Conversions in Denmark

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By Mogens S. Mogensen, PhD

Introduction
In this paper I want to give an updated overview of the research on conversion carried out in Denmark and reflect on the social and religious significance of the variegated phenomenon of conversion.

Conversions in History
Within the last few decades religious conversions have attracted a lot of attention in Denmark. Danes have converted to Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, and immigrants to Denmark and their children have converted from these and other religions to Christianity. Many have perceived conversions to be something new and exotic in a Danish context. The reality, however, is that various conversion movements and events within the last millennium have played a significant role in the history of Denmark and have contributed significantly to the development of the Danish society as we know it today.

On the runic stone erected in Jelling around 980 king Harald Bluetooth claims that he “won all of Denmark and Norway, and christianized the Danes”. Whatever the truth of this claim, the Danes over period of time underwent what the psychologist of religion Lewis Rambo calls a tradition transition as they converted from their former faith in Odin and Thor to the new faith in the “White Christ”.¹ That Christianity and the church in the following centuries became a key element of the foundation of the Danish kingdom is among other things seen in one of the paragraphs of the “Jutlandic Law” (Jyske Lov) from 1241, where it is stated that a child could not inherit its parents if it had not been baptised.

The reformation in 1536 brought the church under the control of the king, and laid the foundation for development of a symbiosis of the state and the church. All citizens in the Danish kingdom underwent a so-called institutional transition by shifting from Roman Catholicism and to Lutheranism within the same Christendom. Following the religious wars the Westphalian Peace treaty in 1648 strengthened the territorial nature of religions and confessions by laying down the principle of “cujus region, ejus religio”. The “Danish Law” (Danske Lov) from 1683 even stated that a citizen who converted away from the Lutheran faith to Catholicism would be banished from Denmark, and Catholic missionaries trying to convert Lutherans to Catholicism would be sentenced to death.

While the decisions about the formal religious adherence of the citizens in the Danish kingdom for centuries had been made by the political rulers, individuals entered the scene in the 18th and 19th centuries when revival movements swept across the country and individuals and groups turned away from a rationalistic understanding of the Christian faith to a more pietistic

¹ Rambo (1993:12-14) distinguishes between the following types of conversion: Apostasy or defection (deconversion from a religion), intensification (revitalization or revival of one’s faith), affiliation (conversion from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with a religion), institutional transition (shift from one community to another within the same religion) and tradition transition (shift from one religion to another).
version of Christianity. This religious revitalization (conversion as intensification) was a struggle for spiritual freedom which prepared the ground for broader popular and democratic movements and for political freedom.

Only in 1849 with the June Constitution were the citizens granted the freedom to leave the Lutheran Church and for example join the Baptist Church or the Roman Catholic Church. The number of people who did so was very limited, and even more limited was the number of people who for the next 100 years or more decided to convert from Christianity to another religion (conversion as tradition transition).

Much more important is the religious change that has been taking place within the last 100 years, and in particular in the decades after World War two, i.e., secularisation. The Lutheran Church lost much of its influence as an ideological foundation of society, and many Danes became increasingly alienated from Christianity. The number of churchgoers on a given Sunday has fallen from around 10 % to around 2 % of the population, and the membership of the Lutheran Church has fallen from around 99 % to around 83 %, a striking example of conversion as defection.

Many sociologists of religion predicted that secularisation would in the end lead to the elimination not only of Christianity but also of other religions. This has not happened. In stead we have witnessed a resurgence of religions and spiritualities as our Danish society is becoming multi-religious. Following on this development we have over the last decades also witnessed a number of conversions between religions and religious traditions. Apart from the various Christian denominations and the other world religions a number of new religious movements (New Age and others) have become part of the religious or spiritual scene where conversions are taking place. Most of the converts to these new religious movements come from the Lutheran church, but others have little or no religious background (conversion as affiliation).

Danish Conversion Research

The conversion of Danes to the new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the conversion of Danes especially to Islam from the 1980s and onwards attracted the interest of the media, and following this also scholars in Denmark have begun to focus on the phenomenon and the concept of conversion as a topic for their research.

Religious conversion was part of one of the four core areas, Religion in transformation, of the Research Priority Area, Religion in the 21st Century. And one of the outcomes of the research in this area was the book “Dansk Konversionsforskning” (Danish Conversion Research), which includes both empirical studies of conversion phenomena and more theoretical articles reflecting on the concepts of conversion (Mogensen & Damsager 2007). Also the Danish Pluralism Project at the University of Aarhus with its mapping of religious and spiritual groups in Denmark touch upon the issue of conversion in a number of their books.

Some Danish scholars have studied conversion phenomena in other parts of the world (Mogensen 2004; Jørgensen 2006), but here we will concentrate on empirical studies of conversion phenomena in Denmark in order to give a broad overview of what we know about it today.

The anthropologist Tina G. Jensen and the historian of religion Kate Østergaard have in their research on conversion of to Islam provided both quantitative and qualitative data in this field together with analyses and interpretations (Jensen & Østergaard 2007). Among others the historian Anne Boukris Vistisen (1998a & b) and the anthropologist Andrew Buckser (2003) have studied conversion to Judaism in Copenhagen. Converts to Baha’i have been studied by the sociologist of religion Margit Warburg (2006; 2007).

Some 17 % of the population that are not members of the Lutheran Folk Church belong to a non-Christian religion or to a non-Lutheran church (5 - 6 %).
Unfortunately we do not have similar thorough studies of conversion to Hinduism and Buddhism, but aspects of this field is reflected in the works by the historian of religion Jørn Borup (2005) and the historian of religion Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger (2007).

The involvement of Danes in – or conversion to – new religious movements, many of which are inspired from Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, including New Age, has been studied by many scholars, most recently by the theologian Merete Orskov (2003), the historian of religion René Dybdal Pedersen (2005) and the sociologist of religion Lars Ahlin (2007a).

Until recently very little research has been carried out on the conversion of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others that convert to Christianity. So far I am the only one who has studied this field (Mogensen 2005a 2005b; 2007).

Conversion between various Christian denominations have taken place in Denmark ever since the introduction of freedom of religion in 1849, and in particular the conversion to the Roman Catholic Church has been in the focus of researchers (e.g., Werner 2005). The sociologist of religion Annika Hvithamar has studied conversions to an Orthodox church in Denmark (2007)

Demography of Conversions in Denmark

Although religious conversions are popular items in the media, and fears have been expressed that Muslims will sooner or later become the majority in Denmark, there are no indications that any major shifts have taken place or are underway between the world religions in Denmark (Warburg & Jacobsen 2007). Since we do not have a religious census, and since definitions of an adherent to a particular religion and of what constitutes a conversion to a particular religion are constantly being discussed, it is of course impossible to present any conclusive demography of conversion. What follows, therefore, is a summary of the results of the research in recent years of scholars according to their definitions:

- **Deconverts from the Lutheran Church:** The only religious community whose members are counted by the government is the Lutheran Folk Church. The effects of secularization in the form deconversion from the Lutheran Church seems to continue, with an annual reduction in the membership of the church of about 0.5 % per year (Kleinbeck 2007).

- **Converts to Islam:** Tina G. Jensen and Kate Østergaard (2007) have shown that the number of Danes that have converted to Islam from the 1970s up to 2005 is probably between 2100 and 2800. A majority of these converts are women. While it was predominantly women married to Muslim men who converted during the first decades, the balance between men and women has since the 1990s become much more equal. 36 % had converted as teenagers and 42 % in their twenties.

- **Converts to Buddhism:** Jørn Borup (2005) estimates that the number of Danes who have converted to Buddhism is between 4000 and 5000. The large majority of these converts follow the Tibetan Buddhism, and most of the rest belong to Zen-Buddhism or Saka Gakkai Buddhism.

- **Converts to Hinduism:** The number of Danes who have been or still are practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM) or a form of yoga has increased to tens of thousands, but even though both TM and most forms of yoga are rooted in Hindu-traditions very few who practice TM or yoga will identify themselves as Hindus. For more well-defined Hindu-communities such as ISKCON (Hare Krishna) it is possible to estimate the number of Danes...
who have actually converted to Hinduism; the large majority of the of the about 500 Hare Krishna devotees are Danish converts (Fibiger 2007)

- Converts to new religious and spiritual groups: Rene Dybdal Pedersen in his research identified 130 independent groups, with about 6,000 people who have a rather strong attachment to their group, and about 18,000 so-called users and between 10,000 and 20,000 so-called “spiritual shoppers”. He therefore concludes that there are probably about 40,000 people who in one way or the other are involved in these new religious and spiritual groups in Denmark (Pedersen 2005:25 & 208).

- Converts to Christianity from other religions: Based on interviews with about 2/3 of all pastors in the Lutheran Folk Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the so-called free churches and the migrant churches I have registered that in the period 2000 – 2004 the churches have baptised at least 340 converts from Islam, 140 from Hinduism, 80 from Buddhism plus 109 from other religions including Judaism and Sikhism. Based on this I have estimated that the total number of converts baptised in churches during the period 1980-2004 has been 655-880 from Islam, 302-406 from Hinduism and 172-232 from Buddhism. About half of the converts were baptised in the Lutheran Folk Church and most of the rest in migrant churches (which are often related to the so-called free churches) (Mogensen 2005).

  The number of Danes that convert to Judaism, Baha’i and other religions is very small. Every year there are also Danes who convert from one church to another, but we do not have any statistics about this movement.

  The total number of people who have undergone a religious conversion of one sort or the other may still be less than one per cent of the population. But due to the long tradition of religious homogeneity in Denmark these few conversions combined with the immigration of people of other faiths have attracted a lot of attention and among some also caused anxiety.

Globalisation and Migration

What do we know about why people in Denmark convert? In a micro-perspective it is very hard to identify the causes in detail because of the problematic nature of the most important sources available, the conversion narratives (Warburg 2007). In a macro-perspective, however, it is clear that conversions can be explained with reference to the increasing globalisation that has taken place since the middle of last century. Most of the first converts to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism came in contact with the new religions while they in the 1960s and 1970s were travelling abroad.

Beginning in the late 1960s and accelerating in the following decades Denmark has experienced an unprecedented immigration of people who have brought with them their Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist traditions and non-Lutheran church traditions. Much research has pointed to the connection between migration, which may be seen as an aspect of globalisation, and religious change.

The religious change following migration may take three forms: (1) Migrants stick to their pre-migration religion, which, however, often undergoes changes when they settle in Denmark. (2) Migrants who stick to their pr-migration religion contribute to the spreading of their own religion to their neighbours and friends among the Danes. (3) Migrants adapt to their new Danish context by leaving their pre-migration religion and perhaps joining the Christian religion, since it is the predominant religion of their new country (Mogensen 2007),
Globalisation in general and migration in particular have brought people with different religious traditions into an almost daily contact with each other, and one of the outcomes of this multi-religious experience has been conversions.

**Encounters and Interactions**
In Lewis Rambos sequential model for conversion he outlines seven stages or dimensions of conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (Rambo 1993:16ff). Above we looked at the globalised context for conversion. In some cases the religious quest is prompted by a crisis (Mogensen 2005b:79-85), but this factor is not universal and as mentioned above it is often very difficult to identify causes of conversion (Jensen & Østergaard 2007:48-51).

Many conversion studies, however, indicate the crucial significance of a social and personal factor, the encounter with individuals and groups from the other religion. Tina G. Jensen has shown how young Danes who are socialized into a group of young Muslims from immigrant background and how that may lead to the wish to convert to Islam (Jensen 2007). In the case of the converts to Baha’i, Warburg, also point to the significance of the personal encounters at crucial times (Warburg 2006 & 2007).

Interreligious marriages, however, seem to play a crucial role in a significant number of conversions. There are examples of almost purely pragmatic reasons for conversion, but in most cases this motive seems to work together with other motivations (Mogensen 2005:23f; Jensen & Østergaard 2007:133-137).

For many converts the participation in religious rituals or practices seems to be a main entrance into a new religion. This applies to many of those who involve themselves in the new religious and spiritual movements (Ørskov 2003; Pedersen 2005; Ahlin 2007a), but also to some of those who convert to Christianity, and for whom participation in worship services, funeral services and others was important (Mogensen 2005a). In her research Kate Østergaard has shown how rituals and bodily practices play a significant role in the conversion process of Muslims for their development of a Muslim identity and their socialisation in the Muslim community (Østergaard 2007).

**Conversion and Danish-ness**
In my own research on conversion of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other immigrants I traced (among other patterns) a pattern that linked the conversion of immigrants to Christianity closely to their integration into the Danish society.

For those who convert to Christianity in the Lutheran Folk Church the pattern may be described in the following way: The migrants and their children convert to the religion which is predominant in the culture to which they come, i.e., to Christianity, and they convert within the church, which is the church of the vast majority, and which has the status of being the official church, the Folk Church, of the Danish people.

When immigrants convert to Christianity in migrant congregations the integration-conversion pattern is slightly different: When they convert to Christianity in ethnic churches, their original ethnic identity is strengthened so that they do not lose their relationship with their history, culture and people, and at the same time through the Christian faith they establish bonds in terms of common religious values with the Danish society and significant relations with the indigenous Danes.

What integration and conversion have in common is that they are both processes with significant social dimensions. Both processes lead to incorporation of the persons - who are converting or are being integrated - into a community or a group or another social entity. In his
study of conversion to Judaism in Copenhagen Andrew Buckser (2003) focuses on conversion as a social event. The social dimension in a conversion may be so dominant that it may in some cases be a “purely social conversion” There are indications that for some immigrants who have converted to Christianity the social dimension has been so dominant that what we see is an almost “purely social conversion” without much reference to other aspects of the Christian faith. In other cases, however, the social dimension seems to have been one factor alongside a number of other factors.

There are many indications that Christianity/the church in the integration process of immigrants from a non-Christian religious background works as a sort of a “pull & push” factor, which some feel attracts them to adapt to the Danish Christian culture and society, and which others feel put them under pressure to adapt. The pressure may come from the perception by many Danes that to be truly Danish you have to be a Christian (Mogensen 2007).

With the above mentioned relationship between a Danish and a Christian identity conversion away from Christianity will obviously create problems. In her research Tin G. Jensen (2007) explores how converts to Islam experience their identities as “Danish” and “Muslim” which in the present public discourse seem to be polarized.

One strategy followed by some converts is characterized by a tendency to internalize the public image of them as “not-Danish”. On the basis of an essentialised understanding of Danish culture with a focus on elements that are incompatible with Islam, they talk about themselves as having emigrated from the Danish society, or they identify with their fellow Muslims who are immigrants by calling themselves immigrants. They then position themselves as Muslims over against the Danes.

Another strategy is for the converts to insist on their “Danish-nes” by defying a discriminating public discourse on dissimilarity that indicate an incompatibility between being Danish and Muslim. They endeavour to formulate a conception of “Danish-ness” and “Danish identity” which is characterised not by homogeneity but by diversity and dynamic development. Thereby they establish a continuity between their identities as Muslims and Danes.

Conversion of religions?
Conversion involves changes of the converts. When Hindus convert to Christianity, or Christians convert to Islam they undergo many significant changes concerning their values, ideas, relations, language and behaviour. The question is if the religions to which people convert in Denmark also undergo significant changes or reinterpretations, so that we might even speak about the conversion of religions? Or to put it differently: Do conversions lead to new contextualised forms of the religions or the religious traditions in question?

In her research on the conversion of Danes to the Orthodox Christian faith in the congregation “The Protection of the Mother of God” Annika Hvithamar (2007) deals with the question about how foreign religious traditions through the interpretation of Danish converts adapt to the Danish surroundings. This congregation, whose members are all Danish converts, has over the years adjusted its national (Russian) elements of the Orthodox tradition to the Danish context by modifying or adjusting the church building, the liturgy and the religious behaviour and by reinterpreting the history of the Orthodox church so that their Orthodox faith and their Orthodox congregation and the are perceived to be not only Orthodox but also Danish.

A conversion or change of religious traditions can also be traced when Danes convert to Hinduism and Buddhism or at least adopt elements from Eastern religions and spiritualities. Surveys show that about 25 % of the Danish population now believes in reincarnation. Already in
1993 the Danish theologian and missiologist Johannes Aagaard noted that the classical Eastern
reincarnation concept had been reincarnated in the West in a way so that reincarnation was now no
longer seen as something inherently negative from which you should seek release, but now
reincarnation was combined with evolution so that reincarnation was understood as part of a
positive continuous development of the soul (Aagaard 1993).

In his book “Dansk Dharma” Jørn Borup points out that the conversion of Westerners
to Buddhism, or the adoption and reinterpretation of Buddhist traditions by Westerners in the 19th
and 20th centuries has lead to the development of a so-called “Protestant Buddhism” where the
focus is on the direct encounter with the centre of Buddhism (God/nirvana) without any interference
from superior religious leaders and on an understanding of the authority of the scriptures in stead of
a mechanical use of ritual magic (Borup 2005:30-31). This development may explain why there has
been so little contact between ethnic Danish Buddhists, who follow a Western/Danish form of
Buddhism, and Buddhist immigrants, who follow for example a Thai or Vietnamese form of
Buddhism.

Danish converts to Islam have generally had a much stronger relationship to and
interaction with Muslim immigrants. But still a similar development may be traced. Converts to
Islam adopt an interethic form of Islam, which is cleansed from the cultural habits and traditions,
that are based in ethic cultures in the countries from which Muslim immigrants come, and not in
Islam proper. The resulting Muslim identity coming out of this process, however, may develop in
two different directions.

In the more liberal position the converts focus on the Danish society in which they
live, and a “clean” Islam is sought out as basic principles behind the concrete actions of the prophet,
which may then be contextualised according to the Danish setting. In a more conservative position
the focus of the converts is on the universal umma, and a “clean” Islam is sought out in a meticulous
imitation of the example of the prophet in all details, which may then bring the converts in conflict
with the Danish society (Jensen & Østergaard 2007:62-85).

Conversion of the Conversion Concept?
Conversion issues are most unambiguous when they take place according to a bounded (extrinsic
well-formed) sets understanding of categories. There are clear boundaries between who is a
Lutheran Christian and who is a Catholic Christian, and converting from Christianity to Islam or
vice versa means crossing a well defined border.

The strong de-traditionalisation and individualisation of the Danish society coupled
with multi-religious effects of globalisation, however, has lead to a situation where conversion
issues become much more complicated. Some religions develop more fuzzy boundaries, so that
people (converts?) may have varying degrees of belonging to a religious community and of
subscription the tenets of a faith.

In her analysis of Hinduism in Denmark, Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger distinguishes
between four categories of “Hindus” in Denmark: (1) Those who consider themselves to be Hindus.
(2) Those that are related to Hinduism. (3) Those who are consciously inspired by Hinduism. (4)
Those who are unconsciously inspired by Hinduism.

Members of the first group for instance are the 50 Hare Krishna adherents who have
been initiated as nuns or monks, whereas the 450 Hare Krishna devotees are considered to belong to
the second group. Members of the last group (which according to the estimate of Qvortrup numbers
more than one million Danes) are those who make use of what the three first groups offer in terms
of beliefs or practices. This means that all those who practice yoga or believe in reincarnation are

3 For an explanation of sets theories applied to conversion, see Hiebert 1994:107-136. See also Mogensen 2005b:59-61.
included in this groups. When has a person converted? Only when he or she has joined the first group, or the second group, or what?

It becomes even more complicated as we may observe that conversions (if we may still call them so) begin to take place according to a centred sets understanding of categories, where conversion is understood primarily in terms of a change in direction or orientation towards a new centre (religious faith). Many of those Danes who begin to focus on Buddhism or a New Age religion or spirituality are and continue to be members of the Lutheran Folk church while they move closer and closer to the new faith.

Conversions according to a centred sets understanding of categories, however, may also become fuzzy, so that the same person either moves from one centre (faith, religion, spirituality) to the second or third in a conversion career, or at the same time moves towards different centres and begins to subscribe to elements from different religious and spiritual traditions which seen from a Western dogmatic position are incompatible, but which according to the “converts” themselves only are enriching their life.

The same person may use different religious traditions for different purposes. “Converts” may appreciate Christianity for its relational qualities (“God loves me” and “The rituals confirm my Danish identity”). They may seek insight in Buddhism (“I find peace of mind”). They may be attracted to Hinduism because the concepts of karma and reincarnation help them to understand suffering in the world (“I find a satisfactory explanation”). And they may at the same time make use of therapies and practices in the new religious movements and New Age that offer energy and power (“It works for me”).

Based on similar analyses of the religious situation in Denmark today, Lars Ahlin asks if the concept of conversion has lost its relevance. As he views it the concept of conversion in its original Christian meaning is difficult to apply to other religious movements outside the Christian context. Furthermore, since we now live in a de-traditionalised late modern society in which the individual’s identity and autobiography is subject to constant change, he finds it more appropriate to exchange the more narrow concept of conversion with the broader concept of “individual religious change” (Ahlin 2007b).

Towards the end of the first millennium king Harald Bluetooth claimed that he initiated the collective conversion of the Danes. Now at the beginning of the third millennium individual Danes are undergoing their own autonomous “individual religious change”.

Litterature


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4 Inspiration for these distinctions has been drawn from Notto Thelle (2007).


