

CONVERSION TO ISLAM AND VEILING AMONG AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN
IN KANSAS

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Liberal Studies.

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DEDICATION

To the greatest woman in the world and the Hereafter;
Fatima Zahra,
Daughter to Prophet Mohammad Prophet of Islam,
Wife to Imam Ali the Chief of the believers, and
Mother to Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain
The prime leaders of the people of Paradise
(Peace be upon all of them)

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Islam has come of age in America. Despite Islam being a controversial subject, its presence in America is obvious, becoming the fastest growing religion in the United States. While Americans are selecting Islam as a religion and way of life, the number of converts of women outnumber men by about four times, raising the question of why women more than men have converted to Islam.

The process and reasons for American and European women's conversion to Islam have been studied by scholars of American Muslims and especially American converts to Islam. My thesis reveals that women converts in Wichita offer similar reasons for conversion to those discovered by these other scholars. As with their studies, I found through ethnographic interviews that American women experienced problems with the Christian concept of the trinity, were attracted to the Islamic notion of women's rights, and found satisfaction in the comprehensiveness of Islam. I also explored what converts think Islamic beliefs are regarding women covering, since while covering is a widespread cultural practice in countries that are Muslim-majority, the hijab stands out as a minority practice in countries where the vast majority of the population is not Muslim.

The approach used in this study was to use a snowball sampling technique to find subjects for face-to-face interviews in which I asked a series of questions. A total of 20 female conversion narratives were examined in hopes of answering the question of what motivated these women to convert as well as what the converts thought about hijab. My research reveals that because my informants are American Muslims, their conformity to Quranic rules concerning modesty in dress is expressed in terms of their rights as women to personal dignity and freedom.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Islam is a controversial subject, its presence in America is obvious, as it has become the fastest growing religion in the United States (Naoual, 2012). Surveys performed by Council on American Islamic Relations indicate that 20,000 people convert to Islam each year (Sirin and Fine, 2008). While Americans are selecting Islam as a religion and way of life, it is surprising that the number of converts of women outnumber men by about four times (Haddad et al., 2006). According to a more recent study released by the Pew Research Center in 2011, the number of Muslims in America is estimated to be 2.3 percent of the U.S. population i.e., about seven million people. Smith (1999) has indicated that Islam now constitutes one of the three major religions in America.

In some Western countries, Muslim women have been represented as oppressed, submissive, and backward. There are many negative stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices about American Muslim women, and these are widely shared across the Western world (Haddad et al., 2006). It is curious that such a great number of women have left behind their history and culture and sought a religion that has been introduced into the United States as a violent religion relative to both personal and social life. Many people wonder how American women could intentionally convert to Islam, because of its association with oppressive treatment of women (Nieuwkerk, 2006). On the other hand, as McGinty (2006) has discussed, other people in the West commit themselves to the Muslim faith, finding in Islam support for ideas about solidarity, family, social justice, and peace. The event of religious conversion raises critical problems about human beings' reflections on the meaning of life and their relation to spiritual, social, and

cultural spheres. Conversion increases awareness of the meaning of life in the sense of who one is, who one was, and who one is becoming, in short one's identity. The internalization of self-selected religious beliefs brings about major changes in a woman's life.

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the reasons behind the conversions to Islam through conducting interviews with native-born American women in Kansas using snowball sampling. This research has already been originated by other scholars or American professors in other states. The effects of implementing Islamic instructions in daily life, family, job and body covering of informants are discussed in Chapter 3. It was informative to become familiar with their identities, lives as Muslims, and what they discovered appealing within the Islamic faith. These women shared particular experiences such as having a dream or traveling to a foreign place by endowing them with emotional and existential meaning. These converts highlighted experiences that caused a need for spiritual connection with another lifestyle. They faced a long process of reflecting, discussing, reading, and experimenting with a new worldview. All conversion narratives were recorded and analyzed such that the key factors which attracted interviewees to embrace Islam were extracted. Interviewee narratives constitute one of the main sources of this research.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature about American converts and particularly American women converts to Islam, in addition, the role of hijab in converts' lives. Here, I identify the absence of research on American Muslim women converts in Kansas within scholarly and popularly literature on Islam and conversion to Islam as well as the objectives of my research that I conducted with women converts in Wichita, KS. Chapter 3 introduces the sampling method and procedures which I followed in conducting interviews with converts. It takes excerpts from interviews I did with converts organized around a series of questions to

demonstrate the reasons for conversion and beliefs about the hijab. Some converts in explaining their reasons as well as discussing the hijab compared viewpoints of Islam and Christianity through pointing out passages in the Quran and the Bible. The interviews are analyzed and discussed. Concluding remarks are presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

This chapter includes a review of the literature pertaining to American converts to Islam and the effects of their actions on their lives. This literature review is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the distribution of Muslims around the world. The second section challenges stereotypes about hijab. This section reviews the role of hijab in the converts' adapted culture, in their workplace and the opinions of Christianity about modesty dressing and head covering, while discussing different approaches for hijab. The third section focuses on topics related to this thesis that have not been addressed in the literature and presents the project's research contributions and objectives.

American Converts' Issues

Muslims around the World

The Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2010 regarding the population of Muslims around the world. The result of this study indicates that Islam has 1.63 billion followers making about 23% of the whole world population. According to same study, Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity. Regardless of the misconception in the West that most Muslim people are Arab, about 80% of the total Muslim populations in the world today are not Arab. The largest populations of Muslims live in sub-Saharan Africa (20%), South Asia (30%), and Central Asia (2%) (Sirin and Fine, 2008). The global population of Muslims is increasing, and according to a report of the Pew Research Center Forum in 2006, countries with a Muslim majority had an average population growth rate of 1.8% per year, compared to the world population growth rate of 1.12% per year. Also, the Pew Forum's new projections for

2010–2030 indicate that the world’s Muslim population is expected to increase about 35% in the next 20 years, increasing from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.2 billion in 2030.

In addition, Muslims are becoming a significant minority in Australia, Europe, and North America, in which the majority of citizens are not Muslim. France has the largest Muslim population of these Western countries, about 10% of its total population. Muslims in Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries are represented as a major minority group in each of these countries (Rath and Buijs, 2002). The number of American Muslims is the subject of political debate (Smith, 2002), in part, because the U.S. Bureau of the Census does not collect any information regarding religious affiliation of the U.S. residents since the public law 94-521 prohibits asking any questions about this topic. Nonetheless, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) estimated the number of American Muslims to be 7 million or 2.3% of the total U.S. population (Sirin and Fine, 2008). Another way of evaluating the number of American Muslims is by looking at the FACT survey, a religious practice survey conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research in 2000 (Faith Communities Today, 2006). This survey gathered data from the heads of religious sites, including mosques, in the United States. It recognized that about 2.5 million Muslims in the U.S. are associated with mosques. Of course, this survey fails to account for those who are not associated with mosques, although it is important to note that not all Muslims go to the mosque and thus there may be a potentially large number who are not counted (Sirin and Fine, 2008)¹. Islam is also currently the fastest growing religion in both America and Europe. Based on the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) done in 1990 and 2001 (Kosmin et al., 2001), the Muslim population in America grew by more than 10%

¹ Sirin and Fine (pg# 37) argues that Muslims in America may be undercounted, because belonging to a mosque is not as central to the religious affiliation practice of Islam as church or temple membership is for Christianity or Judaism respectively.

in a single decade. In the United States, there are essentially three categories of Muslims: immigrants, American converts to Islam, and those born to the first two groups as Muslims. Sirin and Fine (2008) pointed out that pace of growth in the U.S. Muslim community may be related to the continuing immigration from South Asian and Arab countries, higher birthrates among all Muslims, and conversions to Islam. They expect a reduction in the number of Muslim immigrants and an increase in the number of converts and birthrates over the next few decades.

Indeed, it is expected that Islam will become the second most populous religion after Christianity in the United States. According to a survey by Zogby International (2004), 30% of the Muslim American population is coming from South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and the Middle East countries of Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Other Muslim American immigrants belong to diverse ethnic groups, including a very large Iranian population and a much smaller population from Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Afghanistan, sub-Saharan Africa, and central and Eastern Europe. Finally, there are a small number of native-born white and Latino converts. The majority of Muslims reside in urban centers such as New York, Detroit, and Chicago, so that four-fifths of American mosques are located in metropolitan areas; they are concentrated in a few states, including almost 20% in California, 15% in New York, and the rest in Michigan, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, and Maryland. However, Muslim populations are extending across other parts of the country too (Sirin and Fine, 2008).

Women Converts to Islam in America

It seems undeniable that American converts come to Islam with the assumption that they can choose to follow Quranic instructions, while simultaneously holding onto beliefs from their upbringing as well as sharing in cultural practices of non-Muslims. Thus, a Muslim woman convert in a hijab might enthuse about her favorite Hollywood movie, U.S. reality television

show, or local professional baseball team. These women are committed to creating a Muslim American identity that is not entirely distinguishable from their previous non-Muslim identity and includes embracing democratic values grounded in the concept of a rights-bearing individual. That they have converted to a religion that is often seen as being dangerous or opposed to America as a nation state founded on liberal democratic values makes these women highly self-conscious about what it means to be Muslim (Ahmed, 2010).

According to Karim (2005), African Americans and South Asians are the two largest Muslim ethnic communities in America, and their historical experiences differ from white native-born women converts to Islam. Their American Islam differs from that of their white female counterparts, since there were Muslim Africans who came to America as slaves. More recently, the presence of Islam among the African American population has been more prominent due to the emergence of the Nation of Islam. African Americans who joined or participated in the Nation of Islam, which was first headed by Elijah Muhammad in 1934 and popularized by the charismatic leadership of Malcolm X, became a major force in the African American community. Karim (2009) exposes how African Americans and South Asian immigrants cross ethnic and racial borders in the American Muslim community as well as cooperate with other Muslim ethnic groups. Women with different ethnic personalities negotiate with others through community networks which Islam provided for them. This is because one of the important foundations of Islam is to connect different ethnicities through the unity of their belief in the pillars of Islam. She added that an individual of *ummah* is marked with Muslim identity, and Muslim women wearing a hijab are even more marked as such. This visible Muslim identity acts as the main medium of relationship.

Even though many people and the media have a historically negative viewpoint of Islam as a religion that oppresses and subordinates women in social life, a considerable number of women are converting to Islam, especially after the event of September 11, 2001 (Abdo, 2006). Dirks and Parlove (2003) indicated that the number of conversions of Americans to Islam after September 11, 2001, has quadrupled. This event has had a considerable impact in increasing converts to Islam in America (Ewing, 2008). It has raised women's curiosity and caused them to seriously study women's rights in Islam, and it has altered their perceptions of previously held negative stereotypes and prejudices (Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2007). After this event, people were encouraged to read the Quran¹. Many women converts have acknowledged that before reading the Quran, they thought the book discriminated against women, but after studying the Quran, they discovered just the opposite, because Islam has given women equal rights as men (Curtis IV, 2009). According to Al-Sheha (2000) Islam considers women equally qualified insofar as financial dealings are concerned, noting according to Islamic rules, women can buy, sell, own, and accept any kind of financial enterprise without the need for guardianship, restrictions, or limitations. Syed (2004) pointed out that the strongest support for the equality of men and women in the Quran is found in verse 4:124, which clearly states that men and women will be rewarded equally based on their deeds where it states *'If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them'*. He also pointed out that verse 3:195 supports explicitly the notion of equality in judging the work of both genders whereby states *'Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female...'*.

¹ The reasons of their persuasion are extensively argued in the last section of Chapter 3.

This might be surprising that, according to Dirks and Parlove (2003), some estimates claim 80% of American converts to Islam are women. Dirks and Parlove represent Islam as a clear need among modern American women. They argue it is important to recognize the contradiction between the popular media image of women being dominated and oppressed by Islam, and the fact that a large majority of American converts to Islam are women. At the beginning of the 20th century, American women received the right to vote. Also, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, if an American woman married a man who was not an American citizen, she automatically lost her U.S. citizenship, and at that time, if a man who was an American citizen married a woman without U.S. citizenship, then she became an American citizen. While American women struggled for women's equality and suffrage under the law, modern American women fought for the right to have successful professional careers and to be active on the corporate career ladder. According to the Quran, Islam gives women independence and security, and most Muslim women who were born in Islamic societies simply accept this as a right from God. Haddad et al. (2006) has argued that the American press and media have depicted the oppression of women in some Muslim majority countries. However, oppression does not originate in Islam but in cultural traditions that misinterpret Islam. According to Al-Sheha (2000) in Islam, the husband is responsible for taking care of the children and any aged parents at home. The wife's income belongs to her, and she does not have to spend it on household chores. It is the husband's duty to use his income to provide for the needs of the entire family's needs. As is discussed in the next section, under Islamic instructions, many rights serve to liberate women, while many Islamic laws have been established towards men to support their family. Next section is dedicated to women's liberation in Islam.

There is an image of the Muslim woman convert that assumes she decides to convert to Islam as a result of marriage to a Muslim man. Her decision to convert appears to be self-chosen only in the sense of desiring to please her husband, since it is his religion or because he wants his children to be raised as Muslims. However, it is the personal choice of women that results in this decision and conversion to Islam is not restricted to any particular age group (Aswad and Bilge, 1996). At least a third, and possibly as much as half, of the Muslim people in America include native-born Americans whose parents belong to or once belonged to some other religious tradition. Muslim American converts do not come from one specific ethnic background but rather exist within the scope of American ethnic identities.

Islam and Women's Liberation

From Islam's point of view, women's liberation is what is considered as a woman's right, power or authority as a person without consideration of sex, ethnicity or race (Naseef, 2007). The term "Liberation" is also applied to status of women compared to pre-Islamic era that women were treated as the lowest level of societies to the extent that they were buried alive. Women are regarded as one of the main foundations of societies that Islam glorifies their value and upholds their rights. According to Al-Sheha (2000), the purpose of freedom and liberation is that a woman is able to act independently socially, economically, etc, rather than dealing with the society via her guardian, which is her father, brother, or husband. Islam identifies the limitation of freedom and liberty such that an individual's behavior does not harm himself or other members of society. This limitation on both men and women is to guarantee protection of society's health psychologically, so women's freedom comes from what protects their dignity and identity within the family and society. With this definition of liberation in Islam, the Quran provides an affirmation of a woman as a woman such that, the men and women are equal in the

eyes of God. According to Quran *'They (women) are your garment and you are their garment ...'* (2:187). It can be concluded from this statement that men and women protect and are complementary to each other while nobody has any privilege over others except by righteousness (Tabatabai, 1988).

Reasons for Converting to Islam

American women converts have traveled different roads than those Muslim women who were born into an Islamic society or have grown up as Muslims in Muslim households. Also, sometimes subtle nuances between American culture and different Western cultures of Europe cause the paths of American Muslim women and European Muslim women to be different (Dirks and Parlove, 2003). American Muslim women's backgrounds, education, and culture, as well as certain kinds of fundamental value formation, are firmly rooted in their American heritage. Converts come to know what is important: individual virtue, regardless of ethnicity, language, the role of race, etc. In that way, they personally share an Islamic religious legacy with an American cultural heritage. However, it must be accepted that while their dual legacy as American Muslim women is very valuable to them, at times it may be difficult.

Dirks and Parlove (2003) have argued that these converts have clear reasons for their decision. They document that, women converts firmly believe in the theological superiority of Islam over Christianity. Women converts reject the doctrine of original sin along with the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Many say that they find Islamic doctrine compared to the three elements of the trinity to have no contradiction. Haddad et al. (2006, p.51) stated, "Some have noted that they always found it hard to see the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of the same scripture. Not only are they different in style, but the Old Testament clearly says that

there is only one God while the New Testament, really seems to say that there are three despite the claim that these are simply aspects of one unity.”

Converting to Islam

Islam does not require any type of ceremony for conversion; becoming Muslim is very private and easily performed. Regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, a person is considered Muslim, when he or she pronounces in Arabic, “Allah is the only God, and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger.” With the declaration of this testimony, he or she becomes a Muslim. Muslims with different cultures attend mosques or masjids all over the world, and some of them also attend the religious schools considered to teach the objectives of Islam, which are accessible for a variety of age groups (Bagby et al., 2001).

Representation of Quranic Teachings in Daily Life

Muslims believe that Quranic teachings are presented in every aspect of life. For the practicing Muslim, no arena of life exists without the presence of God and Quranic teachings. It means that Islam has detailed instructions for all public and private daily life of the Muslims including for the workplace, child-rearing, family relationships, marriage, divorce, education, moral and immoral behaviors, cruelty and justice, and so on. For example, a Muslim prays five times a day, fasts thirty days in month of Ramadan, and follows so many other instructions in daily life. One of the main sources of this claim is in several verses from the Quran: Verse 16:89, “. . . *We have sent down to you a Book explaining all things, a Guide, a Mercy, and Good Tidings to Muslims*”; verse 6:38, “*Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end*”; verse 27:75, “*Nor is there anything of the Unseen, in heaven or earth, but is in this clear record*”; and verse 6:59, “*There is not a grain in the darkness (or*

depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered), but is inscribed in this record clear (to those who can read).”

Role of Hijab in Daily Life

This part of the literature review focuses on one of the Quran’s teaching; women covering their bodies and particularly the viewpoints of American converts to Islam. Before starting the discussion about the role of the hijab in daily life, it requires us to make clear the interaction between faith and the practice of Islamic instructions. One of the most important points in Islamic teachings is the relationship between beliefs and deeds. In Islam, the correct belief should be supported by the righteous deeds and vice versa. That is, a good deed should be established based on a correct belief. Otherwise, the belief and the good deeds are lonely worth nothing (Mutahhari, 2007). Mutahhari, as an Islamic scholar, indicates this relation between beliefs and deeds from the Quran where it says ‘*Verily man is in loss, except such as have faith and do righteous deeds, and join together in the mutual teaching of Truth, ...*’(103:2-3). As a result, from the view point of a Muslim, there is a tight and interrelated connection between Islamic beliefs and their applications in all aspects of daily life. “Body covering” is one of those principles that Islam has issued certain instructions thereof. Islam believes that following these instructions by both men and women helps the society to have a peaceful environment which is ready for progress.

Delaney (1991) quotes Abdelwahab Bouhdiba’s statement that Islam is an “a stable attention paid to one’s own body.” Syed (2004) points to the representation of Quranic teachings in every condition of life. He also adds that one important feature of daily practice for women is covering the body and to some extent even for men. Demographers of the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life calculated some regional statistics on the percentage of

women who wear the veil. They collaborated with researchers at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria on projections for the United States and Europe. Among American Muslims, approximately 5% to 15% of women wear the hijab. In the Middle East, 60% to 70% of women wear the veil, although in some areas like Saudi Arabia, this figure is around 99%. In South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) 3% to 5% of women have hijab coverings, and this number is higher in rural areas. Afghanistan is not included in this calculation because the Taliban's control remains uncertain. In East Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia) approximately 30% to 50% of women wear the hijab.

Definition of Hijab and Stereotypes in the U.S. regarding its Meaning

The main objective of this section is to explore Islam's opinions about the Muslim body, focusing on the head and the morphology, or shape of the body. In achieving this objective, the term "hijab" is defined correcting misreading of the term. Quranic understandings of the meaning of hijab and related Ayahs or verses are also addressed.

The Arabic word for hijab, *hajaba*, meaning "hide from view" refers generally to Islamic modest dressing. But hijab has a wider meaning of modesty, morality, and privacy (Guindi, 2003). The phrase "hide from view" does not refer to being covered, as being hidden behind a curtain or existing in the harem. The hijab is not just covering the body and hair, thoughts, speech and actions are important as well. A person's speech and actions can destroy everything the hijab is supposed to achieve (Mutahhari, 2007). For women, hijab acts as a symbol of women's choice, piety, and personal privacy. Modest dress has an undeniable role in making the interaction between men and women appropriate (Karim, 2009). Stowasser (1998) described hijab as a passport for women to any public space with men. Fatima Mernissi (1991) defined the multidimensional meanings of the word hijab, which popularly refers to the hair covering,

although this is not the original Quranic or cultural meaning of the word. She explained the three dimension of hijab as “The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark border, to establish a threshold, and finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden... Space hidden by a hijab is a forbidden space.”

The non-Muslim population sometimes confuses harem and hijab, because they equate hijab with harem; this is a result of their not knowing the range of meanings associated with the Arabic word, haram. Haram means “forbidden” in Arabic, and while both the institution of the harem in Islamic history and the contemporary hijab are related to that term, the hijab cannot be reduced to the institution of the harem in Islamic history. While some non-Muslims think that the hijab derives from Islamic instructions that women be placed behind curtains or not leave the house, the Islamic religion does not prescribe that women be imprisoned in the home. The harem was a product of the ancient Islamic Near East, where royal households contained quarters for the wives, children, and concubines of a king or nobleman. The purpose of the harem was to protect these women’s privacy from violation by men.

The Western image of the harem as a space of royal despotism began in the 18th century with European contact with the Near East, travelers, painters, missionaries, colonial administrators become fascinated with the harem, as evidenced by the emergence of Orientals. During the Ottoman Empire, the harem was to house women who were being raised to marry noble and royal men. Eventually, the harem or women’s quarters in Muslim societies came to be associated with and came to be related to the idea that men were forbidden from violating their privacy. Hijab in modern terms does not mean harem, but associated with outside of the house and mobility (Mernissi, 1991), because the purpose of Islam is not to imprison women. The

philosophy of hijab in Islam refers to covering the body against men to whom they are not related based on what is believed to be Divine Law: *na-mahram* (those men that women cannot marry).

Images of Hijab

In the United States and Canada, hijab is a symbol of oppression and backwardness in the eyes of most non-Muslim American people, and most Muslim women that have covering encounter prejudicial attitudes in many parts of American life (Haddad et al., 2006). However, some scholars, including Mutahhari (2007), argue that oppression comes in other ways such as when women are treated as sex objects for selling products or, when some jobs expect women to wear clothing that is appealing to the eye of the opposite sex. He discusses the hijab is a protection in the sense that when a woman wears the hijab, other people are left to judge her on her intellect and character, not on whether they find the woman attractive, or if they think she needs a different hair color or style. American Muslims respect women's right to choose their Islamic dress and they expect other Americans who are not Muslims to do the same.

Anway (1995) argued that negative issues about a Muslim's lifestyle occur in the media but converts' responses show extremely positive reactions to such stories. One convert who was raised in a non-Muslim family believes that although hijab is viewed by some as oppression, it has been the most amazing and liberating experience of her life. As will be explained in Chapter 3, many women converts feel Islam has given them a sense of freedom that they did not experience in their previous lives. Tarlo (2010) indicated that American women converts have expressed that wearing the hijab is not a form of repression but an assertion that their body is private. Dressing modestly stresses to women to obtain power by using their intellect and mind.

It is a symbol to show others that Muslim women are passionate about this Quranic instruction (Mutahhari, 2007).

Hijab in the Workplace

Haddad (1991) stated that, in the Islamic community, the idea about whether hijab covering is necessary or not is broad and depends on a woman's opinion. McGinty (2006) reported that most Muslim women believe hijab gives them freedom to work in any profession because there is no unwanted advance from men with whom they work. However, there are some situations in which Muslim women with hijab find it hard to be accepted for a job. McGinty also argued that, in the workplace, employers often look suspiciously at a Muslim woman with hijab and fear that other employees and customers will find it strange and think of it as a sign of religious fanaticism. Yet, another viewpoint of the American people relative to hijab is that it is a symbol "of cultural difference, a threat to security, or a personal expression of religiosity" (Haddad, 1991). In recent years, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has been considering cases of prejudicial behavior in the workplaces (McGinty, 2006). For example, women with covering who cannot professionally progress or are not hired in the first place, immediately report this information to the Islamic press and the Internet. Companies that exhibit such discrimination may be forced to apologize or return a woman to her job or prepare for antidiscrimination proceedings.

Different Kinds of Hijab

There are different kinds of hijab: most south Asians wear a dupatta hijab, a long rectangular scarf that covers the ears and upper neck, or a triangle hijab, a square scarf folded into a triangle. Some of them are not required to have covering while in the community. Karim (2009) pointed out that African American women have understood the description of modesty

from the American context of Catholic nuns covering their heads with wimples that tied in the back not in the front. There is a community of Muslims under the leadership of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (WDM community) founded in 1975 and recognized as the largest organized group of African American Muslims. The women of this community wear head wraps that raise the head, leaving the ears uncovered and revealing the upper neck. This model of head wrap shows their culture and modesty. There are diverse culture expressions of covering in Islam, and the Quran does not advocate a particular fashion of dress (Karim, 2009). Figure 2.1 shows the corresponding hijab for a number of cultures regarding different countries.



Figure 2.1 Different cultures for implementation of hijab.
From above left to right: Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Iran

Ayahs of Hijab in the Quran

The central reference point for religious understandings of Islamic dress is the Quran. The hijab is derived from the Islam's revealed book, the Quran, and the hadith (William and Vashi, 2007). Two Surahs (divisions) of the Quran, Nur and Ahzab, include the statement of hijab. The key verse on women's dress states, '*Say to the believing women that they should lower*

their glances and guard their private parts, and not display their charms and ornaments except what ordinarily appears thereof. They should let their khumur [head scarves, singular khimar] fall to cover their juyub [two possible meaning; breast or necklines] except . . . (a list of some exceptions of particular individuals).’ (24:31). This Ayah specifies the guidelines of hijab in detail; the faithful women should extend the coverage of bosoms, chests and necks with their head scarves except for some individuals. At the time of revealing this Ayah, it was common that Muslim or non-Muslim women in Medina normally would wear long head covers, thrown behind ears and shoulders. They would also wear vests open in the front, exposing their bosom, chest and neck carelessly. Some people interpret that the Quranic verse primarily sought to have women cover their chests up to the beginning of the cleavage. While some other women interpret this verse as a command to use one’s hair garment to cover the neck, the neckline, and their breast, others see this command to use any piece of cloth to only cover bare breasts. Some women cover their hair and wear garments up to their necklines, but some of them do not cover their ears, necks, and bosoms. However, others commit themselves to do so (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003).

The other most important verse on women’s dress states, *‘Prophet! Tell your wives, your daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested (not insulted). And God is most forgiving, most merciful.’ (33:59)* Molest here means a physical abuse or harassment. Some Muslim women interpret this verse for women to wear loose garments, while there is no mentioning of any specified dress code for women as long as they remain modest. Others, however, translate the Quranic word “outer garments” to *jalabib* (plural of *jilbab*) and wear a particular type of dress known as *jilbab* (Karim, 2009). The Quran

explicitly declares in this Ayah the manners to prevent the sex harassment and instigations for believing women in their society. Through the application of hijab, Islam preempts any possibility of misdeeds caused by the intruders. Hijab is considered, in these verses, as a safeguard that elevates the modesty and honor of women. Verse (33:59) indicates that women with an appropriate covering of their body are protected from any lustful gaze that causes harassment of any kind. At the time of revealing this Ayah, women did not have any proper way of covering their bodies, so some men exploited the situation through staring intently at women's bare body parts aggressively as a mere sex object resulting to series of assaults and rapes. Hijab is declared as an index of distinction of faithful women from others, so as to preserve their identity and so that men cannot harass them (the part of '*they should be known and not molested*' in 33:59). Some interviewees pointed to the fact that hijab has distinguished them from unbelievers in their societies while allowing them more concentration and peace of mind. Verse 33:32 states, '*O Consorts of the Prophet! Ye are not like any of the other women: if ye do fear (Allah), be not too complacent of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speech (that is) just.*' In this verse, disease of the heart means lack of power of faith in Quranic terms. In this manner, hijab secures women against the people who might violate the rights of other people in the society.

As a result, the philosophy beyond of the Ayahs of hijab is that Islam emphasizes two important elements of hijab from a sociological point of view. First, hijab is regarded as a powerful approach to prevent social misconduct and to establish psychological security 1400 years ago. Second, hijab shows that the believing women want to demonstrate that the evaluation of social standards is not based on physical shape but on manners, deeds and mind. The faithful women do not want to follow the fashions imposed purposely on them in their daily life. Hijab

unites the believing women in the world. The devoted women are not willing to show off their bodies and attract men outside their houses, because much of this kind of exposure of sensual parts of a woman's body arouses men, and misleadingly guides them to realize their dream, endangering their relationship with their spouses and leading up to putting their marriage at risk.

Islamic Views of Hijab

The Quran does not insist on any particular fashion or dress. However, some Islamic scholars have interpreted the verses of hijab based on hadith of the prophet to mean that women should cover their head, neck, and bosom, except the face and hands, from wrists to fingers (Karim 2009, Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003, Alvi et al., 2003). Since everything has been mentioned in the Quran briefly, some phrases and terms of the Quran need to be interpreted by the Prophet and his Ahlul-Bayt because the Quran states, *'We have sent down this Quran to you the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may give thought'* (16:44). According to this verse, for answering the question about which part of the body should be exactly covered, we must refer to the hadith of the prophet and his Ahlul-Bayt. In one hadith, some people quoted the prophet Muhammad who said, "In the age of puberty, no part of a woman's body should be seen but this . . . and pointed to his face and hands" (Mutahhari, 2007), so, it is worth mentioning that covering the face and hands has not been imposed by Islam. According to the interpretation of the vast majority of scholars, as exemplified by Allameh Tabatabai (1988), from the Quran and the hadith hijab means not only covering the head but also the entire body, except for the face and hands. The statement, *'The believing women should not display their charms and ornaments and should let their head scarves fall to cover their breast or necklines'* of the Quran (24:31) points out wearing a cloth over other clothes to conceal the shape of the body. Even though the Quran has not specified a certain dress for Muslims to wear,

it has stated some requirements. First, the Quran identified parts of the body that must be covered. Second, the looseness of dress should be such that the morphology of a woman's body is not shown. Third, the thinness of clothing should not be such that the color of the skin and the shape of the body are shown. Fourth, the dress should not be flashy or shiny to attract undue attention.

Body Covering in Christianity

Table 2.1 shows a comparison of modest dressing and covering the head from the viewpoint of the Bible and the Quran. The Ayahs of hijab in the Quran were discussed in previous sections. On the other hand, the Bible states that women should cover their head when they are praying, while men do not (1 Corinthians 11:3-6). Furthermore, the Bible (1 Timothy 2:9-10) commands women to dress modestly and avoid using gold or expensive clothes. It has been emphasized in the New Testament (1 Peter 3:2-5) the real beauty of women lies in their actions and deeds not the way they dress, their ornaments or appearance. There are, of course, different interpretations by different commentators, some believing that women should avoid wearing provocative dresses, while some thinking that women should cover their heads only during praying. Others maintain that women should dress modestly according to the customary dress code of the society in which they live.

TABLE 2.1

HEAD COVERING AND MODESTY DRESSING
FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE BIBLE AND THE QURAN

<i>1 Corinthians 11:3-6</i>	<i>Quran 33:59</i>
<p><i>‘Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head. . . . If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head’</i></p>	<p><i>‘O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’</i></p>
<i>1 Timothy 2:9-10(New Testament)</i>	<i>Quran 24:31</i>
<p><i>‘I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.’</i></p>	<p><i>‘...they (believing women) should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women...or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex...’</i></p>
<i>1 Peter 3:2-5(New Testament)</i>	
<p><i>‘Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.’</i></p>	

Figure 2.2 depicts Christian Nuns wearing hijab and covering hair. Early 1900, the exact date of this photo is unknown.



Figure 2.2 Christian Nuns with hijab in Turkey
<http://www.forumbiodiversity.com/showthread.php?t=31632>

Interview-based Research on American Women Converts to Islam

Considering the fact that this thesis is based on the conducted interviews, this section deals with interview based literature in relation to America-born converts to Islam. To highlight the importance of the point, the differences of this thesis and the work done by other scholars are summarized in two basic arguments. First one is the field work methodology, explained in Chapter 3 as snowball sampling. Second, their arguments are in form of comparison of the new religion and their old knowledge based on the main sources of the Bible and the Quran. This process makes a better understanding of the ultimate decision making of the converts to the readers.

Naoual (2012) in her article, Women and Conversion to Islam, The American Women's Experience, examines the reasons behind the increasing American women trend to Islam during

the recent decades and especially after 9/11. While introducing some cites which have cleared out the situation of the American Muslim women, she deals with searching the answer of how despite negative media against Islam, we witness a considerable rate of growth in conversion of women to Islam in American non-Muslim families. She answers the question using sixteen videos of conversion narratives. Through exploring the narratives, she finds two main motivational grounds behind it. The first is the “personal”, arguing the notion that “women would sacrifice everything including their religion so as to keep their marital relations with their husband” could not be true and be judged as original reason for the conversion of American women to Islam. She continues that the most important primary reason of confusion of convert women is “Trinity”. Furthermore, she mentions that the highly important element of their rationale for the converts is Quran and its *raison d’être* which is in contrast with what they have already learnt prior to conversion. At the end, Naoual masterly elaborates “The controversy of Christianity is another main reason that pushes the native-born American women to embrace Islam.”

Ahmed et al. (2010) in their book, *Journey into America*, tries to shed light to the importance of co-existing relations between the different religions. They point out the basic troubles of all societies and nations and show that how they can live together peacefully. They also offer solutions for the mutual understanding of Islam and other minorities, and Christianity as well in the United States. As a matter of fact, the book builds a kind of bridge amongst different religions and by doing so; it discusses the issue of “Interfaith”. This book presents an excellent inner approach to “diversity” and “vibrancy” of the American Islam, briefly, it expresses the exigency for the people of the world to live better and respect each others’ ideas and beliefs.

In reality, for many Americans, their knowledge of Islam has a long way to go and they are not aware of the role of Islam in the U.S. history. The authors offer several different subjects to explain. For example, the first country recognizing the U.S. officially as an independent nation was Morocco, a Muslim country and the first man stepped on North American soil was a North African Berber with an Islamic background in 1620, before the landing of Mayflower. President Jefferson was always carrying a copy of Quran who was learning Arabic to understand it, holding the first Presidential *Iftar* in month of Ramadan in the White House and even the Statue of Liberty has some Islamic connotations. The subject matter of this book is that both Muslims and non-Muslims have to avoid any wrong accusations, blame or prejudice to each other. Ahmed and his associated have discovered many of the Islamic cultural contributions to the United States. Through obvious reasoning, the authors emphasize it is necessary that U.S. societies should possess a right comprehension of Islam at the present. For example, American troops are located in several Muslim countries and that Islam maintains 25% of the world population, also that Muslims play a vital role in academic and business sectors of the United States. Their projects covered all categories of history, religion and political science.

Professor Ahmed, in association with his team spent one year for preliminary studies and interviews with the Islamic and non-Islamic top scholars and worked around nine months for execution process, visiting seventy five cities and more than one hundred mosques. They utilized anthropological methods called “participant observation”. This technique offers enough time for the researchers to obtain accurate information, so by face-to-face meetings with them and their families during their daily routine practices such as prayer or other religious and social activities, they could chat with them to ask them about the details of what they do or believe. They strongly believe that no other method could replace the anthropological approach to study Islam in

America. They collected about two thousand open-ended questionnaires with two objectives. The first is to find out about the vision of a special person in a special time of his life on his environment. The second is uncovering his personality. This method provides more detailed information from people that the multiple-choice questionnaires could not. Amongst the questions were American identity, the books they read, the media source of their opinions, and “What do you think as the biggest threat to the U.S.?” Despite the prediction of the research team that they thought “terrorism” would be the response; their answer was “ignorance and compromising of civil liberties”.

Karim (2009), the author of “American Muslim Women”, is an African American researcher and university instructor. In her book, she interviews Muslim men and women from different nationalities in Chicago and Atlanta to find out about their common ideas and racial differences amongst American Muslims in these two regions. She argues mainly about race and class relations in Muslim communities. By pointing out to the fact that South Asian and African American immigrants are the biggest ethnic Muslim groups in the U.S., she declares that the attitude and the reaction of these two groups towards each other have created differences and gaps amongst them. In this book, a widespread connection between the two factions at the basis of “American identity” and “American experience” has been portrayed, at the same time, she expresses that how Islam has synergized, united and bonded them together. Karim brings the concept of *ummah* under discussion in the two mentioned states and synonyms it with “American Muslim Community”. She delves into the fact that “How Islamic ideas of racial harmony and equality create hopeful possibilities in an American society that remains challenged by race and class inequalities”.

Following the 9/11 event, many American came to the conclusion by accusing Muslims to be oppressive and cruel towards women. Haddad et al. (2006) is amongst many books published in this field, according to the authors, in which, women's environments and their treatment pre and post 9/11 in the U.S. and Canada has been brought under scrutiny to clear the dark clouds and illustrate an improved understanding of Islam in west. This book institutes a better perception of the problems women converts are facing and how their identity will be modified following their conversion. It also demonstrates how Muslim women in the U.S. have been energized to overcome their social issues. Through quoting and narrating the expressions of American Muslim women throughout the U.S., this book undertakes to portrait the role of American Muslim women in transformation of image of Islam in the U.S.

In this book, primarily, she describes the general circumstances, history and population distribution of Muslim women in the U.S. and at in continuation quotes the informants' responses to the following question, "Why any woman would select intentionally to become a Muslim whereas the general perception in which Muslim women draped in heavy clothes and oppressed by their men"? A section of the book deals also with U.S. scholar activist women and one chapter assigned to women's education, employment and their relations with other family members. The authors discuss the critiques of the effective role of women in Islamic traditions performed in varieties of religious organizations.

McGinty (2006) in her book, *Becoming Muslim*, has done interviews with six Swedish and three American ladies regarding their "personalized views" from Islam. The core issues of this book is that conversion is a "personal model" rather than a "public discourse", therefore, it takes its roots from biography and history of their life. The word "Becoming" at the title of this book refers to the fact that "Conversion" is a process rather than a sudden change and comes up

after following a elongated period of study, research, meditation, pondering and conversation with experts and others. Through the extended face-to-face interviews, the diversified connotation of “Americanness”, “Swedishness”, “Muslimness” and “Femaleness” in relation to each other have been brought into discussion. McGinty has expressed the views of interviewees that how challenging it is to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim atmosphere. For example even though Hijab is firmly tied and associated to the distinctiveness and characterization of a Muslim woman, but for some interviewees, it necessitates time to get used to it. In her book, she refers to three main principles associated with family, Job and connection with other Muslim women.

Rouse (2004) in her book, *Engaged Surrender, African American Women and Islam*, is searching her answers to the following questions; “How Islam has been adopted as a method for personal and social transformation among African American in Southern California?”, and “Are these women reproducing their oppressions as it is portrayed in media?”. Mentioning that 40% of U.S. Muslims are African American, she puts her figures in a perceptive work of analytical ethnology of twenty four African American in Los Angeles, a systematic map of their life under the structure of Islam. She discusses how the converts wish to bargain for authority, and conventional patriarchy for raising their child in issues such as head covering, jobs, marriage and Quran exegesis. She chose two mosques in southern California as her original fieldwork locations and spent two years collecting more than one hundred formal and informal audio-video interviews. While making more than twenty speeches in mosques, she participated in speeches after Friday prayers and in more than thirty women meetings. In her book, she tries to stay away from religion’s pro and cons, instead, she deals with the fact that what interpretation of Islam African American women have in their “Practice” and “Perception”. Throughout the book, she is trying to establish the fact that the propensity of the African American to Islam as a “Faith” is a

clear indication that Islam has the ability to be relied on as a “Legitimate framework to liberate women from racism, sexism, and economic exploitation”. To them, Islam is their “epiphany”, at the same time, is the bond between their “Social history” and “Personal reality”. Considering the history of American black women, the author goes on demonstrating that these new converts to Islam always confront skepticism and it is now that they can settle their discord and conflicts between “Common sense” and “Religious ideology” through dialogues to amend and clarify the general knowledge of misunderstandings and true interpretations of their religion.

Dirks and Parlove (2003) in their book, *Islam Our Choice*, portray the life of six American women before and after conversion coming from North, West, East, South, expressing their personal background, the reason of their propensity to Islam and their inner connections with the society and their own family after conversion. All these people have one common issue at mind “what makes men, women more distinguished and superior than others is their virtue and righteousness not the redundant color of their skin, language, ethnicity, etc. Notwithstanding our origin, tribe or nation, we are all members of one family”. One of the points referred to in this book is “Dual Self-Identity” in regards of converts. These women have to integrate their American heritage with Islam. Even though they are Muslim, they are still American and it forces them not to ignore their constitutional rights. Like any other patriot American, they oppose any violence, oppression and see no justification for any kind of terrorism, while denying it. According to the life story of these six women, when these new comers to Islam encounter any of their psychological, social and other similar pressures, they resort to Islam and specially Quran as the most comforting, satisfactory remedy.

At the end of this chapter, the main purposes of this research are resented. The objectives of this thesis were twofold. The first was to discover what attracted women in the state of Kansas

to convert to Islam, in spite of the controversy surrounding it, and to ascertain answers to the following question: “What makes the women to depart or put away their family history for a religion that has been expressed by some media and the press as oppressor and authoritarian?” The second objective was to expose the impact of Islamic teachings, including hijab or veil, in the lives of women converts. The extent of their commitment to implementing Islamic instructions in their daily lives is also discussed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The first part of the chapter presents the method utilized for sampling the converts. All arguments and reasoning behind their conversions have been articulated in the form of narrations. It will be shown how the research model was developed in two stages; first, the converts were selected and interviewed based on a defined sampling method and second, the interviews were analyzed. The second part of the chapter is organized thematically that interviewees claimed were reasons for their conversion to Islam as well as reflective of their discussion of the hijab. The seven themes discussed are the “Trinity,” “Women’s rights,” and “Comprehensibility of Islam,” because these were the main reasons women claimed for conversion. Also included are themes related to problems that emerged for converts in their daily life. These are “Hijab”, “Relationship with the family”, and “Dual self-identity.” The last theme represents the influence of “The event of 9/11” on the converts’ beliefs.

Research Procedure

The steps involving the procedure of this research are depicted in Figure 3.1.

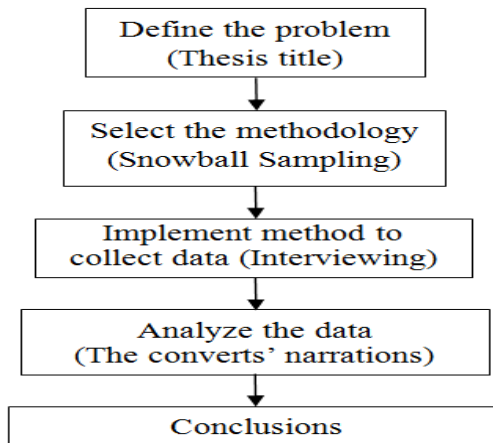


Figure 3.1 Research Procedure

Snowball Sampling

Sampling is a technique whereby a subset of the population is used to represent the whole population. The snowball sampling is an effective technique for taking a sample when the population is small or it is difficult to locate subjects. It is necessary to locate the first subject, who in turn helps to find the other subjects. This process continues until a sufficient number of subjects are obtained. This method is a helpful sampling method in social networks research in which the people know each other.

The snowball sampling technique however has its disadvantages. The most obvious is that the snowball technique does not produce a random sample like surveying a large population. The smaller the sample, the harder it is to generalize from it. While in snowball sampling the subject relies on previously observed subjects, the researcher has less control over the sampling compared to other methods. With snowball sampling how distributive the findings are is unknown, and there is no evidence or guarantee that the sample is representative of the population from which it comes (Bernard, 1988).

Even though I am a Muslim and have access to the local mosques in Wichita, the mosque I occasionally attend is not one in which I am a member. Because Muslim women converts in the Wichita community compose a population that cannot be approached about their experience of conversion except through the main mosque, and because I am not intimately involved with the mosque, I could only find converts to interview through going to the mosque and seeking people to help me find a woman convert. In addition, I sought to understand the women converts' own interpretations of why they converted. A large survey might have been more statistically representative but would lack the women converts' own viewpoint on their conversion.

This thesis is based on narrations, as mentioned in the last section of Chapter 2. Informants' viewpoints are the core of this study in a way that their narrations play a substantial role in comparative arguments in Chapter 3. Bearing in mind the geographic limitations for the preparation of this thesis, accessing the informants was only possible by referring to the Muslim Community Center (MCC) in Wichita, the only Islamic center for women gatherings of social and religious activities. It was a location, actually, with the majority of non-Muslims, making it rather difficult to access the informants. Amongst different methods, it was only the snowball sampling technique to adjust these restrictions, so this method has been chosen as field work methodology for sampling in this thesis.

Sampling Procedure

The first interviewees were sought out at the Muslim Community Center in Wichita, Kansas, and in turn, these subjects helped to locate other interviewees. This continued until twenty subjects were interviewed. Since the interviewees introduced other subjects, the sampling population was not random. Using the snowball sampling method, twenty American women in Kansas who converted to Islam were interviewed in person. The excerpts that follow in this section are taken from those conversations. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed line by line. The first subjects were found in the Muslim Community Center in Wichita. Six of them were teachers. Four of them were working in the Annoor Islamic School and two of them were working in the American public schools. Six of the interviewees were homemakers, four of them had full-time jobs, and the other four had part-time jobs. Phone numbers of other interviewees were obtained by the secretary of the school and the school teachers. All of the interviewees were born in America into non-Muslim families. Their ages ranged between 22 and 67. Seven of the interviewees (35%) were African American, and the rest were Caucasian. Only

one out of the twenty interviewees did not wear the hijab, and two of them were single. It is notable that this research did not specifically target women who were veiling. The overwhelming dominance of veiled women among my informants may have been a result of my sampling method in the sense that veiling women may be part of the same social network.

Most of the converts had a good relationship with their family of origin members, while one of them cut off her relationship with her family. The interviews were conducted in different places at the request of the interviewees. The characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in Table 3.1. Sixteen of them did not offer the type of Christianity they practiced before conversion, and I was unable to reach them after their interviews to ask for this information.

TABLE 3.1
CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee	Original religion	Married	Convert before marriage?	With hijab?	Satisfied with hijab or not?	Do you have a job?	African American?
I ₁	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₂	C	Y	N	N	-	Y	N
I ₃	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₄	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
I ₅	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
I ₆	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
I ₇	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₈	C	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
I ₉	C	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N
I ₁₀	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₁₁	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₁₂	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
I ₁₃	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₁₄	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N

Interviewee	Original religion	Married	Convert before marriage?	With hijab?	Satisfied with hijab or not?	Do you have a job?	African American?
I ₁₅	C	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₁₆	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
I ₁₇	C	N	-	Y	Y	Y	Y
I ₁₈	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
I ₁₉	C	N	-	Y	Y	N	N
I ₂₀	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

C = Christian; Y = Yes; N= No

Some statistics of interviewees are tabulated in Table 3.2.

TABLE 3.2

INTERVIEWEES STATISTICS

Subjects	Comments
The sampling technique	Snowball Sampling
Number of interviewees	20
Range age of interviewees	22-67
Percentage of African American	35%
Number of interviews for each interviewee	2-3 times
The length of each interview	30-45 minutes
Period time of interviews	March 2011 to December 2011
The main reason for conversion to Islam	Trinity in Christianity (50%)
Have a job	60%
Conversion before marriage	40%

The questionnaire of interviewees is shown in Table 3.3.

TABLE 3.3
QUESTIONNAIRE OF INTERVIEWEES

Num.	Questions
1	What was your religion before converting to Islam?
2	How did you find out about Islam?
3	How long have you been converted to Islam?
4	Did you have any problems with the hijab in your workplace after conversion?
5	How is your relationship with your family after conversion?
6	What are the social effects of hijab?
7	Do you think to wear the hijab is a restriction or a protection? Why?
8	In Islam what parts of a woman's body have been emphasized to be covered?
9	Describe briefly your feeling about covering your body after converting to Islam?
10	Why do you think some Muslim women do not practice the Ayahs of hijab in Quran?

The rest of this chapter is dealing with the factors, constantly supported by the narrations, persuading and leading up interviewees to their conversion, divided into two different groups. First are original elements such as Trinity, women's right, comprehensibility of Islam, and the event of 9/11. The second group is side effects and consequence resulting from conversion of religion such as hijab, dual self-identity and relationship with the family.

It is notable that during the interviews, the converts would often cite some verses of the Quran or some statements of the Bible. When a few mentioned these passages, I asked them "Can you show me where these passages are?" In order to explicate the converts' viewpoint, I

went and found the exact referred sentences from the Quran and the bible and included the full passage in the interview excerpts. It is worth mentioning that the discussions behind the women converted to Islam, as mentioned before, are all the outcome of interviews taken place in Kansas.

Trinity

Christianity maintains that Jesus died on the cross then resurrected and accordingly, secured the salvation of all his followers. One of the converts pointed out that Islam declares nobody can pardon somebody else's sins or secure their salvation; otherwise people will have a tendency towards committing sins they believe that have already been forgiven. In other words, one is not responsible for his good or bad deeds on the Day of Judgment because Jesus has already taken care of everything. Furthermore, the interviewees thought there is no accurate and reasonable assessment of good or malevolent deeds for their efforts to do the right things and avoid the bad ones, whereas in Islam, everybody is directly responsible for all their deeds at the Day of Judgment. One of converts narrated that "I did attend for a while, in different churches and attempted to understand why God would need a sacrifice to forgive our sins; to me it was like I was putting restrictions on God's ability. After a long period of attending church services, I was asking questions regarding if Jesus is God in man's form, then while Jesus was on the cross, who was he praying to on the cross, when he said father forgive them for they know not what they do? My questions could not be answered to my satisfaction. The biggest question I had about Christianity was the Trinity, and if Jesus is God, how did he die on the cross?" She brought up another fundamental question about Christian beliefs. "Their belief is, Once Saved Always Saved. I was told Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and all I needed was faith and to know that Jesus was in my heart as my savior. I asked the pastor himself to explain. He said, just accept Jesus in your heart and you are saved, and any sins are automatically forgiven. Sounds were nice,

but not logical. Later I met my husband. He gave me the Holy Quran to read, and our Muslim friends helped us answer the questions by the verses of the Quran. I am so thankful and feel very blessed every day for Allah's guidance." Another interviewee explained her reason for embracing Islam, "I had a serious issue with Trinity. I could not believe that God forgives sins of people because His son died in a very painful death! And how it is acceptable that God with absolute power wishes to have a son?"

One of the most common issues troubling the interviewees is the notion of worshiping God in the Bible. Unlike Christianity, Islam emphasizes that one has to worship only one God who is unique, exclusive and matchless, has no child and is the origin of absolute divine power beyond our imagination (Tabatabai, 1988). One of the interviewees stated "I believed in Jesus as a prophet of God and it was weird to me that God sends his prophet to guide people and select his prophet as his son. I could not accept a world where God is the father and has a son Jesus. I could not believe that God could be divided into three things (Father, son, and Holy Spirit). I was never satisfied with the answers I received. It was a blind obedience which is not intellectual. It was hard for me to follow a religion that recognizes its prophet as Allah. For many years I was confused, and I turned away from my religion."

Indeed, one of the principal rationales leading some interviewees to Islam was the concept of Trinity. One said "I read a copy of the Quran in English. This guided me to compare the Quran with the Bible about the Trinity. I have to acknowledge that the Quran's teachings and the Prophet Muhammad's hadith and his lifestyle were what attracted me to Islam." She brought in some evidence for this comparison. "As the Bible says '*I have not come on my own; but He (God) sent me*' (John 8:42). In another part of the Bible, Jesus calls himself a servant of God. '*I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one*

who sent him' (John 13:16). I was wondering if Jesus is who I needed to pray to, why he was praying to God like the Bible says, '*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed*' (Luke 5:16) or '*. . . he (Jesus) fell with his face to the ground and prayed . . .*' (Matthew 26:39). In another part of the Bible, it is emphasized that no one can see God, as it says '*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only . . .*' (John 1:18), or Jesus says that he has no ability without God, '*for the Father is greater than I*' (John 14:28), or as it states in another part of the Bible, '*By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear . . .*' (John 5:30). On the other hand, the Quran (5:17) says, '*In blasphemy indeed are those that say that God is Christ the son of Mary. Who then has the least power against Allah, if His Will were to destroy Christ the son of Mary, his mother, and all every one that is on the earth? For, to Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between. He createth what He pleaseth. For Allah hath power over all things*'."

For some women converts learning to see Islam and Christianity in a comparative framework shed light on their problems with the trinity. One of the interviewees took a course in 'comparative religion' which unintentionally changed the course of her life forever. She narrated "One of my big issues was how Jesus could be the son of God. My college class explained a very similar story about Jesus being a prophet. After that I decided to look for more information about Islam. I tried to read the Quran and make a decision. Two Ayahs of the Quran answered my biggest questions about Christianity: '*The Jews call Uzair a son of Allah, and the Christians call Christ the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse is on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth!*' (Quran 9:30). Another verse explicitly states that Christ is the son of Mary, not the son of God. '*They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah, and*

(they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but One God (Allah): there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: (far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).' (9:31) These two verses inspired me to answer the big questions that I had in my mind for many years."

One of the converts stated that "I could not believe that God has a son. It made my mind busy until I got my answer after converting to Islam". She explicitly pointed out to me the Quranic passage (5:72) which states, *'They do blaspheme who say: (Allah) is Christ the son of Mary. But said Christ: O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever joins other gods with Allah, Allah will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help.'*

One of the women explained the question that forced her to convert to Islam. "It was for quite a while this question was stuck to my mind: The Son of God, what does it mean? This was why I tried to collect some verses from the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) to help clarify the meaning of 'The Son of God.' It is documented in the Bible that some prophets have addressed some priests and good followers as 'Son of God' or 'Children of God.' For instance, for David, *'He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son'* (2 Samuel 7:13-4), or for Ephraim, *'They will come with weeping; they will pray as I ring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son'* (Jeremiah 31:9)." She continued that after many years of struggling with this question, she got acquainted with a Muslim woman at her workplace. She gradually became familiar with Islam and could find her answer in the verses of the Quran. She stated "it is strongly commanded in the Quran to worship one God. I received the answer of my

question in the following verse; ‘. . . *Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His apostles. Say not Trinity: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs*’ (Quran 4:171).”

Women’s Rights

The problem with the women at the present U.S. society is that they are under pressure in connection with preservation of their beauty, fitness and wearing provocative clothes. Women in this society cannot grow up without being concerned about showing their bodies in public beautifully. One of interviewees narrated that “At age 15, I felt insecure about my body and the clothes that I was wearing in society. The woman, in this culture, should show off her beauty as much as she can, should have brilliant jobs and be good partners for their boyfriends. The foundations that families are being built on are weak, which leads to higher rates of divorce and an increase in the number of single parents.”

Some women facing Islam for the first time are fascinated with this Islamic characteristic that women and men, whether in this life or at the Day of Judgment, having equal rights, are also treated equally and the criteria for both genders is the same and is only that of “righteousness.” One of converts explained the significance of Islam’s emphasis on equality between women and men in her embrace of Islam. “I was impressed by how much Islam emphasized social justice and other issues about equality of women and men. The egalitarian of Islam is what appealed to me as a reason for my approaching Islam. So I converted.” She compared the status of women in the Bible, the Quran, and hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. As she pointed out to me, “The Quran (42:49) states, *‘To Allah belong the dominion of the heavens and the earth. He creates*

what He wills. He bestows female children to whomever He wills and bestows male children to whomever He wills.’ Or prophet Muhammad says, ‘He who is involved in bringing up daughters, and accords benevolent treatment towards them, they will be protection for him against Hell-Fire.’ On the other hand, the Bible states, ‘*For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man*’ (I Corinthians 11:8-9) or ‘*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives are to their own husbands in everything*’ (Ephesians 5:22-24).”

One of interviewees had been raised as a liberal Christian. At the university, she saw and interacted with a Muslim woman with a different culture who was warm and friendly and treated her the way she wanted to be treated. After two years, she became familiar with one of her friend’s relatives that worked in a company and they got married. She narrated that “I feel as a woman, I have been supported in Ayahs of Quran where it has strongly specified women’s rights in detail. I can have my own income and hold it away from my family. The housekeeping chores are not only my responsibilities. I know my deeds would be rewarded in this world and hereafter in the Day of Judgment fairly by God. In addition, I found some women who count as perfect models in the world of Islam. Khadija as the prophet’s wife and Fatima as his daughter, peace be upon them, were strong models. Khadija, the first convert woman to Islam, was a successful business woman who devoted all her wealth to her husband for spreading Islam. Khadija as the most valuable prophet’s wife showed that a woman did not have to compromise her beliefs and her modesty to be successful. That is why I had taken the name Khadija after conversion.” As other scholars have documented, “it is not unusual for women converts to take the name Khadija

after conversion” (Ahmed, 2010, p.107). Since in his book, *Journey to America*, he states that he found several of his informants took the name Khadija upon conversion.

The only discretion assigned by God, qualifying the distinction of values between men and women, is the scale of faith and trust and their conviction to “righteousness”. One white woman who is teaching in a public school said “Islam, as a progressive religion, is very applicable to daily life. One of the most attractive aspects of Islam is the equal rights for men and women. As revealed in the Quran, *‘Allah may requite each soul (either man or woman) according to its deserts; and verily Allah is swift in calling to account’* (14:51) or *‘Every soul (either man or woman) will be (held) in pledge for its deeds’* (74:38). The most important criterion for placing the value for mankind in Islam is doing deeds of righteousness. This attribution recognizes the equality of men and women’s rights by which some converts were lead to embrace Islam. One of converts indicated this point in her interview. “I thought that the Quran discriminates against women. I found, after a few months of research, that Islam has brought equal women’s rights, the same rights for women as men. One of the verses of the Quran answered my concern about men and women’s equality, stating *‘If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female—and have faith—they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them’* (Quran 4:124).” Another interviewee said, “ Islam has treated women as equal to men in all life aspects such as property fourteen centuries ago; the rights of women have been given with their clear role in society without any injustice against men.” She then cited the Quran (49:13) saying, *‘O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he or she who*

is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).’

One of the concerns of some interviewees was about what the Bible and the Quran say about the personality of women. There are some differences between the two books regarding female identity. One informant mentioned that “The Bible states, *‘I find bitterer than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. Look, says the Teacher, this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all’* (Ecclesiastes 7:26-28), and the Quran exemplifies the wife of Pharaoh and Mary as two of the best servants of Allah for all believers (men and women): *‘And Allah sets forth, as an example to those who believe, the wife of Pharaoh . . . And Mary the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants)’* (Quran 66:11-12).” One of the white converts stated the prophet saying that ‘Heaven is at the feet of the mothers.’ She then added “With the comparison of viewpoints of religions, I found Islam places a high value on women’s rights.”

One of the women in explaining how she converted noted the difference between how she expected a Muslim man to behave based on her view that Islam advocated male dominance of women but instead discovered as a result of getting to know and later marrying him that Islamic marriage guaranteed certain rights for women. “One day a Muslim man, my current husband, suddenly came and started talking to me. At first, I thought he is an oppressor of woman. His kindly attributes attracted me. During our meetings, he was able to answer my

questions about Islam. At the same time, I tried to study more and compare Islam and Christianity. My journey to Islam was on my own choice, not forced by anybody else. It took me six months to think about changing my religion. Finally, I converted to Islam, and we married in an Islamic ceremony at the mosque. It was interesting to me that my husband was required to give me Mahr [the dowry paid to bride by groom to do whatever she wants.] I thank Allah that guided me to worship only one God and obey His instructions in the Quran. Islam helped me understand my role and my value in my family and in the world. I am free to obey Allah. However, I know that He created me and is responsible for my guidance. So following His instructions helps me to avoid misguidance and find the best way of my life by which results to success in this world and the hereafter. He mentioned all necessary of rights of men and women in the Quran and I am sure my God has done everything fair for males and females.”

One of the important issues that affected the decision of some converts was the view of Islam and Christianity regarding women’s education. One of them, as a member of board of education in a public high school, said “The view point of the Bible about the right of education for women is documented as, *‘Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression’* (I Timothy 2:11-14) or *‘Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also faith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church’* (I Corinthians 14:34-35). On the other hand, Prophet Muhammad stated that ‘Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim man and Muslim woman’. Despite that Islam has spiritual, ethical, and religious roots; it is not against technological progress.” One

educated converts shared “My Muslim husband encouraged me to pursue my studying without having any concern about the expenses. I do not need to worry about working for paying the bills. Besides, I own independently the money I earn by working. As a Muslim, I am not expected to help pay bills by my earnings, as had been done for me before I embraced Islam. My husband is very kind and respects my decisions and helps me do housework. I can make decisions in my home. After my first child was born, I left my job, and my husband never asked me to go to work to help pay our expenses.” From the academic outlook, her statements pointing out to the fact that on the issue of job responsibility and description, a balance should be kept between house wife duties and her husband. So as to women should take the task of raising, breeding, motherhood and educating their children rather than dealing with business affairs.

One of the main areas that the converts have come to the conclusion is the way Islam treats men and women fairly and justly. The proportion of the relation of these two genders in society from the view point of Islam, is a safe relation based on values, not their gender, or preference of one to another according to their masculinity or femininity, whereas, the converts declare that at the present, the lives of women in their society is merely dedicated to the realization of goals and objectives of Men. One African American woman said, “In my life, I have seen many differences between the value put upon women in Islam and Christianity during the civil rights movement, based on my experiences and how women were treated overall in America.” In contrast to what some think, female converts believe that Islamic rules support women’s rights in a variety of ways in daily life. One of interviewees stated that “Islam granted women social rights in the seventh century whereas women got their property rights in Europe in the eighteenth century.”

One of the distinctions between Christianity and Islam is how the Quran and the Bible treat the judgment of Adam and Eve. Christianity states that Eve deceived Adam into eating the prohibited fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden and continues that all of descendants of Adam and Eve got stuck with this original sin committed by Eve. So, there is much blames on Eve as a representative of one sex only. In Islam, both Adam and his wife are equally guilty of eating the fruit. It is not only Eve that commits the sin, but both of them are equally responsible. The rest of this section is mainly devoted to the reasons shared by the informants regarding the judgment of Adam and Eve by Islam and Christianity.

One of converters said, “It took two years for me to become a Muslim. I had two concerns: first was about the hijab and second was about the conflicts in the Bible.” Then she added that it is stated in the Bible, *‘When the woman (Eve) saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband (Adam), who was with her, and he ate it. . . . Then the man (Adam) and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, Where are you? He (Adam) answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” And he (God) said, who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? The man said, “The woman (Eve) you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” To the woman he (God) said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” To Adam he (God) said, “Because you listen to your wife and ate from the tree about*

which I commanded you, you must not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil, you will eat of it all the days of your life” (Genesis 3:6-17).’ Then she brought up the story of Eve and Adam from the Quran to show two different viewpoints for considering the women’s rights. She noted, “The Quran says ‘God said, O Adam! You and your wife dwell in the Garden, and enjoy (its good things) as you wish: but do not approach this tree, or you run into harm and transgression. Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them (Adam and Eve), bringing openly before their minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before): he (Satan) said: “Your Lord only forbade you this tree, lest you should become angels or such beings as live forever.” And he (Satan) swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser. So by deceit he brought about their (Adam and Eve) fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies. And their Lord called to them: “Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy to you?” They said: “Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: if You do not forgive us and do not bestow upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost” (Quran 7:19-23).”

One 28-year-old teacher was concerned about considering women to be inferior to men in Christianity. She addressed one part of the Old Testament about women’s sorrow which I found after the interview, *‘Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shall bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee’ (Genesis 3:16)*. On the other hand, there were some questions in her mind about the equality of genders and the value of women in Islam. She quoted one verse of the Quran *‘. . . Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he/she who is) the most righteous of you . . . (Quran 49:13).’* She added “I tried to read the Quran more and more, and I

could find all of my answers. Then I decided to convert to Islam and spoke with my family members about my decision.”

Hijab

The hijab, veil or scarf can be counted as a part of Muslim women’s identity and seems to enhance the converts’ feelings of pride, self-confidence, and respect. Even though hijab may not be considered as one of the main original reasons for conversion of American women, in most occasions, the practice of wearing hijab by them was satisfactory. These women converts find that wearing the hijab is not a form of repression but instead experience it as a decision for keeping their body private. Women converts criticized the public exploitation of the female body and sexuality in America and wear hijab as a sign that communicates particular social messages including privacy, identity, purity, resistance, privacy, personal integrity, and power. The social effects for immigrant women who cover their heads are different than that for native born women, in any culture. Explaining the benefits of wearing the hijab, one of converts who was trying to practice the rules of Islam narrated “First, I tried to cover my hair and wore a long shirt dress, but it was difficult for me. After five months I wore the hijab. For me personally, hijab helps me remember to try and be a better person, and it also keeps me out of trouble, generally, when people are going to do something I should not do (gossip, go out drinking after work), because they are often reluctant to do it around me, since they are unsure about how I would react (Personally, I am not offended with what other people do, but it does make it easier on me when they do not do these things around me). Wearing the hijab, just the piece of cloth, clearly defines a line between ‘personal’ and ‘public’ space. It is also a protection to help me stay on ‘the straight path,’ and remember what I believe about how the world works, what will happen

on the Day of Judgment. I never wore really skimpy clothing to start with, so I did not feel like I was making a big sacrifice.”

Wearing the hijab is an important aspect of dress for these women. There are women who choose to cover their hair while praying or attending religious activities. The identification of Muslim women based on dress and covering has caused some Muslim women concern about being easily identified by anti-Muslims who may put them at risk of being attacked. The social effects of wearing the hijab can cause acceptance by those who share the same religion while causing others who may have negative views about Islam to react differently. One of interviewees described the reason for conversion, “I believe a woman should wear the hijab for the right reasons and understand its importance. It could be difficult if it is worn to please someone else. Hijab can be considered a protection from having to be exposed to unwanted advances from strangers. It has been emphasized, in Islam, to cover the whole body and hair except the face and hands. Covering was not a difficult choice for me after converting to Islam. Hijab is an important aspect of my daily life. The lower rate of divorce, orphans, single families, and especially AIDS in majority Muslim countries wearing hijab are all solid indications of the authenticity of the hijab issue.” One convert who is teaching in college stated her reason for wearing the hijab “I accepted hijab easily because God wants me to obey His rules. It brings for me respect, honesty, confidence, and protection. I have experienced kindness from those who respect it. I decided to raise my daughter under Islamic teachings because I found Islam is a religion which helps me live a better life. We should provide a strong self confidence in our children. Islam is not only halal, haram, or wajeib, but disciplines, logic, and values.”

Another convert narrated “When I get on the bus and there are no more seats, men get up and give me a seat; when I walk into stores, people hold doors for me and the men call me

madam out of respect. It is wonderful. Some Muslim women do not have the hijab because some of us come from different cultures and interpret the ayahs of the Quran differently, and some are just disobedient. This is why we all need to study our religion under scholars so we can get the proper interpretation of what Allah means, when He tells us to do things in the Quran.”One of the converts expressed her feeling when she wore hijab after embracing Islam “After converting to Islam, it was almost unbearable for me live in the society with the hijab, but after a while I could finally adapt to my new life, obeying Islamic rules. I am wondering why Christians do not follow the Bible teachings about the modesty dress where it explicitly states, *‘In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array’* (1Timothy 2:9).” One of the African American converts stated the reason of wearing the hijab “Hijab indicates modesty and identity of a woman in the environment she is living. When a Muslim woman wears hijab, she is rejecting the role of a woman who uncovers her body for pleasures of men. She is denying the role of mere sex which hurts the identity and personality of women. I was ashamed before my conversion to Islam because I was trying to fit the American society. As a Muslim woman, I am now dressing for the sake of Allah not for the pleasure of people and this is my contentment and gratification to follow the Allah’s instructions instead of society's will.

When I asked the question, “Do you think hijab is a restriction or a protection?” a 23-year-old convert answered, “I think the hijab is a protection that women are not looked upon as sex objects. Hijab increases my confidence and keeps me away from sin. When I did not wear the hijab, boys would grab my clothes or arms, and they were aggressive, but after covering my body they do not allow themselves to bother me like before. I have gotten used to covering myself, and I cannot imagine myself without it. I feel it is not appropriate for a woman’s

personality to show off her body and jewelry which causes other people to look at her. This is what I practice living in my society. In my opinion, this is one of the main solutions to stop the sex crimes in the society that Allah brought up in the Quran in which hijab has been recognized as a requirement for believing women to protect them from being molested.”

One of converts explained about the reason behind hijab, “We should cover our bosoms as women because these parts of the body can attract men. Everything must be modest not flashy and not attract attention. Some Muslim women cover their hair but wear tight jeans and shirt; maybe they do not want to be different from Westerners or they think covering their hair is enough and do not need to wear loose dress, or it is hard for them to follow this or they have problem in their workplace. I work on the board of education at a high school. Some students and their mothers ask me about Islam and my hijab and I explain kindly to them what caused me to change my lifestyle and religion.”

In American society it is recommended to show your beauty in public and not hide it. Every man is happy when his wife shows her beauty, because she is for him and he is proud of that. One of young converts shared “There is no restriction between men and women’s relationship in the American society which I believe causes the foundation of family not to be stable and the rate of divorce to be high. I look at the hijab not as a restriction but as a protection. The modest dress obtains honor and respect from others. However, a Muslim woman should not cover her hair inside her home where she can look attractive for her husband. She is only required to cover herself in front of men who are not her immediate family members. A Muslim woman has dignity and carries herself in a way that represents her character, attitude, and belief in the One God, Allah.”

According to Haddad et al. (2006, p.53), “The Muslim women, specially one who chooses to dress modestly, is freed from having to portray herself as a desirable sex object and can follow her pursuits without being under the wondering gaze of men. Islamic dress causes men to see women as a person not as an object,” one of the women said. Another woman convert said “Growing up in the west and converting to Islam, I have watched how women in the west have continued degrading themselves for the sake of men’s pleasures and believing they are now liberated over the years. Knowing the importance of covering and protecting your body from onlookers defines you as being modest, respected, and a follower of God. In business affairs, a Muslim woman can conduct her own business without trying to impress others or worrying if other people (men and women) find her attractive and is less likely to be exploited for beauty and femininity.”

For some of the women converts I interviewed, following other Islamic practices is not as difficult as wearing the hijab. The converts’ clothing has become a recognizable symbol of Muslim women in America. One of converts shared the process of wearing the hijab, “I first started dressing modestly with long sleeve shirts and long pants and skirts. It took time for me to feel ready to wear the hijab because I did not feel that I was strong in my faith. After I researched and understood the reason behind this Quranic teaching, I admired it and wore the hijab. Now I am ready to answer the questions and doubts people ask me about different aspects of the Islamic practices especially the hijab.”

As an outcome of their observations, some women converts acknowledged that veiling and hijab make them more distinguished among their family members. It reminds them of their identity as a Muslim. One of the women converts explained the difficulties of wearing hijab in the current society, “The main point of wearing the hijab in Islam is that women should keep

their beauty for their husbands. All of the women over the whole world have struggled with self-image and self-perception, at some points in their lives regardless, if they are Muslim or not. So that is a choice for them to make about how they want to present themselves to the world. Wearing the hijab is a heavy decision. In America, it opens you up to active discrimination and threats. In Turkey, it means that you cannot attend university, and finding a job will be very, very difficult.” Another interviewee talked about some consequences of wearing the hijab, “My family did not like me wearing the hijab, and my sisters laughed at me and saw my cover as weird. Also, I had difficulty in the workplace.” She added information about workplace issues, “At the time I could understand that there is a certain discrimination against Muslim women.” She ended her interview with this sentence: “Being a Muslim woman in the U.S. can be challenging.” One of the converts pointed out to the discrimination in the workplace especially for finding jobs and added, “The American society should end disrespecting of women with hijab in the workplace.” She explained that the main obstacle in her way as a Muslim woman had not been from Islam or other Muslims, but from the American society in which she lives. “I have lost many jobs because of my Islamic dress and have been discriminated against. However, I do not think that wearing jeans or provocative clothes bring me more freedom, but I feel honored to wear hijab in public. Since I wear hijab for the sake of Allah, I am respected more.”

Comprehensibility of Islam

One of the main appeals of Islam was that converts perceived that their previous faith was not comprehensive but instead led them to go to church once a week while doing whatever they wanted to during the rest of the week (Ahmed et al., 2010). “In high school, I tried to question myself about remembering God only once a week on Sundays. I felt something vitally missing in my life, and nothing could fill that gap,” one said. Some interviewees were searching

for answers to their spiritual needs and found Islam's responses attractive and satisfactory to their fundamental questions. It offers a guide to every aspect of daily life, expecting the followers to be Muslim not just for a day, but for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. One of the interviewees expressed the comprehensibility of Islam as one of the most important factors caused her to embrace Islam whole heartedly and openly, "I converted to Islam during the chaotic years of early 1970's. The most attractive characteristics about Islam for me are the five pillars of faith which cover all my needs in the life: (a) belief in one God, (b) belief in God's angels, (c) belief in God's book, the Holy Quran as God's last book, which includes all required instructions of life (d) belief in God's prophets and in Muhammad (God's blessings be upon him and his family) as his last and final Messenger, his *sunnah* and progeny (*Ahlul-Bayt*), and (e) belief in life after death, fulfilling all we need in our daily life."

One of the distinction points between Islam and Christianity is the manner of appraising the beliefs and acts in the Day of Judgment. Whereas Islam considers different ranks of faith for the believers, in Christianity one either passes or fails the test, i.e., one either accepts Jesus as his redeemer or not and will go to the Hell without any other choice. In Islam, there is no way that one can make sure to go to Hell or Heaven. Everyone is responsible for his/her beliefs and deeds in the Day of Judgment. This viewpoint of Islam in which one is judged on one's deeds during one's life makes that life challengeable and constructive for the people. The human being needs to dedicate his/her acts to Allah and everything is done to please Him. In this manner, Allah has a clear presence in all moments of life. The point is that one's deeds should support one's thoughts and beliefs; otherwise, those beliefs are not worth anything¹.

¹Relations between beliefs and deeds were fully discussed in section "Role of Hijab in Daily Life" in Chapter 2.

One of the reasons causing Muslims to be in continuous contacts with God spiritually, is the five times prayer in different times of day. This is compulsory to all Muslims and creates an inseparable association to God. Therefore, the presence of Him would be felt in all moments of life. One of the points mentioned by interviewees was the bond generated with divinity through daily prayers. One convert stated “For me as a Muslim, the five daily prayers provide a reminder of the path that I am attempting to follow.” Another convert articulated the reasons for her decision “My husband and I decided to buy some Arabian horses and needed to obtain more information about these horses. Because of this issue, we became familiar with some Arab Muslims. Then we visited some countries in the Middle East and communicated with some Muslim families. I was attracted to the spirit and love of brotherhood and sisterhood that I witnessed among Muslims. Their nice behaviors, actions, and hospitality toward us as non-Muslim Americans amazed me and helped in proclaiming myself to be a Muslim. Also, the sound of *Adhan* affected me while I was listening to its beautiful sound. Besides, Islam places a high value for family and it is important to me to raise my kids in an Islamic manner. Praying to God in a personal way helped me have a relationship with Allah without going through men which was a very important characteristic of Islam for me.”

Relationship with the Family

Accepting that a member of household has converted to Islam is a complicated situation for families to encounter. The different parents may have different opinions against this big decision of one of their loved family members. The converts disclosed a variety of parental reflections, from acceptance to completely rejection. Conversion may create a kind of trauma within the family. In some cases, it may lead to separation from her family because of the family’s ignorance of Islamic doctrine, whereas other parents consider it as the choice of their

family member and respect her decision. One said “My parents were very supportive, open, and accepting when faced with my decision to become a Muslim.” One convert who is a nurse explained her relationship with her family, “I have to acknowledge that my acceptance of Islam led some friends to simply reject me. Some of them attempted to stay with me for a period of time in order to try changing my mind back toward Christianity. One of my sisters was liberal and fairly open to my conversion to Islam. Another sister was very negative and resistant to my decision. Then I explained the differences between the viewpoints of Western societies about Islam and what it really is. After a while I could convince her that I have selected the way of my life from now on with an open eye.” Another convert described her conversion to Islam as a successful one in terms of her family of origin. Converting to Islam did not have any negative impact on her family relationships. Her family has always respected Islam. They understood that she still serves God and they respected the religion of Islam. She continued to pray and acknowledge that there was only one God and that accepting Islam gave her a better view of religion and the prophets of God. However, one of converts narrated that “It was difficult for me to talk to my family because they were strict in their religious beliefs. I use struggled with them for five months, but after that they accepted my conversion.” One of the converts convinced her family by showing them the changes in her lifestyle and behaviors before and after conversion by practice. “Before embracing Islam I was coming home late and I had the first divorce in my family. Islam has changed my behaviors and morals. This is because Islam gave a different belief to this world and the hereafter. These beliefs had affected directly my deeds and behaviors in daily life. I think changes in my behaviors and morals caused my family to never criticize me or my religion. My parents are happy that I have a good life with my family and I will try to transfer my good behaviors to my daughters.”

One of the problems of converts with their family is converts' decision to wear the hijab. One of them said, "My real trouble with my family started after I began wearing the hijab. My sister felt that I was weird and did not care for me. She was ashamed to be seen in public with me. I felt a distance with my family. My mom does not understand why I cover my body and wear the hijab and do not eat any food that has pork." One of converts narrated some facts about her relationship with her family, "When I accepted Islam, my family was not surprised because they knew I am honest. When I started to wear hijab, they worried I was separating myself from the society and that I would be discriminated against; then I would not be able to reach my purposes. They were ashamed to come out with me in the public. After three years, they understood that Islam did not destroy my life. It brought me happiness and peace, not pain and sadness."

Dual Self-Identity

Because American Muslim women still protect each aspect of their twofold self-identities, they must mix their own belief in Islam with American culture for finding their own individual identity (Dirks and Parlove, 2003). Sometimes, practicing this dual self-identity becomes more of a juggling act than a flawless blending. At worst, they feel that they have stepped one foot into two worlds not entirely belonging to either world. The blend of their obedience to Allah with their American inheritance brings a spiritual comfort that goes beyond anything these converts have ever known before. In this way, they expend considerable energy and time reflecting on their identities, which in turn makes them spiritually stronger. Accepting Islam does not mean refusing everything American; rather, it means embracing and believing in the special spirituality of Islam. Although these women converts are Muslim, they are still of American heritage. Being American Muslim women does not signify that they are less eager

than other American people in valuing their rights as Americans or less loyal than Americans. It also does not indicate that they are less worried by the irrational, hateful, and decidedly non-Islamic violence of September 11, 2001. It is indisputable that women converts come to Islam while they do carry over some of their own American culture. They mix their American background with Islamic cultures and practices. One of them acknowledged that “I had to perform all of this blending while trying to mend my relations with my parents. My mom and grandma were worried because they loved me and they wished only the best for me. They feared that I would not be safe and that my husband would force me to cover my body. Based on Islamic teachings, I did not cut off my relations with them and spent much more time with them than before.”

The Event of 9/11

During the course of research, there were a couple of interviewees who cited the events around 9/11 as leading them to find out more about Islam and thus eventually converting. The 9/11 was one of the most unforgettable incidents registered in the history of the world as an unjustifiable viscous act. In this section, its aftermath is brought into consideration from both points of views of Islam and then on religion in general.

As Curtis IV (2009) discussed, all Muslim countries condemned this action, and the American Muslims took a series of actions in sympathy with the victims and their families, by donating blood or some other types of donations and holding vigils. The Muslims also demonstrated their anger by putting banners in Muslim community centers. By putting the U.S. flags in Islamic centers and mosques in the U.S., Muslims held gatherings and emphasized their supportive intention. Through this, and especially the outstanding discerns and the peaceful sense of Americanism, an atmosphere of co-existence was created and established among Muslims and

Non-Muslims, mending to some extents, the old wounds and reconnecting the two groups together. Muslims sought to educate non-Muslims in expressing their protest and conveying their message that this is against the peace and friendship Islam is based on. As the result of these communications, Americans got curious, trying to visit mosques for the first time and participate in information sessions on Islam, observing the specifications and messages of Islam expressing peace searching objectives, while declaring their abhorrence from any terrorism action or killing innocent people. Since an unwanted relationship between this incident and Islam was surfaced, it made the heads of Islamic communities in charge to take actions in the immediate aftermath of the event to clear any misconceptions. They tried to declare their sheer objections to this violent act of terrorism from the Islamic point of view and condemning it. Furthermore, they became resolute to prevent any such brutality and bloodshed, demonstrating the fact that Islam contradicts such actions. The event of 9/11 provoked Americans to increase their knowledge about Islam. The books written in this domain soon became the best sellers. Colleges offered more courses in relation to Islam. The presence of Muslim experts became more observable in T.V. shows and the construction of Islamic centers and mosques increased.

On the other hand, according to Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007), the 9/11 not only had its effect on public minds, but it changed the nation's attitude towards religion. Criticism from any religion came out of its taboo status. As a result, the importance of "Interfaith efforts" missing previously became talk of the town. The White House launched a "College Interfaith Affairs" program to help distribute interfaith events across the country. This program motivated students with different religions to work together on their common teachings, while mosques held joint membership services for the first time. Expansion of "Interfaith Affairs" set the foundation to increase the general level of knowledge of Islam amongst people. Muslim scholars

tried to distinguish between the terrorist objectives and real Islamic concepts. There was not that much information, identity and recognition about Islam in the U.S. before 9/11, whereas, later on, not only their general knowledge about Islam was increased, but it also encouraged some people to think more of conversion.

Some of the interviewees are riding the unprecedented wave of curiosity and interest in Islam following the event of September 11, 2001. Since then, Islam has been very much in the public eyes. According to Dirks and Parlove (2003), statistics indicate that the number of conversions went up significantly after 9/11. One possible explanation for the increasing rate of converts after this time is that this event created a kind of curiosity in non-Muslim women about the status of women in Islamic societies, since the media portrayed Muslim women as oppressed by their male kin. This media portrayal arose from the fact that those who committed the acts on 9/11 came from Muslim-majority societies. Through the media Islam became associated with a particular kind of society, one in which women did not have rights and husbands abused their wives. Because the abuse of Muslim women became a sign of the oppressiveness and violence inherent in Islam, non-Muslim American women were horrified but also excited by this negative image. The media portrayal of women in Islamic societies focused on extreme cases of domestic violence that occurred within Muslim societies, and that in turn provoked American women who supported women's rights. As converts became initially interested in Islam, they wanted to know whether Islam as a faith advocated violence against women. They discovered, to their surprise, that Islam granted women certain social rights that they found attractive. The converts then became voices of correction regarding the negative stereotypes portrayed about Muslim women by the media. One of women explained how she converted after this event, "I was born in a Christian family. I did not know anything about Islam except this religion as being backward

and oppressive to women. After the event of September 11, 2011, I was encouraged to increase my knowledge about Islam. Before this occasion, I thought that the Quran discriminates against women. I found, after a few months of research, that Islam has brought the equal women's rights same as men. At the time, one of my classmates who is now my current husband had asked me to marry him. His family wanted me to become a Muslim. I was afraid of changing my religion because my Sunday school told us that if I do not believe that Jesus had died for my sins and was my personal savior, I would go to hell. But Allah showed me the right way that I felt inside me. Also, then we went to a mosque and took the Shahadah." One of converts stated how she embraced Islam, "I grew up in a Catholic family. Sometimes we went to church on Sunday mornings and read the Bible. I converted to Islam after September 11, 2011. I acknowledge that this event has had a significant effect in my conversion. This event made me more interested to study women's rights in Islam. My studies about the different opinions of Islam for women and lifestyle caused me to correct the negative beliefs I had before."

On the other hand, this event had some its own side effects on some converts. One of interviewees converted to Islam before this event. She said, "At first, I was wearing the hijab, but after September 11, 2001, I decided to take it off due to the pressure of society. The hijab was scary for my daughter, and students told her go back to your country. My boys became scared to bring their kids to my home. I lost my grandchildren, and then I decided to remove the hijab. I think modesty is in the way people present themselves and their behaviors. I tried to wear long sleeves and loose shirts that cover my bosoms and neck."

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

One motivating force behind this research was the response to the question of how non-Muslim born American women were converted to Islam in such an increasing rate. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to discuss my background and its effects in selecting the subject matter of the thesis, followed by its implications on me and finally, a conclusion in correlation with of all these elements involved.

Born and raised in an eastern culture compared to west, with a background of an Islamic country, I came to the U.S. for my graduate studies. It was captivating to me to arrive, study and live in the U.S., where the freedom of religion plays a vital and constructive role, while people of all religions co-exist peacefully. While all my observances were informative, at the same time appealing, what I found fascinating was the idea that in a society with religious pluralism, so many women demonstrate a tendency towards conversion and post 9/11 to Islam and how is it that they are willing to risk and revamp their whole life along with their inner spirituality?"

On the other hand, because of the mere existence of non-Islamic communities in relation to Islam and meeting converts, I was encouraged to view Islam from the point view of non-Muslims. Consequently, during this research, I became curious about Christianity and Islam and their relationship to each other, because of the interviewees and the fact that they had knowledge of both. Evaluating the reasoning for conversion offered by the interviewees, I discovered that I needed to better understand Islam from a scholarly perspective. As someone raised Muslim, I have taken Islam for granted and not seen it as something requiring study. The different views and reasoning directed them to convert, inspired me to study Islam deeply.

Obviously, the socio/economic environment and historical development of the Western industrialized world and the Middle East are vastly different. Though the advent of both was in the Middle East, Islam mainly remained in the Middle East, while Europe became the main base of Christianity. With these two geographic changes, came differences in communication, traditions, culture, language, beliefs, modernity, technology, science, political issues and so on, indicating the religious practices stem from these cultural variations. Accordingly, many of the converted people are still following traces of their own westernized culture.

In summary, the main constituting factors of women conversion to Islam in Kansas, could be recapitulated to such elements as Trinity, women's rights, hijab, comprehensibility of Islam, and the 9/11 event. In connection with "To be committed to the Islamic teachings" in daily life, the converts have different required practical levels. In so far as I was concerned, in some cases, the converted women were thoroughly committed to the Islamic teachings such as praying five times a day, fasting and wearing the hijab, whereas husbands who were Muslim born, were not practicing or, some women who despite losing their job, did not give up hijab. Whereas sometimes some women did not believe in hijab, or after conversion, fear of losing job caused them to put it aside. In general, some convert women completely follow the teachings of Islam and practice them, and some do not show willingness to carry out their obligation in their life. As the matter of the fact, despite of all affirmations and positives experiences narrated by interviewees, things are not always as rosy as converts may have expected or hoped for. The realities of being a new member of an established community, or one in the process of negotiating its identity, soon impinge, and converts recognize that their problems are not all solved simply by the act of becoming Muslim.

Inference

Unlike in their past, American women demonstrate an inclination to live independently in the present century and be the sole decision maker in their personal and social affairs without other's interference, including their husbands or parents. One of the fundamental decisions in everybody's life is religion conversion, different from their parents' or the majority. Despite their background, history and culture they have grown up with, the converted women in the U.S. have welcome their new religion based on deep scrutinizing and thoughtful assessments. These women, not only have turned to Islam, but by thorough implementation of Islamic instructions and practicing, they have proved that their faith is authentic and genuine. For example, at the present American environment, by wearing hijab, they have proven that they have opted to Islam heartily with deep conviction and strongly believe in the path they have chosen for the rest of their life. Tolerating range of unbearable complexities to put their religious beliefs into practice in an environment surrounded with the surge of media oppositions is the clear proof of a determined pronouncement of their independent personal decision.

Differences of the main concepts of Christianity and Islam have had a fundamental effect on their conversion. The main similarities and dissimilarities of the two religions from scholar views have been extensively argued. This course work demonstrates that the "Conversion" has profoundly penetrated into the life of American women. Through execution of Islamic commands, these women are determined to express that their identity has been modified; therefore, they want to be respected by the society and be treated based on their new religious beliefs. From another perspective, the growing rate of American women converts is a solid indication that Islam respects women's rights; on the other hand, the outcome of the interviews

demonstrates that those women played a substantial role in transforming the Islam image in post 9/11 in the United States.

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APPENDIX

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adhan: The Muslims call to prayer, pronounced loudly to indicate the time to pray is due.

Ahlul-Bayt: are central and the main source of interpreters of Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad and what has been revealed to him as Quran. Ahlul-Bayt are successors of Prophet Muhammad and are consist of Prophet Muhammad, his daughter (Fatimah), his cousin and son in law (Ali-ibn-Abitalib), Hassan-ibn-Ali and Hussain-ibn-Ali (the Prophet's grandsons or Fatimah's sons). They are also called as the Ahlul-Kisa.

Al-Hamdulillah: All praise is to Allah.

Al-Salam 'Alaykum: Greeting of peace by Muslim Brothers and Sisters.

Allah: The one and only one God.

Bismillah: In the name of one God.

Fasting (Sawm): refraining from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse from dark to dusk.

Hadith: Saying and actions of the prophets and Aemmeh Maasoomin, specially pertaining to matters of religion.

Hajj: The fifth pillar of Islam. Islam prescribed pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are physically, mentally, and financially able to do so.

Halal: Something that is permitted or acceptable

Haram : Something that is not permitted or prohibited.

Hijab: A partition or curtain for the sake of modesty, usually refers to a scarf, head covering, and body covering subjects of religion.

Iftar: Breaking the fast in the evening

APPENDIX (Continued)

Imam: The leader of the congregational prayers

Iman: Faith

Islam: the religion of the prophets and messengers of Allah culminating with the revelation of the Quran to the last prophet, Muhammad and his followers

Jilbab: Traditional, loose, outer garment of women.

Juyub: Two possible meaning; breast or necklines

Kafer: Disbeliever, one not on the straight path.

Masjid: Mosque

Muslim: Muslims believe in a single God, or Allah and Muhammad as the last prophet

P.B.U.H: Peace Be Upon Him (the prophet Muhammad) and his progeny.

Prophet Muhammad: The Last prophet of Allah for Muslim people.

Quran: Scripture revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad via the Angel Gabriel

Ramadan: the month of fasting for Muslims. It is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar.

During this month, Allah began to reveal the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad.

Salat: Ritual prayer

Shahadah: Repeating the witness that there is God is only unique and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.

Surah: A chapter in the Quran

Sunnah: is used to refer to custom, deeds, sayings, and behaviors of Prophet Muhammad in his life time.

Ummah: The Muslim community, the shared brotherhood and sisterhood of all Muslims

APPENDIX (Continued)

Zakat: One of the pillars of Islam, obligatory charity from all Muslims who have a surplus income.