

Coffee with the Cantor

2017

Hazzan Rob Menes

Wednesdays, 11:00-12:30

<http://www.hazzanmenes.com>



Perceptions of Modern Judaism

Jewish and non-Jewish Views on Conversion

Issues:

Who is a Jew?

How do Jews view non-Jews?

Do Jews proselytize?

What are the requirements for conversion?

How is conversion perceived within Judaism (by other Jews)?

How is conversion to Judaism perceived by those outside of Judaism?

"When a proselyte comes to be converted, one receives him with an open hand so as to bring him under the wings of the Divine Presence."

(Leviticus Rabbah 2:9)

"Dearer to God than all of the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai is the convert. Had the Israelites not witnessed the lightning, thunder, and quaking mountain, and had they not heard the sounds of the shofar, they would not have accepted the Torah. But the convert, who did not see or hear any of these things, surrendered to God and accepted the yoke of heaven. Can anyone be dearer to God than such a person?"

Tanhuma (ed. Buber),
Lekh Lekha 6:32

"Beloved are proselytes by God, for the Bible everywhere uses the same epithet of them as of Israel"

(Talmud, Gerim 4:3)

"Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried"



**Ruth, a Moabite and the
great-grandmother of King David,
(Ruth 1:16-17)**

"You shall love the convert"

(Deuteronomy 10:19)

Is the convert treated differently than one who was born of a Jewish mother? Should a person born of a Jewish father be considered Jewish?

(from Judaism 101)

Jewish Attitudes Toward Non-Jews

Level: Basic

Judaism maintains that the righteous of all [nations](#) have a place in the [world to come](#). This has been the majority rule since the days of the [Talmud](#). Judaism generally recognizes that Christians and Moslems worship the same [G-d](#) that we do and those who follow the tenets of their religions can be considered righteous in the eyes of G-d.

Contrary to popular belief, Judaism does not maintain that Jews are better than other people. Although we refer to ourselves as G-d's chosen people, we do not believe that G-d chose the Jews because of any inherent superiority. According to the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 2b), G-d offered the [Torah](#) to all the [nations](#) of the earth, and the Jews were the only ones who accepted it. The story goes on to say that the Jews were offered the Torah last, and accepted it only because G-d held a mountain over their heads! (In Ex. 19:17, the words generally translated as "at the foot of the mountain" literally mean "underneath the mountain"!) Another traditional story suggests that G-d chose the [Jewish nation](#) because they were the lowliest of nations, and their success would be attributed to G-d's might rather than their own ability. Clearly, these are not the ideas of a people who think they are better than other nations.

Because of our acceptance of Torah, Jews have a special status in the eyes of G-d, but we lose that special status when we abandon Torah. Furthermore, the blessings that we received from G-d by accepting the Torah come with a high price: Jews have a greater responsibility than non-Jews. While non-Jews are only obligated to obey the [seven commandments](#) given to Noah, Jews are responsible for fulfilling the [613 mitzvot](#) in the Torah, thus G-d will punish Jews for doing things that would not be a sin for non-Jews.

The Seven Laws of Noah

According to traditional Judaism, [G-d](#) gave Noah and his family seven commandments to observe when he saved them from the flood. These commandments, referred to as the Noahic or Noahide commandments, are inferred from Genesis Ch. 9, and are as follows: 1) to establish courts of justice; 2) not to commit blasphemy; 3) not to commit idolatry; 4) not to commit incest and adultery; 5) not to commit bloodshed; 6) not to commit robbery; and 7) not to eat flesh cut from a living animal. These commandments are fairly simple and straightforward, and most of them are recognized by most of the world as sound moral principles. Any non-Jew who follows these laws has a place in the [world to come](#).

The Noahic commandments are binding on all people, because all people are descended from Noah and his family. The [613 mitzvot](#) of the [Torah](#), on the other hand, are only binding on the descendants of those who accepted the commandments at Sinai and upon those who take on the yoke of the commandments voluntarily (by [conversion](#)). In addition, the Noahic commandments are applied more leniently to non-Jews than the corresponding commandments are to Jews, because non-Jews do not have the benefit of [Oral Torah](#) to guide them in interpreting the laws. For example, worshipping G-d in the form of a man would constitute idolatry for a Jew; however, according to some sources, the Christian worship of Jesus does not constitute idolatry for non-Jews.

There is a growing movement of non-Jews who have consciously accepted these seven laws of Noah and chosen to live their lives in accordance with these laws. This movement is referred to as B'nei Noah (Children of Noah). For more information about the B'nei Noah movement and the Noahic commandments, see [Chavurath B'nei Noah of Fort Worth, Texas](#).

Goyim, Shiksas and Shkutzim

The most commonly used word for a non-Jew is goy. The word "goy" means "[nation](#)," and refers to the fact that goyim are members of other nations, that is, nations other than the Children of Israel.

There is nothing inherently insulting about the word "goy." In fact, the [Torah](#) occasionally refers to the [Jewish people](#) using the term "goy." Most notably, in Exodus 19:6, G-d says that the Children of Israel will be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," that is, a goy kadosh. Because Jews have had so many bad experiences with anti-Semitic non-Jews over the centuries, the term "goy" has taken on some negative connotations, but in general the term is no more insulting than the word "gentile."

The more insulting terms for non-Jews are shiksa (feminine) and shkutz (masculine). I gather that these words are derived from the [Hebrew root](#) Shin-Qof-Tzadei, meaning loathsome or abomination. The word shiksa is most commonly used to refer to a non-Jewish woman who is dating or married to a Jewish man, which should give some indication of how strongly Jews are opposed to the idea of [intermarriage](#). The term shkutz is most commonly used to refer to an anti-



Semitic man. Both terms can be used in a less serious, more joking way, but in general they should be used with caution.

If you are offended to hear that Jewish culture has a negative term for non-Jews, I would recommend that you stop and think about the many negative terms and stereotypes that your culture has for Jews.

Conversion

In general, Jews do not try to convert non-Jews to Judaism. In fact, according to [halakhah](#) (Jewish Law), [rabbis](#) are supposed to make three vigorous attempts to dissuade a person who wants to convert to Judaism.

As the discussion above explained, Jews have a lot of responsibilities that non-Jews do not have. To be considered a good and righteous person in the eyes of [G-d](#), a non-Jew need only follow the seven Noahic commandments, whereas a Jew has to follow all [613 commandments](#) given in the [Torah](#). If the potential convert is not going to follow those extra rules, it's better for him or her to stay a gentile, and since we as Jews are all responsible for each other, it's better for us too if that person stayed a gentile. The rabbinically mandated attempt to dissuade a convert is intended to make sure that the prospective convert is serious and willing to take on all this extra responsibility.

Once a person has decided to convert, the proselyte must begin to learn Jewish religion, law and customs and begin to observe them. This teaching process generally takes at least one year, because the prospective convert must experience each of the [Jewish holidays](#); however, the actual amount of study required will vary from person to person (a convert who was raised as a Jew might not need any further education, for example, while another person might need several years).

After the teaching is complete, the proselyte is brought before a Beit Din (rabbinical court) which examines the proselyte and determines whether he or she is ready to become a Jew. If the proselyte passes this oral examination, the rituals of conversion are performed. If the convert is male, he is [circumcised](#) (or, if he was already circumcised, a pinprick of blood is drawn for a symbolic circumcision). Both male and female converts are immersed in the mikvah (a ritual bath used for spiritual purification). The convert is given a Jewish name and is then introduced into the Jewish community.

In theory, once the conversion procedure is complete, the convert is as much a Jew as anyone who is born to the religion. In practice, the convert is sometimes treated with caution, because we have had some of bad experiences with converts who later return to their former faith in whole or in part. However, it is important to remember that [Abraham](#) himself was a convert, as were all of the matriarchs of Judaism, as was Ruth, an ancestor of King David.

For more information about conversion to Judaism, see [The Conversion to Judaism Home Page](#). The information provided by Professor Epstein at that site is written from a [Conservative](#) perspective, but is valuable to anyone considering conversion to any [movement](#) of Judaism.

Return Conversion to the Rabbis

Opinion

By Marc D. Angel

Published January 06, 2010, issue of [January 15, 2010](#). (Forward)

For centuries, rabbis steeped in Torah and Halacha have served as the gatekeepers of the Jewish people. They have determined which non-Jews may join the Jewish people as converts.

Halachic literature provides a wide array of opinions and attitudes relating to conversion. In recent years, however, the more extreme views espoused by the Haredi rabbinic establishment have gained predominance — and those Orthodox rabbis who do not share these views have been increasingly marginalized.

In 2006, Israel's chief rabbinate announced that it would no longer accept conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora, unless these rabbis were on a pre-approved list (i.e., they were deemed sufficiently Haredi in their approach). The mainstream Orthodox rabbinic group in the United States, the Rabbinical Council of America, essentially went along with the dictates of the chief rabbinate. The RCA set up regional rabbinic courts to oversee conversions. The individual Orthodox rabbi — even if a member in good standing of the RCA — generally will not have his conversions accepted by the rabbinate in Israel, unless the convert has gone through the RCA's conversion bureaucracy.

The result of this shift in authority has been profound. Good, talented and well-intentioned Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora have been eliminated as recognized gatekeepers to the Jewish people. Power has been concentrated in fewer hands. The more restrictive views on conversion have become universalized, leaving rabbis with little leeway in dealing with candidates for conversion who are not ready to become fully Orthodox Jews. Rabbi Ben-Zion Uziel, who was the first chief Sephardic rabbi of the State of Israel, sought halachically valid ways to bring such individuals into Judaism and the Jewish people. The current rabbinic hierarchy shuts the door on them.

At a time when many thousands of people in Israel and the Diaspora want to become Jewish, the Orthodox rabbinic gatekeepers are becoming ever more restrictive. They adopt new stringencies not required by the Talmud, the Rambam or the Shulchan Aruch. There are women whose conversions have been denied because they wear pants — loose-fitting, modest pants. I know a woman whose conversion was rejected because the rabbinic court did not think her boyfriend was sufficiently Orthodox. A number of would-be converts have been told that they will not be accepted for conversion unless they first move to more religious neighborhoods — even though they currently attend an Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood where they presently reside. Meanwhile, rabbinic courts in Israel have annulled conversions when converts lapse from a stringent observance of *mitzvot*.

These restrictive policies are not mandated by Halacha. They reflect a deep xenophobia and a narrow view of Jewish peoplehood. These policies prevent and deter many people from converting to Judaism



according to Halacha. They cause unspeakable pain and frustration to numerous individuals who want to cast their destiny with the Jewish people — but who are rejected, humiliated or threatened by the rabbinic bureaucracy.

In recent months, we have witnessed scandal after scandal involving Haredi rabbis. In a particularly notorious case, Rabbi Leib Tropper — who set himself up as the head of an influential Haredi conversion authority, the Eternal Jewish Family — has resigned his position due to allegations of particularly heinous and repulsive behavior, reportedly involving sexual coercion of a prospective convert.

These high-profile scandals should be cause for alarm. But we should also be concerned about the scandal of what is being foisted upon the public as “true Judaism.” At an Eternal Jewish Family conference, Rabbi Nachum Eisenstein stated that Rabbi Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, one of the Haredi world’s leading authorities, holds that any rabbi who believes the world is more than approximately 6,000 years old should not serve on the rabbinic courts that perform conversions. (Elyashiv is not known to have disputed this characterization of his views.) Indeed, the Eternal Jewish Family includes a question on “the Torah view of the age of the universe” in its testing of would-be converts. Knowing that we have perfectly legitimate traditions in Torah Judaism that allow for belief in a universe billions of years old, should we allow the obscurantists to disqualify all rabbis who dare to accept the clear findings of science? Do we want such people as the gatekeepers of Jewish identity?

The Orthodox rabbinate has become narrower and more extreme, exactly at a time when world Jewry is very much in need of responsible, creative, sensitive and inclusive religious leadership. Can the State of Israel afford to have a bureaucracy of rabbinic gatekeepers who seem more interested in keeping people out than in letting them in? Can world Jewry afford to leave halachic conversion in the hands of a rabbinic hierarchy that refuses to draw on the inclusive opinions within Halacha, that insists on creating higher and higher barriers, that values restrictiveness as a sign of religiosity? Can we really trust a Haredi-dominated rabbinic establishment that does not inspire our respect as a model of morality, idealism and intellectual vitality?

The Jewish people needs and deserves an effective and inclusive halachic framework for accepting converts. The current gatekeepers have not served us well, and there is no sign that they will change their ways if left to their own devices. We would do much better by dismantling the current rabbinic bureaucracy and leaving conversion in the hands of local Orthodox rabbis — as had been the practice for centuries. Let each rabbi draw on the halachic sources that best apply to each situation and not have his hands tied by an inflexible and restrictive hierarchy. Let each halachic convert be fully accepted as a Jew in the State of Israel and throughout the Diaspora.

If some in the Haredi world will not accept the Jewishness of such converts, then that is a problem for the Haredim. The Jewish people as a whole should not be held hostage to the extreme views of the rejectionists.

Halachic conversions performed by local Orthodox rabbis will draw many more converts into the Jewish people more efficiently, more compassionately and with more halachic integrity. Every bona fide member of a reputable national or international Orthodox rabbinic body should be empowered to perform conversions. Each rabbinic organization must ensure that its members conduct conversions according to Halacha, with the highest ethical standards, and without financial remuneration.



5915 Beacon St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15217
412-421-2288

The Torah describes the people of Israel as a wise people; let us, then, act wisely.

Rabbi Marc D. Angel is founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. He is a past president of the Rabbinical Council of America and the author of "Choosing to Be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion" (Ktav, 2005).

CONVERSION TO JUDAISM: SOME REAL STORIES

Some very Personal Conversion Experiences of
Those Who Have Chosen Judaism are available here

<http://www.convertingt Judaism.com/Personal-Conversion-Experiences.htm>

There are about 200,000 people in the United States who have chosen to become Jewish. They join untold numbers of people in Jewish history who have joined the Jewish people, including the most famous one, Ruth. I researched conversion and interviewed hundreds of converts for my book *Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook* (Jason Aronson Inc., 1994). In their own way, all these people have fascinating stories to tell. Some of those who became Jewish are well-known, such as movie stars like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Sammy Davis, Jr. One famous story about Sammy Davis involved his filming *Porgy and Bess*. It was not long after his conversion, and he refused to work on Yom Kippur. The director of the movie got angry and called the legendary producer Samuel Goldwyn. Goldwyn immediately called Sammy and wanted to know if it was true about his refusing to work. Sammy said that, as a Jew he could not work on the Day of Atonement. There was silence for a moment, with Goldwyn no doubt noting that stopping production would cost \$30,000, a large sum then. Finally, Goldwyn said, "Bless you." Production on the film was stopped for Yom Kippur.

Some people who chose Judaism have written about their experience or about conversion. Lena Romanoff, for example, is the author of *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice*. Ms. Romanoff is also a widely-known lecturer and counselor who has started several support groups, including her newest one for children of interfaith and conversionary couples. John David Scalamonti was a former priest who, after questioning his faith, eventually fell in love with a Jewish woman. She and her patient family explained Jewish customs to him, and he eventually embraced Judaism. Scalamonti frequently lectures on the great changes in his life and has written about it in his book *Ordained to Be a Jew*. Catherine Hall Myrowitz has written *Finding a Home for the Soul: Interviews with Converts to Judaism* in which she presents a wide variety of fascinating stories about people who embraced Judaism. The well-known black writer Julius Lester wrote of his conversionary experiences in his book *Lovesong*. Lydia Kukoff has written a guidebook for converts, *Choosing Judaism*.



Other converts have made important contributions to their congregations or Jewish life. Ben Asher, for instance, helped organize and now runs the Rabbinical Assembly's 800 number (1-800-- ASK-N-LEARN) for those interested in learning about the Conservative movement's conversionary and outreach programs. Dru Greenwood heads the UAHC-CCAR Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach which provides information about the movement's conversion and outreach programming.

The Holocaust had a profound effect on many converts. Dr. Gilya Gerda Schmidt became Jewish as a response to what she saw as the "crimes committed by my parents' and grandparents' generations." She wanted to replace some of the Jews who had been killed. Then there is the strange case of Reuel Abraham. Abraham was born a German citizen with the name Karl Heinz Schneider. At 18, he joined the Nazi air force. One day he saw Nazi storm troopers killing a group of Jews, and he was especially impressed as he saw a rabbi clutching a Torah tightly as he died. Schneider, thoroughly shocked, suddenly realized the horrors of Nazism. He began to disobey orders, dropping bombs into lakes, or fixing them so they wouldn't explode. After the war, he worked for 20 years as a penance, giving two-thirds of his salary to groups that helped Jewish orphans who had survived the concentration camps. He also began to attend Jewish services. After the 20 years, he sold all he owned and bought a farm in Israel. He then went to the rabbinical authorities in Haifa and asked to be converted. Astonished at his story, the rabbis investigated. When they learned that what he had told them was true, he was allowed to study and ultimately became Jewish and a citizen of Israel.

Not all those who wished to convert had it easy. In the 19th century, a man named Warder Cresson was put on trial by his family for insanity after he announced he wished to convert. Cresson has received an appointment as the first American consul to Jerusalem, and indeed had come to the land of Israel to help missionaries. Once he got there, however, he was overwhelmed at seeing Jews back in their ancient homeland. He converted and returned to his family in Philadelphia. Shocked at his religious journey, they had him declared insane. In a nationally-covered trial held in May, 1851, Cresson was declared legally sane. After the trial, Cresson and his wife divorced. He returned to the land of Israel and married a Sephardic Jewish woman. He worked tirelessly to help the Jews there. All Jewish-owned businesses in Jerusalem were closed on the day he died.

Once in a while the appearance of difficulty in converting can be deceiving. A rabbi told me this story about one of the members of his congregation. This young woman went to her parents telling them of her desire to become Jewish and marry a Jewish man. The parents were mildly upset, but agreed. They warned her, however, not to tell her grandmother who was very religious and would not accept her conversion. The young woman loved her grandmother and wanted to be honest with her. She told her grandmother the truth. After hearing the news, the grandmother leaped out of her chair and went into the bedroom. Loud crying could be heard through the door. Upset, the young woman gently knocked at the door, went inside, and told her grandmother of her love. The grandmother drew her close. "You don't understand," she sobbed. "I was born a Jew. I have hidden this fact almost my whole life, ever since I married your grandfather. I never told your parents. Nothing could make me happier than you becoming Jewish." Despite hardships, small and large,



thousands of people are being drawn to Judaism. Their stories are being woven into the fabric of Judaism's majestic history.

A Judaism Conversion Victims Anonymous

Support Group and Information Resource for Victims of Unethical/Abusive Jewish Conversion Practises Outside of North America. Particular Emphasis on the Nordic Countries and Northern Europe. This Resource is Non-sectarian and Helps Victims Choose Their Own Way Forward, Which May Include Disengagement from Judaism and the Jewish Community.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ConversionExodus/links/>

Huh?

Jewish Attitudes Toward Proselytes

At times, Jews have embraced large numbers of converts, but hostile relations with Gentile neighbors often led to suspicion of proselytes as well.?

By **Valerie S. Thaler**

In the United States, there are about 185-200,000 individuals who have converted to Judaism, with approximately 3,600 people converting each year. "Introduction to Judaism" classes flourish around the United States in Reform and Conservative synagogues, and some congregations count large numbers of proselytes among their members. All of this data suggests that, today, much of the American Jewish community is particularly welcoming to Jews-by-choice.

This survey of the contemporary scene begs the question: How did Jews of other eras treat the new Jews within their midst? This article attempts to outline the conclusions scholars have reached on this sensitive subject.

Biblical Times

In the biblical era, the notion of a full religious conversion as we know it today did not yet exist. Joining the Israelite population meant following a specific set of communal practices without necessarily adopting Israelite ritual laws. Central to this process was a commitment to monotheism, the factor which most set pagans apart from Hebrews. Those Gentiles who were members of Israelite society were known as *gerim* (strangers or foreigners), and the Bible repeatedly emphasizes the obligation to welcome such people.



In addition, after the Sinaitic revelation, the prophets enjoined the Israelites to uphold Jewish ritual and moral teachings, and to expose the problems inherent in paganism. However, this message is not to be confused with actively seeking converts.

Jews have never believed that one had to be Jewish to achieve salvation. Jewish tradition holds that a special covenant between God and Noah established moral precepts for non-Jews (the Noahide Laws). If Gentiles observed these commandments (refraining from murder, theft, and idolatry, among others things), they would receive a portion in the World to Come. Jews in biblical times were open to prospective proselytes, but they did not see it as their mission to convert Gentiles.

The Second Temple Period

Between 323 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. (the year the Second Temple was destroyed), many individuals converted to Judaism. The vast majority of these proselytes made the decision to become Jewish on their own. Judaism's belief in one God was particularly appealing, as was the tenor of the Hebrew liturgy. Still other proselytes fell in love with Jewish partners and wished to be of the same faith.

We lack direct evidence of how Jews of the Second Temple era received their new co-religionists, but the high number of proselytes in this period suggests a welcoming attitude. The opposite was the case for the small number of Gentiles who were forcibly converted to Judaism (a measure that has traditionally been rejected in Judaism). The first example of forced conversion known to us was the High Priest John Hyrcanus's conversion of the Edomites in 125 B.C.E. During his reign, Hyrcanus conquered the Samaritans and the Edomites, and gave them the option of converting to Judaism or being exiled from Judea.

Rabbinic Times

In the Talmudic era (about 200-800 C.E.), formal rituals were established to welcome proselytes into the Jewish religion, suggesting that conversion to Judaism was still a relatively widespread phenomenon. The Hebrew word *ger* was now understood to refer to "one who had converted to Judaism" instead of a "stranger" or "foreigner."

Rabbis' attitudes toward proselytes were mixed, although on the whole, positive. The most famous negative statement in the Talmud about converts was made by Rabbi Helbo, who believed proselytes were "as troublesome as a sore." Most sages appear to have disagreed with Helbo, however, and tried to list specific historical circumstances which led him to this conclusion. Most prominent among these was the fact that the proselyte and his new Jewish community often suffered punishment from Christian leaders following a conversion.

Toward the close of the Talmudic period, Jews began to feel increasingly ambivalent about the proselytes. In addition, anti-Semitic authorities prohibited Jews from accepting any new converts and punished them if they attempted to do so.



The Middle Ages

Jewish ambivalence toward converts also appears in the literature of the medieval period. On the one hand, the Tosafists (talmudic scholars who lived in France during the 12th to 14th centuries) declared that Jewish law requires full acceptance of proselytes. They felt distinctly uncomfortable with Rabbi Helbo's understanding of converts, and offered a number of interpretations of his statement to lessen the severity of its impact.

On the other hand, the *Zohar* (the classic work of *kabbalah*, medieval Jewish mysticism) strikes a different chord. The *Zohar* emphasizes the superior position of the born Jew in relation to the proselyte. This theme probably reflects the extent to which Jews felt persecuted and, consequently, entirely separate from the Gentile majority.

Modern America

Even among Jews in early America, attitudes toward converts were not always welcoming. The Sephardic community (Jews of Spanish descent) that immigrated in the 18th century clung to a perspective on proselytes established in late seventeenth-century England. It was considered a crime in England to deny Christianity's role as the true religion. To embrace converts to Judaism was virtually against the law. Those Jews who established the first American congregations treated outsiders with suspicion. Many new synagogues explicitly forbade assisting someone in conversion to Judaism.

The pendulum began to shift in the 19th century with the rise of Reform Judaism. Classical Reform rabbis in the U.S. viewed modern Jews as a "light unto the nations," restoring the universalistic vision of the Jewish religion. Following the legal emancipation of European Jews and their higher level of integration into Gentile society, Reformers considered it part of their mission to educate others on the precepts of ethical monotheism (for them, the essence of Judaism).

Leaders such as Rabbi Emil Hirsch tried to shed Judaism of its negative attitude toward outsiders. It was possible, Hirsch believed, to open the doors to proselytes without sacrificing Judaism's distinctiveness from other religions. Nonetheless, practice seldom followed theory, and few Reform congregations in late 19th-century America proved to be especially welcoming to proselytes.

The Contemporary Scene

In the 1960s, conversion became a prominent feature in American Jewish life. At least part of the impetus for this trend was the decade's embrace of ethnic distinctiveness. Another factor encouraging conversion to Judaism may have been American Jews' high degree of comfort in American society following World War II.

Today's "Jews by choice" are in large part accepted by American Jewry. Most Jews consider them a welcome addition to a community struggling to ensure its own survival in future generations. Yet even as they might fully accept proselytes as co-religionists, American Jews often feel that Jews-by-choice cannot fully share the bond of Jewish ethnicity, peoplehood, or history--at least not immediately. The contemporary situation is especially complex in Israel, where only conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis are regarded as legitimate.

Attitudes toward converts in Jewish history have been anything but consistent or unidimensional. Throughout the centuries, Jewish professionals and laypeople have heatedly debated the "right approach" to proselytes.

The following works were consulted for this article: Lawrence Epstein, Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994), The Theory and Practice of Welcoming Converts to Judaism (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), and Readings on Conversion to Judaism (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995); Dana Evan Kaplan, "Conversion to Judaism: A Historical Perspective," Judaism 48.3 (1999): 259-74; National Jewish Population Survey, 1990.

Valerie S. Thaler is a Ph.D. student in the Judaic Studies Program at Yale, where she concentrates on 20th-century American Jewish history. She is beginning dissertation research on American Jewish identity in the 1950s. An alumna of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, Valerie received her M.A. in Judaic Studies and Jewish Education from Brandeis, and has her B.A. in American Studies from Yale.

Religious conversion

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"Converts" and "Converted" redirect here. For other uses, see [Conversion \(disambiguation\)](#).

This article is about voluntary acceptance of a religion. For forced conversion, see [Forced conversion](#). For renunciation of a religion, see [Apostasy](#).

Conversion of Ghazan. [Ghazan](#) was born and raised as a Christian, studied [Buddhism](#), and converted to [Islam](#) upon accession to the throne. Illustration from: "World History", Rachid Ad-Din, 14th century.

Religious conversion is the adoption of a set of beliefs identified with one particular [religious denomination](#) to the exclusion of others. Thus "religious conversion" would describe the abandoning of adherence to one denomination and affiliating with another. This might be from one to another denomination within the same religion, for example, from [Baptist](#) to [Catholic](#) Christianity or from [Sunni](#) to [Shi'a](#) Islam.^[1] In some cases, religious conversion "marks a transformation of religious identity and is symbolized by special rituals".^[2]

People convert to a different religion for various reasons, including: active conversion by free choice due to a change in beliefs,^[3] [secondary conversion](#), [deathbed conversion](#), conversion for convenience, [marital conversion](#), and [forced conversion](#).

Conversion or reaffiliation for convenience is an insincere act, sometimes for relatively trivial reasons such as a parent converting to enable a child to be admitted to a good school associated with a

religion, or a person adopting a religion more in keeping with the [social class](#) they aspire to.^[4] When people marry one spouse may convert to the religion of the other.

Forced conversion is adoption of a different religion under duress. The convert may secretly retain the previous beliefs and continue, covertly, with the practices of the original religion, while outwardly maintaining the forms of the new religion. Over generations a family forced against their will to convert may wholeheartedly adopt the new religion.

[Proselytism](#) is the act of attempting to convert by persuasion another individual from a different religion or belief system. (See [proselyte](#)).

[Apostate](#) is a term used by members of a religion or denomination to refer to someone who has left that religion or denomination.

Abrahamic religions^[edit]

Judaism^[edit]

The traditional normative conversion process to Judasim (*gijur*) of one, two or more years is finalized with [ritual immersion](#) in a natural collection of water, e.g. a river, a lake, or a [mikveh](#), down to the present day (Beth-El reform-synagogue, Birmingham, Alabama, 2006).

E
Main article: [Conversion to Judaism](#)

Procedure^[edit]

[Jewish law](#) has a number of requirements of potential converts. They should desire conversion to [Judaism](#) for its own sake, and for no other motives. A male convert needs to undergo a ritual [circumcision](#) conducted according to Jewish law (if already circumcised, a needle is used to draw a symbolic drop of blood while the appropriate blessings are said), and the convert must commit to observe Jewish law. A convert must join the Jewish community and reject any previous religious affiliation. Ritual immersion in a small pool of water known as a [mikvah](#) is required.

History^[edit]

Main article: [List of converts to Judaism](#)

The Greek word "proselyte" means a convert to Judaism. It is known that some Chinese, [Khazars](#), [Edomites](#), and [Ethiopians](#), as well as many Arabs, particularly in [Yemen](#), were converts. As late as the 6th century the Eastern [Roman empire](#) and [Caliph Umar ibn Khattab](#) were issuing decrees against conversion to [Judaism](#), implying that this was still occurring.^[5]

Christianity^[edit]

E
Main articles: [Conversion to Christianity](#), [Christianization](#), and [List of converts to Christianity](#)

The Conversion of Saint Paul, a 1600 painting by Italian artist [Caravaggio](#) (1571–1610)

Within Christianity *conversion* refers variously to three different phenomena: a person becoming Christian who was previously not Christian; a Christian moving from one Christian denomination to another; a particular spiritual development, sometimes called the **second conversion**, or the **conversion of the baptised**.^[6]

Conversion to Christianity is the religious conversion of a previously non-Christian person to some form of Christianity. Some Christian sects require full conversion for new members regardless of any history in other Christian sects, or from certain other sects. The exact requirements vary between different churches and [denominations](#). All Christian sects hold that [baptism](#) is a necessary ritual, but the practice differs. Jesus Christ was baptized at the beginning of his ministry, and prior to that event, John the Baptist had been baptizing Jewish believers as a sign of repentance, though not of conversion per se. Baptism is usually understood as an outward symbol of an inward change. Prior to that Awakening at Antioch (Acts ch.8 ff; see also Acts 2:38), all converts to Christianity were ethnic and religious Jews. Following the Awakening, Pagans and [infidels](#) were required to undergo Christian baptism to be ultimately accepted in the [Kingdom of God](#). Christian Baptism has some parallels with Jewish Immersion by [Mikvah](#).

Converting to [Catholicism](#) involves religious education followed by initial participation in the [sacraments](#), which are baptism, confession, penance, and communion. In general, conversion to Christian Faith primarily involves [repentance](#) for [sin](#) and a decision to live a life that is holy and acceptable to [God](#) through faith in the [atonement](#) death and [resurrection](#) of [Jesus Christ](#). Most other sects require a period of indoctrination prior to acceptance. All of this is essentially done through a voluntary exercise of the will of the individual concerned. True conversion to Christianity is thus a personal, internal matter and cannot be forced.

Christians consider that conversion requires internalization of the new belief system. It implies a new reference point for the convert's self-identity, and is a matter of belief and social structure—of both faith and affiliation.^[7] This typically entails the sincere avowal of a new belief system, but may also present itself in other ways, such as adoption into an identity group or spiritual lineage.

Baptism^[edit]

Main article: [Baptism](#)

[Catholics](#), and [Orthodox](#) denominations encourage [infant baptism](#) before children are aware of their status. In Roman Catholicism and certain [high church](#) forms of Protestantism, baptized children are expected to participate in [confirmation](#) classes as pre-teens. In Eastern Orthodoxy, the equivalent of confirmation, [chrismation](#), is administered to all converts, adult and infant alike, immediately after baptism.

Methods of baptism include immersion, sprinkling (aspersion) and pouring (affusion).^[8] Baptism received by adults or younger people who have reached the [age of accountability](#) where they can make a personal religious decision is referred to as [believer's baptism](#) among conservative or evangelical [Protestant](#) groups. It is intended as a public statement of a person's prior decision to become a Christian.^[9] Some Christian groups such as [Catholics](#), [Churches of Christ](#), and [Christadelphians](#) believe baptism is essential to salvation.

Accepting Christ and renouncing sin^[edit]

The [Augsburg Confession](#) divides repentance into two parts: "One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the [knowledge of sin](#); the other is [faith](#), which is born of the Gospel, or of [absolution](#), and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors."^[10]

"Conversion" derives from the [Latin](#) *conversio*-em, literally meaning "turning round" and figuratively meaning a "change in character".^[11] "Change of heart", "[metanoia](#)", and "regeneration" are among the synonyms for conversion.^[12] Conversion is, therefore, more than a mere change in religious identity, but a change in nature ([regeneration](#)), evidenced by a change in values. [Jesus](#) demands "[metánoia](#) (conversion)" to become a good tree that bears good fruit ([Matthew 7:17–18](#), ^[13][Luke 6:43](#)).

According to Christianity, a convert renounces [sin](#) as worthless and treasures instead the supreme worth of Christ in Jesus' [sacrificial death](#) and [resurrection](#).^[14] Christian conversion is a "deeply personal" matter. It entails changes in thinking, priorities and commitments: "a whole new direction in one's life".^[15]

Because conversion is a change in values that embraces God and rejects sin, it includes a personal commitment to a life of [holiness](#) as described by [Paul of Tarsus](#) and [exemplified by Jesus](#). In some [Protestant](#) traditions, this is called "accepting Christ as one's Savior and following him as Lord."^[16] In another variation, the 1910 Catholic Dictionary defines "conversion" as "Any turning or changing from a state of sin to repentance, from a lax to a fervent way of life, from unbelief to faith, and from a non-Christian religion to Christianity."^[17] The Eastern Orthodox understanding of conversion is illustrated in the rite of baptism, in which the convert faces west while publicly renouncing and symbolically spitting upon Satan, and then turns to the east to worship Christ "as king and God".^[18]

Responsibilities^[edit]

In the [New Testament](#), Jesus commanded his disciples in the [Great Commission](#) to "go and make disciples of all nations" (^[Matthew 28:19], ^[Mark 16:15]). [Evangelization](#)—sharing the Gospel message or "Good News" in deed and word, is an expectation of Christians.^{^[19]}

Reaffiliation^[edit]

Transferring from one Christian denomination to another may consist of a relatively simple transfer of membership, especially if moving from one [Trinitarian](#) denomination to another, and if the person has received water [baptism](#) in the name of the [Trinity](#). If not, then the person may be required to be baptized or rebaptized before acceptance by the new [church](#). Some denominations, such as those in the [Anabaptist](#) tradition, require previously baptized Christians to be [re-baptized](#). The Eastern Orthodox Church treats a transfer from another denomination of Christianity to Orthodoxy (conceived of as the one true Church) as a category of conversion and repentance, though re-baptism is not always required.

The process of conversion to Christianity varies somewhat among Christian denominations. Most [Protestants](#) believe in conversion by *faith* to attain salvation. According to this understanding, a person professes faith in [Jesus](#) Christ as God, their Lord and [savior](#). Repentance for sin and a holy living are expected of those professing faith in Jesus Christ. While an individual may make such a decision privately, usually it entails being baptized and becoming a member of a denomination or church. In these traditions, a person is considered to become a [Christian](#) by publicly acknowledging the foundational Christian doctrines that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and was resurrected for the remission of [sins](#).^[citation needed]

Comparison between Protestants^[edit]

This table summarizes three Protestant beliefs.

Topic	Calvinism	Lutheranism	Arminianism
Conversion	Monergistic, ^[20] through the inner calling of the Holy Spirit, irresistible .	Monergistic, ^[21] through the means of grace , resistible .	Synergistic , resistible due to the common grace of free will. ^[22]

Latter Day Saints movement^[edit]

Main article: [Baptism in Mormonism](#)

Latter Day Saint baptism ceremony, circa the 1850s

Much of the theology of Latter Day Saint baptism was established during the early [Latter Day Saint movement](#) founded by [Joseph Smith](#). According to this theology, baptism must be by immersion, for the remission of [sins](#) (meaning that through baptism, past sins are forgiven), and occurs after one has shown faith and repentance. Mormon baptism does not purport to remit any sins other than personal ones, as adherents do not believe in [original sin](#). Latter Day Saints baptisms also occur only after an "[age of accountability](#)" which is defined as the age of eight years.^[23] The theology thus rejects [infant baptism](#).^[24]

In addition, Latter Day Saint theology requires that baptism may only be performed with one who has been called and ordained by God with [priesthood](#) authority.^[25] Because the churches of the Latter Day Saint movement operate under a lay priesthood, children raised in a Mormon family are usually baptized by a father or close male friend or family member who has achieved the office of [priest](#), which is conferred upon worthy male members at least 16 years old in the LDS Church.^[26]

Baptism is seen as symbolic both of [Jesus'](#) death, burial and [resurrection](#)^[27] and is also symbolic of the baptized individual putting off of the natural or sinful man and becoming spiritually reborn as a disciple of Jesus.

Membership into a Latter Day Saint church is granted only by baptism whether or not a person has been raised in the church. Latter Day Saint churches do not recognize baptisms of other faiths as valid because they believe baptisms must be performed under the church's unique authority. Thus, all who come into one of the Latter Day Saint faiths as converts are baptized, even if they have previously received baptism in another faith.

When performing a Baptism, Latter Day Saints say the following prayer before performing the ordinance:

Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen^[28]

Baptisms inside and outside the temples are usually done in a [baptistry](#), although they can be performed in any body of water in which the person may be completely immersed. The person administering the baptism must recite the prayer exactly, and immerse every part, limb, hair and clothing of the person being baptized. If there are any mistakes, or if any part of the person being baptized is not fully immersed, the baptism must be redone. In addition to the baptizer, two priesthood holders witness the baptism to ensure that it is performed properly.^[29]

Following baptism, [Latter Day Saints](#) receive the [Gift of the Holy Ghost](#) by the [laying on of hands](#) of a [Melchizedek Priesthood](#) holder.^[29]

Latter Day Saints hold that one may be baptized after death through the vicarious act of a living individual, and holders of the Melchizedek Priesthood practice baptism for the dead as a missionary ritual. This doctrine answers the question of the righteous non-believer and the unevangelized by providing a post-mortem means of repentance and salvation.

Islam^[edit]

Further information: [Spread of Islam](#), [List of converts to Islam](#), [Al-Baqara 256](#), [Islamic Missionary Activity](#), and [Conversion to Islam in prisons](#)

There are [five pillars](#), or foundations, of [Islam](#) but the primary, and most important is to believe that there is only one [God](#) and creator, referred to as [Allah](#) (the word for God in [Arabic](#)) and that the [Islamic prophet](#), [Muhammad](#), is God's final messenger. The time of a person's conversion is counted from the moment they sincerely make this [declaration of faith](#), called the [shahadah](#) in front of witnesses.^[30]

Islam teaches that [everyone is Muslim at birth](#)^{[31][32]} but the parents or society can cause them to deviate from the straight path. When someone accepts Islam, they are considered to revert to the original condition. In Islam, [circumcision](#) is a [Sunnah](#) custom not mentioned in the Qur'an. The majority clerical opinion holds that circumcision is not a condition for entering Islam.

The [Shafi'i](#) and [Hanbali](#) schools regard it as [obligatory](#), while the [Maliki](#) and [Hanafi](#) schools regard it as only recommended. However, it is not a precondition for the acceptance of a person's Islamic practices,^[clarification needed] nor is choosing to forgo circumcision considered a sin. It is not one of the Five Pillars of Islam.^{[33][34][35]}

Bahá'í Faith^[edit]

In sharing their faith with others, Bahá'ís are cautioned to "obtain a hearing" – meaning to make sure the person they are proposing to teach is open to hearing what they have to say. "[Bahá'í pioneers](#)", rather than attempting to supplant the cultural underpinnings of the people in their adopted communities, are encouraged to integrate into the society and apply Bahá'í principles in living and working with their neighbors.

Bahá'ís recognize the divine origins of all revealed religion, and believe that these religions occurred sequentially as part of a Divine plan (see [Progressive revelation](#)), with each new revelation superseding and fulfilling that of its predecessors. Bahá'ís regard their own faith as the most recent (but not the last), and believe its teachings – which are centered around the principle of the oneness of humanity – are most suited to meeting the needs of a global community.

In most countries conversion is a simple matter of filling out a card stating a declaration of belief. This includes acknowledgement of Bahá'u'llah – the Founder of the Faith – as the Messenger of God for this age, awareness and acceptance of His teachings, and intention to be obedient to the institutions and laws He established.

Conversion to the Bahá'í Faith carries with it an explicit belief in the common foundation of all revealed religion, a commitment to the unity of mankind, and active service to the community at large, especially in areas that will foster unity and concord. Since the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy, converts to this Faith are encouraged to be active in all aspects of community life. Even a recent convert may be elected to serve on a Local Spiritual Assembly – the guiding Bahá'í institution at the community level.^{[36][37]}

Indian religions^[edit]

Hinduism^[edit]

See also: [List of converts to Hinduism](#)

Since 1800 CE, religious conversion from and to [Hinduism](#) has been a controversial subject within Hinduism. Some have suggested that the concept of missionary conversion, either way, is contrary to the precepts of Hinduism.^[38] Religious leaders of some of Hinduism sects such as [Brahmo Samaj](#) have seen Hinduism as a non-missionary religion yet welcomed new members, while other leaders of Hinduism's diverse schools have stated that with the arrival of missionary Islam and Christianity in India, this "there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism" view must be re-examined.^{[38][39]}

Hinduism is a diverse system of thought with beliefs spanning [monotheism](#), [polytheism](#), [panentheism](#), [pantheism](#), [pandeism](#), [monism](#), and [atheism](#) among others. Hinduism has no traditional ecclesiastical order, no centralized religious authorities, no universally accepted governing body, no prophet(s), no binding holy book nor any mandatory prayer attendance requirements.^{[40][41][42]} Hinduism has been described as a way of life.^[40] In its diffuse and open structure, numerous schools and sects of Hinduism have developed and spun off in India with help from its [ascetic](#) scholars, since the [Vedic age](#). The six [Astika](#) and two [Nastika](#) schools of [Hindu philosophy](#), in its history, did not develop a missionary or proselytization methodology, and they co-existed with each other. Most Hindu sub-schools and sects do not actively seek converts.^[43] Individuals have had a choice to enter, leave or change their god(s), spiritual convictions, accept or discard any rituals and practices, and pursue spiritual knowledge and liberation ([moksha](#)) in different ways.^{[44][45]} However, various schools of Hinduism do have some core common beliefs, such as the belief that all living beings have [Atman](#) (soul), a belief in [karma](#) theory, spirituality, [ahimsa](#) (non-violence) as the greatest dharma or virtue, and others.^[46]

Religious conversion to Hinduism has a long history outside India. Merchants and traders of India, particularly from Indian peninsula, carried their religious ideas, which led to religious conversions to Hinduism in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Burma.^{[47][48][49]} Some sects of Hindus, particularly of the [Bhakti](#) schools began seeking or accepting converts in early to mid 20th century. For example, [Arya Samaj](#), [Saiva Siddhanta Church](#), [BAPS](#), and the [International Society for Krishna Consciousness](#) accept those who have a desire to follow their sects of Hinduism, and each has their own religious conversion procedure.^[50]

In recent decades, mainstream Hinduism schools have attempted to systematize ways to accept religious converts, with an increase in inter-religious mixed marriages.^[51] The steps involved in becoming a Hindu have variously included a period where the interested person gets an informal *ardha-Hindu* name and studies ancient literature on spiritual path and practices (English translations of Upanishads, Agamas, Epics, ethics in Sutras, festivals, [yoga](#)).^[52] If after a period of study, the individual still wants to convert, a *Namakarana Samskaras* ceremony is held, where the individual adopts a traditional Hindu name. The initiation ceremony may also include [Yajna](#) (i.e., fire ritual with Sanskrit hymns) under guidance of a local Hindu priest.^[51] Some of these places are *mathas* and *asramas* (hermitage, monastery), where one or more *gurus* (spiritual guide) conduct the conversion and offer spiritual discussions.^[51] Some schools encourage the new convert to learn and participate in community activities such as festivals ([Diwali](#) etc.), read and discuss ancient literature, learn and engage in rites of passages (ceremonies of birth, first feeding, first learning day, age of majority, wedding, cremation and others).^[53]

Sikhism^[edit]

[Sikhism](#) is not known to openly proselytize, but accepts converts.^{[54][55]}

Jainism^[edit]

[Jainism](#) accepts anyone who wants to embrace the religion. There is no specific ritual for becoming a Jain. One does not need to ask any authorities for admission. One becomes a Jain on one's own by observing the five vows (*vratas*)^[56] The five main vows as mentioned in the ancient [Jain texts](#) like [Tattvarthasutra](#) are:^{[57][58]}

1. [Ahimsa](#)- Not to injure any living being by actions and thoughts.
2. [Satya](#)- Not to lie or speak words that hurt others.
3. [Asteya](#)- Not to take anything if not given.^[59]
4. Brahmacharya- Chastity for householders / [Celibacy](#) in action, words & thoughts for monks and nuns.

5. [Aparigraha \(Non-possession\)](#)- non-attachment to possessions.^[60]

Following the five vows is the main requirement in Jainism. All other aspects such as visiting temples are secondary. [Jain monks and nuns](#) are required to observe these five vows strictly.^[56]

Buddhism^[edit]

Persons newly adhering to Buddhism traditionally "[take Refuge](#)" (express [faith](#) in the [Three Jewels](#)—[Buddha](#), [Dharma](#), and [Sangha](#)) before a monk, nun, or similar representative. But cultural or secular Buddhists often hold multiple religious identities, combining the religion with some [East Asian religions](#) in different countries and ethnics, such as:

Ethnic	Buddhism with local traditional religions
Chinese ^[61]	Mahayana Buddhism with Confucianism , Taoism , and Chinese folk religion ^{[62][63][64]}
Japanese ^[61]	Mahayana Buddhism with Shinto ^{[65][66][67]}
Korean ^[61]	Mahayana Buddhism with Confucianism , and Korean shamanism ^{[68][69][70][71]}
Vietnamese ^[61]	Mahayana Buddhism with Confucianism , Taoism , ^{[72][73]} and Dao Mau ^[74]
Mongolian	Vajrayana Buddhism with Tengrism , and Mongolian shamanism ^[75]
Nepali	Vajrayana Buddhism with Hinduism ^[76]
Jewish Buddhist	Buddhism with Judaism

Throughout the [timeline of Buddhism](#), conversions of entire countries and regions to Buddhism were frequent, as Buddhism spread throughout Asia. For example, in the 11th century in [Burma](#), king [Anoratha](#) converted his entire country to [Theravada](#) Buddhism. At the end of the 12th century, [Jayavarman VII](#) set the stage for conversion of the [Khmer people](#) to Theravada Buddhism. Mass conversions of areas and communities to Buddhism occur up to the present day, for example, in the [Dalit Buddhist movement](#) in India there have been [organized mass conversions](#).

Exceptions to encouraging conversion may occur in some Buddhist movements. In [Tibetan Buddhism](#), for example, the [current Dalai Lama](#) discourages active attempts to win converts.^{[77][78]}

Other religions and sects^[edit]

In the second half of the 20th century, the rapid growth of [new religious movements](#) (NRMs) led some psychologists and other scholars to propose that these groups were using "[brainwashing](#)" or "[mind control](#)" techniques to gain converts. This theory was publicized by the popular news media but disputed by other scholars, including some sociologists of religion.^{[79][80][81][82][83]}

In the 1960s sociologist [John Lofland](#) lived with [Unification Church](#) missionary [Young Oon Kim](#) and a small group of American church members in [California](#) and studied their activities in trying to promote their beliefs and win converts to their church. Lofland noted that most of their efforts were ineffective and that most of the people who joined did so because of personal relationships with other members, often family relationships.^[84] Lofland published his findings in 1964 as a doctoral thesis entitled "The World Savers: A Field Study of Cult Processes", and in 1966 in book form by [Prentice-Hall](#) as [Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith](#). It is considered to be one of the most important and widely cited studies of the process of religious conversion, and one of the first modern sociological studies of a new religious movement.^{[85][86]}

The [Church of Scientology](#) attempts to gain converts by offering "free stress tests".^[87] It has also used the celebrity status of some of its members (most famously the American actor [Tom Cruise](#)) to attract converts.^{[88][89]} The Church of Scientology requires that all converts sign a legal [waiver](#) which covers their relationship with the Church of Scientology before engaging in Scientology services.^[90]

Research in the [United States](#) and the [Netherlands](#) has shown a [positive correlation](#) between areas lacking mainstream churches and the percentage of people who are a member of a new religious movement. This applies also for the presence of [New Age](#) centres.^{[91][92]}

On the other end of the scale are religions that do not accept any converts, or do so very rarely. Often these are relatively small, close-knit minority religions that are ethnically based such as the [Yazidis](#), [Druze](#), and [Mandaeans](#). [Zoroastrianism](#) classically does not accept converts, but this issue has become controversial in the 20th century due to the rapid decline in membership.^[citation needed] [Chinese traditional religion](#) lacks clear criteria for membership, and hence for conversion.

The [Shakers](#) and some Indian [eunuch](#) brotherhoods do not allow procreation, so that every member is a convert.

International law^[edit]

The [United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) defines religious conversion as a [human right](#): "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief" (Article 18). Despite this UN-declared human right, some groups forbid or restrict religious conversion (see below).

Based on the declaration the [United Nations Commission on Human Rights](#) (UNCHR) drafted the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), a legally binding treaty. It states that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" (Article 18.1). "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" (Article 18.2).

The [UNCHR](#) issued a General Comment on this Article in 1993: "The Committee observes that the freedom to 'have or to adopt' a religion or belief necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief, *including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another* or to adopt atheistic views [...]" Article 18.2 bars coercion that would impair the right to have or adopt a religion or

belief, including the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to their religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief *or to convert*." (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, General Comment No. 22.; emphasis added)

Some countries distinguish voluntary, motivated conversion from organized proselytism, attempting to restrict the latter. The boundary between them is not easily defined: what one person considers legitimate evangelizing, or witness-bearing, another may consider intrusive and improper. Illustrating the problems that can arise from such subjective viewpoints is this extract from an article by Dr. C. Davis, published in [Cleveland State University's Journal of Law and Health](#): "According to the [Union of American Hebrew Congregations](#), [Jews for Jesus](#) and [Hebrew Christians](#) constitute two of the most dangerous cults, and its members are appropriate candidates for [deprogramming](#). Anti-cult evangelicals ... protest that 'aggressiveness and proselytizing ... are basic to authentic Christianity,' and that Jews for Jesus and [Campus Crusade for Christ](#) are not to be labeled as cults. Furthermore, certain [Hassidic](#) groups who physically attacked a meeting of the Hebrew Christian 'cult' have themselves been labeled a 'cult' and equated with the followers of [Reverend Moon](#), by none other than the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis."^[93]

Since the collapse of the former [Soviet Union](#) the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) has enjoyed a revival. However, it takes exception to what it considers illegitimate proselytizing by the [Roman Catholic Church](#), the [Salvation Army](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), and other religious movements in what it refers to as its *canonical territory*.^[citation needed]

[Greece](#) has a long history of conflict, mostly with [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), but also with some [Pentecostals](#), over its laws on proselytism. This situation stems from a law passed in the 1930s by the dictator [Ioannis Metaxas](#). A Jehovah's Witness, [Minos Kokkinakis](#), won the equivalent of \$14,400 in damages from the Greek state after being arrested for trying to preach his faith from door to door. In another case, *Larissis v. Greece*, a member of the Pentecostal church also won a case in the [European Court of Human Rights](#).^[citation needed]

Some Islamic countries with [Islamic law](#) outlaw and carry strict sentences for proselytizing. Several Islamic countries under [Islamic law](#)—[Saudi Arabia](#), [Yemen](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Pakistan](#), [Egypt](#), [Iran](#), and the [Maldives](#)—outlaw [apostasy](#) and carry imprisonment or the death penalty for those leaving Islam and those enticing Muslims to leave Islam.^[citation needed] Also, induced religious conversions in the Indian states [Orissa](#)^[disambiguation needed] has resulted in communal riots.^[citation needed]

Paul's Success in the Conversion of Gentiles: Dynamic Center in Cultural Diversity

V. George Shillington

That Paul's mission resulted in the widespread conversion of Gentiles and their incorporation into Christian communities is a truism of the first order. But the reason for Paul's success is another matter. The aim of this article is to address the question: How can we account for the positive response of Gentiles to the preaching of this Jewish-Christian missionary? Gentiles had not been converting to Judaism (the parent of Christianity) in significant numbers, even though provision was made for their inclusion in the Jewish covenant community; and Judaism apparently had its missionaries who "traversed sea and land to make a single proselyte" (Matt. 23:15).

Paul is like one standing at a cosmic frontier.

Paul's mission into the Gentile world, launched from Antioch, marked a critical turning point in the early Jewish-Christian movement. Gentiles began to accept the God

of Israel and the Messiah of God as they had not up to this point. And more to the point, Gentiles were being accepted into the new community of Messiah, a phenomenon of some moment given the history of clashes between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 15). {126}

In this article I intend to answer the question, Why was Paul's mission to the Gentiles successful? First, I shall offer a proposal, and then I shall argue for its probability. The proposal is this: *Paul preached Christ (Messiah) as God's universal, dynamic center of life and thought that meshed spontaneously with the cultural particularity of his Gentile converts.* If this proposal reflects a correct reading of Paul in his letters, then it represents a marked difference from the covenantal categories of contemporary Judaism where *fixed distinctives marked the boundary of inclusion (and exclusion) of all members, native Jews and Gentile proselytes.* "Boundary of inclusion" is the key term here. It contrasts with the "universal, dynamic center" for Paul's Christian thought and preaching as proposed above.

FROM A COVENANTAL BOUNDEDNESS TO A DYNAMIC "KNOWING" OF CHRIST

The thesis is attested first by the character of Paul's own conversion and call. The change of thought and life that overtook Paul when he encountered the resurrected Christ may be justly called "conversion." "It is a call to mission"² to be sure, but Paul's sense of mission and center of thought were transformed utterly by his encounter with the Christ of the Christian proclamation. The persecutor-preacher of Jewish persuasion became the persecuted preacher of Christ, as Paul himself is witness. In recalling his life in Judaism he writes:

[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless (Phil.3:5-6).

Did he then abandon his Jewish heritage altogether at conversion? I think not; he identified with his "brethren," his "kinsmen by race" (Rom. 9:3), affirming both an attachment to his heritage of faith as a descendent of Abraham and an identity as an Israelite (Rom. 11:1-2). Nor did Paul exchange one God for another or one Scripture for another. Yet Paul had a change of vision. He gained a new understanding of the plan of God for the ages in the experience of Messiah resurrected. Previously he knew of Christ, as he says, "according to the flesh" {127} (*katasarka*), but his knowledge of Christ was radically transformed, as we may conclude from 2 Corinthians 5:16f: "We know him thus no longer." Paul experienced a change in the basic pattern of thinking and knowing that he held prior to his encounter with Christ. However we wish to describe the change, we may be certain that something transformed his thinking from a covenantal boundedness to a relational, dynamic, spiritual "knowing" of Christ. "Whatever gain I had," he says, "I counted as loss for the sake of Christ... that I might know him and the enabling energy (*dynamis*) of his resurrection...being shaped [in thinking and life] by his death" (Phil. 3:7-10).

This dynamic thought pattern surfaces in the letters in various ways: "God was pleased...to reveal his Son *in me*" (*en emoi* Gal. 1:16). "I live, and yet not I but Christ

lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.... We are being changed from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:17f). The implications of this new understanding of Paul’s life in relation to God in Christ point in the direction of a winsome proclamation for Gentile ears.

Paul’s experience and understanding of Christ sketched above had its antecedents in the preaching of the primitive church that settled in Antioch. The former Paul, the Pharisee, detected a threat to the standard Jewish categories from the new pattern of thinking and living represented in the speech of the hellenistic Jewish Christian, Stephen (Acts 7). This new Christ-thinking cracked open the boundaries of the traditional observance of the Law to which Paul had been so ardently committed. Eventually, however, he adopted the Christ-center, abandoned Torah-observance in light of end-time salvation (cf. Rom. 10:4), to become the most prominent exponent of the new reality of Christ among the Gentiles in the middle of the first century.

THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST AS THE ENABLING CENTER OF LIFE

By the terms “Christ-center” and “dynamic Christ-center” I do not mean that Paul had studied the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth to know his words and emulate his deeds recorded in written gospels. His main access to the earthly Jesus was through the living word of the Apostles who remembered Jesus in the flesh. But in his letters Paul only rarely {128} appeals directly to any word or act of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-25; 7:10; 9:14). He was not dependent on the record of Jesus’ life for his new life of faith in Christ, nor were the multiple acts and words of the historical Jesus central to his preaching among the Gentiles. One act was central and generative: the act of God in raising the crucified Jesus from among the dead (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3-5; Rom. 1:3f; 8:11; Phil. 2:6-11).

Conscious of this dramatic turn of the ages by the supreme act of God in raising Jesus Messiah, Paul’s every aspect of life was affected. He now viewed the sacred past, all of it, as pointing to the present reality of Christ, and the present reality of the Spirit of Christ as the foretaste of the resurrected life soon to come. Here we see, I believe, the distinctive thinking and preaching of Paul the Christian. The emphasis falls on *God’s* act in history on behalf of all humanity (Jew and Gentile) with the corresponding experience of the *Spirit of God* in hearts and minds of faith in Christ crucified and raised.

This is the good word that reached into Gentile lives where they lived. It did not require them to deny their culture, to abandon their heritage, to learn a new language, to be circumcised, to eat certain foods and not others, to observe certain days and not others, to attend feasts, to present offerings. They were summoned rather to accept a life-giving center around which the cultural fabric of their local lives was woven. This is how Paul’s letters read. They arise out of situations in the congregations. They answer recent questions, give apt directions in line with the situation of the people involved, but always with a keen eye to the enabling center of life in the Spirit of Christ. In short, the gospel Paul lived and preached was translatable, to use Lamin Sanneh’s term.³ It did not merely cross cultural lines; it entered into the cultural configuration of the particular

people. Its universal character, to be sure, remained unchanged and unchangeable, as God is. But it had the inherent capacity to become incarnate in particular cultures, as God had become incarnate in Jesus.

To describe Paul's thought in this manner runs the risk of making him an inconsistent thinker who allowed different situations to change his mind. On the contrary, I believe the heart of Paul's thought and life was thoroughly consistent. But this "thoroughly consistent" center of thought should not be construed as a body of doctrine that Paul espoused and expected his converts to espouse before they entered the {129}community of Christ. His was a life-giving message infused with the unfathomable love of God in Christ; it was the good news of Christ that called Gentiles to be part of the plan of God for the end of the ages.

THE GENERATIVE SCHEMA IN PAUL'S THOUGHT

Now while we insist that the Christ-center of Paul's preaching was not doctrinal but dynamic, we acknowledge a certain *schema* or pattern of interrelated ideas apparent in his letters and by analogy also in his preaching among the Gentiles. Not only are the ideas interrelated, they are charged with generative energy that Paul would call "the power (*dynamis*) of God that leads to salvation" (Rom. 1:16). As such this "truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2:14) as a generative center is open to cultural variety and diversity of expression. But more on this point later. For the present we should highlight three principal facets in the *schema* of Paul's thought that drive his mission to the Gentiles and open the door for their inclusion in the new people of God.

Christ-event

There is no denying that the figure of Christ stands out in bold relief in Paul's letters. His thinking about Christ is vast, majestic, overpowering, dynamic. Paul acknowledges that the Christ was in the form of God (Phil. 2:6); that God "sent" him into the world for the redemption of humankind (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4f); that he died in weakness on the cross to be raised again to universal lordship (1 Cor. 1:20ff; 15:3-5; Phil. 2:8-11); that his full presence in the world is still future (1 Cor. 15:20-55; 1 Thess. 4:13-18); that his Spirit indwells the community of faith in Christ to give life and hope (2 Cor. 3:17f; Rom. 8:9-27). And he further affirms that anyone from the human family who believes in this Christ thereby participates proleptically in a new creation that God has in mind for the world (2 Cor. 5:17f; cfr. 1:21-22).

Despite the spiritual overtones of the language just cited, the Christ of Paul's thought is not a mystical figure (cf. Rom. 8:9f; 2 Cor. 3:17f). The revelation of the grace of God toward humankind comes not in mystical but in historical dress. The resurrected Lord has an antecedent on the other side of "the third day" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-5). There cannot be a resurrected {130} Christ apart from the crucified Christ, crucified in ordinary time and in human flesh to redeem both. Still, the Christ in Paul is defined primarily in transcendental terms, not restricted to the historical Jesus. Instead, Paul's Christian thought in the letters is centered on *the act of God in raising the crucified Jesus to universal lordship*. It is a saving event for the world, represented every time the gospel

is proclaimed. It makes Paul's preaching good news. Something of great moment has happened in the world and for the world: God has brought out of human mortality a new form of incorruptible life in the person of the resurrected Christ. Paul lives and works in the experience of this event, and interprets all other saving events recorded in Scripture in its light. "The message that Paul finds in the Old Testament," says Richard Hays, "is the gospel of Jesus Christ proleptically figured, a gospel proclaiming the inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God."⁴ Now to the second principal element.

The Change of Aeons

The change from the old age to the new was not merely a piece of information Paul acknowledged. It became for him a reality of immense proportion, one that shaped his thinking and impelled his mission to the Gentiles. A cluster of questions present themselves: When did the change occur? What new frontier has the change brought about? And what are the consequences for Paul's mission to the Gentile world? The questions interlock, as do the answers that follow.

C.J.A. Hickling has made the point that, for Paul, "God has already brought about in Christ a decisive and final *transformation of time*."⁵ What was "decisive and final" for Paul was the reality of the resurrection of Messiah to *universal* status. Christ was the Messiah of the whole world and of all humanity. Paul's new understanding of himself in relation to the plan of God was "of one standing at a cosmic frontier."⁶ God had raised Jesus from among the dead, signalling the dawn of a new order of life in the midst of ordinary history. The resurrection of Jesus Messiah marked a turning point for humanity and for the cosmos. From that point onward resurrected life in Jesus Christ was the new ontic reality to be reckoned with; it belonged at "the end of the ages" and the beginning of the new age to come (1 Cor. 10:11).⁷

The Adam-Christ typology of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 {131} fits within this pattern of thought, a typology that lies at the heart of the inclusion of Gentile people in the people of God. The first Adam (human being) became an animate physical being (*psuchen zosan* 1 Cor. 15:45a) whereas the last Adam became a life-giving spirit (*pneuma zoo poioun* 15:45b). The new creation in the last Adam constitutes a different order of existence from the first Adam. Yet both are Adam (human). The new rises out of the old by the power of God, and is related to the old as fulfillment to promise, antitype to type⁸ (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). Significantly, Paul views the new Adam as the resurrected Christ, the life-giving spirit, "the man from heaven" (v. 49), not the historical Jesus. The change from old to new, from physical to spiritual, from mortal to immortal, occurred at the point where a radically new reality appeared to the eyes of faith: the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:3-5). Such a new reality in the church and in the world was bound to have cosmic consequences, and it did. It transformed Paul's worldview, his understanding of the Law (Torah), and his attitude towards Gentiles. His new way of understanding the Law was, more than anything, the catalyst that attracted Gentiles to the Messiah (Christ) of Paul's preaching. More on this presently. But what of the third major element in the pattern of Paul's Christian thinking to be considered?

The Ingathering of the Gentiles

This is not an optional issue with Paul. Nor is it merely obedience to a command to do mission work. Gathering the Gentiles into the new people of God is at the heart of the plan of God for the salvation of the world. If the Gentiles cannot be incorporated, then the plan has failed. But the plan cannot fail, so the Gentiles must be converted to Christ and included in the new community of the end time in preparation for the ultimate transformation of humanity into the likeness of the resurrected Christ. Moreover, Paul finds necessity laid upon him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:16), until their full number is gathered in (Rom. 11:25). Israel is being reconstituted and the Gentiles must be included, because the new Israel is in effect a new humanity under the new Adam (cf. Eph. 2:15). And sure enough, Gentiles were being included on the single basis of faith in Jesus Christ crucified and raised. And Paul ensured that they were accepted as full members along with their Jewish counterparts in Jerusalem. He brought {132} the “offering of the Gentiles” from the nations of the world to Jerusalem, sacred city of God’s salvation, as a sign of their full membership with the new people of God (Rom. 15:16).

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAW

We have identified three principal factors in the generative *schema* of Paul’s thinking as a Christian. We return now to the question of the effect this new way of thinking had on Paul’s view of the role of the Law in the plan of God for the salvation of the world. The success of Paul in the conversion of Gentiles hangs largely on his new understanding of the Law and its function, which fits roundly within the pattern as outlined above. The following four points, while they hardly represent a full discussion of the debated issue of the Law in Paul’s thought, do have a direct bearing on the proposition that Paul preached Christ as universal, dynamic center that interacted authentically with cultural particularity.

The law was not intended to give life (Gal. 3:21). The “truth of the Gospel” (Gal. 2:14) is that life is transmitted via the “life-giving Spirit” of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:2; cf. 1 Cor. 15:22) through faith. Paul grants, of course, that the law had certain functions: it was added on account of transgressions, it consigned all under sin, it kept its adherents under restraint, it acted as a guardian until Christ came (Gal. 3:19-25). But at no time did God intend the law to provide life. Life is granted exclusively as a gift at God’s initiative. And God’s supreme initiative was in the giving of himself in the Son and in the Spirit of the Son (Rom. 8:3; 5:5).

A person is not justified (“righteoused”⁹) by keeping the law (Gal. 3:6-18; Rom. 4:1-25). The record of Abraham’s relation to God proves as much. He believed in God who “righteouses” the *ungodly*, and his believing was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham then is seen as a paradigmatic type of the “ungodly” Gentile who believes in the Christ that Paul preaches and is thereby righteoused on the basis of faith alone.

Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4). The troublesome term here is “end” (*telos*). It could mean termination or goal or purpose or all three. The idea of Christ

being the end of the law is in keeping with the change of aeons from old to new at the resurrection of Christ. The law served its purpose until the {133} new age of Christ arrived (Gal. 3:19ff). At that point the resurrected Christ took over from the law, thus rendered its purpose and observance inoperative (see 2 Cor. 3:7-18).

The law is to be fulfilled in the community of faith by the enabling Spirit (Rom. 8:4). In saying this, Paul in effect upholds the law (cf. Rom. 3:31), but he does so by a new principle: “not in written code but in the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6). In other words, he expects his Gentile converts who transfer into Christ to be led thereafter by the Spirit and thus to fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 5:16-6:5). The parameters of the fulfillment are, of course, really quite different from the Jewish concept of obedience to the commandments of Torah. Paul’s new understanding is that the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8ff).

The important point to be made here is that the practice of Torah-law is not a requirement for inclusion. Some of the standard practices related to incorporation, such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and the eating of certain foods, were set aside altogether for Gentiles. He saw in these practices an obstacle that blocked the Gentiles from coming into the community, so he set the requirements aside. He encouraged the Gentile converts, rather, to form communities within their own cultural milieu without the unauthentic constraints of Jewish particularism. In what then did the successful conversion of Gentiles consist? The answer to this question will form the conclusion to our discussion.

CONCLUSION: THE CONVERSION OF GENTILES

Gentiles who responded to Paul’s preaching were expected to participate in the new community of faith in Christ formed within the society in which they lived. Entrance rested on a single requirement: faith in Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. They had to adopt this new center of thought and confess the same with their lips, that Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead is Lord (Rom. 10:9). The implications of this commitment and confession were significant. Converts had to abandon the worship of idols so as “to serve the living and the true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). They could eat food that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:23-30), but they could not offer food themselves as participants in an idol’s temple (1 Cor. 10:14-22) since they were already participating {134} fully in the body of the only living universal Lord, Jesus Christ. Participating thus in the “living” Christ the Gentile convert found a new center of energy for life in the world (Rom. 6:4) and a guarantee of a place in the world to come (2 Cor. 1:22).

The conversion of Gentiles also involved the proper control of physical passions (Gal. 5:16-26). Sexual sins figure with idolatry in that both fixate on the created order rather than relate to the Creator of the world (Rom. 1:24-25). Both contradict life in the Spirit (Gal. 5:19; Rom. 8:5-11).

Beyond these two basic areas of change—from idolatry to faith in Christ, from sensuality to life in the Spirit—Paul exercised remarkable freedom in the Spirit in guiding

his culturally conditioned Gentile congregations in the way of Christ. He did not invite them into another system of cultural distinctives-language, name change, food, circumcision, etc.-that would extricate them from their own cultural heritage. He called them to experience the dynamic center of faith in Christ that would interact authentically with all aspects of their culture until the ultimate transformation of the old order at the parousia of Christ.

NOTES

1. The article is an abridged and revised version of a lecture given at a conference on conversion in Africa at Harvard University. May 1988.
2. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976, 7-23.
3. From a lecture delivered at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in 1987. Lamin Sanneh has studied conversion in Africa, and is currently professor of religion at Yale University.
4. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale, 1989, 13.
5. C. J. A. Hickling. "Center and Periphery in the Thought of Paul," *Studia Biblica* 1978. Vol 3. Sheffield: JSOT, 1980, 208.
6. Ibid., 209.
7. "Resurrection is a historical-ontological category, manifesting in this world the dawning of the new age of transformation Resurrection language expresses the new age in the midst of the old; Paul stresses the resurrection of the body, not the resurrection of the flesh." J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980, 153.
8. On the Adam-Christ typology in Paul see Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, 127-152; and V. G. Shillington, "The Figure of Jesus in the Typological Thought of Paul," Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 1985, 81-135 and notes.
9. E. P. Sanders, recognizing the problem of using different English rootwords to render forms of the same Greek root (*dik-*), decided to make the adjective "righteous" into a verb ("righteoused") to solve the difficulty. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983, 6, 13 n.18.

George Shillington is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

HOW TO CONVERT TO ISLAM AND BECOME A MUSLIM

Islam and Muslims

The Arabic word 'Islam' means 'submission', and is derived from a word meaning 'peace'. As such, the religion of Islam teaches that in order to achieve true peace of mind and surety of heart, one must submit to God and live according to His Divinely revealed Law.

Islam is not a new religion because 'submission to the will of God', i.e. Islam, has always been the only acceptable religion in the sight of God. For this reason, Islam is the true 'natural religion', and it is the same eternal message revealed through the ages to all of God's prophets and messengers. The main message of all the prophets has always been that there is only One True God and He alone is to be worshipped. These prophets start with Adam and include Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, and Jesus, peace be upon them all. God says in the Holy Quran:

"We did not send before you (O Muhammad) any messenger but We revealed to him: 'none has the right to be worshipped except I, therefore worship Me.'"
(Quran 21:25)

However, the true message of these prophets was either lost or got corrupted over time. Even the most recent books, the Torah and the Gospel were adulterated and hence they lost their credibility to guide the people to the right path. Therefore 600 years after Jesus, God revived the lost message of previous prophets by sending the Prophet Muhammad with His final revelation, the Holy Quran, to all of mankind. Since the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet, God Himself has promised to preserve His last revealed words so that it is a source of guidance for all humanity till the Last Day. It is now imperative for everyone to believe and follow this final message from God. God Almighty says in the Quran:

"We have not sent you (O Muhammad) but to all mankind as a giver of good news and as a warner, but most people do not know." (Quran 34:28)

“Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers.” (Quran 3:85)

The word “Muslim” means one who submits to the will of God, regardless of his/her race, nationality or ethnic background. Hence, any person who is ready to submit to the will of God is eligible to become a Muslim.

Benefits of Converting to Islam

There are many benefits of converting to Islam. Some of them are:

- One forms a personal and direct relationship with God by worshipping Him *alone*, without the need of intermediaries. One feels this personal relationship and is aware that God knows everything and is there to assist him/her.
- A person realizes the true purpose of his or her life, which is to recognize God and follow His commandments.
- A person is provided with a light, which guides him/her through life. The religion of Islam has answers to all situations, and one will always know the right steps to take in all aspects of life.
- One finds true happiness, tranquility, and inner peace.
- Upon converting to Islam, all of one’s previous sins are forgiven, and one starts a new life of piety and righteousness. And as a Muslim, when one makes a mistake thereafter, he/she can always repent to God who forgives the sins of those who repent to Him sincerely. There are no intermediaries or created beings to make confessions to.
- One achieves salvation from Hellfire, which all prophets have warned against.
- The greatest benefit is that a Muslim is promised by God the reward of eternal Paradise (Heaven). Those who are blessed with Paradise, will live eternally in bliss without any sort of sickness, pain or sadness. God will be pleased with them and they

will be pleased with Him. Even the lowest in rank among the dwellers of Paradise will have ten times the like of this world, and they will have whatever they desire. In fact, in Paradise there are pleasures that no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, and no mind has ever thought of. It will be a very real life, not spiritual only, but physical as well.

To know more about some of the benefits in converting to Islam, you may read this article ["The Benefits of Converting to Islam \(3 parts\)"](#).

How to Convert to Islam - The Testimony of Faith (Shahada)

Becoming a Muslim is a simple and easy process. All that a person has to do is to say a sentence called the Testimony of Faith (*Shahada*), which is pronounced as:

I testify "**La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasoolu Allah.**"

These Arabic words mean, "There is no true god (deity) but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the Messenger (Prophet) of God." Once a person says the Testimony of Faith (*Shahada*) with conviction and understanding its meaning, then he/she has become a Muslim.

The first part, "There is no true deity but God," means that none has the right to be worshipped but God alone, and that God has neither partner nor son. The second part means that Muhammad was a true Prophet sent by God to humankind.

To be a Muslim, one should also:

- Believe that the Holy Quran is the literal word of God, revealed by Him.
- Believe that the Judgment Day (Resurrection Day) is true and will come.
- Believe in the prophets that God sent and the books He revealed, and in His angels.
- Accept Islam as his/her religion.
- Not worship anything nor anyone except God.



5915 Beacon St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15217
412-421-2288

It is that easy! To hear the Testimony (*Shahada*), [click here](#) or click on “Live Help” for immediate assistance by chat.

The conversion can be done alone, but it is much better to do it with the help of one of our advisors through the “Live Help”, so we may help you in pronouncing it right and to provide you with important pieces of information and advice that is especially prepared for new converts, to help them get started with their newfound faith.

Alternatively, we can call you over the phone to help you with the conversion process. In this case, please leave us your phone number and the suitable time to call through our [Contact Us](#) form.

You are Not Alone

If you have followed the guidance above and converted to Islam by yourself, then rest assured that you are not alone, rather the same faith is shared by 1.7 billion people.

We highly recommend that you inform us now through the [Contact Us](#) form or through the “Live Help”, so that we can provide you with useful resources and advice, suitable for you as a new Muslim.

We congratulate you on your decision, welcome you to Islam, and will try our best to help you in any way we can! :)

Some Common Misconceptions

Some people may postpone their conversion to Islam, though they believe it to be the true religion of God, due to some misconceptions. They may think that things like changing their name, knowing some Arabic, informing others of their conversion, knowing some Muslims, or not having committed many sins, are conditions for conversion – however the reality is that none of these are valid excuses for delaying the conversion.

If you would like to learn more about these and other similar misconceptions, please read the article, [“I want to be a Muslim but... Myths about Converting to Islam \(3 parts\)”](#).



For Those Not Yet Convinced

Islam claims to be the true way to God. What makes one religion valid over other ideologies is the proofs it offers for its truthfulness. Hence, one needs to look at these proofs, weight them and take an informed decision. One needs to be sincere in one's endeavour and above all seek the help of the Almighty to guide him/her to the right path.

If a person is still not convinced of the truthfulness of Islam, then he/she can further look at the proofs Islam offers. Islam offers overwhelming proofs of its truthfulness and is the only religion that completely appeals to common sense.

Some of the proofs Islam offers are: the scientific proofs in the Quran, the miracles performed by the Prophet Muhammad and the prophecies of his coming in previous scriptures, the foretold events mentioned in the Quran that later came to pass, the unmet challenge of the Quran to bring even a chapter like it, and the divine wisdom in the laws and teachings of Islam that cover all aspects of life. To learn more about the proofs of Islam, please check the articles under this section, ["Evidence Islam is Truth"](#).

If you would like to learn more about Islam and its fundamental beliefs and practices, then please refer to the article ["What is Islam? \(4 parts\)"](#).

Our everlasting life in the Hereafter depends on what faith we choose to follow in this transient life, hence let us give this struggle the priority it deserves.