

The Straight Way: A Narrative Study of Conversion to Islam

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I. Introduction

Conversion to any religion is inherently a life-changing process. A convert's social and spiritual life, worldview, and self-identity are fundamentally altered during conversion. Any conversion story involves these changes but I chose to focus on conversion to Islam due to my personal connection with it, which I will address later. I present the narratives of two converts to Islam, Dawud and Musa.¹ I focus on the process that led to their conversions, although the post-conversion process, which I touch upon in the "Shahada-when and why" section, is just as important. Conversion is a search for identity. It is important to note that both Dawud and Musa converted in their early adulthood, when the struggle to define oneself is at its most turbulent point. Islam grounded their identities. It provided them with a set of beliefs and a community with which they now strongly associate.

In the discussion I explain two central themes that emerged in my analysis of the interviews. The first is the conversion process itself. I explore each stage of the process chronologically, explaining how the converts came into contact with Islam and then discussing their investigation into Islam. I present and interpret the converts' process of dispelling doubts and contradictions, slowly adapting certain Islamic tenets, their transition from a non-Muslim to a Muslim identity and the actual point at which they become Muslim. The second theme is the relational context of conversion, meaning the role that other people play in conversion and the social changes that accompany it. I

¹ All names of people and locations have been changed to ensure anonymity.

explain the role that Muslim mentors, the *Ummah* (Muslim community), and non-Muslim friends and family play in conversion. In discussing the conversion process I combine both Dawud's and Musa's experiences due to their similar progression. However, because their conversions took place in different relational contexts, I consider each of their stories separately when discussing the second theme. Finally, I share my own story in relation to the two narratives. It is up to the reader to decide how you wish to interpret this paper. Muslims will read it through a different lens than non-Muslims. But if you wish to consider the personal nature of this paper and the context in which it was conducted as you read it, I suggest that you read my story first.

I must stress the scope of this project before I continue. This is not a massive ethnographic endeavor. It is the stories of two individuals. Their experiences are unique and do not necessarily represent the conversion process of others. When appropriate, I have extrapolated certain themes to the conversion process in general, although these are merely postulations.

The limitations of this paper are also important to acknowledge. Both participants are American males. A woman's conversion story or the conversion story of someone in a different country may bear little resemblance to Dawud's and Musa's experiences. I cannot answer whether women experience conversion differently from men and how nationality impacts conversion. I hope to expand my research to encompass these questions in the future.

*Glossary*²

Commonly used Arabic terms in Islam:

Alhamdulillah-Praise be to God, a commonly used phrase in Islam.

Halal-Permitted in Islam. Some people compare the idea of halal to kosher in Judaism.

Halal refers to dietary as well as more general guidelines.

Haram- Forbidden in Islam. Muslims believe that God only made things that are physically, mentally and spiritually harmful haram. Common examples are pork, alcohol, and adultery.

Ihsan-God-consciousness. One of the most important concepts in Islam, it is often explained as worshipping God as if you could see God.

Iman-Faith. One of the most important concepts in Islam, it is often used to refer to the strength of conviction in a Muslim.

Inchallah-God willing, a commonly used phrase in Islam.

Khutba-Sermon. This usually takes place during congregational prayer on Fridays.

Salam alaikum-Peace be with you. Although this is not strictly an Islamic greeting (Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews use it as well), it is associated with Islam.

Salat-Prayer. Muslims pray five times a day: before dawn (Fajr), after midday (Dhuhr), mid afternoon (Asr), evening (Maghrib), and night (Isha). Prayers are recited aloud or silently depending on the time of day.

Salla allahu alaihi wa sallam-May the Blessings and Peace of Allah be upon him.

Muslims are required to recite this blessing after saying or reading the Prophet Muhammad's name.

² Where possible I have included the meaning of Arabic terms in the text. If the meaning is too complicated to succinctly explain, you will find it in the glossary.

Shahada-The declaration of faith and one of the five pillars of Islam. Shahada is discussed in more detail later.

Shia-The second largest denomination in Islam, estimated at about 15-20 percent of all Muslims. What distinguishes the Shia from other Muslims is their belief that the Prophet's cousin Ali was the rightful successor and their rejection of the first three caliphs (leaders) after the Prophet.

Subhana wa ta'ala-Allah is Pure and High. Muslims recite this phrase after saying or reading the name of Allah.

Sunnah-The teachings of the Prophet. Thousands of quotes and anecdotes about the Prophet exist. Muslims are not required to follow everything in the Sunnah, as they are with the Qur'an, although it is heavily recommended that they adhere to the Sunnah as best they can.

Sunni-The largest denomination in Islam, estimated at about 80-85 percent of all Muslims.

Malaikum salam-And peace be with you. Reply to *salam alaikum*.

Masjid-Mosque, the Islamic equivalent of a Church or Synagogue.

Ummah-The global Muslim community.

II. The Narratives

Dawud

“I remember leaving his house almost as if it was yesterday walking down the street, my head half cocked up looking in the air and pondering over this conversation that we just had.” Dawud closes his eyes. The intensity with which he concentrates on his memory makes me feel like I’m there alongside him. He continues: “I remember I reached the corner where I had to stop to cross. I didn’t want to break my thought, I didn’t want to stop and look and see the traffic so I could cross. So I stood there for a minute, still my head looking up in the air...and watching cars out of my peripheral go by, a couple cars stopping at the corner, waiting, trying to motion to me to go across, and then stopping to look to see what the heck I’m looking at, cause I’m just standing there. And finally, after however long it was, I reached an exclamation point in my thought and I verbalized out loud, ‘yeah, I’m gonna be a Muslim.’ And then I stopped and I looked at the traffic and I crossed the street. To me, that’s when I really entered Islam cause that’s really when I acknowledged and knew that I wanted to be a Muslim.”

Dawud was sixteen years old when he realized that he wanted to convert to Islam. He had just left the house of his guide and mentor, Cheikh Ababacar. Although he had known Cheikh Ababacar for several years, this was the first time that the Cheikh had given him a formal lesson about Islam. As Dawud walked down the street, he experienced an epiphany that every Muslim convert goes through. It is the realization that one is and always has been Muslim in his or her heart, and the realization that one wants to convert to Islam.

Dawud is short and stout and wears an off-white robe that ends below his knees. I've never seen him without his customary black turban. At fifty-three, he maintains a puffy white beard and closes his eyes when he is saying something important. His voice is gravelly, which he attributes to all the drywall he works with. I first met Dawud at Masjid al-Aziz (Mosque of the Almighty) in Baltimore. It was about half-way through Ramadan and I decided to finally meet some Muslims so I didn't have to fast alone. I arrived about ten minutes before the Friday evening prayer. As I was taking my shoes off in the lobby, Dawud greeted me: "Salam alaikum brother." *Peace be with you.* "Malaikum salam," I replied. *And peace be with you.* We small-talked for a bit about Baltimore and then he asked me how long I had been Muslim. I told him I hadn't converted yet but was going through the process. He inquired as to what was holding me back. I explained that it was a big lifestyle change for me and I didn't want to rush it. He agreed and asked if I had any doubts about converting. I said whatever doubts I had would hopefully dissipate as I learned more about Islam. He agreed again and introduced himself as Dawud. He put some leftovers wrapped in tinfoil on the shoe rack and we went upstairs to the prayer room together.

As Dawud and I got to know each other, he told me about his own conversion story. Sometimes we would meet at the library where he works. Other times we met at the mosque in Dawud's tent (he set it up in the prayer room during the last ten days of Ramadan, the holiest time of the year, so he could spend as much time as possible at the mosque). For our first interview, we sat in my car on the side of the road. No matter where we were, Islam was always the subject du jour and Dawud enthusiastically answered my questions and told me about his own experience with Islam.

Dawud grew up in a Christian environment. Although his family was not very religious, Dawud went to church every week. He was involved in various church activities, sang in the choir, and enjoyed a close relationship with his pastor. When he was fourteen he decided that he wanted to learn about other religions: “My intention was to worship God. I didn’t have to prove one thing or the other...my resounding prayer that I used to pray all the time in church was I wanted to know the truth. I didn’t want to prove this right or that wrong. I just wanted to know the truth.” Dawud decided to investigate other religions and determine which one was best suited for discovering the truth.

Around the same time, Dawud met his mentor, Cheikh Ababacar. The Cheikh was the director of an urban league in Dawud’s area. He took Dawud under his wing and introduced him to Islam. Cheikh Ababacar became a father figure for Dawud: “I didn’t have a father at home and he was already like a teacher...I was very impressed and very drawn to this brother’s character and personality and his demeanor.” Dawud became the Cheikh’s protégé. He spent as much time as he could with the Cheikh.: “Sometimes we wouldn’t be doing anything, wherever he was going I just liked to be with him, you know, he’d go to the mosque or he’d go take care of business or whatever, I’d just be hanging out...and learning vicariously, I learned so many things for life in general, really just being with him. Different things about business and being a man and a lot of other things.”

After a couple of years the Cheikh decided to formalize his instruction and set up a structured lesson for Dawud to learn about Islam. After Dawud’s first lesson at the Cheikh’s house, he had his epiphany on the street. Unfortunately shortly after that, the

Cheikh had to leave the country and Dawud didn't see him for several years. He continued going to church but he didn't forget about Islam: "I used to pray asking God [to] show me the truth, which is right Islam or Christianity." Although he no longer frequented the mosque with the Cheikh, he continued researching Islam and by the time they were reunited, Dawud was ready to take his Shahada.

Shahada, the declaration of faith, is the most important pillar in Islam. It escapes the lips of millions of Muslims every time they pray. It is heard throughout the Muslim world five times a day when the faithful are called to prayer. The entire meaning of the Qur'an and the Islamic creed can be whittled down to this one, all-encompassing phrase: "Ashadu an la ilaha illallah ashadu anna Muhammadar-rasulullah." ("I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"). Needless to say, when a Muslim utters the Shahada for the first time with full comprehension and conviction, it is a momentous rite of passage.

Dawud's declaration of faith followed another rite of passage in most Americans' lives. He took Shahada the day after his twenty-first birthday. The night before, he had celebrated his birthday in the typical manner: "Saturday night I went out and partied and did stuff I hadn't done in months upon months, stuff that I shouldn't do, as a Muslim." The next day, as Dawud headed to the mosque where he would officially enter Islam, he faced one last hurdle before his conversion: "The devil came onto me and he's like 'why you gonna go do that? You alright the way you are. You know you don't have to become a Muslim. You had fun last night and you like to do all them kind of things and so just stay like it is! Everything where it is!'" Dawud struggled with his doubts. He knew that he couldn't turn his back on Islam when he was so close to converting: "So now here I'm

like ‘yeah but you don’t want to stop doing that and you really don’t want to stop doing this,’ and I said to myself ‘you said you wanted to know the truth. Now he gonna show it to you and you just gonna turn around and walk away? You know you gonna have something to answer for that!’ So I hurried up and went straight to the masjid and took my Shahada and as the saying goes, I never looked back since.”

Since his conversion, Dawud has overcome his doubts about Islam. When I asked him how Islam’s role has changed in his life since he took Shahada, he replied, “Islam is my life. Islam is my life and my focus and my hope and my desire, my dream that Allah uses me for helping other people to accept Islam and come to Islam... What I do as far as my work or my job or who I marry or where I go, everything, it’s the focal point for whatever decisions that I make in my life.” Dawud’s faith defines his existence. It guides him, comforts him, and inspires him. Islam permeates every aspect of Dawud’s life.

Musa

I met Musa at Masjid al-Aziz on a Sunday morning. Musa, a seventeen year old student at an orthodox Jewish high school in the Baltimore area, converted to Islam two years ago. He is small in stature and has long brown hair and a five o’clock shadow that outlines his face. At first he seemed somewhat hesitant to share his story with me and may have been anxious because of the tape recorder. Eventually his glances towards the recorder stopped and he began telling me about his conversion.

Musa initially became interested in Islam in seventh grade, when he started talking to Muslims in Africa and the Middle East online. At first there was “not really a

Muslim focus” in Musa’s online conversations; he was simply interested in talking to people from different countries. But after September 11th some of Musa’s teachers started attacking not only Muslims but also Islam itself. At this point, Musa decided to find out whether or not his teachers were telling the truth about Islam. As he explains, “I really just found Islam through trying to weed out misconceptions about Islam.”

Fortunately, he had a network of online Muslim friends at his disposal. His friends helped him clear up misconceptions about Islam. Musa recounts his interactions with his online friends: “I would go online and ask people who I know, ‘Why does the Qur’an say this, why does it say that?’ And one brother showed me a website that clears up misconceptions about Islam.” Musa’s interactions with Muslims online countered the negative image of Muslims that his teachers espoused. But he was not satisfied, so he went to the most reliable source on Islam, the Qur’an. After reading the Qur’an Musa was still confused about Islam. He thought, “How could the same God who says this also say this? And that’s because I was fifteen years old reading the Qur’an without any context.” Using his online network he was able to clear up his misgivings about the Qur’an and it was at that point that he knew he wanted to become a Muslim.

Musa did not name one particular person who led him to Islam. Rather, it was the combined effect of his entire network of Muslim friends that taught him about and encouraged him to embrace Islam. There were however, a few important people Musa named that stood out from the crowd. One of them was Alia, a Muslim and the daughter of a famous Cheikh in Trinidad who had spent time in Saudi Arabia. Alia and Musa talked frequently online, which gave Musa an intimate glimpse into the life of a devout Muslim. Every time she had to pray they would take a pause in their chatting. During

Ramadan, Alia told Musa about fasting. It seems that Musa's interaction with Alia provided him with a real life example of what he had been reading about online and in the Qur'an. By encountering such practices and beliefs on a more personal, palpable level, Musa moved one step closer to embracing Islam.

In ninth grade Musa decided that he wanted to become a Muslim. He waited until summer break to take his Shahada, perhaps so he would have more time to focus on his conversion. He told Alia that he wanted to convert and she asked him if he had taken Shahada yet. In order to take Shahada, two Muslim witnesses must be present, although Musa explained that the most important witness of all is God and the intention to convert is just as important as the act itself. Musa was isolated from other Muslims so he hadn't officially taken his Shahada. Alia suggested that he take it online with her father and a friend as witnesses. They would use the internet telephone program Skype in order to hear Musa declare his faith.

Early one morning during the summer of 2006, Musa went down to his basement, logged onto Skype, and became a Muslim. Immediately afterwards, Musa was filled with *iman*, or faith. He described it as a rush, a "high on Islam" feeling: "It was a feeling like after I did it I didn't want to just go and eat breakfast. After I did that I wanted to read the Qur'an." After his Shahada, Musa printed out large sheets of paper of the various prayers he was now obligated to recite five times a day. He laid them out in front of him and made his morning prayer, the first time that he prayed "for real."

Although Musa was now a Muslim, he had no contact with the Ummah, the Muslim community, aside from his online friends. Living in a Jewish suburb and attending a Jewish high school did not offer him an opportunity to meet other Muslims in

person. Musa is a closeted Muslim; his family does not know that he converted, nor do his friends at school. The only time he was openly Muslim was at a summer camp, around people who were not a part of his life back home. Musa prays in his bedroom with the door locked. During Ramadan he fasts in secret. Before he could drive, he went to a nearby mosque once every couple of months. Now that he has his license he is able to go to the mosque frequently. At one point, he was going almost every day, sometimes twice a day. His parents never knew.

Musa looks forward to college next year, where he plans on being openly Muslim. He also intends to tell his parents soon. But for now Musa remains in the closet. He celebrates Jewish holidays with his family. He goes to school every day and talks to his Jewish friends and teachers. But when Musa goes home, he goes up to his bedroom, locks the door, performs his ablutions, and prays to Allah. He worships the same God as the rabbis at his school, but in a different language. He spends much of his time reading the Qur'an, taking classes for converts online, and talking to his online Muslim friends. Musa's family and friends know that he is interested in Islam. But they don't know how deep his interest is. Musa frames his current situation as a transition from one lifestyle to another: "Naturally I have one life, I go to school, hang out with friends, and then I have another lifestyle which is more like pray and read the Qur'an. So right now it's more about fitting my American lifestyle into my Islamic lifestyle, not the other way around...I'm trying to make those things fit around Islam." Being a good Muslim is Musa's priority. Everything else is secondary to his faith. But as he becomes more and more devout, the rest of his life improves. For example, he thinks that Islam has made him a better son: "In Islam, we are commanded to obey our parents... And so I think it

made me probably a better son in the sense that I help my parents more.” Now that he spends less time with his friends (who he avoids because of their affinity for alcohol, marijuana and other haram, or forbidden, substances) he has more time for his family.

Two years after his conversion Musa is still adjusting to his new identity and new lifestyle. As he enters young adulthood and gains more independence, his Muslim identity will probably change. Once at college, he will have more liberty to meet other Muslims and openly express his faith. He will hopefully be able to share his momentous decision to convert with the people he loves. But for now, Musa still leads a double life.

III. Discussion

I do not intend to compare Musa’s and Dawud’s stories. Either story can stand on its own. Although I was tempted to compare their experiences I refrained from framing my discussion in such a manner. By discussing two conversion stories rather than one, I hope to show the variety of ways in which people embrace Islam. Their stories are equally valid and there is no archetypal conversion with which to compare them. At times I will place their experiences side by side to gain a fuller understanding of the topic at hand and lend more credibility to my generalizations of certain aspects of the conversion process. If the reader so chooses, s/he may compare and contrast their stories; I simply present and interpret them. Here I will briefly discuss the two narratives in relation to each other and then move on to a separate analysis of each one.

Musa’s and Dawud’s stories differ drastically. The contexts in which they first discovered and subsequently embraced Islam are dramatically different. They also contrast demographically: a white, formerly Jewish teenager in an affluent suburb who

recently converted online, and a black, formerly Christian middle-aged man who lives in the ghetto and converted thirty years ago. Despite these differences, there are multiple themes that link their two stories together, suggesting that there are fundamental aspects of conversion which are universal and transcend race, class, and generation.

Two central components of conversion emerged during my analysis of the interviews. The first component is the actual conversion process itself. The conversion process encompasses different stages from the first encounter with Islam to the decision that one wants to convert, from doubts about converting to taking Shahada and finally adapting to an Islamic lifestyle. The second component, without which the first could not exist, is the social and relational aspects of conversion. Other people play a central role in a person's decision to convert. The first encounter that people have with Islam is usually in a relational context. By talking to Muslims, they familiarize themselves with this formerly foreign lifestyle. Shahada itself is taken in the presence of other Muslims. The integration into the Muslim Ummah is one of the most important changes in a convert's life. I will first explain the conversion process and then place it in its relational context.

The Conversion Process

Predisposition/reversion

Most people would assume that converting to Islam is a momentous change and fundamentally alters a person's self-identity and worldview. This is undoubtedly true but the disruptive impact that conversion has on a new Muslim's life is often balanced by the predisposition that some converts feel towards Islam. Such a circumstance applies to

both Dawud's and Musa's cases. Before ever encountering Islam, they both held certain views and practiced certain lifestyle choices that reflected an Islamic mode of thought, which led to the idea of predisposition to Islam. From beliefs about God to the avoidance of alcohol, they both practiced various aspects of Islam, unbeknownst to them. When Dawud started exploring Islam, he found that many of its tenets were in keeping with his own beliefs: "A lot of things that Islam teaches...have come easy to me and have been quite in line with my own personal nature." Dawud explained that when potential converts start learning about Islam they feel an automatic connection to its beliefs and practices. Dawud's demeanor and actions were closely in line with Islamic thought even before he started learning about Islam. His default Muslim demeanor facilitated a smooth conversion process.

In his article *Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change*, Rambo (1999) theorizes that conversion involves a fundamental change in a convert's life story. By reconstructing his or her biography, conversion gives "new meaning to a person's definition of self, identity, relationships, and God" (265). Part of the conversion process involves establishing connections between "my story" (the convert's experience) and "the story" (the history of Islam). Dawud found similarities between himself and the Prophet, which validated the predisposition he felt for Islam. One example that Dawud gave me was that the Prophet said "Seek the middle course." Dawud elaborates: "Don't try and go too extreme to the right or to the left, you know, seek the middle course. That's always been part of my nature. I've always been that guy who's trying to find that balance." The similarities that Dawud found between his narrative and that of the Prophet facilitated his transition to Islam.

Dawud attributes the ease with which he embraced Islam to God: “Allah says in the Qur’an that He created Islam within the very nature of the human being. If we lived in a natural state, ‘without being tainted by societal adaptations, the way we would live would be Islam.’” Many converts refer to their embracing Islam as reversion, not conversion, because they see it as returning to their original state. Musa confirms: “Through this whole experience I have discovered that I did not find Islam, I re-embraced Islam; nor did I convert, I reverted.” Using religious reasoning, the predisposition which many converts feel towards Islam is attributable to the way in which God placed Islam at the center of the human experience.

The first encounter

Both Dawud and Musa encountered Islam in a seemingly accidental way. Dawud’s role model and Musa’s online friends all happened to be Muslim. When they both felt unsatisfied and disillusioned with their respective religions, Islam happened to be in their peripheral view. A search for the truth and a curious investigative attitude slowly nudged Islam into the center of their lives. Some people would call such a chain of events happenstance. Dawud and Musa would call it guidance from Allah.

During both interviews, the topic of prior religious experiences arose. Because both participants were affiliated with Abrahamic faiths prior to their conversions, I cannot extrapolate their experiences to those of an atheist or polytheist convert, although I will relate my own experience with atheism and conversion later. It seems that religious experiences prior to conversion, what I will refer to as pre-conversion beliefs, facilitated Dawud’s and Musa’s interest in Islam. As Musa became acquainted with Islam’s tenets, he realized that “it is a pretty similar religion to Judaism so I understood the basics of it,

from the start.” For Dawud, his study of the Bible steered him towards Islam. Once he started reading the Bible with Islam in mind, he realized that it “talked about the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, *salla allahu alaihi wa sallam*, in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And I found secure in the Qur’an...and I scrutinized those things and I did my due diligence and analyzed those things and found them to be true and consistent to the point that I believed Islam was right and I had no right to deny it anymore.”

Dawud’s study of the Bible gave him the definitive answer to his resounding prayer, “Which is right, Islam or Christianity?” and the answer was Islam. Christianity acted as a platform, which he used to corroborate the Qur’an and learn about Islam. Dawud’s pre-conversion beliefs gave him a “moral consciousness... [but] by no means a methodology on how to inculcate it within my daily life and so forth. Which of course Islam gives you...but for most people I don’t think their religious affiliation really dictates a lot of things in their daily life.” Islam provided him with moral guidelines that Christianity could not offer. At the same time, Dawud’s and Musa’s initial religious mindsets probably eased their transitions into Islam. They both believed in God beforehand and grew up in semi-religious environments. Once they entered Islam, their pre-conversion beliefs seem to have helped them transition to similar Islamic beliefs.

The gradual process-following the path

Although many converts feel a natural affinity for Islam, the path towards conversion and the adaptation of an Islamic lifestyle is a lengthy and gradual process. It took Dawud five years to convert after he knew that he wanted to be a Muslim. Musa waited four years to convert after his initial contact with Islam. Many times before and after conversion, doubts and misconceptions act as roadblocks to embracing Islam. The

path towards Islam is by no means linear; it is a path with many potholes, dead ends and loops back to the start. The idea of a path towards God is a central element of Islamic thought and it is found in the first verse of the Qur'an: "Show us³ the Straight Way, the way of those on whom you have bestowed Your Grace, not the way of those who earned Your Anger, or those who went astray." This mantra is repeated during every prayer and speaks to the difficulties that Muslims face in adhering to their creed and remaining on the path. At the same time, it gives them strength and reaffirms their faith in God and their desire to seek the truth. Both Dawud and Musa named searching for the truth as one of the main reasons motivating their conversions. That being said, they also both described the slow process of learning about Islam, confronting their doubts and misconceptions, and finally being able to embrace Islam.

Musa's story shows the slow process that many converts endure when moving towards Islam. Before taking Shahada and officially becoming Muslim, he went through a period of time when he believed in Islam and practiced its tenets but still wasn't Muslim. This murky midpoint between non-Muslim and Muslim is an important step in the conversion process. Musa explains, "I had this long period of time where I believed Islam and I started, you know, slowly went into it. And yeah, I kind of learned how to pray between then and all, but that's a slow process." At this transition point in the conversion process, a person's self-concept and identity are fundamentally altered. Although I cannot assume that every convert navigates this stage, I strongly suspect that it is a common component of many conversions. A convert may still associate with non-Muslim friends and acquaintances but s/he is also in the process of meeting Muslims and

³ The use of the plural "us" rather than the singular "me" speaks to the importance of community in Islam, discussed later.

integrating into a new community. As s/he moves closer to conversion, s/he may start to identify more with his or her Muslim friends than non-Muslims friends and family. S/he may alter, drop, or incorporate different habits and beliefs. Perhaps s/he stops going out with his or her friends to the bar and makes sure that s/he has enough time to pray. S/he may become more aware of what is halal (permitted) and what is haram (forbidden) in his or her life and adjust appropriately. At this point the future convert is grappling with two identities and two worldviews. The decisions s/he makes now effect the rest of his or her life.

After two years of being a Muslim, Musa now fully identifies with the Muslim Ummah. The changes in Musa's social life reflect his new identity and worldview: "I have more in common with the Muslims at the masjid than I do with the non-Muslims at school." The manner in which Musa navigated the transition period discussed above led to his strong faith. Before converting, Musa was already praying and talking to Muslims online as he started tweaking his beliefs and his lifestyle to adjust to Islam. He explored extensively this new faith that he could potentially adapt as his own. After reading the Qur'an, certain passages struck him as contradictory. His online Muslim friends cleared up the misconceptions he had and directed him toward reliable sources to which he could refer when he encountered something confusing. His persistence and determination to seek the truth pushed him forward as he tapped various resources to learn more about Islam.

Dawud also grappled with misconceptions and doubts before his conversion. Immediately prior to his Shahada he faced a barrage of doubts about converting. This attack was so severe that it even crossed his mind to turn his back on Islam. He admitted,

“at that time there were some things that I knew about Islam...that I thought maybe I didn’t want to do or didn’t want to abstain from.” Keeping in mind that he had just celebrated his twenty-first birthday the night before, the temptation to turn back must have been strong. Dawud eventually overcame his doubts after he converted, but many converts continue to have difficulties adapting to their new lifestyle. Judging from what Dawud told me, it seems that problems tend to arise more in the secular rather than spiritual aspects of conversion. Worshipping God does not seem to cause many problems, especially for a convert like Dawud who had a strong religious background prior to conversion. The obstacles that Dawud related to me consisted of giving up pork, alcohol, and sex. However Muslims view such secular issues as affecting their relationship with God. Someone who is busy drinking and having promiscuous sex is more likely to neglect his or her relationship with God than a Muslim who avoids such habits. So although the obstacles that arose were not directly related to a convert’s spiritual practices, they still impeded the convert’s focus and ability to worship.

Upon conversion, new Muslims are encouraged to change not only their spiritual practices but the secular aspects of their lives as well. However, making over their entire lifestyle in one day is not reasonable. The slow process of adaptation to Islam continues after conversion. Dawud likes to poke fun at new converts who drag their feet on certain issues. Impersonating people that he’s talked to, he laments ““When I get myself together, you know...I’ll come to the mosque, I know Islam is right. I know that’s what I’m supposed to do, I know how to live the Qur’an but you know...I just want my pork sandwich!” he exclaims as he laughs at his impression. ““I just can’t give up that swine man! You know, I’m living with my girlfriend. I know if I’m Muslim I’m not supposed

to be doing that but we together.’ And I just cut away all the excuses. Because none of it is necessary, I mean very few, course some do some time...stop right there you know. But not everybody can. And that’s ok. ‘Cause Allah is merciful. Allah is forgiving and merciful.”

In Dawud’s opinion, it is unrealistic to expect new converts to adhere to the same guidelines as experienced Muslims. They shouldn’t use their newcomer status as an excuse to ignore rules that they find too demanding or illogical, nor should they rush into obeying such rules without a full understanding of their significance. Dawud elaborates, “You don’t gotta delay, cause ‘I’m doing this, I’m doing that’ or whatever. You know what I tell you? Start learning how to make your prayer. Inchallah [God willing] everything else will come. You know, Allah is merciful. Know that if you doing something that you not supposed to do, know and acknowledge that maybe that’s wrong and you shouldn’t do it, you know what I mean?” Dawud seems to think that as long as a new convert is cognizant of which rules s/he is obeying and which ones s/he is ignoring, and if s/he tries to make a concerted effort to align his or her practices with the tenets of Islam, then s/he is on the right track.

Shahada-when and why

Early on in my meetings with Dawud, I confided in him that I was having some serious doubts about converting. He assured me that no one is ever 100 percent certain that converting is the right thing to do when they take Shahada. Even the most devout Muslims are sometimes confronted with doubts about their beliefs in the back of their minds. But if a Muslim strives towards the truth and is steadfast in his or her worship of God, Dawud believes that such reservations will dissipate. For new converts, the first

step towards seeking the truth is to rid their lives of distractions that interfere with their spirituality. But before they can embark on this cleanup mission, they must first acknowledge that such distractions exist. In Dawud's words, "Don't justify 'well it's ok.' Nah I ain't telling you that it's ok, you know what I mean? Acknowledge that 'ok, I shouldn't be doing that,' living with your girlfriend or whatever the case may be, know that that's wrong. Know that you shouldn't do that. But don't let that stop you... I always tell people it's better for you to die as a weak Muslim, as a Muslim making some mistakes, than to die as a disbeliever."

Judging from the last sentence, Dawud puts a heavy emphasis on what I will call a person's Muslimhood, his or her status as a Muslim. As long as s/he believes the basic tenets of Islam and is ready to practice its five pillars (Shahada, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage), then s/he should convert, even if not all of his or her beliefs and actions are in line with the Islamic creed. A convert has the rest of his or her life to explore Islam and follow its teachings. However, none of us know how long the rest of our lives will last. I think that mortality and the unpredictability of death influence Dawud's emphasis on entering Muslimhood with reasonable haste. So if I am pretty sure that I want to convert but still don't agree with everything Islam preaches, I should convert anyway while I still can and confront my doubts on the other side of conversion, the safe side, the Muslim side. Taking a leap of faith is an inherent part of conversion and religion in general. Faith defines the religious experience. When taking Shahada, a person must put his or her doubts aside in order to believe what s/he is saying and truly enter Islam: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." Without a leap of faith, I think that proclaiming belief in Allah and

Allah's Messenger is extremely difficult for a convert to believe and converts will often struggle with doubt after their Shahada. People who are able to "stop right there" in their misgivings are "very few." But according to Dawud, after certain people take their Shahada they experience an immediate rush of faith, like Musa did, which can lead them to dismiss many if not all of their doubts.

As explained earlier, Musa was already following some of the Islamic creed prior to his Shahada. He spent much of his time reading the Qur'an and talking to his Muslim friends online. Although he hadn't yet converted, Musa was clearly leaning towards Islam. Once he took Shahada, a change in his spiritual practice occurred. Beforehand, although he strongly identified with Islam and Muslims, he was not held to the same rules as his Muslims friends. He was not obligated to pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, abstain from pre-marital sex, avoid alcohol, and other such rules that a Muslim is required to follow. After taking Shahada, such guidelines were no longer optional: "Then once you take Shahada you realize as this point this is when you're actually Muslim. You have to keep up with salat [prayer]; it's not just pray when you feel like praying. And you have to start following the Sunnah [the teachings of the Prophet]...Suddenly you have to take on a lot of obligations. And so I guess when I took Shahada is when I realized like, I guess that was really the only major change for me, was I had to actually do these things instead of just feeling like praying today." Since Musa was already adhering to most important Islamic guidelines, his spiritual practice did not drastically change after his Shahada. The only major alteration that occurred was that he was now required to follow such guidelines.

The Shahada is not the climax of a Muslim's life. It is a momentous rite of passage; but it is only the beginning of a Muslim's relationship with Allah, not the final destination. A person does not take Shahada and then stop exploring Islam. It is a lifelong process and multiple epiphanies and changes in religious thought and lifestyle can come after Shahada. I have tried to treat Shahada as an important, defining event in a person's conversion and faith, but not as the singular most important event.

Islam-the healthy lifestyle

One of the overriding themes that surfaced repeatedly in both interviews was treating Islam as a lifestyle, not just a religion. As Dawud and Musa became more and more devout and knowledgeable about Islam, it slowly permeated every aspect of their lives. Musa explains, "As I became more religious, I realized that Islam is not...just how you pray and how you believe, it's an actual lifestyle...And through the example of the Messenger, *salla allahu alaihi wa sallam*, him, we have an example of the healthy lifestyle." Islam's impact on Musa is not confined to one hour a week at the mosque or during the holidays. The tenants and guidelines of Islam are constantly on his mind as he strives to follow the example of the Prophet. Dawud describes the "constant evaluation that a person is doing with their connection with Islam. They're conscious about each and everything pretty much that they do, whether or not it's acceptable." Islam, via the Qur'an and the Sunnah, dictates how Muslims pray, worship God, and other spiritual matters, but it also gives them direction in the more secular, mundane aspects of everyday life: sleeping, eating, hygiene, etc. It dictates their social interactions: how Muslims greet each other, marry, divorce, earn a living, spend, invest, give to charity, and a myriad other social and legal issues. For a mother, Islam provides tips on childrearing. For a

country at war, it provides rules of engagement. For a host, it provides instruction on hospitality. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a renowned Islamic scholar who translated the Qur'an into English, succinctly explains "for a sociologist, the Qur'an is a miracle in its social system; for a legislator, in its legislative system; for a politician, in its politics; for a ruler, in its justice." Islam's all-encompassing effect is evident in both Dawud's and Musa's stories. Although this paper's focus is the conversion process, the Islamic lifestyle to which they converted is just as important as the path that led them there.

The Relational Context

The role that other people, Muslims and non-Muslims, play in Dawud's and Musa's stories deserves a section of its own. Conversion is inherently a relational phenomenon. Not only does the act of adapting to a new faith change one's relationship with God, it also effects one's interactions with other people. From shaking hands to marriage, Islam dictates how a Muslim is supposed to act. Conversion also opens the door to a formerly mysterious and distant community. A new set of greetings and meeting places are now accessible and most Muslims embrace converts with open arms. Musa recounts his first visit to a mosque when "I had like five different old Pakistani men sitting around me, getting me to recite" the Qur'an. After Dawud converted he moved into a nearby mosque for a short time, "which was a very good help" in his integration in the Ummah. I will explore the relational aspect of conversion chronologically, beginning with the role that other people play in sparking a convert's interest in Islam. I will revisit the role of mentors and guides who lead a convert through the process. Integration into the Ummah, exposure to new cultures and worldviews, and changing relations with non-

Muslim friends and family will also be discussed. Finally, I will opine on the convert's relationship with God. This section will show that conversion is intrinsically a relational experience.

Dawud

Guides and mentors

Dawud's integration into the Muslim community revolved around his relationship with Cheikh Ababacar, his mentor. He spent every free moment he had with the Cheikh, who became a father figure to Dawud. Dawud learned about Islam vicariously through the time he spent with the Cheikh. When they first met, he had no intention of converting. He was simply attracted to the Cheikh's personality and enjoyed his company. His exposure to Islam was inadvertent. He did not seek out information about Islam, but because of the amount of time Dawud and the Cheikh spent together, he was bound to learn about his role model's religion. Initially, Dawud did not think of his relationship with Cheikh Ababacar as a means of learning about Islam. He was curious about the language in which he prayed and what he believed in, what he called the "uniqueness" of his mentor's religion. But it seems that he thought of the Cheikh first and foremost as a role model, not a spiritual guide. Later on in their relationship, as Dawud spent more time with Cheikh Ababacar and grew more interested in Islam, their relationship changed. The Cheikh's faith became one of Dawud's preferred topics, although he also continued to learn about various secular aspects of "being a man."

Dawud considers himself lucky to have had such a knowledgeable mentor. At the time of his conversion in 1976, a major shift was occurring in the Black Muslim

community. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), died the year before and with the transfer of power to his son, a number of people left the NOI. They realized that Muhammad had been propagating blasphemous rhetoric that was not in line with Islam's true message. In addition to naming himself a prophet (in Islam the Prophet Muhammad is the final messenger of God), he used Islam as a platform to promote racist ideas and preach hate against white people. Racism is a sin in Islam. After his death, many NOI members left the Nation and began searching for a more traditional form of Islam. Dawud described the disillusionment that rocked the Black Muslim community after they realized that they had been following a false prophet: "They believed everything that they had been taught hooked, lined and sinker. And now they're hearing something different, you know now you're telling me wait a minute, that wasn't all true." While other Black Muslims were reorienting themselves and transitioning to a new Islamic worldview, Dawud was under the tutelage of Cheikh Ababacar. The Cheikh, who had studied Islam in Egypt, had never been involved with the NOI and was a follower of orthodox Islam. When I asked Dawud, "So you started from the get go with a truer form of Islam?" he replied, "Yes. Alhamdulillah [praise be to God]."

Dawud once told me "Guidance is the hand of Allah, only Allah can give guidance." But Cheikh Ababacar played a major role in leading Dawud to Allah's guidance. He was the only role model that Dawud named as playing an essential part in his conversion. He first introduced Dawud to Islam, the information he gave Dawud convinced him to convert, and he led Dawud through his Shahada. While other Black Muslims were struggling with the upheaval in the NOI, Dawud was being instructed in orthodox Islam under his mentor.

Integration into the Ummah

Dawud did not encounter any difficulties as he assimilated into the Ummah. He attributes the ease with which he integrated to “the majority of the Muslims around, [who] were African Americans... so there was not an issue of acceptance or non-acceptance.” Because Dawud shared a common socioeconomic background and racial identity with the Muslims that he met, he immediately gained insider status. Dawud also hailed from the same religious background as other Muslims: “The majority of us have that camaraderie from a Christian background and Christian parents and some sort of connection with the Christian Church in our upbringing.” Not only could he connect with other Muslims through their shared faith and worship, they also connected over previous religious experiences and similar upbringings. When Dawud first entered the Ummah, what he experienced was decidedly less foreign than a convert coming from a different background. He already had years of exposure to Islam due to his relationship with the Cheikh. Furthermore, he shared a similar demographic background with many of the Muslims that he met. The positive experience that Dawud enjoyed is evident in his description of the Ummah: “Islam is one brotherhood and generally [you] find that receptiveness and that warmth and that love from Muslims from all different nationalities and all cultures and colors. And anybody who’s really practicing Islam will tell you the same thing.”

Although Dawud was initially in contact with Muslims who shared his background, he eventually met other Muslims of different nationalities and traveled through parts of the Muslim World. Dawud believes in Islam’s unifying power,

claiming, “if I go to different parts of the world where I don’t know anybody, I never fear. I could go right now, go to Germany, I’ll go find a masjid, don’t know nobody there, and go tell them ‘Salam alaikum’,” and he would instantly be welcomed as a fellow Muslim. Dawud’s belief that Islam is one brotherhood is echoed throughout the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the teachings of the Prophet). Muslims believe that God made humans different (in terms of language, color, etc.) so that they could know each other and exchange ideas. Islam’s diversity is evident at Mecca, where millions of Muslims from different backgrounds are united in their faith. The faith that Muslims share and the passion and devotion with which they worship God transcend skin color, language, and nationality. It gives them strength to overcome their differences. Uniting with people of diverse origins seems to be one of the most exhilarating relational aspects of conversion to Islam.

Non-Muslim relations

Dawud comes from a secular Christian family. He was the only one who was “active religiously.” Before converting, he attended church regularly. His family knew he was interested in Islam and he did not encounter much hostility from them when he converted. When I asked if they supported his decision, he replied with an emphatic “Oh yeah!” His mother even defended him when other people questioned his faith. When Dawud started wearing Islamic clothing, his sister made fun of him and questioned why their mother would want to be seen in public with him. She replied, “I may not agree with everything he does but I will defend his right to do it.” Years later, when they were adults, Dawud received a phone call from his sister. She told him that she admired his devotion and was glad that he took his faith seriously. Although Dawud’s family did not

seem able to relate to his decision, they respected it and admired his dedication to his religion.

The tranquility that Dawud enjoyed with his family concerning his conversion applied to the rest of his non-Muslim relations as well. The preacher at his former church, with whom he enjoyed an amicable relationship, never admonished Dawud for leaving Christianity. Nor did Dawud encounter any hostility from his friends. They didn't seem particularly interested in his new faith, but they didn't harass him about it either. Dawud's friends enjoyed drinking and experimenting with drugs. Before he converted, Dawud abstained from alcohol and drugs because he had no interest in them. When he abstained for religious reasons after his conversion, it did not cause a change in his social interactions, "so my social network didn't change a lot initially." Dawud recognizes that for other converts, conversion constitutes a major change in their social lives. Musa's story is an example of how conversion drastically alters a new Muslim's social network. But Dawud transitioned into Islam with relative ease. As discussed earlier, he already felt a predisposition to Islam and, unbeknownst to him, followed many Islamic guidelines, so he had no need to alter his social life in a major way in order to remain *halal* (permitted). He did not go out to bars nor was he promiscuous. He simply avoided these temptations now for religious reasons as well as due to a lack of interest.

Musa

Guides and mentors

Musa's network of online Muslim friends played a key role in his conversion. They were present during each step of the conversion process. The first contact he had

with Muslims and Islam was online. After reading the Qur'an, he went to his friends to clear up contradictions and questions that he had. Finally, he took his Shahada online. Musa's congenial rapport with his online friends struck a dent in the rabbis' allegations. He knew that not all Muslims were fanatics because the Muslims he talked to never expressed any hate towards him for being Jewish. He started talking to people, including Muslims, from the Middle East and Africa in seventh grade, so three years later when he decided to convert, he had built a long list of Muslim contacts to guide him through the process. Looking back, Musa thinks that "once I cleared up that Muslims weren't as the media portrays them, which is what the Muslims I knew online did...then I could open my mind to reading Islam." After reading the Qur'an, Musa felt enlightened but also confused because he was "fifteen years old reading the Qur'an without any context." He again relied on his online friends to guide him. They cleared up the contradictions that he perceived in the Qur'an and pointed him towards reliable sources on Islam.

Musa thinks that "not anyone specific led me to Islam." Rather, it was the combined effect of his entire online Muslim network. However he did single out one person that played an important role and may even be perceived as a mentor. As discussed earlier, Alia, the girl from Trinidad, gave Musa an intimate glimpse into the life of a devout Muslim. She acted as a reference and a role model. Because their contact was frequent, Musa got a feel for what it was like to pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, and perform other obligations. By talking to Alia, it seems that the abstract and confusing aspects of Islam became real and palpable to Musa. Alia helped Musa cross the boundary from understanding Islam on an academic, theoretical level to a

personal, tangible level. When Musa was ready to convert, he went to Alia and took his Shahada online with her father.

Logging onto Islam-the role of technology

I feel it necessary to touch upon the role of technology in Musa's conversion, since it functioned as the platform by which Musa met Muslims. The internet is inherently a relational tool since its *raison d'être* is to connect people around the world. As the conversion process is by nature a relational one, the internet's prominence in conversion is not surprising. When we are interested in a certain subject or wish to fact-check something we hear about, few of us pick up an encyclopedia anymore. Rather we log on to our computers, perform an exhaustive online search and before we realize it, we've spent three hours staring at the computer screen. This habit applies to people interested in Islam as well, and the internet does not fail to disappoint. Websites about Islam abound (a Google search of "conversion to Islam" produces 520,000 results and "Muslim chat rooms" over a million). Youtube videos of the call to prayer, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Muslim comedians and scholars are numerous.

In his article, Rambo discusses the Globalization Theory of conversion. This theory asserts that the growth of Islamic Reform and Revitalization Movements is made possible by "the ease of global communication systems... Through various forms of mass communication the desires and yearnings of people who are... searching for spiritual renewal and transformation are contacted, cultivated, and recruited to new religious options" (262). The Globalization Theory plays a major role in Musa's story. Musa was able to navigate his entire conversion process online. From first meeting Muslims and

learning about Islam, to clearing up misconceptions about the Qur'an, to understanding Islam on a more intimate level and finally taking his Shahada, Musa was online every step of the way. His experience may be a bellwether for how future technology-prone generations will experience conversion. On the surface, it stands in stark contrast to Dawud's conversion process thirty years ago. Dawud interacted with Muslims in person every day. From shadowing his mentor to moving into the mosque, he was in constant contact with Muslims. But so was Musa. The minute he got home from school he would log onto his chat rooms. Both Dawud's and Musa's conversions took place in a relational context, but Musa's was online whereas Dawud's was in person. It seems that the relational nature of the conversion process will remain intact as telecommunications becomes more and more indispensable in our relationships.

Integration into the Ummah

Eventually Musa started meeting Muslims in person. Once he got his driver's license, he started going to a nearby mosque. When Musa first went to a mosque, he was greeted with warmth and curiosity. In Islam, "It doesn't matter their nationality and I think most brothers it's true, they don't care if you're white or black." It is important to consider that the incidence of White Americans converting to Islam is a relatively recent phenomenon. At Masjid al-Aziz, I usually see two or three white people out of a congregation of perhaps four hundred. Musa compared the demographics of Islam to that of Christianity and Judaism: "When you go in a church, there's white churches and there's black churches and in a synagogue it's almost all white...but in the masjid within one line of prayer you'll have an African American brother next to a Pakistani brother next to a Saudi Arabian brother next to an American, you know a white American. It's

very diverse, so Alhamdulillah, I never really felt out of place.” The diversity of the Ummah facilitates the acceptance of new converts and helps them relate to other Muslims. Musa was able to connect with people whose backgrounds were completely different from his own. They bonded over their shared passion for worshipping God. So when Musa first went to a mosque, he didn’t feel out of place. After the khutba (sermon) a man came up to Musa and asked him who he was. He introduced himself as Omar and told Musa how important it was to come to the mosque and be “a part of the Ummah, the Islamic community. And not separating yourself because Islam is more than just like a belief, you know? It’s an entire lifestyle, it’s the community, it’s all the rest. And in order to strengthen that lifestyle it helps to have the community with it.” Omar named the important role that other Muslims play in a new convert’s adaptation to the Islamic lifestyle. In certain schools of thought, practicing Islam alone is discouraged. When Musa converted, his situation was not ideal, as he had no contact with Muslims in person. Although he defends his decision to keep his conversion a secret, he also admits that when he did start meeting Muslims and was able to share his faith with others at the mosque, he experienced a surge of enthusiasm for Islam. His experience sums up the importance that the Ummah plays in a convert’s life. Especially for a closeted convert, routine interaction with other Muslims provides a valuable source of information and reassurance and it is an essential component of the conversion process.

After his encounter with Omar, Musa was encouraged to go back to the mosque and he made time to pray there at least once a day. Once he started meeting Muslims in person, his faith grew by leaps and bounds: “When you’re praying every single day five times a day and your praying behind a locked door and you don’t have many Muslim

relations, you start to lose faith. And so as soon as I started going to the masjid, after you know like two, almost three years of not being with Muslims...suddenly I became a lot more devout.” When Musa expanded his Muslim contacts from online friends to friends in person, he experienced a rush of faith similar to what he felt after taking Shahada. Musa now feels more comfortable at the mosque than he does at school. Routine interaction with Muslims in person served to bolster his faith and helped him delve deeper into Islam.

Non-Muslim relations

Musa’s conversion not only introduced him to a new community, it also changed the way that he interacts with his non-Muslim friends and family. As Musa became more interested in Islam, he spent more time online chatting with his friends. He also began to feel less comfortable with his friends at school, all of whom were Jewish and most of whom knew nothing about Islam. When I asked Musa how converting affected his social life he told me “it definitely stopped almost completely.” His friends, like many American teenagers, drink, smoke, watch pornography, and steal. Islam forbids Musa’s to participate in such activities, so even if he wanted to be with his friends, he would have to ignore his faith in order to do so. Fortunately, Musa seems content maintaining the current rapport he has with his friends. He sees them at school but aside from that they don’t spend much time together. As mentioned earlier, Musa feels a stronger connection with his Muslim friends than with his school friends. His comfort level with other Muslims demonstrates how strongly he now identifies with Islam.

Musa has encountered some difficulties being a Muslim in a Jewish community. Although he is a Muslim “behind closed doors,” many of his friends, teachers, and family

know that he is interested in Islam. He is the local expert on this mysterious and hostile religion. In tenth grade, Musa took a history class about Islam, and the teacher asked him what the difference was between Shia and Sunni. Other than fielding questions about Islam and explaining its basic tenets, Musa keeps his association with Islam to himself. This poses problems, especially during Ramadan, when Muslims are required to fast from sunup to sundown. Musa has to come up with a variety of excuses to explain why he skips all his meals: “Like at school they’ll give you doughnuts and you have to find a reason when everybody has like five doughnuts why you’re just standing in the corner like that, ‘No, I don’t want any doughnuts.’”

Musa explained to me that Islam does not recommend that Muslims hide their faith: “After the Prophet, *salla allahu alaihi wa sallam*, went to Medina, he recommended Muslims not to hide their faith anymore. While they were in Mecca, many Muslims did hide their faith. But once they had refuge, he kind of outlawed it. And so, it’s really not recommended but like I said before it’s about your intentions.” Musa emphasized the importance of intentions several times. He believes that God knows he is a true Muslim and sees that he strives to follow the Islamic creed. As long as God knows his intentions, nothing else matters. That being said, being a closeted Muslim can be a hassle, not only logistically, such as during Ramadan, but emotionally as well. Converting is a life-changing experience and a joyous occasion. Normally when a person converts s/he would share his or her experience with friends and family. Musa does not have that luxury. He chose to conceal his conversion from his family because he “had no idea how they would react.” At the time of his conversion they, like the rest of his community, were “anti-Islam.” But even though Musa has kept his conversion a secret, it

has produced some positive changes in his relationship with his parents. He spends more time with them now that he is not out with his friends. Furthermore, Islam dictates that a child must be obedient to his parents. Musa explains that “as a Muslim you have to obey your parents much more than most people in the West do.” Musa takes this obligation seriously and it has resulted in a better relationship with his parents.

Relating to God

Before his conversion, Musa’s prayers were sporadic. He did not communicate with God on a regular basis and often when he did, it was to ask God for something. After Musa took his Shahada, he constantly thought about God: “From that point for the next few weeks, everywhere I went, even at school and in the summer, Islam and Allah subhana wa ta’ala was always on my mind.” The power of reciting his Shahada opened the doors to a higher level of connection with God. When Musa became Muslim, he began speaking to God on a regular basis. In Islam, he explains, “we do not pray through anyone or anything, and therefore, we speak directly to Allah.” Such a direct connection to God allows Musa to develop “a very personal relationship” with God. His prayers no longer revolve around various demands. Instead Musa thanks God for the blessings that he has.

Musa is constantly aware of God’s presence. The God-consciousness that he strives to maintain is called *ihsan* in Arabic. It is often regarded as the third step in the path towards God, after Islam (submission) and iman (faith). It is also considered one of the most difficult concepts of Islam to grasp. Musa knows that God is constantly watching him, which leads him to believe that “there is nothing to hide from Allah...and

that idea really forces us into being better human beings.” Musa’s relationship with God is beneficial to his self-improvement and spiritual, social and intellectual growth.

My Story

Although it is hard for me to believe, Islam has only been a part of my life for a short while. The way in which quickly permeated my existence makes me feel as if it has been there forever. But two years ago, I barely knew a thing about Islam. I had read a biography of the Prophet when I was in high school but aside from that brief exposure, this religion remained a mystery to me. Then in the fall of 2007 I participated in a study abroad program in Senegal. Upon hearing the first call to prayer at my neighborhood’s mosque, I was immediately fascinated with Islam. The reciprocal way in which it shaped Senegalese society and in which it was influenced by Senegalese customs and beliefs confused and intrigued me. I posed a constant litany of questions to my Muslim friends and host family about their religion. The strength that Islam bestowed in them to overcome problems and navigate through their difficult lives attracted me to this formerly foreign way of life. In an effort to understand Islam, I prayed alongside my friends at the mosque, I fasted with my family during Ramadan, and I celebrated Muslim holidays with everyone else. Although my experience with Islam in Senegal was enlightening, it also confused me and left many questions unanswered. Feeling that it would be unjust to put Islam on the shelf and relegate its role in my life to the past, I continued exploring Islam when I came back to Goucher. I checked out books at the library, I contacted Muslims in Baltimore, and I eventually incorporated Islam into my academic pursuits.

Before my conversion research, Islam's role in my life remained personal. I talked with my Senegalese friends on Skype about how to pray. I discussed spirituality with my coworkers during the summer. I fasted, prayed, and read the Qur'an this past Ramadan. But now Islam has catapulted into my academic life. I've incorporated it into all my courses (even my violin lessons, playing along with the call to prayer) and I am currently planning my senior thesis, a series of monologues about Muslims' experiences in the United States.

It takes a lifetime and more to become an expert on Islam. People devote their careers to studying women in Islam, Islamic law, animal rights in Islam, and memorizing the Qur'an, to name a few fields of study. I have just scratched the surface of Islam and all that it encompasses. Nevertheless, I still know more about it than the average American. Although I am by no means an authority on Islam, I do have the capacity to share my knowledge with others. For the non-Muslim reader, I hope that this paper has been enlightening and rendered Islam less abstract to you. I encourage you to discover how Islam is present in your life, because whether we acknowledge it or not, it is always there. Maybe you have a Muslim coworker or friend or maybe you agree with certain Islamic tenets. For the Muslim reader, you are undoubtedly asking yourself "Why hasn't he converted yet?" I've noticed that although all Muslims agree that only Allah can provide guidance and plant the seed of conversion in a person's heart, many Muslims enjoy helping Allah water that seed. At Masjid al-Aziz, people are often confused when they find out that I'm doing research on Islam but have not converted. They take it upon themselves to convince me. I greatly appreciate the help I have received from all of my spiritual guides, Muslim and non-Muslims alike. Without them I would not be writing

this paper. But in the end, no one else can tell me why, when and how to convert to Islam. That decision is between me and God. Yes, Islam fascinates me and yes, I agree with many of its tenets and have applied some of them to my own life. But all of that is irrelevant if I don't believe in God. I admire Musa's personal connection to God and I yearn for the same closeness. But as Dawud's and Musa's stories have shown me, the path towards God is a long and bumpy road.

Dawud's and Musa's stories are not my own. We all encountered Islam in a different place and at a different time. More importantly, I am not Muslim. My story is not a story of conversion. And yet throughout my conversations with Dawud and Musa, I found myself nodding in agreement. They named many things to which I can relate. Musa's Skype conversations with Alia reminded me of my own Skype chats about Islam with my Senegalese friends. The role that Cheikh Ababacar played in Dawud's conversion reminds me of Dawud's role in my own story. Although we each have our own unique experience with Islam, through this research process Dawud's and Musa's stories are now interwoven with my own. Thank you both for sharing your stories with me. I hope I have done them justice.

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