"He Knows Best Those who are Guided" I: A Typology of Convert Experience

Cheerios hastily eaten in the predawn dark before the start of a Ramadan fast, only to break it alone over take-out. Attending a Muharram Majlis with sincerity, only to find that your clothing color was a faux pas that became a source of gossip. The realization that people in your religious community casually use words in their mother-tongue that denigrate your skin color. These are just some of the social hurdles that people who accept Islam encounter upon engaging with a Muslim community.

As Muslim communities establish deeper roots in countries like the United States, Canada, and the UK, the need for supporting people who convert to Islam will only grow. When the "issue of converts" is addressed in Muslim spaces—whether through literature, social media, the pulpit (*minbar*), or dedicated forums—the focus often lands on isolated challenges. While these issues are essential to discuss and resolve, the proposed solutions are often offered in a piece-meal fashion: invite your convert community members to *ifṭār* gatherings, be lenient with converts regarding communal etiquette, and the common "don't be a racist." **Though well-meaning and helpful, this piecemeal approach does little to convey a holistic understanding of the conversion experience. Without that broader picture, communities struggle to develop a coherent and sustained strategy for meaningful convert support.**

Setting the Stage

The American Shīʿī community must engage in an honest assessment of its current capacity, its (de)prioritization and often limited interest in supporting new Muslims, or establishing meaningful pathways for sincere seekers of truth. Based on over 18 years of engagement with the national Shīʿī community—and,

more importantly, through heartfelt conversations with converts old enough to be my grandparents—I've reached a sobering conclusion: we are, for the most part, deeply underprepared to carry out meaningful and sustained work that truly supports converts.

Some might point to a handful of communities that excel in this area and suggest that our work is already done. But we must be honest: "an exception by definition contravenes the norm. We can acknowledge the exceptions. We can celebrate them, even. But ultimately we have to deal with the norm."((https://stevesalaita.com/no-resurrection-the-life-and-death-of-the-modern-university/))

I also want to note that there may be good and justifiable reasons for explaining our community's blindspots and weaknesses in terms of both individual and communal ability to support converts—histories of marginalization, economic reasons, the continued flow of migration, other institutional priorities, etc. However, examining those reasons is outside the scope of this paper. For those who believe that it is a good idea to bulk up our capacity for supporting seekers and converts, we need to begin the work of exploring how.

The Qur'ān provides us with a fundamental principle that we should build upon in this regard. In *Sūrat al-Naḥl*—the Chapter of the Bee—Chapter 16, Verse 125, God says to the Prophet:

ٱدْعُ إِلَىٰ سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَٱلْمَوْعِظَةِ ٱلْحَسَنَةِ ۖ وَجَـٰدِلْهُم بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ ۖ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best. Indeed your Lord knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best those who are guided.((All translations of the

Qurʾān are from Ali Quli Qarai, *The Qurʾan with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation*, 6th ed. (self pub., Ali Quli Qarai, 2018).))

Regarding the phrase "Invite to the way of your Lord *with wisdom*," there is debate within the exegetical (*al-tafsīr*) literature about whether the phrase "with wisdom" refers to *the content* (*al-maḍmūn*) offered to the audience, or to the mode or way (*al-uslūb*) one engages with the other. In the first analysis, the verse means "Invite to the way of your Lord by way of teaching them *the Qurʾan* or elucidating a *rational argument*" or other similar formulations that are encompassed by the meaning of "a word of Wisdom." In the second analysis it means "Invite to the way of your Lord in a *wise way.*"

Utilizing the second analysis, the upshot of the verse is that *the way* of your calling must *put things in their proper place*—a gloss of the heart of the word often translated as "justice": *al-ʿadl,* which is closely associated with "wisdom," *al-ḥikmah.* **While truth in content is essential, the caller to God must use a wise method by means of recognizing the complex components of the listener's psyche.** They must be lenient when wisdom calls for it, and brutally direct when necessary. They must explain issues in detail when the time calls for it, or offer generalities of complicated ideas when that will be most effective. They may need to be familiar with the audience's racial, class, regional, or national background, their gendered experience, their age, their level of intellect, and any other relevant category of identity and experience that helps the caller's communication resonate with the audience. **In all cases, the person calling people to the Truth must have depth of character and knowledge, breadth of experience, and strength of emotional intelligence.**((See the extended discussion on this phrase in Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallah, *Min Waḥy al-Qurʾān,* 2nd ed., vol. 13 (Beirut: Dar al-Malāk, 1419/1998), 321-328.))

With this second reading in mind—and extending it as a method for both inviting non-Muslims to Islām and strengthening the belief and practice of Muslims—we must develop a robust discourse on conversion. This discourse should equip community organizers, scholars, and Muslims at large with the

conceptual tools and insights into the convert experience necessary to inform our organizational efforts, community etiquettes, and cultural norms. Only then can we build communities that not only support converts but are also genuinely receptive to seekers and nurturing for all who walk the path of faith.

Toward this end, I offer a rudimentary typology of convert experiences. In an upcoming paper I will offer a brief sketch of three, interdependent stages of the conversion experience. These two articles are aimed at starting an exchange of ideas to help both communities and converts understand and navigate the convert journey. I encourage those who disagree with the picture I paint to offer alternatives—through discussion and disagreement, we can grow.

Providing a conceptual background to conversion experiences and stages of growth serves as a first step in mapping the convert experience, and supporting our collective ability to effectively commune with, educate, and socially foster converts. For Legacy((I use "Legacy" and "Legacy Muslims" as analogues to "Convert" and "Convert Muslims" to differentiate the religious experience of those who were born Muslim and raised with some semblance of Islamic values, education, and identity from people who were born to a non-Muslim family and were raised without the above.)) communities and individuals alike, I hope that this high-level conceptual map helps them thoughtfully cultivate etiquettes and methods of support for converts with sensitivity and foresight. For converts, I hope that this map is useful for reflecting on their own experiences, feeling a sense of connectedness with other converts, and charting out their individual spiritual, intellectual, and communal paths toward a rich religious life.

What's in a name? The use of the term "convert"

There are a few semantic issues to tackle first. What are our terms and to whom do they refer?

Convert vs. Revert

There is ongoing debate about the use of "convert" or "revert" as an identifying label for individuals who are not born and raised in a Muslim household and

later accept Islam. The impetus to use the term "revert" seems to be founded upon the theologically accepted understanding that everyone is born Muslim. This teaching can be derived from Sūrat al-Rūm 30:30:

> So set your heart as a person of pure faith on this religion, the original nature endowed by God according to which He originated mankind (There is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى فَطَرَ ٱلنَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلدِّينُ ٱلْقَيِّمُ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُون

This teaching is further clarified in various narrations (*aḥādīth*) found in both Sunnī and Shīʿī collections of narrations. In Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's *al-Tawḥīd* he narrates from his chain to Imam al-Ṣādiq, that the Prophet (ṣ) said:

> "Every infant is born upon the divine nature (*fiṭrah*)—meaning [born with] knowledge (*al-maʿrifah*) that affirms that God (the Mighty and Sublime) is their Creator. This is the meaning of [God's] statement, 'If you ask them, "Who created the heavens and the earth?" they will surely say, "God."' [Q. 31:25]"

كُلُّ مَوْلُودٍ يُولَدُ على الفِطرَةِ ، يَعني على المَعْرِفَةِ بأنّ اللّه عزّوجلّ خالِقُهُ ، فذلكَ قَولُهُ ۞ وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۞

The problem with this term is that "revert", and related words like "reversion" carry the negative connotation of "regression." While it is true that the divine

nature (*fiṭrah*) is the original state embedded deep within every human being, the path of Islam—as the final ethical framework and civilizational expression of that *fiṭrah*—is not a simple return, but a complex and deliberate journey. Embracing Islam involves more than just recognizing God as the Creator; it requires a conscious transformation of one's worldview, values, and way of life.

Conversion is a fulsome change in the individual's view of reality, and a shift in their engagement with the world. A convert adopts a new language based on the terms of scripture—the Qurʾān and the teachings of the Prophet and his family—as well as the rational and spiritual meditations and formulations of scholars based on scriptural sources. This new language creates a new lens through which they think through and describe themselves, their Creator, the cosmos, and the relationship between the three.

At the level of "creed" (*al-ʿittiqād*), conversion is an adoption of a new language that describes and gives meaning to what they are convinced is real—*al-Īmān*. At the level of "devotional law" (*al-sharīʿah*((Often imprecisely called *al-fiqh.*))) and ethics (*al-akhlāq*) conversion is an adoption of a new language that provides contour, meaning, boundaries, and priorities to the ways in which they behave—*al-ʿAʿmāl al-Ṣāliḥah*. In sum, conversion is the cultivation of a new devotional lifestyle and culture. I contend that "conversion" is a clearer English term for this *process* and "convert" is a clearer term for an individual undergoing this process than "reversion" and "revert."

A Typology of Convert Experiences

Who is included in our term "convert"

When we utilize the term "convert" the immediate sense that comes to mind is "New Muslim." The issue is more complicated. The convert experience is multilayered. In my usage, I include the following categories of experience:

Non-Muslim to Muslim Categories

1. **New Muslim – one who recently became Muslim after previously adhering to a different theology or view of the world((We may also argue that this experience can apply to people who were born to a Muslim father and are considered *bi-ḥukm al-muslim* during their childhood prior to the Islamic standard for the age of majority (*al-bulūgh*)—that is that they are treated *as if* Muslim until maturity because *to be* Muslim requires an assent (*al-taṣdīq*) to faith which, in legal terms, is accepted by an individual after the age of majority or upon being able to discern between right and wrong (*mumayyiz*), which can precede the age of majority—but who were raised without any information about Islam or its culture. This sometimes occurs when the parent raises their children according to the religion of their non-Muslim spouse, or when the parents raise their children according to purely secular norms or the norms of another religion. In this circumstance, the child, though born to a technically Muslim father, is not familiar with the religion or its culture and will share a similar experience as the person born to a non-Muslim family who later converts. This population is small but present.)), and is in the early stages of familiarizing oneself with the Muslim thought and culture. This category is what most immediately comes to mind. The demarcation from "New" to "Veteran" is admittedly hard to define. In my view, one can be considered "New" until they have a sound grasp of basic theology and practice, *and* are familiar with Muslim community life.**

There are two issues that I need to justify here. "Familiarity with Muslim community" is a prerequisite for emerging from "new Muslim" into veteran status because of the *religious* nature of communal belonging. It is true that

conviction (*īmān*) is first and foremost an act of will by an individual; conceptually, you can be a Muslim and be completely isolated from the community. However, there are two necessary considerations. In this paper I am using "convert" as a social category of analysis: and thereby asking how the community best serves converts through education, resource access, and other factors. Second, since the Islamic tradition provides a law that shapes the contours of social interaction and has a society-focused spiritual practice that exalts virtuous social interaction, then experience and familiarity with Muslim community is a useful indicator of one's fluency with the Islamic tradition. This is precisely because religio-social virtue is expressed *through* social interaction and is strengthened by repetition. For instance, an individual is best able to strengthen the quality of their control over their anger through deep experience with provocations to the soul and conscience. Additionally, a person best develops humility through overcoming challenges that provoke a sense of pride in the ego. Note the synergistic relationship here: the soul shines through socially-reinforced cleansing of negative attributes that are endemic to the human condition: selfishness, pride, covetousness, etc. Thus, community life drives spiritual purification.

The second issue is regarding the deliberate selection of the terminology. I utilize "familiar with" rather than "integrated in" the Muslim community because integration requires broad acceptance from *both* sides. This obviously extends beyond the agency of an individual. If a Muslim community stubbornly refuses to acknowledge and integrate new Muslims, this cannot be the fault of the convert.

2. **Veteran Convert – one who became Muslim after previously adhering to a different theology or view of the world and is deeply familiar with Muslim thought and culture**

"When is a convert no longer a convert?"((A related question is: why are the children of converts often treated as converts? The enduring status of convert-

hood onto their children often leads to the children of converts facing similar social challenges in the community.)) On one hand, this question indicates the enduring power of the superficial understanding of the label, leading the community to treat converts as "New Muslims" until they die.

On the other hand, this question can raise another contention: should we not abandon the concept and/or term of "convert" altogether because, ideally, New Muslims should become part and parcel of the larger community and thus don't need a separate label, and "Muslim" is sufficient without another qualifier. At one level of analysis, it is true that converts ought to be seen as equal participants in community life, with all of the rights and privileges conferred to them from the community as "Legacy Muslims" as this is the demand of devotional law (*al-sharīʿah*).

However, **at the social level of analysis, "convert" is a useful tool for short-handing the experience of abandoning a prior set of beliefs for an adherence to an Islamic theology and ethical code. This shift often entails an experience of alienation from one's prior self and history.** This shorthand helps us mark the experience of the challenges of alienation from family and friend groups as well as the difficulties—and often failures—of attempting to adopt a new social circle.

In general, this set of experiences is shared by all converts despite their diversity of ethnic, linguistic, national, class, and racial backgrounds. Despite this diversity, the shared set of experiences creates a thread of camaraderie between converts. Socially, the label "convert" is often a source of positive identity assertion and communal belonging with a subset of the Muslim community.

"Veteran Convert" is used to indicate a further subset of experiences. Using "convert" for "convert programs" or "convert support" can limit our understanding of the convert experience to that of recent adoption of Islam. **Using more detailed terms helps us understand that within the larger convert umbrella, there are elders and veterans who have deep wisdom**

and knowledge—indeed some are themselves seminary-trained students or scholars (*'ulamā'*). There is a wellspring of wisdom to draw from within the convert community itself to let lead, or consult and work with when creating convert-oriented programming.

This distinction also helps us understand that there are different categories of convert-oriented programming that are necessary: some must be geared toward New Muslims and others should be inclusive of Veteran Converts' needs. In a word: convert programming should not be limited to elementary-level topics or programs highlighting the early-phase of conversion.

Intra-Islam Shifts

3. **A Muslim who shifted from one path of Islam to the path of the Family of the Prophet—the path of Imāmī Twelve-Imām Islam.**

Some may argue that this is not "conversion" in the conventional sense since it isn't a change from non-Muslim to Muslim. This shift is inclusive of people who come from Sunnī, Khārijī, and non-Twelve-Imām forms of Shī'ī Islam. However, this type of shift often leads to a similar experience of alienation—from one's prior convictions, religious language, lifestyle, and sense of self, as well as from family and community. This involves learning new theological and legal terminology, learning and practicing differences in worship (e.g. the form of the formal prayer, *al-ṣalāh*), a change in the hierarchy and sacrality of historical figures, the challenge of selectively adopting or rejecting non-fundamental((By "non-fundamental" I mean beliefs and practices that are not essential to the Madhhab as a theological and legal path.)) Shī'ī specific customs and culture (e.g. *Muharram* commemorations), etc. It also often involves a new social dynamic, whereby the person has to adjust to their new religious orientation in social terms: defending their change to their friends and family who may now consider them misguided. In regard to a Sunnī-Shī'ī shift, the individual has to adjust to being labeled and treated as a minority after enjoying a relatively

privileged status in the social hierarchy of the Ummah, with all of the psychological implications this entails. This necessitates a process of intellectual and spiritual recalibration as well as social integration into an expanded body of practitioners. Thus, it is—at the very least—*convert-adjacent* and is included in my analysis of the stages of conversion.

Conclusion

This typology is offered to add color to the picture in our minds about converts and the convert experience, and to problematize the flat and sometimes stereotypical concepts we may have in mind. Noting the variety of these three experiences will help us tailor our support for converts of various stripes institutionally and on an interpersonal level.

I must also acknowledge the weaknesses of this rudimentary categorization. This typology focuses on the convert's time spent building an Islamic personality and on the convert's religious origins. In particular, the distinction between New Muslim and Veteran Convert helps to expand the community's understanding of the positionality of different types of Muslims in their midst. This nuance should translate into more targeted convert support programs, and a more holistic interpersonal ethic between community members of Legacy and Convert backgrounds. I welcome the production of more complex pictures of the convert experience. There are many more stories to be told and analyses to be written on different axes of identity and experience—including issues of class, race, national-origin, gender, etc.—which will further enhance our understanding of our diverse community.

In a forthcoming article I will map out three distinct but interdependent stages that a Convert traverses through on their religious journey, *in shāʾ Allāh*.