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Reverting to Islam in Seattle: American Women and an Emerging Muslim Identity

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Abstract: *There exists a Western perception of a homogeneous Islam in the Middle East and, overwhelmingly, the image of the veiled Muslim woman has come to represent not only this Islam as a whole but also the perceived lack of freedom and agency of Muslim women. Amidst these harsh stereotypes, Islam has planted a following in America and the perceived conditions of Islamic women does not seem to coincide with the growing sisterhood of American Muslim converts. Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States today and American born and raised women are leading the way. Through in depth interviews, portraits of seven American Muslim women in Seattle, and their Islamic conversion stories are narrated. They reveal not only the diversity of Islam and American Muslim women, but also the trends and common beliefs of this new feminist Islamic identity in the United States.*

The Literature

There exists a Western perception of a homogeneous Islam in the Middle East, stemming from a lack of exposure and understanding perpetuated by the stereotyping media coverage of American foreign politics and current events. Overwhelmingly, the image of the veiled Muslim woman has come to represent not only this Islam as a whole but the perceived lack of freedom and agency of women oppressed by their religion, controlled by their men, and covered by their veil. This demoralizing and uniform perception of Islam is, in effect, projected onto the Muslim communities in the United States.

Amidst this, Islam has planted a following in America, a country originally shaped by strong Judeo-Christian ideals and traditions and an appealing reputation for the freedom of religious practice. The combination of these founding cultural traditions and the harsh stereotypes of Islam and the conditions of Islamic women does not seem to coincide with the growing sisterhood of American Muslim converts.

Islam in the U.S.

A 2006 report by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) estimates that some 20,000 Americans convert to Islam each year, with women outnumbering men four to one. According to the report, 36% of American Muslims were born in the United States and 64% were born in eighty different countries, making the U.S. host to the most diverse group of Muslims from around the world. There are more 2,000 Islamic organizations in the United States ranging from promoting and fostering "all schools of religious thought, intellectual trends, political ideologies and Islamic movements" (CAIR 2). "Mainstream Muslims consider core American values to be consistent with normative Islam" including the values of hard work, liberty, and democratic processes for public and government decisions (CAIR 2). The report also indicated that American Muslims tend to be better-educated, demographically younger, hold higher positions in the work force, and contribute more to society through volunteer services for schools, elderly, children or the homeless than average Americans. Despite the majority (58%) of American Muslims reporting that they have seen or experienced discrimination since September 11th 2001, an even larger majority (93%) reported that they favored the American political process and would consider financially contributing to endorse non-Muslim candidates and social service programs (CAIR 3). In light of these findings, CAIR suggests, "rather than be viewed as cultural outsiders, the Muslim presence needs to be embraced as culturally enriching and economically benefiting" (CAIR 2). As the majority agrees that mainstream Islam can be

easily integrated with the values of American culture, American Muslims clearly have a growing and constructive presence in the United States.

What perhaps is most transforming and significant for American culture is not simply the integration of Muslim immigrants from different cultural backgrounds around the world, but the emergence of a culture of American born and raised converts to Islam. The United States Census Bureau does not gather statistics on religious affiliation; therefore, data and accurate numbers of religious converts are difficult to define. However, recent efforts by the Pew Research Center have published the first nationwide survey that attempts to measure the experiences, demographics and attitudes of American Muslims. The report builds on surveys conducted in 2006 in European nations as well as global studies over the past five years of more than 30,000 minority Muslims in twenty-two nations around the world. The findings were similar to that of the CAIR report, noting the overall relative desire for, and integration success of, Muslims in American culture. The report notes that 35% percent of the American Muslim population is native born; more specifically, 21% are native born converts to Islam while 15% are born Muslim; though these figures are most likely underreported. The Pew report estimates there to be over 2.35 million Muslims living in the United States today, however, it notes that there are probably many native born converts to Islam unaccounted for as data on conversion rates to Islam is essentially non-existent. Statistics on gender differences among American Muslim converts was not reported.

Studies of Muslim Populations In United States

Most of the literature on Muslim populations in the United States has focused on Arabs and other immigrant Muslims and how they have come to adjust to American culture and define their Islamic immigrant identity within the current socio-political context. Prominent Egyptian ethnographer at the University of Southern California, Fadwa El Guindi, comments on her estimation of over ten million Muslims in the United States today, and notes that there is no box on the national census form for Arab Americans. On the other hand, she recognizes that there is a general reluctance of these Arab immigrants to be classified and thus stereotyped as an Arab or Muslim. Aside from this lack of recognition as a legitimate population in the United States, there have been recent efforts by anthropologist and sociologists to explore these unique communities.

In the American Anthropologist, El Guindi reviews post-September 11th ethnographies on a diverse group of Arab Americans including Without Forgetting the Imam by Linda Walbridge, Family and Gender Among American Muslims by Barbara Aswad and Barbara Bilge, and Arab Detroit by Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock. Walbridge depicts the cultural adaptation struggles of Shiite Lebanese immigrants in Dearborn Michigan who have lived in the area for the past thirty years. Aswad and Bilge explore the intermarriage of Turkish men and American women and the resulting family structures of this particular cross-cultural marriage, while Abraham and Shryock explores how Arab immigrants move from marginal social positioning, to the mainstream, and for some, back to the margins in their efforts for first and second generation immigrants try to "Americanize". El Guindi critiques some of the authors for assuming a homogenized concept of "Americanization" as well the use of assimilation and integration as one and same term.

Other researchers and authors have become weary of some of the recent literature on Islam. Lauren Weiner, author of "Books in Review" in The Journal of Religion, Culture and

Public Life, notes that books such as Behind the Veil by Unni Wikan, The Forgotten Queens of Islam by Fatima Mernissi, Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy by Fawaz A Gerg, and The Trouble with Islam Today: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change, by Irshad Manji, have come to sensationalize and unjustly focus on the stereotypical images of Islam in the West. Wikan focuses on the veil as a defining aspect of female Omani Muslims, reiterating stereotypes and references books and films of and by Muslim women fighting against "jihadist bent" of militant or extreme Islamic sects. Mernissi concludes that some Hadiths "were likely invented after the Prophet's death and wrongly attributed to him", referring to Hadiths that assign women an inferior status in society, while Gerg outlines his research on the differences between homegrown religious radicals and violence in Iraq and Al Qaeda, hoping to provide information on "how the U.S. and its allies can fight the war of terror". According to Weiner, Mernissi assumes that a rise in Islam and women wearing veils correlates with a rise in Islamic terrorism. Manji perpetuates some of these ideas with commentary criticizing Islamic and Arab socio-centrism and Islamic schools. He criticizes the Quran for not being "transparently egalitarian for women" and states that "Islamists are dead set against women exerting a moral influence upon men". The literature of these sensationalized topics and false accusations of Islam by authors of various backgrounds are hurting the image of Islam and Muslims around the world by further funneling Islamic practices and beliefs into ones of anti-feminism, violence, and vast homogeny.

Studies of Female American Muslim Reverts

Studies of American Muslim converts are few and far between. Despite her distain for defamatory literature on Islam and Arabs, Lauren Weiner criticizes authors Debra L. Dirks and Stephanie Parlove's collected conversion stories of female converts entitled Islam Our Choice: Portraits of Modern American Muslim Women, noting significance in the fact that they had backgrounds of "rootlessness, loss, dysfunction and divorce" before conversion (Weiner 6). Weiner almost places pity on these women. "Far be it from us to begrudge spiritual succor to these women – or to anyone else, for that matter. But perhaps it is not amiss to hope that they someday encounter the thought of women with a direct experience of repressive subcultures with Islam. If there is to be a Muslim reformation, and a clearly defined, tolerant tendency, let it be true that these American women stood up and made a contribution" (Weiner 6). Despite the defamatory and loaded statement by Weiner, her comment does hold some value for the reputation of Islam in the United States. Is there a responsibility for these America converts to reveal a peaceful Islam so foreign to the Western media?

A great burden has been placed on these American women of Islam, as others too, believe that the role of young Muslims will be crucial in a nation where Islam is a "dynamic, growing religion that increasingly reflects its American context," notes Leonard (474). What is this role of the American Muslim woman and how does this newfound faith alter their identity as an individual? Identity is conceived through differences and "is based on interactions, perceptions that are the same or not the same as others, and elements of one's personal or collective identity, including, not only, religion but gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and generation" (Leonard 473). What then is this identity of American Muslim women? To what extent do they embrace an Arab cultural gendered society and social roles alongside their Islamic faith and how has this changed their lives? Most importantly, why women?

In the West, women have become the image icon of Islam. How could they not, when a single veiled woman, of which styles and meanings vary significantly through time and place,

represent not just Arab-Muslim women but women who wear the garment all around the world – women who are perceived as needing liberalization. Veiling is a complex practice, and ubiquitous images of veiled women "make it hard to think about the Muslim world without thinking about women, creating a huge divide between 'us' and 'them' based on the treatment or positions of women" (Lughod, *Eurozine* 2). Additionally, these images "make it hard to appreciate the variety of women's lives across the Muslim or Middle Eastern worlds- differences of time and place and differences of class and region" (Lughod, *Eurozine* 2). The *hijab* and *burqa* have multiple meanings ranging from what anthropologist Hanna Papanek has coined "portable seclusion" for hiding the sacredness and pride of the woman's body from the eyes of the general public, to a simple "symbolic separation of men's and women's spheres, as part of the general association of women with family and home, not with public space where strangers" interact (Lughod, *Eurozine* 3). For some, the veil is comparable to high heels for women in the West – a sign of beauty, sophistication, business attire and more than appropriate for formal situations, but often limiting in physical activity and unadvised by podiatrists, never confused with what Lughod discusses as a "lack of agency" (*Eurozine*, 4). Comparative to the heel, the veil is often a symbol of virtue rather than oppression – not exactly what the Western images, articles and propaganda portray.

Women in Islam have proven to be a timely topic in both a surge to understand Arab-Islamic culture as if it may explain or aid the West's political and moral agenda with the Middle East, and as a revelation of female oppression that the government, liberal and religious groups aim to save. However, "if one constructs some women as being in need of pity or saving, one implies that one not only wants to save them from something but wants to save them for something – a different kind of world and set of arrangements. What violence might be entailed in this transformation? And what presumptions are being made about the superiority of what you are saving them from? Projects to save other women, of whatever kind, depend on and reinforce Westerners' sense of superiority" (Lughod, *Eurozine* 6).

An important question to ask regarding the hot topic of women in Islam is that of the end goals of feminism and liberalism. Do hopeful ends justify the means, or more specifically are these ends of the American liberal woman universal? A logical appeal to the life of the Arab-Islamic woman is not hard to understand. "For example, addressing himself to the United States, one notorious Islamist accuses: 'You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products or advertising tools...you use women to serve passengers, visitors, and strangers to increase your profit margins. You then rant that you support the liberation of women [while]...you practice the trade of sex in all its forms [where]...giant corporations and establishments are established on this, under the name of art, entertainment, tourism, and freedom, and other deceptive name that you attribute to it'" (Lughod, *Eurozine* 6). Is the Western notion of liberalism and freedom one that all women want and strive for? It is a grave mistake to think so – liberalism and freedom have more than one manifestation.

A Clarification of Terms

Throughout this research I refer to certain aspects of Arab and Islamic culture and traditions as Arab-Islamic to avoid making generalizations about Islam or Arab culture that are not congruent with non-Muslim Arabs and non-Arab Muslims. For example, it is a tendency for many Arab cultures to interpret Islam as prescribing the separate socialization of genders but also equally glorifying the differences between men and women. However, some Muslims attribute

this emphasis on the differences of gender to Arab culture and not to Islam at all. I try my best to avoid making these generalizations, though Islam, as with any religious tradition, can be interpreted in many ways.

In this paper, I refer to the scarf worn by women to cover their head by its Arabic term, *hijab*. There are endless ways of wearing the *hijab* that stem from different Islamic and cultural traditions that continue to have combinations of religious, social, and political meanings for women all over the world. Head coverings come in various forms that conceal more or less than the basic *hijab* and can often be attributed to a woman's country or culture of origin by the way she ties or *hijab* or the style of head covering she wears. The *nicab* is the fabric that covers a woman's whole face except her eyes, the *abaya* is the black light weight cloak that women of the Arabian Peninsula tend to wear over their clothing when going out in public and the *jilbab* is a stiffer, heavier version of the *abaya* more commonly worn by women in Jordan and by women of more conservative Islamic sects in the Seattle. Traditionally, girls begin to wear the *hijab,* or other forms of covering, and avoid socializing with the opposite gender when they reach puberty. In general, it is a way to preserve and respect the beauty of the female body for her family and husband only. For purposes in this research however, I use the term *hijab* to refer to all practices of female head covering, unless otherwise distinguished by my informants.

I also refer to the conversion of American women to Islam as a process of *reversion*. Islam teaches that all people are born Muslim and the journey of straying from Islam to another faith or belief and finding oneself back with Islam is simply *reverting* back to one's original state. Though not all of my informants used the term *reversion* when describing their personal journey with Islam, I use the term out of respect for this Islamic belief.

Islam and Gender: The Intrigue and The Struggle

As the literature suggests, most of the intrigue about Muslim women is focused on the first visible difference that separates the "us" from the "other", in this case the *hijab*. Despite honest efforts of researchers and Muslim women themselves in dialogues with Western organizations and the media to detract from the *hijab* as the central focus of women of Islam, it is difficult. My personal interest in capturing the stories of American Muslim female reverts in Seattle is rooted in my own struggle to understand and accept the Arab-Islamic notions of female empowerment.

I spent two years of grade school living in Cairo, Egypt where my family moved for my dad's job. I was young enough that I did not experience the traditional separate gender socialization patterns of the Egyptian youth, nor was I ever really expected to wear a *hijab* or modest clothing. My first experiences and images of Islam were not the *hijab* but rather the tiled mosaic blues of mosques and Egyptian art, the *azan* calls to prayer five times a day, markets full of Persian prayer rugs and polished prayer beads, and the burning incense during *Eid*[1] in the homes of my Egyptian friends. I admit that my first youthful fascination of Islam was simply a spoonful of the exotic sense of otherness, perfect childhood memories of all that is good in the world.

My second experience of Islam was bitter sweet. In the winter of 2007, my junior year of college, I decided to spend a semester abroad. Feeling brave and adventurous and wanting to

[1] *Eid ul-Fitr* is an Islamic holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting and prayer. It celebrates God giving Muslims strength to practice self-control and generosity towards other over the past month.

rekindle my nostalgia for my childhood in Cairo, I closed my eyes and put my finger on a country in the Middle East, Oman. Studying the development of women's soccer in Muscat, I was able to participate in, or at least write about, the very activity that gave me a sense of female empowerment in a culture where women don't play sports. However, I struggled living in Oman as a grown woman who was expected to socialize with only women, avoid wandering around the city alone and wear the *hijab* and *abaya*. I felt like I had lost all sense of personal empowerment. And, in a way, I had. The feeling of empowerment engrained in mainstream American liberal feminism values the ability of women to fully integrate into male dominated realms like the work force or athletics. It also challenges the quintessential 1950's social roles and expectations of women. I mistakenly focused on what I felt was taken away from me rather than embrace the unique sense of womanhood that I had gained.

I was thrown into an entirely new understanding of female empowerment, one where women are highly respected by men, protected by their families and carry their reputation, are revered as having beautiful sacred bodies, are the calm rational thinker in the family, and the head of social affairs. Gender roles do put limitations on individual actions and personal pursuits that stray from the norm, but in a collective society, it proves to act as a sense of comfort and personal identity for both women and men. Eventually, after much stubbornness, I grew to enjoy wearing my *hijab*. I felt a new sense of womanhood with my Omani sisters, an experience of female empowerment and respect that I did not feel back home trying to downplay gender differences and adhere to the sexualized image of women.

This research embodies my struggle to make sense of my hybrid perspective while in Oman, stuck between two ideologies, or in this case, two lifestyles and cultural interpretations of female empowerment. I approach this research with the belief that the hybrid sympathetic anthropologist or cultural relativist, beautifully narrated by post-modern anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod[2], somehow identifies with the beliefs and ideologies that are true for her informants. Thus, I am intrigued as to how the American women came to know Islam and interpret these gender differences and contrasting notions of female empowerment in the American cultural context. Particularly, I was interested in understanding their choice to revert and the role that gender played in their decision.

The Research Goals

When I first read the 2006 report by the Council on American Islamic Relations, the fact that American women reverts out number men four to one stuck me and, I had to ask why. How can the image of the veiled woman, with all of the political, social and religious baggage associated with it in the West, continue to represent a faith tradition that a growing number of American women are captivated by? How do these American Islamic converts not only change their faith but also adapt to a new paradigm of womanhood? What are their perceptions of women in the Middle East and to what extent do they feel they relate to them?

I wanted the research to first and foremost capture the diversity of American Muslim women reverts and to begin the much needed dialogue with this growing group. I also wanted to see if this community of Muslim women was merely a trendy fascination with the indigenous exotica, Orientalism, even the mystical spiritual knowledge of Sufism, or if it was, in fact, a true

[2] Abu-Lughod, Lila. "A Tale of Two Pregnancies". Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History. Ed. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004. 552-561.

enlightenment to the world's second largest religion. I also do not doubt that many Americans, including the U.S. government, have questions about the timing of post September 11th reverts to Islam and their spiritual authenticity. Seattle is notoriously referred to as the least religious but most spiritual city in the United States. Is Islam a trendy spiritual experience, a way to personally protest our current foreign policy and even question current feminist trends in the U.S.?

I chose to limit my research to Seattle for two reasons: the first, to see if these Islamic reverts were simply looking for an exotic new spiritual experience and two, for logistics with time, money and travel. I wanted to be able to interview all of my informants in person rather than over the phone, they needed to know that I was not just another bogus reporter, but an honest anthropologist simply conducting a study.

This study does not address current dialogues about women's rights in Middle Eastern states; this topic is a much larger endeavor unrelated to the American women that I interviewed. However, informants give their personal opinion on these topics of women's rights as they pertain to their particular practices and encounters with Islam in the United States.

Research Methods

I conducted seven interviews with women aging from nineteen to about fifty that I connected with through a key informant who works with my University's Islamic Association on campus. Informants also connected me with their friends or other Muslim reverts who they thought would like to talk about their experiences with Islam. Though all of these women were born and raised in the United States and have consciously reverted to Islam on their own for the purpose of my research, they all have come from different faith and family traditions and have very different experiences and interpretations of Islam.

There are two women who I consider outliers from the data. Both are the two youngest women still in undergraduate school who do not currently define their faith tradition as solely Islamic. One has recently just left the faith while another is just beginning to participate in Islamic practices and currently identifies with both Christianity and Islam. These outliers are important to include in the study for two reasons. First, they were referred to me as Muslim sisters by the same key informant who put me in contact with some of my other informants who have been practicing Islam for many years. Secondly, it is interesting to see how Islam is experienced and understood by Americans at varying stages and degrees of belief.

The data and analysis presented are qualitative only, and are based on the hand written field notes of the conversations that came out of semi-structured formal interviews with these seven women. Interviews began in April 2008 after being granted Institutional Review Board approval and focused on the topics of personal identity, reversion, attraction to Islam, life changes, conflicts with American culture, marriage, family, Arab and Islamic culture, gender roles in Islam, the meaning of *hijab* and the American Muslim culture in Seattle.

← I choose to discuss my own impressions of these women and my experiences with Islam as an American woman because they played an important role in my interviews. Many of the women had negative experiences with past interviews and media misrepresentation of Islam in the U.S. and were rightfully concerned about how I would interpret the data and represent them. I felt my informants could open up more about their experiences if I engaged in the interviews and told them about what I already knew of the faith, as well as my experience with Islam as a woman both in the U.S. and abroad. My informants often commented or reflected upon their lives based on conversations about my own statements, reflections and questions about Islam. It is a qualitative approach that is similar to what Lila Abu-Lughod[3] coins as "ethnography of the particular". I have written about not only what my informants had to say, but also how I experienced Islam through their stories.

Portraits of Seven American Muslim Women

These are the stories of seven American women who have grown up in the United States, been enculturated by their American families and have personally chosen to revert to Islam[4]. Though some have traveled abroad to Islamic nations, they all encountered Islam for the first time here at home. The portraits of these women focus on the story of their reversion, contextualized within their particular lives, personalities, family, desires, and personal beliefs.

The Protester

"I am a cultural bridge," proclaims Galla, a librarian and single mother who reverted to Islam a few months after September 11th, 2001. She takes pride in knowing that foreign Muslim women feel relieved when coming to the U.S. and have American Muslim women, like her, to talk to. There is a sense of trust and familiarity between Muslims for Galla, even in those from across the world. During the interview that took place while she was working at the library, Galla was distracted and often interrupted her own stories to keep a close watch on the book bags of a group of Saudi Arabian students who asked her to watch their bags while they went to get some lunch. She agreed to his request because they were Brothers of Islam but she expressed some from frustration because they had been gone for a long time and she was tired of looking after their bags.

The Saudi students' bags were not the only thing that distracted Galla from the focus questions of the interview; she successfully found a way to lead almost every discussion away from her own practice of Islam to her critiques of our current U.S. White House administration, American foreign policy in the Middle East and the declining morals of American ideals. Commenting on the sense of nationalism that emerged after September 11th, 2001, she says that she finds "nationalism as a divisive excuse for war, killing and taking...I'm not a flag waver, I've never been a flag waver. Americans want to believe that they are better, special, and more democratic that others...its like borders, they don't exist, people just made them up...You shouldn't kill for a flag, the Quran says do not kill". Reminding me again that she is a self-proclaimed hippy, Galla stresses that aimlessly supporting military troops is the "biggest hypocrisy in the world...just because they are in the military doesn't mean they are more patriotic or some kind of hero". After dodging out of the room to meticulously check on the Saudi

[3] From "A Tale of Two Pregnancies" (2004).
[4] The names of these women have been changed to keep their personal identity anonymous.

students' bags again, she leans in with a lowered voice and proclaims, "I hate Americanism and nationalism, they are nonexistent concepts...We spend billions of dollars on the Iraq war but one fourth of U.S. citizens have no health coverage". Her first encounters of Islam and story of reversion embodies these political stances.

Galla officially reverted to Islam about five years ago when she made the *Shahadah*[5] at the mosque she attends weekly for Friday prayer. However, she had been exploring the faith and its practices since early 2002. "I was raised vaguely Christian in the Midwest...a spin-off of American Protestants called First Christians or Disciples of Christ." She admits that she "used to be apathetic about religion before Islam...God, by definition, was beyond human understanding". Her first encounter of Islam in 1998 was "complicated". "I worked here at the library as a clerk, and used to tutor students, mostly foreign students, some from the U.A.E. They spoke to me about Islam and encouraged me to read the Quran but I just wasn't interested." In 1999 Galla took a few months of vacation from work but continued to tutor a few of the Arab students. One student, Mohammad, again suggested that she read the Quran. After her first read, Galla stated that "it was dull and cruel...I told him that your God seems intensively cruel...I had a negative reaction to the first reading".

"When I came back to work, another woman had started working here. She was a convert too. She never tried to convert me and I wasn't interested at all." After the events of September 11th 2001, Galla's friend and co-worker said she was worried about the stereotypes of Muslims in the United States and was concerned for her safety. Galla said that she would always call people and not go out by herself. "I was concerned for her security. So, I said that I would join her in *hijab*." I asked her why she chose to wear the hijab and she stated that she "was annoyed with George W. Bush...do you remember when he said after 9/11? He was talking about Osama Bin Laden... 'You are either with us or against us'. So I was against them, because I knew I wasn't a Republican". Galla began wearing the *hijab* strictly as a means of political protest.

← "In the meantime, I started to look more at Islam, and it just made sense as a way of living, equality for all, people live by basic principles, Islam is basic." In 2002, Galla's mother died while she was in the process of reversion to Islam. "My mom was buried in Nebraska...I have three non-Muslim sisters and one asked 'You're not coming to Mother's funeral in a costume are you?' But they accepted it." "I have one good friend who still doesn't believe it [her reversion to Islam] but overall my family is very accepting and understanding".

Her interpretation of Islam encompasses more of the universal themes of Islam than particular theological tenets and schools of thought. "I don't know enough about my practice to pick it out of the four Sunni schools but I know that is follows in the tradition of W.D. Muhammad Al Islam...the Nation of Islam". Elijah Muhammad was the son of W.D. Mohammad who, in 1975, lead some American followers towards Sunni Islam, and a practice of Islam that focused more on Islamic theology and less on racial differences and African American empowerment. "Shiite confuses me...I understand how it began, but I don't understand why anyone would follow it...the Quran is very specific, in plain Arabic...Shiite has secrecy, sacred information, the twelve mystical Imams where only the esoteric few can have access to the real truth...but that is just my understanding of it all".

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[5] *Shahadah* is the declaration of faith for a Muslim and often witnessed by an Islamic congregation. The Arabic translation proclaims that the revert witnesses that there is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his Messenger.

Aside from a political statement and sympathy for her friend, Galla has found truths in Islam that she feels is not present in Christianity. "Islam is very necessary for the ego. People begin to think that they matter too much and that we have a right to all of this stuff. I get angry with any group that says we were given dominion over the Earth. Islam says we are here to protect, not exploit the Earth". She also disagrees with the Christian notion of original sin and instead says that "people are born in a beautiful mold". "'Allah Al Akbar' means God is Greater. To say that God is 'Greatest' kind of limits one's conception of God. A father [like in Christianity] is not a strong image of God – we are not created in the image of God! 'God is closer to you than your jugular vein' says the Quran". She thinks that the Christian conception of humanity, in image and likeness of God, seems odd and selfish.

But she is also quick to recognize certain aspects of Arab interpretations of Islam that she strongly disagrees with. "Muslims will tell you that you have to either be a Muslim all the way or your not at all...they will tell you the Dali Lama is going to Hell. But I say, how can you speak in absolutes about who is right or wrong"? "It doesn't matter to me about who is going to Hell and who is saved...don't worry about either, just be ready to share to those who show interest...that is what 'jihad' is, it means worry about yourself". "Like Brahmanism, if you really learn compassion, you are on the right path...I know its my fault, but I just cant feel compassion for Bush, Cheney, Rumsfield, and all of those guys".

← Galla also had passionate words regarding the compatibility of her feminist ideals with Islam. "Actually, the first speech of the Prophet focused on treating your wives well." "Misogyny is alive in all cultures...the Democratic race right now is about what is stronger, racism or misogyny." For Galla, Islam seems to combat the misogyny present in some form in all cultures. When I brought up the topic of women she laughed. "The women situation...I know what you are trying to ask. Another woman asked me 'how can you cover, don't you find that truly demeaning?' I looked at her with her makeup, plucked eyebrows, and dyed hair and I knew she was the one who was oppressed... Some people see *hijab* and think pity, but I see it as no more bad hair days! It takes so much pressure off of you as far as being examined". She is referring to the scrutiny that women experience on how they look, act and carry themselves from society and men in particular. "Its easier to be a woman in Islam that a man. At first, I actually found it offensive, the way they give attention to menstruation for women. In reality, it makes it easer for women during menstruation because you are not supposed to have sex, do *Salat*[6], and you don't fast. There is an appreciation of the female body...its not a disrespectful thing! We view women so backwards here in the West".

Revealing the many sides of feminism, Galla takes a contradictory stance on the declining Arab cultural practice of polygamy incorporated into Islam. "I have no problem with polygamy... part of it came from wars and cultural traditions. There are four women for every one man that convert to Islam in the U.S. so...something has got to give! Men need to be willing to take more than one wife." The Quran says that you must treat all your wives equally. "I thought it would be fun to have a polygamous family, not as a sexual thing, but I like to keep it in the realm of fantasy...Being a single mother with one son is hard...its fun to have groups of single mothers getting together".

Regarding the popular understand of gender relations ascribed by Islam, Galla understands that gendered social differences is an Arab cultural interpretation but comes to embrace it. "Islamic relationships with men is very Arab gendered...I'm old and beyond being a sex object so it doesn't matter much for women like me...and technically, I don't even need to

[6] *Salat* is the Arabic term for one of the five daily prayers in Islam.

wear *hijab* because I am past marrying age, but I still do". "Hijab is just a way of demonstrating my desire to live a life Allah would approve of...and no more bad hair days," she says with a smile. Admitting that she used to hold the opposite opinion in her youth and "hippy" years, she currently stresses "there are many, many problems caused by unfettered relations between men and women in this country...not just sexually transmitted diseases but all the adultery leads to bad social situations. Keep your girlfriends close at hand, so that you know what you are doing". Galla is referring to the temptations of premarital sex that young men and women have when socialized together. The Arab and Islamic emphasis of gender separation is an attempt to eliminate the temptations and opportunities to commit perceived sexual sinful acts.

Galla has a positive view of the future for Muslim women in the United States and a refreshing sense of humor to accompany her through the challenges of now living as a minority in the United States. "The majority of Americans view Muslims as the enemy...you know what helps me to get past this everyday? Three things: I'm a woman, I'm non-confrontational, and I'm nearsighted. Seriously! It's a blessing. I can't see strange looks that people give me. But overall, people are very accepting".

The Embodied Female

It was difficult to encourage Becca to speak to me about her experiences with Islam because she is currently in the process of shedding her Islamic image. She declined my interview requests "due to some recent circumstances with me wrestling with some personal issues of self-identity that are utterly incompatible with Islam". "My personal practice of the faith has pretty much diminished to close to nothing. All I do now is follow the dress-code with *hijab* and everything, mainly because I would rather not have to deal with the disappointment or displeasure from my Muslim friends and acquaintances". This response was hard for me to conceptualize, as I have seen this woman from time to time around my community wearing conservative Islamic dress, a strong visual identity marker for anyone living in the United States. Despite her current rejection of Islam, Becca continues to wears the *hijab, nicab* and full Islamic dress, similar to the traditional *Salafi*[7] dress of many women in Saudi Arabia today. "It's a very conservative strict school," she notes, adding that it has spread quickly and is a popular interpretation of Islam in the state of Washington. She encountered this school of Islam by chance, as it was the faith of the first Islamic women who took her in and continued to teach her about Islam.

← "I was raised Catholic, but relaxed Catholic. When I started to look at Islam and do research, theologically, it just made sense to me." When she converted, she became friends with the women at the mosque she attended in Kent. Taught by a Somali *Salafi* teacher who led a weekly Quranic studies group for Muslim women in her home, Becca was quickly "led to believe in traditional *Salafi*" and incorporated Somali culture, dress and language into her practice of Islam. She reverted at age fifteen, while she was still in high school; "one day I took a bus ride to the local mosque alone and went to go say the *Shahadah* in front of witnesses, it was easy". "I was immediately surrounded by tons of women...there was one girl in my high school who kind of took care of me, she was a Somalian girl. She was my first introduction to Islam".

← "What drew me to Islam was the theology, it is a message for everyone, which is big. Judaism is more of an ethnic message and Christianity, essentially derived from Jewish tradition with a strong Hebrew background, seems concerned with its own people, not everyone. The Bible does not really say to convert others". "Islam is just different enough from Christianity that if you have some problem with the theology of one, you might accept the theology of the other". "I think people are attracted to Islam because it is very structured, easy to follow, that is the trend for conservative religions. They give you a checklist for morality – they think for you...a lot of people like the idea that religion is laid out for them...similar to conservative born-again Christian movement, they are reassured that they are saved. It gives you a sense that you are superior to others in this 'sin-cursed world'".

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[7] *Salafi* is a school of Sunni Islam prominent in Saudi Arabia today. The word *Salaf* is an Arabic noun contextually meaning "righteous predecessor" or "pious ancestor", referring to the first three generations of Muslims, looked up as examples of how Islam should be practiced today.

← Her reversion to Islam brought significant changes in her life that were, according to her, both positive and negative. "With Islam, I felt a sense of community and understanding...there is a strong network for you at the mosques and in the homes if Muslim women. With other Christians, a sense of hostility, tension between two faiths even though both are Abrahamic." "It is a unique experience being Muslim in the U.S.". "Its comforting to know that if you have faith, if you do your best, justice will be served and you are being a good Muslim". Becca refers to the justice of a life in Heaven with God.

← Most of the changes she experienced were everyday changes. She listed her most significant ones as praying five times a day, dietary changes and dress. "Prayer was especially hard in high school, I had to get out of class at certain times to pray. With the dress, I started out right away wearing the *hijab* and then eventually added the *nicab*. "*Hadiths*[8], traditions of the Prophet that Muslims follow, spoke about how his wives' dress so that is how we dressed. Imitation of the Prophet's wives is big in Islam for women". "For me, I was doubting my femininity – wearing Islamic dress was a way for me to reassure my identity externally".

← Becca felt the stigmatization of being a Muslim in the United States more strongly that most of my other informants. "Of course, the stares are always awkward...I sometimes felt like a second-class citizen". "My family and friends' response were generally accepting. Some men in my family made comments like 'watch how they treat you, they treat women bad etc.'. But we [immediate family] don't talk much anyway to my [extended] family...I didn't loose any friends, they just asked a lot of questions." "Some Americans are hostile, some just afraid of Muslims, from 9/11, they just don't know, its mostly ignorance, indifference...some try to be respectful but its usually just awkward and its kind of funny...there are a wide variety of responses. Overall, there is still distrust...not always hostile but passive aggressive". Though she felt that she stood out as Muslim in the U.S. she does not "feel a responsibility to reveal the message of Islam, but it just kind of happens that way". "I don't go out of my way as an example or anything". "I do feel pressure to explain myself all of the time, to justify myself. I'm not doing this just to be rebellious, I really believed in this religion".

← Becca also began the processes of trying to learn Quranic Arabic, picking of words and phrases from brief Arabic classes and self-tutoring methods from books she was given that were from Medina University in Saudi Arabia. Though she does not consider herself to be able to speak and fully understand Arabic, she performed her prayers in Arabic that she originally learned in English. "I was not supposed to say them in English because Arabic is the language of the Prophet, translations often alter meanings and understandings...It is considered an act of worship to read the Quran out loud, so it needs to be in Arabic, but I have read many translations in English".

← Her initial concerns and disagreements with Islam were rooted in the conservative nature of the particular Islamic tradition she was taught to adhere to. "A Muslim is a follower of God's will, you have a contract with God...as long as you protect us from Hell. It is a very business oriented relationship". "Before I lost my Muslim faith completely, I considered studying Sufi, Shiite traditions...but in the end, the problems I had was being transgender – it's essentially a problem in all of them. I'm now just staying back from organized religion and staying spiritual".

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[8] *Hadiths* are the reported sayings and traditions of the Prophet Mohammad that supplement the Quran as a source of Islamic law and a guide for Muslims in conducting their lives.

← In the past few months, Becca recognized that she been dealing with a lot of internal doubt – at first tried to live a more religious life but eventually just stopped talking to the women from the Mosque and all of her Muslim friends. The only people that know of her change in heart are her roommates and close friends. I asked her why she continues to wear Islamic dress to school. "I guess its just my pride, and to avoid that awkward conversation of why. Outside of school I wear normal clothes".

← Ultimately though, Becca left Islam for the very same reason she was attracted to it. It not only resolved theological issues she had with Christianity, but forced her to resolved her questions of gender identity. "I don't practice anymore because of identity struggle issues...gender struggle...in Islam, there is no room for fluidity in gender...well more in Sufi practice than any other...I always thought I was just being deceived by the devil for struggling with my gender identity". "Now, religion does not empower me, it restricts me. For me, its okay to be a spiritual person, just not a religious one." "Islam has a beautiful history, but its best for me right now not to continue practicing – I am spiritual now, but not religious". The socially conservative practices of *Salafi*, more so than other practices of Islam, strongly emphasizes the separate roles and identities of gender. Her adherence to female Islamic dress forced her to ignore and suppress her gender identity questions and outwardly continue to identify as a female. However, she could not continue to ignore this internal struggle. Though she tried to continue practicing Islam as a transgender, she eventually came to terms with two aspects of her life that were simply not compatible; her particular practice of Islam and her embodied transgender self.

The Storyteller

Thumbing through my interview notes, I noticed that Jenna never actually answered any of my questions directly. She contextualized the ideas and questions I brought up, with stories from her life. Whether her carefully chosen words and stories had to do with her creative nature as an artist, passionate activism for Muslim women and Palestinian rights in the U.S. and abroad, or recent controversy stirred from negative misrepresentation of Muslim women in local media, she asked me many questions about my research motives. This was truly evident in a story of Muslim and Christian misunderstandings here in Seattle.

← Muslim immigrants in the U.S. have also brought particular cultural interpretations of the faith that may make it difficult to assimilate even within an Islamic or simply Islamic accepting community. Jenna has a friend that goes to a Unitarian church here in Seattle that neighbors a conservative mosque down the street. After members of the church found out that the mosque had endured some vandalism, the congregation had decided to help them repair the damage. After this positive neighborly experience, the church also decided to invite the members of the mosque over for a dinner. Though the Unitarian Church tends to believe in all faith traditions and there were a few Muslims that actually attended the church, they didn't do their research about Arab/Islamic culture when it came to sharing meals. Naturally, the church had all the women come to the dinner as well, creating tensions and discomfort for the men of the mosque with the seating arrangement. First, Islam in Arab cultures tend to socialize men and women separately, including dining arrangements. Secondly, many Arab mosques are only attended by men, and this particular mosque did not have a female congregation. Evidently, the event did not turn out well; the women ended up leaving and eating in another part of the church feeling insulted and regretting their invitation. "The church could not wrap its mind around the cultural differences and were like 'we're never doing that again'," said Jenna. This mosque had a lot of first generation families, direct immigrants who brought their culture with them. Jenna sees the major issues with Islam in the U.S. today as not discrimination but misunderstandings in the differences of Islam from different groups of people.

← Though Jenna expressed little of her own theological attractions and beliefs about Islam, she did share events surrounding her life that lead to her gradual reversion, which were rooted in social activism, feminism, and her questioning of Christianity. She grew up in the Midwest in an evangelical Christian home. Her father was a music minister during her younger years at her private Christian high school, and then a professor at her private Christian college. "Most of my family and friends are still there, still within the evangelical Christian belief system," she says. Before she graduated from her Christian college, she decided to move to Seattle to take classes at a local community college and eventually graduated with a degree in theater studies from Evergreen State College. She has two children and married her husband Mohammad, a Palestinian, shortly after moving to Seattle. They met at a 7-Eleven convenience store where they both held brief jobs. "The majority of women that I know converted to Islam because they married Muslim husbands. It is not forced on them, its just that Islam is a big part of Arab culture and everyday Islamic life, so its hard not to".

← "My first encounter with Islam and Muslims led up to the Gulf War. I was in Minnesota and had never heard of Palestine before. I remember I had a sticker on my Bible that had the name 'Jerusalem' with 'USA' in the middle. I did not think twice about it...of course Jews were there, and of course that's where they belonged and should be allowed to live...it was right there in the Bible!" Wanting to learn more about the Middle Eastern region, she began her own study of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict up until the Gulf War, and was fascinated in the role the U.S. had in the Middle East. In Seattle, she met a group of Arab Muslims while working in the University District, including her future husband and eventually joined what was called the Palestinian Solidarity Committee which was involved in public protests, and educating Americans about the conflict and the Middle East. Even when after she married, she had not converted to Islam. She was more interested in social justice issues in the Middle East.

← "When my son was born, it occurred to me that it would be important to raise him in a Muslim household. I made this decision on my own, and decided that's what I wanted to do". Her faith just followed suit as she explored the theology of Islam more and more. "I left Christianity long behind even before I met Mohammad. I still identify with the ideas of peace, social justice, and Jesus... as man or Prophet who exemplifies a human role model...no matter what you believe in, stories of his life have strong implications for how to treat people, and actually get down in the ditches with people". "I had a hard time with the image of the clean white Church surrounded with the all white middle class congregation – it had no appeal to me anymore."

← Jenna does not attend mosque regularly, but participates every once in a while for an event or occasion. "I am always wary about the American women I see at the mosque [Northgate] because I feel like they have dumped their whole past life". She sees American culture and Islam as compatible. American female reverts "adapt cultural tendencies...in Islam there isn't dating or a courtship period, women really make poor choices trying to embrace the whole identity of Islam...I've seen the bad effects of some of this, I've seen women get divorced and they have nothing left because they have left their past lives behind and now have nothing".

← "Years ago, I did political work as a Muslim woman and wore the *hijab* as a symbol of an un-oppressed Muslim woman. It was not a spiritual sense." "I was also a speaker for the Seattle Islamic Sisterhood. We focused on the education of Muslim women's concerns abroad and in the U.S." This was the group that she belonged to when the *Seattle Times* wrote a story that took interview quotes from many Muslim women out of context, resulting in numerous complaints and misunderstandings from men in the Muslim community about what was printed. "I am defending *hijab* all of the time. It is the one aspect of Islam that is the focus of the news media. It's never about how women are uniting together to break into the workplace, dealing with life after divorce or anything else that actually matters". "*Hijab* is meant for modesty and saving a woman's beauty. But in the U.S., this is ironic because when you do wear the *hijab*, all eyes are on you. Without it, you blend in more." Jenna thus chooses not to wear it. For her, not wearing it to make more of a statement, "its unexpected, shakes people's notions of what a Muslim woman is and I like that".

← Though Jenna does not associate with any theological or traditional sect of Islam, her husband's family is Sunni. "I would help with leading Quran classes for women, but I choose not to attend the mosque regularly until there is equality for women." She understands why the men and women are separated, but the women's room is very small upstairs, and not on par with the men's grand prayer room. "The mosque is really bursting at the seams with people though". "The mosques in Seattle are predominantly immigrant, so culturally, they are trying to recreate what they have back home".

← Her reversion has political significance in her life as well. "Everyone is free to practice what religion they want." "My kids have to spend quite a bit of time explaining Islam to kids at school or anywhere". Though she does not feel like American culture and Islam are not compatible, she does recognize that it is hard for her and her kids sometimes. She gets annoyed with having to always go into school and speak on things, or get asked for interviews... sometimes I just want to be the normal mom that takes her kids to soccer". This longing begets another story.

← Her son is really into theater at school and made callbacks for the school play. The date of callbacks fell on *Eid* Day. As the most importantly holiday in Islam, similar to the importance given to Christmas, he could not go. "Do don't ask people to make appointments on this day. The level of awareness or understand for Islam traditions is low". They asked questions and said things like "wasn't Ramadan more in the fall a few years ago, and now your saying it's at the end of the summer?" She said that each year she has to explain the lunar calendar to her children's school so that they can be excused for *Eid,* but every year they still don't understand. In the end, her son did not go to the callbacks disallowing him reschedule, and ultimately loosing the part. Her letters to the administration and the school board were futile attempts that made little impact.

← Her reversion story is also strongly influenced from her pre-existing notions of feminism. Constantly battling the renunciation of female empowerment for Muslim women, she tells the story of an alternative manifestation of feminism in Arab Islam. After visiting her husband's family abroad, "as an artist, a well educated woman, all the things that I am good at, had nothing to do with how clean my house was, or how well I can cook or take care of children...it was different". "A woman's sphere is different over there, she is in control of the home and the social network...my mother-in-law is a powerhouse, just not outside the house". From these contrasting experiences, "I have a great appreciation for family strength. It has helped me to reevaluate part of myself as a woman I wasn't tuned into...it became a process of melding worlds together. It's hard for me to feel good about the work I do while over there, they do art for a living everyday – they value different skills. For example, my husband's sister wanted to do photography. She took a few classes, then got married and had three kids and that is her world, she never went back to photography. Maybe things will change for women's roles in Islam, but maybe not".

← Before we parted, she reminded me again to make sure that her opinions and stories were used to represent only her and not make generalizations about American Muslim women on this single interview. "No matter who you are, you end up being an example for another person. But, people should not feel like they are under a microscope all of the time...it can be annoying to be continually asked about it". "As the diversity of the religion changes, and it will as other people from other cultures come to Islam, so the culture of Islam change. Kids adapt things from both parents, and hopefully combine the best of both worlds".

The Philosopher

← Holly and I had planned to meet at a coffee shop early Saturday morning but she accidentally slept through the interview. She called me a few hours later, asking for my "forgiveness" and hoping to reschedule. I had a track meet at the University of Washington that day which consisted of a lot of sitting around waiting for your event. She offered to bring her family, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon to the track meet and interview her in the stands. She was doing *me* a favor, but was insistent on making up for missing our appointment and decided to come to the track meet. I got the impression that she did not want to give a negative impression of Muslim women and wanted to fulfill her duty as an American Muslim, by speaking up about her faith and the community she belongs.

← Holly attends a mosque in Belleview where she once met a woman who says that more Muslims need to speak out and talk about Islam, differentiate between cultural interpretations and the true Islam. "Grassroots converts need to talk about it," agrees Holly. "In the end, there is a right answer of what is culture and what is Islam. God left some things open for interpretation for time and place". Her husband, a Moroccan and devout Muslim, faced criticism for his practice of Islam in Morocco. "In Morocco, when a man has a beard or a woman wears hijab, they are generally seen as fanatics or uneducated, even though both a beard and a scarf for women is part of Islam, not cultural". Holly notes that her husband actually practices Islam more in the U.S. than back home – he feels freer to worship his own faith in the U.S.

← "Don't stay in your community and not explain your faith. If someone has the wrong idea than you need to speak out about it". She brings up the recent popular news story of the Saudi woman who was out by herself and attacked and raped by a group of men and the government is considering punishing her for the attack. "This is not Islam...I need to explain these things to my family, my parents...I should do that this week, today even. So yes, there certainly is a responsibility, you cant live in a cave".

← Or, maybe Holly was intent on keeping our interview appointment because, as a Muslim, she is more conscious of her actions and intentions. She sees her life dramatically different before and after Islam. "It completely changed my life, I see everything in a new way, with a new meaning now". "For example with education, we are taught to work hard in school so that we can get a good job and make money...but as a Muslim, I work hard in school so that I can learn to better myself as a person, as a Muslim 'for the sake of God'...my intentions for many things have changed". Her life is similar, but her intentions behind them have changed.

← Born and raised in Minnesota, Holly attended a Christian college and grew up with a Catholic family that went to church every Sunday. During college though, she stopped attending Sunday services, " I was just indifferent to religion". "I wasn't really a religious person, so Islam was a huge change for me". "I learned about Islam purely from books and texts, first hand sources that were not tainted by cultural aspects." "The different sects are historical and political separations, there is no need to classify them as different because they are all Muslim. I follow as close to the Quran as possible...in the end though I would say I am Sunni. Shiite lack some aspects and add others...I learned Islam from the pure sources, untainted and unchanged by man, unlike the Bible". "This has made me more confident in my faith with untainted sources, I don't like reading about what other people think about Islam...this is similar to some Christians, you don't just listen to the priest or the pastor in Church". As with other American female reverts, Holly believes that her "conversion was not tainted by culture, it was pure".

← After moving out to Seattle to pursue a PhD in biostatistics at the University of Washington, Holly met a group of Muslims, including her future husband, who talked to her often about Islam. "We didn't just talk about religion, but philosophical discussions *about* religion too". "I had to prove to myself that there is a God, and then that he created us, and then that it logically made sense for him to send down some set of instructions for how we are supposed to be...Torah, Bible, Quran". "I started to learn a lot more about Christianity, actually, after looking at Islam". "At first, I saw Islam as in contrast to Christianity, and I found myself trying to defend Christianity. But with certain aspects, I realized that I couldn't, some things didn't make sense. My first approach was to compare the two, but I couldn't defend things like the Trinity". Holly was hesitant with her critiques of Christianity; concerned that she may insult a faith tradition I may believe in. She continually apologized, reminding me that she does not speak for all women and that she is not judging anyone regarding their beliefs.

← "My beliefs need to be logical, needs to be consistent with science". "I realized that my faith also needed to make sense for everyone, around the world, different backgrounds etc., all things had to make logical sense...Islam makes sense". She references the philosopher Pascal, and how "he got it all wrong" when he suggested that it was more logical to choose religion because it's a safe bet; if you get it wrong, you just wasted your time, but if you get it right, you get to go to Heaven. She thinks you don't need to take such an extreme stance, because "Islam makes common sense". "For example, I did this big project for school on the heart, learning how it worked and what aspects of the heart and its workings we don't completely understand...there are signs that there had to be a Creator". "You can take some things on faith, but the foundation has to be logical". Also says she likes Islam because it is very practical, it teaches you how to do everything". Islam "teaches you about etiquette for everything, how to be a better person with the right intensions. It even teaches you how to go to the bathroom, what to eat, how to date, and raise children".

← Holly doesn't remember the exact day of her reversion but remembers how she felt. She struggled with her decision, wondering what would happen if she chose either Islam or Christianity. "I kept asking myself, if I knew I was going to die tomorrow, which path would I pick?" "I remember that day, I took a shower, did a prayer in my basement and did *Shahadah* on my own...in the end is just matters if its in your heart, not if its in front of a crowd of people...I never did it in front of a group of people". "I go to mosque every Friday so I see it a lot – see women who have decided to convert and say the Shahadah in front of everyone...sometimes they have open houses at the mosque where women can come and learn if they are interesting in Islam...but they are emotional, spiritual about Islam, things are different for me, I am logical".

- "I did everything gradually...the Quran says to not be rash about anything, especially religion. Some women overwhelm themselves and end up leaving the faith." Holly's first focus was her prayer and adjusting to praying ceremoniously five times daily. "It's nice to have that time and break for God". "When you believe in it, its not that hard to get up at sometimes five in the morning for prayer...its harder to remember at school and at work". She gradually incorporated more scriptural reading, memorizing parts of the Quran and taking Arabic classes offered at the University of Washington. One the most difficult changes Holly endured was gradually leaving family holiday celebrations like Christmas and Easter. "I remember my first Christmas after conversion, my husband and I did go back to Minnesota, but I remember just being extremely uncomfortable with celebrating the idea that Jesus is God and things. The family took it hard, on why I felt uncomfortable but I just cant go home for Christmas...there is also problems with alcohol, Muslims don't drink it and we don't even want to be around it. It's a huge deal". "The biggest thing for me now is figuring out how to not upset my family and not go against my faith, it's a struggle".
- "My parents knew I was learning about Islam, and they knew about my friend, who is now my husband. *Alhamdulillaah*[9] they are pretty open minded, they feel that religion is a personal choice...they were initially concerned thinking 'are you still going to be here, still be our little girl, the same person?' Actually, now I'm an even better daughter to them, I don't yell at my mom, especially not my dad anymore when we get in arguments. I can't imagine I swore at my mom when I was younger". "I didn't wear a scarf until about a year after I converted...in the back of their [parents] mind I knew they were a little concerned because of what they see on the news, but its easy to misunderstand".
- Holly completely identifies as both an American and a Muslim. "I like the fact that I am American, born and raised in the Midwest...I am proud of my family, the way that Americans are friendly and have a general amiability towards others...I am thankful for the exceptional education in the U.S., medical care...Americans in general seem to be tolerant, especially in Seattle, they are politically correct". "As Americans we can criticize, and this is good, its my right...and missionary work in the Middle East, oh my gosh! Becoming Muslim made me feel more aware of politics, cultures of my brothers and sisters in Islam".
- "Men and women are equal in Islam in terms of piety, this is the only way to judge people. Duties are different for men and women though. The man is the head of the household and ultimately decides major decisions, but should talk about them with his wife and get her advice and opinion. I raise my family, and am in charge of family matters such as finding someone to watch my daughter if I am at work or away. It doesn't mean I have to stay at home though".

[9] *Alhamdulillaah* is the Arabic translation for the phrase "All praises are for Allah". It is used to show gratitude for something, attributing it to Allah.

← "After I converted, I felt a stronger sense of identity as a woman. American culture tells you that less is best for clothes, to strive to be more popular etc. But now, I see the scarf and modest clothing in a new way. I don't have to worry about how men are looking at me, or checking me out at the bus stop. For example, at job interviews, I know they are looking at me and my abilities and not how I look or what I am wearing. Islam gives me confidence, and now I have intentions in everything that I do." "Covering is honoring myself in some sense...they don't have the right to look at me." "General covering up is obligatory in our faith but also explanatory, something you have to do. It makes me feel better, its an understanding of honoring my body, I choose who has the right to see it. Its about honor, dignity, and practicality."

The Spiritual Seeker

← I admit Heidi's blond hair blues eyes and girl-next-door smile took me aback. Within moments of our her passionate contribution to a dialogue spanning over two hours on all aspects of her life,, she staunchly voided my thoughts of her naivety. In fact, what struck me most about her was her ability to overcome strong emotional hardships while maintaining her Islamic faith. Amidst the struggles of living as a Muslim woman in the United States, she continues on her Islamic journey; Heidi is searching for spiritual experiences. "I worked in Snohomish delivering mail to farmers and wore modified modest Islamic clothing. If I lived up here in on Capital Hill or something I could wear hijab and things, but not in a small town...one guy actually answered the door with a shot gun!"

← Her spiritual search began at a young age. "I was raised Roman Catholic and went to Catholic school with nuns. My dad was Presbyterian but converted to Catholicism when he married my mom. I did a lot of research... had decided I wanted to be a nun. My parents weren't very strict Catholics but my grandmother was very Catholic and I liked that about her." "If I hadn't found Islam, I would have been a nun". "Outside of school, my family didn't really practice, we were what you call 'recovering Catholics' or non-practicing"

← "When I was nine years old, I learned that Jesus died, and we as Christians need to treat everyone around us like Jesus, and be willing to die for others. That night I had a nightmare that I was being crucified! ...I also had questions about the Trinity...I would ask the priests and they said I was sinning for even questioning aspects of Christianity. I had to do the Rosary over and over again for my questioning. In 5th grade I started to read the Bible intensely. I would go through whole chapters and saw major contradictions. The Old Testament seemed so brutal to me and the New Testament was inconsistent. I felt so guilty for questioning it. With Islam you are encouraged to question, it requires you to study and question it." "I liked the Muslim stories of Jesus better, it just made more sense". "The original version of the Quran is everywhere, where as there are different versions of the Bible. I remember when I moved from Alaska to Pennsylvania I noticed that our church had a different version of the Bible. I thought it was crazy! Translations of the Bible are just based on the interpretations of different men. I just have more faith in the Quran".

← "The girl who introduced me to Islam was a friend when we were fifteen years old. Her mom was American and her dad was Iraqi. She had a hippy mom, who didn't think they had an American culture and she completely took the cultural identity of her husband. This pattern was the last generation, my parents' generation. Now it's different. Converts are trying to keep their American identity along with Islam".

- "I reverted at age nineteen while I was in college. I was part of a feminist group, actually arguing with Arabs about women in Islam when they told me to read the Quran. I ended up reading it and then converted!" "No one treats you the same, but it allowed me to remake myself. I was very shy and didn't talk to many people and very anxious all the time, wanting to please others. After I started wearing the hijab I started doing speeches in schools, lead leadership groups and classes and it really boosted my confidence". "I like the Quran because it is universal and practical...reading it gave me confidence and backing for my arguments when people did wrong to me...I used to blame myself for letting people walk all over me".
- Heidi took the Shahadah about five months after converting, with her friend Mohammad from Saudi Arabia. They met in school and did leadership classes together. She married him and six months later "I came home and there was another girl in his bed...he was living a double life. I wore full *hijab*, *abaya*, and was very strict for him. Later I heard he had parties and girlfriends he would talk to on the phone at home in Arabic. I eventually picked up some of the Arabic, realized what he was saying, how he was saying things to them. It took along time for the divorce to go through though. In September 2004 of the same year, I moved out and was on my own". "I had an Islamic divorce through my Sheik. He spoke called my and it was done properly. In October of 2006 I was remarried, Islamically to my current husband. He reverted one week before we got married. We met only a few months before we got married, but it just clicked, we knew".
- Heidi struggled with her family's misunderstanding of the faith from the beginning. Her and her husband live on a large property near the home of her parents-in-law. "After my conversion, I eventually started wearing the hijab. My mom was against it. She pulled it off in public and pretty much kicked me out of the house...I converted in June of 2001 and then shortly after September 11th happened...my parents called the FBI and gave them a list of my friends phone numbers saying they were Muslims." "At first, my mom asked me stereotypical questions, freaking out, like 'do you believe women should be subservient?' to me. She believed what she wanted". "I was interviewed by *People Magazine*, trying to explain that Islam embodied all the feminist qualities that I was looking for in a religion. As soon as the Quran came the land, women were give property rights, jobs, ability to vote, and respect, but the magazine skewed was I had said. They misquoted me as saying 'Islam is the most feminist religion'. My mother-in-law freaked out that she might be identified as being Muslim, on the no fly list, and was scared she couldn't go to Canada and stuff".
- My "father-in-law cant identify with brown skin...white Americans who cover their hair are seen as traitors...there are tensions between white Americans who think I'm a traitor, Shamanism group saying why women aren't more moderate, Arab Muslims asking why I don't cover...I cant talk to them about the other...sometimes it seems like they are all contradictory, but I try to be truthful".
- "My brother-in-law is sort of a white supremacist, says that there are concentration camps for Muslims being built etc. He was also mad about the *People Magazine* interview...he lives on the same property of my parents-in-law, in a trailer, a seventeen acre family land. My husband Aerik and I agree so...he's thirty years old, druggy, balding, brings home bad women that take his money...he's a good person inside, means well, says 'life is tough' and out to get him all the time, but he just has some backward views".

← "My relationship with my mom is better now that I took the scarf off...but for *Eids* I still wear it outside. My mom is conscious of the stares that I get...I didn't like taking it off because then my mom just thought it was all a fad. My parents-in-law actually bought my husband and I some prayer rugs from Palestine for wedding presents. I think they finally realized it's truly a spiritual thing and not a cult".

← A big focal point of our conversation was based on sub-culture of *hijab* and Islamic dress in the United States. "The whole part of the *hijab* is to be modest so guys don't stare at you, your body, its not the point to run around and scare people, or have people stare at you. I think it helped by being extra nice and smiling a lot so that when they have an opinion of a Muslim, its positive". "When I decided to take off my *hijab*, I lost about 70% of my Muslim friends. They look down on girls who don't cover properly, but they are the ones coming to me about sleeping with men, asking me where they can get an abortion etc." "They are the 'in clique'...hijab wearers". "My mother-in-law sees my daughter playing with her scarf on and has a heart attack...I don't make her wear, she likes to play and tie in on her head for prayer at home".

← She looks down at her skirt. "My friend actually gave me this skirt because one time I came to her house wearing pants". "There is tension between the group of Islamic women that follow Arab cultural practices and those that don't. They kind of look down on us when it comes to what we wear or not adhering to stick prayer times. Converts in the community are expected to be more religious and conservative. We are always being instructed. Other Islamic immigrants are not instructed or expected to dress so conservatively. I do my afternoon prayer sometime in the afternoon, I'm sorry but Mohammad didn't have a watch!" "Me and other converts are not always accepted as being knowledgeable, or fully accepted Muslims in this community".

← She laughs when she speaks of instances were Islamic dress has been poorly interpreted or drastically changed from Quranic time. "There is a *Hadith* that says that says to take your hair covering and cover your breasts with it. Women used to wear dresses that exposed their breasts, used to entice the men to fight well and come home soon...the women used to cover their hair but not their breasts, thy just weren't seen as sexual." "*Hijab* to me is significant in how it makes me feel...really good, I feel more feminine...I used to be a tomboy. My mom used to encourage me to be a tomboy. She was a super-feminist and even called me 'Tim'...but I just love the having the soft fabric of the *hijab* on my face, next to me, flowing... when I have it on for prayer it helps me to focus". "But in the American community, it's a status symbol, a division. I don't like this part, it's awful".

← "For women that cover their hair and cover their clothes, there are three women in all of Seattle that actually import hijab and other Arab clothing from the Middle East. They sell them to other women in Seattle, like a business. So everyone knows how much you paid for your hijab...$165 verses $30...it becomes a status symbol. You can look at a woman and pretty much see if she is, or is married to, a Saudi or Jordanian etc. There are all different ways to wrap it...I used to wear a *jilbab*. I totally bought into it, but I don't wear it anymore. There is definitely a stereotype for those who don't wear it, they are considered slightly slutty." "I'm too open minded for the Islamic community here – but spiritually it works for us, it's the right meditation for us, but may not be right for others"

← Heidi also spoke heavily about the culture of American reverts, citing many of the differences between immigrant Muslims and American Muslims. “The UW crew they will take in a young girl, nineteen years old who is wanting to look at Islam and will right away encourage her to cover her hair the next day, marry an Arab guy etc. I keep hearing these things about how they try to marry Arab men, the Arab gets bored with and messes up, he knows what he is doing is wrong, they separate and the girl will stop wearing hijab and be so confused...her full identity is striped, waiting is good because then maybe they will find their own spirituality first, and for themselves.... the Belleview crowd will tell the girls to start covering 2-3 weeks into it...it all kind of demoralizes men, encouraging them to wear *hijab* and *jilbab*, they wipe away their American identity.”

← “My friend and I wanted to raise our young daughters to be American and Muslim...its okay for others to keep their culture”. Referring to herself as a married, white American, she “had to start from scratch, and had no Arab/Muslim husband to take Islamic/cultural practices from”. “So we go by what’s in the Quran, the *Hadiths*, Sunni...supposed to be the same as the Quran... But we do take it with a grain of salt because it embodies Arab cultural ideas”.

← The topics of women in Islam, feminism and Islamic clothing were major focal points in the dialogue. “There are different things expected of women and men in Islam...I told my husband I either wanted a full time career or to have a family...it is his responsibility to financially take care of the family but its my responsibility to protect myself for him...neither of us have good friends of the opposite sex, mostly because we both have dealt with so much jealousy. As a woman, I enjoy being home, taking care of the family. “Islam is horribly sexist but...here’s an example, women are supposed to back down and talk about it later if they are in an argument with their husband...I have found from experience that men get so heated that its the job of the woman to be the clearer thinker and calm the argument...to me, this is feminism...but its not the life for everyone”.

← Unlike Holly’s logical and rational attraction to Islam, Heidi sees and experiences God in the mystical and spiritual of Sufism. She spoke about the growing Sufi community and the spiritual classes she attends for meditations. “Mysticism in Islam is big, especially here in Seattle...I thought I was very Sunni but really I found out I was Sufi”. “I started to identify as Sufi...but a lot of Sunnis don’t consider Sufi to be Muslims...but I still follow Sunni practices like the five pillars of faith. Principally, I am Sufi, but practically, I am Sunni.”

← Three years ago, Heidi also began exploring Shamanism, and noted that “it was the first place I actually found healing after Mohammad cheated on me...they have moon ceremonies. I took energy-healing classes to help with grief. A regular participant of the moon ceremonies she describes as “ancient old weaving energy things,” Heidi and her mother-in-law constructed a place for moon ceremonies of their own. “There are so true connections between Shamanism and Islam, and when two things have connections like this from two very different parts of the world, you know they are more true”. “One of my Shaman spiritual leaders at school encourages me to be better Muslim...my husband and I got into Islam because of the mysticism of it”.

← During the summer, Heidi works at women’s summer solstice Sufi gatherings in Eastern Washington leading rights of passage and healing classes for women. “There are a few Muslim women, Shaman women, but mostly Wickens, new age witches. There is also a huge white following of Native American practices...but only three Muslims there last summer”.

← Heidi holds a unique position in the American Islamic culture. Though she practices and identifies as a Sunni Muslim, her strong spiritual connections is rooted in Sufism, two traditions that many Muslims in her community do not see as compatible. She also struggles to identify as a Muslim woman who has a desire to wear the *hijab* and teach others about her faith but rejects the petty sub-culture of *hijab* styles and worth defining cloth that she says many Muslim American women are obsessed with adhering to. Despite all of this, Heidi has found a satisfactory balance in her life. "Before I converted, I was partying a lot, used to wear, you know, boob shirts, drink...then I thought about being a nun, then I was a super strict Muslim, and now I am just balanced...I needed the extremes to find a good balance now". "To be a Muslim is to put yourself on a path, devote yourself to a path of God...one Hadith says that the path to Allah should not be too strict or too relaxed, we are supposed to spend the day finding this balance and become conscious and aware of our actions".

The Novice

← Like most college freshmen, Rory is looking for something meaningful. Perhaps a young reflection of Heidi, she is willing to take the plunge and wholeheartedly define her spiritual identity – as soon as she finds it. She is less concerned with her personal fate via adhering to the one righteous organized religion, and more occupied with finding what everyone seems be looking for, the Truth. Though Rory is not as well versed in Arab culture, Islamic interpretations and the American Muslim culture here in Seattle, she does bring a genuine and fresh perspective as a woman seriously beginning to look at her life through the lens of Islam. A freshman at a university in Seattle, she is involved in numerous Arab and Islamic clubs on campus. She first got involved with these campus groups when she expressed interest in participating in *Ramadan* over the summer before the school year began.

← *Ramadan* began this year in early September, allowing her to meet a few Arab and Muslim students through the Muslim Student Association before classes began. "*Ramadan* is all about community. It's hard to do it alone." She often had dinner after sundown with the Muslim group on campus to celebrate each day's completion of fasting. On the nights she was at home with her family, she had to cook meals for herself because her family had already eaten dinner. "With *Ramadan*, I wanted to experience Islam for myself – the traditions". Her first experience of *Ramadan* was "more for practical understanding and for an open mind". "The spiritual component of Islam had started earlier during 10th grade".

← Rory's first real exposure to Islam was during her 10th grade world history class. Assigned to focus on one region of the world to study, Rory chose the Middle East though she had little knowledge of Islam. Her project allowed her to read parts of the Quran. "The school project was kind of an excuse to explore something different – a personal spiritual exploration. I was actually kind of sad when the project ended". "I was worried about what my parents would think! But they are not very conservative –they actually worried about what my other more conservative relatives would think".

← When asked where she felt she stood at this current point in her life, she decided to divide her life into spiritual chapters. "The first chapter was my life up until 6th grade. My family had gone to church my whole life but my parents are not super religious. We don't really talk about it we just always go. At Sunday school, you know, we focused on Bible studies, God, Jesus that's it". The second chapter began around 6th grade. " I had started to experience a sense of spirituality. I could say 'I believe' this or that instead of just Bible stories. I felt a real connection." This early spiritual connection began at a church camp. She said that the church camp that she went to in 6th grade was "way more conservative than her own congregation. It has a mini college for students in their first year of ministry". I went to this camp, actually because they had horses we could ride. "We did church stuff, rode horses, ate, slept and went to bed, that's it". "There was a lot of reflection on God, service – which was important to me...at the end of the week I was by myself meditating and reflecting on God, looking at the stars and I felt very calm and centered. I found what I believed". Back home at her family's United Church of Christ congregation, she continues to stay involved with her church interfaith community. The U.C.C. is interesting in that each congregation decides what it believes. She likes the U.C.C. because of how open it is to different faith traditions. Currently identifying as both a Muslim and a Christian, she feels that "if I went to a church that fit exactly what [she] believed, I probably wouldn't go, so [she] likes the U.C.C." "My church has a lot of diversity...my group ranged from closet atheists to devout Christians".

← The third chapter of Rory's life, from about 6th grade to 10th grade, was not as spiritual but she held on to basic Christian fundamental principles. "You are going to think I am crazy, but in 6th grade I actually had a dream of being in heaven, then in hell, then in heaven, then in hell back and fourth and it was frightening. I see it as a metaphor for periods of enlightenment and then periods without God. I wish it would be stable because I enjoy spirituality so I wish it didn't waver so much – it probably happens to a lot of people". "I used Christian language because that is what I knew. Even when I felt down, I held on to a core center of beliefs. There is a God, there is a Truth, and Jesus is a very important person. We can't describe God definitively, and Jesus is very important but it's hard for humans to understand his relationship with God". She is religious, but weary of laws and rules. "I believe in them, but I need to understand the reason behind them; I need to understand the 'why' behind everything". In this chapter of her life, she had an intense interest in world religions, focusing on the connections they have with Christianity. At first, Rory was captivated by the negative perceptions of Islam, like in the media. "But, when I opened the Quran I was drawn by the similarities with the Bible". "Originally I was drawn to the cultural contrasts between perceptions of what Islam is and what is actually is – I found satisfaction in getting past this". "American culture has a lack of knowledge and understanding about Islam. "Many Muslims tell me things are getting better, but I talk to a lot of 'interfaith' groups, so it might be different".

← The 4th chapter spans from her first experience of *Ramadan* in September to the present. "I should have brought my journal, I thought about that earlier. I read some of the things I had written. One of them was 'Am I a Christian? Am I a Muslim?' Though I identify as Christian, I feel like the two religions don't contradict. It's hard for me not to be Muslim". Islam teaches the lessons of tradition where you can feel spiritual connections. At that point in my journal, I didn't know what I identified with". When she is with her Muslim friends, she notes that she often identifies with Christianity because of the misconceptions on the other side – the Islamic students' misconceptions, to help break their own stereotypes and teach them about Christianity.

← Despite her uncertainly about which religious box to check, she remains solid in her present discoursing status. "I attend Church usually, and mosque when I have another Muslim to come with me. I pray with my friends from the International Center too". At Church though, Rory never feels as if she identifies with the average American Christian. However, as a American with German heritage, Rory has recently been attending a small German church on Capital Hill for a stronger sense of community and identity. However, she continues to perform her physical prayers in the imitation of both Christians and Muslims. "The Muslim prayer is about cleansing yourself before you pray, and for girls, that is covering your head. You say *bismillah*[10] and *alhamdulillaah* during the prayer and before and after many things like eating – all as everyday reminders to remember and thank God".

← "I am drawn to Islam because it has my core beliefs and it explains and gives reasons for all of its practices and laws. It makes sense." She knows little about the difference branches of Islam, therefore refraining from adhering to a particular sect. "Most of my friends are Sunni, but I don't know much about it. I don't really believe in divisions, I care more about what it is at its core. The Quran says not to divide but to be united". Rory "said the *Shahadah* privately, its more of an internal spiritual thing". She was more comfortable not pronouncing her faith in front of everyone. Though she sometimes performs Islamic prayers, she says she has not adapted any Arab cultural traditions. "If I have, along with Islam, it is probably just because I am friends with a lot of Arab students. Islam is so much a part of culture, so it's easy to find connections".

← Though she does not completely identify as Muslim, Rory has already experienced reactions and changes in her life that other American Muslim reverts have experienced. "My friends asked questions about my participation in *Ramadan*, saying 'how can you not eat all day', they thought it was crazy. The only negative response I got was from my aunt. She told my family not to vote for Barak Obama because he is a Muslim". Rory noted she had some more conservative family members who are a "little more closed minded".

← With her Muslim friends, she said "it is kind of intimidating to be the only girl hanging out with the Saudi men, as a white Christian woman. But it's okay for me, because they expect me, as an American to hang out with boys". In Islam, "genders are separate but equal. The separation is a cultural thing, but it's actually kind of nice. Men say that women are gifts from God. They cover their head when they pray because they are like a jewel that needs to be protected. At first I was like 'I don't need protection' but it was nice...definitely opposite of the stereotypes of Islam today. It was just really nice to hear." "In the mosque or prayer room, they pray in the back...why? It's probably a cultural thing, but I wasn't restricted by that so I can pray with the men". Rory recognizes the unique position she has an American Muslim, for she has not been acculturated to socialize with the opposite gender in a particular way. She feels that she's not expected to wear the *hijab* regularly. "The *hijab* is not repressive, it is a respectful thing to do, it is a form of self identification, covering oneself with this symbol is respectful before God – a conscious decision". "It doesn't matter what it is, it's the fact that is a conscious decision".

[10] Bismillah is the Arabic phrase that Muslims say to bless work about to be undertaken. It asks for assistance "in the name of Allah".

← For example, "*Ramadan* teaches me to be more conscious, to remember God. That is why Muslims pray five times a day. It changed my perspective and way of looking at God and faith in my everyday life." Though Rory did not change the way she dressed, she noted that she has always been more comfortable it more modest dress, compared to American standards. "This naturally fits well with Islam. [Later] I did start finding the *hijab* really appealing, and I wear it for prayer".

← In the Arabic club, Rory is learning a little bit of Arabic. "I loves languages, and I want to go to another country to study Arabic". The Quran in written in Arabic, the original language of the faith, and "gives the reader the full implications and meanings. Language is the key to understanding... but its important to translate the Quran so that non-Arabic speakers can read it. I feel its worth it and not sacrilegious". After all, Rory believes that Islam is not simply an Arab religion and it's certainly not easier to be Muslim if you are Arab. In the end, "to be a Muslim is to simply submit to God and be conscious of your actions".

← " I would describe my identity as truth seeking, above all else. I feel like an endless search...I am afraid of what would happen if I stopped searching before I really understood the truth!" She describes this year as transitional, full of personal challenges and growth. "Its hard to find the right language to describe identity. Winter quarter has been kind of hard, kind of an identity crisis, I haven't had anything to really identify with since high school".

The Steadfast Rock

← Marian intimidated me. As my last informant, I approached the interview with a bit of confidence and a more concrete direction for our discussions, but she seemed to have her own ideas about the focus of Islam in the United States. A few minutes into our discussion, I felt like she was steadfastly grilling me on my ability to ask pertinent questions about the women of American Islam. Quite frankly, she made me nervous. Marian brought to the table a solid, unwavering image of a Muslim woman, a reversion of logic and confidence and a lifetime of Islamic faith, nurturing and teaching. Though she was tired of justifying herself as a Muslim in the United States and defending the image of women, she agreed to an do interview with me to help me with my researcher, as she herself is a former social science researcher from my University.

← After her father retired from the Corps of Engineering, her family moved from Alaska to a very small logging town in Oregon that lacked a reputable school system. Her parents decided to enroll her in Catholic boarding school for a better education. However, he family identified with Protestant/Episcopalian Christians. Though they were not extremely devout with practice, they had deep belief in God. Right after high school, Marian moved to Mexico City to live with the family of a good friend from high school. The international students at her boarding school could not always go home during holiday breaks, so Marian's parents often had students stay at her home – including her Mexican friend from Mexico City. Here, she was exposed to a distinctive cultural interpretation of Catholicism that she had never seen.

← It was in this atmosphere that she became fascinated with world religions. She lived with the Catholic nun "sisters", took Catholic studies classes and attended Mass every Sunday. "The media really stereotypes Catholic nuns, like they do Muslim women. The sisters I knew were nothing like that...they were dynamic, adventurous, independent, strong women". Marian reverted to Islam shortly after she graduated from the University of Oregon with a B.A. in comparative religions. She laughs, "It's hard to find a job – those days there are not a lot of graduate schools in religion. I did a lot of office work mostly, and book keeping, because of my major". She bids me a sarcastic "good luck" upon my own graduation.

← Marian's first real encounter with Islam, after brief introduction in high school, was in a class on Islam she took in college that was only offered one quarter a year every other year, and "not very in depth". "College classes focused more on obscure religions, such as polytheistic faiths, and not major religions of the world, such as Islam". "I had a friend in college from the Middle East, so we talked often, but mostly I read about Islam myself...I read a lot...read the whole Quran on my own". "I had a classmate from Libya that spoke with me about Islam...she invited me to speak with Muslim women at her mosque who could help me learn more about it". Marian made the Shahadah with her shortly after. "After learning of my conversion, most of my friends dropped away, the non-Muslims...the nuns were actually the most supportive of conversion to Islam". "My parents are respectful, never saw us as extensions of themselves...they respected our individuality". "What drew me to Islam was the concept of God, the unity of God, non-anthropomorphic Jesus. God was not a man, he is a separate entity". I also like how there is no intermediary between you and God, no priest needed". Jesus was a prophet, but Mohammad is the last prophet that began with Adam, the seal of prophets".

← She met her husband through a friend of a friend. "I did not convert for a man, that is the world's worst reason to change, for a man". She and her husband have lived in Seattle ever since they got married. Marian does not speak Arabic, and admits that it is very hard for her to learn now. Her husband is multilingual, speaking Pashto and Dari - which is a dialect of Persian. He also speaks Uzbek, Urdu and Arabic. "He was outside of the country in Dubai for work when the Soviet Union invaded. He couldn't stay in Dubai, as a guest worker and he didn't want to go back home because of the war, so he went to the U.S. He works for the city of Seattle...he's a housing specialist for minorities and those with financial needs". When their oldest daughter was two years old, her young family decided to spend a year in Pakistan, living with her husband's family in a refugee camp for a year. Her husband is from Afghanistan, but due to the war, his family had to live as refugees in neighboring Pakistan. "I am fascinated with history," she says. Her experiences in Pakistan were yet another realization that culture does not always equate to religion; "they had very different faith practices there".

← When Marian and her husband found out they could not have children, they decided to adopt. The adopting process gave her, her first sense of deeply ingrained prejudice in the country. "There are a lot of issues in the adoption and foster care system". Marian has four adopted children, and was a foster parent for many others for seven years. Her oldest child is African American/Caucasian, and the two youngest were "ethnically placed" in their "ethnically appropriate home" as they are Arab. "Just goes to show how much of a difference that makes, because my husband is Afghani, not Arab. There are big differences in culture, language, and heritage. The second oldest child was orphaned in the Afghan war, but from a different ethnic group than her husband. After foster parenting, Catherine went back to graduate school at a University in Seattle for Adult Education to become a teacher of English as a Second Language. She currently teaches at a community college and at a Community Based Organization, the local equivalent to an NGO.

← She regularly attends mosque in Redmond and is highly involved in an organization called MAPS: Muslim Association of the Puget Sound. "The culture of the mosque is very diverse, with lots of second generation Muslims, Microsoft people – they like it because its diverse. They try to keep it focused on religion and not on any one culture – scholastic trend...it doesn't ascribe to any particular school". The mosque was a bottom-up effort by the community. They wanted their own type of mosque without cultural influences, strongly emphasizing the diversity of the community. When I asked her if the mosque was Sunni and Shiite she brushed it off. "I don't identify with any particular school of thought...[long pause] if you were to twist my arm and force me to pick one, I would say Sunni". Shiite tend to have an individual or Imam they follow and Sunni, they tend to be more independent".

← Somehow, through my nervous questions and my attempts to use political correct language I asked her about her understandings of conservative and liberal Islam in the U.S. and abroad. "You can't assume this, with American Muslims, the faith is too diverse to say...it all depends on culture. What is conservative in one culture may be liberal in another. For example, we had a foster child from Somalia. We had a hard time with her at first because her expression of faith was so different. We kept asking ourselves, was this family culture, trial culture...etc?"

← "The greatest misconceptions of American Muslims is that life is so different for us now. Its not, I shop at Eddie Bauer, complain about the price of gas...live pretty much the same as before. We look at the other and don't see then as normal...this is partly the media's fault". Marian feels that American culture and Islamic lifestyles only conflict when ignorance of Islam generates differences. She says that Muslims in the United States are still viewed as "the other". " Ramadan can be challenging, our day to day life with busy schedules can be distracting during this holiday. But some Muslims, especially in Arab countries sleep all day and stay up and eat all night during Ramadan – what's the point of that? I think we have an advantage in the U.S. because we cannot do this, we have still go to work and school everyday and fast for Ramadan". She also mentioned that "people make a big deal about head scarves, but look around you, what's the big deal? You see women with blue hair or something, and that stands out a lot more than a scarf should". "Women are perpetrated as either militant or oppressed creatures weeping and crying, it's ridiculous. The justification for American colonization or occupation of Muslim communities has always been for the "freeing" of their women. In my [Muslim] women's group, it is actually stated in the by-laws, that we don't talk about *hijab* and we don't talk about nail polish". "My scarf is an expression of identity, a symbol that says take me seriously as a human being. But it doesn't feel that way by wearing it in the U.S., so maybe it defeats the purpose of wearing it". She said it's also an expression of faith. Both of her daughters wear *hijab*. "After awhile, you just roll your eyes – I usually dot get angry at people's comments to me but it depends on how I'm feeling that day. Most of the time I try to be patient".

← Marian had strong feelings on Islam in the United States and the prescribed roles of Muslim women. "There is no distinctive day to day practice that differentiates women and men. But cultural interpretations come into play for some. We are all held accountable for our sins and our good and bad deeds. There are some financial differences though, where men are required to support his wife and family, but women are in full control of all finances. The wife is not required to spend her income from a job to support the family". There are some minor differences for women, including having a break from prayers for her monthly menstrual period and right after childbirth. In her mosque, women and men pray in the same room but just on different sides of the room. "In the mosque, women are on the board and vote. In the last mosque election, the top two vote earners were women".

← She made sure to note that her reversion to Islam was not expressing any personal critiques to politics or American cultural ideas of feminism as is relevant to some other reverts. "I know some women who have converted for these reasons and they don't end up staying. When I left the church, it was a difficult decision. I miss the pews, the priests, the sisters...it was a difficult decision but it was done out of honesty...I'm not an Arab wannabe – that's what they call them – these women who adapt Arab culture, they become more Arab that the Arabs!" "I didn't convert to 'Arabism' or 'Afghanism'...if you are careful and thoughtful you can find the core of the true religion". She says she wears Afghani clothes and scarves simply because her in-laws give them to her. "I love Arab food, but I also love Thai food, so it doesn't mean anything". "We [Americans] don't have a lot of experience to or exposure to the rest of the world...we have an ignorance of world which can be dangerous...this is not a threat! Its just that we are a global community and so we need to understand each other". This situation is "like any other minority group in the U.S. Does Condoleezza Rice speak for every African American? As far as the responsibility of American Muslim women, no one individual cannot represent a whole group – this is the core of stereotypes". "Every group is ethnocentric, it is a part of human impulse to see their own group as being preferable to any others. This is not unique to the U.S. but seems to happen here more by virtue of its geography...luxury. We don't have to learn about the rest of the world because we are surrounded by two oceans and only have Mexico to the south and Canada to the north...the world is changing rapidly, I don't know why we do not all least speak Spanish too. My children take Spanish lessons in school, but its still not enough".

At the end of my interview, Marian gave me a couple of issues of *Azizah Magazine*, a monthly publication of an American Islamic magazine that "presents the issues, accomplishments and interests of Muslim women in North America" and is "a catalyst of empowerment[11]". After browsing through the magazine's website, I saw that Marian has been published in the publication numerous times. She is truly the strong independent Muslim woman with American values that I was hoping to find.

Themes

Diversity within this group of women is a significant aspect of this research. It combats the sensationalized image of the Muslim woman and reveals the Islamic identity in the American cultural context. However, despite this major theme and my informants' persistent efforts to resist the homogenized labeling, there exist multiple themes that permeate these portraits. On a basic level, all of the women were born and acculturated in the United States, have achieved or are currently working towards higher education, and regardless of any negative experiences with an Islamic faith community, had a genuine desire to uphold a positive reputation of Islam, both in the United States and abroad. More deeply and complexly, commonalities in our dialogues spanned the realms of an emerging Muslim American culture, feminism and female empowerment through Islam, Christianity and theological questioning, and ideas of Arab culture in American Islam.

Muslim American Culture

[11] Quotes from *Azizah Magazine*. Home Page. 15 March 2008. http://www.azizahmagazine.com/info-upfront.html

I must distinguish this Muslim American culture from the prominent and successful movement of the Nation of Islam made famous by Malcolm X and W.D. Muhammad Al Islam in the 1970's. Coupling Islam and black empowerment ideals, the Nation of Islam revealed the universality of Islam as well as a new American interpretation of the faith in a successful effort to resurrect the spiritual, social and economic condition of blacks in the United States. Though one informant, Galla, references the Nation of Islam as the origin of her own Islamic faith tradition, I have to disagree. Though the Muslim American culture revealed to me by my informants is similarly rooted in personal cultural or political critiques, or a newly discovered sense of feminism and female empowerment, it has nothing to do with race or the social, spiritual and economic vitalization of an oppressed minority.

The Islamic community revealed to me by my informants has emerged in an entirely new historical and socio-political context. Islam is no longer the far off mystical faith of the Middle East. It is the religious practice of new immigrants from all over the world including Africa, the Middle East, southwest Asia and beyond. Unjustly, it is the poster child of twenty-first century terrorism and the iron fist of authoritarian regimes, female suppression, and anti-American sentiment. Most influentially, it has been represented in the media as a violent faith, allowing justification for anti-Islamic attitudes in the United States. The Muslim American culture today has emerged in light of all these negative associations the West has with Islam, obstacles that the Nation of Islam did not encounter to the same degree. This perhaps is what make the growth in numbers of American reverts in the United States so fascinating.

Rather than conflicting with their American identity, these women who deliberately choose their Islamic identity, found that the two identities compliment each other. Heidi spoke of the ill effects of erasing one's American identity for an Arab identity upon reversion, a step that some immigrant and American Islamic groups in the United States are encouraging. Jenna agrees, and finds "American culture and Islam compatible". All of the women believe, to some degree, in the notion of religious pluralism, and liberal democratic American politics, and had a curiosity for or academic training in philosophy, world religions or cultural studies. A few have been or still are social and/or political activists around the more specific issues of American foreign policy in the Middle East, rights of Muslims in the U.S. and around the world, raising awareness of social injustices such as the plight of Palestinians in Israel, and fighting the negative media representations and stereotypes of Muslim women. Congruently, those that did mention they have fought for these causes also recognized and were appreciative of the fact that they could use their American rights to protest and criticize in the first place.

> "I like the fact that I am American, born and raised in the Midwest. I a proud of my family, the way that Americans are friendly and have a general amiability...I am thankful for the exceptional education in the U.S., medical care etc. Americans in general seem to be tolerant, especially in Seattle. As Americans, we can criticize, and this is good, it's my right," proclaims Holly.

Though many did mention logical difficulties of being Muslim in the United States, it was predominantly attributed to an overall American ignorance of Islam and difference in Christian and Islamic holiday celebrations and dates.

All had a generally positive perception of America and American values. Exceptions included not simply the United States' but the West's focus on wealth, career paths materialism, and the assumption of American culture's ignorance with the rest of the world. Despite this, all had no desire to move from their home and live in a predominantly Muslim country, as Islam is entirely compatible with American culture. Some even said that it is easier to be Muslim in the United States because of the rights of Americans to practice freedom of religion, and more specifically, to practice Islam according to their own interpretation.

Consequently, all of my informants had congruent notions of what it meant to be a Muslim, and what it meant to be a Muslim in the United States.

> "To be Muslim, is to be a servant of God, and to put yourself in a lower position. In the United States, its also to make hard choices and to do the right thing," said Jenna.

> "To be a Muslim is to believe that human beings are ethical by nature and worshiping God is way to maintain a healthy ego balance," noted Galla.

> "To be a Muslim is to put yourself on a path, devote yourself to a path of God," said Heidi.

Islam, as an aspect their identity, has also helped to reshape the way they view themselves and the world. They are more conscious of their actions, thoughts, and body and how they are represented as a Muslim.

> "To be a Muslim is to submit to God and be conscious of your actions," said Rory.

> "I know have intentions in everything that I do," said Holly.

> "[Islam] really changed the way I think about things daily...putting on the scarf helped me to find confidence, represent myself as a Muslim...and correctly," explains Heidi.

Feminism and Female Empowerment through Islam

I found this theme to be one of the most significant in the research. First, the ideas of Islamic feminism and feelings of female empowerment were all topics of discussion deliberately avoided by me, but pushed by my informants. Not one of my informants mentioned the *hijab*, Islamic dress, or gender differences as a major change in their everyday life that accompanied their reversion to Islam. Many reflected on their decision to wear *hijab* only after I brought up the topic.

> For Jenna "*hijab* is meant for modesty and saving a woman's beauty. But in the U.S., this is ironic because when you do wear the *hijab*, all eyes are you all the time. Without it, you blend in more". Choosing not to wear the *hijab,* she notes that it makes more a statement. "It's unexpected, shakes people's notions of what a Muslim woman is and I like that".

> For Rory, "the *hijab* is not repressive, it is a respectful thing to do, it's a form of self identification, covering oneself with this symbol is respectful before God – a conscious decision...It doesn't matter what it is, it's the fact that it's a conscious decision".

Though I had hoped that this research would break the stereotypically oppressed image and misrepresentation of the Muslim woman, I did not want to feed research results with my personal biases by pushing for specific conversations. However, to my delight, one of the major attractions to Islam for my informants was this "other" sense of feminism and empowerment not usually experienced or embraced by women in American culture.

> "Men say that women are gifts from God. They cover their head when the pray because they are like a jewel that needs to be protected and taken care of. At first I was like 'I don't need protection' but it was nice...definitely opposite of the stereotypes, it was really nice to hear," notes Rory.

> "There are different things expected of women and men in Islam...it is [the man's] responsibility to take care, financially for the family, but its my responsibility to protect myself for him...Islam is horribly sexist but...here's an example. Women are supposed to back down and talk about it later if they are in an argument with their husband...I have found from experience that men get so heated that it's the job of the woman to be the clearer thinker and calm the argument...to me, this is feminism...but its not the life for everyone," says Heidi.

> "Women situation [laughs]. I know what you are trying to ask. Another woman asked me 'how can you cover, don't you find that truly demeaning?' I looked at her with her makeup, plucked eyebrows, dyed hair and I knew she was the one who was oppressed. Some people see the hijab and think pity, but I see it was no more bad hair days! It takes so much pressure off of you as far as being examined," proclaims Galla.

> "After I converted, I felt a stronger sense of identity as a woman. American culture tells you that less is best for clothes, to strive to be more popular etc. But now, I see the scarf and modest clothing in a new way. I don't have to worry about how men are looking at me, or checking me out at the bus stop. At job interviews, I know they are looking at me, my abilities and not how I look or what I am wearing. Islam gave me confidence," said Holly.

Perhaps this is the answer to the question of "why more women are reverted to Islam in the United States than men?" Islam has brought these American women a new sense of femininity, gender awareness and empowerment in a feminist culture that downplays gender differences and works towards proving the legitimacy of women in a proclaimed man's world.

Christianity and Theological Questioning

All of the women in my study came from Christian backgrounds. Their childhoods ranged from strict to loose family Christian traditions, leaving out the possibility that reversion to Islam was either a rejection of strict religious rules imposed on by parents or relatives, or an attraction to an organized religion as a result of their family's loose religious believes. In fact, on of the major attractions to Islam was that it affirmed believes and ideals they already had.

> "At first I saw Islam as in contrast to Christianity, and I found myself trying to defend Christianity. But with certain aspects, I realized that I couldn't, some things didn't make sense...I couldn't defend things like the Trinity," said Holly.
>
> "I left Christianity long behind before I met Mohammad. I still identify with the ideas of peace, social justice and Jesus, as man or Prophet who exemplifies a human role model No matter what you believe in, stories of his life have strong implications for how to treat people, actually get down in the ditches with people," said Jenna, noting that she no longer believes Jesus is the son of God.
>
> "What drew me to Islam was the concept of God, the unity of God, the non-anthropomorphic Jesus. God is not a man he is a separate entity. I also like how there is no intermediary between you and God, no priest needed. Jesus was a prophet, but Mohammad is the last prophet that began with Adam, the seal of prophets," notes Marian.

Islam not only formally spelled out existing beliefs my informants already had but also resolved theological questions and tensions with Christianity.

Arab Culture in American Islam

Islam is presented in the media and literature as a predominantly Arab faith tradition; therefore it is no wonder that concepts and customs of Islam and Arab culture are often intermingled in the United States. Especially when a faith tradition is a strong identity marker in an individual or community's life, it becomes difficult for both in the insider and the outsider to distinguish between cultural and religious traditions. As when Marian experienced the variations of Catholicism in Mexico City and Islam in Pakistan, she saw first hand, alternative cultural interpretations of two major universal religions. In the 7th century, Islam emerged in the Middle East and spread as one of the most successful empires in our world's history. Powerful Arab tribes, Christian and Jewish communities quickly became part of the Islamic Empire, incorporating aspects of Islamic law and traditions and in some cases, the revolutionary liberation of women's rights and respect that Islam introduced. Islamic and cultural ideals and traditions soon became disheveled and, as with any cultural manifestation of a world religion, it became difficult to distinguish between culture and religion.

This phenomenon becomes problematic and a topic of controversy when a single practice is attributed both Islamic prescription and simply cultural tradition. The *hijab*, or any variation of modest covering for women, has been considered by many women in different cultures and time periods to be either an aspect of Islam or simply, as aspect of Arab culture. Studying the development of women's soccer in Muscat, Oman, I found that some of the upper class Omanis educated in the West and holding high social positions in Oman, saw the *hijab* and traditional female roles as an aspect of Omani culture, not Islam. These contextually liberal Omani women stressed frustration when they saw, in their opinion, cultural traditions attributed to religious traditions, for it made social change more difficult, as culture tends to change faster than religion.

Islam in the United States, especially for American reverts who have grown up with Arab and Islamic traditions, recognize this problem and value their unique position to explore and interpret Islam from the texts, presumably without the influence of other cultural traditions. Many suggested that their own American interpretation and practice of Islam is "truer" and less tainted or altered by cultural interpretations than in the Middle East or other Islamic countries. "I didn't convert to 'Arabism' or 'Afghanism'. If you are careful and thoughtful you can find the core of the true religion," notes Marian. Though there remains variation in what my informants' attributions to Islamic or Arab culture, depending on the context in which they encountered Islam, the traditions of their spouses, and faith community they belong to, they all valued their ability to practice the "true Islam".

> "My friend and I wanted to raise our young daughters to be American and Muslim...its okay for others to keep their culture though. We had to start from scratch, and had no Arab or Muslim husband to take Islamic cultural practices from. So we go by what's in the Quran and the *Hadiths*. Sunni Islam is supposed to be the same as the Quran, but we do take it with a grain of salt because it embodies Arab cultural ideas," said Heidi.

Significantly, all of the women refused to align their Islamic faith with a particular sect such as Sunni or Shiite, as these are rooted in political and leadership differences rather than theological interpretations. However, a few said that if they were forced to choose, they would identify with Sunni Islam.

Ironically, many of these women do not speak Arabic, the language of the Quran, *Hadiths* and even *Salat* prayers. Though many wished they knew more Arabic than they currently understand, time, age, money, difficulty of the language and instruction availability were all factors that they claimed inhibited their language acquisition. The Quran is revered as the most beautiful and poetic language ever recorded and is considered an act of worship to recite verses out loud. Some Muslims consider the translation of the Quran to be sacrilegious, losing meaning, beauty and context in another language. While I was in Oman, it was extremely difficult for me to find an English translation of the Quran and those that were translated into English were paired side-by-side with the original Arabic text. Though translation is discouraged, all of my informants found it necessary and acceptable for other non-Arab speakers to learn about Islam. Recognizing potential faults of translations, all of my informants have said that they read numerous translations by different authors to better understand the core messages of the Quran. None were overly concerned with issues of translations, noting that the Bible has been translated countless times throughout history.

Conclusion

The formal literature and my personal experiences with Islam and Arab culture raised significant questions of this emerging Muslim identity in the United States. Issues such as the representative role of the American Muslim revert, the elevated attraction of women to Islam, my informants' perceptions of Islam abroad and the extent to which they relate to Muslims in the Middle East were revealed through the dialogues with these women. Additionally, the embodiment of a new paradigm of womanhood and the role that political and social protests have in their Islamic reversion were all answer and addressed in the research process.

The representative role of the American Muslim revert was a contested topic. Some felt that their unique position as an American who has embraced the identity of Islam has a societal role to teach others about Islam and represent the faith to break stereotypes, while others took a less direct approach and noted their heightened awareness of their actions, including interviews, when speaking about Islam.

> "Yes! There is a responsibility for American converts to reveal the true Islam in the U.S. With my Muslims friends, I am actually doing the opposite with Christianity...it is important for me to teach them about my faith. We live in the same world," said Rory.

> "We need to stop stereotypes, not just wear the hijab, [but also] live in your community and act like a Muslim," proclaims Galla.

Others took the opposite approach, urging the fallacy in having a few individuals represent a faith tradition that spans continents and billions of people from many different cultural backgrounds.

> "I don't feel a responsibility to reveal the message of Islam, but it just kind of happens that way – I don't go out of my way as an example or anything. I do feel pressure to explain myself all the time, to justify myself," said Becca.

> "It's like any other minority group in the U.S....does Condoleezza Rice speak for every African American? As far as responsibility, no.... one individual cannot represent a whole group – this is the core of stereotypes," explained Marian.

Why women? Though none of my informants directly answered this question, almost all of them expanded on their newly embodied paradigm of womanhood and empowerment. Islam not only resolved theological questions and issues that Christianity presented, it introduced new ideas feminism and revealed positive aspects of the differences of gender rather than the American feminism tendency to suppress them. Congruently, their adaptation of this newly found feminism gave them a sense of connection to other "sisters" of Islam around the world and a shared plight in the stereotypes of Muslim women in both the United States and abroad. However, their American Muslim identity far outweighed any relation to Muslim women abroad as they feel that the Islam in the United States is a "truer" interpretation of the faith than that of their sisters abroad.

Lastly, though some of the women found initial attraction to Islam through political and social critiques of American politics and cultural ignorance towards the rest of the world, their reversions did not seem to result from trendy fascinations with an exotic spiritual tradition, rather, they were expressed to me as honest and logical identifications with a true world religion. Islam in the United States, for both immigrants and American reverts is here to stay, where the ethnographic lens is necessary to understand its emergence and development. The growing population of Muslim women, who are leading the American Muslim culture in both numbers and media attraction, will surely come to have a strong influence on American feminist and female empowerment ideals. Most significantly, this group will surely have things to teach us about identity stereotypes, religious pluralism and the "other" finding ways to integrate with the "us". Given the history of political interest in the intersection of women and Islam, it becomes essential to continue to question the motives of those approaching the topic while remembering to contextualize their varied and complex perspectives.

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