Conversion and the Truth of Tolerance

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Abstract:

Exploring the environment of inter-religious interactions to find out about its nature and meaning, is done with many presuppositions in mind, which should be clear before we engage the subject. In this study we come with a certain view of what tolerance means and argue for the importance of distinguishing the view which allows for tolerance from the one that dissolves tolerance. We also seek to present the arguments for the needed ingredients which constitute a tolerant attitude and we cannot emphasize enough the role of conversion in determining the level of tolerance present in the environment of conversion. The element of conversion is crucial in defining as tolerant a certain inter-religious environment. Depending on the cultural context where conversion happens the consequences of conversion are felt in different ways. The anthropological approach seeks to understand the nature and the meaning of this phenomenon in its cultural context, where social and political dimensions are considered, employing ethnographic description and theoretical analysis.

Keywords: Conversion, inter-religious tolerance, interview, correspondence view of truth.

Introduction

How is conversion related to tolerance?

We are interested in conversion here because of the relationship of conversion and tolerance. This relationship of conversion and tolerance is more complicated than it may seem. There are different ways of thinking about tolerance and the one that says that "all religions are equal" meaning they are "all equally true" would be nonsense if we hold to a correspondence view of truth and we know religions contradict each other on important matters. Such prior theoretical presuppositions are important to consider but more specifically to our concern with inter-religious tolerance it is important to recognize the consequences of philosophical presuppositions. We should be able to agree that all religions are to be treated at face value as equals, some would like to say equally true, in the sense of having equal right to be expressed freely in the marketplace of ideas, but not judged as equally true with regard to their content or truth claims, which is a matter of philosophical and theological discussions to continue until the end of time.

The correspondence view of truth:

The agreement above touches on the view of truth and the correspondence view of truth, which can be understood easily with reference to every kind of words we use anytime, without going into spurious detractors in the form of verificationistic accounts of truth (Dancy and Sosa 2001, 511). When we speak or write, or even think, we need to make sense. Ludwig Wittgenstein's great contribution in this regard is worth reflecting at this juncture: "The sense-giving relation between language and the world is called 'picturing' because the words in a basic (elementary) sentence are supposed to stand for objects in the same way that points on the surface of a picture stand for points in physical space. Everything that we can say, and equally everything that we can think, must be a projection of a possible arrangement of objects"(Dancy and Sosa 2001, 524). A correspondence view of truth would be one that holds that true is such a statement in words that corresponds properly to the "arrangement of objects" that it refers to.

The problem of a relativistic view of truth for tolerance:

If our view of truth was relativistic, meaning that all truth is created or without any correspondence to reality, then we are left with managing conflicting truth claims as a parent with children who don't understand that, from this enlightened parent point of view, they are all wrong, all right or all irrelevant. This "parent paradigm," sometimes dangerously assumed by those in power, would be patronizing and condescending about religion. The problem is that one can not expect for these proverbial children to ever grow up to believe, with regard to religious truth claims, like this proverbial enlightened parent that says "all religions are equal" in the sense that all truth claims are of equal value. This stance again is nonsensical and cannot be believed for that reason only even though it can be spoken and used contradictorily just like an inconsistent parent when thinks he is disciplining the child but because of being wrong ends up hurting everybody.

The ultimate reason different religions will be held by different people for the foreseeable time is because they are believed as of a different value with regard to picturing the truth of reality perceived by different religious traditions and its many intelligent adherents. No amount of education, as the West has tried, and no amount of persecution, as the East has employed during Communism, will eradicate this understanding of religion. Therefore, tolerance in this environment, where different religions live with clashing truth claims, does not mean accepting as of equal truthfulness the view of the other but accepting as equally valuable each person whatever one believes.

Taking the analogy of the enlightened parent as the patronizing paradigm, viewing from the relativistic perspective on truth, it appears that for one person to change religion or convert it is either completely irrelevant (justifying not doing anything about it) or completely unnecessary (justifying prohibiting it so everyone stays within the fold of its parent's religion). In Albania, it seems as if the philosophy of the government, since the fall of Communism, reflects this "patronizing paradigm" with their unclear efforts sometimes completely neglecting the religious domain, and at other times jumping to hyper-controlling mode. This seems to be the case more recently with introducing some form of teaching about religion in public schools because of fear of religious radicalization.

From the perspective of the correspondence view of truth perspective, conversion is a serious matter of tolerance. Conversion is understandably disturbing for the people of the tradition the convert left behind, but to be protected as the right to pursue one's own path toward any possible attainment of personal alignment with one's view of reality. The right of freedom to follow one's path within the law, according to the dictates of one's conscience, is a pillar of the great western civilization exemplified in Europe or USA, and to jeopardize this pillar is blindness to the privilege we are bequeathed and now enshrined in international law and the Declaration of Human Rights (Schirrmacher 2014).

The broader context of our study of conversion:

Exploring the environment of inter-religious interactions in this study, to find out its nature and meaning is done with many presuppositions in mind. Throughout this study, especially in connection with the survey done with the students of the University of Shkodra, but also when we analyzed the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh related to the building of the Catholic church in this predominantly Muslim village, we have sought to clarify such theoretical perspectives and ideas as influence our research and we have given reasons why the element of conversion is crucial in defining as tolerant a certain inter-religious environment of interactions. The working definition we have operated with in this study is: "Tolerance exists between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view." It should be clear that not accepting the freedom of the individual to convert to another point of view, without hindering or interfering with such free exercise of one's right to believe according to one's choosing, cannot be qualified as a tolerant stance.

The third probe: Interviews with converts

The main task of this study overall is understanding the nature and meaning of the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania as exemplified in the case of Malbardh. Taking Malbardh as the exemplary Albanian environment, we analyzed

the environment of inter-religious interactions there through methods including participant observation, interviews and focus groups, consisting in the first probe of this multi-pronged study. We explored the environment of tolerance at the University of Shkodra with a second probe; a questionnaire of 50 questions with a sample of 139 students. From that vantage point arrived with gathering and absorbing that information, as I have interacted personally throughout the process with the people in these two related contexts, it was natural to branch out into following the lives of those converted from these two groups and learn more inside information through interviewing them in depth. This is the third probe to discuss now; the developing, conducting and analyzing of the interviews with converts from Malbardh and the University of Shkodra.

Importance of conversion cases for positive proof of tolerance:

The cases of conversion are positive evidence of revealing the attitudes present and thus enabling us to positively identify the quality of the inter-religious environment if it was tolerant or not. There are other indicators of a tolerant environment at the absence of cases of conversion but one cannot neglect conversions, if they are present, while in the search of understanding the make up of the inter-religious dynamics of an environment. Therefore, analyzing the import of the conversions in the understanding of the environment of Malbardh and its relevant centers of interaction, is of great importance to ascertain the nature of such an environment of inter-religious interactions.

Conversion is complex phenomena studied in different ways from different disciplines such as theology, psychology, sociology and anthropology. A respected expert on the study of conversion, Lewis R. Rambo writes in the early years of the turn of this century: "The study of conversion has expanded dramatically in the last two decades [80's and 90's]. Once the almost exclusive preserve of psychologists and evangelicals, conversion is now being examined by anthropologists (Harding 1987; Hefner 1993; Jules-Rosette 1975, 1976), historians (Cusack 1998; Kaplan 1996; MacMullen 1984; Maldoon 1997), literary scholars (Viswanathan 1998), sociologists (Montgomery 1991, 1996, 1999, 2001; Richardson 1978; Robertson 1978; Yang 1999), and theologians from many religious traditions" (Buckser and Glazier 2003, 211). The two decades since this quick survey have seen even more growth in the literature of conversion and emphasized its importance for study.

While a study of the phenomenon of conversion *per se* is not the focus of this particular study at hand, we want to explore the different aspects of conversion with an eye to the environment of conversion in Albania. This is why we consider this more as exploring the edges of the stories of conversion. In order to better understand how we explored the experiences of converts in our study it is important to look at what informed the shaping of the guide with questions for the interview.

A Theoretical framework for studying conversion: The "stage model"

In preparing for the interviewing of the different converts to inform my study on the environment of conversion in Albania, I read broadly and consulted several diverse studies (Snow and Machalek 1984; Hefner 1993; Buckser and Glazier 2003; Speelman 2006; Kirmizialtin 2007; Rasanayagam 2011; Shanneik 2011; Chua 2012; Skinner 2013; Tramontana 2013; Das 2013). It was rewarding to learn from those who have experience in exploring conversion scientifically but I am not a stranger to conversion since I have experienced it myself and have been involved in working with groups and organizations that are also very interested in conversion for theological reasons.

The most helpful from my readings on conversion has been the book *Understanding Religious Conversion* by Lewis R. Rambo because it gave shape to my many questions about the dimensions of conversion (Rambo 1993). His "stage model" seems to me as a very good framework to go about exploring conversion in a way that gives due consideration to the multiplicity of factors that go into that complex process. As I indicated I am familiar with analyzing the theological dimensions of conversion from my previous work with religious organizations but in this study those dimensions are bracketed in order to surface the other aspects such as the cultural, social and personal dimensions of conversion.

Theological and phenomenological considerations:

When we discuss the religious dimension here I will be careful to distinguish the sociological label of "Muslim" and "Catholic" as an identifier of the religious person as distinct from the theological requirements to properly call someone Muslim or Catholic or Evangelical. We are following the perceptions of those we want to understand so we refer to Muslims and Catholics here from a sociological and phenomenological point of view. Therefore in this study we mostly are dealing with sociological identifiers and descriptive language of what is perceived. I would have to alert the reader when I would like to point to the theological dimension at some juncture in order to understand some important aspect because as Rambo also writes: "If we are to be phenomenologically true to the experiences and the phenomena of conversion, we must take the religious sphere seriously" (Rambo 1993, 11).

Attention to the context:

The first aspect to keep in mind when approaching the study of conversion is awareness of context; historical, cultural, social and personal. I have sought to include such questions in the first part of my interview guide that would surface such issues related to context in these categories (questions 1-3 in the "Interview Guide").

Attention to the type of conversion:

Another category to consider was the conversion "type" (Rambo 1993, 12–14). This is an effort to describe the phenomenon of conversion in relation to the existing institutional structures of religion in the environment. So (1)*Apostasy*, or defection, would refer to the abandoning of a certain faith of a certain recognized religious tradition and would be considered here as conversion because it does "constitute an important form of change, both individually and collectively in the contemporary setting" (Rambo 1993, 13). (2)*Intensification*, refers more to a case when the concerns or the beliefs of the community one may belong to nominally, start becoming paramount in one's life giving shape to that individual's activities and pursuits. (3)*Affiliation* would be the term appropriate for somebody becoming part of an institution or community of faith. It may be part of a previous "defection" type of conversion or it may be without any prior religious commitment. (4)*Institutional transition* refers to moving within one recognized religious tradition between different groups or denominations that make that tradition and it can be not as deep as another kind of conversion but consist in simple change of affiliation because of whatever reason. (5)*Tradition transition*, often takes place in times of cultural change and upheaval, conquest or contact with a foreign power and a different worldview. But in a place like Albania where we already have the different traditions of major world religions such as varieties of Christianity and Islam, the "tradition transition" type of conversion need not include such historical upheavals any more. In the words of another writer they are "universes next door" (Sire 1997).

Another way of describing the conversion "type" is to say we are discussing here conversion in relation to perceptions of distance from certain reference points that are important primarily in the culture because of the perceived distance from recognized institutionalized religious entities. This doesn't mean that different groups would accept as conversion what another considers as such and in this context I agree that "conversion is what a faith group says it is" (Rambo 1993, xiv), but this definition is not satisfactory for all and we have to agree that it is more along the lines of the last type, tradition transition type, that conversion is the most obviously recognized as such hence the more controversial and the best test for the existence of tolerant inter-religious attitudes in the environment where it happens. Without going into more details now, this is where we will focus shortly.

Awareness of the conversion motifs:

The other dimension explored by Rambo is the "conversion motifs" (Rambo 1993, 14–16), and I will use those helpful categorizations of the substantial qualities of the form and structure of conversion in analyzing the experiences of the individuals I interviewed so here I will only mention that they are six: (1) intellectual, (2) mystical, (3) experimental, (4) affectional, (5) revivalist, and (6) coercive. Since our main interest is not primarily in understanding the nature of religious conversion as such but more what the experience of those converted tells us about the environment of conversion, we will not pay too much attention to this aspect. Nevertheless, in the interview guide I prepared one can detect such categories

behind probing questions I have grouped under the 4th question including question 5 and 6. I wanted the individuals to reflect freely about their converting experience so we could then indirectly learn of the influences more relevant to our research question.

Utilizing the "stage model":

More important for the structuring of our research into conversion experiences I find the "stage model" which Rambo has developed (Rambo 1993, 16–18). The seven stages, helpfully seen with flexibility as "a series of elements [or period during that process of change] that are interactive and cumulative over time," include (1) context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) commitment, and (7) consequences. I was most intrigued by exploring the dimensions of context as the organizing factor of the whole framework but one again can detect these helpful words as "pegs" in my framing of the interview guide including question 7. This framework will be helpful therefore as we analyze the data we gather from the interviews which have questions and probing organized around these concepts which will be helpful in organizing the data otherwise to disparate for use.

Considering the "tradition transition" as the ideal type for our interview:

Considering what kinds of conversion cases to analyze among the different types categorized by Rambo such as "apostasy," "intensification," "affiliation," "institutional transition," or "tradition transition," the more relevant is the last (Rambo 1993, 12–16). While technically I would agree with Rambo that "conversion is what a faith group says it is" (Rambo 1993, xiv), the "tradition transition" type is what is normally understood in Albania as constituting conversion while the other types, which would fall generally within the original religious tradition of the convert, may be considered not as relevant to our discussion of tolerance. It seems wrong to assume that any of the types of conversion mentioned above is not cause for expecting strong reactions by those in the circle of the convert but of all the types we must agree that "tradition transition" is the most radical and affecting most areas of life and relationships which would be the most likely case of arousing the greatest range and intensity of reactions thus providing the best test for the existence of tolerance in the environment where this conversion happens.

So while it may be worthwhile to consider different types of conversion cases, in view of our goal to understand the environment of tolerance, we must agree that, the best cases to study would be those of the "tradition transition" since if this kind of conversion is tolerated the others we can assume to be less controversial.

Clarifying the distinctions of traditions in Albania:

We need to clarify at this point the distinction between the "institutional transition" and "tradition transition" types of conversion because in Albania it is possible for many, as we see in some of the interviews with converts from Catholicism, to consider the traditional branches of Christianity, namely Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical as generally constituting one "tradition" when contrasted with both Sunny and Bektashi branches of Islam as constituting another tradition. If we considered the Christian religious institutional bodies of Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical, as consisting one tradition it would assume they have one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe and life-style.

This can be a long discussion but for our purposes, again focusing our study phenomenologically, it seems best to recognize the general perception of the population of each religious branch as a separate enough tradition, even though there is no question that the divide between any of the Christian branches contrasted with any of the Muslim branches in terms of worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe and life-style, could bring valid arguments for a different conclusion.

Clarifying a "tradition transition" conversion in Albania:

An "institutional transition type involves the change of an individual from one community to another within a major tradition" says Rambo (Rambo 1993, 13), thus implying denominations such as Baptist or Presbyterian within the Protestant branch of Christianity rather than the move from Protestant to Catholic tradition. Even though some of the comments of the converts

imply their understanding to be of a smaller scale of change when an Albanian Catholic becomes an Evangelical, this is due to specific factors in Albania which need more clarification but we should not muddle the situation here (Intervista me Xhoni, p.2).

We are seeking to represent the thinking of our converts in the context of the perception of the population in general and not to give precedence to a specific perspective on what should constitute a tradition, so for Albanians generally, as expressed also in the legal categorization of these five religious bodies (Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Sunny and Bektashi) as distinct religious communities, we would consider a transition of an individual from one to another of these religious communities as a "tradition transition." So the perception of some converts that the jump from Catholicism to Evangelicalism is of a lower threshold than the jump of converts from a Muslim background to Evangelicalism, can figure in our study as an explanatory factor for some important aspects of the environment of conversion but not as the categorizing principle of what constitutes a religious tradition in Albania.

The reality of few "tradition transitions" in Malbardh:

In seeking to interview those undergoing such "tradition transition" it became apparent that by far the most prevalent situation was that of individuals from Muslim background converting to Christianity, primarily of the Evangelical kind, but some include the Catholic tradition, rather than an individual from a Christian background converting to Islam. I have not found any such cases of the last kind of direction in the area of Kurbin which is the broader area of Malbardh. This may be due to different reasons, including the relatively small number of "tradition transition" conversions from Malbardh, there are probably about 5 such cases we know from Malbardh and all of them from Muslim background religiosity to Evangelical Christianity, and others may be able to elucidate further what the full picture includes but our interest here is not to ascertain this aspect.

Curious reality of the direction of "tradition transition" conversion:

From our perspective in seeking to understand the dynamics of inter-religious interaction it doesn't matter which direction of conversion is involved, and I would have been happy to have the full spectrum of cases from all directions, but apparently the most common "tradition transition" kind of conversion is from either Catholic or Muslim tradition converting to Evangelical. In the course of my interviews I asked the converts about cases of conversion from Catholic or Evangelical to Islam and they couldn't think of any (Intervista me Falmurin, p.1). Orthodox Christians are much rarer as a population in the region we focused this study so they didn't figure much at all in my sample.

When I asked about conversions from Islam to Catholic tradition somebody mentioned a friend, L.T., whose mother was Catholic while his father was Muslim but couldn't meet him (Intervista me Flamurin, p.1). One can argue that this is a case of "tradition transition" but it would take more analysis of the specific case to come definitely to this conclusion. Nevertheless, the point here is that although such cases are rare, they are not nonexistent. Marenglen, the convert from Malbardh, told me of a young woman from Pllana, just across ther river from Milot in the region of Lezha, who had became a Catholic coming from a Muslim background family.

Considering the lack of "tradition transition" cases between Catholicism and Islam:

In our discussion about the reasons for such lack of more cases of conversion between the two major world religions of Catholic and Islam in the region, it was mentioned that their focus as Catholics or Muslims seems to be reviving the faith among the population belonging traditionally to their religious background and not reaching out in any significant way to evangelize or propagate Islam or Catholicism to the traditionally perceived individuals of the other religion. This explanation sounds very convincing even though both religions are irreducibly expansionistic theologically.

The coexistence in Albania for a few centuries of these two theologically opposing world traditions in the midst of one people, one nation and even one family sometimes, is a curiosity that makes such explanations of possible arrangements

plausible. During the period of Communism, prohibition of any form of religious expression and even abolishing any practice of any religion, created a much more homogeneous environment among Albanians in Albania than at any other period in history since Islam broke the generally Christian flavor of the country after the conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the last part of the 15th century.

Theologically informed phenomenology needed:

Analyzing the type of conversion in these cases we need to emphasize that it should not be considered as if these people from Muslim background left the religion of Islam for another to constitute "apostasy" or defection, as if it was a repudiation of previous religious belief. But why not? It does appear as if they left the religion of their family to embrace a different religion. This would take us into definitions of conversion informed by theological considerations but it is important to distinguish between "apostasy" and "tradition transition" with respect to belief. To what level does knowledge and belief of religion of origin need to be in order for the transition from it to be considered "defection," and to what level need the understanding of the new religion be to be considered a "tradition transition?" The issue of awareness of religion of the family is important for other aspects of our study especially when we consider the response of the parents in the context of such awareness. So we need to wait for gathering the perceptions of the converts about such reality of awareness and knowledge of their religion of origin but here we simply needed to distinguish the focus being on the arriving of the convert and not on the departing side of the conversion when we define the kind of conversion we are looking at. In all of the cases there was no sense on the part of the converts that they had abandoned something as much as arriving at a better place they were eager to have their friends and family join.

Muslim and Evangelical perspective differs on apostasy:

These are good and worthy issues to discuss but we cannot do them justice here due to our more specific focus being the phenomenological understanding of the environment of conversion. Nevertheless, what people understand as "apostasy" depends on their personal conclusions derived from their cultural upbringing and theological sophistication. Generally speaking, for Muslims it may be easier to label anybody from a Muslim background who becomes a Christian as an apostate, independent of the level of understanding or practice of Islamic faith. On the other side of the spectrum I believe it may be more difficult for an Evangelical to label somebody, who may have identified with the Evangelical community, an apostate, because in their understanding it is not related to simple phenomenological explanations but it has much to do with internalized specific personal belief and theological doctrine.

Sticking with descriptive but informed phenomenology:

From the perspective of these Malbardh people who became Evangelical, they came to faith in God through a personal relationship with Christ for the first time, as they now understand faith from an Evangelical perspective. So why do we then call this a "tradition transition" type of conversion? Are we not adopting a distinct view of the theological level of understanding required for transitioning from one tradition to another? No, we are not trying to reflect here any particular theological judgment because we seek to describe phenomenologically the perceptions of both the converts and those in their environment. Tradition transition here means simply personal identification of someone with a recognized religious tradition reflecting, possibly, the understanding of the tradition itself in their form of such identification with it.

Why the preponderance of conversion cases of one kind is not problematic:

The reality on the ground seems to be that cases of "tradition transition" conversions from the Christian to Islamic faith are nonexistent or very rare indeed as my contacts in the region inform me, but this is not a problem to our effort of understanding the reality of inter-religious interaction with regard to conversion in this same environment. In regard to the reactions among people of different traditions it doesn't matter that much what the direction of "tradition transition" is exemplified. Since almost all of the cases involve individuals leaving either Islam or Catholic traditions for another tradition,

we should be able to observe the reactions from individuals and groups of each community dealing with the same kind of issue they would have dealt if the direction of conversion was in any other direction.

This is most prominently the same kind of situation we would expect in any direction of the "tradition transition" because the reactions of the family members and friends are not concerned as much with the wellbeing of the religious tradition they belong to but much more with their personal sense of loss and confusion. In our study we have not evidenced any form of institutional opposition to the conversions we have analyzed. This doesn't mean there is no such effort on the part of the institutionalized religions as to protect their perceived folds but in the stories we didn't get any such interference of an institutional kind with these particular individuals. There may have been individuals who have expressed their views and exerted their influence but this was not portrayed as an institutional attack on the individual or their family. This should speak well for the Albanian religious institutions at least until other evidence surfaces.

The non-propability and chain referral sampling of candidates for interview:

In **selecting the candidates for interview,** recognizing that "… cultural data require experts" (Bernard 2006, 146), I was guided by the two previous probes I had already undertaken in exploring the environment of inter-religious interaction in the village of Malbardh and among the students of education in the University of Shkodra nearby. One has to agree with professor H. Russell Bernard of Florida when he writes in his very informative book on methods of research in anthropology: "Really in depth research requires informed informants, not just responsive respondents – that is, people whom you choose on purpose, not randomly" (Bernard 2006, 187). I did ask if including only converts blinds me to some important perspective other members of the community could offer on conversion or tolerance, but again, those personally involved and who have had to think hard about such issues remain the better helpers. The best informants for me would be those converts who were from the village of Malbardh and studied at the University of Shkodra.

So connecting with one convert from the village of Malbardh, Marenglen, I was able to expand the network of the people who were good candidates for the in depth interview of converts related more directly to the environment of Malbardh (Marenglen, Besnik, Flamur, Rivelino and Nezir).

As I have explained in discussing the survey with the students of education at the university of Shkodra, the environment of Malbardh, as a representative environment of the area from where most students in Shkodra came from, is both the informing and the informed environment of the lives of such students of education at the University of Shkodra that we surveyed. I find it helpful to remember in this connection what an expert on religious conversion writes: "We have a tendency to split the person and the environment. We forget that the political, religious, economic, social, and cultural worlds are shaped by people. Conversely, people are shaped by the socialization processes of the wider world. The networks of relationships and the cumulative effects of education, training, and institutional structures all influence the potential convert" (Rambo 1993, 166).

Interviewing the converts among the students, gives us insight in the dynamics of the environment in Malbardh and the region it represents, both directly through the converted villagers of Malbardh among those students and indirectly through the comparisons and contrasts with the others from the broader region. It also informs us about the kind of influence we can expect from the mentality fostered through the impact of the university experience and education on these students which they will bring back to the environment of Malbardh as some of them will literally come to teach Malbardh children in its village school.

One example in particular should illustrate this; the case of Besnik. Besnik is from Malbardh, born and raised there in a family of Muslim background, who went to study education in Shkodra, was converted to Christianity there, and upon graduation came as a teacher in his own village. In the example of this one member of the village we have all the elements that I am referring to among the reasons for probing the environment of the university of Shkodra, especially in the education department; (1) reflects the mentality of the family and the village he came from, (2) reflects the influence of the environment

and education at the University of Shkodra, (3) reflects the influence that will come back to the villages in the form of teaching the young generation in the village schools. We cannot go very far in our prognosis of the future trend of such influence, especially since some of the converts are more optimistic while others more pessimistic about the future of tolerance, but they, nevertheless, help shed more light on the different elements of the current reality of inter-religious environment in Malbardh. Such ideal cases to study as Besnik's are rare necessarily and we should consider the opportunity to explore our questions through the eyes of such an ideally placed individual as a great advantage of this study.

To put our findings from the converts of Malbardh in context of similar cases from the broader region as best we can, it was important to expand our survey through the interview to other converts in the same general environment both as part of the University of Shkodra where they studied and most of them were converted, but also as coming from similar background as far as being from the same region of Albania as Malbardh.

The interviews then are undertaken with **only converted university students** who, through their experience and perspective as insiders of the University of Shkodra environment, will help clarify further the understanding we gain through the survey we did there measuring tolerance. The importance of the University of Shkodra for the whole area where Malbardh is a part, cannot be emphasized enough in reflecting and shaping the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh as well. Such influence is connected with being the main regional city from where others get their cues in almost everything but with regard to its university, Shkodra's influence, is much more specific in shaping hearts and minds of those who will lead different aspects of life in Malbardh and the region. It is interesting to note the high rate of conversions of people from Malbardh/Milot, four out of five, happening in close relation to the University of Shkodra or its students.

The converted students interviewed are from areas similar to Malbardh in the same general region and comparing them with the interviews of the converted students of Malbardh and Milot would reveal any noticeable difference or would confirm our view of general similarity of conclusions from interviews with our previous conclusions from both environments; the village and the university. The valuable perspective of converts on the nature of the inter-religious interaction in their immediate environment of conversion will enrich our understanding of the broader environment we are studying being related closely in varying ways both in being specifically from the village of Malbardh and from outside of Malbardh either highlighting any difference or emphasizing the common features.

The value of the semi-structured interview:

This kind of interviewing, a semi structured interview, which allows the subject to reminisce freely in a conversational style, is best fit to explore areas and instances that are unique to some people but because of the preparation to cover the previously mapped territory of conversion experience we feel confident we have gathered what is needed to have a good view of the environment from their perspective.

The ultimate focus of our interviewing:

Keeping again in mind that our overall goal in this study is understanding the environment of inter-religious interactions, the interviews give us an opportunity to look at this environment through the eyes of the people who are the best positioned people to know first hand how this environment can affect those who cross the border of one religion for another. We have seen the importance of conversion itself as evidence of the obtaining of tolerance in a given environment, so now it is important to see how the converted people see from the inside the reality of tolerance as applied to them personally.

Privilege of interviewing and conclusion:

We should be aware of the limitations of this approach in that subjectivity and isolated instances cannot be generalized automatically but, nevertheless, such an opportunity to see tolerance in action where it matters most, in the lives of the converted people, is a privilege. Being aware of this privilege I prepared well in advance to formulate my approach and guiding questions to allow for a free flow of conversation end telling of experiences while making sure to cover important

aspects of the conversion experience that are most pertinent to our goal of ascertaining the nature of the inter-religious interactions in Albania.

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