

*FEELING MUSLIM: PROLEGOMENA TO THE STUDY OF*  
AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO ISLAM

by

KARLA NICOLE EVANS

(With the Direction of Alan Godlas)

ABSTRACT

In contrast to studies of identity formation of converts to Islam that do not attempt to analyze experiences and identify emotions within different stages of the conversion process, evidence from this mixed-methods study of American female converts to Islam reveals: 1) some converts distinguish between outwardly *becoming/being* Muslim at the time of conversion to Islam and *feeling* Muslim; 2) some of the key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness* (as identified by 257 U.S. female converts); 3) the greater the degree of key factors, the more rapidly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, and the lesser the degree of key factors, the more slowly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, if at all; 4) additional significant issues related to *feelings of Muslimness* are the degree to which such feelings differ in public and private settings, the extent to which the feelings are esoterically and/or exoterically based, and 5) what *feeling Muslim* means to American female converts to Islam.

INDEX WORDS: Feeling Muslim, Conversion studies, American female converts to Islam, U.S. female converts to Islam, Islam in America, American Muslims, U.S. Muslims, African-American Muslims, Latina Muslims, Hispanic Muslims, Muslim Americans, Religious Conversion, Conversion to Islam, Conversion as transition, Conversion as transformation, Religious transformation, Spiritual transformation, Being and becoming, Identity formation, Identity cultivation, Conversion Process, American Muslim communities, U.S. Muslim communities, U.S. female Muslim convert support, American female convert support, Unmosqued, Islamophobia

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KARLA NICOLE EVANS

B.A., the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of  
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by

KARLA NICOLE EVANS

Major Professor: Alan A. Godlas

Committee: Kenneth Lee Honerkamp

Sandy Dwayne Martin

Carolyn Jones Medine

Electronic Version Approved:

Julie Coffield

Interim Dean of the Graduate School

The University of Georgia

May 2015

## DEDICATION

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clearly from error; whoever rejects evil and has faith in God hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks. And God hears and knows all things. (Qur'an 2:256)

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## INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO ISLAM

In contrast to some studies of identity formation of converts to Islam that do not attempt to analyze experiences and identify emotions within the conversion process, evidence from this mixed-methods study of American female converts to Islam—building on certain conversion stage theories and process models—reveals: 1) some converts distinguish between outwardly *becoming/being* Muslim at the time of conversion to Islam and *feeling* Muslim; 2) key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness* (as identified by 257 U.S. female converts); 3) the greater the degree of key factors, the more rapidly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, and the lesser the degree of key factors, the more slowly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, if at all; 4) additional significant issues related to *feelings of Muslimness* are the degree to which such feelings differ in public and private settings, the extent to which the feelings are esoterically and/or exoterically based, and 5) what *feeling Muslim* means to American female converts to Islam.

In this chapter I contend that it is increasingly crucial for scholars of religion (and other fields) to research U.S. converts to Islam, and in particular women, for the following reasons: Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world; many Americans find it novel and even incomprehensible that a “real American” would convert to Islam; the diversity of Muslim Americans is underrepresented and misrepresented in the news media; and the majority of U.S. converts to Islam are women.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (Oxford University Press, 2006), Book., 42.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have taken anti-Muslim sentiment worldwide, and especially in the United States, to an all-time high.<sup>2</sup> From Gallup, to Pew Research Center, to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the numbers are in, and they do not look good for Muslims in America. Islamophobia has a grip on the United States, and increasingly Muslim Americans as well as those who are mistaken for Muslims, are finding themselves the victims of violence, hate crimes, and discrimination in nearly all sectors of the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> In her 2012 thesis *Islamophobia in the Post-9/11 United States*, Andrea Cluck, drawing from the Runnymede Trust, states,

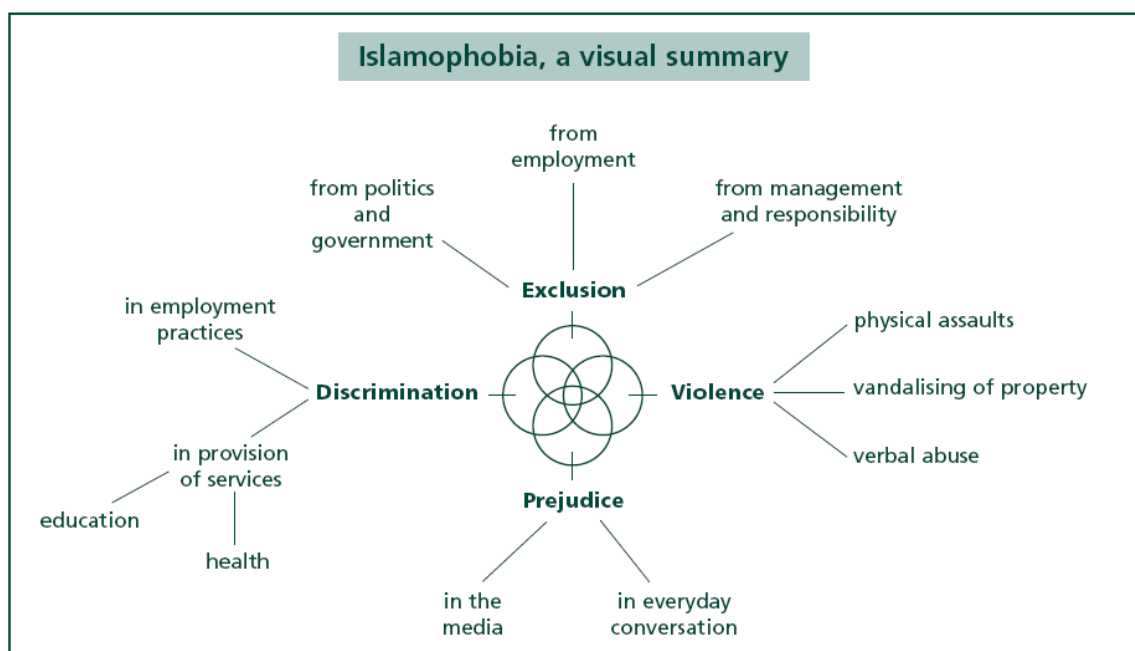
Islamophobia includes discrimination against Muslims in employment practices, the provision of health care and education; exclusion of Muslims from government, politics, and employment (including management and positions of responsibility); violence toward Muslims including physical assaults, verbal abuse and vandalizing of property; and prejudice against Muslims in the media and in “everyday conversation.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* is a documentary based on a six-year research project by Gallup, considered by many to be the preeminent polling organization. During the course of six years, more than 50,000 respondents were interviewed, accounting for a 90% representation of the global Muslim population. A comparison of Gallup Poll findings showed that in the United States, lack of understanding of Islam and Muslims was at 54% in 2002 and five years later, in 2007 was at 57%, showing a greater lack of understanding now than shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Elizabeth Cluck, *Islamophobia in the Post-9/11 United States [Electronic Resource] : Causes, Manifestations, and Solutions / by Andrea Elizabeth Cluck* (2012., 2012), Bibliographies. Theses. Non-fiction., 66-71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



**Figure 1: Islamophobia, a visual summary from the Runnymede Trust Report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*<sup>5</sup>**

According to a 2007 Gallup Poll, 57% of the American public feel less knowledgeable about Muslims and Islam six years after 9/11 than they did in a 2002 Gallup Poll (54%).<sup>6</sup> While there is a great deal of research focusing on the experiences of Muslim Americans post-9/11, it is crucial to understand whom the term “Muslim Americans,” is referencing. A majority of the research on Muslim Americans focuses on the experiences of first generation, foreign-born immigrants, and the second and third generations of U.S.-born immigrant families.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

However, a 2007 Pew Research Center report, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, offers a great deal of information, stating that:

More than three-quarters (77%) of Muslim Americans say they have always been a Muslim, while 23% say they converted to Islam. Nine-in-10 (91%) converts to

<sup>5</sup> The Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Gallup Poll, 2007. “Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157082/islamophobia-understanding-anti-muslim-sentiment-west.aspx> (Access date: December 18, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Inc. Gallup, “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait,” (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, 2011. “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism.”



Islam were born in the United States, and almost three-fifths (59%) of converts to Islam are African American. A 55% majority of converts identify with Sunni Islam and another quarter (24%) identify with no specific tradition. Only 6% of Muslim converts in America identify themselves as Shia.<sup>10</sup>

There is a wealth of valuable information in this report, and this cannot be understated.

A 2009 partnership between Gallup and The Coexist Foundation, the Muslim West Facts Project, conducted a study, which resulted in a report, *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*.

The word 'convert' and/or 'converts' is only used six times in the entirety of the 140-page report.

Of those six times, only four were pertaining to the data within the report, and of those four instances, three were in this excerpt:

Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group surveyed in the United States. African Americans (who are, for the most part, converts to Islam and children of converts) represent the largest racial group (35%) within the national Muslim population. The significant proportion of native-born converts to Islam is a characteristic unique to the United States and not found in the makeup of Muslim populations living in other Western countries. More than a quarter of Muslim Americans (28%) classify themselves as "white." However, the findings do not show whether such Muslims are of European, Middle Eastern, or other geographical origins. Nearly one in five Muslim Americans identify themselves as "Asian." Another large group (18%) classifies itself as "other," which may reflect identification with more than one race or people's discomfort with conventional racial categories. Finally, just 1% of Muslim Americans volunteered "Hispanic" as their answer.<sup>11</sup>

The data of American converts to Islam in this survey is limited, the line of questioning for racial and ethnic demographic data is vague, there are no questions directly about converts in the survey, and there is no follow-up questioning to provide an explanation for the ethnic origins of the respondents.

The researchers make the statement that the majority of African American Muslims are converts to Islam and the children of converts, but when it comes to the (28%) of Muslim Americans who classify themselves as 'white,' there is no information whatsoever as to what percentage are American converts to Islam. There was no designation for Hispanic or Arab-

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<sup>10</sup> Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream." Pg. 22

<sup>11</sup> Gallup, "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait." Pg. 20

American listed in the initial question of race/ethnicity. Another group with no designation in the initial question on race and ethnicity is the Hispanic/Latino population. Additionally, the document states that, “It is interesting to note the relative similarity between Muslim African Americans and African Americans in the general public in spiritual commitment because African Americans likely make up the lion’s share of converts to Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

According to a 2011 Pew Research Center report, *Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism*, the majority of Muslim Americans (63%) are first generation, foreign-born immigrants. Second generation Muslim Americans, who are born in the U.S., but have at least one parent that is foreign-born, make up 15% of the Muslim American population, while third generation Muslim Americans, who themselves are U.S.-born and whose parents are both U.S.-born, make up 22% of the American population. Of all Muslim Americans, 21% are converts to Islam.<sup>13</sup> Who are these converts?

What became more and more clear is that there is a vast gap in current literature on American converts to Islam, which leaves this group significantly underrepresented in academic research while simultaneously underrepresented and misrepresented in the U.S. media.

So, why study American converts to Islam? For one, thing, Islam is arguably one of the fastest growing religions in the world, even in a post-9/11 United States. Secondly, because of a lack of understanding of the diversity of Muslim Americans through underrepresentation and misrepresentation in the news media, conflicting information in polls, and Islamophobic political and civic discourse, many Americans find it incomprehensible that a “real American” would convert to Islam.

The American public is bombarded with overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. news media (57% of Muslims portrayed in the U.S. news media are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Pg. 80

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center, 2011. “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism.”

militants, when in reality they only make up a fraction of 1% of the global Muslim population).<sup>14</sup> It is now imperative for scholars of religion provide accurate portrayals of Islam and Muslim Americans to the American public in particular, as there is possibly, and even probably, a direct correlation between the reported decrease in understanding of the American public about Islam and Muslims as well as an increase in hate crimes targeting Muslim Americans and those mistaken for Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Due to a lack of information and misinformation, it is essential for Americans to see that the diversity of Muslim Americans goes far beyond first generation, foreign-born immigrants, and their U.S.-born children, and is inclusive of American converts to Islam who are culturally quite American.

Given the confusion regarding why an American would convert to Islam, it is essential for scholars of religion to provide the American public with a deeper understanding of how converts to Islam understand their own conversion experiences and identity formation. Conversion to Islam, as with religious conversions in general, is not a decision that is taken lightly and deserves a more in-depth analysis than statistics on demographics.

Regarding the specific focus on females within the subcategory of American converts to Islam, the vast majority of converts to Islam are women, and there is a misconception that women would not willingly or independently convert to Islam because it is often understood by non-Muslims to be oppressive of women. A relatively recent book, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* states, "Surveys conducted through (CAIR) conclude that some 20,000 people convert each year, with women outnumbering men approximately four to one."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, when it comes to U.S. news media's portrayal of Muslim women, 73% of images the American public are seeing of Muslim women are portraying them as passive victims

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Gardner, "Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think," (Unity Productions Foundation, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Cluck, *Islamophobia in the Post-9/11 United States [Electronic Resource] : Causes, Manifestations, and Solutions / by Andrea Elizabeth Cluck.*

<sup>16</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. Pg. 42

who are oppressed, compared with only 15% of Muslim men who are portrayed in such a manner.<sup>17</sup> This portrayal of Muslim women does not at all match the perceptions Muslim women have of themselves, which is reflected in the findings of this study. This study provides American female converts to Islam a platform on which to tell their own stories of conversion and experiences of Islam through a uniquely American lens to which their fellow citizens may relate.

Research investigating Muslim women is seen as having such great importance in the scholarly community that on December 2, 2013, Dr. Kecia Ali, an Associate Professor of Religion at Boston University, sent the following e-mail via the ISLAMAAR listserv, which caters to Islamic Studies scholars in the American Academy of Religion, it said:

Dear colleagues,

After a second successful Muslim Women's Studies mentoring and networking breakfast at this year's AAR annual meeting, a group of us are proceeding with an application for a new program unit on Women, Gender, and Islam. This group will not duplicate the work of the existing Islam program units (Study of Islam section, Qur'an group, Islamic Mysticism group, and Contemporary Islam group), all of which strive to incorporate the study of women as well as gender analysis in their panels. Although we would be open to co-sponsored paper or panel sessions in years to come, we are primarily interested in non-traditional programming – creating an environment that fosters networking and mentoring; hosting thematic conversations around perennial themes like women's authority and newer topics like masculinity; and perhaps organizing book panels. Becoming a formal program unit will enable us to use regular AAR meeting spaces and thereby include more people than we could accommodate this year and last.<sup>18,19</sup>

I recently followed up with Dr. Kecia Ali regarding the progress of the initial proposal, to which she responded, "You may be interested to know that the program unit has been approved, thanks in no small part to the support of AAR colleagues and other Islam program unit leaders. We are now in the process of putting together this year's workshop."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gardner, "Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think."

<sup>18</sup> These e-mails are shared with permission from the author, Dr. Kecia Ali.

<sup>19</sup> Kecia Ali, December 2, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> March 25, 2015.

An understanding of American female converts to Islam and what makes them *feel* Muslim could not come at a better time. The purpose of this study is to provide a more accurate and comprehensive examination of one aspect of Islam in America: the U.S. female convert.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACKNOWLEDGING EMOTIONS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

#### Introduction

As stated in the Introduction this study reveals: 1) some American female converts distinguish between outwardly *becoming* Muslim and inwardly *feeling* Muslim; 2) some key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness*; the greater the degree of key factors, the more rapidly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, and the lesser the degree of key factors, the more slowly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, if at all; 4) additional significant issues related to *feelings of Muslimness* are the degree to which such feelings differ in public and private settings, the extent to which the feelings are esoterically and/or exoterically based, and 5) what *feeling Muslim* means to American female converts to Islam. However, when the omission of a respondent's emotions occurs, large and important parts of their experiences are lost in translation. Including a discussion of emotions is imperative, for not only the researcher and the audience to understand the respondent, but also for the representation of the respondent and their experiences to occur in such a way that fulfills the trust between the researcher and participant. Analyzing individual respondents' feelings is not within the scope of this study. To attain the highest level of nonbiased objectivity, this study uses both manual techniques and QDAMiner, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to categorize the feelings that occur during the conversion process by identifying "emotions," words used by respondents to describe their conversion experiences.

It is also crucial that the reader is privy to the emotions experienced by the author of this thesis, not only as a researcher, but also as an American female convert to Islam. This chapter argues that scholars of religion who neglect acknowledging and/or analyzing emotions are doing

a great disservice to the respondents, to the audience, and to themselves. This chapter concludes with a personal subjectivity statement.

### **The Emotions of Respondents: Why Discuss Them?**

When a researcher decides to study a group of people, one of the first and most important procedural things to do, is to get permission from the group of people one wishes to study. During the process of obtaining permission, the researcher has to explain what it is that he or she is attempting to understand about the group and what question(s) the researcher hopes to be able to answer by the end of the project. A group under study may have their own reasons for allowing or not allowing an ‘outsider’ to come ‘in’ so to speak. It is often the case that the group may feel misunderstood by others and may see the research as an opportunity for others to learn about their culture and about them, as human beings. Upon receiving permission, the researcher may begin observing the group and attempting to become an insider, which requires building a certain level of trust with the respondents. In this way, the researcher has an obligation to the participants in the study, to give a factual representation of them as people. While factual representations are hopefully always the goal, when researchers neglect interpreting the emotions of respondents and themselves, a gap occurs. It would be nearly impossible to comprehend the experiences of any ‘other’ while simultaneously attempting to omit any discussion of emotions.

Imagine a tale of two participant observers, each tasked with observing the baptism of new converts to Christianity at a Pentecostal church and reporting the converts’ experiences. Researcher A is utilizing a methodological approach that requires a description of the baptism that is inclusive of emotions. Researcher B is utilizing a methodological approach that requires a description of the baptism that excludes emotions. Researcher A’s description may include a discussion of the emotions the convert was feeling before, during, and after the baptism, and how the convert felt that his/her sins were symbolically or literally washed away and that his/her life had literally been saved through this sacrament. Researcher A would also include a discussion of the emotions the convert experienced, such as feelings of joy, peace, wonder, affection,

anticipation, relief, etc.. Researcher B, on the other hand, may include a discussion the convert's entrance into the baptismal pool, hearing a recitation of a biblical passage, complete bodily submersion in the water, emergence while dripping wet, and exit from the baptismal pool. While, for our purposes here, both descriptions are brief, it is clear that Researcher A got a better understanding of what was truly going on for the convert than Researcher B. One description may relay an understanding of baptism as a life-altering experience for converts while the other may have a description of the ritual devoid of the ritual's power as a catalyst toward inner transformation.

### **The Emotions of Researchers: Why Do We Need to Know about Them?**

The subject matter of this section relies heavily on the scholarly volume, *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*<sup>21</sup>, whose contributors are some of the key scholars leading the push to “help retrieve emotion from the methodological margins of fieldwork.”<sup>22</sup> Within the text, the researchers investigate how some of their own emotions that occur during fieldwork inform their understanding of the complex and diverse contexts in which they find themselves. This is especially crucial when researchers are engaging in participant observation, during which, in some cases, a researcher may become part of the group he or she is studying by joining a community or by participating in a ritual in hopes of gaining an inside perspective on the functions and meanings of those activities as understood by those participating in them.

The traditional standpoint with regard to advising researchers about how to deal with any emotions that may arise in the field was to, “offer advice about how emotions could be “managed” and “tamed” in ways that would free fieldworkers to undertake more unclouded

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<sup>21</sup> James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, *Emotions in the Field : The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).. The main aim of this text is to retrieve emotion from the methodological margins of fieldwork and bring it to the mainstream.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg. 1



research.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, from a traditional empirical standpoint, there is a link between emotions in the field and cloudy research, whereas objectivity and emotional detachment are the standard. As Davies summarizes the traditional standpoint, “If emotion is linked with irrationality, and the irrational with a kind of distorted vision, then emotion is simply grit in the eye of rational inspection.”<sup>24</sup> Another way to look at it is, according to traditionalists, if it is subjective, reject it. So, in a very real way, researchers in the field have undergone years of training that if they feel any emotion, they are to squelch it, push it down, ignore it, and detach; for if they feel emotions, the belief is that all objectivity is lost, along with the validity of their research. Scholars from various fields are now coming forward to argue against the traditional stance and argue that emotions do have a place in fields other than psychology and can be a source of epistemological data, with the correct methodology.

Although there are many scholars who argue that emotions are informative in an epistemological sense, a majority of scholars continue to insist upon total detachment between the researcher and the subject. This insistence has led scholars such as Michael D. Jackson, an anthropologist and Visiting Distinguished Professor of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School, to push researchers from various fields to share the emotions they experience during fieldwork, and use those experiences in an epistemological sense. Jackson strongly believes that,

“One can use both psychology and local epistemologies to unravel field experiences by building upon George Devereux’s idea that much anthropological knowledge is an outcome both of disinterested observation and of the observer’s struggle to allay his anxieties and find his bearings in a new environment.”<sup>25</sup>

Jackson believes that researchers are also able to learn through the study of their own inner reactions and by using local epistemologies when in the field.

Another scholar, Tanya Luhmann, a professor of Anthropology at Stanford University, discusses her own ‘non-cognitive’ experiences and concludes that, “Individuals do not experience

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pg. 11

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pg. 12

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pg. 15

the ideas of their culture in the same way: They must have something else: a willingness, a capacity, perhaps an interest in allowing those cultural ideas to change their lives.”<sup>26</sup> She argues that, “If psychological and bodily proclivities make a difference to the way people use and understand cultural models, it is to the advantage of the anthropologist to understand their own proclivities and the way those proclivities may shape the way they learn about culture in the field.”<sup>27</sup>

Researching this topic, reading the scholarly arguments for and against interpreting one’s own emotions in the field, and seeing these scholars publish work that recognizes their emotions in the field as an integral part of their research has given me the courage to continue on my quest to do so as well. I view the interpretation and discussion of my own emotions in the field as being necessary for an accurate assessment of my findings to occur. Simply put, if there is a possibility that the emotions I am experiencing are affecting my analysis, I owe it to the study participants, the audience, and myself, to include a discussion of those emotions. I owe it to the study participants and the readers, to disclose my own subjectivity, in that I am an American female convert to Islam, and as such, this research is deeply important to me ... more important perhaps, than it would be for someone who is not an American female convert to Islam.

While the scope of this research project does not assess the emotional intelligence of the respondents, it is important to note that, for the purposes of my own self-reflection as both a researcher and a convert, I am working from the definition of emotional intelligence put forth by John Mayer, a personality psychologist, and Peter Salovey, a social psychologist, which states that,

Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge;

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pg. 21

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pg. 21

and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.”<sup>28</sup>

It is hard to imagine being in the field while having a goal of understanding the ‘other’ when one of the main obstacles to reaching an understanding is that one learns not to feel and not to relate. Imagine if Clifford Geertz, an influential cultural anthropologist, and his wife had not run away when the police arrived to disperse the crowd at an illegal cockfight in Bali. Clifford Geertz and his wife could have easily played the ‘foreigner’ card, but instead, they chose to run, just like everyone else. They ran into the home of a complete stranger, who was also running. When the police arrived to interrogate them, their host, a complete stranger to them, immediately jumped to their defense. Geertz and his wife had been in Bali for over a week and there had been little to no interaction with the Balinese during that time. However, all that changed when they stepped into their world and experienced the fear of running from the police, just like the native Balinese did. Geertz explains that,

The next morning the village was a completely different world for us. Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of all attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and most especially, amusement. Everyone in the village knew we had fled like everyone else. They asked us about it again and again (I must have told the story, small detail by small detail, fifty times by the end of the day), gently, affectionately, but quite insistently teasing us: “Why didn’t you just stand there and tell the police who you were?” “Why didn’t you just say you were only watching and not betting?” “Were you really afraid of those little guns?” ... “But above all, everyone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply “pulled out our papers” and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our covillagers.”<sup>29</sup>

While this is only one of many stories, it is a striking example of what can occur when the “interplay” that Jackson speaks of, happens. Geertz goes on to say that after that incident,

The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise, and certainly very much faster... And, perhaps most important of all, for the other things might have come in other ways, it put me very quickly on to a

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<sup>28</sup> John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey, "What Is Emotional Intelligence?," in *Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications.*, ed. Peter Salovey and David J. Sluyter (New York, NY US: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," (1973).

combination emotional explosion, status war, and philosophical drama of central significance to the society whose inner nature I desired to understand.<sup>30</sup>

Over the course of researching and writing this chapter, I began feeling like an archaeological ethnographer of living human experiences. This feels right. My longing for an archaeological excavation in a literal earthen field is now absent, and I find myself longing for this new excavation; realizing now, gold rarely materializes on the surface, you have to carefully excavate, collect artifacts, record and understand the context, and analyze the artifacts once the excavation is complete. For archaeologists, the most plentiful artifact of human life is pottery – the potsherds that remain once the people are gone. If one is fortunate enough, there will be enough fragments left behind to form some semblance of the former vessel as a whole. This leaves me wondering what the pottery of living human experiences is: the people; they are the complete vessels; their experiences are the potsherds they choose to share. These particular shared experiences, the potsherds of each human vessel are remnants of truth that can be pieced together to identify what the former vessel looked like and what events and processes brought about the transformation that exists today. It is in this way that scholars of religion, and particularly of religious conversion, may begin the difficult work of understanding the complex processes that come into play when an individual makes the conscious decision to leave the comfort or discomfort, as it may be, of their respective upbringings, to enter the unknown realm of a new religion. A subjectivity statement discloses my own biases as an American female convert to Islam.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

I am interested in studying American female converts to Islam. Converting to Islam in the United States can be an extremely difficult endeavor especially post-9/11, due to an increase in discrimination and prejudice. I distributed a mixed-methods survey, *Feeling Muslim* to converts to understand whether U.S. female converts to Islam distinguish between *being/becoming* Muslim

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Pgs. 416-417

by taking the shahada, and *feeling* Muslim. I also wanted to understand the process of conversion to Islam and post-conversion identity cultivation. The participants are American women of all races, ethnicities, classes, and sexual orientations who identify as converts to Islam and who were born in the United States.

In this thesis, I argue that there is a distinction between *being/becoming* Muslim at the time of conversion, and *feeling* Muslim. The expectation is that by understanding post-conversion identity formation, I will be able to develop an understanding of what makes American female converts to Islam *feel* Muslim.

I hold a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte with specializations in the Anthropology of Islam and Contact-Period Archaeology of the Southeastern U.S. I am currently a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Religion at the University of Georgia where I am pursuing an M.A. in Religion (Islamic Studies) with specializations in Religious Conversion, American Female Converts to Islam, Islam in America, Sufism, Primary Sources of Islam, Religiological Analysis of Islam, Emotional Intelligence, and Anthropology of Islam. Regarding geographic location and time period, my interest is in the United States, particularly post-9/11. Within the demographic of American Muslims, my current interest is in female converts because I am an American female convert to Islam who gradually, upon converting in the United States, post-9/11, began transitioning to Islam, which facilitated my *feelings of Muslimness* — I am still transitioning.<sup>31</sup>

As an American female convert to Islam, I believe my personal experiences give me a unique insight on the problems affecting other converts. Upon my conversion to Islam, I experienced numerous challenges, such as discrimination and prejudice not only from strangers, but also from acquaintances, friends, immediate family members, as well as other Muslims. I have to take special care of over attachment to the project and/or looking for answers that will

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<sup>31</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad : Women's Reform in Islam / Amina Wadud* (Oxford : Oneworld, c2006., 2006), Non-fiction.

satisfy my own personal needs rather than the needs of all the women I hope to represent through this project. I will do this by utilizing Emotional Intelligence and regularly reflecting on my emotions while in the field and while analyzing, reporting, and interpreting the results of the mixed-methods survey. I am confident that the anonymous responses to this study will enable me to identify common themes and develop a solid, comprehensive understanding of what makes American female converts to Islam *feel* Muslim. My intention is that my awareness of personal bias will allow me greater objectivity, thereby reducing the likelihood of biased findings, and increasing the likelihood of hermeneutical understanding.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW: VARIED APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

#### **Introduction**

In contrast to studies of religious conversion that avoid defining it altogether or assign a monolithic meaning, this chapter begins with a general definition of religion, reviews various approaches to religious conversion within four academic fields of study, and lays the groundwork on which to build a definition of the process of religious conversion and identity cultivation based on the self-reported experiences of 257 American female converts to Islam. The chapter ends with concluding remarks, a brief summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the four disciplinary approaches, and my approach to the study of religious conversion moving forward. Due to the nature and scope of this thesis, the literature review is limited to a discussion of prevalent twenty and twenty-first century approaches to religious conversion within the fields of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Religious Studies (general and Islamic Studies), and concluding remarks on the advantages and disadvantages of each discipline.

To understand the process of identity cultivation among American female converts to Islam, or any group of converts regardless of religious affiliation, it is essential to have a working definition of religious conversion that is consistent with a majority of converts' self-described experiences. However, a review of the literature available lays a framework of current understandings of religious conversion, which allows for comparison. Curiously, the vast majority of literature discussing religious conversion is outside the field of Religious Studies, which could be due to Religious Studies scholars distancing themselves from Phenomenology, which seeks to study human consciousness by understanding the interaction of the devotee(s) with phenomena. This distancing within Religious Studies could explain the consistent delegation

of studies of religious conversion to the realms of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and even History. While the perspectives of religious conversion in these fields are valuable and should be present in any comprehensive study, I contend that the academic study of religious conversion belongs squarely within the field of Religious Studies since Religious Studies deals directly with what many have described as religious phenomenon. This is not to discount the ongoing research in other fields, but to say that it is time for religious conversion to return to the realm of the academic study of Religion, for without religion, there would be no study of religious conversion.

### **What is Religion?**

While this thesis and this chapter in particular address religious conversion, it is beneficial to have a working definition of religion itself. Roger Schmidt offers two definitions of religion which are useful here for our purposes, a substantive definition, and a formal definition: 1) “Seeking and responding to that which humans experience as ultimate or holy,” and 2) “A set of beliefs, practices, and social structures, grounded in a people’s experience of the holy, that accommodates their emotional, social, intellectual, and meaning-giving needs.”<sup>32</sup> The substantive definition Schmidt puts forward is useful in terms of defining religion and/or religious phenomena in relation to human experience, whereas the formal definition seeks to define religion by what it does for those who subscribe to it. Having a solid understanding of what religion is in a general and specific sense increases the degree to which one can grasp the nuances of religious conversion, beyond immediate change. Through an examination of prevalent twentieth and twenty-first century definitions of religious conversion in the fields of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Religious Studies coupled with a discussion of their

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<sup>32</sup> Roger Schmidt, *Exploring Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1988). Schmidt explains substantive as “an approach that seeks to define religion or religious phenomena in terms of its essential nature rather than by what it does.”



respective advantages and disadvantages, a more nuanced conception of how religious conversion is defined across disciplines emerges.

### **Psychological Approaches to Religious Conversion**

William James

Oddly enough, Psychology, not Religious Studies, is where the majority of literature on religious conversion resides. William James was one of the first in this field to define religious conversion, and in many ways, his initial observations on conversion as a process that is gradual or sudden, remain the standard today. James initially says the following about religious conversion in his classic psychological study, *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.<sup>33</sup>

James also mentions that, “To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.”<sup>34</sup>

It is from James’ early work on religious conversion that the concept of converted individuals as “once-born” or “twice-born” develops (untroubled and troubled/sick souls), which sets up a potentially misleading dichotomous framework for understanding those who convert. James’ main interest was extreme, emotionally charged cases, which as Henri Gooren correctly points out, “often bordered on the pathological, establishing a link between conversion and pathology that would prove very hard to overcome for generations of future scholars (especially

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<sup>33</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1902 and 1929).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

in psychology).<sup>35</sup> In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James identifies four “feelings which immediately fill the hour of the conversion experience.”<sup>36</sup> These “feelings” are: 1) the sense of higher control; 2) the sense of perceiving truths not known before; 3) an appearance of newness beautifies every object, and 4) the ecstasy of happiness produced.<sup>37</sup> James’ work laid the foundation for studies of religious conversion, which provides further clarification of why the majority of scholarly research on religious conversion is in Psychology rather than Religious Studies.

#### Raymond R. Paloutzian

In the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Raymond R. Paloutzian puts forth his chapter, “Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation,” and begins by asking why the psychology of religious conversion seems to have stood the test of time, which he answers by stating that, “psychological research on the processes that mediate religious conversion,” and more recently, “spiritual transformation, goes to the core of what it means to be a human.”<sup>38</sup> Paloutzian argues that understanding the processes of conversion requires an account of individual and socio-cultural factors, and their interplay, and recommends an examination of the following:

1. The paths that early psychological researchers in this area took and the context in which they worked;
2. The gaps that remained in the data and theory as that era came to an end;
3. How researchers in the more recent period, by employing the model of religion as a meaning system within the multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm, may be able to integrate diverse types of research on religious conversion and spiritual transformation through a common language;
4. How, in its modern manifestation, psychological research on religious conversion and spiritual transformation has expanded far beyond the scope of the early researchers and has bequeathed a great potential for us.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Henri Paul Pierre Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

<sup>36</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 10:168-174

<sup>38</sup> Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 210

Regarding the first area of examination, in his discussion of paths that early psychological researchers took, Paloutzian defines psychology as, “the scientific study of mental and behavioral processes,” stating that psychological knowledge ranges from, “the micro to the macro in level of analysis.”<sup>40</sup> He also provides a brief overview of early definitions of religious conversion, including conversion as sudden or instantaneous, such as with Saul of Tarsus, but goes on to blend notions of religious conversion with notions of spiritual transformation, which culminates with the following definition:

[Conversion is defined as] a more distinct process by which a person goes from believing, adhering to, and/or practicing one set of religious teachings or spiritual values to believing, adhering to, and/or practicing a different set. The transformative process in conversion may take variable amounts of time, ranging from a few moments to several years, but it is the distinctiveness of the change that is its central identifying element. In contrast to someone arriving at a point of belief through the process of socialization and other developmental mechanisms, the convert can identify a time before which the religion was not accepted and after which it was accepted.<sup>41</sup>

Addressing his second area of examination, Paloutzian summarizes some early researchers of the psychology of conversion and observes five limitations of the early period: 1) the research was influenced by the particular religious context in which it was conducted, 2) which means the research was not inclusive of conversion to others religions, 3) study of converts was restricted to those who emphasized individual acceptance and conformed to a specific idea of religious conversion, 4) which led to restricted meanings of religious conversion, and 5) a lack of integration of theoretical ideas with the empirical research on the causes and consequences of conversion.<sup>42</sup>

Moving on to the third area of examination, Paloutzian highlights the need for a meaning-system model and points to the fact that psychology is all about meaning and the psychology of religious conversion is about individual perceptions of particular meanings. He asserts that the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 211

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 215

most powerful idea that psychologists have developed for, “understanding at all levels of analysis how human religiousness functions and how conversions and spiritual transformations happen,” is the model of religion as a meaning system.<sup>43</sup> Paloutzian then outlines three goals, which he finds to be essential for understanding religious conversion and spiritual transformation:

1. the creation of a complete psychological theory of human functioning;
2. the promotion of the psychology of religion in general psychology;
3. the creation of a theory based on data-evidence that explains the psychological processes that mediate religious conversion and the larger category of which it is a part, spiritual transformation.<sup>44</sup>

With these goals in mind, Paloutzian attends to questions of meaning, which he points out, are infinite. He goes on to say that when we ask what something means, we are really asking a great number of interrelated questions, which point to central questions about, how the human mind makes meaning and how we attribute a meaning to a stimulus.<sup>45</sup> Paloutzian then presents his social psychological way of defining a meaning system and its application to conversion and spiritual transformation, which he characterizes as, “a structure within a human cognitive system that includes attitudes and beliefs, values, focused goal orientations, general overall purposes, self-definition, and some locus of ultimate concern.”<sup>46</sup> He goes on to explain that each element affects the others, which may ultimately lead to a modification of some aspects of the meaning system, depending on the level of pressure imposed and the ability or inability of respective elements to withstand the pressure. He then makes an important distinction between religious conversion (when change reaches a certain threshold) and spiritual transformation (the replacement of a whole system by an entirely different one), which are dependent on the level of modification in the meaning systems.<sup>47</sup> It is at this point that Paloutzian outlines six elements of meaning systems, which he considers part of the process of conversion from one religion or spirituality to another, namely:

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 218

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 218-220

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 220

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 221

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

1. the person must need or want something; this may or may not be conscious or explicit;
2. the person must doubt that the need(s) can or will be met or that the problem(s) will be solved within the current frame of reference;
3. there must be contextual resources that make conversion possible;
4. the above resources must be noticed, encountered, and appropriated;
5. prohibitions and other barriers must be either set aside or satisfied;
6. the change must be implemented; something new must be believed or something actually done differently than before.<sup>48</sup>

Paloutzian states that these six fundamentals imply the presence of *inputs*, which are stimuli that enter the system and prompt modification, *intermediate processes*, which are the components of the six-step meaning system Paloutzian summarizes, and *outputs*, which are reactions to modifications in the meaning system.<sup>49</sup>

Addressing his last area of examination, Paloutzian discusses new directions for research and concludes with seven implications of meaning-system analysis, of which three are particularly important to the topic of this thesis. First, he states that there is no excuse for not having a data foundation for our ideas and not extrapolating from that data, theoretical frameworks. Second, Paloutzian asserts that research on meaning systems can be tested empirically, by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and lastly, he insists that interdisciplinary research from fields from the neurology of religion and conversion to the sociology and cultural understanding of religion and conversion is essential.<sup>50</sup>

Lewis R. Rambo

Currently, the authority on religious conversion in the field of Psychology and Religion is Lewis R. Rambo, author of *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Rambo almost immediately acknowledges that the average psychological study follows William James' model, which emphasizes crisis in the lives of converts, leading up to the conversion. However, Rambo argues that studies of religious conversion must be inclusive of cultural, social, personal, and religious systems and that for a deep understanding of religious conversion, the disciplines of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 222-223

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 223

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 224-228

anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies must be considered.<sup>51</sup> With this in mind, Rambo defines religious conversion as follows:

Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations. In this book we will see that (a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process.<sup>52</sup>

Rambo identifies five types of religious conversion in terms of “*how far someone has to go socially and culturally in order to be considered a convert*”: 1) Apostasy, or defection; 2) Intensification; 3) Affiliation; 4) Institutional transition; and 5) Tradition transition.<sup>53</sup> *Apostasy*, or *defection* is the rejection of a religious tradition or beliefs by previous members, and does not necessarily involve acceptance of a new tradition, but may indicate a shift toward a nonreligious value system. *Intensification* is a renewed commitment, by the convert, to a previous faith with which they had either formal or informal affiliation. *Affiliation* involves an individual or group shift from little or no religious commitment to full involvement with a religious community or institution. *Institutional transition* refers to an individual or group that remains in the same religious tradition, but changes communities. The last type of religious conversion Rambo discusses is *tradition transition*, which refers to an individual or a group shifting from one major religious tradition or worldview to another.<sup>54</sup> Of Rambo’s typology, tradition transition and in a few cases, affiliation, most closely align with the types of religious conversion discussed herein.

Rambo proposes a process-oriented, sequential stage model, for approaching the study of religious conversion as a “series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time.”<sup>55</sup> In his systemic stage model, Rambo outlines seven stages: 1) Context; 2) Crisis; 3) Quest; 4)

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993). 1: 7

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 1:5

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 1:12-14

<sup>54</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion.*, 1:12-14

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:16-17

Encounter; 5) Interaction; 6) Commitment, and 7) Consequences, which Rambo researches based on a six-step methodology: 1) Observation; 2) Description; 3) Empathy; 4) Understanding; 5) Interpretation, and 6) Explanation.<sup>56</sup> Rambo explains that a stage model is appropriate since, “conversion is a process of change over time, generally exhibiting a sequence of processes, although there is sometimes a spiraling effect – a going back and forth between stages.”<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Rambo says each stage has its own “cluster of themes, patterns, and processes that characterize it,” which may be seen as a “particular element or period during that process of change.”<sup>58</sup>

Regarding the first stage, context, Rambo explains that conversion takes place in a context, which encompasses conflict, confluence, and dialectical influences that facilitate and repress the conversion process<sup>59</sup>. He states that, “context embraces an overall matrix in which the force field of people, events, experiences, and institutions operate on conversion,” and that it is a process influenced by objective, external forces as well as subjective, internal motivations, experiences, and aspirations.<sup>60</sup>

The second stage, crisis, is characterized by the assumption that some form of crisis precedes conversion, and that the crisis may be, “religious, political, psychological, or cultural,” in origin. Rambo characterizes crisis as disorientation, and acknowledges that many scholars disagree on whether the crisis comes before or after contact with a proselytizer, but also points out that converts may be active agents in their own conversions.<sup>61</sup>

Rambo classifies the action stimulated by crisis as the third stage, quest, which according to Rambo, is an ongoing process that begins with the assumption that people actively seek to increase meaning and purpose in their lives, to move away from ignorance, and resolve

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<sup>56</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*. 1:18-19

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:16-17

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:17

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:20

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:44

inconsistencies.<sup>62</sup> Rambo outlines three beneficial sets of factors for navigating the quest stage: response style, which differentiates between active and passive converts; structural availability, which is the freedom an individual has from, “emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, and obligations into new options,” and motivational structures, which seek to identify motivational factors for religious conversion and acknowledges that these factors may change over time.<sup>63</sup>

The fourth stage is the encounter, which focuses Rambo’s assertion that, “no conversion occurs without encounter.”<sup>64</sup> Leading up to the chapter on encounter, Rambo discusses the advocates and their strategies, focusing on missionaries (advocates), or those around the world who are actively engaged in attempting to convert individuals to their respective religious traditions. Rambo classifies this as mission, which is an intentional effort to proselytize, whereas expansion is the growth of a religious tradition through childbirth or inclusion of new members without proselytization.<sup>65</sup> Rambo also discusses the strategy of the advocate before delving into the actual encounter stage between the advocate and convert, which he describes as, “the vortex of the dynamic force field in which conversion takes place.”<sup>66</sup>

The fifth stage Rambo outlines is interaction, which he describes as, “intense and crucial to the potential convert,” and which may be a brief, intense period, or a very long period during which potential converts begin to learn more about the teachings of a specific religious group and are encouraged to convert.

For Rambo, the sixth stage of religious conversion is commitment, during which, after an intense period of interaction, the potential convert makes the decision to convert, sometimes commemorated dramatically with public ceremonial rituals.<sup>67</sup> Rambo goes on to identify and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4:56

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 4:56-65

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 6:86

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5:66-68

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7:87

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 9:124



discuss five common elements of the commitment stage: decision-making, rituals, surrender, testimony manifested in language transformation and biographical reconstruction, and motivational reformulation.<sup>68</sup>

The final stage of Lewis Rambo's systemic stage model for religious conversion is consequences, which he characterizes as "complex" and "multifaceted" before delineating five approaches to their exploration: "the role of personal bias in assessment, general observations, and in-depth looks at sociocultural and historical consequences, psychological consequences, and theological consequences."<sup>69</sup> Rambo's approach represents a drastic shift in the study of religious conversion, toward a holistic, interdisciplinary approach.

### **Sociological Approaches to Religious Conversion**

John Lofland and Rodney Stark

In the field of Sociology, John Lofland and Rodney Stark's process model of religious conversion takes a cue from William James, placing great emphasis on crisis. Even though its' publication was in 1965, contemporary literature on religious conversion across the disciplines frequently cites the Lofland/Stark process model. Lofland and Stark begin by stating that all humans have "ultimate values, a world view, or a perspective furnishing them a more or less orderly and comprehensible picture of the world."<sup>70</sup> Based on this statement, Lofland and Stark go on to say, "When a person gives up one such perspective or ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as *conversion*."<sup>71</sup> In *Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of*

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 9:124-141

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 10:142

<sup>70</sup> John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," 1965., 862

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 862. In their footnote on conversion, Lofland and Stark state the following: "The meaning of this term has been muddled by the inconsistent usage of Christian religious writers. Often they have used "conversion" to refer to an aroused concern among persons who already accept the essential truth of the ideological system. Yet, in keeping with the earliest Christian examples of conversion, such as that of St. Paul, they have also used the word to describe changes from one such system to another. These are very different events and ought to be indicated by different words."

*Conversion to a Deviant Perspective*, Lofland and Stark's classic study, they present a seven-step model of religious conversion:

1. For conversion a person must experience enduring, acutely-felt tensions,
2. within a religious problem-solving perspective,
3. that lead him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4. he must encounter the cult at a turning point in his life;
5. within the cult an affective bond must be formed (or pre-exist),
6. and any extra-cult attachments, neutralized;
7. and there he must be exposed to intensive interaction if he is to become a deployable agent.<sup>72</sup>

Lofland and Stark developed this seven-step process model based on their extensive study of converts to a "West Coast millenarian cult," which we now know to be the Reverend Moon's Unification Church while focusing on the mechanisms that influenced converts to share the "Divine Precepts" worldview.<sup>73</sup> The process model outlines two genres of factors, *predisposing conditions*, and *situational contingencies*. For Lofland and Stark, *predisposing conditions* consist of characteristics or "background factors" people have before they encounter the religious cult, while *situational contingencies* are things that may contribute to the recruitment of people with favorable predisposed conditions, which arise from encounters between members of the religious cult.<sup>74</sup> Lofland and Stark begin their discussion of predisposing conditions with tension, which they see as the necessary first step of religious conversion, stating, "No model of human conduct entirely lacks a conception of tension, strain, frustration, deprivation, or other version of the hedonic calculus."<sup>75</sup> Following this statement, Lofland and Stark characterize tension as a perceived discrepancy between an imagined or ideal state of affairs and the situations in which the people find themselves, and go on to suggest that "acutely felt tension" is a

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 862-863. According to Lofland and Stark, the "Divine Precepts" are the doctrine that the self-proclaimed religious leader of the cult claimed was revealed to him by God, which concerned a complete "Restoration of the World" to the conditions of the Garden of Eden by 1967."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 864

necessary condition for conversion.<sup>76</sup> From this point, Lofland and Stark present the remaining six steps with explanations for each subsequent step in the model.

In addition to their process model, Lofland and Stark delineate two types of converts: verbal converts and total converts.<sup>77</sup> Verbal converts are those whose conversions were not taken as sincere by “core members” because although they professed belief, they did not take an active role in Reverend Moon’s Unification Church.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, total converts are those whose conversions were accepted by “core members” as sincere in word and deed, implying that in order for a conversion to be seen as complete, the convert must take an active role in the religious community.<sup>79</sup> Lofland and Stark explain that it is only when the last step of religious conversion occurs that verbal converts may become total converts.<sup>80</sup> Lofland and Stark’s process model of religious conversion is the original sociological model and serves as the basis for many process models in contemporary studies of religious conversion.

John Lofland and Norman Skonovd

In 1981, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd put forth “Conversion Motifs,” which served as a, “provisional stock-taking,” prompted by a sense that differential conversion experiences, as increasingly reported by investigators of religious conversion, are, “inherent in the central or key features of conversions themselves,” thus necessitating an exploration of the utility of assuming that there are, “several major ‘types’ of conversion or even ‘conversion careers.’”<sup>81</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, in following tradition, use the term “conversion” to refer to, “a

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 864-865. Lofland and Stark go on to provide a list of sources of tension, stating that “Some concrete varieties we discovered were: longing for unrealized wealth, knowledge, fame, and prestige; hallucinatory activity for which the person lacked any successful definition; frustrated sexual and marital relations; homosexual guilt; acute fear of face-to-face interaction; disabling and disfiguring physical conditions; and—perhaps of a slightly different order – a frustrated desire for a significant, even heroic, religious status, to ‘know the mind of God intimately,’ and to be a famous agent for his divine purposes.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 864

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 1981., 374

radical reorganization of identity, meaning, life,” which refers to Richard Travisano’s 1970 definition of religious conversion in his chapter, “Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations,” in Gregory Prentice Stone and Harvey A. Farberman’s compilation, *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, Lofland and Stark lean on Max Heirich’s definition of conversion as, “the process of changing a sense of root reality” or “a conscious shift in one’s sense of grounding,” from his 1977 work, “Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion,” in which Heirich goes on to say that, “it involves examination of core senses of reality, identifying aspects which must be responded to with the whole being and which presumably will affect action choices for the convert thereafter.”<sup>83,84</sup>

Lofland and Skonovd outline six conversion motifs: 1) intellectual, 2) mystical, 3) experimental, 4) affectional, 5) revivalist, and 6) coercive, which they evaluate in conjunction with five major dimensions: 1) degree of social pressure, 2) temporal duration, 3) level of affective arousal, 4) affective content, and 5) belief-participation sequence. The *intellectual* conversion refers to an individual seeking knowledge about spiritual or religious matters from a variety of sources without much social contact.<sup>85</sup> *Mystical* conversion generally refers to cases such as those of Saul of Tarsus and even al-Ghazali, the former of which, is the source of numerous definitions of conversion as, “a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences.”<sup>86,87</sup>

With *experimental* conversion, individuals actively explore religious options, which may be looked at as a “try before you buy,” approach to religious conversion, allowing potential

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<sup>82</sup> Gregory Prentice Stone and Harvey A. Farberman, *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction* (Waltham, Mass., Xerox College Publishing [1970], 1970), Non-fiction.

<sup>83</sup> Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," 1977., 674

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 673-674

<sup>85</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs.", 376-377

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 377-378

<sup>87</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion.*, 1:15

converts to, “try the theology, ritual, and organization for themselves and discover if the system is true (that is, beneficial or supportive) for them.”<sup>88,89</sup> Regarding *experimental* conversion, Lofland and Skonovd point out that, “The actual transformation of identity, behavior, and world view commonly called conversion takes place over a relatively prolonged period – often months or even years – and does not appear to be accompanied by high levels of emotional arousal in most instances.”<sup>90</sup>

The *affectional* approach to religious conversion occurs when a group and its leaders develop strong interpersonal bonds by directly loving, nurturing, and affirming the prospective convert, a motif that dates back to Lofland and Stark’s aforementioned work from 1965.<sup>91,92</sup> However, Lofland and Skonovd assert that with the *affectional* motif, “personal attachments or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process,” and that this sentiment has, “the same defining importance or central significance in the process of affectional conversion as intellectual illumination, mystical encounter, or experimental immersion.”<sup>93</sup> They also point to this particular motif as being a relatively prolonged process of, “at least several weeks.”<sup>94</sup>

With the *revivalist* motif, Lofland and Skonovd refer to the conversion of individuals who undergo, “profound experiences which occur within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd.”<sup>95</sup> With this in mind, Lofland and Skonovd point out that many scholars of crowd or collective behavior have, “generally lost sight of the very real fact that crowds *can* be brought to ecstatic arousals having a critically transforming effect on some people.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs.", 378-379

<sup>89</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion.*, 1:15

<sup>90</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs.", 379

<sup>91</sup> Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective."

<sup>92</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion.*, 1:15

<sup>93</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs.", 380

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 380-381

Lastly, Lofland and Skonovd summarize the *coercive* motif of religious conversion as entailing, “an extremely high degree of external pressure over a relatively long period of time, during which there is intense arousal of fear and uncertainty, culminating in empathetic identification and even love,” with belief following participation.<sup>97</sup> However, they assert that this motif, “takes place only in extremely rare and special circumstances but which has been alleged by some to be rampant among the new religions of the Western world,” and which they address as “brainwashing,” “programming,” “mind control,” “coercive persuasion,” “thought reform,” and “menticide.”<sup>98</sup> They discuss two features of brainwashing or as Lofland and Skonovd prefer to call it, coercive persuasion, which as delineated by Edgar H. Schein’s book by the same name in 1961, is “(1) the *compulsion* of an individual (2) *sincerely* to confess guilt or embrace an ideological system.”<sup>99,100</sup>

Lofland and Skonovd end by pointing out two classes of implications, the first of which concerns the social psychology of conversion, and the second concerning socio-historical and organizational implications. Within the first class, Lofland and Skonovd draw attention to their suspicion that conversion motifs differ across time, societies, and subcultures within a single society. Regarding the second class of implications, they point out that certain religious ideologies and organizations may corroborate more with some conversion motifs rather than others, but that one recurrent dimension of difference is, “the degree to which a religion absorbs and reorders an adherent’s round of life.”<sup>101</sup> Lofland and Skonovd close with an invitation for others researching religious conversion to, “try their hand at increasing our understanding of this complex and evolving body of materials”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 383

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 381-382

<sup>100</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Coercive Persuasion; a Socio-Psychological Analysis of the "Brainwashing" of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* (New York, W. W. Norton [1961][1st ed.], 1961), Non-fiction.

<sup>101</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs.", 383

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 384

Ali Köse

Another important contribution to both psychological and sociological literature on religious conversion is Ali Köse's, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, which focuses on identifying major factors in conversion experiences and the motivating factors for conversion to Islam. From 1990-1991, Ali Köse conducted interviews of 70 native British male and female converts to Islam from psychological and sociological perspectives, which focused on conversion narratives.<sup>103</sup> Köse applied to his data, the findings of John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's 1981 work, which identifies six types of religious *conversion motifs*: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.<sup>104</sup> As previously mentioned, Lofland and Skonovd define *motif experiences* as, "those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person "doing" or "undergoing" personal transformation – aspects that provide a tone to the event, its pointedness in time, its positive or negative affective content, and the like."<sup>105</sup> Based on the findings of his study, Köse states that the converts in his study primarily experienced the intellectual, affectional, and experimental patterns, which Lofland and Skonovd outlined.<sup>106</sup> While Köse acknowledges a reduced presence of the mystical and coercive motifs, he states that the revivalist motif is entirely absent.<sup>107</sup> Köse's primary concern was to understand the psychological and sociological underpinnings of the converts' experiences of religious conversion, and while Köse did identify some motivating factors for religious conversion, such as "brotherhood, community, and friendliness," "witnessing life of a Muslim and attraction to the culture," "religious doctrines and teachings," "moral ethical standards, social matters, and political ideology," and "spiritual, mystical aspect, or inexplicable

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<sup>103</sup> Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (New York: Columbia Univ Pr, 1996).

<sup>104</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs."

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 374

<sup>106</sup> Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts.*, 98

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

religious experience,” he ultimately found no factor that was common to all the converts interviewed in his study.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to using Lofland and Skonovd as an assessment tool, Köse also compares his findings with the aforementioned Lofland-Stark process model of religious conversion from 1965, which focused on converts to Reverend Moon’s Unification Church.<sup>109, 110</sup> Köse finds that Lofland and Stark’s process model is only partially applicable to his sample and that the Lofland-Stark model does not hold up when applied to all groups. Köse states that, “religious conversion does not emerge out of a single influence, but out of the mutual interaction of various forces that make a person sensitive to conversion.”<sup>111</sup> Köse concludes by stating that, “one also has to realise that conversion is a social phenomenon, with affection and emotional ties playing key roles in the affirmative decision,” and he suggests,

The conversion experience is gradual in nature and therefore encompasses the whole process of change in its definition. It is the product of a long and protracted process. It includes a reorientation of the personality system and involves change in the constellation of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>112</sup>

The main critiques regarding the sociological approach to the study of religious conversion, like psychology, is a focus on individuals, and a focus on adolescent converts. Additionally, sociologists tend to see conversion as both a problem and the result of a problem that, in some way, stems from social establishments.

### **Anthropological Approaches to Religious Conversion**

Anne Sofie Roald

In chapter 2 of *Women Embracing Islam*, Anne Sofie Roald’s contribution, The Shaping of Scandinavian “Islam”: Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity, broadly outlines three stages

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 109

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 109-124

<sup>110</sup> Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective."

<sup>111</sup> Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 124



of conversion and includes a discussion of how “Scandinavian values” feature prominently in the discourse of converts to Islam.<sup>113114</sup> Her section on stages of conversion broadly outlines three stages of conversion: the “falling-in-love” stage, the “disappointment” stage, and the “maturity” stage.<sup>115</sup> Roald also discusses Timothy Winters’ term, “convertitis,” which corroborates with her findings on the initial stage of conversion, “falling-in-love,” during which some converts tend to be emotionally obsessed with Islam, detail-oriented in their practices, and absolutist.<sup>116</sup>

During the second stage of conversion, “disappointment,” the honeymoon is over and converts may feel overwhelmed with trying to implement the new rules and regulations of Islam. More importantly, converts express disappointment with the behavior and attitudes of born-Muslims and with the realization that Muslims “cannot live according to the lofty Islamic ideals,” which causes some converts to turn away from Islam.<sup>117</sup> It is also during this second stage that converts may begin to feel like “both an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in their respective societies,” which leads to the development of a discrepancy between the way society at large defines the convert and the way converts perceive themselves.<sup>118</sup> Roald draws attention to a particular female convert who explains this discrepancy as feeling that “she does not constantly feel herself to be a Muslim,” and that this discrepancy between a person’s social status and their self-perception may lead to a “confusion of one’s own identity.”<sup>119</sup> However, Roald finds that new Muslims choose to

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<sup>113</sup> Anne Sofie Roald, "The Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam': Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Willy Jansen (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2006).

<sup>114</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam : Gender and Conversion in the West / Edited by Karin Van Nieuwkerk* (Austin : University of Texas Press, 2006. 1st ed., 2006), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.,48-70

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 49-53

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 49. Roald quotes Timothy Winters from his website, Islam for Today, in which he states that, “The initial and quite understandable response of many newcomers is to become an absolutist. Everything going on among pious Muslims in angelic; everything outside the circle of faith is demonic; the appeal of this outlook lies in its simplicity. The newly arranged landscape on which the convert looks is seen in satisfying black and white terms of Them versus Us, good against evil.”

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 49-50

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

“remain within the Muslim cultural paradigm (being cultural converts)” or, like second-generation Muslim children, develop “integrated plural identities,” which she describes as a “harmonious transcultural oscillation among various patterns of identity.”<sup>120</sup>

The third stage of conversion as outlined by Roald is “maturity,” which occurs when converts come to the realization that Muslims are human and make mistakes, and that there is a huge difference between the ideals of Islam and the reality on the ground.<sup>121</sup> It is during the “maturity” stage of the conversion process that converts may seek alternative understandings of Islamic ideas and begin to shape their understanding of Islam in accordance with their respective cultural contexts, which leads to a sense of “coming backing to themselves,” and the discovery that they are, “Scandinavian individuals living within an Islamic frame.”<sup>122</sup>

Roald then launches into a brief discussion of literature on plausibility structures and points out that the degree of influence they have over converts to Islam depends on life situations. She outlines three alternate plausibility structures and their respective degrees of influence on new converts: 1) if the convert is in an environment with only born Muslims of a particular culture, then it has a stronger effect, 2) a convert who has less contact with born Muslims and more with non-Muslims is less influenced by the plausibility structure of the born-Muslims, and 3) new Muslims with similar cultural backgrounds “mix and create a merged plausibility structure built mainly on the Islamic sources, but mixed with the new Muslims’ preconversion cultural context,” which leads to the emergence of “new views and ideas, built on deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural concepts both from majority society and Muslim cultures.”<sup>123</sup> Roald points out that while most converts to Islam reach the second and third stages of the conversion process, some remain in the first stage for a long time, but especially adherents to extreme movements, such as the *Salafis* and *Hizb al-Tahrir*, which “promote the idea that every single

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 50. Roald credits the term “integrated plural identities,” to S. Østberg’s 2000 article, “Islamic Nurture and Identity Management.”

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 50-51

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 51

Qur'anic verse or hadith should be acted on in a literal way.”<sup>124</sup> Roald refers to this direction as a “particularization of Islam,” which reflects “Arab culture” at a certain period, and particularly the seventh to the tenth centuries.<sup>125</sup>

Roald concludes by predicting that second-generation born Muslims will play a similar role in the near future.<sup>126</sup> It is important to note that to my knowledge, Anne Sofie Roald in her 2006 chapter, The Shaping of Scandinavian “Islam”: Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity, which is chapter 2 of *Women Embracing Islam*, is the first to report a female convert expressing that she does not, “feel herself to be a Muslim.” This statement, “she does not feel herself to be a Muslim,” struck a chord, which led me to question how converts experience “not feeling to be a Muslim,” which logically followed up with a question about what makes converts “*feel* Muslim.” This was instrumental to the approach I took while developing my study, *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*, and to my introduction of the term, “*feeling* Muslim,” which is a juxtaposition of the experiences of Amal, the convert in Anne Sofie Roald’s study who stated that, “she does not constantly feel to be a Muslim.” A further delineation of the concept of “*feeling* Muslim,” and what it means to American female converts to Islam occurs in chapter 6 of this thesis, Conversion as Transition: Nuances of Being, Becoming, and *Feeling* Muslim, in addition to a discussion of “*feelings of Muslimness*” and “*feeling to be a Muslim*,” as explained by Gabriele Marranci in *The Anthropology of Islam*, later in this section on anthropological approaches.<sup>127, 128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 51-53

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 68-70

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 50. My usage of “*feeling* Muslim,” came from Roald’s description of one particular convert’s experience that she “does not constantly feel herself to be a Muslim,” as well as from Gabriele Marranci’s incredible discussion of “*feeling to be a Muslim*,” and “*feelings of Muslimness*,” in his 2008 book, *The Anthropology of Islam*.

<sup>128</sup> Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam / Gabriele Marranci* (Oxford ; New York : Berg, 2008., 2008), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

Nicole Bourque

Chapter 9 of *Women Embracing Islam* is Nicole Bourque's contribution, *How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity*.<sup>129130</sup>

Bourque quickly notes that until recently, most psychological and sociological approaches to the study of religious conversion centered on what type of person is predisposed to religious conversion, and why someone converts.<sup>131</sup> She goes on to point out that researchers now recognize religious conversion as an ongoing process, that there are stages of religious conversion, "various types of converts, many routes to conversion, and different types of Islam to which an individual may convert."<sup>132</sup> Bourque then highlights three crucial issues that most studies neglect: 1) "a consideration of how conversion to Islam requires not only a change in the convert's religious identity, but also a renegotiation of social, gender, and national identities," 2) "how these new identities are embodied through taking up new bodily practices," and 3) "the wider context in which these identities are re-created, including power relations, interactions with other Muslims, and learning how to be a Muslim in a largely non-Muslim society."<sup>133</sup>

Bourque carried out participant-observation with a group of twenty-five female converts to Sunni Islam who attended a weekly Islamic education/discussion group for women in Glasgow, Scotland.<sup>134</sup> She looks at the process of conversion to Islam and the "re-creation of religious, gender, and national identity," with a particular focus on the experiences of one of the converts, Aisha, whose conversion was affected by interactions with other Muslims.<sup>135</sup> Bourque is particularly interested in considerations of how Scottish Muslim female identity is "embodied

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<sup>129</sup> Nicole Bourque, "How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of the Female Muslim Identity," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Willy Jansen (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2006).

<sup>130</sup> van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam : Gender and Conversion in the West / Edited by Karin Van Nieuwkerk.*, 233

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 233

through changing bodily practices, shaped and internalized through discourse, and affected by interactions with other Muslims and with wider Scottish society.”<sup>136</sup> Bourque draws attention to Aisha’s claim that it was two years after her conversion before she “felt strong enough in her faith to wear *hijab* in public,” which corroborates reports from Bourque’s other interviewees who said there was a “difference between things that you could do on your own and things that you had to do in public,” and that “it was one thing to admit to yourself that you were a Muslim and to act accordingly in your private life,” and “quite another to feel strong enough in your faith to present yourself as a Muslim to everyone else.”<sup>137</sup>

Bourque points out that as an anthropologist, she feels, “the process of becoming a Muslim is not just about the adoption of certain quantifiable practices,” but also a “process of learning how to see yourself as a Muslim, how to live as a Muslim, and how to present yourself to others as a Muslim.”<sup>138</sup> Additionally, Bourque argues that the key to understanding the conversion process does not lie in “looking at how certain individuals progress through the “stages” of conversion,” but instead, involves looking at “how progression through these stages involved the creation of a Muslim identity,” and coming to the realization that the process does not “happen in a vacuum of self-discovery.”<sup>139</sup> She goes on to state that “becoming and being a Muslim, particularly in the case of women, means interacting with other Muslims who may have different ideas of what Islam is and how it should be practiced,” which means “confronting media images of Islam,” as well as “dealing with families, friends, and coworkers who have preconceived (and often media-fed) imagine of what Islam entails.”<sup>140</sup> Bourque also asserts that it is through this “interaction with other Muslims and with wider British society that people begin to negotiate

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 233-234

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 238

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 238

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 238. An in-depth discussion of my survey findings surrounding questions of being, becoming, and feeling occurs in Chapter 6 of this thesis titled, *Conversion as Transition: Nuances of Being, Becoming, and Feeling Muslim*.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 238-239

what being a Muslim means to them,” which entails “re-creating personal identity, creating a Muslim identity, and renegotiating national and gender identity.”<sup>141</sup>

Every convert Bourque talked to recognized conversion as change in religion, but more importantly, “a change in who they were.”<sup>142</sup> Bourque states that even though the conversion process begins before taking the *shahada*, the declaration of faith, that it was, “this rite of passage that marked the start of a change in identity,” with many women describing a, “feeling of euphoria after they committed to following Allah,” by reciting the *shahada*, which also marks being forgiven for all previous sins.<sup>143</sup> Bourque also discusses the views of converts to Islam who felt they “were already Muslim,” and explained this feeling by referring to the belief that “all people, angels, animals, and things are born Muslim,” and that “when you take the *shahada*, you are returning to Allah,” which is some women Bourque spoke with “did not refer to themselves as converts, but as reverts.”<sup>144</sup>

Bourque argues “becoming a Muslim woman necessitates a renegotiation of your gender identity,” since “you have to accept the role that Allah set out for women,” which places you in a “particular relationship to your husband, children, in-laws, and parents.”<sup>145</sup> Additionally, Bourque states that many of the women reported that “being Muslim was something that affected their everyday life,” and that “becoming Muslim is not just about taking on a new religious identity,” but rather, “it affects who you are as a person and how you live your life on an hour-to-hour basis.”<sup>146</sup> She goes on to say that, “it is not enough to think like a Muslim, you also have to act like one,” and that the “physical aspects of becoming a Muslim,” such as “changing your diet, your clothes, the way you wash; looking down when you pass men in the streets; and the actions of praying – all play an important role in the creation of a new identity,” and that your new

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 239-240

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

religion “becomes embodied, and your actions serve to reaffirm your identity as a Muslim woman.”<sup>147</sup>

Of her own experiences, Bourque reports that when she prayed with the women, “I could not help but notice how standing side by side with these women made us feel part of the group,” which points to the importance of belonging to the conversion process.<sup>148</sup> Bourque outlines some of the physical aspects of becoming Muslim by noting that when a new convert arrived at one of Aisha’s meetings, Aisha would begin by teaching how to pray, and would gradually teach rules on purification, how to go to the bathroom, appropriate dress for women and men, and eating and fasting, among other topics.<sup>149</sup> Aisha explained that “the *shahada* was a first step and that these practices could be adopted at their own pace: as their faith grew stronger, they would find it easier.”<sup>150</sup> This leads Bourque to assert that “a Muslim identity is embodied through daily bodily practices,” and that these practices are important for others to recognize you as a Muslim,” which is corroborated by many of the women who reported “taking up practices” that would “be witnessed by other Muslims,” and that when they “felt stronger about their Muslim identity,” they would “take up practices that would identify them as Muslims to non-Muslims, such as wearing the *hijab* at work.”<sup>151</sup>

For Bourque, the process of creating a Muslim identity involves a reinterpretation of the past in which discourse plays an important role. Bourque reports that for the women she met, Aisha’s classes were important for learning “how to talk about their past, conversion/reversion, and future,” and that “talking within the group allowed women to concretize and order their thoughts and experiences,” while giving them “a vocabulary to express their thoughts and problems and to re-create memories.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 241

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 242

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 242-243

Bourque identifies contact with or reading about other Muslims is crucial to “talking and thinking about yourself as a Muslim.”<sup>153</sup> All of the women interviewed by Bourque reported experiencing “a sense of belonging,” which was especially noticed by women who converted after marriage to a Muslim man.<sup>154</sup> Bourque concludes that “this sense of belonging” plays a crucial role in “keeping these women converted,” and that frequent interaction with other Muslims (new and born) “helps shape the new Muslims’ understanding of Islam,” including learning “how a good Muslim should act and react.”<sup>155</sup> All of the women interviewed reported that after their conversion, “born” Muslims were “keen to pass on advice and criticism about how to dress and pray” revealing problems between Islam and what Bourque calls “Muslim customs.”<sup>156</sup>

In her section called *Can Haggis Be Halal?* Becoming a Scottish Muslim, Bourque discusses how in addition to redefining their religious and gender identity, “new Muslims must also renegotiate their British and Scottish identity,” which leads some converts to emphasize their religious identity over all others, while some redefine their national identity, and others downplay the problem by emphasizing the “universal community of Muslims.”<sup>157</sup> Bourque points out that becoming a “British or a Scottish Muslim” is not only about national identity, but also involves “living amongst” and “interacting with” other British and Scottish people, most of whom are not Muslim, and that new converts to Islam learn how to explain Islam to their families by listening to stories of how older converts overcame the same problems.<sup>158</sup> Bourque reiterates that for the women she interviewed, “the process of becoming a Muslim was a long one that began with re-creating their religious and gender identity; re-remembering the past; learning how to verbalize

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 243

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 243

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 243-244

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 245

<sup>158</sup> van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam : Gender and Conversion in the West* / Edited by Karin Van Nieuwkerk., 245-246



their experiences; learning how to talk about Islam; and taking up new bodily practices.”<sup>159</sup> She points out that people need time to adjust to the changes and feel comfortable with them, and that it is easier to do this when “surrounded by other Muslims who understand and support you in making these changes,” because it is only when these women “feel confident about their faith and have learned to answer people’s questions that they present themselves as Muslims to the wider public.”<sup>160</sup>

Bourque concludes by stating that to understand “why and how Scottish women become Muslim women” we need to focus on the “processes by which a new identity is created,” which must take the following into account: 1) “the ways in which identity is embodied,” 2) “the effects of social interaction with Muslims and wider British/Scottish society,” 3) “the wider power context in which these interactions operate,” and 4) “the importance of discourse in concretizing experiences and in re-creating biography.”<sup>161</sup>

Gabriele Marranci

While *The Anthropology of Islam*, by Gabriele Marranci does not directly address conversion to Islam, the concepts discussed are relevant it is important to briefly discuss how Marranci further develops the concept of “*feeling to be a Muslim*,” and introduces the term “*feelings of Muslimness*.”<sup>162</sup> In this discussion, I specifically highlight relevant quotes from chapter 6, and conclusion of Marranci’s *The Anthropology of Islam* to provide a greater context for understanding what “*feeling Muslim*,” means in chapter 6 of this thesis, Conversion as Transition: Nuances of Being, Becoming, and *Feeling Muslim*.

In chapter 6, Beyond the Stereotype: Challenges in Understanding Muslim Identities, Marranci summarizes the anthropological approach to identity, reviews early and contemporary

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 246-247

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 247

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* / Gabriele Marranci.

trends, and then asks the question: What Might a Muslim Be?<sup>163</sup> Marranci begins the discussion by stating that, “there is no day, at least since September 11, that the mass media have not discussed, argued, framed, stereotyped, deconstructed and recreated Muslim identity,” and explains that most of the failed attempts at profiling, “what a Muslim might be,” are based on social and cultural stereotypes.<sup>164</sup> Marranci points out what he refers to as, “an incapacity to develop an approach to Muslim identity,” that limits the emphasis on, “differences, cultural peculiarity, and in-betweenness,” and explains this incapacity is due to the fact that, “social scientific interest in identity and Islam,” is a relatively recent development.<sup>165</sup>

In his section, *Reconsidering Self and Identity Starting from Consciousness*, Marranci argues that we need to reconsider the concept of identity, and observe a reality that we often forget: “in order to feel our identities there is a need to have a *conscious* brain,” since it is our brain that enables us to, “attain consciousness and achieve a long-standing sense of selfhood.”<sup>166</sup> Marranci relies heavily on the work of A.R. Damasio, a neuroscientist who explains that, “evolutionary processes have originated increasingly complex systems of ‘selves’, the simplest of which are *protoselves*,” which Damasio defines as, “an unconscious system that is ‘a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions.’”<sup>167, 168</sup> Damasio suggests that, “the common idea that emotions are subjective feelings should be considered “common sense,” because emotions are “bodily responses which are perceived to *provoke* the feelings,” which Marranci adds to by asserting that, “emotions, and the consequent feelings they induce, are the ‘engine’ of these complex neurological processes that we simply call the ‘self’,” and that, “identity is a process,

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 6:89-93

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 6:93

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 6:94-95

<sup>166</sup> Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam / Gabriele Marranci.*, 96

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 6:96

<sup>168</sup> Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens : Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York : Harcourt Brace, c1999. 1st ed., 1999), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

which allows human beings to make sense of their autobiographical self, and to express the it through symbols,” which “communicate personal feelings.”<sup>169, 170</sup>

Marranci concludes that “*what we feel to be*,” determines our personal identity, which means that the statement, “I am Muslim,” is “the *symbolic communication* of emotional commitment through which a person experiences his/her autobiographical self.” Therefore, the person who says, “I am Muslim,” is what he/she *feels* to be, regardless of the perceptions of others. Marranci then states that human beings live in a “circuit of causalities based on information both internal and external to the individual,” which he outlines in six steps:

- 1) The environment produces stimuli,
- 2) which produce emotions (the bodily reactions),
- 3) which human beings perceive and rationalize as feelings,
- 4) which affect their autobiographical self,
- 5) which is experienced through the delicately shaped machinery of their imagination (identities),
- 6) which is affected by the feelings induced by the emotions.<sup>171</sup>

Marranci argues that, “to avoid threatening *schismogenetic* processes,” which may disrupt our identity, and “suffer what has been defined as an identity crisis, human beings have developed what I have called acts of identity,” which are expressed through different actions and ultimately, “try to influence the surrounding environment provoking certain specific emotions,” which would affect feelings.<sup>172</sup> He affirms his hypothesis that what makes a person Muslim is that they, “*feel* to be Muslim,” and that only when a person, “*feels* to be Muslim,” can we observe the expression of those feelings through Marranci’s “acts of identity.”<sup>173</sup> Marranci goes on to suggest a paradigm for studying Muslims as human beings rather than symbols of Islam, but that to do so, we must observe, “identity acts *within* societies,” including the relationship between Muslims and their emotional environment<sup>174</sup>. Marranci concludes chapter 6 by stating that, “emotions and

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<sup>169</sup> Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam / Gabriele Marranci.*, 6:96-97

<sup>170</sup> Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens : Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.*

<sup>171</sup> Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam / Gabriele Marranci.*, 6:97

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 6:98

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 6:99

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 6:100

feelings are central to the development of personal identities,” and to understand Islam, we must first see Muslims as human beings who *feel to be* Muslim, which will enable us to, “understand how Muslim identity, in particular among western-born Muslims is expressed, formed, and developed beyond the imposed stereotypes.”<sup>175</sup>

In his conclusion, Marranci reiterates that anthropologists, “should study human beings rather than just adjectives,” that “human identity is related to the self and environment,” through emotions and feelings, and that, “a person is not Muslim because of reading the Qur’an, following the different Islamic theological instances, or because of being born Muslim, but rather because a person *feels to be Muslim*.”<sup>176</sup> This leads to a reconsideration of Islam, “not as a *tradition*,” but as a “map of discourses derived from the different ways of feeling to be Muslim.”<sup>177</sup>

Henri Gooren

In *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*, Henri Gooren outlines a new way of viewing religious conversion as the start of a dynamic process: the *conversion career*.<sup>178</sup> Gooren begins by focusing on 13 twentieth century approaches to individual religious conversion in the social sciences, then launching into a useful critique of conventional approaches to religious conversion.<sup>179</sup>

In chapter 2, The Conversion Career, Gooren begins by discussing the need for a new approach to the study of religious conversion, which defines an empirically observable and investigable set of parameters, which could be used to identify, “the factors in the conversion process, the indicators that show an actual conversion has taken place, and the indicators that demonstrate an ongoing church commitment after conversion.”<sup>180</sup> Gooren then attends to a

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 6:101-102

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 9:145-146

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 9:146

<sup>178</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*, 3

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 1:17-42

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 2:44

discussion of biases within the psychology of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, and theology or religious studies.

Gooren then draws attention to the best elements of the 13 approaches and outlines 12 beneficial takeaways, before delving into his proposed model for the study of religious conversion, the *conversion career* approach.<sup>181</sup>

- 1) Following William James (1958 [1902]), the emphasis on subjective *religious experience* should be reestablished.<sup>182</sup>
- 2) Conversion in the narrow sense should always involve a change in religious worldview and hence a change in *identity*.<sup>183</sup>
- 3) In the concept of *spoiled identity* (Greil 1977; Goffman 1959, 1963) conceivably lies the basis of changes in levels of religious activity.<sup>184</sup>
- 4) Spoiled identities may turn some people into religious *seekers* (Strauss 1979). This seeking quest, however, will always be constrained by their prior cultural and religious *socialization* (Greil 1977). In turn, socialization is strongly gender-specific.<sup>185</sup>
- 5) As people consider the pros and cons of membership in a particular religious organization competing for members on the religious market, they always make an implicit or explicit rationalistic cost-benefit analysis (Gartrell and Shannon 1985); Gooren 1999; Stark and Finke 2000).<sup>186</sup>
- 6) Religious commitment is built up through *role learning* and mastering (Bromley and Shupe 1979), and conversion is shaped by prior (religious) socialization and subsequent role learning and mastering (Long and Hadden 1983). The influence of gender is equally important in both of these influences and should be further explored.<sup>187</sup>
- 7) It is fruitful to analyze the organizational side of the conversion process by using the concepts of *incorporating activities* (recruitment and monitoring for affiliates), *creating activities* (showing the requirements for membership in the religious group), and the *shaping* of the (pre-) affiliate's behavior with a religious code of conduct and the application of sanctions (Long and Hadden 1983).<sup>188</sup>
- 8) The empirical *indicators* of conversion as developed by Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984) should be carefully operationalized to analyze changes in religious activity levels.<sup>189</sup>
- 9) Spoiled identity, seekership, and "conversion" are clearly influenced by significant others (relatives, friends, and acquaintances) through the *social networks* the individual belongs to (Lofland and Stark 1965).<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 2:46-48

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

- 10) Recruitment by religious organizations is influenced heavily global competition between religious groups.<sup>191</sup>
- 11) The competition methods of religious organizations on the religious market must be carefully described and analyzed.<sup>192</sup>
- 12) The *cultural* or *societal factors* that influence differences in religious activity levels must be carefully described and explored.<sup>193</sup>

Gooren goes on to define religious conversion as, “a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity, based on both self-report and attribution by others,” and lays out his 5-tier typology, the *conversion career* approach: 1) preaffiliation, 2) affiliation, 3) conversion, 4) confession, and 5) disaffiliation.<sup>194</sup>

Gooren’s *conversion career* typology of religious activity begins with *preaffiliation*, which describes, “the worldview and social context of potential members of a religious group in their first contacts to assess whether they would like to affiliate themselves on a more formal basis.”<sup>195</sup> *Affiliation* refers to, “being a formal member of a religious group,” without it being central to one’s identity.<sup>196</sup> *Conversion* refers to, “a (radical) personal change of religious worldview and identity, based on self-report or attribution by others,” but can include people from the same religious worldview or outsiders.<sup>197</sup> Next, *confession* refers to a core member identity, “describing a high level of participation inside the new religious group,” as well as having a strong proselytizing attitude toward those who are not a member of the new religious group.<sup>198</sup> Lastly, *disaffiliation* refers to someone formerly involved with a religious tradition, including apostates and inactive members.<sup>199</sup> Gooren concludes chapter 2 by identifying a list of factors, which may influence religious activity and participation: 1) social factors, 2) institutional factors, 3) cultural or political factors, 4) individual factors, and 5) contingency factors, providing

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 2:48

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 2:49

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

numerous examples of each. Additionally, he uses a combination of literature survey; open, topic list, and informal interviews; collecting life histories; and participant-observation in multiple religious groups as his research methodology for the *conversion career* approach.<sup>200</sup>

Gooren concludes his book by providing some interesting insights on the conversion career approach, such as: three activities that are tools of the trade for increasing membership, six things religious organizations that want to increase their membership should do, five requirements for new members to feel at home in a religious group, the three most common types of religious activity, factors in religious activity, and finally, ten general conclusions and recommendations.<sup>201</sup>

### **Religious Studies Approaches to Religious Conversion**

Yasin Dutton

In *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Trends and Controversies*, Yasin Dutton contributes *Conversion to Islam: the Qur'anic Paradigm*, which offers an important glimpse at conversion to Islam, not only from a religious studies perspective, but from an Islamic perspective grounded in the Qur'an.<sup>202</sup> Dutton begins by stating that, "Islam is based on the Qur'an, which is accepted by Muslims as the final revelation from God to man through the medium of His final Messenger Muhammad," and that the basis for his subsequent remarks on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam is, "what is said about it in the Qur'an and how this Qur'anic picture was reflected in the lives of the Prophet and the first community of Muslims."<sup>203</sup>

Regarding conversion to Islam, Dutton immediately points out that, "there is no word for 'conversion' in Arabic," but there is the idea of "becoming a Muslim," for which he points to the

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 2:51-52

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 6:131-142

<sup>202</sup> Yasin Dutton, "Conversion to Islam : The Qur'anic Paradigm," in *Religious Conversion* (London: Cassell, 1999).

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 151

Arabic verb *aslama*, meaning “to submit.”<sup>204</sup> He also points out that, “the words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ derive from *aslama*, and mean ‘one who submits, a submitter’, and ‘submitting, submission’, respectively.”<sup>205</sup> Dutton states that, “‘Islam’ is not only the name of a religion, but is actually an action, primarily of the heart, but also the limbs”: submission.<sup>206</sup> He goes on to refer to prophets in the Qur’an as being in submission, and states that, “these references make it clear that what is being envisaged here by *islam*, or ‘becoming a Muslim’, is not simply the acceptance of the outward forms of any one particular prophet’s practice,” but rather, “the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all of these prophets, from Noah, through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad.”<sup>207</sup> From there, Dutton goes into an important, oft-neglected question: What does becoming a Muslim involve?

Dutton provides a historical response, “accepting God as Lord, and accepting the Prophet Muhammad as the final prophet and messenger of this Lord,” and further delineating the *shahada* or the double testimony of faith, “I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God,” which, as Dutton points out, “marks the formal entry of someone into the community of Muslims, when said in front of witnesses.”<sup>208</sup> He then goes on to mention a fuller definition, which would include the six articles of faith: belief in Allah (God), the angels, the divinely revealed books, the prophets, the Last Day, and the Decree.<sup>209</sup> Dutton mentions the ongoing debate of whether stating the declaration of faith is enough to classify one as a Muslim, or if outward practice must accompany the declaration. He points to a saying of the Prophet, which indicates that as long as a person is sincere when making their declaration of faith, he or she will attain paradise, “as long as one is not guilty of having associated anyone or

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 152

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 153

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 154



anything else with God.”<sup>210</sup> He also mentions two main tendencies, the first of which is by those who believe the testimony of faith to be enough, and those who, “considered it a travesty of the word ‘belief’ for it to be on the tongue and not appear also as outward action.”<sup>211</sup> Dutton also draws attention to those who choose an “Islamic” name upon conversion to Islam, pointing out that it is not obligatory, but that the practice dates back to the time of the Prophet and was situational.<sup>212</sup>

Next, Dutton discusses two ways of becoming Muslim: the way of light and the way of power. Dutton uses “the way of light,” to refer to someone converting to Islam, “by individual personal conviction and certainty, regardless of the external difficulties this may bring,” whereas the “way of power,” denotes conversion to Islam, “by virtue of external circumstances which make it difficult not to do so.”<sup>213</sup> Dutton traces these two ways back to the Meccan and Madinan periods of the Prophet’s life, aligning the Meccan phase with the way of light, and the Madinan phase with the way of power.<sup>214</sup>

One of the most common things heard today regarding conversion to Islam, is that Islam was spread by the sword. However, as Dutton points out, in Muslim sources, namely the Qur’an, “it is forbidden for someone to force another to become a Muslim,” and while Dutton does not deny considerable military activity in association with the spread Islam, he states that, “Islam spread not so much *by* the sword as *with*, that is, alongside, the sword. For the purpose of the Muslim armies was not so much to make everybody Muslim as to establish Muslim rule,” and, “people in conquered territories were not forced to become Muslims.”<sup>215</sup>

Dutton then moves into a brief discussion of motives for conversion, which he argues is not really a problem in Islam because, once the outward, publicly witnessed conversion takes

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 156-157

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 157

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 157-158

place, the rest is up to each person's conscience. To back this up, he references a famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, "Actions are by intentions, and everyone will get what he intends."<sup>216</sup> He goes on to assert that conversion to Islam is generally, "one-way traffic," because, "once people have entered Islam, they tend to stay in it and, moreover, deepen their attachment to it."<sup>217</sup> The discussion of motives returns to Islam by light and Islam by power, with light referring again to those who chose to convert to Islam based on their certainty about the message revealed in the Qur'an and their love of, and loyalty to the Prophet, while Islam by power refers to those who converted to Islam to because a tribal leader accepted Islam, or through marriage.<sup>218</sup>

In his section on modern theories of conversion to Islam, Dutton states that the role of Sufis in conversion to Islam is great, since Sufism emphasizes a, "universal, non-intellectual but very real *tawhid*, or science of God's unity," which suggests that, "becoming a Muslim is not a question of being convinced by rational means but rather by a recognition of the heart (the seat of the 'intellect' [*'aql*] in Qur'anic terminology)."<sup>219</sup> Dutton concludes by stating that it is impossible to explain why people convert to Islam and why they remain Muslim upon conversion, but also states that once people officially convert to Islam, their attachment deepens and strengthens over time.<sup>220</sup>

#### Patrick Bowen

In his 2009 case study of conversion to Islam among Latinos in Denver, Colorado, Patrick Bowen immediately points out that, "no single work has analyzed the trends of a diverse range of U.S. converts (i.e. men *and* women; white, Latino, *and* black)," which is exactly what he sets out to do by interviewing 13 U.S. converts, both men (5) and women (8), who are either white, Latino, or black, ages ranging from 19 to 57 (34.7=mean, 29=median), and who converted

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 159

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 159

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 159-160

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 164

pre and post-9/11.<sup>221,222</sup> In addition to analyzing responses from a diverse range of U.S. converts, Bowen hopes to contribute to the extant and growing body of literature on conversion to Islam in the West, and to, “explain why in the U.S. conversion to Islam has increased since 9/11.”<sup>223</sup> Bowen sets the stage for his study by explaining his use of Lewis R Rambo’s 7-stage approach to the study of religious conversion as his research methodology, which he finds to be, “a helpful way of examining the complex processes in conversion.”<sup>224</sup>

Bowen conducted interviews over a period of two months at a mosque in Denver, Colorado, where he interviewed respondents face-to-face at a, “weekly ‘Beginning Islam’ class,” asking them, “32 questions about their conversion experience,” with each interview lasting 30 minutes to an hour.<sup>225</sup> Bowen analyzes the 13 responses in accordance with Rambo’s systemic stage model, while comparing his findings to those of other studies, namely Ali Köse, Kate Zebiri, Larry Poston, and Carol Anway.<sup>226,227,228,229</sup> While Bowen goes into great depth in his analysis, interpretation, and comparison, for the purposes of this review, I will summarize his conclusions here. Ultimately, he finds that the Denver converts are similar to converts in other studies because they, “took the *shahada* in their mid-to-late twenties,” but he finds them to be different with regard to education and occupation, attributing the difference to, “the pervasiveness

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<sup>221</sup> Patrick D. Bowen, "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado," (DigitalCommons@USU, 2009-10-12T22:29:22Z., 2009)., 42

<sup>222</sup> See also, "Conversion to Islam in Modern Western Europe and the United States," in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (New York, NY : Routledge., 2015).

<sup>223</sup> "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado.", 43

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam : A Study of Native British Converts* (New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996., 1996), Bibliographies. Non-fiction. Collective biography.

<sup>227</sup> Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts : Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford : Oneworld Publications., 2008), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

<sup>228</sup> Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (1992), Book.

<sup>229</sup> Carol Anway’s book is one of the most fascinating books on American female converts to Islam that I have read. Her questions are thoughtful and in-depth, and her study came about due to her personal struggle to accept her daughter’s conversion to Islam, or reject her. Carol Anderson Anway, *Daughters of Another Path : Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee's Summit, MO : Yawna Publications, c1996., 1996), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

of information about Islam in the media after 9/11,” which he believes, “has reached the less educated in a way that it has not before,” leading to an increased number of conversions to Islam.<sup>230</sup> He also points out that the Denver converts had, “moved several times before converting to Islam,” “were raised more religiously than their English counterparts,” and had “sampled other religions.”<sup>231</sup> Bowen particularly finds that these factors may make potential converts to Islam, “more amenable to conversion,” due to an inability to, “develop long lasting roots in a particular place, combined with being raised with a liberal worldview.”<sup>232</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned factors, Bowen points to other factors, which may have influenced the Denver interviewees’ conversions to Islam, namely, “a disconnection from their own culture sub-culture,” combined with Islam’s, “way of unifying their pre-existing egalitarian views with their predisposition to ‘spiritual’ experiences,” which also, “reconciled questions about the relationship of religion with logic, provide alternatives to previous religious contradictions, and/or appear congruent with their previous religion.”<sup>233</sup>

Bowen then returns to answer his initial question regarding the post-9/11 increase of conversion to Islam in the United States, measuring his findings against Thomas Walker Arnold’s, “general conclusions about the success of Islam’s proselytization efforts,” in his work, *The Preaching of Islam*.<sup>234,235</sup> Bowen’s findings seem to corroborate Arnold’s, leading Bowen to conclude that, “as long as ‘terrorist’ is treated as synonymous with Arab and ‘Islam’ thereby keeping the religion in the news, and Muslim continue to arrive in the U.S., it is likely conversion to Islam will proliferate.”<sup>236, 237</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Bowen, "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado.", 62

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 62-63

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Thomas Walker Sir Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam; a History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* ([Lahore, Shirkat-I-Qalam, 1956], 1956), Non-fiction.

<sup>236</sup> Bowen, "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado."

<sup>237</sup> *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States Volume 1: White American Muslims before 1975*, 3 vols., vol. I (Leiden; Boston: Brill, forthcoming, 2015). Patrick D. Bowen is

Marcia Hermansen

In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Marcia Hermansen contributes, “Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives,” in which she discusses a range of topics spanning from the theology and rituals of conversion to post-conversion support groups, discussions that are desperately needed.<sup>238</sup> Hermansen begins with a brief overview of early Islamic history before discussing theology and rituals of conversion. She goes on to outline some common terms associated with Islamic theology and rituals, such as *da’wa*, or inviting to Islam, *bay’a*, an oath of allegiance, *aslama*, one who submits to or accepts Islam.<sup>239</sup> With regard to *bay’a* and *aslama*, Hermansen states that, “the two are usually combined to refer to a person’s becoming Muslim.”<sup>240</sup> Additionally, Hermansen explains the Qur’anic origins of the concept of *fitra*, “the idea that all souls have recognized God in pre-eternity in an episode known as the Primordial Covenant,” which she points out as a reason that many converts prefer the term ‘revert’, since they view conversion as a return to the primordial state.<sup>241</sup> Regarding this view, Hermansen points out that, “in a broad sense, every created thing in the universe is generically “muslim” in the sense of necessarily submitting to God, whether consciously and voluntarily or involuntarily.”<sup>242</sup> She then explains the concept of the *shahada*, or Islamic testimony of faith, which says, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God,” the recitation of which, “in the presence of two witnesses,” signifies one’s formal conversion to Islam.<sup>243</sup>

In her next sections, Hermansen goes into a discussion of Conversion, Identity, and the Expansion of Islam before entering a deeper discussion on the History of Conversion to Islam,

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currently working on a 3-Volume Series entitled, A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States. The first volume is due for publication in Fall 2015.

<sup>238</sup> Marcia K. Hermansen, "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016: Oxford University Press, 2014)., 632-666

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 632-633

<sup>240</sup> Hermansen, "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives."

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 633

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 633-634

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 634

Conversion in Diverse Regions (Central Asia, Turkey and the Balkans, Southeast Asia and Africa), Internal Conversions, Conversions to Islam in the West, and finally, Conversion to Islam in the United States.<sup>244</sup> It is in this last section, Conversion to Islam in the United States, that the current study is situated. Hermansen goes into a discussion of proselytization among Muslims in the United States and which groups are more likely to do it, stating from the outset that in general, “African American Muslims are more likely to attempt to teach others about Islam,” but that movements such as the Ahmadiyya and some Sufi orders, “have made greater inroads, proportionate to their size, in the American population,” which leads her to the conclusion that, “organized activities in spreading Islam do have an impact on conversion.”<sup>245</sup>

Hermansen points out that although the majority of American Muslims are immigrants, that especially post-9/11 in the United States, “converts, whether white or African American, are increasingly visible,” which has led them to, “play a larger role in American-based institutions that interface with Muslim identity.”<sup>246</sup> Hermansen goes on to highlight a controversial, important, and increasingly common topic of discussion in Muslim communities across America: racism within the Muslim community. She states that while American converts to Islam are, “generally welcomed by the Muslim community,” that in terms of reception, “some may feel that Euro-Americans receive an especially positive reception from the immigrant community, and it may be observed that certain immigrant ethnic groups are particularly impressed by converts.”<sup>247</sup>

Hermansen then turns her attention to the work of others who study conversion to Islam in the West, namely Larry Poston, who wrote *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion*, and Ali Köse, who wrote *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, the latter of which was previously discussed.<sup>248, 249</sup> She then reflects

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 634-649

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 645-646

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 646-647

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 647

<sup>248</sup> Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*.

on her own extensive work on converts to Islam, which primarily focuses on converts to Sufi Islam, or Islamic mysticism, and particularly its occurrence in the United States.<sup>250</sup>

After brief discussions of mass conversion (Warith Deen Muhammad community), styles of *da'wa* (emphasizing Khurram Murad, Larry Poston, and Stefano Allievi), rituals and formalities of conversion to Islam (*shahada* celebrations), and Sufi movements, Hermansen discusses the importance of, "Post-Conversion Support Groups," which she points out, "have been one of the neglected areas of Islamic *da'wa*."<sup>251</sup> According to Hermansen, "follow-up," is crucial for converts, and makes several important observations regarding the needs of converts to Islam, drawing from her fieldwork experiences in Chicago, Illinois.<sup>252</sup> Hermansen asserts that, "support groups seem to work best when run by converts themselves," and that, "the Muslim community with which converts associate immediately after conversion may be crucial in shaping their attitudes to practice and doctrine."<sup>253</sup> Additionally, Hermansen points to the importance of, "integration into the Muslim community," and states that it may be, "more difficult for women

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<sup>249</sup> Köse, *Conversion to Islam : A Study of Native British Converts*.

<sup>250</sup> For further reading, please see the following, which is not an exhaustive list, but which is invaluable for those interested in studying conversion to Islam, and particularly conversion to Sufi Islam. Marcia K. Hermansen, "Cultural Worlds/Culture Wars: Contemporary American Muslim Perspectives on the Role of Culture," (2009); "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America," *Muslim World* 90, no. 1/2 (2000); "Roads to Mecca : Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims," *Muslim World* 89, no. 1 (1999); "Keeping the Faith: Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk and Willy Jansen (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2006); "How to Put the Genie Back in the Bottle? "Identity" Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in America," in *Progressive Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003); "Trends in Islamic Studies in the United States and Canada since the 1970s," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (1993); "Two-Way Acculturation : Muslim Women in America between Individual Choice (Liminality) and Community Affiliation (Communitas)," in *Muslims of America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Pr, 1991); "Survey Article : Interdisciplinary Approaches to Islamic Biographical Materials," *Religion* 18, no. 2 (1988); Marcia K. Hermansen and Shabana Mir, "Identity Jihads: The Multiple Strivings of American Muslim Youth," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Marcia K. Hermansen, "In the Garden of American Sufi Movements: Hybrids and Perennials," in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam / Ed. Peter B. Clarke* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1998).

<sup>251</sup> "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives.", 649-653

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 653

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

than men,” and that, “the single convert is not likely to find marriage facilitated by becoming Muslim.”<sup>254</sup> She also discusses projects and conferences in the United States, held specifically for new Muslims, which leads her to the topic of Finding Community and Retention.<sup>255</sup>

Regarding community and retention, Hermansen states that, “for the first generation of children of convert Euro-American Muslims, retaining Islam has been challenging,” which she attributes to parents who, “veer between the extremes of either being so rigid that the children rebel and leave home or being so tolerant that the children decide to reassimilate to an American lifestyle.”<sup>256</sup> Her research focusing on Euro-American reverts showed that being married to a Muslim man increased the likelihood that the Islamic faith and practices would be retained by the children of such marriages.<sup>257</sup> Additionally, she was able to identify a few factors: 1) “the presence of an extended Muslim family,” 2) “the passing on of faith in conjunction with traditions,” and 3) “simple acts of everyday life.”<sup>258</sup> She goes on to suggest that, “children of cross-cultural marriages are more comfortable with American-born children of immigrants and are therefore more likely to be able to find marriage partners within the Muslim community.”<sup>259</sup>  
<sup>260</sup> In conclusion, Hermansen points out that, “Muslim organizations that take an interest in conversion increasingly understand that having materials and support systems available to meet the needs of new Muslim will play a strong role in influencing the success of further conversion efforts.”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 653

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 654-655

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> "Keeping the Faith: Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West."

<sup>258</sup> "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives.", 655

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 655

<sup>260</sup> Ibid; "Keeping the Faith : Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West," in *Women Embracing Islam* (Austin, Tex: Univ of Texas Pr, 2006).

<sup>261</sup> "Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives.", 656



## Conclusion

In conclusion, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies each have a plethora of approaches to the study of religious conversion and its definition, as well as advantages and disadvantages, some of which overlap. One disadvantage of all the studies within these differing approaches is the size of the cohort of converts studied. Regarding psychological approaches, one of the greatest disadvantages stems from the detrimental link between religious conversion and pathology, often referring to converts as “sick souls.”<sup>262</sup> This link, which began with William James, led to most approaches of religious conversion viewing crisis as a major motivating factor. Additionally, early psychological studies focused almost entirely on conversion in adolescents and young adults, conversion to evangelical Christianity, and conversion in men and women without regard for experiential differences. Early studies often conflated conclusions on religious conversion in adolescence with religious conversion throughout the life span and a focus on individuals.

With sociological perspectives there is some carry over from psychological perspectives, namely the tendency to insist on crisis as essential to the conversion process, a focus on on male adolescents and young adults, and no distinction between the conversion experiences of men and women. Additionally, sociological approaches focus on mass conversions to divergent religious groups, many of which are religious cults, and an increased attention to institutional factors, social networks, and economic factors, and how they motivate individual conversions.

Unlike psychological and sociological approaches, anthropological approaches are the least likely to suffer from disciplinary bias due to their holistic approach to the study of religious conversion. However, there is still a tendency to study religious conversion among remote groups, emphasizing cultural factors and often downplaying psychological or sociological factors. The main critique of the religious studies approach to the study of religious conversion is that, while it excels in offering historical perspectives of religious conversion, such as that of Saul of

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<sup>262</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

Tarsus, Imam al-Ghazali, etc., due to its intense focus on religious doctrine, the attention to the convert suffers. Additionally, there is often an oversimplification and even reduction of the process of religious conversion leading to explanations of religious conversion from a doctrinal perspective, which often does not corroborate with religious conversion as described and experienced by the converts themselves. To this point, when seeking advice on this project, I was initially told, “In religion we open books, not knock on doors.” On the other hand, another prominent religious studies scholar, Dr. Alan Godlas, proposes that emotional intelligence is vital to religious studies because the underdevelopment of emotional intelligence may lead to unnecessary intercultural and interreligious violence in our world, whereas the development of emotional intelligence may decrease the degree to which unnecessary intercultural and interreligious violence occurs in our world.

As for the advantages of these approaches, one of the most important is the abundant definitions, explanations, and models of religious conversion as a process rather than a sudden, life-altering event that occurs at one moment in time. Of particular interest are Köse, Roald, Bourque, Marranci, Bowen, and Hermansen’s works on the formation of Muslim identity, which highlight the importance of listening to, and learning from the converts themselves to understand the process of conversion to Islam. Considering the limited body of literature on conversion to Islam, their insights, along with Karin van Nieuwkerk’s entire volume, *Women Embracing Islam*, were invaluable. Psychology’s initial leap from crisis to transformation provides scholars of religious conversion a deeper understanding of the complex internal processes of identity formation, the development of meaning systems, and spiritual transformation. Sociology’s focus on the impact of social networks, institutions, and economic factors adds an understanding of the varied social contexts in which potential converts and eventual converts find themselves, and how they negotiate and interact with others in those settings. Anthropology’s focus on culture provides an understanding of the complex role culture plays in the process of religious conversion, allowing outsiders to grasp the significance of the diverse cultural norms of Muslims, and how

those norms may be beneficial or detrimental to American female converts to Islam. Like Anthropology, Religious Studies is multidisciplinary, outlining the historical background and doctrinal basis for religious conversion, while providing detailed accounts of religious conversion throughout history and across religious traditions, deepening our understanding of each religion's doctrinal basis for conversion. These approaches offer unique perspectives, which add to our understanding of religious conversion, and without which, our comprehension of the matter would remain incomplete.

However, given the insights gained from this literature review, which, for the purposes of this thesis was significantly reduced, it is clear that the academic study of religious conversion needs to return primarily to the discipline of Religious Studies.

This thesis on identity cultivation among 257 American female converts to Islam will significantly add to the current body of literature on theories of identity formation, religious conversion and specifically, female conversion to Islam in the United States. Utilizing a constructivist worldview, this research attempts to understand religious conversion through respondents' understandings, which contributes to the identification of patterns, theories, and in some cases, generalizations.<sup>263</sup> This thesis reports, analyzes, and interprets the experiences of 257 respondents to the survey *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*, which sought to answer questions surrounding distinctions converts make between being, becoming, and *feeling* Muslim, characteristics of *feelings of Muslimness*, stages of religious conversion and the cultivation of converts' Muslim identities, what makes them *feel* Muslim, and that which helps and hinders their *feelings of Muslimness*.

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<sup>263</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* / John W. Creswell, Vicki L. Plano Clark (Los Angeles : SAGE Publications, c2011. 2nd ed., 2011), Bibliographies. Non-fiction., 40-42

## CHAPTER 4

### STUDYING CONVERTS: AN INTERACTIVE MIXED-METHODS DESIGN

#### Introduction

In contrast to research models that are not interactive, the design of this research models Joseph Maxwell's Interactive Research Design, as presented in *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*.<sup>264</sup> Maxwell's design differs from similar models in his conceptualization of the relationship each component has with the others. Maxwell sees the design as a system in which each component is an integral part of the whole. The five components Maxwell identifies are Goals, Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, Methods, and Validity. While each part is integral, the research questions themselves are at the center of the design, and are the component that connects all other components to one another, and which have the most direct influence on the others, while simultaneously being the component most directly affected by the others. Maxwell's model includes a detailed list of questions that each component should answer. What follows is an overview of the goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and validity of the mixed-methods study, *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*. In each subsequent section, I answer the questions corresponding to each component.

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<sup>264</sup> Joseph Alex Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*, 3rd ed., Applied Social Research Methods (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2013).

### Goals<sup>265, 266</sup>

The study is worth doing for numerous reasons. Understanding, through the lens of this mixed-methods study, the nuances in the conversion experiences of American female converts to Islam, lends a greater understanding of the process of conversion to Islam as well as the identity cultivation process. Such an understanding is critical for identifying key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness*, as understood by American female converts to Islam, which may enable communities across the U.S. to better assist converts by reducing key factors converts identify as hindering their *feelings of Muslimness*, and increasing key factors converts identify as nurturing their *feelings of Muslimness*.

There are many issues surrounding American female converts to Islam, which require clarification. As previously mentioned, 73% of images the American public are seeing of Muslim women are portraying them as victims who desperately need to be rescued from oppression.<sup>267</sup> Sadly, portrayals such as these are not the exception, but the norm. However, these depictions of Muslim women do not at all equal the views Muslim women have of themselves. The responses to this mixed-methods study highlight the unadulterated views of American female converts to Islam and offer a drastically different narrative to counter the misconceptions. The hope is that by listening to the stories of these women, a shift will occur in the dialogue surrounding American female converts to Islam, which may ultimately effect change regarding public opinion.

Additionally, it is crucial to grasp what American female converts to Islam report about their experiences of becoming Muslim and *feeling* Muslim, as well as what distinctions, if any, the converts report, and how, if at all, they relate these two experiences. From a theoretical

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid. Joseph Maxwell outlines five components, which are similar to those put forth, by Margaret LeCompte and Judith Preissle in 1993 in *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Dr. Judith Preissle is a distinguished professor of Qualitative Research at the University of Georgia. In preparation for this study, I began my journey into qualitative research as a student in her course, Qualitative Research Traditions.

<sup>266</sup> Margaret Diane LeCompte, Judith Preissle, and Renata Tesch, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research* / Margaret D. LeCompte, Judith Preissle, with Renata Tesch (San Diego : Academic Press, c1993. 2nd ed., 1993), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

<sup>267</sup> Gardner, "Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think."

perspective, this research will extend existing literature on Muslim American women, which has primarily focused on first generation foreign-born immigrants and second and third generation U.S.-born immigrant families. It is important to understand how converts' personal experiences both pre and post-conversion shape their eventual Muslim identities while exploring notions regarding what led to their conversions through research questions. On a practical level, the results will provide rich data on the firsthand views of this group and provide insights, which may be useful for Islamic studies educators in higher education, primary school, and at the local masjid level as well as schools of education planning for programs and student needs.

On a personal level, the results will lend a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of American female converts to Islam, who willingly became part of a religious minority in the United States upon conversion to Islam. The results will also help researchers explore the impact of community practices and structures on the lives of converts. The results of this research will also further a personal commitment to bringing convert issues to light in such a way that effects positive change for converts, individual Muslim communities, and U.S. society.

Scholars of Anthropology of Islam, Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, Women's Studies, Anthropology of Religion, Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion, and many other fields, should care about this research because it gives the participants the opportunity to speak for themselves, participants are defining the subject, and the large sample size is representative across sects of Islam, races and ethnicities, classes, and sexual orientations. Additionally, the validity of the study strengthens by using mixed-methods research design, independently analyzing each set of data before merging, and drawing on recent studies of Muslim Americans and American Mosques, which corroborate the findings.

### Conceptual Framework<sup>268</sup>

The points below are adapted from Sherry L. Steeley's dissertation proposal outline, *Language, Culture, and Professional Identity: Cultural Productions in a Bilingual Career Ladder Training Program*, which Maxwell cites as an example of interactive research design.<sup>269</sup>

We know very little about the identity formation and feelings of American female converts to Islam, as experienced by them, because there is very little research that specifically addresses convert issues and asks converts directly for input regarding solutions. This research addresses the following:

- 1) Studies of Muslim Americans do not necessarily apply to converts or include them, which leaves a gap in scholarly literature on the subject.
- 2) While there are numerous books and scholarly articles about converts to Islam, many are autobiographical and tell the story of one convert in particular or lead to generalizations about converts based on the experiences of a few.
- 3) To the best of my knowledge, no study yet exists regarding what helps female converts to Islam *feel* Muslim.
- 4) With 85% of full-time paid Imams being born outside the United States, Muslim American educators continue to struggle to adapt instruction and learning environments to the needs of culturally diverse learners, making it difficult for them to identify with the needs of American converts, and the U.S.-born children of immigrants.<sup>270</sup>
- 5) Research conducted on American mosques shows that only 3% of mosques consider classes for converts to Islam a top priority.<sup>271</sup>
- 6) As U.S. citizens who understand American cultural and societal norms, American female converts to Islam are in a good position to serve as advocates and change agents, not only for themselves, but also on behalf of their fellow Muslim Americans.
- 7) A majority of U.S. news media coverage of American female converts to Islam reflects bias toward Islam and portrays converts as brainwashed and oppressed victims.<sup>272,273,274</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2011: Activities, Administration and Vitality of the American Mosque," (Islamic Society of North America, 2012). This study is part one of a three part series that culminated with the production of a documentary of the findings called, *Unmosqued*, which premiered in 2014.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*.

<sup>273</sup> Gardner, "Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think."

<sup>274</sup> Omar Sacirbey, "Female Converts to Islam Face Growing Scrutiny," *Christian Century* 130, no. 11 (2013).

- 8) Understanding converts perceptions about their own identities, their ideas about community support, and what they need, is a first step toward understanding the important role U.S. converts to Islam can play in bridging the cultural divide between Muslims and other Americans.
- 9) Understanding how community support influences *feelings of Muslimness* may provide insight into the identity cultivation of converts as well as revealing steps that communities can take to nurture those feelings.

Thus, a mixed-methods study of American female converts to Islam, focusing on converts' perspectives, can make an important contribution to the extant body of literature.

### **Research Questions<sup>275</sup>**

First, the research sought to answer the following: Do converts distinguish between outwardly becoming Muslim and inwardly *feeling* Muslim. What did becoming Muslim and feeling Muslim mean to converts? What common characteristics do converts identify as '*feelings of Muslimness*'? Do converts identify stages in the cultivation of their Muslim identities? Moreover, do converts identify their needs as converts? By seeking to understand *feelings of Muslimness* as experienced by U.S. female converts, an intimate portrait of their individual and collective experiences develops.

While the aforementioned questions are the overarching questions, the mixed-methods survey itself, is broken down into quantitative and qualitative strands. A table of the quantitative questions is located in Appendix B.<sup>276</sup>

While, for the purpose of these tables, the numbering of questions is sequential, the quantitative and qualitative strands were intermixed throughout the survey, with the bulk of quantitative questions preceding the qualitative questions. Additionally, some questions had both quantitative and qualitative elements. A table of the qualitative questions is located in Appendix C. A complete sequential list of both quantitative and qualitative questions, as they appeared in the survey is located in Appendix D.

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<sup>275</sup> Maxwell, Qualitative Research Design : *An Interactive Approach*.

<sup>276</sup> A copy of the entire survey, *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam* is located in Appendix D.



## Methods<sup>277</sup>

This study represents an in-depth mixed-methods survey of 257 U.S. female converts to Islam. The definition of mixed methods research methodology, as understood herein, is as follows:

Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.<sup>278</sup>

This definition serves as a guide to understanding the approach to this research design, data collection, and data analysis.

With the decision to pursue a mixed-methods approach, came many important questions. As an American female convert to Islam myself, a series of self-reflective questions arose. Would I be comfortable with a stranger sitting in front of me, asking me these questions, and recording my answers? Would I be comfortable with someone having the ability to tell others about my intimate feelings and possibly revealing my identity? My answer was, “No.” Therefore, the line of questioning changed and I began to ask myself, “Which method would help the respondents feel more comfortable with regard to answering these personal questions?” The solution was simple, anonymity. However, how could I ensure the anonymity of the respondents if the questioning was occurring face-to-face? Such a thing is uninsurable. Thus, the decision to make the survey online and anonymous arose. Initially, my inner anthropologist and ethnographer did not like the idea at all. How could the research be ethnographic if there was no face-to-face interaction? The answer was simple enough. By asking open-ended qualitative questions and

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<sup>277</sup> Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*.

<sup>278</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research / John W. Creswell, Vicki L. Plano Clark* (Thousand Oaks, Calif. : SAGE Publications, c2007., 2007), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

quantitative questions with built-in follow-up questioning, the research would retain an equally strong qualitative element.

For the distribution of the survey, the decision to turn to social media was an easy one. The goal was to reach as many potential participants as possible, while simultaneously retaining anonymity. Thousands of women received a link to the survey via messages, message boards, and postings on Facebook, Twitter, and Yahoo Groups. Additionally, outreach extended to numerous Islamic organizations across the United States via e-mail, in hopes that they would forward the information to American female converts in their respective communities. While many individuals and organizations were receptive and aided a great deal in the distribution of the survey, others chose not to distribute the survey or tell their members about the study. The distribution of the survey began on June 20, 2014 and ended on September 23, 2014, for a total of three months.

Upon pursuing a mixed-methods approach, the choosing of a research design commenced. After researching various mixed methods designs and discussing them with the committee as well as fellow colleagues, I chose a convergent, parallel data-validation variant of mixed methods design, which would allow me to include both open-ended (qualitative) and closed-ended (quantitative) questions on the survey. By using this variant of the convergent design, the results from the qualitative questions can be used to confirm, validate, or invalidate the results from the quantitative questions.<sup>279</sup>

Regarding data analysis, responses to qualitative and quantitative questions are coded, categorized, and analyzed on an ongoing basis as a source for further questions, the emergence of themes, and as an eventual source for organizing patterns of response across categories and individuals. Additionally, qualitative responses serve as further basis of discussion according to themes, providing a source to compare and contrast beliefs, practices, thinking, and identity. To

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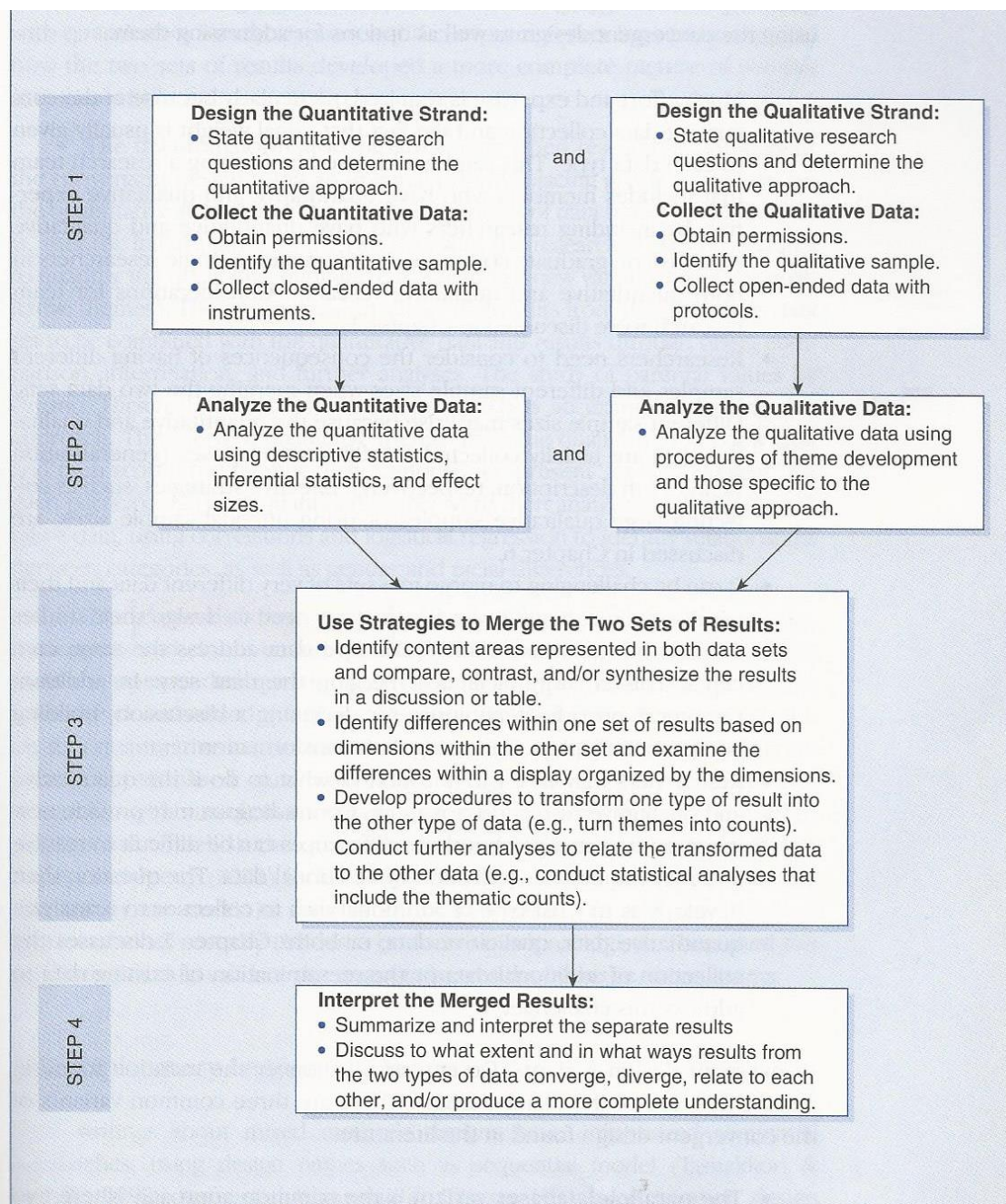
<sup>279</sup> *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* / John W. Creswell, Vicki L. Plano Clark.

verify the findings and themes, I will undertake extensive member checks of the findings and participant responses on an ongoing basis.

To deepen the understanding of the data, I will discuss qualitative responses extensively and accompany the quantitative results with diagrams. The data analysis follows a convergent, data-validation variant of mixed methods design. Initially, the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative strands happens independently, then a merger of the results occurs, followed by a summarization and interpretation of the merged results, ending with a discussion of the extent to which, and in what ways results from both sets of data converge, diverge, relate to each other, and/or produce a more complete understanding. This description is adapted from the flowchart for implementing a convergent design as presented in Creswell.<sup>280</sup> The flowchart provides a brief overview of the basic procedures for implementing a convergent, parallel mixed methods design.

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 2: Flowchart of the Basic Procedures in Implementing a Convergent Design<sup>281</sup>**

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., from figure 3.3, pg. 79.

### Validity<sup>282</sup>

There are numerous ways my results and conclusions could be wrong. While great effort was made to reach as many American female converts to Islam, some communities proved more difficult to reach than others. Thus, those communities I was unable to reach may not be represented evenly in the conclusions or may be underrepresented due to a poor sample size. For example, although African-American female converts to Islam outnumber Caucasian female converts to Islam, far more Caucasian converts completed the survey than African-American converts. This is something to take into consideration when analyzing the responses.

To deal with ‘reactivity’ and ‘hesitation’ on the part of potential participants, I emphasized that I support converts as a fellow American female convert to Islam and that I am interested in learning and understanding more about their views and experiences. To deal with my own biases, I am exercising extensive self-reflection and reflexivity as I proceed through data collection and analysis, raising my own awareness.

Regarding verification techniques, there will be frequent member-checks of qualitative and quantitative responses. Additionally, there will be active searches for discrepant evidence by using informed surveying techniques, and placing emphasis on discrepant evidence in member checks. Lastly, I am actively seeking informed input from colleagues and committee members while undertaking reflection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative responses to ensure that the degree to which my own biases could influence the findings, is diminished.

Rather than to identify a generalizable phenomenon, findings are intended to provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of U.S. female converts to Islam for academics and other interested parties such as policy makers, Islamic educators, administrators of mosques, as well as members of Muslim communities all over the United States.

The results herein deserve consideration as valid due to the large sample size obtained (257 responses), having representative samples across sects of Islam, races and ethnicities, age at

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<sup>282</sup> Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*.

the time of conversion, education, location, length of time as a Muslim, marital status at conversion, current marital status, and choice of attire. Additionally, the validity of the study increased due to employing a mixed-methods approach to the research and independent analysis of each data set before merging. Most importantly, these results should be relevant because the research allows converts to speak for themselves; define the subject of *feeling Muslim*; outline their personal journeys; detail some key factors of their *feelings of Muslimness*; convey what makes them *feel* Muslim; and educate others on how they can nurture or hinder the cultivation of those feelings.



## CHAPTER 5

### 257 AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO ISLAM: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DATA

#### Introduction

The demographic data in this chapter focuses entirely on the socio-demographic data of 257 anonymous American female converts to Islam who chose to respond to the survey *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*. As previously stated, recent polls show that many Americans now fear Muslim Americans due to media misrepresentation and lack of knowledge. An accurate representation of Muslims and particularly Muslim Americans will provide the American public a view of the incredible diversity of Muslim Americans. By providing fresh socio-demographic data on 257 American female converts to Islam, the American public will see an accurate portrait of American female converts to Islam that may remind them of themselves, thus lessening the degree to which they may fear Muslims, and particularly Muslim Americans, and increasing the likelihood that they may begin to view Muslim Americans as potential friends and neighbors. This survey reflects a wide range of diversity among American female converts to Islam and includes socio-demographic data regarding: gender, identification as an American convert to Islam, race and ethnicity, belief prior to conversion to Islam, branches of Christianity prior to conversion to Islam, age at the time of conversion, marital status at the time of conversion, branch of Islam, current marital status, length of time as a Muslim, and highest level of education completed.

For the purposes of increased validity, a majority of the following tables are direct imports from Qualtrics with few exceptions.<sup>283</sup> These exceptions arose from qualitative or open-ended questions, which necessitated quantification of the data. The manually quantified charts

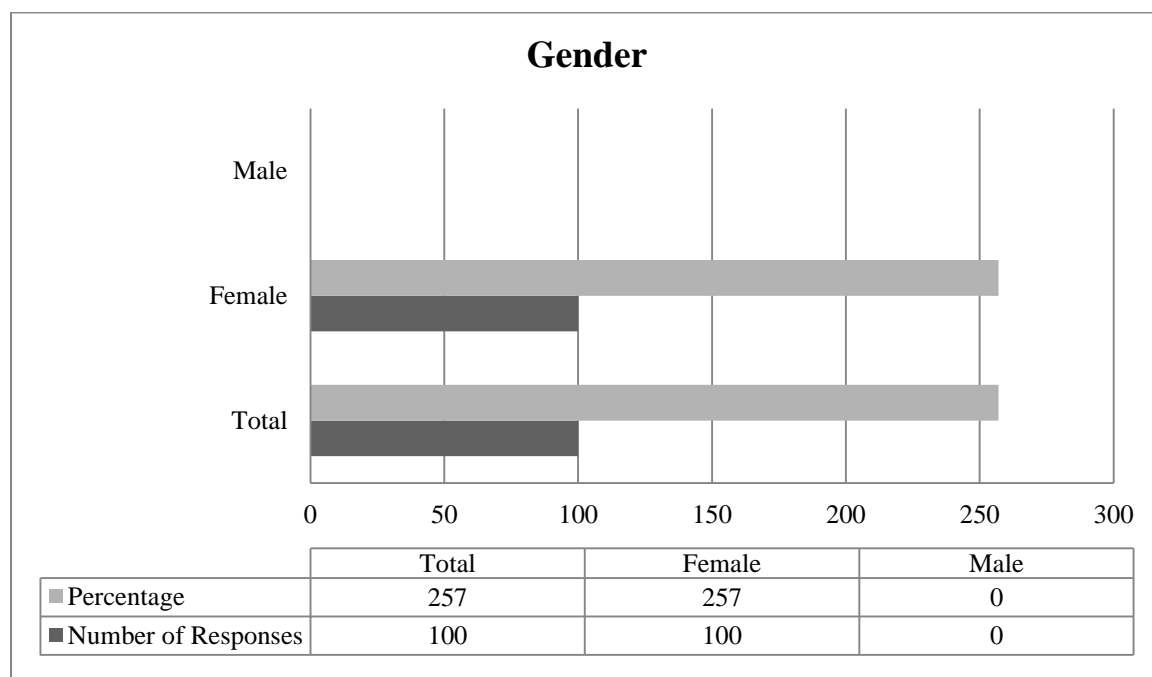
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<sup>283</sup> Qualtrics is an online survey and data collection tool.

include charts on race/ethnicity, belief prior to Islam, and branches of Christianity prior to conversion to Islam. The purpose of making some quantifiable questions qualitative or open-ended is to allow the respondents to self-identify race/ethnicity and belief prior to Islam rather than forcing respondents to fit into fixed categories, which in many cases would not produce accurate representations. By giving respondents the opportunity to input their own answers, a truer representation of the diversity of the respondents unfolds.

### Gender

Figure 3 is a representation of the gender of the participants, and as evidenced below, 100% of the 257 respondents self-identified as female. The participants had the option to select male or female. In order to provide a more accurate representation, future studies will be inclusive of categories outside the traditional male/female dichotomy, such as intersex, trans male, trans female, and non-gender conforming to name a few. One respondent reports that she is a, “trans\* male,” but adds that she presents as female, which explains her choice of “female” on the survey.

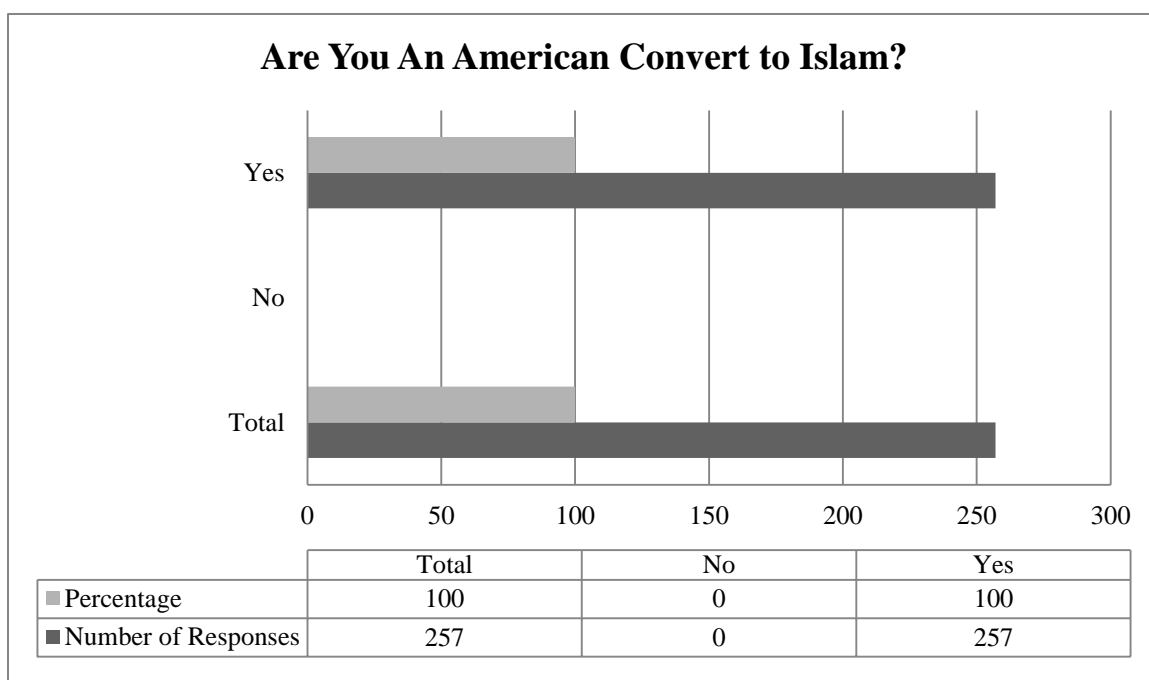


**Figure 3: Gender**



### Are You an American (U.S.-born) Convert to Islam?

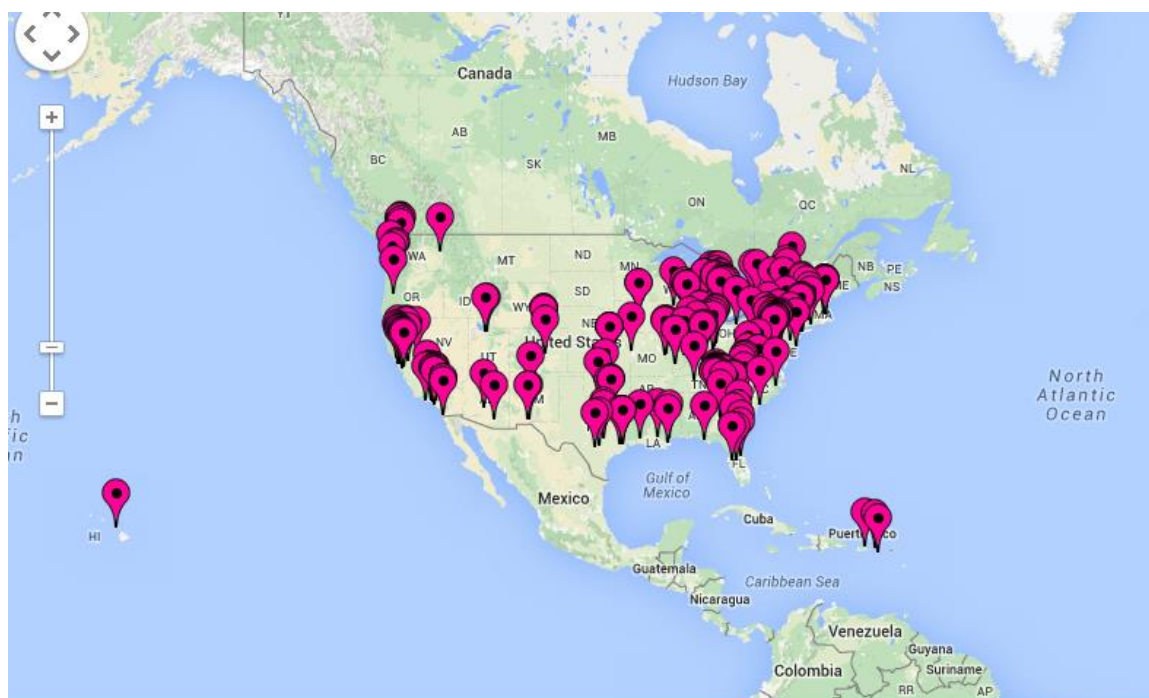
Figure 4 is a representation of responses to the question of whether the participants self-identify as American converts to Islam. For the purposes of this study, analysis is only of those responses in which the participants answered a majority of the quantitative and qualitative questions and self-identified as American converts to Islam. There were a total of 459 responses to the survey. However, of the 459 only 281 were complete responses, and of those 281 responses, 257 self-identified as U.S. female converts to Islam. This thesis focuses on the 257 female respondents of who self-identified as American (U.S.-born) converts to Islam. The remaining 24 respondents answered ‘no’, that they were not American converts to Islam and identified as citizens of other countries and/or born Muslims. The analysis of the 178 partial responses as well as the 24 full responses from participants who did not identify as U.S. female converts to Islam will occur at a later date.



**Figure 4: Are You An American Convert to Islam?**

### Where Are You Currently Residing?

Figure 5 represents the areas of residence within the United States for 90.7 % of the respondents who self-identified as American female converts to Islam. The remaining 9.3% respondents are not currently residing in the United States. For the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, those 9.3% of respondents residing outside the U.S. are not mapped, but they represent 18 different countries around the world. Each pink marker represents areas of residence for these 233 respondents residing in the United States. The map provides a clear understanding of the reach of the survey and shows that the respondents reside throughout the United States.



**Figure 5: U.S. Map of Respondents**

### What is Your Race or Ethnicity?

Figure 6 addresses the race and ethnicity of the respondents. The respondents manually recorded their race/ethnicity, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated manual quantification.

The largest percentage of respondents, by far, 53%, self-identified as Caucasian or White, followed by African American or Black at 20%, then 2+ racial or ethnic identities at 14%, Hispanic or Latina at 7%, Other at 4%, Asian at 2%, and Native American at 0% with only one respondent identifying as solely Native American.<sup>284, 285, 286, 287</sup> It is important to note that of the 37 respondents that self-identified as 2+ racial or ethnic identities, 18 mentioned Native American as part of their race/ethnicity. Furthermore, 11 of those 37 respondents mentioned African American or Black as part of their race/ethnicity. Nine respondents or 4% self-identified as Other.<sup>288</sup>

According to Pew Research Center's 2007 study, Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream, of U.S. native-born Muslims, 31% are White, 56% are Black, 2% are Asian,

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<sup>284</sup> The respondents who self-identified as Asian input the following descriptions: Arab; Asian; Chinese; Indian (South Asia); and Japanese with Korean influence

<sup>285</sup> The respondents who self-identified as Caucasian or White input the following descriptions: 2<sup>nd</sup> generation German immigrant; Irish; Italian; Anglo-Saxon; European American; White; Caucasian; English; North European; Southern Italian; Polish-American; Sicilian and Albanian ancestry; Jewish

<sup>286</sup> The respondents who self-identified as Hispanic or Latina input the following descriptions: Hispanic; Latina; Mexican; Puerto Rican; Hispanic-White; Cuban-American; Latina-White

<sup>287</sup> The respondents who self-identified as two or more races or ethnicities input the following: bi-racial: half English, half African American; Black and Caribbean American; Jewish and Irish; German and Russian; German and Mexican; German and Panamanian; Palestinian and American; White and Vietnamese; Mixed; Mixed (Black/White); Afro-Caribbean; Scottish and Latino; Thai and White; African, Welsh, Irish, and American Indian; African American, Cherokee, Japanese; African Native American; Black Native American; English, Irish, German, French, Native American, and possibly Jewish; Native American, Aztec, Spanish; German, English, French, Dutch, Israelite, Native American; African, Cherokee, Black Foot, Irish, Mongolian; Irish, Scottish, French, Native American, Canadian; Native American (Anishinaabe) and White; White, Asian, and Native American; White Irish and Cherokee; White American Indian

<sup>288</sup> The respondents who self-identified as 'Other' input the following: human; Bilalian; American; Ukraine; Jewish; Other; Romani/Melungeon; Danish/English; Czech family roots

and 11% identify as Other/Mixed.<sup>289</sup> Pew looked at Hispanic U.S. Muslims separately, concluding that of U.S. native-born Muslims, 10% report they are of Hispanic origin or descent.<sup>290</sup>

While the findings of this study do not corroborate Pew's findings, it may be that further investigation into sampling strategies is necessary, specifically regarding the efficacy of random digit dialing (RDD), which Pew used as one of their two sampling strategies, stating that, "The fifth stratum was a commercial list of approximately 450,000 households believed to include Muslims, based on an analysis of first and last names common among Muslims. This stratum yielded completed interviews with 533 respondents."<sup>291</sup> Pew's total number of completed interviews was 1,050 of which over half came from RDD surveying. Additionally, the second sampling strategy utilized Pew's interview database and other RDD survey from prior years. The difficulty with this strategy is that it does not account for the many U.S. converts to Islam who retain their birth names and do not officially change their names to "first and last names common among Muslims."<sup>292</sup>

These self-identifications are representative of the diversity existing among American female converts to Islam, and while there are far more than 257 American female converts to Islam residing all over the world, this sampling is enough to offer a fair representation of the tremendous diversity within the Muslim American community, a diversity that is not being accurately represented or portrayed in American news media, but possibly, and even probably in polls and surveys of Muslim Americans.

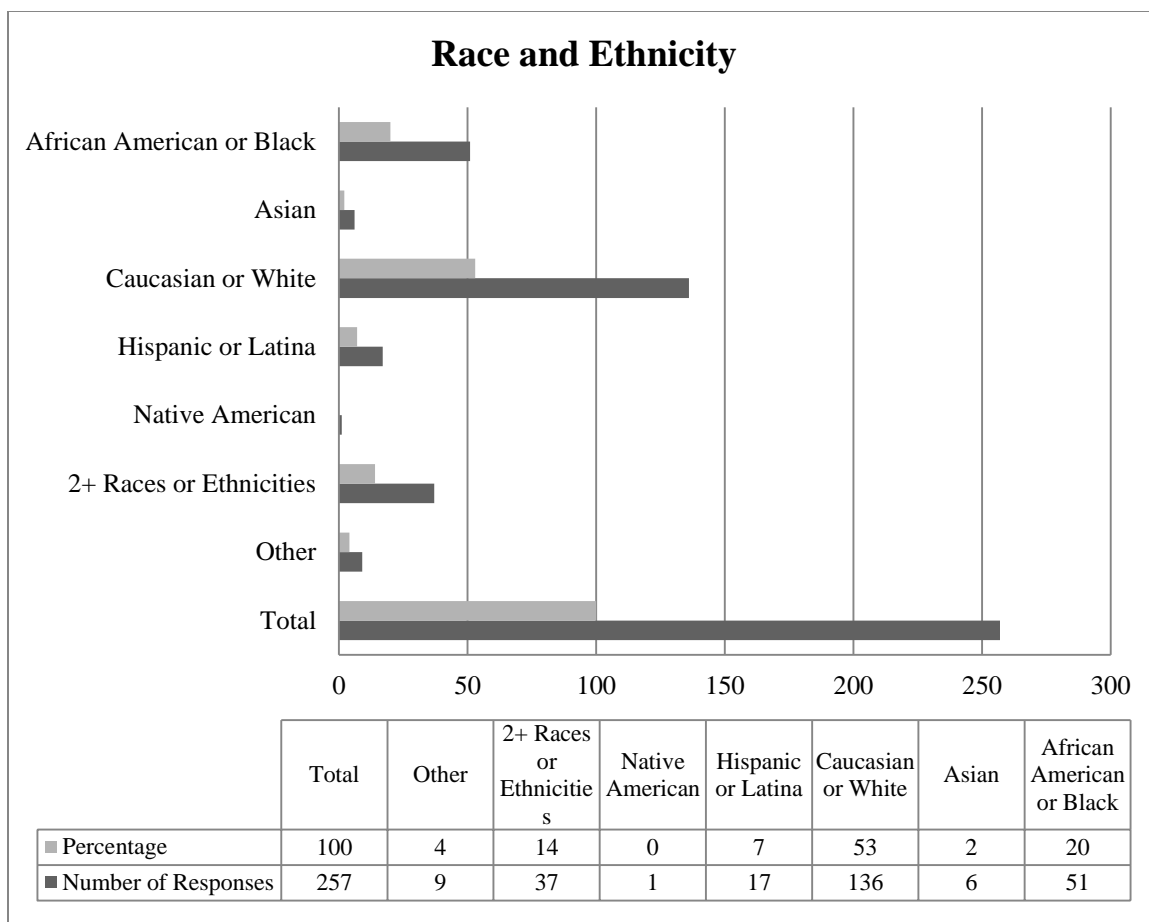
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<sup>289</sup> Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.", 17.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 6: Race and Ethnicity**

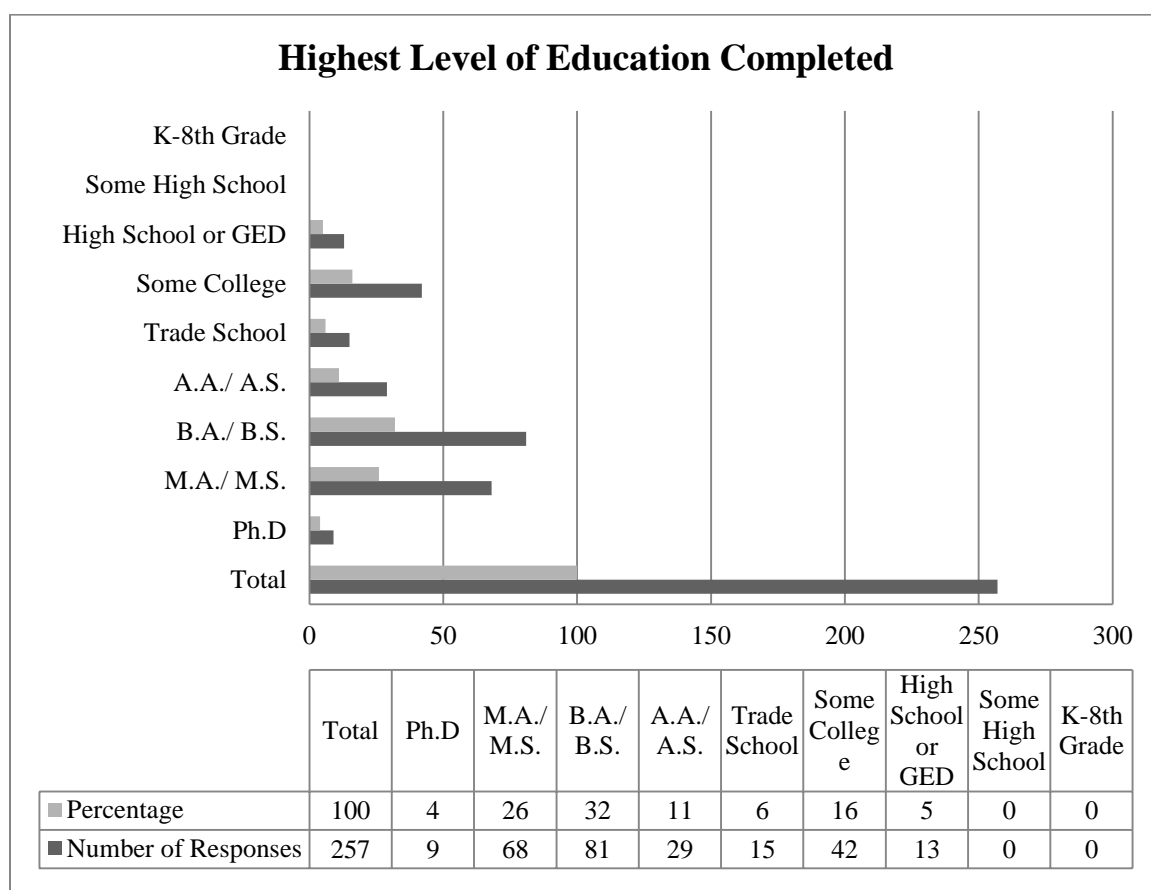
**What is the Highest Degree or Level of School You Have Completed? If Currently Enrolled, Highest Degree Received.**

Figure 7 addresses the highest level of education the respondents completed. The respondents chose from nine possible educational levels, with the ability to choose more than one where applicable. The levels the respondents could choose from are as follows: K-8<sup>th</sup> grade, Some High school no diploma, High school graduate or GED, Some college credit no degree, Trade/Technical/Vocational training, Associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, or Doctorate degree.

Of the 257 respondents, zero respondents or 0% reported K-8<sup>th</sup> grade or Some High School, no diploma as their highest educational level completed. One hundred percent of respondents reported having a high school diploma or GED at the very least. Five percent of respondents report that High School graduate, diploma, or GED, is their highest educational level. Sixteen percent of respondents report having some college credit, but no degree, the third highest percentage. Six percent of respondents report having Trade/Technical/Vocation training. Eleven percent report holding an Associate's degree as their highest level of education. Thirty-two percent of the respondents report holding a Bachelor's degree as their highest completed level of education, the largest percentage of all choices. The next highest percentage, at 26%, are those who report holding a Master's degree as their highest level of education. Lastly, 4% report holding a Doctorate degree as their highest level of education. This data suggests that 95% of the 257 American female converts either have some college credit but no degree, trade or vocational training, an Associate's degree, a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, or a Doctorate. A further conclusion is that 83% hold either an Associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, or a Ph.D.

Pew Research Center's 2007 study, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* breaks down educational levels of U.S. native-born Muslims as follows: 16% did not graduate from High School; 40% were High School graduates; 31% had some college but no degree; 10% were college graduates, and 3% reported graduate study.

The findings of this study highlight a complete departure from those of Pew, which may indicate that social media outreach to potential respondents did not reach as many of those from less educated backgrounds, or the length of the study, 30-60 minutes (with many going over that time), was problematic. However, it is important to note that statistics on the educational backgrounds of the participants who did not fully complete the study align with the educational backgrounds of those who did.



**Figure 7: Highest Level of Education Completed**

### **What Was Your Religion/Belief Prior to Islam?**

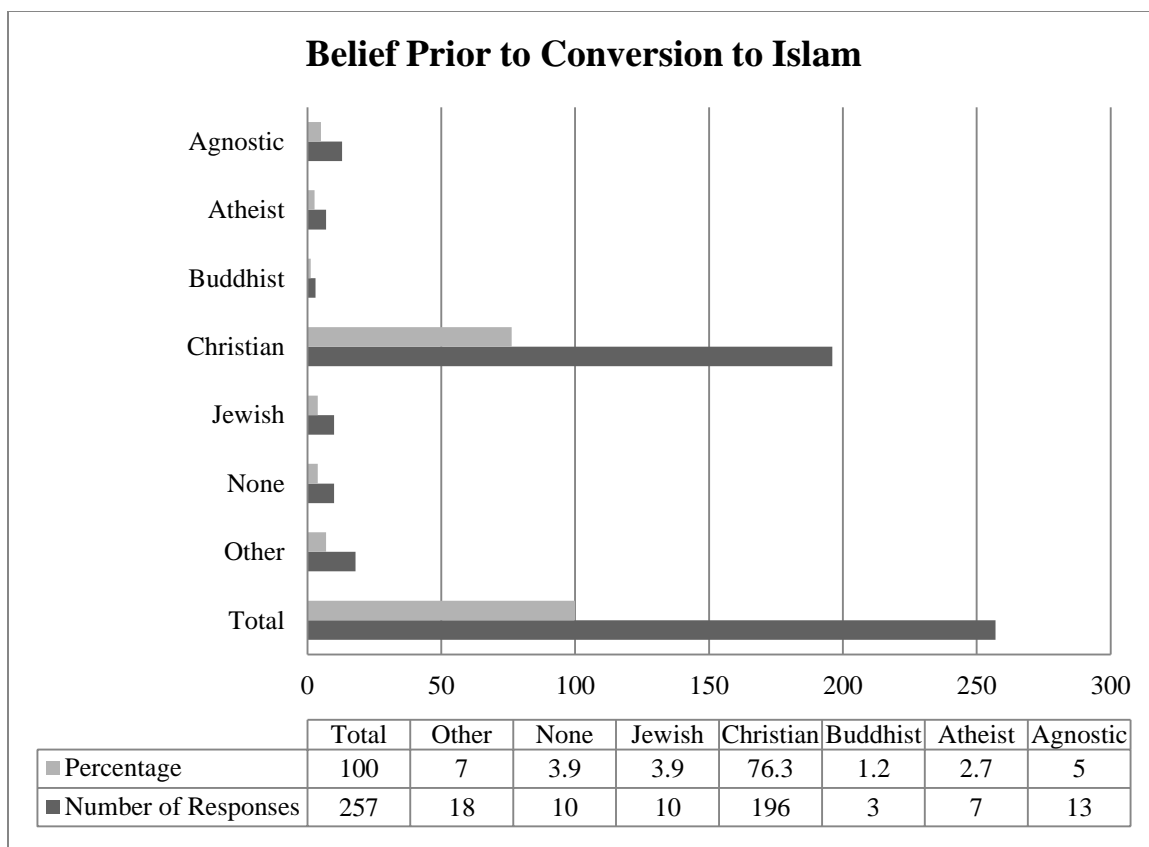
Figure 8 is a representation of the religious affiliations held by the respondents prior to their conversion to Islam. As previously mentioned, this table represents one of the three that include manually quantified data from open-ended responses. This question was qualitative or open-ended to allow respondents to self-identify their belief prior to Islam, rather than forcing them to choose a fixed category, which in many cases would not produce an accurate representation. Of the 257 respondents, 5% identified as Agnostic, 2.7% self-identified as Atheist, and 1.2% self-identified as Buddhist. Of the 257 respondents 76.3% self-identified as Christian and 3.9% self-identified Judaism as their prior belief.<sup>293</sup> Lastly, 3.9% self-identified ‘None’ for their belief prior to conversion and 7% self-identified as ‘Other’. This breakdown prompted further analysis of the respondents identifying as Christian and the development of a table corresponding with that breakdown.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> This is a combination of Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism. However, due to the large number of respondents identifying as Christian, Table 5 is a breakdown of branches of Christianity identified by the respondents.

<sup>294</sup> See Figure 9 for a further breakdown of Christianity.



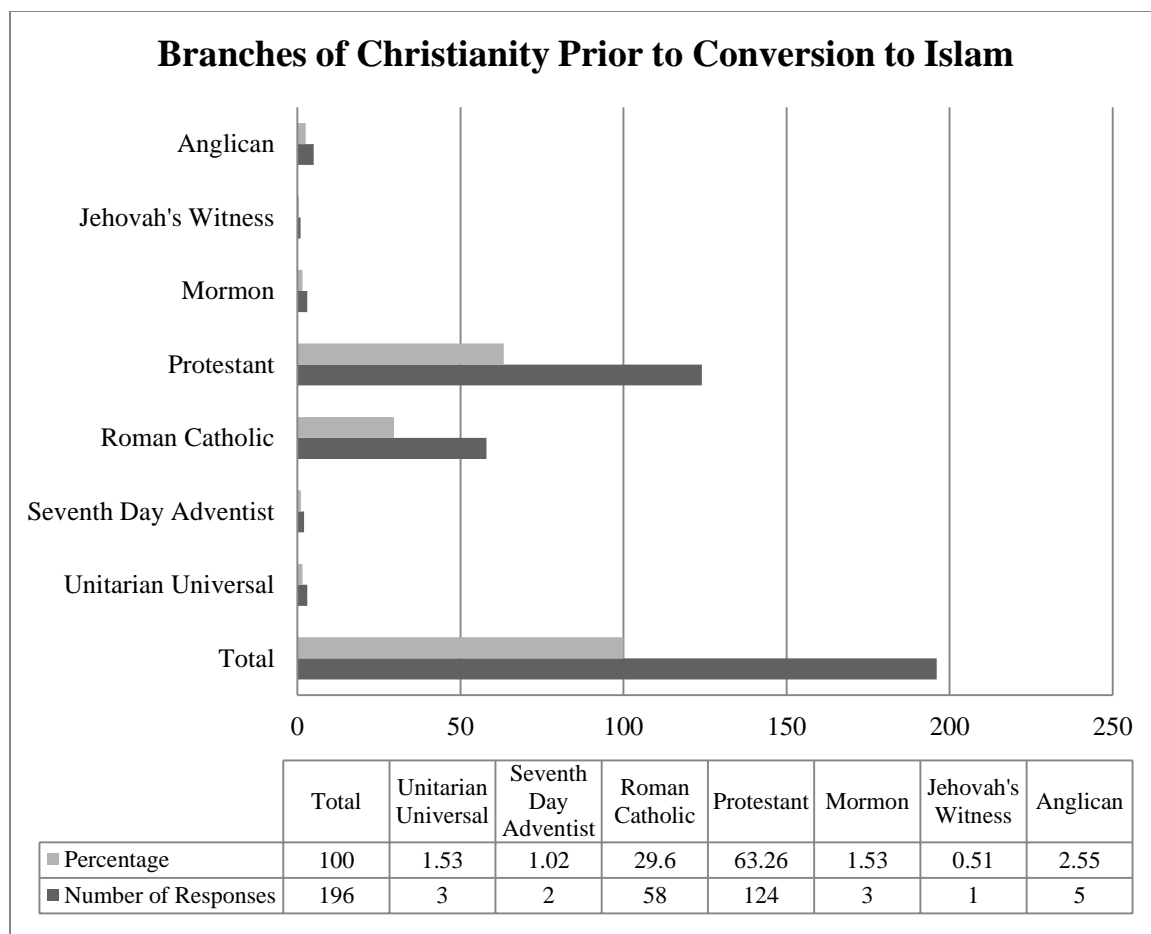


**Figure 8: Belief Prior to Conversion to Islam**

### **Branches of Christianity Prior to Conversion to Islam**

Figure 9 is a representation of branches of Christianity the respondents self-identified as prior to the conversion to Islam. As previously mentioned, this table represents a further breakdown of the 76.3% who identified as Christianity as their belief prior to conversion to Islam. Having such a large percentage of respondents who identified within one category prompted further analysis to identify whether the participants had specified a particular branch or branches of Christianity. The results in Figure 9 are the representation of that breakdown. Of 196 respondents who self-identified as Christian prior to their conversion to Islam 2.55% self-identified as Anglican, 0.51% as Jehovah's Witness, 1.53% as Mormon, 63.26% as Protestant, 29.6% as Roman Catholic, 1.02% as Seventh Day Adventist, and 1.53% as Unitarian Universalist. This breakdown shows that the largest percentage of American female converts to Islam come from a Protestant or Roman Catholic Christian background, which merits further research.

As with smaller studies of U.S. converts to Islam, the vast majority identify Protestant Christianity or Roman Catholicism as their prior belief. In a Christian majority nation, this is not surprising. However, it is necessary to do further research to determine which denominations of Protestant Christianity most U.S. converts to Islam identified with prior to their conversion to Islam.



**Figure 9: Branches of Christianity Prior to Conversion to Islam**

### What Was Your Age at the Time of Your Conversion to Islam?

Figure 10 is a representation of the ages of respondents at the time of conversion to Islam, as self-identified. The respondents chose from eight possible responses: less than 16; 16-19; 20-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; and 65 or over. Of the 257 respondents, 2% said they were less than 16 years old at the time of conversion. Another 16% said they were between ages 16-19, and 28% said they were between 20-24 years of age at the time of conversion. Thirty-five percent of respondents said they were between 25-34 years old, while 10% of respondents answered between ages 35-44. Lastly, 3% said they were between 55-64 years old at the time of conversion, and 1 respondent or 0% (statistically) said she was 65 or over at the time of conversion to Islam. The three largest groups, from greatest to least in number, are ages 25-34 with 35%, ages 20-24 at 28%, and ages 16-19 at 16%.<sup>295</sup> In other words, 79% of the 257 respondents converted to Islam between the ages of 16-34 years of age.

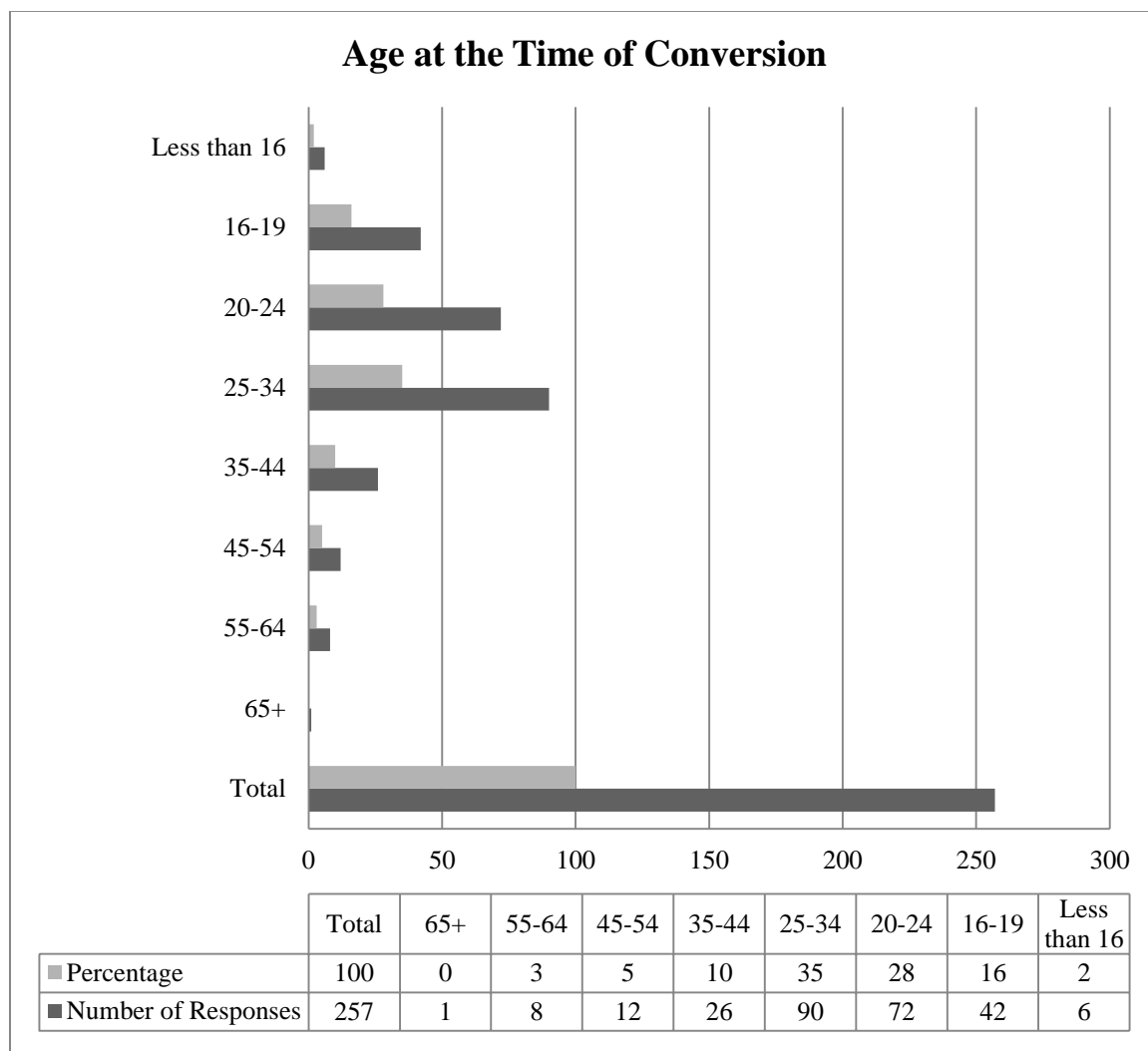
This implies that during young adulthood, a crucial developmental stage and time of identity formation, the largest percentage of respondents converted to Islam. Erik Erickson classifies the challenge of adolescence (ages 12-19) as one of identity vs. confusion, which is resolved by the virtue of loyalty to a greater ideal, community, or sense of self.<sup>296</sup> Loyalty to and perceived loyalty from a higher power – God, a community, an idea - acts as a catalyst in identity formation. Erikson classifies the task of early adulthood (ages 20-25) as one of intimacy vs. isolation, resolving by virtue of love of other, be it an individual, community, or higher power – God. He further classifies the task of adulthood (ages 26-64) as one of generativity vs. stagnation, which resolves by virtue of caring for, empathizing with, and showing concern for others. This

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<sup>295</sup> If we look at the age ranges while thinking of Erikson's Developmental Stage Theory, it is evident that the majority of converts report converting to Islam in adolescence (ages 12-19) and/or early adulthood (ages 20-25), and Erikson identifies the conflicts during those developmental stages as identity vs. confusion and intimacy vs. isolation, respectively. Please see Appendix E for a table of Erikson's Developmental Stage Theory.

<sup>296</sup> Erik H. Erikson and Joan M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York : W. W. Norton, c1997. Extended version / with new chapters on the ninth stage of development by Joan M. Erikson., 1997), Bibliographies. Non-fiction.

will be discussed in greater length in chapter 6, Conversion as Transition: Nuances of Becoming, Being, and *Feeling* Muslim.

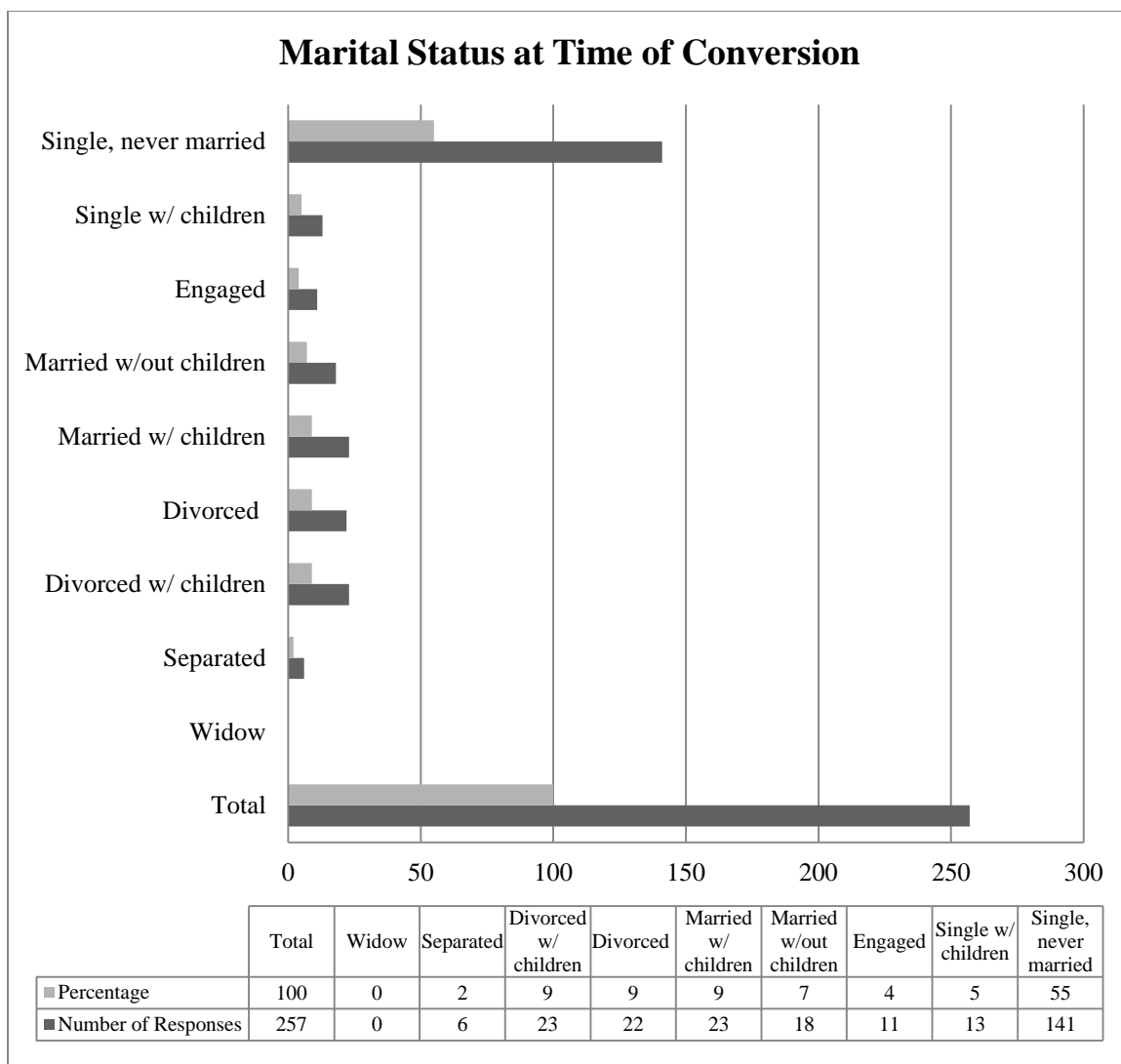


**Figure 10: Age at the Time of Conversion**

### **What Was Your Marital Status at the Time of Your Conversion to Islam?**

Figure 11 represents the respondents' marital status at the time of their conversion to Islam, as self-identified. The respondents chose from nine possible answers: single – never married, single with children, engaged, married without children, married with children, divorced, divorced with children, separated, or widowed. Of the 257 respondents, 55% reported being single, never married at the time of their conversion to Islam, the highest percentage, and an additional 5% reported being single with children at the time of conversion, bringing the total for single respondents to 60%. Four percent of respondents reported engagement at the time of conversion. Seven percent reported being married without children, while 9% report that they were married with children at the time of their conversion to Islam, bringing the total number of married respondents to 16%. Regarding divorces, 9% reported being divorced at the time of their conversion and 9% reported being divorced with children at the time of conversion, bringing the total number of divorcees to 18%. The remaining 2% reported separation at the time of conversion and no respondents were widows.

This suggests that single U.S. females are more likely than any other marital status to convert to Islam.



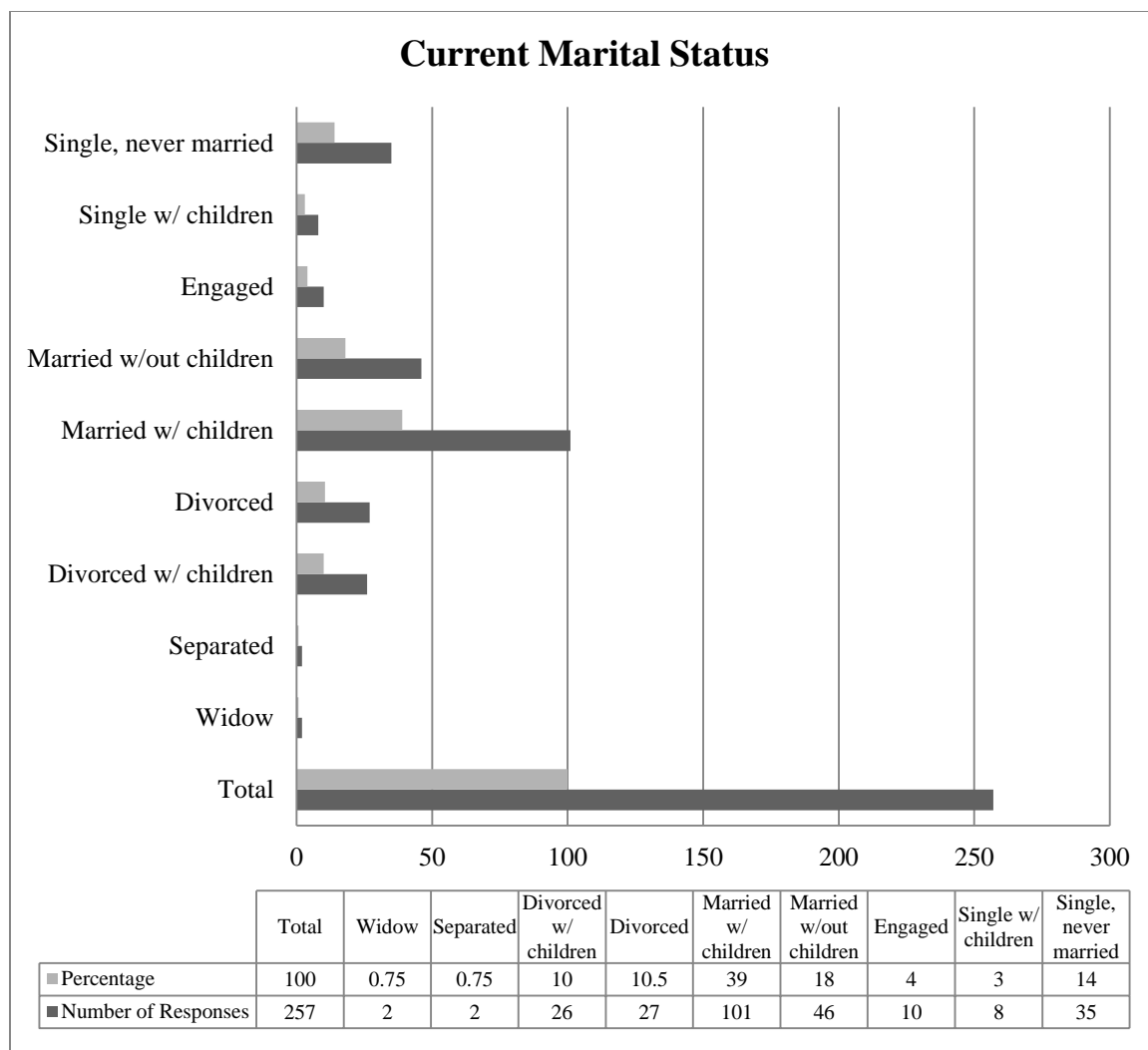
**Figure 11: Marital Status at Time of Conversion**

### **What Is Your Current Marital Status?**

Figure 12 is a representation of the respondents' current marital status, as self-identified. As with the corresponding question regarding marital status prior to conversion, the respondents chose from the same nine possible answers: single – never married, single with children, engaged, married without children, married with children, divorced, divorced with children, separated, or widowed. Of the 257 respondents 14% report being single, never married, with another 3% reporting they are single with children, bringing the total of single respondents to 17%, the third largest group. Four percent of respondents report being engaged. With regard to married respondents, 18% report they are currently married without children, while 39% responded as married with children, bringing the total of married respondents to 57%, the largest group. Regarding divorcees, 10.5% reported as divorcees and another 10% reported they were divorced with children, bringing the total divorcees to 21%, the second largest group. Two respondents or 0.75% reported separation with another 2 respondents or 0.75% reporting they are widowed.

This suggests that the majority of U.S. female converts to Islam (57%) are currently married, which reflects the significance of marriage in Islamic doctrine and may also point to the importance of gender roles amongst some U.S. female converts to Islam.





**Figure 12: Current Marital Status**

### **How Long Have You Been Muslim?**

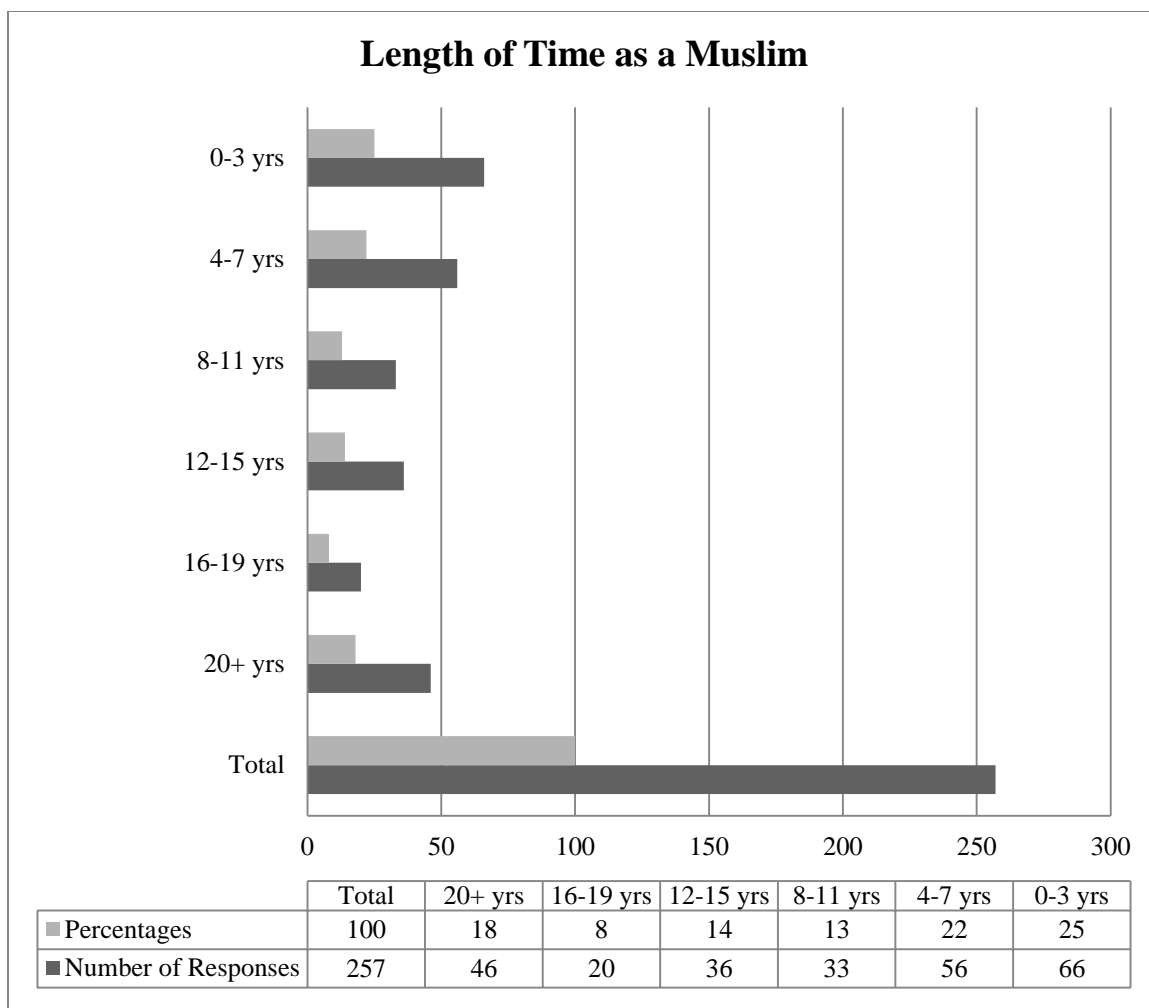
Figure 13 is a representation of how long the respondents have been Muslim, or how long since their conversion to Islam. The respondents chose from the six possible answers: 0-3 years, 4-7 years, 8-11 years, 12-15 years, 16-19 years, or 20+ years.<sup>297</sup> Of the 257 respondents, 25% identified 0-3 years as the length of time they have been Muslim, followed closely by 22% who responded with 4-7 years. Therefore, 47% of the respondents have been Muslim for between 0-7 years. Another 13% report being Muslim for between 8-11 years with 14% identifying with the 12-15 year range, which means that around 27% of respondents have been Muslim for between 8-15 years. Next, 8% said that they have been Muslim for 16-19 years, and 18% said they have been Muslim for 20 or more years.

When we examine the data in light of September 11, 2001, what emerges is a timeline for the growth of U.S. female conversion to Islam. Of the 257 respondents, 25% converted between 2011-2014, 22% converted between 2000-2007, and 13% converted between 2003-2006, indicating that 60% of the respondents converted post-9/11. Fourteen percent of the respondents reported converting between 1999-2003, making it impossible to identify pre or post-9/11 conversions. Twenty-six percent reported converting 16-20+ years ago with 18% of those reporting 20+ years as a Muslim.

The statistics reveal a sharp increase in U.S. female conversion to Islam post-9/11. These statistics validate reports of a sharp post-9/11 rise in conversion to Islam, possibly due to increasing awareness and investigation of Islam and Muslims.

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<sup>297</sup> In the future, the inclusion of more age ranges would almost certainly provide a greater historical context to go along with the conversion narratives afforded by the respondents.



**Figure 13: Length of Time as a Muslim**

**Do You Associate Yourself with any Particular Branch (es) of Islam?  
Check All that Apply.**

Figure 14 is a representation of the branches of Islam in Muslim American society with respondents identify. The respondents chose from the five possible answers, with the option to select all that applied or write in their answer. The five answers were the following: Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Nation of Islam, or Other.<sup>298</sup> Of the 257 respondents, 2.33% identified as associating solely with Nation of Islam, with an additional 0.77% identifying with both Nation of Islam and Sunni. Entailing a great deal of diversity, 13.25% self-identified as Other, including several respondents referring to themselves as Progressive Muslims and many other designations.<sup>299</sup> Regarding Shi'a respondents, 6.25% designated themselves as solely Shi'a, with another 1.55% identifying as Shi'a-Sufi, 1.55% identifying as Shi'a-Sunni, and 0.77% of respondents identifying as Shi'a-Sunni-Sufi, bringing the total identifying with a branch of Shi'a Islam to 10.%. Next, 10.5% self-identified solely as Sufi with another 11.28% identifying as Sunni-Sufi, bringing the total number of respondents who identify with Sufism to around 22%. However, when taking those into account who identified as Shi'a-Sufi and Shi'a-Sunni-Sufi as well, the total number of respondents associating with Sufism is 24%. Lastly, 51.75% identified solely as Sunni, but by adding the categories that included Sunni Islam (NOI-Sunni, Shi'a-Sunni, Shi'a-Sunni-Sufi, Sunni-Sufi), the total number of respondents identifying at least in part with Sunni Islam is 66%.

These statistics closely align with Pew Research Center's 2007 report, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, which states that of U.S. native-born Muslims, 50% identify as Sunni, 7% as Shi'a, 30% Non-specific, and 13% Other.<sup>300</sup> In contrast to mainstream American perception and discourse, Islam reveals itself to be, not monolithic, but rich

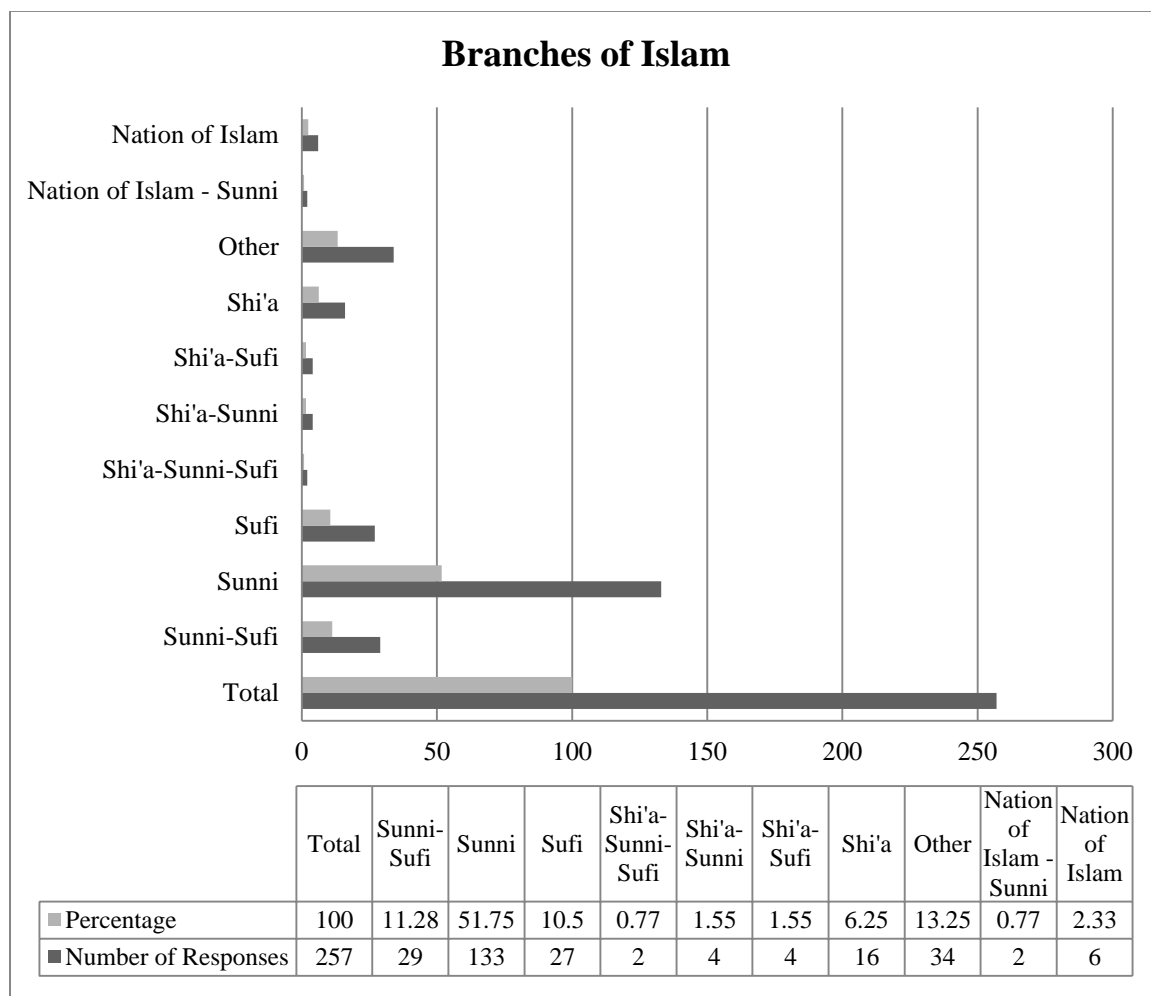
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<sup>298</sup> In the future, Muslim, Salafi, Progressive, and others will be included as options.

<sup>299</sup> Those respondents classifying themselves as 'Other' listed the following: Not associated with a sect; Progressive; Quranist; Reformist; Salafi; Student of Imam W.D. Mohammed (ra); Philosophy of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl; Other; Orthodox Islam; The Prophet Muhammad (saw) advocated unity; None; Non-denominational; Just a believer; Muslim; No particular branch; No need for labels; Islam; I do not know; I am learning

<sup>300</sup> Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.", 21.

in diversity and interpretation. In other words, not all Muslims practice Islam the same way. Islam is a diverse faith worldwide and it is so in the United States.



**Figure 14: Branches of Islam**

## Conclusion

While the socio-demographic data corroborates the findings of some studies, it challenges others, provokes questioning and further research, and challenges all of us to take a closer look at the diversity of U.S. male and female converts to Islam. What becomes clear here is that U.S. female converts to Islam are highly educated, racially and ethnically diverse, represent all branches of Islam, and have been converting to Islam for a very long time, but with increasing frequency post-9/11. Additionally, the 257 U.S. female converts to Islam represent women of varying sexual orientations, which emerged in the qualitative data and merits further research.

CHAPTER 6  
CONVERSION AS TRANSITION:  
NUANCES OF BEING, BECOMING, AND *FEELING* MUSLIM

**Introduction**

Many studies of religious conversion do not include a large sample size, and do not directly ask follow-up questions that go deeper than initial yes or no questions. This chapter presents both quantitative and qualitative data from the study *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*, which sought, among other things, to answer some core questions: 1) Do American female converts to Islam distinguish between *being/becoming* Muslim by taking the shahada, and *feeling* Muslim; 2) how do American female converts to Islam define *feeling* Muslim; and 3) what key factors nurture or hinder the development of *feelings of Muslimness*? Analyzing and interpreting the 257 complete responses to this study is a huge undertaking and, due to the large number of responses, the richness and complexity of the data, and time limitations for completion of my MA program, this thesis became a prolegomena to a more extensive work, which is in progress and will provide an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data.

This chapter, Conversion as Transition is a discussion of nuances in the conversion experiences of American female converts to Islam, which lends a deeper, more intimate understanding of the process of religious conversion as a gradual transition, and key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness* as described by U.S. female converts to Islam. By relying on converts' self-reported experiences of being/becoming Muslim and *feeling* Muslim, an intimate portrait of identity cultivation emerges. The chapter includes the converts' multi-faceted definitions of *feeling Muslim* and a discussion of key factors converts' identify as nurturing or hindering their *feelings of Muslimness*.

This chapter seeks to report and interpret responses to twelve questions, with data from ten questions analyzed and represented quantitatively in bar graphs. Additionally, all bar graphs with open-ended questions are supplemented with excerpts from the responses to the questions, where available. Before answering the questions for this portion of the survey, respondents were reminded, “The questions will give you the opportunity to tell us more about your personal experiences. Please answer openly and truthfully.” It is important to keep in mind that this was a voluntary online, anonymous, and confidential survey with no tangible benefits for survey participants. The identities of the respondents are their own, as are their responses, which appear unaltered throughout the remainder of this thesis and provide an intimate portrait of identity cultivation among these 257 American female converts to Islam. The subsequent sections of this chapter follow a list of twelve survey questions related to *feeling* Muslim or *feelings of Muslimness*, in the same order they appeared on the survey:

1. For you, is there a difference between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada, and *feeling* Muslim? If no, please explain how they are one and the same. If yes, please explain how they differ.
2. Once you converted to Islam, did you instantly *feel* Muslim? (Yes/No)
3. How would you define *feeling* Muslim? What does *feeling* Muslim mean to you?
4. When did you begin to *feel* Muslim?
5. Were there any outside influences that nurtured or hindered your *feelings of Muslimness*? If yes, what and/or who? Please explain in as much detail as possible. If no, please explain what you believe caused your feelings of Muslimness to develop. (Yes/No with explanation)
6. How does feeling Muslim make you feel about yourself as an American?
7. Do Islamic gender roles play any part in your *feelings of Muslimness*? (No/If yes, how?)
8. Are you satisfied or content with your *feelings of Muslimness*? (Yes/No)
9. Do you wear the hijab, or other attire that would make you outwardly identifiable as a Muslim to the American public? (Yes/No)
10. Is your choice of attire related to your *feelings of Muslimness*? If so, how?

11. As an American convert to Islam, do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel you are an integral part. If no, please explain what makes you feel you are not an integral part of your Muslim community.
12. Would you like to be an integral part of your Muslim community?

What follows is an analysis of responses to these twelve questions, derived from the self-reported experiences of 257 American female converts to Islam.

**For you, is there a difference between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada, and feeling Muslim? If no, please explain how they are one and the same. If yes, please explain how they differ.**

Figure 15, below, is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants manually recorded their responses, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated manual quantification.

By a wide margin, the majority of the 257 respondents, 73.15% affirmed, “Yes,” there is a difference between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada and *feeling* Muslim, followed by 19.07% who stated, “No,” they are one and the same, with the remaining 7.78% of entering, “N/A.”<sup>301</sup> Many respondents gave rich, detailed descriptions of the subtle nuances between *being*, *becoming*, and *feeling* Muslim, with a relatively small number reporting that they do not identify with *feeling* Muslim or *feelings of Muslimness*. What follows are several examples pulled from the 257 responses, which capture the sentiments expressed by many of the respondents. With each response, I have assigned the respondent a name, which is not their real name (all responses are anonymous and confidential). However, the voices of these women are real, vibrant, and distinctly American voices. Many American female converts choose to retain their birth names, and in keeping with that, most of the names assigned are distinctly American, peppered with some names common among Muslims.

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<sup>301</sup> Some respondents did not identify with the terminology of feeling Muslim and/or feelings of Muslimness. A more in-depth analysis of this data with excerpts appears in the longer manuscript, which is forthcoming.



We begin with excerpts from respondents who affirmed the difference between *being/becoming* Muslim by taking the shahada and *feeling* Muslim. An initial distinction is *shahada*, the Islamic testimony of faith (I testify that there is no god, but God. And I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God) as the formal moment or rite of passage during which one officially *becomes* Muslim. From a doctrinal perspective, upon taking shahada a person enters Islam as a member of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community, and is officially Muslim. However, one major theme that emerged from descriptions of *being*, *becoming*, and *feeling* Muslim is that *feeling* Muslim is a gradual process, a transition. These transitions are marked by the ebb and flow of positive and negative experiences. In other words, *feeling* Muslim does not always *feel* good, but sometimes it *feels* great.

Nicole:

Yes, I would say there is a difference, being Muslim just involves taking the shahada. I would say feeling Muslim is much more of a process. When I took the shahada I became Muslim, and had the intention to live my beliefs but I still hadn't made many changes in my life other than my beliefs. I would say through the process of learning how to pray and making the prayers a part of my daily life, fasting during Ramadan, and connecting with other Muslims that I started to feel Muslim. The more Islam became a part of my daily life the more I "felt Muslim."

Crystal:

Yes, I think so. It required for me a shift in values, which didn't happen overnight.

Maria:

There is a very big difference (one that I am still grappling with and trying to grasp a year and a half after accepting Islam) between being Muslim and feeling Muslim. Alhamdulillah, my faith is as strong today as it was the day I took shahada and internally, I know that I am a Muslim. On the exterior, however, I often don't feel Muslim. I've realized that feeling Muslim tends to depend more on how others (Muslim or not) perceive you.

Jackie:

Yes, a large difference. Although I took the shahada, I have never felt Muslim. Almost immediately I was confronted with cultural and sectarian viewpoints from individuals who needed me to assume many cultural and sectarian external practices. I quickly found out that no one respected English translations of the Qur'an so I was locked out of the scripture in any approved way. I found out that 'marriage is 50% of the faith', and I was an older single woman. I found out that my voice, my gifts were not needed in this faith because they were nafs infested, and ignorant of Islamic cultural norms. I found out that women, especially

unmarried women are locked away from the prayer, the teachings, and any general social situations, except for women's groups. I found people were suspicious of me and untrusting, including other women.

Sonia:

I believed before I took shahada. I took shahada first in my apartment with a couple of friends. I wanted to take it at the mosque, but my friend asked the imam there how I could become a Muslim, and the imam said he wouldn't let me take shahada until I knew enough Arabic to say my prayers. After moving to a different city shortly after this, I went myself and spoke to the imam there and he told me that was absolutely wrong and that if I wanted, I could take shahada formally at Jumu'ah prayers, but as far as he was concerned, I was already a Muslim. I did it, for formality's sake, but it was really good to know that I was what I felt like I was, not what someone else said I was. That I didn't need a seal of approval. One of my biggest beliefs is that Islam is personal. That's one of my favorite things, that it's between me and Allah and that's all that matters.

Kerry:

They are not the same. One is an external formulation (the shahada) and the other an internal state.

Khalilah:

HMMMM, that is kind of a difficult one to answer. I do believe over time that I do "feel" a lot more Muslim. There are just certain things that I identify with more strongly the longer I have been Muslim. I also realized this difference about a year ago, when it dawned on me that my kids were "born Muslims" - that part of their mentality was (and probably always will be) just a little bit different than mine since this was their first path. In the beginning, even after a lot of research, there is so much to learn. There are so many little idiosyncrasies that get incorporated into your identity over time. In the beginning, I think I related to Islam, saw it as the truth, but it wasn't yet FULLY my being.

The statements of these women affirming the distinction between *being/becoming* Muslim by taking shahada, and *feeling* Muslim identify a transformative experience or gradual process of *becoming*, which corroborates the findings of several scholars of religious conversion, such as Lewis Rambo, Raymond Paloutzian, John Lofland and Rodney Stark, Ali Köse, Anne Sofie Roald, Nicole Bourque, and Henri Gooren, Yasin Dutton, and Marcia Hermansen. Additionally, Dr. Amina Wadud in her book, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* refers to her conversion to Islam as her, "personal transition," citing Dr. Aminah McCloud in an

endnote and explaining her own use of the terms ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’ rather than conversion.<sup>302</sup>

Dr. Aminah McCloud, Professor and Founder, Director of The Islamic World Studies Program (2005) at DePaul University, made a very coherent argument against the overuse of the term ‘conversion.’ It implies completely leaving one’s personal past, or severing oneself from that past, in order to enter something completely new and, by implication, unique or even at odds with one’s past. Her research provides clear evidence that when non-Muslim Americans enter Islam, as also demonstrated by other communities throughout the spread of Islam historically, they often do so as part of a *continual* process of spiritual, moral, and symbolic progression already in motion prior to acceptance of or conformity with Islamic particulars. She prefers the term ‘transition’ to indicate not only particular aspects of one’s past as integral to their entry into Islam but also to indicate that once they enter, they neither exclude their past, nor are completed. I will use ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’ interchangeably to determine that Islam does not start or stop with the *shahadah*, declaration of faith.<sup>303</sup>

I find the term transition to be an appropriate description of the process of conversion to Islam as described by the respondents, and prefer it to the terms conversion and reversion. While not presented as a chart in this thesis, it is important to note that the majority of the 257 U.S. female converts to Islam prefer to be called converts instead of reverts, with some stating they prefer to simply be called a Muslim.

The following are excerpts from respondents who stated there was no difference between *being/becoming* Muslim by taking the shahada and *feeling* Muslim. The respondents describe a range of definitions for *being*, *becoming*, and *feeling* Muslim, with some not identifying with the terminology of *feeling* Muslim at all, and a few finding it suspicious. Many identified the shahada as a formality and stated they felt Muslim before they took the shahada.

Adrienne:

No. As soon as I made shahada, I felt Muslim. But, of course, with that comes knowing what you have to do (Prayers, fasting, Hajj, Sakat, etc).

Aisha:

That's ridiculous. You either are Muslim or you are not. A Muslim is someone who makes Salat. Without those 5 ritual prayers - there is nothing. A Muslim's belief is formulated around the articles of faith and its pillars. I've heard others speak of this "feeling" Muslim. It is an illusion. Something of a holdover from

<sup>302</sup> Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad : Women's Reform in Islam* / Amina Wadud., 2, 263.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

other belief systems. Islam is rooted in action, not feeling. We pray, we fast, we are charitable, we believe in God's Oneness, we believe in God's Prophets, His Angels, His Jinn, His Destiny, we believe in the Day of Judgement, we believe in Heaven and we believe in Hell. These beliefs are also rooted in action as the beliefs dictate our daily actions. So this idea of 'feeling' Muslim - what is it rooted in? And when they no longer 'feel', what do they have to hold onto no?

Charmaine:

I never "took" the shahada, and to this day, I am deeply uncomfortable with any public display of that sort. I am the product of white, upper class American culture, and we do NOT share our religion that way with others. That was waaaaaay to personal for me to share in a public profession of faith! I simply made the decision and began to share it with individuals if they asked. The word got around. I made the change because I felt that if I believed in the tenants of Islam, then how could I not be Muslim? I felt that I owned it. I didn't have a sense of becoming; I was just there because of my beliefs.

Kendra:

Well, the best way I can put it is shahada validates the return to Islam and signifies a vow to surrender your will to Allah ta'ala. Personally, in looking back on my life and correlating the feelings I had before and after shahada I realize I was already on the path long before this as my mannerisms and personal internal beliefs didn't need to change much. So for me, taking shahada to become Muslim and feeling Muslim is one in the same.

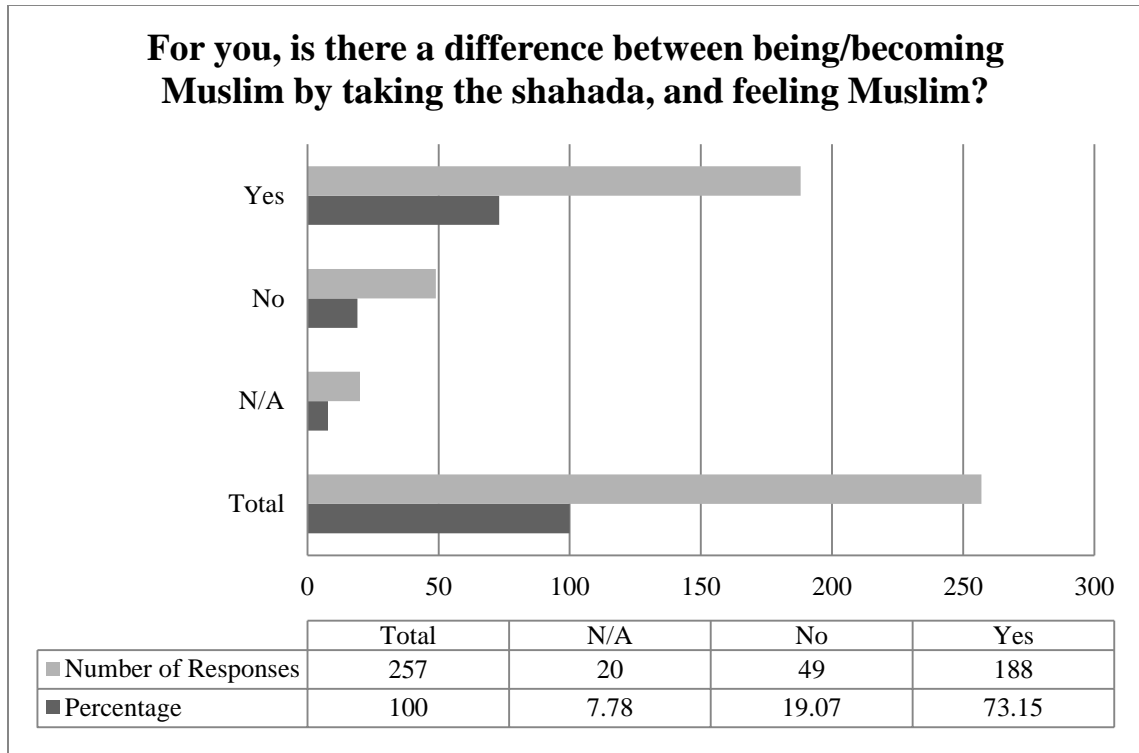
Melissa:

In my heart I have always felt that I have been Muslim...taking the Shahada was just me making the commitment to accept the label. However I feel that other Muslims who I have met do not accept me labeling myself as such...it has been very frustrating and alienating.

Andrea:

For me there is no difference. I actually studied Islam for years and had begun attending jumuah prayers and even fasted before becoming Muslim. By the time I took the shahada, I felt that was more of just a formality of what I already was.

The following bar graph indicates a quantitative breakdown of the qualitative responses.

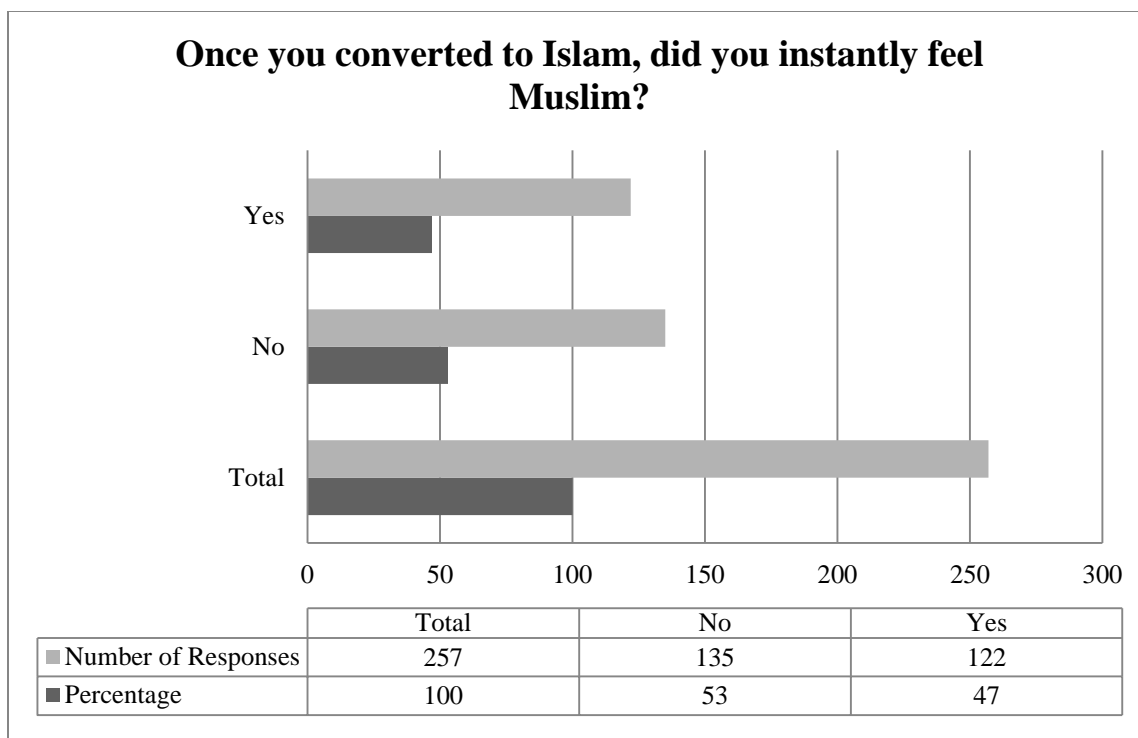


**Figure 15: Do the 257 respondents distinguish between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada, and feeling Muslim?**

**Once you converted to Islam, did you instantly feel Muslim? Check yes or no.**

Figure 16 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants selected yes or no, with no option for extended manual responses.

Of 257 respondents, 47% answered, “Yes,” that they instantly felt Muslim upon converting to Islam, with a slightly larger number, 53% responding, “No,” that they did not instantly feel Muslim upon converting to Islam. However, follow-up questions regarding ‘when’ respondents report first *feeling* Muslim, give a deeper insight into these responses and highlight the importance of including qualitative, open-ended questions in future studies of converts to Islam, and human subjects in general. As reported further in this chapter, the nuances detailed by the respondents provide a level of understanding that quantitative data alone cannot approach. There is a lack of congruency between some of the quantitative, yes or no responses, when compared and contrasted with the qualitative responses, open-ended responses, highlighting the importance of mixed-methods research.



**Figure 16: Did the 257 respondents instantly feel Muslim upon converting to Islam?**

### How would you define feeling Muslim? What does feeling Muslim mean to you?

This particular question is not quantifiable because it is not asking a 'yes or no' question with the option for further elaboration. Rather, it asks the converts to define *feeling* Muslim, and elaborate on what *feeling* Muslim means to them.

It is a great responsibility and trust to accurately report the voices of the 257 women who took a risk and made the decision to be a part of this study, sharing their deeply intimate and personal life experiences, pre and post-conversion experiences, and their continuing transition to Islam and life as American female converts to Islam.

From a psychological perspective, *feeling* is defined as,

**Feeling**, in psychology, the perception of events within the body, closely related to emotion. The term *feeling* is a verbal noun denoting the action of the verb *to feel*, which derives etymologically from the Middle English verb *felen*, "to perceive by touch, by palpation." It soon came to mean, more generally, to perceive through those senses that are not referred to any special organ. As the known special organs of sense were the ones mediating the perception of the external world, the verb to feel came also to mean the perception of events within the body.<sup>304</sup>

What follows is a brief overview of several themes that emerged from the self-reported definitions of *feeling* Muslim as described by 257 American female converts to Islam, many of which corroborate the findings of some scholars referenced in chapter 3, Literature Review: Varied Approaches to Religious Conversion. Accompanying each theme are direct excerpts of responses, the voices of these women speaking. I have not changed the spelling or the grammar in the quotes. The work that follows this prolegomena will more fully develop these themes.

#### Identity and *Feeling* Muslim

A key-term used by many respondents is identity, as reflected in the statements below.

Susan:

Feeling Muslim is more of an internalization of an identity that transcends spiritual beliefs. It's also about culture. It's the feeling you get when Ramadan approaches. It's the feeling you get when you're around non-Muslims. It's a feeling when you here the Adhan.

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<sup>304</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "feeling", accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/203754/feeling>.

Dawn:

Feeling isn't a rational thing. It's an emotional thing in many ways. I tend to think of things from a more thought-propelled point of view. And yet, when, as a non-practicer, I could rationally argue that I am no longer a muslim or would qualify as a fasiq (or whatever term the more judgmental would choose to utilize), there's always this part of me that just \*completely intuitively\* that I am who I am, and Muslim is a part of it. Part of who I am might include parts of me, which would qualify as "not" a Muslim, but there's still a *je ne sais quoi* that's always there. I suppose I could call it emotional self-identity.

Natalie:

How does one define a feeling and sense of being? Someone connects with the idea of being Muslim. For some it's their life-long identity, nothing more. For some it is a passion for following the life-guidelines from Quran and Hadith. For me, it is a part of my self-identity. I love Prophet. Mohammed (pbuh), I strive to follow the rules for living he brought and his fine example of love in life. I feel Muslim because I am... I am Muslim because I feel this love of the Prophet Mohammed and Allah.

Penny:

This is wrapped up in the question of identity. I identify as Muslim, in many ways. Although it's not the only portion of my identity it is a large portion because it makes up the greater portion of my values and guides my every day choices. But feeling Muslim would entail feeling I belong as well. That of which I don't always feel. It's hard to connect to Muslims often.

Melanie:

Feeling Muslim has to do with an inner transformation, which only begins with one's shahadah. And to the extent that a convert does not invest time and effort toward learning Islam, toward claiming Islam, one could potentially never "feel" Muslim--it could theoretically always remain an external aspect of one's identity rather than an integral part thereof.

### *Feeling Muslim in Community*

Another prevalent key-term used by the respondents in their definitions of *feeling Muslim* is community, as reflected in the statements below.

Sumayyah:

I feel Muslim because I have a community where we all actively try our best to help each other out and bring each other up, while learning together more about Islam and encouraging more learning and to hang in there through the tougher times, having people that we have so many things in common with, not feeling alone.

Shemelia:

I might feel more Muslim if I had others around me who were Muslim that I could relate to. I also wish I could speak more Arabic and recite more prayers. I might feel more Muslim if I had a trusted source that I could ask questions of.



The one time I always 'feel' Muslim when I am praying next to other women. This is a time that my heart is always at peace. Still--I am worried that I am not Muslim enough to participate sometimes. I never truly understood why I was covering my head. I had many explanations that ensured me this was a better way to not get raped. But this never made sense to me. I think a greater understanding of certain practices I was doing would mean "feeling Muslim" to me.

Ashley:

The main part of feeling muslim is spirituality. As an american and caucasian and not upper class I dont feel as if the community is or has been welcoming. This makes it difficult to strengthen my iman since I must use the internet or books to learn. To be a part of the islamuc community and to pray with other muslims and be welcomed inside the masjid would help me feel more muslim. I can pray at home and know I am muslim based on my beliefs. But To be surrounded by a community of muslims and practicing our faith in groups and being able to participate in islamic activities with other muslims, such as visiting the sick or praying with other muslims and being able to strengthen my faith and feeding off the positive energy of other muslims is something that would make me feel muslim and this is non-existant for me in my community.

Deanna:

Feeling Muslim to me means feeling like I have a group that I fit into. A community support network for teaching and learning and friendships and help in times of need. It also means that I am present in my prayers and other worship and think of their meaning as I go through my day.

Julie:

I would define feeling Muslim as being a person who learns more deeply about the faith, has access to teachers that can open up the Qur'an and Hadith, being welcomed by community as a full member, practicing the faith with others and being an integral member of a community.

### *Feeling Muslim in Relationship with the Divine*

Many respondents cited their relationship with Allah (God) as holding great significance in their definitions of *feeling* Muslim, as reflected in the responses.

Tanya:

I think when you \*feel Muslim,\* you see the world differently. You see the beauty of Allah's creations. You see how something others might perceive as "bad," (losing a job/divorce/etc), is actually something good because Allah intends good for us. You feel like a stranger, not only because of our dress, but our outlook on life.

Constance:

When I can openly show my faith to Allah and to others is when I feel Muslim. It is not something that is seen with the eyes or made clear by other people but a feeling that the world is whole and we are here for a purpose that only Allah knows. Once we can truly put all our trust in Allah, we feel Muslim.

Danielle:

I am connected to the greatest, most wonderful, amazing Being. Protected, provided for, loved. For me, as I don't feel very connected to the ummah, so to speak, because I don't, it's all about my connection to Allah. When I'm not feeling particularly "muslim", it's because I've been neglectful and gotten caught up in things that don't matter.

Toni:

Being God-conscious, remembering my role and duty as a woman. How the teachings of the most honorable Elijah Muhammad has been my salvation to the truth of who I am. The importance of having to study and read the Qur'an and what and how it in the best way of life.

Maya:

Feeling Muslim means I am secure in my belief in God, in my faith and practice, and in the major tenets of Islam. That I do not need to look to others for validation or religious or cultural authenticity.

Alice:

It is the feeling that the Qur'an beats in my heart, that its recitation flows in my blood, that my soul prays at the feet of God, that I hear the voice of God everywhere, that I see God in everything, and that with each thing I say, do, or think, the pleasure of God is my foremost concern, and God's pleasure is earned by creating beauty, which sometimes means justice and knowledge, as much as it means art, music, and other common expressions of beauty.

Johnnetta:

It took me a while to answer this question. This is a difficult feeling to express into words. So I will try here :/ I would define feeling Muslim as feeling close to Allah, to the last messenger and all the prophets (may peace and blessings be upon them all) I think for me, feeling Muslim has to do with more so the inner workings of striving to become a better Muslim than the outward actions. By that I mean I feel constantly improving one's character (i.e. in particular the book "Purification of the Heart" by Hamza Yusuf), having the correct intention, just working on one's internal self and character development is a foundation in which to improve other outward actions. To me, not having the proper intention when praying or giving zakat diminishes these outwardly actions. So it's more like I can pray 100 times a day and give away money to the homeless all day, but without care in realizing why these actions are obligatory and good for us, it lessens it's blessings / So to sum, feeling Muslim is to purify one's heart and insha'Allah that way one can get closer to Allah (swt), feel his blessings and peace and feel utmost gratitude that He has decided to change your heart and make you part of the ummah.

### *Feeling Muslim in Life*

Several converts defined *feeling* Muslim as concerning requirements in their daily lives and their implementation, as reflected in the responses.

Ruth:

I think feeling muslim is when you accept the faith, the beliefs, and the practices and you actually Institute them in your life.

Flannery:

It's not just an outfit, it's your actual skin is how I would define it. Like your skin color or eye color, it's something you cannot take off and it's something you cannot view yourself as EVER taking off. It's just your natural state is being close to God and believing in God and the Prophet pbuh. It's not sitting there fasting while everyone around you has lunch, but smiling and explaining why you're fasting with joy. It's coming home to a halal home (i.e. no alcohol, no pork etc but also a space to pray, and a place with calmness that does not kick out the angels), and knowing that you created this because of your belief in Allah. I guess to me it just means well happiness. Happiness in the life your chose by being Muslim, and knowing it's less dressing up to please God and more just being you to please God.

Josefa:

To me, knowing in detail what is required of me in my daily life and trying my best to put that into practice is what makes me really feel Muslim through and through. It's been about 10 years and I think it's only recently that I really, truly feel Muslim, completely. I think that may be partly because I recently went through a major life crisis (in my marriage) and had some very big decisions to make, and made them according to what would please Allah without giving it another thought.

### *Feeling Muslim in Practice*

Many respondents defined *feeling* Muslim as involving Islamic ritual and spiritual practices, such as the five pillars of Islam: testimony of faith, 5 daily prayers, charity, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Gabriela:

I define feeling muslim as having an appreciation for, and a desire to learn from the Quran, by praying salah, fasting during Ramadan, and by studying and emulating the prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) life. It is also an inner state of feeling connected to God and striving to purify myself to become more holy, and live "above the fray" of all the worldly desires.

Nikki:

To me, knowing in detail what is required of me in my daily life and trying my best to put that into practice is what makes me really feel Muslim through and through. It's been about 10 years and I think it's only recently that I really, truly feel Muslim, completely. I think that may be partly because I recently went through a major life crisis (in my marriage) and had some very big decisions to make, and made them according to what would please Allah without giving it another thought.

Jane:

Maybe we could say that "feeling" Muslim is what one does when they actively practice their faith. I mean, you could say shahada and then turn around and go on living the exact way you did prior to that. Would anything have really changed? In regards to religion, is it disingenuous to say one thing but do another? We seem to overlook "active" spirituality in today's society, viewing religion as an outlier in our lives that is purely passive or speculative in nature. Do you feel vegetarian when you actually eat meat even though you say you are a vegetarian? Being a Muslim isn't just a belief. It's an actual process or action one takes, that is, submitting to God. To submit is an active action. "Feeling" Muslim to me means actually "doing" the religion past just words.

### *Feeling Muslim as a Process*

Mutiah:

Many times over these last several years I have felt a movement or a steadiness in my heart that I associate with a real connection with the Divine. Each time the connection is different, and each time I feel grateful. As time has gone on and I have learned more through Qur'an study, etc, the moments have come more frequently and with more reliability.

Fatima:

I think becoming Muslim is a process and the regular rules that define Muslims don't always apply to new Muslims, unless they begin with a lot of knowledge. It's a process. The more you learn, the more one is able to become more.

Sharon:

Just a state of being, an acceptance of how things are in the world metaphysically and physically. It's been an evolving process though, sincerity in a wide range of beliefs didn't come all at once but progressed over time.

These rich and multiple definitions of *feeling* Muslim directly corroborate the findings of Nicole Bourque in her work, "How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of the Female Muslim Identity." As mentioned in the literature review, Bourque points out that as an anthropologist, she feels, "the process of becoming a Muslim is not just about the adoption of certain quantifiable practices," but also a "process of learning how to see yourself as a Muslim, how to live as a Muslim, and how to present yourself to others as a Muslim."<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Bourque, "How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of the Female Muslim Identity."

### When did you begin to *feel* Muslim?

Figure 17, below, is a quantitative representation of themes, which emerged across responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants manually recorded their responses, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated utilizing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for assistance with verifying the occurrence of themes and quantification of the qualitative data. Numerous themes emerged during the analysis of responses to this question, with 15 themes occurring more often than others do. It is also important to note that many of the converts fit into more than one category, which accounts for the percentage sum exceeding 100%.

Of 257 respondents, the most respondents by far, 41.63% spoke of beginning to *feel* Muslim over time, or gradually, as well as describing their conversion to Islam as a continual process or transition. The second largest theme with 15.95 % mentioned, ‘Growth in knowledge’, with respondents explaining that the more knowledge they gained, the more they began to *feel* Muslim. Next, 15.56% identified, ‘Community, acceptance, and belonging’, with respondents highlighting that they began to *feel* Muslim when they found a community, felt accepted as members of their respective communities, and experienced a sense of belonging. Another 15.56% identified, ‘At the time of shahada’, as when they began to *feel* Muslim, stating that they instantly felt Muslim upon stating the testimony of faith, “I testify that there is no god, but God, and I testify that Muhammad is His final messenger.” However, it is important to note that many of the 40 respondents who identified, ‘At the time of shahada’, as the moment they began *feeling* Muslim, also reported *feeling* Muslim before converting to Islam and stated that taking the shahada was to formally *become* Muslim.

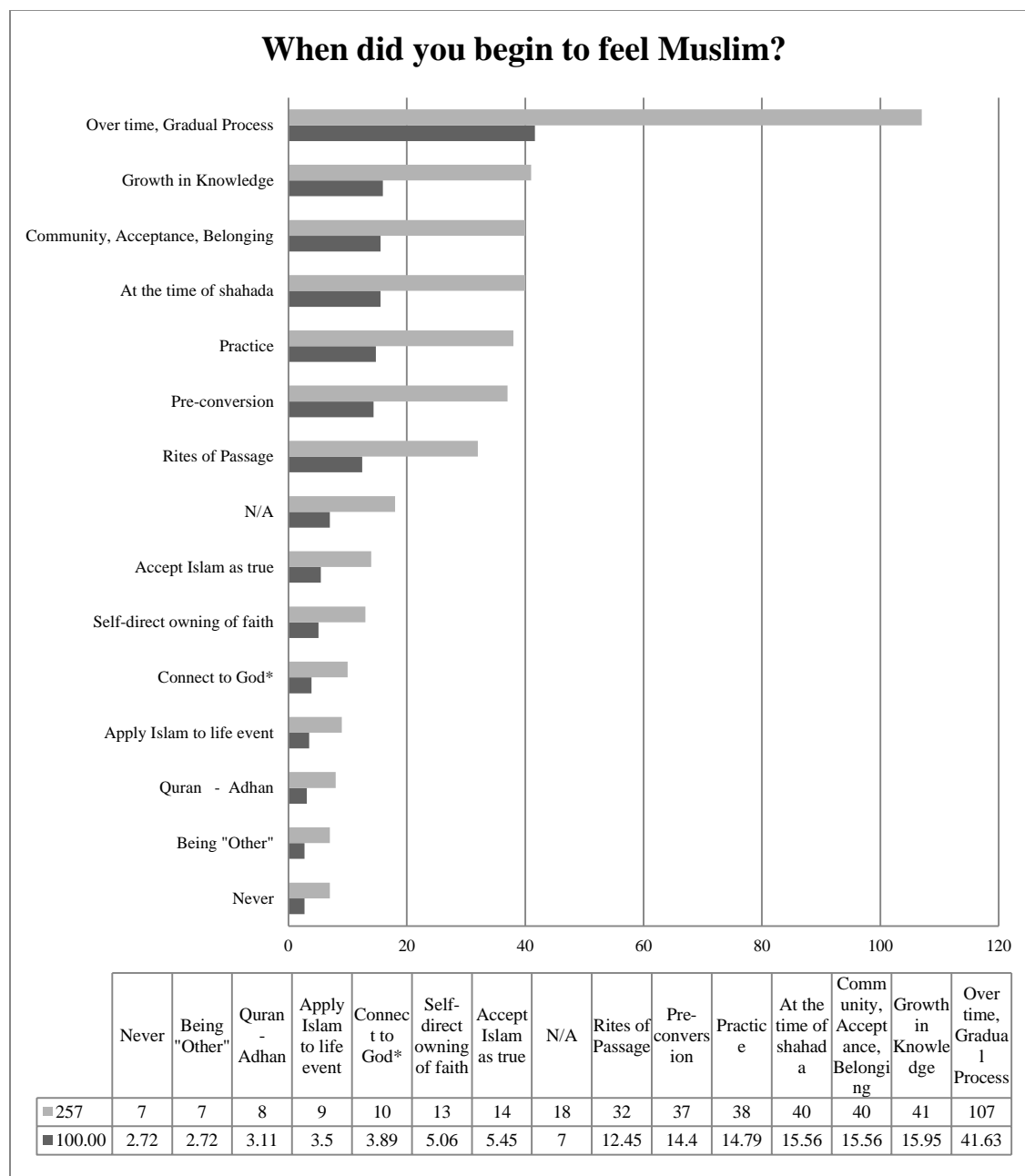
The next theme to emerge was, ‘Practice’, with 14.79% reporting that when they began different Islamic practices, such as prayer and fasting, among many others, they began to *feel* Muslim because they no longer felt they were just going through the motions, but rather like they had internalized the practices, making them automatic. Another theme which emerged was, ‘Pre-

conversion’, with 14.4%, reporting that they began to *feel* Muslim immediately before, and even long before they formally converted, with some even describing, retrospectively, *feeling* Muslim in childhood. The next theme to emerge was, ‘Rites of Passage’, the completion of which 12.45% mentioned as when they began to *feel* Muslim. Some of the rites mentioned were wearing the hijab, and going on hajj, the major pilgrimage to Mecca among many others. Another 7%, entered, “N/A,” as their response, which may be because they do not identify with the terminology, *feeling* Muslim. Another common theme among 5.45% was, ‘Accepting Islam as true’, which, in most cases, occurred pre-conversion. It often came as a realization that their personal beliefs were aligned with Islamic teachings and values, which led to further investigation and ultimately, conversion to Islam.

Some respondents, 5.06% identified the theme, ‘Self-directed ownership of faith’, and expressed *feeling* Muslim when they took ownership of their faith, such as no longer allowing the perceptions of others to sway their *feelings of Muslimness*, or being able to pray for the first time without the assistance of prayer guide. In many of the responses, a sense of empowerment was instrumental for the respondents to begin *feeling* Muslim.

Some respondents, 3.89% reported *feeling* Muslim the first time they were able to, ‘Connect to God’, which many of them describe as being an indescribably beautiful experience that was difficult to put into words. Another 3.5% stated they began to *feel* Muslim when they, ‘Applied Islam to a major life event’, which, for some of the respondents, including going through divorce, child custody cases, negativity from family and friends, and exclusion from the born-Muslim community. For 3.11%, *feeling* Muslim began the first time they, ‘Heard Qur’an or Adhan’ recited, describing it as an overwhelming experience that “shook them to their core.” Another 2.72% stated that being, “Othered,” made them begin to *feel* Muslim. This was described in association with how others perceived the respondents, and particular with regard to news media portrayals. Lastly, 2.72% stated they, ‘Never’, *felt* Muslim, with a few stating they are still waiting for it to happen.

These findings further corroborate the work of Nicole Bourque in particular, as well as the work of Lewis Rambo.



**Figure 17: When did the 257 respondents begin to feel Muslim?**

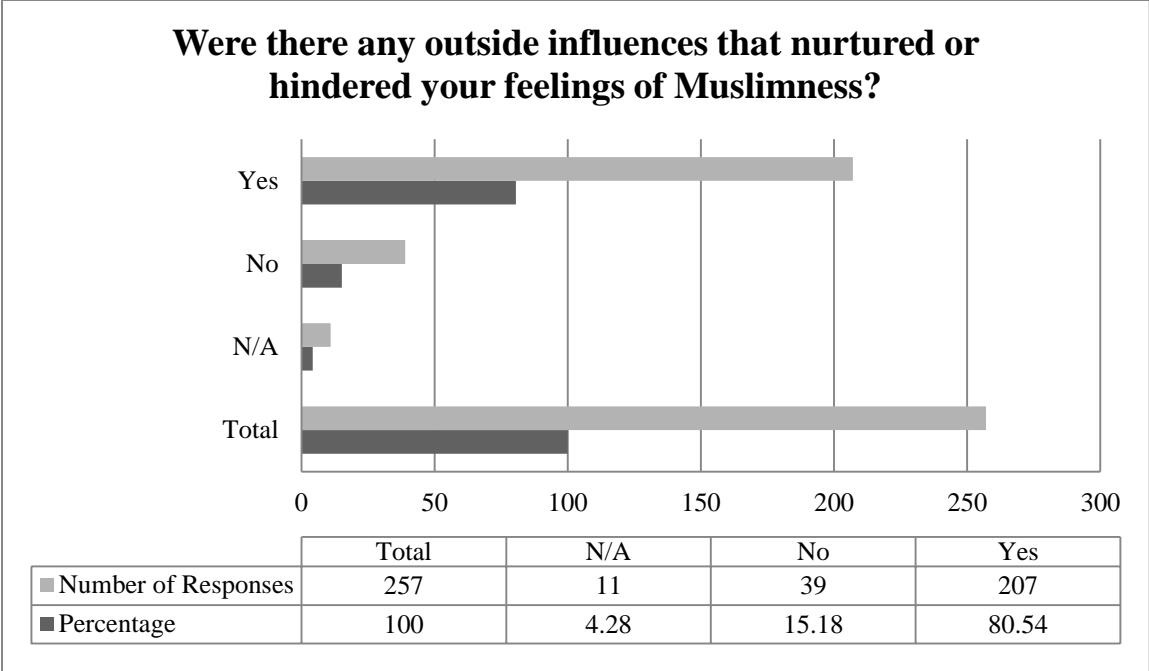
**Were there any outside influences that nurtured or hindered your feelings of Muslimness? If yes, what and/or who? Please explain in as much detail as possible. If no, please explain what you believe caused your feelings of Muslimness to develop.**

Figure 18 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants manually recorded their responses, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated manual quantification, and again necessitated utilizing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for assistance with verifying the occurrence of themes and quantification of the qualitative data.

Of 257 respondents, an overwhelming majority, 80.54% answered, “Yes,” that there were outside influences that either nurtured or hindered their *feelings of Muslimness*, with some reporting outside influences both nurturing and hindering their *feelings of Muslimness*. However, 15.18% reported, “No,” that outside influences do not nurture or hinder their *feelings of Muslimness*, with some asserting that what others do or say does not affect how they *feel* about Islam or *being* a Muslim, or *identifying* as a Muslim. The remaining 4.28%, either entered, “N/A,” or did not provide a clear response to the question, making it impossible to classify it as, “Yes” or “No.”

In the respondents’ explanations, many themes emerged, which are still being analyzed, but as of the writing of this thesis, one of the strongest themes to emerge as hindering *feelings of Muslimness*, is lack of community, acceptance, education, and belonging, and conversely, one of the strongest themes to emerge as nurturing *feelings of Muslimness*, is having a community, being accepted, being educated, and feeling a sense of belonging.





**Figure 18: Were there any outside influences that nurtured or hindered the 257 respondents' feelings of Muslimness?**

### **How does *feeling* Muslim make you feel about yourself as an American?**

This particular question is not quantifiable because it is not asking a 'yes or no' question with the option for further elaboration. Rather, it asks the converts to how *feeling* Muslim makes them feel about themselves as an American.

The responses to this question vary and many of the responses reflect U.S. female converts who identify as culturally American, proud to be an American, uncomfortable with U.S. foreign policy and/or current pop culture, feeling alienated as a religious minority in the U.S., and/or who identify no conflict between being Muslim and being American, as evidenced by these statements.

Roberta:

I think Americans often don't understand islam so because I'm an American and a muslim sometimes I feel like an oxymoron. Sometimes muslims think that Americans can't be muslim, so I'm not accepted by the Americans because I'm muslim and I'm not accepted by the muslims because I'm American. This varies by community. I feel comfortable in America and I feel comfortable with muslims in America. I see islam as a religion and America as a land where people are free to practice any religion they choose and where persecuted peoples can come to for refuge.

Teresa:

I learned more about our country's actions in the world in terms of military, financial and cultural colonialism. I am not proud of that as I am not proud of the way we treated Native Americans, or supported slavery or the current Islamophobia. But in America we have a chance to change and create new and beautiful systems as well. I feel American and am culturally American, and proud of the beauty of America.

Cheryl:

As for being Muslim in America that is a work in progress. As an American woman I feel free to practice my religion without some of the oppressive rules imposed on Muslim women in other countries. Here in American, Muslim are still are still fighting to be accepted by a largely Christian population. I feel that struggle from time to time.

Khadijah:

I feel there is no conflict in being "Muslim" and "American" although the fact that others do makes it an issue but it doesn't have to be. Unacceptance of Muslims in America or Muslims in general stems from political interests, racism, ignorance, or dominant groups' tendency to feel cultural superior to minority groups.

Anita:

I feel more American living overseas as I realize many things about me identity me as American to others. As a person of color, I've had the experience of not being accepted in my country of birth and being Muslim just adds another layer to my experience.

Lakisha:

I feel so proud to be an American! :) I see Islamic values being practiced in America quite often, whether it is conscious or not. I feel that America is a place like any other, with good and bad people. But in America, our rights are protected and our systems of government and justice are robust - and matched almost nowhere else in the world. And, the American values of courtesy, self-reliance, community, integrity, honesty, hard work, and forward planning are indeed the same values that our Prophet (pbuh) had and taught the world to have.

Farasha:

America is such a crazy place for religion. So many religions found so much crazy and wonderful expression here! Goodness! It seems so American to be Muslim! Really, the Nation is a perfect expression of that wildness of American religious commitment that is slightly utopian--and geared toward individual fulfillment of self even if articulated through community. If other Americans do not feel that way about us as Muslims, well that's the history of America too. My dad was a Jew. So that kind of cultural alienation is not unusual to me. We'll get there.

These findings corroborate the findings in Anne Sofie Roald's, *The Shaping of Scandinavian "Islam": Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity* in which, as previously mentioned, she states that some new Muslims, "like second-generation Muslim children, develop "integrated plural identities," which she describes as a "harmonious transcultural oscillation among various patterns of identity."<sup>306,307</sup>

### **Do Islamic gender roles play any part in your feelings of Muslimness?**

**(No, or if Yes, how?)**

Figure 19 is a quantitative representation of qualitative responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants selected yes or no, with an option for extended manual responses when selecting yes.

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<sup>306</sup> van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam : Gender and Conversion in the West / Edited by Karin Van Nieuwkerk.*, 50. Roald credits the term "integrated plural identities," to S. Østberg's 2000 article, "Islamic Nurture and Identity Management."

<sup>307</sup> Roald, "The Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam': Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity."

Of 257 respondents, 45% answered, “Yes,” that Islamic gender roles play a part in their *feelings of Muslimness*, with a slightly larger number, 55% responding, “No”, that Islamic gender roles do not play a part in their *feelings of Muslimness*. The responses to this question vary and the responses reflect the diversity of U.S. female converts, some of which state adamantly that Islamic gender roles have absolutely nothing to do with how they *feel* about *being* a Muslim, with others stating that they do. This is especially interesting given the number of respondents who report wearing attire that outwardly identifies them as Muslim to the American public, and the number of respondents who report their choice of attire is related to their *feelings of Muslimness*.

#### Yes, Islamic Gender Roles Play a Part

Maryam:

This is a really small box here. I am a pro-woman, feminist oriented woman, and feminism within Islam has shaped a lot of my intellectual and social justice interests as a Muslim. I live a gendered experience as a Muslim woman. But in terms of traditional cultural roles or neo-orthodox ideas of normative gender roles.....no. I reject those.

Allison:

So many questions about my status as a trans\* male (I present as female, thus my response of the gender question), especially in terms of fiqh.

Daisy:

Actually, I feel quite at home with the gender roles, and it makes me feel like its easier to live at least THAT part of life.

Brenda:

Sometimes I resent the fact that a wife should always be agreeable and dutiful. If I have a problem with someone, I will say something regardless of how it makes me seem.

Veronica:

Early on after my conversion, I tried to accept wholly uncritically the traditional idea of gender roles I heard or read in many Muslim lectures or books. I tried hide, suppress, and pray away the fact that I'm gay. Even got engaged to be married to a man twice. I started to give up that charade when I met my first Muslim woman partner. Before I thought to be or feel Muslim would require me to act straight but I now feel comfortably Muslim and queer.

Brandy:

It did! I feel for the submissive woman bullshit (tell an Egyptian woman about that and see what she says!). After rejecting that, I had to find a new way of understanding myself as a Muslim woman. Umm Salamah, Khawla, Khadija, and Aisha became my touchstones.....and my knowledge.....deep knowledge.....my

realization one day that the Prophet would have loved me as I am....loud, strong, smart, independent, funny, all that. It made a difference for me and led me to find my way again as a Muslim.

Briauna:

I feel like the Qur'an has great flexibility in how it portrays women, but the Muslim mainstream community puts us in small boxes. The mainstream Muslim insistence on patriarchy makes me doubt my own readings of the Qur'an at times, making me feel less really Muslim.

Tabitha:

Being separate in the mosque makes me feel as though men do not want us there. I am either peeking through holes of a wooden "cage" on the second floor or peering through a curtain as men interact with the Sheikh. I also feel like the guise of Islam allows many to continue sexist practices and promotes sexist beliefs. I do not believe that this is the essence of Islam, though. I believe this is sometimes cultural, sometimes ignorance, and sometimes the patriarchal nature of our entire history.

Lynn:

In a way, yes. A lot less is expected of me as a woman. I don't need to go to jumma prayers. I don't pray or fast while on my period. I can easily get out of the habit of praying, learning, etc while on a hiatus due to a menstrual cycle.

Lydia:

Only in that I reject what are traditionally understood as Islamic gender roles, and that my Muslimness is challenged or strained when attempts are made to force me into that box of the "good Muslim woman". Muslim men are deeply threatened by an intelligent, strong, independent Muslim woman, and I find they often first attack my piety. The more equal my understanding of gender roles became, the more Muslim I felt.

Yasmine:

I finally know what it means to be a woman and it's enlightening and empowering. I wish all women knew what it means to be a woman in relation to God, and not be defined in terms of men and masculinity.

Louise:

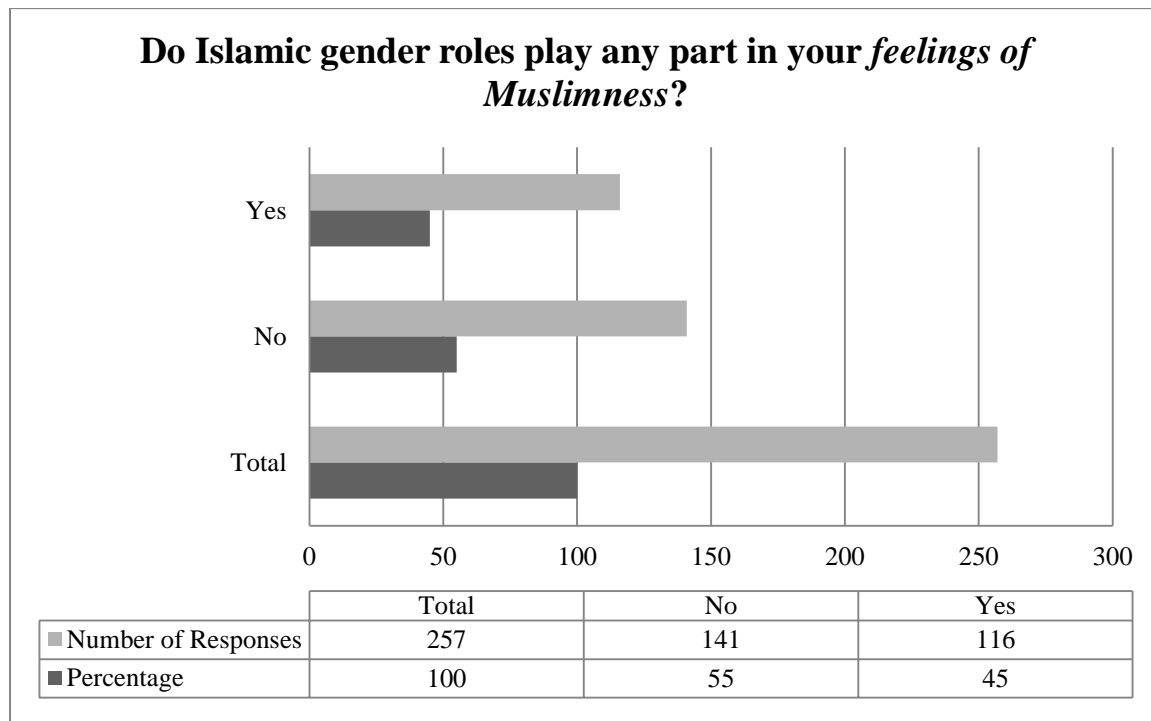
Women are nurturing and have a broader view of situations and feelings they can bring forth, while men are more of the workers trying to accomplish a task, they provide for their family and get things done. Women raise the children, just like in the other religions of God as well. Gender role is just a name for what we really are as human, what we are good at in general, our human nature.

Virginia:

I am happy to do the duties as a wife but we don't only rely on the basic gender roles, we also as a married couple define with Islam how we want those roles to be fulfilled and sometimes change the roles up a bit according to what our lives need at the time.

As is evidenced, U.S. female converts to Islam have varying opinions on the topic of Islamic gender roles. These women are highly intelligent, courageous, and have no problem expressing their opinions on topics, which are highly controversial in Muslim communities across America.

Additionally, the diversity of sexual orientation among U.S. female converts to Islam deserves further study, as several converts self-identified as other than heterosexual, which is representative of broader U.S. society. I recommend that future studies include open-ended questions that address sexual orientation, which is often assumed to be heterosexual, and include questions, which allow respondents to self-identify their sex as well as gender.

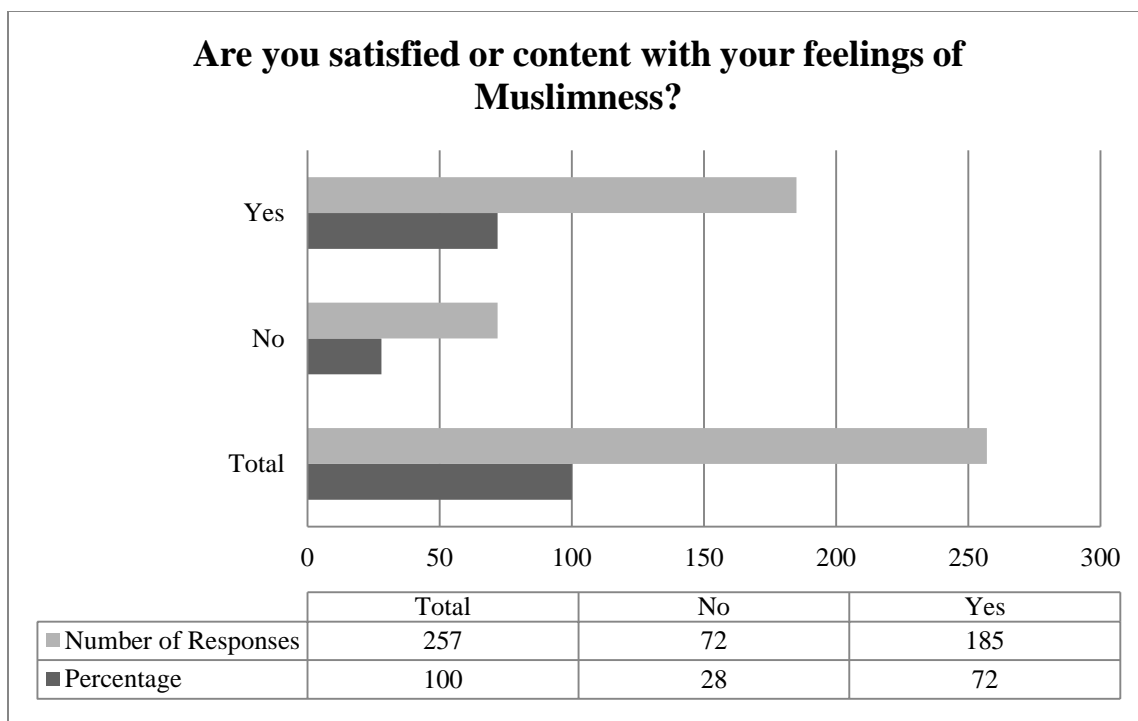


**Figure 19: Do Islamic gender roles play any part in feelings of Muslimness for the 257 respondents?**

### Are you satisfied or content with your feelings of Muslimness? (Yes or No)

Figure 20 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants selected yes or no, with no option for extended manual responses.

Of 257 respondents, 72% answered, “Yes,” that they are satisfied or content with their *feelings of Muslimness*, with 28% responding, “No,” they are not satisfied or content with their *feelings of Muslimness*. While it may have been beneficial to make this question open-ended, I believe the previous questions of when the respondents began to *feel* Muslim and what nurtures or hinders the respondents’ *feelings of Muslimness* both provide statistics, qualitative responses, and interpretation, which explain why the respondents are either satisfied and content, or dissatisfied and discontent with their current *feelings of Muslimness*. By considering these factors, we may infer that one of the reasons some U.S. female converts to Islam may not be satisfied or content with their *feelings of Muslimness* is because *feelings of Muslimness* develop over time as part of a gradual process or transition.



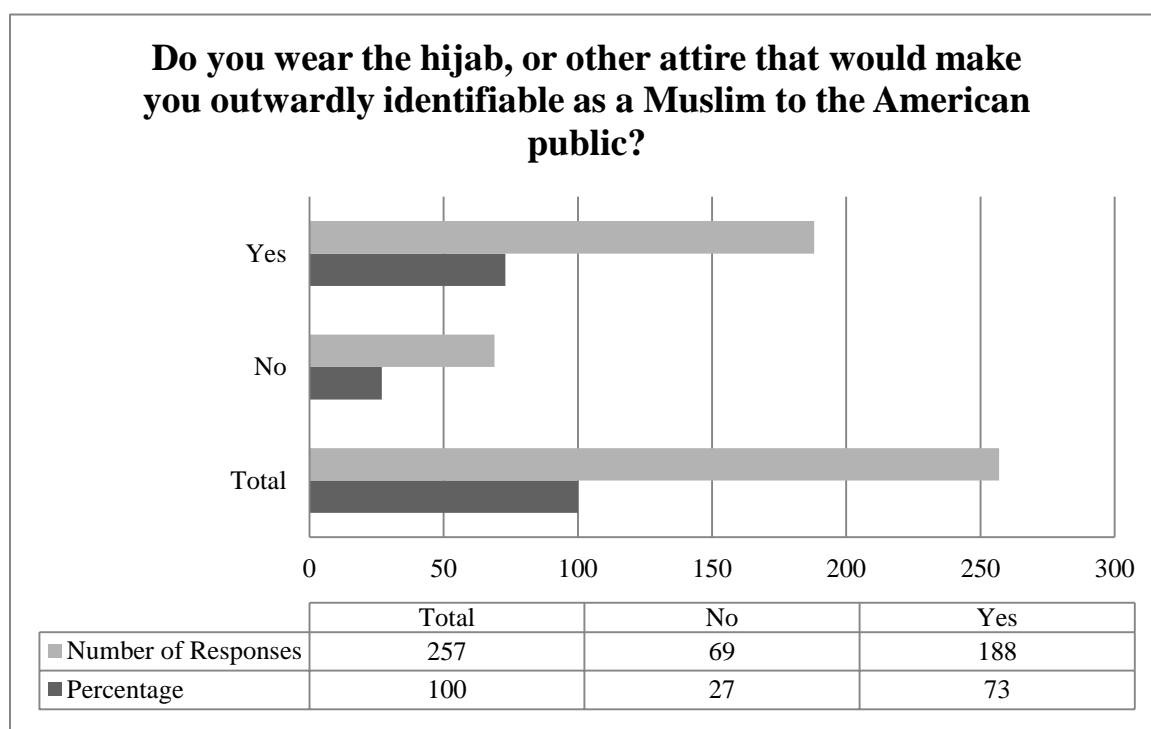
**Figure 20: Are the 257 respondents satisfied or content with their feelings of Muslimness?**

**Do you wear the hijab, or other attire that would make you outwardly identifiable as a Muslim to the American public? (Yes or No)**

Figure 21 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants selected yes or no, with no option for extended manual responses.

Of 257 respondents, 73% answered, “Yes,” that they wear the hijab, or other attire that would make them outwardly identifiable as a Muslim to the American public, with 27% responding, “No,” they do not wear any attire that would outwardly identify them as Muslim.

These statistics are especially interesting in light of responses to the question of Islamic gender roles in which 55% of respondents stated that Islamic gender roles do not play any part in their *feelings of Muslimness*, indicating that many respondents who wear the hijab or other attire that outwardly identifies them as Muslim to the American public do not associate the choice of attire with Islamic gender roles. This is also intriguing in light of responses to the next question, which asks whether choice of attire is related to *feelings of Muslimness*.



**Figure 21: Do the 257 respondents wear the hijab, or other attire that would outwardly identify them as Muslim to the American public?**



### **Is your choice of attire related to your feelings of Muslimness? If so, how?**

Figure 22 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants manually recorded their responses, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated manual quantification, and again necessitated utilizing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for assistance with verifying the occurrence of themes and quantification of the qualitative data.

Of 257 respondents, the majority, 60.31% answered, “Yes,” their choice of attire is related to their *feelings of Muslimness*, with many reporting an intimate connection between the two. Responding, “No,” 29.96% of respondents stated that their choice of attire is not related to their *feelings of Muslimness*, with many adamantly stating that what they wear has absolutely nothing to do with how they *feel* about *being* a Muslim. Another 5.45% either entered, “N/A,” or did not provide a response that was a clear “Yes”, “No”, or “Maybe,” with the remaining 4.28% writing, “Yes and No,” or “Yes and No,” “Possibly,” in response to the question.

The following excerpts are from ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ responses to the question of whether choice of attire is related to *feelings of Muslimness*, and if so, how. These responses reflect a variety of intimate, well thought out views ranging from happiness to frustration, from belonging to isolation, which further reflects the honesty, intelligence, and diversity of American female converts to Islam.

#### **Yes, My Choice of Attire is Related to My *Feelings of Muslimness***

Vivian:

It used to. I wore hijab mostly for identity purposes back when I first converted. Even when I wasn't religious or praying regularly, for some reason, I held rigidly to wearing hijab for many many years. The saddest part of it to me is that while I like hijab, and even today I still do, it is such a little unimportant thing in the bigger scheme of islamic behaviour and belief. See my earlier answer about minority populations and adherence to the external trappings-- in a western country, wearing it becomes "important" in order to be accepted. If you're a convert, wearing the hijab is some sort of "proof" to others that you're serious about your conversion. No one wants to admit that this is how people think, but it's often part of the driving force behind it. Now, when I took off hijab, I made another sad discovery. When I wore hijab, I always felt like others took note of me as a Muslim woman. When I took off the hijab, I became INVISIBLE to

other Muslims. I think this was the most depressing aspect of taking off my hijab. I took it off because I no longer wanted to represent myself as a monolithic representation of my faith, nor did I want to have to spend mounds of time explaining aspects of Islam, middle east politics, etc to total strangers who felt entitled to my time because I wore a headscarf. I also didn't want to defend certain parts of "Islamic thought" that I myself didn't believe personally (such as gender roles, homophobic fique, etc). but when the hijab was off-- I no longer existed to other Muslims. It felt, to be honest, like shit. It also made me realize that I probably had walked by hundreds of non-visible Muslims back in the days when I wore hijab and didn't realize that I was doing to them what was now being done to me. Even today if I approach a Muslim woman or family and talk to them out of the blue, I often get looked upon with suspicion or puzzlement. They don't quite understand why this perceived "non-Muslim" woman is talking to them or what my ulterior motive may be. I actually carry my old driver's license from ten years ago to show them. It usually triggers a lightbulb moment, and things instantly relax and the shields come down. It's so very sad that such shields exist, whether it's with or without the hijab...

Jennifer:

It was - taking off the headscarf was really, really hard for me; I thought I wasn't really a Muslim anymore. And now, being alone, it's a slippery slope. Ok, so I'm still a Muslim even with my hair down. Am I still a Muslim if I don't pray taraweeh? If I drink? If I don't fast??? I hate these questions - I wish I had someone to talk to.

Shirley:

Yes. I was wearing it for many reasons... I started wearing it because I believed it was required, but I slowly began to believe it was not. I still wore it for identity, as a tool to be more effective in arguing with Muslims for women's rights and the lack of a requirement for hijab, to buy legitimacy in the eyes of mainstream Muslims, and to be able to bust stereotypes about what Islam was about and what Muslim women were like for non-Muslims who stereotyped my opinions, self-esteem, choice of family role etc solely based on what I was wearing. I left it because I began to feel suffocated by those assumptions, not only by non-Muslims but by Muslims. I felt like I was no longer very sincere in my self-presentation. Also, I had reached that age when women's dress standards are relaxed, so I could justify it to my more conservative Muslim kids on that basis as well as on my theological arguments.

Charlotte:

I think wearing hijab from my conversion made me 'feel Muslim' because everyone could see I was one. Even though I was a 'baby Muslim' and in many ways still didn't know what I was doing or should do.

Tamara:

It affects my feeling of Muslimness, but does not affect other Muslims' (meaning born Muslims) feelings of my Muslimness. To be honest, I feel Muslim in jeans and a t-shirt now. But sometimes wearing a kurta or scarves (or even a sundress with jeans) makes me feel part of the group a bit more. So I guess the difference is Muslim as in my relationship with God alone (I feel that no matter what I am wearing) or as in my relationship with other Muslims (my dress makes me feel

more a part of community inwardly). But as an outward expression for others to pick up and affirm my Muslimness, that's not really a good way to live. But there was a time (back when I was all into women's submission to men) when dressing modestly in a sort of Christian way was my sartorial expression of Islam. Letting that go meant letting go of that kind of Muslim, that other sense of Muslimness of contrived shyness and modesty (not really contrived, more cultivated) that had little to do with me as a woman, so the clothing was a part of how I felt Muslim then. I was doing my best.

Beatrice:

Yes, I think hijab has a big effect on how I act and also on how others perceive me. Hijab makes me more mindful of my character and actions. When I started wearing hijab many more people commented on aspects of my character such as saying how kind I was, and I felt that I was able to be known for things that I wanted to be known for: my faith, my actions, my character. Wearing hijab I ended up meeting the kind of people both Muslim and non-Muslim who encouraged me to be a better Muslim and a better person.

Aliyah:

Yes. Wearing hijab is an advertisement to the world that you're a Muslim.

Famata:

I definitely feel MORE muslim when I'm outwardly identifiable. I always dress modestly, no short dresses or skirts, longer sleeves, etc.

Mona:

In a way it does make a powerful difference, because it means it is out there on the table for all to see that I am Muslim. So that certainly adds a level of commitment or resolve. However, I kind of cringe at hijab as being this politicized flag/symbol both with positive and negative intention.

Jessa:

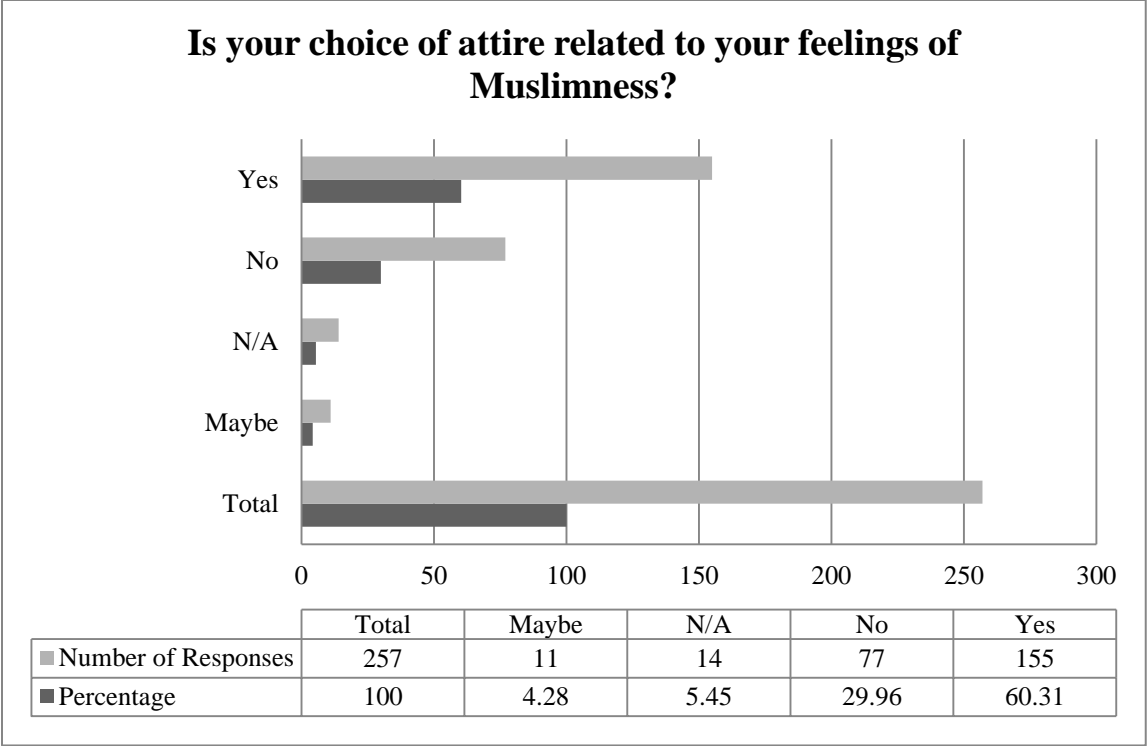
Yes. My Muslimness is tied to me being identifiable as a Muslimah. It gives me accountability and serves as a reminder that I am (inshallah) in a constant state of submission.

Shea:

Yes, only negatively though. Wearing the hijab in America, for me, is miserable. People stare at me and whisper- sometimes I am concerned for my safety. It makes me really unhappy.

Layla:

Wearing the hijab has definitely made me feel more Muslim. It helps me identify with other Muslim sisters, and it causes me to be publicly recognized as Muslim. It allows other Muslims to realize what my faith is so that we can exchange salaams.



**Figure 22: For the 257 respondents, is choice of attire related to feelings of Muslimness?**

**As an American convert to Islam, do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel you are an integral part. If no, please explain what makes you feel you are not an integral part of your Muslim community.**

Figure 23 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants manually recorded their responses, which made the question open-ended and therefore necessitated manual quantification, and again necessitated utilizing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for assistance with verifying the occurrence of themes and quantification of the qualitative data.

Of 257 respondents, the majority, 48% said, “No,” they do not feel they are an integral part of their respective Muslim communities, with 35% responding, “Yes,” they do feel they are an integral part of their communities. Some respondents said, “Possibly,” or “Yes and No,” which accounts for 8%, with the remaining 9% responding, “N/A.” While the majority of respondents gave reasons for the way they feel about how integral they are to their respective communities, I have selected a few excerpts, which highlight the sentiments expressed by many of the converts for the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ responses.

#### Yes, I Feel I Am an Integral Part of My Muslim Community

Anna:

I feel an integral part of my small local Sufi community of converts, I feel apart from other cultural/ethnic muslims communities in the area. There is some interaction but not much.

Daisy:

Yes, since I was born and raised in this country, I (and other American Muslims) am the bridge between Islam and the American culture. On the other hand, I feel as if American Muslims don't get enough say in the community. Muslims from "back home" tend to run the masajid and American Muslims are left out of that. It's important for us (Americans) to be a part of that because we can also be the bridge between "back home" Muslims and Muslims that have been born and raised here.

Linda:

I am the divorced, middle aged, white convert who keeps showing up. At some point, they stopped judging me or trying to marry me to one of the brothers, or get me to wear to hijab. They've gotten over it, and so have I. They notice if I am absent for a while, so I guess that makes me an integral part. I'm glad I have a place in their midst.

Haley:

Yes, I feel like I am an integral part of my Muslim Community, because of the email program and the great website, not to mention a tight community where you can reach anyone easily including the Imam, I have been notified for many events to protest, volunteer, etc, and it allows me to participate in our community outreach and to help everyone out regardless of religion to ensure everyone has a chance to live a decent life. It is nice to know ahead of time of what events are coming up, how to sign up or get ready for it, and if time permits, I can do any and/or all of them if I so choose.

Angelica:

Yes I think American Muslim converts have so much to offer our communities and Islam as a whole. Nobody knows what it's like to be a convert better than a convert, we should be made points of contact for others to come to. Nobody understands what it means to be an American better than us and I believe that gives us a unique opportunity to bring Islam and it's understanding to other Americans.

Zhenia:

Yes - I volunteer at the mosque, I participate in a halaqa with friends, my friend circle is largely (though not entirely ) Muslim, Islam is infused into every part of my life and when we were the only Muslims in town we felt profoundly isolated so we moved to be connected with other Muslims.

Tina:

I have been Muslim for 37 years and am an activist. I used to be deeply involved in my local community. I started our full time Islamic school. I worked for years to make changes in our masjid. I helped build it. But I grew tired of the fight and learned to go around these gray-beards to get what I wanted.might started and run a national nonprofit for Islamic schools. I make an difference, but only by going outside the community and creating my own.

No, I Do Not Feel I Am An Integral Part of My Muslim Community

Barbara:

No, born Muslims expect certain aspects of culture in their Islam, like biryani for iftar or shalwar kameez as Eid outfits or no conversations between sexes. I miss bacon. Don't discount me because I wear jeans and I have platonic relationships with men. I live in America and that is nearly impossible to avoid. Do I make sure these relationships are as halal as possible YES. Would this pass Arab muster? No. But this is culture and a big reason converts are 'shunned' or leave Islam is because they can't turn their lives upside down to be just like the Saudis or the Desi communities. If I say I miss bacon, don't judge me...realize that I have given up something that I like to be a part of your religion/community. Offer me some falafel instead!

Yolanda:

I do not, because I do not feel welcomed by a majority of the community, especially those who were born into Islam. I also feel like I do not know enough to be an integral part of the community and my lack of knowledge would be used against me to discredit my opinions.

Angie:

Yes. As a person who is white, born and raised in America and is a convert when discussing Islam with non-Muslims and fighting Islamophobia converts are crucial. Our voices carry more weight, it's a sad issue, but it is true. Besides that I am active in my community I help out the local MSA, I have hosted a group and I have helped a youth group. I plan on getting even more involved this year.

Donna:

No. And it's not all their faults. There's just a clash of many cultures at this point in time, I guess, and I'm looking forward to someday there being a strong sense of "American Muslimness", where there are more commonalities than differences, and people aren't so insular.

Gwen:

I'm not part of a community now, but I hope to be. Converts can play a huge role in dawah and understanding the challenges that converts face when coming to Islam - both from their families and society, and from the Muslim community. Born Muslims generally don't know the convert experience - they don't understand the loneliness, isolation, what it's like to be fasting Ramadan alone and having Eid be just another day, having family opposed to their religion, etc. I don't know why more masajid don't have a convert (or multiple converts) in leadership roles. Creating infrastructure for converts is, according to the unMosqued documentary, not a priority for over 90% of masajid. How can we hope to retain converts if we do nothing to help them stay? This is why studies have shown that 3 out of 4 converts leave Islam within five years.

Carolyn:

No, I am definitely on the 'outside looking in'. Being involved in community events or more clear instruction would definitely make me feel like an integral part of my community. At this point, it would take a while for anyone to even notice that I did not come to a Halaqa, much less be listed as a member of the community or congregation. I am thrilled when someone occasionally offers advice or support.

Diane:

No, I am a woman :)

Heather:

I do not, because I do not feel welcomed by a majority of the community, especially those who were born into Islam. I also feel like I do not know enough to be an integral part of the community and my lack of knowledge would be used against me to discredit my opinions.

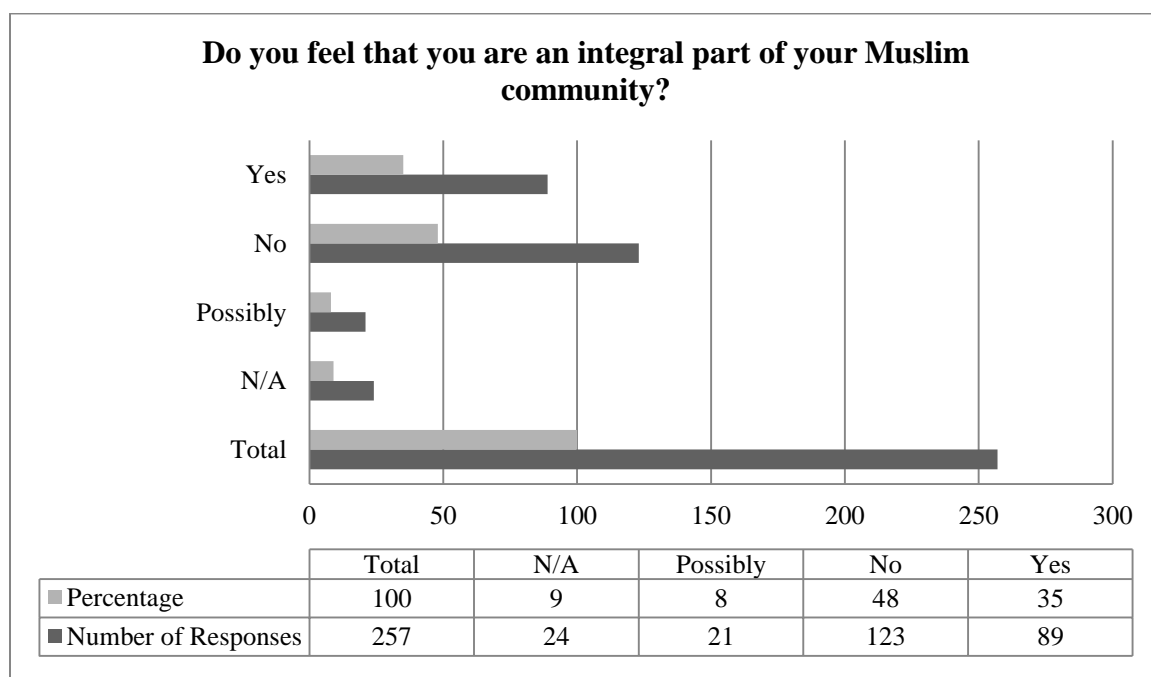
Martina:

At the last jumma I went too, last week, at a new mosque (for me) wearing very normal dress, cardigan, and hijab, and knowing absolutely no one in that building nor anyone who does know someone, the women did not speak to me, except a few said salaam, and when they closed the lines for prayer, no one would stand next to me. I have absolutely no idea why. / That has been a singular event, but things like this are always on my mind. There are just so many nuances I can't seem to satisfy, and when you don't fit someone's idea of a good woman, you are a bad woman.

Keisha:

No. I am not part of my Muslim community at all. I will spend a lot of time with books and with the Quran before I become involved again. I do not interact with other Muslims other than a few who I knew before I converted and even came to the mosque. My passion has always been in community activism and teaching, so I believe I need to move more toward people and groups that act through their faith in this capacity. I believe I will get a better feel for how Islam can meet me where I am at, and how who I am and what I love to do can serve Islam.

These responses paint an intimate portrait of the thoughts, feelings, frustrations, and hopes of American female converts to Islam from across the spectrum. Additionally, the responses provide a glimpse into the lives of U.S. female converts that was largely inaccessible. The responses demonstrate the frustration of those respondents who are eager to help and feel their “gifts” are of no use or that they are “invisible,” while other responses portray converts who are integrated in their respective Muslim communities, and even providing beneficial services within those communities. However, from the responses to this question alone, the number of U.S. female converts who expressed feeling lonely and isolated far outnumbered those who reported the opposite.



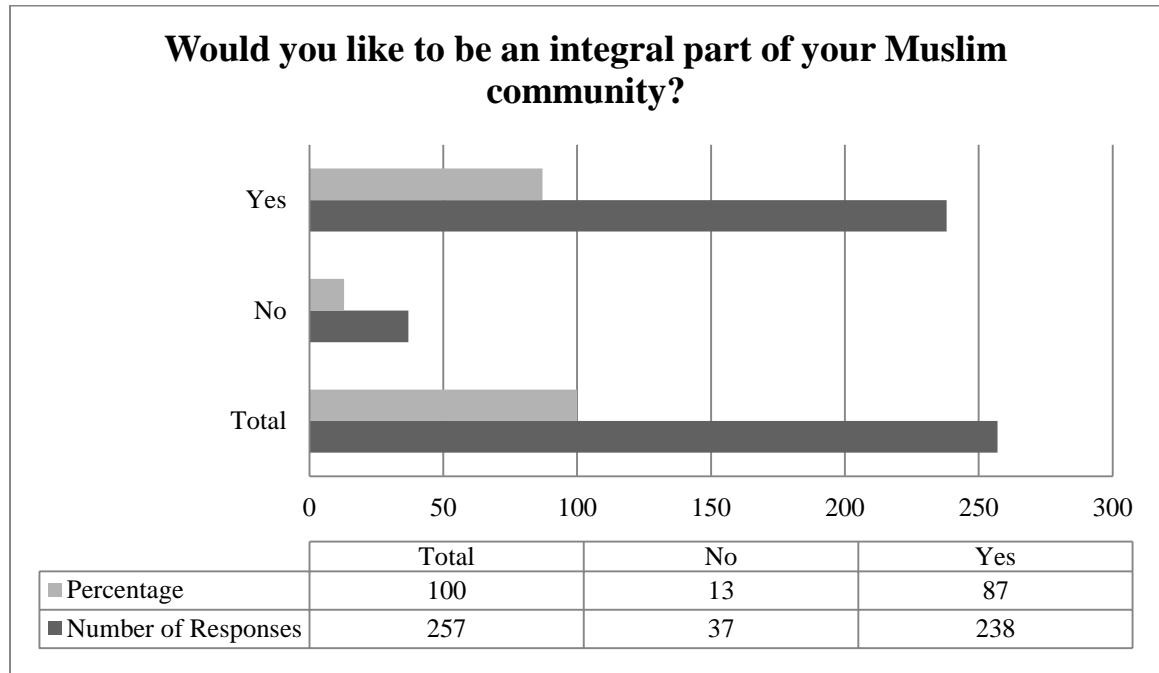
**Figure 23: Do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community?**



### Would you like to be an integral part of your Muslim community?

Figure 24 is a quantitative representation of responses to the guiding question for this section. Participants selected yes or no, with no option for extended manual responses.

Of 257 respondents, the vast majority, 87% said, “Yes,” they would like to be an integral part of their respective Muslim communities, with only 13% responding, “No,” they do not want to be an integral part of their communities. This is especially interesting when considering that the majority (48%) of the 257 U.S. female converts to Islam reported feeling they are not an integral part of their Muslim community. This highlights a disconnect between the vast majority of converts’ hopes of being an integral part of their Muslim communities, and the reality on the ground. The majority of respondents in this study are ready, willing, and able to contribute to their respective Muslim communities all over the United States and even abroad. The question is: Are Muslim communities in America ready to accept their contributions?



**Figure 24: Would you like to be an integral part of your Muslim community?**

## Conclusion

This chapter sought to present qualitative and quantitative data from the study *Feeling Muslim* in response the following questions: 1) Do American female converts to Islam distinguish between *being/becoming* Muslim by taking the shahada, and *feeling* Muslim; 2) how do American female converts to Islam define *feeling* Muslim; and 3) what key factors nurture or hinder the development of *feelings of Muslimness*. The data reported, analysis, and interpretation in this chapter have provided scholars of religious conversion, and particularly, scholars of U.S. definitive proof that the majority of U.S. female converts to Islam distinguish between *being/becoming* Muslim at the time of shahada, and *feeling* Muslim; numerous multi-faceted definitions of *being*, *becoming*, and *feeling Muslim*; and identification and discussion of some key factors converts identify as nurturing or hindering their *feelings of Muslimness*.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In contrast to studies of identity formation of converts to Islam that do not attempt to analyze experiences and identify emotions within different stages of the conversion process, evidence from this mixed-methods study of American female converts to Islam reveals: 1) some converts distinguish between outwardly *becoming/being* Muslim at the time of conversion to Islam and *feeling* Muslim; 2) key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness* (as identified by 257 U.S. female converts); 3) the greater the degree of key factors, the more rapidly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, and the lesser the degree of key factors, the more slowly the *feelings of Muslimness* develop, if at all; 4) additional significant issues related to *feelings of Muslimness* are the degree to which such feelings differ in public and private settings, the extent to which the feelings are esoterically and/or exoterically based, and 5) what *feeling Muslim* means to American female converts to Islam.

This work began with an Introduction to why it is important for many of us to turn our academic focus to the study of American female converts to Islam. Includes a brief recap of gaps in current scholarly literature, suggestions for future studies of converts, the importance of studying American female converts to Islam, a reiteration of the significance of acknowledging emotions in Religious Studies and of returning the academic study of religious conversion to the discipline of Religious Studies, and the importance of presenting a balanced perspective of American female converts to Islam.

In the Introduction of the present work, I aimed to highlight the increasing importance of interdisciplinary scholarly research of American converts to Islam, and especially women, and that such research could not come at a better time. Through the reporting, analysis, and interpretation of 257 responses to my study, *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity*

*Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*, I have provided a more accurate and comprehensive examination of one aspect of Islam in America: the American female convert.

Chapter two aimed to highlight the significance of acknowledging the researcher's own emotions using a subjectivity statement in addition to acknowledging the emotions of the respondents when conducting research in Religious Studies, as well as other disciplines. Sometimes, acknowledging emotions simply means reporting the experiences of respondents as reported by them, and reporting any emotions that arise while the researcher is conducting the study and/or fieldwork. Inclusion of emotions does not weaken academic work, but rather strengthens it since it allows the reader to be privy to the emotions of the researcher up front, which is conducive to relative objectivity by both researcher and audience

Chapter three highlighted approaches to the study of religious conversion from four disciplines: Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Religious Studies, which presented numerous definitions of religious conversion as well as process models and theories of religious conversion. This review of conversion literature points to the increasing importance of returning the scholarly study of religious conversion to the field of Religious Studies while implementing an interdisciplinary approach, which is inclusive of acknowledging emotions.

Chapter four outlined five components of Joseph Maxwell's Interactive Research Design and included an answer to each of the areas: Goals, Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, Methods, and Validity. Additionally, chapter four outlined nine important convert issues, addressed each of them, proved them through analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data from responses, and even provided solutions. First, this study applies directly to converts and bridges a gap in scholarly literature, Second, while the responses are autobiographical in nature, and in some cases, may lead to generalizations, the large number of respondents (257), increases the validity of this work and highlights a complete departure from studies that make generalizations based on the experiences of a few. Next, to my knowledge, this is the first study to directly ask converts about their *feelings of Muslimness* or what *feeling Muslim* means to them.

Fourth, the study proves, through reporting, analysis, and interpretation of responses that Muslim American educators continue to struggle to adapt instruction and learning environments to the needs of culturally diverse learners, making it difficult for them to identify with the needs of converts, and the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Fifth, while not presented herein, the data shows that the vast majority of the 257 American female converts to Islam believe there should be classes held specifically for converts. Sixth, as the data clearly shows, American female converts to Islam are in a good position to serve as advocates and change agents, not only for themselves, but also on behalf of their fellow Muslim Americans—and not only can they, but they are eager to do so. Seventh, as presented herein, while a majority of U.S. news media coverage of American female converts to Islam reflects bias toward Islam and portrays converts as brainwashed and oppressed victims, responses to this study paint a very different picture of American female converts to Islam, one that shatters the stereotypical images. Eighth, as shown in this work, understanding converts perceptions about their own identities, their ideas about community support and what they need, is a first step toward understanding the important role U.S. converts to Islam can play in bridging the cultural divide between Muslims and other Americans. Lastly, this work proves that understanding how community support influences *feelings of Muslimness* may provide insight into the identity cultivation of converts, the conversion process, and may reveal steps that communities can take to nurture those feelings.

Chapter five presented sociodemographic data on the 257 American female converts to Islam who took the study, *Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Female Converts to Islam*, presented a wide range of data collected from the responses of women across the globe, corroborated the findings of some previous studies, challenged others, provoked further research, and challenged us all to take a closer look at the diversity of American converts to Islam.

Chapter six presented both quantitative and qualitative data on the responses to twelve survey questions that were particularly about *feelings of Muslimness*, including a discussion of the

nuances in the conversion experiences of American female converts to Islam, a more intimate understanding of the process of religious conversion as a gradual transition, and some key factors in the development of *feelings of Muslimness* as described by the 257 American female converts to Islam who took the survey. Additionally, chapter six included the converts' multi-faceted definitions of *feeling Muslim* and a discussion of some key factors converts' identified as nurturing or hindering their *feelings of Muslimness*.

With this information, researchers on conversion to Islam, American converts to Islam, Islam in America, and Muslim communities across the globe have a more accurate and comprehensive examination of one aspect of Islam in America: the U.S. female convert.

A new moon teaches gradualness  
and deliberation, and how one gives birth  
to oneself slowly. Patience with small details  
makes perfect a large work, like the universe.  
What nine months of attention does for an embryo  
forty early mornings alone will do  
for your gradually growing wholeness.

~Rumi~

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## APPENDIX A

### JOSEPH MAXWELL'S FIVE COMPONENTS OF INTERACTIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Goals<sup>308, 309</sup>

“Why is your study worth doing? What issues do you want it to clarify, and what practices and policies do you want it to influence? Why do you want to conduct this study, and why should we care about the results?”

#### Conceptual Framework<sup>310</sup>

“What do you think is going on with the issues, settings, or people you plan to study? What theories, beliefs, and prior research findings will guide or inform your research, and what literature, preliminary studies, and personal experiences will you draw on for understanding the people or issues you are studying?”

#### Research Questions<sup>311</sup>

“What, specifically, do you want to better understand about the settings of participants that you are studying? What do you *not* know about these that you want to learn? What questions best capture these learnings and understanding, and how are these questions related to one another?”

#### Methods<sup>312</sup>

“What will you actually do in conducting this study? What approaches and techniques will you use to collect and analyze your data? Explain the relationships that you establish with the participants in your study. How did you choose your selection of settings, participants, times, and places, data collection, and other data sources such as documents? What are your methods for collecting your data? What data analysis strategies and techniques will you use?”

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<sup>308</sup> Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*. Joseph Maxwell outlines five components, which are similar to those put forth, by Margaret LeCompte and Judith Preissle in 1993 in *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Dr. Judith Preissle is a distinguished professor of Qualitative Research at the University of Georgia. In preparation for this study, I began my journey into qualitative research as a student in her course, Qualitative Research Traditions.

<sup>309</sup> LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research* / Margaret D. LeCompte, Judith Preissle, with Renata Tesch.

<sup>310</sup> Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design : An Interactive Approach*.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

**Validity**<sup>313</sup>

“How might your results and conclusions be wrong? What are the plausible alternative interpretations and validity threats to these results and conclusions, and how will you deal with these? How can the data that you have, or that you could potentially collect, support or challenge your ideas about what’s going on? Why should we believe your results?”

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

## APPENDIX B

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY QUESTIONS FROM *FEELING MUSLIM: AN INTIMATE  
PORTRAIT OF IDENTITY CULTIVATION AMONG AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO  
ISLAM*

Number	Questions
1	Informed consent to participate in ethnographic research: If you would like to participate, please select Yes or No below. I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form, to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.
2	Gender
3	Are you an American (U.S.-born) convert to Islam?
4	Which of the following do you prefer to be called with regard to being Muslim, and why? Convert, Revert, Other
5	What is your race/ethnicity?
6	What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
7	What was your age at the time of your conversion to Islam?
8	How long have you been Muslim?
9	What was your marital status at the time of your conversion to Islam?
10	What is your current marital status?
11	What was your religion/belief prior to Islam?
12	Do you associate yourself with any particular branch(es) of Islam? Check all that apply. Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Nation of Islam, Other
13	Once you converted to Islam, did you instantly feel Muslim?
14	Do Islamic gender roles play any part in your feelings of Muslimness?
15	Are you satisfied or content with your feelings of Muslimness?
16	Do you wear the hijab, or other attire that would make you outwardly identifiable as a Muslim to the American public?
17	Is your choice of attire related to your feelings of Muslimness? If so, how?
18	Would you like to be an integral part of your Muslim community?
19	Do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community?
20	Have you ever thought about leaving Islam?
21	Do you believe there should be classes held specifically for American converts to Islam?

## APPENDIX C

QUALITATIVE SURVEY QUESTIONS FROM *FEELING MUSLIM: AN INTIMATE  
PORTRAIT OF IDENTITY CULTIVATION AMONG AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO  
ISLAM*

Number	Questions
1	What city do you currently reside in?
2	How did you first come to know about Islam?
3	What do you feel led you to the particular branch of Islam you are associated with?
4	What brought you to the decision that you should convert to Islam? How did you make the decision? Were there any overarching factors that influenced your decision? Was there any one 'thing' that tipped the scale and helped you make your decision?
5	For you, is there a difference between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada, and feeling Muslim? If no, please explain how they are one and the same. If yes, please explain how they differ.
6	How would you define feeling Muslim? What does feeling Muslim mean to you?
7	When did you begin to feel Muslim?
8	Were there any outside influences that nurtured or hindered your feelings of Muslimness? If yes, what and/or who? If no, please explain what you believe caused your feelings of Muslimness to develop.
9	How does feeling Muslim make you feel about the following: 1. About yourself, 2. About yourself and your relationship with God, 3. About yourself as a member of the local and global Muslim communities, 4. About yourself as an American.
10	Did your family support you (spiritually, socially, emotionally, financially, etc.) before your conversion to Islam?
11	Did your family support you (spiritually, socially, emotionally, financially, etc.) since your conversion to Islam? If yes, is the support the same as prior to your conversion to Islam? If no, please explain how your family support has changed.
12	Do you have a home Muslim community? If no, please explain why you do not have a home Muslim community. If yes, is the community meeting your needs as a convert to Islam? If your community is meeting your needs as a convert, please explain how. If your community is not meeting your needs as a convert, please explain what need are not being met.
13	As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your spiritual needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the

	community could do to help meet the spiritual needs of the convert community.
14	As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your emotional needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the emotional needs of the convert community.
15	As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your social needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the social needs of the convert community.
16	As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting any financial needs you may have? If yes, please explain how. If not, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the financial needs of the convert community.
17	As an American convert to Islam, do you feel welcome in your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel welcome. If no, please explain what makes you feel unwelcome and what could be done to change this.
18	As an American convert to Islam, do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel you are an integral part. If no, please explain what makes you feel you are not an integral part of your Muslim community.
19	Have you ever thought about leaving Islam? If no, please answer 'No'. If yes, please explain what led to those feelings.
20	Overall, what do you think Muslim communities around the United States could do to help new converts to Islam feel Muslim?

## APPENDIX D

### *FEELING MUSLIM: AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF IDENTITY CULTIVATION AMONG AMERICAN FEMALE CONVERTS TO ISLAM*

#### Q1 Feeling Muslim: An Intimate Portrait of Identity Cultivation among American Converts to Islam

Bismillah (In the Name of God)

As Salaamu ‘Alaykum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuh! (May the peace and mercy and blessings of God be upon you)

Dear Sisters in Islam,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study of conversion experiences and identity formation among American female converts to Islam, conducted by Dr. Alan Godlas and Ms. Karla Nicole Evans of the University of Georgia. The purpose of this research is to collect and analyze data collected from public meetings of converts and an online questionnaire to learn if, for American female converts to Islam, there is a difference between becoming Muslim (at the time of conversion) and feeling Muslim. This study aims at understanding converts’ feelings and emotions regarding the formation of their Muslim identities, in hopes of highlighting the importance of understanding the unique situation of American female converts to Islam and identifying what makes some American female converts to Islam feel Muslim. The answers you give will help us gain a better insight into your experiences as American converts to Islam, which will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the spiritual, social, emotional, and/or financial needs of American converts. Please answer openly and honestly as there is no right or wrong answer. Your responses will be kept entirely confidential.

American female converts to Islam are invited to complete this survey. The online questionnaire will take approximately 30-60 minutes of your time, perhaps longer or shorter for some. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Each person may participate by completing and submitting the online questionnaire. All responses and information collected are completely confidential. No identifiers will be included with the data. Results will only be reported in aggregated form. Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the researcher receives the materials, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. No individual participant will be identified in any way. There will be no mention of any information about you and/or your particular community in any reports resulting from this research unless you choose to make your identity known. Otherwise, all information will remain strictly confidential. The results of this research will be used for academic and professional publications or

presentations for the sake and benefit of all Muslims in America. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Information about the study or a summary of its findings will also be made available to any participant who requests it. Should you have any questions or wish to report a research-related problem, please email Karla N. Evans at [knevans@uga.edu](mailto:knevans@uga.edu) or call her at 678.330.5140. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

By signing this informed consent form, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project. Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records. Again, we thank you for your participation!

Yours Sincerely,

Alan Godlas

Associate Professor of Islamic Studies

Department of Religion

University of Georgia

Karla N. Evans

M.A. Candidate

Department of Religion

University of Georgia

Please sign and keep a copy of this informed consent form. Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu).

## Q2 INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

If you would like to participate, please select YES or NO below I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

- ☐ Yes. I agree to participate in this research. (1)
- ☐ No. I decline to participate in this research. (2)

## Q3 Gender

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)

## Q4 Country of birth

## Q5 Are you an American convert to Islam?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q6 Which of the following do you prefer to be called with regard to being Muslim, and why?

- ☐ Convert (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Revert (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Other (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q7 What is your race/ethnicity?

Q8 What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- ☐ K-8th grade (1)
- ☐ Some High School, no diploma (2)
- ☐ High School graduate, diploma, or GED (3)
- ☐ Some college credit, no degree (4)
- ☐ Trade/Technical/Vocational training (5)
- ☐ Associate degree (6)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (7)
- ☐ Master's degree (8)
- ☐ Doctorate degree (9)

Q9 What was your age at the time of your conversion to Islam?

- ☐ Less than 16 (1)
- ☐ 16 to 19 (2)
- ☐ 20 to 24 (3)
- ☐ 25 to 34 (4)
- ☐ 35 to 44 (5)
- ☐ 45 to 54 (6)
- ☐ 55 to 64 (7)
- ☐ 65 or over (8)

Q10 How long have you been Muslim?

- ☐ 0-3 years (1)
- ☐ 4-7 years (2)
- ☐ 8-11 years (3)
- ☐ 12-15 years (4)
- ☐ 16-19 years (5)
- ☐ 20+ years (6)



Q11 What was your marital status at the time of your conversion to Islam?

- ☐ Single, never married (1)
- ☐ Single with children (2)
- ☐ Engaged (3)
- ☐ Married without children (4)
- ☐ Married with children (5)
- ☐ Divorced (6)
- ☐ Divorced with children (7)
- ☐ Separated (8)
- ☐ Widowed (9)

Q12 What is your current marital status?

- ☐ Single, never married (1)
- ☐ Single with children (2)
- ☐ Engaged (3)
- ☐ Married without children (4)
- ☐ Married with children (5)
- ☐ Divorced (6)
- ☐ Divorced with children (7)
- ☐ Separated (8)
- ☐ Widowed (9)

Q13 What was your religion/belief prior to Islam?

Q14 Do you associate yourself with any particular branch(es) of Islam? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Sunni (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Shi'a (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Sufi (3) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Nation of Islam (4) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Other (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Q15 How did you first come to know about Islam? (Please be as detailed as possible)

Q16 What do you feel led you to the particular branch of Islam you are associated with? (Please be as detailed as possible)

Q17 What brought you to the decision that you should convert to Islam? How did you make the decision? Were there any overarching factors that influenced your decision? Was there any one 'thing' that tipped the scale and helped you make your decision?

Q18 For you, is there a difference between being/becoming Muslim by taking the shahada (Islamic testimony of faith), and feeling Muslim? If no, please explain how they are one of the same. If yes, please explain how they differ.

Q19 Once you converted to Islam, did you instantly feel Muslim?

- ☐ No (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Yes (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Q20 How would you define feeling Muslim? What does feeling Muslim mean to you?

Q21 When did you begin to feel Muslim?

Q22 Were there any outside influences that nurtured or hindered your feelings of Muslimness? If yes, what and/or who? Please explain in as much detail as possible. If no, please explain what you believe caused your feelings of Muslimness to develop.

Q23 How does feeling Muslim make you feel about the following: 1. About yourself 2. About yourself and your relationship with God 3. About yourself as a member of the local and global Muslim communities 4. About yourself as an American

Q24 Did your family support you (spiritually, socially, emotionally, financially, etc.) before your conversion to Islam? If yes, please explain. If no, please explain.

Q25 Does your family support you (spiritually, socially, emotionally, financially, etc.) since your conversion to Islam? If yes, is the support the same as prior to your conversion to Islam? If no, please explain how your family support has changed.

Q26 Do Islamic gender roles play any part in your feelings of Muslimness?

- ☐ No (1)
- ☐ If yes, how? (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Q27 Are you satisfied or content with your feelings of Muslimness?

- ☐ No (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Yes (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Q28 If female, do you wear the hijab, or other attire that would make you outwardly identifiable as a Muslim to the American public?

- ☐ Yes (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Q29 Is your choice of attire related to your feelings of Muslimness? If so, how?

Q30 Do you have a home Muslim community? If no, please explain why you do not have a home Muslim community. If yes, is the community meeting your needs as a convert to Islam? If your community is meeting your needs as a convert, please explain how. If your community is not meeting your needs as a convert, please explain what needs are not being met.

Q31 As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your spiritual needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the spiritual needs of the convert community.

Q32 As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your emotional needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the emotional needs of the convert community.

Q33 As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting your social needs? If yes, please explain how. If no, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the social needs of the convert community.

Q34 As a convert, do you feel that your current community is meeting any financial needs you may have? If yes, please explain how. If not, please explain what you think the community could do to help meet the financial needs of the convert community.

Q35 As an American convert to Islam, do you feel welcome in your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel welcome. If no, please explain what makes you feel unwelcome and what could be done to change this.

Q36 As an American convert to Islam, do you feel that you are an integral part of your Muslim community? If yes, please explain what makes you feel you are an integral part. If no, please explain what makes you feel you are not an integral part of your Muslim community.

Q37 Would you like to be an integral part of your Muslim community?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q38 Have you ever thought about leaving Islam? If no, please answer 'No'. If yes, please explain what led to these feelings.

Q39 Do you believe there should be classes held specifically for American converts to Islam?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q40 Overall, what do you think Muslim communities around the United States could do to help new converts to Islam feel Muslim?

## APPENDIX E

ERIK ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES<sup>314</sup>

<i>Age</i>	<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Resolution or "Virtue"</i>	<i>Culmination in old age</i>
Infancy (0-1 year)	Basic trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Appreciation of interdependence and relatedness
Early childhood (1-3 years)	Autonomy vs. shame	Will	Acceptance of the cycle of life, from integration to disintegration
Play age (3-6 years)	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Humor; empathy; resilience
School age (6-12 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence	Humility; acceptance of the course of one's life and unfulfilled hopes
Adolescence (12-19 years)	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity	Sense of complexity of life; merging of sensory, logical and aesthetic perception
Early adulthood (20-25 years)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	Sense of the complexity of relationships; value of tenderness and loving freely
Adulthood (26-64 years)	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Caritas, caring for others, and agape, empathy and concern
Old age (65-death)	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	Existential identity; a sense of integrity strong enough to withstand physical disintegration

<sup>314</sup> Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*.