Embracing Islam in the Age of Terror: Post 9/11 Representations of Islam and Muslims in the United States and Personal Stories of American Converts

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Embracing Islam in the Age of Terror:
Post 9/11 Representations of Islam and Muslims in the United States
and Personal Stories of American Converts

by

Clemence Brunet

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Embracing Islam in the Age of Terror: Post 9/11 Representations of Islam and Muslims in the United States and Personal Stories of American Converts

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were one of the most traumatic events experienced by the American people on their soil. In the aftermath of 9/11, and in the context of the War on Terror, Islam and Muslims became associated with and suspected of terrorism and anti-Americanism. While the political rhetoric of the Bush administration described the situation in terms of “us” against “them”, and the enemy as “evil”, conservative and anti-Islamic media sources increasingly depicted Islam as a threat to America and to the notion of freedom. Stereotypes of Middle-Eastern, Muslim terrorists were reinforced by the entertainment media, in movies and television shows. The political and social context encouraged popular and academic interest in Islam, and as Islam was said to be growing, so was the number of white American converting to Islam. In this context, why have tens of thousands of Americans embraced Islam?
Introduction

The terrorist attacks which destroyed the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11th, 2001, commonly known as “9/11,” marked a pivotal moment in American contemporary history, politics and culture. The events received immediate extensive media coverage and had significant long-term consequences for America’s national security, foreign policy, and economy. For the American people, it was one of the most shocking, even “traumatic” events ever experienced. It was traumatic for survivors, first-responders and observers, and shocking for those who watched it happen on the news throughout the American nation, and worldwide. The attacks were soon attributed to and claimed by al Qaeda, a radical-Islamist terrorist organization based in the Middle East, and its leader Osama bin Laden, who justified them as a direct attack on America and what it represents, its power in the world, its values, and, as claimed by the terrorists, for the US hegemony in the world.²

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² George W. Bush said: “The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is
The American government’s response was what came to be known as the “War on Terror,” spanning from new domestic laws aimed at reinforcing national or “homeland” security, tighter immigration and identity and passport control regulations, including news domestic laws such as the Patriot Act and U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. The beginning of the “War on Terror” was marked by a Manichean vision and definition of the world – as expressed in official statements by then president George W. Bush: on the one hand America and its people; on the other hand its enemy, radical Arab Islamic terrorists. Overnight, al Qaeda became the number one threat to national security and enemy of the US, and of its allies. And thus overnight, Islam became associated with terrorism, and anti-Americanism. Moreover, Islam became associated with a specific category of Muslims, those corresponding to the profile of the terrorists. Meanwhile,

3 As George W. Bush said: “On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars - but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war - but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks - but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day - and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.”; “Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking: Who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda.”; “Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world - and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.”; “Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans. Today, dozens of federal departments and agencies, as well as state and local governments, have responsibilities affecting homeland security. These efforts must be coordinated at the highest level. So tonight I announce the creation of a Cabinet-level position reporting directly to me - the Office of Homeland Security.”; “This is not, however, just America’s fight. And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”; “We will come together to give law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home. We will come together to strengthen our intelligence capabilities to know the plans of terrorists before they act, and find them before they strike.”; George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation,” Washington, DC, September 20, 2001

American Muslims – or Muslim Americans⁵ – also came in the spotlight, often regarded with suspicion, as potential homegrown terrorists – the enemy within.⁶ Americans were asking “why do they hate us?” As the Arabic words *jihadists* and *jihad* became widely used in the media to describe terrorists and the motivations behind their actions – describing their actions as an Islamic duty to defend Islam,⁷ the American people, and the media, wondered “is Islam a religion which promotes violence, war, and terrorism?” ⁸

At the same time, 9/11 prompted a rediscovery and reevaluation of Islam and of its place in U.S. history and society. Research and surveys were conducted to determine the number of Muslims in the US, Islam soon appeared to be the “fastest-growing religion in the US,” and interviews and reports on American who converted to Islam began to surface in the media. Indeed, the idea of Americans converting to Islam in the age of terrorism and the War on Terror may be surprising. In fact, already before 9/11, in

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⁸ See Andrew Sullivan, “This Is a Religious War,” New York Times, October 7, 2001 [http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/07/magazine/this-is-a-religious-war.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/07/magazine/this-is-a-religious-war.html?pagewanted=all) He wrote “The terrorists’ strain of Islam is clearly not shared by most Muslims and is deeply unrepresentative of Islam’s glorious, civilized and peaceful past. But it surely represents a part of Islam – a radical, fundamentalist part – that simply cannot be ignored or denied. In that sense, this surely is a religious war – but not of Islam versus Christianity and Judaism. Rather, it is a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity.”
America and in other predominantly Christian Western countries, as the religion of the minority, and having historically been in conflict with Christianity and Judaism, Islam had been considered as the religion of the other. In a country predominantly Christian, why have more and more Americans embraced Islam? Thus, in the post 9/11 political and social context in America, as Islam became closely associated with terrorism, anti-Americanism, and with the Middle-East, why have there been so many stories of Americans converting to Islam in the last decade?

The objective of the present thesis is to better understand and evaluate the phenomenon of conversion of Americans to Islam in the context of the post 9/11 War on Terror. What do we learn from the existing literature? A survey of the large post 9/11 literature on Islam shows books on the religion itself, the history of Muslims in America, the immigration of Muslims in the US, the rights and role of women in Islam, identities of American Muslims, but few on the recent phenomenon of conversion. 9/11 also prompted studies aimed to account for the number of Muslims in the U.S. (some studies looked at immigration and birth rate, while few explored the issue of conversion). While the media began to acknowledge the phenomenon of conversion, there were very little data and few studies available. Some studies and surveys started appearing, some in the

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9 Some researchers have pointed to the negative and stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims in the news and entertainment media already before 9/11: “In television, films, books, newspapers and magazines Islam is presented as being a backward and barbaric religion. It is seen as oppressive and unjust; and more then [sic.] this it is seen as being most oppressive to women. These various forms of media misrepresent Islam in different ways, but overall achieve the same negative result – the creation of ‘otherness’, and from this a growing barrier of misunderstanding and hostility between Islam and its followers, and the West,” see Sairra Patel, “The Media and its Representation of Islam and Muslim Women, themoderreligion.com. http://www.themoderreligion.com/women/w_media.htm An edited version of this essay will be appeared in April 1999 in a collection of essays entitled “Young Women Speak: A Message to the Media,” edited by Jane Waghorn and published by Livewire, the Women’s Press, London.
form of reports or academic papers, theses or dissertations. In the same way, the media has begun paying and calling attention to this phenomenon. Because of the nature of the topic, studies have usually focused on conversion among specific gender, ethnic or geographic communities, while the contribution by the media has consisted of reports on or interviews with individual converts.

In Chapter One, we will explore the ways in which Muslims have been construed as Others after 9/11, how political discourse in the context of the War on Terror has been characterized by extensive use of the “us” versus “them” dichotomy, and the language of “evil.” We will also see how the distinction between Islamic terrorists and mainstream Muslims has been blurred, in part due to the rhetoric of anti-Islamic groups and media sources, whose publications have largely portrayed Islam and Muslims in as a “threat” to America and to freedom, as “evil” and “anti-American,” thereby inciting fear, misconceptions, and hate. As we will see, after 9/11, Muslims Americans have expressed living in a climate of fear and suspicion, as much as non-Muslim Americans have in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. We will see how Muslims have been perceived and represented as potential terrorists, and Islam as the source of anti-Americanism and terrorism, a context in which, nevertheless, some Americans have been befriended Muslims and developed an interest in Islam, eventually embracing it, and converting to what had been construed as the religion of the enemy.

In Chapter Two, we will explore the ways in which the entertainment media exploited the stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, the terrorist threat and the figure of
the Muslim terrorist and thus not only drawing from public opinion and anxieties in the post 9/11 context, but also reinforcing them. We will also see how the entertainment media reflected some stories and profiles which have already been plastered in the news media about Middle-Eastern Muslims, but also about a new profile, that of the white American convert to Islam who turned to the enemy and represents a new type of threat in America. We will see how movies and TV series based on current events – fiction based on real life events – have often portrayed a sensationalist, one-sided representation of the post 9/11 context, highlighted the threat of terrorism in the U.S., and reinforced the idea of threat associated to Muslims and Islam, thus potentially encouraging viewers to distrust, fear and reject Muslims and their faith. As a result, a very small group of radical Muslims has been highly visible, while the large majority of peaceful, well-integrated American Muslims has been virtually absent from the screen. More interestingly, when attempts were made to show a more real and accurate representation of ordinary American Muslims and of their daily lives, these representations were found “boring” and even criticized for being “pro-Muslim propaganda” because they did no show radical Muslims. We will also see that the cases of American convert to Islam which have been reported extensively in the news and entertainment media do not represent the majority of converts.

In Chapter Three, we will consider the rise of conversion to Islam after 9/11, to understand what converting means, who has converted, what has attracted them to Islam, and how they have, in their ways, tried to share their stories and make their voices heard, notably by using the social media and sharing website such as YouTube. As we will see,
there is a great dichotomy between the post 9/11 negative representations of Muslims and Islam in the media and these converts’ testimonies and journeys to Islam. Indeed, their stories are significant in that their conversion is described as a journey, from the discovery of Islam around 9/11, the encounters with Muslims who did not reflect the negative stereotypes, to talking, reading, sometimes traveling, and progressively embracing Islam. What transpires through their videos are images of people who are peaceful, content, happy, and show that being a (good) American and being a (good) Muslim is possible.

Through this thesis, we will seek to have a better understanding and insight into the reasons that have pushed Americans to convert to Islam, a better understanding of American Muslim converts, and their place in American society, possibly indicating things about the evolution or state of American society in general, and its possible future.

Chapter One: Perceptions and Representations of Islam and Muslims after 9/11: language, media, hate groups and public opinion

The “evil” enemy and the “War on Terror”

In an address to Congress given soon after September 11, President George W. Bush mentioned the difference between peaceful Islam as it is practiced by millions of Americans and citizens of other nations, and the enemy of America, a radical network of terrorists:

I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It’s practiced freely by many millions of Americans, and
by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them. Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.

However, this distinction was soon forgotten. In public opinion across the nation, Muslims became associated with terrorism from the moment it was revealed that the hijackers were Muslims, and the attacks claimed by al Qaeda and justified as an expression of anti-Americanism – as part of a holy war against the opponents of Islam. Although American Muslims mourned the victims of 9/11, oppose violence, reject the extremist ideology of al Qaeda, and have voiced their opposition to terrorism for over a decade, they and their religion have been associated with the acts of terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam. As some have expressed: “We hate these terrorists more than non-Muslims do. […] Because they harm innocent people in the name of our religion and consequently we suffer a backlash because of their acts.”


He also said: “The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics – a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists’ directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children. This group and its leader – a person named Osama bin Laden – are linked to many other organizations in different countries, including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries. They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan, where they are trained in the tactics of terror. They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction.” Pp.66-67.

11 In the context of the Boston Bombing, reviving fear about radical Islamists, political comedian and commentator for CNN Dean Obeidallah wrote: “I’m an American-Muslim and I despise Islamic terrorists. In fact, despise is not even a strong enough word to convey my true feelings about those who kill innocent people in the name of Islam. I hate them with every fiber of my being. […]The unique problem for Muslims is that our faith is being increasingly defined by the actions of a tiny group of morally bankrupt terrorists. Just to be clear: The people who commit violence in the name of Islam are not Muslims, they are murderers. Their true religion is hatred and inhumanity. The only people terrorists speak for are themselves
The USA Patriot Act and the face of the enemy

In the aftermath of 9/11, the response of the Bush administration to the terrorist attacks, in terms of homeland security, foreign policy, and legislation, has affected Muslims in America. Because of suspicions of Islamist sleeper cells plotting other terrorist attacks, all Muslims became potential terrorists. The change in legislation regarding air travel and passport control led to the profiling of Arabs and Middle-Eastern Muslims. Many Muslims were arrested and detained on suspicion of terrorist activities, which has been a controversial topic in terms of human rights and detention. Specifically, the USA PATRIOT Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 26, 2001, broadened the discretion of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of being affiliated with terrorist groups or activity.

Section 102 of the USA PATRIOT ACT reads that Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Muslims from South East Asia “are entitled to nothing less than the full rights of every American”; it states that acts of violence against Arab Americans and Muslim Americans should be condemned and punished by law, acknowledges that Muslims have become fearful of harassment, and that many Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have acted heroically on September 11. Nevertheless, after 9/11 and through the enforcement of the act, Muslims were under surveillance, watched by the government and the others involved in their despicable plot. They do not represent me, my family or any other Muslim I know. And believe me, I know a lot of Muslims.” in Dean Obeidallah, “I’m Muslim, and I hate terrorism,” CNN, 24 Apr. 2013 http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/24/opinion/obeidallah-muslims-hate-terrorism/index.html


and by American citizens. Moreover, many Muslims were questioned and detained by the government, and even deported, for vague reasons, because their ethnic and religious profile made them look suspicious. From a legal perspective, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans – citizens, and “aliens” – non-citizens, had a different status, but in the streets, both citizens and “aliens” were subject to discrimination and suspicion because they “looked” like the enemy.

In the context of the “War on Terror,” U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, reinforced the sense that Muslims were the enemy of America. Through 24/7 media coverage of the “war,” the American people could see, on TV and in the press, images of American soldiers (“us”), and the faces of the others (“them”): al Qaeda members, Afghani and Iraqi leaders, soldiers, and civilians, those who spoke Arabic, wore Islamic clothing, and prayed to “Allah.” The extensive media coverage of Osama bin Laden, of members of al Qaeda, and of the Middle-East contributed to fixing the portrait of the terrorist and enemy of America as Middle-Eastern, Arab Muslims. This was even more so on the conservative-leaning cable news channel Fox News, which had the highest ratings among cable news networks.

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14 It has been argued that many of the act’s provisions have little or nothing to do with terrorism, and its enforcement has increased government’s surveillance, and reduced civil liberties by allowing the government to do records, secret, intelligence, and “trap and trace” searches and access individuals’ records. It has also been argued that the act violates amendments of the Constitution. See “Surveillance Under the USA PATRIOT Act,” American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 10 Dec. 2010. http://www.aclu.org/national-security/surveillance-under-usa-patriot-act

15 See Irum Shiekh, Detained Without Cause, Muslims’ Stories of Detention and Deportation in America After 9/11, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. The author shares oral histories of several of the 1,200 Muslim people who the FBI detained and/or deported as Special Interest Cases – though they were officially charged by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The Language of “evil”

In the context of the “War on Terror,” the words “Islam” and “Muslims” became associated with “terrorism,” “terror,” “threat,” and “anti-Americanism.” Although George W. Bush, in his address to Congress on September 20, 2001, referred to American Muslims and peaceful Muslims worldwide as friends, the very language used by the then President and his administration contributed to portraying, and in fact, reducing, the “War of Terror” to a conflict between “us and them,” between “good and evil.” The imagery of “evil” was repeated by Bush in speeches throughout his presidency, including in the term “axis of evil,” used to describe countries and governments which he accused of harboring or supporting terrorism, and opposed America and its allies.

The importance of language in the context of the “War on Terror” has been studied by Richard Jackson, in *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism*. In Chapter 3, “Writing identity: evil terrorists, good Americans” and the section “Constructing the terrorist enemy,” Jackson analyzes how the use of the terms ‘good’ ‘evil’, ‘terror’, terrorists’ in Bush’s speeches and other linguistic constructions, has projected and supported a binary representation of the context as “evil terrorists” versus “good Americans” or “good American citizens.” Additionally, his speeches have bound together “terror and evil,” “so that by association, any use of the term ‘terror’ or patriotism, referring to ‘our troops’ who were fighting ‘terror goons’. Fox jumped to first in the cable news ratings in January 2002. The channel has now taken its brand of pro-American journalism to a new level. One recent night, a correspondent in Iraq referred to war protesters as ‘the great unwashed.’ […] CNN’s ratings also rose during the war, to 2.65 million average daily viewers, from 610,000, but CNN trailed Fox, which had 3.3 million. Though MSNBC remained in third place with 1.4 million, it saw its share of the cable news audience grow, and for the first time in years had a sense of momentum.

‘terrorist’ is associated firmly with ‘evil’.”\(^{18}\) This rhetoric supported the idea of a necessary mission of America to rid the world of the evil they represent, to protect good people and good Americans. In the subsection “evil terrorists,” Jackson states that “A subplot of the civilization-barbarism meta-narrative, there are literally hundreds of references to ‘evil’ in the official discourse and President Bush in particular uses the term in about every speech about terrorism.”\(^{19}\) Jackson argues that the language used by Bush “implies that rooting out terrorism actually requires the elimination of certain individuals and groups of people. It is a simple and theological construction – rid the world of evil people, and the world will be free of the evil of terrorism”; thus according to Jackson, “one of the consequences of employing the language of good and evil is that it leads inexorably towards a crusader or inquisitional mentality.”\(^{20}\) Jackson argues that

The language of evil results in a transformation of the political, cultural conflict to a moral conflict, a cosmic struggle of the forces of good versus the forces of evil, a powerful way of forcing the American people to side with the forces of good against evil. Secondly, the language of evil suppresses questions such as the motivations or aims of the terrorists; they are evil and evil is its own motivation and its own self-contained explanation. […] Third, the language of good and evil encourages a projection of the world and of people in which the boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ must be clearly delineated, and the nature and qualities of ourselves and the enemy other must be affirmed. This representational project is deliberately designed to dehumanize the enemy, because ‘as agents of evil, they are by definition of less human worth’\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) Ibid. p.68.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, p.66. Jackson adds that “The construction of the terrorists and their acts as ‘evil’ began on the very first day of the attacks. On September 11, 2001, in his first major address to the nation, Bush declared they were ‘evil, despicable acts of terror’, and ‘Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature […].’ Bush (September 11, 2001)”

\(^{20}\) Ibid. p.67. Jackson adds: “As Bush candidly observed, ‘We’ve come to know the truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed (Bush, 29 January, 2002); and ‘we are in conflict between good and evil, and American will call evil by its name’ (Bush, 1 June, 2002) […]. If America really is battling evil (in its theological sense), then it is a divine calling to bring Gol’s justice to bear; it is a necessary part of the ‘conflict between good and evil’.”

\(^{21}\) Ibid. p.69.
Jackson further analyzes the use of the word “alien” to refer to “non-citizen” or “foreigner” and associated with “terrorist” - “aliens” who “come to our country and attack us,” an image which is also associated and reinforced by the term “homeland,” which is also emphasized in the concept of “Homeland Defense” and in the “Department of Homeland security,” formed in 2003. People are thus categorized into two antagonistic groups: American citizens and aliens, a construction in which “citizen” implies “good,” and “alien” implies “bad.”

Therefore, the language of evil, and the association of those “evil terrorists” with Islam could easily be carried over to apply to all Muslims: “them” and with their religion, and an evil agenda, especially among the Americans who had little knowledge of Islam and did not necessarily know Muslims. “Them,” became Muslims as a group, and Islam “their religion,” a religion associated with terror, violence and oppression. This context in part explains how fear has given rise to discrimination and how some groups have formed and expressed anti-Islamic rhetoric and opposition to what they consider a “threat,” including the “islamization” of America. And in fact, these groups have utilized the power of the language of evil, buzz words such as *jihad*, the idea of a Muslim “agenda,” and symbols associated with radical Islamists and mainstream Islam, in their publications, and established what has been describes as a “network of Islamophobia,” whose representation of the Muslim enemy has continued for over a decade.

*In Allah They Trust – the language of exclusion*

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22 See p.72. Jackson adds that between 9/11 and 2005 – the year his book was published – “it has been estimated that more than 5,000 Muslim and Arab ‘aliens’ have been preventively detained by the American government.” See also the section “Constructing ‘good Americans’ – the other and the self,” starting p.76.
The aftermath of 9/11 sparked interest in Islam in America and this interest resulted in the publication of many books and articles on many topics related to Islam and Muslims, including ideology, history, politics, immigration and identity. When searching books on Islam on the most popular websites Amazon.com, and Google Books, one comes across books by scholars providing factual information about Islam and Muslims, books about the lives and experiences of American Muslims and converts, and books with a pro-Muslim or anti-Muslim bias. In the course of our research, we came across a number of books which claim to educate Americans about Islam but have a denunciatory approach. One book has a particularly attention-grabbing title which reflects the premise “American = freedom, Islam = bad, Christianity = good”: In Allah They Trust, Understanding the Spirit Behind Islam and How to Stop Its Advance on America, Our Freedom, and the Church. Published ten years after 9/11, the book’s argument is developed through dichotomous rhetoric, opposing Islam and Christianity, Islam and America, Islam and freedom. This is clearly reflected in the title “In Allah They Trust,” which stands as the opposite of “In God We Trust,” the official motto of the United States, a statement of religious sentiment and American patriotism, adopted in 1956, present on dollar bills and coins and in US courts of justice. The title opposes “us” with “them,” and “God” with “Allah,” and by extension, “Americans” with “Muslims,” thus presenting America as wholly Christian, and excluding American Muslims from consideration. However, according to scholars in history and comparative religion, God

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23 Amazon is the website Americans are most likely to search on and buy from, and Google Books is widely used as a database, and some books can be read online. Therefore, the books one comes across when searching keywords are the ones which a majority of users are likely to come across.
25 See also “History of ‘In God We Trust’,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, [http://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx](http://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx)
and Allah, here presented as antagonistic, are actually the same figure, the one and only God, common to Abrahamic religions. Considering its etymology, the word “Allah” can be translated as “the god,” and in fact, Arabic-speakers of all Abrahamic faiths, including Christians and Jews, use the word “Allah” for “God.”

Furthermore, the front cover of this book is particularly attention-grabbing, and symbolizes the conflict between American and Islam as argued by the author: the illustration represents the Statue of Liberty, symbol of America, of light, freedom and democracy, dressed in a black burqa, symbol of conservative Islam and, as perceived in the West, of the lack of freedom and oppression of women. Instead of holding the tablet symbolizing the law and bearing the date of the Declaration of Independence, she holds a tablet which reads “Qur’an, Sharia Law,” putting them forward as antagonistic. Finally, replacing the flame on the torch she bears is smoke curling away. This illustration depicts a very dark and reductionist vision of Islam, as a threat to America and freedom.

In a TV interview, the author describes the illustration as “a very protruding picture of what could happen and what really Islam has its sights set on.” He explains:

The whole point about it is a warning to America and to the Church, who is responsible of what will take place in America; we need to be aware of what’s going on and have a clear understanding of the spirit behind Islam and how to stop its advance in America, [on] our freedom, and on the Church. The whole idea is to get people’s attention, if they are walking by that book on the bookshelf, I want to get their attention that we have an enemy at the gate, if I can say this, in fact they’re past the gate, they are in the house. So we need to be aware of that. And I’m not talking about necessarily enemy as the people, but I’m talking about the spirit behind Islam, and I’ve discussed that clearly in the book. There’s a clear cut distinction between Islam and Muslims.  

26 "Kamran Karimi Talks About In Allah They Trust,” YouTube, uploaded by AmericanFamilyAssoc1 on 14 Mar. 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6MI9mxefrI This interview was done by the afa channel, the American Family Association, which, as we will see in Chapter Two, is a conservative, Christian association which criticized a reality show representing the daily lives of well-integrated America Muslims, “All-American Muslims,” for not representing radical Muslims.
The message of the author is that Islam and some Muslims – who he calls “Islamicists”\(^{27}\) – have an agenda to bring Islam and Sharia Law to America, that America should be aware of this threat, react before it is too late, and that Christianity is the right way to go, and the Church must reach to oppose this threat. His views reject the possibility of a peaceful practice of Islam, and the similarities between Judeo-Christian beliefs and Islamic beliefs. It rests on patriotic symbols and ideals such as the idea of freedom as belonging to the Western world. As he writes in the preface: “while we must address the influence and dominance of Islam, we must also love the Muslims who are under Islam’s control […] we are not wrestling against Muslims, but we are wrestling against a force named Islam, which has come to stamp out the freedom that is found in and through Jesus Christ. Islam and those who adhere to the words of its book called the Koran, cannot cohabit with those who believe in Christ or with any government who believe in freedom.” In his book and cited interview, the author stresses that the enemy of America is Islam, rather than Muslims. He advocates that Islam is bad, while Muslims are, or may be good. This stands in stark contrast with what Muslims generally believe and have stressed after 9/11, and which American converts to Islam have also expressed – as we will see in Chapter Three – that Islam is good, but that some Muslims are bad, that the religion’s ideology is good, but that the ideas of radical Muslims are bad, who are the cause of terrorism.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{27}\) “Islamicist” generally means “scholar of Islam” but is used in this book to mean “Islamist” or “radical, extremist.”

\(^{28}\) As cited previously, in the article “I’m an American Muslim and I hate terrorism,” and as expressed by converts Mandi Tork and Rebecca, cited in Chapter Three.
The author Kamran Karimi is introduced as “a former Muslim who now reaches Muslims with the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the Middle East via television and Internet.” Therefore, the author is a Muslim who left Islam and who converted to Christianity; he is someone who is supposed to understand Muslims and Islam and have realized that it was wrong. The foreword states that “As an Iranian born and raised in Teheran, but having become a patriotic American Christian, he knows whereof he speaks.” His background is used to give a sense of legitimacy, credibility and trustworthiness to the author’s arguments. However, one Iranian-born individual cannot be deemed to speak for Islam and be representative of all Muslims. In fact, the author is a born-again Christian and his book constitutes part of the author’s proselytizing mission. The author is part of an organization called Voice Of Freedom, whose mission,

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29 Over the last decade, while one type of literature grew – stories of Americans who embraced Islam, another type developed – stories of Muslims who left Islam and converted to Christianity, presenting Christianity as salvation and denouncing torture and barbarity in Islam. See for example Majed El Shafie, *Freedom Fighter: One Man’s Fight for One Free World*, Destiny Image, 2012. This is an example of the personal narratives of Muslims who left Islam and converted to Christianity, and recounts facing torture or death sentence, because some radical Islamists believe it is a crime for a Muslim to turn his back on Islam.

30 See interview cited and the book in the introductory section “What Others are Saying.”

31 Islam is practiced differently by natives of different countries; Iran has different cultural and religious practices (Iranians practice Shia Islam, like 10 to 20% of all Muslims). Moreover, the history of diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S has been unstable and tense and is likely to have had an influence on the author’s personal views and arguments. In the interview cited before, the interviewer says “people need to understand too, you’re speaking from experience, because you were raised in Iran.” However, the author explains that he was born in Iran into a Shia Muslim family, but came to the U.S. at age 15. He mentions that his father was a fundamentalist Shia Muslim, saying “I had this example before me, although I didn’t fully practice it myself.” In America, he experienced “the American dream.” He explains that he succeeded in business but there was emptiness in his heart. At age 28, he was born again: a friend of his invited him to go to church and he found what he had missed. He adds later “I had a major encounter face to face with the lord Jesus Christ in my living room.” His story is the reverse of that of the American converts to Islam whose stories we will discuss in Chapter Three. But while American converts to Islam respect Christianity, but see Islam as the reformed, last revelation of the same religion by God, Karimi presents Islam as a negative force and a threat to America and Christianity, presented as the epitome of freedom.

32 Karimi’s book has a website, [http://inallahtheytrust.com/index.html](http://inallahtheytrust.com/index.html) The “author” page presents him as “a husband, father, author, inspirational speaker, entrepreneur, and international television host. He is a sought out speaker, who cooperates in the supernatural abilities of Jesus Christ. He speaks regularly in churches, leadership and mission conferences, marriage conferences, men’s and youth conferences, as well as business organizations.” We found very little additional publications but the page states: Kamran is the Founder and President of Global Exploits Ministries and Executive Producer of “The Voice of Freedom” TV broadcast. [http://www.globalexploits.org](http://www.globalexploits.org) redirects to the Voice Of Freedom, [http://www.thevof.org/](http://www.thevof.org/)
as stated on its website, is “establishing freedom” to Iran, and other Islamic countries. But in fact, the organization seeks to promote “freedom” by teaching Christianity and bringing the Gospels to Iranians.33

Therefore, the author’s goal is two-fold: denouncing Islam, and promoting Christianity. The message of this book revolves around two premises. First, 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror with military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq proved the danger and threat represented by Islam and radical Muslims – Islam is presented as a religion of war and violence, that of an uncivilized world: the side of evil. The second premise is that Christianity, its values and principals, are inherently good, brought civilization to the Western world, and ensure freedom; therefore, they must stand against Islam, to preserve America’s freedom. The book is divided into three sections entitled “the problem” (Islam), “the solution” (embracing Christianity), and “the solution in action” (what the Church, America and the West, and Muslims, need to know). Endorsers of Karimi’s book also commented in the introductory section of the book: “9/11 made the western world realize that Islam is a force to be reckoned with”; “Kamran makes a compelling point that we must wake up and engage in the battle to protect our unalienable God given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness from those who would like to use our own courtrooms and terrorist plots to destroy our Nation. Every American needs to read this book.” These comments and the whole structure of the book present Islam as a force, in conflict with America. Islam, a religion, is presented as an

33 “In our work in Iran, we daily face attempts from the Iranian government to stamp out the freedom that comes through the message of Jesus Christ, the Gospel. We are continuing to spread the Gospel in the nation of Iran via the web, T.V. and Bible distribution. Help us Amplify Freedom in Iran by donating today! To learn more about the ideology of Islam, visit the store and purchase your copy of Kamran Karimi’s book on Islam.” See vof.org
agent of terror, of evil, of doom. Furthermore, in the preface, the author compares the struggle of America against Islam as an intergalactic conflict between forces of good and evil by referring to a Star Wars movie: “the forces of darkness and evil, consisting of droids and other large robotic machines, are advancing on the peaceful citizens of the planet” – they are stopped when Anakin fights them off by taking out the force which was controlling them. Karimi uses this analogy:

This is also true when it comes to Islam and Muslims. A principality, an evil spiritual force named Islam, is controlling Muslims, especially radical extremists. If we will engage that force in prayer and with the love of God and press through victory, then we will take out that force that is influencing the violent and fear-filled attacks of Islam.34

As in the speeches of George W. Bush, notions of intrinsic good and evil are ascribed to a specific group of people of ideology, as it is evident by the recurrence of specific words: “freedom,” “love,” “peaceful,” “victims” against “terror,” “threat,” “force,” “darkness,” “violence,” “enemy,” “agenda.” While, in the conflict between good and evil as expressed by George W. Bush, the evil and the threat was the radical Islamic extremists, according to Karimi, it is Islam as a whole, and Muslims are “victims” who are under the control of an evil force.

Although it is difficult to assess the actual impact of Karimi’s book on readership, what is significant is the way in which the book is designed to grab the attention of Americans and cause alarm as to the “Islamic agenda.” The illustration on the cover and the title rely on eye-catching symbols and concepts which are likely to trigger an emotional response by American viewers. They reduce a complex issue to a conflict of

good versus evil. This book associates Islam with terrorism, barbarity, the uncivilized world, and opposes it to the Western world, and the traditional American ideals of freedom, democracy, and capitalism, which usually inspire patriotism and evoke the image of America as the light of the world. The approach and language used by Karimi are similar to that used by George W. Bush. According to Karimi, Islam is de facto an evil force. In Bush’s words, Islamic terrorists are evil ones. Karimi’s comparing Islam as a force to be fought as in a Star Wars movie is another example of how, according to Richard Jackson, “the language of evil results in a transformation of the political, cultural conflict to a moral conflict, a cosmic struggle of the forces of good versus the forces of evil, a powerful way of forcing the American people to side with the forces of good against evil.”

Karimi’s essentialist argument is that the force is not people, but the religious ideology that is Islam. As we found in the course of our research, one characteristic of anti-Islamic propaganda is that it blurs the human agents of the acts of terrorism with the ideology of the religion. Instead of trying to understand the reason why they resorted to acts of violence, we conclude that it is dictated by their religion. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that Islamic terrorists have claimed that their actions were motivated by Islamic beliefs in the concept of jihad, but to understand and curb terrorism, it is necessary to understand why some individuals are influenced by radicalism and extremism, while others reject violence and the concept of jihad as holy war.

As long as Islam and Muslims are presented as the enemy of America in political

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35 Richard Jackson, Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism, p.69.
36 In Arabic, jihad as a noun translates as “struggle,” as a verb, it means to strive to achieve something. Jihad can be understood in terms of spiritual struggle or physical struggle. In the post 9/11 context, jihad has become a buzzword referring to Islamic “holy war,” but scholars and Muslims have emphasized the non-violent scope of the concept. See Diane Morgan, Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice, ABC-CLIO, 2010. p. 87.
discourse, in the media, and in publications, America is defining itself as the enemy of its opponents. Representing Islam and Muslims as the enemy is doubly dangerous: it may incite radicalism and anti-American reactions against random Americans, but it may also incite hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. by Americans who see them as the enemy within. As we will consider further below, misrepresentations and lack of integration feed hate and violence, and anti-Islamic literature and rhetoric are presenting the risk of inciting fear, anger and violence, leading to more radicalism on both sides.

In the digital age, the Internet provides a platform for communication and expression. Many blogs represent Islam as a threat, as a religion of oppression and violence. They include WND, World Net Daily, presented as “Free Press for Free people” is an “Independent conservative news website with an emphasis on aggressive investigative reporting and gossip, founded by Joseph and Elizabeth Farah.” Examples of articles include “Criticizing Islam considered National Security Threat,” stating “Spanish authorities threaten to deport Christian to certain death for speaking out.”

37 The Boston Marathon Bombings of April 15, 2013 have been associated with radical Islamist thought.
40 Taylor Rose, “Criticizing Islam considered National Security Threat,” wnd.com, 12 Jan. 2013. http://www.wnd.com/2013/01/criticizing-islam-considered-national-security-threat/ This article reports on an ex-Muslim Christian convert in Spain, threatened with deportation for speaking out against Islam. The article quotes him: He told WND, “Muslims are involved everywhere in terrorism. Christians are being persecuted in Islamic countries to the maximum level of torture and suffering and Islam is trying to invade the Western world and kill our values. Who will stop this all?” […] “It is the time that the citizens of the Western world should stand up and speak the truth against something what is wrong. [The] Bible teaches us to speak the truth in any situation. And for me the truth is that Islam is a man-made religion which was created in order to govern the world. It has several contradictions in itself. It teaches killing (Jihad), hate non-Muslims, discriminate women, rule the world at any price etc....”
Through such sources, stories are framed to send the same message: Islam is evil and poses a threat to Christians. In the course of our research, we found that many prominent anti-Islamic online media sources and organizations have connections, as the names of a few anti-Islamic activists recurred. Two of them have been particularly vocal and virulent in their efforts to spread their views on Islam and alarm the American people of the danger represented by Islam: Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller. Both have been repeatedly been criticized by academics and journalists who claim they and their publications promotes an Islamophobic worldview and conspiracy theories, as we will see below.


A prominent anti-Islam website is Robert Spencer’s Jihad Watch, self-defined as a “Weblog about jihad theology and ideology, correcting popular misconceptions about Islam.” Jihad Watch, launched in 2003, has been one of the most prominent anti-Islamic websites. The organization also has a YouTube page. Jihad Watch is affiliated with the “David Horowitz Freedom Center,” a conservative political organization or think tank founded by David Horowitz, a political activist, and Peter Collier, a writer and publisher.

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41 Jihad Watch, http://www.jihadwatch.org/
42 JihadWatchVideo, http://www.youtube.com/user/JihadWatchVideo  The account was created October 4th 2008. As of April 1st, 2013, the YouTube page had 134 videos, 3,441 subscribers, and 873,591 video views.
43 The David Horowitz Freedom Center runs several websites and blogs, including Jihad Watch, FrontPage Magazine, and Students for Academic Freedom. The homepage of the David Horowitz Freedom Center’s website states: “We are dedicated to the defense of free societies whose moral, cultural and economic foundations are under attack by leftist and Islamist enemies at home and abroad.” See http://www.horowitzfreedomcenter.org/ The David Horowitz Freedom Center and affiliated organizations are listed as non-profit, 501(c)3 tax deductible organization which encourage public donations. For 2008, the DHFC reported revenues of $5,466,103 and expenses of $5,994,547 with total compensation to David Horowitz of $480,162 and to vice-president Peter Collier of $228,744, based on the DHFC’s IRS Form 990 http://www.tennessean.com/assets/pdf/DN1658821023.PDF
in 1988. Their official website claims that “over the next 18 years, CSPC attracted 50,000 contributing supporters and established programs such as The Wednesday Morning Club, the Individual Rights Foundation, and Students for Academic Freedom.” The website also claims that “FrontPage Magazine, the Center’s online journal of news and political commentary has 1.5 million visitors and 620,000 unique visitors a month (65 million hits) and is linked to over 2000 other websites. DiscoverTheNetworks.com, launched in 2005, is the largest publicly accessible database defining the chief groups and individuals of the Left and their organizational interlocks. DTN has had more than 8 million visitors so far this year.” Their official Facebook page has about 7,500 “likes,” or followers.

Robert Spencer is also a contributor to the American Thinker. He is also the author of a dozen books, whose titles reflect the anti-Islamic bias of the writer, but who claim to educate readers about what Islam “really” is. They include Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions about the World’s Fastest-Growing Faith (2003), Onward Muslim Soldiers: How Jihad Still Threatens America and the West (2003), The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades) (2005), The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic

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44 As mentioned on their website, it was founded as the “Center for the Study of Popular Culture” in 1988, “to establish a conservative presence in Hollywood and show how popular culture had become a political battleground” and in 2006, the Center’s Board of Directors decided to change the name of the organization to the David Horowitz Freedom Center.
45 As of April 1st, 2013. https://www.facebook.com/horowitzfreedomcenter
Law Treats Non-Muslims (2005),\textsuperscript{49} Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn’t (2007),\textsuperscript{50} The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion (2007),\textsuperscript{51} Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs (2008),\textsuperscript{52} The Complete Infidel’s Guide to the Koran (2009),\textsuperscript{53} Did Muhammad Exist?: An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins (2012),\textsuperscript{54} Not Peace But a Sword: The Great Chasm Between Christianity and Islam (2013).\textsuperscript{55} His books can easily be found on websites such as Amazon, where some have a relatively high number of reviews: The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades) (2005) has 591 reviews, 356 of which gave him 5 stars.\textsuperscript{56} By comparison, the book Islam: A Short History (Modern Library Chronicles) published in 2002, by Karen Armstrong,\textsuperscript{57} only has 272 reviews. Robert Spencer is also the founder and leader of the organization “Stop Islamization of America” (SIOA)” with Pamela Geller, which has received much criticism, as we will see further.

\textsuperscript{52} Robert Spencer, Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs, Regnery Publishing, 2008.  
\textsuperscript{54} Robert Spencer, Did Muhammad Exist?: An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2012.  
\textsuperscript{56} See Amazon, \url{www.amazon.com} The front cover bears a label stating “New York Times bestseller” and the picture of a masked soldier with an assault rifle. The book equals Islam with war and crusade, and chapters read “Muhammad: Prophet of War,” “Quran: Book of War,” “Islam: Religion of War” etc. In the introduction, he calls Karen Armstrong “a Western apologist” responsible for the the “fog of misinformation that surrounds Islam today.”  
\textsuperscript{57} Karen Armstrong is a British writer, Oxford graduate and scholar of religion whose work focuses on commonalities of the major religions. She has published over 20 books and has receives several honors and awards.
Pamela Geller is an American blogger, author, and commentator who became a political activist after 9/11 and is known primarily for her criticism of Islam and Muslim activities, through various initiatives. Her one-line bio on her blog Atlas Shrugs states: “Evil is made possible by the sanction you give it. Withdraw your sanction.” She makes a direct appeal for Americans to oppose the “threat” and “evil” represented by Islam. Her blog is a collage of news reports, typically not from mainstream media sources, highlighting the case of individuals oppressed by Islam, “honor killings,” jihadists, Sharia law, acts of violence by Muslims in Israel, Syria etc. Geller is Jewish and also a fervent supporter of Israel. Her arguments that Islam/Muslims are dangerous are highly based on the visual and emotional impact produced by striking images and symbols: her blogs displays banners and pictures representing jihadists, or figures such as Osama bin Laden, next to radical quotes including of the word “jihad,” and “killing Jews is worship that draws us to Allah,” (quoting Hamas) and her conclusion as a motto: “That’s his jihad. What’s yours?” Her publications characterize and reduce Islam to negatively-connoted words and individuals, and stereotypical representations of radical Muslims, using highly recognizable signifiers of threat, violence and anti-Americanism. She has also engaged in activities including advertisement campaigns encouraging Muslims to


leave Islam.\textsuperscript{61} Her rhetoric represents her own beliefs that radical Islam as interpreted by terrorists is “pure Islam, original Islam.”\textsuperscript{62} She is also a regular columnist for WND, and the \textit{American Thinker}.\textsuperscript{63} She became increasingly vocal in relation to the project of the construction of an Islamic cultural center in Manhattan’s Park51, also known as the Ground Zero mosque controversy,\textsuperscript{64} gained a lot of media attention, galvanized the opposition against the project and was accused of being responsible for its dismissal.

Such organizations and foundations have been instrumental in spreading a negative, threatening image of Islam and Muslims, and in mobilizing public opinion, support and even financial contributions. Their influence is all the more significant as they have acted as a network, rather than as a single organization – the multiplicity of affiliated organizations and websites allows them to increase their visibility and to reach more supporters by acting at different levels and targeting diverse audiences. Spencer and Geller’s publications, like Karimi’s, literally claim to reveal the truths, correct popular misconceptions, and expose what Islam really is. They have received a lot of criticism from journalists and scholars and from the mainstream and liberal media. In turn, they


\textsuperscript{62} See Kaye Randi, “Firestorm Grows Over Islamic Center Near Ground Zero.” Anderson Cooper 360\textdegree, CNN, 17 Aug. 2010. http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1008/17/acd.01.html When asked “do you agree that the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 were practicing a perverted form of Islam, and that is not what is going to be practiced at this mosque?” [the Islamic center project near Ground Zero], she said “I will say that the Muslim terrorists were practicing pure Islam, original Islam.”

\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{American Thinker} is a daily conservative online magazine which deals with American politics, national security, foreign policy, Israel, military strategy, economics, diplomacy, and culture

\textsuperscript{64} Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer are the producers and primary contributors of a documentary on the Ground Zero mosque controversy released in DVD: “The Ground Zero Mosque: The Second Wave of the 9/11 Attacks” Pamela Geller, Robert Spencer, 911 Family Members, Geert Wilders (Primary Contributor), Andrew Breitbart, Pamela Hall, James Lafferty Ambassador John Bolton (Primary Contributor), Pamela Geller (Director), 2011.
have accused the mainstream and liberal media, and the government, of pro-Muslim propaganda. A group called SpencerWatch was created in reaction to his JihadWatch. He and other public speakers against Islam have been accused of spreading anti-Muslim propaganda by other public policy organizations and media sources. Pamela Geller has been criticized by Media Matters for America, a liberal watchdog group, and other media sources. In relation to the mosque debate, Eric Boehlert, a senior fellow at Media Matters for America, said “She’s been instrumental […] she has whipped up hatred in the right-wing blogosphere and now that’s spilled out into the wider community.” And Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) said “She’s a fringe character. But she is a fringe character who every day is on CNN, Fox, the Washington Post, and the New York Times. She is the driving force behind the Islamic center campaign.” Furthermore, the organizations lead by Geller and Spencer, “Stop Islamization of America” (SIOA) and “American Freedom Defense Initiative” (AFDI) have been designated as hate groups by the Anti-defamation league (ADL): “Wake up America!” With this cautionary phrase, Stop Islamization of America (SIOA) has sought to rouse public fears about a vast Islamic

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66 The “about” section states “this site exposes Robert Spencer of JihadWatch.org, an extremist ‘Catholic’ ideologue who hides behind ‘fake’ scholarly claims to promote a fanatic anti-Muslim agenda.” [http://spencerwatch.com/](http://spencerwatch.com/)
69 Ibid.
conspiracy to destroy American values. The organization, created in 2009, warns of the encroachment of Shariah, or Islamic law, in the U.S. and encourages Muslims to renounce and leave the “falsity” of Islam. “The U.S. constitution is under attack from fundamentalist Islam and Shariah,” reads SIOA’s mission statement. Consistently vilifying the Islamic faith under the guise of fighting radical Islam, the group has introduced a growing number of Americans to its conspiratorial anti-Muslim agenda.

Robert Spencer’s website, Jihad Watch has also been denounced as an Islamophobic Internet hate site, notably by CAIR: “Spencer’s website is notorious for its depiction of Islam as an inherently violent faith that is a threat to world peace.” Such organizations and public speakers have been accused of encouraging terrorism by leading such hate campaigns based on inaccurate representations of Islam and Muslims. Benazir Bhutto, Former Pakistani Prime Minister, accused Spencer of spreading misinformation and hatred of Islam through his website Jihad Watch, and of presenting a skewed, one-sided, and inflammatory story that only helps to sow the seed of civilizational conflict. The Center for American Progress, a progressive public policy research and advocacy organization or think tank created in 2003, has also pointed to the negative impact of these groups and the Islamophobia that they encourage through their activities and publications, including notably Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller. A significant

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A network of Islamophobia, encouraging hate, fear and violence

The report considers the bombing of government buildings and mass shooting at a camp of the Youth league of the Norwegian Labour Party, in essence, terrorist attacks in a case of “lone-wolf terrorism,” killing close to a hundred people, perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik in July 2011 in Oslo, Norway. His long-prepared attacks were based on his far-right militant ideology, including his views reflecting Islamophobia and his rejection of multiculturalism and the Islamization of Europe, which he expressed in a 1,500-page “manifesto” published online, entitled “2083: A European Declaration of Independence.” The Norwegian media reported that “Anders Behring Breivik had contact with a number of anti-Muslim organizations and individuals” including the English Defense League, a far-right protest movement opposing the spread of Islamism, Sharia law and Islamic extremism in the United Kingdom, the Norwegian Defence League, and other groups such as SIOE, Stopp islamiseringen av Europa – Stop the Islamisation of Europe, SIAD, Stopp islamiseringen av Danmark – Stop the Islamisation of Denmark, and SIAN, Stopp islamiseringen av Norge – Stop the Islamisation of

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Norway. On a section on Breivik as an anti-Muslim blogger, the same article also reports that “Breivik writes on Document.no in 2009 that he reads blogs Gates of Vienna, Brussels Journal, Jihad Watch and the Religion of Peace.”\(^{76}\) It also reports that Breivik’s model was a Norwegian blogger using the pseudonym “Fjordman,” a far-right Islamophobic blogger quoted extensively in Breivik’s manifesto, whom the article reports had contacts with Robert Spencer, writer for JihadWatch. In fact, Stop Islamization of America was created in 2010 upon the request of the founder of Stop Islamisation of Europe, Anders Gravers Pedersen.\(^{77}\)

The report “Fear Incorporated” refers to Breivik’s attacks and the influence of American anti-Muslim organizations and public speakers such as Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, and David Horowitz, in its introduction and summary, thereby emphasizing the influence such public speakers and their organizations may have on anti-Muslim individuals and groups:

Breivik’s manifesto contains numerous footnotes and in-text citations to American bloggers and pundits, quoting them as experts on Islam’s “war against the West.” This small group of anti-Muslim organizations and individuals in our nation is obscure to most Americans but wields great influence in shaping the national and international political debate. Their names are heralded within communities that are actively organizing against Islam and targeting Muslims in the United States.

Breivik, for example, cited Robert Spencer, one of the anti-Muslim misinformation scholars we profile in this report, and his blog, Jihad Watch, 162 times in his manifesto. Spencer’s website, which “tracks the attempts of radical Islam to subvert Western culture,” boasts another

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member of this Islamophobia network in America, David Horowitz, on his Freedom Center website. Pamela Geller, Spencer’s frequent collaborator, and her blog, Atlas Shrugs, was mentioned 12 times.

Geller and Spencer co-founded the organization Stop Islamization of America, a group whose actions and rhetoric the Anti-Defamation League concluded “promotes a conspiratorial anti-Muslim agenda under the guise of fighting radical Islam. The group seeks to rouse public fears by consistently vilifying the Islamic faith and asserting the existence of an Islamic conspiracy to destroy “American values.” Based on Breivik’s sheer number of citations and references to the writings of these individuals, it is clear that he read and relied on the hateful, anti-Muslim ideology of a number of men and women detailed in this report and a select handful of scholars and activists who work together to create and promote misinformation about Muslims.

The report further states that:

While these bloggers and pundits were not responsible for Breivik’s deadly attacks, their writings on Islam and multiculturalism appear to have helped create a world view, held by this lone Norwegian gunman, that sees Islam as at war with the West and the West needing to be defended. According to former CIA officer and terrorism consultant Marc Sageman, just as religious extremism “is the infrastructure from which Al Qaeda emerged,” the writings of these anti-Muslim misinformation experts are “the infrastructure from which Breivik emerged.” Sageman adds that their rhetoric “is not cost-free.”

This case established a clear connection between anti-Islamic propaganda and domestic terrorism. “Stop Islamization” groups clearly raise alarm and a sense of urgency, stating “we” are under threat and must not let “them” advance on us and take “our freedom.” They call for action, for people to “unite” because they are “under attack.” Their rhetoric encourages political and social cleavage, hatred, and rejection of the Other, and is very likely to incite to violence, hate crimes, and attacks. Hate speech against Islam and Muslims is likely to encourage violence against Muslims, but it is also likely to

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78 See STOP! ISLAMIZATION OF AMERICA: “The U. S. Constitution is under attack from Fundamentalist Islam and Shariah, Islamic Religious Law Fundamentalist Islam wants Shariah to replace the U. S. Constitution and fundamentally transform America. WAKE UP AMERICA! Men and Women of the World - UNITE Against Sharia […] Fundamentalist... Mainstream... Radical... Supremacist... Islam...”
http://stopislamizationofamerica.blogspot.com/
encourage more extremism on the side of radical Muslims rhetoric may thus encourage mutual antagonism and increase violence between groups.

“The Islamophobia echo chamber”: “Amplifying fear and misinformation” and “misleading the public”

The report also shows that these and other anti-Islam think tanks and grassroots movements which constitute the “network of Islamophobia” in the U.S. receive funding from foundations and wealthy donors. Naming seven funds and foundations, the report states that “these seven charitable groups provided $42.6 million to Islamophobia think tanks between 2001 and 2009.” The authors of the reports stress that they define “Islamophobia” “as an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from America’s social, political, and civic life.”

The report lists and names individuals in the religious right, the media, political players and grassroots organizations which are “amplifying fear and misinformation in the Islamophobia echo chamber” and “misleading the public.” In the media category are listed the Washington Times, the Christian Broadcast Network, Fox News and anchors Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, and previously mentioned David Horowitz and Pamela Geller and their media outlets and organizations. The report also lists members of the Republican Party such as Michele Bachman, and grassroots organizations such as ACT! For America, State Tea Party movements and the Christian American Family.

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79 See pages 2 and 3 of the report. 
80 See page 9.
Conservative media sources have also played a role in increasing the sense of threat presented by Islam and Muslims. A significant source is the cable news network *Fox News*. Examples of articles include: “USA Once Again Under Threat From the Muslim World,” by Bill O’Reilly, the documentary by *Fox News*: “The Threat of Radical Islam,” and TV reports of anti-Islamic media: “New film investigates threat from Muslim Brotherhood – ‘The Grand Deception’ examines radical Islam,” aired in January 2013. These sources usually cite other sources which have acknowledged the growth of Islam, to support their warning that Islam, or radical Islam, is growing. They also put forward the idea that Muslims have an “agenda” to ultimately impose Sharia law in the U.S., and eventually in the whole world – which they argue might happen if Islam keeps growing. One of the conspiracy theories of the twenty-first century is the idea of a “new world order,” and as far as Islam is concerned, a new Islamic world order. These theories usually revolve around Muslim groups secretly plotting to turn the U.S. into a

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81 See page 5 of the report. See also the “leading lights of the Islamophobia network,” the scholars, validators and activists, page 7. The President of the American Family Association, Tim Wildmon, was reported to have said “[Islam] is, in fact, a religion of war, violence, intolerance, and physical persecution of non-Muslims.” on March 6, 2012, by the Southern Poverty Law Center, as quoted on their website http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/american-family-association

82 Bill O’Reilly, “USA Once Again Under Threat From the Muslim World,” *Fox News*, http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/oreilly/transcript/usa-once-again-under-threat-muslim-world. The article comments on and interview of Imam Rauf by Larry King on *CNN*, in relation to the Ground Zero mosque. O’Reilly’s article states “Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is warning America that the violence may break out if the Ground Zero mosque is not built.” While Imam Rauf’s message is that the media coverage of the controversy and of some Americans’ opposition to the Islamic center may encourage anger and crisis in the Muslim world. O’Reilly comments “Come on, building Islamic community center just yards away from where Muslims attacked us? Do the math, imam. Now, if you would state, if you would state, imam, that the center is being built to condemn jihad, to announce that Muslim extremism is evil, then I’d pick up a hammer and help you build and so would everybody else.”

83 Fox News: The Threat of Radical Islam (Pt. 1 of 6) posted on YouTube - This is a special Fox News Network dedicated to the film “Obsession: Radical Islam’s War against the West.” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKtJ1UI1Cs8

Muslim country, or bring the U.S. under Muslim law. This is one of the ideas present in Karimi’s book – the idea of Islam advancing on America, with the Statue of Liberty carrying the Quran and Sharia law. Some include the idea that President Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim, on the side of Muslims. One example is this article: “Obama’s New Islamic World Order,” by Daniel Greenfield, posted on FrontPageMag on July 25, 2012. These sources have been criticized for their conservative and anti-Islamic bias –

85 See the documentary “Faces of the Enemy” California Newsreel, Producers/Directors: Bill Jersey and Jeffrey Friedman, 57 minutes, 1987. “As relevant today as when it was first released, Faces of the Enemy follows social psychologist Sam Keen as he unMASKs how individuals and nations dehumanize their enemies to justify the inhumanity of war. Using archival news footage, public service announcements, and editorial cartoons, Keen unveils the same frightening pattern in conflict after conflict - World War II, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, Islamic and Christian Fundamentalism - and prefigures the current War on Terrorism. First we identify ourselves as victims. Then we blame, demonize and finally dehumanize our adversaries, rationalizing our murder of other human beings. Faces of the Enemy contends that before a drop of blood is spilled we must ‘think each other to death.’ It is a story replayed on the nightly news, in Islamic Fundamentalists’ characterization of the West as the ‘Great Satan’ and our own stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists. In a revealing examination of the images and iconography of war Keen interviews the nation’s leading editorial cartoonists. They discuss how they use an almost universal language of stereotypes and prejudices to tap into readers’ most visceral emotions.”

The documentary is based on the book by Sam Keen, Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination, Harpercollins, 1991. As stated in a review by Publishers Weekly: “Each nation seeks to justify warfare by creating a monstrous image of its enemy. Killing is made a source of pride, murder a patriotic duty; war becomes a holy war ‘with God on our side.’ Keen (The Passionate Life uses political posters and cartoons to demonstrate that belligerent countries have consistently characterized the enemy as aggressor, barbarian, devil, rapist, insect, germ. Noting that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. need to view one another as evil, he urges a massive overhaul of fixed postures and attitudes. His ‘potpourri of possibilities’ to eradicate deep-seated hate and fear ranges from cultural exchanges to divestment of empires (ours and theirs). Illustrated with color and black-and-white art, this original probe of the root causes of war offers a new perspective on ways to thaw the Cold War. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.” See also Walter Goodman, TV Reviews; ‘Faces of the Enemy,’ A Documentary, New York Times, 27 May 1987 http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/27/movies/tv-reviews-faces-of-the-enemy-a-documentary.html

86 Barack Obama has been the subject of much support but also much criticism. His opponents have regularly called him a “communist,” “socialist,” but also a Muslim. A Google search on the words Obama, Islam and evil will show many “Photoshopped” pictures of Barack Obama with captions and statements such as “evil,” “America will bow down to Islam,” or “Islam will dominate the world,” Obama laughing, “plotting” with Islamic leaders, or wearing an Islamic beard and a white turban, or a Palestinian scarf.

87 Daniel Greenfield, “Obama’s New Islamic World Order,” Frontpagemag.com, 25 Jul. 2012. http://frontpagemag.com/2012/dgreenfield/obama%E2%80%99s-new-islamic-world-order/ Frontpagemag.com mainly run by David Horowitz, Editor-in-Chief, who is also the founder of David Horowitz Freedom Center http://www.horowitzfreedomcenter.org/about The “about” page states: “OUR MISSION: The DHFC is dedicated to the defense of free societies whose moral, cultural and economic foundations are under attack by enemies both secular and religious, at home and abroad.” And “The David Horowitz Freedom Center combats the efforts of the radical left and its Islamist allies to destroy American values and disarm this country as it attempts to defend itself in a time of terror. The leftist offensive is most obvious on our nation’s campuses, where the Freedom Center protects students from indoctrination
academics, scholars, groups and websites calling for moderation are in turn “watching” them, to expose the radical biases of these groups and public speakers.88

**The impact of negative representations of Islam and Muslims post 9/11 on public opinion**

Some data obtained through surveys have shown that public opinion of Muslims in the US was highly affected by the 9/11 events and the subsequent image of Islam in the media. Based on a new Gallup Center for Muslim Studies report, released in January 2010, “Religious Perceptions in America: With an In-Depth Analysis of U.S. Attitudes Toward Muslims and Islam,” “More than 4 in 10 Americans (43%) admit to feeling at least “a little” prejudice toward Muslims – more than twice the number who say the same about Christians (18%), Jews (15%) and Buddhists (14%).”89 The survey also concludes that “Islam is the most negatively viewed religion,” based on a chart which shows that, on their opinion of Islam, 31% American respondents answered “not favorable at all,” 22% “not too favorable,” 33% “somewhat favorable,” 9% “very favorable,” and 5% “don’t know/refused.” By contrast, expressing their opinions on Christianity, 4% answered “not favorable at all,” 4% “not too favorable,” 25% “somewhat favorable,” 66% “very favorable,” and 1% “don’t know/refused.” Therefore, regarding Islam, 55%

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88 For example RightWingWatch, “A project of People For the American Way dedicated to monitoring and exposing the activities of the right-wing movement,” trending topics: “anti-Muslim,” [http://www.rightwingwatch.org/category/topics/anti-muslim](http://www.rightwingwatch.org/category/topics/anti-muslim) On Facebook, the group Right Wing Watch had 17,204 followers on April 3rd 2011.

American respondents were on the “not favorable” side, and 42% on the “favorable” side, while regarding Christianity, only 8% were on the “not favorable” side, and 91% on the “favorable” side, including 66% “very favorable.”

The “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy also shows how people associated 9/11 with Islam, not just radical fundamentalist Islam, or rather, its interpretation by radical Muslims. The result of a survey reported by Time show that a large majority of respondents oppose it and reveal that “prejudice toward Muslims is widespread:

According to a new TIME poll, 61% of respondents oppose the construction of the Park51/Cordoba House project, compared with 26% who support it. More than 70% concur with the premise that proceeding with the plan would be an insult to the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center. [...] the survey also revealed that many Americans harbor lingering animosity toward Muslims. Twenty-eight percent of voters do not believe Muslims should be eligible to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Nearly one-third of the country thinks adherents of Islam should be barred from running for President – a slightly higher percentage than the 24% who mistakenly believe the current occupant of the Oval Office is himself a Muslim. In all, just 47% of respondents believe Obama is a Christian; 24% declined to respond to the question or said they were unsure, and 5% believe he is neither Christian nor Muslim. And while more Americans are open to the idea of having a mosque built in their neighborhood rather than near Ground Zero, it’s still not an overwhelming majority; 55% of respondents say they would favor the construction of an Islamic community center and mosque two blocks from their home, and an equal number say they believe most Muslims are “patriotic Americans.” [...] While the poll revealed that prejudice toward Muslims is widespread, respect for other religious traditions remains sturdy. Respondents held the Jewish faith in the highest regard, with 75% professing to hold a favorable

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90 Ibid. Gallup conducted the nationwide U.S. survey between Oct. 31 and Nov. 13, 2009, spanning the Fort Hood shooting in which a U.S.-born Muslim military doctor killed 13 people on the Army base on Nov. 5.”

As for survey methods, it is stated that “Results for this Gallup Panel study are based on telephone interviews with 1,002 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Oct.31-Nov.13, 2009. Gallup Panel members are recruited through random selection methods. The panel is weighted so that it is demographically representative of the U.S. adult population.”

impression – just slightly higher than attitudes toward Protestants and Catholics. Fifty-seven percent say they have a favorable view of the Mormon faith, compared with 44% for Muslims. Despite (or perhaps because of) this widespread antipathy, 62% of respondents say they don’t personally know a Muslim American.

Another insightful article by *Time* is “Islamophobia: Does America Have a Muslim Problem?” by Bobby Ghosh, in August 2010. This article states:

The proposed site of Park51 is close not just to Ground Zero; it’s also a stone’s throw from strip clubs, liquor stores and other establishments typical of lower Manhattan. Local Muslims have been praying in the building for nearly a year, a fact that has been lost in the noise of the anti-mosque protests. But since early August, the site has been the scene of frequent demonstrations in which protesters carry signs saying such things as “All I Need to Know About Islam, I Learned on 9/11.”

The “Ground Zero mosque” controversy, was not the only one: there were several cases elsewhere in the U.S.; in particular, the project of a new Islamic center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, caused protests and vandalism, which was the subject of a documentary by CNN “Unwelcome: the Muslims Next Door.” Another significant source is the Pew Research Center’s “Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers Across the U.S.” published in September 2012. The survey reveals that the number of mosques in the U.S. nearly doubled since 2000, from 1,209 in 2000 to 2,106 in 2011.

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94 “Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers Across the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 27 Sep. 2012. [http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/controversies-over-mosque-and-islamic-centers-across-the-us.html](http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/controversies-over-mosque-and-islamic-centers-across-the-us.html) “In many cases, the opposition has centered on neighbors’ concerns about traffic, noise, parking and property values - the same objections that often greet churches and other houses of worship as well as commercial construction projects. In some communities, however, opponents of mosques also have cited fears about Islam, sharia law and terrorism.”
By the end of 2011, there were at least 2,106 mosques in the U.S., according to the U.S. Mosque Study 2011 (PDF), which was sponsored by a variety of research groups and religious organizations. The Mosque Study Project 2000 (PDF), which was conducted a decade earlier using the same methodology, counted 1,209 mosques across the country in 2000. This suggests that more than four-in-ten mosques in the U.S. have opened since 2000.\(^5\)

The article also offers an interactive map which shows the locations of 53 proposed mosques and Islamic centers that have encountered community resistance in recent years.

**Hate crimes**

A Human Rights Watch report “‘We are Not the Enemy’: Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab of Muslim after September 11”, considers only the immediate backlash in 2001 and 2002.\(^6\) The report states that the backlash against Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 is part of a larger, long-standing problem of hate crimes in the U.S., and that, long before 9/11, “the stereotype of the Arab or Muslim as ‘terrorist’ had taken hold of the American imagination and fueled anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice.” For example, the Persian Gulf crisis in 1990 led to waves of hate crimes in the U.S. – 44 hate crimes were recorded. After 9/11, the violence against those perceived to be Arab or Muslim included murder, physical assault, arson, vandalism of places of worship, damage of property, death threats, and public harassment. As cited in the report, the F.B.I reported that the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes jumped from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001. The ADC reported over 600 hate crimes.

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\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) By Amardeep Singh, “‘We are Not the Enemy’: Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab of Muslim after September 11,” Human Rights Watch, Nov. 2002 vol.14, no. 6. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/usa1102.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/usa1102.pdf)
CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations,\(^{97}\) reported over 1,700 incidents of backlash discrimination against Muslims (at airports, in the streets, etc.) just from September 11 through February 2002. The report mentions that not only Arabs and Muslims were attacked but also several Indians, turbaned Sikhs, and Arab Christians who were mistaken for Muslims, physically identified with the enemy. The report details seven cases of murders, including those of a turbaned Sikh, an Indian, and an Arab Coptic Christian, as well as seven physical assaults, some on turbaned Sikhs. In fact, a decade later, such hate crimes still occur: one example which attracted national media attention in December 2012 is the death of an Indian man, Sunando Sen, who was pushed onto the tracks of a subway station and was fatally hit by an oncoming train, by a middle-aged woman who pushed him because she thought he was a Muslim. As reported in the *New York Times*:

The woman, Erika Menendez, selected her victim because she believed him to be a Muslim or a Hindu, Richard A. Brown, the Queens district attorney, said. […] In a statement, Mr. Brown quoted Ms. Menendez, “in sum and substance,” as having told the police: “I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims ever since 2001 when they put down the twin towers I’ve been beating them up.” Ms. Menendez conflated the Muslim and Hindu faiths in her comments to the police and in her target for attack, officials said.\(^{98}\)

Another article of interest is “Attitudes Toward Muslim Americans Post-9/11” by Kathryn Ecklund and Mussarat Khan.\(^{99}\) This article mentions that:

\(^{97}\) CAIR is the largest Muslim civil liberties advocacy organization dealing with civil advocacy in the U.S.


\(^{99}\) Kathryn Ecklund, Mussarat Khan, “Attitudes Toward Muslim Americans Post-9/11.” Journal of Muslim Mental Health, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2012. This article more specifically explores “the type of situation-specific attitudes held by undergraduate non-Muslim students toward Muslim Americans post-September 11, 2001.” [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jmmh/10381607.0007.101?rgn=main;view=fulltext](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jmmh/10381607.0007.101?rgn=main;view=fulltext)
Following September 11, 2001, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported a 1,700 percent increase of hate crimes against Muslim Americans between 2000 to 2001 (Anderson, 2002). During the process of adjusting to the aftermath of September 11, Muslim Americans faced an upsurge in negative stereotypes expressed by the larger society (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2003; Cassel, 2006) and Muslim immigrants, more than any other immigrant group, were met with negative attitudes (Council of American Islamic Relations, 2003; Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Since then, increased racial and religious animosity has left Arabs, Middle Easterners, Muslims, and those who bear stereotyped physical resemblance to members of these groups, fearful of potential hatred and hostility from persons of other cultures (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Baqi-Aziz, 2001; Kira et al., 2010; Rippy & Newman, 2006).

It has been established that discrimination toward Muslim Americans was present before the attacks on September 11, which may relate to Islam being frequently portrayed by the media as intrinsically intolerant and violent (Giger & Davidhizar, 2002). However, it would be beneficial to study situational attitudes toward Muslim Americans post-September 11, 2001, as the attacks by Muslim terrorists seemed to worsen the general public’s attitudes toward mainstream Muslim Americans. Since Muslim Americans are part of American society, negative attitudes and discrimination would have detrimental effects not only on the recipients of the negative expression (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Rippy & Newman, 2006; Kira et al., 2010), but also on society at large.

According to some journalists, over a decade after 9/11, Muslims still suffer from the negative perception of Muslims in America. According to Sumbul Ali-Karamali, for CNN, “American Muslims live in fear 11 years after 9/11”: 100

Although countless Muslims have condemned the acts of 9/11 in the United States and worldwide, American Muslims became objects of suspicion. The 9/11 terrorists broke numerous laws of Islam and were denounced as mass murderers by Islamic religious leaders. Even so, Islam is viewed as a religion preaching violence. In the aftermath, amidst the fear and anger, many American Muslims realized that the reason

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Americans were so quick to believe the worst about Muslims after the horrific attacks of 9/11 was that Americans knew little about even the most basic tenets of Islam. Despite our efforts, that’s exactly what has happened. Although 9/11 did compel some Americans to learn more about Islam, it also triggered a wave of anti-Islam feeling that has burgeoned. And though there have been interfaith initiatives, books on Islam, documentaries, education efforts, and shows like “All-American Muslim,” polls show that Americans’ negative views of Islam have increased since 9/11, not decreased. Such trends cannot help but discourage even the most optimistic of American Muslims; many of us are more fearful now than a decade ago, and entire Muslim communities feel besieged.

She also states that anti-mosque incidents have escalated in recent years, that hate groups and hate crimes have been on the rise, and that many Islamic studies professors and speakers, Muslim or not, have received hate mail and even death threats. She argues that “it is not simply a lack of information about American Muslims, but also:

misinformation and, in many cases, outright fabrications about what Islam entails and what Muslims believe. […] It’s not just a lack of information on Islam that American Muslims have had to battle, it is an increasing body of vitriolic myths and tall tales about Islam and Muslims that we continually have to explain or dismiss.”

She refers to the report issued by the Center for American Progress in 2011, which called attention to the impact of the network of Islamophobia, and which documented a small but extremely well-funded network of anti-Islam fear-mongers who have worked diligently to spread misinformation about Islam. Directly or indirectly, these fear-mongers fomented the “ground zero mosque” hysteria, promoted the film “The Third Jihad,” which the New York Police Department showed as a training video - and was strongly criticized for doing so – and have been responsible for Islamophobic advertisements on public buses all over the country. […]This anti-Islam rhetoric has been connected to violence. […] The defamatory rhetoric directed at Muslims and Islam in this country has little to do with the actual religion or its adherents and everything to do with fear of the Other. […] irrational fear of Islam and Muslims is bad for all Americans: it frays the social fabric of our society; it creates divisions between Americans; it affects the health of our democracy; and it affects the wisdom of our policy choices.
Like others such as Imam Feisal Adul Rauf, she advocates interfaith dialogue and communication between people.

As we have seen, the number of reports and articles whose title includes the words “threat” and “terror” in relation to Islam is significant. The overwhelming use of these buzzwords undoubtedly has contributed to negative perceptions and public opinion of Islam, and the suspicion and fear of Muslims and Islam in America. Indeed, the media have an influence on public opinion, in terms of what they report, and how they report and frame events. In the age of 24/7 news networks, the power of mass media and its coverage of current events are all the more significant. Similarly to advertisement and political speeches, headlines make extensive use of emotive words made to attract the attention and create an emotional response from the reader. Catching the readers’ eye, almost in a subliminal way, buzzwords shape the way people feel about events.¹⁰¹

Without necessarily reading the content of the articles, we still get influence by the headlines. For example, the repeated use of negatively charged words like “threat,” “jihad,” “terror,” and “radical,” especially in the headlines, has contributed to the negative representations and perceptions of Islam and Muslims in America, even though the articles themselves may rely on suspicions, opinions, and interpretations.¹⁰² This type of propaganda is not leaving Americans indifferent. While some might be influence by it,

¹⁰² See for example RadicalIslam.org http://www.radicalislam.org/ This websites is a compilation of news reports and articles which highlight the sense of threat posed by (radical) Muslims and Islam by reporting instances of violence and anti-Americanism, in an extremely one-sided, denunciatory and alarming perspectives which victimizes non-Muslims. As stated on the “About” page: “RadicalIslam.org, the Clarion Fund’s flagship education tool, is the leading source for information about the threat posed by Radical Islam to all those who value freedom, democracy and other Western values. This website features the latest news updates and developments as well as news analysis from experts on the topic of Islam. RadicalIslam.org also publishes a bimonthly email newsletter to over 100,000 subscribers which provides the latest developments, video clips and in-house analysis articles.”
others have sought to denounce it, for example Brandon Turbeville, on the website Activist Post, in the article “Imminent Muslim Terror Threat Debunked by New Study.”

An insightful study of the concept and use of the word evil is Adam Morton’s *On Evil and Otherness*. According to him:

thinking in terms of evil can give us the same attitudes as evil-doers. They often think their victims deserve what they get, that they are worthless scum, inferior beings, or dangerous alien. They often think, in fact, that their victims are evil. Thinking in terms of evil can, if we are not careful, make us accomplices in atrocity.

In *The Enemy With a Thousand Faces: The Tradition of the Other in Western Political Thought and History*, Vilho Harle talks about identity politics, the politics of exclusion, and the key concept of the Other. Focusing on the Western tradition, Harle analyzes the way in which conflicts between “them” and “us” are often represented as the struggle between the representatives of good and representatives of evil. The origin of this tradition of a struggle between good and evil can be found in ancient Iranian Zoroastrianism, and was then adopted by Judaism, Christianity, and finally, Islam. One of the theses of his book is that “the history of humankind is the history of identity politics.”

In the introduction, Harle states that “We need to know who we are and what we are not,

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103 Brandon Turbeville, “Imminent Muslim Terror Threat Debunked by New Study,” Activist Post, 5 Feb. 2013. [http://www.activistpost.com/2013/02/imminent-muslim-terror-threat-debunked.html](http://www.activistpost.com/2013/02/imminent-muslim-terror-threat-debunked.html) This article claims that “According to a study conducted by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security which was released Friday, February 1, 2013, the original post-9/11 threat of Muslim terrorism that was used to justify the dismantling of the Constitution and the evisceration of civil liberties is exactly what many researchers and activists have been pointing out for years – virtually nonexistent.


where we belong and were we do not belong.” Indeed the idea of belonging is very important in relation to identity and multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and religiously diverse societies and nations. Vilho Harle stresses that: “identity is never a given: it is socially and politically constituted. Identity emerges in social interaction where boundaries between them and us are established.” This is a highly relevant factor in that the boundaries between them and us may fluctuate and in relation to conversion, they are in fact crosses. Harle adds:

> Quite often, this constitution of identity is not just an instance of some abstract construction of social reality but a substantive element in the politics of exclusion, where politics and the political are the driving force, and identity – including ethnic and national identities – is just a way of political mobilization, of politicizing and politicking.

Identity relies on what we are, and what we are not, and constructions of what we are, and what we are not, by ourselves and by others. In the wake of 9/11, there was a strong expression of American patriotism and of the unity of the American nation, also expressed in terms of “us” versus “them,” America versus terrorists, as asserted in political addresses by the Bush administration and by people’s waving of the American flag. The rhetoric of exclusion of “them,” Islamic terrorists, which was carried over to Islam and Muslims, led to the exclusion of the notion “Muslim” from American identity. According to Harle,

> [E]thnic conflicts, genocides, and other expressions of the absolute hate against the Other represent an extreme and therefore highly important form case of identity politics. This extremity reflects the distinction between the Friend and the Enemy, that is, the struggle between good and

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106 Ibid. See p.4
107 Ibid.
108 For example, during rally for religious tolerance, opponents to Islam carried the American flag to signify that Muslims are not Americans, while in fact, a significant part of Muslims are Americans, by birth or naturalization, and some are Americans who converted to Islam. The idea that Islam did not belong in American was also disproved by research which reasserted that Muslims are and have been part of American society, and so since colonial times, as a number of African slaves were Muslims.
evil. However, I claim that this struggle never takes place without human actors and their imagination of such a struggle. Indeed, the struggle between good and evil is socially and politically constructed.\textsuperscript{109}

Harle goes on to explain that while some individuals and groups – and in fact everybody, potentially – are able and willing to torture and kill other individuals or groups, it is impossible that some men represent or are agents of cosmic good and others of cosmic evil. Harle thus claims that “it is not possible to abolish evil by killing the agents of evil. Conflicts are typical to human and social life, and human beings are, and must be, able to deal with such conflicts without attempting to exterminate their opponents.”\textsuperscript{110} Harle’s arguments are all the more significant in relation to the acts of torture and abuse of prisoners by U.S. soldiers in the context of the War on Terror and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq – according to Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense in the Bush administration, “acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel, and inhuman.”\textsuperscript{111}

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who was under attack and at the center of the “Ground Zero mosque” controversy, has been an advocate of moderation, interfaith dialog, and

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Harle. p.5
\textsuperscript{111} In the context of the Iraq War, the prison was used for detention purposes by both the U.S.-led coalition occupying Iraq and the Iraqi government. See Seymour M. Hersh, “Chain of Command,” \textit{New Yorker}, May 17, 2004. “[Donald] Rumsfeld testified at length before House and Senate committees and apologized for what he said was ‘fundamentally un-American’ wrongdoing at Abu Ghraib. [He said] he had not actually looked at any of the Abu Ghraib photographs until some of them appeared in press accounts […] they were ‘hard to believe’, ‘There are other photos that depict . . . acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel, and inhuman.’ NBC News later quoted U.S. military officials as saying that the unreleased photographs showed American soldiers ‘severely beating an Iraqi prisoner nearly to death, having sex with a female Iraqi prisoner, and ‘acting inappropriately with a dead body.’ The officials said there also was a videotape, apparently shot by U.S. personnel, showing Iraqi guards raping young boys.”
http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/17/040517fa_fact2?currentPage=all
American-Islamic relations. He has published several books\textsuperscript{112} and has given lectures on the subject. Regarding extremism, he wrote:

By taking the bait offered by extremist Islamophobes, we Muslims embarrass ourselves, reinforce stereotypes held by those who hate us, and sin against God. As we have seen, it takes only one extremist action to ignite a counter-reaction from extremists on the other side that lights the world on fire and undermines security and economic prosperity. Opposition groups then use extremist reaction to their own ends, undermining government and pushing political agendas, some of which are hardline. […] The first step is to recognize the enemy. It’s not Islam. It’s not Christianity. It’s not Judaism. It is anyone in any faith who would destroy and kill in the name of religion.\textsuperscript{113}

In his books and articles, he has advocated that Americans and Muslims actually pursue the same ideals, and has drawn connections between the American Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and Islamic law:

[T]he Muslim approach to law and justice begins with religious language because secular movements have failed to deliver what Muslims want – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. If that sounds suspiciously like the Declaration of Independence, that’s because – contrary to what many people in the West believe – Islamic law and American democratic principles have many things in common. Thomas Jefferson wrote that the Creator endowed man with these unalienable rights. The framers of the constitution wrote that they were establishing justice, ensuring domestic tranquillity, promoting general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty. In the same way, Islamic law believes that God has ordained political justice, economic justice and help for the weak and impoverished. These are very Islamic concepts. Many Muslims believe that what Americans receive from their government is in fact the very substance of


\textsuperscript{113} Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, “Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf: Let the Global Movement of Moderates Rise,” The Daily Beast, 20 Sep. 2012. \url{http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/09/20/imam-feisal-abdul-rauf-let-the-global-movement-of-moderates-rise.html} This article was written in the context of the anti-Muslim video made by Americans and which caused violent reactions in Egypt. Rauf comments “The people in the United States who made the obscene video that enflamed the Muslim world and the people in Egypt who found it, translated it, and publicized it as the latest Western affront to Islam think they are mortal enemies. They are not. They are allies in extremism.”
what an Islamic state should provide. American beliefs in individual liberty and the dignity of the individual are Islamic principles as well.¹¹⁴

Chapter One sought to analyze the ways in which Muslims have been construed as “others,” as “them,” and Islam, as antagonistic to America. As demonstrated, by describing and representing Islam and Muslims as the enemy, those who oppose Islam through defamation and propaganda, and who journalists have called “hate-mongers” and “Muslim bashers,” encourage misconceptions, fear, hate, and violence. While they denounce a form of radicalism, they contribute to another. Hate speech and binary world views in terms of “us” against “them,” “good” against “evil,” “victims” against “evil-doers,” “ally” against “enemy,” is part of what has influenced Islamic terrorists to attack America, and of what influences hate crimes and lone-wolf terrorism in the West. 9/11 has encouraged research on Islam, and this research and interest has evolved in different directions. It is necessary for people and communities of all background in America to communicate and exchange views and perspectives to better understand each other, for example through interfaith dialog events, in order to coexist peacefully. The media plays an important role in shaping public opinion and could incite negative as well as positive emotional responses – suspicion, or understanding and compassion. The portrayal of Muslims in American entertainment media has also been problematic. The next chapter will consider how the entertainment media has contributed to the representation of Muslims, American Muslims, as well as American converts, as potential terrorists, and left little room for mainstream, peaceful, well-integrated Muslims to be seen, heard, and understood. This also contributed to the Muslim-unfriendly post 9/11 context which

makes it difficult to understand why, as the media have reported, tens of thousands of Americans have converted to Islam over the last decade.

Chapter Two: Muslim terrorists in the Entertainment Media and American jihadists in the Media

We have seen how political discourse, the War on Terror, the news media and anti-Islamic grassroots movements, have shaped and reinforced the sense of “us” and “them” in America, and how anti-Islamic propaganda has greatly challenged the possibility of being both an American and a Muslim. The mainstream media have failed to give voice to the majority of peaceful, “normal” American Muslims. As we will see in this chapter, entertainment media have also emphasized the visible, radical and potentially threatening minority, to the detriment of the less-visible – or as we will see – less interesting and less believable – peaceful, Americanized and integrated majority. As we will see, the entertainment media has perpetuated – reflected, but also exploited – the image of suspicious, potential terrorist Muslims in America, including American Muslims and also interestingly, American converts. Indeed, movies and TV shows whose storyline develops in the context of the “war on terror” have had the potential to further shape public opinion because, although they are supposed to be fictional, they appear as a reflection of reality, because they are based on real events and echoing what Americans are already seeing in the news. Furthermore, the attacks on September 11, and the aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq, had many characteristics of a thriller and action movie – the hijacking of commercial planes by foreign terrorists waging war against America, striking New York City and destroying the symbolic World Trade Center. Millions of
Americans watched the events through their TV screens, and most of the nation, in shock, watched the second plane hit the second tower. In fact, television coverage of 9/11 was the longest uninterrupted news event in the history of U.S. television – 93 hours, with no commercial breaks. As reported in the New York Times:

The terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon have truly become the story of a lifetime on television, surpassing even the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. [...] Initial ratings for the first four days of coverage indicate that an average of 30 million to 50 million viewers a day have watched network coverage in prime time, a far higher average than normal.\footnote{Bill Carter, Jim Rutenberg, “Viewers Again Return To Traditional Networks,” New York Times, 15 Sep. 2001. \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/15/us/after-the-attacks-television-viewers-again-return-to-traditional-networks.html?pagewanted=print}}

Subsequently, U.S. military intervention abroad also has many elements common to entertainment media, and in fact, many reality-based fictions have taken inspiration from the events.

**The Arab and Islamic Terrorist Enemy in Movies and TV series**

Movies about the F.B.I., the C.I.A., espionage, international relations and war have always captivated the audience, before and after 9/11, from the James Bond to Mission Impossible movies, and post 9/11 series such as “Alias,” “24,” and “Homeland.” It has been noted by scholars and journalists that, in these movies and series, the enemy of America has always been the actual “enemy” of the nation, based on current events: the Japanese enemy in the context of World War II, Russian or Soviet Union spies in the context of the Cold War, and Arabs in the context of the Gulf War. In fact, the American public was already exposed to movies with Arab and Middle-Eastern terrorists before 9/11. One example is the movie *True Lies* (1994), by James Cameron and with Arnold
Swarzenegger, who plays a man who leads a double life, performing covert missions for a U.S government’s counter-terrorism unit. He fights against a Palestinian terrorism organization group known as the “Crimson Jihad,” whose leader, Salim abu Aziz, is a pretend antique dealer who possesses nuclear warheads hidden inside antique statues and plans to detonate one to demonstrate his power to the United States.116 The film had a production budget: $115 million, grossed over $146.2 million domestically and $232.6 million abroad, and is ranked second top grossing movie on “terrorism,” after Air Force One.117 The movie did not cause great controversy but received some negative criticism,118 and some journalists wrote about the anti-Arab images in movies, for example Charles Glass, in the article “A prejudice as American as apple pie,”119 called The Siege, by Edward Zwick (1998), starring Bruce Willis and Denzel Washington, about Arab terrorism in New York City and American over-reaction to it, “a new film that depicts Arabs as blood-thirsty terrorists.” This movie was made a few years after the

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116 A quote by Salim Abu Aziz, making his videotaped message to the United States explaining his motivations, rings familiar in relation to the grievances of terrorists after 9/11: “You have murdered our women, and our children, and bombed our cities from afar, like cowards, and you dare to call us terrorists? Now, we have the ability to strike back at our enemies. Unless you, America, pull all military forces out of the Persian Gulf area, immediately, and forever, Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one major US city each week, until our demands are met. First, we will detonate one nuclear weapon on this uninhabited island as a demonstration of our power. But, if these demands are not met, Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one major U.S. city each week.” See http://www.quotefully.com/
118 “In two-and-a-half hours, the movie manages to touch on every anti-Arab stereotype: ugly, terrorist, hostage-taking and rich. […] This film ‘will stand the test of time as one of the most racist movies Hollywood has ever produced,’ said Jack Shaheen, an emeritus professor at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, who has studied Arabs in film for 20 years. Racist depictions of Arabs in movies lead to real consequences for Arab-Americans - including employment discrimination, religious persecution and hate crimes.” Reported by Raina Masri, “Poor taste shown in showing “True Lies,” The Chronicle, Duke University, 4 Dec. 1994. http://www.dukechronicle.com/articles/1994/12/05/poor-taste-shown-showing-true-lies
World Trade Center bombing of 1993 by a group of Arab terrorists, in which six people were killed, and over a thousand injured, and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, which some media sources initially assumed were caused by Arab Islamic terrorists, but was a case of domestic lone-wolf terrorism by Timothy McVeigh, and which killed 168 people and injured over 600. When *The Siege* opened, the spokesman of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Hussein Ibish criticized the movie’s depiction of Arabs and Muslims: “*The Siege* is extremely offensive. It’s beyond offensive. We’re used to offensive, that’s become a daily thing. This is actually dangerous.” He called it “Insidious” and “incendiary” because it “reinforces stereotypes that lead to hate crimes.” While he acknowledged that Arab terrorists did bomb the World Trade Center in 1993, Ibish said that Arab and Islamic groups are upset by

the very strong equation between Muslim religious practices and terrorism. [...] [Thanks to this film] Every time someone goes through the Muslim ablution, the ritual washing of hands everybody does before they pray five times a day, that image is the announcement to the viewer of the presence of violence.

CAIR also voiced concerns after receiving calls and faxes from Muslims in America who were upset by the trailer, and its spokesman, Ibraham Hooper, said

CAIR’s biggest complaint is about a scene showing Muslims praying in a New York mosque juxtaposed with bombings and acts of violence. The way those scenes play back to back shows you have violence in [the

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120 “ Muslims feel under siege from Hollywood, Arab groups decry a sinister depiction in *The Siege.*” 5 Nov. 1998. Source: Philadelphia Enquirer on-line. Available at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/popcult/handouts/demoniz/TERR05.htm The article also mentions “There are an estimated three million Arab Americans, many of whom are Christian. The United States is also home to between four million and six million Muslims – including black Americans and European whites, as well as Arabs. As a relative minority, Arab Americans, particularly Muslims, feel singled out when it comes time to cast movie villains. Actor Tony Shaloub – who is of Lebanese descent and plays an FBI agent in *The Siege* – has purposely shied away from roles as Arab criminals. Mostly, he has found work portraying different ethnic characters, including the Italians he’s played on TV’s *Wings* and the film *Big Night.*

121 Ibid.
Mideast] coming to America, and it’s coming through mosques. [...] We are worried about a backlash.\textsuperscript{122}

Glass’s article also refers to \textit{True Lies} and another movie, \textit{Executive Decision} (1996), another movie on the foreign terrorist threat, in which an intelligence analyst accompanies a commando unit for a midair boarding operation after terrorists seize control of an airliner. The conclusion to his article is all the more relevant for us today with about fifteen years’ hindsight: “Such stereotyping has led to violent attacks, verbal abuse and death threats against Arabs in America. Is it any wonder so many in the political class, divorced from ordinary life in this country and absorbed in Hollywood culture, would rather bomb Iraq than not?”\textsuperscript{123} Indeed, it is little wonder that the 9/11 terrorists attacks against the symbolic World Trade Center, including commercial airline hijacking by Arab terrorist, had everything of a the Hollywood movies of the previous decade, and the subsequent military intervention seemed like the logical and expected response – in the face of terrorism, the American government has a mission to respond and take down terrorists.\textsuperscript{124}

We now will see how, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, a few TV shows and movies have further used – or exploited\textsuperscript{125} – the plot of the Arab, Middle-Eastern,

\begin{itemize}
\item Glass, op. cit.
\item Other movies about terrorism and hijacking include \textit{The Delta Force} (1986) (with Chuck Norris against Lebanese terrorists – “committed to destroy the enemies of freedom” and “fighting to save American lives” (trailer)), and \textit{Air Force One} (1997), with Harrison Ford.
\item As we’ve seen with previous movies and as we will see with post 9/11 movies, movies on terrorism are among the best grossing movies and such TV shows have rather high ratings. See also Box Office Mojo, Genre Terrorism, 1977- present. \url{http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=terrorism.htm} A note adds: “For it to be a ‘Terrorist’ movie, the central action has to occur to promote a cause or for destruction’s sake.”
\end{itemize}
Muslim terrorist, which has a strong potential to captivate the audience, and how, they also introduced a new type of characters: the American convert to Islam who has joined the enemy. On the other hand, as we will see, representations of “normal,” somewhat “boring,” non-threatening American Muslims have failed to captivate the public, while still facing criticism by those who expect Muslims in America to conform to their negative stereotypes, even a decade after 9/11. This will lead to our third chapter: in this context, who are the Americans who converted to Islam? What has shaped their perception and representation of Islam? (which, as we will see, is at the polar opposite of what had made these movies successful). We will also see how American converts have used the social media to make their voices heard and show a different side of Islam – Islam as it is understood and practiced by tens of thousands of Americans who do not make the news.

“Secret Muslims” – white American converts, the enemy within

Stories about Americans converting to Islam have inspired curiosity, fascination, suspicion and criticism. Just as Barack Obama has been accused of being a “secret Muslim” by his opponents, which has led a part of Americans to think he is,\(^{126}\) the idea of a high-ranking or American official being “secret Muslims” has been evoked, especially by right-wing, anti-Islamic sources, as part of conspiracy theories against the American government and the Obama administration. One case is that of the present director of the C.I.A., John Brennan, appointed by Barack Obama in February 2013, who, according to a

\(^{126}\) According to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 17% registered voters think he is a Muslim, 49% correctly identified that he is a Christian, while 31% of respondents said they did not know. See Luke Johnson, “17 Percent Of Registered Voters Think Obama Is Muslim, Pew Poll Finds,” Huffington Post, 26 Jul. 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/26/obama-muslim_n_1706522.html
former F.B.I. agent, converted to Islam. Although this has not been confirmed, anti-Islamic and anti-Obama sources have emphasized the story; such is the case of FrontPage Magazine, and WND, previously mentioned. Whether this is true or not, what is significant is that being a Muslim or having converted to Islam has become the primary identifier of an individual, rather than only a part of his or her identity. To some extent, the way the media, especially the tabloid sort of media, has framed stories of celebrities being “secret Muslims,” seeking to expose or reveal their conversion, as a marginal part of their identity, can be compared to the way such media sources have covered the stories of homosexual celebrities.

“Homeland”, “Alias”, “24” and “Sleeper Cell”

One example of a show revolving around the character of the “insider convert” – the American convert working for the government, is the popular television series “Homeland” aired on Showtime, produced by Fox 21, and premiered in October 2011. The storyline follows C.I.A. agents in the context of the War on Terror, some of whom went to Iraq, working for counterterrorism and in particular against al Qaeda. One character, “Nicholas Brody,” a former Gunnery Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, was rescued after being held captive as a prisoner of war for eight years (held in an

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129 Such celebrities include Janet Jackson, who recently married a Qatari businessman said to be a billionaire, and her late brother Michael Jackson. In the course of our research, we came across stories of American converts to Islam who compared their anxieties about revealing to their parents that they had converted to Islam with a “coming out.”
underground torture chamber) by al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists. Following his rescue and return home, he is hailed as a war hero, but the central character of the show, C.I.A. officer Carrie Mathison, has come to believe that Brody, was “turned” by the enemy and now threatens the United States. As the show progresses, Brody is elected to Congress. In the show, Brody is shown as having converted to Islam while in captivity, and reciting Islamic prayer. As presented in the show, his conversion to Islam is associated with, or parallels the fact that he has “turned” for the enemy – he has joined “them,” and for his colleague, he is a suspect, a threat; he represents the enemy within. After one season of the show, he further achieves power as he becomes a Congressman. He represents the insider Muslim convert, not the face of the Arab/Middle Eastern terrorist, but the white American convert and potential terrorist. “Homeland” has very high ratings, is an award-winning TV show, and the two main characters won Golden Globes for their roles, including Damian Lewis, who plays “Nicholas Brody.”\(^{130}\)

Indeed, some journalists (usually American Muslims who have been personally affected by the stereotypes and misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam by its association with terrorism) have denounced the show as Islamophobic: Laila Al-Arian called it “TV’s


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most Islamophobic show” and Noor Salahuddin denounced “Fear and loathing in Homeland.” About the show’s “them” and “us” representation of Muslims, Peter Beaumont wrote:

The reality is that what “Homeland” portrays is a peculiar view of the Islamic world, one rooted, perhaps, in its genesis as an Israeli drama, where the view of the surrounding neighbourhood is more paranoid and defensive. It matters for this reason. Popular culture both informs and echoes our prejudices. How we portray the “other” – those whom we fear or are suspicious of – reinforces cultures of conflict. In some respects it has always been thus.  

131 Laila Al-Arian, “TV’s most Islamophobic show,” Salon.com, 15 Dec. 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/12/15/tv_s_most_islamophobic_show/ The author states: “With its portraits of Brody and Roya Hammad, ‘Homeland’ warns that Muslims are a hidden danger to fellow Americans.” She argues “All the standard stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are reinforced, and it is demonstrated ad nauseam that anyone marked as ‘Muslim’ by race or creed can never be trusted, all via the deceptively unsophisticated bureau-jargon of the government’s top spies.” About Brody, she writes: “his character is such an awful pastiche of American fears and pseudo-psychology that only an audience conditioned by the Islamophobic, anti-Arab tropes in our media could find him consistent.” “[…] nothing can rid him of his Muslimness, and so, like a child molester, he will always be a threat to the audience. When his wife discovers Brody is a Muslim who has been praying in that most sinister of man-caves, the garage, she tears through its contents like she is looking for his kiddie-porn stash. When she finds his Quran, she points angrily at it, shouting, ‘These are the people who tortured you!’ […] The Quran, the sacred text of billions of people throughout history, is nothing more or less than terrorism and medieval justice embodied. Brody had it all, his wife implies: white, a hero, a family man, but he threw it all away by becoming a Muslim.” She also points to other implicit warning of the show, such as “Muslims are infiltrating America!,” and that “Racial profiling is OK”: “Just when you think you’ve found a silver lining in “Homeland” – that you can’t judge evil by the color of its skin (you do it by its religion!) – you’re reminded that racial profiling still saves time.”

132 Noor Salahuddin, “Fear and loathing in Homeland,” The Chicago Monitor, 1 Nov. 2012, http://chicagomonitor.com/2012/11/fear-and-loathing-in-homeland/ She mentions how she got hooked by the show’s “fast-paced story, compelling performances, and the unrelenting tension between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ – as they are so aptly called in the show.” She mentions “the troubling and reoccurring factual errors about Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East.” She writes “Iraq is shown as a demonic hell-hole where Americans are tortured and killed. Needless to say, any American watching the show will not be inclined to think well of Muslims, much less visit a Middle Eastern country. This type of scene is recycled time and time again in mainstream media portrayals of Muslim-majority countries.” She further writes: “This is what truly makes me nervous about Homeland’s premise, not the mispronunciations or the easily avoidable inaccuracies, but that it actively perpetuates Islamophobia. Carrie and Brody’s relationship is built on fear and distrust; both of them represent the “us vs. them” attitude. Every Muslim character in the show is suspicious at best, a terrorist at worst. None of the Muslims, according to Homeland, can be trusted to run their households, much less run for political office. This propagates further misunderstanding and fear of Muslims in the minds of the audience. Instead of dispelling stereotypes, Homeland promotes them, actively selling Islamophobia in the name of thrill and action. As a fan of the show, I feel compelled to discuss these inaccuracies and problems. As an American, I feel it both misrepresents Muslims in America and abroad and promotes Islamophobia to audiences worldwide.”

133 Peter Beaumont, “Homeland is brilliant drama. But does it present a crude image of Muslims?,” The Observer, 13 Oct. 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2012/oct/13/homeland-drama-offensive-portrayal-islam-arabs He writes that in the show, “high-profile Muslims living in the US share a secret: both willingly or otherwise they are covert helpers of Abu Nasir, the al-Qaida terrorist leader. […] all are to
The impact of television portrayals on perceptions of minorities is not a new issue; it is particularly significant in the post 9/11 context in that it influences the way the general population views minorities. The authors point out the influence of the show in reinforcing and shaping stereotypical representations of Muslims and the fears associated with these: “Television drama such as ‘Homeland’ not only reflect cultural and social anxieties at any given time, it reflects back those anxieties, reinforcing and shaping them.” He adds that “Crucially there is strong evidence that counter-stereotypical fictional depictions in popular culture may have a positive impact, with some arguing that it can help turn around prejudicial attitudes.”

The author also points out that the fact that the show was produced a decade after 9/11 and is nevertheless highly popular, and thereby perpetuates the post 9/11 anxieties: “After a period when […] the trend for depicting Muslims as terrorists seemed to be in decline, it sticks out like a sore thumb.”

Other journalists questioned the patriotic dimension of the show, asking: “Does Homeland just wave the American flag?” According to Rachel Shabi:

“Homeland” presents a retuned version of the same unshakeable assurance that, even when things are really complicated, American values are the fairest, the most right and the best. Sure, the series shows US forces doing terrible things: covering up a drone attack that kills civilians in Iraq; trigger-happy in a US mosque, leaving innocents dead there, too. But these are presented as necessary acts in pursuit of far worse crimes.

“Homeland”’s core message is that the US means well, but sometimes has to do bad things; while the Arab and/or Muslim enemy doesn’t mean well be suspected.” Furthermore, “Homeland presents an odd and unbelievable image of relationships between countries and identities in the region, where Palestinians, Iraqis, Saudis all share an agenda regardless of background, culture and history.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

and hence does unfathomably bad things. Not much of a progression really, is it?

In this binary representation, there is little room for peaceful, majority Muslim and American Muslim representation. The show also reinforces the idea of an ideological division between America and its enemies, making it very difficult for Islam to be perceived as a religion outside of its political association with terrorism, and Muslims to be seen as ordinary citizens who do not necessarily represent a set of values which conflicts with another.

Other popular and award-winning TV shows about the C.I.A. and counterterrorism have portrayed the post 9/11 context to different extents: Alias, a TV show about a C.I.A. triple agent which ran for 5 seasons between 2001 and 2006 on ABC (and premiered only a couple of weeks after 9/11) only made a couple of references to Obama Bin Laden and the “war on terror.” By contrast, the plot of several seasons of ‘24’, a TV show set in Los Angeles and following a Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) agent hour by hour, revolved around Arab Muslim terrorists, suicide bombings and nuclear weapons. The depiction of Arab and Muslim terrorists, as well as the use of torture by the central agent, has sparked criticism, and Muslims have expressed their anxieties about the depiction of Muslims terrorists on the show and the reaction of the non-Muslim American viewers who are already subject to negative views about Muslims. The Associated Press reported the

impressions of Sireen Sawaf, an official with the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, and a self-described “huge 24 fan”: I do realize it’s a multidimensional show that portrays extreme situations. They have gone out of their way to have non-Muslim terror cells. […] But I’m concerned about the image it ingrains in the minds of the American public and the American government, particularly when you have anti-Muslim statements spewing from the mouths of government officials.” Additionally, the article reported, Sohail Mohammed, a New Jersey immigration lawyer who represented scores of detainees caught up in the post Sept. 11, 2001 dragnet, watched the episode depicting the nuclear attack with an Associated Press reporter, and commented “I was shocked” […] “Somewhere, some lunatic out there watching this will do something to an innocent American Muslim because he believes what he saw on TV.”

Another TV show about combating terrorism in the U.S. is “Sleeper Cell,” which ran in 2005 and 2006 for 2 seasons on Showtime. The show’s tagline for the first season was “Friends. Neighbors. Husbands. Terrorists.” and the tagline for the second season was “Cities. Suburbs. Airports. Targets.” Although the title and taglines powerfully reflect the focus of the show, the threat of terrorism, the show has been deemed less biased in their representation of terrorists and Muslims: the main character, Darwyn, is an F.B.I. agent who is an African American Muslim, and who infiltrates a terrorist sleeper cell whose members are of different racial backgrounds, and in which radical Islamists or

See also Rolf Halse, “The Muslim-American Neighbour as Terrorist: The Representation of a Muslim Family in 24,” in Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture Vol. 11, No. 4., 2011, and “Negotiating Boundaries between Us and Them, Ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims Speak out about the ‘Next Door Neighbour Terrorist’ in 24.” Nordicom Review 33, 1, 2012 (pp. 37-52).
fanatics are not assimilated with mainstream practicing Muslims. This led to the show being praised for its portrayal of terrorism and radical Islamists.\(^{137}\)

**Zero Dark Thirty**

Another influential reality-based entertainment movie on the topic of terrorism post 9/11 is the “historical drama” *Zero Dark Thirty*, released in theaters in 2012, which follows CIA agents in the U.S. and in the Middle East/Afghanistan and Pakistan, through their hunt and eventual killing of former al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden by U.S. Navy Seals.\(^{138}\) The film received wide critical acclaim,\(^{139}\) was an expected box office success, having grossed over $138 million worldwide,\(^{140}\) and was nominated for five Oscars for the 85th Academy Awards – though it only won Best Sound Editing, in a tie. However,

\(^{137}\) Lynn Smith, “Showtimes ‘Sleeper Cell’ brings terrorism home,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 Jul. 2005. [http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2005/07/31/showtimes_sleeper_cell_brings_terrorism_home/?page=f ull](http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2005/07/31/showtimes_sleeper_cell_brings_terrorism_home/?page=full) The article states “The several practicing Muslims who work on or consult on ‘Sleeper Cell’ said they are proud and grateful to contribute to the first television show to present a Muslim as a hero and to draw detailed distinctions between Muslim extremists and mainstream Islam. […]One episode dramatizes Americans’ ignorance, when Darwyn confronts punks who attack a turbaned Sikh and informs them that Sikhs are not Muslims. Another portrays a Yemeni Islamic scholar debating Al Qaeda sympathizers to show them how they have distorted the teachings of the Koran.” Indeed, the show does not aim to pretend that there aren’t radical Islamist terrorists but aims to portray them “as they really are – complete with their rabid anti-Semitism, honor killings, use of Quranic quotations to promote and endorse heinous acts of violence” and radically different from mainstream moderate Muslims. See also Alessandra Stanley, “Sleeper Cell, Inside Terrorism’s Tangled Web,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2006. [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/08/arts/television/08slee.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/08/arts/television/08slee.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

\(^{138}\) *Zero Dark Thirty*, billed as “the story of history’s greatest manhunt for the world’s most dangerous man” is an American historical drama and thriller which dramatizes the U.S. operation that found and killed Osama bin Laden. It was directed by Kathryn Bigelow, written by Mark Boal, and starred Jessica Chastain, Jason Clarke, and Joel Edgerton. The movie was in production before Osama bin Laden was found and killed by American soldiers on May 2, 2011. See Alyssa Rosenberg, “‘Zero Dark Thirty’ and the Emptiness of the War On Terror,” ThinkProgress.org, 9 Jan. 2013. [http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2013/01/09/1419141/zero-dark-thirty-4/](http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2013/01/09/1419141/zero-dark-thirty-4/)

\(^{139}\) The movie currently holds a 93% “fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes by critics, based on 245 reviews and an average rating of 8.6/10, while 81% of the audience liked it, based on 127, 992 user ratings. See “Zero Dark Thirty,” Rotten Tomatoes, on 15 Apr. 2013. [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/zero_dark_thirty/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/zero_dark_thirty/)

the movie has been controversial, especially regarding its portrayal of the use of torture in the context of the “war on terror.”\textsuperscript{141} The involvement of the CIA and its influence on the plot has also been evoked. Another aspect of the movie which has been discussed is the line between fact and fiction, regarding the events depicted and the characters. In relation to Islam, “there are few Muslims and/or Arabs in the film to begin with. Those that do appear – in a film about the hunt for Osama bin Laden – were always going to be, predominantly, terror suspects, detainees or insurgents."\textsuperscript{142} However, one scene is of particular interest: an American C.I.A. agent is seen practicing the Islamic prayer in his office. He is the C.I.A.’s counterterrorism chief, a cameo character only referred to as “the Wolf.” An article mentions that “despite being a key figure in the fight against Islamist militants, when we meet him in his office he is practicing Muslim prayer.”\textsuperscript{143} The article does not interpret the significance of his conversion, but mentions that this intriguing character would actually be based on the real-life director of the C.I.A.’s Counterterrorism Center (CTC), and the leader of the hunt for bin Laden, who, according

\textsuperscript{141} Many articles have considered this question. One problem evoked is that, although it is not presented as a documentary, the movie is very closely based on real people and event. See for example Alex Gibney, “Zero Dark Thirty’s Wrong and Dangerous Conclusion,” \textit{Huffington Post}, 21 Dec. 2012. \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alex-gibney/zero-dark-thirty-torture_b_2345589.html} He writes that others have accused the studio of misrepresenting the facts and “perpetuating the myth that torture is effective.” He thinks that “the film conveys the unmistakable conclusion that torture led to the death of bin Laden. That’s wrong and dangerously so, precisely because the film is so well made.” For him, it is significant “because when we go to war, our politicians will be guided by our popular will. And if we believe that torture ‘got’ bin Laden, then we will be more prone to accept the view that a good ‘end’ can justify brutal ‘means.’” He goes on to discuss the use of torture by the CIA in the movie and in real life. See also Glenn Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty, the CIA and film critics have a very bad evening,” guardian.co.uk, 25 Feb.2013. \url{http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/25/zero-dark-thirty-cia-oscars} The article states: “The stigma attached to the pro-torture CIA propaganda vehicle, beloved by film critics, results in Oscar humiliation.”


to an article in the *Washington Post*, really has converted to Islam.\(^\text{144}\) This scene shows an ambiguous and unusual character that may be problematic for the audience of a movie in which the “good guys” are fighting the “bad guys.” While his function and his “Americanness” place him on the side of the “good guys,” his conversion to Islam, his religion and his beliefs, seem to associate him with the “bad guys” he is fighting against. However, as one journalist remarked,

\[\text{[There isn’t] the typical, pseudo-intellectual speechifying by CIA agents (or, for that matter, Muslim detainees) about the role or importance of ‘jihad’, this or that verse of the Quran or some obscure and irrelevant theological issue, as is so often found in other mainstream US movies and dramas about the war on terror [e.g. “Homeland”]. In fact, Islam doesn’t really get much of a look-in during the movie – which is a bit of a relief.}\(^\text{145}\)

This, and the fact that his conversion does not play a part in the plot may explain why this scene has not been commented on by journalists and scholars. However, this scene in the movie is not insignificant in that it makes his character slightly more visible in the media: the white American convert to Islam who works for the government, but who – unlike in “Homeland – is not necessarily associated with the “bad guys.” The article in the *Washington Post* reports that the real-life CIA agent’s colleagues described him as a man full of contradictions, including his fighting against al Qaeda and his conversion to Islam. This topic points out the idea of fighting al Qaeda and being a Muslim convert as contradictory, but this reasoning is based on the wrong idea that Muslims should or

\(^{144}\) Greg Miller, “At CIA, a convert to Islam leads the terrorism hunt,” *The Washington Post*, 24 Mar. 2012. [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-24/world/35447818_1_cia-officials-robert-grenier-etc](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-24/world/35447818_1_cia-officials-robert-grenier-etc) “He presides over a campaign that has killed thousands of Islamist militants and angered millions of Muslims, but he is himself a convert to Islam.” “Since becoming chief, Roger has worked for two presidents, four CIA directors and four directors of national intelligence. In the top echelons of national security, only Robert S. Mueller III, who became FBI director shortly before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, has been in place longer.” “He also married a Muslim woman he met abroad, prompting his conversion to Islam. Colleagues said he doesn’t shy away from mentioning his religion but is not demonstrably observant. There is no prayer rug in his office, officials said, although he is known to clutch a strand of prayer beads.”

\(^{145}\) Mehdi Hasan, see above.

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would associate with al Qaeda; however, Muslims would actually reject terrorism and violence… and many have – those who have fought in the army, collaborated with and within the government, etc. it further points to the misperception that converts join the wrong side, when in fact, they join the faith, but may not join the people or the radical ideology that most Muslims also reject.

The popularity, ratings and revenue of “Homeland” and Zero Dark Thirty show that, over a decade after 9/11, the “war of terror” has remained a significant and a profitable subject for the entertainment media, with a potential for drama which fascinate and grabs the attention of the American audience, not only drawing on existing anxieties but also reinforcing them – thereby exploiting the stereotypes and reinforcing them.

All-American Muslim – the “boring” reality?

“All-American Muslim” was an American reality television program, or “docuseries,” which showed a very different image of American Muslims. “All-American Muslim” followed the daily lives of five Lebanese-American Muslim families living in Dearborn, Michigan, which has the largest Arab (including Christian Arabs) and Muslim community in the United States. The show was aired on TLC between November 13 and December 18, 2011, for one season of 8 episodes of about 42 minutes. TLC did not renew the show for a second season, citing low ratings. Indeed, while the first episode

146 “‘All-American Muslim’ is a powerful new eight-part series that delves deep inside the rarely-seen world of Muslim-Americans to uncover unique insight into this little known community. Following five Muslim American families in Dearborn, Michigan, each episode offers an intimate look at their customs and celebrations, as well as the misconceptions, conflicts and differences they face outside – and within – their own community.” See “All American Muslim S01E01 How to Marry a Muslim,” uploaded by TheAllAmericanMuslim on 5 Jan. 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gSAeACNSe&list=PLA3E0C9C7281DB017&index=1 On YouTube, on 16 April 2013, episodes had from about 60,000 views and up to 214,000 for one of the episodes.
drew 1.7 million viewers, the 8th and last episode only drew less than half – 900,000 viewers. However, the show was also the subject of criticism and controversy over its representation of Muslims, as some claimed the show was spreading Muslim-friendly or pro-Muslim propaganda, while others denounced that criticism as Islamophobic. It was reported that “the series drew the ire of the Florida Family Association who dubbed All-American ‘propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda’s clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values,’ and urged advertisers to boycott the show.”

As a result, Lowe’s home improvement retail giant pulled its ads from the show.

However, the show was considered to be a good show representing real Muslim Americans families without being extreme and sensationalist. According to James Poniewozik, TV critic for Time Magazine Entertainment, “All-American Muslim” was a


148 Ibid. The New York Times also reported the issue, writing that the FFA’s opposition comes essentially from one man, born again Christian David Caton, “the founder and sole employee of a fundamentalist group called the FFA.” He is “the person who has maligned the television show ‘All-American Muslim’ […] as a front for an Islamic takeover of America and pressured advertisers to pull their commercials.” He is called “a person who effectively tapped into a groundswell of anti-Muslim bigotry.” “On his association’s Web site he had accused ‘All-American Muslim’ of hiding ‘the Islamic agenda’s clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values.’ In an interview this week on CNN, he reiterated the thesis.” The author points out that this reaction against the show is part of the larger network of anti-Muslim propaganda is the U.S.: “Mr. Caton’s new obsession also drew upon the heated comments of such prominent anti-Muslim activists as Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer. And it coincided with the national controversies about the “ground zero mosque” – in fact, an Islamic cultural center several blocks from ground zero – and the hearings led by Representative Peter T. King, a New York Republican, on alleged subversion by American Muslims.” See Samuel G. Freedman, “Waging a One-Man War on American Muslims,” New York Times, 16 Dec.2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/17/us/on-religion-a-one-man-war-on-american-muslims.html?_r=0

149 Ibid. In reaction, Christian and Muslim groups were joined by celebrities including Mia Farrow, Kal Penn and Russell Simmons who expressed their support for the series, and call for a boycott of Lowe’s.
“good show,” “one that makes you see something familiar in a new way.”150 After the show’s premiere, he wrote:

A lot of the material is fascinating […] the role of women in the often-conservative community, the question of intermarriage, the religious differences between and within families. But maybe the most striking thing about the show is how ordinary it is: give or take a hijab and some rules about alcohol, these were the same Upper Midwest people I’d grown up around the first two decades of my life […] To me, this is the significance of All-American Muslim: that it shows us mundane life among people whom TV and movies have generally shown only in the most exotic (and often threatening) terms. This is a reality show […] but it doesn’t play up the shock value of its subject.

Precisely because the reality TV show was not the caricature of American Muslims it could have been, Poniewozik anticipated that the ratings would be lower.151 And indeed, his guess was proven right, and just after it was announced that the show would not be renewed for a second season, he wrote the article “Was All-American Muslim Too Controversial, Too Boring, or Too Good to Survive?”152 According to him, the show “presented middle-American Muslims positively without paying attention to Islamic fundamentalism.” Interestingly, the realistic portrayal of Muslims seems to be what led to the dismissal of the show. On the one hand, the series was not entertaining enough for viewers used to the sensationalist aspect of reality shows, which in part, can explain the low ratings.153 This has proved true especially by comparison with “Shahs of Sunset,”

151 Ibid.
153 According to Poniewozik, “All-American Muslim was a good program, not just for depicting a rarely-seen segment of Muslim Americans (ordinary Midwesterners working jobs, getting married and playing football in the Detroit area) but because it was a rare slice-of-life reality show, produced without a lot of melodrama or characters cast for outrageousness. Which, frankly, is probably a big part of the reason the
which follows a group of Persian American friends in Los Angeles. On the other hand, the realistic side of the show posed a problem for its opponents in that they accused the show of portraying too good of an image of Muslims. Thirdly, the show could, in fact, appear as too much of a compromise between the practice of Islam and the American way of life. Somehow, the show was not a representation of Muslim Americans which the general American TV viewers wanted to watch: representing “normal” people who were not sensationalist enough to be in a reality show, not radical enough about Islam for those who see Islam in America as a threat, and too Americanized for more conservative Muslims.

Therefore, it seems that Muslims in America have been perceived, not as individuals and as Americans with a different religion, but as a group which is expected to share

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show’s ratings didn’t hold up. Reality audiences stay tuned to domestic reality shows if they involve extreme family situations (19 Kids and Counting), outsized conflict (Mob Wives) or conspicuous consumption (The Real Housewives of Anywhere). All-American Muslim was a show whose point was the quotidian lives of the people in it, and after a while, people lost interest.”

Poniewozik suggested that “it may be that if viewers are going to watch a reality show about the lifestyle of a Middle Eastern group […] America, it will be something more like Shahs of Sunset, a Bravo show […] about upscale, materialistic Los Angelenos in the city’s Persian community. […] It’s flashy voyeurism like a lot of reality shows on TV. And if it succeeds where All-American Muslim fails, you could see that as a sad commentary – or, rather, as a sign that TV viewers want the same thing from a show about Middle Easterners as from a show about Italian American twentysomethings or rich women in New York.” (He also mentions that Shahs of Sunset follows both Persian American Jews and Muslims, but doesn’t really mention religion). Mike Hale’s review in *The New York Times* wrote that the show’s characters “are a more diverting bunch than the high school football coaches and community activists of the well-meaning, admirable but prosaic All-American Muslim on TLC,” but the “one really unfortunate thing about Shahs of Sunset is the way it exploits, and will in turn amplify, a previously localized phenomenon: the longstanding stereotyping of Los Angeles’s Iranian-Americans as vulgar, materialistic show-offs who don’t fit in among the city’s supposedly more cultured elites.” Mike Hale, “The Children of Old Tehran Go Hollywood,” *The New York Times*, 9 Mar. 2012.


In April 2013, the show was renewed for a third season.

Ibid. The author disagrees with the opponents’ attitude of “boycotting a show because it positively portrays actual decent people, without tarring them by association with murderers who share their religion. To say that there is one religious group in America that it is actually dangerous to represent with law-abiding citizens, lest people make the mistake of liking them, is absurd.” He adds “It was not, however, the only reason the show was criticized – some conservative Muslims didn’t like the show because of the nontraditional, assimilated lifestyles of some characters.”
common views, and has been defined by stereotypes, and in terms of “good Muslims,” “bad Muslims” with different meanings whether conceptualized by non-Muslim Americans or by religiously conservative Muslims. Especially since 9/11, Islam has not been perceived merely as a person’s religion and as only one part of a person’s identity, but as the primary identifier – the person is “a Muslim,” which has with social and political implications.

When it comes down to it, the national debate over Islam hasn’t really been over “Are all Muslims terrorists?” or “Is Islamic extremism a legitimate danger?” – both of them straw-man arguments. It’s really about the implication – through the Sharia-law paranoia, through the idea that “peaceful Muslims” should oppose the Ground Zero project—that Islam is inherently incompatible with American and Western values, necessarily and essentially alienating. To someone who believes that, I guess, simply making a TV series that shows Muslims going about ordinary Midwestern lives will be offensive. But to me, that kind of reaction is all the more argument for making this show.156

In fact, most American Muslims worry about their daily lives and the practice of Islam in their daily lives rather than on the broader, national and international scope. As the show, and experience with real Muslims reveal, the daily life preoccupations of Muslims revolve around their work, their children’s education, their family and friends, social events that they attend, etc. and which are the same for all Americans, and in fact most people worldwide. They are the less visible majority which, when made visible, is deemed boring and at the same time unrealistic, because too peaceful when compared with entertainment movies and shows about Islamic terrorists and insurgents. Their jihad is their personal life, their own daily struggles, related with work, family, and health. This can also explain why the successful Canadian sitcom “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” which premiered in early 2007 to extensive international attention and strong ratings, has

156 Ibid. Poniewozik.
not been adapted in the U.S.\textsuperscript{157} Hillary Rodham Clinton expressed support of the series’ attempt to fight prejudice and misunderstandings about Muslims with comedy.\textsuperscript{158}

**Personal experience with local community**

In the course of this research project, we have met and talked to different members of about twenty families in the Lehigh Valley, in the mosque (Muslim Association of the Lehigh Valley (MALV) Whitehall, PA), and in their homes. In most of these families, the 50-70 year-old parents are immigrants and their children were born in the U.S. These families come from a variety of countries including Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan. More generally, the mosque is additionally attended by Muslims from Pakistan, Indonesia, Cambodia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and other Muslim countries. At the mosque, we met at least seven converts. Two of them are in their late thirties, converted independently, met, got married and now have five children. Two others, a young man, and a young woman, are in their late twenties converted respectively after meeting their Muslim spouse. Each couple now has two children. Another three are women in their late fifties who converted after meeting and marrying their Muslim husbands. After meeting these families, and watching the show “All-American Muslim,” we share the views that the show provided a rather unbiased insight into the daily lives and issued of a sample of American Muslims in the U.S., with their own specificities.

\textsuperscript{157}“Little Mosque on the Prairie,” also known as “Little Mosque” was created by Zarqa Nawaz, and originally run on CBC Television between January 9, 2007 until April 2, 2012, or 6 seasons, for 90 episodes of 22 minutes. This is a sitcom about Muslims and Christians trying to live in harmony in the fictional town of Mercy in Saskatchewan, Canada, and opens with the arrival in town of a Canadian-born Toronto lawyer who decided to become an imam in the small Prairie town. The sitcom is not popular in the U.S. but gives a much more realistic and positive representation of Muslims’ daily lives in North America.

including the variety of personal differences and preferences such as the degree of practicing Islam, wearing the hijab or not, working, being married, single or divorced.

The show reflected some of the ways in which American Muslims balance their faith and practice with their American way of life. The wedding ceremony is a significant example of how Islamic and American traditions merge, not only in terms of religion but in terms of culture. Non-Muslims who are exposed to Arab Muslims often associate cultural customs with religion, however, Arabic music, belly-dancing, hooka, Middle Eastern food etc. are components of the culture of some Muslims which are also part of the culture of Christian Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians and others. In the same way, the largest number and concentration of Muslims in the world is in Indonesia, whose culture is very different from Arab and Middle-Eastern culture.

When converts embrace the faith, because of the influence of the community, they may embrace the cultural experience as well. The association of Islam with Middle Eastern culture and the Middle Eastern face in part explains why it is so difficult for some Americans to consider that Muslims can be American, and share similar values, because first and foremost they see the cultural differences, and the differences in the practice of the religion, rather than the similarities in the ideology of Islam and Christianity.

The cultural impact of 9/11 and the post 9/11 rise of conversion to Islam – the real converts to Islam – those who made the news

Very soon after 9/11, as the American news media began to report on the growth of Islam, and also began to report on the phenomenon of conversion, which accounts, in
part, for the overall growth of Islam. In fact, Westerners have embraced Islam since the 19th century. We will consider the cases of a few individuals who converted to Islam in the 19th century, and then focus on the post 9/11 context to see how the social, political, and cultural context in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks has influenced some Americans to research Islam and led them to embrace it.\textsuperscript{159}

With the hindsight of a decade, the media acknowledged the influence of 9/11 on the subsequent phenomenon of conversion. According to an article published by the Huffington Post, “Though exact numbers are difficult to tally, observers estimate that as many as 20,000 Americans convert to Islam annually.”\textsuperscript{160} According to CNN news, Host Veronica De La Cruz says “a quarter of the estimated 6 million Muslims in the U.S. are converts.”\textsuperscript{161} Several online articles considering conversion to Islam after 9/11 have referred to the Middle East Media Research Institute which reported that, after September 11, in America alone, 34,000 people converted to Islam.\textsuperscript{162} According to an article posted on the website of the U.S. department of Defense, “there are 5 million to 7 million Muslims in the United States. They make up between 10,000 and 20,000 members of the American military.”\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{159} As we found through the videos made by converts, most of them first heard about Islam because of 9/11; in fact, most of them are in their twenties and thirties, and therefore, pre 9/11 terrorism and representation of Arabs had little influence on their views of Islam, while 9/11 marked a turning point.
\textsuperscript{161} 1.5 Million Americans converted to ISLAM in USA, YouTube, CNN News. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTRR7z9Vc5I
\textsuperscript{162} “Terror in America, Muslim American Leaders: A Wave of Conversion to Islam in the U.S. Following September 11,” MERIM Special Dispatch, November 16, 2001.
Converts in the military

In fact, military or ex-military members constitute one group of post 9/11 converts who have been slightly more prominent in the mainstream media. Indeed, their conversion appears as a surprising and fascinating topic – why would an American soldier who fought for the U.S., and has represented the U.S. against its enemy, convert to Islam after 9/11? Looking at a few cases will allow us to understand some reasons behind this phenomenon. In fact, quite often, soldiers who were stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq met Muslims, and became acquainted with their religion and culture. Their first-hand experience in a Muslim country contributed to their discovery of Islam, and a few soldiers met Muslim women, which contributed to their embracing the faith.

An article of 2011 reports on the conversion of a sergeant in the U.S. army and of his wife: “when Spc. Chris Tarantino deployed to Iraq in 2006, his wife began to ask questions about life and death that led her to convert to Islam.”\textsuperscript{164} The article reports that “She was spending time with her older sister, who had converted to Islam after marrying a Palestinian, and she sought her sister’s guidance. Her sister’s answers about Islam made sense to Cristina and gave her some serenity, she said.” Indeed, the idea that Islam “made sense” to them is something frequently mentioned by converts who explain their conversion. Her husband said he was shocked when he heard her say “I’ve accepted Islam,” but by “the second time he deployed to Iraq, the blond, blue-eyed soldier had also become a Muslim. He decided not to hide it.” The met on a base and lived in Germany, and the article mentioned that his situation is unusual: “He’s the only U.S. soldier at his

German mosque, one of the few Muslims in the Army and one of even fewer Muslim soldiers who are not from a traditionally Muslim family or African-American.” It is specified that “the couple’s conversion is personal, not political” but the soldier’s views on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and war in general, have changed, because “As Muslims, we believe that if you kill one innocent person, it’s as if you’ve killed the entire world. But if you save one person, you save the entire world […] I want to be on the side that’s helping.” The article also mentions that “The Tarantinos say converting to Islam has given them new purpose, meaning and guidance in their lives. The adults have given up music and alcohol. The children have given up the tooth fairy and Santa.”

There are numerous articles on the conversion of American soldiers, some not well referenced. Another official case story reported by reputable mainstream media is that of Terry Holdbrooks, who, an article by The Guardian reports, converted to Islam six months into his stint as a guard at Guantanamo.165 This article relates how his experience as a guard there as led to his conversion. The article reveals the case of a young man struggling with the demons of his past and present, and for whom Islam represented hope, potential freedom, structure and order. The article contrasts images of sin and deprivation, associated with his past and the Guantanamo Bay detention camp,166 with...

165 Sarfraz Manzoor, “I questioned things at Guantánamo from day one,” The Guardian, 6 Oct. 2009. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/07/guantanamo-bay-islam The article states that “Terry Holdbrooks arrived at Guantánamo detention camp in the summer of 2003 as a godless 19-year-old with a love of drinking, hard rock music and tattoos. By the time he left Cuba the following year, he had alienated his army colleagues, won the respect of the detainees and, most astonishingly, converted to Islam in a midnight ceremony in the presence of one of the detainees, who had become his mentor[…] While the guards indulged in alcohol, porn and sports, Holdbrooks says he needed to learn how the detainees could endure abuse and still smile, while he was utterly miserable.”
166 It is a U. S. military detention and interrogation camp, located within Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba. In January 2002, the Bush Administration established the facility to hold detainees who were suspected and accused of being associated with terrorism or with opponents in the War on Terror. Insiders
the possibility of personal improvement represented by Islam. He knew nothing about Islam prior to Guantanamo; it was a complete culture shock. He wanted to learn as much he could and spent hours every day talking to different detainees about anything and everything, including religion, and reading and chatting online. He had the feeling that “the detainees had a lot of freedom in their confinement: I had all the freedoms they didn’t have, but I was a slave to what the army wanted me to do.” Their apparent freedom of thought and independence made a strong impression on him, especially when he had seen detainees being tortured and humiliated. The author of the article concluded

Why had this hard-living Arizona boy embraced Islam? […] It is only when, towards the end, Holdbrooks reveals that his favourite words are “structure,” “order” and “discipline” that the pieces fall into place. Holdbrooks’s life had been a search for order: the regimentation of army life had appeared to offer structure, and when it let him down, he turned to religion. Holdbrooks has more in common with his former colleagues than he realises: their allegiance to the army is matched by his adherence to faith. “Islam is a very disciplined, regimented faith and it requires a great deal of effort and conviction,” he says. “I’ve had an unbelievable fascination with structure and order for as long as I can remember: structure, order and discipline – I just love them.”

The idea of structure, order and discipline is also a characteristic of Islam which has been praised by many converts. The article also mentioned that when he met Holdbrooks, he had chosen the name Mustafa Abdullah, was wearing a black Muslim cap, a thick beard and long-sleeved traditional robes. Many converts to Islam have taken on a Muslim name and have adopted at least part of the Muslim dress code, such as the hijab for women and a Muslim cap and beard for men.

reported acts of humiliation and torture against the detainees, and European countries, the Organization of American States, and non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have protested the legal status and physical condition of detainees at Guantanamo.
Another significant convert is James (Yusuf) Yee. Although he converted before 9/11, he became an important Muslim, former U.S. military Captain and public speaker against Guantanamo Bay, where he had worked as a Chaplain for the U.S. Army to Muslim detainees, and against the post 9/11 infringement of civil rights by the U.S. government in terms of arrest and detention, especially as he had been arrested and detained upon unfounded accusations of espionage.

After 9/11, the military was also reported by insiders to be hostile to Muslim American soldiers. Other cases made the news, such as that of Army Spc. Zachari Klawonn, an American Muslim, and a convert, pilot Erich Scherfen, who served in the U.S. military for 13 years, as an Army infantryman in the first Gulf War and then as a helicopter pilot in the National Guard.

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168 Laura Parker, “The ordeal of Chaplain Yee,” USA TODAY, 16 May 2004. [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-05-16-yee-cover_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-05-16-yee-cover_x.htm) See also “James Yee - In his own words,” *YouTube*, uploaded by timjbd on 9 Oct. 2007. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erTiqebHOY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erTiqebHOY) He talks about the use of Islam against the prisoners, as they were forced to sit on the floor on painted satanic circles and to prostrate by interrogators telling them Satan was their God, not Allah. He also recounts his arrest by Customs Officials who found “suspicious documents,” accused him of espionage and jailed him in a maximum security prison for citizens. He describes how his rights as a citizen and human being were not respected, and as he was even threatened of death penalty.


Indeed, it has been reported by many sources that American Muslims and American converts were also subject to harassment and detention upon being suspected of terrorist activities, as part of what became known as “homegrown terrorism.”

**Jihadist Colleen LaRose – beware of the white “convert”? embracing terrorism**

Some Americans were influenced by the negative representations and interpretations of Islam as put forward by radical and terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. A particular case which has drawn a lot of media attention was that of the woman whose online pseudonym was “Jihad Jane,” Colleen Fatima LaRose, 45 years old and recent convert to Islam, arrested in 2009. An article published by Reuters in 2012 brings light to Colleen LaRose’s personal story and conversion to Islam. What was particularly attention-grabbing about her case was that the blond-haired, blue/green-eyed woman was at the opposite of the stereotypical profile of the terrorist, male, Arab/Middle-Eastern with ties to the Middle East. Her case not only reminded the public that the Islamist threat was still potentially there, but also that white American converts to Islam could associate with terrorist activities. This case and that of other white converts were also used by some

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CNN’s Jeanne Meserve reports, added 21 Aug. 2008, CNN.com

171 “LaRose, 46, lived in Montgomery County, Pa., before moving to Europe, authorities said. She called herself JihadJane in a YouTube video in which she said she was ‘desperate to do something somehow to help’ ease the suffering of Muslims, the indictment said. According to the 11-page document, she agreed to obtain residency in a European country and marry one of the terrorists to enable him to live there.’” Quoted from “Jihad Jane, Colleen LaRose, Recruited Terrorists And Plotted Murder, Prosecutors Say,” Huffington Post, First Posted 9 May 2010, updated 25 May 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/09/jihad-jane-collenlarose_n_492586.html See also Ed Pilkington, “‘Jihad Jane’ explains her strange journey from victim to radical Muslim,” The Guardian, 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/08/jihad-jane-journey-victim-radical She was arrested in October 2009 for plotting to kill Lars Vilks, the Swedish cartoonist who had blasphemed Prophet Muhammad by sketching caricatures of the prophet including one with the body of a dog.

groups to support the idea that Islam /radical Islam is what influences people to join terrorist groups, and that converts could be regarded with suspicion.\textsuperscript{173} Richard P. Quinn, the FBI’s assistant special agent in charge for counter-terrorism in Philadelphia, was reported to have said that “the case exemplifies al-Qaeda’s new approach to terrorism. He says the Jihad Jane conspiracy – from recruiting to planning – ‘represents the many new faces of the terrorist threat’.”

The article adds that “some civil rights advocates say the U.S. government has exaggerated the danger posed by aspiring terrorists – in this case and scores of others.” Furthermore, the Reuters article mentions, “Perhaps most intriguing is the story of LaRose, the aspiring assassin whose devotion and naiveté left her susceptible to recruitment but prone to failure.” Indeed, “in the only interview she has given, LaRose says she became devoted to the Muslim men she met online and blindly followed their instructions because they seemed righteous. ‘I just loved my brothers so much, when they would tell me stuff, I would listen to them, no matter what,’ she says. ‘And I also was ... lost.’ This article reveals her as “a compact woman with a seventh-grade education,” an “underdog” who had had a difficult childhood, had lived in a trailer and was raped by her father for years: “During her darkest days, LaRose had endured incest, rape and prostitution. She surrendered her life to drinking and drugs, from crack to crystal meth. Now, if she accepted the order to kill, she would surrender her life to a higher power: Allah.” The way she came to convert to Islam reflects that it was due to her curiosity

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid. “[W]hen U.S. authorities revealed the plot, they repeatedly described the Jihad Jane case as one that should forever alter the public’s view of terrorism. At the time, one official said the conspiracy ‘underscores the evolving nature of the threat we face.’ A second said the case ‘demonstrates yet another very real danger lurking on the Internet’ and ‘shatters any lingering thought that we can spot a terrorist based on appearance.’”
about and attraction to Muslim men, and her need of somewhere to belong, which is one thing provided by religion and religious community.174

Most Muslims would not consider her a true Muslim; the article reveals that “LaRose remained infatuated with Muslim men and Islam throughout the first half of 2008. But shortly after she converted, she stopped taking her new religion seriously. Pledges to stop drinking fell away. She never visited a mosque. She never learned how to properly pray. Her waning interest fit an often flighty personality.”175 Colleen LaRose had been a victim of abuse, and could see herself as a martyr. While her name had remained associated with the label “blond-hair, white American jihadist convert to Islam,” her story is more of that of a lost woman who got involved with radical people who saw how she could help them carry out their goals.

As suggested in the article which compares her to a movie heroin, seeing herself and redefining her identity as “Jihad Jane” gave her a sense of empowerment, made her part of something, presented her with a mission.176 She could see herself as the flip image of

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174 The article by Reuters explains that, while on vacation in Amsterdam with her longtime boyfriend, after an argument with him she met another man in a bar, a handsome Middle Eastern, Muslim man with whom she had a one night stand. She became curious about Islam and, back in the U.S., spent time on Muslim websites and signed up for a Muslim dating website to meet men. The article states: “Just months after her one-night stand in Amsterdam, while chatting with a Saudi Arabian man, LaRose typed the Shahada and converted to Islam via instant messenger. Sitting before the Dell desktop computer, an unusual feeling washed over her. Happiness. ‘I was finally where I belonged,’ she recalls today. She took as her Muslim name Fatima, after one of the Prophet Mohammad’s daughters.”

175 The article describes that she was spending time on the phone with her sister, playing online games, flirted with men in chat rooms, became obsessed with fantasy warrior stories, in books and action movies. She “became riveted by violent YouTube videos of Israeli attacks on Palestinians and American attacks on Iraqis.” “The videos of dead and wounded children moved her most.[…]No one seemed to know or care about the plight of the Palestinians. It was so unfair.”

the heroin of the movie G.I. Jane.\textsuperscript{177} In fact she knew very little of Islam, and her finding Islam contrast with “journey” of most American and other converts worldwide who started reading and learning about the faith, its teaching and practices, and have embraced it and committed to it as what would guide them to being a better person.

While the case of non-radical American converts is not often discussed, other cases of radical jihadist converts have been reported, and have supported the government’s anti-terrorism policies and actions, who become the “visible minority” of “converts,” by contrast with the majority of those who join “peaceful” Islam. Most American “jihadists” or “jihadis” reported in the news have some connections with Middle Eastern or Muslim countries, thus, post 9/11 white American convert jihadists are rather marginal.\textsuperscript{178}

Other cases of “white American Jihadists” include Daniel Patrick Boyd, arrested in July 27, 2009.\textsuperscript{179} Another controversial case is that of John Walker Lindh.\textsuperscript{180} He converted when he was 16 and according to his father:

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\textit{Critical of the US justice department’s statement that “a woman from suburban America agreed to carry out murder overseas and to provide material support to terrorists, underscores the evolving nature of the threat we face,” she replies: “the LaRose business appears yet another instance of a sledgehammer being used to crack a nut.”}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{G.I. Jane} (1997), directed by Ridley Scott and starring Demi Moore. “This film had all the stock elements of the negative portrayal of Arabs in film, including heroic Americans and gun-toting Libyans who are duly dispatched in a desert setting.” As quoted in Peter Beaumont’s article “Homeland is brilliant drama. But does it present a crude image of Muslims?” \textit{The Observer}, mentioned previously.

\textsuperscript{178} “American Jihadis” picture gallery, \textit{The Christian Science Monitor}. \url{http://www.csmonitor.com/Photo-Galleries/Lists/American-Jihadis?nav=442230-csm_article-promoLink#447216}

\textsuperscript{179} Raised Episcopalian, Boyd converted to Islam in 1987, when he was 17, after his mother remarried an American Muslim from whom Daniel Boyd developed his interest in Islam. He took on the name “Saifullah,” meaning “sword of Allah.” “The government charged Daniel Boyd, a 39-year-old American who traveled to Afghanistan two decades ago to fight the Soviet-backed government, with recruiting six young men, including two of his sons, to take part in a conspiracy “to advance violent jihad, including supporting and participating in terrorist activities abroad and committing acts of murder, kidnapping or maiming persons abroad.” Quoted from Robert Mackey, “Americans Arrested for Plotting ‘Violent Jihad’ Abroad.” \textit{New York Times}, 28 Jul. 2009. \url{http://theledeblogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/americans-arrested-for-plotting-violent-jihad-abroad/}

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When he was 12 years old, he saw the film Malcolm X, and was moved by its depiction of the pilgrims in Mecca. He began to explore Islam and, four years later, decided to convert. What attracted John to Islam, I think, was the simplicity of its beliefs, and the authenticity of its source documents—the Qur’ān and Hadith. It appealed to his intellect as well as his heart. To me and to John’s mother, his conversion was a positive development and certainly not a source of worry. I once told him I felt he had always been a Muslim, and only needed to find Islam in order to discover this in himself. He remained the loving son and brother he had always been. There was never a breach of any kind between us. John had always been a good student, but his study habits improved after his conversion. He immersed himself in Islamic literature, and quickly came to the conclusion that he needed to learn Arabic in order to continue his studies.

As far as his involvement in terrorist activities are concerned, they are portrayed in a very different light:

Gunaratna is an expert consultant to the US government itself on terrorism matters. “Those who, like Mr Lindh, merely fought the Northern Alliance,” he wrote, “cannot be deemed terrorists. Their motivation was to serve and to protect suffering Muslims in Afghanistan, not to kill civilians.” John described his motivation in similar terms. “I felt,” he later explained to the court, “that I had an obligation to assist what I perceived to be an Islamic liberation movement against the warlords who were occupying several provinces in northern Afghanistan. I had learned from books, articles and individuals with first-hand experience of numerous atrocities committed by the Northern Alliance against civilians. I had heard reports of massacres, child rape, torture and castration.”

To the western world, and to me as John’s father after I learned where he had been, this was misplaced idealism. John’s decision to volunteer for the army of Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban was rash, and failed to take into account the Taliban’s mistreatment of its own citizens. But his assessment of the Northern Alliance warlords was neither exaggerated nor inaccurate. The brutal human rights violations committed by the Northern Alliance were thoroughly documented in the US department of state’s annual human rights reports throughout the 90s. They did indeed include massacres, rape (of both women and children), torture and castration. John’s impulse was to help. In doing so, he was responding not only to his

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180 Raised a Roman Catholic, he convert to Islam when he was 16, in California. Lindh went to Yemen in 1998 to study Arabic for 10 months, returned in 2000 and then went to Afghanistan to aid the fighters. He received training at a training camp associated with Al-Qaeda. See the long article by his father, Frank Lindh, “America’s ‘detainee 001’ – the persecution of John Walker Lindh,” The Observer, 9 Jul. 2011. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/10/john-walker-lindh-american-taliban-father
own conscience, but to a central tenet of the Islamic faith, which calls upon able-bodied young men to defend innocent Muslim civilians from attack, through military service if necessary. This is not “terrorism” at all, but precisely its opposite.

His father’s article describes the relationship between the U.S. and Middle Eastern countries before 9/11 and in particular with the Taliban, saying that the U.S.’s position took a dramatic shift, to declare them the enemy of the U.S., although their previous relationship had been ambiguous: “[in the US after 9/11] Thirty years of American policy abruptly changed and America swung to the opposite side. The Taliban became our enemy. “They have always been our enemy” is what people in America came to believe. He also reports that the media distorted his son’s beliefs and goals, that CNN portraying him as a “traitor” who had “fought against America,” and the magazine Newsweek published an issue with John’s photograph on the cover, under the caption “American Taliban.”

Nevertheless, Americans who had been in the military converted to Islam, and in fact, their experience in the military often confirmed to them their faith and the righteousness of their belief in Islam. Other soldiers reported to have converted include James Grant, a U.S. military officer married and father of 2 children, reported to have converted to Islam while in Afghanistan, after reading books on Islam for seven months at a coalition camp. Grant reportedly changed his name to Muhammad Asif.181 Although the mainstream print media did not publish much on this issue, the stories of American soldiers who converted to Islam who were interviewed can also be found on YouTube. AFP News reported the

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story of U.S. sergeant Sean Blackwell. The news cast reports that a few months after the American invasion of Iraq, he met Ehda in Baghdad and they got married 3 months later. Sean converted to Islam and they got married secretly. His superiors tried to get their marriage annulled and press charges. They went back to the US and have a daughter born in 2006. They are said to be the first known Iraqi American couple to have met and married in the context of the War on Terror. The report mentions that thousands of American GIs came back with brides from Vietnam, but adds that the number of Iraqi American couples is estimated to be no more than a few dozen.

The American converts whose stories we have seen so far show that those who have been interviewed by the mainstream media usually have an unusual story to tell, a struggle with the government or disapprobation within the military. Additionally, the other cases which were reported by the media were cases of American *jihadists*, whose conversion is associated with terrorism and fundamentalist Islam. Indeed, they are the cases which are “media-worthy”, because their conversion happened in a specific context or led to a potential threat. However, little attention has been given to the white American converts who are just “ordinary Americans”, but who constitute an important part of Muslim converts, as we will see. Few cases were considered by the media, but usually by foreign media sources, such as the Arabic channel Al Jazeera, and other Muslim or Arab sources, who have given more attention to the increase of the number of Americans embracing Islam. Some cases reported by Al Jazeera include that of an American woman

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who lost eight relatives on September 11. Elizabeth Towers is a former Jewish woman, now goes by Safiya al Qasabi, a first name suggested to her on a trip to Morocco, and the last name of her Egyptian husband she married after she converted. The news anchor also interviews Angela Collins, a female convert whose name is cited in several articles about American converts. She tells the host that she became familiar with Islam before 9/11 but it was after 9/11 and after reading the Quran that it became clear to her that the authenticity of Islam was not at all what the terrorist attacks were about. The host asks her about her name and why did not take on an Islamic name and she says that Islam is universal and her name is universal; she is proud of her name and her origins and wants people to know Islam can be in the West. She is now director of an Islamic school and wears a hijab. She is a former Christian. Angela was married with a Kuwaiti; they are asked if their conversion was influenced by their husbands. Both became a Muslim on their own. Both stress we have to understand Islam in a different context that that of those acts committed by radical human beings.

Religion as an emotional topic: the difficulty of being neutral?

We find that reports, stories or narratives of conversion are specific in that they revolve around the personal and emotional journey of the convert. Nevertheless, converts often convert for similar reasons. However, the way their stories are framed is influenced by the bias of the reporter, who is rarely able to remain entirely neutral. Even when they don’t directly seek to convince others that joining Islam is right, these reports usually come from or become part of the literature of Pro-Muslim websites, and usually are put

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183 “Family Member of 9/11 Victims Converts to Islam,” *YouTube* uploaded by faraz123 on 7 Jan. 2007. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anwn54d9fGc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anwn54d9fGc)
side by side and contrasted with the stories of the difficulties and harassment that Muslim soldiers faced in the military. The other common case is that of anti-Islamic media sources reporting stories of marginal converts who converted to radical Islam, or stories of converts having “joined the enemy,” being part of a nation-wide and even global conspiracy to bring about the Muslim agenda to the U.S. It has been very difficult for Muslims to be neutral, because the religion, the God and the principles in which they believe and trust have been misrepresented and attacked, by the radical Islamists whose acts of terrorism they reject, and by the subsequent association of their religion and themselves with “evil,” “terror,” “threat,” and other negative ideas which do not represent “their” Islam.

The post 9/11 context has made it difficult for Islam to just be one’s religion, as only a part of one’s identity. Muslim Americans have strived to defend Islam as being not what it had been portrayed by radical Islamists or by the anti-Islamic media, but as what they believe it to be, a religion of peace and tolerance, of good values, similar to Christian values, then the context has forced people not to remain neutral but to either reject it or embrace it. Another theme and difficulty in the post 9/11 context is the fact of seeing some as victims and others as evil-doers. On the one hand, the terrorists have been presented as the evil-doers, and the Americans who died on 9/11 as victims. From the terrorists’ perspectives, America and its leaders are doing evil things by controlling governments and countries, by their political and economic influence in the world etc. At the same time, Muslims in America has been feeling and presented as victims of prejudices, hate crimes, defamation etc. As long as a group appears as victims, another
bears the blame. Religion is a highly emotional issue which is not just a fad but which constitutes a part of an individual’s identity; religion influence who I am, what I believe is right and wrong, and my actions. Religion provides a sense of justice beyond that of men, beyond that of the government and the legal system. When one’s God, to who Muslims consider themselves the slaves of, and of no one else, is rejected, discredited, or misrepresented, one feels hurts to the foundation of his or her beliefs. While freedom of expression, and freedom of the press, which virtually allow anyone to say and print what they want, and defamation, and hate propaganda may impede on freedom of religion.

Chapter Three: Personal Stories and Experiences of White American converts to Islam

The use of the social media characteristic of the last decade has also influenced the perceptions and representations of Islam and of Muslims, in America and in the world. As we have seen, blogs, Facebook and other online social media have been used by individuals and groups who have been active and vocal against the “threat” and “spread” of Islam in America. Social media has also influenced potential converts and converts. Many converts have mentioned having done some research and found out something that made sense in the Quran and in other books about Islam. In the same way, watching videos on YouTube may and has had influence and viewers. A webpage claims that if

one searches YouTube for videos on converts to Islam, one will find 126,000 videos. When typing “Muslim convert” in the search box, YouTube brings “about 152,000 results,” “convert to Islam” brings up “about 261,000 results,” “American convert to Islam” “about 106,000 results. However, a few of these videos are duplicates uploaded by other users, and not all are reliable or accurate, or corresponds to one specific individual.

The significance of YouTube videos for converts: lifting the veil on their conversion

Converts to Islam have also used social media to share their conversion, their personal journey to Islam. This is a significant source of information as these videos, contrary to interviews, are not framed by the questions of journalists; there is a desire by these converts to “put themselves out there,” to share their personal stories and make them available for others, and in fact for the world, to see. Many say they were prompted to upload a video explaining why they converted by other converts and non-converts, curious to know why they converted, and also to contribute, through their personal stories, to the broader phenomenon of post 9/11 conversion of Americans to Islam. The significance of conversion narratives has been acknowledged before 9/11: an article of interest is Marcia Herman’s “Roads to Mecca: Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims.”

185 There videos concern worldwide converts not Islam, not only Americans. See www.usislam.org, by Dr. Adel Elsaie, at http://www.usislam.org/video/converts_to_islam.htm
186 YouTube, April 9th 2013.
As mentioned previously, 9/11 definitely sparked interest in America for information about Islam, the Quran and Muslim life. A month after the attacks, an article by Jacqueline Blais for USA Today reported that the Quran was a best-seller.\(^\text{188}\) She quoted a Cleveland bookstore manager: “It isn’t just the Koran that’s in demand. People are eager for any books that explain the Muslim world to a nation hungry for information.” She also reported that “Sales are up five times the normal amount for the $9.95 Penguin Classics paperback of the Koran,” according to Maureen Donnelly of Penguin. “The publisher printed 20,000 more copies since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. For the second straight week, Penguin’s English translation is on the USA TODAY Best-Selling Books list, ranked at 188. Islam: A Short History by Karen Armstrong [is ranked ] at 231.” According to her, Islam “is a mystery to many Americans.” She also quoted John L. Esposito, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University and author of 25 books on Islam, who remarked “We are kind of admitting most Americans, however high or low, have no idea what this religion is all about.”

Islam was also reported to be growing, and notably because of conversion. Proselytizing has been perceived as something negative, and Muslims are sometimes perceived negatively as wanting to convert non-Muslims; indeed, in “Letter to America,”\(^\text{189}\) Osama Bin Laden was saying he wanted to bring Islam to the U.S. Muslims


are sometimes perceived to be on a mission to convert others, of having an agenda to make Islam the dominant religion of the U.S., and of the world, as discussed in Chapter One. Therefore, conversion has been regarded with suspicion by Americans. Conversion has also been regarded with suspicion by Muslim immigrants who, after 9/11, could suspect converts going to mosques and attending Muslim events of being spies. Chapter Three will focus on the white American concerts to Islam, who represent a mix of “us” and “them”, and whose voice is not often heard in the media.

After 9/11, some media sources reported an increase of the rate of conversion to Islam in the U.S. How can we account for this phenomenon of conversion to Islam in the U.S., while Islam and Muslims were associated with terror and perceived as violent and anti-American? In fact, it has been acknowledged by the media and by converts that 9/11 brought Islam to the foreground, which encouraged Americans to want to find out about Islam in terms of ideology and practice, and read the Quran.\(^{190}\)

As far as the growth of conversion is concerned, it is difficult to assess how many individuals in America have converted. While a number of sources reported tens of thousands of converts per year,\(^ {191}\) it is difficult to obtain accurate data, and numbers are


usually provided by the leaders of mosques or Islamic centers. Generally, media sources have interviewed two or three American converts for each article and news report on the topic on post 9/11 conversion. As we have found, stories of converts have not been given that much mainstream media attention; however, they have been given greater media attention by either sources seeking to warn America of the growth of Islam, or by Muslim sources seeking to put forward the fact that many Americans were embracing Islam. In the post 9/11 context, not only has there been a desire by American Muslims to call attention to “normal,” peaceful, positive, educated, American Muslims and to white American converts to Islam, but there has also been a desire by white American converts to express themselves and their own views of Islam, beyond media bias. The desire is to show that being a (good) American and being a (good) Muslim is possible.

To understand American converts – who share similarities with other Western converts in Canada, Britain, and other Western European countries – we have researched different sources including books and newspaper articles, as well as videos of interviews and recorded public speeches. Indeed, in the digital age much material is available on video sharing websites, allowing us access to the views and stories of American converts who have become public speakers, and of those who have wished to make their stories public and share their experience, primarily through YouTube.

“American converts to Islam defy stereotypes” 10 Sep. 2010. This number was reported by many sources including NBC News.

192 See the News report by RT TV: “many Americans converting to Islam,” YouTube, uploaded by Guig Mohamed Lemin on 7 May 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fp5Gu5N51M Reporters talk of a “culture of Islamophobia” and the summary of the video reports that the American converts interviewed “say the mainstream media doesn’t help portray a good image of converts and only reports on the small number of extremist radicals.”
Islam in the media has been associated with specific ethnic groups and demographics: Arab, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Americans, but after 9/11, Islam seems to have attracted other groups: Whites and Latinos. As far as YouTube conversion stories are concerned, we will see that the phenomenon has spread mainly among young American women in their twenties whose families are generally Christian.

While the conversion of Americans from these groups may seem puzzling in the midst of negative media representation, it has been acknowledged that hearing about Islam may have encouraged Americans who were interested in Islam to think that Islam was right for them.

First we will consider what converting to Islam means, and why some converts have preferred the terms “reverts” and “reversion.” Then we will consider the profiles and stories of the first Western converts to Islam, and see what similarities they share with many post 9/11 converts. We will finally consider the conversion narratives of young American women on YouTube videos, and what they reveal about this group of converts and about their wish to share their stories.

“Converting” to Islam: what does it mean?

193 The terms Hispanics or Latinos have been used to refer to the same group. They are different from the “white” group in that they generally were immigrants to the U.S. more recently, come from a Catholic background, and have a stronger sense of community based on language and culture. This group has been identified as a specific group of post 9/11 converts and therefore we chose to preserve the distinction.
The shahadah is the Muslim declaration of faith, belief in the oneness of God and of acceptance of Muhammad as God’s prophet.¹⁹⁴ The word shahada is related to ideas of knowing, believing without suspicion, witnessing, testifying and acknowledging. In the last decade, converts to Islam have commonly used the expression “taking the shahadah” to refer to their official declaration of faith, which they consider the official moment of their conversion.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, converting to Islam is made official by reciting the declaration of faith out loud, in Arabic, honestly believing in its meaning. This is generally performed in front of other Muslim witnesses, and specific circumstances vary: many converts choose to do it at a mosque, with an Imam, a mosque’s Islamic leader and sometimes scholar, and in the presence of other Muslims, on a Friday prayer, and or during the holy month of Ramadan. Others may simply do it at home. In this sense, converting to Islam by reciting the shadadah can be considered easy by converts who might have expected a more ritualized process.¹⁹⁶ Many converts also choose to take on a Muslim name.¹⁹⁷

More broadly speaking, converting also means identifying as Muslim and accepting Islam as the one and only true religion, believing and accepting the Quran as sacred and as the words of God revealed to human beings through Prophet Muhammad, and obeying

¹⁹⁴ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلََّا اللَّهُ مُحمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (lā ʾilāha ʾillā l-Lāḥ, Muḥammadun rasūlu l-Lāḥ) (in Arabic, and tranliterated) “There is no god but God/Allah, Muhammad is the messenger/prophet of God.” (in English)
¹⁹⁵ The shahadah takes a symbolic meaning for converts who call “taking their shahadah” their official declaration of faith. The same statements of recognition of God/Allah as the one and unique God and of Muhammad as his prophet are also part of the Islamic call to prayer, called adhan, recited by the muezzin, the person appointed at a mosque and responsible for leading and reciting the call to prayer for every event of prayer and worship in the mosque, at the prescribed times of the day.
¹⁹⁶ It was evoked in an article about Colleen LaRose or “Jihad Jane” cited previously that she recited the shahadah while she was chatting with a Muslim man over the Internet and was surprised how easy it was. American converts who genuinely research and converted to Islam who we will consider later on said that they found the actual reciting of the shahadah easy, especially compared to the longer process of learning about Islam and reading the Quran.
¹⁹⁷ This will be considered further.
the principles of Islam as laid out in the Quran. Just as practicing Muslims born into a Muslim family, converts seek to obey the code of conduct of the Quran, and differentiate between what is right and wrong, or “halal” and “haram.” Additionally, some converts usually adopt cultural as well as religious features: most choose to learn Arabic, and may join a Muslim center to learn more about the faith and meeting people. Most also choose to adopt an Islamic dress code, associated with the concept of “modesty” based on their beliefs: some women may wear a headscarf called hijab, others may choose to wear a full head cover or niqaab, and, or a full body cover, abaya. This choice also depend on the national laws of the countries where Muslims live and one of the specificities of the practice of Islam in America, is the great freedom which allows men and women to choose the dress code they wish to follow.

Islam and the East – reflections on conversion and common motivations.

We are considering conversion not related to the influence of territorial conquest by Muslims (such as the Moors in Europe) but as the result of the spiritual journey of individuals coming across Islam and learning about it, and embracing, joining,

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198 Many Muslims and scholars believe they must perform a ritual cleansing with water, just as before praying, before touching a copy of the Quran. This belief and practice are based on tradition and a literal interpretation of surah 56:77–80: “Indeed, it is a noble Qur’an, In a Register well-protected; None touch it except the purified. [It is] a revelation from the Lord of the worlds.” [http://quran.com/56](http://quran.com/56)

199 Among them are not eating pork, not drinking alcohol, not having physical relationship before marriage. Muslims must obey the five pillars of Islam, which consist of the declaration of faith: the shahada; prayer (five times a day); the “zakat,” a charitable donation of one’s earnings to the poor, usually supposed to be 2.5% of one’s capital; fasting during the month of Ramadan; pilgrimage, or “hajj,” which Muslims are supposed to take at least once in their lives if possible, annually celebrated in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. See Islamicity.com [http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/pillars.shtml](http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/pillars.shtml)

200 In the course of our research, we found that many male converts have grown a beard, and an overwhelming majority of female converts wear a hijab. We came across one American convert who wore an abaya, and one who wore a niqab. Among the American female converts we will see later, some have come together through YouTube as the “International Hijabi Posse” to raise awareness and calling for respect and tolerance of Muslim women and their right to wear their hijab. See “I am a Muslim Woman” by uploaded by IntlHijabiPosse 3 Feb. 2012. (Rebecca, Nye, Heather, Jonnie, Amena) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9VF6jRsHtg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9VF6jRsHtg)
converting, or reverting, as all terms have been used. As it has been perceived by Westerners, Islam is not only a religion, but also a way of life. Islam has been practiced in many countries by people of different ethnicities and languages. For Westerners, Islam has been a source of curiosity and interest, not only from a spiritual perspective, but also from cultural and linguistic aspects. The early converts in the West who were reported to have converted to Islam were attracted to Islam as part of their attraction to the Orient. In America as well, Islam has not been seen only as a religion, but as part of Eastern cultures, and after 9/11, it has predominantly been associated with the visible Muslims – a group broadly defined as Arabs and, or, Middle Easterners. In the course of our research, we have come across the fact that the foreign, cultural aspect associated with the religion is not to be undermined. Indeed, the interest of many converts is not limited to the religious aspect and has been paralleled by interest in the Middle East, including clothing, music, art, film, and food.

Narratives of conversion: Anglo-American converts since the 19th century

Narratives of conversion of Westerners to Islam can be traced back to 19th century Europe, influence by travel and the trend of orientalism. According to an article by the BBC, the first British convert was “William Abdullah Quilliam, a solicitor and son of a Methodist preacher. In 1887, he became the first Christian to convert to Islam in Victorian England. Born William Henry Quilliam, he turned to the religion after a trip to Morocco, and adopted the name Abdullah.” 201 Quilliam owned an old Georgian, white-

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stoned building in old Liverpool which once housed England’s first registered mosque. The article reports that “Quilliam had been responsible for the spread of Islam in England in the Victorian era. He helped to convert about 600 people. They included the wealthy landowner, Lord Stanley of Alderley, in Cheshire, the first Muslim peer in the House of Lords. This also proved controversial.” Other early British converts were acknowledged, because of their social status. Hedley Churchward, also known as Al-Hajj Hedley Churchward and as Mahmoud Mobarek, was an English set designer and painter, born in the south of England within a respected and ancient English family, and notable for converting to Islam and for being the first known British Muslim to make the Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, in 1910. Marmaduke (Mohammed) Pickthall, 1875 - 1936, was a middle-class English writer, novelist, linguist, and the son of an Anglican parson. He traveled across many Eastern countries, studied and published articles and novels of the Orient, and supported the Ottoman Empire, then in conflict with Britain and France. The Orient and Islam came to him as a revelation, and he saw Islam as radical freedom, by contrast with Christianity and the Church. He wrote:

When I read The Arabian Nights I see the daily life of Damascus, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Cairo, and the other cities as I found it in the early nineties of last century. What struck me, even in its decay and poverty, was the joyousness of that life compared with anything that I had seen in abstinence from alcohol. One of the reasons he was attracted to Islam was that alcohol is forbidden for Muslims. He also had theological concerns about Trinitarian Christianity.”

202 “Hajj” may be added to the name of a person who did the pilgrimage. Churchward was exposed to people of multicultural origins as a child through his father’s friends (a commissar in the British Army at the time of the Crimean War) and throughout his school education. He came in contact with Islam on a trip to Spain, in Granada, in Al-Andalus or Moorish Iberia which had been governed by Muslims in medieval times. Amazed by the Moorish architecture of the Islamic period, by the Alhambra in Granada and the Córdoba Mosque, he progressively adopted the Arab culture and dress style and converted to Islam. Eric Rosenthal, From Drury Lane to Mecca; Being an account of the strange life and adventures of Hedley Churchward, also known as Mahmoud Mobarek Churchward, an English Convert to Islam, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1983 reprint of the 1931 edition. See also the website Salaam.co.uk, http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/june02_index.php?l=30
Europe. The people seemed quite independent of our cares of life, our anxious clutching after wealth, our fear of death.\textsuperscript{203}

He officially announced his conversion to Islam to the Muslim Literary Society in Notting Hill, in London after delivering a talk on ‘Islam and Progress’ in November 1917. He became an Islamic scholar and completed his translation of the Qur’an in 1930, \textit{The Meaning of the Glorious Koran}, An Explanatory Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, the first translation by a native speaker of English, and which remained one of the most popular translations.\textsuperscript{204} Other notable converts include Rowland George Allanson Allanson-Winn, 5th Baron Headley (19 January 1855 – 22 June 1935), also known as Shaikh Rahmatullah al-Farooq, an Irish peer and a prominent convert to Islam, who was also one of the leading members of the Woking Muslim Mission, as well as Sir (Abdullah) Archibald Hamilton, Deputy Inspector General Charles William Buchanan-Hamilton (Royal Navy) and his wife, Mr William Bashyr-Pickard, Colonel Donald S. Rockwell, Mr Hameedullah Bowman.\textsuperscript{205}

The contemporary phenomenon of increased conversion to Islam has been proportionally even more significant in the UK (and has also been significant in France and Canada), and, although this is not our focus, it is worth mentioning in that similarities exist regarding the journeys of conversion to Islam by white Westerners.

\textsuperscript{203} See Marmaduke Pickthall, a brief biography, British Muslim Heritage, \url{http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall_bio.htm}


\textsuperscript{205} Some converts from the Islamic Review, \url{http://www.wokingmuslim.org/pers/converts/index.htm}
As for the U.S., Alexander Russell Webb is considered by historians to be the earliest prominent white American convert to Islam. He was born in 1846 in a white, Protestant, middle-class family of printers and newspapermen in Hudson, New York. He converted to Islam in 1888, in fact, within a year or so of the first acknowledged British convert. He founded the “American Islamic Propaganda Movement.” In 1893 he was the only person representing Islam at the Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, and delivered lectures: “The spirit of Islam,” and “The Influence of Islam on Social Conditions.” As mentioned in Curtis’s chapter, he attended Presbyterian Church, but “became a religious rebel at a young age. He did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity and found listening to his preacher’s sermons far less spiritual that playing outdoors in God’s green earth.” In the early 1870s, he “formally abandoned his Christian faith and eschewed all forms of religious belief,” relying on reason and science for answers to his questions about the meaning of life. A few years later, he started working as a journalist, and like other religious seekers, he first explores spiritualism. He became attracted to theosophy (theosophists were devoted to studying the spiritual and inner wisdom of all world religions, but especially emphasized the sagacity of “Oriental”

206 According to some historians, during the American colonial period, while a certain number of African slaves brought to American were Muslims, some African slaves and freemen subsequently converted to Islam because of exposure to Islam through friends and marriage. This is significant in relation to the history of African American Muslims in the U.S. and to the movement known as “The Nation of Islam” (1930s -1970s). See Edward Curtis, Muslims in America. Many scholars estimate that 15-30% of Africans imported as slaves were Muslim. The majority of the remaining practiced indigenous forms of worship. Most were converted to Christianity, and most of them became Baptist although slaves from Louisiana became Catholic because of the French settlers in that area. Today 83% of African Americans are Christian, and only 1% identify as Muslim. See “The Black Church,” according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, blackdemographics.com, http://blackdemographics.com/culture/religion/ However, out of all American Muslims, 24 % to 35% identify as Black, based on surveys by the Pew Research Center and Gallup. See “Why Surveys of Muslim Americans Differ” by Scott Keeter and Greg Smith, 6 Mar. 2009. http://www.pewresearch.org/2009/03/06/why-surveys-of-muslim-americans-differ/

religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.) devoting hours to reading books. Webb’s life and pursuit of Islam continued with written exchanges and encounters with Muslims, especially in the course of his travels to South Asia. He also published articles about Islam and sought to establish an Islamic mission in America.208

At the time, Webb’s missionary efforts attracted the attention of the press. Curtis remarks that “Webb promoted Islam as a religion that expressed some of America’s most deeply held values, especially those of rationality, human equality, broadmindedness, and an acceptance of religious diversity.” However, Curtis reveals that Webb has a specific American audience in mind; while he was interested in a spiritual and elevated aspect of Islam and targeted a white, middle-class, educated American audience, he did not want to associate with Muslim immigrants, which according to Curtis, is significant of Webb’s vision of Islam:

Webb had very little time to build his mission and his constituency, but his lack of success in attracting converts and financial support was also a result of his decision to gear his message exclusively towards ‘respectable’, white, well-educated, and ‘thinking’ middle-class Americans. When he began his mission in 1893, Webb told the New York Times that he wanted nothing to do with the Muslim peddlers and other working-class Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia who already lived in New York. That Webb could even consider targeting white, middle-class Americans for conversion reflected change in American attitudes towards Islam and Muslims during the nineteenth century. Though the Muslim world was still seen as violent, fanatical, sexist and dangerous by many Americans in Webb’s era, it was also

208 He became especially interested in the mystical aspects of Islam and in 1886 or 1887 and he started exchanging letters with Ghulam Ahmad, a Muslim reformer in India. Webb was interested in engaging with Muslims from overseas. In 1887, through political connections he was appointed U.S. consul to the Philippines, but he turned out to live not to meet the Muslim population who lived in a different area, but he continued his intellectual study of Islam. Soon after arriving in Manila, he formally declared himself a convert. Then he began publishing articles about Islam in an Indian review and made efforts to establish an Islamic mission in America. He travelled in South Asia and met with different wealthy Muslims who pledged support of his mission but they did not follow up. Back to American, he eventually lacked financial support and revenue to fund his mission. See Curtis, chapter two.
increasingly understood as romantic, adventurous, and, for religious liberals like Webb, innately spiritual. On the pages of his publications, Webb promoted Islamic religion as a spiritual resource in the battle against what he and other religious seekers viewed as an overly materialistic and spiritually moribund American culture.

Even as interest in Webb and his publications faded away, his view of Islam remained and was taken on by other Muslim missionaries.

As we have seen, those men were a minority, even considered to be marginal in a predominantly Christian society in which Islam was associated with the East, orientalism, and for some, a barbaric culture. But what was significant with these men is that they were interested in sharing their views and journey to Islam, which they perceived as a form of enlightenment, by lecturing, establishing Islamic thought groups, or writing about Islam or translating the Quran.

In a similar way, a certain proportion of white American male converts have become public speakers, *imams* or have taken leadership positions in Islamic societies, associations etc. In fact, in the course of our research, we have found out that, among contemporary male converts, those who came across Islam by traveling to the Middle East or by reading and learning about Islam have become public speakers, more than have those who converted after meeting and marrying a Muslim woman. It seems that, for some, Islam came as an encounter and a revelation in terms of personal experience and spiritual knowledge, while for others, Islam came via encounters, interest in, and love for another person. While this does not undermine the personal relationship the latter may
have with Islam, it has implication as to the formers’ personal journey to Islam and
eagerness to share it.

In the course of our research, we have found that a number of white American males
who converted to Islam in the 1990s and after 9/11 share a similar journey to Islam
including spiritual quest, reading and research which led to their embracing Islam and to
their subsequent role as public speakers seeking to promote Islam by sharing their
personal stories and inspiring others. Among those who became prominent is Sheikh
Yusuf Estes, an American Muslim preacher and teacher, who was born in 1944 and
converted from Christianity to Islam in 1991. He has been active in Islamic missionary
work in the United States since the 1990s, as a guest presenter and speaker at various
Islamic events, and appearing on various Islamic television channels. Sheikh or
Shaykh Khalil Moore, born Christopher J. Moore, is another American convert who has
been visiting Muslim countries and touring the U.S. as a guest speaker and imam in
mosques and Islamic centers. According to his blog, he is “an internationally renowned
educator, public speaker, translator, and author.” He was “born and raised in the United
States into a loving and supportive Christian family. While on the path to becoming a
professional musician, he went through a deeply spiritual and emotional journey that led
to his conversion to Islam in the summer of 1994, at the age of 19. With a sense of
mission and purpose, he later traveled to the Muslim world in search of sacred knowledge

\[209\] By public speakers we mean converts who gained some prominence in the media and within Muslim
communities by sharing their stories and lecturing in various Islam-awareness or interfaith-dialog events.
Some have also published articles on blogs or Muslim reviews. They – mostly men – have been active in
promoting Islam at public events across the U.S., unlike with the women converts who have mainly shared
their stories on *YouTube*.

\[210\] He was a Muslim Chaplain for the United States Bureau of Prisons through the 1990s and a Muslim
delegate to the United Nations World Peace Conference for Religious Leaders at the U.N. in September
2000. Many videos of his public lectures and interviews are available on *YouTube* and *Dailymotion*. 

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and a balanced understanding of the prophetic legacy.” Another American post 9/11 convert is Joshua Yusha Evans. One of the videos of his public lectures has about 1,800,000 views on *YouTube* and explains his journey to Islam: “How the Bible Led Me to Islam: The Story of a Former Christian Youth Minister, Joshua Evans.” These converts not only seek to share their positive views of Islam but also demonstrate that Islam can be practiced in America by Western-born Americans. Even though they may appear as marginal, they have gained some publicity and an audience and have played a part in bridging the divide between East and West. Their efforts have paralleled those of other American Muslims with roots in the Middle East, such as Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, whose views and efforts to show that a positive and mainstream practice of Islam is in agreement with American values, which we will discuss later.

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211 According to his bio page on his blog “Reflect On This” [http://reflectonthis.com/about/#founder](http://reflectonthis.com/about/#founder). Some on his lectures have been uploaded on *YouTube*. According to his bio, he “has studied in the city of Madinah (from 1996 to 1999), the deserts of West Africa, the Atlas Mountains of Southern Morocco, and the Hadramawt Valley of Yemen. And his spiritual and intellectual journey continues till this day […] He holds a bachelor’s degree in English, with a minor in Religious Studies, from George Mason University (2001) and a master’s degree in Liberal Arts from St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland (2007). He has also studied Arabic-English translating and interpreting at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.”

212 As of April 2013. See “How the Bible Led Me to Islam: The Story of a Former Christian Youth Minister, Joshua Evans.” *YouTube*, Uploaded on Jul 29, 2008. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YMKQKSV0bY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YMKQKSV0bY) The video description to another one of his public talks explains: “Yusha (Joshua) Evans was raised by his grandparents in Greenville, South Carolina in a very strict Methodist home. In his teenage years, he became very involved in the church and was studying at a small Bible college in his hometown with the intention of eventually enrolling in Bob Jones University. He was learning to read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and was very interested in textual criticism of the Bible. It was during these years of intense Bible study that he read the Bible cover to cover a half a dozen times. In doing so, he realized there were many inconsistencies and contradictions. He realized the Bible was not the inerrant Word of God as he had always been taught. He eventually left Christianity and searched for the truth about God elsewhere. He studied every religion from Judaism to Buddhism, Wicca to Bushido. While many religions had certain truths to them, they had major tenants or flaws he could not accept. All praise is due to God, one day he found himself talking with a young Muslim who invited him to *jumuah*, the Friday service and congregational prayer. When he saw the Muslims praying, bowing and prostrating with their heads on the floor, all the verses of the Bible describing the prayer of the prophets came flooding back to him. He asked for a copy of the Quran, read it from cover to cover in three days, and the rest (as they say) is history.” See “How Bible Led American Christian to Convert to Islam 1/6,” *YouTube*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHWyW6OrkeA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHWyW6OrkeA)
**Dawah**

Through their public lectures, these converts are also doing something which is encouraged in Islam and called *Dawah* which can be translated as preaching or proselytizing Islam, and more literally means “issuing a summons” or “making an invitation.” The person, which may be considered a religious worker or a volunteer in community effort is called a *Dai* (although some may be referred to as *sheikh* – an honorific term for an official or leader, or *imam* – the worship leader in a mosque), the Islamic equivalent of a missionary, one who invites people to the faith, to the prayer, or to Islamic life.\(^{213}\) In fact, all Muslims may consider that it is part of their role or duty as a Muslim to share the message of Islam, to enlighten others, and by talking about Islam, to encourage others to research about Islam and potentially join – or convert to – Islam. This concept is all the more meaningful for converts – as they were not born into Muslim families, Islam for them was not a given, but was the result of a journey through which they discovered and embraced Islam; therefore, it is more meaningful for them to seek to encourage others who may identify with them, embark on the same enlightening path and embrace it themselves. This helps explain why some converts have become active public speakers for Islam. This may also explain why more and more converts have used social media, especially *YouTube*, to make their conversion public and encourage others, not only to understand them but also potentially to become interested, read and research, and also embrace to Islam.

\(^{213}\) See also entries for *Dawah* and *Dai* on “Oxford Islamic Studies Online.”
http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com
Furthermore, these (non-Arab) American converts may be more “successful” in encouraging others to get curious, research and convert, specifically because they used to be like them, did not necessarily know much about Islam, learned about it, found out that it “made sense,” brought them peace, meaning and purpose, and gave them the feeling of embracing something right and meaningful and positive and enlightening, which will help them be a better person, lead a more peaceful and meaningful life. An example of this positive testimony of conversion is the interview of “Matthew” by CNN, a former Christian who converted to Islam in 2010.\textsuperscript{214} He says he was a happy child, raised by a single mom, growing up in the church where his mother was involved and where preachers were like second dads to him. They later settled Murfreesboro, Tennessee. When he was 19, he had a conversion with a friend who had just become a Muslim; he asked him about Islam and his friend told him about it in what he calls the most amazing conversation he ever had. As he describes it: “something inside of me made me feel good and it was like a light, I felt like, and it was like I was being told the truth; it’s hard to explain but it was amazing.” He explains he them went through a sort of battle with himself for 5 years, wondering “am I good enough to be a Muslim? Is it the right thing to be doing?” He started going to the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, and in the course of a conversation he said that “I believed this, that I truly believed that Muhammad was the messenger of God.” His friend told him “I think you’ve been a Muslim for a really long time, you just didn’t know it” and he said “I said I think so too.”\textsuperscript{215}


Why Islam? - Foreign yet Familiar.

We may wonder why American converts have embraced Islam, rather than embraced Christianity again, or reinforced their pre-existing Christian beliefs and practice. In fact we found that this is what they have done, through Islam. Indeed, as we found in the course of our research, the overwhelming majority of American converts to Islam come from a Christian background, although we also came across a few Jewish converts. We came across very few agnostics or atheists. Therefore, we conclude that typically, converts to Islam already believed in the concept of God, and in the beliefs common to Abrahamic religions. If Christianity already provides answers, for example to questions as to life and death, the universe, and one’s purpose on earth – which is an important factor mentioned by many converts – why did they convert to Islam? In fact, most converts have expressed that Christianity was not enough, that they did not feel touched by Christianity and by the Bible as much as they did by Islam and the Quran. Many also say that “makes sense” to them. It is therefore helpful to consider the differences and similarities between the two to better understand why Christians have embraced Islam.


The population of Murfreesboro was 108,755 according to the 2010 census. The area’s population had been dominated by white conservative Christians, but between 2000 and 2008, the foreign-born population of the Nashville metropolitan area (including Murfreesboro) grew considerably, and the immigrant population rose by about 83%. The local Muslim population increased to reach about 25,000 people. This was in part due to the arrival of refugees from Somalia and Kurds from Iraq, resettled there by the federal government after feeling the repression of Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War. Two local universities have also attracted a number of foreign-born Muslims students. The city’s Islamic Center was established 1980s, has a membership of around 250 families, 1,000 for Friday prayers. In 2010, the Islamic Center faced protests, opposing the building of a new 12,000-square-foot mosque. Signs and equipment on the building site were vandalized, including one saying “not welcome.” Similar vandalism incidents occurred in at least four other cities in Tennessee. See Elisabeth Kauffman, “In Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Church ‘Yes,’ Mosque ‘No’,” Time, 19 Aug. 2010. http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011847,00.html
As far as Christianity is concerned, converts have come from different denominations, including Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, etc. From the perspective of Westerners, while the Christian faith is spread across many different denominations, Islam seems more “whole.” In fact, for converts, Islam is at the same time foreign and familiar. While Christianity has been present in their lives since they were born, they “discovered” Islam as teenagers or young adults – around the time of 9/11. Their curiosity for Islam pushed them towards something new, something to be explored, and the more they read and learned, the more it felt familiar. Many converts mention disagreeing with the concept of the Trinity in Christianity. The idea that Jesus is the son of God is something that they usually find problematic, and in Islam, God is one, as stated in the Quran – God is one, he has no father and no son. This is a crucial concept which most converts mention. However, if they disagree with the concept of Jesus being the son of God, they still believe in Jesus, and that he was a prophet. In fact, some converts have mentioned previously believing that Muslims did not believe in Jesus. When they realize that Muslims do believe in Jesus, as a prophet, but as a human being, they get closer to Islam, and think that it “makes sense.”

Another particularity of Islam which attracts converts is the Islamic prayer and the relationship of Muslims with God. Many converts have mentioned that they like the proximity they feel with God, and the fact that there is no intermediary between them and God, by contrast with Christianity and the role of the priest or minister, confession, etc.

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216 Muslims are generally Sunni or Shia; there are other more specific groups (Sufi, Wahabi…) but these differences are not very well known by Westerners, and converts typical join the majority: Sunni Islam. 217 Unlike Christians, Muslims believe that Jesus did not die on the cross but was substituted, was taken elsewhere by God; but like Christians, they believe in the second coming of Jesus: that he will come to earth again, before the Day of Judgment.
There are also religious leaders in Islam, the imam, the sheikh, they are not considered as being closer to God that any other Muslims. Converts have mentioned that they like the concept of equality in Islam, that the closest to God is the most righteous Muslim by actions, not by race, social status or wealth. This concept is expressed by the white cloth which Muslims wear during the pilgrimage in Mecca, and which blurs differences between rich and poor, but also in the mosque where people pray side by side, shoulder to shoulder, and subjugating to God, and only God.218

Another reason why converts have embraced Islam is because they discover that for Muslims, it is the continuity of Christianity. Islam is an Abrahamic religion, and Muslims believe in most of the previous prophets mentioned in Judaism and Christianity, the stories of whom converts are already familiar with, and are surprised to find again in the Quran. Muslims believe that since the beginning of times, God sent prophets to guide men, but all previous prophets failed to complete the mission of bringing religion to humankind until Muhammad. Muhammad is believed to be the last prophet who completed the mission, and thus Islam is understood as being the ultimate, whole, complete, and reformed version the same, previous religion, Judaism and Christianity. To converts, this is also a concept which “makes sense.”

In the West and including in America, since the 1960s, many people have been attracted to spirituality and philosophy, came into contact with it through the Asian

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218 Although women and men are separate, this is not explained as a question of hierarchy, but because nothing should distract men as they pray to God, and thus women should not be in sight in front of them.
immigrants who practiced it, and converted to Buddhism. After 9/11, many Westerners found out about Islam, and by contrast with the negative representations in the media, found a positive message of love, peace, righteousness, in what they actively researched, read, and accepted. To some extent, Islam seems to offer converts a mix of the spirituality of Buddhism, and similar sets of beliefs than Christianity. In fact, the first American convert to Islam Alexander Russell Webb studied other spiritual religions before embracing Islam. The initial belief to God of many former Christians, and the same values at the core of Christian beliefs and Islam, have facilitated their acceptance of Islam, the oneness of God, the moral values, and the desire to follow a code of conduct clearly laid out, which has roots in the moral values of monotheist religions, as well as in the declaration of civil rights recognized by western nations, in a structured religion followed by millions of peoples in the world, and embraced by more and more Westerners.

While English-speaking converts have been talking about “converting” to Islam, “accepting” Islam, “turning” to Islam, and “embracing” Islam, others have been talking

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219 Buddhism is the fourth religion in the U.S. after Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. See Jane Lampman, “American Buddhism on the rise,” Christian Science Monitor, 14 Sep. 2006. [http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0914/p14s01-lire.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0914/p14s01-lire.html) The article reports that “Even a larger factor, he suggests, is that Buddhism offers spiritual practices that Western religions haven’t emphasized. “People are looking for experiential practices, not just a new belief system or a new set of ethical rules which we already have, and are much the same in all religions,” Surya Das says. “It’s the transformative practices like meditation which people are really attracted to.” See “American Buddhists,” Pew Research Center, 17 Mar. 2008. [http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/american-buddhists/](http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/american-buddhists/) According to the “U.S. Religious Survey” report by the Pew Forum on Religion of Public Life, “Only about a third (32%) of Buddhists in the United States are Asian; a majority (53%) are white, and in sharp contrast to Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism in the America is primarily made up of native-born adherents, whites and converts. The Buddhist tradition (0.7% of the American population) is made up of several distinct groups, the largest of which is Zen Buddhism.”
about “reverting” to Islam.\footnote{Websites about converts or converting to Islam reflect linguistic variety of terms: the blog “We Choose Islam,” \url{http://wechooseislam.wordpress.com/}; the forum “Turn to Islam,” \url{http://www.turntoislam.com/}; the “New Muslims Project,” \url{http://www.newmuslimsproject.net/}.} As a verb, to “revert” generally signifies to “return,” to “go back” to a previous state, condition, subject, belief, or practice. The use of this word in relation to Islam may be ambiguous. When applied to people otherwise called converts, the idea of “reverting” is related to the idea that every human being is born a Muslim, or with the potential of being a Muslim, of accepting Allah, whether he was raised a Muslim by his parents or not. This idea is put forward by those who argue that converts are returning to their natural state once they acknowledge and embrace Islam.\footnote{However, the terms “revert” and “reversion” have been used in reference to Christians who converted to Islam and then left Islam and went back or reverted to Christianity, or to Muslims who had stopped practicing and then reverted to Islam. The words “converts” and “conversion” have been used by the media and by scholars because they more clearly express the differences between those who were born into Muslim families and raised Muslims, and those who embraced Islam later in their lives.} American convert Sheik Yusuf Estes explains why he thinks the term “revert” is more appropriate:

I like to use the word “revert” as opposed to the word “convert” as it more suits the occasion of a person returning back to his natural condition at birth. The baby is born in true surrender, submission, obedience and peace with his Creator. And this is the desirable position of the Muslim, to be in peace and submission to the Will of Allah (God in English). Instead of thinking in terms of “converting” people over to Islam, it is better understood that they are simply returning back to their natural state at birth. And this is from the teachings of our beloved prophet, Muhammad, peace be upon him. […] Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said: “Every child is born on the “fitrah” (natural inclination) of “Islam” (surrender, submission and peace to the Creator on His Terms). And it is their parents who raise them up to be Jews, Christians or fire worshippers.”\footnote{According to American convert Sheik Yusuf Estes, National Chaplain, Islam Tomorrow.com, “Back to Islam? Reverts to Islam In Modern Times, ‘Revert’ As Opposed to ‘Convert’,” \url{http://www.islamtomorrow.com/converts/reverts_or_converts.htm} The topic “conversion, reversion” has also been addressed on many forums on conversion to Islam, and by public speakers and converts.}

This concept may also contribute to convince some converts that Islam in their true religion, that they did not just joined Islam but embraced what was already in them since birth, something innate rather than acquired, and that Islam is where they belong.
The converts whose stories we came across in the course of our research have also pointed out specific features of Islam that attracted them. They consider it as clear, simple, and rational. They like the sense of structure in the practice of the religion, which clearly dictates what Muslims must and must not do, when and how they must pray, one’s role and duties within the family and within society, etc. As many converts have said, “In Islam, there is an answer to everything.” Many converts say they like the commands which forbid drinking alcohol, advocate abstinence before marriage, and prescribe women should cover their hair and be modest in the presence of men. In fact, these commands are also present in the Bible, but these are no longer respected by the majority of Christians, and therefore have almost been lost or forgotten, while they are still observed in Islam. These commands are not limited to Muslims, but as the majority of Muslims have been covering their hair, by contrast with Christians, the headscarf has become a symbol of Islam. American Muslim converts have expressed their choice in a video: “Hijab in Abrahamic religions (Do Jew, Christian and Muslim women have to cover their hair?)”, YouTube, uploaded by ModernHijabLook on 30 Dec. 2011.

223 In fact, just as the Quran and the Torah, the Bible prohibits the consumption of pork: see Leviticus 11:7-8 “And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. 8 You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.” Bible gateway, New International Version (NIV) http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus+11%3A7-8&version=NIV  
Pork is also prohibited in the book of Deuteronomy, see Deuteronomy 14:8. Pork is also described as unclean or impure in the book of Isaiah, see Isaiah 65:2-5. Moreover, The Bible also prescribes that women should cover their hair, see 1 Corinthians 11:6. A young female Muslim convert explains it in a video: “Hijab in Abrahamic religions (Do Jew, Christian and Muslim women have to cover their hair?)”, YouTube, uploaded by ModernHijabLook on 30 Dec. 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObFUB8shV0U

224 In fact, there has been a tendency for American Muslims born in the U.S. not to wear a hijab, which had been considered as a sign of being more westernized, a sign of integration or assimilation to American culture (as represented in the show “All-American Muslim). Some Muslim women started wearing a hijab after 9/11 as they got closer to their faith which was under attack. See Lorraine Ali, “Behind the Veil,” New York Times, 11 Jun. 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/fashion/13veil.html?pagewanted=all  
The article reports: “On Sept. 17, 2001, she wore a hijab into the laboratory where she worked, along with her business attire. A co-worker said, ‘You need to wrap a big ol’ American flag around your head so people know what side you’re on,’ Ms. Ahmed said. ‘From then on, they never let up.’” In the course of our research, we also found that American converts tend to be more observant that American Muslims because they are new to Islam and have a desire to do things right and be good Muslims, and they sometimes feel
their embracing Islam as being related to the conservative aspect of the practice of the religion. Additionally, while Islam has been seen in the Western world as a religion in which women are oppressed and their rights are limited, and sometimes are subjected to the authority of their husband or father or brother. Aminah Assilmi, an older American convert and former Southern Baptist, was a public speaker lecturing about the rights of Muslim women, and details the rights of women as stated by Allah. In a lecture, she explains that some have considered the veil or scarf or hijab as a symbol of oppression, which represents the superiority of the men over the women; she says “if it was true, very few would fight for their right to wear it.” Indeed, according to her, it is a right and women have many other rights, including in terms of divorce and personal property, which are stated in the Quran but not always respected in some Muslim countries. Many other women converts have stressed that they have at least as much freedom as any other American woman, and value the rights and virtues of women as defined in Islam. Overall, they consider that by embracing Islam, what they gain is much more important than what they give up on (such as their former dress style, drinking alcohol, or shaking hands with men).

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226 This is mentioned by Rebecca, whose story we will consider in a later part.
The post 9/11 context has had a crucial influence in encouraging conversion to Islam, especially among the younger generations. Converts have discovered something new, something which was presented as negative, as antagonistic to American values, something to fear, something foreign, others; most converts came across Muslims who were “real, ordinary, kind,” not the terrorists and radicals shown on TV but students, families, generally well-integrated, sharing the same values and the same aspirations in life, in terms of family, education, etc. and because of the division between “us” and “them,” converts have progressively began to think that they were more like “them”; maybe is Muslims had not been presented as others, not so many people would have been attracted to “them” and joined “them.”

Furthermore, in the course of our research, we found that the majority of early converts, as well as many 21st century converts, chose to take on a Muslim name as part of their conversion to Islam, which is significant in relation to the place of Islam as their religion as part of their own identity. Taking a Muslim name does not imply a stronger commitment to the religion, rather, it implies a stronger sense of personal identity change, in that the new Muslim self is acknowledge over the former self, as a personal decision to assert and affirm one’s new identity. While becoming a Muslim officially only requires pronouncing the shahadah, or affirmation of faith and belief in Islam, in Allah as one god and in Muhammad his prophet, taking on a Muslim name is a social construct, which somehow means that one does not only adopt Islam, but defines himself as adopted by Islam, as being a Muslim, with a Muslim name. For some converts, taking a Muslim
name may also help them feel more part of the community of Muslims who may seem to some Muslims to establish barriers between born-Muslims and converts.

In the age of mass media and online social network, the use and help of social media has been an efficient way to have a broader scope of communication and reach of people. The Internet has facilitated publication of material by Muslims and converts, and access for all to resources and connections with Muslims and converts, which has made easier what early converts such as Webb strived to achieve.

American converts therefore play a role in informing others about Islam; they also play a role as a bridge between what has otherwise been perceived as the religion of the “other,” of the East in an East and West world view, and of the Middle East in the context of the Gulf War and 9/11 – and showing that one can well be American and Muslim, and without necessarily having ethnic or historical ties to Islamic countries. In fact, although Islam has, throughout history, been associated with specific countries and ethnic groups, in the U.S. and in the world – including South Asian, Arab Middle-Easterner and non-Arab Middle Easterners, North Africans, and African Americans – many converts have called attention to the fact that Islam advocates racial equality. In 1889, Edward W. Blyden, a scholar and social activist traveled throughout East and South of the United States, lecturing about Islam. In a speech to the Colonization Society of Chicago, he told his audience that the reasons Africans choose Islam over Christianity is that, the Quran protected the black man from self-depreciation in the presence of Arabs or Europeans.227 According to a verse of the Quran which he and many others acknowledged and cited, all

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men are considered equal, and the most righteous are those closest to God and His will.\textsuperscript{228}

This ideology has influenced the conversion of a significant part of African Americans to Islam who felt Christianity was associated with white supremacy, especially in relation to the legacies of slavery. We have been primarily interested in the phenomenon of conversion of white Americans because they have virtually no historical connections to Islam, and because they represent a majority (white Americans) joining a minority (Muslims), and creating an apparently paradoxical group (white American Muslims).

American converts also include African Americans, Asians and Hispanics, but non-white converts have been less visible in the media, or have not made their conversion public, after 9/11. However, more recently, some media sources began to acknowledge an increasing number of Hispanic converts, most of whom are also immigrants to the U.S. and from a Catholic background. An article reported 40,000 Hispanic Muslims, according to the Islamic Society of North America, in 2012;\textsuperscript{229} another reported 200,000, according to the American Muslim Council, in 2006.\textsuperscript{230} The article relates some facts that have attracted Hispanics or Latinos to Islam, including their strong religious beliefs which they

\\textsuperscript{228} “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” Quran, 49:13, Surat Al-Ĥujurāt (The Rooms).

\texttt{http://quran.com/49/13}

\textsuperscript{229} Zuania Ramos, “Hispanic Islamic Converts Find Comfort In God And Latino Culture,” Huffington Post, 11 Sep. 2012. \texttt{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/11/hispanic-islam-converts_n_1873493.html} The article reports the story of “Kalene Santana, a 19-year-old of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent [who] says she ‘lives and loves in Spanish, obeys the laws and pays her taxes in English and worships her god in Arabic.’” The article also reports that there are “approximately 40,000 Hispanic Muslims who reside in the United States today, according to the Islamic Society of North America,” a number stated in other articles on Hispanic Muslims.

\textsuperscript{230} See Hajer Naili, “For Some Latinos, Islam Is Simple,” Illume, 14 Apr. 2011. \texttt{http://www.illumemagazine.com/zine/articleDetail.php?For-Some-Latinos-Islam-Is-Simple-13545} “Without any census based on the religious beliefs in United States, it is difficult to give a precise figure of Latinos who have converted to Islam within the country. Yet, it was estimated at about 200,000 in 2006, by the American Muslim Council. Young and educated women make up a large part of this group. ‘More than 60 percent of converts are women these last few years’, Ali said, who has also noted an increase of conversions to Islam after 9/11 attacks. […] Maybe more that 60 percent of those who converted to Islam in America are Latinos’. The tragic event seems to have aroused people’s interest in Islam, who want to understand what the religion is all about.”

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can transfer from Christianity to Islam – Latinos can turn to Islam because there are naturally more religious people with inclination to religion, by contrast with atheists; the discipline and order of Islam, as well as the Spanish roots of Latinos and the historical connections between Islam and Moorish Spain.\textsuperscript{231} The article reports that Nylka, born and raised in New Jersey in a Peruvian-Ecuadorian family, said she chose Islam because:

\begin{quote}
[I] had a yearning to know God and I didn’t believe in things that I learned as a Christian. I believed in a higher power. I was looking for the truth, the connection between the believer and the Creator. […]Islam taught me a lot of discipline. And Islam is perfectly aligned: the prayers and its time. Why things are done. It is flexibility but discipline.
\end{quote}

According to Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, currently the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, of American University in Washington DC, “because [Latinos] are coming from a Catholic background, they also see some echoes in Islam of their own faith.” Indeed, Christianity and Islam have a lot in common, but most Christians who convert to Islam mention “holes” and inconsistencies in Christianity, such as the concept of the Trinity.

The article also acknowledges the direct influence of the post 9/11 context on conversion of Latinos:

\begin{quote}
Many Muslim organizations have stated that the Latino Muslim community has tripled or quadrupled since 9/11. Ahmed explains that there has been “so much literature on Islam. If you are an American, and day and night people are saying Islam is bad, Islam is terrorism, so you may pick up a book on Islam and what do you see? No, Islam is saying something else. In that sense, the interest in Islam has gone up since 9/11.”
\end{quote}

We will now see how some self-made videos on YouTube, which are in essence first-person conversion narratives, reflect and expose these ideas, and in fact, give a completely antagonistic image of Islam as that presented by Islamophobic views, as a

\begin{adjustwidth}{-1cm}{-1cm}
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid. “Conversion to Islam by Latinos may also be seen as a look back to their Spanish roots, which is embedded in Islamic history for 800 years in Granada, Cordova, Seville and Andalusia.”
\end{adjustwidth}
religion of peace, balance, structure, order, which as we will see later, is in essence the same thing as Christianity, but without the man-made modifications, so a more pure, unmodified version of the words and commands of God.

**Sources, stories, narratives**

In the course of our research for this project, we looked for all interviews of American converts to Islam in articles or video. We found three Masters’ theses which focus on very small groups of converts, in specific geographic locations or specific gender group. We found a dozen articles from reputable and widely read newspapers and their online version, such as the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post*, which consider American converts to Islam after 9/11 and which mention a few converts who give some of their reasons for converting to Islam. In the large amount of videos uploaded to YouTube, we found a number of videos about Americans who converted, most of them extract from television interviews, including doctors, university professors, soldiers, and scientists. Their professional occupation and status appear in the title and emphasizes that they are educated people who converted after reading and researching. Videos include former Christians of different denominations, as well as former Jews, and a general search for converts to Islam shows a significant number of videos of British converts, and a few others of individuals born in Canada, Australia, Germany, or France. Many videos are part or whole interviews conducted by Muslim and or Arabic television channels and hosts (such as Al Jazeera), an uploaded my Muslim users and groups who wish to make

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available on the Internet the resources on Islam and the stories of Westerners who converted to Islam.

More interestingly, we found a significant number of self-made interviews by American converts of a similar profile: we found about 20 white female American converts in their twenties. Additionally, we found one Hispanic American convert, one Mexican convert, and one Jamaican convert, who all correspond to the same profile: young women who, after hearing about, getting interested in, and researching Islam for several years, found that it made sense to them, decided to embrace the faith, its beliefs and practice, and converted. Some of them are single and other are married, but their conversion was not the result of their falling in love with a Muslim. Their journeys have similarities: generally, these young women had not really heard about Islam before 9/11. Usually at some point, they met and became friends with Muslims who did not correspond to the negative stereotypes in the media, and to whom they asked about Islam and the Quran. As their stories show, their conversion was the result of a personal spiritual and intellectual journey into Islam. Most of them come from a Christian background, but Christianity did not “touch” them in such a powerful way. In their videos, they all wear a hijab.233

233 This is all the more significant as a part of American Muslim women born in America to Middle Eastern parents do not wear a hijab. Women who wear a hijab usually emphasize that they wear it by choice, that it should not be interpreted as a sign and symbol of the oppression of women in Islam, but of their freedom to show or hide a part of their femininity and part of their relationship with God and their faith. This is especially true in America, but it would be less so in a conservative Muslim countries. In that sense, wearing a hijab is a symbol of these women’s identity as American Muslim converts, while not wearing the hijab is usually considered as a sign of assimilation of American women of Arab, Middle Eastern or Asian descent who were born-Muslims.
Typically, these converts have made more than one video, one recounting their conversion or journey to Islam, and others talking about topics related to their identity and daily life experiences as young female American Muslim converts, including wearing the hijab in terms of choice and the dress code in relation to the concept of “modesty” of appearance, relationship with their family and friends, marriage, and their perception of Islam. Their videos are insightful first-person conversion narratives, through which these converts share their conversion to Islam in a “raw” format, usually not edited, not framed by interview questions and not originating from Muslim or non-Muslim media sources, motivated by a will to share, help others, raise awareness, and contribute to the broader digital literature or oral history of American converts to Islam. While some use their own names, others use pseudonyms.

In the course of our research, we came across stories of converts from different ethnic, social and age backgrounds, but in the case of YouTube videos, these white middle-class young women (most of whom are about 25) have in common this “lost and found” narrative, some to a more radical extent than others. Typically, as teenagers and young adults, most of them were partying and drinking. But they felt they were

234 One “famous” convert who corresponds to this profile is Nicole Queen, who became a public speaker and has made her story famous in interviews and on her blog: NicoleQueen.com, http://nicolequeen.com. Her blog summarizes her story as “From ‘Party Girl’ to American Muslim, it’s all about changing for the better!” Her bio actually states she watched YouTube videos of converts. She is described as a professional photographer, American Muslim activist, public speaker, and as the wife of a Jordanian man. Her bio states she was named after her devoted Baptist Grandmother. She spent her nights in different clubs. “Drinking became a normal habit and just part of her lifestyle. Nicole’s soul began feeling lost and without purpose. Deep inside, she longed for more in her life and would involve herself in deep conversations with others about life’s existence. ‘There’s gotta be more to life than this’ was a commonly heard statement from her. After years of a materialistic lifestyle surrounded by parties and greed, she began embarking on a soul searching journey with no clue that within 2 years she would join the faith of Islam, a religion she knew nothing about. Nicole heard about Islam from many different sources but the biggest impact came from actual experiences with Islam, more so than just hearing about it. She was attracted to the discipline of the faith, how practicing Muslims could go their whole lives without drinking, or engaging in premarital
missing something, and they were seeking something. As we may remark, the turning point of their journey and conversion to Islam happened at a time during which most young adults ask themselves questions about life and death, the meaning and purpose of life and of their own lives, goals, and future. Questioning where they belonged, somehow, they came across Islam, which appeared as something positive to pursue, as the path of light. Indeed, they all explain how their lives got better after they converted, and how they feel peace and serenity, a sense of doing and pursuing what is good and right, and of belonging, as Muslims. As we found out, religious conversion is a very emotional issue – a couple of young women converts are brought to tears as they talk about their journey – and they consider each step of their past journey to be a significant part of what led to their conversion. We will now consider their individual stories, because they represent faces not commonly seen – at least usually not beyond their hijab – and voices not commonly heard, in America today, but who represent part of the younger, educated and active generations of Americans who participate actively in society and whose views and aspirations will have an influence around them within their families, communities, and in the broader society.

Mandi Tork, 235 25, living in Missouri explains that she grew up in a perfect home, in a Christian family; she was going to church and everybody else was talking about

relations and how life was more important to them than to waste it on the party scene. The same scene Nicole had grown bored with. She became obsessed with Islam online, staying up till sunrise sometimes to read and watch YouTube videos about Muslims converting to Islam. A lot of their stories were comforting to her because of the similar desires these people had found answers to in Islam. Could God really be her answer?” A Muslim man she met gave her a copy of the Quran and she states “If people just sat and read this book, the way I did, they would totally want to be Muslim.”

feeling the Holy Spirit and God’s presence, but she did not and was crying to God at
night “please, let me feel you and have this relationship with you – I tried, I don’t think I
ever knew God until I found Islam.” “My life now is better than I ever could have
imagined it; there’s still struggles all the time but knowing who God is and having rules
to follow that guide my life… and all the rules always have a purpose and they always
make my life better.” In high school she began to rebel and go out with friends who were
partying. She moved out of her parents’ house, seeking her independence, but hung out
with the “rough crowd”; “I was struggling a lot because you’re trying to find who you are
as a person, what you want to do with your life, are you going to be successful? The
actions and the things I were doing were not taking me in that direction.” She got caught
drinking and driving twice in college. She says her struggle is what made her who she is
now and maybe if she had not gone through that she wouldn’t be sitting here as a
Muslim.

She didn’t know anything about Islam, and 9/11 happened when she was in high
school, was she saw in the media and the news was very negative/ negative
representation of Muslims in the media “that Muslims are terrorists, that they are
extremists, that they are violent people; I had this wrong image about what Islam was, I
didn’t know anything...anything truthful.” In college, she made friends from Saudi
Arabia. “It really showed me a different image of Islam, it was completely opposite of
what I had seen on the television.” However, she mentions that she saw some drinking,
going out, gossiping and judging others; she thought it was like Christianity and didn’t
want any part of it. But when she started learning about Islam, she would see something
different, and got close to wanting to convert. The turning point was when she went to
Dubai in December 2011, and met her friends there, she told them she wanted to convert but wasn’t ready, they took her to meet an American convert from Texas who worked at an Islamic center there “he answered my questions better than anyone has ever answered them before.” She was convinced and decided to take her shadadah. As her video shows, she was issued a “Certificate of Embracing Islam.” Her mom has been supportive and recognized that Christianity was “not fulfilling” what she was “seeking,” and “she needs to be a Muslim to find that.” Mandi says “I had the best grades I ever had in my life this semester” because she was dedicated and not going out. She mentions in the street some people stare at her and in her earlier conversion video, she was talking about difficulties with Muslims too. In her earlier video, she talked about through learning about Islam, and about “separating Muslims from Islam; obviously Islam is perfect, and Muslims are not.” Some of the Muslims she knew were drinking and going out and gossiping; but then when she was reading about Islam and everything was beautiful and made sense. She mentioned it took her almost 3 years to revert. She said that the two hardest things she faced were praying on time, and the “judgment from people” actually more from Muslims than non-Muslims in the streets. She calls them her own “Muslim brothers and sisters” She says she feels that they are constantly watching her, judging her, about her clothes. She says she has felt more judged by the Muslim community after she became a Muslim than before, when she was “just an American.” In her more recent video, additionally to the hijab she wears an abaya, a Muslim black robe.
ChelseyHijabLove explains her purpose of making a video about her conversion being to help other girls – “help a girl convert to Islam, help a girl start wearing the hijab.” She mentions she is 25. She married her high-school sweetheart when they were 18. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps. She used to go out a lot and drink. He was very jealous. She moved in with a friend and they all go out and partied all the time. She got arrested for DUI May 2011 and got into trouble. This led to her husband to want a divorce. Around that time she started looking into Islam, after she got her DUI it got her to think about life and spirituality and her lifestyle. She had met a few Muslims and discussed religion with a Muslim friend who was telling her, “your thoughts and opinion are kind of Muslim, I just feel like you’re a Muslim, you’re going to convert eventually I know it– she bought a Quran 5 years before when her husband went to the Marine Corps because she wanted to educate herself on Islam. She wanted to be able to know that derogatory comments on Muslims were wrong. She educated herself on Islam, wrote a paper in college. “When I was going through this rough time, I just thought to myself ‘what better that to turn to something that speaks of washing away everything that was bad, and I think I went through so much bad that I just needed something (sobbing)… I found that in Islam and everything that I ever needed and everything that I ever wanted I found in Islam” she adds that she carries the guilt and the sadness of what she did in the past and the people she hurt. She also talks about her self-image growing up, and how at some point she gave too much importance on her looks– she says “Islam found me and it’s changed my life so drastically […] I feel so much more purely happy than I ever have before, and I realized it wasn’t a matter of who I was with, it’s because I didn’t have

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236 “The ‘REAL’ How I Converted to Islam (Emotional and Inspirational),” uploaded by ChelseyHijabLove on 19 Nov. 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dChlbfqoz9c This video has 74,000 views. She has 73 personal videos, and almost 4,000 subscribers.
Islam in my life.” she is now engaged with another man, a Muslim, and she thinks God makes things happen for a reason. “God took me on this path to be a better person and I’m such a better person now” and that’s why she carries so much guilt.” Islam gave her responsibility, a sense of guilt and consciousness of her acts and hurting people, and modesty regarding her physical appearance.

A poignant testimony is that of an American girl from the Midwest who is not named, who grew up in a small town in a Christian family. She went to college and became a party girl. She met a Palestinian family. She found out about Islam on 9/11. When she met them, they were very kind and had nothing to do with what she heard and saw about Muslims on TV. She recounts drinking and doing drugs in college, because she felt lost and alone, at a distance with her family, she was unhappy and wanted to escape. She doesn’t think people take her seriously as a Muslim and doesn’t talk about it much. People from her community in the Midwest thought she worked for the F.B.I. and wasn’t a real Muslim. She thinks God helped her. She had a Muslim friend who stayed by her side. She asked him for a copy of the Quran, started reading it, read it for four days, and it was “feeding” her. She says sobbing “that’s when I knew that I wanted to become Muslim because I finally felt like there was hope and the message in the Quran was not like – sometimes people say ‘why didn’t you read the Bible?’ […] I grew up a Christian and the Bible was not enough.” She mentions the importance of accountability in the Quran which influenced her to chance. She kept reading and reading more books, she knew she wanted to become a Muslim but she knew it wouldn’t be easy. She wanted to know everything about Islam. She had the feeling that nothing could touch her, she felt
incredible; she felt she had power in herself. She had to get healthy and changed her lifestyle. She thinks if her story can help at least one girl, it is worth telling it; Islam saved her life and she wouldn’t be here is she hadn’t read the Quran and became a Muslim. She was filling her mind and body with poison that destroyed her life. She converted, and 3 years later, she married her best Muslim friend. She says what was so bad turned into something that is so good, and she married her best friend who saved her life. She tries to continue to educate herself and others and help others through her videos. She says it’s hard because of the negative image of Islam in the media “Islam has such a bad reputation, because of what the media has put in everyone’s head but I hope my videos can help somebody.”

Her story is a narrative which presents Islam as a salvation, her reading the Quran as a turning point in her life which saved her from alcohol, drugs, and gave her hope, courage, and put her on the right path. Her story is very inspirational and such a positive message is likely to influence young women who may identify with her. Other converts, included British converts, have talked about Islam as a force to do what is right in a society in which people drink, do drugs, and have physical relationships outside of marriage. Joining Islam represents adopting a set of rules which ensure moral conduct in a society in which nothing else seems to have as much power. Her story is reminiscent of that of the Guantanamo Bay guard who led a dissolute life and tried to become righteous through Islam.

237 “L’histoire de mon voyage vers l’islam partie 1/2” uploaded by scottriano (not author) on 4. Sep 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy2FT3MSegM See also “L’histoire de mon voyage vers l’islam partie 2/2” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHC8oSINOI8
Jewelize444 is a Hispanic-American Muslim Woman convert.\(^{238}\) She has been living in New York City for 10 years, which she describes as a good and a bad place. She had bad and abusive friends. She was raised a Christians but stopped practicing after she was 13-14. “I was in a lot of darkness,” she says. Her health was poor, she smoked cigarettes a lot, but she reached out to God and said “help me.” She felt “swallowed” by the street and her environment, and encourages people to “find Islam.” She started talking to the Muslim friends around her and got a copy of a Quran in Spanish and was going through comparative religion at that point:

I want to find the truth, kind of journey, the search, you get this like yearning from your heart where you want to fill in the gap, you want to close the hole, you want to find your purpose in life, because you wake up and you’re like: There’s a reason why I’m up, there’s a reason why I have two eyes… you want to know the purpose of life, and I found it in the miracle of the Quran. I opened it, you read this, my eyes inside and outside opened, my ears inside and outside they cleared, I said wow this is what I’ve been looking for it’s exactly what saved me from the street, and from those bad friends and from all the vice.

The past was from her to learn from, now she has a wonderful husband and a child and she is grateful to Allah for everything she has and which comes to her. She says:

“This whole self-discovery, this whole search inside has cured my depression, cured any ailment, when you’re free of the vices your health improves, you’re at a point of your life when you’re even grateful to look at the leaves of the tree that have been outside of your house forever.” She started wearing the hijab later, following another feeling that came through her heart. Islam changed her life. It was difficult for her family to accept and

\(^{238}\) “How I Came To Islam,” uploaded by Jewelize444 on 9 Jun. 2011
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5xnfq42P-o She comments “maybe this can benefit a sister out there who is thinking about Islam. […] This video was highly requested. Also I converted to Islam several years ago so this video is just revisiting and retelling my story” See also “Hispanic-American Girl to Hispanic-American Muslim Woman Tag,” uploaded by Jewelize444 on 14 Jun. 2011.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPhU2pr01QI She has 45 videos and about 2,000 subscribers.
understand but now they have new-found appreciation for her. She changed for the best. She accepted Islam in her heart and she hopes and prays “if this video is reaching you” it will benefit you, it will keep you straight, it will keep you right, it will keep you away from everything that is hurtful, that will try to knock you down. It’s hard for her to talk but she hopes it benefitted viewers.

While some had a very difficult past, others had an easier life. Another inspirational young white American converts in their twenties are Nye Armstrong and her friend Rebecca.239 They tell us about Rebecca’s story in three videos. Five years ago, the only thing she knew about Islam was that Muslims prayed five times a day. She said she was self-absorbed and 9/11 didn’t really impact or affect her. A friend of hers was deployed to Iraq and shared very negative views of Muslims when he was there. She worked as a research assistant at the University of Connecticut and with two Muslim men, got to know them, and the two views did not match up. When she learned about Islam, she thought there were things that she always thought and believed. Something beautiful was about hajj, the unique cloth, and the fact that “there is no difference between a prince and a pauper, and the only way you can be better than someone is through your good deeds.”

But it was a long journey:

I kept asking questions to my co-workers, I was so intrigued because I knew so little, that I kept asking questions and it got to the point where he said “you’re Muslim, you just don’t even know it,” and maybe that was the turning point for me was when he said “you’re too good of a person to

not be Muslim and to not have the reward for what you do.” It took me a while to get over such small things I felt like I had to give up, which were nowhere near as important as what I have gained.

Rebecca explains she studied Islam for about two years. Her parents were very supportive. She took her shahada, at the Friday prayer. She mentioned she was doing a Master’s in special education to young children. She knew she wanted to convert but she put it off. Then went to teach in Koweit for a year, hoping it would help her to be among the majority, in a Muslim country. She felt independent, and was part of the majority, she was able to connect with Islam in a way she might not have been able to in a different situation otherwise. About praying as a Muslim, among the majority, her friend Nye says: “It has this wonderful sense of community that I’d never felt before.”

Other American converts express difficulties about finding their place as American Muslim converts, not only as part of the minority as Muslims, but also because of being a convert, not always understood by Muslims who were born into Islam. One young woman in this case is QalbeeTheConvert. Her case is different in that she tells her story as she is about to take her shahada about 10 days later and thus has not yet officially converted. Her family situation is also different: her parents separated when she was a child, and divorced in 2001. Her mom got married in 2003 and converted around the time she met her Moroccan stepdad, and they got married in Morocco. She and her sister started learning about Islam by taking classes at the local mosque (they used to live in Milwaukee but now live in Boston) and she had to start wearing the hijab there, but she felt like she was not herself and she did not want people to think she was Muslim

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVI4vUFqa-o
when she wasn’t. They then went to her mom’s classes and started learning Arabic. But her dad then made her take catholic classes (CCD). After high school in college, in the process of breaking up with boyfriend of 3 years, was feeling lost, and felt there was a part of her that was missing. After chatting with someone online, she wondering why she hadn’t converted already. She was worried about her dad, but then decided to convert. She explains “there’s this great feeling deep down that I’m doing what’s right for once and being true to myself, it’s really breathtaking to find what you’ve been looking for, and I’ve found that in Islam, I never found anything that I disagree with.” She realized she was standing for something she believed in personally, not just for her mom. In another video which she uploaded several months after converting, she describes what, according to her, being a convert means:

Not being born a Muslim. Not having been raised a Muslim. Being an outsider. Being afraid that you’ll offend someone because you’re not always sure about everything. Having to share your conversion story repeatedly. Being questioned about why you converted. Having questions like “did you convert for a guy?” “Did you convert because your parents wanted you to? “Did you convert because of your interest in Islam and in the Arab world?” Being asked “but why are you white?” Having other Muslims treat you like a child. Not feeling like you’re part of a group of Muslims. Losing friends, losing family, hurting people you care about. Not being able to share the same holidays with your family. Being alone, really alone. Not knowing how to spend your free time, and being afraid of making mistakes, and not knowing what sources to trust. And having people tell you that you’re not a real Muslim, having people tell you how to think, what to think and you sit there guessing yourself and you’re worried about judgment from other. But your religion is between you and God and that’s something that’s so special that nobody can take it away from you. 241

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzhE4ITnu_w
She concludes by saying “To all the converts out there I just want you all to remember that you’re aren’t alone in this there are other converts and we will be here for you.” Her message is significant in that it reflects the anxieties all converts may have; indeed, many young female converts may not be surrounded by a strong Muslim community, and in some cities or communities, even if they join an Islamic center, they may feel left out in a place where Muslims may not be well-integrated and may stay among their own ethnic or cultural groups. Her message is sad and optimistic at the same time, because it concludes on a positive emphasis of the importance of one’s relationship with God. Moreover, she states the importance of the role of converts in forming supporting each other and this helps explain why it is so important for these young female converts to share their stories on YouTube, to reach out to others, and recreate a form of online community.

Another young convert is Sarah, also known as TheFutileSearch. She may be the youngest YouTube convert. She discovered Islam when she was 14. She was researching Christianity, was a Christian of the Baptist church. She says she “stumbled upon Islam.” One of her friends has a Muslim mom wearing a hijab. She got curious about it and started searching and reading on the Internet. She started learning that Islam was one of the Abrahamic faiths and saw the connection between Islam and Christianity, while she used to be think “they do that thing and we do our thing” and was a bit “freaked out” by the word “Allah.” She started thinking and disagreeing about the concept of the “Trinity” in Christianity, something she described as shocking even for her as a Christian. She did not grow up believing in it, discovered it was a main doctrine of Christianity, which she

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242 “My Conversion Story- Islam,” uploaded by TheFutileSearch on 6 Nov. 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlww6zvAe_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlww6zvAe_o) “My vlog about my experience as a convert and about Islam.” This video has about 107,000 views. She has 22 videos and nearly 2,400 subscribers.
did not believe in. In another video, she states it as her reason for leaving Christianity, and that what attracted her to Islam is the wholeness of God. She started talking to her Muslim friend about it. After that time she stopped identifying herself as a Christian and started researching more about Islam, and then identifying herself as a non-specific “Abrahamic theist.” The difficult things for her was shifting identities, questioning what she really believed and what she wanted; “the more I started researching Islam, the more I really came to like it, and the more I saw in it, and it just made a lot of sense to me” she started researching in March 2010 and decided that she wanted to become a Muslim a few months later, in June. She stopped eating pork. She told her parents, they were shocked and against it, and she went through difficult times with her family. She took time until she was sure and she officially took her shahadah in August 2011 during the month of Ramadan.  

She also mentions wanting to answers questions and to help out others though her videos. In another video she explains that she does not wear her hijab every day because her parents do not allow her and do not accept her conversion to Islam. Her videos allow her to express herself as she really feels.

“Another Grateful Muslim Revert,” is a video as part of a collection of videos reposted by Anotherexchristian. This young American girl, a student at the University of Indiana, was visiting her father in Florida, when she started looking into Islam. She was close to 19. She decided to move to Florida and transfer to a local university, where

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244 “Frequently Asked Questions,” uploaded by TheFutileSearch on 2 Nov. 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEBTZLPRhU4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEBTZLPRhU4)

she met two Muslims for the first time in her life, as there were no Muslims in Indiana. She was curious and started searching Islam online, bought a Quran, read it. She got close to and moved in with a Muslim family; they were so nice and good to her, her friend’s mother treated her like her own kid from the start. She felt she should be a Muslim. She says: “I feel like there are two ways people convert, they spend a couple years studying it and then they convert, or you can also – there’s people like me just converted before they knew anything because they felt in their heart that’s what the right was and then spend the next couple of years learning.” That’s what she did. She said she wanted to be a Muslim and she took her shahadah with her roommate and his mother in August 2008.

When people ask her what made her convert, she says it’s not what made her convert, it’s a strong gut feeling she had. As others she mentions her video being a request by many YouTube users, which shows there is an interest from the online community to hear about their stories and the reasons why they converted to Islam.

Another video uploaded by the same source under the same title shows the conversion story of an unnamed white woman from the Midwest from a Catholic family. In university she researched religions and “strangely enough, no one really talked about Islam until 9/11 when it was everywhere” […] it was plastered all over the media and it sparked my attention it’s something which called my attention because I thought how a group of people who were so devoted to their creator couldn’t be all negative.” She met a Muslim man who she ended up marrying. They talked about their religions a lot, she begin to find the God she had been missing so much. She went to the

246 “Another Grateful Muslim Revert,” by uploaded by Anotherexchristian on 9 Feb. 2011 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1ZdOwfM5Bk In the video, she mentions wanting to take a Muslim name.
mosque, listened to speeches and could not find anything against what she believed and thought Islam fit her better. She loved everything she heard from the Muslims women about “how free and liberated and powerful they felt, and it was nothing short of inspiring.” Taking her shahadah was a wonderful experience; it felt right, it felt as something she knew she should do and she hasn’t looked back. But she had difficulties talking about her life choices with her family. Nevertheless, she also mentions having a lot of conversations with her classmates and others around her, and she enjoys talking about her faith and answering questions.

Other American converts who have tried to reach and share their stories with others through YouTube include Tammy Corporan, who told her conversion story to others in the mosque, filmed by her friend. She converted as an adult after her daughter met a Muslim man and she went on a trip to Jordan. She learned about Islam, converted, and has encouraged others to think more positively about life. She and her friend Ruba, an Arab Christian who converted to Islam, explain their idea of an initiative called L.I.G.H.T.S., “Living Interested in Giving Hope to Sisters, or to Someone”; to encourage sisters – other Muslim women – and more broadly others, “to work together collaboratively with the hope of strengthening our communities”, to help others out, and keep a journal of “lights given” an “lights received” – in which “lights” may be favors or acts of kindness. Others who have been active on YouTube

include BoulderHijabi,248 who has uploaded 84 personal videos, and whose user page states “Hippy + Hijab – Just my small contribution to the VIBRANT hijabi community here on youtube!! :)” Another convert from the Widwest is SophiaZahara.249 There are also a few international English speaking converts who have used YouTube to share their life stories as converts. Paola Schietekat, from Mexico and born into a Catholic family says: “My name is Aisha, I embraced Islam in September, 2010. Since then my life has changed completely in a positive way, although I had to struggle to be accepted by my family, my friends and by myself as a Muslim.” After after 9/11 her parents said Muslims are terrorists. She says there are around 1,500 Muslims in Mexico City. A British convert who has been active on YouTube under the username ModernHijabLook250 has 64 personal videos, and her user page states “Let’s make the difference!”

We also came across the story of a Jamaican young woman who uses the name TheJamaicanMuslimah.251 She moved to Canada as a teenager and later converted to Islam in February 2011. Her contribution is significant because her profile is more rare but her story has many similarities with the journeys to Islam of white American converts. Additionally it includes interest in Islam related to her African ethnic


249 “My Hijab Journey-Video #1,” uploaded by sophiazahara on 7 Jul. 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh0S0ZHWrnLU She talks about the reaction of people who are not exposed to Muslims to her wearing a hijab in her local, rural Midwest area. She joined YouTube June 5, 2012 and has 9 videos.


background. As others, she explains that “This video talks about my journey and how I became Muslim. […] I hope this inspires people and generates discussion, and open-mindedness about Islam.” As others, she explains she first heard about Islam because of 9/11. She grew up in Jamaica and moved to Canada to go to high school, and in the beginning she was not comfortable around Muslims, but then she learned a lot from her Muslim friends. She went to her friend’s family and though they were surprisingly normal. However, her reaction was to think “they have to convert to Christianity or they would go to hell.” Then she found out they also believed in Jesus, and she was first interested in learning about Islam so that she could convince them to turn to Christianity, and as a result, she had more and more dialogue with Muslims about religion. It opened her mind about what Islam is about. She started thinking: “this really makes sense” and says “there are some questions that I always had growing up, just little doubts and just holes in my faith that weren’t filled, that Christianity was just not fulfilling for me. […] In the end, Christianity didn’t make sense at all, while in Islam there is an answer for everything.” She explains going through a “bargaining phase”: she was convinced that being a Muslim was the right thing but she wasn’t ready to face and embrace it. Her journey was progressive: she starting fasting during Ramadan and covering, and then “promoting” Islam. She explains she got interested in black history and the role of

252 Although this is not the focus of the present thesis, many African American have converted to Islam and African Americans constitute a significant part of the Muslim population in the U.S.
253 In another video, an older female American convert expresses similar ideas about Muslims, Jesus, and hell: “for many years, I grew up with the belief that Muslims did not believe in Jesus, and I thought, oh my Gosh, that’s one religion that’s definitely not gonna get into heaven” See “Why an American, Christian Woman Converted to Islam” uploaded by Converting2Islam on 29 Mar. 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD3ZhqbX4Zs she mentions traveling, including to Morocco, and Istanbul, and meeting people who were peaceful, and talking to people about Islam. One man at a mosque answered all her questions and quoted verses in the Quran, which made her cry, she finally found what she had been looking for, the verses of the Quran touched her heart in a way the Bible did not. She is trying to be a better person and is encouraging people to just consider whether their beliefs are fulfilling their needs. She encourages people to talk to avoid misconceptions and understand others and their beliefs and faiths.
Christianity in the slave trade and she couldn’t call herself a Christian, knowing what Christians had done to black people: “Muslim is what the slaves were before they were Christians.” A concept she loved in Islam is that “there is only one God and you can worship that God without an intercessor.” She recalls an incident which made her realize the extent of her faith: she was at a party, somebody brought a gun, she was afraid of dying without being a Muslim, and she took her shahada the following Friday. She says “I’m very happy now, never once have I regretted it” and she knew it was right “because I had researched it and I put a lot into it before I made the decision.” Her contribution is also interesting in that she talks about her wish to follow the concept of dawah, of calling other to Islam,\(^\text{254}\) especially as a convert, and through hers and others’ videos. She adds looking at some statistics on the amount of people who converted after 9/11 and according to her “bad media” encouraged people to ask questions and media attention is giving her and others the opportunity “to show the world how good of a people and how good of a religion it really is.”

**Conclusion**

All those YouTube converts talk about learning about Islam through talking to other Muslims and reading about Islam and the Quran. Most of these videos were uploaded after 2010 and their journey to Islam took place a few years before or close to the time they decided to share their stories. None of them refer to other videos by converts as an influence on to their own conversion, but comments by other YouTube users to these

\(^{254}\) In her own words, the “opportunity to give dawah [which] literally means ‘issuing summons’ or ‘making invitations’. It is basically inviting people to learn about Islam and what the religion has to offer.”
videos include questions about and interest in converting to Islam. These videos may also have encouraged other young female converts to share their own conversion stories on YouTube. The influence of these videos on potential converts is difficult to assess; nevertheless, these conversion stories have a significant number of views – some over 100,000, and some of these converts’ pages have several thousand subscribers.\footnote{However, some converts do mention watching videos of converts on YouTube; this is the case of Nicole Queen, and of a woman from Texas who converted in April 2011: “Texas lady converts to Islam” uploaded by Adam Riaz on 28 April 2011. \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qB5OY8GejM} she also cites websites and videos who promote understanding of Islam and Muslims, also in comparison with Christianity and common beliefs. She mentions learning Arabic and learning how to pray.}

Beyond potentially encouraging conversion, these videos have the potential to bring awareness to and understanding of Islam and American converts to Islam, through accounts of their experiences, and in their own words. In their way, they contribute to interfaith dialog in the digital age, and provide cross-cultural perspectives on the practice and understanding of Islam in the U.S. today. It is all the more important to acknowledge them as their views on and practice of Islam is at the polar opposite of the negative media reports on and representations of (radical, emphasized or not) Muslims and Islam: where others have associated Islam with terror, anti-Americanism, radicalism, violence, hate, oppression, and threat, these American converts talk about peace, serenity, gratefulness, and love. They also talk about becoming a better person, being more helpful, and being eager to communicate, share and discuss their religious views with other Muslims and non-Muslims. Their messages and testimonies are peaceful and inspiring; their approach is not to convince others that Islam is right and that Muslims are good, rather, that Islam is right for them, that Muslims may be good or bad but should strive to be better people, through the practice of Islam. In a more indirect way than preacher, and public speakers,
they are, in a sense, still making or giving *dawah*, sharing their stories which may inspire others to learn and read and accept and embrace Islam. While opponents of Islam still evoke the image of Islam being “spread by the sword,” alluding to violent, forced conversion, these women’s sharing their stories may remind us of the phrase “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

Contrary to radical Islam, they represent a potential for a peaceful movement, and may be more successful in encouraging other young Americans to convert, through personal discovery facilitated by other converts. Maybe this is precisely so because they are not scholars, but ordinary, women who took an extraordinary path, and as a result, seem more happy, optimistic, serene and at peace than ever, a state a mind many wish to achieve. Their videos could be considered as a form of passive activism: they do not join organizations and go out of their way to express their views of Islam, do not preach or try to convince others by telling them what to think, but in the post 9/11 political and social context, their stories become part of oral history in the digital age, and may influence and inspire others, especially among their generation, nationwide, and worldwide. Though their videos, we see that these converts have nothing of potential terrorists, or radical

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256 A significant example is the story of Rebecca, whose conversion led both her parents to convert to Islam. In one video, Rebecca talks about how Islam changed her entire family’s life. She explains how her father started sitting in on Sunday classes and after one or two years converted – he took his *shahada* in the hospital – he had liver cancer and recovered. A little bit later her mom also converted, during Ramadan. They say: “don’t preach to others, just practice, if you preach to people their ears will automatically shut off, but if not but just practicing, people become curious and want to learn more about it.” See “The Final Installment of Sister Rebecca’s Story,” previously cited. One convert openly referred to *dawah*, The Jamaican Muslimah in “Why I Reverted/Converted to Islam,” previously quoted.

257 An in fact, several possible precursors to this phrase coined in a play by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839 do appear in the Old and New Testaments. See for example in the Epistle to the Hebrews, verse 4:12: “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.” [http://bible.cc/hebrews/4-12.htm](http://bible.cc/hebrews/4-12.htm) Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying “The ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr” although this is disputed and not present in the Quran or the Hadiths.
activists, they are kind and educated individuals who want to lead a righteous life and help make a different in other people’s lives. The fact that they have embraced Islam, as young educated Americans makes them capable of bridging what can be considered as “Muslimness” and “Americanness.” Among their family circle, their friends, and their community, they bring something that was considered to be outside, inside. Most of them mention meeting very few Muslims before converting, and for their family and friends, they become a Muslim that they know, and become a positive embodiment or representation of a Muslim person and by extension of Islam. Most of them mention the important of the distinction between Islam – the word of God, as primarily contained in the Quran, simple and rational, which some Muslims call “perfect,” and Muslims – people, imperfect human beings who make mistakes and have to learn and seek to be better. This distinction has often been blurred or erased in the post 9/11 political context and in the media.

We may note that conversion is just a step in their personal journey and lives. Faith is not acquired, but something to build on. More people might convert to Islam, while some Muslim converts may eventually stop practicing Islam. The post 9/11 phenomenon of conversion may be a phase, in the same way many people converted to Buddhism in the end of the 20th century. Or it might be the beginning of what many in Western countries are so afraid of, a stage in the course of Islam becoming the world’s most practiced religion. It is also important to remember that religion is one part of a person’s identity, and a person should not be reduced to being “a Muslim,” or a “Christian,” or a “Jew,” or a “convert.” But in a political context of “us” versus “them,” individuals hardly
escape labels. In any case, as long as there will be diversity, majorities and minorities, dialog is essential, and interfaith dialog in particular is essential to avoid more wars, conflicts, discrimination, and hatred, motivated by fear and miscommunication. As President Barack Obama said in a speech pronounced in Cairo in June 2009:

I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.\(^{258}\)

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