Conversion to Islam as religious and racial crossing

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Conversion is frequently depicted as an inner reversal of the soul, a solitary gesture that marks the individual as free from social constraints. Such conception is found in conventional accounts of conversion but also in the narratives that converts themselves tell about their religious transformation. Notwithstanding the great diversity of trajectories and motives, conversion stories are often strikingly similar: they all put the stress on the individual and individuating nature of conversion, and rely on an exaltation of singularity and self-fulfillment. Yet, the reality of the social world is often different. Because religion is never just about the soul, but also about society and social boundaries, shifting religions places converts at the crossroads of many collective issues.

This was evident in the in-depth interview study I conducted with eighty-two converts to Islam in France and the United States from 2013-2017. The Muslim converts I interviewed portrayed themselves as self-reliant individuals who had embraced Islam as a faith. A strong rhetoric of religious individualism pervaded their accounts and was used as a tool to authenticate the sincerity and legitimacy of their religious shift: "No one brought me to Islam"; "Becoming Muslim is the only true choice I ever made"; "I am finally in line with my true self" were common expressions pervading their narratives. In sum, my interlocutors presented themselves as individuals able to escape the molding of society in order to reconnect with their "true" inner selves.

What was striking was how much this narrative was challenged as converts progressively asserted their Muslim identity. There, they found that their conversion had implications that largely superseded the expression of their individual subjectivity. Jenna, a 38-year-old

white woman working as a lawyer in Chicago, who converted to Islam from Catholicism, recalled being surprised by the violence of the reactions she encountered: "Frankly, it wasn't a huge leap for me [to become Muslim]. I was a practicing Catholic before, and it wasn't that big of a deal for me to convert to Islam. It was a big deal to everybody else." Jenna's brother stopped talking to her and she had to leave her law firm after work relations started deteriorating. She felt she had become a stranger. While changing religions was for her a smooth and benign process, it was interpreted as an irremediable rupture by her relatives.

To be sure, the social consequences of conversion vary across contexts. Like financial conversions between currencies, religious conversions come with different "rates," "fees," and "costs," depending on the ratio of power between the religious tradition that is left behind and the one that is embraced, and the nature of the boundaries that both separate and connect them. This is what makes conversion so fascinating to experience and to study. By crossing religious borders, converts shed light on the nature and content of such borders, and enable us to decide whether they are simply religious or also embody something more. As a matter of fact, converting to Islam in France and the United States means being exposed to boundary thickness. Due to the specific history of Islam in Western societies, the border that converts go over by becoming Muslim is not simply religious, but also cultural, ethnic, and even racial.

Hence, in addition to the common challenges faced by a convert to any religion, converts to Islam have to deal with a distinctive set of issues. Most notably, because Islam has undergone various processes of racialization over time, Muslim converts frequently experience a shift in how their bodies are perceived and categorized. This is particularly striking in the case of white converts donning the visible attributes of Islam (headscarf, beard, *kufi*, etc.). By modifying their outward appearance in line with religious prescriptions, they expose themselves to new assumptions about their racial identity. In societies where Islam has been constructed as foreign and non-white, white converts wearing religious signs are alternately categorized as Middle-Easterners, North Africans, South Asians, Turks, Bosnians, and even light-skinned African Americans (in the US case), which demonstrates the precarious nature of racial categorization and its close intertwining with religious considerations.

Noémie, a 27-year-old pale-skinned housewife living in Paris, noticed a transformation in the way she was racially categorized after she started wearing the *hijab*: "The moment I started wearing my *hijab*, OK I still had a white education, but in the eyes of people, I became an immigrant. I went over to the other side. I switched from majority to minority." In the United States, Victoria (29, nanny, St. Louis), a blue-eyed white woman, also felt that she was cast outside the realm of whiteness because of her headscarf: "You hear a lot about white privilege. And you don't realize how powerful that is until you are taken out of that category."

The white converts to Islam I interviewed said they discovered what life on the other side of the racial divide looked like. Negative moral characteristics started being ascribed to them on the basis of their outward appearance, circumscribing the development of their selves and personalities within rigidified boundaries. Being subject to hateful comments was new and unsettling for many. Chloé, a 21-year-old blonde and blue-eyed French woman,

reported feeling very upset when people told her that she was "not integrated" to French society because of her headwrap: "I have been integrated all my life! I am French! My family is French. I am in France!" She could not stand being treated as an immigrant in need of assimilation within her own country.

Non-white converts (African Americans in the United States or people of Caribbean descent in France) who, for the most part, had been socialized to racism from an early age, witnessed their white coreligionists' personal discovery of discrimination with either tenderness or irritation. Alisha, a 35-year-old African American freelance marketer in Chicago, shared with me her mixed feelings: "It is sometimes a little frustrating when you hear white converts being like 'Oh! It is so hard!' Like my friend, she stopped wearing *hijab* and her reason was that she got tired of being the flagbearer. I was like 'huh . . . I don't know what to tell you. That's how I always lived my life.'" Yet, Alisha, and other non-white converts, also had to endure Islamophobia as a new layer of prejudice in their lives.

Several interviewees reported being exposed to a variety of insults after donning visible religious attributes. In both France and the United States, the trope of terrorism was paramount. Converts were suspected of violent leanings, sometimes even by their own families. In both national contexts, anxieties about immigration and foreign invasion were also a central repertoire of insults. Converts were asked to "go back to their country" and racist slurs often burst out in the street ("*bougnoule*" in France; "sand n***," "towel head," or "rag head" in the United States).

While terrorism and immigration are common themes on both sides of the Atlantic, there are also national specificities. In the United States, where the black/white divide remains central, racial tropes were frequently brought up. In reference to the legacy of African American Islam, Black converts were often suspected of being affiliated to the Nation of Islam. As for white interviewees, they were called the n-word, but also "wigger" or "race traitor," which indicates they were seen as not behaving in conformity with their white status.

In France, where matters of race and whiteness are less explicit, concerns about secularism and religious visibility were instead particularly salient. In a society where religious sentiment and the display of piety are either unintelligible or conceived in terms of threat to Republican values, converts who decided to become visibly Muslim were suspected of sectarian brainwashing, proselytism, and fundamentalism. In addition, a rough colonial history continues to inform the way Muslims are perceived in France. In families where elders either lived in Algeria or were enrolled as soldiers in the Algerian war (1954-1962), the conversion to Islam of a child or a grandchild often rekindled deeply-buried traumas.

Because collective representations around Islam centralize matters of race, immigration, colonial history, and secularism in particularly explosive ways, converts' religious choices place them at the center of the race/religion conundrum. In spite of their emphasis on religious individualism, they have to wear the racialized "mark of the plural": People despise them, call them racial slurs, or ostensibly fear them.[1] The social construction of Islam as a

racialized religion interferes with converts' conceptions of religious authenticity. Radically individualistic experiences of religious conversion, in sum, do not escape the socially imposed experience of race.

Muslim converts' experiences demonstrate that religion does not operate as a "sacred canopy" floating over society in an autonomous fashion.[2] While in daily discourse and analytical reasoning, we like to think of religion as a separate category, in reality it does not exist in an abstract manner, detached from the constraints of the social world. Because religious identities are never purely religious, but always tainted with race, ethnicity, class, or culture, religious conversion always has implications that largely overstep the soul and the self. This makes conversion a particularly powerful tool to investigate the meaning and appreciate the thickness of religious boundaries, both across historical periods and geographical contexts.