

ROADS TO MECCA: CONVERSION NARRATIVES OF EUROPEAN AND EURO-AMERICAN MUSLIMS

This study attempts to chart some relatively unmapped territory in the study of Islam in the West through considering writings of Europeans and Euro-Americans who have accepted Islam and reflected on this process through literary productions.¹

First of all the "conversion narrative" as a genre in the Western tradition merits some remarks. In considering conversion narratives one may assess the purpose of the author—is it to edify, inspire, justify, convince, or confess? Recent studies of a social scientific, especially sociological, orientation have cast doubt on the usefulness of conversion accounts for informing us of the actual process involved in a conversion experience, since they are already composed and refashioned after the change has occurred.² Bearing that criticism in mind, my approach can be characterized as investigating the literary aspects and cultural significance of these narratives, rather than as an attempt to use them to derive conclusions about psychological processes. In fact, although I have grouped these accounts together under the rubric of "conversion narratives" many of them exhibit conversion only as a sub-theme.

As an additional project, I plan to explore the literary traditions upon which the authors are drawing in composing these narratives and the sense in which they are breaking new ground. For example, what do elements of these texts tell us about the experience of becoming Muslim at particular periods in recent history?

Through discussing examples of such works I plan to distinguish representative genres, as well as to comment on generational, gender, and other factors influencing the choices made in telling these stories.

At the outset we must distinguish between those narratives which are autobiographical and those which are composed by others or collated as brief self-statements. In this study I will primarily focus on longer works

1 Some preliminary studies of conversion to Islam by Westerners informed by sociological or psychological categories are Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wa in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and "Becoming a Muslim in the Christian West: A Profile of Conversion to a Minority Religion," in *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* XII (Jan. 1991): 159-69.

2 B. Taylor, "Recollection and Membership Converts' Talk and the Ratiocination of Commonality," *Sociology: Journal of the British Sociological Association* 12/2 (May 1978): 316-24.

necessary from white America. As Muslims, the members of the Nation of Islam were guaranteed the freedom of religious practice that would prevent harassment. The goal therefore was to be Islamic, but not orthodox. Elijah Muhammad's independence from the need to be accepted by other Muslims is evidenced by statements in the Nation of Islam's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, in the early 1970s. "The Old Islam was led by white people, white Muslims, but this one will not be. This Islam will be established and led by Black Muslims only"⁴⁵ and "These poor Orthodox or Conventional Muslim brothers fail to understand. . . the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. . . 99% of our Muslim brothers from the East have been deceived one way or another."⁴⁶

On the other hand, Elijah Muhammad's attitude toward the classical tradition of Islam is paralleled by many Muslim scholars' attitude toward biblical materials, the latter of which can be summarized as follows: if something from the Judeo-Christian tradition disagreed with the Qur'^{ān}, it was wrong and should not be consulted; if however it agreed with the Qur'^{ān}, it need not be consulted. Therefore, when Elijah Muhammad felt that his understanding of the Qur'^{ān} was both correct and sufficient, whereas classical exegesis of the Qur'^{ān} was either incorrect or unnecessary, he displayed a confidence in Islam characteristic of many Muslim *mufassirs*.

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Nor is it an expedient directed at the black community any longer, for the aegis of orthodox Islam means little in America's black ghettos. So long as the movement keeps its color identity with the rising black peoples of Africa, it could discard all its Islamic attributes—its name, its prayers to Allah, its citations from the Quran, everything "Muslim," without substantial risk to its appeal to the black masses. Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 210.

⁴⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *Muhammad Speaks* 4 (February, 1972).

⁴⁶ *Muhammad Speaks* 11 (February, 1972). Far more important is not the Islamic links, or even the original Asiatic links, but the African links. "The Black African, the Aboriginal Black People of the earth are our real brothers. . . . The Black Man of America and the Black Man of Africa must unite again. We are part of, and belong to each other." *Muhammad Speaks* 17 (October 1969). See also Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 211-12.

featuring autobiographical content. It should be noted, however, that even these works are quite diverse in scope and intent.

There are a number of basic genres of Westerners' conversion narratives to Islam which I term the short testimonial,³ the pilgrimage account, the Sufi-oriented narrative, the esoteric quest motif,⁴ and the explanation. In this study, it seems appropriate to consider the longer genres, ones focused on the pilgrimage, and then, the later Sufi-conversion narratives. At the conclusion of the paper, I will mention yet another emergent trend, narratives which tackle issues faced by Western Muslims living in their native societies.

Motif of the Pilgrimage Narrative and Conversion to Islam

The most prevalent genre of conversion accounts are those embedded in pilgrimage narratives and it is to this type that I will give the most attention here. Notable early examples of this genre are: *The Road to Mecca* (1954) by Muḥammad Asad,⁵ *Triumphant Pilgrimage: An English Muslim's Journey from Sarawak to Mecca*⁶ as told by David Chale (pseud.) to Owen Rutter,⁷ *From Drury Lane to Mecca*⁸—the story of Hedley (Mahmoud Mobarek) Churchward, two books by St. John Philby,⁹ and one female pilgrimage account by Lady Evelyn Cobbold.¹⁰

³ These are brief statements such as those collected in Arafat K. El-Ashi, *Why we Embraced Islam* (Kuwait: Scientific Publishing House, 1977) or published over the years as special features in Muslim newspapers. For example Larry Poston provides references to a number of these accounts published in *Muslim News International*, *Islamic Review*, *Islamic Horizons*, etc. *Islamic Da'wa*, 209-11.

More recent authors have assembled works on the 'varieties of convert experience.' These works, by both insiders and outsiders, tend to situate shorter conversion accounts within the context of an argument that conversion to Islam is a significant cultural phenomenon. They also tend to illustrate the variety of motivations and class backgrounds of converts. See Lisbeth Rocher and Fatima Cherqaoui, *D'une foi l'autre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986); and Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam after Malcolm X* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

⁴ I will however cite some examples of these in a footnote below.

⁵ Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1982 (1st edition, 1954).

⁶ London/ Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1937.

⁷ Owen Rutter (1889-1944) was an English journalist and author who had served in World War One and later as an administrator in North Borneo. He wrote many other works including *Through Formosa* (1923) and *White Rajah* (1931).

⁸ 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* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1982 reprint of 1931 edition).

⁹ H. St. John B. Philby, *A Pilgrim in Arabia* (London: Robert Hale, 1946) and *Arabian Days: An Autobiography* (London: Robert Hale, 1948).

¹⁰ Lady Evelyn Cobbold, *Pilgrimage to Mecca* (London: John Murray, 1934). Cobbold claims to be the "first" female (Northern) European Ḥajji but this is unlikely given remarks in Rosenthal, *From Drury Lane*, 238-39 and John T. F. Keane, *Six Months In Meccah: An Account of the Mohammedan Pilgrimage to Meccah* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1881), who

Triumphant Pilgrimage, published in 1937, is the story of an Englishman who had served as an administrator in Sarawak, and was impressed by Malay culture and, in particular, the role of Islam in it. Gradually, he becomes committed to helping the Malays preserve the best aspects of their religio-cultural heritage and decides that he can only really be effective among them as a Muslim. In order to be accepted he also feels that he needs to perform the pilgrimage, and that his sincere commitment will be reinforced if he is accompanied by a Muslim Malay wife. He returns to England for several years to accumulate sufficient money for the journey and then goes back to Malaya where he marries Munirah, a Malay village girl, who in order to marry him obtains a divorce from her abusive, older Malay husband. Together they travel to London in order for Chale to obtain a visa for Jeddah. Along the way, Munirah is transformed from a rustic to a sophisticated woman of the world who excites admiration in the finest restaurants and clubs of France and England. Their relationship remains chaste throughout the account, at first due to their mutual intention to perform the pilgrimage. Ultimately, it seems that the author's plan is that she will return to her village alone as a distinguished Hajjah, while he will remain in the center of European power trying to lobby for Arab and Muslim political causes. Due to his determination, sincerity, and a certain worldliness, he is able to do the nearly impossible and talk his way into the pilgrimage which they successfully perform together.

The story of Hedley Churchward begins with a preface by the narrator, Eric Rosenthal, recounting Churchward's biography, beginning with the Muslim funeral in 1929 in Cape Town of Haji Mahmoud Mobarek, born of a pious Anglican family at the Hampshire cantonment town of Aldershot.¹¹ After a brief discussion of Churchward's family and childhood, Rosenthal reviews his early career as a scene painter in the British theater world of Drury Lane. In the early 1880s Churchward went on a holiday sketching trip to the Alhambra in Spain. He was entranced and extended his trip to Morocco where he seemed to find an affinity with the local people and culture. After that holiday came to an end he still returned regularly, finally adopting native dress. "No longer did the artist trek through Tunis or Morocco in a lounge suit and a bowler hat. He wore the silver-banded head-dress and white robes of a Bedouin. At the studio in Drury Lane he was Mr. Hedley Churchward. In North Africa, amid the camps and townlets of the Arabs, he was greeted as Mahmoud

mention European women who performed *haji* with their Muslim husbands. Perhaps Cobbold was the first to do it "on her own" and write about it, essentially in diary form.

¹¹ Rosenthal, *From Drury Lane*, 4.

the fortunate. One day he told his kinfolk in Aldershot that he had become a Muslim."¹²

Churchward traveled widely around the British Empire, Australia, South Africa and Egypt. "On the few occasions when he entered European company Churchward again became a cultured, highly-educated Englishman, whose deliberate, old-fashioned drawing room manners could only have been learnt in the best society of his home country."¹³

He married an Egyptian woman in 1900 and decided to set off for the pilgrimage in 1908. The rest of the book is the account of his pilgrimage told in the first person, although Rosenthal states that it is he who is going "to use the old gentleman's own words as much as possible to put into a coherent tale the haphazard facts which came out in ordinary talk."¹⁴

Harry St. John Philby¹⁵ writes of performing the pilgrimage in *A Pilgrim in Arabia*,¹⁶ but goes into a more extensive account of his conversion to Islam in *Arabian Days*.¹⁷ His account in *A Pilgrim* is reminiscent of a guidebook in that he describes the ceremonies of the *hajj* and the topography of Mecca and Medina in a rather detached way. There is a certain coolness and practicality even in his account of deciding to become a Muslim after years of contact with Muslims culminating in a long sojourn in Saudi Arabia and friendship with King Ibn Sa'ūd. For example, in a passage appreciative of Wahhabi teachings, he writes,

Ever since my early days in India I had been greatly attracted by Islam and its highly simplified emphasis on what seemed to me the eternal verities of life and philosophy. . . it was not until I went to Arabia that I came into contact with what seemed to me undeniably a pure form of Islam, deriving exclusively from the original sources of its inspiration, the Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Prophet, and owing nothing to subsequent theological interpolation and exegesis.¹⁸

Lady Evelyn Cobbold is the only female among this early group of European pilgrims. She performed the *hajj* in 1933, and while in Saudi Arabia was a guest of the Philbys. There she met Prince Faisal but not the King. According to her biography, she grew up spending the winters in a villa in Algeria where her parents went for the sunshine, and therefore

¹² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ Philby (1885-1960) was the father of the famous Cold War spy and defector to the Soviets, Kim Philby, who coincidentally seems not to have been taken at all by his father's life style choice and denies any influence on his own career decision. *My Silent War* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 145-46.

¹⁶ Kim Philby, *A Pilgrim in Arabia* (London: Robert Hale, 1946).

¹⁷ *Arabian Days: An Autobiography by H. St. John B. Philby* (London: Robert Hale, 1948), 278-89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

she knew some Arabic and had exposure to Islam. As an adult she realized her Muslim identity when she spontaneously burst out during an interview with the Pope, "I am a Moslem."¹⁹

Her *hajj* account is written in the form of a diary which presents a brief history of the life of the Prophet and basic teachings of Islam. "The more I read and the more I studied, the more convinced I became that Islam was the most practical religion, and the one most calculated to solve the world's many perplexing problems, and to bring humanity peace and happiness."²⁰ Her claim that she is the first Muslim Englishwoman to perform the *hajj* is probably not accurate, but perhaps she is the first to come on her own.

The Road to Mecca of Muḥammad Asad (1900-1993)²¹ is the most famous conversion account by a European Muslim. While not a pilgrimage narrative per se, its charm lies in the rich and evocative description of Arabian life. Among the early writers, Asad has the most to say about spirituality and this may help explain the persistent appeal of his work; "it is not even a story of a deliberate search for faith—for that faith came upon me, over the years, without any endeavor on my part to find it. My story is simply that of a European's discovery of Islam and of his integration within the Muslim community."²²

Asad's account has a certain complexity in that he is writing about events of the 1920s and 1930s from the political and intellectual perspectives of the early 1950s. He thus sounds a new note which increasingly defines the position of Muslims, indigenous and by choice. This is the political and cultural conflict between the West and Islam. In his introduction Asad sets up this opposition through recounting his analysis in terms of a discussion he has with a sympathetic and sophisticated Western colleague to whom he explains the psychological roots of this conflict in "subconscious" European memories of the Crusades, as an event which traumatized the emergent psyche of young European civilization.²³ This oppositional relationship, in turn, explains the persistent hostility of the West to Islam and things Islamic. This element of Asad's narrative places him in between, as it were, the earlier and later phases of pilgrimage conversion accounts since he identifies himself as split from the West in a way not possible for earlier converts.

Asad anticipates the contemporary discourse against Eurocentrism,

¹⁹ Cobbold, *Pilgrimage*, xiv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Asad is also the first Western Muslim to participate in internal Muslim discourse about Islam through his translations. Yvonne Haddad notes the influence of his writings on conservative Muslim intellectuals such as Sayyid Quṭb.

²² Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

Ever since Greek and Roman times, European thinkers and historians have been prone to contemplate the history of the world from the standpoint and in terms of European history and western cultural experiences alone. Non-western civilizations enter the picture only in so far as their existence, or particular movements within them, have or had a direct influence on the destinies of Western man; and thus, in Western eyes, the history of the world and its various cultures amounts in the last resort to little more than an expanded history of the West.²⁴

The book is structured around the motif of the author's various journeys across Arabia and the Middle East culminating in his performance of *hajj* in 1927. In the course of the narrative Asad shifts topically and chronologically among his biography, his adventures in the Middle East, and reflections of Islam.

Asad grew up in a Jewish family in what is now Poland. He frequented the cafe society of Vienna as a youth and talked himself into a career as a journalist.²⁵ At age twenty-two he went to Jerusalem to visit a relative.²⁶ From this time he begins to make unfavorable comparisons between European civilization and the East. In Jerusalem he contrasts the European Jews who are "out of all harmony with the picture that surrounds them" with the Sephardim who are more like Arabs.²⁷ On his trips back to Europe, he increasingly becomes aware of the ugliness of peoples' expressions.²⁸ A repeated motif is his disapproval of the Western (Christian inspired) separation of spirit and flesh.²⁹ He further is oppressed by the arrogance and emptiness of the modern condition which he interprets as the "*Dajjāl*" or anti-Christ figure predicted in the Islamic *hadith*.³⁰

Asad is again theoretically prescient in characterizing himself as "belated."³¹ In a remarkable passage he philosophizes about the position of a Westerner encountering his true self in the Orient. His view of the shift from the intangible possibilities pursued by "discoverers, adventurers or creative artists"—is that they were seeking "the innermost springs of their own lives." "We late-comers are also seeking our own lives—but we are

²⁴ Asad, p. 3.

²⁵ Asad's background and youth is briefly compared to that of Theodor Herzl by Pierre Assouline, *Les Nouveaux Convertis* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1982), 180.

²⁶ His pre-conversion book about this period is *Unromantisches Morgenland* (Frankfurt, 1924).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92, 308-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-78, 100, 136. He also mentions this theme in *Islam at the Crossroads* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1947), 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 293, 295. The *Dajjāl* is mentioned in a number of *hadith* reports as a feature of the trials which will emerge as the end of the world approaches.

³¹ For a discussion of the theory of belatedness see Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Critical Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

obsessed by the desire to secure our own life before it unfolds itself." By entering "the tremendous strangeness of another world" the European experiences the dangerous difference which may ultimately lead to greater self-knowledge.

The challenge presented by Asad is that of grasping, comprehending and communicating with the other. He poses the rhetorical question, "Is this possible or desirable?"

His response is that this is possible if one is willing to exchange familiar habits of thought for new, unfamiliar ones. In an earlier passage he wrote, "For when I ask myself, 'What is the sum total of my life?' something in me seems to answer, 'You have set out to exchange one world for another—to gain a new world for yourself in exchange for an old one which you can never really possess.' And I know with startling clarity that such an undertaking might indeed take an entire lifetime."³²

Asad's resolution to the dilemma of otherness is to attribute the sense of cultural exclusion to an error peculiar to Western ways of thinking—"we are wont to underestimate the creative value of the unfamiliar and are always tempted to do violence to it, to appropriate it, to take it over, on our own terms, into our own intellectual environment."³³ He proposes that "cultural difference can, and should, be overcome by means other than intellectual rape: it might perhaps be overcome by surrendering our senses to it."³⁴

Asad's conclusion is that the juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange awakens one to the intangible realities of their own life, "to become aware of the strangeness of the world around you and thereby to reawaken your own, personal, forgotten reality. . . ."³⁵

A third theme in Asad's narrative is the decay of Muslim societies, which he does not blame on the West per se, but rather seems to attribute to a loss of faith and authenticity,³⁶ for after all, "It was not the Muslims that had made Islam great, it was Islam that had made the Muslims great."³⁷ A number of his comments on this account are reminiscent of Muḥammad Iqbal, whom he cites as a colleague in the introduction. "After leaving Arabia I went to India and there met the great Muslim poet-philosopher and spiritual father of the Pakistan idea, Muḥammad Iqbal. It was he who soon persuaded me to give up my plans of traveling to Eastern Turke-

³² *Ibid.*, 48,

³³ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* In several places Asad mentions a youthful interest in psycho-analysis. This is evident in a number of his formulations, although in this case one might rather detect a Jungian influence in his thought.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 189-93, 282.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 193, 283.

stan, China and Indonesia and to remain in India to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state which was then hardly more than a dream in Iqbal's visionary mind."³⁸ In fact, the tenor of Asad's Islamic writings, for example, his translation of the Qur'ān, is clearly that of an Islamic Modernist.³⁹

While the journey is a powerful trope for structuring a number of these narratives, it does surprisingly little in these accounts to lay out a spiritual itinerary of inner development, whether as direct self-revelation of psychological or spiritual changes or as indirect allegorization. Thus neither the *Western Pilgrim's Progress*⁴⁰ nor the Eastern fable genre such as Attar's *Conference of the Birds* is a direct precursor. Instead, the journey in these accounts primarily constitutes a test in which external circumstances are mastered, and the individual is able to use his or her Western skills to successfully function and at some levels 'pass' and even 'surpass' in the new host religio-culture.

The literary precursors of the pilgrimage conversion accounts are rather the adventure travelogues produced primarily by British explorers. While Sir Richard Burton's⁴¹ is well known, there were quite a number of others, many of which are mentioned in F. E. Peters's book on the *hajj* in a chapter on "Making the *Hajj* Under False Pretense,"⁴² an escapade which represents the ultimate penetration of the Orient. Some explorers took the authoritative attitude of the anthropologist or geographer in measuring and documenting their findings of exotic locals and practices. Others smirked at their success in fooling the naive natives and penetrating their sacred precincts.⁴³ The Western Muslim narrators on the whole avoid the excesses of their precursors but still are not totally free from the colonial gaze and attitudes.

The pilgrimage account narratives of the colonial period present the following themes:

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁹ Note that his teacher in Egypt, Mustafa al-Marāghī, is described as a follower of al-Afghani and 'Abduh, p. 188. Among Asad's Islamic works are *Islam at the Crossroads* (Delhi: Arafat, 1934), *Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Berkeley: University of California, 1961), *This Law of Ours* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1987), *Sahih Bukhari* (partial translation) (Lahore: Arafat, 1938), *The Message of the Qur'an* (trans.) (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1987).

⁴⁰ On the tradition of European pilgrimage narratives and the interiorization of the journey motif by Protestants see Donald R. Howard, *Virtues and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁴¹ Richard Burton, *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah (1855)* (New York: Dover, 1964).

⁴² F. E. Peters, "On Making the Hajj Under Pretense," *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton, 1994), 206-65.

⁴³ John T. F. Keane, *Six Months In Meccah: An Account of the Mohammedan Pilgrimage to Meccah* (London: Tinsley brothers, 1881). This pilgrimage made in 1877-78 is continued in his *My Journey to Medinah* (London: Winsley Bros., 1881).

a) *Joining the Muslims after becoming disaffected by the colonial rule over Muslim societies.*⁴⁴

For example, according to David Chale in *Triumphant Pilgrimage*,

And the more I read and the more I learned from the Malays the more I felt that I might be able to do some good. When I first went out to Sarawak the Malays were all right. They were good Muslims. They went on the *hajj*. They observed their own customs, as James Brooke intended they should. But as time went on I could see their increasing contact with white men wasn't doing them any good. Aping European ways, and all that. Getting lax about their religion. Becoming ashamed of their perfectly good customs. D'you know what I mean?⁴⁵

b) *Feeling that as a European one could somehow influence the direction of Muslim dealings with Western colonial powers more effectively—for the benefit of Muslims.*

In *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, the explicit aim of the author is "to unite Islam, and to make it a power for peace."⁴⁶ He advocates British support for an Arab confederation and giving Mecca a lead in this.⁴⁷ Chale explains that,

The essential teaching of Islam is peace, though most Europeans don't realize it. As a matter of fact the word 'Muslim' means 'one at peace'. But the unity of Islam was menaced. It has been disunited by quarrels and petty jealousies. That seemed an appalling thing to me. Nearly as bad as what's happened to Christianity. I thought that perhaps I, as a European, might be able to help. Do something no Muslim has ever done. Make all Muslims understand the strength of their religion lies in its old and magnificent simplicity. Wake them up so they'd realize the world force for good lying dormant in their faith. . . Now that I've been to Mecca I'm more convinced than ever. I tell you that place is like a gigantic cosmopolitan club. Turks, Chinese, Malays, Afghans, Syrians, Africans are all friends and brothers there, rubbing shoulders with one another. I never saw a row. Never heard a harsh word even. How can they be brought together like that? Only by the power of Islam. And if Islam has that power in Arabia, why can't it be extended through the countries of the world?⁴⁸

⁴⁴ There is a sense of this in the autobiographical statements of Roger Garaudy, for example, in *Min al-ilhād ilā al-Imān: Liqā'āt wā mu'āwarāt*, ed. Rāmī Kallāwī (Damascus: Dār Qutayba, 1990), 127-48.

⁴⁵ *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 16-17.

⁴⁶ Rutter, *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 9 (note).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Asad notes the perplexity of other Westerners when they realized that “my activities at the United Nations made it obvious that I identified myself not merely ‘functionally’ but also emotionally and intellectually with the political and cultural aims of the Muslim world in general.”⁴⁹

There is a sense of this going to help the Muslims even in the later position of Maryam Jameelah, who as a child in the 1940s writes her father, “I am saving the pictures and books which Daddy gave me on my birthday so I can go to Egypt or Palestine and keep the Arabs like they are instead of copying us.”⁵⁰

c) Overcoming the difficulty of winning permission to make the *hajj* due to suspicion over the sincerity of European “professors” of Islam.

Hedley (Mahmoud Mobarek) Churchward (d. 1929) claims repeatedly that he is the first European to openly perform the *hajj* (in 1910) as a ‘genuine’ Muslim.⁵¹ Still he has to be tested several times, first, by a committee of scholars in Egypt,⁵² and then later in Mecca itself.⁵³ In fact he is falsely accused of being an impostor and successfully rebuts these charges due to his extensive Islamic knowledge and impressive credentials.

By the time of Owen Rutter (David Chale) in the 1930s King Ibn Sa‘ūd had made an order that a person must have been a Muslim for at least six years before undertaking the *hajj* in order to put a stop to bogus Muslims attempting this as an adventure.⁵⁶ It should also be noted that King Ibn Sa‘ūd and his Wahhabi followers only conquered Mecca in 1925 and that most of the pilgrimage account narratives by Muslim converts date from the decade immediately following this event. Hence both the personage of Ibn Sa‘ūd and generally favorable expressions towards Wahhabi piety and restoration of law and order find a place in their accounts. For example, Philby states, “The Wahhabi creed seemed to me, as the result of deep study, to be the ideal form of religion, and the fanaticism of its followers did not displease me.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 1.

⁵⁰ Maryam Jameelah, *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth in America (1945-1962): The Story of One Western Convert's Quest for Truth* (Lahore: Muḥammad Yūsuf Khan and Sons, 1989), 9.

⁵¹ Rosenthal, 43. This, however, is not correct. *Arabian Adventurer: The Story of Haji Williamson by Stanton Hope* (London: Robert Hale, 1951) is the story of an Englishman who travels around the world and converts to Islam in the early 1890s while still in his early twenties. He completely goes over to the Arab way of life and makes the *hajj* three times, i. e., in the early 1890s, again in 1898 and in 1936. It seems from his account that at least several converted European women married to Muslims had made the *hajj* by this period.

⁵² Rosenthal, *From Drury Lane*, 44-48.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

⁵⁴ *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 142-43.

⁵⁵ Philby, *Arabian Days*, 278.

Chale's account, like that of Asad and Churchward, features encounters with Saudi royalty and successful repartee based on his cultural knowledge and "insiderness." *Triumphant Pilgrimage* recounts his interviews with Emir Faisal and his subsequent audience with King Ibn Sa'ūd.⁵⁶ Chale trumps Ibn Saud's objections to his making the pilgrimage that year by asking, "Is your majesty, by preventing me from going to Mecca, prepared to accept the burden of my sins?"⁵⁷

e) *The Beauty of Muslim societies/culture.*

This is an observation common to all accounts. The beauty may be physical, as in Asad's description of his Arab guides. "Zayd is probably the handsomest man I have ever known. . . Over the narrow wheat-coloured face with its strongly moulded cheekbones and the severe and at the same time sensual mouth lies that expectant gravity which is so characteristic of the desert Arab—dignity and self-composure wedded to intimate sweetness."⁵⁹ "Mansur is so handsome that if he were to appear on the streets of a Western city all the women would turn to look after him."⁶⁰

Beauty of customs and character is also cited as in Chale's story. "But what came to attract Chale even more strongly was their (the Malays') patience, their forbearance, their modesty, and their calm acceptance of the facts of life and death. Distress and poverty never disturbed them, he envied them their peace of mind."⁶¹

f) *Respect and admiration for the teachings of Islam.*

This is clearly an important theme and specific Islamic teachings such as the five pillars, monotheism, and the life of the Prophet Muḥammad are recounted in some detail in most of the texts.

g) *Passing.*

Each of the early pilgrimage accounts features a photograph or drawing of the author in Arab dress, usually as the frontispiece. For example, Churchward often wore Arab dress, as in the account in which two Englishwomen traveling on the same train in Egypt openly discuss his appearance, commenting, "he is rather like Cousin Henry; on looking at him one would hardly take the fellow for an Arab."⁶¹ When he wears his

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 183-6, 208-13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁸ Asad, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁰ *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 40.

⁶¹ Rosenthal, *From Drury Lane*, 35.

Moroccan fez with a long black tassel in Cape Town, the waitress in a fashionable cafe says that she can not serve him owing to his headgear.⁶²

The theme of ambivalence of identity is evident even in the case of Orientalists such as Burton and Snouck Hurgronje who spent time in Mecca. Debates still persist as to whether they were, in fact, closet Muslims.⁶³

h) Colonial themes—exoticizing and the European gaze.

In *Triumphant Pilgrimage* Chale wryly describes suggestions that he should take a slave wife⁶⁴ and notes the objections of Munirah to this proposal. At the same time, Chale's depiction of his own sexuality (remember that his marriage to Munirah is chaste) is implicitly contrasted with that of the Arabs.

The road was thronged with scores of uxorious Bedouins who had stoned the final pillar and were hurrying back with their wives to perform the final rites so that they might enjoy the embraces that had been denied them while they wore the *ihram*. Sex is of such account in the daily life of Arabs that they suffer more from being deprived, even for religious reasons, of relations with their wives, than men of other races. They had satisfied their spiritual longings on the plain of Arafat, and now it was the natural order of their lives that they should satisfy their physical appetites when they got back to Mina.⁶⁵

Not only does this echo the sentiments of the colonial administrator who is above the licentious desires of the natives, but it also demonstrates his upper-class resources for continence as an educated English gentleman.⁶⁶

Being both a European and a Muslim complicates the attitudes projected in these accounts. Philby, representing an extremely privileged British male who accompanies the royal entourage, made the pilgrimage in 1931. He recounts the details of the performance of the pilgrimage without giving us a sense of his inner reflections of a religious or "spiritual" nature.

His comments concerning the crowded and disorganized conditions at the Namira mosque are telling. "I contented myself with thinking that a

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶³ See for example, Harry Joesoef, "Snouck Hurgronje; Moslim of Niet," in *Tirade XXIX* (Jan-Feb. 1985): 98-128.

⁶⁴ *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 193-97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 255. Similar comments on p. 174.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of class consciousness embedded in colonial discourse on sexuality see Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Duke University Press, 1995).

little organization of the ceremony would obviate a good deal of physical discomfort and spiritual unrest,"⁶⁷ and

. . . the congregation from time to time gave vent to tears or tearful demonstrations as the memories of the Prophet's farewell pilgrimage of A. D. 632—almost exactly 1,300 years ago—were brought freshly to mind. Close by me an aged Indian lay convulsed in sobs, and one began to feel in common with one's fellow worshippers something of the solemnity of an occasion, designed to keep alive in the hearts of men the story of an inspiration which had reached its climax on this very spot so many centuries ago in the perfection of a faith which in the interval has spread far beyond the borders of Arabia to be a guiding light to millions upon millions in Asia and Africa and even in Europe.⁶⁸

More Recent (Post-1970) Examples of Pilgrimage Conversion Accounts

The "European performs the Hajj as a Muslim" genre seems to have dried up since the Second World War. This is significant in reflecting a shift in the way Westerners have regarded the Orient and in the way they actually have encountered it in the post-colonial/post-civil rights period.⁶⁹ There are, however, several *hajj* narratives from this later period which will be described in the light of these changes.

The Fifth Pillar by Saida Miller Khalifa⁷⁰ is the account of a British woman married to an Egyptian whom she met in Canada. They performed the *hajj* in 1970. The book focuses on the *hajj* and its rituals but also includes encounters with other pilgrims (*hujjaj*), descriptions of the conditions in which she and her husband stay, and personal and cultural observations. It does not go into her reasons for becoming Muslim or the process involved except in a two-page introduction where she writes,

Twelve years before going on the *hajj* I had been a person without a specific faith, although I had always believed in God. Then gradu-

⁶⁷ Philby, *Pilgrimage*, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁹ Americans also had their own version of de-colonization with a change in racial attitudes and legislation and the increased immigration to the U. S. and Canada in the wake of liberalized immigration policies after 1965. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has a certain significance in illustrating this development which is beyond the scope of the present paper. On this work as autobiography see James M. Cox, "Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 181-93. African-American conversion narratives to Islam have both important distinctions from and similarities to this material which could be considered in a separate study.

⁷⁰ Saida Miller Khalifa, *The Fifth Pillar* (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1977).

ally through reading, especially Pickthall's, *Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, and discussion with a devoted group of Muslims in London, I seemed by some mysterious agency to be brought to Islam.⁷¹

My aim has been simply to tell the story of my first *hajj* and in doing so to try and convey something of the strangeness and wonder, the tumult and peace, and above all the deep spiritual enjoyment experienced in the course of its completion. It seemed to me that the impact of so profound an experience on an English woman like myself might be of interest to others with a Western background. . . . As far as I know, all previous accounts in English have been written by men, so a feminine viewpoint may be timely.⁷²

Her test in order to obtain permission to make *hajj* from the authorities illustrates both gender and generational differences in contrast to the previous accounts. She arrives in Jeddah with no documentation as to her conversion.⁷³ She is taken before a judge where she is asked to recite the five pillars (in English) and then some short *suras* of the Qurʾān in Arabic. How unlike the male accounts is her statement,

How miserably inadequate I felt my Arabic then, the Qurʾanic verses learned with painful slowness, and only memorized after several months of phonetic repetition before I acquired a significant knowledge of the language. My accent also left much to be desired.⁷⁴

At one point she comments favorably on the fact that Arabia is now safe and regularized, comparing herself to Doughty who tried to sneak in as a Christian. "Now, here I was, less than half a century later, entering the sacred territory in perfect safety and without the slightest fear because my passport bore the official recognition of my faith."⁷⁵

Interestingly, Saida Miller Khalifa's statement, "I was afraid of looking too conspicuous in the neighboring cafes but I need not have worried because other *hajjis* could be seen also taking a meal out, although the majority of customers were men"⁷⁶ seems to indicate unease in relation to her gender rather than to being a Westerner.

Another account, "The Difficult Journey," by Ahmad Thomson,⁷⁷ describes a *hajj* performed in the 1970s by the author and two other disciples of Shaikh Abd al-Qādir al-Sufi.⁷⁸ A persistent theme of this account

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁷² *Ibid.*, xxvi. This is inaccurate since Lady Evelyn Cobbold wrote about her *hajj* in the 1930s.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷ Ahmad Thomson, *The Difficult Journey* (London: Ta Ha, 1994).

is that the author and his companions set out with minimal funds and trust in God, and that they encounter the hospitality of Muslims along the way in order to accomplish their project. Thus, free meals and places to stay are celebrated repeatedly in the narrative, and indeed the hospitality and acceptance which meet the travelers, three young British Muslims, is remarkable. In a way, this is even more striking in contrast to the *hajj* accounts of the colonial period, in which the narrator was privileged as a European and as someone empowered by knowledge of the modern world. While focusing on the performance of the *hajj* and the journey leading to it, this is not strictly speaking a conversion account. Perhaps one could call it a "converted account" since the author constantly explains events in terms of their Islamic or mystical significance. It provides an extensive glossary of Arabic/Islamic terms at the back, a feature of a number of the later accounts.

Michael Wolfe is a Californian who writes about his pilgrimage undertaken in the late 1980s.⁷⁸ During the first half of the book Wolfe describes his trip to visit old friends in Morocco in anticipation of continuing on the *hajj*. He had only been Muslim for a year, but had become interested in Islam and Muslim societies much earlier though visits to Africa and especially two previous visits to Morocco in 1981 and 1985. He describes his religious background as mixed Christian and Jewish, his choice of Islam arising from "looking for an escape route. . . from the isolating terms of a materialistic culture."⁸⁰ At the same time he notes "I was looking for a framework I could live with, a vocabulary of spiritual concepts applicable to the life I was living now. I did not want to 'trade in' my culture. I wanted access to new meanings."⁸¹

Wolfe's account is interesting in that both he and the Moroccans with whom he is engaged are quite relaxed about religion. His Moroccan con-

⁷⁸ Abd al-Qādir is the Muslim name of Ian Dallas, a Western Sufi teacher of British origin. Dallas, a scriptwriter who played the part of the magician in Fellini's movie "8 1/2," was initiated by a Moroccan Sufi, Shaikh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb al-Darqāwī in 1967. By 1976 he had enough followers to establish a Sufi community in Norwich, England. After a period of promoting Māliki fiqh as the ideal legal system, he seems to have abjured Sufism in favor of a more strict and militant Islamic position. These developments may be traced in his writings which move from *The Book of Strangers*, a mystical quest novel (New York: Pantheon, 1972), to *The Way of Muḥammad* (Berkeley: Diwan, 1975) to *Jihad: A Groundplan* (Norwich: U. K.: Diwan Press, 1978) and then to Shaikh Abd al-Qādir al-Murabit, *The Sign of the Sword* (Norwich: Diwan Press, 1984). See Abdul Wahab el-Affendi, "A False Dawn" in *Inquiry Magazine* (January 1988): 50-56. Abd al-Qādir continues to have followers active in Spain, South Africa, England, Germany, and South Central Los Angeles, USA..

⁷⁹ *The Hadj: An American's Pilgrimage to Mecca* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993). Wolfe was featured in April 1997 on a broadcast of the ABC News Television program "Nightline" narrating an on-site presentation on the *hajj*.

⁸⁰ Wolfe, 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

tacts seem to be those he had befriended on previous trips who had been interacting more intensively with Westerners since the influx of the hippies in the 1960s.⁸² They run tourist shops and cafes. Wolfe's reading list is also eclectic;⁸³ and he has done research on previous pilgrim narratives from Burton to Malcolm X. While Wolfe is not a Sufi himself, he is more in contact with them than previous writers. He mentions attending a Sufi session in Tangier⁸⁴ and runs into disciples of Shaikh Nazim in Mecca.⁸⁵

His companions during most of the *hajj* are two African Americans. They are in the Holy Cities for the period of the *hajj* only and stay at a hotel except for the obligatory days spent at Mina. He comments on the multi-ethnic composition of the *Ḥajji* group with American passports, seeing it both as a microcosm of the *hajj* and as the New Americans, resembling a random slice of Los Angeles.⁸⁶

His point of view and purpose in writing are distinctive and suggest ambivalence about the Western Muslim identity. "It has not been my aim to provide a handbook on Islam or a pilgrim's guide. I have tried to address non-Muslims as well as Muslims, recording the essentials of Islam as a modern Western writer might perceive them, without proselytizing."

The significance of these later accounts when compared and contrasted with the earlier set will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper.

Sufi-Oriented Conversion Narratives

A recent (1990s) trend in "conversion narratives" is illustrated by book-length Sufi⁸⁷ accounts such as *The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path*,⁸⁸ *The Sky is not the Limit: An Australian Woman's Spiritual Journey Within the Traditions*,⁸⁹ and *Embracing Islam*.⁹⁰

⁸² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11. Maxime Rodinson and Martin Lings on the Prophet Muhammad, Ibn Arabi and Vincent Crapanzano on Sufism, Western writers such as Paul Bowles and Jorge Luis Borges and Moroccans such as Mohammed Mrabet and Fatima Mernissi.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁸⁷ On Sufi movements in America see Marcia K. Hermansen, "In the Garden of American Sufi movements: Hybrids and Perennials," in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter Clarke (London: Luzac Oriental Press, 1996), 149-72.

⁸⁸ Muhyiuddin Shakor, *The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path* (Element Books, 1994).

⁸⁹ Amatullah Armstrong, *And the Sky is not the Limit: An Australian Woman's Spiritual Journey within the Traditions* (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1993).

⁹⁰ Noorudeen Durkee, unpublished manuscript.

The Sky is not the Limit evokes the trope of “the journey through life.” “My journey took me through the hippie generation, the national and international art scenes, much traveling and living abroad—until I reached the one true journey—the journey within myself to the Source of all Life—Allah.”⁹¹ Her purpose is to encourage the reader in his or her own personal journey. The book’s foreword concludes with the assurance that every aspirant will find the “true guide.” In the preface Armstrong states that in 1990, at the age of 41, she “was initiated by my Murshid into an authentic Sufi *ṭarīqa*, here in Australia.” The first page of the book describes her realization that she is a Muslim, which occurs while she is reading Muḥammad Asad’s *The Road to Mecca*. About a year later she makes her declaration official in another Australian town.

Armstrong describes a fairly normal childhood growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Australia, but recalls incidents connecting her to Islam such as the poem Abou ben Adhem, the verses of Omar Khayyam, and seeing the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. These were all seeds which would blossom later.

In the course of the book Armstrong cites many authors on Islamic topics such as Ian Dallas, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Naṣr, Martin Lings and Shahidullah Faridi, as well as classical Sufis such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi, thus showing a definite tendency towards a Perennialist⁹² interpretation of Islam and Sufism. In fact, I would argue that one literary influence on the Sufi conversion accounts is a related set of “esoteric quest novels”⁹³ having Islamic themes, the earliest example being Gurdjieff’s *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

While telling her life journey she recounts a period in which she lives in France with her artist husband. There she is impressed by a community of Muslim Moroccans and she and her husband decide to visit North Africa.

⁹¹ Armstrong, *And the Sky is not the Limit*, Foreword.

⁹² I am using the term “perennialist” in its broadest sense to refer to the idea that there is a universal, eternal truth which underlies all religions. Certain of these movements deliberately espouse the “perennialist” title as articulated by Rene Guenon, and later Frithjof Schuon and his intellectual circle. This group of perennialists is characterized by an anti-modern and somewhat millenarian vision, while others feel that spiritual practices from various religious traditions may be combined since they all emerge from the same true source which is universal wisdom, rather than being specific to any one tradition.

⁹³ While works in this genre are both less explicitly Islamic and less directly autobiographical, I believe that they should be indicated here both in terms of their influence on Western Sufi movements and their more general diffusion through the ‘occult bookstore/spiritual seeker’ readerships. The original model for this genre may be Gurdjieff’s *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1969). The relevance to such works to convert narratives is that they tend to form part of the reading which is so important in the experience of Sufi-oriented Westerners who eventually become Muslim.

The brief (10 day) experience in North Africa somehow changes her profoundly. Even after the return to Australia she keeps reading books about Islam and finally decides to become a Muslim. Her husband eventually joins her in this. She is especially drawn to Sufism, and the climax of the book comes when she is initiated into a Sufi order by a North African Sufi who operates a book store in Perth.

Armstrong reflects on the difficulty of being a Muslim in the West.

... the nafs, the lower self, starts telling one these sorts of stories in an attempt to prevent one from taking the final step into Islam. One thinks, 'I'll go on as I have been. God knows I would like to be a Muslim, but really it would make life difficult for me!' 'Where would I pray, here in a Western city? How could I possibly wear a scarf on my head when all my acquaintances would make me feel like an alien?'⁹⁴

She seems to feel that it is necessary to adopt all of the external requirements of Islam. After her conversion she becomes conscious of dress, hair, and tinkling jewelry, and her life includes more and more restrictions, no long walks, no music.⁹⁵

Still, she is a "traditionalist" rather than a "fundamentalist." She contrasts the rigidity of young Islamist women she meets at a conference in Algeria with that of the "traditional" Muslim women, saying of the latter "they didn't need uncompromising black veils—their Islam was palpable. It poured from every pore of their skins and I loved them."⁹⁶

Armstrong's account includes material on her inner experiences. After she becomes a Sufi initiate she experiences spiritual awakenings and dreams. She speaks of learning from the Qur^{ān} and of the attitude of the disciple (*murīd*)—"inwardly, expecting nothing yet nevertheless waiting and watching with fearful awareness."⁹⁷ Her account includes more Islamic technical terms (*dhikr*, *baṣīra*, *wird*) than others, as well as technical aids and bibliography. The work speaks to both new Muslims and would-be Sufis, for example, by discussing the problems of new Muslims with the Arabic language and by warning about fake masters in an era of pseudo-esotericism.

⁹⁴ Armstrong, *And the Sky is not the Limit*, 49.

⁹⁵ Maryam Jameelah also evokes the theme of "restrictions" in a letter written to her parents in 1962. "Maulana Maudoodi has told me to stop drawing pictures so I gave away all my artwork as gifts. Despite the eastern subject matter, the art itself was not Islamic but totally western even though some of the pictures did convey a very eastern harmony, serenity, peace, tranquillity and resignation despite the western style. I have not practiced traditional Islamic art because I have never had the opportunity or necessary training to do so. Therefore I am giving up all artistic pursuits in exchange for writing essays and books for the Islamic cause." *Memoirs*, 222.

⁹⁶ Armstrong, 82.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

In *Writing on the Water*, Muhyiddin Shakor recounts a visit to a mosque (in America) where he meets a wise older Muslim lady and the local Imam, who become his first instructors in Islam. The note at the beginning of the book identifies Shakor as a professor of counselor education, and the book's descriptions focus more on his inner understanding of events and teachings than the events themselves. For example, most of the narrative involves his experiences with his Shaikh and the circle of disciples.⁹⁸ He is identified as following the *ṭarīqa* (Sufi order) al-Hayyati ar-Rufai al-Hussaini.⁹⁹ The book includes ten pages of sayings of his Shaikh, who is never explicitly named, as well as a glossary of some 230 Islamic terms. There is some mention of contacts and participation with a larger Muslim and immigrant community. In the latter section of the work a trip to Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Syria is described during which two sentences are devoted to mentioning that the author performed *ḥajj* at this time.

Shakor then meets his Shaikh nine years after becoming a Muslim, and immediately after he has experienced a period of illness and alienation. Most of the narrative consists of teachings and accounts of assigned tasks which turn out to be spiritual tests, usually of the disciple's level of trust and doubt. The gist of the process is that the disciple is being gradually opened to another view of the world. In this sense the theme resembles the Carlos Casteneda series about *The Teachings of Don Juan*.¹⁰⁰

In *Embracing Islam*, Nooruddin Durkee¹⁰¹ begins with his early years in New York State. He recounts his childhood spiritual experiences. As a young man he meets artists and experiences the milieu of the Hippie culture and the coming of Eastern spiritual teachers to San Francisco in the 1960s. He and his associates founded a center in Abiquiu, New Mexico where spiritual leaders such as Sam Lewis and Richard Alpert (Baba Ram Das) come to teach. In the early 1970s Durkee worked with Pir Vilayat Khan, head of the Sufi Order in the West.¹⁰² He then traveled to Jerusalem where he had many experiences with teachers in various traditions,

⁹⁸ A publication note confirms that the book is published with the permission and approval of the Shaikh.

⁹⁹ The third (of four) Rifā'ī branches in the United States is in New York State and is connected to the Rifā'īs of Kosova, Bosnia. Alan Godlas, "Rifā'iyya" in *Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), III, 438.

¹⁰⁰ A further comparison could be made to the books by Irena Tweedie, a British woman who traveled to India and became the disciple of a Hindu Naqshbandī, itself a highly unusual, if not unprecedented combination. Tweedie chronicled the process of her instruction in her book, *Chasm of Fire: A Woman's Experience of Liberation through the Teachings of a Sufi Master* (Tisbury: Element, 1979), and later available in an expanded version as *Daughter of Fire* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin, 1986). Note that Element is also the publisher of Shakor's book.

¹⁰¹ Noorudeen is one of the American Muslim Sufi pioneers. He was one of the creative and active intelligences behind several counterculture classics including "Be Here Now" by Baba

but especially with Muslim Palestinian Sufis.¹⁰³ The manuscript concludes by describing his return to the U. S. continuing up to the point he leaves for Saudi Arabia in 1975.¹⁰⁴

One of the interesting aspects of this account is its depiction of the American context in the 1970s and 1980s as Durkee recounts tensions among himself and former New Age companions at the Lama Foundation in New Mexico. A theme of Durkee's narrative is the supplanting of New Age Sufism by more disciplined or *sharī'a* oriented Islamic practice as more authentic and desirable. For example, he describes Abd al-Qādir al-Sufi visiting New Mexico and changing "the picture most people had of Sufism which was mainly composed from erroneous ideas they had picked from 'Murshid' Sam, 'Pir' Vilayat and readings from the likes of Idries Shah¹⁰⁵ and Reshad Field and their ilk."¹⁰⁶

Durkee's voice incorporates the perspective of an American gradually embracing Islam. He illustrates, for example, the difficulty of beginning to integrate the prayers, do them properly, find Muslim community in New Mexico, and fast during all of Ramadan.¹⁰⁷ He reflects on the problems with secularized and modernized Muslims living in America.

Ram Das, and was associated with the New Age Lama Foundation. Noorudeen held a high rank in the Sufi Order and produced Pir Vilayat Khan's book *Toward The One* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Later Noorudeen found his way to Islam and a Palestinian Sufi Shaikh, Muḥammad Jamal. Noorudeen and his followers returned to Abiquiu in the mid-1970s. While in Saudi Arabia Noorudeen made contact with prominent Saudi patrons and brought the Dār al-Islam concept into reality. The successive leadership of the institution has oscillated between Sufi and strictly Islamic orientations. In 1993, the first "American Muslim Powwow" was held at this site, bringing together American Muslims of all persuasions, including Native American Muslims. Noorudeen lived for a long period in Alexandria, Egypt and returned to the U. S. in 1994. His most recent publishing venture is *The School of the Shadhdhuliyah: I Orisons* (Alexandria: Dār al-Kutub, 1991). He is now working on a two volume spiritual autobiography entitled, "Embracing Islam;" the comments here are based on a manuscript of the first volume.

¹⁰² Noorudeen Durkee, "Embracing Islam," unpublished manuscript, 92-94, 114-209. Pir Vilayat Khan is leader of the Sufi Order in the West and successor to his father, Pir-o-murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan. Vilayat Khan is eclectic in his Sufi practices, continuing his father's practices such as the "universal worship," a service where selections are read from all of the world scriptures, and leading his disciples in chants and meditation practices based on various traditions including alchemy and other hermetic sciences. On the Sufi Order in the West see Michael M. Koszegi, "The Sufi Order in the West: Sufism's Encounter with the New Age" in *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook*, Michael A. Koszegi and J. Gordon Melton, eds. (New York: Garden Publishing, 1992), 211-222; and James Jervis, "The Sufi Order in the West," in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter Clarke, (London:Luzac Oriental Press, 1996).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 209-45.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 749-905.

¹⁰⁵ For a highly critical expose of Idries Shah and his intellectual admirers, see L. P. Elwell-Sutton, "Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism," *Encounter* (May, 1975): 9-17. A somewhat more veiled criticism may be found in the subsequent version, "Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism," in *Islam in the Modern World*, ed. Dennis MacEoin and Ahmed al-Shahi (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 49-56.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 867.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 798-805.

There is a sense of the precariousness of being Muslim in America and of the Muslim community as comprising more complex identities—Sufi, anti-Sufi, secularized. Durkee provides insights into the complexity of contemporary American spirituality, for example, by noting the fact that most 1960s and 1970s devotees of Eastern practices (Hindu and Buddhist) eventually returned to Christianity, sometimes fundamentalist Christianity, or Judaism.¹⁰⁸

Themes of Sufi-Oriented Conversion Narratives

In contrast to the themes of the pilgrimage-based accounts, I will now isolate a number of themes specific to the Sufi conversion narratives.

a) *Islamic Sufism.*

In these accounts Sufism is presented as the inner dimension of Islam and the path to inner transformation. At the same time, each of these Muslim Sufi authors is *shari'a*-oriented in the sense that becoming Muslim is essential.

b) *Spiritual teacher/s.*

Clearly the theme of longing for and finding the master is a major element of these works. While no particular master is solicited, for example, by Armstrong and Shakor, at the same time clues are given so that a seeker could attempt to locate the teachers.

c) *Inner change.*

Perhaps the most dramatic example of change is recounted by Armstrong. She speaks of change as "the force of the miracle that transformed someone named Jyly into the *murid* named Amatullah."¹⁰⁹ "The 33 year old woman named Jyly would never be Jyly again. She had died. Another person now slowly started to be formed."¹¹⁰ This change, however, is not the point of her accepting Islam, nor the moment when she is initiated as a Sufi.

In Durkee's narrative, his road toward Islam is portrayed as emerging from natural and religious experiences which touched his soul as a child. At various points in his life, he has the sense of receiving inner guid-

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 835.

¹⁰⁹ Armstrong, 35.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

ance.¹¹¹ As he moves closer to Islam he describes a gradual process of transformation.

There was still a 'me' and a 'them', but that dividing line was becoming increasingly hard to exactly define, much less retreat behind to find any comfort in. I still couldn't quite bring myself to formally declare that I was a Muslim (or 'turn myself in' as a friend of mine in later years called it), but I felt myself slipping into the rhythms and the tides that regulate the world of Islam and the Muslims and I could feel a deep change in my outlook and perceptions.¹¹²

d) Cultural critique of the West.

In the post-colonial accounts, cultural critique of the West enters the narrative as an explanatory theme. One aspect of this critique is exemplified by Armstrong's comments on her trip to the Maghreb. "To leave the so-called civilized world of the West and enter the so-called uncivilized world of North Africa, is like standing beneath clear refreshing rain after enduring a long drought."¹¹³

The critique of modern Western culture is also present in Durkee's account, as illustrated by the following incident in which Durkee describes an experience where he is a guest at a Palestinian home and the father comes home from work and prays together with his young son. Durkee observes,

Standing, bowing, prostrating, kneeling. Rising and falling. I marveled at the whole thing. It was perfect; complete. I marveled even more how this act transformed my landlord and his son. As they stood I saw them as the perfect representatives of human beings before God. . . I was utterly moved at that moment and equally I knew at that moment that this was the best and most perfect action I had ever seen in all my travels across the world. I also knew at that moment that I must become a Muslim as this was clearly the way. . .

I contrasted in my mind my own father's return from work and how I greeted him. I contrasted in my mind the many workingmen I had known in my own life as a builder and how, tired and beat, they returned home usually to a beer and the newspaper or to turn on the TV and ask, 'What's for dinner?'¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Durkee, 111-12.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 439.

¹¹³ Armstrong, 82.

¹¹⁴ *Embracing Islam*, 273.

Explanations

It seems that the writers discussed above are not concerned with the shortcomings of their personal lives before becoming Muslim, but rather wish to describe the failings of Western society which led them to seek something better and more meaningful.

Several works of "explanation" explicitly pose the question "Why?" Maryam Jameelah has produced a pamphlet, *Why I Embraced Islam*¹¹⁵ and Harfiyya Bell, a British Muslima, published the results of a survey entitled "Why British Women Embraced Islam."¹¹⁶

Jameelah's first chapter in "Why I Embraced Islam" is entitled "How I Discovered the Holy Qurʾān and Realized its Impact upon my Life."¹¹⁷ She discusses the problem of translation and distortions by unsympathetic Westerners such as Sale. She also cites Marmaduke Pickthall's translation of the Qurʾān as one with a positive influence. In a remarkable anecdote she describes how she falls ill and reads Qurʾān intensively. "When I had finished, all of my strength had been drained away! Although I was only nineteen, I felt as a woman of eighty. Indeed I never recovered my full strength or energy afterwards."¹¹⁸

Through this intensive study she establishes that the teachings of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* "were thoroughly compatible with my temperament"¹¹⁹ In her exchange of letters collected in *Memoirs* she provides more detail about her encounters with the Qurʾān.¹²⁵ It is noteworthy that verses from the Qurʾān relevant to the nature of God, afterlife, and patience are liberally interspersed with her own narrative—a trait I also found in Durkee.

Of all the writers, Jameelah and Durkee take up theological issues most directly. Jameelah discounts the Bible's view of life and hereafter. "I wanted the assurance that I had not wasted my life in sinful deeds or worthless pursuits."¹²⁶ She also criticizes Judaism and Christianity for corruption and hypocrisy and contrasts the universality of Islam with the nationalism of Judaism, explaining that her personal life experiences have

¹¹⁵ Maryam Jameelah, *Why I Embraced Islam* (Offa: Hasbunallah Islamic Publishers, 1993).

¹¹⁶ Harfiyya Ball, *Why British Women Embrace Islam* (Leicester: Muslim Youth Education Council, 1987).

¹¹⁷ Jameelah, 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89-96.

¹²¹ Jameelah, "Why," 9.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²³ A further example is Meryam Weld, *Islam, the West, and the Risale-i Nur* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1987).

¹²⁴ Jameelah, *Why I Embraced Islam*, 15.

¹²⁵ Profession of the Islamic faith, which marks the actual moment of conversion externally.

¹²⁶ *Triumphant Pilgrimage*, 162, 183.

convinced her of Islam's superiority.¹²⁷ This raises some interesting questions about Jameelah's voice, context, and perceived audience. I propose that she was, at least at the time of composing these works, heavily influenced by the conservative Jamaat-e-Islami Movement of Pakistan. Thus her rhetoric is not only "fundamentalist" but is primarily directed to an audience of Muslims who want to hear about the defects of the West, rather than Westerners who might be attracted to Islam by her testimony.¹²³

Conclusions

This overview of conversion narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims permits me to make some general observations which I have grouped under the topics of the style/experience of conversion to Islam by Westerners, gendered analysis, generational and class factors structuring these accounts, the ambivalence of the converted voice, and finally, conversion and culture.

1. The Style/Experience of Conversion to Islam.

Conversion is not really an adequate term for the experience. There seems to be a lack of a radical moment of "snapping," or a total rejection of the previous identity. All accounts reflect a sense of returning to what one has always been and it is for this reason that the term "reversion" is often preferred by the individuals themselves.

I contend that the distinctive elements of these Westerners' conversion accounts to Islam do not correspond to conventional definitions of convert narrative. The idea of a pastness which must somehow already contain the seeds of the change of heart, and a presentness which trumpets success is absent. Is there a reason for this in the theological framework or world view of Islam? One answer would be the sense that one is not finally "saved" though embracing Islam—one is not seen as having been transformed from an essentially lost or sinful pre-Islamic state.

Maryam Jameelah writes,

Since I have, I believe, always been a Muslim at heart and by temperament, even before I knew there was such a thing as Islam, my conversion was mainly a formality, involving no radical change in my heart at all. Rather I only had to make official what I had been thinking and yearning for many years.

¹²⁷ *Road to Mecca*, 1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

"My adherence to the Islamic faith is thus a calm, cool but very intense conviction." She goes on to say that she never experienced dramatic dreams or visions, "nothing dramatic at the time of my conversion ever happened."¹²⁴

Chale also realizes that when he is asked how long he has been Muslim, the actual date of his *shahāda*¹²⁵ a few months earlier is not the significant moment of time. He rather replies, "My heart has been Muslim for six years."¹²⁶

Asad in turn explains that "that faith came upon me, over the years, without any endeavor on my part to find it."¹²⁷ "Every time I learned something more about the teachings of Islam, I seemed to discover something that I had always known without knowing it. . . "¹²⁸

Lady Evelyn (Zainab) Cobbold's words are, "I am often asked when and why I became a Moslem. I can only reply that I do not know the precise moment when the truth of Islam dawned on me. It seems I have always been a Moslem."¹²⁹

Introducing his work Durkee explains that,

After much searching along many ways, and often in strange lands, to understand the original form (*fitrah*) upon which I was created, and returned to being a Muslim, and gave myself up into surrender (Islam) by the Grace of Allah.¹³⁰

Thus there is a consistency across gender and generation in the experience of Islam as being familiar and of recognition rather than conversion. What comes in for criticism in many of these accounts is a cultural rather than an individual state. In general, European and Euro-American Muslims do not condemn their personal character, actions, or family life or religious beliefs before becoming Muslim.¹³¹ In fact, generally such matters are little discussed, especially in the accounts of males. An additional reason for the lack of interest in condemning or rejecting the personal past may be the class and generational factors which condition the narrative strategies and theological underpinnings available to individuals who may be said in many ways to come from a "post-Christian" background.

¹²⁹ Cobbold, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, xiii.

¹³⁰ Durkee, *Embracing Islam*, Foreword.

¹³¹ Maryam Jameelah gives more detail on this topic than most writers. According to her account, she was not raised in a religious atmosphere—her family and friends were Jews only nominally. "They were completely decent, respectable, intelligent, broadminded people who firmly believed in and observed all the basic moral laws—yet they denied that ethical behavior was dependent upon theology." Jameelah, "Why," 12.

2. Gender.

Gender analysis works in understanding some elements of these conversion narratives.¹³² For example, as previously noted, scholars of women's writing have established that women often use the marginal forms of diaries and letters to write in a male-dominated field.¹³³ Note that both of our earlier female exemplars, Lady Cobbold and Maryam Jameelah, made use of these forms.¹³⁴

One theme which distinguishes the majority of the female as opposed to male narratives is a perceived need to explain why one would choose Islam. In addition, the female conversion narratives are presented with the intent that others will be convinced to follow them much more than the male ones. The female convert to Islam tends to write much more from the perspective of a "guide," with a sense that others may wish to understand and follow her. I propose that this is an element of women's position in the West and in the Muslim community which the convert has joined, the sense of struggle, of a problem that pushes her to look for a solution, and the fact that she has solved this problem at the spiritual level, if not entirely at the cultural level, and wants to share her experiences.

3. Generational and Class Factors.

It is clear from comparing the earlier and more recent examples of conversion narratives that later narrative forms and conventions permit more self disclosure. The contemporary writers provide more psychological descriptions of inner life made possible in turn by a richer contemporary vocabulary and shared set of concepts for describing these processes.¹³⁵

Also apparent from these accounts is the changing power dynamics of Islam and the West as post-colonialism begins to take hold. In the

¹³² For theory on aspects of gender in women's travel writing see Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹³³ On this aspect of women's writing see Lisa Anderson, "At the Threshold of Self: Women and Autobiography," in M. Monteith, *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 54-71.

¹³⁴ Theories which assist us in understanding some features of these narratives are recent studies of women's travel writings such as Author?, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, (1718-1918)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992). Melman concludes that there are two models: "harem literature" and the feminine "travelogue proper" (16-18). This work includes several chapters on the changing depiction of the harem in women's writings, on how they responded to concerns back home, and how they were more empathetic than male writers.

¹³⁵ On this topic generally see, Anthony, Dicket alii. "Patients and Pilgrims: Changing Attitudes Toward Psychotherapy of Converts to Eastern Mysticism" in James T. Richardson, ed., *Conversion Careers. In and out of the New Religions* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), 65-90, reprinted from *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (6, 1977): 861-86.

post-war period, there is no longer the expectation that a European will be trying to sneak in to Mecca, and even if someone did, their account would be viewed as "bad-faith" and orientalist. There are regularized procedures in which Islamic centers certify Western Muslims and special visas are required as part of a complex system of quotas and services provided.¹³⁶ Thus currently there exists an apparatus of Islamic State power reaching into Western nations in order to determine who can embark on the pilgrimage.

In the colonial period contact with Muslims occurred because "Europeans went there" and writers conveyed the sense of "passing" and "surpassing" due to their access to Western power and knowledge. In the more recent accounts "they come here." That is, the teachers have often come to the West in physical form or through their writings in the post 1970 period. For example, Armstrong asserts that, "it takes a great teacher to lead one on the journey towards such understanding. There are many great teachers in Australia. They are here! One only has to thirst to find them."¹³⁷

Durkee, commenting on the transformation of Harvard Professor Richard Alpert into the guru Baba Ram Das,¹³⁸ writes, "This was of course the time of gurus in America. They had arrived, it seemed, in plane loads. He was, however, the first from among us who had actually become one himself, complete with beard, *dhoti*, and prayer beads."¹³⁹ The point to be noted here is that after this time (the 1960s) Westerners could be considered legitimate teachers within Eastern and/or Islamic traditions.¹⁴⁰

In the later accounts more emphasis is given to the importance of reading Islamic literature which has become available in translation. It is noteworthy that Jameelah, Khalifa, and Weld all refer to the activity of reading as intense and influential in their initial attraction to Islam. Armstrong makes a direct point about reading and accessibility from the Sufi Muslim perspective. "However, when you are a very new Muslim and you are a

¹³⁶ *The Hajj Today*. In fact, the process in embarking from Middle Eastern countries or entering Saudi Arabia overland is much less rigid, and personal influence and irregularities are not unknown. It is my impression that someone who really wants to make the *hajj* without proper documentation would be able to enter in this manner.

¹³⁷ Armstrong, 40.

¹³⁸ Baba Ram Das was the name taken by ex-Harvard psychology professor Richard Alpert, who after accompanying Timothy Leary in the early LSD experiments in altering consciousness, went to India and found a guru, Neem Karoli Baba. He returned to the U. S. as a guru himself. Durkee produced his successful book, *Be Here Now*.

¹³⁹ Durkee, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Perhaps the earliest Westerner to become a Sufi master was Shahidullah Faridi, successor to Dhauqi Shah, an Indian Chishti Sufi. Faridi was an Englishman who went to South Asia in the 1930s looking for spiritual wisdom. He made such progress that he became Dhauqi Shah's son-in-law and successor. His career, however, was spent in India and Pakistan and most of his followers were South Asian. He did leave writings in English, for example, *Inner Aspects of Faith* (Delhi: Noor Publishing House, 1985).

little shy and nervous, it is difficult to find [a teacher]. Yet you can sit in the company of the Great Masters—all you have to do is immerse yourself in their writings and this is not hard to do.”¹⁴¹

In terms of class analysis, it is clear that the majority of early converts who wrote about their Islamic affiliation through *hajj* accounts were privileged European males. Although they were perhaps considered eccentric for “turning Turk”¹⁴² by their class equals back home, they still had a voice that would be listened to—now on a world stage—both in the colonial metropolis and among the Muslims. After all, how many Ḥajjis get to chat with King Ibn Sa‘ūd? The prominence of meeting Prince Faisal in their accounts is also intriguing. Did he have a particular interest in Europeans or was he already being groomed as the most competent successor to his father?

In the following excerpt Lady Evelyn Cobbold also assumes the aristocratic voice.

I had brought an English book with me on my pilgrimage, knowing our progress must be slow in the great procession (to Muzdalafa by car). The book was *Passages from Arabia Deserta* by that mighty traveler Doughty, and during a stop I opened it and from under my veil I was soon absorbed in reading, when a voice from a neighboring car asked, “Is that an Arabic book?” Suleiman answered quickly that of course it was Arabic, and whispered to me to close the book, which I refused to do. Again the voice spoke: “Can you swear by all we hold holy that, it is Arabic and a book for the Moslems?” Before the alarmed Suleiman could answer I turned and held out the book to the anxious enquirer saying, “This is an English book and I am an English Moslem and I am here on pilgrimage by permission of the King.” After a few seconds of astonished silence he returned the book to me saying “*Alhamdulillah!* (Praise be to God).”¹⁴³

The more recent Sufi narratives reflect the solidly middle class origins of the authors who do not depict themselves as coming from privileged backgrounds. Whether abroad in Muslim societies or in the company of others in the West these “new Muslims” seek genuine contact and intimacy. They look into people’s eyes, they are impressed by a kind of recognition on the part of the other which is able to include them in a sacred community. In doing so they aim to transcend the degradation of the modern world.

¹⁴¹ Armstrong, 157.

¹⁴² For this expression and the early history of European conversions to Islam see N. I. Matar, “The Renegade in English Seventeenth Century Imagination,” in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 33 (1993): 489-505; and “Turning Turk: Conversion to Islam in English Renaissance Thought” in *Durham University Journal* Vol. LXXXVI/No. 1 (Jan. 1994): 33-41.

¹⁴³ Cobbold, 224.

Their accounts reflect the new mobility, in terms of resources and travel to exotic locations, of the Western middle classes. They are therefore less prone to exoticize their own experience. It is presented not for titillation but as something that others might be considering and which they might choose to do as well. These are guidebooks rather than travelogues.

This point could profitably be elaborated in terms of Ali Behdad's discussion of the 19th century shift from travelogue to guide book production in Europe as a symptom of "belatedness" in travel. While 19th century travel is portrayed "as an extension of cultural domination"¹⁴⁴ and is related to an increase in bourgeois travel to the Orient and the economic rationale of making the journey conceivable by making the sites familiar and knowable, there is a resonance between our study and the "belated traveler's quest for elsewhere as a response to the onset of modernity in Europe."¹⁴⁵

The early pilgrimage narratives tend to implicate Mecca as the "last Orient," the final "elsewhere," and more than one account is identified as being "the first" by a European "real" Muslim to go on the *hajj*. By the time of contemporary Sufi accounts we still find a certain nostalgia for the authentic, the traditional, the Oriental, and an identification with returning to this original state through Sufi practice.¹⁴⁶

Still, I suggest the guidebook motif here, not as an absolute parallel to transformations of the mid-19th century, but rather in order to evoke the contextual transformation of the citing of contemporary conversion narratives, especially the Sufi genre. There is no longer an external "elsewhere" for the Western Muslim travelers of the late 20th century. They are positioned in terms of a world which is both hybridized and politicized along West vs. Islam lines, as well as within a Muslim community which is itself increasingly self-aware of its complexities arising through immigration and internal cultural and ideological diversities.

The lack of reference to Sufism in earlier accounts may be somewhat related to this lack of interest in inner processes on the part of their authors. Sufism seems to be remarkably absent from these accounts except that Burton disguised himself as a dervish and that some writers mention the extravagant behavior of dervishes cutting themselves with swords.¹⁴⁷ Asad has a decidedly anti-Sufi tone. "The speculations of the Sufis, as the

¹⁴⁴ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers* (Duke, 1994), 37.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ I might note some interesting counter-examples of oppositional discourse—a kind of de-orientalized Sufi discourse in some of the followers of Idries Shah, and a kind of popular anti-Islamic writing which celebrates the predilection of "Orientals" for Coca-Cola, blue jeans and rap-music.

¹⁴⁷ Eldon Rutter, *The Holy Cities of Arabia* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), vol. 1, 244-47.

Muslim mystics were called, betrayed Gnostic, Indian, and occasionally even Christian influences which had brought in ascetic concepts and practices entirely alien to the message of the Arabian Prophet."¹⁴⁸ In his long discussion of the Sanusiyya movement in Libya, Sufism is not alluded to as a factor.¹⁴⁹ Earlier Europeans probably associated Sufis with superstition and lower class elements; spiritual transformation is not a category for them. On the other hand, later converts became acquainted with Islam through translations of classical works which would present the philosophical elements of Islamic mysticism.

A further problematic raised by the consideration of this genre of "border narratives" is that of their relationship to colonial discourse. Said's "Orientalism" posits a hegemonic construction of the Orient which is reinforced and recirculated by all aspects of western discursive practice. Thus even sympathetic Europeans who identified with Muslims tended to exoticize the Orient and be fascinated by the performance of the *hajj*. Orientalism exists apart from the intentionality of its perpetrators. Over time we find that there is in fact a subtle shift from the imagery of "penetrating" the Orient in the role of the passive female awaiting conquest, to "passing" as a form of sympathetic identification and even admiration for the culture of the other.

4. Ambivalence of the Converted Voice.

As previously noted, few of these accounts are autobiographical according to the strict canons of that genre. As "conversion narratives" they are neither modeled on the Western classical model of Augustine's *Confessions*, nor on the moral itinerary displayed by *Pilgrim's Progress*.

These accounts have a problematic task in choosing a voice, and I would argue that this choice of voice shifts over time with changing political situations, de-colonization and even a different sense of what religion is. In other words, major 20th century shifts in perspectives are disclosed in these accounts in ways which are quite apparent.

As a micropractice the conversion accounts often confirm the sense of a dominant Orientalistic vision which could not be displaced even in the most sympathetic treatments. Still they also demonstrate the difference, ambivalence and heterogeneity of the encounter.

In *Mystique of Islam*, Rodinson attempts to get a fix on this cultural shift in relations of Europe to the Orient from another perspective. "In the field of oriental studies, as in other fields, the first World War shattered the self-confident belief of European civilization in the continuity and lim-

¹⁴⁸ Asad, *Road*, 197.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 312-43.

itlessness of its own progress, and in so doing, shook European ethnocentrism."¹⁵⁰ According to Rodinson, the decline of the West's confidence has engendered a kind of romantic exoticism *vis-à-vis* the East.

A rather similar view of the East was shared by European esotericists. They sought in the Middle East, as well as, for example, in the Buddhist East, a model for the wise life, a contact with supra-sensory realities and with ancestral secrets handed down by a long line of initiates. Far from attributing satanic inspiration to the Muslim brotherhoods, they saw in them cells through which was transmitted the ancestral theosophical tradition. Some, like the French philosopher Rene Guenon (1886-1951), actually converted to Islam and died Muslims.¹⁵¹

It seems to me that on the basis of the accounts examined here it is really the process of de-colonization following the Second World War, rather than the first European conflagration, which leads to a cultural shift in the way Europeans could conceptualize their relationship to another religion and other cultural contexts.

More recent conversion narratives are also interesting in comparison to various examples of "apologetic" literature written by European and Euroamerican Muslims. This genre of Euro-Muslim apologetic literature, for example works by Maurice Bucaille, de Vitray-Meyerovitch and Roger Garaudy,¹⁵² has been criticized by some liberal Muslims.

For example, speaking of the book *Promesses de l' Islam* by Roger Garaudy, Mohamed Arkoun describes it as

literature which, in the guise of generosity, 'spiritual' fervor, and reaction against the injustices of the past, is in fact a continuation of colonial literature, perpetuating its intellectual failings, its contempt (no doubt unconscious here) for the real expectations of the Muslim public, and its close connection, on the other hand, with the needs of the Western public.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1987), 73.

¹⁵¹ Rodinson, *Mystique*, 71.

¹⁵² On the tensions embodied in Garaudy's position see Tomas Gerholm, "Three European Intellectuals as Converts to Islam: Cultural Mediators or Social Critics," in *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, eds. Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman (London: Mansell, 1988), 263-77. In fact, the response to European Muslims who take political or theological stances in Muslim societies is not exclusively positive. Both Garaudy and Martin Lings have come under fire from conservative elements, while Muslim liberals find apologetic literature written by Western Muslims to be an obstacle to their criticisms of repressive practices imposed by "Islamic" regimes.

¹⁵³ Cited in Jean-Pierre Peroncel-Hugoz, *The Raft of Mohammed* (New York: Paragon, 1988), which itself is a work of anti-Muslim polemic, quoting *France-Pays-Arabes*, no. 99, 1982. In his biographical writings, Garaudy is not hesitant to critique current political and social conditions in Muslim societies. Roger Garaudy, *Mon tour du siècle en solitaire: Memoires* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1989).

5. *Conversion and Culture.*

Noteworthy in terms of issues raised by these accounts is the relationship of cultural positioning to the narratives. Certainly the earlier and even the contemporary “converts” or “reverts” are seen to be doing something unusual, controversial, which can lead to their being seen as misfits, eccentrics, and even traitors.¹⁵⁴

As the modern West is a site of alienation for some converts, becoming Muslim is a way to transcend this cultural malaise and find a home. Durkee writes, “As I became aware that the edge of ‘foreignness,’ of being the extrinsic outsider, the exotic alien, had been somehow dissolved and melted in myself I also became aware that this was not simply something which had ‘happened’ in or to me.

That is to say, what had happened was not so much due to anything which had changed in my own being, but that the people I was sitting with did not regard me as ‘odd’ or ‘queer’ or ‘strange’ or ‘exotic’ but simply as another ‘student’, another ‘seeker’, another traveler on the Way to Allah to be welcomed.¹⁵⁵

A trend developing in conversion narratives represents what I would term a broadening of conversion literature consistent with the emergence of an “indigenous” American and to some extent European Muslim community.¹⁵⁶ Thus we have an increasing number of translations, scholarly works, and apologetic works written by Muslims of European and Euro-American origin, many of which are not primarily focused on the testimonial or conversion narrative model. In a sense, Mohammed Webb¹⁵⁷ and Muḥammad Asad were pioneering figures in this trend.

Let me briefly indicate two recent works representative of the indigenization process. One is Jeffrey Lang’s *Struggling to Surrender*,¹⁵⁸ which is noteworthy for the “Americanness” of its concerns with Muslim community building, while the second, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* confronts the phenomenon of the multi-religious family.¹⁵⁹ Anway’s daughter, Jodi, married an

¹⁵⁴ A biography of the English Muslim Marmaduke Pickthall is entitled *Loyal Enemy*. Pickthall, by the way, has not left an extensive autobiographical statement.

¹⁵⁵ Durkee, 408.

¹⁵⁶ Another development worth mentioning is the video-taped testimonial such as “My Journey from Christianity to Islam” by Nancy Ali, an ex-nun, and “Islam and My Life” by Cat Stevens (Yūsuf Islam).

¹⁵⁷ Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *Islam in America* (New York: Oriental Publishing Co., 1893). Webb was an early American convert to Islam who did not write a formal conversion narrative.

¹⁵⁸ *Struggling to Surrender: Some Impressions of an American Convert to Islam* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1994).

¹⁵⁹ Carol Anway, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee’s Summit, Missouri: Yawna Pub., 1996).

Iranian and two years after her marriage embraced Islam. The manuscript describes the struggle for the American Christian parents and extended family to deal with what they initially perceived as the loss of their daughter to an alien cultural and value system. Interspersed with the narrative are responses from fifty-three other American Muslimahs, both European and African-American, who describe their pre-and post-conversion lives and the issues which emerged for them and their families during the adjustment period. American families whose daughters had become Muslim were also invited to describe their reactions. In addition to testimony and documentation there is a certain self-help or advice component for those American families which are dealing with this experience—particularly in the cases where it involves more dramatic life-style changes such as the daughters' maintaining gender-segregation, wearing complete *hijāb*, and eating only *ḥalāl* meats. In this case, conversion to Islam is no longer being framed as an individual's idiosyncratic choice but as a broader social movement.

Lang's *Struggling to Surrender* is distinctive in that it is the account of an American Muslim written primarily for other American Muslims. It is located in the context of being Muslim in the United States. Like other accounts, it is not judgmental about the author's past or family, but lays out basic elements of the Qur'ān and teachings about the Prophet. One of the things which draws the author to Islam is meeting Muslim students while in the university environment. The book is distinctive in addressing questions of concern to Muslims in America such as dress code, gender relations, race relations, and the treatment of American Muslims by immigrant Muslims.¹⁶⁰

Conversion narratives to Islam by European and Euro-American Muslims demonstrate changing perspectives on cultural contact between the West and the Muslim world during the 20th century. Over this period there is a gradual decolonization in perspective and an increasing domestication and internalization of the experience of embracing Islam for Europeans and Americans. The combination of the conversion motif with the travel motif in some of these accounts may be assessed in various ways. Perhaps the later conversion accounts depicting travel as a sort of inner quest aiming to transcend cultural differences or to escape the web of a false culture may be perceived as an attempt to achieve closure or to find

¹⁶⁰ Many similar issues are brought up in the responses given by British women who were questioned about issues of dress, women's rights etc. in Harfiyya Bell's pamphlet "Why British Women Embrace Islam."

a place in a world which presents an increasingly unstable ground of identities and values.

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ATTEMPTS TO REVITALIZE KALĀM IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

At the end of the nineteenth century, a great number of Muslim scholars indicated that Islamic theology (*kalām*) urgently needed revitalizing in order to address current issues and become more useful. Thus, they produced some works using the title "new *kalām*" (*ʿIlm Kalām Jadīd* in Arabic and Persian and *Yeni ʿIlm-i Kalām* in Turkish) and other titles implying newness. Unfortunately, studies of these more contemporary *kalām* works are lacking since most attention has focused on the classical period. One may come across a few remarks about *kalām* of this recent age in books generally on Islamic modernism or in biographies.¹ In this way there are only pieces of scattered information and no thorough studies available.

Therefore, in this paper I would like to examine the various attempts carried out to revitalize *kalām*. By comparing these later works to those of the classical period, I hope to discover just what changes were made and consider how successful they were. Before dealing with these questions I would briefly like to examine the history of *kalām* in classical Islamic thought.

***Kalām* Before the 19th Century**

Coming from the Arabic root 'k-l-m', as a verbal noun of *takallama yatakallamu* (literally to speak), the term *kalām* in the second century A.H. became the name of a discipline whose goal was to explain Islamic beliefs and to defend them against foreign ideas and beliefs considered heretical. With the death of the Prophet, Muslims began to debate such topics as the definition of faith (*īmān*), the relationship between free will and predestination (*irāda* and *qadar*), and the qualities required of a Mus-

¹ See for example, Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York, 1933); Robert Caspar, "Le renouveau du mo'tazilisme," *MIDEO* IV (1957): 141-202; G. E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam* (Berkeley, 1962); Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform* (Berkeley, 1966); Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964* (London, 1967); Mehr Afroz Murad, *Intellectual Modernism of Shibli Nu'mani* (Lahore, 1976); Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Islamic Theology* (Karachi, 1978/79); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago, 1982); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (London, 1984).