CHANGING FAITH: THE CONTEXTS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN HUNGARY

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Abstract -
This paper addresses religious conversion to Islam in Hungary which focuses on investigating the contexts influencing Hungarians to convert, and the process of becoming Muslims. This study involved three levels of analysis; micro-levels of converts, macro-levels of Hungarian political system, and the meso-level of Muslim communities. Becoming Muslim at the micro context can be categorized into *finding recognition* and *active participants*. The former depicts religious conversion encouraged by the willing to get mutual recognition either from family or romantic relationships. The latter refers to individuals' decision to convert as a way of looking for meanings and purposes in their life, and the conversion process is generally more complicated than the former. At the macro context, the collapse of communism and the change of the Hungarian state system have impacted the legal support for Hungarians to get religion freedoms, even to be Muslims. The meso-context analysis shows that the Hungarian Muslim communities provide social supports particularly for the category of the *active participants* to convert. However, all of the contexts are generally interconnected with each other impacting one change his religious identity.

Keywords - Changing Faith, Becoming Muslims, Religious Conversion, Hungary.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses religious conversion to Islam in Hungary. Although the number of convert to Islam is not very high, this phenomenon raises questions of why do they convert and how the process of becoming Muslims are. The investigation is relevant for the Hungarian contexts because the nature of religious conversion does not simply replace an individual's biography with something new (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999), instead, the change is influenced by a complex and multifaceted environment (Ugaerumba, 2014). Moreover, becoming Muslims in this country means they have to deal with at least two challenges**.** First, Muslims have to fight against Islamophobia, in which Islam is portrayed, particularly through media, as an existential threat to both the country and Western culture (Sereghy, 2016). According to Pew Research Center (2017), Hungary places the highest unfavorable view of Muslims among European countries. Second, culturally, Muslims have to deal with contradictory principles between Hungarian norms and Islamic ways of life. For instance, living together without marriage, kissing at public places, and drinking alcohol have become Hungarian norms whereas Islam bans them. These facts also in line with Pew Research Center survey published in 2017, 76% Hungarians think that Muslims are unwilling to integrate and wish to lead a life distinct from the country's customs and way of life.
Considering the characteristic of religious identity change and its challenges, understanding this phenomenon should take into account the contexts in which religious conversion takes place. The contexts in this sense should involve micro, macro, and meso-contexts in order to have a comprehensive analysis.

II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

To conceptualize the term of religious conversion, some scholars define it as a process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from previously held religious beliefs (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018; Stark and Finke, 2000). However, there is no single definition and conceptualization of religious conversion. Contemporary scholars view religious identity change as a process involving a series of events rather than a stand-alone experience (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018). While traditional theories stress the cause of religious conversion as external, irresistible, and supernatural which is the consequences of conversion as irrevocable as a result of the "power of God", contemporary paradigm from both sociology and psychology argue that converts as active participants seeking to develop meaning, personhood, and self-identity within their social and societal contexts. Moreover, this paradigm posits that religious conversions are flexible regarding the order of the conversion processes, and they espouse multi-causal views of why conversion takes place (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018; Travisano1970).

Due to the conversion process, investigating this issue should consider multiple levels of analysis (Snook, Williams, &Horgan, 2018; Kleinmann 2012). While Rambo suggests ecological layers oriented at the micro and macro contexts (Rambo, 1993), other scholars include the meso-context (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018). Analyzing at the micro context focuses on factors that influence converts at the individual level including personality traits, thinking styles, and subjective experiences such as their

childhood, relationships with their parents or other socialization processes, may all influence their conversion path (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018; Rambo, 1993). The macro analysis stresses the local and global cultures in which a person lives, includes institutions, such as the overall influence that systems of government, economy, education, and religion may impress upon an individual. Some social issues such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and poverty are also subjects of analysis at this context (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018).

Although both micro and macro approaches are important elements, those are incomprehensive analysis to explain religious identity change. For this reason, analyzing at the meso-context should also be incorporated. This level of analysis helps to bridge the gap between micro and macro level of conversion factors by focusing on how the individual convert interacts with their environment and how each affects the others (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018).

III. METHODS

The empirical research undertook in Budapest which was carried out on three levels; micro-levels analyzing individual converts, macro-level focusing on the Hungarian political system, and the meso-level concentrating on Muslim communities. These three levels of analysis were included because each level provides information about the different contexts impacting the conversion. At the micro level, in-depth interviews were held which involved 13intervieweesof Hungarian who converted to be Muslims including 8 male and 5 female. To start the investigation, the interviewees were asked to tell the stories of their livesand the process of changing their faith which mainly took places at the mosques, and others were interviewed in a university or other places. In the interest of preserving anonymity, all interviewees' names have been changed to be Muslim_1-8 for male and to be Muslima_1-5 for female. While at the macro level was focused on the Hungarian political system and the impact to the Hungarian religiosity between under and post-communism, at the meso-level, participant observations were conducted at the mosques namely Budapest mosque organized by the Church of Muslims of Hungary (*MagyarországiMuszlimokEgyháza*), and HilmiHuszeinmosque representing the Hungarian Islamic Community (*Magyar IszlámKözösség*). Those two mosques were chosen since most of Hungarian Muslims in Budapest conduct their religious practices at those mosques. The collected data from the interviews and observations were analyzed by comparing and contrasting between each finding before finally concluding the results.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The empirical study shows that factors of religious identity change to be Muslims in the Hungarian contexts can be classify into three levels; micro, macro, and meso-level. Although in a certain case, religious conversion can be as result only one of the contexts, in general all of the contexts are interconnected with each other influencing one converts to a new religious belief.

The Micro Context: Finding Recognition, or Active Participants

Religious conversion at the micro level can be divided into two categories; *finding recognition*, and *active participants*. The former means one converts to a new religious belief encouraged by a spirit of getting a mutual recognition (Honneth, 1995). The latter refers to individuals' decisions to change their religious identities voluntarily and consciously as a way of looking for meanings and purposes in their spiritual and natural life, such as finding meaning and satisfaction in their careers, relationships, and psychology(Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2018). From these distinctions, each category implies different process of conversion.

Finding recognition of religious identity change is generally through a simple process, as stated by Muslim_7, a Hungarian guy who has married an Indonesian girl five years ago, and Muslima_1,a Pakistanis' wife with three children at the following stories.

Muslim_7: "Well, to be honest, I was not religious as many other Hungarians. Uhh…but then I converted to be Muslim because I had to adapt to Indonesian ways. You know, Indonesia is very strict in this issue. So, when I decided to get married with the Indonesian girl, and she is a Muslim, I would not be allowed to marry her unless I change to have the same religion. And we celebrated the marriage under the Islamic way."

Muslima_1: "Yeach, I converted to Islam because my husband (she laughed). Ummm…I had a relationship with Pakistanis guy for two years before getting married. And we had a commitment to get married. So when he, my boyfriend, at that time said that we had to marry through the Islamic tradition, I just said, umm…. Alright, I can follow your way."

The stories above can be understood that they converted to Islam since they initially wanted to get recognition which was mutual (romantic) recognition between husband and wife. In this sense, Honneth's concept of recognition is helpful to understand this case. According to him, there are three forms of recognitions; *love, rights, solidarity*. Recognition of *love* involves emotional supports. The subjects mutually confirm each other regarding the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures. In the reciprocal experience of loving care, both subjects know

themselves to be united in their neediness and interdependence on each other. Yet, love is more than just romanticism, it could involve: family, couple, friendship. *Rights* recognition refers only to the situation in which self and others respect each other as legal subjects for the sole reason that they are both aware of the social norms by which rights and duties are distributed in their community. *Solidarity* recognition is a form of recognition within society as a part of social esteem which could only be properly understood at all once one further supposed, as a prerequisite, the existence of an inter-subjectively shared a "valuehorizon". In this sense, self and other can mutually esteem each other as individualized persons only on the condition that they share an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other. (Honneth, 1995). Concerning the case of conversion as mentioned above, both cases depict the "love recognition".

Yet, Honneth (1995) emphasizes that love is more than just romanticism, it could involve: family, couple, and friendship. So love recognition on religious conversion to Islam can also come from the relation between parents and a child. This category can be seen from the Muslima_2'sstory.

"I converted when I was under 16 years old. I believed in only one true God, I trusted that my mum had found the right religion as I knew about her extensive search and her great character. She was the one who seek the right path and found Islam. We officially did "*shahada*" together and became Muslims on the summer2008."

However, finding recognition is not the only a reason why one converts to a new religious belief at the micro context. Some other Hungarians converts are characterized as results of active searching or *active participants*. This category involves a more complicated process of conversion, as told by Muslim_6, a38-year old who just converted in April2019:

"Well, when I became an adult, I realized that my Catholic church and the religious practices was not enough to continuing my relation with the God. Because I had problems when I was at early 20s, unfortunately, I drank a lot of alcohol even I became alcoholic, and I had a problem with a sexual inclination towards not only girls but also guys, I couldn't decide..uhh..how I could choose partner in my life, I meant whether I need to choose a girl or a guy. So I had a lot of discussions with the priest to find any solutions, unfortunately I didn't get a suitable, good answer from him. That's why I did not go to the church anymore after that.

Well, I live here in Budapest, I tried to ..uhh… work, tried to live, tried to be happy, but it's difficult because I grew up in countryside. So I have a strong effect in my life. I had long term relationship in the last few years, and last year, in December it's ended, I found myself alone. Then I try to find out what I had to do alone, how to manage alcoholism, my difficulties in my work, in my personal life with my works, my friends, my relationship and others.

Well I have been interested in Islam and Middle East culture, especially Iranian politic and, you know, I read literatures about them and read the Quran as well. So I had read about these subjectsfor two years before converting. I read not only the Quran but also Islamic literatures, Islamic culture, architecture, and last year I got a special Christmas gift from one of my friends to join in a special city tour here in Budapest which was called "Muslims living among us". That was my gift. So I went to this city tour which had finished in Budapest mosque. So we came into the mosque and I saw the prayers, at Maghrib or maybe isha time. You know there were a lot of people here, adults, children, man, women. It was very amazing to see that children were playing here with the balls, with the other toys, besides adult people were praying. It was quit amazed to me because these are never happen in my previous catholic church. It was very good and… uhh… I enjoyed it. So I decided to come to the mosque several times to visit the Hungarian (Muslim) community here and I had discussions with them. So I had started to keep in touch with them since February 2019, and then I converted in April."

The told story here presents a chronological process of becoming a Muslim. It started from individual crises such as an alcoholic, having a sexual problem, and taking a break from his relationship. Aware of his complicated problems, Muslim_6 tried to find a solution from his previous religious belief by consulting with the priest. Unfortunately, he did not get a satisfied solution from his church, so he tried to look for other sources of the solution such as reading any kind of Islamic literature. Following this, his active searching continued until he got a chance to join in the Islamic city tour which in turn led him to the mosque. This was the first time he knew any activities in the mosque which allowed him to see the Hungarian Muslim communities and to keep in touch with them. This encounter bore his commitment from himself to finally decide to be a Muslim. Nevertheless, in many cases, the religious conversion process is not simply linear but interconnected even sometimes a "spiraling effect"—a going back and forth among stages(Rambo, 1993).

The Macro Context: The Collapse of Communism and The Freedom of Religion

The collapse of the Soviet Union has impacted significantly the religious landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, including in Hungary. According to the Pew Research Center study comparing the degree of religiosity between under communism (1970s-1980s) and today, the more common view is that those countries are more religious today than a few decades ago. Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia place the

highest rank which rises from 25% to 87%, 15% to 59%, and 15% to 55% respectively. In Hungary, although the difference between those periods is not very significant, increasing from 47% to 51%, the new state system after the collapse of communism has impacted to the change of religious regulation. One of the most fundamental Hungarian religious constitutions is that this country provides religion freedom, as stated in the Hungary 2018 international religious freedom report:

"The fundamental constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom to choose or change religion or belief, and freedom – alone or in community with others and in public or in private – to manifest religion or belief through religious acts or ceremonies, or in any otherway, in worshipping, practice, and observance. It prohibits religious discrimination as well as speech "aimed at violating the dignity" of any religious community."

Under the legal constitution, Islamic communities have been increasingly gaining recognition from either the state or public. The community represented by the Islamic Council of Hungary (*MIT – MagyarországiIszlámTanács*) as an umbrella of Islamic organization was recognized by the Hungarian parliament in2012.Moreover, Islamic members have risen their confidence up to declare themselves as Muslims. The following story from Muslim-4'sexperience is one of the proofs of the rise of confidence.

"Alright, I would tell you a bad experience after converting to Islam. At that time, I was working in a company. Uhh….when I had a break around 5 minutes which was at the same time the time for pray came, I said to the company that I need to pray for a few minutes. Unfortunately I was not allowed to do it. So I had a serious discussion about this topic with in my previous company. I said, it is a religious freedom in Hungary, so, you could be a member of any kind of religions, even I don't pray during work, I just need to pray for a few minutes during a break. But they said; "You can do anything in your home, but not at this company." So, uhhh…. finally I decided to leave the job."

Although finally he was not allowed to pray in the company, at least the told story reflects two things. On the one hand, he has aconfidence to declare himself as a Muslim. On the other hand, other people in the company had already acknowledged that everyone has a right to affiliate or not affiliate himself with any kind of religion.

In addition, since the collapse of communism, the number of Muslims has increased significantly. According to the Central Statistical Office (KSH) in 2011, 5.579 people classified themselves as Muslims in which they were only 3.201 people in 2001. Of these, 4,097 (73.4%) declared themselves Hungarian,(Sereghy, 2016). Several Islamic communities even estimate the Hungarian Muslim now days would be between 25.000 and 50.000(Sereghy, 2016).Muslima_2 also says;"in recent years, almost every week there is a Hungarian who converts in this (Budapest) mosque."

The Meso-Context: Social Support among Islamic Community Members.

At the meso-level, this study mainly focuses on Islamic group activities at the mosques to see their role in religious conversion to Islam. In general, the Islamic communities are very active. They establish various Islamic group discussions in these mosques. For instance for Hungarian female Muslimsat Budapest mosque, they have a regular meeting on Saturday afternoon whereas female Muslims on Friday afternoon. They discuss various issues, not only on Islamic teachings such as learning Quran, the way to pray but also share about individual experiences in daily life to get solutions from this community. Sometimes they hold lectures or workshops on various topics participated not only Hungarians but also non-Hungarian Muslims. Moreover, since Muslims have to pray 5 times a day, they used to come to the mosques just to pray, and they can meet each other. So these groups can be as social supports for Hungarians interested in starting to get to know or want to learn more about Islam. As Illustrated by Muslim_6:

"….So I decided to come to the mosque several times to visit the Hungarian (Muslim) community here and I had discussions with them. So I had started to keep in touch with them since February 2019, and then I converted in April. You know, here is very nice Hungarian (Muslims) community, and there is a meeting regularly in every Friday afternoon. So, we speak many topics; about the Quran, we share individual experiences to each other, we share what happen in our life last week. So this community had influenced me to convert."

The story above represents how important social supports from the Islamic community to the individual decision. He says, that he decided to convert after he had a close relationship with the members for two months. From his story, it can be highlighted at least he got informational, companionship and emotional support from the Islamic community members convincing him to convert to Islam. As Taylor says, that there are four functions of social supports; emotional support, tangible support, informational support, companionship support(Taylor, 2011) in which the sources of social support can be from family, friends, romantic partners, community ties, etc.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the phenomenon of Hungarians convert to Islam can be seen through three contexts; micro, macro, and meso-contexts. The micro context categorizes religious identity change into finding

recognition and active participants. The former reflects religious conversion as a consequence of individuals' spirit of getting a mutual recognition from either family or romantic relationship, whereas the latter one's decision to convert voluntarily and consciously as a way of searching meanings and purposes of life.The conversion process of the latter is more complicated than the former in which the process can be either chronological or spiraling process. At the macro context, the collapse of the Soviet Union followed the change of the Hungarian state system has impacted the legal support for Hungarian to get a religious freedom which means also the freedom to be Muslims. The meso-context views that Hungarian Muslim communities provide social supports particularly for the active participants to convert. Finally, it is important to note, though in some cases religious conversion can be a result of only a certain context, in general, all of the contexts are interconnected with each other allowing one to convert.

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