

Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado

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Recommended Citation

Bowen, Patrick D. "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009). <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol1/iss1/4>

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Patrick D. Bowen

CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN THE UNITED
STATES: A CASE STUDY IN
DENVER, COLORADO

Despite the fact that there has been a dramatic increase in conversion to Islam in the United States since 9/11,¹ no single work has analyzed the trends of a diverse range of U.S. converts (i.e. men *and* women; white, Latino, *and* black). While there is some justification for treating each group separately, at many mosques throughout the country, all these groups are represented and interact.² This is the case at the Denver Sunni mosque, Colorado Muslim Society (CMS), where thirteen converts were interviewed for this study. This sample represents

1. One CAIR report stated 34,000 Americans converted in the months following the attack. Cited in Brendan Bernhard, *White Muslim: From LA to New York... To Jihad?* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2006), 14; "NBC NEWS: 20000 Americans Convert To ISLAM Each Year, 75% Of Them Women," September 9, 2008, <http://video.msn.com/?mkt=en-us&brand=msnbc&fg=email&vid=1151784d-66c1-4310-afc2-06ed464eb2ed&from=00> (accessed January 29, 2009).

2. For reasons why they have been and can legitimately be treated separately, see Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 6; Edward E. Curtis IV, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 660; Nuri Tinaz, "Conversion of African Americans to Islam," dissertation, University of Warwick (2001), 99; and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America," *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* Eds. John L. Esposito and Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 46. For examples of interactions between African American, white, Latino, and immigrant Muslims, see, for example, Turner, 232; Margaret Ramirez, "New Islamic Movement Seeks Latino Converts," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1999; and Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

the spectrum of converts in the U. S. since members are white, Latino, and black, eleven converted after 9/11, and there are eight females and five males. It should be noted that Muslim tradition has held that while Muslim men are allowed to marry Jewish or Christian women, Muslim women are generally discouraged from marrying non-Muslim men. This may have possibly affected the decision of two of the men in this study to convert, but neither explicitly reported this as a motive. In fact, all of the converts in this study reported that they experienced no social pressure in making their decision to convert. This essay seeks to contribute to the literature on conversion to Islam in the West, and to begin to explain why in the U.S. conversion to Islam has increased since 9/11.

In *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Lewis Rambo offers a 7-stage model that accounts for the various processes that take place throughout a convert's experience. These stages—context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences—are together interactive and accumulative, accounting for the fact that sometimes individuals go back and forth between stages.³ With this model, Rambo has provided a helpful way of examining the complex processes in conversion. This essay uses these stages as a framework for analyzing the results of my fieldwork, as well as for evaluating the results in light of other studies on Western converts to Islam.

The interviews were conducted over the course of two months at a weekly “Beginning Islam” class at the mosque. I interviewed the converts in a corner of the classroom while class was being conducted. I asked them 32 questions about their conversion experience, and each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the detail of each respondent's answers. The respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 57, with a mean of 34.7 and a median of 29.

CONTEXT

Context can shape the nature of conversion: “context encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate

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

and repress the process of conversion.”⁴ Rambo distinguishes between macrocontext and microcontext. The macrocontext is the major systems of the environment in which the conversion takes place (political, religious, economic, etc.) and the microcontext is the “person’s family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood.”⁵ Each plays its own role in the convert’s experience.

The environment for converts in the U.S. is different than for those in Europe. For example, the U.S. is seen as having a more religious population than European countries.⁶ Colorado, in particular, has a large Catholic population, followed by Evangelical Protestants. Its Muslim community is less than one percent of the state’s total population.⁷ A handful of Muslims arrived in Colorado beginning in the early twentieth century, and the community had no more than a few hundred people in the 1960s. However, there has been significant growth since the 1970s as a result of reduced restrictions on immigration to the U.S., beginning with the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, and an increase of Muslim refugees coming, since the 1980s, from the Middle East, Europe, and, more recently, Africa.⁸ Today there are roughly twenty to twenty-five thousand Muslims in Colorado.⁹ Because the community is still small, Muslims of all ethnic backgrounds attend Denver’s largest mosque (the CMS). The Muslim community has had relatively few difficulties with the surrounding population,

4. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 20.

5. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 21-22.

6. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

7. The Association of Religion Data Archives, “State Membership Report: Colorado,” http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/08_2000.asp, Internet (accessed February 16, 2009); Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, “Counting White and Black Subgroups,” <http://mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/BlackWhite/DiversityBWDDataPages/2080msaBWct.htm> (accessed February 16, 2009); Adherents.com, “Islam,” available from http://adherents.com/Na/Na_334.html (accessed February 16, 2009). The size I give for Colorado’s Muslim community is based on the estimates given by these sources and Muslim leaders.

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

9. Patrick D. Bowen, “Muslims in Colorado: From a Novelty Religion to a Thriving Community,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29/3 (2009): 364.



Colorado Muslim Society Mosque (Courtesy author)

though since 9/11, there have been some reports of harassment.¹⁰ Concomitantly, the Muslim community has increasingly been involved in interfaith and community-based projects. As the community of those born into Islam has grown, so has the convert community. Early converts to Islam in Colorado were mostly women who married Muslim men, but recently, especially after 9/11, more and more men and single women are converting.

Of the 13 respondents, only 4 were originally from Colorado. Two of these 4 were those who converted prior to 9/11, both in the 1980s. Three of the respondents lived in only one previous location before moving to Colorado as adults, however, 2 of the 3 were immigrants to the U.S. The 5 remaining respondents

10. "Fallout of Hatred—FBI Reports that Crimes Doubled After Terror Attacks," *Rocky Mountain News*, December 12, 2002; "Colorado: Hate Crimes Rise 50% after 9/11 Attacks," *Washington Crime News Service*, January 17, 2003, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_ga3985/is_200301/ai_n9203989 (accessed on February 16, 2009); "Denver Mosque Receiving Threats," *TheDenverChannel.com*, May 13, 2004, <http://www.thedenverchannel.com/print/3301210/detail.htm> (accessed December 2, 2007).

lived in more than one state or country, during their childhoods, due to various factors. Having a significant change in one's place of residence, then, is a theme for 7 out of the 13 converts. For the remaining 5, only 3 have never lived outside of Colorado, and 1 of those 3 travelled abroad for several months. In the literature on conversion to Islam in the West, the theme of having multiple residences is almost never mentioned. At most, researchers might note whether their respondents are currently living in urban or rural areas, with urban areas being the most typical. It should be noted that the majority of converts in my study, while moving frequently, have lived in primarily suburban environments.¹¹ If a person has to continually readjust her life, and, therefore, her identity, because she moves to several different places, this might result in being detached from a traditional culture and having a less stable identity—both of which are factors that scholars have noted as contributing to conversion.¹² It is noteworthy that while changing residence is a likely factor in the conversion of my respondents, social class is not: 3 identified themselves as “poor” during their youth, 4 as “middle class to poor,” 3 as “middle class,” and 3 as “upper middle class.”

Education and occupation are factors that diverge from the findings of other Western converts. Of my respondents, 3 had dropped out of secondary school, 3 were attending college courses at the time of the interview, and only 2 had a B.A. or equivalent degree. Anway, who looked at female U.S. converts, found that 53 percent of her respondents had a BA or higher, 12 percent had an MA, and 6 percent had an MD or PhD. Anway's results, however, are probably more revealing of her method for obtaining responses than of U.S. female converts in general. She sent out 350 questionnaires and only received 53 back; those who took the time to respond were probably the better-educated who are more accustomed to writing and filling out surveys.¹³ However, other research-

11. Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 9; Mounia Lakhdar, Genevieve Vinsonneau, Michael J. Apter, and Etienne Mullet, “Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17/1 (2007): 6; Tina Gudrun Jensen, “Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined,” *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 644.

12. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 31 and 41.

13. Carol L. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path* (MO: Yawna Publications, 2002), 6.

ers who did one-on-one interviews with European subjects also saw higher levels of education: Zebiri noted that the converts' education was generally above average¹⁴ and Köse reported that of his subjects, 60 percent had at least a BA and 20 percent had graduate degrees.¹⁵ Similarly, Zebiri and Poston found that many of their subjects were professionals;¹⁶ while for my respondents, only 2 could be classified as having professional-type jobs, while 2 worked construction-type jobs, 4 had clerical/service jobs, 2 were homemakers, and 2 were full-time students. Thus, the level of occupation was evenly distributed. I believe that the lower educational and occupational level of recent U.S. converts, as compared to the findings of previous studies concerning European and older American converts, should be seen in relation to the increased rate of conversion in the U.S. Post-9/11 U.S. conversion has been higher in the U.S. than in Europe, likely because of more pervasive media coverage of Islam in the U.S. It seems that while converts in Europe are the relative elite whose education allows them to know more about a minority religion than the average person, because the attacks happened on U.S. soil, U.S. citizens of all classes have been exposed to information about Islam. In addition, because Islam is usually spread through interaction with born Muslims, the increased rate of refugees to the U.S. (which hosts almost twice as many as the United Kingdom)¹⁷ has meant that more "common" citizens are being exposed to Islam in the U.S. than in Europe. Of my respondents, only 15 percent had any level of university education (which is about half of the national average);¹⁸ this indicates that Islam is actually more attractive to those with less education. This will be explored in more depth later.

Another set of responses that differs from previous studies' findings is that of religious participation before conversion to Islam. Of the respondents 5 were

14. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 9.

15. Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London; NY: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 80.

16. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 9; Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171.

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

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

raised Catholic, 1 Episcopalian, 1 Church of England, 2 Baptist, 2 non-denominational Christian, 1 Pentecostal, 1 Jewish (this person was raised Jewish and Christian, so both religions are counted), and 1 atheist. Six of the respondents regularly attended religious services through at least high school, though 4 of those stopped attending soon thereafter. Four of the respondents attended religious services regularly until their early-to-mid teenage years. Aside from the person raised atheist, 2 others had little religious involvement in their youth. Often, the reason people gave for no longer attending their original church was because they saw the membership and/or leadership of that church as hypocrites, not because they rejected all their former beliefs.¹⁹ Of Zebiri's subjects, two-thirds had a non-religious or nominally Christian background;²⁰ 85 percent of Köse's respondents came from a family which did not identify with a church, and 51 percent said they had "no" or a "weak" religious upbringing;²¹ in Poston's study, 57 percent were raised Christians, but only 32 percent had strong religious participation.²² Conversely, in Anway's study, only 2 said religion was not important in their formative years.²³ The results of Zebiri and Köse, who both studied converts in England, can be seen as reflective of the overall lower rates of religious participation and belief in Europe. Poston's results, on the other hand, might be connected to the fact that the subjects of his study, while American, did not convert at a time when many other people were converting to Islam. They converted when Islam was a much more unknown religion and therefore more threatening to someone who was raised in a religion. Thus, converts to Islam before the 1980s, as Poston's results show, were probably less likely to have been connected to a particular religious denomination. As Islam increasingly became more of a household word in the 1980s due to world political events and increased immigration, more religious Americans felt comfortable to convert—and this is supported by Anway's results which were based on questionnaires

19. Interestingly, those with religious backgrounds in Köse's study provided similar explanations. Köse, *Conversion*, 191.

20. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 44.

21. Köse, *Conversion*, 38-39.

22. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 165.

23. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 11.

given in the early 1990s. My own findings confirm this trend as well. Not only did the majority of my respondents come from backgrounds that included regular religious participation until at least their teenage years, the families in which they lived were typically liberal in their views towards other religions and races.²⁴

It is in regard to childhood happiness that my results again correlate with those of other studies. While some early scholars of conversion believed that family unhappiness during a convert's youth was a precondition for conversion, Köse refuted this. Of his respondents, 44 percent were happy, 26 percent moderate, and 30 percent unhappy.²⁵ My own findings were similar: 15 percent very happy, 55 percent happy/moderate, 15 percent unhappy, and 15 percent very unhappy. Few of my respondents had problems with crime, drugs, or alcohol, and few reported particularly traumatic experiences. In addition, like Köse's subjects, some of the Denver converts had problematic relationships with their fathers. Three of the respondents (23 percent) had fathers who were absent during a large part of their childhood, and 2 others (15 percent) had fathers who were frequently absent and with whom the respondents had a bad relationship. Twenty-six percent of Köse's subjects had absent fathers, and 36 percent had passive and withdrawn fathers.²⁶ Likewise, Roald reported that few of her subjects had poor relationships with their fathers.²⁷ Köse suggests that absent or withdrawn fathers may "exacerbate the child's perception of reality outside the home as unreliable,"²⁸ and therefore may be a factor that motivates some to seek a "reliable" family in a new religion. Generally, however, most converts to Islam in the West do not convert in their teenage years (as will be discussed later), and this is probably reflective of their high levels of happiness throughout childhood, even taking into account their fathers' absence. The next sections exam-

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

25. Köse, *Conversion*, 32.

26. *Ibid.*, 35.

27. Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004), 92.

28. Köse, *Conversion*, 35.

ine how and why these people who have “happy” childhoods come to adopt a whole new religion and way of life.

CRISIS

In 1965, Lofland and Stark wrote that tension is a predisposing condition for conversion. They defined tension as “a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up.”²⁹ Rambo agreed with this assessment and borrowed their definition for his second stage, “crisis.” He suggests that a crisis can take many forms: social, political, a process of self-exploration, or even in hearing a preaching of sins.³⁰ Unfortunately, this is such a broad definition that it is hard to distinguish “crisis” from identity formation. Even William James in 1902 remarked that a conversion which is due to a “sense of incompleteness and imperfection; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like,” is still “in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child’s small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity.”³¹ Nevertheless, looking at Köse’s findings, in the two years preceding conversion, 48.6 percent of his respondents said their lives were filled with distress. Based on these authors, then, I believe that there is something to the idea of “crisis” preceding conversion, but Lofland and Stark’s definition is too broad to be helpful. Instead, I look at whether the respondent indicated that they went through any stressful life change in the few years before conversion. All but two respondents indicated some type of stressful event.

Köse classified stress preceding conversion in five categories. Thus, he found that his subjects reported 1) *spiritual meaninglessness* (48.6 percent); 2) *interpersonal* stress (27.1 percent); 3) *character* stress, meaning problems with

29. John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 864.

30. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 46.

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

drugs or temper (18.6 percent); *material* stress involving employment or education (11.4 percent); and *physical* stress (7.1 percent). I will slightly alter Köse's categories to describe my respondents, noting that some people indicated more than one type of stressful event: 1) spiritual confusion, 23 percent; 2) interpersonal, 38 percent; 3) character (drugs/alcohol, temper), 23 percent; 4) material (job, school, incarceration), 15 percent; 5) physical, 8 percent; 6) moved to a different city, 54 percent. The fact that the Denver converts were not dealing with spiritual meaninglessness so much as spiritual confusion probably reflects the pervasiveness of religious belief in the U.S. as compared to Europe, and so it can be assumed that spiritual meaninglessness is not as much an issue for Americans. Similarly, while Zebiri, Roald, and Köse each said dissatisfaction with a Western, materialist culture was an important motivator to look for other sources of meaning, this factor was at best only hinted at by the Denver converts.³² All the other results in my study (interpersonal, character, etc.) were comparable to Köse's. However, we again see that changing residence is an important theme for these Denver converts.

QUEST

Rambo sees quest as a "process of building meaning" and purpose, and this is continually done by all people. During times of crisis, however, this process is intensified. Rambo suggests we look at 3 factors of the quest: response style, structural availability, and motivational structures.³³ The first factor, response style, boils down to whether the convert played an active or passive role in his or her conversion. Early studies of converts asserted that they were mostly passive victims to proselytization techniques of sects, but this has increasingly been shown not to be the case,³⁴ and is not supported by my findings. The Denver converts were very active in seeking out Islam. As I will explain below, even when they had close relationships with Muslims who told them about the reli-

32. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 2; Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 100; Köse, *Conversion*, 79.

33. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56.

34. *Ibid.*, 58.

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

One of the most salient pieces of evidence that the Denver converts were actively searching and that they were free to choose a new religion (structural availability), is the fact that 7 of them (54 percent), before they converted to Islam, participated in religions other than those in which they were raised. Four of the 7 were for a time affiliated with 1 other religion before converting to Islam, 1 person with 2, 1 with 4, and the other with 10. The religions they participated in varied and no clear pattern emerges. Two people were active in Pentecostalism, 2 participated in witchcraft, 2 had Masonic affiliations, 2 were at some point overtly atheist, and the other religions were only affiliated with by 1 person each: Southern Baptist, Christian Science, Religious Science, Hinduism, Shamanism, Buddhism, yoga, Paganism, magic, Kabalistic practice, Catholicism, and Judaism. Interestingly, this "seeking" behavior is rarely seen in other studies of Western converts to Islam. Only 6 (20 percent) of Zebiri's subjects chose Islam after looking at other religions;³⁵ Köse only classified 22 percent as "seekers,"³⁶ and Anway does not provide a number, but only a few of the subjects' responses mentioned sampling other religions.³⁷ Again, we can attribute the low findings in Zebiri and Köse's work to the generally low religious participation in Europe. My research shows that the converts with the weakest religious upbringing, like many in Europe, did not sample other religions. Anway's results are not as easy

35. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 44.

36. Köse, *Conversion*, 121.

37. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 11.

to understand. Her respondents were all women, but from my research it appears that women participated in other religions about as often as men (for the Denver converts, 4 women and 3 men tried different religions). Anway's respondents were also better educated, but in my results, the people with BA's and the professionals all were "seekers." At this point, I cannot hypothesize as to why Anway's results differed and I only hope that more research will shed light on this contradiction.

ENCOUNTER

Encounter, for Rambo, is looking at how people first learn about a religion. People are often introduced to new religions by advocates of that religion. In fact, in the history of conversion to Islam, the phenomenon of conversion without ever having met a Muslim face-to-face is extremely rare,³⁸ though sometimes classes on religion or television broadcasts do pique the interest of future converts. But in my particular study, just as in most others, converts' interest in Islam usually came after meeting Muslims face-to-face. It should also be said, however, that people rarely convert immediately after their first encounter with Islam and sometimes people may go several years between their first encounter and feeling like they might want to convert. Here, I will only evaluate first encounters as reported to me by the respondents when I asked them how they were introduced to Islam. None of the respondents credited the news media, though by living in the U.S., I think media exposure would have been unavoidable especially as most of the respondents converted after 9/11.³⁹ Instead, I believe that the responses given to me indicate the time when each person began to actively learn details about Islam, even if this was not immediately followed by an interest in conversion.

Most of the Denver converts either did not know any Muslims in their

38. This is noted in the seminal work on the subject, originally published in 1896, Thomas Walker Arnold's, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore: Shirkat-I-Qualam, 1956), 447.

39. Increased US media attention to Muslims after 9/11 has been noted by Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna in "Muslim Americans in the News Before and After 9-11," Conference paper, Presented at Harvard Symposium Restless Searchlight, August 12, 2002.

youth or never talked about Islam with a Muslim that they knew. It was when they matured, that these converts gained relationships with Muslims: 3 of the respondents had made Muslim friends in the U.S., 4 were married to or dating a Muslim or person in the process of converting, 1 had a close family member who was in the process of converting, and 2 lived in Muslim countries where they made Muslim friends. Of the remaining 3, 1 started reading about Islam on her own and 2 learned about it in college courses. In Köse's study, the first social contact with Islam was spread similarly: travel to another country (23 percent), conversation with a Muslim (37 percent), reading literature (23 percent), man-woman relationship (14 percent), and introduced by other family members (3 percent).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Kose's man-woman relationship category appears to have a lower percentage than in the other studies. One-third of Zebiri's converts were married to Muslim men at the time of conversion,⁴¹ Roald observed that most Scandinavian converts marry Muslim men before conversion,⁴² and Anyway showed that 63 percent of her subjects married Muslim men before taking the *shahada* as well.⁴³ Zebiri and Anyway both mention that women are usually introduced to Islam by their Muslim husbands who are usually only nominally Muslim and rarely pressure the women to convert. The same can be said for the Denver converts who were in a relationship with a Muslim.

Throughout history, there has been little organized effort among Muslims to proselytize. Even in Colorado and throughout the United States in general, where Muslims have increasingly organized proselytization efforts and become involved with interfaith dialogues, on the whole, these efforts do not bring in many people. Even converts to Christianity represent less than 1 percent of all people contacted by the Christian churches.⁴⁴ None of the Denver converts in this study indicated that they were introduced to Islam by a formal missionary

40. Köse, *Conversion*, 112

41. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 224, 228.

42. Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 95-96.

43. Anyway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 21. The *shahada* is the Islamic profession of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." Traditionally, a person is considered converted once this said in front of another Muslim.

44. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 88.

or interfaith effort. Thomas Walker Arnold, the first scholar to probe western conversion to Islam noted that in general Islam has had no ecclesiastical body, no priests, no organized proselytization system, and that “calling” (*da’wah*) people to the faith is a repeated exhortation in the Qur’an.⁴⁵ Based on this, he suggested that the individual Muslim “takes more trouble to learn the doctrines and observances of his faith, and thus becoming deeply impressed with the importance of them to himself, is more likely to become an exponent of the missionary character of his creed in the presence of the unbeliever.”⁴⁶ This is reflected in the percentage (77 percent) of the Denver converts who came to Islam only after talking with Muslims. Furthermore, Anway observed that in the case of male nominal Muslims who take Christian wives in the U.S., it was not that they were not practicing Islam because they did not know it, but because they were separated from the social aspect of it.⁴⁷ Still, these men often maintained some Islamic ideas, and transmitted them to their significant others. When the woman converted, the men usually increased their religious participation.

INTERACTION

Rambo suggests that to study converts’ interaction with the new religion, we should look at 4 factors: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles.⁴⁸ What unites the converts in my particular study is that most of them started taking the “Beginning Islam” course at the mosque soon before or immediately after their conversion. The majority of the converts had only known 1 or 2 Muslims before contacting the mosque. When they did so, the mosque secretary generally referred them to the man who teaches the “Beginning Islam” course and he encouraged them to attend that class and a “Basic Arabic” course as well. There, the converts interact with other converts and develop a friendship with the teacher. Most of the respondents attend both classes, Friday prayer, and other mosque

45. 16:126; 42:13-14; 3:19,99-100; 22:66-67; and 9:6.

46. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 409.

47. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 21. It is more difficult to practice Islam, which requires constant praying and rituals difficult to perform in non-Muslim countries (such as fasting during Ramadan), when you are living alone in a society that is not built around these things.

48. *Ibid.*, 103.

gatherings. Before the classes were offered (starting in 2000), small study circles were held in people's houses and both of the respondents who converted before 9/11 participated in those study groups. Anway also noted that her respondents generally all took part in ongoing study,⁴⁹ and Poston noted that Islamic lessons were instrumental in 75 percent of the conversions he looked at.⁵⁰

Intellectual activities relating to Islam are generally popular among Western converts. Thirteen out of 30 converts in Zebiri's research said reading and religious debate were key to their conversion.⁵¹ Köse discovered that 71 percent of his subjects were motivated to convert because of intellectual reasons discovered by Muslim interaction.⁵² For the Denver converts, all but 1 indicated they did some Islamic reading before taking the *shahada*. Most read general books on Islam, and 4 also read the Qur'an. Overall, 8 of the Denver converts indicated that they were attracted to some sort of intellectual or theological aspect of Islam: 4 identified Islam's congruence with science, 2 appreciated its congruity with their former religion, and two liked that Islam did not have the contradictions which they saw within their old religion.

In general, the Denver converts indicated that the lifestyle change to Islam was not very difficult and reported that they had already been doing some of the things required by Islam. All but 3 said their alcohol consumption was very low by the time they considered converting, and only 1 indicated that it took a few months to stop. And all said it was relatively easy to give up pork products, some had even stopped eating pork long before conversion. Köse found similar results: only 6 of his subjects continued to drink, and all gave up pork, as did Anway's subjects.⁵³ Concerning the wearing of the *hijab* and long sleeves, all but 1 of the female converts does it all the time.⁵⁴ Three of the 8 said it took a few months, sometimes longer, to wear it everywhere. The workplace was

49. Ibid., 7.

50. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 176.

51. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 56.

52. Köse, *Conversion*, 98.

53. Köse, *Conversion*, 130; Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 7.

54. The *hijab* is a head scarf. The wearing of this and other clothing that covers the female's body, such as long sleeves, is a sign of modesty and has a long tradition in Islam.

where most were hesitant to wear it. Only 1 of the men I interviewed wore a long robe on a regular basis, and another wore one intermittently. These were also the only 2 men with beards. Anway found that only two of her respondents did not wear the *hijab* full time,⁵⁵ and Köse saw that while 30 of the women did not wear a scarf, all wore long sleeves and a high neck, 6 of the men donned robes, and half had beards.⁵⁶ Most of the Denver converts indicated that they try to do the 5 daily prayers and participate in Ramadan. Forty-nine percent of Köse's respondents did the 5 daily prayers, while the other 51 percent believed they should, and 73 percent of his respondents did the full fast for Ramadan.⁵⁷ Anway's respondents all said they did the daily prayers and the full fast for Ramadan.⁵⁸ In the study of Parisian converts by Lakhdar et. al, 171 out of 191 said they pray on a regular basis, and 187 said they fast for Ramadan.⁵⁹ Given the difficulty, as reported by the Denver converts, of finding a quiet and clean place to pray and a work environment that would allow it, it is hard to believe that the majority of the converts in the other studies regularly made all 5 daily prayers. On the other hand, when it comes to using Islamic expressions, particularly "*insha'allah*" ("God willing"), this seems to be ubiquitous for Western converts.

Rambo suggests that rituals "provide integrative modes of identifying with and connecting to the new way of life."⁶⁰ They reinforce the values and lessons of the new religion, they distinguish the convert from the people not in the religion which solidifies the convert's own identity, they validate the religion to other members of the religious community, and they can help provide a spiritual experience for the person performing them.⁶¹ Arnold, in listing 6 reasons why Islam was successful, noted that the 5 daily prayers are a constant reminder

55. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 7.

56. Köse, *Conversion*, 131.

57. *Ibid.*, 130.

58. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 7.

59. Lakhdar et al, "Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults," 6.

60. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 107-108.

61. *Ibid.*, 115-116.

of religion and community,⁶² as I believe is true also of the abstinence from alcohol and pork, the attending of prayer service and classes, the change of dress, and the adding of Islamic expressions into one's speech. All these help to define the convert's identity and role.

COMMITMENT

The level, kind, and time it takes to make a commitment required by a particular religion varies from religion to religion and from person to person. In the case of the Denver converts, it took on average 3.9 years after first learning about Islam until they officially converted, but for some it took only 6 months and others up to 12 years. And while study, rituals, and entering into a community were all important to the converts, each had his or her own perception of what was the main attraction to Islam which culminated in conversion. The converts were allowed to give multiple answers to what attracted them. The majority, 7, identified spiritual motives. For them, Islam "felt right," and these respondents usually indicated that while the intellectual aspects were important generally in their appreciation of Islam, their conversion was made because of non-intellectual motives. Others, conversely, were attracted to Islam's congruence with science and logic (4), its congruence with their former religion (2), the fact that it did not have contradictions like their former religion (2), its peacefulness/equality (3), and its discipline (1). Interestingly, European motives were primarily intellectual. Almost half of Zebiri's respondents emphasized intellectual motives; Roald's subjects mostly were attracted to Islam because it is a logical religion;⁶³ Köse found that 47 percent thought Islam offered a better philosophy of life, and overall, 71 percent had intellectual motivations, while only 4 percent had mystical motives (not including Sufis).⁶⁴ I believe that the higher rates of intellectual motives among the profiled Europeans are due to their being better educated and therefore more intellectually demanding of their new religion. Roald has also observed that the things attractive to converts about Islam change over time

62. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 417.

63. Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 89.

64. Köse, *Conversion*, 87, 98, 109.

and so it is possible that the relatively short time my respondents have been Muslim, 1.7 years (excluding the 2 who converted before 9/11), may play a part in shaping their response.

The average age at which the Denver converts took the *shahada* was 29.69 years. Poston found that the average age at conversion was 31.4 years.⁶⁵ Köse found the average age at conversion to be 29.7 years.⁶⁶ While my findings correspond with those of Poston and Köse, it should be noted that the age at conversion found in the work of Al-Qwidi, Zebiri, and Roald were all in their mid-20s.⁶⁷ Zebiri suggests that the reason for this difference is that these three particular studies were conducted after 9/11, and because of the wide exposure Islam was getting in response to the attacks, more people were curious about the religion, which meant more people became interested in converting and doing so faster.⁶⁸ While this probably does play a part, I believe that the composition of the sample group provides insight. Köse had a subject pool with more men than women while Roald and Zebiri had more female subjects than male.⁶⁹ It is possible that European women generally convert at a younger age than men, though this would not be consistent with my findings. Early work on conversion found that the average age at conversion was 15, but contemporary works show that conversion is usually later,⁷⁰ and is seen as a result of the process of creating a unified self in a modern world, which now takes longer than it did one hundred years ago. Erickson termed this the “moratorium” process and said that it generally ends in a person’s late 20s.⁷¹ This analysis appears to apply, but more work must be done to see general trends.

65. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 166.

66. Köse, *Conversion*, 37.

67. Al-Qwidi: age 25, cited in Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43; Zebiri: age 23.5 in Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43. In a study by Roald, though she did not give an average age, she found that “(80%) were under 30” in Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 109.

68. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 43.

69. Köse, *Conversion*, 2: 50 men, 20 women; Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 9: 20 women, 10 men; Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 97: 58% women.

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

71. Köse, *Conversion*, 60.

Traditionally, the only ritual required to convert to Islam is the saying of the *shahada* (“There is not god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”) in front of a Muslim witness. Though occasionally there have been other requirements,⁷² today this is generally all that is required to officially convert. Only 4 of the Denver converts took on a Muslim name, though none of them have changed it legally.⁷³ In England, Köse found that 81 percent took a Muslim name but only 6 percent legally changed it; and Jensen saw that “many” adopted new names, but these were “only seldom registered.”⁷⁴ It is not clear as to why the Denver converts did not change their names as much as their European counterparts. Nonetheless, one post-conversion ritual that seems fairly consistent is Muslim marriage. After converting, 5 Denver converts either married a Muslim or became engaged to one. One convert’s spouse ended up converting as well. Those who were already married, were married to Muslims, and those who were not married, indicated that they plan on marrying a Muslim, as has been the trend in other studies.⁷⁵ The percentage of Denver converts who were married to a Muslim before conversion (23 percent), however, is less than the percentages in the other studies,⁷⁶ which is probably reflective of the increased popularity of Islam which may embolden people to convert even without solid social ties in the new religion.

CONSEQUENCES

When a person converts to a new religion, especially one as stereotyped as Islam, the reactions of the extended family and friends can often times be difficult. Eight of the Denver converts’ families had negative reactions at first, but over time most grew to accept it. Often, there are some individuals in the

72. In Yemen, converts ate a “soup made from meat slaughtered according to Islamic law...” Bat-Zion Eraqi Korman, “Muslim Society as an Alternative: Jews Converting to Islam,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 14 (2007): 101.

73. Köse, *Conversion*, 128.

74. Jensen: 645.

75. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 224; Köse, *Conversion*, 80.

76. 63% in Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 21; 58% in Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context*, 97; 33% in Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 224; 57% in Köse, *Conversion*, 80.

extended family that continue to criticize the conversion or who completely disassociate from the convert. Only one convert reported that the extended family was supportive from the beginning. One convert has yet to tell the family, and others waited several months after conversion. Twice when I asked about the reaction of friends and family, no mention was even made of the family. Conversely, four of the converts had family members who also converted or are thinking about conversion. Friendships with non-Muslims, however, are generally ended. This is not usually the result of negative reactions from friends, but the fact that the converts' lives are so filled with Islamic activities and Muslim relationships, that they have no time for or see no purpose in maintaining friendships with non-Muslims. Two converts did not even mention friendships with non-Muslims when asked, but 2 also said they still have good non-Muslim friendships. These results correlate with those in other studies. Anway found that 46 percent of her subjects' families had negative reactions at first, but improved over time, 14 percent said their parents were supportive since day one, some were cut off from their family, and some said it was simply none of their parents' business.⁷⁷ Köse reported that parents were extremely unhappy or hostile in 19 percent of the cases, indifferent in 31 percent, supportive in 14 percent, 24 percent had not seen their parents' reactions (including the 11 percent who had not told their parents), and most friendships died out with hostility.⁷⁸ Zebiri found that converts usually ended associations with non-Muslims.⁷⁹ In general, Western converts have decent relationships with their families and minimal relationships with non-Muslim friends.

CONCLUSION

The Denver converts share a few similarities and several differences with the converts in previous studies. As has been shown, while all Western converts tend to take the *shahada* in their mid-to-late twenties, the education and occupations of the Denver converts are different from the others'. In addition,

77. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*, 46.

78. Köse, *Conversion*, 137-139.

79. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 187.

Denver converts, in this case study, generally share the experience of having moved several times before converting to Islam and having sampled other religions. Also, on the whole, the Denver converts were raised more religiously than their English counterparts. These religious differences, therefore, can be at least partially attributed to the culture from which the converts come. I believe that the other differences, especially education and occupation, are due to the pervasiveness of information about Islam in the media after 9/11. The experience of moving several times, however, has made these particular individuals amenable to conversion. It has been theorized for several years now that converts are generally “disconnected from the sources of power and support of the traditional culture.”⁸⁰ Without being able to develop long lasting roots in a particular place, combined with being raised with a liberal (religious and racial) worldview, these particular converts were receptive to the message of universal unity in Islam. The Denver mosque is also mostly populated by non-white Muslims, so this kind of egalitarian attitude would be a necessary precondition to convert. I believe that the particular phenomenon of having moved several times, while it may not be unique to the Denver converts, is reflective of the fact that they generally have less education than their American predecessors and European counterparts. Information about Islam has permeated American life since 9/11,⁸¹ and therefore has reached the less educated in a way that it has not before. Therefore, since not all who have learned about Islam in the past 8 years have converted (in fact, anti-Muslim sentiment actually increased after 9/11), I believe that those who converted, at least in part, did so because these were individuals who felt disconnected from their own culture sub-culture (not U.S./Western culture in general, which few of them overtly criticized). Islam provided these converts with a way of unifying their pre-existing egalitarian views with their predisposition (because of their religious backgrounds) to “spiritual” experiences. Furthermore, Islam was also able to reconcile questions about the relationship of religion with logic, provide an alternative to the apparent contradictions in their former religion, or, alternatively, appear as congruent with the

80. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 41.

81. See note 39.

aspects of their former religion that they liked. Islam's power of unifying these ideas in a coherent sense of meaning has meant that, as Zebiri observed, individuals are attracted to this religion despite conversion to it having a perceived decline in social status.⁸²

With these findings, we can test the hypotheses of other scholars. Based on his research, Köse proposed that there were three stages in the conversion of his subjects: 1) rejection of religion of origin, 2) getting acquainted with Muslims, and 3) experimenting with Islam, encouraged by intellectual motivations.⁸³ This model essentially holds true for the Denver converts, though their religious backgrounds were stronger than those of Köse's subjects, and intellectual motivations are not as important for the Denver converts. The fact that Köse's respondents were not "seekers," however, led him to reject Lofland and Stark's seven step conversion model.⁸⁴ But since several Denver converts were seekers, I believe the seven step model applies. Lofland and Stark believed that individuals had to meet increasingly narrow criteria in order to be able to convert. These steps were "Tension," similar to Rambo's "crisis;" "Type of Problem-Solving Perspective" in which an individual chose between psychiatric, political, or religious outlets, and converts usually chose religious; "Seekership" in which individuals sampled different religions; "Turning Point" is a new crisis (e.g. "recent migration," loss of employment, etc.) that immediately precedes conversion; "Cult of Affective Bonds" is an affective relationship developed between a convert and one or more members of the new religion; "Extra-Cult Affective Bonds" were, in general, minimal or irrelevant for converts; and "Intensive Interaction" in which the convert performs a variety of the required rituals of the religion.⁸⁵ Lofland and Stark's model appears to apply to the majority of Denver converts.

Additionally, in his book, Rambo proposed several other hypotheses and encouraged their being tested. While many could not be looked at because of the limits of this study, some of his hypotheses applied: "those who do not con-

82. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, 41.

83. Köse, *Conversion*, 122-123.

84. Köse, *Conversion*, 121

85. Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver," 864-873.

vert in a hostile setting are marginal members of society,” “consonance of core values and symbols will facilitate conversion,” and “converts selectively adopt and adapt the new religion to meet their needs.”⁸⁶ Finally, I return to Arnold who made general conclusions about the success of Islam’s proselytization efforts over the centuries. He attributed Islam’s success to: 1) Islam’s theological simplicity, which is easily grasped by people of all education, and holds at its core views that are already held by Christians and Jews (i.e., the oneness of God); 2) the fact that Islam is founded on rational principles; 3) the ability of the *Hajj* to constantly reinvigorate proselytizers; 4) the paying of alms supported and held together a feeling of community; 5) the many required prayers are constant reminders to practitioners about their faith and the community in which they practice it; and 6) particular circumstances for each time and place.⁸⁷ The power of numbers 1, 2, and 5 have already been noted in this study, and the paying of alms (number four) was also fairly consistent among the Denver converts. On the other hand, pilgrimage to Mecca, as far as I know, has not played a strong role in energizing proselytizers, but in today’s day and age of worldwide instantaneous communication, and the emergence of several internet sites on Islam and *da’wah* in particular,⁸⁸ I believe the *Hajj* is less necessary to motivate proselytizers than ever before. Arnold’s final factor, number 6, should be identified as the post-9/11 world in the modern West with instant media communications and increased Muslim immigration. As long as “terrorist” is treated as synonymous with Arab and “Islam”⁸⁹ thereby keeping the religion in the news, and Muslims continue to arrive in the U.S., it is likely conversion to Islam will proliferate.

86. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 41-42.

87. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 413-417.

88. Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet* (NY: Palgrave, 2004), 111.

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