In Western societies, religion is allegedly a private matter (or so the norms of modernization and secularization would have us believe). In actuality, religion is a highly social and public phenomenon, one that is also integrated closely with other social institutions such as marriage and nationality or ethnicity. Therefore, membership in—or conversion to—a religion is often a matter of grave family and public concern, with powerful social and political consequences.

For the Kalasha of Pakistan, converting to Islam is a serious matter. As Wynne Maggi explains, while “all neighboring peoples in this region celebrate a common faith in Islam (though there is, of course, great sectarian, cultural, and linguistic diversity), the Kalasha still actively practice their indigenous religion” (2006: 80) and equally actively resist the incursion of Islam. One of the ways in which they declare their difference from surrounding Muslim peoples is in their endorsement of love-marriages, as opposed to the arranged marriages customary in neighboring societies. Indeed, although many Kalasha marriages too are arranged, at least initially, Maggi contends that the “cultural rights that young Kalasha people claim to translate love and longing into marriage, unique in this very conservative region, is a central marker of Kalasha ethnicity” (82).

Parents often submit to their children’s love-preferences, but when they do not, the young lovers have the cultural option to elope. And even when couples are married by arrangement, women still retain a great deal of freedom, including the freedom to leave, and husbands “are well aware that they have a few short years to win their ‘little wife’s’ affection and loyalty” (84). This is why the men and their kin ply the wives with gifts, from food treats to consumer goods.
The freedom of women is pronounced in other ways compared to their Muslim neighbors:

Women wear elaborate dresses, headdresses, and pounds of colorful, expensive glass beads, and they do not veil their faces. They make and drink wine. Both men and women dance and sing publicly. They worship a pantheon of lesser gods and goddesses, though they also agree that there is only one God. Yet when asked what differentiates them from their Muslim neighbors, Kalasha people almost always remark that ‘our women are free’ (86).

As would be imagined, “the concept of women’s freedom serves as an important incentive for Kalasha women not to defect from the community by marrying one of the wealthier and more prestigious Muslim groups that surround them…. Kalasha women value and cultivate their sexual and marital freedom, and explicitly cite it (well, and the fact that they would have to give up their beautiful beads) as the most important reason not to convert” (87).

At the same time, though, young Kalasha may use the specter of conversion to Islam to pressure their parents into meeting their demands. “By converting, the couple would escape the authority of their parents and of Kalasha traditions. They would be married by a mullah and bound in a new moral community. Converting to Islam is a desperate act, because it is irrevocable—but for this very reason it is an effective threat that gives young lovers powerful leverage in these emotionally charged situations” (87-8). Thus, unhappy parents are likely to capitulate to their children’s wishes for a love-match, rather than lose them altogether to their Islamic neighbors. One wonders how real this threat is, however, since the young lovers would be giving up so much—including the woman’s cherished freedom—in order to get their way in marriage.

In Papua New Guinea the politics of conversion to Islam are similar yet different. There, as throughout the Pacific region, Christianity has been stunningly successful: some islands boast greater than ninety percent Christian identity, and although it is an introduced religion Christianity has generally come to be
seen as integral to local and national culture. Understandably, then, conversion to Islam, or simply the growth of the Muslim minority, has been a source of tension and conflict in these places.

According to Scott Flower, “there is potential for communal and religious conflict (nonviolent and violent) to evolve between the Muslim minority and Christian majority in Papua New Guinea. Major contributing factors include the perceived threat that a growing Muslim minority represents in the eyes of some Christians, the ongoing verbal and physical attacks against Muslims by Christians, and religious discrimination against Islam by the Papua New Guinea Government, Christian churches and the general public” (2012: 202). Muslims definitely feel the strain, as the president of the Islamic Society of Papua New Guinea noted:

We are a minority community and Islam is now subject to ever increasing attacks by its enemies under the guise of “war on terrorism.” Enemies of Islam are out to suppress and eliminate the growth and influence of Islam worldwide; Papua New Guinea is no exception. History has shown that similar situations resulted in the unification of the Muslim ummah (quoted 202).

And these worries are not unfounded: “The increasing number of physical attacks involving Christian protagonists is compounded by rhetorical religious and political attacks by Christians, Christian churches and Christian politicians within the country, which further enhance and promote Muslims’ negative and inaccurate perceptions of the Christian community in the broader population” (203). Some Christian individuals and organizations have gone so far as to request the government to outlaw Islam by amending Papua New Guinea’s constitution curtailing freedom of religion. In the last decade, a number of government ministers, including a Governor-General, have supported this type of discrimination. Papua New Guinea Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Alan Marat stated in 2002 that “a sensible government is expected to do something about the violent behavior of individuals based on their beliefs,” and he proposed “changing the country’s constitution to ban so-called violent religions” (205).

Why then would locals choose to join Islam, when it is clearly so unpopular and subject to informal and formal discrimination? Flower notes five reasons why Papua New Guineans resist or even reject
Christianity. The first is “disillusionment and dissatisfaction” with Christianity; for instance, many new Muslims view Christianity as weak and ineffective at solving their individual problems (like alcoholism or sexual immorality) or the country’s problems. The second reason is, fascinatingly, their alarm at the destruction of traditional culture, which is often called kastom in local pidgin English. “For converts, Islam provides a way of protecting valuable aspects of traditional culture (kastom). This is particularly relevant, given that Islam is free from any association with negative colonial and racial legacies and is a global religion equal to Christianity in its nature” (208). In particular, they often maintain that Islam is consistent or congruent with native culture, on such points as strict laws on punishment, food rules, gender segregation and marriage (including polygamy), embodied symbols like beards and circumcision, and family norms.

The remaining three reasons given for the appeal of Islam over Christianity are that Christian institutions seem to be avaricious and money-grubbing, that Christianity and especially Christian clergy are hypocritical, and that Christianity is racist, promoting the values, wealth, and power of white Westerners and discriminating against native peoples. The same objections have been lodged by indigenous people around the world (including Australian Aboriginals and New Zealand Maori), especially the charge that Christianity is basically a “white” religion prejudicial to people of color, leading to a very interesting increase in the number of indigenous Muslims. Many new Muslims insist that Islam has a better record of racial equality and inclusion, but time will tell whether this enthusiasm is justified or whether their hopes and aspirations for equality with a hegemonic religious center will be frustrated once again.

References