Uncovering Habitus in Life Stories of Muslim Converts

The purpose of this paper is to explore the life stories of Danish Muslim converts in a small-scale study to see how an analytical approach based on narrative inquiry can be beneficial in understanding religious conversion and to which extend my overall research question can be answered using this approach.

Reading through the literature on Muslim converts two questions emerge in particular; the first is methodologically oriented and concerns how we are (or are not, according to most researchers in this area) to use converts’ own stories because of the interpretative difficulties one finds when trying to discover ‘the truth’ in these stories (Mogensen & Damsager, 2007). Some researchers have even advised against the use of these stories, which in my perspective has significant consequences because the stories of converts make up a substantial part of the basis of research into the understanding of conversion. This gives rise to a methodological discussion on how and what a life history/bibliographic research approach can provide in this area.

The second question is analytically oriented. Recent research uses Bourdieu as its theoretical frame and states that most converts actually continue their previous religious habitus in their new religious context – which means that the previous religious perception cannot be separated from their (new) perception of Islam. These studies are interesting when dealing with conversion between religions, and in most cases those who convert to another religion does it out of discontent and inimitability with the former. I find however that a new type of Muslim converts is increasing, namely those who were not particularly religious before they converted and they are this paper’s main focus. Building on previous research one may ask in what way they perceive Islam, when having no previous religious habitus to continue? In what way do their previous habitus influence their new life as Muslims – following Bourdieu through to completion it is difficult to imagine that these new converts do not continue or in some way build on previous habitus in their new religious context – but which, how and to what extend?

This is what this paper examines through the use of Life Story interviews with two Danish Muslim converts, who define themselves as previously non-religious or ‘culture-religious’. Based on a Bourdieusian perspective I show how a narrative approach can shed light on the subjective meanings of the converts. This will be done in an attempt to uncover previous habitus, in order to analyse how these converts bring in this habitus in their new religious life and to discuss how they view themselves in terms of cultural, social and economic capital in a before-and-after conversion perspective.

Literature:

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