

Exploring the Dynamics of Muslim Conversion in Ottawa: Processes, Challenges, and Social Integration

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of Muslim converts in Ottawa, with a particular focus on the processes of conversion, the challenges faced by converts, and their social integration within Canadian society. Through in-depth interviews with 15 converts, the research dives into the role of Islamophobia, societal stereotypes, and cultural identity in shaping the conversion experience. It examines how negative perceptions of Islam, such as the association with terrorism or the belief that all Muslims are Arabs, affect the decision to embrace Islam, and how converts navigate these stereotypes. The study also looks at the intellectual motivations behind conversion and how converts reconcile their new religious identity with their previous cultural and social contexts. Additionally, the research investigates the practical challenges faced by converts, such as adapting to Islamic practices, dealing with the language barrier, and finding appropriate support networks. By contributing to the literature on Muslim conversion, particularly within the Canadian context, this study highlights the need for greater support for converts, including access to educational resources, mentorship, and community-building initiatives, to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for Muslim converts in Canada.

DEDICATION

To my beloved daughter, **Mariam Mina**,

the sweetest girl whose smile motivated me

every morning throughout this thesis journey.

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Continuing my education in Canada became a reality after successfully navigating a highly competitive selection process in Turkey, which ultimately enabled me to secure sponsorship for my studies. First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Presidency of Religious Affairs for their generous support of my research. I am especially thankful to Dr. Selim Argun, whose unwavering support has been an enduring source of motivation and encouragement throughout my academic journey.

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I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Adele Reinhartz, who taught the first course I took in this program. Her invaluable guidance in the Methodology course and throughout the thesis preparation process was instrumental. Her expertise and dedication opened new intellectual horizons for me. One particularly memorable experience during the Methodology course was the guest lecture series, which left a lasting impression on me.

Among the guest speakers was Aaron W. Hughes. After reading one of his articles, I remember saying to myself, “I want to read everything this professor has written.” Months later, as I finalized my thesis topic and sought a co-supervisor, none other than Aaron W. Hughes was recommended to me. This delightful coincidence may come as a surprise to both Prof. Reinhartz and Prof. Hughes as they read these lines. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Hughes for his steadfast support and his thoughtful and prompt feedback, which played a crucial role in shaping my thesis.

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Introduction

“They couldn’t understand why I couldn’t take off my hijab, and I had difficulty explaining this to some people. But now, I think they see me with my hijab, and they just perceive it as my hair. Now, they just say, 'Oh, yeah, that’s Dalia.' “

One of the most challenging aspects of life is probably explaining yourself to others and waiting for acceptance. But what happens when people do not understand you? What if you struggle to find support for the decisions you have made? What if, after making changes in your life, others no longer see you the same way? It is at times like these that, after a long struggle, you may find yourself needing to prove yourself to everyone once again—just like Dalia or other converts who have enriched this thesis with their thoughts.

As someone who went through a similar conversion process about 10 years ago, the words above carry much deeper meaning for me than they might for others. It is deeply moving to listen to others' experiences and watch your own memories unfold like a film in your mind. For this reason, this thesis holds meaning beyond academic interest. So, what does this thesis offer you? It explores the experiences of Muslim converts in Canada, focusing on the personal, social, and cultural transformations they undergo when embracing Islam. The aim of my study is to better understand the multifaceted processes involved in conversion and the challenges that converts face as they navigate their new religious identity within Canadian society.

Chapter 1 introduces the methodology of the study, offering an overview of the relevant literature on Islamic conversion and presenting the research questions that guided the inquiry. This chapter also details the process of selecting participants, the methods used for data collection, and the limitations of the research. As an insider researcher, I reflect on the

advantages and potential risks inherent in this position. Key background information about the participants, such as their educational histories, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds, is provided to set the stage for the subsequent analysis.

The examination of prejudices and stereotypes regarding Islam and Muslims in Canada occupies the core of Chapter 2, titled “*From Prejudice to Understanding: The Journey to Islam in Canada*.” Here, I explore the origins of these misconceptions and analyze how individuals first encounter Islam. The chapter follows the stages of conversion, outlining the factors that lead people to embrace Islam. I also compare the conversion motifs found in the existing literature with the findings of my study, highlighting the similarities and differences between conversion experiences in Canada and other countries.

Moving on to Chapter 3, “*Family and Identity: The Evolution of Family Reactions to Converts’ Embrace of Islam*,” the focus shifts to family reactions. Through detailed narratives from various converts, I discuss both the positive and negative responses from their families. The chapter further explores how converts manage these negative reactions, protect their identities, and seek support from various sources to cope with these challenges.

The post-conversion stages of zealotry, disappointment, acceptance, and secularism are thoroughly examined in Chapter 4. I illustrate how each convert experiences these stages, showing how their personal histories shape their journey. Additionally, I reflect on how the post-conversion experience in Canada aligns with or deviates from the models found in existing literature.

Chapter 5 dives into the challenges converts face in adapting to an Islamic lifestyle. This chapter discusses the changes converts experience in their identity and daily routines, including how they

manage their professional lives, the challenges associated with learning Arabic, and the financial obstacles they often encounter. It highlights the practical difficulties that accompany conversion and adjusting to a new way of life.

In Chapter 6, “*Between Whiteness and Islam: The Identity Struggle of White Muslim Converts in Canada*,” the narrative shifts to the identity struggles of white converts. Drawing on global literature on white converts, I analyze how their experiences intersect with the dynamics of white privilege and Islam within the Canadian context. The chapter reveals how whiteness can serve both as an advantage and as a challenge during the conversion process.

Chapter 7 tackles the differences between born Muslims and converts, focusing on the perceptual, cultural, and religious distinctions that arise. I examine the stereotypes that born Muslims hold about converts, the challenges these two groups face, and their differing views on the relationship between religion and culture.

Finally, in the conclusion, I summarize the key findings of the study, relate them to the existing body of literature, and offer insights into future research directions.

Chapter 1: Research Methodology, Methods, and Literature

Literature Review

The 20th century witnessed significant developments in our understanding of religious conversion. Early studies primarily focused on Christian communities, with theoretical frameworks shaped by theological and psychological perspectives. For example, William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) explored the personal and subjective nature of religious experiences, providing a foundation for understanding conversion as a deeply individual process. However, when examining Muslim conversion experiences, it becomes evident that these experiences differ from those of Christian converts, as the cultural, social, and religious contexts of both religions are distinct.

The experiences of Muslim converts, however, vary significantly due to the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Islam. Scholars like Anne S. Roald, a scholar in religious studies specializing in conversion and identity, and Karin van Nieuwkerk, an expert on gender and conversion, have highlighted the diversity of experiences among Muslim converts, emphasizing the multiplicity of factors that shape the conversion process, which cannot be fully explained by earlier Christian-focused frameworks.

The language and nomenclature surrounding this transformative experience are also subject to considerable debate and reflect the diverse preferences within the Muslim community. Terms such as “convert” and “revert” are often used interchangeably, each carrying its own connotations and significance. While “convert” is more commonly used, a notable number of individuals who embrace Islam prefer the term “revert.” This choice is grounded in the concept

of *fitra*, an Arabo-Muslim term designating an innate predisposition, one common to all humans, to acknowledge the supremacy of God. To “revert,” then, is to recover one’s *fitra*.¹

Regardless of whether we call it conversion or reversion, the process of adopting new religious beliefs is regarded as a profound spiritual journey that deeply influences individuals’ lifestyle and worldview reconstruction (Mossière, 2022). The global landscape of Muslim conversions is marked by a complex array of demographic variables and socio-cultural intricacies, reflecting the multifaceted nature of religious transformation across diverse contexts. In Germany, estimates suggest that Muslim converts number between 20,000 and 100,000. Denmark, over the last three decades, has seen an estimated 2,100 to 2,800 individuals embrace Islam. Turning our attention to North America, by 2001, Quebec was home to a projected Muslim convert community numbering between 4,000 and 5,000. Zooming out to a broader European perspective, by 2016, Europe was home to an estimated 25.77 million Muslims, accounting for roughly 5% of the continent's population. France stands as the country with approximately 5.7 million Muslims, constituting 8.8% of its populace. Close on its heels, Germany and the United Kingdom host Muslim communities of around 5 million (6.1% of the population) and 4.1 million (6.3% of the population) respectively. If trends persist, forecasts by the Pew Research Center posit that by 2050, Muslims could represent nearly 10% of Europe's total population (Younis & Hassan, 2017).

¹ حَدَّثَنَا زُهَيْرُ بْنُ حَرْبٍ، حَدَّثَنَا جَرِيرٌ، عَنِ الْأَعْمَشِ، عَنْ أَبِي صَالِحٍ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " مَا مِنْ مَوْلُودٍ إِلَّا يَلِدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ فَأَبَوَاهُ يُهَوِّدَانِهِ وَيُنَصِّرَانِهِ وَيُجَارِيَانِهِ " . فَقَالَ رَجُلٌ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ أَرَأَيْتَ لَوْ مَاتَ قَبْلَ ذَلِكَ قَالَ " اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا كَانُوا عَامِلِينَ "

“Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) as saying:

No babe is born but upon Fitra. It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Polytheist. A person said: Allah's Messenger, what is your opinion if they were to die before that (before reaching the age of adolescence when they can distinguish between right and wrong)? He said: It is Allah alone Who knows what they would be doing.” (Sahih Muslim 2658e)

According to the 2021 Canadian Census, Muslims constitute 4.9% of Canada's total population, amounting to approximately 1.8 million individuals. This marks a significant increase from 2001, when Muslims represented only 2.0% of the population. The distribution of Muslims across Canadian provinces is diverse, with the largest concentration in Ontario, where Muslims account for 6.7% of the provincial population. Quebec follows with 5.1%, while Alberta and British Columbia have 4.8% and 2.6% of Muslims, respectively. Smaller percentages can be found in the remaining provinces, including Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, reflecting the growing Muslim community across the country. By 2050, forecasts suggest that Muslims could represent nearly 10% of Europe's total population (Younis & Hassan, 2017), and Canada's Muslim population is also likely to continue growing, reflecting global trends in religious transformation.

The academic landscape is rich with studies delving into the intricacies of conversion. While some research (Kose, 1994) explores the motivations behind conversion and the processes of religious education, others focus on specific nations. Noteworthy studies from the United Kingdom (Moosavi, 2015), Germany (Özyürek, 2015), Denmark (Jensen, 2008), and the Netherlands (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004) have examined the intricate relationship between conversion and racial identity.

Further studies exploring various dimensions of conversion include Leon Moosavi's work, a scholar in the field of sociology and social policy, which introduces a fresh perspective by analyzing white privilege and subtle Islamophobia in conversion discussions, while Roald's four-stage post-conversion framework has made a significant contribution to the literature. Vron Najeem's article on the 'culture-free Islam' concept and Esra Özyürek's investigations into social identity, belonging, and cultural integration in the context of Muslim converts are key examples

of the diverse scholarly contributions. The literature extends beyond Europe, with studies on Muslim converts spanning continents, from Brazil to the United States, and from Kenya to Australia. This global scholarship illustrates the diverse contexts in which conversion occurs. But what about the state of conversion studies in Canada?

Canada, a nation characterized by diverse cultural and religious roots, has witnessed the steady growth of Islam, now the second-largest religion in the country. A myriad of factors, from immigration patterns to natural birth rates, has contributed to this growth. Conversion to Islam plays a significant role in this, though it remains a relatively under-discussed aspect. According to 2016 population data, converts make up approximately 2% of the Canadian Muslim population (Shah, 2019). Despite this, the complex and multifaceted journeys of these converts remain largely under-researched (Hiebert, Flower, & Birkett, 2014).

Upon examining the available literature on this subject within the Canadian context, several thematic focuses emerge. Some studies aim to quantify the trends in Islamic conversion (e.g., Hiebert et al., 2014), while others explore potential radicalization within the convert community (e.g., Jones & Dawson, 2021). Comparative studies are also prevalent, analyzing the experiences of Muslim converts in distinct regions such as Quebec and France (e.g., Mossière, 2013). Additionally, there are more personal, qualitative approaches, recounting conversion experiences in specific provinces like Ontario and the Atlantic regions (e.g., Sentse, 2016). Nuray Catic (2024), a scholar in religious studies, in her qualitative, multi-method approach study, explores the conversion process, emphasizing the significant role of Qur'anic engagement and the challenges converts face in integrating into their new communities.

It is clear that there is a need for more research on Muslim converts in Canada, yet the existing studies remain insufficient in terms of both number and diversity. This thesis aims to provide a modest contribution to filling this gap. By focusing on the experiences of Muslim converts in Ottawa, this study intends to shed light on the Canadian context while also exploring how the current situation and existing literature compare or contrast.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research methodology, which aims to deeply understand participants' experiences and perspectives. As qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring the transformation processes of individuals who have converted to Islam, this approach was chosen to examine the personal experiences of Muslim converts and the impact of these processes on their identities. Given the multifaceted nature of the conversion experience, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand various aspects of this phenomenon.

Participant Selection and Sample

The study was conducted with 14 women and 1 man residing in Ottawa. Participants were selected based on volunteerism, using a snowball sampling method. The selection process involved reaching out to Islamic communities, sending emails to WhatsApp groups, contacting Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), and receiving referrals from convert acquaintances. Participants who were able to openly share their conversion processes, communicate in English, and had converted to Islam by their own decision were selected.

Participants were required to reside in Ottawa, be over the age of 18, and have converted to Islam from another religion by their own decision. Additionally, they needed to be willing to

participate in interviews and surveys during the research period, speak English during the interviews, and be open to sharing information about their conversion process, their adaptation to their new religion, and the impact of these processes on their personal lives.²

The selection aimed for a diverse group, considering factors such as gender diversity. Ethical consent forms were obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The research was approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa.

Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews with participants were held either in-person or on Zoom. The duration of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. Interviews were structured using open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their personal experiences. Participants were encouraged to share detailed accounts of their conversion processes, the challenges they faced, and the impact of their transition on their identities.

Interview Questions

The interviews aimed to explore a wide range of topics related to participants' conversion processes, from key turning points and the reactions of family and community to the challenges faced and how they were overcome. Additionally, the research addressed issues such as: identity and lifestyle changes; reasons for choosing Islam; support received during the conversion process; and internal struggles. Participants were asked to reflect on how conversion affected

² For more detailed information regarding the recruitment process, please refer to **Appendix B**.

their personal lives and societal relationships, as well as to share which Islamic teachings were particularly meaningful or transformative for them.³

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their interviews, with the data being used solely for research purposes. Furthermore, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and informed consent forms were collected.⁴

Limitations of the Study

Since every research study has inherent limitations, this study is no exception. Firstly, the sample size is limited, and the study focuses solely on a small group of converts living in Ottawa, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of snowball sampling led to the selection of participants who were primarily connected through similar communities and personal networks. Although efforts were made to ensure diversity, many participants shared similar religious views and experiences. In the interviews, almost all participants identified as Sunni, and although some participants did not identify with a specific group, their answers reflected Sunni views. Furthermore, the requirement that participants speak English limits the inclusion of those who speak other languages, thus excluding potential participants who might have enriched the data. Lastly, as the study is based on in-depth interviews, the subjectivity and interpretative differences in participants' narratives may also influence the findings.

³ For more detailed information regarding the interview questions, please refer to **Appendix A**

⁴ For more detailed information regarding the consent form, please refer to **Appendix C**.

Researcher's Position

I conducted this research from an insider perspective, as I share a similar background with the participants in several ways. I am a Muslim who has undergone a conversion process similar to that of the participants. As such, I have prior knowledge and understanding of the topic, which facilitates empathy and insight. However, this insider position also introduces the risk of bias and subjectivity. My position may make it easier to understand participants' narratives, but it also requires careful attention to maintain independence and objectivity. To mitigate these risks, I made a conscious effort to avoid bias and to represent the participants' stories accurately, ensuring that the research process remained as objective as possible.

Participants

Name	Age	Years since Conversion	Nationality	Ethnic Origin	Previous Religion
Briana	33	>1	Canada	English Canadian	Christianity
Teagan	37	1	Australia	European	Agnostic
Dalia	24	1	Canada	French / Irish Canadian	Christianity
Leila	30	1.5	Canada	East Asian, Chinese/Vietnam	Buddhism
Marta	24	3.5	Canada	East Asian,Chinese/Vietnam	Buddhism
Sandra	25	4.5	Canada	English Canadian	Christianity
Wilma	29	5	Canada	French Canadian	Christianity
Santiago	26	6	Canada	Latino	Christianity
Reese	42	10	Philippines	Filipino	Christianity
Prisha	55	18	Canada	Inuit	Christianity
Judy	46	21	Canada	Mixed with European	Christianity
Natasha	38	22	Russia	Russian/Ukrainian	Christianity
Tiana	48	23	Mexico	Hispanic	I wasn't raised in any religion
Crissy	50	35	Canada	European	Christianity

1.Age and Time Since Conversion

The participants' ages range from 24 to 50, and they have experienced different journeys in their conversion processes, influenced by both their age and the time since their conversion. The youngest participants are 24 years old (Marta and Dalia), and the oldest is 50 years old (Crissy).

The time since their conversion varies from 1 year to 35 years.

Group A (0-2 years):

Participants such as Briana (8 months), Teagan (1 year), Dalia (1 year), and Leila (1.5 years) have recently converted to Islam. Due to the relatively fresh memory of their conversion process, this group adds a unique perspective to the research as they are still in the early stages of their learning. They are in the phase of acquiring foundational knowledge about Islam.

Group B (3-10 years):

Participants like Marta (3.5 years), Sandra (4.5 years), Wilma (5 years), Santiago (6 years), and Reese (10 years) have spent several years in Islam, deepening their understanding and gaining experiences in various aspects of Islamic life.

Group C (18-35 years):

Prisha (18 years), Judy (21 years), Natasha (22 years), Tiana (23 years), and Crissy (35 years) have been Muslims for decades. With their extensive experience, they offer invaluable insights and contribute significantly to the research with their accumulated knowledge and lived experiences.

2. Ethnic Background and Geography

Most participants were born and raised in Canada (Sandra, Wilma, Santiago, Briana, Prisha, Judy, Crissy, Marta, Dalia). However, there are also participants who immigrated from countries such as Australia, Mexico, Russia, and the Philippines. The ethnic backgrounds of the participants are diverse, including English Canadian, French Canadian, Inuit, Russian/Ukrainian, Hispanic, Latino, Filipino, European, and East Asian. This diversity highlights Canada's multicultural fabric and enriches the research by showcasing both shared and divergent experiences across different ethnic backgrounds.

3. Gender

With the exception of Santiago, all participants are women. As a researcher, I initially anticipated that male participants would be more willing to join the study, as I expected them to be easier to reach. I thought women, due to the privacy rules in Islam, might be more reserved, making it harder to find participants. However, the opposite occurred: I had difficulty finding male participants, and those I did find were not eager to participate in the interview. On the other hand, the female participants were not only more willing to participate, but they also provided more valuable and insightful information.

4. Religious Background

Most participants converted to Islam from Christianity. For instance, Sandra, Wilma, Santiago, Prisha, Judy, Natasha, and Crissy all had Christian backgrounds. Some participants, however, came from different belief systems. For example, Teagan identifies as agnostic, while Tiana mentions that she was not raised in a religious family. Marta and Leila, on the other hand, converted from Buddhism.

5. Employment and Educational Background

Participants' employment status and educational backgrounds vary widely. Most participants have higher education and work in different fields. Some are in academia (PhD students, professors), while others work in social services, software engineering, and project management. Additionally, some participants are housewives or work in government institutions.

The majority of participants hold a bachelor's degree or a college certificate. However, some have master's degrees, and a few have completed doctoral studies.

Chapter 2: From Prejudice to Understanding: The Journey to Islam in Canada

2.1 Introduction

Prejudices against Islam are a significant issue in Canadian society. Studies show that 46% of Canadians hold negative views about Islam, while 56% believe that Islam suppresses women's rights (Angus Reid Institute, 2017). Furthermore, 42% of Canadians think that discrimination against Muslims is "mainly their fault" (Csillag, 2012). Additionally, 47% of Canadians support banning headscarves in public, compared to 30% of Americans (Geddes, 2015)

When Canadian converts are asked about their thoughts on Islam before converting, their views often align with common stereotypes found in these broader discourses. These include beliefs that Islam oppresses women and that Muslims are inherently linked to terrorism. Several converts, as we shall see in this chapter, recalled how media narratives and cultural biases shaped their early perceptions, portraying Islam as restrictive and violent. These preconceived notions created barriers for many converts, as they had to overcome not only societal prejudices but also their own internalized misconceptions before embracing Islam.

2.2 Islam as a Religion of Terrorism

A common misconception is the belief that Islam is inherently violent and that Muslims are prone to terrorism.⁵ Media portrayals and public discourse often link Islam with extremist actions, reinforcing this stereotype. Crissy shared how she initially thought of Muslims as “terrorists” and associated the religion with violence:

⁵ The radicalization of converts is also a topic frequently discussed in the literature. To explore the relationship between radicalization and converts, the following sources may be referred to : Azani, E., & Koblenz-Stenzler, L. (2019). Muslim Converts Who Turn to Global Jihad: Radicalization Characteristics and Countermeasures. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 45, 173 - 199 ; ,Jubran, C., Capstone, M., & Shirk, D.A. (2020). The Path to Inmate Radicalization: A Primary Focus on Inmate Converts to Islam ; Kleinmann, S.M. (2012). Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35, 278 - 297.

Islam, from what I knew, was, like, almost not even talked about. I didn't know the word Islam, but I knew the word Muslim. And when I thought of Muslims, I thought of terrorists, I thought of holy war, I thought of people who were crazy barbarians. That was my idea of Muslims.

Prisha also acknowledged that media representations of Islam, particularly after major global events, contributed to her own family's negative perceptions. Growing up, she was exposed to the idea that Islam was a religion of violence and strict rules:

It was right around that time, you know, when certain events were happening. They were calling it an 'Islamic war' or jihad against America. And, of course, the media was always portraying Islam negatively. So, my family started believing what they saw on TV, and they were like, 'How can you join a religion that forces you to do things?'

The negative perceptions held by Crissy and Prisha, shaped by media representations linking Islam to violence, can be connected to Köse's (1996) study on the significance of intellectual motifs. He argues that, despite such misconceptions, intellectual inquiry plays a decisive role in individuals' decisions to embrace Islam.

2.3 The Oppression of Women in Islam

Another deeply ingrained stereotype is the belief that women are oppressed in Islam and that the religion strips women of their rights. Many converts, including Briana, mentioned how they had been taught that Muslim women had no freedom or rights. This stereotype was a major barrier for her before she started learning more about the religion:

So growing up in the West, obviously, everything I had really heard about Islam was negative. It was like a really strict religion. You know, people didn't have freedom, and women had no rights.

Crissy also struggled with the idea that Muslim women were subordinate to men. She initially believed that wearing the hijab and following Islamic practices meant giving up personal freedom and submitting to male control:

But I will never be one of those women who are subordinated. I thought all Muslim women were put down, you know, like servants to men. I told myself, I will not be one of those, and I will never cover my hair. And I will never let a man control me, because I thought that's what Islam was. I thought, you know, Muslims... that's how they treat women.

The process by which female converts challenge and overcome the perception of women's oppression in Islam aligns with the themes detailed in van Nieuwkerk's (2006) work. My observations indicate that many female converts, such as Crissy and Briana, redefine their understanding of Islam by critically engaging with its teachings on gender equity. This redefinition process often takes place within a societal context where Islam is framed negatively, particularly in relation to women's rights. Converts, therefore, navigate both personal and external challenges as they critically assess and eventually embrace Islamic teachings. Van Nieuwkerk emphasizes that this transformative process not only involves dismantling stereotypes but also discovering empowerment within the principles of Islamic gender dynamics.

2.4 The Arab-Muslim Equation

Leila's perception of associating Muslims solely with Arabs is one of the cultural biases commonly encountered during the process of religious conversion. Poston (1992) highlights how such perceptions conflict with the cultural and ethnic diversity inherent in Islam on a global scale. He explains that da'wa (Islamic missionary activities) in the West resonates across various ethnic groups and serves as a tool to emphasize that Islam is not confined to Arab culture alone. For

instance, Leila admitted that, during the period when her knowledge about Islam was limited, she equated being Muslim with being Arab:

I didn't know there were, like, Chinese Muslims. I didn't know there were white Muslims. I just thought it was, like, Arabs, and that's it. But when I tried Islam, I was like, okay, anyone can be Muslim; you don't have to be Arab.

This perception aligns with the lack of understanding described in Poston's (1992) study. Poston notes that da'wa activities in the West often aim to communicate Islam's universal message and highlight the diverse ethnic backgrounds of Muslims. Communities such as Sufi groups and cultural centers play a significant role in demonstrating that Islam is not bound to any specific ethnicity. Leila's shift in perception occurred as she discovered the ethnic and cultural diversity within Islam. This transformation directly reflects Poston's (1992) assertion that "the global Muslim community, or ummah, transcends cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries, presenting Islam as a universal religion accessible to all." We see this, for example, with Leila who illustrates how the misconception of Islam being exclusive to Arabs can be overcome through an understanding of Islam's universal nature and the diversity of its adherents. This underscores the role of da'wah activities in helping individuals challenge their biases and gain a more accurate understanding of Islam's message.

2.5 Root Causes of Stereotypes and Prejudices Against Islam

As Edward Said (1978) argued in *Orientalism*, Western media often perpetuates a distorted image of Islam and Muslims, portraying them as the 'Other' to justify cultural superiority and to mark out an ontological space for the West.. This framework helps explain the negative stereotypes Crissy and her family encountered. As Crissy's account demonstrates, her family's

view of her conversion as a "phase" was largely shaped by negative portrayals of Islam in the media:

Oh, it was definitely the media, 100%. And the culture I grew up in... I mean, if Muslims were ever spoken about—which was almost never—it was always derogatory. It was always negative. There was never anything good about it.

Another major contributor to these stereotypes is the behavior of certain Muslims who do not reflect what some perceive to be the “true” teachings of Islam. Briana mentioned that while she was aware of Islamic teachings, negative examples from some Muslims reinforced her preconceptions. Leila similarly noted that her perception of Muslims in Ottawa was influenced by certain Muslims' behavior, which seemed judgmental and exclusive: "I had a pretty bad opinion of Muslims here because they didn't like to talk to other non-Muslims, and they were very judgmental."

2.6 Perceptions of Conversion to Islam

Considering all these stereotypes and prejudices, it is evident that choosing Islam would not appear to be a rational or meaningful decision for many Canadians. The association of Islam with terrorism, the perception that Muslim women are oppressed, and the belief that Muslims are exclusively Arab all strengthen resistance to Islam. This is further validated by the reactions that converts to Islam receive from their surroundings after converting.

Rambo (1993) discusses how emotional factors, such as problematic relationships and troubled pasts, are often attributed as the primary motivations for conversion. He also references Chana Ullman's research, which illustrates that many converts experienced emotional motivations tied to personal relationships, such as family conflicts or disrupted childhoods (as cited in Rambo, 1993, p. 52). These findings challenge the perception that conversion is purely based on rational,

intellectual decisions, instead emphasizing the significant role of emotional instability in shaping the conversion process.

For instance, Crissy explains that when she chose Islam, her family regarded it as a temporary phase. They viewed her interest in Islam as part of a fleeting search or a youthful whim, and did not take it seriously:

Well, basically, when I told my parents that I was interested in practicing Islam, at first they thought, 'Okay, this is just a phase,' much like when I was exploring other spiritual practices. They believed I would grow out of it and return to what they considered 'normal.'

Similarly, Judy mentions that her family also viewed her conversion to Islam as a "phase": "My parents thought it was just a thing I was going through, like a temporary phase."

In addition to being seen as a temporary phase, the decision to embrace Islam is often associated with personal issues or traumas rather than being considered a rational choice, probably owing to the widespread prejudices discussed above. People tend to believe that those who choose Islam are either mentally unstable or that they made this decision due to unresolved family or psychological problems.

For example, Wilma explains how, during her conversion process, she was perceived as someone easily convinced and manipulated. People around her associated her religious choice with family issues, particularly conflicts with her father. She describes this situation as follows:

People think you're a bit crazy, not stable, easily convinced, or probably have father issues or family problems... It's very insulting to me. I've always had strong convictions and researched thoroughly before making decisions, but people assumed I had personal problems.

This approach reveals that conversion to Islam is often seen as idiosyncratic rather than being seen a reasonable choice. However, Wilma emphasizes that she embraced Islam because its teachings aligned with her pre-existing beliefs: "It's really because I realized that Islam aligned with all the beliefs I already had before, even before meeting anyone Muslim. It just made sense."

My findings through the multiple interviews conducted revealed that converts predominantly cite intellectual reasons for choosing Islam, as opposed to emotional or circumstantial factors.⁶

2.7 First Encounters with Islam

2.7.1 Those in Search of Meaning

Some individuals, at a certain point in their lives, embark on a search for meaning. During this search, they explore various religions and discover Islam. Islam presents itself as an option that responds to their deep search for meaning. Prisha's experience is a fitting example of this. Confronting contradictions in her Christian faith, Prisha began exploring other religions, eventually coming across Islam. As she sought to expand her knowledge of religions, Islam's explanations made sense to her and piqued her interest:

And so I became curious—why Christians believe that Jesus, the prophet, is God, but at the same time, they say, 'We cannot see God.' How can God pray to himself or ask for something? These ideas were conflicting to me. Also, when you're forced to do something, you tend to want to do the opposite. In my case, being forced to go to church when I didn't want to—but eventually loving it—really shaped where I am today. It got me curious about different religions, particularly about Arabic culture and Islam.

⁶ In Sentse's ethnographic study of six Muslim converts in Canada, the idea that women convert to Islam through marriage is shown to be largely invalid. While marriage may have played a role in their initial exposure to Islam, the study emphasizes that the conversion process is shaped by individuals' own free will, research, and personal choices. The women in the study did not convert solely because of marriage but through a process of independent exploration and decision-making (Sentse, 2019).

In Roald's (2012) study, a significant portion of Scandinavian participants turned to Islam because they perceived it as a logical and coherent religion. This is particularly linked to the rejection of contradictions in Christianity and the attraction to the clearer and more logical explanations offered by Islam. Roald highlights that the metaphysical contradictions, such as those concerning the relationship between God and Jesus, were a key factor in prompting individuals to turn to Islam. Prisha's experience supports this finding; by questioning the contradictions in Christianity, Prisha found the explanations Islam offered to be logical, reinforcing Roald's argument that conversion to Islam is often seen as an intellectual and logical discovery.

2.7.2 Through Cultural Interest

Some people are drawn to Islam through their interest in a particular culture. Elements like language, music, or art often bring individuals closer to the teachings of Islam. Natasha's interest in Turkish culture and music led her to encounter Islam. Initially drawn to Turkish songs, particularly those of Tarkan, she developed an interest in the language and, through her connection with a Turkish family, was eventually led to explore Islam:

So I got the textbook and started learning. About a year later, I was able to speak Turkish, and I realized there was a Turkish Cultural Center in our city. I went there, met some people, and made some friends. I started with the language, but I also became interested in Turkish culture, which includes the religion as well. Before that, I didn't know anything about Islam.

Natasha's experience shows how cultural interests, such as language and music, can naturally lead individuals to explore the broader aspects of a religion like Islam.

2.7.3 Learning About Islam Through Relationships

Some people encounter Islam through romantic relationships. Relationships with Muslim individuals often provide an opportunity to learn more about the religion. Sandra's story is a prime example. During her university years, she met a Muslim man and, due to the potential seriousness of their relationship, began learning about Islam. Throughout their time together, Sandra explored the basic teachings of Islam and how the religion might shape her life:

So we talked about a lot of, I guess, heavier topics right at the beginning of our relationship. He said he wanted to raise his kids Muslim. So I said, 'Okay, well, I need to learn more about Islam to know whether or not that's something I'm okay with.' I didn't really know anything about Islam other than, yes, it's a religion—and that's about it.

Similarly, Leila became interested in Islam during her relationship with a Muslim man. Questioning some of his comments about the religion, Leila decided to research Islam more deeply:

And honestly, it was because he used Islam as an excuse for some things, like, you know, he would say really weird things about Islam, like, 'Oh, you know, in Islam, you're allowed to hit women.' For me, I was like, 'There's no way it says that in the Qur'an. There's no way it's allowed in any religion.' So I started looking into Islam and researching that, because I wanted to know. And then I did my research and found that Islam is actually the opposite—it treats women very, very well

These accounts demonstrate how personal relationships often provide an opportunity for individuals to learn about Islam and engage with its teachings.

2.7.4 Encountering Islam in World Religions Classes

Some individuals come across Islam in academic settings, particularly through religion courses. These classes provide general information about Islam and can spark students' interest. Dalia, for example, first encountered Islam during a “World Religions” class in high school. Although the coverage of Islam was brief, it ignited her curiosity and desire to learn more:

I used to go to a Catholic high school, and funny enough, it was mandatory to take a world religions class. As part of that class, we had to go on field trips to a temple, a synagogue, and a masjid. When we went to the masjid, there was one girl in my class who was Muslim and wore a hijab. She brought a bunch of her hijabs for the girls to wear, which I thought was really cool. When we got into the masjid and started looking around, actually seeing how things worked, I felt so at peace. As a 16- or 17-year-old dealing with constant anxiety, it was the first time I felt really calm. I think I kind of forgot about it for a long time, but it was always in the back of my mind.

Dalia's story highlights how educational settings can introduce individuals to Islam, sparking curiosity and encouraging further exploration.

2.7.5 Encountering Islam Through Intellectual Endeavors

Another group of individuals encounters Islam through intellectual efforts. Tania, for instance, noticed Islam's intellectual depth during her philosophy studies, which sparked her interest in the religion. Reading the works of Islamic philosophers helped deepen her connection with Islam:

There are a lot of things in Western culture that have allusions to Islam, but none of them are clear or intentional. The first time I really encountered Islam knowingly was when I was doing my bachelor's in philosophy. During the second semester of the program, we had to read medieval philosophy, including extracts from the writings of Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina. One passage struck me particularly. It was a discussion about the question: if God is all-merciful, why would He allow sickness, tragedy, wars, and all the evil things in the world? Unfortunately, I can't remember if it was Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd, but the author made an argument addressing this apparent incompatibility between the mercy of God and the state of the world. I loved his argumentation—it really stuck with me. I found it very logical.

Tania's comments here illustrate how intellectual engagement can serve as a pathway to exploring Islam. Her encounter with the works of Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd provided her with a philosophical framework to address complex theological questions, including the reconciliation of divine mercy with worldly suffering. These intellectual explorations offered her a structured approach to understanding Islamic teachings and

contributed to her growing interest in the religion. This example underscores the role of academic study and intellectual inquiry in shaping an individual's journey toward Islam.

These examples demonstrate that individuals' initial encounters with Islam are shaped by various contexts, motivations, and social interactions. Personal quests, cultural connections, academic settings, or interpersonal relationships play significant roles in guiding individuals toward exploring Islam. These processes support individuals' intellectual curiosity and search for spiritual fulfillment, contributing to the development of their understanding and perception of Islam.

2.8 Conversion to Islam as a Personal Journey

Conversion to Islam represents a unique and deeply personal journey for each individual. This process is often filled with pivotal moments where intellectual and emotional factors come together, leading the person to embrace Islam. For many, this decision is shaped by a quest to answer questions about their previous religious experiences, meaningful signs they encounter, and the behavior of those around them.

2.8.1 Judy's Search for Meaning

Judy's background is an interesting mix of religious and cultural influences. Her mother comes from a Polish-Ukrainian Roman Catholic background, and her father is of Indigenous, Métis, and Scottish descent. As a result, she was exposed to both Christianity and Indigenous spiritual beliefs. However, she found herself unsatisfied with both and embarked on a personal search for meaning. She describes her experiences with Christianity:

Okay, so I grew up very Christian. I used to go to church three times a week; my grandparents were deeply religious. My mom is Polish-Ukrainian and Roman Catholic, while my dad is Indigenous—Métis, Scottish, and mixed. It was my grandparents on my dad's side, the Native side of the family, who were very evangelical Christians. I always

had a problem with the concept of the Trinity. It didn't make sense to me that if God loved His son, why would He sacrifice him? That just didn't add up. Going to church and seeing the cross with Jesus's head and the thorns wasn't something that brought me peace. Whenever they talked about drinking the blood of Jesus and eating his flesh, it felt disturbing. Still, I believed there was something bigger than me.

Moreover, Judy also struggled with aspects of Indigenous spiritual beliefs, particularly the idea of ancestors acting as intermediaries between people and the Creator:

There's a God who can orchestrate the clouds, the rain, the bugs in the ground, the rivers, and this magnificent earth that's full of creation and constantly recreates itself. That can't just happen by chance. I think that's the Indigenous part of me—the belief in the Creator. Indigenous people believe in the Creator, but they also believe that their dead ancestors intercede between them and the Creator, which I could never bring myself to believe.

After encountering aspects of both belief systems that didn't resonate with her, Judy began a search for meaning, which ultimately led her to discover Islam. However, even though some things about Islam made sense to her, she initially had a firm stance against converting:

So, I was agnostic when I was around 16 or 17, and into my 20s. I ended up taking a year off school and traveled to London, England. While working there, I met a brother at the lunch table. He wasn't eating, so I asked why. He said, 'I'm fasting, it's Ramadan.' I had never heard of Ramadan before, so I asked what it was. He explained that it's a holy month and that they believe in submitting to God. I asked, 'Do you believe in Jesus?' and he said, 'Yes, but we believe he's a prophet, not a god.' And I thought, 'Well, that's what I believe!' Then he said, 'In sha Allah, one day you're going to be Muslim.' I replied, 'No, I'm not going to be Muslim.' Up until that conversation, I had never heard anything about Islam. This was 1997. It was one brother giving me a five-minute explanation of what his religion was, and that was the first time I learned anything about Islam.

Despite her initial rejection, Judy's search for meaning continued, and her exposure to Islam deepened when she traveled to Morocco:

So, I ended up in Morocco three months later, just backpacking and traveling. One night, I heard the adhan for the first time in the middle of the night. The next morning, two young girls at the hotel asked me, 'How was your first night?' I said, 'Well, it was good, but did you hear that guy singing on the microphone in the middle of the night?' They

started laughing and said, 'No, no, that's the call to prayer.' I asked, 'The call to prayer? What does that mean?' They explained, 'We pray five times a day.' I asked, 'Oh, well, what are you?' They said, 'We're Muslim.' I replied, 'Oh, you believe in Islam, you believe in submitting to Allah.' They were shocked that a Westerner knew something about Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Then, this older woman who worked as a cleaner at the hotel came up to us. She didn't speak any English, but the girls explained to her that I was a foreigner who had heard the call to prayer and was interested. She smiled and took me to the back of the hotel, behind the kitchen, where there was a musalla. It was beautiful—the Moroccan architecture was so peaceful and serene. A couple of men were praying, performing sunnah or their regular prayers. The woman pointed and, through the girls' translation, said, 'This is what we do.'

I felt tears in my eyes because, for the first time, I realized I had been searching for something while traveling, but I didn't know what it was. Then, the woman raised her hands and started speaking in Moroccan. The girls giggled, and I asked, 'What is she doing?' They said, 'She's asking Allah to make you Muslim one day, to guide you.' I said, 'That's really nice, but it's probably never going to happen. I don't think I'm ever going to be a Muslim'

Despite her deepening interest, Judy took five years to fully embrace Islam. She attributes this delay to a need for further study and preparation:

I think I knew it was the truth, but I felt I had to continue studying it more. You know, there's Sheikh Khalid Yasin—he has this lecture, it's three hours long. You should listen to it. That lecture, *The Purpose of Life*, was one I listened to repeatedly during that time. He said, 'When a truth comes into the heart, it's a storm.' And that's exactly what happened. It felt like a storm—I couldn't believe I had believed something else my entire life. I thought, 'This is what I'm going to believe,' but I still wasn't completely certain.

The other part of it was wanting to make sure I could actually do all the practices. Before I took my Shahada, I taught myself how to pray. I told myself, 'I'm not going to do this religion if I can't commit to the five daily prayers. I'm not going to say *La ilaha illallah* and then not do anything about it.' I wanted to be sure: could I really do this? So during those years, when I was meeting Muslim sisters, going to the masjid, and trying to get all my questions answered, I practiced how to pray. At first, it was just a question: 'Can I do this? Can I manage five prayers a day? Can I wake up in the middle of the night to pray after sleeping?'—which I still struggle with. May Allah help me with that. But through praying, my heart changed. I felt a peace and calmness, like, 'Oh, I need the prayer.'

Another challenge was accepting all the lifestyle changes. I knew it was the truth, but back then, in 2000, 2002, or 2003, there wasn't much information available online. I was reading about halal and haram, trying to understand everything I'd have to give up. No

more going to the beach in a bikini. No more having close friendships with the opposite sex. No more going to the pub with friends. I wasn't eating pork already, but thinking about family meals, I realized I'd have to say, 'I can't eat that.' The halal/haram rules made me question: 'Can I really do this?' Covering myself and wearing a hijab made me think, 'Can I truly commit to this?' I didn't know if I'd be able to fully follow all these practices.

Judy's journey to Islam represents a deeply personal and transformative process of religious conversion. Raised in a diverse religious environment, she initially found herself dissatisfied with both Christianity and Indigenous spiritual beliefs, prompting a quest for meaning that ultimately led her to Islam. Although her initial reaction was one of resistance, her encounters with Islamic teachings and subsequent intellectual and spiritual reflections gradually brought her closer to the faith. Judy's conversion process extended over five years, characterized by ongoing study, personal reflection, and self-preparation. This extended period of inquiry and personal commitment emphasizes that religious conversion is often a gradual process rather than an instantaneous decision. Judy's experience underscores the role of intellectual exploration, emotional growth, and practical commitment in the conversion journey, illustrating that embracing a new faith involves both overcoming personal doubts and aligning one's life with the principles of that faith.

2.8.2 A Quest for Clarity: Finding Answers in Islam

Just like Judy, many people who could not find what they were looking for in their previous faith began their journey of researching Islam, leading them to find more satisfying answers during their search for meaning. For Dalia, the journey to Islam was driven by a quest for answers to existential questions. Though she had always been religious, she found that Islam provided answers that other religions did not: "I have technically, I've always been religious. I just never

had the answers to the questions. And then when I looked into Islam, I started finding the answers to the questions that I, I needed.”

Santiago’s journey was marked by a process of comparison between Christianity and Islam. He found that the practices and teachings of Islam provided clarity in areas where he had previously felt confusion:

So what made me decide and say, 'This is what I want. This is the truth'? I did the research. First, I looked into the Qur’an, the Hadith, and what the religion was truly about. When I understood that Islam is about worship—worshiping one God, worshiping Allah alone, with no partners—that felt like common sense to me. For example, even Christians know they should worship one God, but some of them get confused in their practices. Back then, there was something about it that didn’t feel right to me.

What really made me conclude that Islam was the truth was looking at Jesus in the Bible. You see that Jesus prayed to God, put his forehead on the floor, and fasted for 40 days—these are all things that Muslims do. For example, during Ramadan, we fast, and we pray five times a day with our foreheads on the floor. So, I started wondering: where did Christians go wrong? Where did they go wrong if now they pray on their knees and sing songs? That’s not how Jesus prayed. Realizing this made me understand that when I read the Qur’an, it filled in the gaps I felt were missing in the Bible. It made everything clearer.

The experiences of individuals like Dalia and Santiago show how a search for clarity and understanding can lead to new perspectives on faith. For them, Islam offered answers to questions and uncertainties that were not resolved in their previous religious beliefs.

2.8.3 Emotional Triggers and Life-Changing Moments

Despite finding intellectual satisfaction, many converts did not make their decision immediately. Emotional experiences often played a role in triggering the final decision to convert. For instance, Leila recounts a significant moment at Bayshore Mall:

To be honest, I received many signs from Allah—real, physical signs, almost strange in a way. For example, one time I went to Bayshore Mall and was sitting alone. I guess I was

feeling really sad or upset, but I wasn't visibly crying or anything. Then, out of nowhere, this little boy came up to me. He said, 'Are you okay? I just had a feeling that you're not okay. I have this sixth sense.' It was so strange. He told me he was walking around the food court, trying to figure out who was really sad, and somehow, he felt it was me.

He sat down with me and told me he was Muslim. I started asking him questions about Islam, Ramadan, and what it all meant. He answered my questions, and everything he said sounded so peaceful. He talked about Ramadan being a special time and shared beautiful things about being Muslim. It countered the doubts I had. Experiences like this happened to me three times. After the third time, I just knew—I said, 'I want to take my Shahada,' because I had this overwhelming feeling that it was the right thing to do.

After continuously researching and reading about Islam for several months, Reese went to a mosque one day and spoke with a woman who had converted from Christianity to Islam. She was invited to attend free Islam classes every Friday, and for three or four months, she participated in these classes, where she gained a deeper understanding of Islam. Although she learned and found reasonable many aspects of Islam, including its pillars and prayer practices, she expressed that there was an inner dilemma she couldn't overcome.

And then I told her about the dilemma I was facing. I was born Christian, and I still couldn't accept that Jesus is not God. I said, 'If you ask me what would make me convert, it would be if I felt satisfied that Jesus is not God. If I could find that satisfaction, I would convert right away.' But at that point, I couldn't. After three months of attending the Islam course, I still couldn't find an answer that satisfied me, an answer that would make me believe Jesus is not God. At that time, I still believed He was God because that's what I was born into—it was what I had always known. I just couldn't accept it, and it made me very stressed.

While this inner dilemma persisted, an event she experienced led to her conversion process.

One day, I was struggling with the dilemma inside me. It was my day off, and I was chatting with a friend when suddenly I smelled smoke. I was in my apartment on the fifth floor, and the smell of burning was coming in. I thought, 'Is there a fire?' Sometimes, when people overcook, the smoke sets off the fire alarms in the building. I figured it was probably a false alarm—maybe someone cooking—and that I was just smelling the smoke. But the smell kept getting stronger and stronger.

I ran to the kitchen, but there was no fire. Then I opened the door and saw a lady standing there. She asked, 'Do you know where the fire is?' By then, the fire alarm had already gone off. I told her, 'Can you come inside? I can smell the smoke in my apartment.' We ran to the kitchen and then to my room, and that's when we discovered it—my room was on fire. Yes, my room was on fire. Smoke was everywhere, and there was a huge fire coming from an electric socket. I had forgotten to unplug a heater.

That day, I almost set the entire building on fire. It felt like a calling to me because, at that time, I was dealing with the stress of deciding whether to convert. I interpreted the incident as a turning point. I thought, 'What am I waiting for? If something happened to me and I didn't know the truth, it would be terrible.' The next day, I went to the mosque and took my Shahada.

Marta, on the day she decided to take her Shahada, mentioned that she received certain signs at the mosque.

Alhamdulillah, I had many positive experiences when converting. For example, on the day I decided to take my Shahada, my friend was supposed to meet me at the mosque, but she couldn't make it. Instead, her husband came because they both wanted to support me. Since it was my first—or one of my first—times at the mosque, I didn't know where the women's prayer hall was. I was standing there thinking, 'I don't know how to get up there.' Then, Subhanallah, the elevators just opened—no one was coming down, and no buttons had been pressed. I thought, 'Okay, if it's upstairs, this must be it.' So I went, and it felt like Allah was calling me.

Later, I found out that the elevators were a bit glitchy, but in that moment, it felt like a sign. I thought, 'Wow, Allah is calling to me.'

These narratives illustrate how moments of emotional resonance or significant life events can serve as turning points in the conversion journey, complementing the intellectual exploration of Islam and guiding individuals toward a final commitment.

2.8.4 Role Models, Escape from Struggles and Delayed Decisions

Natasha mentioned that meeting certain Muslims played an important role in her decision to convert to Islam.

Well, as I said, I had a role model, and I really wanted to be like her. I mean, if I hadn't met her—if I had met someone with lower morals—maybe I wouldn't have made this decision.

Prisha viewed Islam as an escape from the problems she was experiencing in her life.

Tough life. After my mother died, life became very difficult. My grandmother was extremely strict with us. We weren't allowed to go out unless it was for school or community events she attended. Even then, she would take us along and make sure we sat right next to her. Meanwhile, my friends were allowed to have sleepovers, invite friends over, and enjoy their freedom—we were completely deprived of ours.

At the same time, I was exposed to things I had never seen before, like substance abuse. My parents, though not churchgoers, had no substance addictions or issues. So it was a huge shock for me to see alcohol being used at my grandmother's house, especially by my uncles. I often felt scared, but my aunt, who was only two years older than me, seemed used to it and wasn't scared at all. There was such a drastic shift after my mother's death—suddenly, I was seeing all these things I wasn't prepared for.

I think my grandmother's way of coping with the stress was by going to church. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't like being forced to go at first, but eventually, I started accepting it and became genuinely interested. That's when I realized, 'Wow, now I have the freedom to choose who I want to be.' And so, I chose Islam. Islam delivered me from being exposed to substance abuse and all the harmful things that could have happened.

To this day, my aunties—who were strict and gave us no freedom—still wonder why I left Christianity and chose Islam. They think it's because of corporate religion. But for me, it was about escaping all the chaos and finding my own peace. My sister and I spent our childhood babysitting and with no freedom; even our schoolwork was a low priority for them. Islam became my way out of all that nonsense and into a life of peace and purpose.

Kelly discovered Islam when she was around 12 or 13 years old, but at that age, she didn't have the courage to embrace it. However, the thought of choosing Islam always remained in the back of her mind, and it eventually became a reality during her university years.

Um, so yeah, as I mentioned, I always had the intention that when I got older, I would convert and start practicing. Sometimes things just happen without much thinking or planning, you know? It's not always about having one key moment. I actually know people who had key moments, but for me, it was always in the back of my mind.

I even had a friend in college who was Muslim. We spent time together, but we never talked about Islam, and I never told her I was interested in it. I just had this feeling that as I got older, I should convert—that I should do it while I was in college. I think I was around 20 or 21 when, one day, I finally told her, 'You know, I think I want to become a Muslim.' Honestly, she almost got into an accident. She was so shocked—she was driving, slammed on the brakes, and said, 'What? We never talked about this. Where did this come from?'

After that, I started taking steps, and she took me to the mosque, where I said the Shahada.

In conclusion, the experiences of Natasha, Prisha, and Kelly highlight the diverse and personal paths that lead individuals to embrace Islam. For Natasha, meeting a role model was pivotal in shaping her decision, as she sought to emulate someone she admired. Prisha's conversion was influenced by her desire to escape from a troubled home life and find freedom from the constraints and struggles she faced, viewing Islam as a means of liberation and peace. Kelly's journey, on the other hand, was a gradual process, as the idea of converting remained in her mind for years before it became a concrete decision during her university years. These stories illustrate that conversion to Islam is often a complex and evolving process, influenced by a variety of personal experiences, struggles, and encounters, underscoring the importance of individual agency in the conversion process.

2.8.3 Conversion Motifs

Among the various theories of religious conversion, one of the most widely recognized is the model proposed by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd in their 1981 work on conversion motifs. They argue that conversions do not follow a single, uniform pattern but instead occur in response to a variety of personal, social, and psychological factors. They (1981) contend that religious conversions can be categorized into six distinct motifs: Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist, and Coercive. These motifs offer a framework for understanding the

diversity of conversion experiences and emphasize that individuals may come to a new faith for vastly different reasons.

1. **Intellectual Conversion:** This motif emphasizes the role of reasoning and study in the conversion process. Individuals who experience intellectual conversion often come to a new faith after a period of personal research and reflection, seeking answers to theological or philosophical questions. These converts are typically driven by a quest for truth, engaging in a rational evaluation of religious doctrines before making their decision.

2. **Mystical Conversion:** Mystical conversions are characterized by sudden, overwhelming experiences of the divine or the supernatural. These experiences often feel spontaneous and beyond the control of the individual, with a strong emotional or spiritual component. Mystical converts may report visions, spiritual encounters, or moments of enlightenment that lead them to embrace a new faith without any prior intellectual or social prompting.

3. **Experimental Conversion:** This type of conversion occurs when individuals test out a new religion before fully committing to it. The convert "tries on" the faith by engaging in its practices, rituals, or community life to see if it resonates with them. Experimental converts might initially participate in a religion out of curiosity or as a temporary experiment, but over time, their engagement deepens into a genuine commitment.

4. **Affectional Conversion:** In this motif, personal relationships play a central role in the conversion process. Affectional converts often embrace a new faith because of their emotional connections to individuals or communities within that religion. For example, a person may convert due to the influence of a close friend, romantic partner, or family member who practices

that faith. Affectional conversions are driven more by emotional bonds than by intellectual or mystical experiences.

5. Revivalist Conversion: Revivalist conversions occur within the context of highly emotional religious gatherings, such as revivals, mass meetings, or other forms of collective religious experiences. Individuals who convert through this motif are often swept up in the intense emotional atmosphere of these events. The sense of group solidarity and heightened emotion can lead individuals to make spontaneous decisions to convert, often in response to powerful preaching or shared religious fervor.

6. Coercive Conversion: The coercive motif describes conversions that occur under pressure or due to external forces. These conversions are not voluntary in the same way as the others, as they often result from social, political, or physical coercion. While less common in modern contexts, coercive conversions have historically occurred in situations where individuals were forced to adopt a new faith to avoid persecution, violence, or other forms of harm.

Lofland and Skonovd's model demonstrates that conversion is a multifaceted process shaped by a variety of internal and external factors. By categorizing these different motifs, they highlight the importance of recognizing the unique pathways that individuals take toward adopting a new religious identity. While some converts are motivated by intellectual curiosity, others are deeply affected by emotional experiences or interpersonal relationships, illustrating the diversity of conversion narratives.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to highlight the importance of understanding the society and context in which the process of conversion to Islam occurs while examining the conversion journeys of

Muslims in Canada. In Canadian society, there are prominent stereotypes such as associating Islam with terrorism, the belief that women are oppressed within Islam, and the association of Muslims with Arab identity. These perceptions significantly complicate the conversion process for converts. While the portrayal of Islam as the "Other" by Western media plays a significant role in the formation of these stereotypes, it is also important to recognize the contribution of Muslim behavior that does not align with Islamic teachings, which further reinforces these prejudices.

It has been observed that the initial encounters of Canadian converts with Islam are based on different processes. Natasha was drawn to Islam through cultural interest, while Prisha turned to Islam after confronting contradictions in her Christian faith. Dalia began developing an interest in Islam from a young age due to religious education, whereas Tania encountered Islam after an intellectual process. Furthermore, in the cases of Wilma, Sandra, Marta, and Leila, relationships with the opposite sex have also emerged as a significant factor that can lead to an interest in Islam. Judy's long search for meaning reveals both the resistance involved in embracing Islam and the role of pervasive prejudices, while also emphasizing that the decision to convert is a multifaceted and evolving process.

In some cases, extraordinary experiences, as seen in Marta, Reese, Leila, and Tania's stories, supported their conversion processes. In other instances, as seen in Prisha's case, we can observe traces of an escape mechanism underlying the decision to convert. Additionally, the influence of role models, as demonstrated in Natasha's case, is an undeniable factor in the conversion process of many individuals.

When comparing these findings to existing literature, it becomes evident that the experiences of Canadian converts are aligned with patterns observed in other countries, such as the UK and the US. According to Köse and Lowenthal's (2000) study in the UK, intellectual, experimental, and affectional motifs were the most prominent in conversion narratives, with many individuals converting to Islam as part of a personal search for knowledge or due to personal relationships (71%, 60%, and 66%, respectively). This pattern illustrates the multifaceted nature of religious conversion in the UK context. Similarly, Snook, Kleinmann, White, and Horgan's (2019) US-based study found that intellectual motifs dominated conversion to Islam, with 59% of participants stating that their decision to convert was the result of personal research and a quest for meaning. These findings indicate that intellectual curiosity remains a significant factor in conversion to Islam, regardless of cultural or historical context.

The findings from my Canadian sample align with those from the UK and the US. Like in other studies, the most prominent motif in Canada was intellectual. Additionally, we can observe affectional motifs in the experiences of Natasha, Sandra, Marta, and Brittani, particularly in their relationships with Muslim spouses. However, even in these affectional examples, the dominant theme remains intellectual, as the relationships served primarily as a means of learning about Islam, rather than converting solely for marriage purposes.

Upon closer examination of events that could be considered mystical, we find that these experiences do not directly relate to the mystical motif. For example, Reese had already spent over six months researching Islam and was convinced, but hesitated to leave her previous faith. Similarly, although Leila had an emotional encounter at Bayshore Mall, she had already resolved many of her questions about Islam but delayed conversion due to personal concerns. Marta, who described experiencing "divine signs," had her experience in the mosque after already deciding

to take her shahada. Thus, even seemingly mystical events do not necessarily correspond to the mystical motif. Therefore, we can conclude that only the intellectual and affectional motifs are clearly present in the Canadian sample, based on Lofland's six motifs.

Unlike the UK, where experimental motifs were observed, these were absent in the Canadian sample. One reason for this discrepancy could be that in Köse's study, 30% of the participants were introduced to Islam through Sufi groups, which attracted individuals seeking new and unique spiritual experiences. Additionally, the UK sample included participants who had converted as recently as a week before the interviews, which may explain the presence of experimental motifs in their case.

Chapter 3 : Family and Identity: The Evolution of Family Reactions to Converts' Embrace of Islam

3.1 Introduction

Islam is often met with stereotypes and misconceptions, the reactions of family members are crucial in either supporting or complicating a convert's transition to Islam. These responses range from open acceptance to resistance, influenced by a complex interplay of cultural values, societal narratives, and personal beliefs.

This chapter explores how family members, often the most influential figures in a convert's life, respond to the decision to embrace Islam. It examines the varying degrees of acceptance and resistance converts experience, and how these reactions evolve over time. Some families become more accepting, while others continue to struggle with the changes. Through the experiences of converts such as Teagan, Leila, and Marta, we gain a better understanding of how personal and cultural tensions manifest within family dynamics, and how the persistence of the convert in living their faith openly often leads to gradual shifts in family perspectives.

3.2 The Role of Societal Narratives in Family Reactions

Midden (2018) highlights the role of societal narratives in shaping family responses to religious conversion, noting that families often see conversion as a challenge to shared cultural or national identity. While some families show resistance, others adopt a more open or neutral stance. The intensity and duration of this resistance vary, with some converts facing prolonged opposition, while others experience growing acceptance. Converts who receive support from their immediate

circle find it easier to embrace their new identity, while those facing strong resistance struggle to maintain family relationships and continue on their religious path.

3.3 Supportive Families and Hidden Biases: The Reality of Conversion

Some of the participants can describe their families' attitudes as more moderate and supportive. However, as can be seen from the examples below, even in cases that could be considered supportive, difficulties arise due to certain prejudices. While Teagan's family appears to be more supportive, Marta's story highlights the presence of subtle biases. In the cases of Sandra and Tiana, although there is verbal support from their families, it is evident that certain situations make them uncomfortable and concerned. Among the participants, Teagan received the most positive response from her family, and she describes her experience as follows.

Teagan, a convert who received support from her family and friends, speaks positively about their reactions.

So yeah, I agree with that—it's true. From my previous community's side, I am very lucky in that regard. I know some of your questions touch on this, but I've never had any problems with my family. My family has been very supportive, and even my ex-husband is very supportive of me raising our son as a Muslim. He's completely on board and happy with everything.

All of my friends have also been supportive and happy for me. Sometimes, they even join me for events and activities. I've been very lucky on that side of things, for sure.

Teagan's experience illustrates how a supportive environment can greatly ease the transition into a new religious identity, allowing the convert to navigate their beliefs confidently and with a sense of belonging. Leila's story reflects a different nuance, as she encountered subtle biases, despite outward expressions of acceptance. She notes that while her family and friends seemed indifferent, certain prejudices occasionally surfaced, rooted in cultural misunderstandings:

Oh, that's a really good question. But honestly, it's probably going to be a boring answer—no one really cared. Everyone was like, 'As long as you're happy, we're happy.' I have a lot of love for my family and friends, and they've been supportive for the most part.

My mom was the hardest one to convince, though. I come from a Buddhist background, so it's not even one of the three Abrahamic faiths—it's really different. At first, she was a little weirded out and upset. She thought I was going to leave her for the religion, run off with some Arab man, and move to an Arab country. She's an immigrant herself and pretty traditional, so she had certain views that made her uncomfortable. It upset me a little, but I just showed her that I became a better person because of Islam. Eventually, we got over it pretty quickly.

As for my friends, no one really cared. In fact, they were very curious and asked me lots of questions like, 'Does this mean you have to do this or that now?' I clarified everything for them. For example, I told them that I choose not to wear hijab at this point, but I do want to marry a practicing Muslim man and pray five times a day with him. Answering their questions helped alleviate some of their negative views about Islam. Overall, it's been a positive experience.

According to Midden (2018), such subtle biases often stem from the intersection of religion, gender, and cultural identity, where family members project broader societal stereotypes about Islam onto the convert. This dynamic reinforces the notion of Islam as "other," complicating family dynamics even in seemingly neutral or supportive environments. Leila's account demonstrates how subtle biases, though less overt, can still affect family dynamics and challenge a convert's sense of acceptance. Her openness in answering her friends' and family's questions reflects a conscious effort to bridge cultural and religious gaps through dialogue. In Marta's case, her family also showed initial hesitation, even though they were generally supportive. She recounts facing challenges that stemmed more from a cultural divide than from religious opposition:

I can talk about all of them. Realistically, once you change religions and your mentality and thought process, people don't understand you in the same way anymore. But overall, Alhamdulillah, I feel like I've had it really good. I did face some challenges with my family because it's a completely different religion, right?

For example, I told my family first and then slowly started telling my friends. So let's talk about those two. With my family, I remember when I quit my job at the ramen restaurant, I told my parents why I quit. At that point, I wasn't afraid to tell them. I knew they were really big on money, saving, and financial stability. For me, quitting for the sake of Allah meant a lot, but to them, it just seemed like I was losing money. Their mentality was more like, 'You should just keep working,' and they couldn't really understand my decision.

But slowly and gradually, especially my mom, Alhamdulillah, she started to be more supportive. For instance, now as a family, we eat a lot less pork because she knows I can't eat it. And if she does make something with pork, she makes sure I have something else to eat. So, it's been really good overall.

Marta's experience highlights how cultural values, especially around livelihood and dietary practices, can create friction even when family members are generally supportive. Her family's willingness to adapt certain habits demonstrates a slow but meaningful acceptance of her new faith. Sandra's experience adds another layer, where her family, though generally accepting, showed discomfort with some of her Islamic practices, particularly her choice to cover:

So, I think my two closest friends—they're still my friends—didn't really have a big reaction or anything. People definitely handled it differently, though. My family, for the most part, was quite accepting. My mom, however, had some difficulties, especially with me wearing the hijab. She definitely didn't like it at first. Eventually, she started to get used to it, but then I began wearing the niqab, and again, she didn't like that. She doesn't say anything directly against it, but I can tell from the way she looks at me when I go out, or when we're out together, that it makes her uncomfortable—especially in the beginning.

My family is quite liberal, and they pride themselves on being accepting and open-minded, so she won't say anything openly. But as my mom, I can sense her discomfort. On the other hand, my brother and sister were completely fine with it, and my dad didn't really have any issues either.

My grandma, while accepting, also seemed somewhat uncomfortable. Unlike my mom, she doesn't ask questions about Islam. She'll talk to me about all sorts of things—school, life, and so on—but she avoids discussing my faith. I even pointed it out to her once, saying, 'It's kind of odd that you haven't asked me any questions about Islam.' Her response was, 'No, I haven't asked, and I never will.' I found it interesting because Islam is entirely new to her. Her friends all go to church together, so this is something outside of her daily life.

In the end, I've noticed that different people react in different ways. Some are curious and ask questions, while others prefer to remain silent.

Sandra's account reflects the silent tension that can exist within families where liberal values are strong. Her family's hesitation, particularly her mother's, underscores how visible expressions of faith can challenge family members' comfort zones, even when they are outwardly supportive. Tiana's relationship with her father is also telling. Though supportive, her father expressed concerns about how society might perceive her new identity, especially regarding the hijab:

My dad was very supportive. I always had a great relationship with him. I'll never forget what he told me when I said I wanted to convert to Islam. He said, 'I don't know this Islam thing. I don't know what it is or what it means. But I know you, and I educated you. You're an intelligent woman, and I trust that you wouldn't choose something that's wrong for you. I trust that you've researched this and read enough to understand what you're doing.'

He then asked me for three things. First, he said, 'I don't want to hear that today you're Muslim, tomorrow you're Buddhist, and the next day you're something else. This is not a joke. If you're going to choose this religion, you choose it for good. Otherwise, don't choose it at all.' Second, he asked me not to wear the hijab. He explained, 'I don't understand why it's worn or the reasons behind it, but we live in this country, and people will treat you badly if you wear it. So don't.' Third, he asked me to be sure. He said, 'I can't protect you. I can't be with you wherever you go or with whoever you meet. As your father, I can't protect you in this decision.'

My mom, on the other hand, was the most affected by my decision. She didn't understand it and initially thought she had failed as a mother—that she had made some mistake in raising me. She blamed herself for my decision to choose Islam as my religion. It was very hard on her, and the people in our social circle made it even harder. Instead of coming to me to ask questions or understand my choice, they went to her. She bore the brunt of their criticism and judgment. People questioned her parenting and criticized her, making her feel like she was the one to blame.

With me, she was angry and confused, trying to understand my decision. But at the time of my conversion, my mom was living in another city, and I was staying with my dad. Eventually, I decided to visit her. I spent a month with her, talking through everything and taking the time to explain my decision.

Tiana's story shows how family concerns may sometimes stem from a protective instinct rather than outright opposition. Her father's worries about public perception reveal the delicate balance converts often navigate between family expectations and their religious commitments.

3.4 Resistance to Change: Families Confronting Religious Conversion

In addition to examples where the decision to convert to Islam was met with some degree of acceptance, there are also many instances where significant challenges were encountered. In some cases, such as Natasha's, this is perceived as a betrayal of cultural or ethnic heritage, while in Prisha's case, it manifests as insistence on adhering to Christian traditions. Similarly, the examples of Judy and Briana illustrate two different ways in which this tension can be managed.

3.4.1 Cultural Expectations and Conversion: Navigating Family Dynamics

For some families, a relative's conversion to Islam was seen as a cultural loss or even a betrayal of heritage, as illustrated in Natasha's experience. Her family perceived her choice to convert as an abandonment of the cultural identity they shared:

My family received it very negatively. As I said, they considered it a betrayal—a betrayal of their values. At the time, I was living separately with my ex-husband, so there was some distance. However, when I returned to live closer to them, we had many conflicts. They were hoping that I would eventually go back to my old ways. They thought it was just a teenage whim, something temporary that would fade after a few years.

But when that didn't happen, and I continued to remain a practicing Muslim, they were quite upset. My decision to stay committed to Islam disappointed them, and it created ongoing tension between us.

Natasha further explains how her family viewed religion as inseparable from cultural heritage, leading them to interpret her conversion as a rejection of her background:

They view religion as part of their culture, a kind of historical heritage—a legacy, I would say. Even though they are atheists and have always said they don't believe in God,

they were very upset about my decision not to identify as a Christian. Interestingly, they mentioned they would have been upset even if I had chosen to become a practicing Christian—someone who goes to church, fasts, and prays regularly. That would have disappointed them too.

For them, I wouldn't say it didn't matter entirely, but perhaps being Muslim—or a practicing Muslim—was worse in their eyes than being a practicing Christian. Ideally, for them, I would remain nominally Christian—someone who doesn't pray or care about religion but still identifies with it culturally.

Natasha's experience highlights the profound intertwining of religion and cultural identity within some families. For them, conversion can represent a symbolic break from deeply held traditions and values, even when religious belief itself is not a central part of their lives. In this context, Natasha's conversion was seen not just as a religious change but as a step away from her family's sense of shared identity and heritage. Prisha, a convert from an Indigenous background, highlights how family support—or the lack thereof—affects her ability to live as a practicing Muslim:

There is often a lack of support from their families. Without family support and guidance, it becomes challenging to succeed. Since Islam is not part of their family culture, their families may not support their decision and often encourage them to return to their previous religion.

Prisha also recalls the cultural tensions she faced, particularly around practices like wearing the hijab and not baptizing her children:

Wearing the hijab, I would often get teased by family members. They would say it's for old women, that I looked like an old woman. When my kids were born, there were additional challenges. For example, I was baptized as a baby at the church, and my aunt insisted that I should baptize my children too. She said, 'You need to baptize your kids.'

I responded, 'No, my kids are innocent—like all children. They have not sinned, so why should I sacrifice them? They haven't done anything wrong.' I explained that I wouldn't have my children baptized because they aren't even Christian. That was another challenge I faced at the time.

Prisha's story illustrates the layered challenges converts face when cultural expectations conflict with Islamic practices, and family members resist adapting to the convert's new religious identity.

3.4.2 Managing Family Conflict: Coping Strategies in Conversion

Judy's experience with her family was one of the most challenging among the converts, marked by years of estrangement and profound misunderstandings.

When I converted to Islam, my father stopped talking to me for about three or four years. He thought I was a lunatic and that I was going crazy. I converted in 2004, just a few years after 9/11, during a time when Islamophobia was very strong. It was also the summer of one of the Gaza invasions, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a highly controversial issue.

About a year and a half after I converted, I met my husband. It was somewhat arranged—I knew someone who knew him, and we were introduced. When I got married, my mom stopped talking to me for nine years. I lost a lot of friends during that time, but the friends who truly loved me—those who weren't Muslim—asked, 'Does this make you happy?' When I said yes, they responded, 'Then we're happy for you.'

My social circle, which included family, friends, and colleagues, became very small. But the people who stayed in my life truly loved and accepted me for who I was. That support is what helped me get through those difficult years.

Judy explains that she coped with the isolation and rejection by reflecting on the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an, drawing strength from the trials they faced.

Just knowing that Allah has a plan gave me strength. Reflecting on the prophets of the past helped as well. For example, Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was betrayed by his own family, and Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) faced challenges with his father, who tried to convince him to follow a different path. The Qur'an explicitly teaches that if your parents tell you to do something against your faith, as in the case of Prophet Ibrahim, you are not obliged to follow them—and that's okay.

According to Islamic belief, nearly all the prophets faced tremendous resistance when delivering Allah's message. There are many instances in the Qur'an where family members did not

embrace the faith of the prophet within their own family.⁷ For prophets, faith always came first, shaping their entire view of the world. This concept resonates with Judy, as she sees her family members through a similar lens after embracing Islam. Since her conversion, their presence in her life is now measured by their alignment with the values of her faith.

But I think the hardest thing for me—the thing that hurts the most—is knowing that my parents may die as *kuffar*, as disbelievers. I know there are certain people Allah will allow into Jannah who aren't Muslim, but I don't know what will happen. Will we be in Jannah together? I don't know.

When you convert to Islam, loving for Allah is very different from loving for *dunya*. I love my parents and take care of them because Islam teaches me it's my duty to remain in their lives and honor them. But do I *really* love them in the same way? Not fully, because they don't understand this entire other part of me. I can't truly be my authentic self around them. I can't say *insha Allah* or *alhamdulillah* casually to my dad and have him understand. I can't mention Allah without hesitation. So, I feel like I can't fully be myself with them.

When asked why she believes her family responded so negatively, Judy explains that her conversion was perceived as a betrayal. She attributes much of their reaction to the influence of media, which has portrayed Islam in a distorted light.

It feels like a kind of betrayal. I think they believe that Muslims are terrorists and that they want to destroy their way of life. My parents are the type to believe whatever they see on TV—they don't question it. I don't come from a very well-educated family. None of my family members went to university except for me; I have a master's degree. No one else pursued higher education.

My family is very blue-collar, from a lower-income background, and their worldview doesn't extend much beyond their own city or family. They aren't particularly cultured or

⁷ Despite Prophet Noah's (Nuh) years of calling his people to faith, his own son rejected the message, as mentioned in Surah Hud (11:42-43). Similarly, Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) also faced resistance from his father, who was an idol worshipper, as noted in Surah Maryam (19:46-48). Prophet Lut's wife also rejected his message, and her fate was sealed with the punishment of the people of Lut, as described in the same Surah. In Surah Al-Tahrim (66:6), Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced rejection from his own uncle, Abu Talib, who, despite being protective, did not accept Islam. Furthermore, Surah Al-Qalam (68:9) recounts the rejection Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced from his own family and community, where he was ridiculed for his message.

exposed to different perspectives, and they're not well-educated. Because of this, they're very susceptible to manipulation by TV messages and sensationalist narratives.

Judy's story illustrates how difficult it can be for converts from less diverse or less educated backgrounds to gain acceptance from their families. For her family, her conversion seemed like a threat, as their limited worldview was largely shaped by the media's often negative portrayal of Islam. Judy found solace and resilience in her faith, and she drew on the examples of the prophets who also faced resistance and rejection from those closest to them. Her experience underscores the isolating effect of Islamophobia and the challenges converts face in bridging deeply rooted cultural divides within their own families. Briana similarly observes that stereotypes play a significant role in shaping her family's perceptions of Islam, which has made her experience particularly challenging.

Honestly, it's definitely about stereotypes. I'm not sure how to break them. I've tried talking to my mom about Islam many times, but she always changes the subject. She doesn't care to listen or engage—she just doesn't care. I'm hoping that, over time, she becomes more open-minded, but I really don't know. I don't know what to do about it.

Unlike Judy, who has faced open resistance, Briana has taken a more pragmatic approach, carefully choosing when and with whom to share her conversion, given her awareness of her family's and society's reactions.

In all honesty, I only tell people about my conversion if I know they will receive it well. I have a lot of people in my life who are Islamophobic, racist, or simply very close-minded. There are still people in my life who don't know about my conversion. I live about seven hours away from my family, so I don't see them very often.

I told my mom because she's open-minded and understanding. Her reaction was supportive—she said, 'Whatever makes you happy, do whatever you want.' But at the same time, she doesn't really understand. I know some families see positive changes in their children after they convert to Islam and think, 'This is wonderful.' My mom didn't see those kinds of changes in me. Even before I converted, I didn't drink, smoke, or do

drugs, so there wasn't much of a noticeable difference in my behavior. What she did notice was that I could only eat halal and didn't want to sit at tables where people were drinking. She interpreted this as me becoming more uptight, and I'm not sure she saw it as a good thing.

As for my dad, I still haven't told him. He once found out that I was only eating halal and told my brother that I was being brainwashed. I know that if he were to find out about my conversion, it would affect our relationship very negatively, and I don't want that to happen. I don't see him very often, and honestly, it's just better to keep the peace.

Being a visibly Muslim woman due to her hijab, Briana is often asked how she manages to conceal her faith from her family. She explains that living separately allows her to manage this tension more easily.

Um, since I don't live near my family, they've never seen me in hijab. I usually visit them only about twice a year, and when I'm at their home, I don't wear hijab because I'm in a private space with just my family. So, yeah, they've never actually seen me wearing it.

In the Qur'an⁸, family members are considered "mahram," meaning hijab is not required in their presence. By arriving before her father and removing her hijab once inside, Briana can practice her faith within Islamic guidelines while also avoiding potential conflict and concealing her religious identity from her family. When asked about her reasons for doing so, she attributes it to persistent stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Yeah, like I mentioned at the very beginning, my biggest struggle was the fear that my life would change entirely if I converted. I kept thinking, 'What are people going to think? What's my family going to say?' I was terrified to tell them. Even to this day, I've only told my mom. I've talked to my brother about Islam, but I haven't explicitly said, 'I'm Muslim now.'

When we talked, he said, 'Whatever makes you happy, do it.' He also had a lot of questions about Islam. For example, he asked, 'When people say Praise Allah, what does

⁸ "And tell the believing women that they must lower their gazes and guard their private parts, and must not expose their adornment, except that which appears thereof, and must wrap their bosoms with their shawls, and must not expose their adornment, except to their husbands or their fathers or the fathers of their husbands, or to their sons or the sons of their husbands, or to their brothers or the sons of their brothers or the sons of their sisters, or to their women..." [al-Nur 24:31]"

Allah mean?' I explained that it's just the Arabic word for God. We had a good conversation, and I said to him, 'You know, Islam has gotten a bad reputation—it's not what you think it is.' He responded, 'Oh, I believe you. I 100% believe you.' My brother is much more open-minded and willing to listen, which I really appreciate.

He's definitely someone I feel comfortable sitting down with and having an honest conversation about Islam when I go back home.

Here, we see two distinct approaches to handling family reactions to conversion. Like Judy, some converts choose to practice their faith openly, establishing clear boundaries and accepting the consequences of their choice. Others, like Briana, adopt a more conciliatory and strategic approach, selectively sharing their faith only with those they feel will respond positively. Despite their differing strategies, both cases reveal a common underlying challenge: pervasive stereotypes about Islam. Briana's and Judy's stories reflect the various ways that converts navigate family relationships, balancing personal conviction with the reality of deeply rooted societal and familial preconceptions.

3.4.3 Transforming Family Perspectives on Conversion

Crissy is another example of a convert who initially faced resistance from her family but, over time, overcame these tensions. Having converted over 30 years ago, she reflects on how her family gradually accepted her beliefs as she continued living according to her values without compromise.

My family initially thought it was just a phase. My mom, however, started to realize I was serious about it when she noticed me spending a lot of time in my room. She would check on me and sometimes see me praying the Islamic way. At first, my family was concerned—they didn't understand what I was doing. They wondered, 'Is this a cult? What is this?'

But I believe time heals. After about a year, my mom actually started to defend me to the rest of the family. Some relatives were worried, thinking, 'What is she getting into? Maybe her Muslim friends are influencing her, and this is bad for her.' But my mom

would say, 'Well, I have a teenage daughter who doesn't drink, doesn't date, and doesn't do drugs. It could be worse. She's very good to me.'

Her support made a big difference, as she began to see the positive changes in me and stood up for my decision.

Crissy's experience, along with other examples, reveals two primary ways families often interpret conversion to Islam. Firstly, they may view Islam as a harmful influence or as conflicting with Canadian values,⁹ seeing it as a foreign or misguided ideology. Secondly, they might perceive it as a temporary phase or a passing influence from others, one that is expected to fade. However, as converts consistently live their faith over time, embodying Islamic values and dispelling stereotypes through their actions, families often begin to reassess their initial assumptions. This gradual acceptance occurs as families witness the contrast between stereotypes of Islam and the reality of their loved one's commitment and lifestyle. Dalia's experience serves as an additional illustration of how family acceptance can evolve when assumptions about Islam are challenged by real-life examples.

My family's reactions were mixed. My mom was completely fine with it, honestly. She always says that when I told her in the living room, she couldn't say no because I looked so happy. She knew I had been struggling for the past seven years, so she said, 'If you're so happy with this, I can't say no to that.'

But the rest of my family, it's been more touch-and-go. Even now, I'm still trying to negotiate certain things. For example, in Christianity and Catholicism, when you're baptized, you have a godparent who takes on a legal role if your parents pass away prematurely. My godmother took my conversion very personally, and it was really hard to explain my decision to her. She lived through 9/11, and that event was the only thing she associated with Islam.

I remember her telling me to take off my hijab multiple times. But at one point, when she found out I was going to perform Umrah, her attitude completely changed. She got so

⁹ The belief that Islam contradicts Canadian values is often reflected in the communication of many converts with their surroundings. A concrete example of this perception is when Kelly, after becoming Muslim and wearing the hijab, was told, "You are no longer Canadian."

excited and even bought me a bunch of clothes for the trip. Since then, she's been incredibly supportive.

The hijab was also hard for some people to understand. They couldn't grasp why I wouldn't take it off in certain situations. But now, I think they've come to accept it. When they see me in my hijab, it's like they see it as part of me—just like my hair. They think, 'Oh, yeah, that's Dalia.

Dalia's journey reflects the gradual shift in perception her family experienced. Although they initially struggled with her visible expressions of faith, such as wearing the hijab, her consistency and commitment helped normalize these practices in their eyes. The process of acceptance was marked by time, understanding, and Dalia's dedication to her faith, which softened the initial resistance and allowed her family to see her choice as a genuine expression of identity rather than a fleeting phase.

Together, Crissy's and Dalia's stories illustrate how the commitment of converts can gradually shift family perspectives, moving from skepticism and concern to acceptance and even support. Their experiences highlight the transformative potential of living one's faith openly and authentically, challenging stereotypes and fostering understanding in the process.

3.5 Conclusion

The experiences of participants reveal the complex challenges of conversion to Islam within non-Muslim families and the transformative dynamics that develop over time. Each case illustrates how converts maintain their commitment to their beliefs while navigating prejudices within their immediate circles. Some families initially perceive this transformation as a threat to their cultural identity or shared values. However, over time, consistent displays of faith and positive personal growth often lead to greater acceptance, as Sultán (1999) observes. Many converts are drawn to

Islam for its clear moral guidelines and idealized vision of family life. Yet, this alignment with Islamic values can heighten tensions within secular families, who may view conversion as a rejection of shared cultural norms. This dynamic is reflected in Judy's experience, where her family saw her conversion as a betrayal influenced by media stereotypes.¹⁰

Family reactions to conversion show significant variation. While some, like Teagan's family, responded with support, others, such as Judy's and Briana's families, struggled with resistance shaped by stereotypes and negative portrayals of Islam in the media. These examples highlight how familial acceptance is influenced by a combination of personal growth, cultural dynamics, and societal narratives.

Societal biases and perceptions of cultural identity play a key role in shaping family reactions. Leila and Marta noted that their families struggled to understand certain Islamic practices, leading to occasional instances of prejudice. In this sense, conversion is not always seen as a personal decision but as a symbolic departure from shared cultural norms. Judy's experiences illustrate how media representations can influence family perceptions, exacerbating tensions within these dynamics.

At the same time, gradual acceptance over time is also evident in some cases. Crissy and Dalia's experiences demonstrate how consistent behavior and visible adherence to values can help address family resistance and facilitate greater understanding. Through patience and dialogue, these individuals were able to rebuild relationships and dispel misconceptions within their families.

¹⁰ Converts, especially those from Western nations, may confront the quandary of being labeled 'race traitors' either due to their affinity with traditions of African-American Islam or their alignment with racial profiles linked to terrorism and other stereotypes.(Galonner, 2017; Moosavi, 2015a)

These observations highlight the multifaceted impact of conversion on family dynamics. While responses are shaped by cultural identity and societal influences, the consistent actions and communication efforts of converts can contribute to increased acceptance over time. This process underscores the complex and dynamic nature of conversion, offering valuable insights into its broader social and familial implications.

Chapter 4: Post Conversion

4.1 Introduction

Post-conversion processes are complex and multilayered as individuals adopt new religious identities and strive to adapt to them. The secondary literature contains various discussions and classifications regarding different aspects of this process. Although there are extensive studies on Christianity and new religious movements, unfortunately research on this process for Muslim converts remains relatively limited. Studies on the post-conversion experiences of individuals who have converted to Islam, especially in Western societies, are highly valuable as they fill an important research gap in the field.

One of the prominent theories in this area is Anne Sofie Roald's four-stage post-conversion model. In her *The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century*, Anne Sofie Roald divides the processes that Muslim converts [go through after conversion] into four main stages: **Zealotry, Disappointment, Acceptance, and Secularism**. This model explains the transformative process that converts experience in terms of their religious identity and social relationships after changing their faith.

4.2 Zealotry & Fall in Love

"Zealotry" or "enthusiasm" refers to what individuals newly converted to Islam experience during their transition process. Roald notes that this phase became more pronounced especially in the post-9/11 period, with converts to Islam distancing themselves from their former social circles and integrating entirely into a new worldview and culture. (Roald,2012) According to Roald, during this stage, individuals adopt the understanding that "Islam is a way of life" and closely adhere to the social and moral values of the Muslim community. In this context, it is

noteworthy that individuals who convert to Islam often adopt the cultural characteristics of those born into Islam (Roald, 2004, p. 283-4).

Roald (2012) emphasizes that this initial stage is temporary, with most new Muslims gradually adopting a more moderate perspective over time. However, she also notes that some individuals may remain in this stage due to factors such as the desire to align with the cultural and religious values of their spouses or the aspiration to live in Muslim-majority countries. This is particularly the case among those who adopt a Salafi or traditionalist interpretation of Islam, which emphasizes the need for Muslims to distinguish themselves from "unbelievers." Roald highlights that zealotry is a transitional stage in which the individual distances themselves from their former identity. Similarly, Köse (1994) observes that British converts during the early stages of conversion often exhibit high levels of enthusiasm and strict adherence to Islamic practices. This enthusiasm frequently leads to the adoption of cultural elements associated with born Muslims. However, Köse also notes individual variability, with some converts taking a more cautious and gradual approach to integrating these practices into their daily lives. Judy's statements also generally support Roald's theory. We observe how her husband's Salafi background influenced her and how her attitude changed after their divorce.

After I got married, my first husband was Wahhabi-Salafi—very, very strict and religious. He was also a refugee who had experienced war, so his perspective on freedom was completely different. As a result, I became very strict myself. I wanted to be perfect, to embody the ideal image of a Muslim. I strived to do everything perfectly.

But with that, I began to develop arrogance. I started thinking, 'I'm doing it right, and everyone else is doing it wrong.' That mindset took over for a while. Some things happened between us, and we ended up getting divorced.

Since then, being on my own has allowed me to rediscover Islam in a way that feels personal and authentic to me

Tiana also reflects on the challenges she faced during the zealotry stage, particularly in her relationships with those around her:

I tried to be the most perfect Muslim from day one. I wanted to do everything right, but in that process, I became overly strict. I was harsh at times, even to my father, who was always very supportive. Looking back, I realize there were moments where I didn't handle the balance well, and I ended up hurting him in the process.

I also think I caused some harm to my mother in similar ways. There were so many things I did that I didn't need to do, or that I shouldn't have done in the way that I did. I regret not approaching things with more kindness and understanding.

Eventually, however, she recognized the need for balance in her approach, allowing her to reconnect with her family and redefine her practice of Islam in a more compassionate and understanding manner. A similar pattern emerges in the experiences of Briana, a convert for less than a year. Her remarks highlight the zealotry stage:

Oh, it's truly like night and day. When I compare how I felt about Islam just a few years ago to how I feel now, the difference is profound. To say that Islam merely plays a role in my life wouldn't capture the truth—Islam is my life. It shapes everything I do and every decision I make.

I have an insatiable desire to keep learning because it's such an integral part of who I am. I constantly make *dua* for Allah to guide my parents and my brother to the straight path. I want them to experience the same love for Allah that I do so that I can share this journey with them. I hope they come to see how extraordinary and beautiful this religion truly is.

While her experience reflects the evolving nature of a convert's relationship with Islam, other converts navigate this process differently. For instance, Santiago, who has been Muslim for three years, describes a contrasting approach to his initial experiences of learning about Islam. Transitioning into the faith, he immersed himself in extensive research, making use of the free time he had during the early months of his journey:

In the beginning, I learned incredibly fast. During the first six months, I had so much free time—it was practically an everyday thing. I wasn't working or doing much else, so I spent my days immersed in learning. I would sit for hours researching on Google, watching videos, and exploring anything I could find. It was an intense and unbiased deep dive into Islam—just constant research and discovery

This contrast highlights the variety of approaches converts take during their post-conversion journey, shaped by their individual circumstances and access to resources. Santiago's rapid and independent learning process reflects a zeal for understanding Islam, but it also underscores the importance of accessible information and support systems for new Muslims.

In her 2004 study examining the experiences of Scandinavian converts, Anne Sofie Roald uses the phrase "falling in love" to describe the emotional and spiritual connection that new Muslims feel toward Islam, rather than the term "zealotry." However, in her 2012 article, she explains that the term "zealotry" now seems to be more fitting, especially within the polarized atmosphere of the "War on Terror." Roald's choice of terminology appears to center on five main observations:

1. **Distancing from the Former Social Circle:** Newly converted individuals distance themselves from their previous groups of friends and social circles, adapting entirely to a new worldview centered on Islam.
2. **Full Integration into a New Cultural Sphere and Lifestyle:** New Muslims, viewing Islam as a way of life, directly integrate this belief into their lives, which often leads to the adoption of cultural characteristics unique to those born Muslim.
3. **Disconnection from Society and Their Past:** This stage is characterized by a rejection of the individual's former socio-cultural values. The desire to separate from their previous identity results in an effort to live an "Islamic life" in every detail.

4. **Fanaticism and the "Us vs. Them" Paradigm:** Roald notes that individuals at this stage exhibit intense devotion to their faith and adopt an exclusionary attitude toward all non-Islamic views. This phenomenon, described by the well-known English convert and theologian Tim Winter (aka Abdal Hakim Murad) as "convertitis," refers to the tendency of new Muslims to view themselves as "angelic" and others as "demonic" (Murad, 1997).
5. **Strong Adherence to Cultural Practices:** Individuals associated with Sufi or Salafi movements begin to live a life more closely aligned with Islamic rules and traditional norms. Particularly among Salafis, there is an effort to isolate themselves from society in ways consistent with teachings such as gender separation.

Upon examining the Canadian sample, it would seem that the term "falling in love" is more appropriate than "zealotry." The "us vs. them" paradigm, for example, which represents a significant point of distinction, is not as prevalent among converts, as we will see below. Moreover, while there are converts, as Roald describes, who wish to separate from their previous identities, this divide is not as clear-cut in my sample. Aside from these examples, it has also been observed that some individuals have navigated their early stages in a more balanced and controlled fashion. For instance, Sandra adopted a gradual approach to learning about Islam, as reflected in her own words:

I guess I've just been trying to improve myself gradually. I converted to Islam about a week before Ramadan in 2020. Since then, I've used Ramadan as a marker for progress each year, focusing on improving something about myself Islamically.

For example, a couple of years after my conversion—around my second Ramadan—I transitioned some of my savings accounts into halal investment accounts to avoid earning interest. It was a new concept for me, so it took some time to understand and feel comfortable with the change.

I've also been working on learning to read and memorize the Qur'an. When I first started, I didn't know any Arabic at all. Now, I can pronounce the words, though I still don't

understand the majority of them. There are a few words here and there that I recognize and know the meaning of, but it's a work in progress. I've been focusing on memorizing shorter surahs, and while it's been a slow journey, I've found it rewarding to add a little more each year.

The same gradual approach applies to my hijab. At the beginning, I wore skinny jeans with a headscarf and long-sleeve shirts, though they were quite fitted. About two and a half years after converting, I started wearing the niqab. At first, I wasn't sure if I'd like it or stick with it, but it's become part of my journey.

It's all been a slow and steady process, but I've focused on progressing in different aspects of my faith, step by step, year by year.

Similarly, although Kelly also had the desire and enthusiasm to learn, she chose a calmer and slower approach to learning and practicing Islam.

When I converted, it was a happy feeling. I definitely wanted to learn, but I took it slow. I didn't try to change everything at once or dive into learning everything immediately. I allowed myself time to adjust and ease into it. I can't say I was overzealous at the beginning because I approached it at my own pace, taking my time to gradually grow in my faith.

The experiences of Muslim converts in Canada, to sum this section up, reveal that the transition to Islam and the adaptation process can occur at varying speeds and degrees. While some converts undergo a rapid and intense transformation, others adopt a more cautious and gradual approach. This diversity demonstrates that conversion to Islam is an individual experience, with each convert shaping the process based on their life circumstances, cultural context, and internal dynamics. Therefore, the term "falling in love" more accurately describes the approach of Canadian converts to Islam, highlighting the internal changes and personal development involved in the transformation process.

4.3 Disappointment

The second stage proposed by Roald is the stage of disappointment. Initially, new Muslims tend to view the expressions of born Muslims as Islam. However, as they read more books and engage in discussions with other Muslims, most come to understand the gap between Islamic ideals and the behaviors of Muslims, while also realizing that there are many versions of Islam. This awareness of the difference sometimes emerges through observing contradictory lifestyles and behaviors within the Muslim community, and at other times, it is influenced by the attitudes of a Muslim spouse. For instance, in Kelly's case, we see that this realization arose due to the influence of her spouse.

Disappointment, I would say, really hit when I got married. It became very clear to me—this is Islam, and this is Muslims. They're not always the same. I had assumed that others would have the same good intentions I did, and when they didn't, it was disappointing.

The disappointment wasn't so much about Islam itself but rather about the people I encountered after marriage. It was a tough realization, but it definitely stemmed from my experiences during that time.

Prisha shares a similar perspective, reflecting on her disappointment regarding certain interpersonal dynamics she observed: "I've heard of Muslim men breaking the hearts of non-Muslim women. That's the only disappointment I have." Likewise, Natasha states that she has also felt disappointment due to Muslim men.

It kind of reminds me of what we learned in university when we talked about immigration and culture shock. When you move to a new country, at first, you fall in love with everything you see. Then, you start noticing the negative sides, and eventually, you come to terms with it. As a convert, I went through similar phases.

There was a time when I was very strict about what I wore, how I prayed, and how I practiced Islam overall. Especially after my divorce, I went through a period of disappointment. But *Alhamdulillah*, I never thought of leaving Islam, even during those

times. My disappointment wasn't with the religion itself but more with Muslim men in general.

Based on all this, it can be said that people initially tend to idealize Islam and Muslims. However, certain experiences with Muslims (with the spouse factor being particularly prominent in our sample) lead them to distinguish between Islam and Muslims. The classic expression of this distinction is "Islam is perfect, Muslims are not." In fact, this phrase implicitly points us to the third stage, Acceptance.

4.4 Acceptance.

This is the stage in which the new Muslim recognizes that Muslims are "human beings, not supernatural creatures" and mentally accepts "the discrepancy between ideal and reality" (Roald 2004, pp. 285-6).¹¹ After the disappointment stage, many new Muslims are inclined to seek new understandings of Islam that are particularly compatible with their cultural context. Although there is limited research on Canadian converts, we can understand a similar phenomenon among European converts to Islam. Østberg's concept of "integrated plural identities" links cultural and religious transformations to the question: How do we maintain a particular religious worldview within a different cultural context?

Berger and Luckmann (1967) address this with the concept of "plausibility structures": a religious person develops the logical structure necessary for the continuation of a "symbolic universe." In the understanding of Islam among many Muslims, 'religion' encompasses not only faith but an entire symbolic universe, meaning that transitioning to a new faith requires the formation of a new plausibility structure. The impact of this new plausibility structure on the new

¹¹ For those who remain converts, this seems to be true. At this point, although there are individuals who return to their previous religion, we do not have any data on this within our sample.

Muslim depends on their living situation. If the new Muslim lives in an environment surrounded exclusively by born Muslims from a specific cultural background, the Muslim plausibility structure has a stronger influence. However, a Muslim convert who has less contact with born Muslims and more with non-Muslims is less influenced by the religious plausibility structure to which they belong. A more common third option is for new Muslims with similar cultural backgrounds to come together and create a plausibility structure that essentially adheres to Islamic principles, but also conceptually reconstructs both the majority society and the Muslim cultural contexts by incorporating elements of their pre-Islamic cultural context.¹²

4.5 Privatization

In the first three stages, converts view Islam as a way of life encompassing all aspects of existence. However, those who reach the fourth stage begin to consider religion more as a private domain, leading to a secular perspective that supports the separation of religion and politics. With this viewpoint, the individual tends to follow only the parts of the religious message they choose, thus moving away from the strict behavioral rules imposed by the understanding of Islam as “a way of life” (Roald, 2012).

Since each of these stages takes time, it is quite rare to observe this stage in individuals who have recently converted or who have only been Muslim for a few years. However, while some of those who converted more than ten years ago enter this privatization process, others continue to embrace Islam as a comprehensive way of life rather than confining it to a private sphere. My conversation with Natasha perfectly summarizes the secularization process.

¹² I believe the third option sheds light on local Islamic understandings and will provide significant contributions to discussions on “Canadian Islam”.

Natasha: At this point, I feel more in the middle; I'm in a more flexible place. My focus now is on personal development, spiritual growth, and building good relationships with others.

Hakan: So, would you say you view Islam more as an internal and personal matter now?

Natasha: Yes, yes, I think so.

Hakan: Could you explain that a bit more?

Natasha: Having been a Muslim for 20 years, I no longer judge people by their religious affiliation. Among practicing Muslims, you find individuals who can be some of the best people or, unfortunately, some of the worst. Similarly, people who aren't religious, or even identify as atheists, can contribute a lot to society, help others, and engage in charity work. To me, a Muslim is someone who does good to others and avoids harming anyone. That's what matters most to me.

As can be seen from these statements, Islam, which was once viewed in the "falling in love" stage as a religion encompassing and regulating all aspects of life, is now approached primarily through moral principles and confined to the personal domain. These moral principles are expressed through universally accepted actions, such as doing good. Natasha's response regarding how her daily life and Islamic practices have changed is quite insightful.

The easiest way to explain it is by comparing it to clothing. In the beginning, I was very strict about my hijab—I wore long skirts, avoided pants, and made sure not even a single strand of hair showed. But as I went through different stages in life, especially after experiencing disappointment, my perspective changed.

Now, I care less about the specifics of what I wear, as long as it's modest. To be honest, hijab for me has become more of a habit—an integral part of my identity rather than something I strictly police.

As can be seen from Natasha's statements, the principles that were once carefully followed have gradually become more flexible and are now maintained only as habits. Ironically, it could be said that secularizing converts resemble, in some ways, the born Muslims they once criticized.

The main factor leading them to this stage is the disappointment phase, rooted in the realization that the people they idealized based on outward appearances or identities were not as they seemed. While it is not entirely the same, an outside observer might say they have ended up in a somewhat similar situation.

4.6 Conclusion

The post-conversion journey of Muslim converts is a nuanced and multilayered process, shaped by individual experiences, social dynamics, and cultural contexts. Through my qualitative findings from interviews, the transformative phases of conversion—ranging from initial zeal to a more personalized understanding of faith—become evident. These stages align with Anne Sofie Roald’s four-stage model of Zealotry, Disappointment, Acceptance, and Secularism, while also reflecting the specific experiences of Canadian converts.

The Zealotry stage, characterized by initial enthusiasm and strict adherence to Islamic practices, frequently involves distancing from pre-conversion identities and a strong desire to fully integrate into Muslim communities. This resonates with Köse’s (1994) observations of British converts, many of whom also embrace cultural practices associated with born Muslims during this phase. However, my findings indicate that Canadian converts often navigate this stage with greater caution, balancing their enthusiasm with a more gradual integration into Islamic practices.

The Disappointment stage emerges as a critical juncture, where converts confront the gap between the ideals of Islam and the behaviors of Muslim communities. The commonly expressed sentiment that “Islam is perfect, Muslims are not” captures this realization, as many participants shared experiences of disillusionment, particularly in marital or community settings. These reflections echo Köse’s findings, which similarly highlight the role of interpersonal dynamics in shaping this phase.

The Acceptance stage marks a turning point, as converts reconcile their cultural identities with their faith. Many participants described this phase as a time of integration, where they adapted Islamic principles to align with their cultural backgrounds. This aligns with Østberg's concept of "integrated plural identities," which highlights how converts negotiate between Islamic values and their pre-conversion cultural norms. In the Canadian context, this phase often involves creating a hybrid identity that bridges these two worlds.

The Secularism stage, while less commonly observed, reflects the evolving relationship converts have with their faith over time. Long-term converts, such as Natasha, shared how their religious practices became more flexible and centered on universal moral principles. Roald's (2012) insights on this stage are particularly relevant, as they underline the diversity of outcomes in post-conversion experiences, with some converts continuing to view Islam as an all-encompassing way of life, while others adopt a more individual and internalized approach.

In summary, the narratives gathered through my research illustrate both shared patterns and unique variations in the post-conversion journeys of Muslim converts. The interplay between cultural context, personal spirituality, and social integration emerges as a key factor shaping these experiences. These findings underscore the adaptability of Islam as a faith and its capacity to harmonize with diverse cultural identities. By examining these post-conversion processes, a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by converts in multicultural societies is achieved.

Chapter 5: Challenges in Adapting to an Islamic Lifestyle

5.1 Introduction

Islam offers a holistic way of life, requiring specific norms and values that encompass all areas of existence. For individuals raised within Canadian society, integrating these norms into daily life can be challenging, especially when Islamic values may conflict with broader societal expectations. One critical decision that converts may face is what to do with a job that does not align with Islamic principles.

These challenges manifest not only in daily life practices, such as changes in eating habits and clothing choices, but also in professional environments, where issues like conflicts with work-related values may even lead to the decision to leave a job. In Canadian society, the issue of access to reliable Islamic knowledge sources also becomes a concern for many converts. Despite the widespread availability of technological tools and the internet, the anxiety of obtaining trustworthy information complicates this process. Given that Islam is rooted in Arabic, and considering the significant place of Arabic within Muslim communities, many converts face the challenge of learning a new language and culture. Meeting these expectations often results in stress and feelings of inadequacy, and for some, even leads to what is known as "Imposter Syndrome."

Particularly for female converts, financial difficulties can add another layer of challenge. For instance, the need to purchase new clothes to align with Islamic modesty requirements or the difficulties in finding employment that accommodates both their religious sensitivities and financial needs are significant concerns.

5.2 Challenges of Integrating Islamic Values into Professional Life

Marta, worked in a ramen restaurant where pork-based dishes dominated the menu, and halal alternatives were nearly nonexistent. Given that pork and alcohol are prohibited in the Qur'an¹³, Marta found working in such an environment conflicted with her faith. While her family struggled to understand this decision, Marta ultimately chose to leave her position, reflecting her desire to align her professional life with Islamic values despite the personal and social challenges involved.

It was actually a really big challenge that I had to overcome. Working at a restaurant made it even harder. The place primarily served pork-based ramen, so there was barely anything I could eat—let alone anything halal. It was a constant struggle.

Eventually, *Alhamdulillah*, I decided to quit the job. Looking back, it was a tough experience, but it was the right decision for me

The primary reason behind Marta's decision to leave her job was her desire to live in accordance with the tenets of her new faith. She felt that continuing to work in that environment conflicted with her Islamic values, which ultimately compelled her to make this choice:

Hakan: Was leaving the job mainly because of your religious beliefs?

Marta: Yes, it was. I gave it up for the sake of Allah. It was something I really struggled with because I kept going back and forth about it. It wasn't just about the job itself—it

¹³ For the prohibition of pork: "He has only prohibited for you carrion, blood, swine and that upon which a name of someone other than 'Allah' has been invoked. Then, whoever is compelled by necessity, neither seeking pleasure nor transgressing, there is no sin on him. Verily, Allah is Most-Forgiving, Very-Merciful." [al Baqarah 2:173]
For the prohibition of alcohol: "O you who believe! Wine, gambling, altars and divining arrows are filth, made up by Satan. Therefore, refrain from it, so that you may be successful." [al Maidah 5:90]

also felt tied to my tradition and culture in some way. Letting go wasn't easy, but in the end, I made the decision.¹⁴

Marta openly shared the challenges she faced at work with her employer, offering an honest explanation. Although she had been with the company for five years and her employer was quite understanding of her situation, Marta felt that continuing in her job did not align with her desire to live according to Islamic values and her Muslim identity. According to her,

I literally told my boss, 'I'm becoming Muslim—well, I am Muslim—and I don't think working a job like this is right for me anymore.' I had started feeling that working in the restaurant was *haram* because they served alcohol and pork, and I was directly involved in serving those things. It didn't sit well with me, especially now that I was practicing Islam and deepening my beliefs.

So, I made the decision to quit for the sake of Allah. This was back in December 2023. I had worked there for five years, so it was a pretty tough decision for me. My boss was very flexible and understanding—they gave me a lot of leeway when I needed it. But in the end, it felt like the right thing to do for both of us. Sometimes, it just doesn't work both ways

Marta's story reflects the challenges faced by individuals striving to live by Islamic principles within a multicultural society like Canada. Balancing religious values with professional responsibilities can be demanding. Marta's decision highlights the sacrifices and determination required to uphold her new lifestyle as a Muslim, showcasing her commitment to integrating her faith into her everyday life.

5.3 The Journey of Knowledge Acquisition: Challenges for New Converts

¹⁴ In Islamic literature, there is a hadith that contains the good news that if a person gives up something for the sake of Allah, Allah will replace it with something better. Such hadiths can influence the decision-making processes of converts.

Hadith: إِنَّكَ لَنْ تَدَعَ شَيْئًا لِلَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ إِلَّا بَدَّلَكَ اللَّهُ بِهِ مَا هُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكَ مِنْهُ

"Certainly, you will never leave something for the sake of Allah, the Mighty & Majestic, except that Allah will replace it with something better." [Musnad Ahmad 23074; Al-Silsilah Al-Saheehah, Shaykh Albani: Isnaaduh Saheeh

For individuals who have newly embraced Islam, learning the requirements of a new faith and continuously seeking knowledge can be an overwhelming process. The need to acquire foundational religious knowledge, understand worship practices, and learn the details required for daily life places a significant burden on converts. Briana's experience sheds light on these challenges, reflecting the struggles faced by many converts. As Briana strives to perform her daily prayers and respond to questions from those around her, she finds herself grappling with a lack of information. This gap not only serves as a source of stress but also affects her confidence in social settings, making her feel less assured in her interactions.

There were a lot of challenges when I first converted, and there still are. In the beginning, it was incredibly overwhelming—it felt like I was stepping into an entirely new life that I knew nothing about. I had to pray five times a day, but I didn't know how to pray. I needed to recite the Qur'an, but I didn't know Arabic. I was told I had to wear the hijab, but I wasn't ready for it. After spending 33 years of my life without wearing a hijab, suddenly being expected to adopt it felt overwhelming.

On top of that, I was told that if I did any of these things wrong, my prayer would be invalid or I'd be sinning. It was a very scary and intimidating time, navigating all these new expectations while trying to find my footing in my faith.

The challenges Briana faces highlight the difficulties converts encounter in the process of learning Islam. According to her, the journey of understanding Islam is time-consuming, requires patience, and is inherently complex. Briana expresses that her greatest wish during this journey is to be able to continue learning without the harsh comments and judgments from others:

Learning Islam is particularly challenging for converts. One thing I wish people would stop doing is telling converts that their prayer is invalid if they make even the smallest mistake. Allah is the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful, and He understands how difficult this journey is for converts.

It's a time-consuming and challenging process to learn everything. But Allah is with you every step of the way. As long as you're making an effort to learn and doing your best, that is what truly matters

Briana shares that viewing all the knowledge required by Islam to be a Muslim sometimes overwhelms her. She admits that the difficulty of learning everything often leads her to despair, to the point where she found herself crying daily. However, Briana also acknowledges the significant support she has received from her husband, a native Arabic-speaking Muslim, who has been invaluable in helping her through this process:

I was looking at everything as a whole, thinking about all the things I needed to learn. It felt so overwhelming, like I'd never be able to learn it all. I cried a lot—every day, in fact.

But I've been very fortunate, and I'm still very fortunate, because my husband is Arab and his native language is Arabic. Being born and raised Muslim, he has been able to help me tremendously. He's helped me memorize the shorter surahs, and while I haven't memorized much of the Qur'an yet, *inshallah*, I will one day..

Briana's story highlights the pressure and knowledge gaps faced by those newly learning about Islam, illustrating the challenges associated with adapting to a new faith. For converts, explaining and gaining acceptance for their beliefs from those around them can be a significant source of stress, especially when combined with limited knowledge. The uncertainties of transitioning to a new religion make responding to questions from others even more demanding. Sandra, sharing her own experiences, reflects the stress converts feel as they try to explain their beliefs to those around them. For Sandra, conveying the foundational principles of her new faith, seeking acceptance from her community, and addressing her knowledge gaps proved to be an exhausting process.

I think the second issue I faced was with my family. *Alhamdulillah*, I know there are other converts who have had much worse experiences, so I'm grateful that my family has accepted my conversion to Islam and doesn't have a problem with it. However, they still had a lot of questions, and that was sometimes challenging for me to navigate.

Because I had just converted, I often struggled to answer their questions. Sometimes, I didn't feel confident enough to give them proper answers, and other times, I felt like I needed to know everything about Islam in order to respond. When I told my family I had converted, I had only been Muslim for about two months, so naturally, I didn't know everything.

Even when I did know the answers, it was sometimes hard to find the right words to explain things to them. That was a bit difficult for me, but I think it's part of the process of learning and growing in the faith.

Sandra's experience illustrates the challenges that converts face in managing knowledge gaps and responding to the expectations of those around them as they embark on their journey of learning Islam. Although having her family's approval has been a significant source of support, Sandra struggled with feelings of inadequacy, as she was often unable to answer their questions about Islam. This inability became a constant source of stress, as her family's expectations added pressure for her to have "complete" knowledge of her new faith.

For converts, the tension in such social interactions arises not only from a lack of information but also from the expectation that they should be fully informed. Additionally, while converts in larger cities with established Muslim communities generally find it easier to access support, those living in smaller towns or rural areas face more complex challenges. In areas with fewer Muslims, women in particular may struggle to find a community or a reliable mentor to provide guidance on religious matters. Sandra, one of the converts facing this issue, describes the isolation and difficulty in accessing knowledge she encountered while living in Sudbury, a city with a relatively small Muslim population:

I was living in Sudbury, in northern Ontario. There are a couple of small mosques there, but they don't have permanent sheikhs or religious leaders. The mosques were also quite far from the university campus where I lived, so it wasn't easy to access them.

On campus, there weren't many Muslims around me either, which made it a bit isolating in terms of community and support

Sandra's experience demonstrates that the process of learning Islam can be significantly more complex and isolating for converts living outside cities with established Muslim communities. In larger urban centers, Muslim communities often provide valuable guidance and resources on religious matters, offering a support network that is far more limited for converts residing in rural areas or smaller towns.

5.4 Arabic Language: A Key Barrier for Converts

The central role of Arabic in Islam, particularly with the Qur'an being in Arabic, presents a significant challenge for converts. Not knowing Arabic or struggling to become accustomed to Arabic terms can hinder individuals from fully understanding Islam and feeling accepted within Muslim communities. This language barrier often leads to what is sometimes called "imposter syndrome"—a sense of inadequacy or lack of belonging. The experiences of converts living in Canada highlight the difficulties they encounter with the Arabic language and cultural adaptation, showing how these challenges can complicate the development of a sense of belonging within the Muslim community.

Wilma explains in detail the challenges she faced in learning the meanings and proper usage of Arabic terms during her conversion process. She describes the substantial effort required to use commonly heard expressions such as "Alhamdulillah" and "Inshallah" correctly, noting how this process led to stress and occasional feelings of inadequacy. The pressure to understand and use these expressions accurately contributed to Wilma's feelings of alienation, even in environments like the mosque, where she struggled to feel a sense of belonging.

I have a few points to say about this question. First of all, the language barrier has always been a problem. Because especially in the beginning, the Muslim lingo of saying, I don't know, الحمد لله (*Alhamdulillah*), إن شاء الله (*Inshallah*), بسم الله (*Bismillah*), ما شاء الله

(*Mashallah*), and so on. I didn't understand them. I heard them all the time, but I had to ask my now-husband, 'What does it mean, and when to use it?' He even had to train me on how to react after someone sneezes. He sneezes and says, الحمد لله (*Alhamdulillah*). Then he's like, 'What do you say?' I said, 'I don't know what I say,' so he taught me, یرحمکم الله (*Yarhamukumullah*), and then after that, یرحمنا ویرحمکم الله (*Yarhamana wa yarhamukumullah*). It took me five months to learn this. And it was very stressful.¹⁵

Wilma expresses that her inability to grasp the meaning of Arabic expressions led to a persistent feeling of inadequacy and caused her to feel excluded in communal spaces like the mosque. This experience even impacted her motivation to attend the mosque and hindered her full integration into the Muslim community. According to Wilma, this situation induced a sense of "imposter syndrome," making her feel like an outsider within the Muslim community.

Yes, they would often use Arabic terms while talking about the religion, and it made it very difficult for me to follow what they were trying to teach or remind us of. It made me feel excluded at times. I remember one instance when I became so discouraged that I started crying. I left the sisters' floor and went downstairs, texting my husband, saying, 'Can you come see me?' I told him, 'I can't even follow what they're saying.'

My husband was always encouraging me to keep learning and suggested I attend the lectures at the mosque to gain more knowledge. But I felt disheartened because I couldn't understand what was being said. It was a very discouraging experience.

Over time, I've started to learn more of the terms, and now I can follow better. I also understand that many of the people at the mosque are native Arabic speakers or have studied Quranic Arabic, so they've put in the effort to learn. Some attendees only speak Arabic or another language, so Arabic becomes the common language for everyone. I don't take it personally anymore, but I know I still have work to do in this area. In the beginning, though, it was really tough and made me feel excluded.

¹⁵ الحمد لله (*Alhamdulillah*) — "Praise be to God."

إن شاء الله (*Inshallah*) — "God willing."

بسم الله (*Bismillah*) — "In the name of God."

ما شاء الله (*Mashallah*) — "What God has willed."

یرحمکم الله (*Yarhamukumullah*) — "May God have mercy on you" (said to someone who sneezes).

یرحمنا ویرحمکم الله (*Yarhamana wa yarhamukumullah*) — "May God have mercy on us and on you."

These phrases highlight the cultural and linguistic adaptations required for converts to engage fully with the expressions commonly used in Muslim communities.

Wilma also explains how the language barrier impacted her journey of practicing Islam. In this process, she even hesitated to go to the mosque, constantly questioning her own limitations while assuming that others around her already knew everything. This inner conflict created an ongoing struggle within her, challenging her ability to fully embrace and practice Islam.

In the beginning—this might sound silly—I would almost get panic attacks about going to the mosque. I was so scared of not being able to keep up or understand what was going on. It was very intimidating, especially the fast-paced use of terms and lingo. I felt like everyone else already knew everything, and it gave me a sense of impostor syndrome. I would think to myself, 'I don't look Muslim, I can't keep up with other Muslims—am I really a Muslim?'

My belief was 100% there, but it took me a while to feel confident in my Muslim identity. I'm not perfect, of course—I'm still learning a lot. But at some point, I had to accept and understand that I am a Muslim, 100%, just as much as anyone else who identifies and practices. And it's okay that I'm still learning. I'm a convert, and that's part of my journey.

Over time, I became more assertive and confident in my identity, both among Muslims and non-Muslims. However, in the beginning, the constant questioning didn't help. I was always being reminded, by both Muslims and non-Muslims, that I was a convert. It was a daily reminder that I was still finding my place.

Prisha experienced a similar challenge and realized that acceptance within the Muslim community often depended on adapting to Arab culture and language. She noted that knowing Arabic and understanding Arab customs earned her greater respect within the community.

I think learning to speak Arabic and understanding the lifestyles, morals, and customs of Arabs has made things much easier for me. Adapting to their culture feels more natural because many aspects of their lifestyle align with Islamic principles as written in the Qur'an. My husband also follows these customs, which makes it easier for me to integrate into this way of life.

If I couldn't speak Arabic or understand these cultural nuances, I think I would have had a much harder time adapting. For instance, as a new convert who doesn't speak Arabic or understand how to behave appropriately in different settings—such as around men and women—it could be quite challenging. I'm a Westerner, but I've learned how to navigate these behaviors and customs, which has helped me a lot.

I've noticed that when I speak Arabic, I gain more respect within the community. Understanding the cultural norms and how to act in certain situations has also made my experience much smoother. Without this knowledge, I imagine my experience would have been significantly different.

Crissy also experienced a sense of exclusion due to not knowing Arabic when attending the mosque, which made it difficult for her to fully adapt to the Muslim community. Feeling a true sense of belonging within a Muslim community required significant effort on her part.

There's also a common feeling among many converts, myself included, of not belonging when entering a mosque. Back in my day, there was only one mosque in Ottawa, located on Scott Street—the old mosque, the Ottawa Muslim Association (OMA). When I went there, I looked around and saw that everyone was Arab, speaking a language I didn't understand. Here I was, in Canada, and yet I felt unwelcome because I couldn't connect with the language or the people.

This created a sense of disconnection. I would think, 'Where do I belong?' On one hand, I didn't feel like I fully belonged with my family anymore, and on the other, I didn't feel like I belonged with the Muslim community either. This is a significant issue for many converts and can be incredibly isolating.

For Sandra, Arabic also posed challenges in accessing religious materials and staying connected with her family-in-law. Since her husband's mother and sister live in Saudi Arabia, most videos they would share with her were in Arabic, which she struggled to understand, leaving her feeling distanced from important aspects of Islamic learning and family connections.

My mother-in-law and sister-in-law live in Saudi Arabia, so most of the videos they sent me were in Arabic, which I couldn't understand. This became one of the greatest challenges I faced after converting—I didn't know where to turn for clear answers.

Tiana expresses that, as a Muslim who does not know Arabic, she struggles to access Islamic literature. The lack of Arabic proficiency has limited her ability to understand Islam deeply, which has, in turn, made Islam feel more mysterious and distant to her.

One of the first challenges I faced was, of course, the language. Much of what I was reading was in Arabic, and while I now understand why so much of Islamic literature is kept in Arabic, it can also feel very self-defeating. When you produce literature that is, let's say, 20% in Arabic, it makes it incredibly difficult for those who don't understand the language.

This, in turn, contributes to the perception of Islam as something mysterious, distant, and difficult to approach. For many new converts, this can create a barrier to fully engaging with the faith and understanding its teachings.

Each of these experiences highlights the critical role that Arabic plays in the journey of learning Islam and gaining acceptance within the Muslim community. For converts, the language barrier complicates their process of embracing a religious identity and establishing a place within the community.

5.5 The Cost of Conversion: Balancing Faith and Financial Reality

For converts to Islam, embracing a new lifestyle often comes with financial burdens, as the transition to an Islamic way of life necessitates new purchases and lifestyle adjustments. Acquiring items such as modest clothing, which aligns with Islamic principles, can be a significant economic challenge. Dalia's experience highlights the financial difficulties that arise during this transition and the economic obstacles converts may face. The need for clothing that conforms to Islamic standards has created an additional financial strain for her.

I would say financial challenges were a significant issue at the beginning. I've noticed this is a common problem. For example, there are many jokes online about how an *abaya* costs an arm and a leg—and honestly, they're not far from the truth.

The lack of affordable modest clothing for both women and men is a big issue. It can make it difficult for new converts, or even practicing Muslims in general, to find suitable options without stretching their budgets.

Dalia's account illustrates how financial strain is one of the most immediate challenges for new converts. Beyond clothing expenses, it emphasizes the need for accessible community support and information to ease the transition. For many converts, the economic burden of aligning with Islamic practices adds an additional layer to their journey, where financial resources are essential to fully adopt the lifestyle changes required by their faith.

5.6 Challenges in Accessing Reliable Islamic Resources for New Converts

For converts who grew up in non-Muslim environments, access to reliable Islamic resources presents a considerable challenge. The lack of easily accessible, well-organized, and authoritative sources often hinders their religious education, creating barriers to understanding and practicing Islam. Kelly's experience is illustrative of this issue; despite her need for reliable information to support her growth in the faith, she has encountered significant difficulties in finding comprehensive resources.

There are different resources available, but they're scattered and not clearly organized. There's no comprehensive guide specifically tailored for converts, which makes it challenging to navigate.

On top of that, you encounter the issue of different interpretations of Islam. People from various sects often present their own versions, which can add to the confusion for someone new to the faith.

Kelly's account reflects the fragmented and diverse nature of Islamic resources available in English. This disorganization, combined with the variety of interpretations from different Islamic groups, complicates the journey for new converts, who must navigate these resources without the

contextual or cultural grounding that lifelong Muslims might possess. Consequently, the process of acquiring a nuanced understanding of Islam is slow and often overwhelming. This issue underscores the necessity of developing structured, accessible resources specifically designed to support converts, enabling them to engage meaningfully with Islamic teachings.

5.7 Conclusion

The journey of embracing Islam for converts in Canada is marked by a complex set of challenges across linguistic, financial, cultural, and educational domains. For many converts, the initial struggle is not only understanding and practicing Islamic rituals but also reconciling their newfound faith with the demands of a multicultural society. For example, the need to learn Arabic extends beyond language acquisition; it influences one's ability to engage deeply with Islamic teachings and integrate into the Muslim community. As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic plays a significant role in the learning process for converts, yet the language barrier often leads to feelings of exclusion and inadequacy, further complicating their religious journey. The pressure to learn and use Arabic correctly, coupled with social expectations, creates isolation and alienation, as seen in Wilma's experience with Arabic expressions and the exclusion she felt.

Financial challenges add another layer of difficulty for converts adapting to their new way of life. The transition to a lifestyle that aligns with Islamic principles—such as wearing modest clothing—imposes significant economic burdens. Dalia's experience highlights the financial strain many converts face, navigating the costs of modest attire while managing other life changes required by their faith. These economic obstacles exacerbate the already overwhelming process of embracing Islam, as converts must adapt not only to new religious practices but also to the financial realities that accompany them.

Moreover, the lack of accessible, reliable Islamic resources compounds the challenges converts face. Kelly's experience illustrates the fragmented nature of Islamic materials available in English and the difficulty of navigating various interpretations of Islam from different sects. This disorganization, coupled with a lack of cultural and contextual grounding, makes it even more difficult for converts to understand Islam in a nuanced way. Without structured guidance, they often struggle with gaps in religious knowledge that could otherwise be addressed through proper support systems. The absence of a clear, unified approach to Islamic education for converts creates barriers to fully understanding and practicing their faith.

Beyond individual struggles, converts also face social challenges within both the Muslim community and wider Canadian society. The experiences shared by converts such as Marta, Briana, Wilma, and others reveal how cultural biases and misunderstandings within the Muslim community can lead to exclusion and marginalization. Converts often find themselves judged not only by their religious commitment but also by their cultural background, complicating their integration. Tiana's exclusion from social events during Ramadan and Wilma's encounter with an Arabic teacher who was surprised by her conversion demonstrate how cultural affiliations, more than religious beliefs, are sometimes seen as the determining factors for acceptance within the Muslim community. The prejudices and biases of born Muslims can make it harder for converts to feel fully accepted, highlighting the tension between cultural identity and religious devotion.

These experiences emphasize the necessity of creating supportive structures and accessible resources to ease the transition for converts. Specifically, there is a need for more comprehensive educational materials tailored to converts, offering clear and reliable guidance on Islamic practices and principles. Additionally, fostering a more inclusive community environment that

embraces both cultural diversity and religious commitment is essential for helping converts integrate more fully into the Muslim community. Providing social support, mentorship, and emotional guidance is equally important, as it can help alleviate the isolation many converts experience. By addressing the multifaceted challenges of language barriers, financial strain, lack of resources, and social exclusion, the process of embracing Islam can be made more manageable. Such support systems will not only facilitate the religious and cultural integration of converts but also contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate Muslim community in Canada.

Chapter 6 : Between Whiteness and Islam: The Identity Struggle of White Muslim Converts in Canada

6.1 Introduction

In this section, I focus on the self-identity perceptions of white Muslims in Canada by examining their experiences within Muslim communities and broader Canadian society. White Muslim individuals benefit from "white privilege" in the wider society while simultaneously facing significant challenges in achieving full acceptance within Muslim communities. These contradictory experiences highlight the complexity of negotiating identity at the intersection of race and religion.

Moosavi (2021), Casey (2021), and Galonnier (2015) approach the identity struggles of white Muslim converts from different yet complementary perspectives. Moosavi emphasizes that white Muslims benefit from the privileges associated with "white privilege" in broader society but are often perceived as "outsiders" within Muslim communities due to cultural and racial assumptions. This dual dynamic leads white converts to retain social advantages while simultaneously facing struggles for belonging (Moosavi, 2021, pp. 1918–1920). Casey expands on this with the concept of "white duality," highlighting that while whiteness provides social benefits, it complicates integration into Muslim spaces due to cultural and racial perceptions. The lack of full acceptance of white Muslims within these communities forms a central aspect of this duality (Casey, 2021, p. 618). Galonnier, on the other hand, employs the concept of "non-normative whiteness" to describe how white converts challenge traditional notions of racial and religious identity, resulting in marginalization and scrutiny in multiple contexts (Galonnier, 2015, p. 38). Together, these perspectives illustrate that the identity struggles of white Muslim converts emerge from the

multifaceted dynamics of whiteness, which simultaneously grants social advantages while exposing them to exclusion and interrogation.

In this analysis, I will expand the findings from the literature to the Canadian context, analyzing how white Muslim converts in Canada face similar struggles for belonging. These identity negotiations reveal a complex interplay between privilege and marginalization, shaped by racial dynamics, cultural expectations, and religious affiliation. By examining the lived experiences of individuals such as Wilma and Teagan, this section will highlight how whiteness operates both as a source of social capital and as a barrier to acceptance across various contexts.

6.2 Experiences of White Muslim Converts in Canada

Moosavi (2021) notes the risk of converts being viewed as "others" within Muslim communities due to their whiteness and how this affects their identities. For instance, Crissy's experience of not being seen as a "real Muslim" within Canadian Muslim communities aligns with Moosavi's findings regarding the challenges converts face in achieving acceptance among Muslim communities. Crissy shared:

Then there's the other side, where people make it clear that you're not part of their culture or their religion because you're seen as an outsider. Over the years, I've encountered situations like this. For example, one sister called me, very upset. She was newly married to a Muslim, had said her Shahada, and sincerely believed in Islam.

However, while she was praying, her mother-in-law came up behind her, kicked her, and said, 'God's never going to accept your prayers. You're a Canadian.' That experience deeply hurt her and made her feel excluded despite her commitment to the faith.

This example reflects the duality Moosavi highlights: while whiteness may grant societal privilege, it simultaneously challenges converts' ability to be fully integrated into Muslim spaces, where cultural authenticity is often tied to non-white identities (Moosavi, 2021, p. 1922).

Wilma's experiences after she began wearing the hijab provide intriguing insights into how her identity is perceived in society. She notes that prior to wearing the hijab, she was perceived as a "white woman," but once she started wearing it, she observed that society began to view her through a different lens. Wilma said:

Yes, there have been a few incidents that felt a bit odd. There are two sides to it: how people who were raised as Muslims perceive me and how non-Muslims perceive me now.

When I'm at the mosque or with Muslims who were raised in the faith, they almost always assume I'm a convert. One of the first things they say is, 'Oh, you're a convert, congrats,' even though it's been five years since I embraced Islam. In the beginning, it was nice and encouraging, but now it's a bit irritating. At this point, I just want to be seen as a Muslim—nothing more, nothing less. Being Muslim isn't about looking a certain way; you either are or you're not.

This experience illustrates the persistence of racialized perceptions within Muslim communities, aligning with Galonnier's (2015) concept of "non-normative whiteness,"¹⁶ where white converts must navigate racialized expectations that often conflict with their identity as Muslims (Galonnier, 2015, p. 38).

Another noteworthy aspect of Wilma's experiences is the "white privilege" she possesses as a white convert, which affords her certain advantages within the Muslim community. Wilma mentioned:

I was very surprised by how happy his family members were about him marrying a white Muslim, or more specifically, a white convert. For many of them, it seemed to be a source of pride because, in some people's eyes, a white woman is elevated—it's seen as a status symbol. The fact that I was also a convert made it even more significant for them.

I noticed how easily I was accepted by my husband's family. There was almost no issue at all, which made the experience much smoother for me.

¹⁶ Non-normative whiteness describes a condition where individuals identified as white challenge the standard associations of whiteness with power and dominance by aligning with marginalized or "othered" identities, such as Islam. Galonnier (2015) notes that white converts to Islam, by embracing a racialized and often stigmatized religion, disrupt societal expectations and face scrutiny from both their new religious communities and broader society.

Drawing from Wilma's insights, we see that fair skin functions as a kind of "social capital" within Muslim communities, facilitating her acceptance in these circles. This aligns with Casey's (2021) findings that whiteness often intersects with religion to confer both privilege and marginalization, depending on the context (Casey, 2021, p. 619).

Wilma also points out that Canadian society still perceives itself as predominantly white, yet this notion of whiteness conflicts with her Muslim identity. While she acknowledges Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, she emphasizes that certain prejudices and social boundaries persist, making it challenging to exist as a Muslim within this framework:

Even though I'm pretty sure that, at this point, most Canadians belong to visible minorities or ethnicities other than white, Canada still seems to perceive itself as predominantly white and Christian—a nation of colonizers. While there's an awareness of the demographic shift, the collective Canadian consciousness hasn't fully adapted to this change yet.

This observation aligns with Bonilla-Silva's framework of racial stratification, where whiteness persists as a dominant cultural standard, complicating the identity construction of white Muslim converts (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, pp. 229-230). Unlike Wilma, who was readily accepted by her husband's family due to her whiteness, Teagan encountered exclusion and mistrust within Muslim spaces. This contrast highlights how whiteness can function differently depending on context and individual circumstances. Teagan's experience as a non-hijabi convert sheds light on the unique struggles faced by converts who do not conform to stereotypical appearances of Muslim identity. During Ramadan, Teagan described being excluded from social gatherings like iftar dinners, events that are typically community-focused. She shared:

Ramadan was particularly difficult for me, especially because I'm white and I look different. While my friends were constantly being invited to iftars and celebrations—

'Come have iftar with us,' 'Come celebrate with us'—I never received any invitations. Nobody included me, so I ended up spending that time alone

When asked why this might be the case, Teagan explained: “I guess I don’t look Muslim, or maybe I just don’t seem to belong to their culture in their eyes.”

Teagan’s account highlights the intersection of racial and cultural biases, where a lack of visible religious markers, such as the hijab, complicates her acceptance within Muslim communities. This aligns with Moosavi’s (2021) findings that whiteness, coupled with an absence of cultural symbols of Islam, can lead to converts being perceived as outsiders (Moosavi, 2021, pp. 1922–1923).

Teagan also shared experiences that revealed a deeper layer of mistrust tied to her whiteness. For example, she described facing additional security scrutiny at mosques, feeling as though her racial identity marked her as a potential threat:

During that time, there were a few issues because the mosque was much busier than usual. With so many people, there was increased security, and I was asked things like, 'Can you show me your ID?' or 'Can someone vouch for you to come in here?' There were security concerns about people entering who weren’t supposed to be there, and they were understandably focused on safety.

However, this made me feel unwelcome. At the same time, I didn’t want my presence to make anyone else feel uncomfortable either.

This heightened scrutiny, she explained, seemed specifically tied to her whiteness and the historical baggage associated with colonialism:

For me specifically, they asked for extra security, not for others—just for me, because I’m white. It’s hard to explain, but the feeling I get is that because I’m white, due to colonialism, some people seem to want to harm me because they think I deserve it.

Such narratives reflect what Galonnier (2015) describes as the tension between whiteness as a marker of privilege and whiteness as a symbol of colonial dominance, creating an inherent duality for white converts in Muslim spaces (Galonnier, 2015, pp. 39–40).

6.3 Conclusion

The cultural, religious, and social dynamics of white Muslim converts in Canada reveal the multifaceted nature of identity construction at the intersection of race and religion. These individuals simultaneously experience the privileges associated with whiteness and the challenges of being fully accepted within Muslim communities, where cultural authenticity is often tied to non-white identities. As highlighted in the works of Moosavi (2021), Galonnier (2015), and Casey (2021), their lived experiences underscore the complexity of belonging and exclusion that defines their identities.

The duality of whiteness emerges as both an advantage and a disadvantage. In broader Canadian society, white Muslim converts like Wilma benefit from racial privileges that position them as part of the dominant group. However, this privilege becomes a source of tension when combined with visible symbols of Islam, such as the hijab, which disrupts societal expectations of whiteness. This disruption often leads to converts being perceived as "highly devout" or morally superior, as Wilma noted, yet it simultaneously alienates them from the norms of their cultural and social backgrounds.

Within Muslim communities, white converts face a different set of challenges. As explored by Casey (2021) and Galonnier (2015), whiteness functions both as a form of social capital and as a barrier. While some converts are appreciated for their racial identity, as Wilma experienced within her husband's family, others like Crissy and Teagan encounter exclusion and suspicion. These experiences reflect the lasting impact of colonial histories, where whiteness is associated

with power and dominance, creating inherent tensions in spaces striving to decolonize and redefine their identities.

The findings from my research also highlight the intersection of race, religion, and gender. Women like Teagan, who do not wear the hijab, face unique challenges in being perceived as "authentic Muslims." Meanwhile, those who adopt visible symbols of Islam, like Wilma, navigate layers of perception that place them "in between" two worlds. These narratives demonstrate that whiteness is not a monolithic construct but rather a fluid one, influenced by context, culture, and historical memory.

Ultimately, the experiences of white Muslim converts underscore the ongoing negotiation of identity in a world where race and religion intersect in complex and often contradictory ways.

Chapter 7 :Perceptual, Cultural, and Religious Differences Between Converts and Born Muslims

7.1 Introduction

In this section, I aim to dive into a dilemma that emerged while reviewing the literature on converts and conducting interviews, specifically within the Canadian context. There are various differences between individuals born into Muslim families, whom I will refer to as "born Muslims," and those who later choose Islam but were not born into Muslim families. One of the primary reasons for these differences is the cultural socialization process. For individuals living in Muslim-majority countries, cultural socialization is shaped by interactions from family, mosques, and society at large. In regions that have been under Muslim rule for centuries, this interaction also develops through broader environmental factors such as urban structure, architecture, and infrastructure. On the other hand, in countries where the Muslim population is a minority, these civil interactions are much more limited for the individual. Therefore, the aforementioned cultural socialization is restricted to a person's family, local community and mosques. For example, born Muslims may have the advantage of being more familiar with Islamic culture and practices and being able to sustain an Islamic identity more easily, while at the same time, they may fall into the misconception of considering local and cultural elements that deviate from the core principles of Islam as authentic representations of the religion. This discrepancy creates a distinct dilemma between "born Muslims" and "convert Muslims."

As a result of this dilemma, converts often face prejudices, and sometimes, they may feel ostracized and thus, criticize born Muslims for not following "true Islam." Given the scope of this thesis, I will evaluate these issues from the perspective of the converts, attempting to understand their perceptions and feelings. The consistency and foundational validity of the distinction made

by converts between religion and culture, or between "true Islam" and "cultural Islam," is not the central discussion of this thesis and will not be addressed in this thesis.¹⁷

7.2 Cultural Biases and the Integration of Converts

In Canada, Muslim converts encounter both positive and negative experiences in their efforts to integrate into religious communities. This process extends beyond mere religious practices, and is often shaped by cultural biases and intra-community discrimination. Converts often strive to have their identities fully recognized within both Canadian society and Muslim communities. Tiana's statements illustrate how these efforts frequently culminate in frustration:

It has always made me very sad and has had significant consequences on how I practice Islam and relate to the Muslim community. When I first began approaching the community—whether in France, London, or here—I encountered rejection, and it hurt deeply.

Imagine, as a convert, you willingly turn your back on your own culture and tradition to embrace another. You make that profound decision, only to find yourself treated as an outcast by the very community you've joined. You're not accepted, you're discriminated against, and you're seen as something defective. It's incredibly painful.

For me personally, this was especially difficult because I've always believed that being Muslim comes with certain ethical basics. One of those is the understanding that all Muslims are equal, and we should treat each other with kindness, as brothers and sisters in faith. That was my expectation, and it was heartbreaking to realize that this ideal often doesn't exist in practice. It's a very sad reality

¹⁷ It is inevitable that there are certain differences between the theory and practice of a religion such as Islam, which permeates every aspect of life. Given the approximately 15 centuries of Islamic heritage and history, it can be said that this issue requires extensive discussion. This topic has been relevant throughout every era and geographical region since the early years of Islam. Regarding the prevailing Arab customs and traditions at the time when Islam was revealed, three different approaches can be identified: The first approach is to adopt and preserve the existing religious, moral, legal, social, or cultural structure in pre-Islamic Arab society and continue those practices (ibka). The second approach is to continue the existing structure in pre-Islamic Arab society by abolishing or reforming the aspects that contradict the values of Islamic religion, morality, and law (islah). The third approach is to abolish and invalidate the pre-Islamic Arab customs and traditions that are incompatible with Islamic religious, moral, and legal values (ilga). This threefold framework has helped to define Islam's relationship with culture in every period and context, ensuring its dynamism and adaptability. It can be a useful framework for discussions related to this topic.

Converts often feel marginalized within the community as those born into the tradition frequently question their religious commitment and knowledge. Tiana recounts an experience at a mosque where another woman scrutinized her ablution process, describing it as an extremely humiliating encounter:

They had this very simplistic understanding: 'If it's something we do in my country, then I do it; if we don't do it in my country, then I don't.' But that's completely wrong. It's not about what your country does—it's about whether it's something the Prophet said, whether it's in the Qur'an, or in the Hadith. Your country's traditions shouldn't define your practice of Islam. It was very frustrating to witness this mindset and even harder to navigate it as a new Muslim.

I remember some specific examples from my early years as a convert. Going to a mosque for the first time and revealing that I was a convert felt like such a risk. I often experienced outrageous situations. For instance, when I went to perform *wudu*, someone would stand there and watch to 'verify' that I was doing it correctly—even though I had been a Muslim for six years and could perform *wudu* with my eyes closed. That kind of scrutiny felt incredibly insulting.

Or another common incident: people would say, 'Oh, you're a convert? Recite *Al-Fatiha* for us.' Why should I recite *Al-Fatiha* to prove myself? Instead, I would think, 'Why don't you recite it for me and, even better, explain its meaning? You've recited it countless times—do you truly understand it?'

These experiences were very challenging, especially in my early years when I was still emotionally and spiritually maturing. Back then, these incidents caused me a lot of pain. Now that I'm older and more experienced, I've learned to approach them with greater wisdom and patience.

Cultural biases, particularly those held by born Muslims from majority-Muslim countries, often come to the forefront, serving as a significant barrier to the acceptance of converts within the community. Cultural differences, in particular, emerge as a prominent factor complicating their inclusion. Tiana illustrates this issue through her experiences with marriage proposals following her divorce, stating:

You know, at one point, I got divorced, and later I received several marriage proposals. However, many of these proposals were disregarded simply because I'm Mexican. I'm not Bangladeshi, Turkish, or Arab—I don't belong to their culture. Because of that, some families didn't want me, despite the match being good, despite the potential blessings, and despite everything aligning for a successful marriage.

Tiana's statement highlights how Muslim communities often evaluate not only religious ties but also cultural affiliations as criteria for acceptance and marriage¹⁸. Such cultural biases overshadow religious identity, leading to discrimination within the community. The dedication and effort that converts invest in embracing Islam are, at times, undervalued due to these prejudices. This underscores a set of tensions that arise when cultural backgrounds conflict with what the convert perceives to be the universal principles of the religion. Another perspective on these cultural biases is provided by Teagan, who recounts her experience of exclusion during Ramadan as a convert woman, stating:

I have friends from places like Mali and Morocco, and I've noticed a pattern: Moroccans tend to invite other Moroccans, Africans invite Africans, and Arabs invite Arabs. It often feels like people go out of their way to stay within their own cultural groups, especially during occasions like breaking their fast together.

Teagan's experience reveals the sense of isolation that cultural groups within the community can impose on converts. Despite being individuals who are expected to be appreciated for their dedication in choosing their faith, converts often face exclusion and loneliness in practice from the communities they thought would accept them. Even during periods like Ramadan, which emphasizes communal solidarity, these cultural divisions undermine the sense of belonging for converts, and often serve to weaken their connection to the community. Some converts encounter

¹⁸ According to common Islamic belief, a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, whereas a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man. Considering the limited number of Canadian male converts, this legal principle significantly impacts the marriage processes of Muslim female converts. They are often compelled to marry someone who is a born Muslim.

significant challenges in this regard. Wilma's experience offers a striking example of the prejudices faced by converts. During a conversation with an Arabic teacher, Wilma encountered negative perceptions about converts, which she describes as follows:

My husband is the principal of a Quranic school at our mosque, and he works with several Arabic teachers. One of the teachers, an older woman, was sitting next to me during a presentation and started chatting with me. At first, I don't think she realized I was a convert—she thought I was Turkish, for some reason.

During our conversation, she said something like, 'I don't understand why all these white people have started coming to the mosque recently. The women don't wear hijab, and some of the men have tattoos. Why are they even here?' I responded, 'Maybe because they're trying to learn more about the religion or they're converts.' That seemed to silence her.

I wasn't sure what she expected from me—maybe she thought I'd agree with her or join in on the gossip. But then she turned to me and asked, 'Wait, what are you? Are you Turkish? Are you Syrian?' I said, 'No.' She asked again, 'What are you?' and I replied, 'I'm French Canadian.' She was visibly shocked and said, 'Oh, so you're a convert?' Her expression changed to one of embarrassment, and she quickly fell silent.

Wilma's experience highlights that converts are judged not only for their religious knowledge but also for their cultural backgrounds. The prejudices held by some members of the community push converts into a form of "outsider" status, undermining their sense of belonging. When asked about the reasons behind this situation, Wilma suggested that some communities perceive the presence of converts as a threat, explaining:

I'm not entirely sure, as it's difficult for me to fully understand their culture and perceptions from their cultural point of view. I can only really speculate based on my perspective as a native Canadian or at least from a white Canadian point of view.

Perhaps it feels threatening to them that more visible converts are joining the community. Converts are often admired by many for their journey to Islam, the sacrifices they've

made, and the belief that their conversion wipes away past sins. Maybe this admiration creates a sense of discomfort for some.

Alternatively, it could be that a more diverse mosque community feels threatening to their cultural identity. As the community becomes more diversified, they might feel there are fewer people who speak their language or share their cultural background. It might feel less like a cultural group or association they belong to.

On the other hand, it might also stem from a sense of superiority. Criticizing other Muslims—like pointing out that someone has a tattoo—might make them feel better about themselves, as if they're doing Islam 'better' or have a deeper understanding. I'm not entirely sure, but these are some possibilities.

These statements clearly illustrate how cultural affiliation and social dynamics within the community can fuel prejudices against converts. Such perceptions complicate the integration of converts into religious communities and prompt them to question their identities. Dalia reflects on the tensions between culture and religion experienced differently by born Muslims and converts, stating: "I think born Muslims often experience a tension between culture and religion. Converts deal with something similar, but it might not be as intense." Tiana expands on this tension by drawing from her own experiences and those of a friend, offering a more detailed account. She explains:

I once had a conversation with a sister from Morocco about the challenges and experiences of being Muslim in the West. During our discussion, she suggested that converts would always be 'defective Muslims,' burdened with numerous flaws and shortcomings because we weren't born into Muslim families. She said, 'Your parents didn't teach you to fast as a child or to pray properly. You even ate pork, *astaghfirullah!* I've never eaten pork.'

Her comments were somewhat insulting, though she might not have intended them to be. So I asked her a question: 'Have you ever heard that the first three generations, the companions of the Prophet, are considered the best Muslims? Before becoming Muslims, they worshipped idols and embraced Islam in their 30s, 40s, or even 50s. They were all converts, yet they are recognized as the best generation. The Qur'an explicitly states that

the only distinction between Muslims is based on piety (*taqwa*). The circumstances of how you became a Muslim don't matter at all.

These statements highlight how the universal principles of Islam interact with cultural practices within Muslim communities and the profound impact these interactions have on converts. The perceptual, cultural, and religious differences between born Muslims and converts play a crucial role in shaping individual identities and influencing the dynamics within the community.

Converts who have embraced Islam from a different cultural background may sometimes face significant challenges due to the cultural expectations and biases encountered within Muslim communities. The experiences of Wilma and Tiana illustrate how the difficulties faced by converts are compounded by the ongoing negotiation between cultural belonging and religious devotion. At the heart of these issues is the interaction between cultural practices and religious beliefs, where both elements are deeply intertwined in the lived experiences of Muslim communities.

7.3 The Intermingling of Religion and Culture

Born Muslims often find it challenging to distinguish between religious and cultural practices due to the long-standing intertwining of their faith with their cultural environment. This dynamic is perceived by converts as the misinterpretation of certain culturally rooted practices as intrinsic aspects of Islam. Sandra provides a significant observation in this regard:

Yes, I think as a convert, it's almost a little easier for me than for some born Muslims to distinguish between culture and religion. Since I wasn't brought up in a Muslim household, there's nothing I've carried over from my upbringing that I mistakenly assume is Islam but is actually cultural. I know that none of the practices I grew up with are Islamic, so I approach everything I learn about Islam with a clean slate.

I've noticed that some of my Muslim friends, who come from different cultural backgrounds, might do things differently. When I observe these differences, it's easier for me to identify what's cultural versus religious. For many born Muslims, their parents, while trying to teach them Islam, might inadvertently pass down cultural practices that get mixed in with religion.

In my case, since my parents didn't teach me Islam, everything I've learned has come directly from imams, sheikhs, and Islamic studies. As a result, my understanding of Islam has less cultural influence. That said, I've also encountered people who, for example, dismiss my choice to wear *niqab* as purely cultural. But there are evidences in Islamic teachings that support it, so it's not just cultural.

I think while some people are aware of the distinction between culture and religion, they don't always draw the line in the right place.

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This confusion is also vividly illustrated through Wilma's example related to marriage. She recounts the cultural pressures she experienced during her own marriage process as follows:

When my husband and I had our Islamic marriage (*Nikah*), we started living together right away and, like any married couple, began having a marital relationship. To us, it felt completely normal because we were already married Islamically and planned to have the wedding ceremony later. However, many of my family members were surprised and asked, 'What? Aren't you waiting for the wedding?'

For us, we considered ourselves married after the *Nikah*. We had our religious marriage in Canada so most of my family could attend, and then we held our wedding celebration in Egypt so most of his family could be there. We split it between the two countries. We had a marriage certificate here in Canada, followed by the religious marriage, so everything felt in order.

I was confused by some of the reactions, though, and I asked my husband why people were questioning us about living together before the wedding ceremony. He explained that in some cultures, like among Palestinians, couples don't live together or have a marital relationship until after the wedding, even if they're already married Islamically. For me, this was confusing—I didn't understand the cultural perceptions surrounding this practice.

This example clearly demonstrates how cultural norms can be perceived as religious rules. Converts, having embraced Islam later in life, often encounter aspects of their adopted faith that conflict with their cultural backgrounds, leading them to question these practices. Given the prevalence of the intellectual motif among many converts—where deep questioning and exploration often lead to their decision to embrace Islam—they tend to apply the same analytical approach when faced with cultural norms that appear incongruent with Islamic teachings. This enables them to adopt a more critical and conscious perspective toward the blending of cultural and religious practices. Briana articulates this dynamic as follows:

I would say there is a difference, and I've noticed it varies from country to country. There are practices that are clearly cultural, not Islamic. For example, in Saudi Arabia, it was only a few years ago that women were allowed to drive. Many people in the West saw this and assumed that Islam prohibits women from driving. But that wasn't Islam—it was specific to Saudi Arabia.

This kind of misunderstanding happens often. Islam sometimes gets a bad reputation because certain cultures or countries implement their own customs or rules, and these are mistakenly attributed to the religion itself.

Briana articulates her method for distinguishing between religion and culture by emphasizing her reliance on primary Islamic sources and scholarly guidance. She states, "I usually refer to the Qur'an or Hadith, or I ask a sheikh," underscoring her commitment to grounding her understanding of Islam in its foundational texts while seeking clarification from reputable Islamic scholars. This approach reflects her deliberate effort to navigate the intersection of cultural practices and religious principles with authenticity and accuracy. Similarly, Natasha states that she uses the Qur'an and Sunnah as her points of reference and shares an incident she experienced with her former spouse's family to illustrate this approach.

When I was younger and married for the first time, I visited my ex-husband's family. I remember one of his sisters-in-law would kiss the male guests' elbows when they arrived. This was clearly not Islamic—it seemed to be a Kurdish custom, though I'm not entirely sure.

This practice didn't affect my perception of Islam because I understood it wasn't rooted in the Qur'an or Hadith. If something isn't mentioned in these primary sources, it's likely a cultural tradition that developed over time rather than a religious requirement.

Dalia's experience serves as an excellent example of this phenomenon. During her early days as a Muslim, she encountered certain cultural beliefs that she claims were mistakenly attributed to Islam. She explains:

One of the first things I was taught after converting was that you should not leave your prayer rug on the floor. I was told, 'Satan will pray on it.' Curious about this, I asked an imam, and he clarified, 'No, that's just a cultural belief, don't worry. If you want to leave it on the floor, it's fine, but you can fold it to keep it clean.'

Such examples highlight how converts make a distinction between cultural Islam and universal Islam in their journey of learning Islam. The primary reason for this distinction is often that they were not born into that culture but came to learn it later. On the other hand, one of the main reasons born Muslims (from the perspective of converts) struggle to distinguish between religion and culture is that they often adopt these practices without questioning them. Tiana contextualizes this issue within a historical framework:

There's actually a lot of evidence for this if you look for it. For example, in the early days of Islam, around 100 to 200 years after the Prophet (peace be upon him), Muslims started traveling to non-Muslim lands. When they arrived, they carried themselves in a way that made people curious. Their actions and behavior left a strong impression, and many people embraced Islam just by observing how they lived. This is how Islam spread in many places—through example, not force.

Now, when we look at more recent Muslim migration to the West, the situation is quite different. Let's take the example of Muslims from India and Pakistan moving to the UK a

few generations ago. Many came to build a better life, which is completely understandable. But when they started establishing mosques, they brought with them the practices they were used to back home. For instance, in their culture, mosques were seen as spaces for men.

So, if you visit certain mosques in London today, as a woman, you might not feel welcome. In their eyes, women don't belong in the mosque. But think about this in the context of a country like the UK, where women have fought hard to have equal access to public spaces. How do you think that message is going to come across? Telling a woman she can't enter a mosque because she's a woman doesn't just alienate her—it also reinforces stereotypes and creates more division.

The problem here isn't Islam itself—it's the cultural practices that get mixed in. And when these practices are presented as Islam, it can create huge misunderstandings and push people away.

Similarly, Natasha, a Muslim of Slavic origin, describes the conflict she experiences between cultural and religious norms:

It's really challenging to reconcile my Islamic beliefs with my Slavic background. At times, I feel a clash between these two identities. I can read and write Arabic, but I don't speak it fluently. Since Islam is so often associated with Arab culture, coming to Islam from a Slavic heritage creates an interesting mix—but it also leaves me feeling confused at times, even within myself.

These statements clearly illustrate how born Muslims, due to the intertwined nature of religion and culture, often find it difficult to question the origins of certain practices. The differences in perspective, cultural practices, and religious understanding between converts and born Muslims highlight the complex dynamics within Muslim communities. Born Muslims often inherit a fusion of religious and cultural traditions, making it difficult to distinguish one from the other. In contrast, converts typically approach Islam with a more critical and intentional mindset, enabling them to separate cultural norms from religious principles more effectively. However, this clarity

does not shield converts from encountering cultural biases and challenges within Muslim communities, often resulting in feelings of marginalization and exclusion.

7.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiences of Muslim converts in Canada reveal significant challenges in their efforts to integrate into both Canadian society and the Muslim community. Despite their dedication to their faith, converts often face cultural biases and discrimination from born Muslims, leading to feelings of marginalization. The tension between cultural expectations and religious identity is a central issue, as converts strive to be accepted not only for their religious beliefs but also for their unique backgrounds. The narratives shared by individuals like Tiana, Wilma, and Dalia underscore the frustration and pain that arise when cultural norms overshadow the universal principles of Islam, especially during moments meant to foster community and solidarity, such as Ramadan.

These cultural divisions often create barriers to full integration, as seen in Tiana's experience with marriage proposals and the exclusion she felt during Ramadan. Similarly, Wilma's encounter with an Arabic teacher highlights the judgment converts face based on both their religious knowledge and cultural backgrounds. Despite these challenges, many converts continue to navigate these cultural tensions with resilience, seeking to reconcile their religious devotion with their desire for cultural belonging. However, the persistent cultural biases they encounter within the community suggest a need for deeper reflection on how cultural affiliations impact the inclusivity of Muslim communities. The experiences of converts challenge the notion that Islam is merely a set of religious practices; they reveal how deeply intertwined religion and culture are, and the ways in which these cultural dynamics can either foster or hinder a sense of belonging for converts. Therefore, further research into the complex relationship between culture, religion,

and identity in the context of Muslim communities is crucial to understanding and addressing the barriers that prevent converts from fully integrating and feeling accepted.

Vroon-Najem (2019) defines the concept of "culture-free Islam" as a critique and awareness that has become particularly popular among converts in the West, aimed at addressing the blending of established cultural norms with religious teachings. This concept refers to converts' desire to understand and practice Islam in a way that is detached from regional and ethnic traditions. Vroon-Najem points out that cultural norms are often conflated with religious rules, and this confusion is especially pronounced among Muslims from diverse cultural backgrounds. In her article, Vroon-Najem suggests that converts' efforts to imagine Islam as a "culture-free" belief system are a response to the common misunderstanding of Islam in Western societies, where cultural practices are frequently mistaken for religious teachings. In this context, converts often move away from traditional Islamic practices intertwined with culture and seek what they consider to be "true" Islam—an Islam based solely on sacred texts and teachings.

Other academic works, such as those by Özyürek (2010) and Rogozen-Soltar (2012), also describe the efforts of converts to distance themselves from local traditions they regard as deviations from the essence of Islam, which they term "cultural Islam." Vroon-Najem argues that this search for a "culture-free" Islam represents both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit for converts in the West, as "cultural" practices, especially among immigrant Muslim communities, are often blended with religious teachings and sometimes considered religious obligations.

Briana emphasizes the need to separate cultural norms from religious principles, pointing out that the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia is related to a local cultural practice, not Islamic teachings. Briana strives to understand Islam based solely on sacred texts, namely the Qur'an and Hadith, and during this process, she actively seeks guidance from trusted scholars and refers only

to primary Islamic sources to distinguish between cultural practices and religious obligations. Similarly, Wilma provides another example of how cultural practices are often mistaken for religious rules. After her religious marriage, her family questioned why she and her husband started living together immediately, which is seen as a cultural norm in some communities rather than a religious obligation. Wilma and her husband assert that cultural norms should not be conflated with the essence of Islam and should not be regarded as religious practices.

Dalia, too, learns that the belief that leaving a prayer rug on the floor would allow Satan to pray on it is a cultural misunderstanding, not an Islamic requirement. An imam clarifies that this belief is a cultural practice, not a religious one. Dalia adopts a critical approach to questioning such cultural misunderstandings and strives to adopt the correct understanding of Islam. These examples illustrate how converts seek to separate cultural norms from religious obligations and demonstrate their desire to return to the essence of Islam. Vroon-Najem (2019) describes this process as a pursuit of "culture-free Islam," where converts aim to live Islam in its purest and most original form, free from cultural influences. Converts make a conscious effort to distinguish between religious and cultural norms, seeking to understand and live Islam based solely on the texts and without the influence of cultural interactions.

However, the question of whether "culture-free Islam" is achievable is a matter for further debate. It is crucial to assess how realistic the pursuit of a "pure" Islam, free from the cultural practices introduced by born Muslims, truly is. The term "culture-free Islam" might imply that converts are, in fact, seeking a new form of Islam that aligns more closely with their own cultural values. Since religion exists within culture, the desire for a culture-free Islam might open the door to discussions about "Canadian Islam" or similar national variants. In this regard, further research is needed to understand what replaces the unwanted cultural norms and to examine the universality

of these new cultural elements. In particularly multicultural societies like Canada, the new cultural elements proposed for converts may be incompatible with each other, which could lead to practical challenges. Therefore, it can be argued that the cultural perceptions of born Muslims may not be applicable to converts in Canada and may cause some difficulties. However, to move beyond these discussions, more comprehensive and in-depth research is certainly required.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

Though there is a considerable amount of research on the topic of conversion, studies specifically focusing on conversion to Islam represent only a small fraction of this body of work. Furthermore, the process of conversion can vary significantly depending on the religion in question. For example, conversion to Islam is often deeply tied to the concept of Tawhid (the oneness of God), which is a fundamental and unique aspect of the Islamic faith. This theological concept shapes the conversion experience differently compared to religions like Christianity, where the Trinity plays a central role, or Hinduism, where polytheism is a key tenet. Additionally, in societies where Islamophobia and widespread prejudices against Islam exist, choosing to embrace Islam further differentiates the conversion process from that of a religion and society where such issues are not prevalent. These doctrinal differences and societal biases not only influence the reasons for conversion but also shape the psychological and social dynamics of the conversion journey. When we turn our attention to studies of Muslim conversion, we find that the majority of existing research focuses on Europe and the United States, with limited attention given to the Canadian context. Given this gap in the literature, this study aims to make a modest contribution to both the broader field of conversion studies and the more specific body of work on Muslim converts, particularly in Canada.

Through my interviews with 15 converts living in Ottawa, I have been able to draw several key conclusions.

Islamophobia, prevalent in Europe, is also evident in Canada, where it negatively influences the conversion processes of individuals. Furthermore, stereotypes about Islam—such as the association of the religion with terrorism, the belief that all Muslims are Arabs, and the notion

that Islam oppresses women—are pervasive. While these misconceptions undoubtedly make conversion to Islam more challenging, they can also, in certain cases, accelerate the process in two ways. First, these stereotypes may spark curiosity, prompting individuals to explore Islam. This exploration often leads to the intellectual conversion motif, which refers to the role of intellectual inquiry and reflection in the conversion process. This motif is the most common both among my sample and in other countries. Once converts access accurate information, they are better equipped to challenge these misconceptions and make sense of previously unfamiliar aspects of the religion.

The media plays a significant role in shaping negative perceptions of Islam, and the presence of inaccurate representations of Muslims in society further perpetuates these stereotypes. Combined, these factors create a perception that converting to Islam is nonsensical to many Canadians. The underlying question—why would anyone choose such a religion?—continues to fuel challenges for converts, both during the conversion process and afterward. This is evidenced by the reactions and resistance they encounter from their families and communities. Interestingly, even converts who report that their families were supportive often express that, beneath the surface, their families were uncomfortable with the conversion. In some cases, resistance is explicit, while in others, it is more subtle. This becomes especially pronounced when the conversion involves visible changes, such as wearing the hijab, which alters the dynamics between converts and their families. Faced with these challenges, some converts seek resolution through compromise and temporary measures, while others take a more decisive approach, distancing themselves from their families. Moreover, many converts draw guidance and psychological motivation from events in Islamic history and references in the Qur'an, such as the experiences of the prophets, who faced significant resistance and misunderstanding from their own

communities and families. Prophets like Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and others, such as Prophet Noah, Prophet Ibrahim, and Prophet Musa, all experienced rejection and opposition from their closest kin and societies.

Potential converts in Canada encounter various pathways to Islam. Some are drawn to Islam due to dissatisfaction with their former religio (Christianity) while others are introduced to Islam through academic studies, cultural interest, or relationships with Muslim partners. These encounters, which help challenge existing prejudices, often pave the way for the decision to convert.

According to Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) six conversion motifs, a significant portion of converts in Canada can be categorized under the intellectual motif. This finding is consistent with studies from other countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The belief in the oneness of God (Tawhid) and the Qur'an play a central role in the decision to convert. While some converts report experiencing divine signs, it is clear that many have conducted thorough research but were initially deterred by both internal and external reservations about conversion. Even in these cases, the intellectual motif remains the most dominant. However, it is important to note that the affectional motif also plays a significant role for some converts.

Those who overcome various prejudices and choose Islam enter the post-conversion phase, during which new prejudices and challenges emerge. Old prejudices, in other words, are replaced by new ones. In this phase, converts begin to experience Islam and life within the Muslim community from an insider perspective. Roald's (2012) four-stage post-conversion schema is certainly relevant to the Canadian context. In this model, converts initially experience a deep interest and desire to learn and practice Islam. However, due to the absence of a sharp "us versus

them" divide and a lack of clear isolation from cultural practices and their former environments, I suggested that the term "falling in love" better captures the Canadian experience than the term zealotry. Following this intense interest, converts inevitably face disillusionment, as they encounter discrepancies between the idealized version of Islam they have learned or imagined and the realities of how some Muslims live. This leads them to the acceptance stage, where they reconcile the imperfections of Muslim communities, often adopting the rhetoric of "Islam is perfect, but Muslims are not." After this stage, some converts enter a phase of secularism, where they begin to view Islam as one truth among many, rather than the only truth. Since the transitions between these stages are often fluid and ambiguous, they can be considered overlapping sets.

Examining the post-conversion process more closely, I find that many converts attempt to align their work and personal lives with Islamic practices. For some, this is possible by continuing in the same job, while others opt to leave their positions. Some of those who leave their jobs find new employment, while others express dissatisfaction with the limited job opportunities available for converts in Ottawa. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient information sources, such as books, online materials, or local educational programs, and the inadequacy of those available to meet the specific needs of converts, constitutes another challenge. The Arabic language barrier, particularly due to the Qur'an being in Arabic and the predominance of Arab and other ethnic backgrounds in local Muslim communities, is a common roadblock for many converts. For women, especially those wishing to wear the hijab, finding appropriate clothing and managing the financial implications of this is another challenge.

The experience of white converts in Canada presents its own set of unique challenges. Many white converts find themselves in a situation where they are no longer considered "white" by

their previous communities but are not fully accepted as "Muslim" by the Muslim community either. The colonial legacy associated with whiteness sometimes works to their advantage, attributing more value to them in certain situations, while in others, they become victims of the negative emotions rooted in this historical legacy.

The "born versus convert" dichotomy is another significant issue identified in the literature and observed in the interviews. This dynamic involves various prejudices between the two groups. Some converts feel excluded when born Muslims spend time with those they find culturally familiar, while some born Muslims hold prejudices against converts, such as assuming they converted for marriage or that they lack sufficient knowledge of Islam. These tensions, alongside the ongoing debate over the boundaries between culture and religion, further complicate the relationship between born Muslims and converts. Converts often criticize born Muslims for failing to separate their cultural practices from Islamic teachings, as they perceive that born Muslims have not critically examined Islam in the way that converts have.

In conclusion, the issue of Muslim conversion in Canada is multifaceted and raises many important discussions. Among the various challenges faced by converts, a significant aspect is the "double discrimination" they often experience. After converting, they are neither fully accepted as Canadian nor fully accepted as Muslim. This sense of not belonging leads to challenges with both their families and society at large. Despite these difficulties, the need for increased support for converts is clear, particularly through access to educational programs on Islamic practices, religious guidance, mentorship, and organizing Q&A sessions or study circles within local Muslim communities. Efforts to enhance the adaptation process, such as creating safe spaces for converts, providing language support, and organizing community meet-ups and

educational gatherings, are crucial in fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for Muslim converts in Canada.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Opening Questions:

- Can you tell me about your journey to Islam? What first got you interested?
- What were some key moments or turning points in your decision to convert?
- Did you have any misconceptions about Islam that you had to overcome?

Main Questions:

- What challenges did you face during your conversion, and how did you overcome them?
- How did your family, friends, and community react to your conversion? Did any relationships change?
- How has converting to Islam affected your identity and lifestyle?
- Did any communities or individuals support you during your conversion? How did their support help?
- Why did you choose Islam over other religions?
- Can you share any significant experiences that deeply impacted you during your conversion?
- What role does Islam play in your life now?
- How did your view of Islam change after you converted?
- Did you have any internal struggles or doubts during your conversion? How did you deal with them?
- How did you learn about Islamic practices and beliefs? Were there any helpful resources or people?
- How do you balance your new faith with your previous cultural or religious traditions?
- What role does prayer play in your daily life, and how has it affected you?
- How do you handle conflicts between your faith and societal norms or expectations?
- Have you taken part in any Islamic community events or activities? How have they influenced your experience?
- How has your understanding and practice of Islam evolved since you converted?

- Do you feel comfortable living as a Muslim in Canadian society? Do you face any issues?
- How does it feel to be a convert Muslim man/woman?
- Is it possible to be both Canadian and Muslim? Why? Are these identities compatible or contradictory?
- Do you think Islam is compatible with Canadian culture? Why?
- Are the people you interact with daily mostly Muslims or Canadians? Why?
- What does Islam mean to you?
- What is the difference between born Muslims and converts?
- What does it mean to be Muslim? What are the key characteristics?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word "Ummah"?

Closing Questions:

- Are there any Islamic teachings or practices you find especially meaningful or transformative?
- How do you see your role in the Muslim community and Canadian society at large?
- What advice would you give to someone thinking about converting to Islam based on your experiences?

Appendix B

Recruitment

A Study on the Experiences of Individuals Converting to Islam

Assalamu Alaikum,

I am a Master's student in Religious Studies conducting a research project on the experiences of individuals who have undergone the process of converting to Islam. This research aims to explore challenges faced during the conversion process, support systems, and personal transformations among other aspects.

I am seeking individuals in Ottawa who have chosen to convert to Islam and are willing to share their experiences. Your participation will significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of this subject and help improve support for individuals undergoing this transformative journey.

Eligibility Criteria:

The participant must reside in Ottawa.

The participant must be over the age of 18.

The participant must have converted to Islam from another religion by their own decision.

The participant must agree to participate in interviews and surveys during the research period.

The participant must speak English during the interviews

The participant must be willing to share information about their conversion process, adaptation to their new religion, and the impacts of these processes on their personal lives.

Selection of participants will be made among individuals who meet these criteria, aiming to form a diverse group (E.g gender).

Research Process:

Interviews with participants will be conducted online (via Zoom/Skype) or face-to-face, lasting approximately 60 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews will be taken, but the privacy and anonymity of participants will be strictly maintained.

Selection of Participants:

Participants will be selected on a first-come, first-served basis, aiming to ensure a diverse group in terms of gender to reflect varied experiences.

To Participate:

Please contact me via email. Your participation and experiences are highly valuable to me.

Thank you,

Hakan Emin

Master's Student in Religious Studies

University of Ottawa

Appendix C

Consent Form

Title of the Study: Exploring the Dynamics of Islamic Conversion in Ottawa: Motifs and Motivations in the Canadian Context

Principal Investigator:

Hakan Emin Ozturk

MA Student, Department Religious Studies, University of Ottawa

Supervisor:

Lori G. Beaman

Full Professor, Classics and Religious Studies Faculty of Arts University of Ottawa

Co-Supervisor:

Aaron W. Hughes

Dean's Professor of the Humanities, University of Rochester

Adjunct Professor, Dept. of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the study titled "Exploring the Dynamics of Islamic Conversion in Ottawa: Motifs and Motivations in the Canadian Context," conducted by Hakan Emin Ozturk under the supervision of Professor Beaman. This research is being carried out as part of a master's thesis at the University of Ottawa and aims to understand the experiences of individuals in the Ottawa region undergoing the process of converting to Islam.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individuals converting to Islam in Ottawa and to explore the social, cultural, and personal dynamics involved in this process. The research aim to examine the changes experienced by these individuals, the challenges they face, and the impact of the process on their personal identities. The collected data will be analyzed by the principal investigator, with results to be published and used in the master's thesis.

Participation: : My participation will involve participating in an in-depth interview conducted by the researcher, Hakan Emin Ozturk. During the interview, I will be asked about my conversion process, motivations, challenges faced, and the impact on my personal identity. The interview, which will last about 60 minutes, can be conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing technology such as Zoom. The audio of my interview will be recorded. I may request that the recording and/or the interview stop at any point during the process. I may also end my participation in the study at any point, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I understand that if I withdraw, my data will be destroyed and not used in the study.

Risks: If I experience discomfort during the interview, I am able to pause and take a break from the interview, reschedule it or withdraw my participation altogether. By participating in an online interview, someone around me may overhear what I am saying. It is therefore important that I plan well for the interview in a place that provides me with a maximum of privacy.

Benefits: The interview will allow me to reflect on my conversion process to Islam and how this process has shaped my personal experiences. This will be part of a data set aimed at enhancing

our understanding of conversion experiences in Ottawa. I will receive no compensation for this interview.

Confidentiality and anonymity: My identity will remain strictly confidential and the interview transcript will be anonymised by using a pseudonym instead of my real name. I understand that my anonymised data will be shared with the supervisor/co-supervisor of the thesis and used solely for the purposes of this research project and related presentations and publications.

Conservation of data: The data collected, including consent forms, transcripts and audio recordings, will be kept in a secure manner on the password protected computer of the principal investigator. Data will be securely deleted upon completion of research project, except for one master copy of data which will be stored in the password protected computer of the Principal Investigator for an indefinite amount of time.

Voluntary Participation : I, agree to participate in the above research study conducted under Hakan Emin Ozturk of the Department of Religious Studies in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

By checking the appropriate box below and typing my name above, I am electronically or physically signing this consent form. This indicates that I have read the stated information, understand the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study, and give my free and informed consent to be a participant.

Yes (I give consent) ☐

No (I do not give consent) ☐

Date: I may ask the researcher for clarification about the study, including the research process, results and my participation, at any time. I should print or save a copy of this consent form for my personal records.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Canada, ON K1N 6N5

Telephone: 1- 613-562-5387 Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Researcher Confirmation: By checking this box and typing my name below, I am electronically signing this consent form

I agree to uphold the procedures outlined above ☐

Name:

Date: