
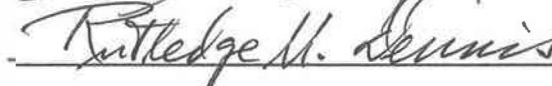


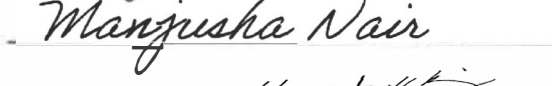



CONVERSION TO ISLAM AND IMPACT ON RACIAL IDENTITY

by

Abdullah Alnassar  
Dissertation  
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Conversion to Islam and Impact on Racial Identity

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy 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.

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I also thank my brothers and sisters who stood by me and encouraged me throughout my various journeys in life. Lastly, a special thanks and appreciation to my younger brother Tareg. Your strength has always been recognized. You are all loved and appreciated, and I pray this work becomes a source of pride for my immediate family, my Muslim brothers and sisters and for my brothers and sisters in humanity.

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## **ABSTRACT**

CONVERSION TO ISLAM AND IMPACT ON RACIAL IDENTITY

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George Mason University, 2021

Dissertation Director: Dr. Lester Kurtz

Black men have converted to Islam in the United States faster than any other minority group throughout multiple generations. This dissertation utilizes a qualitative methodology to investigate this phenomenon and its subsequent impact on Black racial identity. Through nineteen in-depth interviews with Black male Muslim converts, this study uncovered six relevant themes relating to motivations for conversion and subsequent impact on racial identity. Historical, spiritual and cultural motivations were shown to create a matrix of overlapping necessities that served as motivating factors toward conversion. Liberatory themes involving conscious and subconscious racial realignment emerged as post-conversion themes regarding racial identity.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Identity Formation as a Social Problem**

Since the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, Islam and the broader Muslim community were presented to mainstream American society in one of the more jarring ways imaginable, and since then research has pointed to Islam and Islamic identity as being at odds with American identity and culture (Haddad and Harb 2014). Through biased misrepresentation of exaggerated violence, Black men in the US have endured a long history of marginalization in American culture as well (Entman and Gross 2008, p. 98). However, even while the negative portrayal of Islam continued, Black men still continue to convert to Islam at higher levels than any other group. Questions involving the development of oneself, and their subsequent identity can run parallel to deeper existential questions revolving around the why's of existence. While some may never question why they view themselves the way they do, we all come to believe certain things about ourselves. Because of this inevitability it is important to dive critically into the various intersecting factors that contribute to the development of one's identity. Bakhurst and Sypnowich (1995) contend that self is not only thought of as a focus of the events which constitute life, but that even the need to "articulate the idea of a focal

point of the life and thought of an individual, and to do so in a way which captures the intimate, subjective space of personal being” (p. 7-8) demonstrates the potency of the concept itself. Additionally, Burger and Luckman (1967, p. 173) assert that identity is a “key element of subjective reality... formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations.” Given the entangled webs of one’s development of the self and identity with broader social interactions with other social actors and institutions, this study addresses the concept of Black racial and religious identity construction, and the impact conversion to Islam has on its development post-conversion.

While the terrorist attacks may have been among the initial introductions many Americans had to Islam, the Black American community had already experienced a long history with Islam going back to a large portion of the original enslaved African Muslims in the era of American slavery (Diouf 1998). The Black American Muslim community stands at an intersection beyond that of a Du Boisian (1903) double-consciousness, and more toward a triple-consciousness of Black identity, American cultural identity, and a racialized Islamic identity dating back to the early twentieth century (Deutsch 2015). So, this study poses two questions. Why would Black Americans, who already have a marginalized identity in American culture, choose to add another marginalized identity – Muslim – that is also sometimes denigrated in the United States? And how does converting to Islam impact the subsequent development of racial identity?

### **Identity and Intersectional Qualities**

Personal identity is shaped by multiple social factors, as the recent emphasis on intersectionality in social theory insists. Hill-Collins and Bilge (2016) explain that the intersectional framework can be understood as a “theory of identity... A multifaceted perspective acknowledging the richness of the multiple socially-constructed identities that combine to create each of us as unique individuals” (p. 115). Additionally, Curtis (2014) maintains that blackness is “related to narratives and systems of exploitation that their roots in the African slave trade and its reverberations throughout the modern world” (p. 14). The external qualities that become embodied in Black bodies is further explained as a “historically and culturally specific embodied discourse, constituted in and through a discursive tradition mobilized by the reconstituted figure of ‘Africa’ and brutal systems of oppression such as slavery and imperialism. These are ghosts, both creative and dangerous, of a black identity that was made *for* black people” (Curtis 2014, p. 15). The making of the elements that constitute blackness or a Black identity, which are external to the individual but are subsequently embodied, is a central feature of this inquiry. By situating this study at the intersections of motivations for conversion and subsequent impacts on racial identity post-conversion, this study provides insight into the ways Islam impacts the individual at a sociological, rather than theological level of analysis.

While racial identity formation comes from an outside-in context through interactional and institutional influences, religious identity literature highlights



existential factors as focal points as well as a proactive form of conscious identity construction. Religious conversion and identity formation rests along a “conversion of meanings, wherein the paradoxical constitution of a stable identity through a sharp change is possible only when the elements which compose a soul are rearranged in order to express a different language” (Leone 2004, p. 173). Leone’s (2004) conception of religious identity formation demonstrates the inside-out version of identity construction missing from the racial perspective.

As Islam is used as the mechanism in the discussion on evolving racial identity, it is important to detach Islam from its theological framework and evaluate it the way Black Muslim converts in this study have engaged with it. This will be done in two ways. First, similar to the social pressures exerted on Black Americans in the shaping of racial identity by the broader American society, Islam’s history in the US has been one of racializing as well (Islam 2020; Beydoun 2013). The racialization of Islam, stemming from the roots of the original African slaves through the Black power movements at its peak with the Malcolm X-era Nation of Islam and the post-Malcolm X Nation of Islam, will be examined as what Curtis (2014) calls *cultural* blackness, “an identifiable ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices that is distinctively black” (p. 15). Because Islam was first introduced into the US as part of African identity and was subsequently framed by the law and broader American society as a non-white religion (Beydoun 2014), its connection with Black culture persisted.

Additionally, as prominent Black figures in the civil rights and popular culture appeared as defiant faces to racist White power structures, Islam served as a through-line connecting these personalities with black liberation. Second, during the conversion and post-conversion stage, Islam as an institution has built-in mechanisms that provide Black Muslim converts specific means for resisting othering and racism from non-Black Muslim co-religionists. These built-in mechanisms are the beliefs of the converts that the main Islamic scriptures were not only revealed by God but were also preserved. Additionally, explicit anti-racism teachings in scripture, admiration of blackness in scripture, and examples of Black prophetic figures in Islamic history. These mechanisms become the evaluative measuring stick for embodied identity construction and provide Black Muslim converts not only the moral, but also internally legitimized means within the religion to combat other external pressure relating to Black identity construction. Ultimately, a master consciousness is constructed among participants that suggests a realigning of racial identity with one's humanity outside of socially constructed paradigms.

This qualitative phenomenological research study addresses gaps in literature by bridging the gap between the outside-in racial identity and the inside-out religious identity formation processes through the lived experiences of 19 Black Muslim converts as it relates to their motivations for converting to Islam and its impact on their racial identity. This research also explored Islam as an agent of socialization as converts used it as a marker of identity post-conversion to uphold their religious and racial legitimacy.

The results of this study may provide a different lens as it relates to how religion fits within an intersectional approach to examine identity construction. Lastly, this study may also add to the existing, and growing body of literature on the use of Islam within the broader topic of racial identity formation in the United States.

This study uses an intersectional lens in presenting the narratives of Black American Muslim converts. Blackness, masculinity, religion, and the self were used as intersecting lines for analysis. Collins and Bilge (2016) asserted the following principles underlying intersectionality:

racism, sexism, class exploitation, and similar systems of oppression are interconnected and mutually construct one another; configurations of social inequalities take form within intersecting oppressions; perceptions of social problems as well reflect how social actors are situated within the power relations of particular historical and social contexts; and because individuals and groups are differently located within intersecting oppressions, they have distinctive standpoints on social phenomena. (p. 25-30)

While intersectionality was useful in identifying how marginalized identities are negotiated in the process of self-discovery post-conversion to Islam, it also uncovered a blind spot.

Too often within sociological analysis religion is relegated to a participatory rather than a proactive role in the development of the individual's self. Because Islam is a lifestyle and action-oriented religion where one's level of adherence is measured in daily actions, converts in this study were made to renegotiate aspects of their racial identities as they engaged within the institution of Islam. However, by engaging within the Islamic institution converts were able to use their knowledge of Islam and Islamic

scripture in interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims to transcend lines set through racial ascriptions. The proactive model encourages and motivates converts to learn more, which ultimately presents itself as a master consciousness. Lastly, as religion in general serves as a major tool used by people to construct their value systems, the use of religion as a more proactive tool within intersectional analysis is vital in understanding how the social self is formed.

#### **Note on Terms:**

##### ***Muslim vs. Islam***

The word “Islam” means submission in Arabic and the religion of Islam is the submission of one’s will to the will of the Creator, God (Allah). The religion of Islam centers around the Quran, which is believed to be the unchanged and preserved words of God that provide guidance to humanity. Islam also entails the belief in prophets and messengers of God from Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad as the final messenger to humanity. There are a variety of Islamic sects from Shi’a to Sufi’s. Jalabi (2018) provides two forms of the concept of Islam relating to one as an active agent of peace in the world and one finding peace through submission. Jalabi (2018) states, “...Islam means active peace... [and] it is the state of the universe and its sentient beings – for having aligned peacefully to the will of God” (p. 197).

Muslim is the individual practicing Islam. Muslim is also the identity marker used to identify oneself as an adherent to the Islamic faith (Dunne et al. 2020). As a variety of socio-cultural factors can impact the shaping of one's identity, this study will be strictly utilizing Islamic teachings rather than Muslim actions as to how Islam impacts Black Muslim converts.

### ***Black/African American***

"African American" may be used interchangeably with the "Black" as the racial category under study. However, it is noted here that either term will be referring only to native born Black Americans and not individuals who still classify as Black but have immigrated to the United States.

### **The Presence of Islam in American Culture**

This literature review will provide an overview of the American Muslim community as it relates the Black American experience. Particular attention will be devoted to the evolving conception of Islam as a cultural vestige of the Islamic identity held by the original African slaves in the US. Additionally, Islamic resurgence movements connected with Black liberation struggles will be highlighted as a pivotal point in the understanding of Islam as a transformative institution within a broader racialized cultural system. The concepts of both racial and religious identity construction will be expounded on in addition to the push and pull factors used posited as motivations for Black American conversion to Islam. Because of the Islamic emphasis on scriptural

preservation, the scriptural components that constitute its teachings will be scrutinized specifically as they relate to the conception of race. Finally, gaps in literature as they relate to intersectional invisibility will be explored to present a different explanatory framework for evaluating post-conversion racial identity.

### ***Islam in Black American Cultural History***

Background on the historical narrative of Islam in the United States are often times either presented in a “clash of civilizations” way forwarded in the early 1900’s by Lothrop Stoddard in *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920) and *The New World of Islam* (1921) or erased all together. Beydoun (2014) explains how racialization of Islam with Blackness created an erasure in law and distorted the demographic realities of Islam in early American history. Beydoun (2014) asserts, “the erasure of Muslim slaves from legal scholarship is rooted in antebellum segregation of Black and Muslim identity. Since the law and slaveholders did not see Muslims slaves as Muslims, this brought about sparse documentation about their history.... However, starting with the period of American slavery until today, Black Muslims have always comprised the largest segment of the Muslim community in the US” (p. 144). Additionally, just as Islam was racialized along the lines of Black identity, Christianity served as a synonym for White as well. Austin (2006) maintains, “in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the term “Christian” did not merely sound like a racial

term; it *was* a racial term. It was not based on individuals' actual religious practice.

"Christians" were White" (p. 15).

Whether it was outright erasure or a distortion, the fact remains that the relationship between the Black American community and Islam is found at the start of the Black American experience in the U.S.

### ***Islamic Presence in Early American History***

The Black community was, moreover, intimately connected with Islam from the start of their American experience. Turner (2003) 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. (p. 12)

Turner's (2003) estimate of more than ten million enslaved Africans in the United States, suggests over one million Muslim slaves in America. It is safe to presume a resulting maintenance of Islamic traditions within Black culture handed down through the generations to the present-day Black community would have endured. 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 Black experience in America from its

beginning. It is no accident, therefore, that 20th – and 21st – century Black culture would 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. GhaneaBassiri (2010) recounts a common incident involving two slaves who converted to Christianity for advantageous reasons. In the story, 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. (p. 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. Turner (2003) asserts:

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. (p. 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 to not only transcend their lowly position but to assert their remaining personhood through the preservation of their religion. Diouf (1998) asserts that with the enslaved African Muslim's:

affirmation of the faith, prayers, alms, fasting, and dreams of Mecca: Islam did survive on the American continent. It adapted itself to the local realities when necessary, while retaining its force and specificity.... The Muslims actively preserved their religion. They took difficult and sometimes astonishing steps to ensure its continuity in the New World. (p. 69)

This demonstrates Georg Simmel's concept of the stranger: "The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger" (Levine 1977, p. 408). 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, p. 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, Black Americans were still not treated humanely as is evident with the Jim Crow laws and subsequent segregation. The reality

is that the beginning of the Black 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 in times of racial and social injustice Black Americans could have still continued to use some aspects of Islam to endure the subsequent subjugation in the immediate years following the abolition of slavery. GhaneaBassiri (2010) states, "The practice of Islam as a form of resistance under such conditions would necessitate the formation of a distinct Muslim community through which African Muslims would strive to maintain their own identities" (p. 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, many African Muslim's names had been changed by their slave owners who actively sought to change the slaves' religious beliefs in an attempt to bring them to Christianity and integrate them into American society. GhaneaBassiri (2010) notes, "proponents of slavery generally focused on how slavery brought Christianity and civilization to the 'savage' Africans" (p. 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 Black people in the subsequent years following the abolition of slavery.

As it relates 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” (p. 65). Additionally, Diouf (1998) asserts that “the Muslim’s deliberate maintenance of their cultural and religious distinctiveness, as opposed to adaptation, demonstrates that they did not stop considering themselves Africans and Muslims... Clearly, they were convinced that what they had left behind was not only superior, but could, with strong will and organization, be replicated, within certain limits, in the Americas” (p. 106).

Evidence for the persistence of Islam within early Black culture was 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. 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) notes, we can paint a rich picture of religious life among African 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. (p.17-18)

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. GhaneaBassiri elaborates 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. (p. 72)

### **Black Liberation Islam**

From traditions such as these it is important to see how certain Islamic customs, even if they had been stripped of their explicit Islamic meanings, remained active in the Black community in post-slavery America. Islamic identity in the Black community went through many changes that overlapped the Black experience as well. The metamorphosis of Islam within the Black community paralleled the changes the community went through as Black Americans progressed from being slaves robbed of

their culture and religion, to free men forging their own identities and communities, to empowered Black American citizens 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, p. 34). Later known as Noble Drew Ali, Timothy Drew became the “bridge over which the Muslim legacies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries crossed over into the Muslim communities of the twentieth and twenty-first” (Gomez 2005, p. 203).

What brings the MST into a Black liberation Islam is its attention on the socio-political structures of racism and White rule rather than the salvific qualities traditionally ascribed to religious ideologies. Gomez (2005) asserts that Noble Drew Ali’s ideas “reflect the quintessential convergence of Islam, Islamism, Freemasonry, New Thought, Rosicrucianism, anticolonialism, in its critique of European imperialism, and nationalism in the rejection of White American racism” (p. 204). In terms of American citizenship and orientation, Noble Drew Ali emphasized that “there was a connection between the ability of Americans to identify their ethnic heritage and their enjoyment of American citizenship. Once the Moors fully embraced their own background, their circumstances in North America would undergo some degree of amelioration” (Gomez 2005, p.223). Lastly, the message of Noble Drew Ali is inextricably linked to racial affinity, nationality, and dichotomy between a White Christianity and Black Islam. In Ali’s (1996) *Circle Seven Koran* he states:

Therefore, we are returning the Church and Christianity back to the European Nations, as it was prepared for their forefathers for their earthly salvation. While we, the Moorish Americans are returning to Islam, which was founded by our forefathers for our earthly and divine salvation. Come all ye Asiatics of America and hear the truth about your nationality and birthrights, because you are not negroes. Learn of your forefathers ancient and divine Creed. That you will learn to love instead of hate. (p. 141-142)

Although many Muslims today do not consider the Moorish Science Temple (MST) as being a legitimate Muslim group because of their theological ideologies, the MST did have Islamic concepts scattered throughout their philosophies. Curtis (2009) states “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” (p. 34). Curtis (2009) states:

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. (p. 36)

By losing much of their communal and religious identities during slavery, the now free Black community began searching for their deeper spiritual identities, which paved the way for philosophies of independent thought, and spiritual enlightenment through groups like the MST and the Black Muslim movement; mainly the Nation of Islam. The search for identity is key in the relationship between the Black community and Islam, as

the Islamic movements of the early nineteen hundreds focused not only on spiritual awakening, but on self-awareness and self-reliance as well.

### ***The Nation of Islam***

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, p. 214). The NOI 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) details their main positions regarding 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. (p. 39)

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 Black 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 Black community also began to change beginning in the mid-1960s until today. This theme is particularly exhibited in Malcolm X's split from the Black Muslim movement and the Nation of Islam to an 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 Black 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. (p. 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 2003 p. 221).

It is important to note that Malcolm X went through a transformation from a Black-centered Islamic thought, to a more universal approach after his Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In this evolution he began to not only identify himself as more than only a racial



identity, 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 Black community with Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Through his persona and rhetoric Malcolm X brought many Black men to the Nation of Islam as well as to Sunni Islam after his separation from the organization. Because of the distinction Malcolm X enjoyed, an embedding of Islamic ideas, phrases, names and clothing were integrated into Black culture as a whole, as Turner (2003) 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. (p. 239)

The Nation of Islam and Malcolm X both represented visions and examples of Black masculinity, discipline, strength, and self-pride in the face of a White power structure. Perkins (2000) demonstrates that "the Nation of Islam revived patriarchy as the foundation for the nuclear family, making the male the sole arbiter of familial

power.... The man was the breadwinner, disciplinarian, protector, and patriarch all rolled into one” (p. 25). The performance of Black masculinity was also presented and distributed through the institutional framework of the Nation of Islam. Speaking about the success of the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper, Haywood (2017) states:

one of the ways the paper achieved this influence was by appealing to the gendered ideas and ideologies of Black Americans and their ongoing quest to win respect for themselves as “real” men and women.... Their hawking of the paper from street corners was especially important for the time because salesmen contributed to the era’s spectacular displays of Black militancy and masculinity that helped generate a powerfully evocative visual culture of Black Power. In many ways, this culture literally and figuratively positioned Black male bodies at the center of the freedom struggle under the idea that their presence carried with it a manly influence thought to advance the race. (p. 10)

The image of the Black man within a patriarchal family structure as presented by the Nation of Islam was in direct contrast to the 1965 Moynihan Report that depicted the Black family as ineffectively socializing children within a matriarchal structure. Gans (2011) argues the Moynihan report misappropriates joblessness with familial socialization creating a pathological issue. The NOI of the 1960’s served as an institutional example refuting the pathological and deterministic arguments put forth by Moynihan.

### **Black Islamic Culture and Christianity**

There are indications that holding on to Islamic ideologies and concepts from the time of slavery, and the notoriety of Black Muslims in Black culture were not the only contributing factors leading Black men to Islam. An examination into the perceptions of

the Christian church in the Black community is a necessary factor in analyzing the appeal of Islam to Black Americans today, as Haney (1999) 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. (p. 191)

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 Black men have in Islam. Social upheavals, stereotyping, "othering", neglect, lack of understanding, lack of acknowledgment, brutality, discrimination, and inequality in social and economic aspects are issues that the church should address beyond their history with slavery. As Dannin (2002) states "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" (p. 237). Dannin (2002) elaborates further on the social issues Black 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” (p. 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” (p. 190). 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” (p. 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 the Black consciousness movement 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 Black community, constitute the historical push factors that make Islam an alluring path for personal and social empowerment. In addition to the social and cultural factors that may provide motivations for conversion to Islam, the call from Islam becomes equally necessary to investigate.

### **The Call of Islam**

The process of conversion to Islam is not complete if the one investigating the message of Islam does not accept its claims or worldview. The essential claim of Islam is that it is a universal religion, with an unchanged scripture preserved by God and provides salvation for individuals through the process of liberation from social constraints through the willful submission to God's laws. As it relates to the Black American experience, components within Islam that provide compelling pulls toward conversion can be observed in the explicit stance against racial disparity and inclination toward oneness in humanity, praiseworthy qualities found regarding African tribes in history, and descriptions of Black Islamic Prophets found within the context of religious

scripture deemed valid because of its preserved qualities (Marsh 1996; Ibn Al-Jawzi 2019; Azami 2003; Ayoub 1984). Prior to diving into the Islamic call, a contextual understanding regarding race and racism are required.

### **Race-Racism Within Islam**

The contemporary notion of race, how it is defined on the individual micro level and how it relates to a macro level understand of social cohesion requires an introductory unpacking of terms. Race has gone through an evolution of meaning depending on the people and societies defining the terms. Prentiss (2003) states racial categories “have not been in existence from the beginning of time, and all have undergone changes as to how they have been conceived” (p. 3). Austin (2006) similarly states, “In the United States, there are least four different types of criteria used for racial categorization: physical appearance, ancestry, geography, and racialized conceptions of culture” (p. 6). It is in these criteria where the subjectivity rests that lay the groundwork for both suppressive and liberative practices.

In its most modern sense, Omi and Winant (2005) conceptualize race as socially constructed where one’s identity is framed by social institutions consisting of media, political messaging, educational institutions, and economic systems. While sociologists have been analyzing, defining, and redefining race for over a century, the framing of the concept itself has been around since pre-modern times. The issue facing the discourse of race in general is not what constitutes race, but the fusing of race with race-ism. By

conflating the two terms, it makes it nearly impossible to separate and assess racial differences from the political entities that may ascribe meanings to race for political benefits.

The differentiation of individuals within society based on color, biological appearance and ethnic background is certainly not a contemporary occurrence. Rather than use the contemporary understanding of race and what it constitutes, this section will be focused on assessing the concept of race within Islamic scriptural text. The concept of race is defined here as the superficial human features that separate and distinguish individuals within a society. These superficial features can be skin color, ethnic tribe, nation, or language. More often than not these superficial differences amongst members of society become the things that groups attach themselves to, especially when power and political control are at stake. Ultimately, that divergence is what leads to confusion when trying to separate the discussion of race from people's racist actions. Within the context of this review of Islam, it must be noted that Islam as the entity itself will be evaluated through its tenets as presented in scripture, rather than actions that Muslims perform. Because Muslim action may at varying degrees have cultural, political, class or influences of power differentials, detangling Muslim action from Islamic teachings would first be required in evaluating the interplay between race and Islam.

In 7th century Arabia, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community these superficialities were, in fact, present and addressed. However,

because these superficialities very easily and carelessly become attached to the actions of people, this analysis will only be assessing Quran and Hadith literature, rather than Muslim actions, to understand what Islam says about the issue of race itself. Because my preliminary findings showed that there is a heavy reliance on Islamic scripture as a measuring stick for actualizing the individual's sense of self, including the scriptural elements of Islam are important in gaining an overall understanding of how Muslim converts generate a new sense of self.

### **The Quran and Race**

The Quran does provide a racial framework that can be assessed even in contemporary times. While the contemporary notion of race is not used, the concept of color, nations and languages are. Additionally, the concept of racial hierarchies and claims of racial superiority are addressed as well. The Quran seems to go out of its way in linking the notions of superficial racial differences, the oneness of humanity and knowledge together. Quranic verses that address these issues are also explicitly and uniquely presented to the readers, which implies two points. First, that racial stratification and self-proclaimed notions of superiority of individuals within a society are an inevitable part of the human experience. Second, that there is a clear intellectual and spiritual separation between those who engage in that type of stratification and self-aggrandizement and those who struggle against it. Ironically, while the Quranic text



is clear regarding the original oneness of human creation, opponents contend that verses in the Quran display negative racial implications.

### ***Quran and Racial Differences***

Before quoting the Quranic text regarding this topic, it is important to stress how the early Muslim and non-Muslim communities received this message at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Society was stratified along ethnic and tribal ties. Yes, as was shown in Hadith literature, there were instances of prejudice and bigotry along color lines as well. More important than that, however, is whether the anti-racial messages of the Quran were even believed to be coming from God. After all, the Prophet Muhammad's claims that he was receiving revelation from God, and that they happened to counter specific social issues at the time were extraordinary claims to make. In fact, the Prophet Muhammad's words were accepted as coming from a metaphysical source. "The Quran is marked as mantic speech... a speech form that speaker and listener recognize as emanating from a supernatural source" (Wild 2006 p. 4). Wild further asserts that "some were prepared to accept the recitations of the Prophet as mantic speech, but most were not ready to accept it as a monotheist message (p. 5). This note is important because it lends authority to its assertions and to the Prophet Muhammad's traditions. It is also important to understand that the belief of its divine origin from the time of the Prophet Muhammad is a predominant pull factor that leads people in contemporary time to convert to Islam as well.

The Quran states, “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge” (Quran 30:22). While the last part of this verse mentions that these are signs for “those of knowledge”, A.J. Arberry’s (1955) translation of the Quran states, “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your tongues and hues. Surely in that are signs for all living beings” (p. 107). The difference between these two translations is stark. Traditional Islamic exegetes like Ibn Kathir (2017) assert that the correct summation of this verse is “Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge” (p. 14). The Arabic word for “signs” is Ayat. In this verse the word Ayat is used twice, which indicates that the creation of the universe in totality as well as the differences amongst humanity are evidence for the existence of God Himself. Ibn Kathir’s assertion that the verse concludes that they are “signs for men of sound knowledge” (p. 14), indicates that the differences that exist among humans is evidence for rational and thinking individuals.

About variations of color and general superficial differences within humanity, the Quran shows a particular pattern. Chapter 35:27-28 state:

Do you not see that Allah sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby fruits of varying colors? And in the mountains are tracts, white and red of varying shades and [some] extremely Black. And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors similarly. Only those fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving.

Additionally:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (Quran 49:13)

These verses share two distinct qualities. First, they assert that there is a connection between the creative power of God and the variation in colors amongst humanity. Second, that knowledge and nobility is associated with understanding that connection. This connection ultimately creates an intellectual and spiritual line of separation between those who comprehend the evidence listed above and those who do not. Those who do comprehend that superficial human differences amongst people come from God are described as those who have knowledge, whereas those who do not comprehend the differences are amongst those who possess traits of ignorance.

### ***Explicitness of Human Oneness in the Quran***

The oneness of humanity is referenced in several places in the Quran. Verses frequently start out with the proclamation, “O, mankind” or “Bani Adam” (children of Adam), which are verses to address all of humanity. This distinction is especially important since the Quran was revealed in piecemeal fashion where certain social and personal situations were experienced by the Muslim community and the Prophet Muhammad himself. For example:

It might be held, for instance, that the particular events of Muhammad’s lifetime were spoken of in the Qur’an because they exemplified a typified fundamental aspect of human experience. It would follow that the assertions of the Qur’an,

while having a particular reference, yet have a universal character...it would be further argued, the Qur'an is addressed to man universally. (Watt 1969, p. 27)

In this respect the Quranic texts dealing with the oneness of humanity serve to illustrate, not only the interconnection between humans regardless of color or language, but that they are also given preference over all other creations. That the Quran addresses all of humankind rather than a particular tribe, region or group of people is another pull factor for conversion.

The story of human creation is provided in the Quran with a unique twist. In it, one can see how the actions of Shaitan (Satan) reflect the similar distinctions of self-importance regarding one's superficial nature. The Quran states:

And [mention] when We said to the angles, "Prostrate to Adam," and they prostrated, except for Iblees. He said, 'Should I prostrate to one You created from clay?' [Iblees] said, 'Do You see this one whom You have honored above me? If You delay me until the Day of Resurrection, I will surely destroy his descendants, except for a few. (Quran 70:61-62)

Additionally, the Quran states:

And We have certainly created you, [O Mankind], and given you [human] form. Then We said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam"; so, they prostrated, except for Iblees (Satan). He was not of those who prostrated. [Allah] said, "What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?" [Satan] said, "I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay." (Quran 7:12)

In Surah 15 (Al-Hijr) the story is repeated with Satan saying "Never would I prostrate to a human whom You created out of clay from an altered black mud" (Quran 15:33).

The refusal to obey God's command to prostrate to Adam, even while in the presence of God because of the trait of arrogance in one's physical nature, illustrates

how that self-aggrandizing characteristic has been in existence as long as mankind itself. The need for explicitness in universal human oneness in Quranic text, therefore, becomes clearly established. It would not make sense to present this type of contention in the story of creation, show that specific flaw of self-importance and then not address that feature in subsequent verses throughout the Quran.

Further verses that stress the oneness of humanity state, “And We have certainly honored the children of Adam [Bani Adam] and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference” (Quran 17:70). Additionally, the Quran states, “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, an Observer” (Quran 4:1). Lastly, “And it is He who produced you from one soul and [gave you] a place of dwelling and of storage. We have detailed the signs for a people who understand” (Quran 6:98). In Quran 4:1, the word *taqwa* is translated as “fear”, which is a deficient translation and obscures the essence of the verse. Ahmad Halimah (2014) presents a list of nouns and verbs that can be extracted from the word *Taqwa*:

- God fearing / to fear God or to fear Allah (i.e., to do what brings you closer to Allah and His mercy and to avoid disobeying His orders in fear of His punishment)
- Righteousness (i.e., to do what is right and to avoid doing what is wrong) with God fearing in mind.
- Piety
- Piousness

- Devotion
- Religiosity
- Religiousness

Using the above possible synonyms for the term taqwa, the concept emerges that one's consciousness, righteousness and piety of God is connected to Him, as well as to their relationship within society with the statement, "through whom you ask one another." This creates the equilibrium where one's relationship with God is not divorced from their relationship to society, and since social relationships are made up of human interaction, how one interacts with those who are different from their "in-group" becomes an essential struggle to attain that piety.

The Quran does not specifically refute claims of self-importance. Rather, it speaks to mankind as a whole by making them aware of their insignificance in relation to the totality of creation. It mentions, "And do not walk upon the earth exultantly. Indeed, you will never tear the earth [apart], and you will never reach the mountains in height. All that - its evil is ever, in the sight of your Lord, detested" (Quran 37-38). Additionally, the Quran (57:23) states, "In order that you not despair over what has eluded you and not exult [in pride] over what He has given you. And Allah does not like everyone self-deluded and boastful." While these verses are not intrinsically about racial or ethnic self-importance, they are general in scope and allow for that interpretation to be made. To further the assertion of mankind's insignificance in relation to creation, the Quran (79:27) contends, "Are you a more difficult creation or is the heaven? Allah

constructed it”, and “Has there [not] come upon man a period of time when he was not a thing [even] mentioned? Indeed, We created man from a sperm-drop mixture that We may try him; and We made him hearing and seeing” (76:1-2).

The Quranic message in relation to mankind can be outlined in two distinct, yet interrelated, sections: individual submission to God and social accountability. In the Islamic textual discourse this relationship is evidenced in the constant proclamation and reminder that God is the one with ultimate creative power to create the individual according to His will. “O mankind, what has deceived you concerning your Lord, the Generous, Who created you, proportioned you, and balanced you? In whatever form He willed has He assembled you” (Quran 82:6-8). This is intended to make the individual submit their will to that creative power. Further, God asserts that those who recognize His signs and submit their will to His are among a distinct group of individuals, which is one of the few times the Quran makes group specific distinctions.

The distinctions here are also racially egalitarian as it makes those who do submit and call themselves Muslims as part of a favored single Ummah. The concept of the ummah, however, is not defined by racial, ethnic or tribal associations. The Quran relates, “Surely this community [ummah] of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so fear Me” (Quran 23:52). If the other synonyms for the word “taqwa” are used aside from “fear”, like devotion and piety, the meaning changes to suggest that members in this community are one entity with God being the ultimate authority, thereby suggesting the two-fold sections of individual submission to God and social

accountability. The Quran maintains the oneness and favorability of the community by asserting, “You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah...” (Quran 3:110). Quran 2:143 states, “And thus we have made you a just community [ummah] that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you....” These two verses demonstrate the social aspect of Islamic text regarding social accountability. Ultimately, because the ummah is not specific to any racial or ethnic group, it is argued here that this social accountability displayed in the Quranic definition of ummah linked with the individual submission to God provides evidence to the notion of racial egalitarianism in Quranic text.

### ***Racialized Verses in Quranic Text***

Superficial readings and analysis of Quranic text may lead an individual to claim there is a distinction made in the Quran of favoring Whites over non-Whites. While there are a plethora of verses outlining the opposite notion, it is worth examining how these “racialized” verses are being interpreted. The main verse used to show White preference in the Quran is:

On the Day [some] faces will turn white and [some] faces will turn black. As for those whose faces turn black, [to them it will be said], "Did you disbelieve after your belief? Then taste the punishment for what you used to reject. But as for those whose faces will turn white, [they will be] within the mercy of Allah. They will abide therein eternally. (Quran 3:106-107)



Indeed, these verses make a clear distinction between white and black. However, is this the way it was interpreted at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, or are the racialized implications a more post-colonial conflation?

Tafsir Ibn Kathir (2017) provides a classical exegesis to these verses:

On the Day when some faces will become white and some faces will become black; On the Day of Resurrection. This is when the faces of followers of the Sunnah and the Jama`ah will radiate with whiteness, and the faces of followers of Bid`ah (innovation) and division will be darkened, as has been reported from Ibn Abbas. Allah said, As for those whose faces will become black (to them will be said): "Did you reject faith after accepting it!" Al-Hasan Al-Basri said, "They are the hypocrites." (p. 30)

Clearly, the verses used to claim racialized text in Quranic scripture are misinterpreted. In these verses the imagery of brightness and darkness is related to those pious members who are among, and within the ummah, and the darkness is relating to those who accepted and then rejected faith. Since there are no racial or ethnic prerequisites for membership in the ummah, this would imply that regardless of one's earthly skin tone they would be radiant and bright on the Day of Resurrection. It would be a stretch to imply that this would mean that white skin is preferable.

In language, especially language using imagery, white (or light) would be the absence of darkness, and darkness would be the absence of white (or light). These verses merely paint that picture. Additionally, because these verses are referring to the Day of Resurrection, there is other evidence to suggest that what we know in our first-person subjective reality at this time will not be the same as that Day. The Quran states,

“We have decreed death among you, and We are not to be outdone. In that We will change your likenesses and produce you in that [form] which you do not know” (Quran 56:60-61).

Therefore, the idea that the Quran includes racialized verses suggests either misinterpretation of select verses without context or a willful disregard for ample evidence to the contrary. In fact, even the most ardent critic claiming that Islamic text includes racialized sentiments (particularly anti-Black), the pan-Africanist Chancellor Williams (1987), does not include Quran in his critical assessments. Instead, Williams uses Hadith literature to suggest that there is an anti-Black and an Arab supremacy in the Islamic discourse. Williams (1987) stated:

To repeat, then, Blacks are in Arabia for precisely the same reasons Blacks are in the United States, South America, and the Caribbean Islands— through capture and enslavement. In studying the actual records in the history of the race, therefore, the role of “white” Arabs must not be obscured either by their Islamic religion or by the presence of the Africans and AfroArabs among them any more than we should permit white Europeans and white Americans to use Christianity to cover their drive for power and control over the lives of other people. (p. 23)

Williams (1987) accounting of “records” in his book, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, primarily rests on Hadith literature and accounts of incidents in Muslim history that involved African slavery. Because this analysis is not taking into account the actions of Muslims during the rise of Muslim empires, assessments of racial prejudice at these times will not be included. Rather, the following section will analyze common Hadith literature on the matters of racialized text and its interpretation.

### ***Hadith Text and Race***

Regarding concepts like race, which take into account sociological elements, it is imperative that traditional and authentic Hadith material be introduced to the discussion because they help to round out the overall discussion. In fact, if one were to look at the Quran as an outline of a picture of society, the Hadith literature can serve as the paint to fill in that picture. In that sense, the following Hadith texts will serve as examples regarding the community (ummah) and racial differentiation amongst its members.

Some of the explicit representations of Blackness in Islamic history are demonstrated through examples such as, “the Prophet Muhammad would call Umm Ayman (Black woman and freed slave) his mother after his mother. The adopted son of the Prophet Zayd was Black. Ubadah Ibn As-Saamit was one of the first Ansar and a Black man. He accompanied the Prophet in every battle and was one of the writers of revelation” (Suleiman 2008, p.7). Additionally, Suleiman (2018) relates the famous story in Islamic history of Julaybib, a Black man among the early Muslim Community.

After a battle, the Prophet asked every tribe: " Are you missing anybody?" Nobody was missing anyone but the Prophet said: “However, I am missing Julaybib .” They found him next to 7 of the opposing army that he was able to kill. The Prophet stood over him full of emotion and said, “He is from me and I am from him” three times. The Prophet picked him up in his arms, dug his grave, and buried him in it. (p. 8)

### ***Specific Racialized Hadith***

The most well-known Hadith involving race is that of the incident between Bilal ibn Rabah, a freed Ethiopian slave, close companion of the Prophet Muhammad and first Muezzin (caller to prayer) in Islam, and Abu Dharr al-Ghifari. The Hadith is reported by Abu Umamah:

Abu Dharr reproached Bilal about his mother, saying, "O son of a black woman!" So, Bilal went to the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and he told him what he said. The Prophet became angry and then Abu Dharr came although he was unaware of what Bilal told him. The Prophet turned away from him and Abu Dharr asked, "O Messenger of Allah, have you turned away because of something you have been told?" The Prophet said, "Have you reproached Bilal about his mother?" Then the Prophet said, "By the one who revealed the Book to Muhammad (or however Allah willed for him to swear), none is more virtuous over another except by righteous deeds. You have none but an insignificant amount. (Al-Sheha p. 28-29)

Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad's elevation of Bilal was two-fold; spiritual and social. Spiritually, the Prophet Muhammad relayed the message of paradise to Bilal.

Narrated by Abu Huraira, the Prophet Muhammad asked Bilal:

At the time of the Fajr prayer the Prophet asked Bilal, Tell me of the best deed you did after embracing Islam, for I heard your footsteps in front of me in Paradise." Bilal replied, "I did not do anything worth mentioning except that whenever I performed ablution during the day or night, I prayed after that ablution as much as was written for me. (Al-Qadri 2014, p. 131)

Socially, Bilal's elevation in front of society served to dispel notions of racial hierarchy as he was directed by the Prophet Muhammad to stand on top of the Ka'aba and give the call to prayer on the day of the conquest of Mecca. Evidence for there already being a sense of racial and ethnic entitlements of superiority in the Meccan

community, there were those who were offended that a Black man was given the authority to stand on the Ka'ba and announce the call to prayer. Abu Hassan al-Muzakki reports:

On the day Mecca was conquered, Bilal climbed on the roof of the Ka'bah and performed the call to prayer. One person said:  
O servants of Allah! How can this black slave be allowed to perform the call to prayer on top of the Ka'bah? Another man said: If Allah is displeased, He will change him. Allah, exalted is He, then revealed this verse O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female. (Al-Wahidi 2008, p. 143)

This incident was cited as the reason for verse 49:13 of the Quran to be revealed which says "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted." The reason for this revelation (Asbab al-Nuzul) is an inherently racist incident involving racial ethnic superiority and the refutation of those sentiments. The fact that this serves as the reason for revelation ties the spiritual element of being noble in the sight of God with the social action of not claiming superiority over others strictly through superficial ethnic or racial characteristics. Ultimately, this serves as a strong example of the struggle to overcome inherent notions of superiority and racial egalitarianism in Islamic text.

The Prophet Muhammad is credited with other sayings that call to the oneness of the ummah irrespective of racial, ethnic, or tribal backgrounds. In fact, amongst those

in the Prophet Muhammad's inner-circle were, Bilal the Ethiopian; Salman the Persian; Abdullah the Jew; and Suhayb the Greek. The Prophet Muhammad described the ummah in a functional way where he stated that, "the parable of the believers in their affection, mercy and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever" (Sahih al-Bukhari 6011). To further emphasize this point, Ibn Umar reports that on the day Mecca was liberated, the Prophet Muhammad said,

O people, Allah has removed the slogans of ignorance from you and the exaltation of its forefathers. The people are only two kinds: either a righteous, God fearing believer dignified to Allah, or a wicked, miserable sinner insignificant to Allah. The people are all the children of Adam and Adam was created from dust. Allah said: O people, We have created you male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most noble to Allah is the most righteous of you. (al-Tirmidhi, 3270)

These narrations demonstrate that there was an expressed emphasis to stamp out elements of racial superiority within the community of early Muslims. This implies that these notions existed at the time and that they were viewed by the Prophet Muhammad as spiritually evil and socially detrimental. The social acts of worship were also physical representations of Islamic attempts at social cohesion. Because congregational prayer and rituals like Hajj were required to be done as a collective, the attempt at racial superiority would have to fly counter to the evidence of racial egalitarianism.

### ***Racialized Hadith Literature***

The racialized Hadith literature used to propel the notion that Islam came as Christianity did and subjugated Blacks under Arab, rather than White authority, mainly deals with Hadith where color is mentioned. This line of argument would presuppose that race by default is a genetic rather than a social construct and that Arabs would fall under the category of White. Additionally, Hadith stating that the Prophet Muhammad said, “The black person belongs to his stomach and private parts”, and seek out the good seed among you, and marry compatible mates. But, avoid the Negro. For verily, he is a dysmorphic creature”(Ahmad 1990, p. 369-370), have been declared spurious and fabricated by numerous hadith scholars from Imam Bukhari, Ibn Jawzi and Nasir al-Din Al-Albani.

Modern scholarship also falls into the issue of conflating contemporary notions of race with historical interpretations. For instance, the term white and white skin means something completely different in the modern Western world than it did in seventh century Arabia. In fact, the presence of white skin as we know it to signify the White race today was virtually absent in seventh century Arabia. Imam Nawawi maintains, “the predominant colors among the non-Arabs are red (ḥumra) and white (bayāḍ), while the colors that predominate among the Arabs are brown (sumra) and black (udma)” (Muslim 1995, p. 4). Ibn Manzur (1882) relates, “When they said, “Fulān or Fulāna is white”, it was a description of their magnanimity (karam fī al-akhlāq), not a reference to being white in complexion (lawn al-khilqa). And when they said, “Fulān or

Fulāna is red”, they meant “white in color” (bayāḍ al-lawn)” (p. 209). Lastly, Al-fayruzabadi (1995) states, “the usage of white skin in reference to one’s skin color was used to describe a skin condition called *baras*, which are discolored spots on the skin similar to vitiligo” (p.550).

With these narrations in mind, there are clear indications that the society the Prophet Muhammad belonged to held notions of racial and ethnic superiority as was evidenced with the narrations relating to Bilal. Additionally, these narrations serve as a detailed account of how the Prophet and the early Muslim community laid a framework that explicitly and unambiguously called for oneness in the members of the ummah. The communal ritual aspects within this early Muslim community would have consisted of people of varying colors, tribes and ethnic backgrounds as the Prophets inner-circle included that type of diversity as well. Therefore, modern notions of racial contexts superimposed on the early Muslim community are spurious at best. They lack the evidentiary veracity to fully substantiate their claims that Islam racially dominated Black Africans. Ultimately, the explicitness of racial egalitarianism and the universality of humankind in Islamic text along with the belief of its divine and preserved origins by converts to Islam, makes Islamic scriptural evidence a new objective measuring stick used to construct new aspects of their identities from an outer-cultural paradigm.



## **Racial and Religious Identity Development**

### ***Racial Identity Development***

The issue of one's self-concept, is not to imply that Black Americans suffer from a low self-concept collectively. In fact, that is an epistemological and methodological error that has inundated Black identity research since the "Black self-hatred" literature prior to the 1960's. A prime example is Cooley (1902) and Mead's (1934) theoretical framework stressing that "the individual's conception arises through interaction with other members of the society that constitute his or her significant social circle" (Allen 2001). In this model, Allen suggests that:

European-American racism and racist practices are construed to represent the Black community's social looking glass reflecting derogatory images of Blacks. Through Black American's internalization of and/or identification with the European American racist attitude toward Blacks, or through so-called objective comparison (housing, employment, income, etc.), Blacks come to view themselves (cognitively and affectively) as Whites view them. (p. 57)

The self-hate/low self-esteem postulation extended into contemporary work as well. Pettigrew (1978) argued that Black responses shaped by racial oppression had negative consequences for Black personality and to assume otherwise was to deny a fundamental insight of social psychology. Even when empirical literature contradicted theoretical literature on the matter, it was explained away as "life experience and culture must have deleterious effects on the Black psyche, and that if any researcher finds otherwise, this is undoubtedly the result of faulty research strategy" (Allen 2001,

p. 58). Evidence of the high rates of self-esteem were the prevalence of African culture and that Blacks had not been completely assimilated into a White culture.

Porter and Washington (1989) showed that low self-esteem was more prevalent among children than adults, which suggested that higher in-group relationships within the Black community yielded higher levels of self-esteem. Even though the empirical literature provided evidence showing that Black self-esteem was not as it was hypothesized in the “self-hatred” years, it still showed that it was somewhat dependent on what was happening in society, be it the broader society or the collective Black society. The interconnectedness of any community is posited with having an impact on the psyche of the individual and the collective as well. However, Allen (2001) maintains that the issue lies in the fundamental approach in studying this issue because “the selves and theories of selves have been constructed within a European-American cultural tradition or what is sometimes called the Western view of the individual” (p. 56).

To clean up the literature and data in the field, Cross (1991), the father of the nigrescence model, separated the analysis into two periods of the Black self-conception. The first period was 1939-1960, where the Negro self-hatred thesis was popular in the press and academia. The second period was the conversion to nigrescence, the process that occurred during 1968-1980 where Black identity was transformed. It is during that second time span that Cross reported that there was little evidence to support the claim of Blacks having low self-esteem or self-conceptions. Additionally, Porter and

Washington (1989) revealed that personal self-esteem tended to be fairly high and comparable with that of European Americans.

Cross' (1991) nigrescence model for Black identity ultimately served as an explanation of the resocialization process that transforms one pre-existing identity into a more Black-oriented one. Cross (1991) states, "nigrescence is a resocializing experience; it seeks to transform a pre-existing identity (a non-Afrocentric identity) into one that is Afrocentric" (p. 190). Cross' (1991) model consisted of five-stages; pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization, and internalization-commitment stages. The implication of the nigrescence model is the fluidity it affords the identity-making process based on experience and evolving worldviews.

In Cross' (1991) pre-encounter stage, individuals can have low salience as it relates to race to having anti-Black feelings. In this stage, individuals are more open to accepting outside influence from a dominant society and accept even the negative stereotypes placed on them in an effort to be accepted by the dominant White society. Additionally, during this stage, individuals "recognized being Black as part of their identity, but they identify more with other types of identity such as religion, sexual orientation, or gender" (Gooden 2014, p. 114). Lastly, in this stage individuals may distance themselves from an overall Black culture. The encounter stage in the nigrescence model consists of the identity stage where individuals become more influenced by the experiences shaped particularly through their primary groups. During this stage the "encounter must work around, slip through, or even shatter the relevance

of the person's current identity and worldview, and at the same time provide some hint of the direction in which to point the person to be resocialized or transformed" (Cross 1991, p. 199). When the individual enters the encounter stage there is an emotional shock that may elicit feelings of guilt or shame, which may propel entering the next stage.

The third stage is the immersion-emersion stage that comprises two phases. Here, the individual becomes immersed in Black culture, Blackness as an identity and engages in Black-centered activities. Individuals in the immersion phase of this stage tend to elevate Black culture while proactively rejecting White culture and White people. Cross (1991) notes the imbalance of this stage as it is marked with high degrees of emotionality and pro-Black blindness that becomes overcome in the second phase, emersion. In the emersion stage the individual leaves the "dead-end, either/or, racist, and oversimplified ideologies of the immersion experience and finds balance and perhaps even some relief from the intense, heavily emotional first phase... As emotions plateau, one realizes that one's first impressions of Blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured, and complex" (p. 207).

The fourth stage consists of internalization, which Cross (1991) asserts performs three fundamental functions in everyday Black life:

to defend and protect the person from psychological insults that stem from having to live in a racist society; to provide a sense of belonging and social anchorage and; to provide a foundation or point of departure for carrying out transactions with people, cultures, and situations beyond the world of Blackness. (p. 210)

It is in this stage of internalization where Cross (1991) maintains that the individual relinquishes a pseudo-Blackness based on White hatred, to a “Black pride, self-love, and a deep sense of connection to, and acceptance by, the Black community” (p. 210).

The final stage in the nigrescence model is internalization-commitment. This fifth stage establishes the individual as an activist in that their actions are “taken for the cause and follow from beliefs about Blackness that have been developed throughout the stages” (Gooden 2014, p. 115). In this stage, the individual may “devote an extended period, if not a lifetime, to finding ways to translate their personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment” (Cross 1991, p. 220). While there is a great deal of literature on race, what it constitutes and how it is ascertained, the purpose of this study is to go beyond that level of discourse and into the level of how it’s used to form one’s identity.

The issue of race will be assessed using the model that it is not a fixed genetic entity, but rather socially constructed (Omi and Winant 2015). Literature on racial identity formation varies but has a similar thread regarding the dependence on the relationship of the individual with that of various social forces like individual or group relationships or the broader society in general. Broadly speaking, Erik Erikson (1968) asserts:

We deal with a process "located" in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture.... In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself

in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them. (p. 22-23)

Phinney (1996) notes, “for ethnic minorities of color, identity formation has to do with developing an understanding and acceptance of one’s own group in the face of lower status and prestige in society and the presence of stereotypes and racism” (p. 144). Corresponding to the concept of lower prestige and status, Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of racial hegemony applies to the political, economic, and historical exclusion of Blacks from American society during its evolutionary process. Winant’s racial hegemony claim echoes that of Gramsci’s work on cultural hegemony where he outlines that “hegemony is achieved not only by direct manipulation or indoctrination, but by playing upon the commonsense of people, upon their lived system of meaning and values” (Spencer 2006). Gramsci’s model of hegemony is political in nature and requires the existence of a repressive force to exercise that authority, however overt or covert it may be. Additionally, Weber (1978) asserts that an ethnic group is based, in this view, on the belief shared by its members that, however distantly, they are of common descent where race creates a ‘group’ only when it is subjectively perceived as a common trait.

Lastly, Hill Collins (1990) maintains that by “presenting race as fixed and immutable – something rooted in nature – these approaches mask the historical construction of racial categories. The shifting meaning of race and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping conceptions of race ” (p. 107). The common theme

amongst these theories is the connection of the society to the individual's identity creation, which in-turn then ties the individual to the society itself. All in all, the individual is obtaining a portion of their identity formation and self-conception from an unstable and changing society, which creates the potential for becoming subject to that same society's ebbs and flows as it relates to self-conception development.

### **Religious Identity Development**

Religious identity formation is not drastically different from racial identity formation in that it still relies on the group element for the formation of identity. While religion serves as a major element in most American's lives, it is seldom researched in relation to its impact on one's identity. Peek's (2005) study on American Muslim young adults following the 9/11 terrorist attacks concluded with a three-stage model of religious identity development: religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity (p. 223). In the ascribed stage, American Muslims "engaged in very little critical reflection when they were children regarding the meaning of "being Muslim" because their religious identity was taken for granted as part of their everyday lives" (Peek 2005, p. 224). While these sentiments were taken-for-granted ideals held by children, the children "who grew up in predominantly Caucasian, Judeo-Christian towns more frequently described perceived demands to 'fit in' than did those who were raised in urban areas" (Peek 2005, p. 225). In the second stage children grew a more concrete and cognitive conception of their religious identity. As they grew older,

youth “would begin to contemplate more important life questions and their religious backgrounds, and hence re-examine that aspect of their identities” (Peek 2005, p. 226).

In the final, religion as a declared identity stage, occurred as a response to some crisis.

Peek’s (2005) study centered around the 9/11 crisis and the subsequent heightened levels of Islamophobia that followed. In this stage youth were found to “pray more often and increased their need for a spiritual anchor.... Many of those interviewed reported becoming more reliant on God as they became more cognizant of their own mortality”

(p. 231). Relating to prevailing religious identity literature, Peek (2005) notes that:

many of these studies, rather than focusing on religion exclusively, have examined the connection between religion and ethnic identity. This research has documented the continuing importance of religion in preserving cultural and ethnic traditions, supporting the adjustment of first-generation immigrants to a new host society, and providing a source of identity for the second generation. (p. 218)

Essentially, that type of research is meant to understand how ethnic identity is maintained rather than how religious identity is developed. Moulin (2013) contends that in Marcia’s (1966, 1980) framework there are four stages of religious identity creation through which adolescents may progress in order to achieve a coherent self-image and healthy psychological unity, “foreclosure, that a choice of identity is made but without exploration; *diffusion*, no identity is formed and there has been no exploration; *moratorium*, no identity has been formed, but exploration has taken place; and *identity achievement*, identity has been formed after exploration has taken place (p. 1).



While useful as a starting point, a glaring issue with this model is that when ethnicity is incorporated in an Eriksonian-Marcian or positivist model it becomes an essentialized 'fixed' and 'static' concept, susceptible to stereotypical and neo-colonial biases (Archer 2003). In fact, the multifaceted nature of postmodern societies means that identity is therefore constantly constructed across conflicting systems of representation and recognition (Moulin 2013). The complexity of theorizing this phenomenon stems from the lack of academic work done on adults and their relationship with religion and identity. The primary measures used for this line of research have been adolescents and their levels of religiosity, particularly within an academic setting. Because of that, it is imperative to consolidate religious identity formation with religious conversion in the identity construction process, particularly for adults.

Since religious conversion happens to adults, it is presumed that a different thought process is used in the development of that religious identity from that of adolescents. Strangely, spirituality has been devalued in conversion literature as a motivation for conversion. Renard (1996) claims, scholars in the human sciences, almost without exception, neglect, trivialize, or totally reject the role of religion and/or spirituality in their theories of conversion. More specifically, Rambo (1999) portrays a rather negative light on Islamic conversion stretching traditional theoretical explanations for Islamic conversion that include the use of force, attractiveness of Islam as a movement for the liberation of slaves and soldiers, compliance with new political

regimes, desire for the privileges of Islamic political power (e.g. tax relief), influence of traders (through intermarriage and patronage relationships), and attractiveness of monotheism (especially for those from “pagan” and “primal” religions).

Lofland’s (1965) field research on recruitment to the Unification Church sparked a collaboration with Bainbridge (1980) to create a three-step theory of religious conversion. They postulated that to become a member of a new religious group an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts, extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized and he is exposed to intensive interaction within the group.

Lastly, there are two primary models in religious conversion theory: the classic and the contemporary. The classic paradigm popularized by James (1902) portrays “the typical convert as being in possession of a temperamental disposition that was labeled the “sick soul.” The sick soul consisted of characteristics like religious melancholy, a discordant personality or divided self, a sense of lost meaning or dread, emotional alienation, preoccupation with one’s limitations and the inherent evil within the world. The contemporary approach has a more post-modern feel to it by maintaining that “each convert and conversion is unique; it emphasizes non-determinism in both predispositional and situational influences. The convert is viewed as being an active agent in the gradual process of conversion” (Granqvist 2003, 175). The troubling notion with this paradigm is that it claims, “no particular change of the self occurs as a consequence of the conversion” (Granqvist 2003, p. 175).

### **Addressing Gaps in Literature**

Religious conversion does not happen in a vacuum. The prevailing models present gaps in both the classic and contemporary theories of conversion as there are in the religious identity and racial identity formation models as well. As was the case with the racial identity formation perspectives, the preexisting theories are either too narrow in scope to be applied to the contemporary occurrence of Black male converts to Islam in the US, or they are too fixed to be used in this application. To understand the topic at hand requires an understanding of the relationship of the Black community with the US in history, the historical relationship of Islam with the Black community and the pull factors Islam provides for Black male converts. Properly doing so will require a new conceptual model that encompasses a look into the past and an analysis of the present as it relates to the relationship between the individual and society.

Other gaps presented in scholarly literature appear in the dichotomous perspectives stemming from racial and identity constructions models. Both models have similarities and differences in their utilization and overall impact on the individual. These evaluations can be narrowed to active and reactive perspectives that are oftentimes treated as mutually exclusive. The active assertions suggest an active agentic role in conversion and construction of one's racial and religious identity, whereas the reactive perspective positions the individual as one who acts strictly to outside forces. To understand more holistically what is happening with the individual in the conversion and identity construction stages, a more contextualized position resting at the

intersection of race, religion and conversion needs to be evaluated simultaneously. Additionally, the intersectional invisibility of religion has been problematic in that religion has been relegated to the realm of spiritual or existential fulfilment rather than racial or social.

Islam serves as a religion intimately connected to the Black American experience at varying levels throughout American history. Once used as a main identifier and mechanism for personhood during slavery, to an institutional structure providing tangible examples of discipline, liberation, strength and Black pride, to a contemporary measuring stick to gauge one's own humanity and purpose, Islam provides a means for scholars to analyze its sociological impact on historically disenfranchised populations.

Theoretical frameworks that racialize the study of identity from a Black paradigm, such as double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903), Nigrescence (Cross 1991), and racial formation theory (Omi and Winant 2015) rely heavily on the outward social impacts on the development of one's racial identity. They postulate that one's identity is bound by social forces ranging from various institutions, such as media, the economy, politics, and an overall sense of living within a racialized social system. To round out the analysis in one's life course, a look into their religious identity formation is essential as it has seldom been used in the social sciences as a resource in conjunction with identity creation.

Ebstyle King (2003) relates that "although religion offers worldviews, social norms, relationships, and experiences recognized to influence the formation and

contouring of a young person's self-concept, the unique role of religion has generally been overlooked as either a helpful or hindering source of identity formation" (p. 197). Unfortunately, because racial identity and religious identity formation theorists speak past each other, a theoretical model to anchor the phenomenon of Black Muslim conversion is absent. However, within this racial and religious context, the conversion of Black Americans from Christianity to Islam in the United States can be assessed with a fresh conceptual framework that will be anchored with empirical data.

Ultimately, Black American Muslim converts have suffered from intersectional invisibility in scholarship. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) assert:

By intersectional invisibility we mean the general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups. Intersectional invisibility also refers to the distinction of the intersectional persons' characteristics in order to fit them into frameworks defined by prototypes of constituent identity groups... Such individuals tend to be marginal members within marginalized groups. This status relegates them to a position of acute social invisibility. (p. 381)

Even while Islam has been with the Black community in the U.S since the start of the American experience, Black American Muslims and Black American Muslim converts are positioned at the intersections of the Black community and the American Muslim community. Often times, "the narratives of Black American Muslims are lost as Arab and South Asian Muslims dominate normative American Muslim consciousness" (Wadud, 2003, p. 270).

Lastly, this research study will also provide a qualitative assessment to test the notion of Grollman's (2014) double-disadvantage study that found that:

respondents who hold more than one of the disadvantaged statuses...were more likely to experience distress and poor physical health compared to their privileged and singly disadvantaged counterparts...by virtue of their disproportionate exposure to discrimination, multiply disadvantaged adults are at greater risk for psychological distress and physical health problems. (p. 14)

Ultimately, this study presents how participants found that the predominant disadvantage was not about a disadvantaged racial status, but in the acceptance of the idea of race being a marker for one's social legitimization. This distinctive nuance is key in understanding the how race became transcended but not sacrificed post-conversion.

### **Implications, Benefits of Phenomenological Research Design, and Research Question**

While the process one is motivated by to convert from one religion to another might initially be 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" (p. 169). Building on the framework of Snow and Machalek (1984), it is asserted in this study that the intersecting lines between the theological-spiritual and social aspects of converting to Islam create a means for Black men to not only de-power socially ascribed racial statuses but to also shed them with an empowering objective

standard through the belief of the preservation of Islamic scripture. The prevailing counter against this liberating narrative, particularly from a social engagement perspective, is that the lack of representation of Black-American Muslims in Muslim organizations meant that Black American converts “had simply moved from the back of the bus to the back of the camel” (Jackson, 2005, p. 60).

Although the view that Black converts to Islam may be trading White cultural oppression for an Arabized cultural oppression, the inclusion and belief of the Quran as an extra-cultural scripture removes the oppressive ties one may become bound by. To provide an overall picture of how these intersecting lines create this particular dynamic between the individual and society, there are two primary areas that will be focused on throughout this research: the factors as to why Black men convert to Islam and how it impacts their racial identity post conversion.

### **Why Do Black Men Convert 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 individuals grew up in. Undoubtedly, the 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 light of these pressures against converting to Islam we find that

Black men – another stigmatized social group - are the most frequent converts to Islam in the United States (Pew Research Center 2017). The problem this presents on a societal level is one that relates to how converts integrate in society post conversion.

What is happening in this trend? Is converting to Islam a tool that Black men are using to turn their back on a society they feel they cannot fit into? Does this occurrence convey a rejection of American ideals and American social norms? Is Islam a way for Black 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 Black men are turning to Islam more than any other group in the United States.

### ***How does Converting to Islam Impact Racial Identity Construction?***

The main social psychological problem with Black men converting to Islam is the vulnerability one must feel when entering a religion that is predominantly foreign to the United States and is regarded as an Arab/South Asian religion by the broader American society. While Christianity in the United States has deeply embedded roots throughout society and within the Black community as well, Islam is often labeled as a foreign religion practiced by foreign people. Additionally, Islam is linguistically Arabic dominated in the sense that all formal prayers and religious scripture must be recited in the Arabic language. Where one can visit many Churches in the United States and participate in



religious services that are all in English, the same cannot be said about any Mosque in the United States.

Can the Arabic-centered nature of Islamic religious rites be a hurdle to the new Black American Muslim who is navigating their way through the new world of Islam? Will the prevalence of Arabic make Black 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, thereby creating a triple-consciousness? These questions are aimed at understanding the development of racial identity going on within the Black American Muslim convert post-conversion. It must be noted that the framework of this research study 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).

The sociological implications of this study aim to identify a macro-and-micro level understanding pertaining to the trend of Black Americans converting to Islam from Christianity. On the macro level, this study serves to uncover how religion and conversion to Islam impact the identity of the individual in relation to the broader American social landscape as well as within the new group as well. A major inquiry will assess the double-disadvantage hypothesis, and how intersectional invisibility is experienced by the new convert by the broader American society and within the new Muslim group post-conversion. On the micro level, this study will uncover the post-conversion changes made, if any, to the individual in relation to their racial identity. The

two-level approach of this study will provide a more contextually sound foundation in which further research on the topic may develop.

Because few theorists have synthesized the sociological and religious materials concerning this topic, a conceptual framework rather than a solitary theoretical framework will be used. The framework will loosely use concepts related to Black identity and religious identity theories but will frame them in ways more conducive to this study by grounding them in Islamic systems and principles as experienced by the Black Muslim converts. Since it is not a rational notion that the conversion process consists of someone waking up and deciding to change their religion on a whim, the presupposition will be held that some investigation into the new religion took place prior to conversion. Because of that, a grounding in what Islam is and says is vital to the study. Additionally, what Islam teaches in terms of its creed and doctrine will be assessed rather than the actions of Muslims because Muslim actions can be influenced by a myriad of factors outside of Islam, like society, family, culture, and politics. Therefore, to maintain a clearer vision and scope to the study, it will be limited to mainstream Islamic teachings, or Sunni Islam.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework for this study will allow for more fluidity and flexibility in designing the research methodology, which will include in-depth interviews with participants and key informants, and field observation. Forcing interview responses to

fit within the context of current racial identity or religious conversion frameworks will make analysis too constricting because they often times speak past each other. While the pre-existing theoretical frameworks are not in total cohesion, this research will use them as guides in explaining the main concept of identity formation in relation to race and the social construction of the self.

Ultimately, the conceptual framework used here consists of five elements. First, that society “itself is understood as the changing, unstable, loosely coherent product of social relations, cultural innovation and political processes” (Cohen 1985). Second, that race “is an emergent phenomenon arising from structural conditions and processes in American society” (Yancey, Ericksen, Juliani 1976). Third, as the dominant religion in the United States, Christianity is interconnected with the American social culture and in terms of religious identity formation it makes the individual with higher religious identity salience more subject to the ebbs and flows of societal norms by default. Fourth, because of the interconnectedness of Christianity and American culture, racial issues become interconnected within the structure of Christianity as well. Fifth, because of the preservation of original Islamic text, Islam provides a seemingly objective and unchanging standard that allows one to fulfill their individual spiritual needs, as well as an explicit social framework with rules that unambiguously emphasize racial egalitarianism in its text. Because of those factors, conversion to Islam and higher Islamic (religious) identity salience can lead to changes in one’s racial identity,

integration within the new Muslim community, and integration with the broader American society post-conversion.

### ***Phenomenological Design and Research Questions***

This study will use a phenomenological approach to better understand the nuance relating to the construction of identity from the perspective of Black male converts to Islam from Christianity. This interpretive phenomenological approach was selected because this type of analysis “is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experiences” (Eatough and Smith 2017, p. 193). The approach requires:

A highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants. These verbatim accounts are generally captured via giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or diaries, and the analysis then proceeds such that patterns of meaning are developed, and then reported in a thematic form. (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006, p. 103-104)

Larkin et al. (2006) maintains that this perspective allows the researcher to “develop a more overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial ‘description’ in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context... [and] it aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants’ personal ‘sense-making’ activities” (p. 103). Additionally, Creswell (2007) states that the phenomenological process requires researchers to “reduce individual experiences into a description of universal essence” (p. 58). The universal essence in this study is conversion to Islam. Ultimately, because of the intimately personal nature of religion,

spirituality, belonging and the factors that entail the construction of identity, in-depth interviews with specific people about a specific situation is needed to fully understand and extract explanatory themes.

The purpose of this study is twofold, to assess the motivating factors leading Black men in the United States to convert to Islam, and to determine the impact converting to Islam has on racial identity formation of Black American converts. Within this setting this research can uncover new findings on the role Islam plays in the lives of American converts and their placement within American society. No doubt, converting to Islam from Christianity in the United States is something that needs to be studied particularly for the Black community since Black men are the fastest growing convert segment. The underlying inquiry involves investigating why someone who is already a marginalized minority in the United States choose to make themselves an even smaller minority in society and within the new Muslim group as well? While this research will be asking more specific questions than that, it will naturally develop from the root of that general paradox. To limit the size and scope of the study itself, Black men, rather than Black men and women will be used as the samples for gathering empirical data, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two. The specific research questions include:

RQ1: Why do Black Christian men in the United States convert to Islam?

RQ2: How does converting to Islam impact Black men's racial identity post conversion?



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Rationale and Research Question**

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify the motivating factors that contribute to Black Christian men in the United States converting to Islam and how converting impacts their racial identity as it relates to new intersecting identities post-conversion. These intersecting identities become further marginalizing and a potential disadvantage to the new Muslim's attempts at constructing his identity. This research investigated the impact of those varying identities and roles and how conversion to Islam impacted racial identity construction.

In order to understand the nuance of these two issues, it was important to use an approach that allowed the participants to speak for themselves in their meaning-making process, and to reconcile the micro-macro level nature of the phenomenon. In this section, I will present and support the research design chosen for this study and how it best aligns with answering these two research questions. I will also address my role as the investigator along with any potential bias that may enter this research process. Finally, aspects of the research process involving the rationale for the chosen research design, the logic of my participant selection, instrumentation, data analysis plan and ethical procedures will also be detailed in this section.

### **Research Question**

The focus of this study is to understand the motivating factors that contribute to the occurrence of Black men converting to Islam in the United States and how that impacts their racial identity post-conversion. The following research questions are addressed for this dissertation:

RQ1: As members of an historically marginalized minority group, why do Black American men in the United States convert to Islam?

RQ2: How does converting to Islam impact Black men's racial identity post-conversion?

### **Research Design**

As presented in the literature review section, the choice of converting from Christianity to Islam can involve various factors relating to the fulfillment of existential questions, belonging, a positive relationship between the Black community and Islam in US history, and dissatisfaction with theological aspects of Christianity. Additionally, the post-conversion aspects relating to the potential development of a new or different racial self involves a multitude of factors centering on the reliance on the belief of God and the unchanged and preserved Islamic scriptures. Both sections cannot be adequately explained using quantitative means due to the intimate meaning-making nature of religious belief and self-identity. Therefore, a qualitative method involving an empirical phenomenological approach will be used throughout this study to better



understand the perceptions of the participants as it relates to this deeply personal topic. Lastly, utilizing this strategy will ensure a high rate of internal validity to this study as the individuals are able to speak for themselves.

The current study is qualitative in nature and the foundational data collection strategy used to study the population of Black male Muslim converts was the use of in-depth interviews. While theoretical paradigms provided guidance toward potential themes, the approach used in this study was inductive so that more flexibility in the emergence of new and potentially unexpected themes could be achieved. Key informants with deep knowledge and previous positions within the administrative structures of the Nation of Islam before-during-and after its shift to mainstream Sunni Islam were interviewed to provide an in-depth institutional perspective. In addition to the interviews, I attended four Friday congregational prayers as a participant observer. Because I am also a Muslim, my status and participation allowed me a great deal of access, but also made me aware of potential biases.

As a member of the community, I used bracketing to mitigate potential bias. Tufford and Newman (2010) contend that the practice of bracketing in qualitative studies was contested by Heidegger (1962) who centered on engagement as a means of knowing and who “adopted the position of being in the world, where contextual interpretation and meaning were sought and valued” (p. 82). Additionally, Ladkin (2005) and Stringer (1999) reinforce Heidegger’s position on the subjectivity of bracketing in qualitative methods. However, Tufford and Newman (2010) assert that “the impact of

subjectivity in participatory action research encourages researchers to understand, embrace, and surface the frames of reference they bring to an inquiry such as their political, racial, cultural, and gender influences” (p. 83). Additionally, Gearing (2004) echo’s Husserl’s (1931) assertion that the “essence of understanding the lived experience entails *das unmittelbare sehen* or direct seeing, which surpasses sensory experience. Direct seeing looks beyond constructions, preconceptions, and assumptions (our natural attitude) to the essences of the experience being investigated” (p. 1430). Because my membership in the Muslim community entails deeply held beliefs and values from an Islamic point of view, bracketing was used to mitigate potential bias.

Bracketing allows for the researcher to be immersed in the data, whereby they “must be honest and vigilant about [their] own perspective, preexisting thoughts and beliefs, and developing hypotheses” (Starks and Trinidad 2007, p. 1376). Additionally, the use of bracketing in qualitative data collection requires a vigilant and dedicated process. Tufford and Newman (2010) assert bracketing entails a “multilayered process that is meant to access various levels of consciousness... Bracketing is not simply a one-time occurrence of setting preconception in abeyance, but a process of self-discovery whereby buried emotions and experiences may surface” (p. 84-85). In light of these processes, I wrote memos throughout data collection and periods of analysis that may have touched on my preconceived biases. Lastly, to uncover and outline pre-existing assumptions, I wrote the purposes for this study, what it meant to me on a personal level, assumptions regarding my personal experiences growing up as a racial/ethnic and

religious minority in the US, and how my progression and religious adherence in adulthood impacted my worldviews. By writing my personal background it allowed me to identify the taken for granted assumptions about Black Muslim converts and the impact Islam may have had on their construction of identity.

The premise of the phenomenological approach begins with the notion that even if it is desirable for the researcher, it is not possible to “to remove ourselves, our thoughts and our meaning systems from the world, in order to find out how things ‘really are’ in some definitive sense. Somewhat ironically, this is a conclusion that has long since been accepted at the ‘cutting edge’ of the hard sciences” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 106). Due to the heavily personal nature of the research questions in this study, the reified realities made apparent in the world must be understood from the perspective of the research participant specifically. Larkin et al. (2006) adds, " If the objective reality we discover is partly dependent upon processes of intellectual construction and hence upon our various modes of subjective engagement with the world, then any analysis of our intellectual constructions must also reveal something of the objective reality. An account produced by a research participant can hence be used thematically to reveal something very tangible and very real about the constitution of the ‘object’ we are studying” (p. 109-110).

A phenomenological approach was chosen because it attempts to go beyond a simply descriptive methodology as it “focuses upon sense-making activities and our ‘involvement in the world’” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 113). Because understanding the

sense-making activities from the participant's perspectives will be an integral part of the analysis, interviews with participants will be utilized as the primary data collection strategy. The inductive nature of this qualitative design allowed for emergent themes to be displayed through participant narratives. Polkinghorne (1998) states narrative as "the primary way through which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes" (p. 1). Additionally, Richardson (1990) holds narrative as "both a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation...[narrative] is one of two basic and universal human cognition modes – the other being logico-scientific" (p. 21). Through narrative each mode provides a distinctive way of ordering experience and constructing reality. (Burner 1996). Lastly, Richardson (1990) maintains that narrative code "demonstrates narrative reasoning and unlike the logico-scientific mode, which looks for universal truth conditions, the narrative mode is contextually embedded and looks for particular connections between events" (p. 21). The events in this research are the experiences of socially constructed racial categories and contributions to identity making, and conversion to Islam for Black Americans.

Ultimately, in this research design, the question of authority and power differentials during the in-depth interview process are important to address as well. By asking participants open-ended questions and allowing space for their narratives to develop, less constraint, more trust and openness can develop, which would lead to more of their stories being shared. This approach is critical in both allowing for narrative to develop and be engaged with, and for the space required to allow for new and

unanticipated themes to emerge. Additionally, the qualitative design allows me to ask follow-up questions to keep participants more engaged in their recollections of experiences. Richardson (1990) outlines the potentiality of the problem of power by presenting authority of authorship of narratives by stating, “narrative explanation practice, means that one person’s voice – writer’s – speaks for that of others” (p. 27). Being mindful of the power dynamics throughout the data collection and analysis process is essential in ensuring that narratives are coming from the perspective of the participants rather than the writer. Lastly, Richardson (1990) states:

writing narratively permits us to tell collective stories as *both* true *and* partial... there is no escape from subjectivity. Subjectivity is constructed in specific contexts; it is not eternally fixed... As qualitative researchers, we can more easily write as situated, positioned authors, giving up, if we choose, our *authority* over the people we study, but not the responsibility of *authorship* of our texts. (p. 28)

By being mindful of the power dynamics at play, using bracketing to ensure researcher presuppositions and bias are mitigated, and allowing for narratives to develop organically through the use of open-ended interview questions, I am confident preconceptions and conflicts will be abated.

### **Setting and Participant Selection Logic**

According to their website, [thenationsmosque.org](http://thenationsmosque.org), Masjid Muhammad is “the first Mosque built from the ground up and run by Black Muslims.” The Mosque is located on 1519 4th St. NW, Washington, DC, but, because of its prominence, the street was designated as “Islamic Way” by the city and is presented on a street sign above the

street sign to 4th street. While the Mosque was built by Black Muslims, it was founded by a very notable figure in the Black Muslim American experience, Elijah Muhammad, the once leader of the Nation of Islam. Muhammad's son, Imam Warith Deen Muhammad, took over leadership of the Mosque after the death of his father, where he ultimately embraced Sunni Islam and removed the separatist notions of the Nation of Islam from the Mosque itself. As a result, Masjid Muhammad is currently the oldest Islamic faith group member of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.

The dialogues shared with Black Muslim converts in Masjid Muhammad support the theme of Islam as commonplace in the history of the Black community in the United States. The individuals interviewed were first exposed to varying forms of Black cultural Islam before introduction to orthodox Islam by friends and family members. The Nation of Islam provided tremendous support to the Black community, particularly in the inner cities, as it still does today. Additionally, the Nation of Islam's community work focused on eradicating drugs, alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and other criminal elements out of their neighborhoods and instilling a culture of knowledge and self-discipline. The void in the strained relationship between the Black community and the United States in terms of social support and dignity through social equality and equity were filled by the proactive social elements provided by the Nation of Islam. Masjid Muhammad holds that legacy of upliftment and is recognized in the Black American Muslim and non-Muslim community in Washington, DC.

This study was limited to Black American Muslim men who converted from Christianity. The rationale for this was because of the unique relationship the U.S. has with Black men throughout history. Foreign born Black men who came to the U.S. have not experienced the socializing impacts of the American social structure and will therefore muddy the waters when comparing experiences with Black Americans. Additionally, the participants must have been self-identified as Christian regardless of their level of religiosity. The importance of this is because while Black men in the US are marginalized as a race, Christianity is the dominant religion in the US. The paradox of the research question is in why someone who already feels the brunt of marginalization in society, but still connects with a majority religion and religious culture, voluntarily leaves that for a marginalized and stigmatized religion like Islam. Therefore, why these men did not choose to convert to Judaism, Buddhism, or Atheism, which all have less group stigmatization is important to understand as well.

Men were chosen in particular for this study for three reasons. First, because they are the fastest converting group to Islam (Pew Research Center 2019). Second, because while Black male stigma and Black female stigma share similarities, they also have vast differences. By only utilizing the experiences of Black males, more congruence can be achieved in analyzing the respective themes that emerge from the interviews. Because of the stigmatized image of the violent Black man exists in popular American culture, it is worth investigating why they would choose to convert to a religion that has been characterized as violent as well over a more pacifist religion. Third, because of the

personal nature of interviews in terms of the subject matter and one-on-one intimacy in a closed room setting, Muslim women may feel uncomfortable speaking with me due to Islamic etiquette. Not only would that make access to Muslim women more difficult, but it may impair the depth to which female participants may feel comfortable speaking. Due to those factors, restricting participation to only men was more practical and efficient and was done without sacrificing any of the intellectual or analytical opportunities that population would provide to this study.

Finally, men from the Washington DC, Northern Virginia, and Maryland areas were selected for this study. The rationale for this geographical limitation was for the purposes of access and expediency. Also, the Washington DC metro area has a long history of involvement with Black Muslim movements, particularly Masjid Muhammad in Washington, DC. Lastly, the Washington DC metro area demographically has a high concentration of Black Muslims and Muslim converts, which helped me find more participants through snowball sampling.

Data was also collected through participant observation and in informal interviews that took place with different Black male converts to Islam, born Muslims and frequent members of the congregation whose ages ranged from early 30s to late-50s. Some people were Black Americans and others were from various African nations ranging from Ghana, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The data obtained through informal interviews, provided insight into the individual choices and roads people took on their paths to personal fulfillment. The primary discussions with those who converted to



Islam ranged from their past with Christianity, what about their previous religion did not resonate with them and how they saw the world before and after Islam. Issues of racism and how race is viewed in their eyes were also topics of discussion. The data provided similarities and added context to the in-depth interviews this research subsequently engaged in. Lastly, time spent engaged in religious services at Masjid Muhammad allowed this research to have access that aided in obtaining community trust and a willingness to be open during in-depth interviews.

### ***Participants***

The participants for this study were obtained primarily through Masjid Muhammad and the networks developed within that institution. However, my initial attempts at securing participants failed as I attempted to post requests on the social media platform, Instagram. While trying to acquire participants through Instagram, I was met with extreme hesitancy as people often replied to my inquiries asking if I worked for local or federal law enforcement. The hesitancy persisted even after identifying myself through my profiles on LinkedIn, and my teaching evaluations to verify my identity. The hesitancy experienced through the social media platform was eye-opening as it shed light to the necessity of trust in the qualitative practice. It also shed light as to the hesitancy still persisting within the Muslim community as it relates to the broader society (Pew Research Center 2017).

Of those who participated in this study three would be considered key informants. Marshall (1996) describes five characteristics a key informant should possess:

a role in the community, where “their formal role should expose them to the kind of information being sought by the researcher. Knowledge, where in addition to having access to the information desired, the informant should have absorbed the information meaningfully. Willingness, where the informant will be willing to communicate their knowledge to the interviewer and to cooperate as fully as possible. Communicability, where the informant should be able to communicate their knowledge in a manner that is intelligible to the interviewer. Lastly, impartiality, where the key interviewer should be objective and unbiased, and any relevant biases should be known to the interviewer. (p. 92)

Relating to Marshall’s (1996) description of key informants, this study utilized data obtained by two Imams and a former high-ranking administrator with the Nation of Islam. One Imam is not affiliated with Masjid Muhammad but has strong ties to the Washington DC Black Muslim population, and the other Imam teaches in Egypt at an Islamic university. While Marshall (1996) asserts a weakness of key informants as being “unlikely to represent, or even understand, the majority view of those individuals in their community” (p. 93), the experiences with the key informants in this study proved beneficial. Lastly, Pickard (2013) asserts that key informant’s insider perspective “compels the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities and documenting multiple perspectives of reality is crucial to the understanding of why people think and act in the different ways they do” (p. 139).

### **Listening to Converts**

In-depth interviewing of Black American male converts to Islam was the primary method used in the data collection, along with participant observation of congregational prayers at an appropriate mosque. Additionally, I conducted lengthy interviews with key informants including two Imams. One is an Islamic jurisprudence scholar residing in Egypt and a former high-ranking administrator in the Nation of Islam who served during the time of Elijah Muhammad and during the transition of leadership to Imam Warith Deen Muhammad. Interviews with these key informants provided deeper insight into the history of the Nation of Islam, a large portion of which followed the Imam Warith Deen Muhammad into Sunni Islam, having an impact on traditional Islamic teachings within the Black community. Lastly, I engaged in participant observation of Friday congregational prayers at a mosque with a large number of Black Americans. During my attendance, I arrived early and spoke with other congregants, listened to the sermon (khutbah), prayed, and socialized after the prayer service ended. This time allowed me the opportunity to not only observe community members, but to also speak to them about my research study and obtain contacts for potential participants.

The in-depth interviews conducted tended to be conversational, lasting for approximately 55-65 minutes on average. The interviews began with greetings of peace (As-Salamu Alaykum) and I asked permission to record the interviews so that I would have an exact record of their responses. I reiterated that their participation in the study

was voluntary and that they could choose to eliminate their participation from the study even after the interview was conducted. The technique of announcing my intentions, greeting them with a familiar greeting and giving them notice regarding my actions at the moment helped to ease tensions and build rapport with the participants. All of the interviews were conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform during the COVID-19 pandemic and I announced when I would be starting and stopping the recording. Lastly, prior to the interview starting, I presented them with the outline for the interview stating that I would ask them about their background, their initial interest in Islam, the process of their conversion to Islam, and their before-and-after worldviews. The approach used for data collection was systematic as all interview participants were asked the same questions, even if elaborations and opportunities for follow up questions were allowed.

Participant observation in the field was utilized for multiple purposes. First, it provided an on the ground contextual framing of the population under study. While the practice of Islam was not under scrutiny, the observation yielded data that contextualized narratives from the in-depth interviews. One example is the uniqueness Masjid Muhammad, and the congregants, displayed their Islam in ways that do not incorporate Arabized Islamic culture. This detail will be further elaborated on in the final chapter as it relates to the managing of external transnational forces that attempted to absorb the Masjid after the split with the Nation of Islam. Second, utilizing participant observation provided access to people I would otherwise not have had access to, which

ultimately provided interview opportunities based on trust in my research and my intentions to not distort their narratives. Dhalke, Hall, and Phinney (2015) stated that in their study “active involvement from the beginning of the study facilitated participants’ trust in and appreciation for the lead researcher” (p. 1118). Active participant observation served a more valuable tool in providing context and instilling trust to allow subsequent potential themes and theories to develop. As Dhalke et al. (2015) asserts, “gathering data using PO contributes to theory that adequately conceptualizes the subject of inquiry, because participants’ actions stimulate researchers to ask questions and provide observations o contexts that promote nuanced theory development” (p. 1117). Lastly, engaging in participant observation also aided in the snowball sampling process and the ability to connect with key informants.

### ***Sampling***

Snowball sampling is a process allowing for the researcher to use their networks to elicit participation in a study. This method proved more effective than posting digital flyers (advertisements) on Instagram. In their study testing the effectiveness of recruiting participants through traditional snowballing methods versus Facebook, Chambers et al. (2020) contend that “snowball sampling was far more effective and cost-sensitive than subject recruitment via advertisements on Facebook” (p. 849). Additionally, “fifteen studies found social media to be less effective than other methods tested, with one of the studies generating zero participants” (Chambers, Bliss, and

Rambur 2020, p. 849). There is a twofold reason behind the inefficiency of social media and recruitment for a study of this nature. First, the anonymity experienced on social media presents a trust hurdle that marginalized groups, such as Muslims, would be leery of. Second, religion and the reasons as to why someone would convert to another religion may be a sensitive topic that involved soul searching, estrangement from past friends and family, fear of their new role, and a host of other deeply held emotions. Due to the personal nature of conversion, coupled with the impersonal presentation offered through social media, its utilization yielded no results.

My role as researcher within the setting of the Masjid was viewed as secondary to that of my being a fellow brother Muslim. Having that kind of access allowed for high levels of trust after initial conversations. Additionally, as people began to hear about the research some found me to express their interest in the study along with their encouragement. After the in-depth interviews were completed, I would stop the recording, thank them for their time, and engage in conversation with them about topics they raised that I found particularly interesting. This technique not only showed that I was attentive and interested in what they had to say, but that I was sincerely grateful for their insights. I would ask the participants to forward my information to others who they believed would want to participate as well and I would email them a thank you email after a couple of days as a friendly reminder. This method certainly expanded my network of those interested in participating, as well as yielded me extra material they believed would be helpful to my study. Finally, this method allowed me to

obtain data in the most efficient way possible, as the sampling criteria were known and presented throughout the network of previous interview participants.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

The Black Muslim population is not only present in the Washington, DC area, but has deep roots there as well. However, the substantive area of concern for this study prevented recruiting a sizable portion from the community. All participants in this study were converts to Islam from a Christian background. Additionally, none of the participants were Nation of Islam Muslims and all were adherents of Sunni Islam. However, no restrictions were made regarding length of time since conversion to Islam since a diversity of duration would provide valuable insights regarding their decision and meaning making throughout their process of investigation and ultimate conversion. It would also provide a deeper insight into the nuances of social circumstances revolving around their conversion.

Adherents to any religion are going to fall along a scale as to how strictly they practice their faith. For this research study, their religiosity was not measured or tested. Rather, how they saw themselves, how closely they identified Islam as a central aspect of their identities and lives, and the staunchness of their beliefs were more applicable to the nature of this study. Finally, all participants were over the age of 18 so as to not engage vulnerable populations in the study.

### ***Sample Size***

The goal for establishing adequate sample size in this qualitative approach was at the point of saturation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that the level of saturation is achieved at “the point at which no additional data are being found whereby the researcher can develop properties of the category” (p. 61). Since Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original explanation of saturation, the term data saturation has been used for a broader purpose to reflect a wider application. Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) state, “saturation is often described as the point in data collection and analysis when new incoming data produces little or no new information to address the research question” (p. 2). Creswell (2014) additionally positions saturation as a point when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights” (p. 189). For narrative and phenomenological research Creswell (2014) states, “From my review of many qualitative research studies I have found narrative research to include one or two individuals; phenomenology to typically range from three to ten” (p. 239). Guest et al. (2006) present saturation as conditional with respect to the phenomenon researched. They assert, “The more similar participants in a sample are in their experiences with respect to the research domain, the sooner we would expect to reach saturation” (p. 76). Kuzel’s (1992) recommendations also consider the homogeneity of the population as he tied his recommendation to “six to eight interviews for a homogeneous sample” (p. 41). Lastly,



while Guest et al. (2006) found that six-twelve relative participants are sufficient to reach data saturation, Starks and Trinidad (2007) state:

Phenomenologists are interested in common features of the lived experience. Although diverse samples might provide a broader range from which to distill the essence of the phenomenon, data from only a few individuals who have experienced the phenomenon—and who can provide a detailed account of their experience—might suffice to uncover its core elements. Typical sample sizes for phenomenological studies range from 1 to 10 persons. (p. 1376)

This study uses a phenomenological approach in that the essential element under scrutiny revolves around conversion to Islam as the phenomenon. In so doing, the sample for this study has 19 primary participants who conducted in-depth interviews, which achieved saturation in relation to common themes relating to the impact of converting to Islam. Additionally, three participants were classified as key informants and provided deeper insight into institutional and community wide themes over time. Lastly, all participants were native born Black American males above the age of 18 who had grown up identifying as Christians and later in life converted to Islam. The results elaborated in this chapter are focused on the in-depth interviews performed with 19 Black American male converts to Islam. These interviews were primarily conducted over the span of six months. The majority of interviews were completed between April 2021 to July 2021, with four final interviews completed in October 2021. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over 90 minutes, with the average being approximately 65 minutes. The interviews covered two main categories of inquiry. The

first category involved detailing the participants disillusionment with Christianity and their motivations for seeing Islam as an alternative faith to practice.

The second category involved their post-conversion life detailing how they coped after accepting Islam and how Islam impacted their sense of racial identity. Within these two categories there were six emergent themes that were consistent amongst the participants' lived experiences. Within those six themes multiple sub-themes emerged that more explicitly demonstrate each corresponding theme. More details regarding the themes are provided in this chapter along with complimentary quotes from participants. Lastly, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure privacy and anonymity and identifying markers such as schools or places of work have been suppressed as well.

### **Participants**

This was a qualitative study and involved participant observation and interviews with 19 Black male Muslim converts. All of the participants grew up in Christian households and converted to Islam in adulthood. Additionally, all participants self-identify as Black African American, meaning that they and their parents were native born American citizens. This is a key factor because this study entails assessing markers of self-identity construction. Foreign born parents may raise their children with different cultural sensibilities that complicate the matter of how race is conceptualized in the United States. Additionally, if participants were Black foreign born American citizens, they too may have a different conception of Blackness outside of an American racialized

conception. For that purpose, this study focused only on self-identified Black Americans who were born to native born American parents in the US.

The age of the participants ranged from 33 to 77, with the average age being 53.9 years old. All participants were married with children, and all had earned a minimum of an associate degree. The breakdown of educational attainment is as follows: Associate's degree (n = 2), Bachelor's degree (n = 14), Master's degree (n = 1) Doctorate's degree (n = 2). All of the participants were employed except for six individuals that were retired. While many of the participants lived in different cities and parts of the world at the time of the interview than the ones they grew up in, I obtained the locations of where they grew up as that area would be more pertinent to their socialization and exposure to Islam, and therefore more relevant to the interests of this study.

According to the US Census the Northeast region consists of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The Midwest consists of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The South consists of, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. Finally, the US Census states that the Western region consists of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington (US Census,

2010). In this study, the participant's geographical locations ranged from the Northeast (n = 11), the Midwest (n = 2), the South (n = 5), and the West (n = 1). All participants spoke English as a first language, but all knew enough Arabic to perform religious rites, and three participants were fluent enough to teach the language in an academic capacity. Table 1 provides a summary of participant's demographics. Being a participant observer greatly impacted my ability to obtain interview participants and brought along the challenge of sifting through candidates that did not meet the required criteria stated above. While Guest et al. (2016) recommends 12-15 candidates to achieve saturation, this study used 19. However, it was observed that after 15 interviews emergent themes were being reinforced by new interviews and I allowed for four more interviews to allow opportunity for new themes to emerge. Additionally, subsequent conversations were conducted with the three key informants that could provide deeper insight into matters involving institutional and community affairs.

Table 1 Participant demographics

	Ansar	Hakim	Faraj	Khalid	Eddie	Atif	Dwayne	Dawkins	Imran	Ben	Shahir	Michael	Adam	Rashed	Abdul-Kareem	Lewis	Umar	Tariq	Abu-Bilal
<b>Age</b>																			
18-30																			
31-40															X				X
41-50				X	X					X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
51-60																			
61-70	X	X	X					X	X										
71-80						X	X							X					
<b>Education</b>																			
Associate's Degree															X	X			
Bachelor's Degree	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X			X	X	X
Master's Degree												X							
Doctorate Degree				X									X						
<b>Employment</b>																			
Unemployed																			
Employed Full Time			X	X	X					X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Employed Part Time		X																	
Retired	X					X	X	X	X					X					
<b>Geographic Region</b>																			
Northeast		X		X	X		X		X	X		X		X	X		X	X	
Midwest						X		X											
South			X								X		X			X			X
West	X																		

### **Data Management and Analysis**

In-depth interviews were partially transcribed through the Zoom platform and finalized by the researcher. Because of the automatic method of transcribing interviews through Zoom, there were many mistakes in the automatic transcriptions, particularly when Arabic phrases were said by the participant, when the sound quality was muffled, or if the participant was speaking too fast or low. After the video and transcription rendering, I would listen to the interview again and fix mistakes manually. Interview participants were also given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

### ***Data Analysis***

Patton (2002) asserts that inductive analysis comprises “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453), which was demonstrated in the coding process of data analysis. Creswell (2007) recommends locating quotes that demonstrate an understanding of participant experiences, grouping them in clusters of meaning to present emergent themes, and to derive a structural description of the context to demonstrate the essence of the participants common experiences (p. 81-82). Through the process of bracketing, I detailed personal experiences of being a non-White Muslim minority growing up in the United States and learning more about, and adhering to Islam, in adult life. This process increased the likelihood that I was able to interrupt presumptions, bias and preconceptions related to the experience of Islam and identity construction. After transcribing the interviews, the coding process included sorting relevant text into emergent themes using an inductive approach. A qualitative data analysis software called Nvivo 12 (QSR International 2018) was used to code topics and organize emergent themes.

Themes emerged from the rich narratives presented by the in-depth interviews. As interviews, on average, lasted a little over 60 minutes, the vast majority of the time was devoted to listening to the participant’s stories. This technique allowed for a vast range of data as participants would begin to remember events and quickly make connections between events in ways they had not considered prior. This process

ultimately generated enough data to where saturation was achieved as well as a variety of exclusive and overlapping themes that will be further discussed in the final chapter.

### **Researcher's Role**

My role consisted of interviewing participants about their lived experiences both prior to, and post-converting to Islam. Because of the personal nature of this study, a more conversational approach was taken during the interviews, which allowed for people to relay their narratives. Follow up questions were asked to gain more elaboration on key themes observed among participants. Additionally, questions were asked and revisited throughout the course of the discussion that allowed for more opportunities to investigate deeper into relevant themes. The structure of the interview questions followed a chronological format that started at the participants religious life while growing up, their first introduction to Islam or Muslims, when they converted and their post-conversion lives.

I did not anticipate, nor did I experience, any issues with access to this community, conflicts of interest or ethical dilemmas during my data collection process. Because this is an extension of my master's thesis, I have already established positive relationships with Imams and administrators at various Mosques around the Washington DC, Northern VA, and MD areas.

As a Muslim myself, and a Ph.D. level researcher, I anticipated that there may have been issues in the types of answers I received from interview participants.

Recognizing that there may be a power dynamic involved where participants may provide answers they think I may want to hear rather than their true narratives was a practical concern that needed to be addressed. The issue was mitigated by providing more opportunity for participants to speak in a narrative style rather than a strict question and answer format, as well as my previous participant observation time at Masjid Muhammad and utilizing a snowball sample that relied on networks built on trust and word of mouth. Additionally, one-on-one interviews rather than group interviews were conducted that allowed participants to feel more comfortable sharing personal information. Lastly, participants received the questions before hand for them to have time to think about their answers privately without the scrutiny of a researcher or fear of judgement from a fellow Muslim occurring on the spot during the interview.

### **Limitations**

Because the scope of this study attempted to understand the impact Islam had on the individual, there were a number of limitations that may affect certain conclusions reached. 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 was 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 and comfort in relaying narratives.

I believe that interviewing another group of practicing Black Christian men, particularly born-again Christians, would allow another way to further isolate the effects of Islam as the catalyst for change in racial identity. Interviewing practicing and adherent Christian men, comparing their responses as it relates to their beliefs about themselves as Black men 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 men, generalizations originating from these findings should be avoided.

The relatively small sample size will restrict the ability to generalize, but it will increase the ability to better extract common themes from the one specific phenomena of conversion. Lastly, the sample size of interview participants only consisted of men. This limitation excludes gender variables that could confound the issue of conversion and racial identity. While expanding the scope of interviewing women would provide more opportunities to collect data, the issues of theoretical overlaps in gender and race variables could have potentially muddy the waters. The logic of attempting to eliminate other variables that relate to gender allowed the post-data analysis to be more focused on only race related factors.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All research for this study was performed in harmony with IRB protocols.

Participants received and were required to provide recorded verbal consent prior to their interviews indicating their voluntary involvement. While this study did not create personal danger, there were two issues considered with protecting participants. First, I recognized that the choice of converting from one religion to another may have entailed highly sensitive and personal subjects that might have created varying degrees of emotional harm. Participants had to recount their narratives, which could have opened up forgotten emotional wounds. To mitigate that issue, participants received questions ahead of their interview for their review. Because participation was voluntary, they were under no obligation or duress to participate if they felt the nature of the questions were too sensitive or personal. Second, participants may have decided to convert to Islam without notifying personal friends or loved ones out of fear of severing relationships. Because of that, all personal details and descriptors of participants were changed so as to ensure anonymity.

All data for this study was confidential. A summary of interviews was available to each participant after their interview became transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to review the summary and either provide additional information, or request that misrepresented information be removed. Once the research had been completed, the data will be secured for a period of 5 years and subsequently destroyed.

### **Compensation**

No compensation was provided to interview participants for this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Converting to Islam: Reasons and Consequences**

The findings in this study present a narrative that demonstrates the impact Islam has on the racial identity of Black men post-conversion. Findings also present a pre-conversion story of participants not accepting religious, spiritual and social meanings that were embedded in conventional American society. The process of investigating Islam not only answered previously unanswered existential questions, but encouraged them to continue to ask deeper questions. The more participants investigated the Quran and other Islamic texts, the more fulfillment they felt and ultimately converted to Islam. The post-conversion lives of participants provided clarity on issues pertaining to self-identity and with the use of Islamic scripture, participants broadened their scope on their identities. Rather than feeling bound by societal ascriptions of race, participants used the Islamic scriptures as new tools to construct their identities.

### **Bracketing**

It is important reemphasize that as a Muslim who has undergone the process of overcoming feelings of stigmatization by rediscovering Islam, my perspective may

involve blind spots. To mitigate the risk of blind spots in this research, I employed a bracketing method to keep on track with potential biases, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. The process of bracketing allowed me to challenge the assumptions that my proximity had in relation to this topic and the shared identities with the research participants, which may have served as a barrier to substantive research. Rather than becoming sidetracked, or having my own preconceptions being confirmed by emerging data, bracketing allowed for me to better explore the shared identities with the participants and overall enhance the qualitative and phenomenological process.

### **Conversion Themes**

Six major themes emerged from interviews about the study's addressed two central questions: why have Black American men converted to Islam and what impact did Islam have on their racial identity? Table 2 provides an overview of each of the major themes and subthemes for those categories. Table 3 provides a frequency chart of the number of participants who fell within specific themes and subthemes in the motivations for converting to Islam category. Table 4 provides a frequency chart of the number of participants that fell within specific themes and subthemes in the post-conversion impact category.

Table 2 Themes and subthemes

Themes & Subthemes	# of Participants
Category 1	
<b>1. Islam is not a foreign religion</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"The Nation as fearless"</i> : Strength and independence	16
b. <i>"Oh, he's a Muslim"</i> : Family relationships with Muslims	13
c. <i>"I felt safer 'cause people knew I was with them"</i> : Neighborhood support and social involvement of the Muslims	9
d. <i>"I remember seeing them moving as one"</i> : A symbol of structure and discipline	10
e. <i>"What's my name!?"</i> : Strong Black representation in culture	17
<b>2. Broken connection with Christianity</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"That doesn't make sense"</i> : Theological uncertainty	19
b. <i>"Just believe"</i> : Unanswered theological questions	15
c. <i>"Jesus didn't look like that"</i> : Unrepresented in mainstream Christianity	7
<b>3. It's in the Quran</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"It's in the Quran"</i> : Answers to unanswered questions	16
b. <i>"It made sense"</i> : Spiritual consistency	17
c. <i>"It was talking to me"</i> : The intellectual test	16
d. <i>"It's all in there"</i> : Quran as a specific guidebook for life	13
Category 2	
<b>1. Community Finding - Brotherhood</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"We're shoulder to shoulder and don't think nothing of it"</i> : Diversity within Mosques	11
b. <i>"I know people from all over"</i> : Expansion of Social Network Diversity	12
c. <i>"We're here to build"</i> : Islamic emphasis on social services	11
<b>2. Islamic Ideals as Perceived Objective Cultural Toolkits</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"You've heard of Bilal"</i> : Quran and Sunnah used to address in-group and out-group racism	16
b. <i>"I'm a Muslim, I'm good"</i> : Resilience in redefining racial categories	13
c. <i>"Show me in the Quran"</i> : Scripture used as new measuring stick for society	17
d. <i>"It's got everything I need"</i> : Islam used as a self-contained institution for identity formation	10
<b>3. Black Muslim or Muslim that is Black in America</b>	<b>19</b>
a. <i>"I'm a Muslim first"</i> : Contention with Black Muslim label	12
b. <i>"I serve Allah alone"</i> : Human to Black identity filtered through the lens of Islam	17

Table 3 Category 1 Frequency of themes and subthemes by participant

Category1	Ansar	Hakim	Fazaj	Khalid	Eddie	Atif	Doayne	Dawkins	Imran	Ben	Shabir	Michael	Adam	Rasheed	Abdul-Kareem	Lewis	Umar	Tariq	Abu-Bilal
<b>Theme 1</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Subtheme 1b		X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	
Subtheme 1c	X	X		X		X	X				X			X	X			X	
Subtheme 1d	X		X		X			X	X	X	X		X			X			X
Subtheme 1e	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
<b>Theme 2</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Subtheme 1b	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Subtheme 1c			X	X			X	X			X		X						X
<b>Theme 3</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Subtheme 1b	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Subtheme 1c	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Subtheme 1d	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	

Table 4 Category 2 Frequency of themes and subthemes by participant

Category 2	Ansar	Hakim	Fanaj	Khalid	Eddie	Atif	Dwayne	Dawkins	Imran	Ben	Shahir	Michael	Adam	Rasheed	Abdul-Kareem	Lewis	Umar	Tariq	Abu-Bilal
<b>Theme 1</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X	X	X		X						X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Subtheme 1b	X	X			X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Subtheme 1c			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X			X		X	
<b>Theme 2</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Subtheme 1b	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				X		X		X	X
Subtheme 1c	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Subtheme 1d		X	X		X		X		X		X	X	X		X			X	
<b>Theme 3</b>																			
Subtheme 1a	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X		
Subtheme 1b	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X



### **Category 1: Theme 1: Islam is not a Foreign Religion**

One of the questions of this research study involved finding out the motivating factors that would lead Black men to convert from Christianity to Islam. All of the participants discussed their first recollections of hearing about Islam or seeing Islamic images or symbols. Additionally, all of the participants noted their investigative process which ranged from speaking to Muslims, to their engagement with the Islamic scripture, the Quran. Participants also noted their issues with Christianity, which ranged from personal issues with Christian institutions, its connection to an American racialized culture, and confusion over issues dealing with existential questions. While the issues with Christianity served as a springboard for the development of questions about their faiths that ultimately lead them away from Christianity, that does not necessarily imply that Islam was the next choice.

All of the participants discussed how familiar Islam was, and that familiarity allowed for them to inquire more and dive deeper into scriptural investigation. Ultimately, the door for Islam was open because it was not seen as an outside, foreign religion and within that context five subthemes emerged: “the Nation was fearless”: Strength and independence; “Oh, he’s a Muslim”: Family relationships with Muslims; “I felt safer cause people knew I was with them”: Neighborhood support and social involvement of the Muslims; “I remember seeing them moving as one”: the symbol of

structure and discipline; and “What’s my name!?”: Strong Black representations in culture.

***Subtheme 1a: “The Nation as fearless:” Strength and Independence***

Sixteen out of the 19 participants expressed early familiarity about the Nation of Islam prior to considering investigating Islam. They discussed multiple experiences regarding the image of the Nation of Islam’s men and women in their neighborhoods. The high number of participants that experienced and encountered members of the Nation of Islam is consistent with the level of recruitment and presence in majority Black urban areas. Because of their presence, hearing terms like “Asalamu alaykum, my brother”, “insha’Allah”, “Allah” or “Allahu akbar” were not considered unique or strange, and were parts of neighborhood norms. Additionally, these norms were also carried into the school settings as the children of Nation of Islam members and orthodox Muslim parents’ children attended the city schools.

*Michael* from Philadelphia recounted not being Muslim in high school but observing how the Muslim students got unique treatment after their parents got involved and pressured the principle to allow for special Muslim accommodations on Friday’s, wearing kufi’s, and a room that could be used during their prayer times.

...It was wild, I remember other students were getting talked to if they had they hoodies on, but the Muslim kids got to wear the kufi cause they’re parents went and got the people to understand its part of they’re religion. You know, they didn’t want to fight the Muslims in Philly, nobody wanted to pick with the Muslims in Philly. They just had it like that.... They got a room too. A room they used to pray in. They could use it on Friday and I think sometimes

during the day, if I remember. Basically, man, I knew the brothers around the way, I knew how they talked and, you know, they talked big. Like about the White man, and the system, and Black power.... When I saw they're kids getting treated with more respect at school by the teachers and principal, I was like man, I guess they're not all talk.

*Khalid*, describes being a child and hearing his father and uncles talk about how you don't mess with "the Nation", referring to the Nation of Islam. He later recounts how his uncle took him to see the movie *X*, by Spike Lee. This was the biopic of the life of Malcolm X as played by Denzel Washington. Khalid elaborates on the impact that movie had on his views of strength and independence:

...And my uncle took my brother and some of his children to the movie theaters and we saw the movie *X*, I don't think that was an appropriate movie for a child to see... But anyways he took us all to that movie, we sat down and watched that movie from beginning to end, and I just was I wasn't like one of those – I wasn't too young where I couldn't pay attention, I was like 10 or 11 years old. I was actually I watched it from beginning to end then that's the first time I really saw what my uncle and father was talking about. It was my first time seeing that Muslim or Islam... I saw them as defiant, and fearless, and that these drugs and crimes in the streets – they were free from that life.

Like Khalid and Michael, *Rasheed* describes how the Nation of Islam presentation was different from the neighborhood norms in Harlem, New York:

...those were the brothers in the suits. It could be 100 degrees outside, and you know they'd be in their bow ties and dark suits selling that newspaper and pies.... They were always different, I'm kind of a different type of thinking person. I never was the type to want to fit in. You see, in our hood, growing up in school it was like what are you gonna do to be noticed. You're gonna ball, be some kind of athlete, be entertaining, or be the different type of kid or the guy on the street. I was the smart kid. I was the thinking kid. I made money doing people's errands in the neighborhood, talking to older people and just doing my thing. Seeing the Nation brothers, I respected that. I respected there was this group of people that would just do their own thing and it didn't matter... Then when I got older and I

heard, this was after high school, when I paid attention to what they said, I said yeah, that makes sense. You know, they talked a lot of Black pride, and power and of course, you know, I knew Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali were Muslim, I mean there's a Malcolm X Blvd up the road, but hearing people live say these things, made you feel like a new man. I wanted to be that. They were strong by themselves and when I joined, I saw they were strong together too.

*Tariq* from New Jersey recalls his memory of the strength of the Nation of Islam in a less righteous way than the previous participants. However, even while his perspective on the Nation of Islam was not a positive one, his recollection demonstrates the familiarity and embeddedness of the Nation of Islam and Islamic ideology in the neighborhood:

...(laughing) they were funny to me. It's a funny thing you got me thinking, when I think back to how I knew about Muslims. I knew about Muslims, cause they were just around, but the people I was like thinking of was the Nation. I remember seeing them at their events cause they held stuff a few blocks away from where my place was. They were like gangsters in suits. Like, they were all peace, peace brother, As-salamu alaykum young brother, but they smack you over the head in a minute if you step to them. They had no chill. They always seem serious. I remember one time seeing them, it was at the corner, these group of guys were acting out and not listening to them or something. Next thing I know it was like a group of these Nation guys come up and grab these guys and rush them out the area... It was funny cause you hear about Muslims and the Nation and you expect these clean cut, suit and tie, discipline type guys, but they'll let you know in a minute... They don't play.

*Faraj* from Washington, DC recalls not even thinking Muslims were anything but Black at the time he first began hearing about Islam.

When I first heard of Islam I only thought of the Nation of Islam. Its who I saw every day. I didn't put them together, Islam and, you know, the foreign people I come across. When I heard Islam, I thought the Nation of Islam. I had friends growing up who had family members in the Nation of Islam, so it was just like another group of people in the neighborhood.

*Ben* and *Umar* both recall their memories of the Nation of Islam in their neighborhoods in New York City. Although *Ben* and *Umar* both knew of the Nation of Islam during their youth and into their teenage years, their memories were sparked by the representation of the Nation of Islam women. *Ben* recalls seeing his sister's friend at a shopping center:

But it all this time I'm kind of standing you know and listening to them interact with each other as their own friends and then, when they stopped talking I couldn't nothing, I didn't say anything to her, because she was just she was to certain are striking. I felt like I almost died. I was dumbfounded until their conversation finished and she went on down the down the aisle then after that I asked my sister I said, who is that that was with us. She said that's (D). She says she's in the Nation so that's the first time I saw a woman in the nation... It is like mind blowing it's like what is that. Because she was covered, I mean all the way down to you couldn't even see her shoes so is this like she was floating down when she was walking, I mean I was done, you know. She was floating down the aisles.

*Umar* recalls seeing the Nation of Islam women in a group when he was in high school on his way back from a friend's house:

I don't know if it was like a Eid, or celebration or some kind of event they had. I just remember it was like 30-40 of them, all dressed in white, and covered. All the way. You know, like hijab and covered head to toes. It looked different. I never seen a whole group of women trying to go out looking good, but going out like that all covered up. It still looked good. The sisters looked good. I don't want to be saying it like that, but you know, it was a good type of looking good. Like it had respect. It demanded respect. Like we can still look good but we don't have to be all out there like that, you know.

***Subtheme 1b: “Oh, he’s a Muslim:” Family relationships with Muslims***

As the previous subtheme of familiarity with Muslim images were present with the Nation of Islam in various urban communities, another recurrent subtheme conveyed that thirteen out of nineteen participants had or knew of a Muslim in their immediate or extended family. This trend demonstrated proximity with Islam within primary groups. Additionally, the tendency builds on the previous theme that Islam was not viewed as a strange way of life, and even had positive connotations in the perceptions of the lives of Muslim family members. For instance, it was known to some participants that they could not engage in acts related to gambling, vulgar speech, alcohol, drugs, or eating pork. The familiarity with Islam and the proximity provided added fertile ground for Islam being an avenue in terms of lifestyles when they began questioning their Christian faiths.

*Abdul-Kareem* noted that “they knew he [a cousin] couldn’t have the pepperoni on the pizza”, and *Adam* from Virginia related:

We used to play sports a lot growing up... Basketball and football mostly with the other kids... Sometimes she [aunt] would come by after work for dinner. And I knew soon when I opened the door and saw her shoes that we weren’t having no meat. From my whole childhood growing up til college I thought the whole time Muslims were like vegans or vegetarians or something. I didn’t know about the pork thing, I thought it was an everything. Man, that whole time I swear I was scared of Islam cause I was like I can’t stop eating meat, I wasn’t ready to be no vegetarian. I didn’t know. You know, I didn’t know til when I was in college and we went out to eat and this Muslim guy was in our group. I was like, well I’m just gonna order what I want. You know, being young and defiant. And I got some meat. Then he ordered and got a burger. I said you can’t eat that... he looked at me like I was crazy. Man, I felt dumb that day. But I didn’t pay it no mind growing up, I just knew – uh – Auntie (M) is here, no meat.

*Michael* described his own in-home turmoil in comparison to his Muslim cousin's household and how he appreciated being at their house because of their family structure:

Me and (Q) used to be at his house a lot... I liked going there cause there always people at the house. So, my house was kind of like come and go as you want, my mom worked a lot. So she'd be gone most of the time. I had to a lot of time come home and find food and like cook something or stop at the bodega for something before I got back. But I try to go to my cousin's, you know, probably like maybe 4 – 3 or 4 times a week or something... They had food there and they're house, just felt calm.... We'd play video games, like 2k or Madden... Yeah, they were kind of strict [the parents]. (Q) would have to stop playing sometimes cause his mom would telling him to pray. But they always kept me late there and they ate together and they talked about stuff. I try now to keep my house like that.

*Hakim* from New York City recalls his mother cooking for a big family barbecue they were going to attend and being concerned about the different variety of food she had to make:

She was making rice and beans and was trying to make sure she wasn't getting any bacon grease in there... I said Ma' what's the problem, she said they're Muslim they don't eat that stuff. I just remember her stressing out over rice and beans. It didn't seem like a big deal. But it was to her.

Later in the interview, *Hakim* goes on to relate the subsequent conversation he had some time after the family event and his mother's concern over bacon grease in the rice and beans dish.

She said to me Muslims don't eat pork and I asked why not. She said cause that's in their religion, they have rules about what they can eat and how they can dress and talk and stuff like that. I asked her, well, that sounds hard, how come we

don't have rules? She said we did, and I said what are our rules. She said to be good to people, to love everyone.

*Eddie* from New York City relates his experiences with uncles and cousins who were a part of the Nation of Islam and the example they had on him.

A few of them were Muslim, well, Nation of Islam guys... They were like strong dudes. Like they carried themselves strong. They were always shaped up, and ready for battle. Not fighting but they liked to argue, man. My dad was a strong man, he was my role model. He worked hard and he was the type a guy to do whatever for his family... It's a different type of strength they [Muslim relatives] had, like head strong. I realize it now being older and Muslim, just a different kind of confidence.

*Shabir* from Washington, DC attributed Islam as being the reason for his brother's transformative change while he was in prison.

When he [Shabir's brother] was in he became Muslim. When he came out he was like a different person. We're both hot headed. We grew up in that kind of neighborhood and house. Plus we're big, like my brother played football. I wasn't the athlete, but he was. But I was big too so you get people trying you and we, we weren't the type to take nonsense. He got locked up for, just doing stupid stuff. Things happen. I never did. But when he came out I was in shock. He looked the same but he was the same [T] that I knew growing up. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink, he came out and first thing he did was go to the Masjid. They hooked him up with some work and he was good. When I talked to him he wasn't like pushing Islam on me. He didn't beat me over the head with it. He was just kind of doing his own thing and getting back into life. But I always kept asking him stuff 'cause something changed him.

***Subtheme 1c: "I felt safer 'cause people knew I was with them:" Neighborhood support and social involvement of the Muslims***

This subtheme relating to motivations for conversion involves the social aspects of the Muslims in the community and the impression it had on the participant's views on



Islam. This theme was endorsed by nine of the participants interviewed. *Atif* from

Chicago relates the activities of the Nation of Islam in the neighborhood:

They [Nation of Islam members] were always doing stuff. They had an impact. I liked that and when I was part of the NOI I went right for community clean up.... They were serious about drugs and I'm not saying the dealers were scared of them, but there was a respect thing... Where NOI areas, you knew you just left those spots alone 'cause they wasn't going to stop coming at you... They meant what they talked about for sure.

Growing up Harlem, New York, *Rasheed* had vivid recollection of the social presence of

the Nation of Islam in Harlem:

I'd see them on the corners talking about the White man, the government, handing out brochures. They were always there on the corners, in the streets selling knowledge. They helped people, a lot of people, a lot of press didn't talk about that. You got the White man's the devil talk from the press. But they were in the neighborhoods. I didn't see nobody else there caring. They did events, they helped people get off drugs, alcohol. They tried cleaning things up off the streets how they could. I don't see them like that today, but back then was different.

After joining the Nation of Islam, *Dwayne* recalled the security he felt being with the

Muslims.

I felt safer cause people know I was with them. People knew I was Muslim 'cause of my suit. I could walk around my neighborhood, I could talk to people without fear 'cause I knew I had my brothers behind me and we were real in the neighborhood... We had that respect. We didn't do nothing violent, but people knew we were serious about our stuff... Nobody tried to push nothing on us 'cause you knew the Muslims were clean. Plus we had numbers... There was this older couple that lived on this block and it was close to like, an alley, so you know what, you know the things that happen in alleys. The husband asked if we could be around there more cause they were scared of the things going on close by. So we did. We got the people selling out of there and they took they business to a different block.

*Tariq* recalls when he first heard of the division within the Nation of Islam called the Fruit of Islam.

They [Fruit of Islam] were like the military of the Nation. They did a lot of security work and trainings like karate and martial arts. When I first saw them I was like, wow. I wanna be a part of that. They'd be in formations and marches and they had different types of clothes.... Yeah, I do think that kind of training mentality helps on the street cause you gotta go up against real ones on the street. Having that fearlessness was necessary.

The social responses were not only exhibited in the immediate actions of the Nation of Islam but were also latently present in the overall neighborhood culture. *Tariq* relates:

The Nation's been here for a while. You got the Mosque up the road, and later on you got two more Mosques that opened up on the boulevard and the avenue, but those were more traditional Islamic Mosques. I think they laid the groundwork though for, to be even open to be honest. They [Nation of Islam] been here. You know, they had a presence here for a long time. I got family, I remember from when I was a kid, and friends I played ball with in the parks that's parents or people they knew was in the Nation. So it wasn't ever this type of, like, these foreigners or foreign people were coming into the neighborhood. You know like it wasn't weird to go into a place and give Salams [Muslim greeting] to people. And you know who was who. You see a sister in a hijab [Muslim women head scarf], you see a brother in a suit and tie, you see an Arab or African brother, you said Salam. And if they wasn't Muslim they knew what it meant. It was common, yeah.

In addition to the Nation of Islam, Muslim organizations and groups were heavily impactful in the layout and involvement of neighborhoods in New York and Philadelphia. *Abdul-Kareem* emphasis this relationship when he said:

You ever heard of the North-Philly beard, or Sunnah jeans? Its been like the cool thing to be Muslim in Philly for a while now. That's from the impact the Muslims had on Philly. It's just part of the city. You know. There's a lot of Muslim families here and they been here for a long time doing work in the community. You know the Masjid was the spot, you met up with friends, this Masjid or that Masjid was a landmark you'd meet at. In school there were the Muslim cliques that were like

the righteous brothers. They always were like the people you'd go to for the real facts, you know what I mean. Like they'd be on the whole government thing, they be talking about the poisons in the community, the drugs, alcohol, prostitution... I don't know how righteous they were for real, but they talked it for sure.

Abdul-Kareem's references to the "North-Philly beard" or "Sunnah Jeans" reflects the cultural impacts Islam had on the trends of self-representation in the city. Abdul

Khabeer (2016) contends:

A beard style popular among Black men in Philadelphia, the "Philly Beard", is also known as the "Sunnah Beard" or the "Sunni Beard" because the cut and style – full, wide, and extending beneath the chin – originated among U.S. Black Muslim men. The beard was initially known as the Sunnah because Muslim wear facial hair as a form of piety in order to follow the Sunnah, the model of the Prophet Muhammad... Non-Muslim Black men note that while they wear the beard for stylistic reasons, they are often mistaken for Muslims. (P. 166)

This "Islamic" presentation extended beyond just that of a representation of Islam and more into the presentation of the concept of masculinity and manhood as represented in the male roles within Islamic teachings. The reality of those ideological concepts cementing themselves within the culture of the city demonstrates the impact of Islam, Islamic culture, and the longevity of Islam within the social structures of the city. Abdul Khabeer (2016) also demonstrates the impact of Muslim clothing in the presentation of style among Black Philadelphia Muslims and non-Muslims:

Another Philly trend... is young Black men wearing jeans they had cut at the ankles or right above them. The length of the jeans, again, come from a Muslim male practice of the Sunnah, but the style was worn by both Muslim and non-Muslim men... Male Muslim styles in Philadelphia were linked to hip hop fashion but also to styles from the Islamic East. One of the more notable styles... is the pairing of hip hop staples, a white T-shirt and sneakers, with an *izar*, a male skirt, made of denim. Within U.S. Black American Muslim communities, Philly Muslims

are noted for their construction of such creative and hybrid styles, which flip the authoritative aesthetics of multiple 'mainstreams'... Black American Muslim is an aesthetic choice that is racially and religiously significant. A denim izar looks "fresh" because it is eligible in the 'hood, but it also upholds a particular interpretation of the Sunnah and thus fulfills a particular desire for piety. (P. 166)

***Subtheme 1d: "I remember seeing them moving as one:" A symbol of structure and discipline***

While every participant presented their direct experiences with Islam, this subtheme reflects the symbolic unity they felt Islam embodied. The importance of the symbolic image of unity was present in ten of the nineteen participants. While the perception of unity was seen favorably by some, it was seen with frustration by others as well. Both perspectives will be presented. However, while some participants felt a frustration at the embodied Muslim unity within their neighborhoods, it was also presented as understandable given broader social intersections of marginality.

*Imran* recalled seeing the Nation of Islam as representing one hierarchical structure:

I remember seeing them moving as one... they thought as one, they were focused at that time. They showed what it was like when we put our minds together as a people and come together. We got things done... Before being a part of the organization, I liked that they had structure. They weren't all over the place with their ideology, their message. They were the other guys. You know you had the Martin's [Martin Luther King], and the Panthers [Black Panther Organization], and by the 70's they were, to me, like a memory. The Nation was strong in the community. They stayed strong in the community because they had structure, they had leaders, branches, they made their own money, they built their own schools, they were nation building... You can't get that being what people tried to say they were. That they only wanted to separate from White folks, no. They were building a Black nation from the bottom. They were taking

brothers off the street, cleaning them up and putting them in their structure to serve our community. People got them wrong... That's what was real scary about them.

*Dawkins* recalls the community strength of the Nation of Islam movement, but also critiqued their Muslim-centered approach to community building.

[The Nation of Islam] did a lot of work in the community. They had buildings in the neighborhood for the kids, they had schools and were real big on ownership and owning your own establishments. But all their establishments were Muslim establishments and the whole community wasn't Muslims. They could have worked more with other groups... Yeah, I think if they worked with the Churches in the area, or other government people they could have changed a lot more stuff. It's like they built stuff for the Muslim community, so if you didn't think like they wanted you wouldn't get from what they built. I saw that when I joined the group that things were bigger than that. We couldn't just worry about ourselves. We got family that's not Muslim... I was trying to get them out the fire too.

*Shabir and Lewis*, both growing up in the same area and being close in age recall how the regimented lifestyle of the Nation of Islam and by extension, the rules put forward in Islam appealed to their sense of needed structure in their individual lives.

*Shabir* recalls:

The brother's lifestyle was that they ate one meal a day. It sounds hard, but when you do it you see how much better you focus and how much sharper you are... Now it's a workout trend, you see with [intermittent] fasting everybody doing something like that to stay healthy. For the Nation they were doing that from the start.

*Lewis* shares a similar and more personal recollection of the need for structure:

I needed that structure and the Nation was structured with rules with how you live your life everyday. How you should look, how you should clean yourself, you should smell good, you should pray, wake up early, eat once a day, keep your mind clean, help your family, help your community, teach the people, read... It wasn't like ok, you a Muslim now, go figure things out. They was like, this is a

jungle we live in and you need a road map to not get eaten up by these beasts. And they had people there that would teach you and you pass that knowledge on too.

One of the younger participants, *Eddie*, recalls the structure and unity presented in Islam in his recollection of the Hajj pilgrimage performed by Muslims and his observation of Muslims during the month of fasting in Ramadan:

It was dope. [The image] was people, like I heard it was millions of people there and they all doing the same thing and praying to Allah and praying together. I saw when they were praying, it was at night and they were all lined up in circles around the Kaaba. You know what's interesting now, if you go on YouTube and look up people praying at the Kaaba, you'll see thousands of people walking around and then you hear "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar" to start prayer and then the Imam starts prayer and its dead quiet and nobody's moving. Can you image, you got thousands of people to stop in place, and line up and stand at attention and be quiet by just announcing prayer starting. That's power, brother. That's power. That's not anything you see with anything... Maybe with the army.

On his recollection of Muslims in his college community during the month of Ramadan, *Eddie* shares his experience observing the communal practice of *Iftar*:

I went with a friend for iftar [breaking fast during Ramadan]... I was thinking, these people aint eat nothing all day, they gonna be fighting over this food. They had things laid out for everyone at a table, like a buffet and you get a plate and get food. What I saw was different. When they started to eat they were sharing food. You know the tradition, with the dates. They were giving each other dates and giving out water bottles. Then they went to pray. I'm sitting there thinking there's all this food here, they didn't eat all day and they're not eating, what's going on here? My friend told me that they eat a little to break their fast, then they pray, then they eat, then later at night they pray for a longer time. It was stuff like that just made sense to me. When it says you feed your brother, look after your brother, what better way to show that then feeding someone when you're hungry too.

***Subtheme 1e: “What’s my name!?:” Strong Black representations in culture***

The overall theme in this category not only involves the familiarity of Islam within Black American communities and culture, but the positive connotations attached to Islam as well. This subtheme highlights more of the micro-level impact of Islam as it relates to individual strength. Seventeen out of the nineteen respondents referred to some aspect of this subtheme including how prominent Black Muslims made them feel represented and proud to be Black, and how in their investigation and acceptance of Islam it provided a deeper “knowledge of self.” *Ansar* from California recalls the impact figures like Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X had on him as he lived in a majority White neighborhood and attended a majority White school.

When I was younger, coming up, and there were mostly White families and the only people who weren’t white were Asians, and immigrants. There were other Black families, but it wasn’t like a lot of Black families around. I didn’t – it wasn’t until college that I started getting really into the Black power movement...So when I was younger, knowing about guys like Kareem [Kareem Abdul-Jabbar], Malcolm X, and guys like Muhammad Ali, I saw them as role models. They were the guys that were secure, they were brothers that showed high self-esteem and pride of who they were. When you grow up and nobody really looks like you, it’s a strange feeling. I didn’t feel insecure, but I can’t say I knew what pride was. When I got into college and was around more Black people and we’d have Malcolm and Muhammad Ali on posters for events, we’d talk about them and I felt proud because they were strong and they didn’t care who’s face it was in. The more I got involved in what you would call Black power groups and the people I talked to...I started connecting their pride to them being Muslim.

*Abu-Bilal* recollected the impact of Muslims like Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X in his description of what he thought Muslims were like prior to converting to Islam:

He's [Muhammad Ali] always been my favorite fighter... Do you remember the fight he had with... [Ernie] Terrell? That guy that kept calling Ali Cassius Clay? And Ali went in and punished him, and kept yelling at him, "what's my name, what's my name?"... That man [Ali] also stood up and said you can take my belts and stop me from fighting but I ain't going to your way. That's a man with strength and fearlessness and stood for something. How many people are gonna be at their heights and say I don't agree with something and lose it all and stand up to a government like that? That's why he's my favorite boxer cause he was real. He talked a lot, that was his thing, but when it came to it he stood for what he believed in. And he cared about us. He represented us. He came from the bottom and his name is in history now. You see what his funeral was like, it was all over the world. I think people said he's the most famous athlete in history or something too.

*Michael* describes how he did a school project on Malcolm X and saw himself in

Malcolm's biography:

He went through more than I did, but I can relate to. I think a lot of people can relate to Malcolm. I don't think you have to be Black to relate to his story too. He went from poverty, being an outcast and a criminal to being locked up and everything. He was a pimp and a thief. And now we study him in college. He gave speeches at Oxford and Harvard...When I was doing my [school] project on Malcolm X I saw myself in that story 'cause I had gone through some stuff not fitting in in society, and getting in trouble and stuff. It's just that frustration you feel of being lost. So when I listened to his speeches and read some of the autobiography I saw that a lot of my frustration was coming from inside. I remember hearing.. I can't remember if I heard it or read it... He [Malcolm X] said, who taught you to hate the shape of your nose, your lips, the color of your skin or the texture of your hair ." I never thought like that before... He was talking about loving yourself and being proud of what you are as Black.

Additionally, *Dwayne*, *Faraj*, and *Dawkins* recalled similar sentiments, sharing that they

saw Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam in general as positive role models and

representations of Black manhood. *Dwayne* stated:

They [The Nation of Islam] spoke for me. They spoke for us. Malcolm and Muhammad both came out of the Nation and when they were speaking I'd be



clapping and saying, “yeah! .” They stood up for us and they were unapologetic. That’s why we loved them. They didn’t forget about us.

*Faraj* recalls a conversation he overheard while at a store:

They [two White men] were talking about Muhammad Ali and one of them said, he could box but he’s such a loudmouth...I heard that and it made me happy. I felt proud that this guy is so good at what he did that you couldn’t even deny his greatness and because of that greatness he stood tall and told the White man to their face that I am a Black man. I am my own man. You see, that’s what gets under their skin. That you can’t be controlled, you can think for yourself. Muhammad represented that.

*Shabir, Adam, Umar and Tariq* related shared sentiments of how figures like Malcolm X, Khalid Abdul-Muhammad, and Muhammad Ali were outspoken proponents for Black men and that seeing Black men standing up to a dominant White establishment made them feel a sense of pride. *Shabir* relates:

When you heard Khalid Abdul-Muhammad it was unapologetically Black. He told us why we should be proud of our Blackness. That the whole story we’ve been given by White people was to hold us down.

Similarly, *Adam* recalls debates he would have with friends of his prior to being a Muslim on who was more impactful during the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X:

To me Martin Luther King was part of the establishment and wanted to be let in to the room. Malcolm was saying, keep your room, we’re going to build a whole house for ourselves. The tools he [Malcolm X] was giving us to build it was self-pride, upliftment, to have power in ourselves. It wasn’t about segregation or anything. I think he had a better message ‘cause it was about us and for us to come up, not for someone else to let us in. I think if Malcolm didn’t get killed, he would have done a lot more and his legacy would have been more than Martin Luther King.

These five subthemes within the overall theme of Islam not being a strange religion within the Black community or Black culture reflect a symbolic Islam that had micro-and-macro level impacts for the participants. The structural and institutional efforts of the Nation of Islam provided a cultural aesthetic of self-determination with the construction of Mosques, schools, and businesses that were owned and operated by Muslims who were Black. Additionally, the cultural impact of prominent Black Muslim figures who not only showed transformations in their lives through the utilization of Islam, but also presented an image of strength, defiance toward oppression and exploitation, and pride in oneself. Lastly, the soil set from this theme provided an avenue to where when questions regarding their previous Christian faith went unanswered, Islam became a viable avenue to venture. It is argued that if Islam was viewed as an outside foreign religion, the interest in exploring it may not have occurred as comfortably. The following theme that emerged from participant interviews were the social and theological issues with Christianity.

### **Category 1: Theme 2: Broken Connection with Christianity**

The second theme within the category of motivations for conversion to Islam consists of three subthemes. Those subthemes are: “That doesn’t make sense”: Theological uncertainty; “Just believe”: Unanswered theological questions; and “Jesus didn’t look like that”: Unrepresented in mainstream Christianity. All participants noted their initial issues with some aspects of Christianity and how it is practiced in the United States.

While it is obvious that since the participants converted out of Christianity to Islam, that there would have been some level of dissatisfaction with Christianity, it is important to dissect the reasons why. From the participants' narratives and the emergence of the subsequent subthemes, the issue more so entailed personal growth and spiritual meaning over the Church as an institution.

***Subtheme 2a: “That doesn’t make sense:” Theological uncertainty***

This subtheme is unique in that every respondent stated that a major contention was their inability to adequately reconcile theological issues, particularly with the doctrine of the Trinity or the nature of God. While this study is avoiding areas involving theology, it is a significant theme to explore based on participant narratives. *Abdul-Kareem* is a participant who is deeply involved in Islamic studies at the academic level, and his narrative reflects that initial issue of the trinity. He recalls:

That just doesn’t make sense. It never did to me. Even when I was a kid I would ask if God created Jesus then does that mean God created himself. Then when I got older I thought, how could a human being give birth to God. That sounds like Greek mythology. Then when I started getting more distance from the Church and my family and going to school [college] I started asking even more questions. How could God die? Why would God kill his son? Can’t God just forgive? If God created humans with a ability to sin, why would he punish his son to wipe away mankind’s sins? Stuff like that. It was getting too much. Just too many questions. Then I started looking at other stuff online and saw all these contradictions in the Bible and then it started to make sense. If there are contradictions it means that people added and took away stuff. Who knows what was added that confused everything.

*Adam* shared how he could not understand how one God is divided into three parts, but still remained one God.

To believe it I have to not think about three equaling one and one equaling three. I didn't know how I couldn't think of that. I'd ask people at the Church and I asked friends and they said God is One. Cause, Christians are monotheists. God is one, but in three parts. My thing was all those three parts were separate so how can they all God at the same time. I still don't get it. When I was spoke with Muslims, they didn't have none of that confusion. Same when I spoke to Jews. It was just when I – then they'd tell me God is all love, but at the same time God is going to put people in Hell that don't get what they're talking about.

Additionally, as it relates to the Bible, *Khalid* recalls watching something online about contradictions in the Bible and the impact it had on his faith.

[The video] It showed where some things would say one thing and then there'd be another part of the Bible that would say it happened in a different way. I went and looked it up and that's what it showed. The question the guy in the video was saying, that I couldn't forget was if the Bible was supposed to be the word of God, how could God make mistakes or let people put mistakes in it? That question he asked hit me and I lost faith. It was true. They tell you this is God's words but then there's mistakes and its either God isn't perfect or that book isn't. I couldn't get an answer for that one.

When the participants were asked about what did not resonate with them regarding Christianity, the most common sentiment shared was that of theological confusion. *Ansar*, a key informant and now an Imam at a Mosque spoke about the conversations he had with learned members of the Church while he was a Christian, as well as the conversations he currently has with his Christian friends that lead various Churches in the area.

My spiritual journey brought me to Islam because it gave me clarity. It wasn't complicated. When I was young and still in the Church it would surprise you how many people in leadership don't understand the Trinity. Worse too, if you asked 3 different people you might get 4 different answers. Imagine you went to the Masjid and asked your Shaikh, Shaikh what is Tawheed? And he told you this complicated formula that you couldn't work out but that you had to pray to? I still talk to my preacher friends and we have, you know, friendly debates.

Nothing heated or anything, but we have debates about God, who God is, what's God's nature. And those same questions I had over 30 years ago still haven't been answered. They're still saying the same things.

One of the more candid responses from *Ben* relates how being confronted with irreconcilable questions regarding the nature of God caused an existential crisis that made him question God's existence when he said "It [Christianity] was all I knew... When these people were talking to me and they were making sense about God not being three, and I couldn't answer it my next thing was then God must not be real. ."

*Michael*, one of the key informants who is currently teaching at an Islamic institution recalls his early experiences with interfaith dialogue with Muslim on his college campus. At the time Michael had already been questioning traditional Christian narratives:

I saw a pamphlet that said "Jesus, a servant of Allah" or something like that. The brother at the booth was telling me that they believed in Jesus as a son of God and as a servant of God. That he was a messenger of Allah. That confused me. I said what do you mean, how's he God's son and a messenger? The guy then showed me all these places in the Bible that said righteous men were sons of God. It was probably the first time I thought about Jesus not being God or related to God...That kinda lined up with what I had been thinking and feeling but I couldn't make sense of what didn't feel right about it.

*Lewis's* relates hearing doubt of the Christian narrative in a song.

The song [Nas] said something about the trinity being a retelling of old myths, like old Greek or Egyptian stories of the son dying and resurrecting after 3 days. I looked it up and went down a whole line of questions. It was eye opening and got me to start questioning what I was being told. I didn't want to just follow things without thinking about it.

***Theme 2b: “Just believe:” Unanswered theological questions***

The first subtheme reflected the initiation of questions regarding major teaching within the Christian faith. While asking questions was not necessarily the impetus for the choice to convert, the questions were universally shared as being deep enough to create serious doubts that needed reconciliation. Fifteen out of the nineteen participants recorded not receiving adequate answers to their questions regarding Christian theology. The four respondents who did not endorse this subtheme also did not ask anyone about their inquiry. Rather, they went on journeys of self-reflection and attempted to find out the answers on their own.

*Eddie* recalls a particularly frustrating experience of asking multiple people in his Church as well as his parents about God and the relationship with Jesus.

They all told me to just believe, have faith. If I questioned too much, I was told my faith was weak. Especially when I had to go to Sunday school. I was frustrated ‘cause I really wanted to know. I wasn’t trying to be difficult. I just think they couldn’t answer my questions. [When asked what his questions were]... How could God be three but we say He’s one. I got answers. Its just when I asked for clarifying the situation is when they got upset with me. It also made my mom upset cause they was telling her I was acting up in the Church.

As a key informant with a current leadership position within an Islamic institution, *Michael* had a deeper insight into the realities of the issues people encounter when they are unable to receive answers to major faith-oriented questions.

It’s like a brushing off. With my students I try to answer their questions and if I don’t know answers I tell them I don’t know, but will find someone who can, or send them to someone who can. The Quran tells us “Ask those of knowledge if you do not know .” So I take that to heart and when someone comes to me

thinking I'm one of knowledge I'll try to serve that... [Church leadership] They never did that. They gave me answers to everything but what I asked. I ask them about three-in-one and they tell me Jesus loves me and died for me...Ok, I didn't ask that though. And if you don't know, don't say anything... It messed people up, it makes them lose their faith, even in God... You're supposed to be the elder, the minister, the pastor. You're preaching about God, but don't know about God? Can't explain God? So what am I supposed to do? What hope is there for me? That's how the youth feel. Alhamdulillah, [praise and thanks go to Allah] I'm thankful I experienced that cause I remember that feeling when students ask me questions... I think it made me more compassionate to that mindset.

In addition to unanswered theological questions, *Tariq* felt an internal battle as his ability to reconcile Church teachings, scriptural inconsistencies, and Christian practices were becoming more pronounced as he investigated non-Christian teachings. Tariq's major obstacle was within the structure of the Church itself and how just having faith alone was not enough for him.

I was] feeling sick when I go to Church and pray and in my mind its images of God as this man. Being at the Church and seeing Jesus statues, Jesus on the cross, hearing the stories about him being beaten and hung up... I felt dead inside... spiritually. I couldn't connect to God. He [The Sunday school teacher] told me when you have faith with the living God you have a personal relationship. I didn't feel that. Maybe he did, maybe I didn't have strong enough faith, I don't know. It didn't feel natural though that I gotta connect to God through Jesus or the Spirit or whatever. The images in my mind of this guy, it was like, man, this just is like made up.

*Umar* recounts how his questions regarding the Bible's authenticity and the lack of clarity he experienced when he questioned his fellow Church members and the church minister:

[Church members] told me what everyone else said that it's the word of God... [Minister] said that there are thousands of documents showing that its legitimate. I just needed to know one thing... When I talked to Muslims and when I went online to look stuff up the biggest thing for me was that how do I

know whats in this book is authentic. And the Quran... Muslims say the Quran is literally from God. Like that was clear. They made, they say it clearly. When I talked to the minister, I told him why are there different books? Like why do we have different books in Christianity that we don't agree with? If its something from God it should be preserved and all these different books don't look like preserved...But then you got the Muslims here talking about one Quran that's preserved. He couldn't answer that man. I was in shock. Like, come on. I gotta believe in this and the main guy is just telling me to just believe. What? just believe in that or just believe you? I said no, no, no, no...This aint right

*Abu-Bilal* related that his experience with Church members and clergy were

similar to other participants, but his narrative was different. Prior to going to his Church *Abu-Bilal* investigated other religions as he knew about some of the Muslim claims as well as other religious mythology in history. His skepticism of Christianity had grown to a higher point than other participants prior to his decision to ask the Church about the questions he had. *Abu-Bilal* related that part of his personality was distrusting and skeptical to begin with, so he tended to look into things himself.

I didn't want them to run game on me cause that's what it was feeling like. It was feeling like a hustle. [*Abu-Bilal's* answer on if he talked to Church leaders about his questions] I didn't have to talk to them, I already heard them telling all of us that we gotta believe, we gotta have faith... I talked to them because my mom wanted me to so I asked the preacher when we were at a picnic. I asked him one question about the trinity, and he got to preaching. He talked for like 10 minutes and never answered my question. I said, I'm done with this. [I asked why did that experience make him make that decision] 'cause when a guy starts fast-talking you like that they just running game. Anyone asks me that question now, I say, Allah is one, no partners, no sons, no nothing... Boom, its done, it aint hard.

While the theological issues represented in the participant's answers reflect their own personal journeys to connect with their perception of God, the representation of the Christian Church served as a minor motivational factor for leaving Christianity. As will be



presented in the following subtheme, there was an interesting generational difference as it related to the perception of the Church.

Older participants seemed to value the Church and its social role within the Black community, whereas younger participants did not see it as important. Younger participants viewed the Church more from their personal interactions within the Church setting rather than the broader social implications of the Church as a major social institution. Older participants recognized the value of the Church in the community from a social perspective. While neither the older nor younger participants viewed the Church as an institution as being a major motivating factor for leaving Christianity, younger participants viewed the Church in a more negative light than older participants. The negative feelings they shared dealt with historical racism and the Church's connection to White dominance. These negative perceptions will be elaborated on further in the recommendations for future research section as it may be an indication of a lack of awareness by younger people of the role the Church played in the civil rights and post-civil rights eras.

***Theme 2c: "Jesus didn't look like that:" Unrepresented in mainstream***

***Christianity***

Representation in mainstream Christianity is a subtheme expressed by seven out of the nineteen participants. This theme encompasses two spheres: the institutional and the representational. The institutional sphere demonstrates how participants did not

feel represented within Christianity as a religion. This sphere presents critique regarding racialized images of important religious figures, namely Jesus and Mary. The representational sphere relates to the othering some participants felt at being in the “Black” Church. While the issue did not relate to the actual demographics of the Church itself, it had more so to do with the proximity the “Black” Church had to mainstream, or normative, Christianity. *Khalid* relates his impression of Church imagery and its impact on how he viewed Christianity.

It was just, that was Jesus. You grow up seeing it like you grow up seeing Santa... When got older and was exposed to more I could see it for what it was. Jesus didn't look like that. How could he coming from there? So why do the Church make him look so European. Its like that scene, remember in the Malcolm X movie when he priest was debating with Malcolm...It bothers me that we the only people worship something that doesn't even look like us. I heard someone say one time, this was on the street where people were preaching. He said, you get on your knees and close your eyes and ask God to help you, to give you money, to make you healthy, to all this... then you open your eyes and it's a picture of a White man you're begging, and you want liberation?

Similar sentiments were shared by *Shabir* who claims that his uneasy feeling with the image of Jesus and Mary were present for as long as he can remember:

[Jesus and Mary] were the holiest people. I hear my mother and grandparent say things like Jesus save him, oh Lord Jesus!... I go to friend's houses, we had them too, and see pictures – paintings on the wall of Jesus, the last supper, and see all these White people. I was maybe 7 or 8 and thinking that don't look right. I look at my family and it didn't feel like we belonged. Christmas time come around and they play the Jesus movies, and it was always a White man and Mary was a White woman. I thought White people were different. Like special in some way.

The lack of representation within the religion of Christianity was significant in feelings of powerlessness for *Adam*:

[As a Black man] I would think that there was something godly or superior with White people. [I asked if racialized images were impactful] I think so because it was hard not to close my eyes and see what I thought was God and it was that Jesus image, and that image was of a White man. It made a lot of sense to me, later on, when I saw Muslims don't use images of God or Jesus or Prophets. I think Jews do the same. What's that painting [The creation of Adam by Michelangelo] that shows God and Adam touching fingers, you know which one I'm talking about... Yeah, its all White. God is White, Adam is White, Angels are White, Jesus is White. Its wild.

*Faraj's* perspective reflected the dominance of Christianity, its proximity to Whiteness and the subsequent domination of Christianity over Black people throughout history:

When you conquer a people you put your face on what they worship so what Europeans did was put they're face on our people's deities. They used it [The Bible] to say we were supposed to be slaves to them cause of Ham's curse. I think it's a mental domination.

The representational sphere reflects the participants' relationship with the broader American Christian community. This sphere within this subtheme does not represent skepticism or negativity within the doctrines of Christianity, its theology or the Church as an institution. Rather, this sphere reflects the interactional relationship within American Christianity as it relates to the segmentation of the Black Church. A similar issue will also be explored in the post-conversion category as it relates to the label of "Black Muslims" as well.

*Dawkins* provides insight into how the Black Church served as a beneficial institution for the Peoria, Illinois community while at the same time being segmented from the mainstream Christian community.

[There were] many Churches around. I'm not Christian anymore because I didn't believe that was how I could reach Jannah [Islamic concept of heaven]. The

Church did help people out though. It gave some structure and we go there and we feel good being together. We sing and glorify God how we knew. You know, we brought our own flavor to it.... It was, especially when I left the Church I felt like this, not when I was still there. Like there was a difference between the Black Churches and the White Churches. I don't mean different like we had different buildings or anything, just like they were legitimate. I don't know if I'm explaining myself right. Right now I can go to a Masjid where you're at and line up with you and pray and go to another Masjid and it's the same. My Masjid here has Black people, Arabic people, Asians, people from other parts of the world and we all be praying as one. And it's the same any Masjid I go to here. The Church didn't have that feeling. I guess of unity.

*Dwayne* recalls the benefit of the community Church in his neighborhood in New Jersey.

The Church was respected and the people who ran it were also in the community. I think it's like that in a lot of communities you'll go to. They helped suffering people. I don't agree with them, but it was a safe area that people in the community can go to to escape the streets. They [also] did things that picked people up and brushed them off, like the Nation [Nation of Islam], did to a lot of people too. If you had a drug or drinking problem or something, they had services to help you. [Asked if it was integrated in mainstream American Christianity] I don't know. I don't know if I ever thought about that. I think they were just focused on us in the community, but I don't remember seeing other Churches helping also. Now that I think about it, I don't see a lot of community Churches and bigger Churches working together now.

*Dwayne's* observation and distinction between community and bigger Churches is interesting in that there seems to be a separation between the urban community Churches and the mainstream Christian churches. Whether that distinction is financial, spatial, or demographic would require further research.

### **Category 1: Theme 3: It's in the Quran**

Every participant in this section had engagement with the Quran prior to converting to Islam. This category is of particular importance because within the Quran

unanswered questions participants had with clergy and Church congregants were answered. Additionally, four subthemes emerged within the main theme of exposure to the Quran: “It’s in the Quran:” Answers to unanswered questions; “It made sense:” Scriptural consistency; “It was talking to me:” The intellectual test; and “It’s all in there:” Quran as a specific guidebook for life. While exposure to Muslims were present in the participant narratives, exposure itself was not perceived as a significant factor for conversion. Rather, self-reflection produced from reading the Quran impacted participants in a more significant fashion. The intimate level of appeal coupled with the clarity of answers provided by reading the Quran appeared to have more impact in the participants' narratives.

***Theme 3a: “It’s in the Quran:” Answers to unanswered questions***

This subtheme was endorsed by 16 of the 19 participants explicitly. However, within the overall narratives every participant made mention in some sort to the impact the Quran played regarding answers to questions involving faith, the nature of God, their roles in life, and the positions of Prophets and Messengers. Sixteen were included in this section because the overall theme relates to a combination of questions generated by the Quran that were self-referentially answered as well as previously unanswered questions the participants had prior to reading the Quran. This subtheme only relates to the previously unanswered questions.

*Hakim* recalls how the questions he had about the trinity were put to rest quickly when he read the Quran for himself. His account demonstrates the clarity he was seeking and how the Quranic narrative fit with his preconception of the nature of God.

[The Quran] provided so many answers for me I was looking for, brother. It [The trinity] never sat right with me, that God is three. It didn't sit right with me growing up and as a adult, when I could go out on my own for learning, it really didn't sit right. [Asked if he sought clarity from Christian clergy], I did. I asked a lot of times cause, like I said, it didn't sit right... [I asked for elaboration on this point] Ok, we were told God is Father, son and spirit but the Bible says Jesus prayed to the Father. So my question was how did God pray to God? You see? Open the Quran, you won't find that. You find it say over and over again God is one. That the only sin God won't forgive is if you make God more than one. That's serious. And it made sense. Of course, God can only be one like I thought.

Of the question regarding Jesus being both God and man, *Abu-Bilal* mentioned that he liked that he didn't even have to speak to anyone to find the answers he was looking for. Additionally, while reading the Quran *Abu-Bilal* stated how it initiated more questions that he never considered, like that of heaven and hell.

That I didn't have to even talk to anyone and worry about them telling me something to get me to believe. I still love that and there's been a lot of things I found over the years that was like, wow, I never thought of that. When I study the Quran it's like it's asking me questions to consider and then I have to think and come to my conclusions... [Lately] topics like *akhira* [afterlife] and the day of judgment have been what I'm reading. I got different books on it. The description of it in the Quran is detailed, like the punishment of hell and reward of heaven. When I was a Christian it was never that clear to me. Heaven wasn't talked about like a real place, it was like a place but I couldn't think of it like a place 'cause what they told me was that you'll be with God, you know, you'll be with Jesus. The Quran tells me details cause it's a place I want to get to... I want to pass this test [of this life] to end up there, insha'Allah.

*Rasheed* recalls similarities between the questions regarding the day of judgment and the unclear depictions that both Christianity and the Nation of Islam provided for him.

It seemed like we'd just be floating on clouds in the sky [Christian perspective]. It wasn't something stressed. It was talked about but they stressed life and belief in Jesus. While I was in the Nation it was... I think back to it now, but it was like mythology. Its what I call it, the mythology of the Nation. The stories of the Black man ruling the earth, that it was our destiny. The stories felt good. Reading the Quran I couldn't find any of that and the people didn't have answers. They told me about Jacob and the lost and found nation, but you know, nothing lined up. The Quran was clear about tawheed [Islamic monotheism, oneness of God], it was clear Allah is one, it was clear what my job was, it was clear what being a Muslim meant. I'm 77 brother, and I still ask questions cause I'm still learning. Nothing as a Muslim made me confused. Its exact.

*Atif* shares similar recollections as *Rasheed*. He asserts that the Quran quieted the noise in his mind that he didn't find anywhere else. *Atif's* appreciation, like that of *Abu-Bilal's*, is that reading the Quran for himself is something he can do on his own without the pressures of anyone enforcing their ideology on him:

I'd be in my home and I can read Quran and answer my own questions without someone telling me it means this or that. Sometimes I open it up and read from anywhere and its talking about something I had been thinking about days before. Its, to me, its amazing to me, I've been reading this book for probably before you were born and I'm still learning.

*Ansar* talks about his experience teaching the Quran which was born out of his previous frustration with the Bible and his experience with a lack of clarity from the Church.

I follow the mentality that the best interpreters [of the Quran] were the Prophet [Muhammad] and the companions of the Prophet [Salaf as-Salih]. So, I consult the old books of the scholars when I teach the Quran in my classes. I don't want to make no mistakes, but I also want correct information for them and myself too... [I asked why that is important to him] Because when I really wanted to believe as a Christian I felt left to be confused, no one gave me good answers especially with the Bible. They tell me what they thought. We don't have that in Islam. We don't have I can make up my meaning to the Quran out of my own desires. That could mislead me and mislead the people. Our scripture is the same

now as when Umar and Abu-Bakr were reading it and they walked with the Prophet. They know better than I know so I get my answers from that chain of men and its always been clear... I haven't had to strain my mind or worry.

The participants in this subtheme described the importance the Quran plays in their lives as Muslims. Participants also expressed how the answers to questions they held prior to Islam that initiated their spiritual journeys outside of Christianity were found in the Quran specifically. While some participants made special note of their utilization of the Quran as Muslims, it should be noted that the original questions they wrestled with were present during their times as Christians. Finally, the realization that those previously unanswered questions were in another scripture provided spiritual backing that reinforced the cultural awareness of Islam being a viable avenue of further investigation.

### ***Theme 3b: "It made sense:" Scriptural consistency***

The consistency spoken of by the participants reflects the perceived consistency of the Quran in terms of its scriptural historicity as well as within the text itself and how it coincided with what they naturally believed. The aligning of the Quranic narrative with deeply held perceptions regarding their own existence was particularly striking to the participants. Seventeen of the 19 participants made references to the Quran making convincing sense to them to a degree high enough to be a motivation for conversion. The degree is of particular importance because the decision to convert is a conceivably



big decision, which would demonstrate the degree of impact the Quran had in their comparison with their previously held Christian beliefs.

*Adam* discussed his impression of the scriptural integrity he found in the Quran that he was questioning with the Bible while he was a Christian.

That's the claim, the main argument they [Muslims] make, right. That the Quran is unchanged. That it comes revealed from Allah through Jibreel (Angel Gabriel) to the Prophet [Muhammad] with no tampering by anyone else. [I asked why that was important to him]. It shows that men haven't corrupted what God wants us to know. It made sense to me too when you look at what's in the Quran. Its not just talking about spiritual messages. There's messages on living life, what your life's purpose is, how you act with your kids, your parents, your neighbors and your society. It's a complete package. [I asked how that was different when he was in Christianity]. If we're supposed to live to please God, then I would expect that we know what God wants us to do. When I investigated that the Bible had tampering...I couldn't believe God would let his guide to us be changed and then how am I supposed to know the part God wants us to do and what the changers wanted us to believe?

*Lewis* believed that the Quran appealed to him on a deeply personal level and impacted his *fitrah* [Islamic concept of one's natural inclination to know God].

Everything about it made sense to me. When I read the Bible it didn't feel like it was for me... Didn't feel like it was talking to me. The Quran was... When I read it, it felt like it was talking to us as people, like as human being. It sounded like it was coming from a divine source and not from people. [I asked him for an example]. The thing that hits me hardest, this is something that when I read or hear it now still gets me emotional, which is another thing. I'm not, like a very emotional person. Or very sensitive. But the Quran impacts me deeper... Its awakened my *fitrah*. There is a *Surah* [Quran Chapter] called Rahman and almost every verse ends with "so which of the favors of your Lord will you deny? ." Its one of those Surahs that I can listen to in Arabic and understand it even though I don't know Arabic because I know when its asking "so which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" And I think about it a lot, which favors would I deny? My eyesight? My hearing? My thinking? Then the more I think the more I realize I can't count how much I've been favored to even be Muslim and know my Creator.

*Hakim* highlights his ability to have memorized chapters of the Quran in the Arabic language and relates that to both the consistency within the Quran as well as its historicity. I asked *Hakim* to elaborate on his experience with the Quran. After telling me about how proud he was to have memorized Quran, I asked him to elaborate on how much Quran he memorized and why that was important to him.

[A portion of the Quran] *Juz Am'ma*. I'm 67 and I became Muslim as an adult so learning Arabic was hard. I learned with some brothers from the Nation coming up. We all left because of our studies of the Quran. After the Nation I took classes at the Masjid and learned to recite Quran. [On why it was important]... I feel part of the miracle of the Quran. It says Allah revealed this to mankind and that He will preserve it. It also says that it will be easy to remember. Brother, I don't speak but a few words of Arabic, but I recite all *Juz Am'ma* in Arabic. That's part of that miracle of the Quran and what Allah said... [Also] if all Quran's were destroyed, us people, Muslims can have it back in a day or two cause we memorized it front to back. They'd have to get rid of all of us if they wanted the Quran to disappear... that's a miracle in our time.

While *Shabir* recalled having uneasy questions with Christianity and Church depictions of racialized images of Jesus and Mary, he recalls the relatively fast acceptance of Islam in a bookstore after finding the Quran and reading what he perceived were more accurate stories of Jesus and Mary:

You had two major chains of books in those days Barnes and Noble and Borders, I was at a Borders and this is like it may seem strange... Something said to me to turn around, so I'm in the bookstore and I turned around, and I was in the religious section...it was dominated with Christian text when I turned around I saw a Quran. And I remember it with Louis Farrakhan, that he said about Jesus and his family being in the Quran. So I pick it up... I have this Quran and I'm looking for the concordance, I couldn't find it. There was an index and it was numerically outlined, so there were words I'm looking for like Jesus, there was no word for Jesus. So I looked for Mary, and there was this thing called Maryam... Like maybe that's Mary, so I go to Surah Maryam. It was like almost

very question I had was answered despite only reading Surah Maryam. So I thought is there anything about Abraham, and why he left home. I found Surah Ibrahim. So, in a Borders bookstore I essentially became Muslim just from reading those two Surahs.

*Shabir* continues to recall how “it was my normal practice to read the Bible...When I visited California for about five days I spent walking around and reading the Bible and Quran on the beach...When I came back to the east coast, I was Muslim, I completely submitted.” Additionally, *Eddie* recalls the empowerment felt being able to receive answers to his questions just through the process of self-reflection and reading.

When I say knowledge is power, you know, you understand why they used to kill slaves when slaves learn to read right because knowledge changes everything, and I remember... I will come across these verses that spoke about the Trinity and then it talked about the oneness of Allah. And that just appealed to the intellect, right. Like does it make sense? Like if it were two Gods how would there be peace in the universe, all this stuff just made sense to me man... At that point I was old enough to make my own decisions and I stopped going to the Church. I just decided to immerse myself more on and learn. So, I became captivated... it [Quran] captivated my mind, in terms of just understanding... [The] purpose of our creation and so on, and then to get deeper into it and be exposed to that metaphysical aspect of it... In order to heal spiritually from everything that life brings we need the peace Allah puts in your heart with Islam... All of those pieces really just appealed to me and continues to appeal.

### ***Theme 3c: “It was talking to me:” The intellectual test***

This subtheme was endorsed by 16 of the 19 participants. This subtheme consists of two parts. First, participants shared that they felt as though the Quran was speaking to them as they read deeper into the text. Second, participants shared that the Quran challenged them intellectually and did not rely only on emotional rhetoric in convincing its readers of its validity, the validity of the existence of God or of Islam.

Similarly, in dialogues with Muslims, participants found similar methods of approaching belief. They mentioned that while belief entails degrees of faith, it was intellectually backed more so than their previously held Christian ideals. Ultimately, that served as an appeal that satisfied the participants intellectual curiosities of Islam.

*Tariq* recalls being surprised when he read that the Quran issued a challenge within it to gauge its authenticity.

I took that [challenge] seriously. I believed the Bible and found holes in it and I wanted to do the same thing with the Quran... I even read, it said 'if you think this [Quran] has come from other than Allah, then produce one chapter or one verse like it'. I took that challenge, I looked at other literature, I looked at other people that claimed to take on that challenge and produced material like the Quran and saw no one had been able to do it... Even to put out that kind of challenge, the more I thought about it, was a bold statement. If it were man made why would someone dare people to produce something like it. Especially when I looked back at the *seerah* [historical biography of Prophet Muhammad] that he was an illiterate man and he lived amongst poets. That would be the last thing I'd do is be illiterate and challenge people who know literature to match me.

*Dwayne* spoke about the history of the Muslims in connection to the Quran as it related to issues concerning justice.

People fight and war happens and people struggle to rule all the time. I always view how when people are in power they rule other people. I saw in Muslim history that it wasn't a lot of bloodshed like you heard with the crusades or the Spanish inquisition. Malcolm talked a lot about the justice in Islam and to me justice is hardest when you have an enemy. [I asked if there was anything specific he remembered] it said [The Quran] to fight those who fight you but if they stop then you have to stop or else you will be a transgressor, and Allah doesn't like the transgressor. So what I got from that was if we're two people or if we're two countries fighting I can't just go in and kill all your people if you aren't threatening me. If you look into the *hadiths* [Prophetic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad] he said in war you can't chop down your enemy's trees, kill

their animals, fight their women or children and all other stuff. Fighting was basically only for the people fighting you, not their whole nation or something

*Ansar* shares that his reading of the Quran resonated with his ideas that a God would provide those who are to worship him with a complete system to do so.

I read the Quran and it made me think and that connects with human beings. I tell the youth, God gave you a brain to use, what are you using it for? Then I show them in the Quran where it tells you, “have you not considered”, “did you not investigate.” It encourages you to look into things. To question... For me that was a big appeal and I use that when I talk to the youth and when I talk to non-Muslims for *dawah* [inviting people to Islam]... [I asked him about to elaborate on his experience in this respect] Allah said “I have not created mankind and *jinn* [Unseen creation similar to Angels but with free will] except to worship.” In my investigation time when I read that I thought all Muslims are supposed to do is pray... I learned [after] that whatever you do with the intention of pleasing Allah under his laws is worship. Me teaching, speaking with you about my history that might help someone else, taking care of my children... [These] are acts of worship and Allah tells us what to stay away from and to do. If Allah is our Creator its natural that His book should tell me how to live my life in the best way possible. It was a whole system.

*Michael, Khalid and Faraj* quoted the same wording in the Quran that says, “then will you not use reason.” The three participants found it intellectually appealing that they were being told to think, which requires asking critical questions.

Michael shares, “It was a difference from when I was told I’m asking too many questions or that I just had to believe.”

*Umar* recalls how he would look up what he read in the Quran in an effort to invalidate it. After asking him if he remembered some of the more impactful examples he investigated, Umar said:

You know the story of Pharoah... When Pharoah was chasing Moses and the sea parted? I saw pictures online showing what they said was that Pharoah in a

museum with his mouth open like he drowned... [Also] at the time of Joseph the Quran doesn't call Pharoah, Pharoah. It uses the title king. I learned that at the time of Joseph they wouldn't have even used Pharoah. I didn't know that... Another one, there's a part in the Quran that says mountains go deep in the earth to help balance it and stuff like that with the forming of the baby in the womb also. I get deep in it and then go look things up and it fit with science and to me, I thought, I tell people, man, there's no way someone back then, what a thousand years ago could know this type stuff and not be wrong

***Theme 3d: "It's all in there:" Quran as a specific guidebook for life***

This subtheme was recognized by 13 of the 19 participants as it relates to motivations for conversion to Islam. However, in subsequent themes outside of the main category of motivations for conversion to Islam, it became a more endorsed theme as it related to life as a practicing Muslim. The most notable feature of this subtheme is similar to the previous subtheme in that participants felt their minds put at ease with the clarity of what they were supposed to do in life. The lack of ambiguity provided a perception of completeness that was appreciated and served as a pull factor bringing them to Islam.

While *Imran* shared how his perception of the Quran as a complete way to live life was particularly appealing to him, the most impactful moment was when he reflected on his role as a father. I asked Imran to share specific lessons that had the most impact on his thoughts at the time he was learning about Islam.

[The] roles you're supposed to fulfil and how to do it.... When I looked into this a long time ago I remember the story of Luqman. It had a special meaning for me as a father. When Luqman was giving advice to his son, the first advice he gave him was don't worship other gods with Allah, that its commanded for us to be good to our parents. But if your parents try to make you believe in other Gods,

don't obey them, but to still be good to them. Then, you know it, it adds more and every verse starts with my son, my son, my son. [I asked why that stood out to him] As a father, especially with a son at a certain age, its how a father would talk to his son trying to get him to understand what's really important and it was something I related with.... [And] the first and foremost advice the father gives is to not worship anything except God. To not accept anything than God. See it all starts with that... It doesn't matter what else I could give my son, if I didn't give him the knowledge of Allah nothing else would matter.

*Ben* related how even while he had his doubts about Christianity and the Bible, Islam looked like it was a hard and rigid lifestyle. However, he recalls that the guidance he saw in the Quran were clear things that could give him clarity and could be a form of protection for the community and the country as a whole. Ben was asked to provide specific examples of lessons he thought were most meaningful during his process of investigation into Islam.

I didn't think I could be Muslim only cause of the rules. I knew about the praying during the day and the fasting... Man, the fasting... The way your lifestyle's laid out, it's all in there. I liked that it was like having a... You know when you buy something you gotta put together and you need an instruction manual. The Quran started sounding like an instruction manual the more I read it. [I asked him what that meant to him] I didn't have to think about was this a good thing to do, or a bad thing. I could take myself out of picture and rely on Allah's law. I think it helped me a lot... I think it will help a lot of people a lot. [I asked him for specific teachings] Like modesty, it talks, you know you see the women in *hijab* [headscarf worn by Muslim women] but it doesn't just say women have to be modest, it tells men to not look at women, you know, check out, or gaze, gaze at women. It says to lower your eyes for men, and tells women to lower their eyes too. By itself that would help us. Also just, the prohibitions of drugs, alcohol, gambling, cheating, foul talking, slandering or making fun of people. I can imagine how much different our community would be without those things... If the whole country was like that.

*Abdul-Kareem* provides a comparison of how he positioned his values before and after converting to Islam and how his investigation of the Quran provided the clarity he was seeking.

[As a Christian] I didn't do things because they felt wrong to do, or because I was told by my parents or elders it was good or bad. Looking back, we all just made things up on how we felt. I don't know, society or parents or whatever, but it was like what's the purpose. Like, why is it ok to drink? I'd hear its ok to drink, but its not ok to get drunk.. What? How I'm going to know when I need to stop before getting drunk when I'm already drinking? It didn't make no sense... at all. The Quran was clear and I know its from Allah so I know that when it says to do something or to not do something its only for my benefit and not for someone else's. When I first started reading through the Quran the stories of old Prophets was what was interesting to me and the more I kept going the more I saw it like a whole system for life. Like a connected system.

### **Category 2: Theme 1: Community Finding – Brotherhood**

The second question of this research study investigated the impact Islam had on the participant's post-conversion experiences as it related to racial identity. All participants discussed how Islam impacted their lives and lived experiences. Participants noted how the practice of Islam involved knowing and understanding the Quran and the Hadith, and how Islamic practice provided clarity on their positions in life. There were three major themes and nine total subthemes that emerged from participant interviews.

Among the major themes were the brotherhood experienced within the Muslim community, and a sense of an objective Islamic toolkit provided by extra-cultural sources like the Quran and Hadith to organize how to live one's life. This objective



Islamic toolkit was used as a new objective standard where both Muslim and American culture could be measured against to construct meanings of social relationships and oneself post-conversion. Additionally, the new objective standard was used as a measuring stick in confronting racist sentiments from the Muslim in-group and the wider social out-group. The final theme included the participants notion that their identities are best presented as Muslims first who are Black Americans, rather than the distinction as “Black Muslims .” There are overlaps amongst these three themes which demonstrates the various areas Islam touched in the lives of these participants ranging from institutional, interactional, and individual impacts.

All participants noted some aspects of the communal practices Islam played in their experiences as Muslims. Participants noted community in various aspects of Muslim life from prayer services to social interactions and the emphasis within Islam relating to building up community and social service. Within this first theme, three subthemes emerged: “We’re shoulder to shoulder and don’t think nothing of it”: Diversity within Mosques; “I know people from all over”: Expansion of social network diversity; “We’re here to build”: Islamic emphasis on social service.

***Subtheme 1a: “We’re shoulder to shoulder and don’t think nothing of it:”***

***Diversity within Mosques***

This subtheme was endorsed by 11 of the 19 participants. What this subtheme reflects are the collective aspects of worship within Islamic institutions and how race is

minimized within communal practices. This subtheme relates to the subtheme in the first category relating to being differentiated as belonging to a Black Church within the broader institution. Some participants who frequented Masjid Muhammad in DC aligned their Masjid with the leadership of the Imam Warith Deen Muhammad and other participants aligned with what they called a Salafi Masjid. The interesting note here is that the differentiation was more so about leadership and tradition rather than along racial or ethnic lines.

*Michael*, a key informant, recalls that he did not have an allegiance to a Masjid or any other factor outside of ideology and the Masjid's adherence to tradition.

I attended any Masjid that was in the area. Philly had a few Masajid [Arabic plural for Masjid/Mosque] and I more attended the ones that followed the Salaf and Sunnah. It didn't matter the type of people that would be in there... where they were from... The people spoke English, but, you know, the Salat [Prayer], and classes and everything would be in the Arabic language because that is the language of the Quran. The *Khutbah* [Friday Sermon] was given half in English and the other half in Arabic. So the first part of the khutbah would be in Arabic and then the second part would be in English. Unless there was a guest Khateeb [One who delivers the sermon] and then mostly it was done in English.

*Shabir*, relates the oneness he experiences praying with Muslims in the Washington DC area that came from different parts of the world.

This Mosque is known and you know when its time to pray you pray. That's what's beautiful. [If] You go around the city you'll see the Black Church, the White Church, the Asian Church, the Korean Church. When we pray, we're shoulder to shoulder and don't think nothing of it. Its about worshipping Allah. Its my time to connect. [Masjid Muhammad] gets a lot of African, Arabic, Indian brothers that come here. You know, they'd be driving cabs or Ubers and it'd be *Duhr* or *Maghrib* [Names of prayer times] and they come and line up and pray and its normal. Its like when you see the *Hajj* [Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah] its

people from all over the world. I've never been there... Some day, *insha'Allah* [God willing].

*Shabir* goes on to relate his experiences on the congregational Friday prayer days where the Imam gives a sermon that is followed by a communal prayer service.

Jumu'ah is special. I like Jumu'ah 'cause we get people from all over the world that come listen to the khutbah and after prayer people sit around and talk a little. I've met people from all parts of the world, brother, from all over. All because of Islam. I talk to them about where they come from, and we vibe on that level as brothers and I get to know about they're culture, but we come together as Muslims, as brothers.

*Umar* relates that even while growing up in a densely multi-cultural area like New York City, most interactions he experienced with non-Black people were superficial and infrequent prior to attending the Mosque. Umar also provides his insight into the hierarchical structure of Islam.

It's the person with the most knowledge. It's not about age, race or anything. If the person knows the most Quran they can lead the salat. I've seen video's of kids, like 11-12 years old leading prayers... Its that your level of knowledge, that's available to everyone to get more knowledge, is the thing that makes you a leader. Its not what you look like or your family... New York, you know it, it's a, you got every ethnicity here in the city. But if you look its, everybody is segregated. You got the Irish neighborhood, the Black neighborhoods, China town, little Italy, the Puerto Rican and Dominican spots. When I go to the Masjid it's the only place that's truly multicultural... its because everything revolves around Islam, so the culture isn't as important and with that out of the way we just connect as people.

Similar to Michael's perspective, *Abdul-Kareem* relates the strong presence of Sunni Muslims in the Philadelphia area as being the differentiation in the Mosque's institutional culture.

If they're not on the Sunna I don't go to the Masjid. To me its important that the Masjid represents the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and the Salaf.. That's going to be the most authentic teachings... I'm still learning and I go to a couple different places cause of convenience and they got classes that interest me. But, yeah, the most important thing is them being on the Sunnah.

***Subtheme 1b: "I know people from all over:" Expansion of social network diversity***

Twelve of the 19 participants reported an expansion in the diversity of their social networks in their post-conversion lives. All 12 participants directly attribute it to some aspect of Islam, ranging from the direct ritual practices to the change in awareness of the role of racism in society. For those who attribute the expansion of friend network diversity to direct Islamic practices, they cite the Mosque as the main institution and the diversity within it as the reason they have more diverse friend groups.

Others attributed the increased diversity in their friend groups to the realization of the oneness of humanity and the spiritual damage done to individuals who hold on to feelings of racial or ethnic supremacy. While participants emphasized different catalysts to having more diverse friend groups, all twelve referenced social interactions with Muslims of different nationalities, as well as Islamic teachings regarding race and racial superiority. Ultimately, the expansion of diversity in friend groups can be attributed to an internal shifting through Islamic teachings, as well as increased opportunities to meet different ethnic groups through exposure in Mosques and Muslim gatherings.

*Ansar*, a key informant who leads a Mosque provides insight into his community as he not only converted to Islam but notices these types of changes in the people who come to his Mosque as well.

People come with mixed emotions, you see. Think about it, think about the person who is searching and feels lost and frustrated. They find Islam and come to the Masjid and feel peace in their hearts and minds but the world is still the world we live in... Some of the youngsters are angry because of their homes, neighborhoods, or just confused in life in general. This world does that. Before Islam, most of my friends were from my neighborhood... other Black men. Same as when I was with the Nation. When I came to the true teachings of Islam, I have acquaintances and good, good friends... Good brothers from all over. [I asked why he believed that is attributed to Islam]... Its clear that the judge between us all is our *taqwa* [God consciousness], nothing else. That racism is the, we don't believe in the concept of the original sin, but if there was an original sin in Islam it would be racism. [I asked him to elaborate]. The story of the creation of Adam. Allah creates the human being, Adam, and commands that they bow to Adam... And *Shaitan* [Satan] refuses and says you created me from fire and you created him from clay... Basically saying to Allah that I am better than him because of the way I was created. Its no different all these years now from someone saying I am better than this person because of my skin or my country. It's a realization that I teach and pass on to this community here.

*Abu-Bilal* describes a mental liberation he experienced as it relates to diversity from the Islamic perspective:

[It was] realizing that it's a sickness, its like a mental illness. Its also a deep kind of ignorance... To think you're better than someone because of the way you were born, your race or whatever. In the Quran it tells us clearly that the only thing that separates us as people is our piety. I know I'm a preferred creation by Allah... More preferred than the Angels because I can decide if I want to be submit to Allah and they can only do what they're told. To Allah I've got that status... What do I care what society says about me then. Realizing that... Coming to that realization I talk to people differently. I don't judge off the bat and I don't care what people think of me, like stereotypes. I know my real status.

*Hakim* relates how Muslim events and exposure to Muslims from different parts of the world enriched his experiences as it relates to what he believes the US is supposed to be:

I met brothers and sisters from everywhere. Whenever I hear of a talk happening at the Masjid or event one the Muslim organizations is having, like a barbecue or at Eid celebrations I'm there. Its been like that for years. I helped organize a few... Its nowhere else I would meet so many good people... and the most special people I know in my life I met over the years. I show up and it's truly a family thing. There's people I know for decades. Our kids played together. And they're from all over, brother, some of my closest friends are Malaysian, who they're beautiful people, man. Really, soft spoken, funny people. I have Pakistani friends I've known for a long time... Egyptian friends... I recently met brothers from Denmark. It's a beautiful thing man we all have these different cultures and still come together. A lot of people know me in the community so when we all come together at these gathering kids come up to me saying, "uncle, uncle as-Salamu alaykum uncle."

*Adam* also attributes Islam, and the way Islamic rituals are performed as a reason for the expansion of diversity within his social networks.

During Ramadan I started going to the Mosque for *iftar* and the whole experience makes it to where you're forced... Not in a bad way... Because we're all fasting all day and we all have to break fast so when we're doing it together we're pretty much all having dinner together and praying together for a month. The Mosque I went to was like maybe 100 people and people from different countries and backgrounds. Spending a month with people you don't know or see all the time and eating and praying with them puts you in a different spot to have to converse and get to know one another.

What this subtheme represents is the combination of both the Islamic rituals that are connected to both worship and living an Islamic lifestyle as well as the internal awareness of a human reality beyond the bounds of socially constructed, and uniquely American racial categories. Additionally, it is not as though participants did not see

themselves as Black men any longer. Rather, the different type of social interactions that are part of the Islamic lifestyle allowed space for participants to appreciate their Blackness in an environment that suppressed racialized connotations or stereotypes. Lastly, the Islamic teachings, particularly that of superiority due to how one was created being associated with ignorance and devilishness provided a mental and spiritual deterrent that served as a potential factor that helped to facilitate these different types of social interactions for all parties involved.

***Subtheme 1c: “We’re here to build:” Islamic emphasis on social service***

This subtheme was endorsed by 11 of the 19 participants. This subtheme expressed elements of working within the Muslim community as well as a Muslim’s responsibility to the broader society. Concepts that emerged from this subtheme involved a broadening of the meaning of community and an expansion of one’s role toward humanity. This subtheme shows the impact Islam had on the evolution of racial identity by widening the boundaries of what constitutes community. Because community from the Muslim perspective was defined as a nation of believers, the foundational aspects of the community provided a shared brotherhood in relation to religion rather than race. Within a racialized society like the United States, this realignment of community provided a reconceptualization of one’s place in a community. While this subtheme does not specifically address racial identity, the implications from it show how changes in the perceived foundations within the

structure of a community can either facilitate togetherness or alienation. In this instance, the togetherness shared was multinational and multicultural with Islam being the shared foundation of the relationship, thereby allowing space for participants to connect with other group members in non-racialized terms.

*Ben* notes how nation building took on a different meaning post-conversion:

[Asked about his thoughts on community prior to Islam] nation building. It was about the upliftment for Black people. It's still important for me... it looks different now. Now I want Islam for my people. I want it for all people because it's the only thing that can heal a dysfunctional society. Malcolm talked about that too... I still want my people to succeed but my people are also the Muslims all over the world so I feel for all the oppression happening to my brothers and sisters in China and Palestine. I think we can do more here, from the Mosques. I think we focus a lot on the Muslim population but my understanding is we're here to build as human beings. Like, we... Muslims are supposed to be integral parts of constructing a society. You see in history how Muslims in Spain were leaders of technology and knowledge. That's when we were on top of our game.... That's what we need to get back to.

*Faraj* speaks about how the broadened concept of community within Islam expanded his conception of himself as an individual:

I became part of a worldwide community by my decision... when I accepted Islam. I recognize that I am a servant of Allah... Abd-Allah... those who serve Allah are also my brothers and sisters with me. We are, when you really look at it, we're the favored by Allah. I don't have to fit no one's definition, I'm a son of Adam like everyone else. I can see how they try to divide us by race, culture and language and money and everything like that. At the end of the day, we were all born and we'll all die, so we're all His servants whether we like it or not.

*Eddie* relates his thoughts on how his concept of "us" changed from being about the Black community to a wider Muslim community. While *Eddie* relates a broadened perspective of "us" as a Muslim community, he does so without sacrificing his Black



identity as well. This balance is noteworthy and will be further explored in the next chapter.

I'm still a Black man... Its what I am...Islam makes me a part of a worldwide community that's more than, you know, someone's race. I can be Muslim and Black, White, Asian, Spanish, whatever. Its my community as a ummah of believers. Here there's no forgetting that I'm a Black man and being in America and being Muslim, for me, put a lot of this in perspective 'cause I know that, I know how superficial the Black part is. Its in who I am, but what I am is a Muslim, that's what will...When this life is over, that's the thing that's most important.

*Atif* recalls getting more involved in the community and how Islam impacted his viewpoints on racial components and various forms of discrimination:

[After becoming Muslim] I worked, I volunteered in different programs. The Masjid have flyers on postings and they send out calls for helping during Ramadan and even during the years. I get involved when I can. I used to be really involved in social, what you'd call activism... Now, its more trying to help and uplift and not doing as much. I make it my business to help the young one's with, just, you know, life things. I see them deal with things I never saw when I was young so I try to help them one-on-one or just talk to them to share wisdom... Its different form when I was young dealing with it. Its [racism] still alive everywhere but I see it more like enlightened over ignorant now jahil [ignorant, reference to the historical time period prior to Islam]... That society is good versus evil... The God fearing and the people who want the life of the dunya [worldly life] and people's competition for the dunya making them oppress over people.

Ultimately, this theme represents the degrees to which Islam played a role as an institution that impacted the participant's in-group and out-group social interactions. Additionally, this theme demonstrates that Islam served as a means of providing a clearer understanding one's position at the intersections of race, society, and religion. With a clearer understanding of that intersection participants were enabled with a

stronger footing to be able to make important aspects of social and individual life become self-evident through reflection. That ability produced personal empowerment and a form of disconnection from divisive societal norms. Routinized involuntary Islamic rituals that facilitated multi-ethnic and multi-racial group involvement allowed for safe places where groups could come together under a common purpose. This allowed for an expansion and redefinition of interracial social relationships. Ultimately, these activities fostered a proactive redefining for what constituted new normative social, racial, and interactional norms amongst various races.

**Category 2: Theme 2: Islamic Ideals as Perceived Objective Cultural Toolkits**

The Islamic ideals presented here are not necessarily Muslim actions, but rather an adherence to the Islamic texts of the Quran and Hadith. In this theme participants noted the importance of relying on Islamic scriptures to define their Islam above the viewpoints of Muslims within the community. This theme also addresses some of the methods participants used to overcome racism and racial categorization by fellow Muslims. The methods chosen by participants to combat racism within Islam was to use Islamic scripture, which thereby created an objective standard that placed them in a more empowered position. The interesting note with this method was that it demonstrated how a lack of an objective American cultural standard to combat racism serves as a means of perpetuating the issue of racism systemically and its impact individually.

There were four subthemes that emerged within this main theme: “You’ve heard of Bilal”: Quran and Sunnah used to address in-group and out-group racism; “I’m a Muslim, I’m good”: Resilience in redefining racial categories; “Show me in the Quran”: Scripture used as new measuring stick for society; “It’s got everything I need”: Islam used as a self-contained institution for identity formation. These subthemes demonstrate how Islam operates in the lived experiences of the participants in terms of its institutional, interactional, and individual levels of impact. Most importantly, it demonstrates how participants did not need validation from external sources than Islam to validate their Islam to fellow Muslims. Muslims who differentiated amongst groups or created racial hostility were viewed as lessened in their Islamic status due to them adhering less to Islamic principles. Lastly, the explicitness in which the Quran and Hadith texts speak about racial equality and the illusion of racial categories as it relates to piety created an unambiguous measuring stick that provided assurance that the concept of racial superiority was at best a socially manufactured phenomena and at worst satanic.

***Subtheme 2a: “You’ve heard of Bilal:” Quran and Sunnah used to address in-group and out-group racism***

This subtheme was endorsed by sixteen of the nineteen participants. The endorsements ranged from direct conflicts being addressed with fellow Muslims to personal realizations as it relates to racial inequality. All participants who endorsed this subtheme recalled using specific Islamic scripture from the Quran or from Hadith

sources to validate their assertions. Additionally, the sources used were not merely to defend the notion of racial equality as a passive element. Participants used these scriptures to proactively assert the concept of racial equality within the context of Islam and provided scriptural evidence that showed elevated positions of Black men as companions of the Prophet Muhammad. The implication presented was that the Prophet Muhammad himself spoke highly of Black Africans and had within his company a wide range of racial and ethnic groups, which pressured fellow Muslim's ideals on racial distinctions. Lastly, the stories in Hadith literature of Black Africans as close companions to the Prophet Muhammad provided reassurance to participants when they encountered out-group racism by assigning themselves a closer proximity to Islam and thereby embodying a more enlightened identity.

After feeling that he wasn't being greeted as a Muslim because of his race, *Michael*

recalls using Hadith to educate other Muslims at an event he was attending in

Philadelphia:

Sometimes I walk into Masajid or areas where Muslims are and I don't get salam's [greeting of peace]. I... one occasion, but I've had to address things like this on more than one occasion, but this time I was at a fundraiser, and it was taking place at one of the big Islamic centers. I noticed, usually you know it's a lot of as-Salamu alaykum brother, akhi [Brother in Arabic] wa-Alaykum as-Salam, how's the family, how's the kids, this and that. This Islamic center was in a different area so I didn't know a lot of people. But I noticed I wasn't being greeted like that. I had, because I did some work with the other Masajid in the area, one of the organizers asked me to say a few words to the people in the event. This was a fundraiser for, I believe, it was for the Masjid itself, for expansion, I believe. I went to the microphone and said as-salamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu [May Allah's peace, mercy and blessings be upon you]. I then told them that the Salam is not like a hello or a what's up. It's a dua

[supplication] made for the benefit of the person you are greeting... [and] I recited to them the hadith stating that the “salam” is a right that your fellow Muslim has over you when you encounter each other.

*Imran* shares his recollection of his childhood versus that of his child’s childhood as it relates to the opportunities, they had to construct their identities within a framing of positive representations of Blackness.

I saw a book at the center [Islamic center] that got me thinking. It was a book for kids. It had a cartoon drawing of the Kaaba and Bilal standing on top of it making azhan. It had all these people standing at the bottom of the Kaaba watching him. [I asked why that was important] We see Makkah as a holy city, we have a love for the Kaaba... we face in the direction five times a day... So its special to us. To see a cartoon drawing in a kids book for kids showing the scene from Hadith of Bilal, a Black man standing on the Kaaba calling people to come to pray is different than the cartoon pictures I grew up on. I don’t remember ever seeing nothing positive showing us as important or as special as a child. That picture of Bilal shows kids something different than from what I had

*Umar* appreciates that there are scriptural checks on superiority placed within Islam and recalls instances where he’s had to use them to quell racial discrimination from fellow Muslims:

I enjoy history and I don’t think Muslims even know our history like that. [I asked for an example] I was at a friend’s place with some people, not everyone was Muslim but it was a bunch of guys some Muslim, some not. We start talking about politics and racism and religion and getting into some heavy stuff. Not fighting, but just, just debating. One of the people that wasn’t Muslim was saying how Islam is racist ‘cause you gotta learn Arabic and everything is in Arabic. [I asked if he knew what religion this person was] Christian. I said you’ve heard of Bilal right? I said, how could Islam be racist when the Prophet himself told a Black man he hears his footsteps in paradise and that the Prophet appointed him as the one to make the calls to prayer... I [also] told him how anyone who does the azhan [call to prayer] now is step for step walking in the footsteps of a Black man.

*Dawkins* shared a recollection of his time in the Nation of Islam and that when the Nation split after the death of Elijah Muhammad, his son Imam Warith Deen

Muhammad reestablished its membership into orthodox Sunni Islam, but that he also went through different iterations of the name of the group:

He [Imam Warith Deen Muhammad] named us Bilalian, after Bilal. It was more of a ethnic identity for us after transferring from the Nation. It was masterful how he kept us true to ourself as Black Americans and Muslims. You know at that time, all of the sudden a lot of people in other governments heard of this new baby Muslim community in America and they started wanting to join up and give us money and... The concept of Bilalian kept our identity focused on our unique struggle here in America, which is different than what the brothers and sisters go through in Africa, or the Middle East.

*Dawkins* shared how that story of the companion, Bilal, a freed slave at the time of the Prophet Muhammad who was among the first of a handful of people to join Islam at the time still resonates until this day. Bilal's story also provides an example of how a nation of people can maintain their cultural and racial identity without becoming "Arabized" to be considered real Muslims. While the notion of Arab dominance may exist in the practices of Muslims, this subtheme demonstrates how Islamic text and early history can tangibly delegitimize notions of racial and ethnic superiority within an Islamic paradigm.

***Subtheme 2b: "I'm a Muslim, I'm good:" Resilience in redefining racial categories***

This subtheme was endorsed by 13 out of the 19 participants. The subtheme entails the proactive mechanisms used by Muslim converts to not only overcome racism within interactions with in-group members but provides insight into how they use it to redefine and enhance their sense of self. While these mechanisms can be viewed

superficially as mechanisms of coping within a system, deeper insight provided by participants demonstrates how the Islamic system itself facilitated a change in the perspective of their identity thereby providing a means for their newly achieved status to dominate over the ascribed social statuses and stigmas.

In confronting an ascribed racial status in the U.S., *Khalid* attributes becoming Muslim with the changes he experienced in how he saw himself. The important note is that Khalid's narrative shows the mutual relationship between Islam as a matter of faith in a conventionally religious sense and its lived ideals in a societal sense. Khalid attributes his growth in Islam as his way of delegitimizing socially ascribed and defined categories of what it means to be Black, male, or Muslim.

I'm Muslim. I'm good. Allah... being someone who serves Allah's will and knowing the Quran comes from my creator to me is what defines me. When I wasn't Muslim it was like... Like, in Baqara [Title of the second chapter of the Quran] how it says people walk around in the dark scared, then a flash of lightening happens and they can see, but then goes again and it keeps happening. Those people are still in darkness dark. That's like how it was when I was asking questions and I think a lot of people are still stuck there... We're walking in darkness not knowing our purpose or why we're here in life, we get a couple answers here and there and think we're on to something, then it goes away and we're back in darkness. Islam is the light... Islam showed, being Muslim I can see clearly that the more I study the Quran and Islam that I see how fake the world is. How people try to put you in these boxes for their benefit... The media can't tell me what a Black man is, what a Muslim is. Allah already told me, so I'm good, I know myself, my purpose to exist and my concern is my destination.

The synchronous description Khalid describes requires more than only the belief of a proposition from a conventional religious perspective. Khalid described how Islam facilitated his belief in God and afterlife, but it also gave him solid foundations for what

it meant to be a Muslim and a human being. Similarly, *Rasheed* relates that the understanding of his status as a human being was provided by the explicitness and clarity provided by the Quran. Rasheed relates:

Its all there for you if you just read. Wasn't that the first thing told to the Prophet, to read. We're to understand by reading and when we read the Quran it tells us about why we're even here... I think the problem is people don't take that time to reflect on it... Its clear in the Quran what our status is as human beings. The Prophet tells us our status, my teachers showed me how to read the Quran and, you know what I mean, through reading we get understanding. You know how people say knowledge is power? It's not the knowledge. I can be knowledgeable about a lot of things that don't matter. Its... having knowledge of self is power... If you don't know who you are... Your value as a human being, then people can make you anything they want. When you have knowledge of who you are you understand what you really are, and no one can take that out of you.

Being forced to think about existential questions and having clear answers provided within the framework of Islam was an important distinction to *Lewis* who found solace in Quranic answers:

I'm not a believing type of person. Like, I have to be completely convinced before and do my own reading before I can accept stuff. [The Quran] it answers all my questions, the important ones. That gives me confidence to know that that the rest of what it says about what I am is true too... I am a creation, I am a man, I am created as a Black man, I was born here, I was born in this era, all these things mean something and I need answers about all of that. For a while I thought religion was good to give people something to hope for or to feel good about. To know, like, the, to know Jesus loves you it's a nice feeling but it doesn't tell me why I'm here. Hearing that I owe Jesus to believe in him because he died for my sins, is like I didn't ask him to do that and I wasn't around then. It sounds like manipulation. Islam, the Quran... I can read in the Quran and it's clear its directed to us. It says how we should act as and our roles and responsibilities as humans to each other, as men, women, parents. It even talks about people who cheat other people in business. Its all in there, brother. So, I don't know, its just the clarity that makes me comfortable.



What Lewis, Khalid and Rasheed's experiences demonstrate are the multifaceted elements of the relationship participants experienced with the Quran. However, what is most important is that the conclusions they based about their own status in humanity became self-evident through proactive exploration into the Islamic text. Because the participants were able to find explicit and clear answers through Islamic texts bolsters two things; their level of conviction in the veracity of the Islamic texts and their subsequent acceptance of the newly framed conception of what it meant to be a human being. The important thing to note is that the racial component of these realizations was not relegated to the background, but instead was part of the newly conceived perception of what it meant to be a human being. This allowed for the participants to include their racial category within an Islamic framework of what it means to be a human being and simultaneously have the veracity to reject socially contrived racial definitions.

***Subtheme 2c: "Show me in the Quran:" Scripture used as new measuring stick for society***

The main theme in this category is the acceptance of the objectivity of the Quran and Hadith. To reach this level of acceptance, participants firmly believe that the Quran, as we have it today, is word-for-word the revealed speech of God to his creation and that it has been completely preserved without error. The implications of this theme are that participants use these scriptures as objective materials, and thereby possess an

added confidence in applying it as an extra-cultural measuring stick to either validate or invalidate normative cultural practices and sentiments. This specific subtheme was endorsed by 17 of the 19 participants, and it specifically shows the various ways the Quran and Hadith literature are used as new objective standards for measuring society against. Lastly, the main point that separates the use of the Islamic scriptures from previously held Christian scripture was the belief in the preservation of the texts themselves. By relying on the premise of preservation the participants find themselves justified in using texts as an objective standard because they believe it was not written by members of any given society but revealed by God Himself.

*Adam* shares an experience he had with another Muslim where the Islamic texts were used as a means of validating or invalidating Islamic normative practices. The power distinction is important to observe in the exchange the two had as the participant, who had deeper Islamic knowledge, outranked the other individual. Adam relates:

I was at a Masjid during Jummah and I like to get there early 'cause the Sunnah is to sit in the first row. Plus I like to get there when its not crowded and its quiet so I can sit and read and get comfortable... I'm sitting and I have, maybe three books with me and one of them is the Quran. I put the Quran on the ground next to me to go through another book I use as a reference... Then this guy behind me comes up like, "brother, brother, you can't do that ." Can't do what? [He says] "Can't put the Quran on the ground ." I said how do you know that. "I saw it ." Where did you see that? "its in the hadith"... I said show me in the Quran or Hadith where it says that and I'll pick the Quran up. We were sitting in the Masjid that had like 300-400 books. Quran's in a bunch of languages, all the hadith collections, books on *Seerah* [biographies of the Prophet Muhammad], school books, everything. People just be coming up with stuff.

*Adam's* story is important because it shows that the accepted standard shared by Muslims are the texts, so when they are confronted with validating their norms and ideals, the Quran and Hadith texts become the standards to validate it by. This is significant as it provides the participants a means to easily delegitimize ethnic, racial, and cultural norms from fellow Muslims that might uphold racial or ethnic superiority. Ansar shares how latent notions of racial and ethnic superiority embedded in the cultural norms of both American and American Muslim culture are overcome through the use of Islamic text.

A lot of people just don't think about how they, it's a disease of culture that we accept and make true things without investigating. Islam... Muslims I've met time to time will have the same kind of ideas about Black people, Black Americans as White people. The difference a lot of times I see is that they don't know no better. They, a lot them come here from their countries and try to fit in with American lifestyles... They come with their cultures too but also try to fit in here and during that time they sacrifice their Islam... I had a lot of conversations with people where I'm shocked that they think some things and I say, hey brother, the Quran doesn't say that. It says the opposite of that, the Prophet did the opposite of what you're saying... Are you saying you know more than the Prophet?

Islamic texts were also used as measuring sticks for negotiating legitimate placement within a stratified social structure as well. While placement within a racialized system has a dependence on ascribed racial status, the participants used the method of using Islamic text as a measuring stick for validity to overcome notions of inferiority or ascribed characteristics. Additionally, participants provided narratives that emphasized the illegitimacy of a racial hierarchy beyond it being morally unacceptable. Through utilizing a perceived objective textual standard, the weight of racialization was

minimized as it became illusory at a foundational level when measured against their perceived truth of the Quran. *Michael* shared a deep understanding of various Quranic references to emphasize the illusory nature of status hierarchies, particularly one based on a racialized structure.

It [Quran] says that no nation is to mock another nation because it may be that they are better than you. And to not defame one another or call each other by insulting nicknames and that those who day that are absolute sinners. Nicknames here, in this day, is like racial slurs. Its says clearly that as a Muslim it is *haram* [forbidden] for me to say a racial slur against someone. Brother, think about this. How long we've been called "N" word in this country? So much that we call ourselves that now. Allah prevents people from demonizing people from the beginning through the language we use to talk about one another. It also says, Allah created us from a male and female and made us into a variety of nations and tribes so that we can come to know each other and the most honorable amongst us is the one with most taqwa. You see, so follow, Allah created us different with the purpose of us to know each other as groups of people, but we're not allowed to mock each other or use offensive nicknames. Just those couple things, would solve half our problems in this country right now and that just in two verses. [I asked if he had other examples] It says the life of this world is nothing but amusement and it's an illusion and a diversion where people compete with wealth, children and we're stuck in continuous competition. That the illusion is so great that we become obsessed with competing until we enter the grave and then at that point we'll see with certainty the reality. So we shouldn't be deceived by these things in society... *Wallahi* [I swear by Allah] brother, they're meaningless... Even worse, they aren't even real.

The social construction of reality is emphasized in Michael's understanding of the Quranic texts he provided. Additionally, beyond establishing the issue of competition and an over consumption of worldly life emphasized in the Quran, the fact that it provides a description and prescription for the issue is important. Through the prescriptive element provided by the Quran, it lends an additional conclusive emphasis

that the participants can then structure a tangible life from. If the Quran only provided descriptions of moral issues without tangible answers the impact may not be as authoritative for the participants. The tangibility of the Quranic prescriptions are necessary because they replace their previously held issues with Christianity when they were told to believe and have faith without tangible or practical solutions to live by. This process is further elaborated on in the next and final subtheme.

***Subtheme 2d: “It’s got everything I need:” Islam used as a self-contained institution for identity formation***

This subtheme was endorsed by ten out of nineteen participants. This subtheme demonstrates the comprehensiveness of Islam as an institution bolstered by its perceived preserved texts with clear and practical guidelines for everyday life occurrences. These outlined features are important from the perspectives of the participants because they provide a self-contained system that makes participants repeatedly turn and return to Islamic scripture to answer a multitude of life’s everyday questions. The questions addressed range from existential questions to questions relating to ways people should interact in social circumstances, and how to fulfil the various roles in life. Participants therefore perceived Islam as a self-referencing institution. Ultimately, this perception helped to solidify the Muslim identity post-conversion, which will be discussed in the final upcoming theme.

*Hakim* relates that he does not need to look for answers to serious questions he has outside of the Islamic paradigm. His appreciation for Islam and its impact on the re-shaping of his identity is credited to the way Islam must be lived rather than just believed.

You gotta live Islam, you can't just say its my faith and I believe. I forget the surah, brother, but you might know the part I'm talking about... Quran says, "do you think you'll be left to just say I believe and you're not gonna be tested? So when I'm tested where do I turn for my answers? I turn to Allah... I turn to Islam! Its got everything I need. My tests and my answers come from Allah. Allah tells us all he's going to test us, but Allah gave us the cheat sheet...Or, or the study guide [Referencing the Quran]. The real question is what are you going to use? You see? It's not complicated. It's a weight off my mind knowing that I got the answers. It lets me enjoy my life not trying to figure everything out... And it tells me everything on how to live, from the biggest to the smallest. Its all in our lifestyle. The way we go to the bathroom, eat, dress, speak, learn... The way we act to each other and our families. It's all in there.

The Islamic lifestyle model demonstrates that the lived experiences of the participants are not only a lived experience as a Muslim in America but are a lived experience primarily within the context of the Islamic paradigm. That occurrence makes the Islamic paradigm paramount over American cultural norms. *Eddie* provides insight into how he views Islam as a complete and holistic system and alludes to the impact that it had on his identity:

I don't care so much what people... What society has to think. If it's not in Islam it's not important. That's why I think Islam is so different than everything else because it touches on so many parts of life. To be Muslim you have to always be on your *deen* [way of life]... When you look at your life though everything comes back to Islam... I like to play sports and exercise and it'd be like, that don't have nothing to do with being religious... Then I saw a hadith that talked about how a Muslim should be fit and active and healthy. And then [I saw] hadith's on competing in sports and I was like, wow. Its always something new I'm finding.

So now when I work out its like a kind of worship because I know the Prophet recommends it and I want to do that as a Sunnah... Oh, you also heard... When Covid started and nobody knew what to do and stuff. I saw on YouTube or Instagram, I forgot, but some brothers were posting a hadith that talked about social distancing and quarantining and how the Prophet had already mentioned solutions for times like this... I forgot the wording, but you can find it.

Along the same lines, *Dwayne* shares how living as a Muslim has impacted his sense of identity:

I don't know what it means to be anything else now. Everything I do has Islam in it. I schedule my day around salat [prayer] times, if I travel I make sure when Ramadan is, the time I wake up is because of salat, I taught myself to eat with my right hand 'cause it's the Sunnah, you know. Its just... It's so much a part of me but its effortless. I don't think there's anything that I'm required to do that I could find a better way to do anyway so, I mean its helped a lot.

This subtheme demonstrated how Islam works as an active element in the lives of participants, and that doing Islam is required above merely believing in its theology. As the participants noted, the lifestyle aspects of Islam tended to seep into every aspect of their lives from the most important aspects of belief in afterlife, to the minutiae of everyday life like the proper ways of going to the bathroom.

The detailed elements of this Islamic lifestyle also provided further justification to participants that Islam and the Quran served as a complete and holistic way of life with a guidebook for how to live it. This theme can be directly linked to the first category relating to motivations for conversion because participants shared their deep desires to find answers to life's existential questions. Islam not only provided those answers, but also a practical lifestyle that can be lived, which ultimately impacted and helped shape their Muslim identity. Ultimately, the Muslim identity would tend to

override the socially ascribed racial identity when measured against an objective Islamic standard reinforced through the belief of preserved Islamic texts.

### **Category 2: Theme 3: Black Muslim or Muslim that is Black in America**

The theme presented here directly relates to how the participants choose to identify post-conversion. This theme provides insight into the changing of racial categories and the agency involved in declaring a separation from ascribed notions of what it means to be a Muslim as well as Black. The primary contention amongst the participants was the label of “Black Muslim .” While this term is commonplace in media and academia as it relates to this group, participants found issue with its implications. Additionally, participants reflected on how they realigned their identity as being primarily a Muslim, followed by a Black American.

Many of the participants never considered how they would identify themselves until asked that question and were proud that upon reflection they found their Islam to be their master status. This relates to the participant’s answers that reflect while their race is a part of them, it is not what they are. Instead, participants shared that they were creations of Allah, human beings and had a role in life to serve the will of God. Through the proactivity of that declarative process, participants then self-defined their racial identity through the lens of Islam.

Two subthemes emerged within this theme: “I’m a Muslim first:” Contention with Black Muslim label; “I serve Allah alone:” Human to Black Identity filtered through



the lens of Islam. These two subthemes carry some overlap with other themes, but they are also distinct as well. The foundational issue within these two subthemes is the power held in defining meanings. Because of the previously elaborated on notion that Islamic texts sit outside of cultural influence and are therefore perceived as objective standards, participants are provided a means to shape their meanings of self through those sources. The ultimate meaning, therefore, is self-made and provides an empowerment for Black males that is seldom found in social life.

***Subtheme 3a: "I'm a Muslim first:" Contention with Black Muslim label***

This subtheme was endorsed by 12 out of 19 participants. The main contention shared with the concept and label of Black Muslim is that it is analogous to the segmentation within Christianity. Participants felt that the Black Church was separate and distinct from the perceived normative Christianity of the White Church. This distinction carries over to post-conversion life as participants shared the view that distinguishing Black Muslims implies a different kind of Islam. When there is a different kind of Islam the next step is a scale where Islamic authenticity can be artificially gauged through racial or cultural methods.

Participants did not have issue with Muslim groups such as Salafis or Shi'a Muslims as they were Muslims whose authenticity could be measured against Islamic ideology rather than racial or cultural categories. Lastly, the Black Muslim label creates an artificial measure where the status of Black becomes entangled with the

performance of Islam, thereby detracting from the empowering elements achieved from the process of attaining an Islamic self-awareness. It is through that empowerment that *Atif* rejects the concept and label of “Black Muslim”:

A Muslim is a Muslim... Islam is Islam. I consider myself Muslim first. There's only a Muslim way of doing things, there's no Arab, Indian, Chinese or Black way of being Muslim. I speak English, but that's just a language, does that mean I'm a different kind of Muslim now? I believe in the *shahadah* [Muslim declaration of faith] and I live my life like a Muslim. I would do that here and anywhere I was in the world. When it's duhr, I pray duhr. When its Jumuah, I'll go to Jumuah here or anywhere because that my job as a Muslim. Its silly. But that's... That's what we do, we put people in categories. I just know I'm a Muslim first.

The most vocal participants that had issue with the Black Muslim label were Umar and Eddie who both shared similar viewpoints. *Umar* stated:

I didn't give myself that name. Allah calls us Muslims, so I'm a Muslim. Other people coming up after us and saying we're Black Muslims is, to me, just a way to divide and conquer. Its just the same old racism. It's a bad thing we got Muslims also saying it, but I don't think they even get it. Your telling me I'm a Black Muslim, so there's a Black Islam, or there's a Black way and a White way of doing Islam. I get Black Christians 'cause Christianity is not like a lifestyle, you know, it's more like you believe in Jesus and the Cross. But how do you do Islam in a Black or White way? Doesn't make sense.

Additionally, *Eddie* states:

It does annoy me in a way. Like they used to say that in civil rights... “the Black Muslim movement” does this or that. I think that they're just trying to divide the Muslim ummah the way they divide people. Its clear to me, if you're a Muslim you are in the Muslim ummah, the community... And Allah says [In Quran] that our ummah is one. Like, that seems pretty clear to me. So where do these labels come from then? I think they just brought that from civil rights times and use it now to divide us and hope we fight or not trust each other.

As Eddie mentioned the Black Muslim label to describe the Nation of Islam during the civil rights era, Rasheed and Ansar relate how after the death of Elijah Muhammad, one

of the first things the new leadership of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad did was address the name of the Nation of Islam. *Rasheed* states:

The Imam [Warith Deen Muhammad] changed it [Name of the Nation of Islam] to World Community of al-Islam, and to American Muslim Mission. His goal was to show that we as a people believe in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad as his final messenger and we're in the Muslim ummah. The name wasn't important, but I think because it was so attached to, you know, the whole civil rights time and Black Muslims and the nation that it was a way to say our deen is Islam period.

Ansar shares similar sentiments as he relates how Imam Warith Deen Muhammad was teaching classes on the Quran and was himself theologically a part of the orthodox Islamic thought prior to officially taking over leadership.

He [Imam Warith Deen] used to teach Quran to the people and, I thought, more Islamically inclined than his father was. He would understand Quran better than anyone. So I was already his follower so when he took us to becoming the World Community of al-Islam it wasn't a different thing for me. I was attentive... I was closely listening to the man because he was brilliant.

From the perspectives of the participants the notion, or category, of Black Muslim is at best a relic of civil rights era labeling and at worst an active attempt to sow divisions within the Muslim community for the purposes of control and domination. Ultimately, the participants shared their thoughts that Islam is a thing practiced and the only way to practice it is how it is prescribed in the Quran and Sunnah.

***Subtheme 3b: "I serve Allah alone:" Human to Black identity filtered through the lens of Islam***

This subtheme presents the participants views of their realigned identity. The subtheme was endorsed by 17 out of 19 participants. During the interviews, participants were asked how they would classify themselves prior to Islam and all of them said Black

men first. After conducting the interview, the second to last question asked was after becoming Muslim, how would you classify yourself? Seventeen out of 19 participants answered that they would classify themselves as Muslim first, followed by Black male second. The interesting consideration in this section is that at no point would they have classified themselves as Christian first, which may indicate a deeper level of disconnection with Christianity than they may have originally thought. Lastly, the participants seemed as though they had never considered how they viewed themselves in the past in comparison to now and they were surprised when they reflected at the depths Islam had shaped their identity.

*Faraj* stated that prior to Islam he viewed himself as Black first because the things that meant most to him were mental, physical, and social liberation. However, after becoming Muslim, Faraj states that Islam broadened his perspective of liberation and that while he never stopped seeing himself as Black, it was not the most important identifying characteristic.

I still see society the same as I did. I want my Black brothers and sisters to overcome the issues here and I know the way is with Islam. I know I am a Black man in America... I've always known that. Now I serve Allah alone, I don't serve society so I don't listen when the news... Or media say Black people are killers or thugs. Allah tells me I'm *Bani Adam* [Son of Adam] and if I serve Allah's will my lasting place will be paradise. It.. Its, everything, then becomes second. I'm 63 years old, I'll be 64 soon, and it's a long time to be alive but paradise is never-ending. So my work here is busy with serving Allah by being a good Muslim, father, grandfather, brother, everything.

*Dawkins* states his surprise as he never considered how he would vocalize his identity and summarized his feelings:

[Laughing]. I never thought, wow, brother. I think you, what do they call it? A light bulb moment... You gave me a light bulb moment. Yeah, I'd have to say easily brother, I'm a Muslim. That's what I am. I see. Wow. Everything in my life is Islam. From the time I wake up til I go to sleep, I look at everything from the eyes of a Muslim. If I see things going on unjust, I used to think about how it is unjust in society. Now I look at things and see deeper meaning of injustice how it comes from Shaitan. Islam does that though by making things in a perspective. Oh, let me give you an example. When I was buying furniture for my daughter, I felt like the salesman was being funny with me and my first thought wasn't that because I'm Black he was being funny with me, it was the verses in the Quran about the person who conducts business and cheats people. Now, he could have been acting funny because me and my daughter are Black... I don't know for sure! But, it didn't matter because in mind the way I saw it was he is one of those people the Quran talks about that cheat people, it didn't matter why he was cheating. You know what I'm trying to say?

*Tariq* shared his perspective about the empowering aspect of being able to define what you are free from social ascriptions. *Tariq* states:

I'm a Muslim first... I live my life as a Muslim and it is the most important thing to me because that is the *haqq* [Ultimate truth]. The news and people in America can say what they want about Muslims, but I know what a Muslim is and I'm proud of it and don't hide it. As a Black man, I can't hide that either and I have to also deal with society telling me how I'm supposed to be too. The difference is with Islam I can go to the truth and find it for myself and when I see it I see their real agenda. All you can say when society tell you how to be a Black man is that its racist and wrong, morally wrong but it can't tell you why. All it says is you should treat everyone equal and not harm anybody. But what does that mean? Not kill them, but jail them? Make it hard for them to get jobs? Keep them poor? What's your definition of harm? With Islam I can tell you exactly how you're wrong and I can look within myself and see how Allah prefers me for being a believer and a Muslim. It lets me see clearer how people can be and it makes me feel like I'm ten toes down.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conversion and Post-Conversion Implication

Black Americans make up the fastest growing Muslim American population in the United States largely due to conversion (Pew Research Center 2019). Using a phenomenological qualitative method, this study sought to examine two categories related to this phenomenon. First, what are the motivating factors leading Black men to convert to Islam faster than other demographic groups in the United States? Second, how does Islam impact individual's racial identity post-conversion? Among these two categories six major themes emerged along with twenty-one subthemes. The themes and subthemes were distinct in some areas but overlapped in other areas as well. The overall mapping of these themes suggests a rich narrative that both reinforces and disputes previous literature and assumptions on motivations for conversion and the potential agentic power of religion on racial identity.

To understand the nuance of this study, it is important to investigate the interconnected histories of Islam, Christianity, the United States, and Black Americans as they relate to the construction of the individual's racial identity. It is also important to investigate how these two religious institutions combined with the socializing impacts of

the broader society impacted Black identity formation on the individual level.

Addressing people at the micro-level and expanding outward towards the macro-level as it relates to conversion to Islam provides a better and more nuanced understanding of how the individual's spiritual needs connect with sociological forces, such as social influence, status, and culture. By engaging with these issues from a historical macro-and-micro level, a clearer picture was presented to the seemingly paradoxical occurrence of Black men converting to Islam. Examining the post-conversion lives of participants provided insight into how Islamic adherence served as a transformative element to proactively renegotiate race within one's own consciousness.

The following sections will present how conversion to Islam provides a means for participants to perform Islam while at the same time legitimize their Muslim position. Because the normative Islamic practices are enshrined in Islamic texts, possessing knowledge of those texts provides more Islamic validation within the group, thereby superseding racial or ethnic dominance. Additionally, the Islamic experience can be seen as self-contained where individual and social actions are encouraged by scripture, and scripture can be used to legitimize or de-legitimize people's actions. The reliance on scripture for individual and social action then becomes the agreed upon standard for normative behavior. The interconnectedness of scripture and actions replaces cultural norms as validators of interactional normativity and provides room for Black Muslim converts to construct an Islamic identity and realign previously held ascriptions of racial identity.

## **Motivations for Converting to Islam**

### ***Islam and Black Cultural Familiarity***

The dialogues shared with participants support the theme of Islam as viewed in a familiar and somewhat favorable light in the history of the Black community in the United States. The individuals interviewed were first exposed to varying forms of Black cultural Islam before introduction to orthodox Islam by friends and family members. The Nation of Islam was talked about as the primary religious group that participants identified with most within their neighborhoods. Additionally, the Nation of Islam provided considerable support to the Black community, particularly in the inner cities, as it still does today.

Support provided by the Nation of Islam ranges from institutional to ideological and cultural support. Participants noted how the institutional support came in the form of cleaning out criminal elements within neighborhoods in areas where the broader local and state governments neglected to assist in, assistance with jobs in small Muslim-owned businesses and educational institutions with extracurricular activities for the youth. Ideological and cultural assistance came in the form of the symbolic elements the Nation of Islam represented. Among those symbolic elements were the walking representations of the Nation of Islam as men were presented as reformed, clean cut, strong, self-disciplined, and knowledgeable. Additionally, the Nation of Islam provided a counter-narrative to the broader social contexts that framed Black men as dependent



and beholden to a White power structure. Ultimately, the void in the strained relationship between the Black community and the United States in terms of social support and dignity was filled by the proactive social elements provided by the Nation of Islam. These elements ultimately created a positive aura of strength around the Nation of Islam that instilled feelings of liberation and knowledge of self.

The appeal with the Nation of Islam in the Black community was not so much about Black nationalism or militancy, but rather about Black consciousness and self-respect. These are qualities necessary for the backbone of any group of people within any society, particularly a disenfranchised group where slavery and subsequent racially targeted laws seemed to specifically concentrate their attacks on Black dignity and self-awareness. As a result, within the Black community Islam became a trusted and positive cultural element. Haney (1999) relates, “While cultural information from the dominant culture conveys the notion that Muslims in general are not to be trusted, the cultural information within the African-American community affirms that African-American Muslims can be and are usually trusted” (p. 252). The trust element certainly comes from having a familiarity of Islam within African and American Black history.

The awareness of the embeddedness of Islam within African and Black American culture in history was described by most participants. They recounted multiple popular stories of the early Muslim community and their positive interactions with African people, the king of Abyssinia’s relationship with the early Muslims, and the references of Black Prophets. Michael made special reference to a Hadith that he urges as many

people as he can to read that described the physical features of the Prophet Moses as being Black. In *Sahih Al-Bukhari* one of the authoritative books on Hadith, it is narrated that the Prophet Muhammad stated “Musa [Moses] he was Adam in complexion and slim as if he was from the men of Az-Zutt. According to classical Islamic scholars like al-Asqalani documented in *Fath al-Bari*, the men of Az-Zutt were known to have very dark skin. Additionally, the wording of the Hadith stating that Moses was “Adam in complexion” is described as meaning that Adam also had a dark brown to jet black skin complexion (al-Bukhari). When Michael described this narration to me, he did so because the conventional perception of Prophets depicted in famous Christian films are notably White. These types of narrations provide material evidence from early Islamic sources that bolster empowering narratives provided by groups like the Nation of Islam in their construction of counter narratives. The counter narratives also provide a sense that Black history had been suppressed and missing historical pieces can be filled through the study of Islam.

The Nation of Islam’s historical image, particularly during the civil rights era, provided the image of a group determined to go down a path of self-determination. Curtis (2006) states, “it was called the *Nation* of Islam, and in the early 1960’s, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and other NOI members were perhaps the most prominent African American advocates of a separate Black nation, or at least a territory, where African Americans could determine their own economic, political, and social future” (p. 92). Additionally, Curtis (2006) asserts that the Nation of Islam saw Islam “not just a

theology based on Elijah Muhammad's mythological and eschatological teachings... They also viewed it as a history that determined their ontological and existential identities as human beings of a particular kind" (p. 92). Curtis (2006) extends the reach of the Nation of Islam further by asserting their re-imagined histories stating, "these Black Muslims 'moved across' time and space, constructing their contemporary identities by imagining who they had been in the past" (p. 69). While the Nation of Islam served their congregants and potential members a new socio-political, economic, and theological narrative, their message ran deeper.

Participants described the appeal of the nation as providing a truth that countered that of the conventional stories they had been told growing up. They shared how the experiential elements in school, media, and attending Church served to construct a reality that they felt apart from. The Nation of Islam provided a narrative of self-determination, self-empowerment, and a call to develop a knowledge of self within a framework that relied on Islamic symbolism. The Islamic symbols used by the nation included language, forms of dress, new cultural norms through the prohibitions of drugs, gambling, alcohol, and sexual immorality. Additionally, participants recalled that the Nation of Islam provided a history they felt was more authentic than the one they had been erased from. These positive images provided by the Nation of Islam provided a sense of Islam within the Black community as being the original state to return to.

Participants described hearing Islamic terms, slogans, greetings, and phrases throughout their experiences prior to ever investigating Islam. They described how they

knew “as-Salamu Alaykum” meant peace be unto you, that Muslims fast during Ramadan, that Allah was not a foreign or different God, and that Muslims were not strange. Many of the participants had Muslim in their immediate or extended family whom they saw as the disciplined members of the family, even if they didn’t understand why they were being so. Within this paradigm, participants demonstrated the relatability and familiarity to Islam from multiple institutions. All the participants were raised in major urban cities where hip hop served as a relatable mechanism by which they received positive Islamic messaging from Muslim and non-Muslim artists. Participants in their 30’s-to-late-40’s were particularly aware of Islamic references in music. Aidi (2004) states, “Islam also offers emancipatory identities and cultural options for poor, disempowered minorities disenchanted with Western liberalism... The increasing presence of Islam in urban America is obviously having political effects...but also cultural repercussions as Islamic culture interacts and blends with urban—mostly African-American, but also Latino—cultural forms” (p.109).

The history of Islam in America is interconnected with the Black experience. While Islam was used amongst enslaved Africans as a means of inner and outer struggle to maintain individual and community strength, its cultural expressions became absorbed within cultural nuances. With the end of institutionalized slavery, an Islamic resurgence resurfaced from the remnants of those cultural nuances within Black liberation Islam most notable through the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. While the MST and the NOI still exist today, Sunni Islam became the normative

Islamic standard as spearheaded by Imam Warith Deen Muhammad's transition away from the theological tenets of the NOI. By doing so, Imam Warith Deen Muhammad was able to include the individual salvific qualities of Sunni Islam while maintaining the call for social liberation uniquely representative of Black American historical experiences.

Ultimately, Islam within historical American Black culture was not perceived as strange or foreign and was met with more positivity than negativity. The images of prominent figures like Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and religious groups like the Nation of Islam provided examples of individuals and an institution determined to liberate Black people from White mental, physical, and social subjugation. Islam symbolized a counter to Western ideology, particularly a White Western ideology. As many participants had Muslims in their families, the reach of Islam was already present in the Black community in primary and secondary groups alike. Lastly, with the constructed narratives provided by the Nation of Islam, the views of Islam sought to impact individual's primarily by impacted the individual's own sense of self to place them on a journey of self-discovery where the truth of Islam could become self-evident to them.

### ***Christian Questions and Islamic Answers***

The familiarity and relatability of Islam to the participants is important to highlight in their narratives because it provides a backdrop for their potential conversion. It should be noted that disillusion with Christianity does not necessitate that

the individual converts to Islam. However, because of the familiarity and relatability of Islam within Black culture as a more positive than negative lifestyle, its investigation happened sooner. Rather than becoming disillusioned with Christianity and seeking answers from multiple other faiths, Islam became the next one within arm's reach to investigate. Because participants expressed that their primary questions that lead them away from Christianity were answered by their investigation of the Quran allowed for a quicker arch toward conversion.

The main factor that turned participants away from Christianity were unanswered theological questions that impacted their sense of self and purpose. All participants shared unresolved questions regarding the nature of God as a prime motive for seeking answers outside of the Christian paradigm. All participants used the same phrase when asked about what about Christianity did not resonate with you? Using similar language, they all asserted that "it didn't make sense." What they were referring to were the central questions.

All participants shared that they had questions that had gone unanswered from their youth until adulthood. This is an important element because it reflects the intellectual journey of participants were not quick, but rather required intense scrutiny and mental grappling. Most of the participants noted that the Quran and Islam "made sense", which indicates that converting to Islam was an intellectual rather than emotional venture.

Park and Edmondson (2012) assert that religious beliefs ultimately provide an existential function of meaning restoration, especially for restoring meaning after traumatic events. Participants in this study consistently related that there were two questions that caused them the most anguish: the nature of God and the purpose of their creation. Ultimately, these questions can be framed as why am I here and who put me here? To answer those two fundamental questions most of the participants asked clergy, friends, and fellow Church associates. Most participants recalled that they were not only unfulfilled in receiving answers, but that they felt brushed off. Park and Edmondson's (2012) theory of meaning restoration provides insight into the heightened sense of distress participants may have encountered as they were attempting to generate meaning but may not have been able to do so with a cloud of confusion blurring those two central questions. The contention here is that the road for turning to Islam to answer those questions was made easier because of the cultural familiarity and relatability of Islam through its history among Africans and within Black American culture. Lastly, because Islam provides answers to those central questions, as well as encourages Muslims to ask more questions, it allowed for the opportunity to investigate deeper into the religion where issues dealing with race, identity, and societal issues were seen as overall solutions for a comprehensive and self-empowering lifestyle.

All participants except for three chose to convert to Islam through their involvement with the Quran. The three who did not are the oldest participants who chose to convert to Islam because of their introduction to members of the Nation of

Islam. However, through their involvement in the Nation of Islam, they became more familiar with Islamic teachings and once they began reading the Quran, they became Sunni Muslims. What this suggests is that while there are many social and interactional elements within Islam and its worship rituals, there is a high degree of individual autonomy. However, in Islamic autonomy one's individuality is tied into the norms Muslims adhere to through the agreed upon preserved instructions of the Quran and Hadith. Ultimately, what is considered legitimate Islamic behavior must be matched to the Quran and Hadith. Because of that standard, participants viewed the Quran and Hadith as guidebooks through which all aspects of personal and social life can be learned.

Through Islamic scripture, participants' initial questions were answered relatively quickly, and new ones were generated. Many participants informed me that they are still learning and that they consult areas within Islamic scriptures specifically for answers relating to all of life's tasks and opportunities. The implications that followed from this new zeal to question were twofold; first, it further solidified Islamic scripture as divinely revealed in the minds of participants, and second it provided a mechanism for participants to not be afraid to ask questions for the goal of getting deeper into self-reflection. By becoming more introspective participants were then able to renegotiate racial identity utilizing a mechanism outside of culture as a guideline.



## **Post Conversion Racial Identity Impact**

### ***Islamic Ideals and Identity***

Operating from the position that socially constructed meanings become ascribed onto racial categories (Ifekwunigwe et al., 2017), this study examined how Christianity and Islam were used as mechanisms within the broader social context for interactions amongst individuals. Because one lives within a cultural system, they can become bound by a multitude of cultural messages and frames in various degrees depending on their level of passivity in receiving those cultural messages. As it relates to Black men living within an American racialized system, one may become confined to their ascribed racial status through that process. This racial baggage becomes a byproduct of the individual's interaction within culture and begins to shift when going through the process of learning about and converting to Islam. The process of converting to Islam requires a proactive investigation into the religion and a subsequent acceptance of core tenets that impact the individual's identity. These core tenets include the acceptance and belief in God (*Allah*), the Quran as the preserved and unchanged words revealed by God to humanity, and the finality of the Prophet Muhammad in the line of prophets and messengers throughout human history.

For participants who experienced this process of converting to Islam, the belief in these core tenets make the Quran and the Hadith (the approved words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) the new objective measuring stick with which to measure

oneself and society against, thereby replacing an American cultural measuring stick. By finding within this new objective standard scripture that actively promotes ideals of transcending deceptive cultural ascriptions of race, participants were able to use these texts to shed the societal racial baggage once held and construct their identities from an extra-cultural perspective. This appeal to scripture reinforcing new identities through introspection and renegotiation was demonstrated in participant interviews.

All participants actively practiced Islam, believed in its preserved scriptural elements and still maintained their sense of racial identity. My contention is that participants were able to maintain a Black American identity and become Muslim without having to sacrifice their sense of identity because their introduction to Islam primarily happened through the Quran rather than through social networks. The phenomenon of converting to Islam from a non-Arab religion and still maintaining a sense of one's own cultural identity is first, not unique in history, and second, is possible because of the Quranic maxim that God created people into various nations and tribes to get to know one another. Blyden (1967) relates the experiences of Blacks with both Islam and Christianity in Africa and the United States. In his analysis Blyden demonstrates the strength of the religious institutions in their impact on the identity formation of the people. Blyden (1967) asserts:

In all thriving Mohammedan communities, in West and Central Africa, it may be noticed that the Arab superstructure has not been superimposed on a permanent indigenous superstructure; so that what really took place, when the Arab met the Negro in his own home, was a healthy amalgamation, and not an absorption or an undue repression... Christianity, on the other hand, came to the

Negro as a slave, or at least as a subject race in a foreign land. Along with Christian teaching, he and his children received lessons on their utter and permanent inferiority and subordination to their instructors, to whom they stood in the relation of chattels. (p. 12-13)

Blyden (1967) additionally asserts that:

the Mohammedan Negro has felt nothing of the withering power of caste. There is nothing in his colour or race to debar him from the highest privileges, social or political, to which any other Muslim can attain. The slave who becomes Muslim is free. Mohammedan history abounds with examples of distinguished Negroes. (p. 15-16)

In comparing-and-contrasting African Muslim and Christian converts and the impact the two religious institutions had on the individual's racial formation post-conversion Blyden (1967) asserts:

The Negro in Christian lands, however learned in books, cannot be said to have such a thing as self-education. His knowledge, when brought to the test, often fails him. And why? Because he is taught from the beginning to the end of his book-training... not to be himself, but somebody else. We might illustrate what we mean by some of the most ludicrous and painful incidents... of the efforts of Christian Negroes of intelligence to force their outward appearance into as near as possible, a resemblance to Europeans. From the lessons he every day receives, the Negro unconsciously imbibes the conviction that to be a great man he must be like the white man...To be as like the white man as possible – to copy his outward appearance, his peculiarities, his manners, the arrangement of his toilet, this is the aim of the Christian Negro – this is his aspiration. (p. 37)

In the text above, Blyden demonstrates the interconnectedness of American slavery and Christianity and the de-powering socializing impact it had on the development of the Black identity. Alternatively, Blyden (1967) contrasts that occurrence with the experiences of Black people with Islam:

Imitation is not discipleship. The Mohammedan Negro is a much better Mohammedan than the Christian Negro is a Christian, because the Muslim

Negro, as a learner, is a disciple, not an imitator. A disciple, when freed from leading-strings, may become a producer, an imitator never rises above a mere copyist. With the disciple progress is from within; the imitator grows by accretion from without. The learning acquired by a disciple gives him capacity; that gained by an imitator terminates in itself. The one becomes a capable man; the other is a mere sciolist. This explains the difference between the Mohammedan and the Christian Negro. (Pp. 37-38)

The underlying theme in Blyden's (1967) main contention rests on change in one's consciousness, and the subsequent agentic ability to manifest that change outwardly post-conversion. Operating from the premise that one's consciousness is imperative to their own sense of self, analysis pertaining to the development of Black racial identity within a racialized American society can often times become socially or culturally deterministic.

In locating Black identity, the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness cannot go overlooked. Du Bois (1903) provides a famous portrayal of the relationship the Black community has living in a racialized society. He maintains that the Black American has a "two-ness", where he is both consciously Black *and* an American with "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (1903, p, 45). The key takeaway from Du Bois's concept is that this racial framing for Black people is happening at the depths of one's consciousness, which makes it a foundational and constitutive precursor that contributes to the production of the individual's self-identity. However, while Du Bois is operating on a level of consciousness, the factors that impact it are tied into material and/or cultural capital in relation to Whites, or lack thereof. Mocombe (2009) asserted:

The institution of slavery impacted and re-shaped the African practical consciousness. Africans were introduced into the American Protestant capitalist social structure as slaves. American whites represented their African practical consciousnesses as primitive forms of being-in-the-world to that of the dominant American white Protestant bourgeois social order... the structural forces – race, class, and status – eventually, under the contradictory principles of marginality and integration, shaped the majority of African consciousness as a “racial class-in-itself” (Blacks), a “caste in class”, forced to embody the structural terms (bourgeois ideals in the guise of the Protestant ethic) of the dominant American (capitalist) social relations of production, over all other “alternative” African adaptive responses to its then organizational form, slavery. (pp. 71-72)

What Mocombe’s position on the connection of slavery, the White Protestant bourgeois social order and American capitalism maintains is a relational dynamic where the collective Black experience, and subsequent individual ability to construct a racial identity only existed within the material framing of those factors. Mocombe (2009) contends that “society’s bourgeois ideals (temperance, economic gain for its own sake, and good moral character), which they acquired through “ideological apparatuses” defined by their White Protestant capitalist masters viewed Black emotionalism, intuition, disobedience, “immorality”, and “barbarity” as contrary to White civilized Protestantism” (p. 72).

The main contention relating to Du Bois’s perception of race in American society vacillates between factors of determinants. For instance, is the power and function of race in the lives of individuals being constructed and subsequently reified from the depths of consciousness or is it being constructed from external conditions? Dennis (1996) relates the intellectual struggle experienced throughout Du Bois’ career in three

stages of social and political thought in a rapidly changing American landscape starting from his conception of double-consciousness and ending with a more pan-African orientation. Dennis (1996) presents how Du Bois' perspective on this matter shifts from the internal and external determinants relating to the "changing situations and circumstances in the sociopolitical world here and abroad" (p. 5). Additionally, Dennis (1996) notes Du Bois' confidence of objective science bringing light to experiences in Black society waning and giving way to ideological rationales for American racial disparities. Dennis (1996) relates,

having been forced to recognize that humans may not be primarily motivated to seek truth, Du Bois now viewed the fight against injustice and inequality as one entailing the uprooting of deeply embedded symbols and interests whose framework related to and responded to issues that were ideological, psychological and emotional. (p. 9-10)

The societal impacts of racial categorizations and subsequent characterizations of those racial categories from various agents of socialization were present in the pre-conversion lives of the participants and modified in their post-conversion racial renegotiation. Every participant except for one, mainly interacted with non-Black members of society to any meaningful degree. However, after converting to Islam friend networks became more diverse. The reason for the difference was that participants had changes in both internal and external factors that were guided by a singularly accepted source. When participants encountered inter-group racism, they used the Quran and Hadith to justify their position of superiority through knowledge of those sources. While fellow Muslims may have held racist notions on the individual level, power dynamics in

social interactions revolved around who best adhered to the Quran and Sunnah. From the institutional side, participants noted that the majority of Islamic services, events and religious rituals were performed in multi-cultural settings. Participants expressed added comfort in these interactions because ethnic and cultural norms were not arbitrarily made normative over that of the guidance from the Islamic texts. Ultimately, while non-Black Muslim individuals may have harbored racist sentiments the racial logic as it exists in Islamic scripture held a more authoritative position in legitimizing normative values.

This realization of the inherent irrationality of racial logic is imperative to this study. However, this study demonstrated that rather than going more into the socio-political determinants of racial ideology as Du Bois did, themes that dove deeper into the development of one's racial self from the perspective of the individual were more paramount to their ability to reconcile race within a racialized society. While religion does serve as a major social institution, in this context, because it transcends into concepts relating to an individual's soul, it is possible to see how this internal-external relationship can either liberate or shackle one's racial identity formation. The significance of this will shed light on the degree to which individual agency may manifest materially in the lives of individual's lived experiences as it relates to a racial identity.

Within the framework developed by Du Bois and re-interpreted by Mocombe, the inextricable tie among social conditions, class, economy, and religion affects the individual on multiple levels. For subaltern groups, this affect may become detrimental, particularly if excluded from the dominant aspects of relating to class or society's

dominant religion. Investigating the issue of Black identity formation from the social structural perspective entails utilizing means that would then limit one's agentic capabilities even beyond the concepts posited by Du Bois and Blyden.

Omi and Winant (2005) create a matrix of external forces constructing hegemonic ideologies that then become deterministic in one's racial formation. They assert, "the overdetermined construction of world "civilization" as a product of the rise of Europe and the subjugation of the rest of us, still defines the race concept" (Omi and Winant, p. 10). More specifically, Omi and Winant's (2015) racial formation theory contends that race itself is socially constructed through social, political and economic functions that then influence the shaping of one's individual racial identity and broader social categorization. Participants in this study recognized the fragility of the racial categories once becoming fully immersed in Islamic teachings and studying Islamic texts. Prior to becoming Muslim, the socializing impacts of racial categories as presented by Omi and Winant (2015) were commonplace and expressed by most of the participants. I contend that analyzing race from a strict institutional perspective misses the mark on its true impact and construction. While agents of socialization must put forth messages to socialize, the power lies in the interpretation of those messages by the receivers. Without an adequate tool to legitimize or delegitimize those messages, people can become subject to them. As the participants demonstrated, utilizing an extra-cultural source in their toolkit provided escape from the cultural ascriptions of race, and the freedom to self-identify with a higher degree of assuredness.



Most participants recalled direct verses from the Quran and Hadith narrations that clearly addressed humanity and dispelled the façade of racial superiority or inferiority. Because the Quran was seen as an unchanged scripture it was then able to be used as a means of truth for a reality otherwise obscured. This is one of the few areas where participants shared their belief that Christianity and Whiteness had become synonymous. I contend that representation was made possible because of the amalgamation of a racialized American culture with Christian culture, and an ambiguity in Christian text that made it inadequate to dispel White supremacy at a time when Christianity was used to justify racist systems like slavery, Jim Crow and racial segregation. Islamic texts, on the other hand, provided clear and unambiguous statements rebuking racist ideologies, and held the status as an unchanged message directly from God that gave it the authority in the minds of the people as superior over cultural desires.

The consciousness of a people is just as important, if not more so, than the social directives put into society for inclusion and integration. Even when a community of people are included into society, if the overall consciousness of the people is built upon generations of inequality, and insecurity, elements of distrust and disunity are not far-fetched. Social inclusion programs do not address the underlying issues regarding the types of marginalization and segregation we currently witness, they only serve to treat the symptoms, rather than the root of the disease.

The lasting impact of slavery and subsequent racialized means of social control impacted the development of Black identity by constructing the racial category in a perpetually subservient position to that of a racialized and normative White American identity. What it means to be White is firmly implanted in society and is the invisible baseline setting, yet since slavery and emancipation, what it means to be Black is an identity of fitting into a normative White framework. Du Bois's (1903) double-consciousness asserts that it is "the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 351). Within that framework DuBois sought to provide a sense of "distinctiveness that entailed equality [and] a sense of distinctiveness that did not imply inferiority" (Bruce 1992, p. 305). The distinctiveness would allow room for the African identity to develop without the normative constraints imposed by the broader White society. For DuBois, those suffering from this double-consciousness, or "two-ness", feel the greatest anguish upon becoming aware of their condition [and] their desire to possess a single individual self" (Bruce 1992, p. 306). DuBois (1903) concludes that it is for the individual to "merge his double self into a better and truer self... losing neither of the older selves."

Within the Du Boisian (1903) cultural framework, the normative standards of White America were always imposed on the people, rather than the people imposing their own sets of standards on themselves in order to become a secure and unified group. His resolution for the individual to "merge his double self into a better truer self without losing neither of the older selves," is a tall order in the face of generations-old

cultural norms that help to program one's thoughts of positivity and negativity. For instance, the normative ideal of beauty, success, appearance, and respectability are birthed from a White paradigm first. That paradigm then becomes the measure with which to gauge other ideals. While the Du Boisian model creates a wide framework illustrating the struggle of identity formation within a powerful cultural system, the model itself sits on a European foundation as well.

Turner (2003) relates that Du Bois' "esoteric internationalist perspective appealed primarily to well-educated middle-class Blacks, who were a minority group in their race" (p. 77). Additionally, of Du Bois' concept of the 'talented tenth', Turner (2003) notes its incompatibility with the masses:

The ebb and flow of Afro-American social and cultural history in their power to reject or ignore leaders whose programs and statements do not appear in the best interest of the "race" and... through their support of leaders who combine an awareness of Afro-American culture and traditions with a viable program for advancement... Although Dubois had demonstrated that he understood the 'feelings and emotions' of black folk culture, his elitist Pan-Africanism was based on a nineteenth-century British model of universal history which emphasized the influence of 'great men' rather than the organized social and political movements of the masses. (Pp. 77-78)

In the case of Black Muslims, Curtis (2005) maintains that Islam may serve as a mechanism of recapturing the old Black (African) identity prior to the slave trade and the imposition of that normative White-American ideal:

Converts constructed their Muslim identities by creating or reinterpreting stories about their collective past. African-American Muslims imagined that their identity as a people, a race, a nation, or an ethnic group... was linked to the religion of Islam... In many cases they imagined that God had intended for them to convert –

or revert to Islam – and that their ultimate destiny as a people would be determined by how well they realized God’s plan. (p. 680)

What is unique to the Black Muslim experience over the Black American one is that it allows for what Du Bois touched on; a way for Black individuals to attain individual strength in their identity formation within a more dominant social framework without the experience of that ‘two-ness’. However, it could be reasonably assumed that since Islamic religious practices must be performed in Arabic, that an Arab-dominant framework could simply replace the White-American framework in that two-ness scenario with Black Muslim converts. Rather than gauging one’s Black experience through the lens of Whiteness, they would instead feel forced to gauge their acceptability and experience through the lens of “Arab-ness” under the pretext of Islam. However, what the participants displayed demonstrates that the opposite occurred.

Participants viewed their new identity construction from the perspective outside of culture all together; be it American or Arab. They use a strict Islamic paradigm that relies heavily on traditional Islamic source materials (Quran and Hadith literature) as a more salient guide and one they perceive provides inherent truths on the individual and societal levels. Within that believed truth, Islamic scriptures uniquely and directly address concepts of race and connect them to the individual’s level of piety, morality and even humanity. Additionally, Islamic texts connect the concept of race with social cohesion on a macro-level and as a sign of the existence of God on a metaphysical level as well. It is imperative to understand this framework because of its use for converts in

helping to shape aspects of their identity post-conversion. Lastly, this study provides a new paradigm that allows for analysis on racial formation to assess truth values and the degree to which individuals give authority to cultural symbols.

The participants in this study see Islam as an answer to personal and social upheaval because of the elements presented in the Quran of “truth prevailing over falsehood”, and because of that extra-cultural grounding, Islam provides an avenue to reconstruct one’s identity apart from social impositions. This empowering mechanism was described as a liberating force freeing the individual’s mind from the illusions of the social world. As demonstrated by the participants, a deeper issue is at hand relying on the desire for the individual to be made whole with one’s own human identity, and that this identity has been lost since slavery through external manipulation.

The reflexive process is an essential component in the formation of one’s identity. Cross’s (1991) Nigrescence model maintains, “Blackness is a role formation that emerges from certain critical environmental interactions. The role or reaction of ‘Blackness’ ultimately passes into a transcendent phenomenon that only considers racial identity as a role component of the real internalized self” (Akbar, 1989, p. 259). Cross is essentially illustrating the symbiotic nature of one’s identity being formed as a part of their social surroundings, but also apart from it. It is in that ‘real internalized self’ that the interview participants seemed to speak from.

Alternatively, Erikson (1956) asserted:

from a genetic point of view, the process of identity formation emerges as an evolving configuration-gradually established by successive ego syntheses and resyntheses throughout childhood; it is a configuration gradually integrating constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations and consistent roles. (p. 71)

However, Akbar (1989) asserts:

Erikson's epigenetic conceptualization of identity assumes a psychosocially predetermined emergence that occurs in reaction to certain social as well as psychological conditions. Identity is core and essential to personality functioning even though social conditions may enhance or impede the emergence of that integrated entity which assimilates a person's varied pre-identity experiences and serves as the core of one's post-identity development. (p. 260)

While social conditions certainly play a factor in one's identity construction, the participants' narratives call into question whether the effects of society on identity are due to the power of societal impositions or the passivity of the individual in internalizing those cultural attributes. Specifically, the issue then becomes, whether one is a passive consumer of culture and societal norms and thereby has their identity pre-formed for them, or if they are active agents attempting to tap into their inner selves for their own human meaning. Additionally, the issue of tapping into the inner self in one's engagement with society is not a racial issue, but a human one. However, within the context of America's relationship with the Black community, the social elements cannot go understated due to the systematic nature of racial oppression within both institutions and culture.

The participants experiences illustrate the journey's taken to find the inner-self and the subsequent removal of the layers of imposed racialized baggage that occurred as

a byproduct. It is not assumed that their journeys to Islam began because they intended to find more social meaning. It was demonstrated that their initial disillusionment with Christianity was sparked by unanswered theological inquiries and a failure to receive adequate answers. My contention is that if participants became cultural Muslims devoid of Islamic scriptural superiority as performed within a variety of Muslim-American ethnic enclaves, they would have become more embedded within deeper ascribed social meanings rather than individually constructed ones and thereby limited their agency rather than bolstering it.

Jackson (2005) contends, “Blackamericans continue to labor under the false universal that enshrines the values and aspirations of the dominant culture as both normal and normative” (p. 165). This study demonstrated that by the participants placing authority to external sources of legitimacy, space to construct an identity had more agentic juice that allowed it to not become subservient to any dominant culture.

Cross, Erikson and Du Bois’s models all show a form of societal–essentialism to one’s social surroundings above that of the self. The role and process of converting to Islam questions that paradigm. Utilizing Dennis’s (2003) model of double marginality, the potential for Black American Muslim converts to live within their inner world of “Black Muslim convert” world to the outer normative Islamic world as represented by ethnic Muslim-Americans. Additionally, participants provided narratives that indicated how domination of space, particularly at Muslim events, and exclusion occurred. Dennis (2003) relates that “even as formal exclusionary laws and ordinances were struck down informal

codes were established' (p. 28). The informal measures of exclusion were noted in participant interviews as coming from Muslims who would self-segregate amongst their own ethnic group. Other ways participants experienced exclusion involved Muslims gathering and speaking in different languages even while English was known by all.

A few of the participants in the study combated double marginality by not only re-defining the power in the social interactions, but the notion of Black Muslim as a category in and of itself. Participants made clear their reasons were because it created an artificial power dynamic that implies a different form of Islam performed as "Black" Islam. Rather than the category of Black Muslim, they explained they were Muslims that were Black in America. This assertion implies a conscious attempt to reconcile the notions of Blackness, being an American and being a Muslim as non-contradictory forces. Also, it demonstrates that within the construction of identity, these three elements are non-competing and harmonious within an Islamic framework of the Quran and Hadith.

### **A Concept of 'Master Consciousness'**

Du Bois's conception of double consciousness brings forth the veil, an "intangible boundary that affects the perceptions of and relations between racializing and racialized subjects" (Itzigsohn and Brown, p. 235). Additionally, Du Bois asserts his own experiences of racialization stating, "had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born" (Du Bois 1940, p. 27).



While I initially assumed that Black Muslim converts would assume a triple-consciousness status, in which their Black, Muslim, and American identities would create a triple-marginality, the participants provided a different picture. Rather than multiple veils that screened racializing and racialized subjects, the Islamic institution itself forced cross-racial interaction through worship services and codes of conduct. Participants expressed multiple ways they felt thrust into multi-racial and multi-ethnic inclusion through conventional Islamic practices.

Participants like Michael noted how the right of one Muslim over the other is to greet them in peace (as-Salamu Alaykum), that they must stand shoulder to shoulder in prayer, that the Imam is not designated to a single ethnicity or race, that knowledge of the “deen” (Islamic way of life) eclipses racial, ethnic, and age categories, and that the Islamic scripture specifically chastises those who engage in acts of racial or ethnic superiority. Michael referenced Hadith literature that states:

Six are the rights of a Muslim over another Muslim... When you meet him offer him greetings, when he invites you to a feast accept it, when he seeks your council give him, and when he sneezes and says: “All praise is due to Allah”, you say Yarhamak Allah (may Allah show mercy to you), and when he falls ill visit him, and when he dies follow his bier. (Sahih Muslm 2126b)

These normative Islamic standards altered the lived experiences of participants that ultimately reduced racialization and increased the racial and ethnic diversity of participant’s friendship networks. While a triple-consciousness was not observed after hearing the participant’s narratives, a master consciousness did emerge.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) assert that intersectional invisibility renders individuals with multiple subordinate identities invisible to those with single subordinate identities. While the intersectional invisibility framework operates on an interactional level, the double-disadvantage (Moncrief et. al, 1991) hypothesis demonstrate how multiple marginal identities are discriminated against institutionally. Both frameworks speak past the occurrence of Black male Muslim converts. Participants in this study provide narratives that presented Islam and Quranic knowledge and adherence as elements that displaced elements contributing to marginality. Ultimately, participants demonstrated that the element used to displace intersectional invisibility amongst co-religionists and experiencing double disadvantage within the framework of Islam, was the knowledge of Islamic scripture. Through that knowledge, participants used an agreed upon tool (Islamic scripture) as the mechanism to increase their status within the institution and amongst peers. Lastly, participants also used the same mechanism to then realign their own racial identity outside of the spectrum of societal pressures.

The ascribed racial status of participants and their achieved Muslim status within their new conceptualization of Islam served to construct a master consciousness. The master consciousness of participants was guided through Quran and Hadith literature and became the yard stick by which status was validated and legitimized. The use of an external status barometer provided space for converts to assert their own ideas of racial identity. This new autonomy freed participants from pre-existing social constraints and the potential new constraints of prejudiced Muslims. This is particularly clear in the

participant's hesitation with the terms "Black Muslim" and convert. When asked about the term convert, participants expressed that they "reverted" back to Islam because to them being in a state of submission was the natural inclination of every born human being. Their perspective that being in a state of "Islam" meant reconnecting to their natural human inclination is further evidence that participants viewed their Islam as a master consciousness working deep within them.

The concept of master consciousness serves to connect Du Bois's social psychological knowledge and awareness of living within a racialized society with the liberatory notion of using Islamic scripture as a tangible tool for legitimizing an achieved master status. Additionally, opposition to the term Black Muslim also demonstrates a restructuring of the power of racialization in a deeper sense. The master consciousness presented here establishes how Islam did not wipe away the racial identity of participants, but instead was used to reconstruct it within the spectrum of one's own natural humanity. Lastly, because participants associated their achieved Islamic identity with an internal completeness connected to their sense of humanity, this concept extends beyond a master status involving external placements in or social ascriptions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study which will be addressed as they may be used as a guide for future research into this topic.

### ***Sample***

I made an effort to use key informants, Masjid Muhammad members and non-members and a range of age categories and educational backgrounds. While participant had a great deal of variety in their pasts, lived experiences, and lifestyles leading up to Islam, greater heterogeneity of geographical locations may have provided newer insights. Because all participants grew up in major urban cities, the presence of groups like the Nation of Islam and their Temples would be commonplace in the layout of the city. Participants largely came from the East coast where the Islamic presence is more visible. More participants from the South and Mid-West may have provided a different insight into the strength of familiarity factor of Islam in the Black community as a motivation for conversion.

### ***Participant and Researcher Bias***

Social desirability bias was a constant concern throughout the participant interviews. As I could only ask questions and take answers at face value, it is unclear if participants desired to be seen in a positive light in their interactions with me. Additionally, because all interviews were conducted through the Zoom video conferencing platform, some participants were not able to have their cameras on, which inhibited my ability to gauge nonverbal cues during their answers. Participants were aware of my work beforehand, which may have impacted how they wanted to answer some interview questions. Participants expressed additional information after

recordings ended, which made me think that their answers may have just been scratching the surface.

As a member of the Muslim community, mitigating my potential bias was a constant concern. The positives of being a part of the community is in understanding the nuance and the lens that interview participants were looking through to see the world. However, the negative side is the potential of seeing for them. Through the use of bracketing and remaining conscious of this potential bias, I attempted to allow participants to speak. My interviews were structured in a way where I did little speaking and allowed for the participants to tell me their stories. This led to rich and lengthy monologues, but it did allow for the participants to speak for themselves.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

This study shed light on the lived experiences of Black American Muslim converts. What it provided was insight into the use of Islam and its scriptural sources as a mechanism to overcome racial categorization through the process of utilizing an extra-cultural object as a means of identity construction. This study demonstrated the power of individual agency coupled with Islamic scripture as a means of reconciling a Black Muslim American identity. There are three recommendations for future study.

First, as a main contention for participants was not receiving answers to questions posed during their times as Christians, it is recommended that research be done into how Black born-again Christians, or Black converts to Christianity reconcile the

racial identity question as well. While the narratives and subsequent themes were clearly established, this study does not answer whether another religious faith if adhered to in similar ways would have the same impact.

Second, participants mentioned a distaste for the term Black Muslims. As this is a familiar concept used throughout academia, it was interesting to see the level and antipathy felt at the term by the participants. In subsequent discussions I had with other Black Muslim converts, I inquired about it and was told about how it's another form of segmentation. They also mentioned that nowhere will you see people say stuff like that except for in America. Those answers came up in a few conversations and it would need further exploration. Potential research would involve investigating the link between the term Black Muslim and tradition language of racial segregation or segmentation. Additionally, research should be conducted to investigate alienation that may occur as a result of these categories.

Third, the generational viewpoints allowed room for future research in that the view of the Black Church was seen differently by different generational groups. The older participants saw the Black Church as a positive part of Black culture and society yet disagreed with their theology. Meanwhile, younger participants had a more negative perspective of the Black Church. It is not known if this negative perspective is due to historical reinterpretations of the Black Church in American history or the current interactions the institution and the people have. As all of the participants were Church

going members of the community, that phenomena would require its own research to understand the generational divide as it relates to the benefit of the Black Church.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black Muslim converts from Christianity. This study sought to investigate two essential questions: Why do Black males convert to Islam from Christianity, and how does conversion to Islam impact one's racial identity. The findings of this study offered an in-depth look into these two questions and used a qualitative phenomenological approach to provide answers. From interviews with nineteen Black Muslim converts, six overall themes emerged constituted by twenty-one subthemes. The main themes involved motivations for conversion that ranged from Islam being familiar and relatable, disillusionment with Christianity because of unanswered theological questions and receiving answers through Islamic texts. Additionally, the impacts of conversion on participants ranged from having more diversity in social networks, using the Islamic sources rather than culture as an objective measuring stick to legitimize worldviews, and a renegotiation of one's own self-conception.

Participants expressed their narratives and presented Islam as a liberating force within proper framings. The frames used to perform Islam for participants was accepting the authority of the Islamic texts over that of Muslim cultural norms. That distinction allowed for their Islam to be self-referencing and self-bolstering. When faced with

questions, difficult interactions or contraindications, participants referred back to the Islamic sources for answers. By accepting those as the objective standards, participants were then able to renegotiate their own identities within a safe environment. The safe environment was provided by Islamic texts that clearly and unambiguously linked racial supremacy and categorization to ignorance and satanic practices. Because Islamic sources were the final say, within that framework the Black Muslim convert's identity could be explored within a brand-new framework that allowed more room for one's agency. The process of doing so granted the participants in this study a sense of empowerment, self-assuredness and completeness that they expressed as feeling "ten toes down."

This study demonstrates how the utilization of religion as a major component within intersectional analysis is key in understanding the development of the social self. While much of the intersectional literature focuses on the interactional and individual levels of analysis, incorporating religion into the discussion allows for an understanding to the degree in which one's values and sense of self may be shaped. By investigating those shifts it also becomes possible to see how previously observed lines of oppression may be transcended.

While structures of racism and racial ascriptions are firmly implanted within a racialized structure, prescriptive elements that only focus on one level of analysis are incomplete to remedy communities impacted by racism. This study demonstrated that race and racism are social and institutional constructions that require prescriptions



coming from institutional, interactional, and individual means. This three-pronged approach used within the Islamic institution is presented in the writings of the institution (Islamic scripture) that guides people on the interactional level and possesses a salvific attribute that works on the individual level. Similar systems can be produced on smaller scales utilizing this three-pronged approach. Doing so may motivate fundamental shifts in institutional, interactional, and individual actions that are necessary for advancing generational social progress.

## **APPENDIXES**

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

## **Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer**



### **Take Part in Research on Islam in America**

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

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

I am conducting **Dissertation Research** for the George Mason University Sociology Department, and I am 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.

The objective of this research is to hopefully open new doors of understanding regarding conversion to Islam.]

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

If you are unable to participate, please forward this along to anyone else you know who may be interested in participating in this research.

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

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

Conversion to Islam and its Impact on Racial Identity

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Interviews:

This research is being conducted to study the process of converting to Islam among African American males in the United States. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to have a formal audio interview conducted, which may last anywhere from 30-50 minutes. During the span of the interview, you will be asked about your interest in Islam, your background growing up in the United States, your viewpoints on how you perceive your racial experiences growing up in the United States, your motivations for converting to Islam (if one has converted), and how Islam has either shaped or re-shaped your views on yourself as an individual and on society.

Observation:

Observation in the Mosque during congregational prayers and the Friday (Jum'uah) prayer will be conducted during the course of the study. This observation is intended to understand how new Muslims interact and mesh within the Muslim community. This

observation process does not involve formal interviews with Mosque participants. It is solely a means to observe interaction among Mosque members.

The interview portion and observation portion of this study are different and will be held in different locations. If you are an interview participant, your participation in Mosque events (i.e. Prayer and religious services) may also lead to you being observed in the observation portion of the study.

It must be understood that your participation as an interview participant does not mean that you will also be observed in Mosque events. However, it must also be understood that as an interview participant you may, by chance, be observed during the observation portion of the study because of the congregational nature of the Mosque.

#### RISKS

The foreseeable risks or discomforts include sharing past experiences which lead to an interest or a conversion to Islam. Aside from the psychological risks associated with reflecting on one's own past, there are no foreseeable physical, psychological and/or social risks for participating in this research.

There is always a slight chance that someone might feel upset after completing the survey, however it is important to know that there are no expected risks or negative effects associated with your involvement. Please note that if you do feel upset and would like to speak with someone, you can contact the George Mason Counseling and Psychological Services Center (CAPS) at (703) 993-2380.

#### BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in Islam in the United States, Islam in the African American community and how Islam serves as a path for African American males in their lives.

#### AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDINGS

All interviews will be recorded through either audio or video conferencing, or a combination of both. The recordings will take place on the day and time of the interview. The information that will be gathered include participant's personal narrations on their experiences pre-and-post conversion to Islam, why they converted and how it impacted their identity.

Recordings will be deleted after transcription of audio/video.

The recordings will be kept secure on the researcher's computer where only the researchers will have access to them. The transcriptions would be stored for at least 5 years after the study ends and then deleted.

Those who participate via Zoom may review Zoom's website for information about their privacy statement. <https://zoom.us/privacy/>

Those who participate via Skype may review Microsoft's website for information about their privacy statement. <https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-US/privacystatement/>

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. Pseudonyms (false names) will be used for all participants in the interviews, and they will be coded with numbers corresponding to

their pseudonyms. Audio recordings of the interviews will be kept for no longer than 5 years after the date of recording. Within 5 years the audio recordings will be destroyed.

While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

Recordings will be deleted after transcription of audio/video.

The de-identified data could be used for future research without additional consent from participants.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee that monitors research on human subjects may inspect study records during internal auditing procedures and are required to keep all information confidential.

#### PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is absolutely no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

#### CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Abdullah Alnassar, a graduate student in the Sociology Department at George Mason University. He may be reached at 703-969-3548 for questions or to report a research-related problem. This study is being supervised by Lester Kurtz in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at George Mason University. Dr. Kurtz may be reached at 703-993-1441 for questions or to report a

research-related problem. You may also call the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 703-993-4121 or email the Board at [IRB@gmu.edu](mailto:IRB@gmu.edu) if you have any questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

#### CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this research.

Please verbally inform the researchers at the start of your interview if you consent to participate in the study.

Please also verbally inform them if you consent to be audio recorded.



### **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

Interview Questions –

Follow up Questions May be Asked for Clarification Purposes

1. Tell me about how you first heard of Islam.
2. Tell me about how you came to Islam. The process.
3. Before you converted to Islam, how did you see yourself as a man in American society?
4. Before you converted to Islam, were there any instances of you feeling like an outsider in American society?
5. 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).
6. Before you converted to Islam, did you know of any Muslims in your family or close friends in the neighborhood?
7. What was/is it about Christianity that is not resonating with you?
8. What was/is it about Islam that was/is appealing to you?
9. When you first converted to Islam, how did you feel?

10. When you first converted to Islam, did you get any resistance from friends, family, or people within the African American community?
11. Before converting to Islam, how well integrated within American society did you feel?
12. When you first converted to Islam, how well integrated did you feel within the African American community?
13. When you first converted to Islam, how well integrated did you feel within the Muslim community?
14. Before Islam, what were your observations or thoughts on how race impacted society, and impacted you in particular?
15. After Islam, what are your observations or thoughts on how race impacts society, and impacts you in particular?
16. Before Islam, how would you classify yourself first? A black man? A Christian man? An American?
17. After Islam, how do you classify yourself first? A black man? A Muslim? An American?
18. After Islam, what has changed in terms of your friendships? What is the racial make-up of the friends you associate with?
19. Before Islam, what was the most important thing in your life?
20. After Islam, what is the most important thing in your life?
21. How do you think Islam has changed your views on race and society?

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Abdullah Alnassar received his Master of Arts in 2013. He was employed as a sociology instructor from 2019 until 2021 focusing on social and cultural issues. Abdullah is earned his doctorate in sociology in 2021.