

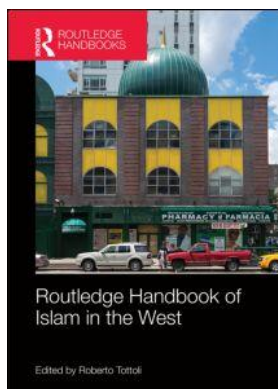
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Conversion to Islam in modern Western Europe and the United States

Patrick D. Bowen

Introduction

Over the past thirty years there has been a marked rise in conversion to Islam in Western Europe and the USA. Unlike the converts one hundred years ago, today's new Muslims come from a wide variety of backgrounds and are attracted to a diverse array of Islamic beliefs and practices. A growing number of converts are also becoming leaders and spokespersons both within their local and national Islamic communities and in the public sphere. Contemporary Muslim converts, then, are a significant force shaping Islam in their regions.

Despite the diversity of today's converts, however, their understandings of Islam are often situated within discourses that frame Islam not only as the religion that exemplifies both individualistic (i.e., non-clerical) and, sometimes, rational religiosity, but also as the one that best promotes a just, tolerant, loving, and peaceful community. To understand why such themes are so prominent – particularly in times when anti-Islamic sentiment is common – their history must be considered. These discourses have roots in the modern West that extend beyond Muslim converts and are linked in many ways to what has been called the “third current” of modern Western religiosity. How this “third current” has developed over time, and the ways it has done so within different regions, has had important implications for the historical trajectory of conversion to Islam. However, over the course of the twentieth century, the “third current” became less of a distinct entity; therefore today's converts' motives and demographics – which at one time varied little – can no longer be easily characterized, even despite the fact that liberal discourses are still central for today's new Muslims.

Historical context: the “third current” and Islam

C. McIntosh (1992: 20–1) introduced the term “third current” in an attempt to explain the new forms of religiosity that were emerging in eighteenth-century Europe. McIntosh was most concerned with the relationship of these highly diverse movements with, on the one hand, church-based orthodox Christianity and, on the other, the Enlightenment and secularism. A variety of religious movements appeared that seemed to display traits from both ends of the

spectrum, particularly religions associated with mystical religiosity and Freemasonry. Also, increasingly, a number of these movements seemed to incorporate non-Christian traditions. McIntosh further observed that there was no typical political stance associated with these “third current” movements; some groups, for instance, promoted very liberal views, while others endorsed extremely conservative ones. Even more, individual movements frequently displayed seemingly contradictory positions, such as endorsing radical liberal political ideas while at the same time maintaining esoteric doctrines that were to be given only to a spiritual elite.

What the “third current” represents, then, is not the emergence of a coherent set of doctrines and institutions, but rather a cultural revolution consisting of a wide array of groups and ideas. This transmutation of Western Europe’s religiosities was produced by a variety of factors: influx of wealth and widespread economic reconfigurations, scientific and philosophical developments, urbanization, the spread of literacy, modern communication and travel technologies, global immigration, the rise of Protestantism and subsequent wars of religion, changes in the relationships between the races and sexes, and Western Europe’s ascent to the position of a global colonial power. The old religiosities and identities were, in the phrase of Deleuze and Guattari (1977: 33), “deterritorialized.” Those with the resources and interests could now explore an almost unlimited array of religious possibilities in a globalizing world. The “third current,” then, can be understood as the largely amorphous cultural space in which new types (and sometimes revived old types) as well as non-Christian types of religiosities were able to, to an extent, flourish or at least be investigated and experimented with in early modern Western Europe.

It is within this “third current” that we find early moderns who on occasion sympathized with Islam (such as Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century) and, in some rare cases, framed Islam as superior to contemporary Christianity. The authors who expressed these views were typically (though not exclusively) radical liberal Protestants living in times of religious violence who were primarily concerned with identifying a religiosity that promoted justice, religious tolerance, and peace. These writers – among which Henry Stubbe and John Toland were the most notable – were not interested in converting to Islam, but rather in holding Islam as a model towards which Christianity, and Europe, should strive (see Holt 1972; Jacob 1983). To these early apologists, Islam represented a purified religiosity (*viz.* Christianity) that lacked pagan attributes and idolatry, such as belief in the Trinity and the superior religious authority of clerics; had simple, clear tenets; and that promoted the individual’s freedom to have and express publicly a personal relationship with God without insisting that all people should express the same beliefs. Because he thought Islam represented these ideals, John Toland in fact called for a “Mahometan Christianity.”

That Islam was held up by these writers as the religion that best exemplified modern liberal ideals is very significant. Islam typically represented, in the cultural psyche, Christian Western Europe’s polar opposite and greatest enemy. Islam was usually associated with violence, deception, and indulgence, and in fact was seen, because of Islamic society’s encroachment on Christian majority lands, as “the most powerful instrument for the destruction of the Church” (Daniel 1962: 245). Therefore, as N. Daniel observed, “[a] society would have to be remarkably tolerant” to accept and respect a religion framed in this way (Daniel 1962: 246). By inverting the negative image of Islam, then, radical Protestants like Stubbe were effectively saying that a true commitment to religious freedom, peace, and tolerance is empty unless one is willing to stand up for it even when this means accepting the presence of one’s former enemy. This position also implied that Europeans should see contemporary violent manifestations of Islam as not representative of “true” Islam.

Not surprisingly, this idea was not very popular. Europe may have been “deterritorialized” to a degree, but certain cultural dynamics remained, and religious freedom stayed limited. It would

take integration within another set of “third current” movements – movements that were much more accepted in Western culture than those that simply endorsed Islam as the best religion – for this sympathetic and idealized view of Islam to be transformed into viable Islamic-identity movements.

While there has been a tendency among some scholars to see eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European interest in Islam as superficially “Orientalist,” that is, as seeing Islam as an exotic, wild, and primitive Other (e.g. Rodinson 1991: 52–71), there has been a long European tradition of appreciating the so-called mystical elements of Islam. This tradition began prior to the rise of secularism, when science and religion were still commonly understood as going hand in hand, and its continued existence into the nineteenth century reflects the fact that the connection between religion and science in European minds was not suddenly severed in the eighteenth century. S. Akerman has demonstrated that Arabic (and often Islamic) texts were in fact at “the heart of” what “triggered” the “third current” movement of Rosicrucianism, which itself would provide the crucial themes and momentum for another: modern speculative Freemasonry (Akerman 1998: 238, 214). Akerman observed that Arabic astronomy (and, to an extent, geometry, optics, alchemy, and other fields) was key for the authors of the Rosicrucian and “proto-”Rosicrucian manuscripts, who saw deep millennial and “third current” significance in a number of astronomical events in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In addition, in the two main Rosicrucian texts, the *Fama Fraternitatis* and the *Confessio Fraternitatis*, Christian Rosenkreutz, the Rosicrucian legend’s sage-hero, is said to have traveled to gain knowledge in “Arabia” and passed it on to a fraternity that continues to exist. Rosenkreutz was likely based on the mysterious medieval figure with similar traits known as Artephius, and the story also played off Christian Europe’s more general awareness of its reliance on Arabic knowledge since the twelfth century (Anonymous 2000: 4, 22; Clulee 1984: 61). It was the ideas associated with Rosicrucian as well as the more general trend that associated Islam with esoteric wisdom and magic (Pingree 1987; Matar 1998: 87–98), given impetus from “third current” modernizing dynamics that were pushing for a reconstruction of ideological and social structures, that activated the interest in finding secret fraternities and shaped how those fraternities were understood, thus contributing to the rise of Freemasonry (which, interestingly, frequently had members who maintained an interest in Rosicrucianism) (Stevenson 1988: 100–3; McIntosh 1992).

Still, while Freemasonry flourished and increasingly incorporated non-Christian and non-Greco-Roman elements, the Islamic roots (including both the factual ones, which did not extend beyond the late sixteenth century, and the mythical ones, connected to knowledge transmitted from “Arabia”) appear to have been ignored for the most part by early European speculative Masons. But by the eighteenth century, Western Europeans began exporting the Craft to Muslim majority lands, where local Muslim Masons saw the fraternity – with its discourses of math, science, esoteric knowledge (and degree systems), mysticism, religious tolerance, brotherhood, and of course its “Eastern” origins claims – as having Islamic roots that went back prior to the late sixteenth-/early seventeenth-century emergence of speculative Freemasonry in Europe. They subsequently developed Masonic genealogy myths, just as many Masons throughout Europe had done before them and would continue to after, in ways that promoted their own religious commitments and interests (Zarcone 1993).

By the nineteenth century, with the growth of the original factors that had produced the “third current,” new religious movements were rapidly developing, including a number – frequently groups that resisted a strict separation between science and religion – which took an interest in “Oriental Masonry,” as it was sometimes called. European Masons had long been convinced of their organization’s own ancient-genealogy origins, and so, for some in the “third

current,” especially those already predisposed to religious discourses that promoted justice, tolerance and peace, Islamic Masonry seemed to be the true ancestor of European Masonry. This was helped by the fact that Bektashi Sufis in particular were claiming a Freemasonic identity, which would mean that those Europeans who were interested in Eastern mysticism and Spiritualism – and Masons were often among this group – would also see deep significance in Sufis (Zarcone 1993). It seems that the first waves of converts to Islam living in Western Europe (particularly Britain) and the USA were individuals involved with, directly or indirectly, “third current” movements which held that there were important mystical knowledge and/or Freemasonic roots in Islam. By the late nineteenth century, a handful of relatively influential Englishmen and North Americans had been (or claimed to have been) inducted into Islamic Masonry groups and had formed relationships with other Westerners interested in “third current” movements (Zarcone 1993: 222–7, 301–2; Geaves 2010; Bowen 2011b). These “third current”-affiliated Islam sympathizers formed the bases of the early convert communities in England and the USA, the two most prominent Western convert communities at the time.

Conversion to Islam in Western Europe

History

During the medieval period, Islam had, of course, many converts in southern Europe, particularly in Iberia and Sicily (Glick 1979: 33–5; Metcalfe 2003: 15–17, 32–4, 86–9). While there are rumors of *individual* converts hailing from more northern parts of Europe during the Middle Ages, we only begin hearing about relatively significant numbers of converts from the area starting in the sixteenth century. However, most of these individuals had converted while living in Muslim majority lands, and we know of almost none who returned to Europe as Muslims. The evidence suggests that in most cases early modern conversions were done either as a matter of expediency or out of attraction to the worldly benefits that a convert might acquire while living in Muslim majority lands. Sometimes captive soldiers held in Muslim lands chose to convert in an attempt to receive less harsh treatment, some found increased military or political prestige by aligning with local leaders, some conversions were undertaken primarily as a rejection of European society (this seems to have been far more common among converts from southern Europe than among those in northern Europe), and others who were living freely in these regions converted simply to improve their social standing or to avoid difficulties that Christians sometimes faced when religious antagonism was high (Matar 1998: 21–49; Allievi 1998: 51–6; Bennassar and Bennassar 1989).

In the late eighteenth century, we begin hearing isolated reports about converts in Western European lands, particularly in Great Britain and Germany; these were usually individuals who had converted while traveling in Muslim lands, but had maintained their new religious commitment after returning home (Allievi 1998: 270–1). Nevertheless, because anti-Muslim sentiment had not yet decreased significantly, there are very few examples of converts to Islam living in Western Europe prior to the late nineteenth century. The first relatively major Islamic convert movement was that led by the Englishman William H. Quilliam, who had converted while traveling in Morocco. Quilliam’s understanding of Islam, notably, demonstrated the two “third current” features that were associated with the rise of Islam convert movements in the West: an interest in the Islamic roots of Masonry and a promotion of liberal religious and political values, features that were shared by many of the converts who joined his movement (Geaves 2010: 34, 62, 109, 119, 125, 322n; Köse 1996: 14–16). Even through the early twentieth century, these type of “third current” commitments – though more common than an interest in Masonry was

an interest in spiritualistic religiosity – were frequently connected to Muslim convert movements, particularly those led by Sufis and the Ahmadiyyas (Bowen 2011a; 2011b: 321, 324).

By this time, however, two new dynamics were changing how Western Europeans would come to Islam. First, there seems to have been a growing acceptance – or at least presence – of “third current” religiosity. This meant that entering non-mainstream religious groups – once largely the privilege of the educated and wealthy, who had the social capital to risk – had become easier for the general public, which resulted in a slight demographic change for the converts to Islam (Zebiri 2008: 35, 36). Second, Muslim immigration to Western Europe, which had been slowly increasing for centuries, by the early twentieth century had produced a noticeable Muslim presence. Local non-Muslims were now coming in contact with Muslims on a greater scale. Social ties, particularly marriage, then became an important source of conversion, and this led to greater diversity of converts, who now sometimes came from the lower classes, which had more contact with Muslim immigrants.

Still, it seems that conversion rates were low until the 1980s, with there being no more than a few thousand Muslim converts in each Western European country. In the 1980s, however, increased conversion rates began to be noticed across Western Europe (Allievi 1998: 65–70), and today it is estimated that each Western European country has around 10,000 converts, making up, on average, 1–2 percent of each country’s total Muslim population (Moreras 2002: 132; Lathion 2008: 53; Toronto 2008: 62; Zebiri 2008: 42). Because study of Muslim converts has been notoriously difficult (Allievi 1998: 62–5; Cesari 2004: 10), there is no clear explanation for the elevated rates. It seems likely, though, that two main factors have contributed to this development. First is the growing presence of Muslim immigrants in Western European countries, which, as has been explained, exposes non-Muslims to new social ties which can lead to conversion. The second factor may be related to the deep cultural transcript concerning Islam’s supposed antipathy to liberal values, and the tendency for this transcript to be inverted by some who become committed to liberal values. It is in the 1980s, following a series of violent events in the Middle East that were framed in Islamic rhetoric (after several decades in which secularist discourse was dominant), that the cultural transcripts of “Islamic terrorism” and “Islamic extremism” were reinvigorated. A rise in anti-Islamic sentiment seems to have been paralleled by growing elements of sympathizers and even converts – with the latter groups frequently stressing religious tolerance and peace. The apparent spike in conversions immediately after September 11, 2001 seems to confirm this tendency (Zebiri 2008: 43).

Traits of contemporary converts

As noted on pp. 260–2, converts in the early waves of modern Western European conversions were frequently educated and from the comfortable classes, and thus possessed the social capital to reject standard religious conventions. This seems to have remained a prominent trait among Western European Muslim converts, even if the proportion is decreasing as converts diversify for the reasons noted above. In 1996, A. Köse, in one of the first in-depth studies of modern Western converts, reported that, of his British subjects, 55 percent came from middle- or upper middle-class families, 60 percent had at least a bachelor’s degree, and 20 percent had graduate degrees (Köse 1996: 80). Later studies of British converts showed roughly similar trends (see Zebiri 2008: 9, 45).

As far as religious background is concerned, Western European Muslim converts, first of all, generally share the common trait of having a weak religious upbringing, or at least never having felt very committed to the religion in which they were raised (Köse 1996: 38–9; Zebiri 2008:

44; Allievi 1998: 95; Jensen 2006: 653; Sultan 1999: 326). While this factor may be more an indication of the relatively secular cultural climate in Western Europe than of personal preference, it is notable that these converts rarely are active religious seekers prior to conversion (Zebiri 2008: 44; Köse 1996: 121).

It seems that converts also grow up relatively happy. Köse reported this as well as the fact that as children they had decent to good relationships with their fathers (Köse 1996: 32, 35), a trait also noted by A.S. Roald, who looked at Scandinavian converts (Roald 2004: 92). Nevertheless, at some point, usually during their third decade of life (Zebiri 2008: 43; Roald 2004: 109; Köse 1996: 37), the future converts often begin to feel the need to seek out a new ideology/religion, social community, or both. Köse observed that this was instigated by some sort of crisis, or at least an abnormally difficult period or event in their lives (Köse 1996: 32). Other researchers, however, have focused less on the timing of the distress and more on the issues that the future converts wanted resolved. These range from a variety of pragmatic issues to psychological, social, and spiritual ones (and these are not mutually exclusive) (see Allievi 1998: 93–145). A popular motive for looking for other sources of meaning, as reported by Zebiri (2008: 2), Roald (2004: 100), and Köse (1996: 79), is dissatisfaction with a Western, materialist culture. Other frequently cited motives are: (1) the desire for a meaning system that simultaneously allows for rational and “religious” thought (Daynes 1999: 316; Jensen 2006: 648, 654; Köse 1996: 98); (2) the desire for mystical/spiritual experiences (Daynes 1999: 316; Jensen 2006: 648, 654; Köse 1996: 98); and (3) the desire among those feeling socially and culturally uprooted for a more meaningful and cohesive community (Daynes 1999: 316–22; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999; Lakhdar et al. 2007: 13; Köse 1996: 98). The last of these three is also closely related to two other common motives: the desire for justice/fair treatment (Sultan 1999; McGinty 2006; van Nieuwkerk 2006: 7–10) and the desire for clear rules concerning morality and social interaction (Sultan 1999; McGinty 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). While conversion purely for marriage does play a role for some converts (Allievi 1998: 101–3; Roald 2004: 97; Zebiri 2008: 224; Köse 1996: 80), there have been a few scholars who have noted its decreasing importance (Lakhdar et al. 2007: 13; Jensen 2006: 644).

Many of these motives, then, revolve around two central themes: (1) Islam as a religion that is “spiritual” *and* rational, and thus is understood as a more cohesive/integrated approach to the world; and (2) that the Islamic community is one that is loving, tolerant, just, and moral. These themes are in fact closely connected to the longstanding liberal discourses described on p. 260, even despite the fact that the demographics and motives of converts appear to have changed somewhat over the last century. The reason for this continuity seems to be that modern conversion to Islam in Western Europe is deeply connected to the two longstanding socio-cultural dynamics described above: (1) the emergence of a “third current” in Western European religiosity and (2) the tendency of some people who are seeking a peaceful and tolerant yet cohesive religious society to see Islam, which is often portrayed as the opposite of this, as the religion that best exemplifies this; by inverting the typical portrayal of Islam, converts suggest that liberal religious values are worthless unless the religion, which is typically seen as the antithesis of those values, is also included in the idealized society. The psychological implications for this move are profound: It allows for those who – due to the very modernizing and globalizing forces that produced the “third current” – feel uprooted and disconnected from society and culture (i.e. “deterritorialized”) to create satisfactory new roots by deeply committing themselves to modern ideals. It should be clear, however, that these ideals are often *not* framed in the rhetoric of politics, but rather as *general* social, cultural, and religious ideals.

That these dynamics are at the core of contemporary Western European conversion to Islam is reflected by a number of notable features concerning these converts. First, while there do

exist among converts a wide range of understandings of Islam, and a minority even commit to particular groups – including Sufism, Salafism, and Shi'ism (Allievi 1998: 67–8; Zebiri 2008: 47–8) – there is in fact resistance among many converts to identify with any particular Islamic sectarian movement or theological stance (Jensen 2006: 653; Zebiri 2008: 47–9). This seems to reflect the primary commitment to religious tolerance and the desire for a peaceful community. Perhaps this strong commitment to liberal religious values is also what motivates so many Western European converts to become spokespersons for Islam by being active in a variety of public sphere-oriented activities, such as publishing, teaching, and lecturing (see an extensive list in Allievi 1998: 265–71). Finally, the trait of having a deep commitment to justice, tolerance, and peace – and the tendency, in order to demonstrate or justify that commitment, to hold Islam up as the religion that exemplifies these ideals – is reflected in the reported rises in conversion to Islam, which correspond with increased media attention to “Islamic terrorism” and anti-Islamic sentiment.

Conversion to Islam in the United States

History

The history of conversion to Islam has developed very differently in the USA than it has in Western Europe. At the core of this difference is the unique role of race and racism in the USA, largely due to the longer existence of and closer experience with slavery, which produced a deep cultural and psychological dichotomization of “black” and “white.” This became both a discourse and a *habitus* which still exist, to a large extent, today (Emerson 2006: 134–54). Therefore, while conversion to Islam in the USA has, as in Western Europe, been shaped by the “third current,” it has been a “third current” modified by the USA’s particular racial dynamics.

Early white US American sympathizers with and converts to Islam, like their European counterparts, were usually committed to liberal religious values as well as an interest in “third current” religions (Bowen 2011b). The first significant promoters of Islamic identity in the USA – Alexander Webb and A.L. Rawson – both had an interest in spiritualistic and esoteric religiosity, and Rawson in particular had ties to Islamic Masonry. The two men, in fact, for a short time aligned with each other and with Quilliam’s group in England (Abd-Allah 2006; Nance 2009: 92–7; Singleton 2007: 481–2; Bowen 2011b: 323–4). The Islamic movements associated with these white US Americans, however, quickly fell apart.

These early US promoters of Islam, and white US Americans generally, were aware of Islam primarily through literature and international travel, and there does not seem to have been a strong awareness by early white Muslim converts of the significant Muslim presence among the enslaved Africans in the USA. Still, contact with enslaved African Muslims was somewhat common for white Americans. But, due to the social position of the enslaved, religious ignorance of their owners, and intentional actions to prevent slaves from perpetuating their traditional religions, Islam was often ignored, dismissed as a non-white religion, or simply not recognized when practiced. Given this association of Islam with the African American underclass, whites generally had little cultural incentive to consider converting to Islam through these local social channels, though there may have been a few exceptions (Bowen 2011b: 318).

The connection between Islam and black Americans would play an important role during the next phase of US conversion to Islam, which lasted from roughly 1900 to 1954. By the late nineteenth century, Americans were becoming increasingly aware of the fact that many Africans were converting to Islam and rejecting Christianity. Because Islam was often framed as a religion that lacked racial discrimination and thus promoted equality among all people, a few

Americans, white and black (and some immigrant Muslims), began promoting the idea that African Americans should convert to Islam (e.g. Singleton 2006: 438–40; Turner 2003: 50–62). This coincided with the rise in US culture of what is known as the nadir of US race relations. In the post-Civil War USA, the termination of institutionalized slavery resulted in increased informal racism and white resentment against US blacks. As African Americans fled the rural South to Northern cities, whites there, who were encountering blacks in large numbers for the first time and had not yet fully shed traditional racist feelings, reacted with their own acts of racial intolerance. At the same time, African Americans were now coming into contact with immigrant Muslims.

Due to the influence of stories about Islam being free from racism, the growing racial tensions, and the increasing contact with immigrant Muslims, a number of African Americans – many of whom were becoming disenchanted with the black church for having withdrawn from advocating social and political reform – began converting to Islam. In the period between 1920 and 1954, there were no fewer than fifteen distinct African American majority or led Islamic movements; around fifty African American Islamic religious authorities; and hundreds – sometimes thousands – of African Americans embracing Islam in every Northern city of any significant size (Dannin 2002; McCloud 1995: 10–35). It should also be noted that, despite their diversity, almost all of the movements promoted liberal values (particularly equality and peace) and many had “third current” characteristics, including a belief in mystical experiences and Masonry (Bowen 2011a; 2011b: 324–6).

Meanwhile, it seems to have been precisely because the high level of racism, combined with white awareness of the attraction of Africans and African Americans to Islam, that was responsible for the fact that conversion of whites to Islam in the first half of the twentieth century was relatively rare. US racism had to a large extent trumped the liberal desire to invert the traditional image of Islam. Where we do have evidence of white conversions, however, it seems that these were people who displayed strong liberal tendencies and openly joined multiracial religious communities. And, while the evidence is meager, they appear to have been from the better-educated and wealthier classes.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, however, there was a dramatic transformation in the historical trajectory of US conversion to Islam. This was the result of several factors: (1) the Civil Rights Movement and the corresponding cultural wave that promoted equality, peace, and justice for all; (2) increased Muslim immigration to the USA; (3) awareness of various international anti-colonial movements; and (4) increased interest in “spiritual”/mystical religion due to the influence of the emerging New Age movement. From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, Americans from a wide range of ethnic and social positions were being drawn to Islam, and were exploring a variety of Islamic communities and doctrines.

Despite this diversity, however, during this period the Nation of Islam (NOI), an African American Islamic sectarian movement, unquestionably became the dominant Islamic movement, and was now attracting at least tens of thousands of African American followers (Lincoln 1994: 102–3). With rhetoric highly influenced by the dichotomizing view of race that had been so prominent in the previous period, the NOI was largely responsible for the general public continuing to perceive US conversion to Islam as a “black” phenomenon. Only after its head, Elijah Muhammad, died in 1975 and his son, W.D. Mohammed, began to lead the group to be more in line with international Islam did the public perception of conversion to Islam begin to change.

Subsequently, US conversion to Islam has increasingly demonstrated tendencies similar to those in Western Europe, though, because of continued racism and the legacy of African American Islam, there is a markedly stronger emphasis on racial equality in the US context.

Still, the promotion of racial equality fits in easily with the other longstanding liberal discourses discussed above, and they serve to reinforce one another. This emphasis on liberal values is important as US converts increasingly take on leadership roles. In 2000, two-thirds of all US imams were African American (Bagby et al. 2001: 52) and a growing number of US converts are becoming politicians, writers, and college professors (who, notably, frequently teach and write in Islamic studies, thus shaping US students' perceptions about Islam) (e.g. Haddad 2006: 38, 42).

Traits of contemporary converts

Because of the unique effects of race on conversion to Islam in the USA, it is difficult to make broad statements that generally apply to all US converts to Islam. Around half of all African American Muslims, for instance, primarily attend African American majority mosques, which have characteristics and demographics notably different from immigrant majority mosques, where most white and Latina/o converts are found (Bagby 2012: 12). White and Latina/o Muslims, furthermore, are more likely to join mosques in the suburbs than African American converts, who more frequently join urban mosques. The difficulty in providing general traits of US converts is further compounded by the fact that not only have there been few studies to examine these characteristics in any detail, but the studies we do have are frequently based on small sample sizes, or do not satisfactorily identify the trends in differences between converts who belong to the different Islamic communities. With these difficulties acknowledged, though, there are some general traits that have been tentatively identified.

Three major studies of US Muslims have been published since 2001 and all found that converts and their Muslim children represent around one-third of the total Muslim population (Bagby et al. 2001: 16; Pew Research Center 2007: 1, 21–2; Bagby 2012: 13). The raw numbers, however, are difficult to estimate largely because there is major disagreement about the size of the US Muslim community, which has been estimated as being anywhere from slightly over one million to over seven million. If we assume that the total US Muslim population is five million, then the convert population is around 1,650,000. All of these studies found that African Americans make up just over 60 percent of all converts (1,023,000). The most recent of the three studies noted that over the last ten years the percentage of white converts has dropped from a little under 30 percent to a little over 20 percent (363,000), while the percentage of Latina/o converts has doubled to 12 percent (198,000) (Bagby et al. 2001: 2; Pew Research Center 2007: 17–18, 22; Bagby 2012: 13). Still, when compared with findings from studies published in the early 1980s, it appears that the numbers and proportions of converts (to non-NOI communities) have increased significantly since that time for all ethnic groups (Ghayur 1981, 1984). Slightly over half of today's converts identify as Sunni, 6 percent as Shi'i, and at least 24 percent as non-specific (Pew Research Center 2007: 22). Unlike Sunni mosques, both Shi'i mosques and Sufi groups have a much higher percentage of white converts than African Americans (Hermansen 2000: 187; Bagby 2012: 17).

Only two of the large-sample studies looked at convert characteristics other than their ethnicities, locations, and percentages. However, because these two studies did not control for converts' ethnicity, they produced several findings that are, *prima facie*, not consistent with a number of other studies of US converts. However, because there is a large proportion of African American converts in both studies, it is likely that their findings are more reflective of African American convert demographics. These findings include a high proportion of male converts (68 percent) (Bagby et al. 2001: 21), a relatively young age at conversion (nearly half converting before the age of twenty-one) (Pew Research Center 2007: 22), and a high

proportion of converts having been raised as Protestants (67 percent) (Pew Research Center 2007: 22). The findings in these large-sample studies are generally consistent with those for other African American convert groups (see Tinaz 2001), and differ somewhat from the observations reported in the previously mentioned studies from the 1980s, which indicated that, at least among whites, females were much more likely to convert than males (Ghayur 1981: 158; 1984: 57). In the 2001 study, African American converts also overwhelmingly displayed an interest in social justice issues; African American majority mosques were more active than immigrant mosques in community improvement programs and outreach activities to non-Muslims, including politicians, than other US mosques (Bagby et al. 2001: 41, 44). In the most recent large-sample study, however, this appears to have decreased (Bagby 2012: 20–4).

Smaller-sample studies of groups not purely composed of African Americans have tended to produce different results and look for different features. Studies in which (1) the converts' sex and ethnicity were diverse but not controlled for, (2) sex and ethnicity were not identified, (3) the converts were exclusively women, and (4) the converts were exclusively white all tended to find that converts were raised middle class, with some college education, and that at least some of the converts were professionals (Esseissah 2011: 31; Ibrahim 1995: 69–70; Robinson 2010: 60; Hedaithy 1985: 25, 34–5; Anway 2002: 6; Poston 1992: 171), though one study showed lower levels of education and employment (Bowen 2009: 46–7). Other findings about convert demographics include the tendency for conversion to take place during one's mid- to late twenties (Khan 1978: 45–6; Bowen 2009: 59; Hedaithy 1985: 25–6, 35; Ibrahim 1995: 69–70), that there is a close to equal ratio of males to females (Khan 1978: 45; Hedaithy 1985: 25; Bowen 2009: 43), and that converts generally come from a variety of Christian backgrounds, as opposed to the vast majority simply being Protestant (Khan 1978: 46; Bowen 2009: 47–9; Hedaithy 1985: 26) – though there is some disagreement over the converts' level of religiosity prior to becoming Muslim (Anway 2002: 11; Poston 1992: 165; Bowen 2009: 48; Esseissah 2011: 28–30; Robinson 2010: 63; Haddad 2006: 36).

Because the smaller-sample studies have used a variety of methodologies, it is difficult to compare their findings on motives for trends in conversion and values of converts. Still, some general themes can be tentatively identified. Islam is frequently characterized as having more clear and simple doctrines than Christianity, as being more rational/logical and as not having any intermediary between the individual and God (Khan 1978: 47; Hedaithy 1985: 28, 31; Bowen 2010: 8; Robinson 2010: 80–2; Haddad 2006: 30–1). In addition, by and large, converts were usually introduced to Islam by a Muslim acquaintance (Khan 1978: 46; Hedaithy 1985: 26; Bowen 2009: 55; Bowen 2010: 2–3, 7; Ibrahim 1995: 68–86; Robinson 2010: 76–80; Martinez-Vazquez 2010: 51–2). Among women of all ethnicities there is an emphasis on the ideal that Islam liberates and provides justice and equality for women (Robinson 2010: 82–4; Anway 2002). Among Latinas/os, there is a strong theme of equality and justice for all races (Martinez-Vazquez 2010: 92–103; Bowen 2010). While some studies reported an increase in conversion immediately after September 11, 2001, or at least a notable number of converts who became interested in Islam because of the events that day (Esseissah 2011: 1, 32–4; Bowen 2009: 42, 43; Robinson 2010: 70–6; Martinez-Vazquez 2010: 60–1), the most recent large-sample study indicates that in 2011 conversion rates were actually slightly lower than they were in 2000 (Bagby 2012: 12).

Case study: fifteen US converts

In the summer of 2010, I interviewed fifteen Sunni Muslim converts from across the USA. Their backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions illustrate many of trends that have been presented so far.

The converts in this study represented all geographical regions in the USA equally. However, those who chose to respond were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white (eleven in total) and female (also eleven in total). Three Latinas/os (two females and one male) and one African American female completed the sample group. A slight majority of those interviewed (eight) converted while in their twenties, five while in their forties or fifties, and only two in their late teens. While these particular demographics do not reflect the proportions reported in the major studies of Muslim converts, there are other features that are more consistent with previous research.

Fourteen of the respondents came from middle-class backgrounds, and all had at least some college education. While most of the converts had a Christian upbringing and demonstrated moderate levels of religiosity as children, there was no pattern in terms of religious denomination prior to conversion. Most shared the feature of having been raised with liberal views on race and religion despite the fact that only slightly more than half grew up having friends of multiple ethnicities and religions. At some point during or after their teen years, however, they began to make Muslim acquaintances. All but one became interested in Islam through Muslim social ties – most had been dating a Muslim, and some made Muslim friends of the same sex.

A number of these new Muslims indicated a concern with social justice issues and a desire for a peaceful society. Similarly, consistent with findings for other Western female converts, the eleven women interviewed were attracted to what they understood as Islam's superior and just treatment of women, as well as the sense that there was a strong community that would foster this treatment because this was perceived as part of the Islamic "way of life." In fact, it was repeatedly emphasized by almost all of the converts that "Islam is a way of life"; in other words, Islam was understood by them as a religion by which one's mind and actions should constantly be guided. There does not, however, appear to be a strong sense of sectarian or theological exclusivity: while almost all identified as Sunni when asked, a number of them explicitly rejected the notion that there is only one, inflexible way of life or thought for a Muslim, and that some US Muslims are too strict. Four even indicated that they "mosque-hop," regularly traveling to a variety of mosques to hear different perspectives. Finally, all indicated that they had some intellectual interests in Islam, but that their conversion was usually done because "it felt right."

Conclusion

There are three major factors contributing to conversion to Islam in Western Europe and the USA. The first is a minor tradition in the West that dates back to the sixteenth century: the tendency of some people to define Islam as the ideal liberal religion, which, precisely because it goes against the popular tendency to see Islam as the least liberal religion, is ultimately a call for religious tolerance. This idea is particularly attractive when it is combined with mystical and/or esoteric interests. The second factor, while related to the first, differs slightly because it emphasizes the idea that Islam is uniquely free from racism, or at least better for black people than Christianity. Finally, as the Muslim population grows in Western Europe and the USA, non-Muslims there are more likely to develop relationships with Muslims. Because social ties are often crucial for religious conversion (Stark and Finke 2000: 114–38), when the potential convert desires to find a new religion there is a now greater chance that he or she will look to Islam instead of other religions.

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