

ISLAM AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

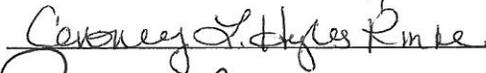
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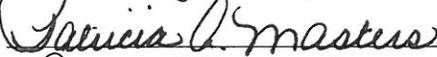
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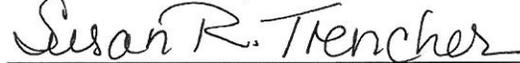
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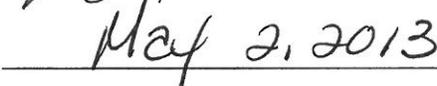




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Fairfax, VA

Islam and the African American Experience

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## DEDICATION

In the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the exceedingly Merciful. Praise be to Allah. We praise Him and seek His help, His guidance and His forgiveness. We repent to Him alone and we seek refuge with Allah from the evil within our own souls and from our bad deeds. Whomsoever Allah guides will never be led astray, and whomsoever Allah allows to go astray because they don't desire guidance, then no one can guide. I bear witness that there is no god or deity worthy of worship but the one and ultimate Creator, Allah alone with no partners, offspring or associates. He raised the status of knowledge and held humanity in high esteem. And I bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His slave and Messenger, may Allah send blessings and peace upon him, and bless him and his family and companions and the rightly guided generation, and upon all those who follow them in their righteous path of truth until the end of days.

Indeed, truth is in the words of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who over 1400 years ago emphatically declared in his last sermon to “beware of Satan for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope that he will ever be able to lead you astray in big things, so beware of following him in small things... It is true that you have certain rights in regard to your women, but they also have rights over you... All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor a Black has any superiority over a white- except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood... I leave behind two things, the Quran and the Sunnah (Hadith), and if you follow these you will never go astray”.

This study is dedicated to upholding the call of Islam to positively contribute to furthering the true understanding of the message of tolerance and knowledge within Islam. Certainly all good comes that has been achieved throughout this study was from the Creator of the worlds, and whatever deficiencies are displayed are from my weaknesses and lack of knowledge.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Noura for her love, support and patience throughout my studies. Surely, none of my accomplishments could have been met had I not been blessed with a strong, supportive and patient wife. I also send my appreciation to my father, Fahad, who set a bar of attaining knowledge that I am sure will take many more decades to reach. I thank him for setting a proper example of what it means to be a man, a student and a leader. My deepest appreciation is given to my mother Shaheeda, whose encouragement, compassion, gentleness and honesty has never gone unnoticed. I also thank my brothers and sisters who stood by me and encouraged me throughout my various journeys in life.

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## ABSTRACT

### ISLAM AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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The conversion of African-American men to Islam , has been taking place for many generations. But why are African-Americans, now experiencing a more assimilated position within American society with the second-term presidency of President Barack Obama, choosing Islam, increasingly marginalized in American culture?. This thesis not only explores the motivation for this conversion, but also how it affects the converts' identity and how they place themselves within the broader American landscape.

Interviews with African-American men demonstrate a mixture of spiritual fulfillment, historical acknowledgement of Islam and a renewed sense of personal, as well as, group identity within the United States.

## CHAPTER 1: ISLAM AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY THROUGH HISTORY

Over the past decade, there has been an increase of interest regarding Islam in the United States. Because of the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, subsequent wars with predominantly Muslim countries, various reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes, Muslim profiling, Mosque infiltration by United States Government agencies and general fear at an unknown collection of people regarding their ideology, thoughts and practices, Islam has quickly become a heated topic. While the preponderance of negative imagery related to Islam can be witnessed through various news outlets, there are also factions of the American public that view Islam with a mixture of hostility, curiosity, appreciation and apprehension. The way in which Islam has been defined and re-defined by the media over the last decade is analogous to the process of stigmatization African Americans encountered many decades ago, and to a large extent still experience. These images not only help to shape the construct of the society as a whole by influencing opinions some may have about Muslims, but they contribute to the shaping of a stigmatized group as well. They have resulted in stigmatization of an entire social group, what Erving Goffman (1963:3) calls a “spoiled identity”. Given that these two groups are firmly implanted in the contemporary American landscape, it becomes necessary to examine the trend within the African American community of converting to Islam in order to gauge the way this occurrence impacts how African Americans position themselves in relation

to the larger American social body. This is particularly significant considering that this occurrence is taking place during a time when the imagery of African Americans is turning slightly more positive, while the once benign imagery of Islam and the Muslim have become increasingly more negative. While the balance of equality and equity between the African American community and the rest of the American society still remains skewed, the impact of President Barack Obama's two terms as President of the United States has assisted in providing a positive image of an African American family, which has helped combat years of negative African American stereotyping. Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo (2012) - relates how "throughout the campaign, innumerable images of Obama and his family contradicted negative racial stereotypes and changed the balance of black exemplars in mass media in a positive direction, thus causing reductions in prejudice among political television viewers". This type of change in imagery and attitude is a step in the right direction because it portrays a different face for African Americans, and mainly the image of the African American man. While the systems of inequality and socioeconomic disparities are still prevalent, the change in imagery speaks to a potential paradigm shift in how African American's are viewed and in turn view themselves. In this case, it becomes even more of a question as to why African Americans would leave a positively changing sphere to join one that is experiencing progressively worsening imagery in the United States.

With increasing national and international political upheaval, the imagery of post-9/11 Islam has become one of violence and intolerance, which has led to it being met with suspicion and fear. The problem extends beyond media imagery and into civil

insecurity as there have been reports of government involvement in Mosque surveillance programs as well. The most recent of these reports involves informants paid by the NYPD to infiltrate New York area Mosques, Islamic studies groups and college Muslim Student Associations in order to entice Muslim members to say things deemed violent and threatening (Goldman and Apuzzo 2012). The six-year program did not net any results, and while this may seem as an obvious infringement of civil liberties, these actions have been justified by Mayor Michael Bloomberg who stresses that “As the world gets more dangerous, people are willing to have infringements on their personal freedoms that they would not before... We live in a dangerous world, and we have to be very proactive in making sure that we prevent terrorism” (“Bloomberg Stands by Spying on Muslims”). The fact that calls to end Muslim stereotyping and profiling have been met with responses like Mayor Bloomberg’s sheds light at the declining public imagery of Islam.

While the problems that stem from this type of negative imagery can lead to an increase in social intolerance, group alienation from the greater society, violence against the group and fear from the general public of the stigmatized group, Islam has continued to thrive in the United States even with the negative imagery. According to a 2010 U.S. Religion Census, Islam has been “the fastest growing religion in America in the last 10 years, with 2.6 million living in the U.S. today, up from 1 million in 2000... the burst of anti-Islam sentiment after the 9/11 attacks could have done more to grow the religion's presence in the U.S. than slow it” (Goldman and Apuzzo 2012). However, with this anomaly taking place in regards to the increase of Muslims in the United States in the

light of negative stereotyping and imagery, the ease to which government officials can stand behind programs that violate the civil liberties of a targeted population of citizens in the United States is cause for alarm. This attitude creates an atmosphere that can fuel feelings of apprehension among the public and create sentiments that this group of people have to be lived with, but not given their due rights. This atmosphere can be observed through FBI reports showing how “anti-Muslim hate crimes soared by an astounding 50% last year, skyrocketing over 2009 levels in a year marked by the vicious rhetoric of Islam-bashing politicians and activists” (Potok 2011).

A bigger problem that can develop is that when legitimacy is given to profiling certain groups, the systems of profiling can become commonplace and thereby deteriorate the civil liberties of the nation as a whole. One such trend towards legitimizing and nationalizing group profiling is the escalation of counterterrorism agencies in the years since 9/11 and the type of information that is used to train agents. According to Stalcup and Craze, since 2006, the Department of Justice has developed a program called the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative that allows local police to become intelligence gatherers that give reports to a network of 72 “fusion center” across the United States. With a created atmosphere brought on by fear of a marginalized group, these types of programs become perceived as legitimate means for keeping the country safe. Subsequently, the type of training involved in these programs to local police aims at targeting groups and reinforces profiling by teaching that a legitimate embodiment of suspicion is an individual who has facial hair, a trimmed moustache, being in a public environment and moving lips because “if their lips are moving, these guys are praying

and he is telling you I am willing to be a martyr” (*ibid.*). These fears are further legitimized, and feelings of upholding civil liberties by law enforcement are further quelled by trainers reminding police that “being politically correct inhibits you... they (Muslims) want to make this world Islamic. [To have] The Islamic flag to fly over the White House... When I look at the life of Muhammad, I get a very nasty image... Anyone who says that Islam is a religion of peace is either ignorant or flat out lying... the best way to handle these people is what I call legal harassment” (*ibid.*). While this problem is specific to the Muslim population, one must look at the practice of legitimizing profiling and stereotyping to see the greater social harm. Justifying the ideological necessity of these types of programs and attitudes affects the social cohesion of a pluralist country and continues the divide between groups within a nation.

The attitude associated with making profiling and stereotyping acceptable is the same attitude that popularized the occurrence of “driving-while-black”. Currently, flying-while-Muslim can be added to the list as well. When one looks at society, a determination can be made that there is cause to distrust every group outside of the one the individual making the) determination is a part of, and as long as the mirror of profiling and stereotyping is not aimed at that individual’s own group the practice can be justified to preserve that individual’s placement in society. However, the main problem with this ideology then becomes making social discord and social inequality something that is an acceptable aspect within society.

Historically, African-Americans have, and continue to suffer in the United States from this type of ideology to the extent that the effects of “othering” and stigmatization became imbedded commonplace imagery in the fabric of society. There is perhaps no group of people within the United States that have had to overcome more because of the legitimization of alienation and othering than have African-Americans. From slavery, to segregation, to Jim Crow laws, to fighting for voting rights and equality in citizenship, African-Americans continue to fight for access and opportunity in a country they have been a part of for hundreds of years. While few will defend stereotyping, the effects of how it can become an ingrained part of society can be observed when one looks into the struggle African Americans faced in the past and continue to face currently. It becomes a generational battle, where the effects of it only slowly dissipate. While there is currently an African American family in the White House for a second term, one can look towards that as a step in the right direction for changing stereotypes. Because of this, it is interesting to note that while the imagery of African Americans is on a slow upswing and the imagery of Islam and Muslims is on a downswing there are more African American converts to Islam than any other group within the United States” (Bagby 2012:5).

#### *Statement of the Problem*

While the process one is motivated by to convert from one religion to another might initially be a prospect thought of as an individual spiritual journey, various social factors may come into play as well. Snow and Machelek (1984) contend that converting from one religion to another entails a radical personal change where the “notion of this change

remains at the core of all conceptions of conversion, whether theological or social scientific” (169). Building on the framework of Snow and Machalek, it is asserted in this thesis that the intersecting lines between the theological and spiritual and social aspects of religious conversion from Christianity to Islam among African American men strengthens the relationship between the individual and the broader society. It is further asserted that the theological and spiritual decision to convert to Islam satisfies the struggles of the inner-self, which in turn provides the individual with better footing in relation to their placement within their immediate social circle as well as the larger society. To give an overall picture of how these intersecting lines create this dynamic between the individual and society, there are three areas that will be focused on throughout this research: the factors as to why African American men convert to Islam, how it impacts their feelings and ideas of self, and how it impacts their placement within the overall American society.

#### *Area 1: Why African American Men Turn to Islam?*

Converting from a religion one was born into and practiced alongside their parents and families can, in some ways, be seen as a rejection of the traditions that individual grew up in. Undoubtedly, these feelings of stress from one’s family can be a deterrent to ever formally changing one’s religion. More so, the social stress of converting to a marginalized religion, like Islam, is also a factor in not formally converting, especially if the conversion requires a changing from the mainstream “American lifestyle”. In the light of these pressures against converting to Islam we find that African-American men –

another stigmatized social group - are the frequent converts to Islam in the United States. The problem this presents on a societal level is one that relates to integration within society.

What is happening in this trend? Is converting to Islam a tool that African-American men are using to turn their back on a society that they feel they cannot fit into? Does this occurrence convey a rejection of American ideals and American social norms? Is Islam a way for African-American men to grab hold of a part of history they feel may have been taken away from them? Is it a form of resistance being carried out by a marginalized group? These are key questions in learning the motivating factors that relate to why African-American men are turning to Islam more than any other group in the United States.

### *Area 2: How does Islam Impact the Feelings of Self?*

The main social psychological problem in regards to African American men embracing Islam is the vulnerability one must feel when entering into a religion that is predominantly foreign to the United States. While Christianity in the United States has deeply embedded roots throughout society, to the extent that the United States is considered by many politicians to be a “Christian country”, Islam is often labeled as a foreign religion to some degree. Islam is very Arabic dominated in the sense that all prayers and scripture must be recited in the Arabic language; whereas, one can visit many Churches and participate in religious services that are all in English, the same cannot be said about any Mosque in the United States. Can this fact be a hurdle to the new African

American Muslim who is navigating their way through the new world of Islam? Will the prevalence of Arabic make African American Muslims feel left out of the circle of Islam thereby weakening their feelings of membership to their new group? Will there be a double feeling of vulnerability within the circle of Islam and within the American society, and will it increase alienation among African American Muslims? These questions are aimed at addressing the development of identity within the African American Muslim because of the precarity involved in developing an identity. It must be noted that the framework of this thesis in terms of identity relies on the notion that “identity is more often considered an evolving process of becoming rather than simply being” (Dillon 1999:250).

### *Area 3: How Does Islam Impact Inclusion Within American Society*

Having accepted Islam and becoming a practicing Muslim, the main issue in this section is to understand how Islam shapes the African American Muslim man’s placement within the greater American society. Because of the generational baggage of racism, alienation, stereotyping and othering African Americans have faced, the problem may arise that converting to a religion that is on the fringes of American society, like Islam, may be a form of social rebellion which can further alienate and radicalize the individual from the society at large. Can the African American Muslim practice Islam and be a well-integrated member of the American society? Is Islam a motivating or de-motivating factor for social inclusion among African American men? These questions are particularly important in understanding how the African American Muslim’s relationship

within American society will become. By doing so, an understanding may be attained as to the level of inclusion or exclusion African American Muslims feel within society. The problem with higher levels of exclusion is less social integration, which in turn exacerbates problems related to assimilation. Hillel Fradken (2004) perceives the problem of lack of integration within American society for Muslims as a means for radical elements of Islam to shape the feelings of the individual because

the pervasive radical interpretation of Islam poses a direct threat to the development of moderate alternatives – for it does not simply attack certain democratic principles but rejects the entire democratic way of life... For all radicals and many traditional Muslims believe the only legitimate authority is divine law, sharia, understood as intrinsically incompatible with human freedom (*ibid* 52).

The more Islam is thrust into the limelight with negative stereotypes in front of the entire American public the problem of distrust and insecurity arises in the relationship between the African American Muslim and the American society. This section attempts to explain the extent of the friction that may be experienced by African American Muslims in relation to the ideals of the mainstream American society, and whether Islam is a radicalizing exclusionary or integrating force for social cohesion.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersecting lines associated with why African American men convert to Islam, and how that conversion affects their views on the self as well as their inclusion within the American society. This inquiry is needed

because it may shed a new light on the role Islam is playing in the United States. As it currently stands, Islam is portrayed as a religion that leads to militancy, radicalization and intolerance to the democratic ideals of the United States. Understanding the trend of why African American men are converting to Islam in large numbers, and how becoming Muslim impacts their viewpoints can provide evidence to either bolster or undermine these assertions. In order to obtain empirical evidence to test these assertions, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 12 African American men in the Washington D.C. metro area who grew up Christian and then embraced Islam later in life. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a thorough understanding of the three areas related to this study. Using this method allowed for greater insight as the researcher was able to ask follow up questions and allow the participants to build on their thoughts. Interviewing African American male converts to Islam on their stories of conversion, how Islam has shaped their views of themselves and the society around them provided in-depth context to complex issues related to self-awareness, internal and external motives for belief and whether Islam was in fact a catalyst for any kind of change in life or ideals.

### *Research Questions*

What are the factors related to African American men converting to Islam? How does converting to Islam influence the individual's views of their identity? How does converting to Islam influence the individual's views on their placement within the American society?

### *Limitations*

Because of the scope of this study in regards to trying to understand how much of an impact Islam has on the individual, there were a number of limitations that may affect certain conclusions reached. While 12 members of the Washington D.C. African American Muslim community were interviewed for a significant amount of time, more interviews with more diverse backgrounds and geographical orientations would have yielded clearer results. The fact that I am a Muslim conducting the interviews may have affected responses to the questions. Due to the personal nature of the interviews, it is reasonable to anticipate that some respondents might be compelled to give answers they think I would want to hear because I am a Muslim as well. This occurrence falls in line with a power dynamic where participants might not want to be judged negatively by the researcher. I believe this to be one of the most impactful limitations to this research, as the crux of the data relies on interview responses. Lastly, I believe that interviewing another group of practicing African American Christian men would have been another way to further isolate the effects of Islam as the catalyst for change. By interviewing practicing and adherent Christian men, comparing the responses in regards to their beliefs about themselves and their placement in society could have shown if Islam was the change that truly had an influence in the converts' viewpoints. By only interviewing Muslim converts, there was no additional way outside of asking the participants if they believed Islam was a catalyst for change to really pinpoint Islam as the true catalyst.

### *Ethical Considerations*

To safeguard against violations in this study, a full research proposal, participant safeguards and methods for this study were submitted to the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB). After getting approval from the Institutional Review Board flyers were posted at local Mosques that reflected the need for participants and the anonymity they would receive throughout the course of the study. Names of participants were not used in the interviews, and identifiers such as job titles, names of companies they work for, and family names were not used in order to uphold anonymity for the participants. The participants for this study were also given an IRB approved consent form that was signed prior to the interviews taking place. If there were any concerns, requests or questions in regards to the consent form, the participants were able to ask me for clarification. Because of the personal nature of the interviews, participants were advised that there would be personal questions regarding their pasts and that if their involvement in this research was voluntary if they were uncomfortable with discussing sensitive events in their pasts. Participants were also informed that they could skip over questions they felt were too sensitive to discuss. In order to safeguard the study from posing any danger to the participants, the interviews were structured in a way where it was more conversational in order for the participants to guide the discussion and comfortably relay their stories on how they came to Islam.

## CHAPTER 2: ISLAM AND CAUSE AND EFFECT

Understanding one's journey from one faith to another is difficult and incomplete when only exploring theological reasons for religious conversion. Because religion is regarded as such a personal and private matter in contemporary American culture, investigating various factors for conversion are necessary in order to get a total picture as to why one would leave a previously held religion for another. Rebellion from social norms and injustices, spiritual uplifting, lack of fulfillment or understanding of previously held beliefs, finding a sense of purpose, finding solidarity within a group structure and searching for answers to the inevitability of death are all determining factors and motivations for seeking out other modes of belief. Because of the scope and power religion has in many people's lives and in societies, it has been used as a justification for both magnificent and horrible actions. Religion has been used to uplift people as well as to destroy them. In many cases it can be viewed as a malleable construct made to fit a variety of situations depending on the person interpreting it. Ultimately, religion is a powerful tool that, along with social analysis, can be used to shed light on many interesting occurrences throughout American society.

It is without question that Americans are predominantly Christian by stated belief, and it is also certain that it has had an extremely sordid history with the African-American community. This analysis is not meant to focus on past social or racial ills perpetrated on African-Americans throughout the centuries, nor is it about the benefits or

drawbacks of Christianity. This study attempts to pursue the contributing factors that are leading African-American men to the religion of Islam, and how embracing this new religion influences their attitudes on their own identity and integration within society at large. As minorities in the United States, both African-Americans and Muslims have stigmas and stereotypes attached to them in mainstream American culture.

The essential purpose of this research is to uncover and analyze what compels an individual to go willfully from one exploited minority group into an even smaller one. Additionally, the main goal of this thesis is to understand and explain intersecting lines among three social occurrences in the United States. First, to examine the motivating factors that ultimately lead African-American men who were raised as Christians to learn about and accept Islam. Second, to analyze how this new religion impacts their identities in either positive or negative ways. Third, to explore how Islam influences African-American Muslim converts viewpoints on American society and their inclusion within it. This analysis is theoretically significant because it sheds light on intersecting issues relating to the self, the group, and the greater society in the forms of identity formation among African-American men, group allegiance in Islam and it's interaction within the greater American social landscape. The expectation of this study is to uncover deeper questions regarding this phenomenon, which can be delved into for future research.

### *Historical Factors Leading African-American Men to Islam*

The path to Islam for African-American men involves various factors that include theological, spiritual and sociological motivations. Because everyone's journey to a particular religion is highly personal, one must analyze the push and pull factors that capture a wider scope of social and personal spiritual reasons why African-American men turn to Islam. For instance, push factors includes social elements that may drive African-American men away from Christianity and towards Islam, such as historical motives that connect Islam and the African-American community from the era of American slavery, the justification of slavery by early Christians in American history, injustices in social systems and social circles and embedded systemic racial inequalities. Pull factors that may attract African-American men towards Islam may include spiritual areas related to personal views on the relationship the individual can have with God, the fundamental daily requirements of Islam's creed involving the belief that there is one God and that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the messenger of God, five daily prayers, fasting the month of Ramadan, paying charity (zakat) to poor members of society, and making pilgrimage to Mecca to perform Hajj. This section will further elaborate on the push and pull factors that contribute to the appeal Islam may have on African-American men.

Specific push factors involve events such as the African slave trade to the United States, the rise of the Black Muslim movement during the civil rights era, which addressed the need of social justice in Black communities, and the ambivalent role the

Christian church played throughout the African-American social experience in United States history with its institutional support of an opposition to slavery and racism. The African-American community was, moreover, intimately connected to Islam from its inception in the United States. In *Islam in the African American Experience*, Richard Turner (2003:12) elaborates on the experiences of African Muslim slaves in the early history of the United States:

It is estimated that 10 to 15 percent of the Africans enslaved in America from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were Muslims. These Muslims were a distinctive and resistant minority in the slave population. Their life stories are fascinating and extraordinary, for they tell us about African princes, teachers, soldiers, and scholars who were captured in their homelands and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to the “strange” Christian land called America, where they became the only known Muslims to maintain Islamic traditions during the antebellum period... They were the transmitters of a major world religion to the American continent.

Turner (2003) estimates more than ten million enslaved Africans in the United States, which would suggest over one million Muslim slaves in America, no doubt resulting in the maintenance of Islamic traditions within African-American culture handed down through the generations to the present day African-American community. It is safe to presume that with the sheer amount of African Muslim slaves, some elements of Islamic thought and tradition would be embedded in the African American experience in America from its beginning. It is no accident, therefore, that 20th – and 21st – century African-American culture might have an affinity with Islam. Indeed, the path from Islam to Christianity among many African slaves was driven by a complex set of reasons, some more sociological than spiritual. For instance, many African Muslim slaves converted to Christianity in the hopes of either being treated less severely or to attain their freedom. GhanaBassiri (2010) recounts a common incident involving two slaves who converted

to Christianity for advantageous reasons. “Selim Abdul Rahman and Lamine Kaba appealed to Reverend John Craig for religious instructions and immediately after their baptism they asked the reverend to fund their trip back to Algiers”.

Abdul Rahman and Lamine both responded to the American Colonization Society’s evangelical zeal to establish a Christian colony in Africa, and to instruct his own people in the ways of the Gospel of Christ. Muslims reverted back to Islam once they arrived in Africa, which further corroborates the notion that they pretended to convert to Christianity or to comply with their de-Islamicization, because of the opportunity it provided to return to their homeland. (2010:82)

Although these two particular individuals returned back to Africa, there are accounts of African Muslim slaves who used their Islam as a form of *jihad*, or struggle against the injustice of their condition.

African Muslim slaves interpreted jihad as an “inner struggle within the ego”, a resistance to oppression, and a struggle for justice in an unjust land. In this context, writing in Arabic, fasting, wearing Muslim clothing, and reciting and reflecting on the Quran were the keys to an inner struggle of liberation against Christian tyranny. (Turner 2003:25)

The practice of Islam thus provided a form of resistance and a coping mechanism for slaves. In the degradation of slavery these African Muslims used their Islam to channel an inner strength and therefore a means of transcending their lowly position.

This is similar to Georg Simmel’s concept of the stranger: “The univety of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger” (1950:408; cf. Levine 1977). It is the paradoxical unity of nearness and remoteness that creates a special social type to which we might say both American Muslims and African-Americans belong. The stranger “may be a member of a group in a *spatial* sense but still not be a member of the group in a *social* sense; that a person may be *in* the group but not *of* it” (McLemore 1970:86). In this scenario the

African Muslim slaves used Islam as a way of distancing themselves from a stigmatized identity in a psychological and social way. While the African Muslim slaves were present in their degraded condition and social standing, they were at the same time peripheral to it because of Islam. By holding on to their Islam and making the Muslim role dominant in their identity they were able to relegate and thereby transcend their physical condition internally.

Once the abolition of slavery occurred, African-Americans were still not treated humanely as is evident with the Jim Crow laws and subsequent segregation. In fact, many African-Americans today feel as though they have not yet fully been integrated in the American society as is observed in various social issues like job placement, income distribution, the criminal justice system and negative media stereotypes. The reality is that the beginning of the African-American experience in America involved approximately one million Muslims, some of whom used their Islam as a survival and empowerment mechanism, which enabled Islam to become a cultural resource for resistance. This occurrence suggests that it is not a far leap to assume that in times of racial and social injustice African-Americans would have continued to use Islam to endure the subsequent subjugation following the abolition of slavery.

“The practice of Islam as a form of resistance under such conditions [slavery] would necessitate the formation of a distinct Muslim community through which African Muslims would strive to maintain their own identities” (GhaneaBassiri 2010:64-65). The concept of identity is crucial in the complete make-up of not only an individual, but of a

group as well. In the institution of slavery a large number of African Muslims names had been changed by their slave owners who actively sought to change the slaves' religious beliefs by bringing them to Christianity in order to integrate them into current American society where the Black identity was degraded and dishonored by slave owners.

GhaneaBassiri (2010) notes, "proponents of slavery generally focused on how slavery brought Christianity and civilization to the 'savage' Africans" (46). The characterization of the savage African was common among the ideologies during the time of slavery in America, and it undoubtedly had an effect on, not only the Black psyche and self-image, but on the image of African Americans in the subsequent years following the abolition of slavery. In regards to maintaining a sense of identity during slavery, GhaneaBassiri (2010) notes, "The signification (the issue of naming and identity) is the interpretive thread that runs through the historical narrative of Islam in Black America. In this context, Islam, since slavery, has been a means for resisting the signification of blacks as inferior, offering Black Americans the chance to signify themselves, giving them new names and new political and cultural identities" (65).

Evidence for the persistence of Islam within African-American culture is revealed in the oral histories preserved by the Georgia Writers' Project in the 1930's as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Projects Administration (WPA). By recording the oral histories of people whose ethnic traditions were being lost or transformed in modern America, they also captured information about Islam in America. Because of these records, Curtis (2009:17) notes, "we can paint a rich picture of religious life among

African American Muslims from the Georgia Coast” including the relationship between Islamic concepts and traditions and that of the post slavery community, such as this one:

Katie Brown was the great-granddaughter of Bilali. She remembered the names of Bilali’s daughter, some of whom had Anglo names like Margaret and others who were called Medina and Fatima, which were Muslim names. Brown said that Bilali and his wife Phoebe “was very particular about the time they pray and they was very regular about the hour; [they prayed] when the sun come up, when it straight over the head, and when it set... They pray and face the sun on the knees an bow three times, kneeling on a lill mat... Bilali, said Katie Brown, would pull each bead on the long string and recite words of devotion to God, and his Prophet Muhammad...Katie Brown remembered that her grandmother would make a “funny flat cake she call ‘saraka’”. She remembered that she would offer a blessing on the cakes by saying “Ameen, Ameen, Ameen” before eating them. Brown Also recalled that her grandmother Margaret would wear some type of hijab, or head scarf. (Curtis 2009:18)

GhaneaBassiri (2010) notes that the flat cake called “saraka” was derived from the Arabic word sadaqa, an Islamic concept referring to the voluntary action of giving alms. He goes on to elaborate, “that Katie confusing saraka with the name of a sweet cake suggests that the giving of sweet cakes to children may have been the only form of voluntary almsgiving practiced by their Muslim ancestors... That Margaret gave sadaqa to kids marks a way by which they were forging new relations with the next generation with whom they did not have clear kinship or tribal ties. As such, this Islamic practice became a way by which these women were able to form new communal boundaries” (72).

From traditions such as these it is interesting to observe how certain Islamic customs, even if they had been stripped of their explicit Islamic meanings, remained active in the African-American community in post-slavery America. Islamic identity in the African-American community went through many changes that overlapped the Black experience. The metamorphosis of Islam within the African-American community paralleled the

changes the community went through as African-Americans progressed from being slaves robbed of their culture and religion, to free men forging their own identities and communities, to empowered Black men striving for civil rights, to members of the mainstream American community. “One of the first African-American-led Muslim movements was the Moorish Science Temple (MST), established in Chicago in 1925 by Timothy Drew” (Curtis 2009:34). Although many Muslims today do not consider the Moorish Science Temple as being a legitimate Muslim group because of their ideologies, the MST did have Islamic concepts scattered throughout their philosophies. “Followers extended their arms in a salute and prayed: ‘”Allah, Father of the Universe, the father of Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom, and Justice. Allah is my protector, my Guide, and my Salvation by night and by day, through His Holy Prophet, Drew Ali. Amen’.” As Curtis (2009:36) observes:

The words they recited and the gestures they used were different from those of most other Muslims, but the Moorish Science Temple represented an important moment in the history of Islam in the United States as “It was the first example of an independent, African-American Muslim missionary group devoted to the cause of spreading Islam, however defined.

By losing much of their communal and religious identities during slavery, the now free African-American community began searching for their deeper spiritual identities, which paved the way for philosophies of independent thought, and spiritual enlightenment through groups like the Moorish Science Temple and the Black Muslim movement; mainly the Nation of Islam.

The search for identity is key in the relationship between the African American community and Islam, as the Islamic movements of the early nineteenth hundreds focused

not only on spiritual awakening, but on self-awareness and self-reliance as well. In 1930, the mysterious Wallace D. Fard, or Farad Muhammad, established the Nation of Islam “in the wilderness of North America... he proclaimed the same message that the Moorish Science Temple broadcast... the original religion of Black people, he said, was Islam, and their original language was Arabic (Turner 2003:214). The Nation of Islam moved Black consciousness forward through the decades spanning the 1930’s until the civil rights era from the 1950’s until the 1970’s. Edward Curtis (2009:39) details their main positions regarding the Black identity:

The Nation of Islam appealed to African Americans on many levels simultaneously. It was, at once, a political, a social, and a religious organization. Like some other religious groups of its era, it encouraged the practice of a socially conservative morality, condemning sports, secular entertainment, sexual promiscuity, obesity, tobacco, and other vices. Good Muslims, the Nation of Islam taught, should be clean living—pure, hard-working, punctual, disciplined, and modestly dressed. Children were taught these values in the Nation of Islam’s primary and secondary schools. Elijah Muhammad preached the need for economic and financial independence, encouraging believers to establish and patronize their own businesses, and he emphasized the need for black political self-determination as well. Teaching his followers that the total separation of the races would be the only lasting solution to racism.

The Nation of Islam, which still exists today, reached its zenith during the 1950’s and 1960’s with the prominence of Malcolm X. It is not unusual that the call for total separation between the races was an appealing concept to many throughout the African American community, as jobs and living situations were obstructed due to Jim Crow laws. Clearly, total separation between the races did not occur, and as such, the Islamic concept within the African American community also began to change beginning in the mid-1960’s until today.

This theme is particularly exhibited in Malcolm X's split from the Black Muslim movement and the Nation of Islam to a more orthodox mainstream form of Islam after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Turner (2003) chronicles Malcolm X's journey of self-identification, which serves as a microcosm to the overall African-American experience:

Malcolm underwent two dramatic changes in his religious identity that became significant models for contemporary African American Islam. First, Malcolm X established multi-racial orthodox Islam as an option for African American Muslims... Malcolm changed his name to El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. As his wife would say later, 'he went to Mecca as a Black Muslim and there he became only a Muslim'. Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca also changed his theological understanding of racism... he now understood racism primarily as an economic and political consequence of capitalism. The white race was not inherently demonic; the American social and political system that perpetuated racism was. (214-215)

Malcolm X later went on to preach that "I'm not an American, I'm one of 22 million black people who are victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are victims... Expand the civil rights struggle to the level of human rights" (Turner 2009:221).

It is important to note that Malcolm X went through a transformation from Black-centered Islamic thought, to a more universal approach after his trip to Mecca. In this transformation he began to not only identify himself as more than just a Black man, but also desired an extension to human rights for his community rather than just equal rights. From his religious identity to his social identity, it is without question that Malcolm X was prominent in many facets of the African-American community. Because of the distinction Malcolm X enjoyed, an embedding of Islamic ideas, phrases, names and clothing were integrated into African American culture as a whole, as Turner (2003:239) relates:

Today, most African Americans are aware that Islam has deep roots in their culture. Since the 1960's, the Nation of Islam's leaders, businesses, newspapers, radio programs, food, and distinctive clothing have become visible and routinized aspects of black communities in America's inner cities. Although most black Americans are Christians, they tend not to share with America's open hostility towards Islam... In this context, aspects of Black Muslim identity have become commodities in black American, taking the form of stylized media-oriented "cultural products" with little of their original religious content of substance. Bean pies, incense, the television series *Roots*, Muslim clothing, Arabic names and expressions, and the speeches of Louis Farrakhan have all become products of mass consumption in contemporary black America. Even Malcolm X must be considered in the context of this process. After his death, he became an icon in African American culture; black artists, intellectuals, and celebrities tended to commodify his image and political ideas in a way that makes it easy to forget that Islam was at the center of his spiritual-political journey.

However, there are indications that holding on to Islamic ideologies and concepts from the time of slavery, and the notoriety of Black Muslims in African-American culture were not the only contributing factors leading today's African-Americans to Islam. An examination into the perceptions of the Christian church in the African- American community is a necessary factor in analyzing the appeal of Islam to African-Americans today, as Marsha Haney (1999:191) emphasized:

One of the most important tasks facing the African American church is the need to help both Christian and non-Christian African Americans to understand and communicate the deceit and oppression practiced by the early Christian church (racism), i.e., the church's identification with White racism. Until the church is able to explain how and why the church and racism interlocked, and identify this process as syncretism and not biblical Christianity, very little can be done to correct the damage inflicted on the self-dignity and self-image of people of color, especially people of African descent, in the name of Christianity.

To insist that Christianity should not be associated with its past ills, such as racism and slavery, is understandable. However, when generational struggles for identity are combined with embedded Islamic/Afrocentric cultural characteristics, and organizations that directly counter the White establishments beliefs, it is difficult to untangle that emotional knot. The Christian church being associated with slavery is only part of the

issue the church has with the growing interest African-Americans have in Islam. Social upheavals, stereotyping, “othering”, neglect, lack of understanding, lack of acknowledgment, brutality, discrimination, and inequality in social and financial aspects are issues that the church should address beyond their history with slavery.

W. Deen Muhammad argues that slavery took away African Americans’ ability to properly serve God, even though they lived in a Christian culture. God ordains freedom, equality, justice and peace. But blacks in this country have been deprived of this divinely authorized foundation. (Dannin 2002:237)

Dannin (2002) elaborates further on the issues African-Americans face that propel them further from Christianity by asserting that “you have African American men seeking liberation, and many see Christianity as a White man’s religion that continues to oppress... By living according to the precepts of Islam they counter white America’s stereotype of black men as being on drugs, out of work, or in jail” (242).

Haney (1999) cites a Eurocentric (or White) dilemma regarding the view of the Christian church among some African-Americans. “Some believe the Whites have used the Bible the same way they used the chain and whip – to keep the Black man in check, by putting guidelines in it, and having the world follow it, but they do whatever they need to get and gain power. Haney (1999) also claims that “because of the past history of Eurocentric Christianity, African Americans fail to see themselves in scripture... Christianity taught Black people to be weak and submissive to those who tended to harm them; Islam is not segregated along racial lines as Christian groups in this country are” (1999:190).

Historical issues such as the dehumanizing effects of slavery and the subsequent social degradation of Jim Crow laws created a fragmented society that harbored a great deal of social and racial conflict from the beginning. Islam provided a certain portion of slaves the means to keep their identity, and offered them strength to endure through the years of their slavery. By holding on to their Islam, slaves transmitted Islamic customs and traditions that embedded themselves in the fabric of Black consciousness subsequent to the abolition of slavery, as was evident in the sadaqa tradition as well as other Islamic traditions, names and phrases. The rise of Black consciousness that was coupled with Islamic features up until the civil rights era watered the seeds of left over Islamic sentiments from slavery, and grew it into a mainstream element throughout Black culture. Ultimately, these factors combined with the disenfranchisement felt for the Christian church because of their association with racism and slavery, as well as their ineffectiveness in addressing the social issues important to the African-American community, makes Islam an alluring path for personal gratification and social empowerment.

### *How does Islam Change the Individual?*

Religion and converting from one religion to another impacts the identity of the individual. Because of the personal nature of one's religious journey, there are many aspects involved in the way religion impacts the religious adherent. However, this section aims at highlighting two occurrences involving the relationship between

negotiating one's identity and religion, and the extent to which one cultivates an "Islamic" identity after conversion.

Before engaging in discussion on identity, it is important to first specify how this wide-ranging concept will be addressed in this study. Identity will be regarded as a result of "internal subjective perceptions, self-reflection, and external characterizations", and as a means to "define and describe an individuals' sense of self and group affiliations" (Peek 2005:216). Identity construction will be then regarded as the process in which an individual "attempts to link their conception of self and the larger social structure within which the individual thinks and acts" (Peek 2005:217). More specific to the occurrence of African-American men converting to Islam, the notion of identity salience will be especially useful in understanding the various contributing factors and progressions that constitute one's identity. Identity salience asserts a hierarchy of multiple identities that encompass the self, and where "discrete identities may be thought of as ordered in a salience hierarchy. As individuals become more committed to a given role, that role will assume higher identity salience" (Stryker 1980:81).

In terms of the Muslim converts identity salience, Snow and Machalek (1984) argue that the role and narrative of the convert is one that is taken as a means of identity construction for the individual, where one sees him or herself mainly in the terms of a "convert". In this sense, "Daily activities and routines are interpreted from the standpoint of the convert role... He or she enthusiastically avows his or her convert identity in nearly all interaction situations. It is not merely a mask that is worn only in some

situations” (174). While Snow and Machalek make their claims from a standpoint of general religious conversion, their assertions are only somewhat accurate with Muslim converts in America as well. This may be due to the comprehensive view of Islam as an entire way of life. For born Muslims and converts alike, Islam is a lifestyle that is interconnected with the way one lives their lives, whereby every decision that is made by an individual has an impact on their level of adherence to Islam.

For converts, Snow and Machalek’s assertions of making the convert role high in salience, may be replaced with Islam securing the more salient source because the convert role automatically thrusts the individual into their Muslim role after conversion. One reason why the Muslim role may overshadow Snow and Machalek’s convert role is because of the personal responsibility one must shoulder in order to maintain their own Islam, and how that personal responsibility becomes a source of empowerment. Some of the main appeals Armstrong (2003) uncovered among Muslim converts involved a “new sense of personal empowerment, a rigorous call to discipline, an emphasis on family structure and values, and a clear standard of moral behavior” (21). Another reason for the salience of the Muslim role may be the element of converting to Islam as a reclamation, and a means of solidarity with the original African people, which can be observed in the dismissal of one’s “American” name for a Muslim one. Turner (2001) maintains how a “black person preserved his or her Muslim name or took a new Muslim name to maintain or reclaim African cultural roots or to negate the power and meaning of the European name” (27).

Additionally, Long's (1986) concept of signification refers to the process by which "names, signs, and stereotypes were given to non-European realities and peoples during the Western conquest" (129). This concept is important because the African-American community was signified as inferior to the dominant group in America. However, "Islam undercut this signification by offering black Americans the chance to signify themselves, giving them new names and cultural identities. Thus, signification was both imposed and self-affirmed" (Turner 2001:26).

Snow and Machalek's claim of the convert role possessing the highest salience in one's identity construction only expresses pull factors that lead an individual to look for and embrace a different religion. In particular to Islam, the push factors leading African-American men away from Christianity must be analyzed in relation to the pull factors attracting individuals to Islam as well. Because of these factors, the presumption that Islam has higher salience among converts is more fitting. However, does this "Islamic" identity cancel out one's African-American identity, especially considering the noticeable Arabness of Islam?

#### *The African-American Muslim in American Society*

Developing the Islamic identity most certainly involves the need for the individual to move towards some form of Arabic involvement in their practices because Islamic rituals are exclusively conducted in the Arabic language. The problem associated with this heavy reliance on Arabic in the intimate aspects of Islamic practices may suggest a form of dominance of the Arab culture over that of the converts' culture. In the case of this

study, it is important to analyze how African-American Muslim converts negotiate their African-American identity with their newfound Islamic identity. As it was stated earlier, the push factors involved in bringing African-American men to Islam involved issues pertaining to the American societies mainstream White dominance over the African-American community. It is therefore essential to understand if this dominance of one group or culture over another is repeated in Islam in regards to its predominant Arabic characteristics, thereby creating another push away from Islam for the new converts. It is additionally necessary to understand this occurrence because it suggests that an acute form of alienation can occur for the individual who was pushed away from the social mainstream and into the marginalized Muslim group if they perceive that they also do not belong in the Muslim group as well. Essentially, this experience would produce a double form of alienation; one from the society at large and one from within the converts new group as well.

Curtis (2005) suggests that African-American Muslims “have constructed what is ultimately a communal identity” (661). Additionally, Curtis (2002) maintains that Islam was a driving force in eroding color lines by “extinguishing racial differences between Muslims of all colors, and provided blacks with protection against ‘undue reverence for the Arab’” (21). Blyden (1962) mentions this protection in his evaluation of Arab racism by interviewing African-American Muslims who replied to his inquiry by quoting from “sura 9, verse 97 of the Quran: ‘The Arabs of the desert are the worst in unbelief and hypocrisy and most fitted to be in ignorance of the command which Allah hath sent down to His Messenger: but Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.’” (21). Additionally, the Quran

further accuses the Arabs of arrogance and ignorance in sura 49, verse 14 by relaying: “The wandering Arabs say: We believe. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Ye believe not, but rather say "We submit," for the faith hath not yet entered into your hearts”. Because of the supremacy of the Quran in Islam as the undisputed revelation of God, the verses carry a heavy weight in regards to feeling inferiority in relation to Arabs.

The historical narrative of Islam also provides a protection against reverence for the Arab by establishing that the second person after the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to accept Islam was an Ethiopian slave named Bilal Ibn Rabah al-Habashi “whom he freed and honored further by appointing him as the first *muezzin*, or summoner to prayer” (Austin 1997:19). The stories of Bilal and other narrations of racial equality are further catalogued in the *hadith* (official documented sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad):

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: Whoever calls towards 'unsuriyyah (racism/tribalism/nationalism etc) is not from amongst us, he who fights on (the basis of) 'unsuriyyah is not from amongst us, and he who dies upon 'unsuriyyah is not from amongst us (Abu Dawood)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) further said:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor a black has any superiority over a white- except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood (Al-Bukhari:1623).

Finally, this narrative recounts an incident that took place between Bilal and another companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

Once Abu Dharr and Bilaal had a dispute, but in a moment of anger Abu Dharr said: "O son of a black woman!" So Bilaal complained to the Prophet (peace be upon him) who said to Abu Dharr: "O Abu Dharr, did you slander his mother? You are a man in whom there is still some jaahiliyyah (ignorance)!" Abu Dharr began to cry profusely and asked the Prophet to ask for forgiveness for him. Abu Dharr left the masjid with tears streaming from his eyes and went to Bilaal. When he saw Bilaal he placed his cheek on the ground and said: "I will not get up until you place your foot over my face. You are the noble and I am the lowly!" Bilaal began to cry: he approached Abu Dharr, stood him up and then kissed him on that very cheek. Then they hugged each other and cried. (Al-Bukhari:30)

These narrations represent a few accounts of racial cohesion during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). They also represent an unwavering and clear repudiation of tribalism, racism or superiority in regards to race or status. These narrations, which are viewed as historical facts that contribute to the framework of contemporary Islam, are profound texts within Islamic groups. Because of these types of narrations, a major leader in the African-American Muslim community, Warith Deen Muhammad, preferred that "we [African-American Muslims] call ourselves Bilalians" (Muhammad 1984:78), referring back to the freed Ethiopian slave, Bilal.

Accompanying the Quran is the *Sunnah* (traditions and saying of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him). While Muslim groups dispute over the importance of adhering to the sunnah in Islam, the largely African-American *Salafi* Muslim movement in America calls for following what has been revealed in the Quran and faithfully observing the traditions and way of life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) presented in the sunnah. The Salafi movement in America was "born out of the resurgence of Black Consciousness... Of all the Islamic schools of thought and

perspectives that were operating in the United States it was the Salafiyya that established a strong presence, if not domination, over the religious discourse” (Elmasry 2010:222). Additionally, the Salafi movement is an “organization that is focused on the inner-cities” (Elmasry 2010:235), thereby addressing social needs felt by the African-American Muslim community. Because of this, this movement within Islam also provides a safe haven where individuals can share common experiences, practices and knowledge.

Elmasry (2010) further expounds:

As much as it offered religion, the Salafi movement provided its members with a refuge of like-minded companions from a society in which they were disadvantaged outsiders. Salafis founded their own social centers, based on the store-front ‘Salafi masjids... These conveniences amount to creating a culture of assembly: Salafis are always getting together for something. The constant assembly with like-minded individuals is a sure way to establish friendships and bonds. (227)

Similarly, Durkheim contends that religion serves major functions related to discipline and social cohesion. “Religious rituals prepare men for social life by imposing self-discipline and a certain measure of asceticism. Religious ceremonies bring people together and thus serve to reaffirm their common bonds and reinforce social solidarity” (Cosser 1977:139). In regards to African-American Muslim converts this holds true in the sense that the individual demands Islam places on the new converts requires a significant amount of learning prayer and other religious rituals in the Arabic language, which then binds the individual to the Muslim group because of their reliance for that knowledge.

Because of the emphasis placed on racial equality and a condemnation of racial superiority in the Quran and Sunnah, it is safe to presume that a framework to repress reverence for the Arab in Islam helps African-American converts to maintain their racial

identity. This component in the African-American Muslim convert's maturation within Islam provides a further pull towards group involvement with other Muslims.

Additionally, the need to learn Arabic in order to practice the prayers and rituals in Islam binds the new Muslim to Arabic-speaking members of Islam. However, because of the already stated texts emphatically denouncing Arab or racial dominance, the reliance that occurs between the African-American Muslim convert and the ethnic or Arabic speaking Muslim can be achieved without suppression. This ultimately allows the African-American Muslim convert the ability to both be a part of the immediate Islamic group without losing their racial individuality. This is an important notion as it inhibits the new convert from being alienated within the new Muslim group. How this occurrence translates into how well integrated the African-American Muslim convert becomes with the larger mainstream American society will be discussed in the next section.

### CHAPTER 3: BECOMING MUSLIM AND THE AWAKENING

Personal accounts of African-American Muslim converts concerning their journey to Islam reflects the changes they may have experienced in regards to their views on their own identity and that of the society around them. It has been noted that a historical disenfranchisement with Christianity, social injustices and a historic affiliation of Islam from the era of slavery are among some of the factors that lead African-Americans towards Islam. The goal here is to also analyze the respondents' answers to some of these social queries and then to delve further into how Islam impacted their identities and subsequent inclusion within the broader American society. Specifically, the aim is to get greater insight into whether Islam changes one's opinion of their identity and their world view, or is conversion mainly a way to fulfill spiritual and theological desires.

Due to the current stigmatization of Islam, coupled with the stigma African-American's endure, the social problem faced is that Islam may further disenfranchise and alienate African-American converts from the broader American society. Therefore, this section attempts to provide an alternative to the presupposed fear of further alienation by presenting the notion that empowerment may be achieved by African-Americans who willingly take themselves out of the American society, reevaluate themselves through

Islamic ideals on a personal and psychological level and then reevaluate their position in society through those Islamic terms.

*The Nation of Islam as a Stepping Stone*

Some of the issues involving the push away from Christianity for African-Americans involved the lack of attention the Christian Church paid to racism and inequality and a lack of specific solutions for psychological development away from the chains of stereotypes and social pitfalls driven by racism. Among the groups that specifically and ardently addressed Black empowerment was the Nation of Islam. They were able to embed the organization as well as their ideals into the African American community throughout the civil rights era at a time where Black consciousness was at its peak in the public arena. All but one of my interviewees were influenced in some way by the Nation of Islam as their first introduction to Islam. While the Nation of Islam served as an introduction to Islam from a Black-centered approach, the participants eventually used the Nation of Islam to evolve their psyche and gain a sense of self-assuredness they felt was damaged growing up in American society. Ibrahim, who grew up in Montgomery Alabama during the civil rights era recounts his experiences:

Although they use religious language, the Nation of Islam was more of a social movement that addressed religion. We weren't really in a religious frame of mind. We were in a social improvement, like nationalist, frame of mind. The problem I had with the Church was they never addressed societal issues, the big moral issues like racism, like poverty and stuff like that. They never really took a stand like the Nation of Islam did.

In accord with Ibrahim's views, Robert, who grew up in Washington D.C. relates how the Nation of Islam was an instrument used for evolving the African-American out of the

mindset of disempowerment and subordination to the mainstream White majority, and into a self-reliant position:

See, the Nation of Islam, I view it as – I look at the whole transformation as three R's. There's the resurrection, there's the reformation and then a reconnection. I think the Nation of Islam for African-Americans was probably the best venue to resurrect the dead mind to the knowledge of self, our culture and our ways that were stripped from us. It helped me resurrect the dead mind and think in a different pattern from what I was taught to think. It gave me a sense of being. After resurrection, they reformed us and gave us new clean lifestyles to have, no drinking, no smoking, no premarital sex, no lying and they were upfront. They focused on resurrecting the mind, once upright then you reform yourself, and then you can reconnect to the teachings of Islam as a confident well-balanced person.

Hakim, who also grew up in the Washington D.C. area contends that “the Nation of Islam was based more towards ethnicity and economic development. It basically taught a means to rehabilitate us and to get away from certain behaviors”. Clearly, the appeal of the Nation of Islam relied on social empowerment for African-Americans, and self-assuredness as Black men. However, this appeal and race-centered approach was not enough to keep these members within the folds of the Nation. Used as an evolutionary process in reforming the ideals instilled in the individual from the dominant society, the Nation of Islam did not fully empower the individual in totality, but rather cleared the individual's mind of the power outside social influences had on the individual's psyche.

Winant and Omi (1994) contend that race and racial identity constitutes a “common sense” that dictates the way an individual comprehends, explains and acts in the world. They further contend that “everybody learns some combination of the rules of racial classification and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation” (13). Additionally, the power of racial imagery and stereotyping

in keeping people in their designated place are elaborated on further as systemic to a racialized social order:

The continuing persistence of racial ideology suggests that these racial myths and stereotypes cannot be exposed as such in the popular imaginations. They are too essential, too integral to the maintenance of the US social order. Of course, particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, but the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of US culture. (Winant and Omi 1994:14)

Ultimately, there was a historic and cultural awareness of the Nation of Islam, as well as how the organization provided the African-American community a means to escape the power of the negative imagery of African-Americans. This psychological hold to outside influences was an impediment to personal and social evolution for African-Americans, and the lack of attention addressed to this area by the Christian Church allowed there to be a void that was filled by the Nation of Islam. Further disenchantment with the messages of the Church in terms of spiritual and social issues provided an avenue for African-Americans to explore Islam as an alternative.

#### *Confusion with the Christian Doctrine*

Confusion within the Christian doctrine and a lack of answers to theological, spiritual and race-oriented questions within the Christian Church are also factors that push African-Americans away from Christianity. Interestingly, these answers were also not adequately provided by the Nation of Islam either. This process is where the evolution from the Nation of Islam to conversion to orthodox Islam takes place. As it was previously presented, the Nation of Islam provided a retreat from negative external social messages about what it meant to be Black, and thereby empowered the individuals with a more

confident image of being Black. After gaining this self-assuredness, the individual then embarked on satisfying the inner-self by seeking answers to spiritual questions. By not being equipped to answer these questions, some individuals took the next progressive step towards orthodox mainstream Islam. These findings presume that the Nation of Islam was not interested in saving souls in the religious sense, but rather to socially uplift a people's consciousness.

This is exhibited in Ismail's reporting of his time in the Nation of Islam. "In the Nation of Islam we didn't take shahada (declaration of one God and the Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of God) you see. We only pledge allegiance to the Nation of Islam and to the leadership of Elijah Muhammad". This detail is especially interesting considering the mainstream orthodox Muslim creed asserts that one is not a Muslim if they do not make or believe the shahada. Because of this, it is safe to presume that the primary goal of the Nation of Islam was not Islam itself as a religion providing salvation to adherents, but rather a social movement that provided salvation to a depressed people.

All twelve participants in this study expressed a profound sense of confusion within the Christian Church and answers given to them by clergy and learned members. Nine out of the twelve participants claimed to have been dedicated Church going Christians who adhered to the teachings of their parents and the Church. Some of the main questions that created confusion for the participants had to do with the Church's representation of God and the Trinity, and confusion over the iconography of White

symbols in Christianity. Some of the symbols in question were White figures of angels, Prophets, Jesus and Mary.

In terms of the questions regarding the view of God, Yameen, a 57-year-old Muslim whose mother was a Christian preacher recounts the confusion he used to have in his discussions with his mother about God:

When she used to talk to me about Jesus she would say ‘Jesus died for your sins’. Quite frankly I felt that was a guilt trip. I told my mother, ‘I didn’t ask him to’. She said ‘He was God’s only son’. I said ‘well what about the rest of us?’ Then I had a problem with the Adam and Eve concept because they said that God created Adam and Eve, but the Christians were calling Jesus God saying they’re one and the same. So I said, ‘okay, so I guess Jesus created Adam’ and my mother said ‘no, God created Adam’. I said, ‘but you told me Jesus is God in the Trinity’. So, all of it was very confusing.

Similarly, Kamil was raised in a household where his father was a Christian preacher, and had similar unanswered questions. He contends that he “never belied this – the three in one, the Trinity, that Christ is the answer for everything. It just didn’t resonate with me that way because I wanted to do what Christ did, and Christ worshiped one God, not himself”. The concept of the Trinity also lead Salih away from the Church:

It just didn’t make any sense to me; the three parts, the Trinity. I don’t know if you know about that, the Trinity; the Holy Ghost, the Father, the Son. That is a primary thing that I couldn’t figure out and nobody could answer it. I don’t get it that nobody couldn’t clearly give me a good answer to what that’s about, to believe in one God, which I do believe in. Then I found that the story of Jesus is not the first time that same story has come up in history of a God-person born of a virgin mother. There are at least 12 other people in history with that same story. So that was an issue that steered me away from Christianity.

Besides the issues pertaining to the question of who or what God is in Christianity, the perception of insincerity within the Church in regards to social and political issues and the emphasis of the divinity of Jesus coupled with the White iconography associated with

it also posed problems for African-American Christians. Ibrahim, a 24-year-old Muslim convert claims:

Things happened in the church that pushed me away. The Church became more of a business than a place of refuge. They started saying one thing but they didn't act the way they were preaching you should act. I would ask them questions about scripture, and the church officials would get upset and not want to answer my question.

Haney (1999) also references issues pertaining to the view of a contradictory church sentiment present among African Americans, "church leaders need to stop guiding people with so-called fundamental religion which most often is another form of racism and White indoctrination, and instead give people a sense of pride about Christianity. Leaders must not only teach and preach essential Christianity, but practice it also" (193).

Out of the twelve participants, 8 found issues with the use of White imagery in Church iconography. In regards to the image of White Jesus, Robert asserts that "we're the only people on earth that worship somebody that didn't look like us. It's all about White supremacy". Omar, a 42-year-old Muslim convert from New York stresses that the issue of White religious figures, particularly the image of Jesus made him start questioning Christianity at an early age:

When I was about 11 years old, the images of Jesus as a White man would be – kind of bother me. I didn't understand it. When I got a little older, about 16 I began questioning it all the time. I got baptized at 15 and I questioned the Trinity and saying there's no way that picture on the wall of Jesus as God could be our God and also a human being who had a race and lived and would die. From that time, I just always questioned and never got good answers.

*The Role of Conversion in Identity Salience for African-American Muslim*

As it was discussed earlier, the main literature in terms of religious converts entails placing the role of being a convert as higher on the scale of identity salience. My assertion is that in the case of Muslim converts the role of being a Muslim is higher on the salience scale, thereby dominating the way they formulate their identities. Among the reasons for this occurrence is the need to learn religious rituals in the Arabic language while having various scriptures within Islam renouncing the superiority of the Arab. Additionally, this group reliance for learning as well as the communal aspect of Islam provides a harmonious and balanced mixture of independent responsibility and group dependence for the individual.

All participants in this study were asked three important questions to uncover what they perceived to be the dominant aspect of their identities pre and post-Islam. The first question asked what the racial make-up of the individuals friends were while growing up prior to accepting Islam. The second question asked what they held to be the most important aspect of their lives growing up prior to accepting Islam. The third question asked how the participants viewed themselves growing up; whether as a Christian first, a man, a Black man, or an American. In regards to the first question, eleven out of twelve participants claimed to have all African-American friends while growing up. For the second question, seven said their family and 5 said to be educated and economically successful in life. Finally, eight participants replied that they saw themselves as Black men first, three claimed to have perceived themselves as Christian

men and one claimed to view himself as a law-abiding American, for the third question. The participants were then asked the same three questions post-Islam, and if Islam had influenced what they claimed to have originally been the most important aspect of their identities. After accepting Islam, all participants responded that they currently have a multicultural group of friends because of the diversity stressed in Islam. However, one respondent did not attribute that to Islam as they had always had a diverse group of friends. In response to the second question, ten respondents believed Islam to be the most important aspect of their lives, whether in practicing Islam or continuing to learn more about the religion itself. One participant responded that his family was the most important feature in his life, and another responded that being a good provider and improving himself was the most important. Finally, to answer the third question, ten of the participants claimed that they perceive themselves as Muslim first followed by Black, while one perceived himself as a mixture of multiple things ranging from Muslim to a man to a father, and another participant viewed himself as a family man first.

What these findings suggest is that prior to Islam the social circle for the individuals was much smaller, thereby creating only a social reliance within the African-American community. Because of generational degradation the African-American community endured over the centuries, sole reliance on the secular community does not alleviate the precariousness of the position for African-Americans. After converting to Islam, the individual becomes responsible for himself as well as reliant on the community. Hakim illustrated this point:

One of the tools of Islam for improving yourself is education, and my effort is to learn more about Islam. I am surprised after 32 years I'm still learning. It's a lifelong learning. Once you become a Muslim it kind of opens up this door in your mind that you want to absorb as much because look at things much clearer. You know, Islam taught me that society - it begins with the individual, once you rebuild the individual you can improve society, and once you improve society you are going to improve civilization.

Because of the responsibility placed on the individual, and their reliance on the group for the attainment of knowledge, it is presumed that the Muslim identity carries more weight with the individual than the convert role in their identity salience. This theme is also demonstrated by the results showing Islam to be a motivating factor in the diversification in the racial make-up of friends. The results that express Islam as being the most important aspect in the individual's lives, as well as the main feature they outwardly portray also supports the view that Islam became the dominant aspect in their identity salience. Ibrahim, a 36-year-old participant sums up this theme by stating:

Before Islam I was a Black American first. Black meant my people came from slavery and lost their culture, their language, lost their names and had to re-find themselves and then experience the elevation to who they are now. I consider my identity as a Muslim. Not a Black Muslim, not a Muslim-American or Muslim anything; just a Muslim. A creation of Allah and this dislodges me from the pettiness around me. By seeing myself as a Muslim first, I see myself as only a creation which makes you feel insignificant. In the bigger picture I see that race is only a tiny factor of what you are, I see myself as a whole person now.

### *Social Inclusion in American Society*

The concept of feeling like a whole individual is essential in the evolutionary process the African-American Muslim convert goes through. By feeling as a whole individual, one experiences a form of grounding and self-assuredness that enables them to more

confidently react to, and participate in, the world around them. The universal message of Islam also acts as a factor that expands the world-view of African-American Muslims. The ritual and communal aspect of Islam that provides situations where men of different races and social standings must stand shoulder to shoulder in prayer creates a sense of unity and togetherness across humanity. By experiencing these factors, it is emphasized that African-American Muslim converts are not only more readily willing to engage in the American society around them, but are required to become positive contributing members within society, thereby dispelling the notion of alienation from the broader American social body. To elaborate on this theme, Hakim stresses:

Islam has helped me better understand my patriotic sense because living in a society is addressed in the Quran. It says if you are not satisfied living in some place then move or help change it by enjoining what's good and forbidding what's evil. If I go someplace, I have an obligation to that society. Wherever I'm at, or whatever environment I'm in, I have an obligation to that environment to make it better.

#### *Message Universality in Islamic Doctrine*

The universality in the message of Islam can be observed in its text and communal rituals. In terms of its appeal to what is natural it is asserted that all things are a creation from God, and all creations, from humans to animals and nature, submit to Him. Sakr (1990) maintains that Islam, as a term is generally misused. Islam is a verb that describes four actions; to submit yourself to the will of God, in sincerity, in obedience, and to do so in peace. The one who does these acts is known as a Muslim" (67). Similarly, "Al-Islam says that the sun is a Muslim, the moon is a Muslim, the earth is a Muslim. Muslim is the

tendency in God's creation to obey His will" (Muhammad 1984:86). According to these viewpoints the universal message of Islam transcends racial and materialistic boundaries as the marker of a Muslim is judged by their level of submission to God.

This desire for humanity has been prevalent throughout the Black social experience, as was witnessed when Malcolm X called for human rights as opposed to just equal rights after he left the Nation of Islam and embraced orthodox Islam. "In the North American setting, there is within African Americans the desire for freedom from racism and discrimination. There is the desire to be treated as a complete person – that is to be judged and evaluated on the basis on being human instead of the continuous and constant struggle to be treated as an equal" (Haney 1999:151). The desire for humanity is seldom placed ahead of the argument for equal rights in the public sphere. However, the participants of this study primarily cited feelings of being whole and grounded as the ultimate effect of their conversion to Islam. More so, Paul, a 41 year old convert to Islam contends that even the term "convert" is limiting, because through Islam one becomes awaked to their natural state:

There's no such thing as converted. The Prophet Muhammad didn't convert, he was no revert either, and neither was Abraham or Moses or Noah or any other Prophets. They were awakened. For me, I feel like the light came on in a world of darkness. That's the reason why I say awakened. And my world view on race became looking at a person to see who's closer to their Muslim nature, because a Christian can be closer to their Muslim nature than they even realize.

Similarly, Kareem, a 57-year-old Muslim convert maintains the same message regarding the empowerment he felt because of feeling like a whole person in humanity, and how that empowerment translated into becoming more positive within the broader society:

I see myself as being part of a global community now. I don't see myself as being better than anybody because of my skin color or vice versa – because basically that was the nature of Islam. Allah says in the Quran, the blessed person is the one who engages in taqwa (God-fearing or God-consciousness). That's what I try to aspire to, to be the best human being I can in taqwa. Not like 30 or 35 years ago when I saw things as in different perspective trying to be the best Black man I possibly can.

Sadiq, a 41-year-old Muslim convert stresses this theme by maintaining that “after I converted I felt a sense of pride, more part of a global consciousness. Now I feel connected to a global community of humanity that I didn't have before... Islam makes me feel like a whole individual, I feel grounded”. Similarly, 34-year-old Mikael maintains that:

Our whole experience here is based on race, and Islam shatters that once we embrace it. Our whole life has been Black and White so when you find something that doesn't stress the Black and White, and stresses you as a human being and bettering yourself as a human being you run with it.

Ultimately, the universal message of humanity within Islam, and the measuring stick used to gauge one's level of Islam is a key factor in the empowerment felt by the participants in this study. It is therefore safe to presume that empowerment must come from a myriad of factors that address both the inner-psyche of the individual as well the material world around them. Islam cannot be viewed here as a hindrance to an individual's association or inclusion within the broader American society. In fact, the responses from the participants paints the opposite picture. Through Islam, the individual gains a sense of awakening to their natural inclination, or natural humanity.

It is alleged here that various social forces that bombard society with negative images and stereotypes of what it means to be Black obstruct the natural humanity of American-Americans. Islam, therefore, provides a venue for stripping away those forces in order to get back to one's natural inclination and humanity. After doing so, the individual then feels a sense of grounding, whereby they feel more confident. While they engage in the learning and practice of Islam, the individual then becomes reliant on the immediate Muslim community without the baggage of racial divisions. This process then leads one to feel a sense of responsibility to their surroundings and society, which dispels notions of alienation one may anticipate could happen in this scenario. Ultimately, this process constructs a framework for a disenfranchised individual to gain a sense of self, confidence, responsibility and productivity to the society around them.

## .CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY

The research questions for this study include the following:

1. What are the contributing and motivating factors that encourage African-American men to embrace Islam?
2. How does becoming Muslim impact the African-American Muslim convert's views of their identity?
3. How does becoming Muslim impact the African-American Muslim convert's views on their placement within the American society?

This qualitative research study describes the cultural and historical impact Islam had on the African-American community, and how becoming Muslim impacts the individual's viewpoints on the self and the greater society around them. The main method of obtaining data involved in-depth formal interviews with 12 members of the African-American Muslim community. These interviews were conducted in a way to answer the research questions regarding how the individual first became aware of Islam, how it has changed them on a personal level and how it has impacted their views on the society around them. The goal of the interviews was to allow the participants to speak freely in regards to telling their story of how they found and subsequently embraced Islam.

### *Setting*

While the data for this study came through personal interviews from members of the African American Muslim community, locating the participants was the first step in the data collection process. To achieve this, flyers were posted at various Mosques throughout Washington D.C. and Maryland. Among the Mosques that promotional materials were posted were, Masjid Muhammad in Washington D.C., Prince George's Muslim Association (PGMA) in Lanham Maryland and the Islamic Society of Baltimore (ISB) in Baltimore Maryland. Flyers were posted in these Mosques after first obtaining the approval of the resident Imams (religious leaders). The flyers requesting participants (Appendix A) reflected my desire to interview African American men who were once Christian and subsequently embraced Islam. The parameters for the research had only two criteria, which required that the participants be African American males who grew up as Christians and subsequently embraced Islam. The subsequent interviews with participants ranged in locations from local coffee shops, business owners' offices and within the Mosque itself.

### *Sample/Participants*

The sampling procedure used by for this study was a nonrandom convenience sample. The participants were restricted to those who fit the two criteria and who attended the various Mosques and were available for participation. Participants included twelve men of various ages and backgrounds. While the participants selected for this study were those who were interested and available, an attempt was made to have individuals

participate who grew up in similar environments. Although the participants ranged in age groups and backgrounds, it did not obstruct the commonalities of their stories in regards to the main research questions.

The participants in the study were from diverse backgrounds and ages. There were twelve men total. Two of them were 42, 2 were 57, and the rest of the ages ranged from 24, 35, 58, 31, 61, 41, 36 and 34. Of the twelve participants, 4 were raised in New York City, 4 were raised in Washington D.C., 3 in Virginia and 1 in Montgomery Alabama. All but three of the participants were raised in two parent households, and nine out of the twelve participants classified themselves as Church going and practicing Christians in their youth. Four participants embraced Islam in their teenage years, seven became Muslim in their 20's and one accepted Islam in his 30's. These are approximate ages as the exact age the participant accepted Islam were not accurately recalled by the individuals interviewed.

### *Measurement Instrument*

Data collection was entirely achieved through interviews with the participants of the study. The interview schedule for this study is in Appendix B. While the majority of the questions on the interview schedule were asked, there were some follow up questions that were not part of the schedule. However, the follow up questions were not used to open up new themes, but rather to have the participants keep elaborating on the ideas they were trying to relay. This method safeguarded the validity of the instrument used in the study by allowing the researcher to frame the questions to specifically measure what was

intended to be measured. This method also ensured reliability by using the same questions for all respondents and consistently measuring what was intended to be measured.

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data were transcribed and categorized in terms of research questions and emergent themes for coding. Specific interview questions were used to in order to purposely answer the three research questions. A coding method was used to organize and lay out the emergent themes that became evident throughout the course of the interviews. These themes were coded and organized by the three specific research questions. Quotations were then selected from the interviews that explained and illustrated the major themes and concepts in relation to the research questions. These interviews were also organized and coding in a way that displayed a before and after insight in regards to how they viewed life and themselves before Islam, and after embracing and practicing Islam for some time.

## CHAPTER 5: FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The American social landscape is rife with imagery and messages permeating the culture about what it means to be and behave like a certain race. Race is then “assumed to be a variable which is shaped by broader societal forces” (Winant and Omi 1994:11).

African-Americans have endured a tremendous amount of negative stereotyping and imagery through various media and political messages. Due in some part to these negative images a sense of insecurity and alienation emerges among many African-Americans in American society.

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors related to why African-American men would chose to become Muslim in the United States, how it impacts the formulation of their identity, and whether converting to Islam alienates or assimilates African-Americans in the broader American society. Key factors related to why African-American men accept Islam include a historical interlocking of Islamic phraseology, ideals and history with that of Black culture from the era of slavery, and rejection of social inequality in American society. African-American men who convert to Islam also displayed Islam higher in their identity salience scale and therefore made that the more dominant aspect of their identity. Finally, African-American Muslim converts were shown to become more involved in the broader American society because of their feelings of completeness and humanity.

### *Limitations*

Although this study yielded independent data through in-depth formal interviews, there were limitations to this study in regards to the actual interviews. First, the researcher for this study is a Muslim. This element is important to point out because of the possibility that the respondents may have answered more favorably to questions regarding Islam than they would have had this been an anonymous survey or interview. Second, the amount of interview participants was limited due to the inability of the researcher to find more participants. Third, the participant's demographics in terms of background and age were wider than expected. Because of the nature of a convenience sample, the demographic limitation was unavoidable. It is safe to presume that different backgrounds in terms of geographic areas and time periods one experiences may be variables that could change certain results.

### *Recommendation for Future Research*

The results of this study suggest several recommendations for future research. First, some of the limitations in this study may be minimized by interviewing more participants and using a multiple data collections methods to ensure reliability. For instance, using survey questionnaires and cross matching those results with themes outlined by the interviews would provide more secure results and findings. Second, including African-American Christian men in the study would allow for a better isolation of Islam as an actual catalyst for change. By including African-American Christian men and asking

them the same questions as the Muslim converts the researcher can see if there is any influence from the two doctrines on the individual. This can then provide the researcher the opportunity to understand if the change in the individual was due to Islamic philosophies or a different outside source. Third, categorizing participants in relation to socio-economic status can also provide another outlook as to the influence of Islam in the lives of the participants. By doing this, the researcher can uncover similarities in thoughts and opinions between people across different economic positions.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, a few key points are evident from this study. First, the social and racial identity of African-Americans is tied into the sordid relationship between the group and the nation throughout American history. Second, Islam seems to have an effect on African-American's feelings regarding the problem of social and racial identity issues and insecurities by removing the individual's identity construction from the framework of race. Instead of viewing themselves as having a Black racial identity, they transform it to having a Muslim identity first followed by race. By doing this, African-American Muslim converts seem to be able to sidestep the discussions of race and are empowered to redefine themselves from the perspective of humanity. Ultimately, shedding race means shedding the stigma, stereotypes and stresses associated with race, and adopting the personal view of a human being opens one's eyes to the broader world context. After going on this journey of awakening, the African-American Muslim convert then becomes an even more integrative and involved member of the broader American society.

APPENDIX A



**Take Part in Islam in America Research**

**Were you once CHRISTIAN and have become MUSLIM?**

**Tell us the story of your journey to Islam.**

I am conducting **Master's Thesis Research** for the George Mason University Sociology Dept., and looking to interview **30 African-American Muslim Males living in the DC/VA/MD area.**

The focus will be on your journey from Christianity to Islam.

**The requirements for this study are:**

**1 – African-American males.**

**2 – Were once Christian and are currently Muslim.**

If these apply to you please contact me if you are interested in participating in this research.

Very little *unbiased* research has been done to represent African American Muslims, and Insha'Allah, with your help we can begin opening new doors for understanding.

**Please respond to the contact info below if you are interested.**

If you are unable to participate, please forward this along to someone who you feel may be able to contribute to this research.

**All personal information will be kept 100% confidential.**

## APPENDIX B

1. Tell me about how you first heard of Islam.
2. Before you converted to Islam, how did you see yourself as a man in American society?
3. Before you converted to Islam, were there any instances of you feeling like an outsider in American society?
4. Before you converted to Islam, what kinds of friends did you have growing up? (racial make-up of friends, were they mostly men or women, multi-cultural or mostly same race).
5. Before you converted to Islam, did you know of any Muslims in your family or close friends in the neighborhood?
6. What was/is it about Christianity that is not resonating with you?
7. What was/is it about Islam that was/is appealing to you?
8. When you first converted to Islam, how did you feel?
9. When you first converted to Islam, did you get any resistance from friends, family, or people within the African American community?
10. Before converting to Islam, how well integrated within American society did you feel?
11. When you first converted to Islam, how well integrated did you feel within the African American community?
12. When you first converted to Islam, how well integrated did you feel within the Muslim community?

13. Before Islam, what were your observations or thoughts on how race impacted society, and impacted you in particular?
  14. After Islam, what are your observations or thoughts on how race impacts society, and impacts you in particular?
  15. Before Islam, how would you classify yourself first? A black man? A Christian man? An American?
  16. After Islam, how do you classify yourself first? A black man? A Muslim? An American?
  17. After Islam, what has changed in terms of your friendships? What is the racial make-up of the friends you associate with?
  18. Before Islam, what was the most important thing in your life?
  19. After Islam, what is the most important thing in your life?
  20. Tell me about how you came to Islam. The process.
  21. How do you think Islam has changed your views on race and society?
- For those in the process of converting: (Additional questions).
1. What is it about Christianity that is not resonating with you?
  2. What is it about Islam that is interesting to you?
  3. Are there Muslims in your family?
  4. How did you first come to hear about Islam?
  5. What sparked your interest?
  6. Tell me about how you went from being a Christian to embarking on a road towards Islam?
  7. Why haven't you converted yet?
  8. How long have you been learning about Islam?
  9. Was there a specific person or incident that lead you in this direction?

10. How does your family or friends think of what you are doing?
11. How do you think Islam will help you in your self-understanding?
12. What do you hope to gain by being a Muslim?

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Abdullah Alnassar attended George Mason University where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication in 2002. He further continued his studies and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology in 2011. Abdullah currently studies Islamic studies related subjects from a sociological perspective.