

Reasons for Conversion to Islam Among Women in the United States

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Nine reported reasons for converting to Islam were quantitatively assessed regarding prevalence and importance among 304 women in the United States. The appeal of Muslim moral values and dissatisfaction with one's former faith were primary reasons, followed closely by enhanced sense of identity and alignment with cultural views (regarding ethnic diversity and gender roles). Active (theological and personal) reasons for conversion were more important and prevalent than passive (social) reasons. Qualitative analyses of additional write-in responses suggested four other reasons for conversion, including the appeal of Muslim tenets and an increased sense of significance/meaning. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for future research.

Keywords: Muslim, Islam, convert, revert, women

When individuals align themselves with particular faiths, the process can involve spiritual, psychological, and/or ideological factors and can range from being relatively sudden to gradual. For example, some persons experience spiritual conversion, others alternate between groups, and others choose a new faith group over time (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Those who join a new religious group are often simply referred to as converts, but this fails to acknowledge the diversity of ways in which individuals come to faith. For example, Islam teaches that conversion is not possible because all persons are Muslim at birth, with adherence to any other faith being the result of errant socialization. Thus, choosing to become Muslim later in life is referred to as reverting (Rehman & Dziegielewski, 2004). As such, whereas some models of the conversion process

have been proposed (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Zinnbauer & Pargament), they do not directly apply to Islam, given its theological rejection of conversion. An equally important and more accessible question concerns the reasons why persons choose a particular faith (Loveland, 2003; Roof, 1989). The current study addressed this latter question and simply examined reasons why women in the United States choose to become Muslims. In order to maintain consistency with the psychological literature and popular word use, however, the terms “convert” and “conversion” were used for the purposes of this study.

Women's decision to become Muslim merits specific study for several reasons. First, some researchers suggest that Islam itself views women as especially important. For example, Marcotte (2003) has proposed that Muslim women are “the most powerful symbol of what constitutes an ‘Islamic’ identity” (p. 163). Moreover, Rehman and Dziegielewski (2004) report that most persons who convert (revert) to Islam are women. Second, derogatory stereotypes regarding Muslims in general are prevalent in the United States (Madani, as cited in Sheridan & North, 2004), increasing the likelihood that non-Muslim Americans might be perplexed by any man's or woman's decision to convert to Islam. Third, Muslim women are “most commonly represented in popular culture as strongly opposed to feminism and feminist

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values” (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, & Leathers, 2008, p. 39), and “the belief that Islam is oppressive to women is not uncommon” (Rehman & Dziegielewski, 2004, p. 34). As such, non-Muslims might be prone to even more negative bias regarding a woman who becomes Muslim than a man who does so. In particular, given that many feminist views (e.g., regarding women’s rights, equality, etc.) are widespread in the United States (McCabe, 2005), popular understanding might prejudicially assume strong disincentives for such women to choose Islam and/or assume that extenuating circumstances must be involved, such as lack of education and/or desire for marriage to a Muslim. On a related note, research on those who convert to Christian faiths (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, etc.) has shown that desire for marriage can indeed be the most frequently cited reason for switching (Roof, 1989), but no study has assessed whether this is true for Muslims. Fourth, whereas studies report that as many as 33% of Americans change religious groups at some time during their lives (Love-land, 2003; Roof, 1989), such studies have assessed primarily Christian samples, presumably relegating Muslim respondents to the “other” category. This is becoming increasingly inappropriate, however. Recent figures (Mamiya, 2001; Read & Bartkowski, 2000) estimate between 4 and 8 million Muslims living in the United States, and Ross-Sheriff (2001) projected that by 2015 Islam will be the second largest religion in the United States. Clearly, Muslims in the United States, and Muslim women in particular, merit systematic research.

When we began our study, a search of the American Psychological Association’s PsycINFO database revealed no quantitative research addressing reasons for converting to Islam for either or both genders. This is consistent with a general scarcity of psychological research on Islam. For example, a recent comprehensive search of PsychInfo (Sheridan & North, 2004) covering 105 years (1887 to 2002) produced only 1,354 abstracts linked either to the terms “Muslim,” “Islam,” or their derivatives (e.g., “Islamic”), and only 62.5% of these described empirical research. For comparison, we conducted a PsychInfo search for the key terms “religious,” “religion,” or “spiritual” during the same 105 years and found 23,266 abstracts.

Fortunately, in spite of the absence of quantitative studies regarding Muslims’ conversion in the United States, some qualitative research has provided useful insights regarding American women’s decision to choose Islam (Anway, 1996; Hermansen, 1999; Mamiya, 2001; Rehman & Dziegielewski, 2004; Smith, 1999). In order to obtain more generalizable findings, the current study quantitatively examined some of the reasons for choosing Islam identified in this qualitative literature.

One such reason is the perception for some women that Islam promotes positive cultural views of gender roles and ethnic diversity. Regarding gender, some women have expressed the belief that Islam protects women’s rights (Anway, 1996), with Muhammad seen as the liberator of women everywhere (Ahmed, 1992; Wadud, 1999). Historically, female infanticide was ruled out when Islam was implemented (Douki, Nacef, Belhadj, Bouasker, & Ghachem, 2003), and polygamy was instituted to protect Muslim widows, whose husbands were killed during wars (Sechzer, 2004). More recently, Ali et al. (2008) interviewed seven Muslim women in the United States, most of whom not only believed that Islam supports feminist principles but also considered themselves to be feminist. Regarding favorable views of ethnicity, some African American women have cited their anticipation of both support from fellow Muslim women (Wyche, 2004) and shelter from discrimination (Byng, 1998) as motives for choosing Islam. For example, Wyche notes that “[t]he mosque becomes a source of pride, a refuge, and a means of social status in the community, especially when the psychological aspects that build self-esteem are not available in the . . . larger society” (p. 326).

Conversely, other qualitative studies suggest various burdens that Muslim women can sometimes bear. Zaidi and Shuraydi (2002) interviewed 20 Pakistani women in the United States and Canada. They reported that “Muslim females have to cope with a prevalent double standard governing the behavior of males and females,” (p. 507), whereby women are prohibited from courting potential mates but men are given tacit approval. Further, Smith (1999) noted that women’s roles even in American mosques can be very restricted. As an additional potential stress, women who become Muslims may sometimes find that they receive vacillat-

ing or no support from family, friends, or even fellow Muslims (Rehman & Dziegielewski, 2004). Ultimately, however, identifying issues as stressors presupposes that women find them to be problematic. If, for example, a Muslim woman feels comfortable with restricted roles in the local Mosque or with different courting practices, these values would more accurately be described as merely different from Western culture versus problematic. Given that qualitative research reports mixed perspectives regarding Muslim cultural values concerning gender roles and ethnicity, the current study quantitatively assessed the extent to which women choose Islam due to perceiving these values as positive.

Qualitative studies also suggest that the appeal of an increased sense of personal identity can be a reason for becoming Muslim. For example, Ketner, Buitelaar, and Bosma (2004) found that Moroccan Muslim girls living in another Western country (Netherlands) viewed their Islamic identity as significant because of the sense of control they derived from it. This led the authors to argue the following:

“[M]igrant” identity is an *assigned* identity. . .but the Muslim identity can be an *asserted* identity, an identity that is chosen. Because it is a matter of personal choice, the Islamic identity can be very meaningful. Stressing Islamic identity in a non-Muslim context can give minorities the feeling that . . .in some ways they can be in command of their own lives (p. 154, italics in the original).

Similarly in the United States, Byng (1998) suggested that, given their historical oppression by Caucasian Americans, some African Americans might embrace Islam to increase an independent sense of identity apart from the larger, discriminating group.

Becoming a Muslim might also be prompted by a desire to gain autonomy from familial pressures. No Muslim studies have assessed this possibility, but Chen (2005) studied female Taiwanese immigrants to America who converted to either Christianity or Buddhism. In both cases, they described conversion as a way to promote individuation from what they perceived as authoritarian dictates of their family in general and mother-in-law in particular. Thus, we also examined the desire for familial independence as a possible reason for choosing Islam.

Several qualitative Muslim studies have suggested that marriage can be a reason for becoming Muslim (Anway, 1996; Smith, 1999). Whereas this reason has been shown to be common among Christians, (Loveland, 2003), its prevalence among Muslims has not been assessed. Similarly, friends' influence has been frequently cited as a reason for joining various Christian groups (Loveland, 2003), but this reason has not been quantitatively examined among Muslims. Thus, we explored the salience of both these reasons for Muslim women.

Dissatisfaction with Christian beliefs and/or with secular values might also prompt one to become Muslim. Indeed, some Muslims have cited their own rejection of a perceived corrupt Christian/American culture (Hermansen, 1999) as one reason for converting, together with their perception that Islamic culture is holier (Anway, 1996). We therefore examined dissatisfaction with a previous faith and/or with secular values as two other potential reasons for converting. On a related note, it seems feasible that some persons might switch to Islam due to feeling marginalized by their former faith group, and we examined this possibility. In contrast to these negative reasons, it also seems reasonable to expect that persons with no previous religious affiliation might simply view Islam as the best choice, for many of the positive reasons listed above. Thus, we also assessed the prevalence of this rationale for becoming Muslim.

After our data collection was already completed, the first quantitative study regarding reasons for conversion to Islam was reported (Lakhdar, Vinsonneau, Apter, & Mullet, 2007). Although they did not examine United States residents, their sample (191 adults and adolescents) was Western (France); and whereas 38% were men, no gender effects were found. Whereas Lakhdar et al.'s measures were not available to us, their reasons for conversion had some overlap with those we assessed. As such, their findings provided useful bases for generating some hypotheses regarding women in the United States.

Lakhdar et al. (2007) examined an 8-factor model of motives for conversion based on Apter's reversal theory of motivation. Factors included (a) *telic* (future-oriented, goal-directed, carefully reasoned conversions), (b)

paratelic (here-and-now, playfully impulsive, experientially motivated), (c) *conformist* (motivated by valuing rules and structures for moral guidance), (d) *negativist* (incited by a desire for freedom from rules or to provoke authorities such as parents), (e) *autic mastery* (prompted by desire for enhanced self-mastery), (f) *autic sympathy* (based on a desire to strengthen attachment to valued others), (g) *alloic mastery* (driven by a desire to obtain enhanced sense of self via affiliation with an esteemed group), and (h) *alloic sympathy* (inspired by the desire to extend beyond oneself and contribute to others).

Lakhdar et al. (2007) found that both negativist and autic sympathy conversion responses were infrequently endorsed, and autic sympathy was also inversely related to frequency of prayer. They reasoned that such passive motives would not be particularly strong and thus would be less likely to motivate consistent religious practice (e.g., saying prayers). This seems logical, as both negativist motives (e.g., converting to oppose and gain freedom from family pressures) and autic sympathy motives (e.g., converting in order to marry or in order to gain acceptance from friends) seem to treat conversion more as a means to an end than as an end in itself, suggesting less intrinsic commitment (Gorsuch, 1997). Conversely, Lakhdar et al. found that conformist conversion responses received the most endorsement. It is noteworthy, however, that several items on this conformist factor (e.g., "Because it leads the believer to redemption (God's forgiveness)," "To be admitted to Paradise at the end of my life"; Lakhdar et al., 2007, p. 9) referred to Muslim doctrines. As such, this factor might also be viewed as measuring an appreciation of Muslim tenets and not merely a conformist desire for structure. The second highest endorsement occurred for telic conversion responses (e.g., "To achieve better self-knowledge," "For moral reasons," "Because I felt Islam could give meaning to my life"). Such responses can indeed be viewed as intellectually prompted, and similarly might also be seen as conveying a desire for a sense of purpose or meaning. Lakhdar et al. concluded that reasons for conversion to Islam are primarily very personal (active) ones and only secondarily social (passive).

Goals of the Current Study

Reasons for conversion suggested by previous qualitative research were quantitatively examined to determine their relative prevalence and perceived importance among women in the United States. Specifically, we explored the extent to which women's conversion to Islam is due to (a) active, personal factors (e.g., an enhanced sense of identity, enhanced freedom from societal/family pressures), (b) active, value-laden/theological factors (e.g., the view that Islam upholds good morals and appropriate cultural values regarding ethnicity and gender, choosing Islam as a first faith, dissatisfaction with a former faith), and/or (c) passive, social factors (e.g., influence by best friends or potential spouses, feeling marginalized by a previous faith group).

Whereas our study was primarily exploratory, we did formulate several hypotheses. First, given that 76.5% of those in the United States self-identify as Christian and less than 1% percent identify as Muslim (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001), we expected that dissatisfaction with former faith would rank highly among reasons for conversion to Islam. We reasoned that most Muslim converts in the United States would have grown up within a Christian context, given the prevalence of Christianity, resulting in conversion decisions involving comparison of the two religions. Conversely, given that 13.2% of the general population identifies as nonreligious or secular (Kosmin et al., 2001), we expected a comparable percentage of the current participants to cite Islam as their initial religious expression. We also made several predictions based on Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) findings. First, we expected to replicate their finding that active reasons for conversion (including personal factors, values, and theological beliefs) would be more prevalent than passive, social ones. We also anticipated replicating their finding that converting for passive reasons (e.g., marriage) would be negatively related to religious practice (i.e., frequency of prayer). Unlike Lakhdar et al., however, we did not assume that converting due to freedom from pressures from family or societal pressures would be inversely correlated with religious practice. Whereas Lakhdar et al. framed these freedoms as negativistic (e.g., "to anger certain persons that opposed me"; p. 9),

we framed them as neutral (e.g., “an increased sense of independence”). In this light, we reasoned that such desires for individuation need not be oppositionally motivated.

Finally, after women responded to quantitative rating scales regarding reasons for conversion, we also invited them to list any other reasons why they chose Islam, via open-ended statements. Whereas the rating scales measured reasons already suggested by previous qualitative research, these earlier studies all assessed small samples, making it possible that some common reasons might not yet have been identified in the literature. Thus, we explored open-ended statements in order to see if other prevalent reasons for conversion might emerge via qualitative analysis of a larger sample.

Method

Procedure

Data was procured via an online survey and was part of a larger ongoing research project. For this larger project, the editors of a North American magazine dedicated to Muslim women were contacted. With their permission and cooperation, a link to our online research survey was posted on the home page of the magazine's website. The link stated, “What does Islam mean to you? Please click here to take a survey. Your voice counts!” Clicking this link directed potential participants to a written endorsement of the research by the magazine editors. Those who chose to participate clicked on a “take the survey” link on the endorsement page redirecting them to the online survey. It started with an informed consent form, assuring that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data entry was instantaneous. The survey was available for three months, after which all collected data were downloaded for analysis.

The magazine editors reported that during the three-month period, 2,347 persons clicked the “take a survey” link and 1008 chose to take part (43% response rate). Of these 1008 global participants, 538 lived in the United States and 342 met the selection criteria of both living in the United States and converting to Islam. Of this number, three were dropped from analysis because they were not adults (i.e., under 18), and four were dropped because they reported belief in more than one God—contrary to central

teachings of Islam. Finally, 31 were not considered due to incomplete data. The final sample thus included 304 participants.

Participants

Participants were 304 women ($M = 36.03$ years old, $SD = 10.76$ years) living in the United States who were Muslim converts and survey respondents as indicated above. Participants identified their ethnic descents as African (38.5%), Arab (0.3%), Asian (2%), Caucasian (38.2%), Latina (6.6%), Native American (1.3%), or other (unspecified) ethnic descents (13.2%). Participants' family status included 16.4% single, 66.8% married, 1.6% widowed, 13.5% divorced, and 1.5% choosing “other.” They were well-educated, completing high school or GED (9.2%), one year of college (11.8%), two years of college or AA degree (13.5%), three years of college (7.9%), four years of college or BA degree (28.9%), graduate school (9.2%), or having a graduate degree (19.4%). They had lived in the US an average of 32.83 years ($SD = 8.71$), longer than the period in which they became Muslim ($M = 11.06$ years, $SD = 9.05$). The sample ascribed to Sunni (46.7%), Shiite (3.3%), Sunni-Sufi or Shiite-Sufi (1.3%), Nation of Islam (2.3%), Sufi (3.3%), or other (<1%) sects, as well as persons (42.1%) who did not affiliate with any particular Muslim sect. They prayed 4.91 times daily on average ($SD = 1.60$), consistent with the Muslim faith's five calls to daily prayer, and most (80.6%) of the respondents were mosque attenders. Moreover, they rated the importance of their religion on a 5-point religious importance scale as high ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .57$). Whereas such 1-item measures cannot comprehensively assess religious behavior, they do suggest commitment regarding prayer and attendance.

Measures

Reasons for conversion. We developed one-sentence descriptions of nine reasons for conversion. These were based on a review of the qualitative research on Muslim conversion discussed above. Before rating each reason, participants read the following instructions:

People choose to follow a specific faith for various reasons. Some people have no particular faith when

they join a faith group. Others convert to a new faith when they decide to leave a former faith. We are interested in learning about your reasons for becoming a Muslim. For the following items, please first indicate whether each is true or false for you. Second, if an item is true (does represent one reason for your conversion), please rate how important it was to your decision, using the 5-point scale to the right of each item.

Participants then rated each of the nine reasons as *true* or *false*. For any one marked as *true*, they also rated importance using a 1-item scale (1 = *not important at all*, 5 = *extremely important*). Each item began with the phrase, "One reason I converted to Islam was because. . . ." The nine reasons were presented in the following random order: (a) influence from a potential Muslim spouse (Marriage), (b) influence of close friends (Best Friends), (c) choosing Islam as one's first faith (No Former Faith), (d) dissatisfaction with one's former faith (Dissatisfaction), (e) preference for Islamic values versus Secular Values (Islamic Values), (f) appreciation of Islamic cultural views on ethnicity and gender (Culture), (g) feeling marginalized by those in one's former faith community (Marginalized), (h) gaining an increased sense of identity (Identity), and (i) gaining an increased sense of freedom (Independence). After giving true/false and perceived importance ratings for the nine reasons, participants were invited to write up to three additional reasons, each responding to the following prompt: "One reason I converted to Islam was because (please write in the box below, 200 character limit)." They then rated the importance of each write-in item they chose to add with the same 5-point scale described above.

Data Analytic Strategy

Quantitative analyses began by obtaining means and standard deviations for all responses. Next, average endorsements (coded 0 for *true* and 1 for *false*) of the nine conversion statements was assessed for relative prevalence differences using a one-way MANOVA with the nine items as repeated measures, followed by post hoc pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction. Thereafter, importance ratings (1 to 5) of each of the nine responses were also assessed for relative differences using the same strategy. Finally, correlations between demographics and all the variables of interest were examined, as well as intercorrelations between

the importance ratings of the nine conversion reasons.

Qualitative analysis of the responses to the three open-ended statements involved three stages. First, the first author sorted responses by placing each, if appropriate, into one of the nine conversion categories already assessed quantitatively. For example, if a participant wrote, "I converted because I was considering marriage but was under no pressure," this would be classified in the existing category of Marriage. The first time a response did not clearly fit within one of the existing nine categories, the first author created a new category. Classification then continued until another response did not fit into the existing categories, whereupon another new category was added. This resulted in four new conversion categories and an Ambiguous Response category, in addition to the existing nine, for a total of 14 categories (see Results). Second, a trained research assistant independently classified each of the open-ended responses into one of the 14 categories, and initial interrater agreement was 67%. Third, the 33% of responses producing disagreement were independently rated by a third rater, the second author. In virtually all instances, the second author's ratings agreed with one of the other two raters, and ultimate decisions were reached by consensus among the three raters.

Results

Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 shows the percentages of the full sample that endorsed each of the nine conversion reasons as true. They ranged from 92.8% (who cited Islamic values vs. secular values being a good fit with their moral and family values) to 16.8% (who cited influence from best friends). Table 1 also depicts the importance rating means and standard deviations regarding the nine reasons. These ratings are displayed for the endorsing subsample regarding each respective reason and also for the entire sample. To obtain importance ratings for the entire sample (permitting equal *N* comparisons), participants who had marked a given reason *false* (and thus did not enter an importance rating) were assigned the logical rating of 1 (*not important at all*). For example, the average importance rating of the appeal of

Table 1
Endorsement Percentages and Importance Ratings for Conversion Reasons

Reasons for conversion	% Endorsed	Endorsers only		Entire sample	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Because I believe Islamic (e.g., vs. secular) values are a good fit with my moral and family values (<i>Islamic Values</i>)	92.8%	4.31	0.83	4.07	1.17
Because I was dissatisfied with my former faith, and I felt Islam was a better faith (<i>Dissatisfaction</i>)	79.3%	4.34	0.98	3.64	1.61
Because it gave me an increased sense of my own identity (<i>Identity</i>)	75.0%	4.03	0.99	3.27	1.57
Because I believe it fits well with my cultural views regarding ethnicity and gender (<i>Culture</i>)	63.2%	3.96	0.95	2.87	1.62
Because it gave me an increased sense of independence from societal or family pressures (<i>Independence</i>)	35.5%	3.72	1.12	1.97	1.46
Because I previously followed no formal faith, and I believed that Islam was the best choice (<i>No Former Faith</i>)	26.6%	4.04	1.08	1.81	0.44
Because I was considering marriage to a Muslim who influenced my beliefs (<i>Marriage</i>)	20.7%	2.94	1.11	1.40	0.93
Because I felt marginalized by persons of my former faith (<i>Marginalized</i>)	18.1%	3.40	1.20	1.43	1.05
Influence from my best friends who were Muslim (<i>Best Friends</i>)	16.8%	3.04	0.98	1.34	0.86

Note. Each response began with the phrase, "One reason I converted to Islam was. . ." Each of the nine Reasons for Conversion is followed by its label in italics, enclosed in parentheses. Importance ratings ranged from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The % Endorsed column depicts what percent of the entire sample endorsed that reason. For Endorsers Only, mean importance ratings were computed only for those persons who marked *true* for a given reason. In order to obtain Entire Sample importance ratings, persons marking *false* were assigned the logical importance rating of 1.

Islamic values was 4.07 for the entire sample but 4.31 for the 92.8% who endorsed this reason.

Table 1 shows that the entire sample's mean importance ratings of the nine reasons varied considerably, from relatively unimportant ($M = 1.34$) to very important ($M = 4.07$). Ratings for the subsample who endorsed each reason as *true* ranged considerably less. Whereas they could have marked a reason *true* and then assessed it as only slightly important, they did not. Instead, ratings of those who endorsed each of the nine reasons only ranged from important ($M = 2.94$) to very important ($M = 4.34$).

Those who cited Dissatisfaction as a conversion reason were also asked to list their former faith. They responded as Christian (37.3%), Protestant (29.5%), Catholic (19.5%), other (5.0%), a mixture of Christianity and other faiths (1.7%), Buddhism (1.2%), Judaism, (.4%), atheism/agnostic (.4%), and none (.4%), respectively. No response was given by 4.6%.

Conversion reason differences. Endorsements of conversion reasons were coded

(*true* = 0, *false* = 1). Then the nine mean endorsements (each potentially ranging between 0.0 and 1.0) were examined with a repeated measures one-way MANOVA, which revealed that the endorsements of the nine conversion statements were statistically different, $F(8, 296) = 211.78, p < .01$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni correction revealed the following significant differences across the nine reasons (see Table 1): Islamic Values was endorsed more than either Dissatisfaction or Identity (both $ps < .001$), which were statistically comparable to each other. Both Dissatisfaction and Identity were endorsed more than Culture ($p < .001$ and $p < .05$, respectively). Culture was endorsed more than Independence ($p < .001$). Independence was statistically comparable to No Former Faith but was endorsed significantly more than Marginalized, Marriage, and Best Friends ($p < .001$ in each case). Endorsements for No Former Faith, Marginalized, Marriage, and Best Friends were not statistically different from each other.

Next, the entire sample's importance ratings of each of the nine responses were assessed with

a repeated measures one-way MANOVA, $F(8, 296) = 193.46, p < .01$. Pairwise comparisons again using a Bonferroni correction showed the following significant differences (see Table 1): Islamic Values was rated more important than Dissatisfaction ($p < .001$), which was more important than Identity ($p < .05$). Identity was more important than Culture ($p < .01$), which was more important than Independence ($p < .001$). Independence and No Former Faith were statistically comparable, but both were more important than Marginalized (both $ps < .001$). Marginalized, Marriage, and Best Friend were statistically comparable.

Correlations. Table 2 shows the correlations between the relevant demographic variables (ethnicity, family status, education, age, prayer frequency, years as Muslim, and years in United States) and the nine conversion reasons. Correlations regarding ethnicity and family status used η , which is appropriate for examining relationships between nominal and continuous data. All other correlations used r . Regarding ethnicity, only those of African descent ($N = 116$) and Caucasian descent ($N = 117$) were considered, given the very small numbers of other ethnic groups. Similarly regarding family status, only married ($N = 203$) and single ($N = 50$) women were considered. All other correlations assessed the full sample ($N = 304$).

Ethnicity was significantly related to Islamic Values, Dissatisfaction, Identity, and Independence, with women of African descent reporting more importance than those of Caucasian de-

scent in each case (see Table 2). Specifically, they reported more importance for Islamic Values ($M = 4.19$ vs. 3.76), for Dissatisfaction ($M = 3.86$ vs. 3.41), for Identity ($M = 3.70$ vs. 2.74), and for Independence ($M = 2.26$ vs. 1.68). Family status was significantly related only to Identity, with more importance reported by single versus married women ($M = 3.65$ vs. 3.14). Education was significantly negatively related to Dissatisfaction, Identity, and Independence. Age was significantly negatively related to No Former Faith. Prayer frequency was significantly negatively related to both Marriage and Best Friends, as expected. It was also significantly positively correlated with Culture. Finally, Years as a Muslim and Years in the United States were both significantly negatively related to No Former Faith.

Table 3 shows the zero-order correlations between the nine reasons for conversion. The following correlations were significant: Islamic Values, Dissatisfaction, Identity, and Culture were all positively intercorrelated. All four of these scales were also positively correlated with Independence and Marginalized, and Dissatisfaction was also negatively correlated with No Former Faith. Independence was positively correlated with Marginalized.

Qualitative Results

Of the 304 participants, 239 provided write-in responses to the first open-ended prompt, 161 did to the second, and 122 did to

Table 2
Correlation of Demographic Variables With Conversion Reasons

Variable	Ethnicity	Family status	Education	Age	Prayer	Years Muslim	Years in USA
Islamic values	.18**	.05	-.10	-.07	.03	.00	-.04
Dissatisfaction	.14*	.07	-.11*	.05	.00	.08	.03
Identity	.33***	.13*	-.13*	.02	.06	.09	.10
Culture	.05	.07	-.04	.06	.14*	.06	.05
Independence	.20**	.08	-.11*	-.04	.05	-.02	.10
No former faith	.11	.05	-.01	-.13*	.01	-.12*	-.17*
Marriage	.08	.09	.05	-.02	-.11*	-.06	-.02
Marginalized	.09	.01	.01	.07	.00	.05	.07
Best friends	.05	.01	.00	-.04	-.15**	-.11	-.06

Note. Prayer refers to frequency of prayer. Effect size for the nominal variables (ethnicity and family status) uses the eta (η) statistic (see text for description). All other values use Pearson product moment correlations. Ethnicity ($N = 233$) considered only women of African and Caucasian descent, due to small numbers of other ethnicities. Similarly, family status ($N = 253$) only considered single versus married women. All other correlations considered the entire sample ($N = 304$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Correlations Between Reasons for Conversion

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Islamic values	—	.26*	.37*	.33*	.27*	.02	-.04	.15*	.04
2. Dissatisfaction	—	—	.25*	.27*	.20*	-.30*	-.07	.19*	.02
3. Identity	—	—	—	.36*	.42*	.01	-.06	.16*	.02
4. Culture	—	—	—	—	.33*	.00	-.04	.25*	.05
5. Independence	—	—	—	—	—	.06	.02	.37*	.09
6. No former faith	—	—	—	—	—	—	.04	.01	.01
7. Marriage	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.02	.07
8. Marginalized	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.10
9. Best friends	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

* $p < .01$.

the third, for a total of 522 write-in responses. Each one was classified in only one category. The new four categories included converting due to (a) the appeal of Islamic tenets (e.g., “I believed in all the tenets [of] the religion,” “I believe there is only one God,”), (b) Islam’s provision of a personal sense of significance or meaning (e.g., “I felt I needed a better mental/physical/spiritual discipline for my daily life,” “I needed to know my purpose in life”), (c) a passive sense that converting to Islam was meant to be or just felt right (e.g., “Islam just makes sense,” “Through many events, I felt God chose it for me”), and (d) the example of Muslim role models (e.g., “I admired and re-

spected the Muslims I met before converting,” “I casually knew some Muslims that really lived their faith. . .”). Hereafter, these four reasons will respectively be referred to as: (a) Tenets, (b) Significance/Meaning, (c) Destiny/Intuition, and (d) Role Models. Unclear responses (e.g., “Fear to do bad,” “It was a better fit for me,” “It’s peaceful”) were classified as Ambiguous.

Table 4 depicts the frequency of write-in responses for the four new categories. Most of the write-in responses (74.91%) fell within one of these new categories. Tenets was the most prevalent category (222 responses), followed by Significance/Meaning (79 responses), Destiny/Intuition (68 responses), and Role Models (22).

Table 4
Categorized Write-in Responses to Three Prompts for Additional Reasons for Conversion

Category	Prompt response number			Total (<i>N</i> = 522)	Percentage of 522 responses
	First (<i>N</i> = 239)	Second (<i>N</i> = 161)	Third (<i>N</i> = 122)		
<i>Existing nine reasons</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>16.28%</i>
Islamic values	6	3	4	13	2.49%
Dissatisfaction	16	7	7	30	5.75%
Identity	2	2	1	5	.96%
Culture	4	16	9	29	5.56%
Independence	2	2	1	5	.96%
No former faith	0	0	0	0	.00%
Marriage	1	1	0	2	.38%
Marginalized	0	1	0	1	.19%
Best friends	0	0	0	0	.00%
<i>New reasons</i>	<i>193</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>391</i>	<i>74.91%</i>
Tenets	125	55	42	222	42.53%
Significance/meaning	28	24	27	79	15.13%
Destiny/intuition	32	24	12	68	13.03%
Role models	8	11	3	22	4.22%
<i>Ambiguous responses</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>8.81%</i>

Note. Subtotals are in italics, and individual totals are in regular font.

The remaining write-in responses either fit into one of the existing nine categories (16.28%) or were ambiguous (8.81%).

Discussion

Research regarding conversion to Islam in the contemporary West (Kose, 1996b; Lakhdar et al., 2007) is rare. No quantitative study has examined persons who choose Islam in the United States, nor has any quantitative study focused on Muslim women. The current study did both. As such, these findings provide a useful foundation for continued research in this important area. The nine reasons for conversion assessed in this study of Muslim women were all empirically supported, and qualitative evidence was also provided for four other reasons. In addition, all hypotheses were affirmed, as discussed below.

All nine reasons for conversion suggested by previous qualitative studies were empirically supported as relevant. Even the least frequently cited one (influence of friends) was acknowledged as an important reason by almost 17% of respondents. Consistent with previous literature (Haddad, 2006; Kose, 1996a; Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006), our findings support Kose's (1996b) finding that conversion to Islam is a complex decision typically occurring in adulthood. These women rated multiple reasons for conversion that, with only a few exceptions, were also positively intercorrelated, suggesting that conversion is a multidimensional decision. It is notable, however, that virtually all participants (92.8%) cited an appreciation of Islamic values (in contrast to secular values) as a very important reason.

Hypothesized Findings

Active versus passive conversion. As expected, active (personal, theological, values) reasons for conversion were more prevalent than passive (social) reasons. Indeed, these women rated the three social reasons (converting due to influence by potential spouses or by friends or due to feeling marginalized) as less important than the other six reasons. Categorizing conversion reasons as active versus passive has been utilized previously (Kose, 1996a; Lakhdar et al., 2007; Paloutzian, 2005). It seems logical to suppose that those who chose Islam

due to either personal or theological reasons were more deliberate, and therefore more active, in their search compared to those who were motivated to join the religion because of social reasons.

Social conversion and religious practice. Also as hypothesized, converting due to potential marriage and converting due to friends both negatively correlated with prayer frequency, replicating Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) findings regarding autistic sympathy conversions. As stated previously, conversion as a means to an end presumably provides less motivation for adhering to religious practices than converting for more personal, intrinsic reasons (Gorsuch, 1997). Conversely, this assumption of differing motivation levels was further supported by our finding that converting due to an appreciation of Islamic cultural views was positively linked with prayer frequency. Unlike Lakhdar et al. (2007), we did not find that converting in order to increase freedom from family or societal pressures was negatively related to prayer frequency. As stated earlier, however, we did not expect this result because our "freedom" item was worded neutrally whereas Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) items were negative (e.g., "to anger certain persons that opposed me" p. 9). Thus, it appears that gaining freedom from family or societal pressures might also be considered a positive, constructive motivation by some converts.

Dissatisfaction and conversion. As hypothesized, converting due to dissatisfaction with one's former faith ranked highly. This is especially noteworthy, given that dissatisfaction was not addressed by Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) model. In fact, other than converting due to an appreciation of Islamic values, dissatisfaction was the most prevalent reason. It also received the highest importance rating from those who endorsed it. Also as predicted, roughly 90% of those citing dissatisfaction identified their former faith as some form of Christianity. Quantitative ratings did not elucidate the nature of discontent, but the 30 write-in responses classified as Dissatisfaction with Former Faith were informative. Specifically, qualitative assessment of these responses suggested dissatisfaction in the form of a) 14 tenet-related responses, b) 6 denomination-related responses, and c) 10 miscellaneous responses.

Tenet-related write-in responses constituted the most common form of dissatisfaction. This is not surprising given that the most prevalent write-in responses conversely expressed appreciation of Muslim tenets. Furthermore, more than half of these dissatisfaction statements articulated problems with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Examples of these write-in response included “[There] is one God, no Trinity,” and “Jesus is not God.” Whereas Christian orthodoxy teaches that there is one God, albeit triune, participants’ rejection of the Trinity likely relates to the Muslim concept of *shirk*. Adams (1995) notes that *shirk* is the worst form of *kufir* (disbelief) and notes, “[t]he great fault of the Christians is the same as that of the polytheists: they ascribe associates to God and thus are guilty of the capital sin of *shirk*” (p. 440). It seems improbable, however, that committed Christians would commonly choose to reject the Trinity, given this concept’s centrality (particularly regarding Jesus’ divinity) to Christian orthodoxy. It might be more likely that those who claimed dissatisfaction with the Trinity might have chosen Islam after having been involved only casually with Christian faith practice.

Alternately, it might be that women citing problems with the Trinity do so after already converting to Islam and then later learning about *shirk*. As such, it is possible that some women in our sample reinterpreted their past religious history, especially because doing so is part of “the process of creating a Muslim identity” (Bourque, 2006, p. 242). Such an explanation would be consistent with cognitive dissonance research, particularly studies that link dissonance to self-concept maintenance (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995).

Six participants cited dissatisfaction with Christianity due to denomination-related concerns, including clergy (e.g., [being required to go to a] “priest. . .to forgive or decide if I’m good enough”) and worship style (e.g., “I do not like all the crazy singing and fainting that goes on in the churches”). These reasons illustrate that dissatisfactions sometimes did not apply to Christianity in general. For instance, confessing to a priest is not relevant to Protestants, and “singing and fainting” typically refers only to Pentecostal/Charismatic worship, which is known for its emotional expressiveness (Trice & Bjorck, 2006). Together, however, these examples show that some participants seemed to

generalize their negative experiences regarding a particular denomination to the entire Christian faith, which then motivated them to convert.

For whatever specific reason, changing one’s religion due to dissatisfaction or conflicts with one’s old religious beliefs is understandable, especially given that a sense of discontentment, that is, between “the *ought* and the *is*,” often precedes religious conversion (Paloutzian, 2005, p. 337, italics in the original). Still, converts’ critical expressions regarding their old religion might also be somewhat distorted in light of their dedication to the new belief system. To this end, Haddad, Smith, and Moore (2006) argue that:

[c]onverts to any different way of thought and action are notoriously zealous in their critique of the old and defense of the new. Women who choose to adopt Islam are no different, and one can sense in their stories an eagerness to convince themselves that Islam is truly superior to Christianity in many important ways (p. 52).

Alternately, however, it is equally possible that participants’ genuine dissatisfactions motivated conversion to Islam, which they indeed perceived as a superior faith. Future research should seek to clarify these alternative possibilities.

Converts with no former faith. Our final hypothesis regarding the presence of formerly nonreligious women among the converts was also supported. In fact, whereas Kosmin et al. (2001) reported that roughly 13% of persons in the United States are secular and/or nonreligious, over 25% of our sample reported having no former faith before converting to Islam. This, together with the prevalence of conversion by those dissatisfied with Christianity, contradicts the suggestion (Moughrabi, 1995) that the growth of Islam in the United States is primarily due to immigration. Indeed, the idea of an immigration-based increase in United States Muslims was further called into question by the characteristics of the larger sample from which the current sample was drawn. Specifically, the current sample of 304 converts comprised the majority (64%) of the larger sample of 538 United States residents who responded to the overall survey for the larger ongoing research project. Thus, the minority (36%) of the larger sample were not converts and may or may not have been immigrants who already held Muslim beliefs.

Qualitative Findings

Whereas quantitative findings supported the nine listed reasons, qualitative analysis of write-in responses suggested four other reasons for conversion. Three of these could be categorized within the same two general groupings proposed for the other nine: (a) active (values/theology, personal) and (b) passive (social). The most common reason, choosing Islam for its tenets, fits well within with the values/theology subgroup. Such doctrine-based conversion might also overlap with Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) conformist conversion, given the latter's emphasis of an appreciation of tenets. Indeed, we would suggest that Lakhdar et al.'s conformist category might have been better labeled "tenet-based," given that the items on their measure collectively seemed to address theological issues more than a conformist desire for structure and moral guidance. Converting to gain a sense of significance or meaning seems to be a clearly personal reason, similar to Lakhdar et al.'s telic (intellectual) motivation. Converting due to the example of Muslim role models living out their faith could easily be placed within the social category. Although these categorizations are tentative, they add support for the idea that active reasons are more prevalent than passive ones. Specifically, Tenets (active) was the most popular reason, followed by Significance/Meaning (active), with Role Models (passive) the least prevalent.

The remaining reason, converting due to a sense of destiny or intuition, did not fit clearly within either values/theology, personal, or social categories. This reason might be seen as another passive basis for conversion, however, similar to Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) paratelic category (passive, impulsive, experiential, etc.). Certainly, responses conveying that converting intuitively "felt right" and responses conveying that converting was "meant to be" both reflect a passive, experiential approach. Still, future research might benefit from closer inspection of destiny and intuition as two separate motives for conversion to see if significant functional differences between them might exist.

Of all the write-in responses, 44 were ambiguous. This is unfortunate and might be related to the small space (200 characters) provided for each written response. Future research might benefit from permitting respondents to write

more and/or follow-up on unclear responses. For the most part, however, these 44 responses were considerably less than 200 characters, suggesting that a small but significant number of respondents might have simply written their responses in haste, resulting in semantic errors.

Islam in the United States: A Unique Scenario?

The current findings point to the appeal of Islam to women converts in America. This raises the question, however, regarding whether this phenomenon generalizes to other countries. The influence of American culture, replete with its Judeo-Christian underpinnings, needs to be taken into account when considering this question. The fact that Muslims constitute a minority in the United States and are surrounded by a non-Islamic culture raises the possibility that Islam in America differs from Islam in Muslim-based societies. For example, it is possible that American converts are attracted to a less controversial and/or complex version of the religion. In fact, the majority of Western Muslim converts read the Yusuf Ali's English translation, the commentary of which "smooths over controversial sections and provides reinterpretations as a defense of the Qur'an and its message, which had been developed over a century of encounter and debates with evangelical Christian missionaries" (Haddad, 2006, p. 29). Indeed, Haddad reported that Qur'anic experts are often confused upon hearing these converts' assertion that there is nothing befuddling in this Muslim holy book for them, which implies that even experts expect questions to arise in relation to the sacred text. Research is needed to discover whether American Muslims' practice of Islam does avoid the more controversial and/or provocative dogmas. If this is found to be true, it might further elucidate the attraction of converting to Islam in the United States.

Another possible difference between Islam in America versus that which is practiced in Muslim-based societies may be rooted in the United States' Constitution, which protects free speech and therefore makes it possible for more liberal and/or feminist Muslim views to propagate. Indeed, female Muslim authors, such as Ahmed (1992), Barazangi (2004), McCloud (2000), and Wadud (1999, 2003), have utilized this freedom to expound on controversial issues within Islam

in general and American Islam in particular. In each case, they have proposed alternative interpretations of the religion's sacred texts in the search of a more egalitarian Islam. Such interpretations might be more readily accepted in the United States than in Muslim countries. In contrast, Keddie (2004) notes, "[D]espite attempts by some Muslims to reinterpret Islam as compatible with gender equality, resistance to improving women's status has generally been greater in the Muslim world than elsewhere" (p. 25).

Limitations

Despite the satisfactory return rate, data collection was methodologically limited. Because the survey was posted online, the veracity of either the participants' responses or identities could not be guaranteed. Aside from the one web site link, however, there was no other study publicity; so only visitors to this web site, or those whom these visitors informed, received any information about the survey. Data were also screened for obvious fictitious responses (i.e., all positive, all negative, etc.), and none were found. The survey was also programmed to allow only one completion from any given IP address, discouraging multiple entries by one person. Thus, given this particular web site's ongoing history of other successful surveys, data likely reflected a genuine sample of U.S. converts to Islam, with the obvious generalizability limitations of participants being highly educated and Internet-savvy. It is also difficult to gauge whether this sample's sectarian background is representative of the general Muslim American population, since there is no reliable source available to compare (Y. Y. Haddad, personal communication, April 25, 2007). In addition, the research design was also limited. Specifically, even though participants' conversions occurred approximately 11 years previously on average, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretations. Another limitation concerned the historical self-report responses, which could have been subject to social desirability and/or possibly could have involved converts retrospectively reinterpreting their preconversion narratives (Bourque, 2006; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999).

Conclusions

In spite of the aforementioned limitations, this study presents several important findings that can provide a useful foundation upon which future conversion studies of Islamic women can build. First, women who decide to become Muslim in the United States appear to do so for a bevy of reasons, suggesting a complex process meriting further study. Among our sample, common reasons included an almost universal draw of Islamic values over and against secular values, a highly prevalent dissatisfaction with former faith, the desire to solidify one's identity, and the appeal of Islamic views regarding gender roles and ethnicity. Moreover, qualitative analysis suggested the appreciation of Islamic tenets as another common reason for conversion. Second, it is also noteworthy that conversions typically occurred in adulthood, consistent with Kose's (1996b) study and that almost 30% of these women reported graduate education. Together, these findings contradict any popular assumption that women's conversion to Islam is due to extenuating circumstances. Conversely, they suggest that this choice to become Muslim is a mature decision, primarily involving active, intrinsically motivated reasons. Third, whereas some women did choose Islam for more passive, extrinsically motivated reasons, such as marriage or the influence of friends, these reasons were much less common. This finding is also consistent with Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) study but contrary to research on Christian samples (Loveland, 2003; Roof, 1989), where the possibility of marriage or the influence of friends are prominent reasons for switching religious groups. Clearly, future research should view conversion as a potentially diverse phenomenon with respect to various faith groups.

The current findings also clearly point to several new directions for research on Muslim conversion. First, developing a more uniform framework for discussing Islamic conversion would be advantageous, in comparison to the multiple systems that independent researchers have suggested thus far. To this end, Lakhdar et al.'s (2007) model shows promise, particularly if dissatisfaction with a former faith and/or preference for Islamic versus secular values are added as significant reason for conversion. Second, future research should focus on gender

differences regarding Islamic conversion. Even though Lakhdar et al. did not find gender differences in their French sample, our findings certainly cannot be assumed to generalize to Muslim men. Third, even though ethnicity was not a focus of this study, preliminary results suggested significant differences between women of African and Caucasian descent. Thus, ethnic influences on conversion should be examined more closely. Fourth, whereas comparison across sects was not possible, given the very small number of non-Sunni Muslims, future studies should examine how sect differences might influence reasons for conversion. These unanswered questions notwithstanding, the current study shows that women's conversion to Islam is a complex issue that should no longer be ignored. Indeed, ongoing empirical research in this area will likely increase understanding not only regarding Muslim women but also regarding converts in general.

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