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Latinas Converting to Islam in New York: Habitus' influence in modern identity formation

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Latinas Converting to Islam in New York: Habitus' influence in modern identity formation

by

Amalia G. Alonzo

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Bryan S. Turner

[This paper explores the topic of religious conversion in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, with a focus on Catholic Latina converts to Sunni Islam. Bourdieu suggests that these types of religious choices are not choices at all, but predetermined by an individual's history, culture, and setting. That is, an individual already has dispositions that are taken for granted. While this study's participants report that Islam is a new religion for them and not a continuation of their Catholic faith (as habitus would suggest), this study shows that these converts retain dispositions that are consistent with their previous religious identity. However, there are limits to the theory of habitus when analyzing complex patterns of behavior including religious conversion. Therefore, a theory of reflexive-identity formation is also considered. I argue that these Latina converts are breaking down traditional religious boundaries and, in doing so, they embody the complexity of a modern identity.]

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Introduction

While the exact number differs from source to source, it is consistent that women convert to Islam at a higher rate than men (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999; Wagtendonk 1994; Haleem 2003). This trend undermines common assumptions about Islam, modernity, and traditions. Muslim women undergo a vast amount of scrutiny for belonging to a religion presumed to subjugate women. While some accuse Muslim women of being submissive, weak, oppressed, and victims of Islam, others are more supportive of their traditions, characters, and religion. Women converting to Islam in modern, secular societies are a phenomenon because they challenge fixed notions about traditional religions. Therefore, female converts provide a rich opportunity to analyze a variety of popular misconceptions.

This is a study about Catholic Latinas converting to Islam in New York City. Latina Muslims are a group who challenge traditional notions of religion, culture, and identity. They defy labels that have been maintained and reinforced by time and society. While religious conversion offers a number of points for analysis, this research focuses primarily on influences that facilitate Latinas' conversion to Islam and the significance of their conversion in terms of understanding modern identity construction.

First, the literature review discusses conversion and habitus. The literature review on conversion is drawn primarily from the American philosopher and psychologist William James. *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) investigates different forms of religious experiences including religious conversion. James remains an important figure in the study of religious experience. He sympathizes with individuals' religious experiences and analyzes their spiritual and psychological developments.

Important historical factors have encouraged and discouraged certain religions from being embraced. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (1996), edited by Peter van der Veer, contains a variety of historical accounts concerning the spread of Christianity mostly during colonial periods. It examines multiple cases of colonialism reproducing new discourses of modernity based on the spread of Western popular religion. The topics of Christianity, colonialism, and modernity contribute to the final discussion on the significance of Latinas converting to Islam in New York City.

The habitus provides a sociological framework for understanding religious conversion and makes connections to internal mechanisms that could explain possible motivations for converts choosing particular religions. I use Bourdieu's concept of habitus because it is connected to the notion of practice. Bodily practices and habitus are suggested to reinforce one another. Daniel Winchester explains the relationship between habitus and practice, "In simpler terms, habitus is an embodied set of durable yet flexible dispositions that serve to generate practices that are structured by existing patterns of social life yet able to re-structure, in turn these very same patterns" (Winchester, 2008:1758). In terms of religion, bodily practices strengthen religious habitus and vice versa.

Reasons for religious conversion consist of personal crisis, dissatisfaction with previous religion, or as previously stated historical, political incentives. Bourdieu suggests that each individual has a pre-structured set of dispositions that subconsciously guide his or her choices, the habitus. It generates and organizes practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to an individual's outcomes (Bourdieu, 1984: 93). Habitus, as understood by Bourdieu, allows for a deep sociological analysis of common internal social factors shared by both Latinos and Islam that account for religious conversion into a new group.

Nonetheless, habitus is also the topic of criticisms that are reviewed from scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Matthew Adams, and Mark Featherstone. Their criticisms are important to the study because they question the application of Bourdieu's habitus in the present and especially in modern identity formation. Because habitus suggests that choices are predetermined by one's historically formed social structures, and bodily practices are argued to reinforce a habitus, habitus becomes problematic in terms of reconstructing one's self-identity. Modern identity construction is important to this study because it concerns two groups that carry with them sharply defined social identities: Latina and Muslim. Both categories are deeply intertwined with their specific culture and leave little space for flexibility; therefore, a fixed connotation is attached to both Latino and Muslim identity. As Latinas straddle a Muslim identity, their external bodily practices are modified to embody a new identity produced through a conscious, reflexive self-discipline.

Next, I argue that these Latina converts subconsciously chose a new religion with similar, internal religious and social structures as their existing habitus. The mechanism of habitus replicates internal structures that are subconscious. However, the external, conscious bodily practices converts have acquired such as fasting, praying, wearing a hijab, and not eating pork challenge the role of Bourdieu's habitus and practice in their new identity construction. Latina converts test the influence of the habitus in our globalized society. My study throws light on how habitus and identity formation conflict and enable one other. The study outlines Latinas' conversion experiences to Sunni Islam demonstrating an enriched reflexive identity formation and an inscribed habitus.

The study itself examines Latinas' habitus and its susceptibility towards Islam. Interviews were conducted via Facebook Chat with converts and fieldwork involved

attending classes offered to new converts. The objectives for this study include identifying the social, religious structures inscribed in Catholic Latinas, and analyzing the internal mechanisms for their dispositions to Islam. The external, conscious practices converts engage in are also presented. External conscious practices are directly tied to identity construction and modernity. The incorporation of Latina converts' experiences is included in the study.

Finally, a discussion on the significance of Catholic Latina converts to Islam in a modern, secular society completes the project. Latina converts become visual representatives of a new religious identity. Their highly fluid identities point towards a modern trend that challenges traditional notions about “regressive” religions, Islam, modernity, and stereotypes.

Literature Review

What is Conversion?

William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) discusses the spiritual and psychological aspects of conversion. James focuses primarily on how converts spiritually engaged with their new faith and that moment of religious immersion into a new religion. He recognizes individual's susceptibility to religion and spiritual guidance. By analyzing their personal religious narratives of conversion, James tries to define what makes certain individuals more susceptible to religious conversion than others.

According to James, religious conversion occurs as an individual experiences both hot and cold moments. James defines hot moments as strong emotional, exciting feelings. "When hot moments remain permanently in one's system, and if it is a religious experience, it is called a conversion. To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy" (James, 1902: 196). Nobody knows, not even the convert, how an experience can change their center of energy. There are two things in the mind of the candidate for conversion: First, the present incompleteness or wrongness, the "sin" which he is eager to escape from; and second, the positive ideal which he longs to compass (James, 1902: 209). A religious conversion revolves around a crisis and emotions of an incomplete life. James believes that happiness is an individual's primary goal in life and their motivation in all of her or his life's work, "We must also acknowledge that the more complex ways of experiencing religion are new manners of producing happiness" (James, 1902: 71). In this manner, James encourages a sympathetic understanding of religious conversion as an individual's vehicle towards genuine happiness.

Religious conversions are not always personal, voluntary acts. *Conversion to Modernities* (1996) is a series of historical accounts retracing the relationship between colonialism and Christianity. While James focuses on the individual's experience of religious conversion, *Conversion to Modernities* centers on political power structures that encouraged the spread of Christianity. This book analyzes how colonialism impacted the West's view of modernity and its use of religion as a tool to claim modernity as a partner of Christianity.

Peter van Roden argues that in the late nineteenth century, Western Christians interpreted the status of Christianity in their own societies by its popularity abroad. Therefore, Protestants, Christians, Catholics, and Orthodox stopped opposing missionary endeavors and deemed them extremely worthy of their efforts and resources, "Views of the relationship between civilization and piety, between societal transformation and individual conversion, were shared by all" (van Roden, 1996: 84). This reflects the West's perception of Christianity as a superior religion. New populations were hence viewed as subjects to be dominated not only through territory and government, but spiritually as well.

Public skepticism often follows the convert. The practice of conversion is questioned for its authenticity. How sincere is the convert? Did they really convert? Judith Pollman argues that although converts emphatically professed a new religion, their conversion narratives were often written in response to political attacks challenging their new spiritual character. For instance, Pollman uncovers that in seventeenth century France, the Protestants (a minority) attempted to hold on to their religion by pairing religious conversion with false consciousness. They attempted to invalidate French Protestants' religious conversion to Catholicism by claiming: "The less one gains materially and politically from one's religious affiliation, the more sincere it is" (Pollman, 1996: 11). Skepticism encourages doubt and

suspicion in part because of the important consequences that converts carry. Religious conversion is powerful because of its ability to refashion social and political boundaries. Historically, it provided governments with leverage to dominate its citizens. Consequently, citizens were often forced to convert in order to gain security. The spread of religious conversion has not been detained by modernity or secularism, in fact, religious conversion is strongly protected by secularism.

The Habitus

Bourdieu's concept of the habitus has been widely used by sociologists, educators, and anthropologists, and it provides an insightful framework for internal mechanisms that Bourdieu argues manifest an individual's predispositions. In other words, individuals are "preprogrammed" to have certain preferences. The habitus is formed through the system of an individual. "The system" is one's social setting. An individual's economic conditions, cultural group, political structure, and society conjure up a system with rules and norms, both written and unwritten, that shapes a person. He argues that habitus is "a system of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). That is, he suggests that one's social conditioning pre-programs people to have certain tastes, needs, and tendencies specific to their particular social class.

Bourdieu goes on to suggest that these specific, personal preferences are reproduced subconsciously. In this sense, the habitus guides the individual towards certain dispositions that have been previously shaped by one's history. For example, William James recalls when he was young, his father read aloud from a Boston newspaper, which four of his lectures are now

founded on, about Lord Gifford. James recalls how it did not mean anything to him at the time and he was not even considering being a teacher of philosophy, “Yet here I am, with the Gifford system part and parcel of my very self” (James, 1902: 149). Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus suggests that this was indeed a product of James’ ‘structuring structures’ that inclined him to make this particular choice.

Critics of Bourdieu find habitus problematic for analyses of identity-formation. If Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is accurate, then it posits a point of contention for new identity formation. The habitus is to be reproduced through subconscious processes that dictate one’s dispositions toward certain choices; “A feel for the game” is Bourdieu’s frequently cited phrase. An individual is theoretically programmed to routinely make decisions which are subconsciously guided by his or her habitus. However, some scholars, particularly reflexivity theorists (Anthony Giddens, Matthew Adams, and Mark Featherstone), criticize this notion.

Reflexivity explains the decision-making processes individuals employ to construct their identity and entails conscious decisions that individuals make as they decide what aspects to integrate into their identities. Featherstone argues: “Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity, and the assemblages of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearances, and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle” (Featherstone, 1991: 86). Reflexivity scholars argue that the contemporary self is a part of a highly consumerist society able to continuously make and remake its identity. First, individuals are no longer a part of traditional and static societies. Second, they have multiple lifestyles, products, and groups to choose from. Third, people practice agency in every decision they make to construct their identity(ies). Instead of

the habitus' subconscious, internal mechanics that make choices for individuals, reflexive scholars argue that individuals are continuously engaged in making choices that permit them to consciously convert their identity in multiple ways.

Matthew Adams argues that Bourdieu's concept of habitus and practice is too deterministic and eliminates the notion of agency. "Notwithstanding its generative abilities, agency is still a bounded process, compromised and attenuated, via habitus, by social structure and unconsciousness to the point where the applicability of the term "agency" is stretched to its limits" (Adams, 2006: 515). If one is preprogrammed to make certain choices, where does the habitus leave room for an individual's autonomy?

Although reflexivity theorists propose a solution to the gap between habitus and identity formation, they have also undergone criticism for being too voluntaristic. Adams "accuses the extended reflexivity thesis of employing an excessively weak concept of social structure which fails to account for the restraints on agency which either persist in contemporary societies, or are novel to them" (Adams, 2006: 513). On one hand, the habitus proves to be far too deterministic and on the other hand reflexivity is limited to being far too voluntaristic.

Despite the complexity behind habitus and identity in the present, religious conversion offers an interesting opportunity to evaluate the extent to which habitus continues to play a role in an individual's tastes and dispositions in today's diverse society. Throughout this study, the tensions between habitus and reflexivity are considered. It is argued that this group of Latina converts' habitus guided them, subconsciously, towards Islam due to its similar internal social structures shared with the Latino Catholic culture. However, the limits of the habitus on conscious, reflexive-identity formation (particularly through external, bodily practices) are analyzed.

Argument

Latina converts demonstrate how traditional religious boundaries are redrawn. Tradition is a concept, ritual, practice, or belief that has been reinforced by time and society. It continuously reproduces practices and structures that solidify its social significance, thus establishing its fixed status in society. Boundaries emerge in order to protect traditions from external threats. Threats can be posed from new people, new ideas, and new technology that carry change as a common denominator. Even in prehistoric archaeology, native societies were considered to be stagnant by American anthropologists. According to Bruce Trigger, “the more obvious changes in the archaeological record were attributed to ethnic movements that had carried static cultures from one region to the other” (Trigger, 1980: 662). As individuals attach themselves to new spaces and groups, new lifestyles develop. Inevitably, human exchange and cultural formation have always engaged in processes of redefinition and since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the advancement of technology and migration precipitated the interconnection of social groups and their influences on tradition.

Whereas religious identities could not be divorced from one’s culture in the past, today Latina converts demonstrate a clear re-shifting of previously established religious identity markers. Customary Muslim identity is perceived to be Middle Eastern. A Latino Muslim is striking for the public at large. A Latina speaking Arabic, adopting an Arabic name, and wearing a hijab embodies a contemporary trend that transcends conventional religious and cultural stereotypes. She represents a high level of fluidity between religious boundaries that deconstruct once fixed religious identities. These are consequences of living in an interconnected, diverse society.

How does the concept of habitus fit in with religious conversion? Although critics suggest that habitus is overly deterministic and does not leave space for agency to play a role, these Latina converts demonstrate that despite traditional religious barriers being broken in a modern multi-faith society, the habitus continues to act “as a system of cognitive and motivational structures, procedures to follow and paths to take” (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). I argue that Latina converts chose a religion (Islam) predetermined by their ‘native’ religion and cultural habitus. Guided by their habitus, these converts, found a religion that shares similar internal structures with Catholicism and retains strong ties to their cultural and social structures. These structures are durable, internal, and subconscious, and therefore these women feel that their new religion, new community, new practices, new ideas, and new beliefs are breaking with their old religion, but in fact it is their old religion that guided them towards their new religion. These apparently new ideas are subconsciously guided by their habitus (dispositions) into making a conscious decision of entering a new religious group. The habitus does not remove agency from the converts. However, it subconsciously guides converts towards the familiar, but the converts exercise agency at the moment of conversion and thereafter.

The next question is: If Latina Catholic converts share a habitus so similar to Islam, why would they convert to Islam? Why would they not remain Catholic? First, one has to look at the understanding of “conversion.” Religious conversion defines an individual transferring from one religion to another. Conversion is based on the assumption that the individual’s first religion was practiced, believed, and followed. Latina convert, Minerva, states, “*I wasn't religious but I was baptized catholic.*” A person’s original religion is implied to have a convert’s faith and devotion. An individual is typically born into the religion his or her parents practice, this religion being his or her native religion. All Latina converts in this study expressed the view that

they were never legitimately convinced of their native religion. Although they followed it to an extent, they expressed their doubts to religious leaders several times. Latina converts mention that they would get mixed, contradictory, incomplete, and insufficient responses that would encourage further questioning about Catholicism. Although they practiced Catholicism because it was their 'native' religion, their loyalty to Catholicism was challenged multiple times.

There exists a difference between loyalty and faith. Albert O. Hirschman's, *Exit Voice and Loyalty* (1970), is based on the theory of market economy. Hirschman makes an important distinction between loyalty and faith. Their meanings are conducive to exploring the rationality of converts in choosing a new religion. Faith, Hirschman argues, is not logical because it is based on the irrational idea that over a period of time, the right turns will more than balance the wrong ones. In other words, a faithful individual believes that dissatisfactions will eventually improve; therefore, they remain with the group. Loyalty and loyalist behavior, on the other hand, retain an enormous dose of reasoned calculation (Hirschman, 1970: 78-79). Loyalty can neutralize within certain limits the tendency of the most quality-conscious customers or members to be the first to exit (Hirschman, 1970: 79). Loyalty is what holds exit at bay. Under this argument, converts are seen as rational thinking individuals that have loyalty as opposed to the irrational concept of faith. However, loyalty holds an expiration date if their voice fails to be taken into consideration.

In a way, converts are like consumers within secular societies. Their secular and diverse environment provides them the opportunity to gain exposure to a large amount of religious lifestyles, their secular environment guarantees them the protection to exit their native religion and enter a new religious group. Hirschman argues that when members of a group are dissatisfied with the services they are receiving, they consider exiting the group and begin

searching for another group that would offer them comparable services for a lower price or better service for the same price. What prevents dissatisfied customers from exiting the group, according to Hirschman, are two things; loyalty and voice. If group members are unable to exercise their voice in order to be provided with opportunities to change their religion. Exiting the Catholic religious structure is predictable when applying Hirschman's theory.

A member has to be able to exercise the concept of voice in an effective manner to incite the organization to change. If the voice of the dissatisfied customer encourages the organization to change its structure or services, the customer will feel valued and the organization will maintain his or her loyalty. However, if voice is activated and the organization continues to ignore the customer, then the organization will lose his or her loyalty and the customer will find another comparable organization. In addition to this, the member has to be valued enough within the organization to have a strong voice. If the member does not have the opportunities to voice his or her dissatisfaction, their loyalty will terminate.

Hirschman's theory of loyalty provides an analysis for a potential convert's reason for conversion. If women's dissatisfaction is not valued in the Catholic Church, then the Church is unable to maintain their loyalty and according to Hirschman, exit follows. Willy Jansen makes a similar connection in her research on conversion and gender. Jansen questions why women convert, especially to Islam, due to the highly contested topic of gender. In her argument she concludes that "due to their social position, women often have less power of agency in many fields, including religion, therefore the autonomy of the person in accepting religious beliefs is less recognized for women than for men" (Jansen, 2009: X). If women hold lower social position and power within their religious organizations, then they are less able to practice a high

level of voice within their religious group, therefore, promoting exit. This is in no way simple for the group of converts because they face high risks in exiting their religious faith.

Revert highlights Islam's belief that every person is born a Muslim. The Quran states, as a child, one is born with a natural state of surrender, submission, obedience, and peace with his Creator, specifically under Islam (TheTruereligion.org). Latina converts (and several other converts to Islam) refer to themselves as reverts. Revert stresses a convert's original ties to Islam and eliminates ties to their native religion. Revert is a term of resistance; resistance against tradition, native religion, and assigned identities. Therefore, religious conversion to non-Western religions in secular societies can also be viewed as an act of resistance and agency.

Methodology

This study takes place in New York City. It consists of twenty interviews with Latina Catholic converts to Islam. Muslim Education and Converts Center of America (M.E.C.C.A) offers a variety of religious courses for new members to Islam. I attended weekend sessions in which the Quran was interpreted, da'wa lessons were given, and 'sister circles' narrating challenges new members faced as new converts. The Institutional Review Board provided permission to conduct interviews via Facebook only. Through these interviews, Latina converts answered questions such as: Can you tell me about your personal history? Did you grow up Catholic? When and how did you learn about Islam? When and why did you decide to convert? What happened next? How has your life changed? Some of the responses are in Spanish. I have translated them into English next to their Spanish response. Their responses are in a chat friendly format. I tried to make them more legible, but I also did not change them much because I want to keep the converts' voices as genuine as possible. Their religious conversion experiences are integrated throughout the study.

Habitus and Latina Converts

Latina Converts to Islam

Who is a Latina? According to Elizabeth Martinez, “Latinas like Latinos are in general a mestizo or mixed people. They combine, in varying degrees, indigenous (from pre-Columbian times), European (from Spain’s invasion of the Americas), and African roots (from the millions of slaves brought to the Americas, including at least two hundred thousand to Mexico alone). Today in the United States, Latinas include women whose background links them to some twenty countries and going back one, two, or ten generations” (Martinez, 1995: 1019). This study analyzes repetitive values found within Latino culture. It draws comparisons from similar habitus’ found in Latino culture and Islam. The section on Latino culture focuses on social, family, and collective structures and roles. The section on religion will focus on the religious power dynamics commonly shared between Catholic Latinos and the Muslim community.

According to Haifaa Jawaad, the term “conversion” has no equivalent translation in Arabic. Jawaad instead focuses on the idea of submitting oneself to God and becoming Muslim and denotes this description belongs to the word “Islam” itself. (Jawaad, 2009: 155). “Islam denotes an act of submission and envisages not only the acceptance of the outward forms of any one particular prophet’s practice, not even that of the seal of the prophet, Muhammad. Rather, the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all those prophets, from Noah, through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to the seal of the prophets, Muhammad” (Dutton, 1999: 153). Unlike William James’ definition of conversion, focused more on the experience that brings the individual up to the point of conversion, Jawaad defines conversion as the specific moment of submitting oneself to Islam. Becoming Muslim,

continues Jawaad, must be declared publicly in front of two witnesses (*shahadah*). Afterwards, the new member is supposed to live by the five pillars of Islam; praying five times per day, payment of the annual alms-tax (*zakat*), fasting during Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition, no pork, consuming halal meat, and prohibition of alcohol are also obligatory. Some new Muslims also take new Islamic names (Jawaad, 2009: 155).

Converts believe that they have experienced profound changes due to their external new practices. These conscious choices affect their lifestyle; diet, dress, and prayers making them feel closer to God spiritually within a community that socially reinforces that idea. The new life style conjures up a new identity. The new practices of the convert are applied in practical conscious ways that retain their inherent subconscious conditions. They are the internal structures that lie within their new modes of practicing their new religion. These new practices and lifestyle need to be examined in terms of the habitus.

“There is also the idea of respect and honor of parents and elders (with regard to cultural similarities)”-Melissa

The values of family and patriarchy undergird the Latino and Islamic culture. A patriarchal system relies on the premise of accepting the male authoritative role within the family structure. It is reflected in the social hierarchy, gender roles, family relations, etc. shared by both cultures. Gloria Anzaldua’s important contribution to Latina feminist studies, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987) tackles challenges in the traditionally strong patriarchy inherent within Latino culture. Anzaldua argues that Latino (specifically Mexican from her experience) culture expects women to show greater commitment to its value system than men, “The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala* (bad woman). If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman” (Anzaldua, 1987: 39). Men are

expected to take a central role in the decision making and women are expected to take a nurturing role within the home.

Second, the socially acceptable behavior women are expected to practice is a respectable and modest demeanor within and outside of households that reflects a good upbringing thereby reinforcing the social structures inherent in the two communities. Practicing socially acceptable behaviors within the new community promotes a sense of belonging. The Latina converts describe positive emotions brought by their conversion such as respect and security amidst their new community, especially within the male population. A'ishah, a Latina convert, compares Islam with Mexico,

“you know that in Mexico you can't leave your home until you're married, or when they ask for your hand in marriage, they have to speak to your father, or like in Islam you have to take care of your parents and always respect them just like in Mexico.”

However, it repeats the notion of women needing to be cared for by a male figure in order to feel secure. This positions men in a socially acceptable hierarchal dominating position in relation to women.

Another inherent Latino value shared with Islam is the concept of familism. The term 'familism' refers to a model of social organization, based on “a collective orientation in which family roles and obligations are highly valued, and the well-being of the family group takes precedence over the interests of each of its members” (Vega, 1995). Sabogal et al. (1987) found that Latinos report stronger familistic attitudes when compared to whites and Yvonne Haddad argues that “Latinas and Native American women often see in Islam elements that resonate with their own cultures, such as respect for family and elders, appreciation of the rhythms of nature, and the integration of religious and spiritual beliefs with the whole of life” (Haddad, 2006:

46). Latina convert Aishah Ayan adds to Haddad's argument in her comparisons between Catholicism and Islam

catolico: cren en respetar a nuestros padres(believe and respect our parents)

islam: cremos que ay q respetar mucho a nuestros padres, el profeta Mohamed, le dijo a uno d sus apostales, el vino y le dijo a profeta, queien tiene derecho en mi, el profeta dijo, tu madre, el pregutno luego, tu madre, y luego tu madre y luego tu madre y luego tu padre(we believe you have to respect our parents alot, the Prophet Mohammed, told one of his apostles. He came and asked the prophet, who has a right over me?, the prophet said, your mother, he(the apostle) asked Next?, (the prophet replied) your mother, and then your mother, and then your father

catolico: mas antes avia dichos que las mujeres no tienen alma eso pasaba el los prinsipios d los 1900's (before there existed sayings that the mothers didn't have a soul and that happened at the beginnings of the 1900s)

islam: dise q unas d la llaves d el cielo esta debajo d los pies d tu madre, que la tines q respetar, y que el mejor d los hobres es el q respeta a su esposa, el islam dise mucho mas d la mujer y le da derechos como el hombre (Islam says that one of the keys to heaven is under the feet of your mother, that you must respect her)

Gloria Anzaldua elaborates on the importance of kinship in Latino culture. The individual is overshadowed by the welfare of the family. Anzaldua argues, "In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue"(Anzaldua, 1987: 40). Familism is a common thread amongst Latinos. Loyalty to the family overrules loyalty to self.

The values of familism and patriarchy have been challenged by the Latino community, but are immediately labeled as Anti-Latino movements by the majority. This signals the strength of these highly developed norms within Latino communities. Alma Gomez (1973) argued that the Chicana Feminist movement of the 1970s clashed heavily with Chicano culture in general. Latina Feminists were portrayed as being anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-man and therefore, anti-Chicano. The group of feminists advocating later marriage, more education and

labor opportunities, in addition to challenging the Chicano patriarchal structure were received with a largely negative stigma. They represented the opposite of Chicano ideology and therefore were attacked as betraying their culture. In addition to the Chicana Feminist struggle, Alma Garcia describes male supremacy against such Chicanas. They were accused of being traitors to their people and their culture. It is clear that such patriarchal dispositions have been inherent in Latino culture. Challenging the traditional perception of male dominance and unity of the family is challenging Latino culture in its totality.

Another continuation of the habitus amongst converts is the religious institution. There remains a central figure that has a male, charismatic prophet that passed down his message through scriptures. Following this structure, religious authority is delegated amongst his followers. The structures of both religions are also delegated by male figures that stand at the front of the building to lead the assembly. In Christianity, priests are centered in the front and deliver the sermon while in Islam the imam is the leader and delivers the Quranic verses. The inherent religious structure remains the same in both religions, therefore, converts do not need to negotiate on reconfiguring their religious structure.

The continuation of maintaining a connection to Jesus Christ within the transition to Islam is important for Latino Catholic converts. The central charismatic figure within Christianity remains a central key figure within Islam. In fact, during the *shahadah* (the oath that marks ones acceptance and membership into Islam) the name Jesus Christ is mentioned in addition to acknowledging His role as a messenger of God. Angeles says:

“there is only one God, no sons, He is the auto-creator, Jesus is a Prophet not a son, and Mohammed is the last Prophet.”

It is not only in the *shahadah* that converts are reminded about Jesus Christ’s role in Islam; it is also mentioned in the Koran. The fact that Islam acknowledges a key role of these figures is important for converts such as Aisha:

“And I, as a Muslim, also believe in Jesus (peace be upon Him) because if one Muslim does not believe in Jesus it’s because they are really not a Muslim but we know that Jesus is a Prophet as well like Mohammed, Moses, etc. But Jesus never told us to adore him because the only one that we should adore is god the only and owner of heaven and the earth.”-Aisha

Converts do not need to break their ties with Jesus, they can continue to connect with Him through Islam because He is one of the God’s prophets. Melissa refers to not only Jesus Christ as having an important role within Islam, but the Virgin Mary as well:

We both (Islam and Catholicism) share a respect for The Virgin Mary, as well as Jesus Christ. Many people don't know it, but in order to be a sincere Muslim, you have to believe in Christ. The only difference is, we don't see him as the son of God. We see him (peace be upon him) as a messenger, and we also believe that he is the savior, (i.e., he will return to the world and enlighten mankind)- Melissa

The 1990 Mexican Nobel Laureate in Literature, Octavio Paz, famously stated, “The Mexican people, after more than two centuries of experiments and defeats, have faith only in the Virgin of Guadalupe and the National Lottery.” In Christianity the Virgin Mary is believed to be the mother of Jesus Christ that gave birth to Him through divine intervention. There are several apparitions of the Virgin Mary that have been officially recognized by the Catholic Church, one of which is very popular in Mexico is the account of the Virgin Mary appearing four times to an indigenous man on a hilltop in Mexico City. The story goes that she gave him roses that were not grown in the region and told him to take them to the bishop and to remove his traditional dress shirt in front of the bishop. Once Juan Diego did this, the Virgin Mary’s image was painted onto his shirt. San Diego delivered the Virgin Mary’s message to the bishop stating that she wanted a church built on the hilltop for herself. Every year many pilgrims go to Mexico City and pay tribute to this event. So the Virgin Mary is often referred to as “La Virgen de Guadalupe” and holds a very special place in Mexican Catholic culture and society. Yolanda Lopez is a famous Mexican Artist from California renowned for her series on the Virgin de Guadalupe. “I see the *Virgen* de Guadalupe as being the great Aztec goddess and I think that’s one of the

reasons why she has such a strong, indefinable hold on Mexicans and women in general. It's more primordial. I think the great Aztec goddess, *Cuatlique*, depicts the primal forces in nature: life, death and rebirth" (Latinopia.com).

The Virgin Mary continues to carry a significant role in Islam. The Quran refers to her as 'Maryam' mother of Jesus. Loren D. Lybarger (2000) explores the role of Maryam mother of Isa (Mary mother of Jesus) in the Quran. Lybarger asserts that the Koran's narrative of Maryam stresses her purity and agrees with Christianity's view that Mary's pregnancy was a consequence of God's favor and will. She is considered to be a guide for Islamic women as Latina convert, Angeles, explains;

"Mary is mother of a prophet and should be respected. Her method of birth was unique and she is the most pure and chaste of all women and is an example for all women, she always dressed modestly and wore loose clothing like all respectable women should." - Angeles

Aida Hurtado uncovers in her article, *Hypatia* (1998), the differences in Latina culture between *Malinchismo* and *Marianismo*. Whereas *Malinchismo* is used to describe *La Malincha*, an Aztec woman historically known as the ultimate traitor of Mexico for her cooperation with the Spaniards, *Marianismo* is known as the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Hurtado argues that the Virgin Mary is the role model for womanhood, nurturer, mother, enduring pain and sorrow, and willingness to serve. (Hurtado, 1998: 41). She continues that although the root of these values stem from the Catholic Church, women are encouraged to apply them in serving their husbands and children. The maternal theme resonant with the figure of the Virgin Mary re-emerges throughout a Latino Catholic's life and history. Maria, another convert, says:

"The virgin Mary also dressed like this, and we are doing something very beautiful by imitating her, and I think that is a very special thing"-Maria

The importance of the Virgin Mary cannot be discarded or underestimated. The veneration, respect, and divinity is therefore allowed to continue within Islam. Although, not to be praised, however, respected and emulated is important for these Latina converts. They acknowledge her valuable role in Islam and some consider their use of hijab as a way of imitating the Virgin Mary's chastity.

Latina Converts' and Identity

“Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside.” Gershen Kaufman, 68

Where do identity and habitus clash or coincide? New identities, I believe, are an external engagement with new practices, traditions, and rituals. The habitus goes only as far as facilitating a transition into another similar habitus. This transition is an internal subconscious change, however, self-perception is altered with conversion and its new practices. Identity consists of bodily practices, self-perceptions, and values. Bourdieu argues that habitus is subconsciously reinforced by bodily practices, but the concept of identity also clashes with the concept of habitus. The habitus may appear to be spontaneous, but it is unchanging. It has inclined individuals to act in a pre-determined way. However, a new identity process is taking place with this group of Latina converts. Once converts make a conscious decision to enter a new religion, their external bodily practices are affected. They begin to re-make themselves through bodily practices that guarantee their exclusive membership into Islam. Jannah, a convert from Colombia explains her conversion experience:

“I started wearing hijab about four months into, I started little by little. I learned to do things step by step. I decided to do the most important things first like prayer, read Koran, and learn Arabic.”-Jannah

Wearing a hijab was an initial challenge for this group of Latina converts. Due to its high religious visibility, converts approached the hijab little by little like Jannah expressed. Converts' visual representation of Islam carries negative consequences as well. Nahela, a convert from Mexico, describes how the hijab affected her job:

“Shortly after I took shahadah (religious ritual professing Islam as your religion), I began to wear a hijab. I worked as a medical assistant for a Jewish doctor. I told him that I'd like to have a meeting because I'm going to start wearing a headscarf. It took three days to get fired. I went home, I cried, I threw myself to St. Jude, and I asked Allah too, to open whatever door and to guide me.” -Nahela

Nahela felt obligated to share her religious faith with her co-workers before her use of the hijab. The threat of public backlash or shock forces a convert to come out publicly as a Muslim. Another interesting experience from Nahela's story is that she prayed to St. Jude after being fired. It demonstrates how converts, initially, still have a natural tendency to gravitate towards the familiar and embrace the old and the new religions simultaneously.

Does the habitus play a role in determining one's new identity? In some ways the habitus leads the converts to positively engage with their new practices because it provides them with comfort given the notion that the converts were predisposed to subconscious values. For example, wearing a hijab can be derived from inherent modest values present in one's social and cultural structures. This new style of dress is a conscious decision. Although their habitus guided the Latina converts towards Islam, reflexivity has made it possible for them to consciously reconfigure their identity, and modernity has broken down traditional barriers that once discouraged strong identity transformations.

Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that the "self" has now become a reflexive project. Whereas traditionally stable and cohesive societies discouraged new diverse identities from developing so easily, modernity's consumerist, and diverse society enables emerging new identities. Individuals are now more likely to reflect upon the identity they wish to project onto the public and experience internally.

"In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options." (Giddens, 1991: 5).

Latina converts are representative of modernity's increasingly fluid identities. They embody Giddens' reflexive project of the self.

Muslims possess a strongly marked identity that enables a commonly fixed conception over their physical appearance. After 9/11, Islam received an enormous amount of scrutiny and it has been well documented that Muslim were targeted by the public. A 2011 Pew Research Center Report found that 52% of Muslims said they were singled out by government anti-terrorism policies for increased surveillance and monitoring. The report also stated that the less than 1% U.S. Muslim population is extremely diverse, in addition to belonging to no particular single race or ethnicity applying to more than 30% of the Muslim population. However, the fact that 52% of Muslims reported to be singled out for inspection indicates the high level of generalizations the public maintains over Muslim's physical appearance. Minerva describes her first experience wearing a hijab and being targeted by others for representing Islam:

"When I started wearing a hijab some people didn't recognize me . I work retail and a customer come and looked at me and asked if it was Halloween, I went to get my hair done the people that have been doing my hair for over a year weren't looking at me and didn't want to take care of me. they're Asian and speaking about me, I starting to get upset and tears were starting to run down my face I took off my hijab and then they knew who I was, then they took care of me, and apologize to me, til this day when I remember or tell someone about it I cry, but now I know that it was a test, other than that I haven't had real challenges yet, but I have faith that Allah is there and he knows how much I can handle."-Minerva

The stereotypes developed and continued to be reinforced by the media, courts, policies, politicians, and public at large.

Latino identity is also a strongly marked identity. Intertwined with Latino identity come cultural stereotypes involving one's physical appearance, language, and religion. Latina converts demonstrate a possibility to reimagine traditionally fixed identities in that no identity can be fixed in modernity. Alheli describes her encounter with Islam:

“I went on a mission trip to the capital: Mexico City. During my trip there I met this guy and his wife. They were missionaries in Morocco, they showed me the Qur’an; an Arabic Qur’an. I held it on (in) my hands and fell in love with the complicity and uniqueness of the language. Of course I didn’t understand a single word but it was so beautiful! About two weeks after that I met another missionary and he showed me how Muslims prayed. It was enigmatic to me. As soon as I came home I started to study the Bible way more and I found out many contradictions in it. No pastor could answer my questions and I felt betrayed. I was confused, I felt lost. Everything I believed in was a lie and I didn’t know what to do, where to go; so I remembered that Qur’an I had seen months before and started my research on Islam. I searched about it on google and read on Islamic websites...I read, read, and read”

Opportunities to remake a self-identity are increased in an interconnected world. On one hand Latinas and on the other, Muslims present a dynamic illustration of traditional religious boundaries being crossed and erased. Previously fixed conceptions held over strongly marked identities perpetuate misconceptions over what certain groups should look like. They are defining culture in the moment and reflect how misconceptions and stereotypes will continue to be broken down in the future.

Ketner, Buitelaar, and Bosma (2004) draw attention to the concept of identity, specifically “assigned” identity vs. “asserted” identity. They argue that migrant identity is an “assigned” identity, but the Muslim identity can be an “asserted” identity, an identity that is chosen. In today’s consumerist culture, asserted identities can be collected reflexively. Whereas “Latina” can be an assigned identity, “Muslim” can be an asserted identity for converts. As a constantly reiterated cultural norm, identity is deeply inscribed in the body. However, Latina converts transcend their assigned label through their new religion. Their asserted identity and assigned identity provide a space for resistance, self-determinism, and re-conceptualization of a socially constructed identity.

Latina converts offer a compromise for critics of reflexivity and habitus. They provide an example of the habitus’ continuing influence upon today’s consumerist, diverse, and modern

society. The habitus influenced their choice to convert to Islam and critics who say habitus is too deterministic, can look at Latina converts' rational, conscious decision to enter Islam. Although their habitus made them predisposed to Islam, converts exercised agency to finally convert. Furthermore, they continued to reflect upon the new religious practices they incorporated into their new identity, and are slowly constructing a new habitus. Giddens' critics argue reflexivity is far too voluntaristic and doesn't allow for factors that are beyond individual's control, which is where habitus becomes its response. Latina converts engage in choosing a new lifestyle and identity, but they were predisposed to the Islamic lifestyle via their habitus.

As converts begin to re-conceptualize their religious identity, they engage in new and conscious bodily practices. These practices guarantee their membership into their new Islamic faith. They include praying five times per day, abstaining from pork, alcohol, eating halal, wearing a hijab and loose fitting clothing, taking religious classes, and fasting. The new practices force Latina converts to be more reflexive of their actions and behaviors. It draws similarities to Bryan Turner's (2013) analysis on the body and illnesses. When bodies suffer a shock or crisis, individuals are much more aware of the movements projected by the body. Therefore, they become more conscious of their external movements. In a sense, converts experience a similar situation with their newfound religion. They make conscious efforts to fulfill their new religious-lifestyle by changing their diet, dress, and prayer routines. Jannah, a convert, explains that it was not easy for her to identify as a Muslim at the beginning, "*Is this not for me? Am I trying to fit in? Is this just for Arabs?*" Jannah emphasizes that her Muslim friends did not create tension, but her ethnicity and race caused her much grief. She demonstrates that initially, she had to consciously reflect upon the change of identity she was going undertaking with her new religion.

Through the external religious bodily practices Latina converts are engaging in, they are expanding their bodily practices in order to reconfigure their moral values. Sisters Circle is an event by M.E.C.C.A that provides a space to voice challenges that new converts encounter. When Yasmin spoke up, she expressed her difficulty in creating a modest personality:

“That is just not my personality, I am not shy and quiet. But I know I have to keep making da’wa and reading the Koran like the Imaam says. Alhamdullilah (thank God) I have improved, but it is still very difficult.”

Daniel Winchester studied a community of adult Muslim converts in Missouri. He argues that “converts did not see their practices as derivative of an already fully-formed moral reason, but rather understood practices such as prayer and fasting as central to the ongoing development of their new moral selves” (Winchester, 2008: 1755). Latina converts attend classes for new Muslims. In these classes, they learn how to pray, Quran recitations, Arabic, and good Muslim habits. They express facing challenges about how to develop a nature more suitable for Islam. Through prayer and hadith classes they are ideally supposed to form a more pious character. A “good” Muslim demeanor favors shyness, and humility. They are desirable feminine virtues.

Winchester follows Saba Mahmood’s argument in *Politics of Piety* (2011). Although Mahmood did not research Muslim converts, she does her fieldwork in Cairo with a Muslim women’s group. In her work, Mahmood uncovers the development of pious natures through bodily practices. She argues that moral selves are inculcated by disciplinary bodily movements established within Islam. Latina converts face important challenges in their process of conversion. On one hand, they must grow accustomed to new religious practices and on the other, they must develop new moral selves via religious, bodily practices.

Modernity is reorganizing traditionally established practices, however, not in a typically organized manner. Identities are spilling out of tightly defined categories and challenging stereotypes. Latina converts provide an excellent portrayal of this idea. Aisha describes her parents' inability to separate culture from religion at the beginning of her religious conversion:

“Mis papas son catolicos y ellos no querian que fuera musulmana llego a un nivel que mi mama me dijo que no hera au hija porque yo soy mexicana y por algo dios hiso que naciera catolica, ellos confunden la religion con la cultura (my parents are Catholics and they did not want me to be Muslim, it reached a state that my mom told me that I wasn't her daughter because I am Mexican and for some reason God made me be born a Catholic, they confuse religion with culture)”-Aisha

They project an external Islamic image to the public by wearing a hijab, mixing Arabic phrases in their English/Spanish conversations, and other religious behaviors. Yet they remain Latina internally. They speak Spanish, love their traditional food, and maintain the same cultural memories. Latina converts continuously remind their families that only their religion is different, they are still Latinas. It is not only difficult for their families, but Latina converts also express sentiments of rejection by some Muslims. They are negatively affected by both groups' rejection. These women cannot be Latina enough without Catholicism or Muslim enough without an Arab background. Despite the resistance from Latinos, Muslims, and converts (resisting traditional boundaries) there is no doubt that individuals are reacting to an increasingly diverse society in ways that break down strongly defined categories and labels.

Conclusion

About thirty years after Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus, it continues to play an important role in theories of dispositions. Latina converts demonstrate that through an internal social structure of personal schemes of perception, they were predisposed to Islam. Their taste for Islam encouraged them to choose it as their religion because it shared similar internal social structures converts were already exposed to.

Through bodily practices, the habitus is supposed to be reinforced and continuously reproduced subconsciously, however, this is where the limits of habitus are challenged by today's diverse society. As Giddens and other reflexivity scholars argue, the consumerist culture exposes individuals to a plethora of lifestyles and practices. Without the historical negative legal and political repercussions for deviating from one's religious group, Latina converts intentionally converted to Islam. Not bounded by religious persecution, and dissatisfied with their 'native' religion, Latina converts chose to enter a faith with new practices, rituals, and traditions, yet their habitus continued to play a role in their decision-making process.

As Latina converts continue to develop their religious practices, they are also fine tuning their moral value system. These are not subconscious practices that fall in line with their habitus, but rather very conscious practices that are redefining their habitus. By remaking their external and internal selves, Latina converts prove to play a strong role in analyzing identity formation. Latina Muslims are an interesting group because both categories have strongly defined them. They were previously defined by Latina generalizations and have now added to that definition with a Muslim category. Their new addition creates a strong reaction from all sides which is normal when traditions are broken.

Peter Van Der Veer introduces *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* with a narrative about George Psalmanazar. Psalmanazar (~1704) introduced himself to the British as a former pagan converted to Christianity from Formosa. Of course, Psalmanazar never visited Formosa, but Van Der Veer briefly analyzes Psalmanazar's conversion narrative. Psalmanazar was intent on showing his true conversion to Christianity in his posthumous memoirs. He described his pagan religion as "old" and that of a cultural "Other" while Christianity was progressive and novel. According to Van der Veer, Psalmanazar's religious account "enabled the British to reflect on their modernity" (van der Veer, 1996: 2). In other words, the British increasingly began to associate their Christian religion with modernity and as a partner of progressive societies as opposed to non-Christian religions. A century after Psalmanazar's account, other published works contributed similar religious analysis during a period of intense British colonization.

This anecdote presents a point for reflection. History has shown that Christianity was commonly defined by the West, governments, and politics as a religion of modernity, especially during colonial periods. Christianity was historically a strong partner of colonialism. Conquest partnered with Christianity in order to tie subjects both politically and spiritually to a central government. Subjects were pressured (either legally and or socially) to side with modernity and leave behind their traditional religion. The message being that their religion was inferior to the new power that now occupied them and their home. However, contemporary secular societies, like New York City, bring a fresh perspective to modern, progressive religions.

Latina religious converts demonstrate how Western-defined backwards religions, like Islam, are currently sought out in secular modern societies. Secularism provides individuals with an opportunity to protect their religious right not to remain tied to their native

religion. Secularism in modernity allows individuals to circumvent their native religion and consciously choose their spiritual lifestyle. Interestingly, they are sometimes choosing religions considered to be non-modern. Hence, instead of strengthening Islam's label as a "backwards" religion, Latina converts are forcing society to redefine traditional and modern religions.

Because Latina converts provide important points of analysis in the fields of identity, belonging, politics, religion, and cultural norms they must continue to be studied. Further developments can be made in challenges Latina converts face when they are dependent on learning a new religion from male leaders--Imams or religious scholars. They also have Muslim friends, but differences exist when someone is brought up as a Muslim with influences from their family, friends, culture, and religious scholars vs. religious male scholars and a few friends. I found points of contention from Native Muslim women and new Muslim converts in their weekly meetings. Native Muslims were very critical of religious male scholar's teachings and interpretations of the Quran. Without a strong background in Islam, converts are dependent on their new religious community. Therefore, these two groups (new Muslims and native Muslims) offer room for further research. In addition to this, the Latina group can be further broken down for deeper analysis. Long-term research would also be helpful in identifying the turnover rate of converts. That is, how many are holding on to their new faith and continuing to practice Islam.

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