



## The moment of truth

**In many parts of the world, the right to change one's beliefs is under threat**

**A**S AN intellectually gifted Jewish New Yorker who had reached manhood in the mid-1950s, Marc Schleifer was relentless in his pursuit of new cultural and spiritual experiences. He dallied with Anglo-Catholicism, intrigued by the ritual but not quite able to believe the doctrine, and went through a phase of admiration for Latin American socialism. Experimenting with lifestyles as well as creeds, he tried respectability as an advertising executive, and a more bohemian life in the raffish expatriate scene of North Africa.

Returning from Morocco to his home city, he was shocked by the harsh anonymity of life in the urban West. And one day, riding the New York subway, he opened the Koran at a passage which spoke of the mystery of God: beyond human understanding, but as close as a jugular vein. Suddenly, everything fell into place. It was only a matter of time before he embraced Islam by pronouncing before witnesses that "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet."

Some 40 years on from that life-changing moment—not untypical of the turning points that many individuals experience—Abdallah Schleifer has won distinction as a Muslim intellectual. Last year he was one of 138 Muslim thinkers who signed an open letter to Christian leaders calling for a

deeper theological dialogue. The list of signatories included (along with the muftis from Cairo, Damascus and Jakarta) several other people who had made surprising journeys. One grew up as an English non-conformist; another as a Catholic farm boy from Oregon; another in the more refined Catholic world of bourgeois Italy.

Sometimes conversion is gradual, but quite commonly things come to a head in a single instant, which can be triggered by a text, an image, a ceremony or some private realisation. A religious person would call such a moment a summons from God; a psychologist might speak of an instant when the walls between the conscious and unconscious break down, perhaps because an external stimulus—words, a picture, a rite—connects with something very deep inside. For people of an artistic bent, the catalyst is often a religious image which serves as a window into a new reality. One recurring theme in conversion stories is that cultural forms which are, on the face of it, foreign to the convert somehow feel familiar, like a homecoming. That, the convert feels, "is what I have always believed without being fully aware of it."

Take Jennie Baker, an ethnic Chinese nurse who moved from Malaysia to England. She was an evangelical, practising but not quite satisfied with a Christianity

that eschews aids to worship such as pictures, incense or elaborate rites. When she first walked into an Orthodox church, and took in the icons that occupied every inch of wall-space, everything in this "new" world made sense to her, and some teachings, like the idea that every home should have a corner for icons and prayer, resonated with her Asian heritage. Soon she and her English husband helped establish a Greek Orthodox parish in Lancashire.

### Following the heart

In the West it is generally taken for granted that people have a perfect, indeed sacred, right to follow their own religious path, and indeed to invite—though never compel—other people to join them. The liberal understanding of religion lays great emphasis on the right to change belief. Earlier this year, a poll found that one in four Americans moves on from the faith of their upbringing.

America's foundation as a refuge for Europe's Christian dissidents has endowed it with a deep sense of the right to follow and propagate any form of religion, with no impediment, or help, from the state. In the 1980s America saw some lively debates over whether new-fangled "cults" should be distinguished from conventional forms of religion, and curbed; but in the end a purely libertarian view prevailed. The promotion of religious liberty is an axiom of American foreign policy, not just in places where freedom is obviously under threat, but even in Germany, which gets gentle scoldings for its treatment of Scientology.

But America's religious free-for-all is very much the exception, not the rule, in

> human history—and increasingly rare, some would say, in the world today. In most human societies, conversion has been seen as an act whose consequences are as much social and political as spiritual; and it has been assumed that the wider community, in the form of the family, the village or the state, has every right to take an interest in the matter. The biggest reason why conversion is becoming a hot international topic is the Muslim belief that leaving Islam is at best a grave sin, at worst a crime that merits execution (see box). Another factor in a growing global controversy is the belief in some Christian circles that Christianity must retain the right to seek and receive converts, even in parts of the world where this may be viewed as a form of cultural or spiritual aggression.

### A fighting matter

The idea that religion constitutes a community (where the loss or gain of even one member is a matter of deep, legitimate concern to all other members) is as old as religion itself. Christianity teaches that the recovery of a "lost sheep" causes rejoicing in heaven; for a Muslim, there is no human category more important than the umma, the worldwide community of believers.

But in most human societies the reasons why conversion causes controversy have little to do with religious dogma, and much to do with power structures (within the family or the state) and politics. Conversion will never be seen as a purely individual matter when one religiously-defined community is at war or armed standoff with another. During Northern Ireland's Troubles a move across the Catholic-Protestant divide could be life-threatening, at least in working-class Belfast—and not merely because people felt strongly about papal infallibility.

And in any situation where religion and authority (whether political, economic or personal) are bound up, changes of spiritual allegiance cause shock-waves. In the Ottoman empire, the status of Christians and Jews was at once underpinned and circumscribed by a regime that saw religion as an all-important distinction. Non-Muslims were exempt from the army, but barred from many of the highest offices, and obliged to pay extra taxes. When a village in, say, Crete or Bosnia converted en masse from Christianity to Islam, this was seen as betrayal by those who stayed Christian, in part because it reduced the population from which the Ottomans expected a given amount of tax.

In the days of British rule over the south of Ireland, it was hard for Catholics to hold land, although they were the overwhelming majority. An opportunistic conversion to the rulers' religion was seen as "letting the side down" by those who kept the faith. Similar inter-communal tensions arose in many European countries where »

## Islam and apostasy

# In death's shadow

With some exceptions, an increasingly hard line across the Muslim world

“CAN a person who is Muslim choose a religion other than Is-

lam?” When Egypt's grand mufti, Ali Gomaa, pondered that dilemma in an article published last year, many of his co-religionists were shocked that the question could even be asked.

And they were even more scandalised by his conclusion. The answer, he wrote, was yes, they can, in the light of three verses in the Koran: first, "Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion"; second, "Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve"; and, most famously, "There is no compulsion in religion."

The sheikh's pronouncement was certainly not that of a wet liberal; he agrees that anyone who deserts Islam is committing a sin and will pay a price in the hereafter, and also that in some historical circumstances (presumably war between Muslims and non-Muslims) an individual's sin may also amount to "sedition against one's society". But his opinion caused a sensation because it went against the political and judicial trends in many parts of the Muslim world, and also against the mood in places where Muslims feel defensive.

In the West, many prominent Muslims would agree with the mufti's scripturally-based view that leaving Islam is a matter between the believer and God, not for the state. But awkwardly, the main traditions of scholarship and jurisprudence in Islam—both the Shia school and the four main Sunni ones—draw on Hadiths (words and deeds ascribed with varying credibility to Muhammad) to argue in support of death for apostates. And in recent years sentiment in the Muslim world has been hardening. In every big "apostasy" case, the authorities have faced pressure from sections of public opinion, and from Islamist factions, to take the toughest possible stance.

In Malaysia, people who try to desert Islam can face compulsory "re-education". Under the far harsher regime of Afghanistan, death for apostasy is still on the statute book, despite the country's American-backed "liberation" from the tyranny of the Taliban. The Western world realised this when Abdul Rahman, an Afghan who had lived in Germany, was sentenced to die after police found him with a Bible. After pressure from Western governments, he was allowed to go to Italy. What especially startled Westerners was the fact that Afghanistan's

parliament, a product of the democracy for which NATO soldiers are dying, tried to bar Mr Rahman's exit, and that street protests called for his execution.

The fact that he fled to Italy is one of the factors that have made the issue of Muslim-Christian conversion a hot topic in that country. There are several others. During this year's Easter celebrations, Magdi Allam, an Egyptian-born journalist who is now a columnist in Italy, was publicly baptised as a Catholic by Pope Benedict; the convert hailed his "liberation" from Islam, and has used his column to celebrate other cases of Muslims becoming Christian. To the delight of some Catholics and the dismay of others, he has defended the right of Christians to proselytise among Muslims, and denounced liberal churchmen who are "soft" on Islam.

Muslims in Italy and elsewhere have called Mr Allam a provocateur and chided Pope Benedict for abetting him. But given that many of Italy's Muslims are converts (and beneficiaries of Europe's tolerance), Mr Allam says his critics are hypocrites, denying him a liberty which they themselves have enjoyed.

If there is any issue on which Islam's diaspora-experiencing the relative calmness of inter-faith relations in the West—might be able to give a clearer moral lead, it is surely this one. But even in the West, speaking out for the legal and civil right to "apostasise" can carry a cost. Usama Hasan, an influential young British imam, recently made the case for the right to change religions—only to find himself furiously denounced and threatened on Islamist websites, many of them produced in the West.



>Jews converted to Christianity in order to enter university or public service.

In most modern societies, the elaborate discrimination which made religious allegiance into a public matter is felt to be a thing of the past. But is this so? In almost every post-Ottoman country, traces exist of the mentality that treats religion as a civic category, where entry and exit is a matter of public negotiation, not just private belief. Perhaps Lebanon, where political power is allocated along confessional lines (and boat-rocking changes of religious affiliation are virtually impossible) is the most perfectly post-Ottoman state. But there are other holdovers. In "secular" Turkey, the Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish minorities have certain poorly observed rights that no other religious minority enjoys; isolated Christians, or dissident Muslims, face great social pressure to conform to standard Sunni Islam. In Greece, it is unconstitutional to proselytise; that makes life hard for Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. In Egypt, the fact that building a Christian church requires leave from the head of state is a direct legacy of a (liberalising) Ottoman decree of 1856.

#### Tactical manoeuvres

But the Ottoman empire is by no means the only semi-theocratic realm whose influence is still palpable in the governance of religious affairs, including conversion. In an odd way, the Soviet Union continued the legacy of the tsars by dividing citizens into groups (including Jews or some Muslim ethnicities) where membership had big consequences but was not a matter of individual choice. In post-Soviet Russia, the prevailing Orthodox church rejects the notion of a free market in ideas. It seeks (and often gets) state preference for "traditional" faiths, defined as Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. This implies that other forms of Christianity are "poaching" if they seek to recruit Russians.

But issues of conversion are also painful in some former territories of the British empire, which allowed its subjects to follow their own communal laws. Take India, which once aspired to be a secular state, and whose constitution calls for a uniform civil code for all citizens. That prospect is now remote, and the fact that different religious groups live by different family laws, and are treated unequally by the state and society, has created incentives for "expedient" conversion. A colourful body of jurisprudence, dating from the British Raj, concerns people who changed faith to solve a personal dilemma-like men who switched from Hinduism to Islam so as to annul their marriage and wed somebody else. In 1995, the Supreme Court tried to stop this by saying people could not dodge social obligations, or avoid bigamy charges, by changing faith. What India's case law shows, says Marco Ventura, a reli-

gious-law professor, is the contrast between conversion in rich, liberal societies and traditional ones, where discrimination tempts people to make tactical moves.

And in many ways religious freedom is receding, not advancing, in India. Half a dozen Indian states have introduced laws that make it hard for people to leave Hinduism. These states are mostly ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But last year Himachal Pradesh became the first state led by the more secular Congress party to bring in such legislation: such is the power of Hindu sentiment that even non-religious parties pander to it.

The state's new law is billed as a "freedom of religion" measure, but it has the opposite effect: anyone wishing to switch faiths must tell the district magistrate 30 days before or risk a fine. If a person converts another "by the use of force or by inducement or by any other fraudulent means", they can be jailed for up to two years, fined, or both. Local pastors say "inducement" could be taken to mean anything, including giving alms to the poor.

Supporters of such laws say proselytisers, or alleluia wallahs, are converting poor Hindus by force. It is true that Christian evangelism is in full swing in parts of India, especially in its eastern tribal belt, and that it enjoys some success. Officially, fewer than 3% of India's 11 billion people are Christian. But some Christians say the real total may be double that. Christian converts, most of whom are born as dalits at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, often hide their new faith for fear of losing their rights to state jobs and university places kept for the lower castes.

But it is unlikely that many Hindu-to-Christian switches are forced. In states with anti-conversion laws, credible allegations of conversion under duress have very rarely been made.

Anyway, India's arguments have more to do with politics than theology. Hindutva, the teaching that India is a Hindu nation and that Christians and Muslims are outsiders, has been a vote-winner for the BJP. Even in Himachal Pradesh, voters were unmoved by the Congress party's attempt to ride the religious bandwagon; the BJP still won the latest elections.

The contest between theocratic politics and a notionally secular state looks even more unequal in another ex-British land, Malaysia, where freedom of choice in religion is enshrined in the federal constitution, but Islamic law is imposed with growing strictness on the Muslim majority.

Until the mid-1990s, say Malaysian civil-rights advocates like Malik Intiaz Sarwar, the federal authorities enforced religious freedom; the National Registration Department, a federal agency, would comply when anybody asked to record a change of religion. More recently, both that agency and Malaysia's top judges have deferred to the sharia courts, which enjoy increasing power in all 13 states of the Malaysian federation; and those courts rarely let a registered Muslim quit the fold. A recent exception was an ethnic Chinese woman who was briefly married to an Iranian; a sharia court let her re-embrace Buddhism, but only on the ground that she was never fully Muslim, so the idea of "Once a Muslim, always a Muslim" remained intact.

A more telling sign of the times was the verdict in the case of Lina Joy, a Malay convert from Islam to Christianity who asked a federal court to register the change on her ID card. By two to one the judges rejected her bid, arguing that one "cannot, at one's whims or fancies, renounce or embrace a religion". Too bad, then, for any Malaysians who have a moment of truth on the subway, especially if the faith to which they are called happens not to be Islam. •

