Identity Conversion: Female Muslim Converts in the United States

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A Master's thesis

submitted to the Faculty of

the program in Middle Eastern Studies

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School
April 2017

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This thesis seeks to investigate female conversion to Islam in the United States, and the role of gender and identity in this process. Utilizing various conversion studies, from four different fields, I will provide the background on conversion in general and will attempt to rationalize the decision for conversion to Islam in an environment, which may not be conducive to these beliefs. By looking at individual conversion narratives, the motivations for conversion, as well as the purposes for the conversion process will be revealed. Ultimately, this research attempts to understand the factors which may drive an individual to convert to Islam, when other religious options are easily accessible.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the support from my family, friends and colleagues, and I owe much of my success to them. Most important is the love and support I have received from my family and my girlfriend Alyssa, for they are the ones who saw me at my best and at my worst, remaining with me every step of the way. I would like to offer my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Natana DeLong-Bas, for her advice, support, and never-ending help throughout the entirety of my master's program. I also wish to thank Dr. James Morris for his academic advice, as well as his help in the review of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Ali Banuazizi and Dr. Kathleen Bailey for their academic assistance, and for heading the Middle Eastern Studies program, which has allowed me to grow not just as a student but as an individual as well. I would be remiss if I did not thank my cohort, Nazim, Basil, Pauli, and Will, for sharing this journey with me. A special thank you to Karina Ovalles and Shirley Gee for putting up with me while I worked on my thesis in the political science office. Finally, I would like to thank all the professors who I have had the pleasure to work with at Boston College, for in one way or another, they too are a part of this thesis.

PREFACE

The topic of conversion is in many ways controversial, in particular due to theological and spiritual nature of the phenomena. With the inclusion of identity, and various studies seeking to understand conversion from a psychological perspective, this research touches upon areas which may be deemed as sensitive by some, and depending on one's perspective, open for debate. Because of this, I wish to stress to the reader that I am by no means seeking to diminish the spiritual nature of the conversion process, nor do I wish to portray a particular faith tradition in a negative light. The intention of this paper then, is to introduce the reader to the conversion phenomena and to humanize the experience.

It is my view that conversion is a natural human process in which the individual has come into contact with some aspect of the divine, and as such must grapple with this encounter through a means that is psychological, sociological, and spiritual. Yet, the reader will notice that this investigation focuses very little on the spiritual nature of the conversion phenomena, as this aspect of the conversion process is not easily quantifiable. With that being said, this investigation and its findings should be understood as representing only one part of the conversion process which is "tangible," and the apparent absence of a spiritual inquiry does not mean that one does not exist.

INTRODUCTION

I. Completion

Faith and religion play an important role in the human experience. Despite the variability of extant religions and beliefs, our quest for spiritual enlightenment is humanity's greatest and most unique unifying factor. For some, religion is the crux of one's existence; the bond between the individual and God becomes that which shapes both themselves and their world. For others, religion is an integral part of their overwhelmingly complex "whole," important to their character but not all encompassing as to the definition of *who they are.* Yet, there are some for whom religion is far beyond their grasp, whether it is due to the context of their environment, intellectual comprehension, or interests along another path; for these individuals, religion's role in *who they are* is seemingly absent, or so I thought.

It is the spiritual growth and expansion that lead to *who I am* today, ultimately leading me on quest for answers and the pursuit of this thesis. While the categories of religiosity above are nowhere near sufficient in representing the astronomical variances in each individual's approach to religion, it serves to easily depict how religion and faith may be a driving factor in the composition of one's own being. Years ago, I was in the last category in which religion was almost entirely absent from my identity. Yet today, how I perceive myself has changed, after years of a spiritual quest I have come to identify with a form of religion not so easily defined.

Having found religion through Islam, part of my identity became unequivocally Muslim. Yet, there is a part of who I am that does not feel fully 'accepted' by this newly acquired sense of self. Ironically, what generally serves as a primary means for religious identity, be it a denomination or particular faith, is a greater conflict for me than it is a resolution. More confusing

is the fact that, while I have a particular attachment to each monotheistic tradition, none has served as a structured enough "home" for myself to fully embrace a particular denominational or faith based identity. Simply put, while I was born into a Christian family, I do not feel truly Christian, and, while I found religion through Islam, I do not feel truly Muslim. Regardless as to the level of identification that I may experience with one faith or another, one thing is certain: the change that has occurred in response has led to a sense of wholeness and completion that I had lacked previously. Now I am at home in the second category of religiosity, in which religion and faith has become an important part of *who I am.*

Even today, I am left with many questions, yet one stands out amongst the rest that I cannot so easily answer, and may never will. *"Why did I choose Islam?"* This question I have asked more recently, particularly in light of the rise in Islamophobia in the United States. What began and should have remained the happiest moment in my life, finding happiness in Islam, later became tainted by fear. For the first time in my life, I began to fear for the reputation of my character and sometimes my safety solely for that which became part of *who I am.* It is during these times that I ask the aforementioned question, even though deep in my heart I know the divine answer. But the pursuit of this thesis is not about finding the "divine answer" but rather the "rational answer."

The central component and ultimately the drive in seeking this answer is my own *identity.* While I now feel that a part of myself is more complete, grounded through my attachment to Islam, I gave up one form of security [physical and social] in exchange for another [spiritual and individual]. While I much prefer the latter, it was the change to the former that led me to question my own "decision" for my change of beliefs. While my immediate family and close friends fully support my decision, the change to the former sense of security was revealed through the reactions of relatives and friends, those who did not approve of my "reformed" identity, and was further

revealed through the political and societal opposition to such a change in general. Rather than be supported for my newfound connection with the divine, distasteful jokes, criticism, and apparent reversion were justified for my case.

As a white male living in the United States, I had admittedly never experienced the receiving end of prejudice, that is until a part of myself identified as Muslim. For even the briefest moments, I had felt what it is like to be "the Other" and it is a feeling that I will never forget. What I have experienced can never compare to what the various individuals subject to prejudice everyday have endured and many continue to endure, but my perspective of the world would be forever changed. As I began to notice the struggles of individuals and groups I had overlooked under my "previous" self, the question of *"why did I choose Islam"* still remained but became much more prominent when I heard the stories of Western women who had converted to Islam.

I realized that while I could navigate my daily life with my beliefs hidden, these brave women proudly displayed it to the world. Not only were they subject to Islamophobia but also misogynistic beliefs that have become the norm in the United States, whether or not one wishes to recognize it. It is female converts' unique position in the United States that would lead to the pursuit of this thesis. I cannot answer the "rational question" alone, but with the help of other converts I may be able to find what I have been looking for namely, *what leads an individual to convert, and remain steadfast in their beliefs, even when doing so is not conducive to their societal wellbeing?*

II. The Rational Question

For some, particularly those more inclined to spirituality, the answer is simple: *"Your choice was by God's Grace, you have been led to walk this path, this is the meaning."* While I am inclined to accept this answer based upon my own spirituality, I cannot overlook the "rational" side of the aforementioned question. By "rational" I am by no means equating spirituality with "irrationality," rational here is referreing to that which can be tangibly investigated and understood. Any study that has a connection with aspects of religion and spirituality must contend with this very issue, for one does not wish to devalue or delegitimize various beliefs. Therefore, while I do have a spiritual answer to this question, the intent of this paper is on the "rational" one.

This "rational" answer will be investigated by looking at other converts to Islam in the United States, and their reasoning for such a decision. As alluded to previously the primary subjects of this investigation will be female converts, due to the "uniqueness" of their decision for conversion, based upon the context of the current culture and society in which they reside. It must be taken into account that such a decision stokes greater curiosity in the United States, in part due to the generally negative reception coupled with low knowledge levels in regards to Islam. Not only must female converts contend with Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry, but also with misogyny that has come to be a culturally defended norm of 'Western culture.' The *environment* in which an individual makes their decision to convert must have some role to play in the rationale behind their chosen path, but not necessarily the destination. It is this "destination" that intrigues me most and is ultimately at the crux of the question I am seeking.

III. The Destination

For the purposes of this thesis, the "destination" of these women's conversion process will be Islam. Now it must be made clear that each individual will have their own experience and understanding of what Islam is, so the use of *destination* must not be seen as a restricting, nor should it be seen as finite. As will be explained later in greater depth, the conversion process is an ongoing event in the individual's life, and cannot be confined to a singular moment in time. Similarly, their *destination* must be understood as their perception of where they are and *who they are* at this moment in time, having a direct connection to their conversion process. Thus, outside definitions of who or what one is must be applied with great care and thought.

The importance of Islam being the *destination* in this case is due to the *environment* in which the individual has converted. Most of the studies done on conversion have been within traditions which have been predominantly focused on Christianity. The research in these cases has generally focused on the psychological drives towards conversion and have not had to grapple with the complex social aspects of such a decision. It is here that this research will depart from the majority of those previous studies, while still drawing upon their vast reserves of data. It is also for this reason that the importance of the *destination* takes precedence over the "preparation" for such a journey in the current case. As we will see, the question as to why one chooses a certain *destination* for conversion, may be heavily influenced by their *environment* of upbringing, which has a deep connection with aspects of individual *identity*.

IV. Identity

While *identity* has a consistent definition in both the sociological and psychological fields, in everyday practice the concept of *identity* often amounts to personal opinion, in many cases thrown around negligently for political use. *Identity* is a complex concept that oftentimes oversteps the boundaries of its own well-established definition. Seen by many as the pioneer in the modern conception of the term, Erik Erikson argues this very point stating, *"...one person's or group's identity may be relative to another's, and that the pride of gaining a strong identity may signify an inner emancipation from a more dominant group identity, such as that of the "compact majority.*[1]*"* The acknowledgement of the relativity of *identity* is integral to the understanding of the individuality of the conversion process. Embracing an alternative *identity* as a form of "inner emancipation" may offer a partial clue to the question of the choice for a given *destination* regarding religious conversion. Erikson elaborates stating,

> *...in psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him.*[2]

Thus, one's own self-conception is based upon their perception of surrounding *identity* constructions, as well as the projection of *identity* norms. According to Erikson then, the *context* of one's identity construction plays an increasingly prominent role as the process develops. The

[1] Erikson, Erik H. Identity, Youth, and Crisis. 1st Ed.]. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 21-22
[2] Ibid., 22-23

concept of *identity* as it pertains to religion and by extension conversion, will be fleshed out in the review of various studies on this particular subject.

In order to put the concept of *identity* in a context suitable for an introduction to this subject, I will use my own conversion experience as a point of departure. Here I will introduce a simple analytical model for my own case, as well as key terms and concepts that will be utilized frequently throughout this thesis. In particular, the *context* and *environment* of a given conversion experience plays an important role in the in construction of an individual's *identity*, and, as we will see, is integral in the understanding of the *motivations* for conversion.

Based upon my own conversion experience and *identity* stemming from this, it is quite easy to see the complexities involved therein. How can I feel neither truly Christian nor truly Muslim, while at the same time identifying more as a Muslim than as a Christian? Logically, one could argue that because I had found God through Islam, there would be an inevitable emotional *attachment*, thus leading me to identify as a Muslim more so than as a Christian. Here *context* and *environment* also plays a role, particularly in the level to which I may identify with a particular faith. While my initial questioning as to my choice of Islam remains, the *context* of my conversion as well as my environment of residence may play a role in my identity, for better or for worse.

Why is it difficult to commit fully to a particular *identity*, in my case as a Muslim? This is where *context* and *environment* in regards to conversion negatively affects the extent to which one can embrace a particular *identity* in full. Due to the negative depiction of Islam in the West, as well as criticism from friends and relatives, societal expectations influence a portion of my commitment to a particular *identity*. Without a full commitment to embracing a particular identity resulting from the conversion process, there is a greater potential for *"backsliding." Backsliding* has been witnessed in many conversion cases, in which the individual convert "retreats" after a successful

conversion back to their prior starting point with a new reconstructed self. Again, this can be seen in my own case, and accounts for my sense of lacking a structured religious *identity*. Because my point of departure on this spiritual journey was almost entirely secular, it would only make sense for the *"backslide"* to return to a state closest to my previous position. In a sense, my current religious *identity* is a mirror of my previous secularly oriented *identity.*

Based upon my own brief self-analysis, the complexities involved in the conversion process become apparently clear. If we wish to fully understand the phenomena of conversion not just from a psychological or sociological perspective, but spiritually, it is imperative that we include *identity* formation as having role in the conversion process. Finally, in order to answer the "rational question" that I have proposed, we must look at not just the factors and variables leading one towards conversion, but more importantly the manner and the form of change resultant to this process.

V. Methodology

This "rational question" may not be answered fully and to my own satisfaction by the end of this thesis, but it is my hope that an investigation into this matter will lead to a greater depth in understanding the connection between *conversion* and *identity.* More importantly, this study will seek to legitimize the agency of women in which their important life-changing decisions are given the proper respect they deserve. Therefore, this study will not seek to psychologically or pathologically diagnose the factors which may predispose an individual to conversion, nor will the normally investigated factors customary in similar studies hold much weight.

Factors such as an absence of father in adolescence and/or a troublesome upbringing, while potentially important to understanding underlying drives towards conversion, serve very little in

the understanding of what causes one's beliefs to become integrated into their *identity* in such a manner as to sacrifice a sense of "outer" security in favor of a sense of "inner" security. The security I speak of may or may not be acknowledged by the convert, but has to do with holding a position within a particular community in which the individual is "comfortable" as a member of the majority. These individuals then 'lack' something in their *identity* that their previous religion and/or belief system then becomes associated as a corollary factor of this absence, if not the primary cause.

The factors relevant to this study will be those which the convert positively links with their new *identity.* Because of this, the conversion narrative will play an important role in the understanding of *"who I was"* and *"who I am now."* By looking at how the individual reconstructs their previous self through their current understanding, one may be able to draw a broader theme focusing on their current desire for their reconstructed identity. It is through this narrative of self-reflection that we may find factors which may show a correlation between the *context* and *environment* of the conversion process and the particular *destination,* and how *identity* plays a role in this matter.

Due to the little research available on this specific topic, I will be utilizing various theories and studies within the field of conversion studies in general, most of which are focused specifically on conversion within or to Christianity. Four theoretical fields specifically will be utilized as the foundation for this study, namely *Psychoanalytical, Process, Feminist, and Identity* theories. Prominent scholars from within these fields will be referenced and their data compared and applied to my own findings. Individuals such as *Lewis Rambo,* on whose model of the process of conversion this study will be based, and *Erik Erikson,* whose contributions to the understanding

of *identity* will provide the foundations for the investigation of this thesis, will both be heavily relied upon.

Because established research in this field has focused primarily on Christianity in a predominantly Christian environment, the models and theories offered by scholars in conversion studies do not fit neatly in the context of this current investigation. Thus, their findings will need to be delicately applied and interpreted for a new context. Because of this, I will be offering my own "hybrid" theory which seeks to remedy the issues that arise when applying theories from the aforementioned studies to the current case.

Originally, my intention was to distribute a survey to Muslim converts in the United States via email, but unfortunately, due to time constraints this needed to be altered. Instead, I will be looking at conversion narratives of converts on various websites, many of which cater precisely to these testimonials. Here I will analyze, on a case by case basis, these individual conversion narratives to see if there are any elements in both the content and composition, that may lend insight into my proposed question.

I will begin in *Chapter 1* with a review of literature from various fields on the conversion phenomenon. I have carefully selected two authors from four varying fields to offer a well rounded perspective of the conversion process. Due to the complexity of this topic in general, I felt that it was important to provide as much background information as possible, which will aid the reader and serve as the foundation upon which this study is built. I will then move to provide a methodological critique of the proposed theories in *Chapter 2.* Here, I will make connections between the various theories and their findings place them in the context of the current study. I will address the *context* and *environment* of conversion process as it pertains to this thesis, as well as general factors that may drive an individual towards conversion. Based upon this and previous

studies, I will attempt to formulate and propose my own theory, which specifically addresses the case of conversion to Islam in the United States. In *Chapter 3,* I will analyze the conversion narratives of seven women individually. Here, I will attempt to depict each narrative as accurately as possible, while at the same time seeking any similarities between each individual case. Moving from the conversion narratives, I will analyze my findings in *Chapter 4* and attempt to apply my own theory to see if it is indeed applicable to the current case. Ultimately, I will seek to answer my Rational Question in *Chapter 5* where I will conclude this study.

1.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the complexity and vastness regarding both the study and understanding of conversion in general, the literature review will serve a greater role than one might anticipate. Each of the studies and theories presented will have a direct connection to some aspect of this study. While some may seem more relevant than others, there is a purpose to both their inclusion and the order in which they are presented.

The reader will find that while there is some relevance to each theory in regards to the current study, no one theory is able to sufficiently provide an answer to the aforementioned question. Because of this, and after presenting the established theories, I will be offering a methodological critique of the listed theories and the associated case studies. I will then present my own "hybridized" theory, which is finely tuned to answer the current case, as well as to remedy the oversights in the established studies. It is my own theory that I will seek to test and apply in both the methodological critique and in my own analysis of the online narratives.

1.1 PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY

1.1.1 Leon Salzman:

In his research investigating conversion from a psychoanalytical perspective, Leon Salzman attempts to understand the conversion process in its most raw form. He believed that the conversion experience served as a defense mechanism through which an individual may quarantine any psychological disturbances brought about by a crisis event. For the purposes of his own research, conversion was to be defined as, *"…any change of religion or of moral, political, ethical, or esthetic views which occurs in the life of a person either with or without a mystical experience,*

and which is motivated by strong pressures within the person.[3] *"* From this definition, he makes a distinction between two groups of conversion, progressive and regressive. As their names suggest, the distinction being made between these two groups is both a positive and a negative, despite his own reassurance that neither form is good nor bad.

His understanding of the progressive or "maturational" conversion is that it is a growth within the individual, in which new beliefs and values are adopted after a deliberate rational search. The beliefs and values are determined to be of a higher elevation than the ones previously abandoned.[4] According to Salzman, the growth of the individual through the conversion process correlates to a lessening of anxiety, ultimately becoming a development of integration.[5]

The second group, and the primary focus of his research, he defines as a regressive or "psychopathological" conversion.[6] Here Salzman focuses on a specific type of conversion in which the individual attempts to solve a serious problem or conflict resulting in a "highly charged, profound, emotional experience."[7] This type of conversion is often associated with mystical encounters or a sudden and dramatic increase in the enthusiasm of the individual's own group. Ultimately, Salzman views this type of conversion as pathologically induced. Based upon the case studies Salzman presents in his research, conversion of the regressive type is a "manifestation of struggle with irrational authority."[8]

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[3] Salzman, Leon. *"The Psychology of Religious and Ideological Conversion." Psychiatry* 16 (1953): 178. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1953.11022922 (accessed September 30, 2016).
[4] Ibid., 178
[5] Ibid., 178-179
[6] Ibid., 179
[7] Ibid., 179
[8] Ibid., 187.

His own definition of conversion opens up many avenues for further study, particularly in cases where politics and religion intersect in an individual's conversion experience. Yet, while this definition is multidimensional in its applicability, he immediately limits the bounds of his own study when he reveals that his primary concern is of a type of conversion which is emotionally charged,[9] while in the very next sentence stating that, *"In the religious sense, then, it matters not where the person went, but what moved him to go, and why he went where he did."*[10] Ironically, it is almost impossible to gain an accurate understanding of the specific *destination* of an individual's conversion experience, if one focuses only on the influence of emotional factors driving the conversion, while neglecting factors that may be attributed to a more rational pursuit in this context.

Ultimately, Salzman's findings point to a link between factors involving hatred emanating from the *environment* of one's adolescent upbringing, and the manner and reasoning for which their conversion experience is based. Based upon his case studies, Salzman argues that, *"…conversion experiences may be used as a solution for conflict with any authority figure, whether the father, the mother, or other significant persons."*[11] This struggle manifests itself in the search for the epitome of authoritative figures, the perfect and always present father, God. It is from these cases that Salzman relegates conversion of this type as merely a psychological defense mechanism.[12]

While the data Salzman provides does not necessarily complete the understanding of *"…why he went where he did…,"*[13] his overall investigation and definition of conversion and its

[9] Ibid., 178.
[10] Ibid., 178.
[11] Ibid., 187.
[12] Ibid., 186.
[13] Ibid., 178.

categorizations, even if potentially overgeneralized, helps provide a framework for a more in-depth investigation of the *destination* at which an individual arrives through the conversion experience. It is this statement that will serve as an important question for the purposes of this study, one of which Salzman only scratched the surface.

1.1.2 Chana Ullman:

Another important and more recent study in the psychoanalytical field was conducted by Chana Ullman in her book titled *The Transformed Self.* Her initial investigation was based upon her own questions as to the nature of conversion and of the predispositions ultimately leading an individual towards conversion.[14] Here Ullman seeks to investigate the phenomena of conversion by looking into the emotional life of individual converts. She argues that conversion *"...occurs on a background of emotional upheaval and promises relief by a new attachment."*[15] Yet, while emotion is prevalent in the narratives of many converts who had participated in her study, the complexity of these emotions led her to categorize the major themes of conversion which she saw as a driving force behind each individual's conversion.

For her study Ullman surveyed seventy individuals, forty of whom were religious converts with the remaining thirty being non-converts.[16] This group was diverse in both gender, age, and educational experience, but were predominantly white of urban middle-class backgrounds.[17] They were all previously either Christian or Jewish, with the group being composed of Roman Catholics,

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[14] Ullman, Chana. *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion*. Emotions, Personality, and Psychotherapy. (New York: Plenum Press, 1989). xv.
[15] Ibid., xvii.
[16] Ibid., 6.
[17] Ibid., 6.

Orthodox Jews, Hare Krishna devotees, or Baha'i followers post-conversion.[18] Ultimately, Ullman sought to compare both the converts and non-converts to see if there were any factors absent from the experiences of either group, which may lead one to be more inclined to convert to a new faith tradition.

Ullman's own initial findings do indeed point to emotion playing a large role in the conversion process for many individuals. She states that, *"The data presented here indicate that at least for this population of converts the religious quest is best understood in the context of a search for relief from emotional stress."*[19] She found that religious converts reported more often than non-converts as having had an *"...unhappy and stressful childhood*[20]*...and adolescence*[21]*...and described specific psychiatric difficulties."*[22] These perceived difficulties became manifest in the two years preceding the conversion event, as Ullman reports that eighty percent of religious converts reported as having been plagued by negative emotions during this time period. For this sizable majority, conversion was reported as being a means of relief for these negative emotions and anxieties.[23] She also notices a common theme of love and acceptance in the conversion narratives of these individuals. For many, this love manifested itself as love for a particular figure, whether they be corporeal or incorporeal. Finally, Ullman noticed a prominence of rigidity in the manner in which the convert group expressed their beliefs in relation to the group of non-converts. She notes that the rigidity in the beliefs of the individual convert correlates with

[18] Ibid., 6.
[19] Ibid., 24.
[20] Ibid., 24. Her data here reports 47.4% converts vs. 13.3% non-converts.
[21] Ibid., 24. Her data here reports 65% converts vs. 6.7% non-converts.
[22] Ibid., 24. Her data here reports 35% converts vs. 6.6% non-converts.
[23] Ibid., 25.

the level of stress they had experienced prior to their conversion, leading Ullman to speculate that the conversion itself serves as a defensive function.[24]

Interestingly, Ullman refers to the notion of social desirability regarding the choice for conversion in groups of generally well educated individuals. Here she argues that one would assume that a group of this composition would actually be less likely to convert due to the preservation of their own self-image due to social pressure.[25] What she found was, in fact, quite the opposite, where the individuals of this group converted despite the potential social consequences that can come with such a shift in beliefs. Ullman states that,

> *...for the majority of contemporary converts across religious groups, relief from anxiety was sufficient justification for any change of beliefs or practices. For them, a pursuit of sanity and stability was more urgent than a pursuit of a truth or a vision.*[26]

While it is clear that emotional distress did play some role in the decision for a majority of these individuals to convert, Ullman points out that these emotions alone merely drive an individual towards change, but cannot explain the conversion event itself.

Understanding the particulars of the conversion process make up the remainder of Ullman's study, where she seeks to categorize the themes found in the various conversion experiences. After analyzing her data and reviewing the conversion narratives of the converts' transitional experience, Ullman found that the conversion process had a deep connection with an

[24] Ibid., 25. This defensive function is a common belief amongst psychoanalytical theorists.
[25] Ibid., 25.
[26] Ibid., 25. Here Ullman assumes that sanity and stability are not conjoined with a pursuit of "truth." While she points to changes in beliefs as a sufficient justification for the relief of anxiety, it may be that the particular set of beliefs of a given destination need not be compromised at the spiritual level, even if the change in beliefs was spurred by a pursuit in the relief of said anxieties.

involved relationship. These relationships appeared to be central in the conversion experience for these individuals, and generally appeared in one of three forms.[27]

The first of the three was a type of attachment to an authority figure, be it a religious cleric, a prophet, or a mentor with some religious association; these individuals were critical in supplying the desired structure and paternal security for converts expressing their conversion in this manner.[28] Ullman sees this attachment to an authority figure as having some connection with the converts' parental relations (primarily with the father) preceding and during their conversion. According to her data, nearly 80 percent of converts who participated in her study were perceived as having had an *"…extremely stressful relationship with their fathers."*[29] This was in stark contrast to the much lower 20 percent reported by non-converts.[30] The relationship of the father was described as either, *Absent, Passive, Hostile, Unstable, Overprotective, Neutral,* or *Positive;* with *Absent, Passive,* and *Hostile* each with around 20 percent reporting, and *Positive* also reporting 20 percent.[31] While the converts reported a *Positive* relationship with their parents in generally the same percentage as the negative forms individually, the perceived negative relationship combined vastly outnumbers the positive reporting. For this reason, it appears that for the majority of these converts, the issue of parental relationships is at the crux of their conversion experience.[32]

For those affected negatively by their parental relations, the majority were noted as having issues specifically with the father. It was this negative relationship that ultimately led to what

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[27] Ibid., xvii.
[28] Ibid., xvii.
[29] Ibid., 30.
[30] Ibid., 30.
[31] Ibid., 30-31. Table 3: **Percentage actuals for converts** (39 with 1 refusing to answer about parents): *Absent=28.2%(11), Passive=20.5%(8), Hostile=23.0%(9), Unstable=2.6%(1), Overprotective=2.6%(1), Neutral=2.6%(1), Positive=20.5%(8).* **Percentage actuals for nonconverts** (30): *Absent=3.3%(1), Passive=6.7%(2), Hostile=13.3%(4), Unstable=0%(0), Overprotective=0%(0), Neutral=23.3%(7), Positive=53.4%(16).*
[32] Ibid., 30.

Ullman sees as a sort of gendered conversion, in which the individual's attachment with a religiously associated authority figure had fulfilled the paternal model that they desired in their pre-conversion life. She relies heavily on Freud's understanding of conversion, and his own theories as to the connection between God and the father figure. Despite the prevalence of a stressful relationship with the father, Ullman notes that a similar relationship was reported with the mother, which again was higher amongst converts than their non-convert counterparts.[33] The father figure's prominent role in the conversion process is due to the developmental obstacles made manifest due in part to this negative relationship.[34] According to Ullman,

> *"The absence, withdrawal, or hostility of the father…may affect children's perspective on moral prohibitions and may hamper their perception of the environment as safe and masterable. It renders difficult, especially for boys, the process of separating from maternal care. A religious conversion, whereby an inhibitory structure is imposed and the protection of an omnipotent authority figure is supplied, offers ways of bypassing these obstacles while simultaneously reflecting them.*[35]

As she had theorized previously, it appears that religious conversion had been utilized at least on some level, as a psychological defense mechanism. For some, this conversion experience offered a sense of paternal authority, which may have been lacking in their early life. While for others, particularly males, this allowed for a separation from the maternal figure upon whom they had relied. While this love for an authority figure was prominent amongst many of the converts' narratives, there was also a social component that played a role in the conversion experience.

The second of the three relationship types was based upon social aspects involving a desire for community and *identity.*[36] For many converts, the sense of fulfillment gained through

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[33] Ibid., 44-45.
[34] Ibid., 59.
[35] Ibid., 59.
[36] Ibid., xviii.

affiliations with a new community impacted not only the positive outcome of their conversion, but also the construction of their *identity.* Ullman notes that, in most cases, conversion is *"…the occasion of turning away from previous affiliations to become a member of a new community. As it offers an emotional haven, the new faith also offers a tie to a new social network."*[37] This shift in affiliations is often accompanied by a shift in emotions from negative to positive, and generally occurs due to social interaction and community presence.[38]

The social relationship type proposed by Ullman is again divided into two distinct groups; the first involving group influence and ideological manipulation, with the second focusing on developmental demands of adolescence, utilizing religious conversion as a means of achieving congruity.[39] In regards to the first subdivision, Ullman notes the power of social influences on an individual particularly in the case of conversion. She states that, *"The various groups into which we are born, which we join or which we value become important sources of validation of our feelings and beliefs. They take part in shaping our identity and may therefore participate in its transformation."*[40] It is here that *identity* is explicitly referenced as having a direct connection with the social influences effecting an individual. It is this socially influenced *identity* that helps to maintain the continuity of behavior and beliefs embedded within familial relations, and within similar communities and groups.[41] For Ullman, it is the shift away from the pre-constructed social *identity* which has ties to small and large societal groups, towards something "radically" different, that makes conversion so unique. This change in beliefs is potentially influenced by a shift in social

[37] Ibid., xviii.
[38] Ibid., xviii.
[39] Ibid., xviii.
[40] Ibid., 78-79.
[41] Ibid., 80.

environment,[42] thought reform within a totalistic environment,[43] identity predispositions,[44] and lastly emotions within the group setting.[45] While this subdivision has a clear link to *identity* as can be seen in the individual pursuit for a new and accepting social setting, it is the second subdivision, which is linked with adolescence that in many ways can be seen as *identity* "construction" as opposed to "reconstruction." It is here that Ullman applies Erik Erikson's concept of *identity* and its role in conversion which will be explained further in the review of Erikson's work.

The final relationship type was one involving a deep attachment to a transcendental object.[46] This form of conversion can often be identified by the individuals desire to perfect themselves by "merging" with this perfect incorporeal being. This divine bonding leads the individual towards a feeling of greater self-worth and given purpose. In her studies, Ullman finds it difficult to look past what appears to be tendencies of psychological narcissism.[47] Again, Ullman notes the defensive purposes, this time focusing on the psychological understanding of *narcissism* itself. She states that, *"Narcissism is a defensive focus on the self, a self-absorption that serves to bolster positive self-regard. Mental activity is narcissistic to the extent that it functions to maintain cohesiveness, the stability, and the positive affective coloring of the self-representation."*[48] This does coincide with the belief that conversion itself serves as a defensive function for an individual, with tendencies of narcissism appearing in extreme cases.

While her investigation of conversion is psychologically oriented, Ullman herself is careful not to dismiss the spiritual and divine aspects of conversion in general. She questions whether the

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[42] Ibid., 80.
[43] Ibid., 86-87.
[44] Ibid., 92-93.
[45] Ibid., 94-95.
[46] Ibid., xix.
[47] Ibid., 139.
[48] Ibid., 142.

inherent focus on conversion as a psychological quest for relief, overlooks the genuine possibility of a spiritual pursuit. Conversion then becomes divided in its understanding as a quest for truth, versus a search for relief, [49]when in fact it may not be so simply divided. Ullman recognizes that one is not necessarily isolated from the other and it may be that a search for relief spurs the quest for truth. Ultimately, her study shows emotions playing an extremely important role in the conversion process and its outcome. Most importantly, Ullman notes the focus on the "self" and its definition, as central to the conversion experience. She makes reference to William James who had proposed two aspects of the self; the "me" or the self as the object, and the "I" or the self as the subject. According to James, the "me" was

> *…everything the persons calls his or hers, includes the material self,*[50] *the social selves,*[51] *and the spiritual self.*[52] *The 'I,' on the other hand, was defined as 'pure experience' as 'the knower' which is present in all of the person's experience and which, in fact, constitutes experience and is therefore elusive and difficult to examine.*[53]

Based upon the data from her study, Ullman notes that for many converts, the "me" was altered in response to the religious conversion. Yet, it is the shift in the "I" which had occurred that she felt was most important, particularly when the "I" became represented by a *"…distinctness and separateness from others."*[54]

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[49] Ibid., 169.
[50] Ibid., *(body and possessions)*
[51] Ibid., *(roles, relations, and interpersonal traits)*
[52] Ibid., *(thoughts, beliefs and values, psychological mechanisms)*
[53] Ibid., 194. William James as quoted by Chana Ullman.
[54] Ibid., 195.

1.2 PROCESS THEORY

1.2.1 Lofland and Stark:

In a study on millenarian cult conversion, John Lofland and Rodney Stark sought to uncover why certain individuals appear more "susceptible" or attracted to converting to a group or ideology that was societally devalued or "deviant." The interest in conversion to "deviant" cults and beliefs was due in part to the small but consistent growth in both interest and conversion rate in these cases. This study was meant to understand why certain individuals who had come into contact with cult practitioners adopted their beliefs and converted, while others did not. It is on the basis of this investigation that a theoretical model for the conversion process was designed to help answer, or at the very least elucidate, this question.

Lofland and Stark noticed interesting similarities in the conversion narratives of the cult converts. The majority of the converts described their pre-conversion life as something tenuous, even if the occurring tensions appeared minimal. In general, it appeared that most converts had struggled with bringing to life their own diverse aspirations. This tension arising from the individuals' own self-perception and the restrictions imposed upon them based upon their *environment*, seems to have led these individuals to be more open to the cult message. While it is almost inevitable in the life of any individual that they experience some form of tension, it appeared that in the case of the converts, the tensions were experienced more intensely and over a longer period of time than most individuals.[55]

[55] Lofland, John, and Rodney Stark. *"Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective." American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965). 867. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2090965 (accessed March 9, 2017).

Lofland and Stark move from "*Tension"* towards *"Type of Problem-Solving Perspective,"* as the next stage in their theoretical model.[56] Here they argue that an individual's access to other avenues for a solution are investigated. Due to the numerous methods through which one may successfully manage tensions, the possibility that one will seek conversion as their path to solution becomes much lower. For whatever reason, the individuals in this study were not able to successfully find alternative options, ultimately relying upon a religious solution. It is the stage of *"Seekership"*[57] where the individuals restrict their options for solution to those which are religiously aligned, at least in the context of their present study. Despite the religious orientation of the solution seeking process, most of the converts felt disenfranchised with the established traditions. It is here that Lofland and Stark seek to understand the question of *"why one goes where they do."*

From here, the focus of the study shifts from attributes considered "pre-dispositions," towards situational, time significant factors.[58] In the next in the series of stages, dubbed *"The Turning Point,"* pre-converts were documented as having reached a "turning point" immediately prior to, or concurrently with their first meeting with the group the Divine Precepts. During this time pre-converts had reached some form of "turning point" in their lives in which the Divine Precepts was present as a viable solution. These "turning points" generally, appeared to be an "absence" of something, such as in the aftermath of losing a job or completing an education program. The uncertainty of their future, as well as a desire for a social-structure appears to have played an important role in pre-converts' decisions in accepting the belief system of the Divine

[56] Ibid., 867.
[57] Ibid., 868.
[58] Ibid., 870.

Precepts. Yet, while the "turning point" plays a major role in the pre-converts' decision-making process, it was reinforced through an *"affective tie"*[59] that one had with the group.

While affective ties played a prominent role in the individual's interests and attachment to the belief system, *"Extra-Cult Affective Bonds"*[60] would become one of the primary factors in either reinforcing the individual's bond with the belief system, or inhibiting any further progression in their conversion process. Here Lofland and Stark recognize the importance of extra-cult relations and the impact this has on the individual's conversion process. Control by this factor is due to emotional attachments, which may influence the outcome of the conversion. In this case there was either little existing extra-cult attachments in the lives of the individual, leading to a lack of influence on the conversion process; positive attachments to extra-cult religious seekers[61] who encouraged the continuation of the individual's conversion process; or attachments to "conventional extra-cult persons"[62] which may be positive or negative. Ultimately, many of the individuals were societally "unintegrated"[63] to such an extent that their conversion process was able to go either unnoticed and/or unimpeded. The final stage and factor contributing to an individual's total conversion involves *"Intensive Interaction,"*[64] in which the convert engages in intense and regular participation in cult activities. For "total conversion" to be completed, it appears that physical proximity to cult members was a consistent necessity. Proximity in this case was either consistent participation or proximity related to living arrangements.

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[59] Ibid., 872.
[60] Ibid., 872.
[61] Ibid., 872. Individuals in this case who are on a similar path for investigation, even if under different circumstances and in a different context.
[62] Ibid., 872
[63] Ibid., 873
[64] Ibid., 873

Lofland and Stark conclude that, despite having very little in advantage to offer in comparison to other "unusual religious groups,"[65] their attraction and success in converting those they did can be attributed to the circumstances and conditions in which the Divine Precepts was filling a role absent in that *environment.* The model that Lofland and Stark provide, while suited more for the purposes of their own study, does provide a foundation for the understanding of the complex processes leading an individual towards converting to an alternative belief system.

It appears at least from the data presented that *identity* did indeed play an important role in the conversion of these individuals, yet seems to have been overlooked by Lofland and Stark. The tensions that had arisen in many of the conversion narratives stemmed from the individual's own internal aspirations, and their struggle in achieving them physically. The attachment to these internal aspirations displayed by many converts appears to show a conflict with identity. Thus, *identity* in and of itself was a major drive and factor for many leading to their joining of the Divine Precepts group. The *environment* of the individual and the *context* of their conversion also appeared to directly impact the *destination* of the conversion process, in this case the result was one which was deemed socially "deviant." Yet, the focus on an individual's predisposition to conversion, while interesting and important in its own right, fails to take into account the agency of the individual in the conversion process. It is this *agency* that integral to the understanding of the decision making process behind one's conversion.

[65] Ibid., 875.

1.2.2 Lewis R. Rambo:

In his pursuit of a greater understanding of conversion and the processes involved, Lewis Rambo would come to see conversion not as an isolated and instantaneous event, but one that is cumulative and ongoing. His contributions to the field of conversion studies has helped to refine the often applied *Process theory.* Using the work of his predecessors (such as Lofland and Stark) as a foundation, Rambo proposed his own process theory of conversion which was composed of seven stages.[66] It is from this model that Rambo sought to structure the understanding of conversion, and the approach in which one may investigate the phenomena in conjunction with the alternatively utilized theories of investigation.

Setting himself apart from alternative conversion theories early in his work, Rambo opts to use the word "process" rather than "event."[67] While his work focuses on conversion as a process, Rambo does not fully discount the events of sudden conversion; for whether a "process" or "sudden," the conversion itself is by definition the same. For Rambo conversion means, *"…turning from and to new religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality."*[68] Yet, while many focus upon exactly what conversion "is" and what constitutes the experience, Rambo seeks to understand both how and why an individual's spiritual and religious beliefs change or intensify. It is here that Rambo will seek to apply his model for conversion in the hopes of explaining both the "how" and "why" of religious change.

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[66] Rambo, Lewis. "*Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change." Social Compass* 43 (1999): 267. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003776899046003003 (accessed March 9, 2017).
[67] Rambo, Lewis R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993. 1.
[68] Ibid., 3.

Rambo begins by constricting the definition of conversion to one that is ideologically unbiased and universally applicable in regards to religion. Conversion according to Rambo is,

> *…a process over time, not a single event; …is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process.*[69]

Conversion then, is not a monolithic and singular event that occurs instantaneously for a given individual. Due to the even greater complexity brought about by this definition, Rambo created his own theoretical model to compensate.

Rambo proposes a "Holistic" model for which conversion needs be approached and investigated. This model addresses the complexities of his proposed definition for conversion by including four major components which have influence over the cause and outcome of a conversion experience; cultural, social, personal, and religious systems, each having their own ties to a particular field of study which may further contribute to the understanding of the conversion process.[70] This approach itself, while important due to its focus, was in need of further constraints, thus leading to Rambo creating another model of study.

Due to his belief that conversion occurs gradually over time, the adaptation of a "stage model" was the most appropriate means of addressing conversion that also complied with his holistic proposal. Building upon the work of Lofland and Stark, this model is composed of seven different stages through which an individual will pass, starting with the initial pursuit of conversion and leading through to its completion. The stages of his model begin with *Context,* followed by

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[69] Ibid., 5.
[70] Ibid., 7.

Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment, and lastly *Consequences*.[71] While Rambo orders the stages in a linear fashion, this is strictly for the purpose of a coherent model, as the actual order of the stages are variable and interacting. In practice, his own adaptation of the "stage model" would forgo its sequential format in favor of a systematic composition. This places *Context* at the epicenter of a web of the remaining six stages in which each affects and is affected by the other. While this is more complex than the sequential format, it allows for greater scrutiny of the individual interacting variables that may affect the individual in regards to the conversion experience.

For Rambo, *Context* was seen as the beginning stage in his model due to its universal and ever present influence on the actions and beliefs of a given individual; it is within the stage of *Context* that conversion ultimately takes place. The importance of this stage, particularly in regards to the understanding of the drive towards conversion, is the impact and effects of cultural, social, political, and religious influences of the outside world on the individual. *Context* in many cases is oftentimes overlooked as Rambo argues, *"We have a tendency to split the person and the environment."*[72] These influences can shape the decision making process, one's needs and desires, and even the pursuit of happiness, each potentially serving as a catalyst which may drive an individual on a path towards religious conversion.[73]

The second stage of the sequential model is *Crisis,* for which serves as the initial catalyst which the individual seeks remedy and security. This should not be confused with the psychoanalytical trope that "conversion is strictly a psychological defense mechanism"; while a crisis is sought to be addressed, this need not and should not be limited only to a psychological

[71] Ibid., 17.
[72] Ibid., 166.
[73] Ibid., 166.

pursuit. It is well documented and accepted by the majority of scholars of conversion that some form of crisis generally precedes the conversion event.[74] According to Rambo, *"This crisis may be religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin. Where scholars disagree is on whether the disorientation precedes contact with a proselytizer or comes afterward."*[75] The preceding crisis is not a monolithic event, and in order to understand crises' role in the conversion experience, it is imperative that both the *context* and severity of the crises are taken into account, as well as the agency of the individual convert. According to Rambo the crisis event is of two types, both important to the conversion process: *"…crises that call into question one's fundamental orientation to life, and crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back."*[76] These crises often do appear to align themselves with worldly discomfort of the individual, while at the same time triggering an almost primal spiritual quest for solace. It is in the third stage of his model that Rambo will address this pursuit of relief aptly named the *Quest.*

In the *Quest* stage, the individual is driven towards avenues offering growth and development, which under their current circumstances are seen as either absent or lacking. Due to Rambo's, as well as many of his contemporaries', belief that conversion is an active process on behalf of the individual convert, motivations for conversion must also be taken into account.[77] These motivational drives are contextual and variable based upon the individual, yet these motivations will carry on through multiple other stages of the conversion model, ultimately influencing the direction and outcome of the conversion process.

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[74] Ibid., 44.
[75] Ibid., 44.
[76] Ibid., 46.
[77] Ibid., 56.

The proceeding two stages, *Encounter* and *Interaction,* are both connected by the influence of a particular individual or ideology outside of the convert's original sphere of influence. The *encounter* stage *"…brings people who are in crisis and searching for new options together with those who are seeking to provide the questions with a new orientation."*[78] Due to the convert's active role in the conversion process, the initial encounters with advocates of a particular orientation are not always successful in meeting the convert's interests. Rambo notes that acceptance or rejection of a new option is impacted by personal and group inclinations affecting the individual's perception during this encounter.[79] When the individual's "requirements" are met by said group or ideology, they move towards the *Interaction* stage.

During the *Interaction* stage, the potential convert will immerse themselves in the new option available before them. This stage is often educationally inclined on the part of both the potential convert, who is seeking to investigate the potential of their new interest, and of the advocate who wishes to fulfill the needs of the individual educationally. If successful, the potential convert will have developed a new sphere of influence through social encapsulation brought about from members of the new group. Within this new sphere of influence, there are four dimensions of interaction which play a role in the forthcoming transformation: *relationships, rituals, rhetoric,* and *roles.*[80] It is from this new sphere of influence and the structure that it provides that the potential convert will move to the stage of *Commitment*.

In Rambo's sixth stage of conversion, *Commitment* is centered around intensive decision making preceding an anticipated change. At this point, the active potential convert has become invested in their new option and seek to authenticate and display their acceptance of inner change.

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[78] Ibid., 167.
[79] Ibid., 167.
[80] Ibid., 107-108.

There are five elements that characterize this stage and affect the success of commitment; *decision-making, rituals, surrender, testimony and biographical reconstruction,* and *motivational reformulation.*[81] The individual must still overcome conflict that may arise during this stage, particularly when it is often seen as a turning point. A central component of this stage and ultimately the whole of the conversion process is the biographical and narrative reconstruction of the individual's past up until this point. It is from here that the individual will experience fulfillment as a member of a new community.[82] This leads to the seventh and final stage of Rambo's model called *Consequences*.

It is at this stage that the individual will come to terms with the changes that may have taken place during their conversion process. The consequences of the conversion process can be varied and experienced in a range of areas. Ranging from theologically oriented consequences, such as a deeper connection with God, to socially oriented consequences, such as the acceptance into a new group or ostracism from their previous group, the individual will confront outside responses to their changes. While this generally marks the end of the conversion process, it does not mean the individual ceases their spiritual growth, with some finding that their destination was not what they had originally anticipated.[83] Nevertheless, the continued growth of the individual will ultimately continue to define the conversion that they had initially experienced.

Based upon his research Rambo concludes that conversion is not a monolithic or even a binary experience stating, *"Debates about whether conversion is sudden or gradual, partial or total, internal or external, and the like, can be resolved by acknowledging a spectrum of*

[81] Ibid., 124.
[82] Ibid., 169-170.
[83] Ibid., 170.

possibilities."[84] Certain aspects of conversion may in fact be sudden or gradual, but that should not ultimately define the entirety of the conversion process. Ultimately, it is a complex web of elements which allows the conversion to become available, increasing in complexity as the conversion process takes root and is allowed to flourish. Rambo ends his book calling for greater diversity in the future research of conversion. He notes the lack of conversion studies focused on gender, in which conversion may vary between male and female. In an appropriate segue to the next theoretical approach to conversion Rambo raises an important question: *"To what extent are women's experiences distorted, denigrated, or denied by any patriarchal requirements of the conversion stereotype?"*[85]

1.3 FEMINIST THEORY

1.3.1 Susan Juster:

Susan Juster investigates the relationship between gender and conversion, by reviewing the conversion narratives to Evangelical Protestantism in post-revolutionary America. Here Juster argues that conversion may in fact reveal a more complex dynamic regarding both gender and authority in the *context* of the *environment* in which the conversion occurs; when she states that, *"…the conversion narrative is as much a cultural mirror as a personal statement."*[86] It is from the conversion narrative that Juster is able to elucidate the role of conversion in the growth of an individual, and their comprehension of the self, personal autonomy, and agency.[87]

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[84] Ibid., 170.
[85] Ibid., 174.
[86] Juster, Susan. *""In a Different Voice": Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America." American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1989): 35. doi:10.2307/2713192 (accessed September 29, 2016).
[87] Ibid., 34.

Similar to some psychoanalytical perspectives on conversion, authority and a resistance to such appears as a common theme in the conversion narratives presented by Juster. It is through the *"…close scrutiny of the psychological dynamics of the conversion experience…,"*[88] that Juster proposes an androgynous model of individual regeneration; one that is contrary to the prevailing notion of a polarized separation of gendered spheres in antebellum American society.[89] This model incorporates gender as a prevailing factor that plays a large role in the conversion process of an individual. Yet while there are distinct processes regarding gender and conversion, Juster argues that, *"…the final destination is the same for both sexes: a mature union with God that can best be described as the recovery of moral agency and spiritual potency."*[90] The outcome of conversion in this case is seen as a means for equalizing gender, rather than further polarizing them as religion is oftentimes accused of doing.

By looking at two hundred accounts of conversion, from 1800-1830 published in six evangelical magazines,[91] Juster discovers that authority appears to be common theme in both genders' conversion narratives. Here authority is heavily resisted prior to an individual's conversion, and more often than not, it is this resistance that inhibits an individual's pursuit for conversion. In order to understand the reasoning behind the magnitude for which authority was to be resisted, Juster looks to the *context* in which these conversions were taking place. During this period in time, post-Revolutionary War, the negative connotation of authority was still alive and well in both the minds of the citizens and the cultural belief system.[92] This almost "instinctual" resistance to a form of tyrannical authority was further exacerbated by the local clergy's propensity

88 Ibid., 36.
89 Ibid., 37.
90 Ibid., 37.
91 Ibid., 37.
92 Ibid., 45.

for coercing individuals towards conversion.[93] In understanding the *context* of conversion, Juster was able to then pinpoint the areas of diversion which appear to have been based upon the gender of the individual.

In contrast to the conclusions of similar studies in which women were understood as having a greater difficulty in coming to terms with the relationship between authority and the evangelical faith,[94] Juster finds that the conversion experience was equally difficult for both genders, stating that the distinction between, *"…male and female narratives, however, is the underlying model of authority which informs notions of agency and will."*[95] To summarize, authority as experienced by women was *"…personal rather than abstract power."*[96] Experienced in this manner, authority manifests itself in personal-relations, heavily employed by means of emotional and social interactions.[97] Men on the other hand experienced authority as a manifestation of an, *"abstract system of rules and principles rather than in a personal figure."*[98] Juster argues that authority as experienced by men, *"…is not to be judged by whether it is good or beneficial to those under its jurisdiction, but rather by whether it is reasonable, fair, consistent, and accords with universal principles."*[99] These differences in how authority is comprehended will ultimately manifest in the conversion narratives.

In understanding the dynamics between authority and gender, God would become the embodiment of authority regardless as to whether the individuals were resisting or accepting conversion. Here Juster was able to pinpoint specific themes and types of terminology that were

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[93] Ibid., 38.
[94] Ibid., 39. Epstein's conclusion on study.
[95] Ibid., 39.
[96] Ibid., 39.
[97] Ibid., 39.
[98] Ibid., 39.
[99] Ibid., 39.

prevalent in the conversion narratives. In line with what was mentioned previously, Juster found that, in the conversion narratives of women, the relationship with God was one which took on the connotation of personal relations. Themes and terminology were much more emotionally charged, where the relationship with God took the form of a partner or parent, in some cases even being expressed through sexual metaphors.[100] The emotional passion expressed in the female narratives were nearly absent in the narratives of their male counterparts. Men expressed their understanding and relationship with God using overt legalistic terminology. Here it appeared that men's connection with God was one through almost an emotional disassociation. The terminology used was more "governmental," where God became the primary lawgiver and distributor of justice.[101] An interesting point in the use of terminology was between the appearance of the concepts *"contract"* and *"covenant."* Juster finds that men often describe their relationship with God in the form of a *contract,* while women often described their relationship as a *covenant.* Here the terminology depicts a gendered conception of God, where the primary difference is a more legalistic orientation for men, versus the more relational orientation for women, in regards to how each views their relationship with God. The consistent use of these concepts is further evidence pointing to not only a gendered understanding of authority, but also evidence of a gendered experience of conversion in general.

Juster sees conversion as a "moral problem" which both evangelical men and women must grapple with through the engagement of personal *agency* and self-assessment.[102] Referring again to a "gendered" set of terminology used in psychological theories based upon *"...male and female*

[100] Ibid., 41.
[101] Ibid., 42.
[102] Ibid., 50.

modes of being,"[103] *"agency"* and *"communion"* become the primary concepts that an individual must overcome if they are to emerge successful from the conversion process. These concepts are in fact in opposition, as Juster cites David Bakan as having stated, *"...Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separations."*[104] In this sense, men generally approach moral conflict through *agency* motivated by the self, whereas women act through *communion* where motivation is community and relationship based. Interestingly, it is a particular gender's "strength" in their adherence to a particular mode of approaching moral action which ultimately becomes their "weakness" in successfully navigating the conversion experience. According to Juster,

> *Men, in other words, must overcome their alienating self-sufficiency through interaction with others if they hope to reach God. Women, on the other hand, must disengage themselves from over-dependence on friends and family in order to fully establish an adult relationship with God. In the context of religious conversion, the quest for salvation must, for women, be undertaken alone; for men, with the aid of others.*[105]

Ultimately, the relationship with others drove each gender to overcome their "normative" mode of approaching moral action. For men, it was the influence and the conversions of those around them that drove them on this path towards communal support; for women, it was the loss of a close relationship that sparked their search for self through God, whom would serve as a "replacement" for that which they had lost.

Through the conversion process, Juster sees a growth of the individual to a point where both genders came to a state of spiritual maturity and equality. Religious conversion then would

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[103] Ibid., 50.
[104] Ibid., 50. David Bakan as quoted by Susan Juster.
[105] Ibid., 51.

become a means of empowerment, particularly for women, in which self-expression was accepted and even promoted. More so in the case for women, conversion was a sort of liberating experience in which they may be able to break from cultural restraints.[106] In the words of Juster, this psychological transformation brought forth from the conversion experience,

> *...may help explain why evangelical women, in particular, seemed to be more capable than their unconverted of liberal sisters of breaking through the limitations of the cultural system of separate spheres to actively engage society in the pursuit of moral reform.*[107]

Juster's study was extremely illuminating, particularly in regards to the role gender plays in the conversion process. Despite her use of early 19th century accounts, her data and analysis is in many ways more in-depth and relevant than the later studies on conversion. While she is very thorough in her analysis, she only briefly touches upon instances that appear to have "identity markers[108]," without going into much depth on their role. Yet, Juster appears to agree, intentional or not, that *identity* does play a role in the conversion process when she states, *"I would suggest that these women were empowered by recovering their sense of self through the assertion of independence from others.*[109]*"* While this appears to be a suggestion that *identity* is at the core of the conversion process, she offers no direct confirmation of such. Regardless, Juster's research into conversion and gender dynamics offers much to work with for the purposes of this study, and will be foundational for the purposes of a comparative analysis.

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[106] Ibid., 56-57.
[107] Ibid., 58.
[108] Instances where the individual references a self-understanding or self-fulfillment. Juster herself metions "selfhood" multiple times throughout her study. Without offering an alternative definition, one must assume that "selfhood" in these instances has a direct connection to the conceptual understanding of *identity.*
[109] Ibid., 53.

1.3.2 Karin van Nieuwkerk:

In her book, *Women Embracing Islam,* Karin van Nieuwkerk seeks to dispel the gendered bias regarding female conversion to Islam. Compiling the essays and research of prominent academics in the field of *Islam and gender studies,* van Nieuwkerk reveals another side to the conversion experience both feminist and in this case Islamic in nature. While each of the authors address a specific area regarding gender and conversion, there is a universal message within each; gender, agency, and identity are a central and crucial component of the conversion process that has often been overlooked. It is from both the feminist and Islamic perspective of equality that van Nieuwkerk and her colleagues seek to understand the complex nature of the conversion phenomena.

Seeking to understand the sociological pull and attraction of Islam for Western women, van Nieuwkerk seeks to find any correlation between their specific cases and the conversion narratives of their fellow converts. Van Nieuwkerk approaches gender and conversion in a distinct fashion by comparing the narratives of Dutch women who converted to Islam she had interviewed in 1997 to 1998,[110] to conversion narratives given on the internet. The purpose of such a comparison was due in part to her own confusion regarding the motivations of many of these women in their decision to convert to Islam. She notes that while she understood each individual's choice for conversion to Islam, the confusion stemmed from the specific motivations and life stories which seemed to lack a particular similarity to the other converts' experiences.[111] Rather

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[110] van Nieuwkerk, Karin. *"Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives."* In *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 95.
[111] Ibid., 95.

than focusing strictly on the variables possibly leading to conversion in general, van Nieuwkerk sought to understand what leads an individual, women in particular, to convert to Islam.

Despite the apparent lack of commonalities in the conversion narrative of these individuals, there was in fact one important aspect shared between them; all of the women who had converted to Islam were living in the "West." While this may appear obvious, as van Nieuwkerk specifically conducted her research with Dutch women, this does not devalue the fact that there is a population of Western women who converted to Islam. The conversion narrative then, was integral to understanding the rationale behind these women's conversions with van Nieuwkerk stating,

> *They thus share important aspects of their identities related to ethnicity, religion, and gender. These important aspects of the converts' identities are crystallized in a structured narrative or discourse. Most conversion stories contain a biographical narrative (why they as individuals took the path of Islam), a religious discourse (why Islam), a gender discourse (why they as women chose Islam), and finally an ethnic or national discourse (why they as Dutch/Western women chose Islam).*[112]

The importance of these four elements in the conversion narrative led van Nieuwkerk to compare their presentation and composition in both face-to-face interviews and Internet conversion testimonials.

She begins by acknowledging the issues arising from a reliance upon conversion narratives. The first is the reverse rewriting of an individual's past to fit with the convert's present state of being. In other words, the conversion narrative is created post-conversion through associated recollection. It is very rare for an individual to make specific notes during their conversion process, recording the process as it occurs. Because of this Nieuwkerk states that, *"The stories should*

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[112] van Nieuwkerk, Karin. *"Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives."* In *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 96.

therefore not be understood as containing factual information on the conversion process."[113] The second issue stems from the reconstruction process itself. Occurring at both the individual and group levels, the reconstruction process is often influenced by the narratives of fellow converts, creating a collective narrative model with shared elements.[114] Third, van Nieuwkerk cites a study by Stromberg (1993) on conversion narratives in which it was found that the retelling of the conversion narrative might play a role in the actual conversion process. The importance then may lie not strictly within the elements of the conversion narrative, but the purposes and motivations for one's retelling. Lastly, she notes the importance of *context* and its connection with the motivations for the composition of the conversion narrative.[115] In many cases, the *context* of the narrative is often overlooked in favor of understanding the motivational drives individually. As we have seen in Rambo's process model for conversion, the *context* is indeed a major factor that must be taken into account.

Van Nieuwkerk begins her comparison by selecting fifty internet conversion testimonials from women with a Christian or secular background from the United States, Canada, and Europe.[116] This selection was then compared to her twenty-four previously conducted face-to-face interviews. While initially there were similarities between the groups of stories, such as the reverse engineering of past events, van Nieuwkerk noticed that the internet selections were much more uniform in composition and even theme. While the face-to-face conversion narratives also shared "scripted" experiences between the interacting converts, the internet testimonials displayed these "scripted" themes at a much greater frequency. According to van Nieuwkerk this is due in part to

[113] Ibid., 97.
[114] Ibid., 97-98.
[115] Ibid., 98.
[116] Ibid., 96.

the fact that for some converts, *"…the internet was the main means through which they came into contact with Muslims."*[117] These individuals had then sought out advice and information from fellow converts on the internet, often leading to the circulation of a particular individual's conversion experience for use as inspiration. The primary difference between these two groups was how the *context* and the setting of their testimonials seemed to affect the manner in which *identity* construction was presented. Van Nieuwkerk states that,

> *Whereas in fieldwork and interview setting narratives about identity and religious change are constructed in an interactive context, the selected stories from the Internet are self-presentations. How does identity enactment take place on the Internet?*[118]

It is this question regarding *identity* enactment that will ultimately frame the remainder of her investigation.

Van Nieuwkerk divides her comparison into four sections based upon that which the conversion narrative is often composed; *Biographical Narratives, Discourse on Gender, Ethnicity,* and *Religious Discourse.* Beginning with *Biographical Narratives,* she explains how the biographical retelling of events that led to the individual's conversion most often sheds light on their motivation for doing so. Comparing the biographical narratives of conversion experiences from the internet and her previous research, van Nieuwkerk noticed some interesting variances between the two groups. Starting with their similarities, almost all of the conversion stories were those who had converted to Sunni Islam. Most of the converts also appeared to have a middle-class background.[119] The initial interest in Islam itself can be attributed to relationships made with

[117] Ibid., 99.
[118] Ibid., 100.
[119] Ibid., 101.

other Muslims in an academic or workplace environment. The difference arises in the institutions where these initial relationships were forged; the in-person Dutch experiences occurred either in secondary school or in the workplace, while the Internet stories prominently featured the university setting as the initial place of encounter.[120] The individual's level of religiosity and their religious orientation did not necessarily play as large a role as one would initially expect. Van Nieuwkerk found that most of the Dutch converts were from a religious background but were no longer practicing when they engaged with Islam. These individuals were motivated out of curiosity or secular proselytization on behalf of their Muslim partner or friend, converting from a secular to a more religious orientation.[121] Internet stories, on the other hand, which were primarily converts from the United States,[122] were thematically more religiously conflictual. Here the individuals were practicing their former religion during their encounter with Islam and immediately prior to their conversion. In many cases, the individual had attempted to convert their Muslim friend to their religion only to find the reverse occurring during their own attempts at proselytization.[123] The general differences between the two groups of biographical narratives are summarized by van Nieuwkerk who states, *"Whereas the life stories gathered through interviews are heterogeneous, the online narratives show a high level of standardization in the personal trajectories."*[124]

The second element of the conversion narrative is the *Discourse on Gender,* in many cases placing itself squarely at the center of the conversion experience. During van Nieuwkerk's fieldwork, she had found that gender and its role in Islam was often discussed in the conversion

120 Ibid., 101.
121 Ibid., 100-101.
122 Ibid., 106.
123 Ibid., 102.
124 Ibid., 102.

narratives.[125] Most often, it would arise as a defense to the Dutch perceptions of the oppression of women in Islam, an idea vehemently criticized by these converts. Van Nieuwkerk notes three main aspects of the discourse on gender. The first regards sexuality, in which many of the converts feel that the idea of freedom, particularly sexual freedom, is over exaggerated in Western societies.[126] The second involves gender construction, in which the converts argue that their equality to men is expressly stated in Islam, granting them a more equal gender status than can be achieved by societal standards.[127] Lastly, the concept of motherhood, which is argued by converts as being underappreciated in society, is given an honorary and respectable role in Islam.[128]

In general, van Nieuwkerk notices that while the discourse on gender and sexuality is prominent in the Dutch conversion stories, they are largely absent from the internet stories. While conversion "as a woman" is featured in the online narratives, it took the form of agency and self-discretion rather than a critique of gender and sexuality. While themes regarding sexuality do arise, van Nieuwkerk states that, *"…generally there is little discussion about their conversion as women and the appeal of "Islamic" constructions of femininity."*[129] Interestingly, stories regarding the decision to veil appear more frequently, in what van Nieuwkerk coins *"*the *hijab* and *niqab* stories,"[130] and are thematically more oriented towards personal *agency.* While gender and sexuality do factor into these narratives, they are not expressed as a central motivation for the individual's conversion.

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[125] Ibid., 102.
[126] Ibid., 103.
[127] Ibid., 103. These women do note the separation of Islam and culture. In the cases where women are oppressed "by Islam" it is generally seen as an example of cultural or political oppression, utilizing religion for these ends.
[128] Ibid., 104.
[129] Ibid., 105.
[130] Ibid., 106.

The third element of the conversion narratives are discourses tied to *Ethnicity.* Van Nieuwkerk found that ethnicity and nationality played a large role in the conversion narratives. For instance, many Dutch converts reported conflicts of ethnicity stemming from their decision to convert. Van Nieuwkerk states that,

> *During the interviews with relatives of Dutch converts, they often explained that to them the most amazing thing is how an emancipated Dutch girl can become a Muslima. The self-image of the Dutch is that the Dutch, in contrast to Muslims, are very liberal and emancipated. The Dutch narratives on nationality and ethnicity are thus very much linked to gender discourse.*[131]

Most importantly for many of the Dutch converts, Islam offers an alternative *identity* distanced from the Western conceptions of individualism and materialism that they criticize. The Internet stories on the other hand do not appear to be heavily influenced by ethnicity in the same manner as the Dutch stories. As stated previously, the majority of the Internet stories are from converts from the United States, yet, in this group of narratives, evidence of racial or ethnic *identity* is fleeting.[132] Race does play a role in the Internet stories, though, as van Nieuwkerk notes,

> *The discourse that is dominant on the Internet appears to deliberately underplay the ethnic or racial component. Islam is presented as the universal non-national religion, and occasionally this is mentioned as one of the attractive things about Islam.*[133]

While the Dutch converts defended their decision for conversion based upon a more gendered discourse, the online narratives took up a more inclusion oriented defense. Interestingly both groups felt the need to defend their decision for conversion, yet each took different trajectories when regarding conflicts involving ethnicity.

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131 Ibid., 106.
132 Ibid., 107.
133 Ibid., 107.

The final aspect of the conversion narrative centers upon the *Religious Discourse.* This form of discourse was interwoven throughout many of the other areas of discourse, and in some cases is an important element affecting the motivation for converting. Both groups include the religious discourse in the conversion narrative, yet it is more prominent among the online stories from the United States. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the rational aspects of Islam and its congruence with the sciences.[134] Van Nieuwkerk states that, *"Not only is Islam appealing because of its rationality, but it also offers an intellectual route to conversion."*[135] This "intellectual route" is most often depicted through Quranic engagement, with many addressing theological issues they had been harboring. More prominent in the online narratives is the converts own enlightenment through self-discovery. Some find that their religious beliefs had always been aligned with Islamic theology, thus giving rise to the trope, "I had always been Muslim and had never known."[136]

These four elements of the conversion narrative each has an effect on its overall portrayal. Van Nieuwkerk summarizes these two groups stating, *"Whereas the fieldwork narratives consist of varied discourses and different voices, the Internet accounts are rather depersonalized, standardized religious narratives."*[137] The thematic prominence of the religious discourse found in the online narratives versus the prominence of gender discourse in the Dutch accounts, and the more depersonalized and standardized narratives from the Internet are the most striking differences between the groups of conversion accounts. Van Nieuwkerk looks at three elements that may shed light on these variances and may offer greater insight into the attraction of Islam in the West.

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134 Ibid., 108.
135 Ibid., 108.
136 Ibid., 109.
137 Ibid., 109.

Van Nieuwkerk begins by looking at the national *context* of the conversion narratives; between the face-to-face Dutch accounts and the Internet stories from the United States. Due to the greater extent of secularization in Dutch society, Islam's "otherness" is not defined in a religious and ideological *context,* but rather in the form of emancipatory discourse. This is why there appears to be a much greater prevalence of gender and sexuality in the Dutch accounts, and less of a strictly religious ideological conflict.[138] On the other hand, the online narratives of converts from the United States were thematically much more religious in nature. Van Nieuwkerk argues that the reason for this is that, *"In the United States…there appears to be more religious vitality in the various denominations or new religious movements than in the Netherlands (Bruce 1999)."*[139] The prevalence of religious activity in the *environment* of the convert then, appears to influence the mode of discourse chosen to defend their decision for conversion, and ultimately the construction of their conversion narrative.

The second element van Nieuwkerk focuses on is the purpose of the conversion narrative in a public forum. For the Dutch converts, the purpose of divulging their conversion experience seemed to focus more on the defense of their decision for conversion. While there were mentions of religious obligations in some of the narratives, they were generally personal in nature. The notion of agency and defending one's own character against societal misconceptions defined the face-to-face interviews. Van Nieuwkerk noticed that the online narratives were much more missionary oriented than their Dutch counterparts. The retelling of conversion experiences in this format were much more inspirational and geared towards educating new and potential converts. With websites dedicated to the spread of these shared experiences, whether or not the intent of the

[138] Ibid., 110-111.
[139] Ibid., 111. Bruce, St., as cited by Nieuwkerk.

retelling on behalf of the convert is in fact missionarism, the online narratives take on this tone.[140] While there are religious and gender defenses similar to the Dutch accounts, they tend to be much less prominent.

Finally, van Nieuwkerk looks at the *context* of narrative production, between online and offline.[141] Face-to-face interviews provide a wealth of information which understandably appears to have been withheld in the online accounts. While one would assume that the anonymity of the Internet would give rise to a greater divulgence of information on behalf of the convert, what van Nieuwkerk found was in fact the opposite. The face-to-face interviewees, while potentially less willing to divulge certain information deemed private, may offer an alternative source of information due to the connection they have with the interviewer. In addition, van Nieuwkerk's request to interview the converts' relatives influenced the sincerity and extent to which the convert would go in revealing personal information regarding their conversion. In van Nieuwkerk's case, her own gender affected the level of openness of the interviewees.

The online narratives do not necessarily have this personal connection and are impacted by the anonymity and accessibility of the Internet. By being able to create one's own identity on the Internet, important information regarding the conversion process in connection with the portrayed identity, can be glossed over in the self-presentation. Rather than gaining information regarding the reasoning for conversion on behalf of the convert, the online narratives tend to leave us with a sense of the motivation for the manner of reporting instead. This form of self-presentation is one of the greatest drawbacks regarding the online narratives when compared to their offline counterparts. Despite the difficulty in some areas that the Internet narratives provide for a causal

[140] Ibid., 113.
[141] Ibid., 113.

investigation of conversion, it does offer insight into the way *identity* plays a role in the conversion process and the formation of a wider community.

1.4 IDENTITY THEORY

1.4.1 Erik Erikson:

Each of the previously applied theories attempts to understand the "phenomena" of conversion, utilizing their associated field's methodological approaches. As previously mentioned, while each theory succeeds in offering some headway into the understanding of religious conversion, no single theory alone was able to successfully account for the variabilities that leads an individual towards conversion. Yet, each theory does appear to overlap in their findings, in particular the concept of *identity.* Due to the apparent prominence of *identity* in the studies of various theories investigating conversion, theories centered on conversion and its connection with *identity* will play a greater role in this current study.

The concept of *identity* as it is understood in the fields of psychology was first proposed by Erik Erikson, by whom the term *"identity crises"* was coined. This term was applied to veterans during World War II who, according to Erikson and his colleagues, appeared to be neither, *"... 'shellshocked' nor become malingerers, but had through the exigencies of war lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity."*[142] Erikson found that these cases of "identity crises" were not something restricted to those suffering from the trauma of war, as this loss of "personal sameness" was to be found in "delinquent" youth, suffering from a "…*war within themselves."*[143]

[142] Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. (New York: W.W. Norton &, 1994), 17.
[143] Ibid., 17.

Erikson's literal and metaphorical reference to war as the basis for the concept of "identity crises" reveals that, at least in some instances, an individual's *identity* can be destabilized by intense conflict.

From his initial encounter with cases of "identity crises", Erikson would go on investigate the basis and formation of *identity,* beginning in early childhood. It is at this juncture that Erikson's investigation becomes much less clear, and in many ways less useful for the purposes of the investigation of conversion. His heavy reliance upon Freudian psychoanalytical theory muddies his own theoretical understanding of *identity,* making it difficult to fully separate his own thoughts from those of Sigmund Freud. Where Erikson does succeed, which is much more beneficial to conversion studies, is in his investigation on youth adoption of totalitarian belief systems.

In his paper titled "*Wholeness and Totality—A Psychiatric Contribution",* Erikson offers a more clearly defined understanding of *identity* and its role in the conversion to a totalitarian ideology. Here Erikson proposes that certain individuals may have a predisposition to the adoption of a totalitarian ideology. Due to his own focus on childhood and the development of *identity,* Erikson begins his investigation through this medium. He starts by orienting his position in the theoretical field of psychoanalysis when he states,

> *Psychoanalysis has amply demonstrated the fact that the individual develops an amnesia concerning crucial childhood experiences; there is good reason to suspect that this individual amnesia is paralleled by a universal blind spot in the interpretation of history, a tendency to overlook the fateful function of childhood in the fabric of society.*[144]

[144] Erikson, Erik H. *"Wholeness and Totality: A Psychiatric Contribution."* In *Totalitarianism*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 157.

His reference to both history and society in connection with the importance of the recognition of the effect of an individual's childhood on their adult behavior is extremely significant. Similarly, in reference to his understanding of *"identity crises"* the loss of personal sameness appears to have a deep-seated connection to a loss of one's conception of a historical continuity.[145] With this in mind, he shifts back towards his initial questioning as to the reasoning and rationale for an individual's shift in beliefs towards *totalism.*

This shift, in which he makes reference to the German *Umschaltung* and *Gleichschaltung,* is, *"…that sudden total realignment and, as it were, co-alignment which accompanies conversion to the totalitarian conviction that the state may and must have absolute power over the minds as well as the lives and the fortunes of its citizens."*[146] According to Erikson, this conversion occurs when certain conditions are met in the individual's progression during childhood, ultimately predisposing their adult self towards this ideology. It is understood that the individual shifts from a sense of "wholeness"[147] in existence and behavior, towards a state of existence dominated by expressions of "totality." Despite psychoanalysts' inclination towards pathological conclusions, Erikson finds that this transition towards a totalitarian belief system occurs in those with both normal and abnormal histories, and in the most extreme cases, appears on the borderline of pathology.[148] Yet, this shift towards an existence of totality is not without cause or purpose, and appears to benefit the individual during times of extreme stress.

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[145] This loss of conception of one's historical continuity may be the primary purpose for a narrative reconstruction and may play a primary role in the purposes of the conversion process itself.
[146] Ibid., 159.
[147] This sense of wholeness appears to be the key in the connection between *identity* and the conversion process. Conversion as a process tends to lead an individual towards a sense of wholeness or completion, differentiating itself from the concept of *totalism* proposed by Erikson.
[148] Ibid., 160.

This conversion according to Erikson is in fact a "psychological need" that may override the individual's desire for a sense of wholeness.[149] He argues that, *"…When the human being, because of accidental or developmental shifts, loses an essential wholeness, he restructures himself and the world by taking recourse to what we may call totalism."*[150] Interestingly, Erikson appears to diverge from fellow psychoanalysts when he warns against categorizing this as a "regressive or infantile mechanism,"[151] even if a more "primitive" form of psychological defense. The purpose of this form of conversion is clear, yet it is what drives an individual down such a path that Erikson seeks to understand.

Erikson moves to place this transition towards *totalism* in context, by providing the foundation for which a sense of wholeness may be achieved, starting with the relationship between mother and infant. Erikson and others in his field believe that an individual's *identity* or sense of wholeness was established from a healthy relationship between the mother and her infant. Due to the infant's biological state in which its survival is focused almost entirely on reception (knowledge, sustenance), the mother, at least in the case of the relationship, becomes almost entirely focused on aspects of provision. The mother's inclination towards care and provision of her infant is influenced by values of her own community, which in turn strengthens the infant's sense of wholeness not only with the mother, but also with the world outside of their immediate relationship. It is here that Erikson proposes the concept of Basic Trust stating,

> *The ontological source of faith and hope which thus emerges I have called a Sense of Basic Trust: it is the first and basic wholeness, for it seems to imply that the inside and the outside can be experienced as an interrelated goodness. Basic*

[149] Ibid., 162.
[150] Ibid., 162.
[151] Ibid., 162.

> *Mistrust, then, is the sum of all those diffuse experiences which are not somehow successfully balanced by the experience of integration.*[152]

The concept of *Basic Trust* proposed by Erikson appears to be the foundation for what will become a "healthy" and whole *identity* in the growth of the child. In opposition, *Basic Mistrust* will ultimately remain a static and contentious force in the growth of the child, surfacing in adulthood during times of stress. This, according to Erikson, is a normal facet of human life which is usually kept in check by the individual's sense of *Basic Trust.* Interestingly, the concept of *Basic Trust* alone is not always enough to fully override the experience of a lack of integration and wholeness that is embodied in *Basic Mistrust.* Instead, individuals will rely upon social structures to reinforce the former.

Erikson sees social institutions as playing a major role in the reinforcement of the concept of *Basic Trust,* in a sense becoming an extension of this infantile development. By participating in these institutions, the individual gains reassurance against the perturbation stemming from *Basic Mistrust.*[153] While his references to social institutions were generalized in this regard, Erikson quickly reveals the true focus as being on religion. Erikson argues the role of organized religion stating,

> *…makes comprehensible the vague subject matter contained in Basic Mistrust by giving it a metaphysical reality in the form of tangible Evil; and it offers to man by way of rituals a periodic collective restitution of faith and realism. In prayer man assures a superhuman power that (in spite of everything) he has remained trustworthy, and asks for a sign that he now may also continue to trust his deity.*[154]

[152] Ibid., 163.
[153] Ibid., 163-164.
[154] Ibid., 164.

This passage is important as it puts Erikson's concepts of *Basic Trust* and *Mistrust* into context, and clearly links them with the desire and in a way need for human's persistence in the participation of religion. Religion offers structure and meaning to both of these concepts, which due to their infantile development are often incomprehensible to the rational adult. It is the structure of religion at its core that seeks to unify *Trust* and *Mistrust* in the individual. Erikson states that, "*Religion restores, at regular intervals and through rituals significantly connected with the important crises of the life cycle and the turning points of the yearly cycle, a new sense of wholeness, of things rebound."*[155] The success of religion regarding the stabilization of *identity* can be understood through the cyclical recurrence in which the individual need not "leave" or search for an alternative social institution of the same caliber. Wholeness is then maintained or obtained by the conceptualization of *Basic Trust* and *Basic Mistrust* through the lens of religion, with *identity* solidifying in the process.

It is *identity* that becomes the focus of Erikson, who argues that young individuals must come to this sense of wholeness on their own terms.[156] This is the first point at which Erikson fully links his continued use of *"wholeness"* with his own conceptualization of *identity.* Here he summarizes stating,

> *…identity includes, but is more than the sum of, all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and was often forced to become, like the people he depended on. Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age-mates and with leader figures outside of the family.*[157]

[155] Ibid., 164.
[156] Ibid., 168.
[157] Ibid., 168.

Based upon this definition, *identity* is not necessarily static in its composition for a particular individual. Rather, it is a conglomeration of past *identities* leading to their present composition. These past and present *identities* are molded through interactions beginning with the family, then with authority figures and individuals of the same age range.

Adolescence is understood to be the most "volatile" stage in regards to *identity,* in which the individual undergoes a comprehensive self-evaluation and reorientation. This "search" as Erikson puts it can be understood as, *"…the persistent endeavor to define, to overdefine, and to redefine oneself and each other in often ruthless comparison."*[158] When an individual's self-definition becomes too difficult, whether due to personal or collective reasons, the result can be *Role Diffusion.*[159] It is the concept of *Role Diffusion* coined by Erikson, which resembles an individual's move toward conversion.

The conversion in this case is toward a totalitarian ideology, but offers much in the understanding of religious conversion. According to Erikson an individual in a state of *Role Diffusion*, *"…counterpoints rather than synthesizes his sexual, ethnic, occupational, and typological alternatives and is often driven to decide definitely and totally for one side or the other."*[160] This shift towards *totalism,* while spurred by the natural self-definition during adolescence, is also influenced by an individual's culture and society, often playing a large role in the shaping of the individual's *identity.*

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[158] Ibid., 168.

[159] Ibid., 168.

[160] Ibid., 168. The Shift towards *totalism* can be equated to the beginning stage of the conversion process understood by some as "love." As mentioned before this stage of love is integral to the individual's overall "success" in the conversion process, leading to a foundational understanding and the formation of the associated identity. When the individual becomes lost in this stage is where this concept of *totalism* sets in leading to an extreme ideology. In the case of Erikson, his use of *Role Diffusion* leading to *totalism* is negative in context.

Amongst other things, society's function is to guide and narrow an individual's choices.[161] Erikson points to puberty rites of more "primitive" societies and the *identity* formation stemming therein. In contrast, the "advancing" civilizations adopted spiritual alternatives "confirming" an individual's role in life.[162] Yet, he argues that youth have a tendency to revert to the more primitive means of initiation or rites of passage. Gangs, fraternities, and other social groups, as well as fads, hand gestures, and language, are cited as evidence for this youth's inclination for this type of self-defining social method.[163]

There is such a desire and need for acceptance and *identity* rigidity at this stage that adolescents often adopt a *negative identity* rather than none at all.[164] Erikson sees a greater prevalence of this *negative identity* in the "delinquent youth"[165] of large cities, as a response to the apparent absence of a foundation for the construction of a *positive identity* which is constrained due to economic, ethnic and religious marginalization.[166] Here Erikson argues that oftentimes the *negative identities* are reinforced by authority figures' acceptance of this as the youth's "natural" *identity* and an end of their potential growth in this regard. This ultimately leads the individual to embrace this *identity* in totality.[167] Erikson concludes his paper by summarizing the need and purpose of a *positive identity* stating,

> *In outbalancing the inner remnants of the original inequalities of childhood (and in outbalancing the dominance of the 'superego') a positive sense of identity permits the individual to forego irrational self-repudiation (the total prejudice against themselves which characterizes severe neurotics) as well as an irrational hate of otherness. Such identity, however, depends on the support which the young*

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161 Ibid., 168.
162 Ibid., 169.
163 Ibid., 169.
164 Ibid., 169.
165 Ibid., 169. Erikson defines these "delinquents" as addictive or homosexual.
166 Ibid., 169.
167 Ibid., 169.

individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to him: his class, his nation, his culture.[168]

A *positive identity* then allows an individual a healthy sense of security and self-esteem, which affects not only the livelihood of the individual but also the health of their social relationships outside of the sphere of their *identity.* Yet the acquisition of said *identity* does not rest solely on the individual alone; according to Erikson, it is heavily influenced by the culture and society of the individual as well as the support they receive from their authority figures.

Identity must be approached with all of this in mind, and in regards to religion can offer not only a glimpse into the interconnectivity between *identity* and spirituality, but also as a reflection of a particular culture and society. Based upon Erikson's work, conversion then can be understood as one of the many methods in which an individual seeks to gain this sense of wholeness described by him as the *Sense of Inner Identity.*

1.4.2 V. Bailey Gillespie:

In his book *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity,* V. Bailey Gillespie investigates the direct relationship between *conversion* and *identity,* where the line between the experiences of one and the other are often times blurred. The prominence of change is emphasized by Gillespie who states that, *"Both the experiences of religious conversion and personal identity formation have profound effects on the style of life and the actual perception of the importance of life."*[169] It is the shared outcome of change in both conversion and *identity* construction experiences that begs

[168] Ibid., 170.
[169] Gillespie, V. Bailey. *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change*. (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1979), ix.

the question, are these phenomena one and the same? Ultimately, he seeks to place the experiences of conversion and *identity* crises in a context in which both can be examined together, rather than prodded in isolation as they oftentimes are in other studies.

Gillespie begins by noting that the study of conversion is oftentimes seen as taboo, while psychological inquiries into the concept of *identity* are permissible, despite the prominence of *identity* in conversion studies. This hesitance towards the study of conversion is due in part to the very nature of the experience itself. The religious connotation of conversion deters many from pursuing a thorough investigation into the cause and motivation for change, despite its almost undisputable existence. Thus, while studies on *identity* construction and experiential change is more credibly weighted, the same cannot be said for studies on conversion in a similar case, simply because of the religious orientation.

Because of this, Gillespie feels it important to define the "religious experience" in a context in which both conversion and *identity* are being investigated. Due to the varied definitions of what it is to be "religious" and what constitutes a "religious experience," Gillespie favors a more inclusive and comprehensive definition. He states that, *"Religion involves the belief, the feelings, the process of becoming, and the content of faith…It is not just the feelings when one encounters the divine, yet is it not that as well?"*[170] Yet, this definition does not account for the source of the religious experience, and does very little in terms of offering an insight into the experience itself.[171] Gillespie offers a separate definition for "experience" in general stating,

> *…every experience, be it aesthetic, scientific, moral, or political, could have religious qualities. But 'religious' as a quality of experience signifies something that may belong to all these experiences. Therefore, all experiences are potentially*

[170] Ibid., 6.
[171] Ibid., 6.

> *religious and contain a possible religious dimension, since religion is a perspective on life and a quality given to the experience by one who experiences it.*[172]

His definition and understanding of an "experience" in general makes both a distinction and bridges the experiences of *identity* construction and conversion. So while an individual may experience change through *identity* construction incorporating religious qualities, this in and of itself is not necessarily a religious conversion experience. Yet, the prominence of both religion and *identity* in their respective experiences leads Gillespie to speculate a possible inherent connection between these two concepts. He argues his own view on conversion stating, "*...if a knowledge of Deity and man's relationship to others is enhanced, the experience will be actualizing in the life of the believer, growth will take place, and religious identity will be established, an important factor in identity formation….*"[173] For Gillespie, *identity* plays a large role in the conversion process and guides the individual towards the culmination of their experience.

Gillespie notes the various ways in which investigations of conversion are often pursued. Simplified, these approaches are as follows: defining its *essence* or *nature,* analyzing its *content,* and understanding its purpose or *function.*[174] For Gillespie, conversion and *identity* studies must apply definitions that are not restricting in reach, while at the same time not being so loosely defined to the extent that every applicable variable falls under its fold. When approaching the study of conversion, he notes that one must take into account the numerous variabilities within the experience. Gillespie argues that,

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[172] Ibid., 7.
[173] Ibid., 32.
[174] Ibid., 44.

> *It is important then to insist that there are many varieties of religious conversion experience and any definition that does not allow for the individual variations due to genetics, environment, tradition, or personality variables has negated an important fundamental point. Individuality, uniqueness, and separateness must be allowed.*[175]

He stresses that since the purpose of investigating conversion is not to prove or disprove the religious validity of the experience itself, the most applicable definition for the understanding of the conversion experience stresses both *function* and *process.*[176] Based upon these two concepts, Gillespie offers his own definition for what constitutes a "religious" conversion.

At its core, religious conversion is a type of change experienced by the individual convert. Yet, in the case of religious conversion, this change is composed of a particular set of elements that together helps to both identify the type of conversion and aids in the understanding of the process itself. According to Gillespie, the elements of religious conversion are as follows:

> *…(1) a unifying quality for self, which includes self-integration, wholeness, and possible reorganization; (2) a positive resultant function; (3) intensity of commitment to an ideology, usually thought of as occurring within the Christian tradition as a confrontation with ultimates, but may include change with any subjective religious quality; (4) includes a decisive 'change or returning to' brought on suddenly or gradually, seen as either instantaneous or incubational.*[177]

The *function* of the conversion process can be understood primarily through the first element of conversion above. The *function* itself has a deep connection with *identity* as can be seen by the tendency for feelings of wholeness and completion stemming from the conversion process. It is here that Gillespie links both the conversion and the individual's *identity*, seeing the latter playing a larger role in the process than many studies report.

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[175] Ibid., 45.
[176] Ibid., 46.
[177] Ibid., 47.

Referencing the studies of Erik Erikson involving adolescence and *identity* change, Gillespie fleshes out the "secular" side of conversion. The adolescent pursuit for a sense of wholeness and completion, oftentimes accompanied by a resulting reconstruction of the individual's *identity,* is strikingly similar to the conversion experience both in result and process. This search for *identity* is in many ways dependent upon an ideological solution to the current state of the individual which is influenced by the social context of their environment.[178] This ideological essentialism is integral to the stability of adolescent *identity*, just as is the ideological position of the religious conversion. It is the overlap between ideological necessity and *identity* that leads Gillespie to believe that they are experientially one and the same.

The change experienced in both *identity* and conversion processes are almost identical in their outcome. Gillespie argues that, *"One might say, then that religious conversion experience and identity experience are alike, even perhaps the very same experience, in fact."*[179] The difference between them is the religious aspect of the experience itself. Gillespie notes that while *identity* is an integral component of all religious conversions, *identity* experiences do not always incorporate a religious ideology.[180] The *function* of the conversion process, being the overall sense of unification and desired wholeness, has a direct connection to conflict resolution. Gillespie argues that, *"When we look at the two experiences themselves, both are framed, molded, and shaped by the actual manifestation of conflict and tension. These factors always exist in the midst of crises."*[181] These conflicts manifest themselves in existential questions, such as *"Who am I?"* and *"What is my purpose?"* driving the individual towards change.[182] The change experienced as

[178] Ibid., 186-187.
[179] Ibid., 188.
[180] Ibid., 188.
[181] Ibid., 192.
[182] Ibid., 192-193.

a result of a religious conversion will ultimately take place in the core of the individual's *identity.* Thus, the outcome and even the purpose of religious conversions, fundamentally, will be a form of *identity* reconstruction.

Gillespie concludes by presenting the four areas which offer evidence to the theory that these experiences are the same phenomena. First, the nature of conflict resolution in both conversion and *identity* experiences allow for meaningful change affecting ideology, behavior, and ego processes.[183] Second, he cites the "*functional relationships"* between religious conversion and identity formation, including the processes connected to the ego.[184] Third, the similar relationships in regards to the nature of the experienced crises, as well as the resulting sense of unification stemming from conflict resolution. Fourth, the homogeneous context of both experiences offers insights into the connection between identity and religion, and the role of adolescence in both.[185] For Gillespie, it is clear that these experiences are of equal caliber, and if one wishes to understand the phenomena of conversion, the concept of *identity* must be taken into account. For while the study of *identity* can be approached in a strictly secular manner, the same cannot be done for the study of religious conversion. *Identity* then, is the key to unlocking the motivations for, and the purposes of, the conversion process and ultimately the reasoning behind an individual's chosen *destination*.

[183] Ibid., 200.
[184] Ibid., 200.
[185] Ibid., 201.

2.0 METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The above four theoretical approaches to the study of conversion were chosen specifically for the purposes of this current case, each offering their own unique perspective on the conversion process. As I have stated previously and despite the merits of each theoretical field, no one theory can truly account for the conversion phenomena as a whole. Due to the prominence of *identity* as a variable in each of their findings, *identity* is arguably the most important factor of the conversion process. While many of the aforementioned studies do in fact address the prominence of *identity,* they oftentimes lose sight of the basis of what they are investigating, namely the purpose of conversion in general. Even when the studies were specific as to their primary directive e.g., *"why does one go where they do?"* the concept of *identity* is not given the weight it deserves, even when evidence of such a correlation appears in the research. I argue that it is *identity* which ultimately answers many of the questions raised in each of these studies, my own included, and it is the relationship between *identity* and religion that will shed light on the reasoning for a particular *destination.* Yet, there are multiple factors which contribute to the conversion process and, while I believe *identity* is the most important contributing factor, it is important to acknowledge and address the variables of the conversion process as they appeared throughout the various studies.

Conflict and *tension* were paramount in the early studies of conversion and currently remain as an important focal point in many studies of conversion. While the prominence of conflict itself is telling in regards to the conversion process, it only ever serves to illuminate the motivations that may drive an individual towards conversion. The psychoanalytical perspective of conversion is equally as controversial as it is helpful in the understanding of these motivational drives. While

lending an important perspective from the field of psychology, the Freudian baggage it brings with it hinders an approach to the understanding of conversion that is not psychopathological oriented.

The focus upon the conversion process' purpose as a psychological defense mechanism loses sight of any alternative benefits that may have greater corollary weight. It is hard to argue with both Salzman's and Ullman's findings though, much of which does indicate a higher level of stress prior to and concurring the conversion process. Specifically, Ullman's findings situated the conversion event as a means for the alleviation of experienced anxieties. Moreover, these prior conflicts tended to have parental connections, such as the majority of converts in both their studies having strained relationships with the father. While this does appear to play a role in the motivational drive towards conversion, it does not account for the particular *destination.* Salzman supports this claim, making it clear the intent of his investigation is not in this direction when he states that, *"In a religious sense, then, it matters not where the person went, but what moved him to go, and why he went where he did."*[186] The issue with this position is that it overgeneralizes the conversion process, only focusing on an initial variable which, in isolation, does not help to explain the particulars of the conversion process.

While the prevalence of *conflict* and *tensions* is striking, within the psychoanalytical field these occurrences are often viewed as if existing in a vacuum. In these cases, apparent conflicts were not compared with similar cases, which did not result in a religious conversion. So while there is data to support that *conflict* and *tensions* do indeed increase the likelihood for the individual to undergo a religious conversion, it is not a conclusive variable in the understanding of a given *destination* for the conversion process. While the psychoanalytical perspective on the role of

[186] Salzman, *The Psychology of Religious and Ideological Conversion,* 178.

conflict offers little to this current study, *conflict* in general does serve as a catalyst for the conversion process.

The appearance of *conflict* in the conversion narrative is well documented by each of the presented studies, and for many individuals, these conflicts have either emotional or psychological repercussions. Lofland and Stark's inquiry into the individuality of the conversion process and the motivational drives of a given case placed a greater emphasis on the *context* of said *conflict* and *tension.* Their study presents similar findings as to the level and occurrence of tensions appearing to drive an individual towards conversion. In their case, the individuals generally experienced tensions that were, to the observer, not as tenuous a situation as the caused stress levels seemed to represent. Moreover, the tensions arising were primarily economic or social conflicts based upon an individual's own "failed" aspirations.

The *context* or the circumstances of the conversion process has a deep-seated connection to the *destination* of a given conversion experience. Lofland & Starks own investigation sought to uncover the motivational factors that may drive an individual towards converting to a particular faith. They state that, *"The continual emergence of tiny cults and sects in western industrial nations makes it clear, however, that sometimes persons relinquish a more widely held perspective for an unknown, obscure and often, socially devalued one."*[187] In their study, the relinquishing of a more socially "acceptable" faith perspective by an individual as a result of conversion, closely resembles the instances of individuals converting to Islam in the United States.

The *context* as it applies to Lofland and Stark's case study was seen as both the level of *tension* as experienced by the convert, and the proximity to the particular *destination.* While

[187] Lofland & Stark, *Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,* 862.

tensions played a large role in the drive towards conversion, it was the consistent presence of the cultist group, *The Divine Precepts,* which offered the support that these individuals required. Thus, the presence of alternative perspectives within the *environment*, as well as their availability to the individual, will affect the *destination* of the conversion experience. Rambo also addresses the scholarly oversight when it comes to taking into account the *context* of the conversion process. As stated previously, he notes that the reason for this in general is that, *"We have a tendency to split the person and the environment."*[188] This separation is extremely damaging to a thorough investigation of the motivational drives, let alone the conversion process in general. Ultimately, the qualities of both the *environment* and the *destination* will factor into the rationale behind a specific outcome of the conversion process. What alternative beliefs are prevalent in the *environment* of the convert, and what do these beliefs offer that their previous faith did not? Understanding the factors behind this question will bring us closer to understanding the tendency towards a particular destination.

Environmental factors are prevalent in both the works of Juster and Nieuwkerk, each of their studies incorporating a gender dynamic into the study of conversion. Juster in particular addresses the importance of both the *context* and *environment* in her study, in which gender was found to be a crucial variable defining the conversion narrative. Her statement that, *"...the conversion narrative is as much a cultural mirror as a personal statement..."*[189] reinforces not only the importance of contextual scrutiny regarding the conversion process, but how the narrative itself may offer clues as to the *environmental* effects upon the conversion experience.

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[188] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion,* 166.

[189] Juster, *"In a Different Voice": Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America*, 35.

Based upon her findings, she concluded that the particular thematic construction of the conversion narratives was due primarily to the prominence of gender dynamics and the cultural resistance to *authority* within the environment of the converts. Juster's findings provide important evidence giving greater weight to the role of *context* in the conversion process. In addition, the prominence of resistance to *authority* within the conversion narrative points to a desire for an increased sense of *agency.* The individual's choice in conversion gave them control over not just their spiritual *destination,* but, to a greater extent, their social security. Thus, the conversion itself served as a means for individual's to break socio-cultural boundaries that inhibited their physical livelihood. The environment of these individuals ultimately influenced the reconceptualization of the self, and I argue that it is the desire for an *identity* that can reconcile the beliefs of the individual and those of their *environment,* that drives this conversion.

This brings us to the epitome of the conversion process, which I believe is the ultimate guiding force behind conversion in general, that being the desire for self-composed sense of *identity.* Erik Erikson has contributed immensely to the theoretical understanding of *identity,* and in many ways, he was the founder of the modern conception of *identity* theory. In particular, his proposed concept of *"identity crises"* was connected with a loss of a sense of *"...personal sameness and historical continuity."*[190] The individuals experiencing these *identity crises* had been exposed to an *environment* in which certain factors destabilized their sense of self, and the static place of their *identity.* This is evidence of a reactive conception of *identity,* one that undergoes change in response to present *environmental* factors. It is here that we may conclude that a defense mechanism does in fact exist, not in the purpose of religious conversion itself, but *identity's* characteristic of malleability and adaptability. In a sense then, the psychoanalytical perspective of

[190] Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. (New York: W.W. Norton &, 1994), 17.

conversion's defensive purposes is partly true, in that the conversion process itself exists as a result for the need of a defined *identity.* It is the adaptability of *identity* that allows for the search and means of restructuring to better suit the individual's *environment*. Yet, if we wish to understand *"why one went where they did",* we must look to both the *context* and the *environmental* factors of a particular conversion narrative.

The vast majority of the research and studies on conversion listed previously were focused primarily on conversion within or to the Christian tradition. There is little research on conversion between traditions, and even less so regarding conversion to and from Islam in particular. Despite this lack of research, the studies that are available provide the basis for a model which may be applied to conversion regarding Islam. While it can be assumed that similarities exist between the types of conversion listed previously and conversion between traditions, the *context* and *environment* play a much greater role when Islam becomes the focus.

2.1 THE GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE

The single most common question I have come across regarding conversion to Islam is, *"why would anyone willingly convert to another religion, let alone Islam?"* I had found the sense of aversion or uneasiness towards the act of conversion and particularly Islam, to be quite telling as to the level of knowledge many have on the subject. There is a sense of "alien-ness" for lack of a better term, which I feel accounts for this antipathy both in regards to the act of conversion itself and the given *destination,* in this case Islam. For many, conversion is an uncomfortable topic due in part due to the private nature of religion and spirituality, as well as the shift in ideology which some may perceive as a form of abandonment or failure in upholding values, on behalf of those who are witness to the conversion.

Given the *context* and *environment* of the United States, when Islam is the *destination* for conversion, the religious aspect is viewed much more negatively with the ideological shift being perceived as a form of radicalization. Yet, both conversion and Islam have existed as a part of the United States since its founding, each contributing socially and culturally. Despite these contributions, the relatively small population of Muslims residing in the United States being only 1% of the population as of 2015(3.3 million)[191], means that many Americans have no proximity to Islam leading to a lack of knowledge regarding the religion in total. With a low knowledge base regarding Islam and a social resistance towards conversion, it would appear that *environment* for conversion between traditions would not be conducive. Yet, it is occurring and as of 2011 according to a Pew Research Center poll, an astounding 20% of the Muslim American population

[191] Mohamed, Besheer. *"A new estimate of the U.S. Muslim population."* Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (January 6, 2016). http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/ (accessed March 9, 2017).

are converts from another faith tradition.[192] This 20% conversion ratio within the American Muslim population is consistent with the 20% ratio of the general U.S. population being converts which was reported in 2007.[193] With new data reporting that the American Muslim population is expected to double by 2050, the current 660,000 Muslim American converts could jump to 1.3 million in number. This begs the question, is there a correlation between the lack of knowledge regarding Islam and the seemingly large portion of converts composing the American Muslim population? Does religious proximity and public favorability play a role in individual's embrace of Islam? Ultimately, what was the rationale that led this portion of the population to Islam, when there exists more "socially acceptable" options for conversion?

Since the events of September 11th 2001, Muslims residing in Western countries, and Islam in general, received a vast spike in attention for better or for worse. Due to the perpetrator's affiliations with terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, and the ensuing "War on Terror" Islam came to be depicted by many as the antithesis of Western values. On April 15th 2013, the nation would again be tested with the Boston Marathon bombing. Islam once again came into the public eye. With the declaration of the Caliphate by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi only a year later, and the ensuing success of the terrorist organization, much of what the American public would come to know of Islam would be directly associated with these events.

Unsurprisingly, the terror attacks of 9/11 sparked increased levels of "positive or neutral" public curiosity. This type of interest may have initially been spurred by fear or anger, but would settle into a positive or neutral position on Islam, as the individuals were able to separate the terror

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192 *"Section 2: Religious Beliefs and Practices."* In *Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism.* Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 30, 2011). http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-2-religious-beliefs-and-practices/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

193 Ibid.

attack from the religion itself. At the same time, it served to reinforce an already negative reception of Muslims and Islam. Regardless as to the initial emotions driving this interest, the curiosity itself had apparently led to an increase of inquiries amongst individuals, in some cases leading to conversion. Despite a lack of concrete numbers as to extent of an increase in conversion rates in the United States post 9/11, this event amongst others would introduce and reintroduce Islam to millions of Americans.

A poll conducted in August of 2010 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life reports that most Americans know very little about the religion of Islam.[194] In regards to the extent of knowledge and understanding of Islam, of the 1003 adults surveyed 30% of the respondents reported they "do not know very much" with 25% reporting they "know nothing at all." On the positive end of the spectrum, 35% reported saying they "know some" with 9% reportedly knowing "a great deal."

There does appear to be "positive" changes in public awareness since November 2001. There was a 3% increase in those who reported knowing "a great deal" from 6% in 2001 to 9% in 2010. Those who reported to "know some" increased by 3% as well, from 32% to 35% in 2001 and 2010 respectively. This shows a 6% net increase on the positive end of the spectrum. The most drastic change is the decline in the percentage of those who "do not know very much," falling 7% from 37% in November 2001 to 30% in August of 2010. Finally, those who reported to "know nothing at all" increased from 24% in 2001 to 25% in 2010.[195] This data does show a slight elevation in the level of knowledge regarding Islam but unfortunately, the "positive" increase does

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194 *"Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam."* Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 24, 2010). http://www.pewforum.org/2010/08/24/public-remains-conflicted-over-islam/ (accessed March 10, 2017).
195 Ibid.

not necessitate a positive reception, nor does it determine whether the proclaimed levels of knowledge are factually sound.

Despite this slight increase in knowledge, the favorability ratings of Islam have actually decreased overtime. According to an analysis of the 2010 Pew Research Center data, those reporting a "favorable" opinion of Islam decreased from 41% in July of 2005 to 30% in August of 2010.[196] While those reporting an "unfavorable" opinion increased only by 2% from 36% in 2005 to 38% in 2010, those reporting they "don't know" increased from 23% to 32% in 2005 to 2010 respectively.[197] This data regarding favorability in conjunction with the data regarding the level of expressed public knowledge appears to show that as individuals reportedly become more informed, 9% became indecisive as to their expressed opinion appearing as a negative trend. Again, we cannot discern whether this increase in knowledge is factually based, as the survey itself is based on the opinion of the surveyed individual's own self-assessment as to their level of knowledge regarding Islam.

We might hypothesize that the correlation between an increase in "knowledge" and a decrease in "favorability" may be attributed to the outlet in which individuals receive their information regarding Islam. More likely than not, most individuals will retrieve information from media outlets rather than scholarly sources. If one only gains information regarding Islam from media outlets, which generally depicts Islam in a negative light[198], those harboring negative views will have their beliefs reinforced, while those with no stance or "favorable" opinions may be led

196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Bridge Initiative Team. *"New Study Analyzes Media Coverage of Islam Over Time."* Bridge.Georgetown.edu. (April 24, 2015). http://bridge.georgetown.edu/new-study-analyzes-media-coverage-of-islam-over-time/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

to question their previously positive or neutral stance leading to an increase in those reporting they "don't know."

This data offers insight into both the *context* and *environment* for those converting to Islam in the United States. On the one hand, generally low levels of public knowledge regarding Islam means that for individuals who convert, many will most likely do so through an investigative process or *active inquiry*, where knowledge of their particular *destination* is gathered on an active and rational basis. Moreover, the individuals will most likely have some form of contact or proximity to Islam in their surrounding *environment,* outside of the exposure by media or negative influences. Due to the low levels of knowledge, difficulties may arise in communicating and legitimizing their decision for conversion, potentially isolating individuals within their own community. On the other hand, further evidence supports the active investigative process, resulting in a decrease in levels of favorability towards Islam correlating with both an increase in public knowledge, as well as an increase in levels of neutral favorability. While initially appearing as a negative trend, it may in fact be this state of neutrality that promotes greater levels of what I will refer to as a state of *active inquiry,* and in turn conversion.

It is my belief that as a whole, non-convert individuals who harbor a neutral favorability towards Islam are more likely to convert than those who hold a favorable or unfavorable view. For non-converts holding a favorable view of Islam, the state of an *active inquiry* has most likely passed, and if they still remain non-converts with a favorable opinion there is little evidence to suggest an intent to convert. Similarly, non-converts with an unfavorable view of Islam will also most likely have already passed through a state of *active inquiry.* For these individuals, their unfavorable view of Islam will likely be reinforced by the generally negative depiction of Islam within the *environment,* making conversion extremely unlikely. Interestingly, while a shift from

either a state of positive or negative favorability, towards a state of neutral favorability indicates some level of *active inquiry*, it also appears to show some semblance of an ideological shift on a particular matter. This "ideological shift" may in fact indicate an individual's tendency towards conversion, in that the individual is engaged in *active inquiry* and thus potentially open to change. However, simply engaging in a form of *active inquiry* does not necessitate an openness to change to the extent that is brought about by the conversion process. Rather, there must exist some form of *conflict* on behalf of the individual leading to and concurrent to the process of *active inquiry,* for conversion to be a possibility.

Islam may be unique, due to the *environmental context* of the conversions, in the way that *conflict* is presented and the way it manifests in the conversion process. It is important then to address *conflict* as it pertains to conversion to Islam in its current *context.* Both the low levels of knowledge and the lower favorability ratings regarding Islam, as well as Islam's emphasis on its Middle Eastern origins, position it in the *context* of the United States as something new and "exotic." Equal is our curiosity and fear of that which is "unknown" or "foreign," or that which we are told shy away from. Oftentimes this curiosity or fear is strong enough to drive an individual on a quest for knowledge, with the end goal being "ownership" or "domination." Under certain circumstances and during this process of *active inquiry,* if the individuals themselves are presented with a *conflict* or an answer to an ongoing *conflict* by the knowledge gained regarding a particular *destination,* an ideological shift may occur.

The *destination,* in this case Islam, may present the individual with a "new world perspective," dredging up dormant issues affecting the individual that they may have been unaware existed. This "new world perspective" may also offer answers to ongoing and apparent issues already acknowledged by the individual to which Islam then becomes associated as providing a

means of reconciliation. Due to the *context* of the *conflict* and its effect on the individual's worldly perspective, the individual may undergo a form of *identity crisis.*[199] It is during this *identity crisis* that the individual assesses and reassesses their environmental and social standing, redefining himself or herself in contrast. Islam in this instance will serve to ground the individual during this conflictual state, remaining as one of the necessary static elements of the conversion process.

This more generalized theory based upon the various work of others presented above serves as a model in the understanding of *"why one went where they did"* at least in regards to Islam. As we have seen, there is a multiplicity of factors which influence the drive and outcome of a given conversion process, the most important of which is the *context* of a given conversion. Yet, I would argue that the second if not equally as important factor to the conversion process is the role of *gender* which greatly overlaps with aspects of *identity.*

As we have seen in the work of Juster, *gender* and *identity* played an extremely large role in the conversion process for both women and men. Similarly, van Nieuwkerk reported that gender narratives were present in many of the conversion testimonials, with *gender* appearing to play an underlying role in the narratives even when they did not specifically report a gender dynamic. While both of these authors focused primarily on *gender* and incorporated female conversion accounts, one might argue the inevitability that a gendered discourse would arise. Yet, it is precisely the existence of such a discourse, particularly in the narratives of female converts, that legitimizes their conversion and signifies a potential *conflict,* offering an insight into the *context* of said conversion. I will offer my own theory based upon the works presented and tuned specifically for this current case. It is here that I will turn back to the *rational question* I proposed

[199] See Erik Erikson's explanation of *identity crises* and its connection with a loss of historical continuity.

at the beginning of this paper; *what leads an individual to convert, and remain steadfast in their beliefs, even when doing so is not conducive to their societal wellbeing?*

In the case where the individual moves outside of their previous religion[200], their previous religion may be seen as either allowing or partaking in the beliefs which negatively affect their *identity*.[201] Thus, *"culturally-distinct*[202]*"* alternatives are seen as "unadulterated" in their current context. Because the *culturally-distinct* alternative is not bound by its normative cultural practices due to the residing context,[203] nor is it the overwhelming majority tradition which can be linked with the residing cultural practice or beliefs that negatively affect the convert, the *culturally-distinct* alternative serves as a "sanctuary" in which a reconstruction of *identity* may take place. This is reflected by the steady rational approach many converts to Islam engage in prior to conversion due to the societal opposition to such a decision. This self-imposed form of a gradual conversion process allows for a greater understanding of the self both prior to and post conversion. In this case, while converts are known to "act out" their religious choice appearing more pious dependent on the stage of conversion, the outward projection of Muslim converts' religiosity may be less of a spiritual/political statement, and more of an expression of their *identity*.[204]

Identity reconstruction therefore may correlate with "minority" groups, as in many cases these groups are affected more so by culturally negative beliefs where the prospective convert can

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200 E.g., moving from Christianity to Islam.

201 E.g., some may argue that, as a "Judeo-Christian Nation" Christianity has apparently not done enough to remedy the status of women and minorities.

202 Islam in this case is perceived as 'culturally distinct' due to its small presence, as well as the low levels of public knowledge regarding Islam. This coupled with the confrontational approach towards Islam within American politics gives one the sense that the United States is not the "natural home" for Islam.

203 In the United States, there is a greater level of cultural separation from Islam's place of origin. In that while individuals may appear to convert to a form of "cultural Islam" by taking on the hijab, the fact remains that Islam in the United States is much more moderate and less likely to be influenced by cultural practices oftentimes interwoven with Islamic doctrine.

204The argument then, that by partaking in veiling the individual is reinforcing the oppression of women, actually overlooks and undermines the agency and identity of the individual who wishes to don the hijab.

more easily associate. Thus, were an individual to convert to the "normative majority" *identity* reconstruction would occur in the same format, as the "majority" becomes the *culturally-distinct* alternative in the *context* of the individual's prior "minority status," in which certain beliefs negatively affected their *identity*.[205]

For female converts in the United States, the *conflict* will most likely be influenced by *environmental* factors as was seen in Juster's work, taking on a more gendered discourse. Despite the progress made in terms of gender equality in the United States, patriarchal norms have become institutionalized affecting the conception of gender roles and in turn individual *identity.* Social and economic movement for women, while indeed much easier than in the past, is still limited in certain aspects. As Juster had discovered, the female converts experienced greater levels of social, political, and economic mobility than their non-convert counterparts, superseding the societally imposed gender boundaries. Social boundaries and limitations regarding gender do still exist, and there is no evidence that societal expectations on gender would not remain an influential factor in the current case.

Both the concepts of gender and *identity* are arguably inseparable, with each being a *contextual* construct based upon the individual's own self-perception, in relation to perception of themselves by others in their *environment.* In the case where a sense of congruence falters in the contact of these inward and outward perceptions *conflict* arises. The incorporation of gender into the conversion dynamic, which has until recently been rarely pursued, is in a sense a "fourth dimension" for conversion theories. The question often asked in regards to conversion is simply *"why?"* Yet, when gender is involved, there seems to be a raised sense of emphasis and urgency

[205] E.g. Conversion from Islam to Christianity within the United States. In this case, the individual moves from a "minority" religious group to a "majority" religious group. Christianity would be seen as *culturally distinct* in the *context* of the individual's conversion despite its "majority" status.

changing the question to become *"WHY?!"* Interestingly, the need to rationalize this *"WHY?!"* regarding female conversion has led many I have spoken with to offer answers to their own question such as, *"…they must have been forced…"* or *"…clearly a man must have been involved… ."* These individual self-proposed answers appear more often than one might think, and one can verify with very little effort that it is a commonly held and widespread belief.

What is most striking about this belief is not the individuals' assumptions of male dominance in Islam, but rather, it is the apparent absence of any sort recognition of personal *agency* on behalf of the female converts. The assumption that female converts had no choice in their conversion and were subjected to male domination, projects a societal belief of a frail weak female gender, which is inherently influenced by the decision making process of the opposite gender; ultimately implying the status of a *follower* rather than a *leader*. This is not just a contextually based answer arising from the connection between Islam, conversion, and gender; it is in fact a projection of the societal expectations regarding the level of *agency* a woman is supposed to maintain, anything more is something out of the norm. While there are cases of conversion due to marriage in the United States, the underlying theme in the conversion narrative is *love* rather than *fear,* and the *agency* of the women is an integral factor even in conversion linked to marriage. For many women who convert to Islam in the United States, the answer to those who would question their reasoning for conversion would answer with a resounding, *"Because I can."*

3.0 VOICES OF AGENCY

The best way to understand conversion is to hear it from individuals themselves. While the primary focus of this paper is on the social aspects of conversion, the spiritual aspect is equally important. Due to the abstract nature that often characterizes spirituality, it is difficult to gauge its level of influence on the conversion narrative. By this I mean that it is difficult to discern a truly spiritual experience versus the mundane which is ascribed a spiritual purpose, it is not my intent to differentiate these experiences of the conversion narrative, for who am I to define what is truly spiritual? It is the answer to the *rational question* for which I am searching, and it is from the conversion narratives of other converts where I believe I will find it.

As we have seen from van Nieuwkerk's work on female conversion, online narratives are generally more homogenous in their construction than were the face-to-face interviews. While we must be aware of the fact that the anonymity of the internet may affect the conversion narrative, the manner in which the internet is utilized should also be taken into account. While van Nieuwkerk's use of internet testimonials appeared to show a lack individuality, the majority of these testimonials were from websites which specifically focused on promoting conversion narratives to spread awareness. Why does this matter? For one, while the sites themselves are well intentioned, it is difficult to discern whether these narratives had already existed online and were then promoted on a conversion testimony website, or if the websites themselves reached out to individuals asking them to offer their own story. If it is the latter, which I believe may most often be the case, then individuals may craft a narrative based upon thematic elements that they perceive as being well accepted within the conversion community, thus making the conversion narratives

appear homogeneous by design. Ultimately, this is what van Nieuwkerk had issue with in regards to the utilization of online conversion narratives. Yet, it may have been the internet medium, in this case websites and collections dedicated to conversion narratives, which led to a more homogenous construction, not the anonymity of the Internet itself. Moreover, even when the use of these websites are necessary, the homogenous construction of the narratives may in fact not just be a shared narrative composition, rather it may be that these individuals do indeed share a common experience that has previously been overlooked in previous research.

The Internet is a space where conversation is easily accessible and dialogues are easily formed. While testimonial websites are often linear in their presentation of conversion narratives, Internet platforms fostering conversation may provide the least "homogenous" narrative forms, and are equally as accessible. Thus, I will be attempting to utilize platforms such as Reddit[206] in conjunction with the testimonial websites, in order to analyze conversion narratives posted in a more conversational format. It is from this means of a conversational exchange between individuals that expect to see a reduction in the homogeneity within the given narrative.

3.1 MEREDITH & MARY

In a Reddit post titled *"I love sisterhood in the deen!"* an individual going by the username MeredithofArabia offers her own experiences as a Caucasian female convert.[207] She begins by emphasizing the inclusionary nature of Islam, after forming a bond with Somali Muslims at an all-

[206] Reddit is an online communication forum where specific topics and subjects are initiated and discussed by the users themselves.

[207] MeredithofArabia. *"I love sisterhood in the deen!"* Reddit.com. (December 11, 2014). https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/2oz8jv/i_love_sisterhood_in_the_deen/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

female gym. She notes that despite her being a convert she was treated no differently stating, "*They are so nice to me, and it doesn't matter that I'm very light skinned and they are very dark skinned. We are united by our deen, and it's wonderful. Sisterhood in Islam is a beautiful concept."*[208] Her focus on the concept of "sisterhood" seems to point to both the concepts of *gender* and *identity* playing a role in the individual's interactions as a convert. Her initial posting leads to a conversation between herself and another female convert whose account appears to have been deleted. For the purposes of this interaction, MeredithofArabia will be referred to as Meredith, while the anonymous respondent will be referred to as Mary. Meredith soon discloses to another anonymous respondent that she converted from Catholicism to Islam during college and had the support of her university's Muslim Student Association, as well as having the support of her numerous Muslim friends.

Later in her conversation, Meredith states that her initial interests in Islam can be attributed to her learning the Arabic language as a senior in high school. She states that,

> *My journey started through the Arabic language. I love languages and began taking Arabic in a sweet post secondary program when I was a senior in high school. Arabic quickly became my love, despite how difficult it is. I decided I would major in Arabic in college, which I did along with international studies. I realized Arabic had a pretty significant connection with Islam, so I figured I should know at least the basics. To my great surprise, I found that Islam had in common with Catholicism what I already believed and corrected the things I disagreed with.*[209]

Due to the brevity of this conversation and the information she provides, it is difficult to pinpoint the drive towards her conversion to Islam. Her attachment to the Arabic language in her adolescent years may signal the incorporation of language as part of her *identity.* Further evidence to this can

[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.

be seen in the continuation of the Arabic language program prior to her showing any interest in Islam. Only after she made the connection between her passion for the Arabic language and Islam does there appear to be an *active inquiry* into the religion itself.

While there does not appear to be mention of a *conflict* that may have prompted her conversion, there is evidence that there was potentially the existence of conflictual beliefs. Meredith mentions that she had found that she was surprised to find that Islam corresponded to the beliefs she already held as a Catholic, and "*corrected"* those that she had disagreed with. This statement is important as it seems to support the theory that the *context* of conversion to Islam in the United States incorporates *identity* to a greater extent than conversions to other *destinations.* Rather than correcting and individualizing the beliefs she had disagreed, remaining within Catholicism, Meredith moved towards a set of beliefs that were similar yet absent of these disagreements. One might assume that socially, it would be easier to adjust one's beliefs in their current *context,* rather than moving towards an alternative as "extreme" as conversion. Yet, this may not be the case, and depending on the severity of disagreements within the individual's held beliefs, a total reconstruction of beliefs may in fact be easier for the individual to manage.

The topic of conversion to Islam as a Western taboo arises, offering a glimpse into the potential disagreements Meredith held,

> *My family was more than miffed. They were distraught. My mom was upset because of the beliefs themselves, rejecting the trinity and divinity of Christ. My dad was upset for more superficial reasons. He thought the whole thing was embarrassing. He didn't want to be seen with me in a scarf, fearing the assumptions [people] would have about him. Rather selfish, [in my opinion], but whatever.*[210]

[210] Ibid.

Here Meredith reports the reaction of her parents to her conversion, with the rejection of the Trinity and divinity of Christ being the only mention of a specific *conflict* with her new beliefs. Despite these areas of tension, Meredith notes that her mother had come to accept her new beliefs, even catering to them on specific holidays.

Similarly to Meredith, Mary had converted in college as well, also having the contact with her university's Muslim Student Association. Yet, these appear to be the only apparent similarities between their reported accounts. In response to Meredith's posting in regards to her family's reception of her conversion, Mary writes,

> *My family really didn't care too much [to be honest]. I moved out when I was 16. I had already been pretty independent in terms of what I did and where I went for awhile. I started studying Islam as a student with no intention to convert…They thought it was a little strange at first, [They] wanted to know if I was going to move to [Saudi Arabia]…funny stuff like that. They have come to respect my faith a lot though. My family is very non-religious. I think they saw Islam as something stable in my life, which for a long time I had no stability. I lived a lifestyle very at odds with my spiritual nature, and I think they saw that.*[211]

Unlike Meredith, Mary is of a non-religious background which is apparent in that there is very little mention of religious themes in her narrative. In the case of Mary, we do not get much insight into the decision making as to her choice to convert to Islam. Her independence at such a young age may play a role in the initial drive towards conversion, but Islam cannot be easily placed within this *context.* In fact, Islam only appears in her narrative as a source of study during her university education. Also unlike Meredith, Mary did not have any proximity to the Arabic language, something that appears to have influenced Meredith's decision in converting to Islam.

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[211] Anonymous. *"I love sisterhood in the deen!"* Reddit.com. (December 11, 2014). https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/2oz8jv/i_love_sisterhood_in_the_deen/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

Interestingly, Mary seems to have been surprised by her conversion when compared with Meredith's stating, "*I'm pretty surprised that I converted [to be honest]. If you would have told me that I would have converted to a monotheistic religion I would have laughed at you. It's weird like that. It really speaks to some people."*[212] While there may have been other factors influencing both of these women's conversions, the only real similarity in their cases is their conversion occurring in college, which was preceded by a period of study focusing on Islam itself. While the impact of societal environmental factors is not immediately apparent, the fact that Islam was the focus of their study is important. This alone does appear to support the theory that an individual in the state of *active inquiry,* regarding an unfamiliar set of beliefs, may be subjected to knowledge leading to a change in worldly perception, leading to an incorporation of these new beliefs into their *identity.* Yet, the study of Islam alone is not an indication that one will convert or even intends to; rather the individual must be in a state that is open to a shift in ideology.

3.2 BETH

In a separate forum post on Reddit, another white female convert to Islam offers a brief narrative, before she opens for questions to the "public." Going by the user name imannnnnn, who will now be referred to as Beth, states that she is from a Midwest town, and was not raised in a religious household.[213] Beth offers an interesting description of both the *context* and *environment* of her conversion stating,

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[212] Ibid.

[213] imannnnnn. "*IamA white American female, hijab-wearing convert to Islam. AMA!"* Reddit.com. (July 8, 2014). https://www.reddit.com/r/casualiama/comments/2a4qq8/iama_white_american_female_hijabwearing_convert/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

> *Town is mostly Baptist Christian, as is a lot of the surrounding area. Went to college in a much larger city hours away from home, interacted with Muslims. Took up a Religious Studies minor, enrolled in a number of classes about religion, one of them being Islam. Spent two years investigating Islam and began learning Arabic, eventually deciding to do a double major and add the Arabic language.*[214]

Despite not being raised in a religious household, her surrounding *environment* was religiously oriented. Yet, it appears that moving away from her religiously "homogenous" *environment* to one that is more religiously diverse was an extremely important factor in her drive towards conversion. This new *environment* offered a proximity to Islam that was almost entirely absent from the *environment* of her upbringing. Without the influence of former environmental expectations, the opportunity to explore alternative faiths was less restricted.

Again, it appears that interactions with other Muslims is a prominent factor in the conversion processes thus far, with Beth's being no exception. In line with both Meredith and Mary, Beth would enter a state of *active inquiry* going so far as to structure her college studies around this investigation. The Arabic language also appears to play a large role in Beth's decision, culminating in her conversion. She notes that, *"In the summer of 2010 I converted to Islam. After graduating in 2012, I traveled to the United Arab Emirates and worked on my MA there in a city near Dubai. I am currently back in the US."*[215] Her initial investigation of Islam culminated in not just her conversion, but in her educational decision-making processes. The extent to which the outcome of Beth's conversion shaped the direction of her life appears to support the theory that conversion itself has a deep-seated connection with *identity.*

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214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.

While *conflict* is not initially apparent in her reported narrative, there does appear to be a disagreement with previously held beliefs. When asked by an anonymous poster if she believed in the doctrine of Islam, or whether the attraction to Islam was due to similarities with her previously held beliefs, she responded as follows:

> *Yes, I do. 100%. Hard to show that online, or even in person I guess. For me, what it basically came down to was that I believed in God, and if I was going to be part of one of the monotheistic religions, the only one that made logical sense was Islam. Islam continues off Judaism and Christianity, and has the same Prophets… In many ways, though, it is also the religion that is closer to the beliefs I held before converting. I had always believed in God (kind of called myself 'agnostic'), but was very confused how God could have a son and how this "son" could be equal parts divinity and human. That whole thing did not make logical sense to me, and no matter who I talked to, no one could give me a full answer. Most Christians pushed away the idea of questioning their dogma. Muslims encouraged it.*[216]

Here we can see that, at least on some level, there was a religious *conflict* with her beliefs. Islam then appears to have been attractive to Beth due largely to its cohesion with her previously held beliefs on religion. In a sense, Beth struggled to place herself in the larger *context* of religion due to the manner of disagreement in regards to her religious beliefs. Because of this and the similarities between her preexisting beliefs and those offered by Islam, conversion was the most logical option for her.

[216] Ibid.

3.3 EMILIE

Moving to another Internet platform in search of online conversion narratives, I came across Emilie's story on a website titled *MuslimConverts.com.*[217] As one might have guessed, this website is geared specifically towards supporting converts and providing information to those who are potentially interested in conversion to Islam. The format of these narratives, in contrast to the more conversational narratives found on Reddit, is understandably more story-esque and structured. The benefit of narratives of this format is the inclusion of more information in regards to the conversion itself, but, as was reported by van Nieuwkerk, has a tendency for being more thematically homogenous. It may be that in some cases, the apparent homogeneity is not just thematically constructed shared experiences; rather it may in fact point to something significant occurring within the conversion process itself.

The first conversion narrative I had come across was from a female convert of a Catholic upbringing named Emilie. She starts by explaining her perception of her own conversion, stating that what she had experienced was less a conversion and more a realization of her own beliefs.[218] She then goes on to explain her initial interests in Islam stating,

> *I was born a Catholic and have always been very religious. After meeting a friend from Pakistan my first year in college I became interested in learning about Islam. I studied Islam and Arabic through the course of many classes, and eventually studied in Cairo for a semester.*

College appears again as the *context* for the conversion process, with the contact and proximity to Islam being the primary catalyst for further investigation. Similar to the other cases, Emilie had

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[217] Emilie. *"Emilie."* MuslimConverts.com. http://muslimconverts.com/converts/Emilie_R.htm (accessed March 10, 2017).
[218] Ibid.

formulated her educational experience around her newfound religious interests, with the Arabic language appearing as an accompanying factor. Interestingly, as was the case with Beth, travel to a majority Muslim country appears to play a role in the conversion process.

During her studies in Cairo, she would come to feel a deeper connection with what she describes as her "interests." She states the following,

> *I also loved being in a Muslim country where religion played such a central role in daily life--a far cry from the US. I loved how literally everything went back to God in the constant references throughout conversation--whether it was al-hamdulillah after safely crossing the street or saying goodbye with a 'see you later, Insh'Allah' -- the role that God played in their lives had a deep impact on me.*[219]

Whether or not it was the immersion into a culture associated with her new beliefs that produced a means for Emilie to convert, or if this immersion simply reinforced her beliefs held prior to her travel is unclear; but I expect that the latter is the most likely case. By immersing herself in an environment that was not in conflict with her religious beliefs, this offered a *context* in which she could securely act out and reconstruct a new *identity,* one that was able to securely incorporate said beliefs. Thus, while she references the prominence of religion in everyday life, I expect that what she is truly referencing is not a lack of religiosity in the United States per se; rather it is the lack of a form of religiosity which she is able to *identify* with and being unable to place herself *contextually.*

In Emilie's case, we get a better perspective on the length of time of investigation prior to her conversion, as she states that it was a three-year long process. She does not give any indication as to where her conversion occurred, or what other factors may have influenced her decision. Seemingly absent is any form of *conflict* that may have led to a state of *active inquiry.* The only

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[219] Ibid.

information she does provide which seems to hint at any sort of prior *conflict* is that she has yet to inform her family of her conversion, for fear of their reaction.

3.4 AMY LUZ U. CATALAN, Ph.D.

On the same website, I came across a very intriguing conversion narrative offered by Amy Catalan, a formerly devout Catholic. Despite not taking place in the *context* of the United States, her narrative may offer insight into the complexities involved with conversion and *identity.* Her story is much different from those of the previous women in both narrative construction, as well as the overall *context* of her conversion. She was raised by her father in the Philippines, where he originally traveled to work as a Lassallian missionary. She was enrolled in De La Salle University in Manila for her bachelors and eventually completed her PhD program at the University of St. La Salle, after which she taught at the institution for 14 years. During this time, she became *conflicted* with her beliefs and those proposed by the Catholic Church. She states the following,

> *I stopped going to church and hearing mass. At that time, the Catholic Church was beset with internal problems. I started questioning the doctrines and teachings that I learned from years of Catholic education, especially the priests' authority to preach about justice and love, while they themselves were capable of committing the most atrocious offenses against their parishioners. I prevented myself from listening to their sermons by not hearing mass at all. My reason was simple: the very people who professed their faith in God, to the teachings of Jesus and who acted as my intermediaries to God were the very persons who violated the principles that I believed in. I resolved that I would pray directly to God in the confines of my own room and cry out to Him for mercy and guidance.*[220]

[220] Amy Luz U. Catalan, PhD. *"Finding my Truth: My Transition from Catholicism to Islam."* MuslimConverts.com. (May 25, 2014). http://muslimconverts.com/converts/catholic-convert-to-islam-1.htm (accessed March 10, 2017).

The *conflict* that arose in regards to her beliefs was not necessarily a *conflict* with the beliefs themselves; rather, it stems from a sense of deception on the part of those relaying the beliefs that leads Amy to question the integrity of the beliefs she had previously held. This led her to initially investigate Buddhism as an alternative, yet she found that this did not appeal to her desire for religious fulfillment.

In 2012 Amy was hired to teach in Oman, where should would encounter Islam. Initially she had reservations in regards to Islam in general stating,

> *When I came here, I did not expect to become a Muslim, for after all, Muslims were known to be associated to terrorism and Jihad (a holy war in defense of Islam)… Moreover, the 9/11 event in the US added to the belief that they were capable of mass murder. It was only natural that my aunts and uncles warned me to avoid them at all cost and to focus on my work here. I soon found out that what I learned from the media and from well-meaning relatives and friends proved to be contrary to the misconceptions and biases against the Muslims. As a people, the Omanis acted and behaved differently from those that the media portrayed to the world. In due time, I fell in love with Oman and its people!*[221]

This was the first narrative to display a more negative perception of Islam prior to officially having contact. This perception as Amy reports, was shaped primarily by the way the media portrays Islam and the Muslim world. Once Amy was able to overcome these prejudices, primarily through direct contact with Muslims and by immersion in a predominantly Muslim society, she would enter a state of *active inquiry.* Over a period of years, Amy had begun to investigate various aspects of Islam by a means of spiritual self-reflection.

A *conflict* of beliefs and worldview would again be presented to her, becoming a central component of her conversion process. She states the following,

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[221] Ibid.

> *As I began reading the Quran and other Islamic books, I found out that both Christianity and Islam shared the same basic set of principles of love, charity, kindness, and most importantly the belief in One God. However, the differences between them struck me most. While I believed that there is One God, it did not occur to me that He has no partners or helpers as the Supreme Being of all Creation. Moreover, the Christian belief that Jesus (Peace be Upon Him) as the Son of God could not fit quite well in the Islamic faith.*[222]

In contrast to her initial interests in Buddhism, Amy found that the beliefs of Islam aligned with her previously held beliefs as a Christian. The primary irreconcilable difference she found was the status of Jesus in Christianity as the Son of God, something not recognized as theologically sound in Islam. Yet, despite struggling with this foundational difference in belief, Amy appears to have been able to reconcile her previous beliefs to an extent that overrode the initial differential *conflict.* With the support of her students, friends, and colleagues, Amy would eventually make her formal declaration of faith. Displaying her new beliefs and incorporating them into her *identity*, she dons the hijab and eventually chooses to wear the abaya. Amy offers her closing remarks seeming to imply her own recognition of conversion as an ongoing process stating,

> *My journey as a Muslim has just started. This is not the end of my narrative. One of my plans is to become a Muslim scholar and to propagate the principles of truth that the people who are closest to me must know. May Allah grant and guide me in my endeavors and instill in me a pure and humble spirit to pursue the Islamic way of life until my last breath. In sha Allah!*[223]

By providing a much more comprehensive biographical narrative, Amy was able to offer greater insight into the overall timeline of the conversion process itself. Her narrative and closing remarks support Lewis Rambo's theory of conversion as more of an ongoing and natural process and less a sudden and dramatic event. While the previous narratives may have appeared more

[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

"sudden" in contrast to Amy's. I expect, if retold in the same comprehensive manner, we would see similarities in the conversion process' timeline. Yet, even with the difference in the structure of the conversion narrative, Amy's case still shares multiple similarities with the previous narratives.

First, Amy was raised as a devout Christian where her beliefs only wavered initially in response to corruption within the Catholic Church. Her religious beliefs were deep-seated yet there was an inclination towards conversion as can be seen in her interest in Buddhism, which she found to be incompatible with the beliefs she held. Second, and similar to each presented case is that the initial interest in Islam stemmed from direct proximity to practicing Muslims themselves. Third, Amy left the *environment* associated with her previously held beliefs, entering a state of *active inquiry* in an *environment* where such an investigation of these new beliefs is felt to be more secure. During this state, it again appears that rather than adopt an entirely new set of beliefs, as is commonly claimed of conversion, Amy legitimizes her previously held beliefs in the *context* of Islam. Finally, her newly *contextualized* beliefs become a central part of her *identity* where she sought to publicly legitimize these beliefs by wearing the hijab and eventually the abaya.

3.5 DEBORAH

Based upon the evidence thus far, it does appear that an *environment* containing low levels of knowledge regarding Islam, while at the same time providing little in the ways of directly accessing said knowledge, eventually leads to this state of *active inquiry* that I have proposed. As was mentioned previously, the active engagement in the pursuit of knowledge in this manner appears to culminate in a greater sense of ownership over the knowledge gathered, with an

increased chance of attachment to these newly discovered beliefs. In a very brief narrative offered by Deborah Frazier, we are provided with a potential driving factor leading her towards a state of *active inquiry.*

Deborah's initial interests in Islam appear to have been based upon fear, with the intent of "domination" through the attainment of knowledge. This is in contrast to what has been reported previously in the other narratives which appear to have been spurred by a more neutral or positive curiosity. Deborah begins as follows,

> *I came to Islam after 9-11. As an American I wanted to know my "enemy" and once I came to understand Islam I knew it was what I always believed anyway and I shortly thereafter took shahadah… I am an American. Born and raised. Blond hair and green eyes, Christian background but empty and searching for answers. I even spent a year studying Judaism in my search but nothing ever answered my questions and fulfilled my longing for the oneness of my creator until Islam.*[224]

Of the conversion narratives thus far, Deborah's is the second to mention the events of 9/11 in conjunction with her conversion narrative. The *context* of her conversion then would have been in an *environment* in which Islam was actively scrutinized and even vilified by the mainstream media. Evidence to this negative atmosphere is her admittance that she had wanted to understand the American "enemy."

By stating she had wanted to understand her "enemy," Deborah herself verifies having been in a state of *active inquiry.* What is interesting is her apparent focus on her own *identity* as an American, playing both a role in her initial interest in understanding Islam, as well as an introduction to *"who she is"* first and foremost an American. While we cannot know for certain, due to the brevity and lack of information included in her conversion narrative, Deborah may have

[224] Deborah Frazier. *"Deborah Frazier."* MuslimConverts.com. http://muslimconverts.com/converts/Deborah_Frazier.htm (accessed March 10, 2017).

undergone an *identity crisis* due to the events of 9/11. Her *identity* as an American may have become unstable following the attacks, by what was described as the "enemy" of her *identity.* This alone may lead an individual to enter a state of *active inquiry,* serving as an "offensive" defense mechanism, while the understanding of the antithesis of one's *identity* serves also to stabilize it.

While this is speculation, it would explain the reason that upon coming into contact with Muslims, certain individuals become interested in understanding Islam. In a sense, their own religious *identity* is destabilized by an encounter with an alternative worldview, disrupting the individual's sense of historical continuity in what existed in their previous *environment* versus what exists in their current *environment.* As was seen in the work of Erik Erikson, this has led to individuals undergoing *identity crises,* which again would explain the apparent attachment of one's previous beliefs, to the beliefs found in the encounter with the "new world view."

3.6 AMIRAH

This exposure to a "new world view" and the apparent destabilization of one's previously held beliefs seems to be the most striking commonality within the majority of the conversion narratives I have come across. In each of these cases, the individual was raised within an *environment* which had exclusivist tendencies in regards to alternative religious beliefs and cultural practices. While in most cases this was caused by the demographics of the individual's *environment* of origin, the contact itself may have triggered a sense of resentment and deprivation on the part of their previous beliefs. The narrative offered by Amirah appears to support this connection between the *environment* of an individual's previously held beliefs, and the effects of contact made between beliefs which were non-existent in this previous *environment.*

Amirah was born in Arkansas and raised as a Baptist Christian prior to her conversion to Islam. She makes a point to describe the Baptists as simply a sect of Christianity, similar to various sects in Islam such as Sunni and Shia. Interestingly, Amirah states that she identifies as a Sunni Muslim, the first of the narratives to specifically state a conversion to a particular sect of Islam. The *environment* of Amirah's upbringing appears to be an important part of her conversion narrative, in which she attempts to describe the beliefs it espoused:

> *The town that I lived in was completely white raced and all Christians. In fact this was the scenario in a 300 mile radius of me. So I had never been exposed to any other cultures or religions. But I had always been taught that we were all created equal in the eyes of God, and that there was no difference in race, color, culture or religious practices. Later I discovered that this was easy for them to preach and teach as long as they stayed closed minded and these other people did not invade their world.*[225]

Similar to the other women's narratives, Amirah's *environment* was not religiously or even ethnically diverse. This "exclusivist" *environment* appears to be at the receiving end of Amirah's resentment, in which she appears to associate the existent beliefs to the *environment* itself as a means of a purposeful deprivation of the "outside world."

This shift in perception of her *environment* of origin occurred in the University setting. She states that,

> *The first time I seen a Muslim was while I was in college at the University of Arkansas. I will admit at first I stared at the women in their "different clothing" and the men with the towels wrapped around their heads and wearing "night gowns". But the first time I had the opportunity to get to know a Muslim lady that I felt comfortable with in asking questions, it started a thirst in my heart and soul that will never be quenched. Alhamdulillah!!!*[226]

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[225] Amirah, "*Amirah: This is the story of how I became Muslim.*" MuslimConverts.com. http://muslimconverts.com/converts/Amirah.htm (accessed March 4, 2017).
[226] Ibid.

Her first contact with Islam again appears to lead her to a state of *active inquiry* in which she sought to understand and expose herself to these new beliefs. In contrast to that which was reported previously, it appears that one of Amirah's friends was engaging in sort of missionarism. Amirah reports that her friend tried to convince her of the truth of Islam and seemed to incorporate Amirah's previously held beliefs into the fabric of Islam by assuring her it was the same religion from the same God.

It is important to note that prior to her friend's own engagement in Amirah's conversion, Amirah herself had already begun to question aspects of her own belief. She states that,

> *Even though I had never voiced this to anyone, I had always questioned in my mind the concept of what Christians called the "trinity" and why we had to pray to Jesus (pbuh) and not to God directly, and why so much emphasis was put on "Christ" and not God.*[227]

It is unclear if Amirah had always questioned the concept of the Trinity in Christianity, or if this wavering occurred in response to contact with Islam. Regardless it signifies a *conflict* within her religious *identity* and may ultimately be a driving factor in her conversion.

After her friend graduated and moved back to Palestine, Amirah received news that she had been killed outside of her home only two weeks later. The loss of her friend, someone with whom she had had a deep spiritual connection with drove Amirah to investigate Islam further. She was soon formally introduced to the Arabic language and became infatuated, the language itself helping Amirah cope with her loss. After her graduation she would return home, where the beliefs of her former and current self would once again come into contention, reporting as follows:

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[227] Ibid.

> *After I left college and returned to my "community", I didn't have the honor to be around Muslims any longer. But the thirst had never left nor had my love and desire for the Arabic language. Which I might add infuriated my parents and other friends. This confused me, because I had always been taught that we were all equal in God's eyes. I guess there were a few exceptions to this concept for my friends and family.*[228]

Her initial return to her own "community" appears to signify a tension within her newly constructed *identity.* The primary absence in this *environment* was Islam that she had so closely associated with during her years of university.

While tensions rose due to her interests in Islam, it was not until her engagement to a man from Saudi Arabia and her subsequent conversion to Islam, that would push the limits of her *environment's* acceptance of her beliefs. Amirah reports the following:

> *When I became engaged to an "Arabian" or "foreigner", my family was in shock, they rarely spoke to me. I also lost most of my American friends. BUT when I embraced Islam, my family first tried to have me committed to a mental hospital, when that didn't work, they completely disowned me. They did make calls to me to tell me that they hoped I rotted in hell...and calls from my so called friends stated the same desire. Yes this hurt, even though my family and I had many differences, I still loved them deeply.*[229]

Despite this response from both her family and friends, and the breaking off of the engagement at the urging of her fiancé's parents, Amirah remained steadfast in her beliefs. While there are many cases in which female conversion to Islam occurs after meeting a Muslim partner, Amirah's case is unique in that while the support of a Muslim partner allowed for an immediate and secure *environment* for her conversion, the conversion itself was not predicated upon the engagement itself. Amirah's steadfastness points to a deep sense of integration of her beliefs, in which their

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228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.

safeguarding is prioritized over the extent to which they are socially accepted. Even her own physical safety was of a lower priority, as she reports having been attacked by a male assailant in a parking lot of her own town.[230]

Amirah's case offers insight into the level of impact that the conversion has on the individual and evidence that the beliefs themselves are more securely integrated with the individual's *identity* than some have theorized. While the timeline of her conversion is not entirely clear, it does offer evidence that conversion occurs as a process based upon individual *agency,* even when the individual is potentially exposed to missionarism and undergoes traumatic events as a result of their newly acquired beliefs. Amirah's narrative includes extremes of both love and hate, where she herself is caught in the center of this clash. Despite all of this, she depicted a strong sense of ownership over herself and the direction of her life, regardless to the existence of the factors influencing her in one direction or the other.

Based upon these women's narratives and the many others I have come across, I believe that the similarities which appear between their narratives is neither coincidence nor a shared thematic narrative construction. These similarities are in fact emblematic of the role *identity* plays in the conversion process, particularly when an individual converts from one faith tradition to another. It is the reconciliation of two *identities* between the former and current self, which makes conversion to Islam unique in comparison to other conversion cases.

230 Ibid.

4.0 ANALYSIS

Based upon the evidence at hand, it appears that my proposed theory as to the reasoning for conversion to Islam in the United States was not adequate nor applicable to many of these cases. While I had theorized that *identity* indeed played a large role in the conversion process, the area in which it functioned was misplaced. I had expected to find the use of gender and feminism as a case for conversion, similar to what was reported by van Nieuwkerk and even Juster. Instead, what I had found was evidence more closely resembling the theoretical model proposed by Lofland and Stark, in conjunction with Erikson's concept of *identity crises.* While I believe that gender is an extremely important factor and does in fact play a role in the conversion process, the fact that it was seemingly absent from the conversion narratives of these women, leads me to believe that it was not prioritized in terms of *identity* in the conversion process. This corroborates the findings of van Nieuwkark in which the Internet narratives were seemingly devoid of any mention of gender in regards to the individual's conversion to Islam. It appears that for many of these women, their *identity* was more associated with their religious beliefs and communities, rather than an articulated association with a gender discourse.

4.1 BACKGROUND AND ENVIRONMENT

Of the conversion narratives listed, five of the seven women reported being of a religious background and closely associated with these beliefs. Of these seven, six reported having been raised in an *environment* that was religiously active yet homogenous, with Christianity being the dominant faith tradition. Expanding further, all seven of these women were in proximity to an active religious community and had easy access to information regarding at least one faith

tradition. The *context* of upbringing is important in this case, as six of the seven women appear to have been isolated from "alternative" beliefs due to the religiously homogenous nature of their *environment.*

Seemingly absent from the conversion narratives is any mention of initial *conflicts* stemming from their *environment,* whether they be familial or societal strains, which may factor into the drive towards conversion. In fact, any *conflict* of this type appearing within the conversion narrative occurs only as a result of the women's conversion. Only one woman reported having strained family relations prior to her conversion, with the conversion itself being described as a source of stability. Other than this single case, the psychoanalytical theory provides very little in the understanding of these cases, only offering an understanding of the functionality of the potential use of the conversion as a psychological defense mechanism. Because these cases make no direct mention nor exhibit any tendencies which may be considered psychopathological, the only relevance for the psychoanalytical theory is in relation to a potential *conflict* of *identity.*

4.2 IDENTITY AND THE CLASH OF WORLD VIEWS

The prevalence of an apparent *conflict* of *identity* in the narratives appears to be an integral part of the conversion process, and may explain the drive towards conversion itself. In these cases the *conflict* of *identity* appears to stem from a destabilization of a world view with which the individual has come to *identify*. It is no coincidence that these women converted only after leaving their *environment* of upbringing, settling in a new *environment* that is more diverse in beliefs. The majority of these narratives report an interest in Islam occurring in the university setting, which for many was where their initial contact with Muslims would occur. Islam as a faith tradition,

offered an alternative world view that would call into question the beliefs that these women had previously held, ultimately destabilizing their sense of historical continuity.

Based upon this, it would appear that conversion not only requires an exposure to an alternative set of beliefs, but will occur "outside" of the *environment* identified with their beliefs prior to conversion. Thus, the prominence of the university setting as the *context* in which one enters a state of *active inquiry* is due not just to the typical demographic makeup of the university *environment* in general, but also to the fact that the *environment* itself is disassociated from the individual's previously held beliefs. For many, the college experience is the first true means of independence, culminating in a greater sense of self and maturity. This will inevitably lead to a form of rebellion against the previous self, in which the individual is free to explore alternative beliefs that were absent from their previous *environment.*

While the university experience was the *context* through which the majority had entered a state of *active inquiry,* this was not always the case. The narrative offered by Amy reports that her initial interest with Islam occurred much later in life, many years after her college experience. Yet, the *context* in which she had come into contact with Islam, leading to a state of *active inquiry,* is very similar to the instances where it had occurred in the university *environment.* The reason Amy's case may differ in regards to the *context* of her conversion, may be that she appears to have remained within her original *environment.* She reported having been raised with a religious background and was enrolled in a religious university, which may have helped to reinforce her religious *identity* through this experience. Only when she had left the *environment* she had come to identify with, was she then exposed to an alternative set of beliefs, which would ultimately lead to her conversion.

It appears then, that for conversion to occur the individual must not only move from an *environment* of "security" to one which may be deemed "foreign," but they must also be exposed to a set of beliefs which challenges their worldview. An encounter with an alternative belief set of equal force is a threat to the individual's worldview, which in many cases grounds their *identity.* The difficulty in this case lies not with the differences between the beliefs in contention, rather it is the similarities which the individual seeks to confront through conversion. In the case of conversion to Islam, it appears that the conversion itself may be a reconciliation between two worldviews that the individual has been exposed to.

4.3 ISLAM, THE IDENTITY OF BELIEFS

What appears to be the most mundane mention reported in each of these narratives, may in fact be the key to understanding part of the conversion phenomena. While I initially had brushed aside the common statement found in the narratives referring to "shared beliefs" while investigating Islam, as a "reverse engineering" of the narrative construction itself, I soon returned to this mention after speculating about its appearance in the reported narratives. Appearing to offer a legitimization of their conversion, each woman reports in one way or another that, *"…I had soon come to realize that my beliefs were very similar to those which I was investigating…."* While this legitimization is important, I had been preoccupied by a focus upon differences rather than similarities and overlooked the importance of what this statement implied.

This sense of a seamless transition from one belief set to another may be an indication of the unique functionality of the conversion process in regards to Islam. My observation of such statements is not the first, and they appear frequently in the conversion narratives regarding Islam.

Larry Poston in particular, addresses this unique transitory state in his own research on conversion to Islam arguing that,

> *These statements indicate that conversion to Islam did not involve an upheaval in the lives of these individuals. On the contrary, it appears that it is possible for one to slip effortlessly into the religion; that one can take on characteristics of Islamicity without being aware that a significant transformation is taking place.*[231]

Poston notes that the ease in the shift of beliefs may be due to the rational nature that often characterizes conversion to Islam, and the general character of the individuals themselves.[232] In fact, the seamless transition of beliefs for these individuals is an indication that the conversion in these cases was indeed a process over an extended period of time, rather than a sudden dramatic event. The surprising absence of sudden conversion events such as visions coupled, with the rational approach that characterizes the majority of the conversion narratives to Islam, is in stark contrast to those within the Christian tradition. Here Poston argues that, "*Conversions to Islam, then, differ significantly from conversions to Christianity in that they appear to be 'conversions of the head' (i.e., the intellect) rather than 'conversions of the heart' (i.e., the emotions).'*"[233] It is this intellectual rather than emotional shift, which I believe has a stronger connection to the reformulation of one's *identity,* and explains the attachment that these individuals express in regards to their previously held beliefs.

Conversion has thus far been defined and depicted as a shift or change in beliefs, being described by Erikson as an adoption of *totalism* in regards to a change in *identity.* Yet, in this current case, there is little evidence that there in fact was such a dramatic change in beliefs that

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[231] Poston, Larry. *"Islamic Da'wah in the West."* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1992). 169.
[232] Ibid., 169.
[233] Ibid., 170.

characterizes the conversion process. This, coupled with the dominance of an intellectual and rational approach to conversion, seems to place the current case outside the bounds of the commonly accepted definition of what constitutes conversion in general. Thus, if we are to take these women at their word, then their conversion occurred due to strong similarities between the beliefs they held prior to their encounter with Islam. If in fact these sets of beliefs were so similar to one another, then why did these women convert and come to identify with the beliefs they had come into contact with, rather than remaining in their current state of being? The answer may lie with the understanding of the destabilization of one's worldview when coming into contact with what is perceived as "an equal and opposite force."

As stated previously, the subconscious threat posed by an alternative worldview is strong enough to lead an individual towards a state of *active inquiry.* During this investigative state, these women had found that their beliefs were so similar, yet distinct enough that both sets of beliefs could not logically exist alongside the other. Thus, the women would come to attach their previously held beliefs to those offered by Islam, legitimizing their beliefs and granting them a *context* through association. Interestingly, the only alteration made in their previously held beliefs was the reported questioning of the Trinity. These women then were able to bring the beliefs that they had come to *identify* with, and merge them with a new worldview, ultimately removing any potential conflict within the individual's *identity.* The old beliefs became revitalized from this new worldly perspective, and granted *agency* in the choice these women had in the construction of their own beliefs. The state of *active inquiry* would solidify the attachment of these beliefs, aiding in the construction of the individuals "new" *identity.*

While the definition of conversion is open to interpretation, what I found from these cases appeared less like the stereotypical dramatic shift in beliefs, but rather was an ongoing process

which seemed to culminate in a "revitalization" of previously held beliefs that were granted new life. This leads me to believe that while these women do in fact *identify* with Islam and believe in its tenents, they did not convert per se, but rather appear to have merged their beliefs so that they would become more malleable and universalistic. Ultimately, I would argue that in these cases, the conversion to Islam is not "conversion" as a shift in beliefs, rather it is a means of giving a voice to the beliefs one already holds.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The topic of conversion as we have seen is one which is deeply complex and at many times controversial. There are many opinions in both the scientific and theological fields which attempt to understand the event of conversion itself, yet none have been able to fully account for the motivations which drives certain individuals towards such a "dramatic" change in beliefs. What does appear to be conclusive is the primary role the *environment* plays in the conversion process and its effect on an individual both prior and post conversion.

The *environment* not only influences the beliefs of an individual prior to one's conversion, but also serves as a forum for *conflict* when a change of *environment* occurs. The ensuing clash in worldviews between what the individual *knows* and what they thought they *knew* will culminate in a reconciliation of two worlds. This merger between the beliefs previously held with those, which have been newly encountered, is in a sense a defense mechanism, one that seeks to provide stability for the individual. Yet, unlike the psychoanalytical perspective in which the conversion serves as a psychological defense mechanism, in these cases it appears that conversion serves as more a sociological defense mechanism, protecting the integrity and stability of an individual's *identity* in relation to the *environment* that they inhabit.

Despite the "defensive" orientation of the conversion process, these women displayed a level of *agency* in their decision for conversion that seems to defy the supposed "subconscious" occurrences driving the conversion process itself. Each of these women were engaged in an active investigative state, which led them to their *destination.* There appears to be little evidence that influence or missionarism played a role in the conversion process, here the individuality of the

experience appears to corroborate Juster's findings. As was reported in Juster's study, these women also appear to have broken away from their reliance upon community, instead turning inwards towards a greater sense of individual *agency.* This may be where the gender dynamic appears, one which is not overt, but equally as important and effective in the social empowerment of the individual.

While I had initially theorized that female conversion to Islam would be based on a gendered discourse, one in which the associated *environment* of the individual would be seen as damaging to the individual's *identity,* thus leading them to seek and alternative which is disassociated from said *environment;* it is difficult to apply to these presented cases, primarily due to the fact that an *environmental conflict* was not present prior to the conversion process. While I do feel that there is merit to the proposed theory in specific cases, it only addressed certain factors in the current study which did little to illuminate the drive towards conversion on an individual basis. What I am left with though, is a better understanding of the conversion process and its functionality on a sociological level.

Due to the nature of the conversion narratives analyzed in this research, having been derived entirely from the Internet, it is quite possible that there was some thematic homogeneity in the narrative construction. There were similarities between my findings and those of Karin van Nieuwkerk, particularly regarding the absence of a gender discourse in the Internet narratives of converts in the United States, and the prominence of religiosity as a drive towards conversion. While van Nieuwkerk did question the level of standardization of the Internet narratives, she does note that the *environment* plays a large role in the proclaimed motivations for conversion.[234] Thus,

[234] van Nieuwkerk, Karin. *"Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives."* In *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 111.

in the *context* of the United States, which is more religiously oriented than the Netherlands, it does make sense that a religious discourse would be prioritized over a gender discourse. Yet, despite the potential for a higher level of standardization amongst Internet narratives, it is difficult to prove without first comparing them to face-to-face interviews of the same *environment.* A more in-depth analysis of conversion to Islam in the United States may in fact reveal a gender discourse which is absent from the Internet testimonials, and it may be the medium through which the narrative is transmitted that dictates the type of discourse contained within the narrative itself. Ultimately, the *rational question* which I had hoped to find the solution, seems that it too will also require a more thorough investigation before the answer can be fully uncovered.

Interestingly, the *rational question* I had proposed has taken a new direction and in some ways feels redundant based upon my findings. If conversion in these cases is not necessarily a change in beliefs or an adoption of a new ideology, but rather the reconciliation and contextualization of one's beliefs post encounter with an alternative worldview, then based upon the immediate evidence gathered, the answer to the proposed question is simple; the individual's *identity* and its connection with their beliefs is prioritized over the individual's societal wellbeing. This was not the answer I was expecting, nor did it appear where I had assumed it would. I expect there is more to this question than what I am left with, and is not nearly as simple as it appears. In a sense, this *rational question* appears and permeates throughout the various works on conversion, even when it is not immediately apparent. Each author and their associated theoretical approach in one way or another, attempts to uncover the rationale behind an individual's choice for conversion; yet in each case the *rational answer* seems to be just out of their reach. It may be that the answer itself is not quantifiable, with some portion remaining in the realm of spirituality. Until a theory is able to balance the sensitive nature of conversion's spiritual side, with the psychological and

sociological aspects, the *rational answer* may always remain beyond our grasp, and perhaps that is how it is meant to be.

Nevertheless, my own investigation into these matters has taught me more about myself, and the choices I have made, in many ways corroborating my own findings. I find now that I too followed along a similar path in my own conversion, with many of these women's narratives resonating with some aspect of my own. As I look back to the questioning of my own religious *identity,* I find now that my own beliefs had never really changed, as much as I had found a means to contextualize them. It is through the contextualization of conversion that I was able to address and understand *"who I was"* and *"who I am"* now, finding that each in a way is one and the same.

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