THE INCREASING CONVERSION TO ISLAM SINCE 9/11: A STUDY OF WHITE AMERICAN MUSLIM CONVERTS IN NORTHWEST OHIO

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the trajectories of conversion to Islam among White Americans after 9/11 in Northwest Ohio by analyzing the social and cultural forces that influenced these individuals’ conversion experiences, relationships with pre-9/11 converts, and interactions with the rest of American society. This research project addresses two significant themes that are related to the increasing conversion to Islam in Northwest Ohio after the tragic attacks of September 11th. First, I argue that the increase of Anglo-Americans’ conversion to Islam was a reflection of their dissatisfaction with some of the social, cultural, and religious practices in present America. In the narratives of my informants, I identify a number of motivational factors such as social protest and marriage, especially for women, as major reasons for the conversions of Americans to Islam. Second, I discuss the ways in which American converts to Islam act as critics of immigrant Muslims, especially non-practicing Muslims. I examine how their disappointment with transnational Muslims motivates them to establish a distinct American Muslims’ religious identity that speaks to their cultural and social needs.

Overall, the result of my research indicates that post-9/11 Ohioan Muslim converts are happy and satisfied with their new faith despite all the challenges they face in America. Apparently, Islam provided them with theological satisfaction as well as spiritual fulfillment that give them peace of mind and a sense of tranquility.
To my beloved parents for their unconditional love, unfailing support, and prayers.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, an interview on the Arabic Satellite Television Network Aljazeera with Safiyah Al-Qasabi caught my attention. Al-Qasabi is an American Jewish, who converted to Islam after September 11th, 2001 attacks. What struck me in the narrative of Al-Qasabi was not only her ethnic, gender, or Jewish identity. What really stunned me, and deeply hurt me, is the tremendous loss and traumatic wound that the attacks of 9/11 caused to Al-Qasabi’s family. I was in a state of disbelief and somehow became more curious to learn about the story of Al-Qasabi’s conversion to Islam, especially when the journalist asked her, “How was your experience after September 11th, when you lost eight relatives? You did not feel that those people (Muslims) are the cause of that?” These questions, indeed, spark the interests and curiosity about the stories of White American converts to Islam after September 11th such as Al-Qasabi’s.

According to Lewis R. Rambo, “Conversions are often stimulated by an extraordinary, and in some cases mystical, experience. The nature of the experience varies, but for most people a mystical experience, especially an unexpected one, is profoundly disturbing.” This quotation suggests that converts frequently experience an emotional crisis, breakdown, or dissatisfaction with their religion of birth which may lead them to explore other religious venues.

THESIS STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study focuses primarily on the population of White American converts to Islam since the attacks of September 11th, 2001, in Northwest Ohio. I am particularly interested in analyzing

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the factors that prompt Americans to change their belief system and accept Islam. Thus, this research project addresses two significant themes that are related to the increasing conversion to Islam in Northwest Ohio after September 11th attacks. First, I argue that the increase of White Americans’ conversion to Islam is a reflection of their dissatisfaction with some of the social, cultural, and religious practices of present America. In the narratives of my informants, I identify a number of motivational factors such as social protest and marriage, especially for women, as major reasons for the conversions of Americans to Islam. Second, I discuss the ways American Muslim converts act as critics of immigrant Muslims, especially non-practicing Muslims. I examine how their disappointment with transnational Muslims motivated them to establish a distinct American Muslims’ religious identity that speaks to their cultural and social needs.

The central question that guides the present study is: Why do White Americans convert to Islam since September 11th, 2001? It encompasses the following questions that are crucial in understanding the experiences of post-9/11 converts in Northwest Ohio: (a) how is the process of conversion like? (b) What are the types of conversion? (c) Why do White American women convert to Islam? (d) How do recent converts relate to pre-9/11 converts? (e) How is their post-conversion experience like?

I raise these interrogations in the context of post-9/11 America, where Islam is often perceived as an anti-American religion in U.S. news media. Indeed, the roots of this troubled relation between the Muslim World and the United States predate the tragedy of 9/11. However, the bombings of the World Trade Center has reinvigorated those tensions and increased the animosity between the two worlds. Despite the attempts from both sides to bridge the gap of
misunderstanding, the chasm seems be growing rather than shrinking. In a documentary about Islam in America, Rageh Omaar remarked, “There is deep distrust on both sides. How can Americans trust Muslims who terrorized their cities and how can Muslims trust Americans who bombed their countries?”

Omaar’s illustration points out to the roots of the current crisis between America and the Muslim World. In a sense, the U.S. political and military involvement in Muslim countries, for the sake of economic power and natural resources, has sparked the emergence of political violence and terrorist organizations, in many Muslim countries, as a response to U.S. ongoing occupations of countries that are predominantly Muslims such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the months and years that followed September 11th attacks, 2001, many American Muslims have suffered blatant acts of racism and discrimination. In a response to the 9/11 tragedy, some Americans have chosen to express their rage and anger by attacking Islamic centers, mosques, and Muslims’ belongings. These incidents suggest the considerable surge of hate crimes that were perpetrated against Muslims, especially against those who originate from Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, in the aftermath of 9/11. A press release posted on the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee website from Congresswoman’s Marcy Kaptur’s office

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states: “The FBI reports that the number of anti-Muslim incidents rose 1600% from 2000 to 2001, largely due to post-911 backlash” (Kaptur 2003). For example, the rate of crimes and discriminatory behaviors against veiled Muslim women increased dramatically after 9/11. As the former U.S. President George W. Bush stated in a speech that he gave at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. on September 17th, 2001, Muslim women are easy to spot because of their remarkable visibility in appearance. The Hijab or headscarf represents a visible maker of Islamic woman’s identity and, for many Americans, a signifier of her otherness and difference.

Yet violent attacks were not directed only against Muslims, since they were also perpetrated against anyone who associated with the Middle East or bore Islamic names. According to Nadine Naber’s article “Look Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming,” several attacks were reported against South Asian Hindus, Sikhs, and Middle Easterners of Christian faith. Some of these persons were Americans who originated from South Asia or the Middle East and were often mistaken as Muslims, because of their traditional outfits, appearance, or even accent. A case in point is the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian American Sikh, on September 15th, 2001 at a gas station in Mesa, Arizona. Sodhi’s identity was confused and mistaken with that of a South Asian or Middle Eastern Muslim. On the same day Sodhi died, another person of South Asian descent, Waqar Hasan from Pakistan, was killed in Dallas, Texas. Another Christian from

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7 Ibid., 289.
Middle East, Adel Karas, was also murdered, on September 15th, 2001, in San Gabriel, California.  

In effect, these incidents speak extraordinary well to the extent of Americans’ rage against Muslims as well as the degree of their ignorance of the different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups that form the social fabric of the Middle East and South Asia. In his essay, “Islamophobia in America? : September 11 and Islamophobic Hate Crime,” Jeffrey Kaplan argues that Americans still possess no or little knowledge about Middle Eastern cultures and South Asian countries, despite the United States’ military and political involvement in those regions. These incidents of hate crime forced the Bush’s administration to break its silence and address this issue publically. In his September 17th, 2001, speech at Washington Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., President Bush declared that, “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam… Islam is peace.” President Bush went on to denounce these acts of violence against Muslims, especially veiled Muslim women, and to emphasize that they are un-American. He stated:

Women who cover their heads in this country must feel comfortable going outside their homes. Moms who wear cover must be not intimidated in America. That's not the America I know. That's not the America I value. I've been told that some fear to leave; some don't want to go shopping for their families; some don't want to go about their

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8 Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming,” 289.


10 Bush, “Address at Islamic Center of Washington,”
ordinary daily routines because, by wearing cover, they're afraid they'll be intimidated. That should not and that will not stand in America.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite President Bush’s condemnation of the wave of hate crime and acts of violence against Muslims, Americans Muslims were victims not only of ordinary Americans’ random acts of violence, but also of federal police harassment, racial profiling, and post-9/11 discriminatory policies that were enacted and put in place such as \textit{Patriotic Act}. According to Naber, the backlash of the American government to the attacks of September 11\textsuperscript{th} was out of proportion and discriminatory.\textsuperscript{12} Muslims became frequently targeted and arrested without any charges in airports, train stations, and other public places. To marshal her arguments, Naber further states that the increase of federal police raids and unexpected visits to mosques and Muslims’ homes was also a true manifestation of the unfair treatment of American Muslims.\textsuperscript{13} Discussing the injustices against Muslims after the 9/11 tragedy, the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan states in his book \textit{Western Muslims and the Future of Islam}:

\begin{quote}
It is an established and unacceptable fact that the government of the United States (particularly after the outrages of 11 September 2001) and Europe maintain relations that are sometimes disrespectful of and even clearly discriminatory against citizens and residents of their countries who are of the Muslim faith. It is no less true that they apply a security policy including constant surveillance: distrust is maintained, and the image of the “Muslim” often remains suspect. The general picture conceived by the Western
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Bush, “Address at Islamic Center of Washington,”

\textsuperscript{12} Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming,” 288-289.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 285-286.
population in general is so negative that one could call it Islamophobia, and this is a fact that many Muslims have lived with on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{14}

The preceding quote, in the context of the United States, refers to American news media’s negative coverage of Islam which plays an important role in the widespread stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslims among Americans. The emphasis on the so called “Islamic terrorism” and “Islamic threat” to the United States has definitely contributed to the demonization of Islam as a dangerous religion.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the media’s portrayal of Islam has increased the level of misunderstanding and deepened mistrust between Americans and Muslims. Nonetheless, the constant coverage of Islam as well as the ongoing war on terror in the news media has contributed in great deal to the growing interests among Americans about Islam. As Patrick D. Bowen points out:

\begin{quote}
Post-9/11 U.S. conversion has been higher in the U.S. than in Europe, likely because of more pervasive media coverage of Islam in the U.S. It seems that while converts in Europe are the relative elite whose education allows them to know more about a minority religion than the average person, because the attacks happened on U.S. soil, U.S. citizens of all classes have been exposed to information about Islam.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

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Therefore, in the midst of the increasing waves of islamaphobia and mounting animosity against Muslims in the United States, Islam seems to be attracting more Americans. This attraction of Americans to Islam reflects what Sarah M. A. Gualtieri terms “the other September 11 effect.” In that way, the impact of the 9/11 tragedy is visible in the fact that many Americans have expressed their desire and interests in learning about Islamic history and Islamic religious texts, and most importantly about the real motives of those “Muslim terrorists” who bombed their cities. In the years after September 11th, non-Muslim Americans’ visits to Islamic centers and mosques have become more frequent. Americans are, indeed, asking many questions about Islam and Muslims. They have attended Friday prayers and mosque’s events to learn more about the Islamic faith. The questions that seem to be on everyone’s mind are: Why do they hate us? Who are they? What is Islam? Who are the Muslims? What is Islam stands on the activities of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the like?

While seeking answers to these questions a number of Americans converted to Islam. In a response to my question about the reasons of the increase of Americans’ conversion to Islam after 9/11, Farooq Aboelzahab, the Imam of Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, stated:

Yes, there’s been an increase in the number of people who converted to Islam from previous religion or may be no religion also and that happened after 9/11, because after 9/11 Islam was really mistaken and people were demanding to know more about Islam.


People come, ask questions, and attend the service. We have people who come just to find out about Islam and when they read about Islam, when they are given the Qur’an to read, then they are connected with God. One of the main attractions for them that Qur’an gave very straightforward answers for what they were struggling with in their previous religions. There are many questions mark never been answered and questions never been given satisfying answers, so Islam gave that. They know that Islam is universal. Islam encompasses all religions, has lots of goodness, and appreciate all the prophets of God their books, dedication, and houses of worship…

Aboelzahab’s statement emphasizes the growth of conversion to Islam in the United States and underscores the increasing influence of religion vis-à-vis the secular aspects of contemporary American society. In this way, religion provides a source of comfort, spiritual healings, and a peace of mind and tranquility to those individuals. As Rambo observed, “Religion is, in effect, a form of personal entertainment or leisure-time activity.” Therefore, religion is a good way to cope with stress and pressure. It provides a very comfortable refuge and a solace in an ever increasing interconnected and yet depressing world. Indeed, religious faiths represent an essential part in today’s post-secular world to use Diana Eck’s formulation.

It goes without saying that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world today. Indeed, many studies have indicated that post-9/11 attacks have witnessed a remarkable surge in

19 Farooq Aboelzahab, interview with author, April 9, 2010.
20 Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 29.
21 Diana Eck, “Religion in the Age of Pluralism,” (Harvard University, Boston, March 13, 2010).
the membership of Americans to Islam, especially among White American women. In his book, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*, Akbar Ahmed writes, “…the unprecedented wave of curiosity and interest in Islam following the 9/11 attacks. Since then Islam has been very much in the public eye. Many imams told us that conversions went up after 9/11, and the Quran sales skyrocketed.” In this way, Islam seems to offer an alternative style of life that some Americans find more alluring. In that way, Islam’s social and theological regulations constitute a source of attraction to American Muslim converts after 9/11.

My research interest about the population of White American converts in Northwest Ohio was born out of my interactions with my informants. My conversations with them have shaped the nature of this research project. When I first began this study, at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, in January 2010, I had two assumptions about the rise of conversion to Islam in the United States. My first assumption is that African-Americans constitute the biggest number of converts to Islam. The reasons that led me to make this assumption are twofold. The first reason is the history of the Nation of Islam and the rise of black American converts to traditional Islam, especially in 1970s and 1980s. The second one is that Islam has historically been an attractive force to the oppressed and marginalized groups in American society. My second assumption about the rise of Islam is that the majority of American converts are males. When I started gathering data for my research, I found a very different reality. I realized that the increasing numbers of American Muslim converts are overwhelming young Anglo-American women.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

To foreground my analysis of religious conversion to Islam in Northwest Ohio, I draw on several studies that deal with religious conversion in the West. Among these studies are Lewis R. Rambo’s *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Ali Kose’s *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996), Kate Zebiri’s *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (2008), and *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion In the West* (2004). In his seminal book, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo argues that converts go through different phases before turning to a new religion. He provides seven steps that constitute the conversion process. These steps are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.  

I will apply Lewis Rambo’s model of “the seven stages of conversion” to theorize and analyze the data of my interviews with Ohio Muslim converts.

Köse’s *Conversion to Islam* is the first ethnographic study to explore the different factors and venues that led seventy native British Muslim converts. He examines the process and stages of conversion to Islam, specifically the post-conversion stage and converts’ interaction with Western society. In his study, Köse grouped Western converts to Islam in three main categories: (a) converts who come from secular or irreligious background, (b) those who were very religious but were completely disappointed and disillusioned with their beliefs, (c) and those who gave up their religion of origin, but still believe in God. Another important study about conversion to Islam in the West is Zebiri’s *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*. Zabiri’s book focuses on the changes that Islam brought into the lives British Muslim converts, their

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disappointment with some aspects of British modern society, and their marginality within British Muslim community. *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* discusses also post-conversion stage and converts’ social and cultural roles as cultural mediators between British Muslims and non-Muslims. Nevertheless, most of these studies deal exclusively with conversion to Islam in European context.

The two ethnographic studies that treat conversion to Islam in the United States are Robert Dannin’s *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (2002) and Akbar Ahmed’s *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (2010). In his study, Robert Dannin presents an important study about the history and experience of African-American Muslim converts since the early 1920s to late 1990s. Drawing on fieldwork between 1980s and 1990s, Dannin analyzes the factors that prompted Black Americans’ conversion to Islam as a way of connecting to what he terms the “unchurched culture” of early slaves from West Africa. Dannin’s book also provides an interesting analysis of African-American inmates in Green Haven State Prison in New York. Nevertheless, Dannin’s book deals only with African-Americans’ conversion to Islam prior September 11th. The book also does not provide detailed accounts about the process and types of conversion of African-Americans to Islam.

Meanwhile, Akbar Ahmed’s *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* offers an interesting account about the entire history and experience of Muslims in the United States, their struggle, success, and challenges they faced and continue to face. He included a chapter, entitled “Muslim Converts: Shame and Honor in a Time of Excess,” that focuses on the factors that

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appeal American to Islam including theological and moral aspects. Ahmed’s book concentrates particularly on the experiences and stories of famous American Muslim converts such as Nicole Queen, Sheikha Fariha Fatima Al-Jerrahi, Sheikha Hamza Yusuf, and Cat Stevens better known as Yusuf Islam. Using these studies as theoretical framework, my thesis will explore the lives and stories of white American Muslim converts in Northwest Ohio and shed light on their changing religious identity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

My thesis is a gap in scholarship study. It endeavors to address the marginality of White American Muslim converts after 9/11 in the field of American Culture Studies. To this date, little research attention has been directed to the population of White American Muslim converts in the United States. I seek to voice the voiceless stories that are under examined in academic scholarship as well as U.S. news media. Thus, the significance of this research project lies in its endeavors to cast light on the increasing religious conversion to Islam among Anglo-American population. That is to say this phenomenon might greatly and fundamentally impact the nature of the relationship between the United States and the Muslim World in the upcoming decades. For instance, White American converts to Islam can play an important role in changing misperceptions and views about Islam in the United States and vice versa. More precisely, American Muslim converts, particularly Anglo-Americans, are highly qualified to be real bridge builders between the United States and the Muslim World.

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METHODLOGY

For this ethnographic study, I chose to study The Islamic Center of Greater Toledo and the First Cleveland Masjid as sites to my fieldwork. The two mosques are located respectively in Perrysburg, Northwest Ohio and Cleveland, Northeast Ohio. I chose these two mosques in order to provide a comprehensive analysis about Ohio converts to Islam. I was obligated to eliminate the possibility of conducting research at the First Cleveland Masjid, because of time constraints as well as problems of communication. In my preliminary research phase, I also envisioned doing research at the Islamic Center of Detroit, Michigan before I was dissuaded by the Imam, because of the sensitive nature of my topic and the possibility of jeopardizing the lives of people, by putting them in the spotlight.

At some point during my research, I also visualized the idea of interviewing African-American inmate converts. However, I ended up by dropping that idea, due to the length and complexity of the process to receive access and approval to interview converts to Islam in U.S. prisons. In this process, I also decided to limit the area of my research because of time factors and challenges involved in all these sites such as travelling, contacting informants, and most importantly the sensitivity surrounding research about Muslims and Islam in the United States after 9/11. In the face of all these challenges, I arrived at the decision to limit my study to The Islamic Center of Greater Toledo in Perrysburg, Northwest Ohio (figure 1).
To begin with, I started attending Friday prayers where I met with the community leaders at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo and interacted with other Muslims who provided guidance and help about approaching American Muslim converts after the attacks of September 11th, 2001. I visited the mosque’s library several times and read some books and materials in their collection. I also attended school services where I met with students and teachers during the break and heard from them about their programs of the school. I also consulted and read articles from Monitor, the official newsletter of the mosque. Most of the coverage of the magazine deals with events and activities of the center. Therefore, there were not any reports that dealt with American converts to Islam.

During this period, my linguistic skills were a great help for me in communicating with Imams and the Muslim community. Given the fact that I speak Arabic was a source of comfort of them and facilitated the process. I am also an African Muslim. I am well-positioned to study American converts including black and white American converts to Islam. Having stated that,
the present study may suffer from a number of limitations. First, it suffers from my own biases and subjective analysis. Indeed, my worldview and knowledge of Islam can greatly influence the interpretation of my data analysis and presentation of this project. Second, the statistic about converts to Islam in America is hard to find, since the U.S. Census Bureau does not provide any statistic about religious conversion in the United States.

The informants of this study are: Farooq Aboelzahab (the Egyptian-American Imam of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo), Dr. Fatima Al-Hayani (the Lebanese-American principal of the School of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo), Maria Williams accepted Islam in 2007 (White American female, age 23), Xavier Mark took his Shahada (declaration to be Muslim) in 2009 (White American male, age 25), Aisha Williams converted to Islam in 2009 (White American female, age 62), Lisa Ayhan accepted Islam in 2010 (White American female, age 34), Kerry Wherly accepted Islam in 2009 (White American female, age 23), and Philip Schreffler took his Shahada in 2010 (White American male, age 42).

In our first interview, the Imam Aboelzahab provided me with the names and phone numbers of Americans who took their Shahada with him at the center, since they keep a record of all converts at the mosque. In this sense, my strategy to recruit participants was to call them first, after that I introduced my research interests, and then we when they agreed to meet in a location of their choice, after that we met for interviews. Two of my participants live in distant locations; therefore, I had to use phone interviews. I invited them to participate in the study, and then, they agreed, I scanned my recruitment letter, interview questions, and consent form and sent it to them. As soon as they approved everything and agreed on a good time for them, we would have the interview on the phone. The interview questions were designed to generate participants’
knowledge about Islam before conversion, historical background, and most importantly their reasons for choosing Islam. The questionnaire intended to stimulate their answers about their conversion’s experience both before and after Islam; the challenges they faced and are facing to live as Muslims in America today. I sought to understand their behaviors, dressings, habits, and relationships with their family and old friends on one hand and the Muslim community on the other hand.

Before, I started each interview I would invite my informants to read the consent letter carefully and made sure they understood all the information included. The entire interviewing process took one year, more precisely from January 2010 to January 2011. Each interview took me around 30 to 35 minutes and for all data to tape recorded. Moreover, I started my data analysis while I was conducting my research in the field.

Out of respect of my participants’ wishes, I used pseudonym to refer to two informants who did not want their names and location to be revealed in this study. Meanwhile four participants are identified with their real names and locations. Moreover, I draw on other online testimonies of other post-9/11 American converts to Islam, TV programs, and newspapers articles about conversion to Islam in the west.

CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter 1 “Who Are the Converts and Why?” aims to explore the trajectories of conversion to Islam among White Americans after 9/11 in Northwest Ohio by analyzing the previous religious history or philosophical background, and level of education of these converts as well as the social and cultural forces that influenced these individuals’ conversion experience. In this
chapter, I will place the rise of Islam in Northwest Ohio in the context of 9/11 America and ongoing characterization of Islam in the U.S. mainstream media. I seek to understand the reasons behind the growth of Islam, in the United States, by drawing on the testimonies of six Ohioan Muslim converts and their journey to Islam. Using the stories of my informants and accounts of other American Muslim converts across the United States, I will provide some explanations about the factors that are likely to attract Americans to Islam including theological belief, quest for justice, rejection of Christianity, and social protest.

In this chapter, I will also explore the puzzling phenomenon of White American women converts to Islam in Northwest after 9/11. Looking into the narratives of my female informants, I identify that they are attracted to Islam because of the Qur’an’s message and the constant connection of the believer with Allah (God). Further, I examine the claims that American girls are drawn Islam because of their desire for an Islamic marriage. Moreover, I argue that the increasing conversion of American women to Islam is a reflection of their dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the “immoral” representation of women body in advertisement for goods and products. I treat the increasing of Anglo-American Muslim converts after 9/11, especially veiled converts, as a form of resistance and social protest against women’s objectification and commoditification in contemporary America.

Chapter 2 is entitled “How Do Recent Converts Relate to Pre-9/11 Converts?” which explores the relationships between pre-9/11 converts to Islam (predominantly African-Americans) and recent or post-9/11 converts (overwhelmingly Whites). In this chapter, I first provide an historical overview of the emergence of African-American Orthodox Islam, by tracing its historical evolution from the Nation of Islam in 1975, through the development of
American Muslim Society as a powerful representative of Traditional Islam in the United States, to the evolution that is known today as African-American Islam. Next, I will examine the reasons behind the growth of Islam among African-American population and the factors that make Islam appealing to them. Finally, I compare the similarities and differences between the stories of Black and White American Muslim converts as well as their post-conversion experience especially in terms of their relation to each other as well as their interaction with immigrant Muslims living in the United States.

Chapter 3 is “Post-Conversion Stage and Converts’ Interaction with Society.” In this chapter, I will address Northwest Ohio converts’ relationship with their non-Muslim family and ex-friends as well as their interactions with immigrant Muslims. Then, I will interrogate the social and cultural role that converts play as critics of non-practicing transnational Muslims living in the United States. In this way, I treat American Muslim converts as good bridge builders who can create channels of communications between American Muslims and non-Muslims. This chapter will also examine some of the cultural issues and different interpretations of certain Islamic texts as a source of the troubled relationships between American converts and transnational Muslims living in the United States.
CHAPTER 1

WHO ARE THE CONVERTS AND WHY?

This chapter aims to explore the trajectories of conversion to Islam among White Americans after 9/11 in Northwest Ohio by analyzing the previous religious history or philosophical background, and level of education of these converts as well as the social and cultural forces that influenced these individuals’ conversion experience. In discussing these aspects with my informants, I discovered that understanding the development of converts’ personality is very indispensable for comprehending the growth of Islam among White American populations today. Most participants involved in this study reported that they spent a great deal of time researching about Islam before they took their Shahada. Köse corroborates this point when he writes, “Conversions do not come in flash. Long months of study and reasoning are necessary with the help of Muslim friends in most cases.”

In making this comment, Köse argues that religious conversion is a long, complex, and evolutionary process that is time-consuming. Thus, religious conversion is a radical transformation that does not happen in a vacuum. It is the product of a combination of social, cultural, and political forces. In his book, Understanding Religious Conversion, Rambo refers to this process as the implication or impact of “macro context[s]” on the convert’s experience. Here, Rambo identifies two types of contexts: the macro context that encompasses the political,

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29 Köse, Conversion to Islam, 113.

30 Ibid.

31 Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 20.
social, economic, and religious forces; and “the micro context[s]” which refers to family, friends, and relatives.  

In this fashion, religious conversion is a form of protest or rebellion against some of the established norms or structures of a society. When a person converts from one religion to another or an ideology to another, he/she is making a public statement against some particular aspects of his or her previous religion or ideology. This determined and radical nature of conversion is apparent in the ways in which some of my informants reported that they chose Islam because its stands on drinking, premarital sex, or the clarity of its theological belief vis-à-vis what they see as inherit contradictions of Christianity. When I asked about the reasons of her conversion, Aisha Williams passionately and emotionally observed, “I had taught the children in churches for many years. Maybe this is when questions first started to arise, like…if God is a jealous God, and then does he become jealous because Jesus gets all the credit for healings, salvation, etc? And the contradictions in what are supposed to be 'The Word of God', the Bible.”

The story of Williams reflects her frustration and disappointment with some of the religious aspects of Christianity. Williams accepted Islam because it provides her with an alternative life and straightforward answers for questions about God, the Trinity, and Jesus. For example, Islam insists on the uniqueness of Allah and accepts Jesus as a prophet and servant of Allah, but not a son of God. In a way or another, some former Christians, like Williams, may find this reasoning to be more logical and convincing. In their book, Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of

32 Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 20.

33 Aisha Williams, interview with author, April 20, 2010.
One of the most commonly cited reasons for the conversion of American women to Islam is their having seen the light, so to speak, about their discomfort with Christianity. Many women profess to having long struggled to understand Christian doctrines and to be greatly relieved to find what they consider to the most straightforward tenets of the Islamic faith. Most of the women who cite religion per se as the reason for their conversion believe firmly in the theological superiority of Islam over Christianity…They stress the Islamic understanding of Allah, who is never defined according to gender. They find the Christian notion of the Trinity simply baffling in its complexity and the assertion that God is a male father and Jesus a male son to be sexist.34

On this understanding, these former Christian women are influenced by the following statement of the Qur’an, “Those who believed, and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest…”35 Hence, Islam offers theological satisfactions that provide converts with peace of mind and a sense of tranquility.

In the process of my research, I realized that it is impossible to fully understand the conversion process of White Americans without analyzing the motivational forces and context that shaped and influenced the converts’ experiences. In their essay “Conversion Motifs,” John Lofland and Norman Skonovd group converts into six categories or types of conversion. These


six conversion motifs are: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.\textsuperscript{36} In this chapter, I intend to use Lofland and Skonovd’s model of studying types of conversions in order to analyze the data of my interviews. Therefore, I identify two kinds of conversion that are prevalent among the population of White American converts in Northwest Ohio. The two types are: intellectual and experimental.

In this chapter, I also provide an overview of the growth of Islam among Anglo-American women since 9/11 and the appealing aspects of Islam to them. According to the accounts of my female informants, Islam simultaneously offers them a framework to balance their female roles as wives and mothers with professional obligations. It provides them with an opportunity to have a professional life and compete equally and equitably with their male counterparts. In her essay, “The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam,” Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad argues that American women are attracted to Islam because of the gender equality aspect.\textsuperscript{37} In Haddad’s words:

Many [American women] appear to welcome the concept of distinct responsibilities and duties within male/female relationships expressed in Islam. They commented on the importance of the fact that the equality granted to men and women in the Qur’an provided for different roles and functions for each gender. Some like the idea of a


division labor where it is a man’s duty to provide for his wife and family, while the duty of a woman is to raise the children.\textsuperscript{38}

Haddad’s argument suggests the gendered division of responsibilities in Islam. According to Islamic teachings, Allah created men and women from the same soul, but with different physical bodies that lead to different responsibilities and shared obligations. For instance, in Islam, the husband or the father of the family is financially responsible for all the expenses of his wife and children. In the meantime, Muslim women are supposed to take care of their children. These are well-defined Islamic social and religious roles that appeal to many American women. As Haddad, Smith, and Moore point out, “Those women who are looking into Islam for the first time are always impressed by the religious and spiritual equality afforded to men and women in the Qur’an. Both genders are accorded equal rights and responsibilities and an equal measure of accountability in the hereafter.”\textsuperscript{39} In this logic, Anglo-Americans see Islam as a liberating force from American feminists’ theology that forces them to compete with men to the point they lose their roles as mothers, wives, and in some cases American women find it even difficult to get married. Haddad writes:

Islam liberates women by providing a connection to Divinity and a comprehensive way of life for all people within society. It provides balance for men, women, and children. It balances personal liberty with commitment to the community. It removes the emphasis on the ego and focuses attention on Divinity, the centrifugal force that unites all life.

\textsuperscript{38}Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,” 33-34.

\textsuperscript{39}Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, \textit{Muslim Women in America}, 54.
Feminism on the other hand focuses attention on one ego, de-contextualized from the need and desires of everyone around her.\textsuperscript{40}

The above quotation suggests that Islam provides both men and women with social rules and regulations that govern their lives. In today’s America, these regulations are missing. Haddad’s statement also implies a criticism of White feminist critics’ claims for liberating women of color in general and Muslim women in particular. In conversing with my subjects, I also learned that White American women are drawn to Islam for other alluring reasons such as Islam’s emphasis on family unity and motherhood, the need for a Muslim husband, the influence of the Qur’an, and, most importantly, the religion’s theological beliefs.

\textbf{WHO ARE THE CONVERTS?}

While I was conducting my research I witnessed the conversion ceremonies of two White American ladies at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, where they gave their Shahada. The ceremony usually starts at the end of the Friday prayers, where the Imam summons the new candidate to come and announce publically his/her Shahada. Before doing so, the Imam gives a brief introduction about the individual’s conversion’s experience, explaining how this person arrived at his/her decision to accept Islam. After this introduction, the convert proceeds to testify, and is then supported by loud applause from the audience and the attendants who scream “\textit{Allah Akbar}” (God is the greatest).

However, a conversion ceremony is an event that means more than just having a joyous celebration that welcomes new members to the community. This ceremony goes beyond that to

\textsuperscript{40}Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,”34.
something deeper and more substantial. I do not intend, by any means, to belittle the sincerity of Muslims’ joy toward the new converts, but rather to emphasize the underlying aspects and logic of the ceremony or “commitment stage.” The expressions of happiness that accompany the ceremony and the joyful smiles on all faces in the mosque represent a special moment that all members of the community take special pride in, a moment to remember at a time when Muslims are still living the consequences of the tragedy of 9/11 and being treated with suspect and scrutiny in many public places. The majority of Muslims at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo are of South Asian and Middle Eastern origins. Those geographical locations are often associated with the so called ‘Islamic terrorism,’ because of their looks or appearances.

As Naber points out, “…For example, in some contexts, a name such as Mohammed coupled with a beard signified the “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” identity and in other contexts, it was a nation of origin coupled with dark skin and a form of dress that signified the Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim.” Hence, witnessing Americans, especially White Americans who do not fit “the category of Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim,” join Islam is a remarkable moment for all the Islamic community’s members. It underscores that Islam is still capable of attracting Americans, despite its characterization in the news media as a religion that is anti-America. In essence, this moment of celebration marks the end of a tedious process of deep reflection, intense reading of Islamic texts, and long period of interaction with born Muslims on one hand, and the beginning of a lengthy phase of commitment (or post-conversion stage) on the other.

An analysis of my interviews reveals that there is always an intervening period of time between converts’ initial exposure to Islam and the actual conversion stage. For example, Maria

\[41\text{Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming,” 279.}\]
Williams, who converted to Islam 2007 at the age 23, observed that she was exposed to Islam at a very young age.\footnote{42} Williams said that she grew up outside Detroit, Michigan, where they were many Muslims around her.\footnote{43} When I asked her about how and when did she learn about Islam? She smiled and jokingly responded, “Do you want the long story or the short story?” And I said “The long story is better.” Then, she continued her narration: “I went to a Christian university in my undergrad [years] where they made us take religion and diversity classes. They taught us about Islam. So I learned some there.”\footnote{44}

Williams’ first exposure to Islam is similar to that of Xavier Mark, who converted to Islam in 2009. Mark said that he first heard about Islam in high school where he learned about some of the basic Islamic concepts such as five prayers, Ramadan (Muslims’ fasting month), and the like.\footnote{45} What struck me is the long interval between Williams’ first exposure to Islam, in high school, and her actual conversion to the religion in 2003. To better understand Williams and Mark’s trajectories of conversion, one needs to study the development of their previous religious history and upbringing.\footnote{46}

\footnote{42} Maria Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010. 
\footnote{43} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010. 
\footnote{44} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010. 
\footnote{45} Xavier Mark, interview with author, April 10, 2010. 
\footnote{46} Köse, Conversion to Islam, 31.
CONVERTS’ PREVIOUS RELIGIOUS HISTORY, LEVEL OF EDUCATION, AND OCCUPATION

In talking with my informants, I realized that initial and early troubles with their religion of birth or previous philosophical background sometimes represent an important motivating factor of their quest for an alternative religion. Most of these troubles begin with an early age in converts’ life and often mirror their parents’ attitudes towards religion. For example, if a person grows up in a conservative and religious family he/she is likely to be affected by their parents and become more religious. Meanwhile, those who were raised in a secular environment might be very indifferent about religion. In this sense, it is important to mention that all participants involved in this research were born and raised as Christians. Even though, they came from different Christian backgrounds and branches.

Based on my informants’ testimonies about their history of religion or philosophical background, I decided to group them into two categories. The first group includes those who come from ultra conservative backgrounds. Two of my informants fit this category. For example, Maria Williams expressed these views when she stated, “I was really a religious kid.”

And when I pressed her to clarify what she meant by “a religious kid,” she said, “My mother I went to church very often, my father sometimes went with us and my sister sometimes went with us. But my mum and I went every Sunday.”

This statement shows that religion played a predominant role in Williams’ life since her young age and her religious views were shaped by her mother. However, Williams’ comments

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47 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

48 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
bring up a substantial problem in regard to her upbringing as a religious kid. That is to say that her mother was strict and rigorous with her in terms of attending church regularly and practicing other Catholic rituals, but without providing her with any rational explanation about the Catholic teachings or theological beliefs to which she was exposed. In other words, Williams did not receive any education about Catholicism when she was young. Hence, Williams was just “a religious kid” who blindly followed what her mother did every Sunday. In this sense, religion becomes a routine or a sport that she practiced on a regular basis without the spiritual or Catholic element of it. In the course of our conversation, Williams expanded her views on this matter and remarked, “I have never read the bible. We did not read the bible in the church.”

This assertion shows that when children, who received strict religious upbringing like Williams, grow up and read more about their religion of birth, they sometimes become disenchanted and discontented with its teachings. Then, they start searching for other viable alternatives. As Köse points out, “Even some of those who had religious upbringing reported not being happy with it at the time. They were confused with what they were taught.”

Here, Köse addresses converts’ spiritual confusion of their religion of birth as a source or a motivational force in their quest for a different religion and, eventually, in their conversion.

The second group of converts includes those new believers who come from irreligious or secular backgrounds. The participants who fit in this category are generally known as “serial converts,” to use Haddad’s expression. “Serial converts” refer to those convert who had experienced different religions before they finally stumbled on Islam. For example, Philip

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49 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
50 Köse, Conversion to Islam, 39.
51 Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,” 34.
Schreffler, who was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio and converted to Islam in 2010, observed that he had known different religions before Islam including Christianity and Buddhism. Schreffler told me that he was atheist the time he accepted Islam. Interestingly enough, Schreffler is one of the few participants that the Imam of the Toledo Islamic Center strongly recommended as a person that I should include in my research, probably because of his broad knowledge of Islamic traditions. When I asked him about his religious upbringings, Schreffler delved directly and emotionally into his family’s religious history and noted:

My family is very much splintered religiously. My father is an agnostic. My sister is what she calls a Jesus loving agnostic. My mum is a self-described Anglo-catholic Buddhist wherever that is... I became very disillusioned with religion and when I was growing up in high school I was an agnostic. At the beginning of college, I was atheist. It was so hollow. I came to that conclusion of disillusionment with disorganized religion, especially Christianity.

Schreffler’s statement speaks to converts’ disappointment with their religion of birth. In this way, his religious conversion functions as a criticism of his family’s upbringing as well as a protest against some of the values and practices of present America such as materialistic and individualistic values. By adopting a different religion from his parents, Schreffler implicitly expresses dissatisfaction with his parents’ education and indirectly rejects their irreligious or secular views. In essence, his disappointment with religion may also reflect some of his family members’ problematic relations with one another such as frequent father and mother disputes,

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the absence of one of his parents in the family, or a broken marriage. A similar situation is that of Kerry Wherly who is also a “serial convert.” Wherly stated that her parents’ divorce seriously affected her and her sister. Therefore, the stories of Schrffler’s and Wherly’s conversion to Islam may reflect a growing phenomenon among Americans’ quest for a meaningful religion that satisfies their spiritual needs and gives sense of their life. Accordingly, “serial converts” are, in many ways, persons who are looking for a religion or an ideology to quench their hunger for spirituality and supernatural divinity.

Another important factor of religious conversion is class and, specifically, the level of education and occupations which influence the lives of new converts. According to the accounts of my informants, post-9/11 Northwest Ohioan Muslim converts come from middle class families and are all college graduates. Three of my informants hold B.A degrees, two of them were working on their Master’s Degree at the time of our interview, and one lady who is 62 years old and used to work as an office manager in a business school. Other studies also indicate that Western Muslim converts are generally averagely educated. In her book, British Muslim Converts, Zebiri maintains that, “[their] educational level...was above average, with just over half being educated to first degree level or higher (including one Ph.D.).” Zebiri’s argument reveals an important point about new born-Muslims’ relation with immigrant Muslims. The fact that White converts are highly educated is problematic and a source of tension between Muslim groups in the United States. For example, transnational Muslims in America often favor White American Muslim converts over African-American or Hispanic converts, because of their

54 Kerry Wherly, interview with author, October 1, 2010.
55 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 10.
economic status and educational background. In return, African-American Muslim converts often complain about mistreatment and racism they experience at some immigrant Muslims’ mosques or social gatherings. As Haddad, Smith, and Moore assert, “African American converts in several interviews expressed their feeling that immigrants tend to seek “Anglo” converts to Islam and regard them as more important; they seem to prefer to associate with whites and pay more attention to their speeches. African Americans accuse immigrants of being valuing white converts as “special trophies.”

TYPES OF CONVERSION

As previously mentioned Lofland and Skonovd provide six motifs of conversion that propel individuals to adapt a new religion. Using their study as a model, I have divided the conversions of my participants into three types. My informants have converted either through intellectual conversion (by reading the Qur’an and other Islamic texts) or through experimental conversion (by interacting with Muslim friends, classmates, or neighbors). In a response to my question about the reasons for the increase of Americans’ conversion to Islam since 9/11 Dr. Fatima Al-Hayani, the principal of the Islamic school of Greater Toledo, stated:

What I see is a great deal of interest after 9/11 in Islam and the interest led to learning more about Islam…To learn more about Islam, they come to the Islamic Center or other centers or talk to Muslims as well {and} that leads to reading the Quran and that leads to something else… that {September 11} helped a great deal in a sense. Although, it was a

56 Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,” 40.

57 Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 375.
negative, the issue that comes of 9/11 it turned to be positive. Many of them just want to know what this religion is…

Dr. Al-Hayani’s views reflect immigrant Muslims’ deep appreciation of American converts to Islam after 9/11. Despite their firm denunciation of terrorism and the hideous acts of those who committed the violence of 9/11, transnational Muslims feel relieved when they see the growth of Islam among Americans and interpret it as a positive sign to paraphrase Dr. Al-Hayani. In the views of many Muslims, the increase of conversion to Islam after 9/11 is a palpable proof and clear evidence of the distinction between the so-called “Islamic terrorism” and the “pure or real Islam.” To many Muslims, like Dr. Al-Hayan, Americans accepted Islam because they were able to see its beauty though self-learning and education or by observing and talking with Muslims.

In essence, September 11th attacks served as an instigator that propelled many Americans to investigate Islam. Americans’ interests in Islam were increasingly sparked by the pervasiveness of Islam in the media and, in particular, by the news reporters’ focus of the negativity of Muslims. Remembering the beginning of his journey to Islam, Schreffer said, “If you’re looking for a specific date where my interest was piqued. It has to be sort of around 9/11, to be honest. After all, the media was feeding me. Oh these people were all terrorists, better learn more about them.”

The story of Schreffer epitomizes the trend of the growth of Islam in the United States after 9/11. That is to say that September 11th was a time of transformation and a moment of reflection for many westerners. Some Americans became eager to learn about Islam, the prophet

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60 Schreffer, interview with author, September 25, 2010.
Mohammed, the Qur’an, the concept of Jihad, Islam’s stand on the activities of Al Qaeda, and other important issues. Therefore, the events of September 11th have served as what some religious conversion scholars call “Catalysts for Crisis”⁶¹ which, I believe propelled some Americans to learn more about Islam. In that way, conversion to Islam was caused by other motifs and happened under different circumstances or influences. Various factors have conspired together to lead to the penetration of Islam to the hearts and minds of many Americans since 9/11. In this sense, it is important to understand the different versions of conversion.

First, let us examine intellectual conversion. In their essay “Conversion Motifs,” Lofland and Skonovd define intellectual conversion or intellectual converts as persons who are introduced to a religion through self-reading. Those individuals, who become curious about whatever religion, start their own investigation and spend a great deal of time learning before they decide to convert without experiencing any social pressure or problems. ⁶² That was the case of Maria Williams who observed, “I only studied Islam intensely for like three months and I was like, no this is right and I converted.” She went on to state, “For me it was not like a big deal. It was a lot of what I already believed {just} I didn’t realize that Muslims believe that… and I was like, this is not weird, this is not crazy. I believed that too. There is just the last little piece… that was not really any different. I guess I am a Muslim.”⁶³

What she calls “last piece” refers to the belief and submission to the will of Allah as the only creator of the universe and Mohammed (Peace Be Up on Him) as the last prophet. Maria sees this “last piece” as a fundamental concept that differentiates between Islam and Christianity.

⁶¹Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion, 48.
⁶²Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 376.
⁶³Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
Nonetheless, Williams’ remark underscores an important point about the similarity between Islam and Christianity. In other words, Islam recognizes some of the teachings of Christianity such as the insistence on good manners, morality, and son. And for this reason Williams did not see Islam as a ‘weird religion.’ Zebiri illustrates this point clearly when she writes, quoting one of her informant:

Much of who I am, how I act and what I think are a legacy of my Christian upbringing. I am not ashamed of this and so do not think I should be. This upbringing taught me good manners and modesty after all, both of them perfectly admirable Islamic characteristics. And there is more: concerns about global justice and social responsibility… I do not consider Islam a negation of my upbringing, but a continuation of it… a perfection of it.⁶⁴

In this context, one commonality between the two religions is that Muslims believe in Jesus, better known as Issa (PBUH), as a prophet of God but not a son of God as Christians believe. Moreover, in Islam, Christians and Jews are known as Ahl-al-Kitab (people of the book). The Qur’an mentions and validates the books and scriptures of both Jews and Christians. Yet there is a major difference between Islam and Judeo-Christianity, since Christians believe in the concept of the original sin, salvation, and the crucifixion of Jesus (PBUH) while Muslims do not.

The second mode of conversion that informants of this study have experienced is “experimental conversions.” Experimental converts are those who take great deal of time to attend religious rituals and prayers. This type of conversion also necessitates close observation of the followers of the desired religion.⁶⁵ Lisa Ayhan, who comes from a very secular background,

⁶⁴Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 132.

is an example of an experimental convert. She said, “At the time I accepted Islam I had no religion…but the majority of my friends were Muslims. I like the way they treated me, the way they talked to me, and agree with most things they were saying to me that’s why I chose Islam.”66 As reported above, Ayhan’s interaction with Muslim friends greatly influenced her decision to become a Muslim. Ayhan’s example fits in the first category of the converts illustrated by Köse. In his first classification, Köse argues that some western converts choose Islam because they were very disenchanted or fed up with their religion of birth, especially in their late twenties and early thirties. Köse describes this group as, “Those who had no religious commitment for a long time or described themselves as nominal in their religion of origin.”67

One participant, Schreffler, stated that losing faith and living in deep doubt made him question the purpose of his life.68 He explained that this period had badly affected his grades and GPA as freshmen in college.69 Hence, converts like Schreffler and Ayhan often reflect on those years that follow adolescence or young adulthood as period when they became less connected with their religion of birth and abandoned their early beliefs. In my estimation, Ayhan, who converted at the age of 32, is the perfect exemplification of the anxiety and depression that some young adult Americans experience as the result of high pressure and stress. This period is the time when young people are preoccupied with lots of problems. It is a time of intense activity and young people are going through financial insecurity, college course loads, or emotional problems. Therefore, these individuals are in a state of isolation and loneliness, and when they

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66Lisa Ayhan, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

67Köse, Conversion to Islam, 69.


are exposed to other religions through friends or neighbors, they are more likely to change their belief system.

Another “experimental” convert that I interviewed in this study is Aisha Williams. After my interview with Williams I learned that she was exposed to Islam by coming in contact with a Muslim friend on Facebook. After having a conversation with him about religions, Williams said that she found herself gravitating more and more toward Islam. “Actually, I have a friend in Algeria and I tried to convert him to Christianity. I tried to talk to him about Trinity, God the father, and God the son,” stated Williams, who sounded overwhelmed by our conversation on the phone. She paused and sighed several times while telling her story. Later, when I asked Williams about her background, she commented that she was a very religious and pious person. She went on to explain that she was drawn more to Islam when she learned that Islam accepts Jesus (PBUH) as a prophet and messenger of God. Islam has theological attraction to some former Christians who can accept Islam without abandoning their monotheist faith or losing their connection with Jesus (PBUH).

Williams’ story speaks to what Rambo terms the “encounter between the advocate and convert,” which he describes in this way: “In every encounter between advocate and potential convert, the real details of their interplay are extraordinarily complex…the outcome of the encounter can range from total rejection at one end of the spectrum to complete acceptance at the other.” In this case, the “encounter” happened between Williams and her Algerian friend. They both attempted to allure each other and win the conversation. Therefore, Williams’

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70 Williams, interview with author, April 20, 2010.

experience epitomizes the phenomenon of Americans’ conversion to Islam after 9-11 either through face–to-face interaction with immigrant Muslims or through social networks and other means.

WHY DO THEY CONVERT?

When it comes to the reasons behind White Americans’ conversion to Islam, I cannot help to think of a conversation that I had with Maria Williams, a twenty three-year-old Anglo-American female convert, at the Starbucks of Bowen-Thompson Student Union, Bowling Green State University. My interview with Williams was unique and enriching for a number of reasons. In part, Williams is not the only female informant who participated in this study and wears the hijab, but also the sole woman that I interviewed face-to-face. In part, the way I met Williams was different from the way I met other informants. Nobody introduced us. I was studying at Jerome Library of Bowling Green State University, and then I saw an Anglo-American girl who was wearing the Islamic hijab. Indeed, Williams’ dressing drew my attention. I walked toward her and after we greeted each other I introduced myself and my research topic. After hearing about my research, Williams agreed to meet for an interview and gave me her contact information.

In the course of my conversation with Williams, I noticed that she had some unpleasant experience with born Muslims. She spoke bitterly about her interaction with immigrant Muslims and pleasantly about Islam as a religion. In the course of our discussion, I asked Williams about the reasons for her conversion to Islam. My question, indeed, was “why did you convert to Islam?” Surprisingly enough, Williams replied in a wild state of irritation and emotion:
I hate that question, sorry. Everybody asks that question and I hate it...I especially hate when Muslims ask...Because, you don’t convert religion unless you think that the religion that you are converting to is the truth. You don’t, so I feel like when people ask me they want me to give them answers like wow, I felt like I did this or I felt like I got this. Yeah, that’s all true. But that isn’t the reason that I converted. I converted because this is the absolute truth. The rest aren’t correct. You get the rest of it with it.\textsuperscript{72}

For the sake of clarity, I rephrased my question and explained to Williams that converts come from different backgrounds and seek religion for different purposes including the search for justice, theological attractions, peace, and other important aspects. Then, she stated, “For me it was not a complicated thing at all. Yes, I got the oneness, the justice, and all these things. But, I feel like people will seek those out and other ways. That would not be a reason for people to convert.”\textsuperscript{73} From Williams’ perspective, Islam is a package deal. She accepted Islam because everything fit nicely together and made sense to her.

In a sense, Islam is viewed as the last religion that was revealed to complete all other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. Muslims consider the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) is considered to be the “sealed prophet” of all prophets.\textsuperscript{74} In the course of our conversation, Williams told me that she just reads widely and intensely about Islam for a short period of time. This point about former American Christians’ familiarity with Islam was clearly illustrated by the following testimonial of a convert that Haddad renders when he states: “For a

\textsuperscript{72}Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

\textsuperscript{73}Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

number of years, I had been living a Muslim life without knowing it.”

This illustration points out to the closeness between the message of Islam and Christianity not only in their origins, but also their core values. For example, Islam requires believers to treat their fellow human with respect and dignity, so does Christianity, Islam forbids backbiting, lying, and forbids all types of injustice so does Christianity. More important, Islam and Christianity share the same origin they are both monotheist and Abrahamic religions.

Moreover, as suggested earlier, this research exposed me to a wide range of explanations and reasoning about the growing interests of White American populations about Islam. My informants cited various reasons of their conversions to Islam including the uniqueness of Allah, the influence of Qur’an, and the desire to find a Muslim husband. In what fellow, I will explore these factors in more details.

**THE ONENESS OF ALLAH**

In the course of discussions with my participants, I found out that the most frequently-given reason for attraction to Islam was theological belief, especially the religion’s emphasis on the uniqueness of Allah. The fact that Muslims represent Allah as the only almighty God that is worth of worshiping, and the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as the last prophet has a powerful influence on my participants. With regard to theological attractions of Islam to non-Muslims, Haddad, Smith, and Moore, in their study *Muslim Women in America*, write:

In theological terms, converts report that the image of God in the Qur’an is clear and expresses the basic monotheism that they cherish: “What the Qur’an says about one God

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75 Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,” 34. Quoting a convert.
is what I have always known to be true.” Some converts go so far as to affirm that the religion of Islam was chosen for them by God in such as clear and specific way that was beyond their own volition.\textsuperscript{76}

Viewed in this light, the oneness of Allah attracts many Americans to Islam. It provides clear-cut understanding of a monotheist God. For example, Mark said, in a response to a question about the most appealing aspects of Islam to him, that the theological belief in Islam was the most alluring aspect of the religion. Mark, who was brought up as Christian, remarked that he never felt connected or persuaded by the teaching of Christianity. He described himself as a person who “was Christian by default.”\textsuperscript{77} In his teens, Mark reported that he lost faith in the church and teaching of Christianity and, like many young teenage Americans, he drifted to drinking and partying to find solace for his spiritual confusion. As he grew up and moved to college, Mark became more dissatisfied with his social life and drinking and, then, started to seek other religions. While doing his graduate studies at Bowling Green State University, Mark met a couple of Muslim students on campus who exposed him to Islam. He then started to do some dabbling and initial readings about Islam. In this process, Mark was brought to Islam by the centrality and emphasis on \textit{Twhaíd} (the uniqueness of Allah).\textsuperscript{78} As he stated:

\begin{quote}
The most attractive part of Islam for me is the theological belief of the oneness of God. For me the oneness of God and the fact Mohammed [PBUH] was teaching that made that like something that to me seemed like a very simple centered to the religion and from
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{76}Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, \textit{Muslim Women in America}, 49.

\textsuperscript{77} Mark, interview with author, April 10, 2010.

\textsuperscript{78} Mark, interview with author, April, 10, 2010.
which to judge everything else. To me the belief system particularly the oneness of God is something that I always believed but never had like a religion that said exactly that. Because in Christianity, and I was never very religious, but being in the United States Christianity is the dominant religion, so I was very familiar with it. And, there is nothing that is as simple as that. For me trying to find a religion or trying to find some people who share similar beliefs and people who I could worship with. Christianity did not have that sort of philosophy because of the Christ is son of God. 79

In effect, Mark’s narrative illustrates an interesting point about religious conversion to Islam. For instance, his comments, “To me the belief system particularly the oneness of God is something that I always believed but never had like a religion that said exactly that,” and, “trying to find a religion or trying to find some people who share similar beliefs and people who I could worship with,” suggest that his acceptance or adoption of Islam is more of a reversion or return to an original faith rather than a conversion into a new one. His confession that he identified with Islam before he declared his Shahada reflects a sense of early and subconscious familiarity with Islamic teachings.

In her study, British Muslim Converts, Zebiri argues that persons who identify themselves as revert rather than converts are consistent with the Hadith (sayings, deeds, and approvals of the Prophet Mohammed PBUH) which states that every person was born on the fit rah (natural goodness) and that his/her parents made him/her a Christian, a Jewish, a Buddhist, and Atheist etc… 80 In his book, Journey into America: the Challenge of Islam, Ahmed elaborates further on

79 Mark, interview with author, April 10, 2010.
80 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 15.
this point when he maintains that, “For Westerners like Roger and Nicole [two American converts to Islam], Islam is both a foreign and a familiar religion. They find in it the notion of God and the great prophets such as Abraham and Moses and see that Jesus and Mary are highly loved and revered figures.” This argument implies that reverts considered themselves Muslims before even embracing or knowing Islam. They just were not practitioners of Islam. Because to be a Muslim, a person must declare publically that there is no God worth of worship, but Allah and Mohammed (PBUH) as the last prophet of all prophets. As Aminah Beverly McCloud asserts, “The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the last in a long series of prophets and messengers sent to human communities with the message of the existence of God and the obligation of humans to strive to submit their will to the will of God.” Thus, professing the uniqueness of Allah is absolutely central and fundamental to the Islamic faith. Accordingly, in the Qur’an it is clearly stated that Allah can forgive all believers’ sins and bad behaviors, except širk or Shirk (to deny or worship another deity with Allah).

**QUR’AN’S EFFECT**

The Qur’an, which means recitation, is Muslims’ holy book that was revealed to the prophet Mohammed (PUBH) fourteen hundred years ago. The Qur’an includes all the teachings and guidelines that govern all aspects of all Muslims’ life. In my research, I came across many Western converts’ testimonies online as well as offline that indicate that reading the Qur’an has a shining aspect for them. There is also an abundant literature that was written about the impact of Qur’an on the increase of religious conversion to Islam in the West. As Haddad points out,
“Others [converts] tended to focus on the intellectual appeal of the Qur’an. They often explained that the clarity and logic of the Qur’an are what influenced them most.”83 This illustration demonstrates that converts find the Qur’an to be appealing in a number of areas and ways of including its scientific aspects, logical nature, coherence and consistence of arguments. In contrast to the Bible, the Qur’an seems to be more persuasive to them. For example, Maria Williams said that after reading the Qur’an she took it and compared it with the Bible “verse by verse.”84 Here, Williams describes some discrepancies of the Bible vis-à-vis the Qur’an. She said that she did not experience the same spiritual confusion when she read the Qur’an.85 This argument suggests that Christians have different versions of the Bible while Muslims still use the same version of the Qur’an that was revealed to Mohammed (PBUH). Moreover, the Qur’an is written in a very sophisticated, intellectual, and yet simple and understandable language.

ISLAM HEALS SOCIAL PROBLEMS

One study participant, Dr. Al-Hayani, who has visited and lectured at many American and Canadian universities, remarked that Islam appeals to many Americans today, because it provides practical solutions for what she calls “the social problems they have with drinking.”86 Here Dr. Al-Hayani discusses the dissatisfaction and disenchantment of American Muslim converts with some of the social aspects of American society today. Dr. Al-Hayani’s remarks imply that converts are vocal critics of the immorality and deviations that characterize

84 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
85 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
86 Al Hayani, interview with author, September 12, 2010.
contemporary American society such as obsession with sexuality and insatiable hunger for money, corruption, criminality, promiscuity, adultery, high rate of broken marriages and rape against women. In his popular book, *Race Matters*, Cornel West argues that social and racial problems of present America are reflections of the important attention attached to materialistic objects and sexual pleasure.\(^{87}\) West writes, “In the American way of life pleasure involves comfort, convenience, and sexual stimulation… This market of morality stigmatizes others as objects for personal pleasure or bodily stimulation.”\(^ {88}\) In this way, these practices represent a source of depression and uneasiness for a large segment of American population, especially young people who frequently find themselves drifted to trouble and drug addiction. Moreover, converts see the decline of religion in the face of the power of materialism and secular practices as a source of their dissatisfaction. Therefore, they seek out other religions to provide them with solution for depression problem.

According to the accounts of participants involved in this study, Islam did not only provide solution of their depression and social problems, but also brought them peace of mind and happiness. One convert, Wherly, said, “I think that after I heard about Islam and read about it. I don’t know it just made sense to me. I really liked it.”\(^ {89}\) Here, Wherly speaks to the closeness of practicing Muslims to Allah as well as the strictness of Islam in terms of applying the rules and prayers on a daily basis. Regarding this point, Peter Ford writes in the following message, quoting a Frenchwoman Muslim convert, “Islam demands a closeness to God. Islam is simpler, more rigorous, and it’s easier because it is explicit. I was looking for a framework; man needs


\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) Wherly, interview with author, October 1, 2010.
rules and behaviors to follow.” Practicing Muslims believe that their closeness to Allah make them happy. In a sense, for Wherly, the strictness of Islam provides a framework to avoid social problems such as drug and alcoholism. Because they are required to pray five times a day, Muslims are in a constant remembrance of Allah. Briefly put, Islam encompasses all aspects of a Muslim’s life. Therefore, it is hard for a practicing Muslim to drift into these social troubles.

GO HOME: AMERICAN GIRLS CONVERT ONLY TO GET MARRIED

It should be noted that Muslim women are often perceived to be oppressed by their religion, because of their difference in appearance. Thus, female Muslims are easily targeted and attacked by western media and feminist critics, because of the hijab or other markers of Muslim woman’s identity. In the context of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, this rhetoric has re-emerged in American media and has been reinvigorated with particular focus on Afghan woman wearing Niqab (face veil) as one of the justifications of the war on Taliban’s regime. In this sense, it is important to note here the statement of the former first lady Laura Bush just before the beginning of the war on Afghanistan. She remarked, “We are now engaged in a worldwide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the Taliban.”

Recent research suggests that there has been a surge in the number of American women accepting Islam since the attacks of September 11th 2001. Obviously, Islam seems to attract more women, especially White Americans, than men and this extends the discussion to the reasons for female conversion. However, what are puzzling and difficult to understanding are the

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91 Haddad, Jane I. Smith, Kathleen M. Moore, Muslim Women in America, 3. Quoting Laura Bush.

92 “NBC NEWS: 20000 Americans convert to Islam each year, 75% of them women,” September 9, 2008.
reasons behind Anglo-Americans’ conversion to Islam. What is hard, for me, to fathom is why do these women accept a religion that is widely perceived as oppressive toward women? In the course of this study, I interviewed five women. Four Anglo-American Muslim converts and one Lebanese-American born-Muslim and asked their opinions about conversion to Islam. All of them reported different reasons and offered a wealth of explanations including social, theological, and cultural reasons. I asked Dr. Al-Hayani “why do American girls accept Islam?” and she noted:

One reason I know. For fact, they want a Muslim husband… many of them are married to Muslims and they turned Muslims, some of them, they want a Muslim husband, because, they believe they will be more protected and once they learn what Islam is about this idea of oppression against women in Islam. They understand that is customary and traditional. It has nothing to do with Islam.93

According to Dr. Al-Hayani, Islamic marriages are supposed to last longer, be more stable, and successful. The preceding quote has two points which are of particular importance. First, the statement reveals an indirect criticism or counter narrative of the discourse of Islam as a patriarchal and oppressive religion toward women, especially the Western feminist critics’ interpretation of hijab as a sign of oppression and backwardness. From Dr. Al-Hayani’s perspective, American women convert to Islam feel more liberated and enlightened than they used to be, because she said, “The Christian church blame the woman for the down fall of mankind.”94 According to Dr. Al-Hayani, American women feel offended and insulted by this

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93 Al-Hayani, interview with author, September 12, 2010.
way of thinking. And when they convert to Islam, they feel more relieved, especially with the Islamic emphasis on modesty and piety. In this way, Karin Van Nieuwkerk, in her studies of Dutch women converts to Islam, similarly argues that, “This articulation of Muslim values offers clear concepts of marriage and motherhood.”95 Therefore, Islamic marriage is a source of empowerment and provides American women with a framework to balance their social roles and professional responsibility.

Second, Dr. Al-hayani’s statement about Islamic marriage refers to the respect and esteem that are tied to the notion of motherhood in Islam, which can be a driving force for American girls to seek a Muslim husband. In her study, “Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West,” Nieuwkerk elaborates on this point further when she writes, “Contrary to Western socialization, Islam highly values motherhood and the nurturing qualities of women. Motherhood is not merely valued in Islam, but acknowledged as important equal to labor and is also supported by men.”96

In that way, Muslims, male and female, are required to treat their mothers with the utmost respect and love. The obedience to a mother is an integral part of the Islamic faith and a crucial condition to get access to paradise and be granted Allah’s grace and mercy. In the Qur’an, it is mentioned several times that Muslims are not allowed to argue with their parents, especially the mother, let alone question her authority or disobey her orders. In fact, the mother is the only human being that Muslims are obliged to obey.

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In an attempt to further understand the relationships between marriage and White American females’ conversion to Islam; I contrast the testimony of four American female converts who participated in this study. These women reported that they accepted Islam out of conviction and choice, not because of marriage. They argued that they were drawn to Islam because of its simple and clear message about gender equality, women’ responsibility, family unity, the emphasis on modesty in women dressing, and other factors. When asked if her conversion has something to do with her Egyptian Muslim husband, one female participant laughed and jokingly replied, “Oh I don’t think it was like that for me.”97 When I pressed to clarify her stands, she said, “To be honest, I never thought I would like a Muslim man. I think in America, people have certain views how Muslim men are… I converted to Islam for my own reasons.”98 Another participants stated similar views and reported that she converted to Islam because she felt it is the right thing to do. During my conversation with Maria Williams, I realized that she tried to negate the claims about American girls’ conversion to Islam to seek a Muslim husband. She found them insulting to her intelligence and recalled a particular incident that happened at an immigrant mosque when she first wanted to convert. She said: “I had a lady who told me to go home, because American girls convert only if they want to get married and she sent me home,” she reported with a voice filled with anger and frustration.99 Here, Williams opposes the popular argument of many immigrant Muslims that marriage is the major reason for American women’s attraction to Islam.

97Wherly, interview with author, October 1, 2010.
98Wherly, interview with author, October 1, 2010.
99Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
Even though female participants have rejected the idea of marriage, this argument is hard to prove, especially since two of my four respondents got married to Muslim husbands either prior or shortly after their conversion to Islam. Ayhan noted, “I converted the same day I got married on March 21, 2009.”\textsuperscript{100} Another informant, Wherly, said that she met her spouse before accepting Islam and was exposed to Islam through him and other Muslim friends. In this way, marriage might not be the main reason of conversion; but it clearly remains an important factor for American women. Despite that fact, Muslim males are allowed to marry non-Muslim women, especially Christian and Jews. These women may convert to seek acceptance from the husband’s family as well as the Muslim’s community. In Islam men are allowed to marry Christians and Jews, but Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims.

Another factor that seems to attract Caucasian women to Islam is the religion’s spiritual guidance and the emphasis on equality and brotherhood. Asma Gull Hasan, speaking on NBC News about the growth of Islam in America after 9/11, remarked “In the Qur’an, it says those women were created independently of Adam. That Eve was an independent creation of God. So lots of White American women, that really appealed to their sensibility of equality, and it is very liberating for them.”\textsuperscript{101} Hasan’s assertion speaks to the fact that the first convert in the history of Islam was a woman, Khadija bint Khoualid, who later became the wife of the prophet

\textsuperscript{100} Ayahn, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
\textsuperscript{101} Asma Gull Hasan. Interviewed by George Lewis, NBC News, September 9, 2008,
Mohammed (PBUH). This important role of women in the early history of Islam is alluring not only to Anglo-American woman, but also to other women in general.
CHAPTER 2

HOW DO RECENT CONVERTS RELATE TO PRE-9/11 CONVERTS?

As previously pointed out, post-9/11 era has witnessed a dramatic increase of Islam in White America. However, it should be noted that African-American Muslim converts remain historically the largest group in the United States, especially in the period prior to 9/11. As Jamillah Karim writes, “Many African Americans have been Muslims for over thirty years and an entire generation of African American Muslims has been born since 1975.”102 The preceding quote refers to the first and largest wave of African-American converts to Orthodox Islam in 1970s when the Imam Warith Deen Mohammed broke with the teachings of the Nation of Islam and led the largest single conversion wave of African-Americans to traditional Islam. It also important to note here that African-Americans represented not only the biggest American Muslim converts group, but also the largest ethnic traditional Muslim body, even among immigrant Muslim populations. As Akel Ismail Kahera, in his article “Urban Enclaves, Muslim Identity and the Urban Mosque in America,” estimates:

The evidence of ethnic diversity among the eight million Muslims in the United States is compelling. In the breakdown, African-Americans are reported to comprise 40% of the total; 24.4% are Indo-Pakistani; 12.4% are Arabs; 5.2% are Africans; 3.6% are Iranians; 2.4% are Turks; 2% are South-East Asia; 1.6% are white Americans; 3.2 are Albanians; and all other groups comprise 5.6%.103


These statistics reflect not only the cultural and ethnic diversity of American Muslims, but also the importance of African-American Muslims to the cohesion of American ummah (Muslim Community). More specifically, African-American Muslims represent the bedrock of the American Muslim family. Therefore, it is crucial to study the evolution and development of this group in order to understand Islam in the United States today.

In this chapter, I explore the relationships between pre-9/11 converts to Islam (predominantly African-Americans) and recent or post-9/11 converts (overwhelmingly Whites). First, I provide an historical overview of the emergence of African-American Orthodox Islam, by tracing its historical evolution from the Nation of Islam in 1975, through the development of American Muslim Society as a powerful representative of Traditional Islam in the United States, to the evolution that is known today as African-American Islam.

To fully understand the complexity and specificity of African-American Islam, I engage with Aminah Beverly McCloud’s notions of “asabiya (tribal solidarity based on similar interests)” and “ummah (the community of believers which transcended tribal differences).” In her telling book, African American Islam, McCloud argues that African-American Islam has historically moved between two trends or schools of thought: one that is exclusionary in its teachings and the other which is more inclusive in its approach for other races. In this capacity, I employ McCloud’s notion of “asabiya” which, in my estimation, speaks directly to the Nation of Islam’s endeavors to create a nation within a nation as a reaction against the ultra dehumanization of Black people in America under slavery, Jim Crow Law, and other systemic

105 Ibid., 4-5.
discrimination. In the meantime, I use McCloud’s notion of “ummah” to address the inclusive nature of African-American Orthodox Islam, particularly the efforts of Warith Deen Mohammed to reach out for the global ummah or world Muslim community at large.

Next, I will explore the reasons behind the growth of Islam among African-American populations and the factors that make Islam appealing to them. Finally, I compare the similarities and differences between the stories of Black and White American Muslim converts as well as their post-conversion experience especially in terms of their relation to each other as well as their interaction with immigrant Muslims living in the United States.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS AS PRE-9/11 MUSLIM CONVERTS

First, it should be noted that the story of Islam is centuries old in the United States. Islam is an integral part of American history. As President Barrack H. Obama recently remarked, in his famous Cairo speech to the Muslim World on July 4, 2009, “I know, too, that Islam has always been a part of America’s story.” This statement implies that the first Muslims in America were forcibly brought from Africa to work as slaves on plantations. For example, most of African slaves had Islamic names such as Bilali Muahammad (born in 1770 in Guinea and died on Sapelo Island, Georgia in 1857) and Abdulrahman Ibraheem Ibn Sori (brought from Guinea Kingdom to work on plantation in Mississippi).

In his book, Journey into America, Ahmed elaborates this point further when he discusses some of the cutting-edge information about Islamic manuscripts and Arabic writings of early

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African-American slaves that substantiate the early slaves’ Islamic identity. From his interview of some Sapelo’s residents in McIntosh County, Georgia, Ahmed writes convincingly about the influence of Islamic traditions in shaping African-Americans’ identity. Paraphrasing Mrs. Baily, who is a resident of Sapelo Island and a descendant of Bilali Muhammad, Ahmed states:

For Mrs. Baily, history amounted to a constant battle to preserve as much of her people’s identity as possible. Here African Baptist Church, for example, was a response to the mainstream Baptist Church dominated by white people. It was established to assert the congregants’ unique identity and distinct ancestry from Africa, including some possible Islamic roots, she said. Even though worshipers were Christians, once they entered the church the men went to a section on the left and women to one on the right. They also took their shoes off, and the men and women covered their heads. The church was called a “prayer house” rather than a church, an echo of the meaning associated with the term “mosque.” Churches face the east, she explained because the sun rises in east and the “devil” resides in the west. Clearly, the east was originally perceived as good, and the west, because of its association with slavery, was seen as bad. Even as Christians, they said their prayers facing east. Perhaps the significance of facing the east comes from the fact that Mecca, which Muslims face to pray, lies in that direction. Mrs. Baily recommended a long tradition of washing hands and feet, which comes directly from the Muslim wudu… She recalled her grandmother not eating pork, although it slowly entered their diet out of necessity, but still in small, reluctantly eaten, quantities. She mentioned
stories of her ancestors and grandmother praying five times a day. Divorce was strongly discouraged, and even today men and woman are not allowed to “live in sin.”

The preceding quote speaks extraordinarily well to the presence of a vibrant and powerful Islamic culture among the early slaves in Sapelo Island. It also demonstrates the degree African Muslim slaves’ practices had influenced African-Americans’ identity and religious practices both Muslims and Christians alike today. Most of these traditions that survived are entirely Islamic and presently practiced in West Africa, the region where many of the slaves were kidnapped, as well as in other parts of the Muslim world. For example, “to live in sin” here refers to the men and women sexual relations outside the wedlock which is forbidden in Traditional Islam.

It goes with saying that most of these traditions died out or were merged into church doctrines of Black Christians when the first generation passed away. Nonetheless, these vestiges or remaining Islamic practices were preserved and handed down from generation to generation thanks to the art of storytelling, music, dress, cooking, and prayers traditions that continued among Black Christian slaves in some southern communities. These are means for survival and ways of resistance for oppressed groups. As Manning Marable points out “Oppressed people learn strategies for survival: if they do not learn, they perish.”

In this sense, African-Americans managed to keep some of their Islamic heritage. Being a descendant of slaves, I fully understand the power of storytelling and the place of oral literature in African culture. In fact, I still vividly remember my grandmother’s tales, to me and my young

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brothers before going to bed at night, about Arab-Berber invaders’ raids to steal and kidnap children and women from African villages. Briefly put, storytelling is purely an effective technique of transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. This same technique was utilized by African-Americans to preserve some aspects of their Islamic heritage.

THE STORY OF THE NATION OF ISLAM

Another chapter of African-American Islam with paramount importance is the history of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Today, in discussing indigenous American Islam one must address the role and influence of the NOI in shaping American Islamic identity, regardless of its doctrinal or philosophical teachings. The Nation of Islam is an historical reality of native African-American Islam that cannot be dismissed and its history is very detrimental in understanding American Islam in general and African-American Islam in particular. In his seminal book, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Towards the Third Resurrection*, Sherman A. Jackson maintains that, “… It is almost uniquely through Blackamerican conversion that Islam enjoys whatever status it does as a bona fide American religion. In this context, without Blackamerican Muslims, Islam would be orphaned in the United States, with no indigenous roots to complicate attempts to relegate it to the status an alien, hostile intrusion.”

It should be note that Jackson refers to the influence of African-American Orthodox Islam branch rather the NOI. However, the NOI played a major role of the emergence of traditional Islam in America. Many ordinary and giants of Black Muslims such as Wallace D. Fard Muhammad (1930-1934), Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Imam W.D. Mohammed, Imam Siraj

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Wahhaj, Sherman A. Jackson himself, and the list is too long were all once members of the Nation of Islam. It is through the teachings of NOI that most of them found their way to mainstream Islam? To recognize this fact is to give credit to the NOI and its role in the formation of what can be called an authentic American Islam, though not all had positive opinions about NOI as Islamic.

When asked for their opinion about the Nation of Islam, four study participants expressed negative opinions about the teachings of the NOI and qualified its version of Islam as a distorted Islam. For instance, one informant criticized some of the positions of the NOI, in particular its exclusionary attitudes as well as designation of White people, as he put it, “the blue-eyed white devil.” 111 Two study informants reported that they have no knowledge about the NOI and chose not to talk about its teachings. Nonetheless, one study participant, Dr. Al-Hayani who is a Sunni Muslim, expressed favorable views about the activities of NOI, particularly under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan. Surprisingly, Dr. Al-Hayani sounded very appreciative and supportive of the good works that Louis Farrakhan is doing to improve the lives of many young African-Americans in the ghettos. In Dr. Al-Hayani’s words:

I met with Farrakhan and many people did not like him and when I lecture people say to me you mean you approve Farrakhan and I said his philosophy is his philosophy. But what Farrakhan is doing in this country is taking young kids who are in drugs, drunker, alcoholics, having no jobs, living on welfare, abusing their kids and their families. He ‘s taking them and pulling them out of that system and giving them a future, helping them get jobs and finish schools, and helping them maintain a solid Muslim family. And

what’s wrong with that? Anti-white I don’t believe in that, because I’m White. I’m an Arab, but I’m white. But, I don’t care about what he says anti-white. I don’t think he means anti-per se. He is talking about anti-white establishment, but he phrases it in a different way. But that part, I don’t care. I care about what he’s doing… He’s doing good deeds and we need to acknowledge that…

Here Dr. Al-Hayani sums up the activities of the Nation of Islam and its ongoing effort to uplift African-Americans out of poverty. Her statement reveals many layers about the perception of the Nation of Islam among orthodox Muslims and non-Muslims, especially White Americans. With respect to Orthodox Muslims’ perception of the NOI, there is a tendency of viewing the Nation of Islam as a radical organization, without acknowledging its good deeds. Of course, the NOI advocates a different Islam from Orthodox Islam. As an Orthodox Muslim, I have some reservations about the theological beliefs of the NOI meanwhile; I agree with Dr. Al-Hayan’s positions about the good deeds of Louis Farrakhan and his disciples. In fact, I was quite flabbergasted by Dr. Al-Hayni’s bold views about the Nation of Islam. Interestingly, Dr. Al-Hayani, who is an Arab-American, Orthodox Sunni Muslim, and considers herself as a “White” person, acknowledges and endorses publically the activities of Louis Farrakhan.

The other aspect that I found interesting in Dr. Al-Hayani’s observation is related to the demonization of the NOI as an anti-white organization. Because of the media’s negative coverage of the Nation of Islam, many White Americans have bad views about its leaders, teachings, and activities. Even tough, White Americans’ fear is somehow justified, because of

\[112\] Al Hayani, interview with author, September 12, 2010.
the NOI’s designation of them as “devils”. However, this fear gets exaggerated and overstated in the media.

From its inception, the Nation of Islam was envisaged as a response to the unjust and inhuman treatment of African-Americans in the early twentieth century. The founding fathers of the Nation of Islam, Wali Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad, envisioned a religious and political project that aimed primarily to restore to African-Americans their dignity of self-esteem that were robbed by centuries of slavery, uplift them out of poverty, and liberate them psychologically and physically from Whites’ domination.

But, the question worth asking is: why did the founders of the NOI adopt Islam over Christianity? In her thesis entitled “Comparative Study of the Nation of Islam and Islam,” Yuliani-Sato Dwi Hesti details the reasons why the NOI chose Islam as a source of inspiration of their activities. More specifically, Hesti offers two explanations for the NOI’s adoption of Islam:

There are at least two reasons why the Nation of Islam adopts Islam as a tool in its social movement’s struggle. First, if Christianity is considered as white people’s religion, then Islam (compared to other non-Christianity religion) as a non-European and non-(white) American religion and (what is often seen) as the opposite of Christianity is considered as non-white. The ineffectiveness of Christianity in solving the problems of African-Americans due to its manipulation by white people to maintain human’s enslavement and justify racism requires something else that is non-Western (non-Euro-American) as an alternative. Islam is chosen to give African-Americans in the Nation of Islam a non-white identity, thus to separate themselves from their oppressor and oppressors’ identity. Second, by considering Islam as the natural religion of African people, the adoption of
Islam connects the Nation of Islam’s members with their heritage as Africans or Black people.\(^\text{113}\)

In my approach, two points must be emphasized in regard to Hesti’s observations. First, it goes without saying that Islam is often represented in U.S. media and scholarship as an anti-White and Christians religion and that might have appealed to some members of the Nation of Islam, especially first generation group. However, it is noteworthy that many African-Americans, including members of the NOI, were attracted to Islam, because of what they believed as Islam inclusive nature and ability to surmount racial divisions and offers them a sense of justice and racial equality, not because of Islam anti-White or Christians per se. Second, it is true that African-Americans see Islam as a religion that connects them to their African roots and heritage. However, there are some substantial differences between the types of Islam that the Nation of Islam preached and continues to preach and Islam that is practiced in regions where slaves originally came from. In other words, there are some considerable dissimilarity between Orthodox Islam and the Nation of Islam.

According to the teachings of the Nation of Islam, Wali Fard Muhammad represented Allah in person, Elijah Muhammad was his messenger, and the movement uses both the Qur’an and the Bible as sources of its teachings. In his book, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, Dennis Walker argues that under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, from 1930s to his death in 1975, the organization had known its golden age in mobilizing many Black Americans, especially at the grassroots level. Its membership increased dramatically and

influence spread widely. During his era, Elijah Muhammad incorporated some of the Islamic traditions.\textsuperscript{114} For example, some of these practices that the NOI took from Orthodox Islam include the concept of fasting, separation between men and women, the interdiction of alcohol and sex outside marriage, cleanliness, and respect for women and family values. Even though, these concepts were taken from Traditional Islam they were incorporated differently and in some case radically reformed. More precisely, the NOI has adopted the fasting ritual from Islamic traditions. However, Orthodox Muslims perform fasting in the month of Ramadan which is the ninth month of the Islamic Lunar year. Meanwhile the members of the Nation of Islam perform fasting in December, according to the Western or Christian calendar. They call it December fast. This represents an example of a digression or deviation from Orthodox Islam which later led to Warith Deen Mohammed to break with the NOI, moved toward traditional Islam, and established Muslim Society of American in the middle of the 1970s.

Indeed, the Nation of Islam preaches the separation between Black and White Americans and advocates the urgency for establishing African-Americans autonomous and independent state in order to end to the suffering of Black people in America as well as achieve their freedom and independence from their former masters. According to McCloud, the Nation of Islam even went further in its aspiration for an African-American nation and demanded that White people must provide lands which are rich and full of natural resources for ex-African slaves in America.\textsuperscript{115} Moreover, the teachings of the NOI are quite exclusionary especially toward White people who considered as “devils” who cannot join the organization. Only Black people are allowed to

\textsuperscript{114}Dennis Walker, \textit{Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam} (Atlanta, Georgia: Clarity Press, 2005), 47.

\textsuperscript{115} McCloud, \textit{African American Islam}, 30-31.
adhere to the teachings of Islam. From this perspective, the NOI represented a Black American Islam and advocated the creation of a nation within the nation that formerly had slavery.

On this understanding, the NOI appears to be more a divisive rather than a unifying factor for all Americans. This rhetoric of asabiya also contradicts the true spirit of Islam that encourages brotherhood and solidarity among the members of ummah. This rhetoric was also one of the reasons behind the conversion of many former members of the Nation of Islam to Traditional Islam. The most famous example is the conversion of Hajj Malik Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X in 1964. After his first hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Malcolm asserted that he was deeply moved and sincerely touched by the strong brotherhood and kinship that Islam creates between all Muslims, regardless of their color, race, nationality, or station in life. All Muslim pilgrims stand as one facing the same direction and before the same God. This view had a tremendous impact on the personality of Malcolm X and certainly led to his break with the Nation of Islam. To take Malcolm X best at his words:

The color-blindness of the Muslim world’s religious society and the color-blindness of the Muslim world’s human society; these two influences had each day been making a greater impact and an increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking...There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black skinned Africans. But we were all practicing in the same ritual. Displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led to believe never could exist between the white and non-white.\[116\]

From my experience, this idealized brotherhood in Islam, that Malcolm X talked about, is rarely practiced by Muslims whether in or outside the United States today. Even though, it exists in Islam and still attracts many non-Muslims. As one of the most eloquent speaker, courageous, and yet controversial leader of the NOI, Malcolm X’s conversion represents a watershed in the history the organization. McCoud argues that Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam exemplifies paradigmatically notions of asabyia and ummah with African-American Islam.\textsuperscript{117} From this view, the tension between Orthodox Islam and the NOI is reflected through the story of Malcolm X. As a member of the NOI, he advocated preached for the creation of an independent African-American state, an idea that he gave up when he accepted Islam and called for unity and brotherhood. Indeed, Malcolm X’s conversion ushered in conversions of many members of the NOI to mainstream Islam that was culminated in 1975 with conversion of the Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (the son of Elijah Muhammad) which led to the biggest transformation in the history of the organization. In this context, the NOI witnessed many setbacks and obstacles; however, it was revived under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, especially after the successful organization of Million March in 1995.

ORTHODOX AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISLAM

The year 1975 was a turning point in the history of the Nation of Islam. It marked the death of Minister Elijah Muhammad and the emergence of his son the Imam Warith Deen Mohammed as the leader of the organization. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed introduced a series of radical changes to the organization. Being uncomfortable with some of the misguided teachings of the NOI such as its theological belief and its designation of White people as devils, Imam Warith

\textsuperscript{117}McCloud, \textit{African American Islam}, 37.
Deen Mohammed decided boldly to move the Nation of Islam toward a more universal and global form of Islam. This reformation led the biggest transformation in the history of the organization and largest single conversion to traditional Islam in the history of the United States.

Some of the revolutionary changes that Imam Warith Deen Mohammed incorporated were doctrinal as well as structural. Indeed, he adopted Qur’an and Sunnah or teachings of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as the main sources of the teachings of the organization. He also encouraged his followers to embrace their American culture, attempt to integrate into mainstream America, and not to adapt immigrant Muslims’ cultural practices. In this sense, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed preached that Islam and American values are compatible and they can exist together. He also called for the reformation of Islam in a way that fits Americans. As Sherman A. Jackson points out, “In fact, even before September 11, Blackamerican Muslim leaders such as Imām Wārithuddin Muhammad were loudly proclaiming their belief in the complete compatibility between America and Islam.”

Viewed from this perspective, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed was considered as the greatest American mujadid (reformer) of Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, in every century appears a new Alim or a learned man to revive the Islamic faith and put believers back on the right path. In his study, Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam, Ahmed compares the influence of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed on African-Americans’ history to that of Martin Luther. He states, “Although cross-cultural references can be misleading, it seems to compare the impact of Imam W.D. Mohammed on Islam among African Americans with that of Martin Luther, who radically altered the course and content of Christianity. Like Luther, the imam took

118Jackson, Islam and the Blackamerican, 133.
on the entire establishment of what was normatively seen and accepted as Islam and gave it a new direction.”

In this view, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s transformation of the NOI was welcomed by many Americans. However, it triggered some negative reactions from some immigrant Muslims as well as from some hardliners within African-American Muslim community. Mainly, because of his calls of a rapprochement between Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States, particularly his stands that Islam and U.S. constitution go perfectly hand in hand. As Ahmed asserts, “Imam W.D. had Muslim critics, most commonly among immigrant and African American Muslim literalists, many of whom had been part of his movement at some point but decided to deviate from the “straight path”… Many literalist African-Americans accuse Imam W.D. of the grave sin of “innovation” and claim he disliked immigrant Muslims, especially Arabs, and was therefore a “racist.” On this understanding, African-Americans and immigrant Muslims strict hardliners accused Imam Warith Deen Mohammed of being pro American secular values and also not supporting or sympathizing with the suffering and mistreatment of Muslims around the world that are perceived to be the results of the U.S. misguided foreign policies. In addition, The NOI accused him of downplaying the suffering of Black people in America, by asking them to accept White Americans as their fellow citizens, brothers, and sisters.

HOW DO RECENT CONVERTS RELATE TO PRE-9/11 CONVERTS?

From what has been said so far, it is clear that African-Americans represent the biggest number of American Muslim converts prior to the September 11th, 2001 attacks. Since 1975


thousands of Black Americans have adopted Islam as their own religion. Black Americans seem to find the message of Islam more relevant to their social and cultural reality in the United States. Having stated that, post-9/11 has witnessed a remarkable increase of conversion to Islam among White American population. Thereby, it is important to explore the history of these two genealogies and put their narratives in conversation with each other. In addressing this issue, I examine the stories of Black and White American Muslim converts especially in term of their relationship to each other and their interactions with transnational Muslims. Before I proceed to this I will briefly address some of the factors that contribute to rise of Islam among African-American population. With respect to White American Muslim converts’ attractions to Islam, chapter one provides an overview about this point.

To begin with, religion has often played a major role in shaping African-Americans’ struggle for self-affirmation and self-independence. Black Religion, including NOI, traditional African-American Christian churches (e.g. Black Christian churches that were organized from 1750 to 1861 Episcopal, Methodist, Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal Zion, Presbyterian, and Baptist), and those organized in the twentieth century is often used as a weapon or a form of protest against White-racist oppression. On this understanding, Black Americans tend generally to associate Christianity with White people. It is perceived as the religion of the oppressor. As it is also well known, the church endorsed slavery and many pastors manipulated the teachings of the Bible to justify the enslavement of Africans. This serves as a motivation for some African-Americans to protest against Christianity. As Sherman A. Jackson argued that the increase of conversion to Islam among black Americans is rooted in Black religion and the spirit of revolt against white America. He writes, “At bottom, Black religion is an instrument of holy protest against White supremacy and its material and psychological effects. While it is an inextricably
religious orientation, it refuses to separate the quest for otherworldly salvation from the struggle for temporal liberation and a dignified existence.”

From this vantage point, many Black Americans seek religion for freedom and liberation. In this context, some African-Americans’ conversion to Islam represents a rejection of Christianity that brought them suffering and destroyed their cultural identity. In the meantime, there are many African-Americans who accept Christianity for a number of reasons including the teaching of Jesus (PBUH) particularly his insistence on brotherly love between all human beings. However, it should be noted that even African-American Christians have developed a new understanding of Christianity that rejects all forms of oppression, racism, and exploitation. As Jackson further observes:

…it is to note that increasing numbers of Blackamericans were developing a different appreciation of and agenda for Christianity. It was not of freedom from the oppression of sin or of the bonds of the flesh that these early Blackamericans sang in their spirituals; it was of liberation from the bitter plight of bondage and racial subjugation.

Hence, religious conversion whether Islam or Christianity generally represents a form of resistance against oppression and constitutes African-Americans’ raison d’être. It functions simultaneously as a moral barometer and a weapon of survival for Black Americans in a hostile environment.

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122 Ibid., 36.
Other factors that prompt African-Americans to accept Islam can be related to the popularity of Malcolm X, the dissociation of Islam with slavery in America, the prevalence of Islam in African and Asian nations that protested against European colonialism and its association with oppression of darker hued peoples. Indeed, religious conversion to Islam represent a protest against the ongoing social inequalities and racial discrimination of institutions that manifest itself through massive unemployment of young Black men, squalid conditions of Blacks’ housing, and the widespread of drug and alcohol in African-Americans’ neighborhood.

In addressing the issue of racism against African-Americans in present America, Glenda R. Carpio, in her seminal book, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, writes, “…Racism began to be coded in the language of color-blind politics and antiwelfare, anti-affirmative action arguments. This is not to say that the old-fashioned racism became a thing of the past.”

This illustration points to racial profiling and police brutality that is more likely to target African-Americans than any other ethnic groups in the United States. In the same logic, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in his study *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, argues that contemporary discrimination against minorities in the United States is produced and reproduced through “color-blind racism” (mechanisms and explanations that White Americans have utilized to develop new form of racism against African-Americans) that perpetuates racial inequalities, economic, and educational discrimination between African-Americans and Whites.

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receive in public places, indirect acts of everyday racism through racial slurs and coded jokes about African-Americans’ work ethic, physical strength, and sexual prowess. All these practices are manifestations of the “new form of racism.”

Facing all these challenges cumulatively, African-Americans are constantly looking for viable alternative and way out of this system. Alternatively, Islam, African, and Asian Traditional religions seem to offer some practical solutions, or this is what Black Muslim converts believe, for social justice, peace, and equality.

In my approach, direct and indirect racism represent a powerful motivational force of African-Americans’ conversion to Islam. As Kate Zebiri precisely points out, “The issue of race is mentioned by some converts, especially those from a non-White background. In such cases, there is often an implicit or explicit comparison with the historical baggage (rather than inherent ideal) of Christianity, in particular colonialism and slave trade.”

Here it should be noted that Islam has always been an attractive force to the weak and marginalized groups in the society. For instance, when Islam was first revealed in Arabian Peninsula the early converts (first generation in Islam) were mainly slaves and members of the low cast of the society. They embraced Islam because of its message of justice and freedom. In the same vein, African-Americans finds some inspiration in the stories of early Muslims, who came from humble backgrounds and share a similar history of oppression with them. More specifically, what black Americans find incredibly inspirational is the story of Billal, the first muezzin in Islam, who was a descendant of a slave and converted to Islam, later became one of the closest companions to the prophet Mohammed.

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126 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 59.
(PBUH) and a respectable figure in Islam.127 Yet, some researchers may challenge my view that Christianity and other religions are associated with poor and disinherited “Middle-Eastern” peasants too. However, African-Americans’ identification with the story of Billal is not the only motivational factor for Islam, as stated earlier, there are other factors that make Islam appeal to African-Americans including theological, social, and historical dimensions, but the story of Billal remain clearly a shining aspect as well as driving force for some African-American Muslim converts.

Some Black Americans turn to Islam not only to protest or a rebel against the Whiteman’s oppression, but also to connect to their African roots and reclaim a lost identity. To put it more concretely, Black Americans come to Islam hoping they will be able to connect with their past and a lost history. In addressing this issue, Ahmed maintains that African-Americans’ conversion to Islam is to rediscover a lost identity before anything else. In paraphrasing one of his informants, Imam Al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid of Harlm, Ahmed asserts, “… Almost 50 percent of Africans brought as slaves were Muslim, and it is true that most slaves were from the continent’s west coast, where Islam was the predominant religion. In spite of those terrible centuries of slavery, the community miraculously clung to the memory of Islam, however tenuously.”128 Here, it should be noted that tribal rivalries and ethnic divisions arguably contributed, in one way or another, to the enslavement of African-Americans. According to Sylviane A. Diouf, farouche tribal warfare between Africans, extreme starvation, and deadly


128 Ahmed, Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam, 162.
diseases contributed greatly to Atlantic slave trade of Africans in the Americas. In consequence, Africans facilitated the slavery process by selling their African fellows to the Whiteman.

Given the fact that some African-American Muslim converts are descendants of African Muslim slaves, I believe that the designation “reverts” fits better Black Americans rather than other Muslim converts. Because, reversion refers to a return to origins that one was once voluntarily or forcibly uprooted and deracinated from, as the case for African-Americans. As Kate Zebiri writes, “This reflects the idea of converts as ‘reverts’, returning to their original nature, and helps to explain why many do not necessarily see themselves as having ‘new identity’ as such.” In this sense, Black Muslim converts often change their names and adopt Islamic names to “reintegrate” quickly to their environment. They are often eager to learn Arabic, tend to use Arabic greetings such as saalam alikoum (peace be upon you) and insha Allah (God’s willing); they also take upon Islamic names such Aisha, Yusuf, Bilal to name few examples. Even tough, Islam does not require converts to change their former names and adapt Islamic ones. Sometimes Black Muslim converts also keep their original names to use them among non-Muslims. In addition, African-Americans’ reversion to Islam can be interpreted as nostalgic feeling for their African roots.

In his majestic work, The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon argues that they only way for Black people’s emancipation and total liberation is by reclaiming their past heritage and rejecting

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130 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts,
Western culture. For example, African-American Muslim converts reject some aspects of American culture such as materialistic and individualistic values. In thinking along these lines, African-Americans’ reversion to Islam is a counter strategy for mainstream American culture on one hand and an assertion of their African Islamic identity on the other.

Against this background, I am tempted to view the encounter between Black and White Muslim converts. In this sense, Black and White Americans’ historical relationship continue to shape their interaction not only as Christians or secular Americans, but also Muslim converts. As mentioned above, Islam tends to promote social justice and racial equality between all Muslims. But in practice, Muslims, in and outside the US, are still unable to translate that spirit of idealized brotherhood and harmony into reality.

In this way, one may wonder why Blacks fall for Islam if hardly does better than Christianity in this respect. In his book, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, Dannin argues that African-Americans fall for Islam, because of what he terms the “Islamic Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” which offers a framework not only to address some of the real and substantial problems in African-Americans neighborhood such as the lack of good education facilities, gang violence, and drug problems, but Islam also serves as a “liberation theology” for many African-Americans.

However, African-American Muslim converts, as previously stated, face cultural and racial prejudices from immigrant Muslims that prevent them from attaining the greater freedom, equality, and justice that Islam offers. As McCloud points out, “The ethnic and cultural prejudices of transnational Muslims have obscured the principles of the Qur’an and itself and

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thus the hopes of many indigenous Muslims that they were engaged in a religion in which they were not considered inferior.” Viewed in this light, the problems lie essentially with the behaviors and attitudes of Muslims themselves rather than the teaching of Islam. Islam provides social justice and equality between all believers, provided that Muslims apply those teachings. Briefly put, transnational Muslims are generally failing to put all the teachings of Islam in practice.

Thus, the trouble relationship within the American Muslim community greatly affects all its members. In the course of this research, I learned that African-American and White Muslim converts do not often interact with each other. In discussing with my African-American friend, who converted to Islam in 2007, I often felt resentment and bitterness in his voice against White establishment. On many occasions, he implicitly or explicitly blamed White people for all the malaise and social ills of African-Americans community. In our personal communications, Shean Law never made the distinction between White Christians or Muslims. In Law’s words, “This is a European country and the dominant culture is mostly from Europe and Christianity started with them.” In my understanding, what makes Law still unable to notice the presence of White American Muslim converts is because they are still a minority; therefore, African-American Muslim converts, like Law, never have the chance to interact with them on regular basis.

Another major factor that hinders interactions not only between Black and White American Muslim converts in particular, but also Black and White Americans in general is social

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133 McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society*, 133.

134 Shean Law, e-mail message to author, April 15, 2009.
disintegration. That is to say that social interaction between African-Americans and Anglo-Americans is quasi nonexistent, with few exceptions. In his study, *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva discusses some of the serious challenges that prevent social interactions between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Based on extensive interviewees that he conducted with some White college students, he concludes that the social disintegration between the two groups is the outcome of residential segregation and personal attitudes toward Blacks. In Bonilla-Silva’s words:

> Based on their answers to questions dealing with their own behavior, white seemed less committed to an interracial life. For example, when students were asked about the five people with whom they interacted on a daily basis, 67.7 percent stated that none of these five people were black. Similarly, to the racial-distance question, “Have you invited a black person for lunch or dinner recently?” 68.5 percent said “no”…

The preceding quote addresses the *de facto* social integration between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Even though mixed marriage and interracial dating are now more frequent than before. Blacks and Whites are still socially disintegrated. The two groups often attend different religious establishments and live in different areas. Of course, this type of separation is not as institutionalized as it was back in the days of slavery or Jim Crow. It is a *de facto* separation and that what makes it more difficult to eradicate and combat.

Furthermore, the presence of immigrant Muslim sometimes complicates further the relationships between African-American and White Muslim converts. As I already pointed out, there is a tendency among some transnational as well as born Muslims, especially those of Arab

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and India-Pakistani backgrounds, of favoring consciously or unconsciously White American converts over African-American or Latino/as converts, mainly because of Whites converts privileged position in the society. Another factor that causes immigrant Muslims to brush aside African-American Muslims and stick with White Americans is their desire to assimilate and integrate fully into mainstream American society. Immigrant Muslims believe that Black people can succeed and make it provided they work harder and smarter. As Ahmed reported about the opinion of one of his informants’ attitude toward immigrant Muslims, he writes “One young man commented on relations with Muslim immigrants, expressing a sentiment by now familiar to us: “Why can’t they see us as you see us? They see us through white eyes.” The preceding quotation implies that South Asian or Arab immigrant Muslims often meet African-Americans with a set of preconceived notions that associate them with violence, criminality, and lack of education. Indeed, Muslims immigrants have constructed these images of Black American Muslims and non-Muslims as well, before even their arrival in the United States, because of American mainstream media’s portrayal of African-Americans as gangsters and violent people. Briefly put, immigrant Muslims do not consider African-Americans as real or authentic “Americans.” As Jackson observes, “Like many non-Muslims Blackamericans, they do not equate being rooted in the black community with embracing America. To them black America is one thing; America is quite another.”

Being immigrant Muslim myself, I can easily understand the source of these stereotypes and prejudices about minorities in the United States. Indeed, mainstream American popular

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culture contribute immensely to those stereotypes, by painting the U.S. image abroad not only as the land of limited opportunities, freedom, and equality, but also projecting White culture as authentic and real American culture and other minority groups such as African-Americans and Latino/as are often depicted as criminals and undocumented immigrants in the media.

Such a critique also speaks to Muslim immigrants’ desire to integrate to mainstream America. For example, marrying White girls or living in suburban areas are true manifestations of this desire among born Muslims. In other words, getting a piece of the American dream is a real motivation for them to associate with White Americans. In so doing, transnational Muslims distance themselves from African-American Muslim converts. In some cases, some immigrant Muslims blame Black people for their own failure, because of their perceived laziness or inability to pull themselves, like other minority groups, by their own bootstraps and hard work. To put the matter more concretely, some Muslim immigrants do not realize how white racism works against African-Americans. Islamic studies scholar McCloud problematizes African-Americans and Muslim immigrants’ relationship further when she writes:

African American Muslim prisoners’ litigation won rights to change their names, have pork-free diets, have Muslim chaplains, have prison facilities purchase Qur’an, thus putting Islam and Muslims in public discourse. Other African American Muslims similarly won these rights in professions such as medicine, law enforcement, and education; in public schools, and social services. Many immigrant Muslims stepped into the benefits of these battles without any acknowledgment of them. As if there were no Muslims present, immigrant Muslims set out to build cultural organizations, masajid, and schools. African American Muslims were regularly shut out and almost completely
marginalized regarding issues of leadership and authority, setting the stage for the current debate. They have little knowledge of the lives of transnational networks even though they see them every day.\textsuperscript{138}

From McCloud’s perspective immigrant Muslims’ failure to recognize African-American Muslims’ achievements and reach out to them in order build bridges of understanding is the biggest challenge for American Muslims’ unity. With these attitudes, transnational Muslims, indeed, undermine and hinder communication between White and African-American Muslim converts. In consequence, many African-Americans feel left out, alienated, and marginalized within the Muslim \textit{ummah}. And, they see their hope of social justice and racial equality in Islam being crashed down and smashed aside. In a response, African-American Muslim converts decided to clique with each other and establish their own mosques and Islamic schools. And, this reduces the chance of interaction between them and other Muslims. In this capacity, I believe that African-American Muslim converts do not get the chance to interact with White Muslim converts. Briefly put some immigrant Muslims do not contribute to the solidarity of Muslim \textit{ummah} and the strong bonds that Islam is supposed to create between all members of the Muslim community. This depressing fact is what really hinders meaningful and positive interactions not only between immigrant Muslims and African-Americans, but also between American Muslim converts too.

\textsuperscript{138}McCloud, \textit{Transnational Muslims in American Society}, 132-133.
CHAPTER 3
POST-CONVERSION STAGE AND CONVERTS’ RELATIONS WITH SOCIETY

This chapter focuses on the post-conversion stage of White Ohioan Muslim converts and discusses the experiences and interactions of seven participants with their families, ex-friends, transnational Muslim acquaintances, and American society at large. The chapter explores the ways in which conversion to Islam has impacts on the lives of White American Muslim converts in the context of post-9/11 America, especially in terms of giving up certain practices and adopting new ones. More significantly, I discuss the challenges including prejudice and discrimination that conversion to Islam brings in the lives of Muslims in the United States. Furthermore, I interrogate the social and cultural roles that White American Muslim converts play as critics of non-practicing Muslims living in the United States. I examine some of the cultural issues and the different interpretation of certain Islamic texts as a source of the troubled relationships between American converts and transnational Muslims living in the United States.

In conducting this ethnographic research, I found out that the post-conversion stage is the most challenging step in the whole process for converts. Of my respondents, this stage is the toughest part in the process because it involves great deal of sacrifice, commitment, observation of rituals, and integration to a new environment. These challenges are apparent in the following statement that Maria Williams made when she was asked about her transition and post-conversion experience:

That was the worst. The actual converting wasn’t a problem, like a few days. There was a kind of a point where I knew that I was going to convert and I was like ok. I knew that I want to be a Muslim. So there was like few days do I say the shahada do I not. But whom
I am lying to I know this is what I believe. So that was not actually the biggest deal. It was like starting to cover my hair, because of that identity thing like who are you?\textsuperscript{139}

The above quotation demonstrates the struggle that Anglo-American female converts go through to follow Islamic rules and rituals in post-9/11 America. Williams’ remark reveals different layers about Muslim women’s struggle in general, and Anglo-American female converts in particular, since September 11\textsuperscript{th} 2001. It speaks to their fear of being constantly singled out and rejected by their own family and friends. The Muslim females’ fear of public exposure and rejection is related to their weariness of not being able to find a job or being attacked. Such a level of frustration is apparent in Williams’ statement which also addresses Anglo-American female converts’ ambivalent attitudes toward wearing the headscarf or reluctance about it.\textsuperscript{140} Some Anglo-American female Muslim converts tend to avoid wearing the headscarf because it draws attention and renders them more visible. This visibility might bring harm to Muslim women who might face discrimination as a result of their Islamic dresses.

Another key participant of this study, Al-Hayani, stated similar views about wearing the Islamic hijab in present America. Al-Hayani, who does not wear the headscarf, suggests that Muslim women take more attention and become more visible by wearing the hijab.\textsuperscript{141} In that logic, Muslim women who decide not to wear the headscarf are following the principle of “prevention is better than cure.” Arguably, one of the main reasons behind wearing the hijab in Islam is for women not to draw attention to themselves and be verbally abused or sexually

\textsuperscript{139} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

\textsuperscript{140} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

\textsuperscript{141} Al-Hayani, interview with author, September 12, 2010.
assaulted. From Al-Hayani’s perspective, this prevention of unnecessary exposure and violence is the intent of the Islamic laws and it is a good reason for Muslim women not to wear the *hijab* in Western context.

In his seminal book, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo argues that the commitment or post-conversion stage brings about a fundamental change in an individual’s personality. It involves various steps including decision-making and observation of rituals. In addressing the importance of rituals’ observation, Rambo writes: “At the heart of conversion ritual is the difficult combination of saying no and saying yes. Conversion implies that a person is “turning away from” the past and turning to a new future.”142 From this understanding, the post-conversion stage requires great deal of sacrifice, commitment, and effort for integration. According to Rambo, religious conversion is a “combination of saying no and saying yes.”143 This duality underscores some of the challenges that converts face, particularly in their attempt to be integrated into their new environment. It is for this reason that some converts tend to avoid certain practices and abide by certain rules at the beginning of their commitment stage. For example, they may shrink from certain responsibilities or obligations because they are afraid to provoke strong reactions from some members of their family or friends. As Brian L. Coleman, in his dissertation, “Post-Conversion Experience of African-American Male Sunni Muslims: Community Integration and Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Philadelphia,” remarks:

The process of religious conversion results, to some extent, in the creation of a new sense of self. Introducing this new self into one’s old environment may prove difficult because


143 Ibid., 127-128.
the conversion process itself may have resulted in the disruption of the social bonds that linked an individual to others pre-conversion. Bonds of mutual identification and interdependence among individuals produce a sense of collective belonging. This sense of belonging is one of the primary markers of belonging to a community.\textsuperscript{144}

From this perspective, changing one’s religion and adopting another one is utterly challenging. It is a radical transformation and a total rupture with one’s past life. In the case of conversion to Islam, the transformation is much more profound because of Islam’s insistence on rigorous application of and obedience to the rules of Allah. In effect, Islam is arguably one of the strictest religions especially in terms of observing its rituals. As Coleman notes, “Islam is considered a strict religion and as such, there are certain costs involved in participation which could certainly affect one’s integration into various areas of society.”\textsuperscript{145} Of greater concern, conversion to Islam entails the adoption of a wide range of beliefs, practices, and, in some cases, a change of appearance and code of dressing (for women). Islam also imposes new rules on converts that are sometimes hard to follow including the five daily prayers, fasting, abstention from lying, and backbiting. Furthermore, American Muslim converts are required to abstain from certain food items, alcohol consumption, sex outside marriage, and celebration of non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas and Easter. In short, Islam requires a change of identity and lifestyle. As Zebiri puts it, “For those who come to Islam, conversion affects not just their beliefs and values but often their whole lifestyle; from being confined to their inner, spiritual world, their faith is nothing less


\textsuperscript{145}Coleman, “Post-Conversion Experience of African-American Male Sunni Muslims,” 49.
than revolutionary in terms of the impact it has on their whole lives…”\(^\text{146}\) In that way, Islam brings tremendous social, cultural, and religious changes in converts’ belief systems as well as their relation vis-à-vis their society.

In an attempt to navigate their way through all these challenges, my informants reported that they battled and continue to battle on regular basis to create a balance between the conflicting demands of contemporary American society and the teachings of their new faith. More precisely, the participants observed that they face the challenge of integrating to their new Muslim community as well as remaining faithful to their American culture. In what follows, I provide detailed analysis of my subjects’ narratives about these challenges.

**CONVERTS’ RELATION WITH THEIR NON-MUSLIM FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

As I discussed earlier, conversion to Islam can greatly disrupt or change individuals’ social networks. Much less expected, Islam can significantly affect converts’ relationship with their non-Muslim families and friends because it introduces a whole wide range of activities that do not correlate with some of the social practices of contemporary Western society such as social mixing between opposite sexes or celebrating non-Islamic holidays. In his study, *Conversion to Islam*, Köse argues that “Converting to Islam in a non-Muslim society may mean social suicide and boycott for some converts.”\(^\text{147}\) From this logic, by converting to Islam, Americans provoke a total rupture with social practices which may lead to the converts’ excommunication by some members of their families or friends.

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\(^\text{146}\) Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 1-2.

\(^\text{147}\) Köse, *Conversion to Islam*, 137.
In some extreme cases, Islam also requires converts to alter or break up with some members of their families or certain “bad” friends. For example, female Muslim converts, who were married before their conversion, are generally and arguably given two choices in Islam: either to seek divorce or to demand that their husbands convert to Islam. In Islamic traditions, women are allowed to marry only men from their faith. In this case, conversion can have some considerable and direct ramifications on female Muslim converts’ relationship with their spouses and greatly jeopardizes their marriage’s relationship. As Zebiri points out, “Converts who are either married or in a relationship at the time of their conversion experience complications due to certain Islamic prohibitions.” Of course, this complication is related to Islam’s prohibition of Muslim woman marriage to non-Muslim man. It also speaks to converts’ intention to adhere to a strict Islamic principle. That is to say that American converts to Islam tend to observe enthusiastically all rituals of Islam, at least in the initial phase.

One of the most dramatic cases that I studied in the course of my research is the story of Aisha Williams’ marriage. Williams reverted to Islam in 2009 at the age of 62. She is married and has 16 grand children. In narrating her transition to Islam, Williams reported that her marriage was a big concern for her, despite the fact that her husband was quite supportive of her decision. In recent weeks, I had the chance to meet and talk with Williams and her husband. We had dinner together and I spoke at length, particularly, with her husband who seemed to have a relative knowledge of Islam and sounded very understanding of his wife’s decision. I thoroughly enjoyed my conversation with this lovely couple. During our discussion, Williams’ husband told me that Islam and Christianity came from the same source and that they are both monotheistic.

\[^{148}\text{Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 77.}\]
and Abrahamic religions. While I was talking to him, I also found out that he was in Saudi Arabia and had the Qur’an read to him in Arabic with translation.

Despite his positive views of Islam, Williams’ husband has not declared his shahada and for that reason he is still considered as a non-Muslim. It is for this reason that Williams has also either to renounce her marriage, which is problematic because of her love, or pray for her husband’s quick conversion to Islam. In describing her dilemma with her husband, Williams observed that she consulted two Imams of different mosques about her case and both advised her to keep her marriage and continue praying Allah for her husband’s rapid conversion.149

Nevertheless, Williams is experiencing great amount of pressure from some of her Muslim friends overseas who advised her to ask for divorce. She also mentioned that there are other Muslims who advise her to wait and pray for her husband’s conversion.150 Apparently, Williams is very concerned about her marriage and for that reason she asked me, as a born Muslim who may know better about this issue, to help her find the right answer. Williams said to me:

I’ve tried to research it in the past and got completely confused by contradictions. I don’t know who to listen to and who not to listen to. It is probably better for a born Muslim because you will be more aware of which is correct…Chris, {her husband}, is given the choice: revert or divorce. I really think he would revert…Imam at home said that Chris is

149 Williams, interview with author, April 20, 2010.

150 Williams, personal interview, April 20, 2010.
already a Muslim in his heart because he believes as a Muslim, but he will not say
shahada or pray with me…\textsuperscript{151}

It is clear that Islam has different interpretations and stands on Williams’ case. However, I am
not going into the details of Islamic positions on her marriage with a non-Muslim because it may
lead to a digression from the moral of this story. What matters here is how Williams’ conversion
substantially altered her relationship with her spouse. It is a great revolution in her social life. In
this respect, the story of Williams emblematizes some of the effects and consequences of
religious conversion in disrupting post-9/11 Anglo-Americans’ social relations. Other religious
scholars correlate this view. For example, Rambo, in his famous model of religious conversion,
theorizes the consequence stage as the emotional, psychological, or cultural ramifications that
religious conversion brings not only into the lives of those who converted, but also in their social
milieu.\textsuperscript{152} Rambo further argues that the impact of religious conversion may have some durable
and long lasting consequences of the convert’s relationship with his/her environment. As he
notes, “Initial change, while important, is but the first step in a long process, a pilgrimage. More
profound changes may come in the months, and even years, after the initial conversion takes
place.”\textsuperscript{153} This statement reflects the complexity and intricacies of the journey of religious
conversion and its durable consequences on individuals.

In general, the accounts of my research informants suggest that they had painless transition
and good experience in telling their family about their conversion. However, the degree of

\textsuperscript{151} Williams, interview with author, April 20, 2010.

\textsuperscript{152} Rambo, \textit{Understanding Religious Conversion}, 148.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 146.
acceptance varies between participants. As a result, I grouped the study participants’ non-Muslim families’ responses to their conversion to Islam into two categories. The first group includes those who observed that their families immediately accepted their decision and warmly welcomed their conversion. Five study informants fit in this category. They reported that they had a good experience revealing conversion to their family. Ayhan told me about her mum’s reaction as follows: “My mother said no matter what she will always love me.” Another interviewee, Maria Williams, stated similar views about her family’s response. She said that her parents welcomed her conversion because they trusted her decision and knowledge. However, she explained that her parents accepted her because she constantly communicated with them about her interests in Islam while she was doing research about the religion. In this way, she greatly helped in facilitating her acceptance by gradually introducing her family to Islam. In order to reveal her conversion to Islam to her parents, Williams said:

I had to break them in slowly. I didn’t start covering my hair right away. I think they kind of knew that I was going to convert. I did it while I was away at school. So I think that made it easy… I did not start covering my hair right away… When I was reading about I like talked to them and tell them about it… My mum was actually happy. She knew that I had like researched. I started covering my hair at school again. I sent them pictures and they got used to it. 

154 Ayhan, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

155 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

156 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
Here it should be noted that both Ayhan and Williams initially faced some form of rejection or resistance from their non-Muslim family. In a sense, their family’s initial rejection to their conversion to Islam was a natural response, given the negative coverage of Islam in the news. It speaks powerfully to the growing animosity and rejection of Muslims in the United States since the September 11th, 2001 attacks. As pointed out earlier Islam has been unreasonably targeted and vilified in the U.S. news media, in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. As Patrick D. Bowen remarks, “When a person converts to a new religion, especially one as stereotyped as Islam, the reactions of the extended family and friends can often times be difficult.”

Thus, it is quite understandable that converts sometimes face some opposition from their family, especially at the beginning of their conversion process. However, this resistance often fades away with time. According to a few studies, subjects, their parents or children often change their opinions when they see some of the positive changes that Islam brings and realize that they are actually happy to be Muslims. As previously pointed out, Islam provides a spiritual healings for some of the social problems such drinking and other problems. Moreover, converts develop special relationship with their parents because of Islam. In her study, British Muslim Converts, Zebiri explains “In practice, converts often go to some lengths to maintain their family ties, despite the difficulties around ‘coming out’ and ensuing tension; a few of the interviewees felt that their relationship with their family had actually got better since their conversion, most of them attributing the improvement to Islamic teachings on the good treatment of parents.” On this understanding, converts develop a closer relation with their family that probably did not

157 Bowen, “Conversion to Islam in the United States,” 60.

158 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 71.
exist or was not very intimate before their conversion to Islam. Consequently, they become more respectful toward their parents and show them more love.

The second category includes two study participants who reported that their families were split over their conversion to Islam. In the course of my conversation with them, I found out that some members of their family were very understanding and supportive. Nonetheless, there are other members of their families who were very hostile and unwelcoming to their conversion. One of such cases is that of Aisha Williams who sounded very relieved when she was talking about her stepdaughter’s positive reaction. Meanwhile, she observed that her older son, who is a soldier and was in Iraq at the time I had the interview with her, has been very hostile to her conversion and accused her of betraying the real values of Christianity. Williams said, sounding very overwhelmed and heartbroken, “He is 42 years and is in Iraq. He thinks I am going to strap a bomb on myself and walk into some public place or airport and blow myself up.”

Williams’ remark about her son’s response suggests a prevalent mindset and a widespread perception toward Muslims as dangerous people and threats to the United States. Her son’s imagery of her as a person who will be “strapping a bomb on herself and walk into some public place or airport and blow herself up,” reflects the general attitudes toward Muslims, whether American converts or immigrants. Muslims are generally perceived as trouble makers whose main purpose is to harm, kill, and destroy the United States. In her book, Transnational Muslims in American Society, Aminah Beverly McCloud writes: “While the ‘Middle East’ has always been portrayed as a violent other, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, added

159 Williams, interview with author, April 20, 2010.
terroristic to the list of adjectives, thus making the region a totally undesirable place and Islam an unredeemably violent religion.”¹⁶⁰

Viewed from this perspective, some of informants’ families considered them as traitors who turned their backs on all their teachings, upbringing, most importantly against their country. And in some cases, this attitude led to the excommunication of the new Muslim converts from their family. As of these examples is that of Schreffler, who is 42 years old, but could not help to hide his emotions and feelings from me when it came to the response of his extended family. He remarked with a sad tone, “I think that they kind of excommunicated me from family gathering which honestly that hurt. We are still blood.”¹⁶¹ It should be noted that converts are likely to face aggressive resistance from family members who are ultra conservative and deeply religious.

With respect to friendship, the case is different from family. As I listened to my informants’ testimonies, I realized that there is a deep sense of inclination, among some of them, to intentionally distance themselves from their non-Muslim friends. As discussed earlier, when persons adopt a new religion they become obsessed with that religion and tend to adhere strictly to its teachings. The same rule goes for American converts to Islam. In their preliminary stage, converts tend to be obsessed with Islam. It is the “falling-in-love stage,” to borrow Anne Sofe Roald’s expression.¹⁶² In her essay, “The Shaping of a Scandinavian “Islam”: Converts and

¹⁶⁰ McCloud, Transnational Muslims in American Society, 21.


Gender Equal Opportunity,” Roald provides three stages that newly converted persons to Islam go through. The three stages are: love, disappointment, and maturity.163

In the love stage, converts are expected to be more fervent and practicing Muslims. More importantly, converts are afraid to drift to their pre-Islamic practices; therefore, they prefer not to maintain close connection with their ex-friends. As a result, they have more time to practice their faith and stay away from haram (religiously forbidden) activities such as attraction to extramarital sex, eating non-halal (religiously permitted) food, using liquor, and the like. As Zebiri points out, “Generally the converts who retained some of their former friends were selective, choosing to keep those friends who were prepared to accommodate their new faith, for example by abstaining from swearing or being prepared to socialize in an alcohol-free environment.”164 This statement speaks well to Islam’s insistence on the importance of keeping the company of good and well-behaved friends, because friends have a great influence on each other. As the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) stated, “Man is on the religion of his friend, so let every one of you examine whom he befriends.”165 In this logic, converts tend to avoid some of their ex-friends in order to stay on the right path and not drift back to their pre-Islamic habits.

In other cases, converts’ former friends decided to excommunicate them. For example, Schreffler remarked with a quiet and sincere tone, “My friends did not really know how to take it. I lost few friends to that. But, in reflection if drinking is the foundation of our friendship they

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163 Ibid., 49-50.

164 Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 79.

165 Hadith: http://www.alminbar.com/khutbaheng/2163.htm
were never really friends to begin with.”\textsuperscript{166} It is this sort of rejection that propels converts like Schreffler to become very determined and more engaged with their new religion. They become more assertive of their Islamic identity when they receive hostile remarks or unfriendly treatment in regard to their faith.

CONVERTS’ RELATION WITH TRANSNATIONAL MUSLIMS

In relation to transnational Muslims, the testimonies of my informants differ greatly from the experience of one person to another. Some of my informants reported that their encounter with immigrant Muslims in the United States was not quite fruitful. It was colored with cultural misunderstanding and ethnocentric attitudes. In describing her experience, Maria Williams observed that she had some bad experiences with immigrant Muslims. She said that she was hugely surprised by their behaviors. She noted:

I think that the biggest issue where I converted there weren’t lots of Muslims. I had some Muslim friends, but they were not really practicing. I think when you convert you have a very idealized vision of what all Muslims are going be like. I was like this is what the religion says so everybody should be like this and it does not happen. What happened is like what I do now, because the people were my friend, they all don’t like me anymore and all these other Muslims. They say that they are Muslims, but they aren’t really and they know that I am a convert and they all treat me differently. That’s like the hard part.

\textsuperscript{166} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.
It just likes figuring out where I fit. Obviously, I stand out of regular Muslims because, I am pale.¹⁶⁷

In this context, Williams was going through what Road refers to as the “disappointment stage” that most new converts experience.¹⁶⁸ As stated earlier, converts are initially eager about Islam and would like to literally follow all its rules. In the face of some transnational Muslims’ mistreatment as well as their secular or irreligious attitudes, converts like Williams tend to distance themselves from non-practicing immigrant Muslims and become more vocally critical of them. In many ways, Williams’ allusion to the “idealized vision of what all Muslims are going be like” expresses her shock and surprise at witnessing immigrant born Muslims who break the rules of Islam, even though most of them profess and claim to be good Muslims.

Thus, the hypocritical attitudes of transnational Muslims do not only complicate their relationship with American Muslim converts, but also push the later to produce their own understanding of Islam that fits their American reality as well as develop their own circle of friends and colleagues. In describing the process of her post-conversion and the evolution of her relationship with immigrant Muslims, Williams also told me that she took her shahada in a mosque in Detroit, Michigan, and she moved to Bowling Green City, Ohio, to pursue her graduate education and struck acquaintance with some non-Muslim friends whom she found more understanding of her conversion than many Muslims were.¹⁶⁹ Talking about her non-Muslim friends, she said, “People here do not think that I am a convert. Like if I do not tell them,

¹⁶⁷ Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.


¹⁶⁹ Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
like who are non-Muslims that I am a convert. They do not think anything of it. But all born-Muslims, in general, she is a convert.”

The above quotation illustrates not only Williams’ deep frustration and disappointment with immigrant Muslims, but also reflects her intellectual growth and development in understanding her own religion. In other words, the type of criticism she articulates aligns with her attempts to integrate her multiple identities together and to live peacefully as an American-veiled Muslim girl. In his essay, Road refers to this phase of American Muslim converts as the “maturity stage.” Road further explains: “At this stage many new Muslims tend to search for new understanding of Islamic ideas and attitudes, and it is at this point that many new Muslims actively start to shape a new understanding of Islam to particular cultural context they live in.”

According to Road, converts arrive at this stage when they become more aware of the infallible nature of immigrant Muslims and see them as human beings who are bound to commit sins and mistakes. Upon arriving at this stage, converts rely more on their own interpretation of Islamic texts that match up well with American context.

Based on our conversation, I also learned that the other issue that Williams had with transnational Muslims is related to cultural problems. Immigrant Muslims often see their relationships with new American Muslims deteriorate when they tend to mix culture and religion very often. In this vein, Williams evokes a painful experience at an immigrant mosque where she felt marginalized and discriminated against because of her Polish-American culture. She said:

170 Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.


172 Ibid., 50.
I have never been to a mosque where they had Polish food, like it is always cultural food, cultural practices. This night we’re having Pakistani food, this night we’re having Egyptian food, this night we’re having Somalia food. It is broken down by culture in every mosque. I have been to a mosque where they had American food. There is potluck and this is where I fit (smile). It isn’t an intentional exclusion. People do what they know and associate with people that are like them. It is not like people are mean to me.173

Two points should be noted in regard to the preceding quote. First, Williams addresses a profound cultural problem that lie at the heart of the troubled relationship between transnational and American Muslim converts, particularly the difficulty that the latter face to fully integrate to their new environment and participate in the unity of Muslim ummah, on the one hand, and build bridges of understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in post-9/11 America, on the other. Western Muslims converts can be great cultural mediators between Muslims and non-Muslims. Zebiri corroborates this point when she argues that, “Many converts feel that, individually and collectively, they have the potential to inject some fresh thinking in the Muslim community.”174

In essence, Anglo-American Muslim converts are highly qualified and better equipped to bring American Muslims and non-Muslims together and educate them about one another. Especially noteworthy, American Muslim converts speak the language (English), know well American culture, and have considerable knowledge of Islamic traditions. Therefore, the exclusion of converts within transnational Muslim community creates more problems for

173Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

174Zebiri, British Muslim Converts, 83.
Muslims living in the U.S. than it does solve. Their marginalization is a major obstacle to their contribution to the betterment of the image of Islam in the United States.

Second, Williams’ remark speaks to the tendency and habits of transnational Muslims to stick only with their own kind. In Williams’ words, “It isn’t an intentional exclusion. People do what they know and associate with people that are like them. It is not like people are mean to me.”\(^{175}\) In effect, Muslim immigrants, like any other groups, are tempted to hang around each other, which is absolutely natural. Another key study informant, Al-Hayani, noted “In general our community is very open and do accept them. The problem comes from the cultural backgrounds. For example, we have cliques in our Islamic centers…Let’s face it, we have Pakistanis who clique with each other, the Lebanese like me, they clique together, and the Egyptians they clique together. I mean this is normal.”\(^{176}\)

In my approach, such views imply that human beings, from infancy, are conditioned and shaped by their cultural practices and religious beliefs. These two facts are most likely to influence individuals’ behaviors, values, and worldview. The more persons grow up the more they become unconsciously ingrained and fixated in their traditions and beliefs. Therefore, people are somehow trained from early childhood to think that culture is religion and vice versa. In the same way, people tend to hold on to certain stereotypes and misconceptions about each other, because of either their fundamental ignorance or negligence to educate themselves about people who look different from them. Again, the more persons grow up and interact with each other the more they become conscious of both their ignorance. The prominent communication

\(^{175}\) Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

\(^{176}\) Al-Hayani, interview with author, September 12, 2010.
scholar Edward T. Hall explains: “In all these crises, the future depends on man’s being able to transcend the limits of individual cultures. To do so, however, he must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of unconscious culture, because, every culture has its own hidden, unique form of unconscious culture.”177 Thus, common sense seems to dictate that human beings stay attached to their own kind because they feel more comfortable with them. The same rule applies to transnational Muslims and American Muslims converts’ relationships. However, what is inadmissible and unacceptable is when immigrants, for example, start to push American Muslims aside, because they do not behave according to Middle Eastern cultural norms or dress like Indo-Pakistani Muslims in clothes such as Sari or traditional outfit. In so doing, they treat American Muslim converts like new born babies who should be instructed how to dress, eat, behave, and so on.

As I listened to the narratives of my informants, I realized that some of them are more knowledgeable of Islamic texts and traditions than many born Muslims. However, they still face some condescending attitudes from immigrant Muslim who are often doubtful about converts’ knowledge of Islam. In my discussion with him, Schreffler observed that two of his best friends are transnational Muslims: one from Libya and the other from Ghana. In the meantime, he criticized those immigrant Muslims who regard themselves as the only ones who have the religious authority over Islam in the United States. He attempted to discredit these claims and explicitly stated that being White American Muslim converts does not mean that one is ignorant about Islam. More precisely, Schreffler remarked that transnational Muslims disqualify his knowledge of Islam mainly because of his appearance as a White male with pale skin and blue-

eyes. He qualified some immigrant Muslims’ attitudes as ‘backward thinking’\textsuperscript{178} and described
them as “shady people who give Islam as a whole a very bad name.”\textsuperscript{179} Schreffler went on to
give specific examples of some transnational Muslims’ attempts to disqualify his knowledge of Islam:

I myself am a bite of curiosity. I am a White American who is converting to Islam. I think
what hurt my credibility is again I am very American and I am very White. It is like does
this guy really knows what he’s talking about. The classic image of Islamic guys is
usually Middle Eastern with nice and big beard…usually an old man and if you don’t fit
that image then the assumption is that you can’t really know very much about Islam. I
know just more about Islam than many born-Muslims.\textsuperscript{180}

The above statement attests to the fact that immigrant Muslims strive to impose their “cultural-
religious authority” to borrow Jamillah Karim’s expression.\textsuperscript{181} Obviously, they claim a better
understanding of Islamic texts especially in regard to certain controversial issues like hijab,
polygamy, or gender equality to give few examples. Regarding this point, Michelle Cottle writes
about some clashes between African-American and immigrant Muslims as follows: “The
immigrant community itself at times treats African-American as second-class Muslims.”\textsuperscript{182} In
another situation, Cottle quotes Mohamed Abdoul Rahman, an African-American Muslim,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{178} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.
\textsuperscript{179} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.
\textsuperscript{180} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.
\textsuperscript{181} Karim, Jamillah, “Between Immigrant Islam and Black Liberation: Young Muslims Inherit Global Muslims and
Laura K. Egenderf (Detroit: Green haven Press, 2006), 69, Quoting one convert.
\end{flushleft}
complaining about transnational Muslims’ mistreatment of American Muslim converts: “I used to be around a lot of Eastern Muslims…They would come over here and treat us like we are babes in Islam. They thought they should be our leader just because they could speak Arabic. They would come to into [our] masjids and try to be our teachers.” By emphasizing their knowledge of Islamic laws, immigrants create a racial hierarchy among Muslims which reinforces their superiority over indigenous American Muslims. Again, this problem represents a major obstacle for developing an effective and productive communication between immigrants and Americans.

In the process of my research, I also found out that immigrant and American Muslim converts rarely mingle with each other, except on rare occasions such as religious holidays and celebrations. For example in educational institutions, international students who come from Muslim countries do not often seek out American Muslims on campus or mix with them on a regular basis. In interviews, some informants complained that international Muslim students usually establish their own circles and networks with their countrymen or student with whom they identify geographically and linguistically. One convert told me about her exclusion within the MSA (Muslim Student Association). Maria Williams sounded very bothered with the fact that international student Muslims use only Arabic to make announcements in their meetings and gatherings. As a result, she remarked that American Muslim students are alienated and excluded from many activities of the MSA because of linguistic barriers and communication limitations. Here are Williams’ own words:

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I cannot speak Arabic which I think is the prerequisite for communicating with Muslims on campus. I think lots of Muslims on campus are international students and I am not, so like the Saudi Association. I am never going to go to Saudi Association, because I am not a Saudi. I did not know even it exists. I feel comfortable when I am with Muslims, but getting to meet Muslims is the hardest part.\textsuperscript{184}

Such attitudes from international Muslim students generate mistrust and misunderstanding between American Muslim converts and them. From Williams’ viewpoint, Muslim students do not show willingness to accept American Muslims. In other words, they are not ready to go out of their ways to seek American Muslim converts and make them more comfortable with their new environment. In so doing, they create walls between converts and them. Here, Williams’ experience is a microcosm of a broad and a bigger problem that American Muslims generally experience at immigrant Muslims’ gatherings. Haddad articulates this issue clearly in the following assertion: “The linguistic barrier of not being able to speak or read Arabic or Urdu was often mentioned as a difficulty in finding acceptance in Muslim communities. Some describe feeling out of place at the masjid \{mosque\} because they could not understand the sermon. They have to learn to live in segregated space.”\textsuperscript{185} From this perspective, the usage of Arabic and Urdu languages is interpreted by American Muslim converts as an attempt from immigrant Muslims to promote their cultural identity over those of Americans. Converts accuse immigrants of privileging their Middle Eastern or Indian-Pakistanis cultures over the teachings of the prophet.

\textsuperscript{184} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010.

\textsuperscript{185} Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission,” 41.
These types of attitudes create sensitivities among Muslims and breed suspicion about immigrants’ ethnocentrism.

Figure 2. On January 3, 2011 in Ada, Ohio, Khaled Esseissah, on the left, Samar Alhashime, Palestine student living in the U.S. since fifteen years, standing behind, and Aisha Williams (American convert) on the right. (Picture was taken at the occasion of a dinner at Samar’s house). When transnational Muslims and American Muslim converts come together and interact positively. Photo by Khaled Esseissah

Nonetheless, the results of my research indicate that there are other study participants who have had a very positive interaction with immigrant Muslims. In contrast, they expressed favorable opinions about transnational Muslims, saying that they were extremely helpful and nice with them. They invited them to their homes (as shown in figure 2 at Samar Alhashime’s house), catered to them, provided guidance about Islamic traditions, and even expressed desire to provide them with Arabic lessons.

Indeed, Samar Alhashime threw a dinner party for Aisha Williams and me at her house in Ada, Ohio, On January 3, 2011. She generously prepared an extravagant and lavish oriental meal
mixed with appetizers, desert, and the like. It was quite impressive. Over dinner, we talked about
certain issues related to Islam and Christianity, the understanding of certain Islamic *hadith* and
*Qur’anic* verses in American context. Basically, the discussion revolved around practices of
Islam and rituals as well as the mixing between culture and Islam. For example, one issue that
came out during our conversation is whether Muslims are allowed to wish happy Christmas or
happy New Year to non-Muslims and we had different opinions about it. Moreover, Samar also
shared some of her experiences in the United States. She talked excitedly and positively about
her studies, work experience, and interaction with the non-Muslim female community in Ada,
Ohio.

In this way, the social gathering between immigrant and convert American Muslims
exemplifies paradigmatically a positive and meaningful exchange between transnational and
American Muslim converts. For example, Williams showed acute eagerness to learn about
oriental food and insisted to take the recipe of some of the dishes from Samar in order to prepare
them on her own. This demonstrates the desire of an American Muslim convert to integrate fully
to American Muslim *ummah* and embrace its cultural diversity in terms of food and eating
habits. In the course of our dinner, Williams seemed very keen and showed a great desire to learn
Arabic. She rehearsed and repeated any Arabic expressions that Samar and I spoke.

But what the above social gathering really demonstrates is the solidarity and brotherhood that
Islam is able to create between Muslims in the United States, regardless of their cultural
background, racial identity, or station in life. This unity among converts participates in the
formation of an American Muslim *ummah* as an “imagined community,” to use Benedict
Anderson’s phrase. An American Islamic community that perceives itself as bound not only by common sacred text and rituals, but also by a common challenge that all its members face since the tragic attacks of September 11th, 2001.

**CONVERTS’ RELATION WITH AMERICAN SOCIETY**

When asked how they feel about being Muslims and Americans in the post-9/11 context and how they are reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable facts, my informants frequently observed that they do not see any contradictions or conflict in their multiple identities. Interestingly enough, only male participants who observed that they do not see any conflict with being American and Muslim reasoned that Islamic traditions are in perfect harmony with American values, especially the constitution. Probably, White American Muslim male face less discrimination and prejudice than their female counterparts, because they blend easily into mainstream America. Meanwhile, White American female converts, as previously pointed out, are more likely to face more challenges living in post-9/11 America, because of their Islamic dress as well as their skin color.

Indeed, male informants vigorously and confidently reported that their Islamic faith and American core values are not incompatible and can coexist in perfect harmony with each together, even though they acknowledged some challenges they encounter in post-9/11 America. For example, one convert, Mark, employed W. E.B. Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness” to describe his dual identity and affirm that his Muslim identity does not conflict with his American culture. Mark went on to describe his multiple identities as follows: “I think it would

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be very problematic to think of them as separate identities. I am a Muslim for some people I am not American or not patriotic which I believe it is completely false assumptions. They see a split in my identity, but for me, my religion is me and so I am American as well.”

Here, Mark implies that he simultaneously embraces the best of both worlds: Islamic traditions and American values. More specifically, Mark refers to the notion that there is no compulsion in Islam which correlates perfectly well with the American constitution that guarantees the right of individuals to practice any religion. Meanwhile, Mark rejects any practices that he judges as not Islamic such as lying, using drugs, or even the killing of innocent civilians. From Mark’s perspective, these practices are not only anti-Islamic but also un-Americans. Another study participant expressed similar views about the compatibility of Islamic teaching with American core principles, Schreffler responded when asked if he sees a split in his identity. He fired back:

I think that a false comparison. I don’t think that there should be a conflict. People create a conflict. I believe that American and what we stand for in this nation is pluralistic society you can practice whatever religion you want as long as you are not violating the right of another person’s right and when I look at Islam it says there should be no compulsion in religion. What scares me is like the hyper conservative Christians…As an American Muslim, I believe that you can be whatever you want to be here. I feel like that I’m a better avatar of American culture than the conservative Christians.  


On this understanding, both Mark and Schreffler categorically oppose the notion that there is a clash between Islam and the United States. In that sense, they implicitly accuse religious extremists and politicians on both sides of creating clashes between Islam and the United States for economic and political gains. For example, Schreffler’s statement, “what scares me is like the hyper conservative Christians,” clearly blames these groups for some of the ongoing tensions between Islam and the United States. In this capacity, Mark and Schreller argue that Islamic values and American teachings are not in conflict with each other. Other scholarly works corroborate these claims. Ahmed points out, paraphrasing one of his study participants, that “Najah Bazzy described herself by fusing her identities: ‘I am a devout Arab, a devout American, and a devout Muslim.”\(^\text{189}\) I should, however, note that there are many levels at which Islam and secular America are in contradictory terms with each other. For example, secular America supports same sex marriage while Islam does not; America endorses bank interest when Islam does not allow Muslims to use those benefits; and more significantly, Islam requires Muslims to submit themselves only to the will of Allah and apply the teaching of the Qur’an while Americans are bound only by the principles of the constitution.

In discussions with my informants, I also realized that the attitudes of converts’ families sometimes mirror the views of the general society toward them. Regarding this point, Zebiri writes: “The reaction of converts encounter from their families of origin reflect the attitudes of society at large…”\(^\text{190}\) In this way, Americans have formulated certain views and images of Islam and Muslims, based on the media’s negative coverage, that affects their interaction with their

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\(^{190}\) Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 75.
fellow Muslim citizens. For instance, Schreffler said that he was unfairly treated and forced to leave his job because of his Islamic faith.\textsuperscript{191} Schreffler’s ex-boss began to mistreat him when he found out about his being an American who converted to Islam. Schreffler said: “Actually in one of my previous job, there was pretty blatant discrimination when my manager discovered, oh, this guy is a Muslim. I was practicing Ramadan… after he discovered that I am a Muslim it would be appropriate for me to do all this grainy work.”\textsuperscript{192} This remark shows that the characterization of Muslims as threat in the news may lead to their mistreatment and exclusion in some public places. In thinking along these lines, it is important to note that stereotypes may contribute to racism against Muslims in the United States. According to Stuart Hall, “Stereotyping deploys a strategy of splitting”\textsuperscript{193} and excludes certain groups because they are different from the dominant culture and that leads to their exploitation which benefits the ruling group. Hall argues that the use of misrepresentation of certain groups is also a way of maintaining power and the order of a system. In this case, American converts to Islam since 9/11 are oppressed in the news, because of their religious identity and difference of appearance.

Likewise, Maria Williams observed that her biggest challenge was dealing with misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam. She said:

My dad was more concerned about how people will treat me. He was like, there is a fine line in this country about what people think is acceptable and what people do not think is acceptable, and this is like over that line…Our country is not nice to Muslims and we

\textsuperscript{191} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.

\textsuperscript{192} Schreffler, interview with author, September 25, 2010.

know about it. When I wanted to cover my hair it became more an issue because I really wanted to cover my hair and my parents were like we can deal with it. But, you are not being able to get a job, you are not being able to do this, people are going to treat poorly.\textsuperscript{194}

According to Williams’ parents, she is bound to remain unemployed and will be treated with disrespect by many of her fellow citizens, just because she chooses to cover her hair and follow certain beliefs and practices. This situation shows that Williams’ \textit{hijab} had turned her from being a privileged White, educated, young girl to being a person with a minority status. That is to say that signs such as \textit{hijab}, turban, even certain names such Muhammad and Osama or certain Middle Eastern looks have come to be understood or represented as markers of Islamic identity.\textsuperscript{195} What is interesting is the way these signifiers are represented in the news and associated with oppression or terrorism. As Stuart Hall points out:

\begin{quote}
In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices… In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them-the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.\textsuperscript{196}
\end{quote}

In my understanding, there is nothing wrong with establishing boundaries between people and marking ethnic or cultural differences. It reinforces the diversity of our world and enriches our

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\textsuperscript{194} Williams, interview with author, April 21, 2010
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\textsuperscript{195} Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming.” 290.
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\textsuperscript{196} Hall, Representation cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, 3.
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understanding of one another. What is wrong or unacceptable is using these differences to legitimize the mistreatment of certain groups or persons, on the one hand, and reinforce the hegemony and cultural domination of one group over the rest on the other hand.

Moreover, Williams’ story with her father epitomizes the spread and increase of “Everyday of Orientalism” as a prevalent mindset among a big portion of Americans about Islam and Muslim around the world. In his book, *Globlization and Postcolonialism*, Sankaran Krishna refers to “everyday orientalism,” as a wide range of essentialized and generalized views about Muslims among Americans. He writes: “By everyday Orientalim I mean the illusion a large number of Americans have that they ‘know’ what Muslim Middle Easterners are like and what their essential characteristics are, and the fact that these characteristics have endured, without much change, for centuries.” 197 On this understanding, there is little or no attention that is given to American Muslim converts in U.S. news media, because these groups do not fit the category of Middle Eastern/South Asian/Arab/ Muslims.

CONCLUSION

Since the 9/11 tragedy, the story of Islam has become frequent and pervasive in news media in which the American public is constantly bombarded with stories about “Islamic terrorism” and images of veiled “oppressed” Muslim women. The picture of Muslims and Islam is still inaccurate and incomplete as it is represented today in U.S. news media. There are narratives of a growing number of American Muslim converts, since the tragic attacks of September 11th, 2001, which are often silenced and sidelines in the news. In my thesis, I have attempted to give voice to some of these countless and yet voiceless stories of post-9/11 American Muslim converts. I have tried to offer detailed accounts of the narratives of six White Ohioan Muslim converts and their journey to Islam in post-9/11 America. Specifically, I have examined the reasons behind their conversion to Islam, explored their relationships with pre-9/11 American Muslim converts who are overwhelming African-Americans, and, finally, studied their relationships with their non-Muslim families, friends, transnational Muslims in the United States, and their interaction with American society at large.

Drawing on the testimonies of my informants, this research indicates that there are two types of Ohio converts to Islam: intellectual and experimental. Even though the attacks of 9/11 functioned as a catalyst event that intrigued Ohioans’ interest in Islam, my informants reported in various degrees that their conversion to Islam was either through meeting Muslims or by their own reading and investigation about Islam.

As asserted earlier, the findings of the present research suggest that Islam is significantly gaining grounds among White Americans for a wealth of reasons such as the unique oneness of Allah and effect of Qur’an on this population. In conversing with my participants, I also learned that
White American women are drawn to Islam for other alluring reasons such as Islam’s emphasis on family unity and motherhood as well as the desire for an Islamic marriage.

Based on my fieldwork and conversation with my informants, this research concludes that American Muslim converts experiment serious challenges in post-9/11 America. More precisely, they face stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam, which is a major religion that provoked a total change of their identity, habits, practices, and, in some cases, appearance (especially for women). This study finds that conversion to Islam has generally disrupted the relationship of the new converts with their family, friends, and society. Islam requires the adoption of a whole wide range of practices that sometime pose great challenges to new Muslims to apply. Moreover, this thesis research suggests that post-9/11 White American Muslim converts in Ohio have generally had a few unproductive interactions with transnational Muslims, with minor exceptions. Overall, post-911 Ohioan Muslim converts are developing an understanding of Islam that responds to their American cultural reality. In other words, they are finding ways to balance between their Islamic identities without losing their American culture.

Overall, the findings of this research provide the groundwork for additional research about American converts to Islam after the September 11th attacks by forging a new direction in the scholarship on Muslims and Islam in the U.S. Nonetheless, many questions remain unanswered and issues unresolved. Among the issues that can be addressed in future research are the increase of African-American inmate converts to Islam and their resettlement processes after prison, the contribution these individuals bring with them to increase or decrease understanding within Muslim ummah, and their effort to be bridge builders between American Muslims and non-Muslims.
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To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Khaled Essiessah and I am working on my Master’s Degree in the American Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green State University. I am writing this paper for my graduate class, *Ethnography on the Edge: ACS 6370*. This project studies the phenomenon of American converts to Islam after September 11, 2001. Throughout this project, I intend to interview the newly converted Americans to Islam and talk with them about their experience in Islam.

Dear Sir/Madam, I would like to invite you to share your experience with me. Your voluntary participation in this project is a good opportunity to talk about your experience and share your personal story. Although, there might be no direct benefits to you, the study might help you dispel some of the stereotypes that are associated with American Muslims. It will ensure increased understanding between Muslim immigrant groups in the United States and American Muslims. Your participation will also enhance their relations and promote cultural
dialogue within Muslims in America. You will also help in educating other people about your experience as a new Muslim. I estimate that your initial participation will be about one hour and a half to answer all the interview questions. With your permission, I intend to tape record all the information provided in the interview.

This paper studies the phenomenon of conversion to Islam after 9/11 in the United States and the reasons behind the rapid growth of Islam among Americans. By examining the stories and experiences of individual American new converts, I intend to shed a light on some of their struggle to assimilate and negotiate their new religious identity within the dominant American Judaic-Christian religion and culture. I also would like to examine the cultural encounter between these new American Muslims converts and immigrant Muslims. In other words, I intend to address the cultural tensions between domestic and international Islam within the United States.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw anytime. You may decide to skip questions (or not do a particular task) or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. All participants of this project must be over eighteen years old. Information and data that you provide in this project will be confidential and kept in a safe location. I plan to keep all this information with my personal documents in a locked desk in my room at home, and I will keep the key with me at all times. The only person that is going to access to this information is me. I also intend to use your answers, remarks, and observations in my paper. As I already mentioned earlier your participation in this project is totally voluntary and that entitles you the right to either reveal your name and location or keep them unknown. Either ways, I am fully committed to respect your desires in this project. Upon completion of this project, I would like to
use the information provided for future research; should you wish me to destroy it I will. The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

Should you have any questions or concerns, you can reach me at 231-445-3205 or by email at khalede@bgsu.edu/khaledm98@gmail.com. You could also contact my advisor Dr. Sridevi Menon at (419)-372-7119 or smenon@bgsu.edu. In addition, you could also contact the Chair of Human Subject Review Board at Bowling State University at (419)372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. By completing and returning this form, you are indicating your consent to participate in this project.

Please indicate in the check box below if you wish your name to remain confidential or not:

Yes ☐  No ☐

Please indicate in the check box below if you wish your information to be recorded or not:

Yes ☐  No ☐

Thank you for your time and participation

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Signature of the participant: ______________

Date: _______________________________
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How and where did you learn about Islam?

2. When did you convert to Islam?

3. How old were you when you converted to Islam?

4. What made you change your belief system?

5. What was your level of education when you converted to Islam?

6. What was your religious and philosophical background?

7. How did your family react to your conversion?

8. How do you negotiate your new religious identity with your American identity?

9. Are there any challenges or problems that you face today as a Muslim in America?

10. What was your opinion about Islam and Muslims before your conversion?

11. What do you think of the teachings of the Nation of Islam? Are there any differences or similarities between the Nation of Islam and traditional Islam?
APPENDIX C. BGSU HSRB APPROVAL

April 2, 2010

TO: Khaled Mohamed Essaissah
ACS

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10C246GE7

TITLE: Post 9/11 and the Increase in the Number of American Converts to Islam

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of March 29, 2010, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on March 14, 2011. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsrb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
The "clean" stamped consent document is coming via campus mail.

c: Dr. Menon

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7