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American Converts to Islam, Post-Conversion Experiences Post 9/11

Abstract

American converts to Islam and their post-conversion experiences do not attract the attention of many researchers and policy makers in the United States. They have been understudied or overlooked as they are positioned at the margins of studies of Islam and in Muslim communities in the US. Interest in and attention to converts to Islam, however, *is* triggered once a few embrace an extreme worldview, especially if they join a terrorist group. Therefore, this research intends to add the complexity and diversity of post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam to the literature of conversion to Islam studies in the US. Following lived-religion qualitative assessment, this research investigates the challenges that American converts to Islam encounter during and after their conversion to Islam as well as the ways in which they navigate through and negotiate these challenges. It finds that American converts to Islam tend to grapple with distinguishing between what is and is not Islamic, what is theologically-based and what is culturally-based.

Many of these challenges and struggles that converts face are due to some cultural and traditional practices of born-Muslims in the U.S. and all over the world. In order to identify these challenges, I explore these post-conversion experiences in the light of Lewis Rambo's theory of seven phases of conversion people go through during their religious conversion. Several personal post-conversion testimonials of various converts from different backgrounds in the context of the United States, according to Rambo's (1993) 'Stage Theory', demonstrates the complexity and sometimes the contradictory nature of post-conversion experiences. Due to the complexity of such research, the paper narrows its focus on the lived-religion qualitative assessment of mosques' websites, *da`wah* groups' websites, YouTube channels, blogs and articles related to converts to Islam and published post-9/11 in the US. Further, the paper prioritizes experiences of converts in relationship to Muslim communities in the US over converts' experiences with their pre-conversion non-Muslim networks. Studying converts to Islam provides better understanding of the internal complexities of Muslims in the US for researchers, policy makers and Muslims themselves as it highlights converts' diverse experiences such as loss, isolation, confusion, and belonging.

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Muhammad A. Kolila

June 2019

Advisor: Professor Andrea Stanton

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ABSTRACT

American converts to Islam and their post-conversion experiences do not attract the attention of many researchers and policy makers in the United States. They have been understudied or overlooked as they are positioned at the margins of studies of Islam and in Muslim communities in the US. Interest in and attention to converts to Islam, however, *is* triggered once a few embrace an extreme worldview, especially if they join a terrorist group. Therefore, this research intends to add the complexity and diversity of post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam to the literature of conversion to Islam studies in the US. Following lived-religion qualitative assessment, this research investigates the challenges that American converts to Islam encounter during and after their conversion to Islam as well as the ways in which they navigate through and negotiate these challenges. It finds that American converts to Islam tend to grapple with distinguishing between what is and is not Islamic, what is theologically-based and what is culturally-based.

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(Key words: Islam, American converts to Islam, Post-conversion experiences, born-Muslims, Immigrants, Religious conversion)

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PART I

Introduction

“Why do none of the *masjids* (mosques) have programs for us? Does no one care for us?!” an African American convert to Islam once asked me, disappointment clear in his voice. I did not know when or how he converted. Yet, I felt speechless before his angry and disappointed call for help. He expressed his need to learn the Qur’an and he said that many Muslims let him down (after agreeing to help him). Another convert who converted five years ago told me that she felt lost and mad at the community as no one was really checking on her. She pointed to her frustration with the discriminatory looks and words that were directed at her at times from born-Muslim women, especially because she is not married. I was also struck by several opinions and ideas converts hold of their faith as I met some converts who are very literal in their understanding of Islamic texts. For instance, a convert told me that he does not believe in wearing pants because it is a *bid‘ah* (religious innovation). I kept asking myself, why do they hold these unusual views of Islam? Many religious converts, including converts to Islam, in the beginning of their post-conversion experiences, hold very intensified and sometimes literal views and interpretations of their newly endorsed religions (Levtzion et al 1979, Rambo 1993 & Roald et al, 2006).

These experiences are not the only negative experiences American converts go through; another convert expressed his uplifting and meaningful experience of becoming a Muslim. Yvonne Haddad (2006) points to these feelings as a sign of the diversity of experiences of these converts in relationships to born-Muslims (Haddad, 2006). As a Muslim, who is involved in internal Muslim communities' affairs and living their concerns and struggles in the US, I was disturbed by the lack of understanding by my fellow born-Muslims, whether immigrants or second generations, towards converts to Islam's experiences and struggles. I found this lack of understanding common among several Muslim communities across the spectrum of the US. Such a lack of understanding, this paper finds, is the result of community negligence towards converts. Converts are often positioned at the margin of Muslim communities. This might explain why there are not deep and thoughtful studies from academia, policy-making circles, and even Muslims about American converts to Islam and their post-conversion experiences, who are mediators between Islam and the West.

Triggered by these incidents, I found it imperative to study converts' complicated and diverse experiences that many do not know about. After making *shahada* (Islamic testimony of faith) converts set off on a journey full of complex and varied experiences in relationship to their pre-conversion networks along with their new Muslim communities. Their experiences relating to born-Muslims depend mainly on which interpretations and forms of Islam these born-Muslims embrace. British sociologist Booby S. Sayyid (2015) argues that Islam is a "*nodal point*", which means that there are not multiple Islams, rather Islam may be used to "articulate multiplicity of positions" (Sayyid, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of American converts to Islam vary depending on which face

of Islam they embrace only at the beginning of their conversion. In addition, their experiences are influenced by several other factors such as their pre-conversion social, racial, cultural, and personal backgrounds. Therefore, this research expands, adds, and deepens the studies around converts to Islam by presenting and examining converts to Islam experiences in the US. By studying male and female converts from different backgrounds, this paper attempts to broaden the scope of the study of American converts to Islam. Highlighting the diversity among converts in their post-conversion experiences, this research examines post-conversion experiences primarily in terms of converts' relationship to existing Muslim communities in the US (McGinty, 2009).

Converts to Islam in many cases deal with marginalization, stress and discrimination from their pre-conversion social networks. However, their experiences after conversion to Islam are not less significant than their pre-conversion experience. Despite what is being perceived by American public culture, Islam is not monolithically practiced in a uniform way. Similarly, American converts to Islam are not following one fixed path in their imagining of Islam. Exploring these different paths that converts take after conversion illuminate researchers, policy makers, and Muslim themselves to an intricate picture of how American Muslims, including converts who constitute almost 25% of total Muslim population in the US, navigate their faith and structure of their communities with their complex fabric in the American contexts.

Despite what many Americans think of Islam as a foreign religion, converts to Islam comprise roughly one fourth of the Muslim populations in the US (Pew, 2017). Nevertheless, they are frequently overlooked in studies related to Muslims. Scholars classify Muslims in the US in terms of their religious backgrounds in two groups,

immigrants and American born. However, there are some studies suggesting that Muslims in the US can be put into three categories: immigrants, descendants of enslaved Africans, and white Muslim converts (Peter and Yaqin, 2011). However, there is a critique to that classification in terms of classifying African American Muslims under a category different from immigrants and white American converts. Some prefer to consider African American Muslims as converts as well as white American converts. Similarly, to white converts, African Americans were born and raised in the US, which is influenced primarily by Christianity as a religion and culture (Roy, 2010). Some of them might not have heard of Islam in their lives. Also, the definition of a convert, as someone who changes the religious and theological identification of his or her sets of beliefs to another faith or religion from their own due to a crisis they experience with theirs, demonstrates that African Americans can be considered converts.

Most of Muslim immigrant communities in the US prefer to live closer to those who are coming from the same country or origin; forging areas featured with predominantly Arab, Pakistani, Indonesian, African and so forth communities. Although, Islam has a long history in the US, the majority of Muslims are foreign born as Pew Research (2018) states. According to Pew Research, there are 58% of Muslims in the US who are foreign born (Pew Research, 2018). Yet, there is no dominant ethnic community among the Muslim communities in the US. American Muslims comprise different linguistic, racial, geographical and even theological (Islamic schools of thoughts) backgrounds. Immigrant Muslim communities form predominantly sub-cultural communities in the US, as well as in other countries where Muslims are minorities, to create a hybrid culture with which they are familiar (Modood,2003). The “symbolic

world” of immigrants, as the Swedish sociologist of religion Eva Hamburger puts it, breaks down as social environments change. Muslim immigrants have to reconstruct a symbolic world for themselves by incorporating their cultural and religious identity within the larger social and cultural US identities that were predominantly forged by Enlightenment Western Protestant Christianity. Therefore, immigrant Muslims build in the US a symbolic world in which they find relevance to their places of origin. Inculturated Islam in these immigrants’ places of origin (Roy, 2010) is their symbolic world which is found explicitly in how many immigrant mosques look like.

As a result, we see mosques that are predominantly Arab, Pakistani, Indian, Malaysian, and so forth (CAIR, 2011). Despite the fact that every mosque has a dominant ethnic representation, mosques operate in a different style than many other houses of worships in the US. For instance, a mosque might have Arabs as the dominant race of its members, yet we can observe, for instance, some members from Asian origins or African American members as well. Converts. They are often in the position of joining existing mosque communities, with dominant ethnic influences that are different from the convert’s own. Converts find themselves having to become involved in one of these ethnic communities, including their cultural specifications, or forge a new community with cultural practices that are relevant to them, as is the case of many African American converts, and so American Latino Muslims.

Converts’ experiences, including converts to Islam, attract the attention of some scholars of religious conversion. Nevertheless, the attention is paid to pre-conversion journey. For example, Lewis Rambo (1993) persuasively argues that studying religious conversion requires an inter-disciplinary approach, including sociology, religious studies,

psychology, and anthropology. Therefore, this research explores post-conversion experiences of converts using inter-disciplinary methods to thoroughly understand those converts' experiences (Rambo, 1993, p. 9-10). Observing converts' experiences requires several disciplines to analyze and assess them with more complex and comprehensive approaches. Rambo explains this under what is called the "*Stage Model*,"¹ an attempt to understand the complexity of why people convert from one faith to another or within one faith (Rambo, 1993, p.11). Here, the *Stage Model* is constructed to present a better understanding of conversion in social, cultural, personal, and religious complex lenses (Rambo, 2014, p.17). These stages, as Rambo organizes them in order, are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo, 2014, p.17, 166).² In this study, Rambo's *Stage Model* is applied, as a theoretical framework, to examine answers to questions such as, what do converts to Islam experience after converting to the religion? how their interaction with born-Muslims shape their post-conversion experiences? What are their reactions to and style of negotiating their diverse identities as a result of interactions with born-Muslims in the US? What role their social, religious, personal motivations of conversion's play in their post-conversion experiences and

¹ Lewis Rambo (1993, p. 1-16) suggests that converts to any faith go through stages. He attempts to unearth the complexity of religious conversion socially, religiously, personally, and culturally. He presupposes that a person can be socially and culturally a convert if they simply change their religion, change their denomination, or practice of their faith they were born in. He calls these changes (apostacy, intensification - affiliation - institutional transition – tradition transition)

² If we to apply something close to this theory on converts to Islam in their post-conversion experience, we can put them as follows, (obsession with the faith – encounter to the community of Muslims- interaction with them in deeper sense by taking roles in mosques – crisis of identity due to cultural and personal practices of born- Muslims that contradict the appealing message to converts , community and belonging - consequences).

negotiations? I will use Rambo's *Stage Model* as a background theory from which American converts to Islam in their post-conversion experiences are examined and explored. Therefore, there will not be frequent reference to his theory; instead, the *Stage Model* is used as a conceptual framework to the post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam post-9/1.

Rambo (1993) explains that understanding conversion is not satisfactory to all as it is complex to understand the relationship between a mysterious God and the internal spiritual aspect of a human being. He argues that, although these stages that converts experience are not necessarily unchangeable and universal, they provide a better understanding of the complicated processes of conversion (1993, p.17, 166). These stages are:

1. Contexts, Rambo (1993) presupposes that context means integrating social, religious, cultural, and personal dimensions of the process of conversion (Rambo, 1993, p.21).
2. Crisis represents the uncertainty and loss of something in the life of a convert.
3. Quest, therefore, is the step that comes out of a crisis a human being experiences. Converts start searching for alternatives as a solution for their crisis.
4. Then, Encounter with members of different religions take place.
5. Interaction, a deeper engagement and sometimes personal interactions with people from the interesting faith to a convert, is the next level in a convert's journey.
6. Commitment is the level that comes with a personal decision to be committed to the new faith or sets of beliefs.

7. Consequences are the results of all long processes of conversion that are mentioned beforehand.

For converts to Islam, this '*Stage Model*' might be applicable to their pre-conversion experiences till *shahada* with the same order. Some of these stages can be applicable to post-conversion experiences as well, but the same order is not applied in post-conversion processes.

Post-conversion experiences that converts go through are classified in various categories in terms of their natures and influences. While some converts experience internal personal struggles due to psychological factors, others' experiences might be more influenced by external factors. Frequently, at least at the beginning of their post-conversion journey, isolated from their pre-conversion social networks, converts search for a reframed identity by building new social networks among Muslim communities. Many converts are attracted to Islam due to the way it portrays Muslims as one *ummah* (community), in which the sense of unity and belonging is emphasized (Haddad, 2006). While searching for and building new networks among Muslim communities, American converts encounter isolation alongside confusion in their interactions with new Muslim communities in the US due to the reality of disparities between what Islam theoretically calls for and what most of Muslims actually practice in their daily lives, due to their cultural diversity (Roald, 2006).

Muslim converts' challenges of finding community with born-Muslims makes converts navigate options and choices. Many converts choose to accept isolation and dissociation from Muslim communities as a solution to create a way of life relevant to their imagination of Islam and their life in the American context. Some others choose to

counter dominant narratives and practices among Muslim communities and carve for themselves a resilient and influential place in the middle of these communities or by creating a blog, a YouTube channel or any other spaces, mostly online per case studies in the project here, where they feel comfortable with their post-conversion journey. There are other converts who disassociate themselves from Islam and embrace different identities than being a Muslim by reconvert back to their previous faith, embracing a new one, or embracing none. There are not enough statistics of their numbers, however, they are some Muslim leaders speculate their high number among converts (Luqman, 2010). Another group of converts choose to be silent about their post-conversion experiences out of piety or out personality (Nicole, 2017). A few converts become attracted to radicalized beliefs and are sometimes recruited to terrorist groups (CBS News, 2014). Despite these diverse and complex experiences of converts, they are understudied by academics (Haddad, 2006, Rambo et al, 2014).

Understanding theoretical principles without examining the individual and social interaction within them constitute an incomplete and misunderstood picture, as the intersection between conversion to a faith and blending into a community are crucial aspects of studying lived religions. Why has Islam been presented in selective readings of texts or selective actions of self-identified Muslim individuals or groups? I assume an answer to this question will explain why converts' experiences are understudied. It is rather a complex and nuanced issue to study how converts navigate what is the individual versus social perceptions of texts. Muslims, who roughly constitute a quarter of the world, are made of diverse ethnic, cultural, theological, and even geographical backgrounds. The same is with Islam in the US, where the most diverse Muslim groups

exist (Pew Research, 2018). Due to the diversity of Muslims in the US, they practice different schools of thought and sometimes different traditions. Such cultural diversity that Muslim communities in the US are distinguished with should be a point of interest to those who study American Islam. Studying American converts to Islam and their experiences, as a result of blending and interacting with Muslim communities of diverse backgrounds, adds worth noting complexity to studies of American Muslims. In addition, Converts' experiences add an additional layer in understanding the ongoing and continuous conversion experiences especially after conversion stages. As a result of their attempt to build networks with Muslim communities in the US, they experience a range of feelings and conditions such as isolation, criticism, belonging, agency, moral stress, confusion, empowerment, spirituality, and individualism. Therefore, they develop diversity of responses such as a sense of agency, resilience, dependence, extremism, religiosity, moral stress.

The resilience, agency, moral stress, isolation, or even radicalization that converts experience by interacting with these diverse and complex Muslim communities is worth noting to offer a better understanding how Muslims navigate their religious, cultural, and social markers as a minority and what the decisions they make as a result of these navigations. Furthermore, to constitute an informed and objective understanding of Muslims in America, converts, this research argues, should not be excluded from scopes of studies related to American Muslims as they represent a significant number of Muslims in the US. Also, their positionality as born-American converts to Islam whose experience within immigrant or second-generation Muslims highlights the internal diversity of Muslims in the US. Converts' distinguishable experiences challenge Muslim

communities' imagination of what Islam is and how it should be practiced in their daily life. More importantly, their experiences and choices after conversion will shed light on not quite familiar, yet significant, human experiences among Muslim communities in the US. The absorbed American cultural worldviews, that American converts is distinguished with, in the processes of adapting to an existing Muslim community's culture, requires intensified efforts, agency, and resilience from these converts (Haddad, 2006, Roald 2006, Luqman, 2010 & Shahida, 2012).

Research Method

This research takes a lived-religions approach, seeking out the lived experiences of American converts to Islam in their post-conversion lives, as detailed in first person narratives through published written narratives and YouTube channels. The thesis prioritizes converts' post-conversion experiences in relationship to Muslim communities in the US. As this study pays attention on post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam in relationship to existing and established Muslim communities, it examines the American Muslim community's role in converts' experiences by studying three mosques' websites in terms of their literature and activities directed towards new Muslims in their respective communities. I choose these three mosques from different geographical settings. They are considered influential in their settings due to their bigger sizes (Galvan, 2017). Also, they embrace and promote diverse outreach messages. These mosques are (1) Islamic Center of Washington DC, (2) Colorado Muslim Society, and (3) Islamic Center of Southern California. In addition, I use three conversion to Islam and post-conversion support websites. These websites provide *da`wah* (outreach) activities to those interested in Islam and post-conversion support to new Muslims in the US and

sometimes in other countries. They are (1) WhyIslam, (2) GainPeace, and (3) AboutIslam.³ The mosques' websites along with the *da`wah* group websites provide a better picture of how the Muslim communities in the US operate in relationship to converts. Mosques' websites' analysis provide of how local communities' style of outreaching to and engagement with converts, while *da`wah* websites give a broader understanding of how preaching based websites engage with new Muslims and those interested in becoming Muslims. I focus on these websites' (mosques and groups) literature, style, and language related to converts.

For first person narratives of post-conversion experiences, I choose written and spoken narratives, published post-9/11, to highlight the differences and similarities between written and spoken narratives of post-conversion experiences by American converts to Islam. This paper argues that both spoken and written narratives address nuances and complexity of narrating post-conversion experiences of American converts. Scholars of religious conversion understand that narratives might be told be slightly different depending on the platform through which they are told (Nieuwkerk, 2006). Further, this paper attempts to highlight the commonalities and similarities of post-conversion narratives of converts from different ethnic and gender backgrounds by selecting diverse converts from ethnic and gender backgrounds.

This research selects two YouTube channels created by two American female converts in 2009 and 2017. Both YouTube channels, as owners state, were created with

³Check ISDC website at, <http://theislamiccenter.us>; Check CMS, <https://coloradomuslimsociety.org/> ; Check ICSC at, <http://www.islamiccenter.com/> ; WhyIslam Homepage, <https://www.whyislam.org/> ; GainPeace, <https://www.gainpeace.com/>; AboutIslam, <http://aboutislam.net/>

the purpose of sharing these two converts' post-conversion experiences. The first channel, with the title *The FutileSearch*, was created by a female convert named Sarah from California in 2009. Sarah, in her channel, exclusively shares her post-conversion experiences. The channel has 19 videos published by the owner, at the time of writing this paper. The second channel is also owned by an American female convert named Nicole from Orlando, Florida with the title *Dreamer Alhamdulillah*.⁴ Nicole explains that she created the channel in 2017 with the aim of sharing her experience as a convert to Islam. She also attempts to share her art work as she identifies herself as an artist.

For written post-conversion narratives, this project examines three published written narratives thoroughly to highlight post-conversion experiences in them. The first is a collection of Latino-Muslim converts compiled by Juan Galvan, the co-founder of Latino American Da`wah Organization, LADO, and he identifies himself as a convert since 2000. He published their experiences as a part of his work, *Latino-Muslims, our journeys to Islam*. Second, an article by a convert named Brian Wright published on www.aboutislam.com on March 18, 2019.⁵ The title of his article is *Navigating the Journey: A Convert's Advice for Born-Muslims*. Third is a blog for an African American female blogger named Shahida. Her article about her experience as a black female under

⁴ For more information about Sarah's channel, check <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheFutileSearch/video>
Also, you can check Nicole's channel at, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIkXBN1t-OLjVGe3vf2TWNQ>

⁵ Check the full article at <http://aboutislam.net/reading-islam/living-islam/navigating-the-journey-a-converts-advice-for-born-muslims/>

the title “*To be a Black. Convert Muslim. Female*”⁶ is the focus of analyzing her post-conversion experience as an African female convert to Islam. I also reference some other articles in her blog related to her post-conversion experiences in relationship to Muslims. The ethnic and cultural varieties of these authors, that this paper selects, are to highlight the nuances of these converts’ navigations of their common identity as converts to Islam in the US. The testimonials of these converts, whether spoken or written, are observed in terms what is related to Muslims in the US. What is the nature of experiences these converts express in relationship to Muslims and what are results of these experiences? Therefore, their testimonials are examined in terms of these highlighting the complexity of their diverse identities and how these identities play a role in their experiences and options in terms of relationship with Muslim communities in the US.

Literature Review

Understanding pre- and post-conversion experiences of converts, we need first to examine scholarly works related to religious conversion, conversion to Islam in the West and the US. Scholars have been navigating the phenomenon of religious conversion for over a century. Early scholars of religious conversion were influenced by a Western protestant understanding of conversion which led them to ignore - intentionally or unintentionally - the vast variables of religious conversion outside Western Christian settings. Since early 1900s, Western scholars such as William James and A.D. Nock dedicated a significant portion of their research to studying religious conversion and experiences. They were driven by psychological disciplines to navigate why people

⁶ Check the full article at <https://jamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/to-be-a-black-convert-muslim-female/>

convert from a religion to another or within their own religions. James's (2013) notion, in *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, of the healthy souls and twice-born souls have been cited in articles and books for the last century (James, 2013, p.64). James and Nock's work led the study of religious conversion until four decades ago, when their notion of conversion as a sudden shift was proven wrong – or at least not exclusive – with most of religious conversion. It has become known and acknowledged now among scholars that conversion is a gradual change (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.1).

For the last four decades, conversion to other religions and beyond psychological domains have been brought up by several scholarly works. Conversion to Islam was one of the early fields of study by Western scholars outside of Protestant Christianity. Thomas Walker Arnold's *The Preaching of Islam* examines the complexities of conversion to Islam and Nehemiah Levtzion's *Conversion to Islam* addresses the contours of conversion (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.6). Attracted to the complexity of various religious conversion motivations, scholars started to shift their studies in fields out the conversion to Christianity. With broader scopes of research, a broader and more complex knowledge around conversion themes and disciplines was brought up. They, however, analyzed the historical conversion to Islam with a sociohistorical approach. Scholars paid little attention to what converts experience after conversion. Rather, there is more attention given to why some people converted to a religion like Islam, especially in the West (McGinty, 2006 & Haddad, 2006 & Guimond, 2018). Thus, post-conversion experiences of converts to Islam in the US have been understudied or frequently overlooked. Several scholars attempt to fill gaps of conversion studies by including conversion to Islam in the West. However, their studies often represent counter or

affirmative narratives for widely known stereotypes about Islam as a religion of misogyny or violence. Lacking a comprehensive approach, post-conversion experiences are usually under-valued in most of academic studies.

Furthermore, the post-conversion experiences I investigated, are mostly in relationship to the non-Muslim environments, ignoring a major factor of these experience: the role that born-Muslims play in post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam. The most of these studies are related to female converts which is problematic in itself. It is true that female converts to Islam in the US outnumber male converts (Pew Research, 2017), yet male converts can add more perspectives to the nuances and complexity of the post-conversion experience. Male converts usually have different access within Muslims communities from their female peers. That also highlights the increasing conversion among African Americans especially in prisons, who are mostly males. Also, conversion is increasingly recorded among Latino-Americans, males and females (Pew Research, 2017).

As an outcome of a conference on gender and conversion to Islam at Nijmegen, the Netherlands in 2003, Karen Van Nieuwkerk edited and developed papers presented by participating scholars in a book of anthological academic writings about Western women converts to Islam. The book came under the title, *Women embracing Islam: Gender and conversion in the West*. The conference was held around the time of 9/11 and the attacks on Afghanistan. Therefore, the propaganda used by the US to justify the war against Afghanistan under the slogan of liberating Afghani women might have been the interest of the conference. A research about Western women who convert to Islam

definitely counters or interests as least US policy makers as they assumed that Islam is not compatible with the US culture.

This anthology about female converts to Islam in the West is a thorough and in-depth study of pre- and post-conversion experiences of mostly women converts to Islam. The editor highlights several academic essays related to questions of conversion and gender. Navigating the gender aspect of conversion, the editor attempts to present several narratives about the question of gender and the ways in which it is navigated before, during, and after conversion. In ten diverse chapters, this study is elaborative in terms of theories of gender and conversion studies along with unearthing complicated female converts' experiences. It assists research with the theoretical literature around gender and conversion in the West, yet it lacks the specific first-person narratives of converts themselves. These academic writings analyze and assess experiences in a broader geographical and cultural settings. However, it overlooks men's navigation of their conversion formulated. As one of the earliest comprehensive studies of pre- and post-conversion to Islam experiences, they nevertheless benefit this area of research with ground breaking background information on conversion to Islam. Using these studies as theoretical frameworks to the notion of conversion to Islam, I will further examine men and women converts in the US and their post-conversion experiences to fill in an important gap in the conversion- focused academic literature (Nieuwkerk, 2006).

After Nieuwkerk et al (2006), further studies were conducted to highlight more nuances to the subject matter. Anna Manson McGinty's work is also one of the early comprehensive studies on converts to Islam in the West. She focuses on the experiences of Western women who decided to embrace Islam as their faith despite the challenges

they encountered as a result. Her qualitative study explores western women through interviewing nine women, three of whom are Americans and the rest are Europeans. Presenting and assessing first person narratives for converts to Islam in the West was not a popular approach for conversion to Islam studies. First person narratives are more expressive of actually what converts themselves say about their experiences. Most of these women converted between the period of 1970s to 1990s. Divided in three parts, the author attempts to surface conversion narratives through qualitative assessment of these Western women's conversion and post-conversion experiences. Yet, her reference to their post-conversion experiences, especially in relationship to Muslim communities, is not as rich as pre-conversion experience. The case studies' theological and social negotiation of their new faith in their social, gender and cultural contexts is also mentioned briefly. McGinty's work is valuable for understanding motivations of conversion to Islam among Western women. Nevertheless, her study's claim is too broad by studying western women experiences under one umbrella. American converts' experiences and narratives operate within social and cultural contexts different from European converts narratives and experiences.

In his PhD dissertation, *Post-conversion experiences of African-American male Sunni Muslims: Community integration and masculinity in twenty-first century Philadelphia*, Brian L. Coleman attempts to highlight African American converts' experiences after converting to Islam in post-9/11 Philadelphia. By conducting twenty-one interviews with converts to Islam, the author assesses different experiences of male converts to Islam in the US. To narrow his research, the author interviewed variant African American male converts living in Philadelphia at the time of study with a variety

of ages. Navigating their new identity, African American male converts negotiate denominational questions within the Muslim *Ummah*. For example, some converts join a conservative community, while others join more liberal community. The author finds that affiliation and denominations play a pivotal role in shaping experiences of converts. He suggests that denominational affiliation was found to be a demarcation between fundamentalist and moderate thoughts among converts to Islam. Due to the prolonged exposure of Muslims in Philadelphia, the author argues, Muslims experience more physical acceptance in the public domain. Nevertheless, the personal acceptance and integration are still absent. This study is helpful by highlighting male experiences as a gender identity after conversion to Islam. Identity signifiers play a role in post-conversion experiences, for instance, gender-based accesses to public spaces among Muslim communities. It, however, does not explore several lenses and perspectives of post-conversion narratives among African American male converts. It focuses on Philadelphia where the experiences of converts to Islam might differ at several levels from African American converts in many other geopolitical settings within the American context. The study is nevertheless useful as it provides an opportunity to explore a relatively overlooked and understudied area - experiences of male converts to Islam. Adding to Coleman's study, I expand on the diversity of male converts to include white and Latino-male converts to Islam in geographically diverse settings within the US (Coleman, 2009, p.52).

More attention has been given to female converts to Islam within academia. Amy Melissa Guimond (2018) wrote (*Converting to Islam, Understanding the experiences of White American Females*) to better introduce white American females who converted to

Islam in the post-9/11 American contexts. She examines, in qualitative assessment, the experiences of white American females by interviewing nine who identify themselves as converts to Islam after 9/11. Deconstructing dominant narratives of Islam as a religion of misogyny, the author presents more complex and thorough narratives about white female conversion reasons and navigations. She highlights what it means to be a white American female who converted to Islam in an intense level of hate against Muslims after 9/11. She presupposes that white American females go through hardship as women and white. Driven by lack of literature about white converts, the author fills in the gap as she considers that area of research is suppressed. She also identifies herself as a convert. She states that as a woman who was raised Jewish by her adopting family, converted to Christianity in college, and then back to Judaism, she would better understand how women converts to Islam feel about their experiences as female converts. The author's self-identified background and experiences play an integral role in her research methodology and perspectives. Guimond's work is relevant in some respect as she addresses post-conversion experiences of white female converts post-9/11. However, her work does not investigate converts other than white and women. In addition, her work overlooks the complexity of post-conversion experiences, especially in relationship to Muslims. Therefore, this research builds on her work to explore deeper several racial narratives of converts to Islam by referencing women as well as men from different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, my work pays more attention to post-conversion experiences in relationship to born-Muslims (Guimond, 2018).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

It is worth noting that religious conversion were mostly academically understood by Western notions of human beings, which are driven from Western interests and Christianity (Rambo, & Farahadian, p.2). Religious conversion to a religion also used to be classified as a warrant to prove the authenticity of the embraced religion by masses in medieval and pre-medieval ages. However, it has become better explained as personal choices in the modern time. The shift in conversion to become a personal choice to most individual converts attract the interest of many scholars to understand religious conversion and theorizing it in the modern globalized world.

Lewis Rambo and Farahadian (2014) list the changes in understanding the religious conversion field of study and unearth the complexities around such changes. They point to seven themes of changes about academic understanding of religious conversion that have been acknowledged among scholars. These themes have been intensively and conceptually contouring the studies of conversion with their subtypes. Therefore, these seven themes can be used in studying the conversion to Islam in the US with consideration to the complexity of American settings. First theme is about the assumption that there were discontinuities between a person's or group religious past and their new religion, yet proofs now suggest otherwise as several converts maintain good relationships with their pre-conversion networks. The second theme is about the role of converts in the process of conversion. Do they play passive or active roles in their conversion processes and journeys? It is complicated to drop gross generalizations around converts' roles, yet studies suggest the active agency of converts in most cases. The third identifies the complexities and diversity of motivations of conversion. Many

converts have several motivations for their conversion and their motivations are complex in nature and process.

A fourth theme is related to the importance of conversion narratives. Some might question the reliability of conversion narratives but how converts engage in discourse around their religious experiences and journeys as experiences are important as well. These conversion narratives play a pivotal role in conversion studies as it explains the transition of experience from being felt to being told. Narratives are not only personal as some scholars suggest, they are also connected to communities, especially the new community of the convert (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.3). The fifth theme is the physical and material aspect of the human body as significant in conversion studies. “The power of actions and changes of rituals to human body can crucially impact religious and material dimensions of conversion” (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.8). The sixth is related to conversion as a process. This process is called “*conversion career*”. Conversion career was coined by scholars James Richard and Henri Gooren. Conversion had been seen as a radical and often sudden and permanent change in persons or groups. Nevertheless, empirical research proves that conversion in most cases takes time and is gradual. The final theme revolves around the engagement of conversion analysis with historical material as conversion analysis does not exclusively study conversion cases, but also applies to historical conversion as well. These theoretical and conceptual frameworks that have been developed in the last four decades have transformed the study of religious conversion from a specialized discipline to an independent field by itself. Therefore, definitions of what a conversion means gets more complicated as well (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p. 7-10).

In efforts to understand religious conversion in terms of involved human disciplines, scholars explain conversion deepening on the discipline involved. There is a psychological definition of conversion which had been solely endorsed in understanding religious conversion until recently. There are several definitions proposed by historical, religious, theological, and sociological disciplines as well. Rambo chooses to define religious conversion as

multiple meanings in different contexts but when we discuss the world in terms of the religious conversion, it means a simple change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within a single faith system” (Rambo, 1993, p.2 & Roy, 2010, p. 30-45).

He also argues that defining religious conversion is beyond any one definition, even his own. For instance, each religion can define conversion to it in a certain way that differs from conversions to other religions. Rambo calls for the study of religious conversion in global context instead of the dominant conversion to Christianity to highlight such complexities in conversion (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.9-10 & Rambo, 1993, p.2).

Furthermore, Scholars attempt to subdivide conversion definitions depending on types of conversion in terms of its nature. Some identify types of conversion depending on how much change a person has to do. These include institutional transition, which is the change of an individual or a group from one community to another (within a major tradition); tradition transitions, which is the change of an individual or a group from one tradition to another; affiliation, which refers to no or minimal commitment to full involvement within an institution or community; intensification, which explains the change that is related to revitalization of commitment to a faith with which the convert

has previous affiliation; and apostasy and defection, which is the repudiation of a religious tradition or its belief (Rambo, 2014, p.13).

In order to understand the motivations of converts, Rambo illustrates that individuals convert in the modern world are in a search for life meanings and spiritual uplifting (Rambo, 2014, p.2). He writes:

Through conversion, an individual may gain some sense of ultimate worth and may participate in a community of faith that connects him/her to both a rich past and an ordered and exciting present which generate a vision for a future that generates a confidence (Rambo, 1993, p.2).

Further, the role contexts of conversion play is significant in converts' experiences. Individual converts are not passive in their conversion, yet they are not isolated from their social and cultural environments. There is no simplistic process or influence of someone's conversion (Rambo, 2014, p.3). "All conversions are mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups" (Rambo, 1993, p.1).

As a result, defining the term of conversion has been a controversial and challenging task for all scholars. Rambo (1993, 2014) classifies conversion as a complex and unsatisfactory notion as it is about the relationships between a mysterious divine and the internal spiritual aspect of a human being (Rambo, 1993, p.17). Most scholars agree that there is no one comprehensive definition of conversion. Recently, some scholars challenged the exact word of conversion as the term itself is attributed to and explained in a Western protestant worldview. For instance, for many Muslims in general and converts to Islam in specific, coming to Islam is a kind of returning to the *fitra* (natural state of humans is to incline toward God and to want to do good) (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.11). There is a famous *hadith* (a saying by the Prophet Muhammad) stating, "Each child

is born in a state of ‘Fitrah’, then his parents make him a Jew, Christian or a Zoroastrian, the way an animal gives birth to a normal offspring. Have you noticed any that were born mutilated?” (Muslim, 46:36).⁷ Converting to Islam then, is unanimously considered by converts to Islam as a returning to the natural state in which God created them. Scholars, therefore, should consider several foundational frameworks and disciplines related to religious conversion in different religions as some definitions highlight certain disciplines over others and sometimes contradict other definitions (Rambo, & Farahadian, 2014, p.14 & Roy, 2010).⁸

Given the increasing expansion and exploration of religious conversion among scholars, this project uses Lewis Rambo’s theory of conversion stages as a conceptual and theoretical framework and apply it to American converts to Islam in the US. Rambo (1993) presupposes that religious conversion is complex and proposes that there are seven stages that most converts go through in their conversion journey and experiences. He calls this the “*Stage Model*”. All converts, Rambo argues, go through seven stages in their experiences, yet they might go back and forth among stages (Rambo, 2014, p.19). These stages can be used in explaining post-conversion experiences of converts to Islam in the US. Converts to Islam might experience these stages without specific order. Here, I will use Rambo’s stage modal as a background theory from which American converts to

⁷ Check <https://sunnah.com/muslim/46/36>

⁸ This hadith is frequently used by converts to Islam as an argument that their conversion is a reversion to their natural state of being that has been negatively influenced and defamed by cultures and traditions. They also tend to reference a verse from the Qur’an backing up this argument. “And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam - from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This] - lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware” (Qur’an 7:172).

Islam in their post-conversion experiences are examined and explored. Therefore, there will not be frequent reference to his theory. Instead, it will be used as a starting background theory from which post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam post-9/11 is explored and examined. The *Stage Modal* is self-explanatory to human nature of change, as human's evolution of beliefs is undeniable, and can exist in both pre- and post-conversion experiences.

Building from this part, I argue that humans keep evolving both religiously as well as culturally, as there is no such a thing as a pure and fixed cultures (Roy, 2010, Ericksen, 2007, Chidester, 2014). This continuous processes of reconfiguration, reformations, or transformation of people identities demonstrate that there is a type of continuous religious conversion taking place, especially in the case of converts. Converts to any religion generally keep developing their perception of their endorsed religion faster and more complex than people born in the faith. Their experience as converts to a faith illustrates their special distinctive willingness to constantly change their perception in their faith and how it should be practiced.

Using Rambo's theories and themes of conversion, this paper can evidently and conceptually relate to conversion to Islam in the US in the light of conversion complex theories and themes. Therefore, studies around conversion will be applied in post-conversion studies to address such complexity. Conversion means change and change does not inhibit identity reconfiguration, reflections, and development. Therefore, I suppose that the journey of converts to Islam starts by embracing the new faith but does not end at that point. Themes of conversion can be used and developed as themes of post-conversion experiences as well. These stages are not universal and unchangeable, yet

“they provide a better understanding of the complicated processes of conversion” (Rambo, 2014, p.18). Therefore, this research uses and adapts this stage theory to better examine and investigate American converts to Islam with focusing on the last stage, consequences. I argue, from case studies here, that converts to Islam in the US as a result from their encounter and interaction with born-Muslim communities end up with some negative and sometimes contradictory consequences in their post-conversion experiences, that frequently create crisis in some converts’ religious identities. They sometimes create agency for others to navigate and negotiate different identities among communities of born-Muslims. The theory will be used to develop and provide post-conversion to Islam experiences and negotiations.

Islam and Conversion:

The theories of religious conversion afore-mentioned can be applied in understanding conversion to Islam over the course of history. Understanding the history of conversion to Islam and the post-conversion experiences of converts to Islam in different historical eras and in different social and cultural contexts provide the readers with a better understanding of the diversity of why American converts to Islam choose the religion. Moreover, it sheds light on post-conversion experiences of American converts as they relate their struggles to other converts in different historical contexts, especially early Muslims. Therefore, I present a brief history of conversion to Islam in the world then the US with some reflections on the post-conversion experiences of converts.

Islam sprang out from a polytheistic environment in which several tribal and ethnic conflicts existed. In such an environment, religion was conceived as a political and social adherence to the ancestors’ faiths and their ways of life. Since the beginning of his

message around 610 CE, the Prophet Muhammad (570 - 632 CE) embraced a missionary approach to disseminate the new message that stands against such social and political construction.⁹ Therefore, early converts to Islam were mostly enslaved or socially oppressed individuals,¹⁰ who were not satisfied with the social system of that time. These early Muslims' post-conversion experiences were mostly violations and persecution by dominant and powerful leaders of Quraysh. Islam, thus, did not attract that many elites from the tribe of Quraysh except very close friends to Muhammad and Abu- Bakr (573 - 634 CE), his closest companion and later on his father-in-law. A change from polytheism to the new message of one God meant a cut off from other activities of the community (Shaban & Nehemia, 1979, p.24). Nevertheless, there was a conversion to Islam among some elites, especially within younger generations (Ibn Sa'd, 2001). Their conversion to Islam was triggered by several experiences and motivations (Ibn Sa'd, 2001, Ibn Hisham & Harun, 2000 & Tabary, 1985).

Muslim sources report several narratives of conversion with varying motivations. They also hint to several lived experiences of those early converts in the city of Makkah. According to early Muslim sources, we can easily observe those, such as Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (584 – 644 CE), who converted by an abrupt and sudden transformation of heart

⁹ However, Islam is seen as a missionary religion, there are accounts from almost all main world religions that missionary works have been approved or promoted by the founders. Hinduism has been distinctive, at least from early accounts, of not promoting missionary works. Nevertheless, there are several modern Hindu movements that actively promote missionary works such as International Society of Krishna Consciousness, ISKON.

¹⁰ There were also socially approved leaders among Muslims such as Uthman Ibn Affan (579 – 656 CE), Abu-Bakr, Sa'ad Ibn Abi-Waqqas (595 – 674 CE), and others. Nevertheless, they were a minority in comparison to poor and enslaved Muslims in Makkah.

once he read the Qur'an. There were others who converted as a way to revolt against persecution of underprivileged social groups and Quraysh's social and racial caste system. They found in Islam's message a meaningful reform for the stagnant and unhealthy life style of Quraysh. Islam's message against all forms of racism and social hierarchy, attracted early followers who were slaves and poor. Most of those converts were socially oppressed or disadvantaged such as Bilal Ibn Rabbah (580 – 640 CE) Somaiya Bent Al-Khayat (550 – 615 CE), her husband Yasir Ibn Amir Al-Qahtani (d, 615 CE), and their son Ammar (570 – 657 CE). Some others converted out of familial and clan support to Muhammad such as Hamzah Ibn Abdul Muttalib (570 – 625 CE), Muhammad's uncle and close friend.

As early converts to Islam varied in their conversion and post-conversion narratives and experiences, Muhammad's style of *da`wah* (preaching) did not take one shape. There were several implemented phases and strategies in terms of how, when and where the spreading of the new message took place. There was a secret preaching to avoid unwavering persecution against early followers especially the socially disadvantaged ones. Then, the style changed to public preaching once some elites joined the early Muslim community and the community became stronger in countering the persecution (Ibn Hisham & Harun, 2000). There was individual and relational preaching at times, and there was rational and communal preaching at other times. It is recorded in several Islamic sources that Abu-Bakr was involved in *da`wah fardiyya*, which means preaching Islam to individuals secretly, with early Muslims such as Othman Ibn A'ffan (579 – 656 CE), who was the third caliph after the Prophet Muhammad. Also, it was reported that the Prophet Muhammad called all Makkans from a mountain to invite them

to embrace Islam (Ibn Hisham & Harun, 2000, p. 40-45). There were some attempts by Muhammad to preach out of Makkah in Yathrib, later called (Madinah) the City of the Prophet, and Al-Ta'if, a city north of Makkah. In other attempts, there were other trials to preach the message of Islam to pilgrims visiting Makkah during pilgrimage seasons (Ibn Hisham & Harun, 2000 & Ibn Ishaq, 1955, p.190-200).

During the early years, there was not much of a focus on rituals along with moral behaviors such as drinking alcohol, eating pigs, excessive polygamy, etc. Rather, they were the core beliefs and tenets, such as monotheism, the resurrections, the unseen world, and the prophethood, that took most of the attention of the early Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's message. Both the belief in one God and the belief that Muhammad is a messenger from the one God were dominant among early Makkan Qur'anic verses. Early Muslims were not required to even challenge Quraysh in their political and social power, rather it was a challenge in their theological understanding of life (Ibn Sa'ad, 2001 & Ibn Ishaq, 1955). These early Muslim lives are referenced to teach how converts now should perceive their lives in relationship to their predominant non-Muslim environments.

Narratives of conversion were recorded among early Muslims and transmitted across different Muslim literatures in various ways. It was reported in most of early Islamic historical writings that, when Muhammad migrated to Madinah, conversion to Islam changed from a total conversion to a total adherence to the newly constructed Muslim community and its leadership (Gibb, 1962). As a result, Muslims did not exert efforts to proselytize to communities in Madinah as long as an allegiance to the new political and social system was preserved. Islam does not believe in coercive conversion. The Qur'an states very explicitly, "There is no compulsion in the religion" (Qur'an

2:256). Al-Tabary explains that this verse was revealed in Madinah to discourage coercive conversion in the city. There were some children of *Al-Ansar* (supporters of the prophet from Madinah) believed in Judaism before the Prophet came to the city. When their parents converted to Islam, these children refused, against their parents' consent, to embrace Islam. Therefore, some parents pledged to force their children to become Muslims (Al-Tabary, Qur'an's Interpretation). Nevertheless, there were incentives for conversion, partly for the purpose of attracting non-Muslims to the religion. There are eight categories eligible for *Zakat* (alms giving). Among them were *Al-Mu'allafati Quloobuhum*, those who are interested in converting to Islam.

Post-conversion experiences of converts to Islam after migration from Makkah were also different. In Makkah, converts experienced torture as a result of conversion, yet their experiences with other fellow Muslims were not negative from what the resources describe. That can be explained by understanding the nature of this early Muslim community. All the members of this Muslim community were converts which would have facilitated their understanding of each other's post-conversion struggles. Upon the migration to Yathrib, Islam had moved from an unpopular and persecuted message in a majority non-Muslim and hostile environment to a safe environment with support of the majority of support or at least public allegiance. Consequently, the post-conversion experiences changed as more people became Muslims for multiple reasons, some of these reasons as merely beneficial. There was a camp in Madinah called *Al-Munafiqoon*, for "the hypocrites", who became Muslims just to get the benefits of joining the Muslim community.

Scholars, such as H. A. R. Gibb, suggest that conversion to Islam can be classified under three categories: total conversion, formal adherence, or enforced and coercive adherence (Gibb, 1962, p.5). Early converts to Islam were falling under the category of total conversion and, thus, were given special status in Islam and in Muslim literature.¹¹ 16 Their conversion is seen as a sincere acceptance of the faith and total adherence to the message and its carrier. Stories of their sacrifice in denouncing and rejecting the religion of the majority, polytheism, was hailed and studied by early Muslim scholars and pious followers.

Afterwards, conversion to Islam took on different shapes during the life of Prophet Muhammad. Later in his life, conversion to Islam was considered a *bay`ah* (adhesion) to him as a political leader. The following passage from the Qur'an praises those who accepted the message of Muhammad during his time in the Qur'an (49:14), addressing the tribal Arabs as not *Mu'minoon* (believers) but *Muslimoon* (submitters), explains a very interesting theme related to adhesion (Shaban, 1979, p.25 & Hermansen, 2014, p. 636).

The Bedouins say, "We have believed." Say, "You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], 'We have submitted,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts. And if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not deprive you from your deeds of anything. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful (Qur'an 49:14).

¹¹ Makkah and names them true believers (Qur'an 8:74), (9: 88, 89,100), (48:18,29), (57:8-10), (59:10). Also, early Muslims were encouraged to favor and hail those who accepted Islam, as their religion, in its early days regardless of their social or ethnic backgrounds. Some like Bilal Ibn Rabbah (580 – 640 CE), formerly a slave, Abu-Dhir Al-Ghaffary (d, 652 CE), formerly a thug, Salman Al-Farisy (568 – 656 CE), from Persia, Khabbab Ibn El-Aratt, a slave, and others were considered among the most revered Muslims. They were respected more than someone like Abu-Suffian Ibn Harab (560 – 650 CE), formerly the leader of Makkah, because of their early acceptance of Islam when Islam and Muslims held no power. However, in governance, the four successors were Arabs and from Quraysh, the tribe of the prophet Muhammad.

As this passage states, those who claim their total conversion were questioned in their claim as many of them did not have that level of conversion yet (Hermansen, 2014, p. 643). Al-Tabary comments on the reasons behind this verse's revelation in his interpretation of the Qur'an. He reports that there was a tribe called *Asad* that was boastful about their conversion to Islam, showing too much pride among other Muslims, even around the prophet Muhammad himself. They also stated that they became true believers and their sincere belief is the source of such pride. Therefore, the Qur'an responded by rejecting their claim of calling themselves believers. Instead, the Qur'an requests, they should have called themselves submitters. That explicitly indicates the issue that was existing, and still exists, in terms of personal conversion vs public adhesion.

Some tribes accepted Islam out of fear from *Jizya* (taxes) or out of gaining privileges in political and social positions at the end of the life of prophet Muhammad (Al-Tabary, Interpretation of Qur'an: 59). This verse was further proven by another example, after the death of the prophet Muhammad, when most of Arab tribes retreated in their allegiance to him and Islam in what is known in Muslim history as *Hurub Al-Ridah* (apostasy Wars). Once they knew about Muhammad's death, the formal allegiance to Islam and its messenger from different Arab tribes faded out and several insurgent movements arose in Arabia. In different Muslim accounts, there were insurgences against *zakat* (obligatory alms giving) while there was other total apostasy against Islam in almost all Arabia except *Madinah* and *Makkah* (Ibn Ishaq, 1956 & Ibn Hisham & Harun, 2000).

After the crackdown on those movements and the expansion of Muslims outside of Arabian Peninsula succeeded, conversion to Islam took a different shape and different motivations in different contexts. Several non-Arabs converted to Islam from those conquered places in different parts of modern-day Middle East, South Asia, and Spain. More complexities of motivations of conversion to Islam had become difficult to narrow them down for a number of reasons. Many of these early non-Arab converts to Islam had to establish a relationship with Arab soldiers who settled in those areas by adopting a *Mawali* (client) status through an Arab patron or tribe. This social system existed before Islam also, when foreign settlers in Arabia had to seek refuge in a clan out of protection, and, in return, they served those clans. It was then abolished by Umar Ibn Abdul-al-Aziz (682 - 720) (Hermansen, 2014, p.636).

As a result of this expansion, non-Arabs in many parts of the emerging Muslim empire converted for multiple reasons and lived diverse post-conversion experiences. It is difficult to examine such diversity as those converts did not record their conversion narratives comprehensively as many converts do today. Therefore, there were several speculations and theories among scholars from different disciplines about motivations and reasons of conversion to Islam. The theory of trans-culturalism of Fernando Ortiz can be consulted here to understand the diverse and complex Muslim *Ummah* (nation) in early years of Muslim empires, the Umayyads and the Abbasids (661-1517 CE). It is worth emphasizing that several of the newly ideological sects in Islam, which emerged in various geographical conquered lands and were led or endorsed by some converts of these lands. The emergence of these sects with influence from new Muslims demonstrates that converts to Islam play a significant role in reconstructing and reframing

the ways in which the religion is practiced. We will see how American converts to Islam experiences related to a similar reconstruction and engagement to early converts' experiences. We see Khawarij (Kharijites),¹² Ismailiyah,¹³ Ibadism,¹⁴ Harooriah,¹⁵ Mu'tazila,¹⁶ Sufism,¹⁷ etcetera who emerged since first century of Islam, during the crisis of leadership after the death of Muhammad. Since then and we see sects emerging in

¹² Kharijites, Arabic Khawārij, the earliest Islamic sect, which traces its beginning to a religio-political controversy over the caliphate. The crisis started by the killing of Uthman, the third caliph and then broke into revolt against the authority of the Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib (601 – 661 CE). Following the Battle of Siffin (July 657 CE), Ali agreed to arbitration with his rival, Muawiyah Ibn Abi Suffian (602 - 680 CE), to decide the succession to the Caliphate. A member of the Kharijites later assassinated Ali, and for hundreds of years, the Khawarij were a source of insurrection against the Caliphate”. Check, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kharijite>

¹³ Ismā'īliyyah, sect of Shia Muslims that was most active as a religiopolitical movement in the 9th–13th century through its constituents' movements—the Fatimids, the Qarāmiṭah, and the Nizari In the early 21st century it was the second largest of the three Shia communities in Islam, after the (Twelvers) and before the (Zaydis). Check <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ismailite>

¹⁴ Ibadism represents a branch of the third great division in Islam, that of the *Khawarij*. It survives in some isolated communities in North Africa but manifested itself periodically in Oman as a full Imamate well into the twentieth century. Check, Wilkinson, J. C. (2010). *Ibadism origins and early development in Oman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Check, <http://ibadism.ahmedsouaiaia.com/>

¹⁵ It is a group of Khawarij who revolted against Ali Ibn Abi Talab, the fourth caliphate after the prophet Muhammad. Their revolt started from a city in Iraq called Haroraa` in the 7th century which gives them the name. They are very strict in their understating of Islam. They believe that committers of sins are permanently resident of hell. They also used to follow very strict way of life. They do not hold a significant presence among Muslims now.

¹⁶ Mu'tazila, (Arabic: Those Who Withdraw, or Stand Apart) English Mutazilites, in Islam, political or religious neutralists; by the 10th century the term came to refer specifically to an Islamic school of speculative theology that flourished in Basra and Baghdad (8th–10th centuries CE). Check, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mutazilah>

¹⁷ It is a mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world. Islamic mysticism is called *taṣawwuf* (literally, “to dress in wool”) in Arabic, but it has been called Sufism in Western languages since the early 19th century. Check, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>

different times over the course of Muslim history. Further, it is interesting that early religious scholars in *Hadith*, Arabic, and history arose from predominantly non-Arab areas, whose residents were new converts, such as modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. This indicates that post-conversion experiences of those converts to Islam who engaged with the religion in multiple ways which resulted in creating new sects within the faith. In addition, the fact that there were several converts to Islam who became religious leaders and scholars of the religion in a very short time is in itself evidence of a mass regard for Islam from those converts. That has some relationship to many American converts' decisions after conversion. Once someone converted to the faith, they passionately engaged in all aspects of political and social identity of Islam and Muslims. Moreover, conversion through intermarriages, trades, saints and Sufi's missionary works, social structure, Muslim systems of governance, and local leaders also existed in more nuanced forms than the gruesome generalization against a statement like "Islam was spread by sword" (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, P.9, Nehmeia, 1979).

Furthermore, it is challenging to analyze conversion motives as they vary in terms of social status, political environment of the conversion, relational experience, personal and psychological struggles, and religious backgrounds of converts. The fusion between traditional cultures and practices and Arab cultures and Islam did not face radical rejection from Muslim traders and rulers. Such diversity is identifiable as the conversion processes were slow and gradual. In Egypt, for instance, we have some proofs explaining the gradual change of language and religions of local Egyptians to Islam till it reached its climax by the 14th century (Mikhail, 2004). It took almost 800 years for Islam to be the religious and social identify of the majority of Egyptians. Despite the tolerance from

majority of Muslim rulers, if we judge them from their historical contexts, to local cultures, there were a few accounts of persecution to local religions and practices over the course of Muslim history in some places such as India, Anatolia and North Africa.

From the history of conversion to Islam, people in the pre-modern times converted to the Islam for several reasons and in several forms. Some converted as a way to uplift their social status. Other convert as a part of tribes and clans. Still others convert as the message makes sense for them. Furthermore, the experiences after conversion were diverse as well. Some converts did not align themselves with the mainstream Muslims by creating theologically or politically based denominations. Some others engaged with the religion and its language until they became revered and credible religious leaders such as Al-Bukhary and Ibn Sibaweah. There are other converts who leave the religion as we have seen in *Riddah* wars. What this research needs to point to is that the diversity of conversion motivations and post-conversion experiences existed in Islam over the course of history. There are some commonalities between old and modern conversion narratives to Islam. Understanding conversion to Islam in the world provides us with a better understanding of conversion and post-conversion experiences of the US converts.

Conversion to Islam in the US

Although we can identify similarities in methods, processes, experiences, and motivations between pre-modern and modern conversion to Islam, conversion in the pre-modern time was different from modern conversion in several aspects of motivations and experiences. The mass conversion that used to take place in pre-modern time was totally changed to mostly individual conversion as a personal choice in modern history, except in small cases such as conversion from the Nation of Islam to orthodox Islam by Wareeth

El-Dien Muhammad and his followers.¹⁸ This is because of the shifts in cultural structures and the way people perceive religions in modern time. Besides, globalization and its tools play a significant role in shifting religious conversion to become more personal choice (Roy, 2010, Rambo, 1993 & Chidester, 2014). Although most of conversion to Islam does not take place without contacts or any type of relations with a Muslim, the interactions with Muslims take different shapes in modern world from pre-modern world.

Contrary to pre-modern era, some of the early conversion narratives from Western converts in modern time were a result of colonial voyages or interactions with Muslims in the Orient except Turks and Europeans who were interchangeably travelling and converting to each other religions in 1500s. During 20th and 21st centuries, the geographical shift in conversion places appeared to take place among Westerners who have contacts with Muslim immigrants in the West instead of predominantly Muslim countries. With the increasing presence of Western converts, Muslims became more aware of the need to exert efforts in translating and producing Islamic literature in European languages to counter early translations of biased orientalists. The Qur'an was first translated in English language by Muslims in early 20th.¹⁹ Yet, there were not organized *da`wah* (missionary) organizations to spread Islam in the West until recently

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the shift from mass conversion to Individual conversion is not distinguished to Islam, it is common among several other religions. For instance, In India, there was a mass conversion among Many Hindus to Buddhism when B.A. Ambedkar, a Dalit activist, converted to Buddhism and asked his followers to convert as well in 1956.

¹⁹ Check <https://wisconsinmuslimjournal.org/a-history-of-translations-for-qurans-in-english/>

except Muhammad Russel Web and his Indian backers (Bowen, 2015). Ironically, a heterodox groups such as Ahmadi were among the first proselytizers to Islam in the West and the US. Similarly, Sufi saints were sent to spread Islam in the US.

In terms of the early history of the US as a nation, Muslims have been part of the US for centuries. There are multiple archeological, legal, and historical indications proving such argument, such as the biography of Umar Ibn Said (1770 – 1864 CE). It has become a matter of fact that there was a percentage of slaves who were brought to the US and were Muslims (Simmons, 2006). Also, there were some proofs illustrating immigration from Middle Eastern countries, especially Ottoman Syria to the US in late 19th century (Shaban, 1991). Nevertheless, the awareness of Islam in the US has been very limited to stereotypes from Hollywood movies among US residents until 9/11. Depicting Islam as an alien and strange barbaric faith has not changed until recently, especially among public American cultures.

The first contact between the US as a country and the Muslim world was through preserving the US trade in the Mediterranean Sea. To pursue its interests, the US became involved with Mediterranean pirates who were backed by sultans in Tripoli (modern day Libya) and Morocco to arrange for its ships a safe journey across the Mediterranean Sea without being hijacked or their crews kidnapped. According to Shaban (1991), that type of interaction was not seen as a positive view of Islam and Muslims among American public at that time. Muslims were portrayed among American publics as pirates and barbaric people who hijack ships and kidnap crews for ransoms. It was magnified when some ships were hijacked by these pirates. The US view also inherited some of these views from their old European stereotypes against Islam and Muslims. It is to be

explained that piracy at the time was not an exclusive act among North African countries; it was common among all countries to look for new resources. That being said, there was some reported conversions to Islam from those who travelled to the Middle East on missions, such as mediations, with those Muslim pirates (Shaban, 1991, p. 68-69). In addition, some of those who were taken for ransom converted to Islam. It is not known whether they converted out of a personal and spiritual pursuit or out of a coercive and fearful need to save themselves from North African pirates.

Furthermore, the US was created on pluralism and freedom of religions, yet Islam was not seen as one of those as it was not considered under what is now known as the Judeo-Christian classifications. Islam has been imagined in American thought as a threat to its political identity. Despite the fact that the US was built on an immigrant society where there is no particular ethnicity as the demarcating factor for Americanness, there is a common European perception that Western European race is the superior race over all others (Shaban, 1991, p. 22-25 & Said, 2003 & McGinty, 2009). Therefore, there is not a lot of available detailed data on Islam and Muslim presence from early builders of the US, let alone conversion to Islam in early American history except small hints to a presence of Muslims among enslaved Africans. That might be known among early Americans at that time, but it is forgotten history.

Therefore, conversion to Islam was not fully documented till the late nineteenth century when we start to see male and female converts to Islam from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Conversion to Islam started among African slaves and white Europeans around the same time in the 19th century. Yet, there were different motivations and distinctions among pre- and post-conversion experiences of the two

groups. For African Americans, understanding early conversion and awareness of Islam cannot be separated from white racism (Simmons, 2006, p. 172 & Manning, 1981, p. 340). Islam among African Americans was a social identity against the white identity of Christianity (Brent, 1997). An organization like the Nation of Islam (NOI) was considered, as some scholars called it, a messianic national sect from the total African American nationalism against white supremacy (Simmons, 2006, p.177). It is also true that many enslaved Africans saw their conversion to Islam as the reversion to and the reclaiming of their lost heritage from their slavery. Therefore, pre- and post-conversion experiences among African Americans cannot be seen as the same with white American converts. It was not even the same Islam that was practiced by a majority of Muslims. Therefore, their post-conversion experiences would have been significantly different.

Patrick Bowen explains in his work about the history of conversion to Islam in the US that there were few converts within the Transcendentalism movements in mid- and late-nineteenth century. Those converts came as a result of the Transcendentalism movements. Transcendentalism spread the concept of religious tolerance and ecumenical understanding among several elite Americans which resulted in some to convert to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other Eastern religions. The shifted view of Eastern religions included Islam as meaningful religions started to arise among some elites in their writings and talks. The Parliament of World Religions of 1893, in which an invitation to representatives from almost all major world religions, explains such shift among American Christian elites. Conversion to Islam among a few of these elites became known among people. Some voices and engagement of American converts to Islam were on the rise. For instance, Muhammad Russel Web was considered to be the first publicly

self-identified Muslim convert. He also embraced missionary works propagating for Islam through his magazine *American Islamic Press* in the US. Nafeesa M.T Keep is considered to be the first white American female convert to Islam (Bowen, 2015, p.156).

It is worth noting that those early converts to Islam were not attracted to common practices of Islam among the most of predominant Muslim societies at that time. They were attracted to faces of Islam such philosophical and spiritual Sufism, or Ahmadiya understanding of Islam. Muhammad Russel Web had contacts with the Ahmadi sect leader as well as his fascination with Sufi practices of Islam. The hegemonized view of Islam from a spiritual and a philosophical lens was what attracted many of early American converts. Consequently, their experience with born-Muslims and non-Muslims in America was based on this view. Despite what has been prevalent within the American public view of Islam and Muslims, Bowen states that there is no recorded data confirming that those who converted to Islam before 1975 expressed any violence or resentments towards non-Muslims. Rather, they converted to get peace, tranquility and spirituality in their life through spiritual aspect of Islamic traditions, especially Sufism which was more accepted at the time before Wahabi influence.

Their post-conversion experiences and challenges were not highlighted in their writings as negative experiences with Muslims. These experiences were rather positive and sympathetic towards Muslims. For instance, Maryam Jameelah, who was an American convert in 1940s, wrote in her diary, “I am saving the pictures and books which Daddy gave me on my birthday so I can go to Egypt and Palestine and keep the Arabs like they are instead of copying us” (Khan from Jameelah’s memoirs, 1989, p.9). There were women converts who took leadership among early convert circles with Russel

Webb as well (Rutter, 1937, p. 116-117). Their practices, views and experiences seem different from a convert to Islam in a predominant Muslim country or even non-predominantly Christian country such as India or China. They seem Americans in culture, Muslims in religion. Islam for them was not a culture and a religion altogether. Rather, it was a personal belief. Similarly, early converts to Islam in 7th century CE were Arabs in culture and Muslim in religion.

Motivations of conversion were not hegemonically identifiable, yet there were some speculations among scholars that early female converts to Islam converted through their marriages with early Muslim immigrants to the US. It was frequently observed that majority of those who converted to Islam were engaged in a marriage with a Muslim especially female converts (Hermansen, 2014, p. 646). After WWI, a bigger wave of conversion started when there was a wave of immigration coming from Asian and Middle Eastern countries. After the World War II, professional and educated Muslim men migrated to the US and some of them got married to American women which led some to convert in bigger numbers. After the US passing the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, which opened up immigration from predominantly Muslim countries in Africa and Asia, there were more numbers of immigrants coming to the US, including Muslims. Students from the Middle East and south- and east-Asian countries, where Muslims were a majority, arrived on US soil with a faith and a tradition different from what had prevailed here in the US. More females converted to Islam especially during 1970s and 1980s due to interactions with Muslim university students (Bowen, 2015).

After 9/11, the numbers and motivations to conversion to Islam increased among female converts specifically and for converts generally. Intellectual and rational conversion was more frequently observed among converts than interaction with Muslims through marriage, known as relational conversion (Rambo, 1993). Mosques became more aware of their Muslimness and set on thriving through opening their doors to non-Muslims. *Da`wah* activities thrived as well and were given more focus among Muslims in the US. *Da`wah* committees were established in mosques to handle the bigger number of those interested in the religion and to reach out to others. The majority of Mosques in the US were built after 9/11 to deter the rising stereotypes (Stanton, 2018). The Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) published a paper stating that around 23,000 people converted to Islam in the months following 9/11. The conversion contexts and motivations began taking different routes from those before 9/11 (CAIR, 2011). The increasing awareness of Muslimness among Muslim communities and the attention paid to the presence of Islam in the US among Americans positively influenced the number of converts. There is no confirmed number of American converts to Islam after 9/11, but it seems to have increased, or their conversions have been given more attention by both Muslims and non-Muslims in the US. We have started to see converts such as Hamzah Yusuf, Ingrid Mattson, Karim Abdul-Gabbar, and many others who play influential roles as Muslim leaders in the US.²⁰

²⁰ Hamza Yusuf is the co-founder of Zaytuna College, the first and only accredited Islamic school in the US. He also was one of five people who met former American president Gorge W Bush days after 9/11 representing some American Muslim communities.

Ingrid Mattson was the first female president to Islamic Society of North America, ISNA, check <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/28/world/middleeast/28iht-muslim28.html?pagewanted=all>

With the increase in attention towards converts to Islam, Muslim communities in the US started to reflect on themselves in more intricate ways to see the diversity and hear the experiences of individual converts. Some criticism to the structure of the communities became apparent, especially from converts who see some disparities between Islam's message and communities' practices and attitudes. African Americans maintain the highest percentage of converts to Islam in the US. They, however, have constructed their own communities with very few exceptions of integration with other racial Muslim communities (Dannin, 2002 & Simmons, 2006). One of the reasons for such communal isolation among African American converts is that they feel unwelcomed in, not a part of, and disassociated with many mosques who are administrated by immigrants. A disorientation due to a diversity of languages, cultures, terminology and relevance is very common among Muslim mosques. Sherman Jackson, an African American scholar of Islam, heavily critiques the actions and attitudes of Middle Eastern and south-Asian immigrant Muslims who seek to impose their cultural practices of Islam on indigenous Americans, meaning African Americans, and other ethnic American groups (Hermansen, 2014, p. 646). It seems that the criticism from African American Muslim communities come as a frustrating cry against un-intentional (or intentional) marginalization experienced among converts to Islam. African American converts accuse Muslims of favoring white converts as a continuation to the systematic racial discrimination in the US (Haddad, 2006). African Americans, Marcia Hermansen explains, frequently choose Islam not only as a personal choice, but a matter of social, economic, and political empowerment against a long history of slavery and persecution. They find in Islam a liberation against racial society. Therefore, their conversion is a

result of other African American *da`wah* organizations. They tend to change their names and embrace public Islamic identity more often than white or other racial converts (Hermansen, 2014, P.649, Diouf, 1998, Brent, 1997 & Simmons, 2006). Therefore, their frustration with born-Muslims is more explicit.

Understanding the history of conversion to Islam in the US provides a significant background analysis to converts to Islam post-9/11 and their experiences, especially in relationship to Muslim communities. Converts used to have less contacts with American Muslims which influenced these converts' experiences and understanding of Islam. In addition, the influence of immigration and spread of Islamic movements including Salafism reformed converts' experiences after conversion. Therefore, setting the historical context is relevant to examine the current experiences of converts who interact with Muslims online and at Islamic centers.

PART II

Online Contexts - Mosques' Websites and Da`wah Websites: Where Converts Go

As this study focuses on Muslim communities' role in American converts to Islam in the later post-conversion experiences, examining online presence of Muslim communities is worth the examination. Understanding the context of converts in terms of Muslim communities in the US provides a better understanding of these converts experiences. The project here is interested in understanding the online context run by Muslim communities, where many converts visit when they want to learn about their new faith and communities. Internet literacy has become increasingly present all over the world, especially in the US. Therefore, disseminated information through digital platforms has been on the rise as well. According to a Pew research study in 2016, there are fewer Americans getting their news from TV sources every year. They lean towards online sources instead of traditional ones such as newspaper and TVs. When Americans want to learn about Islam or they are new to the faith, online platforms are one of the main sources of such learning. During the process of research, Americans interested in Islam get their information primarily, at least in the beginning of their research, from trained *Da`wah* groups and websites, Islamophobic websites, and/or mosques' websites. I chose to study three websites of three major mosques across the US. Such selection is meant to study the American Muslim community's role in converts' experiences through

virtual platforms. Converts to Islam are frequently more educated and informed about the faith than born- Muslims as many of them spend a lot of time understanding Islam and its tenets before converting. Therefore, a higher level of research is expected from them as Americans and converts to Islam.

Studying three mosques' websites in terms of their literature and activities directed towards new Muslims in their respective communities explains some converts' experiences with Muslim communities. That sheds more light on the Muslim context around converts as many of converts seek support and/or community networks, if they need, through their local mosques' websites. For converts, it foreshadows the type of experience they will have with their potential cultural community that suggests which interpretation of Islam they are most likely encounter. When they first move to a place, they search for their neighboring mosques through their website to connect with other Muslims. These mosques were chosen from three different geographical settings to highlight the diversity within communities. Their history is also diverse in terms of community structure and characteristics. They share some commonalities as they are considered influential in their settings. In addition, they are bigger than most of the mosques in their geographical areas and all hold historical significance. Bigger mosques arguably hold more influential roles among Muslims living near them as they are diverse and personal spaces can be achieved for people who seek a private relationship with Allah. They also hold more significance in their outreach among non-Muslim neighborhoods due to their size and wider representation. These mosques are (1) Islamic Center of Washington DC <http://theislamiccenter.us/>, (2) Colorado Muslim Society in Denver, Colorado <https://coloradomuslimsociety.org/>, and (3) Islamic Center of Southern

California, <http://www.islamiccenter.com/>. In addition to those three mosques, my study uses three conversion to Islam and post-conversion support websites. Those websites provide *Da`wah* (outreach) literature and post-conversion religious and psychological support to new Muslims in the US. They are:

- (1) <https://www.whyislam.org/>
- (2) <http://aboutislam.net/>
- (3) <https://www.gainpeace.com/>.

The mosques' websites, along with the *da`wah* group websites, provide a better picture of how the Muslim communities in the US operate in relationship to converts. Mosque website analysis provides local communities' style of reaching out to and engagement with converts. *Da`wah* websites give a broader understanding of how preaching based websites engage with new Muslims and those interested in becoming Muslim. I focus on these websites' (mosques and groups) literature, style, and language related to converts.

Mosque Websites

It is worth noting that many mosques' websites in the US are not a real indication of the level of community engagement. There are several mosques that are engaged with their members, yet their websites are neither professionally updated nor a reflection of such work. This discrepancy between mosques' physical engagement and their websites representations of this engagement is driven by the mosques' administration's priority of management methodology. Many mosque leaders prefer to spend their financial resources and attention on on-site programs as a way to invest on their existing community members. Moreover, they tend to prioritize the maintenance of spaces of

congregation over paying a professional graphic designer and web developer to maintain their websites. Instead, they prefer cheaper methods, such as appointing a volunteer from the community to build a website for their mosque. Further, having a Facebook page or Twitter account, through which they spread information about their activities, is mostly preferred over a professional website. It is also worth highlighting that a majority of mosques are newly built and some of them are recently purchased (CAIR, 2011). The recent establishment of most mosques in the US demonstrates how their expenses are more focused on developing the institution than building and maintaining a professional website that increases their expenses.

The three mosques analyzed here vary in their attention to their online presence, yet their way of shaping their websites differs in the types of information provided. The three mosques are over 40 years old and they are established in their geographical surroundings. Their age and presence in the US distinguished them from the majority of mosques in the US. Although, all mosques cannot be represented in this research, some insights can be highlighted from using these three mosques' websites as case studies. Analysis of these three mosques' websites is focus mostly in terms of the message mosques put for non-Muslims and converts. These mosques websites are analyzed in terms of their content of information about Islam and the organization, their level of inclusivity and community building, and the professionalism [font, design, consistency, and colors], and how appealing the websites are. These three categories illustrate the type of experiences of a convert to Islam, either positive or negative, has when they look for theoretical answers about Islam or a community to be join.

The Islamic Center of DC (ICDC)

The Islamic Center of DC (ICDC) was established by efforts of diplomats from predominantly Muslim countries led by the Egyptian ambassador to the US, Mahmood Hassan Pasha, and M. Howrah, a prominent figure in the area in 1946. Land was bought on the “embassy row” next to several embassies of Muslim countries in DC to be dedicated as a mosque. The architectural style and internal decoration resemble architecture of many medieval and modern mosques in Egypt. The carpet was imported from Iran and the tiles were brought with technicians to install them from Turkey. The diversity of the mosque design and decoration explains the collective efforts among several Muslim countries in building a sign of their presence in the US. Muslims in the US at that time wanted to build a replica of a traditional mosque in their home countries. Egypt reportedly contributed to the project with 80,000. It took 10 years to finish the mosque by international efforts. Then, it was dedicated in a ceremony attended by the former US president Dwight D. Eisenhower on June 28th, 1957.

The center is now led by Imam Dr. Abdullah Muhammad Khouj, who has been the imam and director of the center since 1984. It is important to mention the imam’s name and background as most of Islamic literature, if not all, on ISDC website is written or edited by him. Khouj is a Saudi national given the task of directing the center and leading the religious affairs. He holds a Ph.D. in psychology. There are some speculations of him being funded by the Saudi Embassy in DC (Schwartz, 2008). That might be intentional to oversee the mosque and promote a Saudi interpretation of Islam. The mosque’s website literature and articles are mostly made of excerpts from a book written by the imam under the title, *Islam: Its meaning, objectives, and Legislative*

System. His publishing organization is the center itself whose he directs, which suggests his efforts to publish his understanding of Islam through the place he directs. They also provide a copy of the book for those who visit the mosque and might be interested in learning about Islam.

In terms of the website, it is professionally designed, in terms of font, photographs, consistency and information, to attract attention of those who visit. The target audience are Muslims, converts to Islam and non-Muslims. It is easy to recognize whom the website attempts to reach through the content and the style of topics displayed on it. The focus on Islam as not a new or strange faith, rather a continuation of other messages illustrates that the websites targets those who are coming from Judea-Christian theological and cultural backgrounds. There are designated articles from the imam's book about each pillar of practice in Islam with references to the Bible to back up the argument that Islam is a fulfillment of Judaism and Christianity. Such modernized portrayal of Islam is common among Muslims in the US in an attempt to simply portray one interpretation of Islam to others. On the website we read:

The website is focused on the theoretical principals of Islam and to show that Islam is the guidance and light needed to achieve the proper life for better psychological and social health along with scientific advancement (Islamic Center of DC, 2019).

The virtual platform of the center provides its readers with several resources that can benefit those who are interested in Islam as well as new Muslims. The website provides its visitors with mostly ritual related information, such as how to pray with illustrated pictures, prayer times, Qur'an recitations. Moreover, there are theological articles related to Allah and monotheism in Islam along with prophet-hood. In addition,

there is a very interesting article titled “Who is a Muslim” that explains how a Muslim should look and that not all Muslims represent the true message of Islam.

The ICDC website illustrates that there is no indication of inclusion of converts’ programs to fit the increasing number of converts to Islam in US. Female converts would not find inclusive programs in which they can participate. When a convert needs to join a community, the community’s website is not the best place to visit, however, it should be as it is the online representation of the center. The case of ICDC website demonstrates a bigger issue that is common among Muslim communities in the US: the attention paid to the theoretical part of faith at the expense of the experiential part of Islam, especially community. That is through articles and arguments made in favoring Islam as the true religion. Yet, building inclusive community, through which Islam can be promoted by creating genuine relationships and sense of belonging for those who are new to the faith, is not common among Muslim communities in the US. It is also suggestive from the website information structure that it is a blog or a website for one author. There are no sections for events or weekly classes for those interested. Also, it seems it is not very friendly by not providing contacts of coordinators of different programs. It is true that there is an article about mental issues, yet there are no such practical offerings for community groups who can tackle such an issue through mingling community members’ together in social gatherings. The website can be described as providing introductory information for those who are new to or interested in Islam. It also tells Muslims when the prayers are held. Nevertheless, the website does not provide exclusive DC community information or gathering days to those who seek a community or relationships. Rather, it offers assistance to those who seek intellectual information about Islam.

The Colorado Muslim Society (CMS)

The Colorado Muslim Society (CMS) is located in Denver, Colorado. It had been developing and expanding since 1964 until it has become the biggest mosque in the state of Colorado and probably the Rocky Mountain region. Colorado Muslim communities thrived in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act (Bowen, 2015). That was the time for CMS to witness several expansion projects until it reached its current size today. The last expansion was in 2004 when the Denver Muslim community financially contributed to add another building to the old one to include a conference room, class rooms, and offices. The mosque website seems less attractive than ICDC in terms of font, consistency, colors, photographs, and information. The website is very humble in its design with short and concise information about its history, mission and vision. They seem satisfied by sharing websites such as www.islamiccity.com to explain Islam to their website visitors. www.Islamiccity.com was launched in February 1995 to provide non-sectarian, comprehensive view of Islam. CMS approach to new Muslims illustrates that *Da`wah* and actual mosque activism are more influential in terms of the theoretical information about Islam. The mosque does not provide inclusive programs in which a convert can join, especially for women. That illustrates that some Muslims in the US at mosque levels are not very organized in terms of their *da`wah* activities. In addition, post-conversion engagement and mentoring are almost absent on community levels. It might be more stressed on an individual level or among national organizations such as the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) or the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

There have not been any updates to the website as a whole for a long time as the prayer timing is broken. However, they provide office hours for the imam which might be helpful for new Muslims in terms of access to religious leader. I have checked the mosque activities and found that they are more active on their Facebook page where they share updates, classes, even recorded videos of some Friday sermons. This confirmed what has been stated before that a website for a mosque is not necessarily a self-explanation of the mosque in question's engagement with new Muslims. Examining social media platforms might be an interesting study that the research here suggests for researchers. However, they are for visitors of mosques or American converts exploring the center. CMS does not provide, as far as it is published through their Facebook page and website, very focused classes for new Muslim converts. If there is a convert in the Denver area looking for a community, CMS website would not be the best place visit. Rather, they should visit the mosque and engage through individual relationships with others to navigate building or joining a community. This experience of joining or making a community differs from one convert to another based on their social, cultural, marital, gender, and age backgrounds. An older unmarried female convert might have a different experience than that of a younger unmarried female converts and so forth.

The Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC)

The Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC) website presents a unique style, differing from the other two mosques. As it has been explained, it depends on those who are in charge of the website and how the center is organized internally. Further, there is more of a focus in the case of ICSC on publishing the mosque engagement on online platforms. The website is professionally designed in terms of photographs, fonts, topics,

organization and consistency. It endorses a progressive theological view of Islam with a focus on community building, women's empowerment in leadership, and messages of inclusivity. Once a visitor opens the homepage of the website, it is very easy to explicitly identify the open and progressive message the mosque endorses. That there is no segregation between men and women except during prayers is emphasized on the website. Such emphasis assures an inclusive message to those who are planning to visit or those who are new to Islam and still grapple with gender segregation practices that is dominant among Muslims in the US and all over the world.

The current stand of the center from the way its website expresses its mission and vision has a history behind it. The mosque was founded in 1966 on progressive values endorsing women to be on its board of directors. As ICDC, the ICSC was primarily led by Egyptians, yet the difference is that the early leaders of ISDC were diplomats while ICSC was built by Egyptian thinkers who were aware of their new identity as Muslim Americans. The ICDC was built to serve those who are on a mission to the US and returning back to their countries. Therefore, they wanted a replica of a mosque in their home countries in terms of architecture and management. For ICSC, it was meant to build a community center for those who are immigrants to the US. Ironically, the first Director of ICSC was Dr. Mohsen El-Biali, who was the director of ICDC before he moved to California in 1967. Dr. El-Biali's views of Muslims and Islam influenced the stance that ICSC stands for now. The founders envisioned a comprehensive Islamic center from the beginning, unlike how many mosques are dedicated in predominantly Muslim countries as a space for only rituals. Therefore, they established youth groups, community groups, a school, and other social committees. When Dr. Maher Hathout, another Egyptian

thinker, became the spokesperson and visionary of the center in 1978, he coined what is called “*the American Muslim identity*” which is defined as a vision of Islam in America as home (Islamic Center of South California, 2019). He is famous for his statement, "Home is not where my grandparents are buried, but where my grandchildren will be raised."

Contrary to CMS and ICDC, the center presents community-oriented messages with little focus on the theoretical and theological explanation of Islam. They adopt a relational approach over theoretical and intellectual explanation of Islam to attract newcomers to the community. From the website, it is not difficult for an American convert to Islam to see converts like them taking leadership roles in the center. There is a yoga class for women and skiing class in upcoming events section. It is very interesting that they emphasize a non-sectarian approach to Islam by utilizing websites such as www.Islamiccity.com, which is referenced by CMS as well. More efforts and studies were presented on the website to attract and appeal to newcomers, representing an inclusive message for everyone interested in joining the community. On their website, ICSC has a section dedicated exclusively for converts and their challenges and they offer classes for them every Sunday and Tuesday. From their website, experiences of converts, at least their first encounter with a community like the one of ICSC, will be shaped and constructed in more progressive and inclusive way. Collectively, that might not match some converts' views, who embrace more zealous obsession with literal instructions of Islam. But, it propagates a long term healthy post-conversion experience in a larger American context.

Da`wah Websites

Unlike mosques, national and transnational da`wah websites are more attractive in their style of presenting Islam, intense in information provided and more professionally made and maintained. Their tasks are to attract non-Muslims and counter Islamophobic discourse. There are two websites managed by the grass roots ICNA, www.whyislam.com and www.gainpeace.com. ICNA is a grass roots Muslim organization focusing on services and education among Muslims. They also embraced outreach activities and post-conversion support, but that came later around 9/11 attacks. Both of these websites are designed to attract interested Americans in Islam to the religion. They embrace a missionary style and don't focus on post-conversion support as much as *da`wah* and missionary work. Moreover, they support new Muslims socially, educationally and spiritually by touring around several cities in the US. They provide free literature and Qur'an to those interested. While *WhyIslam* is drawn towards counter anti-Islam discourse through written literatures that are almost in all mosques in the US and YouTube channel that discusses misconception and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims featuring prominent American Muslim theologians and activists such as Yasser Qadhi (b, 1975), Nouman Ali Khan (b, 1978), and Yasmin Mogahid (b, 1980). *GainPeace* provides workshops for new Muslims and those interested in becoming Muslims. They write on their website:

Gain Peace, an Out-Reach project of Islamic Circle of North America, has taken the lead in providing comprehensive supporting services for new Muslim. Alhamdulillah, All praise be to Allah alone, our support structure has enabled many new Muslims and their families to remain strong in Islam, enjoy the blessings of brotherhood and sisterhood and get integrated into the greater Muslims community (GainPeace website, 2019).

They represent a mobile virtual social and educational function of a mosque and a community by providing online classes, shipping books and prayer rugs. They provide mentoring and prayer classes in a syllabus style. The intersection of work between WhyIslam and Gainpeace is easy to identify with slight difference on the focus of work. They are better understood as complementing each other's rather than flawed as both are part of ICNA. Both declare in their mission that their goal is to educate the general public about Islam and clarify the misconception they may hold. They also claim that that they counter the misconception and misunderstanding by dialogue and making friends.²¹ They hold an annual convert conference when they invite converts to Islam to share their journey of embracing Islam. Despite the more attractive style of these websites, there is an inherent problematic issue with several *da`wah* groups and Muslims in general in the US in relationship to converts to Islam. They share, intentional or non-intentional, lack of interests in converts' lives and experiences after conversion. It is ironic to see so much dedication to converting Americans to Islam through *da`wah* efforts while maintaining such efforts by providing post-conversion support is not as dominant as pre-conversion efforts. That is self-evident from several testimonials from converts (Haddad, 2006). That lack of interest is causing isolation or lack of agency and sense of belonging among many converts. I argue that such marginalization of converts among their Muslim communities is unrealized by born-Muslims. Born-Muslims assume that converts become like them. They don't realize that as converts, Muslims' religious and social identities aren't necessarily connected and that they may not have a social and familial community.

²¹ www.whyislam.net. Homepage." WHY. Accessed April 02, 2019. <https://www.whyislam.org/>.

The third website, www.aboutislam.com is more invested to unearth converts' experiences and to counter biases about Islam. It was launched in 2016 to present authentic mainstream Islam to the world as they put it in on the website. They declare:

The aim of *AboutIslam* is to help Muslims around the world grow in faith and spirituality, while at the same time lead productive lives, as Islam teaches, in the context of the modern life of the 21st century. AboutIslam also aims to help support new Muslims in learning their religion in a positive way away from extremism. Finally, AboutIslam is an initiative which strives to build bridges of understanding and peaceful co-existence with fellow human beings around the world, irrespective of their religions and beliefs.

The distinctive approach of *AboutIslam* is that they give a space for all those who would like to contribute to the literature displayed on the website. They encourage all to share their points of interests and concerns related to their identities as Muslims.

It is not exclusively for American audience though, yet it has influence on American converts as there are several converts' writings on it. Their topics are selectively prioritized upon the content. Topics related to youth and converts are given special focus in publishing as the website emphasizes. Therefore, they reject theologically controversial and political topics because they create confusion among readers. It seems that *AboutIslam* is not related to a bigger organization unlike the case of *WhyIslam* and *GainPeace*. They have sections for counselling by a religious leader or a professional psychiatrics. The focus of mental health support is not a common thing as well with other da`wah and mosques' websites. That might suggest that *AboutIslam*'s founders are converts themselves or have some influence from converts' experiences and that is why they built it. Stories of women converts before and after conversion, and community are found across the websites. It is self-explanatory that there is more attention paid to publish women's narratives of conversion as a way to be used against

the dominant narrative that Islam is not the suitable religion for Western women. These stories also might be surfaced and highlighted to disrupt the narrative that Islam is not a religion of truth. That might create some negligence to the diversity of assistance and support for converts who don't fall under the category of being females especially white women. That will be explained more in details later on from post-conversion narratives of converts themselves.

Mosques and *da`wah* group websites indicate the complexity of approaches Muslims take on to outreach to others as they illustrate two main sources converts go to when they look for information about Islam a community to join. Islam does not require institutional authority to which Muslims listen and obey. Therefore, there is some individual and institutional freedom among Muslims especially in the West, where the awareness of Islamic identity frequently dominated the personal and social domains of Muslims. Unlike Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries, this awareness is a result of close interactions with other religions especially Christianity and Judaism with Islam as minority, which influenced the framework in which Muslim perceive their faith. Therefore, the theme of Judeo- Christian relevance is common theme among different websites messages as a smart way in marketing their products. It is crucial to these mission-oriented websites to highlight the relevance of Islam to the Judeo-Christian dominant culture in the US. This message attracts those interested in Islam and those who are new to the faith.

Some converts, among them Americans, use online forums as the only means to get to know about Islam and Muslims (Nieuwkerk, 2006, p.97). Therefore, their early experiences of Islam and Muslims are shaped heavily by these forums. The theme of

monolithic understanding of Islam and Muslims these websites preach can cause some romanticized and egalitarian view of Islam and Muslims. It is understandable that those who are in charge of these websites approach their positionality from a pious worldview. That worldview orients their actions towards a certain goal. When they involve themselves in *da`wah*, their mission is to portray Islam and Muslims in the most perfect way they can. People of faith differ from observers and academia in that respect. However, the passion put on these websites and the messages they call for, the overlooking of expected disparities and confusion between *da`wah* groups and mosques' websites, and lived everyday experience converts might encounter problematize their post-conversion experiences. Many American converts highlight these issues in several testimonials.

Understanding *da`wah* and mosques' websites assist researchers to understand contexts, especially the online platforms, to converts to Islam. It also provides a contextual framework to the experiences converts share with others, whether or not Muslims. Many themes and approaches in these websites relate directly to converts' experiences. Some see some approaches as positive in their overall experiences, while others see them as exclusivist approaches to which they don't see themselves belong. These experiences might be guided by converts' backgrounds, as we will see in case studies here, with their multiplicities (personal, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, and political). One convert stated that she used to be an atheist feminist before her conversion, now she is a social activist against Muslim liberal feminists and their view of

the world (Goda, 2019).²² Now, we will get to know in depth what the research case studies themselves say, as American converts to Islam, about their experiences regarding interaction with Muslim communities in the US. Analyzing their backgrounds and the context of their pre- and post-conversion demonstrates the continuous and widespread, I argue, phases of conversion they go through.

Post-conversion Experiences of American Converts to Islam

Converts' Testimonials

American converts to Islam in their post-conversion testimonials center their narratives around their identification and their awareness of themselves as converts to Islam in the of the intersectionality of their identity positions (race, gender, socio-economic status, citizenship status, age, ability, etc.). Their identity has a significant influence on their experiences and choices after conversion to Islam. The intersectionality of their identities make their experiences and choices complex and difficult to hegemonize and commodify. This section of testimonials will clarify this in more detail. For instance, the racial discrimination among Muslims towards African American converts raised several questions to racism within American Muslims (Coleman, 2009). That also influences African American converts' experiences and choices (Coleman, 2009).

²² Nour Goda explains her position in a talk delivered at George Mason University on March 27, 2019 with title *Islam, Feminism & Identity Politics*. Check a recorded video of the talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHx7aPUMbnc>

In addition, as a result of accusing Islam of subjugating and suppressing women, Muslims became more aware of this and, for instance, began presenting women as leaders in public spaces to counter such narratives. In addition, academic researchers have also tended to focus on women in Islam in order to investigate claims of Islamic attitudes towards women. That is why we see a lack of literature about male converts to Islam and their experiences after conversion influence the number of representations of female converts in this study. According to statistics, American female converts to Islam outnumber males (Pew Research, 2017). This lack seems not related to the number of those who convert as their gender identities.

This section examines and reflects on post-conversion experiences from first-person accounts in terms of relationships with Muslims communities in the US. Due to the limited published testimonials of American converts to Islam, this research is limited to a few resources as case studies. First, it examines two testimonials of two female YouTubers who identify themselves as American converts to Islam. Then, four published written narratives are examined and assessed thoroughly to highlight post-conversion experiences in them. The first is a collection of Latino-Muslim converts compiled by Juan Galvan, the manager of www.latinoMuslims.net. He published their experiences as a part of his work, *Latino-Muslims, our journeys to Islam*. Second, an article by a convert called Brian Wright published on www.aboutislam.com on March 18, 2019.²³28 Third, is a blog for African American female blogger. Her article about her experience as a black

²³ Check the full article at <http://aboutislam.net/reading-islam/living-islam/navigating-the-journey-a-converts-advice-for-born-muslims/>

female under the title “*To be a Black. Convert Muslim. Female*”²⁴ is the focus of analyzing her post-conversion experience as an African female convert to Islam. The ethnic and cultural varieties of these authors’ intersected positions are purposely selected to highlight the nuances of these converts’ experiences and choices in relationship to their born-Muslim communities.

YouTubers

Nicole, The Dreamer Alhamdulillah!

Nicole, an American convert to Islam living in Orlando, Florida, looks like at her late twenties or early thirties. She created her channel on YouTube under the name “Dreamer Alhamdulillah” on July 25, 2018 to spread her art and message of peace along with her life experiences as American Muslim Convert. She writes describing herself and her message:

I am an artist who loves creating and I also have a strong desire to spread a message of love. Inshallah I will be able to use this platform to provide awareness, entertainment and general education about the beauty that is the true Islam. I will also be sharing general life experiences as I go (Nicole, 2018).

Seemingly, with her phone camera and selfie stick, Nicole video tapes all of her videos. She might also use some other cameras in some videos she broadcast because some videos have better quality than others. In general, her videos don’t seem very professional, but they have good quality overall.

With almost 60,000 subscribers, she got in one year, the age of her channel, Nicole’s videos range between 4,000 views to almost 1,000,000 views. It is worth noting

²⁴ 29 Check the full article at <https://jamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/to-be-a-black-convert-muslim-female/>

that among her 19 short videos ranging between 3 minutes to 15 minutes, and published on her channel, the ones that get the most views are the videos related to her *da`wah* efforts with her non-Muslim brother. Her video that was published on October 26, 2018 under the title, “*My non-Muslim Brother visits Mosque First Time, Wudu Attempt Wrong, American Revert*” got 992,360 views at the time of writing this research. Her thirty-year old brother, named Keith, shows up in almost half of her videos. Her videos discuss her daily life activities as a convert and a mother, her *da`wah* efforts with her brother by introducing the Qur’an to him or introducing Islamic life style such as diets, her intercultural marriage experience to her Indonesian husband and their marriage story, and her marketing to some Muslim fashions. Her videos are not published periodically but on average a video every other week there is a new video for her. With her Instagram account and a link for accepting donations referenced on her channel, Nicole aims to share her experience as an American convert, and it seems that she also tries to market her business from these videos to make ends meet.

According to her channel on YouTube “Dreamer Alhamdulillah”, Nicole stated that she converted to Islam during her relationship with her husband whom she met online. Her husband is a Muslim from Indonesia. She said on a video with her husband - under the title, *Q&A How we met, intercultural marriage, Raising Children, revert²⁵ to Islam*, published on December 26, 2018 - that was her exposure to him and her fascination with his character, religion, and also culture that made her become Muslim. She became a Muslim on her marriage day when she declared her Shahada (the testimony

²⁵ I explained the concept of “revert” is preferred among many converts to Islam before, check page 31.

of faith) in 2017. Her encounter with Islam might have been before that though as she hinted to her search for Islam before marriage. In terms of cultural identity, she still expresses her pride of being American as her experience with Indonesian culture is not very deep, yet appreciative of her husband's culture. The common observation results of many American converts to Islam is their rejection and dissatisfaction with some aspects of the American culture. Nicole is more drawn to Islam as a counter identity of some aspects of American identity, but not to the level of total rejection of her Americanness. She prefers Indonesian parenting style and family focus lifestyle.

Nicole had some hardships with her family once they knew about her conversion to Islam in 2017. Her father passed away before her conversion and it seems that she was raised by her mother and her step-father. Her relationship with her mother and brother seems strong as a family. Nicole's case as a new Muslim who converted in 2017 is worth noting. Her experience as a convert can be divided under two time periods; her post-conversion experience with her pre-conversion relations with non-Muslim family and friends, and her relationship with Muslims before her conversion and after conversion. Roald describes converts' experience with Islam and Muslims in three stages, love, disappointment, maturity (Roald, 2006). Nicole did not reflect on her stages after conversion and the consequences. Rather, she focuses on, as it is heavily marketed by many Muslims, her narrative story of conversion journey to Islam and her happy side of her life as a married convert female to a born-Muslim immigrant. Nicole presents the happy life of a Muslim convert by marketing her conversion story. Conversion stories provide very interesting appeal among many Muslims. Many Muslims prefer to hear or read about conversion stories with their happy end, the *shahada*. Conversion that ends

with *shahada* is happy point for many, not necessarily converts as it is the beginning of the journey. That is not exclusive to Muslims as the most of humans prefer happy ends as they influence these people's imaginations of happy future (Fredrickson, 2010).

In terms of her relationships with non-Muslim networks, Nicole has struggles with some social and cultural events such as Christmas which causes several issues and reconciliations with several converts. In an attempt to justify her acceptance of her family's invitation to Christmas, she used a *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) stance towards Christmas celebrations from a *fatwa* (religious opinion) issued by Mufti Ismail Mink, a famous preacher among some Muslims in the US. In positioning herself to argue theologically in terms of Christmas celebration and family relations, Nicole resiliently chooses to take on a leading position in a video published right before Christmas, 2018 to persuade other Muslims especially converts to accept their non-Muslim family's invitation to Christmas gatherings. She said, "As long I stand true to my Islam, I can be nice to my family. I don't say Merry Christmas to non-Muslims as I don't expect them to say Ramadan Mubarak for me" (Nicole, 2018). Being a convert to Islam, she herself is aware of the difficulties of isolation some converts experience, especially if their interactions with their non-Muslim families are cut with their conversion to Islam. She said, "If you are a revert like me, you might feel isolated and have some nostalgia to old lifestyle, but this feeling won't last long" (Nicole, 2018). Her advice for other converts demonstrates the difficulties of her post-conversion experiences in relationship to non-Muslim networks and lifestyles. Nonetheless, she affirms for her followers that living as a Muslim will provide them with strength with all these temptations and nostalgia.

For experiences with Muslims in her neighborhood, Nicole does not discuss challenges she has with them. But, it is very interesting to speculate about her interaction with Muslims in the US. She is married to an Indonesian Muslim which is self-explanatory that the majority of her interactions are with predominantly Indonesian communities in the US. It is more expected when a female convert is married to an immigrant Muslim, she interacts with her husband's ethnic, religious and social circles. Several Indonesian Muslims don't excessively interact with other Muslim communities, as they are minorities among Muslims in the US. It is difficult for me to observe, as far as my knowledge goes, very well integrated Indonesian community with other ethnic Muslim groups in the US. It is possible that Nicole's interaction with other Muslims in her geographical neighborhood is through Indonesian mosques or very limited through her Fridays' services attendance. Or, her interaction with Indonesian communities might be positive and needs no attention or negative reflection from her. Further, she might, as a Muslim, try not to surface challenges she goes through and chooses a traditional-modern message to present Islam and Muslims in romanticized and egalitarian version. There is nothing confirmed about these speculations, but they might have some truth from my experience as a Muslim. What is known for sure, however, is that she is an American convert who sees her religion as a source of dignity, reasoning, and empowerment. Her brother said on one of the videos, published on January 2019, that his sister became a better person with the rest of the family members. Therefore, there is a positive change took place with her views of life and the way upon which she interacts with her family (Nicole, 2019). Some converts' positive change in their lifestyle after conversion draws

some appreciative thoughts from their non-Muslim networks to the influence of Islam. Which, consequently, positively impact those converts' post-conversion experiences.

Nicole's case suggests that some converts might be hesitant to talk about their post-conversion experiences with Muslims as that might create a backlash for them especially if they have a public presence virtually or physically. As a YouTuber looking for more subscribers, Nicole might prefer to adjust the content of her videos to her audience such as her conversion story or her *da`wah* work with her brother. That being said, it is not very clear that she purposely designs her channel in that way. She also, might point to the positive and romanticized experience after conversion as an act of piety. Another possibility is that she has very good experience with Muslim communities. For her family, she has good experience after a short period of time from her conversion time. She also seems to have a strong sense of self and seems pretty confident in her knowledge of Islam. Her confidence to argue about Christmas is illustrating this confidence. Nicole's life is not practically shared on her YouTube channel which makes it difficult for an observer to see all aspects of her life. Overall, she has positive post-conversion experiences, as she describes them. Therefore, her options to such experience are to share it to inspire others to the faith and help those who are new to be strong.

Sarah, The Futile Search

Sarah, an American convert from California, created her YouTube channel on June 23, 2009, yet her first published video, in which she explains her experience with first Fasting experience, was on 2011. It seems that she deleted some videos from her channel to reflect that she is aware of her videos. She also might see some videos are not made she wants, in terms of content and/or quality. Sarah explains her purpose from this

channel writing, “My blog about my experience as a convert and about Islam” (Sarah, 2009). It seems that her channel was created before she became a Muslim and also it is very obvious that her first added video was not the first video about her experience as a Muslim as she said in it (Sarah, 2011). With 3,797 subscribers, Sarah’s videos get between 300 to 158,000 views. Like Nicole, Sarah’s story of conversion to Islam (published on November 6, 2011) and first Ramadan experience (published on August 22, 2012) as a convert attracted the most views. That is not a coincidence to see eye-catching titles such as conversion narratives to attract a broader spectrum of audience, Muslims and non-Muslims. The fact that these videos attracted that number of views indicate that titles play a significant part in attracting audience.

From her 19 videos, that have been published over the last 8 years and from around 4 to 25 minutes long, Sarah is not consistent in her publishing dates. The time between a video and another might be two years. She does not have this channel to make profits out of it. Instead, she created it as a space for her to express her opinions and engage with others through virtual platforms. Her older videos, before 2013, are poor in quality and not very well prepared, but they are seemingly genuine. From the first impression at her videos, it is easy to observe the improvements she made in recording her videos especially since 2013, around the time of her marriage to a born-Muslim man. She even said that her husband has been helping her editing her videos, however, he never shows up in any of her videos.

Sarah converted to Islam in 2010 while she was 16 years old in high school. She was born in a Baptist family. Since early days of her conversion, she has been engaging with other Muslims through her YouTube channel. She let her audience engage with her

experience as a convert by asking them to reflect on their experiences as well at the end of most of her videos. Her first encounter with Islam was when she met a woman with a headscarf, which instigated her curiosity to know more about Islam. It seems from her conversation narrative on her channel that she knew about Islam through her independent research about it (Sarah, 2011). There are some hints though that she has a relationship with a Muslim male who is the son of this woman Sarah talks about. She later got married to this man.

It is worth explaining to relate the spouse origin as it has some influence in several converts' experiences. Based on Sarah's case, it seems that, from Sarah's case, in many cases when an American female convert marries a Muslim immigrant or a first-generation American Muslim, it is easier to observe an adaptation to the husband's culture in some respects. Men who convert to Islam and get married to a born-Muslim woman also may embrace their wives' culture to some extent. Their embrace of a culture of a predominant Muslim country does not erase the complexities of experiences after conversion of those American Converts. Applying Rambo's (1993) stages theory, Sarah's conversion consequences are shaped by her context. It seems that her husband is involved with her in her journey after conversion by offering assistance. She explicitly said that on several videos, "He makes me a better person and he is a great guy" (Sarah, 2014). I assume if someone like Sarah did not get married to someone like her husband, a first-generation American Muslim from Indian origins, she might have been in a different position in her post-conversion experience. Sarah's experience illustrates a phenomenon that might be common among other converts; Muslim partners to converts might have significant influence on their partners' experiences towards Islam. Sarah lost all of her

pre- conversion friends, and without her husband's presence in her life, since they were classmates in high school, she might have experienced different life.

Sarah's experiences during and after conversion can be divided in two sections, her relationship with her family and non-Muslim, and her relationship with Muslims especially her audience. She, first, experienced difficult times with her family as they were severely rejecting her decision of becoming a Muslim. It can be argued that she published videos on her channel to create a space for her to express her struggles, as all other spaces were not accessible at that time. Because she used to live with her family, she was forced not to wear a headscarf. She expressed her resilience in a video (published on June 15, 2011) with a title, *tests from God*,

I have not been for a long time appreciating my tests enough. My test is different from others as a convert. They are different from born-Muslims, but none is more than others. I only make these videos because I know you care, if you have similar struggles, share them with me (Sarah, 2011).

Sarah's family forced her not to embrace, at least publicly, an identity against a typical American lifestyle and dress code. Haddad (2006) explains this by writing, "It seems that the physical appearance of Islamization is more influential and creating more backlash than the belief in Islam itself" (Haddad, 2004, p.31). Struggle with families who are not Muslims is a common phenomenon several converts experience, but in several levels. Some converts face less hostile rejection from their familiar than others such as Nicole in comparison to Sarah. The interesting part is the agency of someone like Sarah who found a virtual channel of which she expresses herself as a convert and her struggles with others.

Her isolation among her pre-conversion networks made Sarah, in her early post-conversion stages, seek Muslim networks. YouTube was mainly her main medium as it might have been more difficult for her to build networks with Muslims in her local area mosques. From her virtual Muslim community, she faced multiple early challenges as well. In 2011, she published a small video about some Muslims who criticize her headscarf that shows her ears. She expresses her frustration with those who frequently say Haram (forbidden) about several things she does. She argued against what she called *Haraamers* screaming at everyone in a video published on July 27, 2011,

Someone commented on my hijab as too modern and my lips look very different. My lips are very natural. If you have a problem with my lips, why not talk to Allah about that because He created them like this? To all *Haraamers* out there, back off” (Sarah, 2011).

Such early frustration with some comments and expectations from her newly embraced community forced Sarah to explicitly talk about them. She said in the same video, “Islam is a flexible religion. There is room for your unique personality” (Sarah, 2011). Rambo (1993) explains that there is a problem with defining genuine conversion between converts themselves and others. Who gets to identify Sarah’s conversion in terms of credibility, other Muslims or she herself? Sarah at that time identified herself as a convert and a genuine convert with profound and sincere conversion narratives, while born-Muslims don’t see her as a true Muslim. Rambo explains something close to this theme we get from Sarah’s experience. He writes, “The problem of who defines a genuine conversion. Often the convert sees the conversion as a sincere and profound, whereas the advocate or the missionary sees it as less adequate” (Rambo, 1993, p.4).

Sarah could not fast Ramadan when she was living with her parents. She said that they forced her to break her fast and not to show any public action that showed her identity as a Muslim. Such challenges from her family were met with blame from some Muslims as well. Some accused her of being too weak in relationship to her parents. The problematic comments from these born-Muslims are understandable due to the complexity of an environment such as YouTube where it is open and accessible for all. The paradox sometimes of some humans who put themselves in a position as judges to others in their environment is that they take situations at face level without understanding the complexity in each person's life. The lack of understanding to Sarah's experience from born- Muslims explains the source of isolation that some converts experience. The isolation is a consequence of expectations from born-Muslims to see a convert in the most romanticized and angelic model without understanding the human and reality frame in people's lives.

Another challenge Sarah went through was the excessive use of gender segregation in several mosques and some Sufi practices towards saints in India. She was shocked by how such practices are spread across the country. She said, "How can Muslims commit Shirk, polytheism and associate partners to Allah. When I asked about people do this, I was told that how everyone does it there" (Sarah, 2012). She was confused by practices da`wah groups never talked about in their messages to interested people in Islam. She said in a video published on December 21, 2012:

Women never be in the masjid. Women are not allowed to come to the Masjid. To those brothers who are in charge of the masjid, do you think how wrong it is to prevent women from coming to the masjid. Was anything the prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him), ever said that women should not be allowed in the masjid.

I don't think so! His wives went to the masjid and prayed with him and other women who were convert went as well. To me it is unfathomable (Sarah, 2012).

Such a shock is expected as the love stage (Roald, 2006) a convert to Islam goes through is usually disturbed by cultural practices rooted among some Muslim communities in and outside the US. It is very compelling to see her response to such practices as not Islamic as there is no proof of not allowing women to come to the masjid. As Karin Van Nieuwkerk (2004) explains, women converts to Islam take up a feminist role based on their faith among communities to build a bridge between Islam and the West (Nieuwkerk, 2006). Sarah seems empowered by her new faith she embraced and asked women to defend themselves. The individualistic lifestyle she was raised in might influence her attitude towards some Muslims/ attitudes. Being shocked by some practices towards the position of women in community and the access they are granted, she called women to stand up for themselves and to ask for access to mosques and for men to stop such cultural practices related to women's access to the masjid. She said, "Women needs to stand up for themselves" (Sarah, 2012).

Sarah's challenges with born-Muslims are deep rooted in some practices or expectations of born-Muslims from converts. She published a video raising the awareness among born-Muslims on how to treat converts to Islam. Her agency as a convert was her counter dominant narrative response to unearth voices of converts among Muslims. She adds that many born-Muslims might be mistaken and cause micro-aggression towards converts when they assume that these converts know nothing about Islam. She said, "Converts have come to the religion after long research that might have taken years for some of them". She also needs born-Muslims not to treat converts as if they know

everything about the religion. To avoid confusion and loss, she advises born-Muslims not to answer converts with information they themselves do not know very well. It would be better if they let them know that they don't know all answers to all questions. In her 15-minute video, she explained how born-Muslims can treat converts in a way that makes them feel included. The main themes in her video range from social inclusion and belonging to the community to theological interpretations of Islam and its instructions and diversity within interpretations.

Furthermore, American converts to Islam might be raised in a way that focuses on normative American expectations, such as personal space and political-correctness. Nevertheless, when they interact with a born-Muslim especially older generation and recent immigrants, they are encountered with some personal questions which cause many of them to be very uncomfortable. Sarah confirms that she asks born-Muslims to accept converts with kindness, patience and respect for their space and personal lives. She gives an example from her life when some people asked her about the reasons of conversion to Islam. They did not wait for her to answer, they instantly speculated why she converted. They speculated that she converted to get married to her husband. She was offended by such speculation as it questioned her faith as a Muslim. There is a common sense of frustration among Muslim converts, especially females as they feel offended by the underestimation of their sincere conversion especially those who are not married to a born-Muslim (Haddad, 2004, Rambo, 1993 & Kirk, 2004).

Converts to Islam find comfort in reading about or hearing from those who have similar experiences. They feel that other converts' narratives resonate with theirs life better. Some converts are empowered by stories of converts' celebrities among Muslim

communities. They might prefer to listen to someone who converted to Islam years ago and see how successful they managed their struggle till they reach a maturity among Muslim communities and their non-Muslim circles. In her efforts to give tips to others who are converting or new to Islam - so they better understand their faith and their communities around them - Sarah published a video on her channel advising converts with ten tips to have a better post- conversion experience. She justifies her choice of these tips by relating them to her personal experience as a convert herself who converted for a long period of time. The themes she discussed in this video are:

1. Theological loss due to the influx of information from the internet and translations of the Qur'an.
2. The frustrations with ritual practices and learning them.
3. The feeling of shame due to some pitfalls after conversion such as drinking alcohol or craving old lives.
4. Frustration from some born-Muslims and their treatment of converts.
5. Is there one interpretation or several interpretations of Islam?
6. The loss and frustration of perfect theories of Islam for converts and imperfect lived experiences of Muslim communities.
7. Loneliness and lack of genuine community.
8. The loss of love for the faith that was intensified at the time of conversion.
9. The loss of understanding Hadith positions in Islam.
10. The stress from not knowing enough about Islam.

Unlike many other videos she broadcast, Sarah prepared for this video, about tips for converts, by having a script. It means that she brainstormed her life experiences to

offer tips to new converts about what to expect. Such agency and empowerment she claims are illustrative to her maturity stage after six years being a Muslim (Roald, 2006). Her experience indicates the path she took and the choices she made after conversion. She referred to her husband more than once as an open-minded Muslim who supports her in her post-conversion journey. In one of her videos, she responds to one of her audience confirming that her husband does mind for her to talk to men as long as it is appropriate. It is intriguing to see her as a convert using Islamic history and theology to argue against born-Muslims. For example, she argues against the perfection of all Hadith traditions confirming that Qur'an stands in a higher position than Hadith. Also, her reference to the stage process of revelation of the Qur'an is used against those who force new Muslims to learn everything in very short time. "Learn to differentiate between culture and religion", she said in her video.

Sarah's post-conversion experience demonstrates the inevitable frustration, isolation, and confusion most converts experience in relationship to Muslims. Sarah's identity as a white woman plays a role in the types of struggles she encounters as a convert to Islam. Her struggle with her parents indicates the way Americans negatively perceive white women who convert to Islam as traitors for the society and the lifestyle in which they were born (Guimond, 2017). Her struggles with Muslims were a result of diverse cultural practices that stand against Western modern understanding of the world. As indicated before, Sarah's appeal to Islam seem intellectual and spiritual, which shapes her post-conversion experience with Muslims. Her argument against *Haramers* is an example for her frustration with some Muslims' intellectual cultivation of their own religion. Sarah's case represents common experiences many females converts go through.

Because of her whiteness and age, Sarah does not comment on any racism issues towards her, yet she refers to community discriminations towards her. Converts' racial and gender identities shape a huge part of their experiences after conversion in relationship to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Her action of creating a space for herself to share her post-conversion experiences proves her cultivation of an identity of resilience and agency. Some converts create spaces, frequently blogs or YouTube channels, where they feel comfortable sharing and expressing their experience in the way they think it is relevant to their social, personal and cultural imaginations.

Written Testimonials

Latino-American Converts to Islam: The Promising Community

“Islam for everyone, Islam es para todos,” wrote Juan Galvan, a Latino-American Muslim convert and the director of Latino American Da`wah Organization, LADO in his *Latino Muslims, Our Journey to Islam* (Galvan, 2017, p.10). Being a Latino and a Muslim is a unique and a challenging intersectionality of religion and race for Latino-Americans in the US. Muslims and Latinix are, as Reza Aslan argues in a talk in 2010 in Southern California, the most misunderstood minorities in the US (Morales, 2018,p.3). Juan Galvan (2017), a Latino convert himself and an activist for Latino-Muslims in the US, agrees with Aslan in his claim (Galvan, 2017, p.9). Latino's numbers among American Muslims are controversial; there were multiple diverse estimations. They vary from 4 % to 8% of the total number of American Muslims (Morales, 2018, p 2-10). They are arguably considered the fastest growing ethnic group who convert to Islam in the US, however, the level of understanding their experiences are not matching these statistics. Why do Latino Muslim experience this negativity and discrimination as Muslims and

Latinos in the US? What is the role of intersectionality of their race and religion? What does this have to do with their post-conversion experiences with other Muslims especially born-Muslims in the US? Gilberto, a self-identified Latino convert to Islam, advises his fellow Latino brothers and sisters in Islam to create a community and to negotiate the intersectionality of their identity to construct a hybrid identity to fit the larger American setting. In response to a survey conducted by Juan Galvan in 2002, Gilberto writes,

Arabs/Indo/Paks, and other groups have developed their own ways of being Muslim. This is something that needs to happen among Americans as well. By doing so, we can confidently and naturally find means to be a Muslim and a Latino (Galvan, 2017, p.23).

Based on the accounts provided in this book, the pre-conversion complex and intersectional backgrounds of individual Latino-Americans play a pivotal role in their post-conversion experiences. I argue that isolating pre-conversion experiences from post-conversion experiences creates an incomplete picture of converts' experiences after conversion. Their journey to conversion influences the journey after conversion. Further, the message that *da`wah* groups disseminate to spread Islam sheds some light on what to expect of converts' experiences with Muslims. Nine converts answered Galvan's (2017) questions about their lives as Latino-American Muslims. In an article originally published in *The Latino Muslim Voice* in March 2002, Galvan attempts to bring up experiences of those whose experiences are not frequently heard or discussed among Muslims and non-Muslims. Galvan himself, the editor, is a convert to Islam. He converted in 2000 while he was in college. His conversion to Islam provided him with a sense of agency and resilience to promote Islam to other Latinos and to raise awareness about the relationships between Islam and Latinos. He writes:

I want to thank the American Latino brothers and sisters who took time out to answer my questions. I hope you have benefited from the responses. The variety of perspectives among Latinos amazes me. Answers to question were both inspiring and enlightening. Muslims always disagree on a range of issues. Regardless of our differences, we all agree that calling people to Islam is essential (Galvan, 2017, p.26).

Five men and three women answered Galvan's questions about their experience as Latino-Muslims. Nothing was given about their background, their age, their profession, or their education. The fact that they identify themselves as Latinos along with their names are the only information about them. They answered questions like, why are not there more Latino Muslims? What are the main joys and difficulties of being a Latino Muslim? What needs to be done to call more Latinos to Islam? What are ways to help Latinos abandon their conception about Islam? What are your hopes and aspirations for Islam and Latino Muslims in America? Here, I will analyze and investigate their answers about their experiences as Latinos in relationship to other Muslims.

From investigating their post-conversion experiences, whether positive or not, in relationship to born-Muslims and non-Muslims, there are several interesting observations that are worth noting. Some see in Islam the explanation of Spanish Muslim roots; others see Islam's emphasis on the importance of family and community. Still others see Islam as the truth, clarity, simplicity, and peace they are looking for. Daniel, one of the nine Latinos answering a question about the joy of being a Latino Muslim, writes that "the joy in Islam is the return to Roots and following the last prophet" (Galvan, 2017, p.16). Teqwa, Gesta, and Farheed, other respondents, refer to Latino-community as the most joyful part of being a Muslim. Gesta writes, "One joy is that since there are so many Muslims now, I can't really feel out of place" (Galvan, 2017, p.16). It is very interesting

that none of them mentions any joys as being a part of non-Latino communities such as Arabs, Pakistani, or Indian. Some of them live among different ethnic Muslim communities. Nevertheless, they never consider themselves part of these communities.

For difficulties as Latino-American converts to Islam, the nine respondents mention far more difficulties and challenges than joys in their experiences as Latino Muslims. The majority of these difficulties are related to born-Muslims, especially immigrants. Four out of the total responses about difficulties are about the stereotypes from born-Muslims. Yolanda writes explaining the neglected challenges and loneliness that converts go through:

I am part of an Indo-Pakistani community. I had to learn what is cultural and what Islam is. That is something I am open to since I work for cultural institution, but what about those brothers and sisters that are converting? Where are they going? How do they feel when they become part of a mosque that is Arab? African American? Indo-Pakistani? Do they feel welcomed? If they don't learn about culture, are they left out? If people leave Islam because communities make them feel 'left out' who is responsible? This is a reality, and I am wondering how many communities choose cultural over religious. Is our goal as Latino Muslims to form our own mosques and separate ourselves culturally as well? (Galvan, 2017, p.17).

Latino respondents to Galvan blame other Muslims of not investing enough on *da`wah* work among Latino-Americans and Latino Muslim converts to Islam. In answer to the question, "why are not there more Latino Muslim?", almost all respondents put blame on Muslims especially established Muslim communities with multiple resources for not doing enough in terms of *da`wah* work. Yolanda writes that the challenge for Latino-Muslims is the "lack of *da`wah* among Latinos and other communities. They did not train us new Muslims very well, so we are struggling on our own" (Galvan, 2017, p.15). Still others mention, as a difficulty, that their gender identity as women influences their access to several spaces. Two out of the three women refers to the reality of their

identity as women as a difficulty for them to be part of the community. Another two refer to the social pressure from their non-Muslim families as one of the biggest difficulties they live as Latino-converts to Islam. Latinos are family-oriented people, one of respondents argues. Therefore, their family ties and interaction create an identity reconfiguration as Latinos, who were born mostly in a Catholic cultural setting. The identity reconfiguration of Latinos is best explained by Aisha, one of the respondents:

The barriers one feels with family. They were astounded by my decision to change my faith. As time progresses, they have learned to accept it, but it is never quite a full acceptance. I have to admit that I have made things more difficult in the process by being very strict on myself and not allowing the adjustment to take time - mainly when I was around my family. Actions speak louder than words and although the path is so steep, the benefits and results are always sweeter when one struggles (Galvan, 2017, p.17).

Richardo, another respondent, explains his post-conversion struggle as a Latino and a Muslim. He expresses his challenges writing that “The main difficulty with being a Latino Muslim is letting go of things that were part of your Latino background that is un-Islamic” (Galvan, 2017, p.19). Juan draws an analogy of this type of struggle to the early Muslim struggles. Her writes, “The *sahaba* [companions of the Prophet Muhammad] sacrificed much of their old lives and had to accustom themselves to a new, altered identity. In many ways the stories of Latino-Muslims are very similar” (Galvan, 2017, p.8). The reconfiguration and navigation of personal and cultural identity, in which a convert was born, within the American settings are common experiences, that many Latino converts – according to these cases- in specific and American converts to Islam in general, experience and deal with starting their early post-conversion period.

From Latino-American converts to Islam testimonials, we can spot several insightful thoughts in relationship to their post conversion experiences. First in terms of

their conversion reasons, some of them find in Islam a way for cultivating their pride in their roots, while others are drawn to Islam's simple, clear, and rational message. Another group are fascinated by the position of community and family in Islamic message. Also, there are other Latinos who may get fascinated, as the majority of them are raised catholic, by Islam's message towards Virgin Mary. Second, their post conversion experiences are a mixture of joy and struggle. The joy is often related to Islam's clear and simple message. On the other hand, their difficulties are frequently a result of relationship with born- Muslims, their relationships with non-Muslim environments, and their own personal struggle with cultural practices that stand against their Islamic imaginations of ways of life. The stereotypes they face from other Muslim communities dominate their post- conversion negative experiences. Therefore, they tend to join or create a physical community, unlike white American converts to Islam who usually create their communities virtually, of Latinos by building a mosque. Some of Latino-converts especially women and darker skinned Latinos, though, are isolated by their own Latino- communities as they don't fit the community. Referring to these difficulties, Teqwa writes, "I think all Latinos, regardless of skin color, should feel welcome by the general Latino- community" (Galvan, 2017, 16).

Brian Wright, the Student of Knowledge

This testimonial is from another convert to Islam. Brian Wright is an American male convert to Islam. He is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada. He had his BA from the University of North Texas and his MA from the American University in Cairo, AUC. His conversion narrative is not available which makes it difficult to examine why he converted to Islam, as motivations of conversion

play a role in post-conversion experiences and choices. Also, I could not find published post-conversion testimonials attributed to him except the article examined here. Under the title, *Navigating the Journey: A Convert's Advice for Born-Muslims*, Wright, given his positionality as an American convert to Islam, points to some experiences, mostly negative, converts have in relationships to born-Muslims. Wright argues that the journey of decades of social, emotional, and psychological consequences starts with the *shahada*, unlike what many Muslims perceive. Many Muslims consider that converts' experiences stop with the ultimate fulfilment of salvation, pronouncing the word of faith (Wright, 2018).

He might have converted in Egypt while he was studying there. His short biography states that he studied with a number of traditional scholars in Egypt. It is a common practice for several converts, who are interested in studying and teaching Islam and its tradition, to spend some time in a renowned Islamic institution such as *Al-Azhar* in Egypt, *Zaytuna* in Tunisia, or *Qaraween* in Morocco. There is no information given about when Wright converted exactly and how, yet his article, which was published on March 18, 2019, indicates that he converted around 15 years ago. That explains that he has a long experience of being a convert to Islam, which he describes as the “one of the most fulfilling – and equally challenging – things that I have ever done” (Wright, 2018).

To examine Wright's message thematically, we can withdraw four main themes in his article. First, cultural competencies that many immigrant/foreign Muslims might not be aware of, especially the American understanding of privacy. Wright highlights the privacy issue when he explains that, as a convert, he gets annoyed sometimes by the repeated question of many Muslims about his conversion stories. He writes, “ ‘How did

you come to Islam,' is a question that most of us are excited to hear, but one that gets tiresome after answering for the 100th time" (Wright, 2018). This is a common theme that exists among many converts; the excessive interrogative style of questioning their lives, their conversion reasons, and even their personal relationships.

Second, the lack of *da`wah* resources for converts which is confirmed by the analysis of several mosques' websites and *da`wah* groups' websites. There might be some resources to American converts to Islam online, yet there are less efforts exerted in several mosques in the US. Wright writes,

One of the biggest problems with *da`wah* is that there are tons of community resources for non-Muslims seeking to know more about Islam, but almost nothing available once they convert. As a result, many new Muslims find themselves alone (Wright, 2018).

It is not very explicit what Wright means by *da`wah* resources. But he might refer to, as suggested by the article context, information about post-conversion that assist converts with having a healthy life as converts in the US. According to Wright, there are many activities and efforts exerted by Muslims towards those who are not Muslims, yet once a person becomes a Muslim, less attention is paid for them. In addition to the lack of resources, Wright critiques the lack of community engagement with converts to Islam. This lack of community engagement with converts, he further explains, might not be an intentional act of individuals. Nevertheless, it is very influential in converts' experiences after conversion to Islam:

If you see someone who is not fitting in or seems lost, invite them for a casual cup of coffee, or just throw them a smile along with a friendly *salam* 'alaykum. If you play a larger role in your community, think about setting up classes for new Muslims, and check on new members from time to time (Wright, 2018).

Wright tries to point to something that is frequently overlooked by Muslim communities, the loneliness that converts go after conversion. He also mentions that classes for converts. Building a community is very significant to many converts as Wright mentions.

Fourth, he points to the perplexity and confusion of presenting one unified and hegemonized interpretation of Islam by those teaching converts about the religion. Wright's academic background in Islam illustrates his vast knowledge and awareness of the nuances of Islamic theology and Muslim history. Therefore, almost a third of his article is related to the flaws of understanding and disseminating Islam as one hegemonic and monolithic message. He refutes this in terms of history and in terms of reality. Unlike portraying Islam as a straight hegemonic message, it has many interpretations for people to live accordingly. Wright explains that presenting one message might cause problems for many Muslims once they are hit with the reality of diversity within Islamic theology and rituals. He argues,

Differing interpretations of the Quran, Sunnah, and Islamic Law such as rules about how to perform prayers or even what day Ramadan starts and ends can throw an entire community into disarray. Realize that there are probably more opinions than the ones that you were brought up with at home or in a majority Muslim context, and don't force a particular approach on those of us still finding our own way" (Wright, 2018).

Then, he deepens his argument by bringing converts to the challenge as they are not very familiar with all of these nuances as they are taught only one interpretation. He presupposes:

Converts, usually unaware of the nuances, are often caught in the middle and can become uncomfortable praying in a mosque because of the pressure they feel to comply with everyone else's interpretation. Don't freak out if you see us not praying the 'best' way possible, or our hijab is not exactly the way you envision

that God or the Prophet would have intended, let us do mistakes, learn more over time, and eventually grow to become better and stronger Muslims (Wright, 2018).

From Brian Wright's article about his lived experience as a convert, we can withdraw and understand common experiences converts experience as new to Islam. The discourse around *da`wah* is Wright's most focuses point. As all the four themes discussed earlier explains that there are theological, communal, social, cultural problematic discourses about how *da`wah* should look like. These discourses created a negligence or a lack of realization among Muslims to the intricacies and complexity of their religions and their communities. Moreover, it created an imagination that the job of a Muslim is to convince another person to convert to Islam and that is it. There is less focus on maintaining this by building a strong community for those who are converts. Wright brings this in a form of advice to Muslims. He is a convert who found refuge and resilience in writing about his experience but in a different discourse. Instead of writing his post-conversion experiences, rather he puts his experience in the midst of tips of advice for Muslims around him and all over the world. His options and negotiations of his struggle, as a convert, are compelling to observe. The results of his struggle are resilience to status quo and construction of an alternative narrative that counters dominant narratives of Muslims about converts as having a happy life after conversion. The reason behind such resilience is the message of Islam, as Wright illustrates. He ends his article by writing:

Being a convert is a massive challenge, but also an equally great opportunity to get closer to God and our fellow Muslims. As someone born into Islam, take the following verse to heart and realize that we are all on this journey together. *'God does not burden any soul with more than it can bear: each gain whatever good it has done, and suffers its bad- Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or make mistakes. Lord do not burden us as You burdened those before us. Lord do not*

burden us with more than we have strength to bear. Pardon us, forgive us, and have mercy on us. You are our Protector, so help us against the disbelievers.' (Quran 2:286, trans. Muhammad Abdul Haleem) (Wright, 2018).

While most converts struggle, they find not a lot of support from many Muslim communities. Born-Muslims, Wright suggests, need to think about themselves and about Islam in relationship to converts.

The Rocky Experience of an African American Convert to Islam

Jamerican Muslimah's Veranda:

Under a blog named, Jamerican Muslimah's Veranda, Shahida attempts to bring up her experience as an African American female convert. Although she converted around 1991 while she was 17 years old, her real understanding of Islam started, as she writes on her blog, in 2000. Her blog is exclusively designed to share her experience, given her identity as an African, Jamaican, American, female, convert to Islam, and a moderate Muslim as she would like to say about herself. With the first article published in November 2007, Shahida set on a journey of documenting her lived rocky experiences, as she prefers to call it, in relationship to Allah, American Muslim communities and their vast and sometimes contradictory understanding and practices of Islam, and American society, at large. Her blog is simple in design, yet very intense in articles. She attempts to counter dominant narratives among Muslims by presenting an alternative, yet realistic, narrative of an African American Muslim. Most of her articles are between 2008 and 2011. She also has a YouTube channel since 2006 under the name Ms. Siraaj with 283 subscribers. With a selfie photo of herself, Shahida writes a brief bio about her academic, religious and even personal life. She explains the purpose of her blog as a space for her to share her experience and wondrous thoughts in life. She explains that by writing:

I'm one of those people who has a thousand and one opinions on different subjects and various topics. This is my place to vent, to unwind, to share my thoughts and feelings and, most importantly, to discuss the issues that concern me about the Muslim community and the larger world (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

Therefore, her choice of naming the blog as "a veranda" is to relate to the veranda discussion that people engage in. As an African American activist, Shahida pursued her higher education to get a BA and a MA in African American Studies from the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), and Florida International University (Miami). For her long and sometimes frustrating post-conversion journey, She involved in almost all faces of Islam. She describes:

When I first took *Shahadah*, I was heavily influenced by the Salafi movement. I never called myself 'Salafi' and didn't even know such an ideology existed, but it governed my complete understanding of Islam. (I also had close friends who were in the Tablighi Jamaat, so I had that influence as well). After 'taking a break' from Islam for nearly five years, I began practicing again in 2000. Now I'm striving to be a person 'of the middle way.' I don't want to be too strict or too loose. You could say that I'm still trying to find the balance (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

Examining Shahida's post-conversion experience as an African American female convert to Islam illustrates the compounded racial, gender and religious identity role in her experiences. Unlike the aforementioned cases studies, hers is unique and more challenging because of her compounded components of her gender, racial and religious identity. The dominant factor that heavily shapes post-conversion experiences is her race and her gender. As a black woman, she was discriminated against by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Her identity as a woman added more difficulties to such experience:

If you ask me what it has been like to be a Black, convert, Muslim, female I will reiterate it has been rough. Having spent most of my Muslim experience in non-Black immigrant communities, I have faced a great deal of racism, sexism and colorism (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

Her experience is related to born and immigrant Muslims in the US, non-Muslims who are white, non-Muslims who are black, other African American Muslims especially the Nation of Islam, NOI.

First, her experience with born-Muslims has mixing of positive and negative feelings. However, she finds some support from many Muslim women, she criticizes the whole community as not very ideal by any means. She relates the negative part of her experience to her blackness more than anything else. She describes that disparities between beautiful speeches about equality and unidealistic reality of racism and colorism by pointing to personal incidents happened to her. She claims that her darker skin is frequently a reason of not getting married:

I watched as my fair-skinned Latina friends were repeatedly asked for their hand in marriage. I watched as the White female converts were held in high esteem and absorbed into immigrant Muslim families (their babies will be so fair, *mashallah!*) and I laughed inwardly at the sisters' tales of being proposed to at the annual ISNA convention because that NEVER happened to me (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

This racism and colorism causes multiple moral stresses and injuries in her imagined world as A Muslim woman. Doehring (2015) explains this experienced in Shahida's blog as a moral struggle resulted from conflicts of lived theology. The lived theology that Shahida encounters in her interaction with born-Muslims is driven from efforts of hegemonized marketed interpretation of Islam that have been promoted for years.

Moral stress and injury can be understood, then, as a pattern of values, beliefs, and ways of coping energized by shame, guilt, fear of causing harm, or self-disgust (some of the so-called negative moral emotions that cut people off from social support). These emotions pull together an interlocking pattern of values, beliefs, and ways of coping— what I call a lived theology (Doehring 2014a, 2014b, 2015)" (Doehring, 2015, p.638).

Shahida describes her stress and religious questions in several occasions as a Muslim convert. She questions her decision to come to Islam. Her first interactions with Salafi movements led to her departure and disassociation from the whole faith. When there was a huge schism between her pre-conversion life of a teenager loving partying and clubbing to a very strict lifestyle in which she does not even talk to men left a huge gap in her sense of being. That paradigm shift left her with unbalance in her understanding of the world and created a religious struggle. Religious struggle, as described by psychologists Pargament, et al (2006, p. 130), has two subscales that are useful for measuring moral stress as a dimension of religious struggles: the moral and ultimate meaning subscales. The moral scale is related to the questioning of the person him/herself, while ultimate meaning subscale questions God and the faith itself. (Doehring, 2015, 638-640). Shahida's struggle is a combination of both that ended up with her leave to Islam for 5 years. She writes:

I was angry at myself because the Afrocentric movement was what had led me to Islam. Before becoming Muslim I was confident and proud of the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, the shape of my nose and of my slave ancestors. How did I move from that to being ashamed of taking off my hijab at sisters' only events? How could I sit silently as people insulted my skin color or asked me if I was a convert or Muslim? What happened to me? (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

Second, her experience with her African American Muslim communities is not that fulfilling and uplifting either. After spending time with the Salafi mosque, she joined when she first converted, she looked for other communities that look like her. She tried to join NOI mosque. Nevertheless, she felt an outsider among her fellow African American community as she was not born in the movement along with her lighter skin color. She elaborates on that saying:

I thought I would find myself welcomed into my local W.D. Muhammad masjid with full and open arms. I was coming home! However, from the moment I set foot in the masjid I immediately knew I was an outsider, not to be welcomed in. This time it wasn't because of my skin color or cultural background. I was an outsider because I wasn't part of the Nation of Islam experience and I didn't have an entire family who was part of it. I was also an outsider because I was attractive, single and a threat to the sisters. The strangest part of all was that Black people no longer recognized me as Black. My light brown skin (once considered too dark in Arab and Indian/Pakistani communities) combined with my hijab made people assume I was East African or a Black Arab. (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008).

Third, she experiences multiple racism and discrimination against her as a black Muslim woman from those who are not Muslims, white and black alike. People assume she is an immigrant or a refugee. She faces multiple micro-aggression from several American in her life. She writes describing her experience before and after 9/11 as a black American Muslims female: "Before 9/11 people would assume that I was from the Nation of Islam. That's what being Black, and Muslim meant. However, after 9/11 I was suddenly 'foreign' and from 'over there.'" (Muslima's Veranda, 2008)

Further, African Americans who are not Muslims assume that she has to be a Christian as African Americans have to be Christians. Due to the reoccurring incidents of microaggression she has to encounter, she wrote an article listing all kinds of aggressions she experiences as an African Muslim convert with non-Muslims. From her list, she relates to the intersected identities she claim. She refers to aggression she faces as a woman, black, hijabi, Muslim who has Jamaican roots. Her experiences are from people in her work, other African American, people in streets, and even from some family member (Muslimah's Veranda, 2008). Her experience of racism post-9/11 is far more that she has ever experienced in her life before.

As a Muslim living in a post-9/11 world, I feel as if my rage has been compounded. I have NEVER, IN ALL OF MY LIFE experienced such overt

racism as I have since those towers fell on that tragic day in September 2001” (Muslimah’s Veranda, 2008).

The question is now how someone like Shahida can endure all of this? Why does she still believe in Islam as the true belief for her life. She answers these questions by coping mechanisms she created for herself. Nevertheless, she does not claim that she does not suffer from these experiences anymore. She finds in her personal relationship in Allah and the true message of Islam a coping belief to keep her in the faith. Also, the Islamic view of life as a challenging test empowers Shahida. The Qur’an’s message along with the life meaning intentional theology (Doehring, 2015) Shahida created for herself through blogging constructed an identity to which Shahida can relate as an African American Muslim female in post-9/11 America. She describes:

So how am I doing? I’m coping. I’m trying to remain positive. I ask for Allah’s help and his guidance. I try to think about all of the rewards Allah will give me for persevering during these trying times. (I’m seriously considering finding a therapist or life coach to help me gain some focus). But I’m human too. Sometimes I really want to cuss someone out. I want to scream. I want to release my rage. Bear it to the world. Fortunately, (for me and for the world) I blog... (Muslimah’s Veranda, 2008).

She adds, reflecting on her relationship with the Qur’an:

Despite the negative experiences I have had and continue to have, the Quran has offered me guidance and peace during these tumultuous times. After all, when I am focused, when I remind myself of my purpose, when I lay that rug out and face the kiblah, I remember that there is nothing and no one else in the world except me and Allah (Muslimah’s Veranda, 2008).

Shahida finds the Qur’an a source of energy and strength she gets when she experience hardships in her life as an African American convert to Islam. The message of Islam regarding life as an exam provides Shahida with resilience. The life meaning intentional theology (Doehring, 2015) Shahida creates for herself provides her a solid

ground on which she can survive her life as a convert. It seems the long post-conversion experiences Shahida has provides us with an illustration that longer a post-conversion experience a convert has, a better understanding of Muslim community and life they have.

Shahida's experience illustrates the complexity of post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam has. The unique personal gender, racial and religious features of each convert form the way of which their experiences are shaped. Shahida's identity as a female and a black convert influences the themes of her post-conversion experiences. Also, her identity as a feminist plays a role as well. It is worth noting that there are many converts like Shahida experience the same challenge she has. But, there are many other converts to Islam, who are content with what Shahida criticizes in Muslim communities. There are many followers of Salafi movements who happen to be women and converts as well. There are several proponents of NOI, and they are very devout believers of the message and the cause. It is true that they are not as critical as Shahida is towards these groups, yet their experience are fulfilled by the message of the group of which they are members. That being said, there is no denial of Shahida's experience. Rather, her experience is a compounded of heavy moral stresses and injuries from all around her, Muslims and non-Muslims, Black and non-black, immigrants and non-immigrants. Her coping strategies and methods are compelling and interesting as they highlight a unique case. She studies African studies which might be in itself a coping mechanism for her to know about her root. Islamic theology and personal rituals are usually highlighted when converts to Islam encounter an unbearable discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Some other converts choose to fit in the community of which they are members endorsing its culture and lifestyle that are influenced by Islam, yet not totally Islamic. From the case studies in this research, I argue that many of converts, who are not satisfied and fulfilled by their Muslim communities, create a virtual community by having a (YouTube channel, blog, writing for a website, Facebook page, etc.) to fill the spiritual and community vacuum they have in their lives. They resort to this as a way of negotiating their identity as American and as Muslims. Physical interaction seem to create several moral stress and dissonance among converts that pushed them to create a tailored environment of which they have control.

The aforementioned case studies demonstrates the challenging experience some converts to Islam endure after their conversion. These experiences differ in nature depending on where the convert's gender, races, religious and family background, and the Muslim community they try to fit in. To better examine the converts' post-conversion experiences, it is significant to highlight the factors that influence these experiences. Their experiences from their interaction to other American Muslims are mostly challenging to the nature of communities and structure of mosques.

Some community members practice micro-aggression against converts. Some of converts have experiences with non-Muslim family and society at large. Others might have challenging experiences as a result of their trials to adapt to Islamic lifestyle that is not widely practiced in the American pop-culture such as avoiding partying, five daily prayers, frustration with the Arabic language, Islamic terminologies, loneliness, alcohol, pork, etc.

These case studies illustrate the following themes, which are more explicit in some converts' experiences than others. They are not all experienced by each and every convert in their post-conversion journey. I summarize these findings in three subheadings. First, converts' experiences in relationship to born-Muslims (Americans and immigrants). Their relationship to Muslim communities is the main theme of their experiences after conversion, especially if they are part a community or are trying to join one. The second is converts' experiences in relationship to their non-Muslim networks and the challenges that accompany to that. Third theme found is converts' choices as a result of these experiences with Muslims and non-Muslims.

Challenges and Experiences from Interactions with American Muslims

1. Frustration with the vague intersection between culture and religion in terms of lifestyle that mosques' members embrace.
2. The women's position and access to resources within Muslim communities, especially during gatherings in mosques and even social gatherings. The gender segregation for some.

3. The lack of intercultural integration of new converts especially converts from marginalized ethnicities such as African Americans and Latino-Americans. That usually leads to lack of converts' community presence in many mosques with exception of Latino and African American mosques.
4. The confusion and loss between several interpretations of Islam and the way Muslims handle these differences within diverse communities and with converts.
5. The informal religious policing in mosques especially from older generations without understanding the level of knowledge of a convert.
6. The organizational style and leadership of some mosques in terms of programs and activities.
7. The focus on theoretical and '*fiqh*' legalistic aspects of Islam by many Muslim imams (religious leaders) in the US and all over the world, and the negligence of family, spiritual, and community-oriented aspects of the religion.
8. The frustrating learning process for some converts.
9. The reality of imperfect Muslim community unlike what has been propagated among *da'wah* groups.
10. The pitfalls and ups and downs of converts' experiences along the process after conversion and the messages disseminated in relation to this. For example, when a convert drinks alcohol and tells some Muslims about it, they might portray this actions as if that convert is not a Muslim anymore. This

response from Muslims, especially who have traditional upbringing is expected as drinking alcohol for them is far beyond what a Muslim should do.

11. The relational challenges that arise along the process. Some of converts get divorced or abused especially women converts by their Muslim partners which leave a negative experience for them.
12. The numbness of the love and passion towards Islam and its message and practices after a period of time. The love and obsession fade out over time.
13. Some converts find the lifestyle of many Muslim communities in the US fulfilling and meaningful and they embrace such religious and cultural lifestyle. They are frequently married to someone from the community which plays a role in their experiences and choices.
14. The intra-community racism, colorism, discrimination, micro and macro-aggression, nepotism, etc.

Experiences as a Result of Interactions with Non-Muslims

1. Abandonment of friends and family due to conversion and adoption of a different lifestyle which frequently leads to loneliness
2. The pressure from families.
3. The discrimination and aggression from the society. For instance, white converts are portrayed as traitors to their own culture and way of life. African American converts are seen as aliens to the country, or terrorists and violent because of the history of the NOI.

4. The cultural and religious ceremonies that are not related to Islam, or sometimes against Islamic beliefs such as Halloween, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Saint Patrick Day, etc.

Choices and Navigations

1. Some choose to be silent about their experiences and not to speak up about them to avoid accusations such as they are embarrassing the Ummah or criticizing Islam itself. They learn how to live with their challenging experiences without bringing up the flaws of the community. Some of them do this as an act of piety as well.
2. Some others develop and construct a resilient lifestyle within Muslim communities by highlighting alternative narratives of themselves as converts. That is through classes for converts or attempting to take a leading position in their respective community. They also do so by looking and joining welcoming communities towards converts.
3. More converts create their resilient and meaningful community through online platforms by having a YouTube channel, a blog, or any type of social media accounts.
4. Group of converts lean towards isolation and dissociation from the community by practicing Islam at personal and individual level.
5. There are a group that leave Islam completely. There are some speculations from some community leaders about the percentage of those who leave the religion. Some leaders assume there are a big number of those who convert

leave Islam within five years. There are no statistics confirming or denying this, yet it is undeniable that there is a number of converts leave Islam after their conversion.

6. Embracing a form of Islam that matches their own personality and choices or being a Muslim in belief, but not in practices. That choice of some converts by fitting in non-Muslim social groups and living a life that does not necessarily agree with Islamic instructions. That might be a common solution among many converts and even first-generation American Muslims who were born as Muslim and don't agree with their communities' structures and style.
7. A very few of converts get radicalized or join extremist groups as it is reported by the number of Americans who are part of ISIS.

These varieties of post-conversion experiences many American converts go through, as it is examined in this research, illustrate that converts to Islam experience complex challenges. American converts to Islam tend to grapple with distinguishing between what is and is not Islamic, what is theologically-based and what is culturally-based as it is mentioned from all studied cases. The majority of these challenges, as the studied cases suggest, are related to Muslim communities in the US. Converts face challenges identifying cultural and traditional practices of born-Muslims in the US. In addition, there are several other challenges in relationship to non-Muslim that converts highlight as well. As this study finds out, many converts, especially women, negotiate for other options other than physical communities to create spaces where they express themselves and their identity as American converts. This research hopes it adds the

complexity and diversity of post-conversion experiences of American converts to Islam to the literature of conversion to Islam studies in the US.

Studying converts to Islam provides better understanding of the internal complexities of Muslims in the US for researchers, policy makers and Muslims themselves as it highlights converts' diverse experiences such as loss, agency, isolation, confusion, and belonging. I hope that converts to Islam in the US are given more attention from Muslims, policy makers, and researchers in terms of their experiences after conversion. Their positionality as converts provides them with several insights that born-Muslims might not be aware of. There are several research gaps in studying post-conversion experiences of converts, especially male converts to Islam, Latinx converts to Islam, and African American converts. There is also a gap to conduct comparative post-conversion studies about American converts to Islam and European converts to investigate the similarities and differences. Post-conversion experiences need more attention as there is a possibility to multiple researches and studies to be done in the genre.

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