

The process of becoming Muslim

*Analyzing the post-conversion processes of Finnish Muslim
convert women*

Lotta Malmirinta
Master's thesis
University of Helsinki
Department of World Cultures
Middle Eastern Studies
January 2017

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta		Laitos – Institution – Department Maailman kulttuurien laitos	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Lotta Malmirinta			
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title The process of becoming Muslim: Analyzing the post-conversion processes of Finnish Muslim convert women			
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Lähi-idän tutkimus			
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Pro gradu		Aika – Datum – Month and year 1/2017	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages 65
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>Tämä pro gradu –tutkielma käsittelee suomalaisten islamiin kääntyneiden naisten uskontulkinnan kehitystä islamiin kääntymisen jälkeen. Tutkielmassa pyritään selvittämään, onko tätä kehitystä mahdollista analysoida luokittelemalla kääntymisen jälkeinen uskonnollinen kehitys erilaisiin vaiheisiin. Työssä tarkastellaan myös sitä, minkälaisia erilaisia islamin tulkintoja suomalaiset käännynäiset omaksuvat, sekä sitä, miten nämä tulkinnat heijastavat suomalaisen islamin kehitystä laajemmin.</p> <p>Tutkielman teoreettisena lähtökohtana on islam-tutkija Anne Sofie Roaldin islamiin kääntymisen jälkeistä uskonnollista kehitystä selittävä prosessiteoria, joka jaottelee kääntymisen jälkeisen prosessin neljään eri vaiheeseen: rakastuminen/kiihkoilu, pettymys, kypsyys/hyväksyntä sekä sekularisaatio. Tämän teorian sovellettavuutta selvitetään kvalitatiivisen aineistoanalyysin avulla peilaamalla sitä tutkimusaineistoon, joka koostuu puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista seitsemän suomalaisen islamiin kääntyneen naisen kanssa. Haastatteluissa käydään läpi naisten käsityksiä siitä, miten heidän elämänsä ja uskontulkintansa on muuttunut islamiin kääntymisen jälkeen, miten he tulkitsevat islamia nykyään ja mikä on islamin merkitys heidän elämässään laajemmin. Haastatteluissa pohditaan myös sukupuolirooleja sekä sitä, miten suomalaisuus ja islam ovat vaikuttaneet toisiinsa naisten elämässä.</p> <p>Tutkimusaineiston perusteella käännynäisten uskontulkinnossa on suuria eroja, sillä haastateltavat edustavat erilaisia islamin teologisia ja tulkinnallisia suuntauksia. Aineiston perusteella näkemykset islamin tulkinnasta voidaan jakaa karkeasti ottaen konservatiivisiin ja liberaaleihin, ja tätä jakolinjaa noudattaa myös se, kokevatko haastateltavat kuuluvansa suomalaiseen muslimiyhteisöön. Suomalaisesta muslimiyhteisöstä piirtyy tutkielmassa melko konservatiivinen kuva, sillä liberaalimmat käännynäiset kokevat, että heidän on vaikea löytää sieltä paikkaa tulkinnoilleen. Sukupuoliroolit ja naisten asema nousevat esille haastateltavia jakavana teemana suomalaiseen muslimiyhteisöön kuulumisen ohella. Erilaisista tulkinnallisista painotuksista huolimatta haastateltavia myös yhdistävät monet asiat, kuten käsitys uskonnonharjoittamisen tärkeydestä, henkilökohtainen jumalasuhte ja luottamus siihen, että tuo suhde kantaa vaikeuksien läpi. Aineistosta käy ilmi, että islamofobia on kasvanut Suomessa viime vuosina. Suomalaisuus ja islam eivät kuitenkaan näyttäyty haastateltaville toisiaan poissulkevinä identiteetteinä, vaan pikemminkin niiden välillä nähdään yhtäläisyyksiä. Aineistosta nousee voimakkaasti esille myös monien haastateltavien pettymys syntymuslimien kyvyttömyyteen erotella omaa kulttuuriaan ja islamia.</p> <p>Kääntymisen jälkeistä uskonnollista kehitystä neljään eri vaiheeseen jaotteleva prosessiteoria osoittautuu hyväksi analysoinnin työkaluksi, mutta se saa tutkielmassa myös osakseen kritiikkiä. Teoriaa lähemmin tarkastellessa ja tutkimusaineistoon soveltaessa syntyy vaikutelma, että uskonnollinen kehitys merkitsee lähes väistämättä sekularisaatiota. Tämän tutkielman tulokset eivät kuitenkaan tue tätä käsitystä. Työn loppupäätelmissä todetaan, että aineiston perusteella voidaan puhua kolmesta kääntymisen jälkeisestä vaiheesta: islamiin sitoutumisesta, pettymyksestä sekä reaktiosta tuohon pettymykseen, oli se sitten tiukempi sitoutuminen tietynlaiseen islamin tulkintaan tai mahdollisesti avautuminen erilaisille tulkinnallisille näkökulmille.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords Islam, islamiin kääntyminen, kääntymys, uskonnollinen kehitys, islamin tulkinta, suomalainen islam, musliminaiset			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited Keskustakampuksen kirjasto			

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Faculty of Arts		Laitos – Institution – Department Department of World Cultures	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Lotta Malmirinta			
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title The process of becoming Muslim: Analyzing the post-conversion processes of Finnish Muslim convert women			
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Middle Eastern studies			
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Master's thesis	Aika – Datum – Month and year 1/2017	Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 65	
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>This master's thesis explores the development of religious interpretation among Finnish women who have converted to Islam and examines whether this development can be analyzed by dividing it into different stages. Another topic of interest in this work is how the diverse interpretations of Islam that converts embrace reflect the development of Finnish Islam in general.</p> <p>The theoretical premise is researcher of Islam Anne Sofie Roald's theory on the process of religious development that converts go through. The theory categorizes the post-conversion process in four stages: love/zealotry, disappointment, maturity/acceptance, and secularization. The applicability of this theory is examined with the methods of qualitative content analysis by mirroring it to the research data that consists of semi-structured interviews with seven Finnish Muslim convert women. The interviews focus on the women's ideas on how their lives and interpretations of religion have changed after conversion, how they interpret Islam today and what the meaning of Islam is for their lives from a broader perspective. Other themes discussed in the interviews are gender roles and the impact that being Finnish and being Muslim have on one another.</p> <p>Based on the research data there are considerable differences in the religious interpretations of the converts, as the informants represent different theological and interpretational currents within Islam. Based on the data the interpretations of Islam can be roughly divided to conservative and liberal. Whether or not the informants feel that they are a part of the Finnish Muslim community follows this line of division as well. The interview data paints a rather conservative picture of the Finnish Muslim community, for the more liberal converts feel that it is difficult for them to find a place in it for their interpretations. Along with the issue of belonging to the Finnish Muslim community, gender roles and the position of women emerge as themes that divide the informants. Regardless of the different interpretative emphases, there are many things that unite the women in their experience of Islam, such as the idea of the importance of practicing Islam, a personal relationship with God and having faith in the power of this relationship to carry them through hardships.</p> <p>According to the research data, Islamophobia has increased in Finland in the past years. Despite this, 'Finnish' and 'Muslim' do not appear as mutually exclusive identities to the informants, but rather the women see parallels between them. A recurring theme in many interviews is the inability of born Muslims to separate between their culture and Islam.</p> <p>The process theory that categorizes the post-conversion religious development of Muslim converts into four different stages turns out to be a useful tool for analysis, but it also becomes subject to criticism. When brought under closer scrutiny the theory appears to suggest that secularization is an inevitable result of religious development. The findings of this research do not support such a conception. An alternative process model based on the research data of this study is proposed in the conclusions, consisting of three post-conversion stages: commitment to Islam, disappointment and the reaction to that disappointment, whether that means a renewed commitment to a certain interpretation of Islam or a widening of the convert's perspective that leads to exploring different ideas of what it means to be Muslim.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords Islam, Muslims, conversion to Islam, converts, religious conversion, religious development, interpretation of Islam, Finnish Islam, Muslim women			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited City Centre Campus Library			

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Theoretical framework	4
2.1 Conversion as a process	5
2.1.1 Roald's theory on the post-conversion process	6
3. Previous Research on Conversion to Islam	9
3.1 Different approaches to conversion	9
3.2 Previous research on Finnish Muslim converts	13
4. Islam in Finland	14
4.1 Conservative currents	16
5. Methodology and presentation of data	17
5.1 The interview process	18
5.1.1 Challenges in the interviews	20
5.2 Qualitative content analysis	21
5.3 Introduction of the informants	23
6. Analysis of Data	24
6.1 Zeinab	24
6.2 Maria	28
6.3 Aminah	34
6.4 Ninni	36
6.5 Erika	42
6.6 Asma	47
6.7 Sanna	50
7. Conclusions and discussion	54
List of references	61

1. Introduction

Increasing numbers of people in Western¹ countries are converting to Islam, and most of these new Muslims are women (van Nieuwkerk 2006, Månsson 2002). The increase in conversion can be credited to the general growth of interest in Islam and Muslims which has been proliferating beginning from the latter half of the 20th century due to political events and transnational migration. Perhaps paradoxically, conversion to Islam has been on the increase in particular since the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Haddad 2006, 19).

Islam and specifically Muslim immigrants have become a popular topic of heated public discourse in Finland due to the increasing immigration starting from the 1990's. Although immigration has not changed the demographic structure of Finland as much as in other European countries, immigrants have nevertheless had an irreversible impact on the society.

During the year 2015 Finland witnessed the influx of more than 30 000 asylum seekers and refugees, mainly Iraqi and Afghani in origin (Finnish Immigration Service 2016). Islam has become an omnipresence in the media and tabloids, and while Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia have been on the rise, there have been several civil movements calling for multiculturalism and equality of all people regardless of race or religion at the other end of the debate. I was inspired to explore the topic of conversion to Islam in Finland due to the increasing visibility of Islam and Muslims in Finland, and the visible increase in conversion to Islam in Western countries during times of political polarization. I chose to research the conversion of women because they constitute the majority of converts to Islam.

According to Isra Lehtinen (2004), who has researched conversion to Islam in Finland, Finnish Muslim converts are often neglected and forgotten in the general discourse on Islam. Finnish Muslim converts are not a homogenous group: interpretations of religion vary, as does the amount of involvement in both the society at large and in the Finnish Muslim community (Lehtinen 2004). According to Lehtinen, there is no 'average convert' neither economically, educationally, age-wise nor in terms of interpretation of religion. Lehtinen (2004, 238-239) writes that some converts do not make their faith

¹ The term "Western", when mentioned, is used in reference to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

visible to outsiders, while there are those who practice their religion in quite a public manner and for whom even the permissible appears to be forbidden. Most commonly however converts tend to embrace a moderate interpretation of Islam. (Lehtinen 2004, 238-239)

The amount of Muslim converts is difficult to determine as there are no statistics to base the assessment on. In 2007 Lehtinen estimated that there are around one thousand Muslim converts in Finland in a personal communication to Tuomas Martikainen (2008, 72). I contacted her for a more recent estimate in January 2017. In an email on 25th January 2017 she stated that the situation has changed a lot from 2008 and that many more Finns have found Islam since then, but that she was unable to provide an assessment of the current amount of Finnish Muslim converts. She also pointed out that while many have become Muslims in the recent years, many converts have also left Islam.

In this thesis I intend to explore what kind of Islam Finnish Muslim convert women practice and how their lives change after conversion. The main research question in this thesis is: How does religious interpretation develop after conversion to Islam and can this development be categorized into stages? Another topic of interest in this work is the development of a Finnish Islam, or rather, whether it is even appropriate to use such a term.

The data in this research is based on seven interviews with Finnish Muslim women who have converted to Islam, conducted during October – November 2015. In order to discover the different interpretations of Islam and the processes behind them, the interviews covered a wide range of issues from mundane to theoretical. I chose to interview women who have been Muslims for at least two years in order to be able to track the consequences that becoming Muslim has had on their lives, and to see whether their interpretations have changed through the years. The focus of this research is thus on the time after conversion, on the life lived as a Muslim. As the sample of data is quite small, this thesis does not claim to be an exhaustive or definitive study on the subject, but rather sets forth to offer an alternative perspective on conversion to Islam.

The theoretical framework of this study stems from Lewis Rambo's (1993) theory of conversion as a process. The process-theory has proven to be a useful tool in many other studies about conversion, such as Anne Sofie Roald's studies on Swedish and Norwegian Muslim converts. Roald has developed Rambo's process theory further in her studies

among Norwegian, Swedish and Danish converts from 2006 to 2012. While Rambo focuses his theory on the process that takes place prior to conversion, Roald's theory deals with the time after it. According to Roald, a convert's understanding of Islam changes as s/he goes through the stages of the post-conversion process (Roald 2006, 48). This thesis examines whether Roald's theory can be applied to the religious development of the women interviewed for this study while taking a critical look on her theory.

Becoming and being a Muslim, particularly in the case of women, means interacting with other Muslims who may have different ideas of what Islam is and how it should be practiced. This means confronting media images of Islam. It also involves dealing with families, friends and coworkers who have preconceived (and often media-fed) images of what Islam entails. It is through this interaction with other Muslims and with the wider society that people begin to negotiate what being a Muslim means to them. This includes re-creating personal identity, creating a Muslim identity, and re-negotiating national and gender identity (Bourque 2006, 238-9). The themes of gender and national identity are pivotal to this thesis as it is a study on Finnish Muslim women, and they were expanded upon in the interviews.

In addition to the research questions stated above, a theme that runs through this thesis is that of diversity in interpretations of Islam, or as the prominent scholar on Islam, women and gender, Leila Ahmed (1992, 71) put it: "How merely a matter of emphasis and interpretation in relation to the same acts and texts are capable of yielding what are in effect, for women, fundamentally different Islams." The question of representation is important in considering diversity in Islam and Muslims. According to anthropologist Ralph Grillo (2004, 866) the category of 'Muslim' in itself is problematic:

There is an imagined coalescence of peoples of different origin and background under the heading 'Muslim'. They are 'represented' (and may well represent themselves) categorically as 'Muslims' (often in an essentialist manner) and be endowed with (or promote) 'representatives' to speak for them.

Grillo (2004, 864) writes about how some scholars of Islam and Muslims see the diversity in Islam as simply "representing different inflections of an essential Islam, in different locations." According to him, Islam could be approached as not one, but many 'Islams', as the religion is so diverse. He pays attention to how at times some Muslims refuse the label of Muslim from unorthodox adherents of the religion whose practices and beliefs they consider heretical, and therefore not Islamic (Grillo 2004, 864).

In this thesis I am hoping to affirm that just like the Muslims of the world in general, Finnish Muslim convert women interpret and practice their religion in a plethora of ways. The informants I interviewed come from different backgrounds and represent different branches of Islam: out of the total seven informants five are Sunni, one is Shia, and one identifies herself as Sufi. Despite their doctrinal differences, all the informants, whether Sunni, Shia or Sufi, are here considered simply Muslim.

In demonstrating different interpretations of Islam, I am hoping to convey a pluralistic and multifaceted picture of Islam and the women choosing to become Muslim also through the use of language: namely by trying to keep a critical eye on the terms and concepts used with reference to Islam. By doing so I wish to contribute something to the larger discourse of challenging ideas of Islam as something monolithic and unchangeable that can still be detected even in some of the works used in this study. For example, Anna Mansson McGuinty, a Swedish anthropologist whose work with Muslim converts has influenced my work quite a lot, uses concepts such as “a Muslim way of dating” or a “Muslim way of life” (2002, 145). In my opinion using terms like these has the effect of reinforcing stereotypes. Instead of speculating about what “Islam says” or what a “Muslim life” includes, my goal is to be sensitive to all possible ways of being Muslim and constructing a Muslim identity.

In addition to my goal of demonstrating the existent diversity in Islam, I believe that having a broad spectrum of religious interpretation in my rather small sample of Finnish Muslim women is pivotal in examining the usability of Roald’s process theory, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

2. Theoretical framework

Conversion is paradoxical. It is elusive. It is inclusive. It destroys and it saves. Conversion is sudden and it is gradual. It is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans. Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict. Conversion is an event and a process. It is an ending and a beginning. It is final and open-ended. Conversion leaves us devastated – and transformed. (Rambo 1993, 176).

I believe that these words of Lewis Rambo ring true to anyone researching the topic of religious conversion. Often times while rummaging through the numerous studies written

on the topic it feels that conversion is indeed only accessible through paradoxes and contradictions.

The elusive, fluid and personal nature of conversion makes it difficult to approach from a theoretical viewpoint. However, theory is necessary for the analysis of conversion, albeit with all its limitations that are important to keep in mind. A lot of literature on Muslim converts tries to explain conversion motives and/or to build theories as to why someone converts to Islam. Although theories often reveal more about the person writing them than about converts, a good theory can act as an important tool for understanding conversion (Rambo 1999).

Since religious conversion has its roots in the convert's life history, personality, social environment and multiple other factors that inevitably vary from individual to another, it is perhaps impossible to find a theory that could explain the reasons behind a person's conversion to Islam or to any other religion for that matter. After all, conversion motives can also change as people change and their religious understanding develops (Rambo 1993). However, some general themes and explanations tend to pop up repeatedly in the conversion narratives and interviews both in this study and the previous research, and they will be discussed later as they occur in the text.

As explained in the introduction, the main theoretical pillars of this research are Rambo's and Roald's theories of conversion as a process. Rambo's theory has been used by many researchers on conversion due to its flexibility and applicability, and it has been developed further by Roald to extend to the time post-conversion. It is her theory of post-conversion stages that is further explored in this thesis.

2.1 Conversion as a process

It is nearly impossible to read literature about religious conversion written after the mid-1990's without references to Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993). In this book Rambo, a professor of psychology and religion, introduces his theory of religious conversion as a life-long process that he divides to seven stages.

The stages of Rambo's (pre-)conversion process are (i) context, the starting point of the convert's journey including the previous social, economic, cultural, religious and political contexts, (ii) crisis, the catalyst for change, (iii) quest, the search for something better than the present situation, (iv) encounter, with the religion through texts or other Muslims,

(v) interaction, a more intense level of learning often established through relationships, (vi) commitment, the final decision to convert and (vii) consequences, which is the topic of this research. The stages can overlap and they do not necessarily succeed in this order (Rambo 1993, 165-170).

The consequences of religious conversion are naturally different in each case. According to Rambo (1993, 170) conversion is nevertheless always precarious, and so the seventh stage, in other words life as an adherent of the adopted religion, needs nurturing, support and affirmation. Conversion can bring with it disappointment or a comprehensively transformed lifestyle. Rambo (1993, 170) adds that with spiritual development comes a new understanding where the convert may begin to reinterpret and revalue the religious transformation.

2.1.1 Roald's theory on the post-conversion process

Whereas Rambo is focused on the journey that leads to conversion, Anne Sofie Roald's (2006, 2012) theory constructs an idea of the post-conversion process. Roald, a historian of religion specialized in Islamic studies and a Muslim convert herself, developed her theory after doing fieldwork among converts in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. I will present the theory and its development chronologically from 2006 to 2012. Before looking at the stages one by one, it is important to keep in mind Roald's (2012, 348) own reservations about her theory:

As an abstraction, each stage represents a cultivated model of reality, although each stage in a convert's conversion process may also include aspects of the surrounding stages. Moreover, not all converts go through these stages, and not all go through them in the same order. The stages in the conversion process are therefore not static.

The initially three-stage post-conversion process Roald (2006) describes consists of the phases of love, disappointment and maturity. In the beginning of conversion and possibly preceding it the convert often goes through a stage of idolizing the Muslim community:

New Muslims are being socialized into a certain cultural context, but, by converting to Islam, there is a total shift of "cultural truths." This cultural shift might put the convert in a contrasting cultural position, where s/he becomes critical of his/her cultural group and tends to look in positive terms at the Muslim group. This is a problematic process, as it might alienate the convert from the previous in-group. At the same time, it might be difficult for the new Muslim to adopt Muslim cultural traits in toto, particularly as this culture, behaviorally and ideologically speaking, is to a great extent founded on patriarchal and traditional ideas alien to many societies in the Western world. (Roald 2006, 48)

The second stage that Roald (2006, 50) calls disappointment namely reflects the feelings of disappointment that many converts go through when they realize that the lofty Islamic ideals laid out before them are often not implemented to practice in the lives of born Muslims. This stage is characterized by difficult internal negotiations that the convert goes through between the self, the community of origin and the Muslim community. It is very challenging because the convert may feel that s/he is neither fully a part of the society nor of the Muslim community. Roald describes this as the feeling of being both “insider” and “outsider” in one’s own society.

Roald (2006, 50) notes that “...a discrepancy develops between the way majority society defines the convert and the way the convert perceives him/herself.” This discrepancy may lead to problems in the converts’ own identity-formation. Usually there are two kinds of responses to this; either the convert decides to remain within the cultural frame of the born Muslim community or to develop “integrated plural identities”, very much in the likeness of second generation immigrant Muslims. The term was created by Sissel Östberg in her study about Norwegian Pakistani children. “Integrated plural identities” is a term that describes the dual identity of the children, its “changeable, fluid, shifting character on the one hand and its stability or integratedness on the other, that is, a dynamic stability” (Östberg 2000, 98).

It is also during this stage of disappointment that many converts decide to leave Islam, due to the insurmountable feelings of disappointment (Roald 2006, 50). Whereas Roald keeps the emphasis on the converts’ feeling disappointed with the born Muslims and seeing the discrepancy between them and the Islamic ideals, one is left to wonder whether the convert is at least subliminally disappointed in him/herself at the same time. Considering the vast emotional investment of the first stage when converts often try to practice the religion to the last detail and furthermore take it all upon themselves at once, it doesn’t seem too bold to postulate that some of the disappointment might be actually directed towards the convert him/herself– or even the religion itself. It is common that at this stage the convert must renegotiate his/her identity and that often includes bringing the possibly problematic aspects of the religion under scrutiny.

The third stage in Roald’s model is called ‘maturity’, as many converts describe having “come back to themselves” (Roald 2006, 51). During this stage the convert in a way learns to accept the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality and starts looking for

alternative ways of understanding Islam: “Many have stated that “in reality” they are Scandinavian individuals living within an Islamic frame” (Roald 2006, 51).

Roald has returned to her process theory later in 2013, adding a fourth stage, ‘secularization’, and changing the names of the first and third stages to ‘zealotry’ and ‘acceptance’. I am tempted to speculate on the possibility that the changes in theory could be reflecting her own personal journey along with the new data and analysis. In the fourth stage, secularization, the convert’s understanding of Islam as a comprehensive “way of life” that covers all aspects of human existence, starts to shift towards an approach of religion as something private (Roald 2012, 356). According to Roald in the first three stages the “Islam as a way of life” –thinking is present one way or another, but the secularization process begins with questioning this idea. According to Roald (2012, 356) the view of religion as a private matter leads the person to choose the parts that are appealing to him/her in the religion rather than following the “ready-made code of conduct” that is implied in the previous stages.

Roald (2012) uses a model of “modal types of conduct” in theorizing the post-conversion process (Susman 1979). This model explains the changes in human character and behavior with a cultural change in the Western world. According to Susman (1979) in the early 20th century the modal type of conduct started changing from that of ‘character’ to ‘personality’. By this change Susman (1979, 217) is referring to the changes in Western culture in the post-modern age, the shift from acting according to the social and moral norms of the community towards a model of behavior that aims to the fulfilment of the interests of the individual. From the four stages only the last one falls to the sphere of ‘personality’ instead of ‘character’. As Roald (2012, 349) points out, “The Muslim cultural sphere that converts are faced with is therefore mainly one of ‘character’, a modal type opposed to that of ‘personality’ into which many converts to Islam are originally socialized.” The four stages that Roald (2012) suggests can be seen as an identity struggle where the convert is trying to find his/her place in the Muslim community on the other hand and the society at large on the other.

In the next chapter I will introduce and discuss previous research on conversion to Islam. After giving a general overview, the works that have special relevance to this research will be discussed in more detail.

3. Previous Research on Conversion to Islam

As explained in the previous chapters, research on Muslim converts has largely focused on conversion motives and theorizing the reasons someone chooses to convert (see for example Wohlrab-Sahr 2006 and Allievi 2006). Despite the differences in theoretical approaches, the default hypothesis seems to be that the individualization of Western culture and the Internet are playing a big role in conversion. Transnational immigration and the great advances in transportation and communication technologies of the past decades have made it possible for thoughts, religions and ideas to spread in an unprecedented way (Månsson 2002, 34). With the Internet, access to religious knowledge is only a click away for those who are searching for spiritual revival and their place in the world (Rambo 1999, 262). New communication technologies and online networking have made it possible for a new kind of an electronic and global *umma* to come to existence. In American sociology theories of a 'religious market' or of religious human capital have become largely advocated. They are reflecting the significance of individualism in relation to religiosity and spirituality (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006, 71). Religions are being viewed as a "commodity on the expanding marketplace of religious goods", and individuals are choosing from the several options available to form the kind of a worldview that suits them best. (van Nieuwkerk 2006, 3.)

In recent years the variety of topics in conversion studies has increased and other issues than conversion motives have been brought under investigation. Next I will move on to present some studies that help put my own research into context.

3.1 Different approaches to conversion

Nicole Bourque (2006) has researched the identity-making of Scottish female converts. Her article is based on participant-observation and interviews with a group of 25 female Sunni converts attending a weekly Islamic discussion group for women in Glasgow, Scotland. Bourque (2006, 233) points out that most of the research on conversion to Islam neglects identity issues, namely how conversion requires a change in not only the religious identity but social, national and gender identities as well. Her article is an interesting contribution to fill this blank in studying conversion to Islam.

Bourque (2006) emphasizes the importance of daily bodily practices in embodying a Muslim identity. She also writes about the importance of reinterpreting the past in terms

of creating a conversion narrative. Discourse has an important role to play in the creation of a conversion narrative, and her observation was that many narratives resemble each other remarkably. These resemblances are most probably not coincidental but rather a result of listening to or reading other people's conversion stories. When asking about the hijab or women's rights in Islam Bourque heard the same answers and even the same phrases over and over again. This indicated that the women had gotten used to defending and justifying their selves to other non-Muslims (Bourque 2006, 242-3).

The women in Bourque's (2006) study reported both positive and negative experiences in relation to the wider Muslim community in the area, which is largely dominated by a Pakistani cultural interpretation of Islam due to a large Pakistani community in the area. Many born Muslims have been very warm and welcoming to the new Muslims, but some had been criticizing the converts for praying in a different way or dressing differently. Bourque notes in the article that during her fieldwork she had met some Muslims whose interpretations of Islam differed quite a lot from the general views of local mosques and Muslim organizations. This had caused a lot of friction in some meetings and had ultimately led to the dissidents no longer going to the mosque and drifting apart from the larger community in their area (Bourque 2006, 243-245). Bourque's study is a good example of how becoming a Muslim often truly begins after taking the shahada, by slowly incorporating different Islamic practices to everyday life.

In Bourque's article one can distinguish different 'Roaldesque' characters: the zealots, the disappointed, and those in the stage of acceptance. As Roald (2012) remarks, all converts do not necessarily go through all the stages, and some will remain in a stage for a long period of time, if not forever. A good example of this is the woman in Bourque's (2006) article leading an Islamic study group who has quite obviously been in the stage of zealotry for years.

Stefano Allievi (2002), an Italian researcher who has done a lot of research on Muslim converts, writes about the 'actual' and 'potential' functions of Muslim converts, who can potentially act as cultural and linguistic interpreters and bridge builders between the broader Muslim community and the rest of the society. Especially intellectuals who convert to Islam serve an important function by giving 'legitimacy' in the eyes of the society and 'confirmation' of the superiority of Islam to Muslims, "especially to those

with a weaker sense of identity”. Allievi (2002, 26) writes about the role that converts can play as mediators between Islam and European societies:

The converts, in their ‘dual position’, appear to be able not only to serve a function in the relationship between Islam and the public space, but also in the transition between the Islam of the fathers and that of the sons, in unison with the second generation. In a way, the converts foreshadow a tendency of the second-generation Muslims towards an Islam that is no longer an inherited tradition, brought from the native country, but a conscious choice. They are in fact at the same time the product and the mediators of the meeting between Islam and Europe.

Similar ideas are discussed by Anne Sofie Roald (2006). Besides introducing the theory of post-conversion stages, Anne Sofie Roald’s article *The Shaping of a Scandinavian “Islam”*: *Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity* (2006) talks about another issue relevant to this study: Scandinavian converts integrating Scandinavian values into their understanding of Islam. Roald grounds her conclusions in fieldwork among Swedish, Norwegian and Danish converts in 1999 and 2000. From her large sample of interviews, she found some recurring themes such as the process of hybridization among highly educated, older converts, where Scandinavian values are becoming Islamic values. In Roald’s (2006, 67) study most of the informants saw their religion in terms of a Norwegian, Danish or Swedish Islam. It was only the recently converted and members of Salafist (or neo-fundamentalist) movements that refused to speak about Islam as “Scandinavian Islam”, as they hold the notion of only one true unchangeable Islam as the only acceptable interpretation. According to Roald (2006, 68) these groups are marginalized and do not reflect the majority’s views on society or religion.

Another observation Roald (2006, 68) makes in her study is the acceptance of the concept of “equal gender opportunities”. She credits this to the spreading of the ideology of emancipation that promotes the empowerment of women, and to the individualization development in Scandinavian societies.

Swedish sociologist of religion Madeleine Sultán (1999) describes two development stages that happen during the conversion process: first, attraction to and being confirmed by the religion and second, reformulation. In her study Sultán (1999) proposes that essentialist gender roles, the idea of Islam as the ultimate truth and the stable set of norms provided by it are the features that mostly attract Swedes to convert to Islam. Paradoxically these exact features that attracted people to convert are the ones that later on become fuel for conflicts. According to Sultán these conflicts are eventually solved in

the reformulation process either by dismissing them altogether or putting the problem into a new context (Sultán 1999, 335). For a woman who was first drawn to Islam because of the traditional gender roles and views on morality and family this could mean later questioning the practical applications of these ideas, such as being forced to give the decision-making power to her husband (Sultán 1999). Another example given in the article is of a convert who was drawn to Islam because of its clarity and because it is “the perfect system” (Sultán 1999, 331). However, the same informant refers to Muslims not behaving correctly or Islamically enough for her standards. This refers to the line often drawn by Muslims between the ‘real’ or ‘pure’ Islam and ‘proper’ Muslims and ‘Islam mixed with culture’ and ‘cultural Muslims’. With this model of separating culture from religion converts can distinguish between themselves and the forms of Islam they do not want to be affiliated with (Sultán 1999, 334). It enables them to continue believing in “Islam as the ultimate truth” and to place their own interpretation of religion above other ways of being Muslim or practicing Islam (Sultán 1999, 334). This can be seen as a defense mechanism against the inevitable disillusionment or disappointment stage where some sort of reformulation of ideas would otherwise take place.

Swedish anthropologist Anna Månsson McGuinty² (Månsson 2002, Månsson McGuinty 2006) has studied Swedish and American Muslim converts and their journey to Islam. Månsson conducted two interviews each with nine women covering a large range of issues. Conversion narratives play an important role in her work as she approaches conversion through the concepts of *cognitive recognition* and *cognitive reconciliation*. In her work, cognitive recognition is namely the recognition of familiarities in Islam, meaning that certain aspects of Islam feel attractive because the framework for accepting them is already there in the mind of the person learning about Islam. In other words, Islam is appealing to such emotions, hopes and thoughts that already exist. This recognition then leads to the awakening of interest, because the practices and ideas perceived as Islamic seem to make sense. They offer plausible explanations and serve personal needs and interests. Cognitive reconciling in the context of conversion to Islam means integrating Islam to the convert’s personal identity. Mansson McGuinty (Månsson 2006,

² Månsson has changed her name to Mansson McGuinty some time between the publishing of her works in 2002 and 2006. In this thesis I refer to her with her current publishing name, Mansson McGuinty.

12-13) sees cognitive reconciliation taking place in to two simultaneous processes: adopting a new religion and the transformation of the self.

3.2 Previous research on Finnish Muslim converts

Finnish research on Islam and Muslims is generally quite new, and Finnish Muslim converts have not been studied much (Sakaranaho 2008, 25-28). Some bachelor's and master's theses³ have been written about conversion to Islam, but other than that the topic has remained largely unexplored. This is understandable considering that conversion to Islam in Finland is still a relatively new and marginal phenomenon.

Isra Lehtinen who is herself a Finnish convert and has been active in the Finnish Muslim community and held positions of trust in the Islamic Society of Finland (Suomen Islamilainen Yhdyskunta) and the Islamic Council of Finland (Suomen Islamilainen Neuvosto) has researched Finnish converts most prolifically. In her article (2004) she gives an account of Finnish converts that still remains the most extensive published article on conversion in Finland, excluding the theses written on the subject.

The increase in conversion to Islam is reflected in the different estimations Lehtinen has given throughout the years: in 2004 it was around 600-700 converts, but in 2007 her estimation had already gone much higher, to 800 – 1000 converts (Martikainen 2008, 72) According to Lehtinen, around 70 - 80% of Finnish converts are women. (Lehtinen 2004, 237-238, Martikainen 2008, 72).

Lehtinen (2004) criticizes the general ideas and prejudices about Islam and Muslims that are pervasive in Finnish media and society. These include Muslim converts either not being taken seriously or being completely ignored, the conception that Islam is not the choice of an intelligent person - especially when it comes to women and the headscarf - and the image of an ignorant, poor and oppressed Muslim woman created by media, a picture that stigmatizes even convert women (Lehtinen 2004, 240).

Lehtinen writes about the discrepancies between the Finnish legislation on freedom of religion and conviction and the realities of everyday life; discrimination, racism and prejudices. She sees the marginalization of Muslims in Finland as a big problem that

³ See for example Haataja 2010, Sipilä 2012 and Leinonen 2014. Haataja's thesis is based on interviews with Finnish convert women, while the latter two analyze blogs maintained by convert women.

touches the entire Muslim community. Both Muslim men and women, Finns and immigrants, face problems in the labor market. It is common that female converts marry an immigrant Muslim who faces discrimination not only because of his religion but for being a foreigner (Lehtinen 2004, 244).

Lehtinen (2004) uses the term folk Islam (*kansanislam*) to describe the nationalized, culture-bound interpretations of Islam that for many Muslims represent the 'real' Islam, and talks about the need to create a 'Finnish-Islamic' culture. She calls upon Finnish converts to reflect on their identity:

There is a strong need in Finland to create a Finnish-Islamic culture using Finnish virtues that are Islamic virtues as well. The folk Islam of Muslim countries on the other hand is suitable for its own environment, not Finland. Finnish Muslims need to reflect on their identity. The ones who acknowledge the significance of their background will survive the best. Trying to deny one's identity can in extreme cases lead to mental unsteadiness. It is imperative to be at peace with one's past, for the past is also a part of the present. The relationship with Western heritage exists, and there is no reason to be ashamed of it (just) because you can hear indigenous Muslims criticizing Western countries. The critique can be joined on the level of matter, but the idea of the inferiority or superiority of any culture as such is incompatible with the Islamic equality principle.⁴ (Lehtinen 2004, 240-41)

Lehtinen's ideas of Finnish Islamic culture, discovering the similarities between Finnish and Islamic and accepting and appreciating the cultural background that converts come from are on par with Anne Sofie Roald's (2006) observations about Scandinavian Islam: the hybridization of Islamic and Scandinavian values. This theme will be explored further in the next chapters.

Before moving to the method and analysis of interview data in this thesis, I will first take a glance at Islam in Finland to present the cultural context in which the informants of this study live.

4. Islam in Finland

It has been estimated that there are around 40 000 Muslims living in Finland. (2008 Martikainen, Ihmisoikeusliitto 2007). As most Muslims in Finland are not registered as belonging to any religious organization or congregation, the estimate is based on

⁴ The translation from Finnish to English is mine.

information about people's nationality and mother tongue. Therefore, the actual number of Muslims remains unclear.

In 2015, over 30 000 asylum seekers, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan, arrived to Finland (Finnish Immigration Service 2016). While many of them ended up canceling their asylum application and returning to their country of origin or heading to another country to apply for asylum, many asylum seekers received a negative decision to their application during the year 2016. However at least for a while, the amount of Muslims – or rather people from a Muslim background – in Finland had nearly doubled. The lasting effect of the influx of asylum seekers in 2015 on the number of Muslims permanently residing in Finland are yet to be seen. While it is difficult to predict what will happen in the future, it seems highly likely that Finland will be receiving an increasing amount of immigrants for many years to come.

The Finnish Muslim community does not only consist of first generation immigrants or their children born in Finland and Finnish converts. The first Muslims in Finland were the Tatars that immigrated to Finland from Russia starting from the late 19th century (Sakaranaho 2008, 7). The last Tatars came to Finland in 1944. Ever since then the community has maintained its size of around 700 – 1000 people. (Leitzinger 2015, 279). According to Antero Leitzinger, a researcher specialized in immigration in Finland, their integration to the Finnish society has been considered a great success due to their patriotism, law-abidingness, high level of education, pride in their own culture and the honesty and calmness considered typical to Finns (Leitzinger 2015, 280). Despite their success in integrating to the Finnish society, Tatars often need to prove their 'Muslimness' to both Finns and to immigrant Muslims living in Finland, who think that their Islam is somehow too 'problem-free', as Leitzinger describes it. (Leitzinger 2015, 274). The issue of not belonging or not feeling accepted in either the Muslim community or the broader society is something that regularly comes up in studies with Muslim converts, and this theme will be explored further in later chapters.

There have not been many studies on the attitudes of Finns towards Islam. The studies that have been conducted on the topic show that in general, the attitudes are quite negative. Kimmo Ketola from Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, the Research Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, studied the religious tolerance of Finns in 2011. His study shows that 52 percent of Finns have a negative perception of Islam and Muslims

(Ketola 2011, 71). Magdalena Jaakkola's study for the City of Helsinki Urban Facts (2009, 61 - 66) on Finnish attitudes towards immigrants also shows that Islam is perceived negatively.

Muslims in Finland are often viewed against the backdrop of religion, as opposed to social standing, education or lifestyle. This phenomenon called religionization (in Finnish *uskonnollistaminen*) has been enforced by both some Islamic countries through funding and active organizational work and by the multiculturalism policies in many Western countries that have emphasized the role of religion. (Sakaranaho 2008)

Finnish Islam researcher Tuula Sakaranaho (2008, 9) emphasizes the importance of looking past the religionizing perspective when dealing with Muslims. According to Sakaranaho the diversity of Muslims and Islam and the fact that all Muslims are not particularly religious has been forgotten. There are plenty of different ways to be a Muslim and live a self-actualized, religious life, which is a perspective that is often missing from the discussion.

4.1 Conservative currents

Besides the more secularized, individualistic orientations of Islam, there is a large number of Muslims following a completely different trend. According to researcher Marko Juntunen (2009), this 'new global Islam' has become popular at the turn of the millennia in Nordic countries. Global Islam emphasizes the universalistic nature of the religion and encourages believers to let go of national traditions. It has been particularly popular among converts and second or third generation immigrants (Juntunen 2009, 4).

French researcher of Islam Olivier Roy (2004) calls this branch of Islam neo-fundamentalism. It is a conservative interpretation of Islam that emphasizes the universal communality of all Muslims (Juntunen 2008, 40, Roy 2004, 1-6). According to Roy (2004) neo-fundamentalism is not an organized doctrine but rather a way to perceive religion and the surrounding global reality. Juntunen (2008, 41) writes that neo-fundamentalism accentuates the global nature of Islam. It emphasizes the "Islam as a way of life"-ideology while trying to cut ties with Islam's centuries of cultural and ethnical features. According to the neo-fundamentalist ideology the revitalization of Islam requires a collective return to the foundations of the faith, namely to the Quran, the *sunna*, and the teachings and doctrine of *as-salaf*, the first generations of Muslims. Neo-

fundamentalism is often called Salafism, but there are several other names for neo-fundamentalists today (*wahabi, ahl al-hadith*). Many neo-fundamentalists refuse to name or define their orientation as anything else but simply a ‘real’ or ‘pure’ Islam (Juntunen 2008, 40-41).

Most of the current Finnish Islamic associations and organizations are in one way or another representing this current trend of global Islam; neo-fundamentalism or Salafism. Many of Finland’s largest Muslim organizations are multi-ethnic and have bonds to international Islamic organizations that are both supported by and independent of governmental entities. (Juntunen 2008, 43). Juntunen (2008, 41) writes about the ability of *dawa* organizations, Islamic Internet forums and e-publications in Finland to build bridges across linguistic, ethnic and generational boundaries. Some examples include The Internet forum *Sunnisiskot* (Sunni sisters) that had 300 registered users in 2009, *Totuudentie* (The way of the Truth), an organization that bases the foundations of its activities on the teachings of Salafist scholars, and the Iqra-foundation established in 2003 that focuses on translating and publishing almost solely the works of Saudi-Arabian Salafist scholars (Juntunen 2008). Their core supporters are young Muslim immigrants and highly motivated converts with strong religious beliefs.

Many Muslims who do not share the views of their neo-fundamentalist peers feel discouraged to become active members in Finnish Muslim organizations. They often feel that their views are not accepted and may end up cutting ties with the Muslim community. The voices of these Muslims are often not heard in the media or even in academic research. The problems of belonging and not belonging in the larger Finnish Muslim community were brought up by many interviewees in this research, and the topic will be discussed further in later chapters.

5. Methodology and presentation of data

In this chapter I will first describe the interview process, the methods used in the interviews and in the analysis of data, and finally give a short presentation of the informants.

5.1 The interview process

The actual research material of this study consists of seven personal interviews with Finnish Muslim convert women. Finding interviewees for this research turned out to be surprisingly effortless. By posting an announcement on three Facebook groups, I received emails and Facebook messages from over 20 women willing to take part in the study. My advertisement was short and clear: I was looking for Muslim converts from different backgrounds with diverse religious interpretations. Luckily I was able to reach such people, and so my sample, however small, turned out to be quite well representative of the many ways of being Muslim.

The interviews were conducted loosely following the model of semi-structured interviews outlined by Anne Galletta (2013). According to Galletta,

Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research. (Galletta 2013, 45)

The book divides the interview in three segments: the opening, middle and concluding segments. The purpose of the opening segment is to first establish a level of comfort between the interviewer and interviewee in order to later ease into the actual interview questions. The model of asking questions in the first segment means moving from broader questions to probing for clarification when necessary. The middle segment consists mainly of asking more specific questions, whereas in the concluding segment there is time for looking for possible contradictions, asking the interviewee for final thoughts and bringing the interview to a close. (Galletta 2013, 45 – 53)

The interviews were conducted in a span of seven weeks during October and November 2015. All were face-to-face interviews in the women's homes, with two exceptions for practical reasons: I interviewed Erika in my own home and Maria via Skype. It was clear to me from the beginning that the interviews would have to be conducted in the informant's homes due to their personal nature, and luckily everyone agreed to the arrangement. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, but most of them lasted for an hour and half. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish.

I recorded and later transliterated all interviews in verbatim. In doing so I did not leave anything outside the transcripts; the notes show where there was silence, laughter, or other

obvious emotions. This helped me later on while re-reading the text to better understand the context and tone of the answers.

In order to grasp an idea of the informant's post-conversion processes, I felt that I needed to cover a broad variety of subjects. Had I simply asked them to analyze how their relationship with Islam has changed during the years, I did not believe I would have been able to gather much information. I had a set of twelve questions that I worked in to all the interviews, but as a rule, I wanted to keep the interviews relaxed and conversationalist in nature. In order to not to impose any prefabricated ideas on the interviewees, I let the women talk about issues that were important to them. Most of the time I took on the role of an attentive listener instead of an active interviewer. This seemed like a fruitful approach because generally the interviewees had a lot to say, and I had to interrupt them at times to move over to the next question or topic.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the interview questions were rather broad and general in nature and worded differently in all interviews, but the twelve questions that I used were more or less as following:

- How did you first get to know Islam?
- What branch of Islam do you adhere to?
- How do you practice Islam and how does it show in your everyday life that you are Muslim?
- What does Islam mean to you?
- What is the most important thing for you in your faith?
- Have you faced challenges in becoming Muslim?
- Have there been changes in your faith?
- What in your life has changed since converting to Islam (including relationships, family, friends, work, studies, or political opinions)?
- Do you feel that you are a part of a local Muslim community or of the global Muslim community?
- How does being Finnish manifest in how you practice/interpretation of religion, or does it?
- Has becoming Muslim affected your 'Finnishness'?
- How do you view gender roles and the meaning of hijab in Islam?

Despite this not being a study on conversion to Islam or the motives leading up to it but rather on life as a Muslim for Finnish women not born into the faith, I think it is important to look at how the informants encountered Islam. Therefore, I started each interview with the question "how did you first get to know Islam?". The question acted as a useful conversation opener and paved the way to other themes. Hearing a brief conversion story

also facilitated understanding the life history of the informants. From there the conversation moved on to other themes.

The issues that were most commonly discussed in most interviews were relationships with family and friends, gender, the spiritual meaning of Islam, the hijab, Muslim communities and the broader theme of Finland and being a Finn. In addition to these, other themes such as Islamophobia and racism were discussed. I did not necessarily have to ask all the questions in all the interviews, because issues such as Islamic dress, the current political climate in Finland or gender roles surfaced quite naturally in the conversation.

5.1.1 Challenges in the interviews

In addition to its many benefits, the fluid, conversationalist nature of half-structured interviews naturally has its challenges. The problem with any research interview is that the interview does not take place in a vacuum, but it is always based on the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer. The interests and theoretical background of the interviewer will always have an impact on the results of the interview, the information elicited. The interviewee may also feel defensive in the interview situation, depending on the background of the interviewer and the chemistry between the two. Many women who have converted to Islam feel that they are inevitably subject to prejudices, which may lead the interviewee to emphasize issues that they deem will convince the interviewer of the legitimacy of their choice.

Several interviewees felt that Islam, Muslims, Muslim women and Finnish Muslim convert women in particular are being severely misrepresented in the media. Many of the informants told me that they felt it was time for them to speak up, and that by taking part in my thesis they hoped to have their voices heard. I could not help feeling that I have a responsibility towards the women to portray them the way they wanted to be seen, although I knew that I was working on a research the purpose of which is to analyze the interviews in light of a particular theory. When beginning to analyze the interviews after the interview process was over, I noticed that the feeling was surprisingly difficult to ignore.

I knew that in order to “...elicit discourse and reveal the cultural understandings underlying that discourse that would not otherwise be voiced by any people under any circumstances, in any type of discourse”, as cultural anthropologist Naomi Quinn (2005,

9) explained, I needed to create an atmosphere where the interviewees would feel comfortable sharing their stories with me, as explained by Galletta (2013) in describing the opening segment of semi-structured interviews. In addition to that, I needed to remain aware of my own position as a researcher, an outside observer with the agenda of finding answers to specific research questions.

5.2 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a rather new method used in social sciences that covers various methods of organizing and analyzing data. As the name itself implies, qualitative content analysis does not make use of any statistical methods for the analysis of data. (Drisko & Maschi 2016). According to the Moroccan sociologist and feminist scholar of Islam, Fatima Mernissi (1985, 94), “qualitative analysis ought ... not to fortify your certitudes but to destroy them.” I tried to remain critical and open-minded in analyzing the data every step of the way, while being aware of my expectations on the outcome.

James Drisko and Tina Maschi (2016, 86) describe the many uses of qualitative content analysis in their aptly named book *Content Analysis*: “Qualitative content analysis may be used to explore new topics, describe complex phenomena in open systems, compare and contrast group differences, and develop and test theories.”

Drisko and Maschi (2016, 90) view categorizing “the manifest and/or latent and contextualized content into a narrative summary” as an important aspect of qualitative content analysis. Using a narrative format is the most commonly used form of presentation for qualitative content analysis studies. Applying the narrative format in practice means identifying the central themes or categories in the data and using the categories as section headings in the research. (Drisko & Maschi 2016, 109) The categorization of data can be topical, hierarchical or formal (Drisko & Maschi 2016, 90).

Before arriving at the current layout of the analysis of data in this study, I tried out several thematic categorization systems. Comparing the use of categorization in order to create narrative summaries with the process theory I am mirroring the interview data to, I finally came to the realization that in order to answer my research questions I needed to substitute thematic categories for a simple one-by-one analysis of the informants’ narratives. Therefore, in this study, each interviewee has their own section heading. According to Drisko and Maschi, in using the narrative format

Each core theme is interpreted in a summary manner and illustrated using quotations that show how texts or participants portrayed their original ideas or views. This form of narrative analysis both clarifies how categories were developed and highlights categories that address the overall research question. The level of interpretation provided by the researchers may vary from minimal to significant. That is, categories or themes may merely be summarized to highlight the content, or the reader may be shown how more contextualized interpretations were made using latent content. (109- 110)

In this study, I have used quotations from the interviews quite generously to better illustrate the informants' own ideas. While summarizing their words I have tried to remove my own interpretation and to relay the stories as objectively as possible. According to Drisko and Maschi (2016, 90), "Qualitative content analysts generally view their approach as more focused on description than on conceptual development; yet any form of categorization will arguably involve some degree of abstraction." Although I am attempting to keep the interpretation and analysis apart from summarizing the informants' stories, I am aware that it is not possible to completely avoid interpretation altogether.

I would like to end the discussion on methodology with a quote from Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968), a book that explores Indonesian and Moroccan Muslims and their religious development. Before embarking on his analysis, Geertz poses the question of whether the comparative study of religion is "condemned to mindless descriptivism and an equally mindless celebration of the unique?" (Geertz 1968, 54). Even though I am not approaching my topic from the perspective of comparative religion, the same question haunted me throughout the process of working on this thesis. Geertz answers himself in the next paragraph:

The hope for general conclusions in this field lies not in some transcending similarity in the content of religious experience or in the form of religious behavior from one people to another, or one person to another. It lies in the fact, or what I take to be a fact, that the field over which that content and that behavior range is not a mere collection of unrelated ideas and emotions and acts, but an ordered universe, whose order we shall discover precisely by comparing, with some circumstantiality, cases drawn from different parts of it. The central task is to discover, or invent, the appropriate terms of comparison, the appropriate frameworks within which to view material phenomenally disparate in such a way that its very disparateness leads us into a deeper understanding of it. (Geertz 1968, 54 – 55)

Ultimately, by discovering the different stages in the post-conversion process and by exploring how different interpretations of Islam are linked with the process, I will attempt to portray an "ordered universe" of conversion to Islam in Finland in the chapters that follow.

5.3 Introduction of the informants

In this chapter I will give a brief presentation of the informants' backgrounds. As mentioned already in the introduction, out of the seven women five identified themselves as Sunni, one as Shia, and one of the women defined herself as Sufi.

All the women live in the Helsinki capital region area, but one of them was living abroad at the time of the interview. Although I had initially hoped to be able to conduct interviews in other regions of Finland, it turned out that nearly all the women who volunteered to be interviewed actually live in the capital region. It was confirmed in the interviews that in general, most converts do live in the Helsinki area.

The names have been changed corresponding to the name that the women themselves use so that those who have changed their names to an Arabic one have been given an Arabic alias, and those who have kept their Finnish names have been given a Finnish alias. Below is a short breakdown of the background information of the interviewees:

Zeinab, in her mid-thirties, has been Muslim for the majority of her life. She converted at the age of 16, is married and has children. She works in the health care sector and is originally from the Helsinki region. Having been Muslim for a long time and having studied Islam and Arabic quite extensively abroad, Zeinab holds a deep understanding of her religion and what it means to be Muslim for her.

Maria, in her late twenties, converted to Islam two years before the interview. She was living abroad in a big Muslim country at the time of the interview, which was conducted through Skype, but she is originally from the Helsinki region. Maria has a master's degree from social sciences from a European university. She is single and does not have children. Maria described herself as a Sufi, but first and foremost as a Muslim.

Aminah, in her early forties, has been a Sunni Muslim since her twenties. She is married without children and works as a teacher. She is originally from a small town quite far from Helsinki.

Ninni, in her late twenties, first converted to Sunni Islam at the age of 14, but says she did not really commit to it until her early twenties. She is married with one child. Ninni has previously worked in health care, but was at the time of the interview a stay-at-home parent as her child was quite young. She is originally from the Helsinki region.

Erika, in her late twenties, had been Muslim for eight years at the time of the interview. She is single and has no children, and is originally from the Helsinki region. She has a master's degree from a European university in social sciences. She does not want to brand herself as a follower of a sect, but said that she could be classified as Sunni.

Asma, in her early fifties, has been Muslim since her twenties. She is originally from the Helsinki region. Asma is divorced with one child and she works as a teacher. She has a master's degree in social sciences. Asma practices Sunni Islam.

Sanna, in her early twenties, had been Muslim for six years at the time of the interview. She is married without children. She is currently studying humanities in a Finnish university. She is originally from a mid-sized Finnish town quite far from Helsinki. Sanna is the only Shia Muslim out of the interviewees.

6. Analysis of Data

In this chapter I will analyze the interviews one by one as explained in chapter 5.2, keeping in mind the four post-conversion stages proposed by Anne Sofie Roald; zealotry, disappointment, acceptance, and secularization.

6.1 Zeinab

Zeinab first learned about Islam at school. Despite her atheist upbringing she got interested in Islam in religious education class. The teacher did not know much about Islam, and so Zeinab decided to learn about it on her own. She described how Islam was the first religion that actually made sense to her, and how easy it was for her to understand the pillars of the faith.

Zeinab never had problems with her siblings or her father because of her conversion, but her mother had a hard time accepting her becoming Muslim. This led to her moving out of the house for a month after her conversion. Zeinab described how her mother used to throw her headscarves to the garbage bin, yell at her, scowl her and her friends and blame them for brainwashing her:

She knew that it's not my nature, I have never done things just because others are doing them, but I have always had the courage to be different and it's not possible to manipulate me. Yet in that situation she couldn't accept that I, her smart child, would be so stupid as

to choose this religion that subordinates women and all these typical prejudices that she had.⁵

Zeinab's mother did eventually come to accept her daughter's conversion, but it was exceedingly difficult for both in the beginning.

Zeinab is still in touch with two of her childhood friends, but many of her friends were, according to her, embarrassed by her after she converted. Her circle of friends has changed completely from her teenage years except for the two friends who stood by her through her conversion.

Zeinab described having been stricter in her beliefs and practice of Islam in the beginning, right in the aftermath of her conversion. As time passed by however, she started to realize that she could never become a 'perfect' Muslim, and that she needed to take a more relaxed attitude in terms of her requirements for herself as a Muslim. She remembered the Prophet saying that a Muslim should live between the fear of punishment and the certainty of mercy, so that one does neither lapse into not practicing Islam at all, nor drive oneself into total exhaustion by trying to follow every single detail to the letter. She realized that the ideal would be to maintain a balance, taking responsibility of her actions on one hand but on the other understanding that ultimately she is not in charge, but God is.

She recalled having gone through some difficulties in life and later realizing that the hardships had been a blessing in disguise. This had given her further proof of the truthfulness of Islam, as the Quran states that God knows better than you and that nothing happens without a reason. Islam has brought her safety and stability because no matter what happens in life, she can always survive without becoming depressed or anguished, for she knows that everything has a purpose and that she can always turn to God. As an interviewer I got a strong feeling that Islam for her, among other things, means having what a non-religious person might think of simply as faith in that everything happens for a reason and being optimistic in that there is inherent goodness hidden in everything that happens, no matter what it might seem like at first glance.

While Zeinab described becoming more forgiving towards herself in the years following her conversion to Islam, she also explained her frustration with some born Muslims who

⁵ The quotations in chapter six have been translated from Finnish to English by me.

cannot separate their culture from Islam. Zeinab's husband's relatives have repeatedly remarked on her being stricter in her practice than them. Having converted to Islam and having had to deal with discrimination and prejudices from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, she believes that she can value Islam in a different way than someone who has been born Muslim.

Zeinab was adamant in differentiating between culture and religion, and said that while cultures differ, religion is the same for everyone. According to her the problems stem from too many Muslims being ignorant of their own religion and simply trusting what they have heard from parents or grandparents. She said that often converts know Islam better than born Muslims because they have the advantage of not having centuries of cultural baggage coloring their perception of the religion.

When talking about different schools of thought, *madhahib*, within Islam, Zeinab mentioned that the Prophet himself had done things differently on purpose so that people would realize that there is space for different ways of doing certain things, as long as the foundations of the faith remain intact. With the "different ways of doing things" Zeinab was referring to the four madhahib of Sunni Islam. She made it very clear that any kind of reformation is not acceptable in Islam because there is only one Islam that is perfect in the form that it was sent to the world and taught by the Prophet.

A theme that came up constantly in the interview was the Islamophobia that Zeinab has countered through the years. She said that since the nationalistic party Perussuomalaiset, The Finns, won an unprecedented number of seats in the parliamentary elections of 2015, there has been an increase in the Islamophobic comments and stares, and she and her children have become targets of insults for random passersby.

Zeinab said that being Muslim is more accepted for Arabs or Somalis or other born Muslims, because "that is just the way they are", and that racism in their case is focused on their skin color. For Finnish Muslim converts however, 'racism' is simply about being Muslim, and for women it all culminates in the headscarf.

Zeinab explained that although she has been Muslim for a long time she did not "become an Arab" or take on any other ethnicity for that matter. According to her Finnish Muslims are different from born Muslims just as Finns in general are culturally different from Arabs, for example. Zeinab disclosed that she generally enjoys the company of Finnish

Muslims more than that of most born Muslims, due to the cultural differences in social behavior and communication.

Zeinab's idea of gender roles follows the principles maintained by many conservative Muslims:

What equality means to me, and to other Muslims in general, is not the Western equality as such due to the fact that a man is not a woman and a woman is not a man. I think that what they here think of equality is impossible to achieve because we are already biologically different. The Western concept of equality would be actualized if men could give birth and menstruate and women could have as much muscle as men and the same hormones and... then we would have what they're going after in the Western countries. I think that the real equality of sexes is manifest in Islam, in that our physical and psychological differences are taken into account. We know that a woman's hormone activity is completely different from that of a man's, we have more of them [hormones] and they affect us differently, we give birth... it has even been discovered in brain studies that our way of thinking is different. I think that in Islam a man is allowed to be a man and a woman is allowed to be a woman without one being inferior to the other. It is even in the Quran that we are equally worthy before God... our differences are understood and that's where our rights and obligations stem from. It's not so that men only have rights and women only have obligations, but both have both, they're just in different places so that they [rights and obligations] support the way we naturally are, like I said, biologically... and that prevents pressure. In Finland nowadays, we are to a large extent living in a man's world, and we have to get along in business and we have to go the army because men are there too... but I think that the Islamic idea of equality is much more liberating because we get to be what we naturally are, and I don't feel that I am in any way inferior to men. The idea that people want to liberate us and we are being pitied feels so stupid, because how can you liberate someone who is already free?

She added that it is extremely irritating when non-Muslim men speak on behalf of Muslim women, and no one ever asks Muslim women themselves what they think. I felt that it was not her first time speaking about these issues, and that she was, maybe not intentionally, but perhaps subliminally, trying to defend herself to me in case I perceived her as someone who would need to be liberated.

It is noteworthy that in discussing gender roles and other issues as well, Zeinab tended to use the word 'we' instead of 'I'. In describing her vision of what equality means, Zeinab continually referred to it as "equality in Islam" or as in the beginning of the previous quote, "what equality means to me, and to other Muslims in general". I found her use of language quite representative of the idea of "one true Islam".

Out of the informants in this study, Zeinab was perhaps the one who seemed most confident in her faith. It would be inaccurate simply to place her on the stage of zealotry based on her interpretation of Islam for, as Roald defines the first stage, it consists of idolizing the Muslim community. Zeinab on the other hand discussed her disappointment

with born Muslims rather thoroughly. For her it has led to a stronger commitment to her own faith and an appreciation of her own background as a convert, as she has not been able to take Islam for granted nor has she been burdened by cultural interpretations of Islam. Sultán (1999, 334) sees the separation of Islam and culture as a defense mechanism of sorts as it enables the convert to continue believing in “Islam as the ultimate truth”. As is shown in Zeinab’s case, it is not the Muslim community that is idolized, but Islam itself, or perhaps rather the idea of Islam as an unchangeable entity, something unwavering, certain and dependable in a world of endless uncertainties.

6.2 Maria

Maria, the newest convert to Islam out of the seven interviewees, had been Muslim for only two years before the interview took place. That could have been the reason why she provided the most personal and detailed account of her conversion, or it could have simply been that her conversion in itself was quite different from the rest.

Maria’s journey of becoming a Muslim started as a general academic interest in religion. She had never been interested in Christianity, but had been looking for some alternative form of spirituality since her teenage years. She studied several religions and was at one point very interested in Buddhism. She ended up taking a class at the university where Sufism was discussed, and she noticed that it had a lot of similarities with Buddhism. Unlike Buddhism however, Sufism included the element of a higher power, and so Maria got very interested in Islam. Back then her interest was more an academic one than an actual interest in converting.

She described moving to a Muslim country later on, where she got to know the religion more closely. Islam started to appear more appealing to her, but she still had some prejudices about it. She read books by feminist Muslim authors, by Annemarie Schimmel, the eminent scholar on Sufism, and articles of Yasmin Mogahed, an Egyptian-American Muslim speaker and writer. After much reading, some of the prejudices were lifted and she realized that Islam was not what people were saying it was. She realized that the more negative aspects that she had encountered were related to how Islam is interpreted, and not representative of what Islam essentially is. It still took her time before she made the decision to convert largely because, as she described it, it is still a big taboo in the West. After she went through a difficult time in her life that forced her to ask herself why bad

things happen, she remembered what she had learned about Islamic teachings on pain and suffering:

Usually people think it's about karma, that you have done something bad and the bad things are a punishment or something, but in Islam it is seen as a good thing when something bad happens, because it... purifies you from your thoughts about yourself and helps you to free yourself from the ego... and somehow at that moment it just sank in with full force and then I converted to Islam.

Maria described realizing that hardships happen for a reason and that they might even turn out to be blessings. One of the things that she found most compelling about Islam was that difficulties are perceived as a means of getting closer to God, as they help you remember what is truly important in life.

Islam has completely changed my perception of life... Especially in the West we tend to think that the purpose of life is to achieve things, to be happy, but happy in the way that you yourself want to be happy... running after external things that in the end never guarantee you a feeling of happiness, because happiness is something that comes and goes, it is not something permanent. Even when we want to believe that it is, it really isn't, because even if you get everything you want you will always want something more, and then you're in this spiral that you can't get out of... So I have stopped looking for happiness from external things, I now know that happiness can only be found from the way that you live your life in relation to God.

The quote above was Maria's answer to what has changed in her life after her conversion to Islam. The spiritual contentment and inner peace she describes are themes that came up in all the interviews when asked about the changes that Islam has brought to the women's lives. In Maria's case, the spiritual dimension of Islam was probably the most prominent.

Maria said that she sees herself first as a Muslim and secondly as a Sufi, because she shares the fundamentals of Islam with all other Muslims. She clarified that with the fundamentals she means the five pillars of Islam. "I see myself as a Muslim first and foremost, but when you go to the level of details, that's where the differences come up", she said. One of the differences she mentioned was that she gives only little value to the hadith-corpus, and sees the Quran as the most important source.

Maria had found Sufism as an easy way to approach Islam, because it gives space to personal interpretation. She added that personal interpretation, in her opinion, should be a part of Islam, but unfortunately today that is generally not the case. She said that being able to question things is extremely important for her, and that it would be really difficult

for her to imagine that she would become a strict Sunni for instance, for it would not agree with her personality at all.

Despite her feeling that her world view has changed a lot, Maria said that she does not notice that she would have changed as a person, as she still has the same liberal attitude and her political views have not changed except for one thing:

I used to be a strong supporter of secular governance but after I have looked into it more, and I am absolutely not supporting some crazy Islamic state or anything like that, I have been thinking about how we define secularism. Actually what we consider secularism is not necessarily the best option but maybe the best option would be to accept that many of the fundamental ideas and values in our society stem from religion and that we wouldn't have to always be so opposed to religion. But still we should guarantee full freedom of religion to everyone and not choose one religion or religious movement as state religion. But somehow we should reconsider what we mean with secularism because I don't see it as a virtue in itself. For example, when we look at what happened in France, the Charlie Hebdo –issue, I was rather annoyed with the conversation that followed the attack. Eventually I think people thought that secularism and freedom of speech are the most important things for us, the rest of you should follow this too and we will tell you how things should go... and it can't be like that, different cultures and religions see things differently and the West can't come and tell everyone else how things really are. I think it should be reconsidered and thought over.

Maria's idea of reconsidering secularism reflects her approach towards religion as well, the general attitude of questioning and redefining things.

As mentioned earlier, Maria described a big spiritual inner transformation that followed her conversion. In connecting the spiritual with practicing Islam, prayer has a big role. She tries to pray five times a day, although it is not always so easy to fit the prayers in their set times to her schedule:

I have noticed that if I let go of praying, I start drifting away from religion. It happened to me a while ago that I was a Muslim in my head, but I didn't actually do anything about it, and then I noticed that I started forgetting all the things I had learned and then I couldn't react to things the way I'm supposed to. That's when I noticed that these things have a point and I realized why you have to do it [pray] and why you have to do it so often. It ensures that you do not forget what is most important in life.

As a flipside to the empowering inner transformation, Maria has faced difficulties with expressing her new religious identity to others. She has two close friends in Finland who know about her conversion and who have been very understanding and interested in it from the beginning. She said that she knew all along who would be open-minded and understanding enough to trust with the news of becoming Muslim, and she has purposefully avoided talking about her conversion with anyone that she feels might not understand her choice. Talking about her family, Maria said that her mother is very open-

mindful and interested in Islam and Muslim countries. Still she has been afraid that it would come as a shock to her parents to find out that she has converted and that it would take them some time to digest the news.

While talking about telling her parents, Maria added that she is not herself yet totally comfortable with being Muslim, which is probably why she has not been able to tell her parents about it either. She said that she is planning to tell them one day but that there are too many prejudices about Islam, especially in the current world situation, that she is afraid of the possible ramifications of telling her parents. She expressed the same reservations about telling her friends, adding that Islam is such an important thing for her that she does not want to start defending her decision to convert to anyone. "I hope that one day I'll be able to be what I am openly but that time hasn't come yet", she said.

In a similar fashion to her hesitation about "coming out" as a Muslim, Maria said that she feels that she is not accepted by the Finnish or Western community due to her conversion to Islam. She is afraid of being perceived as "weird" or "crazy", especially because she is a woman with liberal values. She described having problems also with the Muslim community due to certain opinions held by many Muslims that she does not accept. She mentioned that when she has visited Finland she has felt uncomfortable with the idea of going to a mosque there because she has had the feeling that she would not belong there.

Maria has kept her conversion to Islam private as she has not found a community of like-minded believers. She thinks that if she found a group of Westerners who had converted to Sufism, she might discover a sense of belonging, but instead she has noticed that Western converts in particular tend to be quite strict and even radical in their views.

Maria has lived abroad since she was 18 and has not had a very strong identity as a Finn. Having kept her conversion and religious life in general as a private matter is something that she nevertheless considered very Finnish. She thinks that having a Western background has largely affected her interpretation of Islam, as she has mainly read Islamic literature written by Western converts to more spiritual branches of Islam.

The influence of having a "Western background" is seen in Maria's opinions regarding gender roles that are "feminist and liberal", as she herself put it:

I think that the Quran continuously, to a large extent, speaks of both women and men, and it is stated there all along that women and men are equal, and I think that's it. It is not said

that [women] shouldn't work, but quite the opposite. Of course it [the Quran] says that it is kind of the men's duty to support women financially, but I see it so that in those times, when there was no social security, when a woman got pregnant and had children and could not earn a living, then it was pretty good if the man could provide for her, so that's how I see it. I have obviously given a lot of thought to these issues but then I have read books by Asma Barlas and others, Amina Wadud and so on...

It is clear from her last sentence that Maria has had to go through some internal debate in processing the way that gender is perceived in mainstream Islam.

Maria expressed no interest in wearing the hijab or headscarf. She has not found it meaningful or important for her faith, and explained that she sees it more as a cultural issue than a religious one:

I see it more as a cultural thing, and maybe this is where my Finnishness comes forward, because it is such an unfamiliar thing, although peasant women have been wearing all kinds of scarves in the past but it's not quite the same thing. It is considered strange in our culture and it is personally difficult for me to understand that if the idea is to cover your beauty from men, then I don't see why it's only the hair, so I see it as a bit problematic in that sense. But then on the other hand I understand, or what I perhaps like about it, is the idea of making an anti-fashion statement, that you want to show that none of the values of this world that are targeted towards you matter to you, and so you wear such a thing. But it still doesn't make any sense to me why I should wear it, there's no reasonable point in it for me... I don't see any such commandment anywhere in the Quran... but rather that you have to dress modestly. But that's the only commandment I see in there and I think that it has been purposefully left so ambiguous so that people in different cultures and during different times could interpret it in different ways.

From her last sentence one can come to the conclusion that Maria's acceptance of plurality of interpretation within Islam has given her confidence in believing that her own interpretation is just as valid as anyone else's.

Comparing Maria's comments on gender and the hijab with those of Zeinab's, it is interesting to note that Maria does not speak for Muslim women or Islam as a whole but rather approaches the issue from a personal perspective, describing her interpretation and referring to the process of "giving thought" to "these issues". One can read between the lines the implication that the issue of gender has been something she has had to consider with regards to her becoming Muslim. Her solution has been to look into the writings of feminist Muslim scholars. The existence of liberal and feminist interpretations has given legitimacy to her own ideas on the equality of sexes.

The way Maria described her gradual enthrallment with Islam is somewhat reminiscent Roald's first stage. However, where Roald describes conversion to Islam as "a total shift of cultural truths" (Roald 2006, 48), it is quite obvious that with Maria, the issue is not

that simple. She explained that her personal values have not changed but she has found a basis for them from Islam as well. On the other hand, her description of how her whole perception of life has changed and how she has stopped looking for happiness from external, worldly things, does sound a lot like a total shift of cultural truths – if one accepts as a fact that in the Finnish culture it is the exterior that matters the most.

Based on her liberal interpretation of Islam and the fact that being Muslim has remained a private matter for her, one might see Maria as an example of the stage of secularization. Ironically enough she actually rejects the idea of idolizing secularism. This contradiction suggests that Roald's theory might be unnecessarily burdened with the assumption that the religious evolution of Muslim converts must move towards secularism. Examining the stage of secularization, I find myself agreeing with Maria's thoughts on the need to reconsider the way secularism is perceived as a virtue in itself.

There are certain discrepancies in Maria's description of how she feels about being Muslim: on one hand she seems to have accepted her own way of being Muslim, but on the other she says that she is not entirely comfortable with it when it comes to sharing her religious self with the world. This discomfort seems to stem from her not feeling accepted by the Muslim community for her unorthodox views, or by the Western/Finnish community due to her conversion to a religion that is generally perceived negatively. From this perspective she appears to fit perfectly Roald's description of the stage of disappointment, of feeling neither fully a part of the society at large nor of the Muslim community.

Maria's journey as a Muslim is still in its early stages and she will most probably go through plenty of changes in the future. She said that she wishes Muslims with alternative interpretations of Islam would have the courage to speak out, because it would make it easier for her to voice her opinions and ideas as well.

Going back to Roald's stages, Maria can be seen as balancing somewhere between disappointment and maturity/acceptance. Finding her place and creating an identity as a Muslim is a process she has only began. There is a sense of separateness in certain areas of her life, and she expressed a deep yearning to reach a reconciliation between them. Her situation brings to mind Ruba Salih's (2004, 1004-1005) study on European Muslims, where she describes the identity negotiation process of one of her informants, a born Muslim, as "painful" and "frustrating", and as primarily a "subjective process of

harmonisation of different identifications and political and religious interests.” Having multiple identities is according to Salih seen as an impossibility both by “mainstream Muslim leaders and by the sustainers of multiculturalism”. Maria’s feeling of not being accepted by neither the Muslim community nor the Finnish community reflects the same sentiments.

6.3 Aminah

Aminah first encountered Islam through her first husband, who was a born Muslim. Seeing him practice his religion, she started reading and finding about Islam on her own. According to Aminah it took her some years to actually start practicing Islam after saying the *shahada*.

Aminah’s parents were quite accepting of her conversion, which credited to them being practicing Christians themselves. She explained that she often feels that she has a lot more in common with a practicing Christian than with an atheist, because people who believe in God tend to be on the same “wavelengths”, as she put it.

Despite her currently being in good terms with her parents, Aminah said that in the beginning when she herself was a stricter Muslim who interpreted things more literally than nowadays, there were instances of her and her father screaming at one another, fighting over religious issues such as the doctrine of the trinity. She has later realized that it was not a good way to communicate her new beliefs to her parents, and has chosen a different way to approach the topic. She has given her parents books about Islam and tried to show them with her own example what it means to be Muslim.

Aminah described having been more rigorous and less forgiving towards herself in the beginning of her journey as a practicing Muslim. In her case however this had a lot to do with her ex-husband, who was very strict and conservative in his practice of Islam. Aminah pointed out that once someone becomes a Muslim, it is the person closest to them whose views and practices easily become determinative for the new convert as well.

Later when she had learned more about Islam on her own she started to question her ex-husband’s ideas. The problems they had were very much connected to gender roles, as Aminah’s ex-husband would limit her social life and her academic and professional aspirations. The differences between the couple’s interpretations of religion and ideas of how to lead a married life eventually led to their divorce. Aminah explained her own

acceptance of a more rigorous lifestyle in the beginning with the euphoric state of initial enthusiasm that many converts go through. She said that she knows of converts who have immediately upon conversion plunged to a very extreme and uncompromising version of Islam but who have soon afterwards given up on the religion altogether.

Aminah described her life after her divorce with a smile on her face, as a period of self-discovery and self-determination. She got remarried to a man who shares her worldview and interpretation of Islam but is somewhat less religious than her. The events that transpired with her ex-husband helped her gain a better understanding of her own beliefs and way of interpretation that she described as the middle way, a balancing act. She explained that Islam brings her a feeling of serenity and inner peace, that no matter what happens around her, she can rely on God's infinite mercy. The purpose of religion for her is to give life positive content, happiness and joy, not anguish. Aminah described Islam as a way of life, something that she makes all her decisions based on, something that is always there. Islam means being connected to God and to other Muslims and being guided through life.

Aminah's views on gender were very much in line with those of Zeinab's. She brought forward the idea that in an ideal society a woman should be provided with the possibility of focusing on herself rather than have her working to earn a living:

I do feel that some things are more suitable for women than for men and vice versa. In Islam equality doesn't mean that we're all equal in all things, that for example if men go to the army then women have to go there too... in general women are maybe more nurturing by nature, when you think about childcare and such, maybe it's naturally the woman who principally takes care of the housework and the children, and then in Islam it is the man's duty to provide for the family and go to work outside the home. For a woman it's not an obligation to do so, but the spouses can agree upon it mutually if she wants to go [to work outside home] and then she will. The woman isn't obliged to share her money unless she wants to, although in Finland in practice it most probably goes so that couples earn together and pay the expenses together. But if we were living in an ideal society, then it would be so that the man would take care of matters outside the home and provide for the family, so that the woman could focus more on herself and the home. I don't feel that there's a conflict in any way, I am pleased that I get to be a woman and to be feminine. I think it's one of God's gifts, that Allah has created us different, women and men, to complement one another.

I asked her what she thinks femininity is, and she replied: "...Being able to make yourself beautiful at home for your husband and wear beautiful clothes, or when meeting other women, you can do things that are natural for women, things you enjoy the most, to pamper yourself...". Her way of looking at traditional gender roles from a perspective

that transcends the idea of the woman as simply a submissive homemaker is interesting. For Aminah, creating a dual set of duties has given women, in addition to their particular responsibilities, the possibility of enjoying life and doing things simply for pleasure, when it is the duty of men to make sure that women are provided the opportunity of leisure.

Aminah, who donned the hijab more than twenty years ago considers it to be a pivotal part of her faith. She described wearing the headscarf as one of the most important things in practicing Islam for women along with praying five times a day. For her the scarf is a means of protecting women, a reminder for herself of her faith, and a sign for others that she is Muslim. She said that she would never take off the hijab, as wearing it has strengthened her faith so much over the years.

As her faith has in her own words “evened out” with time, her dressing style has evolved as well. Aminah described having realized that she does not need to dress like Arab women or wear an abaya to be Muslim, but that it is possible to express one’s personality with clothes and be modest at the same time.

Roald’s first three stages are clearly represented in Aminah’s journey from the initial enthusiasm to her life-changing divorce that led to a new understanding of herself and Islam. For her the stage of disappointment was perhaps a gradual disappointment in her marriage and the lack of flexibility that her ex-husband exhibited. For her the disappointment in born Muslims was therefore quite personal. Roald describes the stage of disappointment primarily as disappointment in how the Islamic ideals are not materialized in the lives of born Muslims. In Aminah’s case the problems with her husband stemmed from him justifying his controlling behavior with religion. While Aminah’s views on gender roles can be seen as rather conservative, she emphasized the mutuality and communication between spouses in decision making. While her ideas on how Islam should be interpreted seem not to have changed much, for her the stage of maturity or acceptance has meant being able to explore her own ideas and focusing on herself while reformulating what kind of life she wants to live as a Muslim.

6.4 Ninni

Ninni’s gradual conversion to Islam began with her mother’s search for spirituality when Ninni was a teenager. She joined her mother in her quest to find alternatives to Lutheranism, and the two ended up embracing Islam. In the beginning it was Ninni’s

mother who was more deeply involved in practicing Islam, but a few years later, as Ninni herself became more religious and started to practice more as she put it, it was her mother who turned away from Islam altogether. The two have however maintained a close relationship despite her mother leaving Islam.

Ninni has been Muslim for over ten years, but she did not practice Islam until only a few years after her conversion, when she met her first husband. He was not a religious person which eventually led to a rift between them. She ended up getting divorced and following her calling to discover Islam at a greater depth. She said that she started really practicing Islam intensely four years before the interview took place. Later she also met her current husband, whose worldview is similar to hers.

Ninni described Islam as an immense blessing. She said that she still wonders how and why she was chosen to discover this mercy and salvation. Just being Muslim is no guarantee of salvation in itself, she added, but it gives her hope, strength and confidence. Being Muslim for her means being able to rely on God taking care of her no matter what.

Ninni, the only one of the interviewees who wears the niqab, reported the most harassment from Finns because of her Islamic clothing. She spoke extensively about the niqab and her experiences of Islamophobia.

Wearing hijab or niqab for Ninni is first and foremost doing what God has ordered. She acknowledged the different opinions on whether covering the face is necessary, but said that she has understood it to be a very strongly recommended, if not obligatory act. Despite some Muslims saying that it is not necessary to wear the niqab in Finland, Ninni believes God's law is universal and that it should be followed everywhere. According to Ninni, covering her face makes her more aware of God, of her behavior:

Being under the microscope of other people makes me aware of the fact that God sees me even better than the people around me and that affects my behavior, it makes me avoid sins and bad deeds.

For Ninni, wearing the niqab also acts as a means of protest against the pervasive cultural norms:

I have grown up in a society that says that if you have something, you have to show it, if you have a good body, feet, breasts, anything, then you should show it and bring it forward. That's how my womanhood and personhood are being evaluated.

By not showing her body to the world, she asks people to evaluate her for who she is, not for what she looks like. She explained that wearing the niqab allows her to be in full control of her body, because she can decide who can see which part of her. She addressed the fact that niqab does not stop people from looking at her – actually in Finland it is quite the contrary – but that when they look at her, they are forced to think about her as a person. Preventing men from seeing her was naturally discussed as well:

Some people have this funny idea that I wear the niqab because men can't control their gaze. I still can't control their gaze, but I can control what they see, so people can look at me all they want but they can't see anything else but what I allow them to see. This world is full of men who don't fear God or respect women, and at least it will prevent them from looking at things that are not theirs to look at.

She added that the niqab does not prevent her from communicating with men, but that she does not need to communicate with them beyond a certain limit:

If I go to the bank, I go there to take care of bank business, and there isn't going to be any spark or anything, because men and women are built differently, and men can be aroused by a look or from seeing something... but it isn't worn to protect men somehow, it just happens to make it easier. They have to look at you because of your personality and they can't say anything about how you look. They might say something about subordination but at least they are forced to think about the personality, even if they think wrongly of it, in a negative way, maybe it's false what they think but at least they're thinking about my personality and not my body.

In addition to being able to protect herself from unwanted sexual attention, Ninni thinks that covering up protects women from judging one another based on their looks. As mentioned above with men, she believes that if women covered themselves completely, it would force women too to face each other by getting to know their personalities first.

Ninni described herself as an outgoing, happy person, who has not let the fear of discrimination or unfriendly looks restrict her life. She has been very active in defending her right to wear what she wants in social media and directly to anyone criticizing or verbally attacking her in public. She gave several examples of having being harassed in public because of her attire; in the supermarket, on the street and in public transportation. It does not come as a surprise that she feels that she has had to defend herself and other Muslims in the wake of the current political situation.

For Ninni, becoming Muslim has also opened her eyes to the problems of other Muslims in the world. She said that she has become more active, for instance on Facebook, in speaking against the ill-treatment of Muslims on a global scale.

Ninni expressed similar ideas to those of Zeinab's and Aminah's with regards to gender roles. She believes that men and women have been created as fundamentally different archetypes, and that they have been assigned the roles that best suit them. She described the roles in her own marriage as following:

The way we look at our relationship is that a married couple is a team and the husband is the team leader. We have joint family meetings where my opinions and wishes are heard and taken into consideration, and my best interests are considered, but then he makes the final decisions because in the end he is responsible for the decision, he's the one who earns the money.

Ninni expressed her frustration with many Muslims, both born Muslims and others, who cannot differentiate between their culture and Islam when it comes to gender roles. She mentioned as an example that some ethnically oriented mosques will not offer prayer areas for women and justify it by saying that it is not appropriate in their culture for women to go to the mosque. Ninni believes that Islam has granted women their rights and that the problem is only with certain Muslims who do not follow what "Islam says":

I can't understand why they can't just leave the culture aside and see what Islam says and take it, because in Islam women have full power, full authority and value. It has been interesting to reflect that while people in Europe were still wondering whether a woman is even a person and if she has a soul, while she couldn't inherit anything and she was passed on from one man to another and she was just a pawn in the game, at the same time under Islam, in places where Islam was really practiced, she had the right to inheritance, she had power of speech at home, and she could complain to the caliph or some other leader if she was mistreated at home or something. Women have learned their obligations and rights under Islam long before any UN human rights conventions or such. Someone might think that we have quite traditional roles for men and women but it doesn't make me less valuable if I'm a housewife and I take care of the house and food, and it doesn't make me less valuable in the eyes of my husband either, he doesn't think that he's somehow better than me just because he brings money to the table.

The issues of child care and female scholarship were brought to discussion as well while talking about gender roles. Ninni had recently read a Facebook post written by a 'sister', as she put it, another Muslim woman, who had criticized the lack of female scholars of Islam caused by women not receiving help from their families that would enable them to study:

There are so few female scholars these days, and there has been a lot of critique on that from non-Muslims as well because in the early days of Islam there were a lot of female scholars, so where have they disappeared... women are not given the possibilities to learn, childcare and household help is not provided so that women could go to school or study. Of course there are families who do that, that even if a woman has children and she's married she can still study in a university... it was really nice the way she criticized how culture has messed up that which is rightful for women.

Ninni said that she has always been very close with her family and that her family has always in her words been accepting of “different things”. Her family took her conversion, along with her new attire, quite well. Even her atheist brother and her sister who is not religious in any way have taken it well. She has not faced any problems with her mother either even though her mother left Islam while Ninni herself became more religious.

Even though Ninni has not necessarily had problems with her mother or family, she confessed to feeling anxious about her family not being Muslims. It was somewhat implied the way that she approached the subject, that she herself feels responsible for not being active enough in *da'wa*, calling them to Islam.

Thinking about her family led Ninni to analyze her relationship with Finland and being Finnish. With regards to Islam, she said that being Finnish has probably made it easier for her to incorporate some Islamic values – such as recycling, protecting animals and the nature – to her practice of Islam because these values are already inherently Finnish. Whenever there is a conflict between Islam and anything else however, she would always choose the Islamic perspective, because being Muslim always comes before being Finnish. Ninni said that she has come to terms with being Finnish and that nowadays she is able to be proud of her Finnish background and that she has realized that it does not need to conflict with being Muslim. She has realized that she does not need to become or behave like Arabs or other born Muslims in order to be a good Muslim, but she can be Finnish. She explained that she no longer feels the need to be anything else than what she is: A Finnish Muslim. She continued on the topic of “becoming Arab”:

I don't know how many converts it has happened to but generally once you find Islam you tend to think that since many things are derived from Arab culture, you start wearing an abaya because of that, you start to like certain foods... or if you hang out with Somalis a lot then you may start to be influenced by the Somali culture. In the beginning it can be difficult to find the things in Finnish culture that are ok, that are Islamic as well. But I have found a respite, I don't have to have Arab curtains, I don't have to like all Arab foods or put those big carpets they have, I can decorate the way I want and wear the kinds of clothes that I like, and for example the clothes that I wear outside have been modified a lot on the way. I started wearing abayas because I thought that they are the easiest but I could easily wear Finnish clothes too, as long as they fill the requirements of being loose and so forth.

Ninni continued on the topic of clothing that if she was able to make her own clothes, she would like to for example make them from Marimekko⁶ textiles.

Ninni's contemplative practice consists of the five daily ritual prayers and *du'as*, non-ritual supplications to God. She reflected on how every prayer might be the last one and that although sometimes it is difficult to really take the time to pray, all prayers should be rendered with that awareness. The most common things that she asks for from God in her invocations are broader things such as praying for God to guide her life and the life of her family to the right direction, to help her raise her daughter right and to help her be useful to the community in a positive way so that it would be beneficial for her afterlife as well. Besides these larger themes, she might render an invocation asking for help with any seemingly mundane issue, as nothing is too small or worldly to bring to God. When God responds it strengthens her faith and proves that, in her own words, "the connection works". Her relationship with prayer and supplication displays how the practice of Islam touches everything in her life from the mundane to the sacred. For her, Islam is practical, intense, and all-encompassing, and she evaluates everything through an "Islam screen" as she herself put it.

Ninni is well aware of how she is perceived by the majority of Finns. She regrets that people think of her and other Muslims convert women like her as strange, strict and humorless people who have only become Muslim for their husbands. She perceives herself as the opposite of all that, as she often goes out with her family and friends, laughs, talks and jokes with people and appreciates sarcasm.

Ninni's journey of becoming Muslim has perhaps been quite unusual. She originally converted as a teenager with her mother, and only later on, in her early twenties, began to steer towards the stage of love/zealotry, where from the perspective of simply analyzing interpretation of religion she could still be placed. Ninni has nevertheless been disappointed with born Muslims the way all other informants have, and in the example given in this study, for the same reasons: women's rights and the inability of born Muslims to differentiate between Islam and culture.

⁶ Marimekko is a Finnish company focused on home furnishings, textiles and fashion that is particularly noted for its brightly colored, printed fabrics and simple styles, used both in women's garments and in home furnishings.

Ninni, in her late twenties, is still quite young and it would be impossible to draw lasting conclusions on her religious development from the interview. It appears however that in her case, as with Zeinab and Aminah, being disappointed with born Muslims is not necessarily followed by looking for alternate ways of interpreting Islam, or in other words, becoming more secular. If anything, Ninni's practice seems to have intensified over the years. It appears that in Ninni's case the stage of acceptance/maturity has meant coming to terms with her own cultural background and coming to the realization that she does not need to emulate Arab culture to be a 'real' Muslim. Accepting her roots as a part of who she is has allowed her to be proud of her own cultural background and even discover that there is overlap between Finnish and Islamic values.

In addition to the reconciliation between her own cultural background and being Muslim, Ninni's story bears a resemblance to Sultán's (1999, 334) analysis of how converts tend to separate Islam and culture. I find her case interesting for the idea of separating Islam and culture seems to have been a somewhat simultaneous process to her growing to appreciate her own cultural background. It seems that the compartmentalization of religion and culture that has followed the stage of disappointment has allowed her to see Finnish culture and cultures of born Muslims both belonging to the category of 'culture' as opposed to one culture being more Islamic than the other.

6.5 Erika

Erika's interest in Islam was sparked by her fascination with different countries and cultures when she was still in primary school. She was studying world religions in secondary school when she first learned about the five pillars of Islam. She described how she felt that Islam just made sense to her. When she was 16, she found a copy of a translation of the Quran on sale in a bookstore. Finding the Quran was when her journey towards becoming a Muslim really began. Erika spent years studying Islam and contemplating whether it was the right step for her to take before finally saying the shahada.

Erika said that she had always had a strong, direct relationship with God, even before her conversion to Islam, and that this relationship has remained the most essential part of her faith. "I feel supported by the greatest force", she phrased it. As she started to analyze her own religious development, she recounted the many things that have changed in her life after her conversion. Among many other things, Islam has made her travel a lot and meet

people from different traditions holding completely different views about life. According to Erika, Islam obligates believers to continue learning, to get to know other traditions as well. The moral imperative of continuous learning along with her experiences of meeting different people from different backgrounds has made believing in plurality an integral part of her faith:

God says in the Quran that “we created you into tribes and nations so that you would get to know one another”. There’s a divine reason for all our differences, and we’re here to overcome those differences, and whether it has to do with politics or the rights of women and gender relations or oppression of children or whatever, in all of this I see that it’s our obligation as human beings, a divine command, to get to know each other and establish justice according to the instructions God has given us. Whenever there’s so much struggling for justice somewhere in the world, it’s our obligation to learn about this and how we should respond to it and what we can do to advance their cause. That’s basically establishing God’s will on earth.

For Erika, perhaps the most political of the interviewees, social justice emerged as a concurring theme in the interview. Erika’s vision of Islam as a source of social justice was quite unique: she described herself as an anarchist Islamist who believes in a ‘spiritual caliphate’:

With Islam we have the obligation to only submit to God and follow his commands, and our own judgment about what his commands are, and for me this leads to something which is closer to anarchism than the kind of systems we have at the moment. That’s why I have a hard time believing that we need a caliph and we need to reestablish the caliphate, I think you can reestablish the caliphate only in your own life because the moment someone is imposing God’s law on you, it’s not anymore the things that God really asks us to do. The differences in interpretations are so huge that I think that the caliphate could be like a spiritual caliphate that will be reestablished and not a concrete country, because this nationalistic thinking has destroyed Muslims all over the world, and the Islamic state⁷ has the same nationalistic agenda which is very destructive.

As a part of the idea of anarchist Islamism, different groups of people who hold different beliefs would have different sets of rules to govern both their internal relations and the relations between the different groups. She draws the inspiration to this idea from the first Muslim community of Medina, where there were also Christians and Jews, and these different groups followed their own religious laws:

Nowadays we see a society where you don’t have two Muslims believing in the same way, it’s like we all have our own law, and that’s why I believe if we apply the same laws that governed Medina to this time, it will be that everyone, each and every individual, has their own set of laws.

⁷ Islamic state here refers to ISIS, ISIL or Daesh

This would lead to a fluid society, where people could choose to live with others who are practicing similar beliefs to their own. Every time the groups would need to interact with each other, there would be specific contracts to govern those interactions. Erika emphasized the importance of people having the right to choose:

No one should be forced to follow rules that they cannot accept on a deeper level, and I think by having this kind of society, you would have people fleeing away from extreme ideologies, because when you can choose between living in a place where someone is forcing you to do things that you don't want to do, and you have the freedom to go to another place and live happily with more, whatever, hippie-minded people... then by time, the extremist ideologies would die out... But I don't know how to, or if it's even possible to, or how it would be when we realize it in physical terms but I think it's worth a try.

Erika believes that when given freedom and the power to decide about one's own life, people would naturally gravitate towards what is 'right'. This line of thought closely brings to mind Salih's (2004) informant who was mentioned in relation to Maria's feelings of not belonging, according to whom Islam is "a 'natural' and 'open' religion which intimately suggests to the individual what is correct" (Salih 1004-1005).

The 'spiritual caliphate' itself would not be a concrete state or swathe of land but rather a group of people who "got it right":

There's this hadith that Islam will be divided into 73 sects and only one of them will be saved from hellfire. I don't believe that this is concretely 73 different groups of Muslims, I think it's maybe 73 different types of believers and so it doesn't mean that one group like the Salafists are the ones who will be saved but it's one type of believer, we don't know exactly who that is, but they're the ones who got it right. And so I would say the same thing, that the spiritual caliph would be that group of people who are on the right path, I don't know how they would be connected but maybe on a spiritual level they're on the same plane, so maybe they're not even meeting each other in this life.

It was clear that to Erika Islam provides a strong ethical framework that should be implemented into practice to promote global social justice. She explained having thought of her post-graduation employment and future career choices a lot, and expressed a strong need to work for an organization whose values she could share, and an equally strong unwillingness to work for one whose values she would not find herself in alignment with. To look at it from the perspective of her anarchist Islamism, she would not want to abide by the rules of a group whose beliefs she did not share.

Erika has gone through different stages in her faith, and in the beginning of her conversion she was drawn to a more conservative current. It did not take her long to realize that it was not for her, and she has been developing her own ideas and interpretations freely for

years. Erika has been disappointed with the neo-fundamentalist current that has become so influential in the Finnish Muslim community, and with the views of the majority when it comes to gender roles and for instance the issue of polygamy.

According to Erika, when it comes to gender roles in general, the only thing that cannot be changed or denied is that women will be the ones giving birth and women will be the ones breastfeeding. Apart from that, all the roles in society are negotiable, as during the time of the Prophet there were women working as soldiers, nurses, business women et cetera. Erika added that the Quran even says that if the parents decide, the mother does not have to breastfeed her baby but the parents can give the baby to another woman to breastfeed and she will be compensated for her work:

It says in the Quran really clearly that a mother should not be burdened by her baby, and the man should not be burdened by his baby, and when they want they can give away the baby to be breastfed by someone else. The man has to pay for their food and clothing during that time, it's very clear that what God is aiming for is establishing justice and making it as easy as possible for both of them. I think in those times also, I mean in that kind of society, kids were raised by the whole village, so it wasn't so that the woman would sit in her house taking care of her kids all day, but kids would be running around everywhere, she would walk around with babies and that's how I imagine it, and you can see also that the Prophet was hanging out with his kids, and I think that we can justify Islamically equal responsibilities for family and equal responsibilities in the society for men and women. And men should provide that opportunity for women to engage in society. If you don't help them out, if you burden them, if you let the kids be a burden for women, which God has prohibited, that's when you create an unequal society, and that's what we have seen in the Muslim community.

Bearing in mind that Erika has been very disappointed with the conservative current in the Finnish Muslim community, it was particularly fascinating to notice that two women with rather different interpretations on many other things that would easily lead the observer to place them on different ends of the spectrum, Ninni and Erika, shared opinions on child care and women's education. Both were quite passionate in their opinion that women should be given the opportunity to acquire learning, and that arranging child care is an important facilitating aspect of that.

The hijab can be seen as an indicator of the different stages of interpretation that Erika has gone through. Erika did not put on the scarf right after her conversion, but started wearing it some years later while living in a Muslim country. She described her interpretation of Islam at that time as more conservative, which had something to do with the people that she was in close contact with. After returning to Finland however, she

gave up wearing the headscarf, as her interpretation of the necessity of wearing it had changed:

It is over-emphasized. Muslim women should distinguish themselves as respectable women, by not trying to flatter men or other women with their dress and behavior, and I think that's the message that I get from the Quran's verses which are about women, that basically there are other qualities in us that we should bring forward, like trying to follow the behavior of Prophet Mohammed. It's not so much about having the scarf on your head, in Muslim style, so that people will recognize that you are one of those people, you're Muslim. It's about just being recognized as a respectful human being, who's not trying to draw attention by your looks but just trying to be a decent human being, that's all we have to do. I think the way that hijab is functioning these days is not really about that anymore, it's more about this clan behavior. And I mean women in hijab are not more modest in their behavior or how they enhance their looks than non-Muslims, so that's one of the reasons why I don't wear hijab anymore. Maybe also because while I was wearing the headscarf I felt like I'm focusing too much on how I look, because I draw a lot of looks in Europe while I wear it, so I feel like everyone is watching me so I have to look nice, but when I took it off, it's like I'm invisible again, and I don't have to focus on my looks.

I asked her what she meant by saying that there is too much emphasis on the hijab nowadays, to which she replied, that people don't believe that you are a 'real Muslim' if you are not wearing the headscarf, and that especially as a convert other Muslims tend not to take you seriously. They would think that a convert not wearing the scarf does not know anything:

People assume that by reading those Quran verses and reading the *ahadith* concerning hijab that as a Muslim one is supposed to accept it as a divine truth that this is what you have to do, you have to dress like an Arab. After really reading with the intention to understand, and after I have worn the hijab for three years, I still cannot say that I am convinced that I have to cover my hair. People see it as a complete lack of faith, some would say that I am not Muslim because I lack this understanding for the importance of hijab. Definitely it shouldn't be considered as one of the main pillars of Islam but unfortunately that's how they treat it... or many, not all.

Erika was very self-aware in analyzing how her own background and personality have affected her faith. She said that when anyone converts to Islam they have their cultural beliefs and morals that they bring with them. In her own case, she does not believe that she has changed that much on a deeper level. Erika credited her anti-authoritarian attitude and spirit of free and critical thinking to her own cultural background, especially when comparing it to immigrant communities who according to her like to follow religious authorities.

Like many other informants, Erika too made the remark that it is imperative to have patience and mercy on yourself, because no one is ever a 'complete Muslim'. What counts

is waking up every day with the intention that with her actions she will try to adjust to the will of God. “Some days we manage to be Muslims and some days we don’t”, she concluded.

For Erika being Muslim means adapting her life to her beliefs and applying that to her dealings with people and all her choices. She described her process of becoming Muslim as slightly unusual, as she proceeded very slowly, spending six years just thinking about converting. She said that there have been some ups and downs in her faith but that she still has the feeling that she has been proceeding forward all the time. At the time of the interview she had been focusing more on learning the Quran and on taking up some difficult questions that she had been, in her own words, “putting under the table” for a long time.

Erika has gone through several phases in her faith that seem to have led her to the stage of maturity/acceptance. She is processing her disappointment in how Muslims have not been able to bring about the social justice and equality that Islam calls for by delving deeper into her faith and exploring different ways of being Muslim and interpreting the Quran. Contemplation and interactions with different people have led her to further appreciate plurality, and to see it as something that does not necessarily have to divide us but that can help bring us closer to understanding each other, to get to know one another like God has commanded.

6.6 Asma

Asma who has been Muslim for a quarter century, initially got interested in Islam after watching a TV-program about a Swedish Muslim. She started to find out more about the religion, and soon realized that she shared similar values to those purported by Islam. This led her to study Islam further. Eventually it was the Quran that convinced her of the message of Islam, as she was so convinced by the Muslim holy book she thought it could only have come from God.

Asma, who has been Muslim for a longer period of time than anyone else I interviewed, saw different phases and levels of intensity in her faith and in her practice of Islam. Throughout the ebbs and flows she has always maintained her belief in the oneness of God and that things happen for a reason – a theme that came up as an important tenet of faith in almost all the interviews. She described herself as having been “a bit of a

fundamentalist” in the beginning of her conversion, as she had tried to be a “perfect Muslim” in every way. She saw a connection between her personal life and her overt religiousness in the beginning, as it was the strictness of her religious practice that kept her going through her divorce. While Asma’s interpretation of Islam mellowed through the years, she experienced a crisis in her faith later in life which led her to question many things not just in the Muslim community but in Islam itself. For Asma, gender equality has become a central source of discontent with regards to how gender roles are perceived in the Finnish Muslim community. She feels that the Finnish Muslim community is patriarchal and that Muslim men intend to keep it that way:

Men shouldn’t think that they’re better than women. I think the reason that women’s position is still so much worse than men’s is that we have these men who feel that they have to hold on to their power because they really don’t have any other justification for it than that they are men. It is not a good argument in my opinion because they don’t even learn how to function in Finland, many of them can’t get jobs... so it feels like they have to hold on to their power as men here because if they let go of that, then they wouldn’t have anything... maybe they think that it’s their God given right... but I think the problem is just in their low self-esteem.

She was also lamenting the conservative wave that has taken over Finland’s political climate, and that the Finnish society in general has gone backwards in some things when it comes to gender equality, even when there has been a lot of progress:

I am a youth of the generation that thought that women need to have more, women didn’t have so much back then as they have now. Now that women have more than they used to have, I feel that they’re completely lost with what to do with that freedom.

With regards to interpreting religious texts, it has been the patriarchal readings of the Quran that Asma has had difficulties dealing with. She explained having read all the possible explanations to the verse 4:34⁸, and how hearing the patriarchal interpretations of the verse still insult her as a woman.

⁸ Here is Yusuf Ali’s translation of the famous verse, cited from the website The Quranic Arabic Corpus: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).”

She expressed similar feelings talking about how hadiths that are not even classified as belonging to the category of *sahih*, are being used against women. Asma said that she has experienced feelings of frustration and exasperation while processing her disappointment in the prevailing interpretations that are in violation of the general Quranic spirit of equality.

Continuing on the topic of religious texts, Asma said that she takes hadiths with a grain of salt as they have been written centuries after the death of the Prophet, and due to the fact that some of them are not only conflicting each other but the Quran as well. She added that she is often frustrated with the way some Muslims have a habit of saying “the Quran says...”, without having any knowledge on whether they are actually quoting the Quran, hadiths, or nothing at all.

As already implied in her comments about gender, the interview with Asma centered around the theme of the Finnish Muslim community perhaps more than with the other informants. Asma expressed her disappointment in the way the Finnish Muslim community is plagued by tensions and infighting. She offered the explanation that many people who convert to a religion do so because they already have problems, and that furthermore, many women have foreign spouses who have problems integrating to the society, finding employment et cetera.

In connection with gender and the Finnish Muslim community, Asma talked about her difficult relationship with the headscarf. She has been wearing it since her conversion for almost a quarter century, but for the past four years she has been considering taking it off. When she first converted, wearing the scarf was a very religious act for her. It was an explicit marker of her desire to follow God’s orders. In the years following her conversion however, she has started to reconsider the choice of wearing the headscarf. She said that she has not been able to make a decision about whether or not to wear it, and that both the Finnish society and the Muslim community have been big factors in her indecisiveness:

In Islam the idea is that we should not draw attention to ourselves, but in Finland you draw attention to yourself with it [the headscarf] and I have been dressed modestly wearing what I wear even without the scarf... I do not have to wear the scarf for the Muslim community, do I? My habits do not have to change with taking off the scarf but it would still be a big deal, almost bigger than putting the scarf on my head the first time... I just wouldn’t want to explain what I am doing to everyone, like if I leave the house

without the scarf then some neighbor will comment that “oh, you’re no longer wearing the scarf, so you finally took it off”, I don’t want to listen to that, it’s my own business.

As with her disappointment in the lack of understanding for gender equality, Asma’s battle with the veil conveys her frustration with the Muslim community in Finland: the pressure to conform on the other hand, and the unwillingness to do so that makes it difficult to fit in.

Asma’s story perhaps best reflects the nature of conversion as a process, as she has been Muslim longer than any of the other informants interviewed for this study. She has come to struggle with feelings of disappointment that stem from the state of the Muslim community, especially with regards to how women and gender are perceived and how Islam is being used to subjugate women by some Muslim men. Looking at her situation through Roald’s process theory, it appears that she has not been able to find a way to reach acceptance with regards to her disappointment in the Muslim community and certain patriarchal readings of Islam, although she has herself explored a plethora of different interpretations. Asma continues to negotiate what being Muslim and practicing Islam mean for her in every day life and how to position herself in both the Muslim community and Finnish society at large. Her story further convinced me that the process of becoming more liberal in one’s interpretation of religion does not necessarily go hand in hand with Roald’s stages of acceptance and secularization.

6.7 Sanna

Sanna converted to Islam as a teenager. She first came into contact with Islam through her father, whom she described as a very racist, narrow-minded person, whose negative ideas about Islam and Muslims shaped her worldview from an early age. Her interest in Islam grew with refugees settling in her hometown, and as she started to find out more about Islam on her own:

The more I got to know it [Islam], to know people [Muslims], the more natural it started to feel, and my previous negative ideas about the religion faded away. It started to feel like my thing. I am by nature the kind of a person who doesn’t like to go out or drink alcohol or to have promiscuous relationships or things like that. I am conservative in that way although I have not been consciously brought up to be so.

All of her friends being Twelver Shia, it was natural for her to convert to that branch of Islam as well. Sanna was not in her own words even really conscious that there were two different branches of Islam when she first converted. Nowadays she feels saddened with

how Sunnism has established itself as the mainstream version of Islam that appears normative even to non-Muslims. Sanna explained how logical thinking is important to her, and how in hindsight one of the reasons why Shi'ism was more appealing to her, is the heritage of Platonic philosophy that is more discernible in Shi'ism than in Sunnism.

Sanna's conversion to Islam has been closely tied with her experience of being identified with foreigners by her peers in her home town, and shadowed by her difficult relationship with her Islamophobic father. When Sanna started dating her current spouse and told her father that she is going to leave home, their relationship started breaking down. One day the situation led to an indefinite rift between the two, after which she has only spoken to her father twice. She said that she has never really discussed her conversion with the rest of her family, and that her mother and sister have never asked her about it. "It has become a part of me and they accept it", she said, "I have never felt the need to talk about it, maybe it's a part of the general Finnish attitude towards religion that you don't go around shouting your religious beliefs to anyone". She explained that she sees religion as something private, not just in her own life but in general as well:

I think that religion is everyone's private matter, and when you try to turn it into a paradigm that would cover everything, I think that is an insult to religious freedom. I'll say it directly, the idea of religion as an institution is alien to me, because there is this idea that there are people who wield authority over other people, and I don't like that at all. There's nothing wrong which religions per se, but when it comes to people trying to control other people through religion, that I don't like at all.

She added that she does not judge anyone on the basis of their religion, and she does not think that someone will go to hell because they hold different religious beliefs from hers. She expressed the same notion of plurality when talking about who can be considered a Muslim, and deduced that no one else can define that but the believer him/herself. Talking about validity of beliefs, Sanna said that she finds great comfort in that sharia is something that only God has definitive knowledge of, and that what we call sharia is actually *fiqh*, interpretation of sharia.

Sanna credited much of her method of interpreting Islam to both her academic education and her being a Finn. She described her views as liberal and modern. One of her thoughts was that there are plenty of things in the Quran that are bound to the society of seventh century Arabia, ideas that were modern at their time and worked well in the past but that are no longer applicable in today's society. According to her Muslims should primarily go to the Quran for universal moral principles, not to look for instructions on laying out

the details of everyday life. She said that although Shias are generally required to follow the opinions of a certain religious authority, a *marja* ‘, she does not have one and she does not see it as necessary.

Sanna said that she feels that she is a Finnish Muslim, very much so because of her ideas on gender equality that are not, according to her, shared by many born Muslims:

Equality means exactly, that giving birth is the only thing at this point that belongs exclusively to women because science hasn't yet advanced so far, but otherwise tasks can't be divided to men's tasks and women's tasks in my opinion. I see it more as a sign of an agrarian society that the man goes to work and takes care of matters outside the home, and then the woman is a home maker twiddling within the four walls... I see it as very restrictive and I think that we should get rid of those roles. A person can't always know, even if they're physically male or female, if you are such on the inside, if you feel like you belong in that particular gender. That's why I believe in a gender neutral upbringing for children, so that if one day in the future we will have children, I won't bring them up so that there's girls stuff and boy's stuff.

Despite her liberal and feminist views on gender, Sanna follows rather conservative rules in her own life when it comes to the issue of interacting with members of the opposite sex. While she does not have a problem collaborating with men at work for example, she tries to keep all connection to a minimum. Sanna observes the practice of hijab both by following a moral code in her dealings with the opposite sex and by donning the headscarf. She usually wears a loosely draped scarf with a bit of hair showing underneath the fabric paired with modest, loose attire. She described her ‘spiritual hijab’ as following:

For me the hijab is not a piece of clothing, it's about how I behave, how I represent my faith through body language. I don't have a problem working with or talking to men, but I don't want to show any kind of sexual interest or anything like that, so I remove anything indicative of that sort of thing from my behavior. The scarf is primarily just a piece of clothing, because it feels like overt hypocrisy to me to want to... or I feel that people want to brag about wearing these kinds of overly long clothes. I like the Sufi idea that ... you don't show your faith to outsiders, that you wear flamboyant clothing on the outside, underneath which you have a shabby shirt made of a sack.

For her the issue of clothing was not just about her, but her husband had his own views of what is and is not appropriate clothing for a Muslim woman. She described having had several conversations with him on the subject, and that she had managed to justify her personal style with her own interpretation of the Quran.

Sanna described her own religious transition so that she has become more knowledgeable through the years, and she no longer believes things so easily but wants to go directly to the textual sources herself. As an example she mentioned having had to learn to pray

several times because people have told her that she is doing it wrong. Eventually she had realized that people have different practices even within the same family, and that even if the basic actions are the same, some words might be different. In the same vein she explained having had long conversations with her husband about religious interpretation, and having explained to him on several occasions how there are different ways to interpret the Quran.

Being Muslim has brought Sanna safety and security, and she described Islam as both a source of inner peace and as a lifestyle. Islam has given her life structure and a sense of control. Since she does not spend much time with other Muslims, her relationship with her husband is particularly important in how she navigates Islam as a lifestyle. Instead of blindly following him or anyone else for that matter, she has chosen to make her own decisions based on the Quran.

Apart from her difficult relationship with her father, Sanna seems to have formulated a balance between different aspects of her religious life. Her views on religion as something private along with her deep need to explain things with reason and to look to religion for general moral principles instead of detailed guidance are reminiscent of Roald's stage of secularization. She does however describe Islam as a lifestyle, which Roald sees as a feature of the first three stages.

Sanna's disappointment, unlike that of the other informants, has been more targeted towards the world seeing only one side of Islam as legitimate than at the Finnish Muslim community. She and her husband avoid being involved in the local Muslim communities, because the Shia community in Finland is very small, and therefore being involved in it would according to her mean risking unnecessary drama and gossip, things that her and her husband do not want to be a part of.

Being Shia Sanna is a minority within a minority, as she does not only have to deal with the bewilderment of the majority society, but with being treated as an adherent of a sect of Islam that is, if not outright heretical, then at least considered less legitimate by most Muslims in Finland.

7. Conclusions and discussion

In the introduction of this thesis I put forward the following research questions: How does religious interpretation develop after conversion to Islam? Can this development be categorized into stages? Is there a Finnish Islam that converts are contributing to? I will begin the discussion with the issues of religious interpretation and Finnish Islam, and conclude with remarks on the applicability of Roald's process theory.

As seen in the previous chapter, there is deep diversity in how Islam is practiced, experienced and interpreted among the informants interviewed for this thesis, which is possibly the case with Finnish Muslim convert women in general. It appears that the differences stem from the personalities of the converts and the values that converts bring to their faith and choose to emphasize in their lives. For some of the informants Islam is more all-encompassing, more practical, acting as a general guideline for life. For others, there is more space for personal interpretation. What is noteworthy is that different views exist and are considered equally Islamic by their proponents.

It must be noted that diversity in interpretation and the idea of Islam as an all-encompassing life guide are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as in the case of Sanna, whose interpretation and practice of Islam seem ostensibly to be in conflict. She wears the hijab but sees it as non-essential, she is married and adheres to rather strict rules of not interacting with men other than her husband and family members, but sees essentialist gender roles as obsolete.

Many interviewees referred to Islam as a lifestyle, not just a religion, something Roald refers to as an attribute of the first three stages in her process theory. Although the idea of Islam as a lifestyle was not brought up by everyone, it was quite clear that even for those with a liberal, pluralistic interpretation, Islam is something that needs to be practiced. It is not just a philosophy or a way to make sense of the world but for the informants of this study, Islam is something that materializes in prayer, dhikr, religious dress and in interactions with other people, among many other things. The idea of Islam as something that is practiced also shows in the way the informants speak of their becoming Muslim: for example, Ninni and Aminah both see a clear difference between saying the shahada and actually incorporating Islam as a practice into their lives. Maria described that during a time in her life when she did not pray, she felt herself drifting

away from religion and God, which made her realize that Islam must be practiced in order to preserve the priorities that give life a deeper meaning.

The differences between the informants, perhaps not surprisingly, were most clearly evident in how they perceived gender roles. All women think that Islam offers gender equality and that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. How that is done in practice differs. While some held very liberal, feminist understandings of gender, others felt that there are rules that God has set for men and women and that these rules are not subject to personal interpretation. Some informants believed it is culture that has complicated the bliss that could be achieved if Islam was practiced correctly, while some thought that Islam has been interpreted in a disadvantageous way for women and that in order to restore the balance, holy texts need to be reinterpreted.

It is interesting to note that this difference between interpretations of gender also reflects the way that the interviewees approached religion in general: The ones with an idea of gender as a fixed category more or less subscribed to the idea of ‘one true Islam’, a vision of an authentic Islam that is unchangeable and not subject to personal interpretation. The ones with a more fluid understanding of gender tended to speak of plurality and re-evaluating interpretations of Islam. This more inclusive vision of Islam was conveyed by those who reported not fitting in the mainstream Sunni ideology. While this may not be a surprising observation, it must be noted that the sample of informants in this study is too small to draw any lasting conclusions on the subject.

Having observed things that set the informants apart, what are the things that unite them? In terms of a personal relationship with God, there seems to be a lot of common denominators. A yearning for direct union with God, inner peace that comes with trusting that everything, good or bad, happens for a reason, and a sense of comfort that follows the realization that only God is truly in charge. All informants agreed upon the importance of the daily prayers, no matter what the individual reasoning behind the practice.

In all of the interviews it became clear that freedom – personal and religious – were things that the women valued greatly. From Erika’s Islamist anarchist utopia where different groups of people would be able to live according to their own laws, to Ninni’s tenacity in defending her right to wear the niqab and Sanna’s dislike of religious authorities, freedom to live life according to one’s own voice of conscience while respecting that of others was brought up in all interviews.

It can be argued that conversion to Islam does not mean and did not mean a break from the past. Leila Ahmed (1992, 86) argues that in the course of history different traditions, mores and values were intermingled with Islamic ones, and that Islam was interpreted and understood from the premises of the cultures of origin. The renowned historian Richard Bulliet (1979, 2) arrived at similar conclusions:

Non-Arab converts and their descendants made contributions in every area of cultural life under the aegis of Islamic rule, and the customs and outlook of the non-Arab peoples in general became accommodated in various ways within the developing institutions of the Islamic state and religion.

The same idea is held among many others by Anna Mansson McGuinty (2002) in her theory of cognitive recognition and cognitive reconciling with regards to modern day Muslim converts. Islam does not necessarily change a person's values, but rather it seems to enforce those that are already there: the underlying, existing values that converts have are given an "Islamic coat layer" so to speak.

The interviewees that had a more pluralistic, inclusive interpretation of Islam, namely Erika, Maria, Sanna and Asma, were more eager to see their own cultural background affecting their interpretation of Islam, whereas the rest were more emphatic of differentiating between culture and religion. Maria and Sanna said that Western scholarship on Islam has affected their thinking, and both said that in likeness to most Finns, they view religion as something private that is not generally discussed with people.

When asked whether Islam has had an effect on their 'Finnishness', the informants did generally recognize a process of identity-negotiation. All of the interviewees had much respect for their country and for many aspects of its culture: the ones that came up in several interviews were the Finnish attitude towards nature and animals, the social welfare system and the general trustworthiness and honesty of Finnish people. None of the women saw the two identities, 'Finnish' and 'Muslim' as mutually exclusive or competing. However, most interviewees stated that being Muslim is more important than any national identity. In fact, the whole idea of national identity did not seem that important to the informants. This idea might have already been in place before conversion to Islam, but it can be suggested that the global, non-nationalistic nature of modern day Islamic movements and of the global umma that transcends national differences, has had an effect on how national identity is viewed as well.

Isra Lehtinen (2004) writes that converts do not lose their identity as Finns despite their conversion to Islam, a religion perceived foreign by many Finns. Although they do not lose their identity as Finns, converts often feel like outsiders in the Finnish society. Lehtinen (2004, 239) explains this feeling of being an outsider with the negative media image of Islam and with the actions of some deranged Muslims. According to Lehtinen (2004, 239-240) it is also difficult for Muslims to cross certain boundaries in the society, to gain influence and to be seen as equals: “A Finnish Muslim holds a special status. At best he/she can act as a bridge-builder between the society and immigrant Muslims...often he/she is left somewhere between these two groups, into thin air.”

It is apparent that Muslim converts face controversies not only with the broader society but with the Muslim communities in their respective countries. The biggest source of confrontations from the point of view of converts seems to be the inability and/or unwillingness of immigrant Muslims to differentiate between religion and culture (see for example Bourque 2006, Månsson 2002, Roald 2006, Roald 2012, Sultán 1999). Muslim converts seem to feel that they do not fully belong neither in the Muslim community of their area nor in the majority society.

Muslim converts of Finnish background are at the center of this intersection. Not being accepted as fully Finnish by their country men and women due to their conversion to Islam, and in the case of non-conformity to the ‘Muslim standard’, not accepted as fully Muslim either due to their unorthodox views that often relate to issues of gender equality and the interpretation of Muslim texts, their contribution to both Finnish and Islamic culture and the Finnish Islamic culture could potentially be significant.

The Finnish Islam, or the Finnish Muslim community, at least based on the small sample of this thesis, seems to be rather exclusive and conservative in its interpretation of Islam. The informants with more liberal views on Islam expressed a lot of disappointment in the Finnish Muslim community, whereas the ones with a more conservative, traditional interpretation seemed to have found their place in the Finnish community. It would not be accurate to say that there is only one Muslim community in Finland, as there are in fact thousands of Muslims from different cultural backgrounds representing a plethora of understandings of what it means to be Muslim. Yet the informants interviewed for this study seemed to have some kind of abstract idea of what it means to speak of the Finnish Muslim community. Many for example named certain mosques that represent that

community, and it became quite clear in the interviews that the Finnish Muslim community was something you either did or did not belong to. The informants who felt that their interpretation of Islam differs from the generally accepted ideas of the Finnish Muslim community constituted a narrow majority in this study. This probably has something to do with my advertisement calling for converts from different backgrounds with diverse interpretations of Islam, which may itself have attracted more converts who feel that they do not fit in the Finnish Muslim community. Despite the aforementioned “diversity bias” and the sample of interviewees being very small, this finding leads me to believe that the amount of unorthodox and liberal Muslim convert interpreters of Islam in Finland must be higher than many, including such converts themselves, imagine it to be.

All the women said that they feel that they are part of a global Muslim community, and many said that they would feel closer to any Muslim than to a non-Muslim. It is interesting that this feeling of global connectedness does not translate to a local scale. It forces to ask the question of whether the idea of a global umma that includes all Muslims only exists on the plane of thought. Maybe it would be more appropriate in some cases to talk about networks of Muslims instead of a Muslim community or even Muslim communities.

With regards to Roald’s theory of post-conversion stages, it proved to be a useful tool in analyzing the religious development of the informants, albeit I must disagree with certain aspects of the theory. I found it rather easy to observe her first two stages in the narratives of most interviewees, and the theme of being disappointed with born Muslims was repeated in every interview I conducted. It was in the third and fourth stages where I had to rethink her theory, however I had some other concerns as well.

Roald (2006, 48) writes that in “converting to Islam, there is a total shift of “cultural truths” “. This total shift of cultural truths is, according to Roald, an important aspect of the stage of love/zealotry. As observed earlier however, I have come to a different conclusion in this thesis: that more often than not, converts do not change their values and ideas fundamentally upon conversion to Islam but rather connect their own pre-existing values with Islamic ones.

Many informants reported having been stricter and less forgiving towards themselves in the beginning of their conversion, but having later realized that no one can ever become a ‘perfect Muslim’, and that becoming Muslim is actually a work in progress. This is

essentially the same idea of conversion as a process proposed by Roald, even if arrived at from a different perspective.

The stage of disappointment, mostly with other Muslims, was evident in all interviews. On the basis of this study I would like to emphasize my view that the following third stage that Roald calls acceptance/maturity, does not necessarily lead to secularization.

The problem with Roald's fourth stage in my opinion, at least in the scope of this thesis, is that it equates religious development with secularization. Take Aminah as an example: her ideas on how Islam should be interpreted have not necessarily changed much throughout the years, but it has been her every day life that has changed. She described having become more merciful and forgiving towards herself, as did Zeinab. It would be wrong to assume that these women have stayed on the same stage of religious development. From my perspective, one of the aspects of religious development in their lives has been a process of adjusting their expectations of how much they themselves can embody the perceived 'Islamic ideals' on one hand, and on the other hand, dealing with their disappointment in the Muslim community by a recommitment to the idea of one unchangeable Islam.

Setting aside the word 'secularization', one can approach Roald's fourth stage simply as a stage of enhanced individuality in interpretation. When looked at from this perspective, Maria, Sanna, Erika and Asma are perhaps closest to Roald's last stage. Maria rejects the idea of secularization as a virtue in itself, Sanna refers to Islam as a way of life despite her liberal and pluralistic thinking, and neither Erika nor Asma seem to pick and choose only the parts of Islam that appeal to them, but both are going through a demanding process of reconciliation between their own ideals and those purported by mainstream interpretations of Islam. In conclusion, I would rather not speak of secularization but perhaps just individualization. Then again, when brought under scrutiny, the whole fourth stage in my opinion seems more like an issue of ideological interpretation, not religious development, unless one accepts as a fact that religious development will eventually lead to secularization.

In conclusion, in the context of this study I see only three stages that are applicable in the case of all informants: commitment to Islam, whether it comes in the form of love, zealotry or both, disappointment, and finally the reaction to that disappointment. This leads me to the ideas of Madeleine Sultán (1999), according to whom the conflicts or

disappointments are usually related to the inability of born Muslims to separate culture from religion, and gender roles, issues that were behind the disappointment of the informants of this study as well. Sultán (1999) suggests that the disappointments faced by converts are either dismissed altogether or put into a new context in a process she calls reformulation. This reformulation process seems to open up a necessary process of internal dialogue for the convert to discover what kind of Islam she wants to practice, whether it means a renewed commitment to a certain interpretation of Islam or a widening of the convert's perspective that leads to exploring different ideas of what it means to be Muslim. I believe that it is the reactionary phase, whether one calls it maturity, acceptance or reformulation, with which 'becoming Muslim' truly begins.

List of references

Ahmed, Leila 1992. *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Allievi, Stefano 2006. "The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and Other Issues". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 120-149.

Allievi, Stefano 2002. "Converts and the Making of European Islam". *ISIM Newsletter* 11, pp. 1 and 26. Available at: <http://www.stefanoallievi.it/2002/11/converts-and-the-making-of-european-islam/> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Bourque, Nicole 2006. "How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 233-249.

Bulliet Richard 1979. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Drisko, James W. and Maschi, Tina 2016. *Content Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Galletta, Anne 2013. *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Geertz, Clifford 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Grillo, Ralph 2004. "Islam and Transnationalism". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30(5), pp. 861-878. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183042000245589> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Haataja Anne 2010. *Suomalaiset muslimisiskot - Kokemuksia "kulttuurien välissä"*. Master's thesis. University of Tampere. Available at:

<https://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/81636/gradu04343.pdf?sequence=1>

[Accessed 8.1.2017]

Jaakkola, Magdalena 2009. *Maahanmuuttajat suomalaisten näkökulmasta: Asennemuutokset 1987-2007*. City of Helsinki Urban Facts Research Series 1/2009.

Available

at:

http://www.hel.fi/hel2/Tietokeskus/julkaisut/pdf/09_02_19_Tutkimus_Jaakkola.pdf

[Accessed 8.1.2017]

Juntunen Marko 2008. "Eurooppalaisen islamin järjestäytyminen ja auktoriteettien hajaantuminen". In: T. Martikainen, T. Sakaranaho and M. Juntunen, ed., *Islam suomessa: Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, 1st ed. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, pp. 37-61.

Kouros, Kristiina 2007. *Suomessa asuvien muslimien suhtautumisesta perhelainsäädäntöön*. Ihmisoikeusliitto. Available

at:

[https://ihmisoikeusliitto.fi/wp-](https://ihmisoikeusliitto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Suomessa_asuvien_muslimien_suhtautumisesta_perhearvoihin_ja_perhelainsaadantoon_IOL_2007.pdf)

[content/uploads/2014/05/Suomessa asuvien muslimien suhtautumisesta perhearvoihin ja perhelainsaadantoon_IOL_2007.pdf](https://ihmisoikeusliitto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Suomessa_asuvien_muslimien_suhtautumisesta_perhearvoihin_ja_perhelainsaadantoon_IOL_2007.pdf) [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Ketola Kimmo 2011. "Suomalaisten uskonnollinen suvaitsevaisuus". In: K. Ketola, K. Niemelä and H. Palmu, *Uskonto suomalaisten elämässä. Uskonnollinen kasvatus, moraalit, onnellisuus ja suvaitsevaisuus kansainvälisessä vertailussa*. Tampere: Yhteiskuntatieteellinen tietoaarkisto, Tampereen yliopisto. Available

at:

http://www.fsd.uta.fi/fi/julkaisut/julkaisusarja/FSDjs09_uskonto.pdf

[Accessed

8.1.2017]

Lehtinen, Isra 2004. "Suomalaiset muslimit: käännyttäiset tai islamiin palanneet". In: K. Kouros and S. Villa, ed., *Ihmisoikeudet ja islam*, 1st ed. Helsinki: Like, pp. 236-245.

Leinonen, Kaisa Karoliina 2014. *Neuvottelu suomalaisuudesta islamiin kääntyneiden naisten blogikirjoituksissa*. Master's thesis. University of Helsinki. Available

at:

https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/137628/Leinonen_Sosiologia.pdf?sequence=1 [Accessed 8.1.2017]

- Leitzinger, Antero 2015. "Suomen tataarien islam". In: J. Maristo and A. Sergejeff, ed., *Aikamme monta islamia*, 1st ed. Tallinna: Gaudeamus, pp. 269-285.
- Mansson McGuinty, Anna 2006. *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Martikainen, Tuomas 2008. "Muslimit suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa". In: T. Martikainen, T. Sakaranaho and M. Juntunen, ed., *Islam suomessa: Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, 1st ed. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, pp. 62-84.
- Mernissi, Fatima 1985. *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*. London: Al Saqi Books 1985, Rev. ed.
- Månsson, Anna 2002. *Becoming Muslim: Meanings of Conversion to Islam*. Lund: Lund University.
- Östberg, Sissel 2000. "Islamic Nurture and Identity Management: The Lifeworld of Pakistani Children in Norway." *British Journal of Religious Education*, 22(2), pp. 91-103
Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0141620000220204>
[Accessed 8.1.2017]
- Quinn, Naomi 2005. "Introduction". In: N. Quinn, ed., *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*, 1st ed. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 1-34.
- Rambo, Lewis 1993. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rambo, Lewis 1999. "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change". *Social Compass* 46(3), pp. 259-271. Available at: <http://scp.sagepub.com/content/46/3/259> [Accessed 8.1.2017]
- Roald, Anne Sofie 2006. "The Shaping of a Scandinavian "Islam": Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 48-70.

Roald, Anne Sofie 2012. "The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century". *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23(3), pp. 347-362. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.676782> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Roy, Olivier 2004. *Globalized Islam: The search for a new ummah*. London: Hurst.

Sakaranaho, Tuula 2008. "Arabian aavikoilta Helsingin lähiöihin: Suomalaisen islamin tutkimuksen näkökulmia". In: T. Martikainen, T. Sakaranaho and M. Juntunen, ed., *Islam suomessa: Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, 1st ed. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, pp. 11-36.

Salih, Ruba 2004. "The Backward and the New: National, Transnational and Post-National Islam in Europe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30(5), pp. 995-1011. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183042000245660> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Sipilä, Suvi 2012. *Islam, identiteetti ja naiseuden tuottaminen suomalaisten musliminaisten blogeissa*. Master's thesis. University of Tampere. Available at: <https://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/83795/gradu06083.pdf?sequence=1> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Sultán, Madeleine 1999. "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts". *Social Compass*, 46(3), pp. 325-335. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003776899046003008> [Accessed 8.1.2017]

Susman, Warren I. 1979. "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture". In: J. Higham and P. K. Conkin, ed., *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 212-226.

van Nieuwkerk, Karin 2006. "Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 1-16.

Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika 2006. "Symbolizing Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 71-92

Yazbeck Haddad, Yvonne 2006. "The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam". In: K. van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 19-47.

Websites

Finnish Immigration Service 2016. *Statistics on asylum and refugees*. Available at: http://www.migri.fi/about_us/statistics/statistics_on_asylum_and_refugees [Accessed 28.12.2016]

The Quranic Arabic Corpus, undated. *Verse (4:34) - English Translation*. Available at: <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=34> [Accessed 7.1.2016]