

Women in Canada Converting to Islam: A Narrative Inquiry

by

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ABSTRACT

Although Islam is frequently cited as the fastest growing religion in North America, very little research has been done on the topic of the conversion of Canadian women to Islam. This narrative inquiry uses open-ended, semi-structured interviews with six Canadian women in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces. The women's stories of conversion were collected and analyzed in the context of a number of important scholarly discourses, including: the role of women in Islam; attitudes toward Islam and Muslims in North America; the process of conversion in general; and conversion to Islam in particular. Common threads in their conversion stories included such influences as: identity; the amount of time it took to convert; the importance of social bonds; dissatisfaction with one's former faith; feeling a sense of belonging and community; and appreciation of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices. There are also influences unique to each woman's conversion. This thesis concludes that while the women's stories reflect shared patterns of influence, there is no template for conversion. Also, all of the conversion stories demonstrated a sense of agency; each woman chose Islam of her own free will.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my best friend, my Mum. Thank you
for all your kind words, support, advice, laughter,
and for simply being my Mum.

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This thesis would not be completed without the continuous support of my co-supervisors, Dr. Linda Eyre and Dr. Alexandra Bain. Both professors have showed me continuous kindness, patience, and guidance as well as being listening ears when I needed it most. For this, I will always be grateful.

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Thank you to my family. To my dear mum, my rock. To my life partner, for whatever life throws at us. And to my sister, Caro, *Te amo mas, mi loka chilacita!* :)

I would also like to extend a special note of "Thank You" and big applause to my participants, the Muslim women of the Islamic community along the East coast and throughout Canada who were able to answer my questions, inquiries and opinions on life and Islam. You each allowed me into your world of finding inner peace, and reality. With your devoted attention and patience, and insightful stories of conversion, I was able to give a detailed reflection to help further this research. Many thanks and Salaams to you and your families.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines Canadian-born women's stories of their conversion to Islam. It explores the women's narratives of the life-altering experiences and influences that led them to embrace Islam in the North American environment.

The conversion stories of six women, aged 22 to 59, living in the Atlantic provinces of Canada, and Ontario, were collected through a series of emails, Skype and social media interviews. Their narratives were then analyzed in the context of a number of scholarly discourses, including: the role of women in Islam; Islamophobic attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in North America; the process of conversion in general, and conversion to Islam in particular. Primary sources such as personal narratives, documentaries and memoirs, and secondary works from the disciplines of sociology, history, and anthropology, and narrative inquiry were consulted. These sources helped to frame my research question: What are the influences that shape the decisions of Canadian women who convert to Islam?

In her book, "*Women and Religion*," Majella Franzmann notes that the study of women and religion requires students and scholars to become fully engaged and have a clear understanding of how their own positioning can, and does, affect their work.¹ As a researcher, exploring this sensitive topic, it is important that I begin by acknowledging for the reader the lens through which I see my participants. It is important that I position myself, clearly present my initial assumptions, and examine the influence these assumptions have had on my work as it developed.

Religion and personal faith are already very important to me, and, initially, as a

¹ Majella Franzmann. *Women and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, x.

non-Muslim woman in a relationship with a Muslim partner, I was afraid there would be pressure on me to convert. My relationship with my partner was a new one and I had never known a Muslim and knew little about different religions, specifically Islam. Once I started exploring this research topic, I sometimes questioned why I did not feel the need to convert like other Canadian women I knew with Muslim partners. I sometimes felt something was wrong with the faith and spiritual side of our relationship. However, after I reassessed myself and my faith, and especially after conducting the interviews, I realized that I am quite content with where I am spiritually. Yet, I now also see where my participants were coming from – although they all previously had a "foothold" in religion, they all expressed feeling "lost," confused, thinking something was wrong or missing, finding "inner peace," or simply wanting something more out of life. Through my research I have been dissuaded of my earlier assumption of a male Muslim having an influence on the conversion of his non-Muslim partner, even though this may be the sole reason for at least a few women converts in the world today. I now think quite differently when it comes to women and their decisions to convert to Islam. Through the interview and analysis processes I have gained more insight into conversion and now understand better the participants' personal perspectives as well as my own.

Exploring this research exceeded my expectations. The participants were not only willing to answer my questions but also made me feel that no question was insignificant. I am grateful for their kindness in allowing me to see their world as they saw it before they converted, and then again as women converts to Islam, a religion that unfortunately continues to be portrayed prejudicially.

A literature review (Chapter 2) quickly dispelled my earlier assumption that the majority of women converts come to Islam through their relationship with a Muslim man. Recent studies in the United States and the United Kingdom indicate that the situation is far more complex:² The conversion of Western women to Islam results not from any single reason, but is rather a process with influences that vary from person to person. These influences may be spiritual, psychological, social and even political in nature. According to Brooks in her article entitled "*Religious Conversion to Islam and Its Influence on Workplace Relationships in American and Egyptian Schools: A Case Study*," Islam is the "fastest growing religion in the world," and the conversion of women to Islam in the West is on the rise.³ Also, women converts are playing an increasingly important role in many North American Muslim communities.⁴ Unfortunately, despite their increasing presence, there is little research into the lives of Canadian women converts.⁵ This study seeks to fill this lacuna by offering evidence of multiple influential factors in Canadian women's conversion narratives.

There are many stereotypes that come with converting to any religion, especially Islam. The question many women converts face is, Why would such a free and liberated

² See the following: Audrey Maslim and Jeffrey Bjorck. "Reasons for Conversion to Islam Among Women in the United States." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (2009): 97-111; Yasir Suleiman. "Narratives of Conversion to Islam: Female Perspectives." *The New Muslims Project* (2012). 17-129.

Louise Soutar. "British Female Converts to Islam: Choosing Islam as a Rejection of Individualism." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 10, no. 1 (2010): 3-16.

³ Melanie Brooks. "Religious Conversion to Islam and its Influence on Workplace Relationships in American and Egyptian Schools: A Case Study." *Education Policy* 24, no. 1 (2010): 83-109.

⁴ For example, Ingrid Matteson, a Canadian convert to Islam, was president of ISNA (the Islamic Society of North America) from 2006-2010.

⁵ Brooks, 2009, 83.

Western woman embrace something that is often presented in the media as a "backwards faith" that oppresses women?⁶ This study offered women converts to Islam the opportunity to answer this question. Their answers are articulate and full of agency. Many of my participants pointed out that a wealthy and powerful woman, the Prophet Muhammad's wife Khadija, had actually proposed herself to the Prophet Muhammad for marriage and was the first convert to the new religion of Islam. From the earliest period, women have typically outnumbered men as converts and this continues even today.⁷ All of my participants cited the Islamic perspective on women as part of their attraction to Islam. Historian Leila Ahmed's work on Muslim societies shows how majority of Muslim women value and support the Islamic understanding of women's role in family and society. Ahmed points out that over the decades Muslim society has changed dramatically with exposure to the West. Ahmed argues Western Muslim women's lived experiences often challenge Western assumptions. Whether it is the wearing of *hijab*, in the family, or in a larger society itself: "Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox, androcentric Islam."⁸ Similarly, it is clear

⁶ Suleiman, 1.

⁷ Karen van. Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2006.

⁸ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 66.

Please also see: Abdulai Abukari. "Education of Women in Islam: A Critical Islamic Interpretation of the Qur'an." *Religious Education* 109, no. 1 (2014): 4-23.

And: Ruqayya Y. Khan. "Did a Woman Edit the Qur'an? Hafsa and her Framed "Cortex." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 1 (2014): 174-216.

from the responses of participants in my study that their understanding of the role of women in their Islamic community is a positive and affirming one. While the research participants all immersed themselves in one way or another in the study of Islam, the majority of the general public often knows very little about Muslim faith.

Muslims today suffer blatant racism and hate crimes. Post *9/11*, many countries in the West have witnessed a startling increase in violence against Muslims or those who are perceived to be Muslims.⁹ In Canada, as in many places in the West, Muslims are subject to a growing Islamophobia, which is commonly known as the:

fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims. It has existed for centuries, but has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. This phenomenon promotes and perpetuates anti-Muslim stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, and even violence.¹⁰

While both Muslim men and women may experience Islamophobic violence and hate crime, Barbara Perry argues Muslim women who wear the headscarf are particularly vulnerable to gendered Islamophobia¹¹ because they can be easily identified:

Islamophobic violence against women are both the same and different from those underlying violence against men. That is, they are informed by parallel negative images - Like Muslim males, she too bears the brunt of the entrenched stereotyping profiling Muslims as the primary threat to American national security. But unlike her male counterpart, the headscarved Muslim woman is caught at the intersection of discrimination against religion and discrimination against women. Like men, Muslim women are presented as outsiders: as

⁹ Barbara Perry. "Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women." *Social Identities* (2014). 74.

¹⁰ CAIR - Council on American-Muslim Relations. "Definition of Islamophobia." Accessed June 29th, 2016. <http://www.cair.com/images/pdf/Islamophobia-Pocket-Guide.pdf>.

¹¹ Perry, 74.

Please also see: Sahar F. Aziz. "The Muslim "Veil" Post 9/11: Rethinking Women's Rights and Leadership." *Policy Brief* (2012). 1-43.

foreign, distant "others," and as members of religion (Islam) that does not promote "Canadian" values, but anti-Canadian values such as indiscriminate violence and gender oppression.¹²

Given the current war torn state of countries throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia, the discussion of Western women converting to Islam may be seen as a sensitive one. Muslim women continue to be the centre of much debate with controversies ranging from the wearing of *hijab* and *niqab* to the role of women in Islamic "terrorism."¹³

Alia Hogben, of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, agrees that Muslim women are easy targets since many wear the headscarf and are a visible minority in the public eye.¹⁴ Concerns for their safety are well founded. For example, recently, in Ontario, a Muslim woman who was picking up her child at a Toronto school was attacked by two men who called her a "terrorist." The National Council of Canadian Muslims who track anti-Muslim related incidents said that there had been several attacks against Muslims that same week including an arson attack on the Masjid Al-Salaam mosque in Peterborough, Ontario, which resulted in thousands of dollars in fire and smoke damage.¹⁵ Prior to 9/11, which began a series of world

¹² Perry, 76.

Please also see: Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley. "Defining Islamophobia." Accessed June 29th, 2016. <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/islamophobia/defining-islamophobia>
And see: K. Bullock and G.I. Jafri. "Media (Mis) representations: Muslim women in the Canadian nation." *Canadian Women's Studies* 20, no. 2 (2002). 35-40.

¹³ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat, and Liat Shetret. "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism, Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors." *Policy Brief* (2013). 1-18.

¹⁴ CBC News - Frightening attacks leave Ontario Muslims shaken

(<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/frightening-attacks-leave-ontario-muslims-shaken-1.3323107>).

¹⁵ Ibid.

changing events, "Muslims were not generally recognized as frequent targets of racially or religiously motivated violence."¹⁶ Today, however, Muslims can expect to suffer "hate crimes, discrimination, and even possible violations of their bodily integrity."¹⁷ Nowadays, "most Americans view Islam as inherently foreign, most female Anglo converts to Islam are stereotyped as Arab particularly if they wear the headscarf."¹⁸

Converting to religion in general is a topic of scholarly interest and debate. According to Lofland and Stark, all human beings have a philosophy, a way of understanding their way of life and "When a person gives up one such perspective or one ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as *conversion*."¹⁹ One of the earliest scholarly discussions of conversion was William James' "*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*,"²⁰ written in 1901. James discussed how, "there can be no doubt that as a matter of fact a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric."²¹

¹⁶ Perry, 74-75.

¹⁷ Ibid, 79.

¹⁸ Aziz, 1.

Please also see: Jack G. Shaheen. *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*. Georgetown University Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Occasional Paper Series, 1997.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Longman, 1901.

²¹ Ibid, 7.

More recently, many social scientists propose that a wide range of social and psychological factors take place with conversion.²² In 1984, David, A. Snow and Richard Machalak argued in *The Sociology of Conversion*, that the initial causes of conversion could be attributed to such things as: psycho-physiological responses to induced stress (brainwashing or persuasion), personality traits and cognitive attributes, situational factors that induce stress, and social attributes, along with a variety of other social influences.²³

In the late 1990s, sociologists debated the legal and social scientific credibility of “notions of brainwashing or mind control.”²⁴ According to sociologist Lorne Dawson:

With the end of the so-called "cult-wars" there was as little appetite amongst the most active researchers to be drawn into this old debate once again. With a few exceptions, the consensus view is that brainwashing does not exist, and the kinds of deconditioning and resocialization operative in most new religions is essentially the same as that used by traditional religions, the military, therapists, and many other legitimate social organizations.²⁵

Dawson was studying conversion to new religious movements, but his argument is certainly applicable to the experiences of the women in my study. None of the participants in my study were coerced or manipulated in any way. All of them actively sought out new meaning and understanding in their lives and they found it in Islam.

According to David Snow and Richard Machalak, much of the earlier debate surrounded two possible theories of conversion. The first focused on religious

²² David, A. Snow and Richard Machalak, "The Sociology of Conversion." *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 167.

²³ Ibid, 178.

²⁴ Lorne Dawson. "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (2009): 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

conversion as a phenomenon: what occurs when an individual converts.²⁶ The second looked at the underlying causes of conversion. My study attempts both. I have tried to offer both a description and understanding at the processes and motivations of women who choose Islam.

In a fascinating review of *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*²⁷ in the *Journal of Pastoral Psychology*, author Nathan Carlin offers his findings on conversion: Conversion is sudden and it is gradual; it is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans; conversion is personal and communal, private and public; it is passive and active; it is a retreat from the world; it is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict.²⁸ For Snow and Machalak, conversion is an event and a process; it is an ending and a beginning; it is final and open-ended; it leaves us devastated - and transformed.²⁹ An important finding from my study is that conversion is not an event; it is a process. Although when converting to a religion, an ideology, there is "a radical discontinuity in a person's life,"³⁰ some of my subjects moved through the process quite quickly, while others took their time. One has even technically delayed her

²⁶ Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion." *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 3 (1977): 653.

²⁷ Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁸ Nathan Carlin. "Religious Conversion: Classic and Contemporary Questions and Issues." *Pastoral Psychology* 65 (2014): 293.

Please also see: Lewis R. Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 176

²⁹ Snow and Machalak, 167.

³⁰ Ibid, 174.

"conversion," trying out the role before the full "embracement of the convert role."³¹

Juliette Galonnier and Diego de los Rios, who studied "how converts learn to become religious people," found that converting to Islam is a "learning process" involving "two kinds of knowledge...religious know what and religious know-how."³² Knowing "what" requires studying key texts, learning from classes, etc., whereas knowing "how" is a complicated process that involves becoming a member of a community through participation in ceremonies and religious practices. Metaphorically, they liken conversion to Islam to a religious marathon where one has to pace oneself because the experience of learning about Islam, is a long one.³³ Overall, the process of conversion may be quite different for different people. The women in my study mostly learned about Islam informally through the Internet or reading on their own. They also varied in the extent to which they engaged in religious rituals and bodily practices such as wearing the *hijab*. Some moved quickly to decide, others took their time. Some were very private in their newfound devotion, others seemed to want to scream it from the mountaintops.

The importance of this research will hopefully help disperse some of the negative stereotypes that women converts to Islam continue to face in post 9/11 Canadian society. Furthermore, a study such as this may offer further insight into women's conversion to Islam - a phenomenon that is increasingly important in the context of the many world-changing events taking place today.

³¹ Ibid, 174.

³² Juliette Galonnier and Diego de los Rios. "Teaching and Learning to Be Religious: Pedagogies of Conversion to Islam and Christianity." *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2016): 67.

³³ Ibid, 69.

In the chapters that follow I review some of the studies that have examined Western women's conversion to Islam (Chapter 2), discuss research methods and methodology (Chapter 3), and analyze each woman's narrative with a focus on identifying the most salient influences behind their decision to convert (Chapter 4). The concluding chapter (Chapter 5) offers suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Much of the academic literature on the topic of conversion focuses on the general history and context of religious conversion. Whereas some authors have written on the subject of women converting to Islam, first hand experiences of a friend's conversion, or a personal memoir, there is little that examines accounts of *Canadian* women deciding to convert to Islam. In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on key articles in the American and European literature on the topic of women's conversion to Islam, which have helped to clarify the focus of my discussions with participants and their conversion stories. The following is a brief overview of, and my response to, the articles.

While there is not a lot of research from a *Canadian* perspective about women converts, some research has been conducted in other Western countries. For example, for her doctoral research, Melanie Brooks, currently an Associate professor at the University of Idaho, conducted a case study of one American woman's conversion to Islam.³⁴ Her case study focused on one teacher's conversion to Islam and her workplace relationships in the United States and Egypt. Brooks and her subject, "Amy," were close friends, and she had earlier asked Amy to sponsor her own conversion to Catholicism. In her conclusion, Brooks found that although expressing her Muslim identity was important to Amy, she was profoundly uncomfortable in the post *9/11* environment, even fearful, of revealing her Islam to her non-Muslim American employer and co-workers. When co-workers discovered Amy had converted she felt

³⁴ Brooks. 2010, 83.

they were "insensitive," and unwelcoming. Brooks highlights themes of "alienation, acceptance, fear, and frustration," that appear in Amy's story. However, for Brooks, Amy's discomfort around her identity and her later difficulties as a teacher were not a result of Islamophobia, but rather "her overconfidence and ego ... harmed her workplace relationships."³⁵

Although Brook's research raised interesting questions regarding a single American woman's conversion narrative, I felt that given the complex processes of conversion and debates within the conversion literature mentioned in chapter one, a group of women offered a better opportunity for the study than a single case. I return to my choice of participants in chapter 3, where I discuss my methodology and methods.

A second article I found helpful on Western women converting to Islam, is not focused on women in Canada, but rather from the perspectives of women in Ireland. Yafa Shanneik's article, *Conversion and Religious Habitus: The Experiences of Irish Women Converts to Islam in the Pre-Celtic Tiger Era*,³⁶ is based on interviews with 21 women, who reflected on their Catholic family upbringing and their conversion to Islam. The women described their experiences of feeling suffocated by Catholicism and leaving their families around the age of sixteen, moving to bigger cities, and expressing their anger through music, drugs, and alcohol.³⁷ Overall, with their new lifestyles, these young Irish women felt liberated from the constraints of their strict Catholic upbringings. Another eight converts ended up living in the mountains, growing their own food and living off the land for a while. To them, it was another step toward

³⁵ Ibid, 90.

³⁶ Yafa Shanneik. "Conversion and Religious Habitus: The Experiences of Irish Women Converts to Islam in the Pre-Celtic Tiger Era." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2011): 503-517.

³⁷ Ibid, 507.

freedom and not being tied down to a strict religious upbringing. Instead they became fond of the "spiritual and mystical practices of Buddhism."³⁸

As the women in Shanneik's study became more acquainted with the Islamic culture and religion, they began dating Muslims in their circle of friends. What is interesting here is that the women all pointed out how their Muslim partners did not have any serious interest in introducing them to Islam. I noticed a similar view with the participants in my study who also noted how their partners did not pressure them into learning about Islam or conversion, rather they suggested they should learn about Islam on their own and make their own decisions. Similarly, the women in Shanneik's study described their efforts in learning about Islam on their own, but for them it was more of a feeling of comfort and a security blanket with their new circle of friends than actually studying Islam for the religion itself. Understanding Islam provided the women with a sense of "belonging,"³⁹ and a social connection with other Muslims, which heightened their attraction to Islam.

Furthermore, the women in Shanneik's study felt that their Islamic conversions were influenced by their Catholic upbringings and background, since the majority of them converted to the Islamic branch of Salafism.⁴⁰ For these converts, Salafism is self-oriented and at times skeptical towards religious institutions that claim authority and take control over believers. Similarly, the women felt that they themselves were "skeptical of following the religion of their parents and fore-fathers since they believe

³⁸ Ibid, 507.

³⁹ Ibid, 510.

⁴⁰ Salafism – A modern conservative and literalist movement in Islam that aims at following the Qur'an and Sunnah, or practice of the Prophet, as it was practiced by the earliest generations of righteous Muslims. Personal conversation with Dr. Alexandra Bain. July 1st, 2014.

one must be religious by individual choice not through social or cultural coercion."⁴¹

These converts also felt that the Salafi understanding of Islam was a much better fit with their situations. For example, one of the converts explains that Salafism offers clear guidance; unlike the Catholic priest who seemingly merely repeats himself on Sundays, "Salafism is clear cut"⁴² in understanding. Consequently, for most of these women converts, faith became the centre of their lives.

To help further their understanding of the Islamic faith, many women obtained pocket-size English books that discussed typical Islamic rituals and traditions like, how to perform salat (the ritual of prayer for Muslims), or how to perform wudu (the Islamic cleansing before prayer). At the beginning of their journey of faith, these women were only looking at Islam as a means to become closer with their partners' communities. Later, however, while meeting other Irish women who were also thinking of converting, they became serious about Islam and started to search for their "right path to Allah."⁴³ Some women were even more serious about their Islamic faith and wanted to follow Islamic prescriptions in every detail, asking questions about how to wake up in the mornings, how to dress, how to act with her husband, how to cook, how to think; they wanted to know everything to help them become a "good" Muslim woman.⁴⁴

Shanneik also focused on what impact the women's Catholic upbringing had upon their choice to convert to Islam. Given the historical connections between Irish culture and culture in Eastern Canada, such as the Irish-Catholic immigrant families who settled along the East coast of Canada, Shanneik's research seemed particularly

⁴¹ Shanneik, 510.

⁴² Ibid, 510.

⁴³ Ibid, 511.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 511.

relevant. Being brought up Catholic, yet continuing to question certain Catholic teachings is a consistent theme in the literature, which is why I have found this article to be particularly useful in framing questions about the relationship between a convert's previous life and that after entering Islam.

The next article, by Louise Soutar, focuses on British women and is entitled, *British Female Converts to Islam: Choosing Islam as a Rejection of Individualism*.⁴⁵ Soutar first points out that voluntary religious conversion, an already fascinating subject, is made even more interesting when the convert is female and the religion is Islam. Her research uses in-depth interviews (by phone and in person) with three British women, who point to their dissatisfaction with British society as a major reason behind their conversion to Islam.

Soutar found there are many reasons for the women's decisions to convert to Islam, and that it is usually a long process. The women's motives for converting centred on the system of norms and morality that Islam presents, along with its lack of tolerance of divorce and homosexuality, for example.⁴⁶ Although there were cases where women converted after their marriage to a Muslim, this was outnumbered by the number of women who converted due to their own personal, individual choice.⁴⁷ Another common reason for women converts was their unhappiness with Western feminism which for these women seemed to have been ineffective in countering women's oppression, specifically being able to do little about the harmful representation of the female body in

⁴⁵ Soutar, 3-16.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 6.

advertising.

The work of Karin van Nieuwkerk,⁴⁸ professor of Anthropology at Nijmegen University, in the Netherlands, in her study of Western women embracing Islam, has also been helpful in my analysis. In van Nieuwkerk's study of female conversion, Islam is usually viewed by converts as giving dignity back to women, with many converts seeing the Islamic understandings of femininity and motherhood as more appealing.⁴⁹ Islam's clearly defined roles for women within a household and within a family are important attributes that appeal to many converts. The role of a mother is viewed to be of great importance in the Islamic religion.⁵⁰ Lastly, it is the sense of belonging to a community along with their growing friendships with other Muslims that feels more genuine and stronger than their friendships with other non-Muslims.

Audrey Maslim and Jeffrey Bjorck's research, *Reasons for Conversion to Islam Among Women in the United States*⁵¹ also looks at why women convert to Islam, but from a quantitative perspective. This research involved an on-line survey of 304 women, from across the United States, seeking their reasons for converting to Islam. Maslim and Bjorck also invited participants to include three written responses with their surveys, explaining their reasons for conversion, in 200 words or less.⁵² The most consistently reported factors included: being attracted by Islamic moral values, a search for identity, and the congruence of belief systems. The authors highlight the importance and regard Islam has for women compared to the negative aspects that are often

⁴⁸ Karin van Nieuwkerk cited in Soutar, 6. Please also see, Nieuwkerk, 2006. Other academic works by Karen van Nieuwkerk are also included in the "References" section.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Maslim and Bjorck, 101-102.

⁵² Ibid, 101-102.

portrayed in the media. Islamic "moral values," "a sense of identity," strong social networks and "spiritual coherence" all made Islam attractive to these women converts.⁵³

The authors also determined that the main reason women gave for converting to Islam was the adoption of Islamic values, which were considered to be a better fit with their own family and moral values. The second highest reason for conversion was the influence of friends and individuals who assisted in their exposure to Islam.⁵⁴

I found Maslim and Bjorck's article to be extremely helpful in identifying themes, which I have also included in my analysis. The themes they explored included: influence from a potential Muslim spouse (Marriage), influence of close friends (Best Friends), choosing Islam as one's first faith (No Former Faith), dissatisfaction with one's former faith (Dissatisfaction), preference for Islamic values versus secular values (Islamic values), appreciation of Islamic cultural views on ethnicity and gender (Culture), feeling marginalized by those in one's former faith community (Marginalized), gaining an increased sense of identity (Identity), and gaining an increased sense of freedom (Independence). Maslim and Bjorck's study invited participants to include three written responses with their surveys, explaining their reasons for conversion in 200 words or less.⁵⁵ I used the themes from Maslim and Bjorck's study as a template to begin exploring the themes found in my research through interviews with my participants and their personal narratives.

The last resource I will examine is *Narratives of Conversion to Islam: Female Perspectives*, a project of the University of Cambridge, hereafter referred to as The

⁵³ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 102.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 101-102.

Cambridge Project, written by Yasir Suleiman, who is currently the Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies in Cambridge.⁵⁶ Suleiman explained that The Cambridge Project examined the views and stories of 47 female converts to help provide an "insider's view" of what the overall conversion experience is like.⁵⁷ This report shows the cumulative results of the researchers' three separate meetings with each participant, exploring why they favoured Islam out of all religions, their feelings regarding converting to Islam, and the responses of family, friends, and other Muslims.⁵⁸ The report explores why a free liberated Western woman would want to convert to a faith that many think would only oppress her. With this particular question in mind, Suleiman notes that many people assume there must be something "wrong" with a woman who willingly chooses or decides to do this "wrong" thing. Suleiman argues however, that women may choose to convert to Islam to help them deal with problems they face in Western society.⁵⁹ Suleiman goes even further to state in a news article published by The University of Cambridge, that one might think that bright, young, knowledgeable, ambitious women would be the ones to stay away from Islam, yet a large number of these women have been many of the same ones converting.⁶⁰

The Cambridge Project identified and explored even more themes than Maslim and Bjorck such as: identity, dress, family and personal relationships, marriage, polygamy, domestic violence, divorce, children, sexuality, doubts, spirituality, engagement with "heritage Muslim communities," political participation, bridge-building between non-Muslims and Muslims, women's rights, media stereotypes, and

⁵⁶ Suleiman, 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

need for support.⁶¹ The project also allowed participants an even greater voice by including them in a further level of analysis.

In addition to documented personal interviews, a steering committee consisting of a small number of participants was provided with a preliminary draft of the study's findings, which they were invited to comment on for "content, accuracy, style, tone, and impact." Suleiman, then prepared a new draft, which was sent to all participants.⁶² Although Suleiman's participatory approach might be considered ideal in narrative inquiry, due to my time constraints I took a more traditional qualitative approach: I emailed several participants to clarify minor details of their stories, and I included the clarifications in their narrative transcripts; I did not further include my participants in the writing process.

Both Maslim and Bjorck's work and Suleiman's *The Cambridge Project*, included themes that helped frame my interview questions with participants and also helped me identify ongoing themes in my research. In the process of transcribing and analyzing my interviews, I discovered a number of themes, or influences that matched closely those found in the literature review, in particular the work of Audrey Maslim and Jeffrey Bjorck (*Reasons for Conversion to Islam Among Women in the United States*) and Yasir Suleiman (*The Cambridge Project*). I also found influences not mentioned in previous work. I identify and discuss examples of conversion themes in the participants' stories in Chapter 4, and connect back to previous work in Chapter 5.

The six conversion themes or influences mentioned most often by my research participants are presented in Appendix B (feeling a sense of belonging and community,

⁶¹ Ibid, 9-18.

⁶² Ibid, 7.

relationship (including marriage) to a Muslim man, dissatisfaction with one's former faith, appreciation and acceptance of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices, a search for identity and seeking spirituality (spiritual wanderer). As a qualitative study, frequency is not the focal point of my research. Some themes are common to all participants, but others, less frequently cited but sometimes equally important, are also included.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods

In this chapter I provide an overview of the methodology of narrative inquiry and the methods of qualitative interviewing I used to answer my research question: What are the influences that shape the decisions of Canadian women who convert to Islam? I begin with a discussion of research ethics and how I handled the ethical issues that arose during my study.

Ethical Considerations

My research proposal was approved by the University of New Brunswick and Saint Thomas University Research Ethics Boards (REB), which conform to the Tri Council ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Prior to beginning each interview, I provided each participant with a description of my proposed research along with a REB approved consent form for my participants to read, sign, and return (see Appendix C). The consent form assured participants of confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of their interview data, whether online or face-to-face. Although the protection of qualitative information with online interviews is more difficult to determine than in face-to-face interviews where the researcher has more control on storage of the interview transcripts, I emphasized the importance of confidentiality and trust to my participants. My main ethical concern was my ability to grant and maintain anonymity as recently concerns have been expressed about the safety of personal information online.⁶³ For my part, I assured them I would be the only person who would have access to their stories, and I promised to delete the online transcripts at the

⁶³ Please see articles: Karen Kaiser. "Protecting Respondent Confidentiality in Qualitative Research." *Qual Health Res.* 19, no. 11 (2009): 1632-1641.
And: Rose Wiles, Graham Crow, Sue Heath and Vikki Charles. "Anonymity and Confidentiality." *ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.* (2006): 1-17.

conclusion of my thesis. In addition, I indicated that I would use pseudonyms for all of my participants and remove any identifying features or information in the final report. The consent form also included a description of the project, and a statement indicating that participants could withdraw from the project at any time and without penalty. I emailed the consent form to the participants. Each woman signed the consent form and emailed it back to me.

One area I did find to be challenging in terms of ethics was my initial decision to include a close friend as a participant in my study. I chose to remove her story from the final draft of my thesis because my knowledge of her life experience far exceeded what she chose to share in the actual interview itself. I felt my experience of her as a friend might influence her description of her conversion and unfairly influence my representation of her life story. Also, I had concerns with Melanie Brook's decision to focus her study on a single participant, especially someone who was a close friend. I felt it best to leave out my friend of the final draft to protect our friendship and the integrity of the work.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to search out and listen carefully to people's stories. We use stories to explain our lives and understand the lives of others. We use them to explain our past, our decisions, and our hopes for the future. It is through the telling of our stories that we create and shift our identities.

Narrative inquiry is appropriate for my thesis in interdisciplinary studies as this

research approach is taken up across a wide range of disciplines, ranging from: "philosophy, literary theory, poetics, cinema, cognitive narratology, anthropology, sociology, organizational studies, psychology, psychotherapy, education and even medicine."⁶⁴ Also, narrative inquiry fits well with my research question on women's conversion to Islam as Islam has a foundational connection to narrative through the practice of following the *hadith*, or narration of the Prophet Mohamed's sayings or actions. Together these narrations form the basis of the *Sunnah*, or Prophetic tradition, which is, after the Qur'an, the most important source of Islamic law, indeed, of all Islamic knowledge and understanding.

Arthur Frank, critical theorist and professor of sociology at the University of Calgary, suggests that "human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose."⁶⁵ For Frank: "Stories inform in the sense of providing information, but more significantly, stories give form - temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries - to lives that inherently lack form."⁶⁶ In his discussion of narrative theory, Frank notes how religious stories, in particular those that have been passed down through generations, continue to leave marks on those who read them.⁶⁷ I certainly found this to be the case

⁶⁴ David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*. Sage Publications, 2014. 550.

⁶⁵ Frank, 2010, 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 3.

with the Muslim women in my study.

Narrative inquiry provides a meaningful way to study and interpret an individual's personal narrative, as it contains stories that actually emerge from the "inside out."⁶⁸ Narrative inquiry begins as a story told to the researcher, by the participant. This story is understood as a process of interpretation – yours and theirs. Both the researcher and participant are able to learn from these narratives, seeing them as an opportunity to perceive things in a different way, to learn from another perspective. Narrative inquiry can also be defined as a way to make meaning, by taking the time to reflect, make sense of a story and see how it fits within one's life.⁶⁹

Similarly, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, state that the importance of narrative inquiry is to help make meaning of the stories that shape our daily lives:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which their experience of the world enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study.⁷⁰

In order to understand, from their own points of view, why the women in my study have chosen to convert to Islam, and to better understand my own life, I have

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Frank, 2010, 3.

⁷⁰ D. Jean Clandinin and F.M. Connelly. Narrative inquiry. In J. Green, S. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 2006, 477.

chosen narrative inquiry.

Karen Furlong's work was exceptionally helpful in explaining the context of "storying" when I wanted to provide the participants a process that gathered their conversion stories in a meaningful way.⁷¹ Furlong's study *A Narrative Inquiry Into Nurses' Experiences of Learning: The Case of an Electronic Health Record*,⁷² offered insight into and understanding of how narrative inquiry could be used in research such as my own. Whereas survey research can provide basic demographic data, to understand the in-depth motivations and influences on Canadian women who are converting to a religion that is at least marginalized and often demonized in the West, one must listen to their stories.

Methods

Borrowing from the tenets of narrative inquiry I gathered the conversion stories of six women, aged 22 to 59 years, living in the Atlantic provinces of Canada, and Ontario. I contacted the women by circulating an advertisement via email to my local Islamic Association. This got a positive response: initially four women expressed interest in participating in my study. I then arranged to interview the women either through email, Skype/Skype chat, or G-chat depending on each woman's individual situation and preference. Beginning with Nancy, who responded to my advertisement

⁷¹ Karen Furlong. "A Narrative Inquiry into Nurses' Experiences of Learning: The Case of an Electronic Health Record." PhD diss., The University of New Brunswick, 2014.

And Karen Furlong, PhD defence, UNB Fredericton, May 7th, 2014. (Personal notes recorded during Furlong's dissertation defence).

⁷² Ibid, 2014, ii.

via email, I followed a "snowball" method⁷³ where one participant led me to another contact, and so on. Eventually, over a period of six months, my list of participants grew to include Rachel, Sally, Tina, Rebecca, and Chrystal.⁷⁴

The ideal method to capture each participant's story would have been through in-person interviews. However, women who have converted to Islam in Eastern Canada are hard to find. Based upon my literature review (Chapter 2), I decided upon a set of questions (see Appendix A), informed by the literature review, to be used in a series of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with my participants.

After the consent forms were returned, I then contacted each participant and arranged an interview at their convenience. Although I offered each participant a variety of interview formats, i.e., in-person, telephone, email, Skype/Skype chat, or G-chat, five women chose email, with only one interview being held over a messaging system. I felt that by allowing the participants to choose the means of interview I was better able to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Holding interviews either by email or the chat system seemed acceptable to each of the women and made it easier for them to communicate with me quite frequently, sometimes once or twice a day. The women were very open with their responses, and this method of communicating meant they did not feel pressured to answer my questions immediately. I noted, however, that

⁷³ Please see: Rowland Atkinson and John Flint. "Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies." *Social Research Update* 33, (2001): 1-4.
And: Sven Berg. *Encyclopedia of Statistical Sciences*. "Snowball Sampling - I." Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2006.

⁷⁴ These are pseudonyms. This research has been conducted under the aegis of the University of New Brunswick's Research Ethics Board (see further discussions below).

whereas Nancy, Rachel, Sally, Tina, and Chrystal chose to be interviewed through email, these interviews turned out to be far less detailed than the interview I conducted with Rebecca through an instant chat system. Although I was speaking to all of the participants through the Internet, the methods they chose to communicate with me and conduct the interviews, were not much different than using the regular postal system and letters. Only Rebecca used a chat system, answering individual questions separately over a period of a few days.

During the interviews, I encouraged each participant to elaborate upon her narrative of conversion to Islam. Our conversation began with me asking participants to describe their childhoods and family lives. I then moved onto their initial interest in Islam, and their reasons for converting to Islam. I also asked about the reaction of the people around them to their conversion such as family, friends and co-workers. At the end of the interview, I asked participants to fill out a brief questionnaire to provide demographic data such as: date of birth, former (if any) religious beliefs/upbringing, age at conversion, ethnic or national background, level of education, socio-economic level, etc.⁷⁵ This information was helpful in providing me with the necessary context by which to differentiate amongst my participants. After the initial interview, the majority of participants answered any last minute pending questions or clarifications I had about their responses at their leisure through emails or continuing through our chat system conversations.

⁷⁵ Please see: As of 2014, The Chatham House Rule listed on its website: *When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the **Chatham House Rule**, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.* Accessed July 1st, 2014. <http://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule#>.

Once the interviews had taken place and I had transcribed them, I then pieced together each convert's story into a narrative for myself to read over and review. This gave me the opportunity to remove any identifying information and to make sure each narrative adequately represented each woman's personal story of her conversion to Islam. If I needed any clarification to understand and to best represent each woman's story, they were very happy to help.

I then categorized and analyzed the narratives in the context of a number of scholarly discourses outlined in Chapter 1 and 2, including: the role of women in Islam, Islamophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices towards Islam and Muslims in North America; the process of conversion in general, and conversion to Islam in particular. The literature review (Chapter 2) also provided me with a preliminary list of influences and themes identified by other scholars as important in the conversion of Western women to Islam. The research typologies of Maslim and Bjorck, and Suleiman's Cambridge Project in particular, were most useful. I modified the existing typologies to fit my data, which I explain further in chapter 4. The questions Galonnier and de los Rios⁷⁶ and Carlin⁷⁷ raised regarding conversion were also helpful in my analysis of the interview transcripts. Some of the influences that I found were similar to those identified by other scholars. Some were unique. I identify the most salient influences in each woman's narrative, noting the similarities as well as the differences, in the next chapter.

⁷⁶ Galonnier and de los Rios, 61-63.

⁷⁷ Carlin, 292.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter provides insight into the process of each participant's conversion to Islam. It provides a glimpse of the women's lives before their conversion, and how they came to Islam: their trials, tribulations, concerns, and difficulties as well as their finding inner peace, personal fulfillment, and overall contentment and happiness. This chapter also highlights the recurring conversion themes that are evident through the women's stories. For me, this is one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of my research as it delves deeply into each participant's story in an attempt to understand her personal experiences of conversion. The chapter highlights the common conversion themes that are evident through the women's stories, as well as the differences among them. These six Canadian Muslim women and their conversion journeys to Islam are as follows.

Nancy

Nancy, in her late fifties, converted to Islam seven years ago. She is unmarried and does not have a Muslim partner. Nancy is fair-haired, blue-eyed, and of Canadian of Romanian and Lebanese descent, and lives in east-central Canada. Although she has only been a Muslim for seven years, Nancy feels as if she has been Muslim her entire life. She devotes much of her time working with a local mosque and staying connected with her son. A few years ago, and before converting to Islam, Nancy had a difficult journey with breast cancer which encouraged her to explore her faith, and other religions. She studied widely and, quickly found herself immersed in learning anything and everything about Islam. The conversion themes that appeared most prominently in Nancy's narrative were: dissatisfaction with her former faith of Catholicism, increasing

her sense of identity through her decision to wear the *hijab*, and gaining a sense of belonging within the Muslim community.

Nancy grew up in Ontario with her parents and three sisters. Although her parents did not attend university, they strongly encouraged all of their daughters to obtain an education:

There was a great emphasis on doing well and achieving scholastically in my home. While my parents did not go to university, all four of us daughters attended various universities, and my eldest sister has her PhD. Religion and morality were very important in my home. We were also encouraged to work at part-time jobs and make our way through life.⁷⁸

Nancy's parents were Roman Catholic and raised their daughters in the same faith. Nancy remembers attending Mass every Sunday, attending confession often, as well as reciting the Rosary⁷⁹ as a family during Lent. When she was a child, Nancy was a "devout Catholic" and loved the ceremony and symbolism of the Mass:

We attended Mass every Sunday, went to confession frequently and said the Rosary as a family during Lent. I was a very devout Catholic when I was a little girl, and I loved the ceremony and symbolism of the Mass. I used to pray the prayers of the Mass at home by myself in my bedroom. When I became a teenager, I began to feel adrift from the Catholic Church because of certain doctrines that I could not accept.⁸⁰

Although Nancy considered "Jesus Christ to be a great man and wonderful teacher," she could not fully accept the Catholic doctrine that stated he was the incarnated Son of God, nor could she accept the Catholic concept of the Holy Trinity.⁸¹ Nancy then began having doubts about her Christian teachings altogether and was in search of something

⁷⁸ Nancy - Interview - May 8th, 2015, 1.

⁷⁹ Rosary - a form of devotion performed within the Roman Catholic Church.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 1.

⁸¹ Ibid, 1-2.

that made better sense to her. Nancy discovered Islam during her thirties and forties, when she began looking into other religions including Buddhism and Judaism, but it was Islam that seemed to call to her "right from the very beginning."⁸²

At age 50, Nancy developed breast cancer, which began a series of changes in her life, not only physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. She felt that this was the time to get her affairs in order, and she began attending counselling therapy sessions on a regular basis. Nancy's therapist at the time noted that she saw her as a "spiritual person, but someone who had not yet found her spiritual home."⁸³ A few months later, Nancy happened to be walking by a city mosque, and her curiosity drew her into the building:

I felt an almost overwhelming desire to personally connect with that faith, to learn more about it. I believe that I was called by Allah to be on His straight path. To me at the time, Islam was very mysterious and foreign and I knew nothing about it. And so, at the age of 52, I telephoned the mosque and was put in touch with a wonderful Sister who met me at the mosque and provided me with a number of books that I could read to learn about Islam. Later, she gave me about fifteen books from her own personal collection to read, and I read them with great interest and passion. But the most profound book that I read was the Qur'an.⁸⁴

While Nancy continued reading the books she received from her new friend she also began attending weekly *halaqas*, or learning circles, with other women from the local mosque community. For Nancy, the weekly learning circles with the other Muslim sisters in attendance were informative; but the sisters were not the primary reason she chose to convert. She explains how her conversion happened:

I was gently influenced by the kind, generous, loving, caring and deeply spiritual women with whom I interacted on a weekly basis at

⁸² Ibid, 2.

⁸³ Ibid, 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 2.

the halaqas at the local mosque. But in no way did they intend or attempt to influence my decision to become a Muslim. That came from my own soul, and deep in my heart. I fully embraced Islam with all of my being and went lovingly forward into the faith with my eyes wide open.⁸⁵

Nancy's conversion was an emotional and exciting experience that she will always remember. Her conversion took place on February 1, 2009 at the home of two dear, married friends:

There was a ceremony, in which a Sister asked me Islamic questions and I responded. I was surrounded by friends and family members, including my son. As I said the words of the Shahada,⁸⁶ I was really moved by the importance of the occasion on my entire life. It was a very emotional and beautiful moment and afterwards, I went around and hugged all of the ladies in attendance. There were many tears and greetings of welcome to the faith. Then we had a beautiful buffet dinner, which was so kind of my friends to provide. There was no "controversy" around my taking the Shahada, although my mother and some of my four sisters had reservations. However, they were not present at the ceremony. I chose just to invite my son, of my immediate family, as he and I are closest to each other, and he was accepting of my decision.⁸⁷

Many of Nancy's close friends and family members were behind her decision as they saw a positive change in Nancy and her lifestyle:

My best friends were quietly supportive, though they registered some concerns. My closest friend in the world, who is like a brother to me, does not agree at all with many of Islam's main tenants, but he is supportive of my following the faith, as he sees the significant, positive changes in me. My mother, who remains devoutly Catholic, has attended many Islamic events both at the mosque and in the community with me, and I am very proud of her for being respectful of her daughter's life decisions. My sisters are quiet, on the whole, about my faith. The person for whom it has been hardest is my son who, when I reverted to Islam, was only fourteen. He was taunted and mocked by other teenagers who made fun of him for

⁸⁵ Ibid, 2.

⁸⁶ *shahada* - the verbal Islamic declaration of the belief in the absolute unity of God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 4.

having a hijab-wearing Muslim revert mother. But he never, ever asked me to reconsider my decision. I am very proud of him.⁸⁸

Nancy committed to wearing the Islamic headscarf less than a year after she converted to Islam. She was 52 years old at the time of her conversion, seven years ago, and wanted to express her newfound identity. She held off becoming a *muhajiba*, a *hijab*-wearing *muslimah*, because she wanted her family to be comfortable seeing her wearing a headscarf.⁸⁹ Initially she needed patience in getting used to wearing the *hijab*. She has now worn the scarf for many years and is comfortable wearing it all the time.

Nancy calls the *hijab* her "cloth of honour":

As a servant of Allah, I believe that I am following His wishes to dress and behave modestly, and cover my head and shoulders with a veil, as stated in the Holy Qur'an. Secondly, I am proud to be identified as a Muslim woman, which occurs when I wear the *hijab*. I am very proud of and happy about my faith!⁹⁰

For Nancy, although she feels the public has generally accepted her as a Caucasian, *hijab*-wearing, Muslim woman, she has faced her fair share of discrimination. For example, being spat upon in public and being told by a cab driver to "not drop bombs" on the city. Nancy tries to conduct herself in a humble, graceful way and accepts that not everyone will be fully accepting of her choice to convert to a religion that continues to be portrayed in a negative way.

Nancy's biggest challenge is having to constantly battle social stereotypes and Islamophobia. She is concerned how the media blames Islam for "unrest and terrorism:"

Firstly, because this is an age of Islamic unrest and terrorism in some parts of the world, I have found that most Muslims have been painted

⁸⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁸⁹ *hijab* - a headscarf worn by some Muslim women to cover the hair and neck. The Arabic term for a Muslim woman is *muslimah*, the term for a woman who wears *hijab* is *muhajiba*.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 7.

with a broad stroke and there are widespread attempts to generalize Muslims. You cannot generalize 1.6 billion people, especially with incorrect and misleading stereotypes. I have been touched in a real sense by Islamophobia, and it is disturbing. From a second perspective, I have found it hard to accept the actions of some individuals who say that they are following Islam, but are, in fact, violating the very essence of my religion, which is a faith based on justice, truth and peace. I am constantly reminded of words that were spoken to me when I reverted: "Allah and Islam are perfect, Muslims are not." For this reason, I denounce un-Islamic actions like "honour" killings, which have no basis in Islam.⁹¹

Nancy continues to be very active with her local mosque and presently holds an administrative position with a Muslim women's organisation. She feels that in her younger days, Islam not only gave her the answers to questions she was wondering about but also gave her a new way of living and she found an inner peace within herself: "In Islam, I have found the answers to profound questions that constantly perplexed me in my younger days. I have found a way of living. I have found peace. I have found blissful joy. I have found my reality."⁹²

Discussion

When exploring Nancy's narrative, four conversion themes, stand out. First, similar to Maslim and Bjorck's findings, Nancy was dissatisfaction with her former Catholic upbringing and even though she enjoyed certain activities held within the Catholic faith (such as her love for the Catholic Mass ceremony and its symbolism), she felt she could not accept the Catholic doctrine that stated Jesus was the incarnated Son of God, nor the concept of the Holy Trinity. And, after Nancy's conversion, she began wearing the Islamic headscarf, the *hijab*, which was a clear symbol of her new identity,

⁹¹ Ibid, 6.

⁹² Ibid.

and her "cloth of honour."⁹³

A third theme from my study has to do with the sense of companionship with other women that conversion to Islam provided. While attending her regular therapy sessions, Nancy recalls how she felt spiritually lost and was looking for a "religious home;" she found this through weekly learning circles held at her local mosque where she enjoyed the hospitality and friendliness of the other Muslim women. Socially, she began to feel a sense of belonging amongst this group of women.

A fourth theme has to do with education. Once Nancy began reading more about Islam, she became more interested in the religion as a whole. Even though she was aware of negative portrayals and Islamophobia in the media, this did not deter Nancy away from Islam. Instead her knowledge strengthened her desire to fully embrace Islam.

Rachel

Rachel has been a Muslim for 15 years and has been married to her husband, a Muslim-born Canadian of Lebanese background for twelve years. They have two daughters together. Rachel comes from a Catholic family who have all converted to Islam, including her mother, sister, and brother:

My family was primarily my single mother and my three siblings. We were raised Catholic, but it wasn't pushed by my mother, it was primarily my older sister who took us to church weekly.⁹⁴

Rachel experienced dissatisfaction with her former faith and she had also explored the Baptist faith in her teenage years:

I was searching for about a year and a half, knowing that the Baptist faith I'd

⁹³ Ibid, 7.

⁹⁴ Rachel - Interview - February 8th, 2015 - 1.

been following in my teens wasn't answering many of my questions, but never doubting that God was real and had a plan in my life. I began looking at all religions with the thought that they were all valid, and we all had the same end purpose - but which path would I take to get there?⁹⁵

Rachel had never doubted the concept of "God" and always felt that there was a plan for her, yet she simply did not know how to get there, or which religion offered the best chance of taking her there.

Rachel's decision to convert to Islam at the age of 21, was influenced by her immediate family who expressed an appreciation and acceptance with Islamic values, beliefs, and practices; her friends and co-workers, however, were not as supportive:

My mother was absolutely fine about it, and ended up converting herself about 3 years after I did. Friends and work were difficult. It was a transition and I found that I changed my entire life, including the friends I had. Starting from scratch in every way was actually liberating, not scary at all. I was able to learn about Islam without the influence of other Muslims and their own ideas about what I should do or think. I wasn't influenced by culture which I am so grateful for now.⁹⁶

Rachel found two books particularly helpful in her conversion: *The Sealed Nectar*, by Safiur Rahman Mubarakpuri,⁹⁷ and the *Makkan Crucible* by Zakaria Bashier.⁹⁸ Mubarakpuri, is a notable Indian writer, who has written many books in Arabic and Urdu, and most of his books have been translated into English. His book *The Sealed Nectar*, is a biography on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, how he

⁹⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁹⁷ Mubarakpuri, Safiur Rahman. *The Sealed Nectar*. Dar-us-Salam Publications, 2002.

⁹⁸ Bashier, Zakaria. *Makkan Crucible*. United Kingdom: Islamic Foundation, 1991.

reached the position of being the most-known and highly respected prophet in Islam still today. The book also provides insight into the life of the Middle East during this time period, starting from the history of the Arabs, and touches on the social, economic, and political historical standpoints as well.

Bashier's *Makkan Crucible*, had the most influence on Rachel because of its focus on the story of the prophet's wife, Khadija. Translated into English, the *Makkan Crucible* uses Arabic sources to provide insight into the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Bashier was born in Sudan, and is currently a professor at University of Al-Ain in the United Arab Emirates. He has published other books on Islam and many academic works and articles which focus on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and cultural distinctions between East and West from historical to modern viewpoints.

Rachel explains the impact *The Sealed Nectar* and *Makkan Crucible* had on her:

I was struck by the social justice aspect of Islam first. Also, by the story of Khadija in *Makkan Crucible*, and how she, an older, wealthier woman, had such faith in her creator and in her husband that she never once had a doubt that he was a prophet, even when he did himself. That level of faith wowed me immensely.⁹⁹

Rachel was impressed by the level of faith she felt Khadija had for her husband and the faith they both had in Islam. She noted how sincere Khadija was in believing in her husband to be an influential prophet. For Rachel, this deep level of commitment and connection with Islam affected her deeply. To feel this type of deep respect towards one's faith was one of the main things Rachel had been searching for in her life.

⁹⁹ Rachel, 3.

Khadija's story changed Rachel's life.

Rachel's decision to convert was in part influenced by her search for an identity.

Three years after converting to Islam and after some hesitation, Rachel began to wear the *hijab*, which she found to be quite liberating. She did however find this a difficult choice:

For me, it was a long choice. I don't wear nijab and feel quite strongly about not wearing that, but for hijab, I find it liberating. For me, it's an expression of my feminism and also being a Muslim.¹⁰⁰

For Rachel, wearing the *hijab* is now an important marker of her identity. Dressed elegantly from head to toe, with *hijabs* matching her outfits and shoes, and with her olive complexion, Rachel could come from anywhere in the Muslim world. She is very active in her local Muslim community, and is passionate about helping others in need. She currently holds an administrative position with a local women's shelter assisting women who are experiencing poverty, homelessness, or violence. She is also a strong advocate of the Muslims for White Ribbon Campaign,¹⁰¹ which promotes lectures, sermons, events, and other means of public awareness advocating the importance of reporting domestic violence cases against women. The Campaign which started in Toronto, 2011 was sparked by the Muslim community's reaction to the Shafia case, where three sisters and their father's first wife were murdered in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, by their own family members.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 3.

niqab - a veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes.

¹⁰¹ Muslims for White Ribbon Campaign, <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/americas/460943-canada-muslims-in-white-ribbon-campaign.html> - <http://muslimsforwhiteribbon.com/>

¹⁰² Kingston, Ontario, Shafia Family Case, CBC - <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/the-shafia-trial-at-a-glance-1.1194933>

Please see: Muslims for White Ribbon Campaign, <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/americas/460943-canada-muslims-in-white-ribbon-campaign.html> - <http://muslimsforwhiteribbon.com/>

Lastly, Rachel feels that her path to Islam has allowed her to find her inner peace: "I liken it to falling in love, you don't know how it happened but you know it's the right thing for you."¹⁰³ Even though she felt like she did not know where she was going or being lead, in the end, conversion simply felt right.

Discussion

Unfortunately, because of her busy life, Rachel provided me with the least amount of interview material of any of the women. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some of the influences behind her conversion. Perhaps the most influential factor was a familial bond. Rachel became comfortable and familiar with Islam because her sister had already converted, and her mother converted later. Dissatisfaction with her former faith along with education though, in Rachel's case, reading the traditional stories of the life of the Prophet and his wife were important influences in her conversion. In Islam, Rachel found the full expression of her identity as a Muslim, as a wife, and as a mother, and as an active member of the Muslim community.

Sally

Sally was a Baptist from a small-town in the Atlantic provinces who came to Islam while working as a teacher at a military base. At the same time, she had been working with Bosnian refugees and eventually married one of her Muslim students. With encouragement from her husband, Sally began exploring Islam and finding answers to questions she had from early childhood. Ironically, Sally's original intention

¹⁰³ Rachel, 3.

was to convert her husband to Christianity. For Sally, the influence of family, specifically her choice of a Muslim marriage partner, was an important factor in her conversion. Sally's other reasons for converting to Islam derived from her dissatisfaction with her Baptist faith, and her strong appreciation and acceptance of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices.

When she was a child, Sally's father was the main income provider for the family and her mother worked at home taking care of Sally and her siblings:

I am the youngest child of three; my father worked and my mother stayed home. My siblings were far older than me and I never actually lived in the same house as they did, as they had each moved out of the family home by the time I was born. My sister is 20 years older than me and my brother, who was killed at 25 years of age, was 18 years older than me. Although, technically, I was the youngest child, I could also be described as an only child.¹⁰⁴

Sally was brought up with what she called a “very religious Baptist” faith. She enjoyed church life and was actively involved through Sunday school, youth programs, and picnics. Sally considered herself a curious child who tended to have numerous questions. Yet, when asking questions in church, Sally's questions were not taken seriously or she was given no valid answers:

I grew up in a very religious family - both parents were involved in the church and denominationally, the family would have been described as ‘Baptist.’ I enjoyed a very full life within the church; Sunday school, youth programs, picnics, family and friends – it was a large social structure that functioned well in many ways. I have a very inquisitive and curious nature and had numerous questions as a young person; however, the leadership in the church either laughed my questions off or truly had no satisfactory answer. I always questioned aspects of Christianity, ideologies and theories – some may have thought I was being facetious or disrespectful, but that was never the intention. I could never find a Christian who was knowledgeable and prepared despite the

¹⁰⁴ Sally - Interview - February 8th, 2015, 1.

fact that there is a globally known Bible college in my hometown.¹⁰⁵

Sally questioned different aspects of Christianity, its doctrines and history. She saw how some people might have taken her questions as disrespectful, but this was not her intention. It was this dissatisfaction with her former Christian faith that led Sally to question her beliefs and eventually seek answers elsewhere.

Sally first discovered Islam while working at the military base camp in the late 1990s where she taught English as a "second language" for the summer. The base housed a large number of Bosnian refugees who were intending to settle in rural areas throughout the Maritimes. Sally describes how at the base there was a make-shift mosque, a large-tented structure. Every time the "call to prayer"¹⁰⁶ was heard, Sally never really knew what to do. She felt that to be "respectful to the call to prayer was to simply stand still, stop speaking and just listen."¹⁰⁷ Sally was curious about the Islamic faith, yet she still had no idea what Muslims believed or "why they did what they did."¹⁰⁸ As Sally continued to learn more about her students, she began to read about Islam.

In 2000, Sally married a Bosnian refugee from one of her English classes. Her new husband encouraged her to learn, ask questions, and to find her own answers. Initially, she began to study and read more about Islam in hopes of converting her husband to Christianity, hoping to convince him that Christianity was the right path:

I ended up marrying one of the (Bosnian) refugees in 2000 and he always pushed me to learn, to ask questions, to demand answers – no one had EVER encouraged me like this and I was so surprised and thankful. Initially, I started to study and read about Islam in the hopes of converting my husband to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Call to Prayer - the Muslim call for prayer, being called from a Mosque in Arabic five times a day.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 2.

Christianity. I would read, study, listen to lectures and stories in secret, hoping to be able to convince him that Christianity was the right path...but I was still never able to put to rest all of those questions I had as a child. Eventually, I was no longer able to deny what I knew to be the truth – Islam was what I had always believed, from the time I was young, and now I finally knew what it was called! It was a feeling of being welcomed home – it was like everything in the world finally made complete and utter sense! All of those questions I had my entire life had finally been answered – I'd just been looking in all the wrong places the entire time.¹⁰⁹

At age 27, and five years married, Sally felt that converting meant changing her entire way of life. Being aware of this, Sally prepared herself for difficult times ahead:

Everything I read and listened to affected my decision – to change my entire way of living was a very big undertaking. I knew there would be struggles, trials, tests, comments and issues, but I believe that my Creator (SwT)¹¹⁰ guided me and through such a beautiful way of guidance, how could I turn my back on what I knew to be true? I'd looked my entire life and found it – I had no choice but to accept that beautiful invitation.¹¹¹

Sally said family and friends were not surprised when she told them about her conversion to Islam. She had always talked a lot about religion and politics, anyway. Sally was never one to make decisions lightly so she tended to "over-prepare" for whatever she was asked:

I don't think many were surprised – I talked a lot about religion and politics, so the door was open. I never make decisions lightly and although there were difficult conversations had, I was prepared. I had studied – I did not make this decision lightly. There were some hurtful comments, but I do not hold grudges and have been able to move past such things. Not all people can be held to the same standard of comprehension as another and it is the job of a Muslim to be patient,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹¹⁰ When writing the name of God (Allah), Muslims often follow it with the abbreviation "SWT." These letters stand for the Arabic words "*Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala*," or "Glory to Him, the Exalted." Muslims use these or similar words to glorify God when mentioning His name.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 3.

kind and understanding.¹¹²

Together, Sally and her husband have three children: one daughter and two sons. The closest mosque for them is located in a major city. When they lived in the city, Sally's husband was very much involved with the Muslim community, while Sally remained aloof because she was not yet a Muslim. Later, Sally and her family moved back to her rural community to be closer to her parents; Sally and her husband are the only Muslims in town. Although Sally has decided to not wear the Islamic headscarf or "*hijab*," she does consider herself to dress quite modestly:

Unfortunately, I do not wear the "hijab" in the most commonly understood form. However, hijab is more than a piece of cloth covering the hair – it is a thought process, a manner in which you carry yourself, your thoughts, your language and the manner in which you wear your clothes as well. I cover my body with modesty, ensuring arms, legs, chest, etc are always covered – I often wear a long scarf around my neck, as well. I also take care of how I speak to people, how I address others and ensure that my clothes are not tight or see-through. I would love to be in a place where I could wear the head covering, but I have fear of backlash and that is a weakness in me.¹¹³

Sally's fear of Islamophobia prevents her from wearing the headscarf while living in her small community, but this is something that she considers as a weakness within herself.

For Sally, one of the biggest challenges and the hardest to overcome is the media's portrayal of Islam and the resulting Islamophobia. Her children also have a hard time with this topic and it is addressed quite frequently in Sally's household. As parents, Sally and her husband feel that it is important for their children to know how to handle anti-Muslim rhetoric in a respectful way. As well, it is important for them to discuss their faith openly as a family and for their children to know important aspects of their Islamic faith:

¹¹² Ibid, 3.

¹¹³ Ibid, 3-4.

My children are greatly affected by people's misinterpretation of Islam in the media and we talk about it in our house all of the time – how to be patient with people, how to answer questions, how to deal with confrontation and accusations. It is also a challenge to ensure that our children will retain knowledge and history about their faith, why things are done the way they are, why we don't eat certain things, why we pray, why we give charity... EVERYTHING in our house is open for discussion - respectful discussion. It is not good enough for us to tell our children to follow the faith – they must understand and make their decision on this. I would be devastated if they could not see the beauty and truth in Islam.¹¹⁴

Sally's choice to become a Muslim has been difficult for her parents, especially around Christian celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter, since they tend to be the most family oriented holidays with her extended family, but it has not affected her respect and love for them:

There are obvious parts of life which are hard for my parents to understand, but they are very kind and they love us – we treat them with dignity and respect and we explain why we don't do certain things any longer. We don't celebrate the same holidays, but that doesn't mean we don't love them or that we don't love Jesus (peace be upon him) – I love my parents, all of the prophets, nature, life, and mankind FAR greater as a Muslim than I ever did as a Christian. Islam has taught me how to be a true human being, how to be a child to my parents, how to be a wife to my husband, how to be a mother to my children, how to be an honest, giving, effective and efficient member of society – it has demanded that I better myself and treat others better – how could anyone object to that?¹¹⁵

Overall, Sally's decision to convert to Islam was inspired by her husband and fueled by her research, especially through her reading of the Qur'an, and watching various YouTube videos.¹¹⁶ Sally was always looking for answers and for "proof," and Islam provided this:

There was not a stone left unturned, not a single question that could not be answered. There was dignity, truth, liberation – it was staring me in the face and how could you deny what you know to be true? Emotion is not enough – you

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 4.

¹¹⁶ Influential Speaker - Nouman Ali Khan (<https://www.youtube.com/user/BayyinahInstitute>).

need proof, answers – I had it all, I had found what I had been looking for all my life. I had no choice but to accept – how could I not? I had searched my whole life and been guided. I had to accept that gift, despite the fact it was wrapped differently than I had anticipated.¹¹⁷

Sally had searched her whole life and had finally found the answers she was looking for in Islam.

Discussion

Sally's future husband introduced her to Islam, and Islamic values were a key influence in her conversion. With the support of her husband, Sally found Islam to be a way of life that matches her value system better than the faith she grew up with. Islamic values were mentioned as a key influence by most of the women I interviewed. While identifying as a Muslim in a rural community in the Maritimes, is extremely important to Sally and her family, it is also very challenging. Since she resides in a close-knit Christian community, she tries not to draw too much attention to herself and her family for fear of negative backlash, and she does not wear the *hijab*. Regardless, Sally is proud of her Muslim identity and does not shy away from acknowledging that she is a Muslim living in a rural town in Atlantic Canada. Sally has slowly and happily adapted to living her life as a Muslim.

Tina

Tina's introduction to Islam began out of the blue in 2001, when she met Ahmed (not his real name), her future husband, in an online chat room. At the time, Tina had a young daughter from a previous relationship. Tina enjoyed chatting with Ahmed and

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

knew he was Moroccan and Muslim, but he never spoke about his religion. Tina was interested, and wanted to know more but she didn't ask Ahmed about it. Instead, she began researching Islam for herself. Although her choice of a marriage partner introduced Tina to Islam, she wanted the path to be her own. Tina, now 46, came from a nominally Christian family who had difficulty with her decisions to become a Muslim, and to marry one, but after 13 years they have eventually come to accept her life choices. Tina takes a very active role in her Muslim community, and her expression of Islamic identity is very important to her. Aside from her marriage to a Muslim man, and her strong sense of Islamic identity, the influence that presents itself most clearly in the narrative of Tina's conversion is the value she places upon Islamic beliefs and practices.

Tina's mother is from Canada, and her family lived mainly in Alberta and Saskatchewan. A large part of Tina's childhood was spent in the interior of British Columbia, where she was able to spend time with her grandparents on her mother's side (they had moved to BC from Alberta). Later, her family moved to another area in BC where they stayed for a number of years until the town shut down due to lack of employment and job opportunities. When Tina's father died there from a tragic accident, Tina's mother suddenly became a single parent who had to work long hours to pay for necessities. This proved to be a difficult time for Tina and her younger brother since a lot of their mother's time was spent working outside the home. Money had been quite tight after Tina's father passed away and when Tina was 18, she left home and moved to Banff, Alberta, where she worked as a hotel maid, and a year later she went to school to study as a baker/pastry chef.

As a child, Tina played outdoors with her friends, going to the local park,

swimming, and going to the cinema. She recalls the financial issues her family faced, and her difficult teenage years, but otherwise her childhood was nothing out of the ordinary to her:

I had a good childhood from what I remember, playing a lot outdoors making tree forts and exploring and going to the park, swimming, cinemas and I had lots of friends. My mother struggled a little when we were young after my father died, being a single parent working many hours to make ends meet. Sometimes we would go to work with her on weekends to spend more time with her. When my mother met my stepfather, things were a lot easier for her with the added financial help and someone to help take care of me and my brother. My brother is 2 ½ yrs younger than me. When I was a teenager in Fort Nelson, I was a bit of a wild child so to speak, off doing my own thing with friends and going to parties involving alcohol. Overall we were a happy family with no real big issues.¹¹⁸

The only religious influence that Tina can recall was from her mother's Christian background:

My mother grew up with Christianity. The branch of her faith has no name, I can say that it is very strict in many ways and at one point my mother rebelled from it and didn't want anything to do with the religion any more. It was a religion that you would go to people's homes and share discussions about the bible and sing hymns about Jesus and God. They always said a prayer before eating, they wore conservative clothing, often rarely wearing pants unless going fishing or something. They did not celebrate Christmas or Easter as other religions did in Christianity. I am not really sure why, I am sure I asked at one point but I have forgotten. My grandmother mostly influenced me with this religion, as my mother did not practice any religion in our home, but she did not object that my grandmother instill Christian values, etc with us. We only went in a church if it was someone's funeral or wedding basically. I was brought up to believe in God and Jesus as the son of God, but not much more than that really that I remember. I would say that overall I had Christian values instilled in me in a general sense.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Tina - Interview - March 11th, 2015, 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 1-2.

Tina was in her late twenties when she met Ahmed in an online chat room. She liked Ahmed because he was the first person who had not asked what Tina termed "vulgar questions." A Moroccan, he did not say very much about his religion, only that he was a Muslim. Tina and her future husband started to communicate, often online, and she started liking him more and more. She thought that since she liked him so much she should research a bit more about his beliefs to get to know him better. She began researching about Islam since she did not know very much about the Islamic faith, beliefs, and practices.

Tina began talking with several people online about Islam, some converts and some born to Islam. She also kept her eyes open for articles about Islam. She kept her online Islamic research from her future husband even though they continued to become closer. She says she was most influenced by the Qur'an, as well as the *hadith*.¹²⁰ She also frequented the website Islam.com for help in furthering her research. Tina discusses how the more she read or talked with people about Islam, the more it started "making sense"¹²¹ to her:

The more I read and talked to people, the more it started to "make sense" more than any other concept of God and how we should live our life in this earth I ever had before. I started to feel a longing to be a part of it and practice it, believing that it was the "right" thing to do for my spiritual health. I felt like for the first time ever that everything made sense, even the things I did not particularly 'like' also made sense if I looked at it logically. I started to feel like I was more accountable for my actions in this world and that if I did not change many of my ways I may not get the chance to go to heaven after I died. I feared that, as I still do today. The thought of going to hell scares the heck out of

¹²⁰ *hadith* - a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that, with accounts of his daily practice (the *sunnah*), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Qur'an.

(*sunnah* - is the verbally transmitted sayings of the Prophet Muhammad).

¹²¹ Ibid, 3.

me!¹²²

A few months later and after much reading, researching, and discussions, Tina felt she was ready to say the *shahada*, the Islamic affirmation of the belief in one God and that Muhammad is the last messenger of God:

One day I decided that was it and I said the Shahada, affirmation of belief in one God and that Muhammad was the last messenger of God. I was alone in my bedroom at the time. I had a 4 yr old daughter from a brief relationship at that time as well. I kept this to myself mostly, because I did not know how my family would feel. A month later September 11, 2001 happened... Such a terrible day and it was the first time I started to watch the news on television. I knew it would be even harder to tell my family that I converted to Islam, so I kept it to myself. I can't remember when I told my husband, I think I told him shortly after I converted before the Sept 11/2001 event. I remember him saying that I did not "have" to convert to Islam because of him. He thought because I liked him that maybe I was doing it thinking I had to please him. But in fact he did not know that I had been researching it and had already begun to believe in the religion way before my conversion due to influence of what I read and answers to my questions, not because I liked him. After all, he did not tell me anything about Islam.¹²³

It is important to note, how Tina underscores her conversion to Islam was not her husband's idea but her own. Nevertheless, it was her initial friendship with a Muslim man (Ahmed) that influenced her decision to learn more about Islam.

After the world-changing events of September 11, Tina decided to tell a few members of her immediate family of her desire to convert. The only understanding Tina's family had of Muslims was from the constantly stigmatized portrayals featured on Fox News or CNN. There was nothing they saw that portrayed Muslims or Islam in a positive light, and they wondered why Tina would ever want to be a Muslim:

¹²² Ibid, 3.

¹²³ Ibid, 4.

Starting with family: My parents were very upset, my grandmother was very upset. My grandmother thought I was going to go to hell. My mother thought the same and thought I was involved in a cult and maybe she needed to take me away and "unbrainwash" me. She felt like it was a slap in the face of the values she thought she brought me up to have. How could I possibly want to be a Muslim? It was something that she could not understand even a little. All she knew of Islam was what was being said about Muslims on CNN and Fox News after the events in Sept. 11/2001. When I started to cover and wear a hijab she practically lost her mind on me. They would not even be seen in public with me for a few weeks, even cancelling a previous engagement we had to go to the restaurant together. If I were to wear 'that thing' on my head, she told me I was not welcome. So I did not go.¹²⁴

As time passed, Tina's mother eventually calmed down, but she avoided discussing anything to do with religion. Her grandmother was more accepting, but whenever the opportunity presented its self, she would try to talk Tina out of her decision. Tina's younger brother stated that as long as she was happy then he was too. However, once she converted she found that many of her former friendships changed:

I lost many friends after I converted, some distancing themselves from me especially after I started to wear hijab. The ones I least expected to support me actually did stay friends with me. That was strange but nice at the same time. I was the only person for a few years in the city I was living in at the time that was Muslim and wore hijab. Around the same time, there were only about 120 Muslims living there, some Arab, some Pakistani, but none covered their heads unless it was for prayer. I actually at first thought I was the only Muslim in the city! I started wearing hijab about a year after I converted. So my first year in university I did not cover, so when I went there I did not know other Muslims. There was no mosque there in the city at the time. Now there is and a much larger Muslim community. I am still friends with many who live there.¹²⁵

A year after she converted Tina and Ahmed decided to marry, secretly:

I ended up falling in love and going to Morocco to meet him in person and then eloping and not telling my family I got married for 3 yrs. My

¹²⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 5.

mom at the time made me feel like I would have been disowned as her daughter had I married in Morocco, so I just told her I got engaged.¹²⁶

However, the truth came out when Tina went to the newspapers with her story of the difficulties her husband was experiencing in trying to get through Canadian immigration. She did not want her mother or any other family members reading about her marriage in the local newspaper, so she decided to tell her mother rather than having her find out later.

Tina and Ahmed had originally planned to make it to Canada and then get married. To help avoid any hurt feelings of her mother or family members not being part of their wedding, they were going to pretend it was the first time getting married. However, this did not work out as planned. Tina's mother was very upset when she finally did tell her the truth, and did not even speak to Tina for roughly three weeks. Fortunately, now 13 years later, everyone is civil with her husband, and her family seems to even like him.

As mentioned earlier, Tina has a daughter from a past relationship. Her husband has chosen to raise her as his own. In the past, the only difficulty Tina faced in raising her child as a Muslim was dealing with family Christian celebrations and holidays, such as Christmas and Easter:

She does not know her biological father, as he did not want to be in her life. My husband has been in her life since she was 4 ½ yrs old. At first, through online only and when she was 10 yrs old he got to become a real dad in person with her. She thinks of him as her dad and the only dad she has ever really known. She does know that he is not her biological dad though. She loves my husband a lot and is actually currently in Canada living with him while I am working here in another country. I did raise her as a Muslim as I said because we tend to raise our children with the values and beliefs that we have ourselves do we not? It was hard only when it came to Christmas, Halloween, and Easter really. My

¹²⁶ Ibid, 5.

family wanted her to participate in those celebrations and I did not as I felt that they were not part of our life anymore due to the conflict between Islam and those holiday celebrations. I have learned that sometimes it is better to just have a little compromise for the 'peace' in the family when it comes to Christmas, etc. but my family for the most part respects my decisions. My daughter is free to make her own decisions, and I have given her that opportunity since she was mature enough to make that decision. She has chosen to remain as a Muslim.¹²⁷

Tina often felt caught in the middle when her Christian family wanted her Muslim daughter to participate in their celebrations. Tina found it easier to compromise to maintain the "peace" within the family around these holidays, but today most of her family members respect her decision to not participate in the celebrations.

As a convert, Tina's Islamic identity was, and is very important to her. After Tina left Ahmed in Morocco she returned home to take an active role in her local Muslim community. In addition to wearing *hijab*, Tina's activism helped her to become publically known as a Muslim:

I was also the president and vice president at different times of the university's Muslim student association. I started it up after I started to wear hijab because I wanted to share Islam with other students and show them that it was not a terroristic religion. I wanted to show them what I saw in it. I even spoke in comparative religion classes a few times as a guest speaker. I had booths giving out Islamic information and Qur'ans to anyone that wanted to learn about Islam for themselves. It was very successful and many students thanked me for helping them see what Muslims really believed in instead of just what they saw on television.¹²⁸

Tina considers herself to be quite well informed in regards to the common branches of Islam, such as Sunni, Shi'a and Salafi and she has a wide variety of friends from each sect. Although she follows the "Sunni" path more, she refuses to identify with any "particular sect," to "me I am just a Muslim." She also notes differences among Muslims:

¹²⁷ Ibid, 6-7.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 5.

There are good Muslims and not so good Muslims. There are those that are more strict than others, there are those that believe in different things than others for reasons of their own or because their parents brought them up to just believe that way. I have my beliefs instilled around what I read in the Qur'an mostly, and I will follow the hadeeths that are authentically accepted by the majority of Muslims. But in the end, I will always question anything that goes against the Qur'an or what I think does not make sense and make decisions from there. Some things I know are wrong and I still might choose to do and I know that this is part of the struggle every human being on earth has. Only difference is that I do not have any violent tendencies. I don't like violence, war or anything that will hurt someone's feelings and will avoid as much as possible. I am a pretty peaceful and happy person overall and try to surround myself with people of the same thoughts.¹²⁹

Some of the biggest challenges for Tina in trying to maintain her Muslim identity and Islamic faith have to do with being stigmatized because of public perceptions of Islam:

Dealing with the general public and my family's hatred for Islam due to some fanatic extremists who twist the teachings of Islam to suit their own agendas and murder in the name of Islam and make so many ignorant people think that this is what the religion is really about. Trying to live a life like anyone else on this planet doing day to day things but having that hanging over your head all the time is tiring often. What do I do about it? Well, if given the chance I try to inform of the truth behind false information. I try to live my life knowing I am a "visible" representation of Islam and hope that I may help people to see that Muslims are not evil.¹³⁰

Tina continues to try and live her life as a "visible" representation of Islam (including wearing the *hijab*) and hopes that she helps more people see that Muslims are not evil, or terrorists. However, wearing the *hijab* and living "visibly" a Muslim makes it harder for Tina to find employment and to make new friends. The rise of Islamophobia in the West, especially following current events such as 9/11 and so called Islamic State, have

¹²⁹ Ibid, 5.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 7.

made Tina's life more difficult.

Another challenging aspect for Tina has been the difficulty of converting to Islam at an older age. She notes that certain cultural values, norms, and beliefs are ingrained "within" us as children, making it more difficult to pursue or actually convert to another religion later in life:

I think that being a person that converted to Islam after living 30 yrs as a non Muslim has difficulty in this area sometimes. Especially since my life before being a Muslim was pretty much opposite in a lot of ways.¹³¹

Overall, Tina simply tries to do everything to the best of her abilities and continues to strive to be better as a Muslim. One of her main aims is to please God before trying to please anyone else, including herself. She is also afraid of going to "hell." She further notes the power of believing, as stated in the Qur'an, that you and only you are held accountable when you die and the higher power decides whether you go to heaven or to hell:

I just try mostly with everything to do the things I can and strive to be better as much as I can. My aim is to please God before anyone, even myself. When you truly believe that you will be held accountable when you die to a God and given heaven or hell, that is very powerful. If someone you care about doesn't share that belief, it is even more difficult sometimes to be around them.¹³²

Today, Tina continues to live her life as a Muslim. Her daughter is now 19 years old, and has also embraced Islam. Tina has been living in a Muslim country for the past seven years as an elementary school teacher, and notes how much easier it is to be a practicing Muslim while living in a Muslim country. She continues to try and live her

¹³¹ Ibid, 7-8.

¹³² Ibid, 8.

life as best she can, and to "jive well" wherever she is.

Discussion

Tina's narrative suggests that there were multiple factors that influenced her conversion. In particular, the growth of social media and the accessibility of Islamic websites played an important role in Tina's decision to convert.

Tina's spiritual search, her blossoming relationship with her husband, Ahmed, and her appreciation of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices, were all major influences on her conversion. Furthermore, education - in particular, her use of the Internet and social media provided Tina with numerous sources to explore more about Islam.

Tina had a difficult upbringing. Her father died at an early age. The religion she grew up with had basically been rejected by her mother, and did not seem to offer Tina much comfort. Tina searched online looking for a relationship and she found Islam, which for her was a new way of life. For Tina her meeting and marriage to a Muslim man and her conversion to his religion seemed to fulfill her need to belong. Tina studied about Islam, then embraced Islam's beliefs and practices. She emphasizes that it was not her husband's influence that brought her to Islam. Tina's main focus is on her identity as a Muslim; she wears *hijab* and is very active in her Muslim community.

Rebecca

I met Rebecca, 26, at a campus interfaith function. Rebecca's upbringing in rural New Brunswick was quite difficult. Her mother was permanently wheelchair bound and her parents divorced when she was very young. After her parents divorced, her dad "came out," and moved in with his male partner. Although Rebecca's initial

interest in Islam was sparked by a relationship with a Muslim man, the influence that was most at play in her decision to convert was her search for identity. Rebecca needed to find a system of beliefs and values that allowed her to be comfortable in her own skin. Coming from her unique background, and clearly being her own person, Rebecca's interpretation of Islam is eclectic and aims at being progressive. Rebecca is unmarried, and while she does have Muslim friends, she continues to surround herself with people of varying faiths and backgrounds.

Rebecca remembers her childhood as time spent tending to her sick mother and helping her around the house:

My mom was mostly wheelchair-bound by the time I was 15 and had hip replacement surgery when I was 16. My mom is an amazing housekeeper and mildly OCD. Since she couldn't do housework and didn't have the finances to hire someone, she required me to do most everything. And considering the state of my apartment through my college years, I was not the best candidate to take care of a house. She was very particular and I could not have possibly cared less. Her medication led her to be easily emotional/anxious, and her mood swings + my teenage hormones led to arguing almost every day... according to social services, since my mom had a child living at home over the age of 14, there were no good reason for her to get a house cleaner and before the two of us self-destructed, I decided to go live with my dad... mostly because if the arguing continued only one of us were going to make it to the next year. My mom was in a state of constant anxiety, worse than bi-polarism, mostly due to pain and pain meds that messed severely with her system and it had a severe effect on me, making me agitated, angry, depressed... that and, you know, being a teenager... Oddly enough, my mom and I were never "not close," there was a long time we didn't talk or didn't really communicate at first, but my mom never closed the door to talking to me and I was never angry, just scared I had disappointed her or that I would make her emotional/anxious... It took me a while to feel that she wasn't going to break down just talking to me, and I guess it took a while for me to attempt it too. After my parents divorced, my grandmother related greatly to my mother being a single-mom, she took it upon herself to play an important role in helping her out when/where she could between the two of them, there is no way but to learn to be a strong woman... if you asked me who raised me, my mom, with my grandmother as her supporter, and my dad with his partner as a supporter. My dad would say my mom was the square and he was the lax parent. He really was. He had a greater income and his job called him to travel so he

would take me along with him sometimes through Canada. A whole lot of union stuff that brought him to Halifax and Ottawa, which little-NB-er me thought was so big and bright and shiny.... His partner was the one that took me places when my dad was in meetings for work/union... a lot of our relationship was based on my dad giving me freedoms and opportunities that I didn't really have with my mother ill and on disability... my step-dad had daughters who were older and so while my step-sisters and I didn't interact much, his experience with his daughters really helped when it came to advising my dad about putting on "rules" ... especially when I moved in with them.¹³³

In terms of her religious background, both of Rebecca's parents were raised Catholic. For Rebecca, going to church was mandatory on Sundays. Things changed drastically when her father started living with a man. At age 7, a priest told her she shouldn't visit her "sinful" dad. By 14 she was living with her dad and no longer required to attend church:

My mother and her family were practicing and involved in the community. My dad's family was not practicing and he fell away from the community altogether after he came out. My dad is mostly anti-theist (anti-organized religion) but somewhat agnostic. My step-dad was admittedly agnostic. My mom having custody, it meant Church was mandatory. I began getting involved at 14 by joining the choir. I loved singing and I had to be there. I think I began questioning the Catholic Church early. At 7, a priest told me I should refuse to visit my dad and his partner because their lifestyle was sinful. I told him Jesus had two fathers... The priest was just stunned. My mom was PISSED and ripped the priest a new one. My mom was a VERY liberal Catholic. My mom was involved in teaching Catechism and when there were not enough kids to have a class; my mom special ordered the Catechism workbooks from another parish to teaching me at home. I was baptized, first communion and confirmed. At 12, a few weeks before my communion, I told my mother I didn't really see Jesus as the ONLY son of God but more like a Prophet since Jesus himself says we're ALL God's children. Back then, it seemed trivial but as you can guess it came to really shape more of my life later on. Personally, I was very bored with the whole concept of organized religion. Not having a car meant we had to walk 30 minutes to get to and back from Church, then the service lasted an hour, they repeated the same stories year after year, I was bored out of my skull. When I moved to my dad's, I no longer *had* to go to Church and you can be sure you didn't see me there unless I was visiting my mother. I only

¹³³ Rebecca - Interview - January 11th, 2015, 1-2.

convinced my mom to let me sleep on Sundays when I finally got to University.¹³⁴

At age 20, and in her second year of university, Rebecca encountered Islam for the first time when she began dating a non-practicing Muslim:

Being raised in NB, Islam never even was part of conversation and was an extremely foreign concept. I moved to Ottawa in 2008 to attend University and that was for all intent and purposes the first time I was made aware of other cultures/religions. So, I entered this relationship very naively. I guess he was in a place in his life where he was rebelling about a very orthodox Muslim upbringing so I heard some mix-messages about Islam being very liberal and similar to Christianity but women not being allowed to work once they marry. It was super confusing. His mom had never worked and his parents blamed his sister's divorce on going against their will in her choice to marry. He came from a drastically orthodox family and he saw Islam as a very strict patriarchal doctrine... Oddly enough, that he somewhat agreed with but not enough to actually live according to it, i.e. didn't pray or fast, drank, had sexual relations outside marriage and so I found out snippets of Islam here and there and when Ramadan came, I asked him what it was and if he was going to do it he said he couldn't because "no one can keep fast that long." I took that as a challenge (because I'm competitive and naïve) so I decided to show him that it was totally possible. I was soooo far from thinking about converting though. I was siding more on my dad's thinking of "there is a higher power but I'm not for the mentality of organized religion."¹³⁵

Although Rebecca first fasted Ramadan¹³⁶ in order to win a bet, she took time to find out more about Islam and she read a few translations of the Qur'an and other Islamic materials. One of Rebecca's friends found out that she was fasting and offered advice on what many practicing Muslims do during the month of Ramadan:

She informed me what "juz" were and how some Muslims read one a night to read the whole Qu'ran in 30 days. I took up www.quranexplorer.com and began my reading. It had/has 3 different English translations so it helped to read and compare. "Juz" mark divisions in the Qur'an. There are 30 juz, 1 for each day of Ramadan. At the end of August 2009 (about mid-Ramadan) I participated in Pride with a youth group for which I volunteered (Jer's Vision) and I encountered another contingent called "Muslims for Progressive Values." The

¹³⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 3.

¹³⁶ Ramadan - Islamic month of fasting.

group's slogan read "Allah loves us all." It took me a while after Ramadan to really take up an interest for Islam. I was swamped with university work and my boyfriend was very unsupportive of non-traditional Islam so I just put it aside. I found the Qur'an extremely interesting and didn't read it at all as patriarchal but I also didn't feel like I had the time and energy to find out more about a community that greatly seemed to promote patriarchal ideologies. So, my very first fast I broke at Royal Oak (pub) with a beer and a bacon burger. I did the fasting but I had no interest in anything but proving that I could resist from eating/smoking/having sex from dawn till dusk.¹³⁷

When Rebecca was still in university, she was often busy with course work so finding the time to learn more about Islam proved to be quite difficult. She was disappointed to discover that her then boyfriend was unsupportive of non-traditional Islam. Rebecca had a mixed group of friends at the time, most of whom were Shi'a/Sunni Muslim. Although many of them were non-practicing Muslims they all seemed to push for her to convert, regardless. While her parents approved of her exploring another religion and experiencing Ramadan, they were concerned that she might feel forced by her new friends to convert when she did not know much about Islam aside from the negative portrayals in the media:

So, I tried to "shut everyone up" by telling them I would NOT get involved with any religion before 3 years: 2 more years of university and then 1 year after that.... if I was still interested in learning. And that's pretty much what happened: didn't touch Islam much through school. Fasted Ramadan a 2nd time in 2010, read *Le Coran*, intro, translation and notes by C. Mason (French). This version of the Qur'an included a lot more background on the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Mohammad and some hadiths. I also got in touch with www.facebook.com/MPVUSA which is Muslims for Progressive Values' Facebook group, learned a bit there. Was put in touch with Ottawa member Shahla Khan Salter whom I met once. On our one and only meeting that year she showed me "The Koran for Dummies" by Suhaib Sultan which does much like D. Masson's introduction but in simple layout and easy to read chapters, read that, after the summer was over, I practically gave up my studies of Islam to complete my 4th year of University. I was heavily involved with University life and my studies and my relationship pretty much fell behind. By graduation, my

¹³⁷ Ibid, 3-4.

Egyptian partner and I broke up. It wasn't a harsh break up since by the time exams had come around, we barely even spoke to one another. Over the summer, I continued my studies, interested in the concept of "hijab" I began wearing more covering clothing -- at least in the daytime. I would still go out in less covering clothing to bars and such in the evening. I discovered that my sensitive skin burn a heck of a lot less with long sleeves and I wasn't nearly as sweaty as I assumed I would be. By the end of the summer, I was wearing more covering clothing.¹³⁸

At this point, Rebecca slowly began to change her identity. She began wearing clothes that covered her arms and legs, and while she was glad to notice she burnt a lot less from the sun it was her attempt to conform to Islamic principles that seemed to be giving meaning to her life. Although Rebecca and her Muslim boyfriend had broken up, she remained interested in Islam and her circle of Muslim friends began to grow. It was these social bonds of friendship that drew Rebecca to Islam and would eventually influence her conversion, even more than her earlier relationship with a Muslim man.

Later, Rebecca began dating a liberal Sunni Muslim Pakistani immigrant who became a Canadian citizen in 2012. She also became more involved with a group called Muslims of Progressive Values and began studying Islamic doctrine and practice. She attended a local convert group:

It was led by a Sunni (self-declared Salafi) Imam. I would often come home to ask both my Pakistani partner and the MPV Facebook group about their interpretation of more patriarchal passages studied at the mosque. *To be noted, I had already fasted 3 Ramadan, and read a number of translations of the Qur'an. By the end of 2011, I knew I liked liberal/progressive Islamic views of women. I perceived hijab as a great equalizer: if both men and women were covered in loose clothing they were both comfortable and able to be judged on their abilities rather than their bodies.¹³⁹

In January of 2012, Rebecca approached her parents with the idea that she would like to convert to Islam and potentially wear the *hijab*. Her mother seemed to be okay

¹³⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 5.

with her decision, and was relieved to hear that she still believed in God, but her father objected to her following any organised religion:

Explaining to her Islam's view of Jesus, she recalled my opinion of Jesus as a Prophet as a teen and thought Islam seemed to fit with what I had always believed about my Catholic upbringing. She was concerned about the Muslim community's acceptance of me as a Progressive, Feminist, LGBT- activist Muslim. My dad was outright outraged that I choose to abide by organized religion and we mostly didn't talk much about it for a long time because I just couldn't seem to make him understand that part of my attraction to Islam was the concept of self before God: and the fact that community can help, it can never interfere in the relationship between an individual and God. It was a bit of "don't ask, don't tell" at first (note, irony) and religion still isn't much of a subject of discussion between us, yet it's no longer a touchy subject, just not something we feel can bring much. He and I agree that there are religious assholes and that the mob-mentality, regardless of the faith background, usually brings about chaos. My dad has no interest in learning about religion and I have no interest in talking about religion to someone who doesn't want to hear it. It doesn't change our relationship for the least; however, he's still the super lax, chill dad! So, it took me a while. I started attending the mosque more regularly, and covering on weekends. Well, mostly I had decided in 2009 to take 3 years, and something inside of me felt that if I didn't take 3 years, I would regret moving too fast and while I looooved hijab, I wasn't ready to wear it full time BEFORE converting.¹⁴⁰

By April 2012, Rebecca had decided to convert to Islam. This change in her life was accompanied by a major change in an important marker of her identity - her clothing:

I decided that I would convert during Ramadan 2012 (July 28th, 2012 to be exact). Since I already knew about it at the beginning of Ramadan, I sent an email before the start of Ramadan (June 20th) to tell my colleagues that I would be fasting and wearing hijab for all 30 days of Ramadan... I did the same thing with some of my acquaintances. I figured 30 days would give me enough time to know whether hijab was comfortable for me. If not, after 30 days I would take it off, if I liked it, I could easily continue to wear it. Most people really didn't bat a lash. My friends were all very happy for me and most attended my conversion ceremony on July 28th, 2012.¹⁴¹

Rebecca had also emailed the local mosque's imam to help perform her

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 5.

conversion ceremony, but she was disappointed when he was delayed in getting back to her. The imam was busy with preparations for Ramadan and could not coordinate:

He was busy with Ramadan preparation when I emailed and only got back to me the day before my conversion was to take place. Since I couldn't get in touch with another imam, I asked a local halal restaurant owner if I could rent the rooftop patio of their restaurant to breakfast and say Shahada and they were very happy to allow me. My friends who attended the ceremony were of all faith backgrounds. Notably, Catholic, Greek pagan, Hindu, atheist, agnostic and Buddhist. I also had some Muslim friends in attendance. One friend converted to Islam 2 weeks after I did.¹⁴²

Rebecca continued her research of Islam at her leisure:

Study a bit of Sunni Islam, some Shi'a Islam, some Sufi/Sunni Islam, progressive, liberal, moderate, feminist, salafi, wahabi... etc. I enrolled at the Islamic Online University led by Prof. Bilal Philips. The man basically drives me insane. In the first lecture he declares that while he does not know God's will, according to the teachings in the Qur'an, Mother Teresa would go to Hell... He's really freakin' intense, but I wanted to study EVERYTHING. No such thing as too much knowledge! In progressive literature, MPV's website includes a LOT of awesome stuff (www.mpv.org). Including Scott Kugle's Islam and homosexuality. I also received as a gift at my conversion ceremony (from my Greek pagan former roommate) "I Speak for Myself" which is a collection of essays by American Muslim Women. I continue to be involved with MPV but now mostly with the physical group in Ottawa, and since I moved to NB, only in my scarce visits. I've fasted every Ramadan since 2009 but I can't say I've ever continued to pray regularly for more than a week at a time except for summer 2012. I see prayer much like the gym or eating healthy: I really REALLY think I should do it... but laying on the couch and eating chips is too damn appealing!¹⁴³

Rebecca embraced *hijab* as part of her everyday clothing and continues to wear the headscarf to this day. There have been a few bumps in the road, such as her current mother-in-law's opinions and views of her pro-feminist, LGBTQ, *hijabie*-wearing lifestyle. Rebecca's mother-in-law would like Rebecca to be less opinionated. Yet, this never stopped Rebecca from wearing the *hijab*, it only made her more insistent on

¹⁴² Ibid, 6.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 7.

wearing the headscarf and passionate for the causes she continues to believe in.¹⁴⁴

However, Rebecca has a very strained relationship with the international community of Muslims:

First, I don't particularly adhere to a school of thought, so it makes it hard to feel a sense of community with either Shi'a or Sunni... Progressive is about individual "labeling" and includes Shi'a, Sunnis, Sufis (Not a whole lot of Salafi/Wahabi). Muslims for Progressive Values has 10 principles (<http://mpvusa.org/mpv-principles/>), the first of which is Collective Identity: We accept as Muslim anyone who identifies as such. The veracity and integrity of that claim is between the individual and God, and is not a matter for the state nor an issue which other individuals can or should judge. We welcome all who are interested in discussing, promoting and working for the implementation of progressive values – human rights, freedom of expression, and separation of church and state – as well as inclusive and tolerant understandings of Islam. More like Progressive allows everyone to label themselves, you want to call yourself Shi'a: you're Shi'a! You want to call yourself Sunni: you're Sunni! You want to be called Muslim: You're Muslim, etc. Pretty much you define what Islam is to you since it's YOUR relationship with God. I define what Islam is to me because that is MY relationship with God, etc... The Ottawa faction of MPV is called Unitarian Muslim because we follow a very similar path as the Unitarian Christian movement. Overall, every group I encountered were happy to bring me resources to learn, but every group seemed to have limitation in their interpretation of abstract concepts. For Sunni/Salafi, it seemed that I had to operate within strictly patriarchal gender roles. In the Shi'a community, while more equalitarian, a very strong sense of historical pride and injury which made it hard to look at myself moving forward with Islam without looking at the pain of thousands of years of Shi'a Muslims. In moderate circles, while being equal was "kind of okay" subjects of sexuality, sexual orientations and gender identities remained taboo. In progressive circles, the definition of a feminist or LGBT-activist seemed limited to non-hijab-wearing Muslim. I mostly find myself practicing Islam from the outskirts of all communities as a sex-positive hijab-wearing feminist and LGBT - activist, my communities are mostly liberal progressive groups: The Ottawa Network for Spiritual Progressive, Unitarian Muslims and Faith House Ottawa, online: Be The Faith United (Facebook) and

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 10.

Radical Muslims (Facebook also). I follow a number of blogs from a number of converts, activists, imams, etc... and that serves as my "sermons."¹⁴⁵

Rebecca continues to live her life as a practicing progressive Muslim, seeking knowledge, while being actively involved in supporting feminist, LGBTQ and progressive values for Muslims organisations:

As a Muslim, I am in a committed, live-in relationship with a Catholic Sri-Lankan immigrant (Canadian citizen for well-over a decade). I do not have much of a "Muslim community" except for my involvement with fellow Muslims online. As for becoming Muslim: I think being pushed to make a decision very fast for or against conversion was probably the biggest challenge... The idea that I could be undecided was very hard for some people to accept because to most either Islam was completely unacceptable or absolutely inevitable. Another big challenge has been not to let the actions of other Muslims define me, whether it's terrorist individuals or groups or friends or mosque-attendees. I constantly have to remind myself that it's **my** relationship with God and that I shouldn't let my disagreeing with what an individual/group/community does affect my belief. Just because they interpret Islam in a way that allows them to be violent/promiscuous/sexist/homophobic/radical/insulting/degrading/etc... doesn't mean that that is what Islam **is** and sometimes more disheartening is feeling like I have to remind "others" that I am not those things and that Islam is not those things. I think in big parts, while I disagreed with part of my Catholic upbringing I never really gave up on the concept of a monotheist God. At its core, I found Islam to define God the way I have ALWAYS defined God: as ONLY ONE worthy of worship, with messengers that were humans, to be admired but never to be worshiped... What I loved of the message of Islam was its focus on the individual relationship with God.¹⁴⁶

Rebecca devotes her time to her website and personal YouTube channel where she posts the narrative of her conversion to Islam, *hijab* style tutorials, and opinion pieces of everyday Muslim concerns.

Discussion

The importance of social bonds is evident in Rebecca's conversion story as is her introduction to Islam through a Muslim partner. By the time their relationship had ended, Rebecca's interest in Islam started to develop more extensively when she began

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 7-8.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 10-12.

making friends with fellow Muslims. Rebecca was influenced by Islamic faith and values she discovered after she began studying Islam on her own. Following the path of a progressive Islam makes Rebecca unique among the other participants in this study. The Progressive Muslim movement exists almost entirely in a North American environment.¹⁴⁷ Even when she chose a long-term partner, it wasn't important to her that he be Muslim.

Although Rebecca was introduced to Islam by a man she was in a relationship with, and it is important for her to have Muslims friends whether they are Shi'a, Sunni, or Sufi, her ability to find likeminded people and support for her unique and modern interpretation of Islam, its values, beliefs, and practices, is a major influence in her conversion. Rebecca's identity as a progressive Muslim is important to her, as is her modern interpretation of Islam. Rebecca's progressive Islam seems to be one that has been strongly influenced by Western culture, supporting LGBTQ Muslims, women's rights, etc.

Chrystal

"Technically," Chrystal, 22, had not converted to Islam at the time of our interview. She is waiting to say her *shahada*, the profession of Islamic faith, until she has perfected her practice of Islam. Adopted at a young age by a "strict" and "very judgmental" Christian family, who were "uneducated" and "small-minded," - Chrystal left home to find a spiritual path, a set of rules and values by which to live her life. In high school she was drawn to images of the Middle East, and in university she discovered Islam. Today, her identity as a *hijab*-wearing Muslim woman has become

¹⁴⁷ See the collected essays in Omid Safi. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*: Oneworld Publications, 2003.

foundational:

I realized I am a Muslim and meant to be when I saw how my life was changing. It is very respectful, clean, modest, kind and honest religion and it makes sense to me. I mostly agreed with myself to become a Muslim because of the rules and laws, I always liked being told what to do in a way; now that I have God telling me how to live my life, it's a lot easier because I'm not walking around lost trying to find the next step to take in life. Instead, I know what's required of me and my capabilities. Technically too, I actually have not done my Shahada yet - as I want to become the best Muslim before I become Muslim and start making mistakes, but if Allah feels that the Shahada in your head counts when you are by yourself then it was last year in June 2014.¹⁴⁸

Chrystal's birth parents had disabilities and could not properly care for her.

When Chrystal was five years old, she was placed in foster care. At nine, a family adopted Chrystal, but this was a worse situation for her than being in foster care. She now wishes that she had stayed in the foster system, rather than live with her newly adoptive family. Both Chrystal's birth family and foster family were practicing

Christians:

We would go to church a lot and she (her mother) would sing me little Christian songs, and my foster family was very strict Christians too, I would go to church like three times a week and see some of my birth family there because my foster family knew my birth family and they all attended the same church. I liked it. (My birth family did love me – but had disabilities so could not actually raise me properly). When I was adopted I continued going to church but only once a week and to Sunday school. What really kept my faith alive was my Real Grampie, (my birth family were strong Christians) and he would always remind of God and taught me about heaven. He died sadly when I was 7 (I was in foster care by then). He told me that we stay alive because God is building us a room and as soon as he finishes our bedroom we will die. When my Grampie died I figured God finished building his room and it was time for him to go and from then on I always dreamed and prayed to God that he would make his room a double and we could be roommates. In my mind I pictured heaven and the rooms like apartments for some reason...¹⁴⁹

After Chrystal's adoption, however, she was unable to continue practicing her faith:

¹⁴⁸ Chrystal - Interview - May 22nd, 2015, 4-5.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 1.

I lost my faith because my foster family were very disbelieving people and did no right and only wrong sadly. The only thing they did to keep that little flame of faith inside me is not telling me that God is not real, and by allowing me to see my birth family which was a reminder of my Christian faith and feeling abandoned by my birth family. I knew they loved religion so I would try to get into it to show off in a way thinking that if I was a believer then I would gain their love somehow.¹⁵⁰

While she was in high school, Chrystal read a few books about Islam and Muslims. Her initial interest in Islam came through reading fiction and nonfiction:

I loved to read books in high school and I found a type of genre that caught my attention. I didn't quite understand it then but I do now. I don't think I really understood I was reading about Muslims, or the Middle East. I was a very insecure teen and didn't let myself think much let alone let myself be smart. I'm not sure what this genre is but here are some of the books I used to read: Secret Daughter – Shilpi Somaya Gowda (Not about Islam but the same theme I guess – girl in another country so it seemed exotic to me in some way and the whole daughter and adoption was relatable). (The following book I did not read but I know it would fit the same genre) I am Malala: the girl who stood up for education and was stopped by the Taliban, After much search I found the two books that really affected me; The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini and A Thousand Splendid Suns also by Khaled Hosseini both of these books were based in Afghanistan. A Thousand Splendid Suns, is really the book that planted the seed inside of me without me knowing, the seed was because in this book it should the pain and suffering of women but their love and strength inside them and they also wore a burqa, which was an more of a exotic introduction into the covering, I wanted to try it out and thought it would be cool to wear one but knew I could never do it as it's viewed badly and I would not be accepted and Muslims are viewed badly like terrorists (I grew up in a very uneducated small minded household). Anyways, this introduction into the Middle Eastern society and head covering stayed hidden until many years later...¹⁵¹

Chrystal was attracted to the exoticized clothing of the East she read about in these books and wanted to dress like the women portrayed. The books helped prepare her for wearing the *hijab*. Also, when Chrystal began reading stories of the lives of

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 1.

(*burqa/burka* - a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by many Muslim women).

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 1-2.

traditional Muslim women, where pain and suffering are overcome with love and strength, she began to experience shifts in her personal identity. Given her difficult upbringing, Chrystal could relate to the lives of these women, and their stories were a major influence on her conversion.

Although Chrystal acknowledges that by identifying as a Muslim, by wearing *hijab*, many people might see her as a terrorist, and some may even treat her as such. Yet she continues to read, imagine, visualize and research more about Islam. In Chrystal's case, Islam also fulfilled her desire for stability and belonging:

I have many things I have to do every day. I have to pray the 5 prayers plus the additional prayers that you do either before or after the prayer sometimes it's both and after, I have to make sure I do everything halal and not haram and eat and do good only with my right hand and do bad only with my left, to say a prayer before eating, drinking, walking, waking up, going to sleep, going to the bathroom, saying hello, driving, etc. There are hundreds of little prayers/dua's that I must learn and implement into my life, I must also learn Islamic studies, the history behind it, I need to learn Arabic which I am now as a student at an - Islamic online university. The online university is hard because it is a real university and I'm a fulltime student there and at a local university here in the city. I am vegan so halal food is not an issue but the difficulties is mostly everything I have to learn and do. I am just trying to focus on one thing at a time and try to be productive and learn and master little things and whenever they become easy I add one more thing to learn. I believe being a perfect Muslim will take a lifetime to master - not a day.¹⁵²

When Chrystal began university, she met a young man of Christian Lebanese-Venezuelan heritage:

Well, truth be told and even though it should not be told, as now I know its haram,¹⁵³ is that I had a boyfriend and he is nothing like anyone here. He is very supportive and very, very encouraging on one being themselves and becoming a better person and doing what they feel is right. He really wanted me to be who I wanted to be and after many months convinced me I could in fact tell him anything and not be judged and be accepted. So, I told him about how I read

¹⁵² Ibid, 4-5.

halal - Arabic meaning permitted.

¹⁵³ *haram* - Arabic meaning forbidden.

books in high school about these women who wore scarves and I thought it was really cool and I wanted to do it. His reaction threw me off guard, he told me I could if I wanted to and supported it completely, yes – he is actually a Christian Arab/Venezuelan so he speaks Arabic and Spanish. Yes, he is not Muslim. It's funny how God is, I never even realized that I was even with a Arab till way later, like I said I didn't use my brain much... The whole speaking Arabic and being from Lebanon didn't really make me think.¹⁵⁴

Chrystal says she is thankful for having such a good friend in her life at the time she began learning about Islam. He provided her with many useful websites, books, and information that she may not have found on her own, and she is grateful. However, the man was not Muslim, and according to Islamic law Chrystal could not marry him, so she eventually ended the relationship.

Chrystal had first wanted to try wearing the *burqa* but then decided against it at the last minute:

I originally wanted to wear the burqa, but I felt it was too much for the society, so I went with the normal headscarf and went to the local Dollarama and bought one. I made a goal that I would try and wear it for 1 year every single day. As I never actually completed anything before in my life and I wanted to prove to myself I could actually do something good. When I wore it, my boyfriend (he told me this many months later) said he was shocked and actually didn't like it but said nothing and encouraged me to continue. I felt very insecure wearing it the first day but after a few days I quickly adapted and never went back.¹⁵⁵

Before Chrystal even started wearing the *hijab*, she had already begun to "cut out" her non-Muslim friends:

As I knew they were bad influences on me and I wanted to do good and change, and I didn't really have a family. The family that adopted me were very judgmental and did not support me in anything and made me depressed so I was cutting them out too. I know they would have mocked me and disapproved of me if I would have stayed, but my boyfriend was very encouraging of making

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 2.

new friends and he wanted me to be with good people and thanks to God, many months later when I was ready I made some new Muslim friends. I know that people around me think it was him (my boyfriend). Just because he is a man and Arab doesn't mean he is Muslim, since he isn't, and he doesn't really like it. He does and doesn't. He supports it 100% but doesn't like it because he finally stopped getting made fun of and being told racist comments and now everyone thinks he is a Muslim and made me one also, but that's not the case as I wanted to do this before I met him (only the hijab part).¹⁵⁶

Once Chrystal began making new friends who were Muslim, she could then discuss topics surrounding Islam and with people who also seemed interested in the conversation. Meeting other Muslims in the community, gave her the opportunity to learn more about Islamic understandings of family, marriage, children, how to be a Muslim woman, including cooking and cleaning tips.¹⁵⁷

To help learn more about Islam, Chrystal attends a weekend school to learn Arabic and Islamic studies where she is the oldest in the class. She is also a full-time student at an Islamic online university and a full-time student at a local liberal arts university, now in her fourth year.¹⁵⁸

Chrystal finds learning how to be a Muslim challenging, even the basic practices of Islam, can be overwhelming, but for her there is no going back:

Well, I didn't really fully comprehend I was becoming a Muslim. I didn't think I was a Muslim even though I dressed like one and I hung out with Muslims and I was learning about it but I didn't quite feel I was Muslim yet. When I finally realized that I will never remove my headscarf and not become a non Muslim, I felt kind of nervous, because I was fearful that I didn't want to meet the bad Muslims, or have people think I am a bad Muslim. Also, I felt like I had no choice anymore that if I became a non-Muslim again, I would go to hell and live a horrible life, I thought this because I had found the truth and knew how to live a good life and how to get to Jannah (heaven) so there was no turning back

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 3-4.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

unless I wanted to deliberately disobey Allah. I thought about this a lot that if this was just a thing or was really who I was.¹⁵⁹

Chrystal believes that she was meant to be a Muslim. She describes her lifestyle after finding Islam as more respectful, clean, modest, kind, and honest, which makes complete sense to her. She also agrees with the teachings of Islam and likes having rules to follow, since during her teenage years she felt lost in trying to find the next step to take in life. Now, Chrystal feels she knows what is required of her and what she is capable of becoming. Today, Chrystal continues to learn more about Islam each day and strives to live her life as best she can as a practicing Muslim. She plans to continue her studies at a Master's level once she finishes her undergraduate degree in 2016.

Discussion

It is important to note here that Chrystal spent a long time adopting identities and practices before she even thought of actually converting to Islam. Dissatisfaction with the lack of faith in her adoptive family, a repressive upbringing and feeling isolated from her birth family and foster family may have influenced Chrystal's decision to convert and be a Muslim. Lacking family support, Chrystal found support in books that focused on Islamic culture and values. Practicing Islam, and especially her decision to wear *hijab*, has given Chrystal an increased sense of identity.

Chrystal's initial interest in Islam was immediately followed by a lengthy period of study, which she continues to engage in today. Although Chrystal consulted the Internet and many online sources to increase her knowledge of Islam, the Internet was not the only major influence in her conversion. Instead, it was her love of books such as *The Kite Runner*, that depict Islamic cultures, that initially drew her to Islam and her

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 4.

eventual decision to enroll in an online Islamic school.

Chapter Summary

The women's stories of conversion presented in this chapter illustrate some common conversion influences that can be linked back to the literature, as well as those original to this study. Dissatisfaction with one's previous faith was a major influence identified by Nancy, Rachel, Sally, and Tina, and in Maslim and Bjorck's research and Suleiman's Cambridge Project. It is important to note that, although dissatisfied with their former faith, the women in my study did not give up on faith altogether, rather they continued to search for meaning in their lives and found it in Islam.

Another major influence noted in the research is a search for identity. In my study, Nancy, Chrystal, Rebecca, and Rachel, all sought new identities as Muslim women. In the Cambridge Project wearing the *hijab* was the marker for Muslim identity. Although in my study Rebecca and Chrystal chose to wear the *hijab* prior to converting, for Tina, Nancy, and Rachel, the decision to wear the *hijab* came later in their conversion, and Sally still does not wear *hijab*. For these women, being Muslim consists of more than just wearing modest dress or a headscarf. It also consists of publically adopting and expressing Islamic values, and practices, support, and becoming active in their Islamic communities.

Taking time to make their decision to convert was a major influence for all of the participants in my study, and appears to be similar to the findings of Galonnier and de los Rios who noted how "Islam is a marathon."¹⁶⁰ Also similar to Galonnier and de los Rios' "knowing what", the women decided to convert after a lengthy process of

¹⁶⁰ Galonnier and de los Rios, 69.

researching and deliberation using textbooks and other sources of learning material,¹⁶¹ lasting anywhere from several months (Sally) to years (Rebecca). Chrystal is still researching and has yet to convert. All of the women researched Islamic beliefs and practices thoroughly, whether through texts acquired through friends, acquaintances, or the public library. The Internet provided the potential converts with a variety of Islamic sources, both primary and secondary, but only one participant, Rebecca, used the Internet interactively in her blog. Educating themselves by researching about Islam was an important component for my participants.

For most of the women, the gradual process of conversion also included the "knowing how," from Galonnier and de los Rios, which can be considered the "most distinctive aspect of pedagogies of conversion."¹⁶² Through experimentation with Islamic practices for example, attending Friday prayers and weekly women's learning circles, wearing *hijab*, and in Rebecca's case, fasting the month of Ramadan, is immersing one's self into the religion entirely. All of the women adopted forms of traditional Sunni Islam, except Rebecca who self-identified as a Progressive Muslim.

While there were similar, common influences amongst my female participants, there was not one cohesive conversion narrative. Many of the women had important influences that were unique to their story. Nancy felt compelled to enter a mosque one day, a place she had never been. Sally wanted to convert her husband to Christianity and ended up embracing Islam. Rachel's immediate family members were converts to Islam. Tina secretly researched Islam because her husband was Muslim but never talked much about his religion. Rebecca tried out Ramadan on a dare, while Chrystal followed

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 67.

¹⁶² Ibid.

the obligatory Islamic practices including wearing of the *hijab* without taking the liminal step of saying her *shahada*.

All of these women were the agents of their own conversion, and although there were common influences, each woman's journey to Islam was unique. As was said so eloquently by Nathan Carlin, conversion is "an ending and a beginning."¹⁶³ It is important to stress that there is no template of conversion to be found in these women's narratives. However, there are some interesting similarities that reflect the findings of earlier scholars, as well as patterns of influence unique to my study. Both the similarities and differences and implications of my findings will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

¹⁶³ Carlin, 293.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

I began this research with a question: why do Canadian women convert to Islam?

After interviewing six women who live in the Atlantic provinces and Ontario I have come to the conclusion that a legitimate response to this question could be: Why not? Islam is the fastest growing religion in North America, and many of its Abrahamic beliefs and traditions are similar to Christianity, and I feel this brought about a familiarity for majority of my participants. All of the women in my study chose Islam because it made sense to them.

My early assumption was that Canadian women convert to Islam because of the influence of a Muslim man. But it quickly became obvious to me that none of my research participants converted to Islam for a single reason. Through my interviews I discovered that their conversion was a process, with varying influences affecting each woman. There were, however, important themes or patterns that I found in their stories. Similar to the findings of Maslim and Bjorck and Suleiman's Cambridge Project, discussed in chapter 2, all six of the women in my study identified their understanding, appreciation and acceptance of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices as a major influence in their conversion. A common statement from all my participants aside from Nancy, was how Islam "made sense." Dissatisfaction with their former Christian faith, whether Baptist or Catholic, was also important in Nancy, Rachel, Sally, and Tina's stories of conversion, while, Chrystal and Rebecca described themselves as spiritual wanderers.

Social bonds, an influence unanimously agreed upon as an important factor by all of the scholars in my literature review (Maslim and Bjorck, Suleiman, Shanneik,

Soutar, and Brooks) played a key role in all of my participants' conversion to Islam. Sometimes this happened through a marriage partner, but to my surprise only Sally and Tina actually married the man who introduced them to Islam, and both would likely argue that their partners had nothing to do with their decisions. Although Rebecca and Chrystal had relationships with Muslim men, they did not marry them. Whereas Sally's partner encouraged her to learn more about Islam, Tina's did not. My initial assumption that women converted to Islam because they married a Muslim man was incorrect. There was no single reason why any of these women converted. Acting as their own agents, they chose Islam freely. However, it appears that social bonds are ubiquitous in these women's conversion stories, and many kinds of social bonds drew the women to Islam. For example, Rachel has a sister who had previously converted to Islam. Nancy devotes most of her time to studying and working with several groups of close Muslim women friends and makes these relationships the centre of her life.

On the other hand, I observed that social bonds could also present challenges to a new Muslim: Chrystal and Rachel both broke social bonds (friendships) so that they would not be discouraged from conversion, and Tina and Rebecca's conversion also threatened their familial bonds. Maslim and Bjorck as well as Shanneik also presented similar findings regarding the social challenges posed by conversion. Each of the women in my study continued to overcome social barriers and move forward with their lives by officially embracing Islam and living as Muslim women.

The search for identity, another factor noted by all the scholars I consulted (Maslim and Bjorck, The Cambridge Project, Shanneik, Brooks, and Soutar) was a major influence for all of my participants. However, I did not restrict my discussion of

identity to what the women wore on their heads. Modest dressing, for the women in my study is simply an external sign of internal changes, which include the adoption of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices, and a willingness to be identified with the Muslim community. For example, Sally chooses not to wear *hijab* but dresses modestly and behaves publicly in accordance with her understanding of Islamic belief.

Having access to research and reading materials on Islam was an important influence in the women's decision to convert. However, unlike participants in the study of formal classroom instruction by Galonnier and de los Rios,¹⁶⁴ all of my participants learned about Islam on their own and at their own pace and leisure. Each of the women acquired knowledge through their own exploration by reading novels or how-to books, searching the Internet, Youtube channels, and other Islamic knowledge websites or attending online weekly Islamic sermons. Suleiman's Cambridge Project also noted how a majority of the participants researched Islam and learned as much as they could, before they decided to convert.

Time is a factor that Galonnier and de los Rios also addressed, and I found that all of the participants in my study took time before committing to Islam. As the authors state, it takes "times to become a true believer."¹⁶⁵ Although the length of time differed from woman to woman, most took months if not years to make their decision. For example, Rebecca decided to finish school, a period of approximately three years, before making her commitment. Chrystal wears *hijab* and continues to fulfill the requirements of a practicing Muslim but has yet to officially become a Muslim.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Galonnier and de los Rios, 67.

All of my participants are strong women who have had to overcome harmful stereotypes and Islamophobia, as explicated by Perry, Van Nieuwkerk, Maslim and Bjorck, and Suleiman's Cambridge Project. All mention how the number of women converting to Islam continues to rise, despite the harmful effects and aftermath of *9/11*. In their studies and mine, women have dealt with negativity at their workplace, at university, and even amongst family members. What has given them the strength to convert? Their lengthy periods of research left them with a solid foundation of understanding Islamic values, beliefs, and practices. Most of them developed strong social networks that supported them in their transition to Islam. And they have adopted a framework for living that offers them guidance to navigate the ups and downs of life, including misunderstandings, and sometimes mistreatment by their fellow Canadians.

The Canadian women in this study embrace Islam because, after careful consideration, it makes sense to them, and because they meet, come to know, learn from, and become fond of their Muslim brothers and sisters. They also feel accepted by their respective Muslim communities. Learning from these women has been an honour and a privilege. It is my hope that the women will recognize themselves in this thesis and appreciate my attempt to tell their stories.

Implications for Further Research

The conversion of Canadian women to Islam needs further research. No one knows, for example, how many Canadian women have converted to Islam. Quantitative studies, with larger numbers of participants might provide a broader picture. However, relying on quantitative methods alone robs us of the richness that qualitative research

(such as these conversion stories) provides. People who tell their conversion stories are not only trying to help non-Muslims understand Islam, they are also trying to make sense of the choices they have made in their own lives.¹⁶⁶ In order to understand the decisions Canadian women make when embracing Islam, scholars need to begin by listening to their stories. My study included mostly white, heterosexual women whereas further studies could reach out to lesbian, queer, and transgender women and women from various ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. As Barbara Perry states, it is important to look not only at the individual categories of identity and various dimensions of people's lives but also at the "*intersectionality* of religion, race, and gender."¹⁶⁷ Women in my study also raised questions for me about the relationship between feminism and Islam. Rebecca, for example, identified herself as a feminist Muslim, and this is something I would like to explore further. Amongst the women were several who had experienced discrimination in public as well as in the workplace. Further research should be aimed at understanding better the experiences of women converts to Islam in various contexts. This kind of research would have broad implications for the challenges ahead as Canada welcomes newcomers who are fleeing war in the Middle East, to our communities and, as in my case, our homes and families.

¹⁶⁶ Dr. Alexandra Bain. Personal Conversation, December 2015.

¹⁶⁷ Perry, 74.

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○ **Appendix A - Interview Questions**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, where each participant was encouraged to elaborate upon her narrative of conversion to Islam. Our conversation began with me asking participants to describe their upbringing, what their families were like during their childhoods, their sparked interest in Islam, and so on.

Upbringing;

- 1) Could you please describe your upbringing.
- 2) What was your family like throughout your childhood?
- 3) Are your parents from a practicing faith? If so, how did this influence you?
- 4) What denomination are they connected with?

Discovering Islam;

- 5) How did you first discover Islam?
- 6) Were there any individuals, groups, organisations, communities, scholars, books, etc. that played an important role in your decision to convert?
- 7) Could you name a few of the book titles?
- 8) Describe these influences and elaborate on how they affected your decision.

Converting/Reverting;

- 9) What was the reaction of the people around you to your conversion: family, friends, your co-workers, etc?

Community;

- 10) Describe your relationship with local, national and/or international Muslim individuals and community/ies (i.e. Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Salafi, etc).
- 11) What Islamic denomination are you affiliated with or have been in contact with? Could you explain your thoughts a bit more.
- 12) In what ways have these individuals/groups helped or hindered you on your path?

Family;

- 13) Can you elaborate more on your family life today as a Muslim?
- 14) Are you married, engaged, widowed, single?
- 15) Do you have any children?
- 16) If so, what is it like raising them as Muslims while your parents are from a different faith?
- 17) How does it differ from your own upbringing?

Challenges;

- 18) Describe the biggest challenges you have faced in becoming and being Muslim. How have you met these challenges?

- 19) Overall, what is, or are the reasons that first come to mind in your decision to convert to Islam?

- **Appendix B - Themes and Influences**

Themes and influences of conversion. They are in no particular order:

- 1- Feeling a sense of belonging and community.
- 2- Relationship (including marriage) to a Muslim man.
- 3- Dissatisfaction with one's former faith.
- 4- Appreciation and acceptance of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices.
- 5- A search for identity.
- 6- Seeking Spirituality (Spiritual Wanderer).

- **Appendix C - Formal Consent Form**

Consent Form

Interviewer: Ella Sentse

Participant

Please Print: _____

Outline of Consent Form:

My name is Ella Sentse and I am pursuing my Master's degree at the University of New Brunswick here in Fredericton, NB. I am doing a Master's thesis and with the assistance and guidance from my supervisor, Dr. Linda Eyre (leyre@unb.ca) and co-supervisor, Dr. Alexandra Bain (alexbain@stu.ca). I am conducting a series of interviews with women who have converted to Islam. I invite female converts in the Fredericton and surrounding provinces to participate in this research.

I wish that the questions I ask each participant be answered to the best of one's abilities and in appropriate detail. Areas that will be covered will be surrounding their initial interest in Islam, the process of converting, and how you got to where you are today, including the ups and downs of converting to another religion. I will set aside at least an hour for each interview, obviously some answers may require more time so please be advised that an interview could go beyond an hour.

Of course if a participant does not want to continue the questions at any time during our conversation, you are free to not answer, or leave if you wish. Again, this is all based on voluntary participation. If you also do not want to answer a particular question, simply tell me and we will move on to the next. I will do my best to make sure you are very comfortable with the questions and in answering them.

This information will be used in my Master's thesis and will help further my understanding of women converting to Islam and help to further research on why women choose to convert to the Islamic faith. For example, a question that you will most likely be asked: "What sparked your interest in learning more about Islam?"

Any information that you do not want to be published, will not be. Any personal information, i.e. - one's own name, names of people, places, can all be changed if you wish, simply let me know.

If you would like a copy of the final publication of my thesis, please let me know and I will do my best to get you a copy from my program's secretary.

If you have any questions, concerns, comments, below is my information - please contact me at my email address or home phone: e*****@unb.ca or (5**) 4** - 3*3*.

Lastly, thank you ALL for your involvement & participation. It is greatly appreciated in furthering this research!

Consent; please fill out.

I, _____ have read this form and know my information will not be visible to the general public if I do not want it to be. I will answer the questions to the best of my ability and I am fully aware that the interviewer, Ella Sentse is available if I have any concerns, issues, problems, and will contact her at the given information above.

I wish to participate in this interview; YES _____ NO _____.

If 'Yes,' please fill out the below information;

Participant, please print name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer, print name: _____

Interviewer's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Supervisor: _____

Date: _____

Co-Supervisor: _____

Date: _____

Curriculum Vitae

Ella M. E. Sentse

Education:

Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, *University of New Brunswick*, 2016

Bachelor of Arts, *St. Thomas University*, 2012

Publications:

Indigenous Education in Contemporary Canada. Unpublished BA Honours thesis, St. Thomas University, 2012.

Dances with Dependency Opinion Piece. Native Student Council Online Journal, October 24th, 2011.

Conference Presentations:

- *Women Converting to Islam in Canada; A Narrative Case Study*. Canadian Society for the Study of Religion Annual Conference, University of Ottawa, 2015.
- *Women Converting to Islam in Canada; A Narrative Case Study*. Workshop on the Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada. Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2014.

Awards:

- UNB Alumnae Student Travel Bursary, 2015
- UNB Alumnae Student Travel Bursary, 2014
- University of New Brunswick Fredericton Bursary, 2012
- Rabbi David Spiro Scholarship, 2011
- St. Thomas University recommendation by the Department of Sociology, Adele Mueller, 2009
- St. Thomas University Entrance Scholarship, 2008
- Fundy Community Foundation Folsom - MacMorran Scholarship, 2008

- M.Y.N.M. Club Scholarship, 2008
- M.A.D.D. Scholarship, 2008

Volunteer and Achievements:

- Syrian Refugee Family Sponsor & Settlement volunteer, 2015-Present
- Coordinator, Celebration of Faith in Diversity, 2012-Present
- Vice President – St. Thomas University & UNB - Native Student Council, 2011-2012
- Native Student Council attendant, 2008-2013