Causes and Effects of Conversion to Islam by White and Latina American Women: A Study of Community, Ethnicity, and Geography

Causes and Effects of Conversion to Islam by White and Latina American Women: A Study of Ethnicity and Community

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Abstract

This study deepens our understanding of the processes of religious conversion to Islam by identifying similarities and differences in the conversion processes of white and Latina women in the United States, comparing the results with previous research on converts in Europe and the Americas and exploring ways that the ethnic, racial, and cultural milieu of each group affect both reasons for conversion and post-conversion experiences. The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing from semi-structured biographical interviews with nineteen converts, eight Latina and eleven white, from the Boston and Los Angeles areas. Findings are presented within an organizational framework based on Lewis Rambo's seven stages for understanding religious conversion, identifying differences and similarities in terms of 1) *Context*, *Crisis*, and *Quest*; 2) first *Encounter* and *Interaction*; 3) *Reasons*, and; 4) *Consequences* of conversion to Islam. The *Reasons* stage is further organized into four discourses: personal/religious, family, community, and society. The study assembles themes drawn from prior research into a conversion path hypothesis, which attempts to describe the influence of ethnicity, culture, race, and language on the paths that converts take, especially in relation to immigrant Muslims. The study finds similarities between these white and Latina converts in many respects, including an unexpected preference for gender separation at mosques, but finds differences in the ways Latinas respond to ethnocentrism from immigrant Muslims by forming their own Latina Muslim associations. The study concludes by presenting several key areas for further research.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, Brigadier General Waqar Mansuri. In the midst of a country turning toward narrow-minded theocracy, he raised me to think for myself. I will always look up to him as a man of integrity, honesty, and open-mindedness and deeply mourn his passing during the writing of this thesis.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Sadaqat Mansuri, for a lifetime of love and support. She raised me to believe in myself.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Dr. Hafeez Malik, emeritus professor of political science at Villanova University, for making it possible for me to come to the United States to study. Your legacy has been daunting, your encouragement has been crucial. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Jocelyne Cesari, and my research advisor, Dr. Doug Bond. For invaluable advice on editing and organization, I am deeply thankful to my readers Ana del Toro Mijares and Megan Tinsely. I would also like to thank Rex Dean for his immeasurable support without which the completion of this thesis would not have been possible. Words cannot express my gratitude.

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Definitions

Terms Denoting Race and Ethnicity

My participants described themselves as either "white" or "Latina." Strictly speaking, these terms are not comparable. "Latina" denotes a cultural heritage without reference to race, while "white" attempts to describe a "race" denoted by a relative lack of skin pigmentation.

The phrase "white women" is used in this paper in its common usage, as a shorthand for the more precise "non-Hispanic (non-Latina), non-Black, non-person-of-color, also sometimes known as Anglo-Saxon, European, or Caucasian women; in this study "white" additionally denotes women who are not recent immigrants. This follows the practice of other scholars of conversion to Islam, including Haddad, Gallonier, McGinty, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Nieuwkerk, who use the term "white converts" when writing about "white" American converts.

Latina refers to women who identify as Latinas of any race, emigrated from and/or with families from Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Central and South America, and parts of the Caribbean. A more nuanced discussion of what is meant by "whiteness" and "Latina-ness" is provided in Chapter 1.

Latino is the male variant. *Latinx* is the genderless variant. Sometimes written as *Latino/a*.[1]

[1] Hispanic is used in some citations but is avoided by me because some Latinx in the United States find offensive the words "Hispanic" or "Spanish" because these words deny the cultural identity many Latinx of Spanish descent feel they share with those of Portuguese descent.

Immigrant Muslim and *born Muslim*, meaning those who were born into a Muslim family and raised as Muslims, usually immigrants from South Asia or the Middle East, whether first-, second-, or third-generation, as opposed to converts or Black/African-American Muslims and converts. Some of the converts in my study were also immigrants, but "immigrant Muslim" refers only to "born Muslims." The term is used as a short-hand, and in no way implies that immigrants remain immigrants forever.

Arabic words

Alhamdulillah! (thank you, God!)

da'wah (proselytization)

hadith (the record of words, actions, and approval from Muhammad, a source of authority for religious law second only to the Quran)

khutba (Friday sermon)

masjids (mosques)

Muslimah (plural feminine of Muslim)

*Nikah (*Muslim wedding ceremony)

taqwa (God consciousness, piety, fear of God

shahada (proclamation of conversion to Islam)

ummah (all-embracing worldwide community of Muslims)

wali (mentor)

Defining Conversion to Islam

Compared to the classes, oaths, restrictions, and ceremonies involved with joining some religions, adopting Islam is surprisingly easy. Reciting the *shahada* ("there is no

god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God") in front of two witnesses is all it takes to "become a Muslim."[2] There are rules for what's forbidden and what's allowed, but essentially what being a practicing Muslim requires is adherence to the "five pillars of Islam," namely: *shahada* (declaration of faith), *salah* (five daily prayers), *zakat* (charity), *sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).[3] Despite their differing familial, societal, and social backgrounds, at some point in their lives all the women in my study decided that Islam was for them, a choice they made openly.

Defining Religion, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nationality - *milieu*

Beyond the scientific classification of *homo sapiens*, attempts to further sub-divide the human race are bound to be problematic. Being a woman can mean almost anything, as can being Muslim, Latina, American, or German. The purpose of comparing and contrasting is to learn more, not to suggest that the divisions are necessarily valid, or good. There is no quintessential Latina or white American woman, and so the question is: why pretend there is? Whether or not this was my original intention, a study like mine adds to the canon of literature that suggests: we are all unique, we are all similar, and above all, we are all connected. The use of language about religion, culture, ethnicity, and nationality is bound to be imprecise. What *kind* of Muslim, Latina, white, or American are we talking about, after all? By presenting their testimony in their own words, my goal

[2] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.
[3] Sophia Dziegielewski and Tabassum Rehman, "Women Who Choose Islam," *International Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 3 (2003): 33, https://doi.org/10.1080/00207411.2003.11449590.

is to let the reader conclude as I do, that we are all mostly unique, but we all share similarities.

This study is about the possible effects of ethnicity, culture, race, and nationality on conversion to Islam. The words are used in their common meaning.

Conversations were edited to remove spurious “like” and “you know,” and in some cases were edited for clarity.

Chapter I.

Introduction

This chapter aims to address the following questions, and provide evidence for the relevance and importance of the following questions:

What is the general research question? What is the specific ***Primary Research Question*** *this study aims to address? Why is this question worth asking? What is the general context in which the phenomenon under study takes place? What background information should we be aware of before approaching research specific to the topic?*

When I stumbled across a statistic about thousands of white women converting to Islam, I was fascinated and confused. I found I was not alone in my confusion. Without exception, when I mention the phenomenon to friends and strangers, they express disbelief: why would they do *that?* I decided to make my general research topic *religious conversion by American women to Islam.*

Having grown up in the ultra-religious Muslim country of Pakistan and having struggled with the limitations on my freedom imposed by religious dogma, I wondered why Americans, especially women, would willingly convert to Islam. I had read Malcolm X and knew that some African American slave forebears were Muslim, and I also knew a little about the history of the Nation of Islam. But white women? And so, began my journey with my first general research question: *why do white American women convert to Islam?*

After traveling to Los Angeles, which is now over 50% Latinx, I wondered if Latinas converted to Islam. My general research question became much more interesting: *What are the causes and effects of white and Latina converts to Islam in the United States, and do their experiences differ based on their ethnicity?*

Reading about the topic I found two things: 1) that there is not much research, and 2) that my favorite researchers warn against making generalizations. So, I refined the general to specific, and after I found participants willing to talk to me, this became my ***Primary Research Question: For 11 white and 8 Latina women who converted to Islam, what were the life experiences leading up to their conversions, the reasons they gave for converting, the consequences of converting, and how did these experiences differ between the two groups? How do their experiences compare to converts interviewed in previous studies in Europe, Latin America, and the United States?***

The short answer to the question "*Why is this question worth asking?"* is that there is a significant gap in the available literature, and any sincere effort to address the misunderstandings and apprehensions that Americans have about Muslims is a worthwhile undertaking.

Background

Today there are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. There are more Christians in the world, but of all major religions Islam is growing the fastest. In the United States, there

are an estimated 3.45 million Muslims[4] worshipping in over 2,000 mosques.[5] By the year 2050, the number of Muslims is expected to more than double, by which time Islam will have surpassed Judaism to become the second largest religion after Christianity.[6]

Today Muslims make up only 1.1% of the United States population, [7] but the purported dangers posed by Muslims and Islam worldwide have taken center stage in recent years as the reason behind a massive military buildup in the US. The Congressional Budget Office estimates $2.4 trillion dollars have been spent to date on the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq alone,[8] while a Brown University study suggests the number is closer to $4.8 trillion, with an overall price tag on "the war on terror" at home and abroad estimated to add more than $7.9 trillion to the national debt by mid-century.[9] There appear to be only about 100,000 militant extremist Muslims in the world[10]–less than 0.01% of the 1.8 billion Muslims on the planet. And yet "Muslim" and "terrorist" are often conflated. Current United States President Donald Trump has repeatedly attempted to institute a travel ban against Muslims, which the

[4] Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World," Pew Research Center, August 09, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/.
[5] Ihsan Bagby, Report Number 1 from *The US Mosque Survey 2011: Activities, Administration and Vitality of the American Mosque* (Washington D.C: CAIR and ISNA, 2012), 4.
[6] Besheer Mohamed, "New estimates show U.S. Muslim population continues to grow," Pew Research Center, January 3, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/
[7] Bagby, Report Number 1, 4.
[8] Jessica Donati, "U.S. Has Spent $2.8 Trillion on Terrorism Fight, Study Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-has-spent-2-8-trillion-on-terrorism-fight-study-finds-1526486451.
[9] Watson Institute, "Costs of War," Watson Institute International and Public Affairs at Brown University, last modified September 2016, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/economic.
[10] Peter Bergen and Emily Schneider, "Jihadist Threat Not as Big as You Think," CNN, last modified September 29, 2014, http://us.cnn.com/2014/09/26/opinion/bergen-schneider-how-many-jihadists/index.html.

Supreme Court has recently upheld.[11] A majority of Muslims in America, 53%, believe the government "singles out" Muslims for surveillance and monitoring.[12] Reported anti-Muslim bias increased by 57% and hate crime incidents by 44% leading up to the election of Donald Trump between 2015 and 2016.[13] On the first day of Ramadan in 2017, two men were stabbed to death on a train in Portland, Oregon after trying to intervene against a man yelling racial slurs at two teenagers, one of whom was wearing hijab.[14]

It is my hope that sharing the stories of how and why Latina and white American women converted to Islam will reduce the fear and ignorance surrounding Islamic stereotypes and lead to greater understanding and acceptance.

Unfortunately, I am swimming against the tide. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported in 2013 that 37 different organizations in the United States spent nearly $120 million between 2008 and 2011 promoting Islamophobia, and between 2011 and 2012, 78 bills or amendments "designed to vilify Islamic religious practices" were introduced in the United States and 29 state legislatures.[15] The images and stories

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[11] Adam Liptak and Michael D. Shear, "Trumps Travel Ban is Upheld by Supreme Court," *New York Times,* June 26, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/us/politics/supreme-court-trump-travel-ban.html.

[12] Tom Rosentiel, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, May 22, 2007, http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/.

[13] Al Jazeera, "CAIR: Dramatic surge in anti-Muslim incidents in 2016," *Al Jazeera,* May 9, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/cair-anti-muslim-incidents-2016-170509210928648.html. From 2,213 in 2016 to 2,599 in 2017 (17%), and anti-Muslim hate crimes, from 260 in 2016 to 300 (14%) in 2017.

[14] Associated Press, "Man Hurling Slurs Kills 2, Injures 1 on Train," *Seattle Times*, last modified May 26, 2017, http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/police-man-hurling-racial-slurs-kills-2-injures-1-on-train/.

[15] Council on American-Muslim Relations, "Confronting Fear: Islamophobia and Its Impact in the U.S. 2013-2015," CAIR Research Center, October 21, 2017, http://www.islamophobia.org/islamophobic-individuals/15-reports/179-confronting-fear-islamophobia-and-its-impact-in-the-u-s-2013-2015.html.

presented to the American populace, and more broadly the Western world, have a measurable impact on their views of Islam: a Pew research study from 2017 found that in the United States, Russia, and four Western European countries, 50% of those surveyed believed Muslims to be "violent" and 58% believed them to be "fanatical."[16] Americans view Islam the most negatively of seven other religious groups mentioned in the survey (Jewish, Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Mormon).[17] Perhaps more striking is the finding that only 22% of Westerners think Muslims are "respectful towards women."[18] These data suggest that Westerners have internalized the idea that Islam is an inherently anti-woman religion, given the misinformation by the global media and governments.

There is a worrying, anti-democratic, anti-liberal, and inhumane trend gathering steam in the world, on the surface aimed at Muslims, but in actuality affecting everyone. Having been grudgingly shamed by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. into accepting that overt racism is wrong, the xenophobia debate has shifted: leaders now claim to have no problem with brown and black people, but their *ideas* threaten our own lovely pluralistic culture - because "those Muslims" believe we must all be either assimilated or wiped out. There is no better evidence that the word *liberal* has become an Orwellian joke than by looking at the way "liberal" leaders of purportedly multi-cultural, liberal societies frame the "Islam vs. the West" debate. One after another, politicians repeat this idea of incompatibility. Angela Merkel feels Muslims keep "their own languages, religion, and cultural habits," creating "sub-worlds" within European

[16] Lipka, "Muslims and Islam."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

countries.[19] David Cameron blames "state multiculturalism" for a "weakening of our collective identity" and said it encouraged different cultures to live "separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream."[20] As Jocelyne Cesari points out, "public discourse primarily focuses on, and feeds into, two perceptions: Islam as incompatible with Western values and Islam as the external enemy."[21]

Challenging the abuse of power and language, where Muslims are purposely misrepresented in order to justify expensive and oppressive surveillance and wars, is important for the future of all Muslims, all Americans, and indeed, all humans. Recent trends toward authoritarian rule, militarism, and the curtailing of civil liberties are usually framed as necessary to thwart "radical Islam." It is essential to close the gap between the reality of the cultural diversity of Muslims and the ugly monolithic stereotypes we are all being fed, and this paper is intended to help.

Need for this Project

The goal of this project is to add to our understanding of Islam and Muslims by studying white and Latina female converts to Islam and comparing and contrasting their backgrounds, reasons for conversion, and experiences as converts. In a society as complex and diverse as the United States, there is much to learn from women who, usually after great deliberation, choose to convert to Islam. Their decision flies in the face of the idea that "American values" and "Islamic values" are incompatible.

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[19] Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.
[20] BBC News Services, "Cameron: Multiculturalism Speech Not Attack on Muslims," *BBC News*, February 23, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-12555908.
[21] Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 6.

My intent is not to treat the *Muslimah* (plural feminine of Muslim) as a unified group, because they are not, and it would be wrong to deny their uniqueness as individuals. The meanings gleaned from what these women have to say about their own lives will differ from reader to reader; every reader brings their own personal lens, just as I have. In this way, I hope to put flesh on the bones of statistics and surveys, to fill out the picture of what it feels like to be a Muslim convert in America.

I chose to study white American women converts because, if you believe the popular press, as majority, mainstream, and privileged, they would have no specific reasons for converting to Islam. Latina American women, on the other hand, are already marginalized in some ways and, much like Muslims, are increasingly persecuted by the current administration. I suspect Latinas might have more and different reasons for converting, as well as different post-conversion experiences from their white sisters. For these reasons, I chose to focus this study on a comparison of the lived experiences of conversion of white and Latina women in the United States.

Only a handful of studies examine the reasons Western women convert to Islam, and most of those were done outside the United States, in: Australia,[22]

[22] Ebony King, "Pathways to Allah: Female Conversion to Islam in Australia," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 28, no. 4 (2017): 543-472, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1324004; Karen Turner, "Contracts with Clauses: The Secret Politics of Being and Becoming Muslim," in *Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Pub., 2010), 52-87.

Britain,[23]Denmark,[24] France,[25] Germany,[26] Scandinavia,[27] Netherlands,[28] Sweden,[29] and Europe-wide.[30] There are studies about women in the Americas, including Latinas in

[23] Ali Köse, "The Journey from the Secular to the Sacred: Experiences of Native British Converts to Islam," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999); Ali Köse, "Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British-converts" (PhD diss., University of London, 1994), https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/2929284/DX190922.pdf; Louise Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam: Choosing Islam as a Rejection of Individualism," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 10, no. 1 (2010): 5, doi:10.1080/14708471003602355; Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014).

[24] Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The Case of Converts to Islam in Denmark," *Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 643-60, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2006.0015; Tina Gudrun Jensen, "To Be 'Danish', Becoming 'Muslim': Contestations of National Identity?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 3 (2008): 389-409, doi:10.1080/13691830701880210.

[25] Geraldine Mossiere, "The Intimate and the Stranger: Approaching the 'Muslim Question' through the Eyes of Female Converts to Islam," *Critical Research on Religion* 4, no.1 (2016): 100, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303216630067; Juliette Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race: Converting to Islam in France and the United States" (PhD diss., Sciences Po-Institute of Political Studies of Paris, 2017), ProQuest (AAT:10289509); Juliette Galonnier, "The Racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some Insights from White Converts to Islam," *Social Compass* 62, no. 4 (2015): 570-83, https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615601966.

[26] Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Esra Özyürek, "German Converts to Islam and Their Ambivalent Relations with Immigrant Muslims" in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. Andrew Shryock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 172-92; Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 71-92; Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 351-62, https://doi.org/10.1177/003776899046003010.

[27] Anne Sofie Roald, "The Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam': Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 48-70; Anne Sofie Roald, "The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-first Century," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 347-362, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.676782; Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

[28] Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006) 95-119; Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "'Veils and Wooden Clogs Don't Go Together,'" *Ethnos* 69, no. 2 (2004): 39, doi:10.1080/0014184042000212876.

Brazil and Mexico.[31] A small number of studies on women converts in the United States exist, but they do not reference race or ethnicity.[32] Finally, there are just a handful of conversion studies in the United States specifically about Latinas[33] and white women.[34]

In all the above research, we find hints about the ways ethnicity, race, culture and nationality might affect the religious conversion journey but no real efforts at comparing the different ways these forces shape the paths women travel. Three scholars have

[29] Madeleine Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 325, https://doi.org/10.1177/003776899046003008; Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Anna Mansson McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam: Feminist Approaches among Muslim Converts in Sweden," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30, no. 6 (2007): 474-485.

[30] Stephano Allievi, "The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and Other Issues," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 120-148; Thomas Luckmann, "The Religious Situation in Europe: The Background to Contemporary Conversions," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 251-58, doi:10.1177/003776899046003002.

[31] Jerusa Ali, "Bahamian and Brazilian Muslimahs: Struggle for Identity and Belonging," in *Islam and the Americas*, ed. Aisha Khan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 186-213; Sandra Cañas Cuevas, "The Politics of Conversion to Islam in Southern Mexico," in *Islam and the Americas*, ed. Aisha Khan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 163-85.

[32] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 19-47; Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*; Amina Inloes and Liyakat Takim, "Conversion to Twelver Shi'ism among American and Canadian Women," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (2013): 3-24; Audrey A. Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam in the United States: An Exploratory Study" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary 2008), ProQuest (AAT 3299120); Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 95-119; Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 351-62; Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 71-92.

[33] Stephani Londono, "Immigrant Latinas and Their Shahadah in Miami," FIU, accessed August 16, 2018. https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/publications/commissioned-paper-londono.pdf; Maryam Shahmoradi and Hasan Hosseini, "Latina Shi̇a Women in the United States of America: Converging Identities in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 19-35, https://doi.org/ 10.1353/isl.2015.0022.

[34] Amy Melissa Guimond, *Converting to Islam: Understanding the Experiences of White American Females* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race."

explored comparisons of European converts with American – Sweden,[35] Germany,[36] Netherlands,[37] France,[38] – and these have been highly suggestive in guiding my own research. Of these, only Gallonnier's studies race explicitly considered; other cross-national studies treat Black, Latina, and white converts without differentiation.[39]

Within the United States itself, the use of ethnicity, race, and culture in a comparative study of Latina and white converts as a way to shine light on the conversion phenomenon, has, to my knowledge, never been explored. For these reasons, the current study is both relevant, justified, and needed.

The paper is organized as follows. The current chapter, Chapter 1, presents the Primary Research Question, and the background to the issue, including the relevant contemporary context, reflections on white-ness and Latina-ness, a brief history of Latinx conversion to Islam in the United States, as well as the historical and ongoing context of Orientalism. Chapter II presents a review of prior literature on the subject, both specific reasons for conversion to Islam, including possible cultural differences between white and Latina converts, and a synthesis of themes drawn from prior research, all with the goal of developing research questions and hypotheses that might help explain some aspects of the phenomenon. Chapter III presents the phenomenological, in-depth interview, biographical narrative research methods used in this study, describes the selection of participants and attempts to describe my own potential biases as a researcher. Chapter IV explains the structural framework for the paper, drawing from theories of

[35] McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam," 474.
[36] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance."
[37] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 95-119.
[38] Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race."
[39] Ibid.

religious conversion scholars Lewis Rambo and Karin Nieuwkerk. Chapters 5 introduces my findings. Chapters VI through XII present my findings, drawing upon prior research where appropriate, and when applicable, comparing the Latina and white experience. Chapter XIII, Conclusions, restates and responds to research questions and hypotheses. The paper concludes with Chapter XIV, Final Thoughts, with observations and reflections on "cultural Islam," geography, and relevance, as well as questions for further research.

Reflections on White-ness

White women, having lost their original, historical, ancestral ethnicity by coming to America, can, for the most part, no longer claim an ethnicity. Nor, according to James Baldwin, can they even claim a community:

> There is, in fact, no white community… There is, for example—at least, in principle—an Irish community, . . . a German community, . . . an Italian community, . . . a Jewish community. . . . There are English communities. There are French communities. There are Swiss consortiums. There are Poles: in Warsaw (where they would like us to be friends) and in Chicago (where because they are white we are enemies). . . . There is the underworld—the poor (to say nothing of those who intend to become rich) are always with us—but this does not describe a community.
>
> It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become "white." No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.[40]

The process of "becoming white" in America is ongoing. It was not until a Minnesota court case in 1908 that "the law forbade treating Finnish immigrants and

[40] James Baldwin, "On Being White and Other Lies," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 166-169.

Americans of Finnish descent as not white.[41] Armenians were not found to be white, and therefore eligible for citizenship until a 1909 court case in Boston.[42]

Over 100 years later, the Courts and the Government continue to debate over whom is eligible for citizenship in much the same way. The explicit reference to race has been replaced by an explicit reference to religion and culture, Islam being the new "not-white-enough-for-citizenship."

White women are usually considered to be not marginalized or oppressed, although in practice, of course, many are. The cultural backgrounds of white and Latina converts are not so different in many ways, after all. White converts aspire to "traditional values," and many do so, coming, like Latinas, from a predominantly Catholic tradition. White women can and do experience sexual exploitation and objectification, and it is difficult to say to what degree and how that compares to the Latina experience, if there is such a thing. White women are not expected to be on the receiving end of racism, but of course, they can be and are, and regardless of skin color, they can experience classism. White women can experience alienation and marginalization for their own biographical reasons, and above all else, white women can empathize and identify with others–including, for instance, Muslims–as fully and deeply as any non-white minority.

Nonetheless, because white women as a group are perceived as not marginalized, and Latinas as a group are perceived as marginalized, to study Islam through the lens of these two groups may provide extraordinary insight into how Islam is understood and

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[41] Armas K. E. Holmio and Ellen M. Ryynanen, *History of the Finns in Michigan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 23.

[42] "Citizenship for Armenians; Circuit Court Declines to Bar Them on Government's Plea," *New York Times*, December 25, 1909, https://www.nytimes.com/1909/12/25/archives/citizenship-for-armenians-circuit-court-declines-to-bar-them-on.html.

practiced in America. As said before, nobody expects white women to convert, and nobody is surprised that Latinas convert. To find out how these two sets of women arrived, in one sense, at the same place, will, I hope, represent a small contribution to the body of research available on conversion to Islam.

Are Studies of European Converts Relevant to the Current Study?

As described, most of the prior research available to me comes from studies of converts in Europe, because of a lack of studies on Americans. For understanding religious conversion, there are several significant differences between Europe and the United States, in terms of individuality, religiosity. and Muslim emigration patterns.

First, according to a 2014 survey by Pew Research, Americans are 2 to 3 times more individualistic than Europeans. Second, Americans are three times more religious than the French, and twice as religious as both Germans and British.[43]

Third, the emigration of Muslims to Europe is not comparable to Muslim emigration to the United States. Whereas much of Europe is in relatively close proximity to millions of Muslims, the United States is not. Whereas historically, European countries had colonial interests in Muslim-majority countries, the United States did not. Mid-twentieth century, Muslims from North Africa began arriving in France, at the same time as Muslims from South Asia began arriving in the United Kingdom. Germany imported "guest workers" from nearby Turkey. The majority of Muslims emigrating to Europe

[43] Richard Wike, "5 Ways Americans and Europeans Are Different," Pew Research Center, April 19, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/19/5-ways-americans-and-europeans-are-different/.

came with "very low labor skills from underdeveloped nations," and "low standards of education." In addition to their sheer numbers,

> Muslim immigrant populations are often concentrated in segregated, urban areas, which are plagued with delinquency, crime, and deteriorated living conditions. Additionally, the high density of immigrants from one ethnic group in specific areas raises the question of separatism and ghettoization.[44]

In the United States, on the other hand, far from being poor and uneducated, Muslim immigrant households actually earn slightly more than the United States average.[45] Immigrant Muslims are more likely to be college graduates than the United States average (23% vs. 21%) and are more likely to earn advanced degrees (15% vs. 11%),[46] and for these reasons are often considered to be a "model minority."[47]

These differences - the lack of ethnicity inherent in American "whiteness," the relatively equal socio-economic class of whites and Muslim immigrants, and their limited numbers - are noted throughout this paper. The differences with Europe provide an essential backdrop for the conversion studies done in Europe. In sum, Europe is a less individualistic, more communal, kinder (less tolerant of hate speech), less religious, and more accepting of pre-marital and extra-marital sex.

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[44] Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 90.
[45] David Masci, "How Income Varies among U.S. Religious Groups," Pew Research Center, October 11, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/.
[46] Pew Research Center, "Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/.
[47] Ibid. Including U.S.-born, Muslims overall earn slightly less than the United States average, in part because African Americans (who comprise 32% of United States-born Muslims) historically are paid less than the United States average.

Reflections on Latina-ness

"Latina" does not designate race, but it does imply shared ethnicity, culture and language. There is a variety of music, dance, and food that almost everyone recognizes as Latin American; however, these are not expected to play a role in conversion to Islam. What may play a role, however, are cultural values associated with "Latinx."

"Latina-ness" may decrease with time spent in the United States. One study found that Latinas who were either United States-born or lived in the United States before the age of 18 and held American cultural values were more likely to drink and more likely to drink heavily than Latinas who were foreign-born, spoke Spanish, visited their country of origin regularly, and maintained Latin American values. Speaking English, for Latinas, means a far greater likelihood of substance abuse.[48] Retaining traditional ties and not assimilating into United States culture may be factors in conversion to Islam as well.

Latinx exhibit specific cultural factors, including a high value on honor, dignity, and respect. Akbar Ahmed, an anthropologist and a scholar of Islam, suggests honor is a factor for both white and Latinx – "concepts of shame and honor seem to be so important in the conversion of so many white and Latino converts to Islam" but for those lacking material success, honor and respect are all some people have.[49] Particularly among inner-city youth, these cultural values form a "code of the street" that attempts to protect them, however imperfectly, and in part explains the recurring cycles of violence in poor

[48] Josephina Alvarez et al., "Substance Abuse Prevalence and Treatment among Latinos and Latinas," *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* (October 4, 2008): 115-141, https://doi.org/10.1300/J233v06n02_08.
[49] Akbar S. Ahmed, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2011), 321.

neighborhoods.[50] Seeking "honor and respect" by stepping away from a violent milieu is one reason women cite for converting to Islam.

Other facets of Latinx identity are values such as emphasis on and downplaying conflict in interpersonal relationships, preference for gender roles which maintain the illusion of patriarchy, ethnic similarity building trust, belief in family importance of family and reliance on the extended family for support, including a respect for elders, and community above individuality.[51]

Said to be more familial, Latinx measurably are: half as likely as non-Latinx whites to live in a two-person family (28.3% vs 52.8%), over twice as likely to live in large families (5+ person, 25.3% vs. 10.0%), and 50% more likely to have a grandparent householder (9.1% vs 6.1%). Latinx are also less likely to be divorced (9.1% vs. 12.5%), but United States-born Latinas are nearly twice as likely to be pregnant without being married (53.2% vs. 27.6%).

Latinx are more than twice as likely to live in poverty (21.9% vs. 9.8%), and twice as likely to be in jail and to be arrested for a variety of crimes. Especially for Latinos, "being unemployed has been found to predict heavy alcohol use and alcohol dependence . . . as well as illicit drug use."[52] Although their substance abuse mirrors the

[50] John A. Rich and Courtney M. Grey, "Pathways to Recurrent Trauma Among Young Black Men: Traumatic Stress, Substance Use, and the 'Code of the Street,'" *American Journal of Public Health* 95, no. 5 (2005): 816-24, https://doi:10.2105/ajph.2004.044560.
[51] The emphasis on "maintaining the illusion of patriarchy" may also be a factor in conversion, in terms of the comfort level that Latinas in the United States already have with Muslim gender roles.
[52] Alvarez et al., "Substance Abuse Prevalence," 115-141.

general society, Latinx have far less access to treatment, and substance abuse plays a significant role in Latinx neighborhoods. [53]

In terms of poverty, income, job opportunity, unwed pregnancy, education, involvement with police and prisons, likelihood of arrest for violent crimes, and largely untreated alcohol and drug abuse, Latinas face life situations statistically far more difficult than white women.[54]

Both in cultural traits as well as in grim socio-economic statistics, Latinas do therefore differ from non-Latina white Americans. Prior research suggests that many of these cultural values are also motivating factors in Latinas converting to Islam.

Brief History of Latinx conversion to Islam

From the 1920s to the 1970s, Latinx converted to Islam in conjunction with African Americans. Some were drawn to the Nation of Islam in part because of its anti-racist message and solidarity with people of color.[55] By the 1960s, many Latinx became disenchanted by "anti-Latino sentiments."[56] With the influx of immigrant Muslims starting in 1965, national immigration reform under President Lyndon Johnson allowed a large number into America. Some Latinx joined immigrant mosques but disappointed with the lack of attention paid to issues facing African Americans Latinx founded their

[53] Erick G. Guerrero et al., "Disparities in Latino Substance Use, Service Use, and Treatment: Implications for Culturally and Evidence-based Interventions under Health Care Reform," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 133, no. 3 (2013): 119-1123, doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.05.006.
[54] See Appendix C, a summary of relevant statistics on Latinx in the United States sourced from several surveys done by Pew Research Center.
[55] Harold D. Morales, *Latino & Muslim in America Race, Religion and the Making of a New Minority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 48.
[56] Ibid., 60.

own organizations.[57] In this era, Latinx Muslims often tried to drop their own cultural markers, and some even adopted Pakistani style dress and refrained from speaking Spanish at mosque.[58]

By the turn of this century, Latinx Muslim associations had become a significant presence in many mosques, especially in urban areas with high concentrations of Latinx.[59] To cite one example, faced with "arrogance" from immigrant Muslims, Khadija Rivera founded PIEDAD[60] in 1988, with three missions: outreach to women ("meaning that women can be American also and be with us"), training, and community service ("that's where we feed the homeless").[61] Another organization, LALMA,[62] was started in 1999 by one of this study's participants, Marta Khadija Galedary,[63] with similar goals. In total, there are now over a dozen Latinx Muslim organizations.[64] According to one recent study, Latinx converts no longer attempt to integrate with or worship in African

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[57] Patrick D. Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From 'Moors' to 'Latino Muslims,'" *Journal of Religious History* 37, no. 2 (2013): 176-77, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12026. The Islamic Party of North America (IPNA) in 1971 and La Alianza Islámica in 1987 were two of the earliest organizations established to serve the need of Muslim Latinx Americans. Also see Edward E. Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History* (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 292-293.

[58] Haddad Yvonne Yazbeck and Jane Smith, *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 97; Morales, *Latino & Muslim in America*, 60.

[59] Patrick D. Bowen, "The Latino American Da'wah Organization and the 'Latina/o Muslim' Identity in the United States," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 1, no. 11 (2010): 3.

[60] PIEDAD: Propagación Islámica para la Educación y la Devoción a Aláh el Divino was established in New York City.

[61] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 323.

[62] La Asociacion Latino Musulmana de America (LALMA) in Los Angeles.

[63] One of the participants in my study.

[64] These include the Latino American Dawah Organization, HispanicMuslims.com, IslamInSpanish.org, PIEDAD, HablamosIslam, League of Latino American Muslim Organizations, Latino Muslim Association, Bism Rabbik Foundation (Florida), Tri-State Latino Muslims. There are Latino Muslim Associations of Los Angeles, California, and Atlanta, and Latino Muslims of Chicago, Arizona, New York, and the Bay Area. See "Latino American Dawah Organization," Latino Muslim Organizations in the United States, accessed June 16, 2018, http://www.latinodawah.org.

American mosques, to the point that whites and Latinx converted to Islam "in all types of mosques *except African American mosques*. [emphasis added]"[65]

Newer converts can step into the communities created by earlier converts and skip the problematic journey that their forerunners were forced to take.

Orientalism, or Why We are Afraid of Muslims

Orientalism is a discourse in which differences between the "Orient" and "Occident" are created and disseminated widely, to support European/white supremacy over the "Orient."[66]

> My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.[67]

It is this discourse, rooted in the politics of colonization and proliferated by academics to support said colonization, that I wish to avoid. By being of the "Orient" myself, by using a phenomenological approach to research, I hope to express nuances in personal experiences and keep the focus on the converts to Islam themselves, rather than on what women—whether "Muslim" or "American"— are supposed to be like.

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[65] Ihsan Bagby, Report Number 1, 12. The study further states that "Over 82% of all mosques had at least one African American convert. . . . Whites converted to Islam in all types of mosques *except African American mosques*. . . . Likewise, Latinos converted in all types of ethnic mosques *except African American mosques*. Mosques that are roughly evenly mixed between South Asian and Arab have the highest rate of conversion among Latinos. [emphasis added]"
[66] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 5.
[67] Ibid., 3.

Chapter II.

Literature Review

Observations and insights gleaned from prior research are used throughout this paper, wherever they can shed light or make a useful comparison. This chapter includes as much of the prior research and theory needed to answer the questions:

What does prior research tell us about this phenomenon of conversion to Islam?

What are the gaps, what is missing from prior research?

What do I think is going on here? How can I explain the phenomenon?

What research questions and theories can I construct to fill in those gaps?

The prior research includes three sections: 1) What are some of the reasons Western women convert to Islam? 2) What cultural differences does the existing literature suggest affect Latinas' conversion to Islam, and what are some possible differences between the two? 3) What themes can be drawn out of existing literature on the subject in order to explain the phenomena?

Reasons Western Women Convert to Islam

Prior research comes mainly from Europe. As described more fully in the upcoming chapters corresponding to themes of *religion*, *family*, *community* and *society*, prior research suggests a number of specific factors are found to influence Western women's decision to embrace Islam. It would be redundant to list them all in detail, as

what converts in their own words is related in the upcoming chapters.

A broad review of the literature demonstrates that converts find Islam attractive: for *religious* reasons, including dissatisfaction with their former faith and the simplicity and logic of Muslim moral values (McGinty,[68] Köse,[69] Maslim,[70] Galonnier,[71] Nieuwkerk,[72] Haddad,[73] Al-Qwidi[74]); for its focus on values important to *family* life, including an emphasis on motherhood and agreed-upon gender roles (Roald,[75] Poston,[76] Soutar,[77] Sultan,[78] McGinty,[79] Haddad[80]); for the sense of *community* it offers, including sisterhood away from men (McGinty,[81] Wyche,[82] Soutar,[83] Haddad[84]), and for the enhanced sense of identity and significance and meaning it brings, its alignment with cultural views regarding ethnic diversity (Maslim & Bjorck[85]) and its rational guidelines for life that define authoritatively and comprehensively how to interact with *society* and

[68] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 97.
[69] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 201-204.
[70] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam," 33.
[71] Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race," 87-97.
[72] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam,"5-6.
[73] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 50-52.
[74] Maha Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2002), 182, ProQuest (AAT: U158240).
[75] Anne Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London: Routledge, 2001), xi.
[76] Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 149.
[77] Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 5.
[78] Sultán, "Choosing Islam," 325-35.
[79] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 107.
[80] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 41,49.
[81] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 83,170.
[82] Karen Fraser Wyche, "African American Muslim Women: An Invisible Group," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 51, no. 5/6 (2004): 319-28, doi:10.1023/b:sers.0000046615.22900.b2.
[83] Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 9-10.
[84] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 25.
[85] Audrey A. Maslim and Jeffrey P. Bjorck, "Reasons for Conversion to Islam among Women in the United States," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (2009): 97-111, doi:10.1037/a0015735.

avoid its detrimental elements (Wohlrab-Sahr,[86] Jensen,[87] Galonnier,[88] Haddad[89]).

After converting to Islam, there are a number of difficulties that women face. When it comes to *family*, because Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim partners, finding a Muslim partner can be difficult, especially if born Muslims prefer to marry within their own ethnicity, and there are a lack of male converts available (Allievi,[90] Köse[91]). Some women are ushered into marriages with born Muslims that turn out to be abusive (Suleiman[92]). On a *personal* level, most converts find Islam to be a source of strength, even if that strength is required as a result of taking on an unsuitable Muslim partner. When it comes to *community*, converts often find difficulty interacting with born Muslims who claim a superior understanding of Islamic practices, and many converts suffer under immigrant Muslims ethnocentrism (Jensen,[93] Soutar[94]) and in the case of Latina converts, racism (Morales;[95] Ahmed,[96] Bowen[97]). While many converts find the strictly defined gender roles offered in Islam to be a source of comfort (Nieuwkerk[98]), others bridled against them, especially in mosque settings where women

[86] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 81.
[87] Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined," 647.
[88] Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race," 101.
[89] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today,* 50.
[90] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 122, 131.
[91] Köse, "Conversion to Islam."
[92] Yasir Suleiman, *Narratives of Conversion to Islam: Female Perspectives*, Report (Cambridge: University of Cambridge in Association with the New Muslims Project, Markfield, 2013), 43-44, 53-55.
[93] Tina Gudrun Jensen, "To Be 'Danish,'" 399.
[94] Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 12.
[95] Morales, *Latino & Muslim in America*, 38.
[96] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 322.
[97] Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920," 177.
[98] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 95-119.

are often segregated into the basement (McGinty[99], Roald[100]).

Cultural Values Affecting Latinas Conversion to Islam

The research cited above comes both from Europe and the United States, but almost no prior research explores the ethnicity, culture or race of converts as separate groups. Much of what has been related about European women is intended, for lack of sufficient research, as a proxy for research on white American women. As established in Chapter 1, "being Latina" means many things that differentiate the group from white converts. There is a similar dearth of research on Latina converts specifically, and so much of what we know about Latinas must be inferred from studies that focus both on men and women.

It is important to note Akbar Ahmed's observation about Latina Muslim converts: that they "all were reacting to some aspect of American society."[101] Converts generally seem to be hearkening back to prior generations, to "an atavistic Christian memory of purity and virtue, perhaps plain common sense that was being awakened. Whatever the case, they found that in Islam notions of modesty, shame, and honor were not extinct."[102]

Researchers of Latinx conversion to Islam suggest their cultural background is different.[103] Latinas are three times more likely to be Catholic than non-Latina whites, yet

[99] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*; McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam: Feminist Approaches among Muslim Converts in Sweden," 474-85.
[100] Roald, "Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam,'" 48-70.
[101] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 306.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Morales, *Latino & Muslim in America*, 1-16; Bowen, "Latino American Da'wah Organization," 1-23.

many Latinas (19%)[104] come from formerly Catholic families who had already converted to evangelical Christianity and could be considered "spiritual seekers."[105] Converts interviewed by King and Perez liked the idea that both Jesus's mother Mary and their own grandmothers wore veils,[106] and some even considered becoming nuns before they converted.[107] Many Latinas were in favor of hijab and "felt respected" when wearing it.[108] Some reported Islamic values made them "more alert to the importance of respecting their parents, especially their mothers."[109] Others found "a kind of empowerment they do not experience in a culture that is constantly sexualizing them, and Latinas are particularly sexualized."[110] Some suggested that Islam "gave them a sense of completeness and authenticity that was in accordance with their ethnic identity."[111] Another reason tied to ethnicity that Latinas say they convert to Islam is to challenge United States imperialism and injustice against the indigenous people of both the Americas and Palestine:[112] the global *ummah* gives them a cohesive identity.[113]

Yesenia King, a Latina convert and a professor of sociology at Los Angeles Harbor College, states that most Latinas report that they are excluded by immigrant

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[104] Pew Research Center, "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.
[105] Shahmoradi and Hosseini, "Latina Shia Women in the United States of America," 25.
[106] Yesenia King and Michael P. Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality and Agency: Latina Conversion to Islam," in *Crescent over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA*, ed. Paulo G. Pinto, John Tofik Karam, and María Del Mar Logroño Narbona (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 304.
[107] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 321.
[108] Shahmoradi and Hossenini, "Latina Shia Women," 25.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 22.
[111] Ibid., 25.
[112] Yesenia King, "Latina Muslims: In the Borderlands" (PhD diss., California State University, Fullerton, 2009), 37-39, (ProQuest AAT 1468768).
[113] Ibid., 37.

Muslims in various community-related activities;[114] Latina converts experience a "double-edged marginality" both as women of color and as newcomers among Arab, South Asian, and orthodox Muslims.[115] Patrick Bowen, a religious studies scholar who specializes in religious conversion of non-mainline religions in the West, suggests that the Latinx Muslim is actually a "triple-outsider," to United States culture, to one's Latinx culture and family, and to one's local Muslim community.[116] Juan Galvan, a Latino convert writes, "A social barrier exists between the Muslim and Latino communities. . . . Many Latino Muslims find themselves very alone . . . breaking their fast alone, studying alone, praying alone, and culturally alone."[117]

Hisham Aidi, a lecturer in the discipline of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, states that Westerners who convert to Islam are:

> mostly black, but nowadays also Latino, and Native American minorities who, often attracted by the purported universalism and colorblindness of Islamic history and theology are asserting membership in a transnational *ummah* and thereby challenging or "exiting" the white West.[118]

Many converts, therefore, look for other sources, including their ethnicity, culture, and historical heritage, to legitimate their own identity. Some believe that "Islam is their ancestral faith with pre-Columbian ties to their people" and see Islam as an "anti-imperial outlet," finding "a keen sense of indigeneity in drawing similarities between Palestine and Latin America."[119] Martínez-Vázquez likewise suggests reviving the memory of

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[114] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 304.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Bowen, "Latino American Da'wah," 18.
[117] Juan Galvan, "The Latino Muslim Jihad," The LADO Newsletter, accessed July 14, 2018, http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/index.html.
[118] Hisham Aidi, "Ole to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims," *Speakin' Out News* 20, no. 14 (2008): 12.
[119] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 310-311.

Muslim Spain ("Al-Andalusia") is important, and "this re-constructed historical consciousness" legitimizes their status as Muslims and authenticates their practice of Islam.[120] Puerto Rican Muslims also regularly face questions about their authenticity, which they address by learning about the history of Puerto Rico and Islam's part in that history, in the process becoming both Muslim and "more Puerto Rican" and affirm their "inherent right" to being Muslim.[121]

To the contrary, Bowen suggests new Latinx Muslims do *not* tend to take into account cultural connections between Islamic Spain and Latin America.[122] Westerners who convert to Islam are "mostly black, but nowadays also Latino, and Native American minorities who, often attracted by the purported universalism and colorblindness of Islamic history and theology are asserting membership in a transnational *ummah* and thereby challenging or 'exiting' the white West."[123]

Many converts changed their names and rather than accept the labels assigned to them, asserted a new Muslim identity: "Because it is a matter of personal choice, an Islamic identity can be very meaningful [and] can give minorities the feeling that . . . in some ways they can be in command of their own lives."[124]

Like Latinas in the United States, Latina converts in Mexico were found to resist cultural ethnocentrism (from immigrant Muslims from Spain) who told them to stop speaking their mother tongue, stop wearing colorful ethnic dress, stop eating ethnic food,

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[120] Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulman: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 105.
[121] Omar Ramadan Santiago, "Insha'Allah/Ojalá, Yes Yes Y'all: Puerto Ricans (Re)examining and (Re)imagining Their Identities through Islam and Hip Hop," in *Islam and the Americas*, ed. Aisha Khan and Kevin Yelvington (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 117-18.
[122] Bowen, "Latino American Da'wah," 1-23.
[123] Aidi, "Ole to Allah," 12.
[124] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas and Their Shahadah in Miami," 19-20.

and stop associating with non-Muslims, "changes [that] would have produced results contrary to their interests, essentially requiring abandonment of the social network key to their survival." These Latinas broke away from the immigrant group and allied themselves with a Muslim organization in Mexico City. These Latinas also actively resist the idea only men can guide collective prayer. Elsewhere in Latin America, Latina converts believe in keeping gender segregation to a minimum, otherwise, "'you end up with people who are emotionally stunted."[125] Women like these "are becoming adept at developing effective strategies to resist, challenge, or even subvert conservative, foreign-influenced religious ideologies." [126]

Latina converts in the United States find "solutions to real problems" by creating a "culture of resistance."[127] One way they resist is by creating their own organizations, where Spanish is spoken. The Latinx mosque in Houston bears an Andalusian design, a nod to the Moorish Spain. As one convert said, "You step into a place like Centro Islámico, and you don't feel marginalized. You're able to be Latino and Muslim at the same time. Your identity is whole."[128]

Having touched on the *details* shared by prior researchers, I now turn to the *themes* they developed to explain their findings, in an effort to better understand the conversion phenomenon.

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[125] Ali, "Bahamian and Brazilian Muslimahs," 204.
[126] Ibid., 194.
[127] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 304-322.
[128] Adam Doster, "Hola, Allah: Welcome to the Country's Only Latino Mosque, Right Here In Houston," *Houstonia*, May 25, 2017, https://www.houstoniamag.com/articles/2017/5/25/latino-spanish-speaking-mosque-houston.

Themes Related to the Influence of *Milieu* on Conversion

My goal in this section is to analyze and synthesize insights that prior scholars of religious conversion have drawn from their research, specifically themes relating to ways that *milieu* – ethnicity, nationality, race, culture and heritage – might affect both motivations and justifications for conversion to Islam, as well as post-conversion experiences.

The complexity and incomprehensibility of modern life, together with an array of societal problems – sexual objectification, poverty, racism, substance abuse – experienced either intellectually from a distance, or personally close at hand, lead some women to wish to escape the modern world. Several scholars have offered ways of thinking about this goal. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, professor of cultural sociology at the University of Leipzig in Germany, developed a crisis theory regarding conversion to Islam in the West. She suggests that women convert because of specific problems in their lives, which no other faith but Islam can solve. Because of the history of conflicts between the "Islamic" world and the "Christian," conversion to Islam has a symbolic meaning, which plays a critical role in why some individuals choose Islam over other monotheistic religions. Those who voluntarily embrace Islam step into a centuries-old polarization between Islam and the West. Wohlrab-Sahr's research suggests, for the German and American converts she studies, it is precisely the "otherness" of Islam that attracts them to it. [129]

Italian sociologist Stephano Allievi takes issue with this idea of polarization between Islam and the West as being at the heart of a convert's decision. He suggests

[129] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 72; Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 351-62.

instead that what women are after is actually something less intellectual (i.e., not a theoretical clash of cultures) and more primordial (a desire for comfort and familiarity). He reckons that women address their problems, including what is missing in their lives, by hearkening back the "traditional" way women and their families lived in the not too distant past. [130] Modern Western culture does not provide ways to achieve this goal, and Islam as it is practiced today does. In other words, although women are often said to convert to Islam because of its "otherness," in fact what they find most attractive about its "otherness" is its *sameness* with the past.[131]

Lacking the tools to argue against the current cultural debate on the role of women in the West – and perhaps lacking the courage to face on their own a society that looks down on their goals – Western women therefore turn to religion to justify their preference for a traditional, gendered lifestyle.[132] Allievi quotes French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to make this point: "I know very well the reasons for the uneasiness I feel in front of Islam: I find in it the universe I come from," [133] to which for clarity he might have added "in the not too distant past." Converts might not realize it, Allievi argues, but Islam is already familiar to them: the way Christianity and Judaism were practiced a century or two ago is akin to the way Islam is practiced today. One way to keep modern values and ideas out of one's life is to "create religious subcultures designed to keep out the influences of the outside society," but this, Berger points out,

[130] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 120-148.
[131] Ibid., 146.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

has been difficult to accomplish: witness the small numbers of Amish in Pennsylvania or Hasidic Jews in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and the challenges they face.[134]

Most of us have an image, however mythologized, of what life was like before our ultra-fast-paced modernity came to dominate the world. Modernity has, in many places and many ways – to a lesser or greater degree – been accompanied by secularization, or a loss of religiosity. That long-ago life of simplicity, certainty, prayer, piety, modesty in dress, church attendance, tightknit (often multi-generational) families, mothers staying at home, restricted sexuality, fathers being patriarchal heads of the family[135] – generally in a rural setting – is one we can all envision, if not from personal encounters with elderly relatives, then from movies, books, and radio programs like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon[136] – "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve" – of the popular NPR show "Prairie Home Companion."[137] A hundred years ago, both one's local community and the broader society were saturated with religion.[138] The loss or impairment of all the elements of traditional life can be, and often is, blamed on secularization.[139] Put another way, modernity has fragmented society, and

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[134] Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 2008), 4.
[135] Cynthia Kierner, "Woman's Piety within Patriarchy: The Religious Life of Martha Hancock Wheat of Bedford County," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100, no. 1 (1992): 79-98.
[136] Katherine G. Fry, "A Cultural Geography of Lake Wobegon," *Howard Journal of Communications* 9, no. 4 (1998): 303-321.
[137] The show ran for 42 years, from 1974 to 2016, and is set in the fictional town of Lake Wobegone, "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve . . . where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." See Richard Harrington, "Whimsical Satirical Miracle," *Washington Post*, March 29, 1981, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/03/29/whimsical-satirical-miracle/333e9b10-6cbe-483b-b5b0-ae7704d0633e/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cca20c88ca44.
[138] Robert P. Swierenga, "The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America," *Agricultural History*, 71, no. 4 (1997): 415-41.
[139] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 89, 158, 202.; Lewis R. Rambo, "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 265.

Islam offers "a return to the 'whole.' "[140] Converts find in Islam a "chain of memory" to a wholesome, holier past which secularization of the West has disrupted.[141]

Soutar's research demonstrates that, for some British women, conversion to Islam is akin to "rolling back time," allowing them to live a traditional life built around gender roles which the society views as regressive.[142] Anna Mansson McGinty, associate professor of geography and women's and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin, also suggests Islam triggers latent goals: "The conversion to Islam is prompted by recognition, that is, the women are drawn to Islam because its beliefs appeal to already existing ideas and meets certain personal quests and desires."[143] Or in other words, Islam's beliefs and practices "address and activate" pre-existing ideas, inclinations and wants.[144]

Once the insight about "otherness" actually being "sameness (just a few generations ago)" is taken into account, the observation that women turn to Islam because of its opposition to and rejection of "Western values – materialism, individualism, and lack of spirituality, warmth, and a sense of community"[145] – falls into place. The integration of Islamic ideas with the "already existing cognitive framework" (because it recreates old-fashioned Western values) creates an "alternative femininity" (much like one's predecessors enjoyed).[146] What McGinty is really talking about are "Western

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[140] Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined," 649.
[141] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Steve Bruce, review of *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, by Daniéle Hervieu-Lèger, *American Journal of Sociology*, 106, no. 5, (2001): 1478-1480, https://doi:10.1086/320843.
[142] Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 3-16.
[143] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 56.
[144] Ibid., 56, 81.
[145] Ibid., 81.
[146] Ibid., 11, 83, 82.

values today" versus "Western values of the past." The degree to which any ethnicity or culture has retained *traditional* Western values (and most have not) underlies the conversion phenomenon.

Tina Jensen's ethnography of Danish converts reveals that "cultural," "social," "spiritual," and "political" issues - all related to the disintegration of society as a result of secularism - lead some women to wish for authoritative solutions, certainty, and simpler times. Ali Köse also observes that conversion to Islam from nominal Christianity is reflective of a shift from the "secular to the sacred."[147] Therefore:

Women convert to Islam because they want to roll back time and live as their forebears did but without actually leaving their existing societies.

While modernity and secularization are often conflated, it is essential to recognize that both are matters of degree and may not go hand in hand. Sociologists like Berger and Wilson suggest that as portions of society and culture were removed from the influence of religious institutions and symbols, social activities previously motivated by religion became less and less important. Eventually, they suggest, religion lost its connection with the everyday world, and even the upsurges of new religions (and exotic new sects of old religions) were themselves thought to be merely examples of this ongoing secularization.[148]

Berger's initial contribution to "secularization theory" in the 1960s is something he later recanted, having found that his and other scholars' predictions of a growing and inevitable secularity have been roundly disproven. "The assumption that we live in a

[147] Köse, "Secular to the Sacred," 301-12.
[148] Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 133; Bryan Wilson, "Secularization Religion in the Modem World," in *Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religion,* ed. Stewart R. Sutherland (London: Routledge, 2001), 207.

secularized world is false," he writes. "[M]odernization necessarily leads to decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. And it is precisely this key idea that has turned out to be wrong. . . . But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization"[149] – including Western women converting to Islam.

If the world today is, for the most part, as Berger suggests, "as furiously religious as it ever was,"[150] then converting to Islam as a reaction to secularity – one of the more often cited motivations by scholars – may turn out to be false. However, it is more likely that much of the world is both "furiously secular" and "furiously religious" at the same time.

Several researchers related their subjects' despair over their society's descent into materialism and secularization.[151] Likewise, many American converts interviewed by Ahmed were "distressed by the soul-destroying materialism that dominates society" and instead "turn to Islam for a spiritual alternative."[152] One salient aspect of converts "going back in time" is that they often do so to step back from materialism, to a time before modern advertising saturated print and airwaves with proof that "sex sells."[153] The corporations behind marketing, advertising, and selling have a great interest in promoting secular, materialistic values. Individuals alienated from traditional family and community influences make better consumers. Buying gives the illusion of belonging, but "the end result is alienation, frustration, relative deprivation and, potentially, crime and social

[149] Berger, *Desecularization of the World*, 3.
[150] Ibid., 2.
[151] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 158.
[152] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 305-306.
[153] Rodger Streitmatter, *Sex Sells!: The Media's Journey from Repression to Obsession* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2004).

strife."[154] Corporations and advertising "are competing with family and school"[155] to become the most influential institutions in young people's lives.[156]

Materialism creates much of the "cognitive dissonance" and alienation that many converts feel.[157] However, religious organizations – often just as businesslike as their corporate cousins – take their toll as well. Religious institutions, because they have a financial interest in doing so, are primarily to blame for the promotion of the "furious religiosity" about which Berger writes. Escaping the marketing of products *and* religion, conversion to Islam can be, for many women, a way to exclude themselves from the materialism of consumer culture and the "selling" of religion.[158]

The "women of previous generations analogy" works, for although it does not claim to definitively answer *how we got to where we are*, it does suggest *to when* most converts to Islam want to return. The title of the 1999 article by Köse, "The Journey from the Secular to the Sacred," captures this goal. Therefore:

Gaining symbolic and actual distance from one's cultural, ethnic, and societal milieu is an important factor in conversion.

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[154] *World Youth Report, 2003: The Global Situation of Young People* (New York: United Nations, 2004), http://www.worldcat.org/title/world-youth-report-2003-the-global-situation-of-young-people/oclc/55226440.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Interestingly, religion is left out off the list of most influential institutions.
[157] Charles Taylor addresses the correlation between materialism and spiritual despair in these words, "the salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is not that it has fostered materialism, or enabled people to recover a spiritual outlook beyond materialism, to return as it were to religion, though it has done both these things. But the most important fact about it which is relevant to our enquiry here is that it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one;" Charles Taylor, *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 351; Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 201-202.
[158] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 106.

Predisposing factors that go into making a woman receptive to Islam, and therefore increase the likelihood that she will convert to Islam, form a large part of my research as presented in the coming pages and cannot be easily summarized. However, at the most abstract level, Audrey Maslim, a clinical psychologist in California, suggests what is almost always present is "a sense of meaninglessness" that creates a "cognitive dissonance" between the convert's culture and her personal beliefs, and "affective ties with believers of the new faith," including with potential mates.[159]

This dissonance may be found separately or in combination with a similar phenomenon, of women who face a sense of powerlessness over their lives and the environments in which they live.[160]As Wohlrab-Sahr suggests, conversion is used by converts as a means to distinguish themselves from their communities of origin.[161]

According to McCloud, African-American converts embrace Islam to escape problems in their society, mark new boundaries, build better lives and, above all, fight racism in the United States.[162] Some of Wohlrab-Sahr's German subjects, on the other hand, converted to Islam in order to escape an association with their Nazi family history. She suggests that converting to an alien religion represents either "symbolic battle" (with their own society, including ideas about gender and sexuality, or in this case, Nazism) or "symbolic emigration" (where they want to leave behind their own background because of issues of alienation and belonging).[163]

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[159] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam," 3. Maslim here quotes Dein & Barlow, 1999; Loveland, 2003; Pitt, 991.
[160] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 83.
[161] Ibid., 84.
[162] Aminah McCloud, "Islam in America: The Mosaic," in *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and John L. Esposito (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 159.
[163] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 81.

Instead of "symbolic emigration," a perhaps more useful way of thinking about the second category is "*in situ* emigration," insofar as the decision for a non-Muslim to become a Muslim, especially when accompanied by public display of Muslim dress and Muslim practices, provides a very real, very concrete emigration – new buildings, new routes of travel, usually new friends. Even if the new space to which one moves is carved out *in situ*, it is more than a merely symbolic emigration.

Suffice to say, whether the chicken or the egg is secularism, modernity, immorality, the dissolution of family, community, society, or something else, the one overriding goal of all converts is to return to simpler times.

Anna Mansson McGinty takes the idea a step further and suggests Islam triggers latent goals in women: "The conversion to Islam is prompted by recognition, that is, the women are drawn to Islam because its beliefs appeal to already existing ideas and meets certain personal quests and desires." Or in other words, Islam's beliefs and practices "address and activate" pre-existing ideas, inclinations and wants.[164]

Köse found nearly half his British subjects had lives judged to contain emotional distresses, mostly due to family breakups or near-breakups.[165] There are many ways to describe existential and other traumatic crises – meaninglessness, cognitive dissonance, powerlessness, "existential vacuum," "existential quest"— all represent problems which need to be addressed.[166]

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[164] Anna Manson McGinty is associate professor of geography and women's and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin. McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 56, 181.
[165] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 96.
[166] Viktor E. Frankl, "Logotherapy and Existentialism," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 4, no. 3 (1967): 138-42; John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862-74.

Women are receptive to Islam because of some form of existential crisis or quest, including 1) a sense of meaninglessness leading to 2) cognitive dissonance with their socio-cultural environments), and/or 3) a sense of powerlessness leading to a desire to escape difficulties (including trauma related to family breakup) in their socio-cultural environments), and/or 4) Islam triggers latent atavistic goals), and/or 5) converts have affective ties with believers).

These are in no sense black and white categories but are meant to be suggestive of the kinds of struggles that converts face. However organized, these pre-disposing factors lead to three primary paths for converting to Islam. They may be intertwined, but the paths are weighted toward women in three different situations.

First are those seeking to distance themselves from their culture for more abstract intellectual and emotional reasons, that is to say, women who are bothered by the society they live in, its values, excesses, its lack of religiosity and modesty, its ideas about gender and sexuality.[167] Some but not all converts "have spent major portions of their lives in a long spiritual search, looking into many different religious traditions to try to fill what they describe as a kind of spiritual void."[168] Tina Jensen found that many converts saw themselves as "seekers," both as "a quest for truth and proof" and "a quest for spirituality in which explorations and emotions are at stake."[169] While not all converts are "spiritual seekers," most are on what Köse describes as a "cognitive quest" which might include concerns about "social and moral issues, religious doubts, and existential concerns."[170]

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[167] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 323.
[168] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 49.
[169] Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined," 648. Tina Gudrun Jensen is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen.
[170] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 99, 203.

These, in turn, lead to questions: "*what is the meaning and purpose of my life? how does one deal with the fact that one is going to die?* and *what should one do about one's shortcomings?"*[171] Allievi defines this as the "rational" path to conversion.[172]

A search for meaning can take the form of a "return to God,"[173] but also often leads converts to a re-examination of the assumptions and ground rules underlying their culture: "Discontented with ambiguities in their lifestyles and society," converts look to Islam for the fulfillment of the spiritual needs that arise out of their existential questions.[174]

Second are those seeking to distance themselves from social environments for concrete, personally-experienced issues of poverty, sexuality, substance abuse, racism, and discrimination.

Third are women who have neither symbolic nor urgent problems with their societies, but who have simply fallen for the affections or lifestyles of one or more Muslims. Allievi describes this as "relational conversion."[175] This third path – affective bonds with Muslims – often accompanies the first two paths, but:

Sometimes conversion takes place with very little reason except to please a partner and secure a marriage.

The affective or relational path is set aside for the moment and will be considered more fully in the chapter on Family. Therefore:

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[171] Ibid.
[172] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 123.
[173] Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy," 648.
[174] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 101.
[175] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 123.

In addition to the affective path, women follow two main paths to Islam, each fulfilling a need: 1) escape cultural reality and ideas, based on a nostalgia for prior generations' values and religiosity to carve out symbolic distance from a white, privileged, intellectual, racializing path; 2) escape specific reality and societal problems to carve out actual distance from difficult circumstances (Latina, 'necessity' path, already racialized and marginalized.

We now begin to see the ways ethnicity, race, and nationality might influence conversion. The first path – nostalgia for "an atavistic Christian memory of purity and virtue"[176] that leads to an effort to carve out symbolic distance, to some extent marginalizing and racializing oneself – is primarily followed by white converts, both in Europe and the United States. The second path (desire for changes in difficult life circumstances that lead to an effort to carve out actual distance and a safe place from a dangerous society) is primarily followed by already-marginalized, already-racialized, Black and Latina converts in the United States.

Post-conversion

After they make their *shahadah*, "things are not always as rosy as converts may have expected or hoped for."[177] Köse suggests that the convert "who wants to remain converted" must re-shape their social life, dissociating from prior associates or groups, and start associating with those who sponsor or support their new religious identity and maintain a sense of its "plausibility."[178]

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[176] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 306.
[177] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today,* 54.
[178] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 139-40.

Post-conversion consequences share similarities for all groups. For instance, the immigrant Muslims that some converts marry turn out to be incompatible partners. Various disappointments with the immigrant Muslim community are also common among most converts. However, we do find differences related to ethnicity and culture, as well as time and geography, in convert and immigrant relations. This is a simplification, but it appears that white women in Europe initially found it necessary to integrate with immigrant Muslim communities, but once the number of converts grew to sufficient levels, began dissociating themselves from immigrants,[179] after which "the 'new' converts jump directly into the 'old' converts' cultural sphere and internalize convert conceptualizations directly, without having to go through the 'culturalization' process into the Muslim immigrant community."[180]

That said, it is likely that neither the passage of time nor the growing number of converts with which to form a new convert community significantly affect the desire, or lack of desire, to integrate with immigrant Muslims. Instead:

Converts in Europe tend to distance themselves from immigrant Muslims for reasons of class and race. Some Europeans form their own new convert groups.

In general, European converts appear to have a love-hate relationship with Islam. They want to be Muslim, but they are themselves Islamophobic and think of immigrant Muslims as the "other." Research by Leman et al. shows that converts in Flanders,

[179] The number of years since conversion can make a difference in the need or desire of converts to integrate with born Muslims but appears to make little difference in the receptivity of born Muslims to converts. India and modern-day Pakistan converted to Islam over a thousand years ago, and yet many Arabic speaking Middle Eastern Muslims who consider themselves the only "true" Muslims still do not consider South Asian Muslims to be legitimate; within the Muslim ummah there is a hierarchy of who is an 'authentic' Muslim.
[180] Roald, "Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam,'" 52.

Belgium practice "ethnicising strategies," including the adoption of "ethnocultural markers" like wearing the Arab Jelaba dress and hijab and taking Moroccan, Turkish, or Pakistani names, in order to present themselves as legitimate spokespeople for the Muslim community in the eyes of the rest of the society. By the same token, they create organizations such as De Koepel, whose explicit purpose is to show that convert Muslims are distinct from immigrant Muslims, with one stated goal being to "purify Islam from Moroccan or Turkish traditions."[181] Similarly, Özyürek observes that German converts distance themselves from Muslim immigrants by promoting a "denationalized and de-traditionalized Islam" that has no association to Muslim migrants and their traditional practices and is interpreted through a German lens.[182]

Incidentally, several of the most important Sufi communities in America draw predominantly white followers.[183] Some American converts to Sufism may be, like their European counterparts, seeking to distance themselves from immigrant Muslims.[184]

American converts differ from European converts insofar as American whites lack the sort of ethnic or cultural identity that most Europeans have, and as explored in Chapter 1, there is a strong argument that there can be no such thing as a white American community.[185] American Muslims do not have to contend with the "dirty Arab" stereotypes that the French bandy about, but American converts do face their own stereotypes: that Muslims are terrorists and oppressors of women.[186] However, despite

[181] Johan Leman, Christiane Stallaert, and Iman Lechkar, "Ethnic Dimensions in the Discourse and Identity Strategies of European Converts to Islam in Andalusia and Flanders," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 9 (2010): 1484-1495.
[182] Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, 3.
[183] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 311-314.
[184] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 123.
[185] Baldwin, "On Being White," 166-169. See Baldwin, discussed in Chapter 1.
[186] Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race," 577.

these negative stereotypes, the post-conversion relationship between American converts and immigrants is largely friendly and differs in this way significantly from that of their European counterparts. The explanation may be largely found in socio-economic class, since Muslims in the United States, unlike Muslims in Europe, are considered a "model minority."[187]

White Americans without ethnicity or race of their own have no desire to distance themselves from "good immigrant" Muslims. Some whites integrate with immigrants if geography allows while others worship alone either due to their character (introversion) or geographic distance.

Roald suggests the likelihood of successful integration with immigrant Muslims is affected by "the quality and size of the convert community in the person's area."[188] This is undoubtedly true, but the existence of a separate convert community (instead of an integrated immigrant-convert community) may have more to do with the quality and size of the immigrant community.

The post-conversion experience differs primarily based on the quality and size of both the convert community and the immigrant Muslim community in the person's area.

Like white Europeans who do not want to associate with immigrant Muslims, Latinas also tend to start their own associations and (to a lesser extent) to distance themselves from immigrant Muslims. However, Latinas do so not because they are racist, but because they are the recipients of racism from immigrant Muslims. This is an oversimplification which will be addressed in the next section, but the distinction holds:

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[187] Ibid.
[188] Roald, "Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam,'" 52.

Latinas, who have embraced Islam largely to carve out space from difficulties in their own environments are sometimes forced to distance themselves from immigrants due to ethnocentrism and racism from immigrant Muslims, create and attend their own Latina organizations, unless they are geographically isolated, in which case they worship alone.

Having faced a lifetime of subtle or overt racism and discrimination, once they realize the racism continues from born Muslims, Latina converts reformulate their original community goals in converting to Islam (sisterhood with immigrant Muslims) and form their own communities. The actual goal of most converts, and the source of their most significant disappointments post-conversion, can be expressed as follows:

Women convert to Islam because they want to roll back time and live like women of previous generations did, without actually leaving their existing societies, and ideally without racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism.

Unfortunately, no matter how all-embracing it is said to be, tribalism is alive and well in the Islamic world.

Making the *shahadah* is the culmination of months and often years of reflection: "in one sense the end of a journey and in another is the beginning of the process of learning how to assume her new identity as a Muslim."[189] Because Islam embraces most aspects of life, if what converts were seeking is having religion imbued into their lives, Islam is a good choice: "For most new converts, being Muslim is a full-time endeavor, involving them and their families in both private and public ways," with *decisions to be*

[189] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.

made about how she dresses, whether she prays at work, adopts a new name, and thinks about her public identity.[190]

This matter of choice – how do converts make choices post-conversion, what choices are they forced to make due to a scarcity of alternatives – is important. To an American or European, the idea that a woman has *choices* may seem patently obvious and not worth saying, but it is:

> Living in one of the freest societies in the world, Americans are free to choose their religion from the different denominations within Christianity to "lifestyle choices," which in turn range from New Age spiritualism to the green movement. As a result, about half of all Americans practice a religion outside the one in which they are born.[191]

The Western woman who converts to Islam can choose whatever she wants in terms of wearing hijab, style of dress, dating, marriage, work, prayer in public, which mosque to attend, if any, where to travel, whether to drive a car there, where to live, and whether she wants to remain Muslim. She can change her mind whenever she wants, as the situation calls for. Not to belabor the obvious, but women in many parts of the world do not have the same freedoms, whereas Western converts voluntarily make choices which they can just as voluntarily unmake. Looking for the motivations behind the individual choices that converts to Islam make in their daily lives would make a fascinating psychological study but is far beyond the scope of my research. My hope is that the above analysis usefully describes the path a woman might take on her conversion journey, with milieu and motivations somewhat predicting the type of relationship she will have with the immigrant Muslim community. Where the journey ends is a matter of

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[190] Ibid.
[191] Ahmed, *Journey into Americ*a, 310.

no little importance, because the community could mean everything to her – source of husband, family, friends, support—or next to nothing.

We now turn to formulating a hypothesis based on the themes drawn out of prior research.

Hypothesis (A)

This project has followed an iterative process, where exploratory research and thought experiments have sent me back to the existing theory and research multiple times. Following Maxwell's advice, [192] I eventually developed a concept map of the ways ethnicity, culture, race, and nationality might affect the paths of conversion to Islam. I call it my conversion paths hypothesis.

By laying out the themes gleaned from prior research, I formed a new hypothesis that attempts to explain what is going on with the conversion phenomenon. Despite the choices that women have in the way they integrate Islam into their own lives, the paths that their conversion follow seem to be somewhat limited and defined by their *milieu*. The visual representation of the theory is most useful – please refer to Appendix B. Here is the textual representation, in outline form. The scholarly source of each theme was mentioned in the preceding pages. I have listed some of them, often as a single researcher per idea, although in fact there is overlap. In most cases, I have chosen the researcher whose ideas in each regard struck me most forcefully.

[192] Joseph Alex Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 54.

Hypothesis (A) Regarding Conversion Path (Outline Form)

Factors making one receptive to new solutions, predisposing one to Islam:

F1: sense of meaninglessness (Köse;[193] Maslim[194])

F2: cognitive dissonance between personal & societal beliefs (Maslim[195])

F3: trigger of latent goals (Allievi;[196] Köse;[197] McGinty[198])

F4: life difficulties (Ahmed;[199] Wohlrab[200])

F5: affective ties with believers (Maslim;[201]) while these women typically go through the conversion paths described below, in rare cases they can jump directly to Result R7.

→ lead to a **Goal**: escape modern Western culture and its secularity, roll back time (Allievi;[202]Berger;[203] Köse;[204]McGinty;[205] Nieuwkerk;[206] Sultan;[207]Soutar;[208])

→ which takes two forms satisfying two different **N**eeds:

N1: Escape general cultural reality & ideas, nostalgia for prior generations' values and religiosity, carve out what Wohlrab calls "*symbolic* distance". This is the white,

[193] Köse, "Conversion to Islam."
[194] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam in the United States."
[195] Ibid.
[196] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 120-149.
[197] Köse, "Conversion to Islam."
[198] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*.
[199] Ahmed, *Journey into America*.
[200] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 351-62; Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 71-92.
[201] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam," 1-69.
[202] Allievi, "Shifting Significance," 120-149.
[203] Berger, *Desecularization of the World*; Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*.
[204] Köse, "Conversion to Islam."
[205] McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam," 474-485.
[206] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion and Islam," 95-119.
[207] Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts," 325-35.
[208] Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 3-16.

privileged, intellectual, route, which takes one of two paths **P**ost-conversion in relation to immigrants:

P1: Europe racializing differently, Islamophobic, distance from "undesirable" immigrants due to converts' own racism, class differences, which leads to a typical **R**esult:

R1: European converts form new convert group

P2: Americans without ethnicity/race of their own have no choice (and usually no desire) to distance themselves from "model minority" (Gallonier, 2017), which leads to one of two **R**esults:

R2: White converts try integrating into immigrant community

R3: Or failing that they worship alone at home

N2: Escape specific reality and societal problems, carve out *actual* distance from difficult circumstances. (Wohlrab) This is the marginalized, Latina, Black, necessity route, which takes one **P**ost-conversion path:

P3: Latinas try to integrate with immigrants, but they find themselves on the receiving end of immigrants' racism/ ethnocentrism, which leads them to one of two **R**esults:

R5: Now with Spanish-language mosques and services[209] new converts can skip P3:

R6: Or they worship alone when geographically isolated

R7: Less common, some marry a Muslim without any initial interest in Islam and join in-laws without difficulty.

[209] Including Centro Islamico in Houston, and Spanish-language services at Islamic Center of Santa Ana, California and Masjid Omar ibn Al-Khattab mosque in downtown Los Angeles.

What We Know after Reviewing Prior Research and Theory

First, the details. Western women give multiple reasons for their conversion to Islam. These include personal/religious reasons, as well as reasons related to family, community, and society. Scholars of Latina conversion to Islam all suggest there may be cultural factors and motivations at play, specific to Latinas. Chapters 6 to 12 explore whether my original research confirms or challenges the details of the prior research.

Second, my **hypothesis (A)** about the paths that conversion describes what we know about the motivating themes behind conversion and is something I believe could be useful. The hypothesis describes both motivations, as well as outcomes *vis a vis* the immigrant Muslim community. The hypothesis is thematic and conceptual rather than specific and detailed.

Third, we know many specific details of ethnic, and cultural, and national differences that affect both actual motivations and stated justifications for conversion (the source of which may not be the converts themselves, but what they are told in the mosques they attend). Most studies of Latinx converts suggest specific cultural traits in Latinx ethnicity and culture affect conversion, but there are many reasons to believe this is not true. What we know is that Mexican Maya converts that have been studied, living in primitive conditions, are very assertive in protecting their ethnic practices and in demanding gender equality in mosque settings. Latinas in the US have become acculturated and so appear to behave more or less like other Americans – except in the creating of Latina Muslim associations. At a certain point, being Latina might simply mean that one speaks Spanish and can call oneself Latina, both of which can be hugely important in making groups. The question is, are Latinas like whites, and whites like

Latinas, insofar as (for instance) many whites are also Catholic, poor, and live in difficult circumstances? Chapters 6 to 12 each explore whether there are any specific differences found between Latinas and white converts.

Justifications for conversion are thought by prior researchers to be constructed to address whatever needs justifying among a convert's family and community. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is a difference between Dutch and American converts. Nieuwkerk found that the testimonials posted by American converts on the internet rarely mention the status of women in Islam or how Islam addresses their needs as women better and instead focus primarily on religious reasons for conversion.[210] Nieuwkerk suggests that Dutch national and cultural identity is rooted in the belief that women are emancipated and empowered, whereas the American national and cultural identity is rooted in religion. She found that even online testimonies of African-American women do not address the issues of ethnicity and race and are instead hyper-focused on showing how Islamic theology is superior to Christianity.[211]

Confirming or negating Nieuwkerk's observation will be relatively easy – I will simply see relatively how much religious justification goes on when I interview converts. But a more interesting question suggests itself. America really is measurably more religious – 54% of Americans say, "religion is very important in their lives" and only 14% of French do, for example.[212] If the journey to Islam in hyper-secular Europe is "from secular to sacred," then what describes the journey in hyper-religious America –

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[210] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 95-119.
[211] Ibid., 107.
[212] Lydia Saad, "Religion Is Very Important to Majority of Americans," *Gallup News Service*, December 05, 2003, https://news.gallup.com/poll/9853/religion-very-important-majority-americans.aspx; Pew Research Center, "Being Christian in Western Europe," Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/.

"from sacred to sacred"? Not only the justifications, but the motivations in America must be different.[213] This leads to:

Hypothesis (B): Despite its hyper-religiosity, American women will convert to Islam less for religion (which they could get from Christian congregations) and more as a form of protest, to set up a kind of boundary, against a "furiously secular" society.

What is Missing

Missing from many studies are the converts' own observations, in their own words, and so painting a more complete picture of how converts describe each aspect of conversion is relevant.

The race or the ethnicity of the converts is rarely indicated in the studies from Europe and the UK and likewise in the studies from the United States. Only two or three studies talk specifically about white American women as a group and a similar number about specifically Latina converts in the United States

With some exceptions, one gets a sense that "regular women" are either not interviewed in these studies, or their conversations are not reported. Many subjects in existing studies appear to be involved in academia[214], or are thought leaders, and while all have interesting things to say, I believe sharing the actual words of "regular women" has merit and may shed a different light on the conversion.

[213] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 84.
[214] Roald, "Shaping of Scandinavian 'Islam,'" 57; McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 30-31, 57, 59; McGinty, "Alternative Femininities," 477. Both Roald and McGinty have highly educated academically inclined subjects.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Given what I have learned about conversion to Islam, what is missing from the picture, what is it I wish to know?

First, I want to answer my primary research question, which is:

Research Question #1:

"What are some of the reasons Latina and white women in the United States convert to Islam, what is their post-conversion experience like, especially in terms of their relationship to born Muslims, and are there discernible differences between the two groups because of their differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and how does it all compare to prior research?"

Second, I want to find out whether Hypothesis (A) (presented above in outline form, and in Appendix B as a diagram) is useful.

Research Question #2:

Utilizing Hypothesis (A), is it possible to describe, based on their different ethnicities, cultures, and races the ways in which Latina and white women converts to Islam in the United States differ in their conversion motivations and post-conversion relationships with immigrant Muslims?

Third, I want to answer a question suggested by prior research and pose a hypothesis that does not appear to be asked or answered elsewhere.

Research Question #3:

Hypothesis (B) is: Despite its hyper-religiosity, American women will convert to Islam less for religion (which they could get from Christian congregations) and as a form of protest, to set up a kind of boundary against a "furiously secular" society. Is Hypothesis #2 useful in understanding American women's conversion to Islam? Will women describe their conversion to Islam in terms of protest against American society? While many of their justifications are expected to be religious, will there be evidence of carving out distance from society as well? Put another way, what will be their reasons for not taking advantage of the many other religious options available in America?

I have now presented what I believe we know from prior research, and what I believe is happening. The next chapter describes how I will address my questions and hypotheses.

Chapter III.

Research Methods

The previous chapter described much of the available research on converts to Islam in Europe and the Americas and concluded with observations and a conversion path hypothesis that addresses one of the goals of this paper, which is to discover whether ethnicity, culture, and race lead to differences between the white and Latina experience of conversion. In addition, a hypothesis was proposed addressing the incongruence between America's hyper-religiosity and women converting to Islam for more religion.

In order to know what is different, one must know what is the same, which is one reason this paper addresses a Primary Research Question #1 much more comprehensively than the individual hypotheses alone. The conversion path hypothesis and the hyper-religious America hypothesis will be revisited in the Conclusion, to discover whether they fit with my research data.

Now that I know what I want to know, the next question is: *What method of research is most suited to answering the questions raised?* The current chapter presents the qualitative approach suggested by the prior research.

The purpose of my research is, like most conversion studies, to capture "what conversion meant for the individual, and to search for patterns in the actions, feelings, and ideas that were reported."[215] In addition to the interviews I conducted, I refer regularly to the work of approximately three dozen prior studies on conversion to Islam

[215] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 12.

in the West, and use books, newspapers, magazines, journals, radio and television programs wherever a revealing comparison can be made.

Rather than assuming there are generalizable, universal truths to be found among study participants, my research focuses on recording their unique, subjective worldviews and stories. The research participants as thus treated as experts on their own lives.[216] The goal is to discern, if possible, patterns that describe particular phenomena.[217] Auerbach and Silverstein describe this as "hypothesis-generating research," stating that "[a] theory is a description of a pattern that you find in the data."[218] My research does discover many patterns, including a way of describing the several paths that conversion takes. One cannot really ask "what changes when you change the independent variables called ethnicity, culture, race, and nationality?" because those descriptors are not single variables but collections each of a thousand variables. Cesari makes a similar point in her study of Muslims in Europe and the United States:

> This analysis shows that Islam is far from being "the independent variable" explaining their social and political behaviors. Most strikingly, the narrative of Muslims that implicitly emerges from the focus group discussions is at the antipodes of the [stereotypical] Western narrative described in chapter 1. Specifically our results show that Muslims resist any collective identification to Islam, do not see incompatibility between their personal religious identity and their national community of residence, and even envision Islam as an asset to their civic engagement.[219]

While she was writing about born or immigrants Muslims rather than converts, the observation is worth noting. Even though infinitely complex "Islam" cannot be "the independent variable" explaining social behaviors, is there any way to find out whether

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[216] Carl F. Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein, *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 23-26.
[217] Ibid., 3.
[218] Ibid., 31.
[219] Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam*, 27.

behaviors derived from ethnicity, culture, race, and nationality influence conversion to Islam? I aim to find out.

One way of doing qualitative research, the *phenomenological approach*, challenges the researcher "to see reality through the eyes of the informants,"[220] how they see and make sense of things, what it feels like to be "in their shoes," so to speak. The idea of listening without prejudice encourages the participant to describe their experiences freely.[221] As described by John W. Creswell, phenomenological inquiry is

> research in which the researcher identifies the "essence" of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the "lived experiences" marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of participants through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationship of meaning.[222]

Attempting to capture and convey participants' "lived experience" is therefore differentiated from presenting questionnaires and conducting surveys.

Qualitative research can be done in a number of ways. I chose semi-structured interviews as Kvale suggests, "using conversation as research."[223] I was after certain types of information and intended to weave my questions into the conversations I had with converts as best I could, depending on how the participants responded. The interviews included no surveys, nor were they strictly structured interviews, but were loosely guided conversations.[224]

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[220] Toomas Gross, "From Theory to Fact in Anthropology: The Case of Mexican Ethnography," ed. Martin Ehala, *Trames: A Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 53/48 (1999): 21, https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499617709658.
[221] Steinar Kvale, *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).
[222] John W. Creswell, *Research and Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 15.
[223] Kvale, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*.
[224] Creswell, *Research and Design*, 229.

By presenting these women's anecdotes, mostly in their own words, I hope to convey the lived experience—what it's like to get interested in Islam, to learn about it, to decide to become a Muslim, and to live with the consequences—as well as to dispel several stereotypes that Muslims face in American society.

In-depth, face-to-face interviews, asking qualitative, open-ended questions helped develop a rapport, which allowed my participants to move past what they thought I wanted to hear into what they actually thought and felt about their lives, their conversion and post-conversion experiences, within their larger personal narratives. By keeping things informal, I allowed the converts themselves to guide the conversations with only gentle nudges from my questions, which resulted in them revealing aspects of their biographies which my questions could not have predicted.

In terms of religious conversion to Islam, narrative biographical interviews like those I undertook are recommended by Wohlrab-Sahr,[225] and attempt to address the problem described by Nieuwkerk, that conversion narratives, if queried directly, yield stories constructed *after* conversion, where "past events are reinterpreted in light of current convictions."[226] Instead of asking converts specifically about "reasons for conversion," I sought different kinds of narratives about other times in their lives, with the goal of uncovering the environment from which the conversion sprang.

Yvonne Haddad suggests that one can learn about the phenomenon of women's conversion to Islam in the West by reading the testimonies available on the internet, as well as from various magazine articles and missionary literature. However, it is important to note the limitations she discovered with such sources. These testimonies typically have

[225] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 351-62.
[226] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 4.

a two-fold purpose: to encourage new converts' interest in Islam, and to justify the converts' decision to family and friends.[227] Avoiding such pre-packaged narratives is precisely what I aim to avoid, and so my paper does not include any conversion testimonials from the internet, newspapers, or missionary literature.

As Wohlrab-Sahr writes, conversion "has a specific meaning that is related to the convert's background; conversion fulfills a certain biographical function."[228] My research—in-depth interviews with a focus on biography—is therefore aligned with Haddad, Nieuwkerk, Wohlrab-Sahr and Karen Turner[229] insofar as it rejects the tendency of most conversion studies to place conversion into a generalized model that attempts to explain all converts' motivations.

I considered focus group interviews, but due to time and financial constraints I could not do so. With enough resources, the ideal form of research would include several forms of quantitative and qualitative data, including multiple surveys, focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic studies. With my limited resources, and in the belief that "the concern with the particular is incidental to an understanding of the general,"[230] I felt the most useful form of research I could do would be in-depth biographical interviews.

Selection of Participants

Participants were chosen from the Boston and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, primarily because I live in both places but also because Los Angeles has the highest

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[227] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 41.
[228] Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Conversion to Islam," 72.
[229] Turner, "Contracts with Clauses," 55-57.
[230] James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 206.

concentration of Latina-American Muslim converts[231] and Boston has the second largest mosque on the East Coast, 20% of whose members are converts.[232]

Over one year, I attended dozens of Muslim women's prayer groups held at the following mosques: Islamic Society of Boston (Cambridge and Boston branches) on the east coast; Women's Mosque of America, Masjid Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, Islamic Center of Southern California, and Islamic Society of Orange County (ISOC) on the west coast. Some participants introduced themselves to me, others were introduced by my earlier participants, and still others were found through these mosques' private "new Muslim" Facebook groups, which converts invited me to join.

I wanted to study women who had not been included in previous studies, representing a wide range of educational and economic backgrounds, for both white and Latina groups. In an effort to gain more of "real-world" picture of converts to Islam, I chose to exclude from the study current college students, graduate students, professors, or anyone otherwise involved in academia.

Method of Interview

Interviews were conducted primarily as face-to-face meetings and, when necessary, by phone or Skype. Typically, interviews were two to three hours long and took place during a single session, but second and third sessions were added when necessary. Approximately 40 hours of recorded conversation yielded 504 pages of transcripts (209,197 words). In addition, approximately 40 additional hours that were not

[231] Barna Group Inc., "Finding a Place: Faith, Work and Identity," Barna Group, April 15, 2014, https://www.barna.com/research/finding-a-place-faith-work-and-identity/.
[232] Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, "About the Community," ISBCC, accessed April 5, 2018, https://isbcc.org/about-the-community/.

recorded were spent talking with the participants, conversation which is not cited here, but helped form general impressions.

Bracketing

In a phenomenological study such as this, it is crucial that the researcher be aware of her own biases and personal background and not let them color her observations and interpretation of the phenomena she observes. "What about the understandings we are saddled with? These we have to 'bracket' to the best of our ability and let the experience of the phenomena speak to us at first hand."[233] In attempting to understand and reflect on my own point of view, the process of researching and writing this paper has been a journey of self-discovery. Re-examining the way I was raised as a Muslim in Pakistan, and the biases I carried away from that experience, have been of great usefulness to me. As Auerbach and Silverstein observed, "[t]he qualitative paradigm includes a reflexive stance that provides the opportunity for the researcher to examine her or his biases. Accepting the responsibility for examining oneself increases the probability that the research process will not be exploitative or oppressive for the participants,"[234] and I am grateful for having had this opportunity.

Despite being raised as a Muslim in Pakistan until the age of 20, or perhaps because of it, prior to engaging in the current study I simply did not understand the motives behind the phenomenon of white and Latina women converting to Islam. My own view of Islam is somewhat biased, in large part because of the way it is practiced in

[233] Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: SAGE, 2015), 78-79.
[234] Auerbach and Silverstein, *Qualitative Data*, 126.

Pakistan, which is, indeed, sexist. Women in Pakistan are not allowed into mosques, and for the most part, do not have access to egalitarian translations of the Quran. My reservations about Islam run deep.

Born in Lahore, raised on army bases, I was sent to the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Murree for the four years of high school. The majority of students were Muslim and were not required to study Christianity. In a country where a Christian minority is viciously suppressed,[235] it is darkly ironic that the privileged families of the country send their female children to a Catholic, English language boarding school where Urdu is prohibited. For a Pakistani, I was unusually familiar with Western culture and religion. Interestingly, there was never the slightest question of students converting from Islam to Christianity in this Catholic school—doing so would have been considered apostasy, and no students ever did. For college I attended another Catholic institution, Villanova University. While working in Pakistan after college I was told by co-workers that my religious opinions were considered a form of apostasy, and I should censor myself when in public. The juxtaposition of my Islamic background and Catholicism fostered my curiosity of how religion works in a purportedly free society like America, where apostasy is an opinion with no real consequences.

My curiosity towards those converting to Islam stems from my desire to better understand the deep religiosity with which I never identified. Nonetheless, because I look and talk the way I do, Muslims think of me as one of them and seem to trust me.

[235] Michael Lipka, "Religious Restrictions Vary Significantly in the World's Most Populous Countries," Pew Research Center, April 13, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/.

At the same time as I have softened my stance against Islam, I have also come to appreciate Western culture all the more for its variety, inclusiveness, and tolerance. Rejection of Western culture makes no sense to me. Were I to have experienced America only as a hedonistic, consumer-crazed orgy of drinking and scantily clad women, I might understand rejecting it, for I already stay well away from that part of America. As a teenager at Catholic school, what I saw as illogical concepts of the Catholic faith never bothered me, because I was not a religious person in the first place. Had I been invested in Christianity and deeply troubled by the Trinity as most of the converts I studied here were, I would understand the need to reject it. At the same time, because I was raised in the Islamic faith, I have a deeply understood and felt sense of what it is about, both as an intellectual construct and as a way of life. In other words, I believe I am able to see both sides of most arguments presented here, and while I feel no necessity to adopt religion for myself, Islam or otherwise, I can understand and empathize with those who do.

If "the researcher *is* the instrument"[236] in a qualitative study, there is no reason to pretend that any other woman doing this study would have made the same decisions as I have. My ultimate motivation for conducting this research is expressed by Rambo: "Is religious conversion healing and helpful to women, or another mode of domination?"[237] I assume conversion to Islam is both healing and helpful, and am curious to know how, why, and in what ways.

[236] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, 45.
[237] Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 263.

Ethical Issues

Prior to conducting interviews, I obtained ethics training related to human subjects through Harvard's Instructional Review Board (IRB) along with IRB approval, which exempted my study protocol per the regulations found at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). Where appropriate, I provided a copy of these credentials or information regarding IRB review/approval of my study protocol. Lastly, the IRB deemed that my study-protocol could employ an oral consent that would be audio recorded along with the interviews, thus reducing further impediments to study participation. All applicable protocols and policies of Harvard University's Institutional Review Board for the use of human subjects in research were complied with in this thesis research.

Chapter IV.

Organizational Framework

This chapter describes the decisions I made about how to organize my research findings. I started by assembling what Becker calls "modules" from a wide variety of sources. In a chapter titled "Terrorized by the Literature," Becker suggests there is no "one right way" to approach, organize or interact with prior research and theory.[238] What follows is one possible way of organizing, one I hope is both reasonable and informative.

Maxwell suggests that a conceptual framework is "a tentative *theory* of the phenomena that you are investigating," that it is "constructed, not found," and that it is "something you build, not something that exists ready-made."[239] He describes the process of theory-building as *bricolage*, crediting Claude Levi-Strauss (1968) for the concept. Maxwell recommends, with Becker, the collecting of modules – "prefabricated parts for use in future arguments"[240] – from four main sources: (1) one's own experiential knowledge (my background is described in Chapter III under "Bracketing"), (2) existing theory and research (Chapter II, Literature Review), (3) your pilot and exploratory research (throughout the paper), and (4) thought experiments (at the end of Chapter II).[241]

To a large extent, I have chosen practical, descriptive, generic titles for my chapters, corresponding to stages and divisions in life. To summarize the chapter, one can say that a convert to Islam: 1) has a background that predisposes her to meeting Muslims

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[238] Howard S. Becker and Pamela Richards, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 144.
[239] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, 40.
[240] Becker and Richards, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 141-146.
[241] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, 139.

and being receptive to their ideas; 2) actually meets Muslims and is introduced to Islam; then comes up with reasons to embrace the new faith which she thinks of in terms of; 3) her personal, interior, religious self; 4) her family; 5) her community; 6) the broader society, and; 7) there are decisions to be made and consequences of converting. These just happen to be the way I organize my paper, and any number of other ways might be equally valid. This way works for me, and after exploring many alternatives, is the only way I could make sense of it all.

At the same time, the implications underlying what might seem like "common sense" ways of dividing up the world (for example the idea that some people are "white" as discussed in Chapter 1) are manifold, and for that reason I believe it is worth describing the arduous process that led me to these "common sense" ideas.

Maxwell famously suggested theory could be used as "coat hooks" and "spotlights."[242] This idea has led me to think of the structural theory that I need as more of a house, with rooms designed in virtual conversation with several scholars of religious conversion, starting with Lewis Rambo.

Rambo's Seven Stages of Religious Conversion

Lewis Rambo, Professor of Psychology and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union of the San Francisco Theological Seminary, lays out a process theory in his *Understanding Religious Conversion* that provides a framework for my study and lays out how research elements are organized in time and connected to one another as a

[242] Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, 48-49.

process.

Several previous studies on conversion to Islam utilize Rambo's theory of religious conversion, generally modifying it and combining it with other approaches, and this has been my approach for the current study. A process theory was chosen because conversion to Islam specifically is not a single event, but a long-term process. (So much so that Köse found of 70 converts he studied, 97% said they experienced gradual conversion.) Rather than a single turning point, it was "a progressive process, actively searching for meaning and striving towards a solution to personal or collective problems. In this process there was a gradual awareness that they were becoming a different person."[243]

Similar to Maxwell's "bricolage" approach, Rambo's theory integrates insights from the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology in order to avoid the pitfalls inherent in any single approach. Rambo goes on to suggest that "[t]heories of conversion often tell us more about the one making the attribution than the person or group that has converted. . . . Generally, the theory is an attempt by a scholar to make sense out of something otherwise inexplicable to his/her worldview."[244] The question Rambo suggests what is behind all conversion studies is the question: "*Why would anyone want to do that?*"[245]

Rambo's theory builds on the process theory first articulated in 1965 by Lofland and Stark, describing conversion Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Despite its

[243] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 117.
[244] Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 260-261.
[245] Ibid.

inapplicability to less cult-like religions, Rambo recognized the usefulness of the approach for describing religious conversion in general. [246]

Both Lofland and Stark's and Rambo's theories speak primarily to individual conversions rather than to group conversions, for good reason. Most group conversions in history were coerced and did not involve personal choice. For instance, Romans, Saxons, Jews, Slavs, Russians, Hindus, North, South and Central Americans, African slaves, among others, were all converted forcibly to Christianity. There *are* examples of entire families and villages converting voluntarily to Christianity and Islam in modern times, as the Maya of Chiapas are said to have done.[247] These voluntary mass conversions occur primarily in monolithic, traditional societies and undoubtedly have very strong social motivations, whereas converts in pluralistic Western societies tend to have more personal, individualistic motivations.

Rambo proposed a new seven stage model, as follows: *Context*, *Crisis*, *Quest*, *Encounter*, *Interaction*, *Commitment*, and *Consequences*.[248] Unlike a manufacturing process with strictly sequential series of events in time, Rambo's stages are interconnected and ever-present, continuing to affect the experience long after the stage has passed. There is, he says, "no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process."[249]

The assumptions beneath Rambo's theory are important: no one event, no one reason, but a web of events and a web of reasons, interact in a long *process* that pushes or

[246] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver," 862-875.
[247] Cuevas, "Politics of Conversion to Islam in Southern Mexico," 164.
[248] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 71.
[249] Ibid., 69.

pulls an individual into the new religion, and the process involves "going back and forth between stages."[250] Rambo places *Context* at the center of the web, suggesting that one's biographical and environmental background continues to exert an influence throughout one's conversion to another religion, just as it does throughout one's entire life. Likewise, influential individuals who affect our lives – those we meet in what Rambo calls the *Encounter* and *Interaction* stages – not only influence our *Commitment* to the new religion, but become part of our life's *Context* – and are woven into the *Consequences* of conversion.

At the time he first published *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo had studied primarily converts to Christianity, and many of his ideas do not apply to conversion to Islam, any more than Lofland and Stark's ideas about Moonies apply to Christian converts.

Context, *Crisis*, and *Quest*

Rambo argues that in many fields, from economics to medicine, *Context* is often overlooked: "We have a tendency to split the person and the environment."[251] I have chosen to combine Rambo's *Context*, *Crisis* and *Quest* stages into one grouping.

Rambo's second stage is *Crisis*, made up of two sorts: "crises that call into question one's fundamental orientation to life, and crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back."[252] The examples Rambo uses to illustrate his ideas all appear to equate "crisis" with "life in general," in

[250] Ibid., 117.
[251] Ibid., 72.
[252] Ibid., 76.

that almost anything in life could be seen as a crisis. It is therefore not surprising that in a study by Ali Köse, precipitating life crises were not actually found among *necessary* reasons for conversion to Islam.[253]

Merging Rambo's stages is not an original idea. In his *Islam and Cultural Change in Papua New Guinea,* Scott Flower also suggests combining Rambo's *Context* and *Crisis* stages into one,[254] agreeing with Lofland and Stark that *Context* and *Crises* are "predisposing factors,"[255] and should not be considered separately from *Context*. For all these reasons, I have combined *Context* and *Crisis*.

Rambo's third stage is *Quest*, in which a person seeks "growth and development to fill the void, solve the problem, or enrich life."[256] Rambo suggests that religious conversion is not strictly a passive process that happens to someone, as we sometimes think of as hypnotism or brainwashing, but a mostly active process of seeking out, learning, and growing. Whereas Rambo does provide examples of conversion to cults in which various forms of brainwashing, "manipulative and deceptive strategies to seduce people" [257] are actually used, both existing studies and this current study provides evidence that conversion to Islam for women in America involves either very little or no coercion or underhanded persuasion techniques.[258]

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[253] Köse, "Secular to the Sacred," 301-12.
[254] Scott Flower, *Islam and Cultural Change in Papua New Guinea* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 53-54.
[255] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver," 864.
[256] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56.
[257] Ibid., 58.
[258] This is not to suggest that conversion to Islam in other areas of the world, or conceivably in United States prisons, is not accompanied by threats or implications of violence, only that American women appear to choose it freely of their own volition.

Rambo asks the all-important question, "What is the ultimate nature of humans, and are they capable of intentional action for goals or merely directed by external and internal forces over which they have no control?"[259] The answer is, of course, all the above. But for want of a better alternative, the working assumption of my study is that women say what they mean, mean what they say, and do what they do as a matter of personal choice rather than coercion – none of which is always going to be true. *Free will* (informed by emotion) is therefore another module in our *bricolage*, especially because as stated above, conversion to Islam tends to be slow process rather than snap decision.

In the *Quest* stage, Rambo points out several preconditions for conversion, including structural, emotional, intellectual and religious availability. In terms of structural availability, he suggests that the "various networks that shape our lives–family, job, friendship, religious organizations, and so forth–are often very powerful in discouraging or even preventing change and development, however desirable that change may be to the individual."[260] Rambo points out that intellectual availability is also crucial: "[t]he cognitive framework of a movement or option must be somewhat compatible with a person's previous orientation or there will be no attraction. . . . [B]oth the form and content of the new option were appealing to a person because they offered some significant continuity or connection with that person's previous orientation." As with what Rambo describes as religious availability, far from being a radical break with the past, conversion usually involves a high degree of compatibility with one's prior beliefs

[259] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 59.
[260] Ibid., 60.

and lifestyle, "moral values and modes of living."[261] *Possibility, availability, receptivity*, and *compatibility* are additional pieces of the theoretical *bricolage*.

Using Rambo's own understanding of the stage, I found *Quest*, like *Crisis*, should not be considered separately from *Context*. For all these reasons, I have chosen to group *Quest* with *Context* and *Crisis*.

Encounter and *Interaction*

Rambo's fourth and fifth stages, *Encounter* and *Interaction*, I have also chosen to group together, in that both describe "the influence of a particular individual or ideology outside of the convert's original sphere of influence."[262] The *Interaction* stage is characterized by learning, observing, and living in the presence of advocates, essentially coming into a new social group.[263]

Commitment Rechristened *Reasons*

Rambo's sixth stage, *Commitment*, is focused on the decision-making process. The biographical, narrative reconstruction of the individual's past is a central element of *Commitment*. After the *Context*, *Crisis,* and *Quest*, and after the *Encounter* and *Interaction*, what's left is the decision, and the *Reasons or justifications*. I found it necessary to look beyond Rambo to find ways of organizing the reasons given for converting to Islam, as described below under the Four Discourses heading.

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[261] Ibid., 62.
[262] Michael Joseph La Voie, "Identity Conversion: Female Muslim Converts in the United States" (Master's thesis, Boston College, 2017), 31 (ProQuest AAT 10265152).
[263] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 107.

Consequences

The final of Rambo's seven stages of conversion is *Consequences*. The iterative process of going back and forth until the "right" answer is reached – becoming a Muslim – continues after conversion. In the post-conversion *Consequences* stage, converts continue for the rest of their lives to refine and re-balance what will be their own personal version of Islam by revisiting their own life stories, including their original reasons for conversion and the advocates they encountered. This continual refinement results in *individualization* and is another important module in our theory. Even if one wished to adopt "pure" Islam, one cannot – because it does not exist. All Islamic ideas and practices spring from particular cultures and time periods. The existence of countless inconsistencies requires the convert to make choices, first and foremost the adoption or rejection of competing Islamic traditions, which themselves both created and were created by these inconsistencies, as will be illustrated throughout the study.

Summary of Rambo

I've therefore grouped Rambo's stages into four: {*Context*, *Crisis*, *Quest*}; {*Encounter*, *Interaction*}, {*Reasons*}, and {*Consequences*}.

As a shorthand, one might say that one's background, plus meeting and interacting with individual Muslims and Islamic ideas, can result for a variety of reasons in a commitment to Islam, which has consequences.

On the one hand, converts' backgrounds and interactions with Muslims can provide most, if not all, of the reasons for their conversion. In some rare cases, converts are attracted to a specific Muslim and "convert" to Islam without regard to Islam itself.

On the other hand, many people with similar backgrounds to my participants, and similar interactions with Muslims, do not consider converting to Islam.[264] But this is really the point—each convert, each interaction is unique. However, there are natural themes that emerge, in a way common-sensical, to organize the data. This paper is an attempt to share, in an organized fashion, a complex jumble of reasons and influences. The reasons converts give for their conversion form the bulk of my study. I have situated these, for organizational purposes, in the four-part *Reasons* stage.

In order to make sense of these reasons, I have adopted and adapted the theoretical framework of another scholar of religious conversion, Karin van Nieuwkerk.

Four Discourses

In one sense, a process theory is best at describing the *how* of a phenomenon, but the *why* is always, to some extent implied. Why do we do this? "To live a better life" underlies the "how" of the process. In the stages of religious conversion, I found Rambo's organizing theory most useful in addressing *why* questions. Why convert? Consider her background. Consider how she was introduced to the new people and ideas. However imperfectly, the process stages address the *why* of conversion because without

[264] It is worth noting that of a United States population 330m there are 103m non-Latina white women, and 27m Latinas. Taking the rough estimate of converts given earlier of 3,000 white and 1,500 converts per year, that means (very roughly) that only 1 in 34,000 non-Latina white women convert to Islam every year, and of 27m Latinas, only 1 in 18,000. In other words, conversion is a rare phenomenon. See: United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: United States," United States Census Bureau, accessed August 9, 2018, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217.

that background motivation, without those encounters and interactions, conversion would not have taken place.

However, in addition to categories of *process*, much of my research data falls into categories of reflection, dialogue and *discourse* – reasons for committing to Islam. The convert takes it all in and makes a decision. This is Rambo's *Commitment* stage, but I found it too broad an umbrella to be useful by itself. In order to find ways of organizing data, adding to Maxwell and Rambo, I therefore searched further afield to consider ideas from the most prominent scholars in the field of religious conversion to Islam.

Haddad

Yvonne Haddad was born in Syria and is a professor of History of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations at the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. One of the chapters she co-authored, "Embracing Islam," has a section titled "Islam is Personally Compelling," which begins: "Generally speaking, women tend to express their responses to Islam in several ways: personal, social, spiritual, and intellectual."[265] These are reasonable categories, but they strike me as insufficient for my purposes both on their face and in light of my exploratory research. Spiritual and intellectual *are* personal reasons, and "social" is too broad a category, encompassing everything not personal – marriage, family, community, society. Much of the usefulness of an organizing principle has to do with the subjects under study. As will be discussed shortly, many studies of converts tend to focus on the well-educated and well-spoken, people for whom intellectual concerns are a way of life. Haddad's

[265] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 48.

organizing principles I rejected, not only because the women I intended to study were regular women, but because "social" was too broad a category. This is not to suggest Haddad's observations are not clear-sighted: she is cited frequently in the coming pages. It was only this particular way of organizing data that I found not applicable to my own research.

Roald

Research by Anne Sofie Roald, a Muslim convert and professor of religious studies at Malmö University in Sweden, suggests that a "hybridization" of Islam and "Scandinavian values" has led to the emergence of a "Scandinavian Islam."[266] Her three-stage model leaves out pre-conversion stages; instead, she focuses on the convert's relation with the Muslim community post-conversion. Her first-stage is akin to "falling-in-love" – converts idealize Muslims.[267] This insight is of limited use, since there is a lot more to conversion than just idealizing Muslims. Her second stage, "Disappointment," is when converts learn there is a great disparity between Islamic ideals and Muslim behavior.[268] Other researchers have found that after a woman embraces Islam, even if she is disappointed with the Muslim community, she does not necessarily turn away from Islam or jump to the maturity stage and start to adapt Islam to her Western culture – as will be well illustrated in coming pages. In her third stage, "Maturity," converts realize that Muslims are neither infallible nor the only custodians of Islam. As a result, converts start to develop their own understanding of Islam aligned with the Scandinavian cultural

[266] Roald, "Shaping of a Scandinavian 'Islam,'" 48.
[267] Ibid., 49.
[268] Ibid., 48.

context.[269] Again, other researchers suggest this "hybridization" may sometimes happen, but often does not. Roald's insights are manifold and oft-cited in the coming pages. However, this particular organizing model was not found to be useful for organizing my own research.

Sultan

Madeleine Sultán (now Sjöqvist) is a religious scholar in Sweden. Her theoretical framework is based on Rambo's stages of conversion, a long process that has to be understood in its context. In the early phases of their conversion, her subjects felt they had made the right choice and had no conflicts with Islamic principle. Later they found issues with Islamic conceptions of gender essentialism, patriarchal family and strictly defined norms of behavior—Islamic ways of life that first attracted them to Islam. This is what she calls the "reformulation phase" where converts either try to reconcile with Islamic concepts even if they conflict with their Swedish ideas or are plainly dismissive of these conflicts.[270] Sultan's observations, like those Haddad and Roald, are crucial resources for understanding conversion to Islam and are cited often in the following pages, but her "reformulation" idea was not found to be sufficiently useful an organizing principle for the current study.[271]

Nieuwkerk

Karin van Nieuwkerk is an anthropologist and chair of contemporary Islam in the

[269] Ibid., 50.
[270] Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts," 325-35.
[271] Ibid., 325, 329, 334.

Middle East and Europe at Radboud University in the Netherlands. She found she could understand one particular woman's decision to convert to Islam, but that each woman's "motivation was rather specific and quite dissimilar from the motivations and life stories of the women I had spoken to before." However, Nieuwkerk did find commonalities: they were all women living in the West who "share important aspects of their identities related to *ethnicity*, religion, and gender."[272] [emphasis added]

Nieuwkerk suggested there are four main discourses within Dutch conversion narratives: biographical discourse (events in an individual's life that led them to Islam), religious discourse (why choose Islam), gender discourse (why choose Islam as a woman), and finally, ethnic or national discourse (why as Dutch or Western women they turned to Islam).[273] With Rambo, Nieuwkerk found the biographical background to be of primary importance—without the background *Context*, conversion narratives cannot be understood or explained in a "sociologically satisfactory" way,[274] and for this reason I merge her biographical discourse with my biographical *Context* as being one and the same. In other words, biographical discourse is not a theme, but a part of the convert's life context: in-depth biographical interviews are part of our research method and are the source of research data, not a theory or organizing principle for it.

When I began to analyze my initial interviews with converts, I found my own patterns, which I later realized corresponded somewhat with Nieuwkerk's discourses. There were four types of experiences being described, *discourses* in the sense that there is always some sort of dialogue or negotiation going on, between oneself and: 1) oneself; 2)

[272] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 95.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid.

one's spouse; 3) one's community; and 4) one's society. Each discourse casts a wider net. These are not merely a convenient way of dividing up reality: the nature of the conversation at each level is fundamentally different.

First is the religious discourse, unmistakable in every conversion to Islam story. *What is the internal dialogue relating to religion for a woman alone (that is, not in dialogue with anyone else)?* Nieuwkerk's religious discourse (why choose Islam) was similar to my own. Her gender discourse (why choose Islam as a woman), I found to be too broad, and better formulated as: *Why choose Islam as a woman who must interact with three entirely different entities – spouse and children, community, and society*? Each of these discourses is situated in entirely different contexts, and each discourse has entirely different sources and results. The key is that we are talking about women: *gender* is an issue on every level that women relate to others. In this sense, gender is also an over-arching discourse, so much so that it is worth calling attention to in every other discourse. Simply put, we live in a gendered world.

I settled on four discourses for my own conceptual framework: personal/religious; family/gender; community/gender; society/gender. Nieuwkerk's final theme – ethnic or national discourse (why as Dutch or Western women they turned to Islam)[275] – I initially thought was related to my own conception of a woman's relationship with society. But here she is touching on what I would call, as with biography, an over-arching discourse that touches everything – how does one relate one's ethnicity and nationality to the conversion to Islam? This is a question I believe should be reformulated as: *How does being a woman, coupled with my ethnicity, and nationality, affect my decision to convert*

[275] Ibid., 96.

to Islam on every level – personal, family, community, and society? This will become the second part of my primary research question: *given their ethnic differences, how do Latina and non-Latina white female converts compare?*

Structural Framework: Seven Stages and Discourses

Seven new stages and discourses have therefore been adapted from the work of Rambo, Nieuwkerk, and my own exploratory research as being most useful for the current study. The chapters in this paper are organized around these main structural theoretical "rooms" and "spotlights": 1) *Context*, *Crisis*, and *Quest* stage (the convert's background); 2) *Encounter* and *Interaction* stage (how she was introduced to Islam and Muslims); 3) personal/religious *Reasons*; 4) family/gender *Reasons*; 5) community/gender *Reasons*; 6) society/gender *Reasons*; and 7) *Consequences* stage.

The scope of Personal/Religious and Family/Gender are fairly straightforward to understand. Community/Gender takes many forms, but the scope is meant to include only people one actually knows and places one actually goes. Society/Gender is meant to include interactions with strangers and societal forces outside one's circle. Included in society/gender are issues of cultural/ethnic identity, discrimination, Islamophobia, the media, and political activism. I include identity here because identity is defined in relationship to something else: a woman's identity as a wife is in relationship to her spouse, as a mother is in relationship to her children, and as an American, a Latina, and a Muslim is primarily in relationship to a society that sets the terms (or options) for what it means to be American, Latina, and Muslim. A phenomenon as personal as changing one's name to a Muslim name is important to one's family and local community, but it also deeply changes one's relationship to society. I have also placed in society/gender

what are usually thought of as "societal problems" like substance abuse, sexual harassment, materialism, poverty—even though these are also deeply personal, familial, and community problems. In one sense, I think of a woman's interaction with "society" as dealing with societal forces and organizations and issues that are "bigger than life" and the other discourses relate to things she can reach out and touch—but it is all a matter of degree.

There is cross-over between every stage and every discourse, and the placement of an observation, whether from prior research or interviews, is more a matter of weight than certainty. I used my judgment, as all scholars before me have, to decide what ought to go where, and appreciate the reader's forbearance.

Limitations of Organizational Structure

Rambo writes extensively about the necessity of interrogating a theoretical approach for its *origins*, *scope*, *limitations and weaknesses*, and *ideological consequences* and to consider *what attracts the researcher to a particular theory*. The *origin* of Rambo's seven-stage theory has been considered. The *scope* of his framework encompasses not all of life, but everything in a convert's life related to her religious conversion—which is a difficult line to draw. The chief *limitation* of Rambo's theory is its complexity—the full framework has scores and scores of interrelated concepts and caveats—and its chief *weakness* is its scope—past, present, and future of a convert's life.

Narrowing the scope would, I fear, defeat the purpose of studying an experience like converting to Islam, insofar as it can affect many, if not most, aspects of one's life. Each convert took years to prepare for the opportunity, to become aligned with Islamic ideas and receptive to meeting Muslims, to muster the courage necessary make a change

that, however much sense it makes to her, appears to be radical to outsiders. This preparation took, in a very real sense, entire lifetimes, starting with the lifetimes of the convert's parents, which shaped the beliefs which in turn shaped the convert's beliefs…and so on, *ad infinitum*. Studying the "period of conversion" itself is a less daunting task, but less informative, and unsatisfyingly so—even if you do not doubt the convert's sincerity, you cannot trust what she tells you because she herself is unlikely to know about all the motivating factors (which is why, as shall be seen in Chapter IV, Research Methods, that the biographical narrative approach to research was selected). Studying the post-conversion experience—however many months, years or decades have elapsed—is no less daunting.

Just in the field of religious conversion, Rambo suggests the possibility of using any number of other theoretical approaches: globalization theory, post-colonial theory, feminist theory, cross-cultural theory, religious/spiritual theory, intellectualist theory, narrative theory, identity theory, ritual theory, psychoanalytic theory, archetypal theory, attribution theory, attachment theory, process theory, and Islamization theory.[276] There are difficulties with each of these approaches, too many to go into here. Suffice to say, each of these is relevant only to some facets of the experience of becoming and being a Muslim, or else is directly applicable only to individual converts, but not many or most. That is, none capture the whole picture—except for one. The only theory general enough to attempt to wrap its arms around the years-long process leading up to, including, and following the conversion to Islam, is process theory, which Rambo has himself borrowed

[276] Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 262-268.

from Lofland and Stark as the starting basis for his own framework. Writing about his own seven stage framework, Rambo writes,

> Process models attempt to be inclusive of a variety of factors and forces operative in religious change. This [his own seven-stage] process model is a heuristic device used to organize the complex field of conversion studies. I do not believe my eclectic stage theory is universal, but rather a cartography of options in the study of conversion.[277]

Rambo's "eclectic stage theory" is what I have selected to use as an organizing framework for my research. I have treated it as Rambo intended, "a cartography of options" from which to choose what best serves the research at hand. What this researcher ultimately realized is that converts custom-build their own personal frameworks in a way similar to the way this researcher custom-built her theoretical framework, by selecting the elements they find most useful from the "cartography of options" available within the theoretical framework of Islamic tenets and practices. In other words, the researcher's choice and adaptation of theory is not dissimilar from the convert's choice and adaptation of Islam.

To summarize the theoretical underpinnings inherited from Rambo: conversion is a process which can be understood in stages; the stages are multiple, interactive, and cumulative; life context/biography is crucial; conversion is a matter of personal choice, rather than coercion or brainwashing; conversion is not a radical break from the past, but involves a high degree of compatibility with one's prior beliefs and lifestyle. In other words, we do not expect religious conversion to be a spontaneous, momentous, coerced or unconscious radical break from the past. The theoretical framework views subjects as

[277] Ibid., 267.

fully rational, thoughtful, women with agency, whose life stories matter. It is through this lens the participants in my study were interviewed.

Overlaying his seven stages, Rambo suggests the conversion process is "an interplay of forces of attraction, resistance, and repulsion" and describes "motivational structures" that affect it.[278] Drawing on Epstein, he suggests there are "four basic motivations for human beings: the need to experience pleasure and avoid pain; the need for a conceptual system; the need to enhance self-esteem; and the need to establish and maintain relationships."[279] The chapters that follow are structured around the ideas of repulsion, attraction, and resistance. In general terms: *what needed changing in your life? what was attractive about Islam? what were your reservations?*

I shall now proceed to the choice of research methods, to find the best way to respond to the primary research question of the causes and effects of conversion to Islam and differences between white and Latina experiences.

[278] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 63.
[279] Ibid.

Chapter V.

Introduction to Findings

The previous chapters presented research questions and hypotheses, research method, and organizational framework. This chapter introduces the findings of my study. My approach has been to share what my participants told me, in their own words, without resorting to quick summaries. In doing so, I hope this approach will paint a fuller picture of what it is like to be themselves, growing up with questions, converting to Islam, and living as Muslims.

As Rambo suggested[280] for each aspect of conversion, there were forces "pushing away" from the participants' pre-conversion lives— issues with the religion, family, community, and society they grew up with—and there were forces "pulling toward" Islam—the attractions of Islamic spirituality/theology, family life, community and society. The decision to become Muslim, and to live as a practicing Muslim, appears therefore —from what my participants told me—to encompass nearly the entirety of life, from the most private, internal sphere to the most public. The answers to the questions posed by the prior research are found in the following seven chapters.

While my focus is on biographical narratives and the lived experience of my converts, I bring in prior qualitative research, statistics and surveys whenever useful to help make a point or ask a question, and I am grateful for the work of the researchers whose work I draw upon.

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[280] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

So many reasons were given by my participants, but if only one were given, I would have to wonder whether she was sincere. Why do you fall in love with a person, and decide to spend your life with them? There is no one reason, but a thousand flavors, impressions, touches, laughs, ideas, and shared experiences. All of these apply equally well to the process of falling and staying in love with a religion like Islam.

Chapter VI.

Context, *Crises,* and *Quests*

The previous chapter indicated the way my findings will be organized, following a modification of Rambo's seven stages of conversion. The current chapter begins the journey and attempts to convey the life experiences that led up to conversion, from childhood through adulthood. Findings here and throughout this paper include frequent quotations from the women, as well as citations from the previous literature in order to highlight, contrast, and compare what my participants said to me with the interviews other converts have given other researchers.

The responses to the hypotheses derived from the analysis of prior research are all solidly grounded in the *Context* of each convert's life. In a major sense, every attempt to divide lived reality into stages or categories is false: every thread, every stream, every theme of life creates the *Context* from which we think and act, go to work, and make decisions like buying a dress or converting to a new religion. We are never being one thing or doing one thing. Only in stories and movies is there a life-as-usual, a call to adventure, a quest, and a return with the answer to our problems.

In Rambo's seven stages of religious conversion, the personal, psychological, social, political, economic, familial, and community aspects of each participant's biography comprise the *Context* out of which their conversion decision emerges from.

After tagging and organizing my data in NVivo[281] for several months, one of the first things that struck me was how reasons and factors leading to conversion fell into two categories, push and pull. A closer reading of Rambo might have made me alert to that phenomenon sooner, but there is always a difficulty understanding what things mean until you have your hands in them yourself. Rambo clearly states that factors in one's environment encourage (or discourage), insist upon (or ignore), provide (or withhold) permission:

Context

Nineteen women were interviewed, eleven white and eight Latina.

Sixteen expressed a prior belief in God: ten were Catholic, and six were Protestant. Three interviewees said they had become atheists before converting. One atheist had been raised Wiccan, the other two Catholic. In terms of how religious converts' parents were, two had extremely religious parents, eleven had moderately religious parents, five had parents who were not very religious, and one had parents who were not religious at all.

Four converts–three Latinas (Adela, Layla, Wynona) and Macrae–had parents who divorced. Family economic status was described as extremely poor for Adela, Channing, Wynona (3), lower middle class/poor for Esmerelda, Layla, Macrae, Magnolia, Lara, Roxie, Marta (7), middle class for Barbara, Carla, Darla, Jackie, Megan, Patsy, Rachel, Valerie (8), and upper class for Amy (1). All the Latina converts' families

[281] NVivo is a Software program for organizing textual data. See NVivo, "What Is NVivo?" NVivo, accessed March 25, 2019, http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/what-is-nvivo.

were poor or very poor, whereas the majority of white converts' families were middle or upper class, with only Channing and Macrae among white converts having been raised in the extremely poor or poor categories.

One difference between Latinas and whites is that with the exception of Marta (she came to the United States as an adult from Mexico) and Adela who was raised in Puerto Rico and then came to the mainland as an adult, the Latinas were raised by immigrant parents. Four (Esmeralda, Layla, Magnolia and Lara) came to the United States when they were under the age of five. This life background sets them apart from the white converts who were all born and raised in the United States, and their parents were not immigrants.

Only one Latina's parents were college educated, whereas at least half the white converts' parents had gone to college. Sixty-three percent of the nineteen participants had BA or MA degrees, which is nearly twice the percentage, 33%, of American women overall.[282] Over 50% of Latinas in the study had BA degrees, whereas in the general population only 15% do.[283] Of those without a college degree, one had some college, and the remaining two had high school diplomas. Of the white women in the study, seven were college graduates, while four had some college.

All of my participants identified as Democrats.[284] According to Pew Research, 66% of United States Muslims identify with the Democratic party, while 13% identify

[282] Camille L. Ryan and Kurt Bauman, "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015," United States Census Bureau, March 29, 2016, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.html.
[283] Jens Manuel Krogstad, "5 Facts about Latinos and Education," Pew Research Center, July 28, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/28/5-facts-about-latinos-and-education/.
[284] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 197.

with the Republican party.[285] This preponderance of Democrats is undoubtedly due to the geographical areas, Los Angeles and Boston, where the participants were sought.

Brief biographies of the women can be found in the Appendix. As with any study of lived experience, a different set of participants would produce entirely different stories. Nonetheless, we can draw a number of useful observations and conclusions from these women's lives, as well as identify further avenues of research.

Conversion Must Be Possible

One of the most important aspects of converting to Islam is that it must be not only *conceivable* but actually *possible*. As Wohlrab-Sahr points out,

> In addition, there must be a societal context that makes religious choice possible; that is, there must be the sense that the society allows thinking about conversion to a religion that seems ultimately foreign to many people in Western societies. For this reason, Muslim converts usually refer positively to a pluralistic situation that allows them to deviate from the religious orientations and behavior of the majority.[286]

Put another way, if converting to a new religion is simply inconceivable in one's life *Context*, as it was for my friends growing up in Pakistan, there will be no conversion.

Crisis

Among the white converts, 9 out of 11 related significant mental health issues, stemming from significant life crises and trauma. Only two, Jackie and Valerie, had what

[285] Pew Research Center, "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/.
[286] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 73.

can be described as normative or non-traumatic lives.

Among the Latina converts, most experienced poverty as children. Only one of the eight Latinas experienced sexual abuse (although another hinted at the possibility but did not disclose details). Only one of eight Latinas reported serious mental health issues, and 6 of 8 reported "normal"—not easy but also not traumatic, lives. This lack of self-reportage on mental health issues may reflect a traditionally Catholic stigma against mental illness and distrust of psychological counseling,[287] but this researcher does not think so. Two of four former Catholics among the white converts did report mental health issues. Perhaps not a Catholic stigma, but a Latina: according to the National Alliance for Mental Illness, Latinx suffer from mental illness at the same rate as the general population, yet only 10% seek treatment with mental health professionals,[288] far below the 45% of Americans in general who needed help and sought it.[289]

One question that arises is, are white converts more likely to have suffered from childhood traumas and/or mental health issues than non-white converts? In other words, despite indicating very similar spiritual, family, communal and societal goals for conversion, are white women primarily attempting to improve their mental health and well-being *irrespective of their environment*, while Latinas are seeking to enhance well-being *because of their environment*, by distancing themselves from their difficult childhoods and neighborhoods?

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[287] Anna Weaver, "Through a Glass Darkly: How Catholics Struggle with Mental Illness," *US Catholic,* February 2010, https://www.uscatholic.org/node/5811.
[288] "Latino Mental Health," NAMI, accessed May 1, 2018, https://www.nami.org/find-support/diverse-communities/latino-mental-health.
[289] Julian Inasi, "More Americans Continue to Receive Mental Health Services, but Substance Use Treatment Levels Remain Low," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, September 17, 2-15, https://www.samhsa.gov.

There have been so few studies of white and Latina American converts, one cannot guess. What can be surmised is that for all nineteen women, Islam has been somewhat of a panacea for trauma, mental illness, and difficult life circumstances.

Quest

Haddad noted that many of the Western female converts in her study were "serial converts," that is, converts who have been on a spiritual journey and have previously committed fully to different faiths and spiritual traditions before finding Islam.[290] Six of my nineteen participants–Adela, Barbara, Layla, Lara, Esmerelda, and Patsy–indicated they had explored multiple religions prior to converting to Islam, including Buddhism, Jewish mysticism, Hinduism, and multiple sects of Christianity. Adela describes how Islam resonated with her:

> I spent ten years not wanting to believe in anything and then I started feeling the emptiness and so I started looking into Hinduism and Buddhism. I also looked into Catholicism and learnt how to pray to the saints and all those things, and that's when I was introduced to Islam. It was the religion that touched my heart and resonated with me. I knew that it was the right choice for me.

Channing describes not feeling a connection to her Christian roots:

> I never felt any sort of connection [with] different Christian churches, from first grade until college with different friends: Catholic churches, Protestant of various types, Assemblies of God, Apostolic, Baptist, Church of Christ, etc.

Islam is the final destination for my participants because only practicing Muslims were sought out, but remaining a Muslim is a matter of choice. There are no estimates available for the percentage of fallen-away converts to Islam, but according to the Pew

[290] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 27-28.

Research Centre, 23% of Americans raised as Muslims no longer identify with the faith.[291]

In the United States, "becoming Muslim" may be thought of as falling within the spectrum of benign self-care activities, and yet this choice is distinct from most others. As Wohlrab-Sahr points out, the choice of Islam is made different by the negative associations made to it:

> you can choose what you like [but] [c]onversion to Buddhism has a different connotation from conversion to Islam. Those who convert to Islam enter the context of a history of polarization that has lasted for centuries. Even in the historical imagination of European nations, especially in the mythological narratives about their origins, Islam is primarily addressed as "Europe's absolute antithesis and negation, against which the only option was battle" (François and Schulze 1998, 25 [translated by author]). Whether they want to or not, converts participate in this history of polarization. Usually they do not only participate in this history as "victims," but also consciously make use of it, more or less. Conversion, then—scientific observers take note—is used as a means of distinction.[292]

There is a pecking order in the popular assessment of religions in the West. Buddhism is intellectually chic. In Australia, and to a less degree in the United States, there is an appreciation of the sacred sites and spirits, the reverence for land and nature expressed by Aboriginal spirituality.[293] Islam, on the other hand, is widely viewed through stereotypical lenses, and conversion to Islam (as opposed to Buddhism, for example) is regarded as an aberration.

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[291] "Losing Their Religion The Number of Ex-Muslims in America Is Rising," *Economist* 426, no. 9083 (March 17, 2017): 33; Besheer Mohamed and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciupac, "The Share of Americans Who Leave Islam Is Offset by Those Who Become Muslim," Pew Research Center, January 26, 2018, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/26/the-share-of-americans-who-leave-islam-is-offset-by-those-who-become-muslim/.
[292] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 73-74.
[293] Abdallah Saeed, and Anthony Johns, "Muslims in Australia: The Building of a Community," in *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible,* ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 195-216.

Islam has been made threatening for political reasons, first because Muslims occupied areas of the planet historically important to religious crusaders, second because they occupied areas with significant natural resources such as India, or deposits of crude oil such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. In essence, the personal quest of converts today takes place against a backdrop formed by centuries-old quests for domination and wealth.

The American experience is not one single thing. *Contexts*, *Crises*, and *Quests* are all unique. But one thing that is true is that in a pluralistic, heterogeneous country like the United States is in many areas, it is both possible and permissible to meet and engage a Muslim neighbor in conversation. The next chapter describes the ways my participants first encountered Islam.

Chapter VII.

Encounter and *Interaction*

The previous chapter presented aspects of my participants' backgrounds, leading up to their first encounter with Islam. This chapter describes how they first learned about Islam, usually by meeting a Muslim with whom they felt comfortable enough to talk.

Rambo's fourth and fifth stages of religious conversion are *Encounter* and *Interaction*. This is where *relationships* are established, *rituals* are explained and "tried on," religious *rhetoric* is considered and analyzed for plausibility and reasonableness, and *roles* for potential converts are explored.[294] There is no substitute for a real human being to help a potential convert make sense of what they are considering embracing as a new way of life.

While a common perception persists, that women convert to Islam only to please a potential spouse, this (and previous) research found that perception to be false in the majority of cases. Of the nineteen participants in this study, five were introduced to Islam by friends and neighbors, five by future spouses, five at school, two during travel abroad, and two through their jobs. None of my participants reported first encounters with Muslims and Islam over the internet, as Nieuwkerk suggested was common.[295]

Unlike various sects of Christianity, which together field by some estimate over 400,000 missionaries worldwide in any one year,[296] Islamic proselytization for new female converts to Islam is far less active and overt, and *da'wah* (proselytization) in their

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[294] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 107.
[295] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion and Islam," 117.
[296] "Statistics," About Missions, accessed August 13, 2018, http://www.aboutmissions.org/statistics.html.

case relies primarily on Muslims trying to live an exemplary life, and then answering questions from those who wish to learn. Worldwide, the most active Muslim proselytizing is focused on getting non-Sunni Muslims—Shia or Sufi— to convert to Sunni Islam, specifically to the conservative Salafi variation originating in Saudi Arabia. The largest Muslim organization in the world, *Tablighi Jamaat* ("Proselytizing Group"), has just this aim, with several million adherents worldwide, according to the FBI, 50,000 in the United States.[297] While *Tablighi Jamaat* is active in America (and extensive evidence exists that the group's teachings are mostly indistinguishable from the radical Wahhabi orthodox-jihadist ideology shared by many terrorists),[298] especially in American prisons, the group does not appear to reach female converts.[299]

My research concurs with that of McGinty, who found that none of the women she studied had been a target of a Muslim missionary and instead each became interested in Islam by witnessing what they saw as an attractive "Muslim way of life" through friends, co-workers, or through trips to Muslim countries.[300] The converts pursued Islam, not the other way around.

Curiosity may be the one thing all converts have in common. According to Haddad, women who had intellectual issues with Christianity and turned to Islam out of

[297] Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Tablighi Jamaat: An Indirect Line to Terrorism," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, January 23, 2008, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/tablighi-jamaat-indirect-line-terrorism.
[298] Alex Alexiev, "Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions," *Middle East Quarterly* 12, no.1 (2005): 3-11, https://www.meforum.org/articles/2005/tablighi-jamaat-jihad-s-stealthy-legions.
[299] Religion News Service, "Islam in America: In Prisons, a Declaration of Faith Often Means Conversion to Islam," RNS, January 24, 1996, https://religionnews.com/1996/01/24/top-story-islam-in-americal-in-prisons-a-declaration-of-faith-often-means-c/.
[300] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 19.

intellectual curiosity, often later converted to Islam because they found Islam's theology more logical and easier to understand.[301]

Previous research indicates that other Muslims, and the convert's relationship to them, do influence their decision to convert, to varying degrees.[302] Anne Roald's research suggests it is important for converts to know Muslims so that positive images can be associated with the religion in order to counter the negative image of Islam in the West.[303] Similarly, Rambo in his seven stages of conversion stresses stage four, "encounter" with advocates, in the absence of which he claims conversion is extremely unlikely.[304] Zebiri argues that the quality and the length of time one knows Muslims is more important than simply knowing them.[305] An important decision like converting to Islam never occurs in a social vacuum.[306] Or as Wohlrab-Sahr points out:

> These conversions would not have occurred without some process of pluralization as a precondition for religious choice. Even though some people in the study may have encountered Islam while traveling to foreign countries, in most of the cases they were introduced to Islam by Muslims in their own country.[307]

The willingness of friends, boyfriends, spouses, and neighbors to share experiences and answer questions is what tipped the scales towards Islam for my participants. More ongoing process than event, the companionship and mentorship gained through these series of dialogues made conversion much more approachable. Most often, converts explain that the inner peace and aura of calm tranquility they observed in

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[301] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 19-47.
[302] Roberto Tottoli, *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West* (Abington: Routledge, 2014), 269; Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 68, 95; Inloes and Takim, "Conversion to Twelver Shi'ism," 3-24.
[303] Roald*, New Muslims in the European Context*.
[304] Rambo, "Theories of Conversion," 259-271.
[305] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 98-111.
[306] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 47.
[307] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 73.

Muslims is what attracted them to Islam.[308] To a great extent, what converts are after is a way of life—a way of feeling, a way of being—that they see in exemplary Muslims. "I want to do whatever it takes to be like that" seems to be behind conversions, far more than any specific spiritual/theological or rational reasons.

As for first encounters, none of the converts in this study were approached by Muslims specifically trying to attract converts to Islam. Some researchers point out that some converts "began to look into Islam and to learn more without any intent to convert."[309] The following are the ways Islam and Muslims were first encountered by the women in my study.

Friends and Neighbors

Like those in previous studies of converts, most of my participants were impressed by the ordinary Muslims encountered in their daily lives. Macrae echoed a common theme:

> For me, the most compelling feature of Islam is Muslims themselves. In my life, their living examples have brimmed with vitality, acumen, generosity, and depth. As far as I know, superficiality is alien to a Muslim. All my interactions with Muslims, even the more difficult ones, have been collections of connective, deeply truthful, and rich moments.

Wynona was impressed by the orderliness and unity of a neighboring Somali family, especially in contrast to her own chaotic household. Ultimately, she became close to the sisters and was effectively adopted into their family after being kicked out of her own home as a result of her conversion.

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[308] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 47.
[309] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 27.

Marriage

According to van Nieuwkerk, relatives and friends often believe converts are being forced or brainwashed by romantic partners and suspect the converts are being irrational.[310] From my observations, the women I interviewed are too much in the world, and of the world, to have been brainwashed.

Five of my nineteen participants (26%) were introduced to Islam by a man they were dating, a ratio corresponding roughly with Zebiri's research, which found that about a third of her sample had been married to or had a relationship with a Muslim prior to conversion.[311] Another study by Inoles and Takim found that 43% of women converts stated that a Shi'a male partner had influenced their conversion but also found that all of the women converts insisted that the decision to convert had been their own, and that before converting they had investigated Islam on their own.[312] Esmerelda describes a similar experience: "I was introduced to Islam by my current husband, whom I had met in college. But he definitely did not impose it on me, it was just that next step for my own spirituality."

It is difficult to know whether what converts say in this regard is true, or whether they have altered their conversion narratives *ex-post facto* in order to address the brainwashing and coercion accusations coming from families. Wohlrab-Sahr reports that while there are cases in which Muslim men pressure their wives to convert to Islam, her own small study found the opposite: in some cases, the men were looking for a Western, non-Muslim woman and did not actually want their wives to convert. Instead, it is often

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[310] Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "Biography and Choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 19, no. 4 (2008): 431.
[311] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 15.
[312] Inloes and Takim, "Conversion to Twelver Shi'ism," 3-24.

the female converts that pushed their partners to re-embrace their Muslim origins.[313] Two of the converts in my study, Barbara and Valerie, were likewise more devout than their born-Muslim husbands. Several researchers indicate that converts often go through a "holier than thou" stage which is popularly referred to as "convertitis."[314] My research did not specifically ask about converts' attitudes immediately after conversion, but no examples of early-on zealotry as a response to marriage or conversion arose in conversation.

One participant, Jackie, did actually convert to Islam out of convenience, without so much as reading the Quran, at the behest of her husband:

> I met an Egyptian man on vacation visiting his extended family in my hometown. He started chatting me up and impressed me so much at the time that I married him four months later. I didn't really bother to read the Quran or research anything else about the religion before converting, . . . [I just said] my *shahada* a few days before we got married.

Original reasons aside, Jackie later in life found Islam to be meaningful and useful. She remained a Muslim even after this marriage ended and ultimately married another Muslim. Barbara likewise was introduced to Islam by a man she dated (but did not marry) and remained interested in Islam, converting later on.

While the converse is not true, Islam has no requirement that Muslim men marry Muslim women. None of the women in this study described having felt coerced and, in fact, most were told they could keep their own religion. Here is Magnolia: "Before we married my husband said, 'These are my conditions: you keep your religion, but our

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[313] Wohlrab- Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 79.

[314] Abdal-Hakim Murad, a prominent British academic and a Muslim convert coined the term "convertitis," at a conference in 1997. Murad stated that the term "convertitis" captures "the initial and quite understandable response of many newcomers is to become absolutists; See: Abdal-Hakim Murad, "British and Muslim?" Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender, accessed May 9, 2018, http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/british.htm.

children will be brought up Muslim, no pork and no alcohol.' And so, then I started learning about Islam."

In all cases, participants stressed the sincerity of their ongoing commitment to Islam, personal reasons rather than anything related to their spouses. A large part of the appeal of Islam to the converts I interviewed revolves around "family values," so it is not unreasonable to speculate that establishing a family of their own, which for tradition-minded women traditionally entails meeting a like-minded, family-oriented man, is the river on which all of a convert's other stated motivations float, whether she recognizes it consciously or not. The lengths that my participants and other studies' female subjects go to in order to distance themselves from the idea of undue male influence in their conversion decision seems to be a reaction to the idea that choosing a religion to please a spouse is undesirable and wrong.

Conversion to Islam because of marriage can be understood as a causality dilemma: did my participants convert to Islam and shape their lives around the goal of finding a mate who shared their values, or did they shape their lives around Islam with all its benefits to them, one requirement of which is to marry a Muslim man? Only one of the nineteen participants was never married and expressed no desire to marry.

School, Travel, and Work

Education, travel, and a diverse workplace increase the potential for meeting Muslims, and my participants described compassion for Muslims to be an important factor in their initial interest in Islam. One participant, Darla, describes how her interest in Islam began:

> Soon after 9/11, I remember thinking and worrying about the Muslim community at school. I was upset because everybody was bad-mouthing Muslims. At a multi-faith service at the school there were officiants of every religion on the face of the earth—except Islam.

Rather than simply observing the fear in the air, the malice against Muslims, and the absence of Islamic leaders at an interfaith service, Darla's sense of justice and empathy led her to a small act of radical kindness:

> I wrote a note, "Look, if nobody else will tell you this today, I know this [terrorist attack] doesn't represent you, and I know this is not okay by your religion, and I know that you are good people," and slipped it under the door where the Muslim students prayed. I felt I had to own it, so I put my name and number with the note. A few weeks later a student called me and invited me to a class on Islam that still happens every Monday in a mosque in Cambridge.

Half of my participants' first encounters with Islam were in school, travel, or work settings. Amy first learned about Islam in the sixth grade from a teacher who assigned a chapter on the Middle East, telling Amy: " 'This is really important–especially now.' " Amy remembers thinking, "Well, this doesn't sound so bad. This is not what I've been hearing about Islam." She converted to Islam in another educational setting, while attending an elite private college for women, against her parents' wishes; she converted in secret, as she feared losing her parents' emotional and financial support as a result. Another interviewee, Channing, was in charge of an interfaith group for high school students while teaching and noticed that the group had no Muslim students and wondered why that was so. This led her to join the Islam 101 class at a mosque in Cambridge.

Researchers such as Turner and Woodlock [315] indicate that positive encounters with Muslims while traveling were important to converts' interest in Islam, which was

[315] Turner, "Contracts with Clauses," 61; Rachel Woodlock, "Praying Where They Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne, Australia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2010): 267.

true for two of my participants, Roxie and Layla. After 9/11 on a trip to Ethiopia, Layla met an Arabic teacher who gave her a copy of the Quran, which she found "was really pure and answered a lot of questions for me." While traveling in Morocco, Roxie became enthralled by Islamic art, "because it is spiritually based, I always felt an affinity for [its] non-narrative perspective, the geometrical patterns, . . . the spiritual element that operates in that." In the literature on conversion to Islam I found no other reference to Islamic art having been a factor attractive to converts.

Roxie's interest in Islam sparked by Islamic art led me in turn to wonder whether any converts had cited an interest in the astonishingly rich history of Islamic scientific discoveries either, but none had. There was a hint about Islam's relative openness to inquiry in something Channing said: "[In Islam] you are expected to try and grow your knowledge, and learn to reason, and that's an expectation that is definitely not in Christianity [where it is] looked down upon."

Two of my participants first encountered Islam in their work lives. Adela, a social worker, explained that she "[gets] to meet a lot of Muslim families who talked to me about Islam. I consider them to be very good examples of what family should be."

9/11 as First Encounter with Islam

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 sparked extensive interest in Islam,[316] and my research bears out that suggestion. Amy, Barbara, Darla, and Layla all mentioned 9/11 as the starting point for their exploration of Islam. Valerie had been married to a Muslim for more than twenty years without

[316] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 19-21.

converting to Islam and decided to convert out of solidarity for maligned Muslims after 9/11. This corresponds with Haddad's research: having experienced an Islam in no way connected to a terrorist-supporting, violent way of life and wanting to counter the false accusations against it made her subjects all the more sympathetic to it.[317]

Proselytizing among Latinas

According to Morales, Latino Muslim Organizations (LMOs) took advantage of media coverage following the September 11 attacks and reported dramatic increases in membership but were concerned that "negative media coverage is not only resulting in an increased rate of conversion to Islam, but also in an increased adoption of extremist forms of Islam."[318] Although there are several organizations dedicated to bringing new Latinas into Islam, two most active ones are LALMA and PIEDAD, none of the Latinas in my study were introduced to Islam through them.[319] Likewise, none of the non-Latina interviewees were actively recruited in any sort of organized fashion.

Differences between Latina and White Converts' First Encounters

Among my participants there were no discernible differences between white and Latina converts' first encounter with Islam.

Muslim da'wah organizations like the Muslim Student Association (MSA) are found on American college campuses and some of their students try to spread the

[317] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 50.
[318] Harold Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design A Study of Race, Religion and the Internet in American Minority Discourse" (PhD diss., University of California Riverside, 2012), 211, (ProQuest AAT 10265152).
[319] One of my participants, Marta Galedary, co-founded the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association (LALMA).

message of Islam through their own example.[320] White female students can also interact with these students and become curious about Islam. One participant, Debra (white), was urged by a female student from this group to learn more about Islam by going to an introductory Islam 101 class at a Cambridge mosque. Another interviewee, Anne, was already very interested in Islam before joining college and joined the Muslim student group shortly after she matriculated.

None of my Latina converts were introduced to Islam by da'wah organizations. However, for current and future Latina converts, there are at least four organizations (LALMA, PIEDAD, LADO and Alianza Islamica) in the United States that proselytize to Latina women, and no equivalents for white women.

Chapter VIII.

Theme 1: Spiritual/Theological

In what ways were you dissatisfied with Christianity?

Why do you find Islam preferable as a theology?

What reservations do you have about Islamic theology, if any?

[320] Muslim Student Association (MSA) does not describe itself as a da'wah organization, but proselytizing especially on-campus is one of the major activities it undertakes. Students on retreats with MSA are taught dawah strategies; see Muslim Student Association, "Inaugural MSA National Leadership Retreat," MSA National, June 30, 2015, http://msanational.org/blog/inaugural-msa-national-leadership-retreat/.

Merriam-Webster defines spiritual as "relating to sacred matters . . . concerned with religious values . . . relating to supernatural beings or phenomena."[321] Rambo defines theology as "the disciplined effort to articulate beliefs and ways of life in fresh and challenging ways so that the religious message can be accepted and understood by people of various cultures."[322] The "religious message" of Islam is the core set of beliefs, or dogma, defined in the Quran and the *hadith*. The phrase "spiritual/theological" is used in this paper as a stand-in for both core beliefs and the way they are represented, dogma and theology, primarily as they relate to one's inner beliefs about one's relationship to the universe.

Rambo's *Commitment* stage is focused on the decision-making process. Because he deals primarily with Christian, sometimes evangelical, religious conversion, he finds *rituals*, *surrender*, *testimony and biographical reconstruction*, and *motivational reformulation*, as universal themes, whereas I do not believe these all apply in the same way to conversion to Islam. Surrendering to God is part of the process, and indeed, the word *Islam* means in its Arabic derivation "submit (to God)." However, there is no momentous, ecstatic, born-again moment of surrender in my participants' or any other Islamic conversion stories I have found, no rapturous baptism, no testifying in front of an assembly speaking tongues. From what I observed, the convert to Islam is much calmer and more deliberate than converts to evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity.

The subjects of *biographical reconstruction* and *motivational reformulation* are woven throughout this paper; making sense of what converts say matters to them, in light

[321] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "spiritual," accessed May 20, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spiritual.
[322] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 171.

of their "actual" life stories as best the researcher can determine, is at the heart of understanding religious conversion.

Chapter IV, the Organizational Framework, suggests ways the *Commitment* stage may be usefully divided into four levels of being, from the broadest (societal) level, to the community, family, and personal—or what I call spiritual/theological reasons for conversion.

As Rambo writes in his *Understanding Religious Conversion*, "The quest for the sacred and the experience of the holy, the yearning for transcendence, and the human desire for interaction with the supernatural pervade human history."[323] Most of the women I interviewed were drawn to Islam because they craved a closer relationship with God and wanted religion to be the focus of their daily lives.

The faith traditions my interviewees left behind are listed in the following table.

[323] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 3.

Table 1. Religious Tradition of Participants.

Religion	Latina	White	Both
Catholic	6	4	10
Pentecostal	1		1
7th Day Adventist	1		1
Presbyterian		1	1
Methodist		1	1
Baptist		1	1
Episcopalian		1	1
Atheist		3	3
Total Converts	8	11	19

It should be noted that "Christian" here means my participants' own experience of Christian ideas and practice. There are 2.2 billion Christians in the world espousing numerous denominations, sects, and belief groups. Audrey Maslim, a psychologist whose research focuses on religious conversion, found that the converts she interviewed took the issues they had with their own particular Christian denomination and generalized them to Christianity in general, and then listed those problems as the main motivation for their conversion to Islam.[324]

[324] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam in the United States," 34.

Subtheme 1:

In What Ways Were You Dissatisfied with the Christian Religious Tradition?

Danish convert Annette Ballaoui describes growing up with the wrong religion, in her case the "militant atheism" of her parents, in terms of shoes: "I often compare it to shoes. You know if you have shoes that are one size too small, you can wear them, you can walk around, but there's something bothering you constantly."[325] This chapter presents my own interviewees' spiritual/theological reasons for conversion to Islam, reveals why they thought Islam was a better fit for their lives, and, for two converts, why Sufism was an even better fit.

The problems my participants had with Christianity are similar to those found in several previous studies: the concepts of Trinity and original sin; the gender of God; confession and the existence of a hierarchy and intermediaries between believers and God; biblical inauthenticity; and Christianity being fear-based.[326] Among reasons for conversion to Islam, problems with Christianity were cited by my participants more often than any other. A handful of quotations should suffice to convey the flavor of their complaints.

The subject of compulsory confession came up regularly and passionately as a hated aspect of childhood religion. As Rachel asked, "How in the world can [priests]

[325] Akbar Ahmed, "This Muslim Convert is Changing the Conversation About Women in Islam With Music and Humor," *The Huffington Post*, last modified June 24, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/muslim-convert-women-music_us_5941d53de4b0d3185486f32e.
[326] Haifaa Jawad, "Female Conversion to Islam: The Sufi Paradigm," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

know that God forgave me or not? Did God whisper in their ears?" Another participant, Macrae, stubbornly refused to go to confession:

> I understand you have to believe some of the seen and some of the unseen. But I didn't understand why I couldn't ask God for forgiveness and why I had to ask a mortal man to ask God to forgive me. So, this became a really big issue with my family because I really kind of dug my heels in as a kid and, as I got older, I just I didn't go to confession.

Regarding the much-edited, man-made, Christian Bible, Darla observed, "I feel like people played 'telephone' for 350 years before the Council of Nicaea. I just have never been able to fully believe everything that the Bible says, especially the New Testament." Megan felt "the Catholic religion was very based on fear, [but] in the Quran, I was realizing how merciful and forgiving Allah was. I could talk to Him directly and ask for His forgiveness and help. I didn't have to pay for the sins of Adam and Eve—original sin—I just had to pay for my own sins." Channing, an atheist prior to conversion, described her impression of Christian churches as "very fire and brimstone, a very 'holier than thou' judgmental atmosphere, no sense of welcoming or love, much more of an interest in fixing you than getting to know you."

However, not all converts were critical of Christian theology. Amy suggested it is not an either/or question:

> Islam was very similar to what I already believed. A lot of converts [say] 'Oh, I was not satisfied with Christianity or Judaism or Buddhism' and then search for something else. For me, that wasn't the case. I just found out about Islam, and it felt like a better fit for me. There was nothing necessarily about Christianity that was wrong.

As Rambo proposed, conversion usually involves a high degree of compatibility with one's prior beliefs.[327] My participant Amy's observation aligns with Ali Köse's

[327] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 62.

research, suggesting that converts believe, in the face of rising secularism and materialism in the Western world, that it is not a debate between Christianity and Islam, but a matter of choosing the religion that offers them the best environment to include the sacred and the spiritual into their daily lives. [328] His British convert subjects were upset with progressive reform—allowing homosexuality or permitting women to become priests, for instance—of Christian churches in the U.K. and subsequently turned to Islam because, for them, it harkened back to a traditional lifestyle which they believe thrived in the past.[329] Wohlrab-Sahr research reflects Köse's findings: women convert to Islam largely to put a maximum distance between themselves and a rapidly changing *religious* [emphasis added] landscape.[330] In contrast to these British and European studies, none of my participants mentioned "modernizing reforms of the Christian church" as a problem, possibly because most of the American women interviewed were coming from a Catholic or fundamentalist Christian upbringing, where, for instance, female priests are still not allowed.[331]

Subtheme 1a: Christian Clergy's Inability to Intellectually Engage and Satisfy Churchgoers

In addition to having problems with what Christians believe, my participants had problems with how Christian clerics *act*. Of particular concern were: refusal to answer questions, salesmanship, the focus on money, and child molestation.

[328] Ali Köse, "Secular to the Sacred," 301-12.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 351-362.
[331] Köse, "Secular to the Sacred," 301-312.

Whether or not there actually are satisfactory answers to children's questions about Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say, by their report, none of my participants were given any. Prior research also found that questions converts had as young people were never satisfactorily answered, and many of their theological queries were resolved by learning about Islam.[332] Zebiri's research on conversion to Islam in the U.K. suggests that debating the merits of Islam and Christianity with Muslims is what leads many people to convert and fosters an intellectual relationship with Islam.[333]

It is exactly this sort of dialogue that my participants craved. As Channing suggested, "a huge reason that Christianity was a major turn off for me is [that] asking questions was bad. Islam is definitely not the same." Unfulfilled childhood curiosity played a large role for Rachel as well: "We attended [Catholic] religion classes every week. I'd ask questions, and I was told not to come any more."

In contrast to the conversational approach to learning about Islam, Christianity was often seen as being "sold" to my participants. In Channing's experience, "At the Christian church they don't care who you are, and what brought you there. Immediately they start talking about Jesus just like a salesperson [would]." In contrast, the teacher at her mosque, "first and foremost wants to get to know everybody in the group, tries to know who they are." Along with salesmanship, the monetary focus in Christian churches was critiqued. Megan opined, "people have to support the church, you have to pay for your seat, they have envelopes for just about everything; I thought it was a money-making scheme." Asked how that differed from the Islamic practice of charity, or *zakat*,

[332] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 51.
[333] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 92.

she pointed out that in Islam you are not asked to give directly to the mosque but to a recipient of your own choosing, whereas in her experience, Christian organizations solicit money for themselves.

Estella tried several sects of Christianity in her teens before returning to Catholicism and found "in my later teenage years, I came across a lot of men who were looking to take advantage of me. For priests, because I was curious and asking questions, it was like an opportunity for them to take advantage of me as a young girl, which *Alhamdulillah* never happened but, you know, they tried." Roxie, like many of the former Catholics I interviewed, was turned away from the Church by scandal, "I found the Catholic church was in great conflict with itself. I was disgusted with the child molestation."

Subtheme 2: Why is Islamic Theology Preferred over Christian Theology?

For American women converts, Islam offers a satisfying alternative to Christianity: a consistent and simple theology; a direct link to God; the direct word of God; an emphasis on love and compassion rather than fear.[334] Confusing ideas like Trinity are replaced by a straightforward monotheism. Islam, like Judaism, finds no evidence of "original sin" being passed on to children. Confession, hierarchy, and intermediary priests are replaced by a direct relationship with God. Issues with biblical inauthenticity and history, where multiple authors whom all claim to have been hearing God's word are, in turn, later curated by Vatican councils, are replaced by one single

[334] Maslim, "Women's Conversion to Islam in the United States."

conduit for God's word, the Quran as revealed to prophet Muhammad.[335] While Muslims also believe in hell, according to my participants, the fear-based focus of many Christian sermons is in stark contrast to the love and compassion approach of Islam.

Historically, Larry Poston suggests that conversion to Islam from the late 1800s through the 1980s have been motivated by five factors: Islam's easy to understand monotheism versus the complicated Trinity of Christianity; Islam's rationality as opposed to Christianity perceived illogical ideas, such as Jesus's reincarnation and resurrections; Islam being practical and realistic in its worldview, whereas Christianity being "otherworldly"; and finally Islam offering direct contact with God, but in Christianity one has to rely on the intercessory powers of the priest.[336]

My research confirms Poston's findings; I found that while all of the participants expressed an intellectual compatibility with Islam, only one, Amy, researched the different sects of Islam before she converted. Initially converting to Shi'ism, she later decided Sunnism made more theological sense to her. Because the introductory classes to Islam at their mosques were conducted by Sunni Muslims, my other participants became Sunni by default.[337]

Every convert indicated that reading the Quran was a revelatory experience. Rachel's recollections are worth retelling, if only to share in the sheer joy of her discovery:

> I would curl up on the couch and just read and read, soaking it all in, and I was like, 'Wow, it really does have everything to do with God!' It has been 20 years, I can't remember everything, but it was a big awakening for me, and I had these moments where you really can see that everything is from God, has to do with

[335] Larry Poston, "The Future of Da'wah in North America," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 (1991): 503.
[336] Ibid., 505-506.

> God. You notice all the flowers, you realize why the trees are there, the sun is shining, and you are like, 'There is a God!' and you feel like running around and saying that. I was pretty elated and excited, 'Wow, this is it! Everybody should wake up!'

Rachel is one of the two converts who eventually converted to Sufism.

Subtheme 2a: Appeal of Sufi Islam

In their quest for a more direct connection with God, some turn to Sufi Islam. Having already accepted Islam as a teaching that fits better with their own personal beliefs, two of the converts I interviewed found that "standard Islam" was only a stepping stone. Previous research indicates that Sufism has played a crucial role in attracting white Americans to Islam. For instance, Haddad suggests that without Sufism, most American converts would probably not have accepted Islam.[338] In fact, Sufism was the initial attractor to Islam for none of the nineteen converts I interviewed.

This outcome was not expected based on the literature review. Esmerelda and Rachel became interested in Sufism only years after they had already converted to Islam. This relatively low number of converts interested in Sufism may well be a quirk of geography, since this research focused on Boston and Los Angeles, and the largest Sufi centers are in New York and Philadelphia.

Sufism is often derided by traditional Muslims. For example, Patsy was explicitly told by her Islam 101 teacher "not to look into Sufism, don't even bother with it," and so she did not. Rachel's Wahhabi Muslim husband told her Sufism was a transgression from orthodox Islam. But to her, orthodox Islam is more concerned with "outside appearance, roll up your pants before you pray, stand this way," while her chosen path, Sufism,

[338] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 46.

focuses more on the "cleaning of the heart" in order to have a closer relationship with God and live a pious life.

Esmerelda reflected that she was always a spiritual person who believed "we are all energetic beings, all of existence is energy and the energy of our Creator," a view she later discovered was supported by Sufism. Despite discouragement from her Sunni husband, she went to retreats offered by the Sufi University in California. Today, she is a mental health counselor who uses techniques of "Islamic energy healing" in her practice.

David Westerlund predicted that white American women converts might find it hard to adapt to the gender segregation prevalent in the vast majority of mosques and Islamic centers.[339] Traditionally, women are relegated to the back room of mosques during communal prayers, are seated behind men during Friday *khutbas* (sermon), and the privileged position of *Imam*, the person who leads the communal prayers, is reserved for men only.[340] Unlike other sects of Islam in America, Sufism has made considerable reforms to include women in many of its mystical practices, which is a fundamental reason why women are drawn to it.[341] For example, perhaps the most famous Sufis, the Turkish Mevlevi order, only allows men to be whirling dervishes, but in America women are permitted to "turn" and become whirling dervishes if they so choose. In the United States, there are even Sufi sects headed by women, like Sheikha Fariha of the Nur Ashi Jerrahi order in New York City.[342]

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[339] David Westerlund, "The Contextualization of Sufism in Europe," in *Sufism in Europe and North America*, ed. David Westerlund (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 24.
[340] Nevin Reda, "Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 2, no. 21 (2004): 77-97.
[341] Marcia Hermansen, "What's American About Sufi Movements?" in *Sufism in Europe and North America,* ed. David Westerlund (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 36-64.
[342] Ibid., 56-58.

However, both of my Sufi converts, Esmerelda and Rachel, criticize women being in charge of Sufi worship. Both prefer enforced gender segregation and attend Sufi mosques that reflect that preference. So not only was Sufism not an initial attractor to Islam for them, the practice of allowing women to lead worship was rejected by both women who eventually converted to Sufism. The rejection of mixed-gender worship was almost universal among the converts I interviewed, as we will see in subsequent chapters.

Subtheme 3: Atheist Converts

According to Mossiere's research, some subjects identified as atheists before converting to Islam, and found the change relatively easy since they had already adopted what they later found to also be "Muslim values" before converting, avoiding pork and alcohol, and wearing modest clothes, for instance.[343] Channing, Jackie, and Macrae in my own study indicated they were atheists before converting to Islam and likewise found the transition to be a natural extension of how they already lived. Europe is less religious than America, and many converts to Islam are former atheists. In one Danish study,

> [t]he majority of converts who define their families as "atheists" especially emphasize the ways that they have "*had to learn to believe*," . . . [and go] . . . through a process of re-socialization to religious belief in general, and to belief in God in particular.[344]

One of the former atheists in the current study was raised Wiccan, the others were raised in the Christian tradition, and none of the three mentioned needing "to learn to believe." There are born Muslims who go through the motions of worship but privately consider themselves agnostic or atheist, such as myself when I return to Pakistan, but I do

[343] Mossiere, "The Intimate and the Stranger," 100.
[344] Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined," 643-660.

not know, and did not ask, whether it is possible to freely embrace Islam as a *practice* while remaining agnostic or atheist.

Many of the women converts that Köse studied mentioned spiritual experiences such as prayers, dreams and mystical signs had directed them to Islam.[345] None of my participants mentioned prayers, dreams, or mystical signs as having any bearing on their conversion.

Summary Theme 1: Spiritual/Theological

The findings in this chapter suggest that criticizing Christianity appears to take on a somewhat exaggerated role in converts' conversion stories, an observation also made by other researchers. Haddad suggests that "Converts to any different way of thought and action are notoriously zealous in their critique of the old and defense of the new. Women who choose to adopt Islam are no different, and one can sense in their stories an eagerness to convince themselves that Islam is truly superior to Christianity in many important ways."[346] Reinterpreting past religious history may be, as Bourque suggests, part of "the process of creating a Muslim identity."[347] Likewise, Wohlrab-Sahr found in her interviews with German and American converts that many problems with former religions may have developed *after* they crossed paths with fellow converts to Islam, rather than before.[348]

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[345] Inloes and Takim, "Conversion to Twelver Shi'ism," 3-24; Köse, "Secular to the Sacred," 301-12.
[346] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 52.
[347] Nicole Bourque, "How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of the Female Muslim Identity," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 242.
[348] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 76.

The problems my participants reported having with Catholicism felt familiar: they are essentially the same as those reported to me by the more thoughtful of my childhood friends at Catholic school in Pakistan. At the same time, it is likely, and perhaps even necessary, that their issues with Catholicism have been emphasized as a way to contrast Christianity with Islam. The appeal of Islam may be emotional–wanting to be and feel like and live like exemplary Muslims or be in a relationship with a Muslim–and the rational reasons are added later.

As Nieuwkerk suggested, American women in particular are more likely to relate religious reasons for conversion to Islam than their Dutch counterparts, who focus on gender issues.[349] What is being rejected determines the reasons participants give for conversion: in America, Christianity is being rejected; in secular Holland, the Dutch ideal of emancipated women is being rejected for a different ideal of womanhood.

No differences were found between Latina and white converts' spiritual/theological reasons for conversion. As expected from converts in highly-religious America, choosing Islam is accompanied by rejecting Christianity.

Changing one's name as a way to assert a new, self-chosen, identity, was expected, especially among Latina converts,[350] but was not found. Only one participant, a white woman adopted as a baby, changed her name as a sign of her new identity; the rest kept their birth names.

None of my participants were attracted to Islam because of Sufism, which was not expected. Neither of the two Sufi participants appreciated or embraced the liberalization

[349] Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," 102.
[350] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas and Their Shahadah in Miami."

found in some Sufi groups, and preferred the traditional general segregation, which was also not expected.

The women in this study either ignore, re-interpret, or rationalize the troublesome ideas and practices present in their new religion, as do—as they note—other "People of the Book" (practitioners of other major religions built on the Christian Old Testament or Jewish Torah). On balance, my participants find the compromise worthwhile, and find the benefits of becoming a Muslim outweigh the undesirable or unreasonable elements in Islamic theology.

Chapter IX.

Theme 2: Family

The previous chapter presented the findings of this study regarding the spiritual and theological aspects of becoming a white female convert to Islam. This chapter presents what my participants had to say about their family histories and their parents' reactions to their conversion and aims to answer the following questions:

What family-related factors pushed you to make a significant change in your life?

What appeals to you when it comes to Islam in family life?

What issues do you find with non-Muslim gender relations in the United States, including American feminism and gender equality?

How do the white and Latina convert experiences differ, if they do?

McGinty writes about women converting to Islam: "The conversion allows the women, not only to explore and rethink themselves as religious selves but also as gendered selves through different ideas of gender complementarity, equality, attractiveness, desires, and womanhood."[351] *Gender complementarity* is a view that men and women have different but complementary–rather than equal–responsibilities in marriage and family life. The view is held by many Muslims, as well as devotees of other religions, including the Catholic Church:

> Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity. Physical, moral, and spiritual *difference and complementarity* [emphasis added] are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The

[351] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 85.

> harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out.[352]

Margot Badran describes the notion in an Islamic context as "upholding the notion of male predominance, regarded as benevolent predominance, in the family [calling] upon men to fulfill their duties, protecting and providing in ways that upheld the rights and dignity of women."[353] Both Catholic and Muslim doctrine agree: these "gendered selves" are primarily expressed at home, in the relationship between husband, wife, and children. According to Haddad, most converts find "the urgency of maintaining strong family units . . . to be one of its most attractive elements."[354] This chapter touches on the appeal of "strong family units" to converts raised, for the most part, under difficult family circumstances.

Family History as Backdrop for Conversion

As discussed in the chapter on *Context*, most of my participants did not enjoy stable, "traditional," family lives while growing up. One Latina describes a kind of family life not dissimilar to what the other Latina converts faced:

> Esmerelda: I come from broken home, so my father was never around, my mother was struggling, trying to raise her kids in a new country. She had to work two or three jobs, and there was no other family [around]. We were very unsupervised, so that had a negative effect on us as children. I just felt there's got to be a better way to live than the average person in America. I just felt like it was a very empty life.

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[352] Holy See, "Catechism of the Catholic Church," Holy See, accessed April 8, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm.
[353] Margot Badran, "Feminism and Conversion Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 200.
[354] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 49.

Two other Latinas also had fathers that abandoned their mothers early in their lives. The end result of mostly absent parents, for these women, was early exposure to alcohol and sex. Wynona continues, "I was drinking wine cooler by the time I was 10 years old [that] my mom gave me. I was molested by my uncle at a young age. When I was twelve years old, my boyfriend was twenty-three." Reflecting on the effect of being abandoned by her mother, Adela said only, "You don't leave little girls with an alcoholic dad."

At the same time, the "fear of family tension" is a commonly reported and important factor that converts must consider before conversion.[355] Ali Köse observed that "converting to Islam in a non- Muslim society may mean social suicide and boycott for some converts. . . . Some [parents] treated their son/daughter's acceptance of Islam as a 'social death.' "[356] But some converts find their families to be supportive, and are relieved to have a daughter "finally settled into a reliable way of life."[357]

Draw of Family Life based on Muslim Values

Research by Mossiere, as well as McGinty shows that Western women converts enjoy Islam's conservative values and emphasis on gender roles because it reminds them of previous generations, which they equate with stable family relations.[358] As Megan suggested, "When I was growing up [in the 1950's], the man was responsible for his family and there weren't any single mothers back then."

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[355] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 54.
[356] Köse, "Conversion to Islam,"143.
[357] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 55.
[358] Mossiere, "Intimate and the Stranger," 90-108; McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*.

Among the converts I interviewed, their own friends and family members initially failed to understand why women born and raised in America would choose to give up all kinds of rights and freedoms to join a religion which they believe treats women badly. The women I interviewed were drawn to Islam for reasons precisely opposite of that stereotype: they saw women (and men) being treated lovingly and with respect by their Muslim family members. Wynona got her first taste of what she saw as true family only after accepting an invitation to her Somali friends' house:

> Their family was united. When something had to be done in the house, they would do it together. I had never seen that before. [The way I grew up] I would be eating upstairs in my room, my sister would be eating downstairs in the living room, my mom would be at work, my brother would be somewhere else. So, we were never together, unless it was Christmas or Thanksgiving. I thought it was amazing that this Somali family would cook dinners together, eat together, pray together, and I thought it was so beautiful, like, this is what I want, this is the kind of family that I want to have, where we do things together.

One of the common refrains among the converts I interviewed was how important it was to have seen the way Muslims center their lives around their families.

All but one of my interviewees believe that biological differences between male and female cannot be overlooked but in fact should be given primacy in dictating how men and women live their lives. They believe that in America's struggle for gender equality, gender differences have been downplayed to the detriment of women.

The Islamic concept of gender equality is different from the dominant notions of gender equality in the West. The converts I interviewed feel that Islam teaches that though men and women are equal, they are distinct from each other and therefore have specific roles based on their gender: the man provides for his wife and family, the woman raises children and maintains the household.[359] According to Esmerelda, "Allah tells us

[359] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 32-33; Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*.

that, as far as your rights, men and women are equal. Men have equal rights, women have equal rights, and men are a degree higher than women based on the fact that they are the providers." How these beliefs affect day to day life is an open question. Even among strict and devout religious scholars of Islam, there is very little agreement about the roles of women in Muslim marriages in Western society today.[360]

Some of the converts in this study came from more traditional Latino families, where, for instance, permission from the father must be gained before chaperoned dating can commence. Lara described her husband's formal proposal, which involved not only her parents but a stand-in for her fiancé's parents: "In his tradition, he brought his uncle to ask for my father to ask me for my hand in marriage." Magnolia reported a similarly formal proposal:

> I was brought up Catholic then converted to Seventh Day Adventist, and they are very close to Islam, they don't eat pork and no alcohol. My parents were very traditional, and [this Iraqi man] invited me out and I said, "You need to come to my house and tell my parents that you want something serious and that you want to date." Everywhere that we went, we were chaperoned; then he kind of realized that, [I am] not like the typical American.

That there is a similarity between these converts' Latin American family and Muslim family traditions was found in the prior research as well: some first-generation Latina Catholics found similarities between gender roles of Catholicism and Islam,[361] and Catholics who have already converted to other religions, Shahmoradi and Hosseini suggest, are more open to conversion to Islam.[362]

[360] Roald, *Women in Islam*, 171-184.
[361] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 310-311.
[362] Shahmoradi and Hosseini, "Latina Shi'a Women in the United States of America," 27.

Non-Muslim Gender Relations in the United States, American Feminism and Gender Equality

Regarding their relation to men, my participants believe they sacrificed little and gained much. The benefits they listed included increased modesty, peace, familial unity, and more space in which to express their femininity.

Nearly all the converts in this study spoke out at length against their understanding of western feminism and "gender equality" and in favor of "gender complementarianism" and the role of "biology" as a rationale for more traditional family life. Many of the converts McGinty interviewed criticized American feminism for being egotistical and selfish,[363] while others suggest that "feminism has not liberated women; rather it has liberated men from responsibility," which has led to the breakdown of traditional family structures in the United States.[364]

Roxie summed up the prevailing feeling: "As an American female, having observed other cultures, there's a huge disrespect as far as valuing women in America is concerned. I think, [with American feminism], women always lost out more than men. I am all for women's rights and I am all for progress, for equal pay. I just think that the American culture doesn't serve women well all the time."

Out of the nineteen women I interviewed, only one called herself a feminist. The rest rejected the label, and several criticized the ideology passionately, often to the point of absurdity, which indicates a lack of understanding about the concept. In Rachel's eyes:

> [American feminists] want to make men womanly and they want to make women manly. They want to make men less men, and they want to make women more. They want to make men womanly, and they want to make women manly. To say that we are equal is wrong. I see that men have their position, and we have our

[363] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 34.
[364] Ibid.

> position, and they shouldn't cross the line, and we shouldn't cross the line, because every time that's done you end up with homosexuality on both ends.

McGinty found the "gender complementarity" of Islam is a major draw for Western women to Islam because it feels "right" to them.[365] Esmerelda echoed that sentiment, saying, "As women, we have different hormones than men, … we have a womb, we carry life in our bodies, and I think we forget [that] those are important differences."

An oft-repeated comment among my participants was that nature intended women to be "nurturers" and men to be "providers," since, as Rachel suggested, "the man is more physically strong so let him go out and work." They feel gender equality in America has diminished the value of women. Rachel continued, "In America they've taken away from the idea of being a woman. In Islam, she's the nurturer. They say that she's the heart and the man is the head. Woman is the pearl and the man is the shell; what value does a shell have without a pearl? And a pearl needs a shell. The man is the king, but he's not a king without his queen."

The idea that modern feminists do not acknowledge gender differences, while untrue, was reiterated by several of the converts I interviewed. Many of the studies done on European converts were done over twenty or more years ago. Wohlrab-Sahr's research (Germany and United States) was done between 1992 and 1996, McGinty's (Sweden and United States) was done between 1998 and 2001, Roald's (Scandinavia) was done between 1999 and 2000, and Köse's study on British converts was published in 1999. I expected that anti-feminism sentiment would have abated in twenty years, since feminism has evolved significantly since then, in part to embrace decisions like women

[365] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 85.

staying at home. What I found was that my participants, not unlike many conservatives in America today, continue to put up the same caricatured feminism as a straw woman, easy to ridicule and knock down. As we observed earlier with Christianity, what converts feel they must react *against* largely defines their stated reasons for conversion.

The one participant who considers herself a feminist, Amy, went to all-female Smith College. "I consider myself fortunate to have an all-women's group be my first Muslim community. Because it really saved me part of all the patriarchal bullshit. Since all the leadership positions were women, I think it really influenced how I see Islam now, as I consider myself a Muslim feminist and I really prioritize equality for Muslim women."

Most of my participants held negative opinions about what they understood to be both western feminism and modern-day Islamic feminism. Feminism is difficult to define, and each subject chose to define it in her own (usually quite limited) way. For example, women leading the prayers in mosques, especially for a mixed congregation was simply improper in their eyes. According to Esmerelda, American women only need feminism to protect themselves because they have historically lacked rights: "If not for Islam, I would consider myself a feminist, but women's rights are protected in Islam, so there is no need for feminism. The term feminism to me comes from just the lack of justice, and if there is justice, there is no need for feminism."

McGinty found a similar sentiment among her subjects, who objected to the popular view that Islam is inherently patriarchal, and yet still refused to embrace any form of feminism. Some referred to verses in the Quran about the equality of men and women before God, while others emphasized the right of women in Islam to seek

education and develop their talents. At the same time, many of her interview subjects argued that they felt respected in Islam not only as human beings but also as women and argued for a moderate form of gender complementarity rather than full gender equality.[366]

Roxie, Wynona, Carla, and Rachel feel that Islam has validated their decisions to stay home and raise their families, letting the husband be in charge of providing for the family financially. These converts believe that, by treating men and women equally, feminism lets men off the hook financially while forcing women to take up outside work in addition to household labor; for them, Islam is a path to the more traditional lifestyle they believe feminism has broken down. Despite this stay-at-home ideal, all but one of my nineteen participants work outside of their homes.

Ultimately, where you practice Islam is probably the most important thing to consider. If your rights as a woman are somewhat, if imperfectly, protected, then you can make a choice to eschew feminism without significant negative repercussions.

Reaction of Converts' Families

The reaction of converts' families is closely related in time to their conversion and is considered here as part of the reasons for conversion, rather than in the *Consequences* chapter, where longer-term consequences having to do with converts' own eventual Muslim husbands and families is discussed. A summary of family reactions to

[366] McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam," 474-485.

conversion are indicated in the chart below. One Latina indicated her family reaction was unknown because she never told them, certain it would be negative.

Table 2. Reactions of Family.

Reaction of Family	Latina	White
Positive	4	9
Negative	3	0
Unknown	1	0
Mixed	0	2
Total	8	11

Five of my nineteen participants reported unfavorable or mixed (one parent negative) reactions from their families. Families that disapproved of the conversion did so aggressively and caused great pain to the converted women. Wynona's brother physically assaulted her after her conversion, while her mother told her, "You need to snap out of it, you are going through something crazy, you are out of your mind. These girls are brainwashing you, this is all brainwash, religion is a cult." Her mother ended up calling the police on sixteen-year-old Wynona, and even the policeman badgered her, saying, "How could you do this to your family?" before escorting her to a shelter for adolescents.

Adela found her Puerto Rican friends and family were outwardly supportive, but suspicious:

> For the most part they think I've been brainwashed; that I've changed, and it's all because of the Muslim people I have met in my life. They are not happy for me because I've found something that makes sense in my life and I'm happy about, no, [they think there is] definitely something wrong with me. Even close friends that I consider family, they don't say it to my face, but it's okay for them not to

understand my journey. It's my journey, and as long as it makes sense to me, it's okay.

Esmerelda's father refused to speak to her for three years once she started wearing hijab: "The only thing he ever said was, 'Tell her if she wants me to speak to her, she can take that rag off of her head.' " Many of both Haddad's and Nieuwkerk's interviewees say that, for their families and friends, wearing the hijab was more controversial than the actual conversion itself.[367]

Initially Carla was worried about telling her parents "because they were Catholic, I [was afraid] they would think I was in a cult," but after she explained how happy she was, her father said, "'If you've found something that makes you happy, and you still love God, that's the main thing.' " Some of my other subjects also shared that the emphasis on respecting one's elders in Islam affected their parents positively: "My mom just told me, 'Well, I don't know about this religion, but I love it already because it made you change, you are so nice to us now. I don't know what it is, but you have changed and it's for the better, and if that's what your religion did, then I am so happy for you."

Loss or partial loss of family connections is a common consequence of conversion to Islam, but the majority of the women in my study–69%–had families that were supportive. The overall picture of family acceptance was more positive for the white converts–82% had positive reactions–while for Latinas the figure was 50%.

As we will discuss more fully in the chapter on *Consequences*, not all aspects of family life were beneficial or satisfying for the converts.

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[367] Hadadd, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 23; Van Nieuwkerk, "'Veils and Wooden Clogs Don't Go Together,'" 39.

How Do the White and Latina Convert Experiences Differ, If they Do?

Latin Americans are demonstrably more likely to live with extended families. Nearly 40% of adult Guatemalans and Mexicans live with their parents, whereas in the United States only 10% do.[368]

> The patterns of interpersonal relations in Latin America differ significantly from those in other regions of the world. The specific pattern of interpersonal relations leads to Latin Americans enjoying high family satisfaction levels and experiencing many daily positive emotions. A more relational sense of purpose in life also contributes in explaining the favorable evaluation of life.[369]

The World Happiness Report suggests Latinx culture can be described as:

> a focus on the nurturing of warm and close interpersonal relations with relatives and friends, the centrality of the family – both nuclear and extended – an affective regime that values and encourages the experience and manifestation of emotions, the existence of relatively weak civic relationships (those relations beyond family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues), a relative disregard for materialistic values, and weak political institutions.[370]

One study has shown that family–described as including a web of obligations and a source of support–is more important to Hispanics (whether Mexican-, Central- or Cuban-American) than to non-Hispanics.[371] The attraction of Islamic family values might be therefore stronger, or more immediately recognizable, among Latinas than others. The concept of "familism" refers to a "a collective orientation in which family roles and obligations are highly valued, and the well-being of the family group takes precedence

[368] Mariano Rojas, "Happiness in Latin America Has Social Foundations," *World Happiness Report*, March 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323831952_Latin_American_Happiness_has_Social_Foundations_chapter_6_World_Happiness_Report_2018.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Fabio Sabogal et al., "Hispanic Familism and Acculturation: What Changes and What Doesn't?" *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 9, no. 4 (1987): 397–412.

over the interests of each of its members."[372] Gloria Anzaldua describes how in Latinx culture, the welfare of the family is placed ahead of the individual: "In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue. . . . Familism is a common thread amongst Latinx. Loyalty to the family overrules loyalty to self."[373]

Latinx also self-report stronger familistic attitudes when compared to whites,[374] and Haddad argues that "Latinas and Native American women often see in Islam elements that resonate with their own cultures, such as respect for family and elders, appreciation of the rhythms of nature, and the integration of religious and spiritual beliefs with the whole of life."[375] Despite overall declines in marriages, increases in cohabitation, and a higher proportion of children born out of wedlock for Americans of all races, and Latinx families in the United States are still slightly larger and more likely to be extended and multi-generational than those of non-Latinx whites. However, each subsequent generation after initial immigration was found to assimilate more generally to less family-oriented American values.[376] As first-generation immigrants, the Latinas in my study are likely to possess strong feelings of familism, and this appears to be the case, although in this study we have no second-generation Latina converts with which to

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[372] Caroline Sten Hartnett, and Emilio A. Parrado, "Hispanic Familism Reconsidered: Ethnic Differences in the Perceived Value of Children and Fertility Intentions," *Sociological Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2012): 636-53, doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2012.01252.
[373] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 40.
[374] Sabogal et al., "Hispanic Familism and Acculturation," 397-412.
[375] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 46.
[376] Nancy S. Landale, R. Salvador Oropesa, and Cristiana Bradatan, "Hispanic Families in the United States: Family Structure and Process in an Era of Family Change," in *Hispanics and the Future of America*, ed. Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2006), 138-78.

compare. The World Happiness Report studies Latin American happiness in the context of their original countries; not only do levels of familism decline with each generation, but the initial shock of coming to America, in fact leaving behind the extended family and community that are the source of well-being, puts Latin American immigrant families at risk of disintegration, as my participants have described.

One-way Latina and white converts differed is that Latinas point to what was, in their words, a misogynistic culture of origin that was in their minds worse than the slightly male-dominated Muslim family they chose as an alternative. As a way of deflecting the observation that not all Muslim marriages are perfect, they compared them to Latino marriages; in other words, they say, Islam does not have a monopoly on misogyny. As Roxie explained, "Mexican and Latino culture is very Roman Catholic, very macho, and can be very misogynistic." Magnolia echoed the perception, "It's funny, in a typical Mexican household, what do you see? You see men who are very macho who beat their wives, like to go out and drink, and neglect their families." Lara pointed out that multiple partners, if not multiple wives, were not uncommon in the Latino community: "Hispanic men have children and girlfriends on the side, they have children out of wedlock." These are the women's own descriptions, not mine, but it is true that Latinas have a higher rate of births to unmarried women. According to one report, the percentage of births in America to unmarried, non-immigrant Latinas is 56.9%, while the percentage for unmarried, non-immigrant, non-Hispanic white women is 30.0%.[377] American Latinas facing single motherhood at twice the rate of white women could

[377] Steven A. Camarota, "Births to Unmarried Mothers by Nativity and Education," Center for Immigration Studies, May 5, 2017, https://cis.org/Camarota/Births-Unmarried-Mothers-Nativity-and-Education.

provide a strong motivation to "leave" that culture of single parenting for a culture that values having two parents.

Adela's observation about her own life leads to broader questions about how women, especially mothers, are treated in America: "People say that Islam is very unfair to women . . . [but] I was basically left on the street with three children [after being] legally married for twenty-one years, so don't talk to me about 'American family values' and the value of woman. I just think people hear things about Islam and ignore what's happening right here."

Because of limitations in my research—failing to probe deeply about family relationships—the only observable difference, to this researcher, between Latina and white converts was how they themselves talked about family. Latinas disparaged Latinx culture, particularly as related to men, whereas white converts did not go out of their way to offer examples (stereotyped or not) of the sorts men they'd encountered prior to becoming Muslims. In retrospect, I wish I had spent more time inquiring into my participants' family lives, their feelings about family, the types and quantities and qualities of their interactions, and especially the way family relates to and forms a significant aspect of community.

Summary of Family Section

Margot Badran talks about female Muslim converts bringing with them "prior feminist texts" in their interpretation of Islam.[378] In other words, Muslim converts start with their own, unique world-view derived from their own life context. As Valerie says,

[378] Badran, "Feminism and Conversion," 202.

"I was born and raised during the women's liberation movement, women going out protesting for our rights. My religion doesn't hinder me, it doesn't hold me back. Being a Muslim does not mean that you have to stay in the house and pray. I make my own decisions." She, and every one of the converts I interviewed, creates her own version of Islam, based to a large extent on her background.

Roald writes about the dichotomy between the Muslim ideal of wife as homemaker and educator of children, and the real-life practice. She finds many Muslim men "judge according to a Western standard," disrespecting women's domestic work while holding women who work outside the home in higher esteem.[379] Three of the converts I interviewed reported that they sought their husband's permission before meeting with me, but this practice of making decisions with their husband was, to the women in my study, a positive aspect of their relationships rather than a restriction. Lara says she can do whatever she wants, "within guidelines . . . we still do need to ask permission. . . . If there's something that's going to create a problem between us, then I'll not do it."

When asked to compare the importance of material success for herself compared to born Muslims she had met, Magnolia answered with a reference to family life:

> A successful life for me is raising our kids the proper way and then being guided in the proper way. . . . If your intention is to come to America for materialistic things, then maybe God will give you material things. But, for me, it's the wellness, being happy, having a good family, and raising a family.

Despite the Islamic ideal my interviewees expressed admiring, of women being stay-at-home nurturers and men being providers, all of the women in my study worked

[379] Roald, *Women in Islam*, 180-81.

outside the home but two, Lara and Wynona, both Latinas. Wynona explains why she wishes her mother had the benefits of marrying a "nice Muslim brother" when she says:

> My mom . . . if she was Muslim, she would have had a nice husband taking care of her, wouldn't be working as much, and would not need to be dating . . . different kinds of men. She would have more stability in her life and wouldn't be stressed out over bills, because she would have found a nice Muslim brother to help her with the bills.
>
> But a lot of these non-Muslim men who she's with, they don't want to commit, . . . they want to spend time with her and then go home. That doesn't give any moral value to the female.
>
> I feel like in Islam, women have a lot of rights and the fact that a man marries you, and commits to you, is a huge deal. Because nowadays, we [Latinas] don't have that. Non-Muslims, they don't care about getting married, they just want to take advantage and then go party and be with other women and have a free kind of life. In Islam we do have that; people are not perfect. But, *Alhamdulillah* [thanks to God][in Islam], we have men who get married and commit to their wives and their kids.

Put this way, marrying a Muslim man appears to be both a good idea, and a good deal. But there are downsides for those who do not find the right Muslim. Adela, a divorced Latina living in Boston, describes a loneliness which, in the context of judgmental and unaccepting born Muslims, even a supportive family cannot cure:

> [Converting to Islam is] not an easy journey at all, it's not going to be easy moving forward. It's been three years [since I converted, and] I find sometimes that it's very lonely, especially when you are in a family where you are the only person that believes something. And even though they support me, I'm alone. I find sometimes that people in Islam to me can be very judgmental and not accept converts… It makes you…[wonder] did I do the right thing? . . . So, there is a lot of self-questioning of whether this is the right thing for me. But I know in my heart it is.

On the whole, though, when it comes to family values and gender roles, these women have found in Islam something that works for them. Even the physical or mental abuse, financial exploitation, and divorce that some of my participants experienced has not shaken their faith in Islam. Indeed, they say Islam gives them the strength to deal with

adversity in family life. Whether or not one has a family, being part of a vibrant community can make all the difference, as we will see in the next chapter on Community.

Chapter X.

Theme 3: Community

The previous chapter described the factors relating to family that went into converts' decision to convert to Islam. This chapter delves into aspects of community that affected their openness to and eventual affinity for Islam, by attempting to answer the following questions:

Were there aspects of your existing community, if any, that you wished to reject or minimize in your life?

How did Islam offer a sense of community that you found compelling?

Is a white Muslimah community even possible?

How do white and Latina converts' experiences with community compare?

My participants reported being lonely, not feeling like they truly belonged in their communities or social groups. Channing said that the Cambridge mosque was the place where for the first time in her life felt that at home, despite being part of her high school's chess and robotic group. Converts described feeling lonely and isolated despite having families and jobs. What is left out of discourse can be as telling as what is included. My subjects did not report being part of church groups because they disagreed with Christian theology. Even if they were part of other social groups they felt they did not truly fit within these groups. While none of my converts described themselves as "social misfits" prior to their conversion, this finding corresponds Haddad's observation, that many converts did not belong to any social groups, but after becoming Muslim "deeply

appreciate the closeness they feel to their new Muslim sisters."[380] Prior to conversion, the participants I interviewed were mostly alienated from their local communities and actively looking for new community.

How Did Islam Offer a Sense of Community that You Found Compelling?

Mosque communities are often quite active in helping new converts find sisterhood, offering women seminars on the basics of Islam, prayer, raising an Islamic family, and reading and interpreting the Quran. Zebiri suggests that individuals who do not fit into popular culture might find natural alignment with Islamic values of modesty and simplicity.[381] Wohlrab-Sahr suggests that conversion to Islam brings about a new kind of belonging and community, but that it creates what she calls a paradox: "converts symbolize maximal distance from their own society or social surroundings, but they do it from within this society and amid these surroundings,"[382] which is another way of saying that most converts do not actually emigrate to new places, but must stay *in situ.*

Islam's tightly-knit community and the bonds of kinship its members have with each other is one reason why Western female converts report that they find Islam attractive.[383]

Patsy's story is worth relaying about the kinds of community she encounters during a semester abroad in London, where she was warmly welcomed into an Islamic Sisterhood. She recalls thinking "this could be the thing for me." Upon returning to Los Angeles she joined an Islamic center and started taking classes for Muslim converts,

[380] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 33.
[381] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 95-99.
[382] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 88.
[383] Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 32-33.

"That's when I became a part of the social circle, not just the microcosm that colleges are, but actual everyday normal people who are Muslim." A lonely college student who struggled socially, Patsy started to have a vibrant social life. She made friends with Muslim women and was frequently invited to *iftar* dinners during Ramadan. Thus welcomed, her social anxieties dissipated; the "tangible community" gave her the "ropes to interact with others" and showed her "how you make friends," issues that she had struggled with since adolescence. To her, "The social component of the Muslim community is a major asset to the religion." In the absence of her warm and welcome and subsequent feelings of belonging Patsy suspects she would not have converted to Islam. As an example of how converting to Islam can be a practical as much as a religious decision, Patsy suggested becoming Muslim is:

> a social transaction to become a part of the Islamic community. So, particularly since I'm blonde, I don't look like what anyone would think a Muslim looks like. I'm aware that I'm a white blond person saying this, and the irony is not lost on me, but there is another test to being a white blonde person in a mosque. I'm still paler than glue, but still I feel like it's a social transaction, if you want to be a part of a religious community there are rules you have to follow. And in exchange for following those rules, you get all the benefits of being part of a community. The hijab does not bother me. A lot of women struggle with it, . . . but for me the hijab is almost a non-issue. It feels easier to identify as a Muslim by wearing it. It's a pretty shallow answer but it's the honest truth.

Wearing the hijab—in effect being racialized as a Muslim, with all the negative associations that go with it—is a price worth paying to avoid loneliness.

Most converts shared stories stemming from Islamic educational group membership similar to Channing's: "I felt a great sense of community, a sense of home and family and belonging. It's definitely been the only place I've felt in my whole life where I felt a sense of community."

Research in Australia, Britain, and the United States found that strong community bonds with other Muslim women were important reasons for converting.[384]

For several converts, including Barbara, the sense of community was a first-time experience:

> When I went to the mosque in [town omitted], I felt this sense of community that I had never experienced before in the Catholic Church. A real sense of helping one another and being brothers and sisters in Islam, that to me was something that I had never experienced, and wanted. I felt very accepted and very comfortable with these people, and yeah, a sense of community that was extremely important to me.

These statements about finding community should not be taken lightly. To travel from alienation and loneliness to purpose and kinship is quite a journey.

Macrae found her new friends to be a source of inspiration: "I really felt welcomed and cherished by the friends I made. They made me want to spend my own life serving and getting closer to them and others like them." The women's study groups were as much about information transfer than about interacting with other Muslims and potential converts. As Roxie explained, "It's more than just learning about Islam. It's more of a community group too, and there are a lot of Americans. I felt like I was in a group where people shared my experience of wanting to investigate Islam… [When] I finally had all the information I felt like, 'Okay, this is what I want embrace.' "

Marta's views about the Muslim community were nuanced:

> [W]e as Muslims, like any other human beings, make mistakes and some behave inhumanely–we can make a long list of atrocities committed by Muslims. In general, my relationship with the community has been positive. Is hard to say that they did not match my expectations. Every new Muslim goes through a stage of idealizing the Muslims who are born in a Muslim country versus those who convert to Islam. But as time passes and we start learning Islam, we realize that

[384] Turner, "Contracts with Clauses," 36; King, "Pathways to Allah," 458; Soutar, "British Female Converts to Islam," 13; Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 28.

> the majority of Muslims born in a Muslim household or country do not know Islam, and they just practice their culture.

Her reflections precisely match this researcher's observations about the difficulties converts face trying to reconcile "ideal Islam" in its written purity and logic with actual Muslims with their cultural baggage. She also precisely captured the disappointment and acceptance stages posited by Anne Roald.[385]

One of my participants, Amy, credited online resources as being an important aspect of their community, especially because she herself was a contributor:

> I was really big into the Muslim blogging world, wrote a blog, and knew a lot of other Muslim women bloggers. At that point in my life, that was a really important part of me forming a community. And even until today, I'm still actually friends with quite a few of the women I met through that blogging world. When you are a new Muslim, it's very helpful and very beneficial to have specific groups like that, whether they are online or in person.

Ebony King's study of Australian converts attempts to understand what written and visual media converts use when choosing a particular sect or school of Islam, and she found that the six converts she interviewed simply did not do much research at all.

The Women's Mosque of America

The Women's Mosque of America was the first women-only mosque in the United States when it opened in 2015 in Los Angeles. According to Muslim American scholar Furhan Zubairi, quoted in the Wall Street Journal, "Sisters should be empowered, inspired[,] have access to scholarship and be in leadership positions. They should have spaces where they feel safe, welcomed and respected" but then quickly dismissed the idea

[385] Roald, "Conversion Process in Stages," 347-362.

of a women's mosque by suggesting that "[t]hese same objectives can be achieved by working with existing institutions."[386]

To learn about this new institution firsthand, I attended several Friday services at the Women's Mosque of America. When telling my research participants about the new mosque, all but Channing and Roxie found the idea of women leading the *khutba* (Friday sermon) too progressive and indicated they would not be interested in joining. Again, perhaps unexpectedly, gender segregation appears to be a draw to Islam rather than deterrent for many of my participants. Zebiri suggests one of the benefits of Muslim sisterhood is a much-reduced level of competition amongst women when they have their own separate sphere.[387] The Women's Mosque of America is relatively new, and it remains to be seen whether it attracts a significant following.

Are the Experiences with Community Different between White and Latina Converts?

According to Martinez-Vázquez, Latinas in the United States struggle to find social bonds in their religion, typically Roman Catholicism. Martinez-Vazquez suggests women who once felt isolated became much more involved in community organizations after converting to Islam:[388] One of my Latina subjects, Marta, describes her motivation for building community:

> We formed a group of Latina Muslimahs, with the purpose of socializing, learning more about Islam, sharing experiences and make our relationship stronger. … In

[386] Tamara Audi, "Feeling Unwelcome at Mosques, 2 Women Start Their Own in L.A.," *Wall Street Journal*, last updated January 30, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/muslim-women-to-launch-their-own-mosque-1422639983.
[387] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 339.
[388] Hjamil Martínez-Vázquez, "Finding Enlightenment: U.S. Latina/o's Journey to Islam," *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2008): 59-73, https://doi./org10.18085/llas.3.2.e8h26n883418vp31.

> the year 2000 we structured an Islamic course in the Spanish language. A group was formed as a necessity by the new Latino Muslims, we felt the need to learn Islam in our language [Spanish], share culture and create a support group for the new Latino convert.
>
> Lara relates the value of helping organize community events and organizations:
>
> Being active in our community has helped a lot. [Mosque leaders] are starting to see our significant roles, especially since Latinx are the . . . [largest] ethnicity group that is converting to Islam [in Los Angeles]. So, now it's, "Okay, we need you, can you do classes in Spanish?" . . . Our Second Muslim American Society sessions are in Spanish [and] we were the main organizers of that. Our [Muslim] community is finally opening their doors to the Latinos. . . . It's my outlet for my daily life.

The concentration of Latino converts in the Los Angeles area makes it possible for Latina-only groups to form more easily. Latinas in the Boston area found finding community much more difficult, as we will see in the chapter on *Consequences*.

Is a White Muslimah Community Even Possible?

There are predominantly Black mosques in America, and mosques catering largely to one immigrant ethnic group or another, but no whites-only mosques. For the American women I interviewed, a whites-only mosque would be anathema, counter to the reasons they converted to Islam, many of which have to do with setting themselves apart from the predominant society, many of the most unsavory aspects of which are a legacy of "white" hegemony.

The unlikelihood of a predominantly white mosque is also testament to the small number of whites in comparison to the American. It may be harder for white women to build a community around their identity after they convert because they are still, first and foremost, "white" before they are Muslim. The born Muslims within their communities are also influenced by this white/black division because as members of the "East" they

are also taught to be as ideologically and diametrically opposed to the "West"–just as "white" and "black" are.

Even if they have white or light skin, Latinas and South Asians and Arabs all fall into the "black" category as "non-whites," so they find community in both their ethnic/racial struggle, but also in their religious struggle. As Channing reflected, "I think with black converts especially, it's easier to get into the community because there are many born black Muslims, whereas, there are not many born white Muslims. So, I think in a way it's easier to just slip in and be accepted, because you don't stand out as much as others." Another white convert, Patsy, tried earnestly to find community:

> Community is a huge thing. I mean, loneliness is a recurring theme in my life and so religious communities, particularly religious minority groups are, I found, extremely good at welcoming new members. That's how minorities work, they stick together. So, there is something about that. And then there was the genuine desire to have a connection to God. So, it was almost like a "two birds one stone" situation: I want a community and I also want a religion. So, a religious community is really something I want to be a part of, but I couldn't find a religion that I actually believed in [until Islam].

Unfortunately, "minority groups are…extremely good at welcoming new members" turns out not always to be true, as we will see in the chapter on *Consequences*.

Geography: The Tyranny of Distance[389]

According to several of my subjects, distance can make building community almost impossible, as Layla describes:

> I love them [my Muslim sisters] to death, they are wonderful people, but I don't see them much. One lives in Revere, one lives in Chelsea. It's the issue of driving, having to work in your little circle, because you have to drive to meet. . . . It's

[389] Geoffrey Norman Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966). This research has lessons for any geographically dispersed country, including the United States.

> hard to develop that real closeness where you all live in one community and you are all there for each other.

Adela, another Latina in Massachusetts, shares a similar sentiment: "I find it hard that I am so far away. It becomes lonely. . . . The group of friends becomes even smaller, and so the options I have are limited unless I want to drive [an hour each way] every day out towards Boston to be able to meet and do things."

Differences in Community Experience

According to my Latina participants, the oversexualized machismo culture that they face as Latinas adds an extra layer of challenges. Islam provides "a kind of empowerment [Latinas] don't experience in a culture that is constantly sexualizing them."[390] Growing up in a culture where women's self-esteem is even more overtly based on their physical appearance than in the broader society may make the "carving out of space" for personal modesty more urgent and attractive for Latinas than whites. Islam, with its modest dress and optional covering, is attractive because it takes women "off the market," so to speak. Several converts explained that when they are visibly Muslims, i.e., wearing hijab, nobody offers to buy them drinks or asks them out on dates.

Latinx are actually the majority in California, so while they may be marginalized in housing, education, criminal justice, and job opportunities, they are not marginalized numerically.[391] There was some evidence that Latinas are superficially more able to cross

[390] Shahmoradi and Hosseini, "Latina Shi̇a Women," 19-35.
[391] Javier Panzar, "It's Official: Latinos Now Outnumber Whites in California," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-census-latinos-20150708-story.html.

ethnic group lines, insofar as they can look very much like immigrant Muslims from the Middle East, but that only goes so far, as Lara explains:

> Well, they [immigrant Muslims] don't think of us as much beyond what they see. They don't really ask or get to know us. So, they don't know . . . that there are so many different levels of being Mexican American, they just know the negatives. They say, "We didn't know you are Latino. . . . You don't look like a Latino."
>
> Interviewer: You are light-skinned, so you are mistaken for an Arab?
>
> Yes. Most people that look at us are not going to say, "Oh look, a Latina." We blend in. But for us, I think it's more like, "Hey, you know, we are not Arab, we are not Pakistani, we are Mexican, and can you please try to get to know us before you make any judgments?"

The major difference my participants described between the white and Latina experience, as far as community goes, is the existence of Spanish-language Latinx Muslim associations in many mosques, especially in urban areas with high concentrations of Latinx—but these organizations were not cited as having an effect on the Latinas' conversion, either because they organizations did not exist at the time they converted, or they did not find them until *after* they converted. As Haddad et al. suggest, "Converts may find themselves more comfortable in small, interethnic communities than trying to affiliate with groups that have a distinct cultural and ethnic identity that they do not share."[392] White converts are welcome to attend, but as they do in immigrant mosques, they face a language barrier.

[392] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 56.

Chapter XI.

Theme 4: Society

The previous chapter explored ways the converts' communities affected their conversion experience. This chapter attempts to address the following questions:

What social problems do converts identify in non-Muslim American society?

What problems with American society do they feel Islam helps them cope with?

How do Latina and white convert experiences of society differ?

Conflating Christianity with Western democracies, Kerry Lovering, a writer on Islam, suggests, "Christianity . . . has failed miserably. . . . It is now Islam that offers salvation from the drunkenness, sexual license, political corruption, violence, blasphemy and corrupt lifestyles that afflict 'Christian' nations."[393] It is difficult to see how converting to Islam as an individual, personal choice might shield converts from political corruption, violence, blasphemy, and the corrupt lifestyles of others, but it does seem to offer, if not salvation, at least a way to avoid some of the less desirable facets of their own societies, including drunkenness and sexual license, at least in their own homes. Doing so can be of supreme importance.

This chapter deals with the relationship of converts to the broader society, interactions beyond family and community. The distinction is artificial, insofar as societal

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[393] Poston, "The Future of Da'wah," 507. Poston here quotes Kerry Lovering, the publication secretary of Sudan Interior Mission and his observations about Christianity. See Kerry Lovering, "Tough at Home, Aggressive Abroad: Islam on the March," *Muslim World Pulse*, August 1979.

values and messages affect every aspect of one's internal, family, and communal life, but it is useful to consider the broader society separately as a way to organize data. Because the current study is based in the United States, Islam is situated as a personal choice, and not a choice imposed by a theocratic government. This distinction is important. "Becoming Muslim" is for my participants a consciously and freely chosen way of carving out personal space from aspects of a society they do not wholly embrace.

In thirty years of talking to Muslim women around the world, Lila Abu-Lughod writes that not a single woman she knows envies American women:

> women they variously perceive as bereft of community, cut off from family, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by selfishness or individual success, subject to capitalist pressures, participants in imperial ventures that don't respect the sovereignty or intelligence of others, or strangely disrespectful of others and God.[394]

I would be curious to know what these women might say about America if they came to live in and know the United States personally: are their observations from afar based on propaganda or, as I fear is true for many Americans, reality? An immigrant from Pakistan, the brightest aspects of American life are the opportunities and choices available to me, probably because I have the luxury of opportunity and choice.

The cause may be predatory capitalism, an amoral media, declining religiosity, a dearth of empathy or any number of other reasons, but my participants all noted, in one way or another, what they felt was a clear decline in Western society. When asked how immigrant Muslims view converts, Channing said she gets a sense they believe "America is one giant cesspool of hedonism and gluttony and poor choices." This also happens to

[394] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 46.

reflect what my own relatives in Pakistan say about America, even those who have traveled here.

Haddad likewise found that female converts, experiencing the disintegration of ethical and moral life in America "and the isolating individualism to which it leads,"[395] find in Islam a way of life whose structure, discipline and clear set of personal responsibilities serve as a constructive alternative. Based on traditional values, Islam is seen as an authentic and practical way to return to the past, providing a buffer against the secular humanism that has come to characterize the American society that once seemed to be so safe to her subjects. Rather than rejecting their identity as Americans, converts find in Islam "a more valid way of expressing the values that they believe to be consonant with the America they love."[396]

The one image that recurred throughout my conversations with converts was that Islam seems to entail a "carving out of space" for oneself. According to Wohlrab-Sahr, conversion becomes "a means of articulating within one's own social context one's distance from this context and one's conflictive relationship towards it,"[397] partly problem-solving, partly "cultural defense."[398] She suggests conversion to Islam–including adopting boundaries and rules–is a solution to biographical problems which she calls "methodization of life conduct." She also suggests that conversion to Islam can be a response to a failed attempt at upward social mobility, for example due to alcohol or drug

[395] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 50.
[396] Ibid.
[397] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Syncretism and Symbolic Battle," 352.
[398] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 87.

addiction or criminality.[399] I will not venture any cause and effect relationship between difficult life circumstances, only make observations about their existence.

Linking difficult life contexts directly to conversion to Islam is most likely impossible: there are just too many variables, too many who have similar life experiences who do not convert, too many who do not who do, to attribute causes confidently. Suffice it to say, conversion to Islam is a multi-faceted journey, which for many converts includes a conscious rejection of some parts of American society and its values.

What Social Problems Do Converts Identify in Non-Muslim American Society?

The converts in my study tend to paint a dim picture of Western society. They feel they are reacting to and strive to protect themselves from: materialism; drugs and alcohol; promiscuity and objectification. Other researchers found similar reasons. Haddad suggests Islam appears to many converts as an antidote against cheapened sexuality, Western feminism, and materialism[400] while many of Köse's subjects felt Islam provided an effective barrier against secularism and moral permissiveness, especially in America.[401]

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[399] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 84.
[400] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 42-60; Haddad, "Quest for Peace in Submission," 19-47.
[401] Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam a Study of Native British Converts* (London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996).

1. Materialism

In his book, *Identity: Cultural Change and Struggle for Self*, Baumeister discusses how religion became divorced from society in the 20th century, and how an overbearing capitalist, consumer society is incapable of providing meaning in life:

> The spread of urban, industrial bureaucratic life and development of a consumer economy . . . have resulted in the 'mass society' with its collective behavior patterns. The individual lives in the midst of society and is totally dependent on it. Society provides the individual with a means of livelihood, information, food and clothing, entertainment, and so forth. But society refuses to provide a meaning for life other than the system of extrinsic rewards (as in earning lots of money). If the individual is at all sensitive, he or she feels that society is indifferent to his or her fate.[402]

Ahmed describes that Muslim converts are reacting to, "the soul-destroying materialism that dominates society and turn to Islam for a spiritual alternative."[403]:

> By the 1990s the different American identities had folded into one vast national identity defined by consumerism. To be American, of whichever identity, meant to be part of the most powerful, self-indulgent, and affluent nation on earth. Few social taboos and red lines remained. The prevailing attitudes to morality were exemplified in the presiding figure of that decade, Bill Clinton, who when asked to explain his affair with Monica Lewinsky, said he did it "because I could." It was clearly a time to "party."[404]

Kate Zebiri concurs in describing how the rise of consumer culture, and with it an emphasis on the individual rather than community, has significantly contributed to many converts' decision to join Islam. Zebiri's interviewees were critical of the capitalist socio-political policies of the state, the spiritual vacuity of the British culture, and the rise in materialism.[405] One of my Latina participants, Layla, echoes the sentiment:

> Materialistic wealth is not as important to us converts as being good Muslims is. What matters is: are we teaching our children the right way? I do sometimes think

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[402] Roy F. Baumeister, *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 145.
[403] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 305.
[404] Ibid., 333.
[405] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 93-136.

> that, "I would like to drive this [car], and I would like to have all the nice things in life," but I think that that stems more from my parents. They ask me, "Why don't you get a nice house?" and I tell them, "the materialistic things are not as important to us."

Converts draw self-esteem, satisfaction and a sense of pride from the Muslim community looking up to them for their piety–their *taqwa*, "God consciousness"–rather than their financial success.[406] Some research has shown that Muslim religiosity is positively related to positive emotion, whereas materialism has a negative effect.[407]

When asked about their financial and material goals as related to those of born Muslims, the converts I interviewed generally felt as Lara does, that "immigrant Muslims are more materialistic." Focusing their lives on financial success rather than faith, converts recognize the difficulty for immigrant Muslims of attaining balance. As Roxie said, "To embrace Islam is also to embrace a way of life. All the concepts of the material life that Americans struggle with are difficult, especially if you are a person of faith. You have to live in this contradictory world." At the same time, she felt she had found what mattered to her as a convert: "Maybe I would like more money to feel secure and to travel. But you know, life is short, and I just want to live out the rest of my life in peace. I want to make a mark, some sort of good before I go, so that's my motivation these days."

In retrospect, I wish I had asked questions about pre- and post-conversion financial attitudes, jobs, standards of living, and financial well-being, and learned specifically what purchasing and consumption patterns changed, if any.

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[406] This is an attitude I witnessed first-hand while visiting mosques and community groups in both Boston and Los Angeles.

[407] Muhammad Rehan Masoom and Moniruzzaman Sarker, MD., "The Effect of Materialistic Value-Orientation on Religiosity in Bangladesh: An Empirical Investigation," *Religions* 9, no. 1 (December 24, 2017), https:// doi:10.3390/rel9010006.

2. Drugs and Alcohol

Islam offers a lifestyle and community free from the perceived loose morality of American society. Amongst her subjects, Zebiri finds a deep distaste for the dominant drinking and clubbing culture of the West,[408] a sentiment also expressed by my participants. Esmerelda, Wynona, Rebeca, and Carla all related that Islam saved them from the alcohol and drug abuse they witnessed and experienced growing up. Wynona felt that her childhood provided a good example of the moral degeneration of American society. Because her mother worked several jobs to make ends meet, Wynona was left alone in a dangerous public housing project to be exposed to drugs, alcohol, and sexual abuse, all before reaching her teenage years. Had she not converted to Islam at sixteen, she believes her life would have turned out like that of her sister, who "struggled with methamphetamine and crack all her life," spent her youth "partying and drinking," has many boyfriends and, as an adult, "has no stability in her life." Islam offered Wynona a chance to distance herself from the negative environment of the public housing project where she lived and to make something of her life.

Several Christian sects, including many of the Baptist, Methodist, and Mormon persuasions, also believe, like Muslims do, in abstaining from alcohol and drugs. Abstinence contributed to the religion's draw for many of my participants. It would be interesting to see if those from other communities already focused on abstinence have less incidence of conversion to Islam, in order to see more clearly whether abstinence is a strong factor attracting women to the religion.

[408] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 93-124.

Islam as an Alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous?

Some American women are drawn to Islam because it suggests what is permissible and what is not (*haram* and *halal*). To the extent that converts stop associating with former friends who consumed alcohol, and this appears to be the case for many of the participants in the current study, it becomes easier for new Muslims to avoid returning to destructive living patterns.

Patsy struggled with alcoholism: "I could drink the entire six-pack by myself, self-medicating. Cutting those things out of my life, it's tough but it is hugely beneficial." Wynona concurs: "So, there's a lot of benefits. . . . When you become a Muslim, there is a reason God says you can't do certain things. . . . I'm not saying I'm perfect either, because I have my weaknesses and shortcomings like everybody else, but Islam saved me from that lifestyle, drinking and doing drugs at such a young age."

Not only are Muslims meant to avoid alcohol, converts are usually assigned a mentor, which in my second-hand knowledge of Alcoholics Anonymous, can serve very much like an AA sponsor: a more experienced member who shares that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another member who is attempting to attain or maintain sobriety.[409] Darla's mentor not only provides advice, but she also she provides a place to stay when Darla is having a difficult time: "When I get depressed I call Taliha, and Taliha says, 'You don't sound good, come down and spend a few days with us.' So, I mean, she's my refuge."

[409] Alcoholics Anonymous, "Questions and Answers on Sponsorship," Alcoholics Anonymous, accessed May 13, 2018, 7-30, https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/aa-literature/p-15-questions-and-answers-on-sponsorship.

Wynona strongly believes that her conversion to Islam saved her from a life of substance abuse and addiction: "Islam gave me the structure that I needed, so that I can say, no, I'm not going to drink alcohol, or no, I am not going to do drugs."

What is and is not permitted in Islam determines, to some extent, whom the converts end up socializing with; not being around alcohol usually means not being around those who drink alcohol. Research has shown that the rate of recovery from alcohol and drug addiction is very low in part because it is extremely hard to separate an addict from his or her environment; there are triggers in our social environment which exponentially increase the chances of relapse.[410] For converts to Islam who had struggled with alcohol or drugs, the danger of falling back into the old social environment and patterns is diminished, because they now structure their lives around the mosque, taking classes on Islam, volunteering, and forging friendships with fellow Muslims. Unlike her pre-conversion Friday nights "drinking, partying, and socializing in a promiscuous way," Esmerelda now spends Friday nights in the company of Muslim women who "lift each other up to feel confident, to feel strong."

An interesting area for future study would be the relationship between some converts' problems with drugs and alcohol and their decision to become Muslims, and then to compare the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous to "becoming Muslim."

[410]Ann Lynsen, "Prevention of Substance Abuse and Mental Illness," *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, https://www.samhsa.gov/prevention. For the relation between social environment and relapse see https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA-3720/SMA-3720.pdf

According to one WHO study, nine of ten Muslim women worldwide claim to have never even tried alcohol,[411] and so it is not unreasonable to wonder at the effectiveness of Islam vs. other teetotaling religions. For instance, 46 percent of Southern Baptists still drink in spite of the prohibition their faith espouses.[412]

3. Sex, Promiscuity, Objectification

The reaction of my participants to what they called "feminism" is by no means unreasonable. As Ahmed describes,

> Postfeminism has instead devolved into a crude commitment to the idea that "I'm a woman and I can do anything a man can do." Women want to be free from the shackles of the former "repressive" male-dominated society, and they repudiate the purity and asceticism they see in the women of the past. Today women are saying, "Who are you to tell me that I'm being exploited?"[413]

Several of my participants indicated early, often pre-teen, exposure to sex, and most described a culture that encouraged sex and objectified women. Here is Esmerelda on the topic:

> I don't even want to think about how my life would have panned out if I had not converted to Islam. That's pretty scary. I would be out drinking, partying, socializing in a promiscuous way, finding sexual satisfaction, because you believe that's what life is for. Just thinking about it now, wow, it's really just bringing up emotions for me because it would have been a huge struggle. I believe I would have suffered tremendously without Islam, and I am so grateful.

According to several of my participants, Catholicism has a reputation for strict moral codes that almost nobody follows.[414] This disparity between what Christians *teach*

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[411] Patrick Winn, "How the World Gets Drunk, in 4 Surprising Charts," *Public Radio International*, April 18, 2014, https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-04-18/how-world-gets-drunk-4-surprising-charts.
[412] Candi K. Cann, "Mothers and Spirits: Religious Identity, Alcohol, and Death," *Religions* 7, no. 7 (2016): 94, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7070094.
[413] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 342.
[414] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance," 88.

and what they *do* is a major theme in conversion stories. White and Latina participants shared similar stories, but Latinas like Wynona from poor neighborhoods paint a more vivid picture sexual license: "Latinos are hyper people, they act wild, and if we didn't have Islam in our lives where would we be right now? . . . probably be sleeping around with men, you know, maybe exposed to STDs." Her stereotyped portrayal may be an example of what Sultan describes, citing Rambo, as "a strong idealization of the religion a person has chosen to belong to, while earlier experiences are reformulated in a more negative understanding."[415] The elevation of Islam and disparagement of participants' prior lives appears to help converts convince both themselves and others of the soundness of their decision to convert.[416]

Hijab

No discussion of Islam's relationship with Western society would be complete without exploring the hijab, the practice of covering the head. Whether a cause for controversy or a welcome sign of membership in the Muslim *ummah*, hijab has an impact on both family and community, but it is especially important on a societal level. In fact, hijab may be the only thing society at large knows about "being Muslim" As Cesari suggests, discussions on hijab "highlighted the tensions between personal and social identity."[417] Pundits on television, strangers in stores and on trains, passersby, Lyft drivers, all are curious about the practice of veiling, and most express vocal, and usually hurtful, opinions. Hijab is many things, and its meaning differs from country to country,

[415] Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts," 333.
[416] Ibid.
[417] Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam*, 45.

city to city, and person to person.

As Carla said, "My hijab was my flag of courage and I wore it proudly." And it *does* take courage to wear a uniform most Americans misunderstand and malign. Muslim women and their defenders are violently assaulted and sometimes killed, in America, over wearing hijab.[418]

So why wear hijab? According to my participants, American society left them feeling vulnerable, judged primarily by sexuality. Esmerelda was content to opt out of being objectified:

> I was very insecure as a non-Muslim, and I looked at my womanhood as simply my sexuality. Because in the mainstream, a woman's value is her sexuality. It's a tool that is used very, very strategically, and I am very grateful that I'm not a part of that at all.

Islam provides a contrasting statement of values from which one can more clearly see the conditioning we are subjected to in advertising, as Patsy observes:

> I think a lot of American culture equates overt female sexuality with female liberation, and that is pretty much the exact opposite of what Islam preaches. And so, if you associate showing lots of skin with being free, even down to the image of a woman taking down her braid and having her hair blow in the wind, if you associate that with liberation and you see a woman covered from wrist to ankle, with her hair covered, that evokes imagery of oppression.

The concept of "the male gaze" was first used by the feminist and film critic, Laura Mulvey to describe the asymmetry of power between the genders. Throughout the

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[418] Marc Ramirez, "Muslim Woman in Houston Stabbed in Apparent Hate-driven Roadside Attack," *Dallas News*, April 6, 2018, https://www.dallasnews.com/news/crime/2018/04/06/muslim-woman-houston-stabbed-apparent-hate-driven-roadside-attack. In 2018, hate crimes against Muslims have increased by 15% and according to CAIR an increased number of women who wear the hijab have reported being victims of hate crimes. See Deepa Bharath and Brenda Gazzar, "Hate Crimes against American Muslims up 15%, Says CAIR," *Orange County Register,* last modified April 24, 2018, https://www.ocregister.com/2018/04/23/cair-report-shows-15-percent-increase-in-hate-crimes-against-american-muslims-nationwide/.

history of Western art, women are often displayed nude, passive and reclining. Disrupting this pattern of the masculine gaze is not taken lightly by either gender, because women are socialized to look at themselves and their gender in the same way as men.[419]

When a Muslim woman wears *niqab* that hides her face, she has a chance, theoretically, to turn the tables, to become the observer rather than the observed. In practice, I have not found that any style of clothing is guaranteed to protect women from harassment. None of the participants of this current research wear full niqab, but according to one study, even by simply wearing hijab they reject being the "object of the gaze."[420] Again, this is a nice theory, but in practice, wearing hijab in the United States invites both gaze and harassment. Modesty in dress is one of the largest visible differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in America. And yet modesty that draws attention to itself in an immodest milieu can itself be a form of immodesty. Patsy recognizes that hijab in a Muslim majority country is different from hijab in America:

> I do genuinely believe in the concept of modesty, . . . the concept of not putting yourself on display as a woman. But I don't personally think a hijab in mainstream American culture is a demonstration of [modesty] . . . but it is part of the social contract that allows me to more fully engage in the Muslim community. It works for me.

Dress is the primary outward sign of Muslim-ness, and several of the converts described the transformation brought about by clothing. As Adela relates, she prefers to forego the occasional advantage by not allowing herself to be objectified:

> That was a big thing, going to the closet and getting rid of stuff. I don't want to get pulled over and not get a ticket because the police officer is looking at my

[419] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
[420] Myfanwy Franks, "Crossing the Borders of Whiteness? White Muslim Women Who Wear the Hijab in Britain Today," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 5 (2000): 920-921.

> cleavage, you know what I am saying? That's when it comes down to it. And so, yes, I am more modest. Other than that, I think I am pretty much the same person.

Her observation about being the same person is in line with Rambo's theory, that conversion usually involves a high degree of compatibility with one's prior beliefs and lifestyle. [421] Far from being a standard article of clothing, wearing hijab is a conscious and deliberate choice. Patsy explains:

> You know, in comparison to other parts of the world, we both have it better and we have it worse. I think we are so used to being objectified [in America], . . . it is a foregone conclusion that women's clothing has to accentuate her body more than men's clothing. . . . Choice is the important thing, but choice in dressing in a less sexual manner should also be a choice, and it really isn't a choice if you shop at mainstream clothing lines in the United States.

Not long after Patsy's interview, Macy's department store has started courting Muslims as customers for a new line of modest clothing, including hijab.[422] One area for possible future study would be measuring the ways in which segments of society once treated as "the enemy," as Muslims are considered today, come to be accepted by the broader society because of their economic clout, and whether once accepted as economic forces, their actual status improves. But being co-opted for marketing campaigns may represent a lateral move at best. If more women wear headscarves and white Americans get used to seeing headscarves, perhaps there will be less harassment against Muslimahs who cover. I am hopeful.

In *The Veil and Alternative Femininities*, McGinty writes that Western feminists initially saw the veil as a controversial symbol of patriarchal oppression of women.

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[421] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 62.
[422] Christina Caron and Maya Salam, "Macy's Courts Muslims With New Hijab Brand," *New York Times,* February 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/business/macys-hijabs.html.

> The veil is a widely disputed and charged symbol with diverse political, social, cultural, and personal meaning depending on geographical and historical context, in Muslim as well as non-Muslim countries. . . .
>
> The use of the veil can mark certain class affiliations and economic privileges, political struggle, protest, and opposition and reflect larger social and political transformations. In Western discourse the "veil" is politically charged with connotations of the inferior "other," suggesting the subordination and inferiority of the Muslim woman. [423]

McGinty feels Western feminism must enter into a new dialogue with Muslims, with new ways of defining gender roles and freedom. The converts she interviewed found conservative dress acts as "protection rather than oppression,"[424] a sentiment I found among my own interviewees. Esmerelda related a conversation she had with a tow truck driver giving her a ride home after a breakdown:

> "Can I ask you a question?" he asked me, "Why do you women wear a scarf on your head?" and I was like, "I'm so glad you asked me. I commend you for even asking me!" And I told him simply that, "It's to be modest. Women are beautiful, men love women, and we want to protect ourselves for those that we love the most, which is our husbands or our families." And he was like, "Wow. I never knew that." And, here is a man who would never wear hijab, he wouldn't need to, but you know, he was curious, and he asked.

However, not every convert is able to wear hijab whenever they want. Losing one's job over wearing religiously prescribed clothing is a good example of the marginalization converts can face. Carla described what would happen if she wore her headscarf to work:

> I probably would have lost my job because even in their human resources books it said that you couldn't wear scarf, hat, bandanas, turban or anything on your head. So, I went along with that and I promised God that if I ever got married I would wear a hijab. Because I know it was a requirement of the women in Islam, it says so in the Quran.

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[423] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 111.
[424] Ibid., 119.

What the Quran says on hijab is still unclear after centuries of debate,[425] and for many convert Muslims in Western countries, a matter of personal choice. My participants described extensive internal debates about wearing hijab and making oneself a potential target for abuse, especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused an uptick in anti-Muslim sentiment, as Jackie described:

> I debated openly identifying as a Muslim because I did not want to be lumped together with terrorists and was very confused by the whole official story (which we now know was all a bald-faced lie and massive conspiracy against Muslims). The day after the attack I did *not* go to college in my hijab. But I think I wore it again a day or two afterwards.. ..As a hijabi, it was hard being the mostly only visible Muslims in United States–women become the targets of a lot of hate crimes and vitriol due to their visibility.

Muslimahs being part of American society are exposed to the same propaganda and conspiracy theories as the rest of the society, but their personal knowledge of Islam and close relations with Muslims have taught to look beyond these negative stereotypes and judge for themselves.

Lara's conversion to Islam occurred just before 9/11:

> I first put on the hijab the week before September 11. My parents were like, "Don't wear that thing when you come to our house. His mom [Lara's mother in law] doesn't wear the hijab! Why do you have to wear it?" "It's my choice, I want to. Nuns wear them, why can't I?" So then after September 11 happened, that day my mom starts calling me, "Take off your scarf, take off that scarf, think about your children, you are going to endanger them. God forbid something happens to you, who is going to take care of them?" . . . so, I took it off. She was worried. She told me these bad things were going to happen to me and that same day, I didn't go out of the house. But then the next day I put it back on. Who am I going to fear the most, other people or God? I decided I am going to keep it, and since then I've had it.

[425] Roald, *Women in Islam*, 254-294. Roald here presents a very lengthy and complicated theological and historical debate between Islamist scholars and Muslim feminists on the true meaning—or lack of full-covering—in the Quran and multiple hadiths. There is no consensus on covering—hijab or niqab.

Some converts worked for organizations who were refreshingly neutral about hijab, especially in hindsight. As Megan related, "I work for the F.B.I. in New York [and] used to go to work with the hijab after I converted. Nobody said a word to me, it was perfectly accepted." But ultimately, she admits it's difficult for an American Muslim convert "because she almost feels like an immigrant does. You feel like you don't belong to your own country anymore because they look at you like, 'Oh you left us.' You don't get treated like an American."

Added to the pressure from society, community and job, there can also be pressure from one's spouse, as Megan describes: "I had a girlfriend whose husband told her, if she took it [her hijab] off, he's going to divorce her. This was right after 9/11. I told her, 'Please, tell your husband what he is saying to you is *haram* [forbidden]. It's between you and God.'"

Another participant, Darla, suggests the hijab protected her from unwanted attention:

> The following summer it was way too hot, but any time I took it [hajib] off, I felt naked and finally it was like, oh give it up. In the intervening years, like twice, I had a haircut appointment or something, and wanted to just not shove my hair under a scarf anyway, and both times I did that, I walked out of the salon and some creepy guy hit on to me, and I was like finally, "Okay, God, message received."

Attempting to avoid unwanted male attention appears to be a major factor in deciding whether or not to wear hijab.

Interestingly, one of the attractions of women-only groups is the possibility of *not* wearing hijab, as Barbara related: "We had a women's group that would meet at the mosque or at a house event. We just had open discussions; we would not wear our hijab.

We would just have a fun time together and I loved it, you know? And, I thought, 'This is just what I wanted.' "

Studies of Latina converts indicated the hijab was one of their favorite aspects of the religion; as part of dressing modestly, it made them feel safer and more respected in comparison to when they wore tighter-fitting clothing; wearing hijab they experienced less of the regular cat-calling common in Latino culture. Martinez-Vázquez suggests that Latina converts also wear hijab because it protects them from materialism in society, as they do not have to spend as much on fashion: "Women wear the hijab because God—not men—says they have to wear it. Thus, this expectation becomes a decision, not an imposition. Furthermore, many women argue that the wearing of the hijab highlights their break with the materialistic aspects of society."[426]

Another researcher on Latina Muslims found significant continuity between Muslim and Latino Catholic veiling practices:

> For new Muslimah converts, the decision ―to veil or not to veil—is difficult to separate from the desire to prove to their selves and to others the authenticity of their conversion. . . . For Marta and others, the continuity of the virgin and veiled Maria within both the Latino Catholic and the Islamic traditions provides one interpretation of their choice to veil. They veil, in part, because their Latino and Muslim models of piety veiled. For Marta, veiling not only signifies her embrace of Islam but also of her traditional Mexican practices.[427]

Several of the Latinas in my study mentioned similar concerns and deliberations, as did those studied by King and Perez.[428]

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[426] Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o Y Musulman*, 59.
[427] I also interviewed one of Morales's main subjects, Marta Galedary, who expressed this opinion. See Morales, *Latino Muslim by Design*, 157.
[428] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 304.

Appeal of Structure and Discipline of Islam

When converts accept Islam, their lifestyle goes through a major change. For example, life must be structured around five daily prayers at dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, and nighttime. For the women I interviewed, the daily discipline of prayer, the compliance with strict dietary laws, the month of fasting during Ramadan, and the high standard of personal hygiene (ablutions before prayers), were all cited among the reasons they were drawn to Islam.

Many social activities that were a part of their previous life and kept them, in several cases, from being sober, are curtailed or stopped. Women who do not believe in alcohol consumption do not go to bars; women who do not believe in the free mixing of genders do not go to nightclubs.[429]

Differences between Latina and White Converts

The King and Perez study on conversion suggests Latinas find in Islam "solutions to real problems" by creating a "culture of resistance,"[430] and the current research finds this to be true. In my cohort, Latinas were primarily raised in poverty by single parents in dangerous neighborhoods. It's possible that they turned to Islam as a way to get distance from their environments. Both Latinas and whites found similarities in Islam with their traditional Catholic backgrounds, but the particular practice of veiling is one that still exists, in America at least, almost exclusively amongst older Catholic Latinas. Both white

[429] Martinez states that post-conversion many of his subjects lost friends and became isolated because of giving up alcohol, in the U.S. going out drinking is a big part of the social life and when converts refuse to join friends at bars they lose those friendships. See Martínez-Vazquez, "Finding Enlightenment," 19.
[430] King and Perez, "Double-Edged Marginality," 310-311.

and Latina converts regularly face questions about authenticity—participants say some born and immigrant Muslims believe only those from the Middle East and South Asia can be true Muslims— however, this researcher found that white converts report being treated better than Latinas. One possible explanation for that observation could be that some Muslim immigrants, because of their colonial heritage, still view lighter skin as superior to darker, look down upon Latinas for their darker complexions, and have bought into the stereotypical image of Latinx as belonging to the lower socio-economic strata of the society. Not surprisingly, even after converting, white people may benefit from the white privilege that American society is built on.

None of the Latinas in the current study mentioned the idea that Islam may have come to the Americas even before Columbus, nor that they felt any ties to Moorish Spain, a tangential suggestion made in the review of prior research. It is likely that the young men in the study about Muslim hip-hop artists in Puerto Rico face far great scrutiny as to their "authenticity," and must go to greater lengths to prove their right to belong.[431]

All the women I shared a strong sense of solidarity with Palestinians. Regardless of ethnicity, converts do share a sense of being outsiders. What this researcher observed, above all else, was a heightened sense of empathy among converts, at least compared to other Americans I know. Whether white or Latina converts choose Islam to assert an identity of their own, whether they do so to set themselves apart from negative Latina stereotypes or non-existent white ethnicity, and whether empathy is the impetus or the end result, or both, these converts share a sense of solidarity with the marginalized.

[431] Omar Ramadan Santiago, "Insha'Allah/Ojala, Yes Yes Y'all," 115-38.

Chapter XII.

Consequences

The previous chapter explored the aspects of conversion informed by the societal context of the converts' life. This chapter shares my participants' stories about what happened after they converted to Islam and aims to address the questions:

In the years since you converted, has the appeal of Islamic theology continued for you? Has your own marriage and family life as a Muslim been what you expected? What has your experience been like with the Muslim community in your area? What consequences in the larger society have you seen, and in what ways are you trying to shape the public's perceptions of Muslims?

This study's *Consequence* stage asks how women's lives changed after conversion to Islam.

This chapter highlights some of the disappointments and difficulties converts faced, organized into the four themes: 1) spirituality/theology, 2) family, 3) community, and 4) society.

1. Spiritual/Theological Appeal of Islam

Through dozens of hours of interviews, not one participant expressed disappointment with her choice of Islam as a religion, as a core set of beliefs, and as a way of life that enhanced their spirituality. Efforts required to reconcile what converts

admitted were troubling elements of the Quran did not affect their overall satisfaction with their choice of faith. One of the main consequences of conversion has been what was desired: a closer relationship with God, a sense of the sacred and spiritual in everyday life, and a way of understanding the world that has helped them weather the difficulties they encounter in their family, community, and societal lives.

One characteristic my converts shared was a great sense of optimism, a belief that everything happens for a reason and for the best. Darla related, "when l fell and knew I'd broken my leg badly, the first thing out of my mouth was *Alhamdulillah!* I knew in that moment this is something sent to me by God and it's good for whatever reason. How many people in their fifties [are able to] spend nine months of everyday living with a parent before they pass? I was given this amazing privilege." Esmerelda likewise expresses gratitude for the reconciliation with her estranged father that was made possible only because of his cancer and subsequent brain surgery.

In addition to optimism, what impressed me about the group was a sense of peace, of fulfillment, and equanimity. Summarizing her life so far, despite two abusive Islamic marriages, Carla was able to say, "I'm happy, I'm content."

2. Family

All the converts who married after converting married Muslim men, and their experiences with marriage, divorce, and children follow.

Several of the converts had difficult, abusive marriages to immigrant Muslim men. Carla and Rachel were divorced after suffering extremely abusive husbands. Layla saved a Middle Eastern man from deportation by marrying him, but he has been both physically and emotionally abusive to her. Layla and Jackie remain in abusive marriages.

When Layla reached out to other Muslimah and religious leaders at her mosque, they all told her the same thing:

> "Oh, be patient sister, pray, say *dua* [pray]." You pray until you are blue in the face, somebody is mistreating you, it doesn't matter. He's a very practicing Muslim, a religious man. But, his culture is Algerian. Because I have been there, I know his family and culture say it's okay to hit women or put women down. That's a cultural problem.

Carla was introduced to her husband, an ex-military man from Iraq who was given asylum in the United States by her Muslim mentor. She suffered extreme physical and emotional abuse during this marriage. When she looked to the Muslim community for advice she was told that she needed to be patient with her husband and suffer his physical abuse without complaint. "[The *wali* said] I have to let things go and take things slow with him."

One study found that among Muslim men who had multiple wives, one or more of whom were American, there was a high incidence of the men abusing their American wives.[432] Two of the women in my own study discovered *after* they were married that their husbands already had wives in the Middle East and Africa. The men used the marriages to obtain green cards, and their wives' earnings were sent overseas to support the men's families there. One husband conducted credit card scams and talked his wife into giving up her retirement savings, which he wired to his family in the Middle East. Their pseudonymous names are withheld on request.

Other converts reported that their husbands, because of the television shows they had watched, had exaggerated ideas of the likelihood of infidelity from American wives,

[432] Dena Hassouneh-Phillips, "Polygamy and Wife Abuse: A Qualitative Study of Muslim Women in America," *Health Care for Women International* 22, no. 8 (2001): 735-748, https://doi.org/10.1080/073993301753339951.

and justified abusing their wives because they assumed they were unfaithful. One participant's husband threatened to murder her for this reason: "My child was on my breast and [my husband] came over and said, 'If you ever leave me . . .' and he put the gun to my head."

Some converts felt used by the mosque leaders for immigrant Muslims to get green cards, and sometimes they found that their *wali* (male guardian) was arranging marriages with men who had a known history of abuse, violence, or financial fraud. Naive converts appear to be singled out for some of the worst prospective husbands, ones that born Muslims would not likely have accepted. "We get used a lot," said Rachel. "We are like orphans when we enter Islam, we are ignorant, . . .we don't know anything. And we think that, 'Oh, we have to do this.' … We don't have our parents to tell us, 'look out for this, look out for that.' Were really naive." As Layla reflected in relation to marriage to Muslims, "I still don't think there is much of a support system for us."

However, none of these women blame Islam for the behavior of abusive husbands. As Megan suggests, the blame is on the individual rather than the faith:

> I have seen more things, more bad examples of Islam, that if I didn't take this religion because I love it and I really believe in it, I'd be so far away from it, I'd run away from it. But you can't believe in your own religion based upon poor examples that you see from other people. Because it's not indicative of the religion, it's the people themselves.

"It's not the religion, it's the people" as a variation of "pure Islam vs. culture" is repeated often in the prior research and by my participants.

Macrae, Patsy, Channing, Roxie, Adela, and Darla are all single, but Darla is the only one who does not anticipate being married. Per Islamic law, women may only marry a Muslim spouse, but several converts mentioned that the majority of Muslim men prefer to marry within their own ethnicity, which means it can be difficult for white converts to

find Muslim spouses. As Channing said, "I know that you are supposed to marry a Muslim, I'm aware of the expectation. But, I would rather not marry anyone than to marry somebody just because they are Muslim." Of the single converts, only Macrae is dating, and her boyfriend is a non-Muslim American, about which she feels conflicted.

Several of my participants, including Amy, Esmerelda, Valerie, Megan, Wynona, Lara, Magnolia, Marta, and Barbara, now have what they describe as "good marriages." Converts, as you might imagine, can find finding a suitable spouse difficult: for example, Amy shared that "It took a few years. I would have preferred a convert man, but I wouldn't have rejected someone that was born Muslim. It was just a preference. But yeah, in Boston it just seemed hard to find someone, so that's when I had a friend find someone for me." Several participants stated they would have preferred marrying fellow converts, but only Amy was able to do so.

If Islam provides, as all these converts suggested, a better framework for marriage and family, one might expect there to be less divorce among Muslims, and this appears to be the case. According to one researcher, the divorce rate among Muslims in America stood at 31 percent, which was said to be significantly higher than the two highest divorce rates among Muslim-majority countries, Turkey and Egypt, at around 10% each,[433] but lower than the American rate. With the divorce rate for all Americans standing at around 50%[434] one might conclude that Muslim marriages are more successful.

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[433] Samana Siddiqui, "Divorce among American Muslims: Statistics, Challenges & Solutions," *Sound Vision*, accessed June 4, 2018, https://www.soundvision.com/article/divorce-among-american-muslims-statistics-challenges-solutions.
[434] Abigail Abrams, "Divorce Rate in U.S. Drops to Nearly 40-Year Low," *Time Magazine*, last modified December 5, 2016, http://time.com/4575495/divorce-rate-nearly-40-year-low/.

Nine of the sixteen married converts (56%) in this study had been divorced. This is higher than the 31% divorce rate for American Muslims, and higher than the approximately 50% divorce rate for all Americans.

Children

Latina converts like Magnolia describe the difficulties their children have negotiating dual ethnic roles:

> I think my children, when you ask them they will tell you, "I am half Mexican, half Arabic. But I am an American because I was raised and born here." But, they also go through an identity crisis being accepted by the Yemenis and their cousins on that side of the family, also with my Mexican side of the family. They do connect, but sometimes they notice the difference. They are accepted, but they are not.

Wearing hijab, and getting pushback from their families, is as much an issue for their daughters as it was for the converts themselves, as Magnolia describes:

> When my kids started wearing [hijab] my little one wanted to always wear the scarf, because she liked it. Not in front of me, but my mother would tell her, "Take that ugly thing off your head. You have beautiful hair, you know." I would never hear these things but [my daughter] would tell me. [My mother would say] "Well, you know, you don't have to wear it because you are little" and [my daughter would say], "No, but I want to wear it." She eventually told my mother, "Grandma, if you want me to come visit, you need to stop it, because this is my scarf and I want to keep it on, or else I am not going to come see you."

Carla's mother told her that her daughter "'is too young to wear things like that,' and I would just tell them that she loves her hijab. She's got all different colors, and she is happy wearing it." When asked whether she expected if the immigrant Muslim community would consider children of converts as prospective spouses, Carla said:

> Some are still stuck in the mud, they don't want their daughters or sons to marry anybody outside their culture. And there are others [allowed to marry whomever] their daughter or son wants to marry. In California I haven't seen anything as far as prejudice [against] daughters or sons to marry outside their culture or

> nationality. With my kids, I was worried at first because I thought, 'Maybe they will have a hard time [finding a spouse].

Carla's fears were unfounded, however: her daughter was marrying into what she describes as "a nice Arab, Kuwaiti family" soon after our interview.

Acceptance of Gay Marriage

Several of the women in this study expressed acceptance of gay marriage, despite pressure not to, as Darla describes:

> My niece married a woman last fall, and I have to tell you that the first time I ever met her partner, I loved her for who she was. I'd had a very religious, very intelligent friend who is a Muslim tell me, "You can't go to the wedding, you have to just shun them." And my point of view is, "How can they ever know the beauty of Islam if I take myself away?" And, I love these people. These girls would jump to the end of the earth to protect me. They are so protective of my Iman [faith], that I don't think there is any good that will ever come of my shunning them.

This is just one example of the way American women are forging their own version of Islam, choosing what works for them, ignoring what does not.

3. Community

Finding community is one of the main goals of conversion to Islam, according to the women I interviewed, and one of the most difficult things to find. According to its 2014 Religious Landscape report, Pew research estimates 77% of Americans raised as Muslims continue to identify with Islam, and 23% eventually leave the faith.[435] At the same time, 23% of Muslims are converts, which tends to replenish the overall number of

[435] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

Muslims in America. Solid estimates are difficult to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that 50% to 75% of converts leave Islam within one or two years.[436] The psychologist Monique Hassan, a convert herself, explains why converts leave Islam:

> The overwhelming emotional state you will see in any revert group — online and offline— is one of isolation and lack of acceptance. Upon the *shahadah*, the born Muslim community smiles in our faces and says, "*Mashallah* [God has willed], you chose Islam. You are so great!" Then they walk away and leave us alone in our newly Muslim state. Like a child we are entering a new life, a new way of thinking and perceiving the world. We don't always know what to do; we don't know who to trust or who to listen to. Many assume others are helping us or have become our friends when truthfully, most of us spend our Eids alone and we break fast alone. Many of us have never even stepped foot into the house of another Muslim. The majority of converts are alone in their walk of faith.[437]

Immigrant Muslims tend to keep to themselves, which leaves converts feeling isolated.[438] American mosques and Muslim centers are frequently formed based on ethnic and/or national lines. Haddad suggests new converts tend to romanticize the idea of a multiethnic and multiracial community of Muslims in one cooperative whole.[439] Among the converts I interviewed, I found that mild hopes for community were mildly disappointed. It is important to remember that these are the women who have remained Muslims, and not fallen away; they are dealing with their disappointment rather than quitting altogether.

Even when converts are isolated, McGinty suggests that modern travel and communication have been important tools connecting the worldwide Muslim

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[436] Omar Shahid, "Confessions of an Ex-Muslim," *New Statesman*, May 17, 2013, https://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2013/05/confessions-ex-muslim.
[437] Monique Hassan, "In the Age of Islamophobia, Why Reverts Are Leaving Islam," *MuslimMatters.org*, accessed May 4, 2018, https://muslimmatters.org/2018/01/10/in-the-age-of-islamophobia-why-reverts-are-leaving-islam/.
[438] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 50.
[439] Ibid.

community.[440] The technology-enhanced *ummah* was not found to play a big part in the thoughts of the convert women I interviewed, all of whom were seeking real community with their Muslim neighbors.

Converts interviewed feel that a better effort could be made to make them feel welcome at mosques. Born Muslims, they say, may initially welcome them to the mosque, but as Van Nieuwkerk also found, converted American women feel that immigrant Muslim women are "cliquey."[441] When asked how she had been received in the community, Megan offered, "You know who I find the least welcoming? Is the Arab sisters. . .they just don't welcome people out of their inner circle." Other researchers also found converts felt they weren't welcomed, specifically by Arab Muslims,[442] but there can be problems with all ethnicities of Muslim. The sheer diversity of Muslims makes it difficult to find community, as Layla suggests:

> There is no comprehensive Muslim community circle where you can really feel a part of, it's too disintegrated, it's too disjointed different cultures, might be Somalian, maybe Moroccan, maybe Nigerian, you have to find your own little niche in your own community. And women don't always do that. They don't always succeed. I am talking about from the women's point, not the men's. So, yes, I am disappointed.

This point was repeated by several converts, because it's at the heart of their post-conversion experience. Rachel pointed out, "If you are not Pakistani or you are not Egyptian, you are just not a part of them, so you are kind of just floating around." The difficulty of being an outsider among outsiders, of finding a group with which to share an identity, was common. According to Roxie:

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[440] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 20.
[441] Karin van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 39.
[442] Dziegielewski, and Rehman, "Women Who Choose Islam."

> If I go to the mosque there is a large Somali community. But there are always cultural walls. This is just the immigrant experience in general, but I am not an immigrant, so they will see me first as, 'What is this American woman doing in our mosque?' They claim the mosque more than I do. They have a history of observing their faith in the mosque, where this is not my tradition. So, I'm pretty much always on the outside. They don't quite know what to do with me. They don't know what category to put me in. They don't know what community I belong to. So, how do I interact with the various immigrant communities in the mosque, in the various *masjids* [mosques]? I just am happy to meet people and learn about their culture…[but] no, I think American women in general are not [invited into the homes of born Muslims]. I do feel isolated. I wish there was an American convert group that collectively wanted to gather during Ramadan and Eid.

Being invited to the homes of others may be one of the more important measures of community, and every participant experienced community differently. One convert in particular, Carla, has been invited to all sorts of social gatherings. When asked about how Pakistani, Indian, Syrian immigrants treated her, she said:

> I am an outgoing person, so I have never had problems with them because I will insert myself into a circle of people and shake their hand or kiss them or hug them. So, I don't have a problem; we will all introduce ourselves and it's like we are all one. I have heard other Muslims that they are more shy, they are scared of them at first and they don't know how to react to them either. It's human nature I would say. I socialize with all nationalities. I have been to parties where I was the only white person there. But, you know, they are very loving, they bring you in and you feel a real sisterhood with them. And everybody wants to meet you, everybody is kind, even if I get invited to somebody else's house that I have never met before. And with the Arabs, it's the same thing. Some of my best friends are Arabs.

Megan reports a similar acceptance: "I found the Somalian people to be absolutely amazing. If they are talking and you are sitting at the table, they are very respectful of the fact that you don't speak their language, and they will actually tell you what they are talking about so that you feel included."

The difference between the community experience of Esmerelda, a Latina, on the one hand, and Carla and Megan, both white women, on the other, is stark. Of eight Latina women, the four Latinas in the Boston area, one (Esmerelda) follows Sufi Islam and is

married to an Indonesian Muslim man, and is happy with her Sufi community. Two, Adela and Roxie, are single, alienated from the born-Muslim community, and lonely. The other Latina in Boston, Layla, is married to a Pakistani Muslim, and has many complaints about the born Muslim community. The four Latinas in the Los Angeles area–Marta, Wynona, Magnolia, Lara–reported significant problems finding acceptance, friendship, or community among born Muslims, but are happy now with the community they have formed with other Latina converts.

Among the eleven white converts, despite some initial problems being accepted or respected by born Muslims, all but Jackie reported being relatively happy with their interactions with the born Muslim community. Several of the white converts recognize their privilege and have noticed instances of non-white converts being treated badly. Amy and Carla live in the Los Angeles area, and Barbara, Channing, Darla, Macrae, Megan, Patsy, Rachel, and Valerie all live in and around Boston. Jackie lives in Pakistan, and interacts regularly with Muslim women but is extremely critical of Pakistani Muslim men and Pakistani society in general.

From this data, one can theorize that converts are far more likely to be accepted by and satisfied with the community of born Muslims if they are white. Latina converts are likely to be lonely unless they live in the Los Angeles area and find community with other Latina converts.

Racism within the Muslim Community

About travelling to Mecca in April 1964, Malcolm X wrote that seeing Muslims of "all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans" interacting as equals led him to see Islam in a new light, as a means by which America's racial conflicts could

be overcome.[443] Some interviewees notice preferential treatment for white converts, as Amy relates:

> White converts are definitely treated way better than Black converts and Latino converts and Asian converts. White people still seem like an anomaly. For a White person to accept Islam, is seen as both strange but kind of like the ultimate to prove that Islam is true: "Wow, look, even white people are doing this!"

Some converts felt they received preferential treatment for being white, as Barbara describes: "I've noticed a little bit of racism yes, and I should say I guess that I've got preferential treatment as a white, if I'm going to be honest, light skinned, north African sisters, have racism towards darker sisters or African Americans."

Wynona was bothered by the racism other Muslims expressed against her husband. "My ex-husband is black and really dark, so I had a lot of people tell me, 'How can you date a Sudanese? What's wrong with you, you are so light skinned!' I've had a lot of negative criticism about my ex-husband, because I am white. I'm Latina."

Some of the converts in Haddad's study believe that they are not accepted into the born Muslim community because the born Muslims feel converted women are American first, and Muslim second.[444] As Magnolia says, "You are always going to be seen as a convert."

One benefit of becoming Muslim, according to Megan, is gaining empathy: "I probably really understand how my husband feels and how other immigrants feel, because I have been treated that way as an American Muslim [by other Muslims]." Whether or not it is actually possible to "really understand" how anyone feels, the aspect of conversion to Islam that I find most interesting is the question of how big a role

[443] Malcolm X, Alex Haley, M. S. Handler, and Ossie Davis, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015), 388-393, 390-391.
[444] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 50.

empathy plays, if any. In my hours of dialog with Muslim converts, the sensation underlying much of the conversation was not only rapport between myself and the participant, but empathy for others more generally.

According to my interviewees, Americans are biased against born Muslims, and born Muslims are biased against Latina converts. Lara says born Muslims have a "stereotypical image of Mexicans that they only have farm jobs and are not educated." Magnolia concurs: "You are looked down upon."

One unexpected consequence of conversion for the women I surveyed is to encounter what they describe as "haram police" who constantly correct convert women. Roxie, for instance, resents being told to wear hijab when she chooses not to. "I think that there is a lot of judgment in the community, who is more pious, who is more faithful," and Roxie doesn't want to draw attention to herself. Adela has stopped going to the mosque altogether because of the "haram police" harassment from born Muslims. Channing describes feeling unwelcome and deciding to leave the mosque for *iftar*, breaking the fast during Ramadan:

> Ramadan is a trying time, and for converts it's particularly trying because other Muslims have iftar with their families and friends, and we converts really only have one another. And so, trying to sit together in the mosque and then being told, 'No, you can't sit here where you always sit, everybody has to sit on these tarps against this back wall, and you can't have chairs.' Well, many of our sisters are older and need chairs and so they can't really sit on the floor. Sometimes we just end up leaving, because we feel so unloved. Last year a couple sisters and I left and went to eat by ourselves at home, because that was more comfortable than being treated like an animal.

A story like this is rather heartbreaking to hear, knowing how much converts are hoping to find community in the mosque. It may be that every endeavor, every religion, school, mosque, social movement, or business, has the potential to attract and harbor zealous, authoritarian bullies. Channing shares another story about the "haram police":

> I was sitting in a group and a woman comes in and says, "You know, that's the way Satan sits." No, "Hey, how are you? I noticed the way you are sitting and it's actually better if you sit some other way." We have no relationship, we don't know each other's names, that's, like, very unwelcoming to be compared to Satan. If I wanted that, I'd go to the Christian churches—you know what I'm saying?

Cultural Gender Bias

My participants related several differences between what they call "pure Islam" and the practice of Islam. Amy was most vocal of my participants in her criticism of how women were relegated to mosque basements—a good example of marginalization—where they cannot see, and sometimes cannot even hear, the Imam leading prayer. Both Channing and Valerie pointed out that women have to use the side entrance to their mosque and not the main door. Being discriminated against at the mosque was unacceptable to these three converts. In their own way, Amy, Channing and Valerie have each tried to challenge this gender discrimination. As Amy describes:

> I really firmly believe that Islam or the Quran says that men and women are equal and deserve to be treated with the same respect and dignity. But you know, in practice that of course does not always happen. [In my mosque] the women, instead of being in the main hall with the men, are kept in the basement where everything is stored and are forced to be with the kids the whole time and they can't see or hear the Imam. If there's going to be a panel with different speakers, the panel's almost always all men, even if there are women that could just as easily talk about that same topic.

Most of the other converts were, however, in favor of gender segregation at the mosque and elsewhere.

Converts Only Make Muslim Friends?

Some converts find making non-Muslim friends difficult. As Wynona says, "I have not encountered anyone who showed any interest in being friends, probably because I wear hijab and non-Muslims might be intimidated by me. I try to be friends with some

of the girls that come to take a tour of the mosque, but they just distance themselves." Layla, on the other hand, actively rebels against the idea of keeping only Muslim friends: "I found it limiting to hear I should only have Muslim friends because that's just what I should do. No, I grew up in this country, I want my friends to be from all religions and creeds."

For the most part, both white and Latina converts in this study initially encountered difficulty feeling welcomed and accepted into their mosque communities, due to barriers of language, culture, and racism. Most of the white converts eventually found ways to make themselves comfortable, or were made to feel comfortable, among the born Muslim community. Latinas have found ways to replace or augment mosque life, by forming their own women's convert groups.

4. Society

Consequences of conversion to Islam relating to the broader society are now considered in two parts. First are the often-negative reactions of strangers. Second are the ways converts have been inspired to become community activists and attempt to change the hostile society they find themselves in.

Hate Crimes/Islamophobia Post-Conversion

The wearing of hijab has different meanings in different contexts. In America, it is a visible sign of being Muslim and a symbol of solidarity with other Muslims, but it also makes a target of oneself. Darla felt she might be able to draw away and better withstand the insults of ignorant Americans. "It's not the best reason to put a hijab on, but I put the hijab on right away because I felt like I'm a strong articulate woman, and if

anybody's going to mess with a Muslim woman, they are going to get me. And God help them." She augments her empathy and courage with a touch of humor:

> I have had people spit on me. I have had people scream at me, "Go back where you came from!" I would just look at them straight in the face and say, "Cleveland? Cleveland sucks!" That was my standard response. In one demonstration [protest I attended] somebody screamed something and threw their ice cream at me. I was wearing a hijab, and I just wiped it off with my scarf and said, "Was it worth losing ten bucks? Was it worth ten dollars, just throwing ice cream on me, when you can see how easily I wiped it away?"

These women knowingly risked attracting the ire of the ignorant, making a statement about standing in solidarity with a maligned religious group by actually joining it, in a country that defines itself by its religious freedoms but fails to live up to its ideals. As Carla relates, "You know sometimes it got really hard. I've been spit on in grocery stores because I have my hijab on and they tell me to go back to own country, and not too long ago a truck tried to run me off the road." Nearly every convert told me disturbing stories of abuse and hatred, coming not only from adults but from children: "I was driving, and this little boy was riding his bicycle. He just looked at me and put his hand across his neck like he was going to kill me. A ten-year-old boy." (Esmerelda)

The interviewees were aware that wearing hijab might not only invite unwanted vitriol, but it might also induce anxiety in Americans. As Esmerelda relates:

> I was going to the store and this woman came out and looked at me, and she was literally petrified. She was so scared, and I felt so bad because, you know, she obviously had these misconceptions of Muslims and just seeing that fear in her face was heart-wrenching. It took me by surprise and I kind of just kept going but I wish I had taken the time to let her know that I wasn't dangerous, and that I'm sorry she was afraid.

According to Channing, neither Americans nor born Muslims have a monopoly on ignorance:

> When we talk about American society with regards to Islam and Muslims, it is ignorant. Similarly, I think [born] Muslims are ignorant in the exact same way

> about American converts to Islam. Like, the reasons why Americans are so ignorant of Islam, is because they've not seen otherwise. They have not experienced, they have not encountered Islam or Muslims and they don't try to go out of their way to do so. With born Muslims, their experience is being born and raised Muslim. They don't go out of their way to try to learn and understand and feel what the experience of a convert is. So, I think it's the exact same thing, to be honest, whether that's the American Islamophobia or the way that a born Muslim treats a convert. It's the same roots; it's the ignorance, and not trying to fix their ignorance.

In the process of speaking to other members of society in their daily lives, these converts described their efforts to address ignorance and increase empathy. Some converts take it a step further and become community activists.

Although many studies suggest, and this study explores, the idea that unique personal, ethnic, and cultural variations of Islam *are* being created, most converts do not report that they themselves underwent a cultural change, even though they recognize having changed over the years. "They do not feel that by becoming Muslim they have been 'Arabised' or 'Pakistanised'. They feel that they are still English British and see no conflict between culture before becoming Muslim and afterwards. They feel that it is just as valid to be a British Muslim as being a Nigerian Muslim or an Egyptian Muslim."[445]

Becoming Activists

McGinty found that converts to Islam often engage in social and political issues within an Islamic framework. The Swedish converts in her study "emphasized Islam's message of social justice, solidarity with the poor, gender equality, and environmental awareness, ideas held as typically 'Swedish.' "[446] Haddad points out that women make all possible choices as far as engaging with society, from openly declaring their Muslim

[445] Köse, "Conversion to Islam," 140.
[446] McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, 476-477.

identity through behavior and dress to keeping it private, from not engaging in politics at all to attending marches to running for office.[447]

Islam has indeed inspired some of the converts in my study to become activists. Both Latina and white converts get involved with community activism, but Latinas seem to be more active than whites. Seven of eight Latina participants reported being active in community work, and politically active in general, for instance taking part in marches and demonstrations against anti-women and anti-immigrant government policies. Believing Islam improves the lives of converts, Wynona, Lara, and Magnolia actively proselytize in both Mexico and California. Marta co-founded a Latina Muslim organization that does community outreach, provides Spanish-language material and services, and participates in *LA Voice,* a multi-racial, multi-faith community organization.[448] Lara, Magnolia, and Amy regularly talk to the press, serving as spokeswomen for Muslim and women's causes. All the converts I interviewed say they try to be good role models. Those that do wear hijab believe wearing it in public and at work is a form of *dawah*, inviting questions about Islam. According to Akbar Ahmed, "The role is both challenging and empowering. With their conversion, these women become cultural mediators between their new faith and their original community."[449]

Among white converts, six of eleven considered themselves active in their communities, two somewhat active, and two not at all. In a recent study of 1,876 American women in general, only 3.2% had "done something in the women's movement" which the researchers indicated meant, at the very least, as getting involved

[447] Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, 60.
[448] "Who We Are," *LA Voice*, accessed May 11, 2018, https://www.lavoice.org/who-we-are/.
[449] Ahmed, *Journey into America*, 307.

with protest marches.[450] Both Latina and white Muslim converts in my study were far more likely to be actively engaged with community and political issues than American women in general.

Chapter Summary

From the outset, I had no interest in judging the sincerity, purity, or genuineness of my converts' decision to convert to Islam, and I find the idea objectionable. What I was most interested in was the *reasonableness* of their decision—did it make sense in their lives, how and why? This may sound like a psychological question, but I intended it only as something a friend might ask about. Such was the nature of my conversations with my participants.

After listening to my participants describe the *Consequence* of conversion, my respect for them has doubled, almost all of them have suffered in some way after their conversion to Islam—some lost the support of their families and friends, while others were victims of racism and some were taken advantage of by the community they gave everything up to be a part of—but none of them cast aspersions or showed resentment at how they have been treated, instead they are full of compassion and forgiveness.

[450] Eric Swank and Breanne Fahs, "Understanding Feminist Activism among Women: Resources, Consciousness, and Social Networks," *Socius* 3 (2017): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117734081.

Chapter XII.

Conclusions

As described in Chapter III, the questions and hypotheses my research aims to address are based on an analysis of previous research among women in Europe and the Americas conducted by experts in the field of religious conversion to Islam. We now turn to the expertise of my participants and attempt to draw together responses to the hypotheses based on the interview data shared in Chapters VI through XI. The current chapter addresses the questions:

Have I responded successfully to my Research Question #1, that is, do I know significantly more about the topic than I did before?

Were my Hypotheses confirmed as being applicable?

Are there other useful observations and inferences to draw from the research?

Results and Interpretations

The overall goal was to understand conversion in America by comparing two groups, Latina and white converts, and whether ethnicity influenced the experience. The secondary goal was to address two hypotheses drawn from prior research. The first hypothesis had to do with whether motivations and outcomes vis a vis the immigrant Muslim community can be understood as following more or less predefined paths, based on the influence of ethnicity, culture, race and (in the case of European comparisons), nationality. The second hypothesis had to do with the influence of American's religiosity, first, whether religiosity influences justifications for conversion as European studies

suggest, and second, whether those justifications are actually unimportant compared to a more important goal of escaping untoward aspects of American society.

Research Question #1: Overall Conversion Research

Research question #1: "What are some of the reasons Latina and white women in the United States convert to Islam, what is their post-conversion experience like, especially in terms of their relationship to born Muslims, and are there discernible differences between the two groups because of their differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and how does it all compare to prior research?"

The previous seven chapters have answered that question, in the voices of my nineteen participants. I have attempted to compare and contrast their testimony with the insights and interviews of prior researchers. The following are a few observations I would like to highlight.

RQ#1, Conversion, Results of Research

My research suggests that the cultural traits other researchers found relevant to the experience of Latinas converting to Islam were also found among white subjects and are not uniquely Latina. Research on white converts did not explicitly call out cultural traits associated with Latinas, but many of the reasons white converts gave mirror their reasons for conversion. In other words, my research suggests that the absence of what are thought to be Latina traits in research on white converts does not mean those same reasons are not applicable to them as well. For instance, like Latinas, many white converts had also been Catholics, and several also grew up in poverty. Despite the expectations gleaned from prior studies, my data show marked similarities between the two groups, with some slight

differences among the reasons they give for converting to Islam:

Religious beliefs and practices: reasons given by the two groups were similar—extensive, exhaustive issues with Christianity—but only Latinas related the Islamic practice of hijab to their Catholic grandmothers in Mexico wearing headscarves; to some Latinas, instead of being a foreign or oppressive custom, wearing hijab was already a personally familiar sign of piety.

Family: reasons given by the two groups were similar in most respects—gender complementarity, respect for women and mothers, modesty, family cohesion. Statistically speaking, difficult life circumstances are found more among Latinx in the United States than among whites. However, some members of both groups in my study had distressingly similar family backgrounds, and there was no way to tell whether a Latina or a white convert was speaking when it came to problems of early sexuality, substance abuse, and broken families. In other words, to the extent poverty and single or neglectful parenting are motivating factors, the source of the poverty and broken homes did not matter—both white and Latina converts look to Islam for a better way of life. At the same time, some members of both groups also had what they considered positive family lives, and becoming Muslim was more a continuation of what they appreciated rather than an escape from adverse conditions. The main difference between the two groups was this: only Latinas related traditional Muslim patriarchal family practices with their own pre-existing beliefs, where fathers' permission must be obtained prior to chaperoned dates and marriage.

Community: both groups expressed not fitting in with the pre-conversion community groups available to them, especially their church communities. But only

white converts—including Barbara, Channing and Patsy— suggested that they became Muslims to escape loneliness. For some white converts, the longing for community plays a significant role in their decision to convert. For most Latina converts, being part of a community is already a given, an expectation built into their worldviews, and so their post-conversion experience in terms of community was not a radical departure from their pre-conversion lives.

Society: similar reasons for conversion related to societal problems of materialism, drugs and alcohol, and promiscuity were given by both groups. However, Latinas reported far more direct experiences with these societal problems and placed a far greater emphasis on them. Several Latinas suggest the men of their culture are "macho" and "misogynistic;" that they "beat their wives," "neglect their families," have "multiple partners, if not multiple wives;" and have "children out of wedlock." My Latina participants suggest Islam, and marriage to a Muslim man, can avoid these problems. This is not to suggest in any way that what they describe is actually typical of Latino men—nor that some white men do not exhibit many of the same behaviors—but the negative ideas about Latino men weigh heavily on the minds of the Latina women I interviewed.

RQ#1, Conversion, Discussion

It is possible that the focus, especially among first-generation Latinx in America, on family life was stronger than among white converts. The impression I got was that, whatever strength and comfort and social cohesion that may have come from my participants' extended families in Mexico, began to be lost when they moved to the

United States No matter how different the background context—extended and loving Latinx family; single, abusive, alcoholic, absent single parent; traditional and middle-class upbringing by two loving parents—potential converts believe that having a "traditional family" is important, and that aspect of Islam is therefore appealing to them.

The general observation that the Latinas in my study, mostly immigrants who came to the United States as young children, faced challenging socio-economic problems that they wish to distance themselves from, undoubtedly forms part of the attraction of Islam, as it does for many African American converts. On the whole, a higher percentage of my Latina participants reported growing up in challenging environments (drug use and early onset of sexuality) than my white participants reported, and they said these factors had a major role in their decision to join Islam. However, Americans of all ethnicities and skin pigmentation are at risk for poverty, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, economic marginalization, and civic disenfranchisement, and some of my white subjects reported very similar upbringings.

Being children of recent and generally underprivileged immigrants might have something to do with their conversion in that they may be expected to be more sensitive to racism and issues of social justice. However, the current study did not find a difference in sensitivity. In fact, a sensitivity for and empathy with victims of racism and injustice seems to characterize the entire group. In many cases, it was a feeling of solidarity with Muslims that led most of my participants to their first *Encounter*, the experience that set them on their path to embracing Islam.

It does not appear that Latinx culture, in and of itself, makes a woman more open to learning about and converting to Islam. It is possible that Latinas are simply more

likely to *meet* Muslims because of the general situation of immigrants being geographically concentrated into poor neighborhoods. It may well be that many of the mostly white people suffering from the poverty/despair/opioid crisis in America would be good potential candidates for Islam if only there were Muslims to meet living nearby.

RQ#1, Post-conversion, Results of Research

The most significant differences between Latina and white conversion experiences are in terms of community, both positive and negative. On the positive side, partly due to geographic proximity, partly due to the possibility of bonding over ethnicity, Latinas' post-conversion experience (like their pre-conversion lives), involves far more community than white converts enjoy. That is where the major difference lies, mainly because Latinas build their own communities, which does not appear to be a reasonable option open to white converts.

On the negative side, Latinas do experience racism in their interactions with immigrant Muslims more so than white converts; my white subjects observed that they were given preferential treatment compared to African-American and Latina converts and did not shy from saying there is "racism within the Muslim community." Latina converts reported instances of discrimination against them in mosques that primarily cater to immigrant Muslim communities. They observed that immigrant Muslims share the stereotype Americans in general have of the Latinx—not educated, "farmers or laborers" – and did not treat them with respect.

My study confirms that Latinas in the United States resist "cultural" aspects of immigrant Muslims' practice of Islam in order to maintain their own cultural and ethnic

identity and language, as they do elsewhere in the Americas. They all continue to speak Spanish at home, cook Latinx cuisine, and – apart from public dancing - partake in Latinx cultural events. My participants remain actively involved in their pre-conversion communities. In particular, Marta, Lara, Magnolia, Esmerelda and Wynona participate in interfaith events, join political protests and marches, and perform dawah, both within their communities and in Mexico.

Latinas consequently form their own Muslim associations. Latinas in my study have taken concrete steps to protect and nurture their unique Latina-Muslim identities by organizing. Marta (Marta) started LALMA[451] (formerly Los Angeles Latino Muslims Association, now La Asociacion Latino Musulmana de America). Magnolia, Lara, Esmerelda and Wynona have started *halaqas* (prayer circles) for Latina women. They work to make sure that the *khutbas* (sermons) at their mosques are in English not in Arabic or the original language of immigrant Muslims. Several of my Latina participants are the impetus behind their local mosques offering introductory classes on Islam in Spanish.

Less than a handful of the nineteen women I interviewed were in favor of women and men mixing in the mosque or women leading prayer. In retrospect, this was surprising only because I failed to apply my understanding of converts' uniqueness and individuality to "Latinas in general." Latinas in the United States are likely to have something, but not everything, in common with Latinas in the Americas.

[451] La Asociacion Latino Musulmana de America, "Brief History of the LALMA Foundation," LALMA, accessed August 24, 2018, http://www.lalma.net/.

One difference between Latina and white converts that was more sensed that transcribed was that Islam empowers Latinas more than whites and gives them more of a sense of dignity. This sense must be related to where Latinas are coming from in a society that regularly tries to disempower them and treats them and their "illegal immigrant" family members disrespectfully.

RQ#1, Post-conversion, Discussion

Post-conversion was where most of the important differences showed up as predicted by Hypothesis (A). When geographic density and proximity allowed, Latinas formed their own associations. When isolated, Latinas were lonely. White converts attempted to integrate with born Muslims when they could, and depending on their own personality traits, either did so happily (for gregarious converts) or remained lonely (for shy ones), also, again, influenced by geography.

Frustrated with the pressure to conform and not to distinguish themselves as Latinas by ethnocentric immigrant Muslims, Latinas tend to distance themselves from the immigrant Muslims community and build their own Latina Muslim communities, rejecting immigrant Muslims' ethnic foibles and celebrating their own.

The average age of my Latina converts was over 50, and none of them cited the existence of Latina Muslim organizations as being instrumental in *their own conversion* but all had engaged with Latina Muslim organizations at some or many points in their lives *after* converting. The lack of impact on their conversion decisions is primarily because most Latina cultural associations did not yet exist at the time of their conversion and needed to be created—in one case by one of my participants, Marta. The experience

of new Latina converts will, in many cases and especially for those in large urban areas like Los Angeles, undoubtedly revolve around the proselytizing, teaching, and worship of specifically Latin Muslim groups. These associations enhance the post-conversion experience for Latinas in geographical proximity, and eventually affect several aspects of conversion for new converts, in terms of *Encounter* and *Interaction*, *Commitment*, and *Consequences*. Some Latinas in the Greater Boston area who do not have easy access to either immigrant or Latina community groups did not report being lonely prior to conversion but report being lonely and isolated in the post-conversion phase.

Scholarship suggests European converts distance themselves from immigrant Muslims in part because they disagree with their Islamic ideas about gender and in part because the working-class immigrant Muslims in their countries are seen as inferior in class, to the point that some European converts can be described as Islamophobic. White converts in the United States are more likely, in general, to find kinship with immigrant Muslims many of whom are professionals and earn as much as other Americans than either their European or Latinx counterparts.

Latinos do not cite finding community as a significant reason for conversion, because they already have it, and do not appear to be converting to counter loneliness.

Islamic community is theoretically built on the premise that it is color blind, but neither white nor Latina converts found this to be the case. Whether you are Latina or white, you are both discriminated against. The responses of Latinas differ from those of whites—Latinas can brush off discrimination and make their own communities (if they have sufficient geographical concentration), and whites must simply deal with it—but as

far as my research shows, both sincerely want to be part of immigrant Muslim communities, if they can.

All of the previous research about Latina converts in the Americas pointed to their using Islam as a tool for liberation to secure more rights and empower themselves. Converts of Maya, Caribbean, and Brazilian origin were negotiating with born-Muslims and their male counterparts for equal space in the mosque, women speakers, respect for their culture instead of being forced to align their identity with Muslims outside of the Americas. None of my Latina participants showed such a "feminist" outlook; in fact, they stressed that they chose Islam because of its idea of gender complementarity rather than gender equality.

One of my first, now discarded hypotheses, was that women would be drawn to Islam via Sufism, in large part because of its gender equality—I know of Sufi organizations led by women in New York and Philadelphia. But sixteen of nineteen converts *preferred* gender segregation, *preferred* only men to lead prayers and give *khutbas*, and said they did not agree with even the *idea* of the Women's Mosque in Los Angeles. This lack of interest in general equality was found even among my two Sufi adherents. I found all of their strong opposition to feminism to be quite surprising at first, but upon reflection, I realized once again: it is all about the context.

Latinas elsewhere in the Americas have entirely different life experiences and backgrounds than American Latinas. Truly marginalized, deeply impoverished women coming from, in many cases, strict forms of gender segregation, found in Islam what I can only guess many early converts found as Islam spread around the world—a freedom from oppression.

It cannot be repeated enough: the themes and patterns drawn from my own and prior research represent tendencies and not absolutes. Many if not most Latinas do integrate with immigrant Muslims. I believe they do not discriminate against immigrant Muslims of lower socio-economic classes the way Europeans do is because Latinas are socio-economically struggling immigrants themselves. They have their own communities separate from Muslim immigrant communities not as a matter of exclusion - although they do not appreciate the 'haram police' – primarily because they want to assert their Latinx identity and speak their own language.

To sum up, in comparison to the situation in Europe, the relationship between American converts, both white and Latina, with the immigrant Muslims community is quite rosy.

The lack of interest the vast majority of my participants expressed about seeking gender equality in public worship settings was surprising to me but should not have been. Gender essentialism at home is something most converts desired. The gender complementarity of Islam does not seem to garner much complaint, either in prior research or among my participants. The problems converts ran into with immigrant Muslim husbands were usually, but not always, solved with divorce (often with mediation of the sheikh at the mosque), and many converts were happily married. So apart from some sad stories, there were no real surprises on the family/gender front – the emotional and physical abuse described to me did not sound of Islamic origin and seems to be part of the human condition, at least at this point in world history. However, in public spheres I had assumed there would be more interest in allowing women to lead prayer and discussions. While not a universal effort, a number of European and Latin

American converts struggled for and in some cases obtained gender equality at the mosque. The appeal of Sufism and the way some Sufi organizations allow women as leaders was, I thought, just one example of the *milieu* (gender equality in the West) asserting itself into the religion. This gender equality element of Sufism, I expected, would be one of the main attractors to Islam in America. What I found instead was a near-universal disinterest in gender equality in the community and mosque setting. Of nineteen subjects, only two felt that the Women's Mosque of America, where women are allowed to lead prayers and lecture, was a good idea. Even the Sufi converts among my participants were against women leading prayer and integration of women and men at the mosque.

In retrospect, this should not have been surprising, since the prior research was inconclusive in terms of gender equality in public settings. Subjects drawn from areas like New York or Philadelphia where Sufi mosques are found may well have uncovered numerous converts in favor of gender equality in the mosque and skewed the results in the other direction.

When it comes to gender segregation, I believe what is happening is that American women, because they are already guaranteed a certain level of rights, can literally "take it or leave it" – the result is relatively insignificant either way, as it affects *only* the mosque setting, and not the rest of life. This casual disregard for gender equality struck me as akin to the choice of attending an all-women's college. There are very good reasons to do so (women can speak freely without men taking over discussions), and equally compelling reasons not to do so (men make up half the world and we have to co-

exist). And so, discerning women make their own choice. Creating a space for women-only seems reasonable - when it is *your* choice to do so, and not someone else's.

Research Question #2: Conversion Paths

Research Question 2 is about the use of Hypothesis (A) and asks: is it possible to describe, based on their different ethnicities, cultures, and races the ways in which Latina and white women converts to Islam in the United States differ in their conversion motivations and post-conversion relationships with immigrant Muslims?

RQ#2, Results

The conversion path hypothesis predicted several things.

First, the differing paths of conversion to Islam for white and Latina converts was somewhat confirmed, except that some Latinas have what might be termed more as "white" lifestyles, while some white converts came from what might best be described more as "Latina" backgrounds, at least when measured in terms of Catholicism, poverty, violence, hypersexuality, and substance abuse. Overall, the reasons for conversion were strikingly similar between both groups, which suggests that by the time of their conversion, my Latina participants - who either came to America as young children or are second-generation - had already become acculturated to America and had set aside many aspects of their traditional culture.

Second, on a thematic level, there was one potential surprise that bears further research. Most Latinas, like some of the poor and life-challenged whites, seemed to be following the *in-situ* emigration path as expected, attempting to escape difficult *external* life circumstances. The first surprise was the large proportion of white converts who

reported that Islam helped with an array of mental health issues. Instead of coming to Islam for intellectual/symbolic reasons, were the majority of white converts motivated, as it seems to me, by a desire to address *internal* mental health problems? Hypothesis (A) may need to be updated with a new category created for women who come to Islam not for intellectual reasons (symbolic battle) and not for external reasons (*in-situ* emigration) but for what I would call "internal transformation" or "inner battles."

RQ#2, Discussion

While outside the scope of my project, I found it enlightening to follow the paths of converts in Europe on the diagram of Hypothesis (A). No two converts are the same, but the hypothesis was based on trends like white European converts distancing themselves from immigrant Muslims they found to be undesirable. One of the most interesting phenomena I found was in tracing the path of some Flemish Belgian converts who are, in effect, "all over the map," in what can only be described as a truly "love-hate" relationship with immigrant culture. On the one hand, they eagerly embrace immigrant customs, costumes, and names. In this regard, it seems Belgians are more like Americans; although Europeans, in general, have not lost their identity to "whiteness" the way Baldwin suggests Americans have, it seems some Belgians may have, and are in search of identity. On the other hand, these Flemish converts start their own Muslim organizations with the stated goal of ridding Islam of immigrants' cultural influences. In this regard, it seems Belgians are more like the French.[452] I believe this dichotomy is a

[452] Leman, Stallaert, and Lechkar, "Ethnic Dimensions in the Discourse and Identity Strategies," 1484-1495.

reflection of a historic battle for identity that Flanders specifically (split between the Dutch and the French language and cultures as they are) struggles with.

Research Question #3: Effect of Higher Religiosity in United States

Hypothesis (B) is: despite its hyper-religiosity, American women will convert to Islam less for religion (which they could get from Christian congregations) and more as a form of protest, to set up a kind of boundary, against a "furiously secular" society. Is Hypothesis (B) useful in understanding American women's conversion to Islam? Do women describe their conversion to Islam in terms of protest against American society? While many of their justifications are expected to be religious, will there be evidence of carving out distance from society as well? Put another way, what will be their reasons for not taking advantage of the many religious options available in America?

There are two parts to this question. The first, about justifications being religious, is confirmed absolutely. The second, about actual motivations being mostly *not* about religion, is inconclusive.

RQ#3, Religion as Primary Justification for Conversion

The first part what is interesting about American's religiosity has to do with how it frames and fills much of their conversion narratives. Because Americans convert to Islam within a highly religious context, they justify their commitment decision primarily in terms of religion. In general terms, reasons for conversion depend on who needs convincing. Toward the end of my research, I began to realize that almost every reason for conversion my converts gave represented an adaptation to something else unstated, a response to a situation in one's environment, whether from childhood or from yesterday,

a minor or major struggle between new and old, a desire to go back in time, so to speak. Nieuwkerk's observation about converts responding to American's higher religiosity compared to Europeans was one of the first that jumped out at me and was found to be true in my research: negative aspects of Christianity formed—by far—the largest "reason" for converting to Islam for my participants. Like Nieuwkerk, I believe the reason is—unconsciously—exaggerated to a great degree. The reasons converts give for conversion are directly related to the reasons they *need* to give in order to justify their conversion to their detractors, whether parents, co-workers, or society at large. The religious reasons for conversion took up a disproportionate amount of time during my interviews. I have devoted a full chapter to Spiritual/Theological reasons my participants gave, and even that is insufficient to convey just how much they talked about their dissatisfactions with Christianity.

Negative justifications arise from and are made necessary by the societal context. In the case of conversion to Islam, the context for American converts can be described as arising from Islamophobia and religiosity. For Scandinavians, instead of religiosity they must come up with reasons to justify gender complementarity in a society that prides itself on gender equality.

RQ#3, Is the Journey for Americans "Secular to Sacred"?

The second question that arises from American's religiosity is: if America is so religious, why would women need to convert to a different religion? Given the wide array of options available among Christian denominations, including groups that abstain from alcohol and live with what might be called "traditional values" including modesty of

dress, piety, and so forth, why not just choose one of those Christian congregations to find community with?

Are women actually seeking a religion, or are they attempting to distinguish themselves and set themselves apart from American society, and Islam just happens to be a good way to accomplish that goal? If America is already several times more religious than Europe, how does going from "sacred to sacred" make sense?

Obviously, the first answer is that American's hyper-religiosity may not apply to my participants. But several other possible explanations come to mind. First, America may only be nominally religious, and Americans may only be giving lip-service to their religiosity due to their peculiar history of being founded initially by religious zealots. Second, the religious organizations in America are seen as corrupt, as was presented in Chapter VI. Both of these may be true, but I believe converts could have found respectable, pious, modest, tee-totaling, highly religious Christian congregations to join. Third, as I mentioned in the context of Berger saying the world is still "as furiously religious as it ever was,"[453] the world is also "furiously secular" and I would add, in America, "furiously materialistic." America is more religious and more hedonistic, more secular, more individualistic, more materialistic than Europe is. Compared to community-minded Europeans, American converts seeking a return to a "traditional lifestyle" have a lot more to rebel against, and so America's relative religiosity is outweighed as a motivator.

The results are inconclusive because, despite a lot of evidence given in Chapter XI about the desire to escape from the ills of American society, the vast preponderance of

[453] Berger, *Desecularization of the World*, 2.

reasons given for conversion were, in fact, religious. Comparing whether Americans and Europeans had the same underlying attitudes about their own societies, and motivations related to carving out space for themselves from those societies, would be an interesting area for future research.

Chapter XIV.

Final Thoughts

The following are some final thoughts, personal impressions, and suggestions for future research, offered in the hope they may help future scholars or—at the very least—let you into the mind of one particular researcher.

"Carving out Space"

When I started this project, I really could not comprehend why American women converted to Islam. This phenomenon now appears to this researcher to be a reasonable response to a need to "carve out space" in a partly disagreeable world. One of the simplest statements of this idea was found in King's study of Australian women converts: "Islam presented 'an alternative, as almost like a space of resistance to, you know, Western boundaryless-ness and all of this stuff that I'd felt had had a negative impact on my life.'"[454]

What is rejected by converts is what is seen as an immoral, consumerist, overly permissive society rife with unhealthy sexuality and substance abuse, as well as a religious environment (Christianity) perceived as riddled with hypocrisy and confusion. What is embraced is an Islamic blueprint for life, adopting structure and discipline,

[454] King, "Pathways to Allah," 453.

eschewing frivolous choices, and limiting converts' freedoms in order to attain freedom for more important choices: a good life, in terms of spiritual peace, privacy, simplicity and certainty; family; gender roles, and; community

Many reasons for conversion were held in common, but many were unique to each individual. Wohlrab-Sahr asks, "What problem is solved by conversion to Islam and why is it solved by converting to a foreign religion?"[455] The answer is that, far from answering a single problem, converting to Islam answers myriad concerns about religion, family, community and lifestyle.

As a researcher, one of my goals is to see patterns and share generalizations, and yet the most important observation I can make is that there are no generalizations to be made about the question of "why convert to Islam?" One could undertake a large-scale survey, interview every convert in America, and come up with some interesting demographic data. But to understand why American women convert to Islam, you need to get to know individual women and their stories. Despite the importance of biography in telling these stories, there is no predictive power to be gained, only understanding.

What this specificity leads to is "a new kind of Islam" influenced by American ideals, rights, and laws but individualized for each convert. As Roald argues, converts "begin to form their own Islamic space, consisting of new Muslims and perhaps some second-generation Muslims. At the later stages of the conversion process, converts' social space is thus often separate from that of born-Muslims."[456] The Latinas I interviewed in the Los Angeles area have most definitely created their own social spaces, separate from born Muslims. The ten white converts in Boston and Los Angeles have, for

[455] Wohlrab-Sahr, "Conversion to Islam," 353.
[456] Roald, "Conversion Process in Stages," 360.

the most part, joined existing born Muslim communities. Although the Women's Mosque of America creates a new and different opportunity for community, all but two of the nineteen women I interviewed said they would *not* be interested in attending, because it violates the gender lines they believe are an important, and good, part of being Muslim.[457] The four Latina converts in the Boston area are lonely for community, except for the one Latina there who follows Sufi Islam. There is no standard operating procedure for new Muslimah—each must find her own way.

"Cultural Islam"

For this researcher, born and raised a Muslim in Pakistan while attending Catholic schools, one of the most interesting perspectives on conversion to Islam comes from Jackie, an American woman from California who now lives in Pakistan. From the vantage point of living in a Muslim country, she can relate the conversion experience to what many converts think of as "cultural Islam." First, she describes her experiences in America shortly after conversion to Islam:

> Having my hijab ripped off by a police officer while being arrested for something I didn't do, being screamed at by a one-legged veteran, not getting fair representation or a fair trial … when I was going through my divorce, homelessness, pregnancy, and other hardships. There was a lot of misplaced anger at Muslims [in society] at that point because of the economic crash. There were also mangled men returning from a war they had no business starting, A lot of misplaced hate . . . specifically directed at visibly Muslim women, and especially converts, to punish them for making the wrong choice to marry Muslim men.

When she subsequently moved from the United States to Pakistan, Jackie was able to relate the white convert's experience in the two countries.

[457] Amy identifies as a Muslim feminist and works for the Women's Mosque of America and Roxie was the second participant who expressed an interest in the mosque, but she lives in Boston so, cannot attend it.

> As a hijabi, it was hard being the only visible Muslims in the United States– women become the targets of a lot of hate crimes and vitriol due to their visibility. It's different, but no better in Pakistan [where] women are systematically outcast from society and oppressed. There is also so much culture twisted up in the religion that women don't know their actual rights. In United States and other non-Muslim modern countries, many converts are being preyed upon by abusive jerks from these backwards Muslim countries looking for a free ride to the promised land. As a woman who works closely with Muslimah survivors of domestic violence and abuse, I can't tell you how many men have hurt the women they claim to love. It's sickening. Women have the short end of the stick everywhere, but especially in these so-called Muslim populations. This doesn't mean I reject Islam, but I am very close to rejecting all things Muslim culture and patriarchy to just go live and practice my own version of Islam mixed with other things I believe by myself somewhere quiet.

Islam "as an ideal" has proven quite satisfactory for the nineteen women I interviewed because living in the United States has allowed them to create their own version of Islam, free from its cultural baggage to one degree or another. Each has had run-ins with "cultural Islam," whether at the mosque or in their marriages, and each has to some extent managed to accommodate themselves to their new lives as Muslims, either by joining communities of born Muslims, building their own communities of Latina converts, or—for the Latinas unable to find community in Boston—practicing Islam more or less on their own.

In a country like the United States that provides largely equal rights to women, and for the most part allows religious freedom, practicing Islam can be a beneficial, life-affirming, way to carve out traditional values in a world apparently untethered from moral values. While I understand the desire for a more traditional lifestyle and can even see the value of gender segregation in some situations, what makes sense in a free and open American society may not make sense when Islam becomes the rationale behind a theocratic government and a repressively traditional society.

What I can say is that I honor the women who have so generously shared their insights, and I hope they realize, as I have, that the ability to form their *own* Islam, and practice religion on their *own* terms, is a human right that is not available to much of the world.

Just as this paper was nearing completion, the news was announced: two Muslim women, both Democrats, have won seats in United States Congress. Minnesota legislator and former Somali-American refugee Ilhan Omar won the Minnesota Democratic primary and is expected to win her seat in November. Palestinian-American Rashida Tlaib won her Michigan Democratic primary and runs unopposed in November. CNBC is correct in suggesting this offers "a sharp counterpoint to the anti-Muslim policies and sentiment surfacing in Washington and across the country."[458] To be reminded that pockets of tolerance can be found amidst large swathes of hate in the American landscape is heartening.

Geography

Geography plays a major role in the lives of Muslim converts, as we have seen in my research. Those who have sufficient geographical concentration of Muslimah, whether immigrant or convert, can bond together, help each other, and form communities. Those who are geographically isolated, as are some of my participants in the Boston area, are lonely.

[458] Emma Newburger, "Two Democrats are poised to become the first Muslim women in Congress," *CNBC,* August 15, 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/15/two-democrats-poised-to-become- the-first-muslim-women-in-congress.html.

The interplay of geography, culture, and personality can be pictured as a survival situation, far from land. Converts want to escape the mainland and find a place they can live simply, as their forebears did in the past, with traditional values, piety, modesty, and so on. If Islam is a life raft, much depends on how far away the life raft is when a convert takes the (metaphorical) plunge. Some Latina converts leap directly from American society onto a friendly raft peopled with other Latina converts. Some converts try several life rafts of immigrant Muslims, but rebuffed by culture and language barriers, ultimately find themselves floating alone. A few converts are lucky to marry into a friendly lifeboat of extended family, other gregarious souls boldly pull themselves into whatever immigrant rafts they find and make themselves at home, and yet others are simply too shy to make those connections, and float alone. As more converts enter the water, there will be more opportunities to interact with other converts. The more there are looking out for one another, one would hope, the fewer will sink. To complete the analogy, one must remember that Islam represents a life raft to these converts, the raft does not float far from where they started. Apart from moving to a predominantly Muslim country, there is no way to completely separate oneself from American society.

Having studied converts in two of the most liberal, tolerant regions of the United States—Boston and Los Angeles—I am heartened to know that the range of tolerance is being extended into geographic areas like Minnesota and Michigan, which I would never have expected. These Muslim women taking office has taken America by surprise, just as finding out that thousands of white and Latina Americans are converting to Islam takes people by surprise. Going forward, Americans should expect to start being surprised regularly by the positive contributions of the Muslim women to our society. Converts and

immigrant Muslims are forging their own "American Islam," sometimes private, sometimes shared, each instance somewhat unique. They remind us that it is okay to be different, and they make us ask questions about where we have been and where we are going as a society. I look forward to the day that Muslims are seen as they should be, as Americans.

Questions for New Research

When/if there are enough American converts geographically concentrated in one area, they will turn their backs on immigrant Muslims? Will America reproduce the trend in Germany: converts become Islamophobic when they reach critical mass?

How does the conversion experience of Latinas of different races compare? Do more obviously marginalized Central Americans of Maya descent have different reasons for conversion than other Latinas and whites? Are they treated differently by immigrant Muslims?

A convert's *Context*, Crisis, and *Quest* each contain experiences and ideas that make her open to the idea of talking to strangers, say, or going to the home of a Muslims—a receptivity to Islamic ideas and people. The *Encounters* and *Interactions*—people, ideas, practices—with Muslims are like the keys to a lock and must fit with the convert's predispositions and preferences. This way of looking at Rambo's stages would have prompted me to ask far more questions about what made a convert *receptive* to the various aspects of Islam and Muslims she might meet.

A potential convert must be receptive to not only the good people, ideas, and practices of Islam, they must be willing to accept, ignore, or rationalize the unsavory people, ideas, and practices associated with Islam, whether real or not. Asking about the

source of receptivity to the good and the bad is a much different line of questioning than asking about *reasons*.

So What?

The question I asked myself every day of this project is: *so what?* Almost all the people I met during my fieldwork thought I was a mental health counsellor, given the type of questions I was asking; so, nineteen women got a chance to be listened to, very carefully, and that is meaningful to me. My participants opened up to me, perhaps more than other converts have opened up to their mostly white researchers, because I am a brown, born Muslim from Pakistan. They all assumed I was a devout Muslim and trusted me. They assumed incorrectly about the devout part, but I hope with all my heart that their trust was not misplaced, and that I have represented them fairly.

To bear witness is one thing which, I believe, matters. As Cesari suggests,

> the "Muslim" has become the invisible man (and woman) of western societies, like black or Jews used to be. In this context, invisible does not mean hidden or undetectable. In fact Muslims are in plain sight and highly scrutinized. It rather refers to people incapacity to see the reality of Muslims of flesh and blood with their "inner eyes" or what Martha Nussbaum calls respect and sympathetic imagination.[459]

Back to the "so what?" question. I hope this study will be of interest to those interested in conversion to Islam, because it is larger than many studies, more comprehensive, and tries hard to avoid overly narrow and therefore trivial hypotheses. I hope someone who has never heard of religious conversion studies can read this and reflect, and never again look at women who wear hijab and thinks these women are

[459] Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam*, xiv.

oppressed and lack agency. More than that, I hope my readers will never assume anything at all about a Muslimah's background, motivations, goals, biases, beliefs, or anything else, and know only that she is struggling, like themselves, to make sense of this world. I hope the next time they pass a woman in a scarf on the street, they will whisper *salaam,* because peace is something we could always use more of.

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Appendix A: Name, Ethnicity, City and Age of Participants

Name	Ethnicity	City	Age
Adela	Latina	Boston	54
Esmerelda	Latina	Boston	55
Roxie	Latina	Boston	61
Layla	Latina	Boston	47
Magnolia	Latina	LA	50s
Wynona	Latina	LA	31
Lara	Latina	LA	40s
Marta	Latina	LA	70s
Macrae	white	Boston	18
Darla	white	Boston	50s
Patsy	white	Boston	20s
Channing	white	Boston	30
Megan	white	Boston	70
Valerie	white	Boston	59
Barbara	white	Boston	40
Rebeca	white	Texas	55
Jackie	white	LA	40
Amy	white	LA	29
Carla	white	LA	62

Appendix A.2. Latina Converts

1.Magnolia, 50, lives in Southern California. Her family emigrated from Tijuana, Mexico when she was three, and was poor. Originally Catholic, her family had converted to Seventh Day Adventist. She completed high school and now works at an auto insurance company. She was introduced to Islam when she started dating a Muslim man from Saudi Arabi, who she later married. His family, like hers, was traditional, and he asked her father's permission before taking her on chaperoned dates. During her *nikah* (Muslim wedding ceremony), without knowing it, she recited the *shahada* (proclamation of conversion to Islam); two years later she consciously converted. She faces much hostility from her family, who believe her husband has, in her words, "brainwashed" her. Magnolia feels that men and women are equal but different, and she tries to live her life within what she sees as the boundaries Islam has determined for women. Although she felt it necessary to seek her husband's permission to meet with me, she asserts herself in their marriage in other ways. For example, she actively engages in *da'wah* (proselytization), despite her husband considering the act outside the bounds of what he believes to be a woman's place–in the home. She points out that her Hispanic family holds the same stereotypical view of Muslim men that Americans hold of Mexican men, namely that they are "machistas" who "beat their women," "keep women home," and "tell them what to do."

2. Lara, in her 40's, lives in Southern California. She emigrated as an infant with her family from Chihuahua, Mexico. Her family was very poor. Lara married her high school sweetheart, a Palestinian Muslim, despite being raised in a devoutly Catholic household. They were married shortly after high school and Lara converted to Islam a

few years later. Lara lives with her in-laws in Orange County and is now fluent in Arabic. She never attended college but did travel to Jordan with her children in order to learn Arabic and connect them with their Palestinian heritage. Lara regularly gives interviews to the media about her local Latinx-Muslim community, in which she is very involved, and is a homemaker. Lara believes in strict gender roles: “our role is defined as mothers and wives,” “we are different but equal.” She believes the biggest misrepresentation she encounters about Muslim women is that “they have no rights” and that their husbands “forced them into Islam.”

3. Marta, now in her 60s, moved to Southern California from Mexico in her early 30s, and married an Iranian-American. Raised in a devout Catholic household, she discovered Islam when she was a student in the UK. In 1999 she co-founded LALMA (La Asociacion Latino Musulmana de America), which has played a crucial role in the spread of Islam throughout the Latino communities of Los Angeles. The association offers support for and encouragement to newly converted Latino-Muslims and assists with outreach work in the Los Angeles area with LA Voice, a community organization. Marta is a pillar of the Latino-Muslim community and feels strongly that both immigrants and converts should work to, as she says, “invest in America for future generations of Muslims.” She has a BA and a nursing degree and works as a nurse.

4. Esmerelda, 50, was born in Mexico and immigrated to Southern California with her family when she was a child. Religion was never a large part of her family life despite being Catholic, and Esmerelda’s less than happy childhood was characterized by strict discipline, beatings from her mother, and drug use. After her first marriage ended in divorce, Esmerelda met her second husband, a Palestinian, who introduced her to Islam.

Esmerelda became a social worker so that she could understand and recover from her own trauma and help others. She now runs a successful private practice as a therapist, which is greatly influenced by Sufi Islam and caters to Muslim women with various traumas. She has an MA.

5. Layla, 47, emigrated moved to the United States from Mexico at the age of eight and now lives in Boston. Although her parents were not religious, her Catholic schooling engendered an extreme dislike for Catholicism. Her parents divorced early in her childhood, and her mother was forced to work multiple jobs to put food on the table. Layla says she had a "tough time" growing up. In her 20s she married a Jewish man and was close to converting to Judaism before ultimately getting divorced. The events of 9/11 sparked her interest in Islam. On a volunteer teaching trip to Ethiopia, she met an Arabic teacher who gave her a copy of the Quran and encouraged her to read it. During the same trip, she converted to Islam. She has a BA and works for the city of Cambridge.

6. Wynona, 33, was raised in a Catholic household by a single mother who worked multiple odd jobs to provide for the family. Growing up in one of the rougher sections of public housing in Los Angeles, she was exposed to drugs, alcohol, and sex by the age of ten. At twelve, she had a 23-year-old boyfriend. Although she attended church every Sunday and her uncle was a priest, Catholicism never resonated with her. In high school, she befriended a group of Somali sisters, whose family unity impressed her so much that at 16 she converted to Islam. Infuriated, her mother called the police upon finding out and had Wynona moved to a shelter for teenagers. Soon after, she was informally adopted by an Iraqi family, whom she stayed with till she married her Sudanese-American sweetheart. Wynona is currently involved with the Latino-Muslim

community of Orange County, participates in panels about conversion to Islam in her local mosque, has a made a YouTube video to share her story with the rest of the world, and is engaged in *da'wah* work with women in Ensenada, Mexico. She firmly believes that if she had not converted to Islam, her life would have been ruined by alcoholism or drug addiction, much as the lives of her two siblings have been. She graduated from high school and works as a homemaker.

7. Roxie, 61, was raised in a middle-class, Catholic family in upstate New York and now lives in Boston. An artist, her journey to Islam began with an interest in Islamicate art. She travelled to Morocco and was impressed by the architecture of the mosques and the hospitality of the people. When she came back to Massachusetts, she began attending weekly classes for converts at a mosque in Cambridge and, eventually made her *shahada*. She has a BA.

8. Adela, 51, is a Puerto Rican woman from New York City who grew up poor. She was raised Baptist and later joined a Pentecostal church. Abandoned by her mother, she was raised by an alcoholic father. She divorced her husband, who cheated on her. She now works as a social worker in Boston. Impressed with the strong family values of her Muslim patients, she enrolled in classes about Islam at a mosque in Cambridge, Massachusetts, disappointed that when her marriage fell apart, her church did not support her in the way she had expected it to. She took her *shahada* in 2014. She has a BA in social work.

Appendix A.2. White Converts

1. Amy, 28, was born and raised in Albany, NY in an upper-middle-class household. She was happy with her Presbyterian faith until she became curious about Islam at the age of 14, shortly after 9/11. While her father accepted her interest in Islam, she faced great hostility from her mother. Amy converted to Islam while enrolled at an elite all-women college but did so secretly, fearing her mother would cut her off financially. Later, she earned her MA and trained as a Muslim chaplain at a Boston-area divinity school. Amy now lives in Los Angeles and works for the Women's Mosque of America. She identifies as a Muslim feminist and is very engaged with the Women's Mosque of America.

2. Megan, now in her 60s, was raised in a devout Irish Catholic household in Vermont. She attended college and for several years worked for the United States government. She sees converting to Islam as a new beginning after overcoming a number of challenges throughout her life—from being adopted, to poor health, prescription drug dependence and an abusive marriage. In her words, "it was me wanting to define who I was, finding me and finding what made me happy." Megan is the only convert in this study who changed her name after converting to Islam. She converted around the time of her divorce, and

> the day I got divorced, the Judge said to me, 'Do you want to change your name back to your maiden name?' and, I said, 'Well your honor, can I change my whole name?' He said, 'You can change anything you want, young lady, as long as you do it today because it's late.' So, I took the name Megan. I just made it Megan because that's who I am.

3. Jackie, 40, was raised in an atheist household in Los Angeles. She was introduced to Islam by her Moroccan boyfriend, whom she later married. By reading books and listening to CDs about women's rights in Islam, she realized that she was not

being treated fairly by her husband. After ten years, she ended what she described as an abusive marriage. She subsequently married a Pakistani man, and recently moved to Pakistan with him. In Pakistan, she works with victims of domestic abuse and feels that "women have the short end of the stick everywhere, but especially in these so-called "Muslim" populations." She has a BA, a job as a marketing manager, and works with several organizations helping abused women.

4. Barbara, 35, was raised in a moderately religious Catholic household, but never felt especially connected to the Catholic church and explored other religions. She discovered Islam while dating an Algerian man, and continued to learn about Islam even though the relationship ended. Although she took her *shahada* in 2004, it took her a "long time to transition from [being] a so-called Muslim to someone who is really living and practicing their religion to their best ability." She married her Egyptian husband while he was in hospital after a near-fatal accident in 2015. Barbara has struggled with serious depression and anxiety from an early age, but in Islam has found "peace and tranquility," which she reports has alleviated her symptoms. She has a B.Sc. and works as a nurse.

5. Patsy, 29, was raised in an Episcopalian household. Considerable parts of her childhood and teenage years were spent abroad in Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait due to her father's job. Her struggles with severe depression and anxiety started while she was in Russia, where "loneliness became a recurring theme" in her life. She debated the existence of God for her entire young life, wavering between theism and atheism. In college, she decided to explore different religious groups on campus to see which faith most resonated with her. Patsy eventually decided on Islam and took her *shahada* in a mosque in Boston. Islam has provided her a "blueprint" for life, whereas before

conversion “everything was a giant question.” Along with the certainty and confidence that she is on the right path, Patsy’s depression and anxiety have improved, and she has found a new community. She has a BA and works as a barista.

6. Channing, 28, grew up extremely poor in rural Mississippi. Her parents were atheists. Growing up she had many tough experiences: bullying, physical abuse, and the death of her mother when Channing was 19. Channing felt she was discriminated against on two fronts: by the churchgoers in her community and by the slightly less poor families whose children were not allowed to play with her.. Feeling ostracized by these groups, she found a sense of community in her high school academic clubs. While neither of her parents graduated from high school, she eventually earned a Master’s in social work from an elite East coast university. She became interested in Islam while doing an interfaith project with the Unitarian Universalists Church. Noticing that no Muslim students were involved with the group, she decided to educate herself about Islam to make the group more inclusive. She joined the Islam 101 class at the Cambridge mosque in 2013 and converted to Islam in 2015. She works as a social worker.

7. Macrae, 19, recently converted to Islam. She gained legal emancipation from her father at the age of 11 due to the fact that he had been sexually abusing her. Raised by her mother, Macrae grew up in a public housing development in Boston. She was accepted into an elite liberal arts college for advanced high school students in New England but did not complete her degree. As a first-year, her interest in the Arabic language led her to become an online English language tutor for students at a sister college in Palestine. It was her friendship with this online community of Palestinian

students that sparked her interest in Islam and led her to take her *shahada* at a mosque in Boston.

8. Carla, 62, was raised in a middle-class and devoutly Catholic household in Vermont. She did not attend college but worked as a manager for an engineering company in Los Angeles, one of the few women in her position. In spite of her professional success, Carla felt a void in her life. While researching Judaism, she was introduced to a Muslim-American woman convert, who warmly welcomed her into her life and introduced Carla to Islam. She began to attend weekly classes about Islam at this new friend's house and, before long, took her *shahada* while on picnic in Lake Tahoe, a California resort town, with her newfound Muslim community. Carla's *wali* (Islamic guardian) introduced her to an Algerian man and they were married, but she suffered severe physical and psychological abuse at his hands. When her (now ex-) husband threatened to take her life, she escaped with their two children, eventually divorcing him. Carla then married an Egyptian man who treated her no better, ultimately divorcing him as well. Despite these abusive marriages to Muslim men, Carla's faith in Islam is not shaken. She believes that her experience does not reflect on women's status in Islam, and that "women in Islam are supposed to be treated fairly and justly and with passion and with love." Carla's brother committed suicide and she herself has struggled with depression. Carla is grateful that 30 years ago she was introduced to Islam, and her conversion has brought her peace and contentment. She is a homemaker.

9. Valerie, 59, was raised in a middle-class, Baptist household in New Jersey. While in college she met and married a Palestinian man, with whom she moved to Jordan soon after their graduation. After a few years she and her husband returned to the United

States to raise their family. Despite not converting to Islam at first, Valerie acceded to her husband's wish to raise their children as Muslims. Shortly after 9/11, she took her *shahada* in a mosque outside Boston in solidarity with Muslims she felt were being unfairly villainized in the wake of the attacks. She has an MA and works as an art instructor at a community college in Boston.

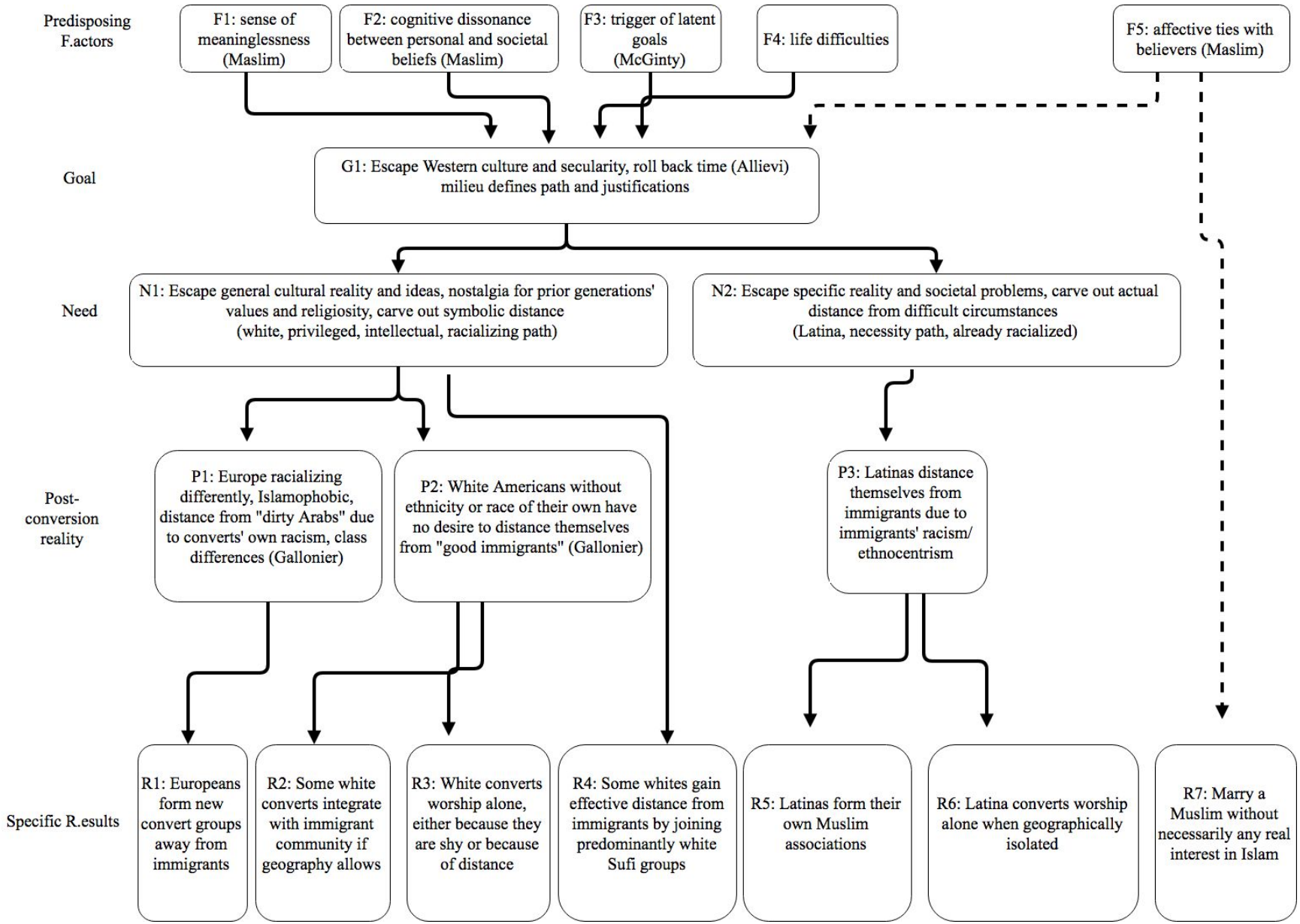
10. Rachel, 55, was raised in a middle-class, Catholic family in Texas. She had a teen pregnancy and suffered an abusive marriage. As a young adult Rachel experimented with drugs, and then joined Alcoholics Anonymous to seek help with sobriety. She discovered Islam when a friend gave her a Quran, and the words resonated with her so much that she joined a class for converts in a nearby mosque. After converting to Islam she ended an abusive marriage and entered a new one with an Iranian man–which, however, ended when her second ex-husband got his green card. Her third marriage was to a Turkish man, and similarly ended when he received his green card. Though Rachel was exploited by men who were Muslim immigrants, her faith in Islam is strong. She has found refuge and solace in the practice of Naqshbandi Sufism and credits her *sheikh* (Sufi guide) for showing her "the straight path and how to be a stand-up person." She attended some college and works as a secretary.

11. Darla, 56, was raised in a middle class, Protestant family in upstate New York. She trained as a nurse practitioner but in her 40s earned her MFA in art therapy. Her interest in Islam was sparked by the September 2001 terror attacks. At an interfaith ceremony at her college soon after 9/11, she noticed that no Muslim officiant was part of the ceremony. To show solidarity with Muslims she wrote a letter to the Muslim Student Association on her college campus. This started a dialogue between her and a Muslim

student, who encouraged her to attend a class about Islam at a mosque in Cambridge. At the mosque she attended a class about science in the Quran, and that very night she took her *shahada* and became Muslim. She is a survivor of rape and as a young adult was sexually assaulted several times by men she knew. She has serious mental health issues, and has received over two hundred electroshock treatments. She credits her conversion to Islam for stabilizing her and putting an end to her suicidal thoughts. She works as an art therapist.

Appendix B. Conversion Path Hypothesis (Diagram Form)

(see next page)


Predisposing F.actors
F1: sense of meaninglessness (Maslim)
F2: cognitive dissonance between personal and societal beliefs (Maslim)
F3: trigger of latent goals (McGinty)
F4: life difficulties
F5: affective ties with believers (Maslim)
Goal
G1: Escape Western culture and secularity, roll back time (Allievi) milieu defines path and justifications
Need
N1: Escape general cultural reality and ideas, nostalgia for prior generations' values and religiosity, carve out symbolic distance (white, privileged, intellectual, racializing path)
N2: Escape specific reality and societal problems, carve out actual distance from difficult circumstances (Latina, necessity path, already racialized)
Post-conversion reality
P1: Europe racializing differently, Islamophobic, distance from "dirty Arabs" due to converts' own racism, class differences (Gallonier)
P2: White Americans without ethnicity or race of their own have no desire to distance themselves from "good immigrants" (Gallonier)
P3: Latinas distance themselves from immigrants due to immigrants' racism/ ethnocentrism
Specific R.esults
R1: Europeans form new convert groups away from immigrants
R2: Some white converts integrate with immigrant community if geography allows
R3: White converts worship alone, either because they are shy or because of distance
R4: Some whites gain effective distance from immigrants by joining predominantly white Sufi groups
R5: Latinas form their own Muslim associations
R6: Latina converts worship alone when geographically isolated
R7: Marry a Muslim without necessarily any real interest in Islam

Appendix C. Latinx Statistics

A statistical snapshot is worth a thousand words and paints a startling picture of difference between Latinx and non-Latinx whites in the United States. Drawn from a 2015 Pew Research Center study, "Facts on United States Latinos, 2015,"[460] the Latinx presence in the United States is estimated to 57.5 million, or 17.8% of the total United States population. In comparison there are 197.6m non-Latinx whites, 61.5% of the overall population. Latinx are a diverse group originating in over a dozen Latin American countries, including: Mexico (63.3%), Puerto Rico (9.5%), El Salvador (3.7%), Cuba (3.7%), Dominican Republic (3.3%), Guatemala (2.5%), Colombia (1.9%), and Honduras (1.5%).

Although 77% identify as Christian, today only 48% of Latinx consider themselves Catholic. Of the remainder, 19% identify as evangelical Protestant, 5% mainline Protestant, and a smattering (2% or less) of Jehovah's Witness, Black Protestant, and non-Christian faiths, including Islam. In comparison, 70% of whites identify as Christian, with Catholic making up only 19%, evangelical Protestant 29%, and mainline Protestant 19%. For those who say they believe in God with absolute or fair certainty, Latinx (85%) edge out whites slightly (81%).[461] Of those who say religion is very important in their lives, Latinx exceed whites again (59% vs. 49%). Latinx are slightly more likely to attend church (39% vs. 34%), pray at least daily (58% vs. 52%), attend prayer groups (27% vs. 22%), meditate (49% vs. 36%), and have a "feeling

[460] Antonio Flores, Gustavo López, and Jynnah Radford, "Facts on Latinos in America: Current Data," Pew Research Center, September 18, 2017, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos-current-data/.
[461] Pew Research Center, "Religion in America."

spiritual peace and well-being" (63% vs. 56%). Latinx are also more likely to believe scripture should be taken literally as the word of God (38% vs. 26%).[462] [463] In terms of religion, Latinx are a slightly more religious in a highly religious country.

In terms of family life, Latinx are half as likely as non-Latinx whites to live in a two-person family (28.3% vs 52.8%) over twice as likely to live in large families (5+ person, 25.3% vs. 10.0%), and 50% more likely to have a grandparent householder (9.1% vs 6.1%). Latinx are less likely to be divorced (9.1% vs. 12.5%) and United States-born Latinas are nearly twice as likely to be pregnant without being married (53.2% vs. 27.6%). Latinx families are very likely to speak Spanish (70%).

When it comes to their work life, Latinx are more likely to be unemployed (8.8% for United States-born Latinx vs. 5.5%), less than half as likely (15% vs. 34%) to have a 4-year degree, and 65% more likely to be high school dropouts. Latinx are around half as likely to work in management and business (8.0% vs 16.2%), science and engineering (2.3% vs 5.3%), legal and social services (1.7% vs 2.9%), education, arts, and media (5.0% vs. 9.1%). At the same time, Latinx are more likely to work in food preparation and serving (8.8% vs. 5.3%), building and grounds maintenance (8.5% vs 3.0%), farming (2.4% vs. 0.6%), and construction and extraction (9.3% vs 4.8%).

Latinas specifically are likely to earn less than non-Latina whites ($460/week vs. $615/week) and live in poverty (20% vs 11%). Latinas are far more likely to be employed in blue-collar occupations like cleaning and maintenance (10% vs. 2%), food preparation

[462] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study: Racial and Ethnic Composition," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/.
[463] Ibid.

and serving (9% vs. 6%), and personal care and service occupations (7% versus 5%), and are far more likely to have less than high school education (36% vs 10%).[464]

Latinx are more than twice as likely to live in poverty (21.9% vs. 9.8%) and less than half as likely to earn $50k or more (17.6% vs 36%). Latinx are also more than twice as likely to receive welfare (3.8% vs. 1.9%), and around three times more likely to receive food stamps (22% vs 8.7%) and lack health insurance (19.7% vs 6.5%). Finally, Latinx are far more likely to be unemployed for the past five years (1.7% vs 0.7%).

Latinx are twice as likely to be in jail: 4% of adult Latinx in 2007 were either in prison or jail or on probation or parole, compared to 2% for non-Latinx whites.[465] At the time of one study by the government of California (2009), Latinx made up 36.7% of the population (compared to 42.5% white). Latinx were more likely to be arrested for crimes, including violent offenses (42.6% vs 27.9%), including homicide (50.3% vs. 19.0%), forcible rape (49.6% vs 23.0%) assault (42.7% vs. 30.8%), and kidnapping (50.1% vs. 22.7%). Property offenses followed a similar pattern, but drug offenses were roughly on par with whites. Latinx are more than twice as likely as whites to be arrested for "lewd and lascivious" sex offenses (58.6% vs. 25.2%) and weapons charges (50.4% vs. 23.7%).[466] There is a strong likelihood that the reason Latinx are arrested more is because they are policed more, but even adjusted for that distortion, one must conclude that Latinas live in the midst of far more violent crime than non-Latina whites.

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[464] Feliza Gonzales, "Hispanic Women in the United States, 2007," Pew Research Center, May 14, 2008, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2008/05/08/hispanic-women-in-the-united-states-2007/.
[465] Mark Hugo Lopez and Gretchen Livingston, "Hispanics and the Criminal Justice System," Pew Research Center, April 7, 2009, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/07/hispanics-and-the-criminal-justice-system/.
[466] State of California Department of Justice, *Crime in California 2009*, Report, (California Department of Justice, 2009) http://ag.ca.gov/cjsc/publications/candd/cd09/preface.pdf.