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**EGOCENTRIC CONVERSION SOCIAL NETWORKS: CONTEXT,  
PROCESS AND IDENTITY IN EXPLAINING CONVERSION TO AND  
REVERSION FROM ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES**

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EGOCENTRIC CONVERSION SOCIAL NETWORKS:  
CONTEXT, PROCESS AND IDENTITY IN EXPLAINING CONVERSION TO  
AND REVERSION FROM ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Şakin Erin  
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Thomas Janoski, Professor of Sociology  
Lexington, Kentucky

2015

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### EGOCENTRIC CONVERSION SOCIAL NETWORKS: CONTEXT, PROCESS AND IDENTITY IN EXPLAINING CONVERSION TO AND REVERSION FROM ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

This dissertation investigates conversion to Islam in the United States analyzing egocentric networks of 30 converts to Islam and that of 30 people in the control group. By comparing Michigan, where there is a large Muslim community, to Kentucky, where there is smaller community, it demonstrates that conversion occurs through weak Muslim ties in the former, while it occurs through strong ties in the latter. Conversion is a life changing event with lasting consequences on both the structure and composition of people's egocentric social network. The egocentric social network data from prior-to-conversion and post-conversion indicate that conversion influences change in the egocentric social networks of Caucasian and African-American converts in a different way. When Caucasians convert to Islam their egocentric social networks tend to fragment into two different sub-networks of Muslim and that of non-Muslim with a low level of connection between the two networks. On the other hand, when African-Americans convert, their egocentric social networks shrink to homophilous ties. This type of change affects the course of the identity building such that converts situated in fragmented networks are more likely to developed failed conversion identities whereas those positioned in well connected and homophilous networks are more likely to develop successful identities. Identity building differs for male and female converts as well. Female conversion identity is more visible, generating stronger negative reactions from friends and family members than that of male identity building. As such, female converts are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion belief because their conversion identity is not verified compared to male converts, whose conversion identities are more likely to be verified. Finally, this study contributes to the understanding of diffusion of Islam in the United States.

**KEYWORDS:** conversion, egocentric networks, change, weak ties, reversion

EGOCENTRIC CONVERSION SOCIAL NETWORKS:  
CONTEXT, PROCESS AND IDENTITY IN EXPLAINING CONVERSION TO  
AND REVERSION FROM ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

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*Dedication*

*To my parents and 14 siblings and to the voiceless people of the earth*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study is about the social networks of converts to Islam in the United States of America. Islam diffuses through both strong and weak social ties. The first argument of this research is that people, who live in a geographical area where there is bigger and well established Muslim community, are more likely to have weak social ties to other Muslims, whereas those living in a place where there is a smaller Muslim community are more likely to have strong ties to other Muslims. Conversion to Islam tends to generate strong negative reaction from both kinship and non-kin social ties influencing the structure and composition of egocentric social networks<sup>1</sup> of people. However, the second argument is that the way the social ties of Caucasian converts react to their conversion experience markedly differs than how those of African-American converts react to their conversion. Conversion among other things means structural change in people's egocentric network, a loss of social capital and identity change. Conversion to Islam in the United States can generate strong reactions from people influencing the structure and composition of egocentric social networks of converts. Although Americans might have a limited understanding of the Muslim people and the Islamic world, they often times have a strong perception about Islam, a perception that evolved in tandem with the US foreign policy especially its recent involvement in the Middle East. Accordingly, the third argument is that if converts to Islam lose social capital from their prior to conversion egocentric social

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<sup>1</sup> In line with social network literature, I use *egocentric*, *personal* and *ego* social network terminology interchangeably to refer to a person's social network.

networks in the form of loss of social ties, they are more likely to develop failed conversion identities and thus they are more likely to revert to their prior belief. Female converts are more likely to develop failed conversion identities than male converts because they are more visible receiving stronger negative input about their conversion, and they are likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion beliefs.

Conversion literature is limited when it comes to understanding the conversion to Islam because studies done in this area have largely focused on conversion to mainly Christianity or its different denominations (James 1929, Lofland 1966, Starbuck 1901). Nevertheless, this trend has been changing as conversion to Islam in the West has arisen to prominence in the last two decades. It is estimated that the average number of converts per a mosque in the U.S. per a year is about 15.3 (Bagby 2012). Given that there are about 2,106 mosques in the US (Bagby 2012), it is reasonable to argue that conversion to Islam in the US merits an attention. This growth in conversion to Islam has been primarily due to a greater presence of immigrant Muslims and more publicity about Islam, which is the fastest growing religion in the United States of America (see Table 1.1). Because this publicity is mostly negative and stereotypical, it is surprising that there is a significant number of Westerners who convert to Islam. Certainly, a portion of Muslim estimate of 2010 (2,600,082 ) is due to immigration of Muslims to the U.S. This number is quite low since it is based on a mosque study (Bagby 2012) which could have neglected the Muslims who are not attending the mosque. Recent studies on Islam claim that there are six to eight million Muslims living in the United States (Bilici 2008, Esposito 2010). In addition to immigrant Muslims, there must be a share of converts making up a part of this estimate. Because of the limitation in record keeping, it is hard to know how many people convert



to Islam. Also, as indicated above, the negative perception about Islam in the United States impedes converts to openly acknowledge their conversion to minimize potential risks and accusations such as being less patriotic from others. In addition, conversion to Islam does not have to take place in a mosque and it is well known that there those converts who keep their conversion private by only sharing it with their immediate circles (Wilson 2011).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this dissertation will use social network analysis and ethnographic methods to investigate how social networks affect conversion to and lapses from Islam in strong and sparse Muslim communities in the United States.

\*\*\*\*\*Table 1.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Although Islam is one of the major monotheistic religions in the world, it does not enjoy the same respect among the American public as Judaism and Christianity. Compared to the other two major monotheistic religions, Islam has been less represented in the United States. It is a late-comer to the American historical scene and it struggles in claiming a space for itself in the American public sphere. With recent events such as the Gulf War in 1991, the Iraq War of 2003 and September 11 terrorist attacks, however, Islam started to appear more on the radar of the American people who associate it with the radicalism and extremism. The appearance of discourse involving Islam in American public sphere is reinforced by the mass media and the US Middle Eastern foreign policy. This discourse is usually not favorable to Islam, the interpretation of which is tainted because of the economic and political conflicts involving the Middle East and the United States. As a result, Islam is considered to be religion of the “other.” Any conversion to this religion

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<sup>2</sup> Although conversion to Shia-Islam and other Muslim sects does occur in the West, this study will only focus on conversion to Sunni Islam, thereby continuing the third wave of conversion studies.

whether a conversion of Caucasian Americans or African-Americans is looked upon unfavorably. Of course, there is a variation in the degree of reaction to conversion to Islam depending on the ethnicity, gender, and the intensity of commitment of the convert.

This dissertation seeks to illuminate the changes in personal networks of converts to Islam undergo from prior to conversion (time one) to post conversion (time two) based on how the people in their social circles react to their conversion. It particularly investigates the relationship between conversion and social ties to Muslim in the prior-to-conversion egocentric social networks, the effects of conversion on the egocentric social networks, and the association between conversion identity verification and changes in the egocentric conversion social networks. In this investigation, it compares different properties of prior-to-conversion and post-conversion egocentric social networks, including their sizes, density, homophily,<sup>3</sup> and most importantly, how alters at two time periods react to the conversion of research participants. In most conversion cases, the converts endure tremendous changes with regards to loss and gain of social ties, identity, daily conduct, dressing and, most importantly, they experience tectonic structural changes in their egocentric social networks. In addition, this research unravels whether converts to Islam lose social ties to their prior network voluntarily in order to build up a new religious social network; or if they their alters drop them because conversion to Islam is interpreted in negative terms. Last, this dissertation addresses the puzzle of why converts appearing dedicated to their new religion revert to their prior belief by comparing the conversion

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<sup>3</sup> Homophily is a concept in social network analysis arguing that people have social ties to others who are similar to them in terms of sociodemographics such as, age, gender, class background, ethnicity, etc. (McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M Cook 2001).

experiences of males and females, and the extent to which churning of social network ties to one's prior-to-conversion social network influence this reversion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Conversion occurs in a lot of different ways. At the turn of the twentieth century, conversion studies focused on conversion to Christianity and to its denominations, such as, Baptism, Episcopalian, Pentecostalism, Methodism, Lutheranism, etc. These studies interpreted conversion from the passive paradigm's perspective which often depicted conversion as an act of "born again" and it typically perceived converts as young, and suffering from psychological crises (James 1929, Starbuck 1901). The studies conducted during this wave mainly occurred within the discipline of psychology which does not take "social facts" into account. A second wave of the conversion studies that dominated the second half of the twentieth century started to focus on conversion to cults and Eastern religious denomination like Hare Krishna and cults within Christianity such as Doomsday, Moonies, etc. They also interpreted conversions to cults and different Christian denominations as brainwashing, but they also argued that religious ideologies appeal more to those who are deprived (Greil 1977, Lofland 1966, Snow and Machalek 1984, Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new third wave of conversion studies emerged with a main focus on conversion to Islam in the West (Köse 1996, McGinty 2006, Norris 2003, Poston 1992, Roald 2001, Soutar 2010, Sultan 1999, Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). One can also argue that between the second and the third waves, there were other conversion models like rational choice and religious markets models. However, these models did leave as much impact in the literature as these three waves. Below, I will introduce all of these models in tandem with their historical trajectory.

## **CONVERSION PARADIGMS**

### **Passive Paradigm**

In his seminal work on conversion, Starbuck (1901) proposed that conversion is an adolescent phenomenon which is brought about as a result of personal crisis and tensions. After studying conversion to Christian denominations, such as, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, etc., he proposed that conversion occurred under a tense religious environment like revival meetings (Starbuck 1901). Forerunners of conversion theory, like Starbuck, started a new line of thought which culminated in an old passive paradigm that classifies converts as passive, suffering from emotional turmoil, drug use, and pathological behaviors (Gillespie 1979, Kox, Meeus and Hart 1991, Lofland 1966, Stark and Bainbridge 1980, Ullman 1989). The ideal type of conversion for this paradigm is the conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus (Richardson 1985, Snow and Machalek 1984). This type of conversion was interpreted as a sudden, emotional and a dramatic act that was devoid of rational qualities.

As this line of thought was adapted by other prominent proponents of the passive paradigm, more psychological explanations of conversion came to the fore. For instance, Freud thought of conversion as something caused by unconscious psychological forces (Köse 1996, Richardson 1985). Accordingly, he argued that humans endow God with features that they attribute to their own father in their childhood. The relationship that people have with God is modeled after their relationship with their biological father. The need for religion comes to the fore because the children feel disappointed with their parents whom they used to perceive as omnipotent and unconditionally protective, but who no

longer have those capacities (Köse 1996, Ullman 1989). Freud also attributed the need for religious beliefs to an Oedipal complex as perceiving religious rituals and beliefs as manifestations of repenting for guilt over displacing the actual father.

The most extreme version of the passive paradigm is the conceptualization of conversion as mind controlling and brain washing. Some argue that this deterministic view of conversion is represented by Marxism which sees involvement in religion as being in a state of false consciousness (Richardson 1985). Others argue that religious cults such as Hare Krishna, Unification Church, and Children of God recruit the young and vulnerable to exploit them (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980). Those recruited are then sworn to sever their attachment to relatives and friends, drop out of school and in extreme cases leave their work (Delgado 1980). The converts, then, are discouraged from employing critical thinking and they are indoctrinated to obey the authority of the cult leaders. Most importantly, they are taught to sever their ties with their social networks of friends, siblings, and other relatives as soon as they join the cult and indemnify their past sins by doing something difficult, like giving up sleep for a whole night. Similarly, Levine (1980) argues that cults use intensive programs to control the thoughts of their members by keeping them involved in activities for fifteen hours or more. This makes it almost impossible for new recruits to learn about the cult since they are deprived of any opportunity to question both the secular and religious views of the cult. The cult advances its objective by deceptions, lies, brainwashing, programming, and peer pressure. These techniques work in an effective way to recruit new members, because those who join cults are susceptible to those occupying positions of authority, they have high rates of using drugs, and they suffer from emotional distress (Levine 1980). The passive paradigm might shed light on conversion episodes that

are a direct result of cult proselytizing. Nevertheless, it remains inadequate in accounting for those conversions taking place as a result of a long process of research, reflection, and negotiation. To what extent the passive paradigm can explain conversion experiences in which the individuals are active seekers who make rational choices from a market of religions? Also, what explains conversions that involve negotiation between the individual and the belief system? Given the fact that there are different conversion cases than what the passive paradigm presents, there is a need to formulate other theoretical models to explain these different cases.

In the following literature review, I will: (1) examine the active paradigm, (2) both the active and passive paradigms and make some proposals for integrating the two approaches, (3) explain the religious market approach, and finally move to (4) various models of conversion.

### **The Active Paradigm**

A paradigm shift in conversion theories occurred as theories of deprivation and strain gave way to a new paradigm that sees individuals as volitional entities who are actively seeking the meaning of action in a social context (Richardson 1985). The old deterministic paradigm was mainly based on conversion prototypes of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Pauline experience, and St. Augustine's conversion to Christ. This paradigm has fallen into disfavor since it attributes the conversion experience to transcendental force and it is strictly formulated within the Christian context.

The contours between the passive and active paradigms became more lucid once researchers started to emphasize the agency part of the convert. The active paradigm states that conversion is not a deterministic act but rather it is an experience in which the

individual as an active agent makes a personal choice that often comes into being after a negotiation with the doctrine of the new faith (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Others also think that the passive paradigm, which perceives conversion process as similar to deviance, has limitations since it does not take the behaviors of social actors and their phenomenological experience of action into account (Straus 1979). Straus, instead, proposes an alternative activist paradigm to study conversion because conversion can be thought of as maintenance of social orderliness and meaning in the life of social actors. The maintenance of everyday life is an endeavor of collective enterprise and preserving that orderliness has practical values for the participants. Straus' fieldwork revealed that individuals were active seekers as they combed through social networks, acquaintances, media, and other sources to find information on their future religion. Accordingly, the individuals did not embrace their faith blindly, but they tested it before making their decision.

### **Integrating the Passive and Active Paradigms**

Why is there such a sharp division between these two theoretical models? Does reconciling both paradigms result in a more comprehensive model? Having approached conversion from an attachment theoretical perspective, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) suggest that the theoretical division between an active and passive paradigm may result from studying different forms of religion or studying different populations. To them the insecure attachment history of the converts with their parents is important in conversion experience. According to this explanation, gradual conversions are more correlated with a secure attachment theory, while sudden conversions are associated with insecure attachment history (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004). The religiosity of sudden converts

was characterized by distress, while that of gradual converts was a result of relationships with significant others. To develop a more comprehensive theory, they suggest that conversion researchers should include among their sample both individuals who experienced a sudden conversion and those who experienced gradual conversion. Others suggest that both approaches are predisposed to treat conversion as a physical change, but conversion should be seen as a metaphor for physical transformation to construct an appropriate level of analysis (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). To satisfy this need they further propose that new religious conversion should be conceptualized at intra-individual and inter-individual level of analyses. The intra-individual level of analysis interprets conversion as happening within an individual and the determining factors to conversion are personal dispositions, biology, and personal constructs. The inter-individual level of analysis, on the other hand, stresses the importance of social networks, cultural milieu, alienation, etc. which are the outside factors reacting upon individuals. Efforts to understand conversion from both theoretical perspectives resulted in a new body of literature seeking to integrate the two perspectives.

In an attempt to blend the two conversion paradigms, others take a different approach to studying conversion (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). To them, it is not enough to theorize conversion either as a self-induced event or something that occurs as result of organized group activity in which individuals are passive recipients of religious doctrine. Conversion can be induced by “push factors” like individual motives and/or “pull factors” such as social network influence (Jindra 2011). In all conversions, there are recurrent themes that highlight social organizational aspects of conversion as well as individual experiences that are memorable and re-orienting to the convert. These themes are



categorized as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) warn us not to treat conversion motifs as exhaustive profiles as they vary along five major dimensions of degree of (1) social pressure, (2) temporal duration, (3) level of affective arousal, (4) affective content, and (5) belief participation sequence. For example, an intellectual conversion motif will be more likely to have a low level of social pressure and the convert is more likely to adapt the religion's cognitive framework before deciding to practice the rituals of their new religion. Lofland and Skonovd believe that today's "media-drenched" advanced societies harbor intellectual and experimental motifs more than any other type.

Long and Hadden (1983) propose that social scientists should integrate the brainwashing and social drift theory. While the former expects conversion to occur when individuals are stripped of their previous identities and their mind is controlled, the latter perceives conversion as a gradual process of social influence. This suggests that religious conversion is similar to other forms of socialization. For instance, becoming a member of a cult of Moonies is similar to becoming a physician. Accordingly, Long and Hadden (1983) claim that conversion theorists should regard conversion as another form of socialization process. Although the socialization and conversion processes may have different contents, the factors and forms involved in molding a new recruit are the same. Similar to how a society will socialize its new members, a religious cult will make efforts to recruit new members and then it will seek different avenues to affiliate them with the group. In both brainwashing and social drift processes the essential elements of socialization are in operation. A group's endeavors to mold new members can be interpreted as brainwashing, whereas the individual endeavors to affiliate with the group

can be seen as a drift model (Long and Hadden 1983). Both the brainwashing model and the social drift model equate socialization with internalization. This is problematic because there are instances of incongruity between the individual's frame of reference and that of the cult. How do converts solve this discord when they carry over their stock of knowledge to their post conversion life? Does internalization of cult doctrines come to a standstill or does individual re-orient his/her carried over stock of knowledge?

Having emphasized the importance of a person's predisposition, which should be understood as his or her total stock of knowledge, Greil (1977) argues that conversion or recruitment to a social or religious movement can take place without the individual accepting the movement's frame of reference. However, this does not mean that individual perspective is free of social influence. A person's stock of knowledge develops as they try to solve problems they encounter in social situations (Greil 1977). Often, individuals will find solutions to their problems in tandem with institutions and significant others. Relying upon the idea of "reference group," which was developed by Robert Merton and later used by Sherif and Shibutani, Greil (1977) posits that individuals are more likely to convert if their reference group holds perspectives different than theirs. Why do individual select a particular reference group to whose perspective they convert among many potential reference groups? There is no clear answer as to why individuals pick a particular reference group, but there is a tendency that people orient themselves towards the groups whom they perceive to have a higher social status. To Greil (1977), this step of orientation towards a group and formation of strong affective bonds to the members of the group are initial steps in conversion.

Recent studies also point to the need to formulate a more integrative approach to conversion. Yang (2005), for instance, argues that individual crisis and personal bonds are not enough to explain conversion. But a better model should contain both micro-process and macro-level social and cultural processes that will better explain conversion (Yang and Tamney 2006). For example, in the case of a Chinese who converts to Christianity, it is the contextual and institutional factors that are decisive in conversion to Christianity. This occurs as the global market creates a perilous consumerist environment in which individuals feel lost and from which they try to escape by means of a religious world view. To Yang (2005), Christianity and McDonalds, which are the symbols of modernity and cosmopolitanism, help Chinese with connecting to the outside world. By embracing Christianity and consuming Western oriented products like eating at McDonald's they feel that they have gained an equal footing with Americans and other Westerners.

Both the passive and active paradigms have to some extent illuminated the conversion experiences of those individuals who were recruited to cults, but they are limited when it comes to explaining conversions taking place in a context of a modern society where people champion the ideas of pluralism and freedom of choice. In the following section I will touch upon a new model developed to explain conversion occurring in the context of pluralism and cornucopia of choices.

### **Models of Conversion to Islam**

The patterns of conversion to Islam fit the active paradigm in that individuals go through a long process of reflection, reading, and comparison before they decide to embrace Islam (McGinty 2006, Norris 2003, Roald 2001). This process, which is similar to Catholic RCIA, is more likely to result in conversion if an individual believes that her

pre-existing ideas and feeling about what is true corresponds with the adopted religion's belief system (Norris 2003). What follows is that converts take on their adopted tradition either with rigorous adherence or they select certain elements of the adopted belief systems provided they feel vindicated (Norris 2003). Similarly, in her study of European converts to Islam, Roald (2001) writes that in the "falling-in-love" stage the converts practice their adopted religion with intense care. However, at the stage of disappointment, the converts realize that they cannot live according to lofty Islamic ideals thereby experiencing feelings of both "outsider" and "insider" at the same time, and in the final stage of the maturity, the convert realizes there is a discrepancy between the ideal and real world and shape their understanding of Islam in their cultural context. She explores how new Scandinavian converts to Islam synthesize the Islamic culture with Scandinavian cultures by introducing novel practices into their communities such as Eid<sup>4</sup> celebrations in mosques for kids and women, establishment of kindergartens, Muslim women's support associations, and summer camps with outdoor activities, bathing and canoeing. Her main thesis that new converts to Islam turn their Scandinavian culture into Islamic culture is not applicable in the American context as American converts whom I interviewed do not constitute their own community. This model also cannot be generalized to the experiences of all converts since the Scandinavian interpretation of Islam emerges as result of concern to integrate women into religious and social life without disrupting prior to conversion ways of life.

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<sup>4</sup> Eid is an Islamic holiday. There are two main Islamic holidays Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. The former is celebrated at the end of the Ramadan, a month of fasting, while the latter is celebrated approximately two month and ten days later when Muslims make pilgrimage to Mecca (Wikipedia.com).

The models propounded to explain conversion to Islam are limited in scope since they are often concerned with applying conversion theories developed within the conversion to Christian context. In her study of 3 Dutch women converted to Islam, Van Nieuwkerk (2008) writes that female converts present themselves as free-willed, rational agents who were attracted to the Islamic construction of femininity and masculinity as an alternative to Western gender construction. Studying Islamic conversion from rational choice and religious market theoretical perspective, she observes that those who convert to Islam make a rational choice from a market of religions which came into existence as a result of globalization.<sup>5</sup> This newly configured market presents Islam to individuals as one of the cultural systems among an array of options from which converts to select Islam citing its rationality and convincing logic as one of the reasons for their conversion.

Although rational choice model seems the most appropriate theory, explaining the conversion of these Dutch women, it is limited as it falls short of treating religion as something that has a content while at the same time it ignores the life story and identity of the actors. Contrary to the assumption of this model that social actors will choose a religious commodity that is closest to their prior belief systems, the converts in this case picked a religion that was quite different than their prior belief. Despite this, they thought their decision was a rational one since their new faith supplied them with a new identity, systemization of their life conduct, and regulation of their gender and sexual relations (Van

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<sup>5</sup> This dissertation uses religious market model in a limited way. The religious market is part and parcel of neo-liberal era, which is constructed upon the principles of privatization of state-run enterprises, reduction in social services and de-regulation of among other thing financial services (Harvey 2005). Similarly, under this neo-liberal climate, not only economic markets, but also religious markets are deregulated which leads to an environment where social actors are no longer considered to be acted upon or a passive receiver of religious doctrines.

Nieuwkerk 2008). Similarly, Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) argues that Islam provided her subjects with methodization of life conduct and helped them with erecting boundaries and rules with regard to sexuality and gender.

Other models of conversion to Islam cite macro-sociological reasons as factors triggering interest in Islam. In his work on conversion to Islam among Turkish immigrants in Germany, Lanz (2010) argues that each conversion needs to attach itself to a significant event which stimulates the conversion process. Nevertheless, his multiple interviews with subject, Talib, revealed that conversion to Islam cannot always be explained with one specific event. In the case of Talib, the conversion to Islam was an attempt to establish meaning in one's life and the need to belong to a primordial community. In a sense, Islam was interpreted by Talib as an alternative to modern capitalism since it furnished him with a truth rooted in space and time. Explaining Islamic conversion from a macro perspective, Soutar (2010) espouses that British converts to Islam are attracted to the Muslim faith as they want to become part of a collective belonging and escape from the individualism presented in their society despite distorted images of Islam in Western world. As a result of contact with Muslim immigrants or travels to Muslim countries, converts became fascinated with the Muslim community and Islamic family values. Some converts in her study reported that they were attracted to the collectivist ideas of taking care of the elderly, the strong Muslim emphasis on family, and unconditional support of Muslim communities for those needing help. Moreover, for Soutar the feeling of being "a fish in a school" belonging, fitting-in, and forming part of a less individualistic culture were other attractions to British females who converted to Islam (Soutar 2010:14). In her study of six Swedish and three American female converts to Islam, McGinty (2006) argues that some of those

who convert to Islam conduct a thorough research about Islam and find out that the Muslim faith supports their values of solidarity, family, social justice and peace. Besides her personal models schema that emphasize the agency aspect of conversion, McGinty (2006) developed theoretical models of solidarity with the Third World, social justice, gender rules, and spirituality as important in explaining conversion to Islam. These models, however, have limitations since they are formulated based on conversion experiences of women. Most of these women get married to Muslim men who might influence their conversion experience and their perception of Islam. A more comprehensive study that includes male converts is needed to test the plausibility of these models. This study will compensate for this deficiency since it will be conducted with a larger sample that includes both female and male converts.

## **THEORY**

Conversion to Islam is characterized by a slow process composed of different stages (Köse 1996, McGinty 2007, Norris 2003, Poston 1992, Roald 2001, Soutar 2010, Sultan 1999, Van Nieuwkerk 2008, Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). This research, for the most part, confirms prior research and argues that conversion to Islam occurs in a slow process; nevertheless it also contends that sudden conversion can be observed although it is not as frequent as the former. This section on theory will lay out four different types of theory in conjunction with prior research to explain slow conversion. The theoretical explanation of the sudden conversion will be provided in the analysis section of manuscript. First, relying on symbolic interaction theories of Mead and Goffman I will show the slow process tends to be long during which converts take up different roles and readjust their actions as they interact with the members of their group. Second, drawing upon social network theory, I

will indicate that the stages can either come to a sudden disruption or continue smoothly based on how people making up the personal networks of the converts perceive conversion and the extent to which their reactions to conversion is supportive or negative. Third, using social capital theory I will discuss the relationship between losing ties to alters in prior to conversion ego network and the likelihood of reversion from Islam. Finally, using contextual theory, I will argue that people living in an area populated by a larger number of Muslims are more likely to convert than those living an area less populated by Muslims.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

“Symbolic interaction” which was coined by Herbert Blumer in the 1960s is derived from the work of George Herbert Mead to understand human interactions which is centered on the shared meanings of symbols used by members of society (Burke and Stets 2009). Mead’s theory, which is based on the concepts of the “I,” the “me” and the “generalized other” among other things, is indispensable to explain how the self emerges as a result of social processes and how it is embedded in social networks which shape the self and are in turn shaped it. What is important in social interaction is the idea that the self treats itself as an object like any other object in the social and physical environment. This notion of self-reflectivity is central to the understanding of symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets 2009, Janoski, Grey and Lepadatu 2009). Since conversion is social interaction process that comes into being as a result of a self taking on new shared meanings and frame of references that may or not conflict with the self’s prior to conversion sets of meanings, symbolic interactionism is one of the key theories that this study uses to account for conversion process.



The concepts of the “I” and “me” in Mead are the building block of the self. The former is the agent aspect of the self aiming to bring about the desired intentions while the latter is the observer part guiding the behavior to its end. The self emerges in a social process and after it emerges as a complete social being, then Mead divides this being into the “I” and “me.” The “I” is basically the organized response of the individual to a set of attitudes that the generalized other directs to the self (Mead 1967:175). The self reacts to these attitudes of the generalized other through the “I.” Through the “me,” on the other hand, the self becomes aware of him/herself as an object (Coser 1979). The “me” is the ability to take itself as an object and reflect over itself. The “me” represents a perspective observer who evaluates the actions of the “I” and steers them to the right course making sure that those actions are aligned with social meaning of the community to which the self is a part (Burke and Stets 2009). The relationship between the “I” and “me” is a constant one. The “me” is the way the self understands himself from the point of view of others. The “I” responds to this set of attitudes that the self assumes through the “me,” but “is always something different from what the situation itself calls for” (Mead 1967:178).

Recently, some proponents of symbolic interactionism argue there are multiple reference groups as well as multiple generalized others (Charon 2007, Janoski, Grey and Lepadatu 2009, Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014, Shibutani 1961). This idea of multiplicity certainly as it is used in symbolic interaction and social psychology circles dates back to the idea that there are multiple selves (James 1929), but it is well known that the French philosopher Rene Descartes also argued that individuals have double selves. Although the terms “reference group” and “generalized other” are widely used across disciplines, such as, sociology, social psychology, and other disciplines, there is no consensus as to what

these terms refer (Williams 1970). Therefore, I explain both concepts separately with reminding readers that sometimes these two concepts are used interchangeably. Shibutani (1961:258) defines a reference group as “any identifiable group whose supposed perspective is used by the actor as a frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field.” To him a reference group can be real or imaginary groups, such as public opinion and social class. These two can have significant bearing on the actions of individuals who act in term of their understating of their class position. More importantly, actor develop self-conceptions by participating in organized groups, but they can act independently once their identity is crystallized (Shibutani 1961). This argument undergirds the passive paradigm in that a convert once recruited to a religious group will start to interpret the world through the lenses of the group’s perspective. Also converts might legitimize their conversion by comparing themselves with those who do not belong to the group.

Parallel to the idea that there are multiple selves and references groups is the idea that there are multiple general others (Janoski, Grey and Lepadatu 2009). According to Mead (1967), the generalized other is the organized community or culture in which the individual lives, a culture that gives unity to the self. The idea of generalized other is similar to what is embodied in Aristotle as the civic body that is united by a bond of common affection (Lord 2010). It is also similar to Rousseauian general will. Generalized other serves as a measuring rod through which the individual self reflects upon itself. I argue that Mead’s idea of generalized other was parallel to the Durkheimian “collective conscious” or, more broadly, it was the society itself. It is plausible that Mead, like other classical sociology founders was concerned with establishing all-encompassing sociological theories that perceived an individual as the product of society. In fact, it is

argued that Mead had borrowed the concept of generalized other from Wilhelm Wundt (1980), who thought that social actors constitute a “mental community” which shares certain attitudes (Turner 1988). Similarly, Burke and Stets (2009:89), argue that individuals strive to change the perceived situational meaning to match the meanings in their identity standard so that they verify their identity. While interaction with others, it is crucial that people verify their identity which can be done based on “shared meanings.” Meanings can be become shared with others only if there is a bond with them. For example, the gesture of crossing legs in Turkish society<sup>6</sup> is interpreted quite differently than how it is interpreted in American society. If there are multiple generalized others in the sense that Mead uses the term, then social actors will feel estranged while navigating through different social circles or groups. However, if multiple generalized others is used to correspond to “multiple selves” or “multiple identities”, such as being a mother, teacher, member of the Republican party, an environmentalist, etc., then social actors will not encounter difficulties interpreting situational meaning and/or verifying their identity standard every time they interact in a new social circle. Janoski and his colleagues argue that if there are multiple selves and multiple identities then there must be multiple generalized others (Janoski, Grey and Lepadatu 2009).

In this research, I argue that there can be multiple generalized others, but if we are talking about multiplicity we are no longer employing the concept of generalized other in the sense that it was used by Mead, who intended society itself by using this concept. However, it is quite plausible to argue that any specific body of knowledge or attitude

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<sup>6</sup> If a young person is crossing legs in presence of those who are older than him/her, his/her act interpreted as offensive. However, if a young person is doing the same thing in other settings like a work meeting, the gesture is interpreted as a sign of confidence.

associated with any group can constitute the “generalized other” or better yet “sub-generalized other” corresponding to these multiple selves provided that the self perceives the world through the lenses of these groups or takes the role of these sub-generalized others. Since this study employs social network theory while investigating conversion to Islam, I consider the prior to conversion social network and post-conversion social network of the converts as these sub-generalized others. To make things less complicated and to avoid jargon jumbling, I will use generalized other instead of sub-generalized other. The extent of similarity and/or difference between these two generalized others with respect to how they influence the behavior of the convert will determine how the conversion process will proceed its course.

While interacting in a social network, the self has the capacity to see herself as an object in the interactional situation in which she will endeavor to bring about perception of others that reinforce her existing self references (Turner 1988), and she will make sure that her identity meaning is being verified which means that individuals will act to make sure that their identity standard is congruent with perceived meaning about herself (Burke and Stets 2009). If the meaning of a person’s identity standard does not match the perceived meaning in the interaction, she will feel a low level of self-esteem or depression (Burke and Stets 2009). According to Burke and Stets (2009:62-67), there are four basic of components to an identity:

- (1) an identity standard, which is a set of meanings defining that character of an the identity,
- (2) an input, which is a perception about the identity,

(3) the comparator, which is comparing the perceptions to the identity standard, and

(4) the output, which is the behavior in the situation.

What is relevant to this study at hand from this model is that whenever a person interacts with others she tries to verify her identity standard, meaning that what she perceives in a behavioral situation has to match the meanings of her identity standard. This model would expect that a convert to Islam will strive for her identity verification both in her prior and post-conversion network. If her identity in her post-conversion network is not verified she is more likely to go back to her prior belief. However, if her identity is being verified in her Islamic social network she is more likely to stay in her adopted belief.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> What is problematic with this schema developed by Burke and Stets is that they neglect social process and structural aspect of identity formation as well as an explanation of how an identity standard is retained among multiple identities. Most identities, like the self, emerge as a result of social interaction with others like a famous story of Frankenstein's monster, who before interacting with others feel inside that he is a good person, the identity that he is trying to confirm by rescuing a child swept by river waters, but he is being chased away by an adult that appears in the story whom the monster speculates to be a person from whom the child is running away (Shelly, 1818[2008]). Frankenstein's monster is confused because he is perceived by others to be dangerous and fiend, while he thinks of himself as affectionate, altruistic, and caring. He takes upon this new identity that emerges in the social process and kills three different individuals, in a sense, to verify his identity that the generalized other befits him. As it can be seen from this illustration, identities are products of social processes for which Burke and Stets do not take into account. Also, it needs to be taken into consideration that an existing social structure, which is an important component in a discussion of identity verification, guides the behaviors of individuals during an interaction. This important aspect of identity verification process is what is missing from Burke and Stet's identity theory. Turner (1988), for instance, argues that norms, which are expectations tied to a position in social network, guides the behavior of individuals who occupy this position and they also help individuals interpret the meanings arising in interactions. Besides norms, social actors *categorize*; which is a tendency to interpret things based on consensus or agreed upon categories, *regionalize*; which means designating a constricted area or a space for an interaction, *ritualize*; which means to direct the interaction to make it highly predictable; *routinize*; which means to do the same thing in space and time, and finally they stabilize the transfer of resources; that is to say, social actors are driven to profit from an

Another theory that is relevant to conversion process is the theory of front and back stage developed by Erving Goffman. Similar to play and game stage theories proposed by Mead in the emergence of self as a social process, Goffman (1959) proposes that in a particular performance, there are two stages that complement the performance: a front region and back region. In the front stage, a performer will try to create an impression that his/her conduct embodies and maintains a certain standard. This is usually done in two different ways. First, the performer will treat his audience in a certain manner; s/he talks with them in a kind way, s/he makes sure that they are comfortable. Second, the performer will behave in a professional way while the audience hears or sees him/her. In the back region, the suppressed acts emerge in the way the Freudian subconscious emerges since the performer is relatively relaxed. This region is totally separated from the front region. In the back region, the performers construct the illusion and impression that they present in the front region. Goffman (1959) illustrates the difference between the front and back regions with a restaurant example. In a restaurant, the front region would be the dining area, while the back region would be the kitchen. A waiter will conduct herself in the dining area in such a way to make the impression that the restaurant cares about their customers. She will ask politely what the customer wants to eat and write down the order meticulously to show that she cares about his/her order. In the back region, she might yell or use profane language while talking to her co-workers. She might make fun of a customer

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interaction (Turner, 1988). These structural categories introduced by Turner guide and regulate social behavior to such an extent that it is hard to say that a social interaction is solely determined by identity verification process. From these properties of the social structure, norms and categorization need a special attention as they correspond to the generalized other.

that she has just served. As can be seen from this discussion, there is a clear demarcation between the front stage and back stage.

Once a person converts to Islam, she will need to make a certain impression that they are fully embracing the doctrines of the religion. For instance, in a mosque or in the presence of other Muslims, converts will behave in a certain way that is different than how they will behave when they are with their non-Muslim friends. In this front region where other Muslims are present the convert will strive to make an impression that s/he has genuinely embraced their religion and committed to follow its rituals. As part of making this impression they will change their name and assume a new Islamic name. On the other hand, in the back region where non-Muslims are present, the converts will use their name given at birth rather than the Islamic name adopted at conversion. If a convert is using a different name in her prior to conversion network than what she uses in her post to conversion network, she is more likely to have difficulty in adjusting to her religion and its community; thus, her identity as a Muslim will not be verified in both networks and she will eventually go back to her prior belief. If she uses one name in both prior and post conversion networks, however, she is more likely to immerse in her religion and have less difficulty in establishing her identity as a Muslim. Moreover, in the presence of other Muslims such as in a religious congregation, they may wear certain clothes similar to other people's clothes, whereas they will wear regular clothes while in presence of their non-Muslim friends. This going back and forth between regions, as it is theorized by Goffman, is more than likely to create tensions that may have decisive effects on converts' ego network. One way to ease this tension would be adapting a style of conduct that can fit in both regions. This way the individual will have a smoother conversion process.

## **Social Network Theory**

There has not been any comprehensive study on religious conversion from a social network theoretical perspective. However, Lofland was one of the forerunners in pointing out that individuals who develop affective ties with a member of a religious group are likely to convert (Lofland 1966). Although Lofland used social network elements in his study on conversion to the Doomsday Cult, his study remained rudimentary as he did not collect any social network data from his research participants to explain how conversion occurs through social networks. For example, it is not clear what percent of social ties constituting personal social networks of the converts are to the cult members and whether there is high connection between converts' cult member friends and non-cult member friends. Moreover, Lofland does not use precise network analysis to explain how potential converts develop these affective bonds to cult members prior-to their conversion. Although his model is precursory in applying network theory to religious conversion, it is rather restrictive as it explains conversion in line with the traditional passive paradigm. Also, in his model, developing prior friendships and affective ties with cult members was only a part of a long conversion process. These ties come into being as a result of intense misleading radio and newspaper advertising that tricked people to come to meetings dealing with other issues rather than religion. Thus, Lofland's model does not account for voluntarily formed social ties to members of religion to which social actors convert.

Lofland (1966) proposes that in order for individuals to convert they need to feel tension which can be characterized as a feeling that there is a difference between an ideal state of affairs and the current circumstances in which individuals find themselves. Second, they will need to define their problems from a religious perspective. It was surprising to



Lofland (1966:43) that all pre-converts were unaware of other perspectives such as psychiatric and political to define their problems since most came from small town and rural communities. This explanation is too deterministic because not everybody who feels tension is going to approach tension from a religious perspective. Moreover, it is parallel to the social conformity theory which perceives the agent as passive and acted upon reinforcing the old paradigm that fell into disfavor among sociologists of conversion (Smilde 2005). Most importantly, this line of thought does not make it clear how network ties influence egos given the fact that human agency and social structure like social networks presuppose each other and that social actors who have meanings and motivations as social agents creating these social structures in turned are constrained by them (Diani and McAdam 2003, Smilde 2005).

Conversion to a religion is a type of diffusion such as the diffusion of fashion, ideas, technology, diseases, etc. which can be more complex than something diffusing through affective cult bonds which are almost imposed on social actors through manipulative recruiting techniques. Not all of ties formed to religious groups are affective bonds generated as a result of effective propaganda. There are circumstances under which people form ties to religious members voluntarily. These voluntary ties do not have to always be affective bonds. As a matter of fact, the emergent theory, after analyzing my data, indicates the strength of social ties matters in adopting a new religion. I discuss how the relationship between the strength of a social tie and conversion process in detail in the analysis part of this work in great detail. It suffices to remind the reader that diffusion in social networks does not always take place through strong ties. For instance, Granovetter (1973) argues that a diffusion such as a rumor can diffuse through weak social ties, which are bridges,

traversing greater social distance. With regards to conversion, weak ties can be crucial in religious diffusion because they connect two different communities.

A study of the historical spread of Christianity proposes that ideas and religious conversion spread through social interconnections similar to how innovations spread in social networks (Collar 2007). In order for conversion to spread in a social network, it is essential that different clusters of networks are connected with interconnected links. Once all of the clusters are joined then a giant component emerges allowing communication across the whole network. This is a '*phase transition*' in a network when change in a network can occur as individuals here and there adopt different behaviors. The change does not come from the center but instead it is a result of individual choices percolating through the system. Other studies conducted on the spread of Christianity propose that the spread of Christianity occurred through both weak ties (Czachesz 2011) and strong ties (Duling 2013) suggesting that religious diffusion relies on both types of ties. I discuss these two works in detail in Chapter 4, where I further elaborate on the diffusion of religion in the egocentric social networks to shed light on the relationship between conversion to Islam and the strength of Muslim ties.

### **Social Capital and Conversion Process**

What is the function of social capital in the conversion process? When people convert to another religion does their social capital increase or does it decrease? How does change in people's social capital influence the course of their conversion process? Does the structure of social network have any bearing on social capital? Conversion process affects egocentric social networks in a tremendous way not only as a result of how converts interpret conversion but also how their social ties perceive it. Change in social capital is a

function of loss and gain of ties, although not all of gained ties can transform into increased social capital. Since conversion to Islam is perceived as a controversial action in the context of the tragedy of September 11 and U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the change in social ties can bring about social structure in which converts are constrained. For example, if a person is positioned in a personal network in which her social ties are clustered in disparate cliques with low level of connectivity among them, she is more likely to experience constraint. This constrain will be more intense if these cliques have different social norms especially with regards to conversion. If one clique approves of conversion, while others reject it or criticize it, the convert will be deprived of social capital needed for a smooth conversion experience. On the other hand, if a person is embedded in a personal network in which there is a high level of connectivity and coherence of norms with regard to interpreting conversion, she is more likely to have pleasant conversion experience as a result of high level of social capital.

Given that social capital is defined by its function (Coleman 1988), the strength of ties can be crucial in the conversion process. The types of ties that someone has will not only affect their access to resources, but also the obstacles they come across while pursuing these sources (Borgatti et al. 2009, Granovetter 1973). When a person makes a transition to a new way of life they will need a high level of social support from their alters (people in their personal networks) to have a successful transition. If their friends and family members do not support this transition, but instead reject social actors because of their choice than they are more likely to have unsuccessful transitions. Getting social supports, which I argue is tantamount to social capital, is crucial in having successful life transitions.

Most importantly, one's social ties are not verifying their identity coming into existence as result of a life transitioning event, they are more likely to have unsuccessful transition.

Social capital takes on different forms like information and norms and effective sanctions that can facilitate certain social action (Coleman 1988). Social capital may emerge in the form of trustworthiness in a social network defined by a high level of closure. For example, in a social network in which students B and C are friends in a school and B's parents A and C's parents D are also friends there will be a high level of closure. In such a structure, parents A and D can use collective sanctions to either reward or punish behaviors of students B and C. Coleman (1988) calls such a structure closure in which the social capital emerges in the form of trustworthiness. Closure of the social structure will aid parents in developing norms regulating rewards and punishments for their children's behavior. Preliminary results indicate that by converting to Islam individuals will seek to obtain this social capital by sending their children to Islamic schools where parents cooperate closely to insure that their children are successful. Also, if a person is embedded in a social structure in which her alters are socially not distant from each other, her conversion identity is more likely to be verified by everyone in her social network, making this life changing event a successful one. In contrast, if she is embedded in a network in which her social ties are distant from each other, it is more likely that they will have different perceptions about her new identity decreasing its chance of verification.

### **Islamic Conversion in Two Different Contexts in the West**

Although conversion to Islam in the West is not a new phenomenon, September 11, 2001 was a turning point in the lives of Muslims across the world, but especially those

living in the West.<sup>8</sup> The post September 11 social and political atmosphere is likely to start two different processes in the United States influencing conversion to Islam. First, it can push the adherents of Islam further to the margin of mainstream society thereby rendering them the excluded minority. In places where Muslims are pushed further to the margin of society, such as in Kentucky, it is likely that the member of the mainstream society or the dominant group will avoid any association with Islam. In such places Muslims will have low visibility in society and the members of the majority group in society will have less opportunity to build social ties to other Muslims. Therefore, people who live in places where Muslims keep low profile are less likely to convert.

Contrary to this process, the post September 11 atmosphere is likely to push Muslims living in the west to further assert themselves and to emphasize their religiosity and their differences from those who perpetrated the events. This process is likely to make this minority group more visibility thereby giving an opportunity the members of the majority group to build social ties to other Muslims. Some recent studies on conversion to Islam indicate that more Muslim chose the latter course by asserting their Muslim identity. The second generation of Muslims living the United States, for instance, started to embrace religion as a salient chosen identity as a result of stigmatization and external socio-cultural and socio-political pressures (Peek 2005). Some, on the other hand, gave in to this societal context such as stigmatization, peer pressure to assimilate, and lack of religious

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<sup>8</sup> During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim population growth in Al Andalusia of Spain was a result of conversion rather than internal growth (Shatzmiller,1996).The legal status of those who converted to Islam was defined in Islamic law which facilitated the conversion process, although this process might have had a toll on the legal and social status of women. The fact that Islamic law is not practiced in the West the way it was enforced in Spain and that Westerners have more access to Islamic texts to formulate their conversion experience brought a new dimension as to why people convert to Islam.

understanding and sought ways to cancel their religious identity. Peek (2005) argues religious identity development emerges in three stages: ascribed identity, chosen identity, and declared identity. After September 11 the second American Muslim generation felt the need to assert their religious identity to preserve a positive self-perception and correct public misconceptions. While September 11 was having this effect on the American Muslims, as I have argued above, it was at the same time pushing their Islamic faith further in the direction of being “other” which is a mirror image of the West.

Conversion to Islam is more likely to occur in places where there are more Muslims than the places where there are less Muslims. According to Kanter (1977), the interaction between social groups is influenced to a great extent by numerical proportions of the groups. Those who are part of skewed or minority are called tokens (Kanter 1977) who make up about less than 15% of the total population. Studying interactions between males and females in workplace in an American corporation, Kanter (1977) discovered that women as tokens were subject to stereotypes attributed to them by the dominant group. In this process the tokens lose their individuality and they are started to be seen as representatives of their group. The tokens react to this perception by increasing their performance at work and they are constantly under the pressure to live up to the highest expectations. If the perceived difference between the majority and the minority group is large, then the minority group is excluded from society. Similarly, in Kentucky the Muslims are minority, while non-Muslim Caucasian Americans are the majority. As a dominant group, Caucasian Americans are more likely to associate Muslim and Islam with radicalism or with terrorism as a result of the post September 11 social and political climate in the United States. Because the religion of Islam belongs these minority group, there is

less likelihood that people in Kentucky will convert to Islam and once converted they are more likely to revert. Contrary to Kentucky, there are more Muslims in Michigan making them more dominant numerically than Muslims in Kentucky. Also, it is widely known the presence of Muslim in Michigan has longer history than that of Kentucky. The dominant group in Michigan is more likely to have different perception about the Muslim residing in Michigan because they have more experience and familiarity with them. Therefore, people in Michigan are more likely to convert to Islam because they can treat Islam as just another religion existing in the area. By collecting data from both states I will show the extent to which context matters when people convert to Islam.

Another study of conversion to Islam conducted in Australia shows that identity politics coupled with the politics of multiculturalism provides a context in which conversion to Islam can take place (Boz 2012). Australia like any other western country is mostly dominated by Christian religion and it is also influenced by the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations whereby Muslims are depicted as the other. Despite this negative context, there are people in Australia who convert to Islam. Since Islam is the religion of the other in the Western context, then how do converts cope with this change in their life. First, the Australian converts to Islam identify themselves as “reverts” rather than converts to ease their path into a new religion (Boz 2012). This means that every human being is naturally dispositioned to believe in Allah, but they grow up believing in other religions as a result of their socialization. The converts to Islam in Australia ease their tension with their social surroundings by identifying themselves as reverts who went back to their origins rather than converts who converted to the religion of the other. At the societal level, the switch in Australia from being a “White Australia” to a multicultural and cosmopolitan

society prepared a social ground for Islam to emerge as a significant presence (Bouma 1997). Thus, some areas of Australia may have a great deal of diversity and many Muslims and other areas of the country may have few if any Muslims. It is obviously much more difficult to convert when one is an extreme minority. Michigan, similar to Australia, is more multi-cultural than Kentucky. For example, while working as a substitute teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I went to a middle school which advertises its diversity by writing “Welcome” on its main gate in many different languages, such as Turkish, Russian, Persian, Arabic, and others that I did not recognize. To my surprise, I had students in my class who were indeed Turkish, Ukrainian, and from many other backgrounds. I could identify the Turkish and Ukrainians ones since I conversed with them in Turkish and Russian. This is a specific example that may not be generalized to the entire state, but it gives testimony to the fact that Michigan is more multi-cultural than Kentucky and therefore those living in Michigan are more likely to convert to Islam and less likely to revert once converted.

What is more significant about conversion to Islam in Australia is that converts were not religion seekers as Lofland’s theory postulates but rather bumped into Islam (Boz 2012). Synthesizing Rambo’s and Lofland’s conversion models, she postulates further that interaction with other adherents of Islamic faith was an important factor in the conversion process. Although converts were rejected by their immediate social circles such as family and friends, they were able to garner support later on. The Islamic conversion experience is interpreted in the context of the West versus Islam, a debate which is influenced by the politics of the clash of civilization and post-September 11 climate indicating that Islamic conversion process contains social as well as individual elements.



For these reasons, this study looks at two different areas of the United States -- Michigan and Kentucky -- to explain why and how conversion to Islam occurs in the Western context. These two sites are different than each other because Michigan has a large Muslim population, but Kentucky does not. Studying these two different sites, will shed light on whether people who live in place with a larger Muslim population has more Muslims in their social network and how having social ties to other Muslims influences conversion to Islam.

## **HYPOTHESES**

In the following section, I will first present hypotheses dealing with the conversion. Then, I develop hypothesis explaining the relationship between conversion and identity change. Finally, I generate the theories explaining reversion from Islam based on success and failure of conversion identities.

### **Networks of Conversion Hypotheses**

This first part of hypotheses deals with why and how conversion occurs. Does context matter in order to induce conversion? Do ties in one's social network have any bearing on conversion? Are people who are connected to other Muslims are more likely to convert to Islam than those who do not have any ties to other Muslims? After developing hypotheses dealing with these questions, then I will propose hypotheses explaining conversion processes and finally I conclude with hypotheses on reversion.

**Muslim Network Hypothesis 1:** Individuals are more likely to convert to Islam, if they have other Muslims in their social network.

Conversion in a social network disseminates the way ideas, innovations, and diseases diffuse into a network. If individuals have social ties to Muslims, they are likely to acquire first-hand information about Islam. This might trigger a further interest in Islam depending on the strength of the tie to other Muslims. Converts are more likely to be influenced by Muslims and/or those who had already converted to Islam. Social behavior like conversion is more likely to spread when individuals are connected to many other people who have already adopted that behavior, a condition that will sustain social reinforcement and render conversion as an acceptable behavior (Centola 2010). Stronger ties to other members of Islam will expose a potential convert to this religion and how it is practiced within a community. A first-hand experience with Islam is prone to trigger further interest in this religion on the part of the convert who may eventually convert. Or a potential convert may discover that this is not a religion that they are looking for and as a result they may turn away from it.

**Hypothesis 1a:** The stronger the ties to other Muslims in one's social network, the higher the probability to convert.

Having close ties to other Muslims provide opportunities to a potential convert to know more about Islam. Learning more about Islam through the actions of alters (those to whom the ego has ties) could have two different effects on a converts with regards to how she approaches Islam. If she is holding up to her Muslim alters in her social network and if she regards their values, customs, way of life highly she is more likely to enquire more about these values and customs, especially if they are associated with Islam. However, she will not develop an interest in Islam if she does not see her Muslim alters as people whom can be taken as good example and hence, she will distance herself from Islam.

**Hypothesis 1b:** If a person has social ties to other converts, he/she will be more likely to convert.

### **Conversion Process Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses explain different conversion processes. There are slow conversions and abrupt conversions. Those who through slow process are more likely to do more research about Islam like reading Qur'an, which is the holy book of Islam, or/and other works publish on Islam. Some people may travel to Muslim countries to gain a first-hand experience about Islam before declaring their conversion (Wilson 2011). Other people may go through abrupt conversion a process attributed to supernatural forces and events. Sometimes these kinds of conversion occur as a result proselytization or manipulation.

**Hypothesis 2:** Conversion to Islam is more likely occur as a slow process rather than being an abrupt.

Since Islam is considered to the religion of the other in the Western context conversion to Islam will require a lot of convincing. As I have pointed out above, prior research on conversion to Islam (McGinty 2006, Van Nieuwkerk 2008) indicates people involve in a lot of reflection before making a decision about conversion. This long reflection preceding conversion is expectable since conversion to Islam is more likely to generate criticism and even rejection from friends and family members given the strong negative perception about Islam in the West. These are the hypotheses that this prospectus aims to test to shed light on how conversion process unfolds. In the following section, I present hypothesis dealing with changes in the egocentric social network of converts.

## **Egocentric Conversion Network Change Hypotheses**

This set of hypotheses deal with changes in the egocentric social networks of converts. Under this section, I investigate how egocentric social networks of people change when they go under the conversion process. I collect egocentric social network data from prior-to-conversion and post-conversion to assess the effects of conversion on egocentric social networks. In Chapter 5, I demonstrate how change in the egocentric social networks is more than the sum of the loss and gain of social ties. The structural changes in egocentric social network are sociologically more meaningful and they have far more consequences for the conversion process than the simply the loss and gain of social ties. I argue that most of the change in egocentric social networks induced by life transitioning events is influenced by how one's social ties perceive these events. Also, I provide a detailed analysis of reaction of the friends and family members of the converts and how this reaction affects changes in the egocentric network of converts in this chapter. More importantly, with regard to conversion to Islam, the amount of change in egocentric social networks of people is more likely to be different for Caucasian converts than that of African-American converts. The following hypotheses are designed to capture changes in egocentric social networks induced by conversion.

**Alters Reaction Hypothesis 3:** Social ties of Caucasian convert are more likely to react negatively to conversion of Caucasian egos than the alters of African-American converts to the conversion of African-Americans.

Caucasian and African-Americans collectively have a different experience with Islam. African-Americans are more familiar with Islam, since as a group they utilized Islam as one of the religions in their struggle of Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the

20<sup>th</sup> century, different African-American groups organized under the banner of Islam, albeit in altered form to ameliorate the conditions of their kindred. I discuss this collective experience in more detail in third chapter of this dissertation. Thanks to this collective experience, African-American social ties are more likely to interpret conversion to Islam positively. Caucasians, on other hand, as group are less familiar with Islam and they are more likely to interpret the conversion of other Caucasians in accordance with the U.S. govern foreign policy toward the Islamic world. Therefore, they are more likely to interpret conversion in a negative way than African-Americans.

**Network Change Hypothesis 3a:** The structure and composition of Caucasian converts' egocentric social networks are more likely to change than that of African-American converts.

Since the kinship and non-kin social ties of Caucasian converts are more likely to negatively react to their conversion experience as a group they are more likely to experience a large amount change in their egocentric social networks.

**Symbolic Interactionism Hypothesis 3b:** Caucasian converts are more likely to have multiple generalized other in their post-conversion social networks than African-American converts.

As I have shown above the generalized other is “the attitude of the entire community” (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:334) toward the self which emerges as a result of social processes. Conversion is a type of social process. When a Caucasian converts to Islam they are more likely to be rejected by their social ties, who will have a different attitude towards conversion than their gained Muslim social ties. On the other hand, their Muslim social ties are more likely have a positive and encouraging attitude toward their

conversion. Whenever a convert is embedded in a social network in which there are clumps of sub-networks, they are more likely to have multiple generalized others. Unlike Caucasian converts, when an African-American converts to Islam she is more likely to receive less negative reaction from her non-Muslim social ties meaning that her both Muslim and non-Muslim ties will have a similar attitude towards her conversion. Thus, African-Americans are more likely to have one generalized other post their conversion.

## **Conversion Identity and Reversion from Islam Hypotheses**

Contrary to the passive paradigm which claims that individuals who are recruited to cults are coerced to sever ties to their immediate social circle of friends and relatives (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980), this study states that if converts were to sever their ties, they are more likely to do it voluntarily. When I first designed this study I expected to find that converts would be more likely to sever their ties to their non-Muslim kin and non-kinship ties in order to better become embedded in homophilous religious social network. I expect that they would cut their ties to their prior to conversion social network at the expense of losing their social capital, and the nurturing that comes with it, which might prove to be crucial in persevering in their new socio-religious environment. However, as I discuss in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 in great details, it is more often the social ties of the converts especially family members and close friends who not only sever their ties to the converts, but also reject them because they interpret their conversion is as a violation of group norm. I argue that those who are rejected by their relatives and close friends will be deprived of social capital that can ease the transition to this new environment and aid the convert to cope with vulnerabilities and insecurities resulting from conversion process (Schnegg 2006). Given that social capital is embedded in the structure of relations among social actors (Coleman 1988), those who cut their social ties will also lose their resources (Borgatti et al. 2009, Granovetter 1973), a circumstance that ends in total isolation for the individual. When this occurs converts will resort to different ways to cope with this increasingly stressful environment and they will revert back to their prior belief in hopes of garnering the social capital they once used to have. Such converts are more likely to revert back to their prior belief to evade the difficulties that come with the conversion.

If a person embracing a new religion is going through a slow process of converting, it is more plausible that she will develop a balancing relationship between her prior and post-conversion egocentric social networks. A slow process of conversion will prevent converts from experiencing extreme stages of “falling love” and then becoming disenchanted with other Muslims. A sudden conversion, however, will reinforce converts to break ties with their immediate social surroundings since converts will feel pressured to prove their new Muslim identity by strictly following religious rituals and code of dress, thereby alienating those who could potentially support them for their decision.

### **Visibility of Identity Hypothesis**

Female converts are more likely to be more visible than male converts. As a result, they are more likely to receive higher level of negative reaction from their social ties.

Conversion to Islam involves among other things identity building. Part of this identity building process is changes in one’s appearance. Female converts tend to be more visible than male converts because they tend to wear Islamic head scarf as part of their identity building. Also, some tend to marry Muslim men from the Middle East to further consolidate their Muslim identity building. These two changes in themselves are more likely generate the most negative reaction from their both intimate and non-intimate social ties.

**Social distance hypothesis 4a:** Female conversion is more likely to result in higher social distance between their Muslim and non-Muslim social ties. Thus female conversion identity is less likely to be verified by their alters.



Sometimes converts to Islam lose ties to their prior conversion network because they are rejected by their immediate circle (Boz 2012). As such, they drift to a new social network which is limited in its capacity to be responsive to the needs of the converts. In such a case, the convert will either resort to ways of establishing support groups or they will plead with their social network to accept their new condition. If converts are embraced by their social network of friends and family, they will remain in their adopted religion, but if they are rejected, they will revert to their prior belief. While interacting with others, people make an effort that their identity standards are verified by others (Burke and Stets 2009). When people's identity meaning is not verified by others they might withdraw or change some aspects of their identity. If converts' identity meanings are not verified by other Muslims, they are more likely to revert.

**Successful Female Identity Hypothesis 4b:** The shorter the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for female converts the more likely they will have successful identities and remain Muslim.

When people convert, their egocentric social network changes based on the perception of their social ties in such a way that their alters are socially distant from each other decreasing the likelihood of the success of their conversion identity. This occurs when people's Muslim and non-Muslim social ties are not well connected. I measure the social distance by calculating reciprocal geodesic, which is the inverse measure of geodesic distance, distances for each and every alters in a network. The geodesic distance is basically the shortest path between two pairs of actors (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013), but in an egocentric social network this measure is not applicable because every social tie is connected to the ego making, even the most distant pairs of nodes are only one

link away from each other. Due to this nuance, I measure the reciprocal distances for every node in an egocentric social network to measure the social distance in it. When a female convert is embedded in an egocentric social network, in which her Muslim and non-Muslim social ties are close to each other she is more likely to have a successful conversion identity because they are more likely to have a similar perception about her newly built identity. In a social structure, in which a convert's Muslim and non-Muslim social ties are not socially distant from each other, it is more likely that there would be harmony between the two groups in interpreting the roles and expectations of conversion identity, thereby increasing its chance of success.

**Failed Female Identity Hypothesis 4c:** The longer the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for female converts the more likely they will have failed identities and the more likely they will revert from Islam.

Unlike successful female conversion identities, failed female identities are more likely to be observed, when female are embedded in a social structure in which their social ties are distant from each other. When females convert, they tend receive the most negative reaction from their non-Muslim social ties, ranging from simply severing social ties to outright rejection. The most severe negative reaction occurs when female converts both start wearing Islamic attire and marry Muslim men from the Middle East creating the longest social distance between Muslim and non-Muslim social ties. Female converts embedded in such a social structure are more likely to develop failed conversion identity because of the divergent interpretation of their identity by their Muslim and non-Muslim ties.

**Failed Male Identity Hypothesis 4d:** The longer the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for male converts the more likely they will have failed identities and the more likely they will revert from Islam.

Although male converts do not have similar visibility and marriage issues affecting the course of their identity building, they still can have failed identities. If male converts are embedded in fragmented network divided into Muslim and non-Muslim sub-networks, then they are more likely to have failed conversion identity which leads to reversion from Islam. In such a network, the perception of Muslim and non-Muslim ties of conversion differs increasing the social distance between the two groups. The differences in the perception of the conversion identity and the long social distance between the two groups reproduce each other, decreasing the success of the male conversion identity. In other words, if the Muslim and non-Muslim friends of male converts are not well-connected, they are more likely to have a different interpretation of conversion, thereby decreasing the chances of the verification of the conversion identity. Under such circumstances, male converts are more likely to develop failed conversion identities; and thus, they are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion beliefs.

**Successful Male Identity Hypothesis 4e:** The shorter the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for male converts the more likely they will have successful identities and the more likely they will remain Muslim.

Contrary to failed male identities, successful male identities emerge when all social ties constituting their egocentric social network interpret their conversion in the same way. If the social distance between people composing these networks is short, it is more likely

that there will be unison among them in interpreting the conversion identity. When people identities are verified they are more likely to stay as a Muslim.

In conclusion, the success of conversion identity, which is closely related to reversion from Islam depends on both how their alters interpret their conversion and the social distance between them. I argue that people are more likely to strive for the verification of their identity meanings by Muslim and non-Muslims people in their social network. However, they do not have control over the verification of their identities process. For example, if a convert has adapted a Muslim name, but she is never addressed by her Muslim name, her Muslim identity is less likely to be verified and as a result, she is more likely to revert. Also, some converts wear Islamic attire or grow beards to establish a Muslim identity. If these changes are not approved by the non-Muslim Americans in their social network, they are more likely to revert. I test these hypotheses in greater details in Chapter 6, where I compare female and male conversion cases to develop theories explaining identity verification process and reversion from Islam.

## **CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW**

The second chapter of this manuscript deals with the methodology of this work. I am using mixed methodology to study social networks of converts to Islam. I am using social network data and semi-structured interviews mostly composed of open-ended questions. The network data measure the ego-social network of research participants at two points in time: (1) their ego networks before converting to Islam, (2) their ego-network post conversion. For my control group, however, I collect ego network data for only one point in time which is the time of the interview. In addition to network data, I gathered qualitative data which is mainly semi-interviews based on open ended questions and follow questions if it was necessary. I gathered my data from two different geographical areas in the United States: Michigan and Kentucky. I have chosen these two different states with regards to their Muslim population to assess the effects of context as one state has more Muslim than the other. Although, my unit of analysis is a state, I concentrated my research in Detroit Metropolitan and Louisville Metropolitan areas since these are two main areas where it could have located potential research participants. I will discuss my research methods and procedures in extensive details in chapter two.

Conversion to Islam in America is relatively a new phenomenon compared to conversion to other religious faiths. Chapter three of my dissertation will trace the historical context in which Islam originated and it started to assert itself. Although, my research aims to study conversion to Islam in post September 11 context, the presence of Islam in America goes further back than this point in time. This chapter will endeavor to capture other historical watersheds in history of Islam in America to paint a broader picture. For

one thing, African-Americans associate themselves more with Islam than Caucasian Americans since they claim that there were Muslims among the first arriving African slaves who gradually lost their Islamic faith. This historical fact is a clear testimony that the presence of Islam in America has deep historical roots. Second, as the United States rose to the hegemonic position after the Second World War the Middle East started to appear on the American radar than ever before (Wallerstein 2008). Nevertheless, more Americans started to hear more about the Middle East and Islam when the United States got involved in the first Gulf War. With the attacks of September 11, the coverage of Islam and the Middle East in the United States reached its apogee. These are some of the key historical turning points in the establishment of the presence of Islam and its discourse in America. Chapter three of my dissertation will present this historical context in detail.

In the following chapters I will present the analysis of my data. The first analysis chapter, which is chapter four, investigates how Islam diffuses in egocentric social networks. I compare conversion cases of Michigan to those of Kentucky demonstrating that the strength of Muslim ties matters in the diffusion of Islam. Here I show that those living in Michigan tend to have weak Muslim ties, while those living in Kentucky have strong ties to other Muslims. Also, by comparing the research group to the control, I show that besides having a social tie to another Muslim there are other factors influencing the conversion process. By comparing the conversion stories of the research group to explanations of non-conversion stories of the control group, I present a four step conversion to Islam model.

Chapter five covers the differences between conversion experiences of Caucasians and African-American converts. Some of the main questions that this chapter will answer

will be how the social networks for white and black converts evolve as they go through the conversion process. Specially, I will demonstrate whether the personal network of converts increases in size or decrease once the convert, what the composition of their networks in terms of religion and race look like, how alters in converts' egocentric social networks react to conversion and their perception of Islam, and most importantly, how these phenomena are similar or different for white and black converts. Furthermore, I will discuss some of my hypotheses with regards to social ties to other Muslims. I will show whether converts tend to have social bonds to other Muslims before converting to Islam or not, and if they gain more Muslim ties once they convert and how this varies with regards to race. In addition, I will discuss the idea of social capital and its relationship with the conversion from social network theoretical perspective. I will present measurement of social capital derived from change in social ties and how these ties change from the time before conversion to the time after conversion. Finally, I will cover symbolic interaction theory of conversion to Islam with a sharp focus on the idea of multiplicity of "generalized others" and how it can be analyzed using the social network data. I will endeavor to visualize multiple generalized others by analyzing the composition and connectedness of post conversion social networks and the implications of the characteristics of networks for conversion to Islam.

Chapter six covers conversion differences between male and female converts to Islam. Here, the primary focus will be on the visibility and non-visibility of converts and the extent to which research participants develop an Islamic identity after they convert. Female converts tend to be more visible because of their Islamic dress than the male ones, and because of this difference it is likely that people composing their social network will

respond differently to their conversion than how people composing the social network of male converts react to their conversion. Also, I will discuss the identity formation process for both females and males and analyze the differences between the two genders. What is interesting in conversion to Islam in terms of gender is that female converts will need to be more visible if they decide to construct an Islamic identity. For instance, they may need to wear a headscarf as a part of their Muslim identity construction, thereby becoming more visible than their male counterparts. The visibility of female converts is more likely to generate more controversial reactions from the alters of female converts who, in return, may develop different mechanisms to deal with this reaction than how male converts deal with reaction to their conversion experiences. This claim does not totally rule out visibility of male converts since male converts are also likely to involve in religious identity building that could potentially make them more visible such as growing beard or wearing religious dress. However, these two conditions are not necessarily directly associated with religious identity which still supports the idea that females are more likely to be more visible depending on the degree of their religiosity. In this chapter of my dissertation, I will extensively cover the differences between female and male converts to Islam with regards to their identity constructions and how people in their social network react to their conversion using social network data collected from the two different time periods to measure change over time.

Building on both chapter four and five, chapter six presents a discussion of reversion from Islam in relation to race and gender differences. Are Caucasian or African-Americans are more likely to leave Islam? Does gender matter in leaving Islam? These are some of the important questions with regards to reversion from Islam that chapter six



covers. The fact that it proved to be more difficult to locate reverts from Islam than converts, the discussion of reversion covered in chapter six will be limited to fewer data. Therefore, chapter six will be more devoted to extrapolations about why people are more likely to revert from Islam than an actual analysis of reversion.

Finally, I provide a conclusion chapter summarizing the result of findings and suggest future research. In the conclusion chapter, I will also restate some of my main hypotheses and inform the reader whether my predictions were supported by data or not. Moreover, the concluding chapter will present the limitations of this study and the extent to which the results could be generalized. Finally, I will provide different scenarios overcoming the limitations of this study. For instance, one of my future projects is to conduct a quantitative study based on a larger sample than the current one. This will give me more ability to make inferences about the population of the study.

**Table 1.1: Religious Congregation and Membership**

Religious Body	Adherents 2000	Adherents 2010	Percent Decrease or Increase
American Baptist Churches in the USA	1,767,462	1,560,572	-12%
Assemblies of God	2,561,998	2,944,887	15%
Catholic Church	62,035,042	58,928,987	-5%
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,439,253	1,453,160	1%
Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)	974,198	1,109,992	14%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints	4,224,026	6,144,582	45%
Churches of Christ	1,645,584	1,584,162	-4%
Episcopal Church	2,314,756	1,951,907	-16%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,113,418	4,181,219	-18%
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	2,521,062	2,270,921	-10%
<b><i>Muslim Estimate</i></b>	<b><i>1,559,294</i></b>	<b><i>2,600,082</i></b>	<b><i>67%</i></b>
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3,141,566	2,451,980	-22%
Seventh-day Adventist Church	923,046	1,194,996	29%
Southern Baptist Convention	19,881,467	19,896,975	0%
United Church of Christ	1,698,918	1,284,296	-24%
United Methodist Church	10,350,629	9,948,221	-4%

Source: ASARB, Religious Congregation and Membership Study 2000-2010

Note: Some congregations are omitted from the table since their data from both time periods were not comparable.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

I have conducted this research in two successive phases. Initially in 2010, I conducted a pilot study for which I collected data about the egocentric social networks of converts to Islam residing in the state of Kentucky. In the course of this pilot study, I collected data of eight different converts who were residing in the city of Lexington and Louisville at the time of the study. This inchoate study was heavily quantitative measuring *change* in social networks of converts to Islam. Nevertheless, it was limited in scope since it collected complete information about only the first six alters, who are the people with whom the egos have a relationship (Carrasco et al. 2008), mentioned by the participants. Limiting the number of alters to six people was modeled to earlier studies (Burt 1984) which suggest the boundaries to be kept around five alters because of the time constraint and measurement issues. Accordingly, those egocentric social networks having more than six alters do not answer some of the research questions I developed in the second stage of my research. For instance, in the second stage of my research I discovered that there is a relationship between conversion and some proprieties of ego networks such as the density of the network and the level of homophily. These proprieties of the egocentric networks were not captured in the pilot study because during this initial research phase I did not deem a relationship between density and conversion to be relevant. As a result, the pilot does not respond to all of the research questions, but it captures change in the network in terms of the loss and gain of ties.

Conducting pilot studies is useful as they give researchers the ability to see the limitation of their research design and how to enhance it to answer the researcher question in more comprehensive way (Sampson 2004). When I set out collecting data for the pilot study, I specified the boundary of the egocentric networks (Marsden 1990) capping it at six social ties. The pilot study made it clear that boundaries of the social network (Marsden 1990) is relevant to the conversion experience. This finding guided the way I collected data from the research participants during the second stage of conducting this research. In the later stage, I let the boundaries of the ego networks of the research participants float freely to capture all of the possible relevant information. This allowed me to get a better grasp of those networks having degrees<sup>9</sup> bigger than six. As a result, the pilot study allowed me to be become deeply immersed in a my dissertation research and focus on more relevant data as I became more familiar with the issues related to the study and gained more knowledge about the social setting of this research (Sampson 2004). This is a more advanced research design than that of my pilot study during which I collected data on only six social ties to which the research participants were tied. Not only the research participants are enumerating everybody in their egocentric social networks, but also reporting how their each and every social tie reacts to their conversion experience allowing a better analysis of the conversion form social network theoretic perspective.

In the second stage of this research which I conducted between 2013 and 2014, I integrated quantitative and qualitative methods giving a bigger weight to the latter as I started to collected more in-depth information about the conversion process and the reactions of the alters to the conversion experience. This shift in methodology was a

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<sup>9</sup> Degree in a social network is a term used to describe the size of a network.

necessary step to be taken to accurately account for the process of conversion to Islam which is a recent social phenomenon in the United States occurring with a limited frequency. Thus, the population of this study, which is the American converts to Islam, is for the most part indefinite. Despite a lack of detailed enumeration of the converts to Islam in the United States, recent estimates suggest that on average about 15 people per mosque convert to Islam per year (Bagby 2012). In addition to those American converts to Islam declaring their conversion at a mosque, there are also converts who keep their conversion experience private (Wilson 2011). Consequently, there is no estimate about this latter group rendering the population of American converts to Islam hard to define.

Another important challenge this research faces is the issue of an access to the population of the study. Although conversion to Islam occurs on a regular basis in mosques throughout the country with a mixed frequency, this does not mean those who convert to Islam become regular attendants to these institutions. In fact, most of the converts to Islam declaring their conversion in a mosque disappear not long after their conversion. For instance, I came into a contact with all of the research participants in the pilot study I conducted in 2010 through mosques located in Lexington and Louisville Kentucky. Three years later in 2013, however, when I began conducting research for this dissertation I could no longer see these individuals at the mosques where I met them for the pilot study, although I would meet some of them occasionally in other social settings around the city of Lexington. This condition suggests not all converts to Islam necessarily become integrated to the mosque<sup>10</sup>, but more importantly it suggests that a sheer quantitative study

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<sup>10</sup> Integration to the mosque can be another interesting study topic; however, this research does not address this particular issue integration directly, although it extensively shows how conversion to Islam influences changes in the social network of converts.

of conversion to Islam is not a feasible choice because finding a large number of research participants is difficult. Instead, this study uses a mix method combining ego social network data and a detailed narrative of conversion experience and how each and every alter composing the network of the converts reacts to the conversion.

This research employs mixed methods relying on both quantitative and qualitative techniques. As a part of interpreting the conversion narratives and the reactions of alters to the conversion, I rely on grounded theory. Consistent with grounded theory, my aim is not to make generalizations from a sample to the population, but rather to generate theoretical explanations about the social phenomena (Corbin and Strauss 1990). This fits well to this research since getting access to a large sample of converts to Islam proved to be extremely hard both while conducting the pilot study and the main research study. Grounded theory allows for conducting equally valid research with small a sample size since the unit of analysis shift from a person or a thing to an incident (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which in this case is conversion to Islam. Fundamentally, the purpose in grounded theory is not to represent a population, but rather to represent different concepts and theories. This study, among other theories, represents active, passive conversion, the rational choice model, free market model and, more importantly, change in ego networks as people undergo conversion experience.

Although qualitative research is heavily geared towards inductive and grounded theory, structured approaches are also applicable in conducting qualitative research since such approaches can help to ensure that research data is comparable across individuals, times, settings, and differences between things (Maxwell 2012). Also, I am using symbolic interactionism to explain conversion processes; therefore, using grounded theory as a

methodology is the most relevant choice since grounded theory rose among the symbolic interactionist school as an alternative to functionalism.

### **Research and Sampling Design**

Given the amorphous nature of the population of converts to Islam, this study utilizes theoretical sampling as a guiding tool for data collection. The theoretical sampling is the most appropriate sampling design for analyzing qualitative data and to test a theory (Coyne 1997). Theoretical sampling guided this research during the process of collecting social network data and conversion narratives to generate theory and it also steered the research process where to go next to find the next research participants (Glaser 1978). This differs than quantitative studies which rely primarily on random sampling to make inferences about the researched population. Qualitative research is more concerned with finding the right individuals who provide the researcher with information explaining the research question (Maxwell 2012). Another advantage theoretical sampling has is that researchers can develop emergent categories explaining a social phenomenon rather than predetermining all potential theoretical explanations (Charmaz 2006). Prior research indicated that when people convert to another religion they tend to reject their prior affiliations with their former work, school, and most importantly with family members and friends (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980); however, during the field work for this study and a careful analysis of the data thereafter brought fourth new theories explaining the relationship between the converts and their social ties. The following chapters of this dissertation present these new emergent theories in greater detail.

Also, initial sampling in grounded theory directs the researcher where to start, while the theoretical sampling directs her where to go (Charmaz 2006). This research started with a pilot study in Kentucky and it expanded into a comparison research for which I compare conversion cases in Kentucky and Michigan under the guidance of the above theories and hypotheses. It also provides emergent theories which came to the fore during data collection phase and post analysis. For instance, during the data collection process and after the preliminary data analyses, I discovered that conversion to Islam has quite different implications for African-Americans and Caucasian Americans; condition that I explain in detail in coming chapters. Nevertheless, while designing this research I was not expecting to find any differences between the two ethnicities in terms of conversion to Islam.

Qualitative research is interested in understanding a particular case in great detail. The researcher wants to know as much as possible about a relatively small number of people. She might interview only 25 or fifty people for our research (Esterberg 2002). This is acceptable because the sampling model in grounded theory is flexible even allowing the research to develop sampling during the research process rather than predetermine it (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) also argue that theoretical sampling maximizes the chance to compare different concepts and theories across groups. The fact that the ability to generalize study findings beyond the research participants using inferential statistics is not the objective of qualitative research suggests it is more relevant to emphasize sample specificity rather than a representative sample. Determining the important characteristics of informants and locating people who match them is important; not developing a large sample size (Goodman 2001).



Because of this flexibility in theoretical sampling, this research is based upon semi-structured interview data from a total of 30 people. I have selected two different research sites to test one of my main hypotheses: Having social ties to other Muslim is more likely to result in conversion to Islam. It is well known that Michigan has the largest Muslim population in the United States. Therefore, people residing in Michigan are more likely to have social ties to other Muslims. Contrary to Michigan, Kentucky, which has about a 90 percent Caucasian population (U.S.Census 2010), does not have as many Muslims as Michigan. As a result people living in Kentucky are less likely to have social ties to other Muslims.

With this initial design I planned to compare these two states with disparate Muslim population using a theoretical sampling to maximize my opportunities to compare conversion cases in these two different areas in terms of ethnic composition and to detect how conversion occurs when there is a variation in social ties to other Muslims (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Given these conditions, I have selected two different research sites to test one of my main hypotheses: Having social ties to other Muslim is more likely to result in conversion to Islam. Also, collecting data from these two different research sites was going to provide me with alternative explanations for conversion to Islam. If people do not have social ties to other Muslims, then there must be other factors leading to conversion.

In the following analysis chapters I test among other alternative theories identity theory. Having explored why people convert to Islam, I then investigate the relationship between conversion and identity. I endeavor to test this set of my research hypotheses dealing with identity salience and identity verification. Are people who have more religious identity more likely to convert to Islam? To what extent does identity meaning of the

converts match the Islamic meaning and how does this relationship influence the conversion process? Also, I explore the extent to which converts' identities are verified while interacting with other Muslim and while interacting with non-Muslims and how this verification affects their conversion experiences. Is it plausible that people convert to Islam because their identity meaning is congruent with Islamic meaning (Burke and Stets 2009)? When this is not sufficient, I provide emergent explanations since theoretical sampling model allows me to develop other theories during the research process rather than predetermine them (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

While collecting and analyzing conversion stories of my research participants, I detected emergent theoretical explanations for conversion. The codes I developed from the conversion narratives reveal whether a particular conversion experience is best explained by passive, active, or religious market models. Alternatively, some of the conversions are explained by a combination of these models.

At the beginning of the initial sampling design which is based on theoretical sampling, this study aimed to select half of interviewees from Michigan, while the other half from Kentucky making these two states the primary research area. Also, theoretical sample was designed to include an almost equal number of female and males to control for gender. Based on my pilot study, during which I found out that more females tend to convert to Islam than males, I designed the theoretical sample in such a way to include about 16 female and 14 males. However, at the time of the pilot study I did not have any access to statistics on the percentage of females or males converting to Islam, but I expected the numbers to be close. In addition, in the initial design, I intended to control for race by interviewing about 27 of the participants who were white and 3 blacks. This composition

was designed to reflect the percentage of both races in the population of the United States. Finally, the sampling design was going to respond to the age factor by including different age groups to control for this factor. Consequently, I designed my theoretical sample in such a way as to interview 20 young, 8 middle aged, and two older people (see Table 2.1).

\*\*\*\*\* Table 2.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The realities on the ground turned out to be different than my theoretical sampling. Although there are differences between the theoretical and actual sample constituting the design of this study, the difference is not huge. First, the gender composition of the actual sample did not exactly correspond to the theoretical sample. The research participants constituting the Michigan group include 12 female and 7 males. Whereas, the sample I collected from Kentucky has 7 males and 5 females. Thus, there are more female converts in Michigan sample and more female in my Kentucky sample (See Table 2.2).

In terms of age of the research participants there is some difference between the theoretical and the actual sample. In theory, I was expecting to find converts who are young since a part of early conversion research (Gillespie 1979, Starbuck 1901) predict conversion to be adolescent phenomenon; however, my sample from Kentucky produced equal number of young and middle aged converts, but no older converts. The sample in Michigan, on the other hand, includes 10 younger people, 4 middle aged, and 4 older converts. One of the reasons explaining why there are older people in the Michigan sample and none in the Kentucky sample is because of the longer presence of Islam in Michigan than in Kentucky.

\*\*\*\*\* Table 2.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

In addition to demographic differences between my Michigan and Kentucky samples, there also differences in terms of accessibility to the research participants. Finding converts to Islam in Michigan was easier than finding them in Kentucky which resulted in a bigger sample from the former than latter. The fact that Islam is more established in Michigan than Kentucky was a decisive factor in this difference. During the field work, I observed that converts to Islam residing in Michigan seemed to be more integrated to the mosques I visited for this research than the converts living in Kentucky. Because of this difference in integration gaining access to converts to Islam in Michigan was easier than in Kentucky. After visiting multiple mosques scattered throughout Ann Arbor, Canton, Ypsilanti, Detroit, and Dearborn, I was able to collect interview data from 18 people from Michigan. Also, the fact that I lived in Michigan for four years made it easy for me to collect data as I knew my way around and I had a good idea about where to look for the research participants (Charmaz 2006). Whenever I went to a mosque I contacted either the Imam of the mosque or a member of the board of the mosque and explained my research to them pleading for assistance to locate research participants for my study. Two of the mosques had an email listserv and they sent an email to their members with a description of my study. From those emails I received eight different responses who agreed to participate in this study. I located two different participants who were working for the two different mosques while visiting the mosques to introduce my research. The story of getting the remaining seven people is quite different. I came into contact with four research participants from Flint, Michigan randomly. A friend and colleague of mine who teaches an introduction to sociology class in a community college had his students write a paper

on sociology of religion and another paper on Bogardus social distance scale<sup>11</sup> as a part of required writing assignments. On different occasions, his students in their papers mentioned either themselves to be a convert to Islam or having either a friend or a relative who had converted to Islam. The fact students at a random community college in Michigan stated in their papers that they know people converted to Islam suggests that Islam is more established in Michigan than Kentucky. Upon learning about converts who had social ties to his students, my colleague who knows about my research, informed one of his students who was a convert to Islam about my research and asked him if he would volunteer to participate in my study. This student agreed to meet with me and he was quite excited about being part of this study. His other student also relayed the information about my study to her sister and to her friend both of whom were converts to Islam. They also agreed to participate in my study and recommended two other converts they knew, one of which I was able to interview for this study. From this group, one convert who is the sister of the student no longer lives in Michigan as she moved to California. Because of this relocation, this participant has two different prior to conversion networks: one from Michigan and the other from California. Her network based in California is not included in the aggregated data. This is how I established contact with four converts residing in Flint, Michigan. The way I came into contact with another person from Michigan was quite different than above approaches. In one of my globalization classes I taught in fall 2013, I mentioned my study to my students to let them know about my research interests in addition to my teaching. At

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<sup>11</sup> Bogardus social distance scale is a psychological testing scale, which measures peoples' willingness to participate in the social circle of those who are different than them especially in terms of ethnicity and race. Wikipedia. 2014, "Bogardus Social Distance Scale". Retrieved July 7, 2014.

the end of that class one of the students approached me and told me that her aunt who is from Michigan and who is still residing there is a convert to Islam. The student also offered to let her know about my research and ask her if she had potential interest in the research. After correspondence with the student's aunt I was able to set up an interview with her. This is how I established contact with my research participants in Michigan. After making three different trips to Michigan and staying in the area for about twenty days in the summer of 2013, I had finally completed collecting data from my first research site.

Finding participants for this study in Kentucky was more challenging than finding them in Michigan. First, I designated my research site as Lexington and Louisville since these are the two cities having the highest number of mosques in Kentucky. As a next step, I obtained a complete list of all mosques in Louisville from [www.islamicfinder.org](http://www.islamicfinder.org), which is a website with the most recent up-to-date information about mosques in any location in the United States. There was no need to compile such a list for the mosques located in Lexington, since I am familiar with them as a result of having lived here for quite some time. After completing the list of the mosques in Louisville and getting their address, I visited my research site to make the initial contacts with the mosques. First, some of the mosques in Louisville did not have imams like the ones in Michigan, so I could not find a delivery person to relay the information about my research to their community. However, I was able to make a contact with one of the mosques which had a mailing listserve and they emailed the information about my study, but nobody responded to this email. After going to about a dozen of different mosques<sup>12</sup>, I randomly found out about a convert group

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<sup>12</sup> The islamicfinder website listed about fifteen different Islamic mosques/centers in the city of Louisville at the time of conducting this research.

meeting on a regular basis. The imam of one of the mosques I visited invited me to this meeting to meet potential research participants. However, this imam was not my primary source to establish contact with this convert group. While visiting another mosque in Louisville, I was introduced to a convert who was present and he also invited me to the meeting to meet more potential research participants. From this endeavor, I was able to interview five different people who had converted to Islam. Also, I was finally able to establish contact with a person who had converted to Islam and then reverted back to her prior belief. She is the only person in this study who had converted to Islam and then reverted back to her prior belief. The discussion of reversion from Islam is based on data collected from this person.

In addition to sampling 30 people who had converted to Islam, I also used a control group of 30 people who are not converts to Islam. Some of the people in the control group have social ties to other Muslims, while the rest of control group does not have any ties. There is a slight difference between the research group and the control group in term so having ties to other Muslims. About 66.7 percent of people in the control group do not have any ties to other Muslims in their egocentric social networks, while the percent of those with no social ties in the control group is about 70 percent (See Table 2.3).

\*\*\*\*\* Table 2.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The participants who have social ties to other Muslims were recruited using the convenient sampling method. Having visited campus events organized by the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the University of Kentucky and other events organized by the two mosques located in Lexington over the years, I started to notice that there were

some individuals participating in these events on a regular basis, although they were neither Muslim nor converts to Islam. This group, who has social ties to other Muslim, but who are not converts, also show up to other Muslim student social events such as pick-up volleyball or soccer game around campus, a study group at a library, or activism around the city. When I asked some of the members of the MSA of the University of Kentucky about recruiting potential participants for the control group I was directed to these individuals with whom I had already developed some acquaintance from sharing the same social space. As I got immersed in my field work for both the research group and the control group, I ran some preliminary analysis during which realized that it was necessary to also recruit people randomly instead of consciously selecting those people having social ties to other Muslims. As a result I shifted my strategy of finding participants for the control group and randomly selected the rest of the people recruited to the control. To randomly find people I went to different coffee shops in Lexington one of which is close the University of Kentucky campus, while the other three are from the campus. I also went to a Panera Bread in Lexington to increase diversity in my control group. I was able to interview one person I met there. Some of other people I approached refused to participate in the study. My visits to McDonalds and Taco Bell to find people for the control group did not produce any results. After one month of field work I was able to interview 30 people for my control group.

The demographics of the research group and the control group match up well in terms of ethnicity and gender, but there is some difference between the groups in terms of age. With regard to gender distribution, 60 percent of the research group constitutes females while 40 percent is made up of males. In the control group, however, there are



approximately 63.3 percent females and about 36.7 percent males (See Table 2.4). This close match-up is also observed in the distribution of ethnicity in the research and control groups. While about 73.3 percent of the converts are white and 26.7 percent of them are black, about 70 percent of control group is white and 26.7 percent is black. There is also one person in the control group who is from India. Finally, there is a bigger of difference between the research group and control group in term of age. For the sake of efficiency and simplicity I categorized people into young and old designating 35 as a cutting point. If people are below thirty-five they were categorized as young and old if they were about thirty-five. Thus, there are more of older people in the research group than in the control group. It is harder to match the research and the control on this variable since it is not feasible to ask people their age before recruiting them into the research. Another factor explaining the age difference between the two groups is the fact that I sampled my control group from coffee shops and restaurants around the city of Lexington, which might have a specific kind of population than the convert group.

\*\*\*\*\* Table 2.4 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The type of data and the narratives that I collected from the control group are comparable to the ones I gathered from the research group. First, I collected information about the egocentric social networks of the converts to investigate network differences between the research and control group. I compare the size and density of networks of the control group and prior-to-conversion and post-conversion egocentric social networks of the converts to Islam. The second type of data that I collected from the control group is qualitative. I asked each participant of the control three standard questions after getting their social network data. These questions were:

- 1) Why have you not converted to Islam?
- 2) Will you convert to Islam in the future?
- 3) If you were to convert to Islam, how do you think the alters (friends and family members) in your personal network would have reacted to your conversion?

In order to get the intended information across, I sometimes worded these questions differently. I always asked follow-up questions to solicit more information from the control group. Having a control group as part of my research design allows me to answer why people do convert to Islam, and whether having ties to other Muslims influences conversion.

### **Data Collection and Interview process**

This research relies on interview data which is one of the most useful data gathering mechanisms for grounded theory studies since they can address individual experience in great detail (Charmaz 2001). Although some researchers prefer structured and unstructured interviews, in this research I utilize semi-structured interviews (which are also known as in-depth interview) as a principal investigative tool. What makes semi-structured interviews the most sophisticated investigative qualitative research tool is that they provide focus of interest, deep exploration of the topic about which the participants have substantial experience, and they give the interviewee a chance to steer the conversation and account for their personal values, culture, and experiences (Charmaz 2001, Fontana and Frey 2000, Goodman 2001, Hakim 2000, Johnson 2002). The strength of the qualitative data resides in the fact the validity of them can be verified by getting sufficient details from the research

participants (Hakim 2000). Also, semi-structured interviews are less rigid than other types as they allow the research participants to express their ideas and opinion in their own words (Esterberg 2002). At times, conducting semi-structured interviews can be disadvantageous since they can be more expensive and they require more time and traveling for completion (Goodman 2001).

Before going to the research sites, I had compiled a list of open-ended questions which guided the qualitative part of this study (see Table 2.5). I decided to include some of these questions based on ideas from previous literature. However, most the questions on the list are good reflection of the topic of conversion to Islam in the United States (Fowler 2009). Conducting a pilot study proved instrumental as I have re-designed my interview questions to answer crucial questions such as how social ties of the convert reacted to their conversion, the degree of religiosity before conversion, the relationship between identity and conversion, adoption of an Islamic name, etc. I administered these questions after collecting detail information about the prior to conversion network and post conversion network.

\*\*\*\*\* Table 2.5 about here \*\*\*\*\*

To increase the quality of my data and gain the cooperation of my respondents, I made sure that to adjust my interviewing techniques along the way (Fowler 2009). Whenever necessary I provided further explanation to make sure that the subjects understand the questions. This balanced degree of instrumentality of my interviews not only prevented me from collecting data that is superfluous and irrelevant but it also prevented me from overlooking important questions (Goodman 2001). In addition, the

interview guide for this study included probes, ideas, and follow up questions to go deeper into the responses of the interviewees (Esterberg 2002, Goodman 2001). Nevertheless, at times I improvised follow up questions while conducting the interviews since the interviewer does not have to follow the guide rigidly like following survey question; instead, she can ask additional questions based on the responses of the participant (Esterberg 2002). This was necessary since semi-structured interview is an active emergent process (Fontana and Frey 2000). Also, grounded theory gives researchers the flexibility to collect and analyze data without necessarily following rigid directions concerning data collection, analysis and theoretical leanings (Charmaz 2006). Despite this, after conducting a couple of interviews I developed a certain logical order and a degree of flexibility while conducting these in-depth interviews to satisfy the strategies of grounded theory of increasing the analytical incisiveness of the final analysis (Charmaz 2001). My list of questions (see Table 2.5), as it can be seen from the table, start with conversion stories of the participants to locate their experience within a basic social process (Charmaz 2001). Listening to conversion stories of the informants, I was able to test which existing conversion theory can best explain their experience. Do their conversion experiences fit better to passive or active paradigm? Or can they be explained with a religious market model or a combination of several paradigms? There were also conversion cases which did not fit to any these existing theories. This was something that I expected because it is quite natural that some emergent theory that is not part of conversion literature was going to emerge during the data collection process (Charmaz 2006, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Especially after conducting interviews with the control group of 30 people, it became obvious that ego network properties have relationship with conversion.

In the final part of my interview, I collected more information about social networks of the participants to test the final group of my hypotheses. Here, I explore how having ties to other Muslims affects both conversion and reversion. Are people more likely to convert to Islam if they have social ties to other Muslims? Having converted to Islam, do converts cut their social ties to their friend and family members? If that is the case, why do converts cut their social ties to their immediate social circle? Moreover, I explore how social ties of those who converted to Islam are more likely to react to conversion when the converts inform them about their conversion. Are people more likely to revert to their prior belief if they lose ties from their prior to conversion social network? These were some of the questions guiding this research on the field to test my hypotheses.

The data on reversion comes from only one person who converted to Islam and reverted to her prior belief. This subject is located in Kentucky. There were other people who had reverted from Islam living in Louisville but they were unwilling to commit to this study because of the delicacy of the subject. As I have mentioned above, most of the converts who declare their conversion at a mosque tend to disappear within a short period of time, a condition that suggests there are more reverts than this study could find. As result of this lack of access, the findings about reversion from Islam are more limited than conversion to Islam. However, this does not prevent me from making predictions about possible reversion from Islam based on changes occurring in the ego networks of the participants as they go through the conversion process. Having explored conversion process, then I test how changes in the social network of converts such as losing or gaining ties influence their decision to convert and ultimately revert. Also, I test this in conjunction

with identity change. If people do not lose social ties from their prior social network and if their identity is verified in their post conversion network they are less likely to revert.

The central findings on conversion are on based the semi-structured interviews mainly consisting of the above questions where I allow subjects to express their ideas and opinions (Esterberg 2002). This satisfies the proposition that hermeneutics and phenomenological understanding of people's self-interpretation and their social relations is central to understanding social behavior (Flyvbjerg 2001). Often conversion conjures up negative connotations and those converting to new religions might be labeled as brainwashed (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980, Lofland 1966) as conversion to any religions is wrongly associated with conversion to cults or other marginal religious groups. This biased generalization of conversion impedes the research process during which it becomes difficult to build rapport with the research subjects who are unwilling to become part of the study. Also, during the fieldwork I encountered several converts who were initially unwilling to be interviewed. This group of converts had reported that they had been accused at times of being unpatriotic because they converted to Islam which has negative connotations in the American consciousness since the events of September 11. As a result of this negativity surrounding conversion, participants were initially hesitant to participate in this research and, even if they did, they were unwilling to divulge information critical to understand the process of conversion. When encountering converts raising such concerns, I assured them that this research was not biased towards them and they were not going to be judged in anyways because of their conversion. Also, I observed that explaining the importance of understanding conversion to Islam in the United States, which is a rather

recent phenomenon, with a high frequency to this hesitant group of converts was helpful to have them committed to this study.

Another sensitive issue during the fieldwork was the question of finding the right place and circumstance for conducting the interviews. It is argued that one of the most important aspects of the semi-structured interviews is that they should be arranged in advance and conducted in designated time and location (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Since semi-structured interviews require in-depth exploration of the research topic, I expected the interviews to last somewhere from three to five hours (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006, Esterberg 2002). This prediction did not hold for most of the interviews, although about four of them required this length. Instead, the majority of the interviews lasted somewhere from two to two and half hours. The fact that social network data collection took a shorter time to complete was a decisive factor in finishing the interviews in a shorter time period than the original prediction. Also as I conducted more interviews, I became better at looking for the right pattern and navigating the interview in the right direction. Two of the interviews required a second meeting since the participants had to interrupt the interview and leave for personal business. Before arranging the interviews, I asked the interviewees which location they preferred to make sure the location selected was comfortable. I expected the location to vary depending on preferences and for the most part to make sure it was conducted in a fairly quiet place where we would not be disturbed (Esterberg 2002). To my surprise the research subjects did not object to the places I proffered for the interviews which I conducted in various locations, such as public libraries, participants' work office, coffee shops, and on the floor of the Sociology Department at

the University of Kentucky. These places for conducting the interviews were finalized when the participants felt comfortable with them<sup>13</sup>.

In order to increase the flexibility of participating in this research, I sought to gain the confidence and the trust of the participant (Janesick 2004). Also, the participants were ensured the information they provide was to be kept confidential and anonymous. While collecting data about the social networks of participants, I asked the research participants to provide only the first name of their social ties. These names later were substituted with pseudo names to protect the confidentiality of this research at a maximum level. Before I started collecting data, I obtained an IRB approval to protect the privacy of my research participants (Esterberg 2002). The protocol that I followed while carrying out the interviews is based on the guidelines designated. Also, based on my experiences of conducting the pilot study I expected gaining access to the field and building a rapport to be challenging. Since interviewing is a form of social interaction built on intimacy, it is important to build up some rapport to view the world from the participant's point of view, while at the same time to keep this relationship at a level that does not influence the objectivity of the research (Esterberg 2002, Fontana and Frey 2000, Johnson 2002). For example, it is possible that my identity as a Muslim and my gender as a male could have influenced some of the answers of my participants, but I endeavored to keep this to

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<sup>13</sup> One of the female converts did not feel comfortable to meet with me one-on-one because of her religious beliefs and brought her husband to the meeting. At the beginning of this interview, I did not feel as comfortable asking questions about her prior social network her relationship her alters; however, as the interviewed progressed, her husband's presence became unnoticeable and the interview followed the natural course like the others did.



minimum by developing different strategies such as telling them they were not being judged and they their answers were going to be kept anonymous.

When institutions like the mosque became the conduit between me and the participants, the process of building rapport became easier. Only one of the participants was concerned about the legitimacy of this research when I established the initial contact with him. Nevertheless, after sitting over coffee and discussing the topic of this research he was convinced this study is not biased towards conversion and finally he gave his consent for the interview.

While conducting the interviews, I both tape recorded them and took detailed notes. It is important to use both of these techniques because one of the main goals of the qualitative research is to capture the words and perceptions of the informants (Esterberg 2002). However, tape recording might sometimes prove difficult to handle. For example, while doing my pilot study, I observed that some interviewees did not feel comfortable with the presence of the tape-recorder. Having made these observations, I sought different ways of minimizing the effects of the tape recorder. For that matter, I started to place the recorder out of sight. This proved to be an excellent technique since I did not any longer observe such effects. These were some of the main measures that I took while conducting this research.

## **Network Data**

The network data for this study come from two points in time. I ask research participants to list the number of people in their social network before converting to Islam and the people in their social network evolved post conversion. The social tie for this study is defined as “socializing with others and “hanging out” with others. These two expressions were used sometimes interchangeably to get the right picture of the network of the participants. The prompt I used was this: Could you please rank the people who you socialize/hang out with starting with your number one person? The social tie in this research is either a friendship or kinship. If participants were socializing or having interaction with their relatives, they included them in their social network. However, if they were not socializing with the members of their kin they did not give the names of their relatives. Even if the research group did not list their kin as a member of their social network, I still asked them to report how their family members had reacted to their conversion.

With regards to time boundary of egocentric social networks, having a relationship with friends or relatives was not restricted to any definite time period. On a couple of occasion when the research participants asked about time period, I asked them to rank the people with whom they socialized in the last month. Contrary to the pilot study, I did not set any boundaries (Marsden 1990) for the size of ego networks when collecting data from the research and control group of the dissertation research. I let the converts generate the list of the names of everybody in their network so that I had the right configuration of their networks. Then, I collected information about the demographics of alters with a particular interest in being a Muslim or not to test one of my hypotheses dealing with a relationship between having a tie to a Muslim and the likelihood of converting to Islam. Once the list

of alters was generated, each convert reported in detail how their alters reacted to their conversion experience. The accounts of the reaction of alters to conversion explain the extent to which the social ties of the converts were supportive or unsupportive when they learned about the egos' conversion. Moreover, these narratives captured how prior to conversion networks of the research participants evolved after they had converted. The number of ties lost/retained and the number of ties gained show how conversion to Islam influences the network composition over a period of time. They also answer the following questions: What is the nature of these ties? Are they strong or weak? Most importantly, how does losing ties affect their decision to revert to their prior belief?

Similar to conversion, life events like entering adulthood, employment, and getting into relationships and social categories, like class, impact the evolution of personal networks (Bidart and Lavenu 2005). Despite these changes, some argue that personal networks tend to preserve their stability over periods of time (Morgan, Neal and Carder 1997). Especially some social ties tend to persist over a long period of time, while some that are less important fade away (Wellman et al. 1997a). This study will contribute to knowledge on change in social networks over time by focusing on which ties persist and which one disappear as result of a significant event in the lives of the research participants (Feld, Suitor and Hoegh 2007). The network data is the main quantitative data in this research. By collecting data from two different time points I measure change in the ego network of people who had gone under the conversion experience. While collecting these data I followed a prescribed method for collecting network data (See Appendices). As I discussed above, this study goes beyond standard ego network questions to induce more

in-depth information about the social network of converts and how they affect their conversion and reversion.

## **Analysis**

There are several ways to analyze qualitative data: analytical induction, negative case finding, extending case analysis and coding. Analytical induction is a method of inducing concepts and laws by systematically examining similarities between social phenomena (Znaniecki 1934). Negative case finding, on the other hand, is a methodology that focuses on emerging cases that theory did not predict to occur such as studying a country where economic growth did not happen (Emigh 1997). Also, the extended case method is conducted to move from micro to macro phenomenon and extract the general from the unique (Burawoy 1998). For example, Burawoy studied a Zambian copper mine to elaborate Fanon's theory of post-colonialism (Burawoy 1998). Finally, coding is the most fundamental method that grounded theorists use to analyze qualitative data. Although there are different types of coding, such as open coding and selective coding this research primarily uses axial coding.

The purpose of axial coding is to link the relevant categories to sub-categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This type of coding requires the researcher to have some categories at the beginning, but an analyst develops a sense of how categories relate as she continues the coding process. Nevertheless, some qualitative researchers suggest that data collection and coding should proceed simultaneously (Lofland and Lofland 1984). Some of the categories that this study expects to find when it comes to conversion categories are passive, active, religious market, Muslim ties, conversion and reversion, and other

emergent categories. With respect to convert types, I may find categories such as seekers, bumpers (those who accidentally come across Islam), social capital (some convert to build relations with others), identity builder, and other emergent categories.

Axial coding makes it possible to embed a social phenomenon in a structure and explain how the process of that phenomenon unfolds over a time, place, and situation (Strauss and Corbin 1998). While axial coding my data, I will be able to explain why people convert to Islam and, some ultimately revert to their prior belief and what are the conditions that lead to conversion and reversion. I will also be able to explain how people converting to Islam interact with other Muslims as well as non-Muslim peoples. Integrating structure and process, I will better capture not only why conversion and reversion occur, but also how they occur (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Utilizing semi-structured interviews, I also analyze how losing social ties to prior-to-conversion egocentric social network influences a person's decision to go back to her/his previous belief. I further analyze my data by looking for patterns and structures in conversion and reversion (Lofland and Lofland 1984). Are there any ideal type converts and reverts? Is there any relationship between losing ties and reversion? How frequently does reversion occur when people lose ties to their prior to conversion network?

To develop initial understanding of structural changes in social networks of those who convert to Islam, I have conducted preliminary research which gives me a good idea about some of the changes their networks undergo. Also, in the process I have gained prior knowledge about some patterns of conversion to Islam. Most importantly, conducting a

pretest has helped me project the time and cost that an interview takes and how these factors feed into the response rate of the interview (Fowler 2009).

### **Data Programs**

I have recorded all of the interviews conducted for this research in addition to taking detailed notes during the interviews. Once the data collection phase was over, I hired two people to help me with transcribing the interviews. I have been reading those transcripts and field notes to look for codes and patterns in the narratives. Some of these codes emerged while conducting the interviews. As for the network data, I use UCINET (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 2002) to calculate network properties such as density, homophily, and other measures. My main dependent variables are conversion and reversion. I have calculated the change in ego network of converts by calculating the difference of ties between their ego network at two points in time: before conversion and after conversion. This change is measured by the lost of ties in the prior conversion and gaining ties in the post conversion social network. The network change for different ethnic groups, namely the white and black compared and contrasted, to theorize how conversion to Islam differs in these two groups. This comparison of conversion for white and black converts is covered in chapter five, which is followed by a chapter comparing conversion experiences of males and females.

Using UCINET, I analyze longitudinal egocentric social network data to investigate how conversion affects people's egocentric social networks. Each and every research participant accounts for their entire personal networks of prior-to-conversion and post-conversion. Based on these data, I have constructed matrices capturing dyadic level

relationship between converts and their kin and non-kin social ties. Research participants report social ties among their friends allowing for full egocentric network data collection. Also, I have created attribute data matrices providing information on the demographic of both research participants and their social ties. In addition to these quantitative data, I collect qualitative data asking the converts to provide information about how each and everybody in their egocentric network reacted to their conversion. This allows me to assess changes in the egocentric social networks of converts using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

In order to analyze the relationship between conversion and having a social tie to another Muslim, I calculate the composition of each and every egocentric conversion social network with regard to Muslim and non-Muslim social ties using UCINET. I measure the amount of Muslim social ties in prior-to-conversion social networks and determine whether they are strong or weak ties. Using Netdraw, which is part of UCINET, I visualize these networks to better investigate the strength of social ties. For example, the software graphically aids to detect a weak tie by showing a node's position in the network such that it can be not well connected to other nodes but it can function as a bridge to a community to which a social actor is not connected. The accounts of research participants of how their social ties react to their conversion help consolidate the information about these ties. Also, Netdraw, which comes with UCINET, graphically shows the structure of social networks and helps to understand the types of social position individuals occupy. The type of social positions social actors occupy can have important consequences with regard to conversion. For instance, if an individual is embedded in a highly dense social network in which everyone is a Muslim, she is more likely to have her Muslim identity verified and remain

as a Muslim rather than revert to her prior-to-conversion belief. These are only some of the many possible ways in which Netdraw can help with visual investigation of a social network. Furthermore, I use UCINET to calculate homophily of the networks in terms of gender, ethnicity and percent of Muslims in a network to measure the extent to which conversion influences the composition of the network and the implication of this for conversion and reversion.

With regards to conversion, I compare a sample of control group with my research group to investigate how conversion occurs through Muslim social ties. I have compiled data I gathered from both the research group and control group to make comparisons. I investigate the extent to which the research and control group are similar or different in terms of the composition of Muslim social ties. During collecting data, the network density measures, which were not part of the original research design, for the research and control groups turned out to be different. The density of a network is a good measurement of the connectedness of the network which has important implication for the conversion and reversion. The theory I have developed to explain the reversion from Islam may be not be as robust as those drawn for the conversion since I was able to convince only one person, who had converted to Islam and then reverted back, to participate in this study. During the field work, I have obtained information about several reversions from the research participants and people affiliated with different Islamic organization: reverts whom I contacted refused to participate in this research because of their privacy concerns. Consequently, the conclusions explaining reversion from Islam are primarily based on analysis of data from one person and predictions based on change in the ego network of the converts who have not reverted to their prior beliefs. This change in the network is



calculated by subtracting the sum of ties from prior to conversion network from ties to post conversion social network. In addition, broad themes include the following: the number of ties that subjects have in their prior to conversion and post conversion social networks, the number of ties lost after conversion and the number of ties gained, the size of homogeneity of social network, religiosity measured by the number of times converts practice religious rituals, narrative accounts of conversion.

**Table 2.1: Theoretical Sampling**

<b>Muslim Population</b>									
<b>Age</b>	<b>Low</b>				<b>High</b>				
	<b>Kentucky</b>				<b>Michigan</b>				
	Male		Female		Male		Female		
	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single	Married	
<b>Young</b>	4YMS	1YMM	4YFS	1YFM	4YMS	1YMM	4YFS	1YFM	
<b>Middle</b>	1MMS	1MMM	1MFS	1MFM	1MMS	1MMM	1MFS	1MFM	
<b>Old</b>	<u>1OMS</u>		<u>1OFS</u>		<u>1OMS</u>		<u>1OFS</u>		

**Table 2.2: Actual Sample**

<b>Muslim Population</b>									
<b>Age</b>	<b>Low</b>				<b>High</b>				
	<b>Kentucky</b>				<b>Michigan</b>				
	Male		Female		Male		Female		
	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single	Married	
<b>Young</b>	1YMS	2YMM	1YFS	2YFM	3YMS	0YMM	6YFS	1YFM	
<b>Middle</b>	1MMS	3MMM	0MFS	2MFM	0MMS	1MMM	1MFS	1MFM	
<b>Old</b>	<u>0OMS</u>		<u>0OFS</u>	<u>0OFM</u>	<u>0OMS</u>	<u>1OMM</u>	<u>1OFS</u>	<u>2OFM</u>	

## CHAPTER 3

### **DIALECTIC OF SETTLERS AND ALIENS: ESTABLISHING HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN AMERICA**

This chapter is about the American historical context in which conversion to Islam takes place. Here, I trace the origins of the perception of Islam in America to lay a ground work for the discussion of how social ties of the research participants react to the conversion experience. Although America was founded in the New World and it is a young country, it has deep historical ties to the Old World, namely to Europe, thereby inheriting centuries long dialectical relationship between Christianity and Islam. Because of religious, cultural and historical connections between the old and new continents, it is impossible to decouple the Americans' perception of Islam than that of the Europeans. Despite a deep seated connection between Europe and America with regards to how Islam is viewed, it is fair to argue that American perception of Islam has also evolved on its own terms. The trajectory of the visibility of Islam in the United States has been decisive in how this perception has taken shape over the course of time.

The presence of Islam in America is almost as old as the birth of the nation. However, Islam has always been relegated to the back row of American society where its presence is either suppressed or censored. This suppression takes place because American encountering of Islam is an offshoot of the European colonization of the non-European world. The presence of Islam in America becomes even more contested since Islam was appropriated in a rather distorted form by the Black Americans excluded from mainstream American society to escape from their oppressed status and lift themselves up. First, I

locate this struggle in what I call the *dialectic of the settlers and aliens* to indicate how Islam comes out of this as silenced and voiceless. Second, for the purpose of further developing a historical context, I divide the history of Islam in America into two main parts: (1) the time when Islam was invisible, (2) and the time when it has been quite visible. In the following section, I begin with a dialectical theory of settlers and aliens to shed light on socio-political configurations that perpetuate the “otherness” of Islam even when it becomes not only more visible in the American context, but when it makes a claim to be one of the institutionalized religions belonging to the American homeland. This dialectic establishes a starting point for the discussion of the otherness of the Islam in the United States.

### **Dialectic of Settlers and Aliens**

The story of the dialectic of the settlers and aliens originates in migration and it is deeply rooted in modernity. Both the settlers and the aliens moved from their original homeland to a new territory to establish a new home. However, while the settler knows from where he had migrated, the alien might never know his original point of departure since his migration is not a voluntary but forced.<sup>14</sup> This is the originary advantage the settlers have over the aliens. The second and more important advantage is that the settler appropriates the lands, which he deems as a Terra Nullius<sup>15</sup> (no man’s land) and retains the

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<sup>14</sup> Some aliens like the native people of the New World fall outside the category of forced migration, but I put them in the alien category since their original homeland is unknown or it is treated as mysterious.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of Terra Nullius was first used to refer to the land that did not belong to the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, however, it referred to the land that did not belong to any Christian ruler. During the discovery of the New World it is used to justify the European appropriation of the land belonging to the native people (Lindqvist 2007).

power of creating the law to appropriate even more land. The final advantage settlers have over aliens is that the settler has an impeccable historical background with regards to land grabbing, looting, invasions, genocides, etc. Instead, he is avant-garde of civilization: with him starts the history of arts and culture. He is the Nietzschean last human, while the alien is sub-human. The presence of aliens on a territory is nullified and his land is void whenever the settlers suddenly appear. This encounter of settlers and aliens negates the entire history of the alien, while it initiates the history of the settler.

The term *settler* is associated with those Europeans who immigrated to places now known as the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. *Alien*, however, can be used to designate any other social group external to the settlers. Therefore, the term *settler* has an ontological stability while *alien* is precarious. I categorize the natives of the New World as the first group of people who are deemed to be *alien* since the *settler* is constructed vis-à-vis this group. This is evident from Europeans first encounter with natives whom they labeled as Indians. For the Europeans, the natives were unfamiliar and unknown, so they must have been Indians since the Europeans expected to come across Indians, not this alien people. Not long after this encounter this first group of alien with whom the settlers have dialectical relationship almost completely disappeared from the face of earth except for those becoming the subjects of museums and those confined to reservations, the whereabouts of which are also hard to locate. Finally, the religion of the *settlers* is Christianity whose god is all-loving, while the religion of the *aliens* is Islam whose god is at best obscure.

Although Islam is not the religion of the natives of the New World, I started with them as the first social group of aliens to establish the origin of this dialectic which is

continuous across time where the Europeans and their descendants are always settlers, while everyone else is alien. In this study, I restrict the discussion of the dialectic of *settlers* and *aliens* to the context of immigration to the United States and to some extent to Australia. The concept of settlers conjures up an image of a group of people who arrive on void land where there is not scant of evidence showing there were any inhabitants prior to the arrival of the settlers. Contrary to this conjured image, Lindqvist (2007:164) writes that even in deserts, “where the land was least accessible and hospitable, even here every stone, every bush and every waterhole had its specific owner and custodian, its sacred history and religious significance.” Similarly, the picture describing the lands of the United States when the Europeans immigrants (who soon become settlers) were setting foot on this seemingly terra nullius was not different than Australia. Las Casas’ (1992:5) depiction of this part of the new world as “such a multitude of people inhabit these Countries that it seems as if the omnipotent God Assembled and Convocated the major part of Mankind in this part of the World” testifies that the idea of no man’s land is a European figment of imagination. Moreover, the idea of settlers evokes a peaceful inhabitation of a land which was never occupied until the arrival of the Europeans. However, a recent work (Stannard 1993) indicates that the natives (alien) of the Powhatan Empire located in Virginia shrank from 14,000 people to 600 people from the time the English came to Jamestown around 1607 to until the end of the century as a result of systematic genocide, enslavement, slaughtering of adult native men, forced separation of women and children, and the diffusion of a host of deadly plagues. These examples are only a few from a pool of countless examples indicating the extent to which the term *settler* drapes a “veil of

ignorance<sup>16</sup> over the past of one ethnic group or a nation negating all their bad deeds, while entrapping others in a perpetual scapegoat (blemished) category. Thus, the dialectic of settlers and aliens prepares a platform for a distorted account of the state of affairs and it becomes an objective scientific discourse. Furthermore, the label settler obscures the colonial attribute of the settler whose encounter with the alien produced colonial relations which are part and parcel of the field of inquiry in social sciences rendering colonialism invisible by omitting it from general categories of modernity and sociological modern theory (Bhambra 2007).

The metanarrative of *settlers* projects an empty land or no man's land (terra nullius) which was never inhabited up until the time when the Europeans arrived to the New World. It was the British settlers who first came up with using the concept of terra nullius to legitimize their invasion of the Australian continent, dispossessing Aboriginal people such as Ngaiawong, Arremnte, Warumungu, Anangu, Warlpiri, and many others of their land, cultural heritage, most importantly of their life (Lindqvist 2007). This attitude toward the natives of the Australian continent was not an isolated phenomenon. The idea of no man's land and the work (The Descent of Man, 1871) of Charles Darwin, who argues that the destruction of the natives is a natural part of the evolutionary process (Lindqvist 2007), functioned as a general principle justifying the destruction of the native people (who are one of the variation of the aliens) at the hands of the Europeans.

Since the *alien* category is rather precarious, the groups of people falling under this category are not limited to the natives of the New World. I began the discussion of the

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<sup>16</sup> I borrow this terminology from John Rawls, who has rather a romantic (and quite distorted) understanding of the origins of inequality in society (Rawls 1999).

dialectic of the settlers and aliens by categorizing the European immigrants as settlers and the natives of the New World as aliens to show the historical starting point of this relationship. From here on, I extend the alien category to other racial and ethnic groups who have intense dialectical relationship with the settlers. In the contemporary American context, the aliens generally include African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians and most importantly with regards to Islam, Middle Easterners. When these later social groups become the alien, the dialectical relationship between these aliens and the settlers may not be as visible as the original dialectical relationship between the settlers and the aliens, namely the Europeans and the natives. One of the main reasons why this relationship is less visible is because the alien assumes a new status, which is his status in the realm of law. This status is called *homo sacer*. Before delving into the discussion of *homo sacer*, it is essential to distinguish between “*zoe*,” which is a simple act of living common to all living beings, and “*bios*,” which refers to a way of life attributed to a group of people (Agamben 1998). *Zoe* is basically our biological bodies, while *bios* is our political bodies (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:619). Also related to these two concepts is the idea of “bare life” which is “the pure fact of birth” (Agamben 1998:127). In this light, *homo sacer* can be understood as “bare life insofar as it is included in the political order” (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:619). Agamben relying on the Roman law provides a more comprehensive definition of *homo sacer*:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that “if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.” This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred (Agamben 1998:71)



The fact that the life of *homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed, but he can be killed with impunity seems rather contradictory. Agamben (1998:79) sheds light on this contradiction by pointing out the double meaning of sacer: “sacer designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of ‘sacred’ or ‘accursed.’” Therefore, *homo sacer* falls outside both judicial and religious law. When describing *homo sacer* as sacred, Agamben relies on a traditional sense of sacrifice meaning that *homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed because he is not part of the community (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014). He is located in a state of exception which is “a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations- and above all the very distinction between public and private- are deactivated” (Agamben 2005:50). The killing of Trayvon Martin on the evening of 26 February, 2012 by George Zimmerman, the shooting of Sean Bell on the day of his wedding on November 25, 2006 by NYPD police who were in both plainclothes and undercover, and the killing of Oscar Grant while laying face down on 31 December, 2009 by the BART Police<sup>17</sup> are good examples illustrating the status of *homo sacer* in the realm of law.

As I am about to conclude this chapter, another story (Goodman and Barker 2014) broke out announcing that the Staten Island grand jury will not indict the New York City police officer, Daniel Pantaleo, who choked Eric Garner, who was an unarmed black man. This announcement was made two weeks after another grand jury decision which also did not find the actions of Darren Wilson, who shot Mike Brown, another unarmed black male criminal in Ferguson, Missouri. These killings and the ones I covered above show that the black man is *homo sacer* who is not a sacred person in the sense that he is considered not

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<sup>17</sup> BART refers to the Bay Area Rapid Transit.

to be part of the collective consciousness of the society. In addition, his murder is not condemned because he is not considered as a part of the wider society. In the case of Mike Brown, who was killed when I first started working on this chapter, the white police officer, Darren Wilson, was given benefit of doubt since he described his altercation as lethal and his shooting of Brown was interpreted as an act of self defense. However, the choking of Garner to death is video-taped in which Garner does not appear to be threatening and it also turns out that the New York police department had banned chokehold as a maneuver in 1993 (Goodman and Barker 2014). Despite these two factors, Pantaleo was not indicted by the grand jury because he committed a crime against a *homo sacer* or an *alien*. In all of these cases and in other unpublicized similar cases, the destruction of Black bodies (the bodies of *homo sacer*) indicates that their bodies are disposable and they become a site on which state power is both displayed and reproduced (Taylor 2013). More importantly, these instances show that Black men (*homo sacer*) reside in the zone of exception which is outside the confines of law and therefore their murder is not a homicide (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014). In the following section, I introduce the historical appearance of Islam on the American scene as a religion of the *homo sacer* for whom Islam becomes a tool to elevate the social status of the alien (*homo sacer*) in relation to the settler. I divide this appearance into two parts: an invisible and a visible period. During the former period the social category falling under the aliens is the African-Americans, while during the latter they are mainly the people from the Middle East.

## **THE INVISIBLE PERIOD OF ISLAM IN AMERICA**

### **The first Muslim Homo Sacers**

There are two main reasons that relegate Islam to the status of the other in the American context. The first reason is that Islam for a long period of time has been the religion of the alien (*homo sacer*). The second is that Islam has remained invisible throughout American history until it was appropriated by the Black Nationalist movement starting in late 1930s. These two conditions are interrelated and they breed each other, thereby perpetuating the otherness of Islam in the United States. Although there were Muslims in America since the beginning of the formation of the United States, their presence is not acknowledged through official history as they were not included in the history of the country nor were they represented in any cultural and/or historical narratives. They are included in American history by being excluded. In this regard, they are an exception to the rule. Agamben (1998:25) writes “ the exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included.” This exclusion implies these early Muslims are aliens who were here but not quite seen.

What makes the first group of Muslims in America alien is that they were brought over as slaves, but their social status and personal skills were quite different than what was associated with being a slave. Historical archives available evince that some Muslim African slaves brought to the United States were prominent figures despite their status of being “subject races” (McMichael 2011). The Muslim slaves brought over to the New World were coming from West Africa, where learning Islam was a commonplace practice.

This was reflected in the traveling accounts of visiting Europeans who were surprised about the number of schools dotting this geography since there were more schools in West Africa compared to their homelands (Diouf 2013). Thanks to the prevalence of learning facilities in West Africa, most of the Muslim slaves originated from there were able to read and write, which made these individuals notable in the eyes of their slave owners (Curtis IV 2009, Turner 2003). A recent work (Austin 1997) provides documentation about seventy-five such prominent slaves about whom there is evidence in the form of autobiographies, portraits, handwritings, etc. One of these individuals was Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, who was also known as Job Ben Solomon, captured and enslaved in Gambia and brought to the British colony of Maryland in 1730 or 1731 (Austin 1997, Curtis IV 2009, Turner 2003). To practice his religion, Diallo used to sneak into the woods to pray his five daily prayers during which the kids would harass him and make fun of him (Turner 2003). The conditions of slavery were too harsh for someone like Diallo who had come from an elite social status. In order to change his life conditions, Diallo attempted to escape from the plantation where he worked, but soon he was captured and put into the jail where he came in contact with his biographer Thomas Bluett, who and others like James Oglethorpe interceded on his behalf to free him (Curtis IV 2009, Turner 2003). Another influential figure is Yarrow Mamout who was a slave for the Bell family in Georgetown, but he was able to buy his own house. Although he lived in America for about a century, he refused to learn the language of the unbelievers surrounding him and he strove to preserve his religion and cultural way of life (Austin 1997). He was known as Mahometan among the community because he professed not to eat hog and refrain from whiskey; he was often seen in the streets reciting prayers to God (Turner 2003). What is significant about Mamout

like other Muslim slaves at this early time in America is that they refused to convert to Christianity and they were adamant about preserving their identity. There are many other individuals such as Abd Al-Rahman Ibrahima, Salih Bilali, Lamina Kaba, Omar Ibn Said, Mahomamah Gardo Baquaqua, Mohammed Ali Ben Said about whom there are historical records proving their identity as Muslims. Although the presence of these early Muslims in America suggests that Islam was represented in America as early as eighteenth century, some stretch the presence of Islam in America further back to 1527 when a Muslim named Estevan came to Florida from Spain as a part of an expedition (Turner 2003).

What is most common among these early invisible Muslims in America is that they refused to abandon their religion, language, and customs. Their alien culture catapulted them against the societal apparatus of the time since they refused to live under slavery against which they organized revolts. Some of the above mentioned Muslim slaves, like Ben Solomon, were able to return to Africa, while those remaining behind were forgotten as they failed to transmit their religion and culture to ensuing generations. These conditions prolonged the invisibility of Islam in the United States until it reappeared with the Black Nationalist movement.

What exacerbated the invisibility of Islam in this early phase was the fact that practicing Islam was confined to an individual level. It was identified with persons rather than with a group of people and it was treated as a mysterious religion. The presence of Islam in America was another encounter between Christianity and Islam, the two monotheistic religions facing each other for one more time, but rather on unequal terms. On the side, the dominant political and cultural apparatus perceived these Muslims from

Christian perspective misidentifying them as Mahometan or Moors.<sup>18</sup> On the other, the Muslim captive slaves, the aliens, refused to become assimilated and struggled to return to their homelands. The label “Mahometan” indicates that the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was perceived like Jesus Christ, although in Islamic theology this would be considered as blasphemy. This labeling suggests that settlers are making sense of the aliens by using terminology from their stock of knowledge. The label “Moors” is also a misnomer and it does not properly identify the followers of Islam as it was used by the Europeans to describe people from the Al-Andalus, which was a Muslim Empire in today’s Spain from 711 to 1492. The misidentification of the Muslims in America reinforced the mysteriousness of Islam in the American imagination like that of Europeans thereby preventing it from taking roots in the American land and establishing itself as one of the religions of the country. Also, these early followers of Islam in the United States were further ostracized from mainstream society and its apparatus because they resisted conversion to Christianity by keeping their religious identity which was a technique they used to challenge the system marking them as slaves and depersonalizing them by taking away their name and historical heritage (Turner 2003).

This particular technique of constructing an identity that is different than what the settlers used to define these early aliens and later using titles such as “Honorable” and “Noble” became a vehicle the Black Nationalist movement used to carve a position in social space (Bourdieu 1998) for themselves and be different than how they were being

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<sup>18</sup> Apparatus is term used by Agamben, who construct it based on Foucault’s idea of *dispositif*. Agamben writes: “I shall call an apparatus anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Agamben 2009).

inscribed in that space. During this process two different things happened: first, black people (*homo sacer*) who were voiceless up to this point acquired a new voice; second, Islam started to be identified with radicalism further perpetuating its status of otherness in the United States. I cover this period extensively below under the section of visibility of Islam and resurgence of the Black Nationalist movement. Before getting to that discussion I present a case which is anomaly, but it is rather important since it has undeniable implication for the current status of Islam in America. The following section is an account of a settler who converted to Islam during the nineteenth century, an event which has for the most part, gone unnoticed despite its reverberations at the time of its occurrence.

#### **The First Muslim Settler: Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916)**

I argue that Islam has been historically the religion of the alien (*homo sacer*) in the American context, but there is an exception to this rule. Following the invisible existence of the first Muslim aliens represented by African Muslim slaves, there was also a settler who had converted to Islam. Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916) is the first known settler (Caucasian American) who had converted to Islam in 1888. This conversion is significant because it was the first known effort to institute Islam in America and it had the potential to authenticate it as an American religion.

What makes Webb's conversion significant is that he did not keep his conversion as a private matter; he instead used it to spread Islam throughout the United States. Webb converted to Islam around 1888 after serving in the Philippines as the United State consul (Turner 2003). His conversion falls under active conversion paradigm since it was a long process during which he tried other religions and philosophies such as materialism,

spirituality, Buddhism, Theosophy and other Eastern religions (Abd-Allah 2006). This process is documented in his *Islam in America and Other Writings*, where Webb briefly recounts his story of conversion and devotes the rest of the book to counter the misperceptions of Islam and to make *dawah* (to propagate) in the United States. He writes: “When I reached the age of twenty, and became practically my own master, I was so weary of the restraint and the dullness of the church that I wandered away from it and never returned to it” (Webb 2006:20). After drifting away from the Christianity, Webb (2006) states he practiced materialism and then for several years he did not practice any religion. Later, Alexander Webb became a strict adherent of Theosophy with a strict dedication to an extent that he severed his social ties to most of his former friends. Webb’s conversion to Islam is closely related to his involvement in Theosophy, with whose adherents located in India, he wanted to establish connection. His correspondence with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who is considered to be a modern controversial figure because of his messianic claims, was one of Webb’s first steps to Islam (Abd-Allah 2006). Webb took his commitment to Theosophy one step further when he took up a position of an American consultancy in the Philippines. In 1888, a short while after arriving to Manila, he publicly declared that he converted to Islam.

Not long after his conversion to Islam, Webb set rather ambitious goals in motion. First, he established the American Moslem Brotherhood located in a three story building on 30 East 23<sup>rd</sup> street in New York (Abd-Allah 2006, Turner 2003). Second, coming from a journalist background, Webb deployed his skills to do missionary work by publishing a week journal dedicated to teaching Islamic history and laws. He describes his missionary project as the American Propaganda aimed at presenting a truer nature of Islam, which



Webb expects to soon spread from the East to the West. In order to facilitate this spread he provides the outline of his project which will consist of a weekly journal, a free lecture room and a library opened to the public in the same building (Webb 2006). Webb's active missionary focused on recurring misconception of Islam in the West where he argues that Islam was not a religion of the sword and he defends the notion of "jihad of words" basing this idea on the first revelation of Qur'an the revelation that commands Muhammad to read.

In addition to his national missionary work, Webb's conversion also gained an international reputation which ultimately worked against his goals. He was immediately recognized by Muslim countries who perceived him as a representative of Islam which culminated in his appointment to be a consul general for the Ottomans. The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II appointed him to the office in New York City. From his time as an US counsel in the Philippines, he also had connections with Indian and Arab wealthy merchants who promised to finance his American Propaganda project (Webb 2006). His final international connection was to William Henry Quiliam, who was also an internationally recognized convert to Islam commissioned by the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II in Istanbul in 1894 (Abd-Allah 2006). Quiliam differently than Webb had a solid group of followers which was a community of 150 British converts coming from all walks of life organized around his "Church of Islam" in Liverpool (Abd-Allah 2006, Turner 2003). Finally, Webb's conversion to Islam was rewarded with representing Islam during the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 as a sole Muslim at the conference.

Although Webb's internationally acclaimed recognition helped his Islamic mission in the United States in its initial phase, it ultimately brought its doom. His relations with

overseas Muslims led him to focus on complicated issues such as dissociating Islam from cultural practices of the Muslim countries, explaining a rather contested concept of jihad, the place of women in society, the nature of the Prophet of Islam, and the compatibility of modernity and Islam. He even devoted a chapter in his book defending the politics of the Ottoman Empire regarding the Armenian revolutions and the contested genocide claims. This could have diverted his energy from his Islamic propaganda in the United States. Besides this ideological entanglement with the Muslim world, Webb also soon found himself embroiled with the press who accused him of exploiting Orientals and using their money for personal benefit based on the accounts of people infiltrating his organization (Abd-Allah 2006). Webb had to close down his organization as a result of financial difficulties since the money promised by the Indian and Arab merchants and the Ottoman sultan never arrived after the first two months. I argue that Webb's connection to the Indian Muslims and the Ottomans led him develop a double Muslim identity: one rooted in an Indian missionary group known as the Ahmadiyya movement (Turner 2003) which can be observed from a picture of him where Webb is seen wearing Indian clothing and a white turban; the second influenced by the Ottoman Turks is supported by a different picture provided by Abd-Allah (2006:266) in which Webb is shown wearing an Ottoman fez, a head gear, and a Turkish style mustache all of which point to his institutionally established identity as a honorary Ottoman consul in the United States. Finally, Webb and Quiliam started a bitter quarrel that completely severed their social ties. All of this tide of bad luck resulted in Webb's withdrawal from propagating Islam in the United States and his association with other Muslims. However, he did not abandoned Islam; he kept publishing his weekly magazines for another six months until he totally ran out of money. Webb's

withdrawal from his Islamic mission contributed to the invisibility of Islam for almost another half century until Islam again surfaced with the Black Nationalist movement. In the following section, I present the visible period of Islam in America through the Nation of Islam after covering social currents from which the nation drew its intellectual and spiritual source.

## **VISIBLE PERIOD OF ISLAM**

### **The Roots of the Nation of Islam**

The visible period of Islam in America starts with the Black appropriation of Islam as a discursive tool to elevate themselves in a discriminatory socio-political structure. It was a tool at the hand of *homo sacer* to escape conditions of slavery and the Jim Crow era of segregation and acquire a social status and political power equal to that of *settlers*. Particularly, Islam was a part of the discourse of Pan-Africanism which is wedded the discourse of colonialism. Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) was the first prominent Pan-Africanist arguing that Islam has better approach to racial separatism than Christianity and therefore it should be adapted as a global religion for black (Blyden 1903). His movement started as a reaction to the legal and political atmosphere of the mid-nineteenth century which is reflected in the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 postulating that even if slaves resided in free states, their status could not change and the federal agencies could treat any free slave as a runaway slave (Turner 2003). Similarly, Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) emerged as another Pan-Africanist encouraging his followers to return to Africa (Talhami 2008) as a result of disillusionment with American democracy for which the Black men fought during the World War I, but when the war was over African-Americans realized that their sacrifice for the homeland was not rewarded since they found themselves lynched and

killed by white men alongside whom they fought. These conditions prepared fertile ground for this philosophy and spiritualism of Bleyden's and Garvey's movement which resonated with and influenced all ensuing black movements in the twentieth century.

Why did these early Black intellectuals and the subsequent Black Nationalist movements subscribe to Islam? First, Bleyden's view of Islam was shaped by his field work in the West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone where he observed first-hand the extent to which Islam had a capacity to unify the African people (Lincoln 1994, Smith 2013). Second, they were able to make a claim to Islam by locating a prominent African figure, Bilal ibn Rabah, as one of the early Muslims in the very inner circle of the prophet Muhammed (Mamiya 1982). However, Islam acquired a new face and ultimately became the religion of the other as it became distorted through the separatist Black Nationalist Movement. The primary role of religion in the African-American experience is to oppose racial oppression and carve out both a more equal social space and a new identity for African-Americans. Islam and the Black Church, which were the main religions around which the African-Americans organized, functioned as a vehicle for a worldly salvation rather than the salvation for the hereafter. In the black experience Islam and Christianity assumed a new religious form known as "Black religion," which is define as "an instrument of holy protest against racism" (Jackson 2004:206). Thus, this is the first stage during which, Islam became associated with political and racial struggle, but more importantly it became associated with radicalism and violence in the American psyche. Since Islam has been used as a vehicle for racial uplifting it becomes distorted as it takes on an ideological form rather than as a religion proper. This becomes more obvious as charismatic leaders of

the Black Nationalist movements start to appropriate Islam tailored to their audience thereby creating an ideology rather than a religion.

The first Black Nationalist movement that appropriated Islam to oppose racial oppression and construct a new identity for the black people is Moorish Science Temple. Timothy Drew (1886-1929), who was the leader of this movement, opened a Canaanite Temple in Newark, NJ in 1913. He then moved it to Chicago establishing the Moorish Science Temple in 1923 making it a permanent headquarters (Turner 2003). This movement can be considered as the first institutionalized Islamic movement in America bearing the mark of creating symbols to carve out social and political space for the *homo sacer*. Adherents of the Moorish Sciences Temple used different nomos than what was in circulation to identify themselves.<sup>19</sup> For instance, instead of using “Moslem” which was an English word describing adherents of Islam and used interchangeably with Muhammedans, they used the word “Muslim” and “Black Men” rather than “negro” (Lincoln 1994). Timothy Drew started the practice of using elevating titles which were also used by leaders of subsequent Islamic Black organizations. Thus, he was known as Noble Drew Ali and ‘the Prophet.’ Not only he called himself ‘the Prophet,’ but he also wrote his own Holy Koran in which he laid claim to an idea that Blacks had their advanced civilization in Africa, and Islam could bring together the offspring of the Asiatic nations. He established a link between Blacks and the Muslims arguing that Blacks were not Negroes; they were olive skinned Asiatic people who were the descendant of Moroccans.

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<sup>19</sup> Nomos has different meanings in the realm of law and sociology. In sociology nomos is associated with the work of Peter Burger, who understands it as a social order imposed upon the meanings and experiences of individuals (Berger 1967).

Drew Ali like other Pan-Africanists inculcated ideas of “imagined community” which could be traced back to Africa. One of his central arguments was that Black could trace their genealogy back to Jesus, who belonged to the Canaanites residing in Africa. Drew Ali considered his effort of establishing a racial link between Blacks in America and the nations of Africa and Asia as a ‘jihad of words’ which he deployed to counter the cultural and racial imperialism of Christianity. Drew Ali was not the only person who adopted this conspicuous identity; he also required his followers to assume new identities by issuing them identification cards described by Eric Lincoln (1994:53) as follows:

Each card bore the Islamic symbol (the star and crescent), an image of clasped hands, and a numeral “7” in a circle. It announced that he bearer honored “all the Divine Prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius” and pronounced upon him “the blessings of God of our Father, Allah.” The card indentified him as “a Moslem under the Divine Laws of the Holy Koran of Mecca, Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice” and concluded with the assurance: “I AM A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES.” Each card was validated by the subscription, “NOBLE DREW ALI, THE PROPHET.”

These different ways of building identities on the part of the Moorish Science Temple imply several things. First, I argue that by adopting the title Noble, Asiatic, Science Temple these aliens (*homo sacer*) are resisting the symbolic violence imposed on them by the settlers. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Bourdieu 2000), symbolic violence comes down to a type of power which is invisible compared to other types power such as Marxian class domination or Durkheimian social constrain. It is a kind of power “which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). By adopting a new identity that is unfamiliar to mainstream culture augmented with titles such as “Noble” and “the Prophet” and exotic clothes such as robes and turbans, the *alien* is countering the *settler*. The dichotomy between the white and black which I expand into a

theoretical model of *settlers* versus *aliens*, itself implies symbolic violence. *The settlers* as I argue above is associated with everything positive; his settlement is peaceful and it is for the common good because he advances the human civilization without encroaching upon anybody's rights. On the other hand, the *alien* is a mysterious figure whose origins are unknown and he is present to derail the cultural and civilizational advances of the settler. When the members of the latter perceive this difference, they start to react to it and also they are controlled by it (Bourdieu 2000). Thus, Bourdieu (2000:170) writes:

Symbolic violence is the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator, which, being merely the incorporated form of the structure of the relation of the domination, make this relation appear natural; or, in other words, when the schemes they implement in order to perceive and evaluate themselves or to perceive and evaluate the dominators (high/low, male/female, white/black, etc.) are the product of incorporation of the (thus naturalized) classifications of which their social being is the product.

Thus, name changing and wearing exotic clothes associated with Muslim culture became a symbolic tool in the struggle of blacks (*homo sacer*) to gain freedom and full citizenship. The practice of name changing was not only a common occurrence among Blacks who converted to Islam, but it was also a practice encouraged by other black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, who encouraged freed slaves to leave their old plantation and change their names to feel completely free.

The Moorish Science Temple's full analysis is important because it serves as a microcosm of the Muslim wing of the Black Nationalist Movement. It includes almost all social elements which were present in the subsequent movements as well. One of the most important elements was the presence of a charismatic leader. The second was creating a new ideology by appropriating the Islamic stock of knowledge which was for the most part

foreign to the American context. The third important aspect of this movement and ensuing other black movements is that the American government kept them under close surveillance by accusing them of cooperation with foreign powers or regarding them as a threat to internal security, thereby eroding the power of the movement to recruit people and make legitimate claims for the human rights of African-Americans (the *homo sacer*). The fourth important feature is that when their charismatic leader died the movement itself disappeared with him; thus, the black nationalist movements could not routinize personal charisma (Weber 1947). This was most observable in the Moorish Science Temple movement. Noble Drew Ali's leadership started to come to an end when other people in leadership positions took the advantage of his movement for personal gain by selling movement related signifiers such as pictures, relics, and literature for personal profit (Turner 2003). This end was culminated in the death of Sheik Claude Green, who was shot and stabbed in Unity Club in Chicago in March 15, 1929. Noble Ali was arrested for this murder, but later he was released on bond. Similar to mysterious disappearance of other leaders of the Black Nationalist movements such as the disappearance of Muhammad Fard and Bleyden, there is no consensus on how Noble Drew Ali died. Some argue that he was killed, but there is no official explanation describing his death (Lincoln 1994). Others argue that on 20 July, 1929, a few weeks after his release, Ali died of tuberculosis despite allegations that police was involved in his death (Turner 2003). After his death, the Moorish Science Temple movement gradually lost its influence as it came under a close surveillance of the FBI. The Bureau and the Department of Justice accused Drew Ali's movement as a being extremist Muslims who devised plans to unite with other darker races of the world especially with the Japanese, to take over the United States while her service



men were fighting in the World War II (Turner 2003). This otherness of the Muslims and their association with the external enemy almost became a norm continuing with successive Muslims groups in the States. Even when Islam became more visible through the Nation of Islam, which can be considered as continuation of the Moorish Science Temple, and through the assertion of Muslim immigrants, it still did not lose its status of a religion of the *homo sacer*.

### **The Nation of Islam**

The story of the visibility of Islam in America is closely associated with the history of the Nation of Islam. This movement, similar to the Moorish Science Temple of Drew Ali, is rooted in the charisma of a mysterious Muslim missionary, Wallace D. Fard, who was a peddler selling religious items among poor black people in Detroit (Turner 2003). What augmented his mysteriousness was his disguise under different names such as Mr. Farrad Mohammad, Professor Fard, Mr. Wali Fard, and others. Also, Fard taught his followers to create a separate identity by signifying themselves and forming a separate cultural group (Turner 2003). In addition, he instructed his followers to adopt a sort of strict Protestant ethic such as working hard, being thrifty, respecting authority, while at the same time refraining from certain vices such as adultery, alcohol, smoking and dancing which he thought was common among Black people in Detroit. These set of practices of the Nation of Islam under Fard are symbolic acts making a claim to being an authentic community which is not an *alien*, but also a *settler* community. Since as a members of the Nation of Islam, the *homo sacer*, who is pushed out the perimeters of the larger community in several ways such as by the denial formal education to him, Fard makes a claim to that education by presenting himself as a professor thereby legitimizing his knowledge and

leadership. In addition, by selecting Islam, which is a religion foreign to the American white society from which Blacks are excluded, Fard and his successors complete their legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. The adoption of Islam as a religion of this movement, the Nation of Islam completed its identity as a separate group becoming the ultimate *other* in the imagination of the larger American public. This otherness was further reinforced when Fard emphasized separatist views with regard to white people and Christianity claiming that the final War of Armageddon would be fought between Blacks and Whites here in America. To him, Black people can only win this war if they convert to their natural religion and establish their original identity (Turner 2003).

I argue that his depiction of Christianity as a white men's contrivance serving the enslavement of nonwhite people (Lincoln 1994) have catapulted the Nation of Islam against the mainstream society. The Nations of Islam by following the footsteps of the Moorish Science Temple perpetuated the marginalization of the National Black Movement associated with Islam. By emphasizing separatism and inventing an apocalyptic discourse in which the white race is the ultimate opponent, the Nation of Islam and other similar Islamist oriented Black movements further became marginalized. Since their discourse is not supported in the scientific world which is more associated with the dominant culture, it is not a legitimate discourse; it is instead an alien discourse. When Islam joins in the body of this discourse through appropriation, it receives its share of being an alien religion in the American imagination.

Also, what makes the discourse of the Nation of Islam illegitimate is the fact that it has produced a charismatic leader who is rejected from the legitimate secular educational system. Fard did not receive formal education, but his charisma drew huge crowds from

the ranks of African-Americans, who filled the urban neighborhoods in Northern cities as a result of an exodus from the South. He delivered his message in neighborhood meetings which soon got so large that it became necessary to accommodate the crowd in formal settings which led to the establishment of their first Temple of Islam. The choice of the word “temple” rather than the mosque or masjid, which is Arabic for a mosque, shows that Nation of Islam continued practices of the Moorish Science Temple. This, in addition to separating the Nation of Islam from the mainstream American society, separated the nation from the Muslim world increasing its marginalization. However, this did not decrease the popularity of the movement among the African-Americans, who started to embrace it in larger numbers under its upcoming charismatic leadership. As the Nation of Islam kept becoming more popular among African-Americans living in the northern part of the country, Fard continued producing a separate identity for it. For instance, Turner (2003) writes that during one of the meetings in 1931, Fard gave a speech declaring that the word ‘Negro’ was a misnomer invented by the white race to separate black people in America from their Asiatic roots. He claimed that Black Americans were the lost-found members of the tribe, Shabazz; that their true language and religion had been taken away from them. At this historic meeting, one of the people among the audience was Elijah Poole, who would eventually take over the Nation of Islam and call himself Elijah Mohammed, or the messenger of God. It is reported that Elijah Mohammed approached Fard after this meeting and told him that he knew he was God himself to which Fard replied : “That’s right, but don’t tell it now” (Turner 2003). One of the teachings of W.D. Fard was that the black people of America were descendants of African Asiatic nations residing around the Nile Valley and the holy city of Mecca, while the slave masters were the descendant of blue-

eyed mutants developed from the black race by a mad scientist Yacub. When Wallace D. Fard suddenly disappeared in 1934 for reasons that are not known until today, similar to the disappearance of Noble Drew Ali, whom I covered above, the Nation of Islam became a prominent political and religious movement in an unprecedented way under the leadership of Elijah Mohammed.

In following the footsteps of Noble Drew Ali and W.D. Fard, Elijah Mohammad constructed a mysterious identity for himself. This was taken up by his followers who attributed divinity to him by comparing him with the Prophet Muhammad (Talhami 2008). Some of his followers even went a step further calling him the “Child of God” a practice that was passed down to the subsequent black Islamic movements in the United States (Talhami 2008). The fact Elijah Pool adopted ‘Mohammad’ as his name which is the same as the name of the prophet of Islam Muhammad, who is considered as the messenger of God, creates a confusion not only in the imagination of his followers, but also in that of the larger American public which is not familiar with Islam. This attribution of divinity serves several outcomes which can be classified as negative and positive. First, as a positive outcome the movement carves out legitimacy for itself in the world of religions or cults by making a claim to the divinity. This is not a surprising route to take for a movement that is separated from mainstream society, to use Du Bois’ metaphor, by a veil. In addition to making a claim to divinity, the movement further distanced itself from white society by creating an “imagined community” for itself by claiming to belong to the tribe of Shabazz. These ideas were not challenged by the members of the movement on scientific and historical grounds since most of them did not have authority to challenge them as a result of being excluded from formal education. On the contrary, these ideologies or rhetoric were

appealing to the followers of the Nation in the industrial North since they offered them a community in which they could situate themselves since they had been not only uprooted from Africa in the past, but also recently from the rural South as a result of the emancipation.

With regard to negative effects, the Nation of Islam became the alien religious group par excellence by creating a religious identity which stood in total opposition to mainstream culture, but which was also not condoned by the Muslim world as it evoked blasphemy. At the center of this identity construction was the religion of Islam which was appropriated (Jackson 2004). In fact, the primary role of religion in the African-American experience is to oppose racial oppression and carve out both a more equal social space and a new identity for African-Americans. Islam and the Black Church, which were the main religions around which the African-Americans organized, functioned as a vehicle for a worldly salvation rather than the salvation for the hereafter. As black people organized collectively around these two monotheistic religions and adopted them for their racial cause, they started to harness their theology and teachings in ways that suited their discourse of racial equality.

In the Black experience, Islam and Christianity assumed a new religious form known as “Black religion.” Having acknowledged that there is no consensus on the definition of Black religion, Sherman, A. Jackson defines it as “an instrument of holy protest against racism” (Jackson 2004:206). Black religion under charismatic figures such as Noble Drew Ali, Wallace Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X appropriated Islam by redefining it and tailoring it in such a way that it became a vehicle for the racial struggle of the black people (Jackson 2004). A good example illustrating this appropriation

is the direction of prayer<sup>20</sup> for which the members of the Nation of Islam turned towards Chicago while praying in Muhammad Temple Number One in Detroit (Bilici 2012) since the center of the Nation of Islam was in Chicago. People while praying in this temple which is now known as The Muslim Center of Detroit, faced Chicago where the headquarters of the nation located (Bilici 2008). Jackson further explains why Islam was more appealing about to African-Americans who moved to the Rust Belt of America during the Great Migration is by pointing out the Eastern roots of Islam and the fact that it was not a religion over which the White people did not have any authority and monopoly of interpreting it. Also, it is well known that Islam has a reputation for its spirit of struggle and well known fraternity. Most importantly, African-Americans can trace their vernacular experience to a prominent African Muslim, Bilal of Abyssinia (current Ethiopia), who was an elite member<sup>21</sup> of the inner circle of Prophet Muhammad. In the end, Islam emerges out of this appropriation as a distorted religion which is not properly recognized by the Muslim world community as well as the followers of the Nation of Islam. For example, there is big confusion about who is the messenger of God. Is it Elijah Muhammad; or is the prophet Muhammad? Also, is “Nation” limited to the American Africans or is it the entire Muslim community? All these mystifications hovering over the Nation of Islam further increased

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<sup>20</sup> While performing a five daily prayer, Muslims are obliged to face Mecca the direction to which is northeast in the United States.

<sup>21</sup> The first generations of Muslims who lived during the time of Prophet Muhammad and had direct contact with him are known as *ashab* (friends) of the prophet. These individuals have the highest place both in the eyes of the followers of Islam and God. This generation is accepted to be a golden generation with impeccable background. Bilal of Abyssinia was one of the members of this generation but with more direct access to Prophet Muhammad.

its state of otherness in the imagination of the larger society and that of the American government.

Soon the Nation of Islam came under close surveillance by the FBI which conducted a large scale raid in September 1942 on the homes and the mosques of the members of the Nation of Islam. The leader of the Nation, Elijah Muhammad, was arrested for evading the draft and instructing members of Nation of Islam not to register for the draft. As a result, he served in a federal penitentiary in Milan, MI from 1942 to 1946. During the last year of his term, on 27 February 1946, Malcom X who would soon carry the Nation to its climax, started his six year sentence for larceny, breaking and entering, and for carrying firearms (Lincoln 1994, Turner 2003). A year later, Malcom X converted to Islam in prison around 1947 and 1948 upon invitation from his siblings and correspondence with Elijah Muhammad (Turner 2003). Malcom X was released from prison on 7 August, 1952 at the age of twenty-seven. Thereafter, he immediately started to work for the Nation of Islam and became the head of Detroit Temple No.1. Elijah Muhammad also appointed him as an assistant minister of the Nation of Islam as Malcolm X was a perfect figure to bring more visibility to the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm X became an ardent organizer in the Nation of Islam despite his submissive role in the Nation until his total break from it. This energetic leadership was rooted in his background as he came from a politically active family. For instance, Earl Little, who was the father of Malcom X, was a member of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). He and his wife were involved in the newspaper, *The Negro World*, which was published by the association. Having been exposed to political activism from a young age, Malcolm X was equipped with influential leadership skills. He played a critical

role in the signification of Black identity. His relationship with the Nation of Islam and the changes in his identity were models for the shifting identities of the Nation of Islam. This is evident in his profound influence on the successive leaders of the NIO such as Warith Deen Mohammed, who was the son of Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan who used to be Malcom X's assistant. During the time of Malcom X, the nation of Islam shifted its focus from a quest for individual identity to an institutional quest for collective identity (Turner 2003).

Although Malcom X was an extremely influential civil rights leader, he is excluded from the official history of civil rights movement. His exclusion is tied to his status in the American imagination. He is *homo sacer* par excellence as he is usually portrayed in college text books or other official rhetoric as a radical. As one of my control group participants told me in the United States, there are streets named after Martin Luther King Jr., but there are no streets named after Malcolm X<sup>22</sup>. He is included in the civil rights movement in the form of exclusion. The civil rights movement is not as a non-violent Black people's movement whose incarnated leader is Martin Luther King Jr. Despite the fact that Malcolm X never committed any acts of violence, he is still excluded from this history because of his status of being a *homo sacer* whose religion was Islam. What increased Malcolm X's denigration in the American imagination in general and his close scrutiny by the American federal government in particular was his international shuttle diplomacy to

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<sup>22</sup> There are scant examples contradicting his statement because I have driven on a street named after Malcolm X in Seattle, WA. This shows that there is at least one street in the USA named after him.



bring the Black people's tribulation to the international arena thereby forcing the government to ameliorate his people's condition.

Part of the Malcolm X's vision to bring racial issues from which the Black people suffered to the international arena was to reach other people who suffered from similar problems at the international level in the form of colonialism and neo-colonialism. For this matter he specially targeted nations who bore resemblance to him and his movement in terms of both religion and ethnicity. As such, Turner (2003) argues that both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X established close contact with some of the leaders of Muslim world. Although the identity of the Nation of Islam did not align well the global Islam, these leaders still maintained contact with the nation since it was increasingly perceived to be the Islamic outpost in the Western world. In order to further cement the bonds of brotherhood with the Muslim world and to settle disputes of identity with larger the Muslim world, Elijah Muhammad sent Malcolm X on diplomatic missions to the Middle East and Western African states in 1959. In the meantime, Malcolm X decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1960 which turned out to be decisive moment in the future of the Nation of Islam. It was during this pilgrimage that he also visited a host of developing countries such as Egypt, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Morocco and Nigeria urging their leaders to bring the violation of black people's right to the United Nation (Clarke, Bailey and Grant 1969).

While performing his pilgrimage, Malcolm X first broke with the Nation at the intellectual level. As a part of this break, he started to perceive racism not as something inherent in human nature, but as a byproduct of economic and political consequences of capitalism. Also, his pilgrimage to Mecca influenced him to such an extent that at this the time he no longer gave credence to the Yacub myth of the Nation of Islam (Turner 2003).

Most importantly, he no longer ascribed to the strategy of the Nation in seeking a domestic oriented solution to the race problem, but he was interested in developing an internationally oriented strategy. This strategy aimed to build alliance with some of the leaders of the third world nations who were not happy with the socio-political arrangements of the Cold War induced by bi-polar world system (Wallerstein 1993). As such, he had a close association with different leaders of the third world such as Ahmad Sukarno of Indonesia, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Gasmel Adb al-Nasser and Mahmoud Yousse Shawarbi of Egypt, Patrice Lumumba of the Belgian Congo, and Ben Bella of Algeria. These relationships exposed him to the political ideals of the third world which in return impregnated his rhetoric with a quest for a connection with Black Left and the civil rights organizations. In addition, what made Malcolm X the ultimate threatening other was not his radicalism, but his international shuttle diplomacy. A crucial aspect of his movement goes unnoticed or purposely neglected by his critics because the scale of his organizational skills negates his denigration of being a radical. At the same time, his international vision for civil rights not only distanced him from the mainstream American society which embraced MLK as the *representative proper* of the civil rights movement, but also from the NIO itself since he no longer believed in the cult-like vision of the Nation and the corrupt leadership of Elijah Muhammad. As a result, his differences with the leadership of Elijah Muhammad came to a head in 1963 which resulted in severing ties with the Nation of Islam on 8 March, 1964 formally announcing this separation with a press conference. This break with the Nation took place after he returned to the United States from his enlightened trips to African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Senegal, and Morocco in May 21, 1964. His separation culminated in establishing of a new mosque, the

Muslim Mosque, Inc on June 29, 1964, but his life did not suffice to further institutionalize his Islamic vision in the US since soon after he was assassinated on 21 February, 1965. The assassination of Malcolm X marks the end of the first period of the institutionalization of Islam in the United States.

### **Nation of Islam's Alignment with Orthodox Islam**

The Nation of Islam and its preceding parent Black movements were not the only actors contributing to the institutionalization of Islam. In the early stages of the visibility of Islam in the United States, Muslim immigrants from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other Islamic countries constituted another cultural group associated with Islam. With the passage of the Hart-Celler Act signed into law on October 3, 1965, by President Lyndon Johnson, more people from non-white nations who erstwhile were restricted from migrating to the United States because of the National Origins Act of 1924 started pour into America to pursue the American Dream. Shortly after the passage of this act, from 1966 until 1977, about 2,780,000 people migrated to the United States from countries with significant Muslim population (Smith 2013). It is hard to estimate what proportion of this wave of migration constitutes those who identify themselves as Muslims since the U.S. government and the Census Bureau do not ask people about their religious affiliation, but Smith (2013) claims that 1.1 million from these group were Muslims. The orthodox Muslims distanced themselves from Black Muslims in general and from the Nation of Islam in particular, because of the movement's racial politics and their un-historic understanding of Islam (Lincoln 1994). To abridge this distance and established more legitimate identity for the Nation of Islam, the nation not only gradually moved away from racial dominant politics of Elijah Muhammad, but it also steered towards the orthodox

Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad. In the 1980s, however, Muhammad proved he was not totally willing to abandon black nationalism by demanding that his followers do not solely rely on Islam as interpreted by the Muslim immigrants but instead develop a more comprehensive interpretation of Islam responding to the Black issue (Curtis 2002). Curtis argues that his vision of social change pitted his movement against mainstream Islam as he thought that individual responsibility is the engine of social change, while the issues facing black people can be solved in a collective manner as once his father believed.

The Nation of Islam was in a way decentralized, although it projected itself as tightly organized under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. For example, his son Warith Muhammad practiced Sunni Islam and taught the Qur'an to his followers in the NOI temple of Philadelphia (Curtis 2002). Similar to his father, Warith Muhammad was convicted and sent to prison for draft evasion in 1961. The federal government stopped this opposition by convicting almost all of its leaders and the leaders of other Islamic movements. In prison, he studied extensively the Bible and Qur'an and contemplated breaking away from his father. Warith Muhammad announced his break from the movement in May 1964 not long after Malcolm X's separation (Curtis 2002).

The Nation of Islam's vision to align with the orthodox Islam was short-lived. This can be observed from the current leadership of Louis Farrakhan, who steers the Nation between the orthodox Islam and Black separatist philosophy of the Nation of Islam. Although Farrakhan encouraged members of the Nation to reach out to all sections of society and adapt a more inclusive vision which was most visible between 2008 and 2009, he was forced to revert back to racial ideology of the group because of the complaints from his

followers (Gibson 2012). Despite the request from the bottom up, the NOI underwent changes which materialized in the recruitment of Latinos converts to Islam, especially in Los Angeles, and the greater participation of females at higher ranks of the group like elections to the executive board (Gibson 2012). The election of the President of Barack Obama proved to be a challenging time for the NOI. Given that Obama was supported by multitude of races, was Obama's election to the Presidency a sign that America has reached a post-racial era? The NOI under the leadership of Farrakhan embraced Obama and the endorsement was announced during the 2008 Saviours' Day convention. Obama, however, distanced himself from Farrakhan and strongly emphasized that he denounced his anti-Semitic remarks (Gibson 2012). This further marginalized the Nation of Islam which has been diminishing and receiving minimum to no coverage from the public. I have watched the 2014 Saviours' Day speech to get a glimpse of the nation's most up-to-date teachings about race relations and its theology. Louis Farrakhan (2014) throughout his speech focused exclusively on the plight of the black people arguing that America has not been just to Black people giving examples from the deteriorated conditions of Detroit to further emphasize his argument. His referrals to the holy texts when he said "both the Bible and Holy Qur'an are our books" (Farrakhan 2014) shows that the Nation of Islam is still confused about its theology. He further made references to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and his bible showing that the organization is still following the footsteps of the founders of the Nation of Islam at least in terms of preaching an ambivalent theology which at best confusing to the listener. He called some individuals to the podium introducing them as reverend Christians and he said "I am a Christian too," afterwards presenting a group of women in white uniforms as "these are the soldiers for Christ, these

are the soldiers of the Mahdi, these are the soldiers of Muhammad” (it is not clear whether he refers to the founder of NOI Fard Muhammad or the prophet of Islam Muhammad) (Farrakhan 2014) indicating the ideology of Nation of Islam is still obscure and a medley of different theologies suiting Black religion’s ideology. This attests that the Nation of Islam still seems to be entrenched in the parochial racial politics and abandoned plans of bonding with orthodox Islam.

### **Permanent Institutionalization of Islam in America: September 11 and Beyond**

The permanent institutionalization of Islam in America is taking place against a backdrop of a change in the form of the alien (*homo sacer*). The *alien* or the *homo sacer* (whose religion is Islam) who is the anti-thesis of the settler constituting the dialectic of the aliens and the settler is no longer the black person, but the Middle Eastern. This switch from the African-American to the Middle Eastern is best captured in the words of John Esposito who summarize the perception of Islam in the United State as “Why do they hate us ?” (Esposito 2010) To him, Muslims, on the other hand, perceive America as a hegemonic power (Wallerstein 1993) engaged in neo-colonial practices with an aim to redraw the map of the Middle East in light of the American economic and political interests (Esposito 2010). The ascendance of Middle Easterners to the category of *the alien* or *homo sacer* is related to the decline of America as a hegemonic power (Wallerstein 2013). I argue that this process started right after the collapse of the Soviet Union bringing the end of the bi-polar world system. This collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the ultimate *alien*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A good example of how the Russians had been the ultimate aliens in the American imagination is how they are depicted in the American movies. The Russians are always presented as the bad guys whose language and culture are obscure. For example, now that I am conversant in Russian, I have recently re-watched one of the Rocky series in which

against which the U.S. legitimized its leadership of the so called “free world,” precipitated the decline of the United States (Wallerstein 2007) which ascended to the hegemonic position at the end of the World War II (Wallerstein 1993). The end of the bi-polar world system brought about discussions centered on the features of the ensuing world order. The biggest candidate for this world order was predicted to be uni-polar world in which the U.S. would be the only hegemonic power whose legitimacy I argue is anchored in clash of civilization (Huntington 1996). In addition to this kind of rhetoric of the clash of civilization, the uni-polar or multi-polar (Wallerstein 2007) world system, there were also arguments about a new world order and the end of the history (Fukuyama 1992) which embodied discourse tailored to predict what would replace the bi-polar world system. It is important to remember that these arguments were taking place in the early decade of the 1990s, a decade during which the last hegemonic power had its first major war against an Islamic country. This war and the ideology centered on the “clash of civilization” laid the ground work for transformation of the *alien* in the American imagination from the Russians (and the Blacks) into Middle Eastern people. With the horrific events of the September 11, this transformation became complete. With these unacceptable attacks on the American citizens, the process of creating an ideology depicting Muslims as an ultimate *other* replacing the Russians or the communists was finalized. Now, the U.S. presence in the Middle East (Wallerstein 2008) is supported with a strong ideology that echoes well in the collective consciousness of America. Thus, in the American imagination the religion of the

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the opponent of Rocky is a Russian guy who looks angry and most importantly who speaks this seemingly ugly language, Russian, while in reality what he speaks is gibberish and it has nothing to do the language itself. This is a good case showing how the ultimate other is constructed to solidify the collective consciousness of a nation.

*alien* became associated with terrorism and conversion to such a religion is deemed as unacceptable.

Parallel to changes in the world system with regards to shifts in the hegemonic powers and ideologies, there was another unleashed process that is relevant to the status of Islam in post-bi-polar world system. These changes not only affected Islam, but also Christianity. As a result, the center of Christianity is no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Adaba and Manila (Jenkins 2011), while at the same time the center of Islam is also longer in Cairo, Damascus, Tehran, Islamabad, but in London, New York, Berlin, Paris, Rome and Washington, DC (Esposito 2010). This indicates that there is a movement towards a decentralization and de-territorialization of Christianity (Casanova 2001) as well as de-territorialization of Islam. This process with globalization became so intense that all cultural systems have become disembedded from their natural territories (Casanova 2001). This change in the religious landscape is best characterized in the following example. A Pakistani architect who came to the United States in the 1960s could not find a mosque in the Pittsburgh area (Smith 2013). However, not long after this experience, Islam made inroads into the American landscape as one of the monotheistic religions establishing its worshipping houses as well as institutions such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Council on Islamic-American Relations (CAIR), etc. These institutions not only encourage American Muslims to make claims to full citizenships as if they are also the *settlers*, but also urge them to reach out to non-Muslims to deconstruct the rhetoric about Islam which I formulate as the religion of *homo sacer*. As such, CAIR launched “open house project” encouraging all Muslim mosques to invite their neighbors in effort to



shorten the social distance between them (*the aliens*) and their neighbors (*the settlers*) by familiarizing them with their worshiping practices and their hospitable culture (Smith 2013).

The institutionalization of Islam is best represented in academic work by Garbi Schmit who studied the Muslim community and its institutions in urban Chicago. Her study focuses on Muslim weekend schools, Muslim full-time schools, and *hafiz*<sup>24</sup> schools where student memorize the Qur'an. But she also brings a Muslim grass rooted political organization into focus in her case study of IMAN (Inner-City Muslim Action Network), which is an Arabic word for faith. The institutionalization of Islam in the form of Islamic schools flourished in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to unfriendly public school environment where Muslims students were often pushed to actually emphasize their identity (Schmidt 2004). Although, the Islamic schools are supposed to function as an ethnic-religious enclave where students are encouraged to withdraw from the mainstream American society on the basis of religion, the parents of the students demanded a curriculum that could prepare their kids for professional careers such as doctors, engineers, professors, and other high status jobs (Schmidt 2004). American Muslims, following American Jews, are the most educated religious minority with 40 percent of adults having a college degree compared to 29 percent for all Americans (Esposito 2010). These schools in a sense are expected to function as sites of reproduction of social status and cultural background.

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<sup>24</sup> Hafiz is an Arabic word referring to a Muslim individual who can recite the Qur'an from the beginning to the end from memory.

Among all these Muslim institutions, the mosque in the United States is the most important indicators testifying to the presence of Islam in America at an institutional level. As such, the Islamic Center of Washington in Washington, D.C., was the first mosque built in 1957 coming into being as a cooperative venture between the American Muslims and the Muslim governments overseas (Smith 2013). A recent study (Bagby 2012) claims that there about 2,106 mosques existing in the United states. The areas with largest number of mosques are Massachusetts (297), California (248), and New York (147) (Smith 2013), while my research site Michigan has 77 and Kentucky has 27 mosques (Bagby 2012). The existence of the mosque in the United States is crucial with regards to the conversion process since it provides a context against the backdrop of which conversion process occurs.

Although Islam has been permanently institutionalized in the United States as a result of changes in the immigration policies of the federal government at the turn of the twentieth century and globalization processes at the end of the same century, this institutionalization did not promote it to the status of the religion of the *settler*. Islam is still depicted in the Western context in general and in American particular, as antithetical to modernity which is understood as a material progress aiming for the emancipation of human beings. When the mainstream media, which is the primary source from which an average American receives her information about Islam, problematizes Islam in relation to modernity, it posits Islam as incompatible with the values of modernity based on its limited understanding of gender relations in the Middle Eastern countries (Stadlbauer 2012). Contrary to this formulation of Islam, Stadlbauer (2012) argues that the Muslim women who practice Islam perceive the Islamic rituals of salat (five daily prayer) and sawm (the

obligatory fasting in the month of Ramadan) as means of self discipline and self realization. Despite this formulation of Islam as compatible with the values of modernity on the part of the Muslim women, they are still “constructed as not having achieved the purported ‘modern’ state and they are also positioned as being un-American” (Stadlbauer 2012:351). This depiction is not surprising as it shows the perpetuated status of the Muslims as an *alien* in the American imagination.

As I have shown above, Islam in the American imagination is perceived as the religion of *alien* and therefore conversion to Islam is controversial. This alien, throughout most of the twentieth century, has been an African-American; but as the pi-polar world system came to close the new alien in the American imagination is the Middle Easterner whose religion is Islam. In both cases, *settlers’* conversion to religion of the *alien* is deemed at best surprising and, at worst, as unacceptable. Although conversion to Islam in the American context is perceived as an unlikely event, it still takes place in such an extent that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States. Why then do people in the United States convert to Islam? In the following chapter by comparing a research group of thirty people who converted to Islam to a control group of thirty people who are not convert to Islam, I aim to answer this question. More importantly, by comparing conversion cases in Michigan to those of Kentucky I investigate whether having ties to other Muslims influence the conversion process or not.

## CHAPTER 4

### HOW DOES ISLAM DIFFUSE IN EGOCENTRIC SOCIAL NETWORKS? A COMPARISON OF CONVERSION NETWORKS BETWEEN MICHIGAN AND KENTUCKY

Conversion is one of the ways in which religion diffuses in society. Different than other diffusions such as adopting a new technology or a fad, religious adoption can be riskier since it entails a life changing transition thereby making it a complex contagion. Why do people convert to a new religion, especially to Islam, which is the religion of the ultimate other in the Western context, despite the fact that it is risky behavior? To what extent are social actors influenced by their social ties in making such a life transition change? I begin the discussion of conversion to Islam by investigating whether Islam diffuses through weak ties or strong ties. I hypothesize that people living in Michigan are more likely to have strong ties to other Muslim because of the presence of a significant Muslim community which has been longer established than Kentucky has. Having tested these hypotheses concerned with comparison between these two research sites, I compare egocentric network properties for the research group (converts to Islam) and for those in the control group (people who are not converts to Islam) to investigate further the relationship between social network properties and conversion to Islam.

The main focus of this chapter is on the strength of Muslim ties and their role in conversion to Islam. The central puzzle I tackle is whether conversion to Islam tends to occur through weak ties or strong ties and whether there is a difference between the two research sites. I further investigate other network properties such as the size and density of

egocentric social networks of the converts and the control group to investigate the relationship between conversion to Islam and social integration. Here, I compare the size of prior-to-conversion egocentric social networks of the research group to the egocentric social network of the control group to elucidate this relationship. In addition, I demonstrate that the egocentric social networks of converts increase in size and they become more connected as they go under the conversion process. This shows that social integration and network connectedness are important factors in conversion to Islam, although connectedness in the post conversion network may not be the same for white and black converts.

In the second part of this chapter, I test conversion models I covered in the introduction of this dissertation with an extended emphasis on active and passive conversion model. Then I touch upon other alternative conversion models such as rational choice, religious market model and mixed models to further shed light on the process of conversion to Islam. Having tested this model, I develop a new conversion model integrating social network theory and a combination of active paradigm and religious market model. I argue that conversion to Islam tends to occur in four successive stages. In the first stage, a potential convert tends to grow disenchanted with their prior beliefs, especially the Trinity doctrine. In the second stage, the converts tend to break away from Christianity or their church, but they continue believing in God. The duration of this stage varies from a year to a couple of decades during which converts may either develop weak or strong ties to other Muslims or accidentally come across Islam. The third stage is when converts read the Qur'an and further investigate Islam by reading online material, watching youtube videos, or reading books before deciding to convert to Islam. In the last stage, a

potential convert first develops a social tie to another Muslim and then visits a local mosque with an intention to convert.

I conclude this chapter with a detail discussion of these stages. In the following section I introduce the social network hypotheses to elucidate the effects of Muslim ties on conversion.

## **NETWORK PROPERTIES AND CONVERSION TO ISLAM**

### **Social Ties**

**Muslim Network Hypothesis 1:** Individuals are more likely to convert to Islam, if they have other Muslims in their social network. Thus, conversion will be more likely in Michigan than in Kentucky.

Conversion to another religion is life changing event which can be enormously challenging to social actors. When this conversion is to Islam, which is increasingly being demonized in the Western context, this life transitional event becomes even more daunting. Why then people convert to religion which is for the most part foreign to the Western context and which is considered not to be the religion of the ultimate other? I argue that in order for conversion to occur it is important that people have social ties to other Muslims both to learn more about Islam before converting and also to get social support while going through the conversion process.

The results of this research demonstrate that people in Michigan are more likely to have social ties to other Muslims than those living in Kentucky. About 44% percent of research participants from Michigan mentioned having a social tie to another Muslim, while 25% of those from Kentucky reported having social ties to Muslims before their

conversion. However, there is no difference between two research groups in terms of the egocentric network composition. Prior-to-conversion egocentric network of both groups are overwhelmingly composed of non-Muslim social ties. While on average those living in Michigan have 0.7 Muslim ties in their prior-to-conversion egocentric networks, those living in Kentucky on average have 0.3 Muslim ties. This research predicted that people living in Michigan would have more social ties to other Muslims because of a larger Muslim population than those living in Kentucky, but the two research sites do not differ in terms of network composition with regard to Muslim and non-Muslim ties. However, an emerged theory indicates that Michigan and Kentucky greatly differ in terms of the strength of Muslim social ties. By comparing my two research sites Michigan and Kentucky, I investigate how conversion to Islam occurs in the American context with an emphasis on the role of social ties in this life changing event.

**Hypothesis 1a:** The stronger the ties to other Muslims in one's social network, the higher the probability to convert.

Previous studies analyzing the relationship between social networks and religious conversion argue that developing affective bonds with the members of religious groups or cults is an essential element in conversion (Lofland 1966, Stark and Bainbridge 1980). One of the earliest studies investigating the role of social networks in the conversion process shows that almost always active recruitment processes precede the formation of a social tie between the cult members and potential converts (Lofland 1966). Follow up research on the relationship between religious conversion and social network adds another dimension to the influence of social bonds in religious conversion (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Stark and Bainbridge (1980) argue that among those who have internal bonds with cult members

only those who are experiencing acute tensions are more likely to convert provided that the cult ideology is appealing to them.

Although these initial works investigating the relationship between religious conversion and social network are groundbreaking, they are limited in scope. First, they fail to emphasize the difference between mutually developing social bonds and self-imposing bonds developing between cult members and potential recruits as a result of persistent proselytization and deceptive messages. Lofland (1966) provides detailed recruitment strategies of the Doomsday Cult (from here on DP) leaders who often imparted their messages in a covert way through magazine articles, newspapers, and radio to reach potential members. As a result, the type of a social tie developing between a religious group and a potential convert in this model is not a naturally occurring tie because the members of the religious group are actively seeking out potential recruits to convert. More importantly, the theories of conversion built upon this model depict the converts as passive (Wilson 1970), brainwashed (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980), or deviant (Bromley and Shupe 1979) who convert because they are experiencing strain or some sort of emotional turmoil. This formulation of social bonds between a convert and a religious group is limited since it does not account for conversion cases which occur through social bonds the convert *develops herself* or the bonds that *develop randomly* rather than those formed as a result of altering the perception of social actors (Greil 1977). In such a model, the convert is a self-seeker active agent (Straus 1979) rather than someone who is being controlled or brainwashed.

The results of this research do not support the theories of social network and religious conversion developed by this line of research. To begin with, the social bonds



developing between Muslims and potential converts to Islam are mutually developing bonds in a sense that the Muslims are not involved in proselytization in order to recruit people into Islam. However, it is accurate to say that Muslim communities in the United States organize activities such as university campus fasting days called Fast-a-thon, public lectures, open house mosque days, conferences, and similar events to disassociate themselves from the purposeful image that the American media creates which is associated with violence and terrorism. In Kentucky, which is the second research site of this research, the level of intensity of these programs has decreased since the time I started conducting the pilot study for this research to until I finished the field work and analysis of the data. This decline is mostly a result of technical changes in the time of the yearly Muslim Ramadan fast. Since Muslims abide by the lunar calendar, which is about ten days shorter than the solar calendar; their fast every year starts ten days earlier than the previous year. As a result of this change, the month of Ramadan no longer corresponds with the school year calendar cancelling most of the organized campus events. Although these events do not necessarily result in the creation of social bond with other Muslims, it provides a Muslim context which may influence the conversion process.

This influence is observed in the difference between the proportion of Muslim ties converts from Michigan have than those of converts from Kentucky. I hypothesize that people living in Michigan are more likely to develop ties to other Muslims than those living in Kentucky but these ties tend to weak ties rather than strong ties. The results of this research partially confirm this hypothesis because more of people converting in Michigan had Muslim ties in their prior to conversion egocentric social network before their conversion than those converting in Kentucky. While about 44 percent of converts from

Michigan had social ties to other Muslims in their prior to conversion ego centric network, only 25 percent of the converts from Kentucky had ties to other Muslim before their conversion (see Table 4.1).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

This implies two interrelated assumptions. First, the presence of Muslim communities in a geographical area provides a Muslim context which can facilitate conversion to Islam. However, living in a geographical area where there is a large Muslim community does not guarantee developing an affective bond to another Muslim. Second, given that most of the people who converted to Islam in both research sites (about 67 percent) did not have a social tie to other Muslims in their egocentric social network shows that people do not always have social ties to other Muslims before converting to Islam. Moreover, in the control group, 30 percent of people had a social tie to other Muslims, but they did not convert to Islam (see Table 4.2).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

This indicates that having a social bond to a religious group does not seem always to be a precondition for conversion. More importantly, as mentioned above, early conversion studies do not make a distinction between social ties in a person's ego centric network and ties developed for the purpose of recruiting someone into a religious movement which often tends to be a marginal group. In light of new advances in social network theory, especially the distinction between strong ties and weak ties and their role in diffusion and adoption, there is a need to further investigate the relationship between religious conversion and social network.

In his seminal work, Granovetter (1973) claimed that a diffusion of information and influence, social mobility and community organization do not always flow through strong interpersonal bonds. Having described the strength of a tie as a “combination of amount of time, the emotional intensity, and reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter 1973:1361), Granovetter argues that information travels a greater social distance through weak ties than strong ties. More importantly, weak ties play the role of a bridge between two social groups disseminating information between them in the most efficient way. Granovetter’s theoretical model essentially explains how information about jobs diffuses in a social network.

This operationalization of weak ties needs further clarification since what constitute a weak tie can be elusive (Kadushin 2012). In addition to the criteria that Granovetter provides, it is also important to consider the frequency of interaction and how one defines their social ties with others such as relatives, close friends, acquaintances, etc. (Kadushin 2012). For instance, if an ego is talking to someone on Facebook or any other social media with high frequency but they actually never meet in person would this be weak tie or strong tie? This is a grey area suggesting that measuring a weak tie can be more difficult than generally is acknowledged. Although there are relatively clearer guidelines about measuring strong ties by asking research participants to name people with whom they discuss important matters (Burt 1984, Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006), there are no such guideline about measuring the presence of weak ties. Technically any social tie which is not a strong tie has potential to be a weak tie. By extension, social actors could have innumerable amounts of weak ties which can be hard to detect and measure.

This problem becomes more relevant while generating egocentric social networks. In generating egocentric network, it is expected that ego will mention those alters (people they know) who are close to them emotionally and with whom they are intimate (Small 2013) unless the research is specifically designed to measure weak ties. Thus, detecting a weak tie in an egocentric social network is more difficult than is acknowledged. While conducting this research, for instance, I often discovered the presence of weak ties, despite the fact that they were not mentioned as part of the social network but they were revealed through probing open-ended questions. Dale, who is one of the control group research participants, for instance, did not mention any social ties to other Muslims while generating his egocentric social network (see Figure 4.1).<sup>25</sup> As can be seen from the diagram depicting his actual egocentric network, Dale does not have any tie to other Muslims. All the nodes (persons in his network) are blue standing for non-Muslim people and there are no red nodes standing for Muslims. The weak ties in Dale's social network are Adam and Anne since they are not well connected to the rest of the network implying that Dale is spending less time with these two alters. However, none of these two ties are Muslim ties. This egocentric social network does not have any Muslim ties, despite the fact while generating it and all other networks constituting this research I allowed the boundaries of the networks to float freely (Marsden 1990) rather restricting it to a person core discussion group (Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006). If there were Muslim ties in Dale's personal network, which is shown in Figure 4.1, we could have classified them as either weak ties or strong ties by measuring their structural position such as whether they

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<sup>25</sup> All of the names that I use in this dissertation are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the research participants.

were bridges or not and/or whether they were well connected to the rest of the network or if they were social isolates. By solely relying on the raw network data provided by this research participant, it is reasonable to conclude that Dale does not have any weak or strong Muslim ties. Nevertheless, it was later revealed during a semi-structured interview, that Dale actually does have a Muslim tie who is a convert to Islam. The following dialogue with Dale illustrates the presence of this tie:

Şakin: Have you heard anything about Islam, or have you learned anything about Islam?

Dale: Umm, a little bit. My friend Erica, who is not on that list (refers to Figure 4.1), converted and she has a lot of friends. I do not hang out with her very often. Well she was actually studying in Morocco for a long time, so I haven't seen her.

Şakin: Okay. And she converted?

Dale: She converted. And she has a lot of friends that are Muslim. And I met some of them through her. I don't know a lot about Islam. I know some of the basic tenets I think. I think I know what the five pillars are. And I know it is an Abrahamic religion.

Dale's social tie to Erica, who is a convert to Islam can best be classified as a weak tie since it functions as a bridge (Granovetter 1973) to the Muslim community because Erica is the person introducing Dale to other Muslims in Lexington, Kentucky. Since there are no established guidelines for collecting network data for weak ties similar to collecting data for strong ties, it becomes difficult to detect such ties by relying only on raw network data elicited from research participants. As it is shown in the above dialogue and Figure 4.1, Dale's tie to Erica is definitely a weak tie for two important reasons: (1) it functions as a bridge (Granovetter 1973) to the Muslim community in Lexington, KY; (2) it is not part of the Dale's personal network meaning that Dale is not spending a large amount of time with her and she is not connected to the rest of his egocentric network. If Erica were in the diagram (Figure 4.1), it would have been easy to measure the strength of this tie by

running network procedures. For instance, in order to detect whether Erica is a local bridge, I would delete her link (Valente and Fujimoto 2010) or delete her (Borgatti 2006) from Dale's egocentric social network to measure the strength of her tie. Nevertheless, it is not possible to run any of these calculations since Erica is not enumerated in Dale's egocentric network. Despite this restriction, it is clear from the qualitative data Dale is providing that Dale's social tie to Erica is a weak tie. This shows that mixed methods have powerful effects in detecting weak ties which are not accounted for in generated networks based only on quantitative methods. This results from the fact that while collecting egocentric network data social actors tend to enumerate people who are close to them rather than those who are distant.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Similarly, Jackson, who is a convert from Michigan, did not mention most of his weak ties while giving information about his personal network. In the dialogue below, which captures his conversion story, it can be seen that he has a lot of weak Muslim ties that are not accounted for in his egocentric social network. When I asked Jackson to tell me his story of becoming Muslim, he said:

Jackson: I got some information from a couple of friends. I have always been familiar with Islam but I didn't know much about it. I definitely knew it was more than what was being displayed on TV. The media spends time on things it wants to. I knew it was more than that, plus and I knew Muslims, so I knew they were not like that.

Şakin: Not like what?

Jackson: Not like how they are portrayed on TV; like how they are all extremist, things like that and that wasn't the case. And I know Muslims, they are not like that the ones I know at least.

Şakin: And from where did you know Muslims?

Jackson: Like Malik (Malik is in his egocentric network; see Figure 4.2) is from Lebanon. I had two friends, two brothers I knew from a few years back; they were from Turkey, Mudasir and his brother cannot remember his brother's name; they were from Turkey. Friends from Jordan and Yemen, you name it, pretty much I knew friends from all over.

Şakin: So you said you used to be familiar with Islam. How? Were you familiar with Islam through these people?

Jackson: Through these people. Just from these people and the small things they would tell me. And just my own watching certain documentaries and reading certain things here and there and things like that. I later got more familiar with it (Personal Interview, August 24, 2013).

As it can be seen from the dialogue above, Jackson has a lot of weak Muslim ties that are not accounted for in the diagram depicting his egocentric social network (see Figure 4.2). In his network, Malik and Isam are present, but all other Muslim weak ties through which he learns about Islam are not present. Jackson's familiarity with Islam was reinforced by his weak ties which he describes as people from all over. We find out about them through his story of conversion.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Again this proves that mixed methods have powerful effects in detecting weak ties which are not accounted for in a generated network based on quantitative methods. More importantly, there is a need to distinguish between what I call *recessive* and *dominant* weak ties. If a weak tie is only mentioned in the conversion stories and they are not enumerated as part of the egocentric social network of the research participants, then they are *recessive* weak ties. Also, the primary role of recessive weak ties is that they act as a transitory bridge to the Muslim community and they are *switched on* when the convert develops an interest in Islam. They appear in the conversion stories of the research participants for a brief moment usually taking the potential converts to the mosque. Such recessive weak ties can

be classmates, co-workers, or somebody met in a store. Recessive ties are different than dormant ties which are defined as a “relationship between two individuals who have not communicated with each other for a long time, e.g., who have drifted apart because of job mobility, divergent interests, or other demands” (Levin, Walter and Murnighan 2011:923). Dormant ties can be strong or weak ties to which social actors resort for pragmatic purposes and efficiency since they serve as a source of knowledge-related benefits, social capital, and other useful benefits (Levin, Walter and Murnighan 2011). What makes a social tie dormant depends of how a social actor perceives a tie, whereas what make a social tie recessive weak tie depends on type of a community to which the tie belongs and how that community is perceived by mainstream society. With regard to conversion to Islam, a tie is likely to be a *recessive* weak tie if a social actor perceives it as absent in their personal network even if the tie is present in their network. This lack of acknowledgement of a tie stems from the fact that recessive weak ties belong to communities which are *homo sacers* (Agamben 1998).

This situation is further exemplified in the conversion of Kristina. When I interviewed Kristina, who is another convert from Michigan, she mentioned in her story that she knew two other Muslims who were her recessive weak ties. However, none of these two recessive weak ties are accounted for in her actual egocentric network (see Figure 4.3).

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Despite this absence in the actual egocentric network, one of these recessive weak ties, who is Kristina’s co-worker, eventually played the role of bridging by offering Kristina



to take her to one of the local mosques. The following dialogue between us describes her relationship with these two recessive weak ties and the bridging role they played:

Kristina: In high school there was one Muslim girl in my grade, I was friends with her, but we weren't really close. But she just was friends with people I was friends with, so like I always kind of wondered about her, because I had a lot of Arab friends but they were Christian Arabs. I just thought Muslims were scary I guess because I never tried to learn anything about it.

Şakin: Why did you think that Muslims were kind of scary?

Kristina: I feel like what you see on TV and the Media, just how they portray it, I guess. Like when you read it you see bad things most of the time.

Şakin: Like what?

Kristina: Like they kill the women; the stuff you see on the TV. And then when my first year in college, I took a class (I don't remember what it was called), Human Relations or something. We had to do a project on a different religion. I had been interested in it before but I just kind of brushed it off, like whatever, so for this I actually had to do research and write about it and stuff. When I started researching it (since my family was not religious just like very), like things I was reading made sense to me, more than anything I had ever heard in church or anything. Like how Jesus isn't the Son, that caught my attention, because that never made sense to me. When I started reading into it; after the project, I would go back myself in my spare time and research things. And I was interested, I was like this is something I feel like I want to do this but I was still kind of hesitant because it was such a change from my lifestyle before. And I don't want to do something that I wouldn't be able to commit to. And I started working at this restaurant. And one of the girls was Muslim, but I didn't know because she didn't wear the hijab.<sup>26</sup> And in my head, everybody wears hijab at that time I didn't know, I thought all girls wear the hijab, so I didn't know she was Muslim. And it was Ramadan, and she said something about it and I started talking to her about it and told her I was interested. And she offered to take me to the Masjid with her, so she took me for the first time, and I just started to talk to other people there. And they would ask me to go to picnic with them and I knew I wanted to convert. I became friends with this one girl, and I met her there in my list (the first one on the list)-.

Şakin: When you went to the Masjid with the girl from the restaurant, is she in here [chart] anywhere?

Kristina: No, because she just took me there. I was not really close with her. She doesn't really go, but she is like I will take you if you want. I thought about going

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<sup>26</sup> Hijab is an Arabic word for a headscarf.

before, but I didn't want to go by myself or anything (Personal interview, September 1, 2013).

Kristina's first recessive Muslim weak tie is a classmate whose presence and Muslim identity provides Kristina with a Muslim context to which she is exposed. This tie is a recessive weak tie because not only this friend is not included in Kristina's egocentric network, but also her identity is unknown since Kristina does not provide us with her name. What makes this tie recessive is that the unknown Muslim friend is a member of a group Kristina describes as scary people. Her perception about the Muslim community, which can be classified as a pariah group in the United States, is shaped by the discourse in the media which tends to associate the Islamic world with violence painting the entire Muslim world with a broad brush. Although Kristina developed an interest in Islam, she brushed it off because of this negative picture of Islam and the Islamic world in the American psyche. While this interest was developed further as a result of a class project and further research on Islam, at same time Kristina was forming a recessive weak Muslim tie to a person who was a co-worker. This is a recessive weak tie because it is not accounted for in her egocentric social network and also it has unknown identity. More importantly, it serves as a bridge to the Muslim community because she takes Kristina to the local mosque and thereafter she entirely drops from the story. Furthermore, the strength of this recessive weak tie and other recessive weak ties does not change even after ego converts to the religion of the recessive weak ties. As it can be seen from these examples and also from an exclusionary aspect of collecting egocentric network data which tend to lie on the strong ties with whom the ego discusses important matters, identification of weak ties in a network requires both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods. The mixed method I use

in this research turned out to be a robust technique accounting for this limitation by capturing weak ties which appeared to have influenced conversion to Islam.

Dominant weak ties, on the other hand are those ties which are presented in the egocentric social network and they are not well connected to the rest of the network. With regards to conversion to Islam, I define a tie as a dominant weak tie based on the several criteria: (1) I asked my research participants to rank the social actors with whom they socialize starting with their number persons; if a tie is not ranked in the top three alters (social ties), it is a dominant weak tie; (2) if the ego does not define a tie as a close friend, relative or, most importantly, as a marriage tie, it is a dominant weak tie. What I call dominant weak tie is not much different than Granovetter's formulation of weak ties. The opposite of a weak tie is a strong tie, which Granovetter formulates as a "friend" rather an "acquaintance" (Granovetter 1973). Granovetter (1973) also differentiates strong ties from the weak ones based on the structure of networks where strong ties form highly dense social networks. In this research, I classify marriage partners, relatives, close friends and roommates as strong ties

Having defined the strong and weak ties, now it is important to discuss how things such as a novel idea, an adoption of technology, and most importantly conversion to a new religion flow through social ties? Although weak ties are effective in circulating novel information such as information about available jobs (Granovetter 1973) or circulating information about activities outside organizational subsystems (Friedkin 1982), are they also effective in facilitating the adoption of risky behavior or a costly innovation? The strength of weak ties, for instance, is not adequate for the diffusion of complex contagions which are costly and risky to adopt (Centola and Macy 2007). Complex

contagion are different than simple contagion like job information and disease in that they are more risky, costly, and having tendency to be controversial such as adopting new fashion, unproven technology and becoming avante garde in a social movement (Centola and Macy 2007). The structural weakness of the weak ties which are socially distant social actors implies a weak relationship breeding a low level of trust and a decreased ability to influence the other. Thus, the diffusion of complex contagions requires strong ties which can provide confirmation and support (Centola and Macy 2007). A recent study (Small 2013), however, suggests that social actors are open to discussing important matters to their weak ties provided that the latter are knowledgeable on the topics they are concerned about and they are available when needed.

In applying social network theory to the spread of Christianity, Czachesz (2011) argues that ancient Christianity spread through weak ties since Apostle Paul was moving tirelessly between early Christian communities located in Greece and Asia Minor (present day Turkey) and consequently was not able to form and maintain any strong ties with the members of these communities. Czachesz bases his evidence on the epistles written by Paul and other apostles and the New Testament which together emphasize the itinerant life style of these early Christian missionaries who are expected to form only weak ties because of their behavior. Czaches (2011) acknowledges that it is difficult to judge the reliability of these texts with regards to the extent to which they describe the actual practice of Jesus and his followers. However, he suggests it is logical to conclude that there were many weak ties in social networks of the early Christians since the teachings of Christianity promoted an itinerant lifestyle. Recent work on Paul's social network and the diffusion of Christianity (Duling 2013), however, points out the importance of strong ties in diffusion of religion

since adopting risky behavior such as converting to a new religion necessitates reinforcement from intimate relations. Based on evidence from secondary sources, Duling (2013) argues that characterizing Paul as an homeless itinerant person like Jesus is limited since he was an urban settler and community organizer supporting himself with hard labor. Dulling (2013) further claims that the meeting places such as the “craftworker house church” where Paul and his followers could have met suggest that these environments were multi-stratified in which one would expect clustering of different social strata. Thus, it was possible the members of the same social strata developed strong ties which could have facilitated the diffusion of Christianity.

With regards to strong and weak ties, my data indicate there is a stark difference between the strength of Muslim ties between my research groups. People converting to Islam in Michigan, which has a high number of Muslim, are more likely to have weak ties to other Muslims, while those converting in Kentucky, which has fewer Muslims, are more likely to have strong Muslim ties before converting to Islam. Adam, who is one of the research participants from Kentucky, had two different Muslim social ties prior to converting to Islam as it is shown in the figure below (see Figure 4.4). One of these ties is to Tony, who is also a convert to Islam, and the other one is to Azrin, who is a born Muslim. Adam’s social tie to Tony is weak tie which does not influence the conversion process, whereas the social tie to Azrin is strong tie which immensely impacts Adam’s conversion process. Adam described this impact as follows:

So I guess about three years ago maybe 4, I met Azrin 4 years ago and about 3 years ago we were kinda of getting serious. We were hanging out all the time online and she wanted me just to look into Islam because you know it is important to her. I had been, I suppose I'd say I had been looking for, you know, some religion to fill my life and so I agreed to look into Islam. I never had before and so I got a translational

Qur'an and I read that. That really interested me. It is a beautiful book and that really interested me. So I continued doing research just reading online about what it is like to be a Muslim. That continued until about a year ago and I visited the Mosque just here across the street. Met some guys there and decided I would revert (Personal interview, July 16, 2013).

Adam's social tie to Azrin is a strong tie because it meets the criteria of spending a lot of time and high frequency of interaction (Granovetter 1973). Adam reported that he spent a lot of time talking to Azrin online and that they had known each other for about four years. His interest in Islam had started as a result of suggestion from his strong tie.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.4 about here\*\*\*\*\*

However, having a strong tie to another Muslim was not sufficient in itself for his conversion process since he acknowledges that he was searching for a religion to fulfill him. This was a pre-conversion condition classifying him as a searcher who is open to a possibility of converting to Islam. The next step, which emerges as a long process lasting about three years, is when Adam read the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an, and did research before making up his mind to convert. While having a strong Muslim tie influenced Adam's conversion to Islam, having a social tie to Tony which is a weak tie to another Muslim did not affect his conversion. When I asked Adam if knowing Tony who was his friend since his high school year had any effect on his conversion to Islam, he said the following:

Like with him, we went to high school together and we kind of lost touch because I moved out of Kentucky and he stayed here. When I moved back, he had already converted. So he was already a Muslim and we never became too close again but we hung out now and then. But we didn't really talk about Islam at all. He's really into health, like healthy eating and just being healthy in general. He was always talking to me about like improving my lifestyle but he never really pushed anything on me (Personal interview, July 16, 2013).

Adam's social tie Tony falls better into a weak type typology, although this tie dates back to their high school years. His story does not reveal the frequency of interaction among the two of them; thus, it is hard to categorize this tie as a strong tie. Although Tony is a potential bridge (Granovetter 1973) to a Muslim community for Adam, evidence shows that he is not utilizing that bridge. Therefore, the conversion in Kentucky seems to occur through strong ties.

In Michigan, however, if a convert develops a Muslim tie this tie always tends to be a weak tie. Henry, for instance, who had converted to Islam in Michigan, had developed a weak tie to a Muslim upon his visit to a local mosque. Henry's conversion to Islam is related to his weak tie to another Muslim, a tie formed when he decided to go to the local mosque to recruit more people to his activist group dedicated to Palestinian cause. When I asked him why he did go to the local mosque, he replied:

Because it had a lot of Palestinians, and every Muslim should be concerned about Palestine. I didn't really know that as much then, and then I became friends with Hamid- because he was from Gaza. And there were other friends too, the anti-war movement, the war against Iraq- that was something that I was very much involved in. And so I would be at the Masjid a couple times a month and I started to come early to see the prayer services and I got to know a lot of people, particularly Hamid and Adil. So one day, I was talking to Hamid in his office, and I told him that I was feeling alone, because I no longer felt at home in the Church. And I told him, "I know and care for more people in the Masjid - (and have a closer connection, I guess that was another thing) than any of the churches in town". And I said, impulsively, "do you think I could become Muslim?" And I had asked earlier, kind of kidding around, but Muslim friends of I would tell me "No, do not become Muslim; you need to remain Christian so you can help the Christians become more Christian." But I needed community and I missed the Church community he smiled and he said 'yes' (Personal Interview, August 15, 2013).

It is seen from the Figure 4.5 and the above dialogue Henry's social ties to Hamid and Adil are weak ties since they function as a bridge to the Muslim community in Detroit Metropolitan area of Michigan where Henry resides. As it is shown in Figure 4.5, Hamid

and Adil are not well connected to the rest of Henry's social network. His network constitutes a well-connected clique which is his pro-Palestinian activist group, but his weak Muslim ties are not well connected to this subgroup. This subgroup fits better into the criteria of strong ties because of the high level of connection among them.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.5 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Similar to Henry, Jackson, whose network I present above had two weak Muslim ties before converting to Islam. In his conversion story, Jackson mentioned that he knew other Muslims who are not part of his personal network. The two ties, Malik and Isam, are his dominant weak ties because they are part of his egocentric social network and they are people from his work. It is noticeable that both of them are not connected to each other even though they are both Muslim ties. Jackson's conversion story revealed more information about the structure of his network. When I asked him how Malik and Isam reacted to his conversion he replied:

Very happy. They gave me more books and CDs. You know, both of them are Muslims. Malik is Shia and Isam is Suni, they both have their input and things like that. And they constantly bombard me with information.

Şakin: How does that affect you that one is Sunni and one is Shia?

It doesn't affect me in the least bit. I got more information from Malik who is Shia. And he gave me one book, what first really sparked my interest, (I read the whole book) by Imam Chirrii, I can't think of the name of the book. I think it is about Islam. And when I read that, it really broke it down, the difference between Islam and Christianity and Judaism things like that what they believe. And the fact that one is Sunni has no bearing on me. It does not affect me in the least way, I just focus on the religious part; I don't get into that part.

Jackson's conversion case deserves further attention because of its uniqueness of involving both recessive and dominant weak Muslim ties. As he mentioned in the previous quote he learned about Islam from his recessive weak ties which he described as Muslim



acquaintances from all over the world without providing any further information about them. His dominant weak ties, on the other hand, are Malik and Isam who are part of his egocentric network but they are neither connected to each nor to the rest of his network rendering them dominant weak ties. Since one of the ties is a Shia and the other is Sunni, one would expect Jackson to experience constrain since he becomes a member of a conflict prone triad. But he assumes the role of neutrality and avoids being caught up in a possible conflict by adopting an instrumental rational action of learning about the religion from them.

As the evidence I present shows, conversion to Islam tends to occur through weak ties in Michigan, while it occurs through strong ties in Kentucky. In other words, Islam tends to spread through weak ties where there are more Muslims, whereas it spreads through strong ties where there are less Muslims. This is a surprising finding since it is natural to expect that a potential convert to Islam from Michigan, which has a long established Muslim community, would develop, at least, some sort of a strong tie to other Muslims, but those residing in Kentucky, which does not have such a community, would have weak ties to other Muslims.

The results of this research show that the social distance between the converts from Michigan and the adherents of Islam is greater than that of converts from Kentucky and other Muslims. Why then do people living in Michigan adopt a risky behavior which is converting to Islam through weak ties, while those living in Kentucky adopt it through strong ties? I argue that the answer to this question is two layered. First, the status of a subgroup or a community in a society is detrimental in the kinds of social ties people form to this community. Although there is a long established large Muslim community in

Michigan, it is being avoided by the members of the mainstream society because of the perception about it. As I have shown elsewhere, the Muslim community is the ultimate other to which one keeps a great social distance. All ties that are formed to such a community are more likely to be weak ties and those who convert to the religion of this community are likely to convert through these weak ties. On the other hand, when such a community is absent or less visible, then a person is likely to convert through strong ties. Second, the availability of ties connecting the members of a mainstream society to the members of a subgroup in that society influences the process of adoption. Since there are less Muslims living in Kentucky and there is not as big of a Muslim community real or imagined, developing social ties to Muslims has low probability and adopting Islam which is a risky behavior will require more trust and effort which can be gained only from an association with a strong tie. This explains why people who convert to Islam in Kentucky tend to convert through marriage ties or close friend ties. It cannot be a coincidence that all social ties to Muslims in Michigan tend to be weak ties, while those in Kentucky tend to be strong ties. I argue that members of a majority group are less likely to form opinions about members of a minority group if they do not interact frequently and thus they are less likely to keep a greater social distance from them. This explains why the members of a majority group develop weak ties to members of minority groups when their community is present and they develop strong ties when that community is absent. What happens if an individual has a social tie to a convert to Islam? Does Islam also diffuse through ties to other converts or does it only diffuse through born Muslims?

**Hypothesis 1b:** If a person has social ties to other converts, he/she will be more likely to convert to Islam.

The data of this research did not support this hypothesis. There were only two converts in the research group who had social ties to other convert Muslims. Adam, who is in the Kentucky group, and Fred, who is in the Michigan group, had ties to other converts, but these ties did not influence their conversion. In the control group at least four respondents had weak ties to other converts to Islam. Despite this connection to convert Muslims, none of them converted to Islam nor did they intend to do so. Thus, I failed to reject this hypothesis which means that knowing other converts does not influence conversion process.

**Hypothesis 1c:** The more conversion diffuses the way innovations are adopted, which means if one's alters adopt Islam, the slower the conversion process will be.

Although Michigan has a higher and more dense Muslim population than Kentucky, people who converted to Islam in the former did not have more significant numbers of Muslim ties in their ego-social network than those converting in latter. Both groups on average had less than one Muslim friend in their prior to conversion social network. Nevertheless, an emergent theory indicates that the density of one's personal network has a bearing on the likelihood of conversion. In the following section, demonstrate the relationship between network density and conversion process.

### **Density of Network**

Network size is considered to be a good measurement of social integration (Marsden 1987). The research group in this study tends to have smaller degree of social networks compared to the control group. It is hard to compare these egocentric network properties to a nationally representative sample since there are no studies at the national level that let the boundaries of ego network float. The studies using the General Social

Survey of 2004 discovered; however, that the average size of discussion networks of Americans has decreased from 2.94 to 2.08. This means that American people have fewer friends with whom they discuss important matters. Nevertheless, this is not a good benchmark to gauge the size of egocentric social networks which is composed of people with whom ego discusses important matters as well as those individuals who are not part of discussing important matters. Despite this drawback, evidence suggests that ego centric networks based on strong ties tend to be small. The size of the ego centric social networks of some of the converts I interviewed are smaller than this average. About 5 people (17%) from the convert group have a network of size three or smaller, while there were no people in the control group who had a network size this small. The average network degree for the research group is about 6.6, while for the control group it is about 11.5 individuals (see Table 4.3).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

This indicates that those people who are connected to fewer individuals are more likely to convert to Islam. There are studies conducted in health indicating that social integration can result in positive effects for individual by decreasing the risk of mortality (Seeman 1996). Similarly, by converting to a religion, people are increasing their integration with the wider society which may result in positive effects. This is evident from the fact the average network size for the convert group increases from 6.6 to 7.7 after they convert to Islam. Although this is not a huge increase, it is still important as it suggests becoming a member of a religion is a way for social actors to increase their integration to a society. What explains this small increase in the size of the egocentric networks of the converts is that that converts for the most part are rejected by their alters because they convert to the

religion of the other, thereby costing them the churning of their ties. I cover in detail the change in the egocentric network of the converts from the time before conversion to the time after conversion in the following chapter. Having discussed the relationship between the network properties and conversion to Islam, I now turn to a discussion of the processes of conversion to Islam to build a comprehensive conversion model in light of existing conversion paradigms.

## **MODELS OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM**

### **Active Versus Passive Model**

As I have shown above, the structure of the social networks of an individual has strong bearings on their conversion to Islam. While Islam diffuses through weak ties in Michigan, it tends to spread through strong ties in Kentucky. Although social ties to other Muslims are important in the explanation of conversion to Islam, they are not sufficient in themselves to account for why people convert to Islam. The majority of converts (67 percent) and the control group (70 percent) did not have any Muslim social ties in their ego centric social network (see Table 4.4).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.4 about here\*\*\*\*\*

This implies two separate but related facts: (1) numbers of Muslims are scarce in the United States and this is why a majority of people in the research and control group do not know any other Muslims; (2) there are other mechanisms concomitant with network theory that explain why people convert to Islam. In the following section, I provide a detailed analysis of a model of conversion to Islam.

Previous conversion paradigms on conversion can be crudely classified into passive and active models. The former tends to treat conversion as an adolescent phenomena (Starbuck 1901) which tends to occur if a person is going through emotional turmoil, drug abuse, and other pathological behaviors (Gillespie 1979, Lofland 1966, Stark and Bainbridge 1980). This model perceives the convert as a passive actor who has been recruited to a cult or religious group as a result of deception, manipulation and brainwashing (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980). What is not discussed in the literature review concerning the passive paradigm is that most of the conversion analyses are drawn based on conversion to marginal cults and religious sects. Often times, these cults and sects operate and recruit their members in surreptitious ways since they are, for the most part, alienated from the mainstream society. Although Islam is the second largest religion coming from the line of monotheistic Abrahamic religions, it still gets a lot of negative publication in the west as a result of conflicts in the Middle East and other Muslim geographies. Most importantly, it is associated with violence in the west because of the horrific events of September 11. Thus, converting to Islam must entail a lot of effort and convincing rather than manipulation and brainwashing.

In this research, there was not enough evidence supporting the passive paradigm. There were three similar sudden conversion cases in which the convert did not study Islam extensively by reading the Qur'an or other materials such as books and online materials before making their decision to convert to Islam. Anne, who is a convert to Islam from Michigan, told me the following when I asked her to relate her story of how she became Muslim:

I would say it started about two years ago. My mom was a yoga instructor and she told me I should take the yoga training. And so I took the training and during this, you do a lot of yoga which is a lot of meditation. And through all of this meditation, I started to feel God's presence and noticed his presence in the room. And I was also doing a lot of Reiki, and in Reiki it is like making Dawah.<sup>27</sup> And I kind of felt like it was God helping me with this, and in the beginning before you do Reiki, you ask the healing angels and Gods to come down. I would ask God to help me with his healing. And every time I would say that, I would feel stronger and stronger because of this feeling. And I was like my words are actually creating these feelings. He is listening to me. And then one day before I went to bed, I decided to pray. And I said, 'Oh god will you please help me, I don't know what direction to go in life.' And that night I had a dream about me going to California, and although I am not planning on going to California, that was the exact dream I needed. And I woke up that morning, and I was, like, 'he has answered my prayer' he has sent me guidance and I was in shock. And I didn't have any religion growing up, and so that was really my first experience with God. Well, I believed these people are probably prophets, I mean that people talk about (Personal Interview, August 21, 2013).

This conversion case is different than the overwhelming majority of conversion cases in this research because in this model the convert is not involved in actively learning about Islam before deciding to become a Muslim. Different than other converts to Islam, Anne did not classify herself as a believer in God. From looking at this story, it is logical to argue Anne's conversion is a dramatic event without any rational elements (Richardson 1985, Snow and Machalek 1984). This experience in itself was not enough for Anne to convert to Islam. She did not immediately converted to Islam after this significant experience which she says occurred about two years ago.<sup>28</sup> The long duration between the time she had this dream and her actual conversion implies that she must have done some active searching and thinking about Islam before making her final decision. This is quite plausible as more

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<sup>27</sup> The word Dawah is an Arabic word people use to refer to proselytization. It basically means to invite someone to something.

<sup>28</sup> When I interviewed Anne in August 2013, she reported that she had converted to Islam about six months before our meeting. This roughly corresponds to a year and a half after her enchanting experiences at this yoga session and her dream.

evidence surfaced when Anne further explained her path to becoming a Muslim. The excerpt below shows other crucial elements in her conversion.

Şakin: Like which people?

Anne: Like Muslims, and Christians, and Buddhists. I was, like, these people probably are prophets. I was able to trust someone's judgment enough to know if they were prophets. But, they were; all tainted mankind, and so that is why I never really picked a religion, I believed in all religions. Even though I knew nothing about Islam, I still knew that Muhammad was a prophet and I feel like the Qur'an probably doesn't say exactly what he taught and stuff. And then after that, I watched the *Life of Pi* (movie) and he believed in many religions. And in that movie, he was Christian, Muslim and Hindu. And I was like, I feel like I'm Muslim too. And so I started to say, "I'm Christian, I am Muslim" And I believed in past lives, and loved how Muslim women dressed. And then I was like, I think I was probably Muslim in a past life (Personal Interview, August 21, 2013).

Although Anne's conversion resembles the passive paradigm on the surface because of the elements of heightened emotions and dramatic acts (Kox, Meeus and Hart 1991, Ullman 1989), her conversion still contains strong elements making up the active paradigms. After watching the film she makes analytical comparisons among three different religions which classifies her as a volitional actor (Richardson 1985) making a conscious choice of picking Islam despite the fact this selection is prone to generate the most negative reaction from her alters. It is puzzling that Anne did not end up converting to Hinduism, but Islam. The reasons behind her choice of Islam are present in her story especially her fascination with Islamic women dress. Moreover, there are other factors which are nascent in these two excerpts, but which became more visible after analyzing her account of conversion in its entirety. First, as she learned more about Islam, she realizes that her belief systems, especially her understanding of the prophets and their roles of preaching religions, are aligned (Heirich 1977) with Islamic belief system regarding the interpretation of prophethood. Second, the reason for her choice of Islam over Hinduism is the fact that



Islam is more of a dominant choice presenting itself to her in the religious market (Gooren 2006) to which she found her way through a recessive weak Muslim tie.

But then I asked a friend who was Muslim who was in one of my classes. And I asked her, ‘can I go to the Mosque with you?’ And she brought me to the Mosque and I asked her a few questions, and she was like ‘we believe in all the prophets’. I didn’t know I was excluding some. And I found out that Muhammad was actually revealed the Qur’an and unchanged. And those two facts brought me to believe in Islam. I was very impulsive, I was, like, I know this feels right; I am just going to do it. I had never been religious before. And I didn’t feel like it was that big of a change at first and I felt like I could still live my same life and be a Muslim at first. I just saw it as a commitment. Like I told Kevin (her boyfriend at the time), I am going to be Muslim, and he was okay with it. He thought it wouldn’t change me at all, but it did (Personal Interview, August 21, 2013).

The alter that Anne mentions (a Muslim friend who is her classmate) in the above statements is not part of her egocentric network and it is a *recessive* weak tie because it is switched on when Anne becomes interested in Islam and functions as a bridge (Granovetter 1973) between her and the Muslim community in the Ann Arbor, Michigan area. After taking her to the mosque, this tie entirely drops out from her story without ever appearing again. Although Anne converts to Islam, the strength of this tie does not change as one would expect that being a co-religionist would shorten the social distance between two individuals. This reaffirms the fact that those converting to Islam in Michigan tend to convert through weak Muslim ties even if their conversion is more akin to the passive paradigm. Despite the presence of the elements of passive paradigm, it is observable that there is also evidence suggesting that this conversion case is an integration of both the passive and active paradigms (Lofland and Skonovd 1981, Long and Hadden 1983). There are “push factors” (Jindra 2011) such as her experiences with the *Life of Pi* she had seen and “pull factors” (Jindra 2011) such as her fascination with how Muslim women dress

inducing her conversion to Islam indicating that her conversion model harbors elements of both paradigms. The conversion to Islam process does not follow along the lines indicated in this story where the convert makes an impulsive decision once they are convinced that Islamic belief system matches their own frame of references. Instead, the social network data and the comparison between the accounts of the research group and the control group indicate that conversion to Islam fits better to the active paradigm. In addition, there was also strong evidence suggesting that some conversion cases fits best to the religious market model since globalization processes and its byproduct of pluralist society presents Islam as one of the choices in the western societies from which individuals can choose. In the following section, I present the research findings indicating that conversion to Islam can best be characterized as a mix of active paradigm and religious market model.

### **Conversion to Islam Model**

The model of conversion to Islam can best be characterized as a combination of the active paradigm and religious market model. The conversion process tends to be long involving much reflection, reading, (McGinty 2006, Norris 2003, Roald 2001) watching youtube videos on Islam and/or comparison between Christianity and Islam, and reading the Qur'an. During this process, the individuals who are going through conversion usually do not disclose their endeavor to their social ties keeping it personal because of fear of backlash, especially from the family members. The results of this research support other Islamic conversion models which depict a typical convert to Islam as a free-willed rational social actor (Van Nieuwkerk 2008) who compares her pre-existing belief system of what is the truth to Islamic belief system (Norris 2003). In tandem with other research (Roald 2001), conversion to Islam tends to proceed in successive stages. Nevertheless, they do not

correspond with Roald's (2001) "falling in love," "disappointment," and "maturity," stages explained in the introduction chapter. Roald's stages spanning pre-conversion and post-conversion period are limited in explaining how conversion to Islam occurs since they focus on the experiences of Scandinavian converts with exclusive emphasis on how they feel when they first convert and how this feeling develops as their conversion unravels. Since Roald is not distinguishing the pre-conversion process from post-conversion process, her stages come across as a single process constructed to explaining conversion, while in reality they are depictions of what converts to Islam experience as they go under this watershed change. There is a need to make a clear demarcation between the processes prior to conversion experience and post-conversion experience. In the following section I introduce a comprehensive model exclusively focused on how conversion to Islam occurs, while in the next chapter I cover the change in the life of the converts after their conversion by focusing on the change in the egocentric network of converts to Islam.

**Hypothesis 2:** Conversion to Islam is more likely occur as a slow process rather than being an abrupt.

The results of this study show that conversion to Islam tends to occur in four successive stages. In the following section I introduce these stages successively providing qualitative data from personal interviews with 30 research participants.

#### *Stage 1: Break with Christianity*

Break with Christianity is the most important stage in conversion to Islam. Without this stage conversion to Islam is less likely to occur. Thus, I provide a detailed analysis of it because of its central importance in the conversion model. The first stage initiates when

people start to break away from their Christian church or when they become disillusioned with Christian theology of the Trinity. This illusion itself is two layered: it is both intellectual and social. The intellectual part of this model has to do with what I call the *Jesus Paradox*, which means that the potential convert at one point in her life no longer believes in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity explaining the nature of Jesus. Sometimes, converts also may express disagreement with the role of Jesus as an interceptor between the believer and God. If a person thinks there should not be anybody between them and what they regard as divine, they are more likely to experience disenchantment with the idea that Jesus is the vehicle through which one reaches the Divine.

While the research group brought up their disenchantment with Christianity in different forms, they did not always pronounce their disenchantment with Christianity in the form of disillusionment with the Trinity doctrine. Owen, who is a research participant in the Michigan group, expressed his disillusionment as hypocrisy in his church community. When I asked him to explain this further he said the following:

Owen: Now also, as a Christian studying the Bible, I had problems with once I was a Christian... I didn't feel like the way people practiced in our community was close to what was actually being taught in the Bible by the prophets and in the Old Testament and by Jesus and all that. I felt like people were sort of just ignoring all the social aspects and just wanted to talk about nice fluffy stories that don't amount to very much. And if it got to anything difficult, like 'don't do this', then they wouldn't mention it in the church usually like stuff about premarital relations, or all kinds of excessive things or punishments, anything that was a difficult issue they wouldn't address it in the church. For example, my father is Anglican, and Anglicans are kind of known for this; they are so moderate that they don't believe in God, but they go to the church because it's a nice thing to do on Sunday (Personal Interview, August 13, 2014).

Owen's disenchantment occurs more at the social level drifting him away from his religious community. He is critical of his religious community since he thinks it does not address

social issues which may involve touchy issues such as premarital sex which is a topic recurring in other conversion stories. In a sense he thinks there is a mismatch between what is the profane and what is the sacred. This disparity which he expresses as hypocrisy drives him from his church community. In other words, the church community to which Owen belongs, deviates from what he may be formulating as an ideal typical church community thereby leading him believe that there is a discrepancy between the sacred canopy of the church and what is practiced by the members. Owen's disillusionment with his prior to conversion belief system is not an isolated act. About 70 percent of those who converted to Islam mentioned in their conversion stories some form of disenchantment with their Christian belief system. To be precise, about 46.6 percent of converts reported that they grew disillusioned with the idea that Jesus was the son of God. In comparison, only about 10 percent of people in the control group experienced such disenchantment with Christianity, but none of them mentioned any facts indicating disillusion with the trinity doctrine (see Table 4.5).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.5 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The first stage of conversion to Islam, which I formulate as a disenchantment or disillusionment with Christianity, is an essential step in conversion since it functions almost as a prerequisite for conversion to Islam. This condition of growing disenchanted with the Christian belief system was also a dominant factor in the conversion of Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916), whom I covered in the historical context chapter. To reiterate, Webb is the first known Caucasian American convert to Islam, who describes his disenchantment with Christianity in the following manner:

When I reached the age of twenty, and became, practically, my own master, I was so weary of the restraint and the dullness of the church that I wandered away from it and never returned to it....I wanted a reasonable foundation for everything and I found that neither laymen nor clergy could give me a rational explanation of their faith; that when I asked them about God and the trinity, and life and death, they told me that such things were mysteries, or were beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals (Webb 2006:20).

In this passage it is seen that Webb drifted from his church because he no longer felt enchanted with the church which he describes as a dull place. In order to legitimize his break, he writes that the clergy could not provide rational explanations of the reality. He mentions the trinity as one of the topics which is not rationally explained by the clergy. He elaborates further how he felt about the trinity. Webb devoted a rather short chapter to his conversion story because by writing a book on Islam he aims to introduce Islam to America and defend it against Western misconceptions. I argue that this is one of the main reasons why he does not discuss his conversion experience in detail. Once Webb and other potential converts grow disenchanted with the Christianity in general and the trinity doctrine in particular, they do not always look for a religious system, namely Islam, which has an alternative view on the nature of Jesus. Islam presents itself as an alternative system to Christianity since it has become one of the choices in the religious market (Finke and Stark 1988, Luckmann 1999) coming into being as a result of globalization processes. A potential convert sometimes will come across this choice through social ties as mentioned above or sometimes they will stumble upon it accidentally. Callie, for example, is one of the converts from Michigan, who felt disillusionment with the trinity doctrine and learned about Islam while playing an online game on Facebook. She told about her first experience with Islam and her disillusionment with Christianity in the following manner when she imparted her story of conversion:

Callie: So it was actually two to three years before I took shahada.<sup>29</sup> I was so stupid and ignorant about Islam. I had met other Muslims, but my first real conversation with another Muslim was on Facebook. There was this game, called the Dot game, and you basically play the game with other people all over the world. It is super cool; I loved playing it because you could talk to people in Australia, a couple of people in Europe whatever. And so I met, I was playing this game with this one guy, and we were just talking, and somehow it came up that he was a Muslim. He had made the comment that you were not going to play with me because I am a Muslim and you were an American because he was in Pakistan at the time. I was like, what difference does that make? I don't care; I even don't know what that means. We would just continue over time play games, I would slowly start asking him questions about Islam. I was so stupid, I didn't even realize that Muslims still believe in Jesus and I didn't know that there is a connection with Abraham. And so I just slowly started asking him questions. Certain things at the time made perfect sense to me.

Şakin: Like what?

Callie: One of the things that I always had problems with in the Catholic Church was that you prayed to saints or you would pray to Jesus instead of just praying to God. That was my biggest thing that Muslims praying directly to God, as opposed to asking for help from other people. You don't ask from Virgin Mary whatever. That was the biggest thing that I completely agreed with. There were other small things I can't remember offhand. So I asked him a lot of questions; eventually...probably we would talk off and on for about 6 months. Then things got, we grew apart; we just got busy whatever (Personal Interview, September 2, 2013).

Disenchantment with the Christianity which I formulate as a first stage in the conversion to Islam is manifest in Callie's conversion story explains her disagreement with the role of the saints and Jesus in the Catholic Church. This disagreement is presented as the main reason for her break from her prior belief system. From this story, it is apparent that Callie comes upon Islam unexpectedly while playing an online game. Callie's encounter with Islam reinforces the argument above that Islam becomes available as one of the choices in the pluralistic religious market characteristic of modern societies as a result of advances in

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<sup>29</sup> Shahada is an Arabic word which is translated into English as a testimony. When a person decides to become a Muslim she has to declare there is no god but one God and the prophet Muhammad is his messenger. This is called the testimony to faith.

communication means in general and advances in social media in particular. Why does Callie develop an interest in Islam despite her acknowledgement of a lack of knowledge about Islam? I argue that Islam is attractive to her because it provides an alternative explanation about her disillusionment with the role of Jesus and saints in her prior belief system. By presenting an alternative view about the nature of Jesus, Islam, which is seemingly a foreign religion, becomes a familiar religion. This familiarity is sustained through discussions about Jesus, Abraham, and other concepts with which the convert is familiar since this kind of discussion occupy a big space in the Christian belief system.

Disillusionment with Christianity, which occurs in the story of approximately 70 percent of the converts to Islam, is not limited to the experiences of Callie. This disillusionment is also exemplified in the story of the Julie who is a convert to Islam from Michigan. When I asked Julie to tell her story of conversion, she recounted the following:

The Trinity did not make sense to me, all the gods and one god; that did not make sense to me. And I had an incident when I was five years old, I hit my dresser and my two front teeth went through my dresser. And it really hurt and I didn't go to the hospital. And I prayed all night to God, and it was one of those things, and when I woke up I felt much better. And I thought, 'why do you have to pray to Mary, Jesus, and all of these others, when I can just talk to God?' Why does Jesus have to be between me and God? And when I taught bible school, I only taught 3 year olds, because I wanted to tell them about what God created, not Jesus (Personal Interview, August 31, 2013).

As the story of Julie indicates when people break away from Christianity at the intellectual level which occurs in the form of not believing in the Trinity they become a population at risk meaning that they are more likely to convert to Islam. This first stage in the conversion to Islam is one of the most important stages for its sheer effect of rendering social actor disposed to conversion. Although this stage is the first link in the chain reaction to



conversion, it may also result in total rejection of all religious belief systems. For instance, more than half of people in the control group (53.3 percent) of this study raised their disenchantment with religious belief systems in the form of atheism or total rejection of organized religion. About 90 percent of the people in the research group reported they believed in God or some divine power despite their disenchantment with the Christian belief system (see Table 4.6).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 4.6 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Severing intellectual ties with Christianity and still believing in the oneness of God go hand in hand in constituting the first stage of conversion to Islam. As it is indicated in the conversion story of Julie, losing belief in the Trinity does not mean rejecting God altogether. Although Julie has disenchantment with the Trinity doctrine, she still believes in God because she says that she prayed to him during the entire night. Once this first stage of breakaway with the Christian belief system takes place a potential convert is likely to resort to Islam since it provides an alternative formulation to what I call the Jesus Paradox. This is also exemplified in the conversion experience of MG who is another convert empathizing this transition:

MG: In a nutshell, I was raised Christian and went to church. In my teenage years, I was uncomfortable with the trinity and I just didn't 'buy it.' It just didn't seem right to me.

Şakin: Why?

MG: God being a man on earth. I just couldn't swallow it. As I started learning more about Islam, I didn't see why we need Jesus to die and come back to earth was necessary. There were aspects about Christianity that I did like praying and things. But Islam fixed the things that I was uncomfortable with essentially. I think that when I learned about Islam, I was like 'Oh there is a religion that goes along with what I believe.' So essentially for me, it was just God exist and life is test and there are consequences. There are two places; you can go to Heaven or Hell after

you pass away. I was very comfortable with the Quran being an open text and having the Bible with many different authors. And so those were the fundamental reason I converted. I did like the idea of prayer and fasting but those were kind of secondary. But ultimately it was the theology of Islam versus the beliefs of Christianity that made me convert to Islam (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

This excerpt from MG's conversion story reinforces my argument that a potential convert needs to feel an intellectual disillusionment with their prior belief to fall into the category of the population at risk. Although MG is happy with the practicing part of her religious belief system, she is distressed with the theological aspect of it. Islam becomes an alternative choice since the theological aspect of Islam matches her belief system. Also, her story reveals other elements of disillusionment which is formulated as a discomfort with the Bible having different authors versus the Qur'an being an open text. This story and other conversion stories show that experiencing an intellectual break with the Trinity doctrine is the first condition in the conversion to Islam.

On other hand, if a person has a firm belief that salvation can be achieved only through Jesus, then they are less likely to convert to Islam even if they are exposed to Islam or if they have social ties to other Muslims. Almost all of the people in the control who have social ties to other Muslims as part of their egocentric social network did not express any confusion about the Christian doctrine of Trinity. On the contrary, most of them tend to have had strong belief in the Trinity showing that even if a person is exposed to the Muslim context they are less likely to convert to Islam if they do not experience the first stage of conversion to Islam. Chris, for instance, is one of the research participants in the control group whose egocentric network heavily made up of Muslims (about 60% , see Figure 4.6) expressed strong belief in Jesus in accordance with Christian doctrine.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.6 about here\*\*\*\*\*

When I asked Chris why he did not convert to Islam, despite his many social ties to other Muslims, he reported that he has strong belief in the Trinity:

There are a lot of reasons. Probably one of them, few of many reasons is I have spent a lot of time sort of analyzing my own beliefs and trying to understand them and I spent a lot time understanding and trying to understand Islam as well and I still feel and hope my beliefs to be true or truer than that of what I have seen in Islam and I feel I have pretty good grasp of a lot of beliefs in Islam.

I believe about Jesus as portrayed through the Bible as he was a man who perfectly lived the life that God wants us to live. And that he walked and lived on the Earth as a man who did no wrong to show us that what God wants us to do with our lives is this. This is the way that He wants us to live our lives and this is how he wants to think about these situations about the interactions, so that we can be the people that God wants to be on this Earth regardless of what happens in the afterlife (Personal Interview, March 13, 2014).

The above quote reveals that Chris does not agree with how Islam classifies Jesus, who is seen as one of the prophets in the chain of prophets starting with Adam and ending with Muhammad. Chris' story shows that he has a strong belief about the nature of Jesus, who he depicts as the incarnation of God walking the Earth. His belief about Jesus is in line with Christianity indicating that he did not experience any intellectual break from Christianity. If a person does not go through this stage, they are less likely to convert to Islam. Similarly, Megan, whose ego centric social network constitutes forty five percent Muslims (see Figure 4. 7), is part of the control but she also does not intend to convert to Islam despite the fact that she has many weak ties to other Muslims.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.7 about here\*\*\*\*\*

During the semi-structured interview I had with her, she also emphasized her strong belief in Jesus as he is understood in Christianity. When I asked her why she has not converted to Islam despite the fact that she has many ties to other Muslims she replied:

Megan: Because I feel like strong about my belief, so I don't feel like that I will ever convert (to Islam). But I am always open to like talking about it, things like that. But I feel very strong in my own faith.

Şakin: What are your beliefs?

Megan: What are my beliefs? I am a Christian, so I believe that God had a son, Jesus. And whenever he was on the Earth he lived a perfect life and whenever he died he took the sins of humanity along with him, so that so that humanity won't have to suffer. The sinners are like suffer for their sins and that if we choose to follow Christ that we can Christ being Jesus that we can eternally whenever we pass away that we will go to Heaven with him (Personal Interview, March 13, 2014).

Similar to Chris, Megan emphasizes her strong belief in the Trinity doctrine by emphasizing the condition for one's salvation. For her, one can go to Heaven only if they believe in Jesus. The story of Chris and Megan fall into the category of my control group who reported they have strong beliefs in the Trinity or that Jesus is the son of God. They are less likely to convert to Islam since their stories demonstrate they do not satisfy the condition of becoming disillusioned with Christianity at the intellectual level. This is an important stage in the conversion model I develop to such an extent that even if a person is inclined to convert they are less likely to do so if they do not break from Christianity at the intellectual level. There are two people in the control group who have been considering converting to Islam for a long period of time, but they have not converted yet. Their stories prove that satisfaction of breaking away with Christian theology which is the first stage in converting to Islam is the most important step in the conversion to Islam model.

Tony, who is one of the participants in the control group, has been considering converting to Islam for about seven years, but he has not converted yet. As it can be seen from his egocentric network (see Figure 4.8), he has social ties to four Muslims.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 4.8 about here\*\*\*\*\*

When I asked Tony, who is the first person I interviewed as part of the control group, why he was thinking about becoming Muslim he said that:

I became disenfranchised [disenchanted] with Christianity; I had a bad experience with the church. People gossiping, people talking...when I went through some problems in my young twenties I was pretty much shut out from the church that I had belong to; they told their sons and daughters at my age not to hang out with me (Personal Interview, March 2, 2014).

Tony is disenchanted with Christianity, but this disenchantment is limited to a social level meaning that he no longer feels as part of the church community. For him, religion, to use Durkheimian theory is the community to which he does not feel connected. This is also important in conversion, but it is not a sufficient condition which needs to be supplemented with an intellectual disenchantment to start a chain reaction to conversion. The follow up conversation with Tony further revealed why he broke away with his church. When I asked him why the church community shut him out he replied:

Tony: Because I was into some troubles. I did some bad things, just having problems with drugs. It was difficult. It was after I came back from Afghanistan.

Tony drifted from his church community as a result of a combination of his personal struggles and his exclusion from his church. The break from his church community needs to be paralleled with intellectual disillusionment with the Trinity doctrine in order for his conversion to occur. The fact that Tony was deployed in Afghanistan brought him into contact with the Muslim context which will make Islam as one of the options in the religious market from which he can choose provided he breaks away from Christianity at the social and intellectual level. I asked Tony if there were other people in his church suffering from drug abuse and similar problems to investigate the extent to which he could have garnered support from his church community. The following dialogue shows that

drug abuse was not a common phenomenon in his church, but it also reveals that Tony not only grew disenchanted with the Church, but also started to doubt the existence of God.

Şakin: Do you think there were other people may be into drugs or similar problems at the church?

Tony: No. Well, sometimes I bought my seed off pastor's son; he was selling weed. And I hear some gossip about me and also I see things when I was in Afghanistan like God does not exist because if God exist he will not allow this to happen; these terrible things.

Şakin: What kind of terrible things?

Tony: Just things that shouldn't happen. I see children with no parents, just terrible terrible things (From the tone of his voice it seems like he does not want to elaborate on the nature of what he describes as "terrible things"). Things that are not human. And it happens, so if it happens can there be God? That's what I was thinking and one religion I had grown up with was another world. I felt my problems so trivial, that they don't want me to corrupt and in the story in the Bible, Jesus hung out with those who needed help the most. He did not hang out with the holiest people. And they are not adopting that message. I was obviously somebody, you know..so.. For couple of years, I just...no religion. I still go to different church I tried to go back. I was raised as Catholic, so I go to the Catholic; I did not feel it there any more I did not feel God, I did not feel the community; you know people were not I was doing better in my life I stopped the drugs, I was back to the school I was doing better I was becoming a better adult you know I cleaned up. I did not just feel God in the Christian church anymore. It didn't touch me. I do not remember the moment I started looking into Islam, but I remember one night I was online and I just started reading stuff about Islam like hadiths,<sup>30</sup> some of the stories, some of the things.

Şakin: Why do you think you started to look?

Tony: I do not remember what it was about?

Şakin: Did you know any of these people in your social network?

Tony: No. Before I was in school with some Muslims, I was in school with a lot of ethnicities; with Chinese, Buddhists, Latinos, and Philipinos. This was all before I moved to Kentucky (He moved to Kentucky in 2007), And I started to go to the Limestone mosque (Personal Interview, March 2, 2014).

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<sup>30</sup> Hadith is an Arabic word describing the prophetic traditions of the prophet Muhammad. Hadiths are oral reports describing Muhammad's teachings, deeds, and sayings.

The research participants who endure similar strains with the church community also experience the same strain at the intellectual level which is translated into the disbelief that Jesus is the son of God. Tony's story is devoid of intellectual disillusionment element suggesting that he does not have different a understanding of the Trinity doctrine than that of the Christian belief system. This is supported by evidence in his story where says he tried to go back to his church. He also tried other churches to solve his disenchantment within his prior church. However, instead of becoming re-enchanted and more integrated into his church, he started to lose his belief in God. The pre-conversion conditions leading to Islam are not fully satisfied in his case. Contrary to his experience, an overwhelming majority of converts to Islam tend to believe in the existence of God even after they break away from Christianity which means that they formulate their own belief system with regards to divinity. In order to stress the importance of disenchantment with Christian belief system at an intellectual level in inducing conversion to Islam, I bring the case of a control group member, who has a strong tie to another Muslim, into a sharp focus. Alisha has been cohabitating with a Muslim man whom she was going to marry, but she has not converted to Islam. When I asked her why she did not convert to Islam despite her strong tie to another Muslim she replied:

I considered that I think if we were in New Jersey (she is from New Jersey) and if we were having more of a network, I probably would have converted already. I really believe that we don't have many people here, so it is just us two. When I met him I was almost 30 years old and I had been brought up Catholic, although I wasn't practicing. I kind of developed my relationship with God. I am more spiritual than religious. I really have deep faith in God, but I don't like how religion separates people off and you know I have a problem with that. Although more than likely it is because of his faith I fell in love with him and because he is so humble and tries to be a good man. I mean I consider it; I just feel like it is... Now, that we have children and of course we did everything so backward, so it is not traditional by any means. It is kind of we are creating our own... Obviously religion says you have to do things in certain way we are not doing. He is not strict. We are not strict you

know we had children before marriage for either faith you know, being Catholic, you are not supposed to do that. We are getting married in June and we are discussing getting my shahada<sup>31</sup> (Personal Interview, March 13, 2014).

Alisha has been with a Muslim man with whom she even has kids, but she has not yet converted to Islam. Her strong tie to a Muslim is not a sufficient condition for conversion to Islam because she does not experience any disenchantment with Christianity for which she can find an answer in Islam. As a matter of fact, she keeps a certain distance from any organized religion which she articulates as having deep faith in God, but dislikes the separation between people resulting from a membership in different religions. Alisha mentions that she was raised as a Catholic, but that she had not been practicing why providing reasons for her practice. However, it can be deduced from other parts of her story that she has a fundamental problem with all kinds of religions which is probably the main reason why she is not a practicing Catholic. If a person is not practicing their Christian faith because the disagreements with the Christian theology than they are more likely to convert to Islam.

### *Stage 2: Searching out other Religions*

The second stage of conversion to Islam starts once a potential convert to Islam completely breaks from their prior belief. Breaking away for different people can occur at different ages. For some people it may start as early as in the elementary school. For others, it may occur in high school or in college. This stage is basically a time period with a variation of length stretching from six months to a couple of decades. The boundaries of the second and third stages tend cross each other. I set the boundaries of the second stage

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<sup>31</sup> Shahada is an Arabic word meaning the testimony. A person considering converting to Islam has to declare that there is one God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.



at a time when the convert makes her first contact with Islam. During this stage a potential convert may try other religions in the religious market or they may come into contact with Islam either through strong or weak Muslim ties or through other means without looking into other religious choices. For Cathy, the second stage started while she was in college. This is indicated in the following quote from my interview with her:

Cathy: I grew up having a very strong relationship with God. From a very young age, I felt God's presence in my life and felt the importance of believing in God. And I went to a Catholic school and learned all about that. I was a model Catholic; I went to Church every Sunday even if I was without my parents I did. I did extra prayers, and as I told you before, I wanted to be a nun at one point. My faith and my relationship with God meant everything to me. And then when I went to the university in my freshman year, I, for some reason, even I was continuing doing the same thing. I was even praying more and going to the church and all that more, I just felt that God had distanced himself from me, and I was really confused as to why.

Şakin: How did you reach to that conclusion?

Cathy: Like I was going to Church, I just felt like empty. Because I always felt close to God and when God pulled away I felt it. I just felt the absence and longed for that connection again and I didn't know why that was happening. What I decided to do for reasons unbeknownst to me, it had to be God's will; I had this idea that I was going to start studying other religions to confirm why I am Catholic. I think I did that because I grew up Catholic and I went to Catholic school and I knew a lot about Catholicism. I had a strong base about Catholic beliefs and I didn't really know a lot about other religions, so I figured by studying other religions, I could identify why I am not those religions and which will make me stronger for why I am Catholic. I started with other Christian religions. For example, I talked with a Lutheran pastor. I talked to my friend Sindy about Episcopalian and with another friend (can't hear the name she utters) about Hinduism and stuff like that. I can see almost instantly within a couple of minutes or an hour why I don't believe in those things for various reasons. But it really didn't help me with my faith in terms of my Catholic faith, but I was glad I could identify... OK, definitely I am not Lutheran, I am definitely not Hindu and all that. So, then my neighbor whom I talked about earlier, he had books on every religion; he heard about my quest and he is very well rounded guy. He is very open to the world and stuff, so he actually himself was very interested in world religions; he had books on almost all the religions.

Şakin: Was he a Muslim?

Cathy: No, he is an American that is self-identified as Buddhist, but not super religious in general; he was intrigued about what people around the world believed and different beliefs and that's why he had so many books. And he asked me to come over and pick any book out of the shelf, and I honest to God, I randomly picked the Qur'an because the color, my favorite color is gold, and the cover was gold and green. And I was just attracted to it and pick it up and I never in a million years that I would ever think ever that I would identify with Islam. Even though I was dating supposedly someone who was Muslim, I didn't know anything about Islam. I didn't know what it was. I didn't think I would ever convert. I was just curious of what they believe and picked up the Qur'an and I wanted to see the translation (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

The second stage is a time period more than anything else. In this case, it started while Cathy was in her freshman year in college and it lasted when she made her first contact with Islam by picking up a copy of the Qur'an from the shelf of her neighbor. From the interview data it is usually not precise when the second stage started and when it ended. Despite this ambiguity, this stage is important as it accounts for the time period which commences when a person breaks from her prior to conversion beliefs away and ends when she makes her first contact with Islam. During this stage people usually experience strain similar to Cathy, who conveys her strain as God distancing himself from her. As a result, she sets out to search for an alternative to fill this emptiness. From Cathy's detail accounts of conversion it is seen that her break had a clear starting date. During her freshman year in college, and soon after, she made her first contact with Islam because of urgent quest to find out about her religious doubts. To answer these doubts, she starts to compare her Catholic belief systems to the other beliefs systems which she enumerates as Lutheranism, Episcopalian, and Hinduism, from the religious market. However, she reports that none of these systems matched her beliefs. Thereafter she comes across another choice from the same market which is symbolized in this case as the bookshelf of her neighbor. She arbitrarily chooses Islam from this market. Although Islam is one of the choices in the religious market, selecting Islam does not have a high probability of being selected because

of the risk it involves since it is the religion of the homo sacer. This is echoed in the above quote where Cathy says that she has never thought in a million years to associate herself with Islam. Upon making a random visit to her neighbor's apartment what is seemingly impossible became possible as she picked up a copy of the Qur'an for a trivial reason. This marks the end of the second stage, while at the same time it constitutes the beginning of the third stage.

As indicated in conversion stories such as this and others, the boundaries of the second stage are not clear. For Callie, part of whose story I covered above, the second stage began when she started to have problem with the idea of praying to Jesus or other saints to reach to God, but the time period when she developed this idea was not emphasized in her story. The second stage, however, ended for her when she made her first contact with Islam which occurred in the form of developing a recessive weak Muslim friend who was an online game partner.

### *Stage 3: Contact with Islam*

The third stage in the conversion to Islam model starts when a potential convert makes their first contact with Islam. This stage is also characterized by thorough research on Islam (McGinty 2006), a long process of reflection (Norris 2003, Roald 2001) on what a convert learns about Islam and comparisons between their beliefs system, life orientation, what they think is the truth and whether the Islamic belief system is that truth they are after. Most importantly, at the heart of this stage lies the reading of the Qur'an. Unlike prior research on conversion to Islam (McGinty 2006, Roald 2001, Soutar 2010, Sultan 1999), the findings of this research indicate that an overwhelming majority of converts to Islam

(about 66.6 percent) compared to only a small fraction of the control group (about 6.6 percent) emphasized that they read the Qur'an before they started to seriously consider converting to Islam (see Table 4.5 above for this comparison). While people in the research group who reported reading the Qur'an read from the beginning of to the end, none of those in the control reading the Quran read it from the beginning to the end. Reading the Qur'an, which I formulate as a *text*, is one of the core factors in the conversion to Islam. I argue that the text is vital for the converts to make their final decision because it gives the sense of durability. The text, the Qur'an, to use the Marxian analogy is that which has not yet melted into the air. Different than other religious books, such as the Bible, it was not written by a host of different writers nor does it have different versions. In today's modern globalized world, it is one of the entities which is not liquid, but solid (Bauman 2000) meaning that it has not been revised or re-written by different authors in order to reflect their interpretations of its meaning. Most importantly, the text makes what is foreign to the convert that which is familiar as well as that which matches what the convert holds as the truth. Therefore, reading the Qur'an is one of the most important factors in the conversion process. Even if a person is exposed to a Muslim context either through strong or weak Muslim ties, they are less likely to convert if they have not read the text. For example, Alisha, who has a strong Muslim tie, has been thinking about converting to Islam for long time, but she has not converted yet. When I asked her if she read the Quran she replied:

Alisha: No, I have not.

Şakin: How much did you read? Did you read it just that one time?

Alisha: Bits and pieces. Over the years probably, and then different surahs<sup>32</sup> like that his parents would give, or things literature about women in Islam and different things like that. I have returned to school in 2010 and I really haven't read regular books from school; just here and there (Personal Interview, March 13, 2014).

Although Alisha has been dating a Muslim man (they were planning to marry about three months after I interviewed her) for a long period of time, she has not read the Qur'an. Her answer indicates that she is also not sure about what she read since she describes her reading as bits and pieces and later in the passage she gives an ambiguous answer about what passages from the Qur'an by saying that she read different surahs (chapters) whose name she does not remember. At another level, it can also be argued that she is not a big reading person which is revealed at the end of the quote where she provides information about not reading regular books. This lack of interest in reading shows that she is not experiencing a break from her own belief system at an intellectual level. Contrary to the research group (the converts), not only had she not read the Qur'an, but also she does not seem to be enchanted with it. Mostafa, who is part of the Kentucky research group, can also be described as not a big reading person similar to Alisha, but he immediately grew enchanted with the Qur'an when he started reading it as it is described in the following excerpt from my interview with him:

Mostafa: After I watched a lot of debates (he refers to debates on youtube), I focused a lot on reading the Quran. And when I first started reading it, I was hooked. I hadn't been much of a reader, it is not something that I enjoy to do. So to read the book was like, amazing.

Şakin: What captivated you most about it?

Mostafa: It was so real, you could tell it was something meant to be read. It was different than any other book that any other read or sound, like Harry Potter or something like that (Personal Interview, January 24, 2014).

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<sup>32</sup> Surah is an Arabic word referring to the chapters of the Qur'an. There are 114 surahs in the Qur'an with different lengths.

Different than Alisha, who is in the control group, Mostafa got captivated by the Qur'an, although he also identifies himself as not a big reading person. To describe his captivation, he compares the Qur'an with a popular book series, Harry Potter, which he thinks is not even comparable to the Qur'an. Why are research group participants so enchanted with Qur'an different than those of the control group? I argue that reading the Qur'an is a crucial step in the conversion process since it renders what is unfamiliar, Islam, more familiar. It provides the convert who had broken away from her prior belief system, which is usually the Christian belief system, with the alternative belief system matching the convert's own belief system. This point is illustrated in the second part of the Cathy's conversion story which I provide at length below:

Cathy: And so I went home. The very first day I was reading about Surah Baqarah,<sup>33</sup> and the very first page of the Surah Baqarah talks about hypocrites. And it basically says if you are a hypocrite and you think you are fooling God and you are fooling no one because God knows what is in your heart. And I started sobbing, because I was like oh my gosh I felt like I was a hypocrite. I felt like I go to the church every Sunday and I make all those prayers, but in my heart I didn't feel God's presence. And that made me feel like God knows how dead my heart is. And that really freaked me out. And then I got to the point of the book where Surah Maryam<sup>34</sup> and I was like vow Mary is in this book and Jesus is in this book and Mary is virgin and I think that's when it hit me that there is a connection between Islam and Christianity and honestly people can tell you that but you have to really feel it for yourself to really believe and that was kind of the turning point for me was seeing these Christian figures Jesus, Mary, Abraham, Moses, Noah in a different perspective, whereas to me, Islam was no longer foreign; it had the same people and it had the same stories. And [that] really started to change how I thought. (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

Cathy, similar to Mostafa, immediately grew enchanted with the Qur'an because she thinks that it is coincidence that the second chapter of the book, which can actually be considered

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<sup>33</sup> This is the name of the second chapter in the Qur'an. Baqarah is an Arabic word which means a cow.

<sup>34</sup> This is the name of another chapter in the Qur'an. Maryam is the Arabic name for Virgin Mary.

as the very beginning of the book since it follows a rather short first chapter, is almost provides an answer to her religious tensions. Different than the control group participants, she is very precise with names of the chapters of the Qur'an, indicating that she is making a thorough reading of the text as well as feeling enchanted with it. Despite this enchantment with the text, Cathy still wants to maintain a certain distance from Islam, which is the religion of the ultimate other. Although she thinks that Islam resonates with her quests, she is worried about this resonance since it is impossible that Islam could be the religion she is looking for. Nevertheless, as she keeps reading the Qur'an she comes to one of the chapters, Surah Maryam, which discusses the Biblical figures with which Cathy is familiar. This becomes a turning point for her since she becomes convinced that Islam is not as foreign as it is portrayed. This point marks the end of the third stage for Cathy, who decides to make a contact with Muslims for possible conversion.

In addition to providing a potential convert with familiarity through discussion of religious figures with whom the convert is familiar from their prior belief, the text also tends to convince them that it corresponds with their stock of knowledge on important existential matters. This point is illustrated in the conversion story of Peter, who is in the Kentucky research group. Peter obtained a copy of the Qur'an through his secretary whom he described as liberal Muslim married to a Christian man. He recounted his experience with reading the Quran in the following way:

Peter: Part of the problem I had with Christainty is I am not literalist, a lot of Christians take it literally, I will never believe in this. When I got the Qur'an I flipped one page read a little bit that's pretty cool then I flipped a page I came to surah 21/30. *“Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from*

*water every living thing. Will they not then believe?”*<sup>35</sup> I am still going wait a minute did I just read what I think I read the Big Bang in a religious book? I cannot believe that the Big Bang is in a religious book. It did not say the Big Bang. But I mean that’s more or less what it is talking about. Then it said we made from water every living thing. We know scientifically life began in the ocean it didn’t begin on the ground. There was not ground on the earth originally. It was all water. ....Just that one ayah<sup>36</sup> that saying hey everything was one at the beginning we ripped apart and made the heavens and earth out of it. And, you know, life began in water. The Quran confirms what we know scientifically the Bible does not. The Bible contradicts all of this: we made all in seven days we did this, like when I read in Genesis, it cracks me up and when I argue with Christians I am, like, what’s a day? What is 24 hours? Twenty-four hours of what? Twenty four hours is what how long does it take the earth to rotate around. I said well that’s good. Except the earth was not created until the third day in Genesis, so how did you have two days before the measure you use did not exist (Personal Interview, February 7, 2014).

This excerpt from the interview with Peter includes elements of all the stages of the conversion model I have covered to this point. Although the starting period of the first stage is not mentioned, it was set in motion when Peter was convinced that the Christian belief system about the origins of creation did not match his own understanding of this origin. He had broken away from Christianity at the intellectual level because what the Bible writes about the creation does not match the scientific theories of creation to which Peter subscribes. The second stage for him started when he acquired a copy of the Qur’an and started reading it. What made him drawn to Islam is the harmony between the Qur’anic formulation of the creation and Peter’s own understanding of it. Of course, it is important to note that Peter’s understanding of the creation is probably shaped by the secular educational system. This is evident from such passages where he says “the Big Bang,” “you know life began in water,” “we know scientifically,” and “twenty-four hour is,” indicating that his perception about reality is in line with that of the secular world, thereby

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<sup>35</sup> Peter looked this verse from chapter 21 up online and read it to me during the interview.

<sup>36</sup> Ayah is an Arabic word referring to a verse of the Qur’an.



contradicting the Christian theological understanding of the reality. When he comes across the above quoted verse which he interprets as a confirmation of the ‘Big Bang’ and in agreement with the evolutionary theory, he decides that he wants to learn more about it as it is shown in the quote below:

When I read that, I read that ayah and it amazed me. I was like vow, so it is in here. Then I went home and I started googling like you’ all Islamic view on creation, Islamic view on evolution. There were not hostile to each other like in Christianity. I just started reading more. And one Friday I decided to go to the Jumah prayer<sup>37</sup> (Personal Interview, February 7, 2014).

The third stage of conversion for Peter continues in the form of follow up research about Islam before he makes his decision about adoption which can be described as a risky adoption. Peter further explores the Islamic perception about evolution and the origin of creation to make sure that these views are in line with his own understanding. In a sense, he is looking for a community of believers who share with him the same beliefs about topics that are of vital interest to him. The fact in today’s plural democratic societies such as that of the United States, people have an access to all sorts of knowledge through other mediums makes Islam one of the religion options. Peter is accessing his further acquired information from the Internet which evinced from his statement where he pronounces that he “started googling” Islamic views on evolution. When he learns about this particular view, he starts to compare with the Christian one to which he used to belong. After deciding that the Islamic view on creation of evolution matches what he thinks is the truth, he decides to take another step further which constitutes the beginning the fourth stage in my model.

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<sup>37</sup> Jumah is an Arabic word meaning Friday. The prayer at noon on Fridays can be conducted only in a congregation.

#### *Stage 4: The Conversion Process Starts*

The fourth stage in my conversion model starts when a social actor intending to convert makes her first contact with Muslims and it ends when she finalizes her decision about conversion. This often takes place in the form of visiting a local mosque or going to the Muslim students association on a university campus. Callie, for instance, after talking to her online game partners and researching about Islam for two years finally decides to make her first visit to a local mosque in her town. The following excerpt describes this visit in detail:

And then in June of 2011, I was OK, I am ready to go see a Masjid<sup>38</sup> and I know that there is one in my area. And I am too shy to go by myself. And I don't know who to contact to go. And so he said 'okay, I will find someone for you.' And, so he, I guess, posted something on this Islamic Forum online and later that same day, I had a call from Samiyah. And she said, 'I heard you are interested in going to the Masjid. And so later that same week, I met with her at her home. She gave me a Quran and she told me certain things. And we just talked about Islam and we met once a week for about 6 weeks. I would read something or she would send something and we would discuss it or I would ask my questions. And we went to the masjid once for Jumah<sup>39</sup> and then at about that time Ramadan had started and so she took me to the Taraweeh<sup>40</sup> for the first time and I went to the iftar<sup>41</sup> one time during Ramadan with her.

Şakin: Were you fasting?

Callie: No. So after Ramadan, school had started, and so we met like every other week. She finally had said to me, 'Callie, without you realizing it, you are Muslim. She said you just need to say Shahada.' I was like, I don't think I am ready, I don't know what my family is going to think. And she said it so perfectly, 'you never know what is going to happen to you. You could get into a car accident one day and die. And what are you going to say to Allah then? The reason you didn't take Shahada is because you were more scared of your family than him,' was what she

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<sup>38</sup> This is an Arabic word for the mosque.

<sup>39</sup> Jumah is an Arabic word for Friday. Muslims congregate in mosques on Friday to perform the noon prayer followed up a sermon.

<sup>40</sup> Taraweeh is usually a long prayer Muslim perform in congregation during the fasting month of Ramadan.

<sup>41</sup> Iftar is another Arabic word which means to break a fast.

said to me. And I was like, I know. And so, the thing with the car, like you never know when it is your time, it is better to say it than not to. The very next day, my sister had got in a car accident, she was fine Alhamdulillah, and I was still..so, it freaked me out. And so that very same day, I called her and told her I was ready. And a couple of days later, we went to the Masjid and after Jumah her dad gave me Shahada. And then we went back to her place and she taught me, and we started learning how to pray and that is how I became Muslim. And it is kind of cool. Because it started with somebody I met in Pakistan, and then someone in the UK who dragged me to someone in California, so I hopped around the world a little (Personal Interview, September 2, 2013).

Callie decided to make her first contact with the local community upon encouragements from her online game partner based in California. This distant recessive Muslim weak tie in a sense plays the role of a bridge and comforter by directing Callie to the local mosque. For Callie, contacting the Muslim community is a risky endeavor because it is a community which needs to be avoided. Although she is physically closer to the Muslim community in the Flint area than her Muslim weak tie based in California, she is socially more distant to the community than to him. He bridges this distance for Callie by posting an online add to a Muslim online forum to which a female Muslim from the Muslim community responds. This is the first physical contact that Callie makes with the Muslims residing in her area with an intention to convert to Islam. The fact that there is a mosque in Flint Michigan and also a Muslim community indicates that the presence of a Muslim context (Rambo 1993) is one of the essential elements in order for conversion to Islam to come to a complete end. After this initial physical contact with Muslims, Callie was still hesitant about making her final decision because of her concerns about a backlash from her family. As time passed and her association with the Muslims increased in intensity, Callie's Muslim friends encouraged her to convert by telling her that she was already a Muslim without her realizing it. Callie still did not make her final decision to convert since she was afraid of the reaction from her family who perceive Islam as the religion of other. The dramatic

event, the car accident that Callie mentions in her story, was the final push for her to convert.

While some people like Callie make their final decision about conversion to Islam as result of a dramatic event, such as her sister's car accident, this is not the case for everybody. The fourth stage of conversion for some people lasts a shorter period of time. For instance, Peter, after reading the Qur'an and doing some online research decided to make his first visit to a local mosque in Louisville, Kentucky without any intermediary. The following excerpt sheds light on his visit to a local mosque:

Peter: And one Friday I decided to go to the Jumah prayer.

Şakin: How long did this happen after you read the Qur'an?

Peter: May be two weeks. I did go there and introduced myself. I did not know what the reaction would be like. I just sat at the back, watched everything, you know, talked to some people afterwards. And there was a visiting imam that weekend from Lexington; he talked to me for two hours, he answered a lot of questions and really put pressure on me to do the shahadah (the testimony). I am not a person to be pressured.

Şakin: Did you do the shahadah when you visited the mosque?

Peter: No. He really wanted to do it. I said I am getting close, don't push. I started going to Friday prayers and it was not too much terribly longer (Personal Interview, February 7, 2013).

The fourth stage in this conversion model for Peter starts when he makes his physical contact with the Muslim community in the Louisville, Kentucky area. This decision to make a contact to with the Muslims is taken voluntarily with an intention to convert to Islam. It follows Peter's conviction about the holy book of Islam since for him it is an embodiment of what is the truth. It is also a trip taken out of curiosity to test the mosque atmosphere which is seemingly a foreign territory. Although Peter is in the midst of the congregation, he is still socially distant from it since he sits at the back and watches the

congregation rather than participating in their ritual. However, after the praying ritual comes to a complete, the two parties engage in a heated interaction. The imam, an authoritative representation of the Muslim community, tries to win over a new member to the Muslim community, but Peter resists this recruitment since he is interested in making his final decision of conversion on his own terms. Thus, he chooses not to convert to Islam after this first visit to the mosque and conversation with the visiting imam. In line with previous research (Van Nieuwkerk 2008), this indicates that a convert to Islam are free willed making their decision of converting to Islam after surveying the religion and its followers before making their final decision. This decision is a culmination of four successive stages constituting the conversion model of this research.

In conclusion, the conversion to Islam initiates when a social actor grows disenchanted with their prior to conversion belief systems. This disillusionment usually occurs in the form of a disbelief in the doctrine of trinity. Once a potential convert to Islam breaks away from their Christian belief system or from the their church community they enter in a second stage of the conversion which has various length of time spanning from a few months to a couple of decades. During this stage, converts living in Michigan tend to develop weak Muslim ties which I classify as recessive and dominant weak ties, while those convert living in Kentucky tend to form strong Muslim ties which tend to facilitate the conversion process. As I demonstrated above, by making comparisons to the control group of this study having social ties to other Muslims in itself is not a sufficient condition in order for conversion to take place. The social Muslim ties have to be supplemented with an intellectual break from the converts' prior belief system. This is a crucial step that comes before the formation of the Muslim ties and it is followed by the reading of the Qur'an.

The act of reading the Qur'an is another significant step in the conversion process since it provides the convert with a frame of reference, which is a legitimate canon of beliefs, confirming legitimacy of the convert's intellectual and social break from the her prior belief system. Also, by providing an alternative formulation of the trinity doctrine and covering stories of the Biblical figures, the Qur'an renders what is seemingly foreign, unknown and distant from the convert familiar and close. Once this familiarity between the convert and Islam is established, then she decides to take another step by making a physical contact with the Muslim community which is done in the form of visiting a local mosque close to her. This first visit usually is followed up by many others which further make Islam familiar to the convert. At this point, potential converts make their final decision of converting to Islam, knowing that it will generate a backlash from social ties in their egocentric social network bringing about sharp change in their social networks. In the following chapter, I cover this change in the network by comparing the prior-to-conversion social networks of converts to their post-conversion network with an emphasis on differences in this change in terms of ethnicity.



**Table 4.1: Comparison of Muslim Ties between the Research and Control Group**

	Muslim Tie	Percent	Non-Muslim Tie	Percent
<b>Converts</b>	10	33.3%	20	66.7%
<b>Non-Converts</b>	9	30.0%	21	70.0%

**Table 4.2: Demographic Comparison between the Research and Control Group**

		Converts	Non-converts
<b>Gender</b>	Male	12 (40.0%)	11 (36.7%)
	Female	18 (60.0%)	19 (63.3%)
<b>Age</b>	Young	13 (43.3%)	22 (73.3%)
	Old	17 (56.7%)	8 (26.7%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	22 (73.3%)	21 (70.0%)
	Black	8 (26.7%)	8 (26.7%)*

\*Note: There is one participant in the control group from India.



**Table 4.3: Frequency of Muslim Ties in Pre-Conversion Social Network by State**

<b>State</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Frequency of Muslim Ties</b>	<b>Percent of Muslim Ties</b>
Michigan	18	8	44%
Kentucky	12	3	25%
TOTAL	30	11	37%

**Table 4.4: Presence of Muslim Ties in the Control Group**

<b>Muslim Tie</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Percent of Muslim Ties</b>
Yes	9	30%
No	21	70%
TOTAL	30	100%

**Table 4.5: Average Network Properties for Converts and Non-Converts**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Density</b>	<b>Homophily by Ethnicity</b>	<b>Post-Conversion Degree</b>
Converts to Islam	6.6	0.56	0.79	7.7
Non-converts	11.5	0.56	0.75	NA*

**\*This is not applicable for the control group since they have not converted to Islam**

**Table 4.6: Comparison of Muslim Ties between the Research and Control Group**

	<b>Muslim Tie</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Non-Muslim Tie</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Converts</b>	11	33.3%	19	66.7%
<b>Non-Converts</b>	9	30.0%	21	70.0%

**Table 4.7: Conversion Model: Comparison between Converts and Non-converts**

The Sample	Disillusionment	Jesus Paradox	Belief in God	Read the Quran	Muslim Context
Converts to Islam	21 (70%)	14 (46.6%)	27 (90%)	20 (66.6%)	24 (80%)
Non-converts	3 (10%)	0(0%)	16 (53.3%)	2 (6.6%)	16 53.3)

**Figure 4.1: A Control Group Egocentric Network with no Muslim Weak Tie**

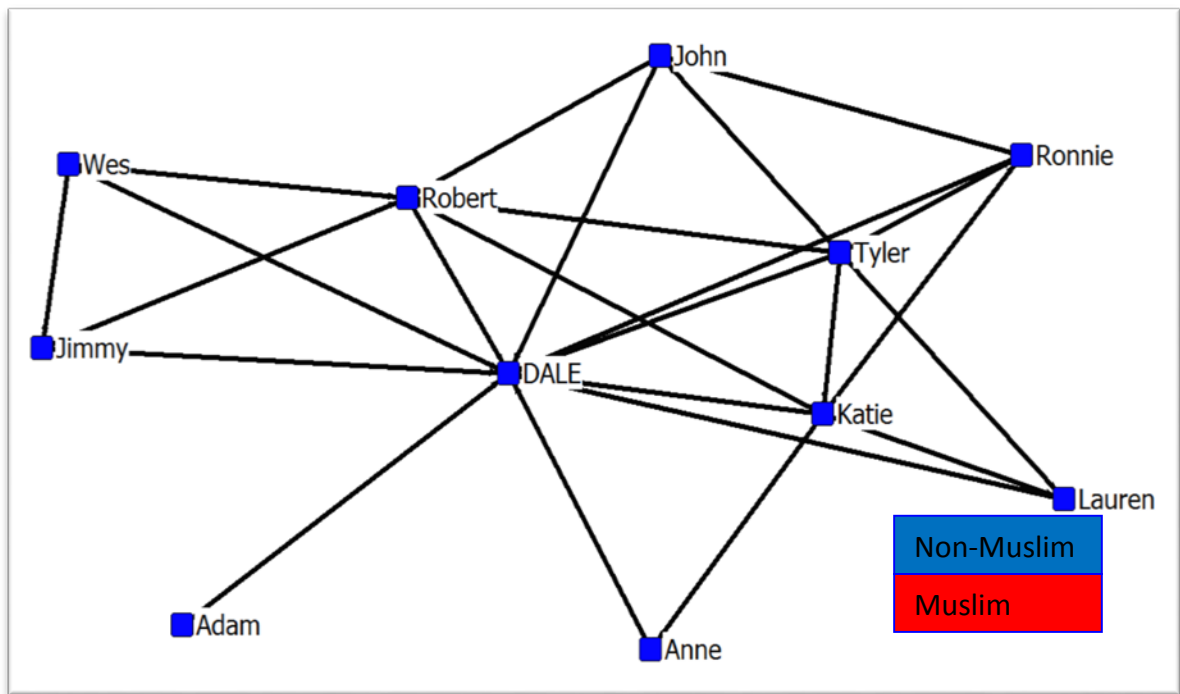


Figure 4.2: A Research Group Ego-centric Network with two Weak Muslim Ties

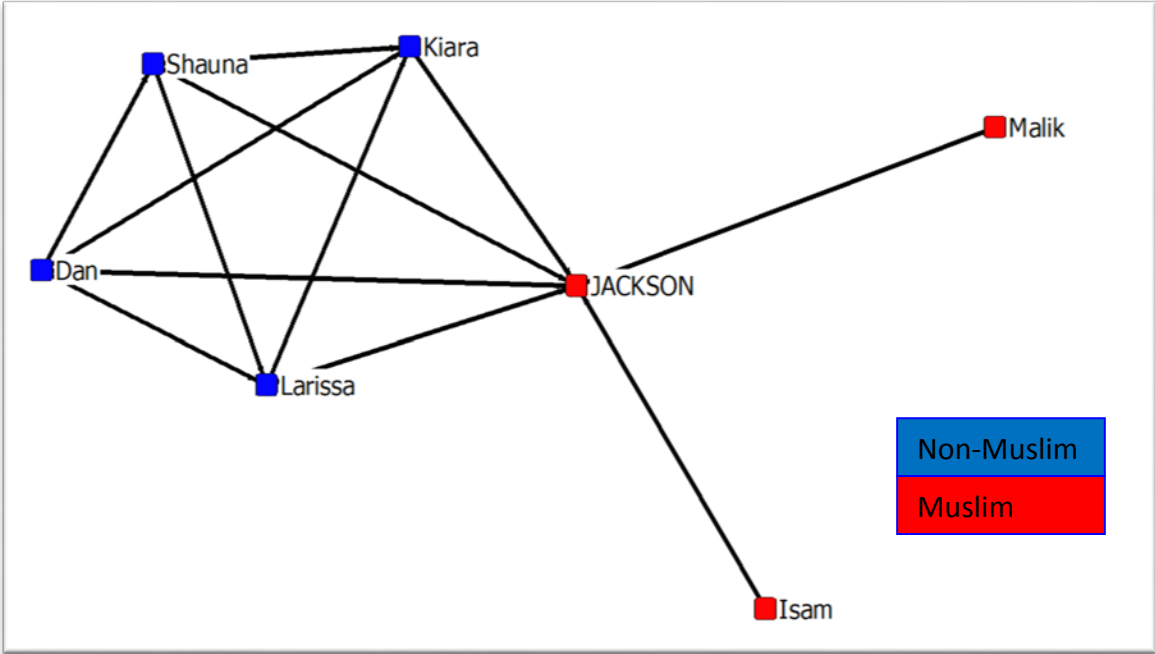


Figure 4.3: A Research Group Egocentric Network with no Muslim Ties

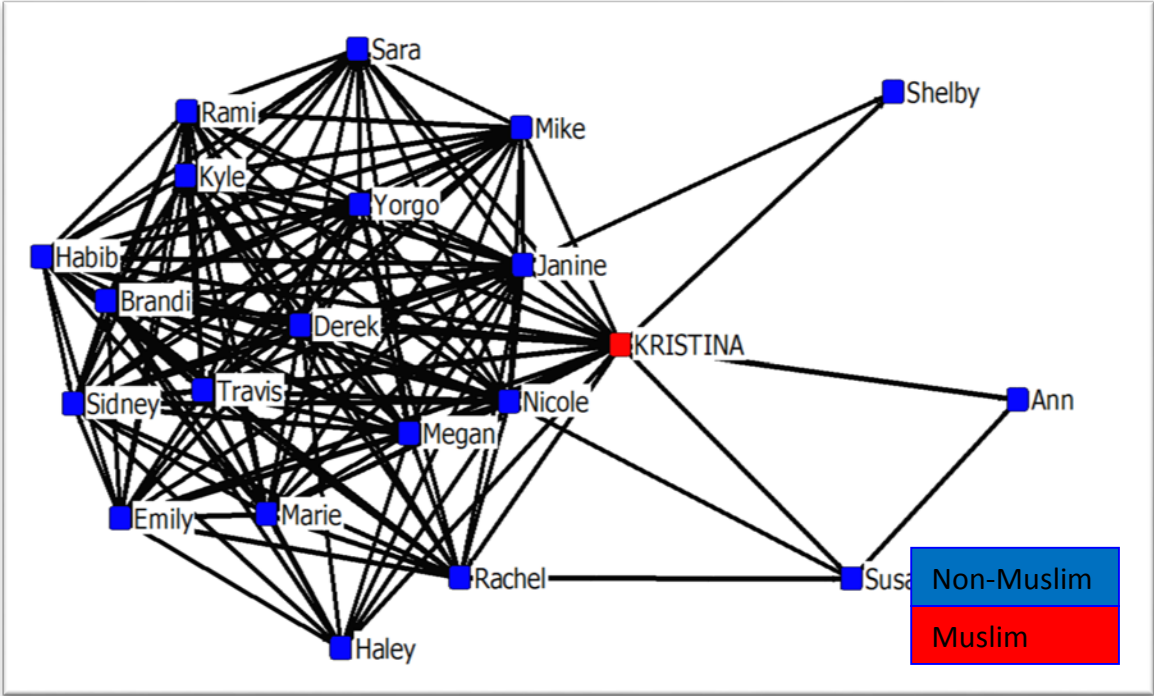


Figure 4.4: A Research Group Egocentric Network with a Strong Muslim Tie

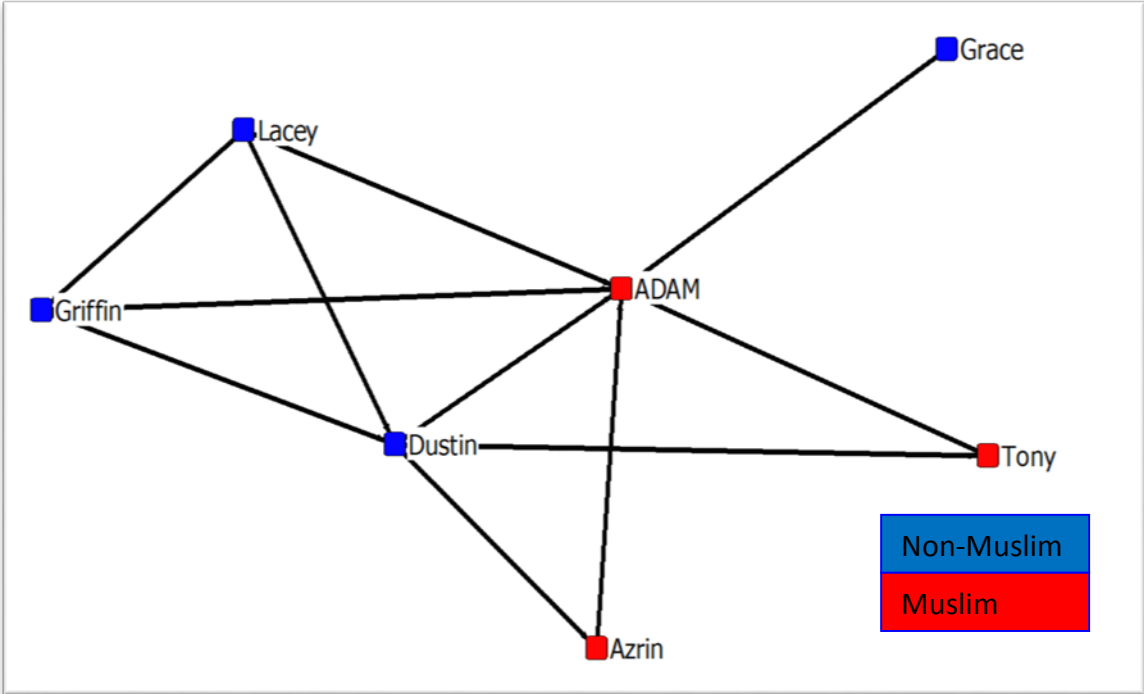


Figure 4.5: A Research Group Ego-centric Social Network with two Weak Muslim Ties

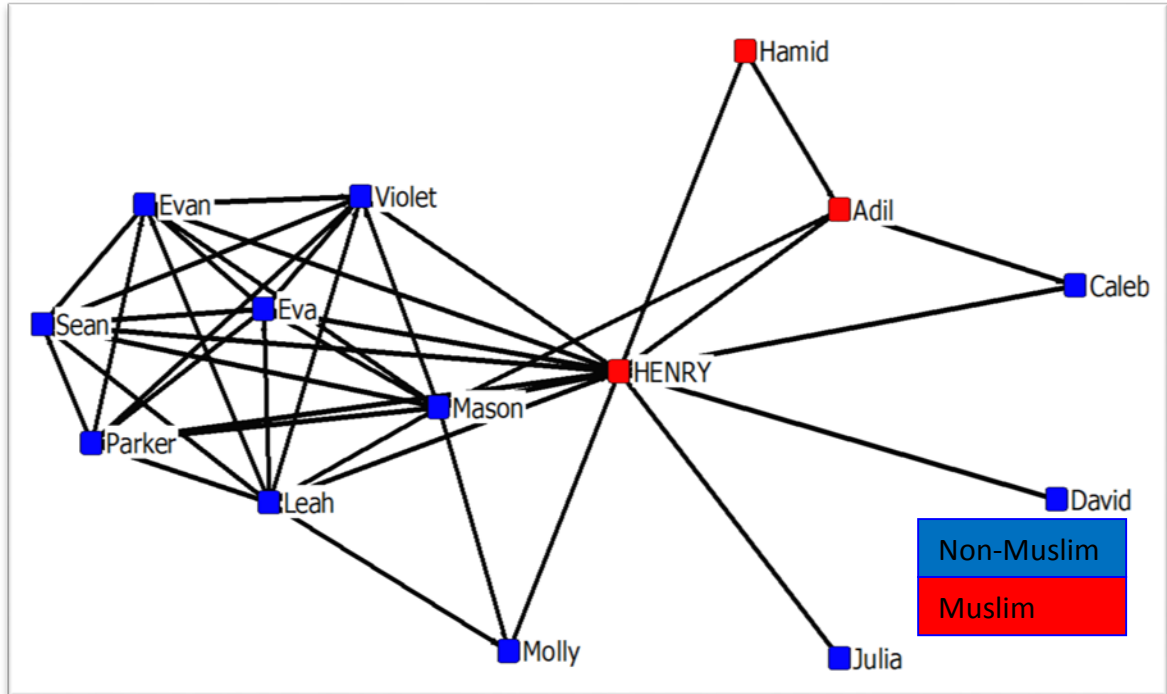


Figure 4.6: A Control Group Member with Strong Belief in Trinity

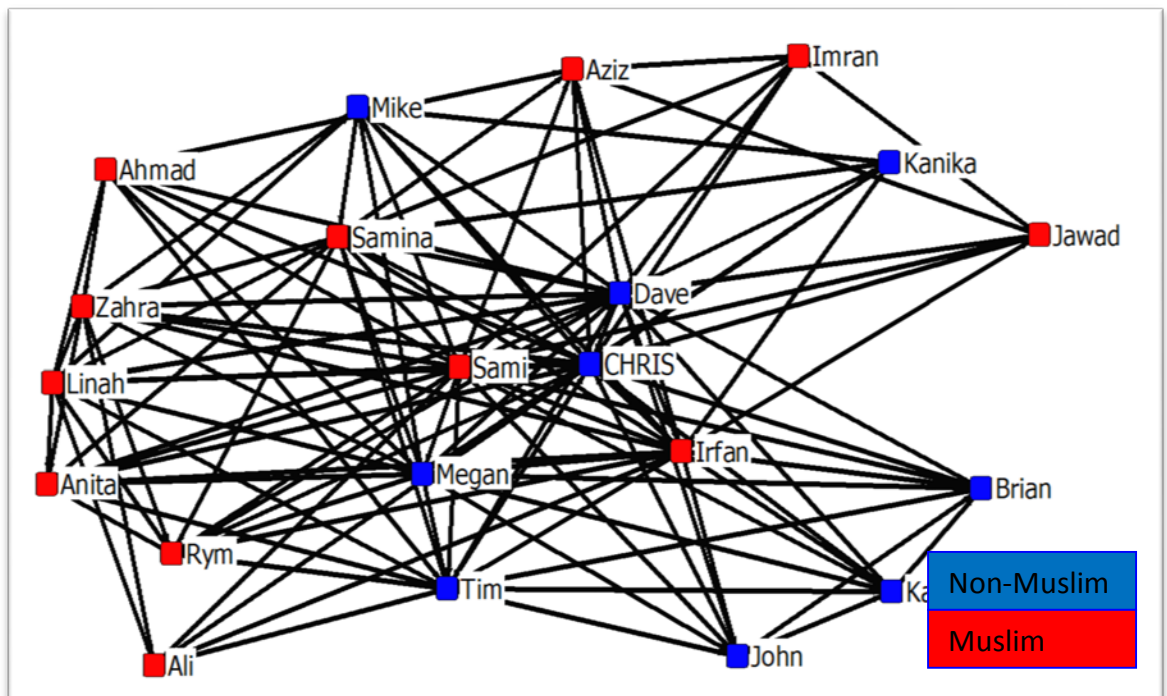


Figure 4.7: A Control Group Participant with 45% Muslim Ties

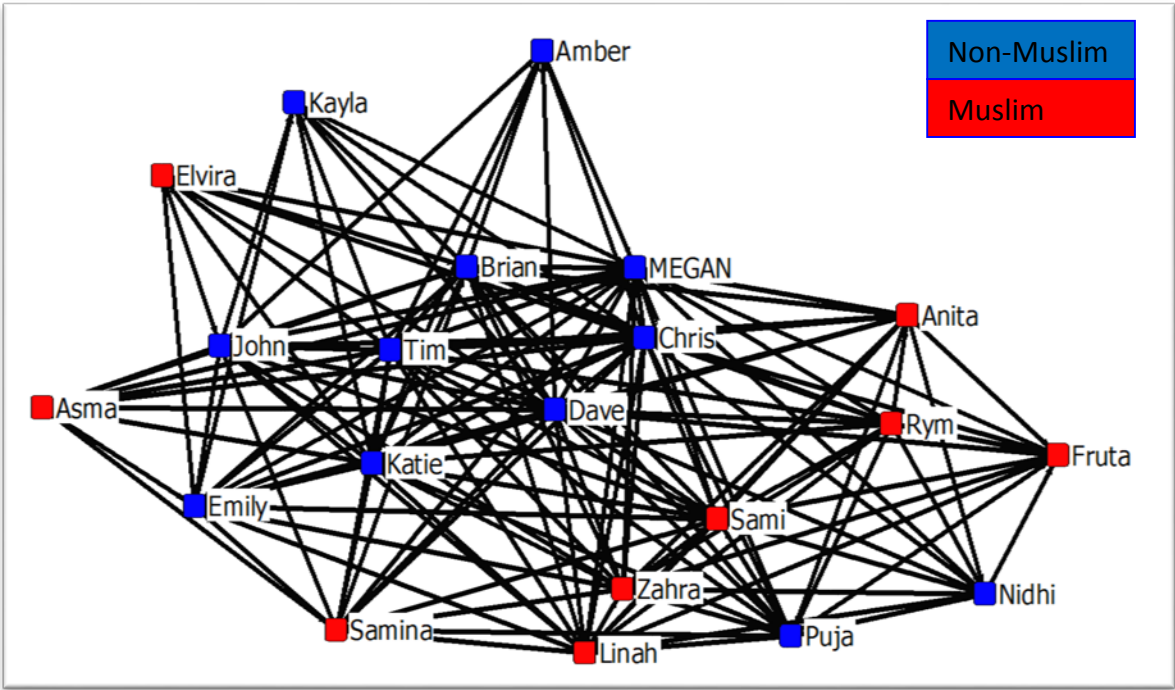


Figure 4.8: A Conversion Ego-centric Network Fitting Religious Market Model

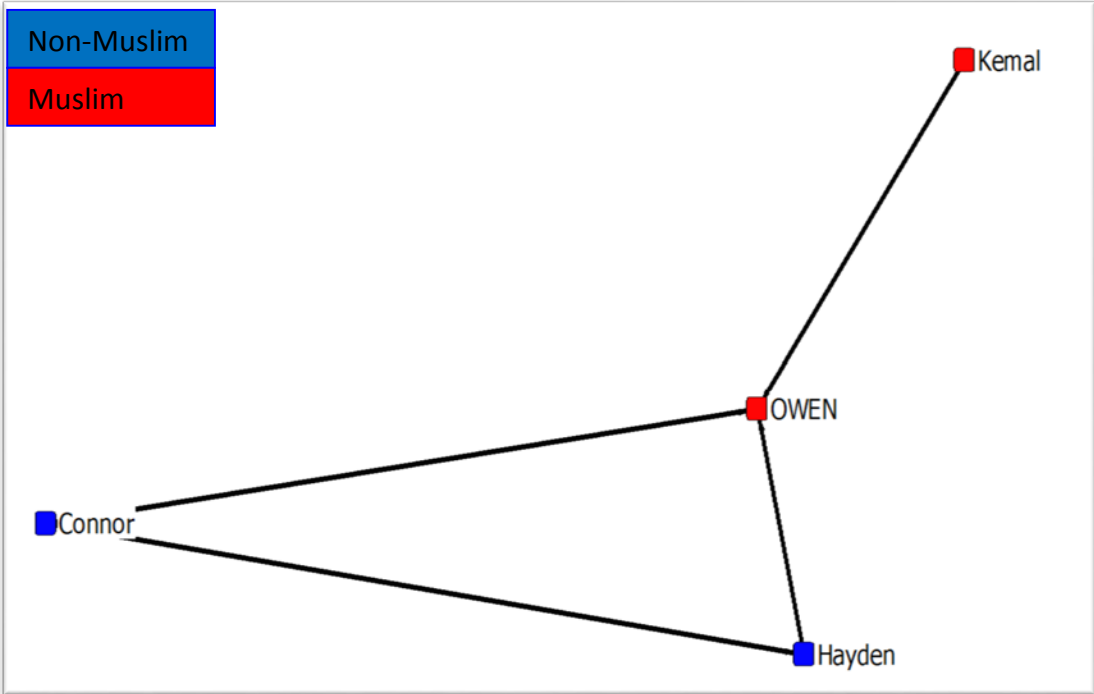
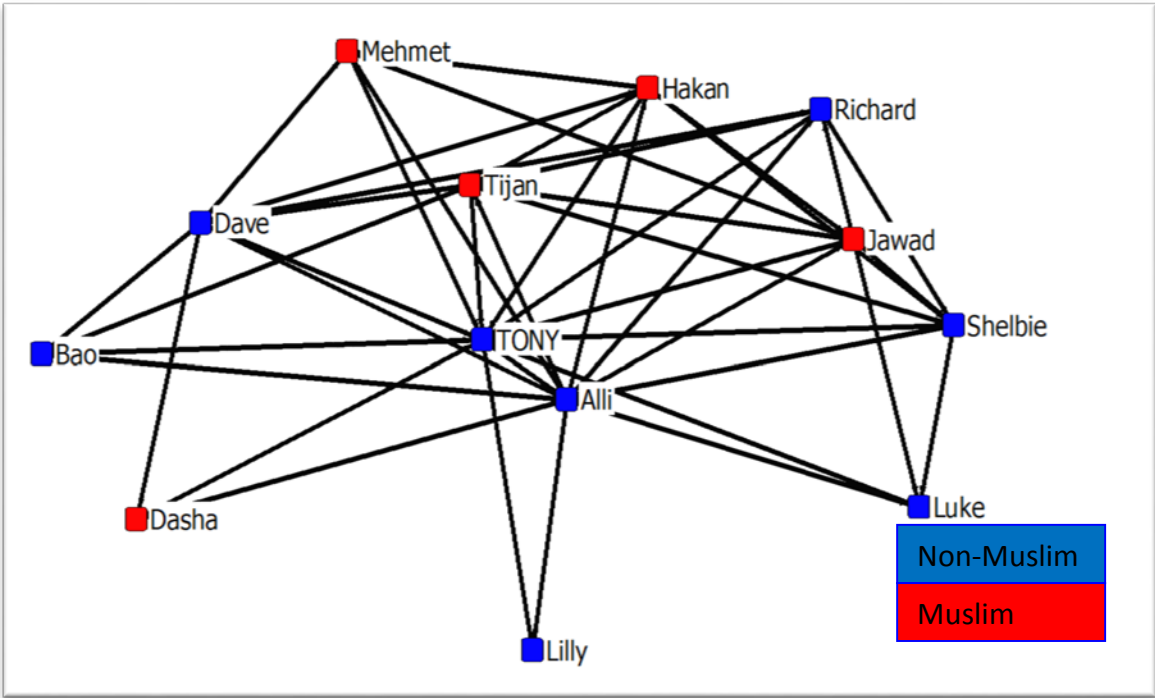




Figure 4.9: An Egocentric Network of Control Group Member Intending to Convert Islam



## CHAPTER 5

### **CHANGE IN EGOCENTRIC SOCIAL NETWORKS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN CAUCASIAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONVERSION NETWORKS**

Studies on social networks tend to measure a snapshot of networks usually focusing on the structures and composition of networks at one point in time. Dynamics of social networks and change over time in networks are topics which are less explored, although recently there has been more focus on this aspect of networks culminating in a debate on social connectivity among Americans (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006, Paik and Sanchagrin 2013, Putnam 1995, Putnam 2000, Wang and Wellman 2010). One of the central questions measuring change in social networks explores the extent to which social ties persist over a period of time (Suitor, Wellman and Morgan 1997). Are those ties which persist fundamentally different than those which are lost (Suitor, Wellman and Morgan 1997)? These and similar questions measuring change in social networks imply that social actors are essentially pragmatic rational actors who either shed their social ties or substitute them with new ones as they go through different life transitions such as divorce (Terhell, van Groenou and van Tilburg 2004), biographical disruptions (Perry and Pescosolido 2012), entering new social context (Mollenhorst, Volker and Flap 2014), entering into adult life (Degenne and Lebeaux 2005), etc. Although this line of research explains why individuals add and drop social ties to serve their purpose, it falls short of explaining changes in personal networks over which egos do not have control. This happens when people make decisions countering the norms and values of a given society such as

converting to a religion which is considered to be the religion of the other. As such, when people convert to Islam how do their social networks change? More importantly, does this change differ for African-Americans, who have more collective experience with Islam, than Caucasian Americans? Finally, how do converts perceive conversion to Islam and to what extent their perception of it influences change in their egocentric social network of converts?

Conversion to Islam has a tremendous influence on change in egocentric networks. This change, however, occurs on a different level for African-Americans and Caucasian Americans. When Black Americans convert to Islam their network tends to shrink reducing almost always to strong ties such as kin or close friends, whereas the egocentric network of White converts fragments into two loosely connected subgroups composed of mostly weak ties. Does this mean that Caucasian Americans and African-Americans experience conversion to Islam in a different way? What kind of implications does conversion to Islam have for these two ethnic groups? In this part of this dissertation, I present conversion experiences of Caucasian and African-American converts in terms of network dynamics by analyzing changes in their egocentric network where I compare their prior-to-conversion egocentric social networks to their post-conversion networks. First, I analyze this change by measuring the number of ties which are dropped from the prior-to-conversion egocentric networks and the number of ties gained to post-conversion networks. Second, I compare the amount of change in egocentric social networks of African-American and Caucasian converts to show the extent to which their conversion experiences are similar or different from each other. Last, I capture change in egocentric conversion networks by demonstrating how the structure and the composition of personal networks of converts change as they go through the conversion process.

Change in egocentric networks does not always occur as a direct result of the actions of social actors. There are episodes in which change in egocentric networks occur as a result of the perception of alters of the ego and their interpretations of life transitions that egos experience. As a matter of fact, most of the alters tend to sever their ties to converts based on their interpretation of the conversion process suggesting that egos do not always have control over the amount of change in their social networks. While social ties of black converts tend to interpret conversion to Islam in religious terms, those of white converts react to conversion to Islam from a patriotic perspective. By applying symbolic interactionism to conversion network dynamics, I demonstrate that as the *convert self* emerges, social ties, which are usually composed of friends and kin, interpret this life transition event based their stock of knowledge of Islam, thereby either severing their ties to converts or providing social support. The way in which alters react to conversion has a direct bearing on the change in egocentric conversion networks. I show this influence by presenting an analysis of qualitative data I collected from semi-structured personal interviews during which converts reported how their social ties reacted to their conversion experiences. Having provided this analysis, I predict, in the following chapter, how converts are more likely to revert from Islam based on reactions from friends and family members and the amount of change taking place in their egocentric conversion networks. Before delving into the discussion of change in the egocentric conversion network, I find it essential to provide the nuts and bolts of change in personal networks and the limitation of the current literature.

### **Network Change and Limitations of Current Literature**

Correct measurement of change in egocentric (personal) networks depends on knowing the size of them in successive time periods. Having the right information about the size of any personal network at time one and a later time two will give us an ability to not only assess whether it has gone under any change, but also how much change it has endured. Although there is consensus among social network theorists that networks change from time one to time two, there is no such consensus on whether those networks become smaller or bigger. I argue that this lack of disagreement stems from the fact that there are no established guidelines as to how to detect accurately the entire network of a given person. As such, estimating the number of people known to a social actor is a difficult task not only because the social network theory is relatively a young field but also dealing with large personal networks is rather difficult (Killworth et al. 1990). This leads social network researchers to focus on more manageable aspects of networks such as core discussion (Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006, Paik and Sanchagrin 2013), close friends (Burt 1982, Fischer 1982), weak ties (Granovetter 1973) or strong ties (Shi, Adamic and Strauss 2007), diffusion in networks (Coleman, Katz and Menzel 1966), etc. When research focuses only on core discussion network, it would naturally neglect the periphery of that network. In other words, if a study is giving an importance to the strong ties of a social network, it would tend to neglect the weak ties of the same network. Consequently, knowing the exact size of egocentric social networks at a given point in time is difficult, if not impossible.

Given that social network theorists put limitations on the boundaries of egocentric social networks, how large would they be if their boundaries were let to float free? Using different proxies to elicit network sizes such as using the phone book, Killworth and

colleagues (1990) estimate a network size of 1700 people with a standard deviation of 400 for their sample from Jacksonville, Florida. This figure refers to the number of people a person might enumerate when they are presented with a telephone list. Nevertheless, it does not present accurately the set of people that social actors might interact on a regular basis. In other words, such a large network cannot be a constantly active network with which the ego interacts on a regular basis. An ideal complete egocentric network which would be composed of both strong and weak ties is more likely to be smaller than this figure. Despite the fact that social network theorists limit their studies to a more manageable aspect of egocentric social networks focusing exclusively on core discussion (Fischer 2009, Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006) to predict change in networks over a period of time. Although this line of research illuminates what happens to core discussion networks over a period of time, it does not provide an adequate picture of personal networks in their entirety. For instance, it does not answer questions such as whether the whole personal networks become smaller when the core discussion becomes smaller or whether people lose or gain weak ties at same rate as losing or gaining strong ties. More importantly, they do not show how egocentric social networks change in terms of ethnicity.

The discussion of change in egocentric social networks based on core discussion network, which is a network of social support (Fischer 1982, Marsden 1987), is divided into two different camps: (1) those who argue that core discussion network have become smaller suggesting a lower level of connectivity among Americans and; (2) those who argue this decline is attributable to the interview errors suggesting that core discussion networks are stable over a period of time. The first line of research follows the rich tradition

started by Tocqueville (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006), who argued that Americans are well connected to such an extent that when an individual wanted to quit drinking, he does not quit by himself, but organizes with thousands of others and they all quit drinking together (De Tocqueville 2000). He further argued that Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all backgrounds have a tendency to unite; they take part in religious organization, they build seminars, hostels, hospitals, prisons, schools, and most importantly, they form associations (De Tocqueville 2000). All of these suggest that Americans are well connected individuals who also most probably have dense social networks.

In his seminal work, Putnam (1995, 2000) presents a bleak picture of the Tocquevillian American civic society suggesting a trend of decline in participation in civic associations, voluntary work, social clubs, and other organizations that are essentially part and parcel of civil society. By comparing today's lack of participation in politics, religious activities, and civic associations among different age groups with other generations, such as the baby boomers, those who came of age during the Gilded Age, the Progressive era, and others, to reach the conclusion that civic participation has plummeted to a record degree among those that he calls Generation X, who were born between 1965 and the 1980s. This implies that Americans are now less connected meaning that they have lower level of social capital. Conversely, when individuals are well connected, there is more trust and reciprocity between them which in turn is vital for the development of civic virtue. Putnam (2000) makes a distinction between two forms of social capital: bridging and bonding. The former is observed among networks that are outward-looking, which are composed of various social groups, a diverse set of organizations, individuals of different

backgrounds, and different races. The latter is more a characteristic of networks that reinforce particular identities and homogenous groups. The Civil Rights Movement is a good example of bridging, while church-based women's reading groups are an example of bonding social capital. As evidence suggests, such as decline in voting from the 1960s and 1990s, Americans are less involved not only politics, but also in civil society (Putnam 2000). This indicates that Americans are less connected and it also implies that their personal social network have shrunk over a period of time.

In tandem with this argument, those who claim that Americans have lower level of connectivity and thus lesser amount of social capital, built their argument on changes in the core discussion networks of social actors (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006). After comparing the General Social Survey (GSS) from 2004 to GSS 1985, the authors argue that Americans have a smaller discussion networks supporting Putnam's argument which translated into lower levels of connectivity among people. The mean core discussion network size of Americans declined from 2.94 in 1985 people to 2.08 people in 2004 (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006). They argue further that American people have lost discussion partners not only to their neighbors but also to their kin with bigger loss occurring in the ties to the larger community. The fact that American core discussion networks are heavily built upon family ties (Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006) reinforces this thesis that American are not dwelled among friends (Fischer 1982) and they bowl alone (Putnam 2000). To what extent is this picture of American society, which is supposedly composed of isolated individuals, is correct?

The second line of research is skeptical about the decline of social connectivity and the loss of social capital among Americans suggesting that findings from the previous



research could have been an artifact (Fischer 2009). In fact, those who belong to this category argue that friendship among Americans is still abundant and flourishing to such an extent that in 2002 and 2007 American adults had an average of 10 people in their social networks (Wang and Wellman 2010). Even online activity does not lead to lower levels of connectivity as evidence suggest that Internet users and non-user have similar number of friends (Wang and Wellman 2010). For this group, the core discussion network essentially is stable. For instance, Mollenhorst and colleagues argue that the average number of people in egocentric networks did not change much over a period of seven years (Mollenhorst, Volker and Flap 2014). The average number of confidants in personal networks changed from 2.31 to 2.41 indicating that this change was not significant. Stability of core discussion of networks has another meaning which accepts that these types of networks change over time but they tend to reach to equilibrium. A recent study indicates that the size and the composition of core discussion networks of individuals change in the short run in response to new social contexts, such as going to graduate school, but they gain their stability as individuals gain new ties which may not be necessarily strong ties (Small, Pamphile and McMahan 2015). In fact, 45% of core discussion networks are composed of weak ties (Small 2013). After studying a cohort of first year graduate students after 6 months into their new career and 12 months later, they argue that the core discussion network changes rather quickly, but the social ties lost are replaced by new ones (Small, Pamphile and McMahan 2015). This understanding of the stability of core discussion network is problematic since it implies the gained social ties to substitute for the lost ones are presumed to be of the same quality in terms of providing social support or any other functions they serve. Nevertheless, there is no evidence showing that the intimate ties a

person gains as a result of entering social contexts can be the same as the ones she has lost. Also, all social contexts may not offer the same amount of opportunity to social actors to substitute their lost social ties. Going to a graduate school may provides a person with rich opportunity to gain new intimate ties since she is part of a group of people who are likely to be similar to her, but moving to a new work environment or a neighborhood may not offer the same opportunity to substitute for lost ties. Thus, there is need to conduct further research to both examine the extent to which peoples' new ties provide the same function as their old ties and whether all new social context provide the equal amount of opportunity to replace lost ties with new ones.

Although the discussion of change in social networks revolving around the core discussion network provides enriching insight into the connectivity among Americans and its implications for civil society and American democracy, it falls short of explaining why social networks change. If individuals lose a part of their core discussion network, usually as a result of a change in social context, they tend to substitute this loss with gaining new ties. This is likely to occur under life transitional circumstances. In his earlier work on change in social networks, Wellman and his colleagues opine that intimate ties are not stable such that when people get married they replace 97% of their intimate ties, and if they do not get married they shed about 62% of their intimate ties over a decade (Wellman et al. 1997b:47). Conversely, Mollenhorst and colleagues argue that the average number of people in egocentric networks did not change much over a period of seven year (Mollenhorst, Volker and Flap 2014). As such, the average number of confidants in personal network changed from 2.31 to 2.41 indicating that this change was not significant. Others also support this idea of the persistence of the stability of strong ties provided egos

and their strong ties have mutual friends (structurally embedded) and that there is a recurrent contact between egos and their strong ties (Martin and Yeung 2006). In addition, some studies show that major life transitions such as divorce may account for network change (Milardo 1987) such that about 10% of social ties are lost immediately after divorce and most of the loss in the network of the divorcees is not compensated for following the divorce (Terhell, van Groenou and van Tilburg 2004).

Similar to these life changing events, conversion to another religion has a large effect on personal networks that can have different consequences for social actors. Such a change in the life of a person is likely to generate various reactions ranging from outright rejection to social support and admiration. I argue that the perception of alters is crucial in how personal social networks evolve as people go through life changing events. For example, if a person wins a lottery ticket or a get high paying job, she is more likely to attract a lot of new social ties and/or admiration from her current tie. Conversely, if she contracts a disease or she goes out of employment she is more likely to lose her social ties. What happens to people's personal social networks when they convert to Islam? Is there any difference between changes in personal networks based on the ethnicity of a person? I argue that when people convert to Islam their ego social networks tend to change in several different ways. When Caucasian Americans convert to Islam their social networks become larger in size and less homophilous, but fragment, while the social networks of African-American converts to Islam shrink almost always either to family members or close friends. More important, most of change in personal conversion networks results from how conversion is interpreted by alters and as a result of how they react to this seemingly life changing event. In the following section, I provide several cases where I demonstrated the

difference between the reaction of Caucasian and African-American alters to conversion experience. Then, I will present an analysis of how this reaction influences the structural change in personal conversion networks.

### **How Do Alters React to Conversion Experience?**

**Alters Reaction Hypothesis 1:** Social ties of Caucasian convert are more likely to react negatively to conversion of Caucasian egos than the alters of African-American converts to the conversion of African-Americans.

Change in egocentric social networks is not always induced by social actors. Minorities tend to be more religious than the majority. The alters of the minority groups like African-Americans, Hispanics and mixed race in this sample tend to interpret conversion to Islam from a religious perspective liking the conversion to Islam as a betrayal to Christianity, while alters belonging to majority groups tend to interpret conversion to Islam from a patriotic point of view. If the alters of the converts belonging to a minority group are religious, they tend to reject the converts, but if they are not religious they tend to be supportive. Cathy, who reported her ethnicity as mixed race, provided the following account of how her highest ranked social ties reacted to her conversion:

Cathy: She (referring to her first alter, Tracy) was not happy because I used to go to a Catholic school when I was a kid. And of her, Tracy, Libby, and Amber we have been a group of best friends since second grade. And I can generalize Tracy, Libby, and Amber are the same. They were not happy that I converted. They obviously thought I was going to hell. I grew up with them. Libby's and Amber's moms are my godmothers; they were there when I did my confirmation. We were all tied. We used to go to Church together, go to communion together and out of the group, I was the most religious. So it was the biggest surprise. They just didn't understand why. And they felt that I was making the wrong decision. I didn't talk to anyone about it until after I converted. I knew I wasn't going to get any good reactions (Personal interview, August, 22, 2013).

Cathy has a heteropholous prior-to-conversion network because only 25% her alters have the same race as she does.<sup>42</sup> The rest of her ties are members of minority groups divided between Asian Americans and mixed race. Her strong ties, which tend to be mostly minorities, reacted to her conversion on religious terms believing that she will go to Hell. For them, Cathy's conversion is an unexpected event which almost amounts to religious betrayal. Cathy does not disclose her conversion because of her concerns of being rejected from her tightly knit network and not getting any social support from them. Her friends think that her conversion is not a good decision because it entails religious consequences. Her decision of conversion is being evaluated within the confines of the sacred world since all of the opposition to her conversion is grounded in religious terms.

There is stark difference between how the alters of Caucasian converts react to conversion to Islam than those of mixed races and African-Americans. The reaction of social ties of White converts varies from outright complete rejection to mild support, while those of African-American converts are likely to be confused but still provide some sort of support. Henry, who is a Caucasian convert, narrates the reaction of one of his sisters in the following way:

By the way, I have a sister who is very fundamentalist Christian. When I first went to Palestine, she said "how can you go there to be with people who hate you?" Well I actually was there with Christian Palestinians, but I got her point. So when I became Muslim, she kind of just wrote me off. And she said something that was meant to really get under my skin: "Just remember Tom, that Jesus is alive and Muhammad is dead" (laughing). And I said, yeah, that is exactly what we believe (Personal Interview, 15 August, 2013).

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<sup>42</sup> Although Cathy reported her race as mixed, I included her as a White in my analysis because she looks more White than any other race.

For the social ties of Caucasian converts Islam comes across more as ethnic property or an alien culture which is interpreted along the lines of current US foreign policy or how the media presents Islam. For African-American conversion to Islam is a purely religious act which is opposed based on religious grounds. Those African-Americans reacting negatively to conversion to Islam is interpreted as a betrayal of Christianity. Asma who is an African-American female converting to Islam, reported the reaction of her highest ranked alter, Felicia, in the following way:

Asma: She was very upset, she didn't believe me at first. And she thought I was joking and she was angry; astonished.

Şakin: Why did she react like that?

Asma: Because we met at the church, we met through a mutual friend who is a pastor. And we were Christian and we worshiped together and went to church functions together, we even worked together at the church. We grew up in the church together, so it was quite a shock to her. Because the main thing for her, she said, 'how can you deny Jesus?' That was the big thing, after all you have been through and all that you have experienced in your life, to deny Jesus. If I went to another denomination, she would have understood that. She couldn't understand that [converting to Islam] (Personal Interview, 21 August, 2013).

In her reaction to Asma's conversion, Felicia does not use any references to the Middle East or Arab culture, violence, and a similar politicized stock of knowledge the Caucasian alters use in their interpretation of Caucasian converts. Felicia sees Asma's conversion as a religious betrayal rather than joining the religion of the other. Despite her shock and disappointment, she still does not reject Asma completely but she drops her from highest ranked in her prior-to-conversion network to the third place in her post-conversion network. Her reaction is along the line of *Jesus Paradox*, which is a dividing line between the two major religions. As such, her reaction to Asma's conversion is more objective compared to that the reaction to Caucasian conversion.

What is also unexpected is the difference between how people react to conversion to Islam in Kentucky versus those living in Michigan. It is normal to speculate that people living in Michigan which has the US largest Arab Muslim population, will be more receptive to Islam than those living in Kentucky, which has smaller number of born Muslim and which is also on the periphery of the Bible Belt. Alters composing the social network of those converting to Islam in Kentucky tend to become more accepting of conversion than those composing the social network of converts residing in Michigan. The following reaction of strong a tie to conversion taking place in Kentucky illustrates this point:

Şakin: Well, I want to ask about how your parents or your wife react?

Andrew: I was actually considering Islam several years ago. I was actually going to a Masjid and they gave me a Qur'an and things like that. I was in a real confused state. I was actually taking Shahada [testimony] then but I didn't comprehend it and I don't think I really meant it. And she pretty much threatened to divorce me over it (Personal Interview, January 12, 2014).

This was the initial reaction from Andrew's wife to his conversion to Islam. However, a year later when he renewed his interest in Islam and converted his wife's reaction had also changed. I was able to observe some dimension of this change when I met Andrew during converts study group at which his wife was also present. Her sheer presence in the meeting indicates that she is less critical to his conversion. However, the following exchanges between me and Andrew show that over time his wife became more accepting of his conversion:

Şakin: But she knows, like she knows you are at the meeting, so she knows that you have become Muslim again.

Andrew: Well it has been almost a year of just explaining it to her, just loosening her up with it.

Şakin: So how does she react to it now?

Andrew: She is okay with it now.

Şakin: Why do you think she changed from threatening you with divorce to being okay with it?

Andrew: Education (Personal Interview, January 12, 2014).

Andrew's wife changes her perception about his conversion after learning about Islam from a personal tie (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970) supporting his conversion by attending the meetings of his conversion study group. More importantly, she does not threaten him with a divorce nor does she associate his conversion with politicized understanding of Islam. The transformed perception of Andrew's wife influences structural changes in Andrew's post-conversion network. Since she is more accepting of his conversion, she is more likely to develop social ties to Andrew's Muslim friends increasing cohesion in his network. A cohesive personal network compared to fragmented one can provide crucial support for a life changing event such as conversion to another religion. The way social ties react toward conversion experience greatly affects the structural and compositional changes in egocentric conversion social networks. I provide detailed analysis of this impact in the following section.

### **Change in Conversion Networks: Comparison between prior-to-conversion and post-conversion-networks**

**Network Change Hypothesis 1a:** The structure and composition of Caucasian converts' egocentric social networks are more likely to change than that of African-American converts.



Conversion to another religion is a life transition event which has a strong impact on the structure and composition of egocentric social networks. The degree of this change is even higher when the religion under study is Islam, which is associated with terrorism in the West and it is considered to be the religion of the ultimate other. Although conversion to Islam strongly influences changes in the egocentric social networks of both white and black converts, the scale of the change is sharply different for both groups. Some of the difference in change for these two groups is captured in the quantitative analysis of personal networks, while the rest emerges from the personal accounts of the converts.

When Whites convert to Islam, they lose more social ties than Blacks but they also gain more social ties than Blacks do. After converting to Islam, White converts lost about 73% of people in their egocentric social networks whereas Black converts lost 64% of their social ties (see Table 5.1). Also, there is a difference between the two groups in terms of keeping their connections from the time before conversion. Black converts were able to keep about 36% percent of their prior social ties, but White converts were able to keep about 27% of their prior social ties. Although there is a lot of loss of social ties for both groups when they go through the conversion process, this does not mean that their personal networks shrink suggesting that conversion to a religion results in a loss of social capital. On the contrary, both convert groups substitute for their loss, albeit at a different level. White converts gained about 80% new ties and Black converts gained 65% new ties. In addition to these two groups, there was also one person in the sample who identified her ethnicity as a mixed race and whose lost ties and gained were the same percentages.

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

These results indicate that personal networks are inherently instable in that they change by losing and gaining new ties. In order to understand the impact of this change on the converts, it is important to assess the egocentric networks as a whole and analyze how the size of the network changes as people experience conversion. The average network size for Caucasian and African-American converts prior to conversion was almost identical: the average size for the former was about 6.5 people on average, while it was 6.6 for the latter. These numbers are low compared to the control group which has a network size of 11.5 people on average suggesting that the control group networks are almost twice the size of the convert group networks. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this indicates that converts tend to be less integrated into society compared to the control group, i.e. the general population. After conversion, the size for both convert groups increases: for White converts the network size increases from 6.5 to 8.3 people on average whereas for Black converts the size increases from 6.6 to 6.9 people on average (see Table 5.2). This is not as huge an increase as one would expect since converting to a religion will increase chances for a convert to become more connected. Nevertheless, both convert groups are less connected than the control group which has an average network size of 11.5 people.

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The change in the conversion networks at the aggregate level obscures a critical aspect of this change. In order to further investigate how conversion influences the network dynamics of White and Black converts, I divided both groups as old and young marking the cut off point at 35 years of age. Analyzing change for both groups revealed that all age groups increase their network size after converting except the young Black converts. From Time 1 (prior-to-conversion) to Time 2 (post conversion), the network size increases the

most for older Caucasian converts from an average size of 7.3 people to 9.3 people which is an increase of an average of two people (see Table 5.3). The egocentric conversion networks of younger Caucasian converts also increase when they convert. The average size of networks for this group is about 6.1 people prior-to-conversion while it is 7.9 post-conversion. Similarly, the older African-American converts experience an increase in their network after converting by adding about an average of one person to their network. Their egocentric networks increase from an average of 5.6 people to 6.8 people. Contrary to this trend, younger African-American converts experienced a decrease in their network after conversion. Although this group has the largest egocentric network which is an average of 9.5 people testifying to their ability to be connected, they tend to have smaller egocentric networks after converting as they lose about an average of two people. This group lost about an average of 8 people from Time 1 keeping only about 1.5 people in their prior-to-conversion personal networks. Older Caucasian converts ranked second in losing the most ties, but they were also the ones who gained the most ties.

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Why does conversion to Islam have a different level of influence on personal networks for different age groups of Caucasian and African-Americans? I argue change in conversion egocentric networks is associated with the perception of Islam in America. Accordingly, it is more likely that older peoples' conversion to Islam is more acceptable than that of younger people. In addition, older people have a better chance of increasing their social capital by becoming more involved in a religious community by taking jobs at religious institutions or volunteering. More importantly, they are less likely to be rejected

by their alters because their conversion to a religion of the other is less likely to be perceived as a violation of the dominant norms and culture.

### **Interpreting Change in conversion networks from Symbolic Interactionist Perspective**

**Symbolic Interactionism Hypothesis 1b:** Caucasian converts are more likely to have multiple generalized other in their post-conversion social networks than African-American converts.

The change in egocentric conversion networks of Caucasians and African-American converts calculated by loss and gain of ties from Time 1 to Time 2 which is a standard practice of measuring change in egocentric networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006, Small, Pamphile and McMahan 2015, Wellman et al. 1997a) provides a good assessment of how conversion influences networks. For instance, it is visible that when people convert their egocentric networks become bigger which can be interpreted as more integration into society. This way of measuring change in egocentric networks, however, leaves out changes in the structure of the networks which can be critical in assessing the extent to which a person becomes integrated into society as a result conversion. The increase in the size of a person's social network does not always translate into benefits such as social capital. In fact, if a network is composed of a set of cliques especially of those which are loosely connected, it is more likely such a network will constrain the ego rather than provide her with a flourishing environment. For example, if a social actor has a network made of a group of progressive Democrats and a separate group of conservative Republicans in her personal network she might endure constraint because of the conflicting ideas of these two groups of friends. This shows that change in egocentric

social networks calculated in terms of the addition and/or subtraction of ties provides a limited understanding of change in such networks. Thus, it is essential to investigate structural changes in egocentric conversion networks from a sociological perspective to fully investigate the relationship between conversion and the dynamics of networks.

### *Change in the Egocentric Social Network of Caucasian Converts*

In this light, when Caucasian Americans convert to Islam their egocentric social networks become larger but usually fragment into two separate groups as opposed to African-Americans converts whose egocentric networks tend to shrink but remain ethnically homophilous. I argue that such structural changes in conversion networks is sociologically more meaningful than the merely loss or gain of ties and it is a byproduct of interaction between the converts and their friends and kin. This structural change is induced by how alters interpret the conversion process. This is best illustrated in the conversion experience of Fred whose network at Time 1 has 13 social ties and which is similar to him in terms of ethnicity with 60% homophily changing slightly at Time 2 by shredding seven ties and substituting them with six new ties with 58% percent of homophily (see Figure 5.1 and 5.2). These arithmetic changes in his egocentric social network by themselves do not reveal the structural changes in the same network. For instance, at Time 1 his network has 0.26 level of density which increases to 0.39 density level at Time 2 suggesting his network becomes more connected. Nevertheless, the graphical visualization of his network at Time 2 shows that he has two separate sub-groups which are not well connected. On the top left side of Figure 6.2, Afifa, Firas, Zahira, Ferat, Jeff, and Ayman are clumped into one group, while on the bottom right side Phill, Susan, Simon, and Mike make up another group. These two groups are

different with regard to religious affiliation. The former is an all Muslim group, whereas the latter is non-Muslim.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.1 and 5.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

This type of structural change in his network is a direct result of how his social ties interpret the conversion experience. When I asked Fred how his ranked social ties from this prior-to-conversion personal network reacted to his conversion experience, starting with his number one tie, who is Phill, he reported that:

Fred: He doesn't know.

Şakin: Well, you said that you are roommates with him, is that right?

Fred: Yeah, we live in a house. It is not as difficult, I live with 7 other people. I don't know, maybe he knows. He knows that I was looking into it, but I don't think I really told him.

Şakin: Is there a reason why you kept it a secret?

Fred: I think because it is perceived as weird. But I know that he would understand, I don't think it would affect our relationship necessarily, I just don't want him to know (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Although Phill is ranked first in Fred's prior-to-conversion egocentric network and they are roommates, he does not know about Fred's conversion despite the fact that it is a life changing event. It is natural to expect them to discuss this important event since Phill is part of Fred's core discussion network, but Fred is even not sure whether Phill knows about his conversion. Why Fred does not let Phill know about his conversion experience despite the fact both have intimate social ties? As Fred develops a new self as a result of converting to Islam which is a social process (Mead 1967), he begins to confront two separate "generalized others," which Mead describes as the attitudes of an organized community (Mead 1967). As it can be seen in Figure 5.3, after converting to Islam Fred's personal

network changes in such a way that he is embedded in a social structure in which he confronts these two separate generalized others.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The first generalized other is the attitudes of the organized mainstream community into which Fred was born and to which he had fully belonged until he converted to Islam. This generalized other (GO1) is the attitudes of the mainstream organized community which is represented by Fred's sub-group of friends encircled on the bottom right side of the above figure. This sub-group is composed of Phill, Susan, Simon and Mike. Having converted to Islam, Fred has developed social ties the Muslim community thereby coming into interaction with a second generalized other (GO2). This generalized other is represented in his post-conversion network by the other sub-group of his friends. The second generalized other is shown in the figure above and it is located on the top left side containing Afifa, Firas, Zahira, Ayman, Ferat and Jeff who are Fred's Muslim social ties. Before preceding further into analyzing change in Fred's post-conversion network, it is important to remember that Mead's notion of "generalized other" is not clear (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014) as his notion of the "I" and the "me." In fact, as I have pointed out in the introduction, the generalized other has to be society in order for Mead to make a claim that self and mind are social processes. I argue that Fred's GO1 corresponds to the mainstream American society, whereas his GO2 stands for the wider Muslim community, which does not have clearly defined boundary similar to Christian community. These two communities are now found in every corner of the globe as a result of dynamic processes of globalization. How does Fred's structural position influence his new emerging self?

As Fred's new self emerges he begins to interact with two separate groups which do not have a shared meanings of symbols (Burke and Stets 2009) in that they do not interpret conversion to Islam in the same way. This is evident in how Fred explains his reasoning for not divulging his conversion experience to Phill, who was ranked highest in his egocentric social network before conversion. When Fred is involved in self-reflectivity which is central to the understanding of symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets 2009, Janoski, Grey and Lepadatu 2009), he thinks Phill might have interpreted his conversion experience as strange and thus he prefers not to share this seemingly life changing event with him. Fred's new self, which is composed of the "I" and "me," as Mead dichotomizes self, plays out in this quote. As I have discussed in the introduction, the "I" is the creative aspect of the self; it is the immediate response of a person to others; (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014). The "me" on the other hand, is the "organized set of attitudes of the others which one herself assumes" (Mead 1967). The self reacts to these attitudes of the generalized other through the "I." Through the "me," on the other hand, the self becomes aware of him/herself as an object (Cosser, 1979) and it is through the "me" that society dominates the individual (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014). The active agency part of Fred takes an initiative and converts to Islam, which he thinks is the right religion for him, but his GO1 makes him re-think about his decision. He starts to internalize the mainstream perception of Islam in America by keeping his conversion secret and not sharing with his alters since he thinks that they think conversion to Islam would be perceived as strange and something against the norm of his first organized community.



This dialectic relationship between the “I” and “me” is further illustrated in the following dialogue in which Fred explains how his second highest ranked alter, Amanda, reacted to his conversion:

Fred: She thought it was stupid. After talking to her, I realized she is strongly atheist, which I didn't really know I guess. So she just thought it was a phase. And we didn't talk about it. After I told her, we didn't talk about it anymore. We are still friends, but I think that she graduated, it is different and I don't see her as often anyway. We do not interact that much (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Amanda's reaction to Fred's conversion is not supportive which means that Fred is not getting any social capital from this social tie with regard to his conversion. For Amanda, Fred's decision to convert to Islam is not a smart decision. She perceives it as stupid and transitory. Amanda's reaction to Fred's conversion reflects how Fred's first generalized other (GO1 as shown in above figure) perceives conversion to Islam. Once Fred realizes that the attitude of this organized community, i.e., the generalized other, towards his conversion is not supportive he decides not to discuss his conversion experience with her anymore. Through the “me” part of his self, Fred learns and internalizes that conversion to Islam is not looked upon as something positive and this leads him not to divulge his conversion to most of his social ties who are not Muslim. Although Amanda is no longer a part of Fred's post-conversion network, her reaction still reflects the attitudes of the second organized community represented by the sub-group located at the bottom right side of the figure.

Fred's GO1 is best illustrated by his parent's reaction to his conversion. Similar to Fred's non-Muslim friends, his parents perceive his conversion in negative terms going as far as labeling it an extreme thing to do. He recounts his father's reaction in the following way:

Fred: He (refers to his father) thinks I am really extreme. Like, praying 5 times a day is extreme and asks me who I hanging out with, what are their names, because he doesn't want me to isolate people. He thinks that it is extreme that I don't drink because I am 21. There are a lot of things. I eat it Zabiha.<sup>43</sup> He thinks that it is weird that I don't eat meat (which is not prepared in an Islamic way). And all of his family in the Middle East, they are Muslim, but they drink. But it is more cultural (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Fred's father also does not approve of Fred's emerging new self, especially his praying five times a day. Although it is possible to interpret praying five times a day as an act of discipline and bringing order to a person's life, his father interprets this religious obligation of his son as an act of extremism. Given that in today's American public sphere the word Muslim and Islam are often associated with words such as "extremism," "fundamentalism," "radicalism," etc. it is clear that Fred's father interprets his conversion based on the this stock of knowledge, thereby taking the attitude of the GO1. This indicates that his father's perception about Islam is not different than that of mainstream American society. When Fred explained how his father reacted to his conversion, a crucial piece of information about his father emerged pointing out to his concealed Muslim origins:

Fred: I will start with my dad. About my ethnicity, my dad is actually Palestinian hundred percent. He is a Muslim, but growing up, he never told me he was Muslim. He is not practicing at all, and he told me he was Catholic. So when I told him he was happy. He never told me I was Arab either until I was 16. So he came to the United States and changed his name and did everything that would make him not look Arab. He did everything he could, even like changing his accent. And he didn't want his kids to go through anything difficult so he never told me that he was Arab. And I didn't know I was Palestinian until two years ago (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

This quote shows that his father decided to suppress his Arab-Muslim identity and instead constructed a Western one in order to feel to belong to American mainstream society. It is

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<sup>43</sup> Zabiha is an Arabic word referring meat prepared in such as way that it is permissible for Muslims to eat.

quite possible that his father did not want to encounter discrimination based on his ethnicity and he thought to carve a niche in American society by forgoing his Muslim and Arabic identities. Although his initial intention could have been pragmatic and instrumental, at the end it becomes a purpose in itself as he not only assimilated into the mainstream culture but also denied his ethnic and religious background. As a result, he starts to perceive Islam the same way as mainstream society. Ironically, his efforts of distancing himself and his family from Islam did not entirely work since his son, Fred, ended up converting to Islam as a result of his curiosity about his Arab identity and the desire to further explore it. The attitude of Fred's kinship ties towards conversion is in line with that of his non-Muslim group of friends. Fred's mother perception of his conversion is also very critical and it is similar to Western perception of Islam. Fred explained her reaction in the following way:

Fred: I think she was mad because she thought I was making a decision that wasn't smart about religion. And to her, it is not that important of an aspect of someone's life. And she didn't want it to make my life difficult, and she didn't want me to change, that is why. She thought it was her fault. She blamed herself for not taking me to church more. And she did not understand it because when she thinks of Muslims, she thinks of terrorist. Even though...she only does that... though my mom is very smart and she knows that all Muslims aren't terrorists, but she just says it because it will make her feel the decision I made wasn't a good one. Ultimately, she doesn't want to see me pray. She just doesn't approve [of it] (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Fred's mother, who is a White Anglo Saxon American as it later became clear in the interview, reacts to Fred's conversion in contradictory fashion. First, she thinks of religion as a private personal phenomenon, but later she expresses her feelings of guilt for not raising her son as a devout Christian by not attending church enough. Second, although she had married to a person with Arab-Muslim background, she still does not refrain from painting the entire group of people with a broad brush labeling them as terrorists. This shows that she has taken up the general attitudes of the organized community towards

Islam, which as I have been theorizing, is the religion of the *homo sacer* in the American context. Why does Fred's mother not develop an independent understanding of Islam and Muslims despite the fact that she had married a Muslim? Why does she take up the political and ideological perceptions of Islam, which is the perception shaped by the media and which is ideologically driven to legitimize American foreign policy of the Middle East specially and that of the Muslim world in general? There are two theories that explain his mother's perception of Islam in particular and that of his GO1 in general: The first theory comes from Tocqueville who states that "I know of no country where there prevails, in general, less independence of mind and less true freedom of discussion than in America" (De Tocqueville 2000:111).

Tocqueville essentially argues that the majority in the United States shapes the general thought and anybody is only free within the limits drawn by the majority. To him, a free thinker who dares to go beyond these limits is not only exposed to all kinds of condemnations and repercussion, but also s/he is denied public office (De Tocqueville 2000). Accordingly, if Islam is perceived as the religion of the other among the American public, it is expectable that Fred's GO1 frames his conversion from this perspective. The second has to do with the America's efforts to construct a "New World Order" and creation of an ideology buttressing and legitimizing this order. I argue that when the bi-world system came to an end as the result of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the external American foe switched from the communists to Muslims. During the Cold War era, the other was always Russians who were demonized, but today it is Muslims. This explains why converting to the religion of this new other is unacceptable and why such an act has a tremendous effect on a person's social network. These two theories are intertwined in that

Americans in general and the alters in Fred's egocentric network in particular do not have an independent perception of Muslims and Islam different from how Islam is politically constructed in the American public sphere. As such, they interpret Fred's conversion as ranging from weird to extreme. As a result, when Fred interacts more with his non-Muslim friends and family members, he begins to take the role of his GO1 towards Islam. The "me" part of his convert self assumes the "organized set of attitudes" (Mead 1967) of his non-Muslim social ties towards Islam and he starts to cut down his devotion to his new religion. This is shown in the following dialogue between us:

Şakin: When you are home with them, do you stop praying?

Fred: Yeah, usually. I do not pray on time. I have been praying at night when everyone was [is] asleep.

Şakin: How did their reaction affect you? Did you consider going back to your previous belief?

Fred: Yeah, the reason that I didn't convert right away is because of my mom because I knew she didn't like it. We did talk about it a little bit in November, and it was not a good conversation; I did not tell her I wanted to be a Muslim but I just talked to her about religion (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Upon reactions from his non-Muslim friends and parents to his conversion experience, Fred starts to evaluate himself and his conversion from the point of view of his GO1 (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014). By taking the role of the GO1 to his self, he stops doing his five daily prayers or he no longer does them on time. The "I" part of his self, which is the agency aspect of his self, wants to do the prayer on time is being controlled by the "me," which is the voice of society, and which derails the praying schedule and the amount of devotion given to it. Fred's non-Muslim social ties' perception of his conversion and how they respond to it explains half of structural change in his egocentric social network. The other

half is a direct consequence of how his Muslim social ties perceive his conversion and react to it.

The way Fred's other group of his friends, who are Muslims, respond to his conversion is entirely different than that of his non-Muslim friends. Their perception of Fred's conversion and how they react to it is more in line with the attitude of his second organized community or Fred's second generalized other (GO2). This second organized community is the Muslim community can range from the Muslim community in the United States to the "imagined" Muslim Ummah<sup>44</sup> in the world. Starting with Jeff, who is Fred's higher ranked alter and who was converting at the same time as Fred, it is seen their interpretation of Fred's conversion is different than that of his first group of friends. They provide more of social capital to Fred by supporting his decision. Fred explained how Jeff, who is ranked third in his prior-to-conversion egocentric network but ranked first in his post-conversion network, reacted to his conversion in the following way:

Fred: So we are both in a fraternity, we were friends a year ago, but we weren't that close. But in the fall semester [2012] like in September and October, we started hanging out more; he started to hang out with Zahira and Ferat. And we just started hanging out more, and I remember seeing him pray. This was in October. He actually told me that the only reason why he prayed was because he wanted Zahira and Ferat to pray, but they needed another guy and I prayed because they cannot pray together. He prayed with them but he was not Muslim. We started talking about it, and basically Jeff and I hung out every day for that fall semester. We talked about Islam all the time. We talked about converting a lot. We did a lot of Muslim things. We just talked about it, I don't know.

Şakin: What aspects would you talk about?

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<sup>44</sup> Ummah is an Arabic word referring to a community or a nation. Muslims believe that all Muslims in the world constitute a nation or community which is supra-national. Every Muslim imagines him/herself as a part of this community.

Fred: Usually us talking about how awesome it was to read the Qur'an. And we would look at all of the stuff and we usually...it wasn't only the two of us. Ferat and Zahira were there a lot of the time. And we would just talk to them about it. We had no... I was questioning why I didn't convert already. In November, I was praying 5 times a day (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Jeff's attitude toward Fred's conversion is different than that of his GO1 despite the fact Jeff is also a Caucasian American. In fact, Fred and Jeff became attracted to Islam because of their positive perception of Islam which is reflected in their attitudes toward Ferat and Zahira and Islamic praying. Jeff takes a different attitude towards Islam than Fred's GO1 in that he evaluates it as a religion in itself rather than a foreign culture or a religion that only belongs to the Middle Easterners. Jeff prays with Ferat and Zahira, although he is not a Muslim showing that he is interested in Islam because of what it has to offer as a religion. The fact that Fred and Jeff characterize their discussion of Islam and Qur'an as something 'awesome' indicates that Jeff is supportive to Fred's conversion experience. Similarly, Fred's social ties constituting his Muslim group have a positive perception about Fred's conversion and they provide him with social support. When I asked Fred how his group OF Muslim friends, who are encircled on the left side of Figure 5.3, reacted to his conversion experience, he replied in the following way:

Fred: Honestly, all of them except Nader were in the process with me. They all knew about it, especially Ayman, Zahira and Afifa, the three of them; I talked about it with them a lot in the fall (he is talking about Fall 2012, when he was going through the conversion process) and I felt comfortable talking to them. They are all happy. Ferat and Nader were both happy too. They did not want to make me uncomfortable, so they did not ask me questions about it, but they were happy. Nader was happy (his voice fades out), but it ended up being weird because I knew him kind of before as a friend not as a Muslim. The only thing it was weird because it was a Shia-Sunni thing and he wanted to talk about it a lot and he told me to be Shia. But then we got passed it and now it is OK (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Fred's GO2 reacts to his conversion in a positive way which is different than how his GO1 reacts to it. In this social environment, Fred develops a different perspective about his new emerging self and he feels comfortable to share his conversion experience with this subgroup of his friends. The agency part of Fred's convert self which is the "I" and the voice of the society in him which is represented by the "me" part of his self take the same kind of attitude toward his conversion. Fred's newly emerged self as a result of conversion is taking on new shared meanings and frame of references that match perfectly with that of his group of Muslim friends. However, there is one social tie in this groups whose frame of reference and shared meaning is different than that of the rest of the group members. As it seen from this figure this tie, Nader, is not connected to the rest of the Muslim group except Jeff, who is Caucasian convert like Fred. The fact that Nader is a Shia Muslim as it is revealed in the above quote explains the reason for his isolation from the rest of the Muslim ties. This fact is likely to create tension in Fred's conversion process since Fred confronts two different Islamic perspective which he can potentially use to understand and evaluate his new self. However, this tension proves not to materialize since Fred and Nader no longer discuss the Shia version of Islam. The main tension that Fred experiences as his new self emerges results from being embedded in a fragmented network.

Similar to Fred's post-conversion egocentric network, MG, who is a 28 years old Caucasian female, is embedded in a fragmented egocentric social network after converting. Although her network size increased from a degree of 8 to 13 social ties, this change does not translate into increase in social capital which can be a source of critical social support for her conversion. Such crude measure of change in her egocentric social network does not reflect the structural changes her network has undergone as a result of



conversion. Her prior-to-conversion egocentric social network, for instance, is one hundred percent homophilous both in terms of ethnicity and non-Muslim ties (see Figure 5.4). As can be seen from the figure, MG is the only red node, which means that she is only Muslim in her egocentric network. All the nodes to the left of her network are the ties she gained after converting. Among these ties, only two are the similar to her alters in her prior-to-conversion network. After converting to Islam, MG's network changed substantially such that her network became less homophilous in terms of ethnicity and non-Muslim ties. Less homophilous social network can mean two separate phenomena in the context in which the network is changing. First, if a network is less homophilous in terms of ethnicity it means that it is more diverse providing opportunity for social capital. Knowing people who are ethnically different than oneself can potentially provide social capital and resources to which one has no access through people similar to herself. Second, social networks which are heterophilous in terms of ethnicity can potentially constrain individuals. This is likely to happen if networks are made of sub-groups which are not well connected and have different frame of references. It is seen from Fred's and MG's post-conversion egocentric social network, conversion to Islam influences the level of ethnic homophily making their networks more diverse in terms race.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.4 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The effect of conversion to Islam is not only limited to change in the composition of the race of social ties in personal social network. It influences, among other things, the gender make up of personal social networks. For example, before conversion 63% of MG's social ties are the same gender as her, whereas about 92% of people in her post-conversion network are the same gender. Moreover, the average education level of her alters from before conversion is 3.8 (less than college), whereas her alters from post

conversion have an average of 5.1 (slightly more than Masters).<sup>45</sup> These changes still do not reveal the entire structural change that MG's social network endures when she converts to Islam. Upon converting, her network splits into different groups which are not well connected (see Figure 5.5).

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.5 about here\*\*\*\*\*

MG's fragmented post-conversion social network is a direct result of how MG's alters perceive her conversion experience. According to MG, her number one ranked social tie, Morgan, reacted to her conversion experience in the following way:

MG: First, she was a little bit surprised and may be suspicious because I did not talk about it when I was making the decision to convert. It was mostly pretty private, so she was a bit surprised, a little wary, [and] a little unsure. It seemed like a very quick decision to her because I had been thinking about it for a long time but not talking about it, so while it was a gradual process for me to her it looked like it happened quickly. She was concerned about me; she wanted to make sure I hadn't fallen in with a bad group of people or something like that I suppose. I joined the MSA in the fall of that year. She was my roommate at the time as well. After that we had some time to talk about it. We were living together and of course she saw that I was still socializing and keeping up with my grades and everything, so she was supportive. She bought me my first Qur'an, for example, with the English translation, and she bought me a prayer rug. She was supportive, very supportive with my family and she learned adequate information about Islam. She became an educated about Islam in terms of we can live together. But it did not go beyond that like in term of me proselytizing to her; we did not do a lot of that. She got to the point when she had enough knowledge and we did not explore Islam deeply together beyond that point (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

The reaction of MG's highest ranked (prior-to-conversion) alter can be classified somewhat supportive since she buys MG her first Qur'an and a prayer rug. She also learns about Islam with MG, but she does not convert with her. With regard to her perception about the Muslims and Islam, it is hard to categorize it as supportive since she is worried about MG's conversion and she thinks that MG might have been associating with people

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<sup>45</sup> I used the following coding for education: 1=less than high school, 2=high school, 3=some college or associate degree, 4=college degree, 5=Master's, 6=PhD.

who are potentially could be dangerous. Although it is not explicitly stated, Morgan's perception of Islam and Muslims is in line with that of the American public. This alignment of perception about Islam is unequivocally shown in the following dialogue in which MG states how her parents reacted to her conversion:

MG: So my mother and father. Initially, my mother had the strongest negative reaction. She was devastated and asked if I had been brain washed. It was very... they are very Islamophobic. They think Islam is dirty and from another culture and all the stereotypical things.

Şakin: Dirty in what sense?

MG: It is an Arab thing. They think they are terrorists. They don't worship the same god, [they say] you are going to Hell. The hijab is ugly and embarrassing. There are many adjectives that have been thrown my way. I have never been able to have her understand and empathize with me. It is strange, she is an educated woman, and I can tell her about Allah. It is like the rational part of the brain shuts down. I could talk to her about Islam until I was blue in the face and I still wouldn't be able to get through to her because of the emotional reactions. She can't even begin to break through her biases. Usually, if she wants to bring something up about Islam at this point, I tell her it is not going to go anywhere, so we should move on to something else. After eight years, having the same conversation, there is no point. It is going to damage our relationship if we talk about it any further (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013)

MG: Okay, well my father, he is not... He is a Christian. He is more upset than he thinks. I am opposed to the way I was culturally brought up. He never once in 8 years has been out with me wearing the Hijab. He would not go out with me with that. He won't leave the house with me. After I got married, he stopped talking to me. He is too much like me, so we have always butted heads. He really loves me, so he can't cope with it. He gets so angry that he cannot have a conversation about it, so he just shuts down. At this point, we do not talk at all. He is very angry with me because the effect it has had on my mom. He is really upset with me because I am the reason she is depressed, etc. (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

The above excerpt shows that MG's kinship ties reacted to her conversion similar to how Fred's kinship ties reacted to his conversion. First, it is interesting that kinship ties do not inquire about the reasons for conversion. MG's parents oppose her conversion based on their perception of conversion. They interpret her conversion negatively since they think of Islam as something alien or "dirty." To them Islam is an "Arab thing" and they are

“terrorists.” Her father takes a step further in his reaction to MG’s conversion no longer talking to her because of conversion and marriage to a Muslim. Why are MG’s parents not inquiring about her conversion experience asking her question about her reasons for conversion? It is quite natural to expect the family members and close friends of Fred and MG or any other Caucasian convert to ask about the reasons why they are converting to Islam. Instead, the alters of Caucasian converts are reacting to conversion experience based on cultural grounds. The stock of knowledge and the frame of reference that MG’s kinship ties use to interpret her conversion have patriotic under toning that the US uses to legitimize its presence in the Middle East. This indicates that the attitude of the MG’s GO1 towards her conversion is similar to Fred’s GO1.

There is not always uniformity among Caucasian alters in their reaction to conversion. There are instances in which some alters cut their social ties to converts, while others provide them with support. This applies to Henry’s conversion experience whose post-conversion egocentric social network is also fragmented. In his prior-to-conversion egocentric social network, Henry has social ties to two other Muslims, who are his weak ties (see Figure 5.6).

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.6 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Different than Fred and MG, Henry lost both of his Muslim ties from Time 1, namely Adil and Hamid, but he kept almost all of his non-Muslim ties except for David, Caleb and Leah. Although his network at Time 2 is also fragmented, there is more connection between his Muslim and non-Muslim networks as the density score for his post-conversion network increased from 0.33 to 0.66. This change is graphically visualized in Figure 5.7.

\*\*\*\*\*Figure 5.7 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Why does Henry keep most of his non-Muslim ties? Are his non-Muslim alters more accepting of his conversion compared to alters of other Caucasian converts? Despite the fact that he keeps his non-Muslim social ties, why is there still fragmentation in his network at Time 2? Most of Henry's non-Muslim alters are social activists, so it is plausible that their activism influences their perception about Henry's conversion. Henry has known most of his social ties for long duration of time which might have created stronger bounds between him and them. Despite this fact, his conversion was not fully supported by his alters as shown in the following dialogue:

Şakin: How did family members and friends react to your conversion to Islam? Did your friends give you support regarding your decision, what kind of support did you get, how often?

Henry: Well, Mason (his first ranked social tie) thought I was crazy. I mean, not really. ..we share much more in common than things that divide us. I love Jewish culture and I have always had Jewish friends. We always kid around about our religions; although he does not have a religion, but he has actually becoming anti-Jewish because of the actions of Israel.

With regard to his friends, Henry does not have full social support, but he also is not totally rejected. Mason and Henry have similar perceptions about most social reality meaning that they take the role of the same generalized other when interpreting social reality. For instance, their political views and perception about the conflict between Israel and Palestine are similar to each other as it indicated above. Also, Henry and Mason are involved in political activism that supports the Palestine cause which is another factor increasing their similarity. Most importantly, their views about religion being personal, prevents their friendship from breaking apart.

As for the Henry's kinship ties, half of them reject him while the other half provide some sort of support. He reported the reaction of former in the following way:

Henry: My sister Rachel, hardly talks to me at all, she is civil if she has to be. She will talk about me and my satanic beliefs to others. The same thing with my sister Patricia, she is always trying to prove to me that Islam is the religion of the devil and it is violent and all this other [things]. They know nothing about Islam. They know lots and lots of what Islamaphobes tell them, like Robert Spencer, if you know who that is. There is a whole industry of people that write books and give seminars and presentations to police groups arguing that Muslims are violent and terroristic. Many of them present themselves as Christians. Rachel and Patricia believe that (Personal Interview, August 15, 2013).

This group of Henry's kin also react to his conversion not entirely on religious ground but along political line. The fact that they are taking the attitude of a marginal group, who are sometimes characterized as "hate groups" or Islamaphobes, such as Robert Spencer, indicates they do not evaluate his conversion based on how it influences him on a personal level. For instance, they do not make their decisions about how to respond to his conversion based on whether it changed Henry for the good or for bad. Instead, they are reacting to his conversion based on political and ideological grounds similar to how non-Muslim alters of other Caucasian converts react to their conversion. Their reaction supports my thesis that in the "New World Order" in which the U.S. is the only hegemonic power, Muslims are ideologically constructed as the new *other* replacing the communist to legitimize this new state of affairs. On the part of this group of Henry's alter, it is easier to go along with the ideology rather than taking the trouble of comprehending his conversion based their own stock of knowledge. On another level, the way this group of Henry's alters react to his conversion demonstrates the objectified culture of a society even tends to be internalized by individuals.

The second group of Henry's kinship ties does not fully embrace the political perception of Islam and Muslims reacting to his conversion somewhat in supportive way as it is shown in the following dialogue between us:

Şakin: You said two of your sisters were mildly supportive, what does that mean?

Henry: It means they don't condemn me and they do not criticize. One of them asks questions about Islam. They also just love my wife and like to spend time with her. They actually come to visit, and my father comes to visit. He actually loves Kelsey more than me. And the other two girls just totally ignore me, it's their loss. One thing about my father, he loves me, and I have shown him lots of evidence about what is happening in Palestine. He has visited the Masjid twice and had a good time. He is a very friendly guy. On the other hand, he has a compartment over here that is very open to me and doesn't criticize me at all, proud of me and all, but the other compartment is filled with anti-Islamic stuff. So we will be talking and he will say, 'as a matter of fact, not criticizing, just as a matter of fact, some stupid remark about Islam.' And I will say to him, 'Dad, you have been reading Robert Spencer again.' And he knows he is going to lose the debate and so he backs off. Did I mention that he is ninety-three (Personal Interview, August 15, 2013)?

The second group of Henry's kin is more supportive of his conversion. Different than the first group they inquire about Islam and they accept Henry's wife who is also a convert. This group is also interested in learning about Islam at a personal level by visiting the local mosque. Despite this level of interest, their perception of Islam is still skewed by what Henry calls "the whole industry of Islamaphobes" showing that they are not totally accepting of Henry's conversion. The information they are getting about Islam and Muslims from their personal ties (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970), i.e., from Henry and Kelsey, is still not convincing enough as Henry's father makes references to information he is receiving from public personas. This mixture of support from Henry's kinship ties is reflected in the structure of post-conversion social network (Figure 5.6) which is not clearly divided along Muslim and non-Muslim ties. As a matter of fact, the average geodesic

distance of his Muslim ties as a group is about 0.73 suggesting that his Muslim ties are not socially too distant from his non-Muslim ties.

### *Change in the Egocentric Social Network of African-American Converts*

Although Caucasians and African-Americans convert to the same religion, their conversion experiences tend to be completely different than that of Caucasian converts. This difference is reflected in the change in their personal social network. While Caucasian converts increase their social connections from time before conversion to the time after conversion, African-Americans either become smaller or do not change in terms of size. Also, both groups tend to experience different structural change in their social network upon conversion. More importantly, the social ties of African-American converts tend to be more supportive to conversion experience than those of Caucasian converts. Here, I demonstrate how the effect of conversion on the social networks of African-American converts.

Prior to his conversion, Jeremiah had a large one hundred percent dense network with no ties to other Muslims. His prior-to-conversion egocentric network is geographically bounded since it was limited to people from Jeremiah's neighborhood which he describes as "people I thought were friends from the neighborhood who tried to rob me for some drugs and things" (Personal Interview, August 14, 2013). This network is also one hundred percent homophilous in terms of ethnicity since each and every alter is an African-American like Jeremiah himself (see Figure 5.8).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.8 about here\*\*\*\*\*



Jeremiah describes his life before becoming Muslim as confined to his neighborhood where he hustled for drugs and other things. This resulted in his arrest which he narrates in the following passage:

Jeremiah: ...after numerous incidents, I got shot in my head, my back, and ear. I was set up by my own friends at that time. People I thought were friends from the neighborhood who tried to rob me for some drugs and things. After being shot I still was trying to get back in doing negative things, hustling and getting revenge type mentality. Then it was a bad drug deal and I got setup and I was sent to prison and I was eventually charged. Set up by a so called friend at the time and I went to prison in 2003 (Personal Interview, August 14, 2013).

While in prison he converted to Islam and finished his term in 2010. His conversion to Islam had a tremendous effect on his personal network which shrank to his close kin and one friend who is another African-American convert to Islam (the network on the left side of Figure 5.8). His prior-to-conversion egocentric social network shown on the right side of the above figure reduced from size of 14 social ties to 4 ties, which are located on the left side of the figure. In terms of ethnicity, however, there is no change in his network meaning that at both times all of his social ties are African-Americans. When I asked Jeremiah how the people in his prior-to-conversion egocentric social network reacted to his conversion, he reported that most of them probably did not know about it and that his network dissolved because “we had separated our ways and I was in prison so they wouldn't even know about it.” It is expected that Jeremiah's personal network before conversion would shrink because of his incarceration, but it is also expected that he can re-establish connection with his erstwhile ties after coming out. Contrary to this expectation, he did not reconnect with his friends from Time 1 since he developed a new *self* which is immersed in religion.

Although Jeremiah is a practicing Muslim going to the local mosques on regular basis he did not form ties to other Muslims who are not African-Americans. This is evident in his post-conversion egocentric social network which has Deborah, Troy, Lonnie, and Kenneth. Deborah is his mother, Troy is his brother both of whom are not Muslims and the rest are his close friends who are Muslim. All of these alters are African-Americans. Why African-American converts who are members of a minority group and who are also considered to be the *other* throughout the history of the United States do not form social ties to Muslims who are the new *other* in the American context despite converting to Islam? It is reasonable to expect that one minority group is likely to form social ties to another minority group when they are sharing the same religion. However, data show that while Caucasian American converts do form ties to other Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds such as Middle Easterners, Asians, and mixed racial backgrounds, African-American converts only form ties to other African-Americans. The following excerpt gives a hint about this lack of connection:

Jeremiah: What makes it hard, especially in the city of Flint, especially the urban communities of Masjid [mosque] is the lack of unity, the lack of support, the lack of being more involved and committing to establish a better look of Islam, helping one another, creating whether it is businesses, being in different fields where we can support each other. That is what makes it hard. Again, the division compared to the Islamic Center where I see a lot of my Arab brothers, some still have their cultural ways because they think that you are born over there and that makes you a better Muslim. So when I encounter those types of things and the lack of distrust, the things that Allah tries to warn us from doing, I see a lot of that. So that makes it hard on me because when I am approaching certain individuals and the bias that I get sometimes trying to open up and practice my Islam with another brother or sister if I encounter them. That is kind of hard (Personal Interview, August 14, 2013).

Jeremiah's perception about the Muslim community in his hometown as being disunited gives hints about the lack of non-Black Muslim ties in his post-conversion personal social

network. To him, there is a barrier between him and the Muslim community because he think that he is not an ideal typical Muslim in the eyes of the Arab Muslims since he is not born in an Arab country. Jeremiah cannot develop social ties to born Muslims because of his perceptions of cultural barriers between him and Arab Muslims who he thinks have biases against him. I argue that African-American converts do not develop ties to born Muslims because their perception of African-Americans is shaped by how mainstream society construct African-American who have, for the most part, been the *homo sacer* in the American context. The born Muslims take up this perception of African-Americans creating social distance between two groups. Despite this lack of connection to born Muslims, Jeremiah's diminished network is providing him with crucial social capital which Caucasian convert usually do not have. The social ties in Jeremiah post-conversion personal network, which is on the left side of the figure above, have been supportive to his conversion as he describes it below:

Jeremiah: My mother has been housing me, she gives me a place to stay. Helping me get to where I need to be and encouraging me when I am feeling down or words of encouragement. I guess always doing a motherly thing. What a mother should do. She has always try to do that to the best of her abilities. Support me regardless of what path I choose and she is there. My brother encourages me. He is younger but he encourages me to keep doing what I am doing. He is inspired by it and is starting to ask questions more as he sees me because he remembers me from my past to my present. He has seen the transformation so it is making him curious. It is the same with Lonnie. He is beginning to get more curious as he is with me and Kenneth on the regular. He is asking more questions and becoming more curious about Islam and me and Kenneth we met in prison and we met coming through a mutual friend and going to Jumah (Friday prayer). We have been at it since. He came home about a month before me from prison and when have been together ever since Ramadan (the Muslim fasting month) and in the struggle and looking for a job or whatever. We support each other to the fullest. He is a good friend (Personal Interview, August 14, 2013).

Jeremiah's social ties which can be classified as strong ties are reacting to his conversion in positive way by supporting his decision. Their perception of Islam is entirely different

than that of Caucasian alters because they see it as catalyst in Jeremiah's struggle for the good. This is evident in the fact his mother gives him shelter by letting him stay in her house. This can be a critical piece of support for someone coming out of prison. His brother is also supporting him by encouraging him to keep on track on what he is doing. None of the kinship members is making any political or cultural reference to Islam which is a common reaction among the White social ties. Different than Caucasian converts, Jeremiah has only one generalized other whose attitude towards Jeremiah's new self, which is the convert to Islam, is the same as Jeremiah's. This kind of change in the personal social network of African-Americans is not limited to Jeremiah's conversion experience.

When Mostafa, who is an African-American participant from Kentucky, converted to Islam his network shrank from a degree of 8 to 6 social ties. His prior-to-conversion egocentric social network is well connected with density score of 0.79. Everybody in his network in Time 1 is non-Muslim, but only one of his social ties have different racial background than him (see Figure 5.9).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.9 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The average education level among his alters at time one is about 2.9, which corresponds to less than one year of college. As it can be seen from this figure Mostafa has a high level of homophilous network both in term of ethnicity and religious affiliation. Once he converts, he loses five social ties but he is able to substitute only three of them (see Figure 5.10).

\*\*\*\*\*Table 5.10 about here\*\*\*\*\*

In terms of ethnicity, he lost one Caucasian social tie and substitute it with an Asian American tie. His post-conversion network is equally divided between Muslim and non-

Muslim ties. However, different than post-conversion Caucasian egocentric network Mostafa's network is not fragmented into two sub-groups. On the contrary, his post-conversion network is highly connected with a density score of 0.80, which is a tiny increase from Time 1. The social ties of African-American converts tend to be more supportive of conversion than those of Caucasian converts. More importantly, they tend to react to conversion based on religious ground rather than political ground. Different than Caucasian alters, African-American alters are more likely to inquire about conversion and ask questions about Islam. The following quote, which captures the reaction of his first alter, from my interview with Mostafa illustrates this point:

Şakin: How did Marcus react to conversion?

Mostafa: He was surprised and did not know why. He asked why I was doing it. I told him I read the Qur'an and I believe it to be the truth.

Şakin: What did he say?

Mostafa: He said he would read it eventually, but he wanted to read the Bible first. I think, he read a little bit from both.

Şakin: Was he supportive or unsupportive.

Mostafa: A little bit of both. You can do your own things but other times it was more like he did not understand (Personal Interview, January 24, 2014).

Marcus has empathy for Mostafa's conversion. He shows that by asking him the reasons that led to his conversion. His level of empathy increases as he volunteers to read the Qur'an, reading of which was the most important factor in Mostafa's conversion as I have shown in the previous chapter. Marcus could also have interpreted conversion to Islam on political grounds, but he does not. To him, conversion to Islam is a personal choice which he finds intriguing but also difficult to fathom. Different than Caucasian alters, he does not see conversion as a betrayal or unpatriotic act.

Similarly, Mostafa's parents do not perceive his conversion either as a violation of group norms or an un-patriotic act. Their reaction to his conversion is based on religious terms lacking any elements of rejection or betrayal. On the contrary, they show an interest in their son's new religion by asking him questions concerning his new faith as shown in the dialogue below:

Mostafa: My mom, did not want me to do it while I was talking about doing it. I think she wanted me to stay Christian. But after I did it she was supportive.

Şakin: How is she supportive?

Mostafa: She made me a couple of kufis.<sup>46</sup> She has been looking for Islamic clothing for me. She asked me questions. She started reading the Qur'an, so she asked me questions. Some of which I knew and some I did not (Personal Interview, January 24, 2014).

Mostafa's mother initial reaction to his conversion is not supportive since she wants him to stay Christian but his conversion to Islam does not make her stop talking to him or rejecting him. Her reaction implies that it is important that the substitution of one religion in her son's life with another one is not a dramatic event.

Mostafa: My dad was supportive. He told me if I was going to do something, I should do it in the right way. Sometimes he asked me questions about Jesus, the differences between Jesus in Christianity and in Islam.

Şakin: What would you say?

Mostafa: I would try to explain to explain to him that we do not believe Jesus as being the son of God, but more so a prophet like Noah, Abraham and all that (Personal Interview, January 24, 2014).

Mostafa's kinship ties are supportive of his conversion encouraging him to live up to the expectation of his life changing transition. Contrary to how parents of Caucasian convert react to their conversion, his father shows his interest in his conversion by asking him

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<sup>46</sup> Kufi is an Arabic word for a cap men wear while praying.

questions about the tenet of Islam concerning his own faith. The interaction between Mostafa and his parents do not contain any political elements nor any stereotypes associated with Muslims and the Middle East. Their discussion centers around his conversion as a unique case rather than being part of an ideological construction depicting the Muslim as the new *other* or the homo sacer. In this discussion, Mostafa's parents make sense of his conversion by asking him questions and accepting him as the expert or the opinion leader (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970) rather than the media or mainstream ideology bent on distorting Islam. More importantly, Mostafa's kinship ties are reacting to his conversion based religious terms rather than patriotism. This tends to be general reaction to the conversion of African-American converts.

Before converting to Islam Asma's personal network was composed of four alters who are all African-Americans. The density of network at Time 1 is 0.66 which suggests that her network is well connected (see Figure 5.11).

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 5.11 here\*\*\*\*\*

Upon conversion, she only loses one tie, but she also gains two ties which are Muslim. Her post-conversion egocentric network surprisingly is similar that of Caucasian converts since it is also fragmented (see Figure 5.12).

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 5.12 here\*\*\*\*\*

In terms of ethnicity her network homophily decreases from 100% homophilous network decreases to 80% homophilous because she develops a tie to Faryal who is a Pakistani Muslim. Although the structure of her post-conversion egocentric social network resembles that of fragmented post-conversion egocentric social networks of Caucasian converts, the reaction of alters are different than those of Caucasian converts. When I asked

Asma how did Felicia, who is her number one ranked alter, react to her conversion, she said:

Asma: She was very upset; she didn't believe me at first. She thought I was joking and she was angry and astonished.

Şakin: Why did she react like this?

Asma: Because we met at church. We met through a mutual friend who is a pastor and we met at church. We were Christians and we worshiped together and went to church functions together, and even worked together at the church. We grew up in the church together, so it was quite a shock to her. Because the main thing for her, she said 'how can you deny Jesus?' That was the big thing, after all you have been through and all that you have experienced in your life, to deny Jesus. If I went to another denomination, she would have to understand. She couldn't understand that (converting to Islam).

Şakin: How did her reactions affect you?

Asma: I expected that from the people closest to me, because the people closest to me are all Christians and they are very devout Christians as I used to be. So I expected that reaction to a certain extent, it didn't affect me, it didn't stop what I did. I made me learn more about Islam so that when I talk to her and when I talk to other people I knew when I was Christian, I could explain to them what it is that I believe. I think it made me better. It made me study more learn about Islam, so that I could speak to my family and my friends who knew me as Christian as a devout Christians, to explain why I did what I did (Personal interview, August 21, 2013).

Although Felicia is upset about Asma's conversion, she does not totally reject her since they are still friends. Felicia reacts to Asma's conversion on religious grounds interpreting her as a denial of Jesus. She is not using any terminology that White alters use such as "an Arab thing," "extremism," "Middle Easterner thing," "terrorism," etc. in her interpretation of conversion. The reaction for her non-Muslim network increases her devotion to her new religion since she starts to learn more about it which in turn enables her to explain the reasons for her conversion. More importantly, different than Caucasian converts, she does not stop or control her new emerging self or the "I" part of her social *self* through her "me"



by taking the role of her generalized other. Why does Felicia interpret Asma's conversion from religious perspective instead of political one? I argue that Felicia's reaction to Asma's conversion can be explained with the fact that African-Americans and Caucasian Americans have different generalized others. African-Americans are less likely to take to role of Caucasian "generalized other" when it comes to religious conversion partly because as a minority group they are rejected from mainstream society ending up with their own stock of knowledge or frame of reference in making sense of the social world. Since minority groups are for the most part denied privileges such as economic sources, social prestige, common contribution to cultural heritage of the country, as majority group enjoys, they are more likely to resort to religion to compensate for that loss. As a result, African-American alters interpret conversion to Islam as purely a religious act, rather than a socio-political one. Some of her non-Muslim alters even support her conversion, despite their high level of religiosity. For example, Devon, who is the second ranked alter in her prior-to-conversion personal network, was supportive to her conversion as she explains below:

Asma: She said, 'Oh really?' She said "good." She was so excited and happy for me. I was so shocked. Her husband is a Christian minister. I was so shocked at her immediate acceptance for me and her congratulations. She was excited about it. Her eyes got big and she said 'tell me all about it' and 'what made you make this decision.' And I told her what made me make this decision (converting to Islam) and to this day she supports me (Personal interview, August 21, 2013).

As I have shown above, when people convert to Islam their egocentric social network change in such substantial ways, they either increase splitting into two sub-groups or shrink becoming homophilous. While White converts tend to receive little to no support from their social ties and tend to be rejected by their kinship ties, Black converts are embraced by their intimate ties which tend to be supportive of their conversion. The way alters interpret

conversion and how they react to it shapes the extent to which conversion egocentric social networks change.

In conclusion, conversion has a tremendous impact on the structure and composition of egocentric social networks. Contrary to research on change in social network, much of the structural and compositional change in personal networks occurs as a result of perception of alters rather than the utilitarian efforts of social actors to shed ties or gain ties to bolster their social capital. This shows that personal ties are unstable especially in situations where the social actors violate the norm of the social group such as converting to Islam. Although Caucasian and African Americans experience the same life changing event, namely converting to Islam, their conversion have different impact on their personal social networks. In terms of structural change, Caucasian converts wind up with fragmented social networks in which Muslim and non-Muslim alters are socially distant from each other. African-American converts, on the other hand, develop personal networks which are comparatively smaller and almost always reduced to kinship ties. Also, the post-conversion personal network of Caucasian converts become less homophilous in terms of ethnicity as a result of developing ties to Muslim of Middle Eastern, Asian, African-American and other ethnic backgrounds, while those of African-American converts remain for the most part homophilous. These structural and compositional change in the egocentric social of networks of converts affect the extent to which they develop a salient identity of a convert to Islam or being a Muslim. In the following chapter, I compare female and male converts to shed light on the extent to which converts develop successful or failed identities based on the amount of structural change taking place in their personal network. I demonstrate that similar to social ties in

one's network, self is not stable. I argue that while the social structure in which the self is embedded affects the process of the emerging new self, the self simultaneously influences the change in the social structure. This two way influence determines the extent to which conversion identities succeed or fail. I argue that if converts fail to develop a Muslim identity because of the structural changes in their social network they are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion belief, but if they succeed they are more likely to remain as a Muslim.



**Table 5.1: Comparative Change in Conversion Networks in Percentages**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Size Time 1</b>	<b>Size Time 2</b>	<b>New Ties</b>	<b>Lost Ties</b>	<b>Kept Ties</b>
<b>White</b>	136	174	137 (79%)	99 (73%)	37 (27%)
<b>Black</b>	53	55	36 (65%)	34 (64%)	19 (36%)
<b>Mixed</b>	7	7	6 (86%)	6 (86%)	1 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	196	236	179 (76%)	139 (71%)	57 (29%)

**Table 5.2: Comparative Change in Conversion Networks by Average Ties**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Size Time 1</b>	<b>Size Time 2</b>	<b>New Ties</b>	<b>Lost Ties</b>	<b>Kept Ties</b>
<b>White</b>	6.5	8.3	6.5	4.7	1.8
<b>Black</b>	6.6	6.9	4.5	4.2	2.4
<b>Mixed</b>	7	7	6	6	1
<b>Control</b>	11.5	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Total</b>	6.5	7.9	5.9	4.6	1.9

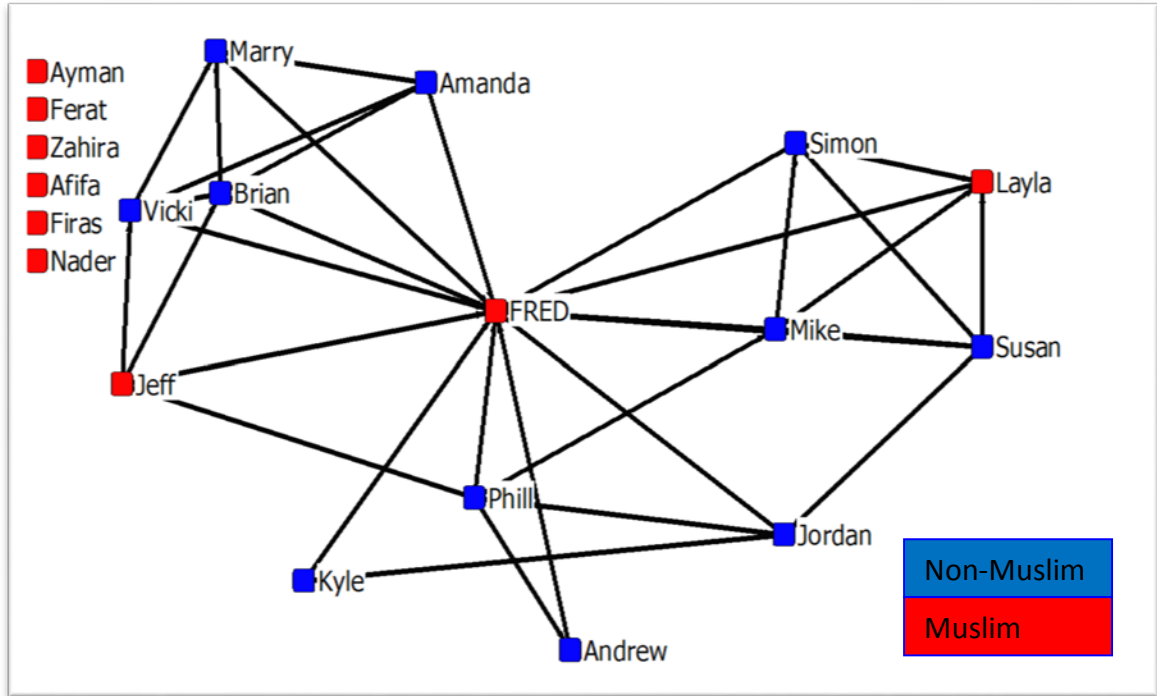
**Table 5.3: Difference of Network Change by Age**

<b>Race</b>		<b>Size T1</b>	<b>Size T2</b>	<b>New</b>	<b>Lost</b>	<b>Kept</b>
<b>White</b>	Young	6.1	7.9	6	4.3	1.9
	Old	7.3	9.3	7.8	5.8	1.5
<b>Black</b>	Young	9.5	7	5.5	8	1.5
	Old	5.6	6.8	4.2	3	2.6

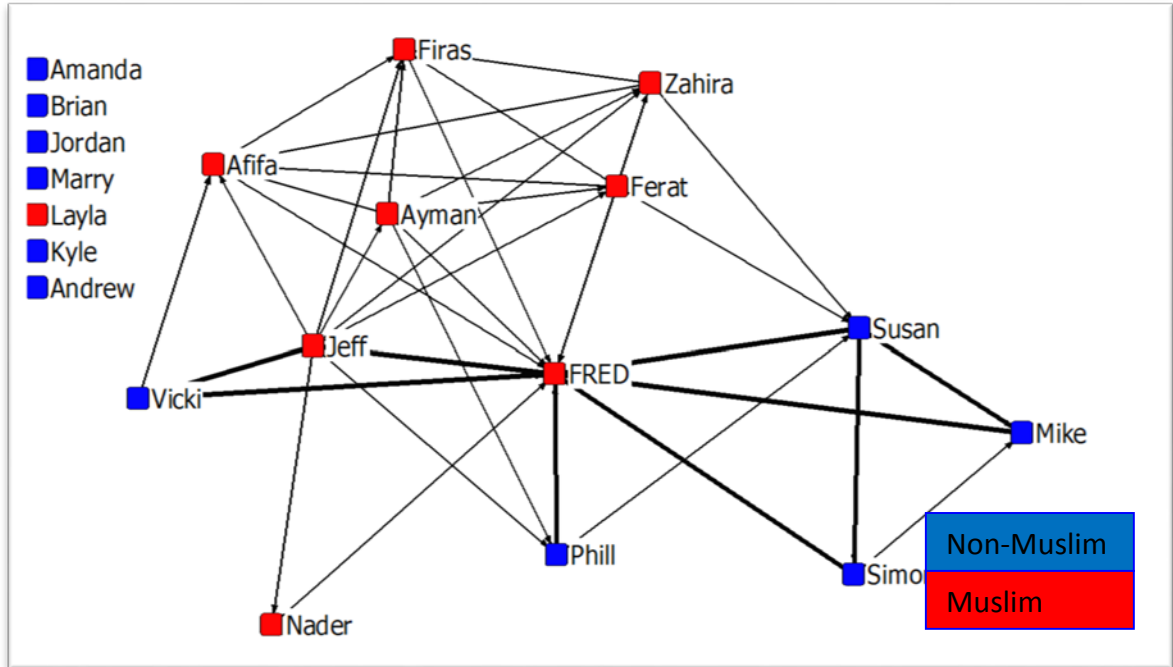
**Table 5.4: Change in the Composition of Conversion Networks by Average Percentages**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Muslim Time 1</b>	<b>Muslim Time 2</b>	<b>Ethnicity Time 1</b>	<b>Ethnicity Time 2</b>
<b>White</b>	7%	69%	80%	31%
<b>Black</b>	12%	63%	82%	38%
<b>Control 1</b>	55%	NA	49%	NA
<b>Control 2</b>	1%	NA	92%	NA

**Figure 5.1: Fred's Prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 5.2: Fred's Post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 5.3: A Convert Self Embedded in two Generalized Others Setting**

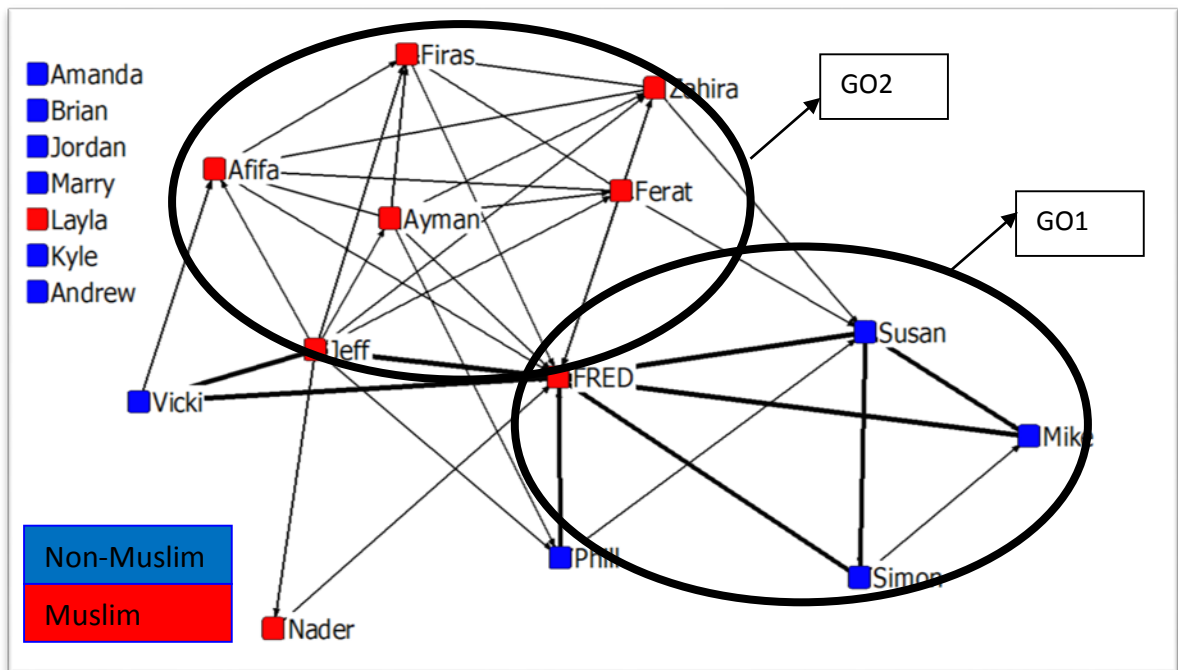




Figure 5.4: MG's prior-to-conversion Egocentric Social Network

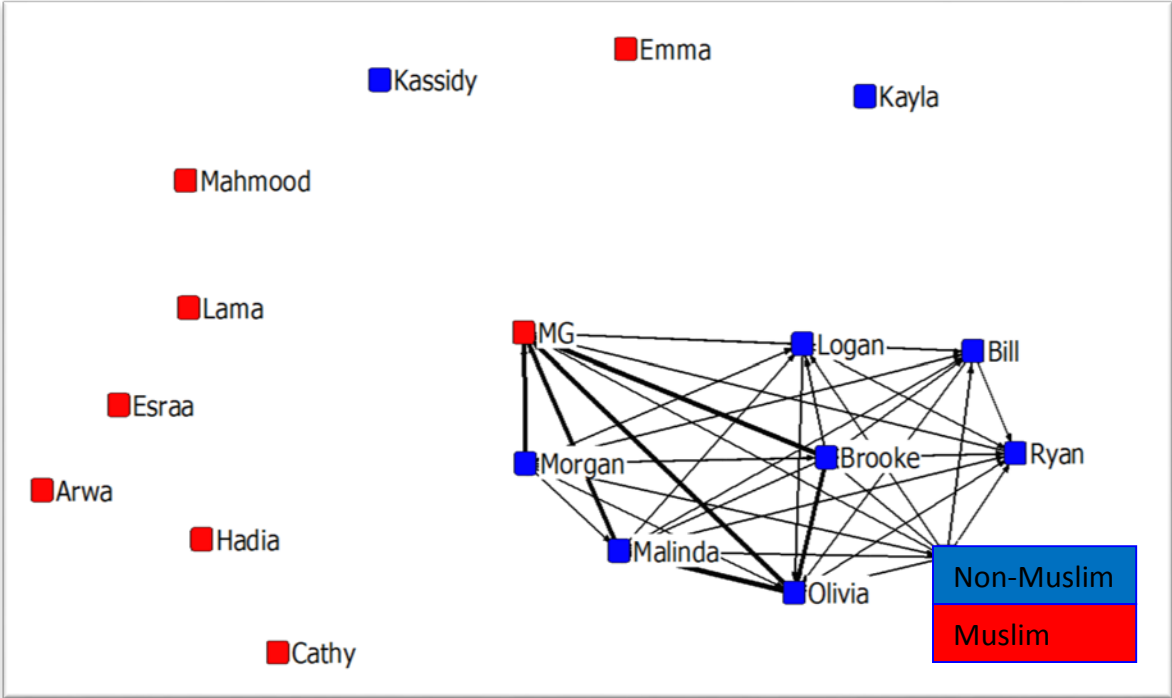
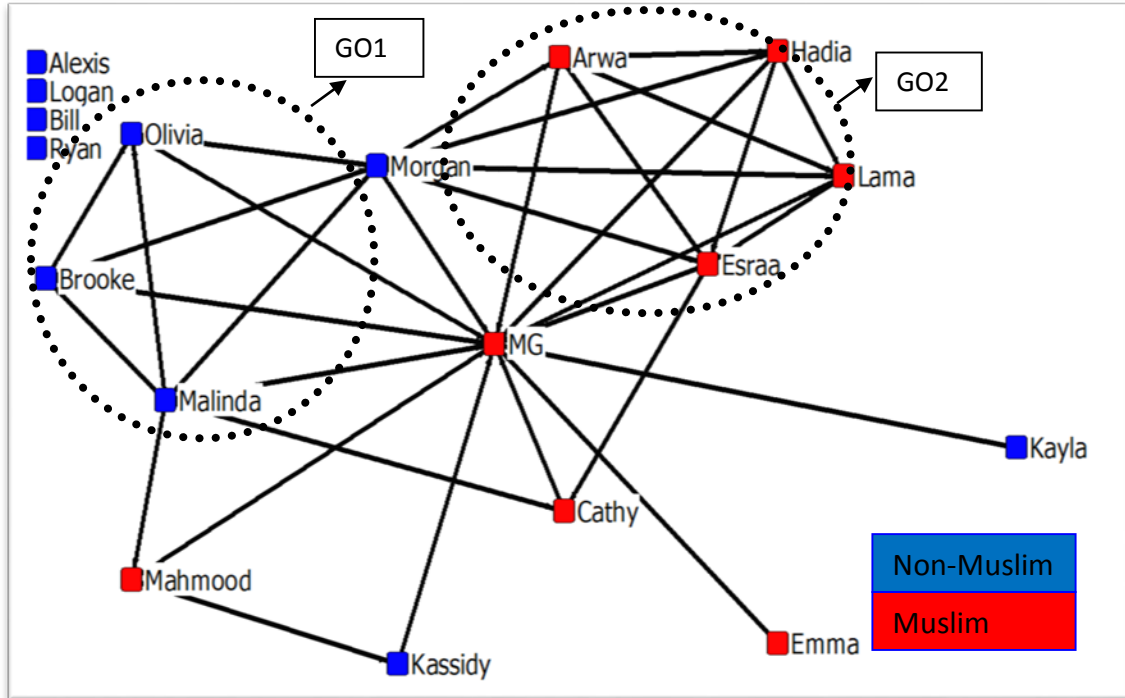
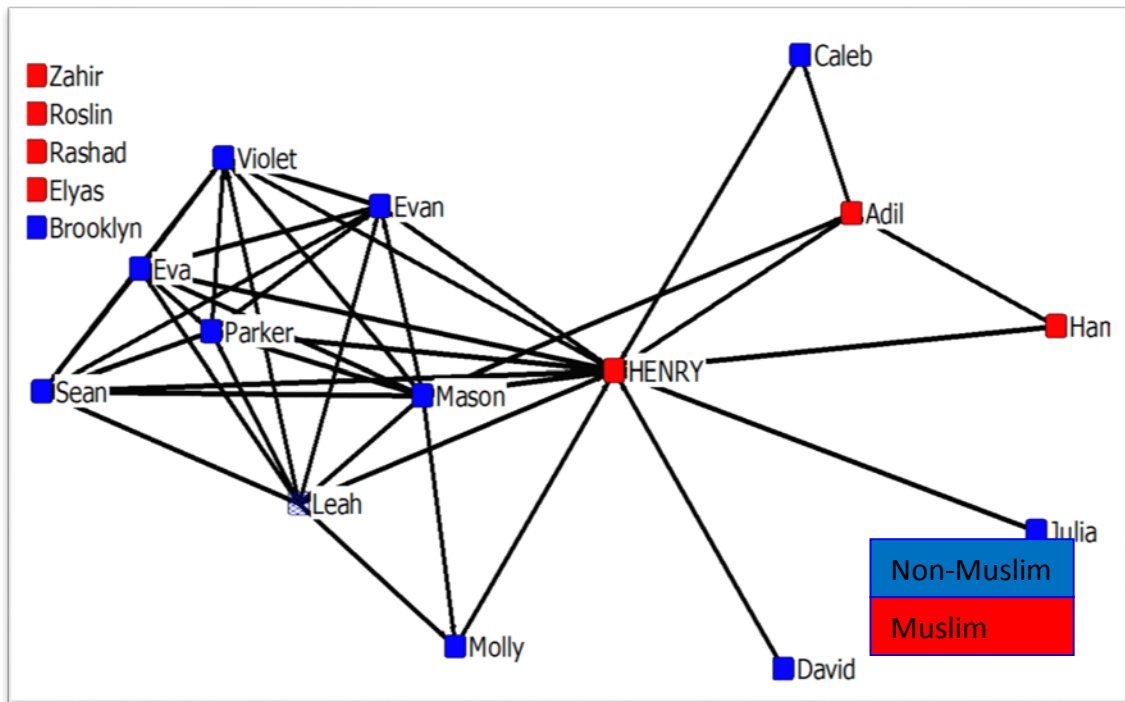


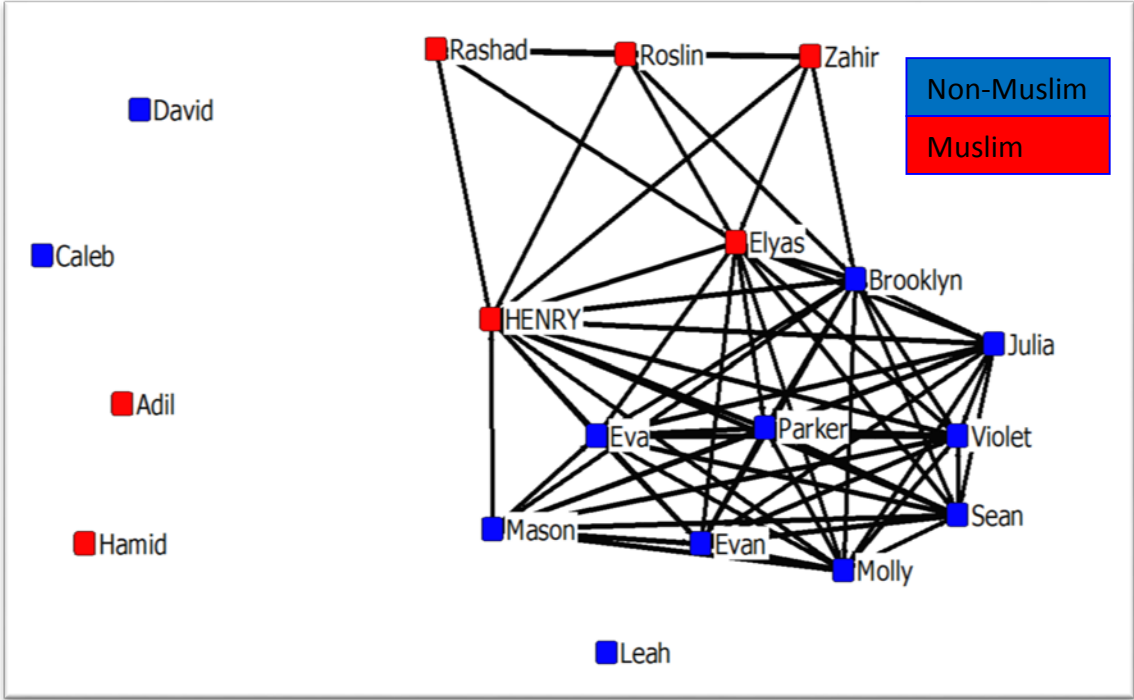
Figure 5.5: MG's post-conversion Egocentric Network



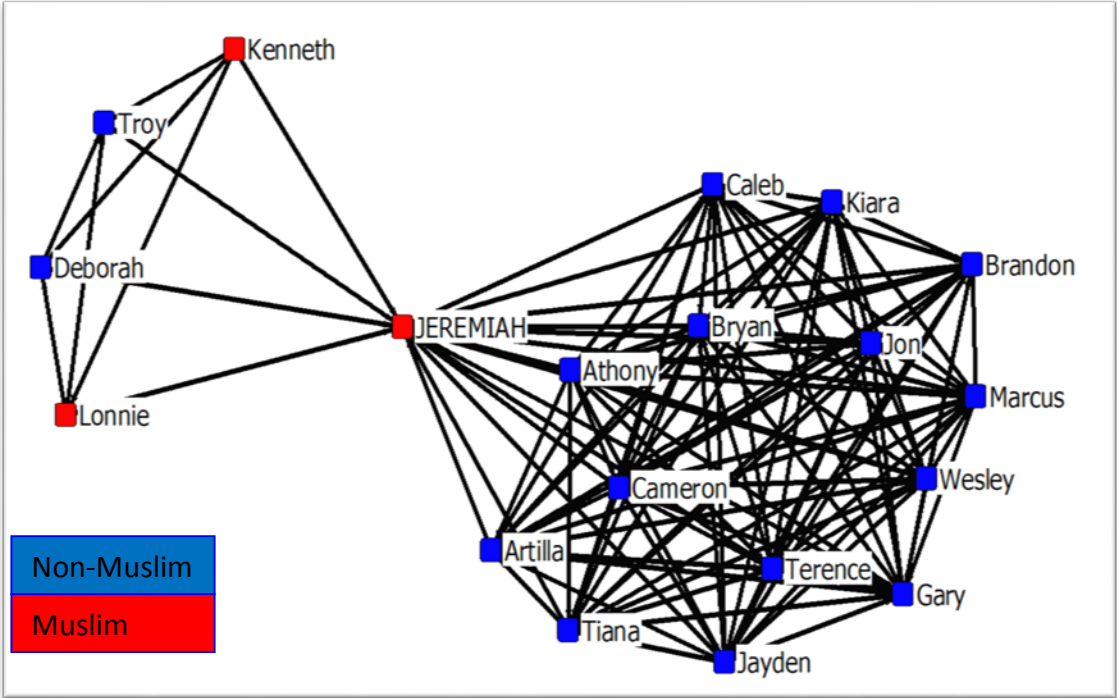
**Figure 5.6: Henry's prior-to-conversion Egocentric Network in terms of Religious Affiliation**



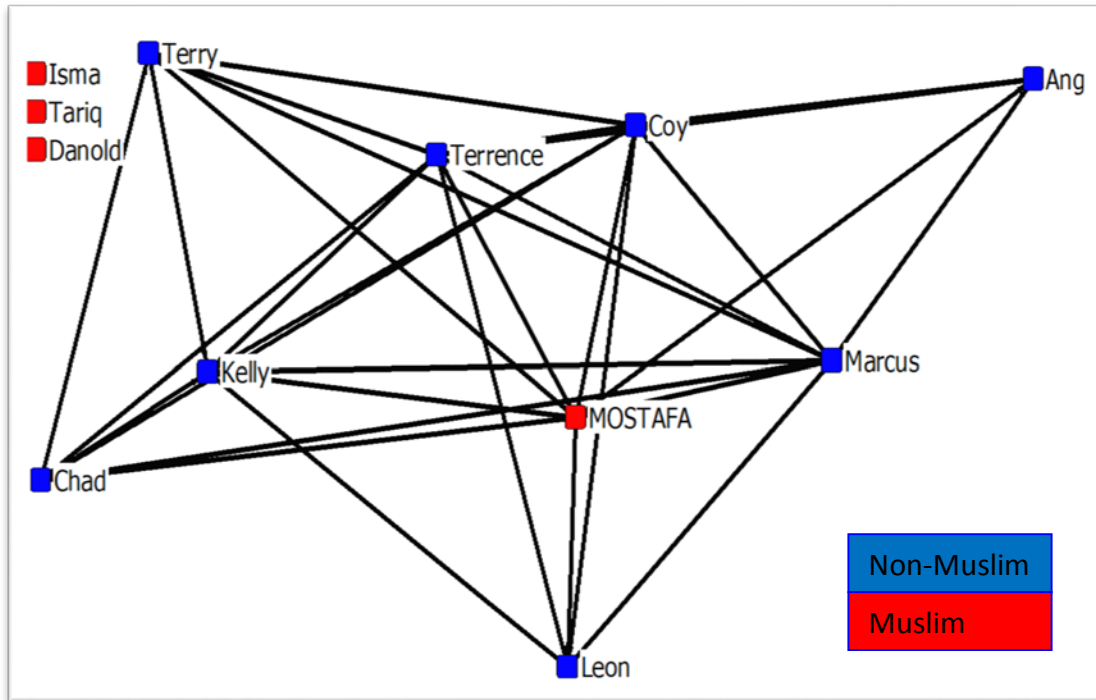
**Figure 5.7: Henry's post-conversion Ego-centric Social Network in terms of Religious Affiliation**



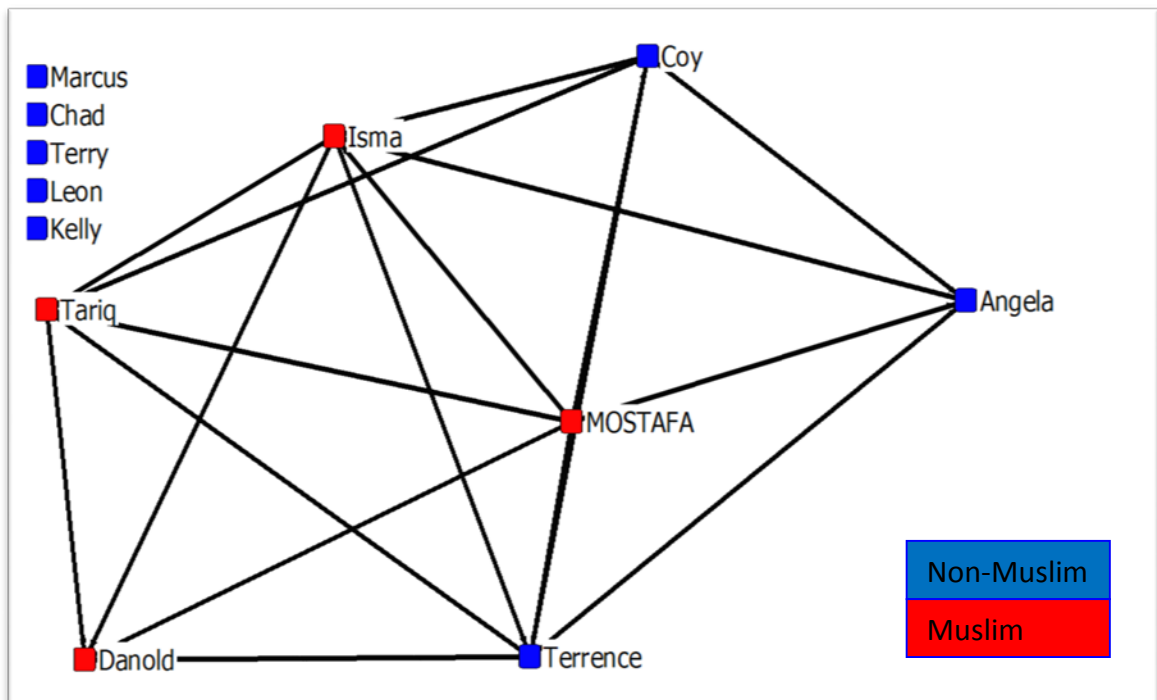
**Figure 5.8: Structural Changes in the Egocentric Social Network of an African-American Convert**



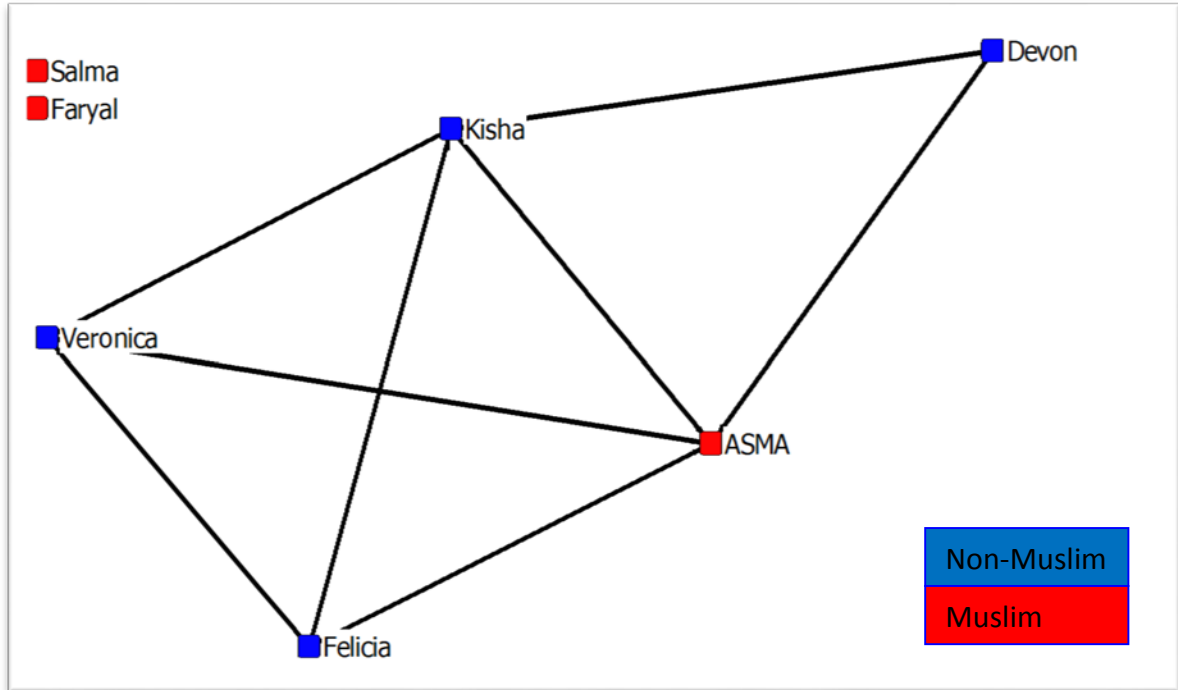
**Figure 5.9: Mostafa's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



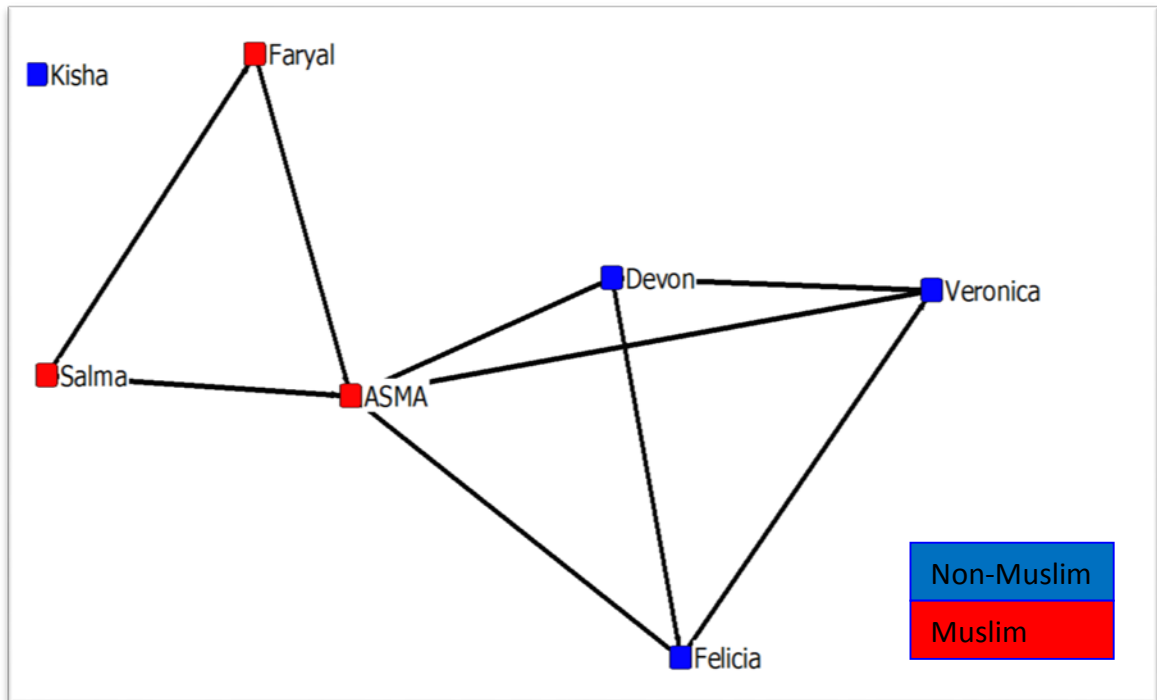
**Figure 5.10: Mostafa's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 5.11: Asma's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 5.12: Asma's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **GENDER IDENTITY CHANGE AND REVERSION FROM ISLAM**

Change in egocentric social networks from Time 1 to Time 2 is a social process bearing far more consequences for social actors than merely the loss and/or gain of social ties. What makes this change more of a sociological phenomenon is the fact that when egocentric social network change, the social structures of networks evolve in such a way that actors either become constrained as a result of positions they occupy in a network or they are supported because of being embedded in a structure which is nourishing. When an egocentric social network changes structurally, a self, which emerges as a result of social process (Mead 1967), also changes with the network. The self both influences the structural change taking place in a network and it is also influenced by this change. I argue that egocentric social networks change both as a result of life transitional events occurring in people's lives and how their social ties interpret this change and respond to it. The change occurring in the self as a result of structural changes in egocentric social networks occurs in the form of identity change which either can be verified or not verified by one's alters depending on the structure and composition of the egocentric social network. As such, conversion to Islam is life transitional event that influences both changes in egocentric social networks and change taking place in self.

Similar to the debate among social network theorists with regard to stability of egocentric social networks (Feld 1997, Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006, Small, Pamphile and McMahan 2015), there is a debate among identity theorists investigating the extent to which self is stable or whether it is subject to change



(Serpe 1987, Stryker 1980). Mead's dichotomization of self as the "I" and the "me" implies a stable self failing to account for the idea of multiple selves which came to fore with the recent advances in the conceptualization of self which is made of separate multiple identities organized into a hierarchy of salience (Burke and Stets 2009, Smith-Lovin 2003, Stryker 1980). Unlike Mead's self this conceptualization of self allows the self to play a bigger role in influencing the social structure. Also, structural symbolic interactionist research shifted its focus from the relationship between self and society to identities and how they are formed and maintained in social interaction (Smith-Lovin 2003). If social actors are connected to two different networks which are not well connected themselves, it is more likely that the self will impact the social structure less and that it will be more unstable.

Instability of self is manifested in situations where the self has to perform two separate roles in two different regions that Goffman calls front region or back region or backstage. According to Goffman (1959:107), the front region "refers to the place where the performance is given." In such a region the performance requires certain standards and/or rules such as the manner of speech, how to conduct oneself, the proper attire, etc. In the backstage, which Goffman describes as a region "where the suppressed facts make an appearance and where the impressions fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course," (Goffman 1959:112) performers saunter and seclude themselves from rigid rules of the front stage. There is an impenetrable boundary between the front region and the back region. I argue that the more the self performs back and forth between these two stages the more instable it becomes. As egocentric social networks change as a result of life-transitional events and how social ties perceive these events and

react to it, what happens to the self? To what extent does self change as its egocentric network changes? What is the mechanism between the structural change in social network and stability or instability of a self? In terms of conversion, to what extent do converts internalize their role identities (Smith-Lovin 2003) and play the role identity (Burke and Tully 1977) of a Muslim as their salient/core identity? I argue that if post-conversion egocentric social networks become fragmented into two loosely connected sub-networks in which Muslim ties are socially too distant from other nodes in the network, then their salient identity of “convert to Islam (being a Muslim)” is less likely to be confirmed by their entire network. In such networks with two different poles, the Muslim friends and non-Muslim friends, it is more likely that social ties will have a disparate meaning of conversion producing a social environment in which *being a Muslim* identity is not verified. Under such circumstances, I argue that converts are more likely to revert from Islam because of the failure of building Muslim identity.

By assessing the influence of commitment on identity salience, Serpe (1987) argues that the structure of self is stable provided that the self is embedded in open social structures providing an opportunity for choice. Others also argue that individuals are tied to social structures suggesting that there is a link between identity salience and behaviors attached to the roles (Stryker and Burke 2000). Social structure is crucial in the process of an emerging self because it operates to constrain not only the conception of the self but also the definition of the situation and the ongoing interaction (Stryker 2002 ). Stryker (2002 ) argues there is a nexus between person and social structure in that social structures have “positions” which carry behavioral expectations. Symbols attached to these positions such as student, professor, rich man, poor, etc. have meaning prompting organized behavior and

certain expectations. People occupying positions are expected to play roles which Stryker defines as “expectations which are attached to positions” (Stryker 1980:57). Roles are sometimes referred to as identities which are “meanings one attribute to oneself” (Burke and Tully 1977:883) or role identities which are “the meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in social situations or social roles” (Burke and Tully 1977:883). Identities are “parts of self, internalized positional designations” (Stryker 1980:60). In addition to identities, there are concepts such as identity salience, which is a theoretical way in which the self can be organized and commitment” (Stryker 1980:60). In terms of social networks and identity change, role internalization is influenced by the degree of connectedness among a person’s alters and the extent to which they verify role performance (Walker and Lynn 2013). Studying student, religious, and work identity, Walker and Lynn (2013) argue that there is a strong relationship between identity salience and the level of connectivity between role-based groups and non-role-based groups in a person’s social network. Also, if people’s identity does not match the identities of their the social ties, they are more likely to experience identity imbalance (McFarland and Pals 2005). Expanding on the idea of “the strength of weak ties,” (Granovetter 1973) Smith-Lovin (2007) further argues that highly differentiated modern social structures resulted in multiple but weak identities.

Conversion to Islam produces both successful and failed identities depending on the amount of structural change in egocentric conversion social networks. Conversion to another religion is a watershed event in a person’s life. However, the degree of change in one’s life after conversion to a new religion can vary based on both the strength of their identity as a new convert and the amount of structural change taking place in their personal networks. More importantly, this change can vary greatly based on the gender of the

convert. With regard to conversion to Islam in the American context, female converts tend to be more visible than the male converts, a condition suggesting that when a female converts to Islam she is more likely to experience a great amount of change in her identity than a male convert to Islam. Thus, female converts are more likely to build a salient Muslim identity than male converts, thereby receiving stronger reaction from their alters.

Conversion is essentially a change in a person's identity. When people convert, they start to occupy a position in the social structure taking on role identities which can be either affirmed in social interaction or not affirmed depending on the composition of the structure and the extent to which the convert and their alters share the meaning of what it means to be a convert. If social actors are embedded in fragmented post-conversion social networks, they are more likely to develop multiple personal selves in conflict leading to failed identity change and thus they are more likely to revert from Islam. On the other hand, if they are embedded in well connected and homophilous post-conversion social networks in terms of religious membership, they are more likely to achieve successful identity change and therefore, they are more likely to remain Muslims. The location of person in the social structure (Serpe 1987) explains whether newly emerged *convert self* is constrained or facilitated. I argue there is a relationship between verification of conversion identity, on the one hand, and the ethnicity, gender, and region of residence on the other. In the following section, I compare the identity change reversion for male and females to demonstrate which group is more likely to develop successful or failed identities.

### **Visibility of Conversion Identity: Comparison between Female and Males**

**Visibility of Identity Hypothesis:** Female converts are more likely to be more visible than male converts. As a result, they are more likely to receive higher level of negative reaction from their social ties.

Male and females experience conversion in different ways. Since conversion is about building a new identity, female converts are more likely to be more visible than male converts as their conversion identity entails wearing religious symbols such as the hijab (the Islamic head scarf). As part of identity building female converts tend to marry born-Muslims generating the strongest reaction from their friendship and kinship ties. While 61% of female converts married other Muslims, who are usually born Muslims, only 42% of male converts married other born Muslims (see Table 6.1). Marriages of female converts to other Muslims compared to those of male converts tend to fail more frequently. About 17% of female converts reported that they either were divorcing or have divorced their ex-Muslim husbands.

\*\*\*\*\* Table 6.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Among the hierarchy of identities that female converts take on, marrying other Muslims tends to generate the most reaction from their non-Muslim alters. Such reaction is more likely to lead to a social structure in which female converts more constrained than male ones. To illustrate this phenomenon further I bring a number of marriages of converts into a sharp focus. When MG, whom I introduced in previous chapters, married her born Muslim husband, her parents not only did not attend her wedding, but also stopped talking to her as she explains below:

MG: We got married three months after we met. It was a quick marriage. We married in Madrid. My ex-husband was an expatriate living in Spain at the time.

For them I got married to a man I just met in a foreign country. They were not at the wedding and they never met him in person. My parents are a bit ethnocentric if not racists. For example, before I became Muslim when I was in my senior year of high school, I was going to a dance party with an African-American kid as a friend and I think he was even a gay, so it was very platonic. My father cried furiously; they prevented me from going. My father is big burly guy I have never seen him cry over anything, but he cried about that. So, as you can imagine marrying a Muslim Arab from North Africa, the worst thing possible thing you can do to them. After I got married, he stopped talking to me (Personal Interview, August 22, 2013).

Although marriage is one of the most important and the most shared events in a person's life, MG's parents did not attend the ceremony.<sup>47</sup> During her marriage, her parents never met him nor were they interested in meeting him. After marrying her Muslim husband, MG lost her social ties to kin, losing important social capital that one needs during such an important life transitional event. Her parents' perception of her husband is shaped by what mainstream society thinks of Arabs and Muslims. In the interaction between MG and her parents the quality of her husband, his personality, what he does, and any other characteristics that would define him do not appear. Her parents' judgment of her husband is not based on experience but it is based on stereotypes about Muslims who are the new *others* in the American context. Since MG's parents do not embrace her husband and they do not approve of her marriage, her salient identity of a convert to Islam is not verified by her kinship ties.

Wearing an Islamic head scarf and marrying a born-Muslim are the two salient identities which make the female converts the most visible but also which garner the most negative reaction from their kinship ties. Similar to MG, Anne's wearing hijab and her

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<sup>47</sup> Not all of Caucasian women converts are married to Muslim men, but the majority tends to marry Muslim men as part of conversion identity building.

marriage to a born Muslim received strong opposition from her parents as she describes below:

Anne: I think she feels like I am forced to wear it. And I think also, embarrassed. I think she thinks 'my daughter is walking around like, I'm Muslim'. I just think she thinks it's uncomfortable. The first time I was in scarf around her... I did it one time only. We were supposed to go out to the store. And she was like 'you have to take that thing off of your head.' And I told her mom, it is beautiful and I like wearing it, it makes me feel so good. I tried to explain these things to her. But she was crying and she was like 'if you respect me, you have to take it off.' I didn't want to take it off because she told me to. I will just take it off when I am around her, which is what I have done. But for her to say "I am not going to go into the store with you unless you take that off your head," I did not like that (Personal Interview, August 21, 2013).

Anne's mother interpretation of her hijab which is a signifier of her conversion is in line with how American media depicts the Muslim world. Her head scarf is ritually polluted and it should be avoided in public places (Goffman 1986). Her mother associates her headscarf with oppression which is something that happens to the women of the Middle East, and if Anne is also wearing it she wears it either because she is obligated to wear it or she is forced to wear it. Wearing hijab cannot be her own choice. By wearing hijab Anne increased her visibility which is undesirable because it makes her different than other Americans. Anne's interpretation of her head scarf is different from her mother's. To Anne, wearing it is a beautiful thing which she enjoys wearing, but to her mother it is embarrassing. Their conflicting definition of the situation and lack of shared meaning of wearing hijab is more likely to lead to the failure of Anne's new identity. Anne's new social self which is experienced during an interaction (Stryker 1980) with her mother is not being verified. The meaning that Anne's attributes to herself as a Muslim who is supposed to perform the role (Burke and Tully 1977) of what it means to be Muslim is not confirmed

by her kinship ties. As Anne's visibility of being Muslim increases through addition of new identities such as marrying a born-Muslim from the Middle East, her kin's rejection of her new identity also increases. Anne describes how her mother reacts to Anne's marriage in the quote below:

Anne: She was very fine with us talking [at the beginning], and [she] was supportive and would give me advice. Then after we got engaged, she became hysterical. She has spread the hysteria to almost the entire family. She is very fearful that I am going to be killed, stuck in the Middle East in an abusive relationship, fears that he is using me for citizenship and feels like it is a direct attack on her. She was like, "you either wait nine months to get married or you're choosing this over your family." And it is not a choice between my family and getting married. She is saying, "if you chose to get married, you do not love your family, and you are just throwing us away." But really, I want to get married to progress towards my spirituality and work together to get close to Allah. That is what I want out of the marriage. She doesn't see it that way (Personal Interview, August 21, 2013).

Anne's marriage to Asef, whom Anne mentioned during the interview to be studying law, is another good illustration of the disagreement of the definition of the situation between Anne and her kinship alters. Although Anne and Asef live in Michigan and do not have any plans to go to the Middle East, her mother interprets her marriage in political terms associating it with the conflict in parts of the Middle East. Anne's mother perceives her marriage as a treacherous act and she demands that Anne should either choose her family or her marriage. Anne, on the other hand, perceives her marriage as part of the process of immersing herself in her new religion. Her marriage is an important aspect of her salient identity of being a Muslim. If her kinship alters do not verify this identity, it is more likely that her identity will fail.



As for the male converts, their visibility level is not as high as that of females leaving them exposed to less negative reaction. This does not mean they are fully embraced by their kinship and non-kin social ties. Although male converts do not get intense negative reaction from their kinship ties similar to the reaction toward female converts, the level of reaction varies based on the ethnicity of the male converts. Accordingly, the alter of African-American male converts express their surprise at conversion but they also provide some support, while those of Caucasian converts express their reaction from rejection to some support. Jackson, who is an African-American convert, reported the reaction of his brother who is also ranked highest in his personal network and ex-girlfriend in the following way:

Jackson: Dan (his brother) was fine with it. He was my younger brother so he was going to suit, you know. [Shauna was] shocked. I guess because I never discussed that part with her, I just did it. So she was surprised. She asked me questions of why I chose to do it. Whatever my reason was, she accepted it. No negative reactions. Pretty much everyone I told was okay with it (Personal Interview, August 24, 2013).

Jackson's kinship ties are not rejecting him because of his conversion to Islam. Also, their reaction to his conversion is not politicized in that they do not attribute his conversion to either the September 11 event nor do they attribute it to the Middle East. One might argue that African-American alters react to the conversion of African-Americans in a positive way because of African-Americans' longer history of association with Islam which I presented in the third chapter. Although this historical association can influence the reaction of African-Americans, it still does not explain all of the variations in their reactions. This viewpoint also implies that conversion of African-Americans to Islam is expected. Contrary to this implication, Jackson's strong ties are shocked by his conversion. Despite their shock, everybody in his network accepts his conversion. His brother accepts

his conversion without showing any negative reactions as well as his ex-girlfriend. More importantly, they show their interest in this seemingly life transitioning event by asking questions about his decision.

Similar to Jackson, Adam's, who is Caucasian American, conversion did not generate a high level of reaction from either his kinship or non-kinship alters. He describes below how his family reacted to his conversion:

Adam: Well, my family is supportive. Although they raised me Christian, they are not real strongly Christian. So I guess I could see you know, some families would be shocked and not okay with it. But my family is supportive and they want me to be happy. They are fine with that (Personal Interview, June 16, 2013).

Adam's kinship ties are supportive to his conversion, despite the fact that he was raised Christian. His family reacts to his conversion by their evaluation of how it influences him. If conversion makes Adam happier than before, his kinship ties are more likely to support him. Their interpretation of his conversion is decoupled from the politicized understanding of Islam in the United States and it is viewed as an isolated event. This kind of approach to conversion is more likely to lead to a successful conversion identity. The success or failure of conversion identity also depends on the extent to which converts adhere to their conversion identity as they move between their front and back regions. For instance, if converts assume an Islamic name upon conversion but at the same time use their non-Islamic American name, they are more likely to experience structural constraint and fail to develop a successful identity change. This happens when converts use their Islamic name while interacting with their Muslim ties (the front region), but use their American names while interacting with their non-Muslim ties (the back region). Such practice implies that converts tend to be embedded in social network which are fragmented into sub-networks

of Muslims and non-Muslims. The boundary and social distance between these two groups is crucial in the verification of conversion identity. The greater the fragmentation and social distance between the two networks, the lower the likelihood that converts' salient identities are confirmed. In the next section, I examine the social distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters in the post-conversion egocentric social networks to demonstrate how this sociological phenomenon impacts the emergence of conversion identity and its verification.

### **The Impact of Alters' social distance on Identity Change**

**Social distance hypothesis 1a:** Female conversion is more likely to result in higher social distance between their Muslim and non-Muslim social ties. Thus female conversion identity is less likely to be verified by their alters.

Since post-conversion egocentric social networks tend to be fragmented because of the perception of non-Muslim alters about Islam, it is important to quantify this distance to evaluate accurately its impact on identity change. One way to do this is to calculate the density of networks which shows the extent to which ego's social ties are connected. The density measurement gives an idea about cohesiveness of network (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013, Kadushin 2012) which can translate to the amount of existing social support (Burt 1982) in a network, but it does not directly account for cliques or clumps in a network. With regard to post-conversion egocentric social networks, the density measurement does not fully capture fragmentation in networks suggesting that high dense networks are well connected which could translate into a high level of fragmented networks. To account for this condition, I measure the average geodesic distance, which is the shortest path between

two vertices (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013), or in this case shortest distance between two pair of actors, namely non-Muslim and Muslim alters, to better represent the social distance between the two groups. Since the networks under investigation are egocentric social network, I transformed geodesic distances into a nearness matrix to calculate social nearness, which is also known as reciprocal distances (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 2002). Ultimately, reciprocal distances convey how near a node is to all other nodes in a network. As it is seen in Table 6.2, the Muslim and non-Muslim alters in post-conversion egocentric network are socially distant from each other. The mean of the average reciprocal distance for the non-Muslim ties is about 0.570, while the mean of average distance for Muslim alters is 0.679. The mean difference between the two groups is 0.108 and it is significant at the 0.05 level indicating that Muslim and non-Muslim social ties are socially distant from each other.

\*\*\*\*\* Table 6.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

A higher distance between the two groups means Muslim and non-Muslim will have separate rather than shared meaning of conversion identity decreasing its chance of verification. Converts who are embedded between two socially distant groups are more likely to perform conflicting role identities in a front stage and back stage. For instance, in some cases those converts who assume an Islamic name use their Muslim names while socializing with their Muslim friends, but use their American names while interacting with their non-Muslim friends. Also, they wear Islamic attire while being with former, but wear ordinary un-Islamic clothing while being the latter. If the border between the front and back stage is tightly closed, it is more likely that converts' salient identity of being a Muslim will not be verified because of the lack of shared meaning of this identity between Muslim

and non-Muslim alters. In the following section, I present individual cases of successful and failed identities which are the result of structural change taking places in post-conversion egocentric social networks.

### *Successful Female Identity*

**Successful Female Identity Hypothesis 1b:** The shorter the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for female converts the more likely they will have successful identities and remain Muslim.

Sadiyah who is research participant from Kentucky had a star like egocentric network in which none of the social ties know the other. The density of her prior-to-conversion network is zero as it can be seen from the graphical visualization of her network (see Figure 6.1).

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.1 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Also, nobody in her network at Time 1 is a Muslim. Once she converts, her egocentric social network changes completely (see Figure 6.2). Her post-conversion network increases since she gains 8 new social ties who are well connected with a density measure of 0.81 and the homophily on religion increase since 75% her social ties are Muslims.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.2 about here\*\*\*\*\*

After conversion, she builds a new identity, which is a convert to Islam and which is a salient identity (Burke and Stets 2009, Stryker 1980, Stryker and Burke 2000) because she is wearing hijab making her visible. She is affecting the social structure by converting

and building a new salient identity since her network is no longer a disparate network. Similarly, the new social structure influences her new identity because connectedness increases the salience of identity which in turn is reflected in role performance (Stryker and Burke 2000). In addition to wearing hijab, she also assumes a new Islamic name and she is engaged to a born Muslim. Although she did not lose her prior-to-conversion social ties because of negative reactions to her conversion, Sadiyah's new social network is composed of alters who are more likely to verify her new salient identity of being a Muslim. When I asked her how Heather and Olivia, who are ranked highest in her prior-to-conversion egocentric social network, reacted to her conversion, she said the following:

Sadiyah: She (Heather) was actually very supportive of it, I wouldn't say that we are not friends anymore; we just aren't able to talk to each other. Her schedule is the opposite of mine. I know Heather would stick up for me if anyone were to ever say anything to me, and she has before. I don't think Olivia would even say anything.

Şakin: Can you tell me about the event where Heather stood up for you?

Sadiya: There was a time when I was attacked, by a young minister's wife. And so, she went with me to make the report. She also made it known to the people at church that she thought it was unacceptable of them and that she wouldn't go there anymore because it wasn't Christian (Personal Interview, February 1, 2014).

Despite the above support from her alters, who are Heather and Olivia, Sadiyah loses her ties to them. Heather's support for Sadiyah is a crucial test of friendship since she speaks up against members of societal influential institution, the church, but she is still not in Sadiyah's post-conversion egocentric social network. This indicates that identity building is a two-way street because Sadiyah's social behavior (Stryker 1980), which is converting to Islam, influences the social structure. Her strong commitment to her new salient identity which can be measured by her name change and engagement to a Muslim person shapes the structure and composition of her post-conversion network.

Her network at Time 2 is 75% homophilous in terms of religious affiliation, indicating that her main generalized other is the organized Muslim community which would expect her to play certain roles of being Muslim. In this sense the social structure in which she is embedded shapes her new identity. She is influencing the social structure by converting to Islam and shedding all of her non-Muslim social ties and the at same time she is influenced by the social structure which is mostly composed of Muslim ties who expect her to play the role of being a Muslim. Different than other converts, her post-conversion network is not fragmented along clear lines in which she has two different generalized others, but there is still some elements of two separate generalized others. Her tie to Amy is a weak tie since it is a potential bridge to a community which is not visible in the figure but which can be imagined. I designate this community as the mainstream American society which can also be considered as another generalized other. This imagined community or generalized other does not verify Sadiyah's salient identity since they have different definitions (Burke and Stets 2009, Stryker 1980, Stryker and Burke 2000) of wearing hijab than her Muslim generalized other. The evidence for this different interpretation of her salient identity is seen in the following dialogue:

Sadiyah: ....at work, I get a lot of negative comments, not from coworkers, but the customers.

Şakin: Like what kind?

Sadiyah: Well, I had one person ask me if I had a bomb. He asked me if I was from Iraq. I have had one gentleman tell me that he was getting warm and that I had to take off my scarf. One guy even said, 'oh, sorry, I didn't see you over there with your hood on, you blended in.' And he told me that I blended in like a ninja. I mean, I have had a lot people... a lot of people ask me, 'where are you from? Oh, you're not from over there?' I have had a lot of people call my Hijab a towel, or a headdress; just very degrading names. I work at the YMCA and I also work at Kmart (Personal Interview, February1, 2014).

This generalized other or what Burke and Stets formularize as Comparator (2009) does not confirm Sadiyah's salient identity. Her act of wearing hijab, which is one of the behaviors she performs to fulfill the expectation of occupying a position of being a Muslim in the social structure is not being verified by her non-Muslim generalized other. Her head scarf is interpreted as a foreign element that belongs to *homo sacer*; it something that 'people over there' wear. The way this generalized other interprets wearing hijab is crucial in the extent to which Sadiyah's new identity becomes a successful or failed one. I argue that her new identity is more likely to succeed because she has limited connection to her non-Muslim generalized other. She only has social ties to Amy, which is her weak tie and Brian, whose average geodesic distance is about 0.86 suggesting that his definition of the situation is similar to that of the Sadiyah's Muslim generalized other and that he has the same shared meaning with the her Muslim GO (Burke and Tully 1977, Burke and Stets 2009, Mead 1967, Stryker 1980). As a result, he is more likely to verify her salient identity.

The success of her identity depends in part on how her kin interprets her new identity. Sadiyah explained that her parents at the beginning of her conversion thought this was phase and forced her to go to the church with them to roll back this phase. However, her parents started to accept her new identity and defend her after she was attacked by the minister's wife and the negative reaction from other people. She reported how her parents' attitude toward her conversion shifted in the following way:

Sadiyah: When I first converted, they weren't supportive of me being Muslim. I was raised Christian. They made me go to church until they realized it wasn't a phase, I was a Muslim and that was it. I wasn't allowed to practice, wear the Hijab, or participate, go to Mosque, or anything. We weren't allowed to talk about it either. Anybody in my family... we were not allowed to talk about it. And my grandmother also weren't allowed to talk about it. I still live at home and they let me practice. I got to a point where I was tired of living one life and pretending not to be Muslim.



Or I could move out and I couldn't afford to move out, so I couldn't. Well, after I was attacked, it kind of opened their eyes. And now they are very supportive. And if anyone says anything bad about Muslims, my mom tells them off. They are both very knowledgeable now, and more supportive.

Şakin: How are they more knowledgeable?

Sadiyah: Well, they just started asking me questions about it and researching it on their own. And I think, not just the facts, but also learned about what it is like for me. I mean after I was attacked, I wasn't allowed to practice but I did anyways (Personal Interview, February 1, 2014).

The reaction of Sadiyah's parents to her conversion is crucial in the maintenance of her new identity of a convert to Islam. Their interpretation of her conversion balances that of her non-Muslim generalized other. At the beginning of her conversion, there is a unison between how her parents and the non-Muslim generalized other interpret her conversion which makes it difficult for her new identity to become salient. She is not allowed by her parents to perform the role of being a Muslim such as wearing hijab, going to the mosque or even to talk about her new identity. This makes it difficult for Sadiyah to make a claim to a salient identity of being a Muslim. After garnering the support of her parents, however, she becomes more successful in establishing her new identity because she and her kin share the meaning of hijab and conversion. In other words, her back stage and front stage (Goffman 1959) are not arenas of conflicting performances, but the ones in harmony. Sadiyah makes claims to her salient identity both at home (in presence of her kin) which can be considered as a back stage and also in the public which can be considered as the front stage. More importantly, her post-conversion egocentric social network, which is heavily composed of Muslims, has the same shared meaning with her when it comes to defining the her salient identity. She does not have to perform two different roles at two different stages. This harmony of performance is also supported by the fact that both her Muslim and non-Muslim alters use her Muslim name while addressing her suggesting that

they verify her salient identity of becoming a Muslim. Thus, Sadiyah is more likely to stay as a Muslim rather than reverting back to her prior beliefs.

When there is more interaction between kinship alters and Muslim alters, the initial reaction of kinship ties to female visibility, wearing the hijab, is more likely to decrease. Female converts and their kinship ties negotiate the terms of visibility. For instance, Kaylee, who is a female convert from Kentucky, was accused of being un-patriotic by her kin when she converted to Islam. However, after several years of observing how conversion changed Kaylee in positive ways and after visiting the local mosque, their reaction has changed. She describes how her two sisters, who are close to her, and her mother initially reacted to her conversion in the quote below:

Kaylee: My mom had a Metastatic Melanoma cancer. The thing is that my mom would have her olive skin, but in the winter she would get white, so she went to the tanning booth. And that is where she got it. Oh, but she was livid. She was pissed. I moved my kids from Arizona. I used to live in Arizona, so I moved them back (to Kentucky), so I could take care of my mom. When I became Muslim, she was like 'OUT!' Like, 'Out right now!' And so I took my stuff and I took them. My mom was like that woman that always believed whatever everyone else thought. She was always concerned about everybody else's impression of her. And because everything that happened at 9/11 was a big deal, she didn't want to be associated with that. My sisters were very much...whatever bothered my mom, bothered them. Anything, they followed her. My mom and my sisters, they didn't want to have anything to do with me. When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I tried to give her zamzam water<sup>48</sup> and both of my sisters, accused me of trying to poison my mom (Personal Interview, January 14, 2014).

This quote shows how female conversion is opposed vehemently even when they make indescribable sacrifices for their family members. Although Kaylee has two other female

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<sup>48</sup> According Islamic tradition, zamzam water, which is found in Mecca, is miraculously generated water, the source of which is from God. Muslims believe that this water gushed from ground when Ishmael, the infant son of Abraham, kept crying for water.

siblings who could have taken care of her mother while she was suffering from cancer, nobody assumed that responsibility except her. In order to get close to her mother and supervise her care, Kaylee moved her family from Arizona to Kentucky. However, her mother kicked her out of her house upon learning about her conversion. This exchange taking place between the two of them occurred three years post-September 11, indicating how the political and social atmosphere of that time influences her mother's perception of her conversion. She makes sense of her conversion by associating it with September 11 events. What is important is that her perception is shaped by the attitudes of the organized non-Muslim mainstream community towards Muslims. The way her mother interprets her conversion also influences the perception of her siblings who accuse her of poisoning her mother, although Kaylee's intention is to heal her. This conflicting definition of the situation and the discord of shared meaning between Kaylee and her kinship ties indicates that her conversion and identity building is not supported. Her sisters and mother make sense of her conversion by associating it with the tragedy of September 11, despite the fact that Kaylee's conversion and wearing Islamic cloth has no connection with the events. Their perception of Kaylee's visibility as a Muslim and their attitude towards it is the same as the attitude of organized mainstream American society. Her mother thinks that members of mainstream society do not have good impression of Muslims. They associate her with Muslims because of Kaylee's conversion. For them, being associated with the religion of the *homo sacer* is undesirable and it has to be avoided. Any element of it, even if it is considered sacred in this religion is defiled and it should be shunned. When Kaylee offers zamzam water, which she thinks might cure her mother, her sisters interpret her action as

poisoning their mother, indicating the discrepancy between their definitions of the situation.

The reaction of Kaylee's kin and non-kin alters from Time 1 is crucial for the verification of her identity because she is embedded in social structure which is hundred percent homophilous both in terms of ethnicity and gender (see Figure 6.3). Kaylee's perception of her social self is shaped by the attitude of those alters composing her prior-to-conversion personal network. In order for her to build a successful conversion identity of being a Muslim, it is crucial that her identity also verified by these alters most of which are still in her personal network.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.3 about here\*\*\*\*\*

After conversion, she only lost ties to Lisa to whom Kaylee cut her social ties because of how she reacted to her conversion but also because of her rough life style as Kaylee describes below:

Kaylee: Not very well (to her conversion) at first. I ended up having to un-friend her because she drinks a lot and she does drugs a lot. She lived a rough life style, drinking and drugs and stuff like that (Personal Interview, January 14, 2014).

Kaylee cuts her social tie to Lisa because she does not approve of her life style which she interprets in light of her new religion. The fact Lisa does not react well to her conversion makes this a mutual decision. Kaylee's post-conversion social network is composed of two sub-networks which are Muslim and non-Muslim (see Figure 6.4). However, the two sub-networks are not totally disconnected from each other.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.4 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The fact Kaylee develops a new Muslim sub-network which is completely connected to post-her conversion indicates that self influences social structure (Stryker 1980). The fact that her front and back region are not separated from each other increases the chance of new salient identity's success. This new social structure in which is embedded is a result of gradual change in the attitude of her kinship ties as she describes below:

Kaylee: I guess, gradually they saw that I am still the same person, ya know, not what they thought. I was going to say, after my mom passed away (in 2004), there wasn't that 9/11 stuff that she was so obsessed with all the time. The 'oh she's part of a terrorist organization.' Before my mom passed away, I just have to say this, she did come to terms. Well, she just called me out of the blue one day and asked for me to come see her. She was in the hospital at that time, and so I did. And she was like- she was like first, 'Don't tell your sisters that we are having this conversation.' And I said, 'Okay.' She asked me to come and see her; and so we were okay. She said that I was the most spiritual person that she knew and she asked if God was going to forgive her. But my sisters took a while to get out of that mindset. They even came to the Mosque with me during Ramadan for iftar (breaking fast) and prayed with me. They even wore hijab that night. It was kind of funny. And my dad came too and he took picture of us. He was telling my sisters how beautiful they were looking in hijab.

Şakin: Do they ask you questions about your faith now? Do they ask you why you are Muslim?

Kaylee: They don't ask why I am Muslim. They will ask some things. Like Natalie, she loves the word Insha'Allah and when I explained to her what Insha' Allah means she says it all the time. Her Catholic friends are like 'what are you saying (laughing)?' My twin sister though, she asks a lot of questions because we were raised to be very feminist. And our papaw (grandfather) taught us how to shoot guns, how to ride horses, and how to swim and so you know. Especially Shawna, she is always asking questions about, 'Can woman do this, or can woman do that?' And I am like, if you actually read the Quran word-for-word, you will find that it is a feminist religion. And that's how certain things are; we have the right to own property and we had the right for the divorce, way before women in the west.' And I think that helped and when we were able to talk about that kind of thing, they would say, 'oh she's not being submissive' (Personal Interview, January 14, 2014).

Kaylee's kinship ties move from totally rejecting her to using her new religion's belief system while embarking on an endeavor. This shift in their attitude is also reflected in the

structure of her network at Time 2 suggesting that her new identity is verified by both her Muslim and non-Muslim social ties. After Kaylee's mother passes way, her sisters no longer have an opinion leader (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970) who interprets and politicizes her conversion by associating it with the tragedy of September 11. Also, the changes in Kaylee's life are interpreted at a personal level elevating her to a position of the most pious person in the family. This new position is shown by her mother's actions who asks her opinion about whether she will achieve salvation in the eyes of God or not. Most importantly, the social distance between Kaylee's kinship and Muslim ties decreases as her sisters and father visit the mosque during the holy month of Ramadan. For them, Islam is no longer the religion of the *homo sacer* and Kaylee's conversion has to be evaluated in itself rather than associating it with patriotism of post-September 11.

The social distance between non-Muslim and Muslim alters of female converts tend to decrease when the members of both group engage in social interaction. This abridged distance between both groups increases the shared meaning of conversion identity, thereby increasing the likelihood of its verification. Callie, similar to Kaylee, faced strong negative reaction from her kinship ties especially her sister and mother who opposed her new identity, especially wearing the hijab. When her sister and mother interacted more with Callie's Muslim female friends their perceptions about Muslims have changed. Despite this change, Callie and her sister still negotiate the term and conditions under which she can be visible in her hijab. I asked Callie how her sister, who is ranked highest in her social network, reacted to her conversion and her hijab:

Callie: She thought I was crazy. For example, one time I told her I was going to the Masjid (mosque) and she asked me how I knew that nobody was a terrorist. She did

ask me that. I took her to my halaqah<sup>49</sup> with all the other girls. I told her we were just like other girls; we are just Muslim and praying. And she kept thinking that it would be super serious, like we wouldn't laugh or be super serious. She was worried about me marrying a Muslim and being oppressed and not having a voice and things like that. I remember she was really shocked that Hawa was going to be a doctor. Those were just her concerns.

Şakin: How did she react to your decision on wearing the hijab?

Callie: She has been very good about it for the most part. There are certain times where she asks me to take it off; and I will do it for her because it is not worth the argument. If she thinks we are going to go somewhere where she will see somebody she knows she wants me to take it off. The other day I took her to ULTA; they just opened the store down the road and one of her friends works there, so she did not want her friend to see me wearing hijab. She did not make me to take it off but she refused to get out of the car until I took it off. It is just when we go somewhere where she knows somebody. But we went to Ann Arbor to an art fair and I wore it there and she was fine with me walking around with it.

Şakin: And why do you think she doesn't want her friends to see you in the hijab?

Callie: I think probably because she is embarrassed and she doesn't want the attention. She is very shy and she doesn't want to answer the questions. It is a little bit of everything (Personal Interview, September 2, 2013).

Callie's sister's attitude toward her hijab, which is part of her salient identity of being a Muslim, is influenced by her non-Muslim generalized other attitude towards it. Her sister does not want her friends to see Callie's hijab because it is something undesirable. It is associated with ultimate other and wearing it is a stigma which Callie's sister does not want to be seen with it. In the immediate geographical area where the attitude of organized community is present, the hijab is being avoided. However, when Callie and her sister to go Ann Arbor, where their non-Muslim generalized other is absent her hijab is not an issue defining who Callie is. If Callie's identity is verified by her generalized other, she will not be able to perform her role identity, which being a Muslim. Before converting to Islam

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<sup>49</sup> Halaqah is an Arabic word meaning circle. It is a name of a religious gathering during which people learn about Islam or socialize. Callie reported that she attends such a gathering with a group of friends at a local mosque in her area.

Callie was embedded in personal networks made up of social ties which were similar to her in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation (see Figure 6.5). In this kind of network which is 80% homophilous in terms of ethnicity her identity is more likely to be verified.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.5 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The reaction of her sister to her conversion reflects the structure of this network. Her conversion affects the structure of her network to the extent that she loses three non-Muslim ties and gain six new ties which are all Muslim (see Figure 6.6). What stands out about her post-conversion network is that it is not fragmented, but highly connected with 0.93 density level.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.6 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Her sister, Amy, who opposes her conversion at the beginning is now connected to everybody in her post-conversion personal social network. The following quote reflects this structure of her new network concerning her sister:

Callie: She loves my friends. I went to Florida with my Muslim friends and we met my sister down there and she loved them. She had a blast. She often goes with me to hang out with them when she is back from school. She goes to school at Central (Michigan University) but comes home on the weekends and holidays. She is eight years younger than me. She is supportive, but she doesn't agree with certain principles. Like modesty being one, that is the big one that we disagree on (Personal Interview, September 2, 2013).

Since Amy is a friend of Callie, who is at the same time her sister, Amy's tie to Callie is transitive (Granovetter 1973) meaning that she started becoming friends with Callie's Muslim friends. This transitivity is a function of the strength of Callie's friendship with her Muslim alters. As a result, Amy no longer bears stereotypes against Callie's Muslim friends. On the contrary, she enjoys socializing with them to the extent she goes on vacation



with them. Although Callie says that her sister does not agree with her decision of becoming Muslim, this does not mean her sister does not confirm her identity of being a Muslim. The sheer level of connection between her sister and her Muslim alters suggest that Callie's role identity is verified. The attitude that Amy has toward Callie's conversion is similar to that of her Muslim friend who reacted to her conversion in the following manner:

Callie: I met them after I became Muslim, four of them are converts themselves. This is how I met all of them, I met them my first Ramadan in 2012. They had just started a convert Halaqah; and that is how we met each other and became such good friends. They were supportive. I mean, they knew me; and at that time I had been Muslim for 8 months. And so they were supportive and wanted to know how they could help. So it was the born Muslims, teaching the converts about Islam and how to practice better and stuff like that (Personal Interview, September 2, 2013).

Callie's salient identity is more likely to succeed because it is verified by her both Muslim and non-Muslim generalized others. Her Muslim alters nurture her new identity through study groups to which her sister makes visits suggesting that they expect Callie to perform the role of being Muslim which among other things might include wearing hijab, attending religious services, fasting, praying, etc. Callie's successful identity is another example of how social self simultaneously influences the social structure and being influenced by it. By converting to Islam Callie influenced the composition and structure of her social network which transformed from being overwhelming Caucasian social ties to half homophilous network. Her network from being completely non-Muslim network turned into overwhelming Muslim network as indicated in the figure above. This new structure allows the verification of Callie's identity showing that social self while affects social structure is at the same time is being affected by it.

*Failed Female Identity and Reversion from Islam*

**Failed Female Identity Hypothesis 1c:** The longer the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for female converts the more likely they will have failed identities and the more likely they will revert from Islam.

Converts are likely to fail in developing successful Muslim identity if they are embedded in bi-polar post-conversion social networks in which the sub-networks are not connected. Under such circumstances, a convert interacts with two separate group of alters who have different interpretation of the salient identity. In such a post-conversion network, converts will be deprived of social capital from their prior-to-conversion network thereby becoming more prone to revert to their prior belief. A network that is well connected is more likely to provide a greater amount of social capital than the one which is fragmented. Also, a well connected and homophilous network is more likely to verify the salient identity of the ego facilitating a stable self than the one which is fragmented and partially verifying the salient identity.

To illustrate this point, I provide a detail account of conversion experiences of Kelsey,<sup>50</sup> who is the only research participant who converted to Islam and then reverted back to her prior belief. Starting with her prior-to-conversion network, it is visible that she is embedded in homophilous network which is also well connected (see Figure 6.7). All of

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<sup>50</sup> I have used this synonym for two different research participants without realizing it. In addition to names, each participant has also an identification number which makes them distinguishable from others. This participant is Kelsey 23, while the other one I mentioned in previous chapters is Kelsey 9.

Kelsey's alters are Caucasian Americans like her and the density of her network is about 0.62 suggesting a well connected network.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.7 about here\*\*\*\*\*

In terms of gender homophily, her network is mostly composed of females (71% homophilous) with one tie to her father and another to her ex-boyfriend. After converting, her egocentric social network changes in a number of ways. First, the density of her network decreases by 0.12 points to 0.5 degree. Although this seems like a low amount of decrease, the structural change in her network suggests that this amount of change is likely to be influential on the verification of her salient identity of being a Muslim (see Figure 6.8). Different than other fragmented networks, Kelsey's post-conversion egocentric network presents two complete separate network of Muslims and non-Muslims who expect different role performances of her new identity.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.8 about here\*\*\*\*\*

When Kelsey converted to Islam, her non-Muslim social ties either avoided discussing it or did not support her decision. Kelsey reported how Molly, who is her mother and who is well connected (her density is 0.43), reacted to her conversion in the following way:

Kelsey: She said, 'NO!' (laughing). I mean she didn't tell me, 'No, you can't do this,' she said 'Don't do this.' Especially in the South, in North Carolina,<sup>51</sup> there are beliefs, I don't want to offend you, I think there is a belief that the men, especially Arab men, are controlling (Personal Interview, January 23, 2014).

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<sup>51</sup> Kelsey met her husband online while she was living in North Carolina, but soon after she moved to Kentucky where her future husband lived.

When Kelsey converted she also married a Muslim person generating negative reaction from her kinship ties. Her mother interprets her decision based on her opinion about a broad ethnic group to which her husband belongs. The general statement about the Arab men being controlling is problematic since this general statement cannot be applied in all Arab countries. More importantly, her conversion and marriage becomes a subject of comparison between the culture of out-groups and in-groups (Tajfel 1982) rather than a specific individual case. Her new identity of being a Muslim is not verified by her kinship ties whose definition of the situation is similar to Kelsey's. In order for Kelsey to successfully build her new identity, it is important that her generalized other interprets her conversion as an isolated event in itself rather than attributing it to the culture of "the Arab men." Although converting to a new religion is an important event in a person's life, Kelsey's highest ranked alter (Caroline) avoided discussing it. Caroline reacted to her conversion as if it did not happen as it can be seen from the quote below:

Kelsey: She was fine. She was still my friend. She didn't really share an opinion. She didn't say anything. She probably thought it, but she didn't say anything (Personal Interview, January 23, 2014).

Kelsey's alters do not acknowledge the change taking place in her salient identity which needs verification. The kind of social structure in which she is embedded does not facilitate the emergence of her new identity; it is there but it is not confirmed. It is implicitly a rejected identity since it is associating Kelsey with *homo sacer*. Her identity as being a Muslim is a failed identity since it is not being confirmed by her generalized other. The only person who gave a conditional support to Kelsey's marriage and conversion was her dad who himself violated a norm by having extra-marital affairs. Kelsey explained this conditional support below:

Kelsey: My dad didn't say a lot, he is pretty open-minded. He didn't say anything. He is a preacher too.

Şakin: Did he find out that you converted to Islam? And he didn't say anything?

Kelsey: I told him. He didn't. Well, there is story of that. My dad and my mom are divorced. He is remarried. And I basically told him that—he got remarried probably—he had an affair, basically. I told him that I will accept this woman you are marrying if you accept, who I am marrying, because he was about to marry this woman. So he didn't have a leg to stand on; he couldn't say anything (Personal Interview, January 23, 2014).

This reaction demonstrates that Kelsey's conversion and marriage to a Muslim are equated with having an extra-marital affair. This implies that someone who is having an extra-marital affair takes on "a cheater" identity which is similar in quality to converting to the religion of the *homo sacer* and marrying a *homo sacer*. The equivalent identity for Kelsey would be either "traitor" or "un-patriotic" as she goes against the norms of her group, the mainstream society. As a result, her salient identity is not being verified by her generalize other. The fact she ends up being embedded in a social structure in which her non-Muslim and Muslim ties are completely separated decreases the probability of her Muslim salient identity to emerge fully and be confirmed. As it shown in Figure 6.8 above, on the left side of the figure her Muslim social ties are clumped together while her non-Muslim ties are loosely connected on the right side of the figure with no connection between the two groups. This lack of connection between Kelsey's two social circles constrains her, decreasing the likelihood that her salient identity will be verified. The failure of the verification her salient identity of being a Muslim will result in her reversion from Islam. As a matter of fact, she is the only research participant who has already reverted from Islam to her prior belief.

#### *Failed Male Identity and Reversion from Islam*

**Failed Male Identity Hypothesis 1d:** The longer the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for male converts the more likely they will have failed identities and the more likely they will revert from Islam.

Male converts are less likely to develop failed identities compared to female converts since their personal egocentric social networks transform into structures conducive to the verification of their conversion identity. Male converts have low levels of visibility generating less negative reaction from their kin and non-kin social ties. Occasionally, prior-to-conversion personal networks of male converts transform into a fragmented network in which Muslim and non-Muslim alters are socially distant from each other. This type of network structure forces social actors to perform different role identities as a result of occupying position located between two separate organized communities. What they may perform at a front stage will be different than their performance at a back stage, decreasing the likelihood of the verification of their salient Muslim identity.

Fred, whom I covered in a previous chapter, is the only convert male embedded in social position located between loosely connected sub-networks. Prior to his conversion he is located in a cohesive network which is overwhelming composed of non-Muslim ties with density of 0.26 (see Figure 6.9). In this network he has only two Muslim ties—Layla and Jeff—who are themselves not connected. About 62% of his social ties are Caucasian Americans suggesting high homophily in his prior-to-conversion to social network.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.9 about here\*\*\*\*\*

After converting to Islam, his personal network substantially changes breaking into two sub-networks which are not well connected (see Figure 6.10). Although the density of

his personal network increases from 0.26 to 0.39 suggesting that he has gained more social support, the structure of his network suggest that this is not the case since he is embedded between two unconnected social networks. While the Muslim sub-network has 0.82 density, the non-Muslim sub-network has 0.40 suggesting that Fred's Muslim friends are well connected but his non-Muslim friends are less connected. The average reciprocal distance for his Muslim ties is 0.72, whereas that of his non-Muslim ties 0.56 demonstrating that his Muslim ties are socially closer to all other ties in his network.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.10 about here\*\*\*\*\*

Whenever Fred performs his role identity while interacting with his Muslim friends, he is performing on the front stage and when he interacting with his non-Muslim friends his performing at the back stage. Since the stages are separated from each other it is more likely that his identity will be not verified by both groups of his friends. For instance, when Fred's was going through his conversion process with Jeff, he reported how he and Jeff felt about his conversion:

We talked about Islam all the time. It was usually us talking about how awesome it was and we read the Qur'an. And we would look at all of the stuff and we usually...it wasn't only the two of us. Ferat and Zahira were there a lot of the time. I started praying in October, and he did it before me, but I think we both started around the same time. We went to MSA events a lot. I was questioning why I didn't convert already. In November, I was praying 5 times a day. But from October to December, we talked about what was holding us back, like our family. We talked about family a lot (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Fred's identity of a convert to Islam, which entails, among other things, praying five times a day is verified by his Muslim alters. As a Muslim, Fred is expected to play this role of praying five times a day since he occupies a position in the social structure composed of his Muslim ties. Fred performs this role in a back stage where he feels at ease and where

he does not have to abide by certain rules to make impressions in which his demeanor is guided by professional principles which is a characteristic of performance conducted at a front stage. Although he has not converted to Islam, he still pray five times a day since he and Jeff and his other Muslim ties do. Also, they read the Qur'an and talk about Islam getting more immersed in their new identity which is confirmed by their Muslim alters. Fred further reported how his other Muslim alters, such as Layla, who is in his prior-to-conversion personal network, reacted to his conversion:

Fred: She was positive about it. She wanted to learn more about it. It made me feel better just knowing the struggle is okay, and knowing that I can get over it. They were happy for me. I think they were happy for me. They were positive about it and they wanted to learn more about it (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Layla, like Fred's other Muslim alters, is supportive of his conversion. When Fred reveals his conversion to her, she enquires more about it reassuring him that negative reactions to his conversion is part of struggle of converting. She verifies his identity and being happy for him she reinforces it. The sheer interest in his conversion demonstrates that his Muslim social ties are accepting his salient identity of being a Muslim. Contrary to Fred's Muslim ties, his non-Muslim ties do not verify his identity making him re-consider performing his role identities. Starting with his parents, his non-Muslim social ties do not confirm his new identity in the following manner:

Fred: She (his mother) thought that it was taking over my life (his conversion in general and his praying 5 times a day in particular). That happened with my dad. I would talk to him about it, but they both think I am just really extreme at this point. They know that I am Muslim, but they don't need to know how I practice my faith. My father thinks I am really extreme. Like, praying 5 times a day is extreme and he asks me who I hanging out with, what are their names because he doesn't want me to isolate people (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).



Fred's parents, who belong to his non-Muslim sub-network, do not verify his new identity. Their perception of praying five-times a day is different than that of his Muslim ties. For his parents, performing this seemingly role identity is extreme and it is consuming Fred's time. Their reaction demonstrates that they do not verify his identity. On the contrary, they are critical to his role performance and they demand him to put a stop to his seemingly irrational behavior. The vocabulary his parents are using like extremism to describe his role performance merits attention since his conversion is subtly associated with ideological distortion of Islam in the West. The fact that his father is asking questions about his friends evokes the idea that his friends, who are Muslims, are probably dangerous people whom should be avoided. Similar to the reaction of Fred's parents, his non-Muslim social ties hint that his conversion is a strange phenomenon which should have been avoided. Fred describes Amanda's, who is one of his non-Muslim alters, reaction in the following way:

Fred: She thought it was stupid. She just kept saying that it was a phase. Kind of like, 'you are wasting your time with it' (Personal Interview, September 1, 2013).

Amanda is also not verifying Fred's salient identity which she thinks is irrational. To her, Fred's conversion is not a serious normal thing that a normal social actor would do. By withdrawing her support for his conversion, she imperils the verification of his identity.

The difference of the reaction of Fred's Muslim and non-Muslim social ties to his conversion experience matches well to the structure of his social network. The fact that his Muslim and non-Muslim friends are socially distant from each other is graphically represented in the aforementioned figure is also reflected in their differing perceptions of his conversion and role performance. While his Muslim alters provides him with social support by praying with him, being interested in his conversion experience, reassuring him

of his struggle, his non-Muslim alters criticize his role performance depriving him of their social support. Fred's new identity is a failed one and he is more likely to revert from Islam compared to male converts located in different social structure. In the following section, I present cases studies of male converts who are located in different social structure developing more successful conversion identities.

### *Successful Male Identity*

**Successful Male Identity Hypothesis 1e:** The shorter the distance between Muslim and non-Muslim alters for male converts the more likely they will have successful identities and the more likely they will remain Muslim.

Although when female converts marry born-Muslim men their salient identity of being a Muslim is more likely to fail, when male converts marry born Muslim women their salient identity is more likely to succeed. The marriages of male converts especially those Caucasian converts are not interpreted the same way as female converts. The kinship ties of male converts tend to react to such marriages with a pragmatic attitude such that if the convert himself is happy with the marriage they tend to be happy as well.

This difference of interpretation is best illustrated in the case of Adam, whom I covered in chapter 4. To reiterate, Adam had strong tie to another Muslim, Azrin, prior to his conversion. As it can be seen from Figure 6.11, Azrin is not an isolate, she is connected to Dustin, who is himself is well connected (see Figure 6.11). This social capital which amounts connectedness among Adam's alters carries over to his post-conversion network.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.11 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The density in his personal network increases from 0.33 to 0.60 and he keeps all his prior-to-conversion ties except Lacey (see Figure 6.12). The only person who is not connected to the rest of Adam's ties is Tony, who is another Caucasian convert to Islam. Since there is no fragmentation in Adam's post-conversion personal social network, his salient identity of being a Muslim is more likely to be verified by his alters.

\*\*\*\*\* Figure 6.12 about here\*\*\*\*\*

The reaction of his alters to his conversion experiences goes along the graphical representation of his post-conversion network. For instance, his highest ranked alters, Lacey and Griffin, were supportive to his conversion as it is illustrated in the following dialogue:

Adam: She (Lacey) got a job in another state, Tennessee. So I have pretty much lost contact with her. I have not talked to her in a few months at least. I did tell her before she moved away and she seemed fine with it but she moved shortly after and we never really talked about it again.

Adam: He (referring to Griffin) is definitely accepting of it. I guess maybe a little surprised that I would convert.

Şakin: Did you guys talk about it at all?

Adam: We talked a little bit about it but he is not interested in religion. He is not interested in any religion really. I guess I would say he is an atheist. I would like for him to someday convert and I have talked to him a little bit about it but he is not receptive yet. But you know he is fine with me being Muslim since it is my choice (Personal Interview, June 16, 2013).

Adam's salient identity is verified both by his Muslim and non-Muslim ties. Lacey does not oppose Adam's conversion, but does not fully support it either since she and Adam do not discuss it in detail. However, Griffin, who has kept his social tie to Adam, accepts his conversion and he does not react to it similarly to how other Caucasian alters react to conversion of other Caucasians. This shows that Adam's social capital from prior-to-

conversion time is carried over to post-conversion time. This condition is crucial for a success or failure of conversion identity. Since there is a high degree of connectedness between Adam's Muslim and non-Muslim sub-networks, his identity is more likely to succeed because his two generalized others converge on interpretation of his conversion. Adam's Muslim ties which are Azrin, Fiza, and Tony are strong ties which confirm his salient identity. Adam is married to Azrin and Fiza is their son, while Tony is Adam's friend since high school. The strength of ties between this group and Adam indicates that they have shared meaning of Adam's salient identity of being a Muslim. The perception of his conversion among his non-Muslim friends is similar to that of his Muslim friends. For instance, the fact Adam discusses his conversion with Griffin and even considers converting him shows that his Caucasian non-Muslim alters do not interpret his conversion as a violation of group norms but rather something that can be even embraced by other group members. Similar to Adam's non-Muslim friendship ties, his kinship ties support and verify his new identity. Their reaction is shown in the dialogue below:

Adam: Well, my family, my parents and my sister, are supportive. Although they raised me Christian, they are not real strongly Christian. So I guess I could see, some families would be shocked and not okay with it. But my family is supportive and they want me to be happy. They are fine with that.

Şakin: How are they supportive?

Adam: I guess by supportive I just mean that they don't criticize. They want me to be happy so they just say 'As long as I'm happy in Islam then they are happy for me (Personal Interview, June 16, 2013).'

There is a harmony between Adam's kinship and friendship ties in terms of interpreting his conversion. His family assesses his conversion as an individual event in itself and it is how it influences Adam's life. Their perception of his conversion is shaped by what it does for Adam. Different than kinship ties of other Caucasian converts, they do not respond to his

conversion on patriotic terms labeling it as an ‘Arab thing’ or a ‘Middle Eastern thing.’ This lack of criticism increases the chances of his salient identity to succeed. The way Adam friendship and kinship ties react to his conversion determines the type of social structure in which he is embedded which in turn influences the confirmation of his role identity. Adam’s conversion is another good example of the relation between self and social structure in that self is affected by the social structure while at the same time it affects the social structure. By converting to Islam, Adam influences the structure of social network which is composed of both Muslim and non-Muslims ties which have connection level. This structure of the network influences Adam’s new self which emerges and becomes stable because it is verified by his alters. As a result, Adam’s new salient identity of being a Muslim is a successful identity change and he is more likely to stay Muslim rather reverting to his prior-to-conversion belief.

To conclude, the failure or success of conversion identity depends on the amount of structural and compositional change in a person’s egocentric social network as well as how kin and non-kin alters interpret their identity. Converts are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion belief if their identity is not verified by their alters. When converts are embedded in personal network in which there is a long social distance between their non-Muslim sub-network and their Muslim sub-network, their identity of being a Muslim is less likely to be confirmed since they are more likely to develop double conflicting identities as result of performing their role in disconnected front and back regions. When the social distance between these two groups of social ties is long, the two groups develop a conflicting meaning of conversion obstructing the emergence and verification of the salient identity of the converts. The longer the social distance between the two networks,

the harder for the groups to have a shared meaning of conversion. For those converts who are embedded in such a social structure, it is more likely that their identity will fail and they will revert to their prior-to-conversion belief. In addition to the change in a convert's personal social network, the perception of their social ties which is affected by the amount of change in their identity is decisive in the confirmation of their Muslim identity. Those converts who go under a lot of change by marrying a born-Muslim, wearing Islamic clothes and changing their names are more likely to receive greater negative reaction from their social ties especially their kinship ties, thereby decreasing the probability of the verification of their identity. Females converts compared to male converts tend to go under such changes generating a higher level of negative reaction from their social ties leaving them bereft of social support. Thus, they are more likely to revert from Islam because of a failure of their Muslim identity.

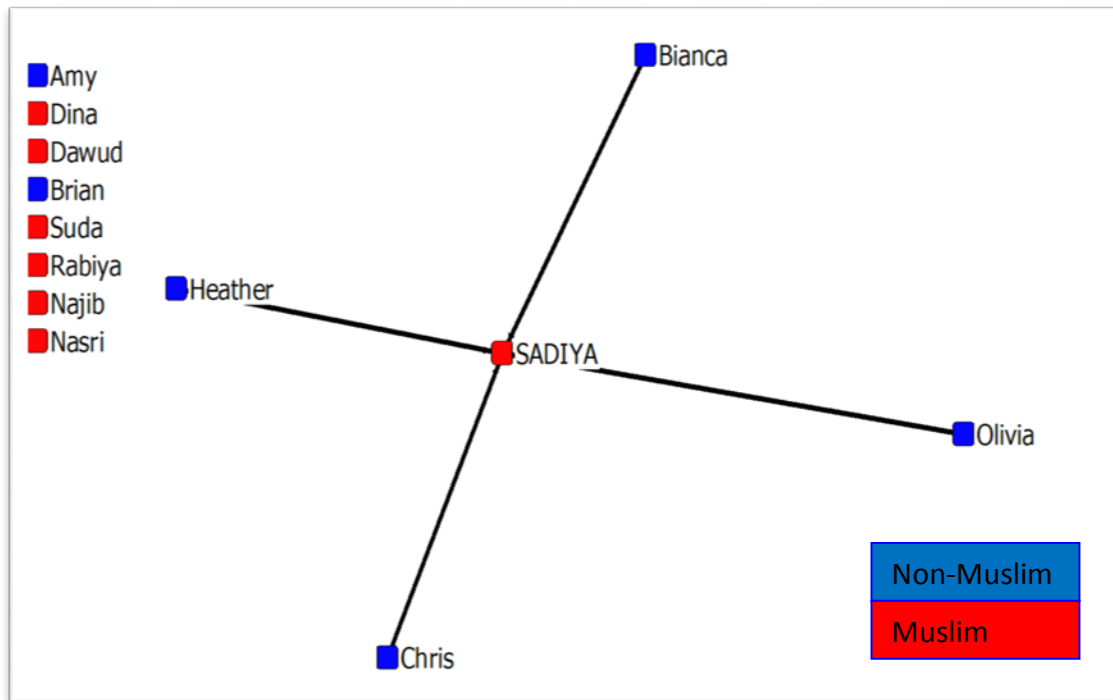
**Table 6.1: Marital Status by Gender**

<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Yes	8 (44%)	5 (42%)	13 (43%)
No	7 (39%)	7 (58%)	14 (47%)
Divorced	3 (17%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>30</b>

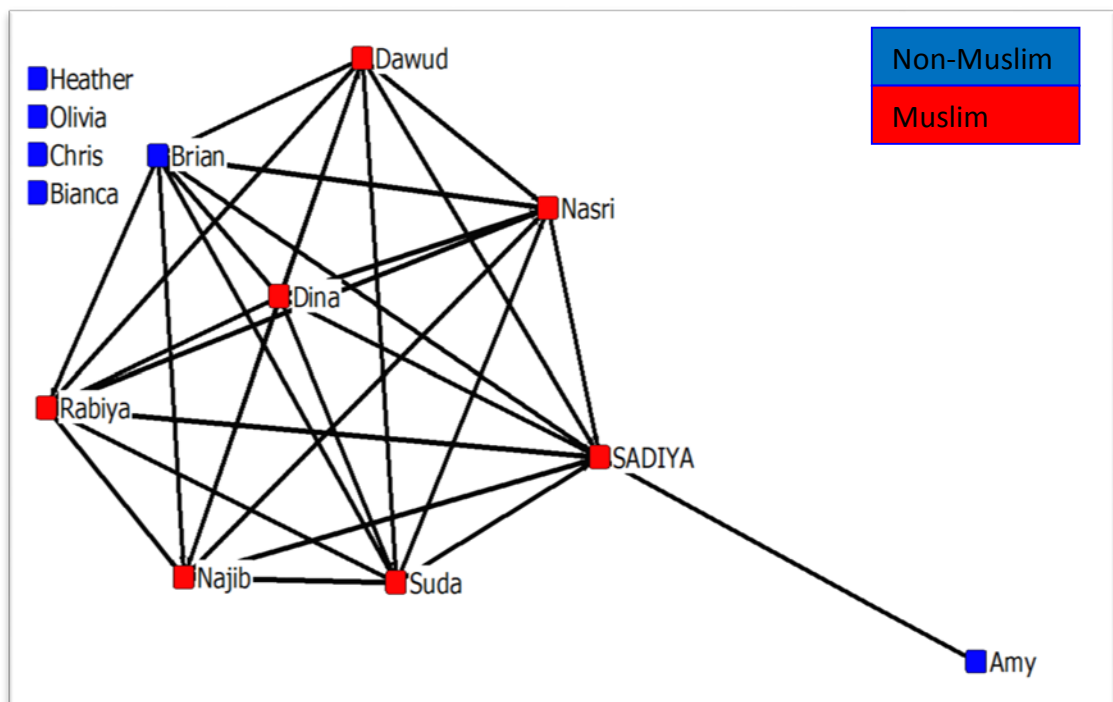
**Table 6.2: Comparison between Geodesic Distance of Muslim and non-Muslim in post-Conversion Social Networks**

<b>N=236</b>						
<b>Group</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Deviation</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>t statistic</b>
Muslim	161	.679	.324	.108	.016	2.41
Non-Muslim	75	.570	.311			

**Figure 6.1: Sadiyah's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**

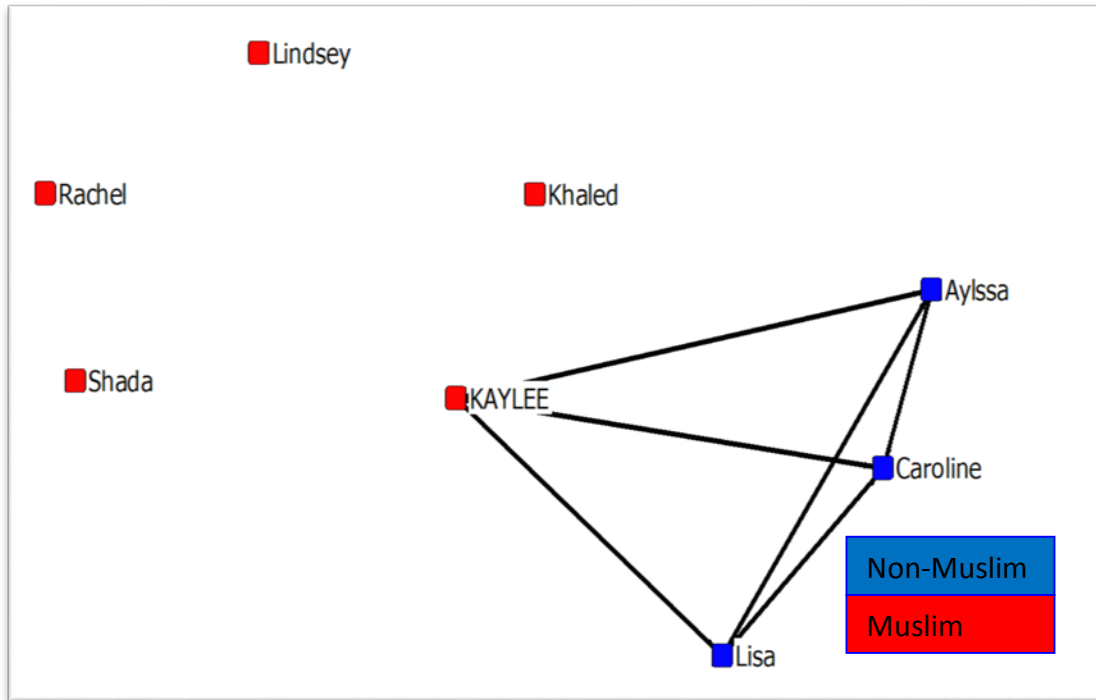


**Figure 6.2: Sadiyah's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**





**Figure 6.3: Kaylee's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 6.4: Kaylee's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**

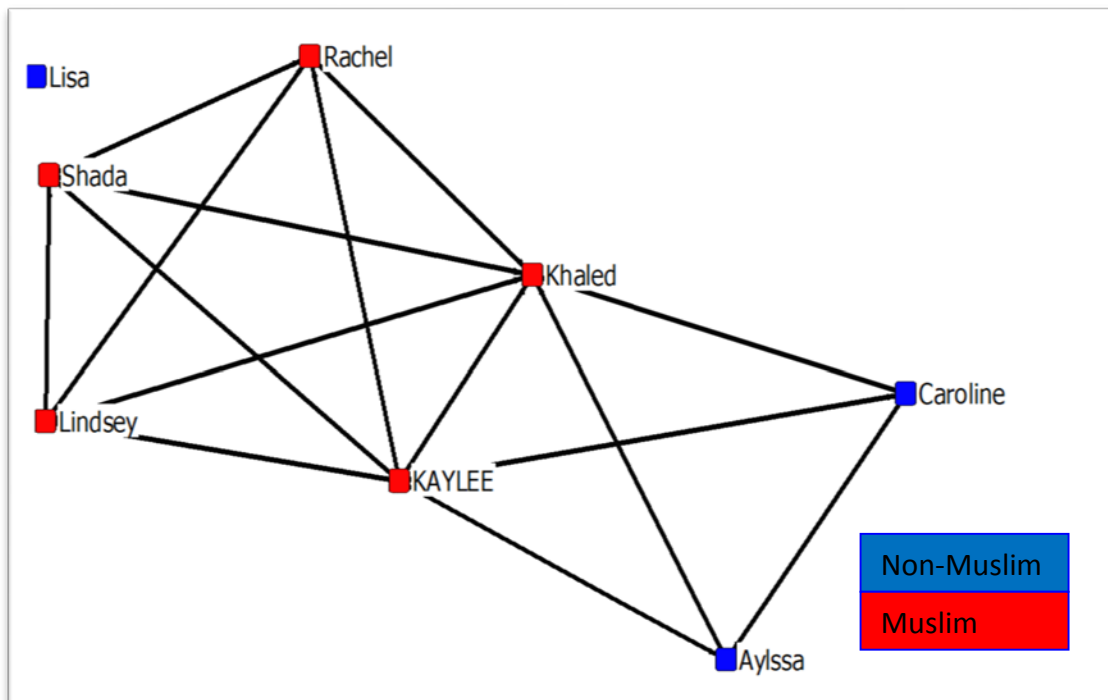


Figure 6.5: Callie's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network

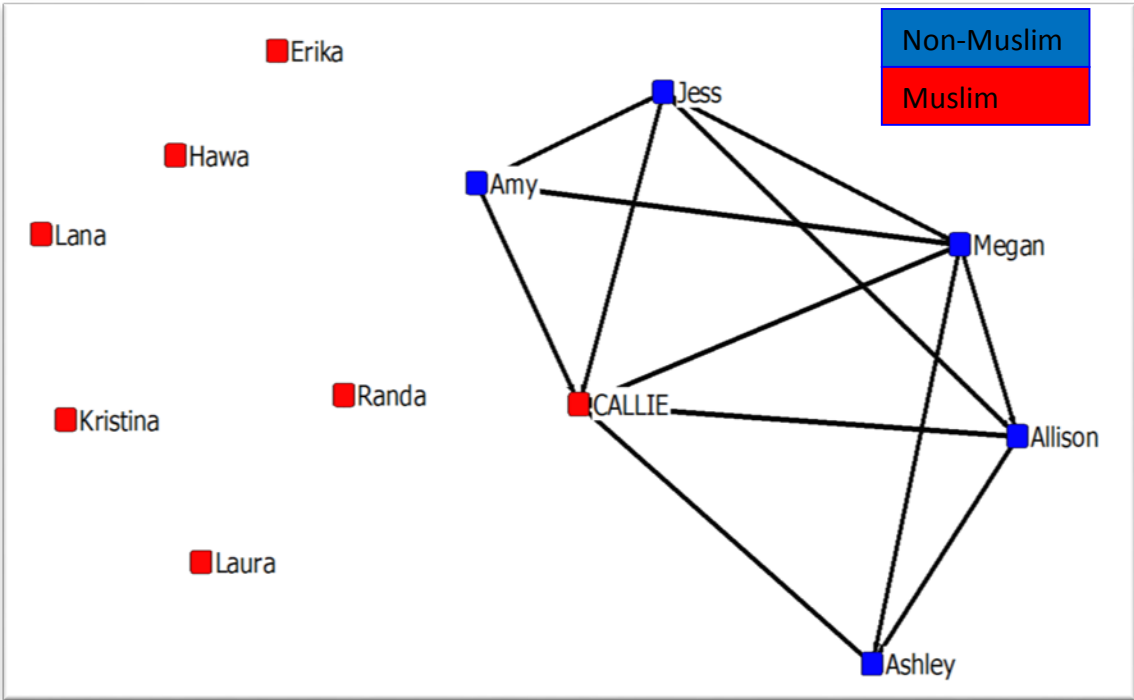
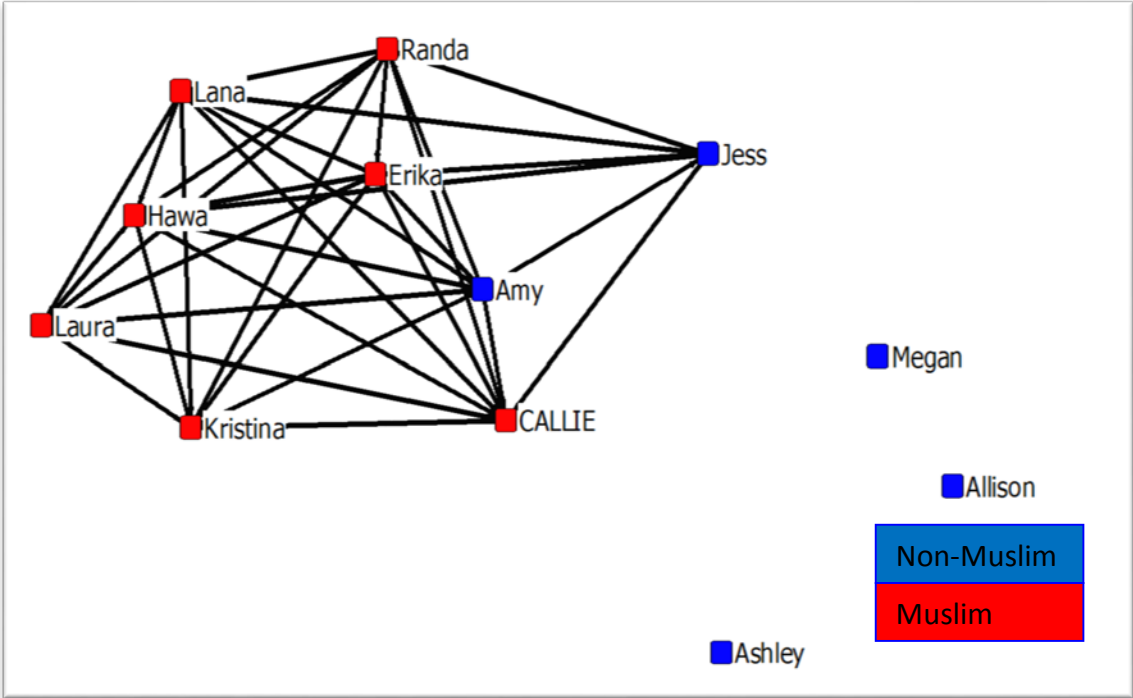
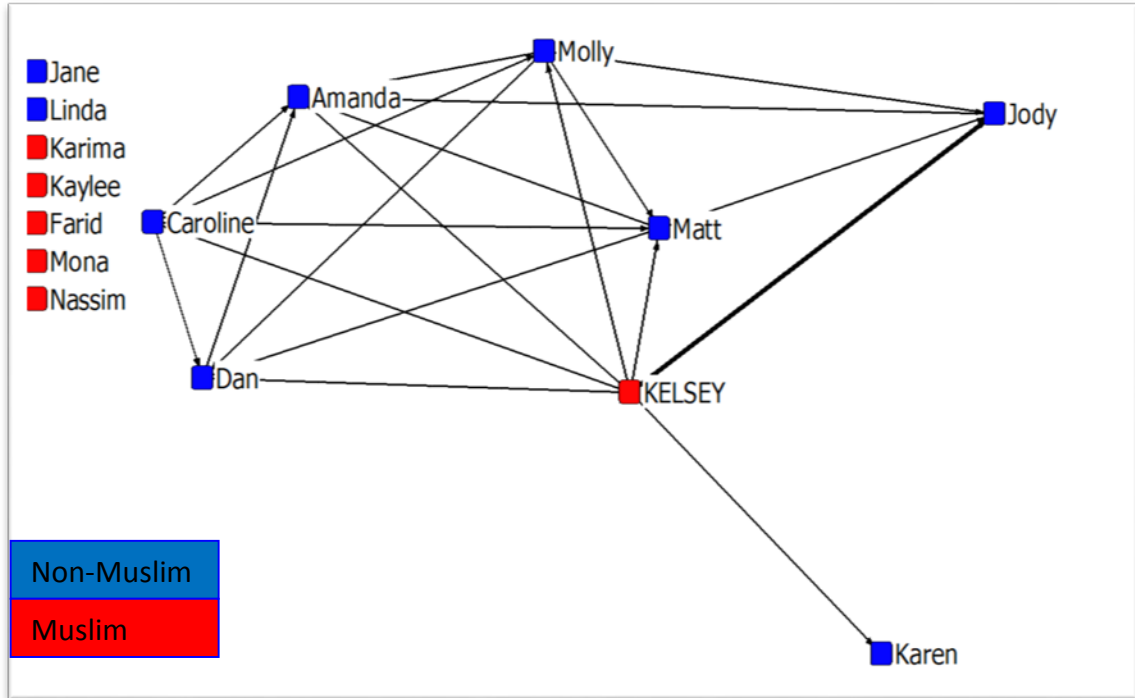


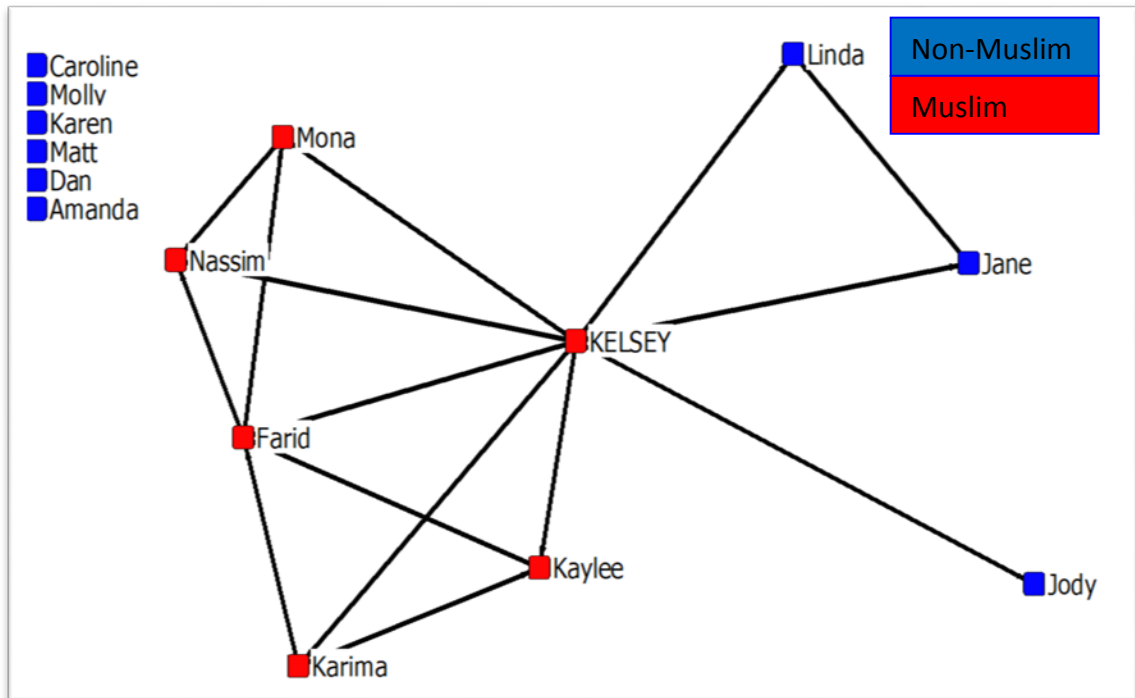
Figure 6.6: Callie's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network



**Figure 6.7: Kelsey's prior-to-conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 6.8: Kelsey's post-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**



**Figure 6.9: Fred's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network**

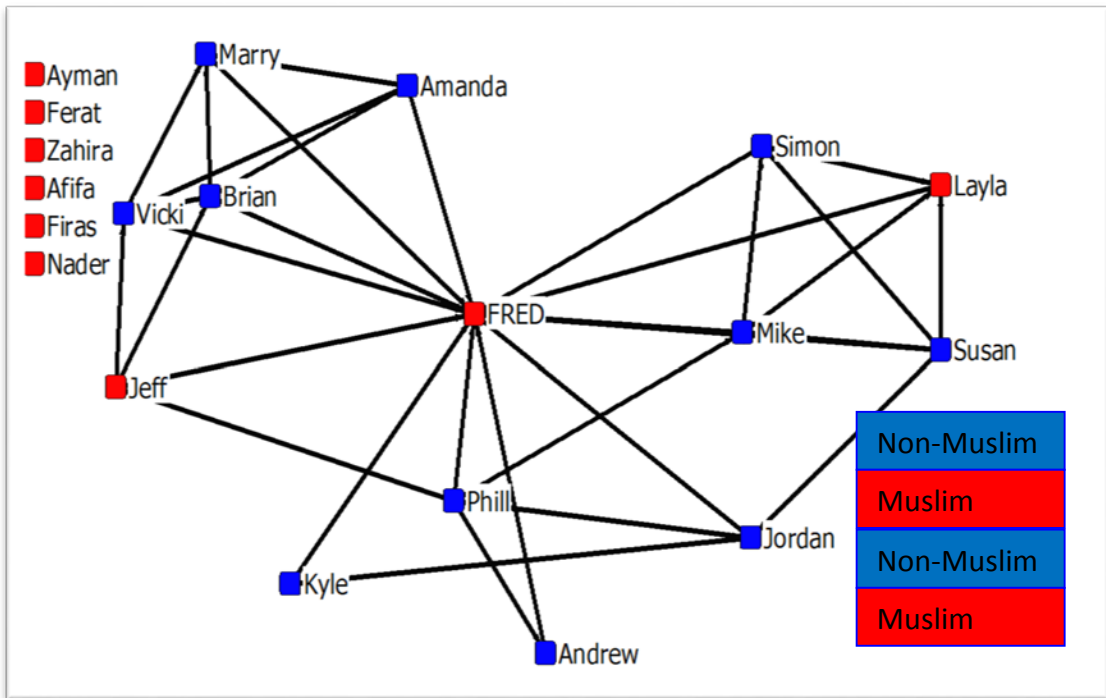


Figure 6.10: Adam's prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Network

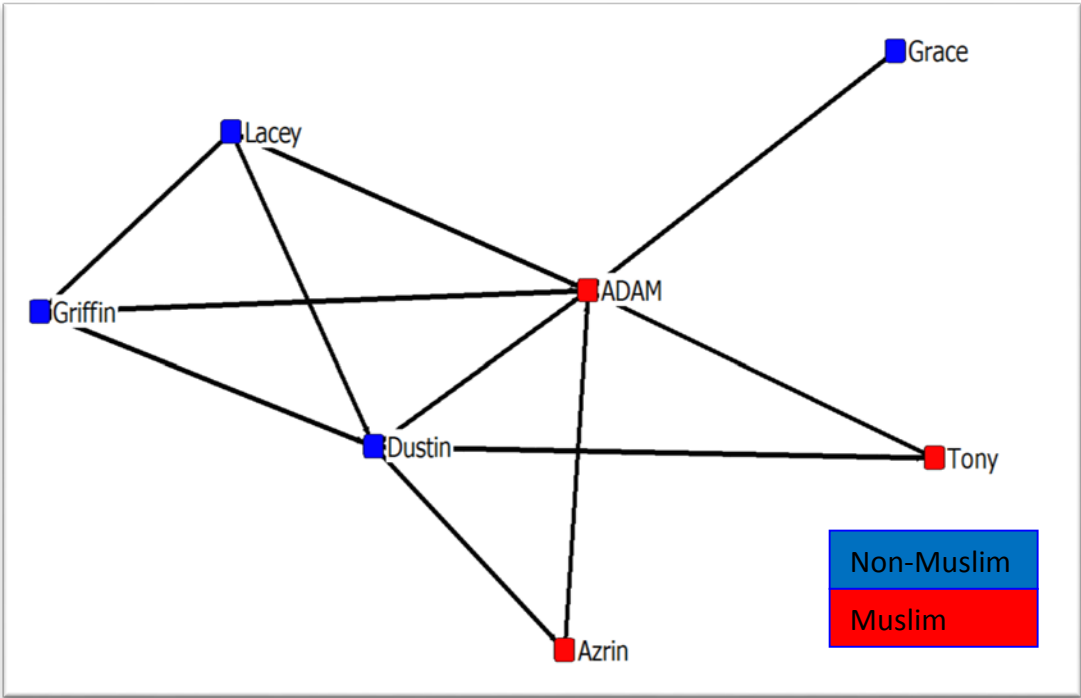
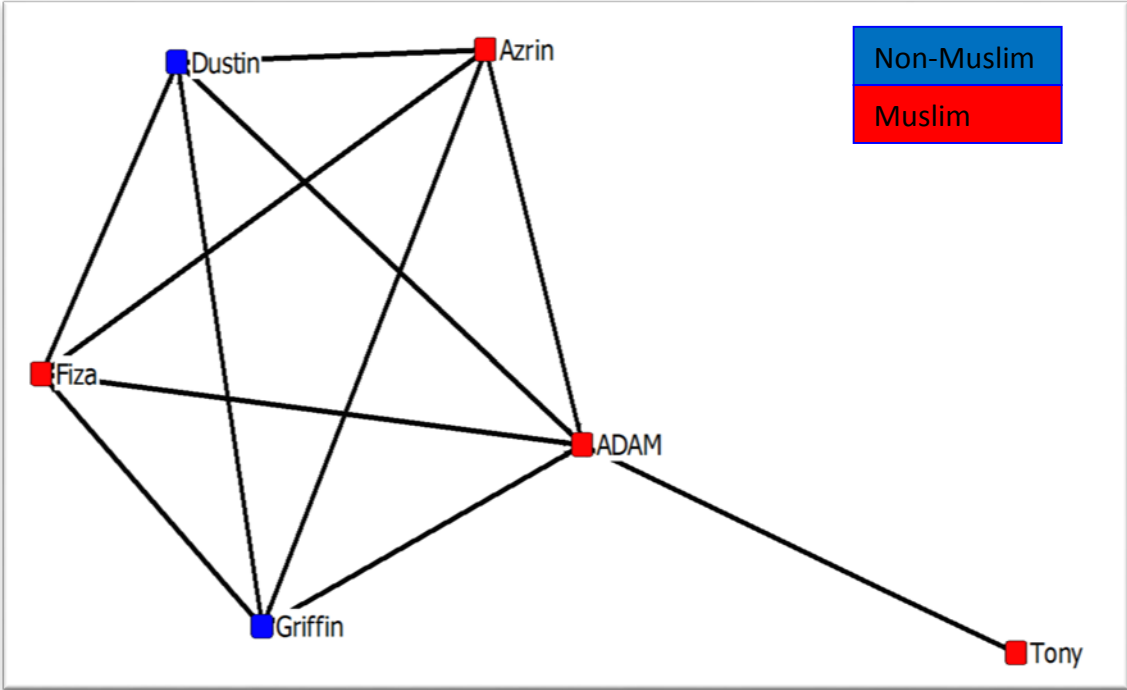


Figure 6.11: Adam's post-conversion Ego-centric Social Network



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West despite its distorted presentation of being violent and incompatible with the modern way of life. The fact that Islam is spreading in the Western world, such as in Europe and the United States in unprecedented level as a part of globalization processes unleashed at the end of the collapse of bi-polar World Systems despite these controversies surrounding it deserves close attention. Although the growth in the spread of Islam is not totally attributable to conversion to Islam, evidence suggests that Westerners are becoming Muslims at higher levels than ever before. For instance, about 15 people on average per mosque convert to Islam in a year. Most of the conversion cases in the Western context go unnoticed or remain undisclosed because of the association of Islam with extremism and violence. Those who convert to Islam are more likely to get a strong negative reaction from their friends and family members forcing them to keep their conversion experience as a private matter.

Despite this negativity surrounding Islam in the West, people still convert to Islam. Are people more likely to convert through their social Muslim ties or are there other factors explaining conversion? Also, when people convert to Islam how do both their kin and non-kin social ties react to their conversion, and as a result how do their egocentric social networks change as they go through the conversion process? In order to answer these and similar questions, I compared conversion cases taking place in Michigan and Kentucky, as well as conversion of Caucasian and African-Americans. I have chosen these two research



sites to investigate how conversion occurs in a place where there is a larger well established Muslim community versus in a place that has a smaller, less established Muslim community. Also, I have collected data from a control group, who are not converts to Islam but who may have social ties to other Muslims, to investigate how conversion occurs in egocentric social networks. Although the research group of this study comes from Michigan and Kentucky, the control group is selected only from Kentucky. There are 30 people in the research group and 30 people in the control group. I used both egocentric social network data and semi-structured interviews to investigate conversion to Islam in the United States.

### **Summary of Results**

The results of this research support some of my hypotheses, while at the same time they do not support others. Surprisingly having ties to other Muslims in itself is not a sufficient condition for conversion. More importantly, living in an area where there is a large Muslim population does not increase the likelihood of developing social ties to other Muslims. Accordingly, people living in Michigan, which has a larger and more established Muslim population than Kentucky, which has a smaller Muslim population, are not likely to convert to Islam. Residing in an area where there is a large Muslim community does not increase the likelihood of conversion. This is a surprising result because at the outset of this study I expected that people living in Michigan would have more ties to other Muslims and therefore they will be more likely to convert to Islam. However, the presence or absence of a larger Muslim community affects the strength of Muslim social ties. The results of this research indicate that the strength of social ties is important in conversion to Islam. Conversion occurs through both weak and strong social ties depending on the

presence of an Islamic community. If there is a larger Muslim community in a geographical area, then those who are residing there are more likely to develop weak Muslim ties. The members of mainstream society in such a place tend to have a strong perception about Muslims and Islam leading them to shun Muslims.

The reason why people avoid Muslims has to do with how Islam is viewed in the United States and the size of the Muslim community in their area. Islam, in the contemporary American context, is the religion of the homo sacers, who are African-Americans and Middle Easterners, making Muslims the ultimate *other*. In chapter 3, I develop in detail the historical context against which conversion takes place, tracing the perception of Islam which influences the conversion process. I argue there is dialectical relationship between what I call the settlers and aliens, synthesizing a distorted form of Islam. The settlers in this relationship are the Anglo-Saxon Europeans and their descendents, while the aliens are all other ethnic minorities, but with regard to this study they are African-Americans and the Middle Easterners whose religion is Islam. Later in the development of this theory, I tie the notion of alien to that of homo sacer, borrowing this idea from Giorgio Agamben. Homo sacer essentially is the person who is not sacred enough to be part of the wider community and thus his or her murder goes unpunished. In the American context, the homo sacer is both the African-American and the Middle Easterner who strive for becoming settlers themselves organized under Islam to achieve that status. This was especially prominent during the nationalist Black such as Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, who were branded as radical and violent creating a lasting perception of Islam.

This perception is more likely to switch on when there is a more significant presence of Muslims, thereby influencing the strength of a tie to Muslims. Throughout American history there has always been a minority group such as Native Americans, Japanese, Irish, Italians, Jews, etc. relegated to a scapegoat position for different socio-political reasons. The ascendance of the Muslims to this position is rooted in an ideology more than anything else. I argue that this perception influences both the type of social tie to other Muslim prior to conversion and also the loss and gain of social ties once conversion sets in motion. Since the perception of Islam and the otherness of Muslim in the Western context have lasting effects on the conversion process, it is essential to remind readers how this perception and otherness have come into being.

There are two main reasons explaining the otherness of Islam, which in turn affects the perception of Islam and ultimately the type of social ties that people are to develop to Muslims. The first has to do with the relation between Islam and the wing of the African-American Civil Rights Movement stationed in the northern part of the country. This part of the movement organized under the Nation of Islam appropriated Islam in an effort to employ it for the needs of the movement. Islam, through this effort, emerges as part an ideology and as part Black religion employed to uplift African-Americans, which was a rather ambitious socio-political project. Through this struggle, Islam enters American psyche as a radical religion as it becomes a part of rhetoric to reverse the historical symbolic violence leveled on the Blacks. Islam is used as a body of knowledge and religious system to reconstruct problematic White-Black race relations through which Black is depicted as good, while the White is as evil. This and other rhetoric of the Nation of Islam

championship returning violence with violence catapulted Islam to the American scene as a foreign religion condoning violence bringing it into the status of the religion of the other.

The position is further solidified after the collapse of the bi-polar world system during which the ultimate others were the Soviets, while the opposing ideology was communism. As the US foreign policy shifted to the Middle East from the Soviet Union, the Islamic world started to appear on the American radar with higher frequency leading the public to develop strong opinions about Islam and Muslims. After the tragic events of September 11, the process of replacing the Soviets with the Muslims as the ultimate other has come to an end. The US government's official discourse tends to depict the Muslim world as a threat to the global interests of the United States and the country itself. The American political and military presence in the Muslim world is justified as preventing this threat and bringing democracy to the region. The American media and popular culture go along with this narrative painting the Muslims and Islam as the ultimate other bent on bringing the destruction to the United States. This way of depicting Muslims and Islam is important because it shapes the way Americans make sense of Islam or Muslims.

The way members of mainstream American society perceive Islam affects the entire conversion process. Those who convert to Islam in Michigan, which has a historically well established Arab Muslim community, tend to convert through weak Muslim social ties. Whenever a convert from Michigan has a social tie to another Muslim, this tie turns out to be a weak tie. Muslim ties are weak ties because they are not well connected to the rest of the social ties in egocentric conversion social networks. The converts residing in Michigan tend to know one or two Muslim friends who are not connected to their non-Muslim friends. These Muslim ties are weak ties since they are bridges to the Muslim community,

to which egos and their social ties are not connected. This is an emergent theory, as I expected those living in Michigan to develop strong bonds to other Muslims. One would expect that converts living in Michigan would know and befriend Muslims in greater numbers since the Muslim community there is larger and has been established for a longer time. Nevertheless, the status of Islam, which I theorize to be the religion of homo sacer, affects the strength of social ties to this community, which is avoided by the member of the majority.

The converts residing in Kentucky, on the other hand, tend to convert through strong social ties. These ties are converts' close friends or social actors with whom they spend a large amount of time and with whom they are more intimate. A good example of such ties would be a person's high school friend or their friend from elementary school. In other instances, strong ties are intimate ties to whom ego eventually marries. It is surprising that people living in a place where there is smaller Muslim community convert to Islam through strong ties rather than weak ties. The fact that there is a smaller Muslim community in Kentucky prevents members of mainstream society in Kentucky from developing strong opinions about Islam and Muslims. If there is a smaller minority community in a geographical place, then members of the majority group are less likely to develop strong opinions about the minority, obstructing formation of social ties to them. On the contrary, the members of the majority group in Michigan have a strong opinion about the Muslim community, which is the minority group. Here, the boundary between the two groups is well established and it is less porous. The members of the mainstream society in Michigan have a strong sense of in-group out-group membership, resulting in a lesser amount of interaction with the members of the minority group. This explains why whenever a convert

in Kentucky has a social tie to another Muslim it is a strong tie, whereas whenever a convert in Michigan forms a tie to another Muslim, it is a weak tie.

Conversion to Islam tends to be a slow process with several stages, although there are occasional instances of sudden conversion as well. The first stage in the conversion process sets in motion when people drift away from their either Christian belief or their church. The former break occurs at an intellectual level, while the latter occurs in a social level. The intellectual break is more likely to occur when people become disillusioned with the Trinity doctrine. This means that people who do not believe in the deity of Jesus are more likely to break away from Christianity. Although they break away from Christianity because of their disenchantment with the Trinity doctrine, they do not abandon religion altogether. They tend to believe in the existence of God. Some of those who break away from Christianity but still believe in God are more likely to look for another religion, whereas others remain dormant until they come across Islam or Muslims in some haphazard way. Those who become disenchanted with Christianity at the social level tend express this disenchantment in the form of disappointment with the discrepancy between what is taught at the church and what is actually practiced in the religious community. A dominant theme that recurs in the conversion stories is extra-marital affairs involving priests and Sunday school teachers.

The second stage of conversion starts with drift away from Christianity and ends with making the first contact with Islam. This stage is essentially a time period stretching from six months to a couple of decades. Once people completely are broken away from Christianity they are likely to feel tension and a religious void in their life. During this stage, those breaking away from Christianity search for an alternative religion. A small

portion of research participants of this study is not involved in active searching, albeit they are open to alternative beliefs. Islam has become one of the options in the pluralistic religious market as a result of globalization processes. What makes Islam, which is seemingly a foreign religion, appealing is the fact that it addresses the Trinity doctrine and that it offers explanations to riddles people have regarding this and other complex theological issues.

The third stage of conversion to Islam initiates when people make their first contact with Islam. The most crucial learning takes place when people read the holy book of Muslims, the Quran, and start to make sense of it using their Christian stock of knowledge. The fact there are similarities between the Qur'an and the Bible with regard to stories concerning prophetic figures and past nations transforms Islam from what is foreign into what is familiar. Reading the Qur'an is one of the most important factors in this conversion model. If a person does not read the Qur'an, they are less likely to convert, regardless of what kind of social tie they have to other Muslims. In constructing this model, I used both a research and control group to accurately capture factors that play important roles in conversion. For instance, in my control group there are people who are married to other Muslims and others who either attempted to convert or have been thinking about converting, but have not converted yet. None of the participants of the control falling into this category has read the Qur'an, but every person in the research group having a similar experience reported that they have read the Qur'an from the beginning to the end. Besides reading the Qur'an, the research group tends to conduct thorough research about Islam before making their decision about conversion.

The final conversion stage starts when people make their first contact with Muslims followed by their first visit to a local mosque, usually with an intention to convert, and it ends in conversion. Going to a mosque to declare that one has embraced Islam is not a mandatory religious obligation. One can declare their conversion in other locations provided that it is done in the presence of four other witnesses testifying their embrace. Although going to the mosque is not obligatory to declare conversion, converts still go there to announce that they are part of the larger Muslim community affirming their belonging. The road to the mosque goes through Muslim social ties. During this stage, people are introduced to Islam through their weak Muslim ties if they live in Michigan, and their strong ties if they reside in Kentucky. After comparing their newly acquired knowledge about Islam to their own stock of knowledge, people intending to convert make their first visit to the mosque.

Conversion has influential bearing on both the structure and composition of the egocentric social networks of people. Analyzing longitudinal data from prior-to-conversion and post-conversion egocentric social networks, this dissertation shows that change in the egocentric social networks differs for Caucasian and African-Americans. When Caucasian Americans convert, they lose social ties, which they replace with new ties making their post conversion social networks bigger than their prior-to-conversion egocentric social networks. However, this increase in their social network does not result in an increase in their social capital. The loss and gain of social ties in egocentric conversion social networks do not explain the entire change in networks induced by conversion. The structural changes in these networks indicate that conversion has more consequential bearing on their networks than merely the sum of loss and gain of ties. As such, when Caucasians convert,



their egocentric social networks fragment into two sub-groups of Muslim and non-Muslims. These sub networks tend to be tenuously connected leaving the egos in constrained social structural positions. The fact that Caucasian converts are connected to two sets of social groups which are different in terms of religious affiliation indicate they are more likely to feel tension with dire consequences on their conversion experience. Those suffering from such tension are more likely to develop failed conversion identities and they are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion beliefs.

Unlike Caucasians, when African-Americans convert their egocentric social networks tend to shrink such that they are confined to kinship and close friendship ties. One would expect that when African-Americans convert they would gain more Muslim ties than Caucasian-Americans because of their historical collective experience with Islam. Surprisingly, this expectation does not materialize as African-American conversion networks are reduced only to intimate social ties, which tend to be Black social ties. Why are African-Americans not developing Muslim social ties to Muslims with different ethnic backgrounds such as Egyptians, Jordanians, Pakistani, Palestinian, Indian, Caucasian, etc.? I hypothesize that African-American failure of developing ties to the members of other ethnic groups is more likely to be the result of the attitudes of these others towards them.

The structural changes in the conversion egocentric social networks go hand in hand with changes in identity. The results of this dissertation show that female and male converts tend to have different conversion experiences, such that female converts become more visible than males, receiving a more negative reaction from their social ties. Accordingly, female converts are more likely to develop failed conversion identities and revert to their prior-to-conversion beliefs. Female converts, who assume an Islamic name,

start wearing hijab, and/or marry Muslim men from the Middle East, tend to receive the strongest negative reaction from their non-Muslim friends and relatives, decreasing the chances of verification of their conversion identity. Thus, females become more vulnerable to revert to their prior-to-conversion belief than males. Also, converts who wind up in post-conversion egocentric fragmented social networks are more likely to revert to their prior-to-conversion belief. Those embedded in such a network are more likely to have multiple generalized others with different attitudes toward their conversion identity, decreasing the chances of the verification of their newly built conversion identities.

### **Importance**

This study contributes to several lines of research. First, it sheds light on how Islam diffuses in the egocentric social networks, contributing to the understanding of the growth of Islam in the West caused by conversion. It shows that people are not likely to convert to Islam if they live in a geographical area where there are more Muslims. It also contributes to the understanding of how U.S. government's involvement in the Middle East and its coverage in the media, which are both macro events, influence the interaction among social actors, which are processes taking place at a micro level. The perception about Islam, which is formed as a result of American involvement in the Middle East, influences the strength of social ties that people form to other Muslims. In terms of religious diffusion in egocentric social networks, this study indicated that diffusion can occur through both strong and weak social ties, depending on the level of existence of the community to which ties are formed.

With regard to change in egocentric social networks, this study demonstrates that change is more than just the loss and gain of social ties. Life changing events, such as

conversion to another religion influence social networks structurally, which is sociologically more meaningful. Being situated in a social network which is fragmented into two loosely connected sub-networks has different consequences for social actors than being situated in a network with one-giant component, which is highly connected. Under the former circumstance, social actors are more likely to experience constraints and become unhappy, whereas under the latter situation they are more likely to feel free and happier. This applies to situations in which the two loosely connected sub-networks are composed of people coming from different ethnic backgrounds and to which egos partially belong. For example, in the conversion situation, an individual could be connected to a sub-network composed of all Muslim because she shares the same religion with them, and be simultaneously connected to another sub-network constituted by non-Muslim because she shares the same culture with them. Being located in a fragmented network can also bring benefits to social actors allowing them to have power by playing two groups against each other. For instance, if a merchant is connected to two other suppliers, who are not connected themselves, she can profit from this situation by telling each that the other person offers her a better deal. On the other hand, being located in a network in which there is a high level of connection means that an individual is a part of a cohesive social group, which can be a good source of social support with regards to a life transitioning event. This study, by collecting a complete longitudinal egocentric social network data, demonstrates that change in social network goes beyond the loss and gain of social ties.

The structural changes in egocentric conversion social networks influence the construction and verification of identities. This study helps bridge the social network theory and identity theories by demonstrating that the social self influences the social structure,

while at the same time it is being influenced by it. When a social actors convert to another religion, their personal network changes such that they can wind up in different types of social structures. For instance, a convert may end up in a homophilous social network in terms of both gender and religion. If a Caucasian male converts to Islam and ends up in a social network in which everyone else is a Caucasian Muslim, or his egocentric network is composed of both Muslim and non-Muslim ties which are well connected, his Muslim identity is more likely to be verified. This illustrates how a person influences the reproduction of social structure but at the same time he is influenced by the same structure.

### **Policy Recommendation**

With regards to policy recommendations, this study offers two interrelated policies. The first addresses the Muslim community in the United States. If I were to give a presentation to the Muslim community in Lexington, Kentucky, I would probably summarize the results of my research as this: When Caucasians convert to Islam, their personal social networks tend to fragment into two loosely connected sub-networks of Muslims and non-Muslims, whereas when African-Americans convert to Islam, their personal social networks shrink to intimate social ties. In other words, when Caucasians convert they are able to make new friends who are Muslims, but African-Americans cannot make new friends who are non-Black Muslims. Then, I would first suggest that Muslim should also reach out African-Americans and develop strategies to integrate African-American Muslims into the larger Muslim community. Second, they should reach out to non-Muslim people in order to build strong social ties to others who are non-Muslims. This is likely to yield two different results that can prevent fragmentation of the egocentric social networks of Caucasians. First, if Muslims develop strong ties to non-Muslims, then

whenever a White convert develops a social tie to another Muslim, she is more likely to develop a tie to their strong non-Muslim ties, thereby developing a post-conversion network which is not fragmented. Second, when Muslims develop ties to non-Muslims their integration to mainstream society will increase, which in turn will decrease the negative perception of Muslims in the United States. As a result, conversion to Islam will have less influence on the structural changes in the egocentric conversion social networks. Also, converts should be advised not to marry, or postpone their ideas of marrying those Muslims from the Middle East since such marriages generate the most reaction from their intimate social ties. Another recommendation would be advising converts not to change their American names into Muslim names and go by one name while socializing with Muslim friends and go by another while socializing with non-Muslim friends.

As for the policy for the non-Muslim mainstream society, I would make two recommendations. First, people should realize that both the Muslim world and Islam are different than how they are depicted in the media. They should also realize that any discussion of Islam in the American public sphere is politicized and it is a byproduct of the tragedy of September 11. Perhaps it is possible that people can start discussing and questioning the way the American government responded to this tragedy, which created “failed states” around the globe, making the world less secure and more unequal. For instance, military operation in Iraq and Afghanistan created failed states there, bringing more chaos and terrorism to the area rather than peace and democracy. This chaotic situation sways people’s, especially Caucasian-Americans’ perception about Islam without realizing that the government’s misdirected intervention in the region reproduces violence, which is wrongly attributed to the religion. Second, the members of mainstream American

society should realize that the Muslim world is a lot more diverse and complicated than simply the Middle East. They should also realize that they need to separate the religion from the politics and give it its due status of an Abrahamic religion, meaning that Muslims are distant cousins of Jews and Christians. Such an understanding of Islam is more likely to decrease the negative reaction toward conversion and prevent fragmentation in the egocentric conversion social networks, which in turn will increase the probability of the verification of conversion identities.

### **Further Research**

Conducting research with a small sample size prevents the researcher from making generalizations about the population from which the sample is drawn. The fact that this study uses mixed methods relying on a small sample size makes it hard to draw conclusions about the population of all converts in the United States. A study conducted with a larger sample size will allow for inferences about this population. Also, the research sites for this study, which are Michigan and Kentucky, have clear distinctions, but at the same time they have similarities too. As one of my audiences in my recent presentation at the Eastern Sociological Conference pointed out, although Kentucky votes Republican, it has a Democratic governor, making it difficult to classify it as purely Republican. Similarly, Michigan tends to vote Democratic, but it has a Republican governor. This shows that the attitudes of people living in both states are not clearly differentiated from each other. With regard to conversion to Islam, both states could have similar attitudes to conversion. A follow up comparison study choosing a state from further South and another from New England could be a better contrast. Moreover, states like California and New York have more mosques than Michigan, suggesting that these could have a larger Muslim population

than Michigan. Conducting a follow up research can shed light on whether the members of mainstream society in these two places will have similar perceptions about Islam as that of living in Michigan, affecting the strength of Muslim ties and the change in egocentric social networks resulting from conversion. Since these two states are more multi-cultural than Michigan it is plausible that those living there have a different attitude towards conversion than people living in Michigan. This difference is more likely to affect the composition and the structure of post-conversion egocentric social networks with different consequence on the verification of Muslim identity.

Another limitation of this research is related to explaining the difference between structural changes in post-conversion egocentric social networks of Caucasian and African-American converts. Although I have developed highly sophisticated models explaining the structural changes in egocentric social networks of Caucasian-Americans, I have limited theories explaining changes taking place in the egocentric conversion social networks of African-American converts. For example, this research has one theory explaining why African-Americans are not developing social ties to other Muslims who are not African-Americans. It is puzzling that Caucasian converts develop social ties to other Muslims who are not the same race as themselves, ending up with more heteropholous post-conversion egocentric social networks, while African-Americans do not develop ties to others who are not Black. One way to develop other theories answering this question would be designing a research in which I would collect egocentric data from non-Black Muslims to investigate the extent to which they mention African-Americans as their friends. Another way to explore this puzzle, would be conducting a follow up study in which I would ask African-

American research participants about their their lack of social ties to Muslims who are not African-Americans.

As far as the reliability of this research goes, I can develop other ways of collecting data in a follow up research. My identity of being a Muslim could have affected the responses of the research participants. For example, when I asked the research group about the religious practice and visits to the mosque, I felt like I was getting socially desirable answers which yielded higher practicing rates. Although these answers do not sway the results of this research, as they are not part of any analyses, they show that the identity of the researcher could have influenced the responses of the participants. If a researcher, who is non-Muslim, had conducted this study, she could have gotten different responses from the participants. Similarly, the gender of the researcher and the study participants could influence the dynamics between them. The Islamic code of ethics regulating gender relations can be restrictive, such that some female converts did not want to meet with me unless some of their close friends were present. This occurred three times. One female came to the meeting with her husband, who at the beginning of the interview kept answering the questions for her. After a while, however, he stopped intervening in the interview process. Although his presence was not a major issue, his sheer presence could have affected her answers because she might have not given any answers concerning her relationships with her social ties that will make her husband upset. In the other two cases, two female research participants came to the interview with their female friends, but their presence did not seem to influence their responses, although the sheer presence of others at an interview can influence the dynamics of it without the realization of the research. If this study were to be conducted by a female researcher the, responses elicited from the



participants could diverge from my results. However, conducting this research by a female can have its own problems, such that similar concerns would be valid in situations where the researcher is female and research participant is a male. Overall, I want to acknowledge that the gender dynamics between the researcher and the study participants can influence the reliability of the research, although I have not detected any reliability issues that could have swayed the results of this research.

I believe that Islam will continue to grow in America and more people are going to embrace it, despite controversies surrounding it. As current growth rate shows, Islam is more likely to become a permanent part of the American social fabric. This study contributes to the understanding of this new social fabric.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

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#### General and Follow-up Questions

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**1. Please tell me your story of how you became a Muslim. Knowing the details of why you and others converted to Islam will be invaluable to this research.**

- a. Do you have any friends who converted to Islam?
- b. Would you consider your conversion as a slow process or a sudden decision?
- c. Do you have any relatives who converted to Islam?
- d. How did you feel after converting to Islam?
- e. Are you married to a Muslim?

**2. Can you describe how religion was important to you before you became Muslim?**

- a. Were you following any religions?
- b. Did you practice religion?
- c. What did you do as a practice?
- d. Was your spouse practicing any religion?

**3. Before becoming Muslim, how would you have introduced yourself to someone that you met for the first time?**

- a. Did you talk about your education?
- b. Work
- c. Age

**4. How did your family and friends react to your decision of converting to Islam?**

- a. Did your friends give you support about your decision?
- b. What kind of support did you get from your friends?
- c. How often did you talk about Islam with your friends?
- d. Did you get any support from your family members?
- e. Did you discuss Islam with your family members?

**5. Can you describe how important Islam is to you?**

- a. When was the last time you did a five daily prayer?
- b. How many times do you perform five daily prayers?
- c. How often do you pray in a mosque?
- d. Did you fast during the last Ramadan?
- e. How many days did you fast?
- f. Have you performed Pilgrimage?
- g. Did you pay Zakath last year?

**6. Can you tell me about your Islamic beliefs?**

- a. Do you believe that Qur'an is the revelation from God?
- b. Do you have any difficulties in believing in Islamic tenets?
- c. Do you think that Islamic beliefs are compatible with your own beliefs?

**7. Now, when you meet someone for the first time, how do you introduce yourself to them?**

- a. Did you talk about your education with them?
- b. Work
- c. Age

**8. Have you adopted any Muslim names after converting to Islam?**

- a. How do you introduce yourself to your non-Muslim American friends?
  - b. Do your American friends call you by your American name or Muslim name?
  - c. How do you introduce yourself to other Muslim friends?
-

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d. Do your Muslim friends call you by your American name or Muslim name?

**9. Can you explain how closely you identify yourself with Islam after conversion?**

- a. How closely your non-Muslim friends identify you with Islam?
- b. How closely your Muslim friends identify you with Islam?
- c. How often do you wear religious attires?

**NETWORK QUESTIONS**

**10. How losing a social tie to X (an important person) influenced your conversion experience?**

- a. Have you got any reactions from X when you converted to Islam? Explain.
- b. What did affect your decision to cut your tie to X?
- c. Do you feel rejected by people in your prior to conversion network?

**11. When you get together with Y (An important person) what do you usually talk about?**

- a. How often do you talk about religious issues?
- b. Does X practice Islam?
- c. Do you ever ask for help with different thing like moving out from your social ties?

**12. How do people in your social network think about your conversion to Islam?**

- a. Do they support your decision?
- b. Do they criticize your decision?

**13. How often do you involve in Islamic community activities?**

- a. Do you volunteer for the community?
  - b. Are you involved in any Islamic schools or other organizations run by the Muslim community?
- 

**Appendix B Social Network Data Survey**

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1) Rank 20 people that you use to socialize with prior to becoming a Muslim starting with the ones you used to socialize with most frequently?

**Person:** Please provide the name of the person or their initial.

**ID:** Number these individuals starting from 1 to 25.

**Gender:** What is the gender of this person?

**Age:** How old is this person?

**Ethnicity:** What is the ethnicity of this person?

**Education:** What is the education level of this person?

**Relation:** What is this person relation to you?

**Muslim:** Is this person a Muslim (yes, no)?

Person (Name)	ID	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Relation	Muslim
	1						
	2						
	3						
	4						
	5						
	6						
<b>From this point on, please provide only the name of the individuals.</b>							
	7						
	8						
	9						
	10						
	11						
	12						
	13						
	14						
	15						
	16						
	17						
	18						
	19						
	20						

2) Please list your friends who know each other

**Who:** The name of your friend.

**Knows:** Yes or no.

**Whom:** The name of your friend.



3) Rank 20 the people that you socialize with now, starting with ones you socialize with most frequently.

**Person:** Please provide the name of the person or their initial.

**Age:** How old is this person?

**Ethnicity:** What is the ethnicity of this person?

**Education:** What is the education level of this person?

**Relation:** What is this person relation to you?

**Muslim:** Is this person a Muslim (yes, no)?

**Activity:** What kind of activities you do together?

**Pray:** Do you pray together (yes, no)?

**Learn:** Do you learn about Islam together (yes)?

Person	ID	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Relation	Muslim	Activity	Pray	Learn
	1									
	2									
	3									
	4									
	5									
	6									

	7									
	8									
	9									
	10									
	11									
	12									
	13									
	14									
	15									
	16									
	17									
	18									
	19									
	20									

4) Please list your friends who know each other

**Who:** The name of your friend.

**Knows:** Yes or no.

**Whom:** The name of your friend





5) What is your education level?

- Less than High School
- High School Diploma or GED
- Some college
- College Degree
- Master's
- PhD

6) In what year were you born?\_\_\_\_\_

7) In which state were you born?\_\_\_\_\_

8) What is your ethnicity?

- Caucasian
- African-American
- Hispanic
- Asian American
- Indian American
- Other

9) What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

10) What city do you live in?

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#### ACADEMIC/RESEARCH INTERESTS

Social Network Analysis, statistics, Islam in America, globalization and religion, world systems

#### EDUCATION

- 2015 Ph.D. Sociology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.  
Dissertation Title: Egocentric Social Networks, Context, Process and Identity in Explaining Conversion and Reversion from Islam
- 2007 Master of Arts. Sociology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI.  
Thesis: *Ottoman Empire's role in the emergence of the "European" world system.*
- 2002 Bachelor of Arts. Sociology, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.
- 2000-2001 Study Abroad. Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.
- 1999-2000 Course Work. Goethe Language Institute, Ankara, Turkey.

#### BOOK

*Ottoman Empire's role in the emergence of the "European" world system: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller: 2008*

#### ACADEMIC POSITION

- 2008-Current Graduate Teaching Assistant: Department of Sociology  
University of Kentucky
- 2009-Current Adjunct Faculty: Division of Social Sciences  
Bluegrass Community and Technical College

2009-20012            Adjunct Faculty: Mathematics and Statistics  
Bluegrass Community and Technical College

2005-2007            Graduate Assistant: Department of Sociology, Anthropology and  
Criminology Eastern Michigan University

## **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

University of Kentucky University

SOC 380            Globalization and Development (9 sections)

SOC 180            Global Societies in Comparative Perspective (1 section)

SOC 304            Classical Sociological Theory (1 section)

SOC 303            Quantitative Sociological Analysis (Social Statistics) (1 section)  
(Spring 2015)

Bluegrass Community and Technical College (2009-2012)

STA 200            Statistics: A Force in Human Judgment (15 sections)

STA 291            Introductory Statistics for Management and Economics (6 sections)

Bluegrass Community and Technical College (2009-2014)

SOC 101            Online Introduction to Sociology (16 sections)

## **GRANTS**

2013    **Dissertation Enhancement Reward**, University of Kentucky

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

2015    Does Islam Diffuse in America through Weak Ties or Strong Ties? Southern  
Sociological Society, New Orleans, LA

2015    Change in Social Networks of Converts to Islam, Eastern Sociological Society,  
New York City, NY

2014    Social Networks of Converts to Islam. Sunbelt XXXIV, St. Pete, FL

2014    The Arab Spring. International Social Theory Consortium, Knoxville, TN

2014    Religious Diffusion through Weak Ties or/ Strong Ties, Mapping the Landscapes  
of Islamic Studies at University of Indiana Conference, Bloomington, IN

## **HONORS**

**Teaching Assistant**, The University of Kentucky,

**Graduate Research Assistant**, Eastern Michigan University,

**MNG Fellowship**, Middle East Technical University

**Turkish Presidency Fellowship**, Ankara, Turkey

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

2014-14 Teaching Assistant, Annual LINKS Workshop, The University of Kentucky  
2008-09 SPSS lab Instructor, Department of Sociology, The University of Kentucky  
2006-08 Research Analyst, Department of Institutional Research, Washtenaw Community College,  
2007-08 Substitute Teacher, Washtenaw Intermediate School District  
2001 Intern, North West Federation of Community Organization, Seattle, WA  
1998 Methodology Practicum in Social Science, Middle East Technical University

## **COMPETENCIES**

Proficient in Turkish, Kurdish, Russian and German. Introductory Arabic.  
Proficient in the following computer skills: SPSS, SAS, Access, SQL, Microsoft Word, Excel, Power Point, Internet Explorer.

## **MEMBERSHIP IN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATIONS**

American Sociological Association  
Sociology Club at University of Texas at Austin  
SAC Club at Eastern Michigan University

## **SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY**

1996 Assistant Manager for non-Profit Organization, Izmir, Turkey  
2001 Intern at Oregon Action, Portland, Oregon

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