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Choosing Faith and Facing Race

Converting to Islam in France and the United States

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about race and religion. These two categories are crucial to how people classify others and position themselves in the world. While scholars typically understand them separately, my research proposes instead to explore instances in which they are conflated. Specifically, I track occurrences of racial reasoning in relation to the religion of Islam in Western societies. Empirically, I focus on conversion to Islam to disentangle the intricacies of race and religion. Because conversion implies crossing religious boundaries, converts shed light on the nature and content of such boundaries, and enable us to decide whether they are simply religious or also embody racial difference. The case of white converts is particularly interesting in this respect: because their conversion implies transitioning from one social status (majority) to another (minority), they offer a near-experimental case to investigate how racial categorization operates. Methodologically, I combine the meticulousness of qualitative methods with the bird’s eye view of comparatism. Using in-depth interviewing with 82 converts in France and the United States; ethnographic observations in convert associations in Paris and Chicago; and content analysis of media and historical documents, I compare the past and present experiences of French and American Muslim converts to answer the following: how and when is conversion to Islam interpreted in terms of changing one’s racial status rather than a mere change in religious orientation?

This research unfolds in three stages. First, I show that converts embrace Islam as a *faith* and situate their conversion within the repertoire of religious individualism. Second, because Islam has been racialized in both the American and French contexts, I demonstrate that converts, especially those who don the visual attributes of Islam, experience a shift in their *racial* status: no longer categorized as “white,” they expose themselves to stigmatization and discrimination in the larger society. In parallel, they also become very visible as whites within the Muslim community. These series of racial objectifications jeopardize converts’ individualistic claims, for they now have to wear the mark of the plural, both as Muslims and as whites. Third, I demonstrate that converts resort to a variety of strategies to *redefine both Islam and whiteness*, in order to assert the legitimacy of their conversion.

In addition to shedding light on the complex interplay between race and religion, this research contributes to transatlantic comparative scholarship. Each of the three stages outlined above reveals similarities and differences across the French and American contexts. Overall, I find that converts’ personal experiences are shaped by a constellation of issues, which include: the racial stratification system (black vs. white divide in the US, post-colonial immigrant vs. native divide in France), race frames (color-conscious in the US, color-blind in France), the secularism regime (embracing in the US, defiant in France), the cultural conception of religion (central in the US, unintelligible in France), and the demographics of the Muslim minority (African-American vs. Immigrant divide in the US, North African dominance in France). Taken together, these configurations durably inform the religious conversion process, the encounter with race and the strategies available to converts to reclaim control over their definition of self.

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PREFACE

This dissertation investigates the intricacies of race and religion using the experiences of white converts to Islam in France and the United States as a case in point. It is a common exercise for academics to reflect, at the beginning of a manuscript, on the reasons that made them choose a topic in the first place. This often leads to artificial biographical reconstructions and self-centered elaborations but it certainly is a worthy endeavor, for it helps readers acknowledge the subjectivity that we inevitably bring into our work.

My maternal grandmother, Reine, was a Jewish woman from Morocco who married an agnostic French man hailing from a conservative Catholic family. Upon moving to France, she loosely kept practicing Judaism on her own, but did not transmit the religion to my mother and her siblings. I grew up in a strictly non-religious household. Both my mother and my father (who comes from a non-practicing Catholic background) consider themselves as atheist and never immersed us in any sort of religious atmosphere. As a child, my only encounters with religion occurred when we visited our Jewish side of the family (my grandmother’s siblings and their offspring), mostly to attend funerals and bar mitzvahs, which I experienced as fun and slightly exotic, although the sermons of the rabbi were often obscure to me. Growing up, I met both Jewish and non-Jewish people who told me that I *was* Jewish because so was the mother of my mother – according to some interpretations, Judaism is transmitted through maternal blood line. I did not understand it.

How could I be defined as Jewish when I did not follow any of the core teachings of Judaism? Others told me that I was a quarter Jewish, which was even more confusing. In my view, either one believed in Yahve and was Jewish, or not. Later on, I obviously learned that Jewishness has been constructed as a sense of *peoplehood*, rooted in a shared history and memories of suffering, and that, for many, belief and practice are only secondary for Jewish identification. The fact that Nazi Germany defined Jews not as a religious group but as a reviled race rendered the issue even more dramatic. Under this system, I would have been classified as a “*Mischling* [mixed blood] of the second degree,” for having one Jewish grandparent. These various discoveries prompted me to reflect on my conception of religion. My early socialization in a Western secular context and a non-believing French household had shaped *my* understanding of religion as a pure matter of religiosity. Yet, it was clear that others endowed it with different meanings: identity, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, race.

My ingenuous childhood interrogations resurfaced during my Master thesis at Sciences Po (supervised by Christophe Jaffrelot and Marco Oberti), which focused on Hindu-Muslim violence in India and its effects on the segregation of Indian cities. My fieldwork took place in Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh), a city which is home to a large Muslim university and is notorious for the frequency of its communal riots. Among my interviewees was a professor, named Tariq Islam, who self-identified as atheist and yet

had to live in a Muslim neighborhood and very much feared for his life during outbursts of anti-Muslim violence. In Aligarh, “Hindu” and “Muslim” did not operate as religious identities but as ascriptive categories, over which individuals had little control. Tariq Islam was defined as a Muslim not because of his voluntary spiritual adherence to Islam, but by him being born into a Muslim family, having a Muslim name and being categorized as such by the wider society. This Indian experience durably informed my appraisal of the vicissitudes of religion.

Upon entering the joint PhD program in Sociology at Sciences Po and Northwestern University, I observed similar processes of rigidification pertaining to the category “Muslim” in both France and the United States, and wondered how to best account for them. Was being Muslim on both sides of the Atlantic akin to being Muslim in India? Was being Muslim similar to being Jewish? What was the nature of the boundaries surrounding Islam in France and the United States?

It appeared to me that the best way to investigate this matter was to look at people who precisely crossed these boundaries: converts to Islam. I started attending Muslim converts’ meetings in Chicago, first out of mere curiosity, then with heightened interest and eventually with the solid conviction that this was the right place to be to answer my questions. I want to stress that doing sociological work is not simply about devising a cool research design and putting together a set of hypotheses with the corresponding social experiment to test them. Ultimately, it is all about the people. This research has been possible thanks to the two convert associations that welcomed me in Paris and Chicago, and the 82 converts who agreed to be interviewed and shared their life stories with me. Their hospitality, sincerity and at times humor have been a constant source of motivation throughout my fieldwork.

In her recent book *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion and Hip-Hop in the United States* (2016), which shares similarities with this research, Su’ad Abdul Khabeer refers to her interviewees as her “teachers,” for they instructed her in the subtleties of music, race, religion and their respective intersections. The same can be said of my interviewees, who can probably best be designated as my “co-researchers.” As will be apparent in this dissertation, converts find themselves at the crossroads of many identities, which gives them a unique vantage point on the social construction of these very identities. The experience of conversion, I argue, is akin to a form of sociological training and the acute reflexivity that often derives from it is a precious heuristic asset. My interviewees have actively participated in this research, seizing on my hypotheses and turning them upside down, until the subject was exhausted. I cannot mention their names because I am bound by rules to protect their anonymity, but I would like to thank them all for having talked so openly about those complicated topics that are race and religion. In transcribing their words, I have tried to be sensitive and respectful of their experiences, and also critical, because this is my job as a sociologist. I hope that they will recognize their trials and tribulations in the following lines.

Next, I would like to thank my two advisors, Carolyn Chen at Northwestern University and Marco Oberti at Sciences Po, for their unstinting support. Marco Oberti has been supervising my research since 2010 and has guided my peregrinations across three countries: India for my Master thesis; France and the United States for the current dissertation. His rigor, probity and expertise on international comparison have largely

contributed to shape my research persona. I have greatly benefited from his uncompromising critiques as well as the latitude he gave me to explore different research topics. Since my arrival at Northwestern in 2012, I have additionally been followed by Carolyn Chen, whose erudition and intellectual commitment have proved a continuous source of inspiration throughout the years. With her inimitable kindness, Carolyn Chen has encouraged me to develop intuitions, strengthen arguments and transform messy empirical data into coherent research findings. I am deeply indebted to my two supervisors and very thankful for their complementary advising styles. At Northwestern, Gary Alan Fine, Aldon Morris and Mary Pattillo have also been very important mentors. Overall, I am grateful for the joint PhD program in Sociology between Sciences Po and Northwestern University, which is truly exceptional. The dual training I have received in the American and French sociological traditions has helped me blossom as a young sociologist, and I hope this dissertation does honor to the ambitions of the program and highlights the strengths of my two alma maters.

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This manuscript is dedicated to Pierre, who knows everything I owe him.

Juliette Galonnier
Paris, April 15th, 2017.

INTRODUCTION

“Neither race nor religion can be responsibly understood without a thorough grasp of how the two categories function in concert.”
(Jacobson and Wadsworth, 2012: 2)

Boran is a 35-year-old American man of Cambodian descent and a professor in a private university in Chicago. I interviewed him in his home, along with his wife Alisha, who is African-American. Boran came to the United States (US) as a child in the early 1980s, after surviving the Cambodian Killing Fields, during which his father, his older brother and a large part of his family were murdered. Boran grew up with his mother and step-father in a disadvantaged immigrant neighborhood of New York and became heavily involved in hip-hop culture as a teenager. First acquainted with the teachings of the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters¹ through rap lyrics, he learned more about orthodox Sunni Islam from a local Muslim store-owner of Middle-Eastern descent who lived a couple of blocks away from his high school. Seeking structure and discipline, Boran embraced Islam at age 18. But upon announcing his conversion to his mother, he learned something unexpected:

That day I went home and I told my mother that, “I am Muslim now.” And she was kind of confused and she was like “What exactly are you talking about? What do you mean by this?” And I explained to her what Islam was, what a Muslim was. And then she goes “Oh! OK. We are already Muslims!”

Completely awe-struck, Boran quietly listened to his mother as she revealed to him that their family actually hailed from a specific ethnic group in Cambodia, which is considered Muslim. Boran found out that one of his uncles was named Yusuf, one of his cousins Mohammed and that his ancestors were Muslims from Indonesia and Malaysia. He gathered that his mother had lost track of her Muslim beliefs and practices upon coming to the US as a refugee. She did not pass Islamic traditions onto her children because she thought living in America implied being Christian. Boran was flabbergasted: “Here I was, converting to Islam, not knowing that I had always been a Muslim!” Yet, this discovery prompted questions in his mind: had he truly always been a Muslim given that he did not know about it, did not believe and did not practice? Boran eventually answered this question to the negative and decided to consider himself a convert. After going to the mosque to authenticate his religious shift, he started practicing the religion diligently, and incited his mother to reconnect with it. Hence, what Boran means by being Muslim (testimony of faith and daily practice) does not align with his mother’s considerations (which focus on lineage and ancestry). As exceptional and unique as it is, Boran’s story raises larger issues for the study of religion. What is it that makes one a Muslim? What is Islam? A religion, an ethnicity, an ancestry, a culture?

¹ The Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters are African-American movements who use Islamic referents to promote black dignity (see Chapter 4 of this dissertation).

A. WHO IS MUSLIM? A CONUNDRUM OF RELIGION, CULTURE, ETHNICITY AND RACE

Defining Islam is not easy. Given that there are “more than 1 billion Muslims living in so many different social, cultural, and geographical conditions, how are we to designate a specific attitude as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’?” asks Olivier Roy (2004: 6). To circumvent this problem, I consider that Islam is what Muslims say it is. In other words, I understand Islam as a *category of practice* (Brubaker, 2013), which is used in multifarious ways by a myriad of actors to identify others or themselves. Specifically, I find that the category “Muslim” works differently in different contexts and oscillates between religious, cultural, ethnic, ideological and, finally, racial considerations.

For a majority of people, Islam is a *religion* and “Muslim” functions as a religious category. In this perspective, Islam is a set of shared beliefs and practices that derives from a foundational scripture (the Qur’an and the Sunnah) and is used to address the “continuing, recurrent and permanent problems of human existence” (Yinger, 1969: 91).

By contrast, some consider that Islam is a *culture*, i.e. a collection of symbols and customs to make sense of the world which is transmitted across generations. In this perspective, one can be a “secular Muslim” and identify with Islamic heritage without being a believer (for a critique of the concept of Muslim culture, see Dakhliya, 2001; Willems, 2017).

The category “Muslim” may also take on an *ethnic* meaning, marked by a distinction between “us” and “them” (Juteau, 1999) and characterized by various degrees of social closure (Weber, 1971 [1922]). Consider the recurring strife between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia or the conflicts in the Balkans. Like the labels “Catholic” and “Protestant” in the Northern Ireland struggle (Jenkins, 2008 [1997]-a), the label “Muslim” can operate without much theological content, and function instead as an instrument of boundary-making based on ancestry and lineage. This process of ethnicization (Bertheleu, 2007) is also occurring in Western societies where, increasingly, “the religious marker transforms a disparate population into an identity group” (Roy, 2010: 69) and the category “Muslim” becomes a “neo-ethnic” label (Roy, 2009: 8).

Some also consider that Islam is not a religion but a totalitarian ideology and that Muslim is a *political category*. As demonstrated by Nadia Marzouki (2013: 111-124), this argument is mostly used by the Christian right in the US to deny Muslims the religious protection of the First Amendment (also see Ekman, 2015).

The blurred definitional contours of Islam have translated into great controversies over how to best characterize hostility against Muslims. In particular, heated debates have unfolded around the concept of “Islamophobia,” which in turn has prompted questions about whether or not the category “Muslim” can be considered as *racial*. Islamophobia is recognized by many international organizations as a legitimate term to designate the preoccupying empirical reality of “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims” (Bleich, 2011).² Among practitioners and scholars, it is increasingly

² Recent years have witnessed the mushrooming of studies on Islamophobia in Europe and North America (Conway, 1997; Halliday, 1999; Geisser, 2003; Werbner, 2005; EUMC, 2006; Deltombe, 2007; Gottschalk

treated on equal terms with other forms of racism, such as anti-Semitism, anti-black racism and xenophobia. Yet, it remains a much-contested term in European and North American public opinion. Public figures on the Right and on the Left deny the legitimacy of Islamophobia as a racist notion on the ground that this would jeopardize the legitimate critique of Islam as a religion – an inalienable right in democratic secular contexts.

Shortly before his assassination during the attacks of January 2015, Charlie Hebdo's journalist Charb published a short essay (2015) arguing that the concept of Islamophobia was a fraud to protect a religion while obscuring actual forms of racism against Arabs. In a forthcoming book, Pascal Bruckner (2017) claims that Islamophobia is an "imaginary racism" since "a universal religion such as Islam is not a race." German politician Thilo Sarrazin defended his derogatory stances against Muslim immigrants by defining Islam as a culture: "I am not a racist. I simply affirm that the problem Muslim immigrants have with integration is related to their Islamic cultural origin." In support, German social scientist Necla Kelek wrote: "Sarrazin can't be racist, since Islam is not a race but a culture and a religion" (cited in Opratko and Müller-Uri, 2014). Likewise, Sam Harris, a well-known American atheist who defends the right to criticize every religion, recently asserted that "Islam is not a race, ethnicity, or nationality: It's a set of ideas" (Basu, 2014). The idea that "Islam is not a race" is crucial to this mode of reasoning, for if people can in no way be attacked for their "race" (on which they have no control), they can certainly be criticized for their "religion" or "ideological beliefs," which they are deemed to be able to choose.

I argue that the position "Muslims are a race" and its counterpart "Muslims are not a race" are equally problematic, for they rest upon faulty understandings of what race is. The first one is absurd, for it implies that races exist, which they do not. Instead, race is a socio-ideological construct that is "grounded in the belief that human beings embody inherited and fixed biological characteristics" (Morning, 2011: 21, my emphasis). Race is based on illusion, falsehood and fantasy; it is invented and "crafted" (Fields and Fields, 2014). Following Rogers Brubaker (2004), I consider that race is "a perspective *on* the world, not a thing *in* the world." Race is a cognitive activity of categorization, which hinges upon exterior, visible bodily cues (skin color, hair, phenotype, body ornaments, clothing, etc.). Hence, nobody *is* ontologically white or black: there are only people who are categorized as such in given social situations. Bourdieu aptly notes that "the verb *kategoresthai*, which gives us our 'categories,' means to accuse publicly" (1982a: 126). This is congruent with an understanding of race as both an activity of categorization and a factor of oppression.³ Although it has no reality on its own, race has a real impact on the life chances of people who are categorized according to its logic. As put by Ruth Frankenberg (2001: 72), race is "the most violent fiction in human history." Under racial thinking, outward and bodily markers are deemed socially significant and used to classify humanity into discrete types, emphasizing their ontological incompatibility and hierarchical ordering. Race assigns to people identified on the basis of their external

and Greenberg, 2007; Fekete, 2009; Allen, 2010; Shyrock, 2010; Bleich, 2011; Esposito and Kalin, 2011; Sayyid and Vakil, 2011; Klug, 2012; Kumar, 2012; Asal, 2013). Two academic journals are now entirely devoted to studying it: the *Islamophobia Studies Journal* at UC Berkeley and the *Jahrbuch für Islamophobieforschung* in German language.

³ Colette Guillaumin (2002 [1972]: 252) adds: « *la catégorie est enceinte de la connaissance comme de l'oppression* » (the category is pregnant with both knowledge and oppression).

appearance a set of defining social and moral qualities that are believed to be inherent, innate and transmitted across generations.⁴

The second position, which implies that Muslims cannot be victims of racism, is also misleading for it relies on a narrow definition of race, that focuses exclusively on biology and genetics. This has become increasingly contested. Some authors advocate to “break with the idea that (contemporary) racism is only about biology” (Levey and Modood, 2009: 241). Etienne Balibar (1991: 22) writes for instance that “biological or genetic naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human behavior. (...) Culture can also function like a nature, as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.” Colette Guillaumin (2002 [1972]) also provides a very extensive definition of race, which includes religious groups, women and even workers. Scholars have coined new terms such as “neo-racism” (Balibar, 1997b), “differentialist racism” (Taguieff, 2001 [1987]) and “cultural racism” (Hall, 1996; Modood, 2005) to promote the idea that cultural, religious or social differences can also be naturalized, biologized and incorporated to generate social exclusion. This demonstrates the need to recognize that racism is polymorphous and that there is a “family resemblance” between different types of essentializing hostility (Stoler, 2002). Therefore, while Islam is certainly not a race, it can be exposed to processes of racial categorization, something which has been referred to as the “racialization of religion.”

B. THE RACIALIZATION OF RELIGION

The conceptual links between race and religion are complex. Before defining what I mean by the racialization of religion, I will sketch out the various relationships between the two notions (for a similar analysis on religion and ethnicity or religion and nationalism, see Kim, 2011; Brubaker, 2012).

First, race and religion are *analogous concepts*. They both are “principles of vision and division of the social world,” which “function as signs, emblems or stigmata” and have the power to “make and unmake groups” (Bourdieu, 1980: 65). Racial and religious categories enable self- and other-identification: they are instrumental to “construing sameness and difference and situating and placing oneself in relation to others” (Brubaker, 2012: 4). Based on distinct sets of beliefs, they operate as systems of classification that provide ways of ordering the social world.

Second, *religions produce discourses on racial difference*, for the better and for the worse. African-American sociologist W.E.B DuBois (1911; 1933; 2007 [1903]) was among the first scholars to investigate the intricacies of race and religion (Zuckerman, 2000; Blum, 2007). One of DuBois’s most innovative findings is that religion can

⁴ For the sake of this research, I consider that race and ethnicity function differently. In comparison to ethnicity, race is more somatic, vertical, global, constraining and it involves a relationship of subordination and disqualification. In this, I follow Omi and Winant (1994); Bonilla-Silva (1999); Jenkins (2008 [1997]-b). Yet, competing understandings also exist, that subsume race under ethnicity and consider that race is simply a form of ethno-somatic closure (Wimmers, 2008b; Brubaker, 2009), or even call for abandoning the concept of race altogether (Loveman, 1999).

alternatively reproduce racial divisions or challenge them (also see Noll, 2008; Yancey, 2010). Religion has often served to legitimate racial inequality. Consider for instance how the Biblical myth of Ham has been marshalled to justify the enslavement of black people (Goldenberg, 2003; Johnson, 2004), how Nazism has occasionally enlisted Christian theological arguments to validate anti-Semitism (Isaac, 1964; Steigmann-Gall, 2003), and how various doctrines of divine election have been used as a rationale for colonial conquest and imperial expansion (Todorov, 1984; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991). Conversely, religion has also been used as a tool for racial empowerment and to supersede racial divides, as evident in the religious arguments used by slavery abolitionists (Noll, 2006), the development of black theology of liberation (Floyd-Thomas, 2014) or the central role of the black church in struggles against oppression (Morris, 1984; Pattillo, 1998; McRoberts, 2003; DuBois, 2003 [1903]; Chappell, 2005). In sum, racial projects are always intertwined with moral arguments, which are themselves frequently undergirded by religious justifications.

Third, religion and race are *co-constituted and inextricably linked*. Some authors argue that “there is no such thing as race or religion per se – only race and religion as they are constructed in and through each other” (Goldshmidt and McAlister, 2004: 7). Race and religion share a similar historical genealogy. Contrary to the dominant idea that race appeared in the 19th century with the first pseudo-scientific attempts to distinguish humans biologically, scholars have emphasized its much longer history and the centrality of religious considerations in its development (Omi and Winant, 1994; Frederickson, 2002; Heng, 2011; Schaub, 2015). It is argued that the concept of race – i.e. the idea of an insurmountable, ontological and hereditary difference inscribed onto the body – first emerged in the Middle Ages in reference to the threatening figure of the Jew (Roth, 1940; Moore, 1987; Anijdar, 2008; Nirenberg, 2009; Thomas, 2009), that of the Muslim (Matar, 1999; Tolan, 2003; Rana, 2007; Meer, 2013a) and that of the allegedly irreligious South American Indian (Pagden, 1982; Maldonado-Torres, 2014), whose very humanity was debated on theological grounds during the 1550 Valladolid debate (Hanke, 1959; Carrière, 1992). Racial thinking, it can be argued, was born from the encounter with religious difference.

While the history of race and religion may overlap and if scholars have typically analyzed how religions talk about racial difference, the central concern of this dissertation is the *possibility for religion to become racialized*. The concept of racialization has gained momentum over the past decades (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Barot and Bird, 2001; Murji and Solomos, 2006). First coined by Frantz Fanon (1968: 212), it was popularized by Robert Miles, who used it as a synonym for “racial categorization” (2003: 100). Racialization puts the emphasis on the socially constructed nature of race and its potential for polymorphism and reconfiguration. For Howard Winant (1994: 59), it “signifies the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group.” It means enlisting race as a cognitive category to think about something or someone. The “racialization of religion” refers to *the process of assigning a racial meaning to a group that was previously defined in religious terms, i.e. associating it with a number of phenotypical, somatic, cultural and moral characteristics construed as inborn and immutable*.

I conceptualize the racialization of religion as a complex social phenomenon, involving two interrelated operations: *essentialization* and *embodiment*. The first stage of

racialization implies reducing the ancient, composite and contested set of beliefs and practices that constitutes a religious tradition into a few distinctive traits, usually portrayed in a negative light and believed to constitute the essence of the religion in question. This operation of essentialization depicts religion as a totalizing system that saturates the existence of its members. Their multifaceted identities are obscured by their religious affiliation, which is construed as paramount and superseding any other form of identification or allegiance. One becomes exclusively defined by one’s religious belonging, reduced to a handful of defining characteristics.

The second operation involves externalizing and projecting religious identity onto the bodies of believers, whose religion is said to be recognizable through their corporeality (Alcoff, 1999; Kruger, 2005). Embodiment includes outward appearance (physical characteristics, phenotype, skin color, clothing, body ornaments) but also inward anatomy (namely blood and genetics that are believed to trace lineage and ancestry).

Taken together, these two operations lead to the mapping of religious difference onto racial antagonism. The racialization of religion has historical precedence. The most dramatic and paradigmatic example is to be found in the case of European Jews and the development of anti-Semitism (Langmuir, 1990; Poliakov, 2003 [1955]; Arendt, 2005 [1951]). As forcibly asserted by Gil Anijdar (2008: 21), “however one defines race, it is undeniable that in modern times, Jews came to be considered as a race.” Jews became targeted not for what they did, but for what they *were* (Taguieff, 2001 [1987]: 25), not for what they believed, but for what they were *believed to be*.

Can the concept of racialization be applied to the Muslim experience in contemporary Western societies? Many scholars refrain from analyzing hostility towards Muslims in terms of race. “How credible is the equation between Islamophobia and racism?”, asks Ali Rattansi (2007: 108). Miles and Brown (2003: 164) recognize for instance the salience of race in anti-Muslim prejudice without entirely subscribing to the view that Islamophobia is a form of racism: “like other religious Others, the alleged distinctiveness of the Muslim is not usually regarded as biological or somatic, so Islamophobia is not to be regarded as an instance of racism. However, it does interact with racism, and there was an anachronistic quasi-racialization of the Muslim (as ‘Saracen,’ ‘Turk’ or ‘Moor’) in the Middle Ages.” Such hesitancy is surprising for Miles and Brown vilipended earlier in their volume the “poverty of only conceptualizing racism in terms of the physical distinctiveness of its victims” (*ibid*: 6). Overall, while the term Islamophobia is generally embraced,⁵ debates remain regarding its contents: scholars argue as to whether it is best defined as religious intolerance against Islam or whether it is more akin to racism against Muslims as a racialized people (Lopez, 2011); and whether Muslim identity is to be understood as “voluntary” or “involuntary” (Meer, 2008). In sum, is Islamophobia bigotry or racism? I see it as a multi-layered phenomenon of otherization that certainly hinges upon both religious intolerance and racial tropes. However, I argue in this dissertation that the interpretation in terms of racialization does hold water because of the joint presence of essentialization and embodiment in the past and contemporary depiction of Islam.

⁵ Other authors have suggested alternative concepts, such as anti-Muslim racism, anti-Muslimism, anti-Muslim prejudice, Muslimophobia (Halliday, 1999; Erdenir, 2010).

Historically, Islam has consistently been portrayed as intrinsically violent, irrational and oppressive (Daniel, 1962; Said, 1997). Such *essentialization* has taken different shapes across history (Soyer, 2013). In the contemporary period, it is further compounded by the so-called “clash of civilizations” between the East and the West (Todorov, 2010), the rise of international terrorism deriving from violent Islamist ideologies (Asad, 2007), a tense geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the Af-Pak region (Mamdani, 2004), the fear of Muslim immigration/population growth and invasion (Carr, 2006), and the perception that “Islam” is a threat to the “core values” of Western democracies, namely secularism (Roy, 2005) and women’s rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This leads to a global disqualification of Muslims and an enduring suspicion towards anyone closely or remotely affiliated with Islam. Islam, understood as a monolithic whole, is perceived as a hereditary mental software that informs every aspect of Muslims’ existence and governs their bodies and psyche. For historian Naomi Davidson (2012: 3), Muslims are *saturated* with their religion, just like women are saturated with their gender. Hence, every individual Muslim is seen as incarnating the collective type of the “Muslim” and is held accountable for the negative actions of other Muslims.

In addition to this essentialization, Islam has also been through a process of *embodiment* and somatization. As early as the Middle Ages, it has been confined within narrow and rigid corporeal boundaries as a “brown” non-Western faith (Bayoumi, 2006; Rana, 2007; Rana, 2010). Think of the figures of the Saracen, the Moor and the Turk. Today, and in spite of their ethnic and cultural diversity, Muslims are often conflated into a homogeneous ethno-racial category (North Africans in France; Arabs or South Asians in the USA).⁶ Conversely, any person belonging to these ethnic and racial groups is potentially “religio-ized” as Muslim, no matter their actual religious beliefs (Christian, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, Atheist, etc.). Hence, the stereotypical figure of the “Muslim” is ambiguous for it combines a number of characteristics that admittedly include belief and a set of negative moral assumptions, but also national origin, ethnicity, ancestry, culture, clothing, phenotypical features and skin color. It operates more like a racial category than a religious outlook, and it is as much about external appearance as it is about religious conviction.

Furthermore, a new wave of studies fruitfully compares hostility towards Muslims with anti-Semitism (Weil, 2005; Bunzl, 2007; Meer and Noorani, 2008; Silverstein, 2010; Meer, 2013b; Weaver, 2013; Werbner, 2013; Klug, 2014; Skenderovic et al., 2014). The point is not to say that anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment are fundamentally the same, but rather that they are analogous, in the sense that they share similar mechanisms. Overall, the Jewish experience functions as a “cursor” (Göle, 2015: 243), a gauge, to evaluate the situation of Muslims living in contemporary Western societies. Some also claim that the figure of the “Jew” and that of the “Muslim” are intimately related (Halevi, 2015) and have worked in tandem throughout European history, the Jew as internal enemy and the Muslim as external enemy, whose purpose was to undergird the corresponding association of whiteness and Christianity (Goldshmidt and McAlister, 2004: 12). There are several affinities between the stereotypical representations of the Jew and that of the Muslim, which indicates a form of parallel racialization. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), philosopher Giorgio Agamben recalls for instance that the Nazis used the word

⁶ This also leads to the erasure of the experience of Muslims from different ethno-racial backgrounds such as African, European (Bosnian, Albanian) or Southeast Asian Muslims.

“*Muselmänner*” (Muslim) to designate the most miserable Jewish prisoners, who were so weak that their bodies bent in prostration, as if they were performing the Islamic prayer (cited in Meer, 2013a: 385-386). In his various elaborations on the Semitic race, French thinker Ernest Renan also lumped together Jews and Arabs and considered that Islam was the utmost embodiment of what he called the “Semitic spirit,” characterized by high religiosity, despotism and contempt for science. He wrote: “the Muslim (the Semitic spirit is nowadays mostly represented by Islam) and the European are like two members of different species, having nothing in common in the way they think or feel” (Renan, 1862: 14). Renan conceived both Judaism and Islam in racial terms.

All these elements point towards the legitimacy of an approach in terms of racialization to account for the specific situation of Muslim minorities in contemporary Western societies. Klug (2012) finds that such “claim stands in need of clarification and is open to dispute. But the literature suggests that the ground of debate is shifting in this direction.” Selod and Embrick (2013) write for instance, that “racialization provides the appropriate language to talk about the details of how racial meanings are applied to Muslim men and women’s bodies.” French researchers Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohamed also propose to redefine Islamophobia as “the complex social process of *racialization*/otherization hinging upon the markers of (actual or alleged) belonging to the Muslim religion” (2013: 20). In one of the first systematic endeavors to connect scholarship on Muslims to scholarship on race, Garner and Selod (2015) consider that “we cannot conceptualize the Muslim experience as existing wholly outside of a racial paradigm.”

In spite of these new developments, confusion and interrogations remain. For instance, Bleich (2009) asks: “where do Muslims stand on ethno-racial hierarchies? Is their status similar or different across countries?” Is the Muslim question a racial question? More generally, how do racial categories work? What exactly is the role of religion in operations of racial categorization? This dissertation answers these questions by integrating the two operations of essentialization and embodiment to track instances of racial reasoning that occur in relation to the religion of Islam in the West. I strive to identify where, when and how Islam ceases to be defined as simply a religious category and operates more like a sticky corporeal essence. Ultimately, my purpose is to unpack the black box of racial categorization. I approach race as a dependent rather than independent variable and seek to understand how and when people use racial language in relation to religion. This study draws on an innovative research design to dissect, decrypt and decipher the problematic junction of race and religion. Specifically, I rely on two original research strategies: a transatlantic comparative analysis; and a focus on conversion, with a specific attention paid to white converts to Islam.

This research concentrates on individuals who are categorized as belonging to the majority population (white) in France and the US, and embrace a minority religion (Islam). Having had to transition from one status to another, they allow us to study racialization in the making. As a near-experimental case, they provide a vantage point on whether religion has an impact on one’s racial categorization and one’s positioning in a given racial order.

C. RACE, RELIGION AND ISLAM IN FRANCE AND THE US

Because the perception of Islam, race and religion varies across countries, this study analyzes the intertwining of race and religion from a comparative standpoint. I apply the same research protocol in two countries which have historically been characterized by different – and at times competing – understandings of race and religion, as well as contrasting encounters with the Muslim world: France and the US. The bird’s eye view granted by cross-national investigation enhances the generalizability of my findings. By analyzing how macro-social configurations structure the daily experiences of Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic, I also illuminate the specificities of each national context.

Since the pioneering study of Alexis de Tocqueville (2010 [1835]), French-American comparisons have become a classic of social science research. Two major Western democracies often presented as polar opposites on an eclectic range of topics (for a panorama, see Sabbagh and Simonet, forthcoming), France and the US are everyone’s favorite comparative duo. They are characterized by contrasted “repertoires of evaluation,” which Lamont and Thévenot (2000: 5) define as the “elementary grammars that can be available across situations and that preexist individuals.” The attractiveness of transatlantic comparative research is further reinforced by the fact that the two countries keep measuring up to one another and are engaged in sharp ideological conflict on a variety of issues (universalism, modes of production, consumption, role of the State, welfare regime, justice system, education, etc.) (Hoffmann, 2000; Benson and Saguy, 2005; Oberti, 2012). As a result, each country occupies a prominent position in the collective imagination of the other: French bashing is a recurring feature of American public debates (Serfaty, 2002; Mathy, 2003), while, in France, anti-Americanism is almost a national pastime (Lacorne et al., 1990; Mathy, 1993). France and the US have historically shaped themselves against one another. “I did not want to do a portrait, but to present a mirror,” said Tocqueville about his work (De Tocqueville, 2010 [1835]: cvii). This construction in mirror is precisely what undergirds and justifies the transatlantic comparative endeavor. In the contemporary period, it is the topic of racial and religious diversity, which is also the central preoccupation of this dissertation, that has concentrated the bulk of the transatlantic dispute.

1) Race frames and racial stratification

France and the US first differ in terms of what Eric Bleich (2003) calls “race frames,” i.e. “a set of cognitive and mental maps encompassing definitions, analogies, metaphors, and symbols that aid actors in conceptualizing a political or social situation.” Race is at the forefront of any analysis of American society. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994: 61), it is even “the central axis of social relations.” In her analysis of the American literary imagination, Toni Morrison (1993: xiii) also writes that America is a “race-conscious culture” and that “deep within the word ‘American,’ is its association with race” (*ibid.*: 47). Racial categories are almost self-evident in the US and used on a daily basis (administrative forms, affirmative action policies).

On the contrary, race and racial categories remain suspect in France where a strong color-blind rhetoric prevails (Noiriel, 2009). In fact, there are debates as to whether the

very word “race” can be of any use to understand the French context. On May 16th 2013, France’s national assembly decided to altogether ban the term from the Constitution. President Hollande proudly declared “there is no room in the Republic for race” and presented the ban as an opportunity to reaffirm his commitment against racism, which generated much sarcasm in the US. France, which embraces a model of abstract universalism, does not differentiate its citizens on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion and has always refused to census its population along these lines (Safi, 2008; Simon, 2008a; Simon, 2008b).

The sharp contrast between American color-consciousness and French color-blindness has nonetheless faded in the most recent period, as segments of the American population increasingly argue that the US have become “post-racial” (a much-contested claim, see Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In parallel, ethnic and racial issues are now the source of heated public debates in the French context, which has put the official rhetoric of color-blindness on trial (Calvès, 2004; Bleich, 2008).

In addition, the French and American racial stratification systems also differ markedly. Racial stratification refers to the hierarchical ordering of various racial categories relative to one another and the corresponding unequal distribution of resources. The American racial stratification system is characterized by a dual Black and White divide, rooted in the legacy of slavery, which differentiates whiteness and blackness in hard, biological terms (think of the one-drop rule). To be sure, the US racial structure is now leaning towards more complexity, with Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and Hispanic Americans occupying an intermediary position at the edge of whiteness and blackness (Kim, 1999; Koshy, 2001; Selod and Embrick, 2013). Bonilla-Silva (2004) suggests that America has evolved into a tri-racial system comprised of “whites” at the top, “honorary whites” in the middle and “non-whites” at the bottom. Nonetheless, the American racial system consistently revolves around whiteness as a position of dominance and integration remains conditioned by the ability to demonstrate that one is white, i.e. not black. Since the seminal work of W.E.B. DuBois (1917; 1935 [1965]; 2005 [1920]), whiteness studies have blossomed in the US (Kolchin, 2002). They have established that whiteness is characterized by structural advantage (Roediger, 1991; Harris, 1993), normative invisibility (Dyer, 1988; Frankenberg, 1993; Keating, 1995) and a dichotomic opposition to blackness. Such dichotomization of racial dynamics is apparent in the incorporation of immigrants. While immigrants from various origins have eventually managed to climb up the racial ladder and gain acceptance into the realm of whiteness, African-Americans have irremediably remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

By contrast, black studies are only an emerging field of study in France (Ndiaye, 2008; Fleming, 2017) where the crux of the ethno-racial predicament is located on post-colonial immigration from North Africa. According to Loïc Wacquant (2014: 8) while “ethnic division [is] rooted in the ‘Black/White’ opposition in the US, [it is] centered on the ‘national/post-colonial foreigner’ schism” in France. In her work comparing racist attitudes among French and American working men, Michèle Lamont (2003) also found that the American “them” are black, while the French “them” are Arabs. A number of studies trace the genealogies of the French racial stratification system back to the colonial period (Bancel et al., 2006; Mbembe et al., 2010) and have demonstrated that, although deeply buried under a thick color-blind discourse, the traumas of colonization and of the

Algerian war in particular periodically resurface. African-American author William Gardner Smith who visited France in the 1960s emphatically wrote in his novel *The Stone Face* (1963) that the Algerians are “the niggers of France” and subsequently referred to African-Americans as “the American Algerians.” Contrary to the US, French racial and immigration issues are overlaid: those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy are immigrants and children of immigrants. As put by Horowitz and Noiriel (1992: 23), “in America the racial issue and the immigrant issue came separately. In France, the two issues are the same, and they are equally unresolved.” A number of events – protest marches in 1983, serious urban rioting in 1981 and 2005 (Lagrange and Oberti, 2006) – have progressively brought to light France’s failure to integrate its citizens of North African descent, who have been socio-economically marginalized and spatially relegated to the outskirts of major French cities (Préteceille, 2009; Safi, 2009; PanKéShon, 2010; McAvay, 2016).

Literature about whiteness is also budding in France (Bosa, 2010; Cervulle, 2011; Laurent and Leclère, 2013). To be sure, whiteness is seldom evoked as such in French public discourse. Its very translation into French language is problematic (*blancheur? blanchité? blanchitude?*). White natives seldom identify as “white” (*blanc*), but think of themselves as “French.” Accordingly, immigrants are not necessarily despised for their skin color but because of their perceived failure to embody “Frenchness” and integrate into the French Republican mainstream, which implies relinquishing any distinctive cultural, ethnic or religious identity of origin. Yet, drawing inspiration from American scholarship, a few authors are wondering whether “when we talk about ‘Frenchmen’ without any further mention, we are not actually talking about ‘French whites’” (Bosa, 2010: 136). For instance, the category “*français de souche*” (rooted French), which indicates the absence of migratory origin and is frequently employed in mainstream discourse, never applies to black natives from overseas France (DOM-TOM) and mostly functions as a euphemism for whiteness. Recent political mobilizations around the theme of “anti-white racism” (*racisme anti-Blancs*) (Charrieras, 2013) also indicate the increasing (yet debated) relevance of the category “white” as an option of identification for the French majority.

2) Religion and secularism

In addition to race, France and the US also entertain contrasting relationships to religion. The two countries differ markedly in terms of their levels of religiosity. Ahmet Kuru (2009: 244) finds that 96% of Americans believe in God while only 61% of French people do so. Only 55% of French citizens are affiliated to a religion, against 85% of Americans. Finally, a mere 10% of French people participate in religious activities once a week as opposed to 40% of Americans.

Both countries practice the separation of church and state (through the 1791 First amendment in the US and the Law of 1905 in France); yet, they do it differently (Whitman, 2008). According to Ahmet Kuru (2009: 11), France follows an assertive version of secularism, called *laïcité*, which “requires the state to play an ‘assertive’ role to exclude religion from the public sphere.” By contrast, the US is characterized by passive secularism, which “demands that the state play a passive role by allowing the public visibility of religion.” These differences are easily explained by history. In France, the Republic emerged during the French Revolution after a bloody and prolonged conflict against a centralized and powerful Catholic church, which led to an enduring

conceptualization of religion as a threat to the polity (Baubérot, 2000). France has a strong tradition of anticlericalism, particularly on the Left, which portrays religion as an obstacle to emancipation and equality (Rémond, 1999; Pénet and Benmouffok, forthcoming). France has always sought to institutionalize minority religions in order to monitor them, as was the case with Napoleon’s creation of a Jewish Consistoire in 1808 and more recently with the foundation in 2003 of the CFCM (*Conseil français du culte musulman*, French council of the Muslim faith). French secularism can be defined as defiant towards religion. On the contrary, in the US, the multitude of Protestant sects has always been perceived as an asset for the young American democracy and a beneficial counter-power to the dangerous hegemony of the State, which rarely interferes with religious matters (Bellah, 2005; De Tocqueville, 2010 [1835]). As a result, the American secularism regime has been embracing religion and encouraging religious expression.

These institutional differences translate into different attitudes towards religion in daily life. Religion is a key feature of American civic life and the sociology of American religion proffers a substantial body of research (Warner and Wittner, 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Chen, 2002; Chen, 2008; Lichterman, 2008) demonstrating that it is through religion that immigrants find a sense of membership and belonging. In *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Will Herberg (1955: 27-28) states that “such [is] the shape of America that it [is] largely in and through his religion that [the immigrant] or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life.” This has especially been the case for immigrants who adhere to Christianity, but not only. Prema Kurien (1998) finds for example that Indian immigrants “become American by becoming Hindu” since religion operates as a common language that enables them to integrate into the American mainstream. Even groups that have historically been discriminated under American Protestant hegemony (Blumenfeld et al., 2009), such as Catholics, Jews or Mormons, have been able to develop autonomous institutions and prosper religiously. In fact, Americans are much more tolerant of any religion than they are of atheists, who appear as ultimate “Others” (Edgell et al., 2006) and are the most hated group in opinion polls.

By contrast, religion is not a factor of cultural membership in the French nation. The French secular context is characterized by the “unintelligibility of the religious” (Fernando, 2010) and the “incongruity of religious sentiment” (Amiriaux, 2016: 39), even if the Catholic heritage remains important culturally. Civic demands on the basis of religion are perceived as awkward at best, intolerable at worst. Religious rhetoric that is common in the American polity (“in God we trust,” “God bless America,” etc.) generates outrage in the French context. Religion is seen as purely private and is seldom discussed in public. As put by Nancy Foner and Richard Alba (2008: 368), an article entitled “becoming French by being Muslim” would simply be unthinkable. Immigrant religion is construed as hindering successful integration, rather than offering bridging possibilities. The cultural appeal of religion, therefore, differs markedly on the two sides of the Atlantic (Portier, 2010). Most Americans place high value on being religious, while most French people take pride in being irreligious.

Religion is also a matter of contention in transatlantic debates. This became evident with the 2004 French ban on conspicuous religious symbols (particularly the Muslim headscarf) in public schools. The parliamentary discussions that surrounded the adoption of the bill reveal that French legislators cared very much about differentiating their

conception of *laïcité* from the American one. References to the US model were numerous throughout the sessions. For instance, one French senator⁷ proudly recalled a statement by French intellectual Régis Debray who once declared: “for them [Americans], the village is erected around the temple and the drugstore. For us, it is around the city hall and the public school.” This defined French political culture as rooted in democracy and public good, as opposed to American religious parochialism and commodification. The US also seized upon the French ban to assert their conception of religious freedom. The director of the First Amendment center, Charles C. Haynes, declared: “in France, it’s considered un-French to wear a *hijab**⁸. In the US, it should be un-American to make someone take it off” (2003; cited in Barb, 2014: 22). Overall, each country uses the other as an anti-model to define the “kind of nation” it wants to incarnate. While France proudly defends secularism against typically-American incursions of religious bigotry, America boasts about protecting religious freedom in stark contrast with oppressive French policies. The fact that the core dispute has materialized on the Muslim headscarf is not insignificant, for Islam concentrates racial and religious issues in a powerful manner in both countries.

3) Islam and Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic

France and the US entertain different relationships to Islam and Muslims. They first have different Muslim demographics living on their territories. The Muslim minority in France is currently estimated at 4.7 million,⁹ which represents 7.5% of the total population (Pew Research Center, 2016a). It is decidedly North African, which skews dominant representations of Muslims towards Arabness. Rough estimates (Laurence and Vaïsse, 2007: 39) consider that over 70% of French Muslims are of North African descent (especially from Algeria), 10% hail from Turkey, 8% from Africa and the Indian Ocean, and 2% from Asia, the remaining 10% being constituted of untraceable undocumented immigrants and people of various origins.

The American Muslim minority is much smaller than the French one, both in absolute and relative terms. Recent estimates (Pew Research Center, 2016b: 1) have established that there are 3.3 million Muslims living on American territory, who make up only 0.9% of the total American population (Pew Research Center, 2015b: 16). In spite of their small size, Muslims are considered as “the most racially diverse religious group in the US” (Gallup Coexist Foundation, 2009: 10). In a recent survey of American mosques, Ihsan Bagby (2012a: 13) found that 33% of American Muslims are South Asian, 27% Arab, 24% African-American, 9% African, the remaining 7% being a mix of European, Turkish, Southeast Asian, Latino, Iranian, etc.¹⁰ The American Muslim minority is therefore more heterogenous than the French one. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the French and American Muslim minorities.

⁷ Josselin de Rohan, member of the center-right party UMP. Senate session of March 2nd, 2004.

⁸ Words with an asterisk are defined in the glossary at the end of this dissertation.

⁹ Another study (Simon and Tiberj, 2010: 6), based on the survey *Trajectoires et Origins* (2010), gives an estimation of 4.1 million.

¹⁰ Statistics about American Muslim diversity are contested. Other estimates find that 42 % are black Americans, 29 % are Indo-Pakistanis, and 12 to 15 % are Arabs, while the remaining 14 or 17 % represent various races and ethnicities, including white and Hispanic Americans (cited in Jackson, 2005: 23).

	FRANCE	UNITED STATES
Size of the Muslim population	4.7 million	3.3 million
% of Muslims within the population	7.5%	0.9%
Ethno-racial repartition of the Muslim population	70% North Africa 10% Turkey 8% Africa/Indian Ocean 2% Asia 10% Other (undocumented immigrants, converts etc.)	33% South Asian 27% Arab 24% African-American 9% African 7% Other (European, Turkish, Southeast Asian, Latino, Iranian, etc.)

Table 1 - Islam and Muslims in France and the US

The contrasted demographics of the French and American Muslim minorities reflect the different historical encounters that the two countries have had with the Muslim world. In both cases, Islam has been apprehended in both racial and religious terms, but with varying combinations. To be sure, a number of international events (the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Rushdie affair, the Gulf war, 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the rise of ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as Daesh) have recently inflected the representations of Muslims towards the tropes of terrorism and fundamentalism in both France and the US (Saïd, 1997; Mamdani, 2004; Deltombe, 2007). However, this recent transatlantic convergence should not obscure profound differences in the historical appraisal of Islam.

Since the 732 battle of Poitiers during which Charles Martel successfully repelled commander Abd-Al-Rahman and established himself as a valiant Christian fighter against “Muslim invasions” (Michaud and Sénac, 2006), France has entertained a troubled relationship to Islam (Amiriaux, 2008). In the Middle Ages, France, “church’s eldest daughter,” played a major role in the crusades against the “Saracens” (Flori, 2006). During the Enlightenment period (Laurens, 2006; Thomson, 2006), Islam was seen in a more positive light, although French writers such as Voltaire (1741) depicted the religion of Mohammed as violent and despotic. The first attempt to colonize the Muslim world was made by Napoleon in 1798 during the Campaign in Egypt and Syria (Laurens, 1989). Subsequently, French authors such as Chateaubriand (1811), Lamartine (1835) and de Nerval (1851) became the champions of what Edward Saïd calls *Orientalism* (1978), offering to their readers a graphic depiction of Islam as sensual and irrational. With the colonization of Algeria and other parts of North Africa, which started in 1830, France became a *de facto* “Muslim power” and had to rule “Muslim subjects” (LePautremat, 2003). The war of Independence with Algeria that occurred more than a century later (1954-1962) was dramatic and left deep wounds in the national memory of both countries, some of which have not yet healed (Einaudi, 1991; Stora, 2005). One cannot overemphasize the centrality of Algeria in the past and contemporary French appraisal of Islam; some even talk about an Algerian syndrome (Geisser and Zemouri, 2007: 15-16). The 50s and 60s saw a massive arrival in mainland France of North African immigrants who integrated into the lower sections of society and swelled the ranks of the French working-class (Barou et al., 1995; Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013). Today, the children and grand-children of these Muslim immigrants are socio-economically disadvantaged and

encounter discrimination in access to housing (Bunel et al., 2017) and employment (Valfort, 2015). This contributes to a strong cognitive association between the figure of the “Muslim” and that of the underclass. The overlapping racial and immigration issues mentioned above additionally coincide with the Muslim question in France, which generates intricate dynamics. This is apparent in a number of vocabulary shifts to designate people of North African descent: first conceived as “immigrant workers,” they have become “Arabs” at the second-generation, and are now depicted as “Muslims” (Allievi, 2005). According to historian Nancy Green (2002), Islam in France has come to function as a “metonymy” for any immigrant-related issue.

In addition, French secularism has always entertained an uneasy and faulty relationship to Islam. Under the colonial period, the separation between State and church never applied to Islam, which was closely monitored by French authorities, especially in Algeria. The imperatives of colonial domination and the fact that Islam was perceived as a “special religion” warranted making an exception to the principles of secularism (Davidson, 2012; Jouanneau, 2013). Inversely, in the contemporary period, Islam has been construed as a threat to the principles of the Republic’s secular creed (Roy, 2005; Bowen, 2006; Laborde, 2008; Fernando, 2014). Anxiety has crystallized on the Muslim headscarf, specifically. Initiated in 1989, in a Creil high school, *l’affaire du foulard* (the headscarf affair) culminated, after decades of debate, with the 2004 ban on conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. It has been presented by some as an instance of political hysteria (Terray, 2004), and has even been compared to the Dreyfus affair (Liogier, 2010). Pierre Bourdieu (2004 [1989]), in a very short article published in 1989 entitled “*un problème peut en cacher un autre*” (one problem can conceal another), suggested that the real issue was not so much the veil, but rather the repeated failure of the French Republic to integrate North African immigrants and their children. In reality, it is the location of the affair at the interface of immigration, race, secularism and gender that made for a particularly explosive cocktail. Islam in France renders visible both race and faith, which are usually hidden under a heavy color-blind rhetoric and irreligious cultural environment. The fact that those who are said to disrupt the secular order are also people of North African descent has created a conflation in the French public imagination. Accordingly, the most recent period has witnessed a redefinition of French secularism towards greater defensiveness. Eleonore Lépinard (2015) has demonstrated how frames commonly related to immigrant integration (social cohesion, assimilation) have been enrolled to regulate religious practices. This extension of the domain of *laïcité* to preserve the cultural unity of the nation has led to restrictions on Muslim visibility. This “new *laïcité*” (Hennette-Vauchez, 2014) or “falsified *laïcité*” (Baubérot, 2014) has been supported by the Right, which equates French values with European Catholic values, and by a significant portion of the Left, which embraces a secularist political culture and combats the infringement of any religious expression on the public sphere.

The conundrum of race, religion and secularism is much different in the US. When establishing the American Republic, the Founding Fathers, especially Thomas Jefferson, asserted principles of absolute religious freedom by envisioning religious rights for hypothetical Muslim citizens (Spellberg, 2013). This was done even if Americans did not hold Islam close to their heart. Upon setting foot on American territory, colonists had apprehended Native Americans through well-entrenched stereotypes about the racialized figure of the “Moor” and that of the “Turk” (Matar, 1999), suggesting that the category Muslim already embodied the ultimate racial Other. Influenced by the European legacy,

American religious polemicists also frequently discredited Islam as a false religion (Kidd, 2003; Marr, 2006). In addition, the first war that the US ever fought internationally was against a coalition of Muslim entities (the Ottoman regencies of Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis and the sultanate of Morocco, in 1801-1805), which did not contribute to enhance the perception of Islam. Nonetheless, principles prevailed and Jefferson even imagined the possibility for a Muslim to be president of the US. Ironically, he did not realize that actual Muslims already lived on American territory, albeit in circumstances that precluded any assertion of their rights: these were African slaves, some of whom were Muslims who concealed their beliefs from white Christian masters (Austin, 1997; Diouf, 2013 [1998]). From the beginning, therefore, Islam in America found itself at the edge of a paradox involving race and religion: although it was accepted in abstract religious terms, it was suppressed for being practiced by a segment of the population deemed racially inferior under the Black vs. White divide. This paradox never disappeared. In the 20th century, Islam was appropriated by African-American religious movements, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, with its famous spokesperson Malcolm X, who used it as a tool to promote black pride and fight white supremacy (see Chapter 4). Islam became closely associated with blackness and came to embody racial subversion against the white Protestant mainstream (McCloud, 1995; Turner, 1997; Allen, 1998; Curtis, 2002; Dannin, 2002a; Gomez, 2005). In doing so, it also became a distinctively American religion, decoupled from immigration issues (in contrast to the French case).

Apart from African-American Muslims, American Islam also has a significant immigrant component. After 1965, the US removed national and racial quotas and opened their doors to immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle-East. Those who were Muslim found their place in America (Bilici, 2012; Grewal, 2013); it must be noted that they were mostly middle and upper middle-class.¹¹ This is a clear difference with France, where Muslims overwhelmingly belong to the lower sections of society. America on the contrary, “tended to attract far greater proportions of wealthy, ambitious and educated immigrant Muslims” (Jackson 2005: 17). For a long time, the fears and moral panics related to immigration in the US mostly focused on Latinos, and spared immigrants from Muslim-majority countries (Zolberg and Woon, 1999). Because of their high socio-economic status, immigrant Muslims have aspired to join the American white mainstream. However, this aspiration has been clearly thwarted in the post 9/11 context, which has witnessed increased police surveillance of Muslim citizens and the construction of Islam as a new racialized threat (Bayoumi, 2008; Abraham et al., 2011; Cainkar, 2011; Peek, 2011; Rana, 2011). Under the War on Terror, immigrant and second-generation Muslims have transitioned from a status of “invisible citizens” to a status of “visible subjects” (Jamal and Naber, 2008): they have tumbled down the racial ladder. The religious shield they were granted by the First Amendment of the Constitution has also been unsettled by their relegation in the racial order and the multiplication of attacks from the Christian right who argue that Islam is not a religion but a dangerous political ideology that does not deserve protection (Marzouki, 2013). In fact, last year, Muslims have surpassed atheists as the most hated group in the US (Edgell et al., 2016). The recent immigration bills proposed by President Donald Trump that single out Muslim-majority countries reinforce these developments. Once again, American

¹¹ Indicative of this is a recent report by the Pew Research Center entitled “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream” (Pew Research Center, 2007b). As put by Foner and Alba (2008: 376), “the average mosque-goer in the US is a married man with children who has a bachelor’s degree or higher and earns about \$74,000 a year.”

Muslims are caught in the paradox of their abstract religious acceptance and their racial demonization.

Table 2 attempts to summarize centuries of history on the two sides of the Atlantic into an operational comparative framework. The categories developed in this table will be frequently referred to throughout the dissertation.

	FRANCE	UNITED STATES
Race Frame	Color-blind	Color-conscious
Racial Stratification	Postcolonial immigrant vs. Native divide	Black vs. White divide
Perception of religion	Unintelligibility of Religion	Cultural Centrality of Religion
Secularism regime	Defiant (religion as a threat)	Embracing (religion as an asset)
Historical relation of secularism to Islam	Exceptionalism	Abstract Acceptance
Muslim population	Majority North African	Multi Ethnic and Racial
Immigrant Muslim population	Socioeconomically marginalized	Socioeconomically successful
Link between the category at the bottom of the racial stratification system and Islam	Strong (North Africans)	Limited, yet relevant (African-Americans)

Table 2 – Backdrop of the comparison

Remarkably, in France, the Muslim question simultaneously collides with secularism (Muslims are deemed too conspicuous in their religious practice); class and immigration (socioeconomically marginalized immigrants tend to be Muslim), colonial history (most violent episodes of colonization involved Muslim subjects) and the racial stratification system (those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, North Africans, are directly related to Islam). These patterns are well-entrenched historically, and have gained momentum with the recent rise of global terrorism committed in the name of Islam. In the US, the problem is more diffused: those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, African-Americans, are tangentially but not overwhelmingly related to Islam; most immigrant Muslims tend to be economically well-off; and the prioritization of religious freedom principles continues to allow for a greater accommodation of Muslim religious practices. This situation has however deteriorated with the War on Terror and the latest political developments, which have led to a disadvantageous repositioning of Muslims in the racial order.

In sum, France is characterized by a unique concentration of racial, immigration and secularism issues that all coalesce on the topic of Islam. By contrast, in the US, issues of race, immigration and secularism tend to be more decoupled from one another and only peripherally relate to Islam, although this is shifting in the most recent period. Overall, France and the US provide a rich and theoretically profitable contrast to analyze the

racialization of Islam. Nonetheless, the problematic overlap of racial and religious issues on the two sides of the Atlantic warrants a judicious research design to disentangle the problem. I suggest that white converts to Islam constitute a heuristic case in this regard because they precisely neutralize the issues of race and immigration that keep interfering with the analysis of Islam in both France and the US.

D. CONVERSION TO ISLAM AS AN EXPERIMENTAL CASE

1) Conversion as a heuristic device

In this research, I use conversion as a lens to decipher the intricacies of race and religion. Conversion is a contentious word. People whom we call “converts” do not necessarily use this term to self-identify. Scholars also disagree as to how much change is necessary to identify a religious shift as conversion (Le Pape, 2009). There are distinctions between “external” and “internal” conversions (Hervieu-Léger, 1999: 120-125), the former referring to religious change across traditions and denominations (shifting from one religion, or none, to another) and the latter to the spiritual reconnection and intensification of practice within a religious tradition (the so-called “born-again” phenomenon). Although there are strong similarities between the religious trajectories of these two types of converts, I use, for the purpose of this research, a narrow conception of conversion that focuses exclusively on external ones. With Mercedes Garcia-Arenal (2001: 7), I define conversion as “the range of processes through which individuals or groups engage in beliefs, rituals and social practices that are *different from those into which they were born.*” Chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation offer a detailed analysis of the religious conversion process.

Characterized as such, conversion is fundamentally subversive, for it entails the possibility of choosing an identity that is different from the one ascribed by birth, thereby allowing for the disruption of established categories and classifications. The seditious character of conversion has recently been highlighted in two episodes in France and the US. When Donald Trump announced during the 2016 presidential election campaign his intention to establish a database registering the names of Muslims living on American territory – a system reminiscent of Jewish registries under Nazism – many called for everyone to register as Muslim (Bulman, 2016). Filmmaker Michael Moore even expressed on social media his intention to convert to Islam and “sign up” if the Muslim registry was to be implemented.¹² Conversion was presented as a tool to blur the lines between ethnicity, race and religion, and prevent the targeting of one category of the population defined in essentialist terms. A similar, albeit more localized, controversy occurred in France when Robert Ménard, the mayor of Béziers, a city in Southern France, declared in May 2015 that 64.9% of Béziers public schools’ pupils were Muslim and that one class in particular had 91% of Muslims. As journalists wondered how Ménard could have gathered such precise figures in a country where ethnic and religious statistics are strictly forbidden, he proudly explained that, as a mayor, he had access to the lists of children enrolled in public schools and had identified Muslims on the basis of their first names. This declaration turned many commentators’ blood to ice for it was evocative,

¹² Twitter, November 18th, 2016.

once again, of the Jewish registration system under Vichy France. Ménard was prosecuted for incitation to racial hatred and illegal filing (L'Obs, 2015). Notably, French converts to Islam living in Béziers directly challenged Ménard for conflating North African first names with Islamic belonging. Blue-eyed converts with typically French names posted pictures of themselves with signs saying: “hey Ménard, my name is Laurent and you forgot me in your registry, even though I am Muslim;” “Ménard, I am Muslim and you know what? My name is Morgane,” etc. Converts used their identity to counter the racialization of Islam and ridiculed Robert Ménard for his essentializing assumptions. This usage of conversion echoes comments by scholar Gauri Viswanathan (1998: 31), who considers that conversion acts as “a potentially destabilizing force in culture because of its radical displacements of meaning.” The investigative nature of conversion derives precisely from such subversive character.

Scholars on race and racism have historically used religious conversion as a key indicator to differentiate religious from racial hatred. George Frederickson (2002: 170) writes: “if conversion is a real possibility, we have religious or cultural intolerance but not racism.” Religious conversion entails fluidity, change and malleability, which racism does not. Thus, the extent to which religious conversion is possible and accepted reveals the extent to which a group or individual is perceived as belonging to the realm of religion as opposed to the realm of race. Conversion has for instance been used to distinguish anti-Semitism from anti-Judaism. For someone who thinks Judaism is a wrong religion, the conversion of a Jew to Christianity solves the problem. By contrast, someone who holds anti-Semitic beliefs considers that a Jew remains a Jew, no matter the religion he actually professes: religious error is conceived as the very essence of Jewishness; the difference is naturalized, irreducible, unescapable.¹³ As Colette Guillaumin (2002 [1972]: 52) writes, when religious conversion is no longer possible, “anti-Semitism succeeds to anti-Judaism; race succeeds to religion; there is an assumption of racial difference as opposed to an observation of religious difference.¹⁴” In sum, the racial permeability of religious boundaries can be assessed by looking at the way converts are perceived and categorized.

The social consequences of conversion vary across situations. Like financial conversions between currencies, religious conversion can have different “rates,” “fees” and “costs” depending on the ratio of power between the religious tradition that is being left behind and the one that is being embraced. To expand the metaphor, it can for instance be argued that, in the contemporary period, conversion to Buddhism is relatively costless while conversion to Islam is socially costly. In fact, conversion acquires a different meaning when religion is associated with racial thinking. According to Maxime Rodinson (1993 [1980]: 26), in societies where religion is ethnicized or racialized, “the concept of error has made way for that of treason. Converts who were accused of embarking into the path or error are now rebuked for betraying their own.” Building on this line of scholarship, my research uses conversion as a heuristic device to investigate the conflation of religion and race in the case of Islam. Conversions to Islam have a long

¹³ This is apparent in a recent family saga written by Christophe Boltanski, in which the author describes the fate of his grand-father, Etienne, a Ukrainian Jew who moved to France and converted to Christianity in the 1920s, before having to endure the dangers of Nazi occupation in the 1940s. When Etienne showed his religious baptism certificate to the local authorities in charge of Jewish affairs, they responded that it was null and void for it “didn’t change anything to the racial question, just like a Negro baptized a hundred times wouldn’t turn into an Aryan” (Boltanski, 2015: 248).

¹⁴ For a critique of this distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, see Favret-Saada (2004).

history in the West (Arnold, 1896; Bulliet, 1979; Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989; Garcia-Arenal, 1999; Luckmann, 1999). Looking at Muslim converts’ experiences in both the past and the present, I ask: when is conversion to Islam interpreted not solely in terms of betraying values but also in terms of changing one’s racial status?

Muslim converts have rarely been studied in terms of their racialized experiences. Most of the literature on conversion to Islam focuses on the reasons for conversion or the religious learning process (Köse, 1996; Allievi, 1998; McGinty, 2006; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006b; Winchester, 2008; Maslim and Bjorck, 2009; Galonnier and De Los Rios, 2016). Very little has been written on how conversion might affect racial identity. A few recent pieces can be found, but they focus mostly on Australia (Woodlock, 2010; Alam, 2012), the UK (Franks, 2000; Moosavi, 2012; Moosavi, 2015), Denmark (Jensen, 2008), the Netherlands (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004), Germany (Özyürek, 2014) and Spain (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). In the US, the possibility of using conversion as a lens to examine the intricacies between race and religion has marginally been explored (Grewal, 2013). In France, this type of investigation has only started to emerge (Larisse, 2013; Brun, 2014; Galonnier, forthcoming). Finally, studies offering a comparative perspective on conversion to Islam are also rare (Daynes, 1999; McGinty, 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006; Mossière, 2014; Galonnier, 2015a). The purpose of this research is to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of how race operates in the lives of Muslim converts on both sides of the Atlantic.

2) White Converts as Breaching Experiments

In this endeavor, I focus more specifically on the experiences of “white” converts to Islam. What do I mean by white? Like race, whiteness is not a quality inherent to individuals but the product of complex historical relations and social constructions. Its meanings vary from one national context to another and its boundaries have contracted and expanded over time. The answer to the question “who is white?” is therefore ever shifting, for groups who were not categorized as whites at a certain point in time, such as Irish, Italian, Eastern European or Jewish immigrants to the US in the 19th century, have progressively been integrated into the realm of whiteness (Ignatiev, 1995; Brodtkin Sacks, 1998; Jacobson, 1999). Whiteness is therefore not simply a chromatic matter; but a social one. It does not solely depend on one’s skin color, but on one’s position in a multilayered racial stratification system that amalgamates phenotype, citizenship, autochthony, language, socioeconomic status and, more often than not, religion. Thus, the Irish in the US have long been categorized as non-white not only because they were immigrants of low extraction backgrounds but also because they were Catholics holding beliefs different from the Protestant majority. Consider also the following example. After the Boston marathon bombing of April 2013, there were debates in the American press to decide whether the Tsarnaev brothers, who committed the attack, were or were not “white” (Beinart, 2013; Demby, 2013; Kendzior, 2013; Walsh, 2013). To be sure, their skin color fits the chromatic standards of whiteness; they hail from the Caucasus region, from which derives the word “Caucasian” (which literally signifies white in the US); and one of them held American citizenship. Yet, the Tsarnaev brothers are also ethnic Chechens, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and above all Muslims, which clearly positions them outside mainstream whiteness in collective representations.

Being white, therefore, means belonging to the majority group, as it is defined at a given point in time. Whiteness enables those categorized within it to evolve freely in society, without experiencing systemic racism or having their identity perpetually questioned. “Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average, and also ideal” writes scholar Peggy McIntosh (1989). Whiteness has been conceived as a default, blank, structurally advantaging identity against which racial minorities have to position themselves. In the most recent period, a new wave of studies (Twine and Gallagher, 2008) has emerged which, without contesting these findings, has sought to refine them, by claiming that “whiteness is not a static, uniform category of social identification” and that “the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences within white identities” should be acknowledged (Hartigan, 2001: 157). Matthew Hughey (2010: 1306) writes for instance that “more work must be done to tease out the junction of whiteness, class, gender, sexuality, and age.” I argue that it is of utmost necessity to add religion to the list, by focusing for instance on white converts to Islam.

The Religion Office of the French Home Ministry estimates that there are roughly 4,000 conversions to Islam every year and Muslim converts are believed to represent at most 100,000 individuals today (Karagiannis, 2012: 99), i.e. not more than 3% of the total Muslim population. Information about the racial background of these Muslim converts is missing, however. In comparison to France, Islam in the US is much more a religion of conversion: converts represent 20% of American Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2011: 24), roughly 600,000 people. In line with the vibrant history of black American Islam, most of these converts (64%) are African-American, 22% are white American,¹⁵ 12% Latino American and 2% are categorized as other by Bagby (2012a: 13).

	FRANCE	UNITED STATES
Size of the Muslim population	4.7 million	3.3 million
Size of the Muslim convert population	50,000 – 100,000	600,000 – 700,000
% of converts within the Muslim population	1-3%	20%
Ethno-racial repartition of converts	Unknown	64% African-American 22% white American 12% Latino American 2% Other

Table 3 – Conversion to Islam in France and the United States

The main protagonists of this dissertation, white converts to Islam, only make up 1% of all American Muslims (Bagby, 2012a: 13) and less than 3% of French Muslims. However, it is not because of their numbers that white converts are of interest to us, but because they disrupt the normal course of racial and religious categorization.

As noted by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994: 59) in their assessment of racial thinking, “we expect people to act out their apparent racial identities. We become disoriented and anxious when they do not,” which provokes “discomfort and momentarily

¹⁵ Other estimates by Alyson Dickson (2010) find that 34% of American converts to Islam identify as white, and that there are around 200,000 white converts in the US.

a crisis of racial meaning.” I argue that such moments of semantic crisis are particularly productive scientifically. White converts do not fit in common-sense expectations about who belongs to Islam and who does not. They disrupt the racial features of the stereotypical Muslim figure. As such, they open fruitful avenues for a sociology of the atypical, the inconsistent, the aberrant and the anomalous. Studies that focus on the “dilemmas and contradictions of status” of those who “deviate from the expected type” (Hughes, 1945); the “marginal” men and women who “break the cake of custom” (Park, 1928); and the “off diagonal” or “non-prototypical” people (Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz, 2013) are always illuminating for they reveal well-entrenched stereotypes and assumptions about the so-called normal or prototypical order of things.

According to Pierre Mercklé (2005), improbable sociological cases “offer a strategic vantage point on the systems of constraints that shaped their improbability in the first place.” By “breaching” the norms of religious and racial identification, white converts actually reveal their enduring and normative character in further depth. First conceptualized by Harold Garfinkel, “breaching experiments” are a research device that consists in deliberately violating social reality in order to shed light on the underlying norms and standards that constitute it. In “the story of Agnes,” a young transgender woman he encountered in 1958, Garfinkel (1967: ch. 5) explains why a focus on individuals who disrupt common-sense understandings can be heuristic: they offer a “perspective by incongruity” that renders observable what is usually taken for granted, in this case gender performance. Like him, I propose to turn sociological exceptions into investigative devices and use the experience of white converts to Islam to shed light on the intricacies between race and religion.

E. METHODS

My research relies on a qualitative strategy. The data is drawn from a cross-national ethnographic and interview study conducted in the US from January 2013 to April 2014 and in France from April 2014 to January 2016. This dissertation puts converts’ subjectivities and experiences at the center of the investigation. In doing so, I seek to answer Garner and Selod (2015)’s call for “fieldwork-based studies, particularly those in which Muslims are the subjects of interviews and/or ethnographies.”

1) In-depth interviewing

I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with Muslim converts in the US and 42 in France. The interviews focused on the trajectory of conversion, religious practices, relationships with family and friends, experiences of discrimination, integration into the Muslim community, etc. The purpose was to elicit rich stories and gather anecdotes about the daily experience of race and religion. Although I never explicitly mentioned that I worked on racialization and whiteness, many interviewees spontaneously engaged in elaborated considerations on this topic.

Because conversion to Islam is mostly an urban phenomenon,¹⁶ I recruited informants through snow-ball sampling in several metropolitan areas: Chicago (n=26), Saint-Louis (n=6) and Detroit (n=8) in the US;¹⁷ Paris (n=24), Lille/Roubaix (n=11) and Marseille (n=7) in France.¹⁸ I selected these cities because of their large Muslim populations and their influence on public imaginaries about Islam. The objective, however, was not to compare how religious conversion unfolds in different urban contexts (although that would be fascinating), but mostly to diversify the entry points of my snowball sampling.

My interviewees are between 19 and 74 years-old, with a mean of 30 years-old. I interviewed men and women in roughly equal numbers. Even though most of my respondents can be classified as white (n=19 in the US, n=34 in France), I also interviewed converts from other ethno-racial backgrounds. In the US, I interviewed converts who identified as black (n=11), mixed (n=2), Native-American (n=1), Latino

¹⁶ According to Bagby (2012a: 12), in the US, 93% of conversions take place in urbanized areas (64% in cities and 29% in suburbs).

¹⁷ In Chicago, it is estimated that there are 285,000 Muslims (Schmidt, 2004: 10). According to Ba-Yunus (1997), 46% are African-Americans, 20% are Arabs, 19% are South Asian, 7% are Turks and 4% are Eastern European. The suburb of Bridgeview is known for its large Arab population; those of Naperville and Schaumburg for their substantial South Asian populations. Chicago has historically been considered as a “Mecca” (Knight, 2006: 57 and 139) for American Muslims, for it has been the site of crucial historical events (relocation of the Moorish Science Temple headquarters in 1925, relocation of the Nation of Islam in 1934, massive immigration from Muslim majority countries after 1965).

Detroit is also home to a vibrant Muslim community, with a large share of Arabs (Bagby, 2004; Abraham et al., 2011). Estimates hover around 200,000 (Howell, 2014). The suburb of Hamtramck features a large number of Yemeni, Bangladeshi and Bosnian mosques and that of Dearborn has the highest concentration of Arabs in the US – although 58% of them are Christians and only 42% are Muslim, many of whom are Shi’as (Wayne et al., 2003). Detroit is also another Mecca for American Islam (Knight, 2006: 109) since this is where the Nation of Islam was initially founded. The suburb of Dearborn is often described as America’s Muslim capitol (Belton, 2003).

St. Louis is smaller and the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis estimates that roughly 100,000 Muslims live in the area (Philipps, 2016), many of whom are Bosnians (Zurcher, 2016). Although St. Louis is not a hotbed of American Islam, this Bosnian component, as well as the existence of a vocal group of Salafis (including one of my interviewees) rendered the city attractive for this study. Overall, the focus of this dissertation on the Midwest is justified by the rich Muslim history of this region (Gomez, 2005: 207). I do not think the effects of regional specificity hinder the generalizability of my study in any substantial way.

¹⁸ While Muslims make up 7.5% of the French population, they are overrepresented in the Parisian metropolitan area, especially in northern districts, where they make up 10-15% of the population (Laurence and Vaïsse, 2007: 40), or roughly 700,000 people. They hail mostly from North Africa, Turkey and sub-Saharan Africa. Paris’s impoverished suburbs, including the 93 district (Clichy-sous-Bois, La Courneuve, Sevran, Bondy, etc.) are periodically scrutinized for signs of Islamic revival (Kepel, 1991; Kepel, 2012).

In Marseille, France’s second largest city, the Muslim community is also very large and the municipality estimates that 25 to 30% of the population has some form of direct or indirect link to Islam (Lorcerie and Geisser, 2011: 37), that is 250,000 people. Marseille’s Muslim community is composed of North Africans, sub-Saharan Africans and a substantial portion of people hailing from the Comoros (whose numbers are estimated between 30,000 and 80,000 - *ibid*, p. 47). The project to build a large mosque in Marseille has been the focus of much national debate (Césari, 2005).

The agglomeration Lille/Roubaix also features a large concentration of Muslims, probably around 100,000 people, many of whom are of North African descent. A much decried book (Aziz, 1996) once depicted Roubaix as a “majority Muslim city” and a bastion for Islamist fundamentalism. Although the book was based on disinformation (Roustel, 1997), it gave the city a central position in French public imaginaries about Islam. Laurence and Vaïsse (2007: 40) estimate that 50% of the Roubaix population is Muslim.

(n=4) and Asian (n=3). In France, my non-white respondents identified as black (n=4), *métis* (mixed) (n=3) and South American (n=1). I sought interviewees from various communities, following different theological orientations (Sunnis and Shias; conservatives and liberals; Sufis, Salafis and mainstream Muslims), but Sunni mainstream Muslims predominate in my sample (only two interviewees identified as Shi’a). Contrary to dominant media and cultural representations which tend to portray Muslim converts as extremist/unstable individuals, most of my respondents work stable jobs and are well-educated.

At the time of the interview, 36 of my interviewees were married, 7 were in a stable relationship with another Muslim, 7 were divorced, and 32 were single. Among those who were married, only 3 (all French men) had a non-Muslim spouse, who was Christian; 19 were married to a born Muslim; and 13 were married to another convert. In total, I interviewed five convert couples: Benjamin and Chloé (Lille), Gaëtan and Delphine (Paris), Jonathan and Monica (Chicago), Alisha and Boran (Chicago), Mariana and Samuel (Detroit). I also interviewed friends together, like Mary and Victoria in St. Louis; Jean and Fabien in Paris. These joint interviewees were particularly rich.

A large portion of my interviewees identify as “converts,” but many others prefer the word “revert” which does justice to the Islamic notion of *fitra*, or primordial human nature (in this perspective, no one converts to Islam, but simply returns to the original covenant made with God). A small number also embrace alternative terms that convey the more continuous and processual nature of their spiritual transformation, such as “transition,” (Wadud, 2007: 5), “continuation” (Shanneik, 2011), “existential reorientation” (Vroon, 2014: 71), “personal reform,” “accepting Islam,” etc. (for an overview, see Van Nieuwkerk, 2006a; Barylo, 2016). Another important dividing line in my sample has to do with individuals’ level of religiosity before converting: some were already part of a religious tradition before embracing Islam while others (especially in France) were atheists/agnostics who discovered faith through their encounter with Islam.

Some of my interviewees had been Muslim for less than a year at the time of the interview while others converted 35 years ago. On average, my respondents have been Muslim for 8.5 years, with a median of 7 years. 10 interviewees converted a year ago or less than a year ago; 21 have been Muslim for two to four years; 25 for five to ten years; 18 from eleven to twenty years and 8 interviewees converted more than 20 years ago. The overrepresentation of recent converts is justified by my interest in the immediate consequences of religious shifts on racial categorization.

A dozen of my respondents can be characterized as “serial interviewees” and their stories have already been the object of blog posts, newspapers articles or Youtube videos. By contrast, it took time to build trust with the others, whose conversion was not necessarily known by their family members, which warranted strict confidentiality precautions. For the sake of anonymity, the names of my interviewees have been systematically modified. The only persons who are mentioned by their actual names are Umar Lee and Ubaydullah Evans, two American converts who are also public figures and shared with me informational, rather than biographical, content.

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of my sample.

	UNITED STATES	FRANCE
Number of interviewees	40	42
Gender	52% male (n=21) 48% female (n=19)	38% male (n=16) 62% female (n=26)
Age	31 on average	32 on average
Race/ethnicity	48% white (n=19) 28% black (n=11) 10% Latino (n=4) 5% mixed (n=2) 7% Asian (n=3) 2% Native American (n=1)	81% white (n=34) 10% black (n=4) 2% South American (n=1) 7% mixed (n=3)
Education	5% high school degree (n=2) 18% some college (n=7) 10% Associate's degree (n=4) 43% Bachelors degree (n=17) 20% Masters degree (n=8) 4% doctorate (n=2)	7% middle school only (n=3) 5% high school degree (n=2) 15% some college (n=6) 7% professional certificate (n=3) 26% Bachelors degree (n=11) 38% Masters degree (n=16) 2% doctorate (n=1)
Occupation (according to the International classification of ILO)	2% unemployed (n=1) 18% students (n=7) 5% housewives (n=2) 2% tradeworkers (n=1) 18% services workers (n=7) 5% clerical support workers (n=2) 17% associate professionals (n=7) 33% professionals (n=13)	14% unemployed (n=6) 17% students (n=7) 5% housewives (n=2) 4% elementary occupations (n=2) 10% services workers (n=4) 7% clerical support workers (n=3) 16% associate professionals (n=7) 27% professionals (n=11)
Marital status	40% single (n=16) 46% married (n=18) 7% divorced or separated (n=3) 7% in a relationship (n=3)	38% single (n=16) 42% married (n=18) 10% divorced or separated (n=4) 10% in a relationship (n=4)
Sexual orientation	5% LGBTQ (n=2)	7% LGBTQ (n=3)
Female head covering (turban, <i>hijab</i> , <i>jilbab</i> * or face veil)	68% yes (n=13) 32% no (n=6)	58% yes (n=15) 42% no (n=11)
Religion in which the interviewee was raised	30% Catholic (n=12) 43% Protestant (n=17) 5% Atheist/agnostic (n=2) 10% Christian (mixed Catholic and Protestant) (n=4) 2% Hindu (n=1) 2% Jehovah Witness (n=1) 2% Buddhist (n=1) 2% Greek Orthodox (n=1)	50% Catholic (n=21) 4% Protestant (n=2) 42% Atheist/agnostic (n=17) 2% Jewish (n=1) 2% Buddhist (n=1)

Table 4 – Interview sample

The absence of reliable statistics on Muslim converts in France and the US makes it difficult to assess the representativeness of my sample.¹⁹ Representativeness is not, in any case, the purpose of this work. Qualitative research is never unbiased for we interview people that are “polite enough” to talk to us, “friendly enough” to spend time with us, and “extroverted enough” to share their stories with a stranger for several hours (Small, 2009: 12). In this research, I strove for saturation, rather than representation: I stopped recruiting interviewees when I felt I did not collect any new or surprising information. My objective being to elucidate processes of religious change and mechanisms of racialization, this explains why my sample is characterized by an over-representation of white converts, middle-class converts and recent converts, for their religious and racial boundary crossing is at once more recent and more striking. This certainly enhances the strength of my reflections on the intersection of race and religion, but can limit the generalizability of this study in terms of conversion to Islam in general. I trust the reader will keep these caveats in mind.

Interviews lasted between one and four hours and were audio-recorded. I systematically transcribed them and coded them with the Nvivo software. This material represents 123 hours of recording and 1,820 pages of transcriptions. Each interview excerpt mentioned in this research comes with the pseudonym, age, occupation and city of the interviewee. Readers can refer to Appendix 1 for more detailed demographic characteristics and to Appendix 2 to read shortened versions of their conversion stories. Interview excerpts from French interviewees have been translated into English but I systematically provide, for the sake of accuracy, the original French transcription in a footnote (on translation challenges in qualitative research, see Temple and Young, 2004).

¹⁹ The quantitative literature on Muslim converts is very limited. In the US, most literature on conversion focuses on Christian samples, with Muslims relegated to the category “other” (Maslim and Bjorck, 2009: 98).¹⁹ Analyzing the data of the Muslim American Study (Pew Research Center, 2007a), a telephone survey conducted with a sample of 1,050 adult Muslim Americans, I found nonetheless that 179, or 17%, identified as “converts” (people who have not always been Muslim). Among them, 57% are female and 43% are male. Their age ranges from 18 to 84, with a mean and a median of 42. The age of conversion indicates, however, that religious change is a youthful phenomenon: 92% embraced Islam before or during their thirties. In terms of previous religions, 62% said they were raised Protestant, 14% Catholic, 15% Atheist and 9% Other. Regarding racial identity, 27% identify as white, 62% as black and the remaining 11% as Other. 6% also identify as Hispanic. Finally, the convert population seems rather educated: 14% are postgraduates, 19% are college graduates, 33% have some college and 26% are high school graduates. In terms of religious practices, it appears that among the 102 female converts identified in the study, 32% never wear the *hijab*, 36% wear it all the time and the remaining 32% wear it intermittently.

In France, the data on Muslim converts is even scarcer. To reach some understanding, I performed some basic computations on the *Trajectories and Origins* data (TeO, 2010), a survey which sampled 21,761 individuals and was the first one in France to focus explicitly on origins, religion and experiences of discrimination. I identified 128 individuals who define themselves as Muslim, while neither their father nor their mother is. However, 83% of these 128 individuals are either immigrants or children of immigrants, several of whom hail from Muslim-majority countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Turkey, which suggests at least a cultural tie to Islam. These respondents do not consider their parents as Muslim (or Muslim enough), but do not exactly fit into my definition of external convert. The remaining 17%, who are either native French people or people from the DOM-TOM, constitute a tiny sub-sample of 22 people, which precludes any form of generalization. 54% are men and 46% are women. Their age ranges from 18 to 60, with a mean of 31. Among them, we find middle managers, qualified and unqualified workers, civil servants, business employees and unemployed individuals. Only 14% always wear a religious sign, 9% sometimes wear one and the remaining 77% do not wear any distinctive religious marker.

2) Ethnography

I use this interview material with a number of qualifications in mind. Indeed, sometimes “talk is cheap” (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014) and what people say do not always correspond to what they do. Hence, I supplemented my interview data with ethnographic observations. In both countries, I followed convert support groups in one city (more information about these convert associations is provided in Chapter 3). I introduced myself as a researcher studying the process of conversion, but also as a “seeker,” someone willing to learn more about Islam. My research method was participatory: I attended all their events and interacted as much as possible with their participants in order to become a regular, well-known member of the groups. I observed carefully their activities and typed extensive field notes (Emerson et al., 2011 [1995]), which constitute a significant portion of my data.

In the US, I worked with an organization called *American Da'wah* (*da'wah* refers to the preaching of Islam). Created in 2005, the association caters to the needs of American converts who express a need for guidance because they feel spiritually disoriented or socially “out of place” in conventional Muslim religious spaces. Born Muslims wishing to recommit to their religion after a period of disengagement are also welcome. I attended most of the association events: discussion groups (held monthly and covering a wide range of topics such as “how to tell your family about your conversion,” “how to practice Islam in the workplace” and “finding your place in the community”); Qur'an classes; classes on the life of the Prophet; classes on spirituality with the charismatic Dr. Uthman. My main source of information, however, was the weekly Being Muslim class which took place in a conventional high school classroom. The class, which lasted from April to November 2013, was taught by John, a white convert in his thirties who had embraced Islam eight years ago. It was aimed at teaching converts strong fundamentals about Islam as well as offering a safe space in which they could share their struggles and discuss lifestyle issues. The class took place every Sunday morning in a traditional classroom. Most students were new Muslims who had converted a couple of months or years before. They were young, in their twenties or thirties, and were also highly educated, for the most part. Ethnically, the class was fairly diverse, though white converts dominated. I also periodically observed classes for new converts at a mosque close to my house, which I call *Chicago mosque*.

In France, I worked with an association called *Bienvenue en Islam* which was founded in 2009 and provides help, support and a community network to new Muslims. Less financially endowed than its American counterpart, this French association organizes “monthly chats” with Maryam, the president of the association, a 75-year-old white woman who converted to Islam several decades ago. The chats take place in the backroom of a small Islamic library. Converts go there to discuss their journey, share their doubts and meet new people. The association also organizes sisters' gatherings, monthly conferences with renowned speakers and small parties during Muslim religious festivals. It sends regular emails containing religious advice, reading lists and short memos about various Islamic concepts or rituals. It is also known for organizing children-parent meetings meant to ease the dialogue between converts and their families. Most attendees were recent converts and came from various social backgrounds. Since events at the French association were less frequent than in the American association, I also attended a weekly female beginners' class taught in a Parisian suburban mosque by Aisha, a 37-

year-old white female convert to Islam; I observed a similar convert class once in a Lille suburban mosque; and I got in touch with another convert association named *Paris New Muslims*. Data from these various field sites enriched my overview.

Overall, what these ethnographic observations demonstrate is that conversion is not simply an individual trajectory; it is also a collective accomplishment (Straus, 1979; Balch, 1980; Cavalcanti and Chalfant, 1994). Research on small groups has demonstrated that it is through them that “individuals find arenas to enact their autonomous selves and to demonstrate allegiance to communities and institutions” (Fine and Harrington, 2004). Likewise, the convert associations I studied operate as “small groups” that accompany conversion journeys and help converts operationalize religious dogmas that would otherwise remain abstract. They offer a great vantage point on the conversion process.

Following a recent trend in the sociology of religion, I also tried to take seriously the subjective religious experiences of converts, by being sensitive to the aesthetics of Muslim rituals. As noted by Omar McRoberts (2004: 202), there are “intuitive aspects of religion that the ethnographer may appreciate experientially and use to deepen inquiry and enhance reportage.” Hence, I tried to follow some of the new practices converts had to incorporate in their lives, such as learning the prayers in Arabic, attending mosques on Fridays or fasting during the month of Ramadan. This auto-ethnography was valuable to understand how religious dispositions can be developed through embodied practice (Winchester, 2008). Although I did not fully engage in those practices and maintained some distance with my respondents (Gordon, 1987), paying attention to the lifestyle changes they require helped me develop ethnographic empathy. In short, I adopted what Mossière (2007d) calls a “circumstantial empathic stance,” involving both an emotional/embodied participation in the rituals of the congregation and a more distant observational posture.

Gary A. Fine has taught me that doing ethnography is about finding the right balance between being *generous* (we have an obligation to understand the world from the perspective of our informants) and being *skeptical* (we should not embrace the world of our informants too tightly). Yet, in his famous article “Ten Lies of Ethnography” (1993), he acknowledges that ethnographers are “caught in a web of demands that compel them to deviate from formal and idealistic rules.” In sum, ethnographers are always somehow deceptive and disillusioned about their code of ethics. Like most of my colleagues, I have not been an irreproachable ethnographer. If I were to make a critical appraisal of my work, I would say that I have leant more towards the generous side than the skeptical one. Several of my interviewees have become my friends. In the course of my observation in Muslim spaces, I have experimented religious emotions previously unknown to me and I have probably allowed myself to be transformed beyond what is recommended by ethnographic orthodoxy. However, as underlined by Omar McRoberts (2004: 191-192), qualitative researchers’ full immersion into a subculture is a source of professional credibility and praise when the groups under study are jazz musicians, factory workers or boxers, but elicits suspicion when they are religious. Such discrepancy would require an investigation in and of itself for it is indicative of contemporary perceptions of religion. In her study of fundamentalist Baptist conversion, Susan Harding (1987) considers by contrast that it is necessary to “get close enough to belief to understand it, or even to see what it is.” During her fieldwork, she let herself “be invaded by the fundamental Baptist tongue she was investigating,” even if her colleagues saw “this type of fieldwork” as

“dangerous.” In her view, her job as an ethnographer was precisely to enter the space between belief and disbelief, rather than naively trying to resist any form of religious experience. I have also adopted this stance, and I do not conceive it as a problem, as long as the reader is aware of it.

3) Content analysis

Finally, I analyzed materials produced by converts themselves: novels, autobiographical accounts, academic books, and blogs. I also examined the portrayal of Muslim converts in the mainstream media and cultural production of both countries. Because so many societal debates occur online today, I monitored the Internet to track any form of content related to Muslim converts and closely followed the social media accounts of the convert associations I studied, the people I interviewed and other famous converts. Finally, I looked at secondary historical sources to see how converts have been portrayed in the past. This has allowed me to extend coverage beyond the microcosm of my qualitative study. For purposes of anonymity, pictures cannot be presented in this dissertation. Yet, studies of racialization necessitate visual material in order to describe the phenotypical, clothing and outward characteristics of individuals. To circumvent this problem, I often make use of movie screenshots, press pictures and archival portraits to illustrate some of my arguments.

F. DOING RESEARCH ON ISLAM IN TIMES OF TROUBLE: THE CONVERT AS BOOGEYMAN

Before presenting the results of this research, I would like to say a few words about the current context and how it has affected data collection. I started working on this dissertation topic in January 2013. My research has continued through the multiplication of attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam on both American and French territories.²⁰ As demonstrated by Talal Asad (2007), religiously-motivated terrorism, much more than any other type of killing or mass violence, generates specific forms of anxiety for Western modern subjectivities. Homicides that are otherwise dismissed as minor news items make national headlines as soon as the slightest religious motive can be discerned. Massive killings of civilians that are justified as collateral damage in the conduct of State wars are condemned as fundamentally immoral when they are the doing of terrorist organizations. I am myself a repository of Western modern subjectivity and fear and mourning have often put a halt to my analysis. In addition, concepts and representations surrounding my topic have kept altering under the course of this research.

²⁰ Namely the Boston Marathon bombing (April 15th, 2013 – 6 dead), the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Casher shooting (January 7th, 2015 – 20 dead), the Curtis Culwell Center attack in Garland, Texas (May 3rd, 2015 – 2 dead), the Chattanooga military shooting (July 16th, 2015 – 6 dead), the Paris attacks (November 13th, 2015 – 137 dead), the San Bernardino shooting (December 2nd, 2015 – 16 dead), the Orlando nightclub shooting (June 12th, 2016 – 50 dead), the Magnanville police homicide (June 13th, 2016 – 3 dead), the Nice truck attack (July 14th, 2016 – 87 dead), the Saint-Etienne de Rouvray priest homicide (July 26th, 2016 – 3 dead).

The intensification of attacks has come with a dramatic increase of anti-Muslim acts and an escalation of Islamophobic rhetoric, further compounded by the American and French presidential campaigns of 2016 and 2017. There has been an explosion in the number of debates over Islam in the mainstream media (*sharia** law, meaning of the Qur’an, *hijab*, beards, Islamic fashion, *burkini**, Ramadan in schools, *halal** food, the term Islamophobia itself, etc.), to the point that Muslims are talked about almost every week, in countries where they only make up 0.9% (US) and 7.5% (France) of the population. As aptly put by Valérie Amiraux (2016), the “religion of some has become the public concern of others” and Muslims are now the object of a national “gossip circuit,” in which experts and non-experts alike make authoritative comments about Islamic practices or the interpretation of Islamic scripture. I have found it hard to conduct dispassionate research in this context.

Converts specifically have been under the spotlight. This has been the case since the advent of Al-Qaeda in the 1990s, which had significant numbers of converts in its midst (Roy, 2011), but even more so with the rise from 2014 onwards of ISIS, which features an even larger share of converts. In 2015, the French Home Ministry established that there were 1,923 French citizens enrolled in ISIS and that among them, 23%, that is roughly 440 people, could be characterized as “converts” (Mathiot, 2015). In the US, Scott Kleinmann (2012: 283) finds that out of 124 people who were involved in terrorist plots on American territory between 2001 and 2010, 36 were converts, that is 29%. Vidino and Hughes (2015) have also established that out of 71 people charged with various ISIS-related activities in the US in 2015, 40% were converts. Given that the shares of converts among the French and American Muslim populations are respectively 1-3% and 20%, it is clear that they are currently overrepresented in the realm of violent religious militancy. A growing number of studies are now devoted to investigating the elective affinities between conversion to Islam and terrorism (Uhlmann, 2008; Bartoszewicz, 2012; Karagiannis, 2012; Mullins, 2015; for an overview, see Schuurman et al., 2016).

The spectacular and shocking trajectories of a number of violent converts have also frequently made the headlines in the US²¹ and France.²² Interestingly, while both black

²¹ In the US, the names of several converts have frequently been on the news: John Walker Lindh (captured as an enemy combatant fighting for the Taliban in 2001, Lindh was tortured by US military personnel and eventually sentenced to 20 years in prison, see Dauphin (2007)), Jose Padilla (arrested on 2002 on suspicion of plotting a dirty bomb attack for Al-Qaeda), Adam Yahiye Gadahn (Al-Qaeda member, killed in 2015 in Pakistan), Christopher Paul (Al-Qaeda member, indicted in 2007), Carlos Bledsoe (aka Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, indicted for the 2009 Little Rock shooting), Colleen LaRose (found guilty of plotting to murder Swedish artist Lars Vilks in 2010), Zachary Adam Chesser (convicted in 2010 for aiding Al-Shabaab), John Georgelas (aka Yahya Abu Hasan, key member of ISIS), Elton Simpson (participant in the Curtis Culwell Center attack claimed by ISIS in May 2015), Douglas McCain (ISIS member killed in Syria in 2014), Ariel Bradley (ISIS member, known for her social media posts from Syria), etc.

²² In France too, many converts have reached fame because of violent actions perpetrated in the name of Islam, including Lionel Dumont and Christophe Caze (founders of the Roubaix gang, which committed violent robberies in the mid-1990s to fund international terrorism), Xavier Djaffo (Al-Qaeda member, killed in Chechnya in 2000), the brothers Jérôme and David Courtailler (suspected of ties with Al-Qaeda in the 2000s), Johann Bonté and Jean-Marc Grandvisir (members of the Djamel Beghal network which plotted an attack against the US embassy in Paris in 2001), Richard Robert (convicted for his implication in the Casablanca attacks of May 2003), Willy Brigitte (convicted in 2007 for planning a terrorist attack with the Pakistani movement Lashkar-e-Toiba), Jeremie Louis-Sidney (main suspect in a grenade attack against a kosher shop in 2012, killed by the police in Strasbourg), Romain Le Tellier (aka Abou al Normandy, convicted for glorification of terrorism in 2014, subsequently joined ISIS), the brothers Nicolas and Jean-

and white converts have participated in extremist activities, the latter have garnered heightened interest, which reveals both racialized assumptions about Islam and a morbid fascination for whiteness. This is evident in a number of newspaper articles emphasizing jihadists' pale skin, blue eyes or light hair: in 2008 *The Scotsman* talked about "Al-Qaeda's white Army of Terror;" in 2013 *Foreign Policy* focused on "Blue-Eyed Jihad"; and in 2014 *Breitbart News* marveled at the existence of "Ginger Jihadis." A number of white radical converts have also been given nicknames, such as the "The White Widow" (Samantha Lewthwaite, UK), "Jihad Jane" (Colleen LaRose, US), "Lady Jihad" (Maria Giulia Sergio, Italy), the "Blue-Eyed Emir" (Richard Robert, France) or "The American Taliban" (John Walker Lindh, US).

All these developments have considerably skewed the representations of Muslim converts. While they have historically been portrayed as adventurers, Orientalists, or Sufi mystics, the figure of the "fanatic religious warrior" has now outshined all others. The highly visual and Hollywood-style *mise en scènes* of ISIS have also contributed to durably ingrain in our brains the archetypal image of "the convert:" a light-skinned, blue-eyed bearded man wearing camouflage clothing and sporting an AK-47 in its male version; and a determined woman dressed with a *niqab** covering her entire body, except for the eyes (also blue), in its female incarnation. More than their coreligionists of color, white converts deepen moral panics over the pervasive threat of Islam for they are not immediately "recognizable" as Muslims, thereby representing a more insidious menace. In a perspective of clash of civilizations, converts become "the enemy from within." Writing about Muslim converts in Denmark, Jensen recalls the words of a far-right Danish politician: "a few Danes have converted to Islam. Unfortunately, there is no possibility to deport them, but we can make sure that the Secret Service watches them closely" (Jensen, 2008). Scholar Esra Özyürek (2009) refers to the complex set of fears about violence, proselytism and Islamic invasion that converts produce as "convert alert."

Accordingly, the "radical convert" has become a prominent figure in popular culture. Suffice it to look at three recent TV shows to appreciate this centrality. *Sleeper Cell* (2005) depicts converts as deeply troubled individuals. Describing the show, Junaid Rana (2011: 82) explains that "the first season features a French convert who seeks to prove his devotion to Islam to his estranged Moroccan girlfriend; and a white American convert who apparently is rebelling against his mother, a feminist professor at Berkeley. The second season – featuring a female convert from western Europe who is a rape survivor [and] a Latino Muslim who is a former gang member – raises the bar in terms of the multiracial threat of Islam." More recently, *Homeland* (2011) deepened these representations by featuring a white American Marine, Nick Brody, who was held hostage by Al-Qaeda for eight years and was eventually turned by the organization. While coming back to the US as a war hero, he is actually planning a suicide attack against the Vice President. The tropes of treason, duplicity and brainwashing generate considerable

Daniel Bons (ISIS members, killed in Syria in 2013), Fabien and Jean-Michel Clain (ISIS spokespersons, who made the audio communiqué claiming the November 2013 Paris attacks), Raphael Amar (ISIS member, killed in Syria in 2014, made the headlines for hailing from a Jewish background), Thomas Barnouin (ISIS member, suspected of having recruited other French people), Emilie König (ISIS member, in charge of recruitment and propaganda), Maxime Hauchard (aka Abu Abdallah Al-Faransi) and Mickael Dos Santos who both appeared in a video released by ISIS in November 2014, in which 18 Syrian hostages and American citizen Peter Kassig were beheaded (notably, Peter Kassig was also a convert to Islam, but not of the same kind as his murderers (Davidson, 2014)).

anxiety in the minds of the viewers. The fourth season of *House of Cards* (2016) also ends with the live execution of a hostage on national TV by two white American teenagers who have pledged allegiance to ISIS and intone Arabic formulas with a heavy American accent while cutting the head of their victim. The radicalized convert appears as an epic, sensationalist, highly telegenic character.²³

Popular music has also found inspiration in radical converts, as illustrated by the song “John Walker Blues” (2002) by American folk singer Steve Earle, which depicts the fate of white American John Walker Lindh: “I’m just an American boy, raised on MTV/ And the first thing I heard that made sense was the word of Mohammed/ We came to fight the Jihad, and our hearts were pure and strong. As death filled the air, we all offered up prayers. And prepared for our martyrdom,” say the lyrics, which highlight both the tragic and poetic character of Lindh’s tormented life. Finally, contemporary literature has also seized upon the dramatic figure of the convert. To take one example, conservative writer Richard Millet provides in *Fatigue du Sens* (2011: 115) the following depiction of a young female convert he sits across from in the metro: “pale, her face strictly wrapped up in a white *hijab*, skinny hands, with, in her look, the contained fury of European converts to Islam and the gently cheerful resignation of martyr apprentices” (cited in Liogier, 2012: 109). Emphasizing her morbid whiteness, Millet implies that the woman, who already looks cadaverous, is secretly preparing for further death and chaos.

In sum, the figure of the “convert” functions as the contemporary boogeyman, an abstract embodiment of terror that is frequently conjured to elicit fear. As a result, conversions to Islam are increasingly apprehended through the univocal lens of securitization. This has had an impact on how my work is perceived. The word “convert” has acquired a new meaning on its own, which has slipped from my control. It has become a semantic iron cage that precludes any form of calm analysis. Thus, when I mention in casual encounters or family gatherings that my research focuses on conversions to Islam, people instantly assume that I work on jihadism or religious extremism. Some even profusely thank me for studying a topic that is so “alarming.” The confusion is not limited to profane circles, and also takes place in academic settings. Since the beginning of my dissertation, it has happened many times that colleagues, at conferences or through email exchanges, misread my focus on “racialization” as “radicalization.” This recurring reading mistake, even on the part of esteemed scholars, is indicative of the strong cognitive association between Muslim converts and violent extremist behavior, as well as the swift propagation of the notion of “radicalization,” now a dominant trope of academic research on Islam and Muslims (Sedgwick, 2010; Crettiez, 2016).

Yet, upon taking an inverted look at available statistics, it is apparent that radicalization “remains an ultra-minority attitude” among converts (Roy, 2004: 318). In June 2005, the French intelligence services released a survey on 1,610 converts, mostly male and already known to the police (i.e. not representative of all converts), and found

²³ To be sure, some blockbusters can at times offer a more nuanced portrayal of converts. Such is the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which depicts the decade-long manhunt for Osama Bin Laden and in which the CIA’s counterterrorism chief is presented as a convert to Islam who frequently performs the Muslim prayer in his office while supervising intelligence operations against Islamist radicals. This character is actually inspired by a real individual, referred to as “Roger” in most newspapers, who is the head of CTC (CIA’s Counterterrorism Center) and is a convert to Islam (Miller, 2012). (I would like to thank Diane-Sophie Girin for bringing this fact to my attention).

that 3% only of this limited sample were close to radical movements (Smolar, 2005). If we consider that the general French convert population oscillates around 100,000 people, the actual number of those who joined fighting groups (roughly 440 in 2015) represents less than 1%. This percentage is even smaller in the US, where the total convert population is around 600,000. My work focuses instead on the remaining 99%, who constitute the silent majority of conversion to Islam in France and the US and whose experiences have been durably impacted by the recurring media frenzy over radical converts. I reiterate that this dissertation is not about radicalization and that none of the converts I interviewed falls into the category of violent extremist behavior. The notion of radicalization has more to do with political commitment than religious conversion and it is necessary to disentangle the two. Furthermore, the spectacular trajectories of a few converts should not obscure the daily reality of conversion to Islam, which is much more mundane and banal. Just like scholar Nilüfer Göle focuses on what she calls “ordinary Muslims” in her most recent work (2015), I too investigate the lives of “ordinary converts,” who do not fit into dominant framings of threat and menace.

G. OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation is organized as follows. Part 1 entitled “Choosing Faith” details the religious career of converts as they enter Islam and progressively become Muslim. It is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1 “Choosing Islam” analyzes conversion narratives and the various repertoires of justification that converts use to make sense of their religious trajectory. I demonstrate that a strong rhetoric of religious individualism pervades converts’ stories and is enrolled as a tool to authenticate the sincerity and legitimacy of their conversion. Chapter 2 “Becoming Muslim” examines how conversion is formalized through two main rites of passage: the *shahada*, or ceremony of conversion, and the *coming out*, or announcement to friends and family. The Unintelligibility of Religion seriously complicates this task in the French case. Overall, the uncertainty, clumsiness and blurriness that characterizes these two moments indicate that conversion is not a clear-cut, terminal act, but that it places converts into a state of in-betweenness and liminality. Chapter 3 “Praying Alone” investigates the costs of liminality and portrays religious conversion as an experience of solitude. The chapter describes how converts are simultaneously rejected from their families and imperfectly integrated into the Muslim community, a precarious situation that can translate into intransigent religious behavior. Convert associations have precisely been created to ease this transition phase. While the findings of Part 1 are generalizable to every religious tradition, the following section delves into the specificity of Islam as a racialized religion in the French and American contexts.

Entitled “Facing Race,” Part 2 directly tackles the conflation of race and religion by analyzing converts’ frontal encounters with race, and the double dimensions of essentialization and embodiment of Islam. Chapter 4 “Converts and Race Throughout History” describes the way Muslim converts have been perceived on the two sides of the Atlantic from the 16th to the 20th century. Starting with the figure of the “renegades” in the 16th century accused of “having turned Turk;” pursuing with converts in the French colonial period portrayed as traitors; and ending with the case of African-Americans using conversion to redefine the meaning of black identity, this chapter demonstrates that

conversion to Islam has always had implications that were not simply religious but also racial. Updating this result with a focus on the contemporary period, Chapter 5 “Coming Under the Veil” constitutes the linchpin of this dissertation. Relying on the testimonies of my interviewees, I demonstrate that converts’ racial categorization changes as they don the visible markers of Islamic belonging, such as the veil and the beard. Previously members of the invisible majority, white converts in particular experience a drastic drop in social status as they are now categorized as members of racialized minorities: they come under the Veil, a metaphor of W.E.B DuBois to describe the color line, and discover what life on the other side of the racial divide looks like. While the process operates in a similar manner on both sides of the Atlantic, the content and texture of converts’ racialization differ along the lines of the Post-Colonial Immigrant/Native Divide in France and the Black/White Divide in the US. Chapter 6 “Race in the Ummah and the Unbearable whiteness of Being” moves the locus of inquiry from the larger society to the Muslim community itself. It examines the various racialized fault lines that crisscross the French and American Muslim minorities and describes white converts’ ambiguous position within them as a visible numerical minority. Alternately revered as “white trophies” or reviled as “white devils,” white converts have to face new forms of racial objectification, which are particularly manifest in the marriage process. The conclusions of Part 2 are unequivocal: in spite of their emphasis on religious individualism, converts have to wear the racialized mark of the plural, both as Muslims and as whites.

Part 3 “Redefining Race and Religion” explores the various strategies that converts use to reclaim control over their definition of self and carve out a space for themselves within the Muslim community. Chapter 7 “Redefining Islam” focuses on converts’ efforts to restrict the meaning of the category “Muslim” as purely religious, detached from race, ethnicity and especially culture. Converts’ attempts to dissociate Islam from the practices and cultural habits of so-called born Muslims take three forms: the fundamentalist path that searches for pure religion and severs any ties with culture; the re-acculturating path that recasts Islam in French or American cultural terms; the re-interpretative path that provides new perspectives on Islamic scripture. The re-acculturating path is particularly structured by the tropes of Defiant Secularism in France and those of Embracing Secularism in the US. Chapter 8 “Redefining Whiteness” examines how this redefinition endeavor unfolds in the realm of race by detailing the various strategies that converts use to re-determine the meaning of their white identity. I show that converts alternately seek to maneuver, repudiate, radically redefine or minimize their whiteness, depending on their socioeconomic, ethnic or ideological background. Their endeavors are also shaped by the various race frames that are available to them (Color-Blind in France, Color-Conscious in the US).

Taken together these three parts plunge the reader into a comprehensive journey on the experience of conversion in France and the US. They successively describe converts’ hopes, their disillusion and vicissitudes, and the strategies they put in place to overcome them. For the sake of clarity, the three parts unfold somehow chronologically, and describe a typical convert trajectory from the choice of faith; the unexpected encounter with race and the attempts to redefine both faith and race. To be sure, this ideal-typical representation does not systematically match individual trajectories, which oftentimes intertwine religious and racial concerns. All along this journey, the specificities of each national context in terms of secularism, racial stratification system and racialization of Islam become clearer.

PART 1

CHOOSING FAITH

CHAPTER 1 - CHOOSING ISLAM: CONVERSION NARRATIVES AND REPERTOIRES OF JUSTIFICATION

This chapter is about conversion narratives. It examines the conversion stories of my interviewees *as they told them to me*. In the following lines, I present how converts make sense of their religious journey and put it into words, in order to best convey the reasons for their conversion to their interlocutors. Rather than a classic sociological appraisal of conversion motives (already extensively done in the literature, see Köse, 1996; Allievi, 1998; Maslim and Bjorck, 2009), this chapter reads as a collection of tales, anecdotes and moral arguments. My objective is to explore how converts *justify* their conversion and build a coherent version of their lives. The issue of religious authenticity, in particular, is at the heart of this chapter.

In the early stages of this dissertation, as I went into the field and started interviewing people, I had not envisioned to write about conversion stories. To me, they were simply a prerequisite in the interview process that had to be completed before delving into issues of more direct interest (racial categorization). Yet, I realized that the questions dealing with the conversion trajectory were the ones my interviewees had most extensively prepared for. Being able to tell their conversion story was often the main reason why they had agreed to be interviewed in the first place. Some of these stories were moving and beautiful and deserved to be made known to the general public. Some brought tears to my eyes and others made me laugh. Ultimately, all these stories are crucial to understand who are my interviewees, how they make sense of their existence and how they subsequently deal with problems of objectification and racialization.

Why people convert is a *passage obligé* of much of the scholarship on conversion. The actual reasons why my interviewees embraced Islam involved a plurality of motives and each trajectory had idiosyncratic features.¹ Some followed their spouses and converted to Islam to ensure religious homogeneity at home. Others were surrounded by Muslim friends and attracted by the community spirit fostered by Islam. Some saw the strict monotheism of Islam as a powerful alternative to the complexities of the Christian Trinity. In other instances of conversion, Islam was seen as the next logical step to Judaism and Christianity (the Qur'an emphasizes the continuity with these two traditions). Some felt a special connection to God during a trip to a Muslim majority-country, after hearing the *adhan** (call to prayer) or performing the Muslim prayer. Others seized Islam as their last chance of spiritual healing after going through a series of dramatic life events. Some embraced Islam for political reasons, as part of a larger anti-racist strategy or critique of Western capitalist societies. Others, finally, were looking for a strong and visible identity. In most cases, several of these motives were closely

¹ In his comparative study of conversion to Islam, Judaism and Christianity in France, Loïc Le Pape (2015: 12) confesses: "I often asked the question of *why* and the answers were so varied, sincere and even whimsical at times, that I found myself helpless as a sociologist." (*my translation*).

intertwined. In his seminal study on Muslim converts in Europe, Stefano Allievi (1998: 93-146) has established a typology of conversion motives. He distinguishes relational from rational conversions. The former stem from interactions with Muslims in different contexts (work, romantic relationships, friendships, travels, etc.), and can be either instrumental (converting to get married, to do business in Muslim countries, etc.) or non-instrumental (cultural curiosity, encounter with the Other). By contrast, rational conversions are the result of intense quests for meaning. Their origins can be intellectual, mystical or political. In sum, relational converts are people who met Muslims before discovering Islam while rational converts tend to be individuals who met Islam as a religion before interacting with Muslims. These, obviously, are ideal types that are differently combined for each individual.

My interviewees make up a good mix of both, although rational itineraries tend to predominate in my sample.² I have compiled in Appendix 2 a condensed account of each conversion trajectory that the reader is invited to refer to, if interested in knowing more details about the life of one particular interviewee or in order to appraise the variety of their itineraries. I do not wish to expand further the analysis of actual *conversion motives*, because this question has already been debated from every conceivable angle in the literature and I find it often reductive. As put by Straus (1979), “reasons *why* a person might seek conversion become of secondary interest to the question of *how* does a person manage to maintain across time any form of strict social, behavioral and/or phenomenological organization.” Following his lead, I would like to focus on *conversion narratives*, i.e. how interviewees decide to tell and justify their conversion in order to sustain it in the long run. Conversion cannot be reduced to an enumeration of the social, historical and psychological forces driving it. It also unfolds in the moral justifications and stories that individuals tell themselves and others to make sense of their lives.

Explaining one’s conversion can be hard and repetitive. Several converts told me that they were so frequently asked to tell “their story” that they had worked out different versions of it, varying in length and content depending on their interlocutor (pretty much like PhD candidates who memorize different versions of their dissertation pitch): “do you want the long, medium or short version?”³ asked Jean (23, student Paris) before starting our interview. Harold (25, NGO employee, Chicago) also confessed that he had “a few phrases that [he] ha[d] worked out that are good to explain things!” while Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) said she “worked it down to 20 seconds.” By contrast, others expressed trouble at putting together a coherent narrative: “I can’t really tell my quote end quote ‘convert story,’” warned Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago) “because it was like a lifetime of events that sort of like led me to make that decision.” They told me that they “didn’t know where to start,” that “there was too much material,” that it was “coming back to them in pieces,” that it was a “very long and complex process” made of “different little parts,” that they had trouble “putting things in order” and they apologized for their “disjointed account.” Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris) admitted that she had

² For the sake of comparison, I looked at the Muslim American Study (Pew Research Center, 2007a), a telephone survey conducted with a sample of 1,050 adult Muslim Americans. Among the 179 individuals who identified as converts, 61% mention spiritual reasons for their conversion, 22% marriage and 17% alternative reasons that are not specified.

³ « Alors... version courte, moyenne ou longue ? »

“invented and mystified⁴” her story to make it shorter, but that the reality of her conversion was much more complex. Some also said they were weary of telling their “*shahada* story” over and over. They experienced the question “why did you convert?” as intrusive and inappropriate: “there is nothing that irritates me more than this question. I hate this question,⁵” said Ghislaine (57, clerk, Lille). Others worried that their case was not “representative” or that they “didn’t have a beautiful story to tell.” Once these preliminary remarks were over, the interview could generally start.

Research on conversion narratives (Billette, 1976; Taylor, 1976; Beckford, 1978; see Rambo, 1999: on narrative theory; Yamane, 2000; Popp-Baier, 2001; Le Pape, 2005) has demonstrated that they cannot be taken as objective reports on experience. Oftentimes, informants tend to reconstruct their whole biography (Bourdieu, 1986) in light of their recent conversion and reinterpret their life as a series of steps ineluctably leading to Islam. They also try to fit their story into the narrative tradition of their religion in order to make it credible and impressive to coreligionists. I am aware of such caveats but consider them as strengths rather than weaknesses. While researchers are often encouraged not to take for granted what their interviewees say, I decided to take what converts told me at face value and explore the moral structure of their stories. I propose to consider conversation narratives as *tools* used by converts to assert the *authenticity* of their conversion in 21st century France and the US.

As defined by Charles Taylor (1991), authenticity is a contemporary moral ideal, rooted in the culture of “self-fulfillment.” What is authentic is what is genuine, real, true to the self. Yet, authenticity is not an objective criterion but a folk idea, whose conception is necessarily mutable and contingent (Fine and Lu, 1995). As put by Richard A. Peterson (1997: 3) in his study of country music, “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct.” I argue that the specific words and modes of justification used by converts to describe their religious transformation indicate what they consider as spiritually “authentic” and outline their conception of what “true religion” means.

Interestingly, in spite of converts’ avowed difficulty to explain their trajectory, the plot structure and narrative patterns of their conversion stories were strikingly similar. More importantly, the same orders of worth were recurring in most accounts. Taken together they constitute a “grammar” of conversion, whose analysis is the main contribution of this chapter. I consider that a focus on conversion repertoires of justification is more productive than an endless search for conversion causes, and locate my analysis in the realm of moral arguments rather than biographical research. Indeed, in national contexts where Islam is stigmatized, the imperative to justify their religious choice is particularly acute for converts. As defined by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006 [1991]: 66) in their study of the moral structure of social life, “forms or worth” or “polities” are higher common principles invoked by people to sustain a justification of their actions. Following their lead, I analyze how converts use words, ideas and moral arguments to convince others (in this case, me) that their conversion is right and legitimate. I find that, out of the six polities identified by the authors (the inspired,

⁴ « J’ai inventé, j’ai mythifié le truc, tu sais pour le raccourcir mais en fait c’est plus complexe ».

⁵ « Moi il y a rien qui m’énerve plus que ‘pourquoi tu t’es convertie ?’ Je déteste cette question ».

domestic, fame, civic, market and industrial polities), three are particularly prominent in conversion narratives:

- the *inspired polity*, which is based on a total acceptance of God’s grace, relies on other-worldly considerations (marvels, wonders, enchantment and divine gestures). It emphasizes creativity, sacrifice and selflessness and considers inspiration as the main engine of change. High value is placed on ideals of singularity, interiority, and spontaneity.
- the *industrial polity*, which I wish to rename “*rational*” for the sake of clarity, hinges upon ideas of science, progress, objectivity, rationality and individual performance. It values efficiency, reliability and functionality. Individuals are rewarded for their work and energy; and evaluation relies on scientific testing.
- the *civic polity*, which is oriented towards the attainment of common good, promotes ideas of general will, collective consciousness and representativeness. It supports participation and collective action oriented towards the defense of a cause. It abhors division, particularism and individualism.

These three polities constitute the underlying moral repertoires of the conversion stories I collected. They were alternately used by my interviewees to assert the sincerity of their conversion. Each provides a particular interpretation of what being *authentically* religious and *authentically* Muslim means in the minds of my interviewees. Given French and American’s contrasting cultural perceptions of religion (unintelligibility of religion in France, centrality of religion in the US), I expected to notice clear differences in the repertoires of justification used by my French and American interviewees. Yet, this did not prove to be the case, which indicates a convergence of what counts as “religious authenticity” in the 21st century across Western countries, at least among people who identify as religious.

A. THE RATIONAL POLITY: RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM AND SCIENTISM

“Not a single Muslim brought me to Islam. You heard me? No one brought me to Islam. No one, no one, no one. And I am proud of it.”⁶ This is how Bernard (47, clerk, Lille) started off his conversion story. Raised in a very poor and non-practicing Catholic family, Bernard became a Jehovah Witness as an adult but expressed doubts over the status of Jesus. He found an answer to his questions while walking by an Islamic library and stumbling across a videotape by South African Muslim preacher Ahmed Deedat, entitled “Is Jesus God?” The Islamic conception of Jesus as a prophet rather than the son of God matched what Bernard had always believed. At 40 years-old, he was won over by the clarity and logic of Muslim monotheism. Bernard emphasized that he embraced Islam on his own, free from any outside influence, after a long theological reflection. This ability to make choices for himself and to search for the most coherent religious doctrine

⁶ « J’ai aucun musulman qui m’a amené à l’islam. J’ai bien dit : aucun m’a amené à l’islam. Personne, personne, personne. Et j’en suis fier ».

was a matter of pride and a key component of his conversion narrative. Like Bernard's, a large number of conversion stories hinged upon a rational order of worth. They provided for a laboratory-like account of conversion as *purely individual* and informed by an *intellectual quest* akin to scientific testing and systematic comparison, at the end of which converts became convinced that Islam was the most logical and functional religion.

1) “One-on-one with God:” maverick spirits and personal religion

Conversion to Islam is often depicted in public discourse as the result of indoctrination or brainwashing, and even at times as a fad. To counter such stereotyping, my interviewees made a point of presenting themselves as independent people who took religion seriously and saw it as a private matter that had to be decided upon individually. The sincerity and authenticity of their conversion hinged upon a solid repertoire of religious individualism. This finding is congruent with the literature on the individualization process that Islam is currently witnessing on both sides of the Atlantic. Scholarship on second-generation Muslims in France (Kakpo, 2007; Simon and Tiberj, 2010) and the US (Peek, 2005; Sheikh, 2007) shows that believers thrive to find their own spiritual path, detached from institutional injunctions, family traditions and cultural influences. In that regard, Islam is no different from other faith traditions, where personal quest, self-achievement and spiritual nomadism now prevail over clerical authority and inherited practices (Bellah et al., 1985; Hervieu-Léger, 1999). As put by Olivier Roy (2004: 5), “Islam cannot escape the New Age of religions,” where religiosity is becoming more important than religion and believing more central than belonging (Davie, 1990).

In line with this larger social trend, several of my interviewees presented themselves as “anti-traditional” individuals who were able to question and eventually reject the religious tradition inherited from their parents. They criticized the way their families practiced the faith, which was deemed sheep-like, unreflexive and purely nominal. Consider the case of Khabir (23, barber, Detroit) who was raised in a devout African-American Christian family and told me: “I remember going to church, not really knowing why. That was tradition. Everything was brought out of tradition. Do what your elders say. And that's it.” Relying on a similar rhetoric, Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille) gently criticized her parents: “they are very simple people. For them, [religion] is more about traditions than having a real approach like the one I have today.”⁷ Having a “real” personal approach to religion and making a willful religious choice, detached from family traditions, was held as an indicator of truthfulness and earnestness in the conversion process. In their accounts, my interviewees vigorously distanced themselves from the *domestic polity*, which is centered around family values, generational transmission, perpetuation of traditions and household stability. In fact, many referenced verse 170 of chapter 2 in the Qur'an, in which Allah vilipends those “who follow what they found their forefathers following, even though their fathers did not understand a thing and were void of guidance.”

In some cases, converts' passionate quest for individuality and dissociation from family traditions dated back from childhood. At 8 years-old, Rachel (30, translator, Paris),

⁷ « C'est des gens très simples, c'est pas réfléchi, hein. (...) Voilà, c'est plus des traditions chez eux qu'une vraie démarche comme moi je peux l'avoir aujourd'hui ».

who was raised in a non-practicing household, went to mass alone and eventually asked to be baptized, much to her parents’ surprise. Elizabeth (30, nurse, Chicago) left her Lutheran tradition at 10 years-old and also demanded to be baptized as a Catholic. Back in Mexico, when she was still a child, Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) used to walk herself to church and signed up for Catechism classes on her own: “I was always looking and searching,” she added. These “serial conversions,” initiated from an early age and eventually leading up to Islam, were held as proof of my interviewees’ inextinguishable and authentic thirst for truth.

Prone to introspection and self-examination, converts also claimed to know what their inner self believed and described their journey towards Islam as a quest to find their religious fit: “I had to find my fit,” said Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis); “It had to fit me,” claimed Shahada (31, accountant, St. Louis); “I absolutely had to find a religion for myself⁸,” asserted Aisha (37, housewife, Paris). “I feel that now I am who I am. I feel more at one with myself” said Elizabeth (30, nurse, Chicago). Islam, they claimed, helped them reconnect with their “true,” “authentic” selves (for similar findings on conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, see Chen, 2005; Chen, 2008). Thus, several converts told me that they had always been meant to be Muslim: “I was born Muslim without realizing it,” said Bernard (47, clerk, Lille). The conversion process is therefore part of a larger project of “cultivation of the self, wherein the relations of oneself to oneself are intensified and valorized” (Foucault, 1986: 43). Such a discourse also hinges upon a self-characterization of my interviewees as stubborn, self-taught and non-conformist individuals who go against the tide and make decisions for themselves, irrespective of social constraint or family pressure. As the only woman at her job, Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) portrayed herself as particularly strong-minded. When her parents feared that she might have converted to Islam out of indoctrination, she reminded them of her strong personality: “I am very stubborn and I am very strong and I never follow the crowds. I never do what other people tell me to do. I never, just, blindly do anything. Never!”

This self-representation of converts as autonomous, self-reliant mavericks was recurrent in my interviews and consistent with modern discourses on religious individualism. It was often coupled with a sharp critique of organized religion, especially Catholicism, which was presented as too hierarchical. Aspiring to an individual, direct relationship to the divine, my interviewees strongly rejected the idea of a mediation through Jesus, saints or priests. Their Islamically-inspired critique had strong Protestant overtones: “why do I have to go through all these people? I am a creation of God. Why can’t I just pray directly to God?,” said Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago), who hailed from a practicing Indian Catholic family, with pictures of saints and Jesus plastered all around their home. A clergy-less religion putting the emphasis on daily prayer and personal invocation, Islam appeared by contrast to meet the individualistic religious demands of my interviewees very well. As Pablo (22, student, Chicago) put it: “what I love about *salat* [Muslim prayer], it is so, like, personal. *You are on one-on-one with God*, you are talking to Him and you don’t have to go to another human being. It is just you and God.”

⁸ « Il fallait absolument que je trouve une religion pour moi ».

⁹ « Je suis né musulman sans m’en rendre compte ».

On a number of occasions, the people I interviewed reported that conversion to Islam was not only individual, but also individuating, as it freed them from any form of social determinism. Emiliano (28, student, Paris) told me that “converting was like inventing [his] own life.” As for Mélissa (27, project manager in an NGO, Paris), she considered that converting to Islam was the “only true choice” she ever made: “nobody interfered in this decision. It was between me and God. It was really a pure choice, probably the only choice that I ever made. Because sometimes we think we make choices but in the end, we realize with hindsight that it was from our parents, or this, or that.¹⁰” In a way, conversion to Islam was a modality of “conversion to the self” (Foucault, 1986), something which Brian (23, student, Chicago) fully admitted: “I almost sound like a heretic when I say it, but for me it was less so a commitment to God than it was a *commitment to myself*.”

In their heartfelt quest for a one-on-one relationship with the divine, my interviewees felt particularly offended when their interlocutors assumed they had converted to Islam for someone or had been brainwashed. Ghislaine (57, clerk, Lille) who was married for a while with a non-practicing Muslim man and decided to embrace Islam on her own, long after her divorce, made a point of debunking the well-entrenched stereotype according to which people convert to marry a Muslim spouse: “there is always this suspicion, like ‘oh you converted for marriage...’, but it is simply not true! People convert and after, indeed, they get married. Me for instance, I had to divorce to convert!¹¹” As for Marta (35, engineer, Chicago), she was completely outraged when her girlfriends insinuated she had converted to Islam for her Muslim boyfriend: “I felt so disappointed! If there is one thing that I am known of it is because I never do anything for a guy! I would never follow a guy, especially on my religion, because that’s my soul! And the guy can be drop-dead gorgeous but you can’t just sell your soul for that, I mean religion is so... personal!” Out of 82 interviewees, only one, Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille), fully recognized that his conversion to Islam was purely relational and instrumental (he did it to marry a Moroccan woman). He explained that he became sincere in his practice only a couple of years afterwards, when his wife gave birth to their first child. Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit) also told me that “as much as [she] hated admitting it,” she was at first primarily interested in Islam because she was attracted to a Muslim man. She added that when telling her conversion story to people, she “usually omitted that part,” but that “to be fair and for research purposes,” it had to be told during the interview, even if it was a source of embarrassment for her. All the other interviewees conceded that some people had been decisive in introducing them to Islam, but insisted that the decision was in the end purely their own. “I did not convert for someone, let’s be clear and accurate. This would not make any sense to me. I never do anything for other people’s sake,¹²” claimed Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille).

¹⁰ « Personne d’autre n’a interféré dans ce choix. C’est entre Dieu et moi. Je me disais c’est vraiment un choix, limite peut être le seul choix finalement que j’ai fait. Parce que des fois on se dit qu’on fait des choix mais au final on se rend compte avec le recul que bah c’est les parents qui parlent à notre place, c’est machin, c’est truc. Et là je me suis dit... enfin c’est peut-être le plus bel acte d’amour que j’ai fait et que je ferai jamais ».

¹¹ « T’as toujours la suspicion ‘oui tu t’es converti pour le mariage...’, alors que c’est pas vrai. Les personnes pour moi elles se convertissent, et après elles se marient effectivement. Mais après t’as toujours cette suspicion, ce truc... Tu vois moi j’ai divorcé pour me convertir ! »

¹² « Je me suis pas converti pour quelqu’un, ça, soyons clairs et nets. C’est pas le cas. La démarche pour moi, elle aurait aucun sens. Et j’ai jamais fait les choses pour les gens ».

This type of assertive discourse, presenting individuality as the sole source of religious sincerity, was at times associated with an underlying critique of “fake” or “insincere” conversion trajectories. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) for instance expressed reservations about what he called “fad converts” (*convertis de mode*), whom he defined as young French natives living in predominantly North African neighborhoods, who start identifying to Islam because it is in vogue and it is what everybody does around them. He felt that such fad converts gave Islam a bad name because they usually did not practice the religion seriously. He also criticized those who converted for dating purposes: “they convert out of love and when they get divorced, they go buy a ham steak! It happened to my cousin. She was dating an Arab and she was so-called converted but then she started dating a [guy named] François and, believe me, she had forgotten everything about Islam!¹³” Olga (23, student, Chicago) also mentioned to me that she knew of “women who convert to Islam after doing World Hijab Day¹⁴” and that she was really shocked by it: “I am like: ‘whyyyyyy?????’” In those examples, my interviewees engage in clear boundary-work and draw moral symbolic boundaries (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002) to demarcate themselves from what they consider as insincere converts and distinguish between right and wrong conversion motives. To be truthful, conversion has to come from the inner self and be free from any external influence. This “exaltation of individual singularity” (Foucault, 1986: 42) was central in many of the accounts I collected. Several of my interviewees decided not to talk to anyone about their religious search for fear of being influenced in their choice. “I knew that I couldn’t ask a person a question for clarification. I was afraid they would give a biased answer. I had to keep it pure,” said Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis). Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) also explained how he “imposed loneliness upon himself¹⁵” during his spiritual quest, while Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) recounted how she isolated herself in her childhood village during several months before taking the final decision to convert. She wanted to ensure she was not converting for her Muslim boyfriend and that the choice was solely her own.

Yet, the quest for radical self-sufficiency could also be a source of anxiety, as converts strove to assess what truly came from them and what came from the outside. Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) panicked when she learned that the French female rap singer Diam’s had converted to Islam shortly after her: “I told myself ‘what have you done? Look! Even Diam’s is doing it! (...) It is a fad.’ And I really questioned myself, whether I too belonged to that fad.¹⁶” Sophie did not know any longer whether she had embraced Islam on her own or whether she was just following a larger social trend. The possibility that her decision might have been unoriginal and foreseeable sociologically provoked so much stress and doubts that she almost gave everything up. In a similar

¹³ « C’est surtout les filles qui se convertissent par amour, et puis quand elles divorcent, elles vont acheter leur tranche de jambon et puis ça y est c’est parti. (...) Moi j’ai ma cousine en France, clairement qui a eu ça. Tu vois, c’est-à-dire, bon elle était avec un rebeu, elle était soi-disant convertie et là après elle est sortie avec Nicolas, et crois-moi qu’elle a tout oublié de tout ça ».

¹⁴ Annual event that encourages all women (Muslim and non-Muslim) to wear the *hijab* for a day and experience what it is like.

¹⁵ « Pendant très longtemps, j’ai été seul. Je me suis imposé un peu cette solitude ».

¹⁶ « Tu vois là où j’ai trop douté et tout, c’est aussi un moment où il y avait vachement de conversions. En fait Diam’s elle m’a fait trop buggé quoi. (...) Je me suis dit ‘mais qu’est-ce que t’as fait ? mais regarde ! même Diams’ quoi ! (...) Ouais c’est des trucs à la mode’. Et je me suis trop remise en cause, tu vois, de me retrouver dans ce lot-là en fait ».

fashion, Florent (30, restaurant employee, Lille) long postponed his conversion because he could not decipher whether his interest towards Islam came from him or from his socializing (he had many friends of North African origin and was dating a woman of Algerian descent at the time): “I was telling myself: ‘in the end, isn’t it my social environment that makes me attracted to it? Maybe it is not me, but my socializing that has rubbed off on me.’ I couldn’t stop asking myself this question. I was like ‘let’s clear everything out. If I didn’t know that person and that person and that person, if I didn’t find this girl pretty, would I still be that attracted to it?’ It really held me up for a while. (...) Because I always had this phobia of doing it for someone else.”¹⁷ Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit, who was in love with a Muslim man before converting, reported the exact same struggle: “I kept feeling like ‘crap! Is my interest in Islam genuine or is it because of this guy?’ (...) So I remember, in my head, it was a huge confrontation.” As these examples show, the separation of internal and external motives of conversion could at times verge on the obsessive (Florent talked about a “phobia,” Anjali of a “huge confrontation”). In their pursuit of isolation and purity, converts asked themselves fundamentally sociological questions: they tried to identify what came from their own volition and what was the result of their socialization and social environment. In their view, only the former could be held as authentic. Of course, sociologists have established that the idea of a personal truth, a pure interiority or a deep subjectivity lying in the heart of our hearts, is largely a myth. In fact, it is one of the most powerful myths of contemporary Western societies (Lahire, 2005: 6). While the emphasis on “choice” and “free will” is at the forefront of present-day discourses, there is no such thing as a purely individual decision, since the social world is always “folded” into the psyche of individuals (Lahire, 2013). To be sure, the very fact that the same rhetoric of religious individualism pervaded almost all my interviewees’ stories demonstrate that they were collectively determined by the larger social context of 21st century France and America to *think* of themselves as free and autonomous individuals. That they found legitimacy in such type of rhetoric is particularly telling about their conception of religion.

2) “Testing God:” logic, science, reason and discipline

In addition to this emphasis on individualism and maverickism, many of my interviewees justified their conversion by resorting to logical and scientific considerations, a common trope of the rational polity. They presented their religious search as deeply intellectual and explained that they eventually chose Islam because it “*made sense*” (this expression was particularly recurrent). Several narratives draw a picture of converts as independent thinkers, with a sharp critical mind and a strong ability to research and investigate. They emphasized their thirst for knowledge and consistent thinking: faced with religious inconsistencies and illogicality, they questioned over and over until they got a satisfactory answer.

¹⁷ « Je me disais ‘est-ce que finalement c’est pas l’environnement qui fait que je suis attiré. Est-ce que finalement c’est pas moi, mais c’est mes fréquentations qui ont déteint sur moi’. Donc je me suis longtemps posé cette question-là. Et j’arrêtais pas. Je me suis dit ‘bon, faisons le vide. Que je connais pas lui, que je connais pas lui, que je connais pas lui, ou que je connais peut-être pas la fille là ou la fille là que je trouve jolie, est-ce que j’aurais cette disposition-là ? est-ce que je serai autant attiré ? et c’est vrai que ça m’a freiné beaucoup pour me convertir à l’islam. (...) Parce que j’étais toujours dans la phobie de faire ça pour quelqu’un ».

In many instances, my interviewees reported that their disposition for critical thinking was quelled in their previous religious tradition, which profoundly disturbed them. Khabir (23, barber, Detroit), who presented himself as an avid self-taught reader, left Christianity because his questions about the Trinity remained unanswered: “I had questions, always inquisitive. And I wanted to know ‘what’s the Trinity? It does not sound right. You are saying that there are three gods in One. And I thought there is only One.’ And they were always like ‘just have faith. Just have faith. Just have faith. Don’t question God. That’s a sin.’ And I never could get an answer. So I got to a point where I just fell back, slowly but surely.” Khabir refused to take on faith what sounded illogical to his brain. Once a devout Christian, Gaëtan (29, student, Paris) also became riddled with doubts when he realized that his mother, who had always been an emblematic figure in his religious trajectory, had not read the Bible in its entirety and was unable to answer his questions. Worse, she evaded them. That her religiosity did not stem from an intellectual, textual understanding of religious sources came to a shock to Gaëtan, who could not envision religious authenticity without it. By contrast, Islam satisfied my interviewees’ passion for questioning by encouraging an advanced personal reflection on religious scripture. Many of them referenced in the interview verses of the Qur’an that are directly addressed to “those who reflect,” “those who are endowed with intelligence,” “those who use their intellect,” “those who have wisdom.” “Islam is a celebration of intelligence,” said Gwenaëlle (35, documentary filmmaker, Paris). This aspect of the religion was also repeatedly emphasized by Ghislaine (57, clerk, Lille) who recalled that “in Islam, mankind is asked to read, study, interrogate and question. Constantly, constantly, constantly. This is not a religion of calm and serenity where you say nothing but say ‘yes, Amen.’ No. When you enter the Muslim religion, you are in for perpetual reflection.¹⁸” The emphasis on questioning and intellectual search as the true locus of religious authenticity was a recurring trope in the conversion narratives I collected.

Several converts in my sample explained that their religious journey towards Islam was at first more intellectual than spiritual: “a lot of it was mental,” said Samuel (25, campaign strategist, Detroit), before adding that his “exploration of Islam was really sort of a head-placed type of thing.” Chloé (21, student, Lille) also confessed that she “wasn’t spiritual at all, but more rational.¹⁹” She focused on Qur’anic descriptions that were subsequently proved by science (e.g. development of the fetus, astronomy) as an indicator that Islam was the truth. James (48, English professor, Detroit) also talked about his conversion as an “intellectual commitment based on understanding.” In some cases, the phase of intellectual research lasted for several years and was held as proof of converts’ seriousness and sincerity. Emiliano (28, student Paris) said: “I didn’t become Muslim overnight. I didn’t want to take a decision lightly. I first had to read the Qur’an in its entirety and all the problems I had with it, be they ideological or theological, I had to solve them. So I spent six to seven months like that, buying billions of books and really spending entire nights questioning myself²⁰.” Olga (23, student, Chicago) could not have

¹⁸ « Il est demandé à l’homme de lire, d’étudier, de s’interroger, de se questionner. Constamment, constamment, constamment. C’est pas une religion de calme, de sérénité, où tu dis rien, où tu dis « oui, Amen ». Non. Quand tu t’engages dans la religion musulmane, tu t’engages à une réflexion continuelle ».

¹⁹ « Moi j’étais pas du tout spirituelle, j’étais plus rationnelle ».

²⁰ « Je suis pas devenu musulman d’un moment à l’autre. (...) J’avais pas envie de prendre une décision à la légère. (...) Je me suis dit il faut déjà que je lise le Coran en entier, que tous les problèmes que j’ai avec le Coran, que ce soit d’ordre idéologique, ou théologique, que j’arrive à les résoudre, avant d’affirmer mon

agreed more: “it’s not like I converted yesterday,” she said, “I have actually been doing a lot of research both academic and on my own about Islam for many years.” Placing a lot of importance on this long process of intellectual maturation, Olga was skeptical of people who “convert on a whim,” “after having a dream” or “after falling in love with a Muslim.”

Such religious quest could at times be very systematic, and almost scholarly. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) read all the books she could find about Islam at Barnes and Noble and even compiled a table listing the similarities and differences between the three monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) before deciding that Islam corresponded most to what she believed. Some converts decided to test the existence of God “scientifically.” So was the case of Edward (35, manager, Detroit) who discovered Islam as a science-enthusiast teenager:

Malcolm X he said in his book that if you take one step towards God, God will take two towards you. So I am this young scientist, that’s a hypothesis, I had to test it! So you know... parties and stuff. I said “I am not going to do that anymore. I am also not going to eat any more pork. And, you know God, if You are real, guide me to Islam. If You are not real, I am going to have an enormous barbecue in the summer time.” That was the plan! And Alhamdulillah, you know, the more I studied Islam, the more I found it to be true. And I was still skeptical, right? I said “I am going to test it. I don’t believe it.” I didn’t believe it, right? I wasn’t expecting to become Muslim.

In short, Edward presented his conversion as the result of a scientific hypothesis-testing. Several interviewees also adopted a quasi-Popperian approach: they first tried their best to disprove the Qur’an and find inconsistencies in Islamic doctrine, but, as they failed, came to the conclusion that Islam was the truth. Fazil (28, manager at a martial arts school, Chicago) explained that he adopted this refutability approach in various realms of life: “that’s how I usually work, you know. Like, for example, I was going to buy a laptop, and I was trying to find every bad review I could find for this laptop! And then I ended up with a Mac [laughs].” Yet, he said that this well-oiled process failed in the case of Islam: “every time I would try to disprove it, it would bring another interesting subject.” Joseph (21, web developer, Chicago) reported the same problem: “I was always looking for, like, that error, that mistake, you know. Because I knew the Bible had mistakes. (...) So that’s what I was looking out for Islam. (...) But I just couldn’t find any mistake.” At the end of these lengthy investigations, my interviewees came to the conclusion that Islam was rational and irrefutable. In fact, one of the most common expressions used in my interviews was that Islam was “logical.” “Everything is logical in Islam!”²¹ said Noémie (27, housewife, Paris). My interviewees draw a picture of Islam as a modern, clear and coherent religion, which did not offend their intellect and was in line with principles of contemporary rationality and scientific thought. They were drawn to it out of pure conviction.

By contrast, Christianity was portrayed as an “archaic” (Jacques), “ambiguous” (Benjamin), “confusing and frustrating” religion (Pablo) that “did not quite sit right” (Elizabeth), “did not hold water” (Adam) and “wrecked the head” (Noémie). The Muslim

islam. Et donc j’ai passé à peu près six ou sept mois comme ça, à acheter des milliards de bouquins, à vraiment passer des nuits entières à me poser des questions ».

²¹ « Tout est logique dans l’islam, tout est logique ! ».

converts coming from Christian backgrounds (who constitute the bulk of my sample) made harsh comments at times about Christian doctrine. In fact, positioning oneself vis à vis Christian theology and engaging in theological arguments with Christians was a common trope of conversion stories. The recurring bone of contention (that was mentioned in almost all the interviews without exception) was unsurprisingly the concept of the Trinity which was deemed incomprehensible, illogical and defying basic mathematical thought: “how could you be God and then be the son of God?,” rhetorically wondered Shahada (31, accountant, St. Louis). “You have passages in the Bible where Jesus is prostrating. It is not logical! If Jesus is God, then for whom is he prostrating?”²² observed Bruno (37, researcher, Lille). “1+1+1 = 3, right? Then if we have father-son-holy spirit, how come that does not equate to three gods when we just learned in religion class that we only have one God?” sarcastically asked Bob (19, student, St. Louis). In all these instances, the theological critique of the Trinity was based on a rhetoric revolving around ideas of consistency, rationality and logic.

The pure, almost militant monotheism promoted by Islamic doctrine was presented as much more functional. “It is clean,” said Noémie. The way the Qur’anic scripture had allegedly been preserved since the 7th century was also held as a key argument. In one of the first Being Muslim classes he taught at *American Da’wah*, John told us that he decided to become Muslim after learning about the science of verification of the *hadith** through various chains of scholars: “Islam is precisely about that: the verification of everything. If you think about it, it is very inspiring. It pushes you to be honest: say where it comes from, from which chain, say when there is a weakness in it, etc.”²³ Something about the way the tradition had been preserved and authenticated as well as the systematic verification of religious sources gave strong scientific credentials to Islam in the minds of my interviewees. Edward (35, manager, Detroit) mentioned: “I had grown up always thinking science and religion were in conflict. And I saw in Islam, they can be in synergy.”

Finally, a number of converts in my sample saw Islam as a rational way of putting their life in order and structuring their existence. In line with industrial orders of worth, they emphasized that they had become more productive and operational individuals after their conversion. Islam put them to work on the path of self-discipline, self-betterment and performance. Brian (23, student, Chicago) explained for instance: “I think there is merit in work. Whether it is physical or intellectual. And working in Islam for me is both physical and intellectual.” Considering Islam as a “code of conduct, a framework to structure your life”²⁴ (Ophélie, 26, legal assistant, Lille), a “hard religion” (Joseph, 21, web developer, Chicago), which “puts your ego and your desire down” (Hasan, 34, clerk, Chicago), many mentioned how it set them in motion to achieve their goals and become reliable individuals. Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago) and Adam (35, unemployed, Paris) overcame their addiction to alcohol; Monica (Chicago) cooled her temper down and escaped the spiral of depression; Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) started practicing boxing with a discipline and diligence he did not know he was capable of; Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) left marijuana and petty trafficking. By

²² « T’as des passages dans la Bible, où Jésus se prosterner. (...) C’est pas logique ! Jésus est Dieu et il se prosterner pour qui alors ? »

²³ Fieldnotes, April 7th, 2013.

²⁴ « L’islam, c’est un code de vie. C’est un cadre dont on a besoin pour construire notre vie ».

embracing the “benefits of strictness” (Iannaccone, 1994), converts stress that Islam has helped them optimize their behavior.

Within the rational polity, therefore, conversion narratives enlist a joint repertoire of religious individualism, rational choice, self-discipline and scientific thought to assert the singularity of conversion. By identifying the self and the intellect as the true loci of religious transformation, my interviewees also attempted to bypass sociological explanations: they wanted to prove that they, alone, had converted to Islam, free from any outside influence, by following a purely rational and logical mode of reasoning.

Utilitarian tales and rational/industrial orders of worth, however, were not the only register of justification. When asked why they thought Islam was the truth, some of my interviewees simply said that it was because “it spoke to them.”²⁵ Consider how Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) presented her choice: “it is not Cartesian at all! But it is because I feel it. I have this sensation.”²⁶ In a similar fashion, John from *American Da’wah* once told me: “you can say whatever you want about which religion is more rational and makes more sense than the other, but in the end, I know that the feeling that I get when I am praying the Muslim way is unique, and Christianity cannot give me that. So it is just a matter of feeling.” I now turn to an examination of these “sensations” and “feelings” that constitute the basis of religious faith. In describing such emotions, reason and rationality often have to be left aside, for the inspired polity to take over. While in the rational polity, converts said they became Muslim *because of* science and logic; in the inspired one, they said they chose Islam *in spite of* it.

B. THE INSPIRED POLITY: RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD THROUGH SIGNS, DREAMS AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

“I was standing in the crowd, near the second pillar, at the entrance of the choir, to the right of the sacristy. And it was there that the thing happened that has dominated my entire life. In an instant, my heart was touched and I believed. I believed with such a force of adherence, such a lightening of my whole being, with so powerful a conviction and a certitude, leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that ever since then, all the books, reasonings, hazards of a tumultuous life, nothing has been able to shake my faith, nor, to tell the truth, to even touch it. I suddenly had a heart-reading sense of the innocence, the eternal childhood of God, an ineffable revelation.”

French writer Paul Claudel (1913: 1010) on his sudden conversion to Christianity at Notre Dame in Paris.

Sociologists of religion have a serious thorn in the side. In studying religious people, they cannot ignore what constitutes a major component of their lives, a decisive (if not all-determining) factor in how they organize their existences: God, the divine, the holy, the supernatural, the transcendental. Throughout my ethnography, during each

²⁵ « Ça me parlait assez en fait » Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris).

²⁶ « Il y a quelque chose de pas du tout cartésien, mais c’est que je le sens ! Voilà. Vraiment, j’ai cette sensation ».

gathering, there was always one participant reminding the others that thousands of angels surrounded us to record our good deed of spreading and sharing Islamic knowledge.²⁷ God was invoked on every occasion during conversations and classes: several of my respondents started their interview with a *bismillah* (in the name of God) – thereby placing our conversation under religious auspices –; punctuated the narration of their past lives with numerous *astaghfirullahs** (may God forgive me) and *alhamdulillahs* (praise be to God); and usually ended with a number of *inshallahs** (God willing) or a prayer on the Prophet. The conversion narratives I compiled are also replete with references to dreams, divine signs and mystical encounters, which were often presented by my respondents as the main reason for their conversion. These events were key in the way they told their stories and instrumental in their self-portrayal as religious individuals. Whether I wanted it or not, God, *djinns**, angels*, *shaytan**, the prophet Muhammad and even his *buraq** were prominent actors of my ethnography. They intruded all conversations, meddled in discussion groups and pervaded the tales of my respondents. The inspired polity was everywhere to be found.

Talking about the enduring presence of Christian beliefs in contemporary societies, Friedrich Nietzsche (1908: 150) asked: “is one to believe that such things can still be believed?” I prefer to sidestep this question by describing instead what makes “such things” appealing and beautiful to the people who actually believe in them. Instead of ruling out the reality of religious mysteries and numinous experiences, I intend to come to grips with it in my analysis of the inspired polity. Conspicuous and recurring in the stories of my interviewees, these moments cannot be bypassed and have to be rigorously examined. While not necessarily considering that marvels, miracles and wonders are “really real” (Shanafelt, 2004), we need to explain how Muslim converts “come to experience God as real” and “cultivate concrete experiences of God’s realness” (Luhmann, 2012: 9-10). Resorting to W. I. Thomas’ theorem (1928: 571), I consider that: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Surely, God was real and tangible to my interviewees and had a significant impact on their lives. Thus, irrespective of debates over ‘His’ very existence or the nature of ‘His’ attributes, I propose to *make God sociological* by taking seriously what my respondents said about Him and the way He guided them. What might sound blasphemous to believers and absurd to non-believers is but one attempt to explore how the inspired polity works. With Robert Orsi (2005: 2), I consider religion a “network of relationships between heaven and earth” crafted by my respondents and I explore “the consequences of these bonds” on their everyday lives. In the following lines, I describe the connections that my respondents make between this world and the hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, the real and the surreal, the spiritual and the material in order to justify their religious transformation. More specifically, I identify three main channels through which my interviewees claim the divine intervened in their lives to trigger conversion: mystical experiences, signs and dreams.

²⁷ This refers to a *hadith* reported by Abu Huraira and referenced in *Sahih Muslim* (book 035, *hadith* 6505).

1) Narrating the ineffable: mystical experiences and changes of heart

“I never thought I would say these words aloud, but I just feel that Allah is real for me. In this way I can’t even explain. It sounds like such a weird thing to say, but it just feels so.” Once a fiery atheist, Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago) is at a loss of words to express his newly discovered faith. His former self would surely be appalled to hear him talk like this: in the past, Stephan found religion simplistic and infantilizing, if not utterly stupid. His favorite hobby was to call religious people out on their beliefs and humiliate them in public. Smart, witty and well-read, he was usually able to ridicule their creed with a few rational arguments and punchlines. Stephan’s encounter with the divine occurred in a rather unexpected way, when he read *The Idiot*, a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, for a course in his liberal arts college:

There is this famous scene in it, where there is, like, some parlor where all these people are hanging out, and they are having all these conversations and this nihilist walks into the room and goes (...) “God is dead” or “He does not exist.” And then this woman replies in a tortured way: “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” And this is a common argument. Like I have seen this soooo many times and as an atheist it was always bullshit to me, like you obviously can have a moral system and ethics outside of religion and whatever. But something about the way this was written, I remember I was in my bed reading it and I was “oh my God, what the hell is this?” And I had to close the book and I was thinking about it a lot. And obviously because of the character of the nihilist as rude, you know, it reminded me of my own behavior, as an arrogant atheist. (...) So anyway, I had this kind of revelation.

This first encounter with a transcendental reality set Stephan about researching religion, which eventually led him to Islam.²⁸ In his narrative, Stephan said he experienced an ineffable awakening (a “kind of revelation”), which he described as emotionally more powerful than the numerous rational arguments he used to support his atheist views in the past. “Something in the way [the Dostoyevsky novel] was written” unforeseeably opened up his heart, beyond what his intellect could ever have envisioned. Stephan experienced a sudden “change of heart” (Heirich, 1977), an unexpected “reorientation of his soul” (Nock, 1933). Several converts in my sample described similar internal reversals or what Ray (48, English professor, Detroit) has called “*aha! moments*.” The opposition between a rational outlook and an unexpected, indescribable brain wave was a common trope of conversion stories, particularly among individuals who switched from atheism to a new form of belief.

What is particularly striking in these experiential accounts is the similarity in the ways they are told: my interviews were always alone when encountering the divine and the very loneliness of the moment was crucial in their narrative. In fact, the accounts of my interviewees bear resemblance with Apostle Paul’s conversion story in the Bible (Mossière, 2007c), where Paul is at the mercy of an external, impersonal force that makes him convert. Conversion is presented as what “individuals experience *in their solitude* as they encounter the divine in a new way prior to any rational apprehension of it” (Finn, 1997: 31). Consider the case of Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) who reunited with the divine in the solitude of her studio after a long atheist period: “one evening, I felt His presence everywhere. It was my first mystical experience. I felt God’s love everywhere,

²⁸ Upon finishing his story, Stephan paused and looked at me with a self-critical smile: “this is probably the bougiest conversion story you have ever heard.” We both laughed as converting to Islam after reading Dostoyevsky is indeed rather uncommon.

in me, in the room, everywhere. I felt all enfolded. It was very very strong. (...) Since that day, I am sure that God exists.²⁹” This feeling of engulfment and certainty was expressed in strikingly similar words by Noémie (27, housewife, Paris):³⁰ “on December 29, I was in the shower (...) and there, in fact, I felt it. I felt like He was there. I felt a kind of infinite love that always existed and that will always exist, which was both within me and engulfing me. (...) From then on, I knew. (...) And I got this deep certainty, which is not intellectual, but which comes from the heart, the soul, the body.³¹” These accounts closely align with that of Paul Claudel in the epigraph of this section, which indicates a common conceptualization of conversion across religious traditions in the Western context.

The emphasis on corporeal and sensory experiences at the expense of intellectual reflection is widespread in the inspired polity. No matter how logical and rational Islam is, it has to be felt experientially to be held as truly valid. The power of emotion and intuition was emphasized by many: “I fell in love with Islam,” said Elizabeth (30, nurse, Chicago), “you have to go with that intuitive feeling,” added Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago). Several converts reported overwhelming bodily experiences, involving tears, shivers and uncontrollable feelings. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille)’s first encounter with God during a trip to Algeria was so powerful that he collapsed on the floor: “one evening, when I was feeling very very very bad, I heard the call for prayer, and it triggered something in me. I started crying, crying, crying. And, I don’t know why, I started prostrating on the floor (...) It sounds like a magical movie, right? [laughs] But it is strictly the truth!³²” In this case, the strength of the conversion narrative derives from the religious interpretation given to such weird experiences. Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) also went through an uncontrollable bout of crying in Morocco, as her host family was celebrating the end of the Hajj: “I cried like I never cried in my entire life. It was really unsayable. (...) Even after, I was trying to rationalize it, but it was not rationalizable. It was too beautiful! Honestly, I really had a hard time recovering from it.³³” The fact that the emotions she experienced were not rationalizable triggered Sophie’s conversion, as she decided to stop intellectualizing her feelings.

²⁹ « Un soir, je parlais à Dieu dans l’hypothèse qu’Il existait. J’ai senti Sa présence partout en fait. C’était ma première expérience mystique. J’ai senti l’amour de Dieu partout, en moi, dans la pièce, voilà. Je me suis sentie enveloppée, c’était très très fort. (...) Et depuis ce jour-là, je suis sûre que Dieu existe ».

³⁰ Blandine and Noémie do not know one another.

³¹ « Le 29 décembre, je suis dans ma salle de bains, sous ma douche (...) et là en fait je sens quoi. Enfin je sens qu’Il est là, je sens que... en fait c’est comme si j’avais senti une espèce d’amour infini qui a toujours existé et qui existera toujours et qui est à la fois à l’intérieur de moi, qui m’enveloppe. (...) A partir de là je savais. (...) Et j’ai eu une certitude profonde, qui n’est pas intellectuelle. Qui est du cœur, qui est de l’âme, qui est du corps ».

³² « Un soir où j’étais très très très très mal, j’ai entendu l’appel à la prière et ça a déclenché quelque chose en moi. Je me suis mis à pleurer, à pleurer, à pleurer. (...) Et je sais pas pourquoi, je me suis mis à me prosterner et à... Ça fait très film magique, hein, ce que je dis ! [rires] Mais c’est la stricte vérité, hein ! ».

³³ « En fait là je les ai entendus réciter le Coran et en fait j’ai pleuré comme j’ai jamais pleuré de ma vie, quoi. Et c’était vraiment indicible. (...) J’arrivais pas à savoir si c’était de beauté ou de crainte ou de... enfin il y avait un truc trop fort en moi, quoi. (...) Même après j’essayais de le rationaliser mais c’était pas rationalisable. C’était trop beau, quoi ! Et franchement, j’ai trop eu du mal à m’en remettre de ce moment-là ».



Figure 1 – Mystical states

The movie *Snow in Paradise* (2014) describes the conversion to Islam of a young white delinquent in the East End of London. After the death of his Muslim best friend, Dave finds refuge in a mosque and starts attending Sufi gatherings where he experiences a mystical awakening, as illustrated by this picture.

All these interviewees pay attention to God with and through their body (heart, soul, tears), which is held as the real locus of spiritual transformation. This “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas, 1993) is articulated in terms of religious revelation when something particularly strong and uncanny happens (Mitchell, 1997). Extraordinary emotional states are interpreted by resorting to supernatural rather than material explanations, and are believed to indicate a true and sincere relationship to God. In her ethnography of new metaphysical practices, Courtney Bender (2010: 67) makes similar observations, noting that “tears and bodily sensations emerge as signs of pure experience.” Thus, in talking about their conversion, my interviewees put forward a category of knowledge that is emotional and embodied (McGuire, 1996; Mossière, 2007a; Mossière, 2011), rather than intellectual and logical. This specificity of the inspired polity is particularly evident in the case of Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago), a Christian woman of Indian descent, who had a strong mystical experience upon hearing the *adhan* early in the morning in Pakistan, where she was visiting her husband’s family:

I never experienced that before. I remember hearing that and just sobbing! I don’t know what was going on, but I was just sobbing and sobbing and weeping. And I got very very... it just affected me very deeply. And I didn’t understand why! I just had this reaction. I knew something was happening but I couldn’t explain it, I couldn’t rationalize it, it wasn’t intellectual, it was... Actually, it was inexplicable. (...) Oh my God, when I think about it... it makes me want to cry. Very powerful. (...) Just kind of feeling this overwhelming embrace of the divine. You know, it is the best way I can describe it, with our limited connotations of language.

Like Deepa, most converts underline the ineffable, uncommunicable character of their encounter with the divine. Similarly, Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) told me: “I don’t know if you understand. It is hardly understandable. In fact, it is more something that you feel.³⁴” Ludovic’s experience is inexpressible in coherent terms and

³⁴ « Je sais pas si tu comprends, c’est... c’est difficile... c’est difficilement compréhensible, ça se ressent en fait ».

cannot be properly articulated. Yet, this inability to tell, far from being an obstacle, is precisely what guarantees the authenticity of the conversion story. As put by Proudfoot (1985: 117-118), “if it can be explained, it is not religious experience” (cited in Bender, 2010: 8). In order to be legitimate, the encounter with the sacred had to occur beyond the realm of language and communication.

2) Seeking God through signs

Apart from embodied mystical experiences, reference to signs and coincidences was another common trope of conversion narratives within the inspired polity. The most fervent believers among my interviewees claimed that “nothing happened by chance” and interpreted various events of their lives as a direct proof of God’s guidance. Such was the case of Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris), who used to identify as atheist and was for long totally uninterested in any serious spiritual quest. When he was 12 years-old, her older son, whom she used to call “my little angel,” decided to become Muslim. She saw it as an opportunity for him to become more disciplined and readily granted him permission. When he solicited her advice to choose a Muslim name for himself, she said she liked the way “Jibril” sounded, without knowing much about the meaning of that name. A few years later, when she opened up a Qur’an out of curiosity, Eleonore realized that Jibril was also the name of the angel that had brought revelation to the prophet Muhammad. Struck by this discovery, she interpreted it as a sign that God wanted her on “the right path.” She described the episode as the moment she acquired absolute certainty: “I think all converts have this moment where they go from ‘maybe...’ to ‘that’s for sure, God is here.’ And for me that was really that moment.³⁵” Signs and coincidences were often presented as decisive in the conversion process. Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) who shifted from atheism to Evangelical Christianity before embracing Islam explained how her transition from unbelief to belief was confirmed by a series of signs: “I prayed and asked God: ‘if You exist, answer! Reveal Yourself to me, send me a sign.’ And I started receiving many signs. (...) Like visual signs in the metro. For instance, once, the metro stopped at the station Saint-Michel. And the ‘i’ of Saint-Michel, which is usually white, was pink this time. So it caught my attention and when the metro moved forward, I saw that there was in fact a sticker on the ‘i’, with ‘Jesus loves you’ written on it. This kind of stuff! [laughs]³⁶” In the realm of the inspired polity, this coincidence was coded by Blandine in terms of religious revelation.

Like the pink sticker in the metro, the events and objects that triggered the conversion of some of my interviewees were at times completely trivial, profane and unholy. Sébastien (29, library worker, Paris) was so embarrassed about the sign that made him convert that he refused to tell me what it was: “it is something silly, I am not going

³⁵ « Je pense qu’on a tous une phase les convertis en général de passer de ‘peut-être que...’ à ‘c’est sûr, quoi ! Dieu est là’. Je pense que ça a été vraiment ça pour moi ».

³⁶ « J’ai prié en fait, j’ai demandé à Dieu ‘si T’existes, réponds !’ voilà. ‘Révèle-Toi à moi, envoie-moi un signe’. Et j’ai commencé à avoir beaucoup de signes. (...) Ça pouvait être des signes visuels dans le métro. Par exemple, voilà, une fois j’étais en train de penser à tout ça, (...) et à un moment le métro s’arrête à une station donc c’était Saint-Michel, et le i..., donc c’était un peu loin le panneau... le i de Michel, normalement il est blanc, et là c’était rose, donc ça m’interpelle le regard, et quand le métro s’avance, je vois qu’en fait il y a un autocollant collé sur le i, avec écrit dessus ‘Jésus t’aime’. Donc des choses comme ça ! (rires) »

to tell you about it in detail. One evening when I was not feeling well, I said ‘if this happens, I will convert tomorrow!’ [laughs] And it happened during the evening. Not completely, not entirely because... it is something very silly. But I had to stick to my word, so I converted the day after. It is pretty dumb, right?³⁷” In line with the spontaneity principle of the inspired polity, my interviewees took crucial decisions out of insignificant signs. Julia (23, student, Chicago) for instance converted to Islam over a license plate. Long a devout Christian, she had been through a period of doubt and anxiety after meeting Muslim friends and taking an “Intro to Islam” class in college. Questioning the concept of the Trinity, she had stopped identifying as a Christian and was going through what Mother Teresa calls “the dark night of the soul.” Out of despair, she prayed for a sign. She recalled in her interview that shortly after, as she was driving with her mother and grandmother, she noticed the license plate of a car in front of them that said “IKHLAS.” Julia knew the word but could not place it. When she eventually was able to Google it on her smartphone, she realized it was the name of the 112th *surah* of the Qur’an, which summarizes the basic foundations of Islamic creed. Julia looked at her screen in awe: she had received the sign she was longing for. Julia finds her own conversion story both laughable and powerful: “part of me is like ‘it was just a stupid license plate,’ but at the same time, it is so specific.” The commonplace character of the sign Julia received and its belonging to a modern, urban and this-worldly environment (a license plate) could be a matter of sarcasm, but is precisely what guarantees the authenticity of her conversion in the inspired polity. The triviality of the signs sent to believers is congruent with the Islamic interpretation of God as omniscient, ubiquitous and all-encompassing (Thomas, 2011). Locating His presence in very mundane and dull things is a way of reenchanting the world and instilling a sacred dimension to daily life. For Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), “in fact, everything is a sign. Everything.³⁸” Faithful to the Qur’anic injunction to pay attention to divine signs (“*Behold! Verily, in these things, there are signs for those who reflect,*” says verse 3 of chapter 13), my interviewees developed new ways of seeing the world during their religious journey.

The identification of strange events and chance encounters as divine gestures often occurred through interactions with other Muslims, who pointed at their significant character. Florent (30, restaurant employee, Lille), who converted to Islam progressively, expressed regrets during the interview that he did not have a “beautiful story to share,” like that of the singer Cat Stevens (aka Yusuf Islam), who saw God’s light after nearly drowning in the ocean. He mentioned however one numinous experience, to signal that his conversion was not purely rational but also involved some form of divine intervention: he recounted that one day he was looking for a law book in the university library and could not find it. The book just was not where it was supposed to be. Disappointed, he was about to leave the library, but as he was walking out, he raised his head inadvertently and saw the book on top of a completely random shelf. He opened it and found a Qur’an CD in it. As Florent was still trying to process what had just happened, one of his Muslim friends passed by and, shrugging in a nonchalant manner, told him “oh yeah, don’t worry, that’s just a sign.” While Florent could not believe his eyes, his friend interpreted the sign

³⁷ « Après c’est un truc... un truc bête, mais là je vais pas forcément le dire en détails, mais j’ai eu comme un signe. Un soir où j’allais pas bien, j’ai dit ‘si ce soir-là, il m’arrive ça, demain je me convertis’ (rires) Et c’est arrivé dans la soirée, pas complètement, pas entièrement, parce qu’en plus c’est pas quelque chose qui est forcément... enfin c’est quelque chose de bête. Et donc du coup bah c’est arrivé et... il faut que je tienne parole, quoi ! Alors je me suis converti le lendemain (rires). C’est assez con, hein ! »

³⁸ « Je sais en fait, que tout est un signe en fait. Tout ».

as something very casual and normal, a self-evident indicator that it was time for him to convert to Islam. In this case, the paranormal and the incredible is rendered trivial and mundane, and divine signs talked about with a detached, well-informed and disenchanting tone. The interpretation of coincidences as divine signs is in fact a skill that converts progressively acquire throughout their religious journey. They “learn to shift the way they scan their worlds, always searching for a mark of God’s presence” (Luhrmann, 2012: 14). It is an ability that can be developed and strengthened, until the boundary between the natural and the supernatural world is completely blurred: everything mundane can be seen as divine; alternatively, events that are commonly understood as magical and bizarre are made part of the normal order of things.

Throughout the course of my research, as I interacted with devout believers, I too learned to pay attention to chance encounters and to ascribe a specific meaning to them. Consider the following example. In July 2016, as my partner and I were strolling about in the old city of Lille, we wandered along a market of antique books. In a dusty pile of newspapers dating from the 19th century, we stumbled across a copy of *Le Petit Journal* (French daily published from 1863 to 1944), whose front page featured a large picture of Philippe Grenier stepping foot in the French Chamber of Deputies in 1897. As a French convert to Islam and the first Muslim ever elected in parliament, Philippe Grenier (1865-1944) is a prominent character in this dissertation, a person whose historical trajectory has always fascinated me (see Chapter 4). This particular front page is very telling since Philippe Grenier, bearded and wearing a large white *burnous* (traditional Algerian dress), is surrounded by clean-shaven deputies dressed in suits who stare at him in awe or with suspicion. I knew of the existence of this picture from the Internet and had already used it in various conference presentations, but holding the actual newspapers in my hands felt special. Moreover, I realized upon looking more closely that the paper was dated January 24th, which happens to be my birthday. Overjoyed, I bought the copy, framed it and hung it in my living room, where it is still standing, watching over my shoulder as I am writing these lines. The random discovery of the newspapers and the fact that it matched my birthday felt miraculous on the moment. Like my informants, I interpreted this event as a blessing by resorting to inspired orders of worth. But as a devout sociologist, I mostly saw it as a sign that I had chosen the right dissertation topic. What mattered ultimately was not the event itself but the interpretation given to it: in a world-to-mind direction of fit (Searle, 1983: 96), my interviewees saw the world in particular ways and made it fit with their intention to convert, just like I made it fit with my intention to write a good dissertation.

3) Dreams, visions and their interpretations

Finally, one of the most prevalent elements in the inspired polity was an emphasis on dreams and visions, some of which were presented as critical in the decision to convert. Capucine (26, unemployed, Paris) reported that she made a series of three mystical dreams prior to her conversion. In the first dream, a woman wearing a long dark veil was standing in the middle of her studio, telling her to look through the bay window. As Capucine complied, she saw a powerful yet un-dazzling light that viscerally communicated with her, leading her to prostrate on the floor. She added: “I still have the

images and the sensations. I said to myself ‘this is God right in front of me.’³⁹” When Capucine woke up in the morning, she felt very light, as if she had lost 15 kilos. In the second dream, Capucine found herself in a mall, ascending on an escalator, but with her head upside down. She reached a dark room with a door. When she opened it, she saw a beautiful, massive wall, covered with plants and Arabic calligraphy written in various shades of blue. As far as the eye could see, people were prostrated in direction of the wall. Next to her was a light-skinned man with a dark beard, wearing a white turban and a brown *kamiz*. Capucine did not know who that man was and woke up right afterwards. In her third dream, Capucine was in a completely blank space, surrounded by women wearing long veils. Beauty and light exuded from them. As she enquired about it, one of the women told her she could be just as beautiful if she acted like them. There too, Capucine woke up suddenly. What caught my attention and incited me to write a specific section on dreams was that another of my interviewees, Roxanne (30, social worker, Marseille), recounted a strikingly similar dream.⁴⁰ She was in the desert surrounded by sand, with a light so special and beautiful that she could not find the words to describe it. In front of her, large numbers of women, all veiled in white, were walking in the same direction. Their gait and presence were very soothing. Roxane felt at peace, until the dream became disturbing as a dog started baying in the background. Roxane told me that when she woke up, she decided to become Muslim right away.

This strong “dream isomorphism⁴¹” warrants sociological investigation. In 1377, Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (also considered by some as the “father of sociology”) wrote that “all human beings can have dream visions, and these visions must be interpreted” (1978 [1377]: 623). This strongly echoes the findings of contemporary sociologists who consider that “dreaming is a universal capacity” (Vester, 1993) and that dreams can be “claimed as legitimate sociological data” (Fine and Leighton, 1993). Building on the sociology of emotions (Thoits, 1989), the sociology of dreams understands dreams as both intimate and deriving from a collective stock of knowledge. Dreams are culturally specific: their content directly depends on the cultural repertoires of the society in which they are embedded. Vester (1993) writes that “although a dream appears to be private, the framework of meaning by which the scenes and themes of the dream can be interpreted refers to symbols, scenes, and scripts derived from collective meaning-systems such as myths.” The fact that converts share similar dreams indicate that they have been exposed to similar narratives and tropes regarding religious authenticity. Analyzing converts’ dreams is also a way of examining how they justify their life decisions and produce a coherent version of their selves within the inspired polity.

Dream interpretations obviously vary, but religious explanations tend to present themselves as particularly convincing. My interviewees often resorted to an Islamic framework to discuss the interpretability of their dreams and authenticate their conversion. Indeed, there is a long tradition of dream interpretation in Islam, which has been extensively studied by Pierre Lory. Three categories of dreams have been identified by Islamic theologians: sound dreams sent by God; dreams from the self that are the mere products of mental agitation; and confusing dreams sent by Satan to mislead the believers

³⁹ « J’ai encore les images et les sensations, je me suis dit ‘mais c’est Dieu qui est devant moi’ ».

⁴⁰ Capucine and Roxane do not know each other.

⁴¹ Or, as Michel de Certeau would put it, the “strange familiarity” of these dreams (De Certeau, 1977: 238).

(Lory, 2015: 56).⁴² While the two last categories can generally be ignored, the first kind of dreams, that are also very rare, are believed to hold special information about the hidden face of things and grant special access to a transcendental truth. They occupy a central stage in the Islamic religious tradition: while experienced at the individual level, they are talked about and interpreted collectively. It is reported in the Qur’an that the revelation sent to the Prophet first began with dream visions. Islamic mythology makes numerous references to the dreams that occurred to him, as well as to his Companions, other prophets, theologians, princes and mystics. One *hadith* also reports that the prophet Muhammad once said that “a good dream vision is a 46th part of prophecy” (Ibn Khaldoun, 1978 [1377]: 144) thereby granting to the common man the possibility of experiencing a small fraction of revelation in his sleep, provided that he can identify his dream as “sound.” The tradition has established that “true dream visions” can be recognized by the fact that the dream is short (the dreamer wakes up quickly) and remains clearly impressed in the memory. Pierre Lory (2015: 358, 364) notes that Islamic oneiromancy is strongly normative in the sense that it is not preoccupied with what the dream really means but rather uses the message of the dream to strengthen the faith of the dreamer. Thus, dreams are permeated by themes and symbols that are clearly detected in the orthodox Islamic tradition, thereby reinforcing the very authenticity of this tradition. In turn, the Qur’anic interpretative framework is systematically drawn on to decipher the most intimate dimensions of the dreamer’s psyche. Islamic oneiromancy and the sociology of dreams have therefore one crucial thing in common: they both consider that dreams “do not belong to the person” (Fine and Leighton, 1993), but are the reflect of either “God” or “society.”

The Islamic perspective on dream interpretation is still vivid today and my interviewees endorsed it in their conversion narratives: they firmly believed that their dreams provided special insights about their future or the hereafter. This became evident in the way Deana (21, student, St. Louis) related her conversion dream to me. Deana’s mother had embraced Islam a few years earlier and, one evening, she asked her and her two sisters if they were interested in becoming Muslim as well. A fervent Baptist, Deana was unsure about her answer. That night, however, she had a dream that was “like a Day of Judgment dream.” The world was in chaos; there was turmoil, fire, and people running everywhere. But Deana was in a car with her mother and two sisters and they were all safe, traveling on the right path. When she woke up, Deana decided to recite her *shahada*. She presented her dream as decisive: “I assumed it was an answer to that question that my mother asked me earlier that evening. (...) So that’s the reason why I have, I guess, decided: it was definitely through that dream, which I interpreted as like a divine intervention.” Dreams were claimed as experiential proofs of the sacred and interpreted as Islamic signs of truth.⁴³ As noted by Michel de Certeau (1977), dreams are “fables that

⁴² This echoes the ancient Greek distinction between *enypnia* (dreams that express the present affects of the individual) and *oneiros* (dreams which tell what is real), highlighted by Foucault (1986: 10) in his account of *The interpretation of dreams* by Artemidorus. Such classification therefore appears to be common in oneiromancy.

⁴³ The quest for God, however, is always precarious and uncertain, since the nature of divine signs (be they coincidences, mystical experiences and dreams) is necessarily disputed and disputable. “How can people tell whether their enchantments are true, or false?” asked Gilsenan (2000) in his study of the dreams of Egyptian peasant women. The main challenge for the converts I met was to adjudicate between what came from God and what came from their ego, in order to assert the sincerity and authenticity of their spiritual transformation. This dilemma has been extensively studied by Luhrmann (2012: 15) in her study of American Evangelicals’ relationship to God. “The most difficult problem that confronts anyone who

make believe,” in the sense that they occur unbeknown to the individual and are interpreted as revealing her hidden, unknown desires – in this case the desire to become Muslim (“believing is wanting to believe,” he adds).

Dreams and visions are also a classic component of famous conversion narratives, which can account for my interviewees’ exposure to them and subsequent incorporation in their lives. In *Islam, l’autre visage* (1995: 54-55), French intellectual and convert to Islam Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (1909-1999) narrates a prophetic dream that precipitated her conversion. Raised Catholic and married to a Jewish man, Eva de Vitray was much distraught when she realized she was attracted towards Islam. She asked God for a sign, which, as she believes, was sent to her through a dream: “I dreamt that I was buried, and through a kind of duplication, I was seeing my grave. It was a grave like I had never seen before, on which my name, Eva, was written in Arabic or Persian characters, which gave Hawa. (...) When I woke up, I remember saying to myself: ‘well, honey, you asked for a sign and there you go: you will be buried as a Muslim.’” Following her conversion, Eva de Vitray became a specialist of the great Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalal Ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273), whose work she translated from Persian to French (2014). Subscribing to an inspired repertoire of justification, Eva de Vitray completes the narration of her dream with a strange coincidence: 15 years after her conversion, as she was visiting a former dervish house in Istanbul, she stumbled across the exact same grave she had dreamed of, except that her name was not carved on it. Her dervish host informed her that the place used to be a cemetery for the female disciples of Rumi, but had been abandoned for centuries. According to Eva de Vitray’s account, the true signification of her dream was revealed after a lapse of 15 years: she retrospectively interpreted it as a proof that she was predestined to die both as a Muslim and as a follower of Rumi. This kind of retrospective interpretation of a dream is also found in *The Road to Mecca* (2005 [1954]: 167-170), the autobiography of the Jewish-born Austro-Hungarian journalist Leopold Weiss (1900-1992), who converted to Islam and became known as Muhammad Asad.⁴⁴ An entire chapter of the book is devoted to the issue of dreams and I wish to quote extensively from it because one particular passage strongly resonates with the accounts of my own interviewees (and because Asad’s great literary style will give the reader a well-deserved break from my repetitive academic prose). In this excerpt, Muhammad Asad is engaged in an intense discussion with the King of Saudi Arabia Ibn Saud (1875-1953) and his son Amir and relates one of the dreams he made...

Long before I ever thought of becoming a Muslim – before I even had set foot in a Muslim country. I must have been nineteen years old or so at the time, and lived in my father’s house in Vienna. I was deeply interested in the science of man’s inner life and was in the practice of keeping by my bedside paper and pencil in order to jot down my dreams at the moment of awakening. (...) In that particular dream, I found myself in Berlin, travelling in that underground railway they have there – with the train going sometimes through a tunnel below ground and sometimes over bridges high above the streets. The compartment was filled with

believes or wants to believe in God,” she writes, is “how to find God in the everyday world and how to know that what you have found is God, and not someone else’s deluded fantasy or your own selfish wish.” Thus, while the interviewees presented here fully believed in the significance of their dreams, others adopted a more circumspect stance. Such was the case of Ghislaine (57, clerk, Lille) who told me: “some people say they dream about the Prophet in their sleep. It is possible... But I think it is more in their unconscious. In Islam, dreams come either from God, or from *shaytan*, or from your ego. So in my opinion these dreams are partly from your ego and partly from God who is trying to rescue your ego!”

⁴⁴ He is the father of scholar Talal Asad, who is cited in this dissertation.

a great throng of people – so many that there was no room to sit down and all stood tightly packed without being able to move; and there was only a dim light from a single electric bulb. After a while the train came out of the tunnel; it did not come on to one of those high bridges but emerged instead on to a wide, desolate plain of clay, and the wheels of the train got stuck in the clay and the train stopped, unable to move forward or backward. All the travelers, and I among them, left the carriages and started looking about. The plain around us was endless and empty and barren – there was no bush on it, no house, not even a stone – and a great perplexity fell over the people’s hearts: “Now that we have been stranded here, how shall we find our way back to where other humans live?” A grey twilight lay over the immense plain, as at the time of early dawn. But somehow, I did not quite share the perplexity of the others. I made my way out of the throng and beheld, at a distance of perhaps ten paces, a dromedary crouched on the ground. It was fully saddled – in exactly the way I later saw camels saddled in thy country, O Imam – and in the saddle sat a man dressed in a white-and-brown striped *abaya** with short sleeves. His *kufiyya* was drawn over his face so that I could not discern his features. In my heart, I knew at once that the dromedary was waiting for me and that the motionless rider was to be my guide; and so without a word, I swung myself on to the camel’s back behind the saddle in the way a *radif*, a pillion rider, rides in Arab lands. In the next instant, the dromedary rose and started forward in a long-drawn, easy gait, and I felt a nameless happiness rise within me. In that fast, smooth gait we traveled for what at first seemed to be hours, and then days, and then months, until I lost all count of time; and with every step of the dromedary my happiness rose higher; until I felt as if I were swimming through air. In the end, the horizon to our right began to redden under the rays of the sun that was about to rise. But on the horizon far ahead of us I saw another light: it came from behind a huge, open gateway resting on two pillars – a blinding white light, not red like the light of the rising sun to our right – a cool light that steadily grew in brightness as we approached and made the happiness within me grow beyond anything that words could describe. (...)

“Glory be unto God!” exclaimed Ibn Saud, when I had finished. “and did not this dream tell thee that thou wert destined for Islam?” I shook my head: “No, O Long-of-Age, how could I have known it? I had never thought of Islam and had never even known a Muslim... It was seven years later, long after I had forgotten that dream, that I embraced Islam. I recalled it only recently when I found it among my papers, exactly as I had jotted it down that night upon awaking.”

“But it was truly thy fortune which God showed thee in that dream, O my son! Dost thou not recognize it clearly? The coming of the crowd of people, and thou with them, into a pathless waste, and their perplexity: is not that the condition of those whom the opening *sura* of the Koran describes as “those who have gone astray?” And the dromedary which, with its rider, was waiting for thee: was not this the “right guidance” of which the Koran speaks so often? And the rider who did not speak to thee and whose face thou couldst not see: who else could he have been but the Holy Prophet, upon whom God’s blessing and peace? He loved to wear a cloak with short sleeves... and do not many of our books tell us whenever he appears in dreams to non-Muslims or to those who are not yet Muslims, his face is always covered? And that white, cool light on the horizon ahead: what else could it have been but a promise of the light of faith which lights without burning? Thou didst not reach it in thy dream because, as thou hast told us, it was only years later that thou camest to know Islam for the truth itself...”

Like Eva de Vitray, Muhammad Asad says in his account that he was not Muslim when he made that dream. Like her, he considers that its full signification was revealed to him several years later. Like Capucine and Roxane, Muhammad Asad also found himself in the desert in his dream, surrounded by a strange light, before meeting a character dressed as an Arab Muslim, who appeared to show him the way. All the canonical elements of an Islamic conversion dream are gathered here. The meaning of the

dream is then fully revealed through the interaction with coreligionists. In this case, the king gently provides a classic, orthodox, Qur'an-based interpretation of Asad's dream (the lost crowd of people are "those who have gone astray;" the dromedary is "the right guidance;" the rider is the Prophet Muhammad; the white light is the "light of faith"). Dream sharing, therefore, is crucial in asserting the authenticity of one's conversion story. For Gilsenan (2000), dreams are "public goods, circulated in conversational exchanges." Dreams participate in a regime of mutual validation of belief (*régime de validation mutuelle du croire*), as conceptualized by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999: 181): they are interpreted collectively by referring to a corpus of shared religious knowledge, as coreligionists point elements of significance to the future convert. As put by Fine and Leighton (1993), "dreams are *performed* for others in the flow of interaction" and the ability to tell one's dream and to elicit a religious interpretation from others is decisive in the conversion process.

Therefore, when talking about mystical experiences, signs and dreams, my interviewees emphasized the preponderance of *mythos* over *logos*. They consistently reported that they could not rationally explain what had happened and had to surrender their intellect in order to recognize that God had touched their lives in an unpredictable way. Contrary to the previous section where the interview excerpts drew the picture of strong-minded, independent individuals making choices for themselves based on rational and scientific evidence, here my interviewees presented themselves as inspired believers relying on emotional and bodily experiences to determine their life trajectory.

By putting the emphasis on unsettling dreams, astounding coincidences and overwhelming emotional states, my interviewees wanted to show me that they had not converted to Islam on their own: God had made them convert. This was apparent in a number of verbal expressions, such as "I wasn't choosing Islam; Islam was choosing me" (Joseph, 21, web developer, Chicago); "truly, I didn't go looking for Islam; Islam found me" (Denyse, 58, IT services employee, Chicago); "I guess that's how Allah wrote it for me" (Souleymane, 45, Islamic teacher and dancer, Detroit); "I know that God wanted this for me" (Gwenaëlle, 35, documentary filmmaker, Paris); "Islam came to me. (...) I would say that God guided me" (Fanny, 26, educational assistant, Paris). In presenting God as the ultimate architect of their lives, my interviewees portrayed their conversion as unique, sincere and authentic. Several interviewees emphasized that they had never envisioned the possibility of converting and that conversion came to them in a rather miraculous way. As put by Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), "five months before converting, I was sure I would never convert in my entire life. I mean I was certain!⁴⁵" In those narratives, converts present themselves as the passive repositories of God's will ("we have no control," says Shahada (31, accountant, St. Louis)).

Like in the rational polity, here again, the narrative is used to bypass sociological explanations. At times, the religious coding of my respondents' entire biography impacted the interview situation. Several of my interviewees gave me amused looks as I was trying to decipher the reasons for their conversion. They probably found me cute, but also very naïve: in their view, God was the ultimate reason and there was nothing left to "explain." Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), who became my friend, showed me one day a

⁴⁵ « Cinq mois avant que je me convertisse, j'étais sûr que je me convertirai jamais de ma vie. Mais j'étais certain ! »

social science book that she had bought on French female converts to Islam (Riva, 2015): she had vigorously struck out pages 23-25, devoted to a typology of conversion motives. She found it absurd, reductive and unconvincing. As she went on her anti-typological diatribe, I remembered one sentence from her interview, in which she talked about “the violence of people who are trying to explain our conversion. Because at the moment we convert, there is only Allah. It is only Him, there is nothing else.⁴⁶” Some of my interviewees resisted any sociological appraisal of their lives and repelled my attempts at establishing the causes of their conversion. In a rather disarming way, David (31, unemployed, Chicago) told me: “I embraced it, because I believed in it, you know what I mean?” This is, very simply, how justification operates in the inspired polity.

C. THE CIVIC POLITY: UNIVERSALISM AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

The rational and inspired polities are definitely the most recurring ones in my sample and both emphasize the individuality of the conversion process. Even when my interviewees had been influenced by friends or lovers in their trajectory, they usually only mentioned it in passing, but did not build on it to *justify* their conversion. To be authentic, conversion had to be strictly individual, be it in the rational or inspired order of worth. A third repertoire of justification, however, re-embedded my interviewees into the social world. Although less prominent, the civic polity, which hinges upon ideals of general will and common good, was used on several occasions to morally explain the decision to embrace Islam.

1) Our religion

“What I like in Islam is that you build on other religious traditions. That way, I don’t say ‘I practice my religion.’ I say ‘I practice our religion.’” This is how Dr. Uthman, one of the most charismatic teachers at *American Da’wah* and himself a convert, presented his decision to become Muslim.⁴⁷ Putting forward the cumulative and consecutive character of Islam with Christianity and Judaism, he wanted his audience to understand that Islam did not mean rupture but continuity with the other Abrahamic religions. As put by famous French convert Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (1995: 147), “Islam is the common denominator to all religions. You don’t convert to Islam. You embrace a religion that contains all the others.” Several converts in my sample resorted to a similar repertoire of justification. While Islam is both heir and competitor to Christianity and Judaism, they put the emphasis on the former aspect exclusively.

Many told me that they became Muslim out of being good Christians, willing to follow God’s message as updated in the Qur’an. The fact that Islam recognized all prophets up to Muhammad (some *hadiths* say there are 124,000 of them), including Abraham, Moses and Jesus, was a powerful argument in the civic polity. As Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago) put it: “I feel that I am worshipping God through not just Mohammed’s teachings but through everyone’s teachings.” More specifically, the figure of Jesus (who

⁴⁶ « Justement c’est là, la violence des gens qui essaient d’expliquer notre conversion, parce qu’au moment de la conversion, il y a que Allah, quoi. Il y a que Lui, il y a que ça ».

⁴⁷ Fieldnotes, November 16th, 2013.

is mentioned more times in the Qur'an than Muhammad himself and is considered an exceptional prophet in Islam) acted as a powerful bridge between faith traditions. Such was also the case for the figure of Mary/Maryam (after whom chapter 19 of the Qur'an is named). Consider Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit)'s conversion ceremony, which was led by famous American scholar and convert to Islam Sheikh Hamza Yusuf. When he learned that Mariana was once a devout Catholic of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, he added a line to the testimony of faith usually recited in Islam: "I believe that there is no God but one God. I believe that the last Prophet is the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. *And I believe in Jesus and the blessed Virgin Mary.*" Mariana was particularly moved by this last line, which meant that she could still love Jesus and Mary, albeit in slightly different ways. Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris) too was much relieved when she realized that converting to Islam did not mean "repudiating Christianity but simply going further than it."⁴⁸

In several accounts, Islam was presented as the most suitable religious choice in a religiously diverse context because it encapsulated and was therefore respectful of other traditions. Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), a communist activist who used to be anti-religious, chose Islam because he saw it as the most tolerant and embracing brand of monotheism: "I was anti-religious because I thought that all religions saw themselves as superior to one another. And of course in Islam, you can sometimes hear this type of discourse, like 'we are better than Jews and Christians.' But, that being said, the major difference is that Islam recognizes all prophets, which means that being Muslim forbids you from critiquing Jews, from critiquing Moses."⁴⁹ Islam was perceived as universal and anti-particularistic. Because of its ability to create bonds with believers from various traditions, it was held as the most representative of all religions, a strong asset in the civic polity.

2) "Something bigger than themselves:" reforming society

Finally, Islam was presented not only as a tool for reforming the self, but also as a means to reform society. Many converts were touched by the simplicity and sincerity of Islamic greetings (*as-salaam 'alaykum* – May peace be upon you), and the fact that you could use them everywhere in the world. This embedded them into a sense of universality and common humanity. For Boran (35, professor, Chicago), "there is intimacy in that. You know, this is a total stranger and you are not just shaking their hands and keeping a distance, but you are pulling them in, you are giving them a hug and you are saying something very intimate, you are wishing someone Peace. Right? You are not just saying 'hello and goodbye,' you are wishing someone Peace!" Most converts in my sample also reported being particularly moved by the collective prayer in Islam, in which humans from all walks of life and from all over the planet bow and prostrate at the same moment, well in sync, towards the same direction (Mecca). This perfect synchronization was held as a metaphor for a global collective consciousness. According to Noémie (27, housewife,

⁴⁸ « C'est pas renier le christianisme, en fin de compte c'est aller plus loin ».

⁴⁹ « Moi avant j'étais antireligieux parce que je considérais que quoi qu'il arrive les religions elles se pensent toutes supérieures à l'autre. (...) Certes dans l'islam tu auras parfois un discours disant 'on est mieux que les chrétiens et les juifs'. Mais, ceci dit, la différence qui est pour moi majeure, c'est que l'islam est la religion qui reconnaît tous les prophètes, tu vois. C'est-à-dire qu'être musulman t'interdit de critiquer les juifs, de critiquer Moïse ».

Paris), “in no other religion, can you see thousands of people, a noisy colorful flock of people, which upon hearing the *adhan*, all get lined up in five minutes, in perfect rows, no matter their age or color or stuff, in order to pray. Nothing moves. It is a perfect ensemble. (...) It reminds you that we are only one body.⁵⁰” Prayer was presented as a display of equality and a powerful equalizer. During one of her classes to new Muslims in a Paris suburban mosque, Aisha (37, housewife, Paris) insisted on this aspect: “in prayer, everybody is equal. We all pray side by side. Here at the mosque, the president of the mosque, who is someone important to us, prays next to the one who collects garbage. You can’t recognize him. He is in one of the rows. He is not in the first row. Through that, God shows us how to organize society.⁵¹” Islam was portrayed as promoting a true belief in equality, which was visible and manifest in one of its most prominent rituals.

Islam was also embraced for its potential for social critique. Many reported being struck by the hospitality and generosity displayed by their Muslim acquaintances, which in their view sharply contrasted with the individualistic attitude found in contemporary Western societies. Like Muhammad Asad in *The Road to Mecca*, one of her favorite books, Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) was called to mind by the “serenity, solidarity and acceptance of destiny” of her Muslim friends, which stood in contrast with what she characterized as the “neurosis, anxiety, selfishness and mental distress of the Western world.” Some converts saw in Islam a subversive force to overcome the ills of our crisis-ridden capitalist societies and reinstall forms of solidarity and social distribution. Consider the case of Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), long active in the Communist party, who said: “my understanding of Islam is first and foremost to be nonconformist, in the sense of refusing the society that is being sold to us, that ultra-consumerism where even human relationships are commodified.⁵²” Because of its universal character, Islam was presented as a remedy to the evils of contemporary Western societies: materialism, individualism, and last but not least, racism.

On countless occasions, during my ethnography and throughout my interviewees, my informants referenced the last sermon of the Prophet Muhammad, in which it was explained that “all mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood.” Emphasizing devotion and religious deeds as the sole criteria to assess individual worth, irrespective of racial categorization, Islam was presented as a potential solution for racial inequality. Such was the conviction of William (30, public health worker, Chicago), who said: “Islam puts to the forefront that you are going to be judged

⁵⁰ « Il y a que dans la religion de l’islam que tu peux voir des milliers de gens, un troupeau, de toutes les couleurs, qui fait du bruit... *Adhan*. En cinq minutes, ils vont être tous alignés, quel que soit leur âge, leur couleur, leur machin, en cinq minutes, ils sont alignés en rangs parfaits, ils se mettent à prier, il y a plus rien qui bouge, ils sont dans un ensemble parfait. (...) ça te rappelle qu’on est tous un seul corps ».

⁵¹ « En prière tout le monde est égal. Nous prions tous côte à côte. Ici, à la mosquée, le recteur de la mosquée, qui est quelqu’un d’important pour nous, prie à côté de celui qui ramasse les poubelles. On ne peut pas le reconnaître. Il est dans l’un des rangs. Il n’est pas au premier rang. Par cela, Dieu nous montre comment organiser la société ».

⁵² « Ma vision que j’ai moi de l’islam, c’est-à-dire quelque chose d’abord d’anticonformiste, au sens de refuser la société telle qu’on nous la vend, tu vois, c’est-à-dire l’ultra consumérisme, au sens où même les relations humaines sont des consommations ».

not because of who your parents are or what skin color you are or how much you have, but on the very essential basis: your intentions, your deeds, what's unseen to other people.” According to some converts, this antiracism was verified in practice. As Boran put it: “that's why I fell in love with the Islamic community, you know. It was the first community where I went into and I saw different ethnic groups praying side by side.” In the US, the legacy of the Nation of Islam, which enrolled Islam as a tool to fight white supremacy and uplift the condition of black people (see Chapter 4), remains prominent, especially among African-American converts, but not only. Boran, who is Cambodian-American and grew up in a poor area of New York, remembered being particularly struck by the work the Nation was doing in his neighborhood: “I liked the militant image and aspects of it, kind of like the unity that was around it at the time and trying to do better for your community and just trying to clean up the neighborhood. You know, *they represented something bigger than themselves.*”

This imperative to transcend oneself in order to bring about peace, justice and equality was recurring in many interviews. In fact, several converts in my sample embraced Islam through their involvement in various social movements and saw religion as a rejuvenating force in their activism. When he was a high school student, Abdullah (39, Muslim chaplain, Chicago) became a member of the local NAACP (he was the youngest and only white person there) and then an activist in the anti-racist struggle, participating in various community projects on the South Side of Chicago. He decided to take Islam seriously and made it a part of his social activism after reading the autobiography of Malcolm X. Even today, he does not dissociate his spiritual practice from his activities in the field, but sees the two as mutually reinforcing: “my understanding of being a Muslim has always been that you have to be active in the community.” Like him, Stephan, Olga, Jessica, Brian, Umar Lee, Samuel and Ubaydullah Evans in the US and Gwenaëlle, Emiliano, Noémie, Mélissa, Eleonore, Jérémy, Sébastien, Pauline, Françoise, Isabelle, Fanny and Rachel in France described their conversion to Islam as having to do with a desire to improve society. As Brian (23, student, Chicago) said, “Islam became part of my life the same time that I realized I wasn't very content with this world.” All of them were committed to various causes, be it the Palestinian struggle, alter-globalization or left-wing activism, feminism, anti-racism, etc. Islam drove and fueled their engagement. For example, Gwenaëlle (35, documentary filmmaker, Paris) considered that “being Muslim implies having awesome duties. I have never felt so obligated, so conscious of my duty as a human being (...) to fight against injustice and make the world a better place.⁵³” These interviewees' practice of the religion is inseparable from their civic involvement and dedication to reform society. As put by Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), “for me, if it is not an Islam who is helping to fight white supremacy, and if it is not rooted in a mission of helping poor people, it is really something that I don't get.” In their view, religion was useless if not used productively in this world and geared towards the eradication of oppression and inequality. Consider also the case of Françoise (74, retired English teacher, Paris), a lifelong feminist who participated in the struggle for abortion rights in the 1970s and traveled to the Middle East, Africa and South America to enhance her feminist framework with Third World politics. With her inimitable speaking style, she explained: “to me, feminist revolution

⁵³ « Pour moi être musulmane, ça implique des devoirs de ouf en fait. J'ai jamais été autant obligée, (...) autant consciente de mon devoir en tant qu'être humain (...) pour lutter contre l'injustice, enfin faire que le monde il soit meilleur ».

and spiritual revolution, well, you don’t say, but they are really tied!⁵⁴” The spiritual and civic spheres are always closely intertwined in these narratives.

Many also found that Qur’anic teachings were in line with their already existing political views, such as Sébastien (29, library employee, Paris) who said he found in the Qur’an “interpretations that corresponded to [his] anti-capitalist, even libertarian, feminist and environmentalist interpretations, as well as anti-racist and anti-colonialist interpretations.⁵⁵” As for Olga (23, student, Chicago), who identifies with anarchism, she chose Shiism over Sunnism because she saw it as a “religion of protest,” which stood up against authority and oppression. She also said that she found in the Qur’an and the *hadith*, “strands of anarchist ideas,” such as the fact that Muhammad smashed the idols of the Kaaba in Mecca, which can be interpreted as an act of overthrowing a conservative establishment. Others actually drew on Islamic history to renew their political activism, such as Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris) who followed the spirit of the *futuwah* (Sufi chivalry geared towards ideas of equality and justice) and believed in Islamic environmentalism (Taleb, 2014); Françoise (74, retired English teacher, Paris) who subscribed to the Islamic theology of liberation (see Esack, 1997) and several others who embraced Islamic feminism (see Mernissi, 1987; Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 2007; Ali, 2012: , etc.) (also see Chapter 7). The proliferation of Islamically-inspired ideas to reform society was striking. As Noémie concluded: “Islam means a just autonomous political system. Islam means a just economic system. Islam means a just family system. Islam means a just social system. *Islam means justice.*⁵⁶” In congruence with civic orders of worth, the social productivity of the Islamic tradition was a key argument to justify one’s conversion.

D. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provided the reader with a torrent of words from my interviewees. My intention was to do justice to their justifications and transcribe them as faithfully as possible. I presented my interviewees as *authors* (Le Pape, 2015: 25) and examined their narrative production carefully. While each conversion story is a very personal piece of work, I noticed strong similarities in the way conversion accounts are told and structured, thereby revealing the sociological relevance of such material. The fact that conversion narratives are also widely available to the public through books, autobiographies, blogs, videos, etc. establishes them as a distinct literary genre, with its own sets of rules and rhetorical devices. Such prevalence might explain the strong similarities from one account to another.

In national contexts where converts are often depicted in mainstream public discourse as crazy, troubled, brainwashed, simple-minded, mentally-unstable or hateful

⁵⁴ « Révolution féministe et révolution spirituelle, et bah dis-donc, c’est drôlement bien lié ces affaires ! »

⁵⁵ « Dans le Coran j’ai trouvé des interprétations qui correspondent à mes interprétations politiques. J’avais trouvé des interprétations anticapitalistes, des interprétations libertaires même, des interprétations féministes, écologistes ! et tout, antiracistes, anticolonialistes... »

⁵⁶ « L’islam c’est un système politique autonome juste. Un système économique juste. Un système juridique juste. Un système familial juste. Un système social juste. Il y a tout dans l’islam. Et l’islam c’est la justice ».

people, the imperative to justify one's conversion is particularly strong. I have argued that conversion narratives are used as tools to assert the sincerity and legitimacy of one's religious itinerary in line with universal orders of worth. I demonstrated that converts resort to similar repertoires of justification to explain their religious transformation. The rational, inspired and civic polities described above provide a set of moral arguments that can appeal to anybody and are universally valuable. These three polities are not necessarily exclusive from one another and were usually combined in the speech of my interviewees.

Interestingly, and surprisingly maybe given France and America's widely different religious histories, they also tended to be equally shared by French and American converts. I did notice a prevalence of inspired orders of worth among my French interviewees and of rational repertoires of justification among American converts. This can tentatively be explained by the long history of Islamic mysticism and Sufism in France, popularized by (Muslim and non-Muslim) intellectuals, artists and Orientalist writers such as René Guénon, Etienne Dinet, Louis Massignon, Isabelle Eberhardt, Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, Maurice Bégart, etc. The availability and popularity of their writings, in which dreams and mystical experiences are frequently reported, might also account for the strong dream isomorphism noticed among French converts and the echo between public and personal narratives of conversion. In the US, the prevalence of Protestantism, whose "inner-worldly asceticism" and "practical rationalism" are considered by Max Weber as the utmost stage of the rationalization of religion (1958 [1915]; 1993 [1922]), can possibly account for the pervasiveness of rational orders of worth. The civic polity was also slightly more prevalent in the US, which is congruent with the well-entrenched tradition of civic involvement through religion. However, given the limited size of my sample, such differences cannot be considered as significant enough to sustain generalization. What is particularly striking, however, is that apart from being available across national contexts, the inspired and rational repertoires of justification are not specific to converts to Islam: they are also found among converts to Christianity, Buddhism and other religions. These drastically individualistic repertoires, therefore, tell us more about what counts as "religious authenticity" in 21st century Western societies than about conversion to Islam alone.

By depicting the moral architecture sustaining converts' lives, this chapter constitutes the bedrock of this dissertation. Knowing the subjective aspirations of my interviewees is indispensable to understand how they subsequently adapt to the objective conditions shaping Islamic religiosity in France and the US. More importantly, the moral arguments set forth by converts in their narratives implicitly reveal what they consider as religiously authentic, which will have an impact on subsequent chapters. I have established that, on both sides of the Atlantic, religious authenticity derives from three different sources:

- a cognitive and intellectual quest hinging upon ideals of rationality, logic and science (the rational polity);
- ineffable encounters with the divine and emotional, embodied connections with the other-worldly (the inspired polity);
- a commitment to be productive in this world and work for the common good (the civic polity).

Contrary to understandings of religion as traditional, inherited and implicit, my interviewees do not find much legitimacy in the domestic polity. To fit their moral standards, religion has to be individually, freely and explicitly chosen. “The language of the self-reliant individual” (Bellah et al., 1985: 154) who “*achieves* her personal identity beyond any prescribed or inherited identity” (Hervieu-Léger, 1999: 65) is pervasive in the conversion narratives I collected, especially those who resort to rational and inspired orders of worth. This type of discourse is also used to circumvent sociological appraisals of conversion. Converts present themselves as individuals able to escape the molding of society in order to reconnect to their true, authentic inner selves. According to Peterson (1997: 211), “one of the most effective ways to assert authenticity is to claim that an action, object or person is ‘natural’ and without ‘artifice.’” In line with this observation, conversion is portrayed as either the product of pure intellect or as the result of divine intervention – two channels allegedly devoid of societal influence, and therefore, of “artifice.” As I elaborate in Part 2, this desire of autonomy from society, typical of contemporary discourses on individualism, does not go unchallenged, since the social construction of Islam as a racialized religion interferes with converts’ conceptions of religious authenticity. This dissertation examines how radically individualistic experiences of religious conversion compare to the socially imposed experience of race.

CHAPTER 2 – BECOMING MUSLIM: THE VARIETIES OF COMING OUT

While the previous chapter analyzed the reasons that drew my interviewees towards Islam, this chapter investigates the shift from word to deed and describes how converts actualize their religious transformation. Becoming Muslim, I find, is made tangible through a variety of coming-outs. Converts often draw a clear distinction between what they see as *divine knowledge* of conversion – which occurs whenever the heart switches – and *social acknowledgment*, which necessitates the disclosure of religious feelings to society. This is evidenced in the following interview excerpt with Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille): “God knows who believes in Him and who does not believe in Him. But then you have to testify in front of people, because it is about living in society. People need to be able to know who is Muslim and who is not, in order to organize life on a daily basis.¹” Although she stresses the central role of the divine in her conversion, Caroline concedes that becoming Muslim necessitates social sanctioning.

This is also expressed by Gwenaëlle (35, documentary filmmaker, Paris), a Muslim convert who identifies as lesbian. In her interview, she drew parallels between revealing her identity as a lesbian and revealing her identity as a Muslim: “Early on, I knew I was Muslim. But I couldn’t take on everything it meant socially. (...) That’s why it took me a long time to tell people about it. (...) It was the same thing with coming out as a lesbian.²” Coming out involves both the adoption of a new definition of self and its public disclosure. It is at once inner-directed and other-directed. In the case of religious conversion, it implies accepting one’s new religious identity, publicizing it to one’s new coreligionists and announcing the shift to one’s entourage. Gwenaëlle describes the shift from an internal (“I feel Muslim”) to an external identification (“I present myself as Muslim”) as particularly difficult. Akin to the process of becoming lesbian, becoming Muslim implies transitioning from one social status to another. It is a choice that requires time and maturation, since it has serious consequences in societies such as France and the US where heterosexual and Christian/atheist identities are perceived as the norm.

In his seminal study on homosexuality in Chicago, Gilbert Herdt (1993: 31) likens the act of “coming out” to a *rite of passage*: “because of its distinctiveness, popularity and symbolic elaboration in Western culture, coming out is best interpreted today as a life-crisis event that resembles the rites of passage that anthropologists have studied around the world.” Herdt is referring to the work of ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960

¹ « Dieu sait qui croit en lui et qui ne croit pas en lui. Mais après il faut attester devant les autres parce que c’est une histoire de vivre en société. (...) Il faut qu’il y ait des gens qui puissent témoigner ‘tu es musulmane, t’es pas musulmane’ ... pour organiser la vie du quotidien ».

² « Assez rapidement je savais que j’étais Muslim. Mais en fait j’assumais pas tout ce que ça pouvait représenter socialement en fait. (...) C’est pour ça que j’ai mis du temps avant de le dire. (...) La même chose avec le côté coming out gouine ».

[1909]) who defines rites of passage as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.” Ceremonies that Van Gennep identifies as similar in nature escort individuals as they move across various life thresholds (birth, puberty, marriage, death, travel, entry into a profession, etc.). Van Gennep is particularly interested in the sequencing of those rites, which are systematically divided into three distinct phases: a phase of *separation* whereby the individual detaches herself from her earlier social position; a *liminal* phase during which the individual passes through an in-between, ambiguous cultural realm; and a phase of *reincorporation* during which the passage is fully enacted.

Bourdieu (1982b) extended Van Gennep’s theory by shifting attention from the description of rites to their actual social function. In doing so, he renamed rites of passage “rites of institution,” highlighting the fact that they consecrate and institute a new status for the individual. According to Bourdieu, rites of institution, such as circumcision or the attribution of titles, separate a before and an after. They consist of “sanctioning and sanctifying a difference by making it exist as a social difference, known and recognized as such by the agent invested and everyone else.” For Bourdieu, rites of institution are acts of “social magic” in the sense that they produce difference *ex nihilo*. They possess symbolic efficacy. Instituting rites, Bourdieu explains, “signify to someone what he is and how he should conduct himself as a consequence.” This can apply to coming out as a Muslim. By instituting the individual within the realm of Islam, the act of “coming out” modifies one’s social perception by lay people and fellow Muslims. It also encourages the individual to act as per her new status by practicing Islam seriously. In this perspective, coming out as a Muslim convert produces discontinuity: it marks a before and an after, separates Muslims from non-Muslims and delineates practice from non-practice.

In this chapter, I address two practical instances of coming out: A) the recitation of the *shahada* (or conversion ceremony in Islam), which is performed in front of coreligionists and sanctions the entry into a new religious community; B) the announcement of conversion to family, friends and colleagues, which institutes a new social status for the individual. These are two modalities of public declaration that have different implications. By analyzing them in further depth, this chapter accomplishes two things. First, I sketch out converts’ relationship to time and change and demonstrate that religious conversion is a drawn-out process. I examine the significance converts assign to the specific moment of coming out within their larger religious trajectory. I show that a conceptualization of coming out as a marked rupture between a before and an after often fails to attend to the messiness and blurriness that characterizes converts’ religious trajectories. Indeed, the significance of the *shahada* often fades amidst issues of individualism and continuous practice; and the announcement to friends and family is sometimes blurred by logics of silence, secrecy and denial. More often than not, the coming out is partial and the rite of institution incomplete. I conclude with a reflection on the concept of liminality.

Second, I illuminate the differences between the French and American contexts in terms of how religion is lived and experienced. While I did not find significant disparities in the way French and American converts justify their conversion (see Chapter 1), there are clear dissimilarities in the way they manifest their conversion to others. The data outlines two different versions of religious individualism: in France, the relegation of

religion to the sphere of the intimate limits the significance of collective rites of passage such as the *shahada* and the Unintelligibility of Religion hinders the announcement to friends and family (*inward-looking religious individualism*). In the US, by contrast, the Cultural Centrality of Religion as a defining feature of individuals facilitates the process of coming out and the assertiveness of religious choices (*outward-looking religious individualism*).

A. THE SHAHADA: COMING OUT TO CORELIGIONISTS

The ceremony of conversion to Islam is well-established and codified. It entails reciting three times in a row the profession of faith (or *shahada*)³ in front of two Muslim witnesses at least. This parsimonious ceremonial can be preceded by a ritual bath (*ghusl**), which involves a full body-washing and the performing of *wudu** (ritual ablution required before prayer). The *shahada* is the “outward, vocalized expression of Islam” (Woodberry, 1992). It is typically performed by newcomers to the faith or by born-again Muslims who wish to recommit to the religion. It must not be done under constraint or insobriety. It has to be performed by well-informed and sound-minded adults who thereby accomplish an act of free will. Word is bond and the action of speaking aloud in front of witnesses durably pledges the convert to the faith. As such, the *shahada* differs from the ritual accompanying the birth of a Muslim child, during which words are simply whispered into the baby’s right ear to manifest her entry into the fold.



Figure 2 - *Shahada*

The movie *Qu’Allah bénisse la France* (2014) describes the spiritual journey of French rapper of Congolese descent Abd Al Malik in the city of Strasbourg. In the above, he recites his *shahada* in a small prayer room, in front of two Muslim witnesses.

Unlike Christian understandings of conversion, the *shahada* is not considered “the terminal point where one may say ‘I am saved’” (Woodberry, 1992: 34). Becoming nominally Muslim through the act of conversion does not ensure deliverance, which, in line with the orthoprax nature of Islam, can only be attained through devout practice and good deeds. Reciting the *shahada* is only the outward and formal means through which

³ *Ashadu an la ilaha ill-Allah, wa ashadu anna muhammadan rasul ullah* (I testify that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet).

one enters Islam and joins the *ummah*, the global community of Muslims. As understood by the Islamic tradition, therefore, the *shahada* is not a ritual of salvation (Mossière, 2007b), but rather a ritual of public recognition whereby the individual is accepted as Muslim by coreligionists. As such, it is best characterized as a rite of passage or a rite of institution, i.e. a rite during which the individual moves from one social status to another. By marking out the entry of an individual into Islam, it is supposed to delineate the state of non-Muslimness from that of Muslimness.

This is at least how things are supposed to work in theory. What happens in practice and in the minds of individuals seems much more complex and ambiguous, as exemplified by Boran’s story. Boran (35, professor, Chicago) was initiated to Islam by a Sunni Muslim storeowner who lived a couple of blocks away from his high school. After learning the fundamentals of the religion, Boran decided to become Muslim. Yet, he is confused about the moment he did so:

He started teaching me *Al-Fatiba* [first chapter of the Qur’an]. We read the Qur’an together. He would teach me bits of the alphabet. He would tell me stories from the *hadith*. And then, there were times when he would just close the store and say “let’s pray together. Let me teach you how to make *wudu*.” So we did all these things and I took my *shahada* technically with him first. And then one day he said “you know we need to go to the *masjid* [mosque] for *jumu’ah* [Friday congregational prayer].” I went with him and I took my *shahada* again there. But I didn’t know that day that I was already Muslim at that point. You know I didn’t know by taking my *shahada* with him, that I had already become Muslim. I thought it was only official when you took *shahada* in a public forum with the imam.

Boran does not know for sure the exact date he became formally Muslim: was it when he recited the testimony of faith in front of his friend or at the mosque? His story raises questions for the study of conversion to Islam. *What exactly marks the entry into Islam?* Is it when one reaches the inner conviction that Islam is the truth? Is it when one utters the words of the profession of faith? Is it when one performs the conversion ceremony in front of a Muslim audience and is recognized as Muslim by fellow coreligionists? Is it when one starts practicing Islam? These are normative and theological issues that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. In this section, I examine how Muslim converts *themselves* relate to the rite of passage that is the *shahada*. I investigate how they determine and make sense of the moment they formally entered Islam. By shedding light on the variety of meanings they ascribe to this rite of institution, I demonstrate that the entry into Islam is blurrier and fuzzier than commonly thought.

1) Styles of *Shahada*

Upon talking to my interviewees, I realized that the *shahada* is endowed with a variety of forms and contents, senses and textures, which at times deviate from its conventional understanding. In the following lines, I describe the diversity of “*shahada* styles” and demonstrate that conversion ceremonies form a continuum, ranging from the most codified to the most personalized. I classify these styles of *shahada* into two broad categories, taken from David Riesman’s classical study (1950: 23-25):

- Other-directed types are characterized by a “need for approval and direction from others.” The *shahada* is performed in front of people whose validation matters for the new convert.

- Inner-directed types, by contrast, rely on converts' "internal gyroscope and piloting." Converts accomplish the *shahada* on their own, in the solitude of their soul: loneliness is embraced as the true locus of religious authenticity, without regard to the social character of instituting rites.

a) Other-directed *shahadas*

Community-oriented. Several respondents took their *shahada* in the classical sense of the term. They decided to go to a mosque or religious organization and pronounced the testimony of faith in front of an imam and lay members of the congregation. Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) went to the mosque with a close Muslim friend and pronounced the *shahada* in front of the imam after a short conversation on the basic tenets of Islam. He invited her to recite it again the following Friday, in front of the entire congregation. He explained: "this is not mandatory. That won't make you more Muslim than you are right now but it is just a way to introduce you to the community, to help you meet people."⁴ Adèle took her *shahada* twice. The second time, she recalled that "it was really moving in the sense that everybody was there... there were hundreds of people and they all congratulated me."⁵ Like Adèle, several converts in my sample did several *shahadas* to authenticate their coming out in front of the community. Some remember their entry into Islam as exhilarating. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) decided to take his *shahada* at a local mosque during *laylat-al-qadr**, a particularly intense night of worship during which mosques typically registered the largest attendance. He said: "The whole mosque went crazy. (...) People were crying, I was crying! It was one of the most emotional moments in my life."

In some instances, the conversion ceremony was also used to strengthen the bonds of the group. One evening after a discussion group at *American Da'wah*, Debora, a young white woman expressed the desire to take her *shahada*. John, the main organizer, enthusiastically fulfilled her demand but added a collective dimension to the ritual by asking everybody to repeat the words along with her. Sitting in the center of the room and surrounded by the group, Debora was pronouncing the Arabic words quietly. Her voice, however, was almost inaudible, covered by the exclamations of the group, which repeated the sentence three times, in perfect unison. John managed to transform Debora's personal rite of passage into a moment of collective effervescence. The objective here is to remind Muslims of their duties towards new converts and to show converts that a whole community is standing behind them. The emphasis is placed on the institutional and collective dimension of the *shahada*, which performs its social role as a rite of institution.

⁴ « Il m'a dit 'il n'y a pas d'obligation, ça vous fera pas plus musulmane mais c'est plus une manière de vous présenter à la communauté, pour que vous rencontriez des gens' ».

⁵ « C'était très émouvant dans le sens où il y avait tout le monde, je ne sais pas combien il y avait de centaines de personnes, elles m'ont toutes dit 'félicitations', tout ça. Donc ça c'était vraiment bien ».



Figure 3 – Public *shahada*

The short documentary *God Calls Me* (2014) by Mohamed Ali Neffati features the videotaped public conversion ceremony of a French man named Yoan (on the right), who recited the testimony of faith into a microphone in front of a large crowd of people.

However, some converts feel uncomfortable with public ceremonies because they worry about the instrumentalization of their conversion. On a Facebook thread launched by *American Da'wah* on the topic of public *shahadas* (December 2013), comments varied between those who felt public ceremonies were necessary to ensure the new convert was recognized by coreligionists and those who worried about becoming “items of display,” “thrust onto a huge stage with a spotlight so the community can feel good about themselves.” They criticized what they deemed to be a “circus show,” “a public spectacle for a very private moment” and considered that Muslims should “get rid of the *shahada* show.” One participant said that “turning the actual act of *shahada* into a public spectacle for our own *religio-tainment* undermines the sanctity of the moment.”

Friends and family-oriented. As a result, some converts opted for a more relaxed and intimate conversion ceremony. Many organized a party and turned the event into a friendly gathering. Sonam, a young American medical student of Indian descent who used to come very often to the activities organized by *American Da'wah*, created a Facebook event and invited many of her friends. Her friend Lisa, a convert too, brought what she called a “*shahada cake*” with *happy shahada* written on it (she mentioned the baker had struggled to write it properly). Before Sonam pronounced the testimony of faith, each of the attendees said a couple of nice words about her personality. After the ceremony, all her friends hugged her and ate food together. In this type of ceremony, the emphasis is put on sharing a nice moment with loved ones in order to mark the occasion. In fact, as mentioned by Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), “ceremony” is a big word to describe the small friendly gathering that she put together to make her religious change public. The main objective is for friends and family to acknowledge a significant biographical change in the convert’s life. The ceremony is neither institutional nor intimidating. It rather feels like a house-warming party or a baby shower.

Witness-oriented. Finally, some respondents simply fulfilled the basic conditions required for conversion to be valid and did not strive to make the event friendly or memorable. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille) embraced Islam with her Muslim female friends when she was in high school. This is how she describes the moment she converted:

I told my female friends: “tomorrow morning, you will come with your ablutions on and me too, and I will recite in front of you right before the history class.” And this is how we planned it! But one of them didn’t arrive on time and the history class was about to start so I told another girl who was sitting there: “what about you, don’t you want to be my witness?” She said “yes.” I told her “OK, good, you are going to stand here and listen to me.” And here you go. I recited the sentence and that was it.⁶

Caroline performed her *shahada* quickly, in the hallway of her high school, between the mathematics and history classes. She just wanted to get it done. Emiliano (28, student, Paris) also reported that his *shahada* was really odd: during the period when he was still learning about Islam, he went to the hairdresser. As he was getting his hair cut while reading a book about Islam, one of the hairdresser’s Muslim friends showed up. Amused, he asked Emiliano to repeat after him the testimony of faith in Arabic, thinking Emiliano did not know the meaning of the words. Emiliano, perfectly aware of what was going on, went along and effectively recited the *shahada* in front of two witnesses: “so yeah, that’s when I did it. It is a bit quirky...”⁷ Emiliano’s *shahada* was based on both a joke and a misunderstanding. There was nothing majestic or emotionally powerful about it, but it can be considered as “valid” in terms of formal ritual. Several converts in my sample also recited their *shahada* over the phone with an imam. When they hung up, they found themselves alone in their apartment, aware that they had just done something important, but disconcerted by the dryness and simplicity of the ritual. In those examples, converts performed the very basic requirements of the ceremony. They were only preoccupied with becoming Muslim in the strict sense of the term. The *shahada* was neither organized nor premeditated. Many ended the description with a simple “you know, that was it,” emphasizing the very short and modest character of the event.

b) Inner-directed *shahadas* and autonomous conversions

In each of the three ceremonial styles exposed above, the minimum conditions were met for the *shahada* to be effective in the orthodox acceptance of the term. Yet, some converts did things differently and created a ritual on their own. After many years of spiritual quest and inquiries about Islam, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) decided to perform her *shahada* in a very personalized way, alone, at a moment that felt right to her. She took a trip to Vermont, a region she loved for the beauty of its natural scenery, and did her own ritual:

I flew to Vermont and I found a mountain site. I had written down on paper the transliteration of what to say for the conversion. I had no clue how to pronounce it. None!

⁶ « Du coup, j’ai dit à mes copines ‘demain matin, vous viendrez avec vos ablutions et moi aussi et je réciterai devant vous avant de rentrer dans le cours d’histoire’. Ça s’est fait comme ça, quoi ! Il se trouve qu’il y en a une elle était pas arrivée à l’heure et le cours d’histoire allait commencer donc j’ai dit ‘mais toi, tu veux pas être témoin ?’ Elle m’a dit ‘oui, oui.’ Je lui ai dit ‘ben très bien tu vas être là, tu vas m’écouter’ et voilà. J’ai récité la phrase et c’était parti, hein ».

⁷ « Bah moi je l’ai faite là, en fait, voilà, c’est un peu insolite mais... »

So I am like “OK, I am just going to give it a try.” So I stood on the hill, I took a picture of the place, and sat there with my little index card [laughs]. And I said the transliteration in Arabic and then I said it in English. And I sat there for a few minutes and then, I came back. I didn’t tell anybody for a while. That I had converted.

Mary relied on her own sensibility to pronounce the testimony of faith and kept it a secret for several weeks. Like her, a sizeable part of my sample (15 people, or 20%) performed the *shahada* by themselves, without any witness. These respondents do not consider conversion as a rite of institution but rather as a private commitment to God. The collective dimension of conversion is bypassed and the covenant only takes place between the individual and the divine. They consider they do not need group sanctioning and perform an inner-directed *shahada*. What matters is that the ritual of conversion makes sense to the individual and aligns with her inner feelings and convictions. This is best exemplified by the story of Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), who embraced Islam after a first conversion to evangelical Christianity. Emphasizing the continuity between the Christian and Muslim faith traditions, Blandine crafted her own conversion ritual, mixing elements from both religions:

When I was told that [the *shahada*] was “there is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet,” I was like “huh... yeah... it is a bit too obvious! Can’t we do a bit more than that?” [laughs] (...) So I told to myself: “I am going to do a Muslim baptism!” And then I wondered: “With an imam or not?” I thought about it for a while. I did not want to just pronounce the *shahada*, it was too simple. I wanted to say it but I wanted to add other things to emphasize the link between the Bible and the Qur’an. So I took a verse from the Qur’an that cites all prophets and I added that. I also added a prayer where I talk about the meaning of purification through water, how it washes your sins away. So I made something up for myself and then I said to myself “I can’t bring all this to an imam! He is not going to understand a thing! So forget about the imam, I will do it on my own.” Then I could have done it with witnesses. I could have found friends to do it; it wouldn’t have been a problem. But I just wanted it to be between me and God. So I did that in my bathroom, alone. I used the bathtub for the purification through water, I recited my stuff with the *shahada* in it and there you go, I was converted.⁸

Blandine’s conversion ceremony was heterodox in many ways, but felt true to her. Inner-directed converts consider the traditional, standardized ritual of the *shahada* unsatisfactory and display a great sense of inventiveness in crafting their own conversion ceremony. Public recognition is perceived as superfluous and embarrassing: no one is invited to witness and vouch for the convert’s religious transformation. While it is supposed to be well institutionalized and codified, there is therefore considerable leeway and room for interpretation around the ritual of the *shahada*. Although these “do it

⁸ « Quand on m’a dit ce que c’était, donc ‘Il n’y a de Dieu que Dieu, Mohammed est son Prophète’, j’ai dit ‘bah oui ! c’est un peu évident ! on peut pas faire un peu plus que ça ?’ (rires) tu sais ! voilà ! (...) Donc je me suis dit « bon je vais faire un baptême musulman ! » (rires) Alors après avec imam ou pas ? J’ai réfléchi. Je voulais pas juste dire la *shahada*, c’était trop simple. Je voulais la dire mais je voulais ajouter d’autres choses pour montrer le lien entre la Bible et le Coran. Donc j’ai pris un verset du Coran qui cite tous les prophètes, voilà, que j’ai ajouté. J’ai aussi ajouté une prière où je parle du sens de la purification par l’eau pour purifier des péchés tout ça. Donc je me suis construit un truc et... je me suis dit ‘je peux pas ramener ça à un imam, il va rien comprendre !’ (rires) Donc on oublie l’imam, je vais faire ça toute seule ! Donc alors après je pouvais faire ça avec des témoins, j’aurais pu trouver des amis et il y aurait pas eu de souci. Mais... je voulais que ce soit que Dieu et moi, donc j’ai fait ça dans ma salle de bains toute seule. Donc... avec baignoire paf, purification par l’eau, j’ai récité mon truc avec la *shahada* dedans et voilà je me suis convertie ».

yourself” rituals significantly depart from orthodox acceptations of the testimony of faith, the converts I interviewed saw themselves as Muslim after performing them. Their entry into the sacred was personal and intimate; the authenticity and legitimacy of their conversion relied exclusively on their own subjectivity.⁹ This aligns strongly with the repertoires of religious individualism outlined in Chapter 1. Inner-directed converts see themselves as self-sufficient for religious matters. To use the words of French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999: 181), a regime of self-validation replaces a regime of mutual or community validation of belief. These trajectories are not a majority in my sample, but they are significant enough to deserve attention.

There are however clear national differences in the moral underpinnings of these individualized conversions. Among the 15 “autonomous” converts that I identified, 11 are French and only 4 are American. This can be explained by the French conception of religion as strictly belonging to the realm of the intimate. In a Defiant Secularism regime that relegates religion to the private sphere, the collective expression of religiosity becomes awkward and out-of-place. Many of my French interviewees confessed that talking about their spiritual sentiments in public was embarrassing and that reciting the testimony of faith in front of others was beyond their ability. Méliissa (27, project manager in an NGO) said she systematically blushes when people interrogate her about her religious convictions: “it is as if I laid myself bare.¹⁰” Accordingly, changing religions is also conceived as a very personal move that it is incommodious to perform in front of others. Such emotional reserve regarding religious matters can account for the prevalence of inner-directed conversions in France.

By contrast, in the US, the choice for an autonomous conversion takes almost militant overtones and is rooted in the legacy of Protestantism. It does not derive from shyness but from assertive individualism. Consider how David (31, unemployed, Chicago) justified his decision to convert on his own: “people say ‘you’ve got to publicly profess it.’ But I mean you can publicly profess anything, and not be sincere about it. I mean you can do it just for the looks, or the outward appearance. (...) I was by myself, it made sense to me. It wasn’t like I needed this huge ceremony for it, like all the hugs, and ‘oh wow,’ you know, the 5 minutes of popularity! I don’t need it. Because I know what I am, I know what I believe.” David, who discovered Islam on his own through extensive reading, values inward sincerity of faith over outward displays of religiosity. He considers that he is only validated by God and does not have to answer to anyone else. This Protestant mindset enables him to refuse the collective ratification of his inner spiritual transformation and to circumvent conventional religious rites of passage.

Such autonomous conversions, however, can become problematic, precisely when converts engage in religious activities that require bureaucratic demonstrations of group belonging. To fulfil the administrative procedures required for instance to go to the pilgrimage to Mecca or to be buried Islamically, some group ratification and official paperwork (in the form of a conversion certificate) is required. Several years after she became Muslim, Fabiola (26, recruitment officer, Lille) had to undergo serious surgery at the hospital. In order to ensure her funeral would be performed according to Islamic

⁹ These “autonomous conversions” were also encountered by Loic LePape (2015: 38-40) in his study of conversion to Islam, Judaism and Christianity in France.

¹⁰ « C’est comme si je me mettais à nu en fait ».

rules if something went wrong, she had to go to the mosque to request a conversion certificate. When the Muslim clerk asked her where she had become Muslim, she simply answered: “[I converted] at home! It is just between me and God!¹¹” Her interlocutor was much surprised by her self-proclaimed religious individualism, but after ensuring she knew the *shahada* and *surat-al-fatiha* (first chapter of the Qur’an), he granted her what she had asked for. Hence, in spite of the variety of personal styles of conversion, some uniformization is ultimately necessary to obtain community recognition.

2) *Shahada* meanings

The variety of styles of *shahada* outlined above matches the equally great variety of meanings that converts assign to their conversion ceremony. While, for some, it represents a clear temporal rupture from their previous life as non-Muslims, for others it is an insignificant formality that does not correspond to the actual moment they became Muslim. I find that other-directed ceremonial styles usually embody a relationship to time and change that is discontinuous; while inner-directed ones intersects with more continuous and progressive experiences of religious time.

a) The *shahada* as ritual climax: discontinuous regime of time

December 27th, 2013 at 1.15 am. Jean (23, student, Paris) remembers exactly the moment he recited his *shahada*. During our interview, he recalled the steps leading up to it, explaining that he used to be a devout Catholic, who would often participate in heated theological debates with his Muslim friends. After losing a number of arguments, he started questioning his faith and decided to investigate Islam in further depth. For a long time, however, he retained doubts and hesitations and refused to convert. Until that night of December 27th.

I was in the bus and started reading the Qur’an. And I reached a passage that talked about hypocrites. That was the thing that hurt me the most. I said to myself “OK... so in fact I am a hypocrite.” The verse talks about hypocrites and their punishment. These people are going to catch hell! And I told to myself “but this is me right here! If I die now, I will be on the wrong side!” So I read the entire verse (...), I closed the Qur’an, I went home and took my *shahada*.¹²

Jean retains clear memories of the instant he uttered the profession of faith in front of his Muslim roommate. Informed by his Catholic background and his distinction between heaven and hell, he remembers his *shahada* as the moment he stopped being a hypocrite destined for hell and started being a sincere believer. For Jean, the date of December 27th 2013, 1.15am marks a milestone, a rupture between a before and an after. Like Jean, most converts know the exact date of their conversion and some even celebrate every year their “Shahadaversary” or “Muslimversary.” Many have strong memories of their ceremony

¹¹ « J’ai dit chez moi, que c’était juste entre Dieu et moi ! »

¹² « J’ai commencé à lire le Coran. Et je suis arrivé à un passage dans le Coran où ça parlait des hypocrites. La chose qui me faisait le plus mal en fait dans mon cœur. J’ai dit ‘ah ouais... en fait moi je suis un hypocrite’. Et donc le verset parle des hypocrites et de leur châtement, des gens qui vont prendre leur compte ! Et je dis ‘mais c’est moi en fait là ! si je meurs maintenant, je suis bon pour le mauvais côté !’ Et donc je lis tout le verset. (...) Je ferme le Coran, je rentre chez moi (...) et je dis à mon ami ‘il faut que tu me donnes ma *shahada*, je peux plus faire autrement’ ».

of conversion and several women, for instance, keep in their closet the *hijab* or the *abaya** they were wearing that day.

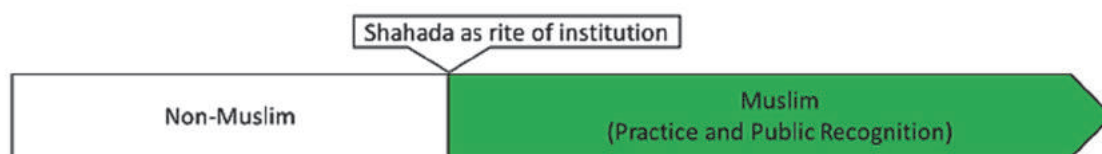


Figure 4 – The *shahada* as rite of institution

For some, the date of the conversion ceremony operates as a landmark that granted them a fresh start in life. Denyse (58, IT services employee, Chicago), who struggled with smoking addiction, severe weight issues, loneliness and depression before embracing Islam talked at length about the all transforming power of her ceremony of conversion. After reciting the testimony of faith in front of two Muslim witnesses in a small room at the mosque, she said: “I felt this weight just lift off of me. (...) Like it was being pulled from the inside out and I felt all of my bad sins and stuff being pulled out of me and making me anew. And for the longest time afterwards, people kept saying ‘you are glowing! Can you turn it down? You are glowing!’ [laughs].” Denyse was not the same person before and after pronouncing the *shahada*. She marveled at the power of the profession of faith and highlighted its symbolic meaning, its “social magic.” After coming back from the mosque, she quit smoking, opened up all the windows of her apartment and repainted it entirely. She put on a *hijab* and started losing weight drastically. Her colleagues, who had become accustomed to her bitterness, could not believe their eyes when they saw her smiling under her brand-new headscarf. For Denyse, the *shahada* fully performed its role as a rite of institution: it projected her into a new life and a new persona.

The might of the ritual is such that many of my interviewees reported being really scared and stressed-out beforehand. Elizabeth (30, nurse, Chicago) explained that she researched Islam for six years prior to reciting her *shahada*. Throughout that period, she used to pray several times a day in Arabic and recite various *surah* of the Qur’an. Yet, she never allowed herself to utter the words of the profession of faith (which is to be pronounced at the end of each prayer): “Even when I was saying prayers before, I would never say the *shahada* because I thought that was something special.” Elizabeth felt that the power of the *shahada* would automatically make her Muslim, something she was not entirely sure about yet. Like Denyse, she invested the words with an almost magical meaning. Once the words were pronounced, there would be no going back. She perceived the conversion ritual as a meaningful act that would “label” her as a Muslim and force her to take public responsibility for her religious beliefs. She preferred to postpone it until the time was ripe.

By contrast, some presented the *shahada* as a crucial step that should absolutely not be delayed. It was even seen as particularly urgent: if the would-be convert was to die before reciting her *shahada*, she would not be considered Muslim. Souleymane (45, Islamic teacher and dancer, Detroit) had initially planned to take his *shahada* on his birthday to make it memorable, but a few days beforehand, he wondered: “how I am guaranteed that I am going to live until then?” He felt the urge to assert his sincere belief in Islam and recited the *shahada* at the mosque earlier than expected. In his view, only

the performance of the testimony of faith could make him truly Muslim and guarantee his salvation.

In all those instances, the *shahada* truly operates as a rite of institution that profoundly transforms the individual and sets her on a new path. Religious change and conversion are framed in a singular, discontinuous regime of time, in which the separation between past and present is understood as clear-cut. Such disjointed experience of religious time tends to be associated with other-directed styles of *shahada*, since collective religious rituals are better suited to embody temporal synchronization and periodization (Sorokin and Merton, 1937).

b) The *shahada* as anti-climactic: continuous religious time

By contrast, several respondents experienced their *shahada* as an anti-climactic, almost banal event, in a larger continuous regime of time. James (48, English professor, Detroit) who performed his ceremony of conversion at the mosque after several months of intense reading and spiritual discoveries, describes it as such: “you know the most powerful moments to me were the moments leading up to it. (...) The *shahada* was beautiful and that was meaningful but it was also anticlimactic because it was the moving of the heart beforehand, I think, that really felt like the moment when I became Muslim. The rest was formalizing it.” In comparison to James’ first mystical and spiritual moments, his *shahada* felt formal, official and insipid. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) expressed a similar feeling, when he compared the *shahada* to “quote unquote ‘registering for school.’” As for Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), she likened her ceremony of conversion to a civil wedding, emphasizing that her love relationship with Islam was already well established.

Contrary to the above, these converts relativize the significance of the *shahada* in their journey. In fact, many of them consider they were Muslim long before their conversion ceremony, since they were already practicing the religion to some extent (praying, fasting in Ramadan, eating *halal* food and avoiding illicit things such as pork, alcohol and dating). This, for instance, is how Melissa (27, project manager in an NGO, Paris) describes the process through which she became Muslim:

I didn’t take my *shahada* overnight. My faith was becoming stronger and stronger but I couldn’t content myself with simply believing. (...) I had to pray, I had to comply with the rules. (...) It was out of the question for me to be a piecemeal Muslim. So I felt the need to start practicing. I stopped smoking, I stopped eating pork. (...) And then I started eating *halal* food. (...) And little by little, I set about praying. (...) And then I told to myself “OK, next Ramadan, I will take my *shahada*.” (...) But I had already been practicing for a year before that¹³.

¹³ « J’ai pas fait ma *shahada* du jour au lendemain comme ça. (...) Ma foi elle devenait de plus en plus forte, mais je me suis dit, je peux pas me contenter de croire. Maintenant j’ai besoin de pratiquer en fait. J’ai besoin de prier, j’ai besoin de me conformer. (...) Moi il n’était pas question pour moi d’être une musulmane à la petite semaine. (...) J’avais besoin de commencer ma pratique. Donc j’ai arrêté de fumer, arrêté de manger du porc. Et puis petit à petit, je me suis mise à la prière. (...) Et je m’étais dit ‘bon, avant Ramadan, je fais ma *shahada*’ (...) Mais sachant que j’avais commencé à pratiquer en fait presqu’un an avant ».

Starting her practice before becoming nominally Muslim enabled Melissa to strengthen her faith and consolidate her belief. Immersing herself into some of the norms and rules of Islam was a way for her to achieve certainty, before formally entering the fold. This certainty was not intellectual but rather practical and embodied, which ensured its viability and authenticity. Melissa’s experiences go against the straightforward linear sequencing of conversion as belief => *shahada* => practice (I believe that Islam is the truth; I take my *shahada* and formally become Muslim; I start my life as a practicing Muslim). In her case, it is replaced by a more complex model whereby beliefs and practices fuel one another before culminating in the decision to convert. Such continuous experience of religious time is usually associated with inner-directed ceremonies of conversion (Melissa converted on her own, in her apartment).

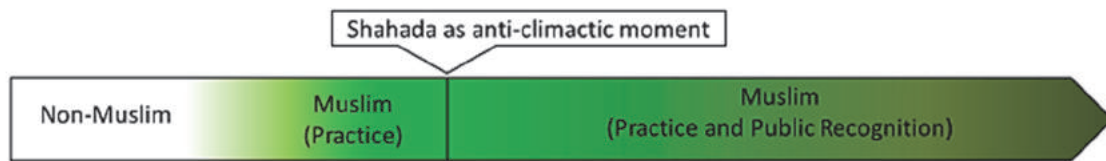


Figure 5 – The *shahada* as anti-climactic

In this model, the practice unfolds in a continuous way from the moment the individual expresses interest in Islam and starts incorporating some basic precepts into her life. Recent anthropological research on religion has demonstrated that embodied religious practices are much more than a mere reflection of beliefs. Rather, they are the means through which beliefs are cultivated. The idea that bodily practices create moral dispositions has first been put forward by Talal Asad (1993) and further developed by Saba Mahmood (2012) in her study of pietist Islamic movements in Egypt. Van Nieuwkerk (2014) also claims that “conversion is not solely a mental activity of accepting a new belief. It requires the embodiment of new social and religious practices.” Similarly, in his ethnography of Muslim converts in Missouri, Daniel Winchester (2008) convincingly shows that it is through the experimentation of various religious practices that converts nurture their religious habitus. By practicing Islam, seekers and novices discover new virtues and learn how to cultivate their new pious selves. The *shahada* simply punctuates this trajectory of transformation, without constituting a major landmark that demarcates practice from non-practice.

Like Melissa, many converts “try Islam out” before their conversion. They first experiment the religion and usually practice quite diligently before becoming officially Muslim through the act of taking *shahada*.¹⁴ Thus, when Olga (23, student, Chicago) recited the testimony of faith after several years of loose practice and regular attendance at Muslim events, John from *American Da’wah* told her: “But I thought you were Muslim for like two years!” Olga, who was proud of having finally made the leap, found his remark “very anti-climactic.” Similarly, when Sébastien (29, library worker, Paris) expressed the desire to formally recite his *shahada* after having partaken in collective prayers on numerous occasions, his friends laughed and told him: “But you have been

¹⁴ In her study of Dutch converts to Islam, Vanessa Vroon (2014: 74) also found that “the practice of Islam often predates the threshold moment of conversion.”

praying for so long and you repeated the *shahada*¹⁵ in front of so many people. It is as if it was done!¹⁶” Sébastien’s *shahada* almost felt superfluous and the sanctity of the moment was minimized.

The reluctance to consider the *shahada* as a significant milestone is probably best exemplified by the case of Brian (23, student, Chicago), who describes himself as a “naysayer,” critical of organized religion. Brian said in his interview that he “had committed himself to Islam a long time before he took the *shahada*.” He was already praying, fasting, learning the Qu’ran and staying away from alcohol. He therefore described his ceremony of conversion as “very random.” He said he contacted two of his Muslim friends and told them:

“All right, I am just going to say my *shahada*, you guys are going to witness. All right, just stay here for like 3 minutes.” And they were like “*Mash’Allah! Mash’Allah! Mash’Allah! Mash’Allah!*” I was like “would you guys cut the bullshit? Seriously. All right? Stop this shit.”

Brian emphasized that he did not want his *shahada* to be fetishized: “It is nasty when it becomes fetishized. It is bullshit actually. That has no real significance. I mean, it does, if you commit to it. But you only commit fully *in time*. So for me, the *shahada* was much more about not drinking anymore, than saying seven words.” Brian advocates an understanding of conversion as gradual, emphasizing the progressive consolidation of religious practice throughout one’s life. Subscribing to a continuous approach to religious change, he rejects the interpretation of the *shahada* as a rite of institution. Yet, he still felt the need to recite the testimony of faith in front of witnesses, which is not the case of everyone in my sample.

Indeed, some converts did not even take their *shahada*. They simply drifted progressively towards being Muslims, without any significant rite of passage or starting point. When I asked Fabien (21, student, Paris), what his conversion ceremony looked like, he could not really answer my question:

I became Muslim through my interactions with brothers and everything, I don’t really know. There would be evenings where I would go to the mosque, I didn’t even have my ablutions done, I would leave class and go pray... Whatever! Non-sense! (...) I am telling you, I feel like it really came down to me. I am incapable of telling you how it came... Even to count up all the prayers I have to make up, I don’t know! So I decided on a fictional date, hoping it is the actual date, but I have no idea, no way to keep track. (...) I never took my *shahada* in public, I don’t know if I ever really took it you know¹⁷.

¹⁵ The Islamic prayer includes the recitation of the *shahada*.

¹⁶ « Tu fais déjà la prière depuis longtemps, tu l’as répété plein de fois devant plein de gens ! c’est comme si c’était fait ! » (rires)

¹⁷ « Par le contact avec des frères, etc., après je sais pas non plus genre, il y a des soirs où je suis allé à la mosquée, je sortais de cours, j’allais à la mosquée, je te dis genre, j’avais pas mes ablutions, je sortais de cours, j’allais prier... tu vois ? N’importe quoi ! Et... je sais pas, tu vois ! La vérité (...) Je te dis vraiment j’ai l’impression que ça m’est tombé dessus. Je suis incapable de dire comment c’est venu. Tu sais pour compter par exemple les prières que je dois rattraper, je sais pas genre ! Je me suis mis une date fictive en espérant que c’est vraiment là, mais... j’ai... aucune trace. (rires) (...) J’ai jamais fait la *shahada* en public, je sais même pas si je l’ai vraiment faite en fait tu vois ».

Contrary to his friend Jean, who clearly remembered his conversion date (see above), Fabien was at a loss of words to determine the moment he became Muslim. While he considers himself a Muslim and lives his life as a Muslim, he was never formally instituted as a Muslim. As for Delphine (27, unemployed, Paris), who did a formal conversion ceremony at the mosque, she keeps forgetting the date of that day: “it is not a date that I manage to remember. Because there is not a specific moment where I can say I switched. It was more, like, fluid.¹⁸”

Finally, some converts also remembered their *shahada* as disappointing. They had entertained fantasies about the spiritual strength of the ritual and were disconcerted by the simplicity and shallowness of the ceremony. Some portrayed their *shahada* as weird and dispossessing. Such was the case of Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille), who discovered Islam during a trip to Morocco and progressively tried to incorporate Islamic teachings and practices into her life. However, she did not immediately renounce her former lifestyle (which involved rapping, doing graffiti, drinking and being surrounded by male friends) and considers that her *shahada* took place at an inappropriate moment:

One day I went to visit my Muslim neighbor and she told me “oh it is amazing, you are praying! Come with me to the mosque, we are going to give you your *shahada*!” I said “OK, I am coming.” But it was so strange because I didn’t decide on doing it. (...) I just went to say hi to my neighbor and I ended up at the mosque! So I took my *shahada* but I hadn’t realized that the night before I had drunk alcohol. I hadn’t showered beforehand, because I didn’t know you are supposed to follow that protocol before converting. So I found myself in the middle of this thing... I wasn’t firm about it... I mean I was completely convinced, I was testifying that Allah *subhanahu wa ta’ala** is unique and that Muhammad *sallallahu alayhi wa salaam** is His messenger but... I was just following the movement... and... I don’t know how to express it... May God forgive me because... it was clumsy and inappropriate. That moment which is supposed to be sacred, I did it without purifying myself. (...) I was just testifying. But in fact I am testifying every day when I am praying you know. And now retrospectively, that moment in the mosque, I don’t think that is the moment when I actually converted. The moment when I converted was before that¹⁹.

For Sophie, the ritual of the *shahada* at the mosque did not feel like a rite of passage since she was not adequately prepared for it and had not expressed the intention of doing it. She cannot equate this moment which the moment she actually became Muslim: understanding her religious journey as continuous and gradual, with slows and setbacks,

¹⁸ « C’est pas une date que j’arrive à retenir en fait... parce que t’as pas de moment où tu dis que t’as basculé en fait. C’est comme si c’était un peu fluide quoi ».

¹⁹ « Un jour je vais voir mon ancienne voisine, qui me dit ‘ah c’est génial, ça y est tu pries ! viens avec moi à la mosquée, tu vas faire ta *shahada* !’ Donc ‘OK, d’accord, j’y vais’. Mais en fait, trop bizarre, je l’ai pas choisi. (...) Et là, bah j’étais partie pour dire salut à ma voisine et finalement je me retrouve à la mosquée en fait. J’ai fait ma *shahada* et tout, mais sauf qu’en fait, ce que j’avais pas réalisé, c’est que la veille, j’avais bu. Je m’étais pas douchée mais pareil j’étais pas au courant qu’il fallait faire ce protocole là avant de se convertir. Enfin bref, et je me retrouve en fait dans un truc où j’avais pas affirmé ni de oui ni de non... Et donc du coup, enfin voilà, j’étais toujours autant convaincue, enfin voilà que j’attestais du fait que Allah *subhanahu wa ta’ala* était unique, et que Mohammed *sallallahu alayhi wa salaam*, c’était son messenger mais en fait je... j’avais suivi le truc, quoi ! Et en fait je sais pas comment dire (...), que Dieu me pardonne parce que quand j’y pense c’était très, très maladroit en fait. Ce moment-là qui est sacré quoi, je l’avais fait sans me purifier en fait. (...) En fait j’attestais. Mais comme tous les jours j’atteste en fait quand je prie, quoi. Et en fait avec du recul, je pense vraiment que ce moment-là à la mosquée c’est pas le moment où je me suis convertie. Le moment où je me suis convertie c’était déjà avant quoi ».

she could hardly relate to the discontinuous conversion ceremonial performed at the mosque.

c) *Shahada* aftermaths: nominal conversion and actual practice

Rite of passage and rite of institution models imply that individuals are radically transformed by the ritual and start behaving as per their new social status once the ceremony is over. In examining the meaning of the *shahada*, it is therefore necessary to look at its aftermath. Do converts start living their lives as Muslims upon taking the *shahada*? In other words, does the ritual bring about the conversion it signifies?

In the female beginners' class I attended at a suburban mosque near Paris, Aisha (37, housewife, Paris), a long-time convert, told her students (recent converts) that Islam was first and foremost a matter of practice and that one needed to authenticate one's religious shift through practice: “in Islam, you can't say ‘I will start praying later.’ Once you pronounced the *shahada*, you have to prove it through your actions. The concept of the ‘non-practicing believer,’ which is in vogue in this country, does not exist in Islam. It is as if you were telling your lover ‘I love you but I am not interested in seeing you.’ It is impossible.²⁰” For Aisha, the recitation of the *shahada* must therefore be substantiated with the incorporation of a solid religious practice into one's life for the religious shift to be enacted. In line with her understanding, a few of my interviewees drastically changed their behavior after the instituting rite of the *shahada* and delved into serious religious practice almost overnight. Jean (23, student, Paris) explained that after his conversion ceremony “a complete reorientation of my life occurred. I totally changed my way of life.²¹” Denyse (58, IT services employee, Chicago) also described her life after the *shahada* as such: “I jumped in with both feet and haven't looked back. (...) I really felt myself change from the inside out.” As for Fabiola (26, recruitment officer, Lille), she insisted that upon reciting the testimony of faith, alone in her room, she felt like she entered a form of “combat mood:” “it wasn't gradual at all. Right after my conversion, I started praying five times a day,²²” she added. This sudden, abrupt transformation stems from the power of the *shahada* as a rite of institution, as converts feel the need to undergo radical life changes in order to validate their religious shift.

Yet, this type of change remains exceptional. Most converts in my sample did not go through a complete refashioning of self overnight. As put by Fred (28, student, Chicago), “nothing happened at once, you know, I still was living the same life that I was living before.” Their conversion ceremony was rather the first step of a long and gradual transformational process. Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago), who grew up in a poor household, worked in the underground music scene and converted at age 17 after suffering from alcoholism and drug-addiction, explained how he struggled at first to follow Islamic rules: “when I first became a Muslim I was still dabbling and doing *haram** things, you know, first year I think or two. I would go pray at the mosque and then at night I would go smoke

²⁰ « En Islam, on ne peut pas dire ‘la prière, c'est bien, mais on verra plus tard’. A partir du moment où on a prononcé la *shahada*, on doit le prouver par nos actes. Le concept de ‘croyant non pratiquant’ qui est très en vogue dans ce pays n'existe pas en Islam. C'est comme si vous disiez à votre amant : ‘je t'aime, mais ça m'intéresse pas de te voir’. C'est impossible ! »

²¹ « Il s'est passé une réorientation complète de ma vie. J'ai totalement changé ma façon de vivre ».

²² « Pour moi c'était comme si j'entrais dans un combat en fait, donc j'étais un peu en mode guerrière ! (...) ça n'a pas du tout été graduel. Juste après ma conversion, je me suis mise à faire les cinq prières ».

weed and drink and hang out with my friends. So it wasn't like, overnight I am like perfect, you know." Sometimes it took months or years before converts reached the level of practice they deemed sufficient. Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago) confessed that during three years, "I was in this very weird conflictual place where I was going between practicing and not practicing. (...) It was really kind of on and off, you know, I don't know what I am doing." To this day, Stephan retains ambivalent thoughts about his religious practice.

Vanessa (40, hairdresser, Lille) also admitted that for several years, she had no idea she was supposed to practice: "I didn't know that practice was an integral part of Islam. I thought it was like Catholicism: the one who goes to church, it is fine; the one who does not go to church, it is fine as well, it does not matter. It took me years before knowing I had to practice.²³" Now a devout practitioner of the religion, Vanessa compared her understanding of Islam at the beginning of her conversion to that of a "cultural Catholic," someone who identifies as religious without corroborating this identity with any significant religious practice. Similarly, Sébastien (29, library worker, Paris) explained that he was ironically more regular in his practice before taking his *shahada* than after. It so happened that the Muslim LGBT group he enjoyed praying with stopped meeting right after his ceremony of conversion, leaving him alone with no incentive to practice: "six months into my conversion, I was practicing less than before I was Muslim.²⁴" Sébastien now defines himself as a very loose practitioner of the faith (a "dilettante" who drinks alcohol from time to time and prays only when he feels like it). Like Vanessa, he compares himself to some Christians he knows: "I am Muslim like many Christians who say they are Christians but don't practice any more than that.²⁵" As for Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) who also converted at age 17, he likens his practice of Islam in the first few years to that of a "born Muslim." In his conceptualization, a "born Muslim" is someone who was born into the faith and is therefore nominally Muslim but does not really practice seriously.

So let's say that from age 17 to age 22, I converted but in fact I almost acted like a born Muslim, meaning that (...) when you are a born Muslim, you don't think much. Me I was a little bit like a born Muslim, in the sense that OK, I wouldn't eat pork, I would fast in Ramadan, but yeah, that was it. I wouldn't drink alcohol, but you know this is just the basic stuff that everyone does to be able to say "yeah, I am Muslim." (...) It is only after, at age 22-23, that I really started getting into it. I started praying, going to the mosque, reading books, learning Arabic and everything. Let's say that I got into it little by little.²⁶

²³ « Je ne savais pas que la pratique faisait partie intégrante de l'islam. Je pensais que c'était comme les cathos : celui qui va à l'église, c'est bien, celui qui y va pas, c'est bien aussi, peu importe. Et donc du coup... j'ai mis plusieurs années quand même ça, à le savoir ».

²⁴ « Pendant presque six mois après ma conversion, je pratiquais moins qu'avant que je sois musulman ».

²⁵ « Je vais être musulman comme plein de chrétiens qui se disent chrétiens mais qui pratiquent pas plus que ça ».

²⁶ « On va dire, de l'âge de 17 ans jusqu'à l'âge de 22 ans, je me suis converti mais j'étais presque comme un musulman de naissance en fait. C'est-à-dire que... Quand t'es de naissance, tu réfléchis pas. Donc moi j'étais un peu comme un musulman de naissance... c'est-à-dire que j'étais là, bon, je mangeais pas de porc, je faisais le Ramadan, mais vas-y, voilà. En gros, c'est tout. Je buvais pas d'alcool, en bref tous les trucs que tout le monde fait pour dire 'ouais je suis musulman'. (...) Après, à partir de l'âge de 22-23 ans, là j'ai commencé vraiment à m'y mettre vraiment dedans, j'ai commencé à faire la prière, aller à la mosquée, lire des livres, apprendre un peu l'arabe, tout ça. Disons que je me suis mis dedans petit à petit ».

In his view, Romain started as a piecemeal, thoughtless practitioner. He incorporated Muslim practices into his life “little by little” and progressively substantiated his nominal Muslim identity with actual spiritual content and practice. What he considers his “real” entry into Islam took place five years after his *shahada*. In this case, the *shahada* appears as a ritual that simply turns the individual into a nominal Muslim but that does not necessarily delineate practice from non-practice.

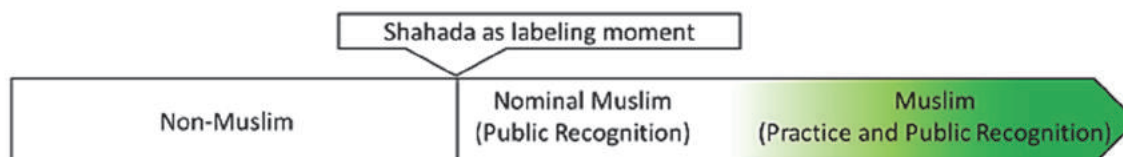


Figure 6 – The *shahada* as labeling moment

These excerpts reveal that converting to Islam is not a black-and-white, clear-cut transformation that materializes with the *shahada*. It is a long progression that stretches over time, sometimes way beyond the *shahada*.²⁷ This drawn-out process has many shades and textures. It involves trials and errors, false starts, doubts, hesitations and gradual improvements. In sum, it takes time before converts reach a comfortable “cruising speed” in their religious practice.

To summarize: the recitation of the *shahada* in front of witnesses is commonly understood as the rite of institution that marks the entry into Islam. In this section, I have investigated what that moment meant for Muslim converts themselves and what significance they ascribed to it within their larger religious journey. As I have shown, what converts stress in their accounts vary markedly. In fact, the diversity of their trajectories is such that the social scientist has a hard job coming to grips with it. I have ordered such diversity by intersecting ceremonial styles with experiences of religious time. I have demonstrated that other-directed ceremonies often match discontinuous regimes of time while inner-directed *shahadas* are congruent with continuous appraisals of temporality. For some converts, the *shahada* fully performed its role as a rite of institution, marking a clear temporal rupture between a before and an after, sanctioned by the community. For others, however, the relationship to time and change proved more multi-layered. Some of them found the ritual of the *shahada* unsatisfactory and crafted their own ceremony, in line with their inner spiritual feelings, in a typical instance of religious individualism. Others were already devout and practicing Muslims before performing the *shahada*, which, as a result, was not remembered as the moment they became Muslim. Others felt that the *shahada* only made them nominally Muslim but it took years before they reached the level of practice and sincerity they deemed sufficient to “feel Muslim.”

Conversion appears as a partial and ongoing process that both precedes and overreaches the ceremony of conversion. It does not fit into a simple narrative of

²⁷ For this reason, scholars and converts themselves tend to reject the term “conversion” to describe their trajectory. They employ a variety of words that convey the more continuous and processual nature of their spiritual transformation, such as “transition,” (Wadud, 2007: 5), “continuation” (Shanneik, 2011) or “existential reorientation” (Vroon, 2014: 71). For an analysis of conversion concepts, see Barylo (this volume).

discontinuity. It is situated both upstream and downstream and cannot be circumscribed within clear temporal boundaries. Therefore, I argue that the sole conceptualization of the *shahada* as a clear and definite rite of institution tends to obscure the complexities of the workings of faith and to overlook the lengthy process that is required to incorporate Muslim beliefs and practices into one's life. As I show next, the same complexity characterizes the act of coming out to friends and family.

B. THE CLOSET AND THE COMING OUT: ANNOUNCING CONVERSION TO FAMILY, FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES

The announcement of one's conversion to family, friends and colleagues is a key moment in the trajectory of a convert, one that tends to generate stress and anxiety. Like coming out as gay, coming out as Muslim can be apprehended as a significant rite of passage in one's life. In national contexts where Islam is heavily stigmatized, the disclosure of one's new identity as Muslim can prove particularly costly. The people I interviewed resorted to various strategies regarding the publicization of their conversion, ranging from immediate and full disclosure to a subtle management of the unspoken.²⁸ Overall, things are seldom clear-cut and, in many cases, converts find themselves in the grey area between the closet and the coming out, which at times leads to unsettling (and comical) moments.



Figure 7 – Family discussions

In the documentary *Face aux salafistes* (2016), German convert and Salafi preacher Pierre Vogel discusses religions with his Protestant grandmother at her home, in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary.

I argue that the modalities of coming out are revealing of the relationship that people and their families entertain with religion across national contexts. My working hypothesis is that the process of coming out is facilitated in contexts where religious

²⁸ In this section, I focus exclusively on *verbal* coming-outs and leave aside the issue of *visual* coming-outs (displaying one's identity through the donning of visible religious signs), which will be addressed in Chapter 5.

conversion *and* conversations over religion are frequent. In this regard, a recent report by the Pew Research Center (2016c: 11) established that “nearly half of Americans (46%) say they talk with their immediate families about religion at least once or twice a month. About a quarter (27%) say they talk about religion at least once a month with their extended families, and 33% say they discuss religion as often with people outside their families.” Another report (Pew Research Center, 2015a: 33) also noted that “if Protestantism is treated as a single religious group, then fully 34% of American adults currently have a religious identity different from the one in which they were raised. If the three major Protestant traditions (evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and historically black Protestantism) are analyzed as separate categories, then the share of Americans who have switched religions rises to 42%.” What stands out from these reports is that not only are Americans used to talking about religion, but it is also quite common for them to change religious affiliations. The Cultural Centrality of Religion in the US offers a perfect breeding ground for coming out as a convert.

By contrast, although data is lacking on the topic, religion is seldom discussed in French families. Among the issues that matter in their lives, French people tend to rank religion last. In the French survey *Trajectories and Origins* (TeO, 2010), 84% say that they never had a dispute over religion with their parents and another 3% explain that they avoided the topic, which makes contentious religious discussions a rarity in the French context. Moreover, a recent article combining data on current and former religious adherence from the International Social Survey Program and the World Values Survey (Barro et al., 2010: 25) found that the religious conversion rate for France was only around 0.02 (as opposed to 0.16 in the US). The uncommon character of both religious conversations and religious conversions, therefore, creates unpropitious conditions for coming out as a religious convert in the French context. Because of the French Unintelligibility of Religion, I expect the realm of the unspoken to be particularly prevalent among French interviewees, rendering their rite of passage blurry and uncertain.

1) Conversations on conversion

When it came to verbalizing one’s conversion, I noticed sharp differences between French and American interviewees. In the US, only 7 out of 40 interviewees (17%) confessed having trouble putting into words and explaining their religious transformation to relatives. These were mostly respondents hailing from strict religious households (Christian or Hindu) where conversion was interpreted as treason. The rest of the sample was comfortable discussing their religious choice. In France, by contrast, a large majority of interviewees (24 out of 42, that is 60%), could not properly articulate their new religious sentiments to their entourage, which indicates a greater emotional reserve over religious matters.

a) American ease

In the US, coming out as a Muslim convert is relatively easy and dictated by imperatives of transparency and honesty. Several American interviewees announced their conversion to their relatives in a very spontaneous and casual fashion. This was particularly the case for respondents who grew up in non-practicing households. Samuel (25, campaign strategist, Detroit) who grew up in a non-practicing Christian family (his mother is Catholic and his father Protestant), said that he simply texted his mother saying

“hey Mom, I am seriously considering converting to Islam.” She casually responded, still over text message: “yeah OK son, just don’t go join any cult,” indicating that she was not particularly concerned by this shift. Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), who converted with an imam over the phone, also said that as soon as he hung up the phone, he walked downstairs and told his mother “hey Mom! Guess what? I am Muslim now!,” to which she passive-aggressively responded “OK... all right...” Not being specifically religious, Jonathan’s mother did not pay much attention to what he announced. As for Lisa (23, school teacher, Chicago), who was raised in an agnostic family, she told me that she had “Facebook messaged” her mother: “by the way, I converted to Islam!” and had ended her message with what she now describes as a terrible joke: “OK, see you later, I have to go catch a Muslims for Terrorism meeting!” Lisa was mortified at the thought of what she had written. Yet, her mother never seemed to hold it against her and accepted her conversion with benevolence and humor.

Converts who grew up in devout Christian families opted for a more serious discussion over coffee or dinner, in order to explain at length the theological reasons behind their religious transformation. Sitting back straight on the living room couch, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) carefully described her spiritual quest to her mother before announcing that she had finally found her fit: Islam. She crafted a progressive and personal narrative and framed her sentences in a way that would not hurt her mother’s feelings (for instance, instead of “I have found the truth,” she said “I have found what I find to be true”). Others, like Julia (23, student, Chicago) who anticipated a heated reaction from her very Christian and conservative parents, preferred to write a lengthy letter exposing their motives in detail, in order to lay the foundations for a subsequent face-to-face conversation. Some converts prepared the ground months in advance, with the objective of showing to their parents that they had remained the same person and had even improved in their filial piety (Islam commands to be extremely respectful toward one’s parents).



Figure 8 – The announcement as rite of institution

Except for a few cases in which conversion was kept quiet for some time, American converts were strikingly at ease in announcing their religious shift. To be sure, the reactions of their relatives were at times hostile and violent (see Chapter 3), but the act of coming out itself was generally handled with calm and serenity. American interviewees knew what to say and how to say it.

b) French clumsiness

By contrast, nervousness and clumsiness characterized the coming-outs of most of my French respondents. Perhaps the most comical and remarkable story was reported to me by Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris), who one day decided to show up at work wearing a turban. Her boss repeatedly enquired about the meaning of her turban, but

Eleonore skillfully avoided the topic of her conversion, tacitly suggesting it was more about fashion than religion. Yet, at the end of the day, when she walked into his office to say goodbye, the prayer alarm she had set on her phone went off. The sound of the *adhan* inundated her boss' office: “Allaaaaaaahu Akbaaaaar!!!!” Eleonore smiled awkwardly and dashed off. “He didn't say anything and me neither. We were both embarrassed. But well, it brought the discussion to a close,²⁹” she said. Eleonore's attempt to conceal her conversion had failed miserably: her coming out was startling and weird. She and her boss did not discuss the topic further, for none of them knew exactly what to say, and for such conversation would have disrupted the underlying norm of privacy regarding religious matters in French professional settings (Le Pape, 2013).

For several French converts, the announcement of conversion was often triggered by trivial and unexpected events, which forced confession and produced rough encounters. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille), for example, was obliged to come out because of a ham and cheese crêpe at the restaurant. Unprepared, he remembered the revelation of his conversion to his father as particularly violent:

One evening, he invited me for dinner. That day, *subhan'Allah**, I was late. (...) He ordered me a crêpe with some pork inside. At that time, I didn't eat pork any more. But I didn't want to tell him. I wanted to wait. So I had my crêpe in front of me, with some pink pieces inside [laughs]. I told him: “Can you order me another crêpe?” He said: “No! Eat! It is going to get cold!” And I said: “No, I can't eat it.” He said “Why?” And I said “Because.” Then I said to myself “OK, let's give it a try.” I told him: “Because I don't eat pork anymore.” I could never have pictured to myself the reaction that it triggered. (...) He started to explode. I had never seen him like that. For real. I never saw my father in such a state of anger.³⁰

Ludovic's unpreparedness, the point-blank character of his announcement, the focus on the contentious issue of food and pork (see Chapter 3) and his inability to communicate with his father made his coming out rough and turbulent. Surprised and shocked, his father refused to talk to him for a long time.

Consider also the case of Chloé (21, student, Lille), who was fasting during the month of Ramadan while still reflecting on the best way to announce her conversion to her grandparents (who raised her). One evening, her grandmother called her to eat fries in Belgium. Time for breaking fast had not come yet, and without appearing to, Chloé suggested a later meeting, around 9.45pm. Her grandmother, not suspecting a thing, jokingly responded “Haha! You are celebrating Ramadan!?” Chloé paused and hesitantly replied “Grandma, I shouldn't lie to you... yes, I am fasting.” A long gap in the phone

²⁹ « C'était juste excellent parce que... tout ce que j'avais royalement esquivé... Je vais dire au revoir à mon chef, j'étais en train de me préparer pour partir et là on entend « Allaaaaaaahu Akbar !!!! » (rires) Il a rien dit sur le coup... bah... on était... bah j'étais gênée et puis je pense que lui aussi... Enfin je sais pas, bon voilà en même temps, ça venait clôturer l'affaire quoi ! (rires) »

³⁰ « Il m'avait invité à manger et *Subhan'Allah* ce jour-là, j'étais arrivé en retard. Et il m'avait commandé une crêpe avec du porc à l'intérieur. Alors il se trouve que je mangeais plus de porc, hein, donc... Et j'arrive et je voulais pas lui dire, je voulais pas... je voulais attendre, je voulais attendre. Et j'avais ma crêpe devant avec ces petits morceaux roses à l'intérieur (rires). J'ai dit 'bon écoute ! est-ce que tu peux m'en commander une autre ?' Il dit 'mais non, ça y est, elle est là ! mange-là ça va être froid et tout !' Je lui fais 'mais non, mais je veux pas la manger'. 'Mais pourquoi ?' Je dis 'parce que'. Et puis j'ai dit 'bon on va se lancer'. Je lui dis 'ouais, parce que je mange plus de porc'. Et dans mon esprit, jamais j'aurais pensé que ça allait déclencher ça. (...) Il s'est mis à exploser. Ah je l'avais jamais vu comme ça ! C'est véridique, hein. Je crois que je l'ai jamais vu s'énerver autant ».

conversation ensued. Chloé recalls: “I remember, the conversation stopped... she was struck.” Before hanging up, her grandmother said in a toneless voice: “we will discuss that again.³¹” A painful and dramatic encounter at their house followed. Chloé and her grandparents found themselves propelled into a contentious religious conversation, whose codes and rhetoric they did not master and understand: “in my family, religion is taboo. We don’t talk about it. It is not something that is talked about,³²” she added. Her grandparents shook their heads in disbelief, as Chloé struggled to justify herself. The illegibility and un-talkability of religious sentiment considerably hindered the communication between them.

Fabien (21, student, Paris) reported a similar story. One day, he came home from school with his headphones on, listening to *surahs* from the Qur’an on his MP3 player. His mother overheard the psalmody of the Arabic language and jokingly asked him: “are you going to convert?”, to which Fabien immediately replied “well, yeah!” His mother jumped with surprise and, furious, took him to the living room. A serious, lengthy discussion ensued: “my father and my brother were there. Even my cat was there!³³” Fabien emphasized that this was absolutely exceptional: “you know, in my family, we are not used to having big discussions like this. So when I told them... Aaaaah! What a night! We spent four hours talking in the living room. I was sitting on the floor with them and we were talking.³⁴” In both cases, a clumsy and inappropriate coming out prompted unusual, intense and labored discussions on religion. The conversation was clipped and the atmosphere heavy, as none of the participants really knew how to dance around the topic. In fact, in some instances, talking about religious matters was so hard that my interviewees simply never came out. I noticed that the realm of silence and secrecy was particularly developed in France.

2) Not telling: silence, denial and secrecy

French converts were less open about their conversion than American ones and a significant portion of my interviewees decided not to inform their relatives about it. When I asked Jean (23, student, Paris), who had been Muslim for a couple of years, to describe the way he told his parents about it, he ironically answered: “oh yeah! Sure! I am glad you asked because... I actually did not tell my parents.³⁵” Throughout my fieldwork, I heard a number of jokes and comments about the fact that many converts “remained in the closet.” For instance, in a Facebook thread on coming out to family members, a

³¹ « Elle m’a dit sur le ton de la rigolade ‘ah ! tu fais Ramadan !’ J’ai dit ‘mamie, faut pas mentir, il faut que je te dise... oui, je jeûne’. Et je me souviens la conversation, elle s’est... elle est restée bloquée. Et elle m’a dit ‘euh... bah.. je te laisse, on en reparlera à la maison’ ».

³² « Dans ma famille c’est un peu tabou. On en parle pas. C’est pas quelque chose qui se parle ».

³³ « Grosse discussion de famille, il y avait mon père, mon frère, il y avait même mon chat tu vois ! »

³⁴ « Tu vois dans ma famille tu sais on n’a pas l’habitude d’avoir des grosses discussions. Et du coup quand je leur ai annoncé, aaaah, ça a été une soirée ! Tu sais, je suis resté genre 4 heures dans le salon à parler avec eux, tu sais genre j’étais assis par terre avec eux ».

³⁵ « Aaaaaaah oui ! ah c’est hyper intéressant. (rires) ça tombe bien parce que je l’ai pas annoncé à mes parents moi en fait ».

participant wrote: “my life is kind of the first rule of *Fight Club*,³⁶” implying that she never talked to anyone about her conversion. During a radio show on conversion in which I participated³⁷ and as we approached the topic of religious practice in the workplace, the presenter also jokingly asked: “being a convert at work, isn’t it the biggest *hide-and-seek* game of France?³⁸” The issue of silence and concealment was therefore prominent in my research.

Georg Simmel (1906: 462-464) once called secrecy a “sociological technique,” a “universal sociological form” and “one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity.” According to him, irrespective of its moral or immoral dimension, secrecy “procures enormous extension of life. [It] secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world.” Secrecy entails agency as individuals deliberately conceal or unveil bits of information in their presentation of selves (Goffman, 1956). In my research, I find that secrecy is a useful category of action for Muslim converts evolving in contexts such as France where religion is relegated to the intimate realm and where coming out entails heavy social costs.

Sometimes, not telling was a deliberate choice. Several French converts embraced the French public norm of religious neutrality and voluntarily decided to keep their conversion secret. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille), for instance, never mentions her religion to her colleagues, who learned she was Muslim only recently, after several years of knowing her. One of them was really surprised: “Wait! I have been knowing you for two years and you never told me!”, to which she replied “But you never asked me! I don’t know what you believe either!³⁹” Caroline added that she finds it “very good that there isn’t any discussion on religion at work. I wouldn’t want it to be different. (...) It is one of France’s riches to let religious opinions aside.⁴⁰” Caroline happily subscribes to the French interpretation of secularism and I could detect in her speech a veiled criticism of the American model, which she conceived as too religion-oriented. Very critical of identity politics, Gwenaëlle (35, documentary filmmaker, Paris) too refused to systematically reveal her religious belonging:

It does not make any sense for me to say “Hello, my name is Gwenaëlle, *ana Muslim*.⁴¹” The whole identity stuff really pisses me off. There is also this reflection by Foucault on homosexuality: it is as if we had to confess our identity. But I don’t have to confess anything

³⁶ *Fight Club* is an American movie by David Fincher released in 1999 about clandestine fight clubs. The rules of the clubs are: “First rule: you do not talk about Fight club. Second rule: you DO NOT talk about Fight club.”

³⁷ Radio Pastel FM Roubaix, October 30th 2015.

³⁸ « Etre converti au travail, est-ce que c’est le plus grand cache-cache de France ? »

³⁹ « Il m’a dit : ‘Mais attends ! ça fait deux ans que je te côtoie, tu me l’as jamais dit !’ Je lui dis ‘mais on a jamais parlé de ça, tu m’as jamais demandé, moi je sais pas en quoi tu crois, enfin !’ »

⁴⁰ « C’est très bien qu’il y ait pas de conversation sur la religion au boulot. J’aurais pas envie que ce soit différent. (...) Je pense que c’est aussi une richesse de la France, de laisser nos opinions religieuses de côté ».

⁴¹ “I am Muslim” in Arabic.

to you. You don't need my identity, my CV, my pedigree. Anyways, you wouldn't be able to understand it! And if I can't tell you everything, then I prefer not to tell you anything.⁴²

Expanding the metaphor of homosexuality, Gwenaëlle contests the constraining character of publicly confessing one's identity which is often implied in the act of coming out. In doing so, she reclaims agency over her religiosity, by deliberately choosing to tell or not to tell her conversion. These interviewees put the emphasis on the personal and private character of their religiosity, which in their view, should not be a matter of public display. They never openly disclose their religious identity, unless prompted to. The most commonly heard motto among them was: "unless it comes up in conversations, I don't usually bring it up." Such discretion is of course facilitated by the fact that these interviewees do not wear any recognizable Islamic sign (on this, see Chapter 5).

Yet, sometimes not telling was also the result of constraint and inability. Many converts were actually intending to inform their family at the time of the interview but still struggling to do so. In national contexts where violent attacks committed in the name of Islam and public polemics about Muslims are more and more frequent, calmly revealing one's conversion nears the impossible. Florent (30, restaurant employee, Lille) who never managed to tell his parents about his conversion, contemplated the increasing precariousness of his situation:

Since I converted, the media situation has kept deteriorating. I always looked for the right moment to tell them, but that moment just never came. Once, we were looking at the news and I said to myself 'this is the right time. I am going to take the plunge.' It was a period where there wasn't a lot of attacks and there wasn't too much talking about the Middle East. But at the very moment I was about to tell them, they talked about a young convert in Tunisia who had blown himself up in a bar a few years ago and his trial was about to start dadadadadada. I was like "well, this is not the right time for me to open my mouth." [laughs] And eventually I never said anything.⁴³

The right time for Florent to inform his parents never came, and he does not envision it to come in the near future. In setting the terms of the debate on Islam in ways that do not align with his personal experience, the public sphere invades the privacy of Florent's family and dispossesses him from the ability to reveal his conversion. When words are traps, silence is the best refuge.

⁴² « Ça a pas de sens pour moi de dire 'bonjour, je m'appelle Gwenaëlle, *ana Muslim*'. (...) ça me saoule aussi le tout identitaire. (...) C'est une réflexion que je trouve intéressante de Foucault, sur l'homosexualité. Comme si on avait à avouer. (...) Mais j'ai pas à t'avouer les choses en fait. J'ai ma vie, je te dois pas mon pedigree, mon CV, mon identité, de toute façon t'arriverais pas à la saisir en deux minutes ! ... En fait le truc c'est si je peux pas tout dire, je préfère rien dire aussi à des moments ! tu vois ? »

⁴³ « Depuis que je me suis converti, la situation... enfin je veux dire, la situation médiatique elle n'a pas cessé de se dégrader. (...) Au début quand j'étais converti, je cherchais le bon moment qui me permettait de bien leur parler. Et en fait ce moment il est jamais réellement venu. (...) Alors il y avait une fois malheureusement où j'étais avec eux et on regardait les informations et je me suis dit 'c'est le bon moment pour leur parler, je vais me lancer'. Et c'est vrai que c'est un moment où il y avait pas trop d'attentats, où on parlait pas trop de ce qui se passait au Moyen-Orient. Le problème c'est que, au moment où j'ai voulu leur parler, mais au moment-même, je sais pas ce qui s'est passé, aux informations, ils ont parlé d'un jeune converti en Tunisie qui s'était fait exploser dans un bar je sais plus quoi, il y a quelques années et son procès il s'ouvrait aujourd'hui nanananana. (...) Je me suis dit 'bon c'est pas le moment que j'ouvre ma bouche'. (rires) Et finalement j'ai rien dit ».

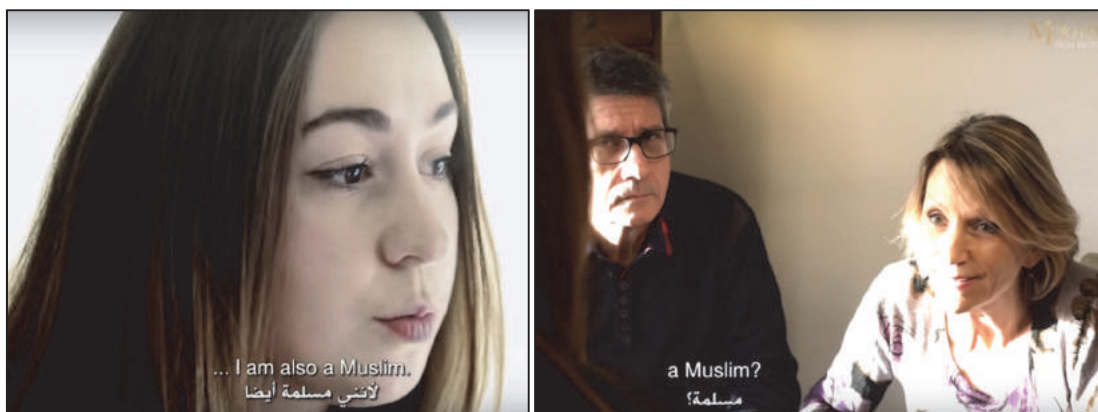


Figure 9 – Media storms and coming out

In the short documentary *Chahada* (2015) by Hisham Ismaili, Camille announces to her French parents that she has converted to Islam the very day of the attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Casher (January 2015). The circumstances render her coming out particularly difficult.

Overall, converts assess the cost of coming out against their own perceptions of the acceptability of Islam in the public or private sphere. Some converts decided not to come out in order to spare themselves and their families a painful situation. In that case, secrecy “afforded protection” (Simmel, 1906: 472) since full disclosure entailed considerable risks. In the US, Julia (23, student, Chicago) particularly feared for the reaction of her mother, a conservative and devout Christian mother: “I know that it would just totally tear her apart. And so that is one of the biggest reasons why I haven’t told them. Because I really don’t know if my Mom can handle that.” Françoise (74, retired English teacher, Paris), who hails from a conservative Catholic family in southern France, also explained: “I deliberately chose to stay quiet with my parents. Because if I had told them, I would never have seen them again. And what does it mean to be a ‘good Muslim?’ No longer seeing your parents? I don’t have a kamikaze mentality. Nor do I have a martyr mentality. Maybe I was wrong, maybe I was right, I don’t know. But my parents... I just did not want to finish them off!⁴⁴” Françoise’s parents died without ever knowing that their daughter had embraced Islam. Like her, many converts decided to circumvent discussions on religion for fear of antagonizing their parents. In France, the Unintelligibility of Religion can further work to discourage the publicization of conversion. As evidenced by Loic Le Pape (2015: 104) in his study on religious conversions in France, converts have to navigate the conundrum of secret, doubt and shame in their attempts to tell their conversion. Several of them also wanted to achieve certainty, confidence and knowledgeability in their faith before coming out as Muslims. They strove to protect their inner spiritual journey from the damage of public gossip and polemic. A “transition stadium between being and not-being” (Simmel, 1906: 472), between revelation and restraint, secrecy therefore acts as a buffer, cushioning converts from family crisis.

A common strategy among French respondents was what I call “the spousal pretext.” A number of interviewees who were in a relationship with a Muslim person let their parents believe that they were practicing Islam to support their spouse, rather than

⁴⁴ « Moi j’ai choisi délibérément, hein, alors là, délibérément,... Je me suis tue. Parce que si je l’avais dit, je voyais plus mes parents. Alors c’est quoi être une ‘bonne musulmane’ ? C’est plus voir ses parents ? (...) J’ai pas une mentalité de kamikaze moi ! Ni de martyre, hein ! Ah ben non sûrement pas. Peut-être que j’ai eu tort, peut-être que j’ai eu raison, ça je sais pas (...) Avec mes parents... moi je voulais pas les achever, quoi ! »

out of sheer conviction. As put by Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille), who is married to a Moroccan Muslim woman: “my parents don’t know I converted. So I took the pretext of my wife to ask them not to put alcohol on the table when we come over.⁴⁵” Using their partners as alibis, these converts emphasized spousal duty to avoid discussing their true religious choice with family members, a conversation they feared would be explosive. In a similar fashion, Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) explained how she was able to “remain incognito for three years” because she was dating a Muslim man of Algerian descent. Out of respect for him, her mother did not cook pork when they both visited her. She also inundated him with Islamophobic comments and questions about Islam, which Blandine was happy not to have to answer herself. In front of their relatives, these converts preferred to appear as empathic and even naïve spouses, rather than sincere believers. This sharply contrasts with the repertoire of religious individualism presented in Chapter 1, where interviewees were offended by the assumption that they had converted for their spouse. In family matters, pragmatism had to prevail. This indicates the contradictions of the rhetoric of religious individualism in the French case, where the boundaries of religious privacy and the unintelligibility of religious matters prevent individuals from fully asserting their religious will.

3) The realm of the unsaid: riding the elephant in the room

Willingly or reluctantly, all the converts mentioned above stayed in the closet. One could say that, as a result, their situation proved more comfortable. But this is not so sure, since the realm of the unsaid also comes with its share of awkward and embarrassing moments. The social implications of silence and denial studied by Eviatar Zerubavel in *The Elephant in the Room* (2006) are clearly noticeable in the case of conversions to Islam. Many interviewees explained how they frequently “danced” around the topic of conversion with their family members, without ever rooting the evil out. The words “taboo” and “unsaid” (*non-dits*) came back repeatedly in the interviews, especially in France. Relatives usually suspected something (becoming Muslim entails a number of noticeable changes in one’s behavior) but did not dare talking about it directly. They were complicit in the non-verbalization of conversion. This is congruent with Simmel’s (1906: 462) observation that secrecy often requires a collective effort: “the secret of the one party is to a certain extent recognized by the other, and the intentionally or unintentionally concealed is intentionally or unintentionally respected.” In the following lines, I analyze how converts and their families deal with the (often open) secret of conversion and ride the elephant in the room.

Consider the case of Ophélie (26, legal assistant, Lille), who became secretly interested in Islam at age 16. Soon afterwards, her parents discovered a diary in her room in which she had expressed the wish to become Muslim. A serious crisis ensued: Ophélie’s mother burst into tears; her father shouted, threw all her clothes on the floor, and accused her of having committed a horrible act of betrayal. Feeling guilty and terrified, Ophélie decided to respect her parents’ opinion and left Islam aside... until ten years later where she felt the need to reconnect to the religion and decided to take her *shahada* at a local mosque. Ophélie still lives with her parents but has not been able to

⁴⁵ « Mes parents, ils savent pas que je suis converti. Donc moi j’ai pris le prétexte de ma femme pour leur dire « bah voilà... ma femme étant là, bon, on veut plus d’alcool à table ».

tell them that she converted for real this time. In fact, after the painful diary incident, they never discussed the issue again. Ophélie dresses modestly now and wears long tunics (much to the despair of her mother); she refuses to eat pork; and tries to fast during the month of Ramadan. Yet, when asked, she denies having converted to Islam. She explained to me that she preferred “suggesting her conversion,⁴⁶” rather than directly verbalizing it. This was very clear in the following incident: Ophélie and her parents were sitting at the dinner table and quietly watching the news, when the presenter announced the beginning of the month of Ramadan. A deafening silence took hold of the dining room. Ophélie lowered her head and stared at her plate, until her mother said in an icy tone: “I’d better not see you fasting this time...” Ophélie responded that she was 26 years-old and had every right of fasting if she saw it fit. Her mother started shouting and her father violently stepped in the conversation: “you converted again, didn’t you?” Careful not to aggravate an already tense situation, Ophélie replied: “No, not at all! Why are you saying that?” Ophélie explained to me that, had she blatantly told the truth, a plate would have flown across the room. Instead, she and her parents resumed their dinner and entered a process of “denying the denial” (Zerubavel, 2006: 52).

To be sure, all family contexts were not as dramatic. Yet, silence and denial were common in many French families. Consider the case of Aisha (37, housewife, Paris), who converted to Islam many years ago and now teaches Arabic and Islamic sciences to female converts at the mosque. In spite of Aisha’s excellent reputation in the field of Islamic teaching, she and her father never explicitly talk about her conversion:

I think my father likes forgetting that I am Muslim! [laughs] I don’t think I ever talked to him about it. But he always casts barbs on me. Each time we talk, he lets me know in an indirect way that what I am doing is stupid. No matter what we are talking about, the conversation always ends up revolving around that, in a very delicate and brushed way. But I absolutely do not pick up on it. Never. Because we could really quarrel. Like, really. So each time he gets into something that is going to hurt me, I skilfully manage to talk about something completely different. There is this tacit rule between us. The other day he was suggesting I was not doing anything with my life, so I told him I was teaching languages. He didn’t ask me anything. But it registered with him. The next time, he asked me “which language?” I told him “Arabic.” He stopped talking. He had to digest the whole thing. The next time, he asked me “where?” I said “in a language institute.” Now, my father is not stupid. By cross-checking, he knows that the language institute is a mosque. But the religious part of it, no, I can’t talk to him about it.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ « Moi ma technique, c’est de leur faire susciter l’idée ».

⁴⁷ « Mon papa, je crois que ça lui plaît d’oublier que je suis musulmane, tu vois ! (rires) Je pense lui en avoir jamais parlé... En fait sans cesse, sans cesse, il m’envoie des signaux tu vois. A chaque fois qu’on se parle, de manière indirecte il me fait comprendre que c’est débile ce que je fais, tu vois ! (rires) (...) Peu importe de quoi on discute, ça revient tout le temps un peu autour de ça, mais tu vois c’est très délicat, tu vois, c’est effleuré. Moi je rebondis absolument pas là-dessus. Sinon, on pourrait vraiment se fâcher, hein. Vraiment. (...) Donc dès que je vois qu’il va rentrer dans un truc qui va me blesser, bah j’en sors habilement pour parler complètement d’autre chose. C’est un espèce d’accord tacite entre nous, tu vois. (...) C’est vrai que quand à plusieurs reprises, il me disait ‘tu fais rien de ta vie machin’, bah en fait un jour j’ai dit que j’enseignais... les langues ! Il m’a pas posé de questions. Mais ça a dû faire son chemin. La fois d’après il m’a dit ‘mais quelle langue ?’. Donc j’ai dit ‘l’arabe !’. Il a arrêté de parler, tu vois il a fallu qu’il digère le truc, et la fois d’après, il m’a dit ‘mais où ?’, donc j’ai dit ‘bah dans un institut de langues !’ Après donc le temps que ça mûrisse dans sa tête, il est pas bête mon père, par recoupement il sait bien tu vois que c’était à la mosquée. Par contre, le côté un peu plus religieux, non, je peux pas l’aborder avec lui ».

Aisha's conversion is an open secret, undiscussable, unmentionable, that is "known but cannot be spoken" and that constitutes "an uncomfortable truth hidden in plain sight" (Zerubavel, 2010). Sullen and un-talkative, Aisha and her father stand at the edge of the abyss, carefully circling around an issue that could permanently alter their relationship if directly tackled. They embody a modality of "silence without secrecy" that is quite widespread among my French interviewees.

The immense reserve that surrounds religious topics combined with the multiplication of polemics about Islam in mainstream media makes it almost impossible for any of them to explicitly tell their families: "I am Muslim." Delphine (27, unemployed, Paris), who has been Muslim for four years, told me she was exhausted of playing hide and seek with her family. A shy person with a tendency to evade conflict, she was never able to thump the table and forcefully assert her life choices in front of her parents, a personality trait that renders her coming out as a Muslim convert particularly difficult. She finds herself trapped in a vicious circle: each year that goes by makes her secret heavier and its disclosure more complicated ("the deeper the silence, the thicker the tensions that builds around it," notes Zerubavel (2006: 84)). "If I tell them, do I tell them that it has been four years already?," she wonders. Delphine constantly covers her hair with a beanie or a turban, has ostensibly stopped eating pork and drinking alcohol, and is in a relationship with Gaëtan (29, student, Paris), whose conversion her parents know of. Because of this combination of clues, she expects her parents to acknowledge her conversion on their own. At times, she feels like they have reached a common tacit understanding, but unfortunately it does not last long: "sometimes, I feel like we have moved forward and that my mother understood everything. But then she offers me some ham and she is like 'don't you want to eat it?' [laughs] And I am like... 'huh...' It is one of my weaknesses. I am unable to tell her 'OK, stop, I think you know now!'⁴⁸" Intimidated and petrified, Delphine would certainly be interested in Zerubavel's realization that the words "silence" and "paralysis" derive from the same root in the Hebrew language (2006: x). In the meantime, she and her mother keep going back and forth between the closet and the coming out, dancing a tense and wearisome dance, while the Islamic elephant in their room keeps getting bigger and bigger. Silence progressively contaminates all their interactions, as the number of topics they can discuss without referring to Islam and entering the danger zone shrinks. Dialogue often has to be suspended. Mundane activities such as watching TV, sharing a meal or going shopping for clothes have to be carefully managed and become a source of anxiety. Overall, Delphine has not yet completed her rite of passage as a Muslim with her mother.

Silence and denial also lead to awkward and unsettling situations. Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) described to me a surreal visit from her sister to her apartment, during which they were completely unable to communicate about her conversion. Despite the fact that Islamic prayer rugs and Qur'anic books were visible everywhere in Blandine's apartment, her sister did not say anything. At some point, she asked Blandine to buy her some ham at the supermarket. Blandine came home with turkey ham instead, hoping that it would trigger a conversation. Her sister remarked: "oh, you made a mistake, you bought turkey instead of ham," to which Blandine proudly replied "yeah, that's

⁴⁸ « Une fois t'as l'impression que t'as vachement avancé, que ta mère elle a tout compris, le lendemain elle te propose du jambon 'bah t'en manges pas ???' (rires) Genre... 'euh... en fait...' (...) C'est une de mes faiblesses, où j'arrive pas à dire 'bon c'est bon là, je pense que t'as compris !' »

because I don’t eat pork anymore.” Blandine’s sister gave her a blank stare and innocently responded “you are right; it is less expensive.” Blandine was staggered by the way her sister seemed to deliberately cultivate her ignorance. Blandine’s sister “feigned inattention” and “pretended to tactfully not see” what was going on. She redirected the subject of ham on issues of market prices to avoid the complicated issue of religious dietary restrictions. But was it “tact or taboo?” (Zerubavel, 2006: 31). In any case, the conversation was over and the topic was never brought up again. As for Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris), she recalled that one day her mother saw her wearing the *hijab* but did not say anything. She acted as if nothing had happened. “I was super shocked,” said Isabelle, “but I can’t talk about these things with my mother. We were never used to communicate in my family, so it is not something that can happen overnight.⁴⁹” The issue of religion remains taboo in all these French families: like the proverbial ostrich, everyone deliberately buries their heads in the sand to avoid tackling a topic that could endanger the harmony of the household. The absence of interaction on a heated topic underlines the “role of silence in preventing conflict” and its efficiency as a “social lubricant” to minimize friction (Zerubavel, 2006: 76). This sharply contrasts with the American case where honesty and transparency have to prevail in religious matters.

For those who live with their parents without having confessed their religious shift, practicing the religion is akin to an obstacle course. Thus, whenever Ophélie (26, legal assistant, Lille) isolates herself in her room to pray, her mother keeps knocking at her door until she opens it. Facing the same problem, Chloé (21, student, Lille) had to make a deal with her sister, who is now in charge of diverting their grandparents away from Chloé’s room while she is praying. When her sister is not around, Chloé goes to the bathroom (the only room that has a lock on it) to pray quietly. In a similar fashion, Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) explained how he started praying the dawn prayer while still living with his mother. Having to do his ablutions early in the morning every day, he was really embarrassed when his mother enquired about his bathroom activities: “but what are you doing every morning?” He defensively responded: “I take showers. I am hot, I take showers. It is my right, isn’t it? [laughs]”⁵⁰ Ludovic cumulated layers of lies to avoid facing a conversation with her mother, which rendered his coming out more and more difficult as time went by. As for Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris), she recalled with humor a ridiculous situation she had to face during the month of Ramadan: “I came home and my mother told me: ‘here! I left for you a piece of cake that your sister baked!’ I said ‘oh thanks!’ And I held the piece of cake in my hand during four hours [until time for breaking the fast came]. My hand was all moist. I was waiting and waiting and waiting. It was very funny.⁵¹” Other converts reported how they strove to avoid gaffes and blunders, such as inadvertently saying “*as-salaam ‘alaykum!*” or “*insh’Allah*” in the presence of relatives. In the age of social networks, this also involves closely monitoring one’s Facebook page to ensure one’s pictures at Muslim events or wearing a *hijab* are not

⁴⁹ « J’étais super choquée, je m’en rappelle. (...) Mais moi c’était impossible, j’arrive pas à parler de certaines choses avec ma mère. Comme on a jamais été habitué à communiquer dans ma famille, bah forcément ça peut pas se faire du jour au lendemain ».

⁵⁰ « Ma mère me dit ‘mais qu’est-ce que tu fais le matin ?’ Je dis ‘bah je me douche, j’ai chaud, je me douche, j’ai le droit !’ (rires) Tous les mensonges possibles et imaginables ! »

⁵¹ « Je rentre chez moi et ma mère me dit ‘tiens ! je t’ai laissé une part du gâteau que ta petite sœur a fait !’ et là je fais ‘ah merci !’ Et je l’ai tenu dans ma main pendant 4 heures ! (...) Ma main était toute moite, j’attendais, j’attendais, j’attendais. (...) C’était très drôle ! (rires) ».

seen by family members. Secrecy imposes on converts to strictly compartmentalize their lives, behaving as Muslims among coreligionists and as non-Muslims with relatives. Such splitting of personality will be further addressed in Chapter 3.

Finally, another modality of denial, which I call “knowledge without acknowledgment” can be found among families where parents do not take seriously the coming out of their children and keep on with their lives as if nothing has changed. Ignorance is a complicated game to play that requires divorcing knowing from acknowledging. A large number of converts in my sample reported that their parents at first did not realize their conversion was real: they dismissed it as a “joke” (Emiliano, Paris), a “stage” (Abdullah, Chicago), a “phase” (Monica, Chicago), a “teenage angst” (Ludovic, Marseille), a “whim” (Sophie, Marseille) or even a “trip” (Pauline, Paris). They thought that it was “going to pass” (Aisha, Paris), that they would soon “get over it” (Victoria, St. Louis) and “grow out of it” (Alisha, Chicago). In all these cases, the family did not duly record the religious transformation of the convert and did not give credibility to the announcement of conversion. The act of coming out went in one ear and outed the other; and the rite of passage was left uncompleted. As a result, converts entered a grey area, in which their change of status was not fully recognized by others. Full family acknowledgment often occurred years later, as converts displayed consistency in their practice, started wearing the *hijab* (see Chapter 5) or got married to a Muslim spouse. Marriage, in fact, was often the moment parents realized conversion was for real (another key rite of passage, the issue of marriage will be dealt with in Chapter 6). In the meantime, converts remained stuck in the limbo phase between the states of Muslimness and non-Muslimness.

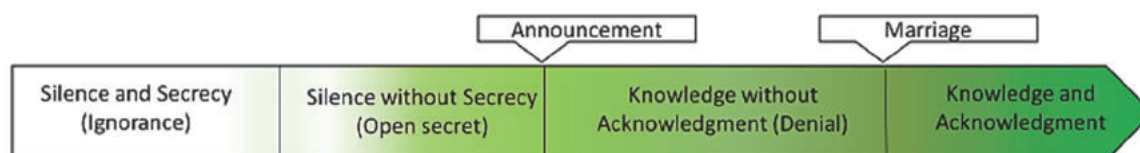


Figure 10 – Blurry states from secrecy to acknowledgment

These anecdotes which range from funny to tragic show that conversions to Islam are often shrouded in silence and denial, especially in the French context.⁵² As opposed to the act of coming out, which can lead to explosive situations, the act of not telling both smoothens interactions and builds tension around them. It creates uneasiness and dilemmas, as converts are torn between the longing to tell and the need to stay quiet, or inversely between the desire to keep silent and the necessity to confess. An open secret, conversion creates uncertain dynamics that reconfigure family interactions, since nobody knows exactly the extent of the other’s knowledge and acceptance. As a result, in many households, conversion to Islam is relegated to the closet and never directly addressed. For instance, both Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) and Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris) were forbidden by their parents to tell their younger siblings about their new religion. Like other family secrets, such as incest, adultery, adoption and homosexuality,

⁵² This is also, to some extent, true in the American context. Interviewees such as Rameya, Cjala and Olga also experienced a similar wall of silence in their relationships with their parents, but never to the extent of French interviewees.

conversion to Islam is kept quiet in certain households because it is seen as a moral transgression.

Ironically, the wall of silence surrounding the topic of conversion in converts' families sharply contrasts with the outpouring and hypertrophy of the public discourse on Islam and Muslims. I hypothesize that silence and concealment in the private sphere are a direct consequence of the proximity of the public sphere and the omniscience of the public gaze. In a context where Muslim beliefs and practices are constantly scrutinized and stigmatized, Muslim converts and their relatives preserve their relationships through silence and denial.

C. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined two practical instances of social ratification of conversion (or “coming out”): the *shahada* and the announcement to friends and family. Involving a change in social status, both can be apprehended as rites of passage or rites of institution. However, there are different patterns of progression to becoming Muslim, ranging from the most clear-cut and discontinuous (decision to convert; recitation of *shahada*; coming out to family; diligent practice) to the most fuzzy and gradual. I found that more often than not, converts occupy a grey area, half-way between the non-Muslim and Muslim status, oscillating between the closet and the coming out. I have identified a multiplicity of situations in which converts' rite of passage feels uncomplete: when they have been practicing Islam for a long time and the ritual of the *shahada* become superfluous; when they do not practice the religion during several months or years after their *shahada*; when they do not dare telling their family about their conversion and have to hide their religiosity; when they tell their relatives about it but they refuse to acknowledge it, etc. In all these instances, nothing is clear-cut and the religious transformation is not fully enacted.

Rather than a “single event pinpointed in time and space” (Herdt, 1993: 30), coming out is therefore best apprehended as a “multiplicity of events, stretching over the years.” It is a process, instead of a single announcement. Such process involves a subtle game of showing and concealing, revelation and restraint. It is also multi-layered since converts constantly need to assess who exactly knows what about their conversion. At times, people know before the announcement is made; at other times, they keep ignoring after the announcement has been made. As put forward by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), no one is never fully in the closet or fully out. The process of coming out is well under way before it has officially started and it is never completely over (cited in Chauvin and Lerch, 2013: 29-30).

Hence, the representation of conversion as a marked rupture between a before and an after is not entirely satisfying. Contrasting with this narrative of discontinuity, this chapter has sought to emphasize the continuous nature of religious change. In this regard, it follows in the footsteps of several scholars who have proposed to conceptualize conversion as a *process* (Straus, 1979; Greil and Rudy, 1983) or even as a *career* (Richardson, 1978; Gooren, 2005) that stretches over time and largely supersedes the rite of institution that is the ceremony of conversion. Straus (1979) writes for instance that

“the act of conversion is not a terminal act” while Finn (1997: 30) recalls that conversion “means a transforming change of religion, but not something over and done with.” Rambo and Farhadian (1999) also write that “authentic conversion is an ongoing process of transformation. The initial change, while crucial, is a first step in a long trajectory of transformation.” What matters for these scholars is not so much the publicization of one’s conversion but rather how converts progressively solidify religious dispositions over time. In a nutshell, conversion is to be understood as a process of accomplishment, rather than a *fait accompli*.

As I have demonstrated, conversion to Islam is not exception to this rule. This finding is in line with the literature. Jensen (2006) indicates that conversion to Islam is “a gradual process of change and transformation.” Galonnier and De los Rios (2016) also propose to re-conceptualize religious conversion as a protracted learning process. As for McGinty (2006: 188), she writes that “the process of becoming Muslim is neither final nor predictable; there are no sudden breaks or absolute changes; it is gradual.” In understanding the process of conversion, we should not limit ourselves to the act of converting or telling one’s conversion to others but also focus on the conversion career initiated by this very act. This relativizes the significance of the instituting rite of conversion and put the emphasis on daily religious practices as the true locus of self-transformation. At the end of this chapter, it seems wiser to talk of “converting persons” rather than “converts,” for the learning of a new religion is a drawn-out process that starts (rather than end) with the act of coming out.

To account for such indeterminacy and gradation, I suggest bringing forward the concept of *liminality*, as elaborated by Victor Turner (1969) on the basis of Van Gennep’s work on rites of passage. In his study of Ndembu rituals in Central Africa, Turner paid particular attention to the intermediate, liminal phase that comes after the phase of separation and precedes the phase of reincorporation (*limen* is a Latin word meaning “boundary” or “threshold”). He wrote that “the attributes of liminality or liminal personae are necessarily ambiguous. (...) Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, convention and ceremonial” (1969: 95). Liminality is a productive concept to understand converts’ experiences. By coming out as Muslims, converts have stepped foot into a liminal phase, which lasts until they are fully recognized as Muslims. Yet, this can be a long process. Achieving solid belief and practice does not happen overnight. The logics of silence, secrecy and denial exposed above also indicate that relatives can be slow at acknowledging one’s religious transformation. In some instances, converts do not really ever quit the liminal phase. They remain “threshold people,” whose relationship to time and change is both continuous and discontinuous. Chapter 3 further explores the consequences of such liminal status.

Finally, one of the contributions of this chapter has been to highlight differences across national contexts in terms of lived religion. Without falling into rough culturalism, it is fair to say that Americans apprehend religion with trust and volubility – something I refer to as the Cultural Centrality of Religion – while religious topics in France are shrouded in silence and approached with distrust and circumspection – or what I call the Unintelligibility of Religion. Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that these structural patterns had an effect on converts’ experiences.

The French context is for instance characterized by a greater prevalence of inner-directed *shahadas*, in which individuals bypass the role of the religious community and rely on a regime of self-validation to authenticate their conversion. These autonomous conversions are underpinned by the conviction that religion is a private and intimate matter and that it is embarrassing to put it on display. In the US, inner-directed *shahadas* are rarer, which indicates a greater propensity to publicize and institutionalize religious identities. This can be accounted for by the “dual attraction of Americans to individualism and conformity, self-reliance and cooperation” (Waters, 1990: 148-149). The few autonomous conversions that occurred in the US are justified not by emotional reserve, but by a more assertive version of religious individualism, in which spiritual subjectivity is presented as paramount. In sum, religion remains anonymous in the French context while it is a central feature of identification in the American case.

The announcement to friends and family is also markedly different on the two sides of the Atlantic. While American converts have mastered the art of religious discussion and theological debate, French converts lack such rhetorical repertoires and are often at a loss of words to convey their new religious conviction to relatives. American interviewees are adamant about coming out as Muslims and are at ease in expressing their religious choice. By contrast, the domain of the unsaid is prevalent among interviewees living in France, where religious conversations are uneasy and where religious conversion remains uncommon. French interviewees do not know how to come out as Muslims and are not even sure this is a right thing to do. While very sincere about their faith, they think disclosing it could do more harm than good. They either remain silent about it or use the spousal pretext to evade religious conversations. As a result, the French elephant in the room is better fed and trumpets much more often than its American counterpart.

Overall, while both French and American converts subscribe to a repertoire of religious individualism – they all present the individual as the true repository of religious authenticity – the data I collected points towards two distinctive versions of it: inward-looking in France and outward-looking in the US. In the French case, religion is individualized in the sense that it is private and intimate, i.e. not shared collectively and not discussed with others. The institutional regime of Defiant Secularism combined with the cultural Unintelligibility of Religion produces the invisibility and untalkability of religious matters. Consequently, French religious authenticity is rooted in discretion and reserve. Disclosure is embarrassing and potentially harmful. In the American case, by contrast, religion is individualized in the sense that it is a defining feature of the individual. As such, it has to be transparent and clearly stated. The institutional regime of Embracing Secularism and the cultural Centrality of Religion produce both candor about religious matters and the imperative to publicly express one’s religious belonging. American religious authenticity hinges upon outspokenness and the ability to assert and discuss one’s inner beliefs. Disclosure is almost mandatory and always considered as beneficial, even if it generates conflict.

CHAPTER 3 – PRAYING ALONE: THE COSTS OF LIMINALITY

“If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of ‘the stranger’ presents the synthesis, as it were, of both of these properties.”

Georg Simmel (1971 [1908])

“The stranger stays, but is not settled. He is a potential wanderer”

Robert E. Park (1928)

When I asked Florent (30, restaurant employee, Lille) to describe what his conversion had brought to his life, his answer fitted in one word: “Difficulties.” Retaining a good sense of humor and self-mockery, he detailed the various problems he encountered as a convert, first in his family and then in the Muslim community itself. He reported that he did not fit in neither of those worlds, in both of which he felt more or less like a “stranger.” Expanding the reflection on liminality already set forth in Chapter 2, this chapter argues that conversion to Islam in France and the US results in a state of “double strangeness,” as converts become seen as potential wanderers by *both* their milieu of origin and their religious community of adoption.

Drawing on Simmel and Park’s classical elaborations on the meaning of wandering, I understand converts as “neither here nor there,” “edge men,” “transitional beings,” “passengers,” “liminal” or “threshold people.”¹ Liminality is to be understood here as “an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” (Turner, 1974b), a “culturally dangerous but creative middle stage” (Weber, 1995), which is best apprehended, according to Victor Turner’s numerous riffs on the concept, through the analogies of a “moon between phases” or “water in process of being heated to boiling point” (Turner, 1964). For the British anthropologist, liminal personas, also called initiates or neophytes, are “at once no longer classified and not yet classified:” “their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox.” Deprived from their former social status and still waiting to be endowed with a new one, they are “the very prototype of sacred poverty.” This chapter examines the social consequences of this state of liminality in the case of converts, who are no longer non-Muslim and not yet Muslim. After examining the reconfiguration of converts’ social status in their family and friendly circles (section A) and detailing their complicated (and only partial) entry into the Muslim community (section B), I show that the liminal condition comes with a distinct set of costs (section C): first, a sharp drop in social capital and intense feelings of loneliness; second, for those who do not feel comfortable with their liminal persona, an obsession with pollution beliefs and formal codes of conduct. This chapter ends with a description of convert associations (section D), which present themselves as remedies against these two problems.

¹ *Limen* means threshold in Latin, notes Victor Turner (1974b).

A. BECOMING A BLACK SHEEP: MARGINALIZATION AND ISOLATION

In this section, I show that, as converts start verbalizing and embodying their religious transformation, they enter a transition period which manifests itself by intense conflicts and misunderstandings with their friends and families.

1) Defriending and Family ruptures

Conversion to Islam first entails a significant drop in relationships with friends and acquaintances. In a recent Facebook post, Melissa (27, NGO project manager, Paris) wrote a cynical piece of advice: “Having too many Facebook friends? Wondering how to sort it out without offending anyone? Convert to Islam and the selection will happen on its own! (For increased efficiency, upload a profile picture of yourself wearing a headscarf).²” A large number of converts in my sample recalled how they progressively grew apart from their friends. There was not necessarily a strong dispute or argument; they simply drifted away as they started having less and less in common. The fact that converts renounced alcohol and parties was often cited as one of the main reasons for their detachment, alcohol being a key element of friendly sociability in both France and the US. Party after party, converts found themselves at odds with long-time friends and acquaintances, until they stopped coming altogether. While converts started feeling embarrassed by their friends, sometimes it was the other way around. A black teenager fond of hip-hop music, Deana (21, student, St. Louis) painfully reported how her best friend “ditched” her just before going to a rap concert, because she was ashamed of Deana’s headscarf: “I lost my best friend at that moment,” she said. Troubled relations could also prompt converts to revisit past friendships and turn fond memories into shallow and superficial experiences. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) pondered: “What did we share? We drank; we partied. We shared binges. We were doing any old thing. But there was no depth.³” Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) also explained: “I lost a lot of friends, I feel. But... I guess it is not really losing them if they were never good friends to begin with.” Converts progressively cleaned their lives up to retain only a handful of people that they deemed “true friends.”

In addition to the crumbling of friendship networks, conversion to Islam also caused serious breaches in family relations. To be sure, not all relatives took it badly. In some families, the transition was smooth and pleasant. Emiliano (28, student, Paris) reported that his mother was actually “very very happy” when he embraced Islam because she had read Rumi’s work in the 70s and found it amazing. Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) described how his mother was “extremely supportive” and would even drive him to the mosque every Friday for congregational prayers, even though she “didn’t know what was going on.” Harold (25, NGO employee, Chicago) mentioned how his parents cooked *halal* lamb for him and his wife when they visited for Easter. And Melissa

² « Tu as trop d’ami-e-s Facebook ? Tu ne sais plus comment faire le tri, sans vexer personne ? Convertis-toi à l’islam, le tri se fera de lui-même ! (Technique d’autant plus efficace si tu mets une photo de profil de toi avec un foulard) ».

³ « Qu’est-ce qu’on partageait ? On partageait les beuveries, on buvait, on sortait... enfin on faisait n’importe quoi. Et au fond il y avait pas de profondeur ».

(27, NGO project manager, Paris) recalled how her aunt, who was at first hostile towards veiled Muslim women, eventually came around and gifted her a headscarf for her birthday. All these families worked a compromise around the issue of conversion and eventually found some common ground. They accepted the life choices of their children and did not oppose it as long as they seemed happy with it. Yet, this remained rather exceptional.

In the vast majority of cases, conversion caused deep and often irreparable cracks and fissures in my interviewees' households. Their conversion "broke something" (Isabelle, Paris), "created a gap" (Thibault, Paris), caused "huge divides" (Hasan, Chicago), "big dramas" (Ludovic, Marseille) and "panic attacks" (Gaëtan, Paris). Harsh words were pronounced and, even though most parents eventually came to terms with the religious decision of their children, relationships were sometimes irreversibly altered. Consider the following violent exchange between a French mother and her converted daughter at a parents-children meeting organized by the association *Bienvenue en Islam*: as we started tackling the particularly controversial issue of the headscarf, one outspoken ginger mother stood up and told her 20 year-old daughter, in front of everyone: "I hope I will be dead the day you wear the veil."⁴ The virulence of her words froze the atmosphere and the two meeting organizers had a hard time resuming the discussion.⁵ In the US, Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit), who comes from a traditional South Asian Hindu household also mentioned the very rough conversation she had with her mother who bluntly told her: "you are no longer my daughter if you are Muslim." Such violent words obviously took a toll on family relations. Sometimes bad words also turned into bad gestures. Ashamed and eaten up with remorse, Bob (19, student, St. Louis) reported how one day he lost his temper as his mother was "yelling and screaming about Islam:" "she insulted the Prophet and I should not have done this, but I did end up hitting my Mom, which I regret doing and I still hope Allah forgives me for that. I have also apologized to my Mom in numerous occasions but I got kicked out of the house for that." Bob was expelled from his house and now lives in the university dorm, where he also often stays on weekends because he is not allowed to pray at home.

On numerous occasions, parents experienced the conversion of their children as a terrible plague afflicting their family. Depicted as a "catastrophe" and a "nightmare" (Ophélie, Lille), conversion was lived as an ordeal similar to that of illness or bereavement. This became apparent in a conversation I had with Aude and Stéphanie, two cheerful and lighthearted women in their thirties I met at a gathering of the *Paris New Muslims* association in September 2014. These two childhood friends had both been interested in Islam for a long time, but while Aude had recently taken the plunge of conversion, Stéphanie was still pondering about it. As we began to talk about their respective religious journeys, they recounted how Stéphanie's father had reacted when she had expressed the intention of looking into Islam. Pale-faced, he had taken a serious tone of voice and said: "after what happened to Aude, we are a bit anxious."⁶ Stéphanie's father had talked as if her friend Aude had caught cancer or some serious illness to express how shocked and saddened he was. References to death and mourning were also a common trope of family discourse. Thus, when Fabien (21, student, Paris) told his mother

⁴ « J'espère que je serai morte le jour où tu auras le voile ».

⁵ Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2015.

⁶ « Après ce qui est arrivé à Aude, tu comprends, nous sommes un peu anxieux ».

he had embraced Islam, she dramatically answered: “I just lost my son.”⁷ This strikingly echoes Victor Turner’s considerations on liminal personas, who are often apprehended through symbols of death and decomposition: “in so far as a neophyte is structurally ‘dead,’ he or she may be treated for a long or short period as a corpse,” he wrote (Turner, 1964). These series of anecdotes illustrate the violence and trauma generated by the conversion of one’s child in both French and American families, as converts step foot into the realm of liminality.

Converts found themselves marginalized by their relatives. Many described a reconfiguration of their status within the family. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), who always felt superior to her rural cousins whom she described as “backward and weird,” explained how she took their place as the strange person of the family: “now, I am the black sheep of the family and I never thought I would occupy that role.” Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris) who always took good care of her widowed mother while her brothers did not show much concern, also expressed her frustration that her ranking within the family had changed upon her conversion: “now, it is as if I was the ugly duckling and they were the nice swans.”⁸ Several converts also completely lost contact with their relatives. Adam (35, unemployed, Paris) explained how his Catholic Caribbean family started ignoring him: “with my family, it was like that: ‘oh he became Muslim? Well, we won’t talk to him again. Let’s cut him dead.’”⁹ Hasan (34, clerk, St. Louis) reported the same type of ostracism from his conservative Christian cousins living in the Bible belt: “they just act like they don’t even know who I am anymore, you know. One of my cousins didn’t invite me to her wedding. I am the only family member she did not invite to her wedding. (...) You feel it in the air, they don’t want me around. They think I am strange, you know. I am an embarrassment.” Conversion to Islam considerably eroded family relationships.

Many converts judged their relatives’ reaction as exaggerate. Stressing that they had not become drug addicts, pregnant in their teens, prostitutes or gangsters but had simply changed religions, they found the uproar and moral indignation provoked by their conversion disproportionate. Envisioning their religious conversion as a means to improve themselves and live a more disciplined and structured existence, converts were distraught that their relatives saw it as a matter of outrage and disgrace. I argue that the source of such misunderstanding lies in the different perceptions of Islam held by my interviewees and their parents. While converts saw Islam as a rational, efficient, inspirational, tolerant, just and civic religion (see Chapter 1), their relatives had more gloomy images in mind. I now turn to a brief overview of such representations, which account for the feelings of fear, anger and loss expressed by many parents.¹⁰ Taken together, these images highlight the *essentialization* of the religion of Islam in French and American families, which constitutes the first stage of racialization.

⁷ « J’ai perdu un fils ».

⁸ « Comme si moi j’étais le vilain petit canard et qu’eux c’était les beaux cygnes, tu vois (rires) ».

⁹ « Ma famille, ça a été ça : ‘ah il est devenu musulman ! hop on parle plus avec lui ! on le calcule plus !’ ».

¹⁰ I reconstituted parents’ perceptions of Islam based on what my interviewees told me about them. This can generate bias and exaggeration. A more accurate and nuanced picture could certainly be obtained by directly interviewing parents themselves. This will have to be explored in future research.

2) Misunderstandings, moral panics and essentialization

Terrorism. Conversion to Islam was first perceived by some families as a first step towards religious extremism and violence, which generated considerable alarm and concern. There were true fears on this topic. Consider the case of Edward (35, manager, Detroit), who embraced Islam as a teenager a few months before 9/11 and came of age as a Muslim at a time when several male converts were making the headlines for engaging in terrorist activities worldwide (John Walker Lindh,¹¹ Jose Padilla,¹² Richard Reid¹³). He described in his interview the anxiety and agitation of his parents: “it was like one convert after another after another that kept getting in the news... and my parents were sure that I was going to be next. It was hard for me.” A teenager in search of identity and structure in a white middle-class suburb, Edward shared some objective characteristics with radicalized converts. Yet, as gentle as a lamb and preoccupied mostly with his spiritual growth, he did not understand why his parents projected such violent stereotypes onto him. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) also recounted in his interview how his mother started yelling and crying hysterically when he told her he was going to pray at the mosque: “What??? Terrorist! You are going to plant bombs!¹⁴” Having embraced Islam as a means to ease his depression and soothe his anger, Ludovic could not have felt further at odds with how his mother depicted him. At times, relatives took direct action against my interviewees. The father of Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) threatened to call a policeman friend of his to surveil him, in case he was involved in religious militancy and combat training. Benjamin, who was immersed in religious books all day long to meditate on the meaning of existence, was appalled by such extreme measures against him. The (former) friends of Jacques (51, engineer, Paris) also contacted the municipality to warn them that a terrorist cell was potentially forming in the midst of the village (Jacques was hosting gatherings of his Sufi *tariqa* at his house). The municipality, who knew about the Sufi order and its benevolent intentions, did not pay attention to their whistleblowing, but Jacques was profoundly shocked by his friends’ behavior. As for Rita (27, unemployed, Paris), a convert of several years, she was flabbergasted when her mother recently admitted that she had been preparing herself to the eventuality that her daughter might go to Syria. A peaceful and spiritual person, Rita could not believe her ears: “it really hurt me that my mother could, even for a second, think of me like that.¹⁵” The suspicion of terrorism, therefore, constantly hung over converts’ heads as they struggled to communicate with their families. Jack, a long-time convert and regular participant in *American Da’wah*’s discussion groups, mentioned that such representations

¹¹ Also known as “the American Taliban,” John Walker Lindh (born in 1981) is an American convert to Islam who joined the Taliban in Afghanistan and was captured in November 2001 by the American army as an enemy combatant. He was sentenced to 20 years of federal imprisonment in 2002.

¹² Also known as “the dirty bomber,” Jose Padilla (born in 1970) is an American convert to Islam who learned how to fabricate radiological bombs at an Al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan. He was arrested in 2002 in Chicago on suspicion of planning an attack on US soil. He was sentenced in 2014 to 21 years in prison for criminal conspiracy.

¹³ Also known as “the shoe bomber,” Richard Reid (born in 1973) is a British convert to Islam who attempted to detonate explosives located in his shoes on an American Airlines flight between Paris and Miami on December 22, 2001. His attack failed; he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment at a super maximum security prison in the US.

¹⁴ « Elle s’est mis à crier, à pleurer ‘quoooooiii !? qu’est-ce que c’est que cette histoooooioire ? Terroriste ! Terroriste ! Tu vas mettre des bombes’ ».

¹⁵ « Ça m’a trop fait mal que ma mère ait pu penser cela de moi une seule seconde ».

had considerably interfered with his attempts to calmly explain his religious choice to his parents. He encouraged recent converts to take them into account: “remember that you are not the only one sitting at the table. There are images of John Walker Lindh sitting with you and you need to talk about that.”¹⁶

Brainwashing. In line with the suspicion of terrorism, converts were also frequently accused by their families of having been brainwashed and indoctrinated. In their view, it was inconceivable that their children had embraced Islam out of free will: some sort of psychological manipulation had to be at play. Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille)’s father was therefore persuaded that his son had joined a cult. He told him it was “impossible that he had made such a choice on his own” and that he was “naïve and being manipulated.”¹⁷ Shortly after Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) announced her conversion to her father, he called her back and asked in a panicky and hush-hush type of voice: “Is anybody forcing you? Is anybody threatening you? You can say a code word if you need to!” Marta laughed about how protective her father was and made fun of his unfettered imagination, which could have made the best spy movie scriptwriters green with envy. In general, my interviewees were not perceived as “converts”, but as “objects” who had submitted their free will and critical mind to an oppressive religion. Apart from the suspicion of brainwashing, converts were also regularly depicted by their relatives as psychologically unstable; their conversion was portrayed as pathological. Many interviewees were therefore asked whether they were going through some depressive stage. This sharply contrasted with their self-representation as independent thinkers in full possession of their mental and intellectual faculties and making religious choices for themselves (see Chapter 1). Melissa (27, NGO project manager, Paris) reported for instance that her friends constantly questioned her decision with a preoccupied voice: “what happened to you? You used to be so free and intelligent!”¹⁸ Melissa, who considers that it is precisely because she is free and intelligent that she embraced Islam, was very annoyed by their comments.

Women oppression. Apart from suspicion of violence and accusations of psychological weakness, recriminations could also take a more value-oriented turn. In line with the overall representation of Islam as a patriarchal and backward religion, the issue of feminism and women’s rights was particularly contentious. Thus, when Emiliano (28, student, Paris) announced his conversion to some of his relatives, they looked at him and told him “well, it must be nice, because now you can beat your wife!”¹⁹ Married to a Christian woman whom he deeply loves and esteems (they respect one another’s religion), Emiliano was very disturbed by this comment. The portrayal of Islam as oppressive to women and the chastisement of converts for having voluntarily embraced a misogynistic religion were a recurring trope of family discussions. Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago), who was raised in a lesbian household, learned it the hard way: when she told her mother and her mother’s female partner that she had embraced Islam, these

¹⁶ Fieldnotes, September 28th, 2013.

¹⁷ « [Il m’a dit que] ce n’était pas un choix qui m’était dû, c’est impossible en fait que c’est moi qui ai fait ce choix, que j’étais naïf et que j’allais me faire manipuler, etc. »

¹⁸ « J’ai eu des amis qui sont sortis du bois ‘oui mais qu’est-ce qui t’arrive ? je ne comprends pas ce choix, toi qui est tellement libre, toi qui est tellement intelligente...’ Mais, euh oui et alors ? Parce que ça veut dire on porte le voile, on n’est ni libre ni intelligent ? Super ».

¹⁹ « On m’a déjà dit des trucs, du style ‘ah bah ça doit être pas mal, parce que tu peux taper ta femme !’ »

two life-long feminists violently scolded her: “now you are just going to be barefoot and pregnant at home,” they said, as if Alisha had renounced their teachings about female self-sufficiency. They also refused to come to her wedding (she married Boran, who is a Muslim convert too). Alisha said the conversation revolved around “the oppressed Muslim woman piece, the silent Muslim woman, the uneducated Muslim woman. And then also the image of the overbearing aggressive Muslim man.” Because Alisha is a smart and strong-minded woman who became her husband’s mentor and put him on the path to academic success (he is now a professor thanks to their joint efforts), she felt these representations did not align at all with the reality of her couple.

Family conversations often turned into an enumeration of horror stories. Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago) had tense discussions with her mother who vehemently interrogated her: “don’t they [Muslims] believe in honor killings? Don’t they do female genital mutilations?” As for Bob (19, student, St. Louis), his parents brandished right in front of his face the 2010 Time magazine cover image of a young Afghan woman whose nose and ears had been cut off by the Taliban for fleeing her abusive in-laws, and told him: “Bob! If you become Muslim, people are going to associate you with this!” Converts repeatedly found themselves stuck in heated debates on the situation of women in the Muslim world. They were often unprepared to address these issues, which did not fit their own understanding of Islam. Discussions were of course particularly tense around the issue of the *hijab*, who was understood by many as the paradigmatic symbol of women’s submission to men (shaming and control of female bodies, visual embodiment of women’s ontological difference, etc.). Such perceptions account for the vehement attitude of the mother at the French convert association (“I hope I will be dead the day you wear the veil”). After the parents-children meeting was over, participants were invited to socialize around cookies and refreshments and I overheard a conversation during which she explained: “I refuse every oppression of women, be they Jewish, Muslim or Catholic. In my view, a woman must be beautiful; she must wear make-up; she must wear heels. My daughter is beautiful; I want people to see her; I want her to be blooming as a woman. My mother was oppressed by my dad. She couldn’t go out; she couldn’t do anything. I shaped my personality against that and swore not to ever let myself be oppressed by a man.²⁰” This mother, who located female liberation in the ability to freely and proudly dress sexily, saw her daughter’s decision to wear the *hijab* as a betrayal of the feminist cause and an affront to her own family history. Family hostility, therefore, often stemmed from a painful emotional baggage. For similar reasons, Rachel (30, translator, Paris)’s father blatantly refused to see her wearing the headscarf. He demanded that she removed it whenever they met, because he considered it a symbol of patriarchy, reminiscent of the conservative Catholic background he was raised in (Rachel, who sees herself as a feminist and is very active in this respect, disagrees with his interpretation). As will be further addressed in Chapter 5, the issue of clothing and outward appearance is central to the topic of conversion, and is particularly contentious in the case of women.

Ethnic/Racial betrayal. Another common bone of contention was that, by becoming Muslim, converts had betrayed their own and embraced a “foreign” religion. Crossing a religious boundary was interpreted as a transgression of basic kinship rules of

²⁰ « Je refuse toute oppression de la femme, qu’elle soit juive, musulmane, catholique. La femme doit être belle, elle doit se maquiller, elle doit porter des talons. Moi, ma fille, elle est belle, j’ai envie qu’on la voie, j’ai envie qu’elle soit épanouie en tant que femme. (...) Moi ma mère a été opprimée par mon père, elle ne pouvait pas sortir, elle ne pouvait rien faire. Moi, je me suis construite contre ça, je me suis jurée de ne jamais me laisser opprimer par un homme ».

allegiance. The rhetoric of ethnic defection and betrayal was particularly prevalent in Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit)’s family, who are Hindus from India. Anjali reported that her parents strongly opposed her conversion on the basis that “you should be what your parents are. There is nothing wrong with Christianity, nothing wrong with Islam but you need to do what your parents do. Muslims are Muslims. We are Hindus. If you are being Muslim, it is a betrayal of who we are.” Anjali emphasized that their issue was an issue of “loyalty to one’s own,” “factionalism,” and “tribalism,” rather than theological soundness. At times, the religious identity of one’s parents only became salient after conversion. Such was the case of Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) who grew up in a quiet rural household in southern France, and only realized her father was Catholic when he expressed opposition to her conversion: “my father is Catholic, but I didn’t know that until I became Muslim.²¹” In line with constructionist theories on the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969; Wimmers, 2008b), Noémie’s father’s Catholic identity did not need to be activated or performed until it was directly challenged by her conversion. Noémie’s religious shift rendered visible the underlying and taken for granted ethno-cultural Catholicism of her father. In some instances, the rhetoric of ethnic betrayal also took on overt racialized tones, such as in Edward (35, manager, Detroit)’s family. Edward explained: “for my Dad, to become Muslim is to apostatize from my white identity. The first thing he said when I became Muslim was ‘you can’t be Muslim, you are white.’” The issue of racial apostasy, which is crucial to this dissertation, will be more directly addressed in Chapter 5.

Food. Religious and ethno-cultural anxieties over conversion materialized explicitly on the issue of food. Shared meals are a privileged moment of family sociability, particularly in the French context. New dietary restrictions often disrupted well-established family food habits and endangered the spontaneity of family gatherings. Pork, specifically, concentrated all the trouble and became a significant marker of European or American Christian identity.²² Pablo (22, student, Chicago) explained how his mother, a woman of Mexican descent who likes to emphasize that pork is central to Latin American cuisine, did not believe him when he stated that he did not want to eat swine anymore because he had become Muslim: “I am like ‘Mom... I am not eating pork. No more chorizo. No more bresaola. None of that!’ And she didn’t believe me then. The next thing I know, my plate is still full!” For the longest time, Pablo’s mother imperturbably kept filling her son’s plate with pork delicacies, refusing the reality of his conversion. This issue is particularly serious in France, where the politics of what DeSoucey (2010) calls “gastronationalism,” or emotional attachment to national cuisine, are well-entrenched. Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) also explained how his father deliberately put slices of pork ham or sausage on his plate during family dinners, which he interpreted as a provocation. Meals became a continual source of tension between them, and often ended in shouts and tears, with Benjamin slamming the door of the dining room to lock himself up in his bedroom and eventually going to sleep with an empty stomach. Delphine (27, unemployed, Paris) also talked about how her mother tried to make her feel guilty by mentioning with nostalgia the dishes of her childhood: “do you remember that bacon and lentil dish I cooked for you? You used to love it. Now I can’t make it anymore.” She faulted her daughter for belittling her maternal feeding duties and

²¹ « Mon père est catholique mais je ne le savais pas avant de devenir musulmane ».

²² On this issue, see the short film *Le Jambon* (The Ham), released in 2008 by the association *A part ça tout va bien*. On the newly discovered cultural centrality of pork, see (Göle, 2015: 229).

interpreted her refusal to eat pork as an act of treason.²³ A significant portion of my interviewees also mentioned being exhausted by the repeated jokes made during meals by family members or colleagues, who faked to ostensibly serve them wine or offer them ham. They said it was funny once or twice, not a hundred times. A middle-aged participant at *Bienvenue en Islam* also reported that her French rural family did not understand anything about her new food habits. When she told them that she was going to buy “meat that was *halal*,” they typically understood “meat *à l’ail*” (meat with garlic) and kept wondering why she had to eat garlic all the time.²⁴ No longer being able to share the same food created distance and misunderstandings. People who used to be relatives or intimates suddenly became strangers, as they could no longer relate to converts’ daily way of life.

The five recriminations exposed above were present in France and the US alike. Yet, there were also clear national specificities, with American families chastising converts for having picked “the wrong religion” and French families reproaching their children for “being too religious.”

The wrong religion (US). In several American families, conversion to Islam was equated with religious apostasy and appraised through the lens of heresy. Converts were accused of having endangered their soul. Thus, Julia (23, student, Chicago), whose parents are conservative and devout Christians, kept postponing the announcement of her conversion because she anticipated a harrowing reaction from her mother, who would certainly think that her daughter had gone astray: “she would legitimately be concerned for the well-being of my soul. She would be like ‘oh my gosh, my daughter is going to hell, what do I do?’” The mother of Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) also panicked because she associated Islam with some sort of pagan belief very different from Christianity: “It’s not OK!” she said, “I always raised you like you should not worship another God and you are worshipping another God.” Mary had to emphasize the continuities between Islam and Christianity to convince her mother that Muslims and Christians were indeed worshipping the same God. Khabir (23, barber, Detroit) also explained how his extended Christian Baptist family had him go through some exorcism rituals: “they thought I had a demon on me. [They] were calling from all over. And they were saying ‘Somebody put some blessed oil on his forehead and bless him and anoint him! Rebuke that devil out of him!’” Khabir was astounded by the level of rejection and moral panic his conversion stirred up. In those theological debates, the figure of the Prophet Muhammad was often central. In line with a long tradition of Christian religious polemic (Daniel, 1962), the Prophet was frequently portrayed as a bloodthirsty paedophile, on top of being a fraud: “your prophet had sex with 10 year-old girls” was for instance a frequent line that Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago) heard from her relatives. In the US, therefore, converts faced the challenge of being non-Christians in a Christian-dominated context.

Being too religious (France). Such historical and theological discussions were rare in the French context, where the crux of the conflict between converts and their families

²³ « Elle me dit : ‘Tu sais ce plat-là que tu adorais... les lentilles... , tu sais avec le lard-là à l’intérieur... ah mais t’adorais ça, hein ! je peux plus te le faire !’ Tu sais comme si c’est la culpabilité genre, c’est comme si tu l’avais trahie à mort, quoi ».

²⁴ Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2016.

was not so much religious content but the very issue of religiosity itself. Many parents were not simply shocked that their children had become Muslim, but appalled that they had become religious at all. Their “gut-level hostility²⁵” towards religions in general explained much of their anger and anxiety. Rachel (30, translator, Paris), whose father had grown up in a very devout charismatic Christian family and had subsequently shunned any form of organized religion, explained for instance that, for him, “there wasn’t a specific fear of Islam, but of religion in general. It would actually have been much worse if I had become Evangelical. He would have had an apoplectic stroke!²⁶” Emiliano (28, student, Paris), who grew up in an atheist, left-wing, activist family expressed a similar sentiment: “had I come out as a Catholic, there would have been problems too.²⁷” In all those cases, hostility towards Islam derived from a strong anticlericalism. Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris) thus explained that her family were “Islamophobes” not out of being “right-wing” or “racist,” but from a left-wing, secular (*laïc*) and anti-clerical standpoint.²⁸ Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), who was born in a family with strong Communist leanings, also described his father as a “*laïc*card” (hard-core secularist) who worried that his son’s conversion would affect his political activism: “for my dad, religion is the opium of the people. And being religious necessarily means submitting yourself to a religious practice that makes you forget about the rest. So for him the fact that I converted meant that I would necessarily grow a beard and abandon activism.²⁹” Jérémy proved his father wrong, since he remained politically active after his conversion. Yet, his sister keeps referring to him as an “*islamogauchiste*,” a highly controversial term to designate leftist activists who are complacent with religious conservatism³⁰. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) summarized the situation as such: “when you were raised in France, they try to make you understand that, roughly, if you are religious, it means you haven’t quite understood humanism, the Enlightenment and all these steps forward. You are an old-school kind of guy, not to say a guy from the Dark Ages [laughs].³¹” Indeed, for many of my French interviewees’ families, entering a religion and becoming religious was perceived as retrograde, reactionary and utterly

²⁵ « Rejet épidermique de la religion » (Pauline, 32, graphic designer, Paris)

²⁶ « Il y avait pas de crainte particulière vis-à-vis de l’islam, mais vis-à-vis de la religion en général. Je crois que ça aurait été pire pour mon père que je devienne évangéliste par exemple. Alors là je pense que... juste il aurait fait une crise d’apoplexie ! »

²⁷ « J’aurais fait mon coming out catholique, il y aurait eu beaucoup de problèmes aussi ».

²⁸ « Ma famille c’est tous des gens de gauche, d’extrême-gauche donc du coup s’ils sont islamophobes, c’est pas d’un point de vue de droite ou de racisme, mais voilà plus d’un point de vue laïc, anticlérical ».

²⁹ « Il faut pas oublier que pour lui, la religion c’est l’opium du peuple, d’emblée. Et qu’être religieux pour lui, c’est forcément être soumis à une pratique religieuse qui te fait oublier le reste. Et donc pour lui, le fait de me convertir, fait que nécessairement, je me mettrais du jour au lendemain, à porter une barbe et à désertier les milieux militants, tu vois ».

³⁰ The controversial and stigmatizing concept of “islamo-gauchisme” (Islamo-Leftism) emerged in the French public debate in the early 2000s. It was used by public intellectuals to criticize activists on the Left who allegedly made unnatural alliances with puritan, anti-feminist, anti-secular and anti-Republican Islamists in the name of anti-racism. The term has mostly been used to discredit those involved in the fight against Islamophobia, who were accused of being passive and naïve in the face of religions’ reactionary agenda and powerful comeback.

³¹ « Quand t’as été élevé en France, (...) on essaie de te faire comprendre, en gros, je généralise pas, mais en gros, que si t’es religieux, t’as pas trop bien compris l’humanisme, les Lumières et les pas en avant. C’est-à-dire que t’es un peu un mec qui reste un peu à l’ancienne, tu vois. Pour ne pas dire que t’es un peu un mec du Moyen Age (rises) ».

stupid. It brought about bewilderment and despise. The main challenge for French converts was therefore to assert their religiosity in a context dominated by the absence of religion.

Standing in sharp contrast with converts' enthusiastic portrayal of Islam listed in Chapter 1, the recriminations exposed above account for the emotional exchange that often characterizes a dialogue of the deaf between converts and their parents. Not being on the same wavelengths about what Islam is and entails, they got mired in impulsive and visceral discussions. The stereotypical figure of "the Muslim," mostly fed by dominant media representations, frequently stood in the middle of their interactions. Words and rational arguments were useless, because the terms of the debate were irrational in the first place. Converts had to assert themselves as Muslims while circumventing the haunting specter of "the Muslim," which pervaded their relatives' psyche. This indicates a clear process of essentialization whereby Islam is reduced to a handful of caricatural traits (violence, patriarchy, no pork, etc.), thereby impeding healthy communication.

As a result, converts progressively grew detached from their family and became increasingly marginalized among their friends. In some instances, they completely reconfigured their sociability circles to hang out only with fellow Muslims. In particular, they sought compensation and meaning in the concept of Islamic brotherhood or sisterhood. Having lost a considerable amount of sociability among both family and friends, converts placed high expectations on their coreligionists. Yet, as I now turn to demonstrate, such expectations were not always met, which further intensified feelings of marginality.

B. IN SEARCH OF BROTHERHOOD

For several months, Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris) kept her conversion secret. She used Islamic websites and online sermons to guide her daily religious practice. Over time, however, she grew lonely. One day, she took her courage in both hands and called a mosque: "I was desperate for talking to a real person. But just holding the phone and dialing the number required a lot of courage. I got an answering machine that said '*as-salaam 'alaykum.*' And the sheer fact of hearing that made my heart pound wildly for 15 minutes! I burst into tears. I had the impression that someone had told ME '*as-salaam 'alaykum*'"³² This amusing anecdote by Fanny, who was so lonely that she cried over an answering machine, reveals the longing for community and inclusion that many converts experience. Interactions with coreligionists are often mentioned by converts as a way to fulfil their new religious needs. Key to these interactions are the notions of Islamic brother- or sisterhood, which is believed to operate as "an effective tool for community making" and belonging (Vroon, 2014: 105). Yet, as I demonstrate in the

³² « Je désespérais de pouvoir poser mes questions à quelqu'un ! A une vraie personne. Et finalement un jour j'ai appelé une mosquée, ça m'a demandé mais un courage ! de prendre le téléphone et de composer le numéro. Et je suis tombée sur un répondeur. Mais rien que le fait d'entendre '*as-salaam 'alaykum,*' mon cœur il a battu pendant 15 minutes ! Je crois que j'ai fondu en larmes ou un truc comme ça. Et j'avais l'impression que genre on m'avait dit '*as-salaam 'alaykum*' ! Alors que c'était un répondeur de messagerie ! (rires) Je suis trop marrante ! Mais voilà donc ça c'était le stade où j'en étais de besoin de communauté, d'être incluse, etc. ».

following, the title “brother” or “sister,” supposedly marking the entry into the *ummah*, was more often than not endowed with ambivalent meanings.

To be sure, several interviewees in my sample expressed their contentment with their integration into the Muslim community. Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) was actually “shocked” by the hospitality and brotherhood demonstrated by her coreligionists: “I didn’t understand why they welcomed me so well!”³³ Florent (30, restaurant employee, Lille) was also mesmerized by the warmth and simplicity of the old *chibanis*³⁴ who welcomed him in their mosque – a small locale in a poor neighborhood –, looked him in the eye, shook his hand and greeted him with respect and recognition. He said it really warmed his heart. The idea of Islamic brotherhood or sisterhood was central in many interviews. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) was deeply moved by the concept of “love for the sake of Allah” implemented by his coreligionists: “there is a bond of love in the community, which we call love for the sake of Allah. When you say to someone ‘I love you in the name of God,’ it’s... magical.”³⁵ The materialization of such love was common through acts of financial aid and solidarity. Jonathan (36, electrician, Chicago), who comes from a poor white household, recounted how local Arab Muslim families all contributed money to buy Islamic books and prayer rugs for him, after he converted at the mosque. As for Rabia, one of the main organizers at *Paris New Muslims*, she narrated during a meeting of the association how a Muslim woman she did not know at all contacted her and offered to cover her debts and pay for her rent, gas and electricity at a time when she was in a harsh financial situation after having been fired from her job. Word had circulated in her local community that she was in trouble and this mysterious woman had taken this opportunity to perform her charity duties. After giving her the money, the woman said goodbye and Rabia never saw her again.³⁶ Another matter of pride for converts was the level of social, ethnic and racial mixing displayed by some Muslim communities. Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago) for instance praised the cohesiveness of Islam, as compared to her former Catholic congregation: “among Catholics, I would often feel like ‘OK, this is an Indian Catholic church’ or ‘this is the Spanish mass’ or ‘this is the church that has the Vietnamese mass.’ You know, it was very segregated. Whereas in Islam, not that this is perfect, but I feel much more cohesiveness.” Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), who comes from a very modest white family, was also impressed by the variety of people he got to meet at the mosque: “in the *masjid*, you would meet all different types of people, lawyers, doctors, engineers. These are people that I would never have met. It is definitely more diverse than almost any other place in America.” All these interviewees, therefore, marveled at the universalism, solidarity and benevolence displayed by their coreligionists. They felt the Muslim community was the place they were always meant to be in.

³³ « Je m’en rappelle que ça m’avait choquée. C’est-à-dire que des fois on m’a accueillie d’une manière, je comprenais pas tu vois ».

³⁴ In France, the term “*chibani*” refers to the first migrant workers who came from North Africa. They are now old and retired (*chibani* means “old man” or “white hair” in Maghrebi Arabic). Invisible and forgotten, their pensions are often smaller than those of French citizens who worked similar jobs (Samaoli, 2007).

³⁵ « Il y a un lien d’amour dans la communauté qu’on appelle l’amour en Allah. Quand on dit ‘je t’aime en Allah’, ça veut dire s’aimer au nom de Dieu, c’est... c’est magique ».

³⁶ Fieldnotes, September 27th, 2014.

Yet, community belonging is a tricky notion for those who, for whatever reason, do not or cannot integrate. Standing in sharp contrast with such enchanted comments, expressions of frustration, anger and bitterness frequently surface in the testimonies I collected. These conflictual statements provide a vantage point to study boundaries and fault lines among Muslims in France and the US. Careful not to throw their newly embraced community under the bus, converts were nonetheless critical of it. Specifically, conflicted experiences of “Islamic brotherhood” arose against three main issues: the reification of “converts;” converts’ unease and discomfort in mosques; and the religious trauma they experience at the hands of indelicate coreligionists.

1) The Convert Role: No Longer Non-Muslim and Not Muslim Yet

Upon entering Muslim circles, many converts talked about the fascination they elicited. Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris) explained for instance how fellow Muslim women always insisted on hugging and kissing her, which happily surprised her. Converts actually felt that they drew too much attention at times. Some interviewees told me how fellow Muslims “waited on them hand and foot³⁷” (Benjamin, Lille), “felt admiration” for them (William, Chicago) and treated them “like mini-celebrities” (Lisa, Chicago). Converts were considered by many as “purer,” “more perfect” and “more loved by Allah” because they had made the effort of deliberately choosing Islam. Almost all my interviewees reported some discomfort from being excessively praised within the Muslim community. As put by Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago): “converts are put a little bit on a pedestal, like ‘converts are better than born Muslims’ and this and that.” Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit) referred to this as the “myth of the convert superior.” Bob (19, student, Detroit) said for instance that he felt uncomfortable when those he calls “Desi uncles” (old Pakistani men) “praise me as if I am like some modern-day *sahabi* [companion of the Prophet].” In France, Fabien (21, student, Paris) echoed a similar concern: “there is a mystification of converts. There is this idea that we are a kind of trophy. I feel like a Pokémon sometimes [laughs].³⁸”

Yet, the pedestal can be deceptive. Many reported with resentment and bitterness that the praises and laudations they received were not always accompanied with actual support and consideration. Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis) explained: “at first everyone saw me as the shiny new toy [laughs]. ‘Oh you are a convert!!!! *Mash’Allaaaah*!*’ [laughs] But then slowly that goes away. And then you are totally left in the cold.” On the other side of the Atlantic, in Lille, Wanda (32, travel consultant) reported exactly the same feeling: “at the beginning, you feel like you enter a very brotherly world. Especially when they know you are a convert, you get a lot of compliments, you are at the center of all attentions. But then nobody even thinks that maybe you spent the month of Ramadan completely alone.³⁹” Many interviewees reported spending Islamic celebrations by themselves, as fellow Muslims forgot to invite them in their families. Jonathan (36,

³⁷ « On bénéficie de petits soins quand on embrasse l’islam ».

³⁸ « Tu sais il y a cette mystification du converti, tu vois. Il y a cette espèce d’idée de trophée, tu vois. ... Enfin tu sais d’avoir l’impression qu’on est un peu des Pokémon, tu vois [rires] ».

³⁹ « T’as l’impression qu’au départ, t’arrives dans un monde très fraternel. (...) Quand ils savent que t’es convertie, haaa ! t’as plein de compliments, ‘waou, c’est magnifique’, on attire la curiosité, on est au centre des attentions. Mais après ils se disent pas ‘peut-être qu’elle a passé le mois du Ramadan toute seule, quoi’ ».

technician, Chicago) also emphasized that the relationships he entertained with fellow Muslims within the mosque for a decade never translated into actual friendships outside the mosque: “I would have tremendous friendships inside the mosque. Outside of the mosque, I haven’t been invited to anybody’s house. And we are talking about years here. And you know, you just begin to think ‘is that normal?’ And then you realize ‘no, it’s not normal!’”

Overall, many of my interviewees admitted that they had few “born Muslim” friends. Some held a grudge against their Muslim brothers and sisters for not having given them the “love” they expected. I vividly remember a poignant talk delivered by African-American convert and Islamic scholar Sherman Jackson at a mosque in the South side of Chicago. Reflecting on the state of solidarity within the Muslim community, he declared:

I grew up in the hood in Philly, real Philly. I had homeboys who loved me and got my back. I mean, they really got my back, no matter what. In the Muslim community, I find that this is the exception rather than the rule. And this has been my biggest disappointment as a Muslim. How could I have more love as a *kafir** than I do as a Muslim?

Sherman Jackson painfully confessed that he never got back the level of trust, support and friendship he used to have as a non-Muslim.⁴⁰ Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis) who converted as a teenager and joined a Salafi Muslim group also admitted years later that his religious expectations had not been met: “I never got really that much love back, you know. I think in some ways, I was hurt by that. I mean... We came in, we dropped all our friends, our families, and this is our whole life. But we didn’t have that love. We carried a lot of baggage and we were looking for Islam to solve all that. We had high religious expectations. That essentially just didn’t get fixed.” For this very reason, Umar briefly left Islam for Christianity in 2013 (a couple of months before I met him) and eventually converted back after being reached out by several prominent Islamic scholars of St. Louis.

According to Viswanathan (1998: 89), “a change of religion is less a change of beliefs than a change of community.” Therefore, in order to be complete and successful, the religious transformation has to be acknowledged and accepted by one’s coreligionists. Yet, many converts in my sample expressed their frustration and disillusion concerning their interactions with fellow Muslims. They explained that they remained perceived as “converts” rather than full-fledged Muslims. White American convert Suhaib Webb who is currently the imam of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center recently expressed his discontent during a talk:⁴¹ “I converted over 20 years ago. Conversion was an event. Islam was a process. But still now I am called a convert. Now, I converted in November 1992. *This has been like the longest shahada ever!* [laughs].” Suhaib Webb indicates that his rite of passage remains incomplete. He is stuck in the limbo of the liminal phase, as if his *shahada* was still lasting. He will forever be a “convert.” Pablo (22, student, Chicago) agrees and mentioned with a half-smile during his interview: “I am not Muslim enough because I am a convert. They are like ‘you are Muslim but you are not the real dude. You still not the real dude.’” Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) also said that the concept of Islamic brotherhood or sisterhood only partly applied to converts: “I feel like people

⁴⁰ Fieldnotes, December 8th, 2013

⁴¹ The talk was organized by the Northwestern Muslim Students Association (MSA) on November 21st, 2013.

aren't necessarily ready to consider a convert as a brother or sister in Islam." Some of my interviewees said they constantly had to prove their Muslimness and were not fully accepted: "I do feel that I am being judged like: 'how Muslim are you?'" said Julia (23, student, Chicago).

Converts also sometimes felt treated like small children who did not know anything about their religion and had to be taught the basics. This actually echoes Turner's considerations on liminality, according to which "neophytes are likened to or treated as embryos, newborn infants" (Turner, 1964). Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago), who has been Muslim for over a decade, recalled: "it is annoying sometimes when people presume that you took *shahada* five minutes ago." David too (31, unemployed Chicago) joked about "youngsters who lecture him like they are his father." Gwenaëlle (35, filmmaker, Paris) recognizes that as a convert she "will always be in the position that people want to teach me."⁴² But Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) did not have the patience of being taught. In particular, she found her interactions with born Muslims repetitive and infantilizing: "they are like 'oh you are a convert? OK. Let me teach you about Islam.' So usually you have to endure like 25 minutes of them telling you the basics." Mary experiences such type of mansplaining as discriminatory: "I am like 'really, dude?' When a born Muslim comes, do you teach them the basics of Islam?"

As put by LePape (2015: 84), "a successful conversion is one that is made forgotten." Yet, the idea that an enduring stigma was attached to their conversion pervaded several of my interviewees' narratives. Whether they were praised or despised, admired or ignored, converts stood out among other Muslims. They were considered as special and different. As put by Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago): "in the Muslim world, the second someone knows you are a convert, then that's all they see you! So you just kind of assume that role." Embroiled in liminality, converts were perceived as perpetual wannabes.



Figure 11 – The convert role

In the short documentary *God Calls Me* (2014) by Mohamed Ali Neffati, French convert to Islam Alaume complains that converts are "put into boxes," that they "belong to a caste system within Islam," that they are not considered as "fully Muslims" and that, even after thirty years, they are still perceived as "inexperienced beginners."

⁴² « Je serai en éternelle position que les gens veuillent m'apprendre ».

As the above testimonies demonstrate, being accepted as an authentic member of the Muslim community is a process that is never completely over and done with. As evidenced by Suhaib Webb’s comment (“the longest *shahada* ever”), it can take time before coreligionists fully authenticate one’s conversion. Stuck in the liminal phase, many expressed the desire to leave that state of liminality. Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago) said for instance during an *American Da’wah* thread on Facebook: “I will be happy when I can just be a regular, old Muslim just like everyone else.” As newcomers in the Muslim community, converts wanted both to be recognized and to go unnoticed. They strove for both visibility and invisibility. One space in which these demands could (or could not) materialize was the mosque, to which I now turn.

2) “Unmosqued:” Navigating Muslim spaces

Mosques are the repository of considerable expectations from converts. In non-Muslim majority countries, such as France and the US, the mosque is not only a prayer space:⁴³ it is also a space where fellow Muslims can meet and interact. The mosque organizes gatherings, celebrations and conferences; it can be in charge of charity and social services; and at times it is also where one is hoping to find a spouse. Especially for converts, who do not have a Muslim family to rely on, the mosque is expected to perform a variety of religious and non-religious functions: sociability circle, social center, devotional space, spiritual advising, religious training, marriage counseling, business networking, funeral services, etc. It is conceived as the key to integrate the community and blossom as a Muslim.

The first entry into a mosque is therefore a significant milestone in a convert’s trajectory, and generates considerable stress and anxiety. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis), a particularly anxious woman, told me:

It was almost two years before I actually went to the mosque for the first time. Because I was really scared. I was just afraid I would screw up. I had never prayed in a line and I had these images in my head about... like dominos... you know these old cartoons where one person knocks a thing over that hits the shelf and they all knock down. That’s what I was afraid of doing in the mosque! [laughs]

Mary’s apprehension translated into absurd scenarios of failure, shame and embarrassment. I could experience first-hand this level of stress when I accompanied Aude and Stéphanie (see above), the two cheerful women, and a friend of them, Edith, for their first visit to the mosque in a Parisian suburb. Aude and Stéphanie suggested we first met at Aude’s apartment before taking the car to go to the mosque together. In the tiny apartment, the girls initiated a session of *hijab* fitting and tried on different outfits. Stéphanie had brought a dress she used to wear when she was pregnant: she found it unsightly and shapeless, but hoped it would cover her body enough to meet what she understood as Islamic standards of modesty. Edith was wearing pants and worried that her sweater did not sufficiently cover her bottom. I lent her an additional long skirt that I had brought with me and she felt reassured. The girls had also bought different headscarves and headbands that they tried on successively. They took a selfie each time

⁴³ In Arabic, mosque is “*masjid*,” which derives from the word “*sujud*,” which means prostration to God. The *masjid* is therefore the place where one prays and prostrates, nothing else.

and laughed hysterically about how ugly they looked with it. Eventually, they all took a deep breath and set about moving. They removed their headscarves because they were afraid of going in the street with them. Throughout the car journey, Stéphanie had stomach ache because of the stress. They already envisioned making gaffes and mistakes and uninterruptedly guffawed about it. Upon arriving at the mosque parking lot, however, they stopped talking. They panicked and tried to hastily put on their headscarves in the car, which only made things worse. Stéphanie worried about the strands of hair that could creep over her scarf. Anxiety was palpable. As they eventually unsteadily walked towards the mosque, a man immediately spotted us and asked if we were new (which was quite evident). He indicated to us the women's entrance and told us the beginner's class would start in a bit. The first discovery of the mosque was anticlimactic for Aude, Stéphanie and Edith: the women's space was almost empty and we just sat on the carpets, waiting. We had come too early. The girls started whispering but Aude said she could not hear anything because her headscarf obstructed her ears, which sparked another session of nervous laughter.⁴⁴ Pursuing her sketch, Aude grasped a Qur'an that was on a shelf, took an absorbed air and pretended to read it as if she had mastered the Arabic language. Her acting was a smoke screen for her anxiety and impatience, but the other two found it hilarious. Eventually, people came in and around twenty women gathered in a circle: the class taught by Aisha (37, housewife, Paris) was about to start. Stéphanie told me I looked very comfortable and at ease in the mosque, which was more an indication of her own state of discomfort than anything else. The class went on well, for Aisha, a convert herself, is very soft-spoken and engaging. At some point, the call for prayer resounded and the women started lining up for prayer. Aude, Stéphanie and Edith exchanged panicky looks but, after a moment of hesitation, they eventually joined the ranks. During the prayer, I overheard Aude and Stéphanie breathing heavily, and I assumed that it was because they found this collective spiritual moment particularly moving. I was wrong: they were simply having another round of repressed laughter because Stéphanie had made a mistake and had stood up while everybody was still prostrating. In sum, she had made the gaffe she had been afraid of making. Despite missteps and blunders, Aude, Stéphanie and Edith have returned to this mosque frequently. Logistical reasons help explain why their first encounter was successful: this suburban mosque has a stunning architecture, a wide and beautiful women's prayer space (a large balcony that overlooks the men's space) and provides a strong support network for converts and newcomers. Such resources are typically not available everywhere. In fact, many converts in my sample confessed never going to the mosque.

In 2014, as I was still doing fieldwork for this research, the movie *Unmosqued* (directed by Ahmed Eid) was released. Subtitled "A documentary film about immigrant founded mosques in America," it draws a vitriolic picture of mosques in the US in order to explain why so few converts and young born Muslims actually go there. The documentary described a whole generation of "unmosqued" Muslims who did not find their place in what were described as conservative, unwelcoming and segregated mosques. It sparked controversy among my interviewees because of its virulent tone and the condescending depiction of (voiceless) first generation Muslim immigrants. Yet, many recognized themselves in the feelings of unease and discomfort expressed by the documentary participants. In the movie, converts occupy a central stage. Female convert Amanda Quraishi lamented for instance about her experiences at the mosque: "I cried

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes, October 1st, 2014

almost every time. I would go there, come home and start crying. Because I was like ‘what have I done? what am I doing here?’⁴⁵”

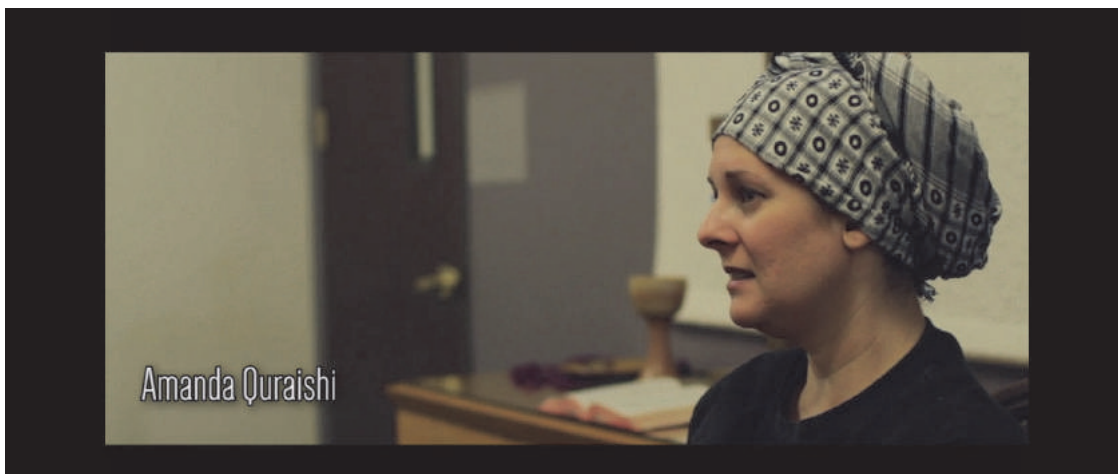


Figure 12 – Convert despair

Following her testimony, Bilal Hito, founder of the Lighthouse Initiative,⁴⁶ an American organization that provides alternative spaces for Muslims, made a dark assessment about converts’ attendance at American mosques. Basing his statistical estimations upon the American mosque report (Bagby, 2012a), he said: “the average mosque in America receives about 16 converts per year. If your mosque is only about 10 years old, you should be seeing about 160 converts floating around your mosque. If your mosque is 20 years old, that means you should be seeing over 300 converts, with their kids! *We are lucky if we see three.*”⁴⁷ In France, several interviewees told me they did not attend any *masjid* regularly either. In sum, converts were nowhere to be found. They had deserted the mosques. Building on my interviews, I now turn to describe the reasons for such absence.

Space and comfort. Due to lack of financial means, especially in France where the Muslim community is of modest extraction, mosques were often composed of tiny spaces. Melissa (27, NGO project manager, Paris), who had the opportunity to visit large mosques in the UK, complained about the state of Muslim spaces in her country: “in France, it is such a bummer. You have prayer rooms of 130ft², where we are all packed against one another. It is kind of sordid.”⁴⁸ The density could be particularly high during religious celebrations, making it almost impossible for some to concentrate to pray. Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago) noted: “I don’t intend any *masjid* regularly. Because they are crazy! During Ramadan, it gets really packed and it is like you have to play Tetris to get out of there!”

⁴⁵ Min. 36’ in the movie.

⁴⁶ Located in Long Island, the Lighthouse Initiative presents itself as an alternative to the mosque in terms of Islamic spiritual development.

⁴⁷ Min. 37’ in the movie.

⁴⁸ « En France c’est la loose, c’est des salles de prière de 12 m² où on est serrés les uns les autres, c’est un peu glauque ».

Bad welcome. Most converts in my sample repeatedly lamented the inexistent or bad welcome they had received in mosques. Joseph (21, web developer, Chicago) explained how he attended a mosque close to his home twice a day during two months, but was never able to connect with the other congregants: “I think I had only two people who really came up to me, they would just greet me, talk to me a little bit. I don’t know, I was kind of expecting more people to talk to me.” Gaëtan (29, student, Paris) was also disappointed by his visit to the mosque: “when you convert, you think everything is going to be awesome. But then at the mosque, people smell bad, they elbow their way through, they are not nice, they don’t say *salaam*... You come back down to earth.⁴⁹” His wife Delphine (27, unemployed, Paris) said he always came back from the mosque totally depressed. For converts in the US specifically, who had been socialized in churches offering a wide range of entertaining and civic activities, the mosque paled in comparison. Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago) criticized mosque leaders for not attending to the needs of converts: “they don’t understand converts, that they came out of church and church has a lot of elements of home and community and activities and they pine for that!” Vanessa (40, hairdresser, Lille) also “really felt very lonely” after her first visit to a Muslim association, where she was “treated like trash” for not speaking Arabic: “they told me ‘what are you doing here if you don’t speak Arabic?’⁵⁰”

Language. Indeed, language was often a central issue for converts. When sermons were delivered in Arabic (or Urdu or Bosnian, etc.) and not translated towards French and English, my interviewees felt upset and excluded. Brian (23, student, Chicago) was particularly up in arms against such practice: “It’s so fucked up. Have you ever been to a South Asian *masjid* [mosque]? A third of the crowd is non South-Asian and they are going to do the *khutbah* [sermon] in Urdu. Like... I am going to murder you! [laughs] Seriously! That is so disrespectful. Can you imagine that? It’s not only awkward, it’s totally retarded!” Monica (34, housewife, Chicago) could not agree more: “imagine, trying a new religion and you don’t understand what they say, except the word Allah!” In France, Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris) was also much dismayed by the language issue: “if you go to the Grand Mosque of Paris, you don’t understand a thing. Fuck! It really pisses me off. I am like ‘are you serious? For whom are you talking exactly? Three out of four Muslims don’t understand literary Arabic, so what’s the point?’ Let me laugh.⁵¹”

Gender segregation. The problem of space and comfort outlined above was particularly acute for women. Since current Islamic orthodoxy considers that it is mandatory for men to go to the mosque but not for women (who can pray at home), women’s spaces tend to be smaller and not as well equipped and attended to (which further deters them from going). In most of the mosques in France and the US, men and women pray in separate spaces, the separation taking different forms depending on

⁴⁹ « Tu redescends sur terre. Parce que toi bon t’es converti, tu dis ‘ah ouais et tout, c’est chan-mé !’ Mais non, quoi ! La mosquée... les gens ils sentent mauvais, il y a des gens qui poussent, les gens sont pas cools, ils disent pas *salaam* ».

⁵⁰ « Je me suis fait recevoir comme un poisson pourri ! Je parlais pas l’arabe. Je suis arrivée, on m’a parlé en arabe, donc déjà ça m’a mis très mal à l’aise parce que je leur ai dit ‘je parle pas l’arabe’, et c’était limite ‘bah qu’est-ce que tu fais là si tu parles pas l’arabe ?’ ».

⁵¹ « Tu vas à la mosquée de Paris, tu comprends rien, quoi ! Et ça aussi, c’est pas possible ! Tu vois, c’est vraiment pas possible ! Merde ! ça me met vraiment en colère. Tu te dis ‘mais vous êtes sérieux ???!’ vous parlez pour qui en fait ?’ pour les Arabes ? déjà les trois quarts qui sont musulmans, même d’autres pays, ils ne comprennent rien. Mort de rire, quoi ! »

context and architecture: separate rooms; same room divided with a curtain; same room with a balcony for women, etc.⁵² In his American mosque report, Bagby (2012b) found that “two thirds (66%) of mosques use dividers to demarcate women’s prayer spaces.” Although similar data on French mosques could not be found, the issue of gender segregation was controversial among my interviewees in both countries. Some female converts considered it perfectly normal and acceptable, and would not have wanted things to be different. They understood gender relationships to be imbued with seduction and sexuality and wanted to isolate themselves in order to best focus on their spiritual practice. “It is best to be only amongst women for such things,⁵³” said Roxanne (30, social worker, Marseille). For some, the female prayer space was akin to the *hammam*, where women meet, discuss and rest, away from the male gaze. Other interviewees, however, were disturbed by gender segregation, which they thought essentialized them as women. Françoise (74, retired English teacher, Paris), said: “the mosque in France is a tough place for me. I have the impression that I am just a sex!⁵⁴” In their view, it also contradicted the prophetic example: several of my interviewees mentioned that men and women prayed together in the mosque of the Prophet back in the 7th century. Overall, whether they were in favor or not of gender segregation, most of my female interviewees complained about the state of their prayer spaces, which were often too small and packed, and at times dark, windowless and dirty. The sermon of the imam was often broadcasted on TV or through a loudspeaker in the women’s room, which came with its bundle of technical problems (sound, image, electricity cuts, etc.). Children also generally came with their mothers to the female prayer space, which significantly increased the noise level. Inappropriate prayer spaces, therefore, took a toll on female converts’ spiritual practice. When we mentioned the topic of female prayer spaces, Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), who tried during several years to diligently go to the mosque until she could not take it anymore, exploded: “It is unbearable for me now. It is all screwed; I am not going to step a damn foot in a mosque again. I am not a rat; I don’t want to pray in a cave. If you can’t even make room for us, I prefer to stay at home, go fuck yourselves.⁵⁵” Pauline was particularly angry because our interview occurred not long after the Grand Mosque of Paris decided to move the women’s prayer space to the basement (women used to pray behind men in the main room). The episode sparked a huge controversy as some women rebelled against it and there was even a scuffle in the mosque (Ben Rhouma, 2013). Some of my female interviewees also reported that on a few occasions they had literally been prevented from praying at the mosque. Wanda (32, travel consultant, Lille) narrated how she missed the Id prayer once because the women’s room was closed for maintenance and she was not allowed in the men’s space. Having negotiated with her boss to change her work schedule on purpose, she was so frustrated about the whole thing that she went home crying. Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris) also recounted how she and a friend of

⁵² The blog SideEntrance compiles pictures of women’s spaces in mosques, as compared to men’s spaces. It features both good and bad examples (“we show the beautiful, the adequate and the pathetic,” says the blog disclaimer).

⁵³ « On est quand même mieux qu’entre femmes pour ces choses-là, pour prier ».

⁵⁴ « Ici, en France, la mosquée c’est un lieu difficile pour moi ! Je sais pas... j’avais l’impression que j’étais qu’un sexe ! »

⁵⁵ « C’est juste insupportable, pour moi maintenant. C’est foutu, je fous plus les pieds dans les mosquées. Tu vois avant, je trouvais des excuses, mais maintenant non, je peux pas me mentir à moi-même. Je suis pas un rat, j’ai pas envie d’être à la cave donc... si vous êtes pas foutus de nous faire une place, je préfère rester chez moi, allez vous faire foutre, quoi ».

hers had to pray in a park, hidden behind bushes, because the women’s room of their mosque was locked. None of the men in the building had the keys, none of them offered them to pray in the men’s space and they also refused that they prayed in the courtyard. Eleonore, who made a point of always doing her prayers on time, experienced the situation as an intolerable infringement on her religious rights as a Muslim woman. She reported her conversation with the mosque guardian: “I told him ‘you are my brother in Islam, for the sake of God, can you help me find a space to pray? I too have duties towards God and I am asking you to help me.’ He wouldn’t have any of it. He stared at his socks. And then he showed me once again the sign ‘women’s room closed’ and told me to go to another mosque, which we never found.⁵⁶” Eleonore was astounded by the episode. Because of these various obstacles, women’s presence in mosques tends to be limited.⁵⁷

For all the reasons exposed above, many converts in my sample stopped going to the mosque altogether. They became “unmosqued” Muslims, who practiced the faith at home or with their friends, but did not attend Muslim community events. Such absence stretched thin their links to other Muslims, which were also jeopardized by another phenomenon: the *haram* police.

3) “*Haram* police” and “religious trauma”

When I asked Aisha (37, housewife, Paris) to describe her relationships with fellow Muslims, she paused, smiled and eventually said: “the Muslim community is like a very large family that meddles in everything, with all the good things and bad things that it implies.⁵⁸” Among the bad things was what several interviewees and participants in my ethnography jokingly referred to as “the *haram* police” (also see Turner, forthcoming). To help new converts understand what the *haram* police was, John, during one of his classes at *American Da’wah*, recounted an incident he and a convert friend of his experienced in a mosque: “my friend Ram is a Hindu who converted to Islam. He has tattoos everywhere, even on his lips. One day he was in a *masjid* doing *wudu**, and some old dude came to him, pointed his finger at him and shamed him saying “*astaghfirullah, astahfirullah, astaghfirullah*” with his arm moving like an energized bunny. This is the *haram* police.” At this point of the story, Deborah, a recently converted woman from Italy walked into the classroom. John immediately integrated her to the conversation by asking: “Deborah, do you know what the *haram police* is?” Deborah burst into laughter and said “I don’t know what they are! But I can guess!” Indeed, many converts in the room had

⁵⁶ « Je lui dis ‘toi, t’es mon frère en islam, par rapport à Dieu, est-ce que tu peux me trouver un endroit ? J’ai des obligations aussi par rapport à Dieu, quelque part je te demande de m’aider, est-ce que tu peux m’aider ?’ Il a rien voulu savoir ! Il me répondait pas ! Et il regardait ses chaussettes ! Il nous a renvoyées, à nous dire ‘allez là-bas, il y a une mosquée’ On a jamais trouvé la mosquée ! Et on s’est retrouvées à se cacher dans un parc entre deux buissons ».

⁵⁷ Babgy (2012b) reported “an average of 18% female attendance at Friday prayers” in American mosques (as opposed to 77% for men). He also estimated that “most mosques (63%) score ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ on a scale for a women-friendly mosque,” which he defines as the combination of four indicators: having female attendance on Friday above the average of 18%; not having a barrier separating women from the main prayer area; having women’s programs and/or women’s group, and having women serving on the mosque board. He noted that Shi’a and African-American mosques tended to be more women-friendly than others. The report identified many avenues for improvement in this regard.

⁵⁸ « La communauté, c’est une grraaaaande famille qui se mêle de tout avec les problèmes et les bonnes choses que ça implique ».

smiled and nodded in recognition of what John was talking about. They all had had encounters with the *haram* police in one form or another. A young woman who had come for the first time that night even exclaimed: “the *haram* police! That might be my new favorite term!”⁵⁹”

In a nutshell, the term “*haram* police” generically refers to some particularly rigid Muslims who walk around in mosques tracking the slightest mistake from their coreligionists and vehemently chastise them, with the intention of shaming rather than gently correcting. In general, the *haram* police focus on petty details linked to outward appearance and behavior (dress, size of beard or *hijab*, position during prayer, eating with your right hand, entering the mosque with your right foot, entering the bathroom with your left foot, wearing socks or not during prayer, etc.). In the case of Ram, who got his tattoos long before he converted to Islam, he was pointed at and attacked by a man he did not know, because tattoos are considered impermissible by some interpretative branches of Islam. Instead of gently explaining the Islamic ruling on tattoos, the man simply despised him for not following what he understood as the proper way of practicing Islam. In the speech of my interviewees, the typical member of the *haram* police was an old Indo-Pakistani or Arab man (or a fat and bitter lady) who never smiled and spoke with a strong accent (for an analysis of converts’ essentializing views on first generation immigrant Muslims, see Chapter 7).

While the *haram* police progressively became part of converts’ discourse as something to laugh at or to ignore rather than to fear, many of my interviewees reported being affected by it and complained that the tough comments they received from unsensitive coreligionists had taken a toll on their spiritual practice. Several interviewees recalled being corrected on their outfit or position while performing prayers. Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris) remembered how one day she was thrown a pair of socks at while praying in a mosque and told to “put her socks on to pray!” She said it was very violent.⁶⁰ John also reported at an *American Da’wah* meeting a story about praying at the mosque when he was still a brand-new Muslim. That day, he had forgotten to roll his pants above his ankles.⁶¹ “I was praying and someone came behind me and rolled my pants up! I was surprised and I stopped my prayer!”⁶² On another occasion, he said that one day at the mosque, he “saw someone entering the prayer room with his left foot. Someone else took him, asked him to back up and re-enter with his right foot!”⁶³ Such interferences with religious practice were perceived as intrusive and a number of my interviewees told me they were exhausted by the endless lecturing comments they received in mosques. Some converts also reported exaggerate demands made on them. Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago) reported for instance how a friend of hers was given “a list of *halal* and *haram* body lotions according to the alcohol content” right after

⁵⁹ Fieldnotes October 20th, 2013.

⁶⁰ « C’est violent quoi ! ‘Mets tes chaussettes pour la prière !’ »

⁶¹ For some interpretative branches of Islam (especially Salafism), hiding one’s ankles is a sign of pride and arrogance, while showing them demonstrates humbleness and submission to the will of God.

⁶² Fieldnotes, October 10th, 2013.

⁶³ This is in reference to a *hadith* that the Prophet Muhammad always started everything with his right foot and right hand (except impure things, which he performed with his left foot or hand).

her *shahada*, as if it was the most important thing in the world. This obsession for small details displayed by some Muslims was described as absurd and irritating.

Women in general and female converts in particular were especially vulnerable to comments on their dress and outward appearance. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) recounted how she was called out for wearing nail polish the first time she went to the mosque:⁶⁴ “it took me a couple of years to go to Friday prayer. I was so nervous of screwing up, I felt so uncomfortable, and it’s like nobody would talk to me, you know, it was so hard! And finally, finally somebody came to me to talk to me: ‘Sister!!! You know, you can’t wear nail polish, your prayers are not counted if you wear nail polish!’” Looking for bonding and friendship, Mary was discouraged by the pettiness of the comments she received about her nail polish. Capucine (26, unemployed, Paris) reported a similar encounter:

They keep looking at your appearance to check whether you are orthodox in every respect. “You know sister, nail polish is forbidden.” “You know sister, this is how you should be doing things.” “You know, sister...” And I know it comes from a good intention but... A few months ago, I went to a *salat al-janazah* [funeral prayer] for the first time. After it was over, I was talking to a group of girls when one woman came up to me. She was younger than me and wearing the *niqab**. And she told me “you know sister, camel humps⁶⁵ are forbidden in Islam.” I had to take a deep breath. You just buried a woman; you are remembering that today you are alive and tomorrow you too will be dead; and you have nothing else to do but to look at my camel hump??? I was very upset. It is always like that in mosques: ‘you are a convert so we are going to teach you the religion: the length of your skirt is not appropriate; your tights are a bit too openwork; be careful with your bun: it indicates that you have very long hair and it might excite men’s desires, etc.’ Damn! If a man is excited because of my bun, he’d better start questioning himself!⁶⁶

⁶⁴ According to some interpretations, nail polish prevents water from reaching the surface of the nail during *wudu*, thereby invalidating both the *wudu* and subsequent prayer (the hands are body parts that must be purified during *wudu* through full encounter with water). In line with this interpretation, a conservative mosque in Chicago, for instance, provides cotton and nail polish remover in the women’s bathroom. As a solution to this problem, Muslim women who believe in this ruling can, since recently, use a new brand of “breathable” nail polish that allows air and moisture to reach the nail, as mentioned in the Muslim fashion and lifestyle magazine *Aquila Style* (Fitriati, 2013).

⁶⁵ The term “camel hump” refers to the bump that some women wearing *hijab* have at the back of their head. It is either due to their normal hair bun or ponytail, or because they add big scrunchies to create volume. Some interpretations of Islam consider it *haram* because it is suggestive of a woman’s beauty. For a discussion of this controversy, see the Muslim fashion and lifestyle magazine *Aquila Style* (Taha, 2014).

⁶⁶ « Ils te regardent, ton apparence, pour voir si t’es orthodoxe en tous points. ‘Tu sais ma sœur, le vernis à ongles c’est interdit’, ‘Ah tu sais ma sœur c’est pas comme ça qu’il faut faire’, ‘Ah tu sais ma sœur ‘... Alors ça part d’un bon sentiment, quoi. Une fois il y a quelques mois, j’ai pour la première fois fait une *salat al-janazah*... Bon, on termine, j’étais en train de discuter avec un groupe de filles et une femme qui vient me voir... Elle devait être plus jeune que moi et en *niqab*, Et elle vient me voir et me dit ‘oui tu sais ma sœur, tu es peut-être au courant mais les bosses de chameau c’est interdit dans l’Islam’. Il a fallu que je respire avant de lui répondre, parce que j’étais là ‘mais...enfin tu viens d’enterrer une femme qui vient de mourir quoi ! et t’es en train de te rappeler que aujourd’hui je suis vivante, demain je serai morte, et toi t’es en train de regarder ma bosse de chameau quoi !’ Et ça m’a juste soulé. C’est vrai que c’est quelque chose qui m’a beaucoup gonflé d’aller dans une mosquée, parce que il y a toujours ce truc-là de ‘bon t’es convertie, donc on va t’apprendre la religion, donc voilà c’est ça, c’est ça, la longueur de ta jupe n’est pas adéquate, tes collants ils sont un peu trop ajourés, c’est pas bien, fais attention tes chignons, on voit que t’as des cheveux très longs, ça risque d’exciter les hommes... ‘ Mais punaise mais s’il y a un mec qui est excité parce que j’ai un chignon mais franchement il faut se poser des questions, quoi ! »

While Capucine was trying to reflect about the meaning of life and death, the shaming comment she received about her *hijab* wrapping style felt like an aggression. The essential meaning of religion, which in her view is about inner reflection, was blurred by injunctions about external appearance.

In those circumstances, mosques become anxiety-provoking spaces for converts who are continually forward thinking about making a *faux pas*. As a result, the interpellation “sister” or “brother,” which converts had been passionately longing for in their quest for community, is welcomed with wariness and apprehension, since it often predates a lengthy homily about everything they are doing wrong. Rachel (30, translator, Paris), who wears the *hijab* and is an avid *hookah* smoker, has become accustomed to admonitions from her coreligionists when she indulges in her favorite pastime in public, on the ground that veiled Muslim women are not supposed to smoke. She learned from experience that when someone approaches her by saying “excuse me, sister...,” she is in for a long moment of lecturing and chastisement. Therefore, before they even start talking, she now preemptively replies: “sorry, but the last time I checked my family record book, I had only one blood brother. And it wasn’t you [laughs]⁶⁷” Invocations of brotherhood and sisterhood are now met with circumspection, since converts have come to consider that the title “sister” or “brother” is used as a prelude to impose rigid views on them. This makes a serious dent in the concept of Islamic brotherhood or sisterhood.

At times, disparaging comments made by the *haram* police have life-long consequences, as converts, striving to do well, blindly follow the piece of advice given to them. Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago), who had once envisioned a career in theater, told me how she brutally put a stop to her ambitions when some of her coreligionists told her theater was *haram*. She was much frustrated when years later she came across the *Hijabi Monologues*, a concept created in 2006 in Chicago and inspired from the *Vagina Monologues* (1996), which aims at creating a theater space for the experiences of Muslim women through story-telling and on-stage performance. Alisha realized she could have worked a solution to fruitfully combine her faith and passion. Bitter that she had to give up a potential vocation based on unsensitive advice, she recalled: “no one ever said to me ‘maybe there is a way which this can be done.’ Again, you got people just saying ‘Haram! That’s *haram*! Don’t do it. That’s *haram*.’” At this point of the interview, Alisha talked about “spiritual rape” and “religious trauma” and mentioned the documentary *Wayward Son* (2013) by Mustafa Davis, which describes the journey of Jordan Richter, a promising skateboarder and American convert to Islam, who gave up his career in skateboard in 1995 when he was told by fellow Muslims that it was *haram*. After a 15 year-long spell in the wilderness, Richter eventually resumed skateboarding but held a grudge against those who had deprived him from his favorite hobby based on rigid religious assumptions.

⁶⁷ « Alors la dernière fois que j’ai vérifié sur mon livret de famille, j’avais qu’un seul frère et c’était pas toi ! (rires) ».



Figure 13 – The *Haram* Police

In the documentary *Wayward Son* (2013), skateboarder Jordan Richter bitterly talks about his experience with the *haram* police: “These dudes pushed their version of Islam on me, bro. (...) That’s what I am angry about: the treatment from people who are putting unruly pressure on a revert to embrace this whole system overnight! And just rip them away from everything. They have become pet Muslims! ‘This is my pet. I have a dog, you can put a sweater on the dog, you put sunglasses, you put a little hat and you sit the dog in a Porsche.’ So you are putting clothes on us, you put a mentality on us, that we are not ready for! And if you do that, a person will end up angry later on when they realize what’s being done, how they have been treated or deceived, or used as a guinea pig. And that’s essentially what I experienced.”

Rightly or wrongly, Jordan Richter feels he has been deceived as a convert and “used as a pet” by fellow Muslims who tried to “fix” every little aspect of his behavior before even teaching him the very basics of the religion. He complained that he had been stripped from his “spiritual evolution” and left with no breathing room to grow. In a similar fashion, Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago) protested about the attitude of a Pakistani friend of hers who started correcting everything she was doing to transform her into a perfectly orthodox Muslim. She almost felt like a Barbie doll in her hands: “I am her project, because I am the new convert.” Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) also reported a similar sentiment: “I feel like I am in the microscope and they are just nitpicking like: ‘what can I tell her? What can I correct?’ And it’s just very very frustrating.”

Because of the *haram* police, converts found themselves projected into a world where the dichotomy *halal/haram* was paramount, obscuring other aspects of the religion. The realm of the *haram* was particularly prominent. Thus, when John asked his beginner students whether they had heard about the words *halal* and *haram*, one of the participants, a middle-aged woman of Cameroonian descent who converted from Christianity, said in a weary tone of voice: “yeah... but more often about *haram* than *halal*,” which sparked an outburst of laughter in the classroom.⁶⁸ For some of my interviewees, the *haram* police was symptomatic of a larger downward slide of Islam, which increasingly focuses on norms, laws and outward details to the detriment of spirituality and inner reform. During a class at *American Da’wah*, John also lamented about the spiritual state of his community:

⁶⁸ Fieldnotes, April 21st, 2013.

You know as a community organizer, I receive a lot of emails from converts. And when I read these emails I think “Allah forgive us!” Because the things that come back all the time are identity issues. We never talk about God. Converts’ main concerns are: “should I have a beard, should I wear *hijab*, should I change my name?” It is like Muslims are this little gang, with strict rules, very narrow minded. Allah forgive us. This is not how things should be.⁶⁹

In sum, the Muslim community did not correspond to what converts had fantasized. In their search for brotherhood and sisterhood, converts frequently encountered bad experiences that left them disappointed and bitter. They either were not taken seriously as Muslims, found mosques to be unwelcoming or were spiritually traumatized by some of their coreligionists. Their rite of passage had a flavor of incompleteness; their liminal persona was prevailing.

C. THE COSTS OF LIMINALITY: LONELINESS AND “CONVERTITIS”

Taken together, the above two sections draw a dark picture of converts’ sociability: not only are they shunned by their family and eschewed by their friends, they are also unable to fully connect with their coreligionists and thrive in Muslim community spaces. Imperfectly belonging to neither world, converts are stuck in a liminal position. Shahada (31, accountant, St. Louis) reflected during her interview on the precariousness of her status as a “double stranger:” “a lot of converts still have one foot in the world, one foot in Islam. And there is no tolerance for two-sidedness.” As she underlined, liminality comes with a set of costs. The two most prevailing costs I encountered through my interviews and ethnography were the issue of loneliness and that of “convertitis,” a convert-specific condition that manifests itself through an obsession over legal matters and formal codes of conduct.

1) Praying Alone: Liminality as Social Death

I first start by describing the drastic decline in social capital and sociable interactions experienced by converts, as they grow apart from their friends and families while remaining imperfectly integrated into the Muslim community. Social capital is here understood as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes, 1998). In *Bowling Alone* (2000: 16), Robert D. Putnam broadly defines it as “the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them,” adding that “those tangible substances, namely good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse count for most in the daily lives of people.” Without delving into the details of Putnam’s study, I simply appropriate the title of his book to argue that the experience of conversion to Islam in France and the US is first and foremost one of loneliness. Relinquished by their families and entertaining ambiguous relationships to their coreligionists, converts often have to “pray alone.” This is both surprising and ironic since, in the US at least, “it has become now almost a cliché that religion generates more social capital than any other American institution,” and the “sociological evidence linking evidence to social capital

⁶⁹ Fieldnotes, October 20th, 2013.

seems overwhelming” (Coleman, 2003). I argue that the entry into Islam fails to generate the expected religious social capital (or “brotherhood”) because of converts’ permanent liminal status.

The issue of loneliness was recurring in my interviews and said to be central to the experience of conversion. American convert and renowned imam Suhaib Webb once publicly declared at a conference that “*converts embrace a religion of loneliness.*”⁷⁰ In line with this statement, a large number of converts in my sample told me they had practiced the religion completely on their own for lengthy periods of time. Mia (37, school teacher and artist, Chicago) declared for instance: “I went years being the only Muslim that I saw.” Some converts became full introverts. David (31, unemployed, Chicago) summed up as such the dilemma he was facing: “I either have to hang out with the orthodox Muslims or I can go back and hang out with the people I grew up with and it is like ‘OK, yeah, sex, drugs and rock’ n’ roll.’ You know, I have no choice. So I have just been a hermit for like ten years. (...) I feel very sheltered and alone.” To illustrate how isolated he felt, David had brought with him a map of the greater Chicago area, in which he had highlighted his residence in a remote suburb and the location of the various mosques and Muslim prayer spaces. He emphasized that he had to commute an hour and a half to reach some of the nice mosques of the Chicago area, which was pointless given that the prayers and sermon lasted 15 minutes. Unsatisfied with his own local suburban community, David simply withdrew into his shell. The issue of loneliness was particularly acute in the US, where the Muslim community is smaller and more spatially scattered.

Loneliness became a salient issue when it came to religious practice. Several interviewees emphasized that Islam was not “meant to be practiced alone” (Elizabeth, Chicago), that you “couldn’t do it by yourself” (Marta, Chicago), and confessed their difficulties. Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris), who struggled at first to learn how to pray, said: “I didn’t know where to start, I didn’t know a lot of Muslims, I didn’t know who to talk to. I was lost, lost, lost.”⁷¹ Rita (27, unemployed, Paris) admitted that after leaving the Muslim family where she had converted in Senegal, she could not stick much longer to Islamic rules and practices: “I came back to France and I had to keep up with everything on my own. It lasted a few months and then you bet I was back with my friends smoking joints and so forth.”⁷² Sustaining a religious practice without community support neared the impossible. Celebrating Muslim religious festivals alone was also particularly tough. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) reported that her first Ramadan was pathetically lonely: “every single night, I was alone in my apartment, breaking my fast with Cocoa Puffs while watching ‘Seinfeld’ or eating *Cheerios* and ice cream and brownies while playing with my cat, and stupid things like that. So lonely, miserable, awful. Hated it!” Overall, converts prayed alone, fasted alone and celebrated Islamic festivals alone, while their relatives ostensibly ignored their practices and their fellow Muslims looked the other way. We are touching here on the contradictions inherent to the

⁷⁰ Conference organized by the Northwestern Muslim Student Association in Chicago (MSA) on November 21st, 2013.

⁷¹ « Je savais pas par où commencer, je connaissais pas beaucoup de musulmans, je savais pas à qui en parler, en fait. Donc j’étais perdue, perdue, perdue, perdue ».

⁷² « Je suis rentrée en France et il a fallu que je me tienne toute seule, quoi ! donc ça duré quelques mois et puis après tu parles que j’étais repartie avec les copains à fumer des joints et compagnie, quoi ! »

rhetoric of religious individualism: while converts insist on their self-reliance when it comes to religious choice, they confess their lacunas when it comes to religious practice.

2) “Convertitis:” Liminality and “Religious Burn-Out”

Apart from loneliness and seclusion, some converts in my sample were afflicted by another social illness stemming from their uneasy liminal status. This illness has been named “*convertitis*” by British convert to Islam Timothy Winter *aka* Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad, who said in a 1997 conference that: “The initial and quite understandable response of many newcomers is to become an absolutist. This mindset is sometimes called ‘convertitis.’ It is a common illness, which can make those who have caught it rather difficult to deal with. Fortunately, it almost always wears off” (Murad, 2014 [1997]). In a nutshell, the amusing neologism of *convertitis* was coined to designate the oftentimes absolutist behavior adopted by some overzealous converts at the beginning of their entry into Islam, as they strive to incorporate all new religious norms at once and become “perfect Muslims” overnight (also see Jensen, 2006). Building on Tim Winter’s elaborations, American convert Saraji Umm Zaid cautioned in a blogpost new converts about the dangers of contracting *convertitis*:

What is Convertitis? Convertitis is a highly contagious disease, which spreads rapidly among converts to Islam, particularly those who are experiencing great amounts of confusion, but who don’t think they are.

What Are the Symptoms of Convertitis? The new Muslim who is suffering from this terrible disease is easily recognizable within the community. You will notice a radical change in appearance, almost immediately: from “regular clothes” to full *niqab* or *kunfi** and *thawb**. Often walking around with a *miswak**. Starts peppering their language full of Arabic-isms they either don’t really know or can’t pronounce (Umm Zaid, 2003).

Given its wide cultural appeal and terminological use among Muslims, it appears necessary to account for the phenomenon of *convertitis* sociologically. In her study of female converts in Australia, anthropologist Karen Turner (forthcoming) has aptly argued that “this phenomenon is not just a fanaticism or fervor in the early stages, but an embodied response to the experience of liminality and ambiguity that engulfs converts as they become Muslim.” Redefining conversion as an “awkward engagement,” implying boundary crossing and in-betweenness, she convincingly suggests that some converts adopt literalist, black-and-white interpretations of their religion, with a strong focus on the distinction between *halal* and *haram*, in order to mitigate the uncertainties inherent to their liminal position. This also implies preserving themselves from any contamination coming from the non-Muslim world. These converts, who at times become zealous members of the *haram* police themselves, enshrine their religious transformation into rigid and conspicuous practice in order to distinguish themselves from their previous social environment (families, friends) and prove their Muslimness to their coreligionists. By overperforming their religiosity, they intend to shrink the liminal phase and accelerate the completion of their rite of passage.

As put by Timothy Winter, “fortunately, [this disease] almost always wears off.” In my sample, I encountered a lot of converts who had, on their own admission, suffered from *convertitis* early on in their journey and progressively softened their practice over time. Julia (23, student Chicago) reported for instance how she became obsessed with

prayer at the beginning of her conversion before eventually adopting a more relaxed approach to it: “I wouldn’t leave the house sometimes, because I was like ‘what if I am not back in time or in a place where I can pray?’ I was terrified to miss a prayer. Now I realize that was probably a little excessive.” Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) also recounted: “in my beginning years of being Muslim, I was very uptight because I felt, literally, the weight of the entire religion to be really on me. (...) I was so strict with myself. I was just trying so hard to do everything so perfect. And then I was like ‘you know what? I need to really relax! I need to just calm down and chillax!’” Many interviewees looked back on their first conversion stages with humor and embarrassment.

Some reported going through some severe “religious burn-out” after they incorporated all at once a series of demanding religious practices. Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) said he “changed drastically” and went from “drinking every evening” to “praying five times a day.”⁷³ He said that lasted for 15 days, until he exploded and felt the need to drink again. Fred (28, student, Chicago) willingly admitted that: “I would get very zealous about things and I would try to do everything at once and it would burn me out a little bit, you know. I was trying to pray, do the extra prayers, and do this, and learn this, and... I overburdened myself.” Fred’s assessment was echoed in an interview I conducted with Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille), a French convert who is now in charge of accompanying recent converts at the mosque and is particularly aware of their struggles: “when you are new to Islam, you are quite perfectionist. You want to do everything right and you feel like you have time to make up. So you tend to leapfrog stages and impose things on yourself that you actually don’t need to. Me for instance, at the beginning of my conversion, I was praying on a prayer rug and I thought that if I stepped outside the rug, I would have to start my prayer all over. I was quite obtuse.”⁷⁴ Like Benjamin and his prayer rug, several converts mentioned how they started preoccupying themselves with small issues, such as Rita (27, unemployed, Paris) who wondered for a while whether the figures printed on her daughter’s pajamas were *haram*,⁷⁵ or Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) who began questioning himself as to whether he was supposed to kiss his female family members on the cheek or not. These interrogations, which were central at the beginning of their conversion, now seemed absurd and superfluous to them.

Several interviewees told me how they underwent radical life changes overnight, which often implied brutally getting rid of former habits and hobbies, or severing ties with friends and family. At a meeting of *Bienvenue en islam*, female president Maryam negatively mentioned the example of a young female convert who burst into her parents’ house right after her conversion, went directly to their cellar and threw away all the ham and sausage she could find. Her parents gave her an incredulous look: “are you done?,” they said. It took 10 years to rebuild the trust with them. Maryam instructed recent

⁷³ « J’étais passé du tout au tout, j’étais passé du ‘je bois tous les soirs’ à ‘je fais la prière’, euh... du coup... pendant 15 jours, une semaine, j’avais vraiment besoin de m’alcooliser ! (rires) Et bon j’ai relâché aussitôt ».

⁷⁴ « Lorsqu’on vient dans une nouvelle discipline ou lorsqu’on entre en islam par exemple, on est assez perfectionniste, on veut tout bien faire et on a l’impression d’avoir du temps à rattraper. On grille parfois les étapes. Et on s’impose des choses qu’on n’a pas à s’imposer en fait. Moi l’exemple que je me dis toujours, c’est au tout début quand j’ai prié, je priais sur un tapis de prière et je pensais que si je sortais de ce tapis, il fallait que je recommence ma prière par exemple. Donc j’étais vraiment assez obtus ».

⁷⁵ Some interpretative branches of Islam consider figurative art is not permissible.

converts not to go to such extremes.⁷⁶ David (31, unemployed, Chicago) also reported that the “issue of music became obsessional” to him to the point that he threw away his entire music collection in the first months of his conversion, a decision he regretted afterwards: “I had, like, a CD collection with 500 CDs. Got rid of it all. Got rid of my computer. Got rid of my TV. I completely got rid of everything.” Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris) also told me how she panicked at some point and envisioned leaving her entire life behind to be able to practice Islam diligently: “I thought I needed a radical rupture. There were times where I was thinking OK, I am going to go live in Egypt, I will wear a full veil and I won’t talk to any of the persons who used to know me, I will disappear and reappear under a new identity in a new life.⁷⁷” Fanny eventually realized this was not necessary after meeting happy Muslims living in France. In sum, converts infected with convertitis became more Catholic than the pope, such as Vanessa (40, hairdresser, Lille), who went working in Saudi Arabia shortly after her conversion. In her interview, she described how she drove her Saudi co-workers crazy at the hair salon as she would systematically turn the music or the TV off and pester them to get lined up when it was the beginning of prayer time: “I was constantly nagging them,⁷⁸” she said. She also put on the full veil, with gloves, which caused her to suffocate at times when she realized she won’t be able to touch anything in public (fruits, fabrics, etc.). Her new outfit also profoundly disturbed her family when she came back to France: “it was a physical shock to them. I heard my brother say: ‘that day I lost my sister. My sister was dead.’” Vanessa now wears a more conventional *jilbab** that lets her face clear: her stage of convertitis has faded but it has alienated many of her friends and colleagues.

In the period of “convertitis,” converts’ religious practice nears the obsessive. One day, as I was walking into the bathroom of the Parisian suburban mosque, I encountered a young woman facing the washstand with a confused and anxious look on her face. I inferred she was a convert because she was young, blond, pale-skinned and looked very stressed out. She asked me if I could help her perform her ablutions. Since we were the only two women in the bathroom and I had myself learned the moves for *wudu**, I agreed to offer my help. She told me she needed someone to stand next to her and watch her doing her ablutions, otherwise the *shaytan** [devil] would whisper in her ear and prevent her from successfully purifying herself before prayer. As she started pouring water on her right hand, I nodded in sign of encouragement, but she immediately stopped, worried that the water was not covering her entire hand. She confessed that she was always apprehensive of spoiling her ablutions, which at times led her to perform the same gesture ten times in a row and spend a lot of time in the bathroom: “I feel I am never clean enough,” she said. As I slowly realized that I would not be in a position to actually help this young lady since there are limits to my patience and even greater limits to my ability to offer psychological or theological advice, an older Muslim woman entered the bathroom, quickly poured some water on her head, smiled and told her: “don’t worry, honey! It is not a big deal if it’s not perfect. What truly matters is your intention!” The young convert did not seem convinced either by this woman’s relaxed approach or by my

⁷⁶ Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2016.

⁷⁷ « Il fallait faire une rupture radicale... en fait il y avait des moments où je pensais je pars vivre en Egypte, je mets le voile intégral, je parlerai plus jamais à aucune des personnes qui m’ont connues... je disparaissais en fait, je disparaissais complètement et je réapparais sous une autre identité et dans une autre vie quoi ! »

⁷⁸ « Il a dit, je l’ai entendu, ‘pour moi ma sœur était morte, j’ai perdu ma sœur ce jour-là’. Ça a vraiment été un choc physique ».

standing still next to her, and she decided to call a Muslim friend of hers on the phone. I left the bathroom perplexed. In my view, this convert's understanding of purification through water was akin to an obsessive-compulsive disorder and I resorted to a pathologizing explanation of her behavior.⁷⁹ It is only as I progressed in my research that I realized I had had a first-hand encounter with a case of convertitis, which could be sociologically accounted for by the concept of liminality. In negotiating her liminal status, this convert strove for perfection in every Islamic thing she did, thereby placing a considerable burden on herself. Interestingly, American convert and writer Michael Muhammad Knight reported similar problems in his early years as a Muslim (he converted at age 15 and traveled to Pakistan to study Islam at 17). In his autobiographical account *Blue-Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey Through Islamic America* (2006: 27-28), he recounted how he became overtly worried about spilling small drops of urine during prayer, which would break his state of purity:⁸⁰

Early on in Pakistan, I became obsessive-compulsive over my *wudu*. (...) I'd get up, walk back down to the *wudu* faucets, wash, and walk back to do it all over again. [But] what if I had leaked and didn't know? (...) I'd keep going to the bathroom to check my pants. I cut back on liquids and went to the bathroom a few dozen times each day, shaking and wiggling and even squeezing to remove any little drop that might have been in there. Before long it made prayer almost impossible; I no longer thought of my Creator while praying, I meditated only on my own urethra. More than once I left a *salat* [prayer] feeling the urgent need to urinate, but when I got to the bathroom nothing would come out.

Knight's obsession with purity and discipline during his first years as a Muslim manifested itself through his complicated relationships to ablutions, urine and cleanliness.

The preoccupation with *wudu* was in fact recurring throughout my fieldwork. At the female beginner's class taught by Aisha (37, housewife, Paris), it was a matter of constant concern. New converts in particular worried about the various things that might invalidate their *wudu* and asked countless questions about it, much to the despair of Aisha who wanted to talk about deeper topics. Among the things that converts felt could nullify their ablutions was: touching dogs, changing baby diapers, stepping foot into the bathroom, having a runny nose. Aisha patiently confirmed that none of these things jeopardized the state of purity and that it was not necessary to perform *wudu* again. At some point, a young convert timidly raised her hand and asked: "I was told that if a man touches you, you have to redo your ablution." She said she felt the need to do so after a man had inadvertently brushed her forearm in the metro. Aisha started losing her temper and explained that the word "touch" in Arabic meant having actual sexual contact, not touching per se. She added: "so unless that guy who brushed your hand was Brad Pitt and you felt all excited about it, you do not need to perform your *wudu* again!!!" She closed the topic by gently chastising her new students for being too hard on themselves.⁸¹ The class offered a good illustration of the uncalled-for zeal often displayed by some converts on minor topics of *fiqh** [law] at the beginning of their entry into Islam.

⁷⁹ Fieldnotes, October 1st, 2014.

⁸⁰ Among the things that nullify *wudu* according to dominant Islamic rulings are: sleep, sexual intercourse, fainting, being intoxicated by alcohol or other substances, vomiting, bleeding intensely and anything liquid or solid coming out from the front or back passage (urine, blood, sperm, etc.).

⁸¹ Fieldnotes, February 22nd, 2015.

Yet, I argue that the focus on *wudu*, which involves considerations on ritual purity, is not insignificant. Rather, the fear of impurity, dirt and contagion is a common attribute of liminal personas. We know since the seminal study of Mary Douglas (2009 [1966]: 2) that “dirt is essentially disorder” and that “eliminating it is not a negative movement but a positive effort to organize the environment.” What may be at first understood as pathological obsessions over norms and rituals derives in fact from converts’ uncertain status as newcomers to the fold. As noted by Turner (1964), building on Douglas’ work in his developments on liminality, “what is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean.” Convertitis can therefore be explained with the tools of anthropology and sociology, instead of psychology.⁸² The precarious position of those who do not master all the rules and requirements of their new religion leads them to focus on ritual matters of purity and impurity in order to ensure boundary maintenance and escape the state of liminality. Pollution beliefs are used by converts to make claims about their new religious status and prove their seriousness to their families, their coreligionists and themselves.

Several interviewees described how their phase of convertitis had ultimately taken a toll on their spirituality. Lisa (23, school teacher, Chicago) confessed during a discussion group at *American Da’wah*: “I guess one of my biggest struggles since I converted was that I focused on being a better Muslim, do the rituals, look like a Muslim and I left God in the back of my mind.”⁸³ Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) explained how he also lost himself in the process: “I tried to leave everything behind: cut off TV, cut off music, cut off movies, change my clothes, cut off all the family. You know, completely cut everything out. And then I ended up feeling like ‘who am I? who did I become?’” Pablo (22, student, Chicago) also talked about how he went through a “month of extremism” at the beginning of his conversion and said “sometimes I take it so serious that I lose the reason why I converted to the religion in the first place.” These converts presented their obsession with norms, external appearance and codification of conduct as detrimental to their inner religiosity and sense of self.

Yet, as Mary Douglas (2009 [1966]: 76-80) has argued, we should beware of “the tendency to suppose that any ritual is empty form and that any external religion betrays true interior religion.” For Douglas, this “anti-ritualist prejudice” stems from the various waves of Protestant reform which “thundered against the empty encrustation of ritual” and promoted the “need for continual watch on the tendency of ritual form to harden and replace religious feeling.” On the contrary, she considers that ritual is creative and mediates experience. As already pointed by Durkheim (2001 [1912]: 4), “the most bizarre rituals and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life.”⁸⁴ In short, ritualistic behavior always means something sociologically. As I have tried to demonstrate, the phase of “convertitis” and its obsessive emphasis on ritual, practical and legal considerations is symptomatic of converts attempting to recreate their social selves in the face of contradictory injunctions and chastisements from both their families and

⁸² For a psychoanalytical account of obsessive and exaggerated religious behavior among contemporary Western Muslims, see Benslama (2016).

⁸³ Fieldnotes, March 31st, 2013.

⁸⁴ He also adds that “acts of worship, whatever they might be, are not futile or meaningless gestures. By seeming to strengthen the worshipper and his god, they really strengthen the ties that bind the individual to his society, since god is merely the symbolic expression of society.” (p. 171).

coreligionists. Their preoccupation with formal codes of conduct is a direct consequence of them navigating the limbos where they find themselves after their conversion, and of their will to reintroduce anchoring and certainty in lieu of liminality and blurriness. To be sure, the respondents in my sample who were prone to convertitis were young and recent converts who did not accept their state of liminality and sought to exit it to become full-fledged Muslims. The older converts, who were at ease with their role as “cultural passers” and happily embraced their liminal position were not affected by it. Overall, even for the most extreme cases, the period of convertitis usually faded away as converts found ways to work a compromise with their families, acquired a more solid knowledge of the religion and expanded their network of Muslim friends and acquaintances. In sum, convertitis disappeared as liminality resorbed or was accepted.

D. CONVERT ASSOCIATIONS AS REMEDIES

The two converts associations I studied, *American Da'wah* in Chicago and *Bienvenue en Islam* in Paris were precisely created to help converts navigate such state of liminality. Respectively founded in 2005 and 2009, these mutual support groups stem from the conviction that converts are special believers, who have special needs and necessitate special care, different from the one that is provided in conventional Muslim spaces.

Muslim convert associations have existed for quite some time in the West. In France, a 1986 report mentioned the existence of an organization called “Vivre l’Islam en Occident” (Living Islam in the West), founded in December 1984 by Yacoub Roty, a French Muslim intellectual born in a converted family, and whose purpose was to “gather the Westerners who have entered Islam” (Legrain, 1986: 22). In the US, historian Patrick Bowen has highlighted the existence of convert-heavy associations, such as the American Islamic Association (AIA) created as early as the 1930s by white American convert Louis Glick and which cultivated unprecedented convert outreach (Bowen, 2015: 250). Yet, it is mostly the last decade that has witnessed an upsurge in associations geared towards converts’ needs, in the US, the UK, Australia and continental Europe. To accommodate growing numbers of conversions, the support network for converts has expanded quickly, in part thanks to the Internet and social media.

A number of older converts in my sample marvelled at the resources now available to new Muslims and regretted that these associations did not exist at the time they had embraced Islam. Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) who converted 20 years ago, says that it has only been “for the last five years or so that he first started seeing this effort to involve converts to Islam more.” Bruno (37, researcher, Lille) who has been Muslim for 15 years also recalled how difficult it was for him to meet fellow converts at the beginning of his journey: at the time, he had managed to find only one person like him, after spending days on a nascent Muslim Internet forum. By contrast, online resources are prominent today. This is for instance how *American Da'wah* describes its goals on its website:

[American Da-wah]’s programming is for anyone curious to learn about Islam in a safe and friendly environment. Our mantra “Come as you are, to Islam as it is” says it all. [We offer] a full-scale system providing step-by-step assistance from the point of a seeker’s active

interest, until the establishment of sustainable conversion and holistic practice of Islam. We offer hands on, one-on-one consultation with our professionally trained staff, courses specifically tailored for seekers, and the support network crucial upon conversion. The “welcome to the fold” program fosters regular opportunities for new Muslims to engage their peers, share both challenges and successes, and reap the beneficial fruits that only the tree of good company can bear. Since its inception, *American Da’wah* has assisted over 500 people in embracing Islam

The American association advocates community spirit, mentorship, non-judgmental ethics and a healthy understanding of the religion. *Bienvenue en Islam*, its French counterpart, shares similar objectives, although they are shrouded in a different language. Here is how it describes its purpose online:

The objective of the association is to accompany new Muslims in their discovery of Islam, to enlighten them in their practice and spirituality, to preserve them from indoctrination and other dangers they might fall prey to, to answer the specific and existential questions that may have arisen after their conversion and to help them overcome their isolation and solitude. Members of the association are long-standing converts themselves; they have a good knowledge of the experience of converting and a solid training in religious matters. Many activities are proposed: individual or small-group meetings, conferences, seminars, mosque visits, mentoring before the month of Ramadan, *iftars*, etc.

The French association emphasizes training and mentoring and insists on the need to remedy converts’ isolation. Overall, I found that the two associations operate in a similar fashion and seek to achieve two objectives: fostering community belonging among converts and promoting a sound and solid practice of the religion.

1) The end of loneliness

The main preoccupation of the two associations is to combat converts’ loneliness and ensure they do not “pray alone.” They strive to provide them with a sense of Islamic brotherhood. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) who has been instrumental in the establishment of convert outreach efforts in her city explained that her “goal in life has been that there’s no convert left behind.” This was particularly apparent during Ramadan, when converts’ solitude is typically the most acute. A number of programs and activities were scheduled throughout the month. The French association created a service called *Les Compagnons du Ramadan* (Ramadan comrades), in which converts register online to find fellow Muslims with whom they can break the fast or attend the night prayers of *taraweeh* at the mosque. The American association has a similar system called *Iftar Ambassadors* through which Muslim families can invite converts over to share the night meal. It is complemented with a program called *Suhoor Buddies* which enables converts to find a partner who will call them every morning to ensure they are awake and eat *suhoor* (pre-dawn meal taken before fasting). There is also the famous *Suhoor Chat* on Facebook in which converts post pictures of their early meals and share healthy and calorific recipes to endure a day of fasting. This chat is followed by roughly 80 persons every morning.

Throughout the year, the two associations also organize a number of activities among converts: events, excursions (bowling, museum, zoo, etc.), gatherings, afternoon teas, etc. Everything is done to create a solid “community spirit” and ensure converts support one another. *American Da’wah* is famous for its numerous “ice-breaker”

activities: each discussion group starts with warming-up exercises during which participants are invited to talk to one another. In Paris, where the culture of community organizing is not as entrenched, this is less the case, but once at the female beginners' class taught by Aisha, we had to do a "manual activity" (crafting a Muslim calendar with colorful paperboards) in order to "strengthen the bonds" between us.⁸⁵ Overall, this was effective and the converts in my sample who attended these associations explained that they had finally "found a home" where they could "recharge their batteries" in times of doubt and solitude.

2) Preventing convertitis

The second objective of the associations was to limit the risk of convertitis or religious burn-out, which new converts are particularly prone to. According to Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit) who has been Muslim for 12 years, the priority is to stop asking converts how they *became* Muslims and rather help them *remain* Muslim by ensuring the sustainability of their religious practice over time. At *American Da'wah*, John devoted the weekly *Being Muslim* class to this effort. Throughout the semester, he repeatedly emphasized the importance of time, moderation and step-by-step progress in the unfolding of conversion:

Islam is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't start too fast. You have to pace yourself because the journey is long. It is going to last all your life. And if you start too quickly, you won't make it till the end.

This metaphor progressively became part of converts' vocabulary for making sense of their experiences and started operating like a mantra. Thus, whenever John would ask his students "Is Islam a sprint or a marathon?" the whole class would answer in unison: "A marathon!"⁸⁶ During the month of Ramadan, John recommended to converts not to be too hard on themselves and to incorporate fasting and prayer progressively rather than abruptly: "Fasting is mandatory, but if you can't, just try to fix goals: fast one day a week, fast every other day. We all have different journeys and different capacities. The important thing is to try and to set goals for yourself."⁸⁷ This tolerance for everyone's capacity is best expressed by the association's motto "come as you are, to Islam as it is." The discussion groups, which are conceived as "safe spaces" where converts are encouraged to share their struggles, failures and doubts also embody this spirit. Before each event, a "non-judgment rule" is circulated among the audience, where it is stated that everyone is at a different stage in their religious journey and that converts should not judge one another on the diligence of their practice. Such indulgence is a characteristic feature of convert associations. Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago), who embraced Islam as a teenager and rapidly joined Salafi groups known for their intransigent religious ethics, frequently makes fun of *American Da'wah* for its smooth pedagogical approach. Yet, he also recognizes the benefits of it:

At some point, you have to feed a baby with baby food. You have to bring them up to toddler. You have to bring them up to speed. With me, when I took *shahada*, we were babies eating

⁸⁵ Fieldnotes, June 13th, 2015.

⁸⁶ Fieldnotes, March 31st, 2013.

⁸⁷ Fieldnotes, May 18th, 2013.

steak! Right then! (...) And I was OK. I had the teeth to eat the steak. (...) But I have seen people run away. (...) And I think that they needed maybe baby food at that time.

Likewise, the French association constantly warn recent converts against abrupt and sudden changes, reminding them of the risk of religious “burn out.” It enjoins them to pursue a gradual path of spiritual transformation, by constantly repeating the same mantra: “slowly, slowly, slowly; bit by bit; little by little.”⁸⁸ Hence, the convert associations are involved in strong boundary making against the methods of the *haram* police. As evidenced by the baby food and marathon metaphors, they emphasize patience, gentleness and benevolence, as well as a progressive approach to religious change.

The two associations also devote time to ensure converts practice a healthy, middle-ground version of Islam, neither too loose nor too extreme. In Chicago, John consistently repeated throughout the course: “We don’t want extremes and extremism in Islam. God in the Qur’an said: ‘I made you a middle nation.’”⁸⁹ Similarly, in Paris, the president Maryam hammered into recent converts the idea that “Islam is a religion of the middle-ground.” “Think about cooking,” she said. “If you forget the salt in your dish, it will be tasteless; if you put too much, it will be inedible.”⁹⁰ These injunctions for balance and moderation are particularly pressing in the current period, which has witnessed the propagation, especially through the Internet, of a variety of competing Islamic interpretations, some of which are radical and violent. This has unleashed an internal ideological struggle, with various subgroups claiming that they hold the “good” or “authentic” version of Islam. New converts are often lost as to which one they should follow.

In this context, convert associations strive to offer a “standardized” religious package to new members and circumscribe the range of sources available to them. At *American Da’wah*, John circulates a textbook at the beginning of the semester called *Being Muslim* and encourages converts to refer to it for questions. He also moderates the Facebook group of the association to ensure misleading religious comments do not take place. At *Bienvenue en Islam*, a bibliography is provided to every convert who joins the association and new members are incited to stick to it. In both countries, converts receive the same warning: beware of “Sheikh Google.” They are encouraged to take their knowledge from actual people, not from websites, and to take advice from locally-based scholars who know about the specifics of their situation, instead of contacting random people online. In the beginners’ class taught at a Lille suburban mosque, when a young woman asked which website she could use to learn about Islam, the organizer of the class, a convert herself, cut her a short and invited her to talk to the imam of the mosque exclusively: “the website is the imam. Period. You don’t get nothing from the Internet.”⁹¹ All these precautions are meant to ensure that vulnerable converts do not fall prey to religious movements perceived as “dangerous” or “on the fringe.” Specifically, the two associations simultaneously draw boundaries against movements that promote an intransigent focus on norms and rules, such as Salafism, and movements that by contrast

⁸⁸ « Doucement, doucement, doucement, petit à petit ». Fieldnotes, January 25th, 2015.

⁸⁹ Fieldnotes, May 26th, 2013.

⁹⁰ Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2015.

⁹¹ Fieldnotes, October 28th, 2015.

put too much emphasis on mysticism and esotericism, such as Sufism (John refers to them as “goofy Sufis”).

3) A permanent liminal status?

Overall, the two associations help converts feel legitimate and empowered in Islam, even if their liminal position prevents them from following all the rules of diligent Islamic practice (think about the difficulties of praying, fasting, or avoiding illicit food in a non-Muslim household that is hostile to conversion). To recomfort new members of *Bienvenue en Islam*, Maryam frequently recalls that the first Muslims and Companions of the Prophet were converts themselves and that they, too, had to deal with hostility from their non-Muslim relatives. The Qur’an, she adds, is explicitly addressed to them. By redefining Islam as a religion of conversion, she ensures converts feel fully welcome. In the US, American convert and Islamic scholar Suhaib Webb has also published an online sermon, in which he explains that the *fiqh* (Islamic law) is different for converts.⁹² He proposes a *fatwa khas* (special religious recommendation) for those who cannot fully practice the religion because they are liable to being hurt, chastised or disinherited by their families. The priority, he stresses, is to maintain healthy relationships with relatives, even if it implies making religious concessions. This type of advice delineates converts as a sub-category of Muslim practitioners, with special needs.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that converts were very good at producing discourses on their own liminality, loneliness and unconventionality. They at times talked about their threshold position with pride and emphasized solidarity with fellow converts. Consider the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago). Mentioning that her biggest struggle was “not really belonging anywhere” (“you don’t belong to Christians anymore. And the born Muslims aren’t really inclusive of the rest of us”), she explained that she eventually found a solution to her state of in-betweenness and double strangeness: “I got happily involved in a convert group because we are all on the same board.”

Ironically, while the purpose of *American Da’wah* and *Bienvenue en Islam* is to help converts navigate the vicissitudes of the liminal phase, they also contribute to solidify and institutionalize this state of liminality. These mutual support groups operate as para-mosques, third spaces, which provide alternative venues for sociability and Islamic learning. Yet, willingly or not, they often end up substituting themselves to mosques and conventional Muslim spaces. For a number of converts, the associations are the only Muslim social network they have. They socialize among converts and organize activities among converts. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) said for instance that one of the most beautiful days of her life was when they organized a convert Id celebration at the end of Ramadan, which was attended by 90% converts. Some converts in my sample were highly critical of this separatist trend. Bob (19, student, St. Louis) who follows a strict practice of the faith, often ridicules convert associations for their self-centered leniency: “sometimes converts can annoy the heck out of me because, like, some come up as whiny. I kind of have more the ‘tough-guy’ approach. For example, I am all for helping people convert to Islam, but sometimes I have been to these support convert

⁹² Youtube, July 26th, 2012.

meetings and some look like an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting [laughs].” Bob does not like when converts gather to complain among themselves. To be sure, some organizers at *American Da’wah* try to resist this isolationist tendency. One of the teachers, a born Muslim of Pakistani descent, keeps repeating to converts: “don’t consider yourselves as victims. This is something I struggle against since we started this group. It is not you against the community. You should not come to this group because you think the community is bad. The community is key; you must become a part of it; you have to make some efforts.”⁹³ But his warnings often fall on deaf ears. While convert associations were at first conceived as temporary springboards to enable full acceptance into the larger Muslim community, they are so comfortable that they have eventually turned into permanent cocoons that converts do not ever want to leave. Hence, converts themselves contribute to the enduring character of their liminality state.

E. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have described at length the way converts are perceived in both their milieu of origin and their religious community of adoption. I have demonstrated that because of misunderstandings on what Islam is and entails, converts find themselves shunned by their family and friends, and enter a state of liminality characterized by a collapse of their sociability networks. In turn, converts also complain about their imperfect integration into the Muslim community: they feel they are not fully accepted as Muslims because they retain the role of “the convert;” they do not like going to the mosque; and they have become apprehensive of interacting with fellow Muslims after some traumatizing encounters. In a nutshell, converts have left one shore but have not fully made it to the other side of the river, which often equates to social death. This is in line with Finn’s observations (1990), according to which converts are “neither insiders nor outsiders but people in between. In transition, they stand on the no-man’s land between the world which they seek to leave and the church which they seek to enter.” By embracing a new religion, converts have crossed a threshold and left their earlier social positions to become ex-Christians, ex-Jews, ex-Hindus or ex-atheists (Ebaugh, 1988). This exit puts them into a liminal phase, which can last for a long time. In sum, converts are embroiled in liminality, suspended in a state of solitude that generates moral turmoil and spiritual distress.

In his theorization, Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) made clear that “somehow, liminality has to end” (Thomassen, 2009). Yet, the people I interviewed appeared to be frozen in the liminal stage. Contrary to his predecessor, Victor Turner had envisioned such possibility when talking about “marginals,” whom he defined as those “who are simultaneously (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another” (Turner, 1974a: 232-233). According to him, “marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity.” As individuals stuck in the liminal position, converts can probably best be defined as marginal personas. In his seminal article entitled “Human migration and the marginal man,” Robert Park (1928)

⁹³ Fieldnotes, February 9th, 2013.

convoked a number of illustrative figures for his theoretical elaboration, among whom the Jew, the immigrant, the Mulatto and... the convert. He wrote that “in the case of the marginal man, the period of crisis is relatively permanent. The marginal man is one who lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less a stranger. The Christian convert in Asia or in Africa exhibits many, if not most, of the characteristics of the marginal man – the same spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness and malaise.” According to Park, religious conversion conduces to a permanent state of crisis and liminality.

Such “permanentization of liminality,” i.e. “when the suspended character of social life takes on a more permanent character” (Thomassen, 2009), can be further reinforced by the creation of social structures along these lines. As I have demonstrated, converts tend to gather with other converts to share their experiences in mutual support groups. The convert associations I studied constitute a liminal congregation, in which a form of “normative *communitas*” is recreated, providing a shelter or a “protective institutional armor” (Turner, 1974b) against both the larger society and the Muslim community itself.

Overall, I did not find significant differences in the liminal experiences of French and American converts. In fact, not only do the results of this chapter apply across countries, they can also be used to account for the situation of many different social groups. For instance, the liminal status of converts, which derives from religious boundary crossing, strikingly echoes that of upwardly-mobile individuals, who cross the boundaries of socio-economic status. As evidenced by a myriad of studies on the subject (Lahire, 1998; Naudet, 2012), people who achieve acceptance into a social milieu higher than the one into which they were born experience similar splits of personality, which are the results of what Pierre Bourdieu (1989) calls the hysteresis effect, when the habitus difficulty adjusts to a new social environment. As mentioned by Richard Hoggart (1957: 242-250) in his study of “scholarship boys,” those who are “uprooted from their class” find themselves “at the friction point of two cultures” and encounter a “problem of self-adjustment.” This often translates into a “temptation of self-dramatization,” which resonates with the plaintive testimonies of my interviewees. Religious converts and “class defectors” share many characteristics in common: a stress on solitariness; feelings of in-betweenness and double inadequacy; and an earnestness for improvement which manifests itself through inflated efforts to assert belonging (ostentatious and intransigent religious practice in the case of converts; exaggerated manners and conspicuous display of wealth or knowledge in the case of upwardly mobile individuals). This indicates that liminality is universal in its manifestations.

TRANSITION

This first Part has investigated the success and vicissitudes of the rhetoric of religious individualism among converts to Islam in France and the US. I have shown that converts embrace Islam *as a religion* and portray themselves as self-reliant individuals who have chosen a new faith out of free will and independent thinking. The process of becoming Muslim, however, is fraught with obstacles and setbacks, as evidenced in the trials of “coming-out,” which are particularly grueling in the French context. The partial

acceptance of converts into the Muslim community also tempers their religious enthusiasm. Finally, irreparable family conflicts derive from the fact that converts’ personal understanding of Islam does not align with dominant essentializing representations. In Part 2, I show that this dimension of *essentialization* is combined with clear instances of *embodiment*, which completes the picture of racialization (as defined in the Introduction). Chapter 4 analyzes how racialized religion has been projected onto converts’ bodies over history and Chapter 5 performs a similar analysis for the contemporary period. Moving from the larger society to the Muslim community itself, Chapter 6 explores perception of whiteness among Muslims and shows how race further contributes to permanentize white converts’ liminal status. In sum, Part 2 shows that, in addition to navigating the contradictions of religious individualism, converts also have to face the tribulations of race in the various social worlds they belong to.

PART 2
FACING RACE

CHAPTER 4 – CONVERTS AND RACE THROUGHOUT HISTORY

People who embrace Islam today do not do so in a historical vacuum. They have been preceded by generations of French and American converts who, for centuries, made similar religious choices, albeit in different circumstances and with different consequences. The rich historical material available on converts has not yet been invested by sociologists. Taking a *longue durée* perspective, I investigate the collective anxieties generated by religious conversion from the 16th century onwards and offer a detailed analysis of how converts have been depicted across different historical periods. In excavating their unknown, and at times surprising stories, this chapter accomplishes two things:

First, it demonstrates the central role of religious conversion in underlining the links between religion and race. Building on the theoretical backdrop set forth in the Introduction, I argue in this historical chapter that the racial permeability of the religious boundaries between Islam and Christianity can be assessed by looking at the way converts have been perceived over time. Relying on secondary historical sources, I seek to answer the following questions: When did people begin to equate religious apostasy to racial crossing? I focus primarily on converts to Islam, although I also incorporate insights from converts to Christianity. I analyze whether conversion was tolerated or castigated, and if so, on what grounds (religious, racial or both). My intention is not to provide a comprehensive history of religious conversion, but rather to highlight a few historical sequences and central figures that are particularly relevant to identify the role of race in the social framing of religious conversion.

Second, this chapter highlights the importance of clothing, costume and bodily adornments in materializing conversion. Throughout history, converts have, more often than not, manifested their religious transformation through a modification of their outward appearance (clothes, hair, accessories). In turn, the ostentation of religious belonging through bodily display has affected converts' position in the racial taxonomy of the time. For instance, as will be demonstrated below, converting to Islam in the 16th-18th centuries was alternatively referred to as "turning Turk" or "taking the turban," expressions that directly involve race, attire and outward appearance. The visual embodiment of religious change, therefore, warrants scholarly investigation. Building on anthropological and sociological appraisals of clothing (Hansen, 2004), this chapter pays deliberate attention to what converts wear. Dress, as anthropologist Terence S. Turner (2012 [1980]: 486) argues, is a "social skin" since "bodily adornment becomes the language through which the drama of socialization is expressed." François Héran (1987: 389) aptly recalls that the word "habit," which refers to "behavior" in English, means "clothes" in French. The two words derive from the Latin *habitus*, which used to convey both meanings and was progressively enrolled in sociology to refer to the embodied dispositions derived from socialization (Bourdieu, 1990: 66-67). In its early French

acceptation, *habit* designated a specific uniform, manifesting a specific social function (monk, nun, knight, soldier, etc.). As noted by Héran, the dual meaning of “habit” also matches the semantic couple “costume”/“custom,” which indicates that clothing functions as the medium onto which a collective habitus is imprinted. Dress and fashion, in sum, carry social meaning (Barthes, 1990 [1967]). Insights from the sociology of dress have been applied to the sociology of religion (Michelman, 1997; Arthur, 1999), the sociology of ethnicity (Eicher, 1999) and the sociology of conversion. In *Undressing Religion*, Linda Arthur (2000: 3) writes for instance that “clothe is an ideal medium for representing [religious] identity shifts” while Elisha Renne (2000: 7), investigating conversions to Christianity in 19th century Nigeria, explains that “part of the conversion process includes the donning of new styles of dress and the taking of new names.” In an essay exploring the role of dress in the making of colonial subjects in 19th century Southern Africa, Jean Comaroff (1994) also provided an analysis of clothing as both *the signifier and the instrument* of religious conversion, as the European costume progressively became associated with Christian missionary efforts. Clothing, she writes, was for Europeans “the fabric of civilization.” Like the converts to Christianity she studied, the historical converts to Islam I analyze embodied the attributes of their new faith through clothing. Central to self-presentation and role embracement, apparel functioned for them as the material expression of religious identity.

This chapter analyzes the effects of conspicuous religious dressing on converts’ racial categorization. Accordingly, pictures and images occupy center stage in the following lines. Investigating converts’ public presentation requires a “visual sociology” (Becker, 1995) in which the visual aspects of reality are recorded and in which “photographs [are used] to portray, describe and analyze social phenomena” (Harper, 1988). In developing my argument, I rely on visual material representing converts (photographs, cartoons, drawings, caricatures) collected in newspapers, travel accounts, novels and autobiographies.

Delving into the past, this chapter examines the interplay of religion, race and dress across five historical periods, with their respective convert figures: a) the Middle-Ages and the figure of the Saracen; b) post-Reconquista Spain and the predicament of the *Moriscos*; c) 16th to 18th century conversions to Islam of French and American *renegades* in the Mediterranean; d) the French colonial period (1798-1962) in North Africa and its plethora of converts; e) 19th and 20th century conversions in the US, among both white and black Americans. For each period, I pay special attention to the role of religious conversion in revealing interactions between race and religion.

As the reader progresses into the chapter, the diverging historical trajectories of France and the US regarding conversion to Islam become particularly clear, especially from the 19th century onwards. In France, conversion has been shaped by the Colonial Encounter and has unfolded in the interstices between the world of the (non-Muslim) colonizer and that of the (Muslim) colonized. Undergirded by such strong imbalance of power, religious differences were rigidified, which rendered conversion socially costly and made it the preserve of adventurers, nonconformists and mystics, who readily embraced liminality. In the US, by contrast, Islam was a remote world, rather disconnected from the realities of the racial stratification system. As such, it was productively enlisted by African-American religious entrepreneurs to challenge the Black and White Divide, which explains the great appeal of conversion among large segments

of the African-American population. These different historical patterns have durably shaped the perception of conversion to Islam on the two sides of the Atlantic.

A. THE PRELUDE: “SARACENS” IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The term “Muslim” did not appear in Western European languages until the 16th century (Tolan, 2003; also see Willems, 2016). Until then, the peoples who followed the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad were mostly designated by a variety of ethnic terms: “Turks,” “Arabs,” “Moors,” “Ishmaelites” (descending from Ismael), “Hagarenes” (descending from Abraham’s slave woman, Hagar) and “Saracens” (descending from Sarah). Emphasis was placed on their lineage and alleged barbarianism: in the European imagination of the time, and especially in the early Middle-Ages folk song traditions or *chansons de geste* (Daniel, 1984), the Saracens were a pagan, barbaric people that threatened to invade Europe, just like the Vikings, the Magyars and the Huns before them. Great attention was paid to their outward appearance and the color of their skin. In the famous French epic poem *The Song of Roland* (11th century), the “Sarrazin Abisme” is described as such:

More felon none was in that company / Cankered with guile and every felony / He fears not God, the Son of Saint Mary / Black is that man as molten pitch that seethes / Better he loves murder and treachery / (...) This Sarrazin great heretick meseems / Rather I’d die, than not slay him clean (Anonymous, 2008 [11th century]: CXXV, my emphasis).

Saracens were often depicted using the language of race. In his call for crusade made on November 27, 1095, the Pope Urban II expressed his alarm about the recent conquests of Turks and Arabs and declared: “I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ’s heralds to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends.” No effort was made to understand the Saracens’ religion and little attention was paid to the fact that their beliefs closely resembled Christianity. In fact, as Tolan shows (*ibid*: 184), the words “Saracen” (or “Moro” in Spanish) became synonymous for “heathen” and “pagan” (*ethnici* in Latin).

Things changed in the 13th century, as opportunities for contact increased. Islam became increasingly depicted as a new Christian heresy coming from “the Orient” (in the vein of Manichaeism, Nestorianism, etc.) and Saracens began to be perceived as “heretics” rather than “pagans.” While pagans were considered irremediably wrong, heretics were described as people who had gone astray but could be reasoned. As a result, medieval Christian polemicists started developing strategies to bring Muslims back into the fold, as they had been trying to do with Jews. Anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim polemics began to closely resemble one another. As Christian missionaries deployed a wider range of rational arguments to convince Muslims and Jews about the superiority of their faith and as efforts at converting them continued to fail, the stereotype of Jews and Muslims as “inherently” irrational and fleshly peoples, insensitive to rational religious rhetoric, became well entrenched (*ibid*: 300). Saracens, like Jews, were deemed irrational *by essence* (Schaub, 2015). The inability to convert them to Christianity found a natural (and comfortable) explanation: religious error was in fact running through their veins and was inalterable.

Their resistance to conversion, therefore, led to a first racialization of Jews and Muslims. This characterization induced new strategies of boundary-making in places where Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together: because they could not necessarily be differentiated phenotypically, Jews and Muslims were asked to wear distinctive markers, such as specific dress or visual signs. The 4th Lateran Council (1215) stated for instance:

In some provinces, a difference in dress distinguishes the Jews or Saracens from the Christians, but in certain others such a confusion has grown up that they cannot be distinguished by any difference. Thus, it happens at times that through error Christians have relations with the women of Jews or Saracens, and Jews and Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, that they may not, under pretext of error of this sort, excuse themselves in the future for the excesses of such prohibited intercourse, we decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress. [my emphasis]

The ban on sexual relations as well as the use of dress as a marker of physical differentiation indicates the emergence of a process of embodiment, i.e. a desire to inscribe *in and on* the body a difference that was first and foremost religious. After this first occurrence, the visual otherization of Muslims acquired a more formal and systematic existence in 16th century Spain.

B. MORISCOS AND THE GENEALOGY OF RACIALIZED RELIGION (1501-1609)

The formal origins of Islam’s racialization can be traced back to 16th century Spain where the category of race emerged via a troubled connection to religion (Anijdar, 2008; Majid, 2009). Again, conversion was at the heart of this process. In 1501, ten years after the *Reconquista*, the Catholic monarchs issued an edict that compelled all *Mudejares* (Muslims) – and Jews – residing on Spanish territory to convert to Christianity. Those who refused to comply faced death or exile. Those who accepted conversion became known as *Moriscos* and were the subject of close scrutiny by the Crown, which worried that they might have retained their previous religious beliefs (Garcia-Arenal, 2012; Poutrin, 2012). In this context of suspicion, Inquisitors began identifying potential religious traitors by the color of their skin. The Moorish (North African) appearance of former Muslims, in particular, became a key hint to track religious heresy (Harvey, 2005; Soyer, 2013). More importantly, lineage and ancestry were central to Inquisitors’ investigations: having Muslim ancestors became a matter of suspicion. In the infamous doctrine of the *limpieza de sangre*, pure blood meant a Christian lineage free of Semitic taint. Because *Moriscos*’ blood was deemed to be “impure,” the sincerity of their faith was put into question (Stella, 2011). Hence, as put by Selod and Embrick (2013: 646), “religious identity had a biological component to it.” According to Rana (2011: 33-39), this is the time when “religious conceptions shifted into racial conceptions” and “Muslim groups began to be defined via racial mixture and notions of blackness.”

Over the course of the 16th century, the *Moriscos* never managed to cast this suspicion off, which culminated with their violent, final expulsion from Spanish territory in 1609-1614, as related by historian Fernand Braudel (1996 [1949]: 796):

The explosion of this hatred, the expulsion, was a confession of impotence, proof that the Morisco after one, two or even three centuries, remained still the Moor of old, with his Moorish dress, tongue, cloistered houses and Moorish baths. He had retained them all. He had refused to accept Western civilization and this was his fundamental crime. (...) The Morisco was still tied deep in his heart to that immense world, which as Spain was well aware, stretched as far as distant Persia. All the diatribes against the Moriscos are summarized in the declaration of the Cardinal of Toledo: they are “true Mohammedans like those of Algiers.” [my emphasis]

Thus, the religious transformation of *Mudejares* into *Moriscos* through conversion to Christianity did not prove sufficient to override racial classifications: their descendants remained *Moors* in the eyes of Spanish authorities. This Spanish episode reveals that Islam was an “important aspect of the genealogy of the race concept” (Rana, 2007: 149) and that conversion was at the source of the historical puzzle that connected religion to race. Most of the *Moriscos* expelled from Spain crossed the Mediterranean Sea and landed on North African shores. There, in what used to be called “the Barbary Coast” (in reference to Berber lands), a reverse scenario of religious conversion was unfolding: Europeans were embracing Islam in large numbers.

C. “TURNING TURK” AND “TAKING THE TURBAN” RENEGADES IN THE 16-18TH CENTURY

One of the first European converts to Islam we know of is Ancelm Turmeda (1355-1423), a Franciscan friar who was born in the Spanish island of Majorca.¹ After studying religion extensively, Turmeda travelled to Tunis, where he decided to embrace Islam, at age 35. He converted before the sultan Abu al-Abbas Ahmad (1371-1394), who granted him protection against Christian retaliation. Turmeda took the name of Abdallah at-Tarjuman and lived in Tunis as a Muslim until his death. He published several theological volumes in Catalan and Arabic, including a narrative of his conversion (Turmeda, 2009 [1420]). A forerunner, Turmeda ushered in a long historical sequence of conversions to Islam across the Mediterranean.

1) Conversion to Islam in the “Barbary States”

Between 1500 and 1750, hundreds of thousands of European Christians forcibly or voluntarily embraced Islam in Morocco and the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989; Garcia-Arenal, 1999). In European public discourse, these Muslim converts became stigmatized as “renegades” for having renounced Christianity. In Arabic, they were called *‘ilj* (Echevarria Arsuaga, 2002: 126-127) or *‘allaj* in Turko-Arabic (Matar, 1999: 59), which means Europeans serving Muslims. Their conversion was driven by a specific geopolitical context. The “Barbaresque” Regencies had turned to piracy in their quest for financial autonomy from the Ottoman sultan and had started preying upon Europeans ships sailing on the Mediterranean Sea. These activities of maritime depredation, or *corso*, progressively turned the Mediterranean into a free-for-all commercial battlefield: attacks took place on

¹ I would like to thank Patrick Pizette for bringing this fact to my attention.

both sides; money and merchandises were frequently seized and captives were reduced to slavery. In that context, many Christian captives embraced Islam to escape a faith-based slavery system (Friedman, 1980; Davis, 2003; Oualdi, 2008). Some became devout Muslims and remained in North Africa as free men, while others escaped to Europe after a façade conversion. A large number of corsairs, soldiers, sailors and merchants also saw conversion to Islam as a factor of social integration into the then thriving North African economy. Becoming Muslim was good for business (Boubaker, 2003). Some also became Muslim in order to marry local women. Finally, a group of European travelers were convinced by the Muslim spiritual message and embraced Islam on their path to salvation.²

The renegades settled in North Africa hailed from all over Europe.³ In 1580, Fra Diego de Haedo (1612) estimated that there were 20,000 renegades in Algiers alone. In 1630, Pierre Dan (1649: 341) gave an estimate of around 9,500 renegades in Algiers and 14,000 in all Barbary. In 1701, Fra Giovanni di S. Bonaventura claimed a number of 6,000 renegades in Algiers (cited in Davis, 2001). These massive conversions to Islam had no equivalent in Christian Europe. As Fernand Braudel (1996 [1949]: 800) put it, “there was no comparable flow in the other direction. Perhaps unconsciously, the Turks were opening doors just as Christendom was shutting them.” In Europe, embracing Christianity was difficult and not particularly rewarding, since it did not ensure full acceptance into what was then a racially homogenous society.⁴ By contrast, the North African society of the time was characterized by its openness, fluidity and multiculturalism. While religious boundaries were rigid and racialized on the Old Continent, they were porous in the Barbaresque Regencies: there was no significant barrier to the upward social mobility of renegades and exiled *Moriscos*. Many former Christians managed to hold important public and military offices. To name just a few, the Venetian slave Hassan Veneziano became regent of Algiers from 1577 to 1587. The renegade Mourad Bey “Corso,” born as Jacques Senti in Corsica and captured by Tunisian corsairs at age 9, became the first hereditary *bey* of Tunis in 1613-1631. He funded the Muradid dynasty, which ruled over Tunisia until 1705. Similarly, Osta Moratto, a famous renegade born in Genoa (Italy), known as “Turcho Genovese,” became the *dey* of Tunis from 1637 to 1640 (Pignon, 1955). Interestingly, as noticed by Mercedes Garcia-Arenal (1999), *Moriscos* and renegades tended to live in the same quarters in Tunis and Algiers

² There is very few archival data concerning this type of conversion. As “voluntary” Muslim converts progressively merged into North African society, historians lost track of them.

³ According to Fra Diego de Haedo (1612), there were in Algiers “renegade Muscovites, Vlachs, Bulgars, Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Germans, Danes, Norwegians, Scots, English, Irish, Flemish, Burgundians, French, Navarese, Aragonese, Catalans, Majorcans, Sardinians, Corsicans, Sicilians, Calabrians, Neapolitans, Romans, Tuscans, Genoese, Venetians, Greeks, Cretans, Cypriots, Syrians, Egyptians, Abyssinians and Indians.” According to Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar (1989: 147-150), Castellans and Portuguese, who made up a significant portion of renegades, should also be added to this list.

⁴ Nabil Matar (1999: 174-175) relates the story of Ishmael Bashaw (1797), a Turk who had settled in England at the end of the 18th century and wished to embrace Christianity in order to become fully integrated to English society. Several ministers refused to baptize him. As Matar puts it, “No Briton would accept a turban-wearing, non-English speaking Turk in the Christian fold.” When Bashaw eventually found a minister willing to perform his baptism, his conversion did not enable him to secure a job nor to find a house. “Neither conversion nor Anglicization could effect his integration into the Christian society of England or Scotland. Bashaw was an Other, defeated, impoverished and alterized” (see also Dakhli, 2011: 346-356).

and were often undistinguishable. Neither fully Christians nor fully Muslims, they occupied a specific, in-between status in North African society.

As mentioned in the previous section, the words “Saracens,” “Turk,” “Moor,” “Mahometan” and “Barbaresque” were often used interchangeably in the European vocabulary of the time (Audisio, 1992: 42; Dakhliya, 2011: 254-255).⁵ The European usage fused religion with racial implications. As a result, renegades were accused of having “turned Turk”⁶ (Rostagno, 1983) or “become Moor” (which comes from the Latin *morus*, meaning black). Conversion to Islam was therefore depicted in ethnic, national and racial terms, obscuring religious considerations. The passage from Christianity to Islam was also often described using the lexical field of clothing: the renegades had “taken the turban;” they had been seen on the streets “vestito de Turcho” (Braudel, 1996 [1949]: 758) or “dressed as Moors” (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 325-332). It is interesting to note that while current debates on Islam and conversion focus on the headscarf (a women’s outfit), the main bone of contention at the time was the turban (a masculine accessory). Overall, conversion highlighted social framings of religion along racial lines. By upsetting religious and racial boundaries, renegades were the objects of rumors, fantasies and moral panics. A large number of theater plays, especially in England, featured infamous renegade characters: *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612) by Robert Daborne or *The Renegado* (1623) by Philip Massinger are good examples (Viktus, 2000: 122-125; Fuchs, 2001). The former featured as central villain the English John Ward, *aka* Jack Ward or Yusuf Rais (1553-1622), a corsair who was one of the most successful and reviled renegades of the period.⁷ Raising the specter of religious apostasy coupled with racial crossing, these characters had a powerful effect on European audiences. Mirroring the Shakespearian figure of *Othello*, a Moor converted to Christianity (Viktus, 1997), the Christian renegade generated much anxiety.

The most famous convert of the period was Count Claude-Alexandre de Bonneval (1675-1747), a French military officer who embraced Islam and went into the service of the Ottoman Empire in 1730, after falling into disfavor with the French military because of his impetuous personality. Bonneval said in his memoirs: “I quit the hat for the turban, which was the only thing that could save me” (De Bonneval, 1806: 436). He took the Turkish name of Humbaraci Ahmed (or Osman), shaved his head and donned the Ottoman apparel.

⁵ Jews and Middle-Eastern Christians were also often lumped together in those categories (Dakhliya, 2011: 338-339).

⁶ The expression “to turn Turk” also had sexual connotations and referred to prostitution (Rice, 1931).

⁷ Ward is also said to have inspired the character of Jack Sparrow played by Johnny Depp in the blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean*, almost four centuries later (2003).



Figure 14 - Claude-Alexandre de Bonneval
Mid-18th century⁸

Bonneval’s attire generated much fascination in the French press and literature. One of his contemporaries, the famous writer Voltaire (1694-1778) sarcastically said in 1763: “it seems to me that his head needed more brain, instead of a turban” (Voltaire, 1817: 656). In 1930, the conservative newspapers *Le Figaro* took great delight in describing the aristocratic Castle of Bonneval in central France, where the portraits of distinguished French counts and countesses stood alongside that of a “character dressed in Oriental style, decked out with a high plumed turban: the infamous Claude-Alexandre de Bonneval, also known as Bonneval-pasha.”⁹ Putting aside the mockeries, Bonneval pursued his career in the East. He said in his memoirs that “on my own, I was eating as a Frenchman, but in public I was living as a Turk” (De Bonneval, 1806: 164). He obtained the title of *pasha* (higher rank in the Ottoman political and military system) and commanded the Turkish artillery against Austria. He is buried in Istanbul.¹⁰

As Pierre Grandchamp (1925: xiii) put it, the Regencies “could not have achieved much without the renegades.” From slaves to leaders, they contributed greatly to the military and economic prosperity of the Barbary regencies, and the Ottoman Empire at

⁸ Sources, from left to right: “Osman Pacha, Comte de Bonneval,” engraving by Fonbonne, 1755, Wikimedia Commons; “Monsieur Le Comte de Bonneval, appelé en Turquie Ahmet Pacha,” painted by Liotard, 1739, Wikimedia Commons.

⁹ *Le Figaro*, July 26th, 1930.

¹⁰ In 2012, one of Bonneval’s distant descendants, the cartoonist Gwen de Bonneval published a comic book about the life of his eccentric ancestor: *Bonneval Pacha* (Paris: Dargaud), whose three volumes are entitled: 1. *The Rebellious*; 2. *The Renegade*; 3. *The Turk*.

large. Many stayed in the region until their death, perfectly blending with the local population. Others, however, returned to Europe, either voluntarily or because they were captured. There, the Christian Inquisition was waiting for them.

2) Renegades and the Inquisition: preserving Europe's civilizational boundaries

What happened to the renegades who returned to Europe? What fate awaited those who had embraced Islam and renounced Christianity? Historians Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar (1988; 1989; 1991) have examined the archives of the Spanish, Portuguese and Venetian Inquisitions and identified a sample of 1,550 individuals judged for apostasy (see also Scaraffia, 1993). Gabriel Audisio (1992) completed their investigation with the case of several French renegades found in the records of the Roman Inquisition and in a number of notarized agreements in Marseille. While anyone having pronounced the Muslim testimony of faith was formally considered an apostate, Inquisitors made every effort to force the renegades to publicly confess their apostasy and bring them back into the Christian fold before sentencing them. They often launched lengthy investigations across the Mediterranean Sea to accumulate clues and testimonies concerning the religious beliefs of the suspects during their stay in "Barbary." These archival records illuminate the intricacies of race and religion in the boundary-making between Islam and Christianity.

The most common hints mentioned in tribunal hearings to substantiate apostasy claims focused on the body and outward appearance. Circumcision, in particular, was often used as incriminating evidence that conversion was definitive and irreversible.¹¹ Inquisitors also spent considerable time questioning witnesses on the renegades' wardrobe back in Barbary: were they dressed like Turks or Christians? Costume and fashion considerations were used as evidence, and detailed descriptions were recorded about the renegades' hairstyle (sometimes completely shaven with only one strand of hair left), the cut of their coats and trousers, as well as the size, color, fabric and wrapping style of their turbans. The mere public appearance of a European dressed as a Turk was often enough to launch an investigation for apostasy. Religious practices were also significant elements for the prosecution: had the renegade been seen performing *salat* [Muslim prayer], going to the Turkish bath, making his ablutions, fasting during Ramadan?

In the face of accumulating evidence, renegades strove to convince Inquisitors that in spite of having lived as Muslim converts in a Muslim society, they had never lost faith in Christianity. To avoid the sentence for apostasy, converts sought to depreciate visible signs of Muslim beliefs as superficial and driven by purely material purposes (escaping slavery, increasing their business, saving their life, etc.). For instance, Sebastian Beza, a Castellan soldier, confessed having dressed as a Moor but insisted that he had always

¹¹ It has been reported that Christian captives in North Africa were particularly afraid of circumcision, which durably affected their status. Captives who had been forcibly circumcised but had managed to escape from Barbary were often captured and enslaved again by fellow Christians in Europe who believed they were Moors and used circumcision as proof of their non-Europeaness (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 356).

resisted circumcision and had never abjured his faith (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 328). Leon de Olivier, from Marseille, related how he had been forcibly circumcised by his Muslim master, given the name of Mami¹² and dressed as a Turk. He contended however that he had remained, secretly, a Christian at heart: he would seldom go to the mosque, abstain from eating meat on Fridays and Saturdays and frequently recite the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria (Audisio, 1992: 5). The Portuguese mulatto Simon Gonzalves, who had abjured Christianity after eight years of captivity in the city of Velez and had become a convinced and practicing Muslim, told the Inquisitors in 1555 that he “used to eat pork in secret” during his stay in Barbary. This, he contended, was the ultimate proof of his Christian faith (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 45). Overall, the definitions of Islam and Christianity that emerged from the renegades’ inquisitorial trials are rooted in material and visual practices rather than morals and faith: being Muslim meant being circumcised, dressing as a Turk and going to the Turkish bath; being Christian meant eating pork, abstaining from eating meat on Fridays, and dressing as a Christian. The boundaries between Islam and Christianity were materialized through clothing and food habits, rather than beliefs and values. The renegades had crossed a boundary that was more cultural, geographical and civilizational than theological.

In some cases, the Inquisitors also had to investigate racial matters. Indeed, another strategy used by renegades on trial was to pass as born Muslim “Turks” and deny having ever been Christian. Such was the case of Ali Raïs, a famous corsair of the Tunisian fleet, who was known for being particularly cruel towards the Christian slaves enrolled on his galleys. In 1624, Ali was captured by a Spanish vessel and brought to Palermo where 18 of his former slaves formally identified him as Francesco Guicciardo, a Christian from Ferrare (Italy) who had abjured his faith a long time ago. But Ali strongly denied the charges held against him and presented himself as a Turk, born and raised by Turkish Muslim parents in the city of Sinop, near the Black sea. He offered a detailed description of his Turkish parents, grandparents and siblings. He pretended not to understand a single word of Italian and systematically answered his interlocutors in Turkish language. While being interrogated, he refused to take oath on the Christian cross and preferred to point towards the sky, as a Muslim would have done. When the Inquisitor asked him “To which race does your family belong? Jewish? Moor? Turk? Are you a baptized Christian?” Ali blatantly responded: “They are all Turks and Moors, from Turkish and Moorish descent. Neither Jews nor Christians. I am a Turk, son of a Turk, as I told you. I am neither a Christian nor a renegade.” If Ali was born a Muslim, he could not possibly be prosecuted by an Inquisitorial trial. By identifying as a Turk, he hoped to escape inquiries into his soul and consciousness. The Inquisitors however decided to pursue their investigation. Problems of racial identification were frequent (Dakhliya, 2011: 333) in that period, as individuals resorted to numerous strategies of identity passing and dissimulation (Ricci, 2007). The period of the *corso* was one of trickery, imposture and confusion. The Inquisitors heard several witnesses who had known Ali in Tunis. The testimonies often resorted to racial, phenotypical descriptions: Ali’s beard was either red

12 Renegades were always given new names: Mostafa, Mourad, Assan, Ali, Mahomet, Soliman, Ramadan or Yusuf were particularly common. The name “Mami” was also widespread and strictly reserved to renegades, which made them easily identifiable (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 332). Some renegades also adopted hybrid names, emphasizing their European ancestry (Thomas-Osman d’Arcos or Rageb Frances are good examples) (Dakhliya, 2013: 71).

or light-brown and everybody had noticed that his complexion was pale.¹³ Everyone in Tunis identified him as a renegade. After eight months, the Inquisitors were able to locate his Italian family: they found a notarial document testifying that Francesco Guicciardo had become Ali Rais, along with his parents' marriage certificate and his own Christian baptism certificate. This was incontrovertible evidence that he had apostatized. But Ali remained adamant: "God made me a Turk, a very fine Turk. Even if you have me cut into pieces or burnt at the stake, I won't say anything else. I am a Turk and I will die as a Turk." In spite of the Inquisitors' best efforts to bring Ali back into the Christian fold through various forms of torture and intimidation, he continued to invoke Allah and the prophet Mohammed. A devout Muslim, Ali was never "reconciled" with Christianity as they expected. Ali's exceptional case proved difficult to solve and he remained in prison for a large number of years before historians lost track of him (Bennassar and Bennassar, 1989: 78-106). If anything, Ali's trial shed light on the complex intricacies between race and religion in the 16th-18th century period: the problem raised by renegades was one of racial indistinctiveness. They were able to blur racial and religious boundaries.

The main stigma facing renegades in the public discourse of the time was their indecisiveness and in-betweenness. In a world where Islam and Christianity had been constructed as mutually exclusive and antithetical, they occupied an uneasy position. When French magistrate Nicolas de Peiresc learned that his dear friend, Thomas D'Arcos, had "donned the Turquesque turban" and changed his name to Osman while in Tunis, he complained in a 1630 letter to a mutual friend that Thomas was now considered as "a Turk among Turks, as a Jew among Jews, and as a Christian among Christians, not knowing who he is or what he should be, for which I am greatly sorry for him" (correspondence cited in Tolbert, 2009). Neither here nor there, renegades were perceived as traitors. As a contemporary writer from Portugal explained (Mendoça, 1607), "being not Christians, the *elches* [renegades] display a difference between their outward aspect and their inner conviction; it is sensibly said that they are the most unhappy people on earth, because the Moors consider them as Christians and the Christians see them as Moors. Neither the Christians nor the Moors are right, for they are neither one nor the other" (cited in Mediano, 2001: 189, my emphasis). The emphasis laid upon the alleged discrepancy between the renegades' outward appearance and their inner belief is particularly revealing: the way renegades "looked" and what they believed in were deemed ontologically incompatible, which indicates once again the existence of racial considerations in the definition of religion.

3) Renegades in the American imaginary

On the other side of the Atlantic, the US were not immune from those problems. The European and American contexts show several similarities. American ships had also been attacked on countless occasions by North African pirates on the Mediterranean Sea. Because the young American Republic was perceived as more vulnerable and less liable to retaliation than its European counterparts, a large number of American citizens were

¹³ Chromatic considerations were often crucial for the identification of renegades. In 1610, ten individuals were brought to the Inquisition of the Spanish Canary Islands: in the Inquisition records, it is written that five of them were "white Moors" (*cinco moros blancos*) and the other five were "black Moors" (*cinco moros negros*). The Inquisition conspicuously ignored the latter and focused uniquely on the former (Mediano, 2001).

held captive and enslaved in the “Barbary States.” The US often had to negotiate tributes for their release. In 1796, all the American captives in Algiers were freed for a total ransom of a million dollars, i.e., a sixth of the national budget (Lewis, 1990b: 76). This situation soon became untenable, which led Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) to launch a military action against Tripoli in 1801-1805 – the first war the US ever waged against a foreign power (Spellberg, 2013).

Barbary captivity narratives, an already well-established literary genre in Europe (Starr, 1965; Matar, 2001; Moureau, 2008), became especially popular in America towards the end of the war of Independence in the 1780s (Lewis, 1990b; Baepler, 1995; Baepler, 1999; Berman, 2007). Notably, the vocabulary and narrative patterns of these accounts staged in North Africa closely resembled that of Indian captivity narratives on American territory. North African Moors and Native American Indians were often described in a similar manner, lumped together as “ultimate Others.” Thus, John Foss (1798) described the Moors who held him captive “as a spare set of people of a very dark complexion, much like the Indians of North America.” Americans made sense of Muslims by projecting onto them the already well-entrenched stereotypes they had about Indians (Matar, 1999: 175-179). More importantly, the word “renegade” applied as much to the Americans who had embraced Islam in Barbary as to those who had “gone native” among Indians, the “white Indians.”¹⁴ Conversion to Islam and conversion to Indianness were therefore closely related in the early American imaginary. Both equated to radical boundary-crossing from a racially-defined “us” to a racially-defined “them.” That conversion to Islam was framed in racial as much as religious terms is best exemplified in the captivity narrative of Francis Brooks, *Barbarian Cruelty* (1693), a text that was used in a famous sermon by Boston Puritan Minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728) to describe the fate of American captives in Barbary: “the poor Christians were grievously hurried and punished by those Hellish Negroes... with a great many Threats, Stripes and Blows by the Negroes, bidding them turn Moors”¹⁵ (cited in Davis, 2001: 123, my emphasis). In this passage, the threat of Muslims, which Cotton Mather alternatively called “filthy disciples of Mahomet,” “Turks,” “Moors” or “devils” in his sermons (Mediano, 2001: 4-5), is made more vivid by summoning the racial figure of the “Negro,” particularly telling in the American context characterized by a Black and White Divide. In that period, collective prayers were frequently organized for the souls of American captives. Just like in Europe, renegades occupied a prominent position in American collective anxieties around race and religion.

Yet, the US also had political and legal features that distinguished it from European nations. In spite of these widespread fears and vilification of Islam, America’s Founding Fathers envisioned religious rights for hypothetical Muslim citizens. Benjamin

¹⁴ As James Axtell (1985: 302) puts it, “by the close of the colonial period, large numbers of French and English settlers had chosen to become Indians – by walking or running away from colonial society to join Indian society, by not trying to escape after being captured, or by electing to remain with their Indian captors when treaties of peace periodically afforded them the opportunity to return home.” These “white Indians” provoked considerable turmoil among their contemporaries. In 1782, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in his Letters from an American farmer that “thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of these Aborigines having from choice become European” (cited in Vaughan and Richter, 1980: 23). This alarming observation echoed similar anxieties concerning massive conversions to Islam on the Old Continent.

¹⁵ For Cotton Mather’s full sermon “The Glory of Goodness,” see Baepler (1999: 59-69).

Franklin (1706-1790), for instance, declared, in the name of religious freedom that “even if the mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, he would find a pulpit in his service” (Franklin, 1958: 97, cited in Spellberg, 2013: 22).

Little is known about American renegades in the Mediterranean except for one man, George Bethune English (1787-1828).¹⁶ Born in Cambridge, English studied law and theology in Harvard. Influenced by Unitarianism and oriental religious ideas, he grew disillusioned about Christianity, and expressed his criticism in several books (1813a; 1813b), which owed him excommunication from his local church in 1814. In 1815, he was appointed lieutenant in the Marine Corps by the then secretary of State John Quincy Adams and was sent to the Mediterranean. In 1817, he resigned and went to Constantinople, then to Cairo. Fluent in Arabic and Turkish, well-versed in Qur’an and Islamic law, he started wearing a robe and a turban and answered to the name of Mohamed Effendi. Some historians believe that English actually worked undercover for Adams. After serving in the army of the Egyptian viceroy Mehmet Ali Pasha (1830-1895), for whom he participated in an expedition to take control over Sudan (English, 1822), he returned to America. President John Adams appointed him in the Diplomatic Corps of the US in the Levant, where he negotiated a series of agreements with the Ottoman Empire. While his conversion to Islam remains uncertain (he always denied it), English was known to have taken up Muslim practices and habits. The “turban-wearing critic of Christianity” was suspected by his compatriots of having genuinely embraced Islam and being a traitor. He was one of the last persons to be called a “renegade” in the 19th century (Bowen, 2015: 35-43). To this day, the renegades remain the object of much fascination and fantasy in the American imaginary.¹⁷

Towards the end of the 18th century, the ratio of power between Europe and North Africa shifted. The practice of piracy significantly decreased and the figure of the renegade, once so prominent, faded away (Dakhliya, 2011: 334).¹⁸ The issue of religious conversion, however, resurfaced during the colonial rule, an altogether different context of power.

D. CONVERSIONS IN THE FRENCH COLONIAL ENCOUNTER (1798-1962)

French colonial ventures in North Africa started with Napoléon’s expedition to Egypt (1798-1801) and continued with the annexation of Algeria (1830) and the establishment of protectorates in Tunisia (1881) and Morocco (1912). The colonized subjects of these regions were first called *indigènes musulmans* (Muslim natives) before

¹⁶ I would like to thank Aurélien Piot for bringing this fact to my attention.

¹⁷ For instance, the American anarchist convert to Islam, Peter Lamborn Wilson, aka Hakim Bey (born in 1945, see below), devoted an entire book to them, entitled *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegades* (1995).

¹⁸ As explained by Garcia-Arenal (1999: 278), at the end of the 18th century, the ranks of renegades in North Africa were mostly swollen by a small pool of Spanish soldiers and convicts who had escaped from Spanish islands and a small number of soldiers from the French Foreign Legion who had been sent to participate in the conquest of Algeria and deserted (see also Bono, 2001: 319).

being renamed *Français musulmans* (Muslim French) in 1945.¹⁹ While being granted the French nationality in 1834, the *indigènes* were systematically denied the same rights as the citizens of mainland France: in the crafting of colonial boundaries, nationality did not equate citizenship (Blévis, 2003; Spire, 2003; Weil, 2003). Especially in Algeria, which was considered a French department (contrary to the protectorates of Tunisia and Morocco), the *indigènes* were subjected to the *Code de l’Indigénat*, a set of laws that enforced their inferior legal status. After 1865, formal citizenship could only be obtained after a long, tedious and almost hopeless naturalization procedure²⁰ that entailed renouncing the Muslim personal status law and demonstrating one’s closeness to French “civilization.”²¹ In spite of the rigid colonial legislation, where religious identities functioned as ethnic categories, colonization also increased the possibility of contact across the Mediterranean, which led to various conversions, from Islam to Christianity and from Christianity to Islam. Such religious changes progressively became a matter of concern for colonial authorities.

1) Dealing with conversions

a) Conversions to Christianity and “Catholic French Muslims”

In the legal context of inequality just exposed, a few Muslim *indigènes* used conversion as a naturalizing tool and embraced Catholicism. Their conversion generated numerous legal arguments (Larcher, 1910; Mary, 1910; Bonnichon, 1931): were they still to be ruled under the *Code de l’Indigénat* or under French jurisdiction²²? What emerged from these debates is that renouncing the Muslim personal law was necessary but not sufficient to be granted French citizenship. Conversion to Catholicism did not automatically open the doors to naturalization, which still necessitated going through the

¹⁹ Colonized subjects could not have possibly been called “Algerians” since this would have meant the recognition of Algeria as a national entity on its own. As the label “Algerian” was progressively reclaimed by European settlers, the colonized population was assigned to a religious category and identified through its Muslim belonging.

²⁰ According to Patrick Weil (Weil, 2003: 9), between 1865 and 1915, only 2396 indigenous Algerian Muslims (out of a total population of three millions) were granted French citizenship (mostly military men and public officers).

²¹ In addition, colonial legislation created divisions between Muslim and Jewish *indigènes*. On October 24th, 1870, the Jewish population of Algeria (37,000 people) was collectively granted the full French citizenship through what became known as the “Crémieux decree,” from the name of the French Jewish statesman who advocated it. This legal change generated an inequality of status with the Muslim population, who did not have the same possibility. It also created a cultural gap, as the assimilation of Algerian Jews, which was already manifest through their adoption of French language and clothing, was confirmed (Chouraqui, 1985; Stora, 2006). The Crémieux decree was abrogated on October 8th, 1940 under Vichy France. The new Vichy decree downgraded Jews back to the same status as Muslims and stipulated that “the political rights of Jewish *indigènes* in the departments of Algeria are governed by the texts that define the political rights of the Muslim *indigènes* of Algeria.” Algerian Jews were brutally stripped of the citizenship they had been granted 70 years earlier. Moreover, while Algerian Muslims retained the possibility to individually ask for naturalization, such procedure was now denied to the Jews (Cantier, 2002: 73). Colonial law was therefore particularly efficient in creating and recreating racial boundaries.

²² Conversions to Catholicism remained limited in Algeria during the colonial period. They occurred mostly in the Kabylia region. It is estimated that there were between 700 and 2000 converts to Catholicism in 1910-1930 (Weil, 2005: 53). According to Laure Blévis, they only represented a legal problem, not a social one (Blévis, 2003: 43).

entire procedure.²³ Indigenous Algerians who had converted to Catholicism but had not been naturalized were therefore still subjected to the *Code de l'Indigénat*. This became clear on November 5th, 1903 when the administrative Court of Algiers rejected the automatic naturalization request of Algerian Catholic converts on the ground that they retained a Muslim status by virtue of their birth. The Court declared:

It is manifest that the term 'Muslim' does not have a purely confessional meaning, but that it on the contrary designates the group of individuals of Muslim origin who, having not been admitted into full citizenry, have necessarily preserved their personal status of Muslim, without the need to distinguish whether they belong or not to the Mahometan cult" (cited in Weil, 2005: 53, my emphasis).

Thus, the verdict christened the surprising category of "Catholic French Muslims." The Court introduced a distinction between Islam as a religion ("Mahometan cult") and Islam as a race ("Muslim origin"): while it was possible to freely embrace and abandon the former, it was impossible to escape the latter, which operated as an indelible and irrevocable ascriptive status (Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013: 170-171). The distinction between Muslim second-rank citizens and French full-fledged citizens was therefore more racial than religious (Jouanneau, 2013: 30-38). Insufficient to override the racial classifications of the French colonizers, conversion to Catholicism acted as a powerful indicator of the racialization of Islam in the colonial period.

b) Conversions to Islam

Colonial authorities also had to monitor conversions in the other direction, from Christianity to Islam. At the very beginning of the colonial expansion (early 19th century), European consuls in North Africa asked local governments to ensure that conversions to Islam were fully voluntary: European converts were often summoned before the *bey* and the consul of their country to publicly declare that they had embraced Islam out of free will and not under constraint. The consuls usually insisted that Muslim converts remain under their jurisdiction since their change of religion did not alter their nationality. They were however particularly concerned by these conversions, which undermined their reputation at a time of competition between European countries to gain control over North Africa (Bono, 2001: 315-317). As France progressively took hold of the region in the 19th and 20th century, conversion to Islam fell under the scrutiny of the colonial administration. Mohamed Kerrou (2001) offers a detailed analysis of the conversion records established by the French administration in the Tunisian protectorate. He shows that conversion to Islam was indexed in administrative records under the section "Abjuration" and was referred to as "conversion to Islamism." Anyone willing to convert to Islam needed the prior authorization of the administration.²⁴ Each conversion file included detailed information concerning the applicant's criminal record, his or her political activities and

²³According to André Bonnichon (1931), three fourths of Catholic converts had eventually been naturalized by 1930.

²⁴ For the most part, the French authorities operated under the principle of freedom of consciousness and did not prevent people from converting. In some instances, however, the colonial administration brought its veto to bear: when the applicant was a "marginal," when his or her motives were deemed fanciful, when he or she was suspected of representing a threat to public order and when the conversion was likely to generate significant tensions between communities (which was especially the case when women were involved).

his or her physical description.²⁵ This strict monitoring indicates that religious conversion was not simply conceived as a private matter but also as a public issue with consequences in terms of public order and state control. Henri de Montéty, the lawyer and sociologist in charge of establishing reliable statistics on conversion to Islam in Tunisia, was one of the few enthusiasts about the phenomenon, which he saw as a means of bringing the two “races” closer. He wrote: “it would be desirable, for the coming together of the two races that currently inhabit North Africa, to see a more significant influx of conversions to Islam, which would match the prior influx of French naturalizations and bridge the religious gap that separates Latins and Arabs” (de Montéty, 1937: cited in Kerrou, 2001: 340). In spite of Montéty’s wishes, conversions remained perceived in a negative light for they subverted the established colonial order and blurred the boundaries between French settlers and the Muslim colonized population.

Given this broader context, I now turn to a more detailed description of the lives of the French men and women who decided to embrace Islam at a time where religious boundaries were becoming increasingly rigidified. In the following lines, I present some of the most renowned French converts to Islam and pay attention to their perception by the general French public. Three categories will be distinguished: colonial figures; adventurers and Sufi mystics.

2) Famous French Muslim converts

a) Political figures

A first category of converts became central political figures of the colonial period. Some were enlisted by mainland France to obtain the allegiance of Muslim subjects. Such was the case of the general Jacques-François de Menou de Boussay (1750-1810) who led the French military during Napoléon’s expedition to Egypt (1798-1801). There, he married a Muslim woman from a wealthy local family, converted to Islam and took the name of Abdallah de Menou. Napoléon wrote in his memoirs that “the general Menou had become Muslim, which was *quite ridiculous*, but much pleasant to the country” (cited in Mullié, 1852: 285-286, my emphasis).²⁶ His conversion was used to gain the favors of the Egyptian population.²⁷

²⁵ According to Mohammed Kerrou (2001: 338-339), there were only 67 conversion applications (mostly Tunisian Jews and Italians) between 1886 and 1930 in Tunisia. Numbers significantly increased afterwards as conversion to Islam became an actual social phenomenon, leading the French administration to establish detailed statistical records (206 applications between 1930 and 1939, 43 applications in 1940, 37 in 1941, 70 in 1950, 51 in 1951). In the 1950s, French converts became more numerous than the others. The most common motive for conversion to Islam was marriage or romantic involvement, followed by business interests and spiritual considerations.

²⁶ Napoléon further wrote: “the general Menou was viewed very favorably by the natives of the country; he had embraced their religion. His spirit, his knowledge, his integrity were not contested by anyone. To be sure, soldiers often teased Abdallah-Menou who prayed with his face turned towards the Orient and whose wife always had her face covered; but his age, his great bravery, his attachment to Napoléon made him win over the army’s opinion” (Napoléon, 1867: 204-205).

²⁷ Throughout the Egyptian campaign, Napoléon himself, as a good strategist, suggested on many occasions that he was interested in Islam to appeal to the local population. On July 17th, 1799, he made a proclamation to the “*sheikhs, ulemas, sheriffs, imams and fellahs* of the Bahhireh province” which started with the Muslim *shahada*: “there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet.” In this letter, he further claimed that “God is merciful and forgiving, and the prophet, in almost all the chapters of the Koran, commanded

Other converts, by contrast, used their in-between position to defend their colonized coreligionists. Consider for instance the story of Thomas Ismayl Urbain (1812-1884), a Saint-Simonian²⁸ who traveled to Egypt and embraced Islam in 1835 after the death of a beloved Muslim woman (Urbain, 1852). A “mulatto” born in Cayenne (his father was white and his mother was a free black Guyanese woman), Urbain saw in Islam an opportunity to solve the contradictions of his mixed-race status. He claimed that “Islam ha[d] been more generous and fatherly to the blacks than Christianity” (D'Eichthal and Urbain, 1839: 40). He donned the Egyptian Muslim costume and took the name of Ismayl, which is revealing, since in Islam Ishmael is the son of Abraham and Hagar, a black-Egyptian handmaid. Urbain progressively pictured himself as a mediator between the Orient and the Occident. In his conversion narrative, he explained: “wasn’t there for me a role to fulfill in the reconciliation of the white race and the black race, of the Muslims and the Christians?” (Urbain, 1852: 118). Drawing on his solid knowledge of the Arabic language and Muslim customs, Urbain became interpreter for the military in Algeria. Viewed favorably by Napoleon III, he strove to give an Arabophile inflection to the French Algerian policy, but also saw it as his mission to “civilize” the Arabs and “perfect” them (Meziane, 2015). He advocated conversion to Islam as a way to bridge the French and Algerian peoples and also encouraged mixed marriages. His pro-Arab positions unleashed the rage of the colonists, who saw him as a “frenetic mulatto,” endangering their interests in Algeria. Auguste Warnier wrote for instance in 1865: “there is, in Algeria, Europeans for whom the Muslim religion and civilization are superior to the French religion and civilization, and who do not hesitate to make themselves Muslims and to have a preference for the first Arab woman that comes along over the French spouse” (cited in Levallois, 2001). With the fall of Napoleon III’s Empire in 1870, Urbain had to leave Algiers and his French-Muslim views fell into abeyance.

Some Muslim converts were however much more critical of the French colonial project. Such was the case of painter Etienne Dinet (1861-1929), who embraced Islam in 1913 after a series of trips to Algeria, and took the name of Nasreddine (which means “defender of the faith”). Dinet successfully merged his French and Muslim identity, which manifested in his dress. Historian Gabriel Audisio said about him that “he never renounced anything from his race and motherland; he did not even give up the European costume; he was Muslim but remained French” (cited in Renard, 2006: 616). Like Urbain before him, Dinet thought that the universal religion of Islam could achieve the union of all races. After performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, he wrote: “a number of colored men seek in Islam the equality and brotherhood that they haven’t necessarily found in countries of Europe and America” (Dinet and Ben Ibrahim, 1930: 102). Throughout the years, Dinet became vocal in his critique of Western civilization and Orientalism.²⁹ In a series of books he co-authored with his friend Sliman Ben Ibrahim (1918; 1921; 1930), he coined the

wise and good men to be merciful and forgiving: that’s how I am towards you” (Napoléon, 1819: 402). To this day, several of Napoléon’s speeches and letters continue to feed the rumor that he himself had converted to Islam. A book about his relationship to Islam, entitled *Bonaparte et l’islam* (1914) was even published by French Muslim convert and positivist thinker Christian Cherfils (1858-1926).

²⁸ On Saint-Simonians’ fascination for the Orient and Islam, see Régnier (2006).

²⁹ Another artist convert who vividly criticized the colonial project was the cartoonist Henri Jossot (1866-1951) who converted to Islam in Tunisia in 1913 and took the name of Abdul Karim. His abjuration was at first a provocation, motivated by his desire to ridicule the “white savages’ civilization” (Jossot, 2013), even though he progressively grew more sincere in his faith and wrote *The path of Allah* (Jossot, 1927). An anarchist and libertarian at heart, Jossot eventually left Islam towards the end of his life (Renard, 2006).

term “Islamophobia,” to alternately refer to misleading interpretations of Islamic scripture by French Orientalists; the Western conquest ideology; or racial hatred against Arabs (cited in Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013: 75-78). During WWI, he advocated the recruitment of Muslim chaplains and designed funerary steles for the Muslim soldiers killed in combat.

France’s most famous Muslim convert, however, was undoubtedly Philippe Grenier (1865-1944), who deserves a more thorough introduction. A doctor from Pontarlier (eastern France), Grenier converted in 1894 after a trip to Blida in Algeria, where his brother used to reside. Fascinated with Algerian Muslims’ simple way of life, he decided to embrace their faith. Philippe Grenier’s religious transformation became a matter of public interest in 1896 when, to everyone’s surprise, he was elected Member of Parliament from the district of Pontarlier, thereby becoming the first Muslim to ever step foot into the French Assembly (Sellam, 1987: 279-298). Highly esteemed in his district for his uprightness and charitability,³⁰ and elected on a left-wing political platform, Philippe Grenier caused a stir in Paris when he came to the Chamber proudly dressed with a *burnous* (traditional Algerian dress) and a turban.



Figure 15 – Representations of Philippe Grenier
19th century French newspapers³¹

³⁰ Pontarlier’s curate said: “if I was the parish priest of this town and had to replace one of the stained glass windows of my church, I would like for an effigy of Dr. Grenier to be featured on it” (Sellam, 1987: 279).

³¹ Source, from left to right: « Le député musulman », *Le Petit Parisien*, January 10th, 1897; « Le musulman de la chambre », *Le Petit Journal*, January 24th, 1897. All newspapers articles were retrieved from the online archive Gallica of the BNF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

Amidst the dark and formal Western suits of his colleagues, his outfit stood out, just like his habit of performing ritual ablutions in the Seine or in public fountains. Many burst into laughter at his sight and Philippe Grenier started making the headlines. In a few days, he became a national celebrity and a major topic of conversation and gossip. His dress in particular became a central matter of concern. Many called him “burlesque,” “exuberant,” and “eccentric.” The rather anti-clerical and left-wing newspapers *Le Petit Parisien* published an interview with him, in which his appearance was described at length:³² “The doctor wears the Arab costume: the white turban, high riding boots, and, wrapping his entire body, a kind of white shirt that can be buttoned up from the front, the *gandourah*; on top of the shirt, a *burnous*.” The deputy’s outfit was the object of many questions: “Will you sit at the Chamber in Muslim costume?”, to which Philippe Grenier responded: “There is no reason for me not to. I adopted it three years ago (although the Qur’anic law does not require it), because I believe it to be much healthier and more hygienic than the European costume, Arab clothes having to be washed more frequently.” The conservative *Le Petit Journal* expressed “sympathy for the manifestation of such intrepid faith to the point of extravagance, giving itself free rein in a milieu where unbelief swaggers with aggressive arrogance³³” and was much “amused by the formalistic indignation of our national representatives who found that the ‘legislative sanctuary’ was being desecrated by such mummeries.” By contrast, the conservative Christian newspapers *La Croix* was outraged by the presence of a “renegade” and “apostate” on the Assembly benches.³⁴ The journalist emphasized the “passably comical side of this man from Franche-Comté, whom the sun of Africa had touched, and who will probably sit on the benches of the radical Left, adorned with the Arab *burnous*, shoed with Mauresque *babouches* [slippers], coiffed with a red *chechia* and performing, during session breaks, the ritual ablutions prescribed by the Qur’an, either at the fountains of the Concorde square or under the archways of the bridge.”

The right-wing newspapers *Le Figaro* rechristened Philippe Grenier “the *burnous* man” (« *l’homme à burnous* ») making his dress a central component of his identity, and called him “crafty” (« *roublard* »). Another journalist of that period renamed him “Mr. Arab:” “For real, this Mr. Arab is member of Parliament? From Algeria or from Sudan? Not at all, from Pontarlier, where you have 300 days of winter...” (Sellam, 1987: 285). *La Croix* also nicknamed him “*le député maboul*” (*maboul* means “idiot” in Arabic and is frequently used in French slang).³⁵ Several colonial songs with racist overtones such as “*Toujours kif kif bourricot*” or “*Allah! Allah!*” and “*Encore un cheikh à la chambre*” by Marius Réty also ridiculed him explicitly (Deroo et al., 2003). By deriding Philippe Grenier, the boundaries between the Muslim/Arab and French identity were clearly reinforced.

Although Dr. Grenier married only once (to Marie-Antoinette Courtet in 1903), he was frequently accused of having a *harem* and encouraging polygamy on French territory. In 1896, *La Croix* fantasized about his romantic habits and worried about the consequences of the freedom of religion he advocated so frequently: “See where the

³² *Le Petit Parisien*, January 10th, 1897.

³³ *Le Petit Journal*, January 24th, 1897.

³⁴ *La Croix*, December 30th, 1896.

³⁵ *La Croix*, August 11th, 1897.

sacrosanct doctrine of so-called freedom of conscience and religion leads us! Dr. Grenier is single, but if he suddenly took the fancy to bringing a *marabout* from Algeria and marrying at once the four wives that every Muslim is entitled to, what could French legislation do? What magistrate, what public prosecutor could take him to court for bigamy or polygamy?” The stigmatization of Dr. Grenier hinged upon a widespread Orientalist and colonial discourse on Muslims’ sexual licentiousness, sexual danger, and moral panics around polygamy (Surkis, 2010: 238-243; Hajjat, 2012).

Philippe Grenier’s election manifesto, published on November 22nd, 1896³⁶ included, among other things, the full citizenship for the Muslims of Algeria, as it had been granted to Algerian Jews in 1870. Because of his religious belonging and this political proposal, Philippe Grenier soon became portrayed as “*le député des Arabes*” (the Arabs’ congressman). On the right side of the political spectrum, his loyalty to the French nation was questioned. The very conservative newspapers *Le Gaulois* chastised him for “demanding civil and political rights in favor of his brothers in Algeria, and progressive taxation against his brothers in France.”³⁷ By contrast, the great socialist leader Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) supported Dr. Grenier against editorialists’ diatribes and praised him for performing a much-needed representative role. In a letter published by *Le Matin* on December 29th, 1896 and destined to “God’s prophet” (« *Au prophète de Dieu* », as Grenier liked to present himself), Jaurès wrote:

“To the risk of being accused of uniting socialism and the Qur’an, let me tell you, sir, with this sincerity that you appear to like, that your election is one of the most considerable events of the past few years. (...) What is important, and even decisive, in your election, is that, through you, for the first time, a Congressman of the Arabs enters Parliament. No matter that you are not from their race: religion, for them, is a tie stronger than race, for it is the tie of race itself; and you truly are from their race, being of their religion. They must even be particularly proud that a man born Christian and French, and having degrees in European science, bent down before the greatness of their prophet and recognized in their book the most recent mark of divine truth. (...) And it will surely appear to them that, in a European Assembly, you will represent them better than would a son of their tribes. As of now, without doubt, they consider you as their emissary, their interpreter. What a responsibility for you, and for the Chamber itself! And how ill inspired, how ignorant of the interest of France in Algeria, are those who advise our congressmen whatever attitude of disdain and contempt towards you! A few weeks ago, my friend Viviani, during a discussion on Algeria, eloquently asked the Chamber to summon Arab delegates for assessing the budget of Algeria. The Chamber welcomed this proposition with superb skepticism. But Allah, whom in our abstract jargon we call the strength of circumstances, rides roughshod over congressmen as He wishes, and a few weeks later a sectarian of the Qur’an was sent to the Chamber to represent, in appearance the electorate of Pontarlier but, in reality and according to a deeper intent, all the Arabs who wait and suffer, from the docks of Algiers to the threshold of the desert. (...) You can do a lot for them, sir; what will you do? The most urgent, so it seems, is to defend them against our prejudices.” [my translation, my emphasis].

Jean Jaurès placed high expectations on Philippe Grenier to connect with the Muslim natives of Algeria and represent their oppressed voice at the Chamber. In his view, the “ties of soul and religion” overrode those of race, making Grenier a great representative for the “Arabs.” “God’s prophet” took his mission at heart, to the point of

³⁶ *La Croix*, December 23rd, 1896.

³⁷ *Le Gaulois*, December 22nd, 1896. Being on the radical Left, Philippe Grenier was in favor of progressive income tax, a proposal that *The Gaulois* opposed.

neglecting his Pontarlier electorate. He was not reelected in 1898 and his political career ended (Bichet, 1976). He resumed his charity work with the poor, which he performed until he died. Overall, the various Muslim converts who came to play a political role under colonial rule found themselves on a complex exchequer of power, where their religious and national allegiances were frequently pitted against one another.

b) Adventurers and racial/religious passing

Another category of Muslim converts in that period were anti-conformist adventurers, such as Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904). Born in Geneva (Switzerland), where a street is named after her, Eberhardt was the illegitimate daughter of a bohemian woman of noble German-Russian descent and an unknown man. She converted to Islam in 1897 with her mother, during their first trip to Algeria. She married Slimane Ehnni, a *spahi* [Muslim soldier in the French army] and acquired the French nationality through him. Fascinated by the Bedouin way of life, Eberhardt strove to quench her spiritual thirst in the North African desert. She became a journalist for the arabophile French newspapers *El Akhbar*. One of the first women to work as a war reporter, she covered in 1903 the rebel uprisings against the French occupation in southern Oran (De Montigny, 2006). Eberhardt had mastered the art of disguise, cross-dressing and forged identities. She frequently wrote under the pseudonym of Nicolas Podolinsky and traveled in Europe dressed as a sailor, under the name of Pierre Mouchet. During her journeys in the Algerian desert, she also dressed as a man, wearing the Arab horseman costume (with her head shaved) and answering to the masculine name of Si Mahmoud Saadi. Throughout her various costumes, Eberhardt moved across the boundaries of race, gender and religion. She wrote: “for them, I am Si Mahmoud, the little Turk” (Eberhardt, 1998 [1908]: 209). To be sure, Si Mahmoud did raise some eyebrows, such as in the Algerian village of Bou-Ayech, where legionnaires laughed at him: “he is cute the little *spahi*, he’s got soft skin!” (Eberhardt, 1996 [1921]: 32). Eberhardt eventually settled in the Algerian town of Aïn Sefra, where she died in a flood at age 27.



Figure 16 – Isabelle Eberhardt in her various outfits (1897-1900)³⁸

A contemporary of Isabelle Eberhardt, and an adventurer like her, Camille Douls (1864-1889) was born in a small town of Aveyron, a French rural region. After studying

³⁸ Source: Wikimedia Commons.

natural sciences and African geography, Douls decided to become an explorer. He learned Arabic, Islamic customs and the Qur’an; got circumcised; and embarked for the Sahara Desert to conduct ethnological observations among “the Moors” (Durou, 2004: 111-114). Hoping to pass as “a Muslim foreigner” (Douls, 1887: 178), he was immediately captured by the Ouled Delim nomadic tribe, who thought he was Christian and threatened to execute him, because he “did not look like a Muslim” and had come by the sea. Douls’ mastery of the Arabic language, his outward appearance and his performance of Islamic daily prayers, however, casted doubts in their minds: he was taken to Sheikh Mel-Aynin (1830-1910) – a key religious and political leader known for his fight against French colonization – to determine his religious belonging and assess his orthodoxy.



Figure 17 - Camille Douls in his various attires (1887-1888)³⁹

Douls passed the test successfully, as he wrote in his journal: “after having me recite the *Fatiha* [first chapter of the Qur’an] and write my name in Arabic on the sand, he declared to the Moors that I was a good Muslim and that I was to be considered as a brother” (Douls, 1888: 9-10). Another local leader confirmed to the still suspicious members of the tribe that Douls was probably a Turk, which could account for his peculiar phenotypical features. Douls eventually spent five months in the Sahara to study local customs, about which he wrote extensively. He was eventually assassinated in 1889, at the age of 25, near Akabli (Algeria), during an expedition towards Timbuktu, in which he tried to pass as a Moroccan pilgrim but was recognized as a European. Camille Douls’ trajectory directly falls in with other explorers of that period, such as René Caillé (1799-1838), the Swiss Jean Louis Burckhardt (1784-1817) and Henry de Montfreid (1879-1974) who wore the Arab costume and took Arab names in order to pass as Muslims and travel unharmed throughout North Africa and the Levant.

Some went even further and embraced Islam in order to travel to Mecca, whose access is forbidden to non-Muslims. Such was the case of the eccentric and wealthy

³⁹ Sources, from left to right: “Aman Victor Camille Douls,” by Nadar, 1888, Gallica, BNF; “Aman Victor Camille Douls,” by Nadar, 1888, Gallica, BNF; Camille Douls, *Cinq mois chez les Maures*, 1887: 223.

woman Marga d'Andurain (1893-1948) who, after settling in Palmyra (Syria), fantasized about being the first female European to step foot in Mecca (D'Andurain, 1996). She wanted to follow in the footsteps of English explorer Richard Burton (1821-1890) who, disguised as a Muslim pilgrim named Abdullah, was one of the first non-Muslim Europeans to enter the holy city in 1853.⁴⁰ In 1933, Marga went to a local imam to recite the *shahada*, took the name of Zeinab and secured a white wedding with one of her employees, Soleiman, who was from the Nejd (central Saudi Arabia), and whom she called the “passport husband” (D'Andurain, 1947).



Figure 18 - Marga d'Andurain alone and with her fake husband Soleiman (1933)⁴¹

The fake couple travelled towards Mecca, but in Jedda, Marga was recognized as a *roumia* (white female) and confined into a harem, until her pilgrimage request was settled. Then, Soleiman died in unclear circumstances and Marga ended up being incarcerated during 60 days, which put an end to her adventure. A whimsical and mysterious character, Marga d'Andurain was saddled with various exotifying surnames in the newspapers of the time (“queen of sands,” “Amazon of the desert,” “princess of Palmyra”) and frequently accused of being a spy. She has also been portrayed as the “antithesis” and the “shadow” of Isabelle Eberhardt (Enard, 2015: 135), because her conversion was purely instrumental. As she put it herself, it was just “for the love of fancy and contingency” (D'Andurain, 1947: 255). On the whole, converted adventurers were characterized by their desire to cross the boundaries of religion and race, irrespective of the consequences.

⁴⁰ The very first was actually the Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema (1470-1517) who made the journey in 1503 as a Mamluk escort.

⁴¹ Source: Marga d'Andurain, *Le mari passeport*, 1947: 130.

c) Sufism and esotericism

A last historical category of French converts includes individuals who embraced Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, which was first introduced in France through Christian and masonic circles and the works of Orientalist scholars (Etienne, 2006; Geoffroy, 2006). The most famous French Sufi convert was undeniably René Guénon (1886-1951), who became Abd al-Wahid Yahya, and published seventeen books on esotericism, comparative religion, metaphysics and the modern crisis of the Western world. Born in a Catholic family, Guénon rapidly became involved in occultist, gnostic and masonic movements, which were particularly in vogue at the beginning of the 20th century. Through them he met the intellectual Léon Champrenaud (Abdul Haqq) and the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli (Abdul Hadi) who initiated him to the Sufi path (Shadiliyya order). Guénon then moved to Cairo in 1930, where he lived a fully Islamic life, wearing the Arab costume and performing all the required rituals. Guénon never limited himself to Islam, however. He studied various religions extensively, such as Hinduism and Taoism, and came to the conclusion that all faith traditions stem from the same Tradition, or divine truth. Yet, where all previous efforts (Freemasonry, Catholicism, occultism, etc.) had failed, Guénon considered the *tasawwuf* (Islamic esotericism) as the last and only possibility to spiritually regenerate our crisis-ridden Western societies (Bisson, 2007).

Guénon had several convert disciples and intellectual heirs, who pursued his metaphysical efforts such as the artist Valentine de Saint-Point (Raouhya Nour-el Dine, 1875-1953) who embraced Islam after a life of eccentricities and joined him in Cairo; the Alsatian Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) who established several Sufi branches in Europe but increasingly distanced himself from Islam to promote a universal religious understanding; the Romanian Michel Vâlsan (1907-1974) who on the contrary remained solidly attached to Islamic orthodoxy; the British Martin Lings (1909-2005) who wrote one of the most famous biographies of the Prophet Muhammad; and the Italian Abd-Al Wahid Pallavicini (1926-...) who promotes a European Sufism and founded the CoReIs (*Comunita Religiosa Islamica*) in Italy and the IHEI (*Institut des hautes études islamiques*) in France (Le Pape, 2007).

Overall, France has a long tradition of Sufism, which has been embodied by various convert representatives, such as the translator Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch; the choreographer Maurice Béjart; Islamic scholars Eric Geoffroy, Maurice Gloton and Philippe de Vos; his son the writer Idris de Vos; the astrophysicist Bruno (Abd al Haqq) Guiderdoni; and the philosopher Michel Chodkiewicz. The writer Isabelle Eberhardt, the cartoonist Henri Jossot and the painter Etienne Dinet portrayed above were also heavily influenced by Sufism. One female French convert, Aurélie Picard (1849-1933), even became the leader of a *zawiya* (Sufi lodge) in Algeria after marrying the spiritual leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, Si Ahmed. She took the name of Lalla Yamina Tidjani, and continued to develop the Sufi school after Si Ahmed's death in 1897. A romantic figure, she is the object of many novels (Frison-Roche, 1978; Lenzini, 1990). Intellectually elitist, these Sufi converts have promoted the continuity of Islam with other religions. Emphasizing mysticism and ecumenism and evolving in prestigious and educated circles, they have been spared by the racialized stigmatization of Islam and have not been attacked or ridiculed like other converts.

To conclude this overview of conversions to Islam throughout French history, it can be said that they were heavily structured by the colonial encounter and were also informed by a long tradition of Orientalism and fascination for the Arab world.

E. CONVERSION IN 19-20TH CENTURY AMERICA AND THE BLACK AND WHITE DIVIDE

While French conversions to Islam were irremediably shaped by colonialism, in the US, they were jointly determined by a) the American tradition of religious liberalism; b) the Black and White divide and the legacy of slavery – the latter being particularly significant. Indeed, the specific history of American Islam draws the portrait of a religion that has always been tied to racial issues.

1) Conversion to Islam among white Americans

a) The Shriners: “Playing Eastern”

Right in the middle of downtown Chicago, at 600 N. Wabash Avenue, there is a flamboyant Islamically-inspired brick building, surrounded by copper domes and replete with arabesques, arches, and geometric patterns. I walked by it on numerous occasions with much wonderment. The tympanum displays a big “Medinah” inscription and the entrance walls are covered with *shahadas* written in Arabic. The building is now home to a profane department store [Bloomingdale’s] but it used to be a religious place of worship, called “the Medinah Temple.”

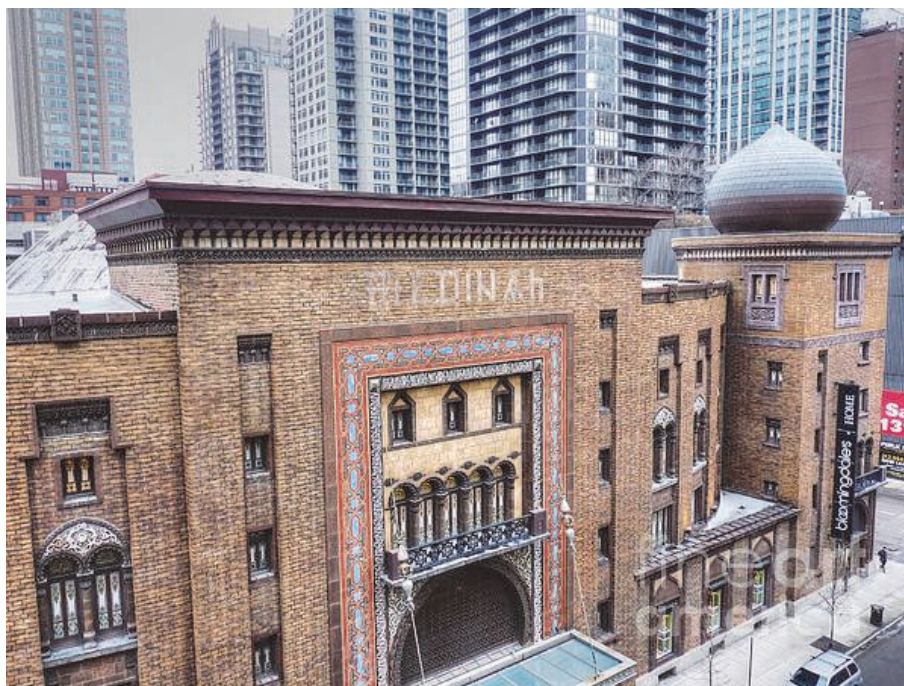


Figure 19 - The Medinah Temple
600 N. Wabash Avenue, Chicago

Interestingly, the faith practitioners who performed rituals in this temple were not Muslims, as one may have guessed, but Freemasons. Created in 1870, the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS), also known as Shriners, was an Orientalist-themed Freemason order, whose members liked to dress in cartoonish Middle Eastern outfits. Their wardrobe included fezzes, turbans and robes; they used Islamic symbols such as the star, the crescent and the black stone; and their rituals mentioned Mecca, Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. “By the existence of Allah and the Creed of Mohammed, by the legendary sanctity of the Tabernacle at Mecca, we greet you,” said their initiation greeting (Gomez, 2005: 244). The Shriners were the outcome of the 19th century American fascination for the “mystic Orient.” Around the same period, another Freemason group called “The Sheiks of the Desert - Guardians of the Kaaba, Guardians of the Mystic Shrine” was also founded (Bowen, 2015: 122). They used cultural appropriation as a strategy to present themselves as enlightened cosmopolitan citizens, cognizant of ancient foreign cultures. As such, they embodied a modality of what historian Susan Nance has called “playing Eastern” (Nance, 2009). Although they were not Muslims, Islamophilic Freemasons contributed to familiarize the American public with Islamic symbols and regalia (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 199-200).⁴²

b) Alexander Russell Webb – the “Yankee Mohammedan”

In line with the development of Freemasonry, 19th century America witnessed a boom of alternative spiritual and philosophical movements (Unitarianism, Idealism, Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, New Thought, etc.), which started exploring non-Christian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Islam). As Islamophilic esoteric movements begun to emerge, the “occult revival” paved the way for the entry of white Americans into Islam (for a complete overview, see Bowen, 2015).

The conversion of Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916), the American equivalent of Philippe Grenier, can be understood against this background. Webb, who became known as the “Yankee Mohammedan,” was one of the first white Americans to formally embrace Islam. He was a writer and publisher, born near the Hudson river in the state of New York. Disenchanted with Christianity, he went through a period of spiritual vagabondage in the 1880s, and became involved in esoteric movements, specifically Theosophy, which opened him to Eastern religions. Islam in particular caught his interest for being rational, moral and practically oriented. In 1887, he became the US ambassador to the Philippines, where he discovered the writings of Indian Muslim reformists (from the Aligarh movement). He formally converted in 1888. With the financial support of wealthy Indian Muslims (who saw in the conversion of white Westerners an opportunity to foster a global Islamic revival), he became the champion of the Muslim cause in the US, establishing several societies (such as the American Islamic Propaganda, the American Moslem Brotherhood, the Moslem Publishing Company) and journals (*The Moslem World*, *The Voice of Islam*).

Most notably, he represented Islam at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He was the only representative of a non-Western faith who had not come from abroad. Like Philippe Grenier, his outfit caught the attention of the audience. On

⁴² While many consider that the Shriners’ use of Arabic and Islamic symbols was purely aesthetic, Bowen (Bowen, 2015: 148) argues that they were much more serious about Islam than is usually granted.

September 21, 1893, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote a report about the Parliament session on Islam and depicted Webb as such: “With his head surmounted by a red fez and his busby brown beard, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, the American convert to the creed of Islam was presented to speak on the principles of the creed which he professes.” As he acquired fame, Webb became the receptacle of white Americans’ fantasies about the Orient and the exotic, to the point that the press was often disappointed when he appeared in public without his full Arab attire (Faruq Abd-Allah, 2006: 9-10). Webb often wore a simple turban or fez along with a standard Western suit. Although he did it occasionally, it was not in his habit to “don full Oriental garb,” much to the disappointment of his compatriots.



Figure 20 – Alexander Russell Webb
(1892-1893)⁴³

Like Grenier, Webb was chastised for allegedly encouraging polygamy (which he actually opposed). The *Chicago Tribune* article covering the World Parliament of Religions related:

Hisses and cries of “shame” greeted the first attempt to preach the doctrine of Mohammedanism in Chicago. Mohammed Russel Alexander Webb was defending the custom of polygamy among the Mussulmen,⁴⁴ and had just declared that under certain

⁴³ Source: Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 2006: 144 and jacket photo.

⁴⁴ In fact, Webb said the contrary: “I want to say to you honestly and fairly that polygamy never was and is not a part of the Islamic system.” Polygamy generated considerable anxiety in 19th century America and mostly revolved around the Mormon question, which led to Islam and Mormonism being frequently compared with one another. In 1917, a book entitled *Mormonism: the Islam of America* was for instance published (Faruq Abd-Allah, 2006: 31). Religious considerations on sexual morality were used to racialize

condition of climate and custom, polygamy should be looked upon as a beneficial practice, but the audience did not agree with him, and made its displeasure felt in a forcible way. Excited women raised themselves from their chairs and cried “No!” “Never!” “Never!” All about the house sounded the deeper-voiced cries of excited men but still the converted American wearing his red fez stuck to the point. (...) It was the first time since the opening of the Parliament of Religions that any decided signs of disapproval have greeted a speaker. Confucian, Buddhist, Parsee, Jew and Christian have preached their doctrines side by side on the platform without arousing anything but hearty applause. It remained for Mohammed Webb to stir up the first genuine and unmistakable symptoms of revolt. [Yet, Webb was also met with] enthusiastic approval when he said that the Mussulman daily offers his prayers to the same God that the Christian adores.

Historian Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (2010: 119-120) wrote that “Webb’s audience may not have afforded him the same courtesy they gave their foreign-born guests because this white, American diplomat’s conversion to Islam challenged the Parliament and nineteenth-century America’s deep-seated belief in the enviable superiority of America and its Protestant faith.” Webb, who presented himself as “an American of the Americans” was depicted with exotifying and foreign tropes by his compatriots.

With his religious conversion, his racial categorization had shifted. In 1893, he was described in those terms by the *New York Times*: “*His skin is tanned and there is about him, especially in his movements, an Oriental air. (...) His face is almost dark enough for him to be mistaken for a light Hindu and he talks with a slight foreign accent. With a fez, he would easily pass for a Mohammedan*” (quoted in Faruq Abd-Allah, 2006: 8). Because of his religious affiliation, Webb’s racial pedigree and mastery of the English language were put into question. While he actually looked like any other white American, his spiritual connection to Islam and his Eastern outfit provoked a shift in his perceived racial identity, which became tied to the Orient and the Indian subcontinent. The uses of the words “Hindu” and “Mohammedan” by the *New York Times* are particularly telling about the conflation of race and religion. “Hindu” in 19th century America did not designate an adherent of the religion of Hinduism but was a “generic term that could mean either ‘Indian’ or occasionally ‘mystic’” (Bowen, 2015: 209). In a typical instance of racialized religion, immigrants from South Asia (be they Muslim, Sikh or Christian) were put under the label “Hindu,” which served as a census racial category (Lopez, 2006 [1996]: 62) – until the 1950 census when South Asians were incorporated into the category “white” (Lee, 1993). As for the word “Mohammedan,” although it is evident that Webb was one since he had embraced Islam, the journalist implied that he could only “pass for” one, thereby revealing the ethno-racial rather than religious connotations of the label. For the most part, Webb’s efforts to convert his fellow Americans were ridiculed and his mission eventually failed.

From the 1890s to 1975, influential white American converts included John A. Lant, Emin L. Nabakoff, Nilla Cram Crook, Nadira Florence Ives-Osman, William Lutz, Louis Glick, Maryam Jameelah, Wilson Guertin, Joseph DiCaprio, Ella May Garber, Thomas Irving, etc. Like Webb and sometimes through him, many of them had come to Islam after being involved in esoteric, alternative religious movements. Sufism also

white Mormons as inferior barbaric “Others,” similar to “Turks” and “Mohammedans.” As a result, Mormons, like Muslims, fell outside the realm of racial Anglo-Saxonism and Protestant morality (Denike, 2010). Such strong boundary making can account for the outrage Webb provoked when he simply dared to pronounce the word “polygamy.”

acquired influence throughout that period, especially through the missionary efforts of Indian musician Inayat Khan (1882-1927), who founded the Sufic Order of America. Khan detached the Sufi tradition from Islam in order to circumvent its social and racial stigmatization and attract white Americans (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 127-131). One of Khan's most fervent disciples was the white American woman Ada Martin (1871-1947), who became Rabi'a Martin and represented him in the US (Bowen, 2015: 217).⁴⁵ Exchanges with René Guénon's disciples were also reported.

This picture started changing with the post-1965 immigration of Muslims from Middle Eastern, South Asian and African countries. From then on, conversions among white Americans mostly derived from their interactions with immigrant Muslims and their profiles became different. As noted by historian of conversion Patrick Bowen (2015: 203), "by 1975, the typical white converts in the US was a female who had married a college-educated Muslim immigrant. She furthermore was college-educated herself and was almost never interested in Western esotericism." He also estimated (*ibid*: 28) that the white convert population in the 1980s represented 13,000 to 27,000 people (as opposed to 2,000 to 3,000 in the early 1960s).

Apart from the rather anecdotal conversion of white Americans to Islam, the history of American Islam has been profoundly shaped by the massive conversions of African-Americans. Interestingly, while Islam contributed to the direct racialization of the white people who embraced it, it had a much more ambivalent racial effect on African-Americans.

2) The legacy of African-American Islam

*"God, going north, and rising on the wings of power,
had become white, and Allah, out of power,
and on the dark side of Heaven, had become Black."*
James Baldwin (1963: 46)

*"A Muslim to us is somebody who is for the Black man;
I don't care if he goes to the Baptist church seven days a week."*
Malcolm X in a 1963 interview (cited in Marable, 2011: 246)

a) Muslim slaves as liminal figures

Before turning to a description of African-American converts to Islam, it is important to understand the origin of black Islam in the US. The first Muslims who lived on American soil were African slaves. They had been captured from areas such as Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria where Islam was present; and were hailing from ethnic groups such as the Wolof, Tukulor, Fulani, Vai, Mandinka, Hausa, Nago, Nupe and Soninke, some large percentages of whom were

⁴⁵ Other prominent de-Islamicized American Sufi movements included the "Sufic circle" founded by Theosophist Thomas M. Johnston in 1887; the Sufi Order International represented by Samuel L Lewis (1986-1971) also known as Sufi Sam; and various groups under the influence of Indian Sufi leader Idries Shah (1924-1996). These esoteric movements did not require conversion to Islam.

known to practice Islam (Diouf, 2013 [1998]: 46). The actual number of Muslim slaves who lived in the US is hard to assess and estimates range from “thousands” (Gomez, 1994) to “30,000” (Austin, 1997). Islam was then underground and largely unnoticed, as slaves could not easily maintain practices and beliefs under the yoke of their white Christian masters. Building on onomastics, genealogy and oral history, recent historiographic efforts have sought to excavate the history of these first American Muslims, whose fate has nurtured increased popular attention.⁴⁶

Enslaved African Muslims represented “liminal figures” in the American racial hierarchy of the time, disturbing racial and religious categories. Because of their adherence to a monotheistic faith and the reading and writing skills they had acquired from Qur’anic training, they were often presented as more advanced and educated than their non-Muslim counterparts. Michael Gomez (2005: 181) writes that as a result, they were believed to occupy “an intermediate space betwixt the Arab and the Negro.” Historian Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (2010: 18) goes as far as to talk about the “de-negrofication” of African Muslims, who were usually “dissociated from popular perceptions of the ‘typical’ Black African.” Umar ibn Said (1770-1864), an enslaved Fulbe from Futa Toro, was for instance called the “Arabian Prince” by his white contemporaries who thought that “he was no ordinary person, and certainly not a Negro” (*ibid*, 19). Enslaved Muslim figures such as him, Yarrow Mamout, Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori, Job Ben Solomon, Nicholas Said, Salih Bilali and Bilali Mohamed (Turner, 1997) fascinated white audiences and generated many stories, biographies and newspapers articles.⁴⁷ As noticed by Jacob Berman (2012: 65), however, “the marking of an African as a Moor did as much to unsettle racial categories as it did to maintain them.” Indeed, as put by Allan Austin (1997: 11), literacy skills “gave [African Muslims] some standing in the New World, particularly among those who decided that the literate slaves must be Moors or Arabs because they would not credit such a possibility as literacy in an African.” The liminal position of Muslim slaves, in sum, contributed to reinforce anti-black stereotypes within the Black and White racial divide. The Anglophone world progressively developed a pattern of privileging Muslims⁴⁸ and putting them in positions of authority over other slaves. In order to improve their condition, some of them played the game of their alleged superiority: they emphasized “Arabian” identity over African ancestry, and were at times enlisted in Christian missionary efforts.

⁴⁶ For instance, in August 2015, a *salat janaza* (Muslim funeral prayer) was performed for former slave Yarrow Mamout (1736-1823), a Guinean Muslim who was brought to the US in 1752 and spent 44 years in bondage before earning his freedom and buying a house in Georgetown (Johnston, 2012). Almost two centuries later, the DC Historic Preservation Office and the Mosque Muhammad organized a Muslim memorial service in his garden, where his remains are believed to be buried, facing Mecca, at the spot where he used to pray.

In 2016, the History Channel remake of the widely-watched miniseries *Roots* (1977) portrayed Alex Haley’s ancestor Kunta Kinte (1750-1822) as a Mandinka *Muslim* warrior from Gambia, who after being kidnapped and enslaved in the US, struggled to maintain and transmit his faith.

⁴⁷ In 2006, a historical documentary entitled *Prince Among Slaves* and narrated by convert to Islam Mos Def *aka* Yasiin Bey, was released about the life of Muslim slave Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori (1762-1829).

⁴⁸ By contrast, in other locations such as Spanish and Portuguese America, literate Muslim slaves were perceived as rebellious, dangerous and threatening (many of them fomented slave revolts), which led to their surveillance and repression (Gomez, 2005; Diouf, 2013 [1998]).

b) Islam vs. Christianity

This idea of Muslim pride and superiority resurfaced in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Islam was appropriated by pan-Africanist intellectuals who used it as a tool to promote black dignity and fight white supremacy. In 1887, black writer and diplomat Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) published *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, in which he fiercely criticized Christianity for having become a European religion, unable to uplift black people, and praised Islam as a more unifying faith tradition for Africans (Jackson, 2005: 61-66). Partaking in the representation of Islam as a “civilizing religion,” he wrote: “there is no Christian community of Negroes anywhere which is self-reliant and independent. On the other hand, there are numerous Negro Mohammedan communities and states in Africa which are self-reliant, productive, independent and dominant” (1887: 10). Although he never formally became a Muslim himself, Blyden provided one of the first romanticized accounts of Islam as a “race-blind” religion (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 54-57). W.E.B DuBois also subscribed to such representations in several of his writings. He made Islam an integral part of the African past, writing that “Islam arose in the Arabian deserts, starting from Mecca which is regarded as part of the African Ethiopia.” (1965 [1946]: 183). He also blurred the distinctions between Moors and Africans by declaring that “Arabs are too nearly akin to Negroes to draw an absolute color line” (1975 [1915]: 50) and that North Africans “were not in fact Arabs; they were Negroes with some infiltration of Arabian blood” (1975 [1939]: 53). Even though he emphasized that the African continent already featured great civilizations before the arrival of Islam, DuBois, like Blyden, viewed Islam in a more favorable light than Christianity to advance the black cause. According to Jason R. Young (2009: 11), he “saw in Muslim societies complex societies comprised of varied races, religions and cultures that might serve to guide the US in the twentieth century into more equitable social and racial interactions.”

c) The Moorish Science Temple

Such ideas materialized in the 20th century as African-American religious entrepreneurs created actual movements in which Islam and Islamic symbols were enrolled as instruments of black nationalism. The first movement of this kind was the Moorish Science Temple, established in 1913 by Timothy Drew, *aka* Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929). Probably influenced by black Freemasonry (Allen, 2000; Dannin, 2002a: chapter 1; Nance, 2002), and especially the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order-Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AEAONMS) or Black Shriners,⁴⁹ Noble Drew Ali developed his own Islamically-inspired theology. According to it, the historical origins of black people could be traced to Morocco, which meant that they were “Moors,” descendants of the Biblical Moabites and Canaanites. The term “Moor,” therefore, resurfaced in an unexpected manner as a source of historical pride for disenfranchised blacks. Islam was presented as the “natural religion” of Asiatic peoples (blacks and all non-European peoples of color), which implied that European Christianity had to be kept at bay (Curtis, 2002: chapter 3; Gomez, 2005: chapter 6).

⁴⁹ Like their white counterparts of the Ancient Arabic Order - Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS), the Black Shriners had adopted Orientalist aesthetics (see above).



Figure 21 – Noble Drew Ali and secretary in their office
January 8, 1928. The juxtaposition of the Moroccan and American flags is symptomatic of the Moorish Science Temple’s endeavor to link Arabo-Islamic history and Americanness (Berman, 2012: 150).

Like other charismatic black religious leaders of his time, such as Father Divine (1876-1865) and Sweet Daddy Grace (1881-1960), Noble Drew Ali used religion to upset the Black and White racial binary and embrace an alternative racial identity (Sigler, 2004). The emphasis on African-Americans’ Moorish heritage was part of a deracialization strategy meant to “eschew the term Negro” and its derogatory implications in the American context (Berman, 2012: 156). Disciples of Noble Drew Ali refused to check the Negro box on administrative forms and frequently “challenged racial segregation which they held did not apply to them since they were Moors and not so-called Negroes” (Grewal, 2013: 87-91). Noble Drew Ali distributed national identification cards to his followers, in which they were depicted as “Moslems” and “Moorish Americans.”

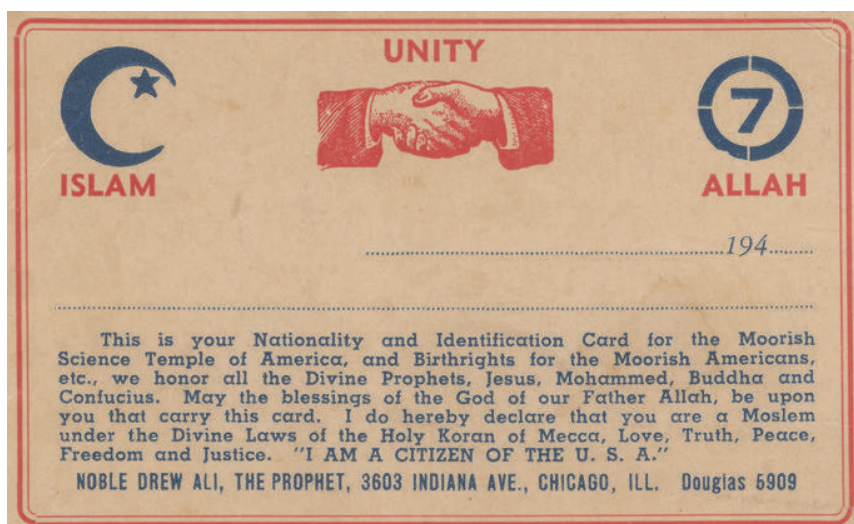


Figure 22 – Identification card of Moorish Science Temple members (circa 1940s)

Noble Drew Ali gave his followers new names and enjoined them to include long dresses and fezzes in their wardrobe. This modification of outward appearance through the adoption of adornments perceived as “foreign” contributed to mitigate the effects of black prejudice in a segregated and deeply unequal America. Indeed, recent research has established that during the Jim Crow era, some blacks managed to escape their condition by wearing turbans. Historian Paul Kramer (2011) describes for instance the 1947 trip throughout the American South of black reverend Jesse Wayman Routt , who traveled unharmed and unhindered in white wagons and ate in white restaurants by donning a turban and speaking with a Swedish accent. He concludes that “the best way for a colored man to dodge white harassment was to wear a turban,” thereby revealing the spuriousness and absurdity of racial classifications and the paramount role of clothing. Contrasting with the experience of European renegades in the 16-18th century, “taking the turban” was therefore not stigmatizing but rather emancipatory for black Americans living under Jim Crow.⁵⁰ Accordingly, conversion to Islam, along with the adoption of a mythical North African past and alleged foreign attributes, became a way to resist negative racial categorizations and reinvent both the past and future of African-Americans.

Some sections of the Moorish Science Temple also welcomed white converts, such as Rafi Yahya Abdullah Sharif-Bey (1940-2006), who was born Yale Jean Singer and hailed from an orthodox Jewish family. The Moorish Science Temple actually has a white offshoot, named the Moorish Orthodox Church, which was created in 1962 by jazz musician Warren Tartaglia. The Moorish Orthodox Church mixes elements of racial consciousness inherited from Noble Drew Ali with Sufism, esoteric Islamophilia, Eastern Christian liturgy, Tantra and Vedanta (Bowen, 2015: 320-321). It features counter-cultural and mystical characters such as white convert Peter Lamborn Wilson (*aka* Hakim Bey) (on this controversial figure, see Knight, 2012b).

d) The Nation of Islam

The Moorish Temple was followed in 1930 by the Nation of Islam (NOI), founded by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad (1877-unknown)⁵¹ and led subsequently by Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975). In fighting against the oppression that befell African-Americans, the NOI mixed teachings from Garveyism⁵² and the Moorish Science Temple, but also took an anti-white stance that was much more explicit than Noble Drew Ali’s. The theology of the movement explained the atrocities black people had to endure on the US soil by the doctrine of “the white man as a devil.” Whites were portrayed as “blue-

⁵⁰ On the use of “foreignness” and “exoticism” to escape anti-black prejudice in the US, see also the autobiography of Angela Davis (1988 [1974]: 86) in which she describes how she and her sister would often speak French to each other in order to escape the brutality of Jim Crow segregation in their native city of Birmingham (Alabama) in the 1950s: “We would pretend to be foreigners and, speaking French to each other, we would walk into the shoe store on 19th Street and ask, with a thick accent, to see a pair of shoes. At the sight of two young black women speaking a foreign language, the clerks in the store raced to help us. Their delight with the exotic was enough to completely, if temporarily, dispel their normal disdain for black people. Therefore, Fania and I were not led to the back of the store where the one black clerk would normally have waited on us out of the field of vision of the ‘respectable’ white customers. We were invited to take seats in the very front of this Jim Crow shop.”

⁵¹ For speculations about Wallace D. Fard’s mysterious life, see Knight (2006).

⁵² Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a Jamaican pan-Africanist leader who promoted a return of the black diaspora to Africa and founded the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association).

eyed devils” (crafted by a crazy scientist named Yakub) that had come to rule the world for the last 6,000 years, while black men were described as the actual original men. Elijah Muhammad invited his followers to strongly reject the white devil’s creed, Christianity, and embrace Islam as “the true religion of the Black man” (Allen, 2000; Curtis, 2002: chapter 4; Gomez, 2005: chapter 7). In sum, while the Moorish Science Temple used religion and Islamic symbols to escape race, the NOI gave a religious justification to racial difference and simply reversed racial imbalance by turning the tables on white people. The NOI became popular through its newspapers *Muhammad Speaks*; its zealous member, the boxer Cassius Clay, *aka* Muhammad Ali (1942-2016); and its staunch spokesperson Minister Malcolm X (1925-1965). Although Malcolm left the NOI to join a more mainstream version of Sunni Islam in 1964, his impassioned speeches contributed to the image of African-American Islam as a religion strongly tied to blackness and fiercely opposed to white supremacy.

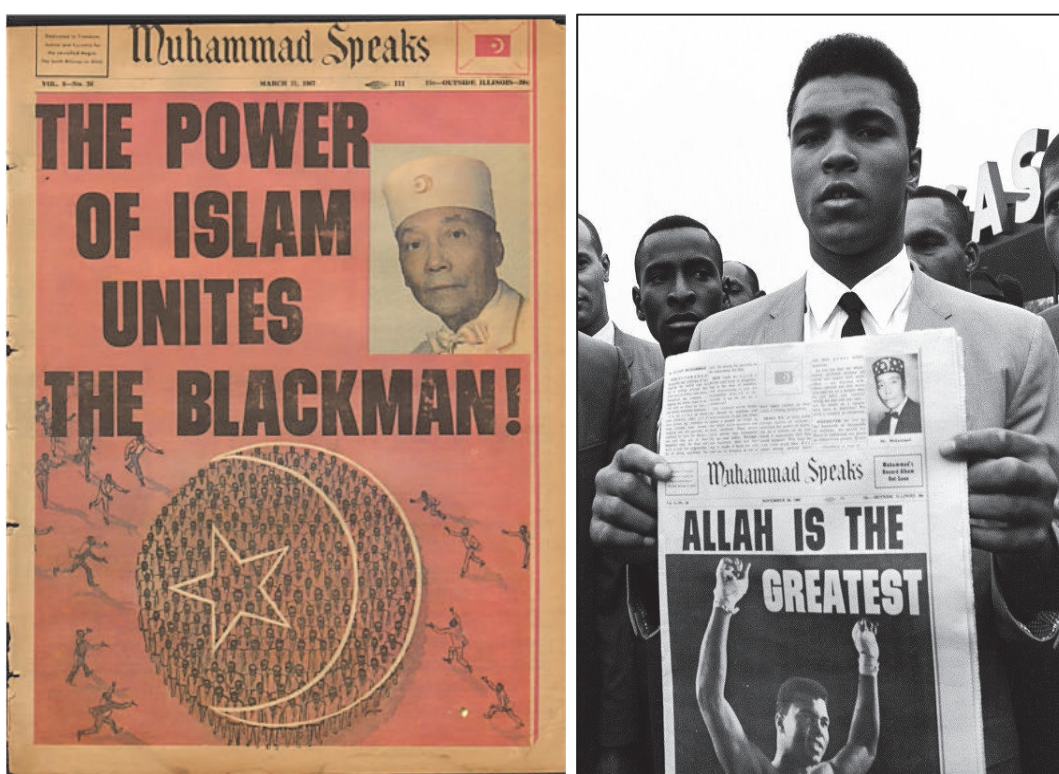


Figure 23 - Front pages of *Muhammad Speaks*
Featuring the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his famous crescent fez (1967) and Boxer Muhammad Ali after his victory at the world heavyweight championship (1965)⁵³

NOI members were encouraged to leave behind their former identities by relinquishing their “slave names” and adopting new Muslim names. Once again, conversion was used as a tool of “self-reinvention” (Marable, 2011). Contrary to the Moorish Science Temple, however, the NOI did not advocate “exotic” clothing. Rather, its “religious inventions were thoroughly American” (Moore, 1986: 194). The NOI encouraged its members to present themselves as American gentlemen, wearing suits and bow ties, speaking eloquently and embodying middle-class respectability, sobriety and hard-work (Jackson, 2005: 69; Grewal, 2013: 105). Strict dietary laws and the avoidance

⁵³ Source: *Muhammad Speaks* online archives.

of all intoxicants contributed to this spirit of self-discipline. As evidenced in the following cartoon from *Muhammad Speaks*, black Muslims from the NOI were portrayed as “clean-cut Negroes,” “intelligent looking,” wearing “dark suits” and “shined shoes.”



Figure 24 - Cartoon in *Muhammad Speaks*
July 1962⁵⁴

Following the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son Warith Deen Muhammad (1933-2008) reoriented the movement towards mainstream Sunni Islam: he progressively left behind the racial theology of the NOI and renamed the movement the American Society of Muslims.⁵⁵ In short, he “replaced racial modes of identification with religious ones” (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 288). While under Elijah Muhammad’s leadership, the NOI did not welcome whites in its midst, a few white converts managed to join the movement under his son. Dr. Dorothy Blake Fardan became in 1976 the first white female member of the NOI, taking the name of Dorothy 13X (Fardan, 2001; Knight, 2011: 66, 92-95; Bowen, 2015: 362). A former devout Catholic, Fardan had developed her political views during the student movement of the 1960s and had married Donald 12X Dorsey, a former Black panther. Holding a PhD in Sociology and Anthropology, she argued in her autobiography that the NOI helped her understand her social position in the world: “I understood the devil teaching and I understood the reality of white supremacy” (Fardan, 2009: 381). She reported being particularly moved by the speech of a black imam who said “the Caucasians help us when they show us that they are not what we thought they were and we help them when we show them that we are not anymore what their fathers made us” (cited in Knight, 2011: 94). In 1976, the *Chicago Tribune* published a lengthy article about the NOI, which featured a portrait of Dorothy.

⁵⁴ Source: *Muhammad Speaks* online archives.

⁵⁵ In 1978, however, Louis Farrakhan split from W.D. Muhammad and recreated his own version of the Nation of Islam, faithful to the original teachings of Elijah Muhammad and firmly committed to black nationalism. He galvanized impoverished black youth throughout the 1980-1990s. Louis Farrakhan was skeptical about the efficacy of Sunni Islam to solve the problems of black people in the US, given the enduring reality of racism within the Muslim world at large. He also felt that W.D. Muhammad’s message could suit the black middle-class but was too half-hearted for the black underclass (Moore, 1986: 193; GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 290). Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam is classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.



Figure 25 – Dorothy Blake Fardan
Chicago Tribune, March 2nd, 1976¹

Journalist Barbara Reynolds wrote: “In her flowing white habit, Dr. Dorothy Dorsey looks every bit the nun she planned to become in the early sixties. But her religious garb marks a conversion to a faith to which no white could belong until recently – the Nation of Islam, which for years denounced whites as ‘blue-eyed devils.’ (...) Today, as a teacher at the Clara Muhammad University on the city’s South Side, she admits that some blacks are hostile to her. ‘It has been implied that I am an intruder and that I have an ulterior motive, but that’s among the non-believers. The Muslims themselves have accepted me as a sister.’ Since W. D. Muhammad, the new spiritual leader of the Nation opened the faith to non-blacks last year, Latinos, a Korean, a family from Thailand as well as other ethnic groups have joined.”

With the Moorish Science Temple and the NOI, Islam became a “Black religion,” which, according to African-American Islamic scholar Sherman Jackson, is a subtype of African-American religion whose central preoccupation is the “desire to annihilate or at least subvert white supremacy and anti-black racism” (Jackson, 2005: 29). Like other religious outsiders studied by R. Laurence Moore, such as the Mormons, black Muslims were “as American as cherry pie because their contests with insiders [mainstream Protestants] were the means by which Americans invented themselves” (Moore, 1982). Indeed, in embodying a counter-citizenship narrative, the NOI had an enduring legacy on the American imagination regarding both race and religion.

e) The Five Percenters

The NOI also had a number of offshoots, such as the Five Percenters (also known as the Nation of Gods and Earth), created in 1964 by former NOI member Clarence 13X (1928-1969). The Five Percent Nation went a step further and taught that the black man himself was God personified (members of the group call themselves Allah, a pure blasphemy in the eyes of many orthodox Muslims). In addition, Clarence 13X developed specific “divine sciences” such as Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, which he taught on the streets of Harlem, attracting mostly urban black youth (Swedenburg, 1997; Knight, 2007). His typically American religious inventiveness solidly anchored Islam into the American landscape. The Five Percenters Islamicized American geography by renaming major cities: Harlem became “Mecca,” Brooklyn “Medina,” Queens “The Desert,” Detroit “D-Mecca,” Chicago “C-Medina,” St. Louis “Saudi,” Los Angeles “Love Allah”, etc. (Knight, 2006: 109). The NOI, and the Five Percenters especially, have had unprecedented influence on American hip-hop: to this day, several black artists (Brand Nubian, Rakim Allah, Poor Righteous Teachers, Busta Rhymes, Gang Starr, Pete

Rock, CL Smooth, Wu Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Sunz of Man, Diggable Planets, the Fugees, Public Enemy, Nas, The Roots, etc.) sprinkle their lyrics with divine numerology, Arabic phrases and sampled speeches from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X or Louis Farrakhan.⁵⁶ Many of hip-hop rhymes, poetry and expressions are informed by Five Percenters' language. Some rappers are directly affiliated to them while others simply display Islamic sympathies, cognizant of the role Islam played in advancing the African-American cause. In line with the teachings of the NOI, the Five Percenters are almost entirely black, but a few white converts, such as Michael Muhammad Knight, have been authorized to integrate their groups and partake in their "ciphers" (knowledge building sessions) and eloquence contests (Knight, 2011).

f) The Ahmadiyya and the "Jazz Caliphate"

Apart from the NOI and its offshoots, another movement that had prominent influence among African-Americans, although not exclusively among them, was the Ahmadiyya. Considered as heretics by many Muslims because of their belief in the prophecy of Indian religious leader Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908),⁵⁷ Ahmadis arrived from India in the US in 1920 through their first missionary, the Punjabi Mufti Muhammad Sadiq (1872-1957), and started proselytizing among black communities, putting the emphasis on Islam's colorblindness and multi-racialism. They were very successful: "due to their ability to translate the egalitarian ethos of Islam to the terms of Black religion" (Grewal, 2013: 92), they became an "Indian-led movement with a mostly African-American constituency" (Gomez, 2005: 252). Patrick Bowen (2015: 229) notes that "African-American Ahmadis would outnumber whites perhaps nearly seven to one. The evidence suggests that whites who joined after this transition were often people intensely committed to the idea of racial equality." As early as the 1920s, the Ahmadiyya journal *The Moslem Sunrise* started listing the names of the new converts who had joined the movement. In the second issue of 1922,⁵⁸ for instance, one could read: "*The following gentlemen and ladies have accepted Islam in Ahmadiyya Movement. Their American names as well as their Moslem names are given below: Mr. Brossfiled – Nasra-ud-Din; Mrs Dirin – Naseera; Mr. W. Hill – Najm-ud-Din; Mr J.H. Thomas – Mohibullah; Mrs Eliza Dunn – Amin; etc. etc.*" Such lists were at times enlivened with pictures and conversion narratives, describing converts as "zealous," "enthusiastic" or "energetic" Moslems.

⁵⁶ In 2014, famous rapper Jay-Z sparked controversy when he attended a sports game wearing a big Five Percenters' medallion (an eight-pointed star with the divine number 7 in the middle).

⁵⁷ For orthodox Muslims, Muhammad embodies the seal of prophethood and no other prophet can come after him.

⁵⁸ Source: *Muslim Sunrise* online archives.



Figure 26 - Portraits of converts displayed in *The Moslem Sunrise* (1923-1931)⁵⁹

While the NOI and the Five Percenters ultimately hold influence on hip-hop music, Ahmadis were particularly prevalent among black jazz musicians. From the 1940s to the 1960s, Ahmadiyya Islam spread rapidly in the jazz milieu, with the conversion of

famous figures such as Art Blakey (Abdullah Ibn Buhain), Ahmad Jamal (Frederick Russell Jones), Yusef Lateef (William Emanuel Huddleston), Idris Muhammad (Leo Morris), McCoy Tyner (Suliman Saud), Idrees Suliman (Leonard Graham), Robert “Kool” Bell (Muhammad Bayyan), Ronald Bell (Khalis Bayyan),⁶⁰ etc. (Turner, 1997; Dannin, 2002a). In 1953, *Ebony* magazine published a special article on “Moslem Musicians” who, according to their estimates, made up 200 people (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 248).⁶¹ In 1947, Art Blakey even founded an all-Muslim band, called *The Messengers*, composed of 17 converted members, including Lynn Hope (renamed El Hajj Abdullah Rasheed Ahmad after his pilgrimage to Mecca), who used to perform with a turban and was exotically renamed “*the Maharajah of the Saxophone*” (Aidi, 2014a). Although they did not embrace Islam, other musicians such as Chuck Willis (knows as the “*Sheikh of Shake*”) and Sonny Rhodes (known as the “*Urban Turban*”) also donned colorful headdresses.



Figure 27 - Album covers of black musicians

Left to right: Chuck Willis, *Wails the Blues*, 1958; Lynn Hope, *The Maharaja of Saxophone*, 1961; Sonny Rhodes, *Disciple of the Blues*, 1991⁶²

Echoing the experience of Moorish Science Temple members, joining the Ahmadiyya was for black musicians a way to escape the racial hierarchies of the time. Although not a Muslim himself, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie underlined in his autobiography (2009 [1979]: 291) the de-racializing power of Islam, especially through the adoption of new names:

⁵⁹ Source: for the first three pictures, *The Moslem Sunrise*, 1923, issue 1; for the last one, *The Moslem Sunrise*, 1931, issue 1.

⁶⁰ Robert Bell and Ronald Bell have declared that the famous song “Celebration” (1980) of their band “Kool and the Gang” was inspired by a Qur’anic verse in which the angels celebrate God for having created Adam (Aidi, 2014b).

⁶¹ Although they did not become Muslims themselves, it is established that Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and John Coltrane were also influenced by the Islamic spirit of the time. As a matter of anecdote, there are speculations regarding the actual meaning of one of John Coltrane’s famous compositions: was it “A Love Supreme” or “Allah Supreme?” Evidence to support the latter include the fact that Coltrane’s first wife, Naima (born Juanita Grubbs), was a Muslim convert; that Coltrane was surrounded by Muslim musicians, including the late saxophonist and composer Yusef Lateef (a famous representative of the Ahmadis); and that the song was intended as a devotional praise to God, mixing various religious influences, including Islam (Curtis, 2010: 404; Aidi, 2014a).

⁶² I would like to thank Pierre Poidevin for bringing these albums to my attention.

“Man, if you join the Muslim faith, you ain’t colored no more, you’ll be white,” they’d say. “You get a new name and you don’t have to be a nigger no more.” (...) When these cats found out that Idrees Sulieman, who joined the Muslim faith about that time, could go into these white restaurants and bring out sandwiches to the other guys because he wasn’t colored—and he looked like the inside of the chimney—they started enrolling in droves. (...) Musicians started having it printed on their police cards where it said “race:” “W” for white. (...) Another cat went into this restaurant and they said they didn’t serve Colored in there. So he said “I don’t have to go under the rule of colored because my name is Mustafa Dalil” (cited in Dannin, 2002b: 74).

Religion, attire and names seemed to eclipse the influence of skin color in racial classifications, thereby granting new freedoms to converted black musicians. Gillespie also recalled how he would wear a turban at times when touring in Europe and laughed at the variety of racial guesses that people made on the basis of his new appearance: “People would see me on the streets and think of me as an Arab or a Hindu. They didn’t know what to think, really. (...) Sometimes Americans would think I was some kind of ‘Mohammedan’ nobleman” (Gillespie and Fraser, 2009 [1979]: 293).

To sum up: in contrast to white Americans, for whom Islam has often felt like an oddity, African-Americans have entertained a close historical relationship to Islamic references in their struggle for equality. Even if only 1% of African-Americans identify as Muslims today (Pew Forum Religion and Public Life, 2009), it can be said that Islam has historically been a central component of black America by providing an “alternative racial compass” (Daulatzai, 2012: 23). Movements like the NOI and the Moorish Science Temple had “the seminal effect of transforming Islam into the cultural and ideological property of Blackamericans as a whole” (Jackson, 2005: 5). Contrary to white Americans – for whom conversion to Islam often meant a racialization as foreign, Other and non-white –, for black Americans conversion was used either as a strategy to escape blackness (Moorish Science Temple, Ahmadiyya) or to reclaim and revalorize it (NOI, Five Percenters). Today, African-Americans make up 64% of converts to Islam (Bagby, 2012a) and 35% of all American Muslims, which makes them the largest racial group among Muslims (Gallup Coexist Foundation, 2009).

3) Immigrant Muslims, race and naturalization

In addition to African-Americans, American Muslims are also made up of large number of immigrants. The relationships between Immigrant Islam and race have been very different, albeit equally complex. Between 1890 and 1924, it is estimated that around 60,000 Muslim immigrants (for the most part, young uneducated male laborers) came to the US (Spellberg, 2013: 274). The legal debates that surrounded the naturalization of these Muslim immigrants under the Naturalization Act (in effect from 1790 to 1952) are particularly revealing. Since US citizenship was then limited to “free white persons,” naturalization courts had to state on the whiteness of applicants, which led to surprising discussions in which judges mixed pseudo-biological, chromatic, cultural, geographical and religious considerations. Court proceedings reveal that, for applicants of Middle Eastern origin, Islam was often an obstacle to be granted white racial status while Christianity proved a valuable asset (for a careful examination of those legal discussions, see Tehranian, 2000; Bayoumi, 2006; Lopez, 2006 [1996]). In setting the boundaries of the young American nation, Islam was racialized as non-white. For instance, in 1942,

District Judge Tuttle, evaluating the application case of a Yemeni Muslim named Ahmed Hassan, declared:

When one seeking citizenship is in fact clearly not white of skin, a strong burden of proof devolves upon him to establish that he is a white person within the meaning of the Act. (...) Apart from the dark skin of Arabs, it is well known that they are part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominantly Christian peoples of Europe. It cannot be expected that as a class they would readily intermarry with our population and be assimilated into our civilization” (cited in Bayoumi, 2006: 269).

Ahmed Hassan’s petition for naturalization was rejected. In this context, a number of Muslim applicants for citizenship did not hesitate to convert to Christianity or simply change their names in order to erase their Islamic identity. GhaneaBassiri (2010: 141) writes that “many Syrian [and Albanian] Muslims sought to pass as Christians in order to be more easily accepted into the US.” He gives the example of Mohammed Asa Abu-Howah, who registered under the fake name of Joseph Howar when he came to New York in 1903 and was eventually naturalized in 1908. Joseph explained himself: “people I met on the boat told me I’d better change my name. They say it labeled me as a Muslim, and no immigration officer would allow a Muslim to enter the US.” Legal scholar John Tehranian (2007: 19) also noted similar cases of “identity covering” among Middle Eastern immigrants: “women frequently dye their hair blonde to downplay their more ‘ethnic’ features. Middle Eastern men will go by the name ‘Mike’ for Mansour, ‘Mory’ for Morteza, ‘Al’ for Ali, and ‘Moe’ for Mohammed.” In fact, until Ahmed Hasan in 1942, not a single Muslim immigrant from the Arab world had petitioned for American citizenship (Beydoun, 2013): they either had not dared to or had presented themselves as Christians.⁶³ Once again, name changing and religious identity shift were a powerful instrument of passing and dissimulation. Contrary to African-Americans who embraced Islamicization as a tool of racial emancipation, Muslim immigrants favored de-Islamicization to be accepted into a mostly white and Protestant American nation. This was their way of guaranteeing their social integration into the Black and White Divide.

F. CONCLUSION

In unveiling the long, dense and rich history of religious conversions in France and the US, this chapter has put forward three main arguments. The first is that, conversion is a point of entry into an integrated understanding of race and religion. Throughout history, religious conversion has acted as a powerful indicator of the conflation between race and religion, albeit in different manners.

- In the Middle-Ages, the failed conversion of Muslims (Saracens) to Christianity led to their essentialization as inherently irrational peoples, impervious to logical religious arguments. In this case, *the resistance to religious conversion resulted in the racialization of religious groups.*

⁶³ In the current context, with the war in Syria and the short-lived, yet damaging “Muslim ban” implemented by President Donald Trump, a lot of conversions to Christianity have been reported among Middle Eastern Muslims to help their asylum applications to Europe, the US and Canada (Ensor, 2017).

- In post-Reconquista Spain (16th century), the forced conversion to Christianity of Muslims, whose descendants became known as *Moriscos*, was insufficient to erase their racial stigma: the alleged impurity of *Moriscos*' blood and lineage eventually earned them expulsion from Spanish territory. Similarly, in the French colonial period (19th-20th century), the conversion to Catholicism of Algerian Muslims was not enough to overthrow their Muslim legal status. In that regard, *religious conversion was insufficient to override racial ascription*.
- In the 16th-18th century, the voluntary and involuntary conversions to Islam of European and American sailors, called *renegades*, was perceived as an apostasy from their racial and national identities: they became Turks and Moors in the public imaginary. Likewise, in the 19th-20th century, both in France and the US, Muslim converts such as Philippe Grenier and Alexander Webb were portrayed as foreign, exotic, ambiguous figures, suspected of traitorous national allegiances and polygamous practices. In the 20th century, by contrast, African-Americans embraced Islam to escape negative representations of blackness. In all these cases, *religious conversion resulted in a reconfiguration of racial categorization*.

These three modalities of racial-religious interplay through conversion all reveal the racial essentialization of Muslimness. It is indelible for those who were born into it or descend from it. And it durably taints and stains the identity of those who embrace it. These three modalities deserve in-depth investigation. In this dissertation, however, I am attached to analyzing the third one specifically, a task I tackle in the next chapter.

Second, this chapter has highlighted important similarities and differences in the history of conversions to Islam in France and the US. In terms of similarities, in the 16th-18th century, both societies had their share of *renegades* on the Mediterranean and both apprehended such massive conversions with anxiety. On the two sides of the Atlantic, the “disorder” and “disruption” created by religious conversions generated a sense of civilizational threat. In the US however, such fears were inflected by the ideal of absolute religious freedom promoted by the Founding Fathers. In the 19th-20th century, on the two sides of the Atlantic, the esoteric and occultist revival also opened up avenues for conversions to Islam among intellectual and cultural elites. The roles of Sufism and Freemasonry, in particular, have been confirmed by many French and American historians.

These similarities, however, are overridden by crucial differences. In France, conversions to Islam were strongly shaped by the colonial encounter and the question of citizenship. Amidst the sharp inequalities of status generated by the colonial power imbalance, French Muslim converts occupied an ambiguous position. Some became ambassadors of France's “civilizing” message to their Muslim coreligionists; others thought to rehabilitate Islam in the eyes of their French compatriots; yet others voiced a strong critique of the French colonial project and of Western civilization at large. While stigmatized in public discourse and the object of many jokes and mockeries, French converts kept all their privileges as citizens, which was not the case for their colonized coreligionists. In the US, religious conversions took place in the context of the Black and White racial divide, informed by the legacy of slavery. African Americans in particular displayed great religious inventiveness in their appraisal of Islam, to an extent that was never matched in France. Black American movements appropriated Islamic frames in

unprecedented ways and coined new theological doctrines. In sum, while in France, conversion took place in an unequal racial situation that directly involved Islam; in the US, Islam was imported to redefine an unequal racial situation that had little to do with it in the first place. Islam was enrolled as an instrument of black liberation, a phenomenon that is specific to the US, although we do find some thin traces of it in the writings of French converts like Thomas Ismayl Urbain and Etienne Dinet. The American color line manifested itself very clearly in the process of conversion, as evidenced by the widely different experiences of black and white converts to Islam. While the latter were downgraded into the American racial hierarchy for having embraced a religion perceived as foreign and uncivilized, the former, on the contrary, used the foreign attributes of Islam to renegotiate their position into the American racial stratification system and endow blackness with a new, more valorized meaning. While Islam stigmatized white Americans (and Middle Eastern immigrants applying for naturalization), it was used as a destigmatization strategy by black Americans.

The third and last contribution of this chapter has been to highlight the importance of dress and attire in the interplay of racial and religious categorization. There is a popular saying in French that claims that “*l’habit ne fait pas le moine*” (literally, “dress does not make the monk”), which is translated as “clothes don’t make the man” in English. This chapter proved the exact contrary: throughout history, clothes did make the convert. Muslim converts, in particular, frequently embodied their new spiritual identities by donning new clothes, as evidenced by the famous expression “taking the turban.” In a context where religious identities are racialized, dress, as a signifier of religious difference, eventually becomes a marker for racial categorization. The turban, especially, racialized converts as foreign throughout history. In the US, this process proved depreciating for whites, but instrumental for blacks, who were able to slightly mitigate the harshness of Jim Crow by modifying their attire. Be it for renegades looking for a better life, adventurers in search of new horizons, sincere religious converts, Freemasons willing to “play Eastern” or African-Americans seeking to escape the brutality of racial segregation, Islamic apparel has frequently been enrolled over the centuries as an instrument of “passing.” While the literature on passing has overwhelmingly focused on members of the minority group seeking to pass as members of the majority (Hobbs, 2014), the reverse scenario is also worth studying (Dreisinger, 2008). The passing of white people as “Other,” non-white and foreigners through clothing and disguise has served different purposes throughout history: cultural appropriation (hooks, 1992; Roediger, 2003); mockery and masquerading (in the case of minstrel shows for instance (Gubar, 1997)); knowledge and empathy (Griffin, 1961; Wallraff, 2013 [1986]), artistic strategy (in the case of white rappers for instance (Hess, 2005; Hammou, 2013)). While some of the historical figures portrayed in this chapter fit into those patterns of dissimulation, trickery and masquerading (renegades saving their lives; Freemasons appropriating Islamic symbols; Camille Douls dressing as a Muslim to explore the Sahara, Marga d’Andurain penetrating Mecca), most of the Muslim converts described usher in a new modality of racial passing: that which indirectly derives from sincere religious conversion.

In the contemporary period, the historical significance of dress, which seemed so important to converts in order to materialize their new religious identity, seems to be fading away. As I demonstrate in the next parts of this dissertation, the externalization of religious belonging through clothing and attire is no longer a necessity in our increasingly

secularized societies. The contemporary Muslim converts I interviewed make different choices in that regard: while some actively display their Muslim identity, others prefer to keep it private and do not modify their outward appearance accordingly. In the next chapter, I turn to a careful investigation of these clothing choices and analyze their consequences on converts' racial classification.

CHAPTER 5 – “COMING WITHIN THE VEIL”

RELIGIOUS MARKERS AND RACIAL CATEGORIZATION

“What exactly is a Black? First of all, what’s his color?”
Jean Genet, *The Blacks*, 1959

“If being Muslim does not necessarily means being religiously so, then Islam plays a role that is analogous to that of skin color: being Muslim is like being Black. Like skin color, Islam is used as a kind of hook, on which all prejudices, stigmas and racisms can be hung.”
Abdelmalek Sayad (2002: 102, my translation)

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the intersection of race and religion in the case of Islam is an old phenomenon that has taken different shapes across history. In many instances, religious conversion acted either as a trigger or an indicator of racialization. In addition, visual markers, in particular clothing and dress, but also names, were decisive in the racialization of converts. Moving back to our current period and to my set of interviews, I turn to a presentation of how race operates in the lives of contemporary French and American converts. More specifically, I explore how Muslim converts’ racial categorization changes as they don the visible signs of Islamic belonging. In analyzing the impact of religion on race, this chapter constitutes the linchpin of this dissertation.

In common-sense knowledge, racial characteristics are understood as fixed and unchanging throughout one’s life. This chapter argues the contrary. It brings empirical support to the idea set forth in the Introduction that race is not an attribute inherent to individuals but the result of a cognitive activity of categorization that varies depending on the context. As put by Ania Loomba (1999: 201), race is “the most powerful *and yet most fragile* marker of social difference.” The cues that are commonly used to determine someone’s race (appearance, skin color, hair, dress, accent, speech, manners, etc.) can be misleading and malleable (up to a certain extent); their semantics fluctuate from one situation to the other. Building on the legacy of symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1963), labeling theory (Becker, 1991 [1963]) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), this chapter takes a micro-perspective to investigate the indexicality of daily operations of racial categorization. In the dramaturgy of face-to-face interactions, the conspicuous attributes of Islam – such as the beard, the *hijab* (headscarf), the *thawb/djellaba* (long male dress), the *kufi* (small cap), the *zebibah* (forehead mark due to repeated prayers), Islamic speech patterns and Islamic first names – are understood as “items of expressive equipment” that make up converts’ “personal front” (Goffman, 1956: 14) and structure

the social performance of Muslimness. These items “serve as iconic representations to help [converts] dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent” (Alexander, 2004: 532). As this chapter puts forward, in addition to indicating religious belonging, these attributes also operate as “carriers,” “clues” and “sign-vehicles” that converts’ interlocutors rely on to classify them *racially*.

This chapter demonstrates that racial categorization shifts in relation to visible religious markers and that Muslim converts experience a modification of their position in the racial stratification system when they choose to display their religious belonging. In doing so, converts “come within the Veil.” The concept of the Veil was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks* (2007 [1903]) and further developed in *Darkwater: Voices within the Veil* (1969 [1920]) and *Dusk of Dawn* (2012 [1940]). Alternatively called the Veil of Race, the Veil of Color, or simply the Veil, it serves as a metaphor for the “color line,” i.e. the racial barrier that both separates and connects blacks and whites in the US (and worldwide). A pioneer for the sociology of race, and sociology in general (Morris, 2015), Du Bois wrote: “the Negro is *born with a veil, and gifted with second sight* in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s Self through the eyes of others” (2007 [1903]: 8, my emphasis).

According to Du Bois, blacks are “within” the Veil, while whites are “without.” They can perceive black people through the veil but can never experience what life is like under it. They “project their own constructions of Blacks onto the veil,” which “works as a one-way mirror” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015: 235). Du Bois envisions whiteness as a position of racial dominance, characterized by blindness and ignorance about racialized social conditions. Invisible and unmarked, whiteness is seldom interrogated as a racial category in its own right. As James Baldwin once said, “being white is never having to think about it.” Contrary to racial minorities, therefore, white people never have to face the fact of their own racialness. For Du Bois, the unburdened, privileged position of whites (outside the Veil) constricts their consciousness of race. Blacks, on the contrary, have “no choice but to see themselves through the eyes of the racializing as reflected on the Veil” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015: 240). Yet, they are also endowed with a second sight, a “double consciousness” that enables them to appraise the reality of racial inequality. The Veil acts for them as both a prison and a vantage point. In sum, “those who are veiled see others better than they are seen themselves” (Blau and Brown, 2001: 230). Howard Winant (2004) has advanced that Du Bois’ Veil is “one of the most nuanced and powerful theory of race and racism ever developed.” He describes the Veil as a fundamentally dialectical concept that “links the micro and macro dimensions of social life.” The Veil is a dynamic, flexible and ambiguous figure. Depending on the context, it can evolve from a thin transparent fabric, mediating racial relations, into an impenetrable barrier, a “thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass” (DuBois, 2012 [1940]: 130) that precludes any mutual understanding. In addition to its richness and complexity, Du Bois’ concept takes on a special flavor in this dissertation, since the veil is also an Islamic marker that strongly impacts the racial categorization of female converts, as will be demonstrated in the following lines. Both an actual and metaphorical fabric, the Veil strongly shapes face-to-face interactions in contexts where Islam is racialized, such as France and the US.

Focusing on converts' everyday encounters with racial assumptions (Essed, 1991; Smith, 2015), this chapter provides a microscopic, almost surgical description of the way racial categorization operates in relation to religious markers. It explores the lived experience of racialization and its impact on converts' self and subjectivity. In order to "operationalize race in qualitative methodology" (Morris, 2007), I must give a description of my interviewees' physical appearance and name the racial categories to which they are ascribed. The point is not to state what my interviewees *are* racially, but to indicate how they are most likely perceived by their interlocutors (Jobard et al., 2012: 433). Such depictions can create uneasiness and discomfort for the reader (Mazouz, 2008), but are a *passage obligé* of social research on racial categorization. To mitigate such problem, I generously quote the own words of my interviewees, to describe how they themselves experience racial categorization and talk about it.

This chapter is divided as follows: a first section analyzes converts' decisions regarding the display (or not) of their new religiosity. Contrasting with the previous historical chapter, the ostentation of religious belonging through clothing and bodily reconfiguration is no longer a panacea, as many converts choose to remain religiously invisible. Those who decide to visually display their Muslimness, however, expose themselves to a new set of assumptions about their racial identity. A second section explores the ambiguous impact of Islamic items of expressive equipment in conjunction with converts' white skin. In contexts where sign-vehicles such as the beard or the veil can be interpreted in a variety of ways, it so happens that converts' Islamic presentation of self fails and is mistaken for something else, generating confusion and cognitive dissonance. A third section describes what happens when converts are successfully identified as Muslims, which usually produces a shift in their racial status and propels them on the other side of the Veil, where they experience stereotyping and discrimination, but also a new consciousness of racial inequality. A fourth section compares how this process of embodiment unfolds in France and the US and demonstrates that racialization takes on different shapes and textures due to the specific history of each country. A fifth section nuances these findings and demonstrates that white converts do not fully come within the Veil since they retain agency over their embodied impression management and have the possibility to cross back and forth the racialized boundary, an option which is typically not afforded to their non-white coreligionists.

A. TO DISPLAY OR NOT TO DISPLAY, THAT IS THE QUESTION.

One of the key issues that pervaded my interviews is whether converts should visually display their belonging to Islam or not. The question of the social performance of religious belonging through dress and visible markers receives a variety of answers. While some decide to modify their outward appearance in order to explicitly signal their religious shift, others prefer to remain *incognito* and live their faith internally.

Among my 45 female interviewees, 28 (that is 62%) wear a Muslim head covering, either a traditional *hijab* (n=18), a turban/bandana (n=7), a *jilbab* (n=1), or a face-veil (n=2). Among the 37 male converts, 27 (that is 72%) grew a beard after their conversion. Among them two display very prominent beards; three also wear a *kufi*; and two wear a large beard, a *kufi* and a *thawb* every day (some also occasionally wear a small

Muslim cap or a *thawb/djellaba* to go to the mosque). Out of my 82 interviewees, 27 (10 men and 17 women), that is 32%, do not wear any distinctive religious marker at all and did not modify their outward appearance upon embracing Islam. 70 of my interviewees, that is 85%, kept their first names; 7 permanently changed their first names; and 5 alternately use their birth name and their Muslim name depending on the setting.

1) Choosing to be visibly Muslim

The converts who choose to visually display their Muslimness do so for a wide array of reasons. Most of them adopt religious markers for spiritual reasons. Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago), for instance, understood growing a beard as a religious command: “a man should grow a beard in Islam. If he is following the religion. If he wants to follow Allah.” Similarly, most women see the headscarf as a religious obligation meant to preserve their modesty. Some even frame their decision to wear the veil in terms of religious revelation. Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), who for long categorically refused to conceal her hair, said she one day felt the urge to hide in the bathroom when one of her husband’s male friends visited them while she was uncovered. She felt naked and started crying. She explained this newly discovered physical reserve as such: “I do not consider that it was decent for me to cry for half an hour because someone saw my hair. That’s not rational, intellectually, OK? But the way I explain it is that Allah placed a new form of modesty in my heart.¹” Others see the headscarf as a commandment from God destined to enhance their spirituality. Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris), who struggled with performing the five daily prayers, thought wearing the *hijab* was a commandment within her reach (“à ma portée”) that she could do in order to satisfy God’s will before being able to fully incorporate all Islamic requirements. Maryam, the 75 year-old president of the association *Bienvenue en Islam*, periodically admonishes female converts who wear the *hijab* simply to “look Muslim,” thereby bypassing its spiritual signification:

One should not wear the headscarf to be seen. If that is the reason why you are doing it, then that’s not worth it. It should be a well-thought-out, spiritual process. I studied Islam for 10 years before wearing the headscarf. For me, it was the culmination of a personal journey in my relationship to God. It is a state that enables me to be watchful at all times.²

Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), who wears a large beard, a *kufi* and a Pakistani *thawb* on a daily basis, shares a similar understanding of Muslim clothing as a tool that “enables him to be watchful” of his conduct. When I asked him why he chose to dress in such a conspicuous way, he explained:

It is part of my spiritual way of holding myself in check and of always feeling like I am a representative of Islam. And I think that helps me. If I did go out with just like a baseball hat

¹ « Je ne considérais pas qu’il était digne de pleurer une demi-heure que quelqu’un m’ait vue avec mes cheveux découverts. On est d’accord ? C’était pas intellectuellement rationnel. Mais comment je l’explique aujourd’hui c’est que... en fait Allah avait mis dans mon cœur une pudeur, nouvelle en fait ».

² « On ne doit pas porter le foulard pour se montrer. Si c’est pour ça, ce n’est pas la peine. Ce doit être une démarche réfléchie, spirituelle. Moi j’ai étudié pendant 10 ans avant de porter le foulard. Pour moi, c’est l’aboutissement du chemin personnel de la relation à Dieu. (...) C’est un état, cela me permet d’être vigilante tout le temps ».

and clothes and no one knows I am Muslim, I would feel like almost tempted to do something wrong!

Abdullah uses his outward appearance to monitor his inner behavior and ensures he stays in line with Islamic principles. In his understanding, clothing is a performative technique of spiritual self-discipline, rather than a strategy of identity display. Such considerations are also at play in the politics of naming. Dwayne (23, barber, Detroit), for instance, permanently changed his name to Khabir, which means “the one who has much knowledge.” He currently strives to be worthy of his name by accumulating as much Islamic (and non-Islamic) knowledge as he can: “The more I hear people calling me Khabir, it makes me contemplate on my Islamic deeds. Am I really being a *khabir* 24/7?” Khabir’s new name encourages him to behave as per his new title. The adoption of Islamic markers is here again commanded by purely religious and spiritual imperatives.

In some cases, however, a change in outward appearance or name is dictated by the will to be recognized as a Muslim in various social settings. This is the truest for white individuals, who are least likely to be perceived as Muslim. Women especially see the *hijab* as a way to validate their conversion. Julia (23, student, Chicago), a new convert who did not wear the headscarf at the time of the interview, explained the difficulties she encountered as a white woman to be recognized as a Muslim by her coreligionists:

Every time I see other Muslims, because I still have my fresh convert mindset, I get very excited. And then I realize that to them I just look like an everyday non-Muslim white person. And I am like “man, if I wear *hijab*, it would be, you know, unquestionable.”

A strong signal of belonging, the *hijab* is often used as a means to be identified as a Muslim. It can also be a tool to prove one’s seriousness and involvement in the faith. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), who wore the headscarf shortly after her conversion, explains that her *hijab* enabled her to counter discrediting comments on her religious practice: “there is always some consistent comment or remark that you are not a legitimate Muslim. I think that’s why I try so hard to look Muslim. Because I have to prove I am super-Muslim!” Willing to gain acceptance and social recognition, Lisa used her *hijab* as a clear strategy of impression management. For Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris), the headscarf also performed a pure function of community recognition, enabling her to “say *salaam* to sisters in the street, be visible as a Muslim.”³ This identity dimension is also at play in choosing a Muslim name. Converts are often incited to adopt Muslim names after their conversion ceremony in order to authenticate their conversion. In the case of African-American converts, the legacy of Malcolm X (born as Malcolm Little) or Muhammad Ali (born as Cassius Clay) who left behind their “slave names” to reclaim their dignity as black men through Islam, is also prominent.⁴ Thus, a complex conundrum

³ « Pour moi je pense que le voile ça reste quand même beaucoup plus un truc de reconnaissance communautaire, le fait de pouvoir dire *salaam* à des sœurs dans la rue, ou d’être visible comme musulmane ».

⁴ Khabir, an African-American man from Detroit, told me for instance: “my name is not Dwayne. My parents, their parents, they don’t know what their names were. (...) I remember I watched a documentary on Malcolm X, they were trying to question him about ‘well, your father’s name is this this this Little.’ He said ‘that is not my father’s name. My father did not know his name. My father only knew the name that was given to him by, you know, the slave masters.’ And he was so confident. And I saw the energy. I took it. I used to always watch Malcolm X. Because I wanted to present myself in a confident manner through my name!”

of spiritual, religious and community-belonging issues provides different points of entry into the visible display of religious belonging.

2) Remaining invisible as a Muslim

By contrast, about a third of my interviewees refuses to wear any Islamic diacritical marker. For some, it is a deliberate choice. Jacques (51, engineer, Paris), who belongs to a Sufi order, expressed reluctance at the idea of visibly displaying his religion: “I never felt the need to be visibly Muslim. If I stroll in *Sunnah* outfit in my town, people are going to think that I am a clown more than anything else.”⁵ Similarly, Jean (23, student, Paris) chastised Muslims who go the extra mile to demonstrate their belonging to Islam through clothing: “I do not understand people who want to show that they are Muslims. The big *djellaba* and stuff... It is just visual. It is like carnival, you know.”⁶ Gwenaëlle (35, filmmaker, Paris) shared similar thoughts on the burlesque dimension of wearing an Islamic outfit when she said “I am not going to disguise myself as a Muslim!”⁷ While I expected these opinions to be confined to the French context, I also encountered them in the US. Thus, Bob (19, student, St. Louis) asserted that he did not want to wear Islam “on his sleeve,” while David (31, unemployed, Chicago) refused to “play the poster boy.” Pablo (22, student, Chicago) concurred: “It is not something I put on. My Islam is not a costume, it is in me, you know.” Some converts also vehemently refuse to change their names, arguing that it would constitute a betrayal to their parents, erase their past identity and that it is actually contrary to prophetic practices (the Companions of the Prophet did not change their names upon converting). These converts’ interpretation of Islam emphasizes inner spiritual reform over external displays of religiosity.

For others, however, invisibility derives from constraint and fear of consequences. Being visibly Muslim in the street, at work, in school, or in front of family members can be costly. To be sure, clothing practices are patterned after the political situation and what is considered as “visible” and “ostentatious” varies from one national context to another. France being particularly sensitive to the visual expression of Islam in the public sphere (Bowen, 2006; Amiraux, 2016), the headscarf and other Islamic markers have become *hyper-visible* (Göle, 2015), which makes them overdetermining and constraining. This is slightly less the case in the US where the public visibility of religion is generally embraced. Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) envisioned wearing the *hijab* but did not feel ready to do so at the time of the interview: “in France, when you wear the headscarf, unfortunately, you don’t go unnoticed. (...) And so, I think you have to be very very very courageous to do so because, yeah, that means, you become very very very visible.”⁸ The

⁵ « Non, j’ai jamais éprouvé le besoin d’être visiblement musulman. Je pars du principe que ça sert à rien de choquer les gens, en fait. Si je me balade en tenue sunna dans [ma ville], les gens vont plus me prendre pour un clown qu’autre chose ».

⁶ « Même en étant musulman, en fait j’arrivais pas à comprendre les gens qui voulaient montrer qu’ils étaient musulmans. Grande djellaba, truc... j’arrivais pas à comprendre ça tu vois. C’est visuel, quoi. On a mis une exigence visuelle. ... Le carnaval tu vois ».

⁷ « Je vais pas me déguiser en musulmane ! (rires) Tu vois... »

⁸ « En fait en France quand tu portes le foulard, malheureusement tu passes pas inaperçue, parce qu’au contraire tu représentes un truc, qui devient super difficile à porter parce que du coup t’es obligée de te justifier tout le temps, quoi, et aussi d’être à la hauteur du foulard que tu veux porter. Et du coup, il faut

headscarf does not merely make one visible: it makes one the center of all attentions, which has different implications. Wanda (32, travel consultant, Lille) also said that she was “extremely afraid of the way people would judge [her]”⁹ and Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) explained that she “completely hide[s] [her] conversion in the professional realm” for fear of her colleagues’ reactions. In my sample, 68% of American female converts wore a religious marker, as opposed to 58% of French women. This difference can be explained by personal preferences deriving from the French logic of inward religious individualism or by a greater set of constraints stemming from the regime of Defiant Secularism. Further, it must be noted that the dialectics of visibility and invisibility vary spatially within the same country: being visibly Muslim does not have the same impact when living in a majority-Muslim (or ethnically diverse) neighborhood and when evolving in an all-white setting. Invisibility is therefore the product of a cluster of reasons that can include deliberate religious choice but also a careful assessment of the social and political environment.

Throughout my research, I noticed that ostentatious religious display was not necessarily correlated with the intensity of religious practice and that religious discretion did not presuppose religious indifference. For instance, during a prayer workshop at the Parisian suburban mosque, I realized that one of the young female attendees, whose large and dark *jilbab* I had taken as an indicator of serious involvement in the faith, had actually no clue about how to recite the Islamic prayer and stumbled over all the Arabic words.¹⁰ This challenged some of the preconceived notions I held about religious visibility. Deana (21, student, St. Louis) who wears a face cover and who everybody was staring at during our interview in a coffee shop, also confessed having trouble performing the five daily prayers. By contrast, Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), who surprised me the day of our interview by wearing a tank top and a short skirt (in light of current Islamic orthodoxy, I was expecting a more covered woman) was among the most assiduous practitioners of the faith I encountered, performing all required rituals and partaking in daily *dhikr** (remembrance) sessions of one hour at least. In sum, contemporary religiosity is characterized by an ambiguous relationship to external display: “clothes don’t make the convert.” Hence, the strategies of religious *mise en scène* (Salzbrunn, 2015), or what Vassenden and Andersson (2011) call “faith information control” differ greatly from one individual to another.

Further, clothing practices are subject to variation within individual trajectories. Throughout their conversion career, converts can go from full invisibility to full conspicuousness (or the other way around) and can also navigate the grey area of discretion and indistinctness. Many pragmatically adapt their appearance depending on the situation, dressing as Muslims in Muslim spaces and undressing in non-Muslim settings (when visiting their families, for instance, or at work). This, by the way, can produce personality splits. Aisha (37, housewife, Paris) said for instance: “when I entered a mosque and put the headscarf on, I felt like one person. When I left the mosque and removed the headscarf, I felt like another person. It was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” Finally, some modulate the effect of their religious marker with the rest of their attire: a

être très très courageux pour moi pour faire ça parce que ouais du coup, pour le coup, tu deviens très très visible ».

⁹ « Je suis quelqu’un qui a énormément peur du jugement des autres ».

¹⁰ Fieldnotes, February 22nd, 2015.

nicely wrapped *hijab* worn with heels, tight trousers and a trendy tunic does not have the same “visibility” as a *hijab* worn on top of a large black dress with sneakers. The politics of Muslim visibility (Amirault and Jonker, 2006) are therefore a strategic and multi-layered issue. Converts evolving in contemporary secularized contexts have a variety of self-presentation options at their command and maneuver the markers of religious belonging in multiple ways.

Intimate and personal for the most part, religious impression management choices have clear social effects. A situational analysis reveals that flaunting or concealing one’s religious belonging has an impact on daily interactions. In the following, I demonstrate that, depending on their decision to visually display their Muslimness or not, converts have contrasted encounters with race.

B. RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY

First, there are problems of religious misidentification as converts’ skin color often interferes with their Islamic presentation of self, thereby creating racial and religious ambiguity.

1) No marker: invisibility and the quest for recognition

“I am questioned all the time as to whether I am really Muslim. They don’t get it. I mean Muslims and non-Muslims,” said Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago), a non-veiled blue-eyed brunette with a very pale skin. Like her, converts who do not wear any visible religious sign report difficulties in asserting their Muslimness in both non-Muslim and Muslim settings. In the mainstream society, not being visually Muslim implies a number of adjustments and additional interactions to confess one’s belonging to Islam. Gwenaëlle (35, filmmaker, Paris), a white woman with brown hair, explains “I don’t wear the *hijab* and I am not Arab. So I am not identified as a potential Muslim... I am kind of in hiding. It is tiresome because I find myself regularly having to come out as a Muslim.¹¹” Gwenaëlle has to tell what is unseen: during the month of Ramadan for instance, she has to spell out why she does not eat; at parties, she has to justify why she does not drink. Because she is invisible, she has to verbally assert her Muslimness to avoid misunderstandings or dispel doubts.

Invisibility leads to awkward encounters. Thibault (35, educational assistant, Bordeaux), a clean-shaven and green-eyed white man, related that “there is this problem, sometimes, when you don’t tell it, is that there are people, white people, who think that amongst white people they are allowed to say a lot of racist stuff! (laughs) So sometimes, I receive racist confidences! I receive them until the moment I tell them I am Muslim.¹²”

¹¹ « Je porte pas le *hijab* et je suis pas Arabe. Donc je suis pas identifiée comme potentielle musulmane (...) Moi je suis une planquée... enfin c’est pas que je suis une planquée, c’est qu’en fait, comme ça se voit pas, c’est fatigant, parce que je me retrouve à faire régulièrement des coming out d’islam, quoi en fait ! »

¹² « Il y a ce problème... il y a ce truc des fois, de quand tu le dis pas, à un moment donné, t’es... t’es confronté... il y a des gens, il y a des Blancs quoi qui se... qui croient que entre Blancs on peut se dire plein de choses racistes ! (rires) Donc du coup, des fois je reçois les confidences racistes ! (rires) Alors bon voilà je les reçois jusqu’au moment où... où je dis que je suis musulman ! »

Some of Thibault's white interlocutors presume his automatic connivance with their derogatory views on minority groups, which he finds upsetting. Unless they explicitly verbalize their belonging to Islam, white converts remain categorized as white on the basis of their outward appearance. Because it is hidden, their religious choice does not alter the way they are perceived. Vanessa (40, hairdresser, Lille) who recently opened an Islamic Montessori private school with her friend Stéphanie, another white female convert who, like her, did not change her name, reported a serious misunderstanding with the French administration: because of their "typically French names," and in spite of its explicitly Islamic curriculum, the religious school of Vanessa Martin and Stéphanie Dupont was, after a few mail exchanges, automatically classified as Catholic by the Board of Education. As a result, the school inspector who visited their school for the first time almost had a panic attack: both Vanessa and Stéphanie wear the *jilbab* and their Islamic identity is very visible, even though their names did not suggest it.¹³ Much tension and argument ensued. Such misunderstandings generate uneasiness in daily interactions, but some converts also enjoy playing around it. Pablo (22, student, Chicago), a black man who does not wear any distinctive Islamic marker, shared the following anecdote: "I will be on the subway and I see a guy *thawb* out, *kufi* on and everything. And everyone is looking at him and then I just say *as-salaam 'alaykum!* And everybody just look like 'did that kid just said that to him? Is he Muslim? He does not look Muslim. He looks just like a regular black kid in Chicago.' I just caught them off guard like that." Pablo enjoys the "surprise effect" he is able to create when he decides to pull out his "Muslim card" in certain situations.

Yet, the absence of religious markers can prove troublesome in interactions with coreligionists, when converts are not necessarily recognized as fellow Muslims. Bob (19, student, St. Louis), a clean-shaven and blue-eyed white man, recounted a strange experience at the mosque: "I entered a mosque in [an Indo-Pakistani neighborhood]. And I had an overzealous *Desi*¹⁴ 'uncle'¹⁵ tell me: 'We don't want Christians coming in to preach Christianity.' I then tried to calmly explain that I am a Muslim. He then said, 'you can't be Muslim, you are American.'" In a similar vein, Olga (23, nanny, Chicago), a blond and light-skinned woman who does not wear the headscarf, narrated how a Muslim store-owner told her "you can't be Muslim, you are blond," while Julia (23, student, Chicago), a blue-eyed brunette, expressed her frustration that her own coreligionists don't identify her as a Muslim: "There is no way for them to just look at me and think 'oh, she could even possibly be Muslim.' Because I look like any other white non-Muslim around here." Because of their white skin and "non-Muslim" appearance, these invisible converts are ignored or despised by some fellow Muslims. Weary of this situation, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis), who does not wear the headscarf either, fantasized about creating an alternative, non-visual signal that Muslims could use to recognize one

¹³ « Notre structure elle a été facilement ouverte. Bon elle a été facilement ouverte mais sauf qu'ils savaient pas que c'était des musulmanes qui l'ouvraient, hein ! Quand on a ouvert l'école, on ne les avait jamais rencontrés. Mais quand on a déclaré l'école, justement je suis retombée hier sur un courrier de l'inspection académique, qui écrivait « Mr. le président de l'OGEC... », alors l'OGEC, c'est l'organisme qui gère les écoles catholiques dans le Nord. (...) Je pense pas donc du coup qu'ils savaient qu'on était musulmanes. Ceci dit oui l'inspectrice quand elle est venue la première fois, elle a été fort surprise, parce que on n'était pas toutes dévoilées quand elle est rentrée ».

¹⁴ *Desi* refers to someone coming from the South Asian subcontinent.

¹⁵ *Uncle* and its feminine equivalent *Auntie* designate elderly people of South Asian origin. Depending on the context, they can be used either in an affectionate or derogatory way.

another: “I do have the secret desire for [my coreligionists] to know that I am Muslim. I do wish that there was, like, an unspoken silent immediate form of identification for each other, but only among Muslims [laughs].” She gave the example of a Jewish colleague who told her he had inferred she was not Jewish herself, because he “mentioned a certain Jewish dish and [she] didn’t give [him] the look of recognition [laughs].” Lacking a visible religious sign, Mary wished a similar secret code could exist among Muslims, to ease everyday interactions and facilitate community recognition.

Not being read as Muslim is painful for converts seeking to substantiate their conversion with social validation. In the absence of an explicit visual marker, converts are often not recognized for who they are. For instance, Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) who is blond, blue-eyed and uncovered, says she is frequently perceived as a racist white woman in the diverse (and mostly Muslim) neighborhood where she lives. At times, she wishes that people could know “who she really is:”

- The fact that I am white and blond where I live, if I am running some errands and I get into a skirmish with someone, people get angry very quickly and always tell me ‘you are racist! You vote for the National Front!’ It really happens to me a lot.
- What if you told them that you are Muslim?
- Oh it would calm things down right away! Sometimes I tell people “if only you knew!” They can’t figure, obviously. But if I were to run into these people again in a mosque, they would be really surprised!¹⁶

Identified as white, read as non-Muslim but too shy to publicly admit her conversion, Adèle is associated with the image of a racist white woman. Because it is both unseen and unsaid, her religiosity does not allow her to relate with her Muslim neighbors, a bonding she thinks could defuse some tensions. Invisibility, therefore, is alternately empowering or debilitating, depending on the context.

2) Failed performances: White skin, Islamic masks

Interestingly, the converts who *do* choose to don visible Islamic markers do not always succeed in passing as Muslims either. In some instances, mostly because of their skin color, their presentation of self fails and they are mistaken for non-Muslims. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952) describes the predicament of blacks who try to imitate the culture of the white colonizer but remain irremediably black in the eyes of others. Similarly, many of the white converts I interviewed try to pass as “Islamic” but encounter the irreducible reality of race: because of their white skin, no one identifies them as Muslim. In managing their Islamic *persona* (which originally means “mask” in Latin), white converts face problems of identification, linked to the semantical contingency of their religious markers. Intended to be self-evident, their Islamic sign

¹⁶ « - Le fait d’être blanche et blonde, même par rapport à là où j’habite quand je vais faire mes courses, ou quand je m’attrape avec quelqu’un, parce que ça arrive, en plus ici les gens sont un peu chauds donc ils s’énervent vite et on me dit toujours « mais, vous êtes une raciste ! vous votez Front National ! » Ça m’arrive hyper souvent, quoi.

- Et si tu leur disais que t’étais musulmane ?

- Ah ça calmerait tout de suite ! Mais je peux pas le faire. Mais des fois je leur dis « mais si vous saviez ! » Après, voilà, ils peuvent pas imaginer. Mais je me dis ces gens-là si je les recroisais dans une mosquée, ils seraient vraiment très surpris, quoi ! »

equipment actually generates uncertainty and creates “definitional disruptions” (Goffman, 1956: 7).

Consider the following examples. A powerful Islamic symbol, the *hijab* is usually a recognizable signal for almost everyone, both Muslims and non-Muslims. This is certainly the case in France, where, from 1989 onwards, various controversies have made it a particularly salient issue (Nordmann, 2004; Amiraux, 2009). Yet, this is not necessarily the case in the US, at least not until recently. Marta (35, engineer, Chicago), a Mexican-American convert, explains that, when in 2001 she first put on the headscarf to go to her office – something she describes as the most frightening experience of her life – her coworkers did not make the connection with Islam at all.

One day I decided to put [the *hijab*] on to go to work. (...) And it was so scary. It was like I was going through a battle. I mean I was going to face a lion or something. It was like the most scary thing that I did. And when I showed up to work, nothing happened. All of those fears, all of the made-up scenarios that I had rehearsed in my head, nothing happened! I was so relieved and frustrated at the same time! Because nobody acknowledged it. Nobody was telling me anything. I was like “come on, you guys! I have something on my head!!!! You are not even saying anything! Are you serious? I get that you are not throwing me or bashing me but at least say something, come on! I am not invisible!” (...) And the first person to tell me anything – I was in the bathroom, I remember – one of the ladies that was there just washing her hands next to me, she was like “oh!!! Did you just graduate from something?” And I got these weird questions on whether it was a holiday, whether I had just graduated or became a higher level of whatever.

The sheer possibility that Marta could have become Muslim was so out of the picture for her co-workers that they did not recognize the Islamic signal she was trying to send, and relied on more profane and casual interpretations instead. Similarly, Olga (23, nanny, Chicago) a blond white woman of Polish descent, explains that, when she occasionally wears a headscarf, people on the street do not always identify her as a Muslim: “when I walk on the street, no one suspects that I am Muslim. Some people give me looks but I bet they are thinking ‘oh she is probably just cold or coming from the rain!’” The veil has never been exclusively Muslim (Abouddrar, 2014), and is worn in various faith traditions, which can create confusions and misunderstandings. Mariana (29, housewife, Chicago), a woman of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent who wears the *hijab*, recalled how she is frequently mistaken for a nun, rather than a Muslim woman: “one day, because I spoke Spanish, an older Mexican lady on the bus was like ‘oh you are *hija de Maria* [daughter of Mary]!’ [laughs] That was something my grandma wanted me to do when I was little so I just thought it was funny. And I was like ‘actually no, I am not *hija de Maria*, I am Muslim.’” Mariana’s skin color, her phenotypical features and the fact that she spoke Spanish transformed the signification of her *hijab* into a sign of deep Catholic devotion, rather than an indicator of Muslimness. Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago), a woman of Native American descent who wraps her *hijab* like a turban recounted in an analogous manner that she is regularly mistaken for a hippie or a Rastafarian, but rarely categorized as a Muslim.

Male converts encounter even more difficulties at displaying a “Muslim look” and asserting their Islamic authenticity, because the visual marker they can put on is particularly ambiguous: like the veil, but to a larger extent, the beard is not the preserve of Muslims. Male facial hair has taken on different meanings throughout history (Oldstone-Moore, 2015), and is currently part of both French and American popular

culture and fashion (Benlaala, 2015). The beard is grown by widely different categories of the population (hippies, rockers, sports players, hipsters, orthodox Jews, etc.), which makes it a slippery sign for religious identification. Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), a blond and blue-eyed tall man who has been Muslim for several decades and displays a very long and impressive beard, explained that he usually gets compliments for it but laments that it is interpreted as almost everything *but* a sign of Muslimness:

I would come through the door with this beard and I would get compliments left and right. I would get stopped in the street, like, “nice beard man!” [laughs]. Especially like, if it’s the time of the year where the Black Hawks¹⁷ are in the finals or something because they all grow their beards, everybody thinks I am a Black Hawks fan. Yesterday, just yesterday I went up to Starbucks and I walked in and there is another guy there with a big substantial beard and the guy is behind the counter like... “we just became an episode of Duck Dynasty¹⁸ everybody!” [laughs] It’s a great time for growing a beard in America. I wish the women could do it!

Because there is no collective consensus on the semantics of the beard, Jonathan is confused with a sports fan or a redneck fond of rock’ n’ roll. His wife Monica (34, housewife, Chicago) added during their joint interview that he frequently gets “Santa Claus, Amish and trucker comments.” Jonathan also recounted an episode at the zoo during which foreign Muslim tourists mistook him for a Jew and loudly commented on his appearance in Arabic (not thinking for a second that he could understand them). He concluded: “it’s ironic, being Caucasian and having a beard, nobody thinks I am Muslim.” Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), a green-eyed and light-skinned man who used to be a children’s attorney, recalled in a similar fashion that, even though he made conscious efforts to look Muslim, wearing a long beard, a *thawb* and a *kufi* almost every day, his young clients never guessed that he could even remotely be connected to Islam: “sometimes I assume that everyone who sees me knows that I am Muslim, but, talking to these kids, I realized they didn’t all know that ‘oh this means you are Muslim.’ They were like ‘what are you? Are you Jewish? Are you some kind of Amish?’” Jonathan and Abdullah’s beards are not recognized for what they intend to signify. Combined with their white skin and light eyes, they disturb their Islamic presentation of self and attempts at impression management. Fred (28, student, Chicago), who has a large beard and often wears a *kufi*, reported a similar experience when he went to work wearing a long *thawb*: “I come in with this white flowing thing and I remember the front desk lady, she was like ‘what are you wearing? A dress?’ And I said ‘what do you think? Do I look like a girl?’” Willing to assert his masculinity through Islamic apparel, Fred was very offended. Overall, even when they wear the recognizable signs of Islam (such as the beard, the *thawb*, or the *kufi*), male converts are commonly mistaken for sports fans, hippies, hipsters, fashion eccentrics or members of other religions, such as Judaism or Amishism. In spite of the clear Islamic signals they try to send, their white skin stands out, generating competing and contradictory visual cues. The religious self-definition converts mean to convey glances off their whiteness. Their Islamic performance fails: the reception of their markers is scrambled and their audience does not decode them as intended.

¹⁷ The Black Hawks are a Chicago professional ice hockey team who are known for not shaving their beards during the finals.

¹⁸ *Duck Dynasty* is a reality TV show featuring the Robertson family, who are portrayed as Louisiana rednecks and display large beards.

3) Cognitive dissonance and illegible identities

Even when correctly interpreted, the religious marker of Islam combined with converts' white skin produces considerable cognitive dissonance in the minds of their interlocutors. My interviewees were generally met with a great dose of incredulity. When Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago), who grew up in an impoverished neighborhood and converted to Islam at age 17, went to his mother to inform her of his conversion, she incredulously looked at him: “but don't you know you are white???! you are going to be Muslim, don't you know you are white?,” thereby pointing at the ontological incompatibility between the two identities. White interviewees do not fit into the mental frames of most people – Muslims and non-Muslims – who associate Islam with certain ethno-racial features. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) experiences this reality every time she takes a taxi. She described how “cab-drivers” (who, in her mental frame, are always Muslim men of Arab or South Asian descent) react when she tells them she is Muslim. Her religious identity systematically sparks off interrogations concerning her racial and genealogical background:

- Cab drivers always react the same way, for some reason (...) They say “so where are you from?” And I am like “I am from [here].” “No, no, no, your family, your family!” I am like “my family, they are American, they are from [here].” “No, no, no, before them, before them!” And I am like “I am three-quarters German, a little bit of Irish, English and French.” “Before that, before that sister!” [laughs] I am like “there is no before that, that's like before Columbus, you know!” And then they would pick which thing they see in me. “I see some Palestinian in you. You are Palestinian!” [laughs].

- Even if you say you are a convert?

- Oh yeah! As white as they come: German, English, French, Irish. They are convinced that there is something in me. And they will tell me I am wrong. They will tell me “no, no, no, no. You need to know. You surely have Palestinian in you.”

- I don't get the logic, though. If you said you converted...

- There is no logic. (...) [for them] there's got to be some cell in me that has driven me to make me want to convert.

Mary's credibility as a Muslim is jeopardized by the fact that she cannot claim any Muslim ancestry. Her interactions with “cab-drivers” reveal that Islam as a faith is strongly tied to certain ethnic, national or racial characteristics. Since Mary is Muslim, it means that she necessarily has some Arab blood in her (or “cell” as she says). Otherwise, her story is unconceivable. Mary experiences a contradiction between her bodily and spiritual selves. Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis), a blue-eyed woman who wear the *hijab*, recounts a similar story: “It's funny when people try to figure me out. Because they want to put me in a nice neat little box, like ‘oh, you are Arab. You are an Arab Muslim’ [laughs]. So when people do find out that I am just a white American, they can't quite grasp that. They are like ‘well... are you sure???’” Victoria's status is so unconceivable that people imply she may be mistaken about her own racial identity. She can't be grasped or made sense of. The perceived lack of congruence between Victoria's white skin and her headscarf reveals deep-seated racial assumptions about Islam. In France, Rachel (30, translator, Paris), a blue-eyed white woman who also wears the headscarf, describes how people often ask her additional questions in order to verify that she is really Muslim “I am still being asked on a regular basis whether I am Muslim. I mean, should I carry a banner? I often reply ‘No, I am dressed up for the carnival!’ And the worst part of it is

that most of the time they think that’s true! In which case, I have to go on saying ‘no I am just kidding, yes, I am Muslim.¹⁹’” In spite of her very visible and clearly Islamic *hijab*, Rachel has to partake in lengthy and tedious discussions over her belonging to Islam, because the color of her skin and the color of her eyes do not match common-sense representations about what a “Muslim” looks like.

Everyday life requires “immediate legibility” (De Certeau et al., 1998: 22). In this endeavor, the body must function as a “record of signs of recognition” (ibid, 22, cited in Smith, 2015: 1141). The fact that converts disrupt the cultural consensus that white and Muslim are incompatible renders their public identity “illegible.” Their performance of self fails. For Alexander (2004: 529) “failed performances are those in which the actor has been unable to sew back together the elements of performance to make them seem connected seamlessly.” In the case of white converts, the association of Islamic markers with white skin generates an incongruous assemblage of sign equipment that disturbs the categorical assumptions of most people. They become anomalous.

According to Mary Douglas (2009 [1966]: 48), “there are several ways of treating anomalies. We can ignore, just not perceive them; or perceiving we can condemn.” Chastisement and condemnation often await white converts to Islam. Because whiteness and Islam have been constructed as antithetical throughout history, they are frequently the object of mockeries and contempt for being weird and aberrant. In 2000, a feud erupted between white rappers Everlast and Eminem. Everlast is Irish American – an identity he has always showcased throughout his artistic career – but he is also Muslim, having embraced Islam in 1996. One of the tricks Eminem used to ridicule his opponent was to point at his dissonant racial and religious identities. In the song *I Remember*, he rhymed: “you’re a homosexual, white rappin’ Irish Muslim / Man I wish I was Irish, I could be a Muslim too / Then I’d be confused as you, and I wouldn’t know what to do.” He brought up the subject again in the song *Quitter*, with his band D12: “You claim to be a Muslim but you Irish white / So fuck you fat boy, drop the mic, let’s fight.” Eminem depicted Everlast as confused and fraudulent for being both Irish and Muslim, two identities he deems to be jarring. As underlined in Chapter 4, this type of comments on the “oddity” of white converts to Islam is not new. Novelist Michael Muhammad Knight (2006: 2), who is also a white American convert to Islam, defines white Muslims as “cultural mutants.” He jokingly writes:

The white Muslim remains such a culture mutant that the sighting of one still demands an explanation. How in the wonder of Allah’s creation did you happen? Had you suffered a freak laboratory accident like Dr. Octopus? Did you travel to outer space and encounter mutagenic rays like Ben Grimm?

By upsetting religious and racial expectations, white converts lose their status as “normal” individuals. They become discordant. So what does it take for converts to be unquestionably identified as Muslims? In the following, I show that one of the ways in which the cognitive dissonance is resolved entails a shift in racial status. When racial and religious frames do not match, converts get cast outside the realm of whiteness.

¹⁹« On continue de me demander régulièrement si je suis musulmane, donc... dois-je porter un écriteau ? comment te dire ? (rires) Bon. Donc maintenant je réponds ‘je suis déguisée pour le carnaval’ et le pire c’est que la plupart du temps ils pensent que c’est la vérité ! (rires) Dans quel cas, je dois continuer en disant ‘non mais je déconne, oui, je suis musulmane’ ».

C. COMING “WITHIN THE VEIL:” RACIAL ASCRIPTION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

Because of their Islamic attire, it so happens that Muslim converts are ascribed to non-white racial categories. This new symbolic labeling has consequences on their position in the racial stratification system and exposes them to unprecedented stereotyping and discrimination.

1) Racial and Ethnic Guesses: Being Labeled Differently

When apparent Islamic markers are correctly interpreted, both white and non-white converts are assigned to various racial and ethnic identities, which lends support to the theory of embodiment. Their interlocutors “make guesses” about their plausible origins, an activity of “racial interpellation” that Omi and Winant (1994: 109) refer to as “making up people.” In many cases, hesitant “facial” or “clothing” profiling highlights the instability of racial categorization.

a) White converts

When I asked Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), a white woman of Polish descent wearing the *hijab*, how she was perceived by the wider society, she readily responded:

I am definitely perceived as a woman of color. Which is sooo insane to go through. As a white person, I think very few white people ever had that experience. It is really strange because sometimes when I enter a discussion, people a little bit older, they convince themselves that I have an accent [laughs]. And they think they understand me! Seriously! Or... Explaining American things to me.

Through a surprising cognitive mechanism connecting hearing to sight, Lisa’s visual association with Islam (through her headscarf) alters the way she sounds in people’s ears: although she was born and raised in a white American suburb, she is believed to have a foreign accent. In Chicago, I personally witnessed Lisa being racialized as an Arab during an Islamic class. As he was pronouncing a complicated sentence in Arabic, the teacher, an African-American Muslim, turned towards her and said: “you must probably know this since you’re Arab.” Lisa exclaimed: “what? I am not Arab!” As the teacher looked surprised (“you are not Arab?”), she said: “No. Polish.” The class burst into laughter and the teacher apologized profusely. Similarly, in Paris, after a beginners’ class at the mosque, I started talking about Aisha (37, housewife, Paris), the teacher of the class, with a young female convert. As we were both praising Aisha’s teaching skills, I mentioned that I had had the opportunity to interview her for my research on conversion. The young convert gave me a stunned look: “what? Aisha is a convert as well? I thought she was a Kabyle, with her blue eyes.” Because of her mastery of Islamic knowledge, Aisha was believed to come from a born Muslim family: within the wide range of ethnic identities she could be identified with, her blue eyes stood out as a distinctive cue and the young convert decided she was Kabyle (Berber). Olga (23, nanny, Chicago) who migrated to the US from Poland when she was a child, reported how she has often been confused with a Bosnian woman in Muslim settings: “It is like if you are a blonde Eastern European at a Muslim event, then you must be Bosnian!” Lisa, Aisha and Olga’s cases highlight the shakiness of racial categorization and how much it is tied to religious

affiliation. Without their Islamic markers (headscarf or attendance at a Muslim event), they would certainly not be associated to Berber, Arab or Bosnian identities. Male converts are not immune from these categorizations. Since his conversion, Stephan (24, youth helper, Chicago), whose father is Spanish, explains that he is often mistaken for a Turk in mosques: “Some people sometimes assume that I am Turkish, which is interesting. I think it is just because of the Spanish features, like the thick eyebrows and stuff.” This indicates a process of epidermization (Fanon, 1952) and embodiment of religion that becomes inscribed into the body and external appearance.



Figure 28 – Religious markers’ effects
Blogger Bin Gregory as a child and now²⁰

Offering a summary of these various categorizations, American white Muslim blogger Bin Gregory, who wears a Muslim cap and a beard, has made a list of the various ethnic identities people usually assign to him: Middle Eastern, Turkish, Syrian, Lebanese, Iranian, Afghani, Pakistani, Bosnian, Chechen, Malaysian, Black (Gregory, 2005). These identifications sharply contrast with how he looked like as a child and are a direct result of the Islamic religious markers he currently displays as an adult.

b) Non-white converts

The issue of mistaken identities is pervasive among non-white converts to Islam as well. Rita (27, unemployed, Paris), who comes from a Mediterranean *pied noir* family,²¹ has very dark hair and olive skin. She explained how she is frequently mistaken for an Arab woman, unlike her blond and blue-eyed friend Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille). As a result, the fact that she is Muslim does not create much surprise: “It is not like Sophie with her blue eyes. For me, there is this thing where my face kind of matches with the rest.”²² While most white converts create surprise and wonderment in the minds of their

²⁰ Source: Blogger Bin Gregory, “An Annotated List,” *Bingregory.com*, May 6, 2005.

²¹ *Pieds noirs* refer to the settler European population who was born and raised in North Africa and lived there until the decolonization.

²² « Souvent, de faciès, on me prend... on peut me prendre facilement pour une rebeu donc... enfin... c’est pas comme Sophie par exemple que t’as vu avec les yeux bleus où de suite les gens , wouaaa ! Qu’une

interlocutors, non-white converts are frequently mistaken for people who have always been Muslim. Their religious transformation and personal story goes unnoticed as they are collapsed into the larger racial category of “brown,” which is increasingly associated with Islam (Joshi, 2006b). Deepa (38, social worker, Chicago), a woman of Indian descent who grew up in a Christian family also reported that “sometimes, people are just assuming that I am Muslim. They don’t treat me like a convert.” Anjali (23, school teacher, Detroit) who is also of Indian origin told me that people do not think for a second she is a convert, until they realize that she is vegetarian, prompting her to reveal that she was actually born in a Hindu household. Along the same lines, Mia (37, artist, Chicago), who is of Puerto Rican descent, said: “I look very Arab. So people thought that I was already, like, Muslim.” Another “brown” population, Latino converts’ religious crossing generally goes unnoticed: they are often categorized as Arabs or South Asians, highlighting interesting facts about how racial profiling operates. Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) a Mexican-American Muslim, explained: “we are incognito because we don’t look Mexican. Most of the Mexicans that convert, especially if they wear *hijab*, they look Arab, or they look Pakistani or they look like anyone else. We blend in so well.” Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit) corroborated: “because we come in all shapes and colors, no one ever knows what we really are.” Emiliano (28, student, Paris) who is of Uruguayan and Chilean descent also related that “even before I was Muslim, people thought I was Kabyle. I have this kind of racial ambiguity,²³” which explains that he fits well in Muslim spaces and his presence does not create much surprise. As brown people, these converts’ race already “announces” their religion for them, and they are automatically categorized as Muslims, obscuring the complexity of their religious journey.

African-American and black converts are not spared by these racial and ethnic assumptions. Fabiola (26, recruitment officer, Lille), a woman of Haitian descent, explained: “since I am black, when I enter a mosque, people are not necessarily going to realize that I am a convert. They might think that I come from Nigeria for instance and that I am a born Muslim.²⁴” Denyse (58, IT services employee, Chicago), who is African-American, humorously recalled the interactions during which she was mistaken for a foreigner: “me being light-complexioned and everything, folks didn’t know what I was,. So I had some people who thought that I was Pakistani and they would come up and start speaking Urdu to me. And I had some people who thought I was Arab and they would start speaking Arabic to me. And some folks thought I was Somali.” Shahada (31, accountant, St. Louis), who also self-defines as African-American, summarized the situation: “sometimes when people look at me, they don’t know where to place me.” She mentioned how she had been confused with an Indian, Somali or Ethiopian woman. In that case, combined with the Islamic marker (name, headscarf, attendance of Islamic events), the color of their skin is interpreted as a sign of foreignness.

blonde aux yeux bleus dise salaam, ils en peuvent plus ! (rires) Moi c’est vrai qu’il y a un truc où la tête, ça va à peu près avec le reste ».

²³ « Avant même d’être musulman, des fois, on me prenait pour un kabyle, du coup... tu vois j’ai un peu une sorte d’ambiguïté raciale ».

²⁴ « Vu que je suis noire, quand je rentre dans une mosquée, on ne va pas forcément se rendre compte que je suis convertie. Les gens peuvent penser que je viens du Nigéria par exemple et que je suis musulmane de souche ».

c) Responses

Faced with those wrong assumptions, converts adopted a number of strategies. Some tried to dispel stereotypes and explain their entire story to their interlocutors. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit), an African-American woman who wears the *hijab*, used those opportunities to spark provocative discussions around race with her interlocutors: “people would say ‘oh, where are you from?’ And I go ‘well. I am black! Like, a Negro!’ And they get really embarrassed!” Kathleen uses her position to disrupt her interlocutors’ preconceived notions. Other converts, however, weary of explaining their story, did not seek to counter people’s assumptions. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), who is regularly mistaken for a Turkish, Syrian or Arab woman, explains: “I don’t pretend or lie. But there has been a lot of times when I definitely let people think what they wanted to think and not stop their assumptions.” Her silence proved convenient and spared her from telling her conversion story one additional time. Similarly, when people think that Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) is of Algerian descent and born in a Muslim family, he does not necessarily disappoint their expectations: “people are not going to look any further, you know. I don’t have to tell them about my life, saying I am a convert and stuff. In their mind, I am Algerian and I am Muslim. And it is very good like that.²⁵” Romain readily embraces this identity. He further describes how he has become the “token Arab” (*l’Arabe de service*) in his family: “my uncle, if he goes to Morocco, he brings me stuff from there. When Algeria is playing a soccer match, people send me messages. It is... cute.²⁶” Romain does not mind this misidentification, which he finds rather entertaining.

2) Enduring Stigma: Status Loss and Dehumanization

Like Romain, converts usually reacted in a light-hearted manner to the racial categorizations they were subjected to, because they were inconsequential. However, some racializing experiences directly affected their social standing and proved very traumatic. Ethnic and racial cognitive categories are usually tied to stereotyped beliefs and an unequal distribution of resources. Specifically, being labeled as “non-white” comes with its bundle of negative attributes and social discredit, with serious bearing on one’s life chances. Moving from “us” to “them” and from “majority” to “minority” has clear consequences in terms of status loss. It durably modifies one’s position in racial power relations and exposes one to discrimination and dehumanization. Converts to Islam who are no longer labeled as white experience stigma, which Link and Phelan (2001: 377) conceptualize as a composite phenomenon. They consider that “it exists when elements of *labeling*, *stereotyping*, *separation* [between us and them], *status loss*, and *discrimination* occur together in a *power situation* that allows them.” Having addressed the issue of labeling in the previous sub-section, I now turn to an examination of the remaining elements.

²⁵ « Les gens vont pas chercher plus loin, tu vois. Je leur explique pas ma vie à dire « je suis converti » et tout ça. Dans leur tête, je suis algérien, je suis musulman. C’est très bien ».

²⁶ « Moi les gens maintenant, c’est, dès qu’il y a un truc avec des Arabes, moi je suis l’Arabe de service dans ma famille, finalement. Tu vois ce que je veux dire ? Genre mon oncle, il va au Maroc, il me ramène des trucs, tu vois. (...) Genre les matchs de l’Algérie, les gens ils m’envoient des messages. Voilà, tu vois, c’est... c’est mignon ».

a) Being cast outside the boundaries of nationality and citizenship

Amelie (Paris) is a 25-year old white woman who studies law in order to become a diplomat. Born and raised in a French atheist family, she converted to Islam a couple of years ago and is now married to Khalid, a Muslim immigrant from the Middle East. Shortly after her conversion, Amelie decided to put on the Muslim headscarf, which she alternately wears as a turban or a *hijab* depending on the context. Recently, Khalid decided to apply for French citizenship. Wearing her *hijab*, Amelie accompanied him to the prefecture for his citizenship test. Upon seeing the couple, the local government officer looked at Khalid and said: “Oh... are you accompanying her for her test?” Khalid hesitantly replied “Hem, no... she is French. I am the one taking the test.” The officer apologized and quickly moved on with the rest of the procedure. The interaction was smooth but stuck in Amelie’s mind, who sent me a text right afterwards. Upon deciding who was applying for French citizenship, the officer used her *hijab* (rather than Khalid’s Middle Eastern features) as the most reliable cue of foreignness. While her belonging to the French nation had never been questioned in the past, Amelie felt otherized and excluded. Her visible Muslimness cast her outside the borders of her home country. The religious boundary she had crossed materialized into a national boundary when she stepped into a government building with her *hijab* (on the racialized boundaries of the French nation as evidenced in administrative encounters, see Hajjat, 2010; Onasch, 2017).

Several converts in my sample reported being otherized and treated as foreigners in a comparable fashion. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit) noticed that her conversion placed her outside the national boundaries. She knew before converting that “if I become Muslim, then my American card was going to get taken away!” Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) a white woman wearing *hijab* described a verbal attack she was exposed to in the metro: “I was in public transportation and an old lady was like ‘Ah! Your headscarf! Look at the way you are dressed! Go back to your country! We don’t dress like this in France.’ I replied very kindly ‘but Madam, why are you saying that? You know it is going to be complicated for me to go back to my country because my father is from Gers and my mother from Picardy!’²⁷” Noémie, who was born and raised in the French countryside had to endure xenophobic comments because of her headscarf. Chloé (21, student, Lille) also reported feeling very upset when people ask her to “become integrated” to French society: “I have been integrated from a very long time! I am French! My family is French. I am in France! I just decided to do something different from the norm, and there you go, everything is upside down!²⁸” Chloé cannot stand being treated like an immigrant in need of assimilation in her own country.

²⁷ « Je suis dans les transports, une vieille dame ‘ah gnagnaaa gna gnaaa ! votre foulard ! comment vous êtes habillée ! retournez dans votre pays ! gnagnagna on s’habille pas comme ça ici en France.’ ‘Mais Madame...’ donc très gentiment quoi, ‘pourquoi vous dites ça ? vous savez, ça va être compliqué de retourner chez moi parce que mon père est du Gers, ma mère est de la Picardie’ ».

²⁸ « Ce qui pose en fait vraiment problème, c’est quand on me demande à moi de m’intégrer. Ça pose problème parce que... on est intégré depuis bien longtemps ! On est français ! Notre famille est française, donc... On est en France, c’est juste en fait on décide de faire quelque chose d’autre de la norme, et là, ça chamboule tout en fait ! »

b) Racial insults and their meaning

Apart from these xenophobic comments, converts are also exposed to slurs with more explicit racist content. In the US, a wide range of insults are used. Sharing his experiences on the *American Da 'wah* Facebook group, a white American convert noted: “people don’t even realize I’m white sometimes. Although I could be an Aryan Nation poster boy, being half English and German. In fact, someone yelled at me and called me the ‘n’ word, no joke” (Facebook group, February 2013). Although this convert embodies what he considers as typically “Aryan” features (he is tall, blond and blue-eyed), his Muslim attire (he wears a *kufi* and a beard) owes him to be treated with one of the most offensive racial slurs existing in the American context: “nigger,” a derogatory word that has historically been used to degrade African-Americans and that is often euphemistically referred to as the “n-word” in current American lexicon because of the uneasiness it fosters (Kennedy, 2002). Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis), who wears the headscarf, also painfully recalled an instance where she was badly insulted on the street: “I have had the nasty comments... I have been called... This has been really bad but... ‘Sand nigger’... Yeah... Someone yelled it out of the car window.” The word “sand nigger” is a variant of the “n-word” (adding a reference to the desert) used to insult individuals perceived to be Arabs. As a white person, Victoria had never been exposed to such a racial slur in the past and was embarrassed to even pronounce the word. Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago) also said that she had been called a “towel head” and a “rag-head” by her cousin in Texas, two insults that are commonly employed against Arabs, Muslims and Sikhs in the US and directly refer to the practice of wearing a turban or a scarf.

In France, verbal attacks are no less violent. Adam (35, unemployed, Paris), who is from the Caribbean, said that each time he saw his older cousin, he received slurs and insults: “you nasty crappy Arab! Look at you! You are dressed like an Arab!”²⁹ Bernard (47, clerk, Lille) reported that he had been called a “*bougnoule*” (nasty Arab) on several occasions: “I am white, but they have created such an image that now if you are Muslim, people think you are Arab. Now, I am a *bougnoule* like the other *bougnoules*”³⁰. While Bernard asserts that he “is” white, his conversion to Islam appears to have altered the way he is racially categorized. The word “*bougnoule*” in French is an extremely abusive racial slur towards North Africans. It was borrowed from the Wolof *wu nuul*, which means “black,” during the colonial period and was frequently used to designate the colonized soldiers enrolled in the French army, where it acquired its racist overtones (Treppe, 2005: 225). In addition to slurs, references to ethnic cleansing also occurred. Rachel (30, translator, Paris) recalled that one day, a man told her that women like her should be “put in concentration camps.”³¹ The racist implications of such statement, which clearly mirrors anti-Semitism, are revealing of the violent nature of anti-Muslim sentiment.

Although mostly fictional, the famous movie *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) which recounts the life of British diplomat T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) in the Hejaz, reveals

²⁹ « Mon plus grand cousin, à chaque fois que je le vois, il me fait ‘ouais alors ! sale Arabe de merde ! tu t’habilles comme les Arabes et tout !’. Je lui fais ‘mais t’es un ouf !!!!’ ».

³⁰ « Je suis blanc, mais ils montrent tellement une image que maintenant si t’es musulman, on te prend pour un Arabe. (...) A partir de là, je suis un bougnoule comme les autres bougnoules ».

³¹ « J’en ai eu un un jour qui m’a dit que les filles comme moi, il fallait les mettre en camps de concentration ».

once again the effect of clothing and attire on racial slurring. Dressed in traditional Arab garment, Lawrence is despised as a “filthy little wog³²” by a British officer, who treats him with much more deference in another setting where Lawrence wears the British uniform.



“You filthy little wog!” says a British officer to T.E. Lawrence dressed as a local Arab



A while later, the same British officer says to T.E. Lawrence, now dressed in British uniform: “Sir! It is Lawrence, isn’t it? Well, may I shake your hand sir?” Lawrence asks: “Haven’t we met before?” To which the officer responds: “Don’t think so Sir. I should remember that!”

Figure 29 – Lawrence of Arabia
Movie by David Lean, 1962

When rightly interpreted, Islamic apparel seems to erase the whiteness of those who wear it. Like T.E. Lawrence in the movie, converts are racially and corporeally objectified on the basis of their clothes and religious markers. In all these cases, aggressors conflate religious belonging with racial and somatic considerations: their insults “nigger,” “sand nigger,” “towel head,” “rag head,” “bougnoule” and “wog” intertwine references to body appearance, geographic origin and attire. In analyzing the anatomy of these insults, one wonders whether racial language is merely a label (simply

³² Mostly employed in Australian and British English, “wog” is a derogatory word for peoples of Middle Eastern or South Asian origin.

used to signal hatred) or whether it is substantial (hinging upon a strong cognitive association between race and religion). With Colette Guillaumin (2002 [1972]: 194), I consider that language is “symptomatic” and constitutes the “material of alterity.” Jacques Derrida (1985) also writes that “there is no racism without a language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word.” The fact that aggressors chose racial slurs among the wide range of insults available in the French and English language is revealing of the racial threat that Islam represents for them. Symptomatically, James (48, English professor, Detroit) recalled how he was once called a “*race traitor*” on a local PBS station after giving a talk on the Iraq war. The dimension of racial treason and racial inferiority induced by conversion to Islam was apparent in almost all my interviews.

c) Fear and physical insecurities

In some cases, attacks are more explicitly physical and directly endangering. Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit) experienced xenophobia in a particularly harsh way on the street while walking with her *hijab* on: “someone spits his gum. And I thought that it was just... an accident or something. But he spits, like, towards my face. And then I heard him saying, kind of under his breath, ‘go back to your country.’ And it wasn’t until I heard the comment that the act of being spit upon felt like really demoralizing. The words kind of affirmed for me that this was, like, an act of hate.” Anjali realized she did not feel safe anymore walking on the street alone. Mariana (29, housewife, Chicago), a convert of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent who also wears the *hijab*, also recounted how she barely escaped being beaten on a public bus:

One of the scariest things that happened to me was that I was almost attacked on a bus. (...) I was on the bus and this Puerto Rican guy was just grunting about every race visible on the bus. Going in on a black woman, started going in on this Mexican guy, just like saying dirty nasty stuff about them. Then his attention turns towards me. He started saying some sexual things, horrible things about me as a woman, and then as a Muslim woman, and then when he said, in his very thick accent “you know, we should go over there and bomb your country”, I remember I just whiplashed my head and looked at him and I told him in Spanish in my very Puerto Rican accent, and I said “well, do you want us to go bomb Puerto Rico?” “*Quiere que tira la bombia a Puerto Rico?*” And his face just got so red. (...) He got up and started charging towards me and I like grabbed my purse and the woman he was with grabbed him and pulled him out of the bus. And I am like shaking and everybody is like “are you OK?” What upset me was nobody got up. I am a woman for God sake! I was like this 19-year old girl. (...) It was traumatic. I think it was when it finally hit me, like “wow I really do stand out.”

The hate and physical insecurity that Mariana felt on the moment led her to become much more careful whenever she takes public transportation alone. For these visibly Muslim converts, as for their coreligionists, public spaces become increasingly difficult to navigate. While she was never victim of a physical attack, Rachel (30, translator, Paris), who wears the headscarf, confessed being exhausted by the stares she commonly gets on the street and that she was continuing to get at the coffee shop where I interviewed her: “I never had a physical aggression, but the most oppressive things for me are the looks I get. (...) You see, for instance, since we have been sitting here, people entering the café

have been staring at me.³³” While she used to go unnoticed and freely walked the streets when categorized as a white non-Muslim, Rachel is now subjected to looks on a daily basis and vulnerable to verbal aggressions.

d) Suspicion and state surveillance

As they started feeling unsafe in certain public settings, some converts also realized that they themselves elicited fear in the minds of others, for being associated with terrorism and radicalization. Marta (35, engineer, Chicago) a Latina Muslim wearing *hijab*, remembered the reaction of fear she once sparked off in a Chicago mall: “I remember walking around one time in a mall and there was this lady with her kids (...). And I saw her look... The first moment that she saw me, her reaction was grabbing her kids and pulling them to her side. And it was almost like an instinctive protective reaction from a mother. And I just... I felt so sad. (...) I never wished to have that reaction on others.” Because of her *hijab*, Marta’s presence was interpreted as a threat. Converts are suspected of entertaining violent thoughts and of planning a terrorist act. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit) encountered serious difficulties at work: “I have pilots deciding that they don’t want to fly with me. They said ‘no we can’t have her up there. We don’t know what she is going to do.’” In the context of the War on Terror and following the emergence of Al-Qaeda and ISIS as major geopolitical threats, conversion to Islam is increasingly appraised through the lens of homeland security and in both France and the US, the figure of the “Muslim terrorist” (Gotanda, 2011) has become prominent in the racialization of converts. As a result, some of my interviewees worried about police surveillance. Mia (37, artist, Chicago), a woman of Puerto Rican descent who used to attend Islamic classes with mostly African-American converts in the early 2000s, recalled “the cost that we had to pay for it. I was literally scared to talk through my phone. I would hear clicks on my phone. This stuff is really, like, real! And I would be nervous. You know what I mean?” After 9/11, Mia became anxious of becoming the target of state surveillance, as has happened to many American Muslims who had a hard time proving their innocence after being incarcerated on false grounds (Bayoumi, 2008; Abraham et al., 2011; Cainkar, 2011). Such profiling and targeting were totally new for many of my interviewees.

In the current geopolitical context, Islamic visual markers have taken on a new signification, associated with terror and danger. A rather mundane and semantically diverse attribute (see previous section), the beard has for instance become the focus of moral panics. In France especially, a series of incidents have shed light on the cognitive confusion it generates. In November 2014, a PowerPoint document from the regional education authority of Poitiers, meant to prevent the “religious radicalization” of students, circulated amid school principals. Among the “external signs” that had to be reported to higher authorities were: “a long, untrimmed beard with a shaven moustache; shaven hair; Muslim clothing; uncovered ankles; refusal of tattoos; forehead prayer bump; loss of weight due to frequent fasting” (Delaporte, 2014). This list of physical markers was considered by many commentators as discriminatory and useless (most of the perpetrators of violent attacks on French territory did not display any of those signs). In fact, it is symptomatic of a felt necessity to *visually* identify potential suspects. Yet, this

³³ « Alors je n’ai jamais eu d’agression physique. (...) Le plus lourd pour moi c’est les regards. Vraiment ce qui est absolument quotidien, c’est les regards. (...) Tu vois par exemple, depuis tout à l’heure, tous les gens qui rentrent dans le café me regardent ».

exaggerated focus on external appearance has led to a number of misidentifications that also affected non-Muslims. Consider the case of soccer player Gaël Givet, who displays an impressive beard and does not have any link to the religion of Islam, but had to leave his club (Evian) in October 2015 after being suspected of being a jihadist by his own coach: “they wanted me to shave my beard because it was too long. They took me for a jihadist while I am absolutely not converted to Islam. How crazy!!!,³⁴” he said.

The suspicion around the beard took on new proportions following the Paris attacks of November 2015 and the declaration of a state of emergency. In Orly airport, 20 Muslim employees wearing long beards were asked to shave by their employer Securitas Transport Aviation Security (they were even offered clippers) (AFP, 2016). Those who refused were fired. On November 19th, during a strong-arm police search at the house of a Muslim family (who eventually proved innocent), a police officer found an illustration of Leonard de Vinci and asked: “who is that bearded person?” (*c’est qui ce barbu?*), mistaking de Vinci for a potential violent Islamist preacher (Leroux, 2015). His comment made the headlines and provoked hilarity among French readers, but is indicative of a general state of suspicion, in which even portraits from the Renaissance are reinterpreted in light of security concerns and fear of Islamic radicalism.

In the US, a series of misidentifications also occurred. One of them concerned Robert Bergdahl, a commercial truck driver and the father of Bowe Bergdahl, a US army soldier who was held captive by the Taliban in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2014 before being eventually exchanged for five Guantanamo prisoners. Displaying a long untrimmed beard and having learned Pashto and various Islamic formulas to understand his son’s abductors, Robert Bergdahl was accused by the conservative right of being a “Muslim” in June 2014 (Whitnall, 2014). On Fox News, political commentator Bill O’Reilly said that Bergdahl “looks like a Muslim. He is also somewhat sympathetic to Islam,” while television personality Brian Kilmeade added: “I mean, he says he was growing his beard because his son was in captivity. Well, your son’s out now. So you don’t have to look like a member of the Taliban. Are you out of razors?³⁵” In a context of geopolitical tensions informed by a rhetoric of clash of civilizations, the beard became a stigmatizing feature.

As religious profiling increasingly hinges upon racial and bodily cues, the conflation of certain attributes with Islamic belonging has led to the targeting of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, many victims of Islamophobia are not actual Muslims but people who “look” Muslim and have a so-called “Muslim appearance,” either because of their facial hair, headgear or brown skin (Joshi, 2006b; Tyrer, 2010). In addition to the beard, the turban, mentioned at length in Chapter 4, has returned to central stage in operations of racial categorization, to the point that cognitive researchers have identified the existence of a “turban effect” in racial profiling and discrimination (Unkelbach et al., 2008). As a matter of fact, countless hate crimes have been committed against turban-wearing Sikhs since 2001 (including several murders and a mass shooting in a *gurdwara* in 2012). Assailants reportedly said to their victims: “Osama,” “Bin Laden,” “terrorist,” “Taliban,” “rags” and “fuck Allah” (The Huffington Post, 2012). Because of their visible

³⁴ « On voulait me forcer à me raser parce que [ma barbe] était trop longue. On me prenait pour un djihadiste alors que je ne suis absolument pas converti à l’islam. Quelle folie ! » (CCIF, 2015).

³⁵ *Fox News*, June 3rd, 2014.

religious attributes, Sikhs were ascribed to the negative stereotypes commonly associated with Islam, which endangered their physical security and social status (Ahluwalia and Pelletiere, 2010). Indian-American Sikh designer and actor Waris Ahluwalia, who wears a large beard and a turban, recently recounted having to go through extra security checks whenever he goes to the airport. He was even barred from boarding a plane in Mexico in February 2016.³⁶ A non-Muslim himself, Ahluwalia ironically underwent the vicissitudes of “flying while Muslim” (Selod, 2016), an experience of racial profiling and suspicion that echoes the famous expression “driving while Black” in American English.



Figure 30 – Mistaken Muslim identities
French soccer player Gaël Givet and Leonardo de Vinci (1452-1519)
American citizen Robert Bergdahl and Indian-American designer Waris Ahluwalia

Other “collateral” victims of Islamophobia since 2001 have included a variety of brown-skinned individuals, such as Indian-American Hindus, Christians and Jains; Arab-American Christians and Mexican Catholics. In addition, the War on Terror has resulted in an upsurge of deportations of Latino men, collateral victims of an increasing suspicion against brown people (Bender, 2002; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Romero and Zarrugh, forthcoming). Such misidentifications clearly underline the racialization of Islam, which ties religious identification to bodily appearance. Born Muslims, converts

³⁶ *The Daily Show*, April 26th 2016.

and non-Muslims who “appear Muslim” are exposed to physical and verbal attacks as well as institutional suspicion on the basis of how they look. Religious hatred leans on corporeal markers.

e) Discrimination at work

Some of the converts I interviewed also experienced overt discrimination at work. When Bianca (33, unemployed, Marseille) started wearing the *hijab*, it worsened the already bad relationships she had with her employer, which evolved into mental harassment: “I had to take a sick leave because I could not stand going to work. I had knots in my stomach.³⁷” Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago) had a similar experience in her law firm: “I had built my whole career there. And, I was very successful. But when they found that I had converted to Islam, it was like the beginning of the end. They were very disturbed by it. They just started to see me like I wasn’t even the same person. So I left.” Françoise (74, retired, Lyon) recalled how her late partner, who was also a convert and worked as an anthropologist, was marginalized within his university after news of his conversion were released: “he lost contracts when they learned he was Muslim. The fact that they knew that, it suddenly discredited him at the scientific level.³⁸” Because they had embraced Islam, converts’ intellectual capacities were put into question. Doubts and suspicion aroused concerning their professional credentials and their scientific neutrality. While he could not prove that he had been victim of discrimination at work, Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago) felt strongly so: “freedom of religion in the US is for every religion, but Islam. That’s my opinion. (...) I have lost jobs in the US, when they found out I was Muslim. They won’t say ‘we fired you because you are Muslim.’ But they will find a reason to fire me.”

While Hasan’s claims are unverifiable, anti-Muslim discrimination on the job market is well documented on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, a 2015 experimental résumé study (Acquisti and Fong, 2015) comparing the job market performances of two fictional US born male citizens named Adam, one Muslim and the other Christian, found that the Muslim job candidate got a 13% lower callback rate than the Christian candidate, the difference being higher in counties with high fractions of Republican voters. In France, a testing experiment (Adida et al., 2016: 24) comparing employers’ reactions to the CVs of Aurélie Ménard (typical French name), Marie Diouf (Christian French citizen of Senegalese origin) and Khadija Diouf (Muslim French citizen of Senegalese origin) also identified a 13% lower interview callback rate for Khadija Diouf as opposed to Marie Diouf,³⁹ thereby revealing a significant “Muslim effect” on job hiring, irrespective of origin. Another recent report (Valfort, 2015) comparing the callback rate for the fictional CVs of six male and female French citizens of Lebanese descent: Michel and Nathalie Haddad (Catholics), Dov and Esther Haddad (Jews) and Mohammed and Samira Haddad (Muslims) also found that Catholic candidates were twice more likely to be called back

³⁷ « Avec ma décision justement de porter le foulard et tout, j’ai vu que ça n’arrangeait pas les choses, et là je suis vraiment devenue la personne en fait qu’elle avait pris en grippe. Donc du coup elle était tout le temps sur moi... et... là j’ai commencé à vraiment mal le vivre. Jusqu’au point de me mettre en maladie parce que je supportais plus d’aller travailler, quoi. Avec la boule au ventre. Donc après j’ai arrêté ».

³⁸ « Lui par exemple, dans son boulot, il a perdu des boulots et des contrats de boulot quand ils ont su qu’il était musulman. Parce que le fait qu’ils sachent ça, et bah ça le décrédibilisait au niveau scientifique tout d’un coup ! Il était plus crédible dans ses recherches sociologiques ».

³⁹ The difference between Aurélie Ménard and Marie Diouf was not significant.

than Muslim candidates.⁴⁰ This ratio rose to four when focusing on male candidates only. This, again, highlights the existence of a discrimination based on religion, independently of origin. Although my sample does not allow me to draw generalizations on hiring discrimination, it is likely that when converts are openly Muslim (through their name or visual appearance) or when word of their conversion gets around, they are exposed to the same type of prejudice as their coreligionists.

f) Sexist encounters

The astute reader will certainly have noticed that most of the discrimination testimonies presented above were from female converts. This disproportionate share indicates that anti-Muslim sentiment is clearly gendered (Dorlin, 2010; Navarro, 2010).⁴¹ In addition to the badge of race, Muslim women also wear the badge of sex. In my sample, it was always female converts who experienced the most painful and pervasive attacks. Consider the case of Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit), who is married to Samuel (25, campaign strategist), a tall black man of African-American and Native-American descent. While used to bad looks and racist comments because of his appearance, Samuel confessed feeling uncomfortable walking on the street with his wife who wears the *hijab*: “I am a 6’2 foot black man and I know it’s hard for me! I can see women on the train put their purses closer to them and it makes me angry. (...) But sometimes I am walking with you and I just... I don’t have the courage to walk with you sometimes.” Samuel feels that his *hijabi* wife gets even more evil looks than he does as a black man.

Not only are women wearing the *hijab* more frequently targeted, but the content of their aggressions is in some instances sexist and sexual. A number of my female interviewees experienced both racial otherization and sexual harassment, in relation to the Islamic markers they were wearing. Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris) reported a disturbing incident that happened to her in the train:

Recently, I was on a local train and a guy, a Tunisian, homeless guy, completely drunk said [acting out as if he was picking up the phone]: “Hello? I would like to talk to Mr Marzouki [President of Tunisia]. Yes, I wanted to tell you that the *beurette*⁴² in France, we can’t fuck them no more, they all wear the *chador*, all of them have put on the *burqa*! There is nothing left to fuck in here. Take your Tunisian girls back, take your *beurettes* back! They are useless now, we can’t fuck them no more.” He said all that while staring at me⁴³.

⁴⁰ And 1.3 times more likely to be called back than Jewish candidates.

⁴¹ Researchers and NGOs have demonstrated that victims of Islamophobia are overwhelmingly female. In France, the CCIF (2016) estimates that 3/4 of its clients are women. In the US, statistics are less precise since reports overwhelmingly focus on the institutions (not people) being targeted. However, the gendered character of Islamophobia is very clear in the British context as well (Allen, 2014).

⁴² Slang for French women of North African descent.

⁴³ « Il y a eu une fois aussi récemment, j’étais dans le RER et il y a un mec, un tunisien bourré je pense, un SDF, qui était complètement bourré dans le RER et qui a fait ‘Allo ! Oui ! Je voudrais parler à Mr Marzouki, oui je voulais vous dire, les beurettes en France, on peut plus les baiser, elles portent toutes le tchador ! elles ont toutes mis la burqa là ! il y a plus rien à baiser ici là ! reprenez vos tunisiennes, reprenez vos petites beurettes ! elles servent à rien, on peut plus les baiser !’ Moi j’étais là ‘quoi ?????’ Tout ça en me fixant ! Le mec me disait ça en me fixant ! Je lui ai dit ‘écoutez, c’est inadmissible que vous me preniez à partir comme ça, c’est complètement inapproprié ! je vous demande d’arrêter !’ Et il s’est excusé après ».

There is a lot to unpack in this incident. To be sure, Fanny’s aggressor was drunk and one should not grant too much importance to his remarks. Yet, the fact that he used a certain repertoire of verbal abuse is significant. Dissecting the anatomy of the insults Fanny received reveals a multi-layered process of otherization: Fanny, who actually hails from a Tunisian Jewish family, is racialized as a Muslim *beurette* because of her scarf. In the French context, the figure of the *beurette* is complex in itself (Guénif-Soulaimas, 2000), mixing elements of racial undesirability (the *beurette* as the daughter of North African immigrants), civilizational rescue (the *beurette* having to be saved from Islamic patriarchy), class contempt (the *beurette* as coming from dilapidated suburbs) and sexual desirability (fetichization of North African female bodies⁴⁴). In this context, Fanny’s headscarf is precisely interpreted as a sign of sexual unavailability, which produces frustration and anger in the mind of her interlocutor. The *beurette* turned into a “puritan” Muslim woman has lost her sexual worth: now useless, she has to be sent back to North Africa. Rachel (30, translator, Paris) recalled a similar experience, when a man in the metro told her “you, you wear a headscarf because you don’t know how to come,⁴⁵” drawing on the same trope of sexual desirability and unavailability.

Another common trope of otherization hinges upon the representation of Muslim women as necessarily oppressed (coupled with the representation of Muslim men as inherently oppressive). Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) described a condescending and heated encounter with a customer at the mall she used to work at:

There was a woman: “Excuse me dear, where are you from?”

“I am from here.”

“No, but like where are you from?”

“I am from here.”

“Ok, but where does your family come from?”

“We have been here for over 300 years actually!”

“Oh wow!”

Still, she didn’t register... And then she is like “Well I went on a trip to Egypt, and our tour guide was Muslim, she wore the thing that you wear.” (...) Then the conversation took a turn and she is like “Aaannd, I know that you women don’t really have a lot of rights.”

I am like “I beg your pardon?”

She is like “you know, you can’t really get divorced and if you do get divorced, you can never marry again.”

And I am like “Mam, that’s factually incorrect!”

And she: “I am sorry, what?”

And then I am: “There is a difference between a culture or a set of constraints or ideas or norms based on everything from culture to the geopolitical situation to the region to the economic situation... and then the religion of Islam.”

44 According to the 2016 online report of the pornographic website PornHub, the words “arab” and “ beurette ” were some of the most researched terms by French users (on the related fantasy of the “ veiled beurette ,” see Fassin and Trachman, 2013).

45 « Le type au bout d’un moment... en fait il parlait tout seul, j’ai fini par comprendre en fait qu’il me parlait, et à un moment il m’a dit « mais toi, tu portes le foulard, parce que tu sais pas jouir en fait » ».

And then she is like “Well, that’s what she said and that’s what I heard.”

And I am “Once again, that’s not coming from Islam and...”

And then she said [angry voice] “You surely know everything, don’t you?”

In this encounter, the woman remained charming and polite as long as she could portray Lisa as a vulnerable woman oppressed by a set of patriarchal religious norms. The moment Lisa spoke up and defended her interpretation of Islam as liberating and distinct from cultural, geopolitical and economic constraints, the conversation took a hostile turn. In a large number of situations, French and American female converts wearing the headscarf are depicted as anti-feminist and reactionary. They are accused of betraying women’s cause, by not showing solidarity with Muslim women in foreign countries who do not have the same freedom as them and are forced to wear the *hijab*. Thus, Lisa was also asked by a family member: “well, if you truly think that you are not oppressed, why don’t you go to Pakistan defending your women?” Lisa did not understand why she was suddenly associated with the gender situation in Pakistan and why Pakistani women had to be “her” women (“there is not even a reply you can have,” she said). Consider also the case of Capucine (26, unemployed, Paris). One day, as she was home wearing a large prayer veil, her father burst in her room and yelled at her: “what are you doing? Take this thing off immediately! Are you having fun provoking people like that? You want to scare your little sisters, is that it? You damned Iranian!”⁴⁶ Capucine’s headscarf was interpreted by her father as a provocation and a symbol of solidarity with the Iranian regime. As for Capucine’s mother, she called her after seeing ISIS atrocities on TV and said: “your religion makes me want to puke, you are disgusting. Come on, go ahead, go marry a damn Arab who will beat the hell out of you!”⁴⁷ In those cases, female converts are projected onto the international sphere and held responsible for the situation of women in various majority Muslim countries (Pakistan, Iran, Arab countries). They are accused of having chosen to be oppressed while Muslim women overseas are presented as struggling to escape their subjugation. Instead of “saving” these foreign women (Abu-Lughod, 2002), female converts have voluntarily donned the very symbol of their oppression and placed themselves under the yoke of bad Muslim men. In doing so, they have become, in the mind of their interlocutors, both oppressed and oppressors, both victims and persecutors, thereby unleashing a whirlwind of hate and hostility.

g) Fading into neglect and insignificance

Apart from stares, verbal attacks, discrimination, physical aggression and sexual harassment, the most striking and painful effect of converts’ racialization is their dehumanization. Several interviewees described how they felt reduced to the status of inanimate objects, unworthy of human attention. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) recounts one such instance where she felt dehumanized after wearing the headscarf:

It is weird because people in [my hometown] don’t recognize me. I had like this one woman who was... it is called the “lunch lady” and that’s basically the adult who comes and watches the classrooms during the lunchtime while the teachers are in break. And I was like the favorite student of this one lunch lady. For years. And I saw her at a diner recently and she

⁴⁶ « Qu’est-ce que tu fais ? Tu m’enlèves ce truc tout de suite. Ça t’amuse de provoquer comme ça ? Tu veux faire peur à tes petites sœurs, c’est ça ? Sale iranienne, là ! »

⁴⁷ « Ta religion me donne envie de gerber, tu me dégoûtes, vous me donnez envie de vomir avec votre religion. Allez, vas-y, va te marier avec un sale Arabe qui te foutra sur la tronche ».

just glared at me. And I wanted to rip my head off, and say “do you know who I am?” So it is... I don’t know... It is just... They are so otherized that Muslims become like unhuman.

Because of her *hijab*, Lisa became invisible in the eyes of her favorite lunch lady. Her individuality and personhood, her past friendship with this person were suddenly erased because of the piece of fabric she wore on her head. Similarly, Aisha (37, housewife, Paris) recounted how she “became transparent” after she started wearing the *hijab*: “before at the crosswalk – that’s what hit me the most – everybody would stop for me. Now, people rarely stop. I have had car breakdowns so many times in my life, but I never stayed more than 5 minutes alone by the side of the road. Now, a car failure with my headscarf, no one stops.⁴⁸” Capucine (26, unemployed, Paris) reported a similar experience, after she started wearing the *hijab*: “It really affected me to see people who used to smile at me every day, say hi to me and talk to me, who overnight stopped saying hello because I put some polyester on my head.⁴⁹” Rachel (30, translator, Paris) also described how she became insignificant with her *hijab*: “The thing is that when you wear the *hijab*, people think that you are blind, deaf and mute [laughs], and that you don’t hear anything when they are talking about you. Or that you don’t see them when they are finger-pointing at you. And that you don’t know how to reply.⁵⁰” All these testimonies demonstrate the violent nature of racial categorization, which crushes personhood and denies common humanity.

h) Coming within the Veil

In sum, it appears that religious markers operate as efficient factors of racialization in everyday interactions. They send a powerful signal that is interpreted by others as a proof of racial belonging, with serious consequences on one’s social position. Hence, white converts offer a near experimental case for students of racialization, since they experience the transition from the world of whiteness to the world of “the Other” and get to know what “life on the other side might be like” (Ware, 2005: 133). In the piece of advice she delivers to new Muslims, white American convert and blogger Olivia Kompier (2013) writes: “welcome to a world you may have never experienced before, the world of ‘the other.’ This is the place of those who don’t hold an ‘entitlement’ card by virtue of their birth, a world of strange looks and racial slurs.” By embracing Islam and choosing to visually display their spiritual identity, converts step foot on the other side of the mirror: people ignore them, call them racial slurs or ostensibly fear them.

⁴⁸ « En fait j’étais devenue un peu transparente. Tu vois ? C’est-à-dire qu’avant, au passage piéton... c’est le truc qui m’a le plus marqué, hein... tout le monde s’arrêtait. (...) Bah en fait, on s’arrête rarement maintenant. Euh... panne de voiture : je suis tombée plein de fois en panne de voiture, je suis jamais restée plus de 5 minutes sur le bord de la route. Panne de voiture avec mon foulard, euh ben... on s’arrête pas ».

⁴⁹ « Je me rends compte encore aujourd’hui que ça m’a beaucoup affectée parce que moi j’aime tout le monde, je suis peace and love, et ça m’a vraiment touchée de voir que des personnes qui me souriaient tous les jours, qui me disaient bonjour et qui parlaient avec moi, du jour au lendemain ne me disent plus bonjour parce que je me mets du polyester sur la tête quoi ».

⁵⁰ « Il y a les regards qui sont ou pas couplés au fait que les gens vont se mettre à chuchoter sur mon passage. Et s’ils sont encore plus indécis, à me montrer du doigt comme si je ne les voyais pas. Alors le truc aussi c’est le phénomène, c’est quand tu portes un *hijab* les gens se mettent à penser que tu es aveugle, sourde et muette (rires) et que donc tu n’entends pas quand ils parlent de toi. Ou que tu ne les vois pas quand ils te montrent du doigt. Et qu’en plus tu ne sais pas répondre. Donc du coup quand tu réponds, ça en surprend plus d’un ».

In other words, converts *come within the Veil* (both literally and figuratively). The reality of structural racism is *unveiled* to them as they discover the flip side of racial relations in France and the US. Converts face race, or to put it more bluntly, race is in their face. Verbal attacks, stares and micro-aggressions become part of their routine. This transition is often painful and destabilizing, as the pervasiveness of the race problem had so far remained invisible to them, by virtue of their whiteness and position outside the Veil. At *American Da'wah*, Dr. Uthman repeatedly warned recent converts, reminding them that “America is not a country for the weak in heart⁵¹” and that they should be prepared to face its reality. Suddenly exposed to hate, racism and discrimination, converts have to learn how to deal with it.

Perhaps, the most striking aspect of this racial re-categorization is that converts lose control over their definition of self. Often for the first time in their lives, their individuality is denied: the possibility of being something else than what people assume them to be and to develop their selves outside the boundaries that people have set for them is shrinking. They are *bound* to their Muslim identity and held *accountable* for the actions of Muslims as a racialized collective entity. They now “wear the mark of the plural,” as Albert Memmi (2003 [1957]) put it in his analysis of the colonized’s situation.⁵² This sharply contrasts with their desire for singularity and distinction outlined in Chapter 1. Converts discover “a world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other” (DuBois, 2007 [1903]: 8).

This loss of self-definition paradoxically opens converts to a form of “double consciousness” and “prompts the emergence of second-sight—a startling, yet gradual revelation that allows [them] to see the structures of [their] racialized environment and the ways in which [they are] situated and constrained in and around the veil” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015: 242). Having a direct encounter with minority experience generates a new form of racial reflexivity. In a way, converts get a form of real-life sociological training. I noticed that a certain number of my interviewees were particularly aware of their new position in the racial dynamics of their country. While whiteness is usually understood as invisible and unthinkable, white converts to Islam were precisely led to *think* about it. Many of my white interviewees interpreted their various racializing experiences in terms of losing their white privilege. They felt they had “crossed the borders of whiteness” (Franks, 2000; Galonnier, 2015b). Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis) confessed: “you hear a lot about white privilege. And you don’t realize how powerful that is until you are taken out of that category.” Monica (34, housewife, Chicago) a convert of Irish and Mexican descent, also said, laughingly: “you lose your white card!” Although talks around white privilege were less frequent in France where the vocabulary on racial stratification is less developed, some of my interviewees made direct references to it. Rachel (30, translator, Paris) explained: “let’s say that I have experienced what it is like *not* to have white privilege. Even if I still have it, of course. But a little less.⁵³” Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) noticed a similar transformation after she started wearing the *hijab*:

⁵¹ Fieldnotes, April 20th, 2016.

⁵² Memmi writes: “Another sign of the colonized’s depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner, he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘they are this.’ ‘they are all the same.’).”

⁵³ « Disons que j’ai fait l’expérience de ce que c’était de pas tout à fait avoir un privilège de blanche. Même si je l’ai toujours évidemment. Mais un peu moins ».

“The moment I started wearing my *hijab*, OK I still had a white education, a white behavior, but in the eyes of people, I became an immigrant. I went over to the other side in fact. I switched from majority to minority.⁵⁴” Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris) concurred: “it is as if you moved to the other side. That’s it, now, you really are with the Muslims. And in France, roughly it means that you are with the Arabs. It is like a break, a fracture from the atheist, French world.⁵⁵” Previously white and invisible, converts now wear the badge of race, the badge of color (Appiah, 1996). While the experience of whiteness is generally akin to that of a fish in the water, converts are suddenly taken out of the water.

D. NATIONAL SPECIFICITIES: CONTRASTING TRANSATLANTIC EXPERIENCES

In both France and the US, Muslim converts are exposed to complex phenomena of racialization. In the two contexts, by donning the visible attributes of Islam, they lose their “majority” status, which previously enabled the smooth development of their selves and personalities, and are projected into the realm of minority life. In both countries, converts have to face similar tropes of otherization: racial slurs, association with foreignness and immigration, conflation with the figure of the Muslim terrorist or that of the oppressed Muslim woman. However, this transatlantic convergence should not obscure clear national specificities in the racial stigma attached to Islam. I now turn to a careful examination of these differences.

1) American Converts and the Black and White Divide

As outlined in the Introduction, Muslim Americans are roughly divided into two groups: African-American Muslims on the one hand and immigrant Muslims from the Middle-East or South Asia on the other. The racial politics and racialization trajectories of these two groups are extremely contrasted, which in turn results in different consequences for the converts who embraced Islam through them.

a) The legacy of African-American Islam

The long history of African-American Islam outlined in Chapter 4 has consequences for the perception of converts today. For white Americans, converting to Islam is usually considered as a form of cultural betrayal (“for my Dad, religion is culture. And to become Muslim is to apostatize from my white identity,” previously said Edward, 35, project manager, Detroit). On the contrary, because of the historical legacy of black Muslims, Islam is culturally at home in the African-American community. In fact,

⁵⁴ « Oui clairement, j’ai vu un changement. (...) En fait ce qui s’est passé, c’est qu’à partir du moment où je porte mon foulard, OK j’ai une éducation de blanche, j’ai un comportement de blanche, mais aux yeux des gens, je suis devenue une indigène. C’est-à-dire que j’ai basculé en fait. Je suis passée de la majorité à la minorité ».

⁵⁵ « C’est comme si tu passes de l’autre côté. Ça y est, maintenant t’es vraiment... en gros t’es avec les musulmans. Donc en France t’es surtout, bah avec les arabes, et... ça y est. Ça fait comme une brisure, une cassure avec le « monde » athée, français ».

according to a recent Pew Research report, black Americans view Islam more warmly than white Americans do (2017: 11). Islamic scholar Sherman Jackson expressed it vividly during a talk he gave at a Chicago mosque:

African-Americans are the only community where conversion to Islam does not equal to cultural apostasy. In the black community, if you say your Muslim name, that is not a shock. As an African-American, I am accepted as a Muslim. That is very natural. It is different in the white and Hispanic community where Islam is seen as foreign. I remember a meeting after 9/11 with black intellectuals. Someone asked a question: ‘what can we do to make Muslims feel part of us as a black community?’ And a Reverend answered: ‘Wait a minute! No one in this church has not someone in their lives (a brother, a cousin, a friend, an uncle) who is not Muslim. They are already part of us!’⁵⁶”

As a result, many of the African-American converts I interviewed said that their families and entourage felt comfortable with their conversion: “in the African-American community, it is not a big deal to become Muslim,” claimed Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago). Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), who is white, contrasted his experience with his black coreligionists. He said that “becoming a Muslim in the African-American community did not mean like you weren’t African American anymore,” while his own conversion had clearly meant that he was no longer totally white. William (30, public health worker, Chicago) who is African-American, reported that his parents were “really embracive” of his conversion since “Islam is closely, intrinsically in tie with the black community. Because, my parents’ idea was partly or more so in line with the Nation of Islam, you know individuals with clean-cut bow-tie; strong, strict and disciplined individuals.” The discipline and black pride promoted by the NOI and other Afro-centric Islamic movements has given Islam a positive reputation among significant parts of the African-American community.

Yet, the legacy of the NOI is also complicated to navigate. In spite of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad’s reform in 1978 (see Chapter 4), the NOI’s racial rhetoric remains solidly implanted in American collective imagination and the vitriolic speeches of Louis Farrakhan periodically make sure it stays alive and well. As a result, African-American Muslims continue to be associated with the NOI’s uncompromising struggle against white supremacy and black converts are often suspected of adhering to its radically racialist beliefs. This became evident in 2017 when African-American convert to Islam and US Congress representative Keith Ellison ran to become chair of the Democratic National Committee. Opposition to his candidacy materialized in part on his alleged ties to the NOI, which were used to discredit him (Cunningham, 2017). My interviewees also experience this type of allegations. Deana (21, student, St. Louis), who is African-American, explains that her uncle keeps making fun of her: “Oh! Are you going to sell bean pies today?”⁵⁷ While she subscribes to a strict Salafi understanding of her religion (she wears the face veil) and strongly rejects any deviation from Islamic orthodoxy, Deana is associated through her skin color to the infamous legacy of the NOI. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) who is black and Latino encounters exactly the same problem: “I am trying to fight the stereotypes of being black and Muslim. The black Muslim stereotype

⁵⁶ Fieldnotes, December 8th, 2013.

⁵⁷ The sale of bean pies is a key component of Nation of Islam’s fundraising efforts and the special recipe of the bean pie is a symbol of the NOI. Elijah Muhammad had encouraged the consumption of bean pies as an alternative to less healthy American food.

is ‘oh he is a Nation of Islam guy.’ Automatically. Automatically! You don’t even know me!”

As for the white converts of my sample who embraced an African-American expression of Islam, they can be divided into two ideal-types. The first type is comprised of individuals who came from marginalized sections of society, such as Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago) who grew up in a lower-class household in an impoverished neighborhood and embraced Islam after a prolonged stay in prison. The way race operates in Hasan’s daily life is minimal: because he already shares a similar social status with the black coreligionists he interacts with in his neighborhood, he does not feel particularly affected by his racialization as a Muslim. The second type of converts is constituted of individuals politically committed to the anti-racist struggle, such as Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), who grew up in an upper-middle-class suburban household and decided to convert after reading the autobiography of Malcolm X. For Abdullah, embracing Islam was part of a conscious anti-racist strategy to repudiate his white privilege and become a “race traitor” (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996) (for more on this, see Chapter 8). These white converts expose themselves to typically American insults, such as “white nigger” or “wigger,” a derogatory word for whites “overly” attracted to black culture (Roediger, 1995; Roediger, 2003). The expression “white chocolate,” as in “white from the outside and black from the inside” is also frequent: it is actually the rhetorical counterpart of “bounty” and “coconut,” which are used against black people accused of “acting white.” Such insults imply that white converts to Islam do not behave in conformity with their white racial status and constitute, like poor whites for instance (Hartigan, 1999b; McDermott, 2006; Laurent, 2011), a disgrace to the race. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) noted: “there is this stigma that you are like a white kid trying to be not white.” This echoes Amy Wilkins’ research (2008: 151) on Puerto Rican wannabes who are often decried for being “white girls who *don’t know who they are.*” This type of reasoning hinges upon highly essentialist beliefs about racial identity. In all those insults, the dichotomic nature of the American Black and White Divide is particularly salient: because they do not comply with dominant understandings of whiteness, converts are associated with blackness. White converts who became acquainted with African-American Islam therefore embody a very particular type of racialized experience (for personal testimonies, see Knight, 2006; Knight, 2011). This symbolic dimension of Islam as opposed to whiteness and white supremacy is mostly absent in the French context.

b) Immigrant Muslims as “the model minority”

American Islam also has a significant post-1965 immigrant component, which mostly belongs to the middle and upper middle-class (Pew Research Center 2007). Better-off than most immigrants, American Muslim immigrants have become stereotyped as the “model minority” (Joshi, 2006a; Naber, 2012) and some of them have crafted an image of a friendly American Islam, wishful of integration and respectful of mainstream American values (Bilici, 2012; Grewal, 2013: 151-156). Within the Black and White Divide, wealthy immigrant Muslims lean towards whiteness. The white converts in my sample who entered Islam through their immigrant or second-generation friends are sociologically very different from those previously described. They are mostly college students who became acquainted with Islam through Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) on large university campuses. These converts’ racialized experiences are different from those who converted through African-American Islam. While they

certainly suffer from objectifying racial categorizations, their encounter with race can also have positive overtones. For instance, Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) explained that her racialization as an Arab proved beneficial in the school context. She jokingly recalled how her teachers' attitude evolved as she became associated with the educational achievements of America's "model minority": "My grades improved! And I kept track. I have a theory about this... I mean nothing major, but they assume you are smarter. There is this stereotype that all Muslims are doctors, engineers and lawyers." Because Lisa, spotting her *hijab*, visually looked like other successful second-generation Muslims, her educational status improved in the eyes of her teachers. This would not likely happen in France, where Islam is associated in the collective imagination with the lower sections of society.

2) French Converts: Dealing with Race and Class in a Post-Colonial Society

As stated in the Introduction, most first- and second-generation immigrant Muslims in France hail from North Africa. Hence, the figure of the "Muslim" in France is strongly tied to that of the "Arab." This is for instance how Melissa (27, project manager, Paris) depicts the situation: "in France, if you say 'Muslim,' people think 'Moroccan, *djellaba* and veiled mamma."⁵⁸

a) The specter of colonization

French Muslims still have to bear the uncomfortable legacy of French colonialism and the violence of the decolonization period. The war of Independence with Algeria (1954-1962) has left traumatic memories in both countries, some of which remain vivid (Balibar, 1997a). A rough colonial and decolonial history continues to inform the way Islam and Muslims are perceived today. Journalist Alain Gresh once declared that "in France, everything starts and ends with Algeria when it comes to Islam."⁵⁹ Such statement deserves to be nuanced, but it certainly rings true to the ears of Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille), whose father is a *pied noir*⁶⁰ and a "nostAlgeric" (someone who entertains nostalgic thoughts about colonized Algeria). During his interview, Ludovic painfully recalls the moment when he confessed having embraced Islam to him: "I did not foresee the reaction that it triggered. I thought that my father was going to understand. Because he was born in Algeria, I thought that he would develop a form of bonding with me. But no. Not at all. Big mistake. Major error of judgment. He started to explode. I had never seen him like that. For real. I never saw my father in such a state of anger. (...) Because of Algeria, [he] has his own way of looking at things concerning Muslims. He's got his share of traumas."⁶¹ French colonial past in Algeria retains an impact on Muslim

⁵⁸ « En France vous dites aux gens « musulman, c'est « ah oui, marocain, djellaba et mamma voilée » ». Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille) also noted « En France, c'est ça quoi. Le musulman, c'est l'Arabe ».

⁵⁹ « En France, tout commence et se termine avec l'Algérie quand il s'agit de l'islam » (Gresh, 2016).

⁶⁰ *Pieds noirs* refer to the settler European population who was born and raised in North Africa and lived there until the decolonization. When Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria gained their independence, they were repatriated to mainland France, an exile that created much tensions and trauma.

⁶¹ « Dans mon esprit, jamais j'aurais pensé que ça allait déclencher ça. Je pensais au contraire que mon père allait être complice, du fait de sa naissance en Algérie, tout ça, je pensais qu'il allait développer une certaine complicité avec moi. Et ben non. Pas du tout. Faute grave. Erreur d'appréciation majeure. Il s'est mis à

converts today, who can easily be perceived as traitors to the nation, especially when some of their family members lived in Algeria or were enrolled as soldiers in the Algerian conflict. Fabien (21, student, Paris), whose grandfather fought during the Algerian war and whose father was born in Algeria, echoed Ludovic’s experiences: “The fact that I am Muslim must have bothered them. It is a topic that is kind of taboo at home. My grandfather was badly affected by the war and when he came home, he used to beat my father up. So the fact that he fought in Algeria and that now his grandson is Muslim, I mean... maybe he killed Muslims there! So I think it must have been a shock. But it is not talked about. There is this mental block. It is taboo.⁶²” A wall of silence has long characterized the historiography of the Algerian war in France (Stora, 2005). With the conversion to Islam of a child or a grandchild, painful memories often resurfaced and deeply-buried traumas were rekindled, which seriously shook some families.

Along with the lasting influence of the war, Maryam, the 75-year-old president of the association *Bienvenue en Islam* also perceives reminiscences of the colonial period in the way the French state has sought to manage and regulate the religion of Islam (Geisser and Zemouri, 2007; Davidson, 2012; Godard, 2015a). During a meeting with converts and their families, as a mother was questioning the reality of anti-Muslim sentiment in France, Maryam lost her temper:

I am going to tell you how we are treated here in France. You all remember the creation of the CFCM⁶³ by Nicolas Sarkozy? I had been consulted for it. Nicolas Sarkozy gathered us all in a room and went up on stage. He said “I hear there are people among you who are unhappy. Now, listen to me. I am the one in charge here. You are going to do what I want. Or else...” And then he started pointing fingers at us, one by one: “you be careful, you be careful, you be careful.” He threatened not to renew the residence permits [of those who were Muslim immigrants]. When he was done, I said with a quiet voice: “what about me? Where are you going to send me? To the Ré island⁶⁴?” I don’t know if he heard me. But I was the only one who could stand up to him, because of my age and my position as a French woman. So this is how we are treated in France! Let me tell you that I am very upset. We are the residue of colonization, even us, as converts. It is not worth considering us, we are just

exploser. (...) Ah je l’avais jamais vu comme ça ! Je n’ai jamais vu mon père s’énervé... mais c’est... c’est véridique, hein. Je crois que je l’ai jamais vu s’énervé autant. (...) C’est l’Algérie. Il a ses schémas à lui de musulmans et... Il a son lot de traumatismes ».

⁶²« Je pense que le fait que je sois musulman ça a dû les travailler quand même, tu vois. Parce que mon grand-père en fait du côté de mon père, tu sais il a fait la guerre en Algérie. Et mon père je pense qu’il a un rapport un peu compliqué avec ça parce que t’as vu... bon c’est un sujet pareil qui est un peu tabou à la maison, mais j’en ai quand même été un peu au courant. Tu sais... mon grand-père du coup ça l’a travaillé un peu la guerre, tu vois quand il est rentré chez lui, tu sais il tabassait un peu mon père, etc. tu vois ? donc tu sais que lui, il a fait la guerre en Algérie, et que son petit-fils soit musulman, enfin tu vois... il a peut-être tué des musulmans ! tu vois ce que je veux dire ? je pense que ouais ça a dû lui faire un choc à mon père tu vois. Et pareil, il en a pas parlé, tu vois. Pareil, il y a ce blocage-là, tu sais c’est des sujets, genre... ouais c’est tabou ! »

⁶³ Conseil français du culte musulman (French council of the Muslim faith). Created in 2003, the CFCM is a national elected body meant to facilitate negotiations between the French state and the Muslim community in the regulation of Muslim religious activities.

⁶⁴ The Ré island is a small French island on the Atlantic shore.

former colonized people. There is no respect for what we are. We are despised.⁶⁵ [my emphasis]

Maryam, who is very proud of her French cultural identity, felt despised and held in contempt in her interactions with French government officials. While retaining her privileges as a French citizen (she was not exposed to the residence permit threat), she felt treated like a colonial subject and made an explicit reference to colonial administrative techniques. In her view, the exceptionalism that prevailed in the French management of Islam during the colonial period was reproduced in the creation of the CFCM, the government interference in religious matters going against secular principles. The way converts experience their racialization is therefore very much tied to colonial history in France, which is obviously not the case in the US.

b) Class overtones

Intersecting with this colonial legacy, the other significant dimension for French converts' racialization is class. As stated in the Introduction, Muslims of North African descent tend to be socioeconomically marginalized and spatially relegated to the outskirts of large cities (*banlieues*). Thus, the racial figure of the "Muslim" in France is also associated with poverty, crime, delinquency and social exclusion. This is another clear difference with the US. African-American scholar Sherman Jackson (2005: 16-17) had the opportunity to reflect on this issue: "As a British convert once remarked to me: 'you in America attracted the Muslim aristocrats, while we in Europe got the plebeians.' (...) From the perspective of an American convert for whom 'immigrant Muslim' translated invariably into 'educated' or 'professional,' this was simply shocking." While in the US, the figure of the immigrant Muslim is usually associated with professional success and educational achievements, it is often synonym of social hardship in France. A French convert would never gain better school recognition upon wearing the *hijab*, like Lisa did in Chicago. Quite the contrary, conversion to Islam can be perceived as a drop in social status. Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) for instance, explained to me that she got into trouble with one of her friends, who associated the religion of Islam with social relegation and lack of education:

I have a friend whose sister is also a convert. I am under the impression that he transferred the anger related to his sister's conversion to me. He made harsh remarks on Islam, with a lot of stereotypes, like "she is going to be hanging out only with Arabs; it is not going to help her think; the intellectual level is too low." For him, Muslims are only people from the hood.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ « Je vais vous dire, moi comment on est traités ici en France. Vous vous souvenez de la création du CFCM par Nicolas Sarkozy ? Nous avons été consultés dans ce processus. Ensuite, Nicolas Sarkozy nous avait tous réunis dans une salle, il était monté sur son estrade. Et il avait dit : 'j'entends que certains parmi vous ne sont pas contents. Alors écoutez-moi bien. C'est moi qui commande ici. Vous allez faire ce que je veux. Sinon...' Et là il nous a pointés du doigt un par un : 'attention à toi, attention à toi, attention à toi'. Et il nous a menacés de ne pas renouveler les titres de séjour. Quand il a eu fini, j'ai dit d'une petite voix : 'et moi, on va m'envoyer où ? à l'Île de Ré ?' Je ne sais pas s'il a entendu. Mais j'étais la seule à pouvoir m'opposer à lui, de par mon âge et de par ma position de femme française. Voilà comment on nous traite en France ! Voilà comment on gère l'Islam en France. Laissez-moi vous dire que je suis très en colère. On est le résidu de la colonisation, nous, y compris les convertis. Vous comprenez, ce n'est pas la peine de prendre des égards avec nous, nous ne sommes que des anciens colonisés. On n'a aucun respect pour ce que nous sommes. On est méprisés ».

⁶⁶ « J'ai un ami qui a une sœur jumelle qui est convertie aussi et en fait je me prenais toute la colère de l'incompréhension qu'il avait, tu vois, par rapport à sa sœur. Donc du coup, enfin c'était... il avait un

For Sophie’s friend, Islam is all about the hood. More surprisingly, Sophie also heard derogatory comments about Muslims’ low social status during an Islamic class. The teacher, a Muslim himself, told the group of converts who had come to attend the class: “it is not because you are converts to Islam that you should start messing around. You should keep being on time. You should not start being on welfare. You should pursue your education.” The teacher projected onto converts the classist stereotypes associated with working-class Muslims. One of France’s most famous white converts, soccer player Franck Ribéry, actually comes from a working-class household in a de-industrialized northern region and is frequently made fun of for his uncouth language and faulty syntax. A paradigmatic example of the “poor white trash” (*petit blanc*), Ribéry’s conversion is often held as proof that Islam is a lower-class religion. This is a recurring trope. Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris) was once challenged by a customer in a restaurant in Paris who pointed at her headscarf and told her “go back home, we are not in your hood here, we are in a restaurant in the 1st arrondissement!⁶⁷” By associating her to the *banlieue*, her headscarf made her socially unworthy of dining in a Parisian food venue. Thus, the racial stigma associated with Islam in France has strong class overtones that are also transmitted to converts.

E. QUALIFICATION: THE RESILIENCE OF “WHITE PRIVILEGE”

Having demonstrated that white converts to Islam come “within the Veil,” albeit with different implications in France and the US, I would now like to nuance this claim by showing that white converts are only partially exposed to racial discrimination and retain a form of structural advantage over their non-white coreligionists.

1) White and non-white converts contrasting their experiences

White converts to Islam are particularly shocked and offended by the racist and discriminatory situations they experience and very prompt to denounce them. Melissa (27, project manager, Paris) who worked at the CCIF for a while confirmed my assumptions: “in my experience and from what I have observed at the CCIF, it is true that converts, especially women, are often very motivated victims. Because they never experienced discrimination before, when they go through it, it is extremely violent for them. Until now, they were white, always treated well, never controlled by the police, never discriminated against, never mistreated, never assaulted, never insulted. So, we often have very active converts who want to assert their rights. They don’t have that unconscious guilt of being immigrants.⁶⁸” According to Melissa, immigrant and second-

discours vachement dur sur l’Islam... enfin pareil avec des espèces de préjugés, ‘ouais mais du coup elle va être qu’avec des Arabes, ça va pas la pousser à réfléchir, le niveau intellectuel...’ (...) Pour lui du coup c’était que des gens de quartier du coup c’était des délires comme-ci, comme ça ».

⁶⁷ « Il a commencé à dire ‘rentrez chez vous, on est pas dans votre cité ! on est dans un restaurant, on est dans le 1^{er} arrondissement de Paris, on est pas dans une mosquée ici’ ».

⁶⁸ « De mon expérience et de ce que j’ai observé au CCIF, c’est vrai que les convertis, a fortiori les femmes sont souvent des victimes très très motivées. Parce qu’en fait elles ont jamais vécu la discrimination et que du coup, quand elles la vivent, c’est extrêmement violent pour elles. Parce que jusqu’à maintenant, elles

generation immigrant Muslims have internalized racism since their childhood and are less ready to denounce it. In her view, they also tend to feel unconsciously guilty for the very racist attacks they receive, which prevents them from reporting those attacks. By contrast, she observed, white converts feel a strong sense of entitlement and cannot stand to be racially objectified and discriminated against.

The indignation expressed by white converts in the face of racial objectification can be explained by the fact that they had, for the most part, been immune from systemic racism and were therefore thunderstruck when crossing over to the other side of racial categorization. By contrast, the non-white converts I interviewed had already experienced different forms of racial objectification since their childhood and had an intimate knowledge of the way racialization operates. Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago), whose parents hail from India, was for instance used to racist and exoticizing comments about her origins: “people always treated me like I was some exotic object, you know: ‘Tell me about India! Do you make curry? Do you speak Hindu?’ [laughs]” Becoming Muslim did not add much to her reality. Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris), who comes from a Tunisian Jewish family, had already endured anti-Semitism in her life (once, a 5-year-old girl she was nannying told her: “I hope you are not Jewish because my parents forbade me from talking to Jews⁶⁹”) and she was not surprised by the reality of Islamophobia, which operates in a similar fashion. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille), who was born from a Mauritian mother and a white father, also recalled being the victim of racism at a very young age, long before she converted to Islam: “my oldest memory of racism was when I was 6 years-old. I was being heckled by my classmates in the school courtyard, they did not want to play with me, they were shoving me and calling me “*sale bougnoule*” (nasty Arab). I didn’t know what it meant at 6 years-old. So I went to see the school teacher who was watching the courtyard. He looked at me and told me “but aren’t you one?⁷⁰” Because of her mixed origins, Caroline was already racialized as an Arab and well acquainted with the various racial categorizations she could be subjected to because of her skin color. Her conversion to Islam did not result in a major departure from her previous experiences of objectification. Well aware of the social construction of racism, non-white converts are less taken aback by the racialization of Islam. In the US, black Oscar-winning Mahershala Ali, who embraced Islam in 1999, recently declared that “if you convert to Islam after a couple of decades of being a black man in the US, the discrimination you receive as a Muslim doesn’t feel like a shock” (Pulver, 2017). Having had previous occasions to develop coping mechanisms, non-white converts do not let themselves be affected by Islamophobia the same way that white converts do. Kathleen

étaient blanches, toujours bien traitées, jamais contrôlées, jamais discriminées, jamais maltraitées, jamais violentées, jamais insultées. Et donc du coup, on a souvent des converties qui sont souvent des personnes vraiment très engagées, très motivées en fait pour faire valoir leurs droits et pour encourager d’autres femmes à faire valoir leurs droits également. Donc c’est intéressant je pense de le noter. Elles ont pas cette culpabilité inconsciente d’être une sorte d’indigène ».

⁶⁹ « Une fois, il y a une gamine de 5 ans qui m’a dit ‘j’espère que t’es pas juive parce que mes parents ils m’ont interdit de parler aux juifs !’ ».

⁷⁰ « J’ai été victime très tôt de racisme... Mon plus vieux souvenir de racisme, j’avais 6 ans, j’étais au CP donc ça a commencé tôt. Dans la cour, j’étais chahutée, ils voulaient pas jouer avec moi, ils me poussaient, etc., et ils m’ont dit « sale bougnoule ! » Je savais pas ce que ça voulait dire moi à 6 ans. Enfin, j’avais jamais entendu ce mot. Et j’étais allée voir donc le maître qui surveillait la cour, je suis allée lui dire ‘mais ils me poussent, ils me chahutent et ils m’ont traitée de sale bougnoule !’ Et là il me regarde et il me répond ‘mais pourquoi, t’en est pas une ?’ ».

(30, flight attendant, Detroit), who hails from an African-American household, was taught by her mother from a very young age how to counter stereotypes about her identity:

There is something my Mom used to tell me when I was a little girl. People used to make fun of me, because I spoke “properly,” whatever that means, you know, they would always say “oh Kathleen, you speak like a white girl!” (laughs). And I would get so mad. So my Mom said, “well, they are stereotyping you.” And I said “well, I don’t want to be stereotyped.” She goes “why?” And I said “because not all black people are like that.” And she goes “well, do you think most black people are like that?” And I said “I don’t know!” She goes “well, how about you define what the most is, by being that. You know, if you think that these girls are making a bad name for you, why don’t you create a new one? You know, create a new name for yourself.” And she just continuously taught me that, you know, my whole life. So when I see, like “Muslim terrorists,” you know, I no longer have that feeling within me to want to yell at people. It encourages me even more to try to be a better Muslim, within my own actions to redefine what it means to be Muslim.

The racialness of the black category being already pervasive, converting to Islam affected only to the margins Kathleen’s racialization. She uses the same strategies she developed as a black woman to dispel the stereotypes she encounters as a Muslim woman. While discrimination came to a shock to most of my white interviewees, who felt bereft and helpless, it was not experienced as a surprise by the non-white converts I interviewed.

As a result, many non-white converts showed signs of irritation and disagreement when white converts expressed distress about their new racial categorization. Monica (34, housewife, Chicago), who is of Mexican descent, gently mocked her husband Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), a tall blond and blue-eyed white man, who “often gets helped by cops when breaking his car in the middle of the road.” She added: “That’s white privilege. So it still exists.” She contrasted his daily experience with her own life before she converted to Islam and adopted the face veil, when she was racialized as a delinquent Mexican woman. She then turned to me and said: “and *you* look white. Not necessarily because you have blond hair, because your hair is brown. But you still are white. You have the small features, *Mash’Allah*. And you walking into a store taking your time, would be different than when I had my lips colorized, the dark, curly, Mexican, *chola*⁷¹ look.” Monica recalled how she would be constantly followed in stores by suspicious vendors who thought she would steal something, and she (rightly) envisioned my own shopping experiences to be much more pleasant. Monica challenged me and her husband, implying that we did not really know what true racial discrimination looked like. In a similar fashion, Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago) who grew up in an African-American lesbian household in an all-white suburb confessed being annoyed upon hearing white converts lamenting about discrimination. While they only became “Other” after donning the visible attributes of Islam, she felt she had always been the Other:

It is sometimes a little frustrating when you hear white converts being like ‘oh! It is so hard!’ Like my friend, she stopped wearing *hijab* and her reason was that she got tired of being the flagbearer. I was like ‘huh... I don’t know what to tell you. I am Brown. And I know that anything I do, I represent the whole. That’s how I always lived my life.’ So I try to avoid those conversations with people. I don’t want to invalidate their experience but it is just... I have always been an outsider! I don’t know what to tell you! I have always been an Other. Always. I lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, in the middle of nowhere, I have always been

⁷¹ Latina gangbanger style, which usually includes tattoos, piercings, dark or red lipstick, penciled eyebrows, crunchy hair and lots of gold jewelry.

Brown. So for me, it wasn't like this huge 'oh my God! When you start wearing *hijab*...!' I was already grappling with people having certain perceptions of me.

Alisha felt it hard to display empathy for her white convert friends who complained about their recent discovery of racial objectification.

2) The lability of religious markers and white converts' agency

Alisha's skepticism derives from the fact that the markers responsible for white converts' racialization are deemed labile and malleable. She said: "I think there is a level of privilege in that you can *exit*." People whose racialization hinges upon dress and body ornaments certainly possess a greater adaptation portfolio than those racialized on the basis of their skin color. Consider the following discussion that took place at *American Da'wah* after the 2013 Boston marathon attacks. As members were talking about their fear of being targeted in retaliation, Dr. Uthman, a mixed-race convert born from a white mother and an African-American/Native-American father, decided to downplay their anxiety by recalling the teachings of his own father. He told the audience: "my father, who is non-Muslim always says to me 'you Muslims better be glad that you can take your hats off. Because we black folks can't change the color of our skin.'⁷²" While enjoining Muslim converts to be proud and vocal about their identity as Muslims, Dr. Uthman reminded his congregants that non-black Muslims are not at the forefront of discrimination since they retain some power and control over the religious markers responsible for their racialization. In times of danger and unsafety, these markers can be removed, as has happened after 9/11 in the US. Boran (35, professor, Chicago) recalled: "after 9/11, people were afraid to acknowledge that they were Muslims in public. So all of a sudden when you *salaam* someone, they *salaam* back at you very quietly. In a hush-hush type of gesture because they didn't want no one to recognize they were Muslims. All of a sudden, brothers would be shaving their beards." While racism possesses a dimension of irreversibility (Guillaumin, 2002 [1972]), the situation of white converts is precisely reversible: they can remove their religious markers and be reinstated into the world of majority status. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) confirmed: "If I had to, I mean, I think I never would, but I could take off my *hijab* and I could pass as white, you know?" While the religious markers responsible for converts' racial categorization are certainly visual and external (headscarf, clothing, facial hair, body ornaments), they are not corporeal and physical in the strict sense of the term: unlike skin color or phenotype, they can be removed to ease racism in given situations.

This, however, is only true to some extent. For many converts I interviewed, the beard or the *hijab* are divine commands that are non-negotiable. Taking them out would be experienced as a failure to meet their religious obligations. Converts, and white converts in particular, are therefore confronted with a complicated moral quandary, in which they have to weigh race against religion. Sticking to their faith, they face race; trying to escape race, they betray their religious ideals. They have to default from their belief to salvage their social status.

Some white converts have found their way around this dilemma: they do wear a religious marker, thereby respecting Islamic commandments, but make sure it is

⁷² Fieldnotes, April 20th, 2013.

ambiguous enough to circumvent racial objectification. More than their non-white coreligionists, they possess agency over the interpretation of their religious signs. Chloé (21, student, Lille) explains that she retains the possibility to modulate her *hijab* style in order to minimize her Muslim look and avoid discrimination in certain situations: “usually, I wear my headscarf in the traditional way. But recently, I started wearing it more as a bandana, because I am less looked at, less finger-pointed at. But I have a friend whose name is Fatima, if she wears it like that, people are going to assume she is Muslim. While me, when I wear it like that, people are going to think it is just my style. So for job interviews, for instance, it is good.⁷³” Because of her name, blue eyes and white skin, Chloé can easily make her *hijab* pass for a fashion decision rather than a religious choice in contexts she assesses as potentially discriminatory. This intentional shift in signifiers grants her leeway in daily interactions. She recognizes that this malleability is not afforded to her friend Fatima who is of North African descent. Racial categorizations are not equally maneuverable and the ability to move across racial identification options (Waters, 1990) is not equally distributed among the population. Because of her darker skin, Chloé’s friend has less room for negotiation. Interestingly, Chloé’s thoughts were echoed in a recent documentary on a feminist Muslim association, in which converted and born Muslim women frequently interact. In one conversation, convert Béatrice and born Muslim Fouzia reflect on the various interpretations given to their turban.



Figure 31 – Debates on discrimination

Béatrice (left): I asked my colleagues if at some point, my Islam had disturbed them in our professional relations. Or my veil. And they said: “but for us, you are not veiled...”

Fouzia (right): Good for you, but I am not sure that, for one of us with dark skin and a name from the Maghreb, it would be the same...

Béatrice: Clearly. If you wear a bandana and your name is Carole, you are following the fashion trend. If you wear a bandana and your name is Amina, you are proselytizing.⁷⁴

⁷³ « D’habitude moi je mets mon voile comme on a l’habitude de le voir. Mais c’est vrai que dernièrement, je le mets plus en bandeau, parce que on est moins regardée, on est moins montrée du doigt. Mais j’ai une copine qui va s’appeler Fatima qui va le mettre comme ça, on va penser qu’elle est musulmane. Tandis que moi si je le mets comme ça, on va penser que c’est un style en fait. Donc, pour mes entretiens... »

⁷⁴ Source: Documentary *A part entière* (2015) by Lauriane Lagarde, on the association Al Houda.

As a white female convert, Béatrice is treated with benevolence by her colleagues, who do not pay much attention to her turban and do not interpret it as a religious sign. For them, she is not covered Islamically. Her whiteness prevails over her veil. Béatrice and Fouzia agree that such a relaxed attitude would probably not apply to Muslims of foreign descent, suspected of religious ostentation and proselytism. Béatrice's turban, in sum, does not seem to modify her position in the racial stratification system. Similarly, on his blog, white convert Bin Gregory disconfirms the assumption that white Muslims are systematically racialized as “non-white” because of their newly embraced religious beliefs. On the contrary, he emphatically claims that they remain absolutely and totally white:

“O my fellow white Muslims! If you think we all automatically stop being white by virtue of practicing Islam, you are gravely mistaken. Your family may disown you, your friends might stop speaking to you, but to the white man on the street, you are still white. Now, you can be ashamed of that, you can be proud of that, you can protest against that, but that is how things are in America. (...) If you get funny looks, it's because you look funny with that hat on your head, not because they think you're not a white male” (Gregory, 2007).

The association between clothing and racial discrimination is therefore not systematic. The testimonies reviewed above hint towards the fact that whiteness prevails over Muslim markers and that white converts remain relatively protected from racism. They have one foot within the Veil and one foot outside.

3) Structural advantage

The discussion around white privilege is well alive in the minds of converts. In my sample, a number of white converts held (self)conscious thoughts about the perpetuation of their white privilege, in spite of their Islamic markers. Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) told me: “I feel guilty when I complain or feel sad about the discrimination because at the end of the day I am white. Even if I wear the *hijab* now and get treated with discrimination, I still have eighteen years of white privilege to capitalize on.” While white converts to Islam are periodically exposed to racial prejudice, they feel they retain a form of structural advantage over their non-white coreligionists in the racial stratification system. By embracing Islam, they have certainly crossed a *symbolic* boundary, but it does not necessarily manifest itself *socially* (Moraes Silva, 2016). As conceptualized by Lamont and Molnàr (2002: 168), social boundaries are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities,” while symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space.” Accordingly, converts are often *symbolically* categorized as racialized others, but are not systematically *socially* impacted by such categorization. This is especially the case for white converts who are invisible or ambiguously visible as Muslims. Unlike others, they often remain comfortably positioned in the structural realms of existence (job market, housing, education, etc.). For instance, Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), a white woman who wears a turban, recognized that even though she converted to Islam, she clearly “kept advantages by being white and having a French name, for finding an

apartment, a job, etc.⁷⁵” Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago), who does not wear any religious marker, also confessed: “I can’t ignore the fact that because I am white it is easier for me in many respects.”

White converts also estimate that they are less subjects to overt racism than their coreligionists. MéliSSa (27, project manager, Paris) remarked: “sometimes I feel people are this close of being rude to me, but when they hear my name, they stop.”⁷⁶ According to Rachel (30, translator, Paris), her white skin deflates the potential violence of her aggressors: “when I read testimonies and reports from the CCIF, I see Muslim women being assaulted, getting their headscarf torn off by other women. But with me, they never took the liberty of doing that. And I am pretty intimately convinced that it is linked to the fact that I am perceived as white.”⁷⁷ Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) also supported this claim: “We still have white privilege. The *sheikh* I study with is a convert. One day his neighbor asked him ‘where are you from?’ He responded ‘well, I am Basque, my father is Basque, my mother is Basque,’ to which his neighbor replied ‘oh well! I am reassured!’ That is to say: ‘OK he is Muslim and that’s not cool, but at least he is French!’⁷⁸ While Noémie’s *sheikh* could be stigmatized for holding wrong religious beliefs, at least he escaped the stigma of being an immigrant. This complexifies the association between religion and race.

Like Rachel and Noémie, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) frequently reflects on his social position as a white convert when he compares his situation to that of his Muslim friends of Arab descent. He was actually chastised when he tried to empathize with the daily discrimination they faced:

When I was talking politics with brothers and sisters, I would always put Islam forward, to make myself credible. And actually I got right in my face the idea that “OK, maybe you are Muslim, but you remain white and your name is Jérémy.” And I could feel that. This idea, like, “stop your paternalism, you are not Arab, you can’t understand what we are going through.” My friend told me: “no matter if you are a convert Jérémy, you will always suffer less from Islamophobia than a brother named Mohamed.” And that’s totally true. I absolutely don’t deny that. That’s obvious. I mean, as a convert, I am almost certain that people are going to ask me questions in a very gentle way. A brother named Mohammed, he will rather receive accusations like “what do you think about lapidation?” [laughs] But for me, it is going to be “oh OK, nice, so are you practicing, OK, well, very good...”, you know what I mean,

⁷⁵ « J’ai clairement eu des avantages en étant blanche, en ayant un nom français, tu vois dans le fait de trouver un appart’, d’avoir un taf, etc., c’est clair ! »

⁷⁶ « Je sens des fois que les gens ils sont à deux doigts d’être chelous mais quand ils voient mon nom, enfin bref ... ».

⁷⁷ « C’est la lecture des témoignages et des rapports du CCIF en particulier qui me confortent dans le fait que... Je vois des meufs quand elles se font agresser, entre autres, arracher leur voile par des femmes, et moi jamais elles se sont permis. Je suis quand même assez intimement persuadée que c’est lié au fait que je suis perçue comme blanche ».

⁷⁸ « En fait il y a toujours le privilège blanc face aux non-musulmans. Le non-musulman qui sait que je m’appelle Noémie, il a beaucoup moins peur de moi. Le sheikh auprès de qui j’étudie, un jour, il croise un voisin, qui lui dit ‘Vous venez d’où ?’, ‘Bah je suis basque,’ ‘Non, mais vous êtes originaire d’où ?’, ‘Je suis Basque, mon père est basque, ma mère est basque’. ‘Ah d’accord ! Je suis rassuré !’. C’est-à-dire que... il était musulman, bon c’est pas cool, mais au moins il était français. C’est déjà mieux ».

it is going to be very benevolent. That's true. So from then on, I started wondering how I should position myself.⁷⁹

Jérémy's uneasy position stems from the fact that Muslimness means different things for different people. For him, Islam is a faith that he freely embraced and tries to practice sincerely on a daily basis. Although he encountered problems in his family because of it, Jérémy is not visibly Muslim (neither through his dress, name or phenotype) and, unless he explicitly verbalizes his religious identity, he does not encounter discrimination because of it. For his friends of North African descent, on the contrary, Islam is like “a skin,” as put by sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad in the epigraph of this chapter. It is a stigma they carry every day because of their names and appearance: irrespective of their actual religious beliefs, they cannot get rid off it. While Jérémy actively chose to become Muslim, they have no choice but to live with the assumption that they are Muslims. While Jérémy can be praised for his courageous decision as a free modern individual, his friends are suspected of having inherited an obscure and dangerous religious outlook incompatible with modern Western civilization. When Jérémy calls them “brothers” and “sisters” on the basis of their shared religion, they respond that they are not exactly brothers and sisters because they do not share the same experience of discrimination. When Jérémy talks about faith, they talk about race. Because of the racialization of Islam, they find themselves at cross-purposes, talking about widely different things. Jeremy's friends can make an argument about being Muslim without necessarily being religiously so, which shows that there are racial and political implications to being Muslim, an interpretation that sharply contrasts with Jérémy's purely religious and spiritual understanding of the word.

In spite of severe and traumatizing encounters with racial objectification, therefore, white converts are often led to qualify their appraisal of discrimination by recognizing that they retain some structural advantage and some agency over their presentation of self. The ambiguity of their racialization as Muslims creates at times misunderstandings with their non-white coreligionists. This issue of race as it unfolds within the Muslim community will be further addressed in the next chapter.

F. CONCLUSION

Religious shifts have racial implications. Almost like a live experiment, conversion to Islam has allowed me to analyze embodiment in the making and observe in real time

⁷⁹ « Quand j'allais argumenter avec des frères et des sœurs, je mettais tout le temps en avant l'islam en fait, pour essayer de me donner une crédibilité. Et en fait je me suis repris trop souvent dans la gueule en fait 'bah t'es peut-être musulman mais tu restes blanc et tu t'appelles Jérémy', ça je l'ai ressenti. Le côté 'Arrête ton paternalisme', tu vois, (...) 't'es pas arabe, donc tu peux pas comprendre ce qu'on subit'. (...) [Une amie] m'a dit 'T'as beau être converti Jérémy, tu subiras toujours moins l'islamophobie qu'un frère qui s'appelle Mohammed'. Et c'est vrai en soi. Je le nie absolument pas ! Evidemment. C'est-à-dire que moi demain en tant que converti, je suis quasiment certain que les gens vont me poser des questions de manière très gentille, voilà. Un frère qui s'appelle Mohammed, ça va plutôt être des accusations qu'il va recevoir « ah mais la lapidation ? t'en penses quoi ? » (rires) Moi ça va plutôt être... et je le ressens... ça va plutôt être « ah oui d'accord et tout, mais alors tu pratiques, ah oui d'accord et tout »... tu vois ce que je veux dire ? C'est très bienveillant. Et c'est vrai ! Et ça a été un peu ce moment-là particulier où du coup je me suis demandé comment me positionner ».

how racial identity is affected and reconfigured by religious conversion. Taking race as a dependent rather than independent variable, I have sought to identify how and when racial reasoning occurs in relation to the religion of Islam. I have offered a micro, almost surgical sociology of how cognitive categorizations based on race operate. One of the most striking findings of this chapter lies in the importance of visible religious markers and their effect on converts’ racial categorization. In his seminal work on ethnic boundaries, Fredrick Barth (1969: 35) wrote that “the interconnection between the *diacritica* that are chosen for emphasis, the *boundaries* that are defined, and the differentiating *values* that are espoused, constitute a fascinating field for study.” Analyzing the torrent of words I recorded from my interviewees, I have sought to follow this research program, by highlighting the articulation between various Islamic markers (headscarf, beard, name, clothing), the racial categorization they induced and the moral assumptions tied to them.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that religious visibility is constantly negotiated. The white converts in my sample who did not choose to display their religious belonging go unnoticed and pursue their lives normally, until they have to tell and verbalize their conversion. By contrast, those who chose to don the visible attributes of Islam step foot into a realm of assumptions and guesses about their racial identity. The interactionist analysis I provided in this chapter does not reify race, but underlines its arbitrary and shifting character (race as a floating signifier). Causing interferences with the intended meaning of the Islamic marker, converts’ white skin, as a competing visual cue, often disturbs their presentation of self and religious *mise en scène*: the Islamic marker can fail and be wrongly interpreted (as a sign of Jewishness for instance); or it can produce considerable cognitive dissonance in the minds of people who do not envision that someone can be both white and Muslim. The co-presence of white skin as a racial marker and the headscarf as a religious marker often destabilizes presumptions and short-circuits the normal course of categorization. Converts’ uneasy and shifting categorization highlights the precariousness and everyday instability of racial categorization. Because of the incongruence of their various embodied markers, converts are a case of racial and religious misfit.

The cognitive dissonance they generate is at times resolved by casting them outside the realm of whiteness: alternately categorized as Arabs, Turks, Bosnians, Blacks, etc., White converts discover the world of minority life with much shock and outrage. Negative moral characteristics (violence, treason, misogyny, etc.) are ascribed to them on the basis of their outward appearance, circumscribing the development of their selves and personalities within rigidified boundaries. Converts are treated as “non-persons” and asked to vouch for and justify the deeds and beliefs of other Muslims worldwide. Converts’ experiences, therefore, also highlight the extreme power and violence of race (race as a totalitarian signifier). Their individuality is crushed: like other minority members, they become representatives of the entire group on the basis of the exterior markers they wear. Islam starts operating for them as a skin, a badge. As Muslim believers, they have to position themselves vis à vis the socially constructed, racially loaded, fantasized figure of the “Muslim.” Having full control over one’s presentation of self is a prerogative of the majority group. Here, the “hypertrophy of converts’ majority self” (Guillaumin, 2002 [1972]: 181) is clearly struck a blow. White converts can be said to experience a shift from majority to minority status. As such, they can be analysed as an instance of “reverse” racial passing (Hobbs, 2014; Beydoun and Wilson, 2017), since

this latter term is usually employed to refer to individuals passing from a minority to a majority status.

The conceptual distinction between religious and racial hatred usually hinges upon the fact that religious intolerance targets people for what they *believe*, while racism discriminates them for what they *are*. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that, due to the racialization of Islam, this distinction no longer holds for Muslim converts in France and the US. By contrast, in a subtle interaction between body and soul, what converts *believe* (spiritually) affects what they are believed to *be* (racially).

Because of French and American histories, race and religion intersect in complex ways in these two countries to generate multi-faceted processes of racial categorization. While it operates in a similar fashion in both France and the US, the contents and texture of Islam's racialization differ in the two national contexts. Thus, American converts are alternately portrayed as "race traitors" because of their connection to the political tradition of African-American Islam, or racialized as Arabs or South Asians, a racial identity that negatively associates them with the figure of the terrorist and positively with the myth of the model minority. Because of the bi-racial character of American Islam (black and immigrant), Muslim converts occupy an ambiguous position in the Black and White Divide. By contrast, French converts are clearly propelled on the wrong side of the Post-colonial immigrant vs. Native Divide. They either have to bear the complex legacy of colonialism and the Algerian decolonizing war or experience a drop in social status since their conversion durably associates them with lower-class citizens of North African descent. These contrasted experiences shed light on the multi-threaded historical trajectories that the racialization of Islam has followed in North America and Europe more broadly.

CHAPTER 6 – RACE IN THE *UMMAH* AND THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF BEING

In the previous chapter, I examined how religious affiliation affects racial categorization in the larger society. I now turn to another exploration of the intersecting fault lines of race and religion by investigating how racial issues unfold *within* Muslim communities in France and the US. The classes for new converts I observed at *American Da'wah* and in a Parisian suburban mosque illustrate the everyday challenges that can emerge in multi-racial religious gatherings. These classes are mostly attended by young people and characterized by a friendly spirit and great racial diversity. They are designed as “safe spaces,” in which anyone can feel comfortable, irrespective of race, gender, age or seniority in the religion. Occasionally, however, racial issues surface in subtle ways.

During a session on ritual ablution at the French mosque, teacher Aisha, who is a white convert, enthusiastically told her students: “after we die, do you know how Muhammad will recognize the Muslims? Their ablutioned members will glow with a particular light. Amongst all humanity, you will see them shine. They will be like a *white* horse in the middle of *black* horses.” Aisha paused for a moment, looked at her audience and realized that many black female converts were listening to her with much attention. She immediately corrected herself: “or the other way around! A black horse amid white horses! ‘White’ only refers to the light, not to an actual color.¹” Aisha was able to rapidly re-tailor her speech. Her quick, yet noticeable correction revealed her intention to spread an Islamic discourse respectful of racial sensitivities.

At *American Da'wah*, a class on ritual ablutions also fostered a discussion around race, and the politics of hair more specifically. Talking about *ghusl* (the purificatory bath that has to be performed after each sexual intercourse and after the end of each menstruation cycle for women), John, the white convert teacher, mentioned: “for *ghusl*, you need to wash your whole body, and the water has to go everywhere, especially in your scalp.” Upon hearing this, Afī, a woman of Beninian descent, exclaimed: “What? What about the women of the chocolate variety?” Deepa, who is of Indian descent, concurred: “yes, what about the women who have curly hair and can’t afford to wash their hair all the time?” Nayah, who is from Cameroon, added: “and what about the women who have braided hair?” Nayah also told Deepa she had no clue what “true curly hair” looked like. A white man with a simple brush cut, John realized he could neither answer their questions nor adjudicate the debate between them. He started scratching his head in embarrassment. Fortunately, his wife Asma, an African-American Muslim woman born to converted parents, came to his rescue: “don’t tell me about it ladies! Just invest in a

¹ « Après la mort, savez-vous comment Muhammad va reconnaître les Musulmans ? Leurs membres ablutionnés vont rayonner d’une lumière particulière. Parmi toute l’humanité, on les verra briller. Ils seront comme un cheval blanc au milieu de chevaux noirs. Ou l’inverse d’ailleurs ! Dans ce verset, le mot « blanc » est utilisé pour la lumière, pas la couleur ». Fieldnotes, February 22nd, 2015.

good conditioner!²” The discussion ended in bursts of laughter. John thanked his wife for being present and helping him handle questions that exceeded his competence.

These two vignettes reveal how race can sneak in spaces that conceive themselves as inclusive. Unintended clumsiness towards black converts highlights the simmering nature of racial issues within the Muslim community. Taking place in liberal settings among like-minded individuals, these two interactions unfolded smoothly, as participants resorted to humor or reformulation to address racial and ethnic differences. Such mildness, however, was rather uncommon in my research, where evidence of tough racial issues prevailed, in both France and the US.

Studying multi-racial congregations, Gerardo Marti (2009) defines “religious racial integration” as the “process by which a person considers the congregation to be *her* congregation, considers herself as *belonging* to the congregation, has *committed* herself to the congregation, and see herself as an *extension* of the congregation.” It is accomplished when members co-construct a shared religious identity that overrides potentially divisive ethnic and racial classifications. Research on multi-racial congregations (Edgell, 1998; Garces-Foley, 2007; Dougherty and Huyser, 2008; Emerson, 2008; Edwards et al., 2013) has established that racial diversity alone is a necessary but insufficient ingredient for religious racial integration to be fully achieved. In some cases, racially diverse congregations actually contribute to reproducing white hegemony, making of integration an “elusive dream” (Stanczak, 2006; Edwards, 2008a; Edwards, 2008b; Perry, 2012). For religious racial integration to succeed, racial diversity must be complemented with the non-tokenistic promotion of a racially-diverse religious leadership and active programming towards cross-cultural understanding. Building on the various experiences of my interviewees and ethnographic observations, this chapter assesses whether the construction of a shared Islamic spiritual kinship helps transcend racial tensions among French and American Muslims.

For most converts, spiritual solidarity is conceived as taking precedence over national, ethnic or racial belonging. As already outlined in Chapter 1, the religion of Islam is perceived by many as a powerful tool to fight racism. Universal Islamic brotherhood is promoted as a means to eradicate or smoothen racial inequalities. Khabir (23, barber, Detroit), who is African-American, stated for instance that “being a Muslim is not being a certain race; it is about your soul.” Muslims often articulate their commitment for racial equality in religious terms. At the convert associations, where attendees are relatively diverse, such commitment was clearly stated. Prominent Islamic black figures were frequently mentioned, like Hajar (black Egyptian handmaiden, wife of Ibrahim and mother of Ishmael) and Bilal (580-640), an Abyssinian slave who became one of the closest Companions of the Prophet and the first *muezzin** of Islam. I heard the following *hadith* about Bilal on many occasions: a Companion named Abu Dharr insulted Bilal about his mother, saying “O son of a black woman!”, an incident Bilal reported to the Prophet. The Prophet strongly reprimanded Abu Dharr and told him: “you are a man who has still the traits of ignorance (*jahiliyya*).” The firm attitude of the Prophet towards Abu Dharr was cited as a proof that Islam does not tolerate any form of racism, considered as a remnant of *jahiliyyah* (state of ignorance in which Arabs found themselves prior to the revelation of Muhammad). It was also reported that the Prophet surrounded himself with

² Fieldnotes, April 21st, 2013.

Companions who were not exclusively Arabs, such as Bilal, Salman Al Farsi (the Persian) and Suhayb Al-Rumi (a blond and light-complexioned former slave). Converts were encouraged to replicate the racial diversity and tolerance of the revered early Muslims.

In the US specifically, the anti-racist Islamic rhetoric is prominent. Constantly revived through new films and documentaries,³ the legacy of Malcolm X in particular continues to shape the experience of converts. To be sure, the tumultuous racial politics Malcolm promoted at some points of his life tend to be obscured in favor of a softer narrative of religious universalism and racial tolerance (Marable, 2011). The letter he wrote after his 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca, when he left the NOI to embrace mainstream Sunnism and became El-Hajj Malik el-Shabbaz, is for instance frequently cited as evidence of the great transformative power of Islam and its positive impact on racial relations:

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to and even eaten with people who, in America, would have been considered “white” but the “white” attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. (...) During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) – while praying to the same God – with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the “white” Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana.” (MalcolmX and Haley, 1999 [1964]: 346-347).

Many of my interviewees strove to live by Malcolm X’s last words, placing religious sincerity over racial considerations. In sum, the Islamic tradition can be considered as well-armed to foster religious racial integration. What happens in practice, however, is different. Several of the converts I interviewed complained about the discrepancy between classical Islamic teachings and the behavior of actual Muslims. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit), who identifies as black, was skeptical about the prospects of Islamic anti-racism: “Islam could solve racism in every country of the world. But will the practitioners of the religion be able to do so? That’s a different story.” Samuel (25, campaign strategist, Detroit), an African-American man, admitted the failure of the American Muslim community in that regard. Referencing Malcolm X’s hopes for Islam in America, he said: “I don’t want to disagree with brother Malcolm... but maybe we missed the opportunity for Islam to help solve the problem of racism in America.” Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis) also talked about his disappointment: “you enter in the community and you think ‘anti-racism etc.’ Then you see the racism within the community... Bad.” Brian (23, student, Chicago) was even more sour: “It’s so fucked up. I always laugh in the face of people that are like ‘oh, Muslims believe in egalitarianism!’ It is like ‘give me a mother fucking break!’”

In this chapter, I explore the permanence of racial considerations within the French and American Muslim communities, in spite of repeated calls for universal Islamic brotherhood. I start with an examination of racial divides among French and American Muslims, with a focus on the latter, for whom these divides are particularly salient. I then turn to an investigation of white converts’ ambiguous position in the racial grammar of

³ See for instance, “Passing the Baton, the Life and Legacy of Malcolm X,” *Ta’leef Collective*, Mustafa Davis, 2013.

their newly embraced communities. I end with an overview of the marriage issue, which crystallizes racial matters in a particularly powerful way.

A. RACIAL DIVIDES WITHIN THE UMMAH

1) US: African-American Islam vs. Immigrant Islam

As stated in the Introduction, Muslims are the most ethnically-diverse religious group in the US. African-Americans, Middle Easterners, South Asians, Iranians, Afghans, Europeans, Africans, white Americans, Hispanics, etc.: a myriad of categories are represented among them. Despite this impressive diversity, my interviewees consider that racial issues frequently get in the way of effective religious identity building. American mosques are for instance accused of not reflecting the American Muslim mosaic. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) noticed: “we are supposed to be all one, you know. And then we get this separation thing going on: ‘oh that’s the Desi mosque, that’s the Nigerian mosque, that’s the Palestinian mosque, that’s the Syrian mosque.’ It shouldn’t be like that.” My interviewees’ feelings about segregation are only partially supported by available data. In a recent report, Bagby (2012a: 14) notes that American mosques are much more diverse than churches: “while Sunday might be the most segregated time for American society, Friday and its Friday congregational service might be the most diverse time for the Muslim community.” He remarks that “only 3% of all mosques in 2011 have only one ethnic group that attends the mosque.” Yet, he also concedes that “three-fourths of all mosques are dominated by one ethnic group⁴” (either South Asian, Arab or African American), which suggests that ethno-racial mixing remains an ideal yet to be achieved.

The most striking and enduring cleavage is that opposing African-American Muslims on the one hand and immigrant Muslims from the Middle East or South Asia on the other hand, both groups making up the bulk of the American Muslim population. With Sherman Jackson (2005), I refer to these two entities as “African-American Islam” and “Immigrant Islam.” To be sure, both display great internal diversity. Such metonymical expressions, therefore, do not refer to reified groups, but rather identify distinct sets of experiences, memories and practices that have a structural impact on the direction American Islam as a whole is taking. A racialized boundary, the African-American Islam vs. Immigrant Islam cleavage overlaps with class inequalities, urban/suburban disparities and the Black and White Divide. As detailed in the following sections, a superposition of issues makes it particularly enduring.

a) Anti-black prejudice within Immigrant Islam

The first problem is one of prejudice. Several of my interviewees denounced the prevalence of colorism and anti-blackness among some Muslim immigrants and second-generation immigrants of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent. Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis), who is white, commented: “I was surprised to see how many of the cultures associated with Islam are so racist towards black people!” Being accustomed to racism in the wider American society, black converts in particular discovered new forms of hostility

⁴ Bagby precises that “dominant groups are calculated by: any group over 55% of all regular participants; 50-59% of one group and all others less than 40%; 40-49% of one group and all others less than 30%; 35-39% of one group and all others less than 20%.”

within the Muslim community, which they had not necessarily envisioned. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit), who is African-American, reported an instance of overt racism at the end of the month of Ramadan, when she was invited for *Id* by one of her Pakistani college friends. As Kathleen entered the house, her friend's mother pointed at her and, while openly smiling, whispered to her daughter's ear in Urdu: "I don't want that *kalu* in my house." *Kalu* is a derogatory word for "black" in Urdu. Kathleen, who had been involved in the Indian Students Association on campus for a while and had picked up some Urdu, immediately understood what she had said. Her other friends, who were all of Pakistani descent, understood it too. An awkward silence took hold of them after the mother left. Kathleen commented on her friends' reaction: "the girls were shocked, but nobody said anything in her presence. It wasn't until she walked away that, like, everyone kind of came to my defense. They were like 'I can't believe your Mom just said that!'" The girls discussed among themselves and some alluded to the possibility of not attending the party. But the friend who had invited them panicked: "oh my God... if you guys don't come, then your parents are going to find out, and they are going to know and..." Kathleen concluded the anecdote with a sour laughter: "at the end of the day, all the girls ended up going. And I ended up going to my dorm room. And I didn't spend *Id* with anyone that year." Distressed about celebrating the Muslim festival of *Id* alone, Kathleen was also shocked by the mother's behavior and especially bitter about her friends' lack of support and solidarity in the face of overt racism. After this incident, she stopped seeing other Muslims and began practicing the religion on her own.

While the Urdu word *kalu* is a common insult in South Asian spaces, the word '*abd*, which literally means "slave," can be frequently overheard among Arabic speakers to designate persons of African descent. In the American context, where words such as "nigger" have been banned from everyday lexicon, the use of such terms by immigrants from Arab countries came as a shock to many converts. James (48, English professor, Detroit), who is a white liberal, could not believe his ears when he first heard it: "it was absolutely shocking! That somebody would just throw that out in the public sphere as if it was nothing." African-American Muslim leader Dawud Walid and an organization named the Muslim ARC (Anti-Racism Collaborative) have recently launched a social media campaign entitled "Drop the A-Word" to raise awareness among Middle Eastern Muslims on the racist implications of the term '*abd*, which is understood as the equivalent on the n-word in the American context (Walid, 2013).

Racial prejudice among the Muslim immigrant community can be explained by two factors. The first is the survival of a tradition of colorism in immigrant households. The trauma of colonization has produced a heritage of self-deprecation and a number of "derivative racist discourses" (Grewal, 2009) in formerly colonized countries. In many parts of the world and in South Asia specifically, standards of beauty value fair skin over dark skin, which is frequently associated with lower social status (Béteille, 1967; Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009; Mishra, 2015).⁵ Epidermal considerations inherited from immigrants' cultures of origin can further thrive in the US, where colorism is equally well entrenched (Banks, 2000; Hunter, 2002). The second factor is that Muslim immigrants are no different from other immigrants to the US who, in their efforts to integrate American society and achieve upward mobility, have often sought to

⁵ Skin bleaching cosmetics or surgery are also widely used in these countries, which indicates a deprecation of dark skin tones and a white aesthetic ideal (Glenn, 2008).

differentiate themselves from African-Americans and embrace the fiction of whiteness (Baldwin, 1984; Ignatiev, 1995; Yancey, 2003; Roediger, 2005; DuBois, 2005 [1920]; Lee and Bean, 2010). According to Samuel (25, campaign strategist, Detroit), an African-American convert, Muslim immigrants have behaved like European immigrants before them: “you always have to strip faith out of the equation when you are talking about the immigrant community, and just have to realize that they are socialized in the same world that non-Muslim white immigrants coming from Europe are socialized. Like, it is not surprising they have a skewed perspective on the black population in America.” Immigration to the US has overall contributed to the reinforcement of the Black vs. White racial binary logic rather than its attenuation, as patterns of competition and avoidance between immigrants and African-Americans have often superseded patterns of cooperation (Waters et al., 2014). Muslim immigrants have proved no exception to this rule and have adopted mainstream stereotypes against blacks (Karim, 2006). In his book *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005: 79), Sherman Jackson claims for instance that immigrant Muslims are characterized by a strong “will to join American whiteness,” which has alienated them from their African-American co-religionists. Sharp socio-economic differences also make this problem more salient.

b) Class inequalities

African-American Muslims tend to belong to the lower middle classes and live in the inner cities, while immigrant Muslims mostly inhabit suburban spaces, enjoy a middle-upper-class status and occupy professional or managerial positions. They tend to be overrepresented in prestigious fields such as education, business, information technology, law, and medicine: while Muslims make up only 1% of the American population, they represent 5% of the US physician workforce, most of them men from South Asia (Padela et al., 2016). Immigrant Muslims are also well represented among higher-income earners: a recent survey (Pew Research Center, 2007b) established that 19 percent of foreign-born Muslims claim annual household incomes of \$100,000 or higher, (as compared to 11 percent for the native-born Muslim population and 17 percent for the U.S. average). Immigrants born in India specifically display very high incomes: in 2013, the median household income of Indian immigrants was \$103,000 (Zong and Batalova, 2015). By contrast, the median household income of African-Americans in 2013 hovered at about \$35,000 (US Census Bureau, 2014), making them the poorest American group. The situation of African-American Muslims being no different from that of their non-Muslim counterparts (Ba-Yunus, 1997; Karim, 2009: 38), one can appraise the extent of the socio-economic gap that currently divides the American Muslim population.

Class inequalities translate into segregated religious spaces. While most African-American Muslims typically worship Allah in small storefront mosques in the central parts of towns, immigrant and second-generation immigrant Muslims mostly perform their prayers in monumental mosques built in the suburbs, featuring domes, minarets and large parking spaces. Such discrepancy is particularly noticeable in the metropolitan areas of Chicago and Detroit, where thriving suburbs with large concentrations of Muslim immigrants (Bridgeview, Naperville, Dearborn, etc.) sharply contrast with the state of African-American inner-city neighborhoods. Accordingly, the purposes of African-American and immigrant mosques also tend to differ. When operating in rough neighborhoods, the former function as community centers, offering social programs, doing counseling and performing charity work, in line with the NOI legacy. Located in

wealthy suburbs that can only be accessed by car, immigrant mosques operate for the most part as simple places of worship, with an exclusive focus on Islamic learning.

The feel and atmosphere of some immigrant Muslim spaces are often said to be discouraging for Muslims of lesser means. The magnificent buildings, the nice cars parked on the parking lot, the fashionable dresses and trendy headscarves of female attendees, their manners of speech, the themes covered during lectures, the cultural references made by the speakers draw the picture of spaces that, although open to all, can feel socially exclusive. Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), a white convert who is very close to the black community, commented on the uneasiness that some Muslim spaces foster: “all the Islamic organizations seem to cater to a certain... either a foreign type of background or some kind of elite type of background. Or something that a lot of people would feel left out from. And definitely I feel that way (...) Sometimes you feel like you are not... You don’t fit in because you are not beautiful like that [laughs]. Even me I feel like I don’t dress so fashionably and I don’t know what’s the fancy tea I am supposed to drink and stuff. I feel like it’s not really my crowd.”

The unequal repartition of financial resources is a common bone of contention between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims, and several of my interviewees wished that some financial redistribution could take place across suburban and urban mosques. Some vilipended the luxury of immigrant mosques, in light of the chronic poverty experienced by African-American Muslims. In St. Louis, Shahada (31, accountant), an African-American convert who reported being marginalized in the immigrant community, vividly remembered the visit of Sheikh Khalid Yasin, an African-American convert and Islamic scholar, at a large and beautiful mosque in a high-income immigrant suburb of West County. To her great delight, he sermonized the attendance about their ostentatious display of wealth: “oh my Gosh,” Shahada said, “he told them about themselves! He was going off! He was like ‘how many poor people is in this community? And why these crystal chandeliers in here? OK, so now you have this beautiful *masjid*, you are adding on, you are adding on, keep adding on! But what about the poor Muslims that live here? What are you doing for them?’” Shahada secretly rejoiced during his entire speech.

Finally, successful Muslims of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent were accused of looking down upon Muslims of lesser means. Several interviewees hailing from working-class backgrounds or rough neighborhoods reported deep misunderstandings with their wealthier immigrant coreligionists, who could not relate to their daily struggles, lifestyle and family dynamics. Consider the case of Mariana (29, housewife, Chicago), a Mexican and Puerto Rican convert who grew up in the South side of Chicago. Upon learning that interest was sinful in Islam, Mariana went to a Pakistani-American Islamic scholar to discuss the fact that, having taken loans before she was Muslim in order to enter college, she was now in the process of reimbursing them and had to pay interest as a Muslim. As a convert, she expected benevolence and empathy from the scholar, but was met with what she interpreted as indifference and contempt:

He is like “well, I mean, you really shouldn’t have taken out that loan, period. Or you shouldn’t have gone to college until you could pay on your own. *Kbalas*.⁶”

⁶ “That’s it” or “that’s enough” in Arabic.

I know he was busy but it was very, like, dismissive. (...) I just looked at him and I said “I will be the first person in my family to go to college, so I have to go. One. Two, I mean I am going to try to pay back my loans as soon as I can, as soon as I get a job.”

He is like, “well, *Insh’Allah*, I hope you can.”

And that was like really the end of the conversation. I started crying... How dare you Mister South Asian whose father paid for you to study at X, Y, Z?

Having grown up in a poor household, Mariana had worked very hard to beat the odds and go to college. Because of his wealthy family background, the one she called “Mister South Asian” could not relate to her struggles and was unable to provide the sensitive religious advice she needed. While sharing the same faith, the parallel social realities they lived in produced contrasted understandings of the same religious teachings and impeded religious communion.

Many converts see the urgent challenge of building truly multi-racial and multi-socioeconomic religious spaces, in which everyone can feel welcomed and coalesce under the worship of the same God. At times, however, this challenge seems overwhelming, as exemplified by the testimony of Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit), a convert hailing from a middle-class South Asian Hindu household, who commented on the uneasiness of her position, caught between upper-class South Asian and lower-class black Muslims. Anjali started talking about her lack of belonging in South Asian Muslim spaces and her greater sense of comfort in black mosques:

In a lot of ways I don’t fit in the South Asian Muslims because I wasn’t raised Muslim. On top of that, I don’t come from a super wealthy background. So it is hard for me to relate to the kind of affluent South Asian stereotype because my family wasn’t like that. Walking into a South Asian mosque, I have often felt very alienated... Ostensibly I fit in. But in terms of, like, feeling, my identity isn’t matched. So in many ways, I personally identify much more with the African-American community.

As a result, Anjali mostly attends small black mosques in inner-city Detroit, where she is often the only non-black person. It was never a problem for her and she enjoys the programming there. However, she also confessed that she found it hard to interact with her working-class black coreligionists. Having studied at a good university and coming from a middle-class background, she stumbled over basic conversational problems.

I held a dinner, with people from the African-American community and I am like “crap... I am totally privileged...” Like... I don’t know how to talk to these people. Because... I don’t know how to relate to some of that, like didn’t go to college, or like, you know... You have certain threads of communication that you are used to when you are meeting someone, right? Like “oh cool! Where are you from? What do you do?” And I feel like the “what do you do?” question is very common in the, like, privileged educated community. But if I ask that in the African-American community, I don’t... I mean I don’t even know what conversational threads to go on because I can’t ask the questions that I usually ask... It is weird because I feel totally comfortable, when the speaker is speaking and I am getting my knowledge, but then, when it is time for the socialization part, I am not a super..., like ... I don’t know how to talk to you!

In spite of good intentions, Anjali cannot overcome the interactional obstacles stemming from disparities in social position and habitus when talking to her black coreligionists. In light of the above testimonies, it is clear that class inequalities strongly

impact the ability of Muslims to relate to one another and further widen the gap between immigrant and black Muslims.

c) Liquor stores wars

Another bone of contention between African-Americans and immigrants has to do with the number of liquor stores being owned and managed by Muslims of Middle Eastern descent in disadvantaged African-American neighborhoods. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) who is an African-American and Latino convert, considered this was a serious problem in his native town of Milwaukee: “in black communities in Milwaukee, Muslims own liquor stores, selling pork, selling wine. They close the shop, go to *jumu'ah* on Friday, come back, sell the pork, sell the alcohol. It is like ‘oh man...you are trying to feed your family, but you are feeding their families poison and junk!’ So I almost felt that there is tension, like, you know, within the blacks and Arabs. The blacks that are not Muslim, you know, they are like ‘oh man the Arabs! they don’t really care about us, they are just trying to get our money, they are just in our hood.’” The presence of store owners of Arab descent partaking in un-Islamic businesses in black communities further strains the already complex relationships between African-American and immigrant Muslims and continues to hinder intra-religious solidarity.⁷

d) Competition for religious authority

The African-American/immigrant divide is also institutional and historical as the two groups disagree on who detains true Islamic authority in the American context. Many African-American Muslims claim that the legacy of African Muslim slaves as well as that of the various black movements that appropriated Islam to turn it into an American religion (Moorish Science Temple, NOI, Five Percenters) are insufficiently recognized by post-1965 immigrant Muslims, who, upon arriving to America, launched their own Islamic institutions while overlooking the fact that Islam had already a well-established history in the US. The oblivion of generations of African-American Muslims was particularly disturbing for John, a white convert married to an African-American born Muslim. In a June 2015 Facebook post, he wrote: “I remember a well-educated Pakistani brother said to me a few years back: ‘my wife’s generation was the first to wear *hijab* in America (1970-80) and it was tough to be the people to introduce Islam to America.’ My wife’s eyes open wide in shock and disbelief that this man said this with conviction.” As evidenced by this example, the pre-1965 contribution of African-Americans to American Islam seems to have been erased and ignored by immigrant Muslims, who have repeatedly portrayed themselves as the first Muslims of America.

⁷ Similar tensions between black communities and Arab American store owners have been reported in California as well (see Alhassen, 2010). In light of these escalating tensions, the Chicago-based Muslim charity organization IMAN (Inner-City Muslim Action Network) has made this problem a priority to solve. In 2008, it launched the “Muslim Run Corner Store Campaign,” which according to its website, aims at “developing alternative business models for corner stores on Chicago’s South Side, [and] healing racial tensions between Muslim and/or Arab store owners and their mostly black patrons.” Through dialogue and microcredit loans, IMAN intends to solve the chronic food crisis in black neighborhoods by encouraging Muslim store owners to sell fresh produce and healthy groceries, instead of liquor and junk food. In doing so, it also aims at rebuilding a pan-Islamic solidarity between communities that have become increasingly at odds with one another.

Immigrant Muslims try to craft a mainstream American Islam, wishful of integration and geared towards whiteness within the Black vs. White Divide. Most immigrant Muslim organizations (CAIR, MSA, ISNA, etc.) project a very American and upper-middle-class ethos (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008; Bilici, 2012). As a result, they have been unable to forge a sustainable Islamic alliance with their black American counterparts. This can partly be explained by the infamous legacy of the NOI, which many orthodox Sunni Muslims consider as heretical, and which continues to carry weight on the perception of black Muslims. But it can also be explained by the social justice activism of African-American Islam, which tries to subvert the very racial order immigrants try to integrate. A corollary of mass incarceration, the well-documented fact that large numbers of African-American Muslims embrace Islam in prison (Moore, 1991; Dix-Richardson and Close, 2002; Ammar et al., 2004; Hasan, 2004; Kusha, 2009; Dillard, 2010) can also be said to have antagonized immigrant Muslims aspiring to middle-class status, social recognition and full citizenship. To this day, black Muslims are frequently suspected of being ex-convicts or sympathizers of the NOI, even when they practice regular Sunni Islam. Such stereotyped portrayal seriously hampers the recognition of their historical legacy, and their integration into immigrant mosques.

In turn, many African-Americans accuse immigrant Muslims of entertaining a religious superiority complex. Several converts argued that South Asian and Middle Eastern born Muslims hold themselves as the sole repositories of authentic Islamic knowledge and the only ones having the legitimacy to define the boundaries of proper Islamic behavior. Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit), a convert of South Asian descent, talked about the existence of a “Desi/Arab supremacy” over American Islam: “as Desis and Arabs have more access to wealth, more access to knowledge, like, they are perpetuating this idea that they have more knowledge than African-Americans.” Khabir (23, barber, Detroit), who is African-American, also noted that Islamic legitimacy was often conditioned by obtaining degrees in South Asian or Arab institutes or traveling in those countries to study: “it is like if you don’t go to the South Asian and the Arab door, you are not a valid Muslim. You are not. That’s the impression I get a lot.”

As immigrant Muslims have progressively asserted their dominion over American Islam, African-American Muslims have been voicing their concerns. The strongest critique has probably been expressed by Sherman Jackson in his book *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005). He argues that Immigrant Islam operates, like whiteness, as a “false universal” that dictates certain types of behavior and imposes narrow cultural norms in the name of universalism. Many of my interviewees seek to rehabilitate the legacy of African-American Islam by turning the tables on immigrant Muslims and putting into question their religious authority. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) contrasted the piety of those he called “prison converts” (mostly African-Americans) with the shallowness of some immigrant Muslims: “I have some Muslim friends, who, you know, their parents are from other countries such as Albania, Pakistan and all these countries. They kind of almost lose the religion because they see America, they see all these things and they kind of get misguided and it is unfortunate. Whereas prison converts, they are like ‘No, no. I am never going back to that lifestyle again.’ They take it more serious than those who come from abroad.” African-American converts discard the religious legitimacy of their immigrant coreligionists. Consider also the example of Khabir (23, barber, Detroit), who is enrolled in the Sufi path and practices a highly spiritual and erudite Islam. No longer able to handle the patronizing comments of some of his

immigrant coreligionists who systematically consider him as a new ignorant convert from the NOI, Khabir developed a counter rhetoric. He recalled the following interaction:

Take a clerk at a gas station. South Asian or Arab guy. I say “*As-salaam ‘alaykum!*” And then, they would be like “how do you know that? where did you learn that from?” And I would be like “man, look, man, don’t let me come through this Plexiglas and knock you out real quick! I am Muslim. What are you talking about?”

Did you revert? Did you come from the Nation of Islam?

Damn! I got to revert to be Muslim? That’s my only entry way into Islam? How do you know that, my family hasn’t been Muslim for 300 years? How do you know? You don’t know! So why do you come at me like that?” And, when I hear that, sometimes I say: “Are you Muslim? Are you Muslim?”

They would be like “yeah I am Muslim! Can’t you see?”

I would be like “well, you look Mexican!” [laughs]

And they would be like “I don’t look Mexican. I am Yemeni! I am Pakistani! I am Indian!”

I would be like “I thought you were, like, Mexican. Or Puerto Rican, something like that. Do you know Fatiha? Can you recite Fatiha?” [laughs] And that’s how I throw it back at them! I say “can you give me a Qur’an? Here! Tell me what this says!” And it turns out they can’t. You will find out that a lot of the Arabs and South Asians are very illiterate. They cannot read classical Arabic. They only know how to speak, in conversation, and it is not even proper Arabi, it is slang. So that’s how I deal with it. I throw it right back at them very quick. Very quick. And a lot of time, like, they are very irritated.

Khabir counters his own stigmatization as a black convert by racially profiling his South Asian or Arab coreligionists as Mexicans or Puerto Ricans, based on the brown color of their skin. Whenever his religious credentials are put into question, he also immediately challenges them on Islamic grounds and displays his disdain when they do not show mastery of Islamic scripture. In coping with racial objectification, Khabir mirrors the behavior of his immigrant coreligionists to make them understand how it feels.

e) Competing narratives of suffering

The structural fault lines within the American Muslim community have somewhat been reshuffled after 9/11, as immigrant Muslims have begun to experience widespread racism as well. State surveillance and improper incarceration have affected Muslims from all walks of life (Bayoumi, 2008; Abraham et al., 2011; Cainkar, 2011; Selod, 2015), especially foreigners or citizens of foreign descent. In that context, it has been said that African-Americans have benefited from their status as domestic Americans (Karim, 2009: 40), although some scholars argue that black Muslims have also suffered from post 9/11 policies by coming under scrutiny as potential “homegrown terrorists” (Daulatzai, 2012: 172). As a result, in my interviews, the debate on “who suffers most from racism and prejudice” was quite common. Online controversies as to whether “Islamophobia is the new Black” i.e. the new utmost form of racism in the US, are currently raging:⁸ some contend that anti-Muslim rhetoric is now widespread and acceptable to an extent that anti-black discourse no longer is, which makes Islamophobia a priority to combat; while others

⁸ In September 2015, the editor of *The Islamic Monthly* had to change the title of an article named “Islamophobia is the New Black” (which subsequently become “Islamophobia is Cool in America Today”) (Ifikhar, 2015) after a controversy ensued on the incomparability between structural racism against African-Americans and Islamophobia (Docmanov, 2015).

claim that immigrant Muslims will never experience the same level of structural racism as African-Americans living in the inner cities. Brian (23, student, Chicago), a white convert interested in the NOI and a student of Aminah McCloud, a prominent African-American scholar and convert to Islam, argued: “most black people that you talk to as Muslims, like my professor, who has been Muslim since the late 60s in this country, they say: ‘9/11 was nothing. This is what we have been dealing with for 250 fucking years!’ So to make a spectacle of 9/11 is to negate 250 years where blacks were always treated like this.” The African-American/immigrant divide, therefore, is also one in which patterns of oppression and suffering are weighed against one another. Nuancing this set of claims and qualifying the arguments of Sherman Jackson specifically, scholar Sylvia Chan-Malik (2011), a Chinese-American convert to Islam herself, considers on the contrary that the “black-immigrant” debate is not insurmountable, as African-American and immigrant Muslims can find “common causes” rooted in their shared experiences as racialized religious minorities. She adds that the Islam practiced by immigrants has also been shaped by the colonial encounter in South Asia and the Middle East and that, as such, immigrant Muslims share a common “background of oppression” with African-American Muslims that portends fruitful future alliances.

To sum up, the American Muslim community operates as a magnifying lens for the wider racial tensions affecting the American society. In its midst, the quest for Islamic authenticity is structured along racialized boundaries. As the two largest demographic groups, African-Americans and South Asian/Middle Eastern immigrants are engaged in a serious competition over religious legitimacy. Overlapping with socio-economic inequalities and mirroring the classic urban/suburban divide, the mutual hostility between Muslims of immigrant descent and African-American Muslims (to which Latino and working-class white Muslims can also be adjoined) renders the American Muslim community a complex space to navigate. Owing to the specific US racial history, racialized boundaries are particularly salient among American Muslims. Although not to the same extent, racial divides are equally present among Muslims in France.

2) France: the North African sway

French Muslims feature a great variety of national origins as well. Yet, contrary to the US where three groups (blacks, South Asians and Arabs) are roughly equally represented, there is in France a marked overrepresentation of North Africans alone (more than 70%). Like their American counterparts, the French converts I interviewed presented their coreligionists as unwisely engulfed in ethnic and racial discord. The segregation of mosques along ethno-racial lines, in particular, was a matter of concern for those who had fantasized the *ummah* as an indivisible whole. Complaining about the monochromatic character of some mosques in Marseille, Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille) explained: “they don’t understand that there is only one Islam. There is not one Islam for the Moroccans, one Islam for the Algerians, one Islam for the Comorians. No!”⁹ A recent study by Jocelyne Césari (2005: 1030) evidenced frequent ethnic conflicts over mosque construction between North Africans, Africans, Turks and Pakistanis: “in such cases,” the author writes, “the universal quality of the *ummah* tends to fall by the wayside, as group

⁹ « Ils arrivent pas à comprendre qu’il y a un islam. Il y a pas un islam pour les Comoriens, un islam pour les Marocains, un islam pour les Algériens. Non ! »

identification becomes based on ethnicity and nationality.” For my interviewees, the ethno-racial homogeneity of Muslim worship services prevents the emergence of an overarching Muslim religious identity that could supersede differences. The long-lasting influence of Muslim immigrants’ countries of origin (Morocco and Algeria specifically, but also to some extent Turkey) on mosques’ management, funding and theological orientation (Godard and Taussig, 2007: 39-46; Jouanneau, 2013: 14) is also frequently pointed as a problem. Dissatisfied with this state of fact, Bianca (33, unemployed, Marseille) lamented that her coreligionists paid excessive attention to one another’s “origins:” “that is very present in the community. Origins remain something that matters to them. You can still feel the boundaries.¹⁰”

In particular, several interviewees mentioned the conflicts opposing North African and African Muslims. For blond and blue-eyed Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille), the antagonism is blindingly obvious for anyone stepping foot into a mosque: “they don’t mix up. It is either only Arabs and no blacks. Or only blacks and no Arabs. There really is a cleavage.¹¹” For MéliSSa (27, project manager, Paris), who long worked at a Muslim organization and strove for unity among French Muslims, such cleavage was a serious challenge: “the disagreements and divisions between blacks and Arabs really hurt the community and prevent us from being as efficient as we could be.¹²” She added that “Arabs are extremely racist¹³” towards black people. Like her, Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) was distressed by the crude racist comments she overheard in the Moroccan family who hosted her: “frankly, the racism is impressive. What you hear about black people sometimes... When they came back from *hajj*, they were talking about all the nationalities and they said ‘Malaysians are amazing, but blacks, they stink!’ I was like ‘ooh ooh!’ It was very shocking.¹⁴” The long stigmatization of black African Islam (*islam noir*), as practiced in Senegal or Mali for instance, as a “peripheral” heterodox Islam tainted with local cultures, in contrast to a so-called orthodox Arab Islam – a distinction that was also enforced by the French colonial administration (Robinson, 2000; Grandhomme, 2009) – contributes to the invisibility and discredit of Muslims of African descent in French Muslim spaces (Diouf, 2002; Schmitz, 2006; Salzbrunn, 2007). The association of Arabness with whiteness, and Africanness with blackness in North Africa (Hall, 2011; Timéra, 2011), as well as a long history of slavery in the Arab world (Lewis, 1990a), also account for the existence of tense relations between black and Arab Muslims.

A number of interviewees also complained about what they saw as the excessive influence exerted by “Arabs” over French Islam. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille), who is of French and Mauritian descent, reported that she “didn’t feel at ease within the

¹⁰ « C’est quelque chose qui est présent dans la communauté... les origines restent quand même quelque chose d’important pour eux... voilà on sent des frontières quand même ».

¹¹ « Ils se mélangent pas. Ou c’est des Arabes, et pas les Noirs. Ou que des Noirs, et pas les Arabes. C’est très clivé. »

¹² « Les dissensions et les divisions au sein de la communauté entre Noirs et Arabes font beaucoup de mal à la communauté et empêchent qu’on soit aussi efficaces qu’on pourrait l’être ».

¹³ « En France, vous savez sans doute que les Arabes sont très racistes ».

¹⁴ « Franchement le racisme c’est impressionnant quoi. (...) Tu vois des fois sur les blacks, ce que t’entends... Alors en rentrant du *hajj*, ils parlent des gens de toutes les nationalités et ils font ‘les Malaysiens ils sont géniaux’ et après ils font ‘mais les Noirs ils puent.’ J’étais là ‘oh ho hoooo !’ C’est choquant, quoi! »

North African community ... because it feels like it is *their* mosque.¹⁵” What is merely the reflection of the demographic composition of French Muslims is experienced by some converts as undue monopoly. Some, like Adam (35, unemployed, Paris), who is black of Caribbean descent, mentioned the arrogant attitude of some of his North African coreligionists: “most of the time, when I talk about Islam with Arabs, we quarrel. (...) Because it pisses them off! They are like ‘how come, you are Caribbean, you are a convert and you want to teach me lessons about my religion? It is my religion!’ They are real nuts! For real! They think it is *their* religion. These guys are convinced that Islam comes from them, that it is them, that it is their stuff.¹⁶” A black convert, Adam denounces what he sees as North Africans hijacking Islamic religious authority, thereby preventing his full participation in religious discussions. Laughing till she cried, Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille), who is blond and blue-eyed, also recounted an awkward interaction at a mosque, when an older Arab woman realized she was a convert: “she came to me and said ‘You like the religion of the Arabs! Right? You like it!!!¹⁷’” Sophie found comical that this Arab woman reproduced common racist arguments about Islam as the religion of Arabs, while she conceived her own conversion to Islam as universalistic. Overall, many converts were critical of the alleged Arab ownership of Islam and sought to overthrow it. Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) reported a sense of relief when she traveled outside of France and prayed in Muslim spaces non-dominated by North Africans. She particularly enjoyed her visits to African-American mosques in the US: “the community I felt closest to in some way was African-Americans. Because they don’t have a long family history [with Islam]; they don’t have this thing like ‘we are Arabs.’ I liked that.¹⁸” Being away from French postcolonial felt refreshing to Adèle.

In both France and the US, therefore, converts lament the lack of intra-religious solidarity among Muslims and their inability to transcend ethno-racial divides. In the following sections, I examine how white converts specifically fit into these divides.

B. FACING WHITENESS: THE INELUCTABLE HEAVINESS OF RACE

1) Becoming white

Whiteness is invisible and unmarked. It maintains itself by remaining unidentified. According to Ann Keating (1995), “the most commonly mentioned attribute of

¹⁵ « Je me sentais pas bien dans la communauté maghrébine... on dirait que c’est leur mosquée ».

¹⁶ « Moi la plupart du temps, quand je parlais d’islam avec des Arabes, on s’embrouillait ! (...) parce qu’ils ... ça les fait chier ! ils me disent ‘ouais comment ça, toi, t’es un Antillais, tu t’es converti à l’islam, pourquoi tu veux me donner des leçons sur ma religion ? c’est ma religion !’ Non mais tu sais, ils sont carrément ouf, eux aussi ! Non mais c’est vrai ! Ils sont carrément ouf parce qu’ils sont persuadés que c’est leur religion ! (...) Les mecs ils sont persuadés que l’islam, ça vient de chez eux, c’est eux, c’est leur truc ».

¹⁷ « Une fois, j’étais à la mosquée, il y a une femme, elle vient me voir, elle me fait ‘c’est bien tu es musulmane ! tu aimes la religion des Arabes, hein, tu l’aimes !!!!’ »

¹⁸ « Finalement la communauté où je m’étais sentie le plus proche d’une certaine manière, c’est les Afro-Américains. Parce que peut être le fait qu’ils aient pas d’histoire familiale... voilà, il n’y a pas ce truc de ‘on est arabe’... euh voilà. Donc ça j’avais bien aimé ».

‘whiteness’ seems to be its pervasive non-presence.” Whiteness is often considered as a default identity, a norm against which “ethnic minorities” are defined as “other.” It is seldom interrogated as a racial category in its own right. Contrary to racial minorities, white people never have to face the fact of their own racialness. These findings forcefully apply in settings where whites are a majority but are typically challenged in spaces where they are marginal. Well, white converts are a numerical minority within the Muslim community. As mentioned in the Introduction, in the US white Americans make up only 22% of converts to Islam and represent only 1% of all mosque participants (Bagby, 2012a). In France, such detailed figures are lacking but converts make up only 1 to 3% of the whole Muslim population (Pew Research Center, 2009) and it is fair to assume that white converts specifically are a rarity in French Muslim settings. This, I argue, has fundamental consequences on the way white converts relate to the fact of their own racialness. Specifically, their whiteness becomes visible and tangible. Consider how Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) talks about his experience as a white Muslim:

I think it is one thing about being a white convert, whatever that means (...) I am never in a Muslim gathering where I feel like “OK these are all people like me or... I am the main group here.” You know what I am saying? Whereas you know Palestinians can be in a *masjid* and say “most people here are Palestinians.” And they can either feel comfortable there or some of them feel uncomfortable with that and want more diversity and stuff. But I have never had the experience. Like I have never been in a gathering where most of the people come from similar backgrounds than me. So I think that’s an interesting experience to have. I think I am always aware of that in some level.

By joining Islam, white converts suddenly find themselves in communities which are overwhelmingly of color, and in which they are an actual minority. When he first stepped foot into a mosque, Joseph (21, web developer, Chicago) experienced his numerical minority status with a mix of wonderment and apprehension: “I was the only white person in a *masjid* full of, like, Pakistanis! When I look back at it, I am like ‘wow! I can’t believe I did that!’ (...) A lot of people would look at me. I felt a little uncomfortable at times. You know, I mean, they had a right to look at me, because I was... I was a different person, I was not like them, I was like... white.” Both Abdullah and Joseph are very aware that other people in the mosque “don’t look like them,” an issue they never had to face in their previous life as white Americans.¹⁹ In those conditions, converts’ whiteness, usually unmarked and unnoticed, is suddenly made visible to them. As put by Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), “in the community, I feel so insanely white. It is weird.” While whiteness usually grants an insider status in the wider society, it is uncommon and out-of-place within the Muslim community. White converts feel at times like interlopers. Among my American interviewees, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) is certainly the one who won the prize of awkwardness and outsidership: while looking for a husband, she started attending matrimonial activities at various Muslim associations and unintentionally went to a speed-dating event organized by the Nation of Islam in Chicago. Surrounded by black people, who gave her interrogative looks, she suddenly became aware of the absurdity of her presence: “I am not like tanned white, I am like glowing white! So I asked one of the girls: ‘am I kind of crashing something that I don’t belong at?’ She is like ‘oh no! Anybody is welcome.’ I

¹⁹ To be sure, a few Muslim communities do exist in which highly educated white converts are overwhelmingly present. Such is the case of the Sufi community of the IHEI (Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques) located in Embrun in France (Le Pape, 2007) or the Dar-al-Islam community located in Abiquiu in the US. But such groupings remain marginal.

am like ‘are you sure I belong here?’ And she is like ‘stay, stay, stay!’ I was ‘OK!’... I crashed a Nation of Islam speed-dating event! [laughs].” Embarrassed by her glowing whiteness, Mary quickly left the meeting, to which she ostensibly did not belong.

In France, where discourses around whiteness and race are usually much less prevalent, several interviewees also described instances when they found themselves as the only white person in the room, a situation they experienced as both comical and unsettling. Wanda (32, travel consultant, Lille), who was hired in a Muslim travel agency shortly after her conversion, related her first days at work as rather unsettling: “I was the first blue-eyed blond girl to show up! All my colleagues were called Fatima, Safiya, Khadija... It was like ‘Helloooooo! It’s me!’ At the beginning, they were staring at me a little bit. But then after two weeks it was fine.²⁰” Conversion to Islam and integration in majority non-white Muslim spaces leads to a reconfiguration of the awareness of whiteness. In Marseille, Sophie (27, social worker) who is blond and blue-eyed as well, explained that she is constantly being stared at in mosques: “I don’t have the typical face of a Muslim, so, with my blue eyes, I really get noticed!²¹” She also confessed that she herself could not help but gazing fixedly at other white converts: “even I catch myself staring at them.²²” The incongruous presence of white people within Muslim spaces attracts looks and raises eyebrows. An indirect effect of conversion to Islam, therefore, is to propel interrogations and reflexivity about white racialness.

It can be argued that by becoming Muslim, white converts also “become white.” Among their fellow Muslims, they become hyper aware of their whiteness, which operates as a “sticky sign” (Nayak, 2005: 141) in their daily interactions. In some instances, white converts felt their whiteness was being thrown back in their faces, as their non-white coreligionists frequently made reference to it. As mentioned by Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago), “you feel kind of boxed.” Such racial objectification came as a surprise for many, but also as an offense. “It is very hurtful,²³” said Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), whose Muslim friends of North African descent constantly remind him that he does not fully experience Islamophobia because he is white. Like him, Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille) confessed having integration issues as a white person. She recounted how the imam at her mosque keeps calling her a “Christian,” even though he sees her pray on a regular basis. Once he gave a sermon on interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians and said he did it just for her, as a Christian. She was really disconcerted: “I know he means well but these are the stereotypes that you see over and over and over again,” she complained. “Even in a religious context, he makes the leap French = Christian.²⁴” As for Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris), who long idealized the Islamic tradition of Mali, he was very disappointed when finally able to travel there, as his encounters with Malian Muslims were not as embracing as he had

²⁰ « Vraiment j’étais la première blonde aux yeux bleus à débarquer, quoi ! Donc voilà toutes mes collègues, c’est Fatima, Safiya, Khadija . ‘Coucou c’est moi ! Ça va ?’ Au départ ils m’ont regardée un petit peu... tu vois. Et puis au final, enfin... au bout de deux semaines, c’était... voilà quoi ».

²¹ « J’ai pas le faciès typique de la musulmane, quoi, tu vois, donc avec tes yeux bleus en fait, tu te fais carrément remarquer ».

²² « Même moi en plus je me surprends à regarder des femmes converties ».

²³ « C’est super vexant ! »

²⁴ « Je sais en plus qu’il est pas méchant, mais c’est les stéréotypes qui traînent et qui re-traînent et qui re-traînent, quoi. Même dans un contexte de religion en plus, il fait encore le raccourci chrétien = français ».

expected: “I felt like Islam mattered less than the fact that I was white. I think it hurt me in some ways. Especially because Islam for me is something antiracist, which does not make color distinctions. So that really struck me.²⁵” The experience of racial objectification, unprecedented for many, was seen as highly disturbing.

Among Muslims, converts also discovered a number of terms identifying them as white people, which they were not necessarily aware of. In the US, the Urdu word *gora*, which refers to someone with light skin, can frequently be overheard in South Asian Muslim spaces. Like most ethnic terms, the intonation with which it is pronounced indicates whether it is intended to be pejorative or not. In France, terms such as *français* (French) and its backward-slang *céfran*; or the expression *jambon-beurre*, which refers to a ham sandwich,²⁶ are oftentimes used among non-whites to talk about whites. Arabic words such as *roumi* and *gaouri* (and its variant *gouère* or its abbreviation *gaou*)²⁷; or West-African terms such as *toubab* (and its backward-slang *babtou*)²⁸ are also extremely common in Muslim settings. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille), who is a white convert, said that such words considerably hurt his feelings:

I take issues with some people who... I mean... There was a girl I was dating, back in college, Samia. She was Tunisian [of Tunisian descent] and she spoke utter nonsense at times. She would be like “French people are like that, *gaous* are like this.” I told her: “Samia, let me remind you something. I am French, my mother is French, my father is French. I am not going to tolerate that one day I bring you to my mother and you have the brass neck of saying ‘*gaou*’ in front of her. It is as if I was saying ‘*bougnoule*’ to you. It is a no-no!”²⁹

Ludovic equates the appellation *gaou* with the term *bougnoule*, a racial slur used against North Africans. Overlooking the fact that the word *gaou* primarily reflected an imbalance of power between European colonizers and North African subjects and can be

²⁵ « Quand je suis parti au Mali, j’ai ressenti que... en fait l’islam il importait beaucoup moins que le fait que je sois blanc. Ça, ça m’a... ça, ça m’a heurté quelque part je pense aussi. D’autant plus que pour moi l’islam c’était justement le... enfin quelque chose d’antiraciste, quoi, enfin c’était... ouais c’est... c’était un des fondements même de l’islam de pas faire de distinction de couleur, quoi. Et du coup là j’étais... interpellé, quoi ».

²⁶ Because it is made of pork, the famous *jambon-beurre* sandwich has become a political issue in the most recent period, as far-right identity groups have started claiming it as a symbol. It has progressively become culturally associated with white Catholic French identity, in opposition to Jewish and Muslim identities.

²⁷ The term *gaouri* comes from *gavur* in Turkish and *gabr* in Persian and was historically used to talk about those who continued to practice Zoroastrianism. It was then employed in the Arab world with regards to Europeans, Westerners or unbelievers/infidels. Now it mostly refers to people having white or fair skin. The word *rumi* in Arabic comes from Al-Rum which was historically used to designate the Greeks and subsequently the inhabitants of Byzantium. During the colonial period, it acquired negative overtones to talk about European/Christian invaders (El Houssi, 2007).

²⁸ The word *toubab* is used in Manding languages and Wolof to refer to anyone with white skin, especially Europeans, but also Westernized Africans (Fanon, 1952). His etymology is uncertain but the term has alternatively been used to talk about educated and mannered men, dignitaries, doctors, colonists and Christian missionaries (Quashie, 2015). The backward slang *babtou* is now widely used in French popular language (and rap lyrics) to talk about white French people.

²⁹ « J’ai du mal avec certaines personnes... enfin je veux dire... la personne avec qui je sortais à la fac à l’époque, Samia, qui était tunisienne, elle m’a quand même sorti plusieurs fois ‘ouais, les français ils sont comme ça. Les gaous’. Je dis ‘mais Samia ? Je vais te rappeler trois choses. Je suis français, ma mère est française, mon père est français. Tu crois pas que je vais tolérer qu’un jour je te ramène devant ma mère et tu vas te permettre de dire ‘les gaous’ ? C’est comme si moi je disais ‘les bougnoules’. Ça se dit pas ! ».

understood as an ordinary instance of “toothless racism” with limited structural consequences (Memmi, 2000 [1982]: 110),³⁰ Ludovic puts it on an equal footing with anti-Arab insults. Echoing Ludovic’s concerns, several white converts consider themselves as victims of racial prejudice on the part of their coreligionists. For Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago), “you are just not welcome in the same way. You are not part of the club because you are not of the right color.” Hearing a white person claiming that she is not of the right color is rather uncommon in Western national contexts where whiteness continues to be a source of structural advantage in most realms of life. Such moral indignation can be partly explained by the fact that converts take it hard to be put into a racial box. Often for the first time in their lives, they are experiencing a situation of “racial stress” that they are not necessarily equipped to tolerate, a feeling Robin Di Angelo refers to as “white fragility” (2011).

By embracing Islam, white racialness becomes pervasive for converts and takes precedence over their personal feelings, self-identification or seniority in the religion. They are racially objectified, just like many members of ethnic and racial minorities commonly are in France and the US. Social interactions with other Muslims get patterned after their whiteness. The next sections focus on the cultural meanings and moral assumptions associated with white skin within the Muslim community, which is alternately endowed with positive and negative attributes, thereby placing white converts in an ambiguous position.

2) White Trophies

a) Life on the pedestal

Reflecting general trends in the French and American societies, white skin is a social asset within French and American Muslim communities as well. More than other converts, white Muslims are over-congratulated for their conversion. The pedestal already mentioned in Chapter 3 has strong racial overtones, since white converts, not black, are put on it. They become “trophy converts” (Fatima, 2009; Smith, 2009; Kompier, 2013), valorized as a blessing, a sign that Islam is truly universal. As noted by white female blogger Safiya: “aren’t white Muslims the prized pets, the conversion stories everyone wants to hear, the ones who get far more marriage proposals and attention?” (Outlines, 2009). Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) talked about the “fascination” and “frenzy” she generates among fellow Muslims: one day an older Muslim woman of North African descent saw her reading the Qur’an on the bus and started crying: “haaaaaa a French girl who is Muslim!!! Thanks God!!!! How powerful Islam is!³¹” Noémie tried to explain that she was not more extraordinary than any other Muslim, but the woman was so happy that she did not have the heart to spoil her joy. At gatherings with South Asian Muslims, Harold (25, NGO employee, Chicago) also noticed that “people get excited” upon learning he is a Muslim for “the concept of the white Westerner is a symbol of progress and activeness or whatever, so, like, to see a convert, people are like ‘oh we were right!’ [laughs].” White skin being associated with modernity, universalism and enlightenment

³⁰ Memmi writes: “in confrontation with the dominant, the racism of the dominated remains at the level of opinion.”

³¹ « Haaaaa, une Française qui est musulmane ! Dieu merci ! La puissance de l’islam ! »

in most people's minds, the sight of white converts often produces feelings of awe and pride among born Muslims. Worn as a badge of honor, the presence of white Westerners amidst Muslim ranks tends to be presented as the ultimate proof of Islam's truth and power, which also contributes to reinforcing hegemonic representations of whiteness.

The white converts I interviewed welcome such praiseworthy comments with ambivalence. Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) feels the wonderment he generates among North African Muslims is un-Islamic for it betrays the universal teachings of Islam: "if the Islamic message had been well-understood, there wouldn't be so much amazement.³²" For him, his presence into Islam is natural, not a matter of discussion and even less of astonishment. Other converts are disconcerted by the attention they attract. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) has for instance the sentiment that she is always put on display, like a fancy object: "I feel like I am a circus animal that's got the spotlight on them. Like feed the lion, ask for their convert story and give them a peanut or something. I don't like it." Mary often loses patience with those who go into raptures over her pale skin and her American-accented Arabic pronunciation.

For some of my interviewees, such quick ascension to fame and recognition proved detrimental to their spiritual growth. During the first years of his conversion, Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) felt he lost himself in a whirlwind of praise and admiration: "in my town, I was one of the first French guys who ever converted. And... I became a role model, really. In the North African community there, everybody liked me. Parents, friends, everyone. At some point, I told to myself 'what kind of game are you playing? You go to the mosque, but is it because you enjoy the way people look at you? Or is it for God?' So that was not necessarily good for my journey.³³" Thibault eventually decided to withdraw from the community and practice the religion at his own pace, far from the gaze of his coreligionists. Other converts did not have the same presence of mind. In Detroit, Edward (35, project manager) told me about a "sad example" that occurred in his community a few years ago:

There was a white convert, very very nice guy. He became Muslim and then like... you know what happens to a lot of converts, how you do everything, and you are not addressing diseases in your heart, because outwardly you are such a good Muslim. So this guy, he became a *hafiz** of the Qur'an in like 4 or 5 years. It is like amazing! He was on a pedestal. All the young Indo-Pak kids loved him. He is like their hero! And... one day he didn't show up. And he just went missing. And finally they went into his apartment. And they found him dead on the floor. And the story that everyone shared was that he died in prostration, and this is a miracle from God. But the reality is: there was heroin all around him. He was a drug addict before he became Muslim. And it is so easy to hide that stuff, because there is so much pressure to hide it too, you know. That you end up living a double life. So that's a case of someone literally killing themselves by embracing the pedestal. And there is no question he was a great, really nice guy. But you know on the pedestal, you can hide some problems you have.

³² « Normalement si on avait compris le message, il y aurait pas forcément d'étonnement plus que ça ».

³³ « Je pense sur [ville] être un des premiers Français qui se soit converti. Il y avait une sorte de... vraiment, j'étais devenu l'exemple, quoi. Au niveau de la communauté maghrébine, tout le monde m'a apprécié. Que ce soit au niveau des parents, des amis, tout ça... A un moment donné, je me suis dit 'mais là ça va plus quoi... t'es en train de jouer un jeu, quoi... tu vas à la mosquée... est-ce que c'est le regard des autres qui te... qui te plaît ? ou t'y vas pour Dieu, quoi, pour prier ?' Donc voilà... c'est pour ça que c'est pas nécessairement quelque chose de... de très positif dans un parcours ».

Life on the pedestal is a double-edged sword for many white converts, who feel loved and supported, but at times disproportionately so.

b) White converts as public faces of the Muslim community

The fascination for white converts is evident when looking at the large number of them who occupy prominent positions as scholars or representatives of the Muslim community. In the US specifically, several male and female white converts are widely recognized and celebrated. Their local and global significance can be assessed by looking at the “top 500 most influential Muslims in the world” report, which is published every year by Jordan’s Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (Schleifer and Ahmed, 2015). In the 2016 edition alone, among the 42 American Muslim personalities holding influence in various domains (theology, politics, arts, media, sports, etc.), there are eight white converts³⁴ and seven African-American converts.³⁵ Given that white Americans make up only 22% of converts to Islam and black Americans represent 64%, this indicates a disproportionate representation. In the realm of Islamic scholarship and Muslim institutions specifically, the following white converts have risen to prominence in the North American Muslim landscape:

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF (ranked 36th in the 2016 top 500): Islamic scholar; co-founder of Zaytuna College in Berkeley (first US accredited Muslim liberal arts college)

DR. UMAR FARUQ-ABDALLAH (listed in the 2016 top 500): Islamic scholar; chairman of the Nawawi Foundation in Illinois; published a biography of first white American convert to Islam Alexander Russell Webb (2006)

IMAM SUHAIB WEBB (listed in the 2016 top 500): imam of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center; social media savvy, he has been called the “world’s coolest imam” (Varagur, 2016)

ROBERT DICKSON CRANE (listed in the 2016 top 500): former advisor to President Richard Nixon; former US ambassador to the UAE; former Deputy Director (for Planning) of the US National Security Council; founding director of the Muslim American Bar Association

AISHA GRAY HENRY (listed in the 2016 top 500): founder and director of the religious foundation and publishing company Fons Vitae, currently translating the works of Al-Ghazali

INGRID MATTSON (listed in the 2016 top 500): Canadian citizen, former president of ISNA (Islamic Society of North America)

NU HAM MIM KELLER (listed in the 2016 top 500): Sufi scholar; sheikh in the Shadhili order

YUSUF ESTES (listed in the 2012 top 500): retired Muslim chaplain for the US Bureau of Prisons; Muslim delegate to the 2000 UN World Peace Conference for Religious Leaders

IBRAHIM HOOPER (listed in the 2011 top 500): spokesperson for CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations)

³⁴ Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Umar Faruq-Abdallah, Suhaib Webb, Robert Dickson Crane, Shems Friedlander, Aisha Gray-Henry, Daniel Abd-al-Hayy Moore, Nu Hah Mim Keller.

³⁵ Sherman Jackson, Keith Ellison, Andre Carson, Sirah Wahhaj, Zaid Shakir, Muhammad Ali, Yasiin Bey.

YAHYA RHODUS: teacher at Zaytuna Institute

ABDULLAH NOORUDDEEN DURKEE: Sufi scholar; leader of the Shadhdhuli school in North America, co-founder of the Dar-al-Islam organization in Abiquiu, New Mexico

ANSE TAMARA GRAY: founder of the women’s spiritual organization Rabata

AMINAH ASSILIMI: former director of the International Union of Muslim Women

YUSHA EVANS: Islamic lecturer



Figure 32 - Influential white American converts

Left to right: Dr. Umar Faruq-Abdallah, Imam Suhaib Webb, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Dr. Robert D. Crane Yusuf Estes, Yahya Rhodus, Ibrahim Hopper, Nu Ha Mim Keller, Nooruddeen Durkee, Aisha Gray Henry, Anse Tamara Gray, Aminah Assilimi, Ingrid Mattson, Yusha Evans

Among these figures, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, a white American convert and Islamic scholar born as Mark Hanson in 1960, is a case in point. Raised in Northern California in a highly educated Greek Orthodox family, Hanson converted to Islam in 1977 after nearly dying in a car crash. A brilliant intellectual, he acquired solid Islamic credentials by studying Arabic and Islamic sciences overseas, in a large variety of countries (first in the UK – under the leadership of white convert Ian Dallas, aka Abd Al-Qadir as-Sufi – then in UAE, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, and Mauritania). Upon coming back to the US after ten years of classical Islamic training, Hamza Yusuf, a gifted orator draped in robes and

turbans, became a leading figure of the American Muslim community (Grewal, 2013: 159-169). Equally well-versed in Western philosophy, literature, and popular culture, dropping quotes of American poetry along with Qur’anic verses in a flawless Arabic, he could touch the souls of American-born Muslims in a way that foreign scholars could not. He started to be revered both nationally and globally as an iconic model. Consider for instance how one of my French interviewees, Jean (23, student, Paris), talked about him: “after Allah, after the prophets, after my parents, there is Hamza Yusuf. He is really someone I want to meet in my life.³⁶” Hamza Yusuf is considered as “perhaps the most influential Islamic scholar in the Western world” (Romig, 2013). He is frequently referred to as a theological rock star and has been called the “Elvis Presley of Islam.” Because of his international fame, Hamza Yusuf epitomizes the various meanings ascribed to white racialness within the Muslim community. He will be frequently made reference to in the following lines.

Contrasting with the US case, there was only 5 French Muslim personalities mentioned in the 2016 top 500, and among them one is a white convert (Bruno Abd-al Haqq Guiderdoni). Albeit not to the same extent and with considerably less international exposure, white converts have also acquired significance in the French context. A number of them are recognized as important public figures of the Muslim community:

BRUNO ABD-AL-HAQQ GUIDERDONI (listed in the 2016 top 500): astrophysicist, director of the IHEI (Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques)

MALIKA DIF: writer and lecturer; founder of the association Lumière d’Islam en Occident

CHEIKH ABDALLAH AL FARANSI: Islamic scholar

DANIEL YOUSSEF LECLERCQ: founder of Intégrité, the first Muslim consumer protection association; former director of the Muslim World League Paris office; co-founder and former president of the FNMF (Fédération Nationale des Musulmans de France³⁷)

CHEIKH AYOUB LESEUR: founder of the demanding yet popular Islamic school *La Madrassah* in Paris

THOMAS ABDALLAH MILCENT: doctor, active in the opposition to the 2004 law banning religious symbols in public schools.

OMERO MARONGIU PERRIA: sociologist; former imam and former UOIF member (Union des organisations musulmanes de France)

ABDELAZIZ DI SPIGNO: founder of ASIDCOM (Muslim consumer protection association focused on the respect of *halal* norms)

ELSA RAY: former spokesperson for the CCIF (Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France)

ERIC GEOFFROY: philosopher and Islamic scholar; president of the foundation Conscience Soufie,

³⁶ « Après Allah, après les prophètes, après mes parents, c’est Hamza Yusuf ! Donc... s’il y a bien une personne que je veux rencontrer dans ma vie, c’est lui ».

³⁷ The FNMF was co-founded in 1985 by another Frenchman, Jacques-Yacoub Roty who is not a convert himself but was born to a French convert family.

MICHAEL PRIVOT (in Belgium): Islamic scholar; director of ENAR (European Network Against Racism)

DIDIER ALI BOURG: former spokesperson of the FNMF, founder of the CERSI (Islamic institute in Saint-Denis).

PHILIPPE AMANOULLAH DE VOS: former secretary general of the Muslim World League Paris office; representative for the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order



Figure 33 – Influential white French converts

Left to right : Malika Dif, Cheikh Abdallah al Faransi, Cheikh Ayoub, Daniel Youssouf Leclercq, Abdelaziz di Spigno, Thomas Abdallah Milcent, Didier Ali Bourg, Michael Privot, Philippe de Vos, Eric Geoffroy, Omero Marongiu Perria, Bruno Abd al Haqq Guiderdoni, Elsa Ray

This overview demonstrates that, while white converts are certainly a numerical minority among Muslims, they are not a *minority* in the sociological understanding of the term (Wirth, 1945): with regards to power relations within the community, they display considerable influence and visibility. Such situation prompted questions in my sample about the reproduction of white hegemony in multi-racial Muslim congregations.

c) Considerations on white privilege and tokenism

Interpretations diverge as to why so many white converts currently occupy leading roles within the French and American Muslim communities. We cannot rule out the fact that competence and ability are key factors ensuring success. Anjali (24, school teacher, Detroit), who is South Asian, remarked that white converts, being on average highly educated, tend to have more of “that entrepreneurial spirit, that understanding of business. Like Dr. Umar, Hamza Yusuf, these people are just effective, you know.” Anjali attributes the rise of these scholars to their plain effectiveness. At the more local level, she also mentioned the case of Edward (35, manager), a white convert who is currently on the board of a mosque in Detroit: “he is like the one who is running the mosque, essentially. And he has actively been trying to pass on the responsibilities and, like, you know, not be the controller, but he is just good, right? He is good at doing his job.” For many, white converts simply have the skills and the knowledge to run things effectively within the Muslim community. In France, Melissa (27, project manager, Paris), a white convert who was chosen as spokesperson for a large Muslim organization, explained her appointment along these lines: “it so happened that I was the only skilled person available back then. I am not saying that I was the only one, but at the time the position had to be renewed, there was no other volunteer. There was no favoritism, in the sense that they weren’t like ‘oh there you go, she is white, her name is Melissa, she is our perfect candidate.’ It did not happen like that.³⁸” For these converts, if white privilege is reproduced within the Muslim community, it is not because of overt favoritism but, indirectly, because white people in general in France and the US happen to have better education and management skills.

This diagnosis was shared by Bruno (37, researcher, Lille), who became very active in a Muslim consumer protection association and thought that, as a convert, he was an asset for the organization: “if we need to go through administrative procedures, for me that’s normal. But for a typical Muslim... I mean not a typical Muslim, but let’s say for someone who is from North Africa, who arrived with a residence permit and who became French at 20-year-old, there is this kind of fear of the administration. Maybe. So yes it can help [to have converts]. It opens some doors. Because we know how the systems work.³⁹” According to Bruno, French converts, as natives, possess an insider knowledge of French society that can ease things for the Muslim community, which explains why they acquire positions of authority within it. Even though many born Muslims are French natives too, their North African descent and Arabic names can prove detrimental in dealing with the administration, a problem converts can easily bypass. These converts, in sum, do not envision their positionality as problematic.

³⁸ « Il s’est avéré que j’étais tout simplement la personne compétente qu’on avait sous la main. Je dis pas que j’étais la seule, mais au moment où il fallait vraiment renouveler le porte-parolat, bah c’est vrai qu’il n’y avait pas d’autre personne volontaire et disponible pour faire ce poste-là. Donc il y a pas eu de favoritisme dans le sens où ils se sont pas dit ‘oh tiens, elle, elle est blanche, elle s’appelle Melissa, elle est notre candidate idéale’. Ça s’est pas fait comme ça ».

³⁹ « Par exemple pour faire des démarches auprès de l’administration par exemple, moi pour moi ça me paraît normal. Parce que par exemple pour un musulman classique ... enfin pas un musulman classique, mais par exemple quelqu’un qui est d’origine maghrébine, qui est arrivé avec un titre de séjour, qui est devenu français par exemple à l’âge de 20 ans, il va avoir comme une peur de cette administration. Peut-être. Donc ça, ça peut effectivement aider. Ça permet d’ouvrir des portes plus facilement. Parce que voilà, on connaît les systèmes en fait ».

By contrast, some of my white interviewees who attained representative positions within the Muslim community expressed embarrassment that their achievement might have had explicitly something to do with the color of their skin. Abdullah (39, Chicago), who recently obtained a position as a Muslim chaplain in a prominent university and is very respected for the dedication with which he performs his job, reflected on the reasons why he was selected:

I have to think. The fact that Muslims accept me as a chaplain, and the fact that some Muslims look up to me and these young Muslims they ask me stuff and stuff, is it somehow... is it... are people privileging me or making me seem more important because I am a white convert? That makes me feel very uncomfortable, obviously. So, I would want to run away from that!

Abdullah feels that his whiteness might have opened professional doors for him in the Muslim community. In an article analyzing the ascension of white American male converts as renowned Islamic scholars, Mahdi Tourage (2012) explains that the “American white convert imams and sheikhs are not idealized for their successful performances and conversion narratives alone, they are also idealized for their whiteness.” In line with this finding, several of my interviewees considered that white converts are often fast-tracked to positions of prestige within the community for the mere fact of their whiteness, irrespective of their actual Islamic knowledge. In Chicago, tall and blue-eyed Jonathan (36, technician), who has been part of a mostly-immigrant mosque for decades, noticed this phenomenon:

If somebody becomes Muslim, and he is Caucasian, they [Muslims] will have him give a lecture about Islam tomorrow. Because they want to say “look! Look! One of these guys is one of us now!”

Because a certain amount of prestige is coupled with whiteness, white Muslims are believed to be “legitimate faces” who can speak in the name of Islam. They can be valued assets for a religious minority that is stigmatized at the national level.

Accordingly, a white female blogger denounced the oftentimes tokenistic use of white Muslims as “public faces” for the community. She writes that “white converts are sometimes given positions of responsibility in a tokenistic way, in order to provide a group with a more ‘North American’ image” (ASoberSecondLook, 2012). In France, Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille), a white convert who does not wear the headscarf, also felt that she was used in a superficial way by the Muslim association she volunteered for. The department council had planned on visiting them and the president of the association called her on the phone shortly beforehand: “he told me that it would be nice if I could come, as a volunteer. He added, very honestly, that it was also because 3/4 of the volunteers were veiled and he did not want the department council to think that all the women in the association were veiled. I thought it was weird, but he was very upfront about it, so fine. And then the day before, his wife called me and she made a verbal slip-up. She said ‘so you will come, right? Because that way they will see that there aren’t only Muslims [in the association].’ ... Isn’t that crazy????⁴⁰” Sophie understands herself

⁴⁰ « Bref, il m’explique qu’il y a le Conseil général qui va venir et que ce serait bien que je vienne en tant que bénévole. Et puis il me dit très honnêtement que c’est aussi parce que les trois quarts des bénévoles sont voilées et que il voulait pas que le Conseil général s’imagine que toutes les femmes qui étaient là-bas étaient voilées. Moi ça m’a un peu questionné, mais en fait à la fois c’était très honnête, bref. Et la veille,

as a Muslim, but because she does not fit into the stereotypical representation of the “Muslim” (she is blond, blue-eyed and not covered), the association symbolically used her presence as a token of integration and assimilation to counter the scrutiny of the local French administration, whose suspicion of headscarves and communalism is well-attested. In that regard, it is noteworthy that a number of Islamic schools in France are named after converts with typically French names. There are no less than five Philippe Grenier schools⁴¹ and one Eva de Vitray school⁴², historical French converts being enlisted as proof that Islam is an integral part of French society. Sophie was disappointed by the attitude of the association: “they see me as the little French girl. Being the only white woman there, it certainly did matter when the department council visited. But it is weird because it is like you have this role to play.”⁴³ Many white converts in my sample felt confined to their role as white faces of the community. During a talk he gave at Northwestern, Imam Suhaib Webb said he resented his instrumentalization by the immigrant Muslim community. Put on the front stage for advertisement purposes, he regretted not being listened to regarding internal mosque matters: “they would not consult me over any decision. They never asked me one question. But when it came to a fundraiser, when it came to get a guy on a poster, you know what I mean, you are an avatar!”⁴⁴

Some of my interviewees were particularly vocal in their critique of what they saw as a fetishization of white skin among Muslims. Brian (23, student, Chicago) was very sarcastic about this phenomenon: “Hamza Yusuf is revered as like a demi-god, with Dr Umar Faruq Abdullah. And Will Webb! Imam Will Webb! It’s like ‘Give me a f*** break!’ (...) Everyone loves them. Everyone loves their white ass!” For some, the veneration of white skin was indicative of racialized insecurities among Muslim immigrants. In France, Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) felt that there is “this colonial mindset where whites are seen as wonderful people who know how to do everything. I don’t like that.”⁴⁵ In the US, Edward (35, manager, Detroit) also claimed that “it shows a huge issue of self-esteem in the Muslim community that, you know, they get so excited when there is a white convert.” Associated with integration, socio-economic achievement, Frenchness or Americanness, whiteness is an ideal to which many immigrant Muslims aspire. In those circumstances, white Islamic scholars are embraced as symbolic figures, the “bright white hopes⁴⁶” in charge of uplifting a community lacking national recognition and facing discrimination.

sa femme m’appelle et elle-même elle a fait le lapsus. Donc elle me dit ‘tu viendras ? comme ça ils voient qu’il y a pas que des musulmans’. Tu vois ? C’est fou quand même ! »

⁴¹ Located in the cities of Grenoble, Reims, Villeneuve-la-Garenne, Aulnay-sous-Bois and Avignon.

⁴² Located in Mantes la Jolie.

⁴³ « Ils me voient comme la petite française, tout ça. (...) effectivement être la seule blanche en l’occurrence... enfin ouais, c’est ce qui s’est joué avec le Conseil général. (...) Mais c’est vrai que c’est bizarre, t’as un rôle du coup ».

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes, November 21st, 2013.

⁴⁵ « Il y a une mentalité colonisée, quoi, où le Blanc est... enfin... il est magnifique, il sait tout bien faire et... et moi ça me va pas ».

⁴⁶ During a talk at the Northwestern Muslim Student Association (MSA), Pakistani-American author Wajahat Ali called out to Imam Suhaib Webb: “you are the bright white hope. I don’t see anyone being such a figure coming from a Pakistani background. Why? Because we don’t embody America enough.” Fieldnotes, November 21st, 2013.

d) African-American converts and the issue of unequal recognition

The valorization of white converts becomes particularly evident when compared to the marginalization of non-white converts, especially in the US. In the conflict that opposes Immigrant Islam to African-American Islam (see above), white converts frequently find themselves enrolled as public figures in favor of the former. James (48, English professor, Detroit), who is white, remarked: “white converts do tend to be embraced by the immigrant community better than African-American converts.” A consequence of the Black vs. White racial binary logic, the coupling of whiteness with prestige, effectiveness and social success implies a reciprocal deprecation of dark skin, as undervalued and unworthy of interest. This was clearly expressed by Souleymane (45, Islamic teacher and dancer, Detroit), a charismatic African-American convert who is currently teaching Islamic courses at the mosque, but who experienced intra-Muslim racism at the beginning of his conversion. During his first years as a Muslim, Souleymane was very active in *da'wah* efforts and brought many new converts to the immigrant mosque he used to attend. Yet, he was under the impression that his coreligionists were only interested in white converts, and dismissive about black converts:

During that year, many African-American women and men took Islam. And within our community, there were 5-6 Europeans who came in. There was one, his name is Abu Bakr, he was from Connecticut. When he took *shahada*, all of the Pakistanis, all the Syrians, they stayed, all the Lebanese people were like: “Oh, I thought you were Lebanese, you look like a brother... *Mash'Allah* brother, we will get you help and everything.” But he was from the hood, they didn't know! They said: “Is there anything you want to say?” And he said: “yeah, there is only one thing I want to say. I have seen other brothers, African-Americans, take *shahada* here and you all didn't care. And me, I will take *shahada* today, all of you all are happy, all of you all are spinning around me. Is it because I am white? Why don't you do that for any of these? This brother here, he took it last week. And that sister, last month.” And he really crushed their whole ego system about the whole thing. His name was Abu Bakr. He became a stronger Muslim after that.

Souleymane was grateful for Abu Bakr to publicly point at the racial power dynamics within the mosque and unveil the greater appreciation shown to white converts over their black counterparts.⁴⁷ The undervaluation of African-American Muslims in comparison to white Muslims, especially in scholarship, is a very important issue for Souleymane. His assessment of the popularity of white Islamic scholars such as Dr. Umar Faruq-Abdallah and Hamza Yusuf is definite: “even though I have great respect for Sheikh Umar and Hamza Yusuf, it is true that they wouldn't have gained as much exposure if they were African-Americans. Because there are tons of African-Americans who haven't been given exposure.” Ubaydullah Evans (40, Islamic teacher, Chicago), an African-American scholar who studied Islam overseas and now teaches in various settings, contrasted for instance the way his scholarship and that of Hamza Yusuf are received: “personally, Sheikh Hamza is one of my teachers and I think he is really brilliant. That said, I think his being white did and does confer onto him a certain image of privilege in the Muslim community. When the same thing was from my mouth and

⁴⁷ Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), a working-class white convert, reported exactly the same phenomenon: “you literally have white converts coming, and I have seen it, within a couple of weeks, or couple of months, they are on the board of directors of the masjid. Now imagine a black Muslim! He has been around for 30 years. He barely gets returned greetings. White guy comes in, and in a month he is on the board. I mean it is going to create a big resentment.”

from Sheikh Hamza’s mouth, maybe it wouldn’t resonate in the same way, because people are so attuned to this reality of white privilege. When people are looking for social commentary that they are prepared to take as authoritative or at the very least valid, I do think the fact that he is white has something to do with how they receive his commentary.” The racialized cognitive association of whiteness with knowledge and legitimacy can therefore partly explain Hamza Yusuf’s rise to a position of Islamic authority within the Muslim community. For Ubaydullah, the fetichization of Yusuf’s figure, which is undeniably linked to his impressive intellectual performance, also has to do with his white skin.

To sum up: whites’ position of racial dominance, generally unnoticed in the wider society, is rendered acute by the small size of the Muslim community and heightened by the African-American vs. Immigrant Islam divide. Like any racial identity, however, whiteness is profoundly ambivalent and endowed with a variety of meanings: fetichization and favoritism are only one aspect of it. As a dominant identity, whiteness also sparks feelings of suspicion and mistrust, which durably impact white converts’ perception within the Muslim community. In parallel of being used as “white trophies,” white converts are also frequently portrayed as “white devils,” potentially dangerous for the Muslim community at large.

3) White devils

a) Western impermeability to Islam

In some Muslim circles, reified representations of “the West,” informed by the global rhetoric of the “clash of civilizations,” contribute to a representation of white converts as inauthentic Muslims, impermeable to Islamic reform. In her study of Australian converts, Alam (2012) notes that “the belief that whiteness and Western culture are at a very base level inextricable from the *haram* and immorality, and that anyone who has been born into it is tainted and can never completely amputate that part of their identity” is well entrenched among Muslim minorities. Similarly, in his study of converts in Manchester, Moosavi (2012) documents the difficulties faced by white converts in their attempts to pass as authentic Muslims. He reveals that white Westerners are sometimes distrusted by other Muslims because of their perceived immorality. Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) noticed that, for some of his Middle Eastern coreligionists: “everything Western is evil, you know, like the big devil!” Born to Western families, white converts are sometimes portrayed as irremediably corrupt and non-purifiable. Their Islamic sincerity is frequently called into question. In France, Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille) could feel it in the eyes of some of her North African coreligionists: “there is always this suspicion, like ‘is she really going to convert?’ It is almost like you have to be better than them.⁴⁸” In the US, Julia (23, student, Chicago) experienced the same sense of discomfort and probation: “the impression I am getting, is that people will be openly happy that I am Muslim to my face but I am not naïve enough to think that this is what they actually think. Because I am really aware, of the mentality like ‘sure you are Muslim, but I guarantee you will still be doing Western things that aren’t appropriate.’” Seen as ontologically linked to the decadence of “the West,” against

⁴⁸ « Il y a toujours cette suspicion de ‘mais elle va vraiment bien se convertir ou...?’ enfin... il faut vraiment presque être mieux qu’eux ».

which Islamic values of morality and purity are, at times, understood, converts' whiteness precludes their entry into the realm of Islamic brotherhood.

b) White guilt and the burden of history

In addition to Western deprivation, whites are also associated with domination and exploitation. The burden of history, whose consequences are still felt today, impacts the perception of white people among Muslims who have suffered from European or white domination, be they immigrants from the colonial world or African-Americans. White converts carry on their skin what is often portrayed as a several-centuries-old struggle between the East and the West. Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), who became immersed in a mostly Arab community when he converted, had to face such history:

The immigrants who come here, they have on their minds: “those are the conquerors. The whites are the ones who spread all the evil throughout the world.” So they don't think of them as potential Muslims. They think of them as like “the Other”, the enemy. There is a lot of bad blood, historically you know. (...) And the same thing actually will happen if you go to an African-American mosque. They... They got a really bad deal in this country. They were brought here as slaves. You know. You can't get much worse than that.

In the US, the historical legacy of slavery and racial segregation frequently looms over the interactions between white converts and their coreligionists. In France, the memories of colonization also remain vivid. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille) had for instance troubles interacting with her North-African in-laws: when they saw her, they saw “the white, the colonist, the French,⁴⁹” she said. As for Wanda (32, travel consultant, Lille), she had difficulties conversing in French with her Moroccan Muslim mother-in-law, who had been traumatized by French colonial teachers in her childhood: “she no longer wants to speak French, because when she was younger she was forced to and now she does not want to anymore.⁵⁰” Now part of the family, Wanda with her blond hair, blue eyes and French language, unintentionally revives memories of colonization in the mind of her mother-in-law. As a white American, James (48, English professor, Detroit) feels he is also associated with the legacy of British colonization by his South Asian coreligionists: “there is somebody who every time I talk to them, he recalls the history of the British empire in India to me. As if I were responsible for that directly! So there is that resentment there.” As a result of history, white converts can be welcomed with suspicion and need to demonstrate their sincerity before being granted acceptance and recognition. For Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago), this is perfectly normal: “I think there is some legitimate suspicion, because... white people have been the people to systematically destroy the entire world for 500 years.”

Yet, being associated with white racial dominance is often processed with shame and guilt by white Muslims. At least, this is the case for Lisa (22, school teacher, Chicago) who talked a lot about this issue during our interview: “I feel ashamed. I guess when you look at all the white guilt I mean, you don't... Nobody wants to be a member of a community that has caused so much physical, emotional, economic, every pain possible. You don't want to be associated with it.” For Lisa, being associated with whiteness is

⁴⁹ « Ils voient le blanc, le colon, le français ».

⁵⁰ « Sa mère elle veut plus parler français, parce que... enfin quand elle était plus jeune, on l'avait obligée à parler français et du coup maintenant elle veut plus ».

painful because it is seen as an oppressive racial identity, one that has for several centuries sought to dominate people of color, who make the bulk of her Muslim friends today. When hearing the stories of discrimination that her non-white friends experience almost every day, she explained that, as a white person she feels “kind of responsible for what is happening.” In France, Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) shares similar feelings. She told me that, for her, the white French identity was associated with three words: “slavery,” “colonization” and then she hesitated between “globalization,” “misery,” “racism” or “discrimination.”⁵¹ This identity was for her difficult to carry: “you are on the wrong side, you are on the unjust side, on the side of injustice. I cannot stand it.”⁵²

Because of their position of racial dominance, white converts are also directly suspected on racist leanings. Lisa (22, student, Chicago) vividly remembered one instance during which she was objectified as an intolerant white person by one of her Muslim friends during Barack Obama’s inauguration speech in 2012:

We were watching Obama’s inauguration and there was a group of MSA [Muslim Student Association] students and then some girl told me “I am sooo sorry Lisa.” I am like “why?” She said: “Obama won, a black man won, I am sorry he wasn’t white Lisa!” She went on and on. And I wanted to cry. It was so embarrassing. And she thought she was being funny. And she just... Everybody was kind of silent (...) And I am not at all claiming reverse racism or any of that and I don’t think I have anything real to complain about or be upset about, but it is just that I haven’t yet learnt how to deal with that.

Lisa carries her white skin with embarrassment within the Muslim community because she knows that it is often interpreted as a sign of racism and intolerance. Last year, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf himself bore the brunt of such suspicion. He was accused of being a hidden “white supremacist,” after a series of comments he made during the annual “Reviving the Islamic Spirit” convention held in Toronto (RIS) on December 23th 2016. Interrogated by journalist Mehdi Hasan on American Muslim leaders’ conspicuous lack of involvement in major contemporary anti-racist struggles, such as Black Lives Matter, Hamza Yusuf circumvented the question:

HY: I grew up in the civil rights period. My mother was a civil rights activist, a very serious one. So I grew up in that environment. One of the things we need to be reminded of is that the US, in terms of its laws, is one of the least racist societies in the world. We have some of the best anti-discriminatory laws on the planet. (...)

MH: But if there are struggles going on, like for examples struggles in the US about black people being shot by the police...

HY: I know, but a lot of them... A lot of the problems in the US with the black community being shot is... We have about 15,000 homicides a year, and 50% are black on black crime. Literally.

MH: But you are not defending the treatment of black people by the police...

HY: No, but there are twice as many whites that are being shot by the police but nobody ever shows those videos. The assumption is that the police are racist and it is not always...

⁵¹ « Le fait d’être franco-français. J’ai envie de te dire... trois mots : ‘esclavage’, ‘colonisation’,... là j’hésite entre ‘mondialisation’, ‘misère’, ‘racisme’, ‘discrimination’ ».

⁵² « T’es du mauvais côté... t’es du côté injuste en fait, tu vois, t’es du côté de l’injustice. Donc c’est ça que je... supportais pas ».

MH: It is not an assumption, we saw it...

HY: It is not always the case! It is not always the case! And I think it is very dangerous again to just broad stroke the police... Any police now that shoots a black is immediately considered a racist. But sometimes these are African-American police officers.

The fact that Hamza Yusuf, a white man, talked about black on black crime and quoted statistics unadjusted for the respective sizes of the white and black population was shocking. During the exchange, the crowd was rumbling. Minimizing structural racism against black people (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), Hamza Yusuf, a revered Islamic scholar, sounded like a random white American conservative. In a subsequent apology, Hamza Yusuf recognized that his comments had come across as insensitive. But his public act of contrition did not prove sufficient. A heated online controversy ensued, in which he was accused of subscribing to the mythology of black pathology and holding racist views (Angail, 2016). Some called him a white supremacist. In an eloquent critique, one of my interviewees, African-American Islamic scholar Ubaydullah Evans, who has always admired Yusuf's scholarly contribution, refuted this accusation of white supremacy. He put the blame for the incident not on Yusuf himself but on the pervasiveness of white privilege in general: "although there are things we know about Sheikh Hamza's upbringing, family-life, piety, religious affiliation, linguistic fluency, customary dress, politics, etc. that distance him from white folks that typically cite black pathology to discredit the movement to affirm the value of black life, *he-is-still-white*. (...) Someone must explain to my Sheikh that the fact of white privilege precludes the possibility of his being able to make such comments with any integrity" (Evans, 2016). Hamza Yusuf's white skin and his position as a revered white scholar of Islam, rendered visible his failure to address the reality of structural racism in the American context.

Ubaydullah Evans also pointed at the incongruity of the context: Yusuf was addressing a mostly non-black audience of immigrant and second-generation immigrant Muslims (tickets for RIS are expensive). More than anything, the RIS controversy revealed the long-lasting conflict opposing African-American and immigrant Muslims, and the position that white Islamic leaders occupy within it. Many commentators have pointed that Hamza Yusuf's rhetoric considerably changed after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin towers, which deeply affected him: once known for his fiery critique of the American society and the West in general, Hamza Yusuf progressively tamed his views to embrace a more cautious discourse of mercy, tolerance and cooperation with the government (Roald, 2012: 354-355). He redirected his criticism to Muslim communities themselves, rather than US government and foreign policy. He also changed his attire and began wearing Western clothing (Grewal, 2013: 305-311). Evading discussions on racial inequality, Hamza Yusuf started prioritizing individual personal reform over collective action for social justice. This ideological shift is said to have alienated him a significant segment of the black Muslim population. Brian (23, student, Chicago), a white convert active in the anti-racist struggle, reported an anecdote about Sheikh Hamza Yusuf that may or may not be fully accurate but indicates the way he is perceived in some black circles: "after 9/11, when Hamza Yusuf's rhetoric changed, the black community considered him a traitor. In 2002, he tried to reconcile his image with the black-American Muslim community and he went to a *masjid* in Brooklyn. And half way through his speech, a brother in the second or third rows stood up, pointed at him and yelled at him: 'Malcolm took a bullet. What are you going to do?' And that ended basically all speaking." The audience faulted Yusuf for cooperating with the Bush administration (some call him "pet Muslim" and "house slave"), for failing to address black suffering

and for stripping American Islam from its subversive dimension. For Umar Lee (40, cab driver, Chicago), Hamza Yusuf falls into the category of complacent muftis who “don’t speak truth to power” (Lee, 2016). Umar frequently accuses him of having been coopted by mainstream Immigrant Islam, at the expense of the black Muslim radical tradition.

c) Infiltrated agents

In the post 9/11 context, which has witnessed the widespread stigmatization of Muslim communities, white converts are also increasingly associated with police surveillance and state oppression. In a context of generalized threat and mistrust, they are often suspected of being infiltrated FBI or police department agents, as explained by Jonathan (35, technician, Chicago):

Think of a white person that’s going to a mosque. If it’s an immigrant mosque, like of Arabs or Indians and Pakistanis or Africans, in the back of their minds, they are thinking “he might be with the FBI,” “he is with the police,” “he is here to investigate us.” That’s the worst.

To be sure, in both France and the US, it has actually happened that intelligence agents present themselves as new converts to infiltrate mosques.⁵³ Called *mosque crawlers* in the US (Shamas and Arastu, 2013; Bechrouri, 2014; Kundnani, 2014), these informants are tasked with penetrating mosques or religious events, recording what the imam says, obtaining information about attendees, identifying potential radicals or simply reporting undocumented immigrants. This phenomenon has also been observed in France (Jouanneau, 2013: 246-247; Sèze, 2015; Ragazzi, 2016a). Jonathan witnessed instances of such covert intelligence gathering in his mosque: “they have actually had some people coming to the mosque and saying ‘hey, I want to convert’ and then somebody gets deported and in the paper work for their deportation, they end up finding this guy was an informant the whole time.” Like him, several of my interviewees said they had encountered “suspicious converts” in some of the mosques they attended. Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago), recalled: “there was this guy at the *masjid*, which I am convinced, was a fucking FBI informer. He was just the most awful mean spirit. Like he would always be talking about why he loved Islam because it subjugates women and stuff! He would like debate with the imam and then the imam would be like ‘no, that’s not true.’ You know, just like stupid shit.” Stephan suspects the man was intentionally provoking the imam to induce him to say something controversial that could subsequently be used against him. In France, a woman I talked to during a meeting of *Paris New Muslims* reported a similar encounter with a convert who asked inappropriate questions: “there was this French guy who came and said he wanted to convert. *Mash’Allah* he did convert and became Muslim, so I don’t want to judge him. But still he would do stuff that raised some eyebrows. Someone told my husband to beware because he was from the intelligence services. My husband thought it was a joke but then he found his behavior was weird. Especially the questions he would ask. This is not the type of questions someone interested in the religion would ask, but rather questions like ‘how many people come to the mosque? What origins are they?’⁵⁴” Mosque goers eventually took their

⁵³ On the issue of FBI agents pretending to be converts and infiltrating mosques, see the radio episode “The Convert” by *This American Life* (Black, 2012).

⁵⁴ « Il y a un Français qui est venu et a dit vouloir se convertir. *Mash’Allah* il s’est converti et il est musulman donc je ne veux pas le juger. Mais il y a quand même des choses qui ont fait tiquer certaines personnes. Quelqu’un avait dit à mon mari de se méfier parce que ce mec était des renseignements. Mon mari avait pris ça à la rigolade mais après il trouvait son comportement bizarre. C’était surtout les questions

distances with him, until he stopped showing up. Was this person really an infiltrated agent? Or was he a sincere convert who unwarrantedly got turned down because of fear and suspicion? No one knows.

Secret intelligence programs implemented in Muslim communities as part of counter-radicalization policies have generated widespread suspicion among Muslims themselves, who constantly fear being recorded and having their speech distorted. Framed as a suspect community (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009; Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011; Hickman et al., 2012), Muslims have come to suspect one another (Ragazzi, 2016b). In those circumstances, mosques have become spaces of anxiety and wariness, a situation that particularly affects recent converts.⁵⁵ The documentary *Unmosqued* (2014) that portrays the daily lives of American Muslims, features for instance a mosque board meeting, in which a white American convert, Shawn Grubb, starts his speech with the following disclaimer: “contrary to some popular belief, I do not work for the FBI. I want to make sure everybody knows that. Seriously!”⁵⁶



Figure 34 – Converts as suspects

White American convert Shawn Grubb dispels doubts about being an FBI agent at a mosque meeting
Shawn’s comment made people smile, which indicates an awareness of the mistrust white converts generate. As newcomers in communities that are under pressure, they have to prove their credentials and dispel doubts before gaining acceptance.

d) Orientalism revisited: the issue of religious appropriation

Finally, an additional issue facing white converts is a suspicion about their arrogating the religion of Islam for purposes of entertainment or cultural distinction. In line with contemporary debates on “cultural appropriation” (Ziff and Rao, 1997;

qu’il posait, qui ne sont pas des questions qu’on pose quand on est intéressé par la religion comme ‘combien de personnes viennent à la mosquée ? et de quelles origines ils sont’ ». Fieldnotes, July 16th, 2014.

⁵⁵ In contexts of widespread surveillance and espionage, the activity of researchers themselves also comes under suspicion (Mak, 2016). This can account for the great time I had to spend in convert associations before being granted authorization to conduct research there.

⁵⁶ Min. 46 in the movie.

Rodriquez, 2006; Rogers, 2006),⁵⁷ the specter of “religious appropriation” periodically resurfaces in conversations within the Muslim community. White identity is frequently conceived as empty, bland, neutral and flavorless. It is believed to lack cultural content, distinctiveness and authenticity (McIntosh, 1989; Jackson, 1999; Kenny, 2000; Frankenberg, 2001; Perry, 2001). In this context, “cultureless” whites are said to long for substance and meaning by emulating aspects of others’ cultures, depicted as “cool” or “oppositional.” The culture of non-whites becomes “a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling;” it is akin to “spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks, 1992: 21). Coded as non-white, Islam can be said to provide white converts with some “color capital” (Hughey, 2012a) to compensate for the dreariness of their whiteness. It adds soul and carnality to an otherwise uncomplete and uninteresting, albeit superior, racial belonging.

Within this perspective, conversion to Islam among white people can be understood as nothing else than an instance of “ethnic envy” (Blazak, 2008), a modality of “eating the Other” (hooks, 1992) or yet another manifestation of Orientalist fantasy (Said, 1978). As such, converting to Islam would not be very different from masquerading as black (Toll, 1974; Lott, 1993; Gubar, 1997), playing Indian (Deloria, 1998) or playing Eastern (Nance, 2009). And white converts to Islam would closely resemble the “white Negros” studied by Norman Mailer in a provocative essay (1957), i.e. white “hipsters” who coopt black culture and music, “urban adventurers who drift out at night looking for action with a black man’s code.”⁵⁸

Obviously, none of my interviewees pictured their conversion in such a way. Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago), a young white convert active in the pro-Palestinian movement who studied Arabic and Middle Eastern history in a liberal arts college, was perhaps the only one to recognize that some form of cultural appropriation might have been at play in his conversion: “on some level, there really was this youthful, bougie [bourgeois], Western thing that led me to exotify Islam.” Yet, he added that this had only been a modality of entry into Islam, however flawed, and that he had since then evolved towards religious sincerity and reflexivity on this issue. No one else mentioned this aspect during our conversations.

Yet, if cultural appropriation did not sit well with converts’ self-representations, it definitely was a prominent trope through which other Muslims saw them. This was evident in some of the heated exchanges reported in my interviews. In the US, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) mentioned the case of a Syrian-American female friend who refused to help her at the beginning of her conversion: “she reacted very strangely. Almost as if it was ‘their’ religion and she did not understand about people converting.” Stephan talked about how seasoned activist friends of his in the Palestinian movement thought his conversion was “ridiculous,” “trivializing” and how they “rolled their eyes” at it. In a similar fashion, in France, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) reported being frequently chastised by some of his North African coreligionists when engaging them on religious terrain: “I was bringing up *hadith* and stuff, but I realized they felt offended by

⁵⁷ Cultural appropriation is broadly defined as “any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another are used to further one’s own ends” (Shugart, 1997: 210-211)

⁵⁸ For a portrayal of white American radical convert John Walker Lindh as a “white Negro,” also see (Dauphin, 2007).

it. Because for them, it was their religion. And I was the white guy that was cornering their religion. That's what it was.⁵⁹”

Talking about revered white Islamic scholars such as Hamza Yusuf, Dr. Umar Faruq Abdallah or Imam Suhaib Webb, Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis) exclaimed: “these celebrity imams are like rappers! They are the shit!” Umar does not know how right he is, since the trajectories of these scholars echo, in some ways, those of famous white hip hop artists such as Eminem (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005; Verstegen, 2011) or Vanilla Ice (Hess, 2005), who broke through in a field where whiteness is incongruous. Their white interloper status, turning them into spectacles, has brought them accelerated fame but has also casted doubts on their professional sincerity and authenticity, especially for Vanilla Ice who could not demonstrate connections with blackness or experience of disenfranchisement (Cutler, 2010). Interestingly, Hamza Yusuf has been called the “Elvis Presley of Islam,” just like Vanilla Ice has been called the “Elvis Presley of Rap.” Such label is telling, not only because Elvis Presley was one of the most famous rock and roll singers in the world, but also because he was accused of having stolen and appropriated black cultural expressions (Roediger, 2003). The suspicions and dilemmas in which white converts to Islam are embroiled, therefore, closely resemble those of whites evolving in contexts where they are a minority and where cultural authenticity is attached to blackness, such as white rappers (Fralely, 2009; Harkness, 2011; Oware, 2016) and white blues musicians (Rudinow, 1994; Grazian, 2005). Debates on privilege, greater visibility, faster ascent, cultural appropriation and lack of authenticity equally pervade all these fields.

White converts are therefore suspected of having weird intentions, partaking in cultural fantasies about Islam from a position of racial privilege, without having the capacity for religious sincerity and authenticity. The white American convert and prolific writer Michael Muhammad Knight wrote one day (2006: 87) : “I can say with authority that every white Muslim in America [is] at least a little off” and he included himself in this statement. “Off” refers to shallow, superficial, cultureless whites who convert to Islam for fun. “Here I am, a white man consuming Islam”, Knight further says, “by embracing what I love, I may poison it” (2011: 89). Successively suspected of being degenerate Westerners, white supremacists, infiltrated agents or religious appropriators, white converts are often perceived as having a hidden agenda: their incongruous presence in Muslim circles and their association with a history of domination cast doubts on their spiritual sincerity.

In sum, it can be argued that white converts’ racialness “remains indelible” and durably informs their interactions with and perceptions by coreligionists. Alternately revered or reviled, embraced or suspected, white converts emerge as highly contradictory figures within the Muslim community. Emblematic and controversial figures such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf epitomize these contradictions. Such dialectic of attraction/repulsion is also particularly visible in the marriage process.

⁵⁹ « J’ai vraiment essayé d’aller sur le terrain religieux, c’est-à-dire de sortir des hadiths, tu vois, tout ça. Et puis en fait je me suis rendu compte que eux ils se sentaient vexés en fait. Je me suis rendu compte de ça. Parce que pour eux c’était leur religion. Et donc c’était le Blanc qui s’accapare leur religion. C’était ça, vraiment c’était ça ».

C. GETTING MARRIED AMIDST RACIAL ISSUES

Having addressed the ambiguous position of white converts within the French and American Muslim communities at large, I now turn to a more specific examination of Islamic marriage, which crystallizes racial issues in a particularly powerful way.

1) The matrimonial process

Marriage is a central, if not the most central, preoccupation of converts. Many conceive of marriage with a Muslim spouse as the ultimate way of authenticating their religious shift and lock their conversion in. In classes or during conversations, my interviewees frequently mentioned the *hadith* according to which “whoever gets married has completed half of the religion.” A matrimonial Muslim website entitled Half Our Deen [*deen* means religion] also directly capitalizes on this idea. Marriage is an instrument to sustain one’s Muslim faith in this world, but also a fundamental act of piety in preparation for the hereafter. According to Noémie (27, housewife, Paris): “the objective of marriage is to come together again on the Day of Judgment, holding hands.⁶⁰” An Islamic religious wedding (alternatively called “*nikah*,” “*hlal*” or “*fatha*”) can be completed with a civil marriage, although that is not mandatory. While divorce is allowed in Islam (marriage is a contract, not a sacrament), the ideal is to find a spouse for life, and learn to love them progressively.

A Holy Grail, marriage is hard to attain. The first difficulty for converts is to comply with Islamic rulings regarding romantic relationships. A majority of legal opinions throughout the Muslim world consider that dating is not allowed and that sex out of wedlock is strictly forbidden. To be sure, a small portion of my interviewees (12 openly mentioned it to me) continued to engage in romantic and sexual relationships after their conversion, with more or less guilt depending on the individuals. Yet, the overwhelming majority of my sample tried to act by the book on this matter: they were determined to follow Islamic discipline and find a spouse the “*halal* way.” This implied meeting or being introduced to someone; talking to them on the phone, in a public space, or under the supervision of a third person (for women, usually a *wali* or male guardian); asking them a number of questions (job, way of life, education of children, etc.); restraining from any physical contact; taking advice from friends and relatives; asking permission from family members; in some cases making *istikharah* (specific prayer asking for guidance); and, if one the same wavelength, getting engaged and subsequently married.

Orthodox conceptions of Islamic marriage go against contemporary French and American romantic ideals. Although chemistry does need to operate between future Muslim spouses, whirlwind romance and sexual passion are not part of the picture. Except for a few who grew up in conservative Christian families, most of my interviewees had to *unlearn* their conceptions of love and stray from their romantic fantasies. Islamic marriage, they learned, was no Disney movie; and a Muslim husband did not have to be Prince Charming to be a good spouse from an Islamic standpoint. Converts also had to

⁶⁰ « Le mariage en fait, l’objectif, c’était... de... ouais de se retrouver au jour du Jugement dernier, côte à côte, main dans la main,... tu vois... Le but c’est l’au-delà ».

explain this to their parents, who were often very disturbed by the process, especially the absence of the girlfriend/boyfriend stage.

There is a number of avenues for converts to meet a Muslim spouse: the mosque, friends, Muslim associations, matrimonial websites, large Islamic conferences. Yet, all my interviewees contended that the Muslim community was going through a severe marriage crisis, both in France and the US. Many rolled their eyes, sighed heavily or even slapped their forehead when I brought up the matrimonial issue. “Marriage is ridiculous!” answered Edward (35, manager, Detroit). “It is an absolute disaster!” contended Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit). “There is a marriage crisis in France, clearly, and everybody knows it,⁶¹” said Melissa (27, project manager, Paris). Be they already married or in the process of trying to find a spouse, all my interviewees reported difficulties. Marriage was an obstacle race and one of the most challenging ordeals they encountered. Throughout the years of my fieldwork, countless blog posts and articles were published about the Muslim marriage predicament (Zuberi, 2013; Shaikh, 2014; Mohamed, 2016). Indicative of the extent of the crisis was also the large turn-up at conferences on marriage organized by *Bienvenue en Islam* in Paris: while other events usually attracted small audiences (mostly composed of converts), those on marriage were so packed (also with born Muslims) that an extra room had to be arranged for, with simultaneous transmission on a TV screen.⁶²

The current marriage crisis finds its root in the match-making process, which is drawn-out, and at times disastrous. The idealization of marriage as a crucial spiritual blessing and the urge to get married, coupled with family pressure, the various Islamic restrictions on gender interactions and the pervasiveness of Western secular romantic norms generate considerable anxiety among young practicing Muslims in the West. This can lead to hasty decisions that eventually translate into high divorce rates, especially among converts (Kompier, 2014). Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), a working-class white convert who was himself been married and divorced several times, made the following assessment: “talking about converts, there is at least a 90% of divorce rate. Probably like 150%. Almost everybody I know have been married and divorced at least 2 or 3-4 times. That’s the norm. So we are talking about the worst divorce rate in America!” Surveys (Ba-Yunus, 2001) have established that the divorce rate among American Muslims is around 31% (which is lower than the national average of 50%, but higher than most Muslim-majority countries).⁶³ However, more precise data on Muslim converts’ divorces is missing and I could not verify Umar’s claims. In France, Capucine (26, unemployed, Paris) was also driven to despair about her marriage prospects: “when I converted to Islam, I thought I would be able to raise a much more solid and stable family than Western families. But the 50% divorce rate also exists among Muslims.⁶⁴ So... my future prospects are lower than the ground floor right now. I feel really

⁶¹ « Il y a une crise du mariage aussi en France, clairement, tout le monde le sait ».

⁶² Fieldnotes, May 5th, 2016.

⁶³ Regarding interracial marriages, which are frequent among converts, there is no conclusive evidence that they are less stable than homogamous ones in the US (Zhang and Van Hook, 2009).

⁶⁴ In France, the divorce rate is around 45% (INSEE 2016). There is no available data on the divorce rate of French Muslims specifically and I could not verify Capucine’s claims. Studies on mixed marriages suggest that they are slightly more fragile than non-mixed marriages, but the evidence varies across nationalities and origins (Neyrand and M’Sili, 1998).

depressed.⁶⁵” In addition, a number of “horror stories” circulated among my interviewees about couples who hurriedly got married, until concealed issues of alcoholism, depression, violence, adultery, deception, financial manipulation or mere inability to interact with the other sex, made things unsustainable.

For both born Muslims and converts alike, therefore, the matrimonial process is envisioned as a complex journey fraught with pitfalls, uncertainty and dangers. Already a serious matter of concern, the issue of marriage is further heightened by racial considerations. In turn, the racial conflicts depicted in this chapter are also aggravated by matrimonial issues.

2) When race gets in the way

a) Sexualizing whiteness

Public outcry recently erupted among Chicago Muslims when a Muslim man of South Asian descent posted on the bulletin board of a mosque an index card with the following ad: “*Looking for a white wife. I am not looking for any Asian, African or Arab. Must be under 23.*” The man received countless phone calls from fellow Muslims saying that his ad was profoundly racist and that this type of requests was inappropriate in Islam. The mosque also received many emails from people in the community who did not understand why the board had agreed to publish the ad in the first place. Given the outrage, the ad was removed and the man severely admonished. If anything, the episode pointed at the existence of racialized sexual penchants – an uneasy topic that is usually silenced in the French and American societies. Once again, the Muslim community operated as a magnifying glass for larger societal problems.

During the matrimonial process, racialized preferences for white or light-skinned converts are frequently expressed. Brian (23, student, Chicago) commented on his matrimonial fetishization as a white male convert: “If you are white in Islam, you are even remotely attractive and you can talk, which is something that we assume most people can do, then you are like the top of the Muslim hierarchy in terms of marriage! It is fucking weird! Like, I need to ignore this for the sake of my own sanity.” Brian is embarrassed by his own romantic attractiveness among Muslims.

There are several explanations for this. Though their white skin, white converts are first associated with prestige and social success, which makes them attractive marriage partners. Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit), a very light-skinned Latina received awkward proposals from mostly South Asian men when she first entered the matrimonial market: “people were like: ‘oh you are going to get married easy because you are so white!’ or ‘oh you are so light-skinned, your mother-in-law is going to love you!’” Mariana felt uneasy that these considerations played a role at all in the wedding process. In the US, where the Black vs. White Divide translates into colorism issues, some converts pointed at disturbing considerations of generational skin-lightening in the preference for white

⁶⁵ « En me convertissant à l’islam, je pensais que j’allais pouvoir fonder une famille beaucoup plus solide et stable que les familles occidentales etc. et finalement les 50% de divorce existent aussi chez les musulmans. J’étais ‘mais... mes perspectives d’avenir là... pour moi elles sont aussi bas qu’au rez-de-chaussée !’ C’est la grosse déprime ».

convert spouses. For Monica (34, housewife, Chicago), who is Latina, immigrant Muslims “want mixed babies. They want, their little white color splash in there.” Deana (21, student, Chicago) who is African-American, made a similar assessment: “you definitely see a lot more mixed matches with white converts than black converts. Because a lot of people like to do the white-washing, like if they are Desi, in their own culture they want fair skin.”

Converts who were registered on international Muslim matrimonial websites also reported being targeted for citizenship reasons by Muslims living overseas (although many born Muslims are French and American citizens as well, the fact that they have Muslim-sounding names limits their exposure to such problem). Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), who is white American, did what he called a “little experiment” on such a website: “I put my characteristics into the thing and within hours, there is like 30 proposals from women in Morocco, Indonesia, for green cards,” he said. In Paris, the president of *Bienvenue en Islam* also reported that she received countless calls from Muslims in North Africa who wanted to marry a French convert. She usually told them to get lost.⁶⁶

White female bodies are construed as particularly appealing on the romantic market. Several of my white female interviewees mentioned the pressure they felt from some coreligionists to get married as soon as possible. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) reported traumatizing experiences when she first started contacting mosques to get support after her conversion:

I called a mosque and I said: “Hi, I recently converted and I don’t think I am praying right, can somebody help me pray?” And they are like [Mary is faking a South Asian accent]: “Oooh Sister! You need husband!!! We have many men here right now! You come over right now, you meet many men!!!!” And I am like “Nooooo!” [laughs]. I am thinking maybe he misunderstood my English but he said “No Mam! Husband help you pray!” So I hung up. And I was like “that was a really weird experience. I will call another place.” I am like “Hi... I recently converted and I need help praying...” “*Mash’Allah* sister!!! Come here, we have many men!!!!”

While Mary is probably exaggerating her story for the sake of making it entertaining, Monica (34, housewife, Chicago), a light-skinned Latina, felt the same type of urge during her first years as a Muslim: “literally, you don’t even know how to pronounce the prayer’s words and they want you to get married. It’s like ‘slow down!’” Her husband Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) nodded in agreement; he had noticed the same phenomenon in his mosque: “honestly, if a Caucasian sister becomes Muslim in a *masjid* and the *masjid* has a fairly good population... I may be exaggerating, right, but she might get several proposals that night!” Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), who is a white convert, was very sarcastic about the attractiveness of white female converts in the Muslim community: “all these Arabs are crazy for white women. All of the Desis are too. You know what I am trying to say. The white woman immediately becomes more popular than she has ever been in her life. She has increased her value in the romantic field, right. All of a sudden, they became very valuable. Very valuable!”

⁶⁶ « Il y a des gens du bled qui nous contactent car ils veulent se marier avec une convertie ! Je peux vous dire que je sais les recevoir ceux là !!! » Fieldnotes, May 5th, 2016.

Entering the matrimonial market, white women find themselves exposed to new sexual objectifications. Previously unmarked, their whiteness becomes salient and is coupled with a set of traits and characteristics that are not necessarily in tune with how they represent themselves. One of those traits is sexual looseness. Consider the example of Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis) who grew up in a strict Protestant household and never dated anyone throughout her whole life. Victoria reported being deeply hurt by some of the sexual assumptions that were made about her when she started looking for a Muslim husband:

When it comes to the matrimonial thing, really men assume the worst of white women who convert! They assume that we are in for anything. (...) It gets very uncomfortable. (...) I think there is an assumption that because we are white American females, we must have led a certain type of life. When I was in college, I was involved in MSA, the Muslim Student Association. I was on the board and we were having a board meeting and... this one girl started talking about (...) who would be what in a horror film, you know, cheesy horror movies. And I would joke around, you know, “oh one of my friends said I would be the idiot running up the stairs!”

And she is like: “oh we wouldn’t say that would be you!”

And I am like “well, what would you say?” You know, I was just curious.

And this guy was like “don’t tell her...”

I am like “what?”

She is like “well, you know, the non-virgin dies first.”

I am like “wait! First of all, you are talking about me behind my back! You are making assumptions about me and you are doing this in mixed company. So basically it turns you give me this reputation that I don’t have!” So I mean, I felt really hurt by that. That they just assumed that I was this type of person.

All of Victoria’s Muslim friends had assumed she was not a virgin because she is a white American woman. She was shocked to learn that she had been the object of much gossip in the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit) who is of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent also encountered similar sexual objectifications as a Latina woman when she started meeting Muslim men online. Although she was raised in a strict Catholic household and never had a boyfriend, she was deemed a high sexual achiever by her suitors, an assumption she found very shocking: “when my *wali* [male representative⁶⁷] wouldn’t be in the email thread or on G-chat, there would be some things like: ‘oh... you must be really good in bed...’ You know, jungle fever. It is like, I understand you are hormonal, but God!!! How dare you???? How dare you!!!!????” In my sample, a number of mostly conservative women, quite prudish by French and American standards, were suddenly portrayed as sexually open, a representation that did not align with their conceptions of self but made them attractive romantic partners.

b) Reluctant in-laws and endogamy

Because of the above reasons, several of my interviewees consider that white converts are priced assets on the Muslim matrimonial market and garner many more

⁶⁷ Having no Muslim male family member, Mariana asked the husband of one her Muslim friends to act as her *wali* during the marriage process;

proposals than others. Yet, others disagree and reckon that they were clearly disadvantaged in terms of marriage prospects.

The difficult position of converts primarily stems from issues of endogamy among some immigrant Muslims, who want their children to marry someone from their country of origin. Many converts in my sample had met born Muslims they really liked and wanted to marry, until families intervened. In the US, James (48, English professor, Detroit) noted: “if families really want their kids to marry within a specific cultural group, that’s really difficult for converts. However much you hit it off, that person’s parents might mix the process completely.” In France, Eleonore (37, sales assistant, Paris) also knew of “families that completely ruined the relationship of a future couple because the spouse was not from that country or that city or this or that.”⁶⁸

Born Muslim families can be particularly apprehensive of converts, either because they are deemed “not Muslim enough” (unreliable believers, lacking the culture and likely to go back to their “old ways”) or because they are perceived as “too much Muslim” (rigid practitioners of the faith who are going to lecture them on the religion). In Detroit, Edward (35, manager) discovered at first-hand this type of suspicion. It took him years to meet his current wife: “I was looking to get married for years. And I am a really social guy, I am very active in the community. And I couldn’t find one person to even talk to for marriage. And I was like... this is ridiculous! If I can’t find someone to talk to, what is a shy convert supposed to do? It is very annoying. People don’t actually want you to marry their daughters. So then you only get women that are, like, overweight, or... they have a wonky eye or something! [laughs] And I am like ‘come on! You have a pretty daughter! Why don’t you suggest her to me?’” As a convert, Edward felt like the fifth wheel of the Muslim matrimonial market, who was only offered the least attractive women.

During interviews, converts lamented that they did not have the right origin to get married. Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) who has had many traumatic experiences trying to find a husband, explained:

I kept dealing with these guys who would start something and then be like: “you know, my Mom, she is not going to accept this. She wants me to marry somebody from my own culture. It’s not going to work out.” And I would be heart-broken. And I kept dealing with it over and over and over. And then, I had people at the mosque, who wanted to be my friend to help teach me, but when I asked them: “would you ever let me marry your son?” They would be like: “no... , no, no, no, I want someone from where we are from.” And I would be like... I don’t even want to be friends with somebody who is only going to accept me from a limited perspective like: “you can have dinner with us but you can’t never be part of our family. Because you’re white and that’s just not OK.” That hit my core. That was really really hard.

Mary’s case is not isolated. When looking for a husband, Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit), who is of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, met a South Asian-American man whom she liked, but strong opposition from his father crushed her hopes: “his father refused to meet me because I was Latina. He said ‘we don’t marry Mexicans, they mow our lawns.’” Coming from another immigrant, such comment was experienced as very violent by Mariana. In addition to the stereotype of Latino men doing menial work, Mariana also had to confront remarks on the alleged sexual promiscuity of Latinas:

⁶⁸ « Des familles qui ont complètement cassé tu vois la relation d’un futur couple parce que ça collait pas, parce que il vient pas de telle ville, de tel machin ».

When I converted, I remember this Desi auntie [older women] being very surprised because in her mind being Latino was being promiscuous. So she said “how can you be Latina and Muslim, that does not make sense, they are complete opposites.” And I was like “what do you mean they are complete opposites?” She was like “you know, Latinas, they have kids when they are young, they don’t finish school.” And I just kind of looked at her and I was just livid.

The older Indian woman enforced strict sexual boundaries around Islam, which she held was incompatible with being Latina, an identity she associates with irresponsible sexual behavior. In fact, the alleged sexual attractiveness of Latina or white women is often what renders them unsuitable to Muslim families, who are looking for “appropriate” stepdaughters. In France, Ophélie (26, legal assistant, Lille), who also never had a boyfriend because her parents are very strict, faced the same type of assumptions: “for many, being French means living a quote unquote ‘degenerated’ life: ‘they do whatever they want,’ ‘they go out at whatever time, with whoever,’ etc.”⁶⁹ Such representations can make the process of finding a husband particularly difficult for white female converts, who often end up being dismissed by Muslim families.

Faced with family opposition, many converts get discouraged. Pablo (22, student, Chicago) who is black and Latino, reported being heartbroken after an Arab-American woman he was really fond of turned him away because of family issues: “there was a girl and we liked each other a lot, but... her family wasn’t going to have it. I wasn’t Arab. It is not that I wasn’t Muslim. I wasn’t Arab. Sometimes race gets in the way! So that was tough for me. Because I really liked her. And I really genuinely cared for her. So I kind of gave up on trying to talk to people, like, a different race in the Muslim community.” Affected by such racial obstacles, Pablo resigned himself to marry someone from his own racial background. After several failures, Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille) took the same decision: “the problem is my non-North Africanness. Parents are defiant, because I am neither Moroccan, nor Algerian, nor Tunisian, nor Mauritanian, etc.”⁷⁰ Still single, Ludovic has restricted his spousal search to female converts because he envisions less trouble.

Others, by contrast, persisted in the face of adversity and eventually married the person they had chosen, by forcing the hand of reluctant in-laws. Caroline (28, PhD student, Marseille) married the man she loved against the will of his parents, who wanted him to marry a Moroccan woman. Caroline was shocked by such opposition, since she had been a long-time friend of the family and had always been warmly accepted as a convert. Yet, marriage was a different thing. Intertwined with issues of sexuality, offspring, respect of traditions, family honor and cultural transmission, ethno-racial issues take on utmost importance in the marriage process. As a non-Moroccan woman, Caroline could be a family friend, but not a daughter-in-law. Caroline and her future husband struggled: “everybody ganged up on us. And they didn’t come to the wedding. Only my mother-in-law eventually showed up at the last minute.”⁷¹ Even though her mother-in-

⁶⁹ « Pour beaucoup être Français, c’est avoir une vie un peu, entre guillemets, ‘débraillée’ : ‘elles font ce qu’elles veulent, elles sortent à n’importe quelle heure, avec qui que ce soit’ tout ça ».

⁷⁰ « Se pose le problème de ma... non-maghrébinité. C’est surtout les parents qui sont réfractaires, hein. Moi je suis ni marocain, ni algérien, ni tunisien, ni mauritanien... ».

⁷¹ « En 6 mois on s’est mariés. Il fallait faire très vite parce que tout le monde s’est ligué contre nous. (...) Et donc ils sont pas venus. Enfin, ma belle-mère, à la fin, quand même, elle est venue au mariage ».

law liked her very much, she was worried about the consequences of such wedding on her family reputation and on the transmission of Moroccan cultural traditions to her grand-children.

To be sure, converts are not the only ones facing such issues. Among born Muslims themselves, marriages between Arabs and South Asians, North Africans and Africans, Algerians and Moroccans, or between South Asians of different castes or different regions are also often the object of much resistance. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit) reported the case of an imam in Rochester who was fired from his mosque because he had agreed to marry two Pakistani-American Muslims against the will of their own families, who objected to the marriage because the spouses did not come from the same socio-economic background. “They kicked him out. It is just mind-boggling!,” she said. Looking at several of his Muslim friends’ marriage ordeals, Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) also commented: “It is hard for converts but actually it is hard for everybody. I have a friend who is Tunisian and he married a Moroccan. Believe me, in his Tunisian family, the knives are out! If tomorrow he says to his mom ‘let’s cancel it,’ she is gonna jump for joy. And I know a lot of people like that. I even knew of one who had to marry a woman from his village back in Tunisia, because his mother didn’t want ‘a Northern Tunisian.’ That’s how far it can get.”⁷²

The interference with children’s spousal choices and the injunction to endogamy is strongly generational and a feature of first-generation immigrants. It is tied to the experience of migration and the necessity of ensuring the transmission of culture, traditions and values from the country of origin (Streiff-Fénart, 1985; Hammouche, 1990; Kibria, 2009). In this context, “marrying out” is seen as unconceivable.

c) Black converts

While issues of endogamy sometimes get in the way of white converts trying to get married, they are particularly acute for black converts, who often find themselves at the bottom of the Muslim hierarchy in terms of marriage. Because whiteness embodies neutrality, universalism, integration and social prestige, white converts often succeed to overcome ethnocentric considerations. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) noticed this phenomenon amongst his born Muslim friends of African, North African or South Asian descent: “if they can’t bring someone from their own community, the best thing for them to do is to bring a French person. That can work. A French person will be accepted anyways. Three days ago, I was at my friend’s and his mother told him straight up: ‘if it is not an Algerian, then bring me a French woman. But I don’t want to see a Moroccan or a Tunisian. And let’s not even talk about blacks!’”⁷³ The ability of French or American

⁷² « C’est encore un truc un peu difficile pour les convertis, mais pour tout le monde finalement. Parce que regarde, moi j’ai un ami il est Tunisien. Il s’est marié avec une Marocaine, bah crois-moi, du côté de sa famille tunisienne, c’est la guerre quoi. Mais vraiment tu sens que sa mère, si demain il lui dit ‘non j’annule tout’, elle saute de joie tu vois. Et j’en connais, j’en connais, j’en connais. J’en connaissais même un qui a été obligé de se marier avec une fille de son village, tu vois, parce que sa mère c’était ‘pas une tunisienne du Nord’. Tu vois ça peut... tu sais, on peut aller super loin ».

⁷³ « Malgré tout, ce qui passera le mieux, si tu ramènes pas quelqu’un de la communauté originelle, c’est de ramener un Français. Tu vois ce que je veux dire. Ça passera, vas-y ! Le Français, il passe quand même. Il y a trois jours, j’étais chez mon pote, sa mère elle lui a dit texto : ‘si c’est pas une Algérienne, au pire ramène-moi une Française. Mais je peux pas voir de Marocaine, je veux pas voir de Tunisienne. Et je te parle pas de Noires et tout ça. Là, ça c’est inenvisageable !’ ».

white converts to transcend ethnic preferences is typically unavailable to black converts, whose racialness is constructed as indelible and stigmatizing.

Black female converts specifically have the hardest time getting married (Tahrir, 2013). In France, Fabiola (26, recruitment officer, Lille), a black convert of Haitian descent who is currently looking for a practicing Muslim husband, told me she envisioned a lot of difficulties: “I am a convert and in addition, I am black. So I know that as far as marriage is concerned, it is going to be a problem.”⁷⁴ Repeated rejections from potential husbands or in-laws generate deep self-esteem issues among black female converts. Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago) a black woman who eventually got married to Boran (35, professor), a Cambodian-American convert, commented on the loneliness and desperation of black Muslim women in her entourage:

Unfortunately, there is a great pain in the African-American community amongst women that they often are not chosen. I think it does not get talked about because part of it is a taboo, part of it is really painful. Extremely. Literally, you sit in the *masjid* and you watch this sister, this sister and this sister, everyone is getting married. I mean it is extremely painful. (...) A lot of African-American sisters are saying, excuse my French, “screw it! I am just going to marry a non-Muslim! No one wants me. I am waiting, and I am waiting and I am waiting, no one wants me! I am going to marry a non-Muslim!” And the other one is... “I just... I will be a co-wife. You know... at least I have somebody. At least I can have a halal relationship. You know, half, part-time.” They are willing to settle, you know.

The relegation of African-American women at the very end of the Muslim matrimonial market often leads them to turn to fallback solutions in order to escape their single status. These solutions include marrying outside the fold or resigning themselves to being a second wife in a polygamous household. The sensitive topic of African-American Muslim women accepting polygyny (multiple-wife Islamic marriage) to sustain themselves has been extensively studied by Majeed (2015), who demonstrates that such difficult choices are also rooted in an ethics of sisterhood, in which co-wives support one another in the face of adversity. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit), an African-American woman still struggling to find a spouse, actually fantasizes about creating communities of Muslim women to overcome her solitude: “this is epidemic... the whole marriage situation... too many sisters... we can’t continue living alone. You know, I think we need to get together, to have communities of women, so that we don’t fall into absolute depression and hopelessness.”

In those circumstances, Alisha does not accept the lamentations of white converts complaining that it is hard for them to get married: “I think that what they don’t understand is that there is a level of white privilege that people have here. I go to a *halaqa* [religious gathering] that is predominantly African and African-American sisters, so we joke all the time that when a white sister comes in and she says “*la ilaha...*”, all of the sudden, it is: “oh I have a brother for you!” [laughs]. But there are five black sisters sitting there, who have been in the community forever! And it is sometimes a little frustrating when you do hear white converts like ‘oh! It is so hard!’” Alisha asserts that converts’ prospects in terms of marriage are deeply racialized and that, if things can at times be complicated for white converts, it is nothing in comparison to the predicament of black converts.

⁷⁴ « Moi je suis convertie et en plus je suis noire. Donc je sais que je peux être intégrée mais dès qu’il est question de mariage, ça devient un problème ».

d) Religion, mixed marriages and the future of the Muslim community

Faced with various racialized obstacles in the marriage process, many converts enlist religious arguments to advocate for more interracial marriages. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit), who is African-American, is up in arms against racial discrimination in marriage and frequently uses prophetic examples to counter racism. She mentioned the life of the Prophet Muhammad who married Sawda bint Zam'a, a black widow from Abyssinia (etymologically, *sawda* refers to blackness in Arabic). Sawda subsequently came to be known as “Mother of the believers,” which makes her, a black woman, a central figure of Islam. Kathleen also talked about Hajar, the black Egyptian wife of patriarch Ibrahim (Abraham) and the mother of Ishmael in the Islamic tradition. She chastises her immigrant coreligionists who seem to ignore this history when refusing to marry out: “If the prophets could marry interracially, what makes you think you can't? What makes you think you are above that? You know... it gets me so angry!”, she said. Racialized or cultural preferences in marriage are frequently dismissed as un-Islamic remnants of *jahiliyyah* by my interviewees.

Such theologically-oriented discourse has an impact on the younger generations. The preference for racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic endogamy, well-entrenched among first-generation immigrants, is clearly declining among second-generation and third-generation Muslims, who tend to put the priority on *religious* endogamy. As part of the global Islamic revival (Roy, 2004), the central criterion for marriage has become piety and righteousness. Increasingly detaching themselves from the practices of their parents, younger Muslims looking for a spouse now favor conformity to Islam over parochialism. This trend has been documented in France (Boubekeur, 2004; Arslan, 2010: 255-259; Jouanneau, 2013: 215-224; Puzenat, 2015) and in the US (Hermansen, 1991: 198; Al-Johar, 2005; Grewal, 2009).

Interracial weddings are therefore more and more numerous and converts directly contribute to increasing the racial diversity of the French and American Muslim communities. Marriages between Latino converts and South Asian born Muslims are for instance particularly common in Chicago. The future of children born in mixed convert families and their impact on race relations within the Muslim community is worth considering. Contemplate the example of Mariana (29, housewife, Detroit) and her husband Samuel (25, campaign strategist, Detroit). She is Mexican and Puerto Rican and he is African-American and Native American. She was raised in a Catholic family; he hails from a Protestant household and they both are Muslim converts. They have three children together. Mariana commented on their future: “they are Puerto-Rican, Mexican, Lakota Indian and black. Is their race going to be an issue?” Mariana asks an important question. How are racial issues going to unfold in the French and American Muslim communities as children born from such mixed marriages grow up? Such question will warrant thorough investigation in the coming decades.

D. CONCLUSION: THE EXPERIENCE OF “FOURTHNESS”

In an article reviewing the literature on multi-racial religious congregations, Edwards et al. (2013) write that “*there is no better modern social site by which to understand how religion reinforces racial stratification (or not) than racially diverse religious organizations.*” Envisioning the French and American Muslim communities as multi-racial religious settings, this chapter has provided yet another vantage on the intersecting fault lines of race and religion, by examining how racial stratification manifests itself among Muslims.

I have demonstrated that the broader dynamics of race present in the French and American societies are replicated within Muslim communities, which operate like a magnifying glass on the topic. The American Muslim community is structured by the cleavage between African-American Islam and Immigrant Islam, which maps onto larger debates on race and immigration, as structured by the Black vs. White Divide. Immigrant Muslims’ high socioeconomic status and aspiration towards whiteness sharply differentiates them from their black coreligionists. The two groups compete over the definition of American Islam. Immigrant Muslims promote a mainstream, middle-class and friendly American Islam that gravitates towards the pole of whiteness in the Black vs. White Divide. Their civic integration through religion requires a double differentiation from the suspicion of terrorism on the one hand, and from the legacy of African-American Islam on the other hand, which is geared towards blackness and a subversion of the racial order. African-American Muslims have been resisting this erasure. By contrast, in the French case, the Muslim community is characterized by the overwhelming demographic dominance of North Africans, who tend to be socioeconomically marginalized. Their uneasy position in the Post-Colonial Foreigner vs. Native Divide, combined with the cultural Unintelligibility of Religion in the French context, complicates their integration prospects.

White converts fit uneasily into these divides. Among French and American Muslims, the social prestige, universalism and enlightenment commonly associated with white skin generate complex dynamics, whereby white converts are alternately revered and reviled. In the US, white converts are often strategically enlisted by Immigrant Islam as tokens of “respectability” and belonging to the mainstream. In France, they can also be used as legitimate public faces for a stigmatized minority. Yet, in a context of growing racial and religious insecurity, white converts can also be suspected of infiltrating Muslim minorities with a hidden agenda of police surveillance, racial domination or religious appropriation. In any case, the politics of *race* cast doubts on the sincerity of the *faith* that motivates converts.

According to Gerardo Marti (2008), religious racial integration in multi-racial religious congregations is achieved when a common religious identity manages to transcend racial and ethnic classifications. For many of my convert interviewees, the Islamic potential for racial reconciliation has not been properly exploited by French and American Muslims. In spite of their claims of religious authenticity and their attempts to integrate a universal Islamic brotherhood, racial considerations continue to durably structure converts’ social experiences within the French and American Muslim communities. Specifically, their whiteness, which is usually unmarked, is rendered very visible and determining for daily interactions. As I have demonstrated, racial issues are

particularly salient in the marriage process, which coalesces a number of sensitive concerns linked to piety, sexuality, family stability, cultural and religious transmission. In this domain, a shared Muslim identity does not prove sufficient to overthrow racial differences and whiteness is endowed with particularly ambivalent meanings (sexual attractiveness, moral undesirability, etc.).

At the end of Part 2, it appears that converts are embroiled in a multiple and at times contradictory set of racial objectifications, which propels new interrogations in their mind and produces strong ethical dilemmas. Having chosen Islam primarily as a faith, converts have to confront race and cannot escape reflecting on it. A case of racial/religious misfit, white converts specifically occupy a rare and uneasy social position: that of the “double minority.” *As Muslims*, they make the experience of being a *stigmatized minority* in the French and American context (Chapter 5). *As whites*, they make the experience of being a *visible numerical minority* within the Muslim community, whose incongruous presence generates mixed feelings of awe and suspicion.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007 [1903]: 8), W.E.B. DuBois talks about the “double consciousness” of African-Americans, which he defines as a sense of “two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” This twoness, which stems from African-Americans’ racial objectification as an undesirable minority, generates a “strife, [a] longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge [t]his double self into a better and truer self.” The African-American, he writes, “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows.” DuBois’ theory of double consciousness has been applied to the experience of Muslims living in the West (Bayoumi, 2008), who find themselves at odds with their true selves because of the multiple layers of prejudice and stereotype projected onto them. In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated that white converts to Islam experience to some extent the same pains and dilemmas associated with the “souls of Muslim folk” (Bazian, 2013). Yet, in addition, white converts also experience a modified manifestation of the “souls of white folk,” also studied by DuBois (2005 [1920]; Hughey and Byrd, 2013). Usually characterized by ignorance and invisibility, the souls of white folk become self-aware within the Muslim community, where whiteness is subject to racial reification and endowed with a variety of meanings. Because of their positioning as a double minority, it can be argued that white converts to Islam experience a sense of “fourthness,” stemming from the merging of their double consciousness as Muslims living in Western societies and as whites evolving in religious settings where they are not a majority. In sum, they experience a double racial bind, that of racialized Muslimness, marked as inferior; and that of whiteness, marked as superior.

TRANSITION

So far, this dissertation has demonstrated two things: having embraced Islam as a faith within the repertoire of religious individualism (Part 1), converts have to face the social fact of race and wear the “mark of the plural” (Part 2). The conclusions of Part 2 are definitive: be it in the larger society or in the Muslim community itself, converts are exposed to a variety of racial assumptions, which are themselves tied to various

semantics, alternately degrading or over-valorizing, but always essentializing. As Muslims in the French or American society, and as whites within the French or American Muslim communities, converts have lost control over their definition of self. In Part 3, I turn to the various strategies used by converts to overcome the challenges posed by this *quadruple consciousness* and reclaim agency over their identity. Chapter 7 investigates how converts attempt to redefine Muslimness as a purely religious category, detached from race, ethnicity or culture. Chapter 8 shows that, in addition to redefining religion, converts are also involved in the reformulation of whiteness.

PART 3

**REDEFINING RACE AND
RELIGION**

CHAPTER 7 – REDEFINING ISLAM

DIFFERENTIATING CULTURE FROM RELIGION

Faced with various racial ascriptions and normative injunctions, converts try to reclaim control over their religion and reconnect with the reasons that made them chose Islam in the first place. They re-invest the language of “religious authenticity” highlighted in Chapter 1 to provide new interpretations of what Islam should be; or rather what it should not. One of converts’ central strategies in this regard is to dissociate Islam from Muslims. Almost all my interviewees repeated as a mantra that Islam as a religion exists beyond the necessarily faulty practices of born Muslims. This intense boundary work, which other scholars studying converts have documented as well (Jensen, 2006; Leman et al., 2010; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Brun, 2014; Mossière, 2014; Özyürek, 2014; Puzenat, 2015; Vroon, forthcoming), materializes in a great variety of ways: “I think the bottom line is Islam is perfect and Muslims especially are not,” said Bob (19, student) in St. Louis. In Paris, the president of *Bienvenue en islam* also drummed the following sentence into new members’ heads: “Live Islam without Muslims. I repeat: live Islam without Muslims.¹” I collected countless similar statements in my interviews, which also echoed public declarations made by famous converts in the media. Singer and British convert Cat Stevens *aka* Yusuf Islam is frequently quoted as having said “Thank God I learned about Islam before I met Muslims.” In a testimony published online, a French convert named Géraldine also stated: “I chose Islam, not Muslims.²” The distinction between Islam and Muslims is therefore central to converts’ discourse. By separating the belief system from its believers, converts can clean up their lives from the influence of social forces and retrieve a feeling of religious purity.

The distinction hinges more specifically upon a separation between “religion” (understood as good) and “culture” (understood as potentially harmful). In their endeavor to carve out a space for themselves within Islam, converts wage a war against what they designate holistically as “North African,” “South Asian” or “Middle Eastern” culture, which, in their view, weigh upon “Islam” in undesirable ways. Irrespective of academic definitions of “culture” (Tylor, 1958 [1871]; Swidler, 1986) which insist on its fluctuating and malleable character, my interviewees use “culture” as a category of practice and refer to it as a reified ensemble of customs and traditions, usually determined by national origin. For the sake of understanding their views, and at the risk of hurting the sociological eye, I follow in this chapter their appreciation of culture. I subscribe to James Clifford’s acknowledgment that “there are times when we still need to be able to speak holistically of Japanese or Trobriand or Moroccan culture in the confidence that we are designating something real and differentially coherent” (Clifford, 1988: 230).

¹ « Vivez l’Islam sans les musulmans. Je répète vivez l’Islam sans les musulmans ». Fieldnotes, September 20th, 2014.

² « J’ai choisi l’islam, pas les musulmans » (Kefi, 2013).

I identify three main critiques of born Muslims’ “culture” (contaminating, hegemonic, backward) which translate into three different paths for Islamic reform (fundamentalist, re-aculturating and re-interpretative). In these different endeavors, converts emerge as “redefiners of religion” and participate in the so-called “Islamic revival,” along with like-minded second and third generation Muslims who also reject the cultural traditions of their parents. To be sure, these three paths are unequally distributed across contexts: structural patterns influence the strategies that are available to converts and national differences become particularly clear in this regard. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the controversies surrounding each of these paths and an examination of the unexpected “comeback of race,” which is at times simmering in the contemporary reformulations of religion by converts.

A. DISSOCIATING RELIGION FROM CULTURE: THREE CRITIQUES

Converts designate people who were raised in Muslim families with a variety of terms: “born Muslims,” “heritage Muslims,” “*musulmans de naissance*” (Muslims by birth), or “*musulmans de souche*” (rooted Muslims). This designation frequently comes with a critique. Muslim converts criticize born Muslims on three grounds: 1) for lacking diligence in their practice and contaminating the religion with superstition, folklore and politics (culture as contaminating); 2) for imposing parochial cultural practices as universal Islamic norms (culture as hegemonic); 3) for importing social evils inherited from their cultural traditions into Islam (culture as backward). These criticisms are detailed in the following sections. They tend to be expressed by different people and reveal three interrelated yet distinctive concerns: a concern for the religious purity of Islam; a concern for cultural comfort within Islam; a concern for social justice and equality.

1) A concern for religious purity: a critique of culture as contaminating and desacralizing Islam

a) Non-practicing “cultural” Muslims

First, converts are invested in a strategy of boundary-making between what they call “cultural” or “ethnic” Muslims (born into the religion but not practicing it with diligence) and “religious” Muslims (who are serious about Islam, whether they were born into it or not). Most of my interviewees have a marked preference for the latter. Throughout my research, I frequently heard them reprimanding born Muslims for calling themselves Muslim without substantiating this label with actual religious practice or knowledge of the religion. Fazil (28, sports coach, Chicago) whose father’s side of the family are Bosnian Muslims,³ said about them: “there are people in my family who would say they are Muslim but they don’t practice what they preach, they don’t do what they say and they don’t walk the talk, you know what I mean?” After his conversion, Fazil

³ Fazil’s mother is a Mexican-American Evangelical Christian and he was mostly raised by her, hence his fitting the category of “convert.”

strictly differentiated himself from his Muslim side of the family, whom he considers as “name-tag Muslims” rather than actual practitioners of the faith. My French interviewees also used a variety of words to designate non-practicing born Muslims. Ghislaine (57, clerk, Lille) calls them the “*Ramadanques*,” i.e. people who only fast during the month of Ramadan but do not respect any of the Islamic prescriptions during the other months of the year. Jean (23, student, Paris) laughed about those he calls “*les musulmans pratiquement pratiquants*” (a pun about practically practicing Muslims). Through their encounters with those they call “cultural Muslims,” converts are led to question their definition of the religion of Islam. What does being Muslim mean? What does it entail? Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) is for example particularly unsettled by the behavior of his own wife, a born Muslim from Mali.

I avoid talking about it, because I feel I am judging her but... I wonder at times... Is Islam about spirituality and believing in God, or is it cultural? Because me, I think that at some point you need to be connected to some form of Islamic practice in order to... I mean there is no problem, I think God welcomes everyone in His mercy, but... you can't really call yourself a Muslim if you are not connected to anything in terms of practice... And she... She does not pray. She does not celebrate Ramadan. She does not fast... So sometimes I ask myself: ‘is she Muslim ???’ [laughs]⁴

Thibault argues that practice is central to Muslim identification and the fact that his wife’s behavior does not correspond to his definition leaves him perplexed: “is she really a Muslim?,” he asks. Thibault also worries at times about his own children. They identify as Muslims but Thibault feels he has failed at transmitting them the content and substance of the religion. Thinking of himself as a “religious Muslim,” Thibault has fathered “cultural Muslims.”

As they partake in strict boundary making with those they see as non-practicing cultural Muslims, converts progressively redefine Islam as a purely religious category which involves firm belief and diligent practice, rather than loose inherited cultural affiliation. For instance, the conflict between so-called “religious” and “cultural” Muslims manifests itself at the linguistic level, over the use of Islamic expressions such as *Insh’Allah*. Most of my interviewees consider *Insh’Allah* as a deeply religious word, intended to act as a reminder of God’s absolute power. When making plans for the future, they pronounce it to remind themselves that, although they will do their best to ensure the plan is fulfilled, ultimately everything lies in God’s hands. Hence, a sentence like “I will pick you up tomorrow, *Insh’Allah*” is to be interpreted as “you can absolutely count on me to pick you up tomorrow, except if God decides to take you or me during the night.” The expression is used as a daily reminder of the fragility of life and the ultimate supremacy of God’s plans. By contrast, my interviewees consider that many “cultural Muslims” make a secular use of the word, sometimes with an offhand attitude. The above sentence is then to be interpreted in a sarcastic manner, as: “it is unlikely I will pick you up tomorrow because I don’t really want to, but you can still pray to God that I will change

⁴ « J’évite de parler comme ça, parce que je me sens un peu juge, quoi. Mais... .. est-ce que l’islam c’est une spiritualité de croire en Dieu ou il y a aussi ce côté culturel ? Parce qu’à mon avis... à un moment donné pour moi aussi il faut se rattacher à des pratiques qui sont de l’ordre de l’islam pour... après il y a pas de problème, hein, moi je pense que Dieu Il accepte tout le monde dans Sa miséricorde, mais on peut pas vraiment dire qu’on est musulman... si on se rattache à rien qui soit de l’ordre des pratiques... Et elle, des fois je... enfin ... elle ne prie pas... elle ne fait pas le Ramadan, elle ne jeûne pas... elle... donc des fois je me suis dit ‘est-ce que... est-ce qu’elle est musulmane ?’ [rires] ».

my mind.” A teacher at the *Chicago mosque*, who was born in an Algerian Muslim family but defines himself as a “religious Muslim,” considered this usage as offensive and misleading: “for us who were raised in Muslim families, these words have become a habit, they have even become jokey. This is wrong; it shouldn’t be like that. It is important to taste the real meaning of these words when we pronounce them.⁵” The linguistic misunderstanding between religious Muslims and cultural Muslims is therefore subtle but profound. For the former, daily language is to be interspersed with religious words as a tool to attain constant spiritual awareness. Converts especially make an extra effort to punctuate their speech with performative words to authenticate their religious shift. For the later, on the contrary, these words have been acculturated into the language and have lost their religious meaning: they are used casually and naturally, without a necessary religious reference in mind (similar to expressions like “Christ!” in English, and “*Nom de Dieu!*” in French).

Some of my interviewees tie “being Muslim” to high levels of demand in terms of religious sincerity and diligence. Such is the case of Isabelle (30, unemployed, France), a very faithful and devout woman embodying rectitude and moral correctness, who laments the state of the *ummah* and the shallowness of those who call themselves “Muslim.” “Islam has become a hollow shell. So-called Muslim countries are Muslim only by name. It is empty, flat, meaningless. It is terrible what’s happening.⁶” An activist in the pro-Palestinian movement, Isabelle was particularly shocked and disappointed when she visited the Palestinian city of Nablus during the month of Ramadan, a trip she had been looking forward to as a rejuvenating spiritual experience. Instead, she found a city animated by shopping frenzy, rather than faith. “People were preoccupied with consumption and comfort. They had something called the ‘Shopping Festival.’ The shopping festival... Come on. In Nablus. People were not going to the mosque. In the evening, they would spend their time watching the Ramadan TV series ‘Bab whatever...’⁷ I felt a big void. It was all about shopping, shopping, shopping.⁸” Isabelle was unsettled by the display of wealth over that of religious fervor. Having rooted her spirituality against capitalism and materialism, she was angry about her coreligionists’ lack of seriousness regarding religious matters. For her, they were Muslims “only by name.”

b) Syncretism and superstition

In addition to practicing Islam loosely, my interviewees accused cultural Muslims of having tainted it with inappropriate cultural content, that is, of having damaged its religious purity and sacred dimension. Many of my interviewees contended that some of

⁵ Fieldnotes, October 17th, 2013.

⁶ « Pour moi-même l’islam aujourd’hui c’est devenu une coquille vide en fait... les pays musulmans ils ont de musulman que le nom et vraiment pour moi, c’est vide, c’est vide de profondeur, de sens. Enfin c’est... c’est terrible hein ce qui se passe ».

⁷ Isabelle is making reference to the very popular Syrian TV series “Bal al Hara,” which was broadcasted throughout the Arab world during the month of Ramadan in 2014.

⁸ « Les gens ils étaient dans la consommation, le confort, machin. (...) Et le festival du shopping. A Naplouse. Moi, ça m’a trop choquée. Le festival du shopping. Quand même enfin... le festival du shopping, quoi. Les gens ils allaient pas à la mosquée, ils passaient leur temps devant le feuilleton du Ramadan, ‘Bab je sais pas quoi’ tu vois. (...) J’ai senti un grand vide en fait... les magasins ils étaient ouverts tard le soir, jusqu’à genre 2-3h du matin et c’est l’effervescence dans la rue, mais shopping, shopping, shopping... et du coup ça m’a interpellée ».

the things practiced by born Muslims were not actually Islamic but the remnants of traditions, folklore or superstitions imported from their countries of origin. Boran (35, professor, Chicago) who discovered after his conversion that his Cambodian mother was ethnically Muslim (see Introduction) lamented what he saw as superstitious practices on her part, which were based on pseudo-Islamic beliefs without any religious foundation:

She would tell me things that went against Islam. You know, like she would talk about spirits in the house. She would even... like... tape various pages of the Qur'an on doorways to keep spirits out of the house. So things that you would see as *bid'ah**, right? Innovation that is considered haram. That's how she was brought up. Much of her understanding of Islam was mixed with Buddhist and Cambodian spiritual beliefs.

Boran has been cautious not to embrace some of the practices and beliefs of his mother, which he considers as culturally flawed and not conform to the Islamic tradition. In a similar fashion, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis) makes fun of some of the practices she noticed among South Asian Muslims, which according to her are akin to witchcraft. Talking about the practice of pronouncing Qur'anic verses to keep evil spirits at bay, she sarcastically said: “and bring the cauldron, and the frogs and stuff and throw them in there!” Mary rejects these practices as belonging to another time and as completely irrelevant to contemporary Islamic practice. In France, many of my interviewees attribute such superstitious beliefs to the working-class, uneducated background of French Muslims, most of whom are immigrants of low social extraction. Caroline (28, PhD candidate, Marseille) claimed for instance that North African Muslims did not know what “true Islam” looked like because they had merged it with local folklore:

Unfortunately, Islam is little known, by French people for sure, but also by Muslims themselves. Because who brought Islam to France? You got to remember the context. These were North Africans, workers, peasants. That's why I am saying – but maybe it is a bit pejorative - that this is a working-class religion, a religion of the hood, a religion of simple people. It is not the intellectual North African elite who brought Islam, otherwise they would have brought other things. But that's not what they brought. They brought practices mixed up with superstitions that have nothing to do with Islam.⁹

Boran, Mary and Christelle consider that, contrary to religiously illiterate born Muslims, they know what “true Islam” entails because they rely on scripture and scholarship, rather than family tradition, ancestral habit or hearsay. They seek to delineate “correct Islamic practice” from what they see as misguided, syncretic and superstitious practices inherited from born Muslims' countries of origin.

c) Islam and politics

In addition to the fear of mixing up superstition and religion, my interviewees also worried about the conflation of Islam and politics. For instance, they criticized activists

⁹ « Malheureusement, l'islam est mal connu, par les Français, certes, ça c'est sûr, mais même par les musulmans eux-mêmes. Parce qu'il faut se dire, qui a apporté l'Islam en France ? Il faut le remettre dans le contexte. Ce sont des Maghrébins, des gens... des ouvriers, des paysans... c'est pour ça que je dis, mais c'est peut-être un peu péjoratif, c'est une religion populaire, c'est une religion de quartier, c'est une religion, voilà, du peuple, de gens très simples. C'est pas l'élite intellectuelle maghrébine qui a amené l'Islam, sinon ils auraient amené beaucoup de choses avec. C'est pas ce qu'ils ont amené. Ils ont amené des pratiques, des mélanges, des superstitions, qui ont rien à voir... ».

in various social movements (Palestinian cause, anti-racist organizations, etc.) who use Muslim identity as an instrument of mobilization. A long-time activist for Palestine, Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris) reported feeling uncomfortable during demonstrations in Paris in which protesters shouted “Allahu Akbar” or made *du’as* (religious invocations) for the liberation of Palestine. She was not at ease with this instrumental use of religious sincerity: “All this stuff sickens me. Allahu Akbar? You are going to say ‘Allah is the greatest’ and you are going to reduce that to a political slogan??? No! It is not a political slogan! These people don’t even pray and they are going to shout Allahu Akbar... I don’t care that they don’t pray but I don’t like them using the religion for identity purposes.¹⁰” For Isabelle, the label “Muslim” is exclusively religious, and it cannot be diverted into a political identity lacking religious substance. So is the expression “Allahu Akbar” which implies the deep, intimate recognition that Allah is the greatest and almost has to be whispered in the solitude of one’s soul. For Isabelle, it should not be turned into a political slogan or enrolled as a communication strategy, because precisely, for a “true Muslim,” Allah is above politics and communication. In her view, the Palestinian cause has been hijacked by activists who call themselves Muslims from a political or cultural standpoint, but who, albeit sincere in their social activism, lack sincerity in their religiosity.

The political influence of immigrant Muslims’ countries of origin on mosques is also experienced by many interviewees as an intolerable infringement on their religious rights. David (31, unemployed, Chicago) lamented the political discussions that often went on at the mostly Pakistani mosque he attended, between partisans of Benazir Bhutto and partisans of Pervez Musharraf: “in the *masjid*, they have a political agenda. They are going on about their politics in Pakistan.” David felt these political strives, which were frequently mentioned during religious sermons, interfered with his spiritual practice. He was under the impression that his mosque was more a political forum for Pakistani exiles than a place of worship. In France, Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) also vilipended Dalil Boubekour, the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, which is often said to be bankrolled by the Algerian state (Godard and Taussig, 2007: 115): “he only does stuff for Algeria and it sucks, because Islam is not Algeria.¹¹” Romain feels the Great Mosque of Paris does not operate as a religious space, but rather as an Algerian consulate.¹²

In sum, the use of the category “Muslim” as a cultural or political identity is shocking to most of my interviewees, who see it as a “purely religious” label that needs to be substantiated with actual devotion and practice. Understood as rooted in strong belief and inner spiritual reform, the label Muslim cannot be worn as a cultural badge of belonging nor enrolled as a factor of political mobilization. My interviewees resent “cultural Muslims” or “political Muslims” for obscuring the spiritual and religious dimension of Islam, thereby desacralizing it.

¹⁰ « Ça me dégoûte tout ça en fait ! Allahu Akbar ? Tu dis là ‘Allah est le plus grand’ et tu le réduis à un simple slogan politique !??? Mais non ! C’est pas un slogan politique ! Des gens qui font même pas la prière et tous là qui sont là à crier Allahu Akbar et je sais pas quoi. Mais vraiment, hein, je te dis, il y en a beaucoup ce sont mes amis, quand je dis ‘ils font pas la prière...’, je m’en fiche, hein, c’est pas ça ! C’est le fait qu’on utilise la religion en fait comme ... c’est purement identitaire ».

¹¹ « Il fait que des trucs pour l’Algérie et ça c’est pourri parce que l’Islam c’est pas l’Algérie ».

¹² In France, convert Daniel Youssouf Leclercq, who is a significant figure in the French Muslim community, is an example of someone who frequently chastises what he calls “*l’influence du bled*” (the influence of North Africans’ villages of origin) on French mosques. See his blog articles (Leclercq, 2012; Leclercq, 2013).

2) A concern for cultural comfort: a critique of cultural hegemony

Another critique addresses the cultural hegemony exerted by some Muslims over Islam. Born Muslims are frequently suspected by converts of erecting parochial South Asian, North African or Middle Eastern cultural traditions (food habits and dress codes specifically) as universal Islamic norms that should be followed by every Muslim. Many of my interviewees criticized for instance the pervasiveness of cultural elements from immigrant Muslims' countries of origin in American and French Muslim spaces. Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), who frequently attends Sufi gatherings in Paris reported feeling unsettled by the decidedly North African atmosphere of these religious meetings: "culturally, it is way too North African. Everybody is wearing a *djellaba*, including the European converts. And big cliché: at the end, we all eat couscous on the floor! What is this? I mean I have nothing against it, but why always associate the image of Islam to this? The fact that it is too embedded with North Africa disturbs me."¹³ Blandine denounces what she felt was a folkloric expression of North African culture rather than a religiously-oriented gathering. Like her, Jean (23, student, Paris) calls this form of Islam "*couscous Islam*" (*l'islam couscous*) and criticizes North African cultural hegemony. In the US, Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago) is also worried about what she sees as a form of cultural imperialism: "there is this idea that Sunna equals Arab. Authentic equals Arab, you know, you are definitely encouraged to be Arab. I find that a little concerning." Like her, David (31, unemployed, Chicago) reported being very upset by the cultural pressure he felt from his Pakistani coreligionists: "it is their way or the high way," he said, indicating that he had no choice but to embrace Pakistani language, clothing and diet in order to "fit in" as a new Muslim. Contrary to the above, these converts do not reject the idea of culture per se, but are preoccupied with the hegemony of some cultural traditions over others. They worry about the equation between religious authenticity and authenticity to these cultures.

Accordingly, many of my interviewees criticized the converts (oftentimes themselves) who had fallen into the so-called "cultural trap." Many new Muslims often adopt the speech manners, dress codes and culinary traditions of the Arab or South Asian worlds as tokens of Islamic authenticity. In Paris, Aisha (37, housewife and Islamic teacher) reported how she tried to erase her Frenchness and fully embraced Arabness at the beginning of her conversion: "I thought becoming Muslim meant becoming Arab. So I tried to erase everything that had to do with my origins. That's when my first name migrated from Stéphanie to Aisha. But it was a bit hard, because I mean, if you are not Arab, well, you are not Arab!"¹⁴ Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) who converted when he was a teenager and became part of a tight-knit Arab community in the suburbs, describes how he became so immersed in Middle Eastern culture that he even started speaking English with a foreign accent: "I don't even remember how I used to speak

¹³ « Il y avait beaucoup de choses qui me gênaient. Alors... je trouvais que déjà culturellement c'était beaucoup trop maghrébin. Enfin... ils étaient tous en djellabas, y compris les convertis européens. Et puis alors le cliché quoi : à la fin on a mangé du couscous par terre ! Non mais c'est... !!!! Voilà c'est... j'ai rien, hein, contre ça, mais c'est juste que... pourquoi tout le temps associer l'image de l'islam à ça ? Et le fait que ce soit trop ancré Maghreb, moi c'est voilà quelque chose qui me gêne ».

¹⁴ « En fait au tout début, j'ai cru que devenir musulmane, ça voulait dire devenir arabe. Donc j'ai essayé de faire disparaître un peu de moi tout ce qui pouvait appartenir à... bah à mes origines. C'est là où mon prénom il a un peu migré de Stéphanie vers Aisha, tu vois... et voilà donc si tu veux ça a été un peu difficile parce que bah si t'es pas arabe, t'es pas arabe ! ... Je me sentais toujours un petit peu en décalage en fait ».

before I became Muslim. Everyone I meet tells me that I have this accent now.” Jonathan considers that such form of “cultural brainwashing” is a phenomenon that “Caucasian Americans run into more than any other group” because they “don’t have any culture” and end up being swamped by others’ cultures. By saying this, he reinforces dominant interpretations of whiteness as bland and empty.

Yet, in Detroit, Khabir (23, barber), who is black, also lamented instances of self-hate among some African-American converts, who fell into the very same cultural trap:

African-Americans, here in Detroit, here in America, coming towards orthodox Islam, they tend to choose the South Asian, Persian or Arab culture to give them sort of an identity back. And... Personally... Personally, it disgusts me. (...) Why do you want to be other than yourself? One day you are James Collar, the next day, you know what I am saying, you turn your name to Abdul Rasheed. And there, from Abdul Rasheed, you get around a community of Indo-Pakistanis. Now you want to talk with an accent, and carry yourself like you come from South Asia... It is like “Bro! you are from Dexter! You went to school in the hood. You went to Cooley high school. You and your family isn’t South Asian. Where did you get this from?” (...) When an African-American Muslim looks in the mirror, they don’t want to see an African. Because they think that a Muslim is Arab, Persian, South Asian. You are not Muslim unless you are of these backgrounds. (...) And I really... I really get frustrated with that reality. I really do! (...) Because now, it feels like you pray to a slave master, subconsciously. Before your slave master was a European God figure. Now you think God is an Arab. Now you think God is a South Asian.

Khabir criticizes the conflation of Islamic authenticity with Arab/Desi culture and its potential negative impact on black converts’ sense of self. The temptation to “become Arab” or “become Desi” to prove one’s Islamic legitimacy is therefore vehemently condemned by most of my interviewees. The various convert associations I studied are particularly adamant about this. At a seminar for female converts organized at a mosque in Lille, the speaker kept repeating: “Islam is not the religion of Arabs. You do not need to Arabize to be a good Muslim. If you are French, you have a French culture, and you should valorize it, not deny it.¹⁵” More than a concern for the purity of Islam, these converts are therefore mostly preoccupied with remaining true to themselves in the process of conversion.

3) A concern for social justice: a critique of cultural traditions as backward

In addition to the critique of born Muslims’ culture as either contaminating or dangerously hegemonic, other converts voice a concern about its alleged backwardness and conservatism. More specifically, the various social evils witnessed in the Muslim community and documented in Chapters 3 and 6 (ethnocentrism, fetichization of whiteness, sexism, *haram* police, etc.) are reinterpreted by converts as a symptom of born Muslims’ cultures of origin rather than a product of Islamic scripture. They see them as a factor external to Islam and not endogenous to it. For Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille), the practice of forced marriage or female genital mutilation in certain parts of the Muslim world is cultural, but certainly not Islamically grounded: “we have to be careful because there are a lot of things that are part of the folklore, the culture, the

¹⁵ October 21st, 2015, Villeneuve d’Ascq mosque, seminar with Ismaïl Mounir.

traditions of some countries but have nothing to do with Islam. Like forced marriage. I for long thought that, in Islam, the woman did not have the right to choose her spouse and had to marry the man that her father had chosen for her. But that's not true at all! On the contrary, a marriage can't be valid if the woman does not consent to it. When you read the *hadith* of the Prophet (*saws**), you understand these things... It is like excision! What the hell is this!? What allows you to mutilate little girls? It's madness!¹⁶” For Adèle (29, bank employee, France), the habit of separating men and women in mosques, which really upsets her, is another instance of a well-entrenched cultural practice that does not have any religious validity, since in the mosque of the Prophet men and women used to pray in the same area: “there are women in mosques who themselves ask to be in a separate room. It is crazy! But it is just so impregnated culturally and it has been done for centuries, so they think that's how things should be. But I am telling them: ‘there is no religious proof that we should be separated.’¹⁷” For many of my interviewees, some of Islam's misogynistic aspects do not come from the Qur'anic scripture itself, but rather from the dominant culture in which the interpretation of the text has always taken place, characterized by patriarchy and the hegemony of male scholars. As a result, they consider that by eradicating cultural influences, going back to the core tenets of the faith, and looking at scripture with fresh eyes, these various social evils will progressively disappear.

B. CONVERTS AS REJUVENATORS OF THE FAITH: THREE PATHS FOR REFORM

In light of Muslims' alleged conflation of culture and religion, converts consider it their mission to decipher, identify and dissociate Islam from the various cultural influences that have distorted it. They often present themselves as rejuvenators of the faith. Having not been born to Muslim families, they consider that they are best positioned to accomplish this task because they are free from the so-called cultural biases inherited from early socialization. According to Chloé (21, student, Lille), converts are the ones who can foster an authentic renewal of the faith: “there is hope coming from new Muslims because we have the advantage of not having the weight of tradition that certain North African families have, when they mix up culture and religion. We come in with fresh eyes and a kind of immaculacy in a way.¹⁸” According to Chloé, religious authenticity lies in

¹⁶ « Il faut faire attention, il y a beaucoup de choses dont on nous parle qui font partie du folklore... de la culture de certains pays, des traditions, qui n'ont rien à voir avec l'islam. Prends l'exemple parfait du mariage forcé. Moi dans ma tête j'ai toujours cru qu'en islam, la femme n'avait pas le droit de choisir son époux, elle était obligée de se marier avec l'époux que son père lui désignait ! Alors que c'est totalement faux ! Un mariage n'est pas valide si la femme donne pas son consentement. Voilà donc c'est en lisant les *hadiths* du Prophète (*saws*)... voilà tu comprends certaines choses. (...) L'excision, d'où ça sort ? C'est quoi ce truc-là ? Qu'est-ce qui permet de mutiler des petites filles ? C'est quoi ce délire ? Voilà, en fait, plein de choses ».

¹⁷ « Tu sais il y a une mosquée, c'est les femmes qui ont demandé à vouloir être séparées. Mais c'est effarant ! Mais ça c'est un problème d'éducation tu vois. Et ça c'est tellement imprégné culturellement, que ça soit fait depuis des millénaires, pour elles, c'est acquis, c'est acté, voilà c'est comme ça que ça doit être fait. Je dis ‘mais t'as pas religieusement de preuve, de ce que tu sois séparé’ ».

¹⁸ « Il y a aussi des espoirs qui sont donnés pour les nouveaux musulmans, parce que... on arrive avec l'avantage de ne pas avoir le poids des traditions de certaines familles maghrébines, qui mélangent un peu

the ability to adjudicate between religion and culture, something converts can do more candidly than born Muslims. At *Bienvenue en Islam*, the idea that converts are a hope for the future of the Muslim community because they bring in fresh blood and perspectives is equally well-entrenched. As put by the president, “Islam will be revived by Muslims in the West. Converts have a great destiny.¹⁹” In Chicago, Pablo (22, student, Chicago) concurred: “I feel like the converts in America are going to save Islam. That’s my theory.”

Several of my interviewees are therefore engaged in various trends of Islamic reform or “Islamic revival,” understood as a “crucial means of infusing life into a community that is bogged down in centuries-old customs and traditions, and whose concentration on the imitation of the past has led to the ossification of Islamic society, restricting its ability to move quickly into the modern world” (Yazbeck Haddad et al., 1991: 4). Portraying themselves as saviors of the religion and spearheads of the Islamic revival, converts redefine what being Muslim means. To be sure, they are not alone in this endeavor, which they perform along with like-minded *born-again* Muslims, most of the time second or third generation immigrants (born and raised in the West) who tend to differentiate themselves from the “cultural Islam” practiced by their parents (or grandparents) in order to embrace a more “religious Islam” (Khosrokhavar, 1998; Roy, 2004; Peek, 2005; Streiff-Fénart, 2006; Duderija, 2007; Kakpo, 2007; Sheikh, 2007; Joly, 2008; Arslan, 2010; Simon and Tiberj, 2010; Brouard and Tiberj, 2012). Like converts, they prioritize voluntary religiosity over inherited ethnic or cultural belonging. They promoted an Islam of the Tradition, instead of a traditional Islam.

The Islamic revival hinges upon a marked separation from Muslims’ cultures of origin. While each of the three critiques detailed above express a similar concern for the nefarious influence of “culture” on Islam, they rely on three different appraisals of the dangers it represents: the first critique is preoccupied with the religious purity of Islam and considers culture as contaminating; the second is concerned with risks of cultural alienation within Islam and worries about culture as potentially hegemonic; the third critique emphasizes issues of social justice and equality and considers culture as carrying backwardness and traditionalism. In his classical book *Christ and Culture* (1951), American Christian theologian H. Richard Niebuhr identifies different religious attitudes towards worldly culture, among which the Christ Against Culture response (uncompromising rejection of culture as sinful), the Christ of Culture response (harmonization of the religious and cultural realms) and the Christ Transforms Culture response (transformation of culture through religion). Similarly, in my study, cultural concerns translate into three specific paths for Islamic reform that correspond to Niebuhr’s typology.

- The first one, widely documented, is the path of *deculturation*, as promoted in contemporary Islamic fundamentalist movements, such as Salafism. It entails renouncing any form of cultural expression in order to practice a “pure” religion, strictly respecting the letter of Islamic scripture.

culture et religion... Donc nous on arrive avec cet œil neuf et avec l’avantage d’avoir une certaine virginité ».

¹⁹ « L’Islam renaîtra par les Occidentaux musulmans. Les convertis ont un grand destin ». Fieldnotes, August 31st, 2014.

- The second one, less studied, is the path of *re-acculturation*, according to which converts adapt Islam to the reality of their society in order to create new cultural expressions of Islam (French or American), detached from Arab or South Asian cultural hegemony. The two convert associations I studied in Paris and Chicago are significant actors in this endeavor to make Islam culturally comfortable.
- The third one, which is the path of *reinterpretation*, is most frequently associated with the label of “Islamic reform” in mainstream discourse, for it involves a scholarly reinterpretation of Islamic scripture in light of contemporary social justice concerns. Muslims engaged in this path tend to present themselves as “progressive” and use new religious interpretations to transform and better society. Feminist and LGBTQ Muslim movements, in which many converts are involved, are a good example of this type of reform.

Each of these three strategies embodies specific claims about religious authenticity. To be sure, they are not necessarily clear-cut, and can at times overlap, as converts move across them throughout their religious career.

In addition, these three paths are more or less successful across national contexts. In the US, the regime of Embracing Secularism, combined with the role religion has always played as a factor of civic integration, makes the *re-acculturation path* particularly prominent. The creation of an American Islam is currently in full swing, especially among converts and second and third generation Muslims. Yet, the *fundamentalist path* is increasingly embraced by segments of the African-American population, as a remedy to their structural disenfranchisement and cultural marginalization. In France, the regime of Defiant Secularism, combined with the position of most Muslims at the bottom of the racial stratification system, complicates the prospects of the *re-acculturation path*. As my data shows, re-acculturation is nonetheless clearly in the making in France, even if the *fundamentalist path* retains considerable attractiveness. In both France and the US, the *reinterpretative path* is smaller and the preserve of highly educated individuals. The following sections detail each of these endeavors, with a greater focus on the re-acculturation path, which was the most represented in my sample.

1) The deculturation path: “Salafism”

The first path of Islamic revival may be called “fundamentalist” because it involves returning to “fundamental” Islamic rules. It advocates the “reformulation of religion into a number of norms in isolation from any real cultural context” (Roy, 2010: 134). The fundamentalist movement shares a filiation with Islamism but can be defined as post-Islamist, for it focuses on society and individuals, rather than the State. Characterized by dogmatism, puritanism, and a desire to renew the Islamic golden age, it includes different groups (Tablighis,²⁰ Wahhabis, etc.) but “Salafis” are the most

²⁰ Often called the “Jehovah Witnesses” of Islam because of their door-to-door preaching strategy, the Tablighis are an apolitical global Sunni missionary movement, initiated in India in the 20th century. Their primary aim is to revive Islamic belief and practice among disengaged Muslims. They frequently organize proselytism and preaching outings, named *khourouj*. They share with Salafis a fundamentalist understanding of the religion but differ from them by their oral teaching style and their less rationalist

prominent and globally influential. In fact, boundaries are often blurred between the different trends of the fundamentalist revival and a general “Salafization” of practices has been observed (Saint-Lary, 2012; Puzenat, 2015: 36).

In the US, it is estimated that Salafis are mostly located on the East Coast and make up 8% of American Muslims. The majority of them are African-Americans (Dubler, 2010: 500). In France, estimates ranged from 5,000 adepts in the 2000s (Amghar, 2008) to 20,000 today (Adraoui, 2015). Yet, the proportion of Muslims who are influenced by the principles of Salafism without necessarily identifying with it may be higher. Out of 2,300 Muslim places of worship scattered throughout French territory, around 100 are believed to preach Salafi interpretations, that is around 5%, although this number is quickly increasing (Fouteau, 2015).

Although they are not a majority in my sample, several of my respondents (7 in France and 9 in the US) can be characterized as subscribing to a pietist (non-violent) “Salafi” interpretation of Islam. I use this label with caution, because my interviewees themselves consider the word highly contentious and are reluctant to self-identify with it. During their joint interview, Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) and his wife Monica (34, housewife), who wears the face veil, reflected on what category could best suit them. Jonathan advanced: “I guess we would probably be referred to as, like, ‘Salafis’ or ‘Wahhabis,’ or what not. I am not really too happy with these labels and stuff. (...) I think it is safe to say that we are more on the conservative end of things.” Monica disagreed and considered they should simply be labeled as “Orthodox Sunni.” Fred (28, student, Chicago) who currently studies Islamic sciences in Saudi Arabia was also reluctant to use the word “Salafi” to describe himself: “I try to follow what’s in the scripture. So if you want to call that ‘fundamental’ or ‘traditional,’ I don’t know, you can call it that.”

Whatever the word these converts use to define themselves, they have in common a regimented practice of the religion that relies exclusively on scripture (Qur’an, Sunnah, *hadith*) and seeks to emulate the example of the *salaf al-salih* (pious predecessors), or first generations of Muslims. The Salafi methodology includes a literalist reading of religious texts. Fred (28, student, Chicago) emphasizes for instance the great simplicity of his approach to Islam: “I am just following what my scripture is telling me. If God is telling me x, y, and z, you know, then I have to believe that. And if I don’t believe those things, then I am outside.” In sum, Salafis trust no one but their book. As mentioned by Fazil (28, sports coach, Chicago): “the main rule of thumb, that you don’t forget, is you don’t follow the religion by the person. You follow by the book.” Accordingly, Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) compares Salafism to the Protestant Reformation: “it is like with Luther and the Protestants. At some point they said, ‘listen, we don’t believe in what you are saying anymore, just give me a Bible, I will read it and tell you what it truly says.’ Here it is the same thing. And I identify with this movement. They go back to the sources and they expurgate anything that is tradition, culture or superstition.”²¹

approach to scripture. The two movements can be said to be in competition with one another (Khedimellah, 2001; Amghar, 2016).

²¹ « Comme il y a pu avoir le mouvement protestant avec Luther qui ont dit à un moment ‘écoutez, ce que vous nous racontez, on y croit plus, donnez-moi une Bible, moi je vais la lire et je vais voir qu’est-ce qu’il y a vraiment écrit dedans’. Et bah là c’est la même chose en fait. Donc du coup, ce mouvement-là voilà, moi je me reconnais dans ce mouvement-là. C’est-à-dire qu’ils sont retournés aux sources, ils l’ont épurées de tout ce qui est tradition, culture, superstition, etc. ».

The over-reliance on the purity of the text, read as a manual to live one's life, leads to an "ethics of intransigency" (Adraoui, 2015), which rejects human subjectivity. Salafism considers there is only one legitimate Islamic interpretation for all times (Wiktorowicz, 2006). It is characterized by its great defiance towards any practice that is not explicitly mentioned in scripture, and which is accordingly considered *bid'ah** (harmful innovation): such is the fate of many cultural practices found throughout the Muslim world, in North Africa, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia or South East Asia, which are deemed misguided, un-Islamic or even pagan. For Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris), who defines himself as a former Salafi having progressively evolved towards a more relaxed and spiritually-oriented practice of the religion: "when you are into Salafism, you learn that everything that's cultural is no good. You must follow a pure Islam.²²" In addition to the cultures of immigrant Muslims, the mainstream culture of the French and American societies is also under suspicion. Fundamentally a-cultural and a-historical, Salafism's "quest of authenticity is expressed against the culture of origin and Western culture" (Roy, 2004: 23).

The rationalist, deculturalized and univocal textual approach promoted by Salafism is particularly attractive for converts, because it implies that religious authority derives exclusively from the mastery of scripture, rather than the practice of Islam for generations. By Salafi standards, a "good" Muslim is not necessarily someone immersed in majority-Muslim culture, but someone who lives his life by the book. Salafism also implies that converts can verify Islamic sources for themselves and do not depend on the expertise of older Muslims. It is conceived by its supporters as independent from tradition: liberating, universal, democratic and meritocratic. As such, Salafism exerts great attractiveness upon new Muslims in search of religious authenticity.

In France, Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (2013) finds that between a fourth and a third of his Salafi respondents are converts. Adraoui (forthcoming) further notes that although various Islamic movements, such as Sufis or Tablighis feature large numbers of converts in their midst, Salafism is the only one having elevated the convert to such a central position. This is refreshing for converts who often struggle to assert their religious legitimacy in Muslim spaces (see Chapter 3). Notably, within French Salafism, the second largest group is made of second-generation immigrants of Algerian descent characterized by disenfranchisement, social anomia and family dissolution, i.e. not immersed in a solid Muslim culture.²³ The trope of deculturation and religious purity, therefore, seems particularly appealing to both converts and disenfranchised born Muslims. Within Salafism, their "lack" of Muslim culture is precisely considered an asset and a source of symbolic capital, for it enables them to decipher with greater ease what is cultural *bid'ah* from what is "truly" Islam. In sum, Salafism provides wings to people who do not have cultural roots (marginalized born Muslims) or want to cut off their cultural roots (liminal converts).

²² « Quand t'es dans un islam salafiste, on t'apprend quelque part que tout ce qui est culturel, c'est pas bon. C'est... c'est des choses qui n'ont rien à voir avec l'islam, il faut être dans un islam pur ».

²³ Adraoui notes by contrast that second-generation immigrants from Turkey are conspicuously absent from Salafi ranks, which might be explained by the strong links they retain with their culture of origin and the solid channels of cultural/religious transmission that exist among Turkish immigrants.

In the US, Umar Lee (40, cabdriver, St. Louis) presents Salafism as the only movement capable of uniting Muslims across cultural, racial, ethnic or class divides. A former member of the once thriving Salafi communities of East Orange (New Jersey) and Northern Virginia,²⁴ Umar has published an online autobiographical account on the American Salafi movement, entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Da'wah in America* (2014), considered as one of the few reliable historical documents on the topic (Elmasry, 2010). In it, he writes that, as a working class white convert coming from a rough urban neighborhood, Salafism was the only movement in which he “didn’t feel like a tourist:”

I am not an Arab or the child of immigrants, and I am not upper-class or yuppie in the least bit. Spending time with other Islamic activists, I learned a lot and was honored to be around people dedicated to the Islamic movement, but at the end of the day I was like a tourist around them. I found the brotherhood I had longed for when visiting and spending time in communities in New York, Philadelphia and New Jersey [which are known for being Salafi hubs]. (Lee, 2014)

Salafism was the only movement that made room for Umar as a religious outsider and a poor white. In Northern Virginia, Umar claimed that he “saw the most diverse community [he has] ever seen till this day. Whites, blacks, Latinos, South Asians, Arabs, Hindu converts, Jewish converts, you name it – they were all there.” In fact, American Salafism is mostly composed of underclass African-Americans, for this Protestant-like Islam has come to fill the political void left by the once thriving Nation of Islam in disadvantaged black neighborhoods (Jackson, 2005: 46; Grewal, 2013: 97; Aidi, 2014b; Blecher and Dubler, 2016). Contrary to the NOI, Salafism stays away from collective action and politics. Yet, like the NOI, it emphasizes education, self-pride, religious zealotry and brotherhood in a way that is particularly appealing to those who are relegated from mainstream society. Commenting on the large numbers of African-Americans embracing Salafism, Umar Lee concluded: “being anti-Salafi today, in practice, means being anti-black.”

Overall, in both France and the US, the people in my sample who gravitate towards Salafi interpretations tend to come from lower-class backgrounds. Although that link is not systematic, it suggests that social marginalization can translate into the adoption of theologically conservative and socially distancing beliefs. Yet, for these interviewees, Salafism is primarily seen as truly universal and more egalitarian than other Islamic currents. As put by Olivier Roy, Salafism “accepts its own deculturation and makes it the instrument of its claim to universalism” (Roy, 2010: 5). As such, it perfectly aligns with converts’ aspirations for a “true Islam,” decontaminated from the cultural influences of born Muslims and free from the domination of mainstream Western culture.

Salafism is only one branch of the Islamic revival that appeals to only a minority of my interviewees. By contrast, a large portion of my sample are converts engaged in another path of Islamic reform, one that seeks to blend Islam in the mainstream culture of their society. Having dissociated Islam from the cultural traditions of Middle Eastern, North African or South Asian immigrants, they reinvest it with a distinctive French or American cultural feel. While Salafis consider that religious authenticity can only be

²⁴ Very prominent in the 1990s, the Salafi communities of East Orange and Northern Virginia, respectively led by Dawud Adib/Abu Muslima and Dr. Jafaar Sheikh Idris/Dr. Ali al-Tamimi dissolved in the 2000s because of a series of internal rivalries (Elmasry, 2010), provoking depression and pain among those, like Umar Lee, who had placed great hopes in the movement.

achieved by an exclusive reliance on scripture, these converts argue on the contrary that being religiously authentic implies “staying true to oneself” by practicing Islam without forfeiting one’s cultural background. While Salafis seek to sever all ties with any form of culture, these converts adapt it to their national culture.

2) The re-acculturation path: Creating a French and American Islam

When I asked William (30, public health worker, Chicago) what were the main challenges for Muslims living in America, his first response was: “just being themselves! Don’t be ashamed that you are born here or that you parents immigrated here. Don’t be afraid to be American!” For William, Islamic authenticity does not imply a complete refashioning of self (either through the adoption of Arab or Desi cultural norms, or through rigid understanding of scripture), but rather an enhancement of the best aspects of self, by merging the respect of Islamic norms with a sense of cultural pride. Converts like him propose to live Islam as “part of the here and now,” as Brian (23, student, Chicago) eloquently puts it. For Emiliano (28, student, Paris), “Islam does not mean we should all dress the same way. For me, Islam means living a normal life, having good relations with your friends, your family.²⁵” This mundane, ordinary understanding of Islam sharply contrasts with the demanding religious virtuosity and sense of exceptionalism promoted by the Salafi movement.

A large majority of my sample is engaged in the re-acculturation path (26 people in France and 28 in the US). Contrary to Salafism’s full-fledged suspicion towards culture, these converts dig into Islamic history to demonstrate that, at all times, Islam successfully blended with local customs to take on different cultural expressions (Lapidus, 2001). It has been demonstrated that Moroccan Islam and Indonesian Islam, for instance, are each endowed with a specific flavor and produce different spiritual climates, while being both equally Islamic (Geertz, 1971). Accordingly, my interviewees frequently reference the variety of Islamic ways of life in Senegal, Malaysia, Tajikistan or Jordan. This is held as proof that a cultural American or French Islam can also emerge, allowing French and American people to practice the faith without being accused of cultural inadequacy.

In his article “What is Universal and Local in Islam?”, anthropologist John Bowen (1998) claims that Muslims throughout the world are pulled between “struggles to define the universal qualities of the ‘religious,’ and efforts to develop distinct identities with respect to these universal qualities.” In the US, one of the central actors of this endeavor is white American convert and Islamic scholar Dr. Umar Faruq Abdallah, who recently wrote a much-commented article entitled “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” (2004). He affirms that “in history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal-clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow.” Faruq-Abdallah sharply criticizes those for whom “culture is a toxic pollutant that must necessarily be purged.” On the contrary, he concludes that “development of a sound Muslim American cultural identity must be resolutely undertaken as a conscious

²⁵ « Pour moi, l’islam c’est pas vivre tous ensemble et s’habiller tous de la même manière. C’est plus avoir une vie normale et... être bien avec sa famille, être bien avec ses amis ».

pursuit and one of our community’s vital priorities (...) Our sacred law requires us to undertake the task.” Contrary to Salafism, therefore, Faruq-Abdallah considers that embracing local culture is an Islamic requirement, and his article has become a rallying point for many of my American interviewees. Along these lines, African-American scholar Ubaydullah Evans (40, Chicago), whom I interviewed, contends that it is necessary to recognize that “American Islam is a very particular reality, just like French Islam is a very particular reality. Islam here can look different and still enjoy authenticity.”

In France, similar ideas are expressed. Expanding on the river metaphor, Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) explained during his interview that “Islam is like water. Whatever the shape of the glass, it will fit its contours.²⁶” Various Muslim intellectuals have been promoting this idea, such as renowned Swiss-Egyptian Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, who advocates the creation of a distinctive “European Islamic culture” in his book *To Be a European Muslim* (2015). French-Moroccan imam Tareq Oubrou is also currently developing what he calls a “theology of acculturation,” meant to adapt Islam to the reality of contemporary French culture and society. Critical of the deculturalizing stance promoted by fundamentalists, he argues that “Islamic principles must remain the same but norms must be acculturated. Adapting principles actually means saving them, not renouncing to them, as some argue. Acculturation saves the essence of the religion” (*Les Cahiers de l’islam*, 2015). Various Sufi orders, such as the Ahmadiyya Idrisiyya Shadhiliyya, led by Italian convert Abd al Wahid Pallavicini are also central proponents of a “European Islam” meant to “bridge the Orient and the Occident” (Le Pape, 2007; El-Ashry, 2016).

The calls for inventing an Islam that is culturally comfortable in the French and American contexts are therefore numerous, and many commentators have noted that Islam is on the path of Americanization (Yazbeck Haddad and Esposito, 2000; Yazbeck Haddad, 2011), Frenchization (Geisser et al., 2010; Brouard and Tiberj, 2012) or Europeanization (Roy, 1998; Göle, 2015). Yet, such cultural reformulations are complicated by the fact that there is no consensus on what “American,” “French” or “European” culture means. Ubaydullah Evans, who was once invited to speak at a conference entitled “Exploring American Spiritual Authenticity” started his speech with a sarcasm: “it is a sign that we move forward and we make progress when the scholars invited to speak don’t even know what the topic means. American spiritual authenticity... I don’t even know what it means!²⁷” The audience burst into laughter, but the statement rung true to many ears.

Being authentically Muslim while being authentically French or American is a complex endeavor, whose definition remains entirely open. Through their daily lives and individual practices, the converts I interviewed and the convert associations I studied strive to provide an answer to this question. In the following sections, I detail the various cultural realms through which such effort unfolds: language, names, food, clothing, arts, history, pop culture, humor and an innovative brand of Islamic sermons. In each of these domains, converts present themselves as bridges between the French/American and Muslim identities and create a new Muslim “habitus” (Göle, 2015: 69) informed by

²⁶ « On dit que l’islam est comme l’eau, quelle que soit la forme du verre, il épousera les contours ».

²⁷ Fieldnotes, June 22nd, 2013.

French and American cultural habits.²⁸ In doing so, they craft unexpected forms of “cultural hybridity,” giving rise to “something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 1990: 211).

a) Linguistic manoeuvres

In the creation of a French and American Islam, language occupies central stage. The religion of Islam being strongly tied to the Qur’anic revelation language, the mastery of Arabic is often presented as a *sine qua non* condition for religious authenticity. Accordingly, most of my interviewees know some Arabic. Some are fluent and know how to read and write, while others have simply memorized the prayer words, which they recite with difficulty and a strong French or American accent.

In the two convert associations I studied, converts were told not to worry about their Arabic pronunciation. To be sure, articulation exercises were at times performed to improve the flow of prayer recitations. I vividly remember a class at a suburban mosque of Paris in which we all had to recite the *Fatiha* (first chapter of the Qur’an) one by one, while the teacher, a convert herself, patiently corrected our ذ (which sounds like “th” in English), our ض (emphatic “d”) and our ق (guttural “q”). Some of the converts had to repeat the words at least ten times before she considered their recitation acceptable.²⁹ Yet, the clumsiness and imperfect pronunciation of converts was also constructed as a proof of their greater religious dedication, rather than a deficiency. Thus, at *American Da’wah*, in order to cheer up some of the converts who were discouraged by their pronunciation, John frequently referenced the *hadith* according to which: “verily the one who recites the Qur’an beautifully, smoothly, and precisely, he will be in the company of the noble and obedient angels. And as for the one who recites with difficulty, stammering or stumbling through its verses, then he will have *twice that reward*.³⁰” The extra effort that converts had to put in in order to pray in a foreign language was erected as proof of a stronger devotion.³¹

As they made efforts to acquire a grasp of the language, many converts in my sample were nonetheless highly critical of mosques that only delivered sermons in Arabic and failed to provide the audience with a translation in French or English. Hence, in addition to removing converts’ linguistic complexes, the two associations I studied also strove to create an environment in which French and English remained central, and Arabic contingent. At *American Da’wah*, a strict rule was implemented during collective discussions according to which every Arabic religious word had to be translated into English in order for newcomers not to feel alienated. John remarked: “Muslims use a lot of words and sometimes it is confusing. For instance, I don’t take my parents to events because they don’t understand what is being said.” Laughing, he recounted that his non-Muslim father one day asked him why Muslims seemed to hate the movie *Shrek* so much. After a few moments of perplexity, John realized his father had in fact overheard the

²⁸ Previous studies, respectively conducted in Nigeria, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Latvia and Russia have evidenced similar trends (Anthony, 2000; Jensen, 2008; Leman et al., 2010; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Özyürek, 2014; Vroon, 2014; Ter Laan, 2015; Misane, 2016; Rogaar, 2016).

²⁹ Fieldnotes, February 22nd, 2015.

³⁰ Hadith of Aisha, reported in Al-Bukhari 4556 and Muslim 1329.

³¹ Fieldnotes, May 5th, 2013.

Arabic word *shirk* in Muslim gatherings, which refers to the sin of worshipping something else than God and is therefore usually mentioned in a severe tone.³² In order to avoid such misunderstandings and ensure non-Arabic speakers feel fully welcomed at *American Da'wah*, John follows the translation rule very strictly. During discussions, he often cuts participants short whenever they use Arabic words (*iman, deen, duniya, hijab, etc.*) without providing English equivalents. He sometimes does it in a jokingly harsh manner, fostering laughter in the room. Intertwining English translation and humor, John participates in the creation of an American Islam. This practice of systematically translating Arabic terminology into French is also a distinguishing feature of the French association *Bienvenue en Islam*.

Converts often take liberties with language and several of my interviewees reported praying in French or English rather than Arabic. While she knows by heart several chapters of the Qur'an in Arabic, Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille) explained that she preferred praying in French: “I know *surahs* by heart but praying in Arabic for me is like praying in Chinese. So I just prefer praying in French.”³³ Other converts reported making the mandatory prayers in Arabic, but performing extra prayers and *du'as* (invocations) in their native language. Jenna (38, lawyer, Chicago) justified her position as such: “I honestly believe that God does not care what language you speak when you talk to him.” As for Olga (23, student and nanny, Chicago), a Polish-American convert still in the process of learning Arabic, she performs the Islamic prayer with a mix of Polish and English languages, as she feels emotionally tied to the former and intellectually to the latter. Such linguistic accommodations give a new flavor to daily Islamic practice.

Language is also used strategically as part of cultural affirmation. Consider the case of Brian (23, student, Chicago), an Italian-American convert who has the ability to pronounce Arabic words with a perfect Arabic accent, but intentionally refuses to do so in order to assert his Americanness.

I can do the whole *as-salaam'alaykum* [perfect Arabic pronunciation]. But I refuse to do that shit. For me *salamalekum* will always be *salamalekum* [strong American accent]. Or... There are cultural things that most Muslims say like, “oh, let's have *shay* [tea in Arabic]. You want to go and have *shay*?” And I will be, like, “this is TEA. We call this tea.” (...) So I am just like blatantly disrespecting rules of pronunciation or like cultural bullshit. I don't know... It's like if you came into my house and I told you “we are going to have *gnooochi* [heavy Italian pronunciation] today.” I would not expect you to say *gnooochi*? And if you said *gnooochi*, I would be like “get the fuck out of there!” You are not Italian, you are never going to be Italian, so why try?

Through these various linguistic maneuvers, and by voluntarily pronouncing Arabic words with a strong American accent, Brian proudly reaffirms that he is an American Muslim, and that his practice of the religion is as valid as everyone else's. He firmly differentiates his practice of Islam from any Arabic linguistic or cultural norm.

Finally, a number of converts in my sample challenged the hegemony of Arabic language in Islamic scholarship and leadership. A white convert in Detroit, Edward (35,

³² Fieldnotes, October 2013.

³³ « Moi je parle pas arabe. Donc je connais les sourates par cœur mais après... le fait de prier en arabe c'est comme si je priaais en chinois. Donc du coup autant prier en français ».

manager) vilipended for instance those who dismiss African-American Muslim leaders on the ground that they cannot speak perfect Arabic: “it is like ‘oh Malcolm X can’t read Qur’an properly so he can’t lead.’ That’s a shame! People whom I have met in the black community are belittled in the suburbs communities, because it is like ‘oh he can’t even pronounce the *Fatihah* correctly!’ But there is a lot more to being an imam than read the *Fatihah* perfectly.” For Edward, being a good Muslim leader does not exclusively depend on the mastery of Arabic and Qur’anic scripture. It is also tied to cultural competency and the ability to relate to an American-born audience.

b) Islamic sermons 2.0

Accordingly, converts expect their religious leaders to talk in a language that reflects the reality of contemporary American and French societies. For Alisha (35, freelance marketer, Chicago), there is an urgent need for homegrown imams who are deeply connected to American culture and society, rather than coming from overseas: “when we were looking for an imam in my previous community, it was like ‘*Mash’Allah*, he is *hafiz**! *Mash’Allah* he is knowledgeable and he came out of Al-Azhar*!’ Great. That’s great. But what does he know about college possibility? What does he know about interfaith? What does he know about converts? What does he know about cultural competency? You know, these things are important here.” The necessity for imams to know French society as intimately as they know the Qur’an was also expressed by the president of *Bienvenue en Islam*, who lamented about the ignorance of some of the imams currently officiating in the country: “they don’t know anything about France. They don’t know what’s happening in remote areas, in the countryside. They don’t know what’s being said in non-Muslim families, how people live in these families. They are completely cut and isolated from French reality.”³⁴

As a result, a number of my interviewees tend to shun immigrant imams and look up to homegrown religious leaders (be they second-generation Muslim or converted scholars). In the US, African-American convert Ubaydullah Evans is an example of a scholar who touches the youth. Brian (23, student, Chicago) likes him very much for his cultural astuteness: “he is very in touch with pop culture. Like I was talking to him about [rapper] Kendrick Lamar’s album... How many Islamic scholars can you talk to Kendrick Lamar about?”³⁵ In addition to his well-established Islamic credentials, his knowledge of popular music is what makes Ubaydullah Evans religiously relevant for Brian. White American convert and Islamic scholar Suhaib Webb is another example of someone who successfully combines religious knowledge with American youth culture. Suhaib Webb delivers religious advice through short videos on social media such as Snap Chat. He calls these online *fatwas* “Snapwas” (Khan, 2016). A graduate from Al-Azhar but also a former DJ, Webb is well-versed in hip-hop culture and speaks a youthful language, mixing slang and Qur’anic expressions. Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis) enjoys listening to his lectures because “he has that old-school hip-hop vibe.” Suhaib Webb often drops catchy sentences in his sermons that are subsequently widely shared on Facebook and Twitter, such as

³⁴ « Ils ne connaissent rien à la France, à ce qui se passe au fond du pays, dans les campagnes, à ce qui se dit dans les familles non-musulmanes, à comment on vit dans ces familles. Ils sont complètement coupés et isolés de la réalité française ». Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2015.

³⁵ Kendrick Lamar is a hip-hop artist born in 1987.

“Islam is the Uber to *Jannah* [paradise]³⁶”, which signifies that Islam is the fastest and easiest way to attain paradise. He translates the Islamic tradition into a language that directly speaks to the reality of 21st century young Americans.³⁷

This distinctive preaching style is also the hallmark of *American Da’wah* where references to pop culture sprinkle the monthly sermons of Dr. Uthman and the weekly classes of John. In the Being Muslim class, in order to describe how life was like in the Arabian society at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, John explained that the Bedouins were like “tribal gangbangers:” “they were tough,” he said. The comparison of 7th century Bedouins with figures of American urban culture embodying aggressive manhood was meant to facilitate converts’ understanding of the life of the Prophet and enable them to identify with him.³⁸ Dr. Uthman also frequently mentions in his lectures the film series Star Wars, which he claims are peppered with Islamic references. During a class, he explained that “may the force be with you” sounds like “may Allah be with you” and that Yoda is similar to the Islamic character of Khidr (*khidr* means green in Arabic, and in the Qur’an he is a righteous man who instructs Moses in esoteric knowledge³⁹). The fact that the Jedis wear North African robes that make them look like Sufi sheikhs and that they embody the principles of the *futuwwa* (Islamic chivalry) completes the picture.⁴⁰ Dr. Uthman’s Islamic interpretations of Star Wars are generally met with incredulity and laughter by attendees of his class, but they certainly create a sense of cultural comfort for new converts. Overall, most of Dr. Uthman’s classes are akin to a one-man show. His witty jokes often have the whole audience (myself included) in fits of laughter. The use of humor is central to the classes and sermons of contemporary youth Islamic preachers. Ubaydullah Evans is known in the whole city of Chicago for his graphic language and the numerous puns, anecdotes and funny stories with which he sprinkles his Islamic lectures. At times, when his audience is doubling up with laughter, he apologizes for going too far: “but we are Americans, and as we say: nothing gets in the way of the joke!⁴¹” This sharply contrasts with the dominant representation of Islamic preachers as severe and austere and participate in the creation of a distinctive American Islam.

At *Bienvenue en Islam*, in line with a general French teaching style characterized by restraint and authority, lectures are less exuberant. Yet, a number of profane references are also frequently enlisted during Islamic sermons to help young converts feel culturally comfortable. During a preparation workshop for the month of Ramadan, one of the teachers explained for instance that the month of Ramadan is to Muslims what the 14th of July (Bastille day) is to French people: “we commemorate the 14th of July to celebrate the French nation, to remind one another why we are together. In the same way, Ramadan is

³⁶ Twitter, January 16th, 2016

³⁷ In the US, non-convert figures are also very popular such as Nouman Ali Khan, who is of Pakistani descent and a leading Islamic scholar for the youth. In France, the controversial preacher Rachid Abou Houdeyfa, who is of Moroccan descent, is also an Internet star who is particularly appealing to young Muslims.

³⁸ Fieldnotes, June 9th, 2013.

³⁹ See *surat-al-Kahf*, chapter 18 of the Qur’an.

⁴⁰ There are actually several online articles devoted to the Islamic influence on Star Wars. See for instance Rydhan (2005).

⁴¹ Fieldnotes, March 24th, 2013.

a celebration for Muslims. It is the festival of the Qur'an.⁴² By drawing a parallel between the celebrations of the 14th of July and those of Ramadan, the teacher establishes a bridge between the French and Muslim identity. To appeal to the youngest in the audience, she also resorted to a sports metaphor: “these days, it is Roland Garros [international tennis tournament held in France every year]. Do you think that the players go there with their hands in their pockets? No! They have been prepping for it a long time ahead. Likewise, you need to prep for the month of Ramadan.⁴³” Young men in the audience nodded in agreement, ready to take up this physical and spiritual challenge.

c) The politics of naming

The invention of a French and American Islam is also manifest in the politics of naming that converts partake in. While it has always been very common for Muslim converts to adopt Islamic names (that is, Arabic sounding names), an increasing number of them consistently refuse to do so. As already stated in Chapter 5, among my 82 interviewees, 70, that is 85%, kept their first names. A common argument is that a name does not need to sound Arab to be Muslim. In a radio interview during which he presented his action in favor of fellow converts, Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille) emphasized that all names are Islamic, as long as their signification does not go against the idea of Allah's absolute power. For instance, a name such as Abd-Shams (which means “worshipper of sun” in Arabic) would be considered un-Islamic, but a name like Mary is as Islamic as Mohammed. Benjamin also reminded the audience that upon converting to Islam, none of the first Muslims had changed their names.⁴⁴

Progressively, a new rhetoric has developed among converts, in which they profess being proud of their first names and insist on keeping them. At times, converts even jealously guard their names as precious cultural assets. When I told David (31, unemployed, Chicago) that for the sake of anonymity I was going to modify his first name in my publications, he panicked: “why do you want to change my name?,” he asked with an anxious voice. As I clarified that it was to protect the confidentiality of his story, he progressively simmered down and explained that he had been asked so many times to change his name by fellow Muslims at his mosque that he was now suspicious of any such attempt. David recounted: “I tried changing my name, but every time someone would call me by a name that wasn't my birth name, it was like a stab in the heart. I felt like they didn't care about my family or where I came from. They wanted me to strip myself from my complete identity.” For David, his name is an integral part of his identity and relinquishing it for an Arabic name means betraying his sense of self. Adamant about keeping it, he eventually left the mosque to practice Islam on his own. After several years of solitude, he contacted *American Da'wah*, saying he was looking for a Muslim association that would allow him to keep his name and cultural identity. John welcomed him with open arms. The policy at *American Da'wah* and at *Bienvenue en Islam* is that

⁴² « On commémore le 14 juillet pour célébrer la nation française, pour se rappeler pourquoi nous sommes ensemble. De la même façon, le Ramadan est un festival pour les musulmans. Et que célébrons-nous pendant ce mois ? Nous célébrons le Qur'an. C'est la fête du Qur'an ». Fieldnotes, June 7th, 2015.

⁴³ « En ce moment, c'est Roland Garros. Vous pensez que les joueurs ils arrivent à Roland Garros les mains dans les poches ? Non, c'est un tournoi qu'on doit préparer à l'avance. Il faut se mettre dans les meilleures dispositions pour ce défi ».

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes, radio show “Spéciale convertis,” *Radio Pastel*, October 30th, 2015.

new converts absolutely do not need to change their names and must remain faithful to the name their families gave them.

The presence of converts with French or American sounding names eventually reconfigures the cultural feel of Islam. At *American Da'wah*, John frequently jokes about the Muslim butcher's shop he goes to at the end of the month of Ramadan in order to perform the recommended sacrifice of a sheep. The tradition is that the butcher slays the sheep while pronouncing the required Islamic incantations and declaiming the name of the Muslim believer requesting the sacrifice as well as his father's name. A common sacrificing sentence is therefore: “*bismillahi ar-rahman ar-rahim* [in the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful], *for Mohammed, son of Abdullah.*” Yet, whenever John goes to the shop, the sentence becomes: “*for John, son of Robert.*” The conjunction of these two very American names systematically generates surprise and amusement among the other customers.⁴⁵ For Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille), such disruptions and redefinitions of the dominant cultural Islamic order are indispensable: “we need to assert the fact that Muslims are not only Arab. Tomorrow, at school, there will be a little blond and blue-eyed boy named Martin who will fast during Ramadan.⁴⁶” The future of Islam, Benjamin argues, lies in this cultural diversity and reconfiguration of meanings.

d) Food considerations

A central element of culture, food and gastronomy are also enrolled in the construction and promotion of a French or American Islam. While abstaining from illicit ingredients such as swine and alcohol, converts remain attached to their cuisine and do not relinquish their food habits upon converting. Melissa (27, project manager, Paris) explains: “I am really attached to my culture, and it is not because I am Muslim that I am going to become North African or Arab. I am not suddenly going to eat *couscous* every Friday. Islam does not keep me from eating cheese and loving *boeuf bourguignon*.⁴⁷” The emphasis on maintaining traditional French diet is also extremely pronounced at *Bienvenue en Islam*. During meetings, the president encourages us to bring snacks and often insists that she prefers *chouquettes* (typical French choux pastry with pearl sugar) over *baklavas* (Middle Eastern pastry made of nuts and honey). The presence among the association's members of Claudio, a convert of Portuguese descent, also gives a distinct cultural feel to *Bienvenue en Islam* gatherings, since he always brings homemade *pasteis* (Portuguese egg tart pastry) to the meetings, much to everyone's delight.

In the US, albeit to a lesser extent, food is also endowed with important cultural stakes. White American scholar Suhaib Webb, who is a strong advocate of merging Islam with American culture, one day reported the following exchange: a fellow imam was talking to him about the internal divisions between South Asians and Arabs in the Muslim community and said “you know, I have a dream that one day there will be *biryani* [Pakistani mixed rice dish] and *mansaf* [rice and lamb Jordanian dish] at the same table.”

⁴⁵ Fieldnotes, September 25th, 2013.

⁴⁶ « Il faut ancrer le fait que les musulmans ne sont pas que des arabes. Demain, il y aura un petit Martin, blond aux yeux bleus, à la maternelle qui fera le Ramadan ».

⁴⁷ « Moi je suis très attachée à ma culture, à savoir que c'est pas parce que je suis musulmane que je deviens maghrébine ou que je deviens arabe. Donc voilà, enfin... je vais pas d'un coup d'un seul me mettre à manger du couscous tous les vendredis. Mais non enfin. Ça m'empêche pas de manger du fromage, voilà, d'adorer le bœuf bourguignon et d'être attachée au cinéma français ».

Suhaib Webb gave him a sidelong look and responded: “why don’t you add corn bread and mashed potatoes to the list?⁴⁸” By making such statement, Suhaib Webb reasserted the equal legitimacy of American food to have a seat at the Muslim table, and instated the American Muslim experience as just as authentic as any other. In doing so, converts expand the definition of “Muslim food” beyond the accepted notions of South Asian, North African or Middle Eastern food: “Muslim food is the mac & cheese, collard greens, turkey sticks, Lima beans, corn bread, BBQ, sweet potato, and bean pie that I was raised on. Muslim food is so diverse!” said for instance one African-American Muslim woman on *American Da’wah* Facebook group.⁴⁹ The bean pie, a recipe invented by the Nation of Islam as part of its strict dietary code (one meal a day), and inspired by Elijah Muhammad’s recommendation to eat navy beans in his famous book *How to Eat to Live* (1967), has become an American Muslim food icon. It is one of the only dishes that distinctively embodies Islamic sensitivity while being uniquely American.

e) Fashion matters

Just like there aren’t single Muslim names or single Muslim food, converts contend that there is no single Muslim clothing. Accordingly, my interviewees include typical French and American dress within the boundaries of *halal* apparel. As put by Jean (23, student Paris), “there is no Muslim dress. That does not exist. I consider that I am a French Muslim, a Muslim of French tradition and I am proud of it. You can be a better follower of Islamic rules by dressing with a suit than someone dressing in a *djellaba*. In Senegal, they have their own clothing tradition. In Pakistan, they have another one. In Saudi Arabia, they have another one. And in Chechnya, yet another one. Well, in France, I have my own as well!⁵⁰” When I met him, Jean was dressed with beige darted pants, a grey sweater and waistcoat, polished leather shoes and his beard was nicely trimmed. He looked like any other Frenchman while meeting all the Islamic requirements of modesty. In Chicago, Monica (34, housewife) also embraces various clothing traditions to satisfy her fashion needs, as long as she considers her body to be sufficiently covered to meet Islamic prescriptions: “I can wear a long skirt, a Jordanian outfit, or a Pakistani *salwaar kameez*. But literally, one day I will have American clothes on, like a blazer on a shirt, and I will just add something that’s bigger, like an American jean skirt. And then I can wear a Chinese, you know one of those red dresses, I just get it lose, it satisfies the needs... I can wear whatever I want. It does not belittle my Islam.”

At the two convert associations I studied, converts were encouraged not to modify their attire. At *Bienvenue en Islam*, this was evident in the dress of one of the leading imams, who is always clean-shaven and wearing a suit; and in the outfit of the president, a 75-year-old woman who, with her long skirts, flowery headscarves and woolen turtlenecks, looks like any of the members’ French grandmothers. At *American Da’wah* the injunction to keep an American style was embodied by John’s laidback appearance

⁴⁸ Fieldnotes, November 21st, 2013.

⁴⁹ Facebook, June 2015.

⁵⁰ « Il y a pas de profil musulman, il y a pas d’habit musulman, ça existe pas... Moi je suis musulman français, de tradition française, fier tu vois. Tu peux être plus dans les règles de l’islam en étant habillé en costard-cravate, qu’un mec qui est habillé en *djellaba*. (...) Tu vas au Sénégal, ils ont une certaine tradition vestimentaire. Au Pakistan, ils en ont une autre. En Arabie saoudite, ils en ont une autre. En Tchétchénie ils en ont une autre. Bah en France j’en ai une autre ! »

(jeans and T-shirt), or by the more elaborated style of Dr. Uthman who, with his darted pants, jacket, unknotted bow tie, circular glasses, hair center part and beret, often looks like an English dandy.

African-American convert and Islamic scholar Ubaydullah Evans is also well known for being a fashion addict. His passion for three-piece suits, cuff links, double-breasted blazers and button down collars is often laughingly mentioned by other converts. Brian (23, student, Chicago) is a fan of his: “Ubaydullah Evans is just such an interesting guy. I mean that dude dresses nice. Like, I love his shit... Most of his collars don’t have buttons so he wears his tie and he puts a gold pin on top that pushes his tie up. I am like ‘that’s some funny shit!’” A native of the South Side of Chicago, Ubaydullah grew up between his mother and his grandmother, who owned a fashion shop, and he would always try on different outfits there. At some point, he prided himself on never wearing the same clothes during the 365 days of the year. When he converted to Islam, Ubaydullah threw away all his clothes, for he came to see his fashion obsession as sinful and narcissist, and started wearing a *thawb* on a daily basis. Yet, as he became acquainted with the thought of other American Islamic scholars, such as Sherman Jackson, he realized he could stay true to himself and successfully merge his interest for distinguished American dress with diligent Islamic practice.⁵¹ Eventually, Ubaydullah went to study Islam at the renowned university of Al-Azhar in Cairo and claimed he was the only one there to graduate in *sharia* law with a bow tie! In Detroit, Souleymane (45, Islamic teacher and dancer) was very much impressed by Evans’ persona, which he interprets as a fruitful example of what American Islam can look like: “this is his Islamic demeanor and this is Islam!,” he exclaimed. Converts are thus encouraged to explore their Islamic modesty within the context of the French and American fashion realms.⁵²

f) France and the US as “Islamic” countries

Creating a French and American Islam also involves building a narrative of the French and American nations as compatible with Islam. This was frequently done in the two convert associations I studied by using historical material. At *American Da’wah*, around the middle of the semester, John introduced a new section in his Being Muslim class, entertainingly called “Did you know?”, in which he presented delightful historical anecdotes about American Islam. In one of them he talked about the 2007 election to Congress of African-American convert to Islam Keith Ellison, who became the first Muslim US representative ever. Ellison was famously sworn in using a Qur’an, not a Bible, and the extraordinary fact that John wanted to emphasize was that the ceremonial oath was performed on a 1764 edition of the Qur’an that had been owned by Thomas Jefferson,⁵³ Founding Father of the US (Spellberg, 2013). Because of his position in favor

⁵¹ To watch Ubaydullah Evans talk about his life and his passion for fashion, see ALIM (2013).

⁵² American Muslim fashion specifically made the headlines recently after the releasing of a video entitled “Somewhere in America” (by Habib Yazdi, November 2013) that featured what came to be known as *Mipsterz*, a contraction of Muslim hipsters. On a hip-hop soundtrack, the camera follows beautiful young Muslim women dressed fashionably, with colorful headscarves, large sunglasses and other fancy accessories as they dance, laugh, ride skateboards and bikes, or practice fencing. It raised debates as to whether Islam was on the path to Americanization or commodification. To my knowledge, no such video has been released (yet?) in France.

⁵³ It is the third edition of George Sale’s (imperfect) English translation of the Qur’an, first published in 1734 in London.

of absolute religious freedom, Thomas Jefferson had been, long before Barack Obama, the first American political figure to be wrongly accused of being Muslim. John concluded: “so what I am saying is: don’t feel threatened by Islamophobia these days. The US has a much longer history than that with Islam.⁵⁴” In doing so, John draws a picture of Islam as domestic to America and constitutive of its very history, a strategy aimed at dispelling stereotypes that construct Islam as foreign and un-American.

A similar historical approach was also used at *Bienvenue en Islam*, as the president kept mentioning in her lectures the book *Le soleil d’Allah brille en Occident* (Allah’s sun shines over the Occident) by German scholar Sigrid Hunke, which goes against the theory of “clash of civilizations” by detailing the various contributions of the Islamic world to Western civilization (medicine, algebra, arts, philosophy, language, etc.). For the president, the book is required reading for any Western convert, because it demonstrates the irreducible Muslimness of France, and the mutual compatibility between the French and Muslim identities, which converts precisely embody. In Lille, Bruno (37, researcher) created a small convert association that frequently organizes lectures and cultural events to confirm such claim. The most recent was an exhibit entitled *Traces* by photographer and historian Georges Bertrand, which documents instances of Muslim presence at the very heart of France in the Middle Ages, most notably in architecture. Bruno was also very enthusiastic about the recent discovery in Nimes (South of France) of Islamic sepulchers dating from the 7th or 9th century (the three skeletons that were exhumed were all facing Mecca) (Paulet, 2016). The oldest ever discovered on French territory, these Muslim graves attest to the long-lasting presence of Islam in France and re-inscribe French converts, such as Bruno, in a glorious and unquestionable shared history.

By digging into the past, converts assert the legitimacy of their dual identity as French Muslims or American Muslims. Prominent historical converts such as Philippe Grenier or Alexander Russell Webb are frequently enrolled in this endeavor. In his quest for an American Islam, Dr. Umar Faruq-Abdallah has for instance written a biography of Alexander Russell Webb, who, as mentioned in Chapter 4, was one of the first white Americans to embrace Islam. Talking about Webb as an example that should inspire American Muslims today, he wrote: “Webb unapologetically espoused his newly adopted faith in terms that made clear he saw no contradiction between it and his deeply rooted American identity” (Faruq Abd-Allah, 2006: 4). Dr Faruq Abdallah describes Webb as a Muslim who was able to reconcile both aspects of his self.

In addition, converts involved in the re-acculturation path picture France and the US as perfectly compatible with Islam. At *American Da’wah*, John frequently told the class that in spite of recurring media frenzy over Islam, they were “lucky to live in America, where there is more religious freedom than in any other country.⁵⁵” John reminded converts that the first Muslims were harshly persecuted in Mecca. America, by contrast, was presented as a welcoming country for Muslims, whose religious rights are guaranteed by the Constitution. Brian (23, student, Chicago) is also a firm supporter of American secularism, which he considers as more religiously relevant than contemporary Islamic states: “I think theocracy in Iran and Saudi Arabia are miserable, for the state of religion in particular. And I honestly think that if the Prophet were to exist in the 21st

⁵⁴ Fieldnotes, April 7th, 2013.

⁵⁵ Fieldnotes, May 5th, 2013.

century, in this time and space, he would be a proponent of secularism.” Brian uses the biography of the Prophet to authenticate his contemporary practice of Islam in America.

In France, several interviewees also explained that, to them, France was actually more “Islamic” in its principles than any of the “so-called Muslim countries.” As put by Caroline (28, PhD candidate, Marseille): “what is a Muslim country? I mean, Islamic values are more respected in France than, say, in Algeria or in Gulf countries. Here, even animals have rights! It looks much more like Islam than countries that do not even give rights to children or divorced women. I mean they are very far from Islamic values in those countries.⁵⁶” For Caroline, “Islamic” values are not necessarily found among those who call themselves “Muslim.” The sharp distinction between Islam as an abstract ideal and the actual members of the religion is this time used to demonstrate that France, albeit non-Muslim, is more *sharia*-compliant than most Muslim majority countries. At *Bienvenue en Islam*, similar rhetorical tropes were used by the president, who for instance claimed during a gathering that: “France is a beautiful country. We have the freedom of saying whatever we want. We can gather today as 20 people and say whatever we want. In Morocco, in Egypt, it wouldn’t be possible! We are amazingly lucky and we need to say it. Of course, there is that old typically French tradition of mocking religions, but there is more freedom for Muslims in France than in most Arab countries.⁵⁷” Mentioning the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly that she sees as conspicuously lacking in Arab countries, the president once again expresses the idea that France is a land of peace and refuge for Muslims. In saying so, she also reinforces the idea that the salvation of Islam will come from Muslims living in the West, for they are more in touch with actual Islamic values.

In creating a French and American Islam, converts and their friends reconfigure the boundaries of *dar al islam* [abode of the believers] and *dar al kufr* [realm of the unbelievers]. They create an Islamic mental geography in which Western democracies such as France and the US are as much, if not more, part of *dar al islam* than any other Muslim majority country.

g) Popular culture and artistic expressions

“I love Qur’an like I love jazz, I love Qur’an like I love hip-hop.”
Souleymane (45, Islamic teacher and dancer, Detroit)

Finally, artistic and cultural expressions are a privileged medium to blend cultural codes, experiment hybridization and foster a process of mutual adaptation between religious and cultural identities (Göle, 2015: 153). Ubaydullah Evans (40, Islamic teacher, Chicago) is known for fully embracing American culture in his practice of Islam. During

⁵⁶ « C’est quoi un pays musulman ? Parce que les valeurs islamiques elles sont plus respectées en France que... que prenons, n’importe, l’Algérie ou les pays du Golfe... Enfin ici, même les animaux ont des droits, quoi ! Ça ressemble beaucoup plus à l’Islam de donner des droits aux animaux que de même pas donner de droits aux enfants ou aux femmes divorcées... Enfin, on en est très loin, quoi, des valeurs islamiques dans ces pays-là ».

⁵⁷ « La France, c’est un beau pays. (...) En France, on a la liberté de dire ce qu’on veut, vous imaginez ça. Quelle chance nous avons. Ici, on peut se réunir à 20 personnes et dire ce qu’on veut. Au Maroc, en Egypte, ce ne serait pas possible ! Il faut dire tout ça. On a une chance extraordinaire. Bien sûr, il y a la tradition franchouillarde de rire de tout et d’attaquer les religions, mais il y a une liberté pour nous les musulmans qu’on ne trouve pas dans les pays arabes ». Fieldnotes, January 25th, 2015.

a class, he for instance gave us the following piece of advice to read the Qur'an: "you need to put yourself in a good state of mind. For instance, when I read the Qur'an, I listen to John Coltrane and Miles Davis and that allows me to read while following the rhythm, and I find myself being much more concentrated." Listening to American jazz music while reading the Qur'an might seem unconventional in most Muslim circles, but Ubaydullah precisely argues that this allows him to delve deeper into the message of Islam, thereby emphasizing that mixing Islam with one's own culture can be beneficial.⁵⁸ According to James (48, English professor, Detroit), a distinctive American Islam will emerge as "American Muslims express themselves artistically, in a way that is not bound to Pakistani traditions or Arab traditions." He cites the example of Dawud Wharnsby, a Canadian singer and convert to Islam, who plays North American folk music and whose lyrics are influenced by the teachings of the Qur'an. Amir Sulaiman is another example of a convert to Islam and spoken word artist who merges both Islamic and American traditions. The various hip hop and jazz artists cited in Chapter 4 have also greatly contributed to the creation of American Muslim artistic expression. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the *Ms. Marvel* comic super heroine Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American teenage girl living in Jersey City, who is the first Marvel character to be Muslim (Gustines, 2013), has been designed by white American convert to Islam Gwendolyn Willow Wilson,⁵⁹ highlighting once again the distinctive contribution of converts to shaping an American cultural expression of Islam.

The embrace by American Muslims of American popular culture has become particularly evident with the shooting in April 2014 of the "Happy Chicago Muslims" video clip (by Rayyan Najeeb), which was meant to echo the "Happy British Muslims" video released shortly earlier. The clip features joyful young Muslims, including a lot of converts (many of whom were my interviewees), smiling and dancing in the streets of Chicago and its suburbs, on the soundtrack "Happy" by American hip-hop artist Pharrell Williams.⁶⁰ The video sparked controversy in the Muslim community from a variety of standpoints: it received backlash from conservative Muslims who deemed it inappropriate because it used music and featured men and (some uncovered) women dancing side by side. It was also critiqued by activist Muslims who dismissed it as a useless token of integration to America, failing to address broader issues of injustice and contributing to the commodification of Islam into a mainstream capitalist narrative (Haballah, 2014; Merrill, 2014; for a scholarly analysis, see Maréchal, 2015). Yet, most of the responses to it were positive: Chicago Muslims had sent a strong message to the world that they were at once happy, Muslim and American.

In France, the merging of the French and Muslim identities has also been advocated by converts involved in the artistic field, such as rapper and writer Abd Al Malik and former hip-hop artist Diam's. A French man of Congolese descent who grew up in a project, Abd al Malik (born Régis Fayette-Mikano) converted to Islam as a youth and joined the Tabligh movement before becoming part of a Sufi order. In his autobiography *Qu'Allah bénisse la France* (May Allah Bless France, 2007), which was subsequently turned into a movie, Abd al Malik contends that young Muslims and

⁵⁸ Fieldnotes, March 24th, 2013.

⁵⁹ Gwendolyn Willow Wilson's journey to Islam is depicted in her memoir book entitled *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam* (2010).

⁶⁰ As I was doing fieldwork the day of the shooting, I also briefly appear on this video.

converts such as himself are endowed with the specific mission of bridging France and Islam. He frequently argues that “Islam is a French religion” (Abd-al-Malik, 2013b) and that it is actually Islam, by opening his heart and soothing his anger, that made him “love the French Republic and the French nation” (Ghozali, 2011). His last novel *L’islam au secours de la République* (2013a) envisions what would happen if France elected a President who would subsequently turn out to be a convert to Islam – an enticing scenario meant to dispel stereotypes about converts and French Muslims at large. As for rapper Diam’s (Mélanie Georgiades), she quit a successful music career after converting to Islam in 2009 and published in 2015 a book entitled *Mélanie: française et musulmane* (Mélanie: French and Muslim), in which she emphasizes the compatibility of the French and Muslim identities. She writes: “I wanted to show that there is no contradiction or incompatibility between these words. I am French and Muslim, I have roots and wings.”

h) “Islamerica” vs. “Islam de France:” legacies and prospects

Overall, I found that the merging of national culture with Islamic references was more prevalent and spectacular in the American context than the French one. This may be due to my position as a French ethnographer, enabling me to identify from the outside the specificities of the American society but making me more impervious to the cultural distinctiveness of my own country. Yet, besides my observer biases, cross-national differences appear clearly. The greater cultural appeal of American Islam can be explained by two factors: first, the distinctive role of religion in producing civic integration; second, the legacy of African-American Islam and the existence of a thriving Latino Muslim community. These two elements are absent in the French context, where the re-acculturation path is further complicated by government interference under the regime of Defiant Secularism.

In their efforts to craft an American Islam, contemporary Muslims in the US perpetuate a typically American pattern, that of integrating through religion. As already stated in the Introduction, immigrants and their children can “become American” by “becoming Muslim,” for religion is a factor of cultural membership in the American nation. In creating an American Islam that is entertaining, respectful of American cultural codes and therefore non-threatening, converts and second and third generation Muslims join the ranks of American civil religion. In this endeavor, they can build upon the solid heritage established by African-American Muslims. According to Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago), a convert of Indian descent: “there wouldn’t be an American Islam without African-American Islam. They really paved the way for us. They are our first teachers, they are our first models to combine that, America and Islam.” In her view, black Muslims have laid the groundwork for the development of a distinctive American expression of Islam. African-American convert and Islamic scholar Sherman Jackson could not agree more. For him, African-Americans are what he calls the “*Banu Hashim*⁶¹ of America,” a local community that has fully accepted Islam as “part of them.” He adds that “the African-American community have established Islam as a religion that belongs here, in America, as home.” Accordingly, Jackson worries about the fate of Muslims in Europe, who do not have the luck of having such a large homegrown community: “look at the Muslims in Europe. Frankly, I don’t know what they are going to do there, because

⁶¹ The Banu Hashim were the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. In the Islamic tradition, they are portrayed as people who always stood by him, even those who did not agree with his religious message.

they have no indigenous Muslim community. America is unique in that regard.⁶² The legacy of African-American Islam, albeit stripped from its most radical racial politics, is re-appropriated by Muslim American youth, who notably embrace Islamic hip-hop culture as proof that Islam is truly American (Abdul Khabeer, 2016).

In addition to the African-American component, the construction of American Islam is further enriched by the increasing presence among Muslims of Latino-Americans, who make up 12% of American converts (Bagby, 2012a). They constitute one of the most striking and rapid examples of Islamic acculturation. Over the last few years, countless newspapers articles (The New York Times, 2011; Amr Ruiz, 2012; Sanchèz, 2012; Hernandez, 2015a; Hernandez, 2015b; Aidi, 2016) have been published on the rise of Latino-American Muslims, the fastest demographics converting to Islam. The successful hybridization of their cultural and religious identities has also garnered academic attention (Barzegar, 2003; Martinez-Vazquez, 2010; Cadinot, 2012; Morales, 2012; Bowen, 2013; Chitwood, 2015). We have historical evidence of Latinos converting to Islam as early as the 1920s, through their ties to African-American Muslim communities or early Muslim immigrants. From the 1970s onwards, Latino Muslims have been carving out a space for themselves in the American Muslim community and creating their own institutions (Bowen, 2015: 362-363), such as the now defunct *Alianza Islamica* founded in 1987 in New York’s Spanish Harlem (Ocasio, 2016); *Islam in Spanish* led by Puerto Rican and Colombian converts Abdullah Danny Hernandez and Mujahid Fletcher; or the *Latin American Da’wah Organization* (LADO) led by convert Juan Galvan and whose motto is “¡Puro Latino! ¡Puro Islam!” This year, the North Hudson Islamic Educational Center in New Jersey, which offers Qur’anic classes in Spanish, will be celebrating their 17th annual “Hispanic Muslim Day.” On January 30th 2016, following in the footsteps of *Alianza Islamica*, the organization *Islam in Spanish* opened in Houston the first Spanish-speaking mosque of the US, which garnered worldwide attention (Ferreira, 2016; Schuessler, 2016).

Chicago specifically is home to a thriving Latino Muslim community. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I collected many Islamic leaflets in Spanish, and attended events in which *chocolate a la espanola* (hot Mexican chocolate) and halal *tamales* were distributed. Monica (34, housewife, Chicago), who is of Mexican descent, said she was very impressed by their numerous activities: “their culture plays a pivotal role in their Islam. And it’s amazing.” Indicative of this cultural hybridity, a documentary entitled *New Muslim Cool* (2009, PBS) about the life of Puerto Rican convert to Islam and hip hop artist Jason Hamza Perez in Pittsburgh was recently released. Talking about the merging of his various identities, Hamza laughingly mentions that he speaks “Arabic Spanglish Ebonics.” Besides language, food also plays a central part in the crafting of a distinct Latino Muslim culture. In a recent online article, Jose Acevedo (2016), a convert of Puerto Rican descent and Islamic teacher, explains that for him the “smells of *Id* [celebration for the end of Ramadan]” are not the traditional “curry, ginger, fenugreek, cloves, cardamom, coriander, cumin, or cinnamon” typical of Middle Eastern and South Asian cuisine but rather bear the distinctive mark of Puerto Rican spices (*recao*, cilantro, *aji dulce*) and dishes (halal *coquito*, *pina colada* and flan). These are only a few examples of the various avenues through which Latino-Americans are crafting new culturally

⁶² Fieldnotes, December 8th, 2013.

relevant forms of Islam in the American context.⁶³

Overall, Islamerica appears to be compounded by a variety of cultural elements that add further diversity to the already vibrant Arab and South Asian heritage and reconfigure the cultural stereotypes associated with Islam. According to Deepa (38, clinical social worker, Chicago), the strength of Islamerica lies in this multitude: “American Islam is not this monolithic thing. You have so many different cultures here like, African-American Muslims, Latino Muslims, Desi Muslims, Arab Muslims, all the different communities in America, they all contribute to that definition of what American Islam will be.”

By contrast, French Muslims do not have in their midst “radical cultural redefiners” as African-Americans and Latino-Americans have proven to be. Because of basic demographics and a lesser number of converts, French Islam is necessarily less culturally pluralistic than “Islamerica.” The French Muslim community is also much less endowed financially than its American counterpart, which hinders the development of platforms, spaces and organizations to craft and promote a distinctive culture. In comparison to the US, the Unintelligibility of Religion in the French context and the association of Frenchness with strict secularism, also limits in theory the ability to claim a dual French-religious identity, or a French-Muslim identity – although this is in practice what most of my French interviewees do.

In addition, the acculturation of French Islam is further constrained by the French government’s interference with it. The expression “Islam de France” (Islam of France) is for instance contentious for it has become associated with governmental efforts to organize the French Muslim community under the regime of Defiant Secularism, where minority religions are seen as potentially threatening for the Republic. Institutional attempts to designate Muslim representatives to dialog with the State (CORIF, CFCM,⁶⁴ etc.) have repeatedly failed because of a lack of coordination among French Muslims themselves, a continuing interference of Muslim-majority countries and a widespread distrust towards the French government action (Bowen, 2009; Fournier, 2009; Godard, 2015b). While “Islamerica” spontaneously emerged as a bottom-up cultural process, “Islam de France” has been experienced by many of my interviewees as a top-down injunction to assimilate. Romain (30, unemployed, Paris) was particularly angry about this state of facts, which in his view, constrains the self-definition of French Muslims: “what we want is just living our religion by ourselves, not that Sarkozy or Hollande come into our mosques to tell us how we are supposed to celebrate *Id!* It is absurd! What we want is being represented by someone who is French, no matter their origin, and who is Muslim, and who knows the specific issues of French Muslims. Not someone who is Algeria or Qatar’s lapdog, because they don’t know anything about our lives. And neither

⁶³ In addition to Latino-American Muslims, albeit much less numerous, Native-American converts to Islam also display a distinct cultural identity, as exemplified by one of my interviewees, Jessica (27, nanny, Chicago) who proudly combines her Choctaw and Muslim traditions. She is particularly fond of the all-female band Three Generationz which fuses Native-American and African-American sensibilities with Muslim spirituality. She actually converted to Islam after seeing them perform in Chicago in 2011, as the show vividly demonstrated that there was no incompatibility between these traditions. On Native American converts to Islam, also see the short documentary “My Identity” (2017, Foster Care Film), and the online testimony by Wolford (2015).

⁶⁴ Conseil de réflexion de l’Islam de France (1989) ; Conseil français du culte musulman (2003).

someone who is the French State's lapdog. It is as simple as that.⁶⁵ Converts are trying to build their own French Islam at the individual level. They do not want to conform to an "Islam de France" formatted by the State and reminiscent of the exceptionalism that prevailed in the colonial period, during which French authorities sought to shape religious practice (Peter, 2006; Meziane, 2015; Pita, 2015; Puzenat, 2015: 28). To feel authentic, the re-acculturation path needs to unfold independently from government interference.

Overall, the deculturalization of Islam has had unintended consequences (Göle, 2015: 235), which depart from the puritan injunctions of the fundamentalist movements: religion has instead become the bedrock onto which a mutual transformation of both Muslim culture and French/American culture can unfold, generating unprecedented cultural hybridizations through mundane daily practices, such as clothing, language and food habits. After having disconnected culture from religion, converts have participated in their reconnection on different terms.

3) The re-interpretative path: "progressive" Muslims

Besides the fundamentalist path, which severs any ties with culture and strictly sticks to scripture, and the re-acculturation path, which merges Islamic practice with mainstream culture, the third path of Islamic revival involves a radical reinterpretation of Islamic sources to transform dominant culture. This path, whose proponents call "progressive" or "reformist," aims at historicizing, revisiting, deconstructing and reconstructing the Islamic canon (Arkoun, 2003; Filali-Ansary, 2003; Benzine, 2008; Bencheikh, 2015), in order to promote a "liberal" or "liberating" theology, adapted to the contemporary context and motivated by ideals of social justice and equality. The reformist movement emerges from within Islam and is not imposed from the outside (Camilleri, 2006). Its guiding principle is that dominant, orthodox interpretations of Islamic scripture bear the mark of the historical and cultural context in which they were crafted. This context being most of the time characterized by class, gender and racial inequalities, new interpretations of scripture are needed to update the Islamic canon and merge it with contemporary efforts towards social progress. While the fundamentalist path is suspicious of any deviation from orthodoxy and the re-acculturation path only marginally adapts Islamic orthodoxy to make it culturally comfortable, the re-interpretative path radically reconfigures the boundaries of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In my study, 12 interviewees fall into that category (3 in the US and 9 in France); they all have in common to be highly educated and engaged in various forms of social activism.

In France, Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), who works as personal assistant for writer Abdennour Bidar, constitutes a good example of this attitude. Son of a born Muslim Moroccan father and a French mother converted to Sufism, partly raised by an atheist grandfather who was also a winemaker, Abdennour Bidar is known for promoting a philosophical approach to Islam that places individual reason and critical thought at the

⁶⁵ « Ce qu'on veut c'est juste vivre notre religion. (...) Et pas Sarkozy ou Hollande ou tout ça qui viennent dans nos mosquées pour nous dire comment on doit fêter l'Aïd, quoi ! Enfin, tu vois c'est... aberrant ! Nous ce qu'on veut c'est juste être représentés par quelqu'un qui est Français, et peu importe son origine, qui est Français, qui est musulman et qui connaît les problèmes des Français musulmans. Qui n'est pas un chien de l'Algérie, du Qatar, parce qu'ils sont pas représentatifs, ils connaissent pas nos vies, ils connaissent pas ce qu'on fait. Et qui n'est pas non plus un chien de la France. Voilà, c'est aussi simple que ça ».

center of the religion. During her interview, Blandine explained that, like Bidar who recently published a book entitled *Self Islam* (2006), she has a “very personal vision of her Islam, very free, not necessarily well understood by other Muslims.⁶⁶” Blandine does not wear the *hijab*, nor does she dress “modestly;” she does not always cover her hair while praying because she deems it unnecessary; and she has crafted her own brand of prayer, mixing elements from both the Bible and the Qur’an, which she always recites in French, rather than Arabic. To many Muslims, her practice of the religion would be considered heterodox. Yet, as a very devout woman who prays several hours a day, Blandine says she wants to “participate in the Islamic reform process.⁶⁷” During her interview, she enumerated what she considers as the three main issues to be tackled: a greater freedom of practice and belief (for instance, having the possibility not to fast in Ramadan, or not to believe in angels, without being considered less Muslim); greater gender equality (eliminating gender segregation in mosques, ensuring more freedom of dress for women, promoting female imams); a greater humanism (especially through sincere interfaith dialogue, not rooted in a feeling of superiority).⁶⁸ She concluded with a sigh and a smile: “big project.⁶⁹”

Converts are involved in a large variety of Islamic reinterpretation movements (spiritual environmentalism, theology of liberation, Islamo-marxism, etc.) but the most prominent endeavor is to be found among the feminist and LGBTQ Muslim movements, which have gained momentum in the recent decade and in which converts tend to play significant roles. These movements build on history, anthropology, linguistics and textual analysis to provide new interpretations of Islamic scripture in order to promote gender equality, advocate for female religious leadership and accommodate all sexual orientations within the Islamic tradition. In the US, converts are at the forefront of these efforts. On March 18th, 2005, African-American convert Amina Wadud became the first woman to lead a mixed congregational prayer in public, a role women are normally forbidden to perform according to dominant Islamic orthodoxy. The prayer, which was eventually hosted at an Episcopal church in Manhattan after several mosques refused to welcome it, gathered men and women praying side by side, without the usual gender separation. It garnered worldwide attention, generating both praise and very harsh condemnation (Wadud received death threats).

⁶⁶ « J’ai une vision très personnelle de mon islam, très libre et tout, c’est pas forcément bien compris par des musulmans qui eux le vivent différemment ».

⁶⁷ « J’ai à cœur de participer à la réforme de l’islam ».

⁶⁸ « Au niveau des objectifs, pour moi ce serait d’arriver à trois choses principales. Une plus grande liberté de croyance et de pratique au sein de la communauté musulmane. C’est-à-dire que quelqu’un qui décide de pas faire le Ramadan, parce que pour lui ça lui apporte pas, il a le droit et il est pas moins musulman que quelqu’un qui le fait. Quelqu’un qui croit pas en je sais pas moi... je dis n’importe quoi, mais quelqu’un qui pense par exemple que les anges, ça existe pas, bah il a le droit aussi, voilà, il est pas moins musulman. (...) Ensuite ce serait l’égalité. Donc je pense principalement homme/femme. Au boulot ! [rires] Donc égalité, ce qui impliquerait, donc voilà, plus de séparation dans les mosquées. (...) Aussi, qu’on puisse aller prier sans voile si on a envie ! [rires] Voilà. Enfin en gros liberté de s’habiller comme on veut. Femmes imams, aussi, tous ces trucs-là. Et puis un plus grand humanisme. C’est-à-dire pas se laisser limiter à aimer son frère le musulman, mais que ce soit pareil pour tout le monde,... pas de jugement du style ‘c’est mieux d’être musulman, les chrétiens sont moins bien.’ »

⁶⁹ « Gros chantier ».

In addition to women's rights, homosexual rights are also promoted. In Washington DC, African-American convert Daayiee Abdullah (born Sidney Thompson) is one of the few openly gay imams in the world, along with South African Muhsin Hendricks and French-Algerian Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed. Abdullah is known for having publicized a new interpretation of the story of Lut in the Qur'an, which is usually cited as proof that homosexuality is a sin in Islam, but which he has reinterpreted as a condemnation of non-consensual sex only.⁷⁰ Daayiee Abdullah is in the advisory board of Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), a human rights Islamic organization co-founded by Malaysian-American singer Ani Zonneveld and by white American convert Pamela Taylor in 2007, whose purpose is to promote critical thinking on religious scripture in order to advocate gender equality and LGBTQ inclusion. The Atlanta chapter of MPV is led by a female convert, Kelly Wentworth, who officiates as an imam there. It is also a convert, transgender woman Mahdia Lynn, who founded the Transgender Muslim Support Network. Having moved across boundaries of gender and religion, Lynn finds parallels between the two situations (Lynn, 2015).

In France, the organization Homosexuels Musulmans de France (HM2F), founded by French-Algerian imam Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, has opened in 2012 the first "inclusive" prayer space welcoming male and female, cisgender and transgender, heterosexual and homosexual Muslims alike to pray side by side. The organization attracts many converts. In my sample, Fanny (26, educational assistant, Paris), Rachel (30, translator, Paris), Blandine (25, music teacher, Paris), Adèle (29, bank employee, Marseille), Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris) and Sébastien (29, library employee, Paris) enjoy praying at this mosque, which they feel is more intimate and embracing. Processes of transnational cooperation are also at play on these issues. For instance, Blandine (25, music teacher) organized in 2014 an interfaith conference on feminism in Paris to which she invited American woman Ani Zonneveld from Muslims for Progressive Values. As for Rachel (30, translator, Paris), she is currently in the process of translating into French the book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (2007) by Amina Wadud, whom she considers as her "role model, her Islamic tutelary figure, her living goddess"⁷¹ for having proven to her that being a feminist woman and being a devout Muslim is possible. This once again demonstrates the centrality of converts in advancing and publicizing Islamic reform.⁷²

⁷⁰ In the Qur'an, Lut (Lot) is mentioned in chapters 7, 15, 26 and 29. He is sent as a prophet to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants are presented as transgressing God's law by indulging in robbery, mistreatment of strangers, collective rape and sexual misconduct. In the Qur'anic narrative, inhabitants refuse to listen to Lut and ridicule him. They eventually incur God's wrath and are wiped off the map.

⁷¹ « C'est mon modèle, c'est ma figure tutélaire de l'islam, (...) ma déesse vivante ».

⁷² To be sure, reformist efforts led by converts do not always succeed, especially when they cannot demonstrate a solid religious legitimacy. In France, this was apparent in the trajectory of Félix Marquardt, a well-known socialite and communication adviser for large companies, who had embraced Islam in 2004 to get married but only started practicing it in 2014. Shortly after his spiritual renewal, he launched in April 2015 a foundation devoted to the reform of Islam: the foundation Al-Kawakibi, from the name of a Syrian Islamic reformer of the 19th century. An American citizen, Marquardt defines himself as an "Atlanticist Muslim" and wants healthy relationships with the US. Armed with his impressive address book and his acute sense of public relations, Marquardt, a neophyte, surrounded himself with renowned Islamic scholars such as Mohamed Bajrafil, Ghaleb Bencheik, Omero Marongiu-Perria, Asma Lamrabet and Adnan Ibrahim to promote a new aggiornamento of Islam: providing new interpretations of Islamic scripture to encourage enlightenment, democracy and tolerance, fight radicalism, assimilate into the French Republic, distinguish culture from religion and circumvent Arabo-centrism. Marquardt envisioned the foundation as "the Davos forum of Islamic reform." The foundation collapsed shortly after its inauguration dinner. At the event, Alain

Overall, be it in the fundamentalist, acculturating or progressive form, converts often present themselves as the spearheads of Islamic revival, even though second and third generation Muslims are very involved as well.

C. CONTROVERSIES

The three paths detailed above are not consensual and generate much internal debates within the French and American Muslim communities.

1) Fundamentalist Muslims’ rigidity and arrogance

For converts engaged in the re-acculturation path, fundamentalists and Salafis in particular are perceived as overtly rigid, anti-intellectual, and uninformed. Kathleen (30, flight attendant, Detroit) commented: “I have never met a Salafi that I have liked.” She finds them conceited and delusional in their interpretation of scripture: “their fundamental process of how to practice the religion is just obviously off! Like ‘ok, sure, return to the Qur’an and Sunnah. How do you incorporate what the Qur’an says about slavery into modern society?’ ‘Well, I do it myself.’ What do you mean you do it yourself? You can’t just, like, ignore 1400 years of scholarship!” Like her, Jean (23, student, Paris) was skeptical about Salafis’ arrogance and their lack of respect for tradition or elders. For him, Salafism is a “hold-up,” an illegitimate reinvention of tradition.

Eric (51, engineer, Paris), who belongs to a Sufi order, also considers that Salafism is “an empty bottle” because it only emphasizes exoteric aspects of the religion, at the expense of spiritual, mystic and esoteric ones. In his view, “Salafism is poison. Because the straightforward way they deal with scripture is pretty good in appearance, and French people are Cartesian, so they like it. But I mean, a religion that’s Cartesian is just pointless.”⁷³ Eric criticizes Salafism’s legalism and over-preoccupation with halal/haram boundaries, which, in his view, obscures the complexity of the workings of faith and erases the mystery of divine revelation. Salafis, who often have a distinctive dress, sporting large *thawbs* or black *niqabs/jilbabs*, are also said to be victims of the culturalization of Islam since the religion they practice is often tainted with Saudi cultural influences. According to Fabien (21, student, Paris), “it is the competition for who will

Finkielkraut, a conservative French philosopher known for his essentializing comments on Islam and Muslims had been invited to talk, and wine had been served by Marquardt’s mother, who is non-Muslim. This created outrage among conservative and less conservative Muslims alike, who felt alienated from the project. Harsh criticism was expressed from French Salafis who accused the foundation of betrayal. Personal attacks against the participants were pronounced. Asma Lamrabet had left the foundation before the dinner because of Finkielkraut, and Mohamed Bajrafil left it shortly after, plunging the structure into a deep crisis (Ben Rhouma, 2015a; Ben Rhouma, 2015b; Le Monde, 2015; Mameri-Chambi, 2015).

⁷³ « Pour moi le salafisme c’est une bouteille vide. Dans toute religion, il y a un aspect exotérique et un aspect ésotérique et le cœur de la religion c’est l’ésotérique. S’il y a que de l’exotérique, c’est comme une bouteille vide, ça contient rien. (...) Le salafisme c’est un vrai poison, en plus. Parce que comme ça, ça a l’air à peu près bien, ça reprend soi-disant de manière carrée les textes de base, alors comme les Français sont cartésiens, ils aiment bien ça, tu vois. Mais bon, je veux dire, une religion c’est pas cartésien, sinon ça n’a aucun intérêt ».

look the most Arab!⁷⁴” Fabien adds that the red and white *keffieh* worn by many Salafis is absolutely not “Sunna” (according to him, the turban is), and is only an appropriation of Arab Gulf clothing. Fabien also criticizes Salafis’ ostentatious religiosity, which in his view goes against Islamic principles of modesty and discretion: “originally, the idea is that we should blend in with the crowd. But if you wear a *niqab* in Paris, I mean... It is a cult of appearance. It’s just ego.⁷⁵”

2) Progressive Muslims’ betrayal

In turn, for converts who profess Salafi leanings, the progressive endeavor to reinterpret scripture in order to accommodate difference within Islam is violently chastised and dismissed as *bid’ah*. According to Bob (19, student, St. Louis): “something is from God. It can be conservative. It can be barbaric. It can be extreme. It can be whatever you want to call it. But you cannot change God’s law.” Following this motto, Bob argues that he does “not like some of the modern-day scholars. There are some people who claim to be scholars but have no background and they change Islam to please Americans.” Bob is particularly angry at Muslims for Progressive Values who support female imams and homosexuality, which, in his interpretation, is nowhere to be found in the Qur’an: “it is a group which is trying to change Muslims. They believe women can lead prayers. They say it is allowed in Islam, but it is not. Daaiyee Abdullah is a homosexual imam. He is saying it is allowed in Islam. That’s innovation!” For Salafis, the fixity of religious scripture precludes any substantive change in the way the religion is to be interpreted. Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), who is also a sympathizer of Salafism, considers that progressive Muslims are misinterpreting the religion to find excuses not to practice it. He dismisses them as “hippie, hipsters, who want to change Islam. They don’t realize that you don’t change Islam, Islam changes you.” Salafis accuse progressive Muslims of soft-pedaling Islam, of sugarcoating it, thereby betraying its fundamental principles.

3) Acculturating Muslims’ lack of assertiveness

Finally, attempts to create a French or American Islam are also met with circumspection by some of my interviewees, mostly on the left side of the political spectrum. Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) feels for instance uncomfortable with the nationalist overtones of some of the organizations that promote an American cultural expression of Islam: “I am always suspicious when Muslims want to stress like ‘we are American Muslims.’ Those kinds of displays of patriotism and national identity, they are always to me associated with being a right-winger... And I know they mean it in a different way. But I am just suspicious of it and it does not appeal to me.” Endeavors to promote a French or American Islam are also perceived as self-deprecating and counterproductive. According to Brian (23, student, Chicago), who is an anti-racist activist, the urge with which some Muslims want to demonstrate that they can be both

⁷⁴ « C’est cet espèce de concours à qui est le plus arabe tu vois ».

⁷⁵ « Le but c’est de se cacher à la base, c’est de se fondre dans la masse. Et tu sais très bien que quand tu mets un *niqab* sur Paris... tu vois ? C’est que le culte de l’apparence, tu vois. Et pareil, ça c’est l’égo tu vois ».

American and Muslim indirectly reinforces the dominant discourse that America and Islam are incompatible:

I consider all these things apologetics. Like “Muslims can be nice people too (...); I can wear a suit.” It is all empty stuff, like... There is something that comes in every apologetic that is that there is a reaffirmation of whatever is dominant. So if you are responding directly or indirectly to dominant stereotypes and clichés, you reinforce them perpetually! You can never escape them, by doing this apologetic bullshit! Because I mean, Dr. Umar Faruq-Abdullah, that’s what he is trying to do, he is trying to say “you can keep your American culture and put Islam on top of it. You don’t need to look Arab or sound Arab or sound Pakistani and blablablablaba.” My whole thing has always been: if you have to say that, there is a crisis that’s a lot deeper than the bullshit you are addressing. Like you are going to seriously tell me that I can be American and Muslim simultaneously???? Like... please, please tell me that I can also use the bathroom! That stuff just makes me so pissed-off. So pissed off!

For Brian, it is so evident that one can be both American and Muslim that the very need to reaffirm this simple fact actually contributes to reinforcing the dichotomy between the two identities. He does not understand why Muslims are seeking affirmation and acceptance into a system that perpetually reinforces their difference. For him, the American Muslim endeavor is another instance of the good Muslim/bad Muslim stalemate (Mamdani, 2004), whereby Muslims who try to fit in by demonstrating that they are “good” only manage to distance themselves from dominant stereotypes but never succeed at fully eradicating these stereotypes.

In addition, the acculturation of Islam to the French and American contexts is perceived by some as hypocritical, for France and the US are societies that reproduce patriarchy, racism, inequality and neoliberalism and, as such, cannot be considered Islamic. Isabelle (30, unemployed, Paris), who is very involved in the anti-capitalist critique from an Islamic perspective, is circumspect about the assimilationist tendencies of some of her coreligionists: “people are trying to show that they can be cute little Muslims, like ‘we can be both Muslims and French citizens’ and I am like...No! We can’t live in this system, a system that puts Allah’s creation into chains. These people just want to integrate into the system. They want to put some Islamic coat of paint over it to show that they can live in it. But it is not true! I cannot stand anymore all these debates about ‘non-alcoholic champagne,’ ‘halal nail polish’... In fact, we must completely change our way of life.⁷⁶” For Isabelle, efforts to mainstream Islam and prove its compatibility with French or American identity are vain, if they are not substantiated with an Islamic critique of the social evils permeating the French and American societies.

Overall, the various disagreements surrounding each of the Islamic revival paths attest to the great internal dynamism of the Islamic tradition and the eclecticism of views within it. Yet, besides ideological debates, the controversies over Islamic reform often take on racial overtones and lead to a direct challenging of the position and legitimacy of white converts within it.

⁷⁶ « Les gens ils vont s’atteler à se faire passer pour les bons petits musulmans ... ils vont dire ‘oui on peut très bien vivre en tant que citoyen musulman’... et tout. Je dis Non ! On ne peut pas vivre dans ce système. C’est pas possible. Un système qui asservit la création d’Allah... Ils veulent juste s’intégrer dans le système. En gros ils mettent un coup de peinture islamique (...) pour se dire qu’on peut y vivre pleinement. C’est pas vrai, c’est faux en fait. Je supportais plus tous ces débats... alors ‘le champagne sans alcool’, tu sais, ‘le vernis à ongles halal’...On doit changer complètement de mode de vie en fin de compte ».

4) The comeback of race

Converts' attempts to "reform" Islam are sometimes depicted as an exclusivist project, which reifies immigrant practices as impure, deviant or backward. For some, converts' obsession to expurgate immigrant traditions from Islam in order to practice a homegrown version of it is no different to nativist and xenophobic discourses. More importantly, the self-portrayal of converts as rejuvenators of the faith, able to identify "pure" Islam from wrongful cultural practices, is seen as problematic and replicating patterns of white hegemony. A white British blogger refers to this behavior as "whititude—an amalgam of 'white attitude' that describes the attitude that [white converts] have a certain enlightenment that is lacking in the established Muslim community" (Smith, 2009). Because they often portray themselves as more "rational," "educated" and "progressive" than immigrant Muslims, the fact that white converts might be imposing their own views on Muslim communities has become a matter of concern and critique.

The champion of this critique is probably Michael Muhammad Knight, a white convert and prolific writer who is known for his numerous novels on American Islam. Knight recently published a much-debated online article entitled "The Problem with White Converts," in which he criticizes white American Islamic scholars, who, in his view, patronize their non-white coreligionists and use the authority that white skin automatically confers onto them to enforce new, Westernized interpretations of Islam. For him, reformist endeavors by white Muslims are condescending and akin to neo-colonialist projects. Contrary to most white American converts who embrace the figure of Alexander Russell Webb, Knight forcefully attacks his legacy by claiming that:

"Webb treated his new religious affiliation like other white men of his time treated entire nations: he marched in and immediately claimed to own it. (...) Webb argued that South Asian Muslims, whom he sometimes called "niggers" in his journals, were so caught up in "ignorance and superstition" that they understood Islam no better than cows or horses.⁷⁷ (...) Over a hundred years later, it's still a problem. (...) The convert, imagined as coming from a place outside culture, becomes privileged as the owner of truth and authenticity. People forget that these white guys aren't simply extracting "true" meaning from the text, but bringing their own cultural baggage and injecting it into the words. When a white guy wears the hats of brown guys and talks about "reviving the Islamic spirit," it might be time to run fast" (Knight, 2013b).

The article did not nominally mention white American Sheikh Hamza Yusuf but was illustrated with a large picture of him, suggesting that he is the paragon of such type of Islamic reformism. According to Knight, white converts unduly "wear the hats of brown guys" when they attempt to "reform" Islam and create new forms of religious expression adapted to Western contexts.⁷⁸ For him, white converts are particularly dangerous

⁷⁷ It is true that Webb acquired a sense of superiority over his non-Western coreligionists, as he felt that his mastery of Theosophical and spiritual thought enabled him to truly understand Islam. He criticized those he called the "fanatical Mussluman..." and wrote: "poor benign creatures! They have no more idea of the spirit of Islam than the cows or the horses!" (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 118).

⁷⁸ Ironically, Michael Muhammad Knight got a dose of his own medicine, since he was recently labeled "the Muslim Rachel Dolezal" by Egyptian-American associate professor Khaled Beydoun (Twitter, March 30th, 2016). Having embraced various Muslim careers throughout his life, first as a fundamentalist (Knight, 2006), then as a punk Muslim (Knight, 2009), a Five Percenter (Knight, 2011), an anarcho-Sufi (Knight, 2012b), a supporter of the queer Muslim movement (Knight, 2012a), a Muslim using drugs to reach mystical states (Knight, 2013c), a Salafi (Knight, 2015) and a scholar praising the notion of magic in Islam

because they picture themselves as “free of cultural blemish, and universal in [their] appeal” (Knight, 2013a). Presenting itself as universal and culture-free is indeed one of the ways through which white hegemony operates (DuBois, 2005 [1920]). Knight argues that these interpretations are not universal at all but carries the cultural mark of white America. In a similar vein, white working-class convert Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis) fustigates on his blog the “white liberals” who convert to Islam with a view of reforming the religion: “there seems to be a breed of white liberals and leftists who accepted Islam and immediately after taking *shahada* were already trying to reform the religion. (...) Sorry, but this to me smacks of a form of cultural imperialism by white westerners” (Lee, 2009). Converts’ self-ascribed mission of reviving the religion is therefore interpreted by some as paternalistic and reproducing hegemonic whiteness. The distinction of religion and culture is seen as yet another trick of white supremacy to impose itself as a “false universal.” The issue of white convert hegemony and contempt for immigrant religious practices has also been widely documented in the case of American Buddhism (Fields, 1998; Hickey, 2010; Cheah, 2011; Hsu, 2016).

White converts are suspected of holding condescending views about their non-white coreligionists. Talking about the marginalization of white converts within the American Muslim community, Muslim convert and blogger Brooke Rollings interrogates the responsibility of white Muslims themselves in this situation: “if you are a white Muslim and you don’t hold very many Muslims of color close to your heart –why do you suppose that is?”, implying that white converts hold a superiority complex over their non-white coreligionists (Br00ke, 2009). Another female blogger, Lucky Fatima, criticizes the way white converts orientalize their fellow Muslims of color:

The way individual white Western Muslims interact with The Exotic Other Muslim majority cultures (South Asian, Arab, African, South East Asian, whatever the Other may be) often reeks of white privilege. Sometimes it is so bad, it seems like we are colonial madams and sirs on some safari. (...) We get to know these cultures, analyze them, marry into them, pick up cultural habits from our native co-religionists. Still, we so often don’t fully respect these cultures (Fatima, 2009).

These statements are acerbic. Yet, throughout my fieldwork, I did collect condescending remarks from my interviewees in which immigrant Muslims were openly despised and implicit stereotypes of Western superiority reproduced (a finding also apparent in Jensen, 2006; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Özyürek, 2014). According to Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis), a white woman, the Pakistani Muslims that make up the bulk of her community are “not known for being organized” and are characterized by a “lack of planning and timing,” while she “lives according to a time-clock.” Like her, many converts put forward their punctuality and meticulousness to picture themselves as assets for the Muslim community, presented as otherwise disorganized and irresponsible. Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille) considers for instance that “Arabs lack rigor” and are a bit “nonchalant” in their behavior, so he considers it his duty as a white French citizen to “bring in some rigor, some exactitude, some punctuality.”⁷⁹ He adds that the Muslim

(Knight, 2016), Michael Muhammad Knight is depicted by some as a “tourist” consuming different trends of Islamic reform for his own intellectual entertainment.

⁷⁹ « Ils manquent de rigueur en fait les Arabes. C’est vrai qu’il y a un comportement... un petit peu désinvolte, quoi. Donc moi j’essaie d’apporter justement un petit peu une rigueur, l’exactitude, la ponctualité ».

community often “makes a rod for its own back. There are lots of Muslims working as butchers, bricklayers, in taxi phones or small grocery stores. Very few are doctors or have knowledgeable jobs. Their children are not well educated, they spit on the floor, they smoke. I mean... not always, but often.⁸⁰” Gérard blames immigrant Muslims and their children for their own stigmatization.

In some instances, I also heard immigrant Muslims being ridiculed and made fun of because of their foreign accent and alleged lack of Islamic knowledge. A humoristic video by American convert Baba Ali entitled “The Haram Police” was once shared on the *American Da’wah* Facebook group by a member. In order to denounce the intransigent behavior of some Muslims (see Chapter 3), the comedian mimicked a Pakistani “uncle,” speaking broken English with a strong accent and telling absurdities (Ali, 2007). I watched it with a sense of discomfort. The figures of the “uncle” (old South Asian man) or the “auntie” (old South Asian woman) in the US, and that of the *blédard* in France (North African bumpkin) are prominent among converts to describe their trials of integration within the Muslim community but they also produce a reification of first generation immigrant Muslims as uneducated, oppressive, bad Muslims.

Converts’ desire to dissociate Islam from immigrant Muslims’ cultural practices often leads to their dissociation from immigrant Muslims altogether. For instance, the president of *Bienvenue en Islam* is often accused of promoting convert exclusivism in her association. Although I could not verify this claim, I heard from two different sources that during a conference, after many Muslims had given their contact information to become members of the association, she conspicuously crossed out all the Arab sounding names from the list, in order to keep only the French sounding ones.⁸¹ This confirms a strategy of boundary-making between converts and born Muslims that reinforces ethno-racial distinctions (as evidenced in the use of names). Hence, it appears that converts’ attempts at redefining Islam as a purely religious category in order to evacuate the cultural, ethnic or racial assumptions tied to it indirectly reproduce ethnic and racial cleavages. In the accusations against white convert reformers, the trope of the “white devil” (see Chapter 6) lurks again.

D. CONCLUSION

The dissociation between religious teachings and cultural practices is a central feature of contemporary religious revivals throughout the world, and converts play, along with *born agains*, a significant role within it. As put by Olivier Roy (2010: 19), “conversion is central to the disconnect between religion and culture.” In this chapter, I have highlighted three different paths of Islamic revival hinging upon a separation of

⁸⁰ « Des fois je me dis qu’on donne le bâton pour se faire battre. Parce que je trouve que malheureusement la communauté, elle est pas assez élevée. Il y a beaucoup de musulmans dans les boucheries, qui sont des maçons, ils travaillent dans des taxi phones, dans des épiceries. Mais il y en a pas beaucoup qui sont docteurs, enfin qui ont des métiers savants, quoi. C’est le problème de la communauté. Son niveau est très bas... voilà... les enfants des musulmans, ils sont souvent mal éduqués, c’est eux qui crachent par terre, c’est eux qui fument dans les endroits qui sont non-fumeurs et... c’est souvent le cas. Bon je veux pas dire... Pas toujours mais souvent ».

⁸¹ Fieldnotes, July 16th, 2014.

Islamic teachings from the cultures of Muslim-majority countries. The fundamentalist path considers that any form of culture contaminates the purity of the religious message and seeks to sever ties with both immigrant Muslims’ cultures of origin and mainstream Western culture. The re-acculturation path detaches itself from the cultures of Muslim immigrants in order to recast Islamic teachings in French or American cultural terms, thereby recreating a distinctive Muslim subculture. The re-interpretative path frames the overall cultural milieu in which dominant Islamic orthodoxy has been developed as conservative and calls for new interpretations of religious scripture. Despite their differences, these three endeavors have in common to redefine what “being Muslim” means, by stripping this category from its cultural and hereditary content to make it a purely religious and voluntarily chosen identity. In doing so, they all make claims about religious authenticity and “true Islam.”

This chapter has highlighted key differences in the way these various paths unfold in the French and American contexts. In the US, the re-acculturation path is thriving and Islam is becoming an American religion, which aligns with dominant patterns of civic integration through faith in the regime of Embracing Secularism. The once-reviled legacy of African-American Islam is increasingly embraced by converts and second and third generation Muslims alike in their re-acculturation efforts. Ironically, while the black tradition is being rehabilitated in the mainstream, the fundamentalist path is gaining ground among the most disadvantaged segments of the African-American population (and among lower-class white converts), whose position in the unequal Black and White Divide dissociates from cultural mainstreaming. In France, the defiance towards religion in general and the complex relationships that the secularism regime entertains with Islam specifically (exceptionalism, interference) limit the prospects of the re-acculturation strategy. The socioeconomic and spatial marginalization of significant portions of the Muslim population tends to favor the fundamentalist path. Yet, as this research demonstrates, re-acculturation is under way in the French context and forms of cultural hybridization are clearly developing.

In sum, in both countries, converts reconceptualize Islam as a religion of conversion, not of inheritance, and erect faith, rather than race, birth, culture or language as the sole criterion of Muslim identification. They build spiritual kinship to overthrow cultural, ethnic or racial kinship, and make believing the only acceptable form of belonging. This redefinition of Islam as exclusively religious goes against the racialization of Islam previously depicted in this dissertation. However, converts’ emphasis on faith, or what Marie-Claire Willems (2016) calls “*confessionalisation*,” can also have unintended racial consequences by deprecating immigrant Muslims’ beliefs and practices while, at the same time, reproducing dominant understandings of whiteness as “culture-free,” “rational” and “universal.” Faced with this new problem, a number of converts in my sample decided to leave aside the redefinition of Islam, and focus instead on redefining the meaning of their whiteness. This is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8 – REDEFINING WHITENESS: IDENTITY CREATIVENESS AND THE REINVENTION OF SELF

Although whiteness has globally been defined as a normative, invisible, unreflexive and structurally advantaging identity, some scholars consider that “whites who are positioned differently in society may actually view or live whiteness quite differently” (Rasmussen et al., 2001: 10) and that “the experience of being white may be subverted through white people exposing and challenging their racial consciousness” (Bonnett, 1996b: 148). White converts to Islam are such an example of whites living their whiteness differently and challenging their racial consciousness. Through their allegiance to a racialized religion, white converts upset stereotypical expectations about whiteness. As such, their situation bears resemblance to that of working-class whites, a “people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order” (Wray, 2006: 2) and who disrupt “the standard ways in which whiteness typically functions” (McDermott, 2006: 40) for failing to live up to its socio-economic standards (Laurent, 2011: 8). Just like working-class whites disturb the stereotypical pairing between race and class, white converts to Islam are an interesting sociological subject for they break the taken-for-granted association between race and religion, namely between whiteness and Christianity, and Islam and “foreignness.” Because of their unusual position, it can be assumed that they entertain a complex relationship to their racial privilege.

As visible minorities within the Muslim community, white converts also share a similar position with whites who belong to environments where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant, such as white rappers (Hess, 2005; Cutler, 2010), whites living in majority non-white neighborhoods, like inner-city Detroit (Hartigan, 1999b), white expatriates in Jakarta (Fechter, 2005) or Abu Dhabi (Cosquer, 2016), “white allies” in the anti-racist movement (Bonnett, 1996a; Case, 2012; Hughey, 2012b) and white children in inner city schools (Reay et al., 2007). All these empirical studies demonstrate that, owing to their specific social position, these white individuals “minimize, acknowledge, deny, embrace, or feel guilty about their privileged status” (McDermott and Samson, 2005) in very specific ways. They reconfigure the meanings attached to whiteness and embrace distinctive strategies to defuse racial situations.

In line with this body of the literature, the present chapter investigates the various coping strategies or destigmatization strategies (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012; Lamont et al., 2016) that white converts deploy to lighten the heaviness of race, in a context where they are alternately revered as white trophies or reviled as white devils (see Chapter 6). I examine how converts try to circumvent these assumptions and redefine the meaning of their white racial identity in a more positive manner. To account for the variety of their strategies, I build on the work of Andreas Wimmer (2008b; 2008a) who has offered a

typology of the different paths through which actors redefine categorical boundaries.¹ He identifies five: *boundary expansion* aims at expanding the range of people included within a boundary, as evident in the building of nation-states or empires; *boundary contraction* entails the drawing of narrower boundaries in order to dis-identify oneself from a larger category, illustrated for instance by the refusal of some Korean or Chinese Americans to be lumped together under the umbrella category of “Asian”; *boundary transvaluation* aims at changing the normative meaning of a boundary and challenging the hierarchical order of categories, a strategy of stigma reversal that has notably been used in the Black power movement; *boundary crossing* (either individual or collective) involves changing one’s categorical membership, apparent in cases of passing or assimilation; finally, *boundary blurring* is a universalizing strategy meant to supersede ethnic, racial or national categorizations.

I find that converts resort to one or several of these strategies in dealing with their racial identity. Chapter 7 has already described the attempts at *boundary blurring* that converts engage in when they seek to redefine the category “Muslim” as purely religious, thereby allowing for multiple membership within it and overcoming racial, ethnic, national and cultural cleavages.² In this chapter, I underline four additional strategies used by converts to deal with their whiteness: a) *working within the boundary* and maneuvering white privilege; b) *crossing the boundary* by passing as non-white; c) *challenging the meaning of the boundary* by promoting heretical forms of whiteness; d) *contracting the boundary* by emphasizing alternative identities (ethnic, regional or class-based).

This chapter shows that resources for racial redefinition are unequally available across contexts. Once again, the effects of national repertoires of evaluation (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000) are visible, since strategies take different shapes on the two sides of the Atlantic. The frames of American Color-Consciousness and French Color-Blindness and the structuring effects of the Black vs. White Divide in the US and the Colonial Legacy in France have an impact on the identity reconfiguration strategies French and American converts choose to adopt. This is particularly salient in strategies C and D.

A. WORKING WITHIN THE BOUNDARY AND DEALING WITH A PRIVILEGED STATUS

Within the microcosm of the Muslim community, where whites are numerically marginal, questions of power and privilege – normally diluted in contexts where they are a majority – become particularly salient. White converts holding positions of Islamic authority or spokespersonship are for the most part very conscious that they have often been favored over non-white coreligionists. This state of facts prompts interrogations and dilemmas about the behavior they should adopt in Muslim settings. How to behave ethically when holding a racialized dominant position, which is structurally unethical?

¹ Wimmer’s taxonomy itself relies on and expands previous typological efforts (Zolberg and Woon, 1999; Alba and Nee, 2003; Lamont and Bail, 2005).

² This strategy of using the universal language of religion to delegitimize ethno-racial categorizations has also been documented in the case of Senegalese migrants in Morocco (Timéra, 2011) and North-African migrants in France (Lamont, 2000; Lamont et al., 2002)

The first strategy is to find moral adjustments within the boundary, without necessarily trying to redefine it. It can involve strategically using whiteness or withdrawing from any public role.

1) Strategically using whiteness

Among my interviewees who occupy positions of importance within the Muslim community, some decided to unapologetically embrace their role as white public faces and use their newly-acquired leverage to promote good causes and break stereotypes. Consider for instance the case of Olga (23, student and nanny, Chicago), a blond woman of Polish descent who was appointed director of communications at a famous Muslim organization. She justified her accepting the offer with the following words:

The fact that I got this position, it does make me think a lot. (...) The director even joked with me, you know, saying “it’s more impressive if we have a white Polish girl talking about Islamophobia than a brown *hijabi* girl. Because when a *hijabi* girl talks about Islamophobia, all it sounds like is ‘of course you would say that because you are a Muslim’ (...) whereas when you have a nice white blond girl from Poland talking about it, people are like ‘oh really, she has a point!’” I feel like that is kind of the sad truth. ... But it’s like messed up that that is the truth... (...) I am known for being very outspoken, passionate, feminist, all these things, that are not seen as being, you know, attributes of a Muslim woman. Even though I know a lot of my sisters who wear *hijab* or are Arab or Desi are like that too but the thing is that even if they say the same things, people will look at them differently. And they know that and I know that. And that’s American racism you know. It’s white supremacy. But I want to acknowledge my privilege as much as I can and use it positively you know, to impact the image of Islam positively.

Part of a racialized system she cannot immediately overthrow, Olga proudly uses her image as a loud-mouthed, uncovered white woman to help change the image of Muslim women. She embraces the pedestal for what she sees as the greater good. In France, Melissa (27, project manager, Paris), a white convert wearing the headscarf who held a position similar to Olga’s (she worked as spokesperson for a French Muslim organization), made exactly the same type of reasoning:

The fact that I am white with a French name, it gives credibility and more importantly it makes people face up to their own biases. Our goal is to break the stereotypes that are harmful for the Muslim community, especially in the media. So if my identity enables me to get things moving and to break prejudices, it is definitely a plus. Now, had it been a North African woman, she could have been just as good, if not better, but it wouldn’t have broken stereotypes in the same way. (...) What counts is not that there is favoritism and this one succeeds better than that one. What counts is to work for the cause. And so if a blond woman named Molly can advance the cause, so be it, all the better.³

³ « Le fait que je sois blanche au nom français, (...) ça donne du crédit, et surtout ça confronte les gens à leurs propres préjugés. Et nous notre but aussi c’est de casser les préjugés qui sont préjudiciables à la communauté musulmane, surtout dans les médias. Donc... le fait que je puisse être en capacité de par mon identité à faire bouger les lignes et à casser les préjugés, bah c’est clair que c’est un plus. Maintenant si, ça avait été une femme maghrébine, elle aurait pu être tout aussi bien que moi, si ce n’est mieux, mais ça n’aurait pas cassé les préjugés de la même manière. Donc voilà. Après c’est vraiment... l’important c’est pas de faire du favoritisme et que machin il réussisse mieux que truc. Ce qui compte c’est de faire avancer la cause et donc si la nana parce qu’elle est blonde et qu’elle s’appelle Molly je sais pas quoi elle peut faire avancer la cause, bah, be it, tant mieux ! »

Both Olga and Melissa make a strategic use of their tokenistic position as white Muslim representatives. They do not seek to redefine dominant representations of whiteness as privileged, but voluntarily marshal it to disrupt the racialized features of the stereotypical Muslim and advance the struggle against Islamophobia.

2) Disappearing

On the contrary, some, like Edward (35, project manager, Detroit) have decided to altogether reject their fetishization as white Muslims and turn down all solicitations for public appearances. Before taking this decision, Edward had a conversation with an African-American Islamic scholar who encouraged him to use his position as a white person to change things within immigrant mosques. The scholar told him: “the reality is if I go to some uncle in a *masjid*, and I give a *khutbah* and I tell him ‘you guys stop being racist,’ they are not going to listen. But if you get up there as a white Muslim, they will start listening to you.” Yet Edward disagreed with this strategy:

I think it is dangerous. You know, arrogance is what corrupts the heart. And it is very easy to fall into the ‘oh I am using white privilege for good things!’ right? And then slowly you start feeling that privilege, and then that’s arrogance. I actually get really worried when I see white Muslims falling into that white privilege trap without knowing it. And that’s very common. You know my advice will just be: don’t do TV shows, don’t do interviews... just stay out of the limelight. And that’s what I do, I guess... I was at ISNA.⁴ And you know how they have that TV channel. They see me walking in the hallway, they are like “Oh brother! Brother! Can you come here? Are you a convert?” I said “I am not going to talk in your show.” And they are like “Please, please, you get all these *hasanat** and good deeds and stuff.” I said “No, I am not doing it!” And then I would actually recommend..., if I see someone, like “you see that Desi girl, talk to her! She is great, like she really is a good person.” I am just firm in that now, like I am not shy about it.

For Edward, the fetishization of whites is a remnant of *jahiliyyah*, the period of ignorance before the advent of Islam, and the “trap of white privilege” is a trick of the devil. As a disease indicating a profound misunderstanding of the core universal message of Islam, white privilege has to be firmly combated. The fact that different white people have different ethical reactions to white hegemony – some embrace it while others condemn it (Winant, 1997) – does not change anything to the structural reality of white hegemony (Hughes, 2010): for Edward, the only solution lies in his own disappearance from public events and his promotion of non-white Muslims as representatives of the community. Edward does not fundamentally redefine the meanings of his white identity, but simply refuses to partake in the publicization that goes with it.

3) Moral quandaries

Olga/Melissa and Edward embody two different approaches to dealing with white privilege: strategic use or withdrawal. Yet, things were not necessarily as clear-cut in the minds of all my interviewees, who were often embroiled in deep moral quandaries about what to do.

⁴ Annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America.

In France, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) was mired in these debates and uncertain about how to position himself as a white convert. He admired the work of Melissa as spokesperson for a Muslim organization but had been confronted on this topic by some of his Muslim friends of North African descent. When Melissa was appointed, they told him: “white privilege has struck again...” At first, Jérémy did not understand the meaning of their remark: “I was like ‘what the hell are you saying?’ For me, Melissa is a Muslim. She is veiled, she is Muslim. That’s what matters, no?” They responded: “that’s not how you should see things. You have to understand that it’s too easy that someone, because she is white, arrives in an organization and climbs the ladder like that, just because she looks more acceptable. We have to understand that we too have the legitimacy to speak.” Jérémy was skeptical: “for me, it is a matter of faith and religion.” They answered: “No. If it was only about religion, it wouldn’t bother us. But it is not. Islamophobia is about religion for sure, but it’s also about race.” Well-versed in social sciences, Jérémy pondered their arguments and decided they were right. He concluded, like Edward in Detroit: “Now I think that, as a matter of principle, if someone offers me to give a talk on Islamophobia, I don’t think I would dare to do it. Frankly, I wouldn’t do it.”⁵ In a context of growing Islamophobia, Jérémy’s friends endow the category “Muslim” with a racial meaning, not simply a religious one, which curtails white converts’ ability to claim the label for themselves. As a white convert only partially exposed to anti-Muslim racism and benefitting from some kind of preferential treatment within the Muslim community, Jérémy resolved to follow his friends’ advice and refrained from speaking publicly in the name of other Muslims. He started viewing silence and discretion as the best way to curb the daily reproduction of his white privilege.

Yet, he also found such position hard to sustain, especially when he saw uneducated, unskilled and irrelevant coreligionists speaking in the name of the community. He was particularly angry after the January 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a kosher convenience store, when journalists started interviewing random Muslims on the forecourt of the Grand Mosque of Paris to record their reactions: “the journalists only picked up guys who were dressed, sorry about the word, like *blédards* [North African bumpkins], who had a strong accent and spoke uncouth language. I was like ‘why don’t you interview me?’ In that case, I think I would prefer to be interviewed because I would better handle the whole thing. So after Charlie Hebdo, I was like ‘this is starting to get on my nerves.’ People tell me ‘because you are white, avoid talking in the name of Muslims,’ but at some point I am like ‘what the hell is this?’⁶” In France and the US, the politics of

⁵ « Elles m’ont dit ‘décidément... le privilège blanc a encore gagné...’ Tu sais moi je m’arrête, tu vois et je dis ‘mais qu’est-ce qu’elles racontent?’ Parce que pour moi Mélissa... elle est musulmane ! tu vois. Elle est voilée, enfin elle est musulmane ! Juste pour être concret... ce qui compte c’est que ce soit une musulmane qui parle, non ? Et elles m’ont dit ‘non Jérémy, il faut pas voir ça comme ça. Il faut comprendre que c’est trop facile qu’une personne, parce qu’elle est blanche, elle arrive dans une association, elle va nécessairement gravir plus vite les échelons que les autres parce qu’elle va paraître plus acceptable. Il faut qu’on comprenne qu’on a [aussi] la légitimité à parler.’ Et donc moi je leur dis ‘ouais mais pour moi c’est une question de foi, c’est une question de religion !’ tu vois, voilà. Et en fait elles m’ont dit ‘non, non ! si c’était un débat sur la religion, ça nous dérangerait pas. Mais contre l’islamophobie c’est une question qui est fondamentalement religieuse certes, mais raciale’. Du coup maintenant disons que par principe, si demain on me propose, admettons... admettons demain on me dit ‘tiens Jérémy, ça te dirait d’aller faire une conférence sur l’islamophobie ?’ Je pense que j’oserais pas en fait. Sincèrement j’oserais pas. Vraiment ».

⁶ « Les journalistes ils prenaient que, excuse-moi du terme mais alors-là, des mecs un peu habillés blédards, tu vois, et qui avaient un fort accent et qui s’exprimaient vraiment dans un langage charretier tu vois. Je disais, mais dans ce cas-là, interviewe-moi. Dans le cas-là, je préfère encore qu’on m’interviewe moi, parce

Muslim spokespersonship involve high stakes, as Muslims are constantly under the spotlight and frequently exposed to stigmatization and litmus tests of assimilation and respectability. Such circumstances deepen the moral quandary of white converts such as Jérémy, who hesitate between stepping up to provide a more “acceptable” image of the Muslim community and refusing that their public image as whites be used to reinforce the already well-entrenched mental association between acceptability and whiteness. Dealing with white privilege while staying within the boundary of whiteness, therefore, generates serious ethical dilemmas. To escape this issue, other converts in my sample, characterized by their connection to anti-racism, decided to engage in boundary crossing and repudiate their whiteness.

B. BOUNDARY CROSSING AND INDIVIDUAL REPOSITIONING: REPUDIATING WHITENESS

Throughout my research, I noticed that white converts often disliked other white converts. Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago) explains for instance that he feels uncomfortable when other white converts try to be friends with him, on the mere basis of their shared whiteness. He equates this to a form of cowardice: “white converts often flock to me. Which I notice. Because white people are cowards in general and they want comfort like ‘oh! There is another white person! Let’s talk!’” Stephan refuses these unwarranted displays of racial solidarity. Similarly, Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) confesses that he has always been suspicious of other white converts:

I am somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of being a white American. It is not something I embrace. So I have mixed ideas when I feel people are looking at me as “the white convert” type person. And I don’t like the fact that I am like other white converts. So, for a long time I think I had some, almost like a suspiciousness of other white converts and stuff like that.

Both Stephan and Abdullah try to differentiate themselves from other white converts by emphasizing that they are not like “them.” Their refashioning of self involves a transgression of racial boundaries. These converts shift sides in order to escape racial stigma, a common strategy in cases of racial passing (Hobbs, 2014). This time, however, the stigma they are running away from is not that of a minority group, but that of the majority population.

1) “Not your average white person”

One of the ways converts circumvent their whiteness is by emphasizing that they are not like the “average white person” (Wilkins, 2008: 203). They often reinterpret their whole biography in light of this effort, by demonstrating that they have never embodied the stereotypical features of normative whiteness. At *American Da’wah*, John explained for instance during a discussion group that, even before his conversion, he had always refused to embrace the codes of the white suburb he grew up in: “when I was a young

que je pense que je maîtriserai mieux le truc, enfin bref. Et donc effectivement après Charlie Hebdo, il y a eu tout ce moment-là où je me suis dit ‘mais en fait mais ça commence à me saouler ces histoires’ parce qu’on me dit que parce que je suis blanc, ‘évite-trop de parler au nom des musulmans’ et tout. Mais à un moment, je me dis ‘mais c’est quoi cette histoire !?’ ».

child, my Mom wanted me to pick up the white suburban culture. But from my childhood, my three best friends were black, Latino and Indian. So from the beginning, she knew I was not going to behave as she wished.⁷” John claims that as a young child he had already asserted the fact that he would not behave the “white way.” The fact that he subsequently embraced Islam confirmed his mother’s fears. Similarly, Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago) who grew up in a very diverse inner-city neighborhood and moved to an all-white Protestant suburb as a teenager, describes that he felt completely out of place in his new white environment: “Caucasian kids in my class, because of the way I spoke, maybe the clothes I wore or the music I listened to, were so different that it was as if I was not white, as if I were a minority living amongst them.” Jonathan felt “totally alien” in this white suburb and did not partake in the dominant cultural codes. Because he was “already different,” his conversion to Islam was not a huge leap, neither for him, nor for his classmates. In France, Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), a white woman who grew up in a homogeneous rural area in the southern part of the country, also considered that she was “on the margin” of her small town, for she listened to rap music and practiced hip-hop dance, a rather unconventional hobby among her peers, whom she considered as “very white.⁸” As for Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), another white woman, she explained that before becoming Muslim she went through an “identity crisis” over her “Frenchness” and “whiteness:” “I didn’t feel French. I was very interested in *négritude*. I felt like I was a little black myself...⁹” These interviewees portray themselves as people who were already on the fringes of whiteness, even before their religious conversion.

2) Conversion to Islam as repudiation of whiteness

As a result, conversion to Islam was often precisely envisioned as a way to disrupt whiteness and escape white privilege. Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) describes how, as a teenager, he was “wearing X hats,” “identifying himself with Africa,” “took an African name for himself” and became a member of the local NAACP (he was the youngest and only white person there). Abdullah eventually decided to take seriously what Malcolm X had to say about Islam and embraced the faith as a way to get rid of his “white attitude.” In a similar fashion, Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) used Islam to overthrow her whiteness. When she mentioned during her interview that she had moved from majority to minority status after wearing the *hijab* (see Chapter 5), I asked her how it felt. Her answer was immediate: “actually, it pleased me. (...) It pleased me, because I am no longer a prisoner of this little French white dominant identity that infuriates me and that does not correspond to what is in my heart.¹⁰” Some converts, therefore, self-

⁷ Fieldnotes, September 28th, 2013

⁸ « Je faisais de la danse hip-hop, j’étais vraiment dans le mouvement hip-hop, quoi. Et du coup j’ai commencé déjà à me démarquer un peu des gens... enfin du milieu en fait d’où je venais, parce c’était une petite ville, à l’époque il y avait pas beaucoup d’immigrés donc c’était très blanc... donc j’étais un peu à part tu vois ».

⁹ « J’avais un problème avec ma ‘*francitude*’, et plus clairement ma ‘*blanchitude*’ entre guillemets. J’avais une identité en crise en fait. C’est-à-dire que je me sentais pas française. (...) Pendant une période je m’étais beaucoup intéressée à la *négritude*, moi-même je me sentais un peu noire en fait ».

¹⁰ « En fait moi ça me fait plaisir... En quoi ça me fait plaisir que ça rejaillisse sur moi ? C’est que je suis plus prisonnière de cette identité de petite blanche française dominante qui m’horripile, parce qu’elle correspond pas à ce que j’ai dans mon cœur, tu vois ».

consciously use their visibility as Muslims as a tool to racialize themselves, in order to encounter race and racism and “cease to be white.”

This is apparent in the trajectory of white American convert Michael Muhammad Knight, who approached his conversion to Sunni Islam at age 15 as a means to settle scores with white America (his father was a white supremacist). Knight writes: “Arabic prayers provided me with the right soap to wash myself clean of America, whatever I understood America to be: my father, white Jesus and all the ignorant small-town dipshits at my all-white Catholic high school” (2011: 80). Like Noémie, Knight took great pleasure in escaping the privilege of whiteness: “when I told a white evangelical Christian that I was Muslim, she looked quizzically into my blue eyes and asked ‘were you born in this country?’ I couldn’t hide my smile; Islam had succeeded in transforming this small-town white boy into an alien, and I loved it” (2011: 83). Knight’s later immersion in the Five Percenters movement (see Chapter 4) was also a way for him to further repudiate his whiteness. He writes that joining a Five Percenters’ “cipher” (gathering of knowledge) “felt like a ritual washing away of my whiteness” (2011: 65). Knight’s numerous references to washing and cleanliness indicate his conceptualization of whiteness as impure and filthy, an obscuring shadow hovering over his soul that needs to be repudiated. In all these cases, therefore, racial redefinition was an actual motivation for religious conversion.

3) Refusing whiteness within the Muslim community

When these converts find themselves in positions of authority within the Muslim community, their strategy is often to oppose the instrumentalization of their white skin, by modifying their dress, name and manners of speech and refusing to play the role of the “white trophy.” Such is the case of Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago), who works as a Muslim chaplain and often wonders whether his whiteness owed him the position. As someone who came to Islam through anti-racist activism, Abdullah frequently reflects on issues of white privilege and is uncomfortable with the idea of being idealized for his white skin:

When I do occasionally get pictures of how people view me, (...) sometimes if I feel like they view me in a way I don’t feel myself then I get a little uncomfortable.... Say, in a Pakistani group, if they start seeing me as like “this is a white Muslim, a white American lawyer who converted to Islam. We want to put him forward as a representant of Islam that will make other Americans like Islam.” So... That makes me feel uncomfortable. And you know... I think I minimize that a little bit by just the way I appear. Meaning that they can’t go to an extreme with that because I have a big beard and I always wear a hat and I always dress like this... And you know I use a different name. Because I think there is that instinct in the community to put forward someone like “this is John Smith, our Muslim leader and he looks just like you and he is wearing like a suit and tie ...” I don’t want to play that role because that’s not who I am... But so I consciously make it so that I can’t exactly play that role.

Abdullah minimizes his public fetishization as a white convert by dressing in a large *thawb* and *kufi* every day and by having renounced his typically American name. He refuses to be reinstated in the boundaries of whiteness, a categorization he has been trying so hard to escape his entire life. Strategies of individual boundary-crossing, however, are always precarious for they remain dependent on others’ perception and categorization.

C. BOUNDARY TRANSVALUATION: MAROON WHITES AND HERETICAL WHITENESS

Hence, some converts resort to more ambitious strategies that do not simply entail individual boundary crossing but aim at radically reconfiguring the semantics of race and whiteness in society. These converts portray themselves as “race traitors, white mavericks who appear to be challenging the meaning of whiteness” (Nayak, 2005: 156). Brian (23, student, Chicago) explains for instance how he seldom identifies as “white” while filling administrative documents:

I am such a nay-sayer and such a dissenting voice in all circumstances. To give an example, (...) when I went to DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles], to get my license last summer, they ask you “what you are racially” and I think those questions are bullshit. (...) So... I put myself down as black. Just because I am an asshole!

Brian takes pleasure at breaking the rules of “normal” white behavior and upsetting the racial assumptions made about him. He actually sees his conversion to Islam as part of a broader philosophical project aiming at disrupting what he describes as coercive systems of discourse. Stereotypes about Muslims in the US are an instance of such systems of discourse, which need to be thrown off. Brian relies on Deleuzian philosophy (1983) to make his point. His objective is to dislocate commonsense clichés about Islam and constrain people to readjust their mental frames:

The question is what can I do in my situation that ultimately fucks up the way people think of me? (...) How do we create an identity that’s so radically outside of the cliché of our identity now? (...) This is a Deleuzian idea. (...) His whole idea is that the cinema provides this very interesting space, philosophically, where the image can be rearranged in such a way, that our relationship to it can change and that in this changing relationship, we break our normal cultural conditioning. I think that’s a totally interesting thing to think about in relation to what we do. (...) In regards to Muslims in the US, what I think would be very productive is the creation of an image (...) that when people look at it, their normal relation to it is cut off at the level of the object. (...) What I try to do in my own personal identity and myself is, when people ask me what I am, I play myself off essentially to be mad. Crazy. In the sense that they have to create a new image of me, whether they like it or not.

As a white convert to Islam who overacts his craziness, Brian envisions his persona as part of a larger project to create “minor identities within American popular discourse that can off-set how we think about American Islam as a whole.” His ultimate aim is to consciously disrupt stereotypical images of Islam and whiteness, and he strategically uses his liminal positionality to achieve that. In a similar vein, Stephan (24, employee in a shelter, Chicago) proposes to transcend his whiteness. Building on the work of James Baldwin, he uses Islam as a means to rise above his inherited status as a white person and gain access to his true self as a human being:

James Baldwin talks a lot about inheritance and birth rights. And he talks a lot about inheritance in this world, being something that you have no choice over and something you have to acknowledge or else you are doomed. (...) If you don’t acknowledge that you are white, that you are part of this thing, you are doomed. But then there is your birth right. Your birth right is that excess of humanity, whatever that means. (...) I mean there is the basic political discourse which is like “yes, in this world, the effect and the consequence of my body is to be white.” But there is also the internal desire to be more than that.

In their book *Race Traitor*, Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (1996: 115) write that “when whites reject their racial identity, they take a big step towards becoming human.” This is what Stephan sees himself as doing by embracing Islam and rebuffing the privileges associated with white skin. Stephan desires to be more than just white and refuses to be locked up in what he sees as a constraining racial order. Later on in the interview, he proposes a strategy to escape inherited racial frames. Quoting a recent article entitled “Toward A Maroon Society” published by jazz musician Fred Ho (2013),¹¹ Stephan envisions the creation of Maroon colonies, in the manner of 16th century African slaves who escaped slavery to form their own independent settlements (Price, 1979). By converting to Islam, Stephan explains that whites can become “Maroon whites” and be “heretical in their practice of whiteness.”

We need to think as escaping colonies. We need to find new forms of existence outside the colony that might involve different kinds of people. And the people who are now white, might have to consider themselves as Maroon whites (...) And it is more radical than just being anti-white or rejecting whiteness. (...) That shows that, yes, every human being has a potential to not be over-determined by these systems.

The thoughts of Brian and Stephan demonstrate the inventiveness and creativity that white converts can display in their attempts at transcending whiteness. Taking seriously the legacy of Malcolm X and building on the thought of prominent authors such as James Baldwin or Gilles Deleuze, they consciously use Islam as a means to challenge common-sense understanding about whiteness and create a subversive identity that upsets classic racial assignments. These converts do not want to simply change their position with regards to the boundary but seek to subvert the very idea of a boundary. They advocate the abolition of whiteness (Mazie et al., 1993; Roediger, 1994); and seek to expose as a “lie” the idea that white people are superior (DuBois, 1917; Baldwin, 1984). They proceed to a normative inversion whereby whiteness is redefined as bad and harmful.

Converts engaged in this path tend to be highly educated in social sciences and the humanities and sprinkle their arguments with philosophical references. I only encountered this type of elaborate reflections in the American context, where the frame of Color-Consciousness, the saliency of the Black vs. White divide and the thriving academic literature on whiteness both warrant and enable an intellectual redefinition of racial categories and a critical approach to white privilege. In France, the lesser saliency of the Black vs. White divide, the frame of Color-Blindness and the lesser availability of discursive resources on the topic of whiteness limit the conditions of emergence for such thoughts.

¹¹ Fred Ho writes: “Maroon whites don’t accept anything white: white people, white culture, white history, white narratives, etc. Maroon whites don’t dress white, don’t eat white, don’t do anything white. They have ended whiteness in everything in their existence.”

D. BOUNDARY CONTRACTION: MINIMIZING WHITENESS BY PROMOTING ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES

Finally, more modest endeavors are performed by converts who simply try to “do whiteness differently” by contracting the boundary and emphasizing sub-categorical distinctions, such as ethnicity, region or class, as their main focus of identity. Such particularizing strategies are used as a means to differentiate themselves from dominant understandings of whiteness. It is in this domain that national differences between France and the US appear most clearly.

1) The American ethnic card: excavating Islam-friendly ethnic identities

One central strategy used by white converts is to emphasize their ethnic identity over their white racial identity (Waters, 1990). Ethnicity is here broadly understood as “a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry” (Wimmers, 2008b). This strategy is particularly developed in the US, where a strong “white ethnic revival” has taken place in the post-civil rights period (Alba, 1990; McDermott and Samson, 2005; Jacobson, 2006). Converts engaged in this path portray ethnicity as positive and enabling and shun white identity as empty and negative. Consider for instance the case of Olga (23, student and nanny, Chicago) who is very proud of her Polish background, and criticizes non-immigrant white Americans for being boring and narrow-minded:

I realized... I don't date white men. I just can't date white men [laughs]! (...) My reason that I don't date white people is because they have no culture. By white, I mean like non-immigrants. So if there is a guy he is Bosnian or Russian or whatever, Eastern European or Southern European, then yeah, because then at least he has another language, culture, he appreciates his family but white American men, all the ones I dated were so “blaaaah” [makes a disgusted face].

Olga partakes in a clear strategy of boundary making with white Americans who are “just white” and do not possess a culture different from the mainstream. She values her ethnic background as a source of distinction. More importantly, the fact that Olga is able to claim a Polish immigrant identity (she moved to the US as a young child) allows her not to be associated with white American supremacy and its negative aspects. She says: “the thing is because I am Polish, and because I am an immigrant, even though I look American and sound American, a lot of my Muslim friends do tell me that I get a sort of a pass at times when they are shit-talking white people.” Olga escapes the moral stigmatization attached to an all-powerful whiteness because of her ethnic background. Joseph (21, web developer, Chicago), who is of Albanian descent, shares a similar assessment and strategically uses his ethnic background to differentiate himself from the dominant white identity: “I look like a white American, but then again I am Albanian, so I am not to blame for, like, slavery and all this stuff, you know! Like, if I hear a black person hates white people, I will be, like ‘yeah man! I am right there with you! I am an immigrant too!’” Like them, Brian (23, student, Chicago) considers that he is not exactly white, because of his Italian heritage: “I am white but I am not, like, stereotypically white. I am Italian.” Olga, Brian and Joseph hyphenate their identity (Polish-American, Italian-American, Albanian-American) to mitigate the negative assumptions associated with the

mere white American label. In sum, they “play the ethnic card” in order to downplay their white privilege while remaining fully American (Gallagher, 2003).

According to Olga, her Polish ethnicity also adds flavor to her practice of Islam. She says: “Islam does not erase my Polish or Slavic identity, it just adds to it, makes it more exciting.” Olga’s ethnic and religious identities are co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing: they both entail a specific language, culture and values that distinguish her from mainstream white America. Polishness, she finds, is compatible with Islam and enriches her religious practice. Similarly, Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago) emphasizes his distant Portuguese ancestry (one of his grand-mothers was of Portuguese descent) to reconnect his personal background to a larger Islamic history: “you know the Muslims ruled Spain and Portugal for like hundred years, so I laugh and say ‘maybe I am the answer to a prayer of one of my ancestors that was a Muslim in Portugal,’ you know [laughs].” The Portuguese connection allows Hasan to make sense of his religious conversion, something his white American identity does not allow him to do. Finally, Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) explains that Islam cannot be practiced in a vacuum: faith needs to be tied to a strong culture in order to thrive. He recalled being very appreciative of his Palestinian and African-American Muslim friends who, without being nationalistic, were very proud of their culture which “informed their background and who they were.” Abdullah decided that in order to be more productive in his own spiritual practice, he also needed to reconnect with his original culture. Since being “white American” was not something he saw in a favorable light, he decided to reconnect with his (remote) Irish background.



Figure 35

“Muslim shamrock” posted by Abdullah on his Facebook page to showcase his dual Muslim and Irish identities (2013).

I said if I want to be authentic to my own history, and my own background, I should really identify with something. And because I wouldn’t do the American thing [laughs], I said I will do the Irish. I will go back to my Irish ancestry and claim it and be like the Irish Muslim. At least my understanding of being Irish fitted very well with this kind of rebel mentality of trying to kind of oppose oppression and stuff. And being a European country that was colonized by another European country. (...) Even though it’s a European identity, it associates more with the Third World and other non-European countries. (...) Really that is a culture that comes out of an identity of self-consciously seeing yourself as coming from a people who were oppressed and fought back against that oppression. (...) Obviously it’s a little difficult now because (...) what has become the Irish American culture is kind of not that anymore. (...) You have like a lot of Irish Americans who yield a lot of power and who, you know, may be racists and may even identify with the Republican party ... So you have that. You still have the other kind of influence though.

Contrary to his white American identity, Abdullah sees his Irish background as an opportunity to connect his ancestry to Islamic principles. He is particularly interested in the political significance of Irishness and reinterprets Irish history with the view of adjusting it to his Islamic ideals, which entail fighting against injustice. By digging into the Irish past and excavating its history of oppression, he is able to reduce the dissonance between his ethnic and religious identities. Moreover, enrolling ethnicity allows him to practice Islam more “authentically” by remaining true to his origins. As noted by Mary Waters (1990: 150), “having an ethnic identity is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity and at the same time it is a personal choice.” Having cut

themselves from their family tradition from a religious standpoint, converts enlist ethnicity to reconnect with a sense of rooted identity while simultaneously keeping dominant whiteness at bay. Contrary to whiteness, ethnicity can be enjoyed without causing problems.

To be sure, ethnic strategies to escape or redefine the meaning of race are not exclusively performed by white converts, even though it is generally easier for them to choose the ethnic identity they like (Waters, 1990: 156). In Detroit, Khabir (23, barber), who is African-American, is also engaged in a creative identity reconfiguration based on ancestry and ethnic roots. Khabir went through a crisis as a new Muslim, when he realized Arab and South Asian Muslims doubted the extent of his Islamic legitimacy because he was African-American (see Chapter 6). Influenced by Pan Africanism, Khabir sought to proudly assert his black and Muslim identities at the same time, and used genealogical inquiries, biological tests and historical investigations to support this endeavor. He took strands of hair from his mother and father and brought his DNA sample to the company *African Ancestry*, which traces ancestry back to a specific African country and ethnic group. He justified this process as such: “I got to the point where: how do I deal with myself as a Muslim? How do I identify? We are from Africa, but what tribe? What kind of African Muslim culture do I take on? I don’t like to be at a disadvantage, especially about my identity, especially about Islam. (...) So I did [the DNA test] for both my mother and father. I spent a lot of money for it.” The results of the test exceeded Khabir’s expectations. He found that his mother was 100% Fulani from northern Cameroon, which indirectly linked him to the great Islamic kingdoms of Futa Jallon (1725-1895) and Futa Tooro (1776-1861), and that his father was 20% French (a detail he carefully omitted) and then Berber from South Morocco, which tied him to the great Muslim conquest of Andalusia (711-732). He said: “I was like yes! Cool! I have indigenous roots and stuff, yes! I am foreign! That was so empowering to me. It made me feel more confident about me being Muslim. Now I have a Muslim background, meaning culturally. (...) I don’t have to reflect on the Arab culture, I don’t have to reflect on the South Asian culture for my identity in Islam. I can reflect on my Berber culture, or Fulani culture, which are very prestigious cultures that have helped Islam be propagated through Africa and throughout Europe. (...) I share this lineage now. I am just not a Detroit Muslim, just not an African-American Muslim. I am more than that.” Delighted, Khabir started investing this new identity: he immersed himself in the Islamic history of these regions and learned notions of Fulani, Darija (Moroccan dialect) and Amazigh (Berber), which he now intersperses his speech with, especially when talking to immigrant Muslims. He began defining himself as a Moroccan-Cameroonian American (i.e. someone with a migratory background), an identity shift that proved efficient, since many of my Detroit interviewees actually referred to him as such, and seemed to ignore that he and his two parents were African-American. Khabir also joined the Sufi order Tijaniyya, which was established in the US by Senegalese Sheikh Hassan Cisse (who studied at Northwestern) and which promotes a connection to Africa that is well appreciated among African-American Muslims. In sum, Khabir used ethnicity to escape race and assert his Islamic legitimacy, a strategy that is reminiscent of the Moorish Science Temple (see Chapter 4). This strategy is ambiguous and paradoxical, however, because it relies on DNA tests (whose accuracy is actually contested) to identify ancestral roots (Nelson, 2016), thereby reproducing biological understandings of race and ethnicity.

2) French regionalist identities and the rhetoric of internal colonialism

In France, French rapper and convert to Islam Akhenaton (Philippe Fragione) is another example of someone who uses his ethnic origins to distance himself from whiteness and reassert his bonds with Islam. In his lyrics or in public interviews, Akhenaton frequently connects his conversion to Islam to his Italian heritage (his family migrated from Italy). He reconciles the two identities by a shared experience of immigration and stigmatization. He also reminds his audience that Sicily used to be an Islamic emirate (from 831 to 1072) and that Muslim influence can still be felt over Sicilian culture and dialect. In sum, “Akhenaton regards Islam as a kind of potential but occulted cultural bridge linking Italian communities, the products of earlier waves of immigration, to Maghrebi-Islamic communities, the more recent arrivals” (Swedenburg, 2001). This allows for the creation of a coherent identity, rooted in a commitment to anti-racism and a distinction from the non-immigrant white French identity.

Yet, the reference to ethnic origins and ancestral past was overall rare among my French interviewees. The ethnic identity revival (through genealogy or DNA tests) is considerably less developed on this side of the Atlantic and does not align with dominant cultural representations of identity, which remain rooted in color-blind/origin-blind universalism (Noiriel, 2009).¹²

However, I was surprised to notice that my French interviewees did engage in the promotion of alternative identities to their whiteness or Frenchness. This was done through the mobilization of strong regional identities, such as Breton (western France) and Occitan (southern France), each of which hinges upon distinctive cultural and linguistic content and a history of resistance to French cultural hegemony (on French regionalist struggles, see Lafont, 1967; Bromberger and Meyer, 2003). Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), who comes from a small village in South-Western France, explained for instance that in the wake of her religious conversion, she started reconnecting with the Occitan roots of her grandparents and rejected her more general belonging to the French nation: “just to make things clear, I am not French. I am Occitan. You see?”¹³ Along with her friend Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) who comes from the same region, Pauline progressively made Occitanism a primary component of her self-definition while simultaneously strengthening her Muslim identity: “we were really looking for an identity. In Islam we found one, but at the same time I think we really needed to reconnect with our roots. It wasn’t sufficient. We liked Arab culture, we liked the Arabic language, but we were not Arabs. And we liked hip-hop and the social awareness it created, but we didn’t come from the hood. It didn’t quite fit.”¹⁴ Her

¹² In contrasting the intensity of ethnic identities in the US with the rest of the world, Mary Waters (1990: 153) notes for instance that “the idea of being American does not give people a sense of one large family the way that being French does for people in France. In America, rather than conjuring up an image of nationhood to meet this desire, ethnic images are called forth.”

¹³ « Pour moi, je suis pas française en fait. Je suis occitane. Tu vois un peu le truc ? »

¹⁴ « Avec Thibault, on a vraiment cheminé là-dedans ensemble. (...) On se cherchait vraiment une identité, tu vois. Et dans l’islam, on s’en est trouvé une mais en même temps, je pense qu’on avait besoin de quelque chose qui nous permettait vraiment de se rattacher à nos racines en fait. C’était pas suffisant. Donc ouais, la culture arabe ça nous parle, la langue arabe, ça nous parle, OK, mais on n’est pas des Arabes, quoi. Donc... il y avait un truc qui collait pas, tu vois. Et même le hip-hop, c’était vraiment une culture qui nous parlait par sa revendication sociale etc. Mais je viens pas d’un quartier, tu vois ».

encounter with Mohammed Taleb, a Muslim philosopher who promotes spiritual environmentalism (Taleb, 2014), opened up new avenues for Pauline to reinvent herself: “we decided to revisit our peasant roots, to go back to the land, to the language.¹⁵” Pauline started learning Occitan, which her grandparents used to speak and her parents had forgotten, and she began a training in herbalism and traditional medicine in order to weave her spiritual and regional identities into something she saw as productive and helpful. In her view, the French identity alone did not enable her to perform this shift.

Thibault took things a bit further: a regionalist activist, he teaches Occitan in a *calandreta* (bilingual school in French and Occitan), and frames his dual identity as an Occitan Muslim in terms of resistance to the French State: “for me, it is political in a way. Because... I hate the French State. I hate the French Republic. And I am really measuring my words! [laughs]. And I found in regionalism an opportunity that I don’t have as a Muslim to openly criticize the French State. I identify with the subjugation that the Occitan language and the Occitan people have had to endure from the French State. The French Republic, and before it the royalty, is so deadly to me. It is racist by essence.¹⁶” In the current context, it is easier to voice a critique of the French Republic from a regionalist standpoint than from an Islamic one, but Thibault considers the two as deeply intertwined. He opposes what he sees as the forced homogenization of the national body by the secular and centralist state, and finds commonalities between linguistic and religious discrimination. As an Occitan, he feels he resists the legacy of French *internal* colonialism, and as a Muslim that of French *external* colonialism. This connection of the Muslim and Occitan identities as sharing a background of oppression is similar to the link established by Abdullah between the Irish and Muslim identities as identities of resistance to domination. In addition, Thibault finds there is much more tolerance with regards to his conversion to Islam in the *calandreta* system than in the mainstream French education system where he does not dare talking about his religious belonging: “with the Occitan teachers, there is much more open-mindedness. It is insane how open they are compared to people who have always been immersed in the Republican, *laïc* (hard-core secularist) environment.¹⁷” He attributes this to the logic of *convivencia* – a way of life respectful of all differences, inherited from multi-ethnic Andalucía and conceptualized by Occitan thinker Alem Surre-Garcia (2005; Ferré, 2012) – which is, according to him, strongly established in the Occitan region and conspicuously lacking at the national level.

Thibault’s reflections are clearly echoed in a recent book entitled *Comment peut-on être breton et musulman?* (How can one be at once Breton and Muslim?), published by Thierry Magot, a convert to Islam from Brittany, under the pseudonym of Jean-Marie

¹⁵ « C’est vraiment Mohammed Taleb, qui nous a réconciliés avec la terre vraiment, qu’on a fait ce retour et qu’on a commencé à réfléchir sur la langue ».

¹⁶ « Par rapport à elle, je crois que moi c’est à un niveau plus politique aussi quelque part. En fait, je... Je hais l’Etat français. Je le hais. La République française... vraiment, je pèse mes mots, je... je la hais au plus haut point ! [rires] (...) Et du coup j’ai retrouvé dans le côté régionalisme, la possibilité que je n’avais pas en tant que musulman de cracher sur l’Etat français. (...) Je me retrouve dans l’histoire, dans la domination qu’ont subie les espaces occitans, et la langue occitane et le peuple occitan par rapport à la domination française. (...) La République française, et la royauté avant elle, est assez mortifère pour moi ! (...) L’Etat français pour moi est d’essence raciste, quoi ».

¹⁷ « Les enseignants d’occitan, ces gens sont... il y a beaucoup plus d’ouverture, honnêtement, c’est... enfin vraiment c’est énorme l’ouverture qu’il y a par rapport à quelqu’un qui baigne dans la culture républicaine, laïcarde ».

Seiget (2015). The book describes with much alarm and concern the progressive disappearance of regional languages such as Breton or Gallo due to the neglect of the French central state. In the author’s view, the Qur’an, through its respect for human diversity and linguistic plurality, can provide powerful spiritual material to support the regionalist struggle. Jean-Marie Seiget advocates an Islamic theology of liberation, which he puts at the service of the protection of regional cultural and linguistic identities. Seiget defines himself in three languages (French, Breton and Gallo) as a revolutionary Breton and a critical Muslim: “*un breton indigné et musulman critique*,” “*ur breton brouezet-ruz ha muzulman a vurutell*,” “*un bertton horni-gamei e muzulman a elouter*.” Here again, unexpected alliances are being formed and unprecedented identities are being crafted to redefine both religion, race and region.

French color-blind universalism precludes the possibility of hyphenation, which is paramount in the American case. While American interviewees can experiment ethnic options *within* the realm of the American nation and present themselves as Polish-American Muslims, Irish-American Muslims, or Moroccan-Cameroonian-American Muslims, these identity accumulations are odd in the French context, which does not accommodate the particularistic expression of difference in the same way. Hence, in France, attempts at identity reconfiguration are often made *against* the French nation-state: as evidenced by the cases of Thibault and Jean-Marie Seiget, religious and regionalist expressions combine themselves into a common denunciation of the French Colonial Legacy (both internal and external). In their view, the Occitan Muslim identity or the Breton Muslim identity is more natural and cohesive than the French Muslim identity (or the Occitan French identity and the Breton French identity), which they deem contradictory in essence.

3) Challenges

One must note, however, that the ethnic/regional identities that converts put forward to redefine race are mostly imagined, subjective and personal, and not necessarily tied to actual cultural content, linguistic practice or group belonging. In France, Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris) acknowledges that her Occitan rural identity is not substantiated by living on the land nor speaking the language (she resides in Paris and is struggling to learn Occitan because her job is taking too much of her time). In the US, Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) who defines himself as an “Irish Muslim,” also confesses that he actually feels uncomfortable among other Irish people:

If I really want to be real about being an Irish Muslim then I should spend time reaching out to Irish people who don’t know anything about Islam or who don’t like Muslim people and I should try to connect with them. And I have tried to do that but I kind of ran into the fact that they are not really like... They don’t really share the Irish identity that I share. So it becomes hard [laughs]. (...) I never felt more out of place in my life than when I walk into an Irish bar. (...) There is no place where I get stranger looks, there is no place where I feel more like I shouldn’t be here. So I don’t feel like I am going back to like ‘my people.’ (...) I don’t feel like I have a home in the Irish community where I feel comfortable going. So that’s too bad.

Similarly, Olga (23, student and nanny, Chicago) reports having rather tense interactions with other Polish Americans: “for me it’s really hard because the majority of the Polish community in Chicago, I would say 90% are extremely Islamophobic, very racist, very

conservative. (...) I just can't stand being around a lot of them. So my Polish identity is mostly myself!" Olga feels she is on her own as a Polish Muslim. In Detroit, Khabir (23, barber) is also well aware of the challenges that his redefinition of self entails, notably the fact that if he travels to Africa, which he hopes to do in the future, he will probably be perceived as an American there, and not as a Moroccan-Cameroonian: "if you go to Senegal, you will be like 'I am in Senegal! I am with the Wolof and the Fulani and the Serer people!' But they would be like 'no, you are Toubab' [white, foreigner]. (...) Indigenous Africans feel that African-Americans are not Africans. (...) And so a lot of people come with that sad fact, that disappointment. (...) Still deep down, I am just a human being from Fenkell & Wyoming in Detroit. And that right there, me holding on to Detroit and me being American protects me from that disappointment." Ultimately, Khabir prefers holding on to his local urban identity in case his self-portrayal as a Fulani-Berber fails. The ethnic projects of converts to escape race are therefore audacious but limited. They enable them to make sense of their personal history at the individual level by deemphasizing their burdensome racial identity and replacing it with a more positive and Islamically consistent ethnic identity. But this endeavor is not immediately recognizable and appreciated by others. Their ethnicity is therefore mostly symbolic (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1994) and not substantiated with actual "cultural stuff" (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2008 [1997]-a).

4) Class solidarity and Muslim brothers in misery

The other "boundary contraction" strategy that white converts use, in both France and the US, emphasizes class status over racial belonging. It is mostly performed by lower-class white converts, who stress their shared socio-economic status with poor coreligionists in order to minimize the significance of their white racial status. In France, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) frequently mentioned during his interview that he came from a working-class family close to the Communist party and had grown up in an industrial region of eastern France, known for its powerful workers' movements and class solidarity with immigrant workers. Others, like Janice (hairstylist, Lille), Roxanne (social worker, Marseille), Aisha (housewife, Paris), Romain (unemployed, Paris), Florent (restaurant employee, Lille), Isabelle (unemployed, Paris), Bernard (clerk, Lille) or Eleonore (sales assistant, Paris) insisted that they had been raised in rough neighborhoods in city outskirts and had always shared their lives with people of immigrant descent. By highlighting elective affinities with lower-class immigrant Muslims, these converts seek to bridge the racial gap that separates them.

In the US, where the African-American vs. Immigrant cleavage overlaps with strong socioeconomic inequalities (see Chapter 6), this class-based strategy takes on racial overtones, as lower-class white converts side with African-American Muslims and distance themselves from wealthy immigrant Muslims. This is evident in the case of Hasan (34, clerk, Chicago), a white American who comes from a chronically poor family and despises his well-off immigrant coreligionists: "the foreign community, I never feel like they did much for us. (...) They don't really care. I have had bad experiences with Arabs. I have had bad experiences with Somalis. They have an issue with us for some reason (...) I think it's socio-economic and I think it's also... (...) They meet someone like me, you know, I was raised, you know, doing things in the street, doing bad stuff, they see me, they are like 'oh he is just one of them blacks!' They think about me like I am lower." Hasan thinks things would probably be different if he was a doctor or an

engineer. His lower-class status as a white person racializes him as black (Hartigan, 1999b; McDermott, 2006) in the eyes of immigrant Muslims. As a result, he feels he did not receive adequate support from them: “Where were they when I was down on my knees in misery sleeping on the streets? They sure as hell didn’t offer me no way to work, yet they’re all professionals.” Hasan developed resentment and bitterness against his upper-class coreligionists of immigrant descent. By contrast, he explains that he always had good relationships with African-American Muslims because they share a common domestic street culture:

I hung out with black people most of my life... you know. (...) I dated black girls in high school. My wife is black, you know, so... I mean... I hang out with everybody. And I happen to hang out with a lot of black people, you know (...) And we accept each other because we are indigenous Americans, you know. We come from the same culture, from the hip-hop culture, from skate-boarding, you know, from that background, street culture as they say.

Hasan, who embraced Islam after a prolonged stay in prison for drug-abuse and drug-dealing and a few weeks in the hospital for alcohol-related diseases, minimizes his whiteness and emphasizes his commonality of experience with “street” Muslims, most of whom happen to be African-Americans.

His identity strategy also entails drawing clear boundaries with upper-middle-class white converts. According to Hasan, there are two types of white converts in the US, which can be differentiated according to their socio-economic status and the period during which they embraced Islam:

- those who converted in the early 1990s tended to come from marginalized sections of society. At that time, Islam was underground, subversive and tied to African-American culture. It entailed a strong rejection of mainstream white America and attracted those who felt left out of the American dream. People, like Hasan, who were living in impoverished neighborhoods, had addiction problems or were involved in criminal activities embraced Islam as a strict disciplinary system that would enable them to reorient their lives. They followed strict and virile interpretations of Islam, characterized by radical discourses and fantasies about creating an Islamic state in America. They became part of tight-knit communities (Elmasry, 2010; Lee, 2014), like Hasan who joined Salafi groups on the East coast, until the movement fell apart because of internal rivalries and 9/11.
- after 9/11, Islam could not afford to be radical any more. A new generation of highly educated and well-integrated Islamic scholars emerged and crafted an image of American Islam that was much more friendly, wishful of integration and respectful of mainstream American values. Under these new circumstances, the people who converted were mostly college students who became acquainted to Islam through Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) on large universities campuses; or professionals, especially doctors, lawyers and engineers who discovered Islam through their colleagues of Arab or South Asian descent.

This is how Hasan sketches the recent history of conversion to Islam in the US, and there is truth in his assessment. He uses this history to differentiate himself from upper-middle class whites. Hasan strongly despises post 9/11 converts and sees them as shallow college-educated white liberals who promote a domesticated, whitewashed version of Islam. He likes to reminisce his young days as a Salafi, when Islam was a demanding

religion, and expresses skepticism concerning the religious sincerity of the “new converts” who never had to endure anything.

We were people that came from the streets. We came from gang backgrounds. And this new group now are people that are college-educated and they are... some of them are rich kids as we would say. And, so they didn't have to struggle like we did. They never slept on the ground. Outside in the cold. I have! You know. They haven't lost a lot. And so sometimes people like this are very sensitive. We were more masculine ... At that time, you know, I would give everything up for Islam. Now, we have to sugar-coat things because people get their feelings hurt. Everybody is very sensitive now. As opposed to in those days.

In differentiating himself from upper-middle-class white converts, Hasan draws a picture of Islamic authenticity that weaves together religious intransigency, socioeconomic struggle, working-class ethic, assertive manhood and solidarity with black people. He suspects upper-middle-class white converts of entertaining anti-black sentiments: “I hung out in the projects, you know, I hung out in bad areas, so I didn't really have that white-guy paranoia of new people” he said. The accusation of being “a paranoid white person” is transferred to post 9/11 upper class white converts and allows Hasan to stay clear of it. Another working-class white convert who joined the Salafi movement in the 1990s, Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis) shares a similar assessment of the situation. On a recent Facebook post, he wrote:

There is a post-911 influx of liberal converts from affluent backgrounds. Often with liberal-arts degrees. Many times considering themselves activists. Strongest on the West Coast. They are uncomfortable dealing with anyone outside of their social-class. They have a particular disdain for working-class whites and masculine expression. They find a natural home with suburban mosques and progressive Muslim groups surrounded by Desis [South Asian] from wealthy backgrounds.

Umar Lee is particularly suspicious of “progressive” upper-middle-class white converts who criticize Salafism, which happens to be mostly black (see Chapter 7). The clash between lower-class and upper-class white converts, therefore, tends to follow the contours of the African-American vs. Immigrant Islam debate. Lower-class white converts proudly recall their struggles and put the stress on their street-savviness to identify with their African-American coreligionists and reject whiteness into the realm of elite suburban culture. In a blog article entitled “The white *masjid* of the future”, Umar Lee (2006) also jokingly imagines what a “white mosque” would look like. Amalgamating whiteness with white upper-class hipster culture, he portrays this imaginary mosque as such:

The Imam has a degree from Al-Azhar and an English Literature Degree from a Liberal Arts college and you can still see the hole in his ear from where the ring was. In his *khutbah* [sermon] he often references things such as butterflies, rainbows and waterfalls.

Carpooling to the *masjid* will be encouraged and there will be bike paths leading to the *masjid*.

Low-fat and low-calorie Ramadan *iftar* dinners will be served.

Fundraisers will include bake sales, craft shows, and canoe trips.

The *masjid* will have sports teams for the youth but they will all be non-contact and low-risk sports and helmets and padding will be required for bike riding on *masjid* premises.

There will be a Muslim therapist on staff.

Umar Lee focuses on cultural practices (biking, carpooling, healthy diet, organic food, nonviolent sports, therapy) to draw distinctions between him and upper-class white converts, who are said to adulterate and bowdlerize “real Islam.” This strategy of boundary making also hinges upon references to masculinity. For instance, Umar Lee frequently criticizes Sufism, which he sees as the preserve of effeminate upper-class white converts: “the white Sufis that I see, I ain’t trying to be disrespectful, but when I see them like that... they seem like homosexuals to me. You know what I am trying to say? You know it is like they are sitting around this guy... I mean it just seems gay to me.” Hasan and Umar Lee summon Salafism, street culture and heterosexual manhood to differentiate themselves from dominant white upper-class culture. They make of their class background the main focus of their identity, thereby erasing their whiteness, and emphasize that they have more in common with poorer black coreligionists than with any of the wealthy post 9/11 white converts. This process of white dis-identification through class solidarity, manliness and religious strictness is one of the most effective I encountered.

On a lighter note, some working-class white converts also highlight the elective affinities between Islam and working-class white ethic. Such is the case of the “Society of Islamic Rednecks” that was recently created in North Carolina, under the leadership of white convert and Muslim chaplain Shane Atkinson, who grew up in Mississippi. The website explains that they “seek to embrace the positive qualities of Rednecks such as hard work, simple living and contentment with what God provides” and “to reform the negative connotation of the term such as bigotry, backwardness and brutishness.” The society claims an online membership of 1,500 people (Khrais, 2015). Members blend Islam with Southern hospitality, hillbilly culture and a sense of working-class rural pride in yet another instance of surprising cultural hybridization.

E. CONCLUSION

The picture of whiteness that emerges from this research is complex. In Chapter 6, I have demonstrated that whites are subjected to various forms of racial objectification, which remind them of the ineluctable heaviness of race, even in contexts where religious brotherhood is expected to prevail. In Chapter 8, I have analyzed how white converts respond to these racial objectifications in order to assert the “authenticity” of their spiritual experience. These responses vary across socio-economic, ethnic and ideological backgrounds, as well as national contexts. Building on the work of Andreas Wimmer, I have highlighted five strategies:

- The first strategy (*boundary blurring*, Chapter 7) aims at *making room for whiteness* within Islam by demonstrating that Islam is for all peoples at all times, and must be disconnected from certain cultural backgrounds. Religion becomes a master, superordinate status that supersedes ethnic and racial categories. This strategy is mostly implemented by white converts who feel comfortable with their identity and want to focus on their spiritual path.
- The second strategy (*working within the boundary*) entails *reflecting on white privilege* and trying to solve the moral quandaries it generates. White converts who occupy positions of authority or leadership within the Muslim community

frequently engage in this path. The valorization of their white skin places them on a pedestal, on top of which they are confronted with very concrete ethical dilemmas revolving around issues of power, privilege and representativeness.

- The third strategy (*crossing the boundary*) intends to *repudiate whiteness* through Islam. By embracing a racialized minority religion, whites consciously rebut classic understandings of whiteness to create a new image of themselves. This approach is pursued by whites who have been influenced by anti-racist thought.
- The fourth strategy (*normative inversion*) aims at *upsetting the very meaning of whiteness* and durably transforming the nature of the Duboisian Veil. This political project is mostly carried out by highly-educated whites in the US who approach whiteness from a philosophical perspective.
- The fifth strategy (*boundary contraction*) aims at *minimizing whiteness* by putting the stress on alternative identities that are believed to be more compatible with Islam. It intends to bridge the gap with fellow Muslims by emphasizing either a shared socio-economic status or an ethnic or regional background of oppression.

These five strategies are unevenly distributed across national contexts. In the US, the Color-Conscious Frame and the structuring history of the Black vs. White Divide enable the reflection on and the promotion of heretical whiteness, a semantical overthrow that is unwarranted in the Color-Blind French context. In the American case, the legacy of European immigration also favors the development of ethnic strategies to minimize whiteness while staying faithful to American identity. In France, this work is performed by enlisting regional identities that express themselves against the French nation and oppose the Colonial Legacy. Finally, the African-American vs. Immigrant Islam debate structures the strategies of working-class whites in the US, who side with their black coreligionists against (well-off) immigrant Muslims and resist efforts to mainstream Islam. In the Black vs. White divide, immigrant Muslims gravitate towards the pole of whiteness while working-class whites feel closer to blackness. In France, working-class converts simply express solidarity with immigrant Muslims, who are socioeconomically marginalized within the Post-Colonial Immigrant vs. Native Divide. In both contexts, strategies for categorical reconfiguration are patterned after the racial stratification system.

Overall, these five strategies are a testament to the inventiveness that people deploy in their daily lives to escape racial objectifications, and to the fact that whiteness is both socially constructed and contested. To be sure, some individuals are more reflexive than others. In studying racial consciousness among whites, Ruth Frankenberg (2001: 77) once reported being “struck by the extraordinary ease with which individuals can slide from awareness of whiteness to the lack thereof and, related to that slippage, from race consciousness to unconsciousness and from antiracism to racism.” This “now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t” articulation of whiteness can also be found among white converts to Islam, who react differently to their newly discovered racial status. Some inadvertently reproduce the tropes of white dominance: the project of dissociating culture from religion highlighted in Chapter 7 can at times be seen as exemplifying such bias for it reifies the practices of immigrant Muslims as unworthy and irrelevant. Yet, other white converts are aware of these issues and try to sincerely come to grips with racial inequality.

The key challenge for them is to assert themselves as “good Muslims” or “good whites,” despite the color of their skin that connects them to a history of antagonism with the Muslim world. Yet, while they try hard to differentiate themselves from “bad whites,” there is always a suspicion, a “twinge of uncertainty” (Hartigan, 1999a: 207) concerning their intentions. White converts who are trying to repudiate, minimize or reinterpret their white racial identity are therefore confronted to a daunting question: can whiteness ever be escaped? Consider the case of Abdullah (39, university chaplain, Chicago) who seeks to escape white privilege by downplaying his white American appearance. In doing so, Abdullah explains that he runs into yet another existential meta-problem: “my response was to run away from being white and try not to be white. But I know that’s probably part of white privilege too, the fact that you can try to run away from it and do what you want [laughs].” The fact that Abdullah is able to pass as what he wishes when he wishes is precisely a feature of white privilege. Abdullah encounters a problem already underlined by scholar Troy Duster (2001: 114) who writes that “whites who have come to a point where they acknowledge their racial privilege are in a difficult circumstance morally because they cannot just shed that privilege with a simple assertion of denial.” In sum, white racial dominance never leaves you; it is impossible to fully part ways with it. Talking about the political project to abolish whiteness, Howard Winant (1997) further notes that “this is all well and good. But is whiteness so flimsy that it can be repudiated by a mere act of political will, or even by widespread and repeated acts aimed at rejecting white privilege? I think not.” Despite their political, religious or moral sentiments, white converts are trapped in this never-ending racial dilemma.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has unfolded like a trilogy. In Part 1, I have detailed the process of embracing Islam. In exploring the moral justifications underpinning conversion, I have shown that the language of religious authenticity and individual self-fulfillment is paramount to analyze how converts understand their conversion. I have also explored the various rites of passage that institute the convert as a Muslim (*shahada*, coming out). Indeed, religious boundary-crossing requires some form of social ratification. But I have demonstrated that uncertainty, blurriness and indeterminacy often preclude the assertion of a clear-cut religious choice. Upon converting, converts enter a liminal state which can be characterized by rejection from relatives and imperfect integration into the Muslim community. This jeopardizes the accomplishment of their new religious persona and translates into a tendency to self-dramatization. The creation of convert support groups to remedy this situation paradoxically leads to a permanentization of liminality. These findings apply to religious traditions beyond Islam: I argue that the rhetoric of religious individualism, its vicissitudes and the development of a liminal condition are a common feature of religious conversion in 21st century Western countries.

The specificity of Islam in France and the US has been most apparent in Part 2. In addition to the common challenges of embracing a religion different than the one in which they were raised, converts to Islam face a distinctive problem: the social fact of race. Because of joint processes of essentialization and embodiment, embracing the religion of Islam produces a shift in one's racial categorization. This is particularly true to converts donning the visible attributes of Islam. While male converts in the past were accused of "taking the turban" and "turning Turk," female converts in the contemporary period come "within the Veil," both literally and metaphorically: wearing the *hijab* affects their position in the racial stratification system. Because Islam has been constructed as foreign, white converts to Islam are no longer fully white. Interestingly, the racial expectations attached to Islam also permeate Muslim communities, where white converts' presence is often perceived as incongruous. White converts are a numerical minority amid their coreligionists and they have become hyper visible as whites. The objectification of their whiteness is Janus-faced for it alternately involves fetichization or suspicion on the part of their coreligionists. No longer white in the larger society and too white in the Muslim community, converts are forced to reflect on the meaning of race and whiteness.

In Part 3, converts have emerged as "redefiners," crafting strategies to reclaim control over their definition of self. I have shown that, along with second and third generation Muslims, converts propose a univocal answer to the question "what is Islam?" By redefining Islam as purely religious, i.e. detached from culture, ethnicity and race, they oppose the racialization of religion and circumvent accusations about their own racial or cultural inadequacy. Once reinstated as a faith, Islam can reject culture (fundamentalist path); be adapted to culture (re-acculturation path); or enlisted to alter culture (re-interpretative path). Such deculturation strategies, however, often lead to

further stigmatization of immigrant Muslims’ cultures of origin, and suspicions of white hegemony periodically resurface. In parallel, converts also use Islam to redefine whiteness: some make a strategic use of their socially anomalous position to dispel racial and religious stereotypes; others escape whiteness by becoming visibly Muslim; some promote forms of heretical whiteness through Islam and, finally, others minimize whiteness by promoting alternative identities deemed more compatible with Islam (ethnic, regional or class-based). Like other social structures, however, whiteness cannot be overthrown by a mere act of individual will and white converts are often embroiled in deep moral quandaries over their position of racial dominance.

In sum, converts choose Islam as a faith; they face race as a result; and they attempt to escape race through faith, without fully succeeding at it. What does this trilogy teach us about race and religion in France and the US?

A. BODY AND SOUL – RACE AND RELIGION

As put by Jacobson and Wadsworth (2012: 11), “we need to more fully theorize how religion informs particular racial identities and how race enables or forecloses different religious identities.” Answering their call, this study has sought to explore the conflation of race and religion by focusing on the specific experiences of white converts to Islam. In a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined, I have argued that white converts stand out as anomalous individuals whose racial and religious identities are deemed dissonant and irreconcilable, thereby offering a near-experimental case to tackle the tangle of race and religion. By overpassing religious boundaries, white converts also shed light on their content and enable us to decide whether they are simply religious or also express racial difference.

The first contribution of this dissertation is to demonstrate that race and religion are not complete strangers, especially when it comes to Islam. As the historical sections of this dissertation have demonstrated, they have always been intertwined and co-constituted (Prentiss, 2003) and they need to be understood as “contemporary, co-extensive and co-concealing categories” (Anijdar, 2008: 28). To the question of whether the experiences of Muslim minorities living in the West can be apprehended through race scholarship, this study answers yes.

I have demonstrated that Islam is undergoing a process of *essentialization*, which is most apparent in the family conflicts opposing converts to their parents. Converts have to grapple with the incomprehension and indignation of their relatives, which derive from a mismatch between their pluralistic understanding of the religion (universal, rational, inspiring, civic, liberating, etc.) and its monolithic representation in mainstream discourse (violent, patriarchal, intrusive, etc.). In fact, this process of essentialization is so powerful that it durably alters family relations: parents become suspicious of their own children, and those who were once close tend to become estranged. Moral panics surrounding Islam are so well-entrenched that converts cannot get their relatives to listen to reason. Converts are saturated with their religion: their individual specificity and sensitivity is crushed by their outrageous religious choice; their enthusiasm and ingenuousness are obscured by the hovering specter of “the Muslim.”

In addition, Islam is also subject to a process of *embodiment*, which completes the picture in terms of racialization. The religious transformation that converts have experimented in the solitude of their soul becomes inscribed onto their bodies. Their case illustrates how racial indexation operates in relation to religion. It has been established that race often functions as a proxy for religion, since brown-skinned individuals are regularly suspected of being Muslim, irrespective of their actual beliefs. What I have shown in this research is that, inversely, religion also functions as a proxy for race. Religious markers, such as the *hijab*, the beard, the *kufi*, are used as visual cues to determine racial belonging. They have almost become a racial uniform. The donning of such uniform by white converts affects their racial categorization. In sum, religion trumps race and race trumps religion; “religion is racialized and race is spiritualized” (Emerson et al., 2015). The distinction between body and soul is jeopardized, and the dichotomy between inward subjectivity and outward appearance fades away. In contexts where religion is racialized, the body is held as an indicator to probe one’s soul; and spiritual orientation is used to situate one’s body within the larger racial stratification system.

In January 2015, a short video in which I presented the preliminary results of this study was published online by the Huffington Post.¹ Afterwards, a member of a French Muslim organization fighting Islamophobia explained on social media that my research proved that Islamophobia was a form of religious intolerance different from anti-Arab racism, because it focused on religious markers rather than skin color, and because whites too could be affected by it. I disagree with this interpretation of my work. As I have argued, no one *is* white or black or Arab; there are only people who are categorized as such. Religious markers do have an impact on racial categorization, and white converts who are visibly Muslim are oftentimes no longer perceived as whites; in fact, they become exposed to racial slurs that are usually reserved to Arabs. This shows two things. First, racial categorization is not simply about phenotype or skin color; it relies on a variety of bodily cues, which can include clothing and body ornaments (headscarf, beard, etc.). Racial reasoning is polymorphous. Second, race and religion are inextricable, and anti-Muslim sentiment hinges upon *both* racial and religious intolerance; it is not one or the other. Because Islam has long been appraised through racial thinking and has been associated with various stigmatized racial categories throughout Western history, it is impossible today to disentangle the religious from the racial substrate in anti-Muslim hostility.

In documenting the appearance of racial meanings in the daily experiences of white converts to Islam, I have shown that converts are not simply trans-religious. Whether they want it or not, because the religious boundaries surrounding Islam have been racialized, converts are also a case of trans-racialness (Brubaker, 2016). As such, they are engaged in a dual process of learning. First, they must learn their new religion. Incorporating new beliefs and practices, and managing one’s new persona as a Muslim is a drawn-out process that requires patience and dedication. Second, converts must also learn race. This is especially the case for white converts who previously enjoyed the possibility of ignoring the tribulations of racial ascription by virtue of their majority status. Now, white converts must learn how to be non-white in the larger society and they must also learn how to deal with their whiteness within the Muslim community.

¹ « Conversion à l’islam : le racisme anti-musulmans touche aussi les ‘Blancs’ », *Ma thèse en deux minutes*, *The Huffington Post*, January 19th, 2015.

The picture of race that emerges from this study is dual. First, race is volatile and contingent, for racial categorization relies on visual signals – including skin color, phenotype but also clothing and body ornaments – whose interpretation varies across contexts and situations. The fictional, socially constructed nature of race is most apparent in the various “guesses” that people make about white converts’ ethnic or racial background on the basis of their religious markers. Processes of racial ascription are always fragile; ambiguity and doubt are inherent to racial categorization. Second, race is prominent and violent, for it significantly affects the life chances of people who are subjected to its logic. Racial categorization determines one’s position in the social stratification system and one’s location in one or the other side of the Veil. The mightiness of race is apparent in converts’ encounters with insults, discrimination and dehumanization because of their visual association with Islam. Race, in sum, is both precarious and powerful. It is a giant with feet of clay.

Within the realm of race, whiteness has a special status. Whiteness has been constructed as a dominant norm, embodying neutrality and universality, against which all other racial categories are defined as “particular,” “different,” and more often than not “inferior.” In Western societies, whiteness is evanescent and unnoticed, which makes it hard to grasp and study. As a numerical minority among their coreligionists, however, white converts render whiteness visible and its boundaries more salient. In this study, I have shown that whites too are subject to processes of racial objectification and that white racial identity is not neutral or empty, but endowed with a distinctive set of normative assumptions. To be sure, white racial objectification is always uneven and ambiguous, and does not threaten one’s position in the structural realms of existence (housing, employment, etc.). This is why I reject the concept of anti-white racism, because racism is about the unequal distribution of resources at the structural level, and this is not what is at stake here. Yet, race is a system that ultimately impacts everyone, even those who benefit from it. It fissures both society and the self, and I have highlighted the deep ethical dilemmas that distress white converts who are aware of their own racial dominance. In the *Souls of White Folk* (2005 [1920]), W.E.B. DuBois talks about the “religion of whiteness,” which he portrays as extraordinarily self-deceptive for it rests upon the lie that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” In this study, I have shown that white converts try to overthrow the religion of whiteness with the religion of Islam, but such individual attempts are often unsuccessful.

Scholar Troy Duster (2001: 114) has proposed an analogy between race and water. In his view, both can be transformed from a fluid to a solid state: “H₂O in its vapor state can condense, come back and transform into water and then freeze and hit you in its solid state as an ice block; what you thought had evaporated into the thin air can return in a form that is decidedly and consequentially real.” This is also how whiteness functions in white converts’ interactions with their coreligionists. They can at times escape it (vapor state) by emphasizing for instance a universal religious brotherhood. Yet, they are often reminded of its ever-lasting existence (ice state), specifically when they are either revered as white trophies or reviled as white devils. In sum, if religion can be changed by an act of individual will, such is not the case of race. Converts can decide to become Muslim, but they do not have control on how Islam is racialized, nor can they cease to be white by simply wanting so. These dialectics of ascription and choice produce contradictions within the repertoire of religious individualism.

B. ROOTS AND WINGS – ASCRIPTION AND CHOICE

Converts portray themselves as self-reliant individuals who embrace Islam as a faith. They present their spiritual choice as voluntary, internal, intimate. While religious identities always result from a mix of ascription and choice for people born into a tradition (Cadge and Davidman, 2006), converts define themselves as “radical choosers” who do not hesitate to overthrow inherited identities in their quest for religious authenticity. Yet, the intricacies of race and religion jeopardize their claims to religious individualism. Because religious identities are never purely religious, but always tainted with race, ethnicity, or culture, attempts to present conversion as a pure religious choice do not go unchallenged.

These contradictions are evident in converts’ encounters with born Muslims, some of whom are not religiously practicing and yet experience stigmatization *qua* Muslims. While converts see Islam as an avenue for self-fulfillment and liberation, for many others, Islam is an involuntary identity that constrains their lives within rigid racialized boundaries. While converts view Islam as “a feature that can be acquired,” others experience it as “a more unchanging quasi-biological essence” (Loomba, 1999). While converts voluntarily put on Islam like a *jacket* (even if that jacket eventually affects their racial categorization); some carry Islam like an irremovable *skin*. While converts proudly display their new Islamic *wings*, others are exhausted of being constantly sent back to their inherited Islamic *roots*.

The dialectics of choice and constraint are also clear in converts’ attitude towards discrimination. Converts to Islam in the West go through a lot: they are rejected by their families; some lose their jobs; they are insulted on the street; they no longer feel safe in public spaces, etc. All these tribulations derive from their voluntary religious choice. And yet, converts stick to the faith in the face of constraints. In fact, many of my interviewees subscribe to a “theodicy of suffering” (Weber, 1993 [1922]), in which misfortunes and challenges are interpreted as signs of religious election or as divine trials of religious sincerity. Consider the case of Marta (35, engineer) in Chicago. Marta embraced Islam on a peaceful Sunday of September 2001. The following Tuesday was 9/11. A storm of anti-Muslim passions unleashed. What did Marta do in the face of insults and racial objectification? She remembered the hardships that Jesus and Muhammad’s disciples had to endure and concluded: “God is really testing me, I talked the talk but this is now the time to walk the walk.” And Marta became firmer in her beliefs. In the repertoire of religious individualism, therefore, mechanisms of ascription and stigmatization further validate converts’ choice and are held as proof that they are on the right path. The encounter with race paradoxically strengthens converts’ faith.

C. THE TRANSATLANTIC MIRROR: FRANCE AND THE US

Finally, this study has demonstrated that national contexts and macro-historical processes structure individual experiences of religion. Converts’ trials and tribulations are patterned after a constellation of issues that are combined differently across countries and durably shape their existence. I have shown that four elements are to take into account to understand the trajectories of French and American converts:

- The race frame: Color-Conscious in the US; Color-Blind in France
- The racial stratification system: Black vs. White divide in the US; Post-Colonial Immigrant vs. Native divide in France
- The institutional regime of secularism and the daily conception of religion that derives from it: Embracing Secularism and Cultural Centrality of Religion in the US; Defiant Secularism and Unintelligibility of Religion in France
- The country’s history with Islam and corresponding Muslim demographics: African-American vs. Immigrant Islam divide in the US; North African dominance in France

One first element of surprise is that, despite such radically different societal configurations, French and American converts’ experiences are strikingly similar. In both countries, Muslim converts embrace the rhetoric of religious self-fulfillment and resort to similar repertoires of justification. This is because secularism produces distinctive forms of subjectivity that construe religion as individualized and personal. In both countries, religious change is gradual and continuous, and it does not boil down to a single rite of passage such as the *shahada*. In both countries, converts are unsatisfied with their integration in the Muslim community. In both countries, they face outrage and incomprehension from their relatives, and have to confront negative depictions of their newly embraced religion, which include the tropes of terrorism, brainwashing and women oppression. This is due to a global disqualification and essentialization of Islam. In both countries, converts also encounter processes of embodiment, which affect their racial categorization and endanger their majority status. That can be explained by the fact that both societies produce phenomena of racial classification, in which outward appearance is held as an indicator of social position, and because in both cases, the category “Muslim” is associated with groups that are at the bottom of the racial stratification system (as the new avatar of “the immigrant” or “the Arab” in France; as one expression of blackness in the US). In both countries, converts become a double minority, as Muslims in the larger society; as whites among their coreligionists. In both countries, they try to dissociate religion from culture, and Islam from Muslims. In both countries, they try to redefine the meaning of whiteness. In both countries, there are convert associations that operate on similar grounds.

Yet, important differences also shape the conversion process at every stage of my trilogy. First, in the act of coming out to friends and family, American converts often go straight to the point while French converts consistently beat around the bush. Coming out as a Muslim is made easy by the Cultural Centrality of Religion in the American context, which encourages transparency and self-affirmation in religious matters. By contrast, in France, the Unintelligibility of Religion precludes the possibility of upfront discussions and often leads to silence, concealment and secrecy. American religious individualism is outward-looking and extrovert, while French religious individualism is inward-looking and intimate.

Second, family conflicts focus on different issues. In line with the centrality of Protestantism and the prevalence of theological discussions, American families are alarmed by the fact that Islam might be a wrong religion and their children might be led astray. By contrast, in many French households, be they atheist/agnostic or culturally Catholic, it is the fact that converts decide to reprioritize their lives around religion that

generates surprise and/or indignation. While Americans situate themselves within the religious realm and are preoccupied with theological soundness, French families located outside the religious realm are simply disconcerted by displays of religious fervor. Converting to Islam is hard in the US because the Cultural Centrality of Religion revolves around Christianity; and it is difficult in France, because any religious expression (and Muslim religious expression specifically) is Unintelligible.

Third, while converts lose their majority status in both countries, the nature of the racialized boundary they cross differs markedly. In the US, the DuBoisian Veil is dichotomic and structured by the Black vs. White Divide. Converts' tainted whiteness propels them on the side of blackness: they receive racial insults (nigger, sand nigger, wigger) and are accused, in light of the legacy of African-American Islam, of being "race traitors." Yet, the ambiguous position of Immigrant Islam at the edge of whiteness and blackness complicates the situation: in spite of xenophobic sentiments and the War on Terror, the fact that many immigrant Muslims are socioeconomically successful and aspire to integration into the American mainstream mitigates the negative effects of racialization. By contrast, the French DuBoisian Veil is shaped by the Post-Colonial Immigrant vs. Native divide. Hence, through their visual association to Islam, French converts expose themselves to insults inherited from the colonial period (*bougnoule*); they revive deeply-buried traumas from the Algerian War among older relatives; and their conversion is framed as a drop in social status, for immigrant Muslims tend to be socioeconomically and spatially marginalized. Overall, in France, Islam centralizes issues of race, immigration, class, religion and secularism in a particularly explosive way, which makes conversion a very sensitive matter. In the US, where these issues tend to be more decoupled, conversion is also controversial but does not concentrate so many anxieties.

Fourth, the demographics of the French and American Muslim minorities affect the insertion of white converts in their midst. In the US, the African-American vs. Immigrant conflict fractures the Muslim community along race, class and space lines. Although this is not systematic, lower-class white converts tend to gravitate towards African-American Islam in the inner cities, while upper-class white converts are embraced by Immigrant Islam in the suburbs. While the former are attached to social critique and a subversion of the racial order inherited from the black religious tradition; the latter aspire to follow the pattern of immigrant civic integration through the mainstreaming of religion. This competition for religious authority along racial lines is absent in the French case where the demographic domination of North Africans results in a greater homogeneity and where conflicts over religious authority mostly oppose first generation immigrants to their children and grandchildren.

Fifth, the paths for Islamic reform are unequally distributed across countries. This is most visible in the re-acculturation path, which seeks to blend Islam into the national cultural mainstream. In the US, this path is prominent because it is natural: all immigrant religions have been through a process of Americanization and Islam shall be no exception to this rule. The racial diversity of American Muslims (America's most diverse religious group) also allows for unprecedented forms of cultural hybridization. In addition, Islam is a religion of conversion (20% of American Muslims are converts), among African-Americans specifically. The black Muslim tradition has contributed to the Americanization of Islam, through jazz and hip-hop culture in particular, and it has produced a relative normalization of the perception of conversion. This domestic

component is absent in the French case (only about 1% of French Muslims are converts), where Islam remains seen as predominantly North African and alien. Religion, and immigrant religion in particular, is not a *de facto* aspect of cultural membership in the French nation, which complicates the prospects of acculturation. Furthermore, government’s pressure to create a French Islam from above interferes with individual attempts at redefinition. In spite of these obstacles, second and third generation Muslims, as well as converts (and convert associations), are crafting a distinctive French expression of Islam in their daily practice of the faith.

Sixth, attempts at redefining whiteness are also informed by national configurations. The Color-Conscious frame sustains these attempts in the US, where discussions on white privilege, whiteness and white hegemony are particularly developed in academia and increasingly common-place in mundane conversations. Intellectual endeavors to abdicate whiteness and make it heretic are for instance expressed by highly educated white American converts. In France, such rhetoric is not immediately available because the Black vs. White divide is not as central and because of the frame of Color-Blindness. The white ethnic revival, which is prominent in the US and seeks to replace a bland and negative whiteness with positive ethnic content is also an oddity in the French context, where the appeal of Republican universalism remains vivid. Yet, we should not infer that French people are not preoccupied by whiteness. They just deal with it differently. Like some of their American counterparts, several French converts have embraced Islam as a strategy of racial redefinition to repudiate their white majority status. Some also blend religious and regional identities to oppose the French norm from both an internal and external decolonial standpoint.

Overall, the transatlantic mirror reflects commonalities of experiences between French and American converts, without flattening national specificities. This study refutes the reification of racial and religious categories, by showing how their intertwining takes on different textures across countries.

D. AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

No research is perfect, nor it is ever finished. I have identified several limits to this work that also open up avenues for future investigations.

A first critique is that this dissertation reifies the boundary between converts and born Muslims. As I have started to suggest, converts and born-again Muslims (oftentimes second and third generation immigrants) are involved in common efforts to redefine religion within the global Islamic revival. This is most apparent in the marriage process where second and third generation Muslims increasingly prioritize religious devotion over ethnic, racial or cultural considerations. The distinction between external converts and internal converts set forth in the Introduction is certainly warranted when it comes to studying processes of racial recategorization, but it loses its importance when looking at religious trajectories. Many born-again Muslims understand religion differently from their parents, which generates serious intra-family conflicts. Many also insist on reciting the *shahada* at the mosque to mark their renewed interest in the religion and they interpret

their reconnection with diligent practice as a form of conversion. A more integrated research on converts and born-again Muslims could yield interesting results.

Second, while this study gives prominence to international differences, it obscures intra-national ones. Yet being visibly Muslim is not the same when living in an ethnically-diverse neighborhood of the Parisian region and when residing in a more homogeneous French town. It is also sensibly different in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn (“America’s Muslim capitol”) and in the heart of the Bible Belt. Patterns of residential segregation structure experiences of racialization. Many of my visibly Muslim French interviewees have for instance settled in Saint-Denis, in the northern part of the Parisian metropolitan area, which is home to large numbers of first and second generation immigrants from North Africa and Africa. They say they feel safer in this environment, where their headscarf or *djellaba* does not stand out. Hence, taking into account localized urban contexts appears necessary to reach a more fine-grained understanding of feelings of stigmatization.

Third, by focusing on white converts as a near-experimental case, this research participates in the already well-entrenched fascination for white Muslims and reinforces a problematic tendency towards fetishization. This aspect requires a more thorough methodological reflection. In addition, by looking at white converts, this research does not do justice to the diversity of French and American Muslims. First, the voice of first-generation immigrant Muslims, who are so vehemently criticized by converts and second generation Muslims, is conspicuously lacking and needs to be taken into account. Second, although I have covered the voice of black converts in the US and shown that African-American Islam is a crucial component to understand the specificities of American conversion to Islam, the experience of black converts in France, notably those of Caribbean descent, has not been sufficiently highlighted in this research (for a comparative study of black Caribbean converts to Islam in France and the UK, see Larisse, forthcoming). Third, this study has mostly revolved around Muslims of Middle Eastern, North African and South Asian descent. The experiences of African, Southeast Asian, Bosnian or Albanian Muslims remain “invisible” and insufficiently covered in scholarship, because they are only peripherally related to the racial stereotypes associated with Islam. Yet, much could be learned from their testimonies. Finally, while this study has focused on people who enter Islam and have to confront race as a result, it would be interesting to look at the reverse case: do born Muslims who leave Islam escape racial stigma? The results of my study suggest that they do not if they hail from ethnic backgrounds that are stereotypically associated with Islam, and that Islam continues to operate for them as a “skin,” a “sticky sign,” even if they have rejected its belief system (for a discussion of how ‘non-practicing’ Arabs are often associated with Islam in ways that do not align with their beliefs or sense of identity, see Naber, 2000).

In order to attend to the diversity of Muslim experiences and further differentiate involuntary racial identification as “Muslim” from voluntary affiliation with Islam, a future research project could compare the experiences of three categories of people: those who are categorized as stereotypical “Muslims” and also self-identify as Muslims (for the most part, Muslims of Middle-Eastern, North African and South Asian descent); those who are likely to be racially categorized as “Muslims” without identifying with Islam (atheists/agnostics, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, etc. of Middle Eastern, North African or South Asian descent); those who identify as Muslim but do not fit into the stereotypical features of the racialized Muslim figure (African, Bosnian Muslims and white and black

converts). Such a study could disentangle processes of self- and other-categorization along racial and religious lines in a more comprehensive manner.

Fourth, although this study focuses on Islam, there is a crucial need to “de-exceptionalize Islam” (Coleman, 2013), for the intertwining of race and religion does not only concern Muslims. In fact, processes of fetishization and privilege have also been highlighted in the case of white American converts to Buddhism (Fields, 1998; Hickey, 2010; Cheah, 2011; Hsu, 2016). Even though Buddhism is not as stigmatized as Islam, this suggests fruitful avenues for comparison. As I am bringing this dissertation to a close, I am recalling the words of John, the leading white convert at *American Da’wah*, who once remarked:

I remember being amazed when I first met a brown guy who was Christian. That dude was Indian and he was Christian. I didn’t know this could exist! ²

Just like John, as a white Muslim, creates cognitive dissonance in the minds of his interlocutors, the brown Christian he encountered was a “big question mark” for him. This is because of the enduring mental association between Christianity and whiteness (Cowan, 2003; Lee, 2004). This anecdote demonstrates that our appraisal of religious categories is always tainted with racial considerations, and vice versa. People who disrupt the “normal” course of racial and religious categorization offer a perspective by incongruity that I find particularly heuristic. Hence, the experiences of white converts to Islam bear resemblance with other groups, such as Native-American converts to Christianity (Martin, 2003) and black converts to Judaism (Mokoko Gampiot, 2013; Bruder, 2014) or to Mormonism (Bringhurst and Smith, 2004; Winters, 2004). This study on Muslim converts can be seen as the first iteration of a larger research plan that seeks to articulate a variety of comparable field sites to provide a more comprehensive theory on the relations between race and religion.

Finally, converts’ status as “aberrant” and “incongruous” individuals has the effect of sharpening their views on social determinism. While converts often reject sociological interpretations of their conversion (Chapter 1), I have demonstrated that the experience of conversion is akin to a form of real-time sociological training. As noted by Rogers Brubaker (2013: 5), “‘Muslim’ is a category towards which one must take a stance; one cannot simply inhabit it in an unreflective manner.” My interviewees are constantly prompted to reflect on what being Muslim means and what converting to Islam entails. They have learned about race, religion and their intertwining from first-hand experience, and often express a variety of views on the racialization of religion, whiteness and transatlantic comparison. Their biographical interviews are sprinkled with sociological thinking, and their very existence has become a form of sociological living (N Plus One, 2013), characterized by a constant reflexivity on their positioning in society and the interpretation by others of their positioning in society. Because of their status as insiders/outsideers, converts are ethnographers, in a way. I feel like this dissertation, at times, has turned into an exercise of meta-sociology, compiling and contrasting the folk sociological interpretations of my interviewees. This raises important methodological questions that need to be further explored.

² Fieldnotes, January 12th, 2013.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1A: RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Pseudonym	M /F	Age	Country	City	Race-Ethnicity	Race (simplified)	Education level	Occupation	Sexual orientation	Marital status
Abdullah	M	39	US	Chicago	White (Irish)	White	Master's degree	University chaplain	Heterosexual	Married, 4 children
Adam	M	35	France	Paris	Caribbean	Black	Middle school	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single
Adèle	F	29	France	Marseille	White	White	Master's degree	Banker	Heterosexual	Single
Aisha	F	37	France	Paris	White	White	Some college	Housewife and Islamic teacher	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child
Alisha	F	35	US	Chicago	African-American	Black	Bachelor's degree	Freelance marketing	Heterosexual	Married, 2 children
Anjali	F	24	US	Detroit	South Asian (Indian)	Asian	Bachelor's degree	Elementary school teacher	Heterosexual	Single
Benjamin	M	25	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Elementary school teacher	Heterosexual	Married
Bernard	M	47	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Primary school	Clerk	Heterosexual	Married, 6 children
Bianca	F	33	France	Marseille	White (Italian)	White	High school degree	Unemployed (childminder)	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child

Blandine	F	25	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Music teacher	Heterosexual	Single
Bob	M	19	US	St. Louis	White	White	Some college	Student	Heterosexual	Single
Boran	M	35	US	Chicago	Asian (Cambodian)	Asian	Doctorate	University dean and professor	Heterosexual	Married, 2 children
Brian	M	23	US	Chicago	White (Italian)	White	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Single
Bruno	M	37	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Doctorate	Researcher	Heterosexual	Married, 4 children
Capucine	F	26	France	Paris	Mixed (Portuguese/Moroccan)	Mixed	Some college	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single
Caroline	F	28	France	Marseille	Mixed (White/Mauritian)	Mixed	Master's degree	PhD student	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child
Chloé	F	21	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Married
David	M	31	US	Chicago	White	White	Some college	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single
Deana	F	21	US	St. Louis	African-American	Black	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Engaged
Deepa	F	38	US	Chicago	South Asian (Indian)	Asian	Master's degree	Clinical social worker	Heterosexual	Married

Appendix 1a – Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Delphine	F	27	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Unemployed (artist)	Heterosexual	Married
Denyse	F	58	US	Chicago	African-American	Black	Bachelor's degree	IT services employee	Heterosexual	Single
Edward	M	35	US	Detroit	White	White	Master's degree	Crowd funding manager	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child
Eléonore	F	37	France	Paris	White	White	Some college	Sales assistant	Heterosexual	Separated, three children
Elisabeth	F	30	US	Chicago	White (Irish)	White	Bachelor's degree	Nurse	Heterosexual	Single
Emiliano	M	28	France	Paris	South American (Uruguayan/Chilean)	Latino	Master's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Married
Fabien	M	21	France	Paris	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Single
Fabiola	F	26	France	Lille-Roubaix	Caribbean (Haitian)	Black	Master's degree	Recruitment officer	Heterosexual	Single
Fanny	F	26	France	Paris	Mixed (White/Arab)	Mixed	High school degree	Educational assistant	LGBTQ	Single
Fazil	M	28	US	Chicago	Mixed (White/Mexican)	Mixed	Some college	Manager at a martial arts school	Heterosexual	Single

Florent	M	30	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Restaurant employee	Heterosexual	Single
Françoise	F	74	France	Paris	White (Occitan)	White	Master's degree	Retired English teacher	Heterosexual	Divorced, one child, remarried, 2 stepchildren, widowed
Fred	M	28	US	Chicago	Mixed	Mixed	Associate's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Married
Gaétan	M	29	France	Paris	Caribbean	Black	Master's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Married
Gérard	M	47	France	Marseille	White	White	Some college	Accountant	Heterosexual	Married, 2 children
Ghislaine	F	57	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Some college	Clerk	Heterosexual	Divorced
Gwenaëlle	F	35	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Documentary filmmaker	LGBTQ	In a relationship
Harold	M	25	US	Chicago	White	White	Master's degree	Political advisee in an NGO	Heterosexual	Married
Hasan	M	34	US	Chicago	White (Portuguese)	White	High school degree	Clerk	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child and 1 stepchild
Isabelle	F	30	France	Paris	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single
Jacques	M	51	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Engineer	Heterosexual	Divorced, two children, remarried religiously

Appendix 1a – Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

James	M	48	US	Detroit	White	White	Doctorate	English professor	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child
Janice	F	30	France	Lille-Roubaix	African	Black	Professional certificate	Hairdresser	Heterosexual	In a relationship
Jean	M	23	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Single
Jenna	F	38	US	Chicago	White	White	Master's degree	Lawyer	Heterosexual	Single
Jérémy	M	24	France	Paris	White (Italian)	White	Master's degree	Educational assistant	Heterosexual	Married
Jessica	F	27	US	Chicago	Mixed (White/Native-American)	Mixed	Bachelor's degree	Student and nanny	Heterosexual	Single
Jonathan	M	36	US	Chicago	White	White	Some college	Technician and Import-Export	Heterosexual	Married, 1 stepchild
Joseph	M	21	US	Chicago	White (Albanian)	White	Associate's degree	Web developer	Heterosexual	Single
Julia	F	23	US	Chicago	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Engaged
Kathleen	F	30	US	Detroit	African-American	Black	Associate's degree	Flight attendant and media artist	Heterosexual	Single

Khabir	M	23	US	Detroit	African-American	Black	Some college	Barber and woodcrafts	Heterosexual	Single
Lisa	F	22	US	Chicago	White (Polish)	White	Bachelor's degree	Elementary school teacher	Heterosexual	Single
Ludovic	M	26	France	Marseille	White (Pied noir)	White	Master's degree	Elementary school teacher	Heterosexual	Single
Mariana	F	29	US	Detroit	Latino (Mexican/ Puerto Rican)	Latino	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	Heterosexual	Married, 3 children
Marta	F	35	US	Chicago	Latino (Mexican)	Latino	Master's degree	Engineer	Heterosexual	Divorced
Mary	F	33	US	St. Louis	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Project manager	Heterosexual	Married
Mélissa	F	27	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Project Manager in an NGO	Heterosexual	Single
Mia	F	37	US	Chicago	Latino (Puerto Rican)	Latino	Bachelor's degree	School teacher and artist	Heterosexual	Divorced, four children
Monica	F	34	US	Chicago	Mixed (White/ Mexican)	Latino	Some college	Housewife, homeschooler and freelance writer	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child
Noémie	F	27	France	Paris	White (Occitan)	White	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child

Appendix 1a – Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Olga	F	23	US	Chicago	White (Polish)	White	Bachelor's degree	Student, nanny	LGBTQ	Single
Ophélie	F	26	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Legal assistant	Heterosexual	Single
Pablo	M	22	US	Chicago	Mixed (Black/Latino)	Black	Bachelor's degree	Student	Heterosexual	Single
Pauline	F	32	France	Paris	White (Occitan)	White	Some college	Graphic designer and student	Heterosexual	Married
Rachel	F	30	France	Paris	White	White	Master's degree	Freelance translator	LGBTQ	In a relationship
Rita	F	27	France	Paris	White (Pied noir)	White	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Separated, one child
Romain	M	30	France	Paris	Mixed (White/Arab)	White	Master's degree	Unemployed (accountant)	Heterosexual	Single
Roxanne	F	30	France	Marseille	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Social worker	Heterosexual	Single
Samuel	M	25	US	Detroit	Mixed (Black/Native-American)	Black	Bachelor's degree	Campaign strategist	Heterosexual	Married, 3 children
Sébastien	M	29	France	Paris	White	White	Middle school	Library worker	Heterosexual	In a relationship, 2 stepchildren
Shahada	F	31	US	St. Louis	African-American	Black	Associate's degree	Accountant	Heterosexual	Married

Sophie	F	27	France	Marseille	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Social worker	Heterosexual	Single
Souleymane	M	45	US	Detroit	African-American	Black	Some college	Islamic teacher and dancer	Heterosexual	Single
Stephan	M	24	US	Chicago	White (Spanish)	White	Bachelor's degree	Youth helper and translator	LGBTQ	Single
Thibault	M	35	France	Paris	White (Occitan)	White	Professional certificate	Educational assistant	Heterosexual	Married, 2 children
Ubaydullah Evans	M	40	US	Chicago	African-American	Black	Graduate from Al-Azhar	Islamic teacher	Heterosexual	Widowed, one child, re-married
Umar Lee	M	40	US	St. Louis	White	White	High school degree	Cab driver	Heterosexual	Divorced and re-married, children
Vanessa	F	40	France	Lille-Roubaix	White	White	Professional certificate	Hairdresser/manager of Muslim school	Heterosexual	Divorced, three children
Victoria	F	29	US	St. Louis	White	White	Bachelor's degree	Nanny	Heterosexual	Divorced
Wanda	F	32	France	Lille-Roubaix	White (Polish)	White	Bachelor's degree	Travel consultant	Heterosexual	Married
William	M	30	US	Chicago	African-American	Black	Master's degree	Public health worker	Heterosexual	Married, 1 child

APPENDIX 1B: RESPONDENTS' CONVERSION TRAJECTORIES

Pseudonym	Conversion year	Years since conversion (at the time of the interview)	Family's religion	Religion before converting	Visible religious markers	Islamic affiliation	Interview date	Interview setting
Abdullah	1994	19	Catholic	Agnostic	Big beard and <i>kufi</i> and <i>thawb</i>	Sunni	10/23/2013	Office
Adam	2002	13	Catholic	Catholic (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	10/06/2015	Friend's home
Adèle	2006	8	Catholic	Catholic	None	Sunni	06/09/2014	Café/Restaurant
Aisha	1989	25	Mother Catholic and Father Atheist	Catholic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	12/11/2014	Mosque
Alisha	1997	17	Buddhist	Agnostic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	04/23/2014	Home
Anjali	2010	4	Hindu	Hindu	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	04/28/2014	Café/Restaurant
Benjamin	2010	5	Catholic (non-practicing)	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	11/01/2015	Mosque
Bernard	2008	7	Catholic (non-practicing)	Jehovah Witness	Beard	Sunni	10/30/2015	Café/Restaurant
Bianca	2001	13	Catholic (non-practicing)	Atheist	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	06/13/2014	Home

Blandine	2010	5	Catholic (non-practicing)	Evangelical	None	Sunni	07/21/2015	Café/Restaurant
Bob	2011	2	Catholic	Catholic	None	Sunni	12/05/2013	Café/Restaurant
Boran	1997	17	Catholic (but ethnic Muslims)	Catholic (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	04/23/2014	Home
Brian	2011	3	Catholic	Catholic (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	02/24/2014	Café/Restaurant
Bruno	2001	14	Protestant	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	10/31/2015	Home
Capucine	2010	4	Mother Catholic and Father Agnostic (interested in Judaism)	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	10/28/2014	Café/Restaurant
Caroline	2003	11	Catholic (mixed with various religious influences from Mauritius)	Catholic	None	Sunni	06/10/2014	Home
Chloé	2013	2	Agnostic	Agnostic	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	11/01/2015	Mosque
David	2004	9	Protestant (non-practicing)	Protestant (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	11/11/2013	Café/Restaurant
Deana	2004	1	Baptist but Mother converted to Islam	Baptist	Face veil	Sunni	12/06/2013	Café/Restaurant

Appendix 1b – Respondents’ Conversion Trajectories

Deepa	2013	2	Catholic	Pentecostal (Apostolic) then back to Catholicism	None	Sunni	05/09/2014	Café/Restaurant
Delphine	2013	1	Atheist	Atheist	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	02/07/2015	Home
Denyse	2012	13	Baptist	Protestant (non-practicing)	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	11/16/2013	Café/Restaurant
Edward	2001	2	Presbyterian	Atheist	Beard	Sunni	04/29/2014	Office
Eléonore	2012	1	Atheist	Atheist	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	10/25/2014	Café/Restaurant
Elisabeth	2012	5	Catholic (non-practicing)	Catholic	None	Sunni	06/28/2013	Café/Restaurant
Emiliano	2010	1	Mother Catholic (non-practicing) and Father Atheist	Atheist	Beard	Shia then Sunni	11/05/2015	Skype
Fabien	2014	2	Catholic (non-practicing)	Atheist	Beard	Sunni	04/24/2015	Mosque
Fabiola	2013	3	Protestant (non-practicing)	Pentecostal	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	11/09/2015	Skype
Fanny	2012	3	Atheist (Father Jewish background)	Atheist	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	04/12/2015	Café/Restaurant
Fazil	2011	6	Mother Evangelical and Father Muslim (non-practicing)	Protestant (non-practicing)	Beard	Sunni	02/28/2014	Café/Restaurant

Florent	2009	35	Catholic (non-practicing)	Atheist	Beard	Sunni	10/29/2015	Café/Restaurant
Françoise	1980	10	Catholic	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	None	Sunni	12/11/2015	Hotel room
Fred	2004	2	Catholic (non-practicing)	Catholic (non-practicing)	Beard and <i>kufi</i>	Sunni	02/20/2014	Skype
Gaétan	2013	10	Catholic	Catholic	Beard	Sunni	02/07/2015	Home
Gérard	2004	7	Catholic	Catholic (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	06/14/2014	Café/Restaurant
Ghislaine	2008	8	Catholic	Catholic (non-practicing)	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	11/01/2015	Café/Restaurant
Gwenaëlle	2007	7	Catholic	Atheist	None	Sunni	10/10/2015	Café/Restaurant
Harold	2007	17	Liberal Protestant	Protestant (non-practicing)	Beard	Sunni	04/21/2014	Café/Restaurant
Hasan	1997	11	Mother Catholic and Father Southern Baptist	Agnostic	Beard and <i>kufi</i>	Sunni	02/13/2014	Skype
Isabelle	2004	22	Atheist	Catholic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	04/01/2015	Café/Restaurant
Jacques	1992	24	Atheist	Atheist	None	Sunni	08/01/2014	Café/Restaurant
James	1989	25	Mother Catholic and Father Agnostic	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	Beard	Sunni	05/12/2014	Skype

Appendix 1b – Respondents’ Conversion Trajectories

Janice	2010	5	Catholic	Catholic	None	Sunni	10/30/2015	Café/Restaurant
Jean	2013	2	Catholic	Catholic	Beard	Sunni	04/24/2015	Mosque
Jenna	2011	2	Catholic	Catholic	None	Sunni	03/11/2013	Café/Restaurant
Jérémy	2014	1	Atheist	Atheist	Beard	Sunni	04/19/2015	Home
Jessica	2009	4	Unknown (parents passed away)	Native American religion	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	09/21/2013	Café/Restaurant
Jonathan	1993	21	Protestant (non-practicing)	Protestant (non-practicing)	Big beard	Sunni	02/25/2014	Café/Restaurant
Joseph	2012	1	Greek orthodox	Greek orthodox (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	09/29/2013	Café/Restaurant
Julia	2013	less than 1	Lutheran	Christian	None	Sunni	06/26/2013	Café/Restaurant
Kathleen	2006	8	Episcopalian Methodist	Christian (non-practicing)	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	04/28/2014	Home
Khabir	2005	9	Mother Pentecostal and Father Muslim (converted)	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	04/29/2014	Café/Restaurant
Lisa	2010	3	Mother Catholic-agnostic and Stepfather atheist	Agnostic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	05/19/2013	Café/Restaurant
Ludovic	2008	6	Mother Buddhist and Father	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	06/26/2014	Skype

			Catholic (non-practicing)					
Mariana	2003	23	Catholic	Catholic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	04/29/2014	Café/Restaurant
Marta	2001	11	Catholic (non-practicing)	Catholic (non-practicing)	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	10/06/2013	Café/Restaurant
Mary	2009	9	Protestant (non-practicing)	Protestant (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	12/05/2013	Home
Mélissa	2013	12	Atheist	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	10/13/2014	Office
Mia	2001	4	Pentecostal	Agnostic	Turban/Bandana	Sunni	03/01/2014	Café/Restaurant
Monica	2009	1	Catholic and Jehovah Witness	Jehovah Witness	Face veil	Sunni	02/25/2014	Café/Restaurant
Noémie	2013	13	Mother Agnostic and Father Catholic (non-practicing)	Agnostic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	10/24/2014	Home
Olga	2012	5	Catholic	Atheist	None	Shia	02/03/2014	Café/Restaurant
Ophélie	2014	1	Catholic (non-practicing)	Catholic	None	Sunni	10/29/2015	Mosque
Pablo	2011	2	Mother Pentecostal (loosely) and Father Muslim (converted)	Protestant (non-practicing)	Beard	Sunni	02/17/2014	Café/Restaurant

Appendix 1b – Respondents’ Conversion Trajectories

Pauline	2003	1	Mother Atheist and Father Agnostic	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	Turban/Bandana	Shia	10/20/2015	Home
Rachel	2006	3	Agnostic (Catholic background)	Catholic then Agnostic	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	05/29/2015	Café/Restaurant
Rita	2007	12	Mother Catholic (non-practicing) and Father Atheist	Catholic (non-practicing)	None	Sunni	09/05/2014	Café/Restaurant
Romain	2000	9	Mother Catholic and Father Agnostic	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	07/15/2014	Café/Restaurant
Roxanne	2005	7	Agnostic (Catholic background)	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	None	Sunni	09/22/2014	Skype
Samuel	2009	14	Mother Catholic (non-practicing) and Father Protestant (non-practicing)	Presbyterian	Beard	Sunni	05/22/2014	Skype
Sébastien	2013	9	Mother Buddhist and Father Atheist	Atheist-Buddhist	Beard	Sunni	06/03/2015	Home
Shahada	2006	5	Mother side Catholic and Father side Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal	Christian	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	12/06/2013	Café/Restaurant

Sophie	2006	2	Catholic (non-practicing)	Agnostic, Spiritual practices	None	Sunni	06/18/2014	Home
Souleymane	1990	7	Baptist and Lutheran	Lutheran	Beard and <i>kufi</i>	Sunni	04/27/2014	Café/Restaurant
Stephan	2009	8	Agnostic (Catholic background)	Atheist	None	Sunni	11/06/2013	Café/Restaurant
Thibault	1999	24	Agnostic (Catholic background)	Agnostic	Beard	Sunni	11/17/2015	Skype
Ubaydullah Evans	1990	4	Protestant	Pentecostal	Beard	Sunni	04/19/2014	Café/Restaurant
Umar Lee	1990	16	Baptist	Baptist	Big beard	Sunni	12/05/2013	Café/Restaurant
Vanessa	1995	20	Catholic	Catholic (non-practicing)	<i>Jilbab</i> or face veil	Sunni	10/28/2015	Home
Victoria	2008	5	Baptist	Evangelical then Spiritual search	<i>Hijab</i>	Sunni	12/05/2013	Friend's home
Wanda	2011	4	Mother Catholic and Father Atheist	Agnostic, some Buddhist practices	None	Sunni	10/31/2015	Café/Restaurant
William	2000	14	Mother non-denominational and Father Baptist (non-practicing)	Agnostic	None	Sunni	04/24/2014	Café/Restaurant

APPENDIX 2 – CONVERSION STORIES

This appendix summarizes the conversion stories of my interviewees *as they told them to me*. As a result, each portrait reflects my respondents' self-understanding and is contingent upon the narrative thread they chose to follow, the representation of themselves they wish to give and the specific elements they decided to stress in reporting their story. Each conversion narrative should therefore be taken for what it is: a subjective reconstruction of various biographical events meant to justify one's conversion, make sense of one's life and present a coherent version of self in the particular setting of the interview. In front of a different person or at a different period of time, the story could certainly be told differently. Conversion stories also generally tend to fit the narrative frames of one's religious tradition in order to authenticate one's religious transformation. They are powerful tools for the reinvention of self. My respondents are also believers and God is present in their narratives as the ultimate architect of their lives. References to dreams, divine signs and mystical experiences are therefore common. I provide these condensed accounts to highlight similarities in the way conversion stories are structured, but also to emphasize the varieties of motives driving conversion to Islam. The objective is to offer a more personal, intimate and internal viewpoint on conversion, detached from grand sociological theorizing, so that the reader gets a better sense of who my interviewees were. Specific events or characteristics may have been omitted or modified to protect anonymity. This appendix does not feature Ubaydullah Evans and Umar Lee's narratives since the interviews conducted with them were mostly informational and did not focus on their personal life story.

UNITED STATES

Abdullah was born as Anthony in a middle-class white Irish Catholic family in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. His parents, who were both teachers, were very involved in Catholicism. Although they had deep-seated disagreements with organized religion and church hierarchy, they strived to transmit to their children a strong attachment to the figure of Jesus, as someone who cared for the poor and society in general. Anthony loosely attended mass throughout his childhood, but was proud to belong to a minority religious group and felt he shared some special bond with Catholic classmates. After his confirmation, however, he lost interest in Catholicism and distanced himself from the church. In high school, he became heavily interested in African-American history. After watching Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* movie, he became passionate about issues of social justice. He joined a local NAACP branch – he was the only white person there – and took an African name for himself, a first step on his path toward identity transformation. Anthony devoted his time to social activism and community service. In college, he joined a Muslim students group who participated in various actions of protest and solidarity with African-Americans and students of color, and did

volunteering in disadvantaged neighborhoods. There, he met a couple of Muslim social activists who greatly influenced him on both political and spiritual levels. After reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Anthony decided to take Islam seriously as a tool to promote racial equality. He started praying in congregation and fasting in Ramadan with his Muslim friends, until someone told him he was probably ready to take *shahada*, which he did, at age 20. He further developed his Muslim identity through mentoring Arab kids at a local community center. He chose the Muslim name of Abdullah and took on Muslim visible religious attributes (beard, *kufi*, and *thawb*), which he kept while in Law school and then as a practicing lawyer. A tall man wearing an unusual attire, Abdullah draws attention on the streets. He proudly combines his Irish and Muslim identities. He is married to a Pakistani-American woman and they have four children together. Abdullah eventually left his job as a lawyer to become a Muslim chaplain at a big university. He now does counseling for the Muslim student community. His Friday *khutbahs* are highly praised and Muslim youth look up to him.

Alisha was raised in an African-American lesbian Buddhist household in a mostly white, rural neighborhood in the north-east. Her mother worked at a local university and was involved in arts and culture. She heavily protected her daughter from both racism and homophobia, which led them to live a rather insular life. Alisha’s mother had converted to Japanese Buddhism long before she was born and was a chanting leader in the Buddhist community. There were often meetings at their house, and Alisha was told to participate. Her only exposure to Christianity came from her mother’s family who would take her to church services from time to time, although she never understood anything about it. Alisha was not entirely convinced either by her mother’s spirituality: the fact that she did not believe in an omnipotent Being seemed “small” and incapacitating. In high school, Alisha met three “handsome” guys from the Nation of Islam who invited her to a meeting at a local community center. She was taken aback by what she saw and heard on that occasion, especially the fact that everyone was searched before the meeting and that the speaker described white people as evil creatures from a mad scientist. It gave her a negative perception of Islam. Later on, at the university, Alisha became curious about an African-American woman who was always covered. One day, she followed her on the bus to ask her questions about her religion. The woman explained to her the differences between Nation of Islam and orthodox Sunni Islam and invited her to a local mosque. Alisha also became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man of Palestinian descent around the same period. She was really impressed to see his grandfather regularly pray at home. She took a 101 Islam class at the mosque and eventually decided to recite her *shahada* on her 24th birthday. She wore the *hijab* right away, as was common in her Muslim community at the time. She also put an end to her relationship, went a year abroad to study and started her life as a practicing Muslim. She quit theater (her passion) when she was told it was *haram*, a decision she now regrets. She got married to Boran (see below), a convert of Cambodian descent. They are now a well-known couple in the Muslim community. They have been married for fifteen years and have two children together. Alisha wants them to have a healthy understanding of Islam and wishes they will be able to carve out a space for themselves as American Muslims, without going through the same struggles as she did. She is very involved in various conversations that are currently happening within the American Muslim community concerning anti-Black racism, homophobia and the situation of women in mosques.

Anjali hails from a middle-class South Indian Hindu household, in a Midwestern suburb. Her parents migrated to the United States from Tamil Nadu and are practicing Hindus. Anjali and her siblings grew up going to the temple, attending multiple religious ceremonies and praying at home in their *puja* room. As a child, Anjali knew that her family's spiritual practices were different from her classmates' but thought that being Hindu was simply part of being Indian. She had periods of high religiosity and enjoyed having intellectual debates over religion. Throughout middle school and high school, however, she stopped having inclinations towards religious practice. Yet, when one of her friends called her an "agnostic," she was deeply disturbed by it, since she still very much identified as Hindu. When Anjali entered college, her eldest sister converted to Islam, but they never really had the opportunity to talk about it. For her part, Anjali started dating a Hindu man of Indian descent, took an "Intro to Hinduism" class and reconnected to her Hindu faith. She became increasingly religious, but the more she practiced, the more she noticed inconsistencies in Hindu rituals. It seemed like every Hindu family was doing a different thing. Anjali was also exposed to other faith traditions in her college residence: she interacted with Roman Catholic, Buddhist, atheist and Jewish girls and her next-door neighbor was a Muslim woman wearing *hijab*. Influenced by the conversations they were having in dorms, Anjali started thinking about other religions. She and her boyfriend also started hanging out with her eldest sister's Muslim friends. On special occasions, such as Ramadan, they would often be the only two non-Muslims. When they eventually separated, Anjali continued to entertain close friendships with many young Muslims. Around that time, she became a residence assistant and had to solve resident's problems (drug abuse, eating disorders), which largely exceeded her ability. Helpless, she felt the need to turn to a higher power. She became more and more interested in Islam, was surrounded by Muslim friends and started doing things that were Muslim (fasting in Ramadan, praying). But she was also romantically attracted to a Muslim man and worried that her interest in Islam was simply the result of this crush. For a long time, she tried to dissuade her inclinations towards Islam. When the man eventually spurned her advances, Anjali felt at peace with herself: she realized she still needed Islam, for her own sake and regardless of what people thought. She decided to recite the *shahada* during the Islam Awareness Week organized by the Muslim Students' Association on campus. She contacted Lisa (see below), who was also planning to embrace Islam, and they converted the same day. She was 20. Everybody was surprised when Anjali went on stage to utter the testimony of faith, since they thought she had been Muslim for a long time. Anjali, like her eldest sister, never explicitly told her parents that she converted to Islam. She knows they conflate religious change with ethnic betrayal and is afraid of permanently antagonizing them. Two years into converting, Anjali progressively started wearing the *hijab*, although she removes it in front of her family. She is very active in the local Muslim community, but ironically feels much closer to African-American Muslims than South Asian Muslims. Although she shares much in terms of culture and education level with the latter, she does not feel at ease with their display of wealth, their patronizing comments on converts and their mosques being gender-segregated. She feels more comfortable in African-American Muslim spaces, where converts are welcome and an American understanding of Islam is promoted.

Bob was raised in a white Irish Catholic household in a Midwestern city. His parents are very practicing, well respected in their parish, and involved in various types of volunteering activities. Some of his grand aunts were nuns and his family is somewhat connected to the archdiocese of the city. Bob was raised in the religion and went to a

Catholic high school. People around him thought he would become a priest because he was very spiritual and frequently talked about moral issues. Yet, Bob confesses he never found any logic in the Catholic tradition and was always skeptical about the Trinity, which, as he says, defies basic mathematics. In high school, Bob started exploring other religions. He was unconvinced by Protestantism for being too influenced by men and skeptical about Judaism for promoting the idea of a selected people. Any type of *à la carte* religion, where people pick and choose the values they most like and practice accordingly, would also exasperate him. One day, a Bosnian-American friend of a friend added him on Facebook and Bob realized that Muslims were not necessarily South Asian or Arab, which sparked its interest. He ended up chatting on Islamic online forums and after several months of reading, he started to pray and went to the mosque. He recited his *shahada* in front of the whole congregation and got many hugs and shakes. He was 17 years-old. Bob’s conversion sparked a lot of conflicts with his family and he was expelled from the house on several occasions. Bob does not wear Islam on his sleeve and does not display any visible religious attribute but he is strict and steady in his religious practice. He does not celebrate Christmas with his parents anymore. He respects Muslims who recognize their sins and shortcomings and strive to improve themselves and please God, but he has very little patience with those who compromise with the religion and seek to reform Islam. He often reminds his interlocutors that while Islam is perfect, Muslims are not.

Boran was born in Cambodia. He came to the United States as a refugee with his mother, in the early 80s, when he was still a small child. They were fleeing from the Cambodian genocide, during which his father, his father’s entire side of the family and his older brother were killed, along with 1.5 to 3 million people. He grew up in a Section 8, disadvantaged neighborhood in a large city. His neighbors were immigrants from different parts of the world (Vietnam, China, Laos, Africa, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Dominican Republic). His family was poor and unstable. His mother struggled to make ends meet and his stepfather was a violent man. Boran grew up going to Catholic school, attending mass and going to Catholic summer camps. During his teenage years, he became very involved in hip-hop music and became a DJ for various college parties, even though he was underage. He was also around gangs and drug-related activities, and was once shot in the leg. By age 17, Boran was already tired from that lifestyle and went searching for religion. His interest for hip-hop music and conscious rap artists, such as Wu Tang Clan, Public Enemy, Gang Starr and Paris, drove him to study the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters, and the Moorish Science Temple. He appreciated the work they were doing in poor urban communities. Upon reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, especially the story of his pilgrimage to Mecca, Boran decided to learn more about Sunni Islam, which he did from a local Muslim store-owner, who taught him how to pray. He eventually took *shahada* at a local mosque, at age 18. When he proudly told his mother that he had become a Muslim, she replied “what do you mean? We have always been Muslim.” Completely awe-struck, Boran came to learn that he hailed from a specific ethnic group in Cambodia that was considered Muslim. He found out one of his uncles was named Yusuf, one of his cousins was called Mohammed and that his ancestors were Muslims from Indonesia and Malaysia. His mother had retained some cultural practices tinged with Islamic references, but she thought being Catholic was simply part of living in America (they had come to the United States sponsored by Catholic charities and living in Catholic homes). As Boran became more involved in his religion, his mother started practicing Islam as well. At age 20, he decided he wanted to get married and met his wife

Alisha (see above) through some mutual friends. They met and wed in a month. They have been together for 15 years and have two children. Under her guidance, Boran overcame his learning difficulties, pursued his education and obtained a doctorate and two post-docs. He now works in academia.

Brian hails from an upper-middle class Catholic Italian-American household in a large Midwestern city. He was homeschooled and raised in the Catholic faith, although his parents had a rather unusual approach to religious matters. His father read the Bible every day but never stepped foot in church. He also rejected any esoteric or mystic interpretations of the faith. His mother seldom talked about religion. Brian was never baptized and never did his communion but was taught to understand the scripture. As a result, he developed strong yet ambiguous ties to Catholicism. When he entered high school, Brian did a foreign exchange year in Germany. In gymnasium, he studied German philosophy and the European Enlightenment, but did not find it particularly enticing. He was perplexed when he learned that these authors were supposed to form the bedrock of secular, modern, humanist societies. Brian thought answers had to be found elsewhere and, upon entering college in the United States, he decided to enroll as an Islamic World studies major. The Middle East was a hot spot and he thought he could both escape European dominance and find an attractive job in that field. There, Brian met Muslims for the first time. Having been homeschooled, he was completely ignorant about Islam, in the sense that he did not hold any prejudice against it. He became close friends with Muslim students and was amazed by their critical minds and sharp understanding of the world. He became attracted towards Islam as a theology wrapped up in worldly matters. He saw it as an opportunity to be both religious and productive in this world, in an effort to promote social justice, in line with postcolonial and antiracist thought. Brian progressively embraced Islam, although he saw his spiritual transformation as an extension more than a conversion, and as a commitment to doing things in this world more than a commitment to God. He understood Islamic commandments (praying, staying away from alcohol) as practical tools, rather than rituals. He did not ascribe much significance to the recitation of the *shahada*, which he refused to fetishize and performed very quickly in front of two Muslim friends. Brian does not separate his spiritual practices from his academic and intellectual life. For him, praying and doing philosophy are two sides of the same commitment. Brian was introduced to the thought of the Nation of Islam through his African-American Islamic studies teacher. He likes their uncompromising, militarized stance. By contrast, he finds attempts to develop a multiculturalist American Islam apologetic and unproductive to solve issues of racism and Islamophobia in America. A white Muslim, Brian likes to convey an image of himself as mad or crazy, to upset both Muslims' and non-Muslims' set of preconceived ideas. Building on Nietzsche and Deleuze, he seeks to develop heretical and heterodox understandings of his ethnic and religious identity in order to rearrange mainstream universes of discourse about Islam.

David hails from a loosely practicing white middle class Protestant household in a Midwestern suburb. His family are one of the few Democrats in a Republican stronghold, and his parents passed on progressive, anti-war and anti-chauvinistic ideas to him and his two brothers. David was born with a tumor in his spine and started having difficulties to walk from age 7. His disability made him resentful, rebellious and firmly atheistic as a child, but he progressively developed an aspiration to spirituality and a longing for a greater power as he grew older. When David was a kid, he was fascinated by Indiana

Jones and developed a strong interest for history and archeology. He often watched documentaries about Egyptian pyramids and was always intrigued to see Muslims pray in the background. He figured they were worshipping the sun. His two older brothers became vegetarians and introduced him to dietarian laws, which they said were present in different religions. Both of them married South East Asian women and David's family became multiracial, which opened up new cultural perspectives for him. As a teenager, David and his friends were very much into skateboarding and listened to a lot of hip-hop artists, some of whom were openly Muslim. Their lyrics gave him a first, superficial introduction to Islam. David became particularly intrigued by religion when people started mistaking him for a Jew because of his last name (Finkelstein). He started inquiring into the matter from his Polish grandmother who told him they were somewhat related to Russian Jews. David always refused to identify as Jewish because he never practiced the religion, but when asked, he would say that his family were *conversos* (Jews who had forcibly convert to Christianity and lost their customs and traditions along the way). His genealogical search introduced him to the possibility of religious conversion. 9/11 happened when David was 19. He was then drunk, stone and disabled. Averse to the overtly patriotic and belligerent inclinations of the American government, he did not buy into the stigmatization of Muslims that was unleashed in mainstream media. Around that time, he sublet an apartment from a Pakistani-American man. They would often drive together and David seized the opportunity to ask questions about Islam. He was surprised to realize that Islam emphasized continuity with Christianity and Judaism. He had always thought that Islam was some ancient Egyptian religion that predated them. David felt strongly attracted towards it, but also knew the timing was bad. He did not want to be an annoyance for the Muslim community and to seem awkward with his questions. He started loosely reading on his own. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq and David resumed his spiritual quest with more determination. He embraced Islam a year later, alone, at age 22, and studied extensively on his own during three years. Then, he decided to join a local Muslim community, which was predominantly South Asian. He recited the *shahada* once again with them. David became very active in the mosque, cleaning up the space and setting up rugs before every Friday prayer. Yet, over the years, he became increasingly estranged from local Muslims who kept pressuring him to wear a *kufi* and a *thawb*, to change his name and to adopt South Asian cultural ways. David despised Muslims who are full of pride and outwardly display their religion without having done any inner spiritual work. He felt alienated and left the community. He continued to practice the faith alone for a couple of years, until he joined a convert association in a nearby city. He now feels he has a community that encourages him to be Muslim while staying true to himself.

Deana was raised in a lower middle class single-parent African-American household in a Midwestern inner city. She has two older sisters. Her family is Baptist Christian and Deana was raised going to church. She sang in the choir, went to Bible study and was involved in many youth activities, although she found that people there were hypocritical and materialistic. When she was in 5th grade, her mother started dating a Muslim man, found truth in Islam and decided to become Muslim. This happened while Deana was at the height of her involvement in the Baptist church and it created some tensions between them. Deana had some harsh words about her mother looking ridiculous with her headscarf and being bound for hell. The family rapidly moved with her mother's partner in a more well off suburban neighborhood. Deana liked it there and started accompanying her mother to her “Being Muslim” class on Sundays. She enjoyed going to the mosque, which was very clean and where congregants had good manners. Sometimes, she would

join her mother and her partner in prayer. She thought it was a fun activity to do. The couple eventually separated and Deana's family moved to a rougher neighborhood. Her mother kept telling her three daughters about Islam, and one evening she asked them if they would be interested in becoming Muslim. Deana's middle sister refused but she and her older sister half-heartedly acquiesced. That night Deana had a dream that felt like Judgment Day. The world was in chaos; there was turmoil and fire everywhere. But Deana was in a car with her mother and two sisters and they were all safe, traveling on the right path. When she woke up, she decided to recite her *shahada*. She was 14 years-old. She started praying, although not necessarily regularly. She attended the mosque and went to a women's *halaqa* every Friday night, which enabled her to stay away from the various temptations of teenage years. With the support of Muslim women, Deana decided to put on the *hijab* during her first year of high school. At first, she was bullied for wearing it, but eventually earned some respect after relatives who were in the same school came to her rescue. Deana was outgoing and became popular among her peers. She played in the volleyball team. During her last year of high school, she decided to put on the face cover. Many of her friends were shocked and turned their back on her. She decided she did not care what people thought and kept it on. She went to university in a very small town, where she was the only Muslim, an opportunity to leave her comfort zone and interact with people who were completely ignorant about Islam. Deana takes pride in showing to the world that you can be a Muslim woman wearing the face veil and still be nice and outspoken, graduate and find a good job. She is still struggling to perform five prayers a day but is very firm on three other Islamic commandments: wearing the face veil, not lying and staying away from *riba* (interest). She found ways to complete all her education without taking student loans with interest. Deana recently got engaged to an African-American Muslim man she met online. They will get married soon.

Deepa grew up in a South Indian Catholic family in a Midwestern city. Her parents are devout Catholics and the figure of Jesus was pervasive in their household. Deepa always knew religion was important in life, but the various questions she had about Catholicism (notably the rationale behind praying towards pictures and statues) remained unanswered. In college, Deepa became roommates with two Pentecostal women who invited her to church services. Deepa was really impressed by their amount of devotion, their intellectual and personal connection to the scripture and their level of commitment to the faith. She converted to Pentecostalism at age 20 and went through a series of drastic changes (in dress and behavior), much to her parents' despair. However, Deepa rapidly found inconsistencies regarding the status of Jesus in the Pentecostal tradition and felt more and more uncomfortable with the parochialism of some of her coreligionists. She left the Pentecostal church and went for a while to a non-denominational church before turning back again to Catholicism. She became very active in the Catholic church. She then fell in love and married a Pakistani-American Muslim man. The wedding ceremony was rooted in both the Catholic and Muslim traditions. Her husband never interfered with her belief and, although he stood firm in his own religion, always supported her in her Catholic practices, accompanying her to mass and putting up Christmas decorations for her. Upon taking theology classes at her university, Deepa realized that many Christian beliefs (notably the Trinity) had been historically constructed and were more the result of human speculations than Revelation. She had a crisis of faith. Several years into being married, Deepa and her husband went to visit his family in Pakistan. Deepa was really impressed by how her Muslim in-laws treated her as a Christian woman, respecting her beliefs and striving to find a church where she could go. This sharply contrasted with her

own parents who relentlessly tried to impose Catholicism on her husband. One night in Pakistan, Deepa woke up to the sound of the *adhan*. Without knowing why, she was deeply affected by it and started sobbing and weeping. She felt she was being called by God. Back to the USA, she started researching Islam and went to different people (the Muslim man who led her wedding ceremony, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a convert support group). Her husband never said anything to her. After two years of doubts and hesitations (especially regarding the status of women in Islam), Deepa finally took her *shahada*, at age 37. She has not told her parents yet. She does not wear the *hijab* and explains she is more concerned with inner spiritual development than outward appearance. She does not want to repeat the mistakes of her first conversion to Pentecostalism, which was too brutal and sudden.

Denyse hails from a large African-American middle-class family, with a strong history of racial mixing. Her Black grand-father had been lynched for having sexual relationships with a French woman, who subsequently gave birth to Denyse’s father. As of Denyse’s mother, she was born from the union of an African-American woman and an Indian man. The family liked to describe itself as “international.” They moved around a lot, since Denyse’s father was in the army. Denyse was raised Baptist Christian. Her family attended church regularly, but was not particularly practicing. As a young adult, Denyse started living a “wild life,” drinking and smoking a lot and messing around with men. But she remained single, and felt unhappy and miserable. She stayed locked up in her apartment most of the time. She used to pray to Jesus on a regular basis, and always wondered why her prayers remained unanswered. Denyse struggled with serious weight issues. Her health started deteriorating when she reached over 400 pounds. She also smoked constantly, to the point that the walls in her apartment were covered in smoke, and developed severe breathing problems. Doctors warned her that she had to reclaim control over her life, or she would die. Around that time, Denyse developed friendships with several Pakistani-American cab drivers who used to give her rides to work. She thought there was a specific calmness about them and wondered what was their secret. She was completely ignorant about Islam and asked many questions when she saw them fasting during the month of Ramadan. She found the idea enticing and decided to try fasting with them, although she failed as far as smoking was concerned. Denyse started researching Islam and kept a notebook that she filled with useful information. When she expressed the desire to perform the Islamic prayer, her friends told her it was impossible since she was not Muslim. One morning, lying in her bed, Denyse decided to talk directly to Allah. As she uttered the words “Allah I love you,” she felt a hole in her heart filling up. She cried without a break during three hours. She decided she wanted Islam in her life. A month later, Denyse took a bath, bought a *hijab* and recited her *shahada* at a mosque. She was 57. She started going out and interacting with other Muslims. Prayer was a challenge, since she was not in shape to prostrate on the floor, but she performed it on a chair. She became self-disciplined and lost 120 pounds. A month after her conversion, following a serious asthma attack, she abruptly quit smoking. Going through withdrawal was painful, but she held on. Her entourage was amazed to see the extent of her self-transformation. People keep telling her that she is glowing now. Denyse has experienced discrimination at work for wearing the *hijab* but remains determined to keep it on. She is happy with who she is now and seeks God’s support to help her face such challenges.

Edward grew up in an upper-middle class WASP family, in an all-white privileged Midwestern suburb, which he characterizes as a “white suburban bubble.” His parents were Presbyterian. God was not particularly present in their household: apart from going to church on holidays and reciting grace on Sunday dinners, religion was not talked about. Edward always had a scientifically-oriented mindset. In middle-school, he felt he had to choose between science and religion, and since many things did not add up in Christianity, he decided to become an atheist. When he was 13, Edward became acquainted with his next-door neighbor, Brian. Edward and Brian were the same age and both played tennis. But while Edward was serious in school and reasonable in life, Brian acted like a crazy teenager, listening to rap music, drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana and messing around in school. He was always in trouble. At some point, Brian’s tennis coach, an African-American Muslim man who had embraced Islam around the same time as Malcolm X, introduced him to Islam. Brian progressively incorporated Islamic practices into his life and became much more disciplined and steady in school. Edward was very impressed by his transformation and they became best friends. Around that same period, Edward read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in school and was really moved by it: not only did he discover the extent of racism in the United States, but he also learned that Malcolm X considered Islam to be a cure for racism. Edward had a problem, however: he did not believe in God. A young scientist, he decided to test the reality of God’s existence: he stopped drinking alcohol and eating pork and waited for a sign. But nothing happened, and he remained skeptical. When his English teacher asked him to write a response letter to an essay, Edward asked Brian to give him Islamic pamphlets and tried to disprove Islamic claims about the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad, but was unable to do so. He started reading about scientific miracles in the Qur’an and realized that science and religion did not have to be in conflict: they were actually in synergy within Islam. As Edward slowly came to the conclusion that Islam was the truth, he also started to read about death and the hereafter. He realized that death was the only thing he was guaranteed in life but that he had not spent one minute preparing for it. He felt a sudden urge to take his *shahada* and went to see Brian, who took him to the mosque straight away. It was in June 2001 and he was 17 years-old. The two boys started practicing Islam together but were very isolated. Their first Islamic teacher was from Saudi Arabia and taught them a Salafi understanding of Islam. They both grew beards and wore the *kufi*. Edward loved Islam and wanted everyone to become Muslim. Then, 9/11 happened. Edward felt completely confused and lost. His parents feared that he or Brian might become the next John Walker Lindh. Things eased when they went to the university and progressively became part of a more cohesive Muslim community. Edward is now a strong pillar of the Muslim community in his city and promotes an American understanding of Islam. After several unfruitful attempts to get married, he eventually married an Arab-American woman. They have one child together.

Elizabeth comes from a middle class white Irish family in a Midwestern suburb. Her parents divorced when she was three. Neither of them is particularly religious. Elizabeth was initially baptized as Lutheran, but started seeking religion from a very young age. She always felt a personal connection to God. She often accompanied her aunt to the Catholic church and decided to convert to Catholicism at 10 years-old. As she grew older, she developed internal doubts about the concept of original sin and the crucifixion of Jesus but never voiced her questions. She was very spiritual but did not consider herself religious. Elizabeth grew up in a sheltered, all-white environment and did not know anything about Islam, until her mid-twenties, where she met a Muslim man at work. They

dated for a while. He was not practicing but they would often debate over religion. He offered her a book called *The beauty of Islam*, which hit her. It fits everything she had internally been believing since she was a child. Elizabeth felt she was meant to be Muslim (she had stopped eating pork on her own at 12). But she had always emphasized spirituality over religion and did not feel like converting. Their relationship ended and Elizabeth became romantically involved with a man of Indian descent, who was Hindu. They got engaged and planned on getting married. But Elizabeth did some soul-searching and realized that Islam might become an important element in her life, in a far or near future. She feared religion could become an obstacle to their marriage and they separated. As an Irish Catholic girl who was dating a Hindu Indian man but was interested in Islam, Elizabeth felt confused. She did not know which path her life would take. She kept pondering about Islam for a while, until one of her close friends died from a heart attack. Elizabeth was going through some difficult times and found comfort in Islam. She had been studying the religion for five years at that point and realized it was time for her to actually convert. She recited the *shahada*, on her own, outside, during a gorgeous day of March. She was 29. Elizabeth’s understanding of the religion is constantly evolving, and she still needs to figure out how conservative she will be, especially as far as dressing, drinking wine and dating are concerned. She does not wear the *hijab* since she fears it might antagonize her patients at the hospital, but she enjoys performing the Islamic prayer whenever and wherever she can.

Fazil grew up in a large Midwestern city. His parents divorced when he was a small child. His mother is a Christian woman of Puerto Rican descent and his father is a non-practicing Bosnian-American Muslim. Fazil was mostly raised by his mother, who had custody. She was involved in the Evangelical movement and would often take him to spiritual retreats, conferences, healing sessions and Bible studies. Fazil would always accompany her, even though he was not particularly interested. As a teenager, Fazil was into music, movies, videogames and parties. Religion fell in the backdrop of his life. When he was 18, his father’s side of the family, who were non-practicing Muslims (he calls them “name-tag” Muslims), started telling him about Islam. Fazil was torn between his father’s and his mother’s religion and decided to define himself as “agnostic,” since he had always believed in God but did not want to worry about religious technicalities. He kept on partying and became a regular in several night clubs. When he turned 23, one of his Muslim family members started *The Deen Show*, a Muslim talk show providing information about Islam, which became very popular for interviewing Muslim celebrities and converts. Fazil started watching the videos and developed a more sustained interest for religion. He decided to research Christianity and Islam in order to disprove them both. But his research further pushed him away from Christianity and pulled him closer to Islam, which he was not able to challenge or contradict. Fazil was disconcerted by the various versions of the Bible and won over by the unchanged character of the Qur’an. To him, Islam was logical and rational. He procrastinated for a while, as he wanted to accumulate as much knowledge as possible, and eventually decided to recite his *shahada* in front of a family member, at age 25. Fazil’s conversion was a shock to his mother, who had retained a bad image of Islam after her rocky relationship with his father and was regularly attending Evangelical sermons that sought to prove Islam wrong. Ironically, Fazil’s Bosnian-American family was also disconcerted when he started practicing Islam more seriously than they did. He began to call them out for following cultural superstitions that were against “true” Islam. Fazil surrounds himself mostly with

practicing young Muslims and feels completely integrated in the Muslim community. He is now looking for a Muslim spouse to start a family.

Fred was raised by his mother, a lower middle-class white Catholic woman, in the Midwest. His father was Native American and African-American but was never in the picture. Fred and his mother would go to church from time to time, but religion was never really engrained into him. Throughout his childhood, Fred was fascinated by nature and regularly watched documentaries on National Geographic. He was always amazed by the beauty of the Creation and felt it had to be the result of some intelligent design. When he was a teenager, Fred met a white American convert to Islam at a barbecue and they talked about the existence of a higher power. This conversation opened his heart. The man happened to move closer to his house shortly after and they became close friends. Fred started to read about Islam and was very much impressed by the detailed scientific descriptions he found in the Qur'an. He knew that the Bible had been edited by men on multiple occasions, and was struck when his friend told him that the Qur'an had remained unchanged since the time of Revelation. For the sake of fairness, Fred started researching other religions (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism) but was always able to find something wrong in their belief system. Islam was the only religion he could not disprove. One day, Fred was in his room, talking to his convert friend. He told him he could not find any reason why Islam was not the truth. His friend looked at him and said “well, if you believe Islam is the truth, then you are Muslim.” Fred was hit by this comment and recited his *shahada* right away. He was 19 years-old. It took some time for Fred to fully practice the religion. He progressively grew apart from his friends who were partying and drinking and went through very lonely periods of time. His mother also embraced Islam shortly after him. As a young adult, Fred took a trip to Saudi Arabia to perform his *umrah* with some friends. One of his friends decided to apply to an Islamic university in Medina and Fred followed his lead. He was accepted and has been living in Saudi Arabia since then, studying Islamic sciences. Fred left his job in the United States to dedicate his time to learning the religion. He is married to a Muslim woman and plans on coming back to America soon. He practices what he calls a “fundamental” or “traditional” version of Islam.

Harold hails from a white upper middle class Protestant household in the Midwest. He grew up in a white suburb and went to the United Christ of Church, which he describes as very liberal and open-minded (they are not particularly attached to any specific creed and welcome LGBTQ people). Harold was baptized and did his communion and confirmation. In his confirmation papers, he drew analogies between Christian theology and the concept of the force in Star Wars. Harold was not traditionally religious and his life was never impacted in significant ways by religion. Upon entering the university, Harold decided to be more serious with it and joined a Bible study group at the Campus Crusade for Christ. Out of pure curiosity, he also enrolled in an Arabic class. There, he met Muslims for the first time and learned that Islam considered Jesus as a prophet rather than God incarnate, which caught his interest. He had never really believed in the Trinitarian doctrine. Harold started defining himself as Unitarian Christian and delved into the history of religions. He found Judaism and Islam to be more logically and historically consistent than Christianity. He ordered a Qur'an and read about Islam for several months. He decided Islam was what he truly believed in and recited the *shahada* to himself, at age 18. After a few months, he gathered his courage and stepped foot in a mosque. He had misconceptions about Muslims and was actually afraid to do so (he now

laughs about it). He went there with some acquaintances from his Arabic class who taught him how to pray. He was soon introduced to a Muslim woman of Indian descent. They had planned on getting married but after several months, her parents refused, pleading fears of cultural incompatibility. Harold was very upset. After a while, however, he reconvened with an acquaintance from his Arabic class, who had been very supportive at the beginning of his conversion. He wrote her a letter and they got married a few months later. They have been together for two years. For a while, Harold practiced Islam “like a Protestant:” he followed the Qur’ani doctrine, which focuses on the Qur’an only, and puts rituals and practices aside. A couple of years after his conversion, however, he decided to follow the Hanafi school and became more orthodox. He enjoys the logic behind the Hanafi methodology of interpretation. Harold works for a non-profit and is very active in the Muslim community. He hosts a Muslim radio show and is planning on writing an Islamic social justice activism anthem. He is critical of Salafism and Wahhabism, which he dismisses as attempts to “Protestantize,” demystify and rationalize Islam.

Hasan is a white American man who was born as Alexander and grew up in what he calls the “Bible belt,” in a lower-class Catholic family. From age 12, Alexander was heavily involved in skateboarding and in the underground music scene (hip-hop, punk, rock, rave, techno). He soon started using and selling drugs. He also became alcoholic to the point of being hospitalized for it. After ending up in jail because of his various criminal activities, he started reflecting on his life and decided to research religions. After his release, he reconvened with an old friend of his, who used to be a rapper and a reckless drug dealer. He hadn’t seen in a very long time and was stuck when he learned that he had actually embraced Islam. He was now living a healthy life and had a “better aura” about him. He started telling Alexander about Islam and recommended a few books to him. From listening to hip-hop lyrics and Five Percenters’ rhetoric, Alexander thought Islam was only for Black people and did not see how he could be part of it. In face of his skepticism, his friend explained that “true” Islam was universal. They started meeting on a regular basis at a Muslim Deli. Alexander was eventually convinced and took his *shahada* at age 17 at a local mosque. He chose the Muslim name Hasan for himself. It took him some time after his conversion to finally stop drinking but he eventually managed to do it. He rapidly got involved into the Salafi movement who was then very prominent on the East Coast (in New Jersey). The community he belonged to was mostly Black, but they understood each other for sharing the same American street culture. Hasan never felt out of place. He followed a rather strict understanding of Islam and became extremely self-disciplined. He gave up music overnight. He has since then mellowed a lot, although he retains a conservative approach to his religion. He denounces liberal Muslims and upper middle-class, highly educated converts for sugarcoating Islam and being too sensitive. Hasan feels he has been discriminated against in various job settings for being Muslim. Disappointed in the United States (where, as he says, religious freedom is for everybody except Islam), he decided to move to Canada. He is married to a Somali-American woman. He has one kid with her and one step-child.

James grew up in an upper middle class white Catholic family in the Midwest. He was raised reasonably practicing and was a serving boy at mass. James entered high school in the 1980s, at the time when New Age spirituality was flourishing. He read books by Richard Bach, which opened up new religious perspectives for him. Over time, James became increasingly estranged from Catholicism: he was struggling with the alleged divinity of Jesus and felt uncomfortable with the emphasis on sacraments and priests to

the detriment of practicing and embodying Jesus' teachings on a daily basis. Living in this world, studying and looking for a job, he also found it increasingly difficult to implement Jesus' message of renunciation. Soon, James stopped considering himself a Catholic, although he did go to a Catholic university after graduating high school. While in college, James pursued his spiritual quest and started exploring Wicca, Taoism and Buddhism. His roommates were spiritual Catholics. One summer, they met a Sufi man at a Franciscan *ashram* and came back home performing Sufi chants. James happily took part in that practice with them. He progressively invented his own spiritual practices, merging elements from various traditions. It worked for a while, and James felt engaged and productive. But at some point, he stopped making progress and became increasingly frustrated with his spiritual stagnation. After reading the work of Joseph Campbell on the importance of childhood religious symbols, James resumed his readings about Catholicism but remained unsatisfied. Around that time, he became close friends with a couple: she was a smart and outspoken practicing Muslim woman and he was a Christian. In order to convince her parents to let her marry him, James' friend started learning about Islam and got really into it. James was won over by his enthusiasm and began reading about it as well. He was immediately convinced. He found the same Semitic tradition, the same prophets, the same perspective on history as in Christianity but with an additional attention paid to day-to-day, mundane life. Practice was central to the faith and nitty-gritty things were part of a sacred understanding of the world. James felt that all the strings of spirituality he had been exploring coalesced into Islam. He was also won over by the kindness of the Muslim students around him, who always encouraged him to take it slowly and never pushed conversion on him. Their attitude contrasted sharply with the Mormon missionaries who used to visit him on campus and would relentlessly pressure him into converting. James decided to formalize his inner spiritual transformation and recited his *shahada* at a local mosque, at age 23. Within a few months, he put a matrimonial ad in an Islamic magazine and got married to a Muslim woman of Indian descent. They have one child together. They lived in Canada and Saudi Arabia before moving back to the United States. In Saudi Arabia, James felt that his faith was put to a test due to the overemphasis on outward rigid practice, to the detriment of spiritual depth. Upon coming back to the United States, he and his wife drew closer to the Sufi tradition. They are both involved in interfaith work and in the creation of an American Islam, i.e. an Islam that would be authentic to traditional sources and comfortably American, especially as far as cultural and artistic expressions are concerned.

Jenna hails from a white middle class Catholic household in the Midwest. She was raised in the Catholic tradition and was practicing the faith throughout her childhood, teenage and young adult years. She worked as a tax attorney and was successful in her field. When she was in her thirties, Jenna traveled to France and met a Muslim man of Algerian descent. They became romantically involved and would often talk about religion. Jenna did not fully understand what he believed in, and decided to learn more about Islam when she came back to the US. She read a large number of books, mostly by Christian authors, and realized it was not very different from Christianity. She took another trip to France, had another round of discussions with her partner and had to recognize she was unable to provide satisfactory answers to his questions about the Trinity. Jenna went back home, did some more research and eventually decided to embrace Islam, at age 36. She recited the *shahada* at a local mosque, in front of a few persons. For Jenna, embracing Islam was not a huge leap. She emphasized the continuity with Christianity and did not see her conversion as a significant departure from her previous lifestyle. It was a big deal to

everybody else, however. Her mother was in shock, her brother stopped talking to her and her best friends avoided the topic. Her conversion also antagonized her partners in the law firm and she eventually had to leave. Jenna is a practicing Muslim but considers her religion to be a private matter. She does not wear the *hijab* and does not display her religious belonging. She feels rather isolated, both rejected by Christians and not fully integrated in the Muslim community. She does not have a lot of born Muslim friends and prefers to be around converts. She wanted to marry her boyfriend but his mother staunchly refused, on the ground that Jenna was not Algerian. Jenna is still single, but remains strongly attached to Islam.

Jessica's childhood in the Midwest was erratic and painful. She never knew her biological father. She and her brother were first raised by their mother, a white and Native American woman from the Choctaw tribe. But she indulged in heavy drinking and drug abuse. At 8 years-old, Jessica was put into the Foster care system and became a ward of the state. She was separated from her brother and shunted around from one house to another, staying most of the time with extended family members. Her mother eventually died from an overdose. Jessica was never given a thorough religious education, although she went to a Catholic high school on scholarship. As a teenager, she went on her own to a reservation in order to develop a connection to her Choctaw lineage. She started taking part in Native American religious rituals, such as peyote ceremonies. She describes her spirituality at that time as very ritualistic. In high school, Jessica had Catholic, Jewish and Muslim classmates and enjoyed being with them. She later joined a theater ensemble, in which two of the comedians were Muslim women. As they would travel together to perform, Jessica was always intrigued to see them pray. She felt strongly attracted to it. At some point, Jessica was placed in her cousins' family. They happened to belong to a Sufi order and would often take her to various Muslim community events, including an Islamic arts and culture café. Jessica grew closer to the religion when she interned for an Arab American organization and worked on a project on Muslim women. She became friends with many young Muslims who were involved in social activism and community service. One night, at the arts and culture café, a Muslim Native American band called Three Generationz did a performance. Jessica was completely mesmerized. She did not know one could be Native American and Muslim. She decided to recite her *shahada* on the spot, in front of the entire audience. She was 22. Even though she still struggles to incorporate Islamic practices into her life (prayer and Ramadan are particularly challenging) and often feels uncomfortable in mosques, Jessica finds that Islam has given structure and meaning to her life and helped her overcome her suffering. She feels she has reclaimed control over her own existence and is much more optimistic than she used to be. She is very active in various anti-war, anti-racist, Muslim and indigenous movements. Her conversion, however, has antagonized her brother who strongly identifies with Christianity, does not like Islam, and served two tours in Afghanistan as a US military member.

Jonathan was raised in a lower class white family in a large Midwestern city and grew up in a very diverse neighborhood. As a child, he was one of the few white pupils in his class. His parents were non-practicing Christians and Jonathan never felt particularly attached to Christianity. When he was a teenager, his grandmother passed away and his parents moved to her house, which was located in an all WASP suburb. Jonathan had a cultural shock and felt completely alienated from his new high school: he dressed differently and talked differently from the other students. He stood out and his grades were lagging behind. When he eventually made the resolution to work harder in school,

the curriculum was then focusing on world history and geography. Jonathan learned about the Middle East and developed an interest for Islam. The war in Bosnia, the war in Chechnya, the drought in Somalia all happened in that same period and Muslims were all over the news. The Malcolm X movie also came out, and Jonathan was listening to various hip-hop artists who mentioned their connection to Islam in their lyrics. At 14 years-old, completely isolated at school, Jonathan read the autobiography of Malcolm X, an English translation of the Qur'an and decided to become Muslim. He did not know how to do that, however. When the only *hijabi* of his high school gave a presentation about Islam, Jonathan asked her about the procedure to become Muslim. She went back home and brought him back a ten-page essay on the topic the following day, a gesture that really moved him. Jonathan recited his *shahada* over the phone with a local imam. He was 15 years-old. At that time, he had tense relationships with his father and his conversion made things worse, to the point that he had to be removed from the house. He went to live with his grandparents, in a more diverse suburb. There, he tried to become part of the Muslim community and learnt how to practice Islam, but he was still a teenager and could not relate to the older Muslims who attended the mosque. Jonathan drifted away from Islam and started engaging in gangs and drug-related activities. He got into trouble with the law and had to go to jail. In his jail cell, he decided to take over the reins of his life and started practicing Islam again, at age 20. Overnight, he left behind his former lifestyle and blended in the local Arab Muslim community. As the only Caucasian Muslim, he still felt isolated and lonely, but over the years, he carved out a space from himself and gained respect. He married Monica (see below), a Latina woman who had embraced Islam a year before meeting him. They live together with Monica's daughter and practice a conservative orthodox version of Sunni Islam that could qualify as Salafi.

Julia grew up in a white middle-class conservative Lutheran household in a rural area of the Midwest. She received a strong religious education. She went to Sunday school every week and was confirmed. She attended a Catholic middle-school, then a public high school before entering a Jesuit college. There, Julia got very involved in interfaith work. Her roommate was a Hindu woman of Indian descent and Julia developed friendships with South Asian Americans from different faith traditions (Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Muslim). She was a member of the Indian Student Association and became very educated in South Asian culture, to the point that people would often jokingly introduce her as an Indian girl. Throughout her interactions with friends, Julia strived to maintain her Christian identity and still very much identified as a "hard-core Christian." Yet, she started to question the belief that her friends would go to hell for being outside the Christian fold. At some point, Julia started spending more time with her Muslim friends and began to read about Islam, although she remained unconvinced. She then took an Intro to Islam class that was taught by a Jesuit professor and was amazed by the similarities between Islamic and Christian beliefs. She wondered how a different religion could profess the same beliefs as hers. She decided to enquire into the two main points of contention between Christianity and Islam: the status of Jesus and the credibility of the Prophet Muhammad. The outcome of her research would determine whether she was Christian or Muslim, and Julia was particularly anxious about it. She decided to put it aside and focus on her studies, but started questioning everything her pastor said in church and lost her enthusiasm for Christmas festivities. She went through a painful period of doubt and anxiety, during which she felt God had abandoned her, what Mother Teresa calls "the dark night of the soul." Julia stopped identifying as a Christian and asked God for a sign. When one of her close Muslim friends' father passed away, Julia sought

information on Islamic mourning rituals and resumed reading about the religion. She was particularly moved by a book written by Karen Armstrong on the life of the Prophet. One day, as she was driving with her mother and grandmother, she noticed the license plate of a car in front of them. It said “Ikhlas.” Julia knew the word but could not place it. When she was eventually able to Google it, she realized it was the name of the 112th *surah* of the Qur’an, which summarizes the basic foundations of Islamic creed. Julia had received the sign she was longing for. A few days later, she reconvened with a good Muslim friend to ask her more detailed questions. At the end of their conversation, her friend told Julia that she was already answering questions on her own. Julia posed for a moment and decided to recite her *shahada* with her friend, in her room. They were crying and laughing at the same time. Julia was 22. Right after that, she incorporated prayer into her life. Julia does not wear the *hijab* and did not tell her parents about her conversion because she is afraid of breaking her mother’s heart. When she converted, Julia was romantically involved with a Muslim man of Indian descent. But he is Shi’a and she leans towards Sunnism. She worries it might cause some problems in the future.

Joseph was born in Albania, in a Greek Orthodox household. As a child, he went to church during religious holidays. He enjoyed the passing of the smoke and listening to sermons in Greek. When Joseph was 7, his parents migrated to the United States and settled in a Midwestern suburb. He attended Sunday school and kept learning about Christianity. As time went by, however, his parents progressively stopped going to church and religion was pushed into the background. Growing up, Joseph kept the belief that there was a God and tried to live a modest and honest life, but felt increasingly disconnected from Christianity and religion in general. One day, Joseph came across a documentary about Islam on TV. He did not have any Muslim friends and did not know much about this religion. In fact, he had negative feelings towards it because of 9/11 and because of the stories he had heard from his mother about Islamist terrorist groups in Albania. Joseph thought of Islam as deeply foreign: to him, Christians believed in God and Jesus while Muslims believed in Allah and Muhammad. Upon watching the documentary, Joseph was struck to learn that Islam recognized the same God and prophets as Christianity. He started searching for information online. A learning frenzy took hold of him as he was redirected from one Youtube Islamic lecture to another. Joseph started ordering books about Islam. He tried actively to disprove it but could not find any mistake. As a result of studying, his faith grew and he felt he was becoming Muslim. He considers that he did not choose Islam but that Islam chose him. Joseph learned how to pray through online tutorials and eventually gathered his courage to step foot in a mosque. For a while, he went to an all-Pakistani *masjid*, where he was the only white person. No one talked to him and he felt very isolated. For *Id-al-Adha*, Joseph eventually got in touch through an online forum with a convert support group in a nearby large city. He recited his *shahada* in front of them, although he felt he had already been Muslim for a long time. Joseph had been learning about Islam, dealing with his family and trying to give *da’wah* to his friends on his own. He had felt a lot of pressure on his shoulders. He was relieved to find a group of converts who could relate to his experience. He has become more humbled and relaxed in his practice since then.

Kathleen hails from an African-American middle class family in the Midwest. Her parents were Episcopalian Methodist Black Christians and raised her and her brother quite traditionally. Her grandfather was also a reverend. When Kathleen was 9, her parents got divorced. Her father married the woman he had long been in love with and her mother

became romantically involved with her best female friend. They became a Lesbian couple and Kathleen was raised in that environment. When her mother decided to become a Unitarian, Kathleen followed her. Their new denomination did not involve any serious religious practice and mostly focused on love and basic moral principles, but Kathleen was firm in it. Kathleen's mother was overbearing and did not allow her to do much. As a result, Kathleen developed strong friendships with children who came from very religious families and had controlling parents as well. When Kathleen was eventually able to leave her house to go to college, she experienced freedom for the first time, partied a lot and botched her studies. She also met her first boyfriend, at 19 years-old. He was a Muslim man of Bangladeshi descent. They were very much in love but he never asked her to convert to Islam. They were planning on getting married, but his parents took a trip to Bangladesh and forcibly married him to a local woman from their village. Kathleen was shocked and heart-broken. She tried to focus on her studies a little more. When 9/11 happened, Kathleen was confused and scared. She decided to ask her Muslim university friends why Muslims hated Americans. They reassured her and spelled out for her the differences between Islam and terrorism. Kathleen was won over and decided to devote her life to dispelling stereotypes about Muslims and promoting tolerance. She joined the Muslim Students Association, the Indian Students Association and the Student Congress and started having a vigorous student life. One day, during the month of Ramadan, Kathleen felt overwhelmed and discouraged: she told her friend, a young woman who had embraced Islam a year before, that fighting against Islamophobia was a difficult task. She feared she would never be able to convince fellow Americans that Islam was good. Her friend looked at her, puzzled. She said: "well, Kathleen, wouldn't it be more productive to be what Islam is, rather than preaching what it isn't all the time?" Kathleen was hit by her comment and decided to embrace Islam at the end of Ramadan. She was 22. She was very happy at first but her interactions with the Muslim community put a damper on her enthusiasm. Kathleen could not stand the strict gender segregation rules implemented by MSA students; she felt that Muslim men of South Asian descent did not take her seriously; she felt pressured to dress like a South Asian woman; and she was called a *kalu* (derogatory word for Black people in Urdu) by one of her Pakistani-American friends' mother. She lost a lot of self-esteem and eventually decided to leave Islam. She joined a new group of friends, who behaved like a gang, and started drinking, partying and messing around with men. She patronized bars or clubs four to five times a week. One night, Kathleen was wearing a very short dress and some of the men she used to hang out with got drunk and started a fight. Her best friend, a petite woman, was caught in the middle of the brawl. Kathleen wanted to protect her, but was unable to do so because her dress was falling apart and her underwear was showing. Kathleen posed for a moment and meditated on the absurdity of her situation. The day after, she abruptly left her group of friends, moved to a new apartment and decided to gain her Islam back. She started anew and became part of a new Muslim community, which strives to promote an American understanding of Islam. A couple of years later, Kathleen had to put on the *hijab* to attend a spiritual retreat. She had always been reluctant to wear it, because she saw it as the preserve of meek, shy and unimaginative women. During her stay however, she met a number of strong outspoken Muslim women with the headscarf, which changed her perspective. She also had a moving spiritual experience while wearing it and decided to keep it on after the retreat to remind herself how close to God she was on that day. Kathleen met a Muslim man through her imam and they got married religiously. It did not work, though, and they got divorced after ten months. She worries about the marriage

crisis in the Muslim community and envisions the emergence of communities of unmarried Muslim women who could support one another on a daily basis.

Khabir grew up as Dwayne in a lower class African-American household in a Midwestern inner city. His father hailed from a Pentecostal family but had embraced Islam at a younger age and was a steady practitioner of the faith. He worked in construction work and was known in the neighborhood for being handsome, rough and manly. He was already married to two women when he met Dwayne’s mother. They lived together for a short period of time, until he turned abusive and violent. They separated when Dwayne was still a small child. Dwayne was mostly raised by his mother, his grandmother and his uncle, who was a friendly and funny man. They were practicing Christians, hailing from a Pentecostal family who had converted for a while to Catholicism before converting back to Pentecostalism. Dwayne’s grandmother passed on strong spiritual values to him. Growing up, Dwayne attended a Pentecostal mega church and was immersed in a Christian environment at home, but he would also practice Islam with his father when visiting him, although he did not really understand what he was doing. He keeps lively memories of his father reading and praying all day long. Dwayne was constantly moving between the Christian and Islamic worlds and started observing differences between the two. His father had offered him a gift box containing a Qur’an and Islamic trinkets but Dwayne kept it locked in his closet. The conflictual relationships he entertained with him drew him closer to Christianity. Yet, growing up in a disadvantaged Black neighborhood, Dwayne was always disturbed to see churches next to liquor stores and strip clubs and became bewildered religiously. He was very impressed, however, by the members of the Nation of Islam who used to distribute fresh produce in the neighborhood. They were known as people you did not mess with. When Dwayne was 7, he and his mother moved to an all-white suburb, which he would later rename “Honkeyville.” Dwayne was mocked by his classmates and neighbors for being Black. The violence of racism hit him for the first time and he became withdrawn, morose and resentful. His mother started taking him to an Afrocentric Christian community on weekends and Dwayne developed a strong interest for Pan Africanism. He became a self-taught, avid reader of Pan African authors and started openly challenging his white teachers at school. He also became very involved in an Evangelical church near his house and started learning the Bible, speaking in tongues and prophesizing people around the neighborhood. But Dwayne stopped attending church after his questions about the Trinity remained unanswered. He fell back, slowly but surely, until he rejected everything that was related to Christianity. He confronted institutionalized religion with Pan-African thought and became agnostic. As a teenager, Dwayne started listening on a daily basis to Nas’ song “Black Zombies.” A former member of the Five Percenters and the Nuwaubian Nation, Nas talked about the “Black man’s true religion” in his lyrics, which caught Dwayne’s ear. He started spending nights awake, browsing Afrocentric websites on his computer and reading about African history, philosophy and spirituality. He subscribed to Black supremacist beliefs and became assertive in his speech and behavior. He stood up to his teachers and principals, calling them “inferior,” and was expelled from school several times. His family worried he was becoming a “field nigger.” When Dwayne was 14, one of his African-American classmates asked him about his parents. When he told her his father’s name, she said “oh you are Muslim?” He vehemently denied and cut the conversation short. She simply had the time to squeeze in: “this is not something you should reject.” Upon coming back home, Dwayne finally opened up the gift box he had kept in his closet for years. He started reading the Qur’an. The first chapter he opened

was *Surah Luqman*, which reads like sage Luqman’s advice to his son. Dwayne was moved by this strong father-and-son relationship, something he had always longed for, and started crying. He became emotionally attached to the Qur’an. The book was written in a direct language; it was clearly structured and exuded confidence. Dwayne went to his father to ask for advice. His father’s response was that he was not manly enough to become Muslim. He enjoined him to first thoroughly research all Black Islamic movements, in order to be firmly grounded in the African-American Muslim tradition. He did not want his son to become too immersed in Arab or South Asian culture after converting. During a whole year, Dwayne visited the Nation of Gods and Earth, the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Melanics. He was attracted by some of their teachings and repelled by others. After a year, his father told him he was ready. Dwayne went to a local mosque and recited the *shahada* the day of his mother’s birthday. He was 15 years-old. He chose for himself the Muslim name of Khabir, which means “educated,” “knower,” something he had always strived to become. It took several years before Khabir gained the knowledge and confidence to start practicing the religion and break the news of his conversion to his family. They were shocked but he firmly asserted his beliefs. He ignored them when they called him Dwayne, and only responded to the name of Khabir. He studied hard in order to be worthy of his name, but went through a difficult period, when he realized Arab and South Asian Muslims despised him and doubted the extent of his Islamic knowledge. Influenced by Pan Africanism, Khabir wanted to proudly assert his Black and Muslim identity. He took his mother’s and father’s DNA to the company “African Ancestry,” which traces one’s ancestry back to a specific African country and ethnic group. He found that his mother was Fulani from Cameroon, which indirectly linked him to the great Islamic kingdoms of Futa Jallon and Futa Tooro, and that his father was French and Berber from South Morocco, which tied him to the great Muslim conquest of Andalusia. Khabir started defining himself as a Moroccan-Cameroonian American, which enabled him to assert his Islamic legitimacy. While satisfied with his newly recovered identity, Khabir found Islam too regimented and dogmatic at times. He felt like a robot, praying and following rules mechanically. His perspective changed when a friend introduced him to Sufism and spirituality in Islam. Khabir had to study *shari’a* and *fiqh* for several months before being allowed to join the Tijaniyyah Sufi order. Then, his *sheikh* introduced him to Islamic mysticism and taught him about the reality of the unseen. For his training, Khabir was secluded in a basement and told to meditate on the meaning of existence. He became spiritually intoxicated and made unprecedented discoveries about his soul. Khabir is now pursuing his training in the *tariqa* and wishes to become a *moqaddam*.

Lisa comes from a middle-class white Polish household in a Midwestern suburb. She was raised by her mother and her step-father, after her parents divorced when she was 2. Her stepfather is atheist and her parents are non-practicing Christians. None of them ever took Lisa to church. As a child, Lisa felt like an outlier. Religion was a mysterious thing that everybody was doing, except her family. She begged her mother to enroll her in catechism classes. But Lisa did not feel any spiritual connection there. When she was in middle school, Lisa’s neighbors were a Pakistani-American practicing Muslim family. They were particularly hospitable and would often invite Lisa over. She asked plenty of questions about Islam but thought of it as a specific culture, rather than a religion. As she wondered about the conception of Judgment Day in Islam, she realized there were many commonalities with Christianity (which she did not expect), but also key differences. She liked the idea that one was not saved for simply accepting Jesus Christ into one’s life.

Rather, salvation was conditioned by the sincerity of one’s belief and accomplishment of good deeds. Lisa started reading the Qur’an and found it very logical. She did not have a strong relationship to God but decided to follow Islamic commandments in order to become a better person. She saw Islam as a set of moral standards, as well as an opportunity to have an identity. She verbalized her intention to convert to a friend but did not take the plunge. At the end of high school, Lisa went to Spain for a year. She put her interest for Islam on hold and partied a lot. She became close friends with Muslim students of North African descent and upon coming back to the US and entering college, she decided to resume reading about Islam. After a few months, she considered herself ready to convert. Her Muslim friends planned everything and Lisa recited her *shahada* during the Islam Awareness Week organized by the Muslim Students Association on campus, in front of a large crowd of people. She pronounced the testimony of faith just before Anjali (see above) and they became close friends. Lisa wore the *hijab* right after her conversion, in order to prove her Muslimness to others and defuse accusations about her so-called promiscuity with men (even though she had never dated in her entire life). But she said her intention to wear it was not “pure” and she put it on and off during some time. Lisa feels that she eventually found a balance and now wears the headscarf for sincere spiritual reasons rather than to conform to people’s judgments. She has gradually developed a strong relationship to God, which she did not have before. Yet, she is still struggling to perform five prayers a day and feels she lacks discipline.

Mariana hails from a lower-class Catholic Latino household and was raised in a large Midwestern city. One side of her family is Mexican and the other side is Puerto Rican. Mariana was mostly raised by her grandparents and grew up in a disadvantaged, predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood. Catholicism was very present in her household, with pictures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and saints plastered all around the house. Growing up, Mariana was a devout and practicing Catholic, although she always felt uncomfortable when she had to pray or make offerings to pictures and statues. Mariana went to a very diverse high school in a different neighborhood. For the first time, she had non-Black and non-Latino classmates and was surrounded by Asian, Arab and white students. One of the female students looked Indian and was dressed like a nun. Mariana kept staring at her until she asked her what she was: the girl laughed and told her she was Muslim. This was the first time Mariana had heard about Islam. They became close friends. Throughout her high school, Mariana hung out mostly with Muslim girls because, like her, they were invested in their religion, hard-working at school, respectful of their families and staying away from dating and partying. Mariana was trying to beat the statistics in order to become the first person of her family to go to college. She was serious. She started to cover her hair, as requested by the Bible. In her junior year of high school, Lent and Ramadan happened at the same time. Mariana was fasting, just like her Muslim friends, who were also reading Qur’an in the library during lunch break. She remembers feeling jealous when she saw the deep connection they had to their scripture. Mariana decided to delve deeper into Catholicism and started comparing it to other Christian denominations and Islam. She found that Islam made a lot of sense. She was won over by the fact that there is no church hierarchy and no confession to a priest in Islam and that humans are responsible for their deeds. In that period, Mariana also made a dream that solidified her will to become Muslim. She learned how to pray, started fasting in Ramadan and began to dress more modestly, but kept postponing her conversion for fear of antagonizing her family. She eventually pronounced the testimony of faith at a large Islamic conference during her senior year of high school. She was 18.

Her grandparents were angry and thought it would simply be a phase but Mariana has been steadily practicing the religion since then. She feels that Islam has helped her answer a lot of questions about God. However, she has encountered a lot of anti-Black and anti-Latino racism in the South Asian Muslim community. Mariana wears the *hijab* and is married to Samuel (see below), an African-American convert to Islam. They have three children together. Both of them are strong pillars of the local Muslim community.

Marta is a Mexican-American woman who grew up in a middle-class household in Mexico. She gets annoyed when people do not believe she is Mexican because she does not look stereotypically so (she is tall and light-skinned). Marta's parents were non-practicing Catholics. Having been raised in strict religious families, they decided to adopt a more relaxed understanding of the religion with their own children, who were never baptized. But Marta avidly sought religion from a very young age. At 9 years-old, she walked herself to church and signed up for catechism classes. She panicked when she realized none of their family members were baptized and risked ending up in limbo after their death. She forced her parents to baptize her and her siblings. She dragged them to church on a regular basis (her mother complained that mass was like an aerobics class, in which you had to kneel, sit, stand up, and bow). Marta was disturbed by some aspects of Christian theology (especially the Trinity) but kept quiet about it when she understood her questions were not welcome. When the congregation recited "I believe in Jesus the Holy Son," she would stay silent and join them at the moment of saying "I believe in God the Father." After finishing her high school in Mexico, Marta went to the United States to pursue her studies. She attended a Presbyterian boarding school and was exposed to different trends of Christianity (Methodist, Baptist, Jehovah Witnesses, Disciples of Christ). They all had different ways of going around the ambiguous status of Jesus but the problem remained. After finishing college, Marta pursued engineering studies. There she met a man of Pakistani descent who introduced himself as Muslim. Marta thought Islam was a country and replied she was Mexican. He laughed, told her that Islam was a religion and started exposing to her the basics of the faith. They became very close and started dating. Marta was fascinated by this religion she had never heard about and particularly moved when she realized it matched her own intimate belief about God being absolute and all powerful, and Jesus being one of His prophets rather than His son. She started reading books and was completely won over when she gathered that Muhammad's message perfectly fell in with that of Jesus and completed it. A few months later, while driving her car, Marta felt the urge to become Muslim and recited the *shahada* to her fiancé over the phone. A few days later, she recited it once again at a local mosque. It was a week before 9/11 and she was 24. When the Twin Towers fell, Marta was confused. It was a terrible timing to become Muslim. A stubborn and obstinate woman, she stuck to her decision. She remembered that, as a child, she would often envision herself at the time of Jesus and wondered if she would have stuck by him when times became rough. She felt it was a test and held on, in spite of the various Islamophobic comments she received from colleagues and friends. Two years into her conversion, Marta decided to put on the *hijab*, which was a long and difficult process, more than becoming Muslim. The very day she wore it, her fiancé's mother called to say she agreed to them getting married, after having blatantly refused for months. Marta saw it as a sign from God and happily kept her *hijab* on. She and her husband ended up divorcing a few years later and Marta is now an active single woman, very popular in her local Muslim community. After having tried very hard to blend in the Pakistani Muslim community throughout her marriage, she is

now proudly combining her Mexican and Muslim identity. She is involved in various Latino Muslim groups in her city.

Mary was raised in an upper middle-class white household in the Midwest. Her parents were non-practicing Christians and she describes them as “hippies.” They had vowed to themselves not to force any specific religion upon their children. Mary seldom went to church, except a few times with her babysitter and her grandmother. When she was a child, her family moved to a small town that was very homogeneous, both racially and socioeconomically. The main criteria of distinction between people was the religious congregation they belonged to. Mary believed in God and felt socially pressured to pick a church. She went to several of them but could not find her fit. She had doubts about the Trinity but her questions remained unanswered. In college, a Muslim acquaintance asked her what she believed in and she felt frustrated when unable to provide a satisfactory answer. Her last name being Goldmann, Mary was also often mistaken for a Jew, which led her to envision different religions than Christianity. In 2008, Mary volunteered for Obama’s primary campaign. Her aunt and grandma criticized her for working for a “Muslim” candidate. Mary was upset and wrote a long letter explaining that a) Obama was not Muslim and b) even if he was, they had no right to judge Islam like that. Then, Mary realized she did not know anything about Islam herself and started researching it. She found online a table comparing Judaism, Islam and Christianity and realized they had much in common as far as beliefs in God, angels and demons and heaven and hell were concerned. Mary decided it was time for her to delve into the topic. During a year, she studied extensively the three monotheistic religions. When she realized that Islam corresponded the most to what she intimately believed, she felt a little worried: in her view, it remained a “scary religion.” She spent another year and a half digging into it, paying specific attention to women’s rights and the concept of *jihad*. Mary did not tell anyone about her quest, since she wanted her decision to remain free from outside influences. One day, Mary attended a conference on Middle Eastern geopolitics and one of the speakers said he had never encountered any Muslim who believed in peace. Mary stood up, protested in front of everybody and walk out of the conference room, very upset. She then wondered why she had taken this remark so personally and realized it was time for her to embrace Islam and reclaim control over her life. Mary left her partner (which she had been planning on doing for some time), moved out of her apartment and took a trip to Vermont on her own. There, she stood on a hill and recited the testimony of faith. She was 29. She progressively incorporated Islamic practices into her life but had troubles seeking Islamic knowledge. She felt lonely and disconnected from the Muslim community. As a white woman, she felt she was only partially accepted by her coreligionists. She never wore the *hijab* and felt uncomfortable when she was compelled to do so in Muslim spaces. After several unsuccessful attempts at finding a Muslim spouse, Mary eventually got married to an Egyptian Muslim man. They are now exploring their religion and growing spiritually together. Mary has been very active in fostering convert support groups and providing online information to recent converts, such as Victoria (see below), whom she did the interview with. She does not want them to experience the same loneliness she has been through.

Mia hails from a lower class Puerto Rican household in a large Midwestern city. Her maternal grandfather had migrated to the United States and had left Catholicism to become a Pentecostal minister. Mia’s mother was born in the US and raised under strict religious rules and gender norms (no pants, no makeup, no haircut, no jewelry). She met

Mia's father at the Pentecostal church. He had just come from Puerto Rico. They got married at an early age and had six kids together. They lived in a disadvantaged Puerto Rican neighborhood, overrun with drug trafficking and gang violence. When Mia's mother was 40 and most of her children already grown up, she unexpectedly gave birth to Mia. At that time, Mia's father had developed a bad drinking habit and their marriage started to flounder. Mia's mother took an apartment for herself and her children in a slightly better neighborhood. As a result, Mia grew up in a totally different environment from her siblings. She went to a very diverse school, where she interacted with students from all over the world. Her mother also left the Pentecostal church to join a much more open, non-denominational church. Mia liked going there and was involved in a youth group. Contrary to her siblings, she was also very arty, and her mother signed her up for a lot of arts programs. During his teenage years, she started a career as a professional dancer. Mia did not know where to fit: she had "Black" urban ways, but was also light-skinned and enjoyed high-brow culture; she spoke Spanish but had not grown up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood and felt at odds with Latin American culture. In high school, she discovered hip-hop culture and along with it, Islam. It was the 1990s and Islam was "cool." Some of her friends were in the Nation of Islam and would give her tapes of Minister Louis Farrakhan. Others were Sunni Muslims who would often debate about the concept of the Trinity in Christianity. Mia, who was very Christian, wanted to respond but was unable to. Her Muslim friends started coming to her Christian youth group to openly challenge her youth minister over the status of Jesus. Mia was embarrassed at first but eventually started to question things. She became fixated on the fact that Jesus was not white and felt increasingly embarrassed in front of his picture at church. At age 17, she decided to quit church, much to her mother's dismay. That same year, she also quit dancing and left her house to move in with her boyfriend. He belonged to the Nation of Islam and would often tell her that her "white ways" were the reflection of the devil in her, which deeply confused her. After many twists and turns, they eventually separated. Mia found herself alone, seeking refuge in art and writing. She believed in God and prayed every day but did not belong to any religion. She became romantically involved with a Black DJ who was Muslim. Mia started hanging out with a lot of African-American Muslims who were into hip-hop culture, but did not drink, smoke, or womanize. She was impressed by their behavior. She started working as a framer and one day had to frame a beautiful symmetrical picture of Muslims praying in *sujud*, all dressed in white. The picture caught her eye and when she mentioned it to her boyfriend, he suggested she read the *Gospel of Barnabas*. She was very moved by the way it depicted Jesus who, for once, appeared like a complex, multi-layered character. She started attending Islamic classes that were held in a basement with her friends. She felt what was taught was everything she had always believed and decided to take her *shahada*, along with two other men who had come that night. She was 24. She got married to her boyfriend and they had four children together. Mia's Islam was very small and personal: she practiced it with her husband and was not really integrated into the Muslim community. When they eventually got divorced, Mia started attending Muslim events, although she could never relate to highly educated, wealthy immigrant Muslims. She felt they were patronizing her for being a single mother and an artist. It was a breath of fresh air when she discovered a Muslim urban community center that promoted arts and culture. Mia is now trying to reconcile her faith with her past family background and current family life through her art.

Monica is the daughter of an interracial couple and grew up in the Midwest. Her mother was Irish American and her father Mexican American, and their relationship had caused

much rift between their respective families. Monica’s childhood was painful. Her parents indulged in heavy drinking and drug abuse. She and her sister were disheveled and harassed at school. When she was 9 years-old, the government threatened to remove them from their parents’ house and Monica’s father decided to bring them to Mexico. They lived there for six years and were raised by their Mexican grandmother. She was a Jehovah Witness and took them to the Kingdom Hall several times a week. Monica enjoyed it and strongly believed in God. Her grandmother also taught them Spanish language and strict traditional gender norms. As a teenager, Monica started to rebel, hanging around with boys and drinking. Her grandmother gave up on her and Monica and her sister went back to the United States. Her parents had separated and both were very sick, suffering from drug addiction, cirrhosis and mental illness. These were difficult years, but Monica was very popular in her high school. At 17 years-old, she met a boy and became pregnant. They got married and settled together. One night, a fire broke in their house and her 7-year-old daughter died from carbon-dioxide poisoning. Monica, who was pregnant with another child at that time, spiraled into despair and depression. She was angry at God and bitter at the church. When she was finally able to go back to college, a professor, willing to develop the critical mind of his students, asked her to write a ten-page essay explaining why all Muslims are not terrorists. To complete her assignment, Monica went to talk to a Muslim colleague who wore the *hijab*. Her husband gave her a Qur’an. Monica was skeptical at first. She thought Islam was very foreign and tried to disprove what she read. But as she learned more about it, mostly through online forums, she discovered that Muslims believed in Jesus and the Virgin Mary. She was also won over by the idea that there was no original sin in Islam, which was comforting and helped her deal with the death of her child. But Monica’s new spiritual search came brutally to a halt when her sister was murdered. This new tragedy brought her back to her former lifestyle. She tried to seek refuge in music, therapy, partying, drinking, drugs and medication. But nothing worked. Eventually, she decided to seize Islam as her last opportunity to heal. She went to the Muslim Students Association at her university and was put in touch with several Muslim women. She took her *shahada* at age 29. While she was not sure she would be able to become a good Muslim, Monica slowly incorporated Islamic practices into her life and learned how to discipline herself and improve her character. She now practices a conservative version of Sunni Islam that could be defined as Salafi and wears the face veil. A year after her conversion, she married Jonathan (see above), a white American convert to Islam. They live together with Monica’s daughter. Monica home-schools her. She has established strong connections with Muslim women who do the same thing. She is also very invested in the local Latino Muslim community and strives to create her own Islam, mixing American and Mexican traditions.

Olga was born in Poland in a practicing white lower middle-class Catholic household. Her extended family was very religious and her family members invoked God’s name on every occasion. Olga was baptized, did her communion but never had the opportunity to question religion. She and her parents moved to the United States, in a Midwestern suburb when she was a child. When she was 12, Olga’s best friend died in a car crash. It was her first time dealing with death and she felt confused and upset. Her punk anarchist cousin questioned her belief in God and Olga realized she did not truly believe but was simply following her parents’ lead. From 13 to 19 years-old, she defined herself as atheist. While Olga’s father was rather indifferent to religion, her mother was very active in church and participated in various charity activities. Olga enjoyed the solidarity aspect of it. At 16, following Hurricane Katrina, she went on a religious mission trip to New Orleans. She

was uninterested in the religious dimension and simply wanted to help. One day, however, she joined the group in prayer, hoping she might be able to reconnect with God. Everybody started speaking in tongues, except her. This experience solidified her belief that there was no God and she developed a strong hatred for religion. She became very involved in various forms of radical left-wing activism (anarchism, feminism and the punk movement). In college, following Operation Cast Lead, Olga decided to become part of the pro-Palestinian movement and started interacting with practicing Muslim students on a daily basis. She was impressed by their wittiness and dedication, which led her to readjust her views on religion. Olga also took a class on North African and Middle Eastern geopolitics and decided to write a paper on the Green movement in Iran. In order to do so, she started reading everything she could on Shiism and Islam, and realized it was very similar to the Catholicism practiced by her family in Poland. Except that Islam made much more sense to her. Soon after, Olga took a trip to India with her best friend, a practicing Muslim woman of Palestinian descent. They woke up at dawn for the morning prayer and Olga was overwhelmed by a strong spiritual feeling when she was a Hindu temple, a Sikh gurudwara and a mosque next to one another. From then on, she intimately knew she was Muslim but did not convert officially. She was involved in two different worlds: the punk anarchist scene, mostly anti-religious on the one hand, and the student Muslim community on the other, where she frequently took part in congregational prayers. She felt torn by this dual identity and struggled to find a balance for a while. She would at times disappear for months, drinking, going to shows, dating men or women and partying, before resuming attending Islamic events. Olga eventually found a middle road and recited the *shahada* alone in her room. She was 22. When she eventually came out as a Muslim, no one in the Muslim community was surprised. They had always considered her as a closet Muslim. Olga mostly identifies with Shiism since some of her closest friends are Shi'a and because the mournful and emotional character of Shi'a ceremonies reminds her of Polish Catholicism. She is not interested in wearing *hijab* for the moment. Olga is very active in fighting Islamophobia as well as racism within the Muslim community itself. She proudly merges her Polish and Muslim identity and feels the two feed one another.

Pablo was born from a Mexican-American mother and an African-American father in a large Midwestern city. Throughout his childhood, he did not have much contact with his father and was mostly raised by his mother. She hailed from a strict Pentecostal Mexican family but had shied away from this denomination and considered herself a simple Christian. Pablo grew up in the Christian Latino culture and regularly went to church but he was always bewildered by Christian theology (especially the confusion between Jesus and God). When he was 10 years-old, Pablo reunited with his father, who was then in prison. He had converted to Islam while incarcerated and seemed more focused than ever. He taught his son about Islam and encouraged him to embrace this religion but Pablo stood by his mother and remained a Christian. In school, however, he had many Muslim friends and enjoyed greeting them with “*as-salaam ‘alaykum!*” At age 12, he watched Spike Lee’s movie *Malcolm X* and was really moved by it. In college, he had to take a religious domain class and chose “Islam and Global Context.” The course opened up new perspectives for him, and he decided to change his major from Health studies to Islamic World studies and African Black Diaspora studies. He started hanging out with Muslim students and attending all Islamic events on campus. He stopped eating pork, learned how to pray and fasted in Ramadan. His father was pleased but encouraged him to first learn about Black history before converting to Sunni Islam, just like Malcolm X had done.

Pablo followed his advice and eventually recited his *shahada* at a local mosque, in front of the whole congregation. It was *laylat-al-qadr* (the Night of Power, during the month of Ramadan), which is supposed to be a night full of blessings, and religious fervor was palpable in the mosque. This was the most emotional moment of his life. Pablo is roommate with Brian, another convert to Islam (see above). He strives to live by example in order to fight stereotypes and show a positive image of Islam. He is particularly preoccupied with the situation of women within the Muslim community and is also concerned with reaching out to both the African-American and Latin American communities.

Samuel was born in an African-American and Native-American middle-class family in the Midwest. His mother is Catholic but not necessarily practicing. His dad is not attached to a particular religious institution. While his parents never went to church themselves, they encouraged their kids to go. Samuel spent most of his childhood and teenage years in a Presbyterian church and was baptized there. He went to Catholic school and was also active in a youth group. When Samuel went to college, a member of his church told him that college was a test, during which you either grew closer or away from Christ. As a matter of fact, Samuel found himself falling back and practicing less and less. He became very active, however, in the Black student union and pledged in a Black fraternity. He was heavily influenced by the thought of Malcolm X and started getting involved in various forms of social activism and left-wing politics. He also became very close friends with a Pakistani American Muslim. This man had grown up in a predominantly Black neighborhood and acted as a bridge between the Muslim and African-American communities on campus. He invited Samuel to a number of events at the Muslim Students Association and Samuel almost became the token non-Muslim of the organization. One day, as they were riding their bikes around campus, his friend told him “see man, this is what brother Malcolm would have wanted: a Pakistani Muslim and a one-day Black Muslim riding together.” Samuel laughed but left it at that. Yet, when they became roommates, they started engaging in deeper conversations over religion and faith. They would read Islamic books together at night and go over a different topic every day. Samuel also decided to take an “Intro to Qur’an” class. For several months, he considered his interest for Islam as a purely intellectual endeavor, which helped him answer questions about Christianity and refine his conception of God. Yet, one day, Samuel felt the urge to take his *shahada* because he realized he did not want to die as a non-Muslim. He rushed to his friend, who was taken off-guard at first, but rapidly organized his *shahada* at a historical African-American mosque, which had been funded by Muhammad Ali and was affiliated to Imam Warith Deen’s community. Samuel was 20 years-old. Soon after his conversion, he worked at an Islamic organization that did social work in disadvantaged Black neighborhoods and organized various cultural activities. He felt he was finally able to conciliate his faith with social justice. There, he met his wife, Mariana (see above), a Latina convert to Islam. They are now married and have three children together.

Shahada was born as Ida in an African-American family on the East coast. She grew up in a Christian environment with Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals on her father’s side and Catholics on her mother’s side. Her paternal grandparents ingrained strict religious rules in her regarding female modesty, music and church attendance. But she had doubts and questions concerning the Trinity, and always expressed reluctance to confess her sins to a priest. When Ida was around 10 years-old, during a crisp winter night, she was stuck by the beauty of the crescent moon and asked her Catholic

grandfather what it meant. When he told her that Muslims would rely on it to determine the starting date of their holy month, Ida secretly decided that she would be Muslim one day. Throughout her teenage years, her step-father's sister, who was a convert to Islam, would often take her to the mosque and she enjoyed the time she spent there. When Ida was 18, she married a Catholic man, moved to another city and kept on with her life. Her interest for Islam was relegated to the background. But when 9/11 happened, she decided to resume learning about Islam and bought *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Islam* and a Qur'an. Her husband was dismissive about her spiritual quest and, along with other issues they were having, they got divorced. She went back to her city and became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man. This man's father sent her Islamic literature and encouraged her to go to the mosque. Ida contacted Muslim women, overcame her fears and hesitations and went to a local mosque. Much to her surprise, it was the same mosque she used to go to during her teenage years. Ida saw it as a sign from God and recited the testimony of faith that same day, at age 24. She considers that she was always meant to be Muslim but that family, romance and life had distracted her from the path she was destined to follow. Ida put on the *hijab*, started practicing Islam seriously and left her boyfriend, who was not sufficiently involved in his religion. One day, as she was sitting in the mosque wondering about the Muslim name she should choose for herself, a Muslim woman brought a large panel with the *shahada* written on it. Again, she interpreted it as a sign and decided to name herself Shahada. She is now a pillar of the local Muslim community and got married to an African-American Muslim man who accepted Islam when he was 17. Her family has always been very acceptant of her conversion. Shahada intends to write a book to dispel stereotypes about Islam, entitled "My Islamic horror story...that you will never hear."

Souleymane was born as Jeremiah and raised in a middle-class African-American family in a Midwestern city. He went to a Lutheran church, studied the Bible extensively, did his communion and became an acolyte boy. The priests wanted him to become a ministry agent but too many of his questions remained unanswered. Throughout his high school, Jeremiah kept going to church out of habit but upon entering college, he started researching other religions. Jeremiah enrolled in the Arts department and started performing as a dancer. He started to do world-wide tours with a dance company. One of his dance partners was a Muslim and they became roommates. This man would often pray in front of him, tell him about Islam and take him to the mosque for congregational prayers every Friday. During hip-hop battles, Jeremiah also encountered members of the Five Percenters and would regularly join their ciphers to debate about Islam and African history. He was fascinated by it and eventually took *shahada* in 1990. He was 20 and took the Muslim name of Souleymane. Souleymane became very active in spreading Islam at the university and in hip-hop clubs. Almost every Friday, he brought someone to the mosque to take *shahada*. Attracted by the spiritual aspect of Islam and willing to establish a connection with African history, he also joined the Tijaniyyah *tariqa* who was then led by Shaykh Hassan Cisse, an Islamic scholar based in Kaolack, Senegal (he passed away in 2008). After a few years, Souleymane's *moqaddam* in the US made arrangements with Shaykh Hassan Cisse to send him over to Senegal to study. His training was supposed to last a few months but Souleymane ended up spending 14 years in Africa. He learned Qur'an, Islamic law, Arabic, Wolof, French, Sufi spiritual practices, patience, *adab* (manners) and resistance to heat. After many years of absence, Souleymane eventually came back to the US. He is now an Islamic scholar and teaches children at the same mosque he took *shahada* at. He also continues to perform as a dancer. Many people

mistake him for an African. Souleymane is committed to the development of an African-American Islamic identity and strives to establish connections with other African-American Islamic scholars in the United States. He considers that African-Americans have been stripped of their identity by the American society first, and by the Muslim community itself next. He wishes to reclaim that identity. He is also committed to bridging the gap between Sunnis, Shias, Sufis and Salafis.

Stephan was born in Spain and moved to the United States as a small child. He was raised in an upper middle class white household on the East Coast. Stephan’s father grew up in Franco’s Spain and was raised with strict Catholic values. His mother is an Irish-Italian American woman who was also brought up under rigid Catholicism. Both of them rejected institutionalized religion as adults and never passed it on to Stephan and his brother. Religion was not discussed by any means in their family. When Stephan was a teenager, he joined leftist punk anarchist movements along with his brother. He did a lot of drugs and started having tattoos. He also developed an interest for “secular humanism” and became vehemently atheist over the years. He firmly believed in the Enlightenment rationalist narrative and saw the end of religion as civilizational progress. He read *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris and started engaging in heated debates with religious people. Smart, witty and well-read, he would often rip their arguments apart and humiliate them in public for blindly following simplistic and infantilizing beliefs. In high school, Stephan became more politicized and developed an Orientalist fascination for the rest of the world, especially the Middle East. He signed up for multiple language classes (Japanese, Russian, Arabic). He then went to a liberal arts college that promoted alternative educational models and enrolled in classes on Islam and the Middle East, which brought nuances to his perspectives on religion. He also became very involved in Palestine activism and the BDS movement, which gave him the opportunity to work closely with mosques in his area. He started having many Muslim friends. One night, Stephan was reading Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* and was hit by the following sentence “if there is no God, then everything is permitted.” It was a common argument that he had heard and refuted on multiple occasions in the past, but this time the words strongly resonated with him. He started regretting his former behavior as an arrogant atheist and decided to explore religions, without admitting it to anyone in his entourage. Stephan started driving his car around on holidays and randomly sitting in various religious services (Christian, Jewish), to which he understood nothing. He developed stronger ties with the local mosques he used to work with and decided to stick around for various events, unrelated to the Palestinian cause. One day, they offered him to take the *shahada* and he decided to go with it. His activist friends resented his conversion, which they saw as a form of cultural appropriation. Stephan started loosely practicing, but, lacking discipline and a good support network, he went through ups and downs. Around the same time, he also discovered that he was queer and started having different sexual experiences. He became torn between embracing his queerness and strengthening his religious practice. Stephan, who still envisions the possibility of transitioning, felt uncomfortable with the gender segregation and gender normative rules implemented in some mosques. He moved to a larger city and tried to practice the faith on his own but grappled with depression and traumatizing romantic experiences. He felt very lonely and misunderstood. After surviving a severe depressive episode, Stephan eventually decided to seize Islam as his last chance of spiritual healing. Islamic rituals such as prayer and Ramadan became a technique of self-discipline to center himself and productively use his time. He discovered and joined a convert association to find support in his endeavor. Although he disagrees

with some of their discourses on gender, his tattoos and piercing are not an obstacle to his integration and he feels welcome there. Stephan does not practice the religion perfectly (he still drinks from time to time and frequently misses prayer), but he earnestly tries. He is invested in various philosophical projects to be cognizant of one's position in the world in order to best escape the burden of one's birth and become a real person. His connection to Islam helps him in that path.

Victoria hails from a very religious white middle class household in the Midwest. Her father was not raised religiously but became very active in the Baptist church as an adult. Her mother was raised Catholic but converted to Protestantism when she married her father. When Victoria was a child, they used to organize Bible studies and Christian youth activities in their house. Victoria was always encouraged to go to church. She was raised with traditional gender values regarding marriage and sexuality. In middle school, she met a friend whose mother was a pastor and drew closer to Evangelical Christianity, which involved speaking in tongues and being filled by the Holy spirit. Victoria was mostly following her friend and was not particularly convinced. She had apparently spoken in tongues but felt she was mostly repeating what everybody else was saying. She felt disconnected and eventually left that branch of Christianity to go back to mainline Protestantism. In high school, Victoria took part in a Protestant missionary trip to Venezuela with her youth group. She enjoyed spending time with children in the *barrios* but was taken aback by the attitude of her friends who wanted to “save” as many people as possible, by converting them from Catholicism to Protestantism. She started to question her religion and realized she had been blindly following what she had been told to believe for many years. For a short period of time, Victoria decided to define herself as agnostic: she believed in God but did not know exactly how to worship Him. Then, she went on a spiritual search. She started with Judaism and went to various synagogues (Orthodox and Reformed) but realized the conversion process was too long and tedious. She then researched Buddhism and Hinduism. She went through several temples but nothing clicked. Towards the end of her quest, she reconnected with a high school friend who happened to be Muslim and who suggested she looked into Islam as well. Victoria had not thought about Islam at all but decided to give it a go. She started attending a New Muslim class at a mosque. She was pleased to learn that Islam recognized Abraham, Moses and Jesus as prophets and was won over by the conception of God in the Islamic tradition, which was much simpler than in Christianity. She realized that Islam corresponded to what she had always believed in her inner self and decided to take her *shahada*. She was 24. Victoria started wearing the *hijab* a year and a half after her conversion. She donned it during the month of Ramadan and kept it on. Victoria got married to a Moroccan Muslim man but his indifference soured their relationship. He never taught her about Islam and did not spend time with her during Ramadan, preferring to live in the mosque during lengthy periods of time. They got divorced. Victoria has felt quite isolated in the born Muslim community and happily gets involved with other converts, such as Mary (see above), whom she did the interview with.

William was raised in an African-American family in a large Midwestern city. His grandparents descend from the South, from slavery. William's father is Baptist and his mother non-denominational. They seldom went to church throughout William's childhood and he does not feel like he was raised in a religious household. One of William's favorite uncles, however, had embraced Islam. When William was a freshman in high school, his Muslim uncle suddenly passed away, which led William to wonder about the purpose of

living and the meaning of existence. After graduating from high school, he decided to join the military. There, he had the opportunity to explore various religious options and chose to attend Islamic services in order to learn more about his late uncle’s religion. The class was taught by an African-American man who had served 28 years in the military as first sergeant. William attended the class every Sunday and was progressively won over by the concept of the Oneness of God, which stood in sharp contrast with the complexities of the Christian Trinity. William eventually took his *shahada* along with two other soldiers, in front of people from the military, at 18 years-old. Repeatedly moving from one training place to another, William did not really have the opportunity to practice Islam before another year, when he finally went to a base that had a Muslim chaplain. There, he learned how to pray and fasted in Ramadan. He describes his years in the military as his happiest years as a Muslim: he never experienced any discrimination; his religious rights were respected and there was a strong sense of brotherhood among Muslim army men. Upon leaving the military four years after, William did a Master’s in public health and took his first steps within the Muslim community outside the army. He was disappointed by the way the community was segregated and by the lack of attention paid to African-American Muslims, who were badly in need of resources and solidarity. William’s conception of Islam is strongly oriented towards community service, improving society and fighting against racism and inequality. He is promoting a healthy understanding of the religion, integrative of American values. He would like American Muslims to be proud of who they are, as both Americans and Muslims. He is married to an African-American convert to Islam and they have one child together.

FRANCE

Adam was raised in a lower class West Indian household in the Parisian region. His parents and siblings are practicing Catholics. Adam was baptized, went to catechism and did his two communions. Growing up, however, he lost interest in religion. Adam lived in a project and most of his friends were second generation immigrants of North African or African descent. Many of them identified as Muslims. During his teenage years, Adam engaged in petty crime, smoked and drunk a lot. At some point, he decided to give more structure to his life through religion. But Catholicism did not make sense to him. One of his Muslim friends suggested he looked into Islam and offered him a book on Islam and alcohol. Adam found the book resonated with his life and decided to become Muslim, along with two other friends, at age 22. His family in the West Indies resented his conversion, as they considered Islam to be a religion of Arabs. Adam quit smoking and drinking, stopped his petty trafficking and started practicing the religion seriously. He dated for a while a non-practicing born Muslim woman, who used to smoke and drink while he was praying diligently. They eventually parted ways. Adam remained invested in his religion, until the night his best friend brutally passed away. He had always reproached Adam for being too strict religiously and not attending parties anymore. He died while Adam was away from him, talking about Islam with another Muslim friend. Adam felt guilty and entertained thoughts of revenge. Overnight, he stopped practicing Islam and got back to his old ways of smoking and trafficking. He spent some time in jail. His cell mate was a devout Muslim who knew the entire Qur’an by heart, which impressed Adam very much. He is now contemplating the possibility of resuming a serious Islamic practice but feels he needs to work on himself first. He wants to abandon some of his bad

habits before starting to pray again since he does not want to live a life of contradictions. He is encouraged by his group of practicing Muslim friends to come back on the straight path. His friend Rita (see below), at whose apartment the interview took place, is also supporting him in this endeavor. But Adam is still pondering and currently focuses on writing and singing rap music. In general, he seldom mentions to people that he is Muslim in order to avoid endless debates and controversies.

Adèle hails from a practicing white middle class Catholic family from southeastern France. She is the oldest of three siblings. Her uncle is a priest and her grandmother went to mass every Sunday. Her parents attended church on every major religious holiday, but seldom discussed religion at home. Adèle was baptized and did her communion, profession of faith and confirmation. She was always very invested in her religion, took part in a scouting group and taught Catechism classes to children. When she was a teenager, her uncle was exiled from the Catholic hierarchy by a traditionalist bishop, an event which estranged Adèle from the church as an institution. She kept her faith in God and enjoyed doing charity work with the church, but grew skeptical of most Catholic rituals. Adèle did not know any Muslims and first learned about Islam in history class in middle school. After graduating, Adèle left the family house and moved to a bigger city, where she met Muslims from all walks of life. She became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man. Out of respect for him, she stopped eating pork and started buying *halal* food. She contemplated converting to Islam throughout their relationship, but refused to do it for his sake. She wanted it to be her own decision. They eventually separated and Adèle moved to another city. She embraced Islam on her own a few months later, at age 21. For a while, she practiced the religion her way, praying every evening without knowing the exact Islamic prayer moves. After a while, she went to a local mosque with a friend and recited the *shahada* in front of an imam. He asked her to come back the following Friday, and she pronounced the testimony of faith once again, in front of the whole congregation. Adèle felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders and she could start anew. But she was glad she met Islam before encountering Muslims, since she experienced difficulties in her interactions with the French Muslim community. Her most powerful spiritual experiences always occurred abroad, in the UK, the US and Latin America, where she met modern and active Muslim families. She finds born Muslims in France to be too caught up in their cultural ways and unable to move forward as a community, particularly as far as Islamic education is concerned. Adèle is very involved in her religion and would like to find a job in relation to it. She participated in the creation of a Muslim directory, worked for a Muslim information website and was interested for a while in Islamic finance. She is now particularly concerned about Muslims' consumer rights and would like to see organic *halal* food emerge in France. Wearing the *hijab* is not among her priorities, since she wants to develop other aspects of her spirituality first.

Aisha was born as Amélie. Her parents divorced when she was young. While her father hails from an upper middle class aristocratic family, Amélie was raised by her mother who comes from a working-class background in southern France. Amélie's father was deist for a while and now defines himself as atheist. Her mother's side of the family were Catholics who migrated to France from Italy. Her grandmother was very involved in the religion and taught Catechism classes to children. Amélie's mother identified as Catholic but did not necessarily practice the faith. From a very young age, Amélie strongly believed in God and asked many questions about Him. She decided to enroll in catechism

classes on her own, much to her mother’s surprise. She was disappointed, however, since most of her questions remained unanswered and unwelcome. She left and went to the classes taught by her grandmother. There, she learned that God is love but remained frustrated by the answers she received, which all seemed illogical. Amélie then visited a Protestant temple and enjoyed the bareness and simplicity of the place, which contrasted with the ostentatious splendor of Catholic churches. Yet, she was taken aback by the austerity the pastor displayed, which did not fit her joyful and expansive personality. Towards the end of primary school, Amélie met a Jewish girl who knew her religion well. She was attracted to the faith and asked if it was possible for her to convert to Judaism. Her friend inquired into the matter and told her it was impossible, since Jews were a chosen people. Amélie was distraught: she felt she absolutely needed to find a religion, but none of the faith traditions she had inquired about suited her. Upon entering middle school, Amélie and her mother moved to a project and she found herself surrounded by second-generation immigrants of African and North African descent. She became friends with a Muslim girl and was regularly invited to her home. When Ramadan came, her friend’s father suggested she fasted with them. Amélie happily accepted the offer and felt a strong spiritual connection to God during that period. At the end of the month, when he asked her if she wanted to become Muslim, she said yes and recited the *shahada*. She was 12 years-old and became known as Aisha. At first, she did not fully understand the implications of her conversion and was not practicing. Her mother did not take her seriously and would still cook pork in one form or another. In her twenties, Aisha moved on her own to a big city. There, she discovered young Muslim women who were wearing the *hijab* and praying. Aisha was surprised and wondered what it truly meant to belong to Islam. She progressively started to incorporate Islamic practices into her life, from wearing the *hijab* to praying five times a day. It took her a few years but she felt like it was a second conversion. Aisha became a regular at the mosque and acquired an impressive Islamic knowledge. Through the intermediary of her imam, she married a Muslim man of Algerian descent whom she barely knew. They now have one child together. Aisha is very popular in the local Muslim community. She teaches Arabic and “Intro to Islam” classes to recent female converts. Everyone loves her for being so cheerful, supportive and clear in her explanations.

Benjamin grew up in a white middle-class family in eastern France. He has Italian and Greek origins on his father’s side. His parents are cultural Catholics, in the sense that they are attached to Catholic traditions (wedding, baptism) but are not particularly spiritual or practicing. Benjamin was never encouraged to be religious. His parents divorced when he was a child. His step-mother is very involved in the Catholic church. His stepfather is open-minded and interested in various forms of spirituality. Benjamin describes his teenage years as tumultuous: while he always maintained good grades in school, he was unruly and impudent, entertained dark thoughts, smoked cigarettes and drugs. At age 18, he decided to change in order to become a good person. In the rap lyrics he used to write at that time, he wondered about the meaning of existence, looking for self-discipline, spirituality and truth. Benjamin started spending his time in the library, reading about various religions. He found too many ambiguities in Christianity, especially with regards to the Trinity. By contrast, Islam appeared as very simple and logical. He liked the fact that the relationship to God was direct and had to take place on a daily basis, not just during religious festivals. After five months of soul searching, he went to a mosque and recited the testimony of faith, at age 20. Benjamin put the emphasis on the fact that his journey towards Islam was solitary and that he was not influenced by anyone. His

conversion was a nonconformist, individual choice. His relationships with his father became extremely conflictual after his conversion. There was a lot of misunderstandings between them and Benjamin felt relieved when he eventually left the family house. Benjamin now works as an elementary school teacher. He is also volunteering at a local mosque and is in charge of welcoming new converts to Islam and teaching them the basics of the religion. He promotes a balanced understanding of Islam, adapted to the realities of the French context. Through his imam, he met Chloé, a convert to Islam who attends the same mosque (see below). They are now married and live together.

Bernard's story is one of suffering and awakening. Bernard was born in a large white lower-class family in a miner's cottage, in a deindustrialized and disadvantaged region of northern France. He and his twelve siblings were baptized in the Catholic church. When he was 2, Bernard suffered from a severe meningitis, which left him permanently deaf. His family grappled with a number of socioeconomic, health and addiction problems. His parents were alcoholic, promiscuous and violent with one another. They did not manage their budget well and food was scarce in the house. Bernard and his siblings were known around their neighborhood for being disheveled and hungry. Social services had to step in on several occasions. As a child, Bernard was mistreated and beaten by his parents. He was also sexually abused by some of his neighbors. He struggled in school, his teachers being unaware of his hearing disability. He used to turn to God frequently to alleviate his pain. As a teenager, Bernard fell into violence, drug abuse and delinquency, which eventually led him to jail for several weeks. Upon his release, he became romantically involved with Martine, a woman from his neighborhood, who later became his wife. They settled together and she became pregnant with their first child at 16. They struggled with debt, had to steal here and there, and Bernard spiraled into depression. One day, Jehovah Witnesses rang their doorbell, followed by Mormons. Bernard encouraged them to spell out their differences. The Jehovah Witnesses won the argument and Bernard was convinced by their optimism. He became part of the movement, participated in door-to-door mission trips, read the Bible, learned how to manage his household and started looking for a job. He bore witness to his conversion on several radio shows. But he also gave a lot of money to the organization and grew suspicious of its cultish character. He eventually managed to leave, in spite of receiving multiple threats. He joined for a while the Dominican order of the Community of the Lamb, and made several trips to the holy city of Lourdes, but did not find the relief he was seeking. He found a menial job at the municipality but sunk back into depression after being harassed at work. Bernard, who was now well-read in religious matters, became increasingly skeptical about the Bible. Praying to statues in church seemed absurd; the idea of Jesus being the son of God no longer made sense; and the story of Lot having sexual intercourse with his own daughters repulsed him. One day, Bernard walked by the window display of an Islamic library and came upon a tape by Ahmed Deedat called "Is Jesus God?" The title caught his attention and he decided to buy it. It was a revelation. All his questions about the Trinity were finally answered. Bernard watched the tape at least 30 times and decided to become Muslim, at age 40. It was hard at first, since he did not feel welcome in mosques and struggled to pronounce Arabic words. Bernard went to online forums and was connected to another disabled Muslim, who patiently taught him *surahs* from the Qur'an. In spite of his hearing disability, Bernard managed to learn several of them. The few Muslim acquaintances he had were greatly impressed. Bernard went to Hajj with them, which was an illuminating experience. In spite of the crowd, he miraculously managed to enter the tomb of the Prophet in Medina. Sitting there, he meditated on how far he had come since

his painful childhood. Bernard now works as a council clerk. His wife Martine did not convert to Islam and they respect one another’s beliefs. They have six children together and let them choose the religion they like most.

Bianca hails from a lower middle class white family in southern France. Her two grandmothers had come from Italy. Bianca’s parents were non-practicing Catholics. They decided not to baptize her in order to let her choose her religion upon reaching adulthood. Bianca went to church only a few times throughout her childhood. Her father died when she was 10. As a teenager, Bianca could not really understand the concept of God. She defined herself as an atheist. Her grandmother, who had been through a lot in her life, would often tell her: “if God really existed, I would not have had to endure all these hardships.” Bianca believed in a kind of spiritual force, but could not relate to the personified figure of God depicted in Catholicism. She grew up in a very diverse neighborhood and had many friends who were Muslims. When 9/11 happened, Bianca was really confused. The portrayal of Islam as a violent religion in the media was at odds with the behavior and practices she had observed among her friends and their families. Bianca got a translation of the Qur’an and started reading it. She identified with many of the values promoted in the scripture and was progressively able to grasp who God was and what divinity meant. After one or two months, she decided to become Muslim. Bianca did not do a public conversion ceremony: she simply spoke to God and verbally affirmed her desire to enter Islam. She was 20. She incorporated Islamic practices in stages, and started praying four years after her conversion. Another five years later, she decided to put on the *hijab*, which created a lot of problems at work. She felt compelled to resign and is now trying to work as a self-employed childminder. Bianca was romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man of Algerian descent for two years. They had planned on getting married but separated when Bianca realized he was drinking alcohol in secrecy. Bianca always wanted to marry a man from a traditional born Muslim family in order to be immersed in Islamic culture and values. A few years later, she met a man of Algerian descent who was not practicing at the time, but progressively drew closer to his religion. They are now married and have one child together.

Blandine was born in a white middle-class Catholic family in Normandy. Her father was a very devout Catholic man who once envisioned becoming a priest. But Blandine’s parents got divorced when she was three and she progressively lost contact with him. They never had the opportunity to talk about religion. Blandine was raised by her mother, a non-practicing Catholic woman who seldom took her to church. She was baptized and did her communion, but stopped believing in God at age 11 after learning the theory of evolution in school. She relegated God and Jesus in the realm of children tales, just like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. At age 18, however, her religious quest resurfaced after meeting an Evangelical Christian man at the university. They became friends and he pointed her to the reality of supernatural phenomena that tended to prove the existence of a higher power. Blandine also realized the Bible could be read from different angles and was not necessarily contradicting the theory of evolution. She decided to pray directly to God to enquire about His existence and started receiving a series of signs, which culminated in a powerful mystical experience during which she felt His presence everywhere. Blandine considers this experience as a turning point in her life, during which she switched from atheism to faith. She converted to Protestantism and joined a Bible study group at her university, mostly composed of Evangelicals and Baptists. Blandine, who did not know any Muslims and was completely ignorant about Islam, learned about

it during a session devoted to disprove other religions. The debate over the figure of Jesus sparked her interest. She read the Bible once again to delve deeper into this issue, learned about internal debates within Christianity over the concept of the Trinity (especially from Jehovah’s Witnesses) and decided to follow up with the Qur’an. She was completely struck by what she read: the Islamic scripture established a clear continuity with Judaism and Christianity, while settling imprecisions within those two traditions. Misogynistic and violent verses were also considerably softer in the Qur’an than in the Bible. After closing the book, Blandine decided she was Muslim. She was 20. Blandine has a very intimate and personal understanding of Islam. She usually reaches her own understanding of scripture and practices the religion accordingly. She does not wear the *hijab* since she was not able to find any Qur’anic evidence for it. She did her own *shahada* ceremony, mixing elements from both the Islamic and Christian traditions. She also crafted her own prayer ritual, incorporating Qur’anic and Biblical references as well as personal invocations. She calculates the beginning and the end of the month of Ramadan herself, based on her own observations of the moon, irrespective of the French Muslim community’s decisions. Recently, she also developed a strong interest for Sufism and started performing substantial *dhikr* every day. Blandine is very invested in interfaith dialogue and is also active in the movement for Islamic reform: she promotes strict gender equality (female imams), support for LGBT Muslims, less rigidity in Islamic practice, greater individual freedom of interpretation, historicization of the Revelation, more humanism and philosophy, and the training of French imams to French Republican values (*laïcité*).

Bruno hails from a white middle-class Protestant household and grew up in a middle-size town in central France. He first went to an Evangelical church, and then joined the Protestant Reformed tradition. At age 8, he joined the Catholic scouts, which enabled him to have a thorough understanding of various Christian traditions. He was baptized in the Protestant faith at age 15, but did not tell his classmates about it. He was afraid of incurring mocking and sarcasm for being religious. In high school, Bruno became increasingly interested in science and found it incompatible with religion. He kept believing in the goodness of mankind, but decided God did not exist. He became estranged from any form of religious practice. After graduating, Bruno moved to a larger city to pursue scientific studies and met classmates of North African descent, which exposed him to a new culture. He also met a Muslim woman of Tunisian descent, who later became his wife. They often talked about religion and she would counter his arguments about Islam being incompatible with science. Bruno decided to enquire into the matter more seriously and stepped foot into a local mosque. At first, he was shocked to see people prostrated on the floor, which he saw as a sign of mental alienation. But once he engaged some of the men in conversation, he was won over by their scientific claims about the Qur’an. He took his *shahada* that very day, at age 23. Bruno found logic and rationality in Islam. In his view, Islam represented an improved version of Christianity, stripped off of inconsistencies and human mistakes. It reestablished practices that were present in the Bible but had been altered or disavowed by Christians along the way: true monotheism, prostration, head-covering for women (for the sake of God, not men). It formed a logical, consistent whole, based on the unaltered nature of the Qur’anic text and supported by a rigorous chain of *hadith* transmission. Islam as a religious tradition functioned like science, with strongly resonated with Bruno’s own work. God’s creation itself, he found, could be incorporated into physics theorems. Bruno did not start practicing overnight. He examined the logic behind each Islamic pillar and practice before

incorporating it into his life. He and his wife are now practicing the religion steadily. They have four children, who have both French and Arab names. They are very involved in the Muslim community and active in defending Muslim consumers’ rights, especially regarding *halal* food and ritual slaughter. Bruno also runs a converts’ association that organizes events to make Islam an integral part of the French Republican landscape.

Capucine’s parents separated before she was born. She was raised in a southwestern French city, by her mother and her mother’s family, who were Portuguese immigrants. They were firmly rooted in Catholicism and read the Bible often, although they seldom went to church. Capucine’s mother was always suspicious of organized religion. Capucine always believed in God and had a strong spiritual connection to nature but never developed a solid interest in Catholicism. During her teenage years, she reunited with her father, a man of Moroccan descent who had a Muslim father and a Jewish mother. Because he had always had conflicting relationships with his father, he hated Islam; and after the death of his mother, he had embarked on a spiritual journey towards Judaism. Following a heartache at age 21, Capucine moved to Paris and became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man. During that period, she had three mystical dreams: in the first, a woman wearing a long dark veil was standing in the middle of her studio, telling her to look through the bay window. Capucine complied and saw a powerful yet un-dazzling light that viscerally communicated with her, leading her to prostrate on the floor. In the second dream, Capucine found herself in a mall, ascending on an escalator, her head upside down. She reached a dark room with a door. When she opened it, she saw a beautiful, massive wall covered with plants and Arabic calligraphy written in various shades of blue. As far as the eye could see, people were prostrated in direction of the wall. Next to her was a man with a dark beard, a white turban and a brown *kamiz*. In her third dream, Capucine was in a completely blank space, surrounded by women wearing long veils. Beauty and light exuded from them. As she enquired about it, one of the women told her she could be as beautiful if she acted like them. Capucine was at first deeply disturbed by the Islamic references present in her three dreams and worried that her mind was tricking her because she was then in a relationship with a Muslim man. At work, she met a young woman who was also interested in Islam. She introduced her to the wife of an imam, who offered her a Qur’an. Capucine completely identified with it and became addicted to reading pages from it every day. She eventually took her *shahada* at a small local mosque. Both her parents were very upset, especially her father who interpreted her religious transformation as a sign of betrayal. Having complicated relationships with men since her teenage years, Capucine decided to put on the *hijab* to preserve her modesty. She usually wears it as a turban in a fashionable way. Capucine eventually left her non-practicing Muslim boyfriend and has since then been trying to find a Muslim spouse but has been through a lot of disillusion. She proudly combines her French, Portuguese and Moroccan heritages with Islam and sees her identity as a tool to refute stereotypes.

Caroline grew up in a lower-class family, in a diverse neighborhood of eastern France. Her father was a “simple man” from the east of France and her mother a Creole woman from Mauritius. Neither of them was very educated. They got married when he was 40 and she was 18, and then got divorced when Caroline was a small child. Caroline grew up with her mother and stepfather and had little contact with her own father. She was baptized and raised as a Catholic, although her mother retained a variety of syncretic religious practices (Evangelical, Hindu, Muslim) from her Mauritian childhood. Both

Caroline's mother and stepfather believed in God but were hostile to any form of organized religion. Caroline was very pious as a kid, did her first communion and prayed every evening. In middle school, however, she started reflecting on the meaning of religious veracity, and wondered whether Catholicism was the only truth available, which led her to distance herself from religion. A child of mixed parentage, Caroline experienced racism from a very young age and developed as a result solid friendships with second-generation immigrants of North African descent, some of whom were practicing Muslims. They told her about Islam and she particularly liked the idea of a continuity with Judaism and Christianity. She converted to Islam quite rapidly, at age 16, in high school. She told her family about her conversion when she reached 18 years-old. She considers that she discovered faith through Catholicism but that Islam helped her maintain her religiosity by filling voids in her religious understanding. Caroline sees religion as something private. She does not wear the *hijab*, does not necessarily tell people that she is Muslim, unless she knows them well, and seldom goes to the mosque, where she feels uncomfortable. She is very critical of the rising influence of Wahhabism in French Muslim mosques and bookstores, and suspicious of any form of identity-based Islam. At age 20, she fell in love with a man of Moroccan descent, who was the cousin of a childhood friend. Although she had been a family friend for a very long time, her husband's mother objected to their marriage, on the ground that she was not Moroccan. They got married nonetheless and Caroline was expecting a child at the time of the interview.

Chloé was raised in a white middle-class non-religious household. Religion was never talked about in her family and was almost a taboo. Chloé never had good relationships with her parents and was mostly raised by her grandparents. In high school, she developed an interest for religion from a cultural and civilizational standpoint, and started reading the Torah. When she left her house to go to the university, Chloé found herself completely alone and started thinking about larger existential questions. She turned again to religion, this time from a spiritual perspective. She first considered becoming Jewish but the many hurdles placed in front of converts to Judaism discouraged her. She did not really envision Christianity, which was always depicted in a negative light in her household. She also felt the Bible read like a children's tale. She timidly started contemplating Islam as a possibility but did not mention it to anyone: she felt both ashamed and frightened to even consider this religion, which was supposedly a source of violence and oppression to women. She took a rational approach to it and read some websites that described the scientific miracles in the Qur'an. For several months, her spiritual search went on and off. What really won Chloé over was the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. She was impressed by his character and decided she wanted to be like him. Chloé went to the mosque near her house and pronounced the *shahada* in the imam's office, at age 19. Chloé's conversion to Islam provoked fear and anxiety among her family. Her grandparents worried she would "become Arab." Her aunt, who came from a Muslim background herself, thought she was indoctrinated. Progressively, Chloé managed to make her new Islamic practices accepted, from food habits to wearing the headscarf. A blond, blue-eyed, pale-skinned woman, Chloé attracts a lot of hostile looks with her *hijab*. She recently started wearing it as a turban. She studies law and is quite vocal about Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslim women. Chloé met Benjamin, a convert to Islam (see above), at the mosque and they rapidly got married. Chloé's younger sister also embraced Islam, although her encounter with the faith developed through her friendships rather than from a spiritual, intellectual search. Chloé worries at times that her

sister might not be able to find a balanced understanding of Islam, oscillating between too lax and too strict interpretations.

Delphine grew up in a white middle-class family in the Parisian region. Both her parents were artists. They were firmly atheist and never taught her about religion. Delphine herself never had questions about it and throughout her teenage and young adult years, she never felt the need to develop a relationship to God. After graduating from high school, Delphine enrolled in a school of fine arts and met Gaëtan, a West Indian man who was a devout Christian (see below). They fell in love and lived together, although Delphine could not really relate to his spiritual practices. As part of her art studies, Delphine had to reflect on who she was and started exploring her Armenian identity for a while (her maternal grandfather was Armenian). Delphine was very open-minded and had friends from various backgrounds, including Muslims. Yet, when Gaëtan decided to embrace Islam, she was disconcerted: unfamiliar with the concept of God, she was afraid they would not be able to get married if she was not Muslim herself. She started learning about Islam but refused to convert for her partner. Gaëtan also had a series of heated arguments with Delphine’s parents over religion and their couple started to flounder. They decided to take a break: Gaëtan went to an artistic internship in the United States and Delphine flew to Brazil to visit a long-time friend. Her friend, who was a non-practicing Muslim, took the heat out of the debate and told her to relax. While in Brazil, Delphine felt that her heart opened. God was more and more present in her life. When she came back to France, Gaëtan asked her to marry him. She went through an additional series of doubts and reversals but eventually decided to take her *shahada*. The woman she met at the mosque, Aisha, who was also a convert (see above), considerably reassured her and eased her conversion process. Delphine took her time and progressively incorporated Islamic practices into her life. She did not explicitly tell her parents about her conversion to Islam, although her changed clothing and dietary habits eventually caused them to suspect it. Delphine wears the *hijab* as a turban, quite elegantly. A little while after her conversion, she and Gaëtan joined a Sufi order. The new practices she discovered and the strength of her relationship to the *sheikh* completely remodeled the way she viewed religion and opened up unexpected spiritual horizons. Delphine has intensified her prayers in line with Sufi teachings and is really enthusiastic about it. In her view, her true spiritual transformation occurred when she encountered Sufism, rather than when she recited the *shahada*.

Eleonore was born in a lower middle-class white family in the east of France. Starting from her great grandparents, her family had always been staunchly atheist, and she would often hear her grandparents making fun of the idea of God. Eleonore was raised by her mother, who was more tolerant. When she was 11, Eleonore started looking for religion. She made some Protestant friends and asked to be baptized. She did not have strong religious foundations, however, and after going through a series of painful life ordeals, she went back to atheism. However, she always kept an open mind towards religion. In middle school, she organized a small demonstration with fellow classmates to protest the 1989 first *hijab* ban in French public schools. As a young adult, Eleonore met a man and had three children with him. She moved to a disadvantaged suburb. There, she was surrounded by Muslims but the inconsistencies she noticed in their practice gave her a negative image of the religion. Her partner’s brother converted to Islam but his violent and authoritative personality further deterred her. After separating from her partner, Eleonore became very active in various anti-racist and humanitarian organizations. There,

she met a lot of young Muslims who were both politically involved and spiritually engaged. She appreciated the way they respected her as a woman, but stayed away from any serious spiritual search. At 12 years-old, her older son, whom she used to call “my little angel,” decided to become Muslim. She saw it as a great opportunity for him to become more disciplined and readily granted him permission. When he asked for her advice in choosing a Muslim name, she said she liked the way “Jibril” sounded, without knowing much about the meaning of that name. A few years later, out of curiosity, Eleonore opened up a Qur’an and realized that Jibril was actually the angel that brought revelation to the prophet Muhammad. She was struck by this discovery and became intimately convinced of God’s existence. She cried a lot and decided to take her *shahada* right after finishing reading the Qur’an. She recited the testimony of faith in a small prayer room near her house, at age 35. She quickly informed her three children and her mother, who were all accepting of her conversion. Eleonore rapidly wore the *hijab*, which she saw as a practice within her reach. Her daughter was skeptical at first, but eventually came to grips with her mother’s choice. To this day, she remains an atheist. Eleonore’s younger son, however, also embraced Islam a year after her. Eleonore is now an active member of the Muslim community in her town and has recently been involved in the construction of a mosque right in the city center. She has helped fostering a healthy dialogue with local authorities and has been actively promoting the creation of a large and welcoming space for women within the mosque.

Emiliano was born in the Parisian region in a Latin American family (his mother is Uruguayan and his father hails from a Chilean family). He has six brothers and sisters. Emiliano described his family situation as “difficult:” his parents were divorced; his mother went through a lot of socioeconomic problems and he had conflicting relationships with his father. His mother came from a Christian background but never passed religion onto her children. His father was atheist and hostile to organized religion. Throughout his childhood and teenage years, Emiliano never thought about God and religion was completely absent from his life. However, growing up in a mostly North-African neighborhood of Paris and having a Trotskyist grandmother who supported the Algerian independence, Emiliano always had a positive image of Islam. In his early teens, he became very involved in far-left political movements and considered himself an atheist, mostly for ideological reasons. He then developed an interest for the Israel-Palestine conflict, colonial history, racism, subaltern studies and Third World politics. He started to question his Westernized and positivist upbringing, did some research on Latin American spiritual practices (especially shamanism) and decided to identify as agnostic. This position proved satisfactory until he met a Muslim classmate in computer science who was deeply invested in his religion (he had studied in Egypt to be imam and was a *hafiz*, someone who has memorized the entire Qur’an). Emiliano was impressed by the peacefulness he conveyed, which contrasted with his own messy life. This man gave him a Qur’an and Emiliano was immediately struck by it. He felt like “his heart opened suddenly.” Emiliano studied Islam very closely during seven months and eventually decided to become Muslim at age 23. His conversion gave him wings and the ability to reclaim control over his life: he traveled a lot and moved to Uruguay a year after converting. He became interested in Sufism and joined a *tariqa* that he subsequently left (he disagreed with the supposedly omniscient figure of the *sheikh* and found the Sufi order too passive politically). He started to look into Shiism, which, in his view, was more conducive to political activism. He was also attracted by the respect towards the family of the Prophet displayed by most Shi’as, the highly emotional and sensitive nature of

Shi’a religiosity and the use of poetry in Shi’a rituals. He stayed in Iran for two months to study Shiism, along with other Latin American converts. But he was disappointed by the ideological and sectarian nature of the teachings he received and upon returning to Uruguay, he considered himself a Sunni again. Emiliano is now very involved in the promotion of Islamic knowledge. He runs a website for Latin American converts to Islam in which he provides detailed theological arguments and translates Islamic literature and videos from famous Islamic scholars into Spanish. His aim is to provide an alternative to the growing influence of Salafi interpretations on the continent. Emiliano is married to a Uruguayan Catholic woman. They often have heated discussions over faith and religion, but living with her taught him much about religious sincerity and humbleness. They plan on raising their children in both traditions.

Fabien was raised in a white lower middle class household in the Parisian region. He describes his family as simple, down-to-earth, non-practicing Christians. Although Fabien was baptized, he never felt a religious atmosphere in the house and never talked about God with his parents. Religion was relegated in a remote background of their lives and was almost unnoticeable. Fabien’s grandparents had an icon of Jesus in their house but he mostly thought of it as something folkloric. He grew up in a neighborhood with many Muslim friends but never discussed religion with them. As a teenager, Fabien defined himself as an atheist: widespread suffering and misery throughout the world were the proof that God did not exist and he tended to despise people who relied on religious books to live their lives. But Fabien’s mindset completely changed when he encountered Islam at age 19, although he does not exactly recall how things happened. He feels like Islam fell upon him without him fully realizing it. Fabien remembers reconvening with an old friend, who happened to be Muslim. They started hanging out a lot and would often meet at a Chinese *halal* restaurant. Fabien recalls feeling happy to eat *halal* food, without really knowing why. His friend also took him to the Mokhtar Awards, a Muslim international short-film festival. There, he met a large number of astute young Muslims who often engaged in deep intellectual discussions over the meaning of life and the superficial nature of the world surrounding them. Their selflessness sparked Fabien’s interest. He started spending a lot of time with them. He would often accompany them to the mosque, until he began praying on his own. Fabien never publicly pronounced the testimony of faith. He simply drifted towards Islam and progressively incorporated Islamic practices into his life. His coming out as a Muslim provided a unique opportunity to eventually talk about religion with his parents. They were quite hostile at first and felt like he had betrayed them, but eventually came to accept his choice. Fabien is now very invested in his religion and strives to accumulate as much Islamic knowledge as possible. He takes part in lively, well-informed discussions with his Muslim friends, such as Jean who also converted to Islam (see below) and did the interview with him. He also joined a Sufi order and practices *dhikr* regularly.

Fabiola was born in Haiti and grew up in Brittany. Her parents are Haitian and belong to the Protestant tradition, although they seldom go to church. Fabiola always strongly believed in God and was very involved in her religion. At 15 years-old, she went to a Pentecostal church and got baptized at age 18. At the church she went to, much emphasis was put on the figure of Jesus and the importance of love. There was a lot of chanting and God was portrayed as a benevolent figure. But when a tragic event happened in her family, Fabiola had to redefine her understanding of the divine. She realized that while God could give, He could also take back, and that religion was not *à la carte*. She went

looking for a stricter religion that would reflect her new conception of God and turned to Adventism for a while. At the university, she joined an Evangelical student group. She loved debating about religion. Among her favorite topics were the figure of Jesus, the status of Muhammad as a prophet and whether salvation came from God's grace or from our own actions and discipline. In her university residence, there was a large number of Muslim students. She enjoyed talking to them about religion and was often convinced by their answers. Their prayer room also gave onto the residence's kitchen and she would often watch them pray. Fabiola was struck by the coordination of their moves while they prostrated on the floor. She started reading about Islam and took classes at a nearby mosque. A friend also taught her how to pray. After two years, she recited the *shahada* alone in her room, sitting on a carpet and facing the *qibla*. She was 24 years-old. She immediately started to pray five times a day and followed *tajwid* classes to improve her pronunciation. She feels that her conversion to Islam has strengthened her relationship to God. She informed her parents, who were shocked at first because they thought Islam was a religion of Arabs, but eventually accepted her choice. Fabiola already covered her hair with African head wraps before her conversion: she now alternatively wears a turban, a *hijab* or a *jilbab* depending on the context. Fabiola proudly combines her Islam with her Haitian culture. She is currently trying to find a practicing Muslim spouse but she knows that, as a Black woman and a convert, the wedding process will be full of hazards for her.

Fanny grew up in a middle class household in the Parisian region. Her father was born from a Tunisian-Algerian Jewish couple in Tunisia and moved to France as a child. Her mother hailed from an aristocratic French rural family. They met in the youth section of the French communist party, but later got divorced. Neither of them was religious and they passed on their atheist convictions to Fanny and her siblings. Fanny never practiced Judaism, although she took part in Jewish holidays and rituals with her grandparents. But she associated it with tradition and culture, rather than religion. She did not believe in God anyways. After graduating from high school, Fanny became active in various feminist and LGBTQ networks. She also decided to reconnect with her North African roots and explore the Arab, postcolonial component of her Jewish identity. She started taking Arabic classes and was particularly moved, without really knowing why, when her teacher talked about the significance of the *shahada*. She became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man who was involved in the Palestinian movement. He would make her listen to the *adhan* and modern Islamic songs by Lebanese-Swedish singer Maher Zain, which deeply resonated with her. Fanny took part in Palestinian activism and was always transported by emotion when hearing religious slogans during demonstrations. She started thanking and invoking Allah on different occasions, a feeling she had never experienced before and progressively identified as faith. When Fanny was 19, her cousin abruptly passed away in his sleep, which deeply troubled her. Her boyfriend also became abusive, harassing and violent around that same period. Fanny moved to her mother's and spiraled into severe depression. She started listening to guilt-inducing Salafi sermons on Youtube, which further increased her anxiety. She was attracted towards Islam but feared she was not worthy of becoming Muslim. Too much of her lifestyle contradicted basic Islamic principles. She was lost and lonely. Things improved when Fanny started meeting Muslim men and women who also struggled with the puzzle of their lives but remained faithful and earnest in their spiritual practices (one was a practicing Muslim woman romantically involved with an atheist, one was a transgender Muslim, one was a non-Muslim lesbian woman who knew entire parts of the Qur'an by heart). These various encounters empowered Fanny to authorize herself to

become Muslim. She progressively incorporated Islamic practices into her life and joined Sufi and LGBTQ Muslim groups as well as anti-Islamophobia organizations. Fanny intermittently wears the *hijab* for aesthetic, spiritual and identity reasons but does not want to project too much meaning on what she considers first and foremost as a piece of fabric. She is critical of both injunctions to wear it in the Muslim community and to remove it in the larger society.

Florent hails from a large, lower-middle class, white Catholic family. He grew up in a small homogeneous town in the north of France. His mother goes to church from time to time, but overall his parents are not particularly practicing, although they insist on defining themselves as Catholics. As a child, Florent believed in God and did his communion. He enjoyed listening to the priest’s sermons, but found the concept of the Trinity confusing and thought the atmosphere of the church was cold and unwelcoming. When Florent was a teenager, his classmates used to make fun of religions and he flowed with the tide. He stopped practicing and decided religion was backward. Florent then moved to a new high school, located near projects in a larger city, and found himself surrounded with youth of North-African descent. He was surprised to notice that they were much more attached to their religious traditions than he and his former classmates were. He wondered why they held on to their religious and cultural values while Catholics seemed to have lost them. Florent became close friends with both practicing and non-practicing Muslims. After graduating, he did not really know what to do with his life and half-heartedly enrolled at the university. He did not attend his classes, however, and started wondering about the purpose of life. He began to read books about religion and drew closer to his Muslim friends. He also dated a non-practicing Muslim girl for a while. Florent thought about converting but held it back: he was unsure about his intention and worried he might be attracted towards Islam simply because he was surrounded by Muslims. He was afraid of publicly defining himself as “Muslim,” feared his family’s reaction and did not want to step foot in a mosque. For a while, he considered himself as “half-Muslim,” fasted here and there during the month of Ramadan and learned how to pray. One day, one of his Muslim friends dragged him to a small mosque, which was actually a praying space for *chibanis* (old, first-generation immigrants of North African descent). Florent prayed there and shook hands with a few old men. He liked the warmth and simplicity of the space. His visit to the mosque was eye-opening and a month later, he decided to convert. One of his friends took him to a Tablighi mosque. Florent was cowed and impressed by the men’s long dresses and turbans, which he found very authentic. He was also amazed to see many former drug-dealers and criminals who had completely remodeled their lives through their involvement in the Tablighi movement. He was served tea and biscuits and recited the *shahada* in this warm and embracing environment. Florent is well integrated into the Muslim community. He has attended countless Islamic conferences and is now well aware of the various movements within French Islam. He hung out with Salafis for a while but did not like their way of thinking. He is attracted towards Sufism but remains particularly attached to the Tabligh.

Françoise was born in the early 40s. She comes from a lower middle-class Catholic family in the south of France and is the eldest of six children. Both her parents worked as teachers in Catholic schools. She received a traditional Catholic education but was never particularly moved by Catholic teachings. She pursued literary studies, became an English teacher, got married and had a child rather early. She then got divorced, something which was much frowned upon in her milieu at the time. Françoise became

very active in the women's movement in the 1970s, fighting for women's rights, contraception, abortion and natural childbirth. These were formative years that durably shaped her understanding of life, love and death. During that period, she also met the man who was going to become her life-long partner. Both of them ended up embracing Islam, albeit for different reasons. The key existential question that accompanied Françoise throughout her life was always the same: God and women. Her first spiritual awakening came from the discovery of Black Madonnas, i.e. Marian statues common in southern regions of France that possess a specific demeanor and attitude, much more majestic than the depiction of Mary in Catholic orthodoxy. Her encounter with Islam occurred a little later, through her political activism and solidarity with the Middle-East and when she started taking Arabic classes. She also developed a strong interest for Black feminism and feminist struggles in the Third World, which fought against both patriarchy and Western domination. She was particularly influenced by various Muslim intellectuals she had the opportunity to meet, especially Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, a famous Muslim convert. She recited her *shahada* in front of two of her friends and became part of a small study group performing a textual, critical analysis of the Qur'an. Françoise seized Islam as an opportunity to enhance her feminist principles with a solid spiritual practice. She joined an interfaith women's group (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) that promoted a feminist reinterpretation of religious scripture in order to achieve spiritual equality. She developed international connections on this topic (Amina Wadud, Sa'diyya Shaikh, groups in Iran, Malaysia, etc.). Françoise became passionate about Islamic feminism and liberation theology. Feminist revolution and spiritual evolution were always intrinsically linked for her. Following the death of her partner, she also joined the CFPE (Collectif féministe pour l'égalité) in France, which brought her much relief and support. She never told her parents about her conversion and never wore the *hijab*, which, as she reminds, is not among the five Islamic pillars. She has always been disturbed by the strict gender segregation implemented in most French mosques. Françoise describes her journey towards Islam as one of internal struggle, oscillating between fascination and aversion and producing unexpected and powerful mental and emotional shifts. It was a life-long process, not something over and done with.

Gaëtan was raised in a West Indian Catholic middle-class household in the Parisian region. Both his parents were very attached to the Catholic faith, which they saw as an integral part of their West Indian identity. His mother in particular was very fervent. Gaëtan was very invested in his Christian identity throughout his teenage and young adult years and put the emphasis on its social aspect through his involvement with the Youth Christian Workers. But when Gaëtan left Paris to enroll in a school of fine arts in a much smaller town, his Christian practice faded away. Church goers in that town tended to be uptight white bourgeois families, lacking community spirit and solidarity. Gaëtan's religious practice became solitary, although he stuck to his evening prayers. As part of his artist career, he also further explored his Black identity and delved into Afrocentrism. Around that time, one of his closest friends, who came from a Muslim background, went to the United States. He was really shocked by the dominance of neoliberalism and individualism and upon coming back, decided to go back to his Islamic roots. He became much more serious about religion and started having lengthy discussions with Gaëtan on the differences between Christianity and Islam. Realizing that he could not answer most of his friend's questions, Gaëtan became afflicted by doubts. He became skeptical about the Trinity and progressively diminished the length of his prayers to eventually erase the figure of Jesus and focus exclusively on God. When he questioned his mother about it

and realized she had not read the Bible in its entirety, Gaëtan felt lost. He decided to be more serious in his spiritual quest and started reading the Qur’an. He describes his first encounter with the Islamic text as “explosive” and mind-blowing. He was particularly won over by the way the Qur’anic text allied faith with reason and science, and also by its emphasis on continuity with Christianity. He recited the *shahada* in front of his friend and started practicing Islam, at age 25. Gaëtan’s partner, Delphine (see above), did not know how to react at first but eventually embraced Islam as well a few months later. After a few years of practice, eager to grow spiritually, both Gaëtan and Delphine joined a Sufi *tariqa*, along with Gaëtan’s Muslim friend. They felt spiritually at home in this community oriented towards love and knowledge of the unseen. They started doing *dhikr* sessions every week with friends from the *tariqa*. They both feel that their relationship to the *sheikh* has opened up spiritual doors they had never envisioned before.

Gérard grew up in a white Catholic household in a diverse neighborhood in a large southern city. His mother had always been a practicing Catholic, but his father was baptized at age 67. Gérard himself was baptized, did his communion and confession of faith, and went to mass every Sunday throughout his childhood, teenage and early adult years. Later in his life, he was shocked by the pedophilia scandals surrounding the Catholic church and progressively grew away from his religion, to the point that he stopped practicing and almost became an atheist. When he was in his thirties, Gérard met a Moroccan Muslim woman online. After chatting for over a year and a half, he went to Morocco to see her and they decided to get married. She insisted that he converted to Islam before their wedding. He agreed to recite the *shahada* in front of an *adoul* (Muslim notary), but saw it as a mere administrative formality. They moved to France together. During two years, Gérard did not really practice Islam and was not particularly interested in it. He had stopped eating pork but kept drinking alcohol with friends and family. His wife gently taught him how to pray and tried to encourage him to become more involved in his religion. When she decided to put on the *hijab* following a personal life event, he was taken aback by it but respected her choice. She took him to a local imam who mildly recommended that he prayed regularly, saying that his habit of drinking alcohol would eventually fade away. Gérard was deeply moved by this soft and gentle approach. But what really triggered his religious involvement was the birth of his daughter: his willingness to be a consistent parent pushed him to practice Islam with more diligence. He has now completely left alcohol, fasts in Ramadan and performs his five daily prayers. He did not tell his parents about his conversion for fear of offending them. Gérard emphasizes that, had he not met his wife, he would never have embraced Islam. They have been married for ten years now and have two kids together, who are raised in the Islamic tradition.

Ghislaine was raised in a lower-middle class white household in a large city of northern France. Her parents were practicing Catholics and her mother taught religion classes in a middle school. Ghislaine and her siblings were baptized and did their communions. Throughout her childhood and teenage years, Ghislaine went to catechism classes, became active in Catholic youth groups, supervised children in Catholic associations and was a member of the Young Christian Workers. As a young adult, however, she became estranged from this milieu. Too many of her questions (on priests’ celibacy, on the Trinity) had remained unanswered and she felt weary. Ghislaine married a non-practicing Muslim man of Moroccan descent. They had one child together. Her husband would only practice the religion during the month of Ramadan and she took the habit of fasting with

him, out of respect and solidarity. Ghislaine was interested in Islam but her husband never taught her about it. When they eventually got divorced, she realized she had been given a wrong image of the religion through her interactions with non-practicing Muslims. She started reading more thoroughly about Islam. One day, Ghislaine attended a conference on Palestine and one of the speakers quoted a verse from the Qur'an, which was also projected onto a wall. Ghislaine suddenly entered in an altered state of mind and felt an awkward warmth in her heart. She left the conference room spaced out and confused. From then on, she knew she had to take the plunge. Ghislaine started contacting various mosques in her city but did not receive a warm welcome. Most prayer spaces were male-dominated and she felt shy and uncomfortable. After a two-month search, she eventually found a mosque that seemed open and welcoming. Yet, the imam dismissed her request to convert and suggested she took Islamic classes first. During a year, she attended all of them, always sitting in the front row. She was eventually offered the possibility to attend a *halaqa* (women's circle). She recited the *shahada* there, surrounded by women. She was 50 years-old. Soon after, Ghislaine started wearing the *hijab*, which felt very natural to her. Her siblings resented her conversion, but Ghislaine had always felt like the black sheep of the family anyways. Her ex-husband was shocked when he saw her covered, but her son accepted her decision. He is suffering from severe depression and Ghislaine tries to lead him on the right path to the best of her ability. Ghislaine went to Hajj with the friends she took *shahada* with. Again, she was in an altered state of mind throughout the whole journey and keeps confusing yet powerful memories of it. She is now active in a convert association that strives to make new converts feel comfortable and welcome.

Gwenaëlle hails from a lower middle class white family in Brittany. She describes her parents as down-to-earth, not endowed with high cultural capital, but she was raised with much love and affection. Her parents were cultural Catholics, in the sense that they followed the tradition without delving too much in its spiritual meaning. Her grandmother, however, was a very pious woman who devoted her free time to doing charity work in her village. Gwenaëlle was baptized and did her first and second communions. As a child, she strongly believed in God. In high school, however, she developed an interest for philosophy, Marxism and leftist revolutionary ideas: she realized religion was “the opium of the people” and became staunchly atheist. She came out as a Lesbian and joined radical feminist and anarchist/libertarian groups. She also became a fervent supporter of the Palestinian cause. As a young adult, Gwenaëlle started a career as a documentary film maker. Upon shooting a documentary in Algeria, she was deeply moved by Muslim practices of charity and solidarity and felt that God's presence came back into her life. Her involvement in pro-Palestinian organizations also drew her closer to Islam. For a while, Gwenaëlle defined herself as an “autonomous believer,” spiritual but not religious. Her mother passed away around the time she was rediscovering her spirituality. Deep-down, Gwenaëlle knew she was Muslim but was apprehensive of the social consequences of her conversion. She kept it to herself and gradually informed her closest friends. Gwenaëlle never pronounced her *shahada* in a public setting. She progressively incorporated Islamic practices into her life. She situates her conversion between age 27 and 29. Her family was rather accepting of her religious transformation, but she experienced contempt and rejection from several left-wing activists whom she thought were her friends. Gwenaëlle does not wear the *hijab* and is not visibly Muslim. She wants to protect her faith and keeps it away from identity politics and religious posing. Gwenaëlle feels that Islam has reinvigorated her social activism. She remains very involved in the Palestinian and feminist movement. She is in a relationship with a

Muslim woman. They are deeply in love and live their faith together. Gwenaëlle says they will get married once Palestine is free.

Isabelle was born and raised in a non-religious white middle-class household in a suburb of Paris. Her parents were indifferent, even hostile, towards religion, but enrolled her in a Catholic private school, which was supposed to be better than the local public school. Isabelle was fascinated by her school teacher, who was a nun, and went assiduously to mass and catechism classes, even though it was not mandatory. While in middle school, she requested to be baptized and did her communion, much to her parents’ surprise. She started living her life as a believing Christian and looked for friends who would share the same devotion for God. She soon became disappointed in Catholic religious services, which she thought were too folkloric and devoid of spiritual authenticity. She developed strong friendships with Muslim and Protestant girls, who were heavily involved in their religion. One day, out of curiosity, she bought a simple and basic book about Islam in a local bookstore and was particularly moved by the few verses of Ibn Arabi that formed the *incipit* (“*I believe in the religion of Love, whatever directions its caravans may take, for Love is my religion and my faith.*”). She started envying Muslims for their belief system, but did not think converting to Islam was an option. Soon afterwards, however, she met several Muslim converts through various acquaintances. She saw these encounters as signs God placed on her path and decided to become Muslim, at age 20. She recited the *shahada* in front of her friends at a local Islamic institute, but did not inform her parents. She took a trip to Spain in order to start practicing the religion in a quiet environment. But a couple of months later, her father passed away and Isabelle came back home to support her mother. She eventually told her about her conversion and started wearing the *hijab*. She also started supporting the Palestinian cause and took five trips to Palestine. Her mother was distraught at first, but upon meeting Isabelle’s Muslim and Palestinian friends, she developed positive opinions about Islam. Isabelle is very devout and God is all that matters in her life. An honest and upstanding woman, her decisions are always informed by her faith. Thus, after a few years, she began to question Palestinian activism, for being too identity-based and relying on a political instrumentalization of religion. She took some distance from it and started developing a more encompassing critique of Western capitalism and individualism. She eventually decided to join a Sufi *tariqa* that combines social activism and spirituality, along with a strong connection to the Islamic tradition. She has blossomed spiritually through that new environment.

Jacques was raised in a middle class white family in the Parisian region. His parents always identified as atheists. Upon growing older, his father adopted a more agnostic stance, but his mother always remained firm in her belief that there is no God. Jacques grew up without any religious education. As a child, he was torn between the will to follow his parents’ opinions and the inner feeling that something else existed, and would often perform strange rituals of his own invention. As a teenager and young adult, however, Jacques strongly identified with atheism and was very vocal in his critique of Catholicism. He developed anarchist and Marxist leanings. He fell in love and married a non-practicing Muslim woman of Algerian descent. Jacques had retained a negative opinion of Islam from his school books and did not have any Muslims in his entourage. Yet, the way his wife talked about the religion sparked his interest: Islam seemed much more modern than any other faith tradition. Jacques eventually opened a Qur’an, with the intention of criticizing it. But as he started reading, he was hit by faith. He became

intimately convinced that the Qur'an had come from a higher power and had not been edited by human hand. Jacques went to a major mosque in his city to recite the *shahada*. He also started taking Islamic and Arabic courses there. One of his teachers was an erudite man who belonged to a Sufi order. Jacques followed his lead and decided to take his *bayah*: he pledged spiritual allegiance to the order and began following the teachings of its *sheikh*. The twenty years that Jacques spent in the *tariqa* were enriching: he practiced *dhikr* and meditation every day, learned how to open his heart to the unseen and interacted with people who came from all walks in life (scientists, former gangsters, bankers, princes, eccentrics), all gathered under the authority of the *sheikh*. Jacques still cries when he remembers his spiritual leader, who passed away a few years ago. To him, he was a saint. Jacques became a steady practitioner of the faith and performed Hajj, although he feels he was not entirely ready for it and missed out on the experience. Jacques and his wife had three children, who are more or less practicing Islam. But they eventually got divorced. Swamped with work and emotional hardships caused by his separation, Jacques distanced himself from the *tariqa*. He started following a more relaxed approach to the religion (he does not fast any more during the month of Ramadan and allows himself a glass of wine from time to time). Jacques is religiously re-married to a non-Muslim woman. He is hoping to resume a more coherent Islamic practice and give his partner a taste for Sufism.

Janice grew up in a lower middle class, large Cape Verdean family in the Parisian region. Her parents were Catholic believers, although they did not go to church very often. As a child, Janice was baptized and did her first and second communions. While she always strongly believed in God, she was not entirely convinced by Catholic rituals: she did her second communion mostly to be able to taste the holy bread, which she shared with her sister. She always had questions about the Trinity, priesthood and the meaning of the Host but was never satisfied with the answers she was given. Janice grew up in a diverse neighborhood and had many Muslim friends. As a young adult, she started watching Youtube videos on the prophets and saints of various religions, mostly Islam and Christianity. She felt like Islam was more logical and strongly identified with it. Janice considered herself a Muslim right away, since, in her view, believing in one God automatically makes one a Muslim. She started practicing the religion loosely, fasting a few days here and there during the month of Ramadan. After five years, she decided to formally take her *shahada*. She was 29. She went to a large and beautiful mosque nearby her house. The imam invited her to his office, made sure she was sound and reasonable and had her recite the testimony of faith. Janice felt strange in the heat of the moment but reminded herself that, deep down, she had already been Muslim for five years. She quickly informed her parents, who were quite accepting of her conversion. Her older brother and her grandmother, however, worried that she would don the *hijab*, which they saw as oppressive to women. But Janice has not put it on yet, since she does not feel ready to face scrutinizing looks. She will consider wearing it later. Janice is engaged to a Muslim man of North African descent. They are willing to get married and have children.

Jean was born in a white middle-class Catholic family in a rural area of southern France. Religion was present culturally and symbolically in his household, but not in a deep spiritual sense. It was only punctually addressed, when tragedies or death occurred. Although his parents did not have a sustained religious practice, Jean was baptized and went to catechism. He always believed in God and strongly identified with Catholicism. He would feel offended when people talked bad about religion or made jokes about Jesus.

When Jean was a child, his parents moved to a lower-class neighborhood in the suburb of a large city. He was surrounded by second-generation immigrants of North African descent but developed a negative image of Islam, which he associated with being Arab and delinquent. After going to a Catholic high school, Jean went to the university. There, he met students from various cultural backgrounds, including Muslims. They would often engage in intellectual debates over religion. Jean would stand for his Christian beliefs but often found himself short on theological arguments. He decided to gather material about Islam in order to best disprove it but his investigations only increased his doubts concerning Christianity. Jean was also impressed by the good manners and behavior his Muslim friends displayed. At some point, he ventured to a friend that he was contemplating embracing Islam. This friend, however, had recently become much stricter in his religious practice and put a lot of pressure on Jean to convert as soon as possible, which took him aback. Jean was overwhelmed with doubts and hesitations. He knew Islam was the truth but was afraid of antagonizing his family. He eventually left to study in the UK for a year. He lived on his own for the first time and seized the opportunity to do some serious soul searching. One day, he bought a Qur'an in a library and started reading it on the bus. He came across a section on hypocrites and the punishment they incurred. Jean suddenly realized he was one of them and ran the risk of going to hell. He rushed to his apartment and asked his Muslim friend, who had meanwhile softened his understanding of the religion, to be his witness. He recited the *shahada* straight away, at age 21. Jean assiduously practices Islam and avidly seeks Islamic knowledge. He particularly likes Sheikh Hamza Yusuf. He proudly merges his French and Muslim identity. He rejects victimization discourses on the part of his coreligionists, who, he thinks, complain too much about Islamophobia. He has joined a Sufi *tariqa* and regularly takes part in Sufi gatherings with Fabien (see below), a friend who embraced Islam and joined him to do the interview.

Jérémy was born in a lower middle class white family in eastern France. He grew up in a small and diverse town, well known for being a Communist bastion. Jérémy's father was a laborer and his mother a nurse. They both descended from Italian immigrants and were actively involved in the Communist party. Their political commitment was a strong part of their identity and family dinners always revolved around politics. Jérémy's father was staunchly atheist and always considered that religion was meant to divert the working class from political struggles. His mother remained attached to Catholic cultural traditions but was not really a believer. Jérémy's sister was also a very vocal atheist. Jérémy's older brother, however, had friends from all walks of life and was always tolerant regarding religion. He would often call his family out on their anti-religious or Islamophobic comments. Jérémy was influenced by him and always respected people's religious feelings. In high school, he listened to a lot of French conscious rap and took part in various left-wing political movements. He was active in student unions and the pro-Palestinian movement, became the spokesperson for the Communist party's youth section and organized various demonstrations, strikes and blockades. He was atheist but believed in fate, destiny and great historical figures. In his view, Jesus and Mohamed deserved to be respected like Che Guevara and Malcolm X for having changed the course of history. The period Jérémy came of age as a young activist corresponded to 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq and the Second Intifada in Palestine. He felt compelled to learn more about Islam in order to counter his right-wing political opponents who depicted Islam as a backward religion. Although he did not believe in God, he liked the fact that Islam recognized all prophets and emphasized continuity with Christianity and

Judaism. While doing his intellectual search, Jérémy experienced hardships in his sentimental life and went through several phases of depression during which he drank and smoked a lot. He envied his practicing Muslim friends who were able to seek refuge in prayer. Out of despair, Jérémy would often try to talk to God at night, but it only made things worse. After a painful break-up, he reconvened with a high school friend of Algerian descent who happened to be Muslim. They became romantically involved and Jérémy decided to resume his study of Islam. One night, Jérémy was unable to sleep and started reading the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. His fatigue vanished and he kept on reading for hours until he fell asleep. When he woke up the next morning, he knew he was Muslim. All his mental blocks about religion had disappeared. He called a friend who put together a ceremony of conversion. Jérémy recited the *shahada* in front of his Muslim girlfriend, his friends and a *sheikh* from Mauritania. He was 23. Shortly after, he got married with his girlfriend. They did both a civil and a religious ceremony. Jérémy is now practicing his faith while pursuing his social activism in the Palestinian movement and various left-wing organizations. He proudly reconciles his Islamic beliefs with his Marxist leanings.

Ludovic hails from a white middle-class family in Marseille. His parents divorced when he was a child. His father was a *pied noir* (French national born in Algeria, who had to move to France after the independence). He hailed from a Christian background but defined himself as agnostic. His mother had a Catholic upbringing but embraced Buddhism later in her life. Ludovic was baptized but never received any strong religious education, nor did he develop an interest for Catholicism, which he thought was too hierarchical. In his early twenties, Ludovic went through a painful romantic breakup and spiraled into depression and despair. He started drinking a lot. He took a trip to Algeria, to visit his father birthplace and get a change of air. One evening, upon hearing the *adhan*, Ludovic collapsed, prostrated on the floor and cried during several minutes. Following this very emotional experience, he decided to quit drinking and started learning about Islam. Back to France, one of his Muslim friends took him to a local mosque. Once again, Ludovic was struck when he heard the *adhan* and felt immense peace when he performed his first prayer in congregation. He progressively incorporated prayer into his life and gradually became a Muslim (he never formally took his *shahada*). Ludovic feels that Islam considerably soothed him, answered his existential questions and helped him find happiness again. But his conversion also created strong conflicts with his family, especially his father who had developed an antagonistic relationship to this religion after his traumatic exile from Algeria. During his first years as a Muslim, Ludovic took a Muslim name for himself and developed “Arab” ways (eating and speaking like an Algerian, supporting the Algerian national soccer team) until he realized he was French and should be proud of his identity. He now lives a more balanced life as a French Muslim, works as an elementary school teacher and is considering getting married.

Mélissa was born in rural Burgundy, in one of France’s smallest villages. She was raised by white, upper middle-class, highly educated parents who taught her open-mindedness and tolerance. They were completely atheist and staunchly refused to register their daughters for catechism classes but always encouraged them to respect everyone’s beliefs. From her early childhood, Mélissa always intuitively believed in a higher power but lacked a frame to express her spirituality. Throughout her teenage years, her parents insisted she went on summer camps with disadvantaged youth and she very much enjoyed being the only white girl among second-generation immigrants of North African descent.

She felt a strong attraction towards Arab culture and civilization and took Arabic classes at the university. Islam slowly made its way to the back of her mind. She left aside the journalism career she had once envisioned and went to work as an au pair for a year in the United States, an enriching experience that enabled her to center herself and further develop her spirituality. Upon coming back to France, she became active in various associations working in disadvantaged urban areas, especially a collective campaigning against racial profiling. A privileged woman, she felt the urge to help those who did not benefit from the same treatment. Through her activism, MéliSSa became surrounded by Muslims, which further strengthened her interest for the religion. She was completely in her element. She started reading about Islam, stopped smoking and drinking, began to eat *halal* food, prayed and fasted in Ramadan, until she eventually took her *shahada* on her own. For a long time, she kept it private because she considered her faith to be a highly intimate topic. She pursued her spiritual journey which culminated with her donning the *hijab* during a trip to London a year after her conversion, a moment she describes as euphoric and spiritually reinvigorating. At the time of the interview, MéliSSa was the spokesperson of an organization fighting against Islamophobia, and used her identity as a white French woman to break stereotypes about Islam. She was contemplating getting married and saw Islamic marriage as an opportunity to further consolidate her faith.

Noémie was raised in a non-practicing white middle class rural Christian household in a small village of southwestern France. She was baptized and did her communion, but mostly because of herd instinct. God and religion were seldom mentioned in her family. Growing up, Noémie defined herself as agnostic. She entertained a strong spiritual relationship to nature, but was skeptical of Catholicism. The concept of the Trinity was beyond her understanding and the depiction of God as an old bearded man felt absurd. Throughout her childhood and teenage years, Noémie never had any Muslims in her entourage. She made her first Muslim friends as a young adult, when she moved to a large city. One of them was a strong and outspoken woman who wore the *hijab*. As Noémie started inundating her with questions regarding her headscarf, she invited her to Muslim women gatherings. They talked about feminism, the meaning of the veil and social justice. Noémie was mesmerized by these young second-generation immigrant women who were generous, active, humble and very intelligent. Out of curiosity, she started learning about Islamic feminism and attended many conferences. Her network of Muslim friends and acquaintances expanded. Around that time, Noémie also went through an identity crisis. She felt uncomfortable with her white French identity, which she associated with slavery, colonialism, racism and individualism. She started reading about the concept of *négritude* and drew closer to her Occitan roots. She did not believe in God and was absolutely uninterested in converting to Islam, but envied her friends who believed in a higher power and found comfort and meaning in it. Noémie became romantically involved with a practicing Muslim man from Mauritania. She was impressed by his serenity and firm belief in God, but did not feel it was for her. Yet, a series of triggering events made her change her mind. She first lost her mother, which reconfigured her understanding of life, death, femininity and motherhood. One day, a Sufi friend also told her she was Muslim without knowing it and Noémie felt secretly happy, which surprised her. A little later, she accompanied her boyfriend to the mosque for the first time. Uninterested, uncovered, she sat in the hallway with a book and waited for him. Yet, upon hearing the *adhan*, she started crying without knowing why during several minutes. As she shared her skepticism to an old Muslim man who was selling tea near the mosque, he advised her to ask God a very simple thing: “if You exist, Guide me.” A couple of weeks later, while wondering

about the meaning of existence in her shower, Noémie suddenly felt His presence. She was engulfed with infinite love and felt a veil had been lifted from her eyes. She left her friends and boyfriend and withdrew for a month in her childhood village, to cut herself off from any outside influence. Her conviction kept growing and after a month, she decided she was ready. She recited her *shahada* at a local mosque and got married to her boyfriend the following day. They rapidly had one child together. A couple of months after, Noémie started wearing the *hijab*. She felt proud and happy to be identified as non-white for the first time, and used her new visual appearance to counter stereotypes about Islam. Noémie was at first very active in anti-racist, anti-Islamophobia and feminist movements but eventually decided to take her distances to center herself. She is now more preoccupied with inner spiritual reform and serious religious practice.

Ophélie is strongly attached to her family. She belongs to a white Catholic middle-class household and grew up in the north of France. Her parents were non-practicing Christians, who only attended church for baptisms, weddings or funerals. Ophélie was baptized but did not do her communion, nor did she receive a thorough religious education. She went to school in a fairly diverse neighborhood and had the opportunity to interact with more or less practicing Muslim girls from a young age. Ophélie was impressed by the dedication of women wearing *hijab* and liked the charity spirit of the month of Ramadan. Ophélie started reading about Islam and was attracted to the spiritual discipline it offered, which contrasted with her family's loose religious practices. She started fasting here and there during the month of Ramadan when she was granted permission not to eat at home. She told her mother she did not like pork anymore and preferred eating quiche with chicken inside. She also began to wear clothes that were more covering. She hung out with girls who were mostly of North African descent and her parents developed suspicions about her behavior and company. They kept a check on her. When her Muslim friends lent her some books about Islam, her mother threw them in the trash. She also enjoined Ophélie to wear short skirts during summer. One day, she found a diary in which Ophélie had explicitly written down her desire to become Muslim. It was a catastrophe. Ophélie's parents interpreted her words as a sign of betrayal and screamed at her. Her mother cried and her father threw all her clothes on the floor. They forbade her from seeing her Muslim friends and confiscated her bedroom keys so that she could not shut herself away to pray. They also asked her elder brother to keep a watch on her at school. Ophélie was distraught to cause such pain to her parents, whom she loved dearly. Although her behavior was irreproachable in every other respect, they resented her religious inclinations. She decided to abandon her spiritual quest. Ophélie went on with her life, pursued her studies and started a career in legal aid. At age 25, she went through a depressive and melancholic phase and realized she needed to resume her spiritual quest. She felt the urge to convert to Islam. In spite of her fear to antagonize her parents, she could not postpone her choice any longer. She went to a nearby mosque and recited the *shahada* in the imam's office, in front of a few friends. Ophélie has not told her parents yet that she converted for good. It is uneasy for her to practice her faith since she still lives in their house. However, she cares about maintaining loving relationships with them and is ready to patiently endure their hostility. She is hoping to progressively make them accept her choice.

Pauline hails from a lower middle class white household in southwestern France. She grew up in a very small and homogeneous town, which she describes as "boring." Pauline was not raised religiously. Her father was more or less a believer, but her mother was

firmly atheist: having been forced to attend catechism in her childhood, she strongly rejected any form of organized religion. Pauline was nonetheless baptized by nuns in a convent, at the demand of her grandmother who was the only practicing Catholic in her family. Pauline was never particularly interested in Catholicism and understood nothing when going to church. But she always had an aspiration for mysticism and esotericism, although she did not have the resources to develop it in her small town. In middle school, she developed a passion for rap and hip-hop, a rather uncommon hobby among her classmates. Animated by a strong quest for meaning, she felt isolated and on the margin. Due to tensions in her family, Pauline left her home and went to a boarding high school in a larger city. There, she was mostly surrounded by second-generation immigrants of North African descent. She was immersed in Arab culture and enjoyed it. One of the few white girls in her high school, Pauline was very affected by her friends' experiences with racism at school and with the police. She revolted against injustice. One of her closest friends was Thibault (see below), a convert to Islam, and she was impressed by his uprightness. He offered her a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, written by Etienne Dinet. She found it incredible and from then on, started incorporating Islamic teachings into her life. Pauline never did a formal conversion ceremony. She did things her way and progressively became a Muslim, although not a fully practicing one. She never wore the *hijab* since she could never understand the rationale behind putting something on her head. She started spending time in the library reading about Islam and developed a strong interest for Sufism. Upon coming to Paris, Pauline became romantically involved with a Moroccan man, who followed a Salafi understanding of the religion. She learned what rigid Islamic practice looked like. They separated when Pauline realized he was already married with two children in Morocco. With the help of Thibault, Pauline founded a humanitarian association and started to learn about the history of slavery, colonialism, Third world politics and Black struggles. Eager to combine her political engagement with a strong spiritual practice, she explored various Sufi orders and decided to join one. At first, she was exhilarated by the spiritual discipline the order provided. She incorporated *dhikr* and mediation into her life and did extensive work on herself. As she progressively drew closer to various *moqaddam*, however, she realized that the *tariqa* was riddled with petty politics, infighting and psychological manipulation. Traumatized, she left the order. Through her work in the association, Pauline met a Muslim thinker who introduced her to Islamic liberation theology, Islamic knighthood (*futuwwah*) and Islamic environmentalism. This man became her mentor and taught her how to fuse social activism and spirituality. Her new interest for environmentalism pushed Pauline to draw closer to her rural roots (her grandparents were peasants) and to revisit her Occitan heritage. Pauline does not identify as French any longer, and prefers to put the emphasis on her Occitan identity. She also started learning about Islamic feminism and ecofeminism. Pauline worked for a while with a shaman who performed various rituals connected to nature and decided to do a training in naturopathy and herbal medicine. She now describes herself as a Muslim “sorcerer’s apprentice.” When her friend Pablo (see below), also a convert to Islam, developed an interest for Shiism, Pauline decided to explore the matter as well. She had never reflected on the differences between Sunnism and Shiism and felt she was a Sunni only by default. She found that Shiism was historically right since no one could support the massacre of the Prophet’s family by Mu’awiya and decided to define herself as Shia. Although Pauline was eventually disappointed by the virulence and sectarianism of some Shi’a leaders, she decided to stick to Shi’a practices, such as poetry and prayer because they felt more natural to her. In 2011,

she traveled to Tunis and met the man who is now her husband. They live in France and explore new Islamic practices together.

Rachel was raised in a white middle class household in southeastern France. Her father came from a very practicing Catholic family that followed charismatic tendencies and strict rules regarding sexuality. As a young adult, he pursued his spiritual involvement in the Christian Left, until he progressively distanced himself from the movement and became hostile to any form of organized religion. Rachel's mother, who hailed from both a Catholic and Protestant background, never displayed any particular feeling towards religion. Although her parents never talked about God, Rachel experienced strong religious fervor from a very young age. At 8 years-old, she asked to be baptized. She enrolled for catechism classes on her own and did her first communion. She went to mass every Sunday, alone. As a child, her wish was to become a nun. Yet, she always had a critical stance towards Catholic teachings and understood early on that the Bible was to be interpreted metaphorically. In middle school, Rachel realized that religions were responsible for many problems in the world and decided to identify as agnostic. She rejected organized religion and went on with her life without appealing to God. In college, Rachel studied political science and enrolled in a specific program on the Arab world. She thought it was necessary to understand post 9/11 geopolitics and relate to the situation of North Africans in France. She studied Arabic and took courses on Islam and Islamism. She felt she was gathering knowledge to counter both Islamophobic tropes and radical Islamist discourses. During her second year, out of curiosity, she fasted the entire month of Ramadan, completely on her own. She also wrote a thesis on the headscarf controversy and the 2004 *hijab* ban in French public schools. Rachel, who was coming from a left-wing family strongly attached to French Republican values, realized for the first time that France was hardly a bed of roses. Her thesis proved an opportunity to delve into the "French collective unconscious" regarding religion, race, post-colonialism and women's dress. She interpreted the ban as an expression of institutional racism. Rachel spent her third year abroad in Egypt. It was a difficult year: she was away from her family for the first time, suffering from the heat and worn out by daily street sexual harassment. She had brought her baptism cross in her luggage and, for the first time in ten years, turned to God to find relief. In her Arabic class in Cairo, she met a French woman who had embraced Islam. They became close friends and Rachel asked her to teach her how to pray. They stayed in contact when they both came back to France. Rachel went through a severe depressive period upon returning from Egypt. Yet, she continued to borrow books on Islam from her friend, who had a rather liberal and reformist understanding of the religion. One day, she gathered her courage and told her she was ready to convert. She took a deep breath and recited the *shahada*. To her, Islam was both a way to blossom spiritually and identify politically with the oppressed. Throughout her spiritual search, Rachel did not visit any mosque or Muslim association. A bisexual and feminist woman having antagonistic relations to organized religion and religious obligations, she knew she would not fit easily in the Muslim community and preferred to practice the faith on her own. But when she learned about Islamic feminism, especially the work of Amina Wadud, and the existence of an LGBTQ mosque in Paris, she realized there was a possibility for her to fully belong. She became very active in those various movements and gained some exposure as a public figure, until she decided to take her distances to center herself. It is no accident if Rachel chose for herself the Muslim name of *Ijtihad*, which refers to a form of historically situated, independent reasoning in interpreting religious law. Rachel decided to wear the *hijab* two years into her conversion. She refuses to make grand

statements about the significance of her scarf, but experienced it on a personal level as a symbol of empowerment, which enabled her to overcome some of her insecurities. Overtime, she learned how to disregard the various Islamophobic comments she elicited as a result, although it was particularly tense and difficult with her father. Rachel is also an avid hookah smoker and has to negotiate her belonging as a white woman wearing headscarf in predominantly male shisha bars. Her acceptance in various Muslim and non-Muslim spaces is a daily struggle, but she feels it has made her stronger.

Rita hails from a middle-class family in southwestern France. Her parents divorced when she was young and she progressively lost contact with her father, who was staunchly atheist. She was raised by her mother and grandmother, who came from a poor *piéd noir* family in Algeria and had moved to France after independence. Neither of them was particularly practicing but both embraced a warm and loving Christian Mediterranean culture. They taught Rita and her brother that God is love and opened their minds to the existence of other religions. Rita always believed in God and prayed to Him from time to time. Her grandmother remained strongly attached to Algeria and passed on her nostalgia to Rita, who thought for a while that she was Algerian. She drew closer to Arab culture and made a large number of North African friends, who also introduced her to Islam. Culture and religion were closely intertwined in Rita’s mind and she started going to mosques to interact with imams. She was partly convinced, but had doubts concerning the position of women in Islam. At 20 years-old, she took a trip to Senegal and stayed in a practicing Muslim family for a couple of months. She was immersed in an Islamic environment and started praying. She found African Islam more tolerant and less gender normative than North African Islam. The family she was staying with was thrilled to see a white Western woman interested in Islam and gently pushed conversion on her. They took her to Touba, a famous religious city, and Rita half-heartedly recited the *shahada* in front of a local marabout. She was put on a pedestal and treated like a queen, which made her feel very uncomfortable. Uninterested in dogma and ritual display, Rita wished she had done things differently, with a stronger focus on spirituality and inner transformation. Upon coming back to France, she tried to stick to Islamic practices but, alone and lacking a conducive environment, she returned to her old ways, partying and smoking *marijuana* with friends. She became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man of North African descent. Yet, became abusive and violent and they separated after she got pregnant. Rita is now raising her daughter alone and strives to pass down a good understanding of Islam to her. She goes through ups and downs in her practice of the faith. Praying, fasting in Ramadan and staying away from smoking are particularly challenging. After going through phases of anxiety and guilt regarding her imperfect practice of the religion, Rita now prefers to focus on maintaining a good heart and pure intentions, hoping that practice will become easier over time. A single mother, she can hardly find time to attend Islamic conferences and Muslim community events. But she reads a lot and has recently developed a strong interest for Islamic feminism, Sufism and Islamic liberating theology.

Romain grew up in a middle-class household in southwestern France. His mother was a white Catholic woman whose practice of the religion varied throughout Romain’s life. His father’s family had a complex history of immigration and passing. Romain’s great grandparents were Kabylis from Algeria. Upon arriving to France, they changed their names, forgot their cultural and religious habits and erased their history in order to pass as French and integrate into French society. Romain’s grandfather married a French

woman and did not tell her about his childhood in Algeria. She discovered it on her own later. Romain's father learned about his Algerian identity when he was 15. Romain himself was always fascinated by his family's connection to Algeria and traveled there a few times on his own to reconnect to his "roots." His father's side of the family were never religious and defined themselves as "humanists," but Romain's mother baptized her son and encouraged him to do his communion. Romain believed in God but was not particularly interested in Catholicism. When he was a teenager, his family moved to a diverse neighborhood in the Parisian region and Romain became friends with second-generation immigrants of African and North African descent. For a few years, he behaved like a "little jerk," until age 16 when he started wondering about the meaning of existence. Romain was very much into science and one of his Muslim friends lent him a book about the scientific miracles of the Qur'an. Romain found the Islamic concept of pure monotheism appealing. He was also unconsciously drawn to Islam because of his Algerian ancestry, something he realized later. He recited the *shahada* in front of a few friends, at age 17. For a few years, Romain did not practice the religion seriously. He followed his non-practicing Muslim friends and behaved like a "name-tag" Muslim: he stopped drinking alcohol and eating pork and fasted during the month of Ramadan but did not delve further into the religion. It is only five years later that a friend incited him to be more steady in his Islamic practice. Romain started praying and learned Arabic. He remembers his first congregational prayer as a key moment, much more important than his *shahada*. Romain now tries to maintain his practice, although he has ups and downs. Most people assume that he is a born Muslim of Algerian descent and he does not contradict them. He recently tried to marry his girlfriend of Moroccan descent but her parents opposed the wedding on the ground that he was not Moroccan. Romain was quite disconcerted by this marital setback, which he sees as the only negative aspect of his integration in the Muslim community, otherwise friendly and cheerful.

Roxane was raised in a white family in southern France. Her parents were non-practicing Christians. She locates their religious convictions half-way between belief and unbelief. When Roxanne was 15, both her parents passed away. She and her brothers were placed in a children's care home that was run by nuns and were raised in the Catholic tradition. Roxanne was never interested in Catholicism but, as a teenager mourning her parents and entertaining conflictual relationships with adults, she always felt a strong need to talk to God. She went through very difficult moments. Coming of age in a diverse neighborhood, Roxanne had a lot of Muslim friends. Her best friend was a non-practicing Muslim woman. They became roommates and used to paint the town red together. At some point, however, her friend became more invested in her religion, stopped drinking and put on the *hijab*, which created some distance in their friendship. Her partner also became very religious: he grew a beard and refused to greet Roxanne by kissing her on the cheek, which really offended her. The two friends grew apart and eventually stopped seeing one another. Roxanne started a therapy to overcome the suffering caused by her parents' death, which did not work. She increasingly turned to God to find solace. One night she made a dream that she still vividly remembers: she was in a desert and a beautiful, surreal light surrounded her. In front of her, several women covered with long white veils were marching towards the source of the light. Calmness and peace exuded from them. In the backdrop, a dog bayed at the moon. When Roxanne woke up, she decided to become Muslim. She recited the *shahada* on her own, at age 23. She stopped drinking and eating pork overnight and started fasting during the month of Ramadan. For several years, her Islamic practice boiled down to these three things. But two years ago, Roxanne also

started praying and going to the mosque on a more regular basis. While her two brothers had always been accepting of her conversion, they had very harsh words when they saw her prostrating on the floor, which really hurt her. Roxanne does not wear the *hijab* because she does not want to face problems at work. For six years, she was romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man. She expected him to accompany her in her spiritual journey and wanted to get married religiously but they separated when he showed no interest in doing so. Roxanne registered on a Muslim dating website to find a spouse but is not really convinced by it. She recently saw her former best friend again and they were able to talk through their past disagreements.

Sébastien was born in a lower middle-class white family in the Parisian region. Both his parents came from a working-class background and his family had always been rooted in left-wing politics. Sébastien’s father was firmly atheist, but his mother lived by Buddhist teachings and practices for over ten years. Throughout his childhood, Sébastien was completely uninterested in religion. The only things he knew about God came from the TV series *Little house on the prairie*. In his teenage years, he became active in left-wing politics and joined anarchist/libertarian groups. He equated religion with oppression and became a staunch atheist. In his early twenties, however, he became interested in spirituality and tried (more or less successfully) to incorporate Buddhist meditation practices into his life. Sébastien became particularly involved in anti-racist movements, anti-Islamophobia activism and the Palestinian cause. During a trip to Palestine, he met a number of young practicing Muslims who became his close friends. At age 25, he became romantically involved with a practicing Muslim woman who was a philosophy teacher. She was very involved in her religion but also critical of mainstream Islamic orthodoxy (especially regarding gender segregation). When a LGBT mosque opened up in Paris, Sébastien’s girlfriend was very enthusiastic about it and took him there. He was invited to pray and participate in collective rituals, even though he was not Muslim. The fact that men and women could pray side by side, that homosexuality was not condemned and that sexuality could be openly discussed was in line with his own political positions. He felt spiritually at home and discovered that many Qur’anic teachings corresponded to his own feminist, antiracist, anti-colonialist and environmentalist opinions. Even after separating from his girlfriend, Sébastien kept an interest for Islam. He converted on his own at age 26. Sébastien is not really a strict practitioner of the faith and drinks alcohol from time to time. Some of his friends make fun of him for not practicing Islam seriously, but he ignores their comments and pursues his journey. He is now in a relationship with a Muslim woman of Malian descent who already has two children. He proudly claims both his Islamic belief and anarchist opinions and is currently reflecting on the links between historical materialism and Islamic theology. He has also been working on a series of interviews with activists who are both anarchists and believers, thereby dismissing the alleged incompatibility between the two positions.

Sophie hails from a middle class white household in eastern France. Her parents were non-practicing Catholics. They were quite critical of the church and its theology, although they raised their children in the tradition. Sophie and her siblings were baptized, did their communion and went to catechism classes. Sophie keeps fond memories of her as a small child attending mass and wearing an alb. But growing up, she found Catholic beliefs limiting and stopped attending church. For a while, she loosely held so-called Buddhist beliefs about life and reincarnation. In high school, Sophie moved to a larger city and started encountering Muslims. One of her friends was a convert to Islam and they often

talked about spirituality. When she was in her early twenties, she took a short trip to Morocco with a group of friends. She enjoyed hearing the *adhan* and using religious vocabulary (*bismillah*, *alhamdulillah*, *barakallahufik*) on a daily basis. In France, saying such things was often ridiculed. Her Muslim friends' beliefs resonated with her. She quivered when she saw them pray and progressively developed the inner conviction that Islam was the right path. She started taking Arabic classes. After graduating, she went back to Morocco for an internship and stayed in a practicing Muslim family for several months. There, Islam became an absolute certainty. Her host family left for Hajj and came back for Id, radiating faith and happiness. Sophie decided to take part in the Id prayer with them. She learned prayer moves and donned her most beautiful dress. Upon hearing the Qur'an, she started crying like she never had before. She had a hard time recovering her breath for several hours. From then on, Sophie started praying on a more or less regular basis. Upon going back to France, she tried to merge her newly discovered faith with her former lifestyle, which was not easy. Sophie was dating a non-practicing Muslim man, hanging out with male friends, rapping, doing graffiti, drinking alcohol and smoking *marijuana*. After a while, she realized her life was full of contradictions and started doubting her choice. One day, her Muslim neighbor took her to the mosque to formally recite her *shahada*, but Sophie had drunk the night before and was riddled with guilt. She went through a dark period, during which she was overwhelmed with fear and anxiety and struggled with depression. She was afraid of being a hypocrite and going to hell. She stopped praying, let the month of Ramadan pass without fasting, and smoked a lot. With the help of her Muslim boyfriend, she slowly resumed practicing Islam and was able to overcome her doubts. Her faith is now stronger than before. Sophie eventually separated from her boyfriend and joined a Muslim association, which enabled her to sustain her practice and strengthen her knowledge. She does not feel ready to wear the *hijab* yet but is thinking about it. Her parents never accepted her conversion, which they understood as a sign of weakness and rebellion.

Thibault grew up in a white middle-class family in a small village of southwestern France. While his grand-mother was a traditional Catholic woman, his parents had strong doubts about religion. His mother was inconsistent in her beliefs and his father often expressed agnostic, even atheist opinions. Thibault did not really receive any religious education and the catechism classes he attended as a kid did not leave any mark on him. Religion was absent from his life, until his middle school years, when he discovered Bob Marley and reggae music, and started believing in a higher power. At that time, Thibault was involved in various petty criminal activities (smoking drugs, stealing) and decided he wanted to pull his life back into line. He also felt the need to develop a more ritualized and standardized relationship to God. He discovered Islam through high school friends of Moroccan descent. As the only white middle-class boy among disadvantaged second-generation immigrants, Thibault also strived to demonstrate he belonged to the group. Following a discussion about Islam, one of his Muslim friends took him to the mosque and told him he could take *shahada* right away, if he wanted to. Thibault, quite surprised and unprepared, agreed to recite the testimony of faith, at age 19. From then on, he started practicing Islam quite strictly and literally, praying every day, leaving alcohol and music, and staying away from women. It was hard at the beginning and he fell off a few times, but eventually managed to follow a Salafi understanding of the religion. He was put on a pedestal by his local Muslim community, which both flattered him and made him feel uncomfortable. At some point, he wondered whether he was practicing so strictly for the sake of God or to please others. During a seasonal job, he encountered Muslims of

Senegalese descent who introduced him to “African Islam” and African Sufism. After reading books by Amadou Hampaté Ba and Tierno Bokar, Thibault developed a fascination for Mali. He met a Malian woman online, traveled over there and married her. They now live in France and have two children together. His wife has a much more relaxed understanding of Islam than he does and Thibault has considerably mellowed under her influence. He now practices Islam much more loosely than he used to, privileging inner development over outward practice. His current struggle is to accurately transmit the Islamic tradition to his children.

Vanessa hails from a lower middle-class family in southwestern France. Her mother was white and her father was from a mixed background (African-American and Polish). Vanessa was raised in the Catholic faith and her family went to church on a regular basis. She was baptized and did her two communions. She always believed in God. Vanessa first heard about Islam when she was 8 years-old during a discussion with her father: as he explained to her that Santa Claus did not exist, he also told her that people, such as Muslims, worshipped God differently than Catholics. Growing up, Vanessa had a couple of Muslim friends and she would at times question them about their practices. At age 18, she left her parents’ house and moved in with a friend. She lived what she calls an “excessive” life, partying and drinking a lot. One evening, at a night club, surrounded by people dancing and drinking, she realized she was bored and tired. A man of Algerian descent was sitting next to her, feeling bored as well. They decided to go outside and sat on a bench, in the street. She asked a number of questions about Islam and he told her everything he knew. They talked all night long. Vanessa liked the fact that there was no original sin in Islamic theology and that Eve (and, therefore, women at large) was not considered guilty of anything. She was also won over by the direct relationship that believers could establish with God, without any priestly intermediary. A few weeks later, Vanessa was meditating in her apartment and visualized two paths, one leading to the same kind of life she had always lived and one unknown path leading to peace and serenity. She suddenly decided to change her life and went back to her parents’ house. She was 20 years-old and told them she was considering becoming Muslim. Things became very conflictual and she left again to move to Paris. For several years, Vanessa considered herself a Muslim, but did not exactly know what that entailed in terms of practice, until she became friends with a very practicing Muslim man who did not listen to music and taught her the basics of the religion. At some point, Vanessa became romantically involved with a non-practicing Muslim man of Algerian descent but they disagreed over religious interpretations and quickly separated. For a while, Vanessa did not know where to seek Islamic knowledge and was “misguided” by various movements she now qualifies as “sects” (Shiism and Ahabash). Feeling uncomfortable in most French mosques, she learned about Islam on her own, until she became friends with a group of Muslim men who were very serious about religion and shared their knowledge with her. Vanessa progressively decided to wear the *hijab*. She would remove it before entering the hairdressing salon where she used to work but it nonetheless created a lot of tensions with her management. Animated by the will to practice her religion freely, Vanessa went to see the director and asked to be transferred to one of the company’s salons in a Muslim country. He happened to have a job opening in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and after two months, Vanessa was gone. She spent three years in Saudi Arabia, which she describes as the happiest years of her life. She wore the full veil (with gloves) and was completely immersed in her religious practice. Every month, she went to Mecca to perform the *umrah*. There, she felt immense peace and could stay for hours in the *masjid al-haram*,

reading the Qur'an and crying. But Vanessa encountered a lot of problems at work with her colleagues for being too rigid with Islamic rules. She also could not find a *kafil* (legal sponsor for foreigners) to help her get married. Her life as a single, under-30, French woman in Saudi Arabia became difficult and she unwillingly resolved to go back to France. Vanessa had changed a lot and was now wearing the full veil on a permanent basis, much to her parents' shock. She lived with her brother for a while and he acted as her *wali* (guardian) to help her find a spouse. She had only one marriage condition: her future husband had to take her out of France to settle in a Muslim country. She wedded an Algerian man who promised to take her to Algeria. But he never fulfilled that promise and the couple stayed in France. Vanessa was resentful but stuck to her wedding, which she saw as a key Islamic commandment. They had three children together, until their marriage collapsed. Vanessa recently opened an Islamic Montessori school with the help of another female convert, in order to remedy the lack of suitable religious education for Muslim children in her city. As she became a public figure of the local Muslim community through her involvement in the school, Vanessa also discovered the extent of division and backbiting that characterized it. Her divorce and conflicts with other Muslims considerably affected her. Vanessa feels her faith has been put to a test. For the first time in 15 years of practice, she is experiencing difficulties to pray. She feels isolated but clings on to her religion and tries to stay strong for her children, who were raised Islamically. Her dream remains the same: leaving France to settle in a Muslim country.

Wanda comes from a white middle-class household in a middle-size town of central France. Her parents divorced when she was a child. Her father was atheist and her mother hailed from a Polish family, with a strong Catholic background. Although she seldom went to church, she kept pictures of the Virgin Mary in her wallet. Wanda was not baptized since her mother could not find a godfather or godmother among her entourage. As a child, she went to catechism classes but preferred messing around rather than paying attention. Religion was never a key component of her life. When Wanda was 12, her aunt passed away at a very young age. She was profoundly disturbed by this tragic event and started questioning Catholicism more vigorously. She did not understand how God could let such a terrible thing happen. In high school, Wanda half-heartedly started a spiritual search and looked into Buddhism. She took some classes and practiced Zen for a while. After graduating, she left her homogeneous town to study in a larger city, where she met Muslim acquaintances. Out of curiosity, she started looking into Islam and found comfort in what she read. A tomboy, Wanda signed up for boxing classes and became close friends with men of North African descent, some of whom were practicing Muslims. One day, her purse with her keys in it was stolen and she called one of her Muslim friends to help her break the lock of her apartment. They unsuccessfully tried during several minutes, until he told her to say "*bismillah*." Wanda thought this was ridiculous and blatantly refused. But he insisted and she eventually gave in. As she uttered the words, her friend eventually managed to unscrew the lock, and the door miraculously opened. Wanda remained skeptical but the anecdote stayed with her. She dated for a while a practicing Muslim man and enjoyed being immersed in an Islamic environment, although their relationship did not last. At work, she started having lengthy discussions about Islam with a female Muslim colleague and one day, she decided to convert. She went to a local mosque with her colleague and pronounced the *shahada*. Wanda's first months as a Muslim were tough since her colleague's Salafi friend was monitoring her and telling her that everything she was doing was *haram*. She burnt out and almost left the religion, but eventually decided to surround herself with more reasonable Muslim friends who would

let her grow at her own pace. Wanda slowly and progressively incorporated Islamic practices into her life (Ramadan, prayer, etc.). For each Islamic commandment, she struggled, took her time and waited for things to fall into place. She does not wear the *hijab* since she does not feel ready for it yet. Wanda is married to a Muslim man of Moroccan descent whom she met online and who lets her practice the faith her way.

GLOSSARY

Abaya: Long over-garment, resembling a dress, which is worn by some Muslim women to cover their bodies.

Adhan: Islamic call for worship, recited by the *muezzin* at the time of prayer.

Al-Azhar: University in Cairo, Egypt, considered as the chief center for Islamic learning in the world.

Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala: The expression *subhanahu wa ta'ala*, which means "May He be praised and exalted" is often added by Muslim believers after they pronounce the name of Allah to indicate their devotion.

Angels (mala'ikah): According to Islamic theology, angels are creatures made of light that are entirely dedicated to serving God's will and that never sin. Belief in angels is one of the six Islamic articles of faith (along with belief in Allah, belief in divine books, belief in the prophets, belief in the Day of Judgment and belief in divine decree).

Astaghfirullah: I seek forgiveness from Allah. Muslim believers alternatively use this sentence to ask for redemption after doing something wrong; express their feelings of shame and guilt, but also to express disapproval of someone else's behavior.

Bid'ah: The word *bid'ah* refers to heterodox doctrines in Islam or to innovations in religious matters that do not correspond to the dominant orthodoxy.

Buraq: According to Islamic theology, the *buraq* is a white-winged steed that carried the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem during the "Night Journey." This fantastical creature was the subject of many discussions throughout my ethnography.

Burkini: Modesty swimsuit for women that covers the whole body except for the hands, feet and face. Designed by Australian fashion designer Aheda Zanetti, it garnered worldwide attention after some French mayors suggested it should be banned from public beaches in the summer of 2016.

Dhikr: Typical Sufi practice in which short prayers are chanted, individually or in group.

Djinns: According to Islamic theology, djinns are creatures made of fire (contrary to humans who are made of clay) that live in a parallel, invisible world. They are said to have free will and can choose to follow good or evil paths, just like humans. A chapter of the Qur'an is devoted to them (*surat-al-jinn*, 72).

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence. It refers to the human understanding of the *sharia*, or divine law. It includes legal rulings or recommendations on the observance of Islamic rituals, social legislations and moral obligations. There are four schools of *fiqh* in Sunnism (see *madhab*).

Ghusl: see *Wudu*.

Hadith: Spoken reports on the sayings, actions and habits of the Prophet Muhammad. Most collections of *hadith* were compiled in the 8th and 9th centuries. They are meant to be tools to better comprehend the Qur’an and practice Islam according to the Prophetic example. Muslim clerics classify *hadith* as “authentic,” “good,” or “weak” depending on the *isnad* (chain of transmission) through which the saying has been traced back to Muhammad. The most widely used and authoritative *hadith* collections are *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, respectively compiled by Muhammad Al Bukhari (810-870) and Muslim Ibn Al-Hajjaj (821-875).

Hafiz: Someone who has completely memorized the Qur’an.

Halal: Any object or action that is permissible according to Islamic law. Regarding meat consumption specifically, *halal* certification requires that the animal’s throat be cut while facing Mecca and pronouncing the formula “in the name of God” (*bismillah*).

Haram: Any object or action that is sinful according to Islamic law.

Hasanat: Credit for good deeds, which Allah will weigh up against bad deeds on the Day of Judgment.

Hijab: In the Qur’an, the term *hijab* refers to a partition in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word. It enjoins both men and women to modesty towards one another and towards the divine. Yet, in common-sense parlance, *hijab* has come to designate the headscarf that some Muslim women wear, which covers the head and is tied below the chin, leaving the face clear. This is also how it is used in this dissertation.

Insha’Allah: God willing. This expression is used when making plans in the future. In pronouncing it, Muslims submit to the idea that they are not masters of their own destiny (God is) and foresee the possibility that something beyond their control might affect their plans. A verse of the Qur’an is devoted to this expression: “And never say of anything ‘Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,’ except [when adding], ‘If Allah wills’” (*surat al-kahf*, 18: 23-24).

Jilbab: Long garment worn by some Muslim women that covers the entire body except the face, hands and feet.

Kafir (pl. *Kuffar*): The word *kafir* is used in the Qur’an to refer to those who disbelieve in God and reject the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. It comes from the root K-F-R in Arabic, which signifies “to hide, to conceal.” In pre-Islamic usage, it designated the farmers who buried seeds on the ground and covered them with soil. In Islamic theology, it means those who intentionally hide and cover the truth.

Kufi: Short rounded cap worn by some Muslim men.

Laylat-al-qadr: The Night of Power is one of the odd nights of the last ten days of Ramadan. According to Islamic belief, it is the night during which the Qur’an was descended on earth. The night is endowed with specific blessings and mercy: sins are forgiven, supplications are accepted and angels are said to be among the believers. Spending this special night in acts of devotion equates to a thousand months of worship. A chapter of the Qur’an is devoted to it (*surat-al-qadr*, 97).

Madhab (pl. *madhahib*): Schools of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) that establish legal rulings and recommendations for practice. Each of them follows a specific methodology for interpreting the divine law revealed in the Qur'an. In the contemporary period, four Sunni schools (Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi), two Shia schools (Ja'fari, Zaidi) and the Ibadhi school are recognized. The rulings established by these schools are all considered valid and only differ in some minor details. Concerning Sunnism, the Hanafi school is mostly followed in the Levant, Central Asia and South Asia. The Maliki school is roughly followed in North Africa and West Africa. The Shafi'i school is mostly present in Egypt, Indonesia, the Middle East and South East Asia. The Hanbali school is followed in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Mash'Allah: God has willed it. This expression is often used to signify appreciation, thankfulness and joy for someone or something.

Miswak: Teeth cleaning twig made from tree. Understood as a traditional and natural alternative to the toothbrush, its use is encouraged in hygienical recommendations.

Muezzin: Person in charge of the call for prayer (*adhan*) at the mosque. The first *muezzin* of Islamic history was Bilal Ibn Rabah, a former black slave who was put in this position because of his beautiful voice.

Niqab: Full veil that covers the entire face, with the exception of the eyes.

Sallallahu alayhi wa salaam (or *saws*): The expression *sallallahu alayhi wa salaam*, which means "May Allah honor him and grant him peace" is pronounced by Muslim believers after they utter the name of the prophet Muhammad to indicate their devotion.

Sharia: Religious law derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah to guide human behavior in this world. Its application is the subject of debates across different Islamic interpretations. The meaning of *sharia* has been distorted in public opinion, notably because of anti-*sharia* activists in the US who portray it as barbaric and want to ban it.

Shaytan: In Islamic theology, the devil is referred to as Iblis or *shaytan*. He is believed to be a djinn who refused to kneel before Adam when God instructed him to do so. After being punished, he vowed to lead all humans astray. He is said to whisper into the hearts of both humans and djinns in order to push them to sin. The *shaytan* can either be interpreted literally or metaphorically as an expression of the lower self.

Subhan'Allah: Glory be to God. This expression is often used to signify awe and admiration, and praise God for His attributes or His creation.

Thawb: A long male garment worn by some Muslim men. Resembling a robe, it usually has long sleeves and falls to the ankle.

Wudu: Partial ritual ablution performed before prayer with clear water (or sand if water is not available). It follows a clear procedure that is partly described in the Qur'an, in *surat-al-ma'ida* (5:6). Dominant Sunni interpretations consider that *wudu* must be performed as such: saying *bismillah*, formulating the intention of purification, washing the hands thrice (right first, then left), rinsing the mouth thrice, cleansing the nostrils thrice, washing the face thrice, washing the forearms (up to the elbow) thrice (right first,

then left), splashing water on one’s hair once, wiping both ears once, washing the feet thrice (right first, then left), reciting the *shahada*. The act of performing *wudu* puts the practitioner into a state of ritual purity, required before prayer. The state of purity is broken by the following: sleep, sexual contact, intoxication, vomiting, fainting, defecation, urination, flatulence, bleeding, emission of semen, vaginal discharge or any other liquid from the private parts. After a major impurity, such as full sexual intercourse or menstruation, Muslim believers must perform *ghusl* (full ablution), which implies washing the whole body in a rigorous manner. *Ghusl* is also recommended when converting to Islam.

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