultivation and integration of reverts in the past and further focuses on horizons and pitfalls of cultivation within the contemporary context.

Quite a lot has been written about the growing number of reverts to Islam of Western descent, with a focus on their numbers, their personal stories of questioning and finally overcoming the concepts and beliefs they were educated in as well as the prevalent distorted image of Islam in the West, accounting the various steps taken on their personal way to guidance. A number of personalities of Western origin have even reached some degree of fame among their Ummah due to their rank in the Western societies prior to their Islam or due to their achievements for the cause of Islam which are not to be belittled.2 From the point of view of those who have been educated in this deen. the way to the pronunciation of the Shahada seems to be of the highest interest, whereas the real story only starts here from the point of view of the person who enters this Ummah and starts his personal process of cultivation and integration. This article tries to shed light on what happens "backstage", meaning the ways and problems of cultivation in the new deen, al-Islam, and the growing into the Ummah of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) It does not focus on problems often faced by new Muslims with family, friends and society at large. Within the family, the respective reactions on this issue fall into paradigms varying from total rejection to the embracement of Islam by other family members. On a larger scale, these reactions are linked to the social reality of Muslims in the West, the overcome distorted image of Islam and Muslims and its historical background and actual role in the Western societies. All these issues have been thoroughly discussed in numerous articles and books. Generally speaking, the embracement of Islam or, as we might prefer, the return to Islam as the deen of the very human inclination and nature, al-Fitrah <sup>3</sup>, by a person who has not been educated in the rows of this Ummah and his cultivation in this deen from the start involves aspects that might affect the entire Ummah positively as well as aspects that may turn out to be negative. A number of sociological and psychological aspects come to bear that decide about the quality and success of this cultivation. The positive sides mainly concern the fact that a person who embraces the message of Islam based on rational conviction has the opportunity to learn its teachings and concepts from the source - uninfluenced by prevalent traditional practices that are more often than not outside the realm of Islam. He will rather search for the correct answer to his questions and demand evidence from the Islamic texts, Quran and Sunnah, than practice a blind following of existing traditions. In this way, a process of integration in the new Muslim's mind is about to start, which - in the ideal case - leads to the

formation of a devout and aware Muslim abiding by the laws of Allah as a result. Theoretically at least, this sounds like a linear and unproblematical process. But the reality of human life is, of course, far from the simple equation: Information input plus sincere attitude leads to practising Muslim aware of the commandments of his deen as an output. How, for instance, does a "new" Muslim acquire the Islamic concepts to a degree that enables him of a new start — as noone would disagree that it is the concepts of a human being that decide about his behaviour in this life, and finally about his failure or success in the Hereafter?

THE MAIN PROBLEM OF CULTIVATION: THE LANGUAGE ISSUE: Given that new Muslims are generally adults who have already gone through their process of education, they are cultivated in the Western cultural tradition, in its concepts, methods and language(s). The new Muslim of Western (or any other) origin will generally not have a knowledge of Arabic that enables him to learn his deen in its proper language, the language of the revelation. To avoid misconceptions: This is in no way intended to mean that Arabic speaking people per se have inherited the correct understandings of Islam, nor does it mean to imply that Non-Arabic speaking Muslims are excluded from them - but, as a matter of fact, the key to deep and correct understanding of the details and secrets of this deen, the key that may open the door to a comprehensive understanding giving way to all possible linguistic and conceptual interrelations and enable ijtihad which is one of the secrets of Islam's dynamism - this key will always remain embodied in the Arabic language. Without it, you may enter the ground floor of the Islamic building of knowledge, but you will hardly gain access to the upper floors. Not everyone who owns this key, i.e., not every cultivated (native) speaker of Arabic actually makes use of it, but anyone who masters this language, be he of Arabic origin or not - may acquire it due to the natural inherent link between Islam and Arabic. To avoid another misconception: There is a difference between acquiring knowledge of the very basic teachings of Islam and diving into the ocean of its sciences - usul ad-deen, usul al-figh, etc. Due to the fact that Islam is the last revelation directed to all of mankind irrespective of their language, colour, ethnic origin and the time and place they live in, and due to the fact that it is the deen of the natural state Man was created in (al-Fitrah), its basic teachings are translatable and understandable in any language: The ground floor of the Islamic

building of knowledge, as described above. As to the upper floors – they clearly need the linguistic key to be opened: Arabic!

Now, we all know - and especially those who have tried - that the goal of learning Arabic is not likely to be achieved by every (new) Muslim in terms of ability and realisation, even though it is a goal to be kept in mind for all. Of course, it is not to be expected that everyone has the ability of becoming an Islamic scholar, be he Arabic-speaking or not. But raising the average level of knowledge would clearly be a step to general improvement. It is to be expected that the new Muslim will rather turn to his mother tongue or another foreign language to cultivate himself. This involves two main problems: First, not everything written about Islam in European languages provides the reader with authentic information. Although the problem of availability of authentical books on Islam has seen a great deal of betterment in the last two decades – and this is especially true for English that has gained the second rank as a language of communication and publication on Islamic issues among Muslims - there is still a prevalent number of books on Islam going back to non-Muslim authorship with the respective deliberate or indeliberate amount of misconceptions. For, given the public interest and the material profit involved, the widely spread attitude of authors "I'm not a specialist on Islamic issues, but Islam means..."; "disclaimer" generally followed by recycled distorted information, still is rather the rule than an exception.4

Second, we know that language does not exist in a sterile vacuum. It rather reflects the history, culture and concepts of its native speakers. Every language carries a particular cultural background with it. This makes up the main difficulty in translation, as translating is not simply transfering words from one set of morphological and grammatical structures to another - It really is about transfering concepts from one culture into another. The more the respective cultural backgrounds made up of history, religion, shared conceptions about life, shared experiences and common traditions differ, the more difficult is translation. Accordingly, transferring concepts particular to the Islamic culture and heritage expressed in and interwoven with Arabic to a language that has been the means of expression of quite a different cultural background resembles a process of sieving: Something is always - though involuntarily - held back: The originality of thought, the natural cohesion of different associations and links inherent to the style of the Arabic language in forming words from a common root simply gets lost in the process of translation. No reader

relying on English as a means of cultivation will find the natural link between the words ar-Rahman, the Beneficient, and the word rahma (benevolence) or rahim (womb) derived from the same root. Of course, these things may be explained to a reader not familiar with Arabic word structure – the translator may also keep the term as it is and explain its meaning - but still, the natural process of finding interrelations between words and their meanings that make up the whole picture is lost. So is the possibility of gainig access to a yet unknown or uncared for link in the future lost by confining a variety of meanings inherent to the origin to the translation of one meaning. This is especially true for translating the meanings of the Quran. To be more specific, we know that the Ouran talks about a number of scientific facts that have only recently been discovered by science, like the description of the several stages the human embryo goes through in its development.<sup>5</sup> Translating these verses in an age where the respective knowledge has not been gained yet means cutting of the access to finding the relevant information mentioned in the translation, for the obvious reason that the translator lacks the necessary understanding. The Arabic original conserves the relevant verses in all possible interpretations as they are, and even if one reader in one age does not fully comprehend their meaning, another reader in a different age might. Now, the linguistic problem of cultivation is to be seen with Muslims of non-Arabic speaking origin who have been educated as part of this Ummah, like native speakers of Persian, Turkish, Malay, Urdu, Suaheli or any other language spoken in this Ummah -- with an obvious difference compared to a native speaker of German or Danish or Italian - which is that the Persians, Turks, Malays, Pakistanis and many others have gone through a process of cultural amalgamation within the Islamic Ummah that lasted for centuries. Their respective languages have gone through visible changes as their native speakers have embraced Islam and have contributed on a large scale to Islamic history and culture. Accordingly, they have coined words and expressions to designate Islamic thoughts in their proper languages, or they have assimilated a large percentage of Arabic loan words. As a matter of fact, most of the peoples who have embraced Islam have even taken on the Arabic script – sometimes with adaptations according to the phonetic particularities. The deliberate "getting-rid-of" the Arabic script as it was seen by Ottoman Turkish in the 1920ies was thought of as a means not only to separate the language now referred to as "Turkish" from Arabic, but to separate its native speakers from the Islamic culture. The new generation was, thereby,

virtually cut off from the literature and culture of its ancestors. The European languages, on the other side, have contributed to and have been part of historical and cultural developments other than that of Islam, and although they have, during the centuries of the predominance of Arabic-Islamic culture, been influenced to a large extent by Arabic as the language of science<sup>6</sup>, they have not coined expressions fit to be used as technical terms that qualify to represent Islamic concepts. Let us look at an example of the different ways languages represent concepts: The word salat in Arabic is clearly linked to the specific Islamic form of worship taught to us by the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). Its usage conserves the literal meaning of the word sila, the link, Islamic worship virtually representing the link between Man and his Creator. The word used in Persian, Urdu and Turkish; namaz, also clearly designates the Islamic form of prayer given the Islamic background of the vast majority of their native speakers. Though, the gates the Arabic root opens giving way to further associations and interrelations are closed. The English word "prayer", on the other side, cannot stand unspecified, as prayer in the Western cultural background dominated by Christianity refers to quite a different form of praying that might even include singing religious anthems. As a result, the cultivation in Islamic concepts will have most chances of being successful if gone through in Arabic, whereas it will be of lesser clarity when undertaken in one of the other Islamic languages and lose a lot of its dynamism and clearness when exerted in a European language. Endeavours of teaching Islamic sciences in European languages are therefore, even if they are not totally condemned to failure, like trying to build a bridge in the midst of a sea: It may stand, but where are the shores it connects? The struggle for the arabisation of education in the post-colonial reality of the Islamic world, to give another example of the power language has in forming a generation, was based on the insight that being educated in the language of a nation means to be educated in its cultural concepts. A lot of countries in the Islamic word still suffer from the results of the cultural bias within and alongside the generations produced by this linguistic and cultural deprivation caused by colonialism.

Cultivation in Islam: A historical glimpse: For sure, the problem of cultivation of new Muslims and their changing of basic concepts and culture is not unknown in Islamic history. For we know that, in the wake of the Futuhat, the movement of opening numerous countries to Islam, a large number of people from different cultural,

religious, ethnical and linguistic backgrounds entered Islam. It has not been reported that they have found hardship in changing their culture, but that they fully integrated into Islamic society, and mastered Arabic as well as their native speakers: We know that peoples as different as the Persians, Amazigh, Nouba and Romans assimilated into the Arabicspeaking Islamic Ummah. Stories of outstanding personalities who reverted to Islam are known to us from the time of the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). Most of the Sahaba were actually reverts to Islam, except those who were born of Muslim parents; their accepting teachings rationally explains the uncompromisingness in matters of deen and their social dynamism that was not to be reached again later. The Prophet's companion Salman al-Farisi was a scholar not only of Islam, but had a deep insight into the Magian and Christian religion, too: Tareg bn Ziyad was a revert to Islam from Amazigh origin who became the leader of the Muslim army that was to open Andalus; the Iberian Peninsula, to Islam, in 711 AD. His famous speech given after the landing of the troups is still refered to as a masterpiece of Arabic literature. Two famous examples out of hundreds. Moreover, the scientific movement that was to take place from the second century of the Hijrah onwards was initiated and carried to a large extent by scholars of non-Arabic origin, some of them being children of prisoners of war. Famous names like al-Hasan al-Basri or Muhammad bn Sirin (both of these eminent scholars of Islam died in 110 after the Hidirah) do, today, not in the least invoke the thought of them being of non-Arabic origin. Sibawayh, master architect of the first comprehensive Arabic grammar and author of al-Kitab, was Persian. The common feature of these and uncountable other personalities is that they, first, embraced Islam as their belief and way of life (or were born into it from "new Muslim" parents), and that they, second, mastered the Arabic language as its means of expression and became after being Muslims – Arabs by the definition of the prophet (p.b.u.h.) to the meaning that what makes someone Arabic is his tongue, and not his descent. They thereby combined the belief and the culture based on it with its innate means of cultivation.

So, one might suppose, maybe there is a kind of automatism inherent to Islam embodied by an idea or one of its laws or systems that realizes the integration of different peoples and gives them the opportunity to grow into this culture without hardship, a guideline we might make use of today regarding our topic? As a matter of fact, there is a substantial difference between those who embraced Islam in the

wake of the Futuhat, and those who find the guidance of Islam in the Western countries today. The Futuhat were characterized by building a new society on the basis of the Islamic belief. As a result, the surrounding environment the new Muslims lived in, i.e. their reality, changed. Islam was implemented comprehensively, and the Arabic language became the means of cultivation. Moreover, the Mawalisystem<sup>7</sup> helped to integrate the different peoples: Whoever embraced Islam at the hands of a person became his Mawla, and whoever became prisoner of war of a Muslim was his Mawla, with the implication that those people cared for the cultivation of their Mawali – in Islam, of course. Further, the different peoples assimilated by intermarriage. This integration took place without the different peoples totally losing their former characteristics, as their language and some civilizational aspects not contradicting the Islamic creed ('Aqida) in terms of food, clothing or architecture. Who embraces Islam in the West today does not have a Mawla taking care of his cultivation, and his social environment has in no way changed fundamentally - except for an Islamic microcosm made up of Muslim friends and visiting the local mosque in the best case. Family, workplace, school, university, media society at large - remain as they are. Evidently, the new Muslim has to rely on his own initiative in order to find his way from the world of written information to practised Islam. Cultivating one's self in Islam will not be successful without the help and guidance of a practising, trustworthy teacher who is able to put unclarities in understanding and practice out of the way. Some Islamic centers in the West have responded to this need and offer courses and tutoring for new Muslims. The ways of making Islamic contacts have broadened in the last years by the Internet, that has become a lively market for getting access to Islamic knowledge and making aquaintances. A very small number of new Muslims even choose the way of Hidjrah, the migration to Islamic countries, some of them pursuing their cultivation at the Islamic universities or traditional Islamic centers of education, the madaris.

Aspects of cultivation: Horizons and pitfalls: The cultivation of an adult person in Islam starting from the very basic concepts involves, as mentioned before, horizons as well as dangers. The positive aspects culminate clearly around the occasion of learning Islam free from unislamic traditional interferences. As to the negative aspects; they are clearly related to the reality of the Muslim Ummah today generally and the situation of the Muslim minority living in the West specifically. In as far as the reverts to Islam are part of this Ummah, they share all of its

problems, its positive as well as negative sides, its correct as well as its erroneous concepts, and its intellectual decline as well as its rise. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said: "The believers are like one man. When he suffers from his head (aching), the rest of his body falls down with fever and sleeplessness."8 To the extent characteristics of intellectual decline as nationalism are to be found in this Ummah at large, they may be found among reverts, too. To the extent the world is characterized by a division between the developed and the developing countries in terms of power, material growth and technological development, and what results from this in terms of superiority or inferiority complexes, to the extent this Ummah suffers from sociological or intellectual problems, to this extent do the new Muslims show its traces. What might, I do not say, what does necessarily result from this is that there are - probably still traces of Western feelings of superiority left, or that there may be an inclination to detach one's self from the Muslim migrant community, as their position in the Western countries generally is one of a despised minority, especially so in the former colonial countries, where they are often seen as a leftover of the past accused of backwardness. Maybe the new Muslim, though convinced of the teachings of Islam, does not want to be identified with this minority, having the fear of losing the social position of a full member of society? Traces of this complex are to be found in a lot of writings; for some authors repeatedly complain about the "Eastern attitude" of migrant and new Muslims in their attire like the wearing of "Eastern" garment (some authors seem to put the Islamic Hijab into this category) that does not match the Western taste and aesthetic ideal, or the usage of Arabic terms in everyday -European! language.9

There is, it is true, still a perception of Islam as the religion of immigrants, probably more so in the European countries than in the States due to the fact that, first, the States are a country historically constituted by immigrants from all parts of the world, and second, that they generally profit from the right to citizenship. Not necessarily so in Europe. The conclusion drawn by some new Muslims to change this perception was to form communities and centers, even groups and parties for new Muslims based on their nationality. The Even though the exchanging of ideas and experiences between new Muslims seems to be natural considered their shared sociological background and the common needs arising from this, the potential danger of gathering new Muslims on the basis of their nationality appears in the light of trials to create a so-called "European" or "American" Islam as opposed to what

some researchers call an Arabic, African or Asian Islam incorporating Western thought in content and method: A new edition of the old principle To divide and rule, as it seems. On the other side, new Muslims of Western origin are often given a kind of attention resembling the two sides of a sword: On one side, there is a kind of attention talking of the prevalent but often unawarely carried on assumption from colonial and postcolonial times that everything coming from the West is apt to be a high quality product: As if there was an analogy made from the technical standard of German cars and refrigerators to the "outstandingness" of reverts from Western origin, with no consideration of their Islamic practice and knowledge. The permissible "ranking" among Muslims in degree can only be one on the basis of Islamic practice, knowledge and understanding, no more. It is true that new Muslims have found their way - by the grace and guidance of Allah - from disbelief in its many aspects to Islam, and it may also be true that a lot of "hereditary" non-practising Muslims take this as a sign to think - Alhamdulillah. But this puts in no way one person above the other in degree. Not the origin is decisive in this deen, but the actual deed in its sincere intention. Allah has called on every human being to think and believe in Him based on rational conviction: Muslims by birth, socialization and education are no exception to this. As a matter of fact, every human being reaches the point of questioning in his life as it is inherent to his fitrah, the person educated in Islam also having the opportunity of confirming the foundations of his belief rationally and of acting according to this premise. On the other side, there seems to be something like a reserved feeling of the already settled, established community towards the newcomer prefering to see him in the context of the country of his origin rather than in his new belief and his efforts in it, making him accountable for the culture, civilisation, achievements or failures of his "fellow-nationals" - a culture he has deliberately left. Being punctual, for instance, is frequently judged upon as a typical "Western" attitude - although it is actually nothing but Islamic behaviour. Coming back to the issue of cultivation: Another danger is undoubtedly the cultivation in "Islam" at the hands of Non-Muslims in the orientalist faculties of Western universities: A problem facing the children of Muslim immigrants as well as reverts to Islam.11 Attracted by the academic outlook and with regard to the lack of other opportunities of systematic learning, they will be taught Islam with non-Islamic methods and for non-Islamic goals. It is to be expected that the outcome will not meet Islamic ideals:

The student probably learning to judge on his own deen from a non-Islamic point of view. Whereas the lack of distinction between what is authenticated in the Islamic sources and what is overbrought custom with no justification in the Islamic texts may be less prevalent among new Muslims due to their willingness of taking on pure concepts based on the intellectual process they are going through, there is a danger of staying in the Western culture in method and thought.12 Accepting the absoluteness and uniqueness of Islamic teachings without trying to reinterpret them in the framework of Western society affects the foundation of the intellectual process, the way to approach issues. The later is not to be put in the same line with the usage of civilisational forms that do not contradict Islam.<sup>13</sup> As to the aim of cultivating in Islam as a new deen, it can only be the integration and service to this Ummah whose unity Allah has emphasized in several verses of the Our'an: "And verily, this Ummah of yours is a single Ummah, and I am your Lord, therefore fear me" (Surat al-Mu'minun, 52) "Hold on fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves!" (Surat Al 'Imran, 103)

A revert to Islam has the same responsibility towards his Creator that all the other parts of this Ummah have: In the learning of its teachings, their implementation and calling others to Islam. As well as there is no preference of black or white, or Arab or Non-Arab, there is no preference of a "born" Muslim over a revert or vice versa — except in Taqwa! As a matter of fact, a lot of "reverts" make up, within a short spell of time, a process of cultivation that has, with most people educated in Islam, lasted from early childhood to adulthood. The prophet (p.b.u.h.) said: "You will find people like (mineral) sources: The best of them in Jahiliyya are the best of them in Islam, when they cultivate themselves (in their deen)." 14

Conclusion: In view of the growing number of new Muslims in the Western countries, the Ummah and especially the part of it living in the West has a great responsibility to take on — not only in accepting the new Muslims as their brothers and sisters and giving them the feeling of belonging to them, but also in revising and updating their own knowledge about Islam, which might, in turn, constitute an opportunity of intellectual development. Reverts to Islam do have, as a matter of fact, special needs, but they are in no way exclusive. The better these needs of cultivation are met, the faster and more natural will be their way of growing into the Muslim Ummah and taking the way of success.

see Anayat Durrani: The search for truth, http://www.suite101.com; see also http://www.welcome-back-org;http://www.convertstoislam.com; http://www.algonet.se/ulwur/reverts/index.

Among the newer (Western) academic works on the "phenomenon" of new Muslims is Monika Wohlrab-Sahr: Konversionen zum Islam in Deutschland und den USA. Frankfurt, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> - Who did not hear of the well-known author of Austrian origin, Leopold Weiss, who was called Muhammad Asad after his reversion to Islam; French philosopher Roger Garaudy; or the former German diplomat Wilfried Murad Hofmann, to name only some

well-known personalities.

- It is reported on the authority of Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him), that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said: "Every newborn child is born in the state of Fitrah. Then, his parents make of him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian." Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-

Jana'iz, Hadith No. 1270

<sup>4</sup> - The number of self-appointed experts on Islamic affairs is so vast that it might suffice to single out the case of one author who was known as an « Islamic expert » to the German audience for years: Gerhard Konzelmann, author of some 20 popular books on Islamic culture and history was, after years as a recognised « expert », convicted of plagiarism.

5 - see Surat al-'Alaq

6 - It is a well-established fact that the European languages are permeated with words of Arabic origin designating things and ideas in various fields of daily life, commerce and the sciences. Cf Bosworth/Schacht (eds): The legacy of Islam. Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> - The term *Mawla* applies to the prisoner of war, slave or the person who embraces Islam at the hands of a Muslim alike. It also designates the owner of a slave and the person who helps someone embrace Islam. The Mawali- system was a milestone for the integration of different peoples, as it made them participate in the family structure of Islamic society and provided them with living examples of practised Islam. 8 - Sahih Muslim, Hadith No.4686

9 - « But it should be equally obvious that Western Muslims are under no obligation to wear the national dress from their countries of origin and-regarding Muslim women-to dress without any attempt at making their Islamic attire aesthetically pleasing. Nor is it indispensible that Muslims spice their everyday language with exclamations in Arabicfrom subhana Allah to masha' Allah. » Murad Hofmann: Muslims as Co-Citizens of the West. Rights, Duties and Prospects.

http://www.islamonline.net/english/Contemporary/2002/05/Article3.shtml - One of these institutions is the German Muslim League ("Deutsche Muslim-Liga"),

founded in Hamburg, Germany in 1952.

- Based on my own observation as lecturer at the University of Bochum, Germany, from 1998-2001, the profile of students of Islamic Studies has shifted considerably towards a Muslim majority.

- As one of the European based advocates of an application of «universal» academic standards in Islamic studies, more particularly Qur'an and Hadith-criticism, we might

refer to Mohammed Arkoun.

- The usage of either traditional qalam or computer technology in writing, to give an obvious example, does in no way affect Islamic 'Aqidah, as its choice falls into the sphere of mubah, permissible things. On the contrary, using a Textkritik methodology that emerged from anti-religious Bible criticism and is therefore part and parcel of a specifically Western history of thought, and demands us to presuppose that the Qur'anic text is not of divine origin, is in obvious contradiction to the basic Islamic belief system.

<sup>14</sup> - Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 3234