

“He Knows Best Those who are Guided” II: Three Stages of Convert Experience

In the first installment of this series, “He Knows Best Those who are Guided” I: A Typology of Convert Experience,” I contend that the North American Shī‘ī community is underresourced – financially, educationally, and in terms of human capital – to adequately and sustainably support seekers and newcomers to Islam. I propose that an essential part of developing the capacity to support converts involves cultivating a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and needs among them.. In the first article I lay out three different categories of converts and their main qualities.

In this article I will offer a description of the three stages of the convert experience: Transformation, Growth, and Synthesis. I also offer brief reflections on particular characteristics of Islamic community centers that contribute to hindering converts’ growth. Understanding these stages will help our community equip itself with empathy and with tools needed to support converts beyond “Intro-to-Islam” classes or “Convert Stories” panels. The needs of converts go beyond the elementary and beyond the classroom or majlis setting.

While I hope that this article is substantial, this rudimentary depiction of the stages of convert growth is not sufficient; I look forward to reading more complex or alternative explanations of these stages by others with more experience and explanatory power. I offer this, in part, as another step toward developing a more robust discourse and community conversation about the convert experience and convert needs in the North American Shī‘ī community.

Three Stages of Convert Experience

The complex and profound nature of religious conversion creates many hurdles, challenges, and opportunities in the life of the new Muslim. There is profound spiritual substance to celebrate when discussing “convert issues” which can help bring balance to the discourse surrounding converts in our communities.

Conversion reflects a wellspring of contemplation and bravery in the soul of the convert. It signifies an individual has assessed their life’s path and decided to embark on an entirely new journey. This requires the sincerity to admit past errors; the courage to be open to new ideas despite significant challenges that lie ahead; the spiritual might to endure the pain of stripping away incorrect ideas about Reality; the amplitude of heart to adopt a new vision for life; and the endurance to leave behind or amend prior social patterns and relationships in order to create a new web of community.

Conversion is a manifestation of the *essence* of “Islam” itself— *submission* to Reality. The three stages outlined below represent one attempt to illustrate the key phases a convert may pass through on the infinite path toward God.

1 - Transformation

Transformation is the initial shift from one vision of life to another. This is the first and most essential component in the conversion journey. It is initially a transformation of the mind and heart through an analysis of what one believes; this may include a metaphysical experience that confirms the basic contours of Islamic conviction. It is secondly a two-fold testimony on the tongue: there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger—the *shahādatayn*. The inner commitment precedes the outer testimony. For those making an intra-Muslim shift it is a transformation that includes the belief and testimony that ‘Alī is the Prophet’s Successor and the foremost authority on Islam after the Prophet (ﷺ).

The stage of Transformation involves a breaking with a portion of the former self. This often entails at least three changes.

A change in one's understanding of truth and one's view of the world

Conversion is a reformation of what one believes is the truth about the world and the way one lives within it. This includes the abandoning of a prior theological or philosophical code (or lack thereof) as well as a change in one's ethical code—the way one ought to behave.

This rupture requires the heavy challenge of sifting one's convictions through a new filter. In this early stage this may take on the form of a simple rejection of agnostic, atheistic, polytheistic, or non-Muhammadan monotheistic views of the world. At the initial level of action it typically includes the rejection of consumption of alcohol and pork, and the adoption of regular prayer (formal and non-formal) and the struggle to fast during Ramaḍān.

For those making an intra-Muslim shift we can amend the aforementioned analysis to mean a shift in conviction and action to the particular views of belief and action as taught by Twelve-Imām Islam.

A change in one's understanding of one's self

Conversion may entail the challenge of reformulating how one sees one's self and identity.

A New Muslim must face the challenge of seeing oneself in a new light: as a member of a universal brotherhood founded on justice and harmony rooted in a message from God. They must navigate the negative stereotypes about Muslims that abound in their social environment simultaneously.

"Turning Turk" was a term used to describe the conversion of European non-Muslims to Islam in the early-modern period. "Turk" was used because it alluded to a wholesale shift from European Christian or Jewish culture to the Islam of the Ottoman Empire, which was a rival power to Europe at the time. "[T]urning Turk' implied not just a religious conversion, but also the complete undoing of all things constitutive of an English Christian identity."((Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage*, 1))

Contemporary social and political environments entail a similar challenge. Being Muslim is often racialized in American discourse. It is a way of life that is “Arab” or “Brown” or “Eastern.” This racialization of the category “Muslim” encompasses stereotypes of barbarity, misogyny, and religious extremism.

Some individuals thrive on this counter-cultural self-conception—breaking away from a moral order they perceive as flawed becomes part of their personal drive, as they actively redefine who they are. They find meaning in rebelling against materialistic, white-Supremacist, or other non-Islamic views of the world.

Others struggle to see themselves as part of a religious and social dynamic that often feels unfamiliar or even at odds with their pre-conversion life. They struggle with national or racial identities such as questioning if one can be both “American” and “Muslim.” They may not be familiar with many Muslims that share their racial, ethnic, national, or linguistic heritage—thereby feeling that they are navigating uncharted waters without a North Star.

To complicate matters, some converts do not see a strong break with their former identity—whether positive or negative. Rather, they view their conversion as a natural consequence of all their prior experiences.

Self-identification often manifests itself in changes in dress (is the thobe really a more religious garb? Does wearing a scarf make me Arab?), eating habits (abandoning of pork, breaking the fast with dates, an increase in eating “eastern” foods—e.g. shawarma and biryani—coded as “Muslim food”), and even in the changing of one’s name (are Arab names inherently more “Islamic”?).

For an individual shifting from another Islamic path, this entails the challenge of identifying oneself with Twelve-Imam Islam that one’s prior religious group may have called renegade, heretic, or non-Muslim.

In many cases there is a subtle or powerful feeling of becoming an “apostate” from one’s prior self.

A change in one's community

Conversion often entails changes in one's familial and social dynamics. Active conversion reshapes one's concerns and lifestyle, which naturally leads to shifts in familial and social dynamics. A new Muslim may be deeply preoccupied with their religious changes but find it difficult to speak openly about them with family or friends—either due to lack of understanding or open hostility. This tension can lead to a weakening of prior relationships. When compounded with the simultaneous struggle to find like-minded Muslims who share similar cultural expressions and life experiences, the new Muslim often experiences a profound sense of isolation.

The Stage of transformation represents all of the challenges that an embrace of, submission to, and voyage upon a new path in life entails: a deep negation and affirmation encoded within the testimony of faith (*shahādatayn*) – that “there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's messenger”. The soul of the convert often undergoes a dynamic and messy oscillation and recalibration between the two: do adherents to my prior religion have access to salvation? To what extent do I accept or deny my prior self, culture, and identity? Does God want me to get closer or further from my family and friends?

2. Growth

The growth stage is a stage that overlaps with Transformation. This is the stage in which the convert begins to settle into their chosen spiritual tradition, with a firm intention to cultivate their Islamic character intellectually, spiritually, and—where appropriate—socially.

This stage is the most crucial for cultivating confidence in one's Islamic identity and cultivating a clear vision for the world through an Islamic lens. This takes a significant amount of time, energy, and effort. For some it occurs through concerted study, reading, or watching religious lectures. For others it could be through anecdotes, and lessons shared in communion with other Muslims or through a family member, friend, spouse, or other social relations.

Converts often develop their conviction through a complex, interwoven combination of these various factors. An Islamic education that combines formal and informal learning is often the most successful in building strong, socially connected Muslims.

The Growth stage is ongoing and without an endpoint. While it serves as a bridge between the Transition and Synthesis stages, it gradually overlaps with Synthesis, forming a continuous and evolving gradient once that stage is entered.

The Three Layers of Growth

The growth stage encompasses strengthening three essential overlapping components: knowledge, spiritually driven action, and community life.

A - Knowledge (al-‘ilm)

The knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) component is to deepen one’s knowledge of the conceptual and practical ingredients that lead to a faithful life.

Knowledge of the Qur’an, history of the Prophet and Imams, theology (*al-kalām*), virtue ethics (*akhlāq*), and law (*al-ahkām al-shar‘iyyah*) form the central concerns at this stage. This is true whether the convert undergoes formal education or is merely taught through communal interaction and sporadic lectures. This includes knowledge of issues as varied as the nature of God, love for the Prophet and his family, social etiquettes, hygienic practices, formal prayer, and basic Arabic recitation of portions of the Qur’ān.

In the early stages of growth, the accumulation of knowledge sets into motion a recalibration of the self, as the individual engages with new terminology and concepts that challenge prior perceptions and ways of living. Basic knowledge of these components also provide an added data set to converse with and relate to the larger community—providing an on-ramp to community integration.

One important challenge the community faces at this stage is the lack of organized educational mechanisms for adults, much less New Muslims. The

lectures organized around the religious calendar generally don't provide adequate education because everyone is entering with different knowledge bases and the lectures are thematically sporadic.

B – Spiritually-Driven Action (*al-ʿamal*)

The action (*al-ʿamal*) component is to live a life in fulfillment of the religious tradition.

Spiritual action comes through the application of the legal and ethical code (knowledge) through pious, reverent intent. Through the adoption of Islamic teachings into one's life, the convert begins a life of Islamically-shaped devotion to God. This spans everything from praying the five daily formal prayers to serving the poor; from fasting the month of Ramadan to choosing your job on ethical grounds; from reading transmitted supplications (e.g. the prayers of *al-Sahīfat al-Sajjādiyyah*) to religiously driven political activism. In sum, it is using the Islamic ethical code to filter your decision making.

The challenges to living a well-founded Islamic life are many, including the convert's social environment, their quality of will-power, etc. The primary institutional challenge within our control is that spiritually driven action depends on the acquisition of knowledge—yet our community centers often lack strong educational resources and effective learning mechanisms. When one's knowledge base is weak, one's actions are less likely to align harmoniously with the will of God.

Secondly, some community centers place heavy emphasis on regionally developed spiritual practices (e.g. forms of *laṭmiyyah*, reading devotional poetry, serving special meals in honor of the Ahl al-Bayt, etc.) that are secondary in relation to learning the core teachings of the religious texts. Relatedly, some community centers use a language other than English for their programming. For a convert this might be confusing or alienating.

Thirdly, in many community centers, "Islam" is framed as a religion practiced primarily through ritual. This experience can narrow the range of spiritually

driven actions a convert perceives as beneficial to their spiritual growth. It can create a chokepoint in their development, particularly for those with an inclination toward intellectual, contemplative, or socially and economically justice-oriented forms of devotion.

The second and third weaknesses are symptoms of the primary disorder of weak educational resources.

C- Community Life

The communal component involves cultivating bonds of love and trust with fellow Muslims, and—where possible—establishing families as part of a rooted and supportive Islamic life.

Islam is a deeply communal religion. Teaching is communal. Communal prayer is, of course, communal. Meals shared after the fast of Ramadan are communal. Islamic teachings focus on care for family, friends and neighbors alike.

Growth of this component is cultivated through rich relationships, marriages, and the giving and receiving of acts of service and generosity. This layer is often a conduit for knowledge acquisition: we learn through living and navigating communal life. We struggle to keep promises. We learn to trust and we learn how to bring people together after conflict: through these experiences we learn about our own character and refine ourselves.

There are multiple challenges here. Firstly, many community centers are built around the idea of preserving their often insular ritual tradition in a secularizing society. So, there are no protocols in place for acculturating and teaching a New Muslim.

Secondly, our communities often harbor forms of prejudice from societies abroad *and* through reifying local forms of racial, ethnic, and class-based animosities. These are often the first hurdles that a new convert faces in the community.

Thirdly, many communities are built on extended-family networks. These family

networks are often hard to break into. People who rely on family networks for their social life often assume others have a similar network, resulting in overlooking that new converts have no similar network.

These challenges often prevent converts from forming deep, meaningful bonds within the community. As a result, they may encounter significant barriers to marriage within the community and find themselves excluded—explicitly or implicitly—from full participation in local community centers. The pain stemming from these social experiences can lead to a weakening of conviction and a sense of disillusionment. In the age of social media, some converts turn to virtual networks to find a sense of belonging. While these platforms can offer valuable connections, they inevitably come with limitations in terms of intimacy, trust, and sustained communal support.

3. Synthesis

The Transformation and Growth Stages sometimes lead to ruptures within the self or in relation to the convert's "culture" or society. As one begins to add new practices to their lifestyle there is a feeling of alienation from one's prior life. Conflicts with family and friends sometimes weaken a convert's resolve. Converts may go through phases where Islamic practice weakens, or one confronts challenges by incorporating their prior identity with their new conviction. These are normal challenges, but they are fraught with uncertainty.

Ideally, the Growth Stage leads a convert to the stage of Synthesis.

Synthesis occurs when the individual utilizes the Islamic Path as an effective filter through which their personality, inclinations, and culture are purified, but not entirely abandoned. One begins to reconcile their complex, lived identity through the lens of Islamic ideals, coming to realize that their previous joys, ethnic background, and national affiliation are not necessarily in conflict with their newfound convictions. At the Synthesis Stage, the convert harmonizes the beautiful parts of their personality and background with their new moral compass. They feel at home in their religious skin – their entire being now transformed by the light of guidance.

Ideally, the Synthesis stage, in turn, nurtures the ongoing Growth Stage. That is, now fully confident in their self-conception as a Muslim, they process religious teachings in more heartfelt and transformative ways. Their knowledge acquisition, spiritual practice, and community engagement deepen due to this self-assurance.

In the end, the individual uses the spiritual light of Islam to see and shape themselves and their society—ultimately becoming a beacon of light through which society is changed.

The challenges to reaching Synthesis are the same as those in the Growth Stage. There must be expressive space for converts to grapple with their new convictions and lifestyle. Islam is not an Arab, Persian, or South-Asian phenomenon. Islam is a dynamic, living, and universal call to all humankind. God’s light of guidance is spread across the world. Islam is not the exclusive inheritance of the Arabs or any single group of people.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَعْبُدُوا ۖ رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَتَّقُونَ

O humankind! Worship your Lord, who created you and those who were before you, so that you may be Godwary.

Q. 2:21

So, we hope to see all peoples of this land—of “the West” and “the East” and everyone in-between—in a single universal brotherhood worshipping the Divine.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ
لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O humankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most Godwary among you. Indeed God is all-knowing, all-aware.

Q. 49:13

Conclusion

This is just one way of illustrating the conversion experience and needs. Despite its weaknesses, I hope that it provides our community with some insights that empower it to lay the groundwork to encourage many more seekers to enter the Islamic path and to nourish the souls of a growing convert community. I hope others will offer their perspectives in future papers to help us more clearly understand our community's strengths and weaknesses in supporting seekers of God.

If I am afforded the opportunity, in a forthcoming article I will map out a more detailed typology of community blind spots and pitfalls that slow down or destroy the convert's journey as an attempt to more clearly diagnose our institutional weaknesses regarding convert support, in shā' Allāh.