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Conversion to Islam in Colorado

Patrick D. Bowen
University of Denver

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CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN COLORADO

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master's of Arts

By

Patrick D. Bowen

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Advisor: Liyakat Takim

Author: Patrick D. Bowen
Title: CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN COLORADO
Advisor: Liyakat Takim
Degree Date: June 2009

ABSTRACT

In the scholarship concerning conversion to Islam in the West, few books or articles have been written that examine non-African American US converts. Furthermore, this literature generally neglects using models of conversion for analyzing US Muslims. This thesis is an attempt to begin such a project. For this thesis, I interviewed 13 converts to Islam over the course of a month and a half at a local mosque: 8 females and 5 males; 9 white, 3 Latina/o, and 1 non-African American black. These converts told me their stories of conversion: beginning with their life prior to conversion, the process leading up to conversion, the conversion experience, and the events that took place after their conversion. In this thesis I compare their responses with other studies of non-African American converts in the West. While these converts share many similarities with their European counterparts, there are 4 prominent differences: the Denver converts, on the whole, had religious upbringings; most have moved several times throughout their lives; European converts tended to have higher education levels; and Denver converts are far less attracted to intellectual aspects of Islam, while being more attracted to spiritual aspects.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Europe and America is representative of many important issues in the academy and in politics: race, religion, pluralism, Islam, globalization, and of course, terrorism¹—social constructs that have played a crucial role throughout US history, but are now increasingly given prominence due to current political situations. Until the last 8 years, however, modern Western conversion to Islam, particularly by non-African Americans, has received little attention from academics.

Two thousand eight marked the 30 year anniversary of the first sociological study of non-African American converts to Islam in the contemporary West. Nafees-El Batool Khan's 4-page article observed, among other things, the now well-known pre-condition

¹ However, the conversion of Americans into terrorist organizations will not be covered in depth in this thesis. Here are some findings: Based on the stories of the converts we know about, they are generally white and young (average age 18.33), save for one of the most notorious, Jose Padilla, who is of Puerto Rican descent. These individuals typically are attracted to mainline Sunni Islam after being disenchanted with US culture. While attending a mosque they are approached by a small group of Muslim men who explain to the convert that "true" Muslims fight to help their Muslim brothers against their enemies. It is unknown how many US converts have actually joined these Muslim fighters. John Walker Lindh: 16, Evelyn Nieves, "A Nation Challenged: The American Fighter," *New York Times*, 4 December 2001; Jose Padilla: 23, Deborah Sontag, "Terror Suspect's Path from Streets to Brig," *New York Times*, 25 April 2004; Aukai Collins: 18, Aukai Collins, *My Jihad*, (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2002); Adam Gadahn: 16, Amy Argetsinger, "Muslim Teen Made Conversion to Fury—Intelligence Sources Say Californian Was on Tape," *Washington Post*, 2 December 2004; Abu Hamid: 16, Colin Soloway, "Tale of an American Taliban," *Newsweek*, 138, no. 24 (2001): 34; Ryan G. Anderson: 21, Michael Janofsky, "Soldier is Facing Charges of Trying to Aid Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, 13 February 2004.

for conversion of not having a strong religious upbringing.² After this brief report, there was little, if any, scholarly attention paid to non-African American converts in the modern West until Poston's 1992 book *Islamic Da'wah in the West*.³ Since 1992, however, scholars have shown much more interest, particularly after 9/11 and the arrest of John Walker Lindh. According to the Library of Congress, there have been 12 English language books published on that subject since 2001 compared to 9 books from all previous years.⁴ Academic journals, newspapers and magazines have seen an even more dramatic surge in their publications on US non-African American converts.⁵ While newspapers and magazines have focused mainly on US converts who have joined terrorist organizations, the percentage of converts who actually turn to terrorism remains only a small fraction of all US converts.⁶ At the same time, though, conversion to Islam significantly increased since 9/11. One report estimates 34,000 Americans converted in the months following the attack; another estimates 200,000 US citizens convert to Islam every year.⁷ Because of the difficulty of interviewing converts, any accurate number will

² Nafees-El Batool Kahn, "The Phenomenon of Conversion," *The Bulletin of Christian Institutes of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1978): 46.

³ Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴ Call number BP 170.5

⁵ A search on Academic Search Premier for "Islam and Conversion" produces 346 results with 219 dated after 9/11.

⁶ Based off a perusal of the results found in note 5.

⁷ From a CAIR report. Cited in Brendan Bernhard, *White Muslim: From LA to New York... To Jihad?* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2006), 14; "NBC NEWS: 20000 Americans Convert To ISLAM Each Year, 75% Of Them Women," September 9, 2008, <http://video.msn.com/?mkt=en-us&brand=msnbc&fg=email&vid=1151784d-66c1-4310-afc2-06ed464eb2ed&from=00> (accessed January 29, 2009). There is some question as to the reliability of these numbers, particularly if they are simply repeating the estimates of Muslim leaders who may desire to inflate numbers to make their religion seem more important.

be hard to acquire, but the trend of increased conversion has been noted in several places.⁸

Within the last 30 years, however, relatively little academic research has been conducted to examine converts in the US. The literature dealing with the US is typically limited to converts' testimonies whereas models for conversion are not applied. Overall, most of the existing conversion literature deals with European converts, especially those in England. That research will indeed be helpful to provide analysis for future studies of conversion to Islam in the US, but that help will be somewhat limited because of the qualitative differences between the US and European converts and the Muslim communities into which they convert. In England, for example, there is a large and well-established convert community which is generally composed of Caribbean blacks and well-educated whites. These converts are frequently introduced to Islam by acquaintances of South Asian heritage. In the US, on the other hand, there is a thriving African American convert community, while the white and Latino converts are not as well organized, and the growth of these US convert communities has been quite different from those in Europe. These differences have given US converts distinct experiences that cannot be accurately understood by using only the results acquired in the study of Europeans. Furthermore, as the body of literature on conversion to Islam has grown, the inevitable result has been theories and analyses becoming increasingly diverse. With

⁸ Difficulty in interviewing converts after 9/11 was noted in Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet* (NY: Palgrave, 2004), 10; Others who have noted the increased rate of conversion: Bernhard, 14; Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 214; Craig S. Smith, "Europe Fears Islamic Converts May Give Cover for Extremism," *New York Times* 19 July 2004; Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West," in *Women Embracing Islam*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 1; Hisham Aidi, "Let Us be Moors: Islam, Race and 'Connected Histories,'" *Middle East Report* 229 (2003): 43.

these issues in mind, this thesis has two purposes: A. It assesses the progress of 30 years of the study of conversion of non-African Americans to Islam in the contemporary West (chapter 1). B. It takes this work as a foundation which will be used to analyze the conversion experiences of 13 converts in Colorado who convert for different reasons than their European counterparts (chapters 2-4). Because of time, scheduling, and financial constraints which prohibited me from interviewing several non-convert Muslims for this study, the thesis aims at primarily looking at the experiences and motives of the converts, as reported by them. This method, of course, has its limitations which will be addressed in chapter 4. However, I should also point out here that because of these limitations, I am also not able to go in depth into what *kind* of Islam these converts practice. That type of analysis would require a very thorough understanding of the specific trends in the local community, and to get that info I would need to conduct an expansive and long-term ethnographic study. While it is an important issue, it is not key in this thesis and can be pursued in future work. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the conversion experiences as reported by Colorado Muslims in light of other studies. Moreover, I believe this case study may provide insight into the motives and backgrounds of the large wave of people who have converted in the US since 9/11.

Chapter 1: The Study of Modern Western Converts to Islam

This first chapter examines the history of academic analysis of conversion to Islam in the modern West. This literature has laid the foundation for future study on the topic. Over the years, the analysis of conversion to Islam has become increasingly complex as researchers have used different theories, studied different Western Muslims, and drawn a wide variety of conclusions—often without stepping back and analyzing why these conclusions have varied. The aim of this chapter is to do just that: to present the trends that have characterized the methodology and the findings of studies of Western converts, and to explain the seemingly contradictory conclusions. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will later use some of these models to analyze my findings.

One of the earliest scholarly discussions of the topic was in Thomas Walker Arnold's seminal book, *The Preaching of Islam*, first published in 1896. The appendix, "Converts to Islam That Have Not Come Under Direct Missionary Influence," mentions a handful of modern Western Europeans and Americans who converted. Arnold even cites evidence for perhaps the first American convert: a Methodist missionary known only as Norman who converted in Constantinople and returned to the US to preach Islam around 1875.⁹ And while Arnold briefly discusses other converts, even the now famous

⁹ Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore: Shirkat-I-Qalam, 1956), 458; based on the source Garcin de Tassy, *La Langue et Literature Hindoustanies en 1875* (Paris: Librairie orientale de

Alexander Webb, he makes no attempt to offer an interpretation of the trends of the people who convert. Sociological analysis of conversion to Islam in the modern Western context owes a debt to the research and theories on general religious conversion developed throughout the twentieth century. The first sociological study of converts, however, which was conducted by Khan, did not use these theories. Khan simply found general patterns among 25 (14 male and 11 female) converts. Poston, who is the first to apply a variety of these theories to Islam in the modern West, traces his influences, like most conversion theorists, to William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹⁰ The popularity of James' work awakened interest in the psychological analysis of religious practitioners and their experiences, including conversion. Poston notes, though, that James himself owed much of his theory of conversion to Starbuck and Leuba who studied Christian converts. Leuba, who earlier in his life had a conversion experience, though later believed conversion to be a mere psychological projection, wrote his dissertation on the subject in 1896. Starbuck, a pupil of James, made the "first successful use of the questionnaire method of research" when he sent out surveys to several Christian communities. Eric J. Sharpe remarked that Starbuck's actions were "bold, naïve and immature...nevertheless it worked."¹¹ James used the responses to those questionnaires for *Varieties* and agreed with Starbuck that religious conversion was most common with teens who had to integrate:

Maisonneuve, 1875), 92. In 1935, an article implied some converts to the Ahmadiya movement were white, but only analyzed the African Americans: G. H. Bousquet, "Moslem Religious Influences in the United States," *The Moslem World* 25, no. 1 (1935): 40-44.

¹⁰ Poston, 146.

¹¹ Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1975), 106.

...the various influences impinging upon the self from the different spheres of one's environment. International, interracial, and interethnic concerns along with political, social, and economic alternatives must be combined with specific cultural factors and individual idiosyncrasies...Since failure to accomplish this task of integration in some way (not necessarily by means of adopting religious faith) can result in psychological malformation and mental illness, conversion has, according to James, an essentially positive function.¹²

These ideas set the framework for the study of converts to Islam, a framework that is still in use today.¹³ Subsequently, developments in conversion theories proliferated, though the vast majority of the studies were psychology-based and looked only at white Christians. Salzman and Spellman, Baskett, Byrne saw conversion as a “pseudo-solution,” in which people simply transferred anger and irrationality to a new belief and no real reduction of anxiety took place. In 1965, Roberts, conversely, found “that those who had stayed with parents’ faith were more neurotic.”¹⁴

Also in 1965, Lofland and Stark, in their seminal work, used sociological theory to look at “a small millenarian cult,”¹⁵ harbingering the ensuing academic fascination with conversion to new religious movements. Lofland and Stark’s work was produced as sociology of religion studies were becoming increasingly concerned with showing

¹² Poston, 146.

¹³ For example, Köse found that 48.6% of his subjects perceived instability in their social worlds in the 2 years prior to conversion, in Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: a study of native British converts* (London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 81; and problems with integration was a key point in Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle,” *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 352.

¹⁴ Leon Salzman, “The Psychology of Religious and Ideological Conversion,” *Psychiatry* 16 (1953): 177-87; Charles Spellman, Baskett, Glen and Byrne, Donn, “Manifest Anxiety as a Contributing Factor in Religious Conversion,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (1971): 245-47; F. J. Roberts, “Some Psychological Factors in Religious Conversion,” *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (1965): 185-87; Poston, 148.

¹⁵ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* (1965): 862.

different levels of depth between individuals' religiosity.¹⁶ This theoretical basis contrasted with the previous era of sociology of religion which saw religious participation as having "unitary" dimensions (i.e, simplistic).¹⁷ This new perspective permitted examining complex and sundry social influences for conversion because it allowed for multiple factors—Lofland and Stark found there to be seven factors for conversion.¹⁸ Besides introducing an enduring model, they offered the idea that conversion was used to "stave off a hostile religious environment" and to "postpone the genuine integrative crisis," a theory later countenanced by Gillespie and Erikson.¹⁹ Erikson termed this postponement the "moratorium process" and specified it as a result of modernization which has created a very complex society in which children have to learn more to become successfully integrated. Erikson said this process usually ended in the person's late 20's at which time most people acquire enough knowledge to become fully integrated. Conversion, Erikson posited, happened during this "moratorium,"²⁰ a theory later utilized by Köse. Conway and Siegelman²¹ offered a unique theory which identified the cause of conversion to be physiological factors; Deutsch²² and Ullman²³

¹⁶ Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 51.

¹⁷ Lofland and Stark note: "Unfortunately, it has become conventional in sociology to treat demographic characteristics, structural or personal frustrations and the like, as completely responsible for 'pushing' persons into collectivities dedicated to protest against the prevailing social order. These factors are not unimportant, but a model composed entirely of them is woefully incomplete.": 864.

¹⁸ Lofland and Stark, 863.

¹⁹ Poston, 149; V. Bailey Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979); Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1968).

²⁰ Köse, *Conversion*, 60.

²¹ Flo Conway and Siegelman, Jim, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1978).

²² A. Deutsch, "Observations on a Sidewalk Ashram," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 32 (1975): 166-75.

²³ C. Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (London: Plenum, 1989).

both postulated that unhappy family environments encouraged conversion; and Heirich²⁴ criticized previous researchers for not being able to show significant psychological differences between converts and the general public.

Poston found 5 general themes in this literature: failure of integration, teens were most likely to convert, there was much stress/anxiety pre-conversion, most had relationships with the people who practiced the religion, and converts followed conscious motivations to convert.²⁵ Poston used these themes to analyze his research, and they can be found in many other works. However, for conversion to Islam in the West, the most widely used conversion theory has been that of Lofland and Skonovd.²⁶ They introduced 6 conversion motifs to explain the most common reasons people converted. Lofland and Skonovd claimed that converts usually undergo one prominent motif, though sometimes they may undergo more than one simultaneously. Their method allows for the converts and researchers to each ascribe reasons for conversion, and synthesize these reasons into one model.²⁷ Lastly, the use of converts' testimonials has emerged as a valid academic method because of developments within anthropology based on the influences of postmodernism, feminism and minority movements. Nevertheless, there has been

²⁴ Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* (1977): 653.

²⁵ Poston, 154.

²⁶ For example, it is used in Köse, *Conversion*; Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004); Mounia Lakhdar et al., "Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults: A Systematic Inventory of Motives," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2007): 2; and Gè Speelman, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Conversion Stories," *Exchange* 35, no. 3 (2006): 306.

²⁷ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 374.

continued debate over what method is best, and if descriptions of people should ever be put into the framework of models and statistics or not.²⁸

Study of contemporary Western converts to Islam, however, did not begin by applying these theories. Besides Arnold's observations, one of the earliest academic studies of US converts to Islam was a 1938 article attributing African American conversion to a "Voodoo Cult" (the Nation of Islam) to the need to mobilize in order to resist systemic racial oppression. The researcher observed that the African Americans who most readily accepted the Nation of Islam were recent immigrants from the rural southern US to US cities, who experienced difficulties adjusting to the cities' social ills.²⁹ But besides a few sensationalized newspaper stories about the Nation of Islam, the small number of converts to Islam meant that relatively little attention was paid to them in academic circles. In 1961, C. Eric Lincoln published his seminal work, *The Black Muslims in America*, in which he also attributed African American conversion to primarily social factors.³⁰ Though it is undeniable that conversion to Islam by African Americans was greatly influenced by social motivations, these are not the only motives. Nevertheless, in doing so, Lincoln reified "Black Muslims" as a distinct group as opposed to immigrant and second generation Muslims. At the time, white and Latino converts, because of their small numbers, were virtually excluded from the discussion.

Besides the aforementioned Methodist preacher named Norman, whites have been converting to Islam in the US at least as early as 1888 when Alexander Webb became a

²⁸ Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), 13.

²⁹ Erdmann Doane Beynon, "The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit," *The American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 6 (1938): 899.

³⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* 3rd ed. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1994), 26.

Muslim after reading about the religion.³¹ In the 1940's, testimonials of converts began appearing in various newspapers and magazines.³² The Sufi movement of the 1970's attracted many converts as well. During that decade, increasing amounts of literature began appearing that explored conversion to Islam in pre-modern times. Poston found that the theories presented by the leading authors, Levtzion and Bulliet, were too generalized to apply to modern converts.³³ When Poston began his research on converts, he found that most converts were reluctant to participate, so he resorted to analyzing testimonials of 72 US and European converts. Poston found that 71 out of 72 converted only after a protracted "process" of studying about Islam, rather than having a "spontaneous," emotion-driven conversion.³⁴ Köse, whose monograph *Conversion to Islam* was the first study that applied the aforementioned theories to living Western converts, agreed with Poston's conclusion.³⁵ Köse's work was incredibly thorough and aimed to see if these many theories could be applied to Muslims. Among his findings were: Ullman's theory of familial problems in childhood led to conversion did not apply; 60% of his subjects had at least a B.A., showing the high education level of his converts; and 75% had no religious commitment prior to conversion, though they did already believe in a god. By applying a large number of theories on a study of actual living people, a first in a study of Western Muslim converts, his work has become the main referent for most subsequent research on converts. Three years after the publishing of *Conversion*, the journal *Social Compass* ran a special issue about Muslim conversion in

³¹ Emory H. Tunison, "Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb: First American Muslim," *The Arab World* 1, no. 3 (1945): 16.

³² Poston, 210.

³³ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁵ Köse, *Conversion*, 89.

Western Europe.³⁶ Since that time, there have been several journal articles and a handful of studies published as books on the subject, many dealing with women and prison converts while using European subjects.³⁷ The monographs are often difficult to obtain, aside from the books by Roald and Zebiri. On the other hand, biographies and testimonials (often published online) have become increasingly available.

The newer findings have deviated from Köse's. The work by Poston and Köse found the average age of conversion to be in the late 20s and early 30s,³⁸ asserting that most converts choose Islam after extensive study (though not necessarily practice) of other religions, while recent studies by al-Qwidi and Zebiri show that their subjects converted in their mid to lower 20s³⁹ with less "spiritual seeking." Both issues are related. Most studies have found that when people convert to Islam in the West, they begin to act out the new gender roles that they interpret as encouraged by orthodox Islam.⁴⁰ Men and women often refrain from extramarital sex, the women usually wear a *hijab* and leg and arm coverings, and in some cases both avoid even shaking hands with the opposite sex. Zebiri showed that female converts often took on very traditional roles

³⁶ Stefano Allievi and Felice Dassetto, "Introduction," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 243.

³⁷ Anna Mansson, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Van Nieuwkerk (2006); Carolyn Moxey Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Carol Anway, "American Women Choosing Islam," *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* eds. John L. Esposito and Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 179-98; Carol L. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee's Summit, MO: Yawna Publications, 1996); Basia Spaler and Slah El-Hassan, "Muslim Converts in Prison," *The Howard Journal* 46, no. 2 (2007); Nawal H. Ammar, Robert R. Weaver, and Sam Saxon, "Muslims in Prison: A Case Study from Ohio State Prisons," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 48, no. 4 (2004).

³⁸ Poston: 31.4 in Poston, 166; Köse: 29.7 in Köse, *Conversion*, 37.

³⁹ Al-Qwidi: 25, cited in Zebiri, 43; Zebiri: 23.5 in Zebiri, 43. In a study by Roald, though she did not give an average age, she found that "(80%) were under 30" in Roald, 109.

⁴⁰ For example, see Madeleine Sultan, "Choosing Islam: a Study of Swedish Converts," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 330; Van Nieuwkerk, 4.

in their marriages to Muslims, particularly by leaving the workforce.⁴¹ Reluctance to speak to a researcher of the opposite sex was also noted by Zebiri⁴² and should be seen as a vital factor in the research results of all studies. Köse, who is a man, had a subject pool with more men than women while Roald and Zebiri, who are both women, had more female subjects than male.⁴³ Roald and Zebiri, thus—because of Muslim rules prohibiting Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, while allowing Muslim men to marry Christian and Jewish women—found higher percentages of converts who had been married to (nominal) Muslims at the time of conversion than Köse, although Köse did remark that marriage plays a significant role in some of the conversions.⁴⁴ Köse also points out that his female subjects had “unstable” identities growing up.⁴⁵ It is likely, then, that given this insecurity and societal pressure to marry, women would chose to convert faster than men, thereby showing a younger average age of conversion. Poston’s work, which looked at male converts primarily, supports this hypothesis with a high conversion age. It is possible that the reason for the lack of many female testimonials in his analysis reflects the fact that he looked at converts who had converted in the mid-20th century, when females were more restricted in their choices of choosing a husband.⁴⁶ One additional result from this female/male divergence was that only 1/3 of Zebiri’s subjects said that intellectual research of Islam was a key to conversion while

⁴¹ Zebiri, 14.

⁴² Zebiri, 12.

⁴³ Köse, *Conversion*, 2: 50 men, 20 women; Zebiri, 9: 20 women, 10 men; Roald, 97: 58% women.

⁴⁴ Roald, 97; Zebiri, 57; Köse, *Conversion*, 114.

⁴⁵ Köse, *Conversion*, 118.

⁴⁶ Poston, 163.

Köse found intellectual motivations in almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of his.⁴⁷ It appears that, at least in Britain, women and men convert to Islam for different reasons.

In conclusion, I highlight the dearth of studies of conversion to Islam in the US as a multiracial and multigender phenomenon. There have been, of course, a handful of articles which identify this subject, but no single monograph (available to me, at least) like those of Köse, Roald and Zebiri, devoted to analyzing the similarities and dissimilarities between the whole range of US converts. The long time treatment of African American Muslims as a separate subject has not helped either.⁴⁸ There are 3 major obstacles to overcoming this separation. First is the positing of African American motivations for conversion as primarily social.⁴⁹ Second is the self-segregation of ethnically-based convert communities which is also reinforced by racial prejudices in the immigrant Muslim community.⁵⁰ Third is the fact that African American Muslims often share a common social context, urban and predominantly African American neighborhood, and this uniformity contrasts with the diversity of social milieus for other converts who also do not have the experience of racism like that of African Americans.⁵¹ However, these trends are slowly changing. Newer literature on female converts to Islam in the US, by showing similar motives for white and African American converts, demonstrates that we can in fact look at shared psychological and social motivations for

⁴⁷ Zebiri, 56; Köse, *Conversion*, 98.

⁴⁸ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 6. Also, studies of African American Muslims are rarely even listed under the BP 170.5 (conversion to Islam) Library of Congress call number.

⁴⁹ Turner, 6; Edward E. Curtis IV, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 660.

⁵⁰ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America," *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* Eds. John L. Esposito and Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 46.

⁵¹ Nuri Tinaz, *Conversion of African Americans to Islam* (England: University of Warwick, 2001), 99.

both groups. In addition, Richard Turner observed that more and more, African American Muslims are integrating with birthright Muslims and converts.⁵² In fact, a recently published book about the Five Percenters, a group which once had a reputation for being extremely anti-white, is written by a white convert.⁵³ Concurrently, African American understandings of Islam have permeated popular culture and have actually introduced some whites and Latinos to Islamic culture particularly via hip hop, which is often laced with Islamic references,⁵⁴ and movies, especially the very popular *Malcolm X*.⁵⁵ Pointing out this interaction and potential for similar motivations is not to say that a researcher could simply transfer the theories developed for European converts onto US subjects, for the US, as stated above, has a significantly different ethnic makeup for its convert community—African Americans, for example, make up 1/3 of all US Muslims and a large majority of US converts while Blacks make a much smaller percentage in England and even less so throughout the rest of Europe.⁵⁶

A study that comprehensively examines all US converts is needed, and the conversion model offered by Lewis Rambo can help give structure to this kind of study.

⁵² Turner, 232.

⁵³ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

⁵⁴ Hisham Aidi, “‘Verily, There is Only One Hip-Hop Umma’: Islam, Cultural Protest and Urban Marginality,” *Socialism and Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2004): 107. Also, Ibrahim Gonzales, co-founder Alianza Islamica, says he was introduced to Islam by blacks in East Harlem during the 1960s, Bill Weinberg, “Muslims in the Americas Face Scrutiny,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* (2003): 25.

⁵⁵ The movie and the book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, have been very influential. For instance, John Walker found it very inspirational, see “A Long, Strange Trip to the Taliban,” *Newsweek*, 138, no. 25 (2001). Margaret Ramirez, “New Islamic Movement Seeks Latino Converts,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1999 has an interview with a Native American who converted to Islam after reading the book. Also, in N. Khan’s study, the reading of the book “was responsible for the conversion of 8 per cent of the sample,” Khan, 46.

⁵⁶This is the commonly cited percentage (Darrell J. Fasching, Esposito, John, and Lewis, Todd, *Religion and Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267), although this is open to debate. One article says 24%: Ghulam M. Haniff, “The Muslim Community in America: A Brief Profile,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2003): 309. Also, in chapter 2, I present other estimates.

Rambo, in *Understanding Religious Conversion*, offers a 7 stage model that accounts for the various processes that take place throughout a convert's experience. These stages—context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences—are both interactive and accumulative, and account for the fact that sometimes individuals go back and forth between stages.⁵⁷ With this model, Rambo has provided a helpful way of examining the complex processes in conversion with stages that are defined broadly enough to account for several different types of converts and their idiosyncratic motives.

In this thesis, I will use these stages as a framework for evaluating my results in light of other studies on Western converts to Islam. I begin with Rambo's first stage, context, which "encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion." Rambo distinguishes between the "macrocontext" and the "microcontext": the macrocontext is the major systems of the environment in which the conversion takes place (political, religious, economic, etc.) and the microcontext is the "person's family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood."⁵⁸ Over the next 2 chapters, I will discuss the macrocontext, first with a brief overview of conversion in Islam, focusing especially on conversion in the US. In chapter 3 I will examine the history of Islam in Colorado and Colorado's overall social, economic, and political environment. Finally, in chapter 4, I will use the rest of Rambo's stages, beginning with the microcontext of the 13 converts in this study, and analyze them to understand how and why conversion has increased in the US since 9/11.

⁵⁷ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16-17.

⁵⁸ Rambo, 21-22.

Chapter 2: Macrocontext: Conversion to Islam in the US

Conversion to Islam in the US has been the result of myriad movements and individual efforts. From the proselytization efforts of Alexander Webb to the post-9/11 wave of conversion, Islam in the US has attracted a wide range of people who come from very different backgrounds and are introduced to Islam via very different paths. This chapter examines those paths to show how Islam has come to America and has led to the expansion of what it means to be a Muslim in the US. I focus on 2 main issues: the arrivals of Muslims to the US and how Islam has been spread to non-Muslims (which I break down into 3 groups: African Americans, Latinos, and whites).⁵⁹ However, before looking specifically at the US, it is necessary to briefly describe the history of conversion in Islam in general because several factors in this history have contributed to conversion in the US. These issues include Qur'anic exhortations to proselytize, the reasons people have converted to Islam throughout history (which, as I will show, are used again in the reasons US converts give for conversion), and the widespread revival movements in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries which were the cause of several early conversions in the US.

⁵⁹ I do not discuss here Asian, Native American, or any other ethnic group converts because the literature on them is virtually non-existent, so I would not be able to adequately treat their stories.

Conversion in Islamic History

According to the Qur'an, God created all things, and their purpose is to serve and worship Him (6:102; 16:48-50; 21:19-20; 64:1). However, humans are weak, inclined to fight (2:30; 4:28), and are seduced to stray from the correct relationship with God (20:121; 82:6-7). So, in His mercy, God seeks to restore humans to their true relationship. In the Qur'an, this is seen as turning (*taba*) or returning (*inaba*) to God's guidance (*huda*). God can control people, making them return to his guidance (42:8, 13; 48:25), but He also allows people to choose to demonstrate their worth with good deeds (29:9; 45:30), suggesting that conversion ("reversion"—a term that many converts today use) to Islam requires some human initiative.⁶⁰ Another example of using human initiative in order to return to God's guidance is by rationally understanding humankind's place in the world, a process taken by Ibrahim/Abraham (6:74-79). The act of calling (*da'wah*) humans to return to God's guidance is done both by God through signs (2:221) and by Muhammad (7:193; 12:108; 28:87)—and therefore all Muslims, as they are supposed to imitate the Prophet. This "calling" is to be done using "wisdom and goodly exhortation, and hav[ing] disputations with [non-Muslims] in the best manner..." (16:125).⁶¹ These issues are central to the understanding of the meaning of conversion in the Qur'an and its exhortation of Muslims to call others to Islam.

After receiving the revelation in 610 C.E., Muhammad did not publicize it for 3 years. Meanwhile, he "called" to Islam those closest to him: Khadija, Ali, Abu Bakr and

⁶⁰ David Thomas, "Conversion," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 436.

⁶¹ *The Qur'an: Translation*, trans. M. H. Shakir, (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 2005), 178.

a few others. Encouraged by these early conversions, he began preaching in public in Mecca. At first, Muhammad was not very successful in bringing many Meccans to Islam. In fact, he was criticized and threatened by the Meccans, though he was protected because he was a member of the Banu Hashim, a respected Meccan family, and was also looked after by Abu Talib who was an influential man in the community. Mecca was both a trade center and the location of the Ka'ba, which was an Arab pilgrimage site. Muhammad preached to pilgrims and travelers, converting only a few. After Abu Talib died, Muhammad lost much of his protection from the Meccans and so emigrated with 150 followers to Medina in 622 C.E. Muhammad was able to create peace between 2 families that had been fighting each other in Medina and they then pledged loyalty to Muhammad who thus became a religious, military, and political leader. Islam was now being spread by many people, and attraction to Islam was augmented by Muhammad's preaching of equality for all, his granting of land to converts, and his sending of letters to nearby leaders. By 628 C.E., there were 10,000 Muslims.⁶²

Islam spread rapidly throughout the Middle East within the first 100 years of the religion. By the early 8th century, Muslims had gained military and political control in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, Persia, and western India. Because Islam covered such a wide territory, it would be impossible to do justice to the history of the innumerable instances of conversion in this brief overview. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out some important themes. First of all, though the Muslims had military and political rule in this area, not all the citizens under Muslim rule converted to Islam. Richard Bulliet has suggested that mass conversions of whole populations required 2

⁶² Arnold, 12-35.

factors: threats to Islam's dominance had to be inconceivable and a "more or less uniform set of social and religious institutions" had to be in place.⁶³ There has been some debate over the rate of conversion, which is *primarily* the result of the fact that Muslims generally did not explicitly record conversions.⁶⁴ Generally, Jews and Christians (and in India, Hindus) were treated as *dhimmi*s, which meant that they were taxed higher than Muslims, did not serve in the military, and often were prohibited from reaching the highest levels of employment. Sometimes, people in Muslim lands were forced to convert, but overall this was rare.⁶⁵ To avoid the *dhimmi* status and because non-Muslims often did not like the socio-political structures under which they lived, many people converted to Islam. When Islam spread to places not under Muslim rule, such as in East and West Africa, the Malabar coast in India, and in Indonesia—Islam was especially attractive to those of the lower classes who saw in Islam universal equality and therefore a means to improve their social condition.⁶⁶ It should be noted that people, both those under Muslim rule and those not, also converted to Islam for spiritual reasons.⁶⁷

⁶³ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2.

⁶⁴ Michael G. Morony, "The Age of Conversion: A Reassessment," in *Conversion and Continuity*, eds. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 135-150; Bulliet, *Conversion*, 4; Arnold, 9.

⁶⁵ Combating this stereotype has been a popular theme in the literature of conversion to Islam, ever since Arnold, p. 7.

⁶⁶ This also is a common theme in the literature of conversion to Islam which began with Arnold's observations.

⁶⁷ However, this category has been somewhat problematic. Arnold's definition is quite vague; for him, "religious" is "matters of the spirit," Arnold, 9. Evidence that this is still a difficult issue for scholars is that Poston, who writes nearly one hundred years after Arnold, equates "religious reasons" with "theological convictions"—an incredibly narrow definition of "religious," Poston, 13, 16. Bulliet points out that in the history of conversion to Islam, references to "religious" motives—to supernatural experiences or to the idea that one religion had a "superior truth"—were rare, but this is a narrow definition of the term "religious" as well; Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam" in *Conversion and Continuity*, eds. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibron Bikhazi (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 128; Richard W. Bulliet, "Introduction: Process and Status in Conversion and Continuity" in *Conversion and Continuity*, eds. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibron Bikhazi (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990),

Muslim geographical expansion in Europe came to an end at the gates of Vienna in 1683. By this time, Western Europe had overtaken the Muslims as the dominant force in the world through its increasing control of the international economy and advancements in warfare technology; the Muslim world had stagnated and began to imitate its Western neighbors.⁶⁸ But in the 18th century, a powerful Muslim response began to emerge. Concerned about the internal deterioration of the Muslim world, Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab led a puritanical Muslim movement in Saudi Arabia in the mid-to-late 18th century with the goal of purifying Islam. His movement rejected old schools of law and allowed for a reinterpretation of Islam that accounted for modern technology (which had been criticized by older Muslims and was therefore seen as prohibitive of Muslim advancement). Wahhab also encouraged stricter Islamic practice, forbidding newer religious activities which he thought were not condoned by the Qur'an. In 1744, he gained an alliance with the Saudi ruling elites by giving them legitimacy, and began to influence the practices at Mecca which influenced those Muslims from all over the world who made their Hajj there.⁶⁹ This movement was followed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by the Pan-Islamic movement (especially through the influence of

5. After all, Bulliet says, even early Arab Muslims had little knowledge of the Qur'an and theological issues, and so a "religious" conversion for them was equated with a change in social status, Bulliet, "Conversion Stories", 129-131. W.M. Watt, however, notes that while in the Qur'an, conversion is "always described in external terms, and no attention is paid to the man's inner experiences," when tribes claim "some of their members had been Muslims at an early date, they took the slightest external signs as evidence of the inner response, thereby apparently implying that the inner response was the essential thing," W. M. Watt, "Conversion to Islam at the Time of the Prophet," in *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 41.

⁶⁸ Cf. Hakan Berument and Asli Gunay, "Inflation Dynamics and its Sources in the Ottoman Empire: 1586-1913," *International Review of Applied Economics*, 21, no. 2 (2007): 207-245; Omer Lutfi Barkan, "The Price Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: A Turning Point in the Economic History of the Near East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6 (1975): 3-28; Omer Taspinar, *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10-14.

⁶⁹ Arnold, 427.

Jamal al-Din Afghani), the revivalist movements of the Ahmadiya and Jamaat-I Islami in what is now Pakistan, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Because of these movements and the concurrent growth and speed of communication technology and travel, Muslims were invigorated and increased proselytizing efforts throughout the world which continue today.

Conversion to Islam in US History

There is some evidence to suggest that Muslims came to America prior to Columbus' arrival in 1492. Several Muslim historians and geographers record what are possible trips taken by Spanish and West African Muslims between the 9th and 14th centuries, and Islamic (Arabic) inscriptions are believed to have been discovered in several places throughout the southeastern and southwestern US.⁷⁰ Also, it is believed that several Native American groups converted to Islam because some tribe names and areas are said to have Islamic origins. In addition, some records indicate that Muslims accompanied Columbus in his voyages. Some current Native American converts to Islam point to these examples as evidence for their having a true Islamic heritage.⁷¹ However, as Jane I. Smith, a leading scholar in Islam in America, has written, "Evidence to support such claims...is still sufficiently vague that the thesis remains somewhat hypothetical."⁷²

⁷⁰ For a list of these sources, cf. Youssef Mroueh, "Precolumbian Muslims in the Americas," The As-Sunna Foundation of America, <http://www.sunnah.org/history/precolumb.htm> (accessed February 24, 2009).

⁷¹ Mahir Abdal-Razzaq, "Native American Muslims," *The Message* (1996), http://www.themodernreligion.com/convert/convert_namuslims.htm (accessed February 25, 2009).

⁷² Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), 50.

Scholars are certain, however, that West African Muslims were brought to America as slaves. African slaves first arrived in the US in 1619,⁷³ but our first “reliable” documentation of Muslim names being recorded appeared in 1717.⁷⁴ In following the pattern of the European slave traders, Americans separated tribal kinsmen so they could not communicate with each other and therefore not revolt.⁷⁵ The practices of religions from Africa, including Islam, were prohibited for the same reason, and proselytization was abated.⁷⁶ Importation of slaves was outlawed in 1808⁷⁷ and the whole institution was legally ended in 1865.

It has now become common to present the immigration of post-slave trade Muslims in 5 waves. The first wave arrived from the Middle East, mostly from the Levant, between 1875 and 1912. They were generally unskilled and uneducated, escaping the economic problems of the Ottoman Empire. They worked in factories, mines, and as peddlers. The second and third waves followed World War I, and they were Muslims who were the relatives of the people who had come in the first wave and had told them of the opportunities in the US. The fourth wave immigrated after World War II until 1960.⁷⁸ These people were, on the whole, more educated, wealthy, urban, and westernized than their predecessors. The fifth wave began and continues today after President Johnson signed an immigration act in 1965 which reduced restrictions on

⁷³ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1998), 191.

⁷⁴ Poston, 26.

⁷⁵ Albanese, 194.

⁷⁶ Poston, 27.

⁷⁷ Albanese, 191.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Islam*, 52.

immigration. Additionally, the US has received increasing numbers of refugees from Muslim countries.⁷⁹

Many of the earliest immigrants, driven by a desire to avoid to their home countries, Christianized their names, married non-Muslims, and became thoroughly “assimilated.”⁸⁰ However, Muslim identity was far from being entirely discarded in the US. The first documented prayer group appeared in Ross, North Dakota in 1900;⁸¹ the first mosque was built in Highland Park Detroit in 1919;⁸² a Young men’s Muslim Association (modeled after the YMCA) was established in Brooklyn in 1923; and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the Muslim-populated Rose Fraternity Lodge was established in 1925 followed by the first long lasting mosque in the US which was built in 1934.⁸³ By the 1960s, several Islamic associations were set up both by the US Muslims and by Muslim country governments, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These associations and mosques, while sometimes proposing to proselytize, were for the most part isolationist.⁸⁴

Despite the reluctance of many early US Islamic groups to organize proselytization efforts, conversions still occurred. Often, Muslim men married non-Muslim women who converted to Islam. Sometimes, individuals who had met non-

⁷⁹ Michael J. McBride, “The Evolution of US Immigration and Refugee Policy,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1999, 4, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/research/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RESEARCH&id=3ae6a0c74> (accessed February 25, 2009); “Refugees and Asylees: 2007,” US Department of Homeland Security, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2007.pdf (accessed February 25, 2009).

⁸⁰ Poston, 34.

⁸¹ Poston, 34.

⁸² Albanese, 297.

⁸³ Poston, 34-35.

⁸⁴ Poston, 29-30, 35-38.

proselytizing Muslims in the US or abroad became attracted to the religion and converted. Often, these individuals were white, and if the work of Poston and the widely read testimony of Jeffery Lang are any indication, they had above average education and weak religious upbringing.⁸⁵

In addition, while the major Sunni groups in the US remained isolationist, several smaller groups were very active in proselytizing. I have already presented evidence for the Methodist-turned-Muslim preacher named Norman who began his mission in the 1870s, and about which little else is known. Alexander Webb's story, on the other hand, is now famous. Webb was appointed to be American Consul in the Philippines in 1887, and, having already begun a search for a "satisfying faith to replace Christianity" which he saw as not being rational, in Manila he began to read many Muslim works that dealt impressively with philosophical issues, and decided to convert.⁸⁶ In Manila, Webb met several wealthy Indian Muslim businessmen who, being impressed with Webb's devotion, agreed to sponsor a proselytization effort led by Webb in the US, which he began when he returned to New York in 1893.⁸⁷ Webb established a journal, a lecture hall with a library, and a book publishing house. "Very little direct contact with non-Muslims was ever established, and all three of Webb's operations were halted within a few months of their inception."⁸⁸ And though Webb made 2 more attempts at publishing Muslim journals, both these also dissolved quickly.⁸⁹ Two followers of Webb created a

⁸⁵ Jeffery Lang, *Struggling to Surrender*, (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1994); Poston's findings will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

⁸⁶ Tunison, 15-16.

⁸⁷ Tunison, 17.

⁸⁸ Poston, 115.

⁸⁹ Brent D. Singleton, "The Moslem World: A History of America's Earliest Islamic Newspaper and Its Successors," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 27, no. 2 (2007): 305.

rival splinter group which, along with Webb's own group, disintegrated by the end of the century.⁹⁰

After Webb, other missionizing groups sprung up. The Ahmadiya movement came to the US in 1920; by 1933 it was established in 6 major cities, and by 1959 it had an estimated 500 converts. Attractive because it was a non-discriminatory religion, "Orientals" composed around 150 of its members, up to 40 were "of 'Muslim' extraction," 50 were white, and the remaining half were African American.⁹¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, the Jamaat-i-Tabligh sent missionaries, though they were less successful than their Pakistani competitors.⁹² Sufis were also early arrivals in the US, with the first organized group coming from the Chisti order which had a few US followers in the 1920s.⁹³ Sufi membership was minimal until immigration restrictions became more lax in the 1960s, at which point Sufis attracted many from the counter culture movement.⁹⁴ Marcia Hermansen estimates that in the 1980s and 1990s, roughly 25,000 people participated in Sufi movements, and today at most 10,000 are currently active, of which 4,000 are white, 2,000 are African American, and the rest are immigrants.⁹⁵

African Americans have developed their own distinct Muslim communities of which many are rejected as even being "Muslim" by mainstream Sunnis. In 1928, Noble Drew Ali established the official headquarters of the Moorish Science Temple in

⁹⁰ Brent D. Singleton, "Brothers at Odds: Rival Islamic Movements in Late Nineteenth Century New York City," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27, no. 3 (2007): 483-484.

⁹¹ Poston, 112-115.

⁹² Poston, 116.

⁹³ Marcia Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements," *The Muslim World* 90 (2000): 163.

⁹⁴ Hermansen, 161.

⁹⁵ Hermansen, 187.

Chicago. Traditions conflict over Drew Ali's exact upbringing, but it is commonly accepted that he studied religion in Egypt and in 1927 wrote *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America*.⁹⁶ This book teaches a way to spiritual enlightenment, drawing on Black Nationalism, Christian, Gnostic, Masonic and Islamic ideologies. Drew Ali taught his lessons, as would future African American Muslim leaders, in the African American ghettos of major US cities. There are some reports that assert that the founder of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Wallace D. Fard, followed Drew Ali who mysteriously died in 1929. It is reported that by 1933, Fard, who met people because of his trade as a door-to-door peddler, had 8,000 followers of his NOI. Though the message he preached was similar to Drew Ali's, it varied in certain distinct ways. While Drew Ali promoted a tolerating view of all people and beliefs, Fard chastised Christianity as the tool of the white man—who he called the “devils.” He also taught that the “Blackman” was the original man and was, by nature, a god (which was similar to Drew Ali's teachings). Fard created secret rituals, doctrines and lessons as well, to be inculcated on initiates.⁹⁷ Prior to his death in 1934, Fard appointed Elijah Muhammad as his successor. Muhammad soon elaborated on Fard's teachings, writing several books. In the late 1950's, as many religious groups do, the NOI began to splinter off into disparate movements. Some left because they felt the NOI's strict morality, dress and financial obligations were too demanding, some were disappointed with Muhammad's own apparent moral laxity, while some felt that the NOI had deviated too far from the

⁹⁶ Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God hop's Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 10.

⁹⁷ Miyakawa, 13.

“true” Muslim path.⁹⁸ When Muhammad passed away in 1975, his son, W. D. Muhammad, was made leader of the NOI and made changes to the group to bring it more in line with Sunni Islam, and eventually changing the name of the group several times.⁹⁹ In 1981, Louis Farrakhan led a group that splintered from W. D. Muhammad and reclaimed the NOI name and its racial priorities. Today, most African American Muslims follow Sunni Islam.

Recently there has been increasing attention paid to the Latino Muslim phenomenon as their communities have formed throughout the US, Central and South America.¹⁰⁰ In the US, Latino Muslim communities have emerged in New York, New Jersey, Chicago and Miami,¹⁰¹ often through the interaction with African American Muslims. In 1992, Latino converts began meeting informally in Los Angeles until 1999, when they formed the Latino-Muslim Movement and began meeting formally at the ILM Foundation where the imam, an African American named Saadiq Saafir, hoped to “tear down the barriers that divide blacks and Latinos.”¹⁰² Ibrahim Gonzalez, who co-founded Alianza Islamica in 1975, was introduced to Islam by African American Muslims in East Harlem in the 1960’s.¹⁰³ In addition, there are several other groups and websites, with estimates for the Latino Muslim population reaching up to 60,000.¹⁰⁴ It is often reported that US Latino Muslims, like their co-religionists throughout Latin America, are drawn to

⁹⁸ Knight, xii.

⁹⁹ Cesari, 27.

¹⁰⁰ “Latino American Muslims: A Growing Presence in the Muslim World,” *Journal of Islamic Law & Culture* 5, no. 1 (2000): 77-80.

¹⁰¹ Ramirez.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Weinberg, 25; Daniel J. Wakin, “Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam are Increasing – Many in City Were Catholics Seeking Old Muslim Roots,” *New York Times*, 2 January 2002.

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Viscidi, “Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 22, no. 5 (2003): 56.

Islam because of dissatisfaction with Christianity and the appeal of historical ties of Islam with Spanish culture dating back to 711 when Muslims first entered Spain. Fidel Castro expressed these views of a shared heritage:

We all have lighter or darker skin. Lighter skin implies descent from Spaniards who themselves were colonized by Moors that came from Africa. Those who are more or less dark-skinned came directly from Africa. Moreover, nobody can consider himself as being of pure, much less superior, race.¹⁰⁵

Gonzalez has reiterated that feeling, and often tells journalists that Latinos have been disenfranchised and Islam helps end this feeling of separateness by being “a universal faith where people of all walks of life pray together. Religion unifies culture and enhances it.”¹⁰⁶ Others feel Islam could unite discreet (nationally or ethnically-based) Latino communities.¹⁰⁷ One white Latino Muslim has also pointed out that the Islamic identity has given him respect in his own Bronx neighborhood, respect that he would not have gotten because of his skin color.¹⁰⁸ Latino Muslims generally feel “torn” from their Muslim roots by colonization and they also feel that Christian American society does not meet their spiritual or social needs.

Today, the Muslim population is estimated to be between 1 to 11 million and it has been identified as the fastest growing religion in the US.¹⁰⁹ A 2007 survey by the

¹⁰⁵ Aidi (2003), 43.

¹⁰⁶ Viscidi, 57.

¹⁰⁷ James W. Blair, “Small Wave of Latinos Feel Draw of Islam,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 91, no. 185 (1999): 17.

¹⁰⁸ Aidi (2004), 123.

¹⁰⁹ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States,” in *Immigration and Religion in America*, ed. Richard Alba and others (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 248. For a discussion on different estimates, cf. “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” Pew Research Center, 2007, 9-10, <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2009) and John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 208, which also proposes that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the US.

Pew Research Center reports that 2/3 of US Muslims were born outside the US, and African Americans make up half of those born here, and converts total 21% of all US Muslims.¹¹⁰ African Americans have been estimated to compose anywhere from 20% to 80% of US converts,¹¹¹ and estimates for white Muslims have ranged from 40,000 to 80,000.¹¹² The report, based off 179 convert interviews, noted that about half of the converts took the *shahada* (pronouncement of faith) when they were under 21, 34% when between 21 and 35, and 17% for over 35; 2/3 came from Protestant religions, 10% from Catholicism, 5% from other religions, and 10% had no prior religion; for 58%, the appeal of Islam was in aspects of the religion, while 18% felt the need to convert because other family members were Muslims.¹¹³ The Pew report admits to limitations in its survey method: it was done solely by telephone, most of the converts it interviewed were African American, it asked converts very few questions about their conversion experiences, and actual percentages and numbers remain unknown.¹¹⁴ After 9/11, while many Middle Eastern students returned home to avoid harassment and mosque construction virtually ceased,¹¹⁵ conversion has increased dramatically. Meanwhile, little else is known about these converts and less is known about the state-to-state variations.

¹¹⁰ "Muslim Americans," 1.

¹¹¹ Pew, 11; Cesari, 25.

¹¹² Hermansen, 187.

¹¹³ Pew, 22-23.

¹¹⁴ Pew, 9, 88, 11.

¹¹⁵ Vincent F. Biondo III, "The Architecture of Mosques in the US and Britain," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 3, (2006): 399-420.

Chapter 3: Macrocontext: Muslims of Colorado

This chapter examines the history of Muslims in Colorado, their population growth, the accretions of distinct sectarian groups, and the response of the non-Muslim surrounding community. All of these factors have played a role in how Muslims, and Islam in general, have reached Colorado's non-Muslims. Colorado's populace is 71% non-Hispanic white, 20% Latino, and 4% black—other ethnic groups are very small. The population is primarily suburban, living in the Denver-Metro area. Eighty-seven percent of Colorado adults have at least a high school diploma and 37% have at least a B.A.¹¹⁶ It is a swing state in national elections and is roughly evenly divided between democrat and republican. The largest religious group in Colorado is Catholic, followed by Evangelical Protestant.¹¹⁷ Muslims make up less than 1% of the population, yet Islam has attracted several converts over the years.

Population

Today, the population estimates of Colorado's Muslim community are not exact, similar to estimates for the Muslim population of the US as a whole. Due to Public Law 94-521 (1976), the Census Bureau is prohibited from asking for religious affiliation. In

¹¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08000.html> (accessed February 25, 2009).

¹¹⁷ The Association of Religion Data Archives, "State Membership Report: Colorado," 2002, http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/08_2000.asp (accessed February 23, 2009).

addition, there were no official attempts to measure the population before 2000. The Association of Religion Data Archives estimated Denver's Muslim population in 2000 to be 14,855.¹¹⁸ This seems particularly small when compared with estimates given by Muslim leaders throughout the years. The Association of Religion Data Archives' method of contacting religious centers for information—which does not account for the many small mosques that are reticent to talk to outsiders, the many individuals who are scared to admit their affiliation out of fear of government or civilian harassment, and the fact that the majority of US Muslims are not members of mosques—makes their number seem questionable, though it does account for a possible overlap of membership with multiple mosques. The Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the University of Albany also estimates close to 14,000, but uses an alternative method.¹¹⁹ Their research involves taking official numbers from the 2000 US census and counting all people as Muslim who identify themselves as natives or descendants of natives from all-Muslim countries. This method fails to account for the fact that some members of those countries were not in fact Muslims (perhaps the reason for their emigration), nor does it account for the growing numbers of African American, white, and Latino Muslims. Lastly, Adherents.com, which compiles its own list of religious populations, references a Denver newspaper article that estimates there to be 10,000 Muslims currently living in Colorado.¹²⁰ However, newspaper articles often

¹¹⁸ Association of Religion

¹¹⁹ Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, "Counting White and Black Subgroups," <http://mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/BlackWhite/DiversityBWDataPages/2080msaBWCt.htm> (accessed February 23, 2008).

¹²⁰ Adherents.com, "Islam," http://adherents.com/Na/Na_334.html (accessed February 23, 2008).

receive their information solely from members of the Muslim community who could have a vested interest in exaggerating their numbers.

Despite these problems, one cannot deny that there was a surge in the Muslim population growth during the 1980's and early 1990's. The sheer number of Islamic institutions established in Colorado during and since that time reflects this surge. Some ascribe this swelling to the US oil boom in the mid-eighties as well as an increasing number of South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African people who have been emigrating in search of a better standard of living or coming as refugees.¹²¹ In my interviews with Muslims throughout the state, I have heard a wide variety of estimates of today's Muslim population from as few as 15,000 to as high as 50,000. In this paper I will present estimates that seem to generally follow the trend of growing Muslim organizations. That the estimate of 15,000 was consistently used throughout the 1990's, and the likelihood that the formal estimates might be somewhat low, suggests that the current Colorado Muslim population is around 25,000, with 20,000 in Denver. Colorado's 2007 population was 4.8 million—making the Muslim population less than 1%. However, it is important to note that while Colorado's population has trebled since the 1950's, its Muslim population has increased at least tenfold, and appears to be growing.¹²²

¹²¹ Colorado Refugee Services Program, "Refugee Chart," <http://stateboard.cdhs.state.co.us/oss/refugee/refugee%20chart.htm> (accessed February 16, 2009).

¹²² Leon F. Bouvier and Sharon McCloe Stein, "Colorado's Population in 2050: A Road Paved With Good Intentions," Negative Population Growth, <http://www.npg.org/poll0301/colorado.pdf> (accessed February 23, 2008).

History

Early Muslim arrival to Colorado was composed of trickling immigration. According to a one-time Denver imam, at around 1900, a few Muslim prairie peddlers came to Colorado with the first wave of Middle Eastern immigration to the US.¹²³ They were mostly Syrian and Lebanese men and usually intermarried with local Christians. In 1914, Kamiss Mahmoud Shelby arrived from Palestine. He would become Denver's only imam for the next thirty years. During that time, Shelby oversaw only 2 Muslim wedding ceremonies—1 of which was for a family from Utah who came to Denver because Shelby was the closest imam.¹²⁴ Throughout the years, Shelby gave sermons (*khutba*) in Denver and Wyoming. In 1933, he was quoted as saying Denver was home to “less than ten” Muslim residents.¹²⁵ The Muslim community remained very small through the 1950's. A local newspaper noted that 28 Muslims gathered for prayer in a Denver park for the Bairam (Eid) feast.¹²⁶

In the 1960's, though the Muslim community was still small, around 200 families, a group of about 7 men formed the Colorado Muslim Society (CMS) as a way to keep the community together. Because the community was so small, just to survive, the members had to overlook each other's sectarian (Sunni and Shi'a), cultural (Arab, Afghan, Egyptian, Indian, Pakistani, etc.), and political differences. CMS was therefore apolitical

¹²³ Jane I. Smith and Karen Isaksen Leonard, “United States of America,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, USA: Oxford University Press, 1995. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu:80/article> (accessed February 23, 2008).

¹²⁴ “Bride Just an Onlooker During Mohammedan Wedding in Denver,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 4 December 1943.

¹²⁵ H. M. Tenny, “Ten Mohammedans Residents of Denver, Says Former Priest,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 26 February 1933.

¹²⁶ George Brown, “Moslems Pray Toward Mecca as Islam Holy Rites Begin,” *The Denver Post*, 8 July 1957.

and focused on observing, preserving, and practicing the fundamental traditions of the Islamic culture. Whenever possible, 2 or 3 families would meet in each other's home for worship and discussions. Soon, they moved to a church basement to accommodate the slowly growing Muslim population that was immigrating after the US passed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965. In 1974, CMS purchased its own building, a small house, which accommodated close to 200 people.

In the 1970's, international students from Muslim countries including the wealthy Arab nations: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, represented a major component of the Muslim community.¹²⁷ Moreover, their membership in CMS became close to a majority. Relying on their number and generous donations, they pressured to control the Society's management. However, because the students were predominantly non-citizens and transient, the resident Muslim community objected and resisted their interference in the affairs of the Society. The problem became acute during the process of revising the Society's constitution. The newly revised Constitution resolved the problem by combining the students together with non-resident community members who have non-voting Associate Membership status. Additionally, during the early 1980's, and for convenience, the students purchased a house near the University of Denver, and used it for their worship. As it became crowded, because of the overflowing resident community began to join them there, the students bought a larger building and sold the house. Due to the recession in the 1980's, the unsettling conditions in the Middle East, and the Iraq/Iran war, hundreds of the students departed to their home countries. Their governments felt

¹²⁷ The information in the section is the result of several interviews conducted with individuals who were leaders of the Colorado Muslim community at that time.

the students were potentially at risk and asked them to return. The building these students left behind eventually became the currently community-run Islamic center named The Denver Islamic Society.

In the 1970's other mosques began to appear. In 1972, Muhammad Mosque 51 was granted the status of being the first official Nation of Islam mosque in Colorado. Within a few more years, Masjid Al-Haqq, a Sunni African American mosque was started. By 1980, there were an estimated 3,000 Muslims in Denver, and Colorado college towns had several groups forming. That year, the Greeley Islamic Center was established and the University of Colorado at Boulder students started their chapter of the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Reshad Field, of the Sufi Mevlevi order, began teaching classes in Boulder in 1976, and other tekkes began springing up in the 1980's for the Chisti, Naqshbandi, and Jerrahi orders. Also, in Fort Collins, a city 45 miles north of Denver and home of Colorado State University (CSU), a Muslim community emerged in 1980. They acquired a former church to establish their first Islamic center, following the formation of the CSU MSA in 1978. The following year, both the Sunni Denver Islamic Society and the Wahhabi-Sunni Islamic Center of Boulder opened their doors to serve the mushrooming population. In 1983, the CMS built Denver's first distinctly "Muslim" mosque with the features of a dome and minaret. The 10,000 square-foot mosque was built in a southeast Denver suburb. By then, the Muslim population had doubled its 1980 numbers. This was helped because in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a rise in male Muslim immigrants marrying white American wives who later converted. Additionally, sometimes, individuals who had Muslim friends also came into the faith.

In 1992, the local press said there were 15,000 Muslims in Colorado.¹²⁸ The following year, community members organized the first Muslim school, the Crescent View Academy, in the rooms of their Islamic center. However, because of strong enrollment and limited space at the CMS, in 1994 they purchased a nearby building. The school is still in use and provides instruction from kindergarten through 8th grade. Like similar schools throughout the country, it instructs students on subjects such as history, math and science, but also teaches Arabic and Qur'anic studies—while offering the children an environment that does not require students to adjust their schedules for non-Muslim related holidays (such as days off for Thanksgiving).

The rest of the 1990's were marked with more expansion. In 1995, the first Shi'a community center was established in a west Denver neighborhood. The next year saw the installation of 2 prayer spaces at the Denver International Airport: 1 inside for travelers and 1 outside for Muslim taxi drivers. About 30 Indian and Pakistani Shi'a Muslims formed the Imamia Education Society in 1998, which promoted religious and cultural programs, including youth activities. In the following year, while the CMS was seeing 500 regular attendees to its Friday prayer, Masjid Ikhlas opened in a northern Denver suburb. A year later, some members of Masjid Al-Haqq left it and formed Masjid Shuhada'a and the North East Denver Islamic Center. Both communities follow the teachings of W. D. Muhammad. By 2001, the Fort Collins Muslim community, which had grown from 200 people in 1980 to 1,200, was beginning to plan for the

¹²⁸ "Muslims Fast to Observe Ramadan: An Estimated 15,000 in State Follow Tradition During Islam Holy Month," *Rocky Mountain News*, 5 March 1992.

building of a new mosque. However, as has been the trend throughout the US,¹²⁹ no mosques have been constructed in Colorado since 9/11.

Difficulties in the Community

As the Muslim population in Colorado grew, so did the amount of controversy between the local Muslim and non-Muslim communities. When the CMS built Colorado's only traditional-looking mosque in the early 1980's, residents of the suburban community opposed it at city council meetings. When CMS prepared to make an addition to the mosque in the late 1990's, residents spoke up again, but to no avail. Prior to 1991, there were no headlines about violence towards Muslims. However, during the Iraq war in 1991, there were several reported incidents of Muslims students being harassed.¹³⁰ That same year, Denver Nuggets point guard Mahmoud Abdul Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson) caused a stir by converting to Islam—several newspaper articles detailed how his Gulfport, Mississippi hometown was overwhelmingly disappointed in his conversion.¹³¹ After the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, various Muslim groups were threatened again—despite the CMS publicly condemning violence.¹³² In 1996, Abdul Rauf made national headlines again by refusing to stand during the national anthem before NBA games, citing religious reasons, despite the CMS' (Abdul Rauf's

¹²⁹ Biondo III, 399-420.

¹³⁰ "Young Arab-Americans Say They're Called a 'Terrorist' or 'Son of Saddam Hussein' in a Show of Prejudice at School: Classmates' Taunts Sting," *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 January 1991.

¹³¹ "Jackson Conversion Stuns Friends: Nuggest's Move Toward Islam Leaves Hometown in an Uproar," *Rocky Mountain News*, 9 August 1991.

¹³² "Bomb Scares Put Area on Edge: School and Offices Searched," *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 April 1995.

main place of worship) statement that they did not support the action.¹³³ Nevertheless, soon local “shock jock” DJ’s went to the CMS mosque with a trumpet and bugle playing the “Star Spangled Banner” during the middle of a prayer. The DJ’s were fired. Between 1998 and 1999, local papers cited “several” reports of hate crimes against Muslims, including two murders of Muslim immigrants and threats made by a man who was arrested with bomb-making material, 4 guns and 1,000 rounds of ammunition.¹³⁴

After 9/11, there was a marked increase in discrimination against Muslims in Colorado—despite CMS’ repeated condemnation of terrorism.¹³⁵ Hate crimes doubled in the 4th quarter of 2001, making the total number that year 18.¹³⁶ These crimes included threatening phone calls to Muslims and groups, threats made in public, and vandalism (broken windows, fires set, blood and graffiti splattered on walls of mosques). Some mosques required 24-hour police surveillance for several weeks following the attacks. Because of fear of violence and US government pressure (e.g. not explicitly stating what an acceptable Islamic organization is), more Middle Eastern Muslims began returning to their native countries.¹³⁷ Often, they were members of mosques to which they made large financial donations. Furthermore, because of government scrutiny of Muslim non-profits, Muslims began to withdraw from mosque participation. Without these donations,

¹³³ “Effort to Sway Abdul-Rauf Failed: Muslim Leader Tried to Urge Nuggets Star to Obey Rule,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 14 March 1996.

¹³⁴ James Brooke, “Colorado Man is Suspected of Planning Mosque Attack,” *The New York Times*, 13 May 1999.

¹³⁵ Jean Torkelson, “7 Colorado Muslim Leaders Sign Declaration to Fight Terrorism,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 28 July 2005.

¹³⁶ “Fallout of Hatred—FBI Reports that Crimes Doubled After Terror Attacks,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 12 December 2002; “Colorado: Hate Crimes Rise 50% after 9/11 Attacks,” *Washington Crime News Service*, 17 January 2003, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_ga3985/is_200301/ai_n9203989 (accessed December 2, 2007).

¹³⁷ “Some Students From Mideast Going Home Because of Fear,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 September 2001.

Denver's Shi'a mosque, Masjid Ahl-al-Beit, began experiencing financial problems¹³⁸ and, because of a lawsuit filed by its main imam against the mosque, most members left and created other Shi'a groups since 2004.

2002 to Present

Colorado was not alone in seeing a spike in hate crimes in the months immediately following 9/11—this was the trend throughout the US. And, like other states, Colorado's reported hate crimes significantly reduced in 2002 to 3 reported incidents.¹³⁹ That year, an MSA at the University of Colorado at Denver was formed, along with the group Muslims Intent on Learning and Activism (MILA). Because a large percentage of Colorado (and US) Muslims do not attend a mosque (for example, at CMS' 2007 Ramadan Eid prayer, 2,000 people attended although there are only about 750 official members of the mosque) some members of the Muslim community decided to organize a non-profit, focusing on Islamic education and charity—with the hope of overcoming theological and cultural differences between the increasingly separate Muslim groups in Denver. Today they have around 300 members and anywhere between 30 to 50 who participate regularly.

Other groups continued to form in the community. In 2003, the Multicultural Mosaic Foundation (MMF) was established. The MMF is a growing international movement composed of primarily Turkish Muslims who follow the teachings of Fethullah Gulen. Also, while Iraqi members of the Masjid Ahl-al-Beit continued

¹³⁸ Jim Kehl, "Islamic Groups Report U.S. Scrutiny Causing Them Financial Woes," *The Denver Post*, 15 November 2002.

¹³⁹ "Anti-Islamic Graffiti Removed," *Rocky Mountain News*, 1 November 2003.

attending there, others began to funnel into 2 disparate groups. With roughly 60 participants each at important prayers, the Imamia Education Society founded by South Asian Shi'as and an Islamic center founded by Persian Shi'as have flourished and are open to worshippers from any ethnic and national background. In addition, there has also been increased participation in national organizations like the Muslim Youth Foundation and Muslim American Society, though neither group has maintained strong support. Statewide, the Colorado Muslim Council holds a monthly meeting for Colorado imams to establish consistent dates for the start and finish of Muslim holidays. However, this Council does not have consistent participation either and does not represent a true unified coalition.

In the last decade, the ethnic backgrounds of Colorado Muslims have diversified. With the increased media attention to Islam since the late 1990s, many white and some Latino residents have converted. Also, because of recent warfare and economic problems in Muslim African states, there has been a significant increase in numbers of Sudanese, Morroccans, and especially Somalians.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, Middle Eastern students are slowly beginning to re-emerge in Colorado universities. Today, the members of the CMS come from a wide range of ethnicities and are not completely dominated by 1 particular nationality or ethnic group. In Denver's north suburb, Northglenn, a significant Afghani community has emerged and has even set up its own mosque. Nevertheless, neither the Afghani community, nor any other Muslim community in Colorado, has created any sort of "neighborhood" similar to those that have been observed in larger US cities. Generally, though, several mosques are located in southeast Denver and its adjoining

¹⁴⁰ Colorado Refugee.

suburbs. Because Colorado Muslims, like their brethren throughout the US, are typically well-educated and make good incomes, there is an effort amongst some to live on that side of town as it is closest to Denver's most elite school district, Cherry Creek.¹⁴¹

Despite the increasing amount of Muslim groups, discrimination against Colorado Muslims has not been completely thwarted. The CMS was vandalized with hate graffiti in 2003¹⁴² and received bomb threats after the death of a US soldier in Iraq in 2004.¹⁴³ The federal government detained Denver resident Haroon Rashid from 2002 to 2006 and failed to produce evidence of his terrorist involvements.¹⁴⁴ Other incidents include a remark by Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo that the US should bomb Mecca as a way of ending all terrorism; 5 reported incidents of Denver talk radio hosts making discriminatory remarks about Islam and Muslims in 2007; multiple gunshots fired at the Greeley mosque that same year; and in September 2008 national headlines were made concerning the dispute between Swift meat plant and its Somalian workers concerning, among other things, their ablutions at work during Ramadan.¹⁴⁵ For many members of the Muslim and Christian community alike, these discriminatory incidents and world events over the past 25 years have been the impetus for interfaith dialogue

¹⁴¹ Pew, 3, 18. US Muslims' income and education are about equivalent to the general US numbers in those areas, and thus higher than most other minority groups.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ "Denver Mosque Receiving Threats," *TheDenverChannel.com*, 13 May 2004, <http://www.thedenverchannel.com/print/3301210/detail.htm> (accessed December 2, 2007).

¹⁴⁴ "Eid Works to Build Muslim Trust," *Rocky Mountain News*, 19 May 2007; John Ingold, "Charges Against Local Pakistanis Labeled 'Absurd,'" *The Denver Post*, 2 April 2003.

¹⁴⁵ "Tancredo: If They Nuke Us, Bomb Mecca," *FoxNews.com*, 18 July 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,162795,00.html> (accessed February 23, 2008); "Local Muslim Leader Gets Air Time to Respond to Clear Channel Host's Bigoted Remarks," *Colorado Media Matters*, 20 June 2007, <http://colorado.mediamatters.org/items/printable/200706200001> (accessed December 9, 2007); Vanessa Delgado, "Greeley Mosque Damaged by Apparent Gunfire," *The Tribune*, 18 May 2007.

Before the 1980's, there were just a handful of instances when a Muslim spoke as a representative of his faith to a non-Muslim audience. These meetings transpired via church invitations to a few prominent Denver Muslims. But for the majority, the only opportunity for most Colorado non-Muslims to hear about Islam from Colorado Muslims was through the sporadic newspaper interviews with members of the Muslim community throughout the first 80 years of the 20th century. Those articles' purpose, primarily, was to describe Muslim rituals and ideas—they were only newsworthy in the sense that their practices were unique in Colorado. However, as the Colorado Muslim population increased and world affairs made it seem more and more rational to work out irenic solutions for relations with the Middle East, members of the Colorado religious community began working on interfaith dialogue, following in the footsteps of other national and international religious groups. Today, there are dozens of interfaith groups which have Muslim representation, though Muslim converts rarely convert to Islam because of interfaith functions.

Chapter 4: 13 Denver Converts

This chapter presents the findings of my interviews and compares the results with the findings of other studies. After the discussion in each section, I provide a brief summary of the main points of that section. In the conclusion of this chapter I bring together all the findings to show the differences and similarities Colorado converts to Islam have as compared to the other studied modern Western converts to Islam. There are 4 salient differences: the Colorado converts, on the whole, had religious upbringings; most have moved several times throughout their lives; European converts tended to have higher education levels; and Colorado converts are far less attracted to intellectual aspects of Islam, while being more attracted to spiritual aspects.

This research is an ethnographic, participant-observation study, backed with historical literature research. The interviews were conducted over the course of 5 weeks (December 2008 to January 2009) at a weekly “Beginning Islam” class at the CMS, held Saturday evenings after the Maghrib prayer for roughly 2 hours. I had contacted the mosque in October and made arrangements with the instructor of the class to do the interviews. Three people declined to be interviewed. As per the teacher’s instructions, I interviewed the converts in a corner of the classroom while class was being conducted. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the detail of each respondent’s answers. The respondents’ ages ranged from 19 to 57, with a mean of 34.7

and a median of 29. There were 8 females and 5 males; 9 white, 3 Latina/o, and 1 non-African American black. All the subjects were Sunnis because I was not able to find any willing Shi'a or sufi converts. I asked the converts 32 questions about their conversion experience. These questions were based on other surveys of Muslim converts and my own hypotheses about US converts (particularly for the questions about race relations). During the interviews, I generally followed the question format except when the convert explained things in a different order or something needed clarification. The research for this paper has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. As per the IRB rules, I do not use in this paper any facts that can identify particular converts.

There were many limitations to this approach. One set of limitations was due to the population interviewed. First of all, because all the converts I interviewed were Sunnis, I was not able to compare these results with the converts in non-Sunni groups. Furthermore, by only interviewing converts who were actively attending an Islam course, I was limited to interviewing a certain kind of eager convert and not getting the full spectrum of personalities and views. In addition, because the converts were being interviewed in a classroom where their fellow Muslims and teacher were within hearing range, they may have felt some need to censor their responses. Also, as Lakhdar et al. noted in their study of French converts, what is recorded are reported convert motives, not actual motives, and so "distortions or reconstruction may have occurred."¹⁴⁶ Another limitation is that by only going to the central Sunni mosque I am not interviewing people

¹⁴⁶ Mounia Lakhdar, Genevieve Vinsonneau, Michael J. Apter, and Etienne Mullet, "Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2007): 14.

with other sectarian perspectives. Additionally, as I noted in the introduction, by not interviewing non-convert Muslims, I cannot determine exactly how the converts are adapting the local Islamic culture. Finally, by only interviewing 13 people, I have not obtained even the minimal requirement for a sample population for statistical analysis. With these things being said, I believe this paper can be still be seen as a case study and therefore a legitimate contribution to the study of US converts, though not necessarily representative of all US converts, and whatever findings I come up with can be reconciled with future studies.

Microcontext

Of the 13 respondents, only 4 were originally from Colorado. Two of these 4 were those who converted prior to 9/11, both in the 1980s. Three of the respondents grew up in 1 area and moved to Colorado as adults, however, 2 of those were immigrants to the US. The 6 remaining respondents lived in more than one state or country due to various factors such as being in foster care, a military family, a migrant labor family, a family that separated, a family that moved for better opportunities, or a combination of these. Having a significant change in one's place of residence, then, is a theme for 8 out of the 13 converts. For the remaining 5, only 3 have never lived outside of Colorado, and 1 of those 3 travelled abroad for several months. In the literature on conversion to Islam in the West, the theme of having multiple residencies is almost never mentioned. At most, researchers might note whether their respondents are currently living in urban or rural areas, with urban being the most typical (the majority of converts in my study, while

moving a lot, lived in primarily suburban environments).¹⁴⁷ If a person has to continually readjust his or her life, and therefore his or her identity, because he or she moves to several different places, this might result in 1) being detached from a traditional culture and 2) having a less stable identity—both of which are factors that have been noted as contributing to conversion.¹⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that while changing residence is a likely factor in the conversion of my respondents, social class is not: 3 identified as “poor” growing up, 4 as “middle class to poor,” 3 as “middle class,” and 3 as “upper middle class.”

Education and occupation are factors that diverge from the findings of other Western converts. Of my respondents, 3 had dropped out of secondary school, 3 were attending college courses at the time of the interview, and only 2 had a B.A. or equivalent degree. Carol Anway, who looked at female US converts, found that 53% of her respondents had a B.A. or higher, 12% had an M.A., 6% had an M.D. or PhD. Anway’s results, however, are probably more revealing of her method for obtaining responses than of US female converts in general. She sent out 350 questionnaires and only received 53 back; those who took the time to write back were probably the better-educated who are more used to writing and filling out surveys.¹⁴⁹ However, other researchers who did 1-on-1 interviews with European subjects also saw higher levels of education: Zebiri noted that the converts’ education was generally above average¹⁵⁰ and Köse reported that of his

¹⁴⁷ Zebiri, 9; Lakhdar et al., 6; Tina Gudrun Jensen, “Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined,” *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 644.

¹⁴⁸ Rambo, 31 and 41.

¹⁴⁹ Anway, *Daughters*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ Zebiri, 9.

subjects, 60% had at least a B.A. and 20% had graduate degrees.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Zebiri and Poston found that many of their subjects were professionals,¹⁵² while for my respondents, only 2 could be classified as having professional-type jobs, 2 worked construction-type jobs, 4 had clerical/service jobs, 2 were homemakers, and 2 were full-time students—level of occupation was fairly evenly distributed. I believe that the lower educational and occupational level of US converts as compared to their European (and, in the case of Poston, older American) counterparts should be seen in relation to the increased rate of conversion in the US. Post-9/11 US conversion has probably been higher in the US than in Europe because: 1) the magnitude of the event itself, it is likely, had a significant impact on peoples' minds, causing them to ask why the terrorists believed that Islam opposed US hegemony and what was it about Islam that propelled such unbelievable acts; 2) the discussions of 9/11 (and, hence, Islam) in the media have been more pervasive. While converts in Europe are the relative elite whose education allows them to know more about a minority religion than the average person, US citizens of all classes have been exposed to information about Islam. In addition, because Islam is usually spread by born Muslims, the increased rate of refugees to the US (which hosts almost twice as many as the United Kingdom) has meant that more “common” citizens are being exposed to Islam in the US than in Europe.¹⁵³ The fact that, of my respondents, only 15%

¹⁵¹ Köse, 80.

¹⁵² Zebiri, 9; Poston, 171.

¹⁵³ Institute of Race Relations, “Refugee Statistics,” <http://www.irr.org.uk/statistics/refugees.html> (accessed February 16, 2009).

had at least a B.A., which is about half the national average, indicates that Islam is actually more attractive to those with less education.¹⁵⁴ This will be explored more later.

Another set of responses that differs from other studies' findings is that of religious participation before conversion to Islam. Five of the respondents were born Catholic, 1 Episcopalian, 1 Church of England, 2 Baptist, 2 non-denominational Christian, 1 Pentecostal, 1 Jewish (this person was raised Jewish and Christian, so both religions are counted), and 1 atheist. Six of the respondents regularly attended church through at least high school, though 4 of those stopped attending soon after. Four of the respondents attended religious services regularly until their early-to-mid teen years. Besides the person raised atheist, only 2 growing up had little religious participation. Often, the reason people gave for stopping their attendance of their original church was because they saw the membership and/or leadership of that church as being hypocritical, and not because they rejected all their former beliefs. (Interestingly, those with religious backgrounds in Köse's study gave similar explanations.)¹⁵⁵ Of Zebiri's subjects, 2/3 had a non-religious or nominal Christian background;¹⁵⁶ 85% of Köse's respondents came from a family which did not identify with a church, and 51% said they had "no" or a "weak" religious upbringing;¹⁵⁷ in Poston's study, 57% were born Christians, but only 32% had strong religious participation;¹⁵⁸ conversely, in Anway's study, only 2 said religion was not important in their formative years.¹⁵⁹ The Pew Center found that the

¹⁵⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_008.asp (accessed February 18, 2009).

¹⁵⁵ Köse, *Conversion*, 191.

¹⁵⁶ Zebiri, 44.

¹⁵⁷ Köse, *Conversion*, 38-39.

¹⁵⁸ Poston, 165.

¹⁵⁹ Anway, *Daughters*, 11.

majority of its converts came from Protestant backgrounds,¹⁶⁰ though this can probably be attributed to the fact that the majority of its interviewed converts were African American, a group which overwhelmingly converts from Protestant denominations.¹⁶¹ Additionally, their study did not record level of religious participation before conversion. The results of Zebiri and Köse, who both studied converts in England, can be seen as reflective of the overall lower rates of religious participation and belief in Europe. Poston's results, on the other hand, might be connected to the fact that the subjects of his study, while American, did not convert at a time when many other people were converting to Islam, and they converted when Islam was a much less known religion, and therefore more threatening to someone who was raised in a religion. Thus converts to Islam before the 1980's (Poston looked at testimonials of people who converted between the 1940's and 1980's), as Poston's results show, were probably less likely to have been connected to a particular religious denomination. As Islam increasingly became more of a household word in the 1980's due to world political events and increased immigration, more religious Americans felt comfortable to convert—and this is supported by Anway's results which were based on questionnaires given in the early 1990's. My own findings confirm this trend as well. Not only did the majority of my respondents come from backgrounds that included regular religious participation until at least their teen years, the families in which they lived were typically liberal in their views of other religions and races.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Pew, 22.

¹⁶¹ Tinaz, 273.

¹⁶² Liberal views on religion and race: 8; liberal views on race only: 3; liberal views on religion only: 1; Non-liberal views on race or religion: 1.

It is with childhood happiness that my results again correlate with those of other studies. While some early scholars of conversion believed that family unhappiness growing up was a precondition for conversion, Köse refuted this. Of his respondents, 44% were happy, 26% moderate, and 30% unhappy.¹⁶³ My own findings were similar: 15% very happy, 55% happy/moderate, 15% unhappy, and 15% very unhappy. Few of my respondents had problems with crime, drugs, or alcohol, and few went through particularly traumatic experiences. In addition, like Köse's subjects, some of the Denver converts had problems with their fathers. Three of the respondents (23%) had fathers who were absent during a large part of their childhood, and 2 others (15%) had fathers who were frequently absent and with whom the respondents had a bad relationship. Twenty-six percent of Köse's subjects had absent fathers, and 36% had passive and withdrawn fathers.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, Roald reported that few of her subjects had poor relationships with their fathers.¹⁶⁵ Köse suggests that absent or withdrawn fathers may "exacerbate the child's perception of reality outside the home as unreliable,"¹⁶⁶ and therefore may be a factor that motivates some to seek a "reliable" family in a new religion. Generally, however, most converts to Islam in the West do not convert in teenage years (as will be discussed later), and this is probably reflective of their high levels of happiness throughout childhood, even taking into account fathers' absence. The next sections examine how and why these people who have "happy" childhoods come to adapt a whole new religion and way of life.

¹⁶³ Köse, *Conversion*, 32.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶⁵ Roald, 92.

¹⁶⁶ Köse, *Conversion*, 35.

SUMMARY: The Colorado converts differ from the other studied converts because they have generally moved more often and to more diverse places than their counterparts, they have less education, fewer of them have professional jobs, and they typically come from religious backgrounds. I believe at least 2 factors account for these demographic differences: 1) the increased media attention given to Islam after 9/11 has exposed people to the religion who might not have had any other exposure because of their education levels and 2) increased immigration of Muslims to Colorado since the 1980's has meant simply that more Coloradans of all types are meeting Muslims. However, Colorado converts grew up with similar levels of happiness to their counterparts.

Crisis

In 1965, Lofland and Stark wrote that tension is a predisposing condition for conversion. They defined tension as “a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up.”¹⁶⁷ Rambo agreed with this assessment and borrowed their definition for his second stage, “crisis.” He believes that a crisis can take many forms: social, political, a process of self-exploration, or even in hearing a preaching of sins.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, this is such a broad definition that it is hard to distinguish “crisis” from identity formation. Even William James in 1902 remarked that a conversion which is due to a “sense of

¹⁶⁷ Lofland and Stark, 864.

¹⁶⁸ Rambo, 46.

incompleteness and imperfection; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like,” is still “in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity.”¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, looking at Köse’s findings, in the 2 years preceding conversion, 48.6% of his respondents said their lives were filled with distress. Based on these authors, then, I believe that there is something to the idea of “crisis” preceding conversion, but Lofland and Stark’s definition is too broad to be helpful. Instead, I look at whether the respondent indicated that they went through any stressful life change in the few years before conversion. All but 2 respondents indicated some type of stressful event.

Köse classified stress preceding conversion in 5 categories: 1) spiritual meaningfulness 48.6%; 2) interpersonal 27.1%; 3) character (drugs, temper) 18.6%; material (job, school) 11.4%; and physical 7.1%.¹⁷⁰ I will slightly alter Köse’s categories to describe my respondents, and I want to point out that some people indicated more than one type of stressful event (these percentages are based on all 13 respondents): 1) spiritual confusion 23%; 2) interpersonal 38%; 3) character (drugs/alcohol, temper) 23%; 4) material (job, school, incarceration) 15%; 5) physical 8%; 6) moved to a different city 54%. The fact that the Denver converts were not dealing with spiritual meaningfulness so much as spiritual confusion probably reflects the pervasiveness of religious belief in the US as compared to Europe, and so it can be assumed that spiritual meaningfulness is not as much an issue for Americans. Similarly, while Zebiri, Roald, and Köse each said

¹⁶⁹ William James, “Lecture IX—Conversion,” *Varieties of Religious Experience*, <http://www.psychwww.com/psyrelig/james/james8.htm#205> (accessed February 18, 2009).

¹⁷⁰ Köse, *Conversion*, 86.

dissatisfaction with a Western, materialist culture was an important motivator to look for other sources of meaning, this factor was at best only hinted at by the Denver converts.¹⁷¹

All the other results in my study (interpersonal, character, etc.) were comparable to Köse's. However, we again see that changing residence is an important theme for these Denver converts.

SUMMARY: Colorado converts generally had similar stressful issues in the 2 years prior to conversion as their co-religionists in other studies: interpersonal, character (drugs/alcohol, temper), material (job, school, incarceration), physical, and moving to a different city.

Quest

Rambo sees quest as a “process of building meaning” and purpose, and this is continually done by all people. During times of crisis, however, this process is intensified. Rambo suggests we look at 3 factors of the quest: response style, structural availability, and motivational structures.¹⁷² The first factor, response style, boils down to whether the convert played an active or passive role in his or her conversion. Early work on converts asserted that they were mostly passive victims to proselytization techniques of sects, but this has increasingly been disproven, and is not supported by my findings.¹⁷³

The Denver converts were very active in seeking out Islam. As I will explain below, even when they had close relationships with Muslims who told them about the

¹⁷¹ Zebiri, 2; Roald, 100; Köse, *Conversion*, 79.

¹⁷² Rambo, 56.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 58.

religion, these Muslims never pressured the future converts to convert. Structural availability, the second factor, looks at how individuals' institutions let them try different activities. This factor is more important for use in a broad historical perspective than in a specific time frame. Most modern Western institutions (excluding the military, legal, and economic system, but including most religious groups), cannot prevent an individual from trying new things. The final factor, motivational structures, deals with the main motivations leading to conversion. These will be dealt with more in the next sections, but for now, suffice it to say that 54% of the Denver converts indicated that their conversion to Islam was based on spiritual reasons.

One of the most salient pieces of evidence that the Denver converts were active in seeking religion, and that they were free to choose a new religion (structural availability), is the fact that 7 of them (54%), before they converted to Islam, participated in religions other than those in which they were born. Four of the 7 tried 1 other religion before converting to Islam, 1 person tried 2, 1 tried 4, and the other tried 10. The religions they tried varied and no clear pattern emerges. Two people tried Pentecostalism, 2 participated in witchcraft, 2 had Masonic affiliations, 2 were at some point overtly atheist, and the other religions were only tried by one person each: Southern Baptist, Christian Science, Religious Science, Hinduism, Shamanism, Buddhism, yoga, Paganism, magic, Kabbalic practice, Catholicism, and Judaism. What is interesting is that this "seeking" behavior is rarely seen in other studies of Western converts to Islam. Only 6 (20%) of Zebiri's subjects chose Islam after looking at other religions;¹⁷⁴ Köse

¹⁷⁴ Zebiri, 44.

only classified 22% as “seekers,”¹⁷⁵ and Anway does not give a number, but only a few of the subjects’ responses mentioned sampling other religions.¹⁷⁶ Again, we can attribute the low findings in Zebiri and Köse’s work to the generally low religious participation in Europe. And, my research shows that the converts with the weakest religious upbringing, like many in Europe, did not sample other religions. Anway’s results are not as easy to understand. Her respondents were all women, but from my research it appears that women tried other various religions about as often as men (for the Denver converts, 4 women and 3 men tried different religions). Anway’s respondents were also better educated, but in my results, the people with B.A.’s and the professionals all were “seekers.” At this point, I cannot hypothesize as to why Anway’s results differed and I only hope that more research will shed light on this phenomenon.

SUMMARY: Unlike their Western counterparts, the Colorado converts often participated in spiritual “seeking.” This is probably due to the pervasiveness of religion in the US as compared to Europe.

Encounter

Encounter, for Rambo, is looking at how people first learn about a religion. People are often introduced to new religions by advocates of that religion. In fact, in the history of conversion to Islam, the phenomenon of conversion without ever having met a Muslim face-to-face is extremely rare, though sometimes classes on religion or television

¹⁷⁵ Köse, *Conversion*, 121.

¹⁷⁶ Anway, *Daughters*, 11.

broadcasts do pique the interest of future converts.¹⁷⁷ But in my particular study, just as in most others, converts' interest in Islam usually came after meeting Muslims face-to-face. It should also be said, however, that people rarely convert immediately after their first encounter with Islam and sometimes people may go several years between their first encounter and feeling like they might want to convert. Here, I will only evaluate first encounters as reported to me by the respondents when I asked them how they were first introduced to Islam. None of the respondents said they were introduced to Islam by seeing it in the news media, though by living in the US, I think that would have been unavoidable especially as most of the respondents converted after 9/11. I believe that the responses given to me indicated when the person began to actively learn details about Islam, even if this was not immediately followed by an interest in conversion.

Most of the Denver converts either did not know any Muslims growing up or never talked about Islam with a Muslim that they knew. It was when they grew up and tried different things in their lives that these converts gained relationships with Muslims: 3 of the respondents had made Muslim friends in the US, 4 were married to or dating a Muslim or person in the process of converting, 1 had a close family member who was in the process of converting, and 2 lived in Muslim countries where they made Muslim friends. Of the remaining 3, 1 started reading about Islam on her own and 2 learned about it in college courses. In Köse's study, the first social contact with Islam was spread similarly: travel to another country 23%, conversation with a Muslim 37%, reading literature 23%, man-woman relationship 14%, and introduced by other family 3%.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ This is noted in Arnold, 447.

¹⁷⁸ Köse, *Conversion*, 112.

Nevertheless, one of Köse's categories, that of man-woman relationship, appears to have a lower percentage than in the other studies. One third of Zebiri's converts were married to Muslim men at the time of conversion,¹⁷⁹ Roald observed that most Scandinavian converts marry Muslim men before conversion,¹⁸⁰ and Anway showed that 63% of her subjects married Muslim men before taking the *shahada* as well.¹⁸¹ Zebiri and Anway both mention that women are usually introduced to Islam by their Muslim husbands who are usually only nominally Muslim and rarely pressure the women to convert. The same can be said for the Denver converts who were in a relationship with a Muslim.

Throughout history, there has been little organized effort among Muslims to convert. Even in Colorado and America in general, where Muslims have been increasingly organizing proselytization efforts and becoming involved with interfaith dialogues, on the whole, these efforts do not bring in many people. Even converts to Christianity are less than 1% of all the people contacted by the Christian churches.¹⁸² None of the Denver converts in this study indicated that they were introduced to Islam by a formal missionizing or interfaith effort. The facts that in general Islam has had no ecclesiastical body, no priests, no organized proselytization system, and that "calling" (*da'wah*) people to the faith is a repeated exhortation in the Qur'an¹⁸³ led Thomas Walker Arnold to observe that the individual Muslim, because there is no intermediary between him or herself and God, "takes more trouble to learn the doctrines and observances of his faith, and thus becoming deeply impressed with the importance of them to himself, is

¹⁷⁹ Zebiri, 224, 228.

¹⁸⁰ Roald, 95-96.

¹⁸¹ Anway, *Daughters*, 21.

¹⁸² Rambo, 88.

¹⁸³ See Chapter 2.

more likely to become an exponent of the missionary character of his creed in the presence of the unbeliever.”¹⁸⁴ This is reflected in the percentage (77%) of the Denver converts who came to Islam *only* after talking with Muslims (as opposed to reading about it first). Anway also observed that in the case of male nominal Muslims who take Christian wives in the US, it was not that they were not practicing Islam because they did not know it, but because they were separated from the social aspect of it—it is more difficult to practice Islam, which requires constant praying and rituals difficult to perform in non-Muslim countries (such as fasting during Ramadan), when you are living alone in a society that is not built around these things.¹⁸⁵ Still, these men often held on to some Islamic ideas, and transmitted them to their significant others. When the woman converted, the men usually increased their religious participation.

SUMMARY: Most Western converts convert only after meeting Muslims face-to-face. However, compared to other studies, fewer Colorado converts were in a romantic relationship with a Muslim when they converted—several simply befriended Muslims. Moreover, the Colorado converts, like many Sunni converts throughout history, were not first attracted to Islam via proselytization.

¹⁸⁴ Arnold, 409.

¹⁸⁵ Anway, *Daughters*, 21.

Interaction

Rambo suggests that to study converts' interaction with the new religion, we should look at 4 factors: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles.¹⁸⁶ What unites the converts in my particular study is that most of them started taking the "Beginning Islam" course at the mosque soon before or immediately after their conversion. The majority of the converts had only known 1 or 2 Muslims before contacting the mosque. When they did so, the mosque secretary generally referred them to the man who teaches the "Beginning Islam" course and he encouraged them to attend that class and a "Basic Arabic" course as well. There, the converts interacted with other converts and developed a friendship with the teacher. Most of the respondents attend both classes, Friday prayer, and other mosque gatherings. Before the classes were offered (starting in 2000 at another mosque, and moving to CMS in 2004), small study circles were held in people's houses and both of the respondents who converted before 9/11 participated in those study groups. Anway also noted that her respondents generally all took part in ongoing study,¹⁸⁷ and Poston noted that Islamic lessons were instrumental in 75% of the conversions he studied.¹⁸⁸

Intellectual activities relating to Islam are generally popular among Western converts. Thirteen out of 30 converts in Zebiri's research said reading and religious debate was key to their conversion.¹⁸⁹ Köse discovered that 71% of his subjects were motivated to convert because of intellectual reasons which they learned by reading many

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸⁸ Poston, 176.

¹⁸⁹ Zebiri, 56.

books and talking to other Muslims.¹⁹⁰ For the Denver converts, all but 1 indicated they did some Islamic reading before taking the *shahada*. Most read general books on Islam, and 4 also read the Qur'an. Overall, 8 of the Denver converts indicated that they were attracted to some sort of intellectual or theological aspect of Islam: 4 identified Islam's congruence with science and logic, 2 appreciated its congruity with their former religion, and 2 liked that Islam did not have the contradictions of their old religion. Here I should point out, however, that only the 4 who were attracted to Islam's congruence with science and logic, were the ones who were *primarily* attracted to intellectual aspects of Islam. The others indicated that intellectual motivations were secondary to spiritual ones.

In general, the Denver converts indicated that the lifestyle change to Islam was not very difficult and reported that they had already been doing some of the things required by Islam. All but 3 said their alcohol consumption was very low by the time they considered converting, and only 1 indicated that it took a few months to stop. And all said it was relatively easy to give up pork products, some had even stopped eating pork long before conversion. Köse found similar results: only 6 of his subjects continued to drink, and all gave up pork, as did Anway's subjects.¹⁹¹ In the wearing of the hijab and long sleeves, all but 1 of the female converts do observe it all the time. Three of the 8 said it took a few months, sometimes longer, to wear it everywhere. The workplace was where most were hesitant to wear it. Only 1 of the men I talked to wore a long robe on a regular basis, and 1 other wore one intermittently, and these were the only 2 men with beards. Anway found that only 2 of her respondents did not wear the hijab full

¹⁹⁰ Köse, *Conversion*, 98.

¹⁹¹ Köse, *Conversion*, 130; Anway, *Daughters*, 7.

time,¹⁹² and Köse saw that while 30% of the women did not wear a scarf, 100% wore long sleeves and a high neck, 6% of the men donned robes, and 50% had beards.¹⁹³ The Denver female converts I interviewed all felt that the this new kind of dress, along with the separation from men during prayer, were positive aspects of the religion because they helped people to avoid focusing on sexuality which they saw as a distraction from proper Muslim thinking. Most of the Denver converts indicated that they try to do the 5 daily prayers and participate in Ramadan. Forty-nine percent of Köse's respondents did the 5 daily prayers, while the other 51% believed they should, and 73% of his respondents did the full fast for Ramadan.¹⁹⁴ Anway's respondents all said they did the daily prayers and the full fast for Ramadan.¹⁹⁵ In the study of Parisian converts by Lakhdar et al, 171 out of 191 said they pray on a regular basis, and 187 said they fast for Ramadan.¹⁹⁶ Given the difficulty, as reported by the Denver converts, of finding a quiet and clean place to pray and a work environment that would allow it, it is hard to believe that the majority of the converts in the other studies regularly made all 5 daily prayers. On the other hand, when it comes to using Islamic expressions, particularly "insha'allah" ("God willing"), this seems to be ubiquitous for Western converts.

Rambo suggests that rituals "provide integrative modes of identifying with and connecting to the new way of life."¹⁹⁷ They reinforce the values and lessons of the new religion, they distinguish the convert from the people not in the religion which solidifies the convert's own identity, they validate the religion to other members of the religious

¹⁹² Anway, *Daughters*, 7.

¹⁹³ Köse, *Conversion*, 131.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁹⁵ Anway, *Daughters*, 7.

¹⁹⁶ Lakhdar et al: 6.

¹⁹⁷ Rambo, 107-108.

community, and they can help provide a spiritual experience for the person performing them.¹⁹⁸ Arnold, in listing 6 reasons why Islam was successful, noted that the 5 daily prayers are a constant reminder of religion and community, as I believe are the abstinence from alcohol and park, the attending of prayer service and classes, the change of dress, and the adding of Islamic expressions into ones speech.¹⁹⁹ All these help to define the convert's identity and role.

SUMMARY: The converts in this study all participated in ongoing study of Islam, which is typical of Western converts. Furthermore, intellectual factors played a role in their decisions to convert. The Colorado converts, like their counterparts, found it relatively easy to follow the food and alcohol prohibitions of Islam. The Colorado women mostly wore hijabs and long sleeves, like in other studies, but the men were far less likely to don Islamically-identifying clothing (like a beard or robe) than their counterparts. Reported amounts of praying were also less for Colorado converts.

Commitment

The level, kind, and time it takes to make a commitment required by a particular religion varies from religion to religion and from person to person. In the case of the Denver converts, it took on average 3.9 years after first learning about Islam until they officially converted, but for some it took only 6 months and others up to 12 years. And while study, rituals, and entering into a community were all important to the converts,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 115-116.

¹⁹⁹ Arnold, 417.

each had his or her own perception of what was the main attraction to Islam which culminated in conversion. The converts were allowed to give multiple answers to what attracted them to Islam, and some people emphasized one factor over another. The majority, 7, identified spiritual factors as the primary motive. For them, Islam “felt” right, and these respondents usually indicated that while the intellectual aspects were important generally in their appreciation of Islam, their conversion was made because of non-intellectual motives. Other responses indicated that people were attracted to Islam’s congruence with science and logic (4), its congruence with their former religion (2), the fact that it did not have contradictions like their former religion (2), its peacefulness/equality (3), and its discipline (1).²⁰⁰ Interestingly, European motives were primarily intellectual. Almost half of Zebiri’s respondents, as I mentioned above, emphasized intellectual motives; Roald’s subjects mostly were attracted to Islam because it is a logical religion;²⁰¹ Köse found that 47% thought Islam offered a better philosophy of life, and overall, 71% had intellectual motivations, while only 4% had mystical motives (not including Sufis).²⁰² I believe that the higher rates of intellectual motives among Europeans are due to their being better educated and therefore more intellectually demanding of their new religion. Roald has also observed that the things attractive to converts about Islam change over time and so it is possible that the relatively short time

²⁰⁰ These categories roughly correspond to Lofland and Skonovd’s (p. 375) conversion motifs: “spiritual motives” correspond with “mystical,” “science and logic” and the non-contradictory state of Islam go with “intellectual,” “congruence with their former religion” and “peacefulness/equality” go with “affectional,” and “discipline” goes with “experimental.” The last 2 motifs, “revivalist” and “coercive” were virtually non-existent for the converts.

²⁰¹ Roald, 89.

²⁰² Köse , *Conversion*, 87, 98, 109.

my respondents have been Muslim, 1.7 years (excluding the 2 who converted before 9/11), may play a part in shaping their response.

The average age at which the Denver converts took the *shahada* was 29.69, 28.6 for men and 30.38 for women. Poston found that the average age at conversion was 31.4;²⁰³ Köse found the average age at conversion to be 29.7.²⁰⁴ While my findings correspond with those of Poston and Köse, it should be noted that the age at conversion found in the work of the Pew Research Center, Al-Qwidi, Zebiri, and Roald were all in their mid-20's.²⁰⁵ Zebiri suggests that the reason for this difference is that these studies were conducted after 9/11, and because of the wide exposure Islam was getting in response to the attacks, more people were curious about the religion, which meant more people were interested in converting and doing so faster than previous converts.²⁰⁶ While this probably does play a part, I believe that the composition of the sample group provides insight. The first factor could be race: the Pew Center's converts were 59% African American. Nuri Tinaz showed that this group usually converts in their lower-to-mid-20s, and those in the NOI convert most often in the 20 to 25 range,²⁰⁷ while the other studies discussed here looked at primarily white converts. The second factor, as I touched on in Chapter 1, could be gender: Köse had a subject pool with more men than women while Roald and Zebiri had more female subjects than male (the gender of the

²⁰³ Poston, 166.

²⁰⁴ Köse, *Conversion*, 37.

²⁰⁵ Al-Qwidi: 25, cited in Zebiri, 43; Zebiri: 23.5 in Zebiri, 43. In a study by Roald, though she did not give an average age, she found that "(80%) were under 30" in Roald, 109; Pew: 49% converted under 21 in Pew, 22.

²⁰⁶ Zebiri, 43.

²⁰⁷ Tinaz, 268.

Pew Center converts was not reported).²⁰⁸ It is possible that European women generally convert at a younger age than men, though this would not be consistent with my findings. Early work on conversion found that the average age at conversion was 15, but contemporary works show that conversion is usually later,²⁰⁹ and is seen as a result of the process of creating a unified self in a modern world in which, because it is very complex, now takes longer than it did 100 years ago. Erickson termed this the “moratorium” process and said that it generally ends in a person’s late 20’s.²¹⁰ This “moratorium” appears to apply to Denver converts, but the very different results obtained by the Pew Research Center indicate that more work must be done to flesh out age distribution in terms of race.

Traditionally, the only ritual required to convert to Islam is the saying of the *shahada* (“There is not god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”) in front of a Muslim witness. Though occasionally there have been other requirements,²¹¹ today this is generally all that is required to officially convert. Only 4 of the Denver converts took on a Muslim name, though none of them have changed it legally. In England, Köse found that 81% took a Muslim name but only 6% legally changed it;²¹² and Jensen saw that “many” adopted new names, but these were “only seldom registered.”²¹³ It is not clear as to why the Denver converts did not change their names as much as their

²⁰⁸ Köse, *Conversion*, 2: 50 men, 20 women; Zebiri, 9: 20 women, 10 men; Roald, 97: 58% women.

²⁰⁹ Ali Köse, “Religious Conversion: Is It an Adolescent Phenomenon? The Case of Native British Converts to Islam,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 6 (1996): 253-254.

²¹⁰ Köse, *Conversion*, 60.

²¹¹ In Yemen’s history, converts have been required to eat “soup made from meat slaughtered according to Islamic law...” Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, “Muslim Society as an Alternative: Jews Converting to Islam,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 14 (2007): 101.

²¹² Köse, *Conversion*, 128.

²¹³ Jensen: 645.

European counterparts. Nonetheless, one post-conversion ritual that seems fairly consistent is Muslim marriage. After converting, 5 Denver converts either married a Muslim or became engaged to 1. One convert's spouse ended up converting as well. Those who were already married, were married to Muslims, and those who were not married, indicated that they plan on marrying a Muslim, as has been the trend in other studies.²¹⁴ The percentage of Denver converts who were married to a Muslim before conversion (23%), however, is less than the percentages in the other studies,²¹⁵ which is probably reflective of the increased popularity of Islam which may embolden people to convert even without solid social ties in the new religion.

SUMMARY: Colorado converts took an average of 3.9 years from first learning about Islam to taking the *shahada*. Their primary motivation was spiritual, unlike European converts whose main motives were intellectual. However, Colorado converts converted at roughly the same age as their counterparts, 29.69 years, suggesting Erikson's "moratorium" theory. Nevertheless, unlike their counterparts, the Colorado converts were reluctant to change their names.

Consequences

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. Eight of the Denver converts' families had negative reactions at first, but over time most grew to

²¹⁴ Zebiri, 224; Köse, *Conversion*, 80.

²¹⁵ 63% in Anway, *Daughters*, 21; 58% in Roald, 97; 33% in Zebiri, 224; 57% in Köse, *Conversion*, 80.

accept it. Often, there are some individuals in the extended family who continue to criticize the conversion or who completely disassociate from the convert. Only 1 convert reported that the extended family was supportive from the beginning. One convert has yet to tell the family, and others had waited several months after conversion. Twice when I asked about the reaction of friends and family, no mention was even made of the family. Conversely, four of the converts had family members who also converted or are thinking about conversion. Friendships with non-Muslims, however, are generally ended (9/13). This is not usually the result of negative reactions from friends, but the fact that the converts' lives are so filled with Islamic activities and Muslim relationships, that they have no time for or see no purpose in maintaining friendships with non-Muslims. Two converts did not even mention friendships with non-Muslims when asked, but 2 also said they still have good non-Muslim friendships. These results correlate with those in other studies. Anway found that 46% of her subjects' families had negative reactions at first, but improved over time, 14% said their parents were supportive since day one, some were cut off from their family, and some said it was simply none of their parents' business.²¹⁶ Köse reported that parents were extremely unhappy or hostile in 19% of the cases, indifferent in 31%, supportive in 14%, 24% had not seen their parents' reactions (including the 11% who had not told their parents), and most friendships died out with hostility.²¹⁷ Zebiri found that converts usually ended associations with non-Muslims.²¹⁸ In general, Western converts have decent relationships with their families and minimal relationships with non-Muslim friends.

²¹⁶ Anway, *Daughters*, 46.

²¹⁷ Köse, *Conversion*, 137-139.

²¹⁸ Zebiri, 187.

SUMMARY: Like their counterparts, the Denver converts experienced negative reactions from their families immediately following their conversions, though their relationships improved over time. Moreover, Denver converts followed the trend of ending most relationships with non-Muslim friends.

Conclusion

The Denver converts share a few similarities and several differences with the converts in previous studies of non-African American groups. As has been shown, while all Western converts tend to take the *shahada* in their mid-to-late 20's, the education and occupations of the Denver converts are different from the others'. In addition, Denver converts, in general, share the experiences of having moved several times before converting to Islam and having sampled other religions. Also, on the whole, the Denver converts grew up more religious than their English counterparts. These religious differences, then, can be at least partially attributed to the particular culture from which the converts come. I believe that the other differences, especially education and occupation, are due to the pervasiveness of information about Islam in the media after 9/11. However, these 2 factors cannot alone account for conversion because it would be easy for the uneducated to criticize Islam given the pervasiveness of negative portrayals of Muslims in the media—so we must also note the other factors of these converts. For instance, the experience of moving several times has made these particular individuals amenable to conversion. It has been theorized for several years now that converts are

generally marginal people,²¹⁹ individuals “disconnected from the sources of power and support of the traditional culture.”²²⁰ Without being able to develop long lasting roots in a particular place, combined with being raised with a liberal (religious and racial) worldview, these particular converts were receptive to the message of universal unity in Islam. The Denver mosque is also mostly populated by non-white Muslims, so this kind of egalitarian attitude would be a necessary precondition to convert. I believe that the particular phenomenon of having moved several times, while it may not be unique to the Denver converts, is reflective of the fact that they generally have less education than their American predecessors and European counterparts. This is because since information about Islam has permeated American life since 9/11, and therefore has reached the less educated in a way that it has not before. And since not all who have learned about Islam in the past 8 years have converted (in fact, anti-Muslim sentiment actually increased after 9/11), I believe that those who converted did so at least in part because these were individuals who *felt* disconnected from their own sub-culture, though not the US/Western culture in general, which few of them overtly criticized (intellectual motives were not overwhelmingly important for the Denver converts). Islam provided these converts with a way of unifying their pre-existing egalitarian views with their predisposition (because of their religious backgrounds) to “spiritual” experiences. Furthermore, Islam was also able to reconcile questions about the relationship of religion with logic, provide an alternative to the apparent contradictions in their former religion, or, alternatively, appear

²¹⁹ In 1965, Lofland and Stark pointed out that while the majority of people in “contemporary society” found an outlet in their stress through psychiatric or political alternatives, those who converted, for whatever reason, did not see these as alternatives: 867.

²²⁰ Rambo, 41.

as congruent with the aspects of their former religion that they liked. Islam's power of unifying these ideas in a coherent sense of meaning has meant that, as Zebiri observed, individuals are attracted to this religion despite conversion to it having a perceived decline in social status.²²¹

With these findings, we can test the hypotheses of other scholars.²²² Based on his research, Köse proposed that there were 3 stages in the conversion of his subjects: 1) rejection of religion of origin, 2) getting acquainted with Muslims, and 3) experimenting with Islam, encouraged by intellectual motivations.²²³ This model essentially holds true for the Denver converts, though their religious backgrounds were stronger than those of Köse's subjects, and intellectual motivations are not as important for the Denver converts. The fact that Köse's respondents were not "seekers," however, led him to reject Lofland and Stark's 7 step conversion model.²²⁴ But since several Denver converts were seekers, I believe the 7 step model applies. Lofland and Stark believed that individuals had to meet increasingly narrow criteria in order to be able to convert. These steps were "Tension," similar to Rambo's "crisis;" "Type of Problem-Solving Perspective" in which an individual chose between psychiatric, political, or religious outlets, and converts usually chose religious; "Seekership" in which individuals sampled different religions; "Turning Point" is a new crisis (e.g. "recent migration," loss of employment, etc.) that immediately precedes conversion; "Cult of Affective Bonds" is an affective relationship developed between a convert and one or more members of the new

²²¹ Zebiri, 41.

²²² For the sake of brevity, I do not test all the hypotheses introduced in chapter 1. Here, I only test the major theories and models that have been used throughout the scholarship of modern conversion to Islam in the West.

²²³ Köse, *Conversion*, 122-123.

²²⁴ Köse, *Conversion*, 121.

religion; “Extra-Cult Affective Bonds” were, in general, minimal or irrelevant for converts; and “Intensive Interaction” in which the convert performs a variety of the required rituals of the religion.²²⁵ Lofland and Stark’s model appears to apply to the majority of Denver converts.

Additionally, in his book, Rambo proposed several other hypotheses and encouraged their being tested. While many could not be looked at because of the limits of this study, some of his hypotheses applied: “those who do not convert in a hostile setting are marginal members of society,” “consonance of core values and symbols will facilitate conversion,” and “converts selectively adopt and adapt the new religion to meet their needs.”²²⁶ Finally, I return to Arnold who made general conclusions about the success of Islam’s proselytization efforts over the centuries. He attributed Islam’s success to: 1) Islam’s theological simplicity, which is easily grasped by people of all education, and holds at its core views that are already held by Christians and Jews (i.e., the oneness of God); 2) the fact that Islam is founded on rational principles; 3) the Hajj’s ability to constantly reinvigorate proselytizers; 4) the paying of alms supported and held together a feeling of community; 5) the many required prayers are constant reminders to practitioners about their faith and the community in which they practice it; and 6) particular circumstances for each time and place.²²⁷ The power of numbers 1, 2, and 5 have already been noted in this study, and the paying of alms (number 4) was also fairly consistent among the Denver converts. On the other hand, pilgrimage to Mecca, as far as I know, has not played a strong role in energizing proselytizers, but in today’s age of

²²⁵ Lofland and Stark: 864-873.

²²⁶ Rambo, 41-42.

²²⁷ Arnold, 413-417.

worldwide instantaneous communication, and the emergence of several internet sites on Islam and *da'wah* in particular,²²⁸ I believe the Hajj is less necessary to motivate proselytizers than ever before. Arnold's final factor, number 6, should be identified as the post-9/11 world in the modern West with instant media communications and increased Muslim immigration. Therefore, almost ironically, as long as "terrorist" is treated as synonymous with Arab and "Islam" thereby keeping the religion in the news, and Muslims continue to arrive in the US, it is likely conversion to Islam will proliferate.²²⁹

I would also like to suggest that these findings intimate 2 conclusions about Islam and religion in today's US. It would of course be irresponsible of me to make broad generalizations based on my findings of just 13 converts, so these propositions should be understood to be very tentative hypotheses and would require much extensive research. The first of these conclusions is that the increased amount and style of media attention to Islam are changing how people view Islam and themselves. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson demonstrates that communities grow as individual people come to believe that others are in their community, and that this is heavily facilitated by media and its ability to reach a broad audience.²³⁰ The increased media attention to Islam following 9/11, whether positive or negative,²³¹ has made more and more people aware of

²²⁸ Cesari, 111.

²²⁹ Cesari, p. 41; also the consider the incident last year when Raed Jarrar was asked to cover his shirt which read, in Arabic script, "We will not be silent." David Elliot, "Bill offers redress to victims of terrorist watchlist," February 4, 2009, http://www.niacouncil.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1328&Itemid=2 (accessed February 21, 2009).

²³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2006).

²³¹ For an example of the "positive" effects of media attention to Muslims after 9/11, see Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, "Muslim Americans in the News Before and After 9-11," Conference paper,

their fellow members of their community and thus in turn changed the way these people see each other. (Its effects are of course augmented by increased Muslim immigration.) I suggest that this change in Americans' "imagined communities" has both fostered conversion for some, and reinforced discrimination for others. This brings me to my other conclusion: the attention given to non-"traditional" (i.e., non-white Protestant Christian) groups in the media has changed the way people understand "religion." Scholars have for the past 40 years now been exposing how the modern concept of "religion" was constructed by Protestants and with Protestant assumptions, implying that the things called "religions" do not necessarily conform to these assumptions;²³² and that "religion" is actually something that can connect and disconnect virtually any idea and experience.²³³ So, the increased exposure of "foreign religions" to people through the media introduces new ways of connecting ideas and experiences and ultimately of seeing oneself and one's community. I submit that because Islam and Muslims (particularly terrorists) are often presented, especially since 9/11, as irrational, "logic" plays less of a role in how Westerners perceive Islam. This would at least partly explain the salient differences between the motivations and educational backgrounds of these Colorado Muslim converts and European and older American converts.

Finally, these conclusions bring to light areas that require further study. What are the relationships between converts and their co-religionists in the mosque? Do these converts attend other mosques? What are the experiences of converts who do not attend

Presented at Harvard Symposium Restless Searchlight, August 12, 2002. For an example of "negative" coverage, see the Islamaphobia Watch website: <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/>.
²³² Beginning with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (NY: MacMillan, 1963).
²³³ See, for example, Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (NY: Routledge, 2006) and Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Islam classes? What are the long-term patterns of the converts' experience as Muslims? And more work should be done to see if the larger trends of female converts in the mosque—are they obtaining positions of power within the mosque? Of course, none of these answers can be approached without conducting larger-scale studies in several areas throughout the US. This will be a difficult task as Muslims remain (somewhat justifiably) suspicious of non-Muslims who want to study them.

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Appendix

Questions for Converts

What is your age, gender, and race or ethnicity?
Can you describe the town(s) in which you grew up?
How would you describe your socioeconomic class growing up?
Can you describe your education growing up?
Can you describe your levels of happiness growing up?
Did you have any significant problems growing up?
Can you describe your experience with religion growing up?
What were your views on other religions?
How would you describe your parents' religious participation?
What races did you interact with?
What were your interests, hobbies, and lifestyle trends?
Where you ever a member of any organizations outside of work and school?
Where you ever involved in politics or political activism?
Did you know any Muslims growing up?
What were your views on Muslims growing up?
Did you study or participate in religions other than the one you were raised with?
What is your occupation now?
Are you, have you been, or are you planning on being married?
Do you have kids?

Please describe your conversion experience. [If information concerning any of the following questions is not brought forward in this description, I will ask that particular question.]

How were you first introduced to Islam?
What attracted you to Islam?
What Islamic activities were/are the most important for you?
Have you experienced any problems with other Muslims since you began learning about Islam?
Would you characterize your conversion as "sudden"?
After learning about Islam, how did your view of the world change?
What about your view on US culture?
Have any of your old relationships with non-Muslims changed (including at work)?
Are you pursuing any new education?
Have you had new romantic relationships with Muslims?
What religious activities do you do (including reading religious texts and praying)?
Which are regularly performed?

Would you like to add anything?