

LIES! DAMN LIES!

STATISTICS AND CONVERSIONS

THE FIRST MYTH TO BE EXPLODED [IS] THE CLAIM THAT ISLAM IS BRITAIN'S SECOND LARGEST (AND IT IS ASSERTED FASTEST-GROWING) RELIGION. BUT THIS GROWTH HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH IMMIGRATION AND BIRTH RATES RATHER THAN CONVERSION. IN THE MARKETPLACE OF FAITHS, ISLAM WOULD NOT APPEAR TO BE OFFERING AN ATTRACTIVE PROSPECT.

Over the years, hysterical newspapers in Britain have written in tones of mock horror at the numbers of converts to Islam, along the lines of “how can a nice middle class girl end up in a religion like Islam”, citing figures of 10-20,000. Of course the hope of missionary-minded Muslims is that the green tide will sweep over these isles, with the oft-repeated assertion that Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe. But beyond the hopes (or fears) of many, did the Census of 2001, which included the first question on religious affiliation since 1851, shed any light on conversion to Islam?

In England and Wales, where Muslims were broken down into ethnic categories, hopes were temporarily raised and then dashed by the “fact” that there were 180,000 white Muslims. But this had little to do with conversion and more to do with the fact that many Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Bosnians, Albanians and others considered themselves to be “White” rather than “Asian” or “Black”.

But north of the border in Scotland, however, we did get figures comparing religion of upbringing with current religion, which revealed an interesting yet disturbing picture. The first myth to be exploded was the claim that Islam is Britain's second largest (and it is asserted fastest-growing) religion. But this growth has everything to do with immigration and birth rates rather than conversion. In percentage terms, the Scottish figures show us that out of all the minority religions and the main Christian denominations, Islam is the religion people are least likely to leave or convert to (under 3% of all Scottish Muslims in each case).

In other words, it is the least attractive to others and yet paradoxically the most resilient (I will leave it to greater minds than my own to ponder what that might mean). This takes place in an environment of substantial defection from the Churches of birth to agnosticism or atheism with relatively few choosing to explore Christian and non-Christian alternatives, most notably Buddhism (50% of whose adherents are converts) and the New Age religions. In the marketplace of faiths, Islam would not appear to be offering an attractive prospect.

Overall 1,224 Scots, about 3% of the Scottish Muslim total, have converted to Islam- 59% from the Christian denominations (although a disproportionately small number from the established Church of Scotland), 27% from a non-religious background, and the rest from the minority faiths and the new religions. Of the 1,175 Scots who have left Islam as their religion of upbringing, 72% lapse into agnosticism or atheism, 18% to Christian denominations, and the remaining 10% to the other minority and new faiths. So while Islam appears to be relatively immune to proselytization from other faiths, it is

less so from modern scepticism about religion in general, even if proportionately fewer people are leaving Islam than any other faith.

The Scottish example (whose population is 9% of the UK's total) provides us a substantial base upon which to speculate about the total number of converts in the UK. If we take the percentage of Scots converts against the total population and apply that to the whole UK population, we get a figure of 14,200 converts which sounds about right. 4,400

According to this estimate then, 0.9% of British Muslims and only 0.002% of

Estimated Muslim Converts UK, 2001	Nos.	%
White/Other	8,700	61
Orig. Hindus	700	5
Orig. Sikhs	400	3
BlackCaribbean*	4,400	31
All	14,200	100

the UK population are converts.

Of course statistics do not tell the human story in all its complex glory, but they do help us to debunk a few myths and tell where we might start looking to understand a complex reality.