

*Conversion, Manipulation, and Legal Exemption: A Few Case Studies from the Early Islamic Period*

Ecclesiastical permission to divorce without legal justification, release of Jewish widows from their levirate bonds, moderation of Islamic religious duties, attempts to escape commercial commitments, and evasion of penal sanctions are examples of exemptions that were sought by means of or issued in response to conversion to Islam in the first few centuries of Islamic rule. Indeed, in most present-day societies exemptions of this type are bound to be met by the rigorous objection of formal state and legal authorities. Yet in the period under discussion, in the context of a social setting that was founded on religious affiliation, religious conversion signaled a radical social act that was often manipulated by individuals for the sake of improving their personal status. The cases that will be presented in this paper were selected from the vast legal literature that was left behind by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim legal authorities from Mesopotamia and its environs in the eighth through eleventh centuries. They suggest both the willingness of religious elites to relax regulations and the attempts of members of their communities to obtain various exemptions, all in response to the threat or given the prospect of conversion to Islam.