

REPORT

THE PERSECUTION
OF EX-MUSLIM
CHRISTIANS
IN FRANCE

TESTIMONIES

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Link to the video report (55'-French) : <https://youtu.be/IA0Sp7YhNIU>

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The ECLJ engages legal, legislative, and cultural issues by implementing an effective strategy of advocacy, education, and litigation. The ECLJ advocates in particular for the protection of religious freedoms and the dignity of the person with the European Court of Human Rights and other mechanisms afforded by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and others.

The ECLJ bases its action on "the spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of European peoples and the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy" (Preamble of the Statute of the Council of Europe).

I.

METHODOLOGY



The purpose of this survey is to **determine whether people from Muslim backgrounds experience persecution for converting to Christianity in France.**

Persecution is defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as: “the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity.”[i]

The ECLJ investigated and met with leaders of the six main French associations involved in evangelizing Muslims and supporting converts and conducted fourteen open interviews with converts.[ii]

Through these twenty interviews and considering the decades of experience of some association leaders, which allow for the cross-referencing of hundreds of cases and individual experiences, the ECLJ has produced a video report as well as this written report summarizing the personal experiences of persecution suffered today in France by several thousand people born in the Muslim religion and having joined Christianity.

On the basis of these interviews, the ECLJ assessed the violations of fundamental rights suffered by these converts.

II.

ESTIMATION OF THE NUMBER OF CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY FROM ISLAM IN FRANCE

This situation would concern between 4,000 and 30,000 people in France. According to the official figures of the French Bishops' Conference[iii] about 300 people of Muslim origin receive baptism in the Catholic Church every year. The figures for all the Protestant communities are not known,[iv] but considering the dynamism of the evangelical community, this number would be at least twice that of the Catholics.

Taking into account the fact that these conversions have been occurring at a slightly increasing rate for several decades, there would be at least 4,000 converts from Islam to Christianity in France.

Moreover, a report by the Montaigne Institute[v] states that 15% of people born to at least one Muslim parent consider themselves "non-Muslim". If we consider that there are 4,9 million Muslims in France according to a low estimate,[vi] 15% represent 735,000 people.

According to all our witnesses, "many" Christians of Islamic origin hide themselves, or remain "invisible." They are either absolutely discreet in their public religious practice, or they never become parishioners or members of a church.

Taking into account the dynamism of the host communities, and the fact that the majority of those who leave Islam turn to atheism or agnosticism, one can reasonably put forward the figure of 30,000 people at the most converted to the Christian faith. It is not possible at this time to establish a more precise figure. [vii]



III.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY ON THE PERSECUTION OF CONVERTS

Today in France, it is at least difficult and more generally dangerous for a Muslim to leave his religion. The overwhelming majority of people who leave Islam to join Christianity experience family and communitarian persecution that varies greatly in intensity, from contempt to violence.

"It is not because we are in France that we are safe from persecution, be it physical, mental or psychological"

Saïd Oudjibou, Pastor and Founder of the Union of North African Christians of France.

THE SOURCES OF PERSECUTION

Persecution is firstly intra-family (parents, spouse, brothers and sisters, cousins, etc.); **it is then communitarian.** It takes place in real life but also on social networks where Islamists are very present and active. Finally, persecution can be anonymous and materialize at any time. Some Islamists carry out intimidation and intelligence campaigns to seek out and repress converts. It may therefore happen that a convert is discovered and threatened, assaulted, or even killed by an Islamist who was unknown to him.

Persecution has no legal source in France because sharia law does not officially apply there. Despite this, certain provisions of sharia law can be applied in practice if a local Muslim community is sufficiently large and radicalized. Furthermore, if the convert has parents who are nationals of a North African or Middle Eastern country where Sharia law applies, the convert may be deprived of their share of the inheritance. In Morocco, for example, when the succession opens, it is enough for a family member to denounce the heir son as no longer being Muslim for the latter to lose his share of the inheritance. Some of our witnesses have renounced their inheritance or doubt that they will receive it when the day comes. This is a loss of rights directly related to conversion.

THE REASONS FOR PERSECUTION

Conversion, which implies apostasy (ridda), is condemned in the Koran, and violently condemned in the hadiths, which justifies for many Muslims a physical and moral persecution of converts. Within the Muslim community, there is a debate about the value of the hadiths and the interpretation of the Koran, but in fact, Muslims who violently persecute converts rely on these texts to legitimize their actions.[viii]

All witnesses agree that the communitarian aspect of the Muslim religion is fundamental. **The communitarian perception of Islam, of the "Ummah" implies that any departure, any conversion to another religion is necessarily a defection, a betrayal.** It is inconceivable for most Muslims that a person of North African origin, even a French person, be not a Muslim. There is an identification made between "Arab culture" and "Islam".

Some Muslims consider that conversion is a provocation because it is not really necessary according to them. Several parents advised their converted child to remain officially Muslim and to believe in Christianity secretly.

The witnesses explain this by the fact that the strong communitarianism is counterbalanced by a weak private respect for the precepts of the Islamic religion. Within the Muslim community, there seem to be basically only two imperatives that are essential to this communitarian membership, namely not eating pork and observing Ramadan.

The other precepts, which are important and sometimes in principle obligatory, are subject to a wider tolerance in their application. The convert would therefore be a provocateur, since he could easily have another religious belief while pretending to be Muslim and respecting at least the two imperatives. As such, the convert's parents may also be persecuted if they tolerate their child's conversion, since as educators they are deemed responsible for their "betrayal."

ACTS OF PERSECUTION

Persecution can take the following forms, in order of severity and frequency. They may or may not be successive, but almost all converts suffer at least the firsts:

- Contempt or verbal aggression towards the convert when announcing the conversion
- Threats, intimidation, or harassment, in order to persuade the convert to return to Islam, occurring within the family, community, or on social networks
- Rejection of the convert by his family
- Expulsion from the family home or flight
- Threats to the convert's physical integrity
- Destruction of the convert's property, ransacking of his place of living
- For girls: sequestration until they return to Islam
- Physical violence towards the convert, from spitting to beating, to lynching in public, with a knife...
- For girls: forced marriage, return to the family's country of origin, rape
- Murder and assassination

There is a gradation in the reaction. **The majority of Muslims generally react with a sanction of "social death" by applying the first three acts of persecution.** More rarely, Islamists such as the Salafists or the Muslim Brotherhood will seek to "wash away" the scandal caused by the convert and will apply more radical persecution.

All of our witnesses have endured the first three forms of persecution. Those who do not suffer the following persecutions are generally those who organized themselves better to avoid any risk.

For example, one father told us that "everything is fine now". In reality, he had moved far away from his hometown, had cut off all contact with his family for several years and never spoke to his neighbours. In fact, he found himself in a more liveable situation, but at the cost of many sacrifices for his social life while still living in a certain fear: he only agreed to testify on the condition that his voice be modified.

"28 years later, I still have no contact with my family. Even if there has been a lot of water under the bridge... among Muslims, one does not leave the circle."

Amaria, convert.



It is necessary to insist on this point: apart from the association leaders, **no witness wished to appear with their face and their real name in our report.** We almost systematically changed the voice and removed references to the French cities where the events took place. There is a palpable fear when talking to converts from Islam: they all fear a violent reaction from their family or community.

This fear is accentuated by social networks. During the interviews, we were able to collect reliable information that some radical Muslims put a price on the contact information of converts. This kind of call for denunciation keeps converts heavily afraid. Not only does it mean that they must keep a low profile, even if they are already living away from their families because anyone could spot them and report them, but they must distance themselves from social networks, or at least be very careful. Several witnesses have given up creating an account on the main social networking sites and others refrain from sharing any word or image that promotes Christianity. There is genuine self-censorship.

According to many of the witnesses and association leaders interviewed, a significant proportion of converts are subjected to acts of violence by their brothers or cousins.

We have several direct testimonies of beatings with injury and attempted break-ins if the convert retreats to his room or an apartment. Generally, these acts of violence cause the convert to leave their place of residence. Whether they flee after the first blow or leave the house after their brother has ransacked their room, witnesses say that this escape avoids more serious violence.

In fact, some were even lynched in the street. A former Salafist Muslim who converted to Christianity confirmed the existence of actual ambushes. Several Muslims from the local community, with or without family members, wait for the convert in the street and beat them, sometimes to death, usually with their fists, iron bars or knives.

Finally, Saïd Oudjibou (UNACF) and Father Paul-Élie Cheknoun (ACIMM) were able to confirm that converts have been subjected to this type of lynching, with rape if it was a girl, resulting in their death. These cases are rare, but the possibility of their occurrence leads to the fear of the convert who say to themselves: "If someone close to me starts to be violent. God knows where it will stop. I have to leave." Several young women converts told us that they were convinced that there would be a violent physical reaction from someone close to them if their conversion became known, and that they would not take the risk of knowing if that person would go as far as to kill them.

"He went as far as to chase her down to stab her."

A young girl about a converted friend being chased by a family member armed with a knife.

PERSECUTION IS WORSE FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Persecution is more severe for women, who are exposed to acts of persecution to a consistently higher degree than men. This additional violence against women is justified by the "dishonour" they would bring to the family by denying the faith of their parents. According to Saïd Oujibou (UNACF), 70% of converts are women. Him and other witnesses said that the situation of women in Islam is inferior to that of men, which gives them more reasons to want to leave Islam.

Some girls who reveal their conversion to their parents may be threatened by them with forced marriage to a "devout Muslim"; confined as long as they do not return to Islam; or sent back to their country of origin if they are from North Africa; all with the same goal: that they return to the Muslim religion of their parents. Men who convert do not face these specific threats.

"There is an insult among Muslims: I would have preferred you to be a prostitute rather than a Christian."

Amaria, convert.



THE REACTIONS OF CONVERTS

Whether the convert be male or female, the infringement of religious freedom is evident in all cases: they are prevented from freely practicing their faith.

All our witnesses were in the same initial situation: an extreme discretion and a certain fear of being discovered during their spiritual journey towards the Christian religion. They are obliged, out of fear, to live their faith in a hidden way and eventually reveal their conversion to their loved ones only after careful consideration.

For example, they cannot talk about their new religious conviction in the family, they generally do not keep any Christian possessions in their parents' house, and as long as they are not independent, they are prevented from going to church if they are likely to be seen by someone they know.

This obligation, for all converts, to great caution and social discretion about their conversion, leads them to live a **double life: pretending to be Muslims with the community, and living their Christian faith the rest of the time when possible.** Depending on the personal situation, this double life is more or less difficult and burdensome; so much so that some converts are followed by psychologists. A young convert under 18 years of age was trembling when she told us on the phone about her situation, was on the lookout for the slightest noise that might indicate that someone was listening to her and said that she was being followed by a psychologist because of the anguish generated by her double life.

The work or teaching environment becomes awkward for many converts because of the presence of other Muslims from whom they try to hide their conversion.

Ramadan time, drinks with colleagues, as well as work or school relationships and interactions between men and women are all moments when the converts may be caught not following the precepts of Islam and then suffer at least contempt from other Muslims and sometimes more severe retaliation (harassment at work or wrongful termination if the employer is Muslim).

Religious practice and the process of officially joining a church is severely complicated for many converts. For example, some must travel dozens or even hundreds of miles to be prepared for baptism.

Moving is often necessary for men and almost always necessary for women, especially if their Christian faith is discovered in the parental home. According to the young women we spoke with and to the paths that the association leaders described to us, they cannot announce their conversion to their parents if they still live at home. Some of them manage to find a job or training far from their parents, allowing them to be freer, but it is not possible for all of them.

All the converted young women told us that they feared being or had been beaten by at least one of their brothers, or by a member of the family or community. Faced with this violence, running away is the only solution, but a dramatic one, since these girls find themselves alone, without money, without work, without housing and without family. It is very difficult to estimate the number of girls in this situation, but considering the number of calls for help that the associations receive every year, it concerns at least several dozen girls. A number to which must be added those who manage to prepare their runaway correctly.

IV. RESPONSES TO THIS PERSECUTION

The reception of these converts to support them psychologically and materially is deficient and does not allow to help them to assert their rights. Only a few associations are committed to this, but with limited means and effectiveness. According to the converts and the leaders of associations, there is a triple challenge:

1. The immediate management of crisis situations
2. Welcoming them into the Christian community
3. The State response to the violation of their rights and security

1. THE IMMEDIATE MANAGEMENT OF CRISIS SITUATIONS

If a converted person or a person in the process of conversion is discovered or finds themselves in a distressing situation, there are two necessary responses to be reinforced:

- the establishment of a dedicated hotline;
- emergency relocation.

First, counselling assistance needs to be provided to Muslims who are thinking about changing their religion or who would like to do so. According to several officials, **converts must be warned and helped to adopt a discreet behaviour** towards the Muslim community, mainly not revealing a conversion too early and anticipating negative reactions. There is also a certain amount of advice to be given to guide and protect a person in religious questioning.

Initiatives in this sense are developing and could be supported by the churches.

Emergency rehousing is a serious problem faced by association leaders: following the announcement or discovery of conversion, the convert is either literally chased out of their home or pushed to flee by violence or the threat of violence. However, these associations have limited resources, and help could be provided both by the State and by the churches, which are, according to the apostolic texts, the families of converts and which should make it their duty to welcome converts in need.

Raising awareness of the public assistance, departmental councils and victim support associations to the particular situation of converts should enable them to be properly taken care of, taking care not to have them be placed with Muslims.

2. RECEPTION IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

There is a great sadness and incomprehension among converts that they are not better welcomed by the religious communities they join. Whether among Catholics or Protestants, the quality of the reception of a convert from Islam varies according to whether the pastor or priest is informed and sensible to the situation of converts from Muslim backgrounds.

We were told of priests who reproached the convert with leaving Islam, of priests who refused to catechize Muslims who requested it, and of pastors who asked someone outside their church to care for a convert in distress. More generally, converts claim to find an unwelcoming community of Christian faithful. Two examples were given several times: converts are almost never invited to share a meal for a feast, and they are more seen as "former Muslims" than as full Christians. There is also a noticeable tension when a convert from Islam expresses a critical discourse towards the Muslim religion.

The convert is often accused of caricaturing or making a generalization out of their story, and sometimes even of lying and not "really" knowing Islam. According to several leaders, this tension is rooted in a conception of interreligious dialogue that refuses to hear any criticism of Islam. An ex-Muslim Christian is sometimes seen as a "problem".

These comments, attitudes and reactions towards converts cause great suffering. Many converts have lost almost everything by choosing Christianity: their family, their city, sometimes their job or their university studies. **When they enter the Church, they hope to find a new family and for many of them, it is a cold shower.** Some are welcomed and find a real family, but many others are not welcomed.

Consequently, after several months or years, loneliness and material difficulties helping, a significant part of converts to Christianity from Islam give up. According to association leaders, between 5% and 30% of converts abandon the Christian religion after several years of practice. Whether they abandon all religious practice or officially return to Islam, the lack of appropriate reception by Christian communities plays a major role in these departures.

According to all the members of associative support teams for converts, **most evangelical and Catholic authorities have difficulty understanding and taking responsibility for the spiritual, relational and material welcome of converts.** It is therefore necessary that an awareness be raised.



3. THE STATE RESPONSE TO THE VIOLATION OF THEIR RIGHTS AND SECURITY

At present, France does not adequately guarantee the rights and freedoms of those who wish to leave the Muslim religion, including the right to change their religion. For the ECLJ, the appropriate response to these testimonies must be firm and lawful: France must effectively guarantee and protect these rights and freedoms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[ix] the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,[x] the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,[xi] and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms[xii] are clear sources of international law guaranteeing this right and to which France has committed itself by ratifying them.

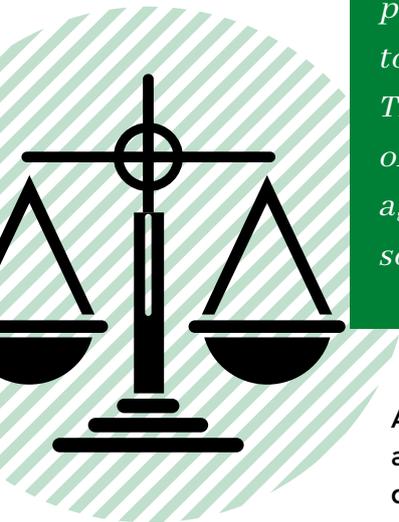
The Anti-Separation Bill is an opportunity for such better guarantee. As it stands, the Bill to strengthen respect for the principles of the Republic would reinforce the proper application of Article 31 of the 1905 law:

Are punishable by one year's imprisonment and a fine of 15,000 euros those who, either by threats against an individual, or by making him fear losing his job or exposing his person, his family or his fortune to harm, have acted with a view to determining him to exercise or refrain from exercising a cult, to be part of or cease to be part of a cult association, to contribute or refrain from contributing to the expenses of a cult.

The penalties are increased to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 45,000 euros when the perpetrator acts by assault or violence or against his or her spouse, cohabitant, partner bound by a civil solidarity pact or a minor.[xiii]

As these persecutions of converts from Islam are mainly situated in the family context, it is delicate for the converts to lodge a complaint since this would imply most of the time denouncing their father, brother or cousin before the courts. The penal response cannot therefore be the only one to fight against this phenomenon of obstruction to conversion.

Another suitable solution to allow people from a Muslim background to effectively choose the religion of their choice would be to give more strength and visibility to "the Charter of Principles for Islam in France."



Article 3 of the Charter, which deals with freedom, states that:

Freedom is guaranteed by the principle of secularism which allows each citizen to believe or not to believe, to practice the religion of his choice and to change religion.

Thus the signatories undertake not to criminalize a renunciation of Islam, nor to qualify it as "apostasy" (ridda), still less to stigmatize or to call, in a direct or indirect way, to attack the physical or moral integrity of those who renounce a religion.

The signatories thus commit themselves to respect Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights. This article enshrines the freedom of thought, conscience and religion.



This article is important because it recognizes and aims to prevent the persecution suffered by converts from Islam in France. This second paragraph summarizes what witnesses and association leaders have told us. This article 3 of the Charter is necessary and is not respected by a large part of the Muslim community in France.

Faced with the refusal of several Muslim associations to sign this charter, the Ministry of the Interior should verify the reasons that push them not to sign it. It is not acceptable that Muslims in France refuse to tolerate those who leave the Islam religion.

"It would be wishful thinking to ask Muslims in France to accept and welcome people who choose to leave Islam"

Mehdi D., Founding member of "Mission Ismérie"



Finally, **a public inquiry by the Ministry of the Interior is needed to shed light on these converts** and to obtain more accurate statistics in order to better understand this phenomenon.

If the State does not establish and acknowledge the reality of the problem, most public actors will continue to deny any persecution of those who leave Islam and will prevent thousands of people from living in peace and exercising their religious freedom.

The ECLJ particularly thanks all the witnesses as well as the following associations: ACIMM (Association des Chrétiens Issus de Milieux Musulmans), Islam et Vérité, Jésus le Messie, Mission Ismérie, Notre Dame de Kabylie, UNACF (Union des Nord-Africains Chrétiens de France) as well as another association that wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Notes

[i] United Nations, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, A/CONF.183/9, 17 July 1998, Art. 7, § 2, g.

[ii] ACIMM (Association des Chrétiens Issus de Milieux Musulmans), Islam et Vérité, Jésus le Messie, Mission Ismérie, Notre Dame de Kabylie, UNACF (Union des Nord-Africains Chrétiens de France), and another who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

[iii] Conférence des évêques de France, "Baptisés de Pâques 2018 - Dossier presse," 298 baptized from Islam for the year 2018.

[iv] The Fédération protestante de France (FPF) and the Conseil National des Évangéliques de France (CNEF) do not keep individual records on the number of converts and their origin.

[v] Institut Montaigne, Un islam de France est possible, September 2016.

[vi] Rémi Banet, Benoît Fauchet, « 20 millions de musulmans en France ? Ils sont environ 4 fois moins, selon les estimations les plus sérieuses », AFP, May 17, 2018.

[vii] According to Roberto Simona, who presented a thesis in 2019 in Switzerland, there would be several hundred converts to Christianity from a Muslim background in Switzerland. Considering that Switzerland is 8 times less populated than France and has a smaller Muslim community, this corroborates our estimate. "When Muslims become Christians and Christians become Muslims" Catholic Media Center, February 5, 2019.

[viii] This is reflected in the law of several Islamic countries. In 2020 apostasy was punishable by death in the following 10 countries: Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia (implicitly), United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

[ix] Article 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

[x] Article 18: "1. 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, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

[xi] Article 10 - "Freedom of thought, conscience and religion"

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. The right to conscientious objection is recognised, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of this right."

[xii] Article 9: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

[xiii] Amendment made according to Article 38 of the Bill consolidating respect for the principles of the Republic, No. 455 rectified, version adopted by the Senate Committee on 1st reading, March 18, 2021. (free translation)

