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**CONVERSION THEORY THROUGH THE
COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION LENSE IN A
CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM CONTEXT**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MICHAEL SPEZIO
PROFESSOR ZAYN KASSAM**

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PREFACE

This project would have never been partaken in had I not been honored to attend a seasonal meeting for the Southern California Working Group on Culture, Cognition, and Religion (SCWGCCR) at Fuller Seminary on November 5th, 2011. In attendance at the meeting were a few major proponents in the field of Cognitive Science of Religion: James Van Slyke, Justin Barrett, and Ann Taves. As I began to search for a topic within the field to write about for my senior thesis project, I found myself reflecting on the meeting of the SCWGCCR that I had attended. Many projects were discussed at the meeting. I remember feeling a bit overwhelmed and excited to be in the presence of some interesting minds. As introductions were being made around the table, I remember one of the members mentioning his fascination with conversion experiences. What he said in his introduction resonated with me, especially since I myself had undergone a similar conversion a couple years prior.

This man, who shall go unnamed, talked about how interested he was in religious phenomena: ritual, conversion, prayer, etc. I could tell that it was a personal interest of his, perhaps because he may have undergone a conversion himself or because I knew (from talking to him afterwards) that he wholeheartedly believes that God exists. In a conversation I had with this man during our lunch break, he told me about his own experiences of God. Among his reasons for his belief he listed the many religious experiences that he had himself experienced. He told me of feelings during prayer and moments of awe and a sense of unity with nature. I myself had similar experiences with nature

and agreed with what he was discussing: that God was real that we as humans can feel and detect this numinous being.

Before this, I had never considered the importance of the religious experience and how it enforces our faith in God or in gods. Furthermore, I had never thought about how our mind partakes in that experience to produce, enhance and facilitate it.

My interest in religion, particularly how the mind elicits religious experiences has always been apparent in my quest for knowledge. I often find myself thinking about God, prayer, existence, as well as how it is we know that there can be a God. It was natural for me to conclude that I wanted to investigate the nature of the religious conversion. I thought of my own conversion experiences in the past and was still baffled at how I could quickly change my viewpoint culturally and philosophically. This project arose out of a personal reflection of wanting to understand my own conversion as well as the conversions of others. This topic also emerges from an especially more sensitive place within me, as I was encouraged by my former church to try to go out into communities and encourage others to convert.

In the past, I never felt comfortable with the conversion aspect of my religion and had often times wondered why so many people would try to get others to convert through philosophical arguments or through sharing “witnessing” experiences, as it is called in Christianity. I found these two conversion tactics to be ineffective. Part of me was interested in finding a

successful way to witness to others in a more effective way, but another part of me was interested in simply understanding *why* people converted.

Nonetheless, this project is a result of my own personal religious struggles and my own interests in conversion that were ignited from a conversation I held with someone at the SCWGCCR meeting in November of 2011. I chose to study the conversion from Christianity to Islam because I did not have much knowledge of Islam. I wanted to maintain objectivity in my study so I avoided conversions to Christianity since I had undergone conversion in that direction. Throughout the process I have learned a lot about the Cognitive Science of Religion, conversion theory, as well as Islam.

Table of Contents

1	Acknowledgements
2	Preface
4	Table of Contents
5	Introduction to Cognitive Science of Religion
	Changing Perceptions of Religion: Natural Theology
	HADD
	Modes Theory
	Ritual Form Hypothesis
6	The Problematic of Conversion
	Anthropology of Religion
	Daughters of Another Path
	Becoming Muslim
7	Applied Qualitative Analysis
	Conversion and Modes Theory
	Twelve Modes of Conversion
	Conclusion
8	Bibliography
9	APPENDIX A: Anway Questionnaire
10	APPENDIX B: Completed Example Questionnaire

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion

Religious conversion throughout history has played a huge role in how society has formed today. It seems that every society, ancient as well as modern, has a myriad of religions or ethical philosophies. From the Stoics to modern day Christianity, the trends in religious conversion have shaped culture as well as how a person navigates within that structure. There are a lot of religions out there: Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and the list continues. Religion has a huge impact on the society that it affects. Because of the power that religion holds on the infrastructure of culture as well as the self within that context, it is important to try to understand what conversion is. This is the task at hand. It is to further query what religious conversion is and how the experience of conversion serves as a revolutionary change in a converter's belief system.

Many fields have attempted to define what a religious conversion is. Anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, and psychologists have tried to understand and at times explain what would cause someone to completely change their previous belief system in order to accommodate some new one that is, most of the time, controversial to the previously held system. It is my hope that cognitive science of religion would allow for a better interpretation and understanding of the religious experience. For my own purposes, I hope to

examine how the application of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) lens would allow for a more holistic and flexible approach to understanding the phenomena of the religious conversion experience by using narratives on conversions from a Christian to Muslim paradigm.

Cognitive science of religion is a broadly interdisciplinary approach to the study of the mind that integrates research from psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and philosophy. The main goal is to bring together cognitive science, the history of religion, ethnographies, empirically oriented theology, and the philosophy of religion to explore applications of cognitive science to religious phenomena, as well as religious insights into the study of the human mind. The discipline is fairly new and there are many contributors to the field trained in a broad range of disciplines. Some of the more well known scholars in the field include Pascal Boyer, Harvey Whitehouse, Stewart Guthrie, Scott Atran, Justin Barrett, Robert N. McCauley, and E. Thomas Lawson. Together they attempt to explain and provide competing understandings of how the human mind can generate religious ideas and experiences through the use of ordinary cognitive processes. This means that we do not need any special abilities or capabilities in order to experience something religious. This would also mean that every person would be capable of having a religious experience, they only need to be in the correct mindset and context in order for it to happen.

CSR attempts to change the view that religion can be reduced to an ineffable construct or experience of something numinous. This is done by applying research questions, as understood by cognitive and evolutionary science,

to religious experiences, behaviors, and transmissions of ideas. By identifying aspects of cognition that are cross-culturally and cross-generationally universal to the human species this approach can be achieved. These aspects of cognition are understood as constraints on how religious concepts (or concepts in general since these are meant to be generalizable across humans) are cognitively processed and then further transmitted. According to Barrett (2007), “What unifies the various projects in CSR is the commitment that human conceptual structures are not merely a product of cultural contingencies but that they inform and constrain cultural expression, including religious thought and action.” Based on the above criteria, there have been several hypotheses that have emerged from research on religious beliefs, rituals, and practices since the inception of the CSR field in the year 2000.

The field can be understood through the use of two major branches of study. The first of the two branches dedicates itself to researching the evolution of religion. The second branch concerns itself with dealing with the problematic of religious experience. Many scholars have not accepted the field at large. Perhaps this is because of a fear of religion being reduced to a purely emergent quality that has resulted as a by-product of evolution’s development of complex neural circuits. In fact, this fear amongst scholars outside the field’s approach is that religious phenomena—is nothing more than a something that just happens in the brain. Contrary to this belief, CSR is actually trying to bridge the reductive gap that exists between science and religion.

Most of the scrutiny for the CSR field emerges from critiques of Boyer's *Religion Explained*. Boyer has been formally critiqued by Griffiths (2002) for being too reductive because he assumes that religion has been explained away because of Boyer's use of evolution's perspective on the development of religion. Along with this critique, there are many others that express similar sentiments. Other critics of the Boyer's work with a similar critique include Bulkely (2003), Haught (2002), and Polkinghorne (2001). However, this specific critique seems to be too harsh on what cognitive science of religion is attempting to do. Nonetheless, we can express that the standard model of CSR has been one that "primarily describes religion as a by-product of cognitive adaptations, which spread in human culture because of the exploitation of default properties of human cognition (Van Slyke, 2011)." From this current model trending in CSR, it is quite easy to see why scholars outside the field would agree that CSR has the potential to be too reductive of religion, religious experience, and the transmission of religious ideas, behaviors, and tendencies.

The goal for my project is to move beyond the traditional approaches to CSR to achieve a holistic approach to conversion theory. My hope is to promote a better understanding of conversion that is multi-faceted at a multi-level approach by using anthropological, philosophical, and cognitive psychological approaches in order to promote a new perspective in not only just how conversion functions, but also in how other religious phenomena could be approached for study in the future. Hopefully these efforts can ultimately lead to further empirical investigation and analysis in CSR by different means than is standard

today. In this thesis, I explore both branches of CSR through understandings of the evolution of religion and experiences of religion, in order to come up with a more holistic approach of the religious experience of conversion by qualitatively analyzing narratives of conversion between Christianity and Islam.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION: NATURAL THEOLOGY

William James was a very influential person who revolutionized how religion was viewed in the early 1900s through his Gifford Series on the varieties of religious experiences. His lecture series is documented in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James and Marty, 1982). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* William James offers a sense of validity to the formerly abstract idea of spiritual experience. With an understanding of physiology, psychology, and philosophy, James studied cases of religious inspiration and concluded there were specific aspects of human consciousness that contained energies that could come to a person's assistance in time of great need. The result is what he refers to as the religious experience. James, who was an American, lived in a country that had become popularly secular. Nonetheless, James was able to popularize and promote what he termed natural theology. In doing this, James was able to change the way religious experience was viewed. In his day, it was thought of as nothing more than a nervous condition or perhaps even indigestion. Nonetheless, James was able to give concreteness to religious experience separate from medical materialism. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* portrays the need for a sense of the spiritual as a

natural and healthy psychological function rather than solely a byproduct of visceral action.

This change in view of religion was very helpful in that later when the cognitive revolution occurred in the 1950s it was natural to begin to examine religious experiences with new introspective techniques. The cognitive revolution was a change in the approach that psychology should take on studying the mind. For years behaviorism had ruled western psychology, so much so that people were ridiculed for trying to explain or understand mental processes. When Behaviorism “had to deal with problem solving and other complex activities... [psychologists] took refuge in covert verbal responses – words spoken by the subject to himself, which were connected with verbal association (Neisser, 1972). In contrast, psychologists instead approach the situation through using cognitive models for explanations of conscious activities such as problem solving and memory. Miller (2003) expresses the importance the cognitive revolution was for changing how psychology today is understood. What Miller importantly notes here is that the cognitive revolution led to a change in how psychology was researched, which in turn led to the field of cognitive science, which has ultimately, paired with James revolution of how religious experience should be understood, lead to CSR.

Before all of this, Feuerbach and Freud suggested that the origin of religion was anthropomorphic. Furthering this view, Guthrie (1980), using cognitive science approaches, proposed a theory of religion that was primarily anthropomorphic. Guthrie posits that some of the universal cognitive structures

that are within the human species predispose us to anthropomorphically interpret the world around us. One illustration provided by Guthrie is the phenomenon when people hear rustling tree branches outside their window at night. People often incorrectly conclude that there is a burglar outside their house. His theory posits that there is an initial attribution to some agent for an event and then later a much more sensible explanation for the event secondarily. Guthrie was also responsible for the *faces in the clouds theory*. In the *faces in the clouds* theory, humans have a tendency to identify faces in the clouds when in reality nothing is there. This phenomenon demonstrates how important anthropomorphizing events and circumstances around us, are to humans.

HADD

Barrett (2004) further explains this phenomenon in his book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* In this book, Barrett explores the role of the Hyperactive Agency Detector Device (HADD). The HADD is what we would now term the cognitive process responsible for creating the effect that Freud, Feuerbach, and Guthrie discuss in each of their works. Barrett claims that the HADD is an evolutionarily developed mechanism, however, it should be noted that there has not been any research done in order to determine whether or not the HADD could be evolutionary or whether it is simply something that results from the developmental process of humans. A huge critique of Barrett's work is that it lacks the biological research that things such as twins studies could rule out the possibility that the HADD is developmental.

Barrett (2004) begins his book by giving a framework of how we come to believe things. He simplifies the mind and attributes the use of mental tools as the things that can categorize, describe, and facilitate our ideas. His description of how the mind works is very simplistic. Central to his discussion is the idea of mental modules and the distinction between reflective and non-reflective beliefs that it underpins. “Reflexive beliefs are those we arrive at through conscious, deliberate contemplation or explicit instruction (Barrett 2004, p. 2).” These are things that we come to believe as a result of some thought such as $5 \times 5 = 25$ or that caterpillars turn into butterflies. “Non-reflexive beliefs are those that come automatically, require no careful rumination, and seem to arise instantaneously and sometimes even ‘against better judgment’ (Barrett 2004, p.2).” Barrett’s book has little philosophical consideration and therefore fails to display reflexive and non-reflexive beliefs to be distinctive. Contrary to his aim, it would seem that Barrett (2004) is actually showing how the two categories are a part of a spectrum instead of two separate categories of types of beliefs. For example, some beliefs can be formed as a result of both implicit and explicit cognitive processes. These beliefs can be neither reflexive nor non-reflexive because both implicit and explicit processes contribute to informing the consciousness.

However, Barrett explicitly claims that non-reflective beliefs are primarily implicit, while reflective beliefs are strictly explicit. I contend that Barrett does not account for an integrated type of belief formation. Barrett would say that reflective beliefs are essentially made when there are number of congruent non-reflective beliefs that make one explicitly believe such a belief. The manor in

which we come to believe beliefs becomes problematic as Barrett explains. There is little mention of the general drift of the results without detailing how belief formation occurs. However, it is possible that Barrett does not go into the details of what makes the two types of beliefs distinctive is because he is working off a model that has already been argued and thus he is just generally explaining why it wouldn't be so farfetched for someone to believe that God really does exist. The effect of Barrett not delving into details results in an unsatisfactorily analysis of theory or empirical results. This in turn prevents the reader from alleviating questions about the nature of how exactly these two types of beliefs are actually distinct. The quick walk-through of the basic concepts used by the cognitive science of religion seems sufficient when taken as solely from the approach of cog science, however is too constrained on what a belief is to actually set up a good primary framework according to other disciplines.

In chapter 2 for his text, Barrett discusses the idea of minimally counterintuitive concepts (MCICs). However, it seems that the MCICs are not within in the domain of what CSR is attempting to investigate. Barrett defines gods as MCI agents that are believed in and belief in who affects people's actions. The reference to belief here is meant to deal with the Mickey Mouse problem, i.e. the problem that the concept of Mickey Mouse is an MCIC but, clearly, Mickey Mouse is no god. Simply agreeing that we know Mickey Mouse is not a god, we still cannot dismiss the problems that arise from how a god is defined.

The first of the problems that arises is that there are MCICs of agents who are believed in but are not religious, at least in the context of modern society.

Some of the examples that Barrett mentions of this type include the beliefs in space aliens or ghosts. Because the category of the supernatural includes a lot more than just those things that are religious, it is easy to see why MCICs do not completely satisfy the root of what CSR aims to investigate. The difference between supernatural elements such as ghosts differs greatly from those that Barrett wants to really investigate which are religious.

Barrett, wants to give an explanation of God as well as give a model that includes the belief in other culturally postulated *superhumans*, however this can be quite counter-effective because we are trying to identify those beliefs that are religious from those that are not. On the one hand, Barrett's model wants to talk about all supernatural beliefs; but, on the other hand, it wants to 'really' be concerned with religion proper, as the name of the discipline suggests. In Barrett this second tendency is visible in how he tries to define magical beliefs as including MCICs of non-agent things such as magical wands. On this definition fairies would have to be considered as religious beings. While that may possibly be true historically, to claim that this is the case in modern society seems to be ad hoc. Likewise, it would entail that religious relics turn out not to be religious at all but instead of the magical sort.

This disconnect between what the world is like and our intuitions is greater with each scientific discovery that is made. For example, Barrett's "venus fly trap" example demonstrates how our intuitions can be wrong about how the world actually functions. Our senses are fallible; this is no secret. If we are not able to fully depend on our senses, as in the cases for things like change

blindness, illusions, the sensitivity of our abilities to hear, taste, see, then it would make sense that the world is counterintuitive to our nonreflective beliefs. This occurs because our non-reflexive beliefs are dependent on the spectrum of capabilities that our senses. This inherently affects the validity of our beliefs because of their infallible nature.

If there is a default in our senses, either due to a change in a biological domain as influenced by culture and experience, therefore non-reflective beliefs can be wrong to some degree and can change depending on the agent that is making these non-reflective beliefs. This idea is contrary to Barrett's idea in that we can think of examples in which a human could be 99% similar to, but then come to find out we aren't and that we are actually 99% related to moss. That seems bizarre, but it is because of situations such as these demonstrate how flawed Barrett's theory on HADD is.

Furthermore, we would have to believe that every human is actually an MCI. This seems strange as well because we know conceptually that we are in fact not MCI's. This conclusion is completely off track. Barrett aimed to describe gods, not humans as gods. Barrett insists that we should want to conclude that gods are unlike people, when in fact that it seems that this cannot be made possible.

One would want to conclude that scientific concepts are forced upon us by empirical evidence while religious concepts are the effect of the functioning of the peculiarities of human cognitive capabilities – the mental modules mentioned earlier (ie...our categorizers, descriptors, and facilitators). While this may seem

correct, the view of why certain ideas are accepted that Barrett puts forward closes this route. He claims that, in general, ideas come to be accepted because they 'fit with' or activate many of the mental modules. Indeed, he discusses the example of the "venus flytrap" in which he claims that we come to believe in their existence because even though the concept is counterintuitive it agrees with a larger number of mental modules than it runs counter to. If this were true, then humans would conduct act rationally based on strong evidence rather than ascribing and following religious beliefs. As a result of these claims, as scholars, we would be forced to reject the fundamental principles of science, which would also cause us to reject objective abilities to perform science as well as rationale for carrying science out.

A final aspect of the problem with minimal counter-intuitiveness and how Barrett uses it is that he moves from MCI concepts, through MCI agents to things such as the "venus flytrap" which happen to run counter to our intuitions. It would seem that Barrett is confusing what we are referring to as 'MCI agents' with MCI concepts of agents or actual agents who happen not to fit with our intuitions. Not distinguishing between these two memes and lumping them together could ultimately lead to the conclusion that if the concept of God exists this also means that God exists.

Although I have strong objections to the theory that Barrett (2004) proposes, I also agree that elements of his argument are systemic of one larger perspective. That would be a non-philosophical rigorous approach. This is not that disheartening though considering most science has advanced without the use

of philosophy making it still possible for HADD to be productive. Lastly, it should also be noted that Barrett is biased in his approach to understanding Atheism. Barrett also asserts that atheism is natural, however based on his evidence atheist religious views cannot exist. Given his model, he cannot reach such a conclusion.

MODES THEORY

Another prominent theory that emerges within the Cognitive Science of Religion field was proposed by Harvey Whitehouse (Whitehouse 2004). Whitehouse maintains that the mode of religious theory argues that there are two fundamental religious systems. The first of the two says there are doctrinal systems that involve an intricate network of elaborately written theologies, institutionalized leadership roles, and predictable rituals that are frequently repeated. The second type of religious system in the modes of religiosity theory involves an imagistic system that involves unpredictable rituals full of excitement that are less frequently performed. Through the doctrinal and imagistic we are able to understand the cultural transmission that occurs within society.

According to Whitehouse, each mode of religiosity is supposed to elicit different cognitive processes in the minds from the individuals who are enacting the rituals. For the doctrinal systems we could say that explicit memory is being activated while in the imagistic system the enactor of the ritual is most likely using episodic memory. Whitehouse's goal is simplify the process of identifying the cognitive processes being used by the person partaking in the religious act by

identifying what mode the person is in. By identifying the mode of the person, we then theoretically have the ability to predict what kinds of cognitive processes are being utilized as well as what systems are maintaining those modes as well.

Mind and Religion (Whitehouse and McCauley 2005) further explores these different types of modes of theory. However, it seems a bit deceptive because the hope would be that in this book Whitehouse and McCauley would be able to provide some sort of empirical evidence to support their theory. Instead, the reader is left a little bit more confused on what the book is really furthering. Whitehouse and McCauley's book consists of three-parts, and is divided into sections that explain the theoretical context, testing the modes theory, and the wider applications of the theory. In the first section readers are presented with a broad theoretical construction of Whitehouse's work. It isn't until reading the following chapter written by Lawson that the problem of cultural transmission in relation to the modes theory is actually directly addressed. I agree with Lawson's assertion that not though some rituals are performed more frequently whilst others aren't, that different rituals do render different weights of the form of the ritual. Boyer also contributes a chapter in this section in which he applies evolutionary psychology to the modes of religiosity in order to differentiate between the cognitive adaptations that produce religiosity from aspects of religion that simply emerge as by-products from those adaptations. Boyer also makes a great critique by showing that the doctrinal mode is correlated with cognitive by-products like literacy. One common critique among all the papers in the first

section of the book seems to express a need for empirical evidence of the modes of religiosity.

The second section of the book is supposed to be directed towards testing the modes theory. In a chapter by Barrett, this is far from done. However, Barrett does suggest several questions that need to be answered in order for the modes theory to be shown empirically valid. The fact that only one chapter in this section, which seemed to be dedicated to testing the modes theory, gave any empirical data. This goes to show how it is much easier to theorize and suggest rather than to actually demonstrate that which is being theorized about. Nonetheless, one experiment that does yields some empirical data is given in the book. This experiment tested students in ritual-like activities directed at trying to discover whether or not rituals that elicit strong emotional reactions would motivate more elaborate reflection about the ritual. The experiment ultimately supported the modes theory hypothesis showing that the subjects did in fact attribute greater meaning to those ritual acts that were greater in number. This is quite an interesting find and seems a bit controversial. This experiment will be talked about in further detail later in this work. For now, I will just mention that a study on religious ritual was done.

The final section of the book is dedicated to wider applications of the theory. This section includes a piece about religious conversion, magical agency, and free will. The religious conversion is redefined into the imagistic and doctrinal modes. Pyysiainen seems convinced that the modes theory can help in the understanding of how conversion works cognitively. However, I'm not so

convinced that conversion acts so simply. There seem to be other outside forces that influence the conversion. Like Pyysianinen states, “the modes theory is meant to be an empirical theory, it’s worth can only be judged by the phenomena it helps explain.” I think that some aspects of the modes theory can help to possibly categorize the types of experiences of conversion as Pyysianinen somewhat does, however I’m not sure if conversion can be demonstrated or grounded in empirical evidence.

I hoped that the book would lend to the reader more evidence for the modes theory, but in many ways I find the modes theory to be problematic. It seems to be too minimalistic and reductive to truly be able to explain how the mind works in religion, or more specifically through ritual. However, the book was beneficial in that it covered a significant number of commentaries on the modes theory. Ultimately, the modes theory has been one of the more popular theories to really push CSR, into its own field. Without the groundwork that Whitehouse has contributed to the field, a lot of the foundation of CSR would still be in its formative stages.

RITUAL FORM HYPOTHESIS

Additionally, another mainstream theory in CSR is the ritual form hypothesis (RFH). E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley proposed this theory (1990). The theory concerns itself with the different cognitive functions that are involved in religious practices. In the RFH, religious rituals are cognitively processed by an “action representation system” which represents

different parts of the ritual. Some of these parts could include agents in the ritual, the action/s being performed, and the objects used during the ritual. Here there is an underlying assumption that there is a superhuman agency that is somehow either invoked or involved during it.

At first glance, it is easy to see how difficult it may be to try to understand the superhuman agent or observe him in the ritual, the actions performed by the enactor are judged by their intentions. Essentially what is being judged is a conglomerate of cognitive processes of which reflect both social and cultural information. Some religions, such as Catholicism, involve the use of specific adornment, costumes, or artifacts. These are pageantry that are used to arouse emotional systems and signify extra importance of the conductance of the ritual. For example, every Sunday mass a priest is dressed in special clothing, and before the Eucharist is given he may go through an elaborate process to transform the wine and wafer into the blood and body of Christ. The priest's robes are most ornately decorated dress to allude to the fact that to one must come to the altar of God: reverent, clean, and pure.

In this book Lawson and McCauley attempt to show and outline a model of how the cognitive representations that an individual holds are used in a religious ritual system. They also proceed to show how those representations also affect the systems structure as a whole. Their research begins by defending two positions. The first theses they defend it that explanation and interpretation interact and are necessary in order to understand religious rituals. The second thesis that is defended in this work is that the "competence approach" that is

presented in linguistics is necessary in order to gain understanding in the knowledge and intuitions of participants in a religious ritual system. Ultimately, McCauley and Lawson are attempting to demonstrate both the cultural and cognitive aspects of religious ritual.

The cultural dimension of religious ritual is demonstrated or rather argued for by indicating that a person's competence in a certain religious ritual is a presupposition of the knowledge and competence of natural language. Thus they conclude that religious ritual must be a cultural product and not a biological or psychological product. The second aspect of religious ritual maintained, that is the cognitive one, is then demonstrated by arguing that people learn religious rituals much in the same way people learn culturally natural language.

Lawson and McCauley also explore at the theoretical level the intellectualist, the symbolist, and the structuralist approaches to conversion. They depict how each approach benefits certain phenomena in religion specifically as well as how those models can be interpreted by using linguistics as an analogy. Ultimately though, they come to a conclusion that it is not beneficial to use any one of those approaches alone given their inability to explain everything.

The primary focus of their study was on religious systems. They argue that these religious systems are the "paradigm case" of all symbolic cultural systems. Furthermore, McCauley and Lawson say they study ritual because it is a stable system of religion. The authors examine the religious rituals that illicit "performative utterances" to further show how ritual is similar to natural language. They argue that these utterances serve as a way to give meaning to

religious ritual. The structure of rituals on the other hand, is determined through the syntax of the grammar used. McCauley and Lawson believe that like the structure of a sentence, the structure of the ritual can be diagrammed through schemas.

Chapter 5 of their books lends itself to few schematics that describe the structure of cognitive representations of participants that are partaking in the religious ritual. The three religious rituals the authors choose to use are the Christian blessing of the water, the Agnyadhana and Vedic rituals in Hinduism, and the Zulu preparatory ritual. Like the priest preparing the Eucharist from earlier, each ritual in its own can be judged and interpreted in order to understand it. Chapter 6 of this book is all about the semantics of religious ritual. Both authors argue that through a reflexive analysis of semantic holism we can begin to decode religious ritual. For an outsider to observe a ritual being enacted, it can be quite difficult to interpret what exactly is going on. In order for us to understand religion as well as the ritual through the lens of the enactor, the semantic holism perspective allows for a deconstruction of the ritual by order as well as meaning. It allows for a holistic examination of how religious ritual works because of its mapping of the symbolism of the ritual. It demonstrates how the symbols relate to one another by considering their positional meaning within the whole religious ritual system. The fact that the mapping allows for this relational and referential analysis is ingenious.

The vigor that Lawson and McCauley use to try to break down religious ritual is quite illustrative and perhaps very much needed. Unlike other theories,

their approach attempts to integrate the interpretive and explanatory into how the model functions. The integration of the cultural approach and cognitive approach seems to be a positive move towards trying to understand religion and aspects of religions in a more interdisciplinary way.

Despite these aspects, it also seems that Lawson and McCauley do not take into real consideration what the ritual actually means. To sit back and observe the ritual being observed is rather easy. There is no way to really know how the enactor of the ritual is really understanding the ritual given their own cultural framework as well as given their own ideological make-up. Their model is incredible in that it allows for a more critical interpretation on rituals, however, it is too reductive in that it allows the observer to judge rather than let the enactor describe the feeling as well.

In general it would seem that the Cognitive Science of Religion still has a lot of room to grow. Again, it should be noted that it is a fairly new field, but it can lend a helpful hand in trying to understand conversion. I will be extrapolating from the CSR theories available in order to examine narratives of conversion stories from women who were once Christians but decided to convert to Islam.

It should be noted that Whitehouse and McCauley (2005) have given a little attention to how modes theory could apply to a CSR approach to conversion. Although the didactic framework of the modes theory, as far as trying to categorize modes of religiosity into dogmatic or imagistic mode, is a bit flawed in some ways, it does allow for an interesting perspective on a baseline of how

conversion could be viewed as well as allow for a more holistic approach than afforded by anthropology, philosophy, or cognitive psychology alone.

Chapter 2: The Problematic of Conversion

A religious conversion is usually viewed to be a sudden and fundamental shift in a person's worldview. A person who undergoes a conversion cannot continue to believe what he or she has previously believed because holding that belief to be true is much more cognitively costly than not holding that belief. This shift in worldview usually causes the person to change significantly. In 1906, William James described a religious conversion to be a representative symbol "by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy (James & Marty 1982, p. 189)." The beliefs become costly to hold because they create great turmoil in the person, albeit moral or emotional. The religious conversion is a way to resolve the internal turmoil to unify the split self once again.

Furthermore, religious conversion is a process by which a person decides to act alternatively religious in order to transform the self's subjective view. A successful conversion, we would assume, would entail a person who has come into a new framework of thinking and can interpret both his or her new life in that framework as well as his or her old life. Conversion can trigger some intense questions about the self. It has the potential for family problems to arise, create chasm between all kinds of friendships, change the way other

people view the converter, as well as many other things. Most of the literature that has given us an understanding of what conversion is has been primarily anthropological and sociological in nature. However, with the help of Cognitive Science of Religion, we will hopefully begin to understand other aspects of conversion that are more cognitively centered. Analyzing conversion narratives of Muslim women who were once Christian but decided to submit themselves to Islam will exemplify a cohesive way to understand the cognitive shift that happens during a religious conversion.

Cognitive science of religion at large has yet to contribute much to understanding conversion. Most scholarly work in the field has been towards understanding religious rituals, another type of religious experience. We can extrapolate from those theories, however, in order to form a theoretical framework from which we can begin to understand religious conversion from the CSR perspective.

Identity formation is key in understanding the process of cognitive reconciliation that is ongoing during a conversion. When people adopt a new religious system it has to be adopted, internalized, and incorporated into the pre-existing cognitive framework that already exists. A person's whole belief system is not changed. Only those beliefs, which pertain to the old religious system, will be altered, reinterpreted to represent the new religious framework. This would mean that the person has to cognitively integrate the new worldview with other beliefs in the cognitive domain.

There is much literature available on the conversion of pretty much any religion to that of Christianity. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that Christianity has been a dominant religion throughout history and therefore more predominantly documented because of its hierarchical political position above other religions. Perhaps the fact we have so much religion on the ‘any religion to Christianity’ viewpoint is because of how much the religion expresses its followers to go out and spread the gospel. Whatever the case, there is something interesting about knowing that what we know about conversion is so limited to the Christian context. In order for scholars to begin to understand conversion, there must a cross-cultural study about conversions done. In this way, we are able to see if in fact, from a naturalist perspective, religious experiences are similar across the human species.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Anthropology has widely aimed to be inclusive of conversion experience narratives or ethnographies of other religions. One such example of a work like this is presented by Buckser and Glazier (2003) in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. This book is a collection anthropological papers partitioned into three sections on conversion and social processes, conceptualizing conversion, and the experiences of conversion. The work is a collaborative effort by anthropologists with varying approaches and perspectives that allows an interesting outlook of conversion in many senses. Some of these approaches are more concerned with the cultural flow of conversion as exemplified by Hinduism

while others are interested on the legitimacy of conversion and whether it should be allowed by religions such as that of Judaism. The range of perspectives allowed in this work is what really makes it interesting in allowing the reader see a multi-faceted approach to understanding how conversion functions, what it means, and what effects it has on the person as well as the community being converted into.

This collaborative perspective seems to defy the premise that conversion is simple, a view that anthropology and even religious studies tend to illustrate. Many think conversion can be a simple moment of “ecstasy” or even insight. I would agree with this book that conversion is not just that moment of insight, but rather can be more complex and that conversion or the process of conversion is not as simple as many make it out to be. This work tries to show how there is an individual change in the converter’s sense of consciousness as well as a change where it concerns social status or belonging. Conversion also seems to entail the mental changes and experiences the converter goes through, but also the physical rituals the person must experience. Conversion is hyper dependent on the culture in which the conversion occurs as well as the individual’s own experience and mental attitude.

The first part of the book is an exploration of the social processes involved in conversion. Every culture presented in this section seemed to have a different take on how conversion was understood. What many wrote about was how the Charismatic Pentecostalism movement really affects other cultures around the globe. For those in India, not only did it cause major cracking and disruption

among the people, but it elicited an anti-India attitude. Those who did not accept Hinduism, rejected what it meant to be an Indian. Therefore, conversion to Christianity or any other religion, in that culture meant also turning from one's own country. It is quite sad that people would perceive this conversion in such way, but perhaps this judgment is biased from my own cultural perspective.

When taking conversion into consideration from a Jewish perspective converting into the religion could seem quite controversial. For example, those whose families may have converted to Christianity during Christian conquest or because of threats to those that want to convert back to Judaism are referred to as Felashurma, or he that converted. For the Ethiopians, conversion back to Judaism means the right to become a citizen in Israel. This is controversial because those who are Jewish do not want those whose families who converted to revert back to Judaism simply for the ability to have citizen status in Israel. Another controversial aspect comes with intermarriages. According to Jewish Law, if a man intermarries, his children will not be Jewish. With increasing numbers of intermarried couples, this is problematic. Some wish their children to be consider Jewish so they ask their wives to convert to Judaism. This again is controversial because Rabbis may question the legitimacy of the conversion.

Overall, this book seems to be calling for a more comprehensive understanding of conversion through collaboration with other fields. Though the book seems to be critiquing psychology for trying to only study the individual perspective during conversion, it seems to also want to ask psychology to further develop it's techniques in order to also aid in adding to the pool of knowledge of

how conversion works and how it affects the self, the community, as well as a religion as a whole.

Rambo in the final paper expresses his concern for stagnation in the field due to scholar's lack of willingness to collaborate with each other. The collaborative approach he proposes seems like it makes sense since little is known about how conversion acts cross-culturally and cross-generationally.

Because conversion is so dependent on the converter's culture, social placement and status, upbringing as well as many other factors, I would agree that the subject of conversion is in dire need of an interdisciplinary approach. In my opinion, it would seem that collaboration using experimental psychology, anthropology, as well as techniques from religious studies could inform the creation of a better model for how conversion works.

In the final piece by a psychologist of religion Rambo (2003) makes an explicit attempt in his afterword to encourage scholars to do more work needs to be done on the conversion experience particularly with Islam because of the growing number of Muslims around the world as well as to lessen tensions after September 11th.

I will be using two books as my primary sources for understanding conversion between Christianity and Islam. I will be focusing on the narratives of women, mainly because gender roles in Islam change the conversion process for males and females. The first of the two narratives I will look at is *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Anway 1996). The second of the books is *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to*

Islam by Anna Mansson. Both of these books are studies done by two women who were interested in Western women's conversions to Islam. Besides just having this type of research goal in common, the works also share the fact that they are both case studies that were conducted in an attempt to try to understand why women would convert to Islam when it is viewed by mainstream western thought as oppressive towards women.

DAUGHTER'S OF ANOTHER PATH

Anway experiences discrimination via the experience of her own daughter converting. Though Anway's book is story of her daughter Jodi's conversion, it is also ethnographic in nature. After having to emotionally sort through the conversion of her daughter, Anway decided to conduct a study to try to understand Islam. In this study she collected conversion stories from American-born women who converted to Islam. Anway created a questionnaire (see Appendix A) and sent it out all over the country in order to make a collection of conversion stories of American women who made the choice to convert to Islam (See Appendix B for a completed survey). Since September 11, 2001 American views on Islam have tended to be negative because of the demonization of Islamic practices after the tragic attacks on the Pentagon and Twin Towers. Because of the negative perceptions that are popular about Muslims, Anway hoped to paint a more realistic picture of American Muslims that portrayed them as real human beings in a positive light.

Anway's questionnaire received a good range of demographic diversity. She was able to collect completed surveys from 53 participants from Oklahoma,

Kansas, Missouri, Virginia, New Jersey, Indiana, Oregon, Alabama, Texas, California, Louisiana, Washington, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Vermont, and Ontario. The ages of the women who responded ranged from 21 to 47 years old. Also, the number of years that the participants had been Muslim's ranged from 6 months to 22 years. Anway also noted that all the women are actively involved with doing daily prayers, fasting at Ramadan, and participating in constantly studying the Qur'an. Overall, Anway notes that her participants "have found fulfillment and happiness in their decision to live a specific lifestyle –Islam. (1996, p. 8)"

Anway begins her inquiry into the conversion process by touching on the religious backgrounds of her participants. She says that all her participants have Christian backgrounds that range from fundamentalist to liberal. The conversion process begins when someone begins searching for meaning in her life (Anway 1996, p. 11). These women expressed the fear they had held within Christianity. One woman said, "When I was seventeen I stopped going to church and had horrible nightmares about the devil coming to get me for about six months (p. 12)." This quote that Anway highlights depicts just how strongly religion can play in someone's life. This woman in particular lived a life that was strictly religious. This means that the woman was expected to diligently attend church on Sunday and during the week.

Some of the women that participated had parents with weak or changing convictions on religion. The women categorized as growing up like this had parents who may have had strong religious beliefs however church attendance

was not stressed or Christian denominations split the family. One such woman who was categorized as having grown up in a weak or changing religious household recalls her childhood by expressing the statement below.

“My religious commitment was deeply imbedded. My parents did not attend church but sent me with family and friends from the time I was two years old. My parents had and, to some extent, still have moral standards that were taught to me in my youth regardless of their church attendance record. My mother’s father is a Pentecostal preacher and my mother had always expressed her ill feelings toward her father for making her go to church three times a week (p. 14).”

Here it is clear that though the woman went to church, her parents did not. Nonetheless, she was raised with Christian morals because her parents still held on to those from when they grew up. A common theme expressed amongst the women who had weak convictions was that they were “always seeking some religious fulfillment.” These women all express the importance that religion played in their lives.

In general, all the women, whether they came from strong Christian households, weak ones, or almost non-existent Christian households all felt a sense of disillusionment, confusion, and were filled with unanswered questions. For many, the feeling of confusion and the need to connect to something eventually led to a moment where there was some interaction with God. It seems that this need to find love or understand what is out there was the initial point in the causal chain that led to conversion.

Jodi, Anway’s daughter, expresses similar feelings as the women from above. Jodi has a conversation with her mother asking her who she believes Jesus is (p. 19). The mother replies with a quaint answer reminding Jodi that at one

point she was a Christian and she knew the answer to the question. Nonetheless, Jodi prods her mother respond, “But, Mom, I want to hear you tell me now (p.19).” This prodding leads to Jodi’s mother answering with a generic answer about the birth of Jesus, his ministry, and his role as the Son of God. Her mom summarizes by saying that Jesus is part of the trinity. Here Jodi seems to be prodding her mother, seeking for an adequate answer to possibly still believe in Jesus. However, this doesn’t happen because Jodi converted to Islam.

The women that returned questionnaires to Anway reported that they were first introduced to conversion as a result of the witness of a significant other, learning about the Islamic tradition while in an Islamic country, the witness of Muslim neighbors or acquaintances, through a college setting or course, sensing the authority of the Qur’an, finding answers in Islam, or identifying something similar in Islam. I will include an example from each category for interpretation later. Because none of the women are identified by name I will give them pseudo-names such as woman A, Woman B, Woman C, etc...

Anway provides three examples for women who first learned about Islam through the witness of their significant other. It was quite clear that sometimes, the husband’s ties to his culture would make the wife interested about her husband’s background. Naturally, trying to understand their husbands better, they would educate themselves about Islam. One lady’s remarks who we shall refer to as Woman A follow.

“ My husband was supportive in helping me put my life together. I was recovering once again from emotional problems. He really had very little to do with my conversion. He introduced me to Islam but never asked me to convert. Islam does not require me to, but he returned fully to his

religion. As I saw him gradually acquire an inner peace, I became envious. Inner peace was what I sought. So I asked for literature. The more I read, the more I wanted to learn. Islam means “submission to the will of God” or “inner peace.” I felt God himself was leading me (p. 23).”

Here Woman A notes that she was jealous of her husband’s inner peace, and that she herself wished to feel that. Not only does she envy what her husband seems to feel, but as soon as she begins to learn about Islam, she also feels as if *God* is leading her. Here we can see that Woman A seems to have a missing thing in her life, but that as soon as she converts to Islam she is beginning to feel God or feel a sense of unity beginning to form with God.

Woman B in Anway’s book learned about Islam while she was in an Islamic country. Woman B expresses a deep connection that she feels with Allah.

“I studied Islam as part of my college major in African and middle Eastern Studies....I did not believe anyone could truly practice Islam in the present age. I traveled to West Africa as a volunteer and stayed 3 month. In that time, I met true Muslims. When they heard the call to prayer, they ran to the mosque. If someone had extra money beyond his basic needs, he gave it to someone less fortunate. The name of Allah was always on their tongues. The more I was with them; the more I wanted to embrace Islam. I became very sick and had to be evacuated to a hospital in the capital. I had no one to comfort me – all my friends were far away. All I could do was pray. I prayed almost constantly for three days. I remembered the conversion story of Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens); he was drowning and promised God he would devote his life to God if God spared his life. I did the same. Within two days, I was back in the village with my Muslim friends, but I still resisted converting. I was miserable when I returned to the U.S. I could no longer function in a society so far removed from what I wanted. I met many American and Arab Muslims who encouraged me ever so gently to let go and submit to Allah. I became so exhausted from trying to resist the pull of Islam that finally on January 21, 1989, I converted (p. 26).”

Woman B expresses the deep turmoil that she experienced trying to resist the pull to become Muslim. She was enamored by the Muslims rush to go pray and also by the generosity that she saw Muslims give each other financially. Not only was

she impressed at their docile nature, but also she herself experienced the healing of Allah through prayer when she was in the hospital.

Muslim neighbors and acquaintances were another mode that some women were introduced to Islam by. These women tended to sense a Muslims personal strength. Woman C writes:

“My husband wasn’t practicing his religion at the time I met him so he had no objections when I decided to go back to church and take the kids. The only thing he requested was that we eat no pork. Visitors from Egypt to my fathers’ business let me see for the first time Islam in full practice. It was then that my husband began to think about putting it in his life more seriously. Then my aunt married a Muslim, and I spent much time there asking questions about Islam. In 1990 I gave birth to my fourth child, and I was caught unaware in my belief. What I mean is I really didn’t know I believed in Islam. But one night Allah made the truth to hit me. It felt like a rock, and I cried like my three-week-old daughter that night as I sat staring at my plaque of the Lord’s Prayer. I kept my belief a secret even from my husband for another two weeks. I told him on the phone one day when he called me from work. He immediately started asking me why. He told me it was very serious, that I shouldn’t “hop on to it.” One must be convinced and not compelled. He cut me short saying ‘We’ll talk about it when I get home.’ He later told me after he hung up the phone, he cried and thanked God. He promised to try to begin a new life and practice Islam to the full extent. He told me that night, he whispered the call to prayer in our newborn’s right ear and the readiness call in her left – something he had not done with our other children (p. 27-28).”

Woman C seemed to have had an extremely religious moment with God before making the decision to convert. She experiences an intense unity with God, one that leaves her crying thinking about leaving her Christian roots and adopting Islamic ones.

Another way that Anway categorizes women learning about the Islamic tradition is in a college setting. Of these women, she says that some women encounter the tradition solely because of interactions they have with other students, classes, and professors. Woman D expresses her conversion as follows:

“ I was Roman Catholic. I studied African- America studies as part of my work toward a degree in social sciences. After reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, I felt compelled to understand the power behind Brother Malcolm’s transformation after making hajj, when he returned to the U.S. and said that racism is not a part of Islam. As I began to study, I felt certain that lightning would strike me down for studying another religion. I studied causally for three months, intensely for the next three months, then made shahada to Allah before I first stepped into a masjid for the first time on May 29 1993, I made shahada in front of witnesses in the masjid. The change was not a choice for me; it was going home. It gave me answers to questions I’d had and questions I didn’t have. I love Islam. I love the concept of ummah. Alhamdulillah, that Allah has seen me fit to test (p. 31).”

Even though Woman D feared for her life because she became interested in Islam, she pushed herself to study what seemed to attract her heart. For Woman D, becoming Muslim was not just researching a new worldview, it was a reconciliation of the lifestyle she lived as a Catholic.

One last mode in which women were introduced to Islam was through a calling from the Qur’an sensing its authority. Woman E began studying the Qur’an because a Muslim challenged her to. The reason for the debate was that she and this other person could debate on the position of women in Islam. Like many people, Woman E believed that Muslim women were oppressed compared to their female Christian counterparts. Woman E grew up Catholic and converted to Christianity. When she began to read the Qur’an she could not put it down. She said that the “Qur’an and ..hadith of the Prophet captured ...[her] (p. 34).” She says she “went through a very odd experience whereby for the whole week it took...[her] the whole week to read the Qur’an...[She] couldn’t sleep and seemed to toss and turn all night with feverish sweat (p. 34).” Woman E had dreams about religious topics because of the readings she had been doing , so much so

that she didn't study for her finals for school. It is apparent from Woman E's testimony that something in the Qur'an enraptured her attention and that it caused her to re-examine what she thought about Muslim women.

Anway describes how these women each begin their journey of conversion and faith in blurbs that have been spliced together. She does this to maximally cover the experience of the conversion in order to contextualize and strengthen the experiences that they each undergo. From the moment after these conversions, Anways describes how the flow of each woman's life is destined to change in both aesthetic flow as well as religiously.

BECOMING MUSLIM

The second narrative that I will look at is *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (Mansson 2006). This book is unique in that the author recognizes the need for an understanding of conversion theory through a psychological perspective. This book especially focuses on the religious experiences that women have that were "charged with emotional and existential meaning, such as having a dream, a separation, or going on trips to foreign places, and having experiences that triggered a need for spiritual connection ... (p. 4)." The book consists of 9 women's conversions to Islam: Ayse, Zarah, Marianne, Lisa, Cecilia, Layla, Mariam, Fatimah, and Hannah.

McGinty conducted interviews with six women from Sweden and three from the United States between 1998 and 2001, and she analyzes the interviews within the theoretical framework of psychological anthropology. All of the women but one had well-organized life stories and speak in terms of personal

agency or the hand of destiny in bringing about their conversions. McGinty relies on “personal models” as her basis for analyzing the women’s narratives. Her framework looks at how the person “create[s] self-coherence and continuity by negotiating meaning between past and present (p. 33).” This approach allows for each individual to analyze their own biography from a before and after approach.

Personal models are subjective phenomena: personal ideas, emotions, and memories that are tied to the subjects’ own “biographical idiosyncrasies” (p. 10). This type of approach to conversion, however, differs in the more popular cultural approach that most anthropologists use to examine the narratives. McGinty’s main goal is to be able to demonstrate her participants cognitive processes by using self-report method for examination. Examining these self-report narratives allows for insights into each persons pre-existing mental model and also allows for the investigation of the reconciliation of new ideas or beliefs that are integrated after conversion.

McGinty concludes that because of the participants coherent senses of what the conversion means to them, the women experience a disconnect between their own self-image as a now Muslim woman. Given that these women converted out of spiritual needs, strong family values, as well as an affinity for social justice issues. The Muslim women, though often viewed negatively by Non-muslim women are stereotyped. Thus these women, for others become re-classified, but the Muslim women themselves also reclassify themselves as they undergo the changes of conversions. The Muslim women, although not positively included into the community around them, include themselves in that community

because of how their perspective is skewed because they feel like they are also part of that community. For example, the Swedish women that McGinty interviews still view themselves as Swedes even though non-Muslims probably would not regard them as such.

McGinty provides a framework which examines each woman's world. However, this is a bit problematic in that it only approaches the problem of conversion at an individual level. It is a psychological approach that could possibly fare better from CSR. Because of how McGinty frames her study, her data is not generalizable to other converts, however, we can draw from her interviews in order to better understand what the converter is experiencing during conversion.

One of the young ladies that McGinty interviews is Mariam. Mariam found herself converting as she did her own fieldwork in Arica. "She had an experience she could not question or dismiss, a feeling of something real (p. 57)." Included here is an excerpt of the conversation Anna McGinty has with Mariam.

"Mariam: When you go back and look on your own life, when anybody talks about their own life, it is like everybody had a point and a purpose and there was a direction. I do not really believe this. I mean, I do and I don't. I think you are guided yes, there is something that is written for you but I'm not sure it has exactly the meaning that we put to it. The way I think of becoming a Muslim, for me it was a solution....I imagine that is how people feel, that it is a solution to a problem that they have been living with, either of not understanding the religion that they have been living with, either of not understanding the religion that they had or combining a certain understanding that they haven't been able to combine.

Anna: You said that when you did the prayer it felt right.

Mariam: Yeah, for me, because it wasn't an intellectual experience. I couldn't deny it and there was no way that I could do my normal 'oh,

maybe it was this.’ No, I really felt it was very real. I’m happy for that. (p 57).”

Mariam comments on how real she now feels and how there was definitely this feeling she experienced that made her feel cognizant of God or at one with God. She sees Islam as the solution to her troubles and expresses how “happy” that makes her feel. Mariam’s conversion experience was a solution to her previously held worldview. She grew up in New York city in a very spiritual household, one that was split Christian and Catholic. While in Africa, she practiced fasting and prayer with the people that surrounded her. Before, Mariam’s Catholicism was meaningless to her. She felt coerced and forced into praying, but with Islam she felt like she found what she needed.

Mariam’s conversion rather than being intellectual was one of high emotion. Instead of learning about the tradition she adopted from the scriptures in the Qur’an, she instead learned from the people she observed and prayed with.

She says:

“ I became Muslim differently than most American Muslims. In some ways I feel that I became Muslim as a child. Because I took it on with learning the other new things. And it just fit and I kept it. And because the people that I was living with lived like the Prophet. They live in the same environment. Their personhood is the same. A lot of the things that I thought were customs particular for them were in fact just *Sunna*, the practices of the Prophet, that they had taken on that were natural to them. So I got a very good education about Islam without ever getting told about anything. (p. 59)”

Through this commentary, we can tell that although Mariam did not gain knowledge of Islam through the traditional sense: reading the Qur’an, discussing ritual or prayer progression, reading, or attending lectures. Even so, Mariam was able to adopt the cultural and social lifestyle of Islam by simply integrating

herself into the community and understanding gave her a spiritual connection with both God and her community. When she did her prayers throughout the day, she felt connected with Allah and was constantly reminded of her position and relation to him, this feeling she says is what she wanted and ultimately the reason she converted.

Ultimately, the aim of McGinty's book is to satisfy the psychological aspects of religious conversion and understanding the self and more particularly on what it means to be a convert to Islam in Europe and the United States. Both narratives, that of Anway and McGinty, had women strongly expressing that the choice to convert to Islam was their own and that their husband did not force them or brainwash them into becoming Muslims. It should also be noted that the women also felt discriminated against in public. Many people think of these women as stupid and uneducated, when usually the contrary is true. Most of the women held degrees and were very educated, usually as educated as their husbands. I mention this only to express something that all the women felt important to note about popular views about Muslims in particular women.

CHAPTER 3: APPLIED QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Having given the background for CSR as well as touching upon the narratives from Muslim women about their conversions from Christianity to Islam it is time to try to understand these two together. The Cognitive Science of religion tries to understand religious experience. Some scholars, especially those of the sciences would probably disagree that religious experiences should be counted as evidence for belief in God; nonetheless, we still see millions of people converting to a variety of different religions.

In *Mind and Religion* Whitehouse and Mcauley provide a further framework in which the modes theory can be used to understand conversions. What is particularly hard about this application is that rituals or experiences are neither imagistic or doctrinal. They are a mixture of the two. This can be problematic however, with a little bit of tweaking we could possibly come to a place where modes theory can be used to understand the narratives that both Anway and McGinty's books were able to uncover.

The religious conversions that the Muslim women experience involve a sudden change in their religious convictions, behaviors, and affiliations. For the most part, these women now switch from understanding the bible and believing that Jesus is the Son of God to now reading and learning the Qur'an as well as studying the hadith. Their religious convictions change becoming much more conservative and the women fall into the roles that women should partake in as a traditional Muslim. Their behaviors change. The women, all but one from Anways's study wear hijab, they begin to pray 5 times a day, they attend mosque,

and they address other people differently. The women change who they affiliate themselves. One woman in Anway's work talks about how she no longer associated herself with old friends that drank and she used to know because it was best to surround oneself with good Muslim people to avoid temptation. Also, it seems that the women also, at least at first, seem to have rocky relationships with their parents or extended family. This in itself changes the family dynamic.

All of these women can pinpoint what exactly caused them to convert as well as can identify the exact time they converted. Conversion is usually a momentous moment for these women because they have to take shahada. Essentially, declare that Allah is the only God and that He is the only God they will worship. Preceding to this conversion, most women expressed a sense of restlessness and a feeling of incompleteness. On page 14 in Anway's book someone expresses that she had been "always seeking some religious fulfillment." This feeling was a common expression amongst almost all the women.

TWELVE MODES OF CONVERSION

For the most part the neurocognitive mechanisms of conversion have been ignored and not studied (Brown and Caetano 1992). Whitehouse (1995) gives 12 modal variables to try to evaluate the relevance for explaining conversion phenomena. The 12 modes are frequency of transmission, level of arousal, memory, ritual meaning, revelation techniques, social cohesion, leadership, inclusivity/exclusivity, spread, scale, degree of uniformity, and structure.

The frequency of transmission has to do with the imagistic ideal but also can involve the doctrinal position. In perspective of conversion we could say that

conversion could be either triggered by a single event or it can happen only after participation on a regular basis. For example, Mariam's conversion happens after a years worth of practicing the ritual to pray and being involved in the Islamic traditions. Opposite of this long term conversion, Woman C's conversion happened all of a sudden as she sat staring at a plaque of the Lord's Prayer. She literally felt like she was "hit by a rock" by God. Both these examples demonstrate how conversion to Islam can be both of the imagistic type (like that of Woman C's) or doctrinal (like that of Mariam's).

The level of arousal that is elicited when converting is also important. Here Whitehouse expresses a different interpretation of emotional measurements. For example, Whitehouse suggests that taking saliva samples could help biologically tell the emotional differences of people who may be converting. Many of the stories that the women explore all involve some form of emotional arousal. It would be interesting for someone to take biological samples to test and see what is happening during conversion. However, because a person cannot essentially know exactly when they will be converting this can be controversial.

Memory is a key component of conversion experiences. As we recall, the imagistic type of experience is episodic while the doctrinal branch of ritual would involve semantic memory for understanding memories role. Almost all, if not all, conversion experiences are very personal and most likely involve the use of episodic memory. Because of the importance of episodic memory as well as the reliance on semantic memory for cultural contexts and such, it is important to

analyze the episodic memories in conjunction with the narratives that one finds a plausible way to approach conversion.

Scale will be used slightly in judging the religious experience on a scale to try to classify the process at the large-scale movements. Scale is important because it allows for the growth already begun.

Degree of uniformity is usually important when one changes one life. For example, McGinty showed how Mariam, was nontraditional. In many ways conversion is important to later being able to establish a degree of uniformity.

Structure is typically a characteristic of imagistic religious experiences or modes. In order for conversion to work or remain, is for the structure to be non-centralized. A focus to move towards non-centralized groups will lead us to a catalyst for religions.

CONVERSION AND MODES THEORY

Modes theory gives us 4 genuine options for how conversion functions. One possibility could be that conversion happens within imagistic religiosity. Another possibility is that the conversion happens as a result of a religious value formation from imagistic religiosity to doctrinal religiosity. The other two options include that conversion happens within doctrinal religiosity and that conversion may come from doctrinal imagistic religiosity.

What do these options actually mean? Well, it would seem that the first option is highly improbable of happening. To illustrate this, Whitehouse gives the example that “ it is very difficult to “convert” from a local cult to another such cult (p. 159). The second option that Whitehouse throws out there is that the

second option would be similar to when people convert because of religious duties. The third option of describing religion is usually the most popular form of it happening in. For this option Whitehouse illustrates why this type of conversion is really probable. This is a conversion of the doctrinal ideal type. A person may hold or function within a Muslim belief system while being ignorant of Muslim doctrine. Again, Mariam provides a perfect example of this. Mariam does not learn the doctrine the traditional way praying, attending lectures, and reading the Qur'an, instead she realizes she's already adopted her style of worship of Islam simply by going through the motions. Other women in Anway's study also noted that converting to Islam wasn't at all different to her new life. The final type of conversion is when someone converts to Islam and then converts to some other imagistic cult. This type is highly unlikely given how many fundamental ideas must be changed in order for the converter to accommodate new rules.

Of the 4 options it seems that it is more likely that beliefs will be held in a more imagistic way. Nonetheless, Whitehouse's model makes it still difficult to really get at what is lacking from trying to understand religious conversion. Here it should be noted that because the modes theory, in many ways was meant to be empirical, there are some discrepancies in how conversion can be understood.

It seems much better to try to understand the commonalities between religions. For example, all the women had something they were yearning for. They wanted to feel at peace and comforted in knowing that God or their god was

benevolently looking out for them or at least that the converter themselves finally recognized their creator.

This initial need to fill an emptiness or void is therefore necessary in order to begin the conversion process. Without this emotional element, conversion cannot happen. Remember, conversion, according to James (1906) says that a religious conversion is a cognitive representation “by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy (James & Marty 1982, p. 189).”

Women A –E and Mariam share the divided self. They also all note that once they convert they become complete and happy with their place in their households, within Islam, as well as within themselves. The women also hold another aspect in common with their conversion. They come to the conclusion that God is ineffable. Yandell (1993) describes ineffability to be the experience of God not being capable of being expressed or described in words. In his work Yandell also outlines an argument about how God is infinite. I believe that the experience that these women have before converting or that drives them to commit is caused by the affect of realizing the infinite nature of God. The argument that Yandell outlines is below (1993).

- (a) God is infinite
- (b) The infinite surpasses our comprehension.

The argument that the claim the concept of God cannot be derived in any way available to us does not entail actually having concept of God. For if:

- (1) Any concept that counts as a concept of God must meet condition A
- (2) No concept that we have can meet condition A
- (3) One's understanding is incompatible with either 1 or 2
- (4) Therefore, we cannot know or believe that 1 or 2 is true
- (5) If 2 is true, than any concept that counts as a concept of God must meet condition A

The argument above describes or rather outlines something that we can't actually describe in words which counter intuitively shows that in fact God is not ineffable . It allows for the experience as well as a meta-language of things that are ineffable: such as God.

It is through this experience of God that pushes the converter over the threshold of holding onto previous beliefs and incorporating the new religious framework into still held beliefs that have not changed. This process does not stop there, especially for the Muslim woman. When someone converts to Islam they are not expected to know all the beliefs and practices right away. They are complicated, extensive, and require a lot of help to learn and incorporate into daily life. It should be said that conversion begins at shahada for the Muslim women; however, the process of learning to actually be Muslim is also a part of that process.

CONCLUSION

The conversion process is multifaceted and should be understood from the perspective of multiple disciplines including cognitive psychology, anthropology, theology, and philosophy. In these narratives themes of why women convert from Christianity to Islam. Ultimately what should be understood is that these women who have converted did so out of a need to feel unity with God. The unity and peace they sought in their childhood religions was not afforded to them. However, these women were able to find that peace and sense of well-being and rightness in Islam.

Honestly, before a more committed study of conversion theory based on CSR can be done, a lot of grounds work needs to be accomplished in the CSR field. Writers in the field tend to write their personal biases in their work. This skews audience objectivity. CSR has made a few claims, especially on that of the HADD, that are not true. The HADD is the hyperactive agency detection device. In order for CSR to continue to be successful, it must begin to empirically back its theories. CSR has enough contribution from multiple fields and what it seems to lack can only be fixed with time.

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APPENDIX A

American-Born Women Converted to Islam Questionnaire
Carol Anderson Anway & Jodi Tahireh Mohammadzadeh

Directions: Thank you for your willingness to respond to this questionnaire. There are two parts to it. The first and last pages are easy --- Just collecting information. The rest of the pages present questions for you to respond by writing down your own experiences.

After filling out page one, respond about your own personal experiences using the questions in small print to guide your responses where appropriate. You may write in the spaces on the questionnaire or on separate sheets of paper.

Please feel free to make copies of this questionnaire and introductory letter to give to other American-born women who have converted to Islam. Encourage them to fill it out and return it within 6 weeks after receiving the questionnaire.

I. STATISTICAL DATA

Age _____ Vocation _____ Work Status _____

Education (Circle highest achieved) Grade School _____ High School _____
AA BA/BS MA/MS Doctorate Other _____

Education at time of conversion: _____

Marital Status _____ Never Married _____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Widowed _____

If Married, nationality of husband _____ Years Married _____

Number of children _____ Ages _____

If school age, are they in _____ Islamic _____ public school _____ home school

How many years have you been Muslim? _____

Check the areas of Islam which you practice:

- _____ wear cover (hijab)
- _____ daily prayers
- _____ fasting during Ramadan
- _____ eat only approved meats
- _____ ongoing study of Qur'an and Islamic teachings

Name _____

Phone _____

Address _____

II. YOUR CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Describe the process of your conversion to Islam.

What was your religious commitment prior to converting to Islam and the extent of that commitment?

Describe the changes that you needed to make in your life as a result of your conversion and practice of Islam. Were there areas left behind that caused you grief and loss? How has this change helped you be what you wanted to be? What has been (or is) the most meaningful part of Islam for you?

III. LEARNING TO LIVE AND PRACTICE AS A MUSLIM

How did you learn to live as a Muslim?

Who was most helpful to you?

What was most helpful to you?

To what extent has it been easy or difficult for you to take on the religious practices?

IV. YOUR FAMILY OF ORIGIN

What effect has your choice to be Muslim had on your relationship with your parents and other family members?

What do you hope for in regard to your relationship with parents or family?

What were or are the main points or events of stress (if any) with your family of origin?

How do you manage the celebration of traditional holiday times?

How do you include your family or origin in your Islamic celebrations?

What are the difficulties or pleasures for you when you visit your family or leave your children with them?

V. YOUR HUSBAND

How did you meet your husband?

What were the characteristics that attracted you to him?

What needs did you have in your life that this man seemed to fill for you?

What part did he have your conversion?

How did your family of origin as your husband?

1. before marriage as your friend
2. as your fiancée
3. as your husband

Tell about your marriage ceremony.

What elements of Islam were in the ceremony?

VI. THE HOMELAND OF ORIGIN OF YOUR HUSBAND

To what extent does your daily life include the traditions and culture of your husband's country?

What are your goals in regard to living in your husband's country or U.S./Canada?

What citizenship does your husband now hold?

VII. YOUR HUSBAND'S FAMILY

Have you met your husband's immediate family? If so, tell about the experience?

How have you been accepted by his family?

If you move to the area where his family is, how do you expect to fit in?

What benefits or problems do you anticipate in relating to your husband's family?

VIII. YOUR POSITION AS A WOMAN

What are the rights you are experiencing as a Muslim woman?

What are some areas you are grateful for or are apprehensive about in your position as a woman in your marriage?

What are some areas you feel are not open to you in your position as a Muslim woman?

IX. CHILD REARING (If you have children)

How are your child-rearing techniques influenced by being Muslim?

To what extent is your husband involved in childcare?

What are your rights and obligations with the children?

What are their rights and obligations to you?

X. YOUR CHANCE TO EXPRESS OTHER VIEWS AND THOUGHTS

What would you like the American public to know about you that has not yet been asked?

APPENDIX B

One Woman's Story In Response to the Questionnaire

The woman is 35 years old, has three children, works part-time, has a bachelor's degree, and has been Muslim 14 years.

Tell of Your Conversion to Islam

My conversion to Islam was a very long and gradual process. I was raised in a culturally Christian household, a place where the major holidays were celebrated but the deeper meaning left unexplored. This was intentional on the part of my parents who felt that much hatred had been done to the world in the name of organized religion. At the insistence of both sets of grandparents, we children were baptized and given some rudimentary Sunday school training. My parents told us that when we were grown we could pick our own religions, if indeed we wanted a religion.

My religious training left me with a belief in God (how else could one explain all the wondrous interconnections and intricacies of earth and universe?) but no belief in any system of religion. I considered myself a Christian, but no belief in any system of religion. I considered myself a Christian, but in a broad sense: belief in God, belief in Jesus as a prophet, belief in the moral and ethical teachings. However, my upbringing engendered a high degree of skepticism and cynicism, and I questioned every aspect of church dogma. In the end, I decided that I didn't believe in organized religion as it was illogical, internally inconsistent, and

hypocritical (having sanctioned many unethical and immoral acts in the name of God).

However, I had a vague, almost unrecognized idea that without religion something essential was missing from life. A life lived without some sense of higher purpose was just an empty, random chase after perpetually changing desires. So I began a rather half-hearted, disorganized search for my “spiritual” self.

I saw glimpses of the spiritualism that I was looking for in various religions but they all seemed to be missing some essential ingredient. This one had a beautiful sense of peace and tolerance, but had lost its moral and ethical sense in the meantime. That one had a strong element of personal responsibility to others and a high code of personal conduct, but was repressive and suppressed logical inquiry. Another had a strong sense of religious collectiveness and historical context but promoted exclusivism. Still another understood the mystery, beauty, and peace that surrounds God, but was impractical about everyday matters and forgetful of our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. At about this time, I met the man who later became my husband and in trying to understand him and his culture, I came across Islam. Islam’s ideas and teachings appealed to me immediately. They were coherent, they were logical, they were moderate, and they promoted a balance of personal responsibility and collective action. They were inclusive and yet outreaching; God was

merciful and yet exacting. I took my shahada the day my husband and I were married.

My conversion to Islam at first seemed to require no change in my life. My husband, having lived in the U.S. for some years, and I, having been raised here, followed the cultural norm and separated our “religious life” from our “secular life.” The first changes (noticeable to those around us) occurred as we began to raise a family and began to make decisions that affected our child and our life together. If there was one definable turning point in our commitment to God, it came when our oldest child was just three years old. I had a good friend who was a practicing Muslim and with whom I spent a great deal of time. My son was a keen observer and quite articulate for his age. One day around Christmas, he questioned why it was that we called ourselves Muslims if we didn’t do any of the (observable) things that Muslims do? He wanted to know why we had a Christmas tree. He wanted to know why I didn’t wear a scarf.

I didn’t have very good answers for him, and his questions prompted a complete evaluation of the role of religion in our lives. My husband and I debated the merits of raising children with or without a strong religious identity and examined how important we felt religion was for ourselves. In the end, we felt that a sense of religion was important for our child(ren) and, therefore, it was necessary for ourselves as well.

Over the next five years or so we adjusted ourselves, and our lifestyle to be within Islamic parameters. Gradually we began to eat only

halal foods and avoided social situations that involved alcohol consumption by others. We began to fast Ramadan, to pray all of our prayers, to study the Qur'an, and became more conscious of Islam meant constantly re-evaluating our surroundings and ourselves. At times the constant evaluation felt constrictive, and we no longer longed for the carefree days of the past where life was lived unthinkingly. However, these times were few, and we would never have seriously considered giving up all that we had gained by living Islam.

Living as a practicing Muslim has brought a sense of purpose to my life. There is a pervasive sense of serenity in the knowledge that life is lived for a purpose. I feel that I have become a much better human being -- more compassionate, more moderate, more deep---thinking. There is richness and calmness in my life that was not there prior to becoming a practicing Muslim. Life in its broadest sense has become one beautiful, intricate whole.

How I learned to Live and Practice as a Muslim

I learned to live as a Muslim primarily by reading the Qur'an and by asking questions of knowledgeable Muslims. I also watched and observed Muslims around me.

I learned how to pray by reading a book designed to guide new Muslims through the prayer. Any other questions I had, I asked other Muslims. I also drew upon sources and people in my husband's family. My mother-in-law and father-in-law were particularly helpful as were

other relatives abroad who sent books or other resources, as I needed them.

The ease or difficulty of taking on any specific Islamic practice has always been directly correlated to how I understood it in connection with what I already knew about Islam. If I didn't understand its significance or see its connection to the intricate "whole" of Islam, I found it difficult to integrate into my life. When I had read enough, asked enough questions, talked enough, and finally understood, I didn't have a problem adding that practice to my life.

My Family of Origin

My becoming a *practicing* Muslim has had a very profound effect upon my relationship with my parents. My parents regard Islam quite negatively and consider it an oppressive, dogmatic religion. They don't hold religion, in general, in very high esteem and regard Islam, in particular, to be very oppressive of women. However, my only sibling, my sister, is quite supportive of my choice.

I hope that in the future I might be able to sit and talk with my parents about Islam and its role in my life. We have attempted to discuss it many times but have made very little progress. They seem unable to understand that being Muslim brings me peace and joy and has added immeasurable depth to my life. Islam has not taken anything away from who I am, but has only added to it. My parents seem to regard my choice only as a rejection of them and a rejection of my heritage. They believe

that I have committed a form of cultural apostasy and blame themselves. They believe that they failed me --- failed to give me strong self-esteem and failed to involve me fully in my own culture. I hope that one day they will accept my choice --- perhaps not understand it, but accept it.

There are many points of stress between myself and my parents regarding Islam. They dislike anything that physically marks me (or my children) as “different” (read “Muslim”). They are uncomfortable going out in public with me or my daughters because we wear hijab (myself) or modest clothing (my daughters wear pants under their dresses). They were upset when we asked them to stop drinking alcohol in our house when they visited us. They used to bring it with them. They try not to take a picture of me if I have on my scarf. They don’t like our children’s Muslim names and argued greatly with me about it when our first child was born. My parents are uncomfortable with my husband’s and my insistence that family comes first --- they feel that I have sold myself short by staying home (although I do work part-time!) and being family-oriented. They wished a “career” for me. They are uncomfortable without our world outlook and find it to be impractical and idealistic. Except for the fact that they believe we are too conservative, they think we are too politically correct. Frankly, most of the time, I am not sure exactly what they think about me because they never *discuss* it openly. I do know from the uncomfortable, explosive, and divisive conversations we have had, that they disapprove of and are disappointed with my choices in life. They

can't, however, ever seem to tell my WHY. I believe it is because they are unable to argue against something that is ethical, moral, moderate, and logical --- and is something that they taught me to believe in since I was a small child (only they didn't call it "Islam").

In our holiday celebrations, we attempted with our first-born to continue celebrating Christmas with my parents. We changed the emphasis to "helping Grandmas and Grandpa celebrate their holiday" and also spoke about the importance of Prophet Jesus (pbuh) in Islam. It didn't work for many different reasons. Our child was too young to really be able to make that distinction, and peer pressure to be link all the other Christmas celebrants pushed hi toward the popular idea of Christmas. My parents used Christmas to push American culture at him creating an "us versus them" environment and creating confusion and tension in our child. As our next children were born we realized that we didn't want these same scenes replicated with them, and so we gradually stopped going to my parents' house for Christmas. It was a decision that both disappointed and angered my parents. They now celebrate Christmas with my sister and her children and husband.

We do send Christmas cards to my parents, my sister, and my surviving grandparent, wish them a Happy New Year, and call them on Christmas Day. We also send my family letters or cards on Eid al-Fitr after Ramadan. My family sends us cards at Christmas and my sister also calls several times during Ramadan to see how we are doing. The other

Christian holidays (e.g. Easter) were not celebrated in my family as I was growing up and are not a factor now. My mom sends all the grandchildren cards at Halloween (which we do not celebrate but overlook in deference to my parents), Valentine's Day, and on their birthdays.

We would love to include my parents in our Islamic celebrations, but they are not comfortable with the idea. They will not accompany us to any gatherings without our Muslim friends if they happen to be visiting us, and in deference to my parents, we usually stay home unless it is impossible to get out of the activity.

We have many difficulties when we visit my parents, most springing from their disapproval of our lifestyle. Our worldviews are quite different – from politics to the role of “independence” and “materialism” in a person's life. We do have many good times with my parents and want a close and mutually respectful relationship with them.

My Husband

I met my husband while I was in college, through mutual friends. The characteristics, which most attracted me, were his generosity of spirit, honesty, compassion, loyalty, intelligence, and his general strength of character. He knew who and what he was and yet he was humble. I greatly admired his strength of character and his generosity to others. He was very accepting and gentle and yet there was strength inside.

My husband had a large role in my conversion to Islam because he was able to answer all my questions, and he spent a great deal of time

explaining both Islam and his culture to me. He always included me in all his Islamic or cultural activities and acted as my interpreter, linguistically and culturally. He made Islam available for me and helped me to experience it firsthand. He never, at any point, pressured me to convert. The decision was entirely mine.

My family didn't accept him very well as my "friend" but were fine after we became "engages." They like him immensely as a human being but blame him for brainwashing me into becoming Muslim. They also blame me for being so gullible. Our relationship with my parents was very good until we became practicing Muslims. We were married in a civil ceremony at the county courthouse and by proxy in Iran (so that relatives who were "clergy" could perform the ceremony for us). Our civil ceremony contained no Islamic elements and our Islamic ceremony was very basic: the marriage contract, the intent (the declaration of desire) to be married, the public announcement of our marriage.

The Homeland of My Husband

We try to run our household on an Islamic model and to the extent that Iranian culture is basically an Islamic culture, our household reflects it. We speak Farsi at home and eat mostly Iranian food although tacos, spaghetti, and stir-fry are big favorites (along with roasts and hamburgers). We intend to live in the U.S. for the foreseeable future due to the economic situation in Iran and because we have student loans to repay in this country. We feel that we cannot forsake our debts here, and we could

never afford to both live and pay off our loans if we lived in Iran. We have considered moving to another Middle Eastern country. My husband is an Iranian citizen.

My Husband's Family

I have met all the members of my husband's family and some members of the (immense) extended family. I met my mother-in-law and father-in-law before we married, when they visited the United States for a summer. They accepted me very well, although it must have been difficult for them since they are very traditional Muslims and I was your typical twenty-year-old college co-ed. I have been accepted wonderfully by my in-laws although they have disagreed with the way we have done many things, e.g., getting married as undergrads and having three children while my husband was still in graduate school. However, they have never belabored their concerns. My in-laws lived with us for about a year and then moved down the block for the next year after that. It was great experience, although it had both its ups and downs! I expect that should we move to Iran, I would fit in fairly well and that I would be graciously accepted by the extended family. I might have a few problems with Iranian culture particularly in those areas which deviate from Islamic norms. Any problems from the extended family might arise from my independence and self-reliance.

I have learned a great deal from my in-laws. They have a wonderful way of relating to their children, a way which engenders respect

for others and great amounts of self-esteem. It is interesting to see how a child-oriented and religious-oriented culture operates. My in-laws, by virtue of being a contrast to American culture, have given me a great appreciation for certain elements of my American cultural identity. From all my comparing and contrasting of Iranian and American cultures, I have seen that Islam is truly correct in saying that moderation in all is the right path!

My Position as a Woman

As a Muslim woman I experience the full benefits given to me by God as a member of the human race. I am responsible only to God for how I live my life, and how well I fulfill my duties to Him. The most important right which I enjoy by benefit of being a Muslim woman is the right of equality before God. Among the other rights which are detailed rights which are detailed for women in Islam are the right to earn and keep our own money, to retain and/or dispose of our own property, the right to inherit, the right to initiate and contest a divorce, the right to education, the right to retain our own name after marriage, the right to participate in choosing our own mates, the right to custody of our children.

However, as Islam is a just and fair religion, along with my rights come many obligations. All levels of Islamic society – including the individual and on through the relationships of husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee, and the society/societal member – are firmly connected by interlocking and mutually reciprocal rights and duties. A

right does not exist without a corresponding duty; a duty does not exist without a corresponding right. As an example: It is one of my rights as a wife to be financially supported by my husband – that is his obligation. Among others, my obligation is to try and live within his financial means without complaint, derision, or greed, and to care for his property and assets in his absence. My husband is obligated to treat me with courtesy and respect, and I am obliged to do the same for him. As a member of a society, I am obliged to help my fellow members, and they and the societal bureaucracy at large are obligated to help me in my times of need. There is much misunderstanding on the part of non-Muslims (and some Muslims) regarding the absolute inter-connectedness of rights and obligations – they come as a unit and cannot be separated out to be viewed separately without losing their essential qualities.

I feel no apprehension about my position as a Muslim woman in my marriage. I do not feel that there are any areas of private or public endeavor that are closed to me. I do have concerns regarding the status of ignorance of our misunderstanding of the teachings of Islam. There exist many Muslim societies where deviations from the Islamic norms regarding the status and role of women (as well as other issues) have resulted in a constriction of the role of women. “Cultural Islam” very often is at variance with Islam. Verses from the Qur’an and Hadis of the Prophet (pbuh) are often taken out of their context of revelation or transmission and used to support patriarchal cultural viewpoints. Both

men and women are often uneducated as to the true meanings of Islamic injunctions and, by default, follow the standard cultural practice of their societies.

Child Rearing

My child-rearing techniques are directly influenced by being a Muslim. Islam touches all parts of my life and as such I try to raise my children in the most Islamic way possible. My children came into this world as Muslims, innocent and submissive to the will of Allah. It is our great responsibility, indeed both a trust and a test from Allah, that my husband and I raise them to remain Muslim.

The most easily observable Islamic influences on our child-rearing techniques include encouraging the children to follow us in prayer, teaching them Qur'anic verses, using traditional Muslim greetings and everyday phrases, encouraging them to dress modestly and behave with compassion and kindness. We use a lot of modeling and verbal encouragement and reminding, but the children are never forced to join us in any given activity as Islam teaches that there is no compulsion in religion. We do, if necessary, insist that the children remain near our activity (while quietly occupying themselves) so that at least they have exposure to the activity and understand that there are some minimal family

standards that they must adhere to. We try to be tactful and discreet when enforcing these standards to avoid provoking outright rebellion.

The major way in which Islam influences child-rearing techniques is that I try to remember that I am always within Allah's sight. Allah has set high standards of personal behavior for humans, not because He is vengeful, but because He knows that we are capable of rising to meet those standards. I am also always aware that my two recording angels are ever watchful! I try to be patient (this one can be quite difficult!), polite, and respectful; and to act with compassion, sincerity, and understanding towards them [the children]. I encourage them to value education and view learning as a life-long endeavor that is not limited to school hours or "school topics." We put great emphasis on doing their personal best at school and elsewhere; to be helpful and kind; not to lie or cheat; to value Allah (and therefore Islam), their family, and their fellow human beings; to stand up for what they believe in, to combine personal piety with outward action' to be sincere and straightforward; and to be generous in thought as well as in action. We also try to view each child as an individual, to view them outside of the influence of birth order, to try not to compare them to their siblings or to ourselves, to try to accept and value those personality traits that are irritating to us but part and parcel of who they are.

Insha'Allah, our children will grow to be compassionate, productive Muslims. To that end we are always re-evaluating our progress

and our child-rearing techniques. We always try to follow the specific Islamic injunctions, but also attempt to follow the “spirit of the law.”

My husband is very involved with the care of the children. I work part-time, and while I am at work he is their sole caretaker. He also is with the children when I go to meetings or study groups. He takes the kids to the doctors, takes them out on excursions, takes them on errands, goes to the swimming pool with them, and any number of other activities.

My rights and obligations with my children? When people mention Islam/mothers/mother’s rights, they are usually referring to child custody in the event of a divorce. Both my husband and I are of the opinion that the children should go with whichever parent is better able to care for them. Of course, in Islam, divorce is allowed, but exhaustive efforts to keep the family unit intact should be made first. In most cases, it is the mother who is better emotionally equipped to raise the children. Unless circumstances warrant differently, the non-custodial parent has the right to frequent visitation. The custodial parent should be helped financially to raise the children, if it is necessary. All divorces should take place in an Islamic family court with a qualified jurist making the decision.

My obligation to my children is to love them respect them, and help them grow to be Muslim adults. This is as much an obligation to my children as it is to Allah, who placed these children in my care as a trust

from Him. I am obliged to remember that my children belong to Allah, not to me – and I must treat them accordingly.

As specified in the Qur'an, y children's obligations to me are that they should respect me (but I must be worthy of that respect), obey me (as long as I am within the bounds of Islam in my request), and care for me if I attain old age. They have the right to expect love, good physical care, and guidance from me. They have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, as I do.

What I Would Like to Express to Others

I would like the American public to know that I am a Muslim by personal choice. I am a fully mature, intelligent human being, capable of making rational decisions. My decision to embrace Islam is not an effort to fit into my husband's culture or family; it is not the result of too little self-esteem; it is not the result of pressure from my husband. I would also like people to understand that Islam is not repressive of women, it does not condone terrorism, and that it is squarely within the Judeo-Christian tradition. I would like the people to realize that Islam stands for moderation and modesty and that there are often great discrepancies between the practices of "cultural Islam" and the directives of Islam.