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**The phenomenon of conversion to Islam in
contemporary Romania: mentalities, associative structures,
transnational influences**

Ph.D. Thesis Summary

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The present study's main objective is to present and analyze, following the methodology of humanistic disciplines, facts and novelties specific to the Muslim community of Romania. These novelties towards which we focus on in the present paper concern the Muslim community as a whole and also its new structural particularities.

The particularities upon which we focus belong to a new component of Islam in Romania, whose existence is actually undocumented and only anecdotally discussed in the specific field of studies, namely the Romanian converts to Islam. As we can see in the following chapters, this group is numerically consistent and influential within the Romanian Muslim community.

Until year 1990, it was possible to discuss about a relatively homogenous Romanian Muslim community, but nowadays migration and the phenomenon of conversion to Islam generated significant changes in relation to its structure that it can no longer be considered exclusively specific to ethnical minorities in Dobruja. Today, Islam in Romania is divided between *Old* and *New* and the Muslim community amid being *traditional*, consisting especially of Turks and Tatar minorities, or being *non-traditional*, consisting of Oriental minorities, Romanian converts and, at the same time, other types of interpretation of Islam than those specific and familiar within the traditional community.

The Romanian Converts to Islam are integrated into a different community than the traditional one, and the various forms of interpreting Islam, encountered among these Muslims, are totally different than the ones specific within the *Old Islam*. This new community has its own specific forms of interpreting Islam, its own sources of religious authority and its own history. At the same time, their cult life and the organizational structures that represent them are different and parallel to those officially recognized by the Romanian state and also to those documented by the Romanian historiography.

Therefore, we will see in the following chapters which are the factors that led to the appearance of this new religious group, what are the particularities of its religious and cult life, how it is organized and, at the same time, what are its sources of religious authority present among the community members.

We mention that the research in question deals with the structural changes of Islam in Romania in the last thirty years. We consider that a deeper incursion in the already written

history of Islam in Romania (*Old Islam*), is not required because it would only move us away from the main purpose of this research paper.

In the absence of studies concerning this community, respectively this new religious group within Romanian Islam, and also of the new realities of the Muslim community in Romania, we consider that the degree of novelty and interest in this topic is very high. As for the originality of this research paper, we believe it is affirmed by the very degree of the approached topic's novelty and by its uniqueness which is unprecedented in specialized studies in Romania.

Keywords: Islam, Romania, religious conversion, Romanian converts, associative structures, Muslim organizations, religious practices, cult life.

Summary

In the first chapter of this study we discussed in detail about the methodological process that underlines this research: we defined our premises and objectives, we placed our research and, at the same time, we discussed the strategy of collecting data and conducting field work.

The main objective of the study is to map the group of Romanian converts to Islam through its historic profile and its social context, thus updating the field of specialized studies regarding this component of the Romanian Muslim community.

The research method used in our study is the ethnographic one that has been chosen for reasons related to the research's objective. Being an anthropological research, we consider that the ethnographic method is the most suitable for the objective of our study because it can sustain a complex vision concerning the group and the chosen phenomena¹. Our interest towards investigating behavioral and structural particularities that can be related to the belonging to a specific cultural and religious environment, choose this method as being the most suitable for our approach.

The present study is built around four research questions. Their purpose overlaps with the general objective of the paper that of reviewing and understanding aspects concerning attitudes, behavioral patterns, individual experiences, values and cultural norms encountered among

¹ Sergiu Bălan, „Ethnographic method in anthropological research”, în *Cogito*, no 4, 2011, pp. 61-69.

Romanian converts to Islam. Therefore, during the following chapters we aim at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the determinant factors of conversion to Islam among Romanians?
2. What are the transformations resulted as a consequence of the conversion to Islam and how do they reflect in the lifestyle of the converts?
3. What are the religious attitudes and tendencies among the Romanian converts to Islam?
4. What are the relations of the Romanian converts to Islam with the members and the representatives of the institution, organizations and Muslim communities in Romania?

The target group of our research consists of Romanian citizens, both female and male, who have adopted the Islamic religion as a result of a religious conversion. The target group does not include Muslims whose relationship with Islam is a native one, as in the case of the traditional Muslim community (Turkish-Tatar) or non-traditional community (i.e. Arabs, Persians etc.). Our interest is strictly limited to the target group consisting of Romanian citizens whose religious identity was acquired through religious conversion.

The sampling was built on the following inclusion-exclusion criteria: citizenship and religion. Potential subjects excluded from the sampling process were the Muslims who: have Romanian citizenship acquired on request (non-inherited), those whose parents (both) were born outside Romania and are members of a non-Romanian speaking ethnic community and, at the same time, of course, those who have a religion other than Islam. The degree of the religiosity of the respondents, whether practicing or non-practicing, is not a criterion for inclusion or exclusion of the respondents from the target group. The location of the respondents was neither an inclusion nor an exclusion criteria. The Romanian converts to Islam who live outside Romania were able to take part in this study.

The research strategy represents the totality of methods and instruments for data collection and interpretation. Given the fact that the present study is a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive one, the research strategy will be one that combines not only a method of collecting and interpreting data, but more for each of these two stages.

In our study we will work with three types of data: printed papers and audio-video materials, the research interviews which address the target group and the observations collected during our field work.

The first category of data is the most varied one and includes: scientific materials (volumes and articles), official documents (i.e. the law of cults), official statistics (data on Romanians who declared themselves as Muslims), press materials (radio, television, periodicals), materials published by the Mufti Institution and the Muslim organizations in Romania (books, brochures, magazines), online materials published by members or representatives of the Romanian Muslim community (articles, conferences, videos, audios), materials from social networks posted by members or representatives of the Romanian Muslim community and materials from personal conversations with members or representatives of the Romanian Muslim community (Whatsapp and Facebook).

The second and third categories of data are: information collected from 17 respondents following the field work, respectively data collected through observation techniques.

In the second chapter of the study we bring into discussion the existing types of religious and community authority in the Muslim community: the authority represented by the Mufti and the authority represented by the Muslim organizations in Romania. In this chapter we show the links and the types of cooperation that exists between organizations, how they were founded, what kind of Islam they promote and, at the same time, what are the types of activities they carry on.

At the present moment, the Romanian Muslim community consists demographically of: traditional national minorities (Turks, Tatars, Albanians, Rroma etc), non-traditional national minorities, present on the Romanian territory, which have appeared on the Romanian territory in the last three decades (i.e. Arabs, Persians, Afghans) and the ethnic Romanian converted to Islam.

Officially, the traditional Muslim community in Romania counts 64.337 Muslims, representing 0.3% of the total population of Romania and it consists largely of: Turks, Tatars and other national minorities specific to the motley demographic structure of Dobruja region². The Muslim cult is one of the eighteen religious cults recognized by the Romanian state. It has been officially recognized in 1923, once with the adoption of the new Constitution. Both institutionally and socially, the Islamic religion in Romania is associated in the Romanian collective mentality with the Dobruja region, and implicitly with the Turkish-Tatar community,

² Institutul Național de Statistică, *Recensământul Populației și al Locuințelor*, 2011.

seen as one of the ethnic communities loyal to Romanian nationalism. The predominant Islam in Romania – specific to the Turkish-Tatar community – is the Sunni denomination and the school of jurisprudence specific to the Muslim community in Dobruja is the Hanafi school, being the most permissive and tolerant school of Islamic jurisprudence³. Moreover, the type of Islam that is present in Dobruja is a heterodox one – influenced/shaped by the confessional realities and the ethnical mosaic of this region.

After 1990, Romania is beginning to see the emergence of a distinct group within the Muslim community. This group consists of people of Romanian ethnicity who identify themselves religiously as Muslims⁴. This new dynamic appears within the Muslim community in Romania as a result of mixed marriages and religious proselytism promoted, mostly, by the new Muslim associations and members of the Arab community in Romania. Currently, the group of Romanian Muslims officially counts 6,281 people, being composed mainly of Sunni Muslims (Sunni), which represents the dominant group, and Shia Muslims, the latter one being a minority and also less visible in the public and virtual space than the dominant group.

The two component communities/groups of the Muslim community in Romania (as a whole) refer to different and, in the same time, opposed authority entities⁵. Therefore, there are two important entities of authority: The Institution of Mufti and the civil sector (represented by the NGO-s of the non-traditional Muslim community). These two forms of religious authority, governmental and civil, on the one hand represented by the Mufti and on the other hand by the Muslim organizations in Romania, represent communities that have different interests, relationships and trajectories, in some aspects these being even opposite (i.e. theology, relationship with non-Muslims). From a confessional point of view, the Muslim community in Romania is not characterized by homogeneity and unity and it is divided by various internal disputes.

The traditional Muslim community, an exponent of *The Old Islam*, is organized around the Institution of Mufti and the non-traditional Muslim community is organized around the Muslim organizations in Romania. This form of religious authority, the latter one, is

³ Bogdana Teodorova, „Islam and the state in Romania and Bulgaria”, in *Annals of the University of Bucharest. Philosophy Series*, Vol. LXI, no.2, 2012, pp. 51-60.

⁴ Irina Vainovski-Mihai, „Romania”, in Jørgen S. Nielsen (ed.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, No. 5, Brill, 2015, pp. 531-544.

⁵ Alina Isac Alak, „Types of religious identities within Romanian Muslim Communities”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 14, issue 41, 2015, pp. 148-173

fragmentarily held by two types of Muslim non-governmental organizations that carry out (partially or fully) activities in Romania: internal non-governmental organizations and external non-governmental organizations. The internal Muslim organizations (NGO) are those founded on the Romanian territory by Romanian citizens or foreign citizens who reside on the Romanian territory, the legal status of this type of organizations being therefore regulated by the Romanian state legislation. External Muslim organizations (NGO) are set up by foreign citizens (or with dual citizenship), outside Romania, on the territory of other states and are exempted from a direct control of the Romanian state. From an ideological-theological point of view, the Muslim non-governmental organizations operating in Romania, both internal and external, can be considered as exponents of two currents of interpretation of Islamic theology: neo-conservatism and ultraconservatism.

The authority represented by the Muslim organizations is visibly divided. It is fragmentarily held by internal Muslim organizations and external Muslim organizations. Most internal Muslim organizations have links in one form or another with Muslim organizations outside Romania (external). The collaboration is either a direct one, without any kind of mediation, or an indirect one, based on different types of mediation.

Twelve Muslim non-governmental organizations operate in Romania: nine are internal (based in Romania) and four are external (based in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Canada). Of the nine internal Muslim organizations, only three organizations can be considered independent and distinct in terms of organizational identity and the activities in which they are involved. Almost all Muslim organizations in Romania, with one exception, are founded, led and dominated by influent members of the *The New Islam*, namely by members linked, in one way or another, to the Arab community in Romania.

The external Muslim organizations operating in Romania do not have legal personality or public offices in Romania. Their target group includes both components – Muslim and non-Muslim – but the emphasis is on the non-Muslim component. All these external Muslim organizations, specific to the New Islam, have as their sole and main purpose the religious proselytism. This type of religious proselytism, practiced by these organizations, is aimed at both non-Muslims and the Muslim community in Romania. The promoted Islam is ultra-conservative and has theological characteristics specific to neo-salafism.

The third chapter is dedicated to religious conversion. In this chapter we discuss the pioneering endeavors of our contemporaries in defining, approaching and understanding it. At the same time, we will describe the analytical approaches to religious conversion that have helped us to understand it in all its complexity and its many dimensions.

There is currently no definition to explain the religious conversion in an absolute way. The definitions of this phenomenon are divided as follows: the classical interpretation, in which the convert has a secondary and almost external role to the conversion, and the modern interpretation, in which the convert has the primary and active role in relation to the conversion⁶.

At the root of the classical interpretation of this phenomenon is the Christian perspective that was built around the conversion of the apostle Paul, described in the Book of Acts (9: 1-22) that had a fundamental role on subsequent theological studies in this regard⁷.

Conversion, in Raymond Paloutzian's view, which offers one of the most complete and complementary definitions in the contemporary context, is a distinct process by which a person moves from believing/adhering to something and/or practicing a set of religious teachings or spiritual values, to believe/adhere to something and/or practice something different. According to his view, the process of transformation following religious conversion can extend over a varied period of time: from a few moments to a few years⁸.

The literature on religious conversion currently discusses the existence of three paradigms: the classical, the contemporary-active (systemic) and the functionalist (narrative-biographical).

In the classical paradigm, the individual, the subject of religious conversion, has a rather peripheral role in relation to conversion. The convert is perceived as nothing more than a passive agent in terms of his own experience, which is reduced to factors and realities external to the individual who experiences it.

The contemporary-active or systemic paradigm starts from the premise that the individual is an active agent in terms of religious conversion. The individual is positioned on a central role, is the active agent who experiences or operates with religious conversion, as such, has the ability to promote, facilitate or mediate it, both in relation to him and in relation to other individuals.

⁶ James Richardson, „The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (2), 1985, pp. 163-79.

⁷Stephen D. Glazier „Spiritual Baptists Who Become Rastafarians and Then Become Spiritual Baptists Again”, in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2003, pp. 149-170.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 209-230.

The functionalist paradigm (biographical narrative) is focused with predilection on the individual, on the biographical function of conversion. This paradigm emphasizes the subjective experience of the convert – understood through his personal biography – in relation to experiencing religious conversion.

Within these three paradigms, numerous study models of this phenomenon can be listed. The most common models of the study of religious conversion belong to Lewis Rambo (systemic model), Stefano Allievi (essentialist model), Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (functionalist model), Anne Sophie Roald and Anna McGinty.

The fourth chapter is the last chapter of this paper where we present and analyze the data collected during the field work. Therefore, in this part of the paper we discuss the individual history of each participant then the attention shifts to topics such as: motivation for conversion, the experience of pronouncing the confession of faith, religious practices, religious life, the tendencies of converts in relation to the assumed religion and their relationship with the new community.

Field survey data were collected through a number of 17 research interviews, of which ten were conducted face-to-face, four by telephone, and three by virtual correspondence (i.e. email/Facebook).

The 17 interviewees are people converted to Islam aged between 23 and 58, of which eleven female respondents and six male respondents. Out of the total number of interviewees, eight respondents have a higher education level and nine respondents have a secondary education level. The range of time since the Islamic religion was assumed varies between 2 to 20 years.

The vast majority of respondents, thirteen out of seventeen, came into contact with Islam as a result of interpersonal relations with native Muslims (usually Arabs or Turks). In most interviews, respondents described that they became interested in the Islamic religion due to Muslims with whom they engaged in discussions about Islam. The types of interpersonal relationships identified in the respondents' biographies that can be related to the conversion to Islam are the following: affective, family and social.

Most of the respondents have biographies that contain elements that can trigger crises, some of them major crises (i.e. those that question the identity and existential reports of the individual), and others minor crises but, in essence, just as reforming, the difference being related only to the intensity with which they unfold.

Visible or quantifiable transformations are theological and, in part, social. An actively assumed or re-assumed religious identity is obviously a much better articulated one than an inherited one. As a result of religious conversion, new converts assume a whole set of religious practices, some of which are strictly observed regardless of religiosity (i.e. the fast of the month of Ramadan), and others with varying variations (i.e. prayer).

The religious tendencies and attitudes encountered among converts are to imitate similar behaviors and practices specific to Arab members of the community. The types of interpretation of Islam encountered among converts are largely a product of Muslim organizations in Romania and are usually neoconservative and ultra-conservative. However, the types of assumptions of Islam that many Romanians assume generate conflicts even within the community.

Most Romanians converted to Islam integrate and take part in the social-religious life of the Muslim community. Romanians converted to Islam, who establish *pre* or *post* conversion relations with local communities, are perceived with interest and openness within most local Muslim communities in the country. Many Romanians converted to Islam integrate quickly and maintain permanent contacts with community members and the religious life.

In addition to the fact that most Romanians integrate in one way or another in the new Muslim community, there is also a tendency to distance themselves from the community after a period of time that varies from one convert to another.

The relationship of Romanian Muslims with the community has three components: the local community, the NGOs and the Mufti, and their relations with these three vary from individual to individual. The most common trend among converts is to maintain a relationship with the first two components by rejecting the third component - the relationship with the mufti.

The relationship with the Mufti is unpopular among converts or non-Turkish-Tatar Muslims. At best, the perception and relationship with the Mufti is only symbolic and is found *par excellence* among Muslims who adopt a progressive interpretation of Islamic theology.

The legitimacy of Muslim organizations in Romania among the non-traditional Muslim community, and therefore also among Romanians converted to Islam, is one that transcends the official authority held by the Mufti Institution. We reaffirm that for the interviewed respondents the Mufti Institution does not represent a source of religious authority and even more, none of them feels represented by it, having no relationship with it.

Regarding the process of conversion to Islam among Romanians, we find that the role of Muslim organizations in Romania is fundamental. Through the activities they carry out and the framework they offer, NGOs are important actors that promote, facilitate, mediate and manage the conversion to Islam in Romania.

Muslim organizations generate religious models that are emulated among Romanians converted to Islam. At the same time, they promote different forms of interpretation of the Islamic religion that have a significant influence on the visions and religious attitudes of converts. The religious and cult life specific to the Romanians converted to Islam, of the non-traditional Muslim community, is parallel, distinct and different from that of the traditional Muslim community from Dobruja.

Beyond all these particularities of the Muslim community in Romania, the aim of this research paper is to present a picture of the Romanians converted to Islam and, at the same time, to explore their religious life inside the non-traditional Muslim community or partly outside it.