PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS

At The Intersection of Isolation and Otherness

Media framing about Muslims after 9/11 has produced many harmful consequences. The stereotypes and misconceptions that are developed as a result of media framing are not harming Muslims living overseas or US immigrants alone but have affected the lives of many ‘pure’ American Muslims—converts.

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Ever since Ohio-born Hans Seidderman was a child, he was confused about his beliefs. Raised by his Christian mother and her Jewish husband, Siedderman’s Christian beliefs never seemed quite right. He studied other faiths but got more confused. At the age of 24, he came across a Muslim friend who gave him a copy of the Quran. “After two months of reading it”, Siedderman said, “I realized that I was reading about the God I always believed in –The God of Abraham. The same week I declared my Shahadah (testimony of faith).”

Like Siedderman, 23-year-old California-born Elena Diana Esparza, a veterinary student at the University of Missouri, had to go through a similar situation. “This faith aligned with my personal beliefs and my deeply held American values. Islam made sense to me,” she said. For both Hans and Elena, the implications were far reaching especially at a time when Islam in America has been associated with terrorism, violence and negative practices.

Both Hans and Elena and five other Muslim converts were interviewed as a part of my Master’s project to learn more about how media’s representation of Islam and Muslims in America has affected their lives and identity. The interviews, conducted primarily in Columbia, Mo., revealed varied and diverse challenges people face after
converting to Islam. Several interesting themes, both directly and indirectly related to media’s impact on the social and personal life of converts including issues related identity, emerged during the first set of interviews from January to March 2014. After March, I conducted additional follow up interviews and observations that allowed me to witness the everyday experiences of the participants and helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the issues facing them. Spending time with the participants mostly at the Islamic Center in Columbia gave me an opportunity to establish a close relationship with them and also observe their interaction with members of the Muslim community in Columbia. A common theme in their narratives before converting to Islam was their dissatisfaction with the religion they were brought up in. They had had a continuous struggle with their inherited religion, which, according to most of them, ‘didn’t seem right’. All of the interviewees were ‘converts by conviction’ and all of them practicing Muslims.

For most converts, challenges come in different forms and at different stages. The first reaction from the family at the time of conversion, which is usually negative, is invariably the most noted and prominent manifestation of how Islam is understood by the public in the US.

Many converts face difficulties when they are beginning to practice Islam openly, which is noticeable in the way they dress, their food habits and other social customs. New Jersey-born Abdullah Zubyr faced ridicule from his family and friends whenever he wore an ‘Islamic’ dress. “My brothers and cousins called me weak-mined and laughed at me every time I wore a Izar (long cloth worn as a skirt from waist to toe).”
Justin McNutt, an engineer at MU’s IT department, who converted from Catholicism to Islam almost 12 years ago said, “Most of the challenges initially are related to cultural traditions rather than religious practice. I don’t think you need to change your tradition or culture in order to practice Islam. This has been a great advantage for me because I look like any other American but still practice Islam.”

In some instances, like in Elena’s case, the negative family response has a deep psychological impact especially at a time when a convert is experiencing a wide range of conflicting thoughts, apprehensions and uncertainties about their future and relationships. In most cases relationships are severed and friendships ended creating a barrier between the convert and their existing culture.

The only refuge for most of them after distancing themselves from their former lives is to turn to the Muslim community, which acts as an alternate social outlet to engage with the members of their new faith. However, challenges do not stop here.

While converts appreciate the warm welcome they receive from existing Muslim communities, the sense of belonging soon turns into a sense of ‘otherness’. This is not true for everyone though. Most of the people I talked to said they are being treated with respect and dignity in Muslim Communities and Islamic Centers. But some of them, who come to the Muslim communities with a quest for acceptance, eventually fail to realize those desires. Because of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of born Muslims, converts find it difficult to fit into the communities and feel like outcasts there too. In some Muslim communities the situation becomes more depressing. While Islamaphobes may make them a proof of the creeping threat of Islam and a potential terrorist, born
Muslims try to make them into a trophy, treating them like some kind of conquest, or eye them suspiciously as a probable spy.

“Some converts like myself even find themselves being made into a kind of symbol. People start to look at you not as a person but as some kind of political object,” said Hans.

The converts find this exhausting and frustrating. Because of some ethnocentric-born Muslims who see things through the prism of cultures and equate their own culture with Islam and converts’ (American) culture in direct confrontation with it, this effectively reduces converts to ‘second-class’ Muslim status.

While some converts claim to enjoy the Islamic environment at the mosques, others see the community as unfriendly, suspicious and judgmental. Converts feel doubly alienated. This state of alienation is what one described as “existing at the intersection of two mutually exclusive states of otherness”.

Most of converts interviewed believe this alienation does not affect their personal and individual identity. “I don’t think I face any identity crisis within me,” said Elena’s husband, Gabriel Esparza. However, any force that imposes any kind of identity on them is almost always external. “It looks like it is all because of the perceptions of others – both Muslims and non-Muslims alike,” he added.

Twenty-two-year-old Michael Dillon believes that it is actually media that has played a significant role, in giving converts a so-called ‘external’ identity of being the ‘others’ within non-Muslim as well as Muslim cultures. Though media has often painted converts with the same brush as it did with other Muslims, most converts have a feeling
that the identity that is thrust upon them is not what they actually are. The bad practices in Muslim culture or violence are as foreign to a convert as they are to his American neighbor. Conversely all the ‘forbidden things’ in American popular culture for which he or she is looked down upon by some born Muslims are alien to them too.

For Minnesota-based Khalil Phillip Klopfenstein, media’s ‘negative’ role has also been a positive driving force for many converts to enquire into anything that it says. “This leads them to credible sources about Islam and changes their mind, though not their identity,” said Khalil.

In the presence of such negative experiences of hostility and alienation, the question that needs to be answered is why do these people convert? Why do they choose a faith that distances them from their family, culture, and friends aside from facing rejection from all sides? It appears paradoxical that more and more people are converting to Islam and retaining their faith despite an increasing atmosphere not only of fear but also a series of challenges that lead to their mistreatment and isolation.

“It is that satisfaction of believing what you think is true that helps you to withstand all pressures. I have found a purpose in Islam and not for a mountain of gold will I change my faith”, said Zubyr.

Most of the converts interviewed said they were Muslims by conviction and saw in Islam what they had always believed in. For many of them, Islam is not only a religion of *fitra* (the natural state in which one is born) but also an expression of their deeply held American values.

“When I studied [Islam], it turned out to be in perfect sync with what I already believed,” said Gabriel Esparza adding that it is frustrating that many Americans believe
that Islam is strange or that Muslims worship some foreign God. “Islam is not foreign at all; it is just common sense, and something most Americans could relate to,” he said.

American Muslim converts want to be seen as individuals rather than symbols or representatives of any idea, race, culture, country or value system. It allows them a space to follow their own conscience, sincerely, without any thought of social pressures or cultural norms. It also lets them see others not as stereotypes but as people just like them.

Hans Sieddeman sums it up as, “Being an American does not mean that I have to love everything that America does or has done. The same is true with being a Muslim: just because you are Muslim does not mean you have to love everything about Muslims. And that does not mean that I am a victim of Identity crisis.”